

October 23, 2022

Walk in Step with the Spirit

Revelation 2:12-17

You see Toronto – downtown Toronto – long before you get there. After all, the CN Tower is 553 m (1815 ft) tall. Most modern cities – Toronto, London, Calgary – are dominated by office towers (especially bank towers). After all business is what matters most.

Something similar was true of Pergamum. There is a high hill in the middle of the city, topped by spectacular buildings. But in Pergamum it's not about business. On top of the hill are a spectacular altar of Zeus, and temples to various gods including Dionysius (god of wine), and Roman emperors. Part of being a good citizen is worshipping the emperor, saying, "Caesar is my Lord." But part of the worship is also going to feasts and sacred temple prostitutes. Food, alcohol, and sex as worship? Does it get much better than that?

For the small, struggling, newborn Christian church, this was a tough place to live.

The believers kept the faith: *"I know where you live – where Satan has his throne – **yet you remain true to my name.** You did not renounce your faith. You refused to deny me even when Antipas, my faithful witness, was martyred among you"* (2:13). More than just believing right things about Jesus, many people trusted Jesus with their lives. True belief is more than just right doctrine. True belief involves acting, in faith, on those truths: trusting, loving, obeying, living, risking, possibly even dying for your faith in Jesus (like Antipas) ...

This living out the truth in practice was a problem for others in Pergamum. Some people who believed all the right things, struggled to live out their faith. With all those temptations, who could blame them? To these folks, Jesus speaks bluntly: *"But I have a few complaints against you. You tolerate some among you whose teaching is like that of Balaam, who showed Balak how to trip up the people of Israel. He taught them to sin by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sin. In a similar way, you have some Nicolaitans among you who follow the same teaching"* (2:14-15).

Some background: Way back, as the Israelites were moving into the Promised Land, they came to Moab. King Balak of Moab was worried. So he hired, Balaam, a Jewish prophet, to curse the Israelites. God intervened. His intervention involved an angel with a sword, a crushed foot, and a talking donkey (read Numbers 22-25). Instead of Balaam cursing the Israelites, every time he opened his mouth, out came blessings upon Israel. Needless to say, Balak, who had hired Balaam, wasn't happy. Neither was Balaam. He wanted the silver and gold Balak had promised him. So Balaam came up with another plan. The direct attack – cursing the Israelites wasn't working for him. What about a sneak attack?

Balaam encouraged Balak to send young Moabite women into the Israelite camp to seduce Israelite men with feasts and sex (Numbers 31:16). As a result, he reasoned, the Israelites would abandon the true God, following their stomachs and lusts to destruction. The honey-trap worked. The Israelites, sucked into the hedonistic lifestyle, also slipped into worshipping

Moabite gods. They forgot God. Having so much fun with food, wine, and women, they didn't even realize they were being led astray. 24,000 Israelites died.

Apparently in Pergamum, some teachers were undermining the church in the same way. Not a direct attack. But a sneak attack. People in the church wanted the social networks – and the fun that came from being part of the feasts, drinking, and sex in the temples. These teachers taught that, as long as you hold to the right doctrine (*"you do not renounce your faith"*), then anything else goes. Of course, they will likely lose their right doctrine soon, too.

Jesus is blunt: *"Repent of your sin, or I will come to you suddenly and fight against you with the sword of my mouth"* (2:16).

So what does this all mean for us, in 2022?

We don't live in a city where any **religion** I know of encourages gluttony, drinking, and sex. Of course, society at large may encourage all those things ... Nevertheless, we feel like we're in evil times, we're living in a space where Satan has his throne – globally (wars, famines, suffering, persecution). And locally (homelessness, opioid use, racial issues).

What we believe in tough times matters. This letter (and all the letters) highlight there are basic, non-negotiable truths. Others are things we can agree to disagree about. There are essentials and non-essentials, core Christian beliefs and peripherals, salvation and non-salvation issues. In the 17th century, Lutheran priest, Rupert Meldenius, encouraged Christians to have unity in the essentials, freedom in non-essentials, and love in all things. That's good advice.

What are the essentials? In Ephesians 4:4-6, Paul says, *"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all."*

Also consider the Apostle's Creed (4th century), for 1700+ years accepted as a good, basic synopsis of core Christian beliefs:

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,*

*the holy catholic Church (in Latin, "catholic" literally means "universal" or "global"),
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.*

What do Ephesians and the creed emphasize?

- We believe in one God who reveals Himself in three persons: Father, Son, Holy Spirit.
- We believe in the church as those who believe in Jesus (whatever their tradition).
- Because of Jesus' death/resurrection, we believe in forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

The New Testament and the Apostle's Creed focus on Jesus. Christianity is Jesus. Why does this matter? Because in a polarized, divided, angry, volatile world, the last thing our society needs is for the church to be another noisy gong or clanging cymbal bashing on about partisan politics, judgment, and outrage, creating more division and discord. The world needs good news. The world needs Jesus. Good news about Jesus.

Our good news is Jesus is the truth that sets us free. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Forgiveness and salvation – freedom – come through Jesus. We have new life through Jesus. We have a Saviour in Jesus. We have hope in Jesus. This is Good News. This truth – this good news about Jesus – matters.

How we live out the truth matters. This truth then shapes how we live. This is where some in Pergamum were struggling. We act on the truth. We live the truth. Even when it's difficult. It's not just about right belief. It's living out our faith, in practice. In good education, one of the principles is that we don't just learn "stuff," but what we learn changes how we think, live, and act. It goes from our heads, to our hearts, to our hands and feet.

Before Paul mentions those basic beliefs in Ephesians 4:4-6, he says this: *"I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace" (4:1-3).* Then he says, *"For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all."*

Paul encourages us Galatians 5:1-25, *"Christ has truly set us free. You have been called to live in freedom. Now make sure you stay free ... Don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ... So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives ..."*

"When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these ... (a lot of the stuff that was going on in Pergamum – it's a good thing none of this happens in Lethbridge in 2022! He says facetiously ☐ ☒

"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ... Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives" or "Let us walk in step with the Spirit."

What does it mean to *"follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"* or *"walk in step with the Spirit"*? For people in Pergamum in AD 60 or so, it meant believing in good news about Jesus. Then living their faith faithfully, BEING GOOD NEWS, despite the challenges.

What does it mean to *"follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"* or *"walk in step with the Spirit"* in Lethbridge, in 2022? It means believing in good news about Jesus. And living our faith faithfully, BEING GOOD NEWS, despite the challenges.

Think about some of the principles in Ephesians and Galatians: be humble. Be loving. Be joyful. Be at peace with everyone. Be patient. Be kind. Do what is good. Be faithful. Be gentle. Be self-controlled. Keep united/in community. Be GOOD news. This all talks so much easier than it walks.

What does that look like in practice? There is a wonderful saying attributed to Teresa of Avila (1515-1582): *"Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours, Yours are the eyes with which He looks with compassion on this world, Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good, Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world."*

I recently ran across a modern paraphrase that gives one example of how this all can apply today: *"Christ has no online presence but yours. No blog, no Facebook, but yours. Yours are the tweets through which love touches the online world. Yours are the posts through which the gospel is shared. Yours are the updates through which hope is revealed."*

What is Jesus saying to you? We can be GOOD NEWS this week. Be humble. Be loving. Be joyful. Be at peace with everyone. Be patient. Be kind. Do what is good. Be faithful. Be gentle. Be self-controlled. Keep united/in community. Together, we can change the world, one smile, one kind act, one encouraging word at a time.