

Seven Letters to Seven Churches: Part 3 - Pergamum

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Scripture: Revelation 2:12-17

I. The Elvis of Asia Minor

I was ordained into Christian ministry in 1995. Around the time of my ordination, *The Christian Century* published an article that quoted Jeffrey Stout, Professor of Religious Studies at Princeton University. His challenge to contemporary Christians has remained with me throughout my ministry. Professor Stout asked how belief in God makes it reasonable for us to do or risk things that a reasonable person who does not believe in God would not do or risk.

When it comes down to it, if our faith in God makes no practical difference in how we live our lives or how we propose living in community with others, a pragmatic observer might conclude that belief in God is meaningless. If there's no discernible difference between belief and unbelief, what good is belief?

This is essentially the question the Spirit of Jesus posed to the ancient church in Pergamum in the Book of Revelation. Our contemporary struggle is nothing new. Fortunately, neither is the solution.

Let's step back into ancient times to discover the wisdom ancient Christians might offer us today. When John of Patmos wrote the Book of Revelation toward the end of the First Century, Pergamum was like the Elvis Presley of Asia Minor. Not Elvis at his peak, as the vibrant and alluring King of Rock 'n' Roll, but the later Elvis, whose heyday had long passed, whose leather suits were many sizes wider, who had become addicted to an identity that had become increasingly tired and irrelevant to wider society. Pergamum had experienced a similar trajectory.

In its prime, four centuries earlier, Pergamum was the most powerful city in all of Asia Minor. In ancient times, the only major cities were also heavily fortified cities. Perched on a mesa 1,100 feet above the valley floor, Pergamum's fortified position made it nearly impenetrable. A small contingent of trained soldiers could successfully defend the city against a large army. Located 16 miles inland from the Aegean Sea, it may not have benefited from being a major seaport, like Ephesus, but its inland position also meant Pergamum wasn't susceptible to naval attack. Pergamum's strategic position along a critical trade route is what ensured a steady stream of wealth flowing into Pergamum. Its impregnability ensured that this wealth stayed in there. Thus, Pergamum housed a large regional treasury.

In its heyday, Pergamum wasn't just a city; it was the capital of the Kingdom of Pergamum, encompassing much of modern-day Turkey. Its legal and administrative structures, including courts and prisons, were housed there. The symbol of Pergamum's Proconsul, a double-edged sword, signified his power over life and death. In our scripture, Jesus claims the double-edged sword for himself – one that comes from his mouth, signifying the power of truth, which is mightier than any steel sword.

Pergamum was also home to a grand amphitheater, temples to Zeus, Athena, Bacchus, and eventually the Roman Emperor, and one of the ancient world's most significant libraries. Its 200,000 volumes were rivaled only by the library in Alexandria, Egypt.

Yet, just shy of two centuries after its founding, the Kingdom of Pergamum was handed over to Rome. The great-great-grandson of the ruler who had led Pergamum's meteoric rise bequeathed it all to Rome in his will. This didn't bode well for Pergamum's future. Two things happened that contributed to Pergamum's decline.

First, Rome had little interest in libraries. Why invest in intellectual pursuits when those resources could be used to expand and defend the empire? The Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, came at a high price to Pergamum. Roman General Mark Antony gave the entire collection of Pergamum's library to Cleopatra as a gift, which she promptly moved to Alexandria. Intellectual resources were drained, and Pergamum's strategic location became irrelevant. Who would choose to climb to the top of a high hill each day when there was no enemy within a thousand miles?

By the time Revelation was written, Ephesus had emerged as the most important city in the region, and Smyrna was the up-and-coming city. Pergamum was a relic of the past. The only significant institutions left were its court and penal system. Important legal cases were tried there and executions were carried out. If you were a Christian in Pergamum, you didn't come there to live for Christ. You came to die for him. One of the earliest Christian martyrs, Antipas, who is mentioned in the letter, was from Pergamum.

Before we move on to consider this letter, I invite you to consider the question Professor Stout posed: How does belief in God make it reasonable for you to do or risk things that a reasonable person who does not believe would not? Or does it?

II. Modern-Day Nicolaitans

When large communities begin to sense that their "glory days" are over and feel culturally, politically, and perhaps even spiritually irrelevant, two things tend to happen – both related to the stages of grief. First, they deny it. Like an aging, addicted Elvis, they pretend their glory days never ended, or at least that those days aren't so far gone that they can't be reclaimed.

Yet, when it becomes increasingly clear that the glory days are over, denial is replaced by anger. These communities lash out against those who represent the "new way."

"What is it with these crazy kids today and that awful new music they're listening to?"

In the late first century, the "crazy kids" were the Christians, and the "awful new music" was *Gospel* music. It sounded the Good News that neither the power of Rome nor the oppressive gods who demanded constant sacrifices had any real claim over people's lives. It conveyed the message that God's love and grace are what save us, not military might or wealth. It told people that God isn't perched atop Mt. Olympus or the throne in Rome, far removed from our lives, but is as close as our next breath. It proclaimed that God's love is for everyone, not just society's elite.

What angered the residents of Pergamum was that these "crazy kids" had no interest in supporting the traditions and institutions that had made Pergamum great and glorious in their eyes, and could restore its glory if people just doubled-down on their loyalty. Institutions like worshipping the Roman emperor as a god and contributing to the pagan temples by purchasing meat sacrificed to idols. In fact, not only did these "crazy kids" not care about these hallowed traditions, they outright refused to participate in them!

It was not lost on the residents of Pergamum that one of its remaining vestiges of former glory was its regional standing as the place where executions took place. They sought to restore the glories of Pergamum – or at least work out their anger over losing their glory – by subjecting disloyal and unpatriotic citizens – like Christians were in their eyes – to the executioner's axe.

If you were a Christian in Pergamum, therefore, you were faced with three choices:

1. You could cling to your beliefs in Jesus and act on your beliefs, thereby putting your life and that of your family in peril.
2. You could renounce your newfound faith and return to your old way of life.
3. You could hold onto your faith in Jesus but act no differently than pagan. This way you could have your cake and eat it, too! Only you'd have to change the recipe slightly to make this work – which is what some did.

This third option may seem hypocritical. According to the Book of Revelation, the Spirit of Jesus thought so, too. In the letter, Jesus refers negatively to "followers of Balaam" and "the Nicolaitans." These are code words, likely referring to a group of Christians known as libertines.

Christian libertines adopted beliefs that appeared orthodox or even fundamentalist on the surface. They taught that belief in Jesus cleanses us from all sin, freeing us from the old, death-dealing Law and allowing us to live fully in the life-giving light of Grace. Curiously, they used this theology to justify their participation in pagan sexual practices, including orgies. They also made sacrifices to the emperor as a god and ate meat sacrificed to idols. Why? Because Jesus cleanses us from all sin! In fact, some libertines claimed that indulging in orgies and other "sinful" pagan behaviors was a deeply spiritual practice. It was a way of experiencing how faith in Jesus frees them from the power of sin.

Imagine how our church might grow if we advertised orgies as spiritual practices!

How convenient.

All it takes is a slight twist of orthodox theology, and suddenly you can have it all: "Jesus died for our sins, so we can party on without consequences!" If only that second part were true. It's like a doctor saying, "Now that triple-bypass surgery has put your heart back in order, here's a prescription for McDonald's Big Macs. Take two, three times a day, but only on a full stomach."

Can we find parallels to Christian libertinism in our day?

If you can't, I'm guessing you don't own a television or read a newspaper! Christian libertines regularly make headlines.

Consider the fire-and-brimstone preacher who wants the government to regulate the bedroom behavior of everyone, only to be caught engaging in the very actions they condemn as sinful. Christian libertinism may not be what they preach, but their actions speak louder than words.

Or the Christian who calls for America to be a "Christian Nation" based on Christian values yet is caught committing financial fraud. Again, Christian libertinism is being preached – not with words, but with actions.

If you think this is only a problem for more conservative Christians, think again.

I get uncomfortable when I consider how evident it is that we are damning our children, grandchildren, and future generations to climate catastrophe, all while those of us with privilege and power carry on like business as usual. I get uncomfortable when I receive praise for driving an electric hybrid vehicle but do nothing that might cause my peers to label me a "crazy climate activist." I've found that those who dwell in any city within the Kingdom of Pergamum treat others quite nicely. They can even be quite generous ... so long as one's faith doesn't show too much.

Christian libertinism rears its ugly head wherever Christians believe that God's Grace comes without a cost; that freedom from the power of sin means freedom to do whatever one chooses; that God's love for us, beyond our wildest imagination, comes without the slightest expectation that we extend this same love to others. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer so famously put it, "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without a cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

The lesson I take from the letter to the church of Pergamum is that Grace is the greatest – and the most dangerous – gift that the world has ever known. When used as directed, Grace will set you free and set your heart on fire. Receiving God's Grace can also inspire a person to offer this same Grace to others, ensuring that God's will is "done on earth as it is in heaven." Yet when Grace isn't used for its healing effects but is simply popped like a pill that will offer a temporary high, it easily leads to a really bad trip. The power of Grace is reduced to nothing more than a pious justification for claiming to be a Christian while acting as if faith makes no difference in our lives.

The letter to the church of Pergamum offers the promise that, for those who use Grace as the label intends, it will be like eating "hidden manna" or being given a "white stone" on which is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it. Translating the code, the promise is that those who dare to translate their faith into action will always find the nourishment they need, even if society seeks to cut it off. And those who not only receive God's Grace, but give it as freely as they have received it, will discover their truest and highest identity in so doing. An identity that may get them banished as pariahs from certain communities but will always provide them a warm welcome in the houses of the holy.