



THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM  
**Swayed by the Culture**  
Revelation 2:12-17

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We are in a series called *First Love*. It's about Jesus being the "first love" of our lives. It's about Jesus having "first place in everything" (Colossians 1:18).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus dictated seven letters to the Apostle John and instructed him to send these letters to seven specific churches. In these letters, Jesus encouraged each church and He confronted each church. As we study these seven churches, we must ask ourselves ... ***Could Jesus be saying this to us, as a church? Could Jesus be saying this to me?***

In these letters, His words are strong and direct. Jesus said, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline" (Revelation 3:19). To one of the churches in Revelation, to Ephesus, Jesus said, "***You have left your first love***" (Revelation 2:4). What was true in that day is true in our day. We have a tendency to drift. If we're not careful, we become complacent, we compromise, we grow cold, and we just don't love Him like we used to. And when it happens, His words are strong and direct. "Wake up! ... Remember who you are! ... Repent, and come back to Me!" If there is any drift or complacency in our lives, He is going to confront it. So, throughout this series, we must answer the question, is Jesus our "first love" or not?

In His letter to the church at Pergamum, Jesus confronted theological compromise. Some in the church had been swayed by the culture. They altered their convictions in order to fit in with the culture. And we can do the same thing if we're not careful.

If we're not careful, what the majority says, or what the media says, or what a professor says, or what a friend says, or what the culture says, will influence what we think and what we believe more than the word of God does. And the moment that happens is the moment we start down the path of compromise; not only compromising theologically, but also compromising morally.

One of the defining books of my life was Francis Schaeffer's *The Great Evangelical Disaster*. It forced me to make up my mind about the Bible. Did I believe the Bible or not? Did I really believe it was the word of God or not? Was I going to commit my life to preaching it and living it or not?

What Schaeffer noticed in the 1980s, when he wrote the book, we see today. Many in the church are drifting, whole denominations are drifting. Schaeffer noticed a "failure of the church to stand for truth as truth." And he said, "There is only one word for this – accommodation. The church has accommodated to the world spirit of the age."<sup>1</sup> Schaeffer called this "the great evangelical disaster." The disaster is when Christians compromise the truth of the Bible in order to be relevant. The disaster is when Christians are swayed by the culture and bend the Bible. The great sin is interpreting the Bible according to what the culture says, rather than judging the culture according to what the Bible says.

And we see that in the letter to the church at Pergamum. Jesus is serious about truth, and He will not tolerate compromise. So, here's the question. *Are you standing on the word of God, or have you been swayed by the culture?*

### THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

Revelation 2:12 begins Jesus' letter to the church at Pergamum. "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this ..." (Revelation 2:12, NAS).<sup>2</sup> Each of the seven letters in Revelation begins with a description of Jesus. Here, Jesus is the one who holds the "sharp two-edged sword." The sword represents truth. Jesus is that truth. And as that truth, as the perfect, righteous Judge, He evaluates the church at Pergamum.

"I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is" (Revelation 2:13, NAS). Jesus was sympathizing with their plight. "I know where you live. I know what you're going through. I know how hard it is." Why was it hard?

Pergamum was one of the most sophisticated cities in the Roman Empire. It was filled with temples to pagan gods; to Athena, Asclepius, Dionysius, and Zeus. That's why Jesus described it as the city "where Satan's throne is." The temple of Zeus was located there. In 1901, the altar was moved piece by piece and reconstructed in a museum in Berlin. When it was originally built in Pergamum, it was a war memorial. So, any patriotic citizen would worship at the temple of Zeus. But what about Christians who refused? They were considered unpatriotic. Imagine how hard it was to bear the name of Christ in a city that celebrated so many other gods.

Pergamum was also home to one of the largest libraries in the world, with more than 200,000 volumes. This was the library that Anthony gave to Cleopatra as a wedding present.<sup>3</sup>

Pergamum was also home to a medical university and the temple to Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing. It had comparable fame to the Mayo Clinic today. Pergamum was where a person went for the best medical care in Asia. But imagine you were a Christian in day, and had a family member with a terrible illness. What would you do? You went to Pergamum for help, but there's a problem for you as a Christian. Medical treatment included worshiping the pagan god Asclepius. Would you worship that god in hope that your family member would be healed?

It was hard to be a Christian in Pergamum, and that's why Jesus said, "I know where you live. I know you're in the minority. I know it's hard to be a Christian in this place."

And that's why Jesus encouraged and complimented them. "You hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells" (Revelation 2:13, NAS). Even when one of their own was martyred, a man named Antipas, the Christians in Pergamum did not deny Jesus. They did not deny the faith.

But ... Jesus also confronted them. "But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. So you

also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:14-15, NAS). Jesus was confronting theological compromise

Balaam is a reference to an Old Testament prophet gone bad, who defected from faithfulness to God. The book of Numbers tells the story. As God’s people entered the Promised Land, they defeated nation after nation and king after king. King Balak of Moab was next, and he feared God’s army. So, King Balak bribed the prophet Balaam to defect.<sup>4</sup> He bribed Balaam to curse Israel, hoping that Moab would not be conquered. The Lord warned Balaam not to do it, but he did it anyway, or tried too. Three times, Balaam tried to curse Israel, and all three times, the words came out of this mouth as blessings instead. King Balak was furious. He was paying Balaam to curse Israel. When everything failed, Balaam had another idea. There was another way to defeat Israel. Balaam advised King Balak to tempt Israel with women.<sup>5</sup> And here’s what happened. While Israel was camping the area, “the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor. And the Lord’s anger burned against them” (Numbers 25:1-3, NIV). The word “joined” means “yoked” with the culture. Because they were swayed by the culture, the Lord commanded Moses to execute every person who worshiped idols.

There was no man named Balaam in Pergamum. Jesus was referring to a Balaam-like teaching that lured Christians away from the truth, that caused them to compromise theologically, and which led them to compromise morally.<sup>6</sup>

***Are you standing on the word of God, or have you been swayed by the culture?***

Because some of the Christians at Pergamum had been swayed, Jesus said, “Therefore repent” (Revelation 2:16, NAS). His words were sharp and direct. “Repent.” Stop. You’re going the wrong direction. You’re headed toward danger. You’re going to regret it. Stop and turn around.

The application of each letter to the seven churches in Revelation is repentance. And that’s the main application for us. This series is not about giving you tips on how to live a better life. This series is not offering gentle suggestions on how you ought to live. Jesus is serious about compromise. And this is how serious He is. “Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth” (Revelation 2:16, NAS). “Or else.” That’s blunt, that’s direct. “Or else ... I will make war against them.” Jesus is serious about theological compromise. Because it dishonors God who has spoken to us. It is a rejection of His very word. And with His sword of truth, Jesus warns us that He will oppose us, our church and any church, if we compromise theologically.

And His appeal is personal. He moved from warning the entire church, to making it personal. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:17, NAS). ***Are you standing on the word of God, or have you been swayed by the culture?*** If you have been swayed by the culture, if you have compromised the word of God in any way, Jesus is calling out to you, “Repent.” Turn around before you regret it.

Then His promise. “To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it” (Revelation 2:17, NAS). This promise is about the future, about the blessings

that await us, if we are faithful until we see Him in heaven. The “hidden manna” is a flashback to the heavenly food God provided for His people as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Here it represents God’s provision of everything we need. The “white stone” was a symbol of acquittal in ancient courts, and here symbolizes God’s grace and forgiveness. Our “new name” is a sign of eternal identity. Jesus is reminding us that God is our Father and we are His children. Jesus is urging us to be faithful to the word of our God.

#### HAVE YOU BEEN SWAYED BY THE CULTURE?

The application is obvious. *Are you standing on the word of God, or have you been swayed by the culture?*

For the church at large, I believe pressure to be relevant is one of the greatest threats to the church today. Of course, it’s a good thing for the church to speak to relevant issues in our day, and it’s a good thing for the church to speak the Gospel in a relevant way. But it’s not good when relevance replaces truth as our priority. That’s why Francis Chan said, “We live in a time when Christians are starting to change their theology because they are ashamed of the words of Jesus Christ, because it’s not popular.”

I believe popular author and blogger Rachel Held Evans has done that. Several years ago, Rachel began to question if Jesus was the only way to God, that’s questioning the very Gospel! And she explained why. “It just didn’t feel right to me, it didn’t fit with my very core sense of right and wrong, of justice and injustice ... My heart tells me something is wrong (with Jesus being the only way) ... therefore, I no longer believe that is the only biblical view ... I listened to my conscience and questioned a theology that simply didn’t feel right to me ... My hope is that more people listen to their intuition.”<sup>7</sup> The definition of compromise is rejecting the teaching of the Bible when it doesn’t feel right to us.

Jen Hatmaker is a popular author and voice for authentic Christianity, but she compromised when she endorsed gay marriage. She just couldn’t believe that God would oppose her gay friends and not allow them to love whom they wanted to love.

Rob Bell was a pastor, and such a creative communicator, but he compromised when he questioned the reality of hell. He just couldn’t believe that a loving God would send anyone to hell. In his controversial book *Love Wins*, he referred to hell as “misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love.”<sup>8</sup>

The Apostle Paul said, “For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound teaching. Instead, they will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject the truth” (2 Timothy 4:3-4, NLT). That’s the problem Jesus was confronting in Pergamum, and that’s the issue Jesus is warning us about.

The Bible says that God created the universe in six days, but the culture says the universe is the product of the big bang and billions of years of evolution. The Bible says sin is an offense to a holy God, but the culture says everyone is basically good at heart and that sin-talk is harsh and offensive. The Bible says Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross as the sacrifice for our sins, but the culture says Jesus was just a good moral teacher who gave us the Golden Rule, treat

people the way you want to be treated. The Bible says hell is the holy justice of God on all who reject Him, but the culture says hell is an invention of the church to scare people. I could go, but it's obvious there is a clash of worldviews.

Alisa Childers is a Christian writer and wrote a great article about the signs of theological compromise. She cited several signs that appear when Christians drift from God's word.<sup>9</sup>

1. There is a lowered view of the Bible, and you hear people say, "I disagree with the Apostle Paul on that issue ... that's just cultural and not meant for us today ..."
2. Feelings are empathized over facts, and you hear people say, "that verse doesn't resonate with me ... but I have good friends who are gay, so how could God ..."
3. Essential Christian doctrines are reinterpreted, and you hear people say, "I just can't believe a loving God would send anyone to hell ... Genesis must be just a story, because science has proven that evolution is true ..."
4. The heart of the Gospel message shifts from sin to social justice, and you hear people say, "we don't need to preach at people, we just need to love them ... I live by the Golden Rule, as Jesus said, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'"

We're not just talking about compromising on the big issues; we're talking about compromising on everyday issues.

- The Bible commands us to forgive each another.<sup>10</sup> But if you don't take that seriously, you're going to become a bitter person. If someone treats you wrong, or been unfair, you're not going to forgive them. You're going to become bitter.
- To husbands and fathers, the Bible says the man is the head of the home.<sup>11</sup> But if you don't believe that, or take that seriously, you won't fulfill your responsibilities to disciple your children. It won't be a priority.
- The Bible says there should not even be a hint of immorality in our lives.<sup>12</sup> But if you don't take that seriously, you're going to open yourself up to all kinds of media and think, "What's the big deal?" That's compromise.
- The Bible says God is holy.<sup>13</sup> But if worship becomes more like a concert to us, or even worse like karaoke, that's not worship. Worship is awe and reverence and humility before a holy God. If our worship does not look like that, we've compromised.
- The Bible says it is the word of God.<sup>14</sup> But if you don't believe that, you're not going to take it seriously. You're not going to read it that much. If the Bible says something, and you don't take seriously, that's compromise.

If you're neglecting the word of God, you are most likely compromising the word of God! Compromise is not always some intentional decision to stop believing God or the Bible. Compromise usually happens when the voice of the culture is louder than the voice of God in your life. When the daily messages of the culture outweigh the word of God. It's just like your diet. If you eat more ice cream than vegetables, you're not going to be healthy. If you consume more of the culture than of His word, you're going to compromise.

## CONCLUSION

### ***Are you standing on the word of God, or have you been swayed by the culture?***

Do you believe the Bible is the word of God? Do you believe the Bible is true, that it is absolute truth, and that it is authoritative over your life? Do you trust the Bible as God's will, as God's best? Are you standing on the word of God as the foundation of your life?

Jesus urges us to build our lives on His word, on this book, on this rock.

“Anyone who hears My words and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rains came, the floods rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house. Yet it did not fall, because it was built on the rock. But anyone who hears My words and does not obey them is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rains came, the floods rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Matthew 7:24-27, MW paraphrase).

There is a God and He has spoken. And this book is His word to us. The Bible is the rock.  
***Are you standing on the word of God, or have you been swayed by the culture?***

If you have, if the Holy Spirit is convicting you that you have, then what did Jesus say? “Repent.” Stop going that direction, turn around, and let His word shape who you are and what you believe. You may need to pray ...

- “Lord, show me if I have been swayed. Show me in what way I might have compromised and drifted from Your truth.”
- “Lord, I confess that I’ve been living my way and doing what I want, thinking I know best and ignoring Your word.”
- “Lord, I confess that I have neglected the Bible. I’m not hungry for it and don’t read it as much as I used to.”
- “Lord, I confess that I’ve allowed the voice of culture to sway me, and I’ve compromised what I believe. Please forgive me and help me get back on track.”

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), page 37.

<sup>2</sup> See Revelation 1:16, 2:12, 2:16, 6:8, 19:15, 19:21.

<sup>3</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), page 65.

<sup>4</sup> See Deuteronomy 23:4.

<sup>5</sup> See Numbers 31:16.

<sup>6</sup> “They have wandered off the right road and followed the footsteps of Balaam” (2 Peter 2:15, NLT).

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “When A Theology Just Doesn’t Feel Right,” [rachelheldevans.com](http://rachelheldevans.com), May 3, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Al Mohler, “We Have Seen All This Before: Rob Bell and the (Re)Emergence of Liberal Theology,” [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com), March 16, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Alisa Childers, “5 Signs Your Church Might Be Heading toward Progressive Christianity,” [www.alisachilders.com](http://www.alisachilders.com), May 8, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> See Ephesians 4:32.

<sup>11</sup> See 1 Corinthians 11:3.

<sup>12</sup> See Ephesians 5:3.

<sup>13</sup> See 1 Peter 1:15-16.

<sup>14</sup> See 2 Timothy 3:16.