

## The All Things to All People Church

In the Book of Revelation, John is told to write a letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor in the general area of Ephesus. Each church was addressed individually in ch.2 and 3, and each message to each church contained a commendation, a condemnation, and an exhortation. In Rev.2:12-17, the church at Pergamum is addressed. The commendation is that they live in a tough city to be a Christian in, yet they have not denied Christ even when threatened with death. In fact, historically a well known martyr, Antipas had been wiped out there. We are told that “Satan dwells” there in Pergamum (your translation may say Pergamos). I’ll give you a tip, this can’t be a good place to live, but what exactly does it mean? Is there really a locality where Satan dwells? Typically what this means is that Satan exerts great influence on the leadership of that city. Pergamum is a real place known in history. It was the center of the Roman emperor cult with a temple erected to the divine Augustus. The city also had a temple to the Greek god Zeus and its citizens worshipped both the Roman emperors and the Greek gods. The fact that the Christian leader Antipas was put to death by the Roman officials in Pergamum leads us to believe that the Christians in the area were threatened by official persecution. In that sense, you could say the throne of Satan and the throne of Caesar were synonymous.

Unfortunately for Pergamum, this is a very short commendation compared to the condemnation that follows in Rev.2:14-15. Pergamum had been making very serious compromises to get along. These compromises were within their church involving false teachers, participation in idol worship, and sexual immorality. We read they hold to the teaching of “Balaam” from the Old Testament story in Numbers 25. Balak and the leaders of Moab had hired Balaam to curse Israel, but the Lord would not let him do anything but bless Israel. Therefore Balaam advised the Moabites to send their version of the Hawaiian Tropic Bikini Team over to the “sons of Israel” (my paraphrase). These beautiful women not only enticed the Jewish men to sexual immorality, but as part of the cultic sexual act, they sacrificed to their idols “and ate and bowed down to their idols”(Nu.25:1-3). The teaching of Balaam, then involved both being somehow involved with sacrifice to idols and sexual immorality. It makes you wonder if being unfaithful in sex leads to being unfaithful to the Lord—Hmmm.

The early church constantly struggled with compromises with Greek culture and its paganism. The church council in Acts 15 dealt with this as well as Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor.8-10. Paul’s conclusion was that you could eat any meat you wanted, but you should not participate in feasts and celebrations where the meat was sacrificed to idols. This was difficult because many of the Christians were members of trade guilds (unions), and required to attend. You can imagine the economic and peer pressure to compromise.

We don’t know exactly who the Nicolaitans were, but according to early church writings they advocated free love. Ignatius said they were lovers of pleasure; Irenaeus wrote that they lived lives of unrestrained indulgence (I think I know them), and Clement wrote that they lived a reckless mode of life. Whoever they were, their philosophy was not at all what God intended for His church. Peter wrote of this type, “those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority...having eyes full

of adultery..enticing unstable souls.. they have gone astray having followed the way of Balaam..”. (2 Peter 10,14-15).

By allowing this false teaching and illicit behavior to be taught in the church they were compromising the truth, condoning sin in their midst, and destroying any true spiritual fellowship and unity that Christ intended them to have. Compromise and toleration can be attributes in some settings, but not in the church. Both James and John warned in their epistles to avoid being immersed in all the perverse things of the world, “keep yourself unstained by the world...you adulteresses, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?” and “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of God is not in him.”

### What About Our Churches Today?

The teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans are still with us today under a variety of new names. There will always be people in every church that are willing to compromise or turn a blind eye to new teaching. They view toleration and compromise as virtues in the church. They actually think they can be ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE. The result is all kinds of wild things going on with wild people. Even worse is a subtle alteration of the Gospel. Before you know it, spiritual life is not about Jesus—it’s all about me. My pleasures, my greed, my selfish desires dominate my spiritual life just as they have my physical materialistic life. This requires a complete redefinition of the Gospel. It takes many forms—whether it’s the health and wealth gospel, the prosperity gospel, syncretism, postmodernism, or some other form, it is all about appealing to the desires of man. This is the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. There are many rationalizations—the culture, shifting morality, the greater good, going with the flow, but the Bible is clear that the church is entrusted with the purity of the gospel as Paul said, “if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed” (Gal.1:9). The leaders of every local church are commanded to “hold fast the faithful Word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.” (Titus 1:9)

### What Has Balaam Got to do With Me? Consider Your Weakest Link

In the old days of walled cities, the enemy would probe the city looking for the city’s weakest point of defense. That is where the main attack would take place; if they could breach that point they could take the whole town. To break a chain, all you have to do is find one weak link and if you can break that one weak link, the whole chain is broken.

Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived. Solomon was a faithful servant of the living God. God entrusted the building of the Temple in Jerusalem to Solomon and filled Solomon with His Spirit; yet Solomon had a glaring weakness for the ladies. I’m sure the elders of Israel found this easy to overlook because of all of Solomon’s

accomplishments. Their boundaries were expanding, their economy was booming, their population growing, and they were becoming a world power. After all, boys will be boys, and wasn't Solomon's sexual exploits bringing peace to Israel? All these wives (1000) were princesses of foreign nations so treaties were made with those nations---peace is a good thing, growth is a good thing, money is overflowing. Aren't these the true measurements of success and virtue? Nevertheless, Solomon's weakest link would mean eventual disaster for Israel. The wives brought their religions with them. Eventually Solomon, in the spirit of toleration and compromise allowed them all to build altars and temples to their gods. After forty years, the entire nation was influenced and corrupted.

In the movie "Wall Street", the main character Bud was a really good guy with a great family and a wonderful dad. Bud had a weak link and that was a desire for easy money, power, and all its "trappings". Enter the devil disguised as Gordon Gecko, and who can forget his speech, "GREED IS GOOD". I even found myself thinking, yes greed is good, yes the ends do justify the means. So Bud was enticed at his weakest point, but it ended up affecting his whole life. He lost his license, he ruined his family, and he ended up in prison.

So what does the teaching of Balaam have to do with you and I? What does it have to do with our church? The wise teaching of Balaam to the Moabites was to entice Israel at its most vulnerable point. Israel already had all the wealth of Egypt. It was faithfully following the Lord and could not be cursed. Yet this second generation of young virile men had been in the wilderness for a long time. They had not seen the Hawaiian Tropic Bikini Team before. What could it hurt to indulge their powerful fleshly desires? The result was more than they bargained for—sex led to an orgy which led to everything else including idolatry.

### Your Church and its Leadership

Does your church want to expand, appeal to more people, and bring in more money? These are good things, but watch out for Balaam. His strategy works almost every time. We are all SUCKERS for Balaam. What is your leadership willing to tolerate? What are they willing to compromise to reach their goals? Don't forget Paul's command to the leaders, "hold fast the Word of God". This should be their number one priority.

How about you personally? What is your weakest link? What are you willing to tolerate? What are you willing to compromise? Jesus' message to Pergamum applies to us as well--"repent or else I am coming to you quickly".

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