

Antinomianism and the Letter to Pergamum:

The Danger of Compromise and Christ's Authority
as Judge

 by Steve Torres

Revelation 2:12-17

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.' 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and 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 the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'"

Introduction

The letter to the church in Pergamum, found in Revelation 2:12–17, stands as a timeless warning against one of Christianity's most persistent heresies: antinomianism. This false teaching—suggesting that Christian freedom liberates believers from moral law—has plagued the church since its inception. From the first century to our present day, many false teachers have arisen, distorting the doctrine of grace by implying that salvation permits believers to "do whatever they want." This dangerous misinterpretation of Christian liberty directly contradicts Scripture's consistent call to holiness and represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be free in Christ.

In this letter, Jesus Christ addresses a church that maintained outward faithfulness in a hostile pagan environment yet tolerated those who compromised with idolatry and immorality. The Lord introduces Himself as the one "who has the sharp, double-edged sword," an image that powerfully symbolizes His supreme authority as judge and the penetrating power of His Word to discern truth from error within His church. This imagery underscores a crucial truth: Christ's judgment is not merely theoretical but immediate and consequential for those who compromise His teachings.

Historical Context: Pergamum as "Satan's Throne"

To fully appreciate the severity of Christ's warnings to the church in Pergamum, we must understand the challenging environment in which these believers lived. Pergamum was not merely another city in the Roman province of Asia Minor; it was a center of political power, pagan worship, and intellectual achievement that presented unique challenges to the Christian community.

Formerly the capital of the Attalid kingdom, Pergamum had been bequeathed to Rome in 133 BC and subsequently became one of the most prominent Roman administrative centers in Asia. The city was renowned for its impressive acropolis that rose approximately 1,000 feet above the surrounding plain, creating a visually imposing presence that symbolized its political and religious significance.

The religious landscape of Pergamum was particularly challenging for Christian believers. The city housed numerous pagan cults, including those dedicated to Athena, Dionysus, and Asclepius (the god of healing, whose symbol was the serpent). Most significantly, Pergamum featured a monumental altar dedicated to Zeus, which some scholars identify as the "throne of Satan" mentioned in Revelation 2:13.

Beyond its religious significance, Pergamum was also designated as the first city in Asia to receive a temple dedicated to the imperial cult under Augustus Caesar, making it a primary center for emperor worship in the region. The designation of Pergamum as "where Satan has his throne" likely refers to this concentration of pagan and imperial worship.

Christ's Authority: The Sharp Double-Edged Sword



Symbol of Divine Authority

The letter to Pergamum begins with a striking self-description: "These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword" (Revelation 2:12). This imagery symbolizes the power and authority of God's Word to judge and execute justice.



Superior to Roman Authority

As the administrative center of the Roman province, Pergamum was one of the few cities in the empire granted the right of the sword (*ius gladii*)—the authority to execute capital punishment. By describing Himself as the one with the "sharp, double-edged sword," Christ asserts His ultimate authority over even the highest human powers in Pergamum.



Penetrating Judgment

Christ's double-edged sword represents a superior authority and a more penetrating judgment. No aspect of human thought or behavior can escape its discernment. This metaphor serves as both a warning and a comfort.



True Sovereignty

In a city dominated by impressive temples to false gods and the intimidating presence of Roman authority, the vision of Christ wielding this sword reasserted His position as the true sovereign over all earthly powers.

Commendation: Faithfulness Amid Hostility



Acknowledgment of Difficult Circumstances

"I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives" (Revelation 2:13).



Maintaining Public Identification

They remained "true to my name," indicating that the church as a whole had maintained its public identification with Christ despite the risks this entailed in a city dominated by pagan worship and imperial cult loyalty.



Perseverance Through Persecution

They "did not renounce their faith," even during periods of intense persecution, exemplified by the martyrdom of Antipas, whom Christ designates as "my faithful witness."



Principles of Christian Faithfulness

Christ notices and values steadfastness in hostile environments. Public identification with Christ—not denying His name even when costly—is a fundamental aspect of Christian witness that cannot be compromised for convenience or safety.

Critique: The Danger of Doctrinal Compromise



Serious Rebuke Despite External Faithfulness

"Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans" (Revelation 2:14-15).



The Balaam Connection

The reference to "the teaching of Balaam" recalls the Old Testament account where Balaam advised Balak to undermine Israel's faithfulness to God by enticing them into idolatry and sexual immorality through seduction rather than confrontation.



Specific Compromises

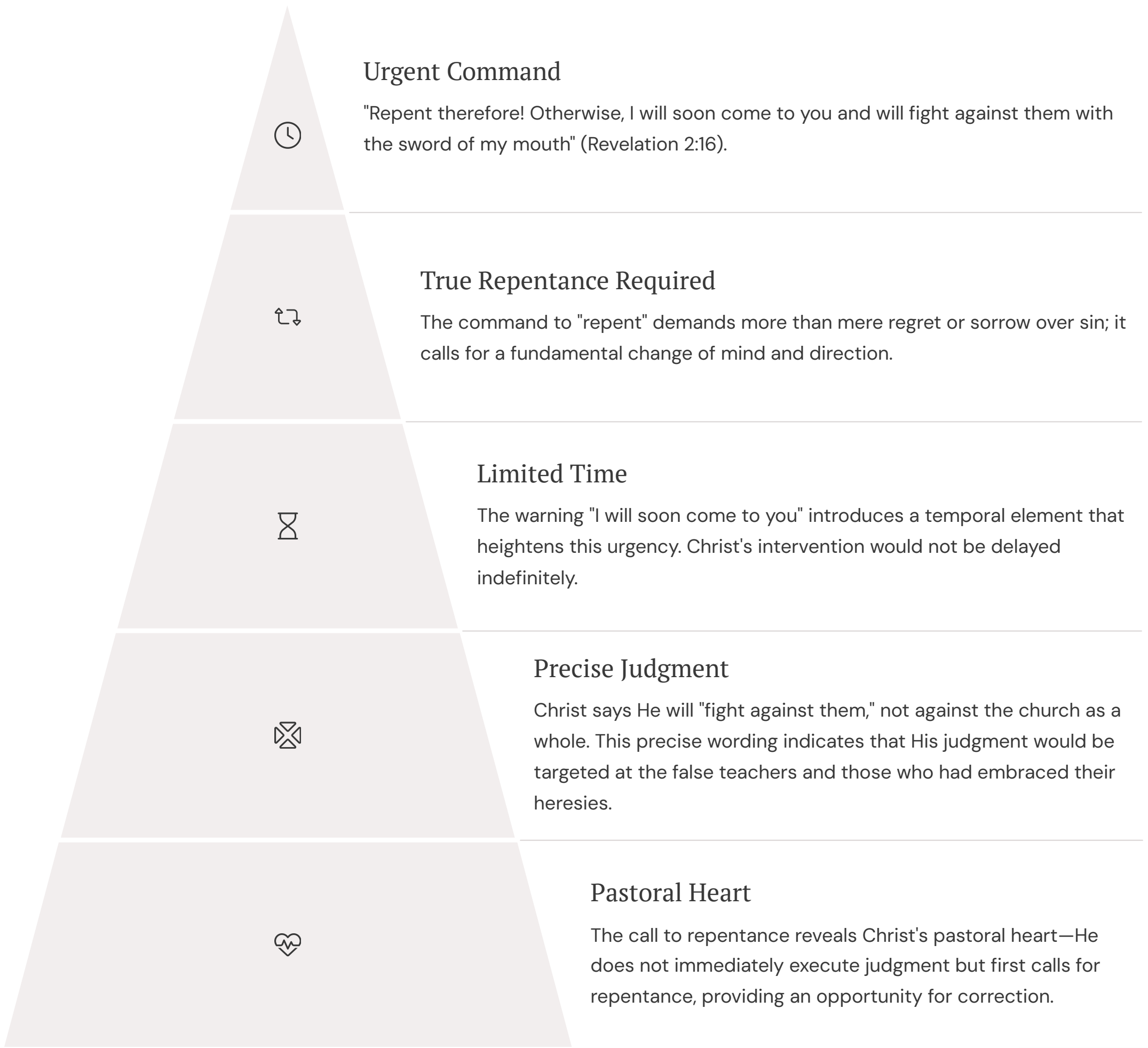
The specific sins mentioned—"food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality"—were directly connected to pagan worship practices in Pergamum, where social and economic life revolved around guilds and associations that regularly held feasts in pagan temples.



Failure of Leadership

The church leadership had allowed these views to persist within the community without discipline or correction. This tolerance reflected a fundamental failure to exercise proper spiritual discernment and maintain doctrinal boundaries necessary for the church's spiritual health and witness.

The Call to Repentance: The Urgency of Response



The Promise to the Overcomer: The Reward of Faithfulness

Hidden Manna

"To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna" (Revelation 2:17).

- Supernatural spiritual nourishment superior to worldly benefits
- Points to intimate fellowship with Christ Himself
- Reminds believers that temporary deprivation will be compensated by God's supernatural provision

White Stone with New Name

"I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it" (Revelation 2:17).

- Symbol of divine acquittal, victory, access to God's presence, and intimate friendship with Christ
- Represents a transformed identity and unique relationship with God
- Assurance that rejection by society would be compensated by divine acceptance

Universal Application

"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:17).

- The message to Pergamum contains enduring principles applicable to all churches
- Warnings against compromise and promises to the overcomer speak to every generation
- Challenges believers in all ages to remain faithful despite cultural pressure

Application for Today's Believers: Resisting Modern Antinomianism

Cultural Compromise

Today's believers often experience pressure to adopt secular values regarding sexuality, consumption, entertainment, and ethical standards, similar to the pressures faced by Pergamum Christians.

Christ's Authority and Word

In an age of relativism, the image of Christ with the "sharp, double-edged sword" reasserts the existence of absolute truth and divine judgment, challenging modern tendencies to minimize judgment.



Distinct Christian Witness

Christ's commendation of those who "did not renounce your faith in me" reminds modern believers that public identification with Christ remains a non-negotiable aspect of genuine discipleship.

Cost of Discipleship

While few Western Christians face martyrdom like Antipas, faithful witness often entails other sacrifices: damaged professional opportunities, strained relationships, social marginalization, or legal challenges.

The Church's Responsibility in Addressing False Teaching

Recognize the Problem

Christ's critique identifies the problem not merely as individual sin but as tolerated false teaching. Modern church leaders must exercise discernment to identify doctrinal drift and moral compromise.



Confront with Truth

Christ's call for the Pergamene church to "repent therefore!" applies to contemporary churches that have tolerated false teaching. Church leaders must exercise proper spiritual authority in addressing error.



Accept Corporate Responsibility

The letter's emphasis on corporate responsibility challenges the individualism prevalent in contemporary Christianity. The church is a covenant community with collective responsibility for maintaining doctrinal integrity.



Restore with Grace

The opportunity for repentance before judgment demonstrates Christ's mercy even in the context of serious error. Correction should be offered with both firmness and compassion.



Conclusion: The Enduring Message of Pergamum

1

Christ's Ultimate Authority

Christ's self-description as the one "who has the sharp, double-edged sword" establishes His ultimate authority as judge and highlights the penetrating power of His Word to discern truth from error.

2

Costly Faithfulness

The commendation of those who remained "true to my name" even amid persecution reminds us that faithfulness often comes at a cost—a reality exemplified by Antipas, the "faithful witness."

3

Danger of Compromise

The critique of those who tolerated false teaching warns against the subtle ways compromise can infiltrate the church through accommodation to cultural practices that undermine distinctive Christian witness.

4

Eternal Reward

The promises to the overcomer—hidden manna and a white stone with a new name—reorient our understanding of reward from temporal benefits to eternal relationship with Christ.

In an age characterized by moral relativism, religious syncretism, and cultural accommodation, the letter to Pergamum calls the church back to its foundational commitments: unwavering loyalty to Christ, adherence to His authoritative Word, maintenance of doctrinal and moral boundaries, and willingness to stand against cultural pressures that would dilute distinctive Christian witness.