

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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LAODICEA: THE “IGNORANT” CHURCH (Part 2)

The glorified Lord Jesus is sick to His stomach. The thought is astonishing! What would cause the Lord to be *nauseated*? Surprisingly as it may sound, the *Church* can make Christ want to throw up! Why? How?!! The answer given by our text is crystal clear. Spiritual indifference stemming from Scriptural ignorance is the cause. The Church at Laodicea was this kind of Church. We hear a lot about *felt needs* today. Churches cater their services around meeting *felt needs*. Preachers tailor their messages around peoples' *felt needs*. People leave churches because their *felt needs* are not being met and seek out some other church where the number one priority will be having their *felt needs* met. I must admit the whole thing leaves me in a state of uneasiness. It reflects a selfish and self-centered mindset. “Our greatest need,” writes Steven Lawson, “is to see our need.”¹ Our need of what? Let's pay close attention to how Christ diagnoses the true needs of the Church at Laodicea. What were the *felt needs* of the people in the Church at Laodicea?

Review: We looked last week at the way Christ described himself in 3:14: “The Laodicean church's true situation was not as it seemed, so it needed *the Amen, the faithful and true Witness* to tell it the hard truth (Rev. 3:14). The epistolary doxology had spoken of Jesus as *the faithful witness* (1:5). His reliability in attesting the truth is especially relevant to a church so blinded by smug self-deception. Jesus is uniquely reliable because he is *the Amen*, the firm One who fulfills all of God's promises and threats (2 Cor. 1:20). Jesus is also *the Beginning of the creation of God*. Paul's letter to the Colossians (also intended indirectly for Laodicea, Col. 4:16) called Christ the *beginning* as the originator and ruler over all creatures great and small (Col. 1:15-18). In Revelation *the beginning*, with its complement *the end*, expresses the eternity of God, who stands sovereign over history's whole span as *the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end* (Rev. 22:13; cf. 21:6). Jesus calls himself *the Beginning* to shame their self-reliance and to turn them to his inexhaustible resources.”²

I. **CHRIST'S INDICTMENT AND REBUKE.** The Church's condition at Laodicea comes under the all-knowing gaze of the Lord Christ. There are no words of commendation. The Church is not tainted with heresy or moral compromise, nor is it confronted with persecution. Instead, the Church is self-complacent and self-satisfied, seemingly content with what they had achieved and serenely unconscious of their present state.

A. **Lukewarm.** The word is *chliaros*, used only here in the Greek New Testament. The word describes that which is tepid.

NOTE: The lukewarm condition of the Church is contrasted with “hot” (*zestos*, hot, to boil, compare with Romans 12:11), and “cold” (*psucho*, to grow cold, compare with Matthew 10:42).³ The standard interpretation of this text is that “cold” refers to spiritual coldness, unbelief, and that “hot” refers to spiritual fervor and vitality – with lukewarmness being, not a transitional stage between the two, but

a deplorable condition of compromise. Practically all commentaries take this position. I do not, however, think that it is correct, even though on the surface it seems to be the only possible way of understanding the passage. My major objection to this interpretation is that it implies that Christ prefers rank unbelief to that of spiritual tepidness on the part of true believers. The condition of any believer is far better than the condition of unbelief. How then are we to understand this? How would the Church at Laodicea have understood this? Recent archaeological studies have shown that the chief weakness of the city at Laodicea was its lack of a local water supply. "It was entirely dependent for water supply (except insofar as wells may have existed within the walls, of which there is now no trace) on an aqueduct conducted from springs about six miles to the south."⁴ Interestingly enough is the fact that the city of Hierapolis, located six miles to the north of Laodicea, was famous for its copious hot springs renowned for their healing power. On the other hand, the city of Colossae was located only 10 miles to the east of Laodicea. Colossae was renowned for its refreshing cold water springs. In both cases, by the time the water reached Laodicea it was lukewarm, to be used only as an emetic. The cold water of Colossae was refreshing and thirst quenching. The hot water of Hierapolis was medicinal and soothing. Therefore, the indictment of Christ points to the ineffectiveness of the Church's works. They were neither spiritually refreshing (cold) nor spiritually healing (hot) in their ministry. Rather, they were permeated by spiritual lukewarmness which produced only nausea. In other words, the "works" of the Church were completely ineffective and worthless.⁵ Because of the Church's tepid condition, Christ declares, "I am about to spit you out of my mouth." The word *mellō* (about to) points to the possibility of repentance on the part of the Church. Christ has not yet reached the point of *emeō*, literally to vomit, to reject with strong disgust. Space is given the Church for reform.

- B. **Wretched.** "You are (the *you* in the Greek text is very emphatic) *talaipōros*, literally miserable, wretched, same word used by Paul in Romans 7:24; here, however, the condition is unknown.
- C. **Pitiful.** The word is *eleeinos*, and it points to one who is the object of extreme pity, cf. 1 Corinthians 15:19. The next three words give the reason for this deplorable condition.⁶
- D. **Poor.** *Ptōchos*, extreme poverty, poor as a beggar, same word used in Revelation 2:9. The Church at Smyrna was "poor" but in reality "rich," while Laodicea has "riches," but is really "poor." On the combination of material poverty and true riches, cf. 2 Corinthians 6:10.
- E. **Blind.** *Tuphlos*, a word often used of mental and spiritual blindness, cf. Matthew 23:17.
- F. **Naked.** *Gumnos*, literally naked or scantily clad, cf. 16:15. This completes the description of the Church's actual condition – "wretched and pitiful."

These things the Church did not "realize," *oidas*, to know, comprehend (contrast with Christ in 3:15). The Church was totally ignorant. Notice that they bragged about their condition. "you say – I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." They claimed that they had "arrived" – all is well. External circumstances had no doubt contributed to the favorable attitude; they had neglected Paul's words in 1 Timothy 6:3-10, they did not know their true condition. "To such self-sufficiency and spiritual pride, its vilest rags seem like royal robes; its filth appears to be gold and diamonds; its mercenary and proud services a holiness that merits reward."⁷

II. **CHRIST'S COUNSEL.** "I counsel you," *sumbouleuō*, to give counsel or advice (compare with Numbers 24:14; Isaiah 55:1). The language that follows is metaphorical. The church is urged "to buy," *agorazō* (compare again with Isaiah 55:1; also Revelation 5:9; 14:3, 4; Matthew 25:9, 10); "from me" – these words in the Greek text are emphatic.

- A. **Gold** – "refined in the fire." The word "refined," *puro*, literally to purify, was used in Revelation 1:15. The idea is that this has been put to the test and can be trusted. Christ counsels the Laodiceans to secure true riches, the kind that will not tarnish and come to

nothing. The reason for this purchase is that “you can become rich” because they are in fact “very poor.”

- B. **White clothes** – “to wear” because they were “naked.” White garments (compare with 3:5) stand for the purity and righteousness of life which is based upon the righteousness of faith – “so you can cover your shameful nakedness” (compare with 2 Corinthians 5:1-10).
- C. **Salve** – “to put on your eyes.” The school of medicine in Laodicea was famous for its eye salve to help defective vision. The Church has a serious eye problem and needs spiritual vision, “so you can see.”

The Lord Jesus summons the Church to find her sufficiency in Christ. Everything is “from HIM,” apart from Him, “you can do nothing” (Hosea 14:8; John 15:5). “But why does He recommend the Laodiceans to BUY from Him? Can salvation be bought? No, certainly not. It is a free gift to us purchased by Christ on the cross. His invitation *buy from me* should not be pressed. He is doubtlessly using language appropriate to the commercially-minded Laodiceans. He likens Himself to a merchant who visits the city to sell his wares and goes into competition with other salesmen. *I advise you to forsake your former suppliers, says the Divine Colporteur, and come trade with me.*”⁸

III. **CHRIST’S FINAL ADMONITION.**

- A. **Explanation** – “those whom I love I rebuke and discipline” (compare with Proverbs 3:12 and Hebrews 12:6). Christ does love this Church. Laodicea is NOT the reprobate church of the Tribulation.⁹ “Rebuke,” *elenchō*, “discipline,” *paideuō* – “Two stages in the process; *elenchō* aims at effecting by words or thoughts what *paideia* accomplishes, where *elenchō* fails, by act; *paideia* is *elenchō* brought about through external means.”¹⁰ Because He loves them, He will rebuke and discipline them.
- B. **Exhortation** – “So be earnest, *zēleue* (present tense imperative) and repent, *etanoēson* (aorist tense imperative). Notice what they are exhorted to be zealous about and for what it is they are to show repentance. They are not being told to become Christians; they are Christians.
- C. **Promise** – “Here I am! I will stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me.” Note the emphasis on the Person of Christ. “Christ not only wants to provide gold, clothing, and sight to this congregation; he wants them to enjoy his person, his fellowship. If only they admit their Lord, he will give them the richest of fare. His plea, *Here I am! I stand at the door and knock*, is poignant and urgent. The verb form for knock suggests insistent, repeated pounding. Although he wants the entire congregation to open *the door* to fellowship with him, the individual is ultimately the one who must decide, as the singular forms indicate: *anyone . . . him . . . he.*”¹¹

NOTE: This verse is constantly used as text for evangelism. Is this legitimate?¹² Is this text addressed to unbelievers? I do not think so. Rather, I think the text is addressed to professing believers. It is actually an explanation and description of the *results* of verse 19. Restoration of communion and fellowship is the subject of verse 20, which describes fellowship under the image of a feast where intimate fellowship is enjoyed. The Laodiceans were preoccupied with other things. They were wrapped up and absorbed in worldly pursuits, and they are exhorted to be zealous and repent. Repent of their worldly ways and be zealous towards Christ, who only can provide the true needs of life. This fellowship is the foreshadowing of the future blessing of the coming kingdom.¹³

- D. **Assurance** – As in all of the letters, Christ closes with an address to the overcomer. The promise is one of complete and ultimate victory with Christ in His Kingdom.

CONCLUSION: The problem with the Church at Laodicea was one of gross ignorance. It was chiefly an ignorance of true riches. They had a misplaced emphasis on what really mattered. William Romaine described in essence the Satanic trap into which the Laodiceans had fallen when he wrote: “He [Satan] will try to keep thine eye upon thy great graces and high gifts; he will flatter thee exceedingly upon them, and will tempt thee to view them with a secret delight, every now and then insinuating what a great Christian thou art, how few there are like thee, to what an exalted state thou has attained, what temptations thou hast overcome, what victories thou hast gained over Satan, and how safe thou art now, fast upon the rock! And if he finds pleasing bait is not instantly rejected with a, Get thee behind me, Satan, then he will begin to work upon thy self-love, and to give thee many plausible reasons for self-admiration, so that thou shalt first look pleasingly at, then fondly love, and at last sacrilegiously dote upon thy wondrous attainments. Thus he will lift thee up with a pride, and will try to draw thee into his own crime, and into his own condemnation. What a dangerous temptation is this! How many have I known who fell into it! If thou sayest, by what means shall I escape it? Mind the first approach, for it is coming upon thee as soon as thou beginnest to think of thyself more highly than thou oughtest to think. Thou art in thyself a poor miserable, helpless sinner, to this very moment, without Christ thou canst do nothing. Thou canst not do one good thing, nor overcome the weakest enemy, nor take one step in the way to heaven, without Christ; nay, thou canst not think one good thought without Him.”¹⁴ “The plain truth,” declared Bishop Ryle, “is that we cannot sufficiently exalt the Lord Jesus Christ as the great Head of the Church, and Lord of all ordinances, no less than as the Saviour of sinners. I take it we all fail here. We do not realize how high and great and glorious a King the Son of God is, and what undivided loyalty we owe to One who has not deputed any of His offices, or given His glory to another.”¹⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ Steven J. Lawson, *Final Call* (Crossway, 1995), p. 192.

² D. E. Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&R, 2001), p. 91.

³ The word *ophelon*, “I would that,” is used to express a very real possibility even though it is presently unrealized, literally, “I would that you were,” compare with 2 Corinthians 11:1.

⁴ W. Ramsay, *The Letters To the Seven Churches* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1981), p. 415..

⁵ This interpretation is advanced by M. J. S. Rudwick and E. M. B. Green in “The Laodicean Lukewarmness,” *expository Times*, LXIX, 1957-58, pp. 176-178, and more recently by Robert Mounce, “Revelation,” *New International Commentary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1978) and Alan Johnson, “Revelation,” in *The Expositors Bible*, ed. F. Gaebelein (Zondervan, 1982).

⁶ By way of emphasis, the Greek has the definite article before the first descriptive word: Thou art “the” wretched one. . . “Miserable” appears to be correlative with “wretched” . . . The three remaining characteristics, “poor, and blind, and naked,” are without the article and appear to indicate the source of their wretchedness and misery.

⁷ James Ramsey, *Revelation: An Exposition of the First 11 Chapters* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 180.

⁸ J. R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (IVP, 1972), p. 122.

⁹ This is advocated very strongly by John MacArthur, Jr., “Laodicea represents the false Church that will be vomited by Christ right into the Tribulation,” *The Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ* (Word of Grace, 1981), p. 66.

¹⁰ H. B. Swete, *Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (rpt. Kregel, 1977), p. 63.

¹¹ M. Anders, K. H. Easley, *the Holman New Testament Commentary: Revelation* (Holman, 1998), p. 61.

¹² “The application usually made from this statement of Christ is that He’s waiting at the door of each human heart, seeking to be admitted to the life of each person who senses his spiritual emptiness and invites Jesus to enter and fill the void. This is a perfectly valid application, as the essence of being a Christian is having *Christ in you, the hope of glory* (Colossians 1:27),” Hal Lindsey, *There’s a New World Coming* (Vision House, 1973), p. 71. It should be noted that the expression *eiseleusomai* (I will enter) *pros* (to) *auton* (him) does **not** contain the idea of entering *into* him. Rather it is “I will come in” (where he is) to him (face to face), compare with Acts 11:3.

¹³ There is also an eschatological aspect involved here, as verse 21 indicates; cf. Mark 13:29; Matthew 24:33; Luke 12:36 and James 5:9 where Christ’s stand at the door is so described.

¹⁴ Wm. Romaine, *The Life, Walk and Triumph of Faith* (rpt. James Clark & Co., 1970), p. 49.

¹⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Warning to the Churches* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 137.