

When Trouble Comes from the Inside - Revelation 2:12-17

You have some who hold the teaching of Balaam . . . Therefore repent.”

Revelation 2:14, 16

The ancient Greeks knew that if you can't defeat your opponent by attacking them on the outside, you should try getting them to let you inside.

This was the strategy behind the famous “Trojan horse.” Since they couldn't successfully break into the city of Troy, the Greeks pretended to give up and leave the Trojans with a parting gift of surrender—a giant horse. The Trojans opened their gates to receive the gift, and discovered too late that they had let in a group of the Greek's most deadly soldiers.

Jesus sent a message to a group of Christians in Pergamum to warn them that they had opened their gates to a Trojan horse—a group of people who held ideas that Christians may engage in idol worship and sexual immorality.

The problem faced by those Christians is relevant to us. When we have longings we feel Christ can't satisfy—for a sense of belonging, identity, and safety—we will try to get these longings fulfilled in other ways. We will come up with plausible-sounding arguments to disown Christ. And when we lack clear-headed thinking and courage, we will fail to deal decisively with these arguments.

So how does Jesus deal with a church that is threatened by trouble *from the inside*?

1. He commends them for their external strength.

Pergamum was a city of over 100,000 people, and an important and exciting center of culture, education, and religion. Guild members and other social groups were expected to throw a pinch of incense into an altar as they swore, “Caesar is Lord!” A massive altar to Zeus towered above most of the city. The shape of its stone columns resembled a gigantic armchair, and this is perhaps what was behind Jesus' saying that they lived “where Satan's throne is” (2:13).

At some point, apparently, the city leaders demanded that the Christians deny that Jesus was Lord and declare Caesar to be lord instead. The Christians flatly refused. As a brutal example of what happens when someone stands against the Roman empire, the city leaders publicly executed one of the Christians, whose name Antipas (probably a nickname) means “against everyone.”

The Christians would not disown Christ, even at the threat of death. But what about the allure of social acceptance and sex?

2. He calls them to repent for their internal weakness.

The “teaching of Balaam” is more of a strategy than it is a set of doctrinal beliefs. It is a way of getting God's people to compromise. It harkens back to the days when Israel was entering the land of Canaan. Balak, a king, was afraid of the incoming Israelites and hired a prophet named Balaam to curse them. Balaam, try as he might, was unable to land a curse on the Israelites. So instead he suggested that King Balak get the pretty Moabite girls to invite the Israelite men to the feasts of their gods—along with the sexual practices that accompanied those feasts.

It worked. Very soon, the Israelites were bowing down to Moabite gods instead of worshiping Yahweh.

Jesus is telling the church at Pergamum that the same thing is happening to them. Instead of tolerating these permissive ideas, they must swiftly and decisively deal with them. The people who hold those ideas must either change or leave.

3. He strengthens them with his promise.

The reason people were lured to compromise their beliefs and morals is understandable. In some cases, it meant being excluded from one's job. After all, if you didn't swear "Caesar is Lord," you couldn't be in the guild, and if you couldn't be in the guild, you couldn't make a living. It could even cost one's life, as proven in the case of Antipas.

Jesus understands this, and reminds the Christians that they have something better than erotic feasts and guild membership: "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" (Revelation 2:17).

While many have debated the precise meaning of the manna and the stone, these symbols strongly suggest that Jesus is promising that those who are faithful to him will enjoy a better and more satisfying feast than they could enjoy at the temple of Zeus. He is offering them true belonging and validation (a white stone was often used as a ticket to a feast).

Application Questions

1. Jesus confronted the church in Pergamum for allowing people in the church to hold harmful ideas about what it means to follow Jesus. It raises an important question: How does a church remain welcoming to anyone regardless of their beliefs and lifestyle, while at the same time upholding Christ's call to follow him in every area of life?
2. What does it mean to "hold the teaching of Balaam," and in what areas might it be possible for the members and attendees of Trinity Baptist Church to do this?
3. How can plausible-sounding arguments be used to disown one's faith or convictions? Can you provide some contemporary examples?
4. What pressures make it difficult or unpleasant to deal with people who hold to harmful ideas within the church?
5. As specific as you can be, fill out the details of the kind of response Jesus expected of the church of Pergamum, as implied in his simple command to "repent."
6. What is true about the symbols "hidden manna" and "white stone" that provides encouragement to overcome compromise and fear?