

NEITHER HOT NOR COLD

Revelation 3:14-22

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Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (Rev. 3:20).

The seven messages to the churches of Revelation have sometimes been interpreted as outlining the history of the church from the time of the apostles until the return of Jesus Christ. There is no evidence in the text to support such a view and, as we have seen, numerous references in the letters that make it clear that Christ was addressing real churches in John's time. It is interesting, however, that those who take the church history view almost never associate the church of Laodicea with their own time. Usually, they see themselves as the church of Philadelphia, a praiseworthy church with its open door for missions and evangelism.

However, the best fit for our time probably is the church of Laodicea. Here were Christians whose material affluence left them little zeal for Christ and his gospel. Likewise, the evangelical church in the West today is focused largely on self – with worship experiences designed to make us feel good and messages geared toward self-improvement – with little apparent interest in Christ. I experienced this a few years ago at the national convention of the Christian Booksellers Association. I was there to do an interview on a book I had written about Jesus' approach to evangelism. The woman conducting the interview expressed surprise that my book was actually about Jesus. She told me that she had spent the entire week interviewing authors and that this was the first time anything pertaining to Christ had come

up. This is reminiscent of the church in Laodicea. John Stott comments: “Perhaps none of the seven letters is more appropriate to the church at the beginning of the 21st century than this. It describes vividly the respectable, nominal, rather sentimental, skin-deep religiosity which is so widespread among us today.”¹

CHRIST’S DISGUSTED ASSESSMENT

Laodicea was the last of the seven churches to which Jesus sent messages through the apostle John. It was one of three churches located in the Lycus valley, together with Colosse and Hierapolis, about a hundred miles east of Ephesus. These churches were founded forty years earlier, during the apostle Paul’s stay in Ephesus, probably by Epaphras, who Paul praises in Colossians 4:13 for his work there.

Laodicea was situated along a major trade route, which is why it was a wealthy city, home to bankers, financiers, and millionaires. The city was destroyed in the great earthquake of AD 61, but was so wealthy that it declined government help for its rebuilding. Laodicea was home to a school of medicine that was famed for its salves, including one for eye ailments. It was further noted for the soft, raven black wool of its sheep, in which its fashionable elites were usually dressed.

Laodicea had one main problem: it lacked a good water supply. Nearby Hierapolis had medicinal hot springs and Colosse was blessed a source of pure, cold water. Laodicea had to bring its water by an aqueduct from hot springs five miles away. The problem was that the water arrived tepid and brackish. Jesus picked up on this issue in writing the Laodicean church: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!” (Rev. 3:15).

The problem Jesus notes in Laodicea was not persecution, gross sin or false teaching. In terms of their circumstances, it seems, Laodicea was singularly blessed. For this reason, however, they had lost their zeal for Christ. It was a spiritually apathetic church. The people gathered for worship, but they came like those today who look more frequently to their watches than to the Bible. They probably believed the right things, but those things did not affect them deeply. When it came to Jesus, they were believers, but only lukewarmly so.

¹ John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 113.

In addition to a lack of personal fervor for Christ and his Word, it is likely that the Laodicean church could show little work or witness. Jesus said, “I know your works,” but then does not cite any worth mentioning. They were probably timid in their witness, unmotivated about prayer, indifferent to the sick and imprisoned, and self-centered in their hoarding of money. They were the kind of people who believed one should not be “fanatical” about religion, but in reality lacked the wholeheartedness that alone pleases the Lord.

Jesus’ response to this lukewarm religion was to express disgust: “So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:16). Some commentators are distressed that Jesus would prefer coldness to a lukewarm faith. The reason, however, is not hard for fathom. It is perhaps most offensive of all for people to affirm the glories of Christ but then to live as if they mean little. Stott writes: “If he is the Son of God who became a human being, died for our sins, and was raised from death; if Christmas Day, Good Friday, and Easter Day are more than meaningless anniversaries, then nothing less than our wholehearted commitment to Christ will do.”²

The church does not always approve the enthusiasm of a man like John Wesley who went into the fields preaching the gospel, but Christ does. The church may urge a man like William Carey to shrink back from “wasting” his life among the heathens of India, but Christ was delighted and displayed his glory in the success of that gospel mission. Carey’s motto – “attempt great things for God; expect great things from God” – was the very antithesis of the Laodicean malaise.

How did the Laodiceans become so lukewarm? Jesus answers that they had come to a false estimate of themselves on the basis of their outward blessings: “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17). The Laodiceans looked on their favorable circumstances and considered their riches as true wealth. In fact, by trusting in money and living for the things of a dying world, Jesus said they were wretched, pitiable, blind, and covered with shame. Anne Soukhanov has labeled this syndrome, so common in contemporary America, as “Affluenza.” She defines it as “an array of psychological maladies such as isolation, boredom, passivity and lack of motivation

² Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 114.

engendered in adults, teenagers, and children by the possession of great wealth.”³ The Laodiceans, like so many churches in America today, had become sick from “Affluenza” and Jesus had become sick of them in return.

The problem was not their wealth but what their riches had done to them. Many great believers have been wealthy, like Abraham in the Bible and like Robert Haldane, who used his wealth to support a great revival in Geneva. The question is if we hold our wealth as a stewardship from God, to be used for his glory, the good of others, and the work of the gospel. Or does wealth cause us to stop thinking about Christ’s kingdom, instead musing on earthly blessings? This was the issue in Laodicea, where God’s people boasted in their hearts and largely forgot about God and the kingdom of Christ.

Notice from this passage that Christians tend to estimate themselves wrongly. This is one reason why we so greatly need sound and clear teaching from the Bible, which alone will present a true portrait and convict us of our weakness and sin. The Bible says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5). We therefore need messages like the one to Laodicea to realize what is the trend of our lives and make changes while there is still time. We need to see the truth about our corruption in sin, our toleration of false teaching, our partnership in idolatry, and our self-absorbed indifference to Christ – in order to avoid wasting our lives and even disgusting our Lord.

Second, notice that the Laodiceans drew their attitude from the secular culture around them. This happens frequently to Christians. In a sophisticated culture, Christians take on airs of superiority. In a patriotic setting we become preoccupied with earthly kingdoms. Among pleasure-seekers, Christians live for the sake of the latest consumer goods. The rich arrogance of Laodicea had infected the believers’ attitudes, making them spiritually poor, blind as to heavenly realities, and disgraced by a shameful absence of good works and a faithful witness. Christians should therefore be on guard against adopting the spirit of the age and of the place where we live, instead cultivating a biblical ethos and the agenda of Jesus Christ. If we do not, the danger is so great that Jesus said he would spit the Laodicean church out of his mouth. Undoubtedly, this indicates that many in that

³ Anne Soukhanov, cited Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 91.

church were not even saved. Apathetic Christianity often masks a spiritually dead unbelief. In his parable of the talents, Jesus ordered that such false professors of faith be cast “into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 25:30).

CHRIST’S LOVING COUNSEL

Christ’s letter to Laodicea is one of the more harsh portions of Holy Scripture, and we may therefore be surprised to see the tenderness and love that Christ shows to this church. We conclude verse 17 expecting Jesus at any moment to spew out this congregation from his disgusted mouth. Instead, Jesus ministers, saying, “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline” (Rev. 3:19). Here is hope in light of our many failings and sins: Christ’s love for his church. “For all their failures, this is nevertheless a church composed of his people whom he loves and whom he wants to bring to repentance.”⁴ It is not surprising, then, that the remedy for the Laodicean malaise comes from Jesus himself: “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see” (Rev. 3:18).

Before considering the particular items noted by Jesus, we should focus on the general theme of his counsel. The Christians were to stop expecting their spiritual needs to be met from the Laodicean marketplace but were instead to come to Christ and do business with him. One thing they would find is that Jesus runs a completely different economy from that of the world. This is what Jesus meant in saying that we should “buy from” him: not that his saving blessings are up for sale but that we should come to him for the divine blessings that will save our souls. He alone can enrich our poverty, clothe our nakedness, heal our blindness, and give life to the spiritually dead. No doubt, Jesus had in mind the market economics expressed by Isaiah: “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isa. 55:1). To trade with Jesus is to come to him empty handed seeking saving blessings by his grace alone. Augustus Toplady put it well: “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 12:7.

thy cross I cling. Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless look to thee for grace. Foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.”⁵

First, Jesus offered them “to buy from me gold refined by fire” (Rev. 3:18). He was referring to the true riches of salvation and a godly life. Jesus told a parable of a rich fool who stored up wealth for his security, not realizing that his life could be forfeit at any minute. Jesus called this was the folly of “one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Lk. 12:21). To be “rich toward God” is to have your sins forgiven, to possess justification through faith in Christ, and then to have a godly character that has been made pure and strong by enduring trials and tribulations. As Jesus pointed out, many wealthy people are pitiable in their misery and despair, while strong believers who are poor in the things of the world are rich in “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

Second, Jesus urges his readers to gain “white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen” (Rev. 3:18). Throughout Revelation, white garments symbolize those who are justified through faith in Christ and have confirmed their salvation by persevering to the end of life (see Rev. 3:4; 4:4; 7:9; 22:14). Here, Jesus speaks also of covering our shame. In the ancient world, the greatest humiliation was to be stripped naked, whereas the greatest honour was to be dressed in the finest clothes. The greatest glory in this world is experienced by those who know they are clothed before God in Christ’s imputed righteousness and who walk in a manner worthy of their high calling to holiness in Christ.

We should remember that the standard color of Laodicea was black, from the lush wools their sheep produced. Jesus seems to indicate, therefore, that part of being cleansed and justified through faith in him is to wear a different color from the world. The Christians in white were to be a public counter-culture displaying the righteousness of Christ, the holy Christian calling, and the glorious hope of resurrection life in the age to come. As Christ’s righteous ones, the Christians were not to fit in but stick out as a testimony to the gospel.

Third, Laodicea was known for its medicinal eye salves, but that did not keep the church from becoming spiritually blind. Therefore they should come to Jesus for “salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may

⁵ Augustus Toplady, “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,” 1776.

see” (Rev. 3:18). With the psalmist of old, they should come to Jesus crying, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Ps. 119:18). They needed to see themselves as they really were; they needed to see anew the glory and grace of Jesus; and they needed to see the world in its true need, which can only be met through a zealous witness to the saving mercy of Christ.

All these gifts are freely given by Jesus, yet he wants something out of this transaction, demanding it as a stern and disciplining Lord: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (Rev. 13:19). The word “zealous” means to be boiling hot (Greek, *zeleuo*). So Jesus wants his people to respond to his gifts by eagerly pursuing the gospel agenda of his kingdom. Paul wrote similarly in Romans 12:1: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Having received everything from Jesus by free grace through his shed blood, he desires that we would give the whole of ourselves in response, as an offering of thanks and as servants of his eternal kingdom.

What will that look like for you? Will it call you to a more devoted ministry of prayer? Will it call you to step out as a witness for to others? Will it energize works of service in the church or call you to the missions field? Our gifts and callings will be different, but Jesus wants each of us, in our own way, to be red hot for his saving work.

CHRIST’S TENDER APPEAL

Jesus adds to his loving counsel a most tender appeal, which is all the more remarkable in that it is given to a church for which he has expressed disgust: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20).

This verse is frequently seen as an evangelistic appeal, but the context shows that this is not the case. This text does not urge unbelievers to “ask Jesus into your heart,” but Jesus is speaking to his church that has closed its door to him. Moreover, the idea of opening an unbelieving heart to Jesus is not the biblical idea of conversion. Biblical evangelism is the proclaiming of Christ in his person and work so that hearers believe in him as God grants them new hearts

(Eze. 36:25-26) which he opens by his Word (Acts 16:14). James Boice explains that here, Christ “is knocking at the closed hearts of those who are his but who have turned their backs on him and shut him out of their complacent, self-satisfied, worldly Christian lives. The knocking Christ is an image, not of Jesus calling unbelievers to give their hearts to him but of calling drifting, worldly believers to sincere repentance and renewal.”⁶

Holman Hunt depicted Jesus at the door in his famous painting, *Light of the World*, which hangs in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. Vines grow against the door, showing that it has not lately been used. Christ wears his crown of thorns and holds a lantern in his hand, the other hand raised to knock at the door. A friend complained to Hunt that the painting lacked a knob on the door, but he answered that this was the point. This is a door to be opened on the inside, which shows that Christ desires his church to show effort in their relationship with him.⁷ As such this is a challenge to the church and to every individual in the church – “if anyone,” Jesus says – to open the door to the presence, the rule, and the powerful blessing of Christ.

Jesus says that we must hear his voice and open the door. This means that Christ calls to us today through the Word, urging his people to awaken and respond with a zealous and repentant faith. Donald Grey Barnhouse comments: “The call of the Lord to Laodicea, then, is to come back to the Word of God. The poverty of this church lies in the fact that the Word of God is not given its proper place.”⁸ John Stott describes Christ’s calling as: “to surrender without conditions to his lordship. It is to seek his will in his word and promptly to obey it. It is not just attending religious services twice a Sunday or even every day... It is putting him first and seeking his pleasure in every department of life, public and private.”⁹

Jesus adds a promise to his call: “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). This is an offer of enriched personal communion with Jesus. The Greeks had three meals each day, the chief of which was the *deipnon*, the evening meal where people lingered and shared the experiences and thoughts of their day. This is the meal that Jesus

⁶ Boice, *Revelation*, 12:10.

⁷ Morgan, *Westminster Pulpit*, 32-33.

⁸ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 82.

⁹ Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 121-2.

mentions. He offers us a living communion in daily discipleship. There are some who see an allusion here to the sacrament of the Lord Supper. While this offer must not be restricted to the sacrament, it is undoubtedly true that a church that has opened itself to the living Christ through his Word is bound to enjoy rich spiritual blessings at the table of the Lord, rather than an empty ritual.

G. Campbell Morgan tells a story related to Holman Hunt's portrait of Christ at the door. A boy was viewing it and said, "Father, why don't they open the door?" His father answered, "I don't know; s'pose they don't want to!" The boy answered, "No, it isn't that. I think I know why they don't; they all live at the back of the house!"¹⁰ The boy was describing those who come to church but have their minds on the things of the world, who are eager to be done with worship, whose bodies are present but whose hearts are not open to the Lord coming in, since Jesus will insist on being sovereign over their priorities, affections, and choices. Christ knocks not as suppliant but as Lord, and Christians who do not open wide the door of their hearts will miss out on the rich blessing of communion that he offers.

CHRIST'S SALVATION OFFER

Christ writes to Laodicea to rebuke a lukewarm church, giving reasons for them to repent and become hotter about him and his gospel. The first reason is that he may spit such a church out of his mouth, as evidently happened to Laodicea, which warns that many members in a lukewarm church are likely not to be saved at all. A second reason is that Jesus offers to give us true riches that the world cannot offer, together with white robes and eyes to see. Third, Jesus eagerly desires to dwell within his church and in Christian hearts, to reign but also to fellowship with joy and love. Finally, the most important reason to renew our zeal for Jesus is his own worthiness and glory. This is why this message began with words describing key attributes of Jesus: "And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation'" (Rev. 3:14).

First, Jesus is the "Amen," a word that signifies solidity and truth. He is the Lord who speaks and it is so, who acts and it is established. As

¹⁰ Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit*, 6:33.

“the faithful and true witness,” he is the one who speaks truth that we need to hear about ourselves, about the world, and about the gospel, and whose Word brings life. Moreover, Jesus is “the beginning of God’s creation” (Rev. 3:14). This may be interpreted also as the “head” of God’s creation. John began his Gospel by stating that Jesus is “the Word,” who was in the beginning with God, and by whom “all things were made” (Jn. 1:1-2). Jesus is able, therefore, to renew our church and restore our lives with his omnipotent, saving power. It is in this capacity that Jesus concludes his messages to the seven churches of Asia with a final offer of salvation: “The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev. 3:21).

The seven messages of Revelation have included stern words that are uncomfortable for us to hear, not least the rebuke to the lukewarm church of Laodicea. But we are reminded that Jesus speaks as one who knows his church intimately and loves his people. His challenge is not for us to miss out on the best in life by yielding to him but rather to raise us up through our faith to a high communion with him. He declares that he is going to seat us beside him on his throne of glory and authority, to join his own victorious communion with God the Father forever.

For this reason, we must conquer in faith, drawing from Jesus’ own victory as the one who says, “I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev. 3:21). Leon Morris writes: “Christ overcome by the way of the cross and this sets the pattern for His followers. They face grim days. But let them never forget that what seemed Christ’s defeat was in fact His victory over the world. They need not fear if they are called upon to suffer, for in that way they too will conquer.”¹¹ We conquer only in his power, with the great reward of spending eternity not merely in Jesus’ heaven but, he says, “with me on my throne.” This is the high and glorious destiny to which Christ calls his church and his people now, saying, as John put it, “this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4).

Seeing the gracious offer of Christ to Laodicea we are all the more willing to identify with this church, widely viewed as the worst of the churches in Revelation 2-3, because of the offer given to them by

¹¹ Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 81.

God's grace. Christ's message to Laodicea is the heartening message expressed by Joseph Hart in his great hymn:

Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched, weak and wounded, sick and sore.

Jesus ready stands to save you, full of pity joined with pow'r...

Without money, without money, without money

Come to Jesus Christ and buy; come to Jesus Christ and buy.¹²

Christ's calling is for us today no less than for the ancient believers of John's day. Jesus thus speaks to each of us with urgency: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 3:22).

¹² Joseph Hart, "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Wretched," 1759.