

CENTRAL BAPTIST – MAY 21 - 2023  
WE'VE GOT MAIL  
CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

---

**THE CHURCH THAT'S ON THE FRONT LINE!**  
**By Tom Cowan**

**(SHOW TITLE VIDEO as Tom walks up)** When we live in Victoria – we live under the constant warning that one day there will be an earthquake – the earthquake experts could not tell you when – it might be next week that the San Andreas fault would decide to hiccup or burb -- or it might be in several hundred years – but we were told it is coming – so be prepared.

How many of you are earthquake ready? Please leave your name and address with the church office – because we are coming to your house!

Like many others -- we had emergency earthquake supplies in our garage – I always wondered about where we kept them – because if we did have an earthquake which brought the house down – it seemed to me that the house would fall on top of the garage and we would never be able to reach the supplies.

We used to live in a house on a little lane across from the ocean [we told people that we lived on the cheap side of the street] and every year in the winter – another few feet of shoreline would slowly wash away. Homes across from us slowly saw their lots vanishing a few feet at a time. You see - earthquakes and erosion ultimately do the same damage – one just does it faster and is more visible – but the final damage is the same. What people were not ready for was the silent destructive force of erosion – That's the struggle the church has to recognize – erosion is just as deadly as an earthquake – compromise can do just as much damage as conflict.

We will learn this lesson for the church today from the next chapter in the Patmos papers – come and pay a visit to the church in a city called Pergamum – and we will see that the dangers facing this church have much to teach us about being the church today.

Revelation 2:12-17. **(SHOW SLIDE 01)**

**12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.**

CENTRAL BAPTIST – MAY 21 - 2023  
WE'VE GOT MAIL  
CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

---

Pergamum had one of the world's most famous libraries. It was the place where parchment was invented.

Like many cities, it was a centre for Caesar worship.

It was one of the few cities to have received what was called the IUS GLADII, which means the right of the sword. This meant that the governor of the city had the right and authority to administer capital punishment. Every Christian in Pergamum would understand the reference to the sword coming out of his mouth (verse 16).

It was also the centre for worship for the god Asklepios who was the god of healing. The emblem of this heathen god was a snake or a serpent.

Those who spent the night in the temple hoped to be touched by snakes gliding in the dark across the temple floor – sounds creepy! The snakes were regarded as an incarnation of the god. Pergamum was the Lourdes of the ancient world.

Behind the city rose a conical hill which was dotted with shrines and temples of pagan gods. Such a hill might have been known as Satan's seat. (verse 13)

**(SHOW SLIDE 02) 13 I know where you live-where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-where Satan lives.**

This refers to some specific act of conflict in which the church at Pergamum had held their ground. Faced with a specific issue – they had stood their ground – there was no doubt about that.

**(SHOW SLIDE 03) 14 Nevertheless, [BUT...]I have a few things against you:**

There is a change of tone – we move from the success of standing against conflict to the seduction of compromise.

**(SHOW SLIDE 04) You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.**

**15 Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.**

CENTRAL BAPTIST – MAY 21 - 2023  
WE'VE GOT MAIL  
CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

---

The reference to Balaam is to a story back in the Old Testament [Numbers 31] when Balaam used the temptations of pagan food and pagan women to attack the faith of the Israelites. The story and the incident became proverbial for spiritual compromise. That's the point of truth for us this morning.

The historical incident is being used to teach a truth – which is -- the danger of conceding when we do not recognize what is at the heart of most temptation.

**(SHOW SLIDE 05) 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.**

**17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.**

There are at least nine different interpretations for the meaning of the white stone- which means they do not really know!

But you get the important point – erosion is just as deadly as earthquakes – compromise does just as much damage as conflict -- in fact, maybe more. This church recognized and resisted the conflict and stood – for that it was commended. But it failed to recognize compromise – and for that it was called to repent.

That is the stage setting for our day –and we will see just how dangerous our culture is for the days in which we live. My application will not so much be on the personal level – rather it will be more on the cultural or political context. This might be harder for us to consider – but just as important. We are told only one thing about a group in 2 Chronicles – the sons of Issachar – we are told – they understood the times in which they lived. I wonder if we understand – really understand – the times/the culture in which we live?

**(SHOW SLIDE 06) John Stott says of the church in Pergamum and the battle they were in – “here a pitched battle was being fought in which the soldiers were not men -- but ideas.”**

Darrel Johnson says – The Church in Pergamum, like the church in Rome and Stockholm, Washington and Manila, New Delhi and Los Angeles – was engaged in a

CENTRAL BAPTIST – MAY 21 - 2023  
WE'VE GOT MAIL  
CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

---

battle for the mind. The outcome of every other kind of battle hinges on the outcome of this battle.

We are familiar with the words of Ephesians 6 – we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers – we are familiar with the truth that one expression to describe the Christian life is that it is a battle – but what we do not often recognize or understand is that the battle we are in is first and foremost a battle of ideas. Ideas are the strongholds of evil in both the individual and in society. Ideas are the womb from which actions are born.

The conflict between Christianity and culture is not a conflict about lifestyles – homosexual or any other kind of lifestyle -- at the heart it is a conflict of ideas.

When Satan wanted to draw Eve away from God -- he just planted an idea – the idea that God could not really be trusted and that she needed to live outside of the safety of God's truth. It started as an idea and it took hold – it gave birth to an act of disobedience.

One day a man had an idea to rule the world and in doing so eliminate the world of homosexuals, gypsies and Jews – the idea took hold – it gave birth to a holocaust of concentration camps and gas chambers. All from an idea.

Ideas are strongholds – and the more innocent they seem – the more dangerous they in fact may be.

Allow me to bring us over 2,000 years – from Pergamum to Victoria – another city where Satan dwells – to Canada – another place where Satan dwells and to understand that the battle we are in is a battle of ideas.

Some suggestions to start your thinking in his direction – there are many other examples –but these may be uniquely Canadian set against the background of the Charter of Rights.

**(SHOW SLIDE 07) THE FREEDOM OF PRIVATIZATION.**

We need to begin with a definition – what do we mean by privatization – a rather clumsy word?

CENTRAL BAPTIST – MAY 21 - 2023  
WE'VE GOT MAIL  
CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

---

Privatization means the process in our society which creates a cleavage between the public and the private spheres of life – and reinforces and encourages the private sphere as the arena for personal development and fulfillment.

This private area becomes the area of incredible freedom – you can do anything you want in his private arena. The private world becomes a place of growth – hobbies and personal pursuit – individual expression. This is what is allowed in the Charter.

We are free to build whatever world we want to our heart's content in our private world – so long as we don't rock the boat in the public pond. You can do whatever you want in this private reserve – Yoga – or Bible Studies – playing golf – Satan worship – Wicca – gardening it really doesn't matter as long as it is private. Each has equal weight and value. Just do your own thing.

You see – everything is permitted in the private sphere – So for Christians on this private world – Christian faith flourishes – Bible study deepens – BUT – the global umbrella and impact of faith may actually shrink!

There is no earthquake but rather a silent erosion. While personal faith can grow – the real Christian penetration of the modern world and society slows down and comes to a halt. Truth is removed from the public area – it now becomes a matter of private conscience.

What this erodes and destroys is the truth and power of the totality of the Christian faith. Remember -- Jesus described his kingdom – the reign and rule of God – to be like a grain of yeast or leaven – permeating and influencing all of life and all of society. The freedom we think we are being given is a seduction – it causes the erosion of our faith. It creates a faith that may be privately engaging and meaningful – but at the same time is socially irrelevant. This is erosion doing its deadly work.

Let me give you an example of a man who understood the need for public faith – his name was William Wilberforce – in 1787 he sat at his desk one foggy Sunday morning and wrote - Almighty God has set before me two great objectives – the abolition of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.

So began one of the greatest offensives in modern history against one of the greatest evils of the day – slavery. Time and time again Wilberforce dragged his battle and his calling into the public arena of parliament in London – he faced defeat after defeat.

CENTRAL BAPTIST – MAY 21 - 2023  
WE'VE GOT MAIL  
CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

---

Then 46 years later – in July 1833 – His Bill to abolish slavery passed 2<sup>nd</sup> reading in the House of Commons – the following Sunday Wilberforce passed into a coma and died early on the Monday morning.

When Wilberforce became a Christian at the age of 25 -- he thought and assumed that the greatest spiritual commitment he could make was to become a pastor – he thought that this is how he would make the greatest public impact. A friend wrote to him and encouraged not to go into the ministry – but to stay in politics. That friend was John Newton – who wrote Amazing Grace – and who had once been the captain of a slave ship.

We are called to have a personal faith – and we may have a private faith – but as Christians we cannot have a privatized faith. Jesus Christ is not only Lord of our spiritual lives – he is Lord over every sphere of life. He insists on encouraging the totality of our faith – it means engaging at whatever the cost in the public arena of life.

Part of the struggle we face with the homosexual agenda is that they have skillfully moved the arena from being a private one to being a public one. So Christianity faces opposition only when it moves its agenda out of the private sphere of the church. But Christianity is called to be a public faith – not a privatized faith.

If I can say this in the right way – it is time for Christians to come out of the closet!

**(SHOW SLIDE 08) THE NEUTRALITY OF SECULARIZATION.**

Once again we face some clumsy words – what do we mean by secularization? –

Secularization is the process by which little by little -- religious ideas and spiritual influence are slowly withdrawn and removed from society. It is the process by which successive sectors in society become less influenced and shaped by religious ideas. Bit by bit things yield to the slow but definite erosion caused by secular thinking.

Christian institutions and Christian ideas are displaced from the centre of modern society – there is a building which is known by a single letter – the Y – it used to be 4 letters – YMCA – the C stood for Christian. I used to belong to the Boy Scouts – started by Lord Baden Powell – it was held in our church.

CENTRAL BAPTIST – MAY 21 - 2023  
WE'VE GOT MAIL  
CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

---

It used to be that churches stood at the centre of the village or town – not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually. Schools, hospitals, welfare all came from this central life of churches. The great cathedrals of Europe were built where trade routes crossed – where people came to set up markets – the church was there. The centre of society is now the mall!

One of the great privileges and challenges that Central Baptist Church has in its location in Victoria is that it is in the middle of the hustle and bustle of this city. We are in the middle of the life and activity of this city in our physical location – but we have to ask the better question – are we in the middle of this life and activity of this city spiritually and emotionally – do we feel the pulse of this city – do we feel its pain – or has erosion does its deadly work in the combination of these two forces – privatization and secularization. Privatization withdraws us within our walls – secularization removes our influence from the public life of the city.

When you combine these two forces in a city – you end up with what John Neuhaus the Catholic scholar calls the naked public square. What he means by this is -- public life which has been stripped of the influence of the spiritual. In its secularization – society has become stripped of its spiritual clothes.

Parliament used to open each day with prayer – that no longer happens – We used to see a Bible on top of the box where you voted – not any more. These two simple things are silent evidence of erosion.

Secularization means that society is closed to the reality or the potential of the spirituality – We end up in a culture of spent sacred forces. It requires more than simply saying that the church is on Pandora Street - it means and demands that the church be in the life blood of the city.

We need to remember that public morality does not decline with an act of parliament – it declines when ordinary people over ordinary issues withdraw from the arena of public activity.

CENTRAL BAPTIST – MAY 21 - 2023  
WE'VE GOT MAIL  
CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

---

**(SHOW SLIDE 09) THE TOLERANCE OF PLURALIZATION.**

By its definition in the Charter of Rights, Canada is officially pluralistic. Christendom is dead. Each truth stands on its own piece of ground – no truth is allowed to overpower other truths.

The word to describe this great Canadian quality is tolerance. We are called to tolerance.

I appreciated Darrel Johnson's comment about that – he says - tolerance is not a biblical virtue. Patience is – understanding is – mercy is – humility is – as are many other aspects of the fruit of the Spirit – but tolerance is not one of them.

The erosion is this – little by little the bar gets lowered in society. Society tolerates more – objects less – and so in this social climate of lenience and broadmindedness – an ethos is created that anyone who does not go with this flow is intolerant – which is regarded as a sin against social equality and inclusivity. So drag concerts for children have to be tolerated – Pride flags have to be tolerated – rainbow cross walks have to be tolerated.

I have a sense that one of the silent effects of growing tolerance in our society has had in the church and among Christians is it has lowered whatever moral and ethical standards that were once accepted.

While we reject the legalisms of the 50's and 60's that many of us grew up with – seeing faith as keeping a set of rules and regulations – a list of do's and don'ts -- we have often rejected them for something looser rather than something deeper. We have often misunderstood spiritual freedom to mean and look the same as spiritual irresponsibility - an attitude that interprets freedom as meaning we can live and do whatever we want. **Luther: Freedom is not the right to do what you want but the power to do what you ought.**

Christian ethics have not been lost overnight in a single battle – rather they have been lost in the silent negotiations of compromise – one issue at a time.

We need to find that narrow path between legalism and license – and recover the path of thoughtful discipleship.



CENTRAL BAPTIST – MAY 21 - 2023  
WE'VE GOT MAIL  
CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

---

So when these three forces – privatization – secularization and pluralization - converge upon the Church and the cause of Christ – and I believe they have - - they do not come with the sudden upheaval of an earthquake – rather they have come with the silent force of erosion – and the damage that they have done is huge. They are ideas that we have silently acquiesced to.

One of the signs of the ineffectiveness of the church today is that while church attendance may increase and the church may actually appear to grow – our influence and impact on society stays the same or actually decreases. So it is not enough to ask – is our church growing numerically – we need to ask a better question – what growing impact if any are we having on our society?

Can the church recover the strength that it should have? The answer is always YES. It begins as all change does with the reality of repentance – which you will remember is a word of decision – it is a word that means we will stop the direction in which we are heading and we will start to move in another direction.

Repentance must always lead to reformation and then transformation. The process of spiritual repentance and transformation is a process that involves progressively challenging those destructive ideas and then changing them for ideas that reflect the mind and heart of God. Spiritual change is interchange of fallen ideas with the ideas that come from the mind of God.

Can you identify an area of your life in which the meaning of your Christian commitment may have been quietly eroded – you would have recognized and fought and won a frontal attack – but there was nothing like that. But – silently – without any battle – erosion was taking place. You saw nothing – you heard nothing – but it is gone.

What do we do with this – an idea – what if congregations got together in a strategic fashion – out its best women and men to run for city council in Victoria – Saanich – Oak Bay – Langford – also put people to run for boards on hospitals – libraries – schools. Would this reverse the compromise?

STAND / WORSHIP TEAM UP

CENTRAL BAPTIST – MAY 21 - 2023  
WE'VE GOT MAIL  
CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

---

Now – what does it mean to recover that area that once belonged to Christ but was eroded – to exchange some false idea with an idea from the heart and mind of God -- what does it mean to redeem that slice of public life for the glory of God?

That moved Abraham Kuyper – famous Dutch prime Minister to say – There is not one square inch of this entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out – this is mine! This belongs to me!

**CLOSING SONG:**

**Jesus says to us --**

**<sup>13</sup> “You are the salt of the earth.**

**In a time long before refrigerators – salt was what stopped meat from going bad.**

**<sup>14</sup> “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.**

**Salt and light – that’s the work of the church!**