

Church of the Closed Door

Special Delivery – Part X

Revelation 3:14-22

Introduction

If you lived in the cities around the Mediterranean Sea two thousand years ago, and someone told you they were going on a vacation and had found the perfect resort for relaxation in natural hot springs, shopping in designer label stores, gambling in bustling casinos, watching professional sporting events, and attending the theater for award winning plays, you would have immediately known that there was one city like this where you could have it all.

The city was named after the wife of its founding emperor. Her name was Laodice, and the city's name was Laodicea.ⁱ

This city was Las Vegas, Beverley Hills, and Chase Manhattan Bank all rolled into one.

It was not just for Gentiles either. In fact, the Jews in Jerusalem had complained about the number of their kinsmen who had forsaken Palestine for the luxuries and the baths of this region.ⁱⁱ

The Jews of this city had even appealed to the Roman governor for independence to follow their own customs and laws. Their request had been granted.

Laodicea was the garment capitol of the world. The sheep that were bred nearby were renowned for having glossy, black, almost violet-colored wool.ⁱⁱⁱ

So coveted was this, that Laodicean mills produced at least four different kinds of outer garments which were exported all over the world. These were the name brands of the first century.

Laodicea was also a medical center. People flocked to its medical and health resorts to find healing through the latest medical treatments known in that ancient world. Laodicea was crazy about physical fitness.

In addition, this city was also the banking center of Asia Minor. In fact, the citizens of Laodicea were by and large so well off that when an earthquake destroyed some of its buildings, they actually declined an offer from Rome to help rebuild, saying they did not need any assistance.

Laodicea was a wealthy, fashionable, physically fit, established, together city. They did not need help from anyone.

Evidently, they did not think they needed help from God either.

One last time, let us dig into the divine mail bag and pull out the last of seven letters written by Jesus Christ to a church – this time to the church in Laodicea.

Introduction by Christ to the Church in Laodicea

The letter to Laodicea is found in Revelation chapter 3, beginning in verse 14.

And to the angel [messenger] of the church in Laodicea write: "The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation."

Once again, Christ signs His unique signature at the beginning of the letter instead of at the end of the letter. And, once again, these titles are specifically

designated to go along with what Christ is about to reveal.

1. The first descriptive title tells us that Christ is final in His conclusive word.

Jesus calls Himself, first of all,

... the Amen . . .

“Amen” in the Hebrew language is a transliteration of the word for “certainty or truth”.

In the New Testament, the Lord often began by saying, “Verily, verily...,” or literally, “Amen, amen...”. In other words, “What I’m about to say to you is the final word – the word of certainty and truth.”

When you “Amen” a preacher, you are effectively saying, “You’re telling the truth and I’m committed to following it.” So, be careful when you say it.

2. Secondly, Jesus Christ is not only final in His conclusive word, He is faithful in His consistent witness.

Jesus Christ follows His first description with another similar reinforcing title. Notice again, in Revelation 3:14b,

... the faithful and true witness . . .

In other words, “What I’m about to tell you is the truth because I only tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

3. The third and final description that Christ says about Himself is that He is first in His creative work.

Jesus refers to Himself as,

... the beginning of God’s creation.

Sometimes the English translation can be ambiguous enough to mislead the English student reader. The English reader could interpret this that Christ is the beginning of God’s creation in that He was the first created being.

However, the Greek word for “beginning” is the word “arche (αρχη)”. It does not mean Jesus is the first created being, it means He is the source of creation; He is the beginning of creation in the sense that He is the one who began creation. Jesus Christ is the beginning of it because He started it! In Him is the beginning of creation.

Genesis 1:1 says,

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Colossians chapter 1 informs us that it was the Son of God who was actually doing the creating.

Paul writes to the believers in Colossians 1:15,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Christ is the firstborn, or the “prototokos (πρωτοτοκος)”. This word refers to, “the one who is first place; supreme”. In other words, in all of creation, Christ is supremely first.

It is very likely that the false teaching of the Gnostics had impacted the church in Laodicea with their teaching that Christ was a created being – one of many emanations from God. The Gnostics also claimed to have a secret, higher spiritual knowledge than anyone else.^{iv}

I received a ten or twelve page letter, this past week, from someone who was disturbed that I was preaching and teaching the full deity of Jesus Christ. He listed as evidence texts like these, which are studied and easily twisted to prove the view that Christ was a created being; not God, but created by God.

I did not think the writer of this letter would want a Greek lesson in “arche (αρχη)” and “prototokos (πρωτοτοκος)”. His false religion is based on the misinterpretation of English texts.

Let us suppose I am mistaken. If I am wrong about Jesus Christ and He was only one of God’s emanations, like you and me, I am still going to heaven forever. However, if I am right, then all those who deny the sovereign, incarnate deity of Jesus Christ will go to hell forever.

This is that significant!

The Colossian believers were evidently stumbling over the deity and eternity of Christ, along with the Laodiceans. They received their letter from Paul, who told the Colossian believers to pass it on to – guess who? – the church in Laodicea. Paul wrote in Colossians 4:16,

And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans . . .

The Laodiceans need to hear as well that Jesus Christ is the supreme sovereign over all of creation,

For by him all things were created . . . (Colossians 1:16a)

So Jesus Christ is saying to this church in Laodicea, “I am the final word of truth – I am the one who will tell you the whole truth and nothing but the

truth and I am the source of and supremely sovereign over all of My creation.

- I am final in My conclusive word.
- I am faithful in My consistent witness.
- I am first place in My creative work.”

Diagnosis by Christ of the Church in Laodicea

Now, Christ gives the diagnosis of the true condition of the church in Laodicea. Notice Revelation 3:15.

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!

The words Christ uses are opposite extremes – ice cold or boiling hot.

When a little girl was picked up after Sunday school, her mother asked her to recite the verse she had learned. The verse was, “Many are called, but few are chosen.” However, it came out, “Many are cold, and a few are frozen.”

Perhaps this is the way you feel in our church sanctuary. I have had people tell me the room is too cold. My mother-in-law tells me, “Stephen, you could hang meat in there, it’s so cold.”

According to this text, the analogy of being cold or being boiling hot are good things, as opposed to being lukewarm.

This is a reference to something the Laodiceans fully understood. The only downside to this incredible city was that their water had to be brought by aqueduct from Hierapolis, six miles away. By the time the water arrived, it was lukewarm.

Cold water on a hot day is refreshing. Hot water on a cold day is comforting. Lukewarm water on any day is neither comforting nor refreshing.

How do we get lukewarm water out of the tap? Turn on the cold water a little and turn on the hot water a little and we get lukewarm water.^v

“Lukewarm” is a word for compromise. The Laodiceans were in the middle of the road – in their comfort zone; on the fence; in neutral.

Revelation 3:16 says,

So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

Who wants to drink lukewarm water?

When I visited a church in India several years ago, I and a couple other pastors who were with me were honored by being given the only folding chairs

in the church in which to rest. While seated, a young man brought the three of us small bottles of Coca Cola. The believers all stood around and watched as we drank this costly treasure they sacrificed for us. The tough thing for me, in addition to drinking their precious gift, was that the Coke was warm – room temperature. It was anything but refreshing or appealing. If I had been alone, I would have spit it out – it was terrible.

Some churches make the Lord weep; some make Him angry; some make Him grieved – this one made Him sick. Their empty religion nauseated Him.

These believers were self-sufficient, self-enamored, self-absorbed, skin deep, anemic people who had no interest in providing either comfort or refreshment to those around them.

Notice the difference between who they thought they were and who Christ said they were. In Revelation 3:17, He says,

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Underline the words “you say” and “you are” in this verse. Jesus is saying to the Laodiceans, “You say you have everything, but you are spiritually poverty stricken.”

These believers were content to play their little religious games, while the world around them pursued empty dreams.

Even worse, the church in Laodicea was pursuing the same dreams and the same comforts and the same goals and the same toys and the same stuff and the same lifestyles as the citizens around them. The believers were absolutely indistinguishable in their purpose for living and their passion for Christ.

Jesus Christ says to this church, and to any church filled with people playing religious games, “You make Me sick!”

Frankly, I am a little embarrassed that our church adds an extra service on Easter Sunday, which possibly communicates a desire to accommodate the religious game. Listen – the next Sunday there will be another celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Many pastors I know are excited – Easter Sunday is the Sunday when attendance records are broken. I wonder if it is the Sunday when the heart of God is broken.

Is your presence in church on Easter Sunday an indication of your curiosity of the gospel and desire

to hear what we believe? Welcome! We are glad you have come on this Lord's day.

Is your presence in church an indication that you believe God cannot see religious play acting – a lukewarm heart that can take church or leave it; that can take the things of God or leave them? Listen to the warning – stop playing games with God.

Lukewarm Christianity is nauseating to the Savior who gave His all for you and for me.

Evidently, much of the problem in Laodicea, and in our town of Cary, stemmed from their comfortable lifestyle and material wealth.

Laodicea said . . .	Jesus Christ said . . .
"I am rich . . ."	"you are wretched . . ."
"I need nothing . . ."	"you are poverty stricken..."
"I have prospered . . ."	"you are blind . . ."

The church in Laodicea had no vision for the world and no passion for their Lord. And Jesus Christ told these believers the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, "You are blind."

I have two dollars in my hands. If I put them in front of my eyes, you are still out there but I do not see you anymore; the Bible is in front of me but I cannot read it anymore; the world is still out there but I cannot see it anymore.

Two dollars have taken my vision away. How much has it taken to blind you?

This is the diagnosis of the true condition of this church in Laodicea, from the One who has the last word; the One who tells the truth and nothing but the truth, who is indeed sovereign, Lord. This is His diagnosis.

Prescription from Christ for the Church in Laodicea

Now, Christ gives the prescription for the total recovery of the church in Laodicea. This prescription is directly related to three significant elements of the Laodicean culture. These believers would have seized Christ's meaning immediately.

1. **In Revelation 3:18, Christ counsels to,**
. . . buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich . . .

In other words, "You know all about gold – you've stored away your own gold in the bank of Laodicea. What you need is My gold."

The Bible refers often to purified faith as refined gold.^{vi}

You may remember Job saying,

. . . when [God] has tried me, I shall come out as [purified] gold. (Job 23:10b)

Instead of floating downstream in the current of your culture, stand up for the truth – look the trials of faith squarely in the eye.

Peter writes, in I Peter 1:7,

So that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

God says, "Be willing to pay the price for the gold I offer you that comes from tested faith."

I was copied on an email, this past week, from a college student who was asking for prayer for a guy she had known in high school and had run into recently. She writes,

"Back in high school, I made friends with Brian. He was one of several Jehovah's Witnesses in my school. But at first we enjoyed our common sense of humor which built a great friendship. Sadly, he received a lot of pressure to convert me or deny me. Four years ago, he gave me the ultimatum.

"Four years later, he contacted me . . . He said that he had realized that his faith didn't make sense. He no longer accepted that the twelve men that make up the Watchtower Society were, in themselves, the way to salvation. It had concerned him that they banned learning Greek and Hebrew to compare the original translations of the Bible to make sure their version, The New World Translation, was accurate. And most importantly, he refused to accept that the Watchtower Society had more authority than the Bible. He now considers it manipulation and mind control techniques to keep their followers from [thinking for themselves].

"His family has disowned him. His friends won't have anything to do with him. He finds himself more alone than he has been in his whole life, but is very excited about his decision. He is visiting other churches that honor the Bible as the only true authority. His email to me today was full of anticipation of finding a church that gives him a strong support system.

"I find myself in awe of his story. Five years ago, he was the most faithful of Jehovah's Witnesses. To see the change in him despite having lost every person in his life is amazing. There is a joy and light in him that was never there before. His pursuit of Christ and the truth of the Bible has become the most

important thing in his life and he has willingly given up everything. It's true, the Word is alive . . . how great is our God."

Jesus Christ would say, "He has gained everything at the same time."

As with these believers who are counseled in this Revelation verse, "All the gold in Laodicea will one day perish – Mine lasts forever."

2. Christ goes on to counsel the Laodicean believers to not only buy gold refined with fire, but to wear white garments of faithfulness. Notice Revelation 3:18b,

. . . so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen . . .

Jesus Christ says, in effect, "You might be shipping clothing all around the world, but you yourselves are naked."

This symbol of white clothing is used throughout the book of Revelation to speak of the righteous deeds of the saints (Revelation 19:8).

In other words, "The nakedness of your inactivity and passivity and lukewarmness needs to be replaced with the righteous deeds of those who truly belong to Me."

3. At the end of Revelation 3:18c, the Lord counsels the church in Laodicea to pursue one more thing,

. . . salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

I mentioned earlier that Laodicea was famous for its medical centers. They were especially famous for an ointment they had developed for ear problems. But even more, they were famous for their tephra Phrygia – an eye powder that was considered in the ancient world to help weak and ailing eyes. This substance was exported all around their world in tablet form. The tablets were ground into a powder form and mixed with water to make a salve to place upon the eyelids and restore sight.^{vii}

As Jesus had said earlier, "You are known around the world for helping people to see – but you are blind."

"What you need is My eye salve. I will make you capable again of:

- detecting needs;
- discerning opportunities;
- spotting danger;
- identifying godly direction;

- determining pure decisions."

"Come to Me so that I can restore your spiritual sight and your vision for the things of God and the true need of the world."

When the church at Laodicea read this letter, it must have sent them reeling.

Imagine getting a letter from the Lord saying, "You make Me sick – you think you have everything and that God is blessing you, but you are, in reality, poor and naked and blind."

The Laodiceans would have been devastated.

The Lord compassionately reminds them, in Revelation 3:19,

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.

In other words, "Change course, turn around, confess your sinful pride and self-centeredness and arrogance and get moving!"

The Lord is writing to Christians. He is writing to people who had become indistinguishable from the world. They fit in. They related. They never caused anyone any heartburn over the gospel. They did not come across as fanatics for Jesus, yet they did not act like atheists either. Anyone could feel comfortable around them – because they were lukewarm.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."^{viii}

Invitation by Christ to the Church in Laodicea

Finally, notice the kind invitation of the Chief Shepherd, in Revelation 3:20.

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.

This is an invitation first and foremost to the church. This is still a valid church. There is still hope for this church. Though often used as a text for an evangelistic appeal, this is an invitation from Christ to the church to let Him in to fellowship.^{ix}

We talked in our last discussion about the church of the open door. Laodicea was the church of the closed door. They had kept Christ out and He was saying, "Let Me in!"

Notice that Christ is knocking. He does not break the door down. He does not barge in. This is the door of fellowship, my Christian friend. Christ,

- waits for us to wake up in the morning and read His word;
- invites us to pray to Him anytime we want;
- welcomes us to ask Him for wisdom anytime we recognize a need;
- stands ready to offer us help and strength whenever we call;
- is prepared to shoulder the cares of our world if we will cast our cares on Him.

This is the mystery of fellowship with Christ.

He reminds them, and us, of the coming day when we will rule with Christ on the throne (Revelation 3:21).

Conclusion – Two Challenges

Ladies and gentlemen, let me give two final challenges from this letter.

1. **First, do not stop halfway.**

Easter Sunday is a wonderful testimony of Christ who did not stop on our behalf. He went all the way to the cross, all the way through the valley of the shadow of death, all the way to the resurrection and ascension. And He will come back and take us all the way to heaven!

Pick up where you left off and finish the job – finish the task; plug back into that ministry; sign back up; start over again. Do not stop halfway!

2. **Secondly, do not settle for half-hearted.**

There is no place in the Christian life for neutral affections; for coasting.

Daniel Cox, a former jet pilot turned business leader, tells his readers in his book, entitled *Seize the Day*, that when jet fighters were first invented, they flew so much faster than their propeller predecessors

that pilot ejection became a more sophisticated process. Theoretically, of course, all a pilot needed to do was push a button, clear the plane, then roll forward out of the seat so the parachute would open.

However, there was a problem. Some pilots, instead of letting go, would keep a grip on the seat until it was almost too late – terrified by the speed with which they flew through the air, not to mention the G-forces on their bodies.

So, the engineers went back to the drawing board and came up with a solution. The new design called for a two-inch strap. One end attached to the front edge of the seat, under the pilot. The other end attached to an electronic take-up reel behind the headrest. Two seconds after ejection, the electronic take-up reel would take up the slack, and literally force the pilot out of his seat, thus freeing the parachute to open.

The bottom line, Cox wrote, was that fighter pilots needed a device to launch them out of their seats.

The question is, what will it take to launch us out of ours?^x

In the mind of Jesus Christ, it would be the hard-hitting truth of this letter – to the Laodiceans, and to us.

It is a reminder to be zealous for Christ – on a day like Easter Sunday when millions of people will play religious make-believe.

This is His word to all those thinking of stopping halfway; of settling for half-hearted. Discouraged, tempted, disobedient – repent; invite Him in for dinner.

This risen, sovereign Christ condescends to knock on our door. Answer it! Answer it! Do not keep Him out – let Him in! And in the strength of His fellowship, follow Him, and live for Him until one day, we reign with Him – forever.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/23/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ William Barclay, *Revelation: Volume 1* (Westminster, 1976), p. 137.

ⁱⁱ William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (Abington, 1957), p. 92.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ray Stedman, *God's Final Word* (Discovery House, 1991), p. 96.

^{iv} John MacArthur, *Revelation: Volume 1* (Moody Press, 1999), p. 134.

^v Stedman, p. 100.

^{vi} Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation: Volume 1* (Moody Press, 1992), p. 314.

^{vii} Barclay, *Letters*, p. 94.

^{viii} C. S. Lewis, Christian History (65.19.1), p. 27.

^{ix} Edward Hindson, Revelation: Unlocking the Future (AMG Publishers, 2002), p. 50.

^x Danny Cox, Seize the Day (Career Press, 1994).