

## **“Living in Christ’s World: The Spirit of Christ Now”**

Reading: Revelation 22:17, Romans 8:9-17

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Is Christianity basically interchangeable with any other religion, or indeed any other system of belief or morality? In other words, are all religions basically the same? And are they pretty much just filling a void in our lives that can just as plausibly be filled by some other moral system that has nothing to do with God? That is, we all need to feel like we have meaning, and we all need to have a system of good and bad in our lives, and if Christianity works for you, good for you; I’ll choose something else that is just as true and good for me.

It’s an idea we often see in our world. When religion is not seen as being a bad thing in itself, many people see all religions as being pretty much the same thing told in different terms. They’re all talking about the same God, right? They’re all talking about eternal issues, what happens after you die, right and wrong, and really their only function is to make you feel better about yourself while you’re alive, give you comfort through the hard times, make you a moral person, and give you hope and meaning in the face of death, if you believe that sort of thing. And a lot of people think you can get the same thing without any belief in God at all, so it’s all pretty much the same.

I think even a lot of Christians think that way, or at least they act that way. Maybe even a lot of us in this room think that way sometimes. Our Christian faith can be just focused on intangible things, hope after we die, comfort in hard times, and moral guidance in general. And if that’s all it is, then just about any other philosophy that helps you get through the day and be a decent person is indeed pretty much just as good and true: Buddhism or atheism or whatever other -ism you like will do the trick. But of course that’s not what we claim about our faith. We insist that faith in Jesus Christ can transform you, make you new, deepen you, beautify you, make you fearless. What sets Christianity apart is that it is not only focused on abstract hopes and comforts, and it’s not just a set of moral principles for living your life.

But what’s the difference? In other words, what about *right now*? What difference does Jesus Christ make for me and you right now, and in all the other nows that have not yet come in our lives? What is it about our faith that transforms us in real life, beyond just the abstract? There are a few ways of answering that question, but a lot of them are in one way or another going to be related to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Obviously we’re called *Christians*, so it’s the work of Jesus Christ that is what most clearly defines our belief and sets us apart from, say, Buddhists or Muslims, but you can’t have a complete picture of the work of Christ if you don’t go on to talk about the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is the one who reveals the truth about Christ to us; the Spirit is the one who enacts the truth of Christ in our lives and transforms us. He is, in fact, the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Today is Pentecost, the church’s celebration of that day a few weeks after Jesus conquered death when He poured out His Holy Spirit upon the church. It’s the church’s birthday, really, because the church is nothing more and nothing less than the gathered people of God with the Holy Spirit of God dwelling in their midst. There was a day, a religious holiday celebrating God’s law and God’s faithfulness in the harvest known as Pentecost, the first Pentecost after the original Easter, when the Spirit arrived with fresh power and was poured out upon all believers regardless of age, class, ethnicity, or gender. It was a day when God was revealed as existing in Trinity in a way we’d never

seen before, when it started to become clearer that one God exists eternally in three distinct persons. On that day we entered the age of the Spirit, the age when God works by miraculously and mysteriously regenerating our sin-stained spirits by the presence of Himself in us.

So what does Pentecost have to do with Revelation? Ever since Easter we've been spending our time working through the book of Revelation, that strange book that concludes the Bible and punctuates the story of what God has been doing. I've been insisting that the point of the apocalyptic visions in Revelation is to give us guidance and encouragement as we struggle through history. Jesus promised to return, and we've been waiting nearly two thousand years through grief and tribulation and persecution and confusion. Has God given up on us? Has His plan failed, since generation after generation of Christians have died with no sure sign of the return of Jesus? John's Revelation gives us an emphatic no, the plan has not failed, and our call while we wait is to remain faithful, to pray, to worship, to bear witness to the faithfulness of Christ. Last week we came to the end, after reading about martyrdom and the rebellion of the powers of the world against God's claim to Lordship. We read about the promise of new heavens and a new earth, a resurrected, redeemed creation where God will dwell eternally with His resurrected, redeemed people.

So today, even though we've told the whole story, we make one more stop at the very end of the book. Just one little verse that's packed with meaning. John is wrapping up this Revelation with instructions and final exhortations for the reader, and we get this wonderfully poetic line: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life." The ending of the Revelation is embedded with the cry of the Holy Spirit through the ages, the cry that the church, the bride of Christ, also raises acting as the voice of the Spirit: an invitation to the world to come, to receive the free gift of the water of life. Whoever is thirsty, there's good news. There's water available, and it's free. It's a cry that is then echoed a couple of verses later, a cry not to the world but to the risen Lord Jesus. Not only do the Spirit and the bride invite the world to come, we also invite Jesus to come, to return and save us by His presence and His reign.

We've been reading Revelation because it shows us what it means to live in Christ's world. It shows us what it means that Jesus is raised from the dead and has conquered death for us, so we've been focusing a lot on what Jesus has done and what He will do. The book is motivated by and driven forward by the presence of the Lamb Who Was Slain. But the fact is that the Holy Spirit is also powerfully present throughout the book. If you're watching carefully, He's soaking through the pages. The entire Revelation is a revelation of Jesus Christ, but it's the Spirit who subtly guides John into seeing the Revelation. I've said before that God's work in our world is done through the work of Jesus and in the context of the church, but the Holy Spirit is another necessary element: you won't see what God is doing unless the Spirit is your guide.

In the very first few verses of the Revelation, John tells us that the whole thing is shown to him while he is "in the Spirit." That doesn't mean he's on some vision quest or on a spiritual plane or just feeling spiritual, it means he's in the midst of worship, making himself particularly ready to hear what the Holy Spirit of God has to say to him. He receives messages from Jesus for the churches in his care, and each time, Jesus concludes by saying, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." It's a message from Jesus mediated by the Holy Spirit. Then John is "at once...in the Spirit" again, and he's ushered into God's heavenly throne room, and the vision really gets going.

Later on he's carried away in the Spirit to see a dramatic celestial reenactment of the birth of Jesus, and again he's carried away in the Spirit to see the descent of the New Jerusalem, the center of God's redeemed creation. Being carried away in the Spirit is shorthand for saying he's having a vision, but it also means that he's receiving what the Holy Spirit has for him; the Spirit is the one moving him and showing him what is to be seen. And again, at the very end, it is the Spirit who joins with the church in extending the invitation for all people to receive the message of redemption offered by Christ.

One of the problems we often face in our spiritual lives is feeling like we don't know how to go forward. It's easy to feel stuck sometimes, even if you're a mature Christian and you've had a vibrant relationship with God for a long time. Or worse yet, it's easy to *be* stuck and be too comfortable to care or notice. It's normal and very common to wonder what to do next, how to go forward, how to stoke the fires of your relationship with God. It's easy to get overwhelmed by the possibilities: there are so many books to read, so many videos to watch or sermons to hear or spiritual disciplines to practice, so many ways to practice generosity in time or resources, and it can be hard to know what's best and what to do next if you do want to go forward. It's easy to feel as though I'm not doing enough to be good enough for God; surely God is disappointed in me because I ought to be doing more. We get overwhelmed by the burden of work required in making ourselves saints or even decent people, to say nothing of the burden of redeeming the world for Christ.

But it's not our task. It's not our work to do. That's what John reminds us, that the Spirit is at work, the Spirit is revealing Christ, the Spirit is guiding us and moving us in God's ways. Our task is to listen to Him. The Spirit was poured out upon the church at Pentecost precisely because we cannot and should not do the redeeming work of God. He is present among us because we can't save ourselves, we can't save anyone else, and we can't even really know Jesus without His presence. In the here and now of daily Christian life, the Spirit is present and working. It doesn't mean you can always perceive Him with a sixth sense or something, but it does mean that if you're listening and ready, you'll hear Him when He calls.

We struggle in our spiritual lives because sometimes we feel like orphans, because Jesus still hasn't come back and we're still waiting for the rest of redemption. But the truth of Pentecost is that Jesus absolutely did not leave us as orphans. In John's gospel, on the night Jesus was betrayed, He promised His disciples that He would send an "Advocate," one who is for us, the Holy Spirit. He describes the Spirit as being the Spirit of truth: the Spirit says what is true, and He reveals the truth of life. He reminds us what Jesus taught us; He testifies about what Jesus said, revealing the truth of who Jesus is as well as the truth about sin and righteousness. And He gives us peace. Jesus may be physically absent for now, but He hasn't left us along. The physical body of Jesus may be localized, but He is present everywhere through the Spirit, speaking and guiding us.

We also read in Romans 8, which comes after a long argument made by the Apostle Paul showing that all people are alike apart from God, and everyone is in need of the pure grace of God. But because of that grace that comes through faith in Christ, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Paul reminds us that if we belong to Christ, we live in the Spirit. Even more than that, the Spirit gives life: "if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of His Spirit who lives in you." The Spirit leads us into being children of God; we become co-heirs of the kingdom with Christ, adopted by the Spirit to become sons and daughters of the Almighty God.

So don't think Jesus isn't at work in us, or that He's forgotten us, or that you've somehow fallen through the cracks in the work of God. Paul says that the Holy Spirit Himself "testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." In Old Testament law, you needed two witnesses to make a case: if you in your own spirit have committed your ways to Christ, no less than God the Spirit Himself confirms that testimony in the courts of heaven. He is, once again, the Spirit of truth, and so He testifies to the truth of what the blood of Christ has done in you in making you God's child.

Our verse in Revelation 22 doesn't only inform us of the cry by the Spirit and the bride. John also gives us instruction for our response: "let the one who hears say, 'Come!'" As the Spirit works in us, He guides us in the truth that the living water of Christ is available for all who thirst. As each of us was invited to come to Christ, we then continue that call to others. Jesus has sent us His Spirit so that we can receive Jesus, and then we can join in the cry of the Spirit to invite others to Jesus. Jesus breathes out the Spirit so that we can breathe in the Spirit, and then give our breath in the invitation to come. Jesus leaves us with His Spirit so He can be welcomed back by the Spirit, accompanied by all the new sons and daughters who have responded to the call to come. The Spirit is at work among us and in you now. Join in the cry of the Spirit and the bride to come.



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