

THE CHURCH IN AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY (Rev. 3:14-22)

D. A. Carson

The ancient city of Laodicea could be reached by following the Roman postal route about 40 miles SE from Philadelphia. It was built in the third century B.C. by the Seleucid king, Antiochus II, who named it after his wife, Laodice. Located on the floor of the Lycus Valley, the city enjoyed the scenic beauty of the place where the Lycus River joins the Meander River, Mount Cadmus forming the backdrop.

The city of Laodicea enjoyed many natural and commercial advantages. Its fertile valley boasted quality agriculture. In fact, the area became famous for its black wool textile industry, the wool being harvested from a species of sheep still found in the area. Located at a crossroads, the city not only became a trading centre but a large banking centre, the Wall Street of Asia Minor. There was such prosperity that when an earthquake decimated much of the area, this one city, in contrast to its neighbours, actually refused help from the Imperial Government. To this day there are inscriptions, still legible, which tell the world that this citizen or that paid for such and such a building out of his own pocket. As if this were not enough, the city became famous for its medical school, a school which developed a highly prized eyesalve which proved valuable in alleviating various eye ailments.

In Paul's day, the leading pastor in Laodicea was probably Archippus, son of Philemon, who lived in nearby Colossae. We know little of the early history of the church beyond that; but we discover that by the time John wrote the book of Revelation, it had degenerated into a tragic spiritual state. In contrast to the church in Philadelphia, which was poor and small, the Laodician church was large and wealthy; yet the former was spiritual and, in the letter addressed to it from the exalted Christ, unrebuked, while the latter was carnal and uncommended. But before considering the sins of Laodicean believers, note carefully that both the church in Philadelphia and the church in Laodicea were still regarded by the Lord Jesus himself as *bona fide* churches!

I turn, then, to sketching in lightly the main contents of this letter [3.14-21].

(1) *The self-introduction of the Saviour*, 3.14. The risen and exalted Jesus introduces himself to the church in two main thrusts. (a) He is the 'Amen, the faithful and true witness'. John's Gospel shows Jesus Christ to be the witness, faithful and true, who testifies to what God is like,

precisely because he is God and the God man who truly reveals him. II Corinthians 1.20 pictures Jesus as the 'Amen', the one who ensures that all of God's promises are fulfilled, because he is himself their sum and substance. But perhaps here in Revelation 3.14, the significance of these christological titles is slanted in a different direction. Jesus Christ is the witness whose truth and faithfulness stand in marked contrast to the faithlessness and deceit of the Laodicean church. Christ must be true: he cannot deny himself. This fidelity both shames and threatens the church.

Moreover, (b) Jesus is the 'ruler of God's creation' (so the NIV, which I am citing. The KJV has 'the beginning of the creation of God', because the Greek word for 'ruler' can also mean 'beginning'. The context shows that 'ruler' is certainly the correct translation). The Laodiceans were gross materialists; and gross materialists need to be reminded that Jesus is the ruler of creation, and not just of some ethereal spiritual realm. In modern terms, Jesus is the ruler of our money, our homes, our furniture, our cars, our hobbies; and he expects us to treat these many gifts responsibly, remembering that he is the ruler of all creation. God forbid that we should attempt to fence Christ's lordship into the enclosure of the 'merely' spiritual.

(2) *The indictment*, 3.15, 17. 'I know your deeds', Jesus says, 'that you are neither cold nor hot'. This church is not accused of immorality, apostasy, heresy, schism, idolatry, or bitterness; yet it receives an indictment no less damning. It is lukewarm.

Just what is meant by this charge? The Laodiceans themselves would understand, because the charge reflected the physical experience of everyone in the city. The city's one major problem was its water supply. The Lycus and Meander rivers were too dirty; and most springs in the area are hot springs, full of gases and other chemicals. Yet that is what the Laodiceans had to use – water from hot springs, piped in from some distance through twin lines of stone pipe (the remains of which can still be seen) to a locally built water tower. The water carried by those pipes was so charged with impurities that it dropped much of its load in flow; the calcium carbonate gradually clogging the pipes. And yet, when the water arrived in the homes of the city, it was still only barely drinkable. It was lukewarm, nauseous, tepid, rather disgusting.

At nearby Colossae there was fresh, cold water, from the only good spring in the valley. Closer yet, Hierapolis boasted hot water, excellent for medical baths and pools. But Laodicea enjoyed neither the hot nor the cold; it endured the lukewarm, the nauseous.

This, then, is the background of the language the Saviour chose to use. I do not think he is saying they are spiritually lukewarm – that is, with

some life, but not much; with some fervency, but only a little; with some love for truth, but little industry. Rather, he is using language everyone in the Lycus Valley would understand, to tell the church that he found them disgusting and nauseous. This church was neither refreshingly pleasant, like the cool, clear waters of Colossae, nor wholesome and healing, like the Hierapolis hot springs. Rather, it was so nauseous the Lord could only just barely put up with it [3.16]. That is why Jesus says he wishes they were either hot or cold [3.15]. He is not saying that spiritual coldness is necessarily to be preferred to spiritual lukewarmness. Such an interpretation confuses the symbol with what is symbolized.

What, then, is the content behind the Laodicean church's 'lukewarmness'? The answer is provided for us in 3.18. Jesus says, 'You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing". But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked'. In a word, the sin of this church is *complacent self-sufficiency*. The church had adopted the attitude of the city after the earthquake: 'I can look after myself, thank you very much'. There is no poverty of spirit, no self-contrition, no brokenness, no meekness. They think they are rich, both materially (like the rich fool of Luke 12.19-21), and spiritually. Yet the tragedy, and the spiritual repulsiveness, lies in their self-delusion.

Jesus says they are poor, spiritually bankrupt – in a city proverbial for its wealth. Jesus says they are blind, devoid of spiritual vision – in a city renowned for its Phrygian eyesalve. Jesus says they are naked, spiritually shamed, wearing nothing but the rags of self-righteousness – in a city famous for its textile industry. Yet more ugly than any of these ironies is the greatest irony of all: this church is blissfully unaware of its poverty, its blindness, and its nakedness. There was an unbridgeable abyss between what Christ thought of them, and what they thought of themselves. This is the content of the Laodiceans' 'lukewarmness'.

How careful must we be not to put the cheat upon our own souls! Are the churches of which we form a part havens for a kind of spiritual arrogance which displaces poverty of spirit? Is western evangelicalism self-complacent? When we by God's grace enjoy some small victory, are we guilty of an ugly triumphalism? Have you detected any spiritual meekness on most of the evangelical TV programmes which fill our screens in North America, or do you find a preponderance of Madison Avenue veneer?

But let me not point a finger only at large institutions, and visible, organized religion. Let me rather address myself. Am I so satisfied with my spiritual state that I feel no need to wait on my heavenly Father in self-abasing prayer? Does my self-assessment before the glare of God's Word incite me to study the Scriptures more diligently, witness more

faithfully, praise more devoutly, obey more whole-heartedly, than ever before? Or do I secretly think of myself as a remarkably spiritual chap, certainly a cut or two above my peers?

(3) *The threat*, 3.16. 'So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth'. Can this be true? Is this the same Jesus of whom it is said that he loved the church and gave himself for her?

Yes, this is the same Jesus. God has always revealed himself as God of all justice as well as God of all mercy; and if judgment must begin, it will begin with the house of God, with his own people. Here the exalted Christ says that the Laodiceans' 'lukewarmness' is as nauseating to him as the lukewarmness of the city water supply is to them. In non-metaphorical language, their self-sufficiency, their self-complacency, is simply disgusting to him. How could it be otherwise? He is the one who suffered for them, whose redemptive work effected the Father's saving purposes, who 'fleshed out' the very meaning of grace. Self-complacency in the light of Calvary love is revolting, repulsive, nauseous. The church which sinks to such depths will no longer find itself cherished and nourished, but spat out from the Saviour's mouth in disgust and revulsion.

(4) *The remedy*, 3.18f. The remedy comes in two parts. (a) First, the Lord counsels the church to buy from him gold refined in the fire, white clothes to wear, and eyesalve which gives true sight. Yet this counsel, like the indictment, is also full of irony, for the church is told to 'buy' these things. How can a church which Jesus himself has just analyzed to be bankrupt buy anything? In truth, it cannot – except in the sense that the Jews of old were encouraged by Jehovah to 'buy' wine and milk without money and without price [*Isa 55.1f.*]. The Laodicean believers cannot buy the Lord's proffered gifts with their wealth; but because the Lord has purchased their redemption for them with his own blood, they can lay hold of the riches he proffers. The price has been paid; the 'buying' has been done for them, and this ironical expression forces them to recognize this most basic of Christian truths.

What, then, shall they gain from this purchase? They shall not acquire more gold coin, but the gold that only Christ can give, the gold refined in the fire, the gold of a regenerated spirit plunging onward to new lengths of purity and sanctification. Here is true wealth, treasure laid up in heaven. They shall not don the black overcoats of the local textile industry, but white clothes, the symbol of holiness without which no man shall see the Lord, and the perfect cover for their shame. They shall not gain some special medicine, formulated by ancient ophthalmologists from dried madder root; no, they shall be anointed with spiritual eyesalve which will open the eyes of their understanding and enable them to behold

wonderful things in the Scriptures, to see all of reality from the perspective of the divine throne-room, to adopt the far-seeing vision of the spiritual giants who endure because they see the invisible, and adopt the values of their exalted Lord. These are riches worth pursuing, the only riches worth pursuing.

(b) The second part of the remedy is this: 'Be earnest, and repent'. The Laodicean believers were to repent of their self-complacency. Not only must one repent of sinful deeds; one must repent of sinful attitudes. To repent when one is self-complacent about holy things will engender earnestness. That is why, in the case of this particular sin, the command to be earnest and the command to repent are virtually one.

The Lord Jesus separates the two elements of the remedy by a quiet claim, the ultimate reason why that remedy is to be avidly pursued: 'Those whom I love', he says, 'I rebuke and discipline'. Unbelievers he may pass over in silence until the day of judgment; but he who saves from sin can scarcely be silent when those whom he has saved return to wallow in sin. It is a mark of the Saviour's love for his own that he rebukes them and punishes them, refusing to let them go too far. As a father disciplines the children he loves, so Christ Jesus, than whom no one loves more, disciplines his own people.

(5) *Invitation to the church, and to Christians in the church*, 3.20. The gross sin of the Laodicean church was its self-complacency, a form of self-reliance which felt no need for the presence of the Saviour. True repentance in their case will prompt them to long for him. Let all other riches vanish, but let him be present. And therefore he offers himself to them: 'Here I am! I 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.'

All of these seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3 were in the first instance sent to local *churches* [cf. 1.11]. Therefore this invitation in 3.20 is first of all designed to stir up the Laodicean *church* to prompt her to seek warm fellowship with her professed Lord. But the invitation goes beyond that. Commands to an entire church might escape the notice of the self-complacent *individual*; and in any case the individual believer is bound by covenant love to obey the commands of his Master regardless of what his local church does. For these twin reasons, Jesus goes on to individualize his invitation: 'If *anyone* hears my voice . . .' In fact, this individualizing is found in each of the seven letters, lest any Christian forget that each one is individually responsible for himself and also, as much as lies within him, for what the church is. One repeated line in these chapters confirms what I say: '*He* who has an ear, let *him* hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*'. Reformation begins with me.

(6) *Promise to overcomers*, 3.21. 'To him who overcomes, I will give

the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne'. What intrigues me most about this verse is that the Lord Jesus Christ himself calls obedient discipleship in an affluent society 'overcoming' Christianity. To overcome sometimes conjures up faithfulness under the pressure of persecution, heroic confessions as the torture pyres burn, exalted selflessness when everything material, and even health, are stripped away. But most of us in the western world are not called upon to 'overcome' in these ways; yet this does not mean we are exempt from the responsibility to 'overcome'.

In what, then, does overcoming consist? Just this: we, like the Laodiceans, must fight victoriously against the temptation to let *our* world squeeze us into its mould. Our affluent society encourages self-reliance, self-complacency, triumphalism, and various forms of showy externalism. For the Christian to overcome in this setting may well take all the spiritual reserves which might be called up in a more openly antagonistic society. To grow spiritually, to obey faithfully, to develop poverty of spirit, is to overcome in our settings. And it is the overcomers who share Christ's reign in the new heaven and the new earth.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
