

Godly Believers, Worldly Believers, Same Congregation: What to do?

1 Corinthians 11:18–19; Revelation 2:12–3:6

Turn to 1 Kings 19 please. Godly believers, worldly believers, same congregation: what to do? This sermon has been percolating in me for about twenty years. Back then, Terry Tiessen was telling me about the Protestant Reformation and about Radical Reformers. Terry taught theology at Providence Seminary, and he knew more about the Reformation than I did.

1 Radical Reformers: You Will Never Stop Leaving

Recently Karli told us a bit about the Reformation and about Martin Luther. That's what Terry was talking about. There were two kinds of reformation. That oversimplifies, but it will do for today. There was a corrective reformation, those who started with the Catholic Church and corrected what was wrong. Lutherans and Anglicans are examples of the corrective reformation.

The other kind of reformation was the radical reformation. They thought the Catholic church was too bad to correct, so the radical reformers threw it all out, and started over from scratch. When the radical reformers left these other churches, the leaders they left said to them, "if you leave us now, you will never stop leaving." (2x) What they meant was that if you do this, whenever there is a problem in the church, you'll leave, and you'll keep doing that. Mennonites and Baptists are among the spiritual descendants of the radical reformation.

When Terry told me this back then, I was stunned, for two reasons. Firstly, because those words were true. When a church has problems, people leave. That has become our heritage. The other reason I was alarmed was that I assumed this was normal. Troubles in the church? Then leave. That's not how I grew up. My parents stayed in the same church my entire growing up years. But others left their churches, and I thought that was okay.

So I started keeping my eyes open when I read the Bible, to see what God wanted people to do when there were serious troubles among his people. What happened when godly children of God and worldly children of God were in the same congregation? Today we'll look at some of those.

2 I Reserve 7,000 whose Knees do not Bow to Baal – 1 Kings 19:13–18

This story takes place late in Elijah's ministry. He was tired, he was scared, and he'd had enough.

Then a voice said to Elijah, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came and (here’s what I want you to do) ... Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.” Elijah, you’re not as alone as you think.

Think about the lives of those seven thousand who won’t worship Baal. Jezebel was the daughter of a Gentile king, and Ahab king of Israel married her to form an alliance with that nation. Jezebel energetically promoted Baal worship in Israel. That’s why Elijah thinks he’s the only faithful Israelite left. But seven thousand have not worshipped Baal.

Given what we know about Israel’s population at that time, that’s about one Israelite household in forty that did not worship Baal. Thirty-nine households worshipped Baal, and one worshipped Yahweh. How would you like to live in a neighbourhood like that?

How did these 7,000 stay faithful? God reserved them. That’s probably not how they experienced it. For them it was tough, and it took all their resolve not to give in and worship Baal. But they were strong and had enough resolve because God kept them faithful. “I reserve 7,000.”

What did God ask of them, with so many unfaithful Israelites all around them? What did God want from them? Nothing more. They did not need to *leave* idolatrous Israel. They did not need to *fix* idolatrous Israel. Just keep doing what you’re doing. Don’t bow to Baal or kiss his image. God’s people really do find themselves in positions like that. Just stay faithful.

3 The Unavoidable Corinthian Division – 1 Corinthians 11:18–19

In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval.

Starting from 1 Corinthians 1, Paul urged them to put away the things that divided them. One of the big problems of the Corinthian church was so many divisions and groups, separating because of things that did not matter to God. Paul spent a few chapters at the start correcting their readiness to divide from each other.

Here in chapter 11 we get a surprise line: *No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval.* In the Corinthian church there were godly, faithful believers, and there were also worldly, fleshly believers. And when that’s happening in a congregation, it will show. Without anyone trying to separate themselves, there will be a division. And that was the case in Corinth.

What should the faithful believers do in that situation, the ones with God’s approval? Just carry on right there being faithful. Most of the Corinthian believers do not have God’s approval, it seems to me, but some of them do. Just stay. There is no call to leave and start a purer church. Just stay faithful.

It was reading these lines in 1 Corinthians 11, the opening lines to the Lord's Supper Scripture that we read last week, that triggered this message. I've been mulling over mixed congregations in the Bible for a long time, and I felt like the Lord said, "Now it is time to teach this."

This is a good time to teach this in our congregation, because all of you have been faithful for a long time. Anyone who is prone to leave would have left long ago. You've proved yourselves.

And yet, you know that in Christian circles around here, in our church environment, often enough people leave churches when something happens that they don't like. They sometimes wear it like a badge of faithfulness to God. That's our radical heritage talking. I'm teaching you today that God never called his faithful people to do that.

4 Pergamum: Some of you hold the Teaching of Balaam – Revelation 2:12–16

Turn to Revelation 2. We'll now turn to the messages to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3. Three of the seven churches were mixed congregations similar to the Corinthian congregation. Some believers were godly, and some were worldly, same congregation.

"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 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, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Detour: Balaam and Idols and Sexual Immorality

Idol sacrifice feasts were common in the Roman world. People would sacrifice an animal to their god and prepare the meat and a supper. They ate in celebration and worship of that particular deity. They drank lots of wine, and these meals commonly ended up in a sexual immorality.

Some Pergamum believers were attending these idol feasts. These Christians gave themselves freedom to attend because there was only the one true God, so these idols weren't anything at all, so it was no big deal. The sexual immorality was so common that it didn't really matter either.

Back in Numbers, Balak the king hired Balaam the prophet to curse Israel, but God would not let him. Balaam could only bless Israel. So Balaam the prophet gave Balak the king some advice. "God won't let you attack them, Balak, he'll protect them."

“So turn the Israelites and God against each other. Have attractive Moabite women go to Israel and invite the men to have sacrificial meals with them.” That was Balaam’s advice.

Balaam’s plan worked well. This happened in Numbers 25. In response to Israelite idolatry and immorality, God sent a plague that killed 24,000 Israelites. That story is used throughout the Old Testament and New Testament as a warning to God’s people about idolatry. That’s the background to the message to Pergamum, and that’s the end of this detour.

Back to Pergamum. *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, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.*

Pergamum was a centre of pagan worship. That’s what made it the city of Satan’s throne. The believers had stayed faithful to the Lord in a dark place, even when one of the church leaders was killed. They remained true to his name.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Some of the believers were attending these idol meals and committing sexual immorality. This was their ongoing practise, even though they would not deny Christ..

*I have a few things against **you** (the church). There are **some among you**. Repent, therefore, or I will come to **you** and will **fight against them** with the sharp double-edged sword of my mouth.*

It is clear that the idolaters and the immoral in the church were in trouble with the Lord, and if they did not change, he would go after them, and only them. He will fight against them. It is not so clear what the rest of the church should do about it. It seems that the faithful church was just letting this go on, and that was a problem. They needed to challenge the idolatrous ones and warn them what was coming.

But leaving the church does not come up, even though the sin in the church was severe idolatry and sexual immorality. These worldly believers still, for their part, consider themselves faithful followers of Jesus. They somehow think this stuff is okay. But to the Lord it is not.

5 Thyatira: Hold on to What you Have until I Come – Revelation 2:18–25

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. She teaches and deceives my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, 'I will not impose any other burden on you, except to hold on to what you have until I come.'

Jezebel in Kings was not a prophet, nor was she sexually immoral. But she passionately encouraged idolatry in Israel. In the Old Testament prophets, when Israel turned to idols she was being an immoral wife. God was her husband, and Israel was being spiritually unfaithful to God.

Some person in Thyatira was promoting idolatry in the way that Jezebel had done. “*She teaches and deceives my servants,*” says the Son of God. Those are frightening words. They are a warning to all of us. The Lord’s servants can be deceived.

In this description, the Lord’s deceived servants, and those who commit adultery with her, and her children, probably all describe the same people. The church was tolerating this deceiving teacher, and to the Lord that was a problem. The Lord is not interested in us just accepting them, what we would call, “loving them.” I have this against you, the church, says the Lord: you tolerate her.

Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, 'I will not impose any other burden on you, except to hold on to what you have until I come.'

What should the rest of the church do about this, those who don’t follow this deceptive teaching? “Carry on as you are. Hang on to what you have until I come.” Would you be able to do that in a church like that? That was the Lord’s call.

6 Sardis: A Few who have not Defiled their Clothes – Revelation 3:1–4

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

Soiled their clothes, or defiled their clothes, means spiritual filth. They have soiled their spiritual clothes with evil. So the sleepiness of the church in Sardis is living just like the world around them. They accommodated themselves to their society, and to the Lord they have contaminated themselves. “Your deeds are unfinished.” You have not separated yourself from the world.

Just a few in Sardis keep themselves separate from the world. The Lord does not call them, because they don’t need it. If he did speak, it would be as the faithful in Thyatira: “hold on to what you have until I come.” He does not call the few faithful in Sardis to fix their church, or to start a new church, or to separate themselves from their worldly fellow believers. It is surprising, is it not? Just carry on. “They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.”

7 Observations

My biggest surprise was how often this happens, that faithful and unfaithful believers are in the same church. In Revelation 2–3, three out of seven churches were mixed in this way.

In Pergamum and Thyatira, the Lord does not like it that the faithful do not challenge the unfaithful. In Elijah’s Israel and in Sardis, the faithful are a small minority, and he wants only that they stay faithful. But he never asks the faithful to go to some place pure, or to begin something better.

To be honest, I am not sure how long I myself could stay in places like that. I’ve never been in such a situation. In any case, it is good for us to hear the stories, and to understand how church life sometimes looked in New Testament times. We can be confident that there are still churches like that. It is a good thing that the Lord never stops praying for his followers! Amen.

PRAYER: Father, you are the God who gives endurance and encouragement. Give us endurance and encouragement. Give us a spirit of unity among ourselves, as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we will bring you glory. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and into Christ’s perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.