

LAODICEA: PRACTICAL ATHEISM
Revelation 3:14-22
August 3, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

This morning we conclude our series on the letters to the churches in Revelation in looking at the last of these churches, the church at Laodicea. I suppose more has been written and more sermons preached in our lifetime on this church than the other six combined. In some regard this is based upon the interpretation of some that this church describes historically the Church age, the current time in which we live prior to the Lord's return. While I disagree with this interpretation, having noted along the way that there are semblances of all of these church in our present age, I would agree that in general this church bears the unfortunate marks of many churches today.

This is tragic given this churches heritage. With the exception of Ephesus, where the apostle Paul spent the better part of three years ministering (Acts 19), we know that Laodicea had received the teaching of the Apostle Paul. In Colossians 4:16 Paul wrote, "When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter *that is coming* from Laodicea." Much speculation surrounds the content of that future letter that came from this very church. But what we clearly see in Paul's conclusion to the letter to the Colossians is that the letter they received was circulated among other churches with the clear command from Paul that it be read to the church at Laodicea. They received this divine treasure and from Paul's perspective, at the time of writing Colossians, were deemed worthy to receive its rich content concerning the person and work of Christ.

However, in a very short time, this church lost its spiritual bearings. They had become a church that literally sickened Christ. As we will see, while Christ had something to commend in all of the churches (even the church at Sardis which was "dead" received a commendation for those who remained faithful to Christ, the remnant), there is no commendation for this church. The reason was that there was nothing in this church that allowed it any longer to be called the church of Jesus Christ. What this church describes is *a church that had become dependent upon itself, not Christ*. They were not building on the sure foundation of the apostolic teaching but were content with a Christless Christianity. They were a church that bore the mark of the title of the message this morning: *practical atheism*. While they would not profess that there is no God, their actions, their practice, demonstrated that they could take Him or leave Him. In other words, they lived as if there was no God. Brennan Manning described the plight this way, "The greatest single cause of Atheism in the world today are Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."¹

What does the world see when it looks at your life as a Christian and our church as a body? More importantly, what does Christ see?

I. Marks of a Healthy Church (3:14)

As Christ has done in all of these letters, He introduces Himself in a way that the particular church to which the letter was addressed needed to hear.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brennan_Manning, accessed 08/02/2008.

1. A church that depends on Christ for all things (3:14a)²

“**The Amen**” may appear unusual to us who are accustomed to “amen” signaling the end of our prayers or our agreement with a statement. However, the term comes out of the Hebrew language, capturing an equivalent to “faithful and true.” The word has its origin in God’s revelation of Himself in Isaiah 65:16 where He is called “the God of truth.” The Reformation Study Bible explains, “The Hebrew word translated “truth” is “amen”,” and then cites the same passage in Revelation 3:14 as a parallel. He is the God of Amen, or as in our text, He is “**The Amen.**”

The title “**The Amen,**” points to the Lord’s reliability, His steadiness, His trustworthiness, and His dependability. The addition of “**the faithful and true Witness**” explains what is meant by the title “**The Amen.**” He can be counted on to remain faithful and true, never wavering from the revelation of Himself that we find in the gospel. Unlike the Laodicean church that changed from a warm-hearted congregation during Paul’s ministry to a lukewarm church later in the first century, Jesus Christ never fails in honoring His promises and keeping covenant with His people. The church is ever to mirror “**The Amen**” in bearing witness to the truth of the gospel. The church is to depend on Christ alone for all things, not the things of man or this world, which bear the marks of sin and are fickle.

2. A church that has Christ as its true Head (3:14b)

As we have already noted, the church at Laodicea would have received Paul’s letter to the Colossians. The language Christ uses here, “**the beginning of the creation of God,**” bears a striking resemblance to the language used in Colossians 1^{”15-20.}

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15). Paul is saying, “What God is invisibly, Christ is visibly.” He is not created but head of all creation. That is further noted in the next verse. “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16) The apostle makes sure that he includes everything that has ever been created, whether visible or invisible; whether on earth or beyond. That includes both visible and invisible powers.

What part does Christ have in the creation? “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17) or literally, all things consist. His eternal existence is declared as well as His sovereign might in sustaining every molecule in creation throughout all time. So, whatever exists in all creation, Jesus Christ is Lord over all!

Is it different for the church? “He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col. 1:19-20). Here Paul demonstrates that Christ is Lord of the new creation of the redeemed as well, having reconciled us through the blood of His cross. There’s probably an allusion in “the Beginning of the creation of God,” to Revelation 1:5 where Christ is declared to be “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Nothing in the old creation or new creation through His death and resurrection, exists outside of Jesus Christ’s sovereign rule. While the Laodicean church may have been enamored with the power of Rome or their own resources, it

² What follows is from Phil Newton, <http://www.southwoodsbc.org/resources/sermons.html>, accessed 08/02/2008.

failed to see the greater might of its Sovereign Lord, Jesus Christ. They failed to serve Christ as the head of the church.

II. Marks of an Unhealthy Church (3:15-17, 20)

1. Lukewarm spirituality (vv. 15-16)

In saying, **“You are neither cold nor hot,”** Christ drew an image from Laodicean culture to describe the church. The city drew its water from hot springs some distance away, probably from either Hierapolis, which was known for its hot springs, or Colossae, known for its cold water. Either way, after the water had traveled some distance to Laodicea, it became lukewarm. Hot water is therapeutic, cold water refreshes, but lukewarm water is useless for either purpose. It was repulsive.

Christ likened the spiritual condition of the church to its water supply, **“So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit You out of my mouth.”** These are some of the harshest words Jesus used in any of the letters. John MacArthur notes, “Some churches make the Lord weep. Others make Him angry. The Laodicean church made Him sick.”³ **“Hot”** people describes those who are on fire for the Lord and His gospel, who have a fervent passion to live for the glory of God. A **“cold”** person is one who rejects Christ and His gospel, living for self rather than for the purpose He was created. The **“lukewarm”** person fits neither category. They are not genuinely saved, nor do they openly reject Christ. William Hendriksen describes their condition in this way, “Lukewarm, tepid, flabby, half-hearted, limp, always ready to compromise, indifferent, listless: that ‘we’re-all-good-people-here-in-Laodicea’ attitude.”⁴ In a word, this church who just a few years earlier had received the teachings of the apostles as the foundation for the church, was now corrupt and was offensive to Christ. And He promised to vomit them out of His body if they did not straighten up.

He made a rather curious statement in v. 15 concerning their condition, **“I wish that you were neither cold nor hot.”** Outright denial would be better than a phoney profession. Peter put it this way in 2 Peter 2:21, “For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them.” That is exactly what these at Laodicea had done. They had tasted the good things of God and turned from Him and His Word. They confessed to be Christian without being touched by fire. John Walvoord was correct, “There is no one farther from the truth in Christ than the one who makes an idle profession without real faith... The result is churchianity, membership in an organization without biblical Christianity and without membership in the body of Christ accompanied by the miracle of the new birth.”⁵ In Christ’s eyes, there is more hope for the one who openly denies Him than for those who remain indifferent.

2. Disillusioned prosperity (v. 17)

Laodicea, like other of the cities we have seen in these letters, was destroyed twice by earthquakes. The second go round, the Laodiceans rejected the help of Rome in rebuilding their city, proudly declaring that they had the resources to do it themselves. They were a wealthy city with all the materialistic trappings that often lead to a false sense of security, a security in the

³ John MacArthur, *Because the Time Is Near*, 99.

⁴ William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 76.

⁵ John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 93.

things of this world rather than on God and Christ. Notice their deceptive evaluation of themselves, **“I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing.”** They were disillusioned concerning their spiritual condition, thinking their material prosperity was a sign of God’s blessing. They were living in the midst of Jeremiah 17:9, forgetting that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. John MacArthur concludes, “They were rich in spiritual pride but bankrupt in saving grace.”⁶

But what was Jesus’ assessment? **“You do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.”** In Jesus’ words, they were lost! They were depending on themselves and had denied their need for Christ’s spiritual provisions off just as they had denied Rome’s material provisions in rebuilding their city. The difference of course is that they were successful in rebuilding their city without Rome but failed miserably in building their church without Christ!

3. Christless church (v. 20)

The truth that Christ was not in their midst is clearly pictured in v. 20. These words are often taken out of their context and used solely as an evangelistic text. But we must remember that these words were written to the entire church. Jesus said, **“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.”** This is a clear indication of a church without Christ, who stands outside the church knocking on the door. Here we see the grace of Christ in initiating restoration and fellowship. It is a personal invitation for the church, calling the many who resided inside to come to faith in Him. If **“anyone,”** any one person, opened the door, then He would take up residence in the church. This seems to indicate that there were no believers in this church. They were a Christless church.

III. Marks of a Restored Church (3:18-19, 21-22)

The truth that Jesus stood outside knocking provided a gracious invitation for them to come to faith in Him. Three things needed to take place for this church to be restored.

1. Receive Christ’s provisions (v. 18)

We read earlier in Isaiah 55:1-3, “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost. ² “Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And delight yourself in abundance. ³ “Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, *According to the faithful mercies shown to David.*”

Here Christ echoes these words.

a. **“buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich” – purity**

b. **“white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed” – righteousness (Gen. 3)**

⁶ MacArthur, 100.

c. “eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see” – spiritual understanding

2. Receive Christ’s discipline (v. 19)

3. Receive Christ’s blessings (vv. 20-22)

Conclusion

Are you living as a practical atheist, saying one thing while living another? Remember the words of Brennan Manning we quoted earlier, “The greatest single cause of Atheism in the world today are Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”