

“A New Name” (Revelation 2:12–17)

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What does it mean to be a Christian?

It’s very easy to say that you’re a Christian. “I’m a Christian”—three easy words. But it’s one thing to say that you’re something and it’s another thing to actually be that something.

For example, imagine that someone asks you if you’re a football fan and you say, “Oh, yeah. Big time.” Then they ask you if you’re going to watch the Super Bowl tonight. “Of course,” you say. Then, they ask, “Do you know who’s playing tonight?” “Sure, Tom Brady.” Now, you know enough to know Tom Brady plays in a lot of Super Bowls, and that answer would be right half of the time over the last two decades. But then you’re asked, “Who does Tom Brady play for?” “Not the Patriots, I can tell you that!” “Yes, but what team?” “That team in Florida.” Now, there are three NFL teams that play in Florida, so your knowledge of football is looking pretty sketchy at this point. “Well, who is Tom Brady playing against in the Super Bowl?” “Not the Patriots, I can tell you that!” Again, that’s a correct answer, but it doesn’t tell us which of the other fifteen AFC teams Tom Brady is playing against. Again, your football knowledge is looking sketchy. Now imagine that the Super Bowl has come and gone, and you’re asked tomorrow if you watched the game. When asked how much, you say you watched a little bit of the end of the second quarter, because you didn’t want to miss the halftime show. And you watched all the commercials on YouTube this morning, because, as we all know, commercials are the best part of the Super Bowl. If all of this is true, are you really a football fan?

The same is true of Christianity. Being a Christian involves a certain amount of knowledge. Now, it’s not trivial knowledge. And it’s not just knowing some facts about God or the Bible. But, still, if you know Jesus personally, you’re going to know some true things about him. And being a Christian involves certain kinds of behavior. It involves following the commands of Jesus, as they are issued through his apostles.

But in both cases, many Americans who claim to be Christians don’t do well. For example, a survey conducted by LifeWay on behalf of Ligonier Ministries revealed that 30 percent of Americans who identify as evangelicals agreed with this statement: “Jesus was a great

teacher, but he was not God.”¹ And 35 percent of American evangelicals disagreed with this statement: “Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of sin.”² To clarify, Jesus is God, and the only way to remove our sin is indeed Jesus’ death on the cross. Apparently, a number of people who identify as evangelicals don’t understand the evangel, the gospel, correctly.

And when it comes to ethics, it’s not clear how much self-identified Christians differ from everyone else. In another survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, about half of American Christians said that sex outside of marriage was “always” or “sometimes” acceptable. Actually, more than half said it was acceptable (sometimes or always) in a committed relationship, and 18 percent said it was always acceptable to have casual sex outside of a committed relationship, with 32 percent saying it was sometimes acceptable.³ On another topic, attending church, only 44 percent of American Christians attend church once a week, with another 18 percent attending church at least once a month.⁴ To clarify, the uniform teaching of the Bible is that the only appropriate context for sex is within marriage, and Christians are told not to forsake meeting together (Heb. 10:25).

So, it seems that there are many people who call themselves Christians who hold beliefs that are not compatible with Christianity, and they also fail to abide by the teachings of Christianity. And, frankly, this is nothing new, as we’ll see this morning.

Today, we’re continuing our study of the book of Revelation by seeing what Jesus says to another church. In chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, Jesus addresses seven churches within the Roman province of Asia Minor. We would now call this area of the world western Turkey. Seven is a symbolic number, referring to completion or fullness. So, it seems that these seven churches represent all kinds of churches that have existed over the last two thousand years. Today, we’ll learn what Jesus said to a church in the city of Pergamum.

Let’s read Revelation 2:12–17:

¹²“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

¹ <https://thestateoftheology.com>.

² <https://thestateoftheology.com/data-explorer/2020/34?AGE=30&MF=14®ION=30&DENSITY=62&EDUCATION=62&INCOME=254&MARITAL=126ÐNICITY=62&RELTRAD=62&EVB=2&ATTENDANCE=254>,

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/31/half-of-u-s-christians-say-casual-sex-between-consenting-adults-is-sometimes-or-always-acceptable>.

⁴ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace>.

¹³“I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war 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 the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.”⁵

It’s always helpful to have some background knowledge of each of these seven cities. Pergamum had a history of being an important political center. It also became one of the centers of the worship of the Roman Emperor. A temple to Caesar Augustus was built in 29 BC. It’s strange to think of political leaders being called gods or saviors, but the fact is that many people today look to political leaders for some kind of salvation or deliverance, whether from a virus or economic problems. Christians living in the Roman Empire would have been pressured to acknowledge Caesar as Lord and Savior, titles they reserved for Jesus.

Like other cities in the Roman Empire, Pergamum had altars or shrines devoted to the gods and goddesses of that age. There was a temple built for Athena, an altar built to Zeus, who was called a savior, and shrines devoted to Dionysus and Asclepius. Athena was the goddess of wisdom and warfare, Dionysus was the god of winemaking and fruit, among other things, and Asclepius was a god of healing and medicine.

Pergamum was also an intellectual center, boasting a library with two hundred thousand volumes. It was probably one of the intellectual centers of the Roman Empire, after Athens and Alexandria.

Jesus addresses the churches in this area by reminding them that he as a two-edged sword, which reminds us of what we learned in Jesus in the first chapter (Rev. 1:16). Jesus’ words are like a sword, because they have the power to judge. And, toward the end of the book of Revelation, we’ll see an image of Jesus returning to the world to judge people with a sword (Rev. 19:15). Jesus is reminding them that he is the one who will judge the living and the dead.

⁵ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

In most of these messages to the seven churches, Jesus says, “I know your works.” Here, he says, “I know where you dwell.” It’s like he’s saying, “I know you live in a rough neighborhood. I know it’s hard to be a Christian where you are.” Why was it hard to be a Christian there? It seems that there was some level of persecution in Pergamum. In verse 13, Jesus says that “Satan’s throne” is in that city, and that a man named Antipas was killed there, likely for being a Christian.

What does it mean for Satan’s throne to be in that city? This is probably a reference to the worship of the Emperor. But it could also be a reference to the altar to Zeus. Perhaps both are in view. The idea is that, from the perspective of the pagans in Pergamum, Caesar reigned over the city, or Zeus reigned over the city. Caesar was considered to be the one who judged the affairs of Pergamum. But Jesus says that Satan is the one on the throne, which means that the worship of false gods is Satanic. Interestingly, the god Asclepius was associated with serpents. Supposedly, a snake taught Asclepius secret knowledge. Another story has a snake crawling on Asclepius’s staff, bringing an herb that could heal. Today, you can still see images of a staff and a snake associated with medicine. Look what’s on the shield of the Blue Cross Blue Shield logo. Of course, Satan is sometimes depicted as a serpent in the Bible, so maybe Jesus has Asclepius in view, too. The idea, again, is that Satan is behind these false gods, and Satan isn’t the true ruler; God is.

Satan seemed to be on the throne in Pergamum, and he was pressuring Christians to deny knowing Jesus. But Antipas refused to give in, and he died for his faith. Jesus commends the Christians there for not denying him. They were holding fast to the name of Jesus. When asked if they were Christians, they said yes, even though that could cost them their lives.

Persecution of Christians wasn’t widespread in the Roman Empire at this time. But the threat was real. Antipas must have died for the faith, because he is called a “faithful witness,” which is a term also used of Jesus (Rev. 1:5; 3:14). In most cases, the persecution Christians experienced wouldn’t be death. Instead, it would be slander, hatred, perhaps losing relationships and missing out on economic opportunities.

So, the Christians did well to hold fast to Jesus’ name. But Jesus has something against them: some in that church held to the “teaching of Balaam.” This is a reference to someone in the Old Testament. In the book of Numbers, we’re told about a false prophet named Balaam. When the Israelites were passing through Moab, on their way to the Promised Land of Canaan, the king

of Moab, Balak, told Balaam to curse the Israelites. Interestingly, God prevented Balaam from cursing his people. Instead, Balaam blessed them, and he even prophesied about the coming of the Messiah (Num. 24:17). But eventually Balaam harmed Israel. In Numbers 25:1–2, we read this:

¹ While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. ² These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.

The Israelites began to “whore” with women from Moab. This a reference both to sexual immorality, but also to idolatry. The men of Israel started to worship Moab’s gods, offering sacrifices to them and bowing down before them. Often, idolatry in the Old Testament is likened to adultery. God made us to worship him and him alone faithfully. When we start worshiping something or someone else, we’re cheating on God. That’s what these Israelites did. And, later in Numbers, we’re told that they did this because of Balaam’s advice (Num. 31:16).

Jesus also says that some Christians held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Now, we don’t know who the Nicolaitans were, though they were mentioned also in verse 6. But it seems that they were teaching Christians that they could worship Jesus and worship the gods and goddesses of the Roman Empire, and that they could be Christians and do whatever they wanted sexually.

So, we see that false teachings from some people lead others astray. In this case, the false teaching was something like, “As long as you call yourself a Christian, as long as you don’t deny knowing Jesus, you’re okay. You can also worship other gods and you can also live like other people do, particularly when it comes to sex.” But Jesus wants more than just for us to believe in his name. He wants our exclusive worship. We can’t say we worship Jesus if we don’t recognize that he is the only God, not one among many. We can’t say we worship Jesus if we don’t treasure him above everything else, if we don’t acknowledge that he is Creator and everything else is creation. And we can’t say we worship Jesus if we are not willing to obey him in all areas of life.

It is important to know what Jesus demands of us and what Christianity entails, because Christianity will put us at odds with the world. The beliefs of Christianity are at odds with what so many other people believe. There are many ideas that are not compatible with true Christianity. Christians cannot believe that Jesus is anything less than divine. Christians cannot

believe that Christianity is just one religion among many other legitimate religions. We can't believe that the Bible is anything less than God's written word. We can't think of Christianity like football. If you're a football fan, you can be a basketball fan and a baseball fan, and even a hockey fan. But if you're a Christian, you can't also be a Buddhist or believe in the power of palm reading, or whatever. Christianity is not some add-on to our lives, that we can mix with other things however we want. Jesus claims our total allegiance, our devotion.

And there are certain behaviors that simply are not compatible with Christianity. If our lives are exactly like the lives of our non-Christian family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, something is wrong. If the only difference between us and them is that we say we believe in Jesus, then we should carefully assess our lives. We should ask ourselves if we are truly living the way that Jesus wants us to live.

If we are no different than the average person in the way that we look at the world and the way that we live, Jesus calls us to repent. He told these Christians in Pergamum to repent. He warned them that if they didn't repent, he would come and war against them with the sword of this mouth. In other words, Jesus would judge them with his powerful words. He would call them out for not truly being Christians. Friends, you do not want to hear Jesus say, "I will make war against you." All of us will stand before Jesus someday. Those who never truly believed in him will be revealed for who they are. There will be many who never claimed the name of Jesus, who never even pretended to be Christians. But there will also be many counterfeit Christians, people who were never born again of the Holy Spirit, who never truly entrusted their lives to Jesus. And they will be judged. They will be cut down by Jesus' words of judgment.

But Jesus makes a promise to those who truly believe in him. He says this: "To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it." I have said this about conquering in recent weeks: We conquer by clinging to Jesus, by believing in him and the good news of what he has done so much that we would rather die than deny Jesus. In short, we conquer because Jesus conquered sin and death. Jesus is the faithful witness to God. He trusted his Father so much that he laid down his life to bear the penalty that we deserve for our sins. Jesus remained steadfast in his faith, which may be why he says the Christians in Pergamum had done well in not denying *his* faith. Jesus is the only one who has had perfect faith

and perfect obedience. Yet he died as a criminal, taking the place of the guilty—you and me. We have sinned and we deserve judgment from God’s sword, but Jesus took the sword for us.

And since Jesus is the conquering King and Judge, he is in position to offer his people rewards. He says he will give them hidden manna. If you are familiar with the Old Testament, you may remember that in those years when Israel wandered in the wilderness, after God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and before they entered the Promised Land, God provided for them. God fed Israel with manna, what we might call bread from heaven, which miraculously appeared every morning. Some of the manna was collected in a jar and kept in the Ark of the Covenant, as a remembrance of what God had done for Israel. We believe that the Ark was probably destroyed when Babylon attacked Jerusalem several centuries before the time of Jesus. But Jewish legend says the Ark was hidden—until the Nazis, assisted by Indiana Jones, found it in Alexandria. Okay, that’s a joke. The Jewish legend said that the Ark would be placed in a new temple in the Messianic age. Also, the “treasury of manna” would be given to God’s people in that age to eat.⁶

So, what is Jesus saying? He is saying that those who conquer, who remain in the faith, will eat a heavenly meal. They will eat with him. They will have a special fellowship with him, eating the finest food. Toward the end of Revelation, this meal is pictured as a wedding supper (Rev. 19:6–9). In other places in the Bible, such as Isaiah 25, eternity with God is described as a wonderful feast of the finest food and wine. I suppose the point is that God will satisfy our physical and spiritual hunger and thirst entirely. The greatest enjoyment is found in God. But there’s something more than that to this idea. Eating with someone is something intimate. When people offered sacrifices to Zeus and then ate the meat sacrificed to him, they thought they were eating with Zeus. But Zeus isn’t real. The God of the Bible is, and we’re told that one day his people have will have intimate communion with him as they enjoy the greatest pleasures possible.

Jesus also offers a white stone to those who conquer. Some have thought the white stone is a vote of acquittal. In the ancient world, white stones were used to acquit people of crimes whereas black stones were used to condemn. That may be what Jesus has in mind. But stones could also be used as tickets to gain admission to feasts or games. It seems that Jesus is saying to faithful Christians, “I will give you admission to this feast, and you can enter this feast because I

⁶ So says the non-biblical book of 2 Baruch. See 2 Baruch 29:8.

have declared you not guilty.” Jesus makes his people righteous by granting them his righteousness.

But notice that Jesus says something else about this stone. He says, “I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.” He promises to give his people a new name. In Isaiah 62:2, God says that Jerusalem would be known by a new name. Jerusalem seems to stand for the people of God: they would receive a new identity. And elsewhere in Revelation, we’re told that God’s people will receive his name (Rev. 3:12; 22:4). Christians will be marked as God’s people. His name is on them; they belong to him. And when people come to true faith in Jesus, they receive a new identity. They are known primarily as belonging to Jesus.

What is your identity built on? Do you see yourself in terms of being someone’s child or parent, or someone’s spouse? Are you identified by your job, the amount of money you have, the abilities you possess? Or is your primary identity Christian? Whatever your identity is built on will dictate your life. If your life isn’t built on Jesus, he will judge you. Your identity will not endure the day of his wrath. It will not deliver you from death and condemnation.

Notice also that Jesus says something puzzling about the new name that his people will receive. The only person who knows this new name is the one who receives it—and the triune God knows this too, we assume. So, not only does the Christian receive a new identity, a new status, but he or she shares something special with God. This also is intimacy.

Think about what idolatrous people who commit sexual immorality are looking for. We all want security, comfort, pleasure, love, intimacy, to be accepted and known. The reality is that whatever we think will satisfy us the most, whatever we think will give us lasting security and comfort, that is our god. We all worship something, whether that’s God, money, power, entertainment, a career, or a relationship. We think these things will give us what we really need. But our tendency is to worship idols.

What’s interesting is that when idolatry is mentioned in the Bible, usually sexual immorality is also mentioned. In other words, the two are often mentioned in the same breath. The reason why that is so is because of what I said earlier: idolatry is cheating on God, and having sex outside of marriage is cheating on your future or current spouse. But the two are also mentioned in the same breath because sex is a kind of god. And what do we do in elevating sex to a god? We think sex will give us the greatest pleasure. We are also seeking physical and

emotional intimacy with someone when we have sex. But if we make sex into a god, we'll never have true intimacy with one other person. By having sex with many people, the action that should only be shared with one other person is stripped of its intimate power. And the physical pleasures of sex don't last. So, making sex into a god leaves us empty, always craving for more, and never feeling the intimacy that we desire.

But God promises pleasure and intimacy to those who trust in his Son. In the new creation, the world to come, we will experience pleasures that we can't properly understand right now. We will experience beauty that we can barely dream about now. And we will have an intimate relationship with God. Instead of feeling empty and alone, we will be full, satisfied, and loved. What we all long for can only be supplied by God. And this is by his design. He has made us for himself, and when we feast on god substitutes, we'll be left hungry and empty. But if we make him our spiritual food and drink and our real spouse, we will be satisfied.

If you are not a Christian, I urge you to put your trust in Jesus. He is the only one who can give you admission to a perfect world. Trust me, you do not want Jesus to make war against you on Judgment Day.

If you believe you are a Christian, I ask you to examine your view of life and your behavior. Do your thoughts and values actually line up with God's? Are you living the way that God wants you to live? If not, perhaps you are not truly a Christian. If that is the case, Jesus says, "Repent!" Repenting may feel like dying. Denying your immediate physical urges, not living as everyone else lives, may feel like suffering. But Jesus doesn't ask you to suffer for suffering's sake. He wants to take away something lesser in order to give you something greater.

To those who are faithfully living for Jesus, continue on in the faith. Hold fast to his name. Jesus knows where you dwell and what you are doing. One day, he will feed you with food that will completely satisfy you, on that day when you are granted admission to the great feast of heaven.