



To the Church in Laodicea

Revelation 3:14-22

How can we immerse ourselves in the culture of the place where we live, without becoming overwhelmed by it and thereby losing the distinctiveness we need to witness faithfully to Jesus? This is the challenge which has faced the church in every place and generation, the difference, in a memorable image conjured up by Martin Luther King, between being 'a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion' and 'a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.'¹

This appears to be one of the problems which is facing the Church in Laodicea. The city was famous for its wealth, based on its status as the banking centre of the region. It was also well-known for the fashionable black wool which came from a breed of sheep developed by local farmers and for a medical school which specialised in ophthalmology, the treatment of eyesight problems.

Such was the wealth of the city that when it was virtually destroyed by an earthquake in AD60, it had no need to appeal to Rome for financial aid. Instead, the citizens of Laodicea rebuilt it with their own money. But could it be that such financial independence produced a smugness and self-satisfaction which rubbed off on the local church? That might explain Jesus' words of rebuke which we find in verse 17: 'You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' However, he punctures any sense of pride they might have with a stark description of their true spiritual condition. 'But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.' In contrast to the surrounding Roman and Greek culture, Jews considered nakedness to be a reason for shame and also a symbol of God's judgement (see Isa 20:1-4; Ezek 16:36 and 23:10). To cover this nakedness, Jesus offers 'white clothes,' a symbol of righteousness referred to on numerous occasions in Revelation (3:4,5; 6:11; 7:9; 19:14). He also holds out the possibility of 'salve to put on your eyes,' undoubtedly an image which would have resonated with the Laodiceans, given the presence of eye specialists in the city. Tom Wright notes that, 'Laodicea was a good place to get hold of a particularly popular Phrygian eye-powder.'²

Wealth is not the only issue which is addressed in this letter. Jesus also memorably speaks of the church in Laodicea as being 'lukewarm,' another description which drew upon issues experienced by those who lived in the city. There was no adequate supply of water to Laodicea. Some water was taken from a hot spring five miles away, but by the time it arrived in Laodicea it had cooled off and tasted only of mineral deposits. Alternatively, cool water could be pumped from Colossae, 11 miles

¹ Martin Luther King, 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,' available at: https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf

² Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, 2011, 37

away, but it was warm upon arrival in Laodicea. For all its wealth, the city was known for its undrinkable water. As Grant Osborne notes, 'As such, it provided a perfect metaphor for the shallowness of the church: beautiful outwardly and sickening inwardly! The exalted Christ is challenging them with a powerful rhetorical question, "Don't you realise that you make me sick?"'³

This final letter to Laodicea is one of the hardest hitting of any of those which are sent to the seven churches. And yet it also contains what is possibly the most gentle and evocative image of Jesus, Lord of the Church, who longs to be welcomed in by his people so that they can know what it is to have fellowship with him and eat at his table. As Grant Osborne has noted, 'The picture of Christ standing at the door and knocking may reflect Song 5:2, where the beloved says, "Listen! My lover is knocking; 'Open to me, my darling.'" Christ's compassion is nowhere better exemplified than in this image of him as a loving visitor seeking admittance to one's home.'⁴

1. Amongst other things, this passage is famous for its description of the Laodicean church as 'lukewarm,' a condition which appears to be appal Jesus, who says, 'I wish you were either cold or hot.' Why do you think mediocrity is so disappointing to God?
2. What experiences have you had of worshipping in churches with little money and churches with significant financial resources at their disposal? Can you think of ways in which churches who are wealthier somehow end up missing out on things God wants to give them?
3. Verse 19 speaks of the love of Jesus, but also the demands which emerge out of the love he has for his church? What do you think it looks like, in practice, for a church to 'be earnest and repent'?
4. The church in Laodicea appears to be one which is in a more perilous place than any other described in these letters, given that no word of commendation is offered to it. And yet the same church is offered the memorable and moving picture of Jesus who wants to come in and eat with his followers. As Tom Wright notes, 'Strange, perhaps, that the one church that was in real trouble drew from the Lord the most intimate and loving response.'⁵ What can we learn from the fact that the church which is so disappointing to Jesus is also the one he wants to draw closer to?
5. We are now at the end of our studies on these Seven Letters to the Churches. As you look back on the words of encouragement and correction which we find here, are there any which strike you as being particularly relevant to our situation in SBC?

³ Grant Osborne, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation*, 2002, 206

⁴ Grant Osborne, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation*, 2002, 212

⁵ Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, 2011, 39