

JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 28

MARCH 1988

NUMBER 1

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CLC - WELS MEETING

On April 16, 1985, a free conference was held at St. John's Lutheran Church, Ellensburg, Washington, which was attended by pastors who are members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC), respectively. The purpose of the conference was to discuss the doctrinal differences which have separated the two church bodies since the 1950's. Those attending prepared a report entitled "The Separation Principle of Church Fellowship," and presented it as a consensus to the respective standing doctrine committees of their church bodies.

The doctrine committees of both the WELS and the CLC did not feel that the document, although acceptable as far as it goes, enters sufficiently into the areas of disagreement so as to provide the basis for a settlement of them. However, correspondence between President Daniel Fleischer (of the CLC) and President Carl Mischke (of the WELS) resulted in a meeting between the CLC Board of Doctrine and the WELS Commission on Interchurch Relations. This meeting was held at Immanuel Lutheran College, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, January 11-12, 1988.

Papers were presented by representatives of each church body. Armin Panning (WELS) and Clifford Kuehne (CLC) read papers on Romans 16:17-18; John Brug (WELS) and Paul Schaller (CLC) read papers on 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15. The discussions which ensued were moderated by Wilbert Gawrisch (WELS) and Rollin Reim (CLC).

We quote from the CLC minutes (which were read and approved by all participants):

"Both sides indicated that a further meeting would be necessary to satisfy questions that both have regarding the position of the other. Theses and antitheses would have to be agreed upon. It was agreed that we would not think of re-establishing fellowship relations without such clear understanding and doctrinal agreement on all issues that stand between us.

"The possibility of a further meeting was discussed and it was agreed that subcommittees would set up an agenda. Suggested for inclusion on this agenda: 'The Role of Admonition in Connection with Romans 16:17-18.' The CLC requested that references to the historical framework of these issues might be permitted. The WELS suggested that, in any future meeting, the ELS be invited."

In his February 1988 letter to the clergy of the CLC, President Fleischer stated that a second meeting between representatives of the CLC and the WELS "is suggested because further understanding and clarification of the respective positions is necessary. A second meeting does not of itself suggest that we are moving, or have moved, closer to agreement. It must be remembered that no agreement with the WELS, should that even or ever come to pass, would be complete until the same is arrived at with the ELS, since the ELS is in fellowship with the WELS."

On the following pages we are publishing the two papers presented at the January meeting by our CLC representatives; that by Pastor Paul Schaller, on 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15; and that by Professor C. Kuehne, on Romans 16:17-18.

A STUDY OF 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6,14,15

Paul W. Schaller

-Introduction-

Paul's memories of Thessalonika were vivid and warm. Al though he had been forced to leave town under cover of dark ness, Paul remembered how those believers—Jews, Greeks, and prominent women—had received the apostles' word as it was in truth: the Word of God. In their faith and love, the Thessalonians had turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His son from heaven (1 Thess. 1:9-10). In their hope, they had endured persecution , suffering from their own countrymen the same things that the churches in Judea had suffered (2:14).

Paul was concerned that the various trials which he and they had suffered might unsettle the faith of some. So when he could not get back to them, he wrote, probably from Corinth (cf. Acts 18:1,5; 1 Thess. 3:6), to teach further concerning the coming of the Lord, and what that meant for those who preceded them in death. He urged them to build one another up, to warn those who were idle, to encourage the timid, to help the weak, and to be patient with everyone (5:14). He told them to test everything, to hold on to the good, and to avoid (ἀπέχεσθε) every kind of evil.

When Paul wrote again, perhaps a month later, his second letter contained some of the same themes. He once again spoke of their faith, of their love, and of the persecutions they were enduring (2 Thess. 1:3-4). He comforted them with the prospect of Jesus' second coming, when He would be "revealed from heaven in blazing fire with His powerful angels" (1:7). Paul also denounced a false rumor about the Lord's coming, reminding the Thessalonians that before Jesus came "the lawless one" would be revealed. He urged them to stand firm and hold to the teachings (παρὰδόσεις) which had been transmitted to them by mouth and by letter (2:15).

-Chapter 3-

In chapter 3 we have the close of this second letter. At the end of his first letter, he had written: "Finally (λοιπὸν) brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God" (1 Thess. 4:1). This time Paul says Τὸ λοιπὸν προσεύχεσθε, urging the Thessalonian brothers to pray for him and his party, first, for the success of their mission, that the word of God might speed on and be honored; and secondly, that he and his companions might be rescued from foul and worthless men, for the Christian's faith is not the faith of all (vv. 1-2).

For their part, the Thessalonians can count on the faithful ness of the LORD to whom they pray, for He will cause them to stand firm, and He will guard them from the evil one (v. 3). Paul and his companions have confidence in the Lord's working among the Thessalonians, so that they are carrying out the word which had been passed on to them and will continue to do so (v. 4).

The paragraph concludes with the prayer: "The Lord guide your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance " (v.5).

How else would they be able to live in a God-pleasing way, except by remembering the great love that God had shown to them, by remembering who they were? "Behold what manner of love the Father

has given us, that we should be called the children of God!" (1 John 3:1).

What better guide in times of persecution than to remember the endurance of Christ? "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary or lose heart" (2 Pet. 2:23; Heb. 12:2,3). The Thessalonians had already followed their Lord in this, as Paul testified in his first letter to them: "You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:6).

NOW WE COMMAND YOU, BROTHERS, IN THE NAME OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST,
THAT YOU SHRINK FROM EVERY BROTHER LIVING DISORDERLY AND NOT
ACCORDING TO THE TEACHING WHICH YOU RECEIVED FROM US (v. 6).

A command is generally passed along the line (παρραγγέλλω), and this one comes from the commander-in-chief Himself. Paul urges the Thessalonian believers to keep away from every brother who is living ἀτάκτως, out-of-line, as a mob is out-of-line compared to a well-ordered company of soldiers. This word for out-of-line, not fulfilling duties, ἀτάκτως, is used only by Paul in the New Testament, and only in his letters to the Thessalonians. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see in what way Paul is using it here, for he continues, "We were not ἄτακτοι when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it" (vv. 7-8). Paul is talking about a brother who is "idle." He is not necessarily lazy, but he is nevertheless not fulfilling his responsibilities.

This was apparently not a new problem among the Thessalonians. Paul had already mentioned it in his first letter to them (5:14). In retrospect, one might also find suggestions of this problem in passages like 1 Thess. 1:5, 2:9-12, and 4:11. On Paul's first visit to their city, he and his party had taken great pains to set a good example, working night and day in weariness and hardship, so as not to be a burden upon anyone. And not only had the members of the apostolic band been a model (τύπον) for the Thessalonians to follow, but they had also taught them in words: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (vv. 9-10). It therefore appears to have been a matter of special concern among the Thessalonians even while the apostles were among them.

It is possible that the disorderly ones were using some of the rumors about the Lord's coming (2:2), or even the true teaching, as an excuse for their irresponsible behavior, but Paul does not mention it here in the section dealing with the ἄτακτοι. Instead he concentrates on their conduct (περιπατεῖν).

From the brother who was walking around disorderly the Thessalonians were commanded to "keep away." The root word here (στέλλω) first meant to set in order, array, equip. Then it was used of dispatching on an expedition, and finally in the middle and passive came to mean what almost sounds like the opposite: to fetch, send for, gather up. On shipboard it was used of "furling the sails." Can you picture gathering yourself, or possibly your robes about yourself, to avoid something or someone? This was the word given to the Thessalonians regarding any brother who did not live according to that which had been passed on to them (παράδοσιν).

This was not just theory for Paul, but he had heard that there were brothers who were idle among the Thessalonians. They were not lazy. They were over-working, meddling in other people's business. To

such Paul comes with a command and exhortation to quietly work for their own bread (vv. 11-12). For the rest, he tells them not to become discouraged in doing well (v. 13). Paul wants no one to be unsettled (1 Thess. 3:3) by the example of the ἄτακτοι.

IF ANYONE DOES NOT OBEY OUR INSTRUCTION IN THIS LETTER, TAKE SPECIAL NOTE OF HIM. DO NOT ASSOCIATE WITH HIM, IN ORDER THAT HE MAY FEEL ASHAMED (v. 14).

Now the apostle, still speaking to the rest, gives instructions about how to handle one who does not listen. For such, more drastic action is required. They should mark him for themselves (σημειοῦσθε). This word is not used again in the New Testament, but it is a direct offspring of the word for “sign,” or “signify.” Not necessarily before the world, but for themselves (middle), they should “hang a sign on him,” so to speak.

And having so taken note of the idler, the Thessalonians were instructed not to associate (μὴ συναναμίγνυσθα) with him. This word, “to mix thoroughly together,” Paul used only once more in his letters, in 1 Corinthians 5:9,11. There Paul told the believers not to associate with the immoral man “who calls himself a brother,” not even to eat with him. Paul further told the Corinthians that if they applied this to the people of this world, they would have to go out of the world.

Applied to the Thessalonian idlers, this is strong medicine. But Paul adds here the purpose of this action: in order that he may feel ashamed; that he might turn about, regard what he is doing, and feel ashamed. Like his Lord in Matthew 18, Paul’s purpose here is to gain the brother.

AND DO NOT REGARD HIM AS AN ENEMY, BUT WARN HIM AS A BROTHER (v. 15).

If we were about to list the paragraph as a call for excommunication, declaring the idler a heathen and a publican, this verse might give us some pause.

“Do not regard him as an enemy.” Is this a person with whom you cannot get along, or an enemy of the faith, an enemy of Christ? Jesus put the two together when He prophesied: “A man’s enemies will be the members of his own household” (Matt. 10:36), and then added: “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. . . .” In this way Christ points to Himself as the dividing point between friends and enemies.

It was the Christ who drew the disciples together from many different backgrounds. And although they many times failed to get along together, they are not referred to as “enemies.” The enemies were those who did not follow Jesus, the “Gentiles and tax-collectors.” Paul also wrote in this way to the Philippians: “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of (σκοπεῖτε) those who live according to the pattern (τύπον) we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ “ (Phil. 3:17-18).

In the present context also, thinking of someone (ἡγήσθε, to suppose, believe, hold) as an enemy is laid parallel to admonishing (νουθετέω) him as a brother. Not to consider him an enemy, then, is to regard him as a brother (in the faith).

There are some who understand this as nothing more than a comparison: “Do not treat him like

you would treat an enemy.” And it is true that ὡς (“as”) is sometimes used for a simple comparison. “Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these” (Luke 12:27). In these cases there is a point of comparison, a similarity, and the figure should not be taken beyond that point.

Again, sometimes when ὡς is used with the participle, it has the force of ὡς ἄν with the subjunctive (“as if it were”). “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Cor. 4:7).

It is not necessary, however, to see these figures in the Thessalonians passage. In Matthew 21, we read:

“But if we say, ‘From men’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold John as a prophet” (v. 26);

and again:

“They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held him as a prophet” (v. 46). [NIV: held that he was a prophet.]

Paul also speaks in this way in 1 Corinthians 4:

“So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God” (v. 1).

We may take 2 Thessalonians 3:15 in a similar straightforward way. The apostle has already told the Thessalonians how they should think of their leaders who bring them the Lord’s counsel. They are to “hold them (ἡγείσθαι αὐτοῦς) in the highest regard in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:13). Now, in his second letter, Paul tells the Thessalonians how to think of any busybody with whom they must deal. Even though they are not to mix with him, this is not yet what we call “excommunication,” for they are still not to think of the offender as a heathen and a publican. Rather they are to admonish him as a brother.

Why would Paul speak in such strong terms of not associating, while not holding him as an enemy? Perhaps it was the nature of the offense in Thessalonika. When dealing with a busybody or a gossip, there might be times when one may not even be able to have a cup of coffee with him. This, of course, is speculation, for Paul does not comment further on the situation or on his reasons for the treatment he prescribes.

Summary/Application

Various interpretations and applications revolve around the 14th and 15th verses of 2 Thessalonians 3.

A. If verse 14 is taken as representing the act of excommunication, then verse 15 cannot be taken as saying that the disobedient is still a brother. Then verse 15 would be taken in an adverbial sense, speaking of the manner or mood in which the Thessalonians are to excommunicate the disorderly one. Perhaps the thought would be something like this: “Do not treat him as an enemy (though he is), but admonish him like a brother (which he is not);” or “Do not contend with him, but remind him in a brotherly way.” This way of understanding the pas sages need not contradict other Scripture, and there have been esteemed theologians who viewed it this way, although it seems to this writer an unnecessarily figurative way of understanding the words of Paul.

As indicated above, the present essayist sees verse 15 as a comment on the previous verse, a

comment added just so that μή συναναμίγνυσθαι will not be taken in the severe way that it would later be used in dealing with the Corinthian congregation (1 Cor. 5).

B. There are some who see the verses as dealing, not with weak brothers whose lives have not reflected the faith that they profess, but with false teachers, who by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple (Rom. 16:18). With such people one must break off church fellowship (v. 14), even though they are not manifest unbelievers (v. 15). They may still be brothers in Christ, but they are separated from outward fellowship by some doctrinal error which they openly hold, tolerate, or promote.

This application is not contrary to what the Scriptures teach concerning causers of doctrinal divisions and offenses. As mentioned before, however, in this passage Paul deals with the Thessalonians as people whose conduct is out-of-line, unbecoming to the Gospel which they had received. If their meddling consisted in spreading false doctrine about Christ having already returned (2:2), Paul does not mention it when telling how to deal with the ἀτάκτως (3:6-15). In chapter 2 Paul urged the Thessalonians to hold to the teaching. Here he urges them not to be weary in doing well. Thus chapter 3 would have more to do with situations such as are described in Matthew 18:15-20 than with those described in Romans 16:17sq.

It is true that conduct is closely related to doctrine. Conduct can teach by its action and example, but Paul does not treat the situation in Thessalonika as a case of false teachers. Nor do we apply Romans 16:17 every time a committed sin sets a bad example, or might mislead someone.

On the other hand, teaching false doctrine is surely conduct that is “out-of-line,” and a false teacher may even be excommunicated if he denies doctrines without which saving faith cannot stand (fundamental error), but we do not on that account regularly apply Matthew 18 to cases of false teaching. (“Bei Irrungen, die nicht den Grund des Glaubens betreffen, wird man zwar auch schliesslich zum Ausschlusse genötigt, aber nicht in dem Sinne, also ob der Irrende fuer einen Heiden und Zoellner erklart wuerde!” [Pastorale Praxis, NWPH, 1913, p. 101]) And again, Paul does not suggest in chapter three, where he takes up the case of the disorderly, that “false teaching” is the disorderly conduct that some are now guilty of, and that he was not guilty of when he was in Thessalonika (v. 7).

It would seem, therefore, that 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15 would not normally apply in the case of a false teacher where Romans 16:17 is being applied.

If, however, these verses are applied to false teachers (and they have been so applied by respected theologians), there is surely no ground for interpreting the passages in a way that contradicts the clear apostolic injunction of Romans 16:17-18, or defends a continuing in fellowship where causers of doctrinal divisions and offenses have been noted.

A STUDY OF ROMANS 16:17-18

C. M. Kuehne

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I. INTRODUCTION -- Romans 16:1-16

Romans 16:17-18 is cited so frequently apart from its Scriptural setting that we may lose sight of the context in which it is found. We should look at this context, for it can help us understand why the Apostle Paul entreats the Romans Christians as he does in verses 17 and 18.

Paul has concluded the main body of the epistle with the benediction at the close of chapter 15: "Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen." (Citations of Scripture in this paper are from the NKJV, unless otherwise indicated.) He begins the final chapter by commending Phoebe to his Roman readers. Phoebe was a deaconess (διάκονος) of the congregation at Cenchræe, the eastern seaport town of Corinth, and had been a helper (προστάτις) of many, including the apostle himself. Apparently, Phoebe would be bringing this epistle from Corinth, where Paul was then abiding, to Rome, and Paul asks that the Christians there in Rome receive her in a manner worthy of the Lord and give her any help that she might need from them. We see here a significant manifestation of the fellowship (κοινωνία) that existed among these Christians—a mutual sharing in the blessings which they had received from their Lord.

Paul continues with a lengthy list of greetings to Christians whom he knew in Rome. This list is interspersed with many terms expressive of Christian fellowship in faith and love—"fellow workers," "beloved," "approved in Christ," "chosen in the Lord." Finally he asks: "Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you" (v. 16).

It was indeed a beautiful and marvelous fellowship which the Christians at Corinth and Rome enjoyed together, a fellow ship that was the fruit of the Gospel proclamation among them, a fellowship created by the Holy Spirit, who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (Small Catechism). In this unity of the Spirit they shared in the blessings of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:5-6). Paul had previously prayed in behalf of the Roman Christians: "May the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:5-6), and we can trust that Paul's prayer was being fulfilled by God through His Word and Spirit. As Paul thought of the fellow Christians in Corinth and in Rome, he would surely have agreed with the words of the psalmist: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1)

Christians will recognize their fellowship with one another as a precious gift of God, and they will therefore endeavor to keep—τηρεῖν, to guard as a treasure—this unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3) with the means that God has given them. They will employ the Holy Scriptures "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (1 Tim. 3:16) as they heed the apostolic admonition: "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10). They will also be mindful of the fact that false doctrine can disrupt this fellowship, and they will therefore heed the voice of their Lord as He warns: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15).

Surely thoughts such as these were present in Paul's mind as he continues this closing chapter of his epistle with the admonition in verse 17 to mark and avoid those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine. By thus separating themselves from false teachers, they could escape the pernicious effects of religious error upon their fellowship and their faith. And, standing thus united in their faith and confession, they could continue to enjoy together "the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ" (Rom. 15:29) and also join hands in helping the apostle in his further missionary endeavors (Rom. 15:24).

We see, then, that our passage, Romans 16:17-18, does not stand in solitary isolation from the rest of the epistle, but flows very naturally from what goes before. Now we can proceed to study the passage itself.

II. EXHORTATION -- Romans 16:17

Παρακαλῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί — Now I entreat you, brethren

The conjunction δὲ manifests a variety of forces in the New Testament. Among the most common are the copulative, adversative, and transitional uses. The essayist has taken the conjunction here as transitional, even as the translations have routinely done. While the content of this verse does relate to what precedes, yet Paul here changes his message from the giving of greetings to a fervent exhortation.²

“I entreat you,” Paul says. The word in the Greek, παρακαλέω, means literally “call to one’s side,” and this meaning was no doubt present in the mind of the Greek reader when ever he came upon the word. In its various New Testament contexts it is capable of a wide variety of translations. Gingrich offers the following: summon, invite; summon to one’s aid, call upon for help; appeal to, urge, exhort, encourage; request, implore, entreat; comfort, encourage, cheer up; try to console, conciliate (Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament). Some have tried to explain this varied usage by telling the story of a mother calling her child to her knee to speak with him. What she says to her child will depend on the circumstances—monition, if the child has been naughty; encouragement, if the child is facing a difficult task; comfort, if the child has hurt himself; etc. In our passage the word surely expresses the loving concern of an apostle of the Lord for the Christians whom he is addressing. He brings them close to himself and urges them to give careful heed to what he has to say.

And Paul strengthens his exhortation with the word “brethren,” a word which in the New Testament is filled with the intimate closeness of those who are fellow members of the body of Christ, united with the Lord and with one another by the faith which the Holy Spirit has created in their hearts through the Gospel. The Romans are brothers and sisters of the apostle, and together with him they are children of the heavenly Father. Surely they will give heed to this brother of theirs who has been “called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1).

σκοπεῖν τοὺς τὰς διχοστασίας καὶ τὰ σκάνδαλα παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν ἣν ὑμεῖς ἐμάθετε ποιοῦντας — to keep on taking note of those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you yourselves have learned.³

The verb σκοπεῖν, in both its etymology and New Testament usage, involves more than a mere looking at something. It generally has the idea of keeping a watchful eye on something, or considering something critically. Compare, for example, Luke 11:35: “Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness”; or Philippians 3:17-19: “Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.” In our passage, Paul is asking the Christians to keep on (present infinitive) paying close attention to those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which they themselves have learned. This involves a careful and critical observation of them—something similar to what John speaks of in his first epistle: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (4:1). We have in the σκοπεῖν of our verse a call for constant alertness. The NIV translation, “watch out for,” is a happy choice!

The word διχοστασία, which is related to a verb that means “stand apart,” is found in only two other passages in the New Testament—Galatians 5:20, where “dissensions” is listed as one of the works of the flesh; and 1 Corinthians 3:3, where the word occurs in the Majority Text and other ancient witnesses: “For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?” Those who teach contrary to the apostolic doctrine cause dissensions or divisions in the church. Insofar as some are deceived by the errorists and are drawn away from the truth, the unity of the church is disrupted and factions are formed. Historians have observed that if Christians had from the beginning consistently heeded Paul’s exhortation to avoid such errorists, the Christian world would not be so deeply divided as it now is.

It is hard to find in the English language an apt translation for σκάνδαλα. “Offenses” is commonly chosen, but this term does not carry the serious import of the Greek. In the words of Kittel’s Theological Dictionary of the New Testament : “In the NT as in the OT what is at issue in σκάνδαλον is the relation to God. The σκάνδαλον is an obstacle in coming to faith and a cause of going astray in it. As in the OT it is the cause of both transgression and destruction, for a fall in faith is a fall in the absolute sense” (7: 345). Those who teach contrary to the apostolic doctrine, then, cause Christians to err in their faith or even to lose their faith completely. Thus their relationship to God, that of children of His by faith in Christ Jesus, is threatened or even destroyed. Surely it is vitally important, then, that Paul’s readers keep on watching out for such errorists!

What, now, is the “doctrine” which the Romans have learned? In the preceding paragraphs I have identified this as the apostolic doctrine, the teachings of Christianity which had been brought to them by the apostles of the Lord. There is nothing in the context which would suggest limiting this “doctrine” to the Gospel in the narrow sense. We must recognize that the term ἡ διδαχή became a technical term for the entire body of truth taught by Christ and His apostles. John records the following statement by Christ: “My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority” (7:16-17). We read of the early Christians that “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42), and Paul exhorts Titus to hold firmly to the faithful Word “according to the doctrine” (1:9, literal translation). In his second epistle, John cautions his readers not to receive anyone who does not bring “the doctrine of Christ” (v. 9). (The genitive “of Christ” should be taken here as a subjective genitive—the doctrine taught by Christ—for this is the uniform usage of the New Testament when a genitive is joined to the word διδαχή) Paul did not shun to declare to his congregations “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and that is how we should understand the term “the doctrine” in our passage.

The preposition παρὰ in this verse is routinely rendered “contrary to,” and this is appropriate. For, while παρὰ does have the root meaning of “alongside,” its usage extends to such ideas as comparison and then opposition. Compare the following passage from Romans 1:26: “For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature.” Moulton-Milligan find clear examples of the meanings “against” and “contrary to” in the papyri (The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament 479).

At this point it is necessary to consider the nature of the articles that precede “divisions” and “offenses” and the relation ship of the phrase “contrary to the doctrine which you your selves have learned” to the rest of the sentence. These matters have been discussed at length by Dr. Robert G. Hoerber in his booklet, A Grammatical Study of Romans 16,17 , and in the following paragraphs I am indebted to his scholarship. Mathematically, there are four possible combinations:

1) Some conservatives have regarded the articles as generic and the phrase as adjectival: “who cause divisions and offenses (in general) contrary to the doctrine which you yourselves have learned.” These conservatives presented matters in this way in an attempt to uphold the traditional interpretation that “divisions and offenses” referred, not to certain particular divisions and offenses which were present in the Roman congregation when Paul wrote his epistle, but to any divisions and offenses occasioned by

false teaching. Their grammatical analysis is not possible, however, for the articles cannot be generic if the phrase is adjectival. As soon as a noun with article is limited by a modifying phrase, that noun and its accompanying article become specific.

2) Some liberals wished to regard the articles as specific, in the unjustified sense of “the well-known,” and the phrase as adverbial: “who, contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, cause the (well-known) divisions and offenses.” These liberals wished thereby to restrict the application of this passage to specific circumstances then existing in the church at Rome. This analysis also has its problems: the articles cannot be specific if the phrase is adverbial, for then nothing in the context would serve to make them specific.

3) Another seeming possibility would be to take the articles as generic and the phrase as adverbial: “who, contrary to the doctrine, cause divisions and offenses (in general).” Thus Paul would be saying that the causing of any kind of disruptions among Christians would be contrary to what they had learned from the apostles. The grammatical problem here is that “divisions” and “offenses” are plural abstract nouns, and the generic article is not used in Greek with such nouns. (The NKJV has seemingly adopted the interpretation being rejected here. It renders the passage, “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.” Notice that the phrase “contrary to the doctrine which you learned” is set off by commas, which punctuation removes the phrase as a restrictive modifier of “divisions and offenses” and turns it into an adverbial phrase.)⁴

4) The remaining possibility, and the only grammatically correct one among the four combinations which are discussed here,⁵ is to take the articles as specific and the phrase as adjectival. The divisions and offenses of which Paul speaks are not all divisions and offenses, but specifically those which are associated with doctrinal error. Thus, even though the articles are specific, the application of the passage extends to all false teachers, including those of our own day.

καὶ ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ’ αὐτῶν — and turn away from them!

This is the only place in verses 17-18 where a legitimate question can be raised regarding variant readings. The choice lies between an aorist imperative (ἐκκλίνατε) and a present imperative (ἐκκλίνετε). If the aorist is original—and I believe that it is the better attested reading—we would have a peremptory “turn away from them!” If the present is original, we would have a linear “keep away from them.”

Some have opted for the present imperative and then suggested that this verb, as a compound of the preposition ἐκ=from + κλίνω=incline, means that we should lean away from false teachers progressively more and more as time goes on. We must be on our guard against such etymologizing errors. The compound ἐκκλίνω denotes nothing less than a complete turning away from those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine. Compare here the other two occurrences of this verb in the New Testament: “They have all gone out of the way; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one” (Rom. 3:12); “Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet. 3:11). Even as the Christian is admonished in Peter’s epistle to turn away from evil, so also is he admonished in our passage to turn away from those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine. Nothing less than a prompt and decisive break can be meant. As someone once put it: “As soon as one has recognized that certain errorists are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of Scripture, then the command to avoid becomes as immediate and binding as any of God’s commandments.”

III. EXPLANATION -- Romans 16:18

Verse 18 is connected to 17 with the conjunction γὰρ, a conjunction which routinely introduces

an explanation or reason for what has just been stated. The Lord would not have to give us an explanation for His injunction in verse 17, but in His love He does provide one—an explanation which manifests His concern for our faith and salvation, which underscores the urgency of avoiding false teachers, and which prompts us to a willing obedience.

οἱ γὰρ τοιοῦτοι τῷ Κυρίῳ ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ οὐ δουλεύουσιν, ἀλλὰ τῇ ἐαυτῶν κοιλίᾳ — For it is not our Lord Christ whom such are serving, but rather their own belly

The above translation attempts to reproduce in English the contrast expressed in the Greek between “our Lord Christ” and “their own belly.” We can perhaps retain a literal translation for 3 0 333333 0 3 , since the term “belly server” has become familiar to users of the King James Bible. This word is indeed a harsh one, but it is appropriate. The causers of divisions and offenses are clearly not serving our Lord Christ by their false teaching. All that is left is that they through such activity are serving human self-interest—more literally, they are slaves of that humanistic bent that is part of man’s fallen nature!⁶

καὶ διὰ τῆς χρηστολογίας καὶ εὐλογίας ἐξαπατῶσι τὰς καρδίας τῶν ἀκάκων — and through smooth words and fine-sounding speech they deceive the hearts of the innocent ones.

The Apostle Paul uses both the simple verb ἀπατάω and the compound ἐξαπατάω in 1 Timothy 2:14: “And Adam was not deceived [οὐκ ἠπατήθη], but the woman being deceived [ἐξαπατηθεῖσα], fell into transgression.” While some commentators maintain a distinction between the two—“deceive” vs. “utterly deceive”—such a distinction is questionable for the period of the New Testament writings. I have chosen to render the compound in our passage simply “deceive.”

What are the “smooth words and fine-sounding speech” through which the false teachers deceive? One is reminded of the following passage from a sermon preached in 1842 by C. F. W. Walther on Matthew 7:15-23: “True prophets in all their teaching appeal to the Word of God. If, now, a person appears who likewise always appeals to God’s Word, who also in many matters truly teaches the divine truth, who asserts that he proclaims nothing but the pure doctrine of the Bible, then do not for this reason trust him at once but beware lest this be perhaps only sheep’s clothing. All heretics in the church without exception have appealed to the Scriptures. Even the prince of darkness, when he wanted to tempt the Son of God, said: ‘It is written.’”

And who are “the innocent ones” whose hearts are deceived? The word in the Greek is 3 0 333333 0 3 , which occurs only here and in Hebrews 7:26, where it is used of Christ: “For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens.” Luther translated quite literally: “die unschuldigen Herzen.” Surely the word does not carry negative connotations in our passage, such as simple-minded or gullible. It probably refers rather to the artlessness, guilelessness, and innocence manifested by Christians in their childlike faith. Compare Christ’s words to the twelve before He sent them out to the cities and towns of Israel: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless [ἀκέραιοι=pure, innocent] as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Surely no Christian should exclude himself from the category of “the innocent ones” in our passage, for both Scripture and history show how even well- trained theologians can be caught off guard and deceived by the words of false teachers.

In our ecumenical age, it is easy for Christians to feel uncomfortable about the Scriptural principle of separation which is taught in Romans 16:17. Obeying the Lord in this matter can lead us into some very awkward and trying situations, and our flesh shies away from such difficulties. But in verse 18 we find something which can help our spirits follow His will in this matter. The text points out that false teachers are dangerous; through the smooth and fine-sounding words with which they clothe their errors,

they are able to deceive Christians in their simple, child-like faith. The Lord is therefore speaking to us in His love when He asks us to avoid. He wants to keep our souls safe from the harmful leaven and gangrene of religious error. When we hear the word “avoid,” we should recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd as He carries out His promise: “I give them [My sheep] eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:28).

Surely we will respond with a love for Christ that has been created in our hearts by His own great love for us. The Bible tells us: “This is the love of [toward] God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). How can the commandment to separate ourselves from false teachers really be burdensome, when the Lord’s purposes toward us are so full of His own love?

IV. APPLICATION

The Spirit-intended meaning of Romans 16:17-18 is simple and direct. The passage tells us that it is the will of our gracious Lord that we avoid, turn away from, those who through false doctrine cause dissensions in the church and set traps which can destroy faith. The word “avoid” is clear, and it is broad. It surely forbids any and all religious fellowship, whether public or private, with those who are promoting or supporting false doctrine.

Nevertheless, the passage has itself become a matter of controversy as Christians seek to apply it to the real-life situations that confront them in this world. The following paragraphs discuss some of the questions which may be raised with regard to the application of this passage.

A. In applying the separation principle, do we not have to consider also those many passages which speak of showing patience and long-suffering toward those who have fallen into error?

Surely God has not given us conflicting instructions for the same situation, for then His Word would not be a lamp for our feet and a light for our path in dealing with that situation. We would be uncertain how to proceed and could only resort to human judgment in deciding which set of instructions to follow.

Some passages of Scripture do indeed exhort us to show patience and long-suffering toward those who have fallen into error. If we examine the contexts of these passages, we find that they are dealing with weak brethren—those who have stumbled into error, do not seek to involve others in their error, and are willing to be instructed from the Word of God. Our approach toward them is to involve “a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1) and “all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). Other passages of Scripture address themselves to false teachers—those who are teaching or promoting their errors and who are thereby causing divisions and offenses in the church and are deceiving the hearts of the innocent ones. Our response toward them is to be entirely different: “Beware of false prophets” (Matt. 7:15) and “avoid them.”

The epistle of Paul to the Galatians illustrates well the distinction that Scripture makes between weak brethren and false teachers, both as to their character and also as to the manner in which we are to deal with them. On the one hand, there are the members of the Galatian congregations who have been misled into thinking that observance of the ceremonial laws was a necessary supplement to the merits of Christ for gaining salvation. Oh, how patiently and gently Paul deals with these people! While he does speak bluntly about their foolishness in giving up the Gospel which he has preached to them, he again and again entreats them with kind and pleading words to return to that Gospel: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? . . . My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you. . . . Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 3:1; 4:19-20; 5:1).

On the other hand, there are the false teachers who have led the Galatian Christians away from the Gospel of God’s free grace in Christ. In no way does Paul recognize or deal with them as brethren. In fact, he refers to them in a very detached way, in the third person, and testifies strongly against their

deceptions: “They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them. . . . He who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is. . . . I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut them selves off [emasculate themselves, NIV]” (Gal. 4:17; 5:10,12).

We must ever guard against any blurring of this Scriptural distinction— something to which we are so inclined by nature. To deal with weak brethren as if they were false teachers would be unevangelical and unloving. To deal with false teachers as if they were weak brethren would be foolish and dangerous.

But more must be said on this matter. Prof. J. P. Koehler warned strongly against taking passages dealing with two different things and attempting to construe or harmonize them in such a way as to come up with something new that is nowhere taught in Scripture—a method which was used by some Lutherans during the controversy on predestination. In his notes on “Biblische Hermeneutik,” for example, he repudiates those interpreters who “twist and adjust a clear word of Scripture in such a manner as to make it agree with some other passage of Scripture, thereby creating combinations of ideas which are not found in Scripture.”

Such a twisting and adjustment of passages of Scripture is bound to result if we take passages pertaining to weak brethren and passages pertaining to false teachers and then try to combine them in some fashion or other. The result will be either an un evangelical sidestepping of the needs of the weak brethren, or a dangerous failure to separate promptly from those who are causing divisions and offenses in Christ’s church and are deceiving the hearts of the innocent ones.

B. Do we not have to make a distinction between church bodies which have become false teaching and individual false teachers in the application of the separation principle?

Such a distinction may seem to be necessitated by practical exigencies, but it is not in accord with the word of the apostle in Romans 16:17-18. False teaching is dangerously deceptive, and it is the Lord’s gracious will that we turn away from all who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine. To delay such separation because a church body rather than an individual is involved thwarts the Lord’s loving intent and can result in the further spread of the leaven of error with spiritual harm to the innocent ones.

C. Ought we not recognize a debt of love toward those brethren with whom we have been in fellowship and there fore not separate from them immediately when they have strayed into error?

If these brethren are weak in their understanding of some doctrine and are not making propaganda for their error, and if they are within the province of our call, then our love is to manifest itself through patient instruction from God’s Word. But if they are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of Scripture, then our love is to manifest itself through prompt separation.

For we indeed do manifest love by such separation. First, there is our love for God who has first so loved us—a love that will show itself through a keeping of His commandments. Secondly, there is our love for the Christians in our fellowship who have not yet been infected with the error—a love that will see to it that they are isolated from that error. Thirdly, there is our love for the false teachers and their followers—a love which through the very separation will testify to them that their error is a serious matter.

D. In dealing with an erring church body with whom we have been in fellowship, is it not appropriate to enter into a state of confession or a period of protesting fellowship before severing relations with them?

If this church body is causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of Scripture, then any sort of arrangement which has the effect of frustrating the Lord’s will that we separate ourselves must be repudiated.

E. Should we not continue in fellowship with erring brethren until they no longer listen to our admonition or until we have reached the judgment that further admonition will be of no avail?

Our passage clearly forbids a continuing in fellowship with false teachers, for by their errors they cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine and deceive the hearts of the innocent ones. Any practice which would permit fellowship with false teachers while a program of admonition is being carried out involves a violation of the Lord's desire to protect His own from spiritual harm.

This is not to say that admonition will not take place at various points in our dealings with such errorists. Why, the very act of separation itself constitutes a most telling admonition to these former brethren to give up the errors into which they have fallen! But we must affirm that admonition is not in itself a necessary prerequisite to the avoiding.

It is, after all, not the failure to respond positively to admonition that makes a false teacher someone to be avoided, but rather the fact that by his promotion of error he is causing divisions and offenses among Christians and is deceiving the hearts of the innocent ones.

F. Ought we not remain in fellowship with erring church bodies long enough to try to extricate from them those simple souls who have unknowingly been caught up in the error?

When our Savior surveyed the multitudes in Israel who "were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36, NIV), His heart was filled with compassion for them. Surely when we observe how multitudes of people in our day are being deprived of the living water and bread of life by false teachers, our hearts too will be filled with compassion for them.

Yet, the matter of the call must be remembered. If God has called us as spiritual shepherds, our responsibility is to the sheep whom He has placed in our flocks. In discharging that responsibility we are to look to the Good Shepherd for guidance, and in our passage He commands us to separate our selves and our flocks from those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of Scripture. While our hearts do go out to those Christians who have unwittingly been entrapped in the errors of false-teaching shepherds, yet our calls do not extend to them. Luther expressed it in this way:

It is not lawful for me to forsake my assigned station as a preacher, to go to another city where I have no call, and to preach there. (As a doctor of divinity, of course, I could preach throughout the papacy, provided that they let me.) I have no right to do this even if I hear that false doctrine is being taught and that souls are being seduced and condemned which I could rescue from error and condemnation by my sound doctrine. But I should commit the matter to God, who in His own time will find the opportunity to call ministers lawfully and to give the Word. For He is the Lord of the harvest who will send laborers into His harvest; our task is to pray (Matt. 9:38).

Therefore we should not intrude into someone else's harvest, as the devil does through his sectarians. With ardent zeal they claim to be saddened that men are being so miserably led astray, and to want to teach them the truth and rescue them from the devil's clutches. Therefore even when a man seeks, with pious zeal and good intentions, to rescue with his sound doctrine those who have been led astray into error, this is still a bad example, which gives ungodly teachers an excuse to intrude themselves, after which Satan himself occupies the see. This example does a great deal of damage. (On Galatians 1:1, American ed. 26: 18)

It is then our responsibility, not to remain in fellowship for a time with a false-teaching church body in an attempt to extricate some in that body from error, but rather to isolate ourselves and our flocks from the error through separation. The members of the false-teaching body we will commend to the Lord in prayer.

Summary:

The Lord's intent in Romans 16:17-18 is to protect the innocent ones from the deceptions of those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teachings of His Word. Any doctrine or practice, by whatever name it is called, which frustrates this loving intent must be rejected as unscriptural.

V. CONCLUSION -- Romans 16:19-20

Paul continues his epistle to the Romans with the words: “For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.”

The apostle is confident that the Christians at Rome will heed the fervent entreaty which he has given them, even though this might involve difficulty and persecution, for he is aware of their obedience—ὕπακοή, the humbly submissive and eagerly attentive listening of faith. He adds that it is his desire that they be wise with respect to that which is good, by increasing in the knowledge of God’s pure Word, and innocent with respect to that which is evil, by not becoming entangled in the false teachings of errorists. Their archenemy is Satan, the father of lies, but they can rest confident in the certainty that God will soon crush Satan under their feet. Surely the saving grace of their Lord Jesus Christ will be with them and accomplish this victory!

May this same Lord Jesus Christ keep us steadfast in His saving Word, for it is through this Word that He will answer the prayer which Luther has taught us (The Lutheran Hymnal 260:6):

Defend Thy truth, O God, and stay
This evil generation;
And from the error of its way
Keep Thine own congregation.
The wicked everywhere abound
And would Thy little flock confound;
But Thou art our Salvation. Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹ This is the text of the paper on Romans 16:17-18 presented by C. Kuehne at the joint meeting of the CLC Board of Doctrine and the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations held on January 13-14, 1988, at Immanuel Lutheran College. The paper as originally delivered did not contain any notes. Notes have been provided here to call attention to a few minor changes made by the essayist subsequent to the meeting and to provide several additional comments which may be of interest to the readers.

² The essayist originally stated that the conjunction δὲ is best taken here as transitional. After hearing the paper on Romans 16:17-18 by Prof. Armin Panning of the WELS, he recognizes the adversative force of δὲ (“but”) as a distinct possibility. This would provide a striking contrast between the repeated exhortation “Greet” in verses 1-16 and the command “Avoid” in verse 17: Greet the fellow Christians in the Lord, but avoid those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of Holy Scripture!

³ At the meeting the essayist was asked why he translated the articular participle, τοὺς ποιοῦντας, as “those who cause” instead of a linear “those who keep on causing.” He responded with the following quotation from Burton’s Moods and Tenses : “The Present Participle is also used without reference to time or progress, simply defining its subject as belonging to a certain class, i.e., the class of those who do the action denoted by the verb. The participle in this case becomes a simple adjective or noun and is, like any other adjective or noun, timeless and indefinite” (Ernest De Witt Burton, Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek , 3rd ed. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898] par. 123). Burton offers the participles in Galatians 6:6 as illustrative examples. The passage reads: “Let him who is taught [ὁ κατηχοῦμενος] the word share in all good things with him who teaches [τῷ κατηχοῦντι].”

⁴ The essayist originally included the NIV in this parenthetical comment, for in his desk copy of this translation the phrase in question is similarly set off by a comma. Happily, the NIV has corrected this error in translation. The current edition now reads: “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.”

⁵ This clause originally read: “and the only grammatically correct understanding.” Several words have been added so as to preclude misunderstanding. The discussion here does not enter into other forces which the Greek article may manifest elsewhere, such as the anaphoric force.

⁶ The essayist feels that this paragraph could have been strengthened through an elaboration upon what it means to “serve our Lord Christ.” From Scripture we know that such service centers in faithfulness to His name, His holy Word. False teachers are to be avoided also because they bring dishonor upon and violate that name which alone can bring salvation to lost sinners.

THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

#3: TO PERGAMOS

John K. Pfeiffer

BACKGROUND

Pergamos was the chief city in the northern part of the province of Asia. From 133 BC until the second century AD, it served as the Roman capital of the province. As such, it was the legal center of the area. Major judicial matters were brought here for judgment.

Pergamos boasted a temple to the goddess Roma (Rome) and to Caesar Augustus. Loyalty to the empire was tested on the basis of worship in these temples. The refusal to proclaim Κύριος Καῖσαρ was traitorous. This was not just a matter of accepting the political rulership of Caesar, which a Christian should have done. It was a matter of proclaiming Caesar as lord, to the exclusion of every other lord, political or spiritual (cf. *Journal of Theology*, 27:1 20-22).

In addition to the worship of Rome and Caesar, Pergamos also had temples to Zeus (the supreme deity of the Greeks), Bacchus (the god of wine and revelry; also called "Dionysus"), Athena (the goddess of wisdom, skills, and warfare), and Aesculapius (the god of medicine and healing). To Zeus they had raised a 50 foot high altar, which was adorned with an artistically excellent frieze of the gods warring against the giants.

The worship of Aesculapius was a particular problem for the Christians for two reasons: (1) it employed the symbol of a serpent, which would have been a symbol for Satan in the mind of the Christian; (2) unlike many pagan religions, this one seemed to stand for mercy and caring, which are tenets of the Christian religion. Thus, the hated symbol of Satan is connected to mercy, caring, and healing. One can imagine the anger that was stirred up when Christians told the story of the fall into sin. The beloved symbol of Aesculapius was suddenly turned into a symbol for all that is evil. On the other hand, the hated cross was held up as the symbol for mercy, caring, and spiritual healing. Thus, on the part of the pagans, there was anger along with revulsion and ridicule.

On the part of the Christians, there was the necessity to speak out against a religion that was associated with something good, something that was accounted as good even in the Christian religion. In the mind of those, who cannot grasp the meaning of justification by faith in Jesus Christ, such opposition

on the part of Christians seems like irrational sectarianism (cf. our opposition to the religion of the Boy Scouts, of the lodges, of religious, fraternal benefit societies, etc.).

What with the Pergaman pride in their great altar to Zeus, in their worship of Aesculapius, and in their temples to Roma and Augustus, this was a city of intense opposition to Christianity.

There is no record of the coming of Christianity to Pergamos. The Acts of the Apostles says nothing about it. Paul does not refer to the city in any of his writings. However, since the Gospel is something that cannot be contained, we assume that it reached Pergamos by means of Christians eager to spread the good news. Furthermore, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul said that there were others who preached the Gospel, although not all had righteous motivations (1:12ff). Thus, the message was being spread, and Pergamos was one city that had been blessed with the Word of life.

EXEGESIS AND COMMENTARY - Revelation 2:12-17

12. Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Περγάμῳ ἐκκλησίας γράψον· τάδε λέγει ὁ ἔχων τὴν ῥομφαίαν τὴν δίστομον τὴν ὀξεῖαν·

AND TO THE MESSENGER OF THE CHURCH IN PERGAMOS WRITE: THESE THINGS SAYS THE ONE HAVING THE TWO-EDGED, SHARP SWORD:

ἀγγέλω - "messenger" - The letter is addressed first of all to the pastor (cf. Journal of Theology , 26:2 9-10).

τὴν ῥομφαίαν τὴν δίστομον τὴν ὀξεῖαν - "the sword the two-edged, the sharp" - When John first saw the vision of the Savior, this sword was coming out of His mouth (Rev. 1:16). Such a picture is not new with the book of Revelation. In prophecy, the Messiah says: "He [the Lord] has made my mouth like a sharp sword" (Isa. 49:2). Moreover, the sword is not the only image of that which comes out of the mouth of the Messiah: "He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked" (Isa. 11:4). Even the wicked are thus portrayed: "Who have sharpened their tongue like a sword" (Ps. 64:3; also 57:4; 59:7; Prov. 12:18).

Although, in modern parlance, we seldom speak of people as having a sword in their mouths, we do make reference to "a sharp tongue" and "cutting words." Likewise, in the New Testament we hear that some were "cut to the quick," when they heard the words of Peter and Stephen (Acts 5:33; 7:54). Likewise, the people were "pierced to the heart," when they heard Peter's Pentecost sermon.

The most telling passages are these: "And take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17). "The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of the soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from his sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:12f). (I find no outstanding significance in the fact that these two passages use μάχαιρα, a short sword or dagger, while Revelation uses ῥομφαία, a Thracian weapon of larger size. Perhaps the vision of Christ in His majesty calls for the larger sized weapon.)

On the basis of these passages, we conclude that the sword in Christ's mouth is nothing less than His Word. In Ephesians, Paul sees the Word as a weapon against the evil forces of Satan. In Hebrews, it is

seen as a weapon to be used on every heart. The fact that it is sharp shows that it efficiently accomplishes everything that it has been sent to do. "So shall my word be which goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). The fact that the sword is two-edged shows that it can cut both ways. This may refer to nothing more than its efficiency. Some believe that it refers to the two great teachings of the Word: the Law and the Gospel. If so, the Law-edge would be used to kill, to cut open and lay bare the sinful heart, condemning in the process: "When the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died" (Rom. 7:9). As for the Gospel-edge, that is used more like the surgeon's scalpel: it cuts evil out of the heart through the knowledge of forgiveness of sins. (Further discussion will come in connection with verse 16.)

13. οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου καὶ τοῦ κατοικεῖς· ὅπου ὁ θρόνος τοῦ Σατανᾶ· καὶ κρατεῖς τὸ ὄνομά μου, καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὴν πίστιν μου καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐν αἷς Ἀντίπας ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός, ὃς ἀπεκτάνθη παρ' ὑμῖν, ὅπου ὁ Σατανᾶς κατοικεῖ.

I KNOW WHERE YOU ARE DWELLING: WHERE THE THRONE OF SATAN IS; AND YOU ARE HOLDING FAST TO MY NAME, AND YOU DID NOT DENY MY FAITH EVEN IN THE DAYS OF ANTIPAS, THE WITNESS OF ME, MY FAITHFUL ONE, WHO WAS KILLED AMONG YOU, WHERE SATAN DWELLS.

οἶδα - "I know" - As in the previous letters, Jesus wants these people to understand that He is personally and fully aware of what is transpiring in Pergamos. οἶδα refers to a clear, complete, first-hand knowledge.

If there is something positive or praiseworthy in a church, the Lord seems to mention that first. This may be to encourage continuance in righteousness. He holds up the positive before rebuking the negative. τοῦ κατοικεῖς refers to Pergamos.

ὁ θρόνος τοῦ Σατανᾶ - "the throne of Satan" - The word "throne" implies ruling, kingship. The demonic powers are frequently referred to as rulers, powers, world forces of this dark ness, spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places (Eph. 6:12); thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities (Col. 1:16); rulers and authorities (Col. 2:15). Satan is called the prince of the devils (Matt. 12:24), the ruler of this world (John 12:31), and the prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2). It is obvious that Satan does rule in this world. He does have those who are in subjection to him and do his bidding.

The question is, "What makes Pergamos the throne of Satan?" First of all, we should not conclude that this is the only throne of Satan. There are, in all probability, many thrones upon which he sits and from which he goes forth to roam the earth.

Some think that the worship of Aesculapius, with its symbol of a serpent, made this a throne of Satan. This religion may have had a special impact on some Christians. The weak may have been fooled by it, because it emphasized goodness and mercy, which are certainly Christian virtues. One might compare this to Mormonism, which has deceived many a professing Christian.

Considering the context, however, I connect the throne of Satan with the imperial cultus. The worship of Rome and Caesar was made a test of loyalty. The worship of Jesus was considered disloyal, since it was exclusive, not permitting the worship of any other. Therefore, if a Christian was put to the test, he was required to deny the name of Jesus.

Pergamos, being the legal center of the area, was the city to which were brought those who refused to worship Roma or Caesar. Antipas may have been one of these. Pergamos had become a place from which Satan carried out a reign of terror against the Church. From this throne, he could command his subjects to do his bidding throughout the area.

κρατεῖς - "holding fast" - This carries the sense of power. This is not just a loose hold, but a firm grip. The Christians clung tenaciously to the name of Jesus. They refused to deny it, even in the face of persecution and the threat of death.

τὸ ὄνομά μου - "the name of me" - Christ's name embraces all that He has revealed about Himself in the Scriptures. It is His full identity and reputation. To hold to the name of Christ is to cling to all the truths concerning Him. It is not simply the external adherence to the word "Christ," while in word and deed denying everything that Christ stands for: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:8f). Jesus made it plain that it was not enough just to take up His names with the mouth: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). Holding fast to His name is a matter of the heart as well as the mouth: "For with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" (Rom. 10:10; cf. 9-13).

At this point in the history of the Pergaman congregation, even the name of Jesus on their lips came from conviction. Publicly to declare Κύριος Ἰησοῦς put one in grave danger. Those lacking in inner conviction would either refrain from making such a confession or else they would say only Κύριος Καῖσαρ when in public.

At other times in history, clinging to the name of Christ involved other ways of acknowledging His lordship. As each truth that Christ has revealed is challenged by false teachers, one is forced to decide who shall be his lord. By whose word shall he abide? Even though both sides may be willing to say Κύριος Ἰησοῦς, this saying shall remain true only for those who abide by Christ's Word. Jesus says: "If you abide in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine" (John 8:31). Paul wrote: "Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey . . ." (Rom. 6:16).

Of course, we realize that there are a great many true disciples of the Lord Jesus who, on account of ignorance and weakness, follow false teachers, thinking that they are submitting to the lordship of Jesus. Likewise, there are many who appear to be clinging firmly to the teachings of Christ, while in their hearts they acknowledge some other lord. Such as these are clearly seen by Christ alone. "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tim. 3:19).

ἠρνήσω - "denied" - There is more than one way of denying Jesus and the faith. The most blatant denial is that of one like Peter, who verbally denied that he even knew Jesus (Mark 14:66ff). There is also a denial of the lordship of Jesus found in the immoral living of those who claim to be Christian: "They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed" (Titus 1:16); "for certain persons have crept in unnoticed . . . ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (Jude 4). Likewise, the man who refuses to provide for his family has denied the faith: "If anyone does not provide for his

own, and especially those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). False teachers also deny the Lord with their destructive heresies: "There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves" (2 Pet. 2:1).

The immediate context shows that the danger in Pergamos was to disown Christianity completely in order to be spared from persecution. It was that type of denial found in Peter. The congregation did not do this.

τὴν πίστιν μου - "the faith of me" - The genitive, μου, is descriptive in the objective sense. Robertson quotes Mark 11:22 (ἔχετε πίστιν Θεοῦ) as meaning "the God kind of faith" (500), which, he says, can be properly translated, "have faith in God." In Romans 3:22, Paul writes, δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ, meaning "the God kind of righteousness," or as we often say, "the righteousness that avails before God."

The connection of the genitive (Χριστοῦ/Ἰησοῦ) to πίστις is found in several places in the New Testament (Rev. 14:12; Gal. 2:16; 3:22; Phil. 3:9; Jas. 2:1). In none of these places do we understand the writer as referring to the faith within the heart of Jesus. The chief question has to do with the meaning of the word "faith": does it refer to the trust that a person has in Jesus or to the object of that trust, i.e., the body of doctrine upon which a person rests his faith? The context alone can determine the answer.

Both the NIV and AT translate: "your faith in Me." KJV, NKJV, and NASB translate: "My faith." Is Jesus saying that they did not deny the trust that was in their hearts, or that they did not deny the body of doctrine? If we follow Robertson, Jesus would be speaking about "the Jesus kind of faith" or "faith in Jesus." Grammatically, this is acceptable. However, "the Jesus kind of faith" could also refer to the body of doctrine which comes from Jesus. I lean toward this latter interpretation. They did not deny the teachings of Jesus, the foundation upon which the Church rests. They remained steadfast, "even" (καὶ) at a time when it could have meant death for them.

Ἀντίπας - "Antipas" - This is the only Biblical reference to this martyr. Whether or not he was a citizen of Pergamos can not be determined. The fact that Jesus makes the point that he "was killed among you" (ὡς ἀπεκτάνθη παρ' ὑμῶν) gives the impression that he was brought in from outside the city and was convicted and executed in Pergamos. As was stated above, this city was a judicial center in the province of Asia.

ὁ μάρτυς μου - "the witness of Me" - This could be a simple genitive of possession ("My witness") or an objective genitive ("the witness of Me", i.e., one who testifies concerning Me). Similar expressions are found elsewhere: "You shall be my witnesses (ἔσεσθέ μου μάρτυρες) both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea . . ." (Acts 1:8). "For many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now his witnesses to the people (εἰσιν μάρτυρες αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὸν λαόν)" (Acts 13:31); "God . . . is my witness (μάρτυς γὰρ μοῦ ἐστὶν ὁ Θεός) as to how unceasingly I make mention of you" (Rom. 1:9). When one is "my witness," this means that he stands up and bears witness to something concerning me. Antipas bore witness to Jesus, to His person, to His office, to His works and words. As a result of his witnessing, he was put to death. Even so, others, who are honored with the title, ὁ μάρτυς Ἰησοῦ, were put to death (e.g., Stephen: Acts 22:20; Rev. 17:6). Eventually, this became a title for all

who sacrificed their lives for Jesus. The Greek word became Anglicized, and to this day we call them "martyrs."

ὁ πιστός μου - "the faithful of Me" - πιστός is a verbal adjective, having either a passive sense (faithful, trustworthy, reliable, etc.) or an active sense (trusting, believing, relying). Thus, Jesus is saying either that Antipas was a faithful one or that he was a believing one. Either would be true. However, the context makes the former seem more likely, for Jesus is emphasizing faithfulness in the face of adversity.

There are also two choices in the manner of translating the phrase. It could read, "My faithful one" (possessive genitive), or, "the one faithful to Me" (objective genitive). Either way, the basic thought remains the same: Antipas was faithful; having made a confession of faith in Jesus Christ, he did not back down, even in the face of death.

Finally, shall we combine the two phrases ("My faithful witness") or shall we keep them separate ("the witness of Me, My faithful one")? It may seem academic, and yet, when translating, we must be sensitive to the exact way in which Christ speaks. He makes the point of repeating the pronoun μου. There must be a reason. Therefore, we should repeat it also, whether we understand the reason or not. It could read, "My witness, My faithful one," or, "My witness, faithful to Me," or, "the witness of Me, the one faithful to Me." What stands out is Jesus. Antipas bore witness to Jesus ; he was faithful to Jesus . Jesus was his reason for living; Jesus was his reason for dying. He bore witness to Jesus in life; he remained faithful to Jesus in death.

14. ἀλλ' ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὀλίγα, ὅτι ἔχεις ἐκεῖ κρατοῦντας τὴν διδαχὴν Βαλαάμ, ὃς ἐδίδασκε τὸν Βαλὰκ βαλεῖν σκάνδαλον ἐνώπιον τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ καὶ φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα καὶ πορνεῦσαι.

BUT I HAVE A FEW THINGS AGAINST YOU, THAT YOU HAVE THERE ONES HOLDING FAST TO THE TEACHING OF BALAAM, WHO TAUGHT BALAK TO CAST A STUMBLING-BLOCK BEFORE THE SONS OF ISRAEL: TO EAT MEAT OFFERED TO IDOLS AND TO FORNICATE.

ἀλλ' ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὀλίγα - "but I have against you a few things" - Christ first mentioned the encouraging things to be found in this flock. However, He does not ignore the bad things. Though these be "few" (ὀλίγος) - little, small, few), they exist and need to be removed. Christ is not like the ecumenists, who only want to talk about the "positive" things, while ignoring the "negative."

The expression ἔχω κατὰ is used in two other letters (2:4; 2:20). In each instance, He is speaking to a congregation that has something good and something bad in it. Let all pastors take note. It is very easy for us to ignore the weaknesses in our congregations, while comforting ourselves in their strong points. However, Jesus very pointedly says, "I have this against you." He does not ignore the weaknesses, but calls upon us to correct them.

ὅτι - "that" - This is exegetical to ὀλίγα. Jesus will now explain what the "few things" are.

ἔχεις ἐκεῖ - "you have there" - The pastor and the congregation were tolerating certain evil people within the flock. It is amazing that a people who could stand so firm, holding fast to Christ's name even in the face of persecution and death, could be so lax in church discipline. On the other hand, maybe it is not so strange. Consider the following: (1) a people, who struggle so hard against one evil, can easily (easily for

sinners, that is) lose sight of other evils, since all their concentrations is in one direction; (2) people, who are weary from one struggle are hesitant to take up another; (3) while a congregation is fighting outside forces of evil, it is reluctant to fight evil forces inside; (4) Satan, also, is involved: while he has them distracted by one battle (diversionary tactics), he slips other forces in behind their ranks.

What Jesus had against them was not the evil of Balaam, but the fact that they tolerated this evil. Those who were practicing the evil are not considered to be a part of the body, but are treated like a parasitic fungus attached to the body.

κρατούντας - "ones holding fast" - The faithful within the congregation "held fast" to the name of Christ. These hypocrites "held fast" to the doctrine of Balaam. As κρατέω shows, these were not deluded because of weakness. They had a strong, firm grasp on this evil.

τὴν διδαχὴν Βαλαάμ - "the teaching of Balaam" - In Num. 22ff, Balaam appears to have been a prophet of Jehovah. "And he said to them, 'Spend the night here, and I will bring word back to you as the Lord (Hebrew: יהוה = Jehovah) may speak to me'" (22:8). Could it have been that the Lord at times revealed His will through men who did not truly worship Him? This certainly seems to have been the case with Balaam. While he sought revelations from Jehovah, the nature of his heart is revealed by what he said and did.

Had Balaam sought Jehovah from his heart, then he would have realized from the outset that Israel was the special possession of God. In fact, if he did not already know, it soon became obvious to him that they held a special position, for God told him, "They are blessed" (22:12). Yet, in spite of this, and in spite of the fact that God told him from the outset that he was not to curse Israel, Balaam still tried to find some way by which he could curse them. God's attitude toward Israel did not become Balaam's. At each turn, God hindered Balaam. He was forced to bless Israel, much to the consternation of Balak. God even used a donkey to hinder this evil prophet (22:22ff).

What was it that caused Balaam to be so wicked? Jude says, "Woe to them! . . . for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam . . ." (v. 11). Peter writes, "Forsaking the right way they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Pet. 2:15). It is clear, then, that Balaam wanted money; he prophesied for pay. Since Balak offered great riches to the prophet, Balaam's lust for wealth drove him to do evil.

It finally became clear to Balaam that Jehovah was not going to give him a single word to speak against Israel, for the Lord said to him, "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent; has he said, and will he not do it? or has he spoken, and will he not make it good?" (23:19). Therefore, Balaam abandoned that strategy. However, since he still desired riches, he looked for another way to create trouble for Israel. Therefore, he advised Balak to send women into the camp of the Israelites, to seduce them: "The people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods" (25:1f). Twenty-four thousand died at the hand of the Lord, because of their great iniquity. Who knows how many more died in spirit, because of the sin of Balaam?

In the end, however, the judgment against Midian was greater. At the command of the Lord, Israel "warred against the Midianites . . . and they killed all the males" (Num. 31:7) as well as the females who were responsible for leading Israel astray (v. 16f). Balaam, also, was killed in the battle.

Balaam remains somewhat of a mystery. On the one hand, he professed Jehovah to be his God; he

received prophetic utterances from Jehovah; he refused to utter a false prophecy. On the other hand, greed became his god; he thought that he could persuade God to change His mind; he would not adopt God's attitude toward Israel; he sought to destroy Israel by advising Balak to appeal to the lust of Israel's heart.

While the man may be a mystery, his work is not. It has been repeated through the centuries. For the sake of riches, evil prophets have led multitudes away from the true God. In many of these instances, they have used the same tactics as Balaam, luring people away to idols and to fornication. Here is the kind who outwardly attaches himself to the true worship of God, while inwardly there is no faith. He is one who speaks the truth at times and falsehood at other times, whichever best serves the situation. He is a tool of Satan, planted in the midst of God's people so that he can lead them astray. Repeatedly he appeals to the lust of the flesh (2 Pet. 2:1ff), while his own motivation is the lust of the eyes for wealth.

Within the Pergaman congregation, there were those who declared that it was acceptable to God to commit fornication and to eat sacrificial meat. The eating of sacrificial meat purchased at the butcher's market was not forbidden, except in such instances where someone's conscience would be injured (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8; 10:23-32). (The Exegetical Greek New Testament , 5: 23, implies that what was an adiaphoron in Corinth and Rome became a principle in Pergamos because of the prevailing circumstances.) However, participating in the idolatrous feast would violate the holy will of God: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Cor. 10:21). The pagans believed that their god was participating in these feasts. Attendance at such a feast might constitute an admission that the pagan god was real and present. Eating at such a feast would constitute a participation in the worship.

Furthermore, it was not an uncommon thing to practice immorality in connection with these feasts. The gods of the Greeks and Romans were given the same passions as their creators; therefore, it is no surprise that these religions were lacking in morals.

It is accepted that there were those in Pergamos who said that there was nothing wrong with eating at temple feasts nor with committing fornication. However, was this the teaching of Balaam? The passage says that "he taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the sons of Israel." It would appear as though the teaching of Balaam was this: "Put a stumbling-block before the Christians by leading them to eat sacrificial meat and to commit fornication." Were the proponents of this libertine philosophy really out to trip up the Christians? Was that their objective? Yes, it was. Whether or not they truly believed what they espoused is beside the point. The Christians were following a specific moral code. Their faith in Jesus Christ was the source of their desire to follow this code. The libertines (those who gave free reign to their fleshly desires, warping the concept of Christian freedom) wanted to sabotage that moral code and destroy the true Christian faith. They wanted to substitute their own concepts and philosophies. So, yes, they were aiming to cast a stumbling-block before the Christians in Pergamos.

How often Satan has intruded his emissaries into Christian congregations, so that they might cast stumbling-blocks before God's people. So often they try to lead the people to do the very thing that was just forsaken. The people of Pergamos were being drawn back to the idolatry they had abandoned, along with the immorality connected thereto. May our Lord lead us to recognize such emissaries and to deal swiftly with them.

15. οὕτως ἔχεις καὶ σὺ κρατοῦντας τὴν διδασχὴν τῶν Νικολαιτῶν ὁμοίως

THUS YOU HAVE, EVEN YOU, ONES HOLDING LIKEWISE TO THE TEACHING OF THE NICOLAITANS.

οὕτως - "thus" - What follows is connected to the preceding. The evils spoken of in verse 14 gave rise to the intrusion of the error of the Nicolaitans.

Νικολαϊτῶν - "Nicolaitans" - (cf. Journal of Theology , 26:2 22) The atmosphere within the Pergaman congregation offered a perfect climate for the rise of the Nicolaitan error. While we do not know for certain what the error of Nicolaus was, we can draw the conclusion that it was closely connected to the teaching of Balaam. Therefore, it must have had something to do with idolatrous feasts and/or fornication. Some think that Nicolaus was a libertine, who heard about Christian freedom, but used the concept "as a covering for sin" (1 Pet. 2:16). I propose that Nicolaus was a compromiser, who declared that it was permissible to join in the social and civic affairs, such as public festivals, even though these were thoroughly permeated with paganism.—Behold how one error, when tolerated, opens the door to other errors. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9).

καὶ σὺ - "even you" - You, who have been so faithful; you, who hold so firmly to My name and refused to deny the faith. You tolerate the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

16. μετανόησον οὖν· εἰ δὲ μή, ἔρχομαί σοι ταχύ καὶ πολεμήσω μετ' αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ ῥομφαίᾳ τοῦ στόματός μου

REPENT THEREFORE, BUT IF [you do] NOT, I AM COMING TO YOU QUICKLY, AND I WILL WAGE WAR AGAINST THEM WITH THE SWORD OF MY MOUTH.

μετανόησον - "repent" - This command is not addressed to the Balaamites, nor to the Nicolaitans. It is addressed to the Christian congregation. Jesus is requiring from them a change of mind and purpose, a 180-degree turn away from their sin. The evil of the congregation was this that **they had** (ἔχουσιν), v. 14) in their midst those errorists. They tolerated such false teachers. Their repentance would demonstrate itself in eliminating the of fenders either by leading them to repent or by removing the impenitent from their midst. They should follow the example of the Ephesians, who hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans (2:6) and who would not tolerate evil men (2:2).

εἰ δὲ μή - "but if not" - If they did not repent, there would be dire consequences.

ἔρχομαί σοι ταχύ - "I am coming to you quickly" - No time should be wasted. Church discipline is not an area for procrastination. If the congregation itself does not do something, the Lord will come and take care of things.

This may sound like an easy way out for the lax pastor and congregation: "I don't have to take care of this, because God will." However, they may find that it is not so pleasant when the Lord comes. Churches that have failed to exercise discipline sometimes find the Lord intervening. In some manner, He brings things to a head, but then there arises such a furor that everyone suffers. In the end, it serves as a blessing to those who remain faithful. However, the intervening turmoil could be avoided by consistent, evangelical discipline.

This expression, "I am coming quickly," is sometimes used with reference to the second coming of Christ (Rev. 22:20). However, in this passage, Jesus says, "I am coming **to you**." This is a specific coming for a specific purpose ("I will wage war").

This coming does not refer to Jesus' abiding presence, either. He had already declared this presence when He described Himself as "walking in the midst of the seven golden candle sticks" (Rev. 2:1). Neither does this coming imply a prior absence.

This coming refers to the fact that Jesus is about to do something. It is a purposeful coming, an effective coming. It is like such comings as are spoken of in the Old Testament: "Stir up Thy power, and come to save us" (Ps. 80:2). Perhaps more familiar to us is the word "visit": "For thus says the Lord, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill my good word to you to bring you back to this place'" (Jer. 29:10). Even so in our passage, when Jesus says, "I am coming," this does not imply previous absence, but refers to the fact that He will be present for the purpose of doing some specific thing.

πολεμήσω - "I will wage war" - The warfare that Jesus carries on in His role as Lord of the Church is a spiritual one. Any attempt to make this a flesh and blood battle flies in the face of Scriptural evidence. Even when Jesus was walking as flesh and blood on earth, He very clearly stated, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then my servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, my kingdom is not of this realm" (John 18:36). The Apostle Paul, who received many a blow to his flesh and blood body, spoke not a word about retaliation in kind, but wrote: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5). The most familiar passage concerning our warfare is found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (6:11f). Following this, Paul lists the weapons of warfare, all of which are clearly spiritual. The last of these weapons is the same as Jesus uses in His warfare.

τῆ ῥομφαίᾳ τοῦ στόματός μου - "the sword of My mouth" - (cf. comments on v. 12). The sword of Christ's mouth is nothing less than His Word. By this He wages war against His enemies. As Hebrews 4:12 reveals, the Word has the incisive power to lay bare the heart, revealing its thoughts and intents.

The dire warning of Christ is that if they do not repent and take care of the problem, then He will come and do it Him self. However, they must understand that this would entail warfare. Jesus would take up the battle against the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans. Harsh words of judgment would be leveled against them. The congregation would be caught in the middle.

As anyone who has experienced a doctrinal dispute can testify, these wars can be very hard on the Christian. He suffers greatly through the battles. This is especially true where a congregation has been lax in church discipline and God must carry out the discipline Himself.

As for the manner of Christ's coming, we have no definite answer. There are those who say that Jesus would afflict the wicked with sickness. However, this does not seem to agree with the concept, "the sword of My mouth." I would rather be looking for some way in which Jesus brought His Word to bear on the evildoers. In the age before the canon was closed, there were still prophets on earth, men to whom God gave direct revelations. It could be that Jesus would raise up such a prophet, who would come to Pergamos and boldly proclaim the truth in the midst of the congregation. Since Christ speaks of "war," we might assume that the errorists would not take this lying down. They would try to fight back. As was said above, the congregation would be caught in the middle. It would not be pleasant for them. While waging war against the errorists, the prophet would no doubt rebuke the congregation for their laxness. On the

other side, the servants of Satan would be engaging in a strong campaign against the prophet, doing everything they could to draw followers after them. The end result would be a serious split in the group, with a man set against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. So it is that the sword of the Lord does not bring peace (Matt. 10:34-35).

Whether or not Jesus used a prophet to wield His sword cannot be said. Others without the gift of prophecy have been raised up by the Lord to bring fearless testimony. After all, the error in question did not require the gift of prophecy to discover. Regardless of the method used, this truth stands out: Jesus is merciful, even to the lax, ridding them of grievous wolves.

17. Ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ Πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις. τῷ νικῶντι δώσω αὐτῷ τοῦ μάννα τοῦ κεκρυμμένου, καὶ δώσω αὐτῷ ψῆφον λευκὴν, καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν ψῆφον ὄνομα καινὸν γεγραμμένον, ὃ οὐδεὶς οἶδεν εἰ μὴ ὁ λαμβάνων.

LET THE ONE HAVING EARS HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING TO THE CHURCHES. TO THE ONE OVERCOMING I WILL GIVE TO HIM THE MANNA HAVING BEEN HIDDEN, AND I WILL GIVE TO HIM A WHITE STONE AND UPON THE STONE A NEW NAME HAVING BEEN WRITTEN, WHICH NO ONE KNOWS EXCEPT THE ONE RECEIVING [it].

Ὁ ἔχων οὖς - "the one having ears . . ." - (cf. Journal of Theology , 26:2 22) As with the other six letters, this one is not addressed to Pergamos alone. All Christian churches are to take to heart the things spoken of in this letter. "If the shoe fits, wear it."

τῷ νικῶντι - "to the one overcoming" - The Ephesians had to overcome error and lovelessness. The Smyrnans had to overcome tribulation. The Pergamans had to overcome persecution and the temptation to be lax in church discipline. Does this overcoming refer only to victory over a temporary conflict? I don't think so. The conflicts are never temporary. Though God gives His flock times of peace, "there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you" (1 Cor. 11:19). Therefore, the conflicts will arise again and again. "It is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved" (Matt. 10:22).

τοῦ μάννα τοῦ κεκρυμμένου - "the manna, the one having been hidden" - The Scriptures speak of three different kinds of manna. The first is that which was given to the children of Israel in the wilderness (cf. Exod. 16:15). This manna was meant to nourish their bodies, while they sojourned in the wilderness. The second manna is given to the spiritual Israel, while they wander in the wilderness of the world. This manna gives life to our souls during our sojourn. It is nothing less than Jesus Christ, Himself. His body and blood, given and shed for the remission of our sins, has indeed brought life to those who believe. The third manna is that spoken of in this place, i.e., the hidden manna.

Some contend that the second and the third are the same. According to this interpretation, Christ will give Himself to those who overcome. He is hidden from those who don't believe, but He reveals Himself to those who do.

However, since the other promises made to those who overcome (2:7,11,26; 3:5,12,21) appear to be speaking of blessings in heaven, I am inclined to interpret this promise in the same manner. Accordingly, the hidden manna is that which God will give us in the great feast in heaven. Though hidden from our sight now, it will be set before us as we "come from the east and west, and recline at the table

with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11). Just as the first manna preserved the body and the second preserved the soul, even so this manna will preserve both body and soul for all eternity.

To speculate on the form that the manna will take would be a futile exercise. This much is clear: those who refrained from participation in pagan feasts will have a far greater feast in the world to come. However, those who chose the meat that they could see would not taste of the hidden manna.

ψῆφον λευκὴν - "white stone" - Those who served as jurors were sometimes given a white stone and a black stone. They would cast one of these stones in a container, thereby indicating their verdict concerning the accused. A white stone meant innocent; a black stone meant guilty.

In the courts of Pergamos, black stones were being cast at the trials of Christians. Christ, therefore, assures them that in the final judgment, He would give them a white stone. In His sight they will stand acquitted.

What grace is exercised by our Lord! Though many be the crimes that we have committed against Him, yet He declares us innocent. And innocent we are, for He was declared guilty of our crimes. He Himself suffered the penalty. He paid for our crimes. Justice has been satisfied forever. Therefore, the Judge of all casts a white stone. Thus, the one who overcomes will not face the final condemnation of the wicked.

ὄνομα καινὸν - "a new name" - καινός refers to form and quality rather than age. This is a new, unused name, although its age may extend back to eternity.

In the final acquittal, the victorious one shall receive this new name, this new identity. As to what this name shall be, he will not know until he receives it. Perhaps it refers to the special nature that will be his in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15). Perhaps it refers to the special relationship that he will have with God.

Apparently, it was a common practice among the heathen of those days to favor certain people with an amulet having some secret, divine name written on it. This amulet was supposed to assure them of safety and grant them admission to certain closed ceremonies. — If this is the allusion that Christ is making, then the assurance would be that the white stone with the new name would give them safe entrance into the heavenly temple.

SUMMARY

Jesus approaches the church at Pergamos in an ominous manner, having a two-edged sword. Here was a congregation which had shown great zeal, standing fast in the midst of bitter persecution. Even though one of their brethren had been killed because of his confession, they did not deny the faith. So great was their battle in this city that Jesus called it "Satan's throne."

Not all was well, however. While they were faithful to their confession of Christ's name, they were lax in their exercise of church discipline. They tolerated in their membership some who advocated feasting in idol temples and practicing the immorality often connected with idolatry. They also tolerated some who promoted the Nicolaitan error. These were not errors of weakness or ignorance, for they held fast to their evil.

Jesus calls for repentance on the part of the congregation. There must be a change, if they are to escape judgment. This toleration had to stop. The evil had to be cut out. If not, Jesus Himself would come

with the sword of His Word, cutting and slashing, judging and convicting.

"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."
