

## THE APOSTATE CHURCH

### JESUS VISITS THE 21TH CENTURY CHURCH



We live in an exciting age. The speed at which human knowledge has progressed is mind boggling. It is also a very contradictory age. When we look around us, we see signs of man's accumulated knowledge and wealth. At the same time, we also see signs of the decay of man's moral character. When Jesus gave His revelation to John, He first described the age of the Church, and its changes throughout the past 2000 years or so. In most cases, the churches are commended for their efforts. The church in Laodicea, not so much. The time is right to gain more insight into the church of Laodicea of the time. It must be a wakeup call for Christians today.

#### Background to the city of Laodicea

The letters to the seven churches were written to real churches in real cities. These cities were all in modern-day Turkey. At the time the letters were written, Laodicea was a very affluent city. People were rich and the city was the centre of commerce and trade in the area. It also had a large Jewish population. There were two things of importance to the city. First, it had a medical school and the city produced a special eye salve that was exported throughout the known world. Secondly, it obtained its water from a hot spring some distance away, carried to the city in a Roman aqueduct. Both of these aspects would later be used in a lesson that counted against the Laodiceans.

This was a city and church with problems. When we think of Laodicea, we tend to immediately think of John's letter to the church as given in Revelation 3. However, long before this, Paul mentioned Laodicea as a problem. Already in his letter to the Colossians, he wrote about his problem with the Laodicean church:

For I want you to know what a great **conflict** I have for you and those in Laodicea...  
**Colossians 2:1, – New King James Version**

Personal conflict takes place in the heart, and as a missionary and church planter, the welfare of churches were always a burden (but in a positive sense) to Paul – a conflict in his mind as to what to do with churches that often fell away from the truth, once he had preached to them and left. One such example is stated in the letter to the churches in Galatia:

6 I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel:  
7 Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. – **Galatians 1:6-7, New King James Version**

In certain cases Paul had never actually met them in person and his involvement was through letters he wrote to them. In the first chapter of his letter to the Colossians he mentions this:

We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, **since we heard of your faith** in Jesus Christ and of your love for all the saints; –  
**Colossians 1:3-4, New King James Version**

This clearly states that Paul has never met them, but heard of them from other missionaries in the field. The same goes for the church in Laodicea. Through the letter to the church in Colossae, he also reaches the church in Laodicea. It does not mean that he never travelled in the general areas where the churches were located, but merely that he did not visit those churches at the time. Towards the end of the letter to the church in Colossae, Paul mentions Laodicea again.

For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis. – **Colossians 4:13, New King James Version**

Lastly, Paul ends his letter by asking that the letter he has just written to the Colossians must also be read by the church in Laodicea. He then mentions something we do not easily see. He says that once the church in Colossae have read their letter and have given it to the church in Laodicea to read, they in turn must also read the letter from Laodicea. This raises an interesting point, that there are epistles and letters Paul wrote to congregations that do not form part of the New Testament:

Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise **read the epistle from Laodicea.** – **Colossians 4:16, New King James Version**

It is therefore clear that the church in Laodicea knew the truth as Paul would have given them more than one opportunity to become acquainted with the Gospel. With this as the background, let us see what Jesus finds in the church in Laodicea.

### **Jesus's message for the church of the Laodiceans**

14 “And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write,  
These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:  
15 “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.  
17 Because you say, I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—  
18 I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.  
19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.  
20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.  
21 To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.  
22 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” –  
**Revelation 3:14-22, New King James Version**

His immediate address to the church in Laodicea states their spiritual situation. This is built on knowledge and experience that the Laodiceans already had about their city, but Jesus explains it in a spiritual context. The water source was some way from the city, and to ensure that they would have a constant supply, it was transported using a Roman aqueduct. The

problem with this was twofold, and Jesus mentions both of these but relates it to their spiritual condition.

First, the water from the spring was warm, and cooled off as it travelled along the aqueduct. Once it reached the city, it was not hot enough to bath with, but also not cold enough to drink. This tepid, lukewarm water was of no use for any situation. In addition, the water contained a high concentration of sulphur, making it unpleasant but not undrinkable.

The eye infections were the second problem. The sulphur in the water led to eye infections. The Laodiceans had a medical school and were excellent at producing an eye salve that cured the sulphur problem, and was also exported to other countries.

The Laodicean church is accused of being neither hot nor cold spiritually, and, like lukewarm water, it is not useable. You will no doubt have drunk a hot liquid in cold weather to warm yourself, or would have drunk cold fluids on a hot day to cool yourself. Anything in between is unacceptable.

Jesus comments on the spiritual level of the church in Laodicea exactly as it is in our day. For the most part, Christians have grown lukewarm. Some do not read their Bible, they go to church to be seen, maybe form part of the various fellowship programmes, but for the most part, do not become involved well enough to be of any use. It is this sort of behaviour that He abhors. He says that because the Laodicean church, and by implication also us today, are neither hot nor cold, He will vomit them out of His mouth. Some translations change the word “vomit” with “spit” but either way, the action is one of getting rid of something vile in your mouth, something you maybe planned to take in as food or drink, but then realise that it is not suitable. Thus it is spat out, vomited out, with force and repulsion.

He then gives the reason for their spiritual state – wealth:

Because you say, I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing –  
**Revelation 3:17, New King James Version**

The source of wealth is money, and when money becomes the sole focus, it becomes the starting point of evil:

For **the love of money** is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. – **1 Timothy 6:10, New King James Version**

The inhabitants of Laodicea were affluent and could afford many luxuries. They did not need much from anyone else, and probably did not really have a need for spiritual growth. However, we must remember that the letter was not addressed at the inhabitants of Laodicea in general, but to the supposedly saved Christians in the church, in the city! Therefore, if the text were to be applied to the unsaved of the city, we may brush it aside as spiritual ignorance as they did not know any better. Those in the church, however, knew the truth and still allowed themselves to be drawn away from the truth of the Gospel because of a wealth of other things – money, maybe a large Roman villa, creature comforts, an abundance of everything, and so on. The sad truth of life in the time of the Laodicean church as well as today is the fact that the apostasy, the falling away from the faith, does not originate with unbelievers. These are lost anyway and have no existing pure faith for fall away from. Those

who fall away are the very people who are supposed to be the light and salt – guidance to the unbelievers to find their way to salvation.

The Laodicean church does not even know that they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked in the spiritual sense because they are so blinded by the wealth they have surrounded themselves with. Jesus says they are **wretched** (unpleasant or of low quality); **miserable** (very unhappy spiritually); **poor** (having little spiritual growth); **blind** (unable to see their own standing in Christ); and **naked** (not clothed in righteousness). Look at the advice he gives them:

I counsel you to buy from Me **gold refined in the fire**, that you may be rich; and **white garments**, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and **anoint your eyes with eye salve**, that you may see. – **Revelation 3:18, New King James Version**

The Laodicean church is advised to do certain things to improve their situation. The New King James Version uses the word **counsel**, (to give advice, especially on social or personal problems) which shows how Jesus still wants them to be saved, despite their unwillingness to listen. They have to learn to buy from Him gold, the metal abundant in heaven. He suggests white garments. At the time, they made garments from black wool. Jesus suggests something better, something pure. He suggests that they do some introspection, and read the Gospel with their own eyes, so that they may see the truth.

Is He upset with them? Yes. Does He love them? Yes. Does He want them to perish? No. Look at verse 19:

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. – **Revelation 3:19, New King James Version**

He says that because He loves them, He **rebukes** (to speak angrily to someone because you disapprove of what they have done) and **chastens** (to make someone understand that they have failed or done something wrong and make them want to improve) them. Because of this, He commands them to be **zealous** (enthusiastic and eager, also translated *hot*) and **repent** (to be sorry for things you have done and strive not to repeat the same mistake).

After chastising them, He says the following:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. – **Revelation 3:20, New King James Version**

This is an invitation extended to the Laodicean church, even in its current dire state. He is standing at the door of modern-day church and He knocks. A thief does not stand at, and knock on, the door. A thief gets in from the wrong side (John 10:1), behind your back. These are the false preachers and false doctrines. If the church hears the knock (the call for repentance), all it to do is open the door. Jesus does not force open a door that we do not want to open. When the church does open the door, He will come in and dine with them. This is not a takeaway or a quick meal. To dine means to spend a good deal of time not just eating to fill and empty stomach, but also to discuss things of mutual importance to both parties (I will come in to dine with him, and he with Me).

Our culture has become used to a takeaway lifestyle – everything has to be on the go, in a hurry, leaving us no time to really dine. We do not often think of dine as a verb. We use it as a noun, dining or dinner, but we forget the importance of dining as a leisure activity. When you enter a dining room, the idea is that it is a rather formal affair that takes time to complete but the occasion is to be enjoyed. When last have you and your family sat down at a dinner table, had your food but at the same time as filling your stomach, also discussed important things with one another? Our takeaway culture has robbed us of a very important occasion for proper communication and fellowship. In the same way the dinner is prepared with great detail, it should be enjoyed with great thanks and appreciation. This takes time!

As with all of the churches that letters were written to, the Laodicean church is also given good news:

To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. – **Revelation 3:21, New King James Version**

We are warned throughout the New Testament that at the end of the Church age, difficult times will come. We see this in our day with the things that are going on around us. We have a choice – we can either **be overcome** (passive statement) by the situation, or we can **overcome** (active statement) the situation. If we sit back and do nothing, the former will happen – the situation will get the better of us. If we act and do the latter, we will be victorious. Now imagine this: Jesus says that if we overcome, we will sit with Him on His throne in exactly the same way He also overcame the challenges during His time on Earth and now sits with the Father on His throne.

The last verse in the selected text does not just refer to the church in Laodicea, but all seven of the churches:

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the **churches.**” – **Revelation 3:22, New King James Version**

### **The Apostate Church**

So far, we have interchanged the time of the Laodicean church with the modern church. There is a good reason for this. The Laodicean church was the last one to which a letter was written. Let us look at the title of the piece again: **THE APOSTATE CHURCH**. What does this mean? **Apostasy** is the act of giving up your religious or political beliefs and leaving a religion or a political party. An **apostate** is the person (or church) who has given up their religious beliefs. Jesus mentioned this as a sign of what will happen in the last days:

And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the **love of many shall wax cold**. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. – **Matthew 24:10-12, King James Version**

This means that the love they had for Jesus and the Gospel of salvation, with become cold and die, in contrast to the word **zealous** (to be hot) Jesus asks for in Revelation 3:19.

Paul expresses the same idea in his letter to the Thessalonians but rather than using the word apostasy, he uses the phrase “falling away”:

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the **falling away** comes first, – **2 Thessalonians 2:1, New King James Version**

In his pastoral letter to Timothy, he warns that a time will come when these things will happen, and uses the word **depart**:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times **some will depart from the faith**, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. – **1 Timothy 4:1, New King James Version**

The problem is not that these persons have departed from their faith and left the church, but rather that they have departed from the faith and are still in the church, affecting others. We often think that the attack against the church, or rather against Christian believers, comes from outside the church. Instead, we are living in a time when comfort is the keyword – we go to mega churches where the police help so that parking can be found; where there is ample space inside, on comfortable cushioned chairs, with air conditioning, sound, and video. With thousands of people present, you can hide in your own comfort zone. There is hardly any need to bring your Bible. After all, the key verses are presented on overhead systems and we believe that what is portrayed there is the true Word of God, without checking it for ourselves, in our own Bibles. We listen to the things the speaker says, mostly without checking what is said or done, against the Word. In so doing, the words and actions of man become the norm, not the Word of God.

The reason for most of this is found in Jesus’ words in the letter to the Laodicean church:

Because you say, I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing –  
**Revelation 3:17, New King James Version**

Many people feel that when they have the things that make their lives easier – money to buy anything they need – why would they need faith? For them, faith seems to be relegated to those that have no money and have to beg God for a handout. James explains it this way:

9 Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted:  
10 But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away.  
11 For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways. – **James 1:9-11, King James Version**

The problem with rich people is not that they are rich – there are many examples of people who were both rich and faithful, Job and Solomon are two of them – but the attitude that goes with being rich. Many people are departing from the faith because they have been blinded by their apparent ability to survive on their own – I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing. Yet they remain in the church. When they are corrected in a godly way, their reaction is often this:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. – **2 Timothy 4:3-4, King James Version**

Today we have many churches where the truth is not preached, because it does not go down well with many in the congregation. They do not accept sound doctrine, which advocates repentance and sinless lives. Instead, probably because of their substantial financial contributions, they are in a position to manipulate church councils and dictate who is appointed as pastors and teachers and who will preach what those in power want to hear, not what they must hear. When the Word is not to their liking, they close their ears to it (turn away their ears) and the sound doctrine is turned into fables (stories that have no basis).

In many churches the Word of God is no longer preached or is the focus, but the ideas and stories of the teachers instead. Because the masses do not bother to check their Bibles, and even worse do not know what is in their Bibles, they are led astray. This is the tepid water Jesus spoke about in His address to the Laodicean church. Biblical teaching that is twisted to conform to our desires, is essentially poisonous, like the water the Laodiceans had. It is good for nothing and Jesus implies that it is better not to have any teaching (cold) than to have twisted teaching (tepid). A lukewarm teacher, teaching a lukewarm message, results in a lukewarm receiver. If you are satisfied with teaching that is a half-truth or a fable, He will spit you out!

Paul made a point of teaching Timothy that these things would happen. If they already happened in the first century church, how much worse has it become today?

1 This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.  
2 For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy,  
3 Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good,  
4 Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God;  
5 Having a form of godliness, but **denying the power thereof**: from such turn away.  
– **2 Timothy 3:1-5, King James Version**

Verse 5 states that many people will have a form of godliness, but the power of the Gospel is nowhere to be found.

The well-known gospel singer, Steven Curtis Chapman, summarised this in a striking way:

There's a preacher in a nice church  
Anchored in the heart of town  
People flock to hear his eloquent delivery

**He talks of Jesus how he can please us  
But the cross cannot be found**

Makin' theory out of facts until they're all deceived  
And the lost lead the way  
And more hearts are led astray

These are the days when the blind lead the blind  
And there's one narrow way out of here  
So pray that the light of the world will keep your eyes clear  
'Cause it's a dangerous place here where the blind lead the blind

- Blind Lead the Blind

Many modern-day preachers teach of how Jesus can please us and answer each time we pray, but many of us will not bow to His will for our lives. If you are reading this and it sounds like you, you had better do something about it. The coming of Jesus Christ to make an end of the dispensation of grace is at hand. After that there is no more chance. Once again, the jokers and critics have this to say (verse 4 of the quoted text):

1 Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder),  
2 that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior,  
3 knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts,  
4 and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." – **2 Peter 3:1-4, New King James Version**

Their jokes were already known to God, which is why they are already contained in the Word. For the believer in Jesus Christ, our salvation is now closer than the day that we were first saved. This is the blessed hope we have:

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. – **Titus 2:11-14, King James Version**

Instead of allowing the current situation in the world get the better of us, God-fearing Christian believers have all the more reason to rejoice, despite the circumstances. As we see the day of His coming approaching, let us keep this in mind:

24 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:  
25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. – **Hebrews 10:24-25, New King James Version**

## SUMMARY

Jesus's call to us is to take a stand and take a side. You are either cold or spiritually dead, in which case you are an unbeliever but can still come to the saving grace of Christ, or you can choose to be hot (zealous) and live a purpose-filled life in Jesus.

Are you a lukewarm Christian? Lukewarm Christians will be spat out by the very Saviour they once belonged to. Either that, or they were never saved to begin with. Before He spits you out, decide to change. You know which side to take.