

Mind Pollution

by Steve Zeisler

Because of the hostage crisis in Beirut, we have in recent days witnessed the President in his role as Commander in-- Chief of the armed forces. The huge aircraft carrier Nimitz lies ready for action in the Mediterranean, close by Lebanon. Though the United States is the greatest military power in the world, however, in this present crisis our armed might has been more or less neutralized because of where and how this battle is being fought. The attack made on the people and the security of our nation was carried out in such a way that our hands are virtually tied.

A similar problem is raised in the passage from Revelation which we will be looking at this morning, the letter to the third church, the church at Pergamum, in the series of seven letters dictated to the apostle John by the Lord Jesus. This letter has several military references. It talks about swords, thrones, the headquarters of evil, the Lord himself threatening war on those who resist him, etc. This "battle" language should remind us that Christians are soldiers in the army of the Lord, and as such we are constantly engaged in a spiritual battle being fought in heavenly places, a battle over much higher stakes than any currently being fought on this earth.

Revelation 2:12-17:

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and 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. 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. Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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.

These verses clearly indicate that we are indeed involved in a war. Here is a helpful quote from John Stott's commentary on these letters:

Persecution, error and sin. These were not just inexplicable phenomena. St. John recognized their source with a clarity of insight which we badly need to recapture today. The devil was at work. Behind the outward situation in the Asian churches an invisible conflict raged between Christ and Antichrist, between the Lamb and the Dragon, between "the holy city" Jerusalem (the Church) and "the great city" Babylon (the world). The devil's assault upon Christ's Church was a pincer movement. He attacked from several directions. Now the onslaught was physical, through a persecuting emperor and his deputies. Now it was intellectual, through false cults, and now moral through sub-Christian ethical standards. These were the devil's three strategies, symbolically represented in the Revelation as the dragon's three allies: the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth (or the false prophet) and the harlot Babylon.

There is raging an invisible conflict, and we are confronted by a wily enemy who attacks us on several fronts in a spiritual pincer movement. Some churches in Revelation were faced with violent persecution -- Antipas had forfeited his life in the service of Christ at Pergamum. Other churches seemed to be prospering externally, but inside their spiritual life was being eaten away by corruption. The church at Ephesus, we learned, while maintaining strong doctrine had lost its first love. Pergamum, as we will see, stood strong in the face of the vicious personal attack, yet inwardly they had listened to the polluting voices of false teachers. This attack on several fronts was causing havoc in the church, and exposing its strengths and weaknesses-- as those of our nation have been exposed in the present crisis.

Our Lord begins by saying to the church at Pergamum, "I know where you dwell." This church had been called to serve Christ where Satan's throne was located. Pergamum was a very important city in the ancient world. It had been the capital city of its region before Rome came to power. It was an important city under the Greeks and under earlier kingdoms. The first church mentioned in these letters was the church at Ephesus, a city which could be compared with our modern-- day New York or Los Angeles. Ephesus was a tremendous commercial center, a wealthy, bustling city. The second city, Smyrna, was perhaps more like San Francisco, a center of culture, sophisticated and beautiful. Pergamum could be compared with Washington, D.C. It was the center of concentrated political power. Like Smyrna, it too was prominently involved in worship of the Roman emperor. The evil power and strength of Rome, the "throne of Satan," was headquartered there. "I know you have been called to serve me there," Jesus tells the church at Pergamum.

Our Lord commends them for their courage in that situation. He mentions Antipas (of whom we know nothing except this reference), who was martyred in the cause of Christ. We may assume that other Christians lost their livelihoods and suffered physically because of their commitment. The Lord commends them because they did not deny his name, the standard which went ahead of the column and never dipped. They refused to sell out, but remained committed servants who stood for the name of their Savior. Further, they did not deny their faith in him. They not only held true to the cause of Christ. they courageously faced personal suffering in his name. When they were attacked they clung to him As a result, they received commendation from him

But our Lord then raises the deep concern he feels for this church. As commendable as was their strength and courage, they had a fatal weakness. "There are some who hold the teaching of Balaam," he declares. Balaam was a remarkable Old testament individual who hailed from Mesopotamia, where Abraham had also originated. evidently Balaam had a reputation that had extended beyond the borders of his own country. In the final days of Israel's wanderings, hundreds of thousands of them moved up the east side of the Jordan, through the land of Moab. They terrified the king of Moab who felt they would destroy his nation. Powerless himself to do anything about this, Moab summoned Balaam, a charismatic, powerful sorcerer (his name means "devourer of the people") to curse the Israelites so as to make them vulnerable militarily.

Balaam obviously had available to him the powers of the spiritual world. He even had access to speak to God, even though he did not love or serve him. But though he went to all kinds of extremes to impose a curse upon the Israelites, God would not allow him to do so. Every time he tried to curse them, in fact. the Lord instead made him speak blessing upon them. Balaam even prophesied the coming of the Messiah in the midst of his efforts to curse Israel. finally, he had to confess to the king who had asked for his services, "Clod will not let me curse these people. But I have another strategy: seduce them. Send women from your nation among them to seduce them. ~That will accomplish your purposes." Thus Balaam's counsel, successful as it turned out, was that idolatry and immorality would impair the movements if the Israelites through the land of Moab

The lord's word to the church at Pergamum was that some among them, the Nicolaitans, were teaching the same things, idolatry and immorality, that Balaam recommended to Balak the king of Moab. These people were evidently a cult headed by a charismatic leader, a leader in the tradition of Balaam himself. We know very little about this cult. We do know. however, that they threatened to accomplish among the people of God what Balaam in his day had accomplished: seduction away from the truth of the gospel by a so-called wisdom that was not of God.

Cults surface in every generation throughout history, but only historians remember and keep records of their teaching. If we could speak to the next generation of Christians of, say, the evil of the Jim Jones and the People's Temple movement, most of them would not have any idea of what you were referring to. But for most of us memories of the charismatic figure who led a thousand people to their deaths in the jungles of Guyana remain vivid. In the church at Pergamum, apparently, the Nicolaitans had infiltrated themselves into the church in the same way Jim Jones used his standing and Christian ordination to trap unwary seekers a few years ago.

The question we must seek to answer, of course, is, What about our church and our home fellowships'? How do the words of Christ to this church at Pergamum benefit or challenge us'? We need to be challenged both by the commendation and the criticism of this church at Pergamum.

First, in commending them, the Lord appreciated their courage and applauded their response to persecution from without. They had suffered at the hands of the Roman Empire but they had not flinched. They had taken on the world at its strongest point in the battle for the sake of righteousness. What a great commendation!

For us, the battleground could include the schools, where the philosophy of this world is taught to our children, causing them pain and confusion. They are taught that man evolved from nothing. that man is insignificant because he is nothing more than energy-- and mass, man is the highest good in the universe all the philosophies of the secular humanists. Far from being neutral in these areas, our schools are largely antagonistic toward spiritual matters. Here, in the public schools system, is where Christians can take a stand and battle in a stronghold of worldly thinking.

Another arena where Christians can have influence is the courts. In 1973, the Supreme Court issued the judgment that has since resulted in abortion on demand throughout our country and millions of subsequent deaths. The courts defend child pornographers, allowing them to escape unscathed despite the evil they are perpetrating. At the same time, they have determined that the counsel given by pastors to parishioners who seek them out are matters for courts to supervise, evaluate and perhaps condemn. The thinking of the world is entrenched in the courts. Christians must be involved in these areas. They may be called to suffer even as Antipas suffered. The Lord commended his servants in Pergamum for their willingness to do battle in the world. He will likewise commend US for our willingness to do battle in these areas.

We as a nation are currently undergoing an economic review, the like of which we have not seen for some time. Our international involvements evolve and change rapidly. In these areas Christians can speak and work against racism and injustice. They can speak and work in favor of loyalty, peace, for the poor, for the protection of the family unit, for honesty and for fairness. We can address the halls of power with a word of truth, even if we are refused a hearing. Such efforts can be costly, but the Lord will commend us for courageous service.

But courage in the face of a foe who is external to us in the strongholds of political power is not the sole concern of this letter. Remember the words of Paul to the Ephesian elders, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them." Despite their success in fighting off attacks from without, the church at Pergamum had allowed false teachers to infiltrate their ranks. The twin issues referred to by the Lord in this letter, idolatry and immorality, are the same issues that are facing the church today. Christian leaders and church members teach these things today. Jesus said we cannot serve God and ; we cannot serve the power of money and the power of God. That is the great idolatry of history, and it certainly is the great idolatry today.

Others today advocate immoral activity. Many in evangelical circles who ought to be our brothers and sisters in Christ are communicating a message that says, essentially, "God wants you to be wealthy, beautiful, healthy, and untroubled. That is his desire for you, his commitment to you. He commands you to pursue the good life and have all its advantages." Therefore, this kind of thinking holds, if we find ourselves confronted by a call to obedience that contradicts what we perceive to be the good life, obedience can safely be jettisoned. Fidelity in marriage is a good thing, this mind set holds, and it is probably best for most individuals, but in certain circumstances marriage vows can be broken. These teachers proclaim by their lifestyles that fidelity is fine for most people but in their particular circumstances, difficulties and struggles, knowing that the Lord wants them to be happy and live the good life, they are justified in divorcing their mates. In his is the kind of thinking that holds that particular acts of fornication express one's inner essence, and since the deepest calling of the Christian is to live the good life, such acts are justified. While these people would not counsel everyone to live this way, in their own case they proclaim themselves justified in doing so.

That is the devilish teaching that has attached itself to the cause of Christ in our day. If we are called to deny ourselves or suffer in any way in order to obey God, then, according to this teaching, such suffering and deprivation cannot possibly be his will for us. This is Balaamite teaching. Advocates of this are trying to seduce Christians away from their faith, so that despite the fact they are willing to do battle with external forces of evil, what they are fighting for is no longer real Christianity; the faith they are defending is not the gospel. 1

he Lord might well say to churches today. "You are strong in your stand against unrighteous political power. against those who attack you from the outside, but you have listened to the siren-song of false teachers from within."

A thoughtful member of our congregation has written a lengthy response to the Board of Elders following some recent changes here at Peninsula Bible Church. Included was this warning. "Perhaps the biggest danger at PBC is 'gracious Christian living and success-- in-- the-- name-- of -- Christ' here on the Peninsula." In his book *The Golden Cow*, John White talks about the idolatry of mammon:

At the heart of the matter lies our dependence upon material things. We take them for granted. We accumulate them. We go into debt to acquire them. work longer hours to earn them. I hey enslave us. They enslave not only our bodies but our hearts which no longer have room for the crying of the needy, the starving and the dying.

All this is done as if it were Christian and God-honoring pursuing the good life, "gracious Christian living," in the name of Christ. But Christians must learn that it is not an act of serious discipleship to go on a Christian cruise rather than a pagan cruise, despite what the travel brochures say. We are so easily swayed by that kind of thinking. While we battle with the forces of evil from without we are becoming undermined from within.

What the Lord dictated to John about what would happen if such were true of us is that the Commander-- in-- chief of our army will turn his attention to us and war on us with the sword of his mouth (v. 16). He will not merely attack the external enemies, but the teachers and their followers who are within the flock of God. This sword is mentioned in Revelation 19, where it is directed against wicked outsiders: "And from his mouth comes a sharp sword so that with it he may smite the nations and will rule them with a rod of iron." But here in chapter 2 the sword that proceeds from his mouth is turned on insiders who have sold out and become unChristian in their defense of the faith.

In a passage on immorality in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul reminds us, "Let no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you." The Lord becomes the enemy of those who are in his own army. Instead of the Word of God being encouraging and comforting to us it will become terrifying to us. hurting us in areas where we need correction.

At the end of this letter there is a touching and beautiful word to overcomers: He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, "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 the one who receives it." Jesus says that two things will be given to those who overcome and resist the temptation to give in: hidden manna and a white stone with a secret name inscribed on it. There is a great deal of speculation about the "white stone" mentioned here. It may refer to the jewels worn around the neck of the high priest, but whatever its symbolic reference, the point of what Jesus is offering is clear: he is offering intimacy.

Jesus himself is the manna, the life-- giving food we need. He is our hidden source of supply, the bread of life. This new name, which is known only to him and us indicates a relationship of great closeness. We often have shared names with those to whom we are closest. Lovers share names with one another that would be inappropriate for anyone else to know. Parents and children likewise have names for each other that are not shared with outsiders. Here Jesus is saying that he will come to us with the same kind of intimacy.

Do you see what he is doing'? What makes us vulnerable to the love of money and to immorality is the perception that we are missing something in life. If only we had more money, prestige, sexual experiences. etc., then we would really achieve what we desire deep inside. But the Lord is saying, "If you will trust me, I am the one who will supply what you need. I will be your intimate Companion, the one with whom you can share your deepest longings. What you regard as lost to you, thereby making yourself vulnerable to this other teaching. I will make up to you in intimate friendship." What a great promise he makes to those who resist the teaching that says pursuing the good life is what Christianity is all about.

Many have been sobered this past week by the threat of terrorism to our nation and what our response might

be. Our military forces are watching closely the situation in El Salvador, where four Marines were killed, and in Lebanon, where our hostages are being held. The possibility of war sobers us and makes us take seriously the threat of terrorism. Yet how is it possible for us to forget that we are at all times members of the army of the Lord, involved in an ongoing battle? It ought to make a difference to us that we have been called to serve Christ in the battle with the external forces of Satan. It also ought to make us think that, just as terrorists have strategies to force great powers to negotiate with them, the devil can attack us in areas where we are vulnerable. If we are indeed involved in a spiritual war, and if we are serving a great Lord, we ought to take these things as seriously as any nation takes seriously the defense of its borders. Let us be courageous enough to fight those who attack us from the outside; and let us be faithful to not listen to the siren song of the teaching of Balaam which, in the name of Christ, will seduce us away from God.

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