

"The Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Ruler of God's Creation": Understanding Christ's remedy for the lukewarm state of the Church in Laodicea

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14 "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. 15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16 So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 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. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. 19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. 21 To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 3: 14-22).

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1. INTRODUCTION

The church in Laodicea is one of the churches in Asia Minor that received a personal letter from Christ through the Patmos prophet John. The church appears as the only church without a commendation from Christ. During the time of the writing of the book of Revelation, the church had developed a syndrome known as lukewarm (neither cold nor hot). It seemed the church had lost its Christlikeness as a result of complacency. This spiritual nature of the church was unacceptable by Christ. It made Him sick. Laodicea received a harsh and unpleasant rebuke from Christ. Christ also appealed to the church to repent (v. 19-20). The destiny of the church was put on a conditional judgment, thus repentance, and a great promise of an exalted position with Christ (v. 21). How do we understand the nature of the Laodicea church? And how does this understanding affect our lives today as a church?

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE LAODICEA CITY

Before the third century BC the name was called Diospolis (the city of Zeus). Antiochus II[1] refounded it about 250-240 B.C. as a military stronghold and named it for his sister-wife Laodice [Laodike].

After the Romans conquered the region, Laodicea became a

wealthy city within the province. It was a commercial center for banking and finance. During the reign of emperors Tiberius and Nero, the city suffered severe damage from earthquakes. However, the city was able to rebuild without any imperial or provincial help (Sherman, 1950: 8). Tacitus wrote in his Annals, "In the same year, Laodicea, one of the famous Asiatic cities, was laid in ruins by an earthquake, but recovered by its own resources, without assistance from ourselves" (Tacitus, Annals 14: 27).

Notable of fabric industry: The city was famous of its black glossy wool, which accrued a great wealth for the city. It dominated the fabric industry in the region. Laodicea was tolerable to religious liberty. Josephus recalls how the Laodiceans sent a letter to Gaius Rabirius, proconsul of Asia, "informing him that in obedience to his command they will permit the Jews to keep the Sabbath and their sacred rites and that the Jews will be regarded as their friends and confederates (Ant. xiv. 10. 20)" (Sherman, 1950: 8).

Laodicea had a medical college. The school was expert in using spikenard, an aromatic plant, to enhance hearing abilities. It was also notable of manufacturing eye powder (ointment) from Phrygian stones to cure astigmatism[2]. The Greek term kollarion may denote a cylindrical collyrium. Two of its famous physicians, Zeuxis and Alexander Philaethes, names appeared

on the coins of the city.

Laodicea was dependent on an external water supply. The city didn't have any cold spring water of its own. The temperature of the water supply was tepid (lukewarm). Porter says, "Since the Laodiceans had no natural springs for fresh water or at least not enough for their growing population, they likely were forced to pipe in whatever water they could. And this water was probably transported to them lukewarm from the outset" (Porter, 1987: 147). From archeological records, Laodicea constructed a water tower that stored water through an aqueduct "The water may have come from hot springs, of which there are many in the neighborhood, and have been cooled down to lukewarmness; but even if it was originally cold, the heat of the sun no doubt warmed it until it was flat and unpalatable" (Sherman, 1950: 11). The great expense of their engineering skills only brought them lukewarm water. The lukewarm water of Laodicea was neither cold for drinking (like the springs of Colosse) nor hot (like the hot medicinal spring of Hierapolis) for bathing. It was unsatisfactory for drinking and nauseating to the stomach. In other words, the lukewarm water was not a genuine drinking water.

The historiographical sketch of Laodicea provides a good lens for understanding the metaphorical description of the church in Laodicea (Rev 3, 14-22).

3. COMMENTARY ON REVELATION 3, 14-22

- v. 14 Christ introduces himself as the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. This introduction defines what Christ wants the church to become. It is the clear image of Christ that defines how the church will relate to Him. Amen signifies "truth" (Isa 65, 16), and we say Amen to invoke certainty "so it be" (2 Cor 1: 18-20). If Laodicea could see Christ in this light, their predicament would be cured.
- v. 15 "I know your deeds"—It is Christ who does the scrutiny. He walks in the church (Rev. 1: 13, 20) and thus examines the church to point out its true nature. The defective nature of the Laodiceans could not pass over without Christ's notice. Christ is the true witness of our nature.
- v. 15a The metaphor of water temperatures (cold, hot, and lukewarm) is used to measure the spiritual state of the Laodicea church. The church needed one state of identity, i.e. either cold or hot. It is only one of these states that the church could be useful to Christ. The church is not accused of any immorality.
- v. 16a The church is neither cold nor hot. It is lukewarm. This may suggest how the majority of the church members have become lukewarm. Lukewarm water is a mixture of cold and hot water. The church has lost a single identity. Her identity is compromised. She now bears a double personality.
- v. 16b Lukewarm water is unsatisfactory and nauseating. The water metaphor in the text is a drinking water. Like in the city of Laodicea, the only drinkable water was the pipeline lukewarm water. The Laodiceans had no other choice than to get used to poor drinking water despite all their riches. The church in Laodicea is figured as lukewarm water in the stomach of Christ and its nauseating effect is making Him sick. Lukewarm attitude makes Christ sick!
- v. 17a Nevertheless, Laodicea has created an honorable image for herself. Her riches seem to make her safe and comfortable. Christ remarked, "You say" (v. 17a) in contrast to "You are" (v. 17b). The Laodicea church was bragging and priding in her artificial self-made character.
- v. 17b Christ, the true witness of the churches, now points out the skeleton in the closet. Laodicea is embarrassed by her true nature: "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (v. 17). After all Laodicea is not what it claims to be, she is **HYPOCRITE!** [Compare the state of Laodicea with Matt. 23, 13-32].
- v. 18 Christ offers corrective measures to restore the true riches of the Laodicea church. Laodicea needed a true business partner. They were to use their riches to buy expensive but quality products. Only Christ possessed these products. Refined gold (1 Pet 1, 7) to cure their poverty, white clothing (Rev. 19, 8) to solve their shameful nakedness, and eye salve (Lk 4, 18; Jn 9, 6-7) to cure their astigmatism. The church in Laodicea needed Christ to help them out. It is very obvious that the Christ-walk is an expensive walk. It has no room for compromise, either you are "Yes" or "No".
- v. 19 Christ makes an appeal for repentance. Laodicea needed a disciplinary love (Heb. 12, 6). Christ's sharp rebuke was to arouse their need for change to accept His offers. Repentance is always a call to accept Christ's gift of salvation. Laodicea needed to take a stand with Christ in a relationship.
- v. 20 Therefore, Christ knocks at the door. Christ is supposed to be inside with the church, how did He become an outsider? The church had kicked Christ out because of their lukewarm attitude! He has become "the stranger at the door". Yet, Christ persists to have a communion with the church. He wants to feast with them. It is only the presence of Christ that can resolve the lukewarm attitude.
- v. 21 There is an exalted position for the Laodiceans should they overcome their hypocrisy. The ruler of the creation of God will rule with the overcomers. The future of Laodicea is so glorious.
- v. 22 No matter how deep the fall of the Laodicea church has been, the Spirit speaks to the hearts to reconcile the church to Christ.

The Laodicea church is identified as the lukewarm church. A church that is complacent, boastful and hypocrite. Christ identifies Himself to the church as Amen, the faithful and true witness, and ruler of God's creation. Laodicea is however called to step outside her lukewarm to have a communion with Christ. The message to the Laodicea church is so relevant, especially in today's Christian experience where many seem to be affected with the lukewarm attitude. The letter to the Laodicea church is a call for reformation and revival. If the Laodicea church could identify themselves with Christ as the Amen, in whom is only "Yes" "Yes", the church would have taken a strong position with Christ without any compromise. Hypocrisy is a compromised life without Christ! The good news is that Christ is a savior who knocks at our heart doors. Why not open Him today?

4. REFERENCES

- 1 Antiochus II Theos was a Greek king of the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire who reigned from 261 to 246 BC. He succeeded his father Antiochus I Soter in the winter of 262–61 BC (Wikipedia).
- 2 “Astigmatism is a common and usually minor eye condition that causes blurred or distorted vision” (www.nhs.uk).

5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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