

Laodicea—The Apathetic, Pathetic Church

By Gerald E. Cumby

It is most disturbing to the person who tries to live life according to the precepts and moral values set out in the Word of God and who genuinely understands God's grace to see a "so called" Christian person or church that represents God in an unholy, ungodly way. The Church at Laodicea (as a body) appeared to be the worst example of God's grace than all other churches mentioned in God's word.

The spiritual state of the church of Laodicea is not only disturbing to the Christian who reads of this pathetic condition that this church was in, but also to the Lord Jesus Himself (Revelation 3:14-19). We, of course, are disturbed by it because the description depicted in Scripture concerning this church is true of many, if not a majority of the churches today. "Spiritual uselessness" of a person or church is bad enough, but when the character of a church reflects on a community in an ungodly way, the reputation of all churches in the area, if not world-wide, suffer and are reviled.

To realize and understand why the Lord Jesus was so upset and disappointed with the church at Laodicea, we need to understand the background of the church and its past. In the ancient world there were at least six cities called Laodicea. This Laodicea was located in Asia Minor (presently Turkey) on the banks of the Lycus River Valley about 40 miles east of Ephesus and was called Leodicea on the Lycus (to distinguish it from the others). *This city was colonized between 261 and 246 B.C. by King Antiochus II of Syria. He named the city after his wife, Laodice. The ironic thing about this is that he later divorced her. She retaliated by poisoning him resulting in his death.*¹

By the first century A.D., Greeks, Syrians, and Romans lived in Laodicea. There was also a large Jewish population that faithfully sent a tribute of 20 pounds of gold to Jerusalem. Many Jewish converts to Christianity were living in the community. No early manuscripts or

¹ Israel My Glory (magazine); Danger—Lukewarmness Ahead, Ministry of the Friends of Israel Ministry, Inc., July/August 2006, page 32.

writings give any indication that the Apostle Paul ever visited Laodicea. However, Epaphras, a fellow worker of Paul, may have been the founder of the church there (Colossians 4:12-13).

The city's importance was due entirely to its position. The road from Ephesus to the east and to Syria was the most important in Asia. It began at the coast at Ephesus and it had to find a way to climb up to the central plateau 8,500 feet up. The road set out along the valley of the River Maeander until it reached what, at that time, was known as the Gates of Phrygia. Beyond this point lay a broad valley in which the river ran through a narrow gorge that hindered the construction of any road. Therefore, the road detoured through the Lycus Valley and in the valley stood Laodicea.

Due to the fact that all travelers and commercial entities from and to Ephesus and Syria had to travel through this city, it was one of the great commercial centers of the world. Due to its strategic trade-route location, the city was quite prosperous and well-known as the center for commercial activities in the region. With this in mind, it is noteworthy to know that the Laodiceans took advantage of the fertile ground of the valley and bred a special sheep that produced a fine, soft and glossy black wool that was widely sought and distributed all over the ancient world. A renowned medical school was located in Laodicea. The founder of the school, Herophilos, and the city physicians came up with a combination of medications that was an ear ointment made from spice nard and an eye salve made from Phrygian stones. The stones were ground up to powder which was mixed with oil producing a well-known eye balm that was distributed throughout the Greek and Roman world. With so much wealth pouring into Laodicea, one of the most noted banks in the Greek and Roman world was located there.

Materially speaking, the Laodiceans were comfortable, satisfied, and very prosperous.

However, Laodicea had a major weakness. It had an over-abundance of lukewarm water of which was unusable for anything other than inducing a regurgitating process (vomiting). The lukewarm water came from a mixture of hot water from nearby Hierapolis (about 6 miles North from Laodicea) and cold water piped in to Colossae (about 10 miles from Laodicea). The mixed water would spill over a mile long cliff that dropped 300 feet down onto the level of Laodicea. By the time it reached Laodicea, the water was tepid (neither cold nor hot) and filled

with minerals picked up from the calcium carbonate that covered the cliff. The cliff was covered with a white encrustation. This lukewarm water was unsuitable to drink. The Lord used clear, strong language when He used Laodicea's useless water supply to describe its spiritual weakness and Laodicea's useless and putrefying qualities that literally made Him sick (Revelation 3:15-16).

The main issue Jesus had against this church was that it was lukewarm. However, with this ungodly quality of a church, there probably were many faithless and immoral actions in the church (not supported with scripture). The old graphic expression "to straddle the fence" means to be neutral, undecided, or uncommitted. The Laodicean Church's complacency and indifference to Christ and the Word of God rendered them ineffective to heal the brokenhearted or refresh the hurting people in the community.

Today the "straddling the fence" form of devotion still turns God's stomach. Imagine where Israel would have been had Joshua, the great warrior leader, had been lukewarm about his commission to claim the Promised Land. He would not have said to Israel,

"And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15).

Jesus Himself explained why straddling the fence does not work:

"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (i.e. riches, money, possessions, etc.)" (Matthew 6:24).

With God, a lukewarm attitude toward Him or His teachings is unacceptable.

The Laodiceans thought they were secure in their affluence, but Jesus said they were actually poor. In Revelations 3:17, the word for "poor" actually means to "cringe as a beggar" (Greek).² Their excessive trust in money, prestige, pleasure and riches left them as a beggar and

² Ibid, page 33.

impoverished before God. They were blind, self-deluded, wretched, and most miserable. With a Godhead that cringes at piety and worldliness, the situation with the Laodiceans would certainly make the Perfect and Righteous Son of God ill at His stomach and desire to “spit out” that which was impossible to swallow. Sin is sickening and it should cause the children of God to regurgitate and throw out the impurity of ungodly actions.

Paul was very quick to warn the followers of Christ to not be haughty when rich in this present age, nor to trust in uncertain riches....but to have faith in the Living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. (1 Timothy 6:17).

The Church at Laodicea, of all the seven Churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3, was most unsparingly condemned. Not only condemned, but there was no redeeming feature. In a 3rd century work, The Apostolic Constitutions (8:46) says that Archippus was the first Bishop of the Church in Laodicea. When Paul was writing to the neighboring Church of Colossae, he says sternly: “Say to Archippus, see that you fulfil the ministry which you have received in the Lord” (Colossians 4:17). *It would seem that Archippus might have already been failing in his duty. Paul was writing about thirty years before the Revelation was written; but it may be that as long ago as that the rot had set in the Church in Laodicea and an unsatisfactory ministry had sown the seeds of degeneration.*³

One of the modern day theologians and well known writers of today comments concerning the Church at Laodicea, “*the four things the Lord Jesus counseled the Church to do were all part of the salvation experience. This indicates that this was not a born-again church.*”⁴ Although this is not what most theologians think concerning this Church that was so rebuked by the Lord Jesus, it is a possibility that needs to be addressed.

The one attitude which the Risen Christ Jesus unsparingly condemns is indifference. It has been said of an author of a biography that he can write a good one if he loves his subject or hates him, but not if he is coldly or awkwardly indifferent. Of all things, indifference is the

³ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John (volume 1)*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, page 140.

⁴ Tim Lahay, *Revelation Illustrated and Made Plain*, Lamplighter Books, Zondervan Publishing; Grand Rapids, Michigan, page 64.

hardest to combat. The problem of modern evangelism is not hostility to Christianity (It probably would be better if it were so). The real problem seems to lie in the fact that Christianity and the Church have somewhat ceased to have any relevance and men regard them with complete indifference. After theologians and great Christian leaders have broken down the “indifference” problem, they must conclude that Christianity can be actually demonstrated only by the fact that *Christianity is a power to make life strong and a grace to make life beautiful.*⁵

There is another attitude that the Church at Laodicea evidently had; that was a haughty attitude that left one feeling that the Church members were less than zealous to see the lost come to know the Risen Savior. They were satisfied with the worldly lifestyle and all the “things” that their possessions achieved for them (*Because you say, ‘I am rich and I have acquired riches, and I am in need of nothing’...Rev. 3:17*). It is always a stench in the nostrils of God for one to think more of himself than others, to believe that what they have achieved is self-gained, and that money earned can purchase those things that make one happy. The Risen Christ (The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the Creation of God) is reprimanding and strongly condemning the Church for their unworthy, ungodly, unholy and pitiful attitude. The Lord Jesus was adamant in telling them that they were “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (v. 17).

Wretched is a strong word to use for a Church as a whole. Wretched means “unsatisfactory; despicable.” Miserable is defined as “unpleasant, inadequate, and disapproved.” Poor, in this sense, is defined as “barren, sterile, lacking in productivity and excellence.” Blind simply means that “they can’t see beyond themselves” or “lacking in insight or understanding.” They cannot see for they are “without the power of sight.” Naked sums up the adjectives that characterize the Church at Laodicea. Naked one comes into the world and naked we go out (we don’t take possessions with us when we depart this world). However, the Church at Laodicea was more than completely uncovered and exposed, they were “invalid and lacked a necessary condition for worthiness” (Webster: definition, naked, #6). In short, Christ Jesus was exposing the Church at Laodicea for what it was. It was a Church that was invalid (having no force; null and void). This Church had lost its validity as a Church of the Living God, or possibly never had

⁵ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, Page 142.

it. It had succumbed to the world values and had not held on to the firm foundation of Christ. While holding on to empty things of the world, they lost their grip on their identity with Christ. They were deemed “null and void” as to being a faithful witness for Christ. They “had no force” which means that they had lost or never appropriated the power of the Holy Spirit as they failed to recognize that without the Holy Spirit, they (individuals or churches) are not one of God’s children (Romans 8:9).

Jesus, the Risen Christ, advises the Church to purchase from the Lord the finest thing that He had to offer...purity and righteousness (His gold that had been refined by fire). One might imagine that if all the treasures of the Laodiceans could be accumulated in one massive heap, it could not purchase what Jesus had to offer. Jesus was not speaking of a precious metal. He was speaking of the finest treasure that could be offered by the richest King; the treasure of God’s Son and the clothing of righteousness given to the individual that humbles himself, falling to his knees....and giving up and giving in to the one who gives the greatest gift ever given, the gift of eternal life. Is it not ironic that man seems to thrive on getting and God seems to thrive on giving?

Eternal riches cannot be appropriated through material possessions or by purchasing anything. Salvation is a gift given, not a gift taken. Eternal riches from Christ are appropriated by the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and are available by faith. Grace for the sinner and grace for the Church at Laodicea is available as it is for others that have made that confession and humbling experience at the foot of the cross. In 1 Peter 1:7, the writer indicates that “the trial of your faith” is more precious than gold. Again, the church that was declared poor and wretched is asked to buy something. This is difficult to understand for the unbeliever. The One that “owns the cattle on a thousand hills”, however, is not interested in selling His fortune, but He is interested in giving the most precious gift away.

Besides counseling the church at Laodicea to buy His gold, the Risen Christ, secondly advises them to buy from Him white raiment. The white raiment refers to the white raiment mentioned in Revelation 3:5 (righteousness) which is required in order to come into the presence of God. The Son of God knew their nakedness and their need for the “white raiment” that

represents righteousness. Righteousness is imputed to men when they “call upon the name of the Lord” and are saved. The Old Testament speaks of “garments of salvation” and a “robe of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:10) which a bride and groom would wear; all the more reason that this church might have lacked salvation, not just a falling away experience of apathy. The church member in Laodicea was quite aware of what the Lord was advising them to do; for they were the ones getting materially wealthy over selling the black wool from the livestock in and around Laodicea.

The third thing that Jesus counseled them to do is to purchase eye salve and “anoint thine eyes with salve, that thou mayest see.” Spiritual illumination is only received through Salvation. No matter how intelligent, brilliant and well-known in the circles of the world (in the flesh), unless the individual is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ Jesus, he will never understand the ways of God. 1 Corinthians 2:14 reminds us that “...*the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God: because they are foolishness unto him...neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*” This hit home with the Laodiceans in that many of the citizens of Laodicea and probably members of the Church had become monetarily rich by selling the eye salve that was manufactured in Laodicea and distributed all over the world. The Lord Jesus emphatically condemned the church for their lack of “insight” into what is holy to the Lord, what is not “seen” by the church as a requirement for salvation, and for their “blind” outlook on what the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ should be doing for the cause of Christ. God’s remedy for spiritual blindness is the healing touch of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 20:34).

The fourth thing in which the Lord counseled of the church at Laodicea was for them to “*be zealous (eager) to repent.*” This lukewarm, materialistic, indifferent, proud and haughty church was challenged by “the faithful and true witness” to repent of their sins and turn to Him. Even in their pitiful state He was challenging them on the basis of His love for them. It is quite refreshing to know that “*even when we were sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8).

Jesus disdained the Laodiceans’ lack of usefulness and fruitfulness. This church or any church as well as individual believers must constantly guard against this alarming disposition. *When we sense that our devotion and love for Christ becomes a shallow, religious pastime rather*

*than a passion of heart, mind, and soul, then beware.*⁶ Beware is not strong enough of a word to turn us around. Red lights and loud sirens should go off in our spiritual alarm system. The Holy Spirit, if He is residing in our lives, should immediately quicken our spirit man and expediently (if not more emphatically) and assuredly shake us until we repent and confess our sin of apathy and indifference. When the Holy Spirit resides in our lives, confession of our sins brings forgiveness immediately in that the Word clearly states that we are to “confess our sins and He is faithful to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). *“It is not appropriate or biblical to ask for forgiveness of sins once we have obtained the righteousness of Christ; all we need is to confess our sins because we are already forgiven of them.”*⁷

Laodicea was a proud and esteemed city by the world of that day. The church fell into the same mind-set of the world; that of thinking “you only get what you pay for...therefore, get all you can as fast as you can.” Paul, the Apostle, stated in Romans 12:2, “...be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind; so you may prove what is that good, acceptable, and perfect will of God.” It seems that this shallow, unbiblical, exposed church of Laodicea was yielding to the ways of the world and not keeping their eyes focused on the One that made its existence possible. If the church was ever any profit to the Kingdom of God, they had lost their saltiness and their value in the region. Jesus, the Perfect One, could not swallow their hollowness and wanted to “spew them out of His mouth.” Holiness in lieu of hollowness is what the Lord Jesus was requiring of the Church.

The image of Christ standing outside the door and knocking may imply that the Laodiceans have locked him out of their church. However, this truly is a symbol of promise. Christ is waiting outside, hoping the Laodiceans will be open to His correction and change their ways. If they do, He will come in and share a meal with them (Revelation 3:20). The fellowship meal figures prominently as a symbol of togetherness with Christ in the Kingdom (19:9).

⁶ Article by Peter Colon, Israel My Glory, magazine; July/August 2006, page 39

⁷ Dave Olander, Professor of Biblical Languages and Theology, 5th class lecture of Systematic Theology, quote

*One of the few stadiums preserved from the ancient world is at Laodicea. It was built by Nicostratus and dedicated to Vespasian in 79 A.D. according to an inscription found there. The stadium is circular at both ends and the total complex is 900 feet long. Used primarily for running races, the length of the track was fixed at 600 feet.*⁸ This stadium (in width and length) is comparable to any professional athletic complex today. With this kind of athletic stadium, the city had to have many fans who attended the various events. Although we don't know how many seats were available, we know that the width and breadth of the stadium was massive and could potentially hold the number of citizens of this city of complacency. As it is today, the families were evidently more interested in the world of athletics and sporting events than what was important in life, worshipping the Risen Savior. As it is today on Sunday afternoons, the world of NASCAR, Professional Football, Baseball, and Soccer (World-wide) seem to attract many more citizens than what our churches are attracting. The enthusiasm exhibited by the fans for their home team is quite a contrast to the unenthusiastic, dreary and complacent crowds heading for the doors of the churches on the Sabbath or on Sunday mornings. Our Lord was upset with the Laodicean Church because of their indifference and complacency. He was adamant in challenging the church to "repent." It is evident that what is said to the Laodicean Church of yesteryear is true in most churches today as well. The "tolerant" message toward homosexuality, the *gentler evangelistic messages preached by noted evangelists*,⁹ and the drive to accept all religions of the world is being pushed, accepted as the norm, and practiced by the majority of our churches and their leaders. Today, Jesus, the Risen Christ, is saying to us, "look at the Church at Laodicea, and he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches." It is time. We must repent and go back to what we were called to do. If we do and overcome, we will be able to "sit down with the Savior on His throne as He did in which He sat down with His Father on His throne" (Revelation 3:21).

To summarize, the Church at Laodicea had deep spiritual problems. The cares of this life, the penetrating power of the society around the members, and wrong spiritual attitudes have blocked out the church's view of Christ to one degree or another. To many members of the

⁸ Bible Places.com, <http://www.bibleplaces.com/laodicea.htm> ; Laodicea, page 2 of 4

⁹ Mark L. Pinsky, *Evangelicals: Is a New Center Emerging?*; Fort Worth Star Telegram Article, Sunday, 24 September, 2006; (Section E, page 5E)

church at Laodicea, the world seemed to be the only compelling reality. They had a desperate need to see behind the scenes, as it were, and discover the unseen reality of Christ Jesus. Members needed to refocus their minds on the real power of the universe, the place where salvation lies—in Jesus Christ, our Savior.

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