

Sermons

CTJ 41 (2006): 103-107

A New Name That No One Knows . . .

A Sermon on Revelation 2:17b

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Revelation 2:17b *To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.*

We know only a little about the church at Pergamum. It wasn't a stop on Paul's missionary journeys, and we don't know how it got there or how big it was or who made it go. We do know this: the church was holding fast to Jesus and yet it also needed to be warned and inspired. The warning comes right away in the form of a ferocious image of Jesus Christ. As in chapter 1, Jesus Christ comes at us here with a two-edged sword in his mouth, and it's a bad one. He's got a *romphaia* in his mouth and that's the broad, heavy sword that marauding nations used to terrorize their enemies. The *romphaia* is for intimidating. It's for killing. The lamb of God has a terrible sword thrusting from his mouth, and so we see here, as we will in chapter 6, some of the *wrath* of the lamb. The wrath of the lamb. An image to chill the blood in your veins.

Why is the Lord so ferocious? He's speaking to a church that is largely faithful and yet is in danger. Christians there were accommodating to a pagan culture that was full of idolatry and lust. Pergamum had a soaring monument to Zeus, *and* a temple for the cult of Caesar, *and* a famous temple for the worship of Asclepius. Asclepius was a god whose symbol was a snake thought to have healing powers. You can hear almost hear this god hissing at the end of its name. Asclepiussss.

Zeus worship, Caesar worship, and the veneration of Asclepius. In this environment it takes guts to belong to the church and at least one member was martyred for his courage. So, the Lord pauses to praise him. "Antipas," he says. "Antipas, my witness, my faithful one." My witness, my martyr, my faithful one. Christ speaks of Antipas as John had spoken of Christ himself in chapter 1: Grace to you and peace from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness.

It takes courage to swear allegiance to Jesus Christ when somebody has the point of a sword in your belly. But Antipas did it. He refused to cave, and the Lord commends him in words of unmistakable love and respect. And he's only one member of a church that was largely loyal to our Lord.

But some of the members were going down. They were giving in, and the Lord has that against them. His sword, his word, his mighty will is *against* them when they make room in their lives for local evil. Some of them have been partying at pagan sites. Some have been feasting with the gods, and the feasts would have included drunkenness and sex. Way back in Numbers, Moses tells us that Baalam purposely placed Canaanite women outside the camp of Israel in order to seduce Israelite men and corrupt them.

Now in Pergamum, you've got this same racket going, and followers of Christ are falling for it. Sex with pagans, orgies at temples, and not only by followers of Baalam, but also by the Nicolaitans. Their name suggests that they are maybe Christians who try to rule over other Christians, but some commentators think the Nicolaitans are just another example of people who were caving in to local culture. They're libertines, Tertullian was to write. They're hedonists. They've trapped themselves with booze and sex and idolatry. You have the Balaamists, says Christ; you also have the Nicolaitans.

All this spells big trouble for the church, trying to survive as an island of godliness in a swamp of debauchery. Things are bad enough that the Lord says: I know where you are living. You're living in a swamp. You live where Satan lives. You live where Satan has made his *throne*—where Satan is celebrated, lifted up, worshiped.

So here comes Jesus Christ with the two-edged sword in his mouth. The sword of the Lord, the Word of the Lord is for dividing bone and marrow, soul and spirit. It's for judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Repent! He says. With all the urgency of an aorist imperative. Repent! If you do not I will come and I will *make war* against your evildoers with the sword of my mouth. Here's the sword of the Lord thrusting at an impenitent church, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart, cutting away evil in ways that hurt terribly.

But, then, in a mysterious burst of comfort, as lovely as a song in the night, the Lord says to the faithful, to the children of Antipas, to those who do not cave in—to them the Lord says, "*To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna and . . . a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.*"

Everyone who conquers gets a new name. A new name! It's happened before, hasn't it! Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah. Jacob got a new name. Simon got a new name. Saul became Paul because Saul was a persecutor but Paul is a missionary. You can't make an old name stick to a new life. And so in Revelation, with its new Jerusalem and its new heaven and earth and its new song, we have the promise of a new name too! And I think we dare to believe that with this promise Jesus Christ was inspiring not just the church of Pergamum, but also the church of all ages.

You and I—if we do not cave in—you and I are in line one day for a new name. Why? Because the name we've got doesn't quite do the job. It doesn't

express our essence. It doesn't tell our story. It doesn't say who we are in God's history of redemption. Our name came out of a book or out of a computer. Or maybe our parents cooked up our name from scratch. They did the best they could.

There was just one problem. Our parents didn't know us when they named us. And so they couldn't name us according to who we really are. Parents make these mistakes all the time. Look around town and you can see it. You see sensitive guys with macho names. You see macho guys with dainty names. You see a woman named after a flower who should have been named after a mineral. You see a man named after a rock star who should have been named after a king.

Lots of us have gotten the wrong name, and it wouldn't help in the least to get it changed in the county probate court because we probably still wouldn't get it right. We ourselves don't know who we really are—not finally, not transcendently, not the way God knows us.

And so this mysterious piece of revelation:

"To everyone who conquers I will give a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it."

Everyone who conquers! All the Christians in Pergamum who refused to say Caesar is Lord. All the Christians there and elsewhere who did not cave in to pressure from their culture. All the persecuted Christians who stuck it out. All the missionary Christians who got beaten up and shot up and shut up in prison. All the martyrs who sang hymns as their enemies set them on fire. All the Christians today in Sudan and China and southern Mexico who suffer on account of Christ. They all get a white stone—everyone who stands against the stream of evil and will not cave in.

But what does this have to do with us in North America today?

Let me ask you a simple question: Are we not ourselves in desperate danger of caving in to local culture in North America? What chance do our children have of getting their white stone when they have to live in a cultural swamp? Young Christian women look at advertisements that lie to them, and the young women come to believe the lies. The ads tell them they are what they eat and they are what they wear. The ads tell them that they can never be thin enough and never sexy enough. Who will tell young Christian women the truth?

Young Christian men play video games and watch movies that tell them they are natural born killers. These games and movies lie to them, and the young men come to believe the lies. They come to believe they can never be angry enough and never lethal enough. Who is going to tell these young men the truth?

The Lord wants to give a white stone to people who conquer, who do not give in to the pressures of an alien culture, but it sometimes seems that we don't even fight back very much. Do you think God can form us and our children with a few table prayers and a weekly church service? Can God do this when pop culture is forming us the rest of the time?

I think we've been losing ground to popular culture. Not everything in popular culture is evil. Of course not. In fact, some of it is delightful. But there is also real evil in it, and the trouble is that a lot of the evil is aimed at young people and children. The trouble is that when you're ten you can't always tell the difference between what's good and what's evil—and especially not if evil is made to look very, very attractive.

Do you know that even conservative Christian parents buy TV sets for the *bedrooms* of their ten-year-olds and then let them watch pretty much whatever they want? They buy a TV set for their fifth grader, hook it up to the cable system, hand their child a remote, and let their child close the door.

And now, day by day, night by night, their child's soul is in the hands of the Philistines. The Lord wants to give our children a white stone with their true name on it, but our *children* are finding out who they are from people to whom *Lord* is just another four-letter word. Every sick joke about God; every celebration of lust or revenge; every cynical assumption about the motives of good people—all this pours into the soul of a ten-year-old just as if her parents had hooked her up to an IV serviced by a profiteer. All the worse if parents buy premium channels such as HBO whose comedians pump sludge. I mean a comedian who mocks Jesus Christ because he didn't understand that compassion is for losers. He didn't understand that wimps get crucified just as they should. I mean a comedian who takes a hand-held mike and starts banging it rhythmically on the stage floor in imitation of hammer blows, and then grins at the crowd as he says, "Sound familiar Jesus? Sound familiar?"

I hope you and I come to understand one of these days that our battle is not with flesh and blood, but with the powers, with principalities, with the princes of this present darkness. The church at Pergamum was in danger of caving in, and so are we. It sometimes seems *that Satan lives here too*.

The forces of darkness seem too strong for us. The world seems too much for us. Popular culture has gotten too big for us. But God's word says that Jesus Christ wants to give power to those who will use it to *prevail* against evil. The forces of darkness are not too much for us if we don't give in to them, if we don't open the house to them. By themselves, the forces of this present darkness can't defeat us. The powers are strong, but Jesus Christ is stronger. The powers are determined, but Jesus Christ is more determined. The powers are clever, but in Jesus Christ are hidden *all* the riches of wisdom and understanding. *Jesus* is Lord, and while we see people around us who are going down in the culture war, we can also see people rising up with the power of God in them.

A *Newsweek* story tells us about a few of these people. On the cover is a fifteen-year-old girl by the name of Jennifer Teschler whose freckled face is bursting with health. Yes, her California high school has the same class wars as every other high school. There are the queen-bee girls and the wannabe girls. Girls who have made it to the top of the popularity heap and cling to it with all their might. Girls who envy them and desperately want to replace them at the top.

Girls who take their identity from their looks, their clothes, their parties, their booze, their sex appeal. If they have a bad hair day they stay home from school!

But Jen Teschler isn't trapped by all that. She's smart, she's confident, she's athletic, and, unbelievably, she really likes her parents! She thinks pop culture is overrated. And the article is explicit that Jen Teschler's healthy freedom comes from her faith. She's a Christian believer, and her identity comes from belonging to Jesus Christ.

All around us people are going down in battle, caving in to the power of the world. But some stand against evil. These are people who are headed toward the city of God, and have picked up some of the hidden manna to sustain them on their wilderness journey. These are people who know that one day they shall have a white stone handed to them, a stone on which is written their new name, their true name, the name that expresses perfectly who God knows them to be. None of us is repeatable. None of us is replaceable. Each of us is a unique divine thought, and one day our Lord will reveal to us who we really are.

Brothers and sisters, your parents named you the best they could. But they didn't know whom they were naming. They named you Herman or Mary or Caroline or Andy or Richard. They couldn't have known that your true name is Faith. Your real name is Courage. Maybe Jen Tischler's true name is $\nu\kappa\rho\omega\alpha$ which means "the one who conquers."

Of course I'm only speculating. Only speculating, because our real name is a secret between us and the Lord. Christ will come to us one day, and he will have either a sword in his mouth or a white stone in his hand. And I know which one we want. I do know which one we want.

"To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna and . . . a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it."

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.