

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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LAODICEA: THE “IGNORANT” CHURCH (Part 1)

J. C. Ryle was one of the great evangelical lights of the last century. He was a staunch Calvinist. He was also a Bishop (of Liverpool) in the Church of England. Among the many useful books that he authored was one titled *Warnings to the Churches*, a book in which he outlined his own fears for the church in his day, a day where rationalism, ritualism and overall skepticism was increasing. In this book he put his finger on the great danger facing the church – ignorance of the Bible. “Let us read our Bibles from beginning to end with daily diligence and constant prayer for the teaching of the Holy Spirit and so strive to become thoroughly familiar with their contents. Ignorance of the Bible is the root of all error, and a superficial acquaintance with it accounts for many of the said perversions and defections of the present day.”¹ The church at Laodicea was “ignorant” and superficial in their Christianity; as such they were nauseating. “Ignorance is *not* bliss,” and because they were ignorant of the Word of God they were ignorant of their true condition. To this church, in this condition, comes the strongest and most severe indictment from the Lord Jesus Christ.

- I. **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.** Laodicea was founded by Antiochus II in the third century before Christ. The city was named after his wife Laodice. It was centrally located and ideally suited as a city of commerce and trade. It became so wealthy that it was soon known as the city of banking and exchange. In fact, its wealth was so great that when the area was destroyed by an earthquake in 60 A.D., it was rebuilt without any assistance from Rome. It was also a major manufacturing center and became quite famous for its wool industry, especially the valuable black wool which was highly prized for its glossy color and soft texture. In addition, the city was famous for its school of medicine which produced a medicine for the eyes. “The *tephra phrygia*, the eye-powder of Laodicea, was world famous. It was exported in tablet form; and the tablets were ground down and applied to the eye. This Phrygian powder was held to be a sovereign remedy for weak and ailing eyes.”² Various gods were worshipped in Laodicea, the most famous being Zeus. It likewise had a temple for the Imperial religion of Rome. But strangely enough, the Laodiceans were not overly zealous as a whole in worshipping any one deity. Unlike the other cities which were fanatical in paying homage to the gods of their particular religion – Laodicea was not renowned for its religion. “There is no city whose spirit and nature are more difficult to describe than Laodicea. There are no extremes, and hardly any very strongly marked features. But in this even balance lies its peculiar character. Those were the qualities that contributed to make it essentially the successful trading city, the city of bankers and finance, which could adapt itself to the needs and wishes of others, ever pliable and accommodating, full of the spirit of compromise.”³ As for the founding of the Church we have no direct Scripture, but we do know of this church from the writings of Paul. In fact, we know that he wrote to this Church (Colossians 4:16). This letter has either been lost or might have been a copy of the letter to the Ephesians. Mentioned in connection with the Church at

Laodicea is Epaphras, one of Paul's fellow-workers (Colossians 4:12, 13). Finally, there is an appendage to 1 Timothy in some later manuscripts (the Old KJV includes this, but later editions do not, e.g., old and new Scofield Reference Bible) which reads "the first to Timothy was written from Laodicea, which is the chiefest city of Phrygia Pacatiana." The textual support for this is extremely weak and even recent editions of the "Textus Receptus" (the Greek text underlying the KJV of 1611) omit it.⁴

II. **CHRIST'S DESCRIPTION.** In His own self-description, the Lord Christ emphasizes three specific things about Himself to this particular church.

- A. **The Amen.** "These are the words of . . ." This phrase precedes the threefold description of Christ. He is *ho amēn* (note the definite article, compare with 2 Corinthians 1:20). The word means "it is true;" the idea is one of solid affirmation. It is used here as a personal designation of Christ. He is the amen personified (cf. Isaiah 65:16). "The idea is thus *the True One, the one who keepeth covenant*. Hence the words that follow are in part a repetition and in part an expansion of the phrase that follows."⁵
- B. **The Faithful and True Witness.** He as "the Amen" guarantees the truthfulness and reliability of His words. The expression looks back to 1:5 (compare also John 3:11, 32, 33). Trench points out three things necessary in a witness. "He must have been an *autoptēs* [eyewitness]; must have seen with his own eyes that which he professes to attest (Acts 1:21, 22). He must be competent to relate and reproduce this information for others. He must be willing faithfully and truthfully to do this. The meeting of these three conditions in Christ, and not the presence of the last only, constitutes Him a *true witness*, or one in whom all the highest qualities of a witness are met."⁶ Also note the words in 3:21, *My Father*. This language, as Lanier points out, stresses a kind of messianic self-awareness. "The first piece of evidence can be found in the poignant scene in the garden, where Jesus, in a moment of anguish that anticipates the even greater one to come, calls out to *Abba, Father* (Mark 14:36). This is a unique occurrence in the Gospels, where Jesus addresses God with the Semitic word *abba* (transliterated into Greek), to which is added the Greek word *patēr*. It is often taught that *Abba* means something like "Daddy" in colloquial English, as something a child would say. Most likely this is an exaggeration. Whether Mark's transliterated Greek word reflects an Aramaic form (like '*abbā*') or a Hebrew form (like '*ābi*'), either way it is best understood to be an ordinary word for one's own *father*, regardless of who is uttering it. (The presence of the normal Greek *father* alongside it would confirm this.) That said, the intimacy of this scene should not be downplayed altogether. In a moment of tearful foreboding, Jesus cries out specifically to his *Abba* for deliverance. He does not plead to *God* or *Most High* or *Lord* or *Savior* – all of which were options (cf. Gk. *Elōi* – *My God*, in Mark 15:34). Rather, he implores the one who stands – in the moment of crisis – as *relationally 'Father'* to him. He appeals to *Abba* to draw near to him and do his will, even if it requires the life of the Son. While the coloring of *Abba* is not quite *Daddy*, its use in addressing God with such profound closeness *is* something that lacks much precedent in early Judaism. An ordinary Jew in Jesus's day would rarely presume to address the God of the universe in such a familiar way. Jesus also speaks to his followers about *my Father* (Matt. 26:53; Luke 22:29; 24:49; John 5:17; 6:40; 8:19). Given that Jesus elsewhere describes God corporately as *our Father* (Matt. 6:9), there is a special significance to his personal *my*. Even as a boy, Jesus is aware that his *true* Father is not Joseph on earth; rather, *my Father* is God himself (Luke 2:49). Interestingly, this use of *my Father* to refer to God is something only Jesus does in the New Testament; even the apostles avoid referring to God as *my Father* (preferring *our*, as in Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; etc.). And in the Old Testament, the only such occurrences of the phrase are

spoken by God himself as a kind of future promise (Ps. 89:26) or hypothetical scenario (Jer. 3:19). So its use by Jesus is almost unparalleled. Moreover, in several instances Jesus goes one step further and denotes his true Father as *my Father in heaven*, indicating that he stands in a sonship relation not to someone *below* but to someone *above* (Matt. 7:21; 10:32; 12:50; 16:17; 18:19). And finally, Jesus refers to himself as *the Son* and to God as specifically *the Father* (Mark 13:32). Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus suggests that he stands in a unique relation to the Father, who is specifically *his*. Their identities define one another: the heavenly Father is specifically *his Father*, and Jesus is specifically *the Son* of that Father. It is not surprising, then, that in John's apocalyptic vision, the exalted Jesus once again refers to *my Father* in a unique and exclusive way (Rev. 2:27; 3:21)."⁷

- C. ***The Ruler of God's Creation.*** The KJV, ASV and NASB have "the beginning of God's creation." Grammatically the phrase can be so translated, but the thought is not that Christ is a created being,⁸ which would be "at variance with the Christology of our author, which makes Christ eternal (1:18, 2:8), and distinguishes him from every created thing as the object of worship paid to him in common with the Father (5:13), while worship of an angelic being is forbidden (19:10). The words mean rather *the one from whom creation took its beginning.*"⁹ Furthermore, the language is similar to that used by Paul in Colossians (compare Colossians 1:15, 18; 3:1, 21), an epistle that the Laodiceans possessed (cf. Colossians 4:15, 16). The Greek *hē archē* (the beginning) is used of Christ again in 21:6, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End," cf. also 22:13. "To go no further than these seven Epistles all the titles which Christ claims for Himself in them are either necessarily divine, or, at any rate, not inconsistent with his divinity; and this must be so no less. He is not, therefore, the *principium principiatum*, but rather the *principium principians* – not He whom God created the first, but he who was the fountain-source of all the creation of God, by whom God created all things (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15, 18); even as throughout this Book Christ appears as the author of creation (5:13)."¹⁰

CONCLUSION: "The theme of this letter then is that the readers need to be renewed (vv. 18-20) as new creatures in their relationship with Christ by testifying to this relationship in an uncompromising manner. And the creative power of the resurrected Jesus can raise them from their spiritual torpor (vv. 15-17), strengthen them in faith (v. 18) so that they will repent (v. 19), and confirm them in their enduring fellowship with him (v. 20). If this happens, they will receive a reward (v. 21). This church needs an injection of Christ's resurrection power, since they are in the worst condition of all the churches in the letters. Even in the nearly dead church of Sardis there was a faithful remnant, but no such remnant is clearly discernible in the Laodicean church, nor is there any commendation as occurs to varying degrees in all the other letters. Perhaps the adjective *true* designates Jesus as the genuine or authentic witness in contrast to fleshly Israel as false witnesses (cf. Jesus as *true*, without the addition of *faithful*, in 3:7 in contrast to those in 3:9 *who call themselves Jews, and they are not, but they lie*). *True* probably includes not just mere moral and cognitive truth, but also authenticity in the redemptive-historical sense: Jesus is *true* Israel by virtue of his fulfillment of the Isa. 43:10-19 prophecy of God and Israel's witness to the new creation. In contrast to unfaithful Israel, Christ fulfilled the prophecy by perfectly testifying to the new creation both before and after his resurrection. In this manner, he showed himself to be the true Israel prophesied by Isaiah. This attribute of authenticity may also be viewed against the Isaianic background of God saying that Israel should be a faithful witness in contrast to the nations, who are false witnesses to their idols, or to the idols themselves, false witnesses that the nations mistakenly believe to be the *truth* (Isa. 43:9). Therefore, Christ is the *true witness* after which all other faithful witnesses are modeled (for this reason Jesus may call Antipas, who was martyred for his faith, only *My faithful witness* [Rev. 2:13], but not *true witness*, since only Jesus fulfilled the prophecy, though the two words could be generally synonymous.)"¹¹

ENDNOTES

- ¹ J. C. Ryle, *Warnings to the Churches* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 138.
- ² Wm. Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London, S.C.M., 1957), p. 113.
- ³ W. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Klock & Klock, 1918), pp. 442-43.
- ⁴ “The mention of Phrygia Pacatiana proves that the author of the note lived after the fourth century, towards the close of which that name for Phrygia Prima came into use.” N.J.D. White, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament IV*, ed. W. R. Nicoll (rpt. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 150.
- ⁵ R. H. Charles, *The International Critical Commentary: Revelation I* (T&T Clark, 1927), p. 94.
- ⁶ R. C. Trench, *Epistles To the Seven Churches* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 204.
- ⁷ Greg Lanier, *Is Jesus Truly God? How the Bible Teaches the Divinity of Christ* (Crossway, 2020), pp. 45-47.
- ⁸ The *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* of the so-called “Jehovah’s Witnesses” translates this: “the beginning of the creation BY God.” As Bruce M. Metzger points out, “The Greek text of this verse (*hē archē tēs ktiseōs tou theou*) far from saying that Christ was created by God, for the genitive case *tou theou* means *of God* and not *by God* (which would require the preposition *hupo*). Actually, the word *archē*, translated *beginning*, carries with it the Pauline idea expressed in Colossians 1:15-18 and signifies that Christ is the origin, or primary source, of God’s creation (compare also John 1:3: *Apart from him not even one thing came into existence*),” *Theology Today*, “Jehovah’s Witnesses and Jesus Christ,” April, 1953, vol. X, No. 1, pp. 79, 80.
- ⁹ Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 488.
- ¹⁰ Trench, p. 205.
- ¹¹ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 302.