

Flexitarianism

Special Delivery – Part VI

Revelation 2:12-17

Introduction

Let me quote from a story that describes the times we live in. It came across the AP Network News a little more than a year ago.

“Even after five years, Christy Pugh has no trouble sticking to her vegetarian regimen. The secret to her success? Eating some meat.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m a bad vegetarian, that I’m not strict enough or good enough,” the 28-year-old bookkeeper from Concord said recently. “I really like vegetarian food but I’m just not 100 percent committed. . . . I really like sausage.”

The article went on to say that this growing number of people are now referred to as “flexitarians” – a term that was voted by the American Dialect Society as the most useful word of the year (2003).

Mollie Katzen, a cookbook author and founder of a mostly vegetarian restaurant, advocates vegetable-based diets, but sees room for flexibility. She said, “I don’t feel it’s wrong if you’ve got a great big plate of vegetables, but your protein is from a healthy, happy chicken.”

How did she know the chicken was happy? How do you know that? Was it smiling right before . . . never mind.

Charles Stahler, co-director of the Baltimore-based Vegetarian Resource Group, credits the growth of his movement to these flexitarians – vegetarians who dabble in meat and meat eaters who seek out vegetarian meals. Stahler said, “This is why Burger King now has a veggie burger. It’s not because of true vegetarians – they wouldn’t rush to

Burger King anyway. It’s because of [the millions of people] in the middle. They are the driving audience.”¹

There it is – a most useful word for diet – “flexitarian”.

Well, I have coined a new word for the church, and I believe millions of people will find it helpful – “Flexitarianism”.

Is that not a great word for a new denomination? It should catch on well because it describes the prevailing mood of the church. It fits the millions of people in the middle.

Flexitarianism is for people who are not 100% committed. They are the undecided; they dabble in both worlds. So, the church of the Flexitarian denomination can be a place where saints and sinners will both be comfortable.

Listen to these advertisements from churches to lure unsuspecting unbelievers or uncommitted believers to be interested in attending:

- “There is no fire and brimstone here. No Bible-thumping. Just practical, witty messages.”
- “Services at our church have an informal feeling. You won’t hear people threatened with hell or referred to as sinners. The goal is to make you feel welcome, not drive you away.”
- “The sermons are relevant, upbeat and best of all, short. You won’t hear a lot of preaching about sin. Preaching here doesn’t sound like preaching; it’s sophisticated and friendly talk.”

- “[The pastor] preaches a salvation message, but the idea is not so much being saved from hell but saved from meaninglessness.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I recently watched one of the most popular preachers in our country today sit through a television interview and repeatedly dodge the implication that anyone who disbelieves in Christ will not go to heaven. He and a growing host of others are amazing Flexitarians.

One author commented that for most preachers caught up in this, they would never say that they are trying to compromise the gospel, but they do. Whenever the word of God is decentralized and the gospel is diluted and the hard truths are avoided and the tough passages are reworded, the truth of scripture is compromised.ⁱⁱⁱ

Have you noticed advertisements from churches of all denominations that arrive in your mailbox? They all say the same thing – you can come dressed any way you want, the coffee and doughnuts are great, the music is really cool music and the pastor’s sermons are short, witty and non-confrontational.

Imagine having the president of the United States here today and the advertisement implying: “We know he’s really not your cup of tea, so we’ll promise you coffee and some music you’ll like and if the president says anything, we’ll make sure it’s witty, short and dynamic.”

Imagine getting an advertisement that read:

“Come prepared to worship the living and true Lord.

Come prepared to study the scriptures and discover truth.

Come prepared to confess your sin and renew your walk of integrity.”

We are here at church to meet with God as an assembly. Do we find Him so dull that we must attract people with coffee and comfortable clothes?

You might say, “The churches are growing and mass numbers of people are attending, as in our own assembly.”

I agree with George Peters, who wrote several decades ago,

Numerical growth can be deceptive. It may be no more than the mushrooming of a social movement; it may be Christendom in the making but not Christianity. Many mass movements of the past have been just that – particularly in France and Russia, when many were driven to baptism and drawn into the

church, resulting in a mass of people professing Christianity without any resemblance in lifestyle defined by the New Testament. It came at the expense of the purity of the gospel and true Christian living. The church has become infested with pagans [in lifestyle] and [undefined] in theology . . . large segments of [the American church] have become Christo-pagan.^{iv}

In other words, the church has become both Christian and pagan – Flexitarian.

This is the new denomination for our times; led by men with nothing to challenge and people with nothing that changes.

A man in our church who usually tells me the latest funny story came to me a couple of weeks ago and said, “Here’s a new one you’ll love.”

I said, “Try me.”

He said, “Okay. There was a lawyer, a doctor and a preacher that were out hunting deer together.”

I said, “I don’t like where this is going.”

He said, “Just listen. All of a sudden, they saw a buck within range and all three raised their rifles at the same time and fired. The buck went down. All three jumped up and said, ‘I got it. That was my shot that got him.’ And as they ran toward it, they argued with each other about which one of them had killed the deer. When they arrived, it was too hard to figure out. The doctor said, ‘Listen, let me settle this. I’ll examine the deer and determine whose shot hit the mark.’ After examining the buck for a few minutes, he rose and said, ‘It was definitely the preacher who got him.’ The lawyer said, ‘Wait a minute! How can you be so sure it was his bullet?’ The doctor said, ‘Obvious! It went in one ear and out the other.’”

Perhaps it is going in one ear and out the other because we say nothing worth retaining. And if the preacher says nothing worth retaining, the congregation may find it easier to find nothing worth reforming.

The truth is that Flexitarianism is not something new. In fact, travel back with me nearly 2,000 years and listen as a church and its leaders are warned by Jesus Christ.

This church body had become Flexitarians. And the Lord was writing a personal letter to them and moving to judge them and remove their candlestick if they did not repent.

Let us open Jesus’ letter to this church body – and to us – in Revelation chapter 2.

While the church we studied in our last session was struggling through pressure and persecution, this church in Pergamum was flirting with corruption and immorality.^v

Look at Revelation 2:12.

And to the angel [the messenger] of the church in Pergamum write: “The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.”

By the way, this is the description of our Lord – who speaks with clarity and discernment. While the leadership and congregation at Pergamum were compromising their message, the word of God remained crystal clear.

In the days of John the apostle, Roman governors were divided into two classes: those who had the right of the sword and those who did not.

If they had the “right of the sword,” they then had the power of life and death in their words. If they spoke the word, a man could be executed on the spot.^{vi}

John reminds his readers that though they live in Pergamum where the governor had the right of the sword, the risen Christ has the power of the double-edged sword. In other words, Rome might be powerful, but Jesus Christ is the ultimate Governor over life and death.

Commendation by Christ of the Church in Pergamum

Look at Revelation 2:13.

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.

This is the commendation. Our Lord is both harsh and helpful. At the same time, He is both frightening and forgiving. Before we hear His criticism and challenge, let us stop long enough to understand His commendation.

The Lord opens with encouraging words, in this verse,

I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is . . .

Pergamos, which is the feminine form of this city’s name, or Pergamum, which is the neuter form that was far more common, was a city built on top of a tall hill from which the Mediterranean could be seen, fifteen miles away.^{vii}

While it was never as famous as Ephesus or Smyrna, it boasted of its famous library which contained more than 200,000 parchment rolls.

In 1878, archaeologists with the Berlin Museum, excavated the ruins of Pergamum and discovered the massive altar of Zeus.

The structure was a huge court in the shape of a horseshoe which projected out from the hillside. The columns that rimmed the court stood 40 feet in the air. The podium for the altar itself stood 18 feet high. The base of the structure was 448 feet long and on it was the carving of a battle between the gods and giants.

From a distance, this structure looked like a massive throne jutting out of the hillside of Pergamum.^{viii}

It was considered one of the wonders of the ancient world.

Many believe that this was the thought behind our Lord’s comment regarding the throne of Satan – the prominence of false religion and false worship to false gods.

Still others believe His comment refers to the worship of another prominent god named Asclepius. He was the god of healing and his temples served as ancient hospitals where people flocked to claim his healing power. There were pools of water considered sacred and to have healing power.

The symbol for Asclepius was serpents wound around a pole, which is used to this day as the symbol for medicine.

I found it interesting that Asclepius is the official name used by Medicare for its email alert system. I am not suggesting that Medicare is connected to Roman gods, although getting them to pay can be considered a miracle.

People would flock to the temple of Asclepius and spend the night on the temple floor. Throughout the temple, non-poisonous snakes were allowed to slither. The sick and diseased believed that they could be healed if one of the serpents touched them.

The symbolism of a serpent would have been immediately connected by Christians with the serpent, Satan. They considered the worship of this god to be a counterfeit of God’s healing power, among other things.

Add to this the fact that one of the most common names for Asclepius was Asclepius the Savior.^{ix}

Can you imagine such a counterfeit religion – a false god whose symbol was a snake and his name was the savior?

Jesus Christ commends this church by saying, “I know where you live.”

Is that not a wonderful thought?

“I know where you struggle in the home of unbelievers; I know where you plug away at work; I know the route you take home; I know everything about your neighborhood and your local school board and the temptations of your culture. I know exactly why you might be tempted to stay quiet; give in; relax; maybe even become a Flexitarian so you do not stick out like a sore thumb at school or on the job.”

However, notice verse 13 again,

I know . . . you hold fast my name . . .

In other words, “You are not telling people you follow the Savior and hope they think you are fitting in with all the other Asclepius worshipers. You are holding fast My name – Jesus Christ.”

. . . for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

These believers were resolute regarding the gospel truth.

This was true even in the face of danger. Notice the next phrase in verse 13.

. . . you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

Even in the face of persecution and death, these believers remained faithful.

We know that later in this city, two stonecutters were executed by Diocletian because they refused to carve out an image of Asclepius.^x

Paul wrote to Titus this glorious truth,

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,

training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,

waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,

(Titus 2:11-13)

Evidently the believers in Pergamum were not doubting the singular deity of Jesus Christ or denying

their faith in the singular deliverance by Jesus Christ alone.

Criticism by Christ of the Church in Pergamum

Now the Lord moves from commendation to criticism. Notice Revelation 2:14-15.

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.

Balaam was an Old Testament prophet who could be hired by the enemy to bring harm to the people of God.

In Numbers chapters 22-24 Balaam was hired by Balak, the king of Moab, who wanted to see the Israelites cursed so they would not defeat him in battle. God kept Balaam from cursing Israel.

You may remember Balaam riding his donkey to meet the king and an angel standing in the middle of the road. The donkey was allowed to see the angel, but Balaam did not. The donkey stopped and refused to proceed, which made Balaam angry. So Balaam smacks the donkey with a stick. Then the Lord put words in the donkey’s mouth and allowed the donkey to actually speak them. He said to Balaam, “Why are you hitting me? Is that any way to treat the animal that’s carried you around all your life?”

Balaam replied, “No, but if I had a sword in my hand instead of a stick, you’d be dead.”

The amazing thing to me is not that the donkey was talking to Balaam, but that Balaam was talking back. He actually got into a conversation with his donkey – without ever asking, “Um, when did you learn to speak?”

However, an angel then appeared and told Balaam what was happening and challenged him only to speak to the Moabite King what God put in his mouth.

At this point the embarrassing analogy was rather obvious, “Balaam, you’re the donkey. Now try to do as good a job as your donkey did, communicating the word that God puts in your mouth.”

He followed orders and refused to curse Israel.

Later on, however, Balaam returns and teaches Balak how to bring Israel down – send Moabite

women around to offer them a combination of sexual immorality and idolatry. The combination would be explosive . . . and destructive.

Balaam's plan succeeded until God moved in judgment and disciplined His people (Numbers 25).

Balaam went down in biblical history as the symbol of mixing immorality with religion. He gave Balak the formula that is still at work today in the church, "Listen, if you can't curse these people, then corrupt them."

What Satan could not do from without, he did with success from within!

The Nicolaitans further seduced the Christians with their teaching that God created sexual activity, so the Christian could maintain his identity as a Christian, but in the name of Christian liberty, attend the pagan orgies and participate in acts of immorality.

This temptation has not changed in 2,000 years. If Satan cannot curse you, he will attempt to corrupt you.

"C'mon, relax. Don't be the odd man out. Flex a little. Join the church of Flexitarians – a little bit of God and a little bit of the world; a little bit of the Bible and a little bit of sin. Lighten up!"

In a later discussion, I am going to talk openly but prudently about what I have entitled "Dangerous Affairs," as Solomon illustrates in the book of Proverbs the seduction and destruction of a young man and delivers to us a warning of incredible loss and heartache.

The bait of Satan has not changed all that much.

One historian provoked my thinking when he said that sexual purity was the one completely new virtue which Christianity introduced into the ancient world.

Demosthenes, the Greek orator who lived 250 years before John the apostle, wrote this of their Greek culture, "We have harlots for pleasure; concubines for daily cohabitation and wives for the purpose of having legitimate children as well as managing our household affairs."

Seventy-five years before John mailed this letter to the church at Pergamum, Cicero, the Roman philosopher, had written the prevailing attitude; the politically correct viewpoint on sexual relationships. Evidently, in this manuscript, he was writing against someone who had suggested sexual abstinence before marriage and fidelity during marriage. He was rather upset at the idea. Follow this to its conclusion as he wrote,

For the one who thinks that men should be forbidden the love of women, he is extremely severe. I am not able to deny the principle [that is, of virtue], but he is at odds, not only with the license of what our own age allows, but also with the customs of our ancestors. When indeed was this not done? When did anyone ever find fault with it? When was such permission denied? When was it that that which is now lawful was not lawful?^{xi}

Does this sound familiar? Ladies and gentlemen, what is considered lawful may be nothing more than evil. What is politically correct may be biblically corrupt. What the world applauds and promotes may very well invite the judgment of God – not only on the world, but as discipline upon the church.

Paul wrote to the Roman believers regarding the holy standard of God remaining, in spite of the fact that their culture not only practiced sinful lifestyles but approved and applauded those who did the same (Romans 1:32).

We all say, "Amen to that! Yes, Lord, that Roman world was guilty! Those Greeks played fast and loose with the truth. Their moral boundaries were made of straw. Amen, Lord, tell 'em!"

What I find fascinating is that the Lord is not telling the world to repent; He is telling His church – you and me.

We have heard the commendation of the Lord and the criticism of the Lord. It is obvious that no church, no matter how faithful, no matter how orthodox, no matter how successful is ever out of harm's way. We can never say, "The enemy has staged his last attack. We're home free."

Challenge by Christ to the Church in Pergamum

Look at Revelation 2:16a.

Therefore, repent. . . .

This is the aorist imperative verb tense. In other words, "Stop sinning! Turn around. Stop compromising and co-mingling truth with error. You are heading in the wrong direction!"

Continue to Revelation 2:16b,

. . . If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

The change in pronouns between "you" and "them" – "I will come to you soon and make war against them" – reflects an underlying Hebrew idiom in which both pronouns refer to the same body. The

church is commanded to deal with their tolerance of immorality. The imperative mood emphasizes the urgency of the request.^{xii}

In other words, “Do it now!”

A Christian is in deep trouble if he does anything with sin but deal with it seriously and severely.

A Christian is in trouble if he feels sorry on Sunday for what he did on Saturday but is planning to do again on Monday.^{xiii}

This is not repentance. We do not get points for being in church on Sunday. The urgency of God’s commands is not lessened for people just because they clocked into Sunday school.

“Sir, you’re planning to meet a woman you’re not married to later on tonight – don’t do it.”

“Ma’am, you’re planning on responding to that email invitation to lunch from a married man – don’t do it.”

“Young lady, you’ve been asked out by a guy you know doesn’t belong to Jesus Christ and you’re tempted because of a hundred reasons – don’t go!”

Listen to the warning and do it today!

Note Revelation 2:17a.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. . . .

Are you listening?

“Will you shut My Spirit up?” God asks.

Will you listen to everyone but Him?

Commitments of Christ to the Church in Pergamum

If you will listen to God and if you are among those who follow after Christ, you are given two special commitments from Christ.

1. First, in Revelation 2:17b, the Lord promises,
. . . I will give some of the hidden manna...

This promise alludes to the fact of coming nourishment and satisfaction, just as the Israelites were satisfied by manna in the wilderness journey. By the way, it was during the days of manna falling from heaven that Balaam did his worst with King Balak.^{xiv}

The rabbis had already been teaching the tradition that Jeremiah the prophet had hidden the ark before the destruction of Israel, and it will not be recovered until Israel is restored in future glory.

Those reading this commitment, to provide hidden manna meant to enjoy the blessing of the Messianic age.^{xv}

To the Christians reading this, it clearly meant that they would enjoy the blessings of the coming new world in which Christ the true Savior of the world reigned supreme.

2. Secondly, the Lord also promised them, further in Revelation 2:17,

. . . 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.

I counted at least six different views on the meaning of this white stone and the name upon it. Frankly, they were all wonderful options and we cannot be sure which one is right. All of them are positive and applicable in the coming kingdom. I will mention two of them.

The juries of the Roman court cast their vote in cases involving the death penalty by dropping into an urn one stone. They had two stones given to them at the outset of the trial; a dark stone for a guilty verdict and a white stone for acquittal and release. Alcibiades, a Greek statesman living before the generation of John the apostle, once wrote, “If I should be accused in a capital case, I would not put my trust in anyone. I would not put my trust even in my mother for fear that through error she might put in the urn a black instead of a white stone.”^{xvi}

So the commitment from Christ is that no one shall lay any charge of guilt upon the elect (Romans 8:33).

There is . . . now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

The other possible meaning of this white stone is from the world of sports. The outstanding victors at the Olympic Games that won several contests were awarded a white stone with their name written on it that would serve as their ticket to a special awards banquet and other festivities.^{xvii}

In this view, Christ is promising a heavenly award banquet and festivities for His bride.

On this white stone that gains the believer entrance, is a special new name. And it is private, between Lord and servant.

The word translated “new” is from a Greek word that does not mean “new” in the sense of recent or newly acquired, but “new” in the sense of different in nature from anything else. In other words, “This is new,” means, “I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Jesus Christ is going to give every believer a special new name. It is a pet name; a nickname.

Isaiah prophesied of God's people when he wrote,

The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

(Isaiah 62:2-3)

Imagine that.

When we refuse to compromise; when we refuse to be a Flexitarian with truth and morals and purity and integrity and values, we will very likely be called names. But God says, "Just wait. I have a special name, just for you – between Me and you – to mark your eternal status and reward in the kingdom."

In the meantime, know that temptation is always lurking – not just for the church, but for the Christian. Satan is baiting his hook. He wants to add another member to this growing denomination called Flexitarianism.

Warnings from Christ to the Church in Pergamum

I pick up on at least three warnings from Christ's letter to the church at Pergamum, which was at risk.

- 1. Do not be surprised by temptation to compromise – anticipate it; expect it!**
- 2. Do not be naïve in the face of temptation – detect it.**

The enemy has not really come up with any new game plan. He continues to use the plays that work the best – and compromise is one of his best plays.

3. Do not negotiate with temptation – fight it.

Resist temptation. Flee it. Like Joseph of old, if you have no other option, leave your coat behind and run for your life.

Conclusion

Legend has it that Martin Luther, the great reformer, was once in his study and became so angry at thoughts of temptation that it seemed as if the devil was in the room with him. According to tradition, Martin Luther picked up his ink well and, as if he were throwing it at the devil, he threw it across the room where it smashed against the wall, leaving a large ink stain.

I am not sure if this story is true, but I do know that Martin Luther used his ink to write such truth that the kingdom of Satan trembled. He also wrote lyrics that spurred the Christian onward with confidence and courage. One particular set of lyrics states:

*Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God's own choosing;
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus it is He –
Lord Sabaoth His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.^{xviii}
He has – and in Him, so shall we.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/24/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ 2006 The Associated Press.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Ashamed of the Gospel (Crossway, 1993), p. 47.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 48.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 73.

^v Ray Stedman, God's Final Word (Discovery House, 1991), p. 46.

^{vi} William Barclay, The Revelation of John: Volume 1 (Westminster Press, 1976), p. 90.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 87.

^{viii} John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1999), p. 86; Stedman, p. 47.

^{ix} Barclay, Revelation, p. 80.

^x MacArthur, Revelation, p. 86.

^{xi} William Barclay, Letters to the Seven Churches (Abington Press, 1957), p. 52.

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- ^{xii} Robert L. Thomas, Revelation (Moody Press, 1992), p. 197.
- ^{xiii} Charles Swindoll, Getting Through the Tough Stuff (W Publishing, 2004), p. 155.
- ^{xiv} Thomas, p. 198.
- ^{xv} Barclay, Revelation, p. 94.
- ^{xvi} Donald Grey Barnhouse, Revelation (Zondervan, 1971), p. 55.
- ^{xvii} MacArthur, Revelation, p. 91.
- ^{xviii} Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” stanza 2.