

CHRIST'S COMMENTARY ON CHURCH HISTORY
"Pergamum: God's Victory Over Secular Government's Influence"
(Revelation 2:12-17)

Introduction: (To show the need for the message...)

(1) Donald LaCroix of New Hartford wrote a letter to the editor of the Register-Citizen this week asserting that Christianity is under attack from the liberal media and institutions. Mr. LaCroix argued that liberals are trying to squelch the right for Christians to be as represented as are atheists, homosexuals, socialists and feminists.

(2) There **is** a battle waging on this front!

(a) Cal Thomas in the Waterbury Republican-American writes that "...while Bibles -- and the values, ethics and truth they contain -- are now being welcomed in previously closed areas of the former Soviet Union...they continue to be treated as contraband in American public schools and much of public life. So often biblical values are disdained by those in academia, politics and the media."

(b) The Supreme Court decision of 1892 in *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States* concluded, "Our laws and our institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teachings of The Redeemer of mankind. It is impossible that it should be otherwise; and in this sense and to this extent our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian..." (The Rebirth Of America, The Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation, p. 21)

Justice Harry Blackman, author of the 64-page document that came from the Supreme Court decision to legalize abortion, admitted that two main sources officially opposed abortion: the medical oath of Hippocrates and Christianity. Since the oath specifically forbids abortion, Blackman wrote, "the Court wrestled with its influence but concluded that, in the context of general opinion, '**ancient religions did not bar abortion.**' As for Christianity, it was apparently dismissed by the court because of the separation of church and state. In effect, the court omitted 2,000 years of Judeo-Christian influence and reached back into **paganism** to find a basis for its moral judgment." (*Ibid.*, 86)

(c) When Surgeon General, Dr. Jocelyn Elders heard of an 8 year old girl giving birth to twins, her response was to suggest that condoms be given out to school children beginning at age 8! She gave no suggested ethical or moral training for 8 year olds to abstain from sexual activity until later -- just give condoms to 8 year olds!! (3) **The concern of Evangelical Christians is this: what is God's program to counter this evil influx of paganism into our lives?**

Need: "*As each new government administration takes office, secularists impose more and more anti-Christian, pagan legislation on us! How can we deal with this -- what's the answer?!"*

I. Revelation 2-3 is Christ's word on the concerns of Church History:

- A. The Greek term "**Tade**" introducing each message in Rev. 2-3 means that each message aims **only** at the singular church it addresses -- **not** to the other six churches, cf. UBS Gr. N.T., p. 839ff; Liddell & Scott, Grk.-Eng. Lex., p. 1197f; Denniston, The Gr. Part., p. 513.
- B. Yet each message applies to a **group** of churches, Rv. 2:7 etc.
- C. Additionally, **each** respective town where these churches existed was a **mail distribution center** for surrounding villages, McRay, "Return to Ephesus," Moody Monthly, Oct. 1992, p. 40.
- D. Also, messengers would travel to these mail distribution centers **in the order** in which these seven churches are addressed in Rev. 2-3, Bib. Know. Com., N.T., p. 932.
- E. The expression "he that hath ears..." appearing in each message of Rev. 2-3 signals prophecy fulfillment throughout the New Testament!
- F. Summary: the messages to the seven churches of Rev. 2-3 symbolize Christ's comments on **seven eras of Church History**.

II. Christ revealed to the Church at Pergamum His program to offset secular government's influence by means of Bible teaching !

- A. The word "Pergamum" in Greek means "thoroughly married," a signal that Christ addressed the merger of the Church with Constantine!
- B. There exists a precise match with Rev. 2:13-15 and Christ's words to believers in this era (cf. Bruce's, The Spreading Flame, p. 293-418):
 1. The symbolic Church of Pergamum existed where Satan's throne was, the throne of the "Holy Roman Empire", 2:13a.
 2. This church had held to the Incarnation (both God and man) doctrine of Christ ("My name") and salvation doctrine ("my faith") though many martyrs died in opposition to Rome's pressures for them to recant (antipas = "against all"), 2:13b, c, d.
 3. However, Constantine's **pagan** promotion of Christianity allowed many pagan unbelievers to adopt the title "Christian" to enjoy legal protection. Thus, many bishops allowed pagans into the Church as a fair price for enjoying an end to persecution!

4. By courting Constantine's favor, the bishops gained sway, forming evil hierarchies ("Nicolaitanes" = "conquering the people"), 15.
- C. Christ warned these bishops to end such evil compromise or He would oppose their clerical ambitions by exposing their error with Scripture, the "sword of My mouth," cf. 1:16 with Heb. 4:12.
- D. For those who refused Constantine's clerical powers to stand against paganism, Christ promised the following blessings:
1. These bishops would receive God's verdict of innocent, the "white stone" received by a defendant when a verdict of "innocent" arrived in Roman Court proceedings, R. St. Bib., KJV, ftn. to 2:17.
 2. They would also receive a lasting influence superior to other compromising bishops and Constantine himself. The "new name" looks back at Isa. 56:3-8 where pagans who believe in Messiah will receive a name along with notoriety in the Kingdom.
- E. Actual historical events marvelously concur with this prophecy!
1. When pagan beliefs in the Church questioned the full deity and humanity of Jesus (Arius et al.), a young bishop, Athanasius, publicly opposed this error. He was thereupon banished several times for this stand, but his creed led the entire Church to formulate the Nicene Creed against the efforts of Emperors starting with Constantine on down! That creed still forms the backbone of Evangelical Christological beliefs to this day!! **Christ gave Athanasius God's "verdict" of "innocent" though this bishop suffered man's "guilty" charge during his ministry!**
 2. Pagan influence in the Church also opposed grace, teaching that salvation came by works (Pelagius). Though he himself originated from a vile pagan background, Augustine was saved and successfully defended the doctrine of justification by faith alone to counter Pelagianism. It is **Augustine's** theology that forms the structure for Reformed theologians like Luther and Calvin to come, and they in turn deeply affect our Evangelical beliefs about grace today! **This former pagan Gentile received Christ's "new name" and impact lasting into the Millennium!**

Application: To counter the influence of secular paganism by secular government forces on the church, (1) believe on Christ as Savior from sin, Jn. 3:16. Then, (2) fellowship with Christ and (3) promote courageous Bible teaching that addresses current evils! God does the rest, for Scripture is God's sharp sword of the truth!

Lesson: God's thriving ministry that counters pagan governmental sway upon the Church is courageous Bible teaching in the Church!

Conclusion: (To illustrate the sermon lesson...)

Nicolae Ceausescu's reign of abusive despotism over Romania ended in a very sudden overthrow and release of the nation into liberty. Ceausescu was about as atheistic as was any leader of the former Soviet Union's rulers, but he fell. How?

For a number of years, a pastor named Laszlo Toekes preached the truths of the Bible in a Protestant church in Timisorara, Romania. His sermons addressed the evils of the world that surrounded his church as those evils did not receive the favor of the God of Scripture.

Pastor Toekes was ordered to stop preaching this view or he would suffer the wrath of Nicolae Ceausescu.

Pastor Toekes refused to quit such preaching, deciding that it was better to obey God than man. Accordingly, the government decided to surround his church with military tanks hoping to pressure Toekes into surrendering himself to the military.

When Pastor Toekes' parishioners heard of the tanks outside their church, they unitedly surrounded the church, forming a human chain and asserted that the tanks would have to run them over before they let the military destroy their church and pastor.

This act by the congregation in behalf of their Bible teaching pastor in Timisorara lit the imagination of many other Romanians. Soon massive protests against the government of Nicolae Ceausescu raged in other cities. Thousands of Romanians lost their lives as they were gunned down by soldiers. The massacre ignited the wrath of 23 million people across the nation, and they rose up as one and toppled Ceausescu's regime with the memory cry of "Timisorara! Timisorara!"

After the dust had settled, Laszlo Toekes, not yet forty years of age, refused to serve on the National Salvation Committee that was formed to run Romania after Ceausescu's fall. The Associated Press reports that, "...the soft-spoken minister said he planned to **remain** in his western village and **build up a congregation there**."

God counters the influence of pagan, atheistic governments against His Church through the systematic teaching of His Word in the Church. May we be as faithful to this task as was Athanasius and Augustine of old, and as was pastor Laszlo Toekes in Timisorara, Romania in our time!