

## “To the Angel of the Church in Laodicea”

Revelation 3:14-22

### VBS Lesson 8

**A Word about the Structure of the Letter(s):** As we studied these letters we observed a basic structure or pattern shared by each of the 7 letters. The determining factor as to whether all of the elements of the structure are present and which ones are left out – if any - is the basic condition of the church. *Having said that, generally* - 1. Each letter begins by addressing the “angel” of the church receiving the letter. 2. This is followed in each letter with the phrase “These are the words of ...” by which Jesus identifies Himself to the church. In all but these final two letters the description Jesus gives is taken from chapter 1. 3. Jesus then gives a status report on the church's spiritual condition which includes an acknowledgement of the commendable works of faithfulness of the church and the identification of weaknesses or failures. 4. This is followed, when appropriate, by calls to repent with warnings for continuing on the current path. 5. Each letter closes with the admonition for the one who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says and promises given to those who “overcome.”

Jesus finished His letters to the 7 churches of Asia with letter 6 to Philadelphia and letter 7 – today's study – to Laodicea. Philadelphia contained no indictment, only encouragement. The letter to Laodicea – before us this morning – is lacking any commendation – only indictment.

### **A Brief Background of Laodicea:**

#### *The Angel of the Church and the Command to Write* – 3:14a

- Though this command marks a new section in the prophesy it follows seamlessly the command to write in 1:11, 19 and is connected by the themes and imagery introduced in 1:12-20.

- The “angel” of each of the churches (cf. 2:8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; also 1:20) – The question of the identity of these angels and their relationship to the churches is difficult in that both their identity and relationship to the churches appear to be assumed.

**Note:** It seems clear to me that these letters are written to real and specific 1<sup>st</sup> century churches with problems that are equally real and specific to the respective churches. However, the language of the exhortation to hear at the end of each letter – “let him hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*” (plural) – as well as the addition of *Kai* introducing letters 2 through 7, makes it equally clear that these were designed to serve as a collective word to the churches of every generation and location throughout the remaining age of the church.

It seems that these angels have a significant connection to the identity of the church, so much so that they appear to personify the spirit of the church and are addressed in their respective letters. However, within the context of Revelation the identity of these angels seems to be “assumed.”

So it is best understand their identity based in the prevailing use of “angel” in Revelation. Throughout Revelation “angel” means “supernatural being.”<sup>1</sup> Fanning would say, quoting Beale, that these “...angels...of the seven churches’ are holy angels, that is, supernatural messengers or instruments of God, who serve as guardians or representatives of the congregations.”

**The Description of Jesus** – 3:14b – We saw in our previous studies that the ways in which Jesus identifies Himself to each of the churches are taken from Revelation 1:4-5, 12-18 – with a couple of exceptions – the letter to Philadelphia (3:7) and here in this final letter – the letter to Laodicea (3:14).

**Note:** The phrase with which He opens each letter “these are the words of...” is formulaic for communicating inspired speech.<sup>2</sup>

- “The Amen” – This 1<sup>st</sup> label given Jesus – the Amen – is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *Amen* which means “surely” and it is taken from the Hebrew verbal root “to be firm or trustworthy,”<sup>3</sup> “to prove oneself steady, reliable,” “to stay faithful to.”<sup>4</sup> Fanning says that it is likely drawn from Isaiah 65:16 where 2 times the Lord is referred to as “the God of truth” where the Hebrew is *amen* and the Greek LXX translates it τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἀληθινόν. This sets up the next label.

- “The faithful and true witness” – cf. 1:2, 4; 19:10 – The first part of this second title is taken from 1:2, 5. In 1:2 the message John writes is referred to as “the Word of God and the witness of Jesus Christ.” It is in 1:5 that Jesus is referred to as the “faithful witness.” This label is expanded by the further characterization of Jesus as the “true witness.” This two part title is brought together in qualifying Jesus as “the Amen” and in doing so, is declaring Jesus as reliable and faithful as He bears witness to the hard truth He is about to speak to the church and the counsel to follow.

- “The ruler of God’s creation” – cf. 1:5 – This seems to correlate with 1:5 where Jesus is said to be the “ruler over the Kings of the earth.” This attributes sovereign rule over all of creation to Jesus. As significant you would expect a significant theme in Revelation is the sovereign rule of God over all things (cf. 1:8; 11:17; 15:3; 19:6). This same rule is attributed to Jesus (cf. 1:5; 2:26-27; 3:21; 12:5; 17:14; 19:15-16; 20:4-6) and to the rule of the Father and His Son together (cf. 5:12-13; 11:15; 12:10).<sup>5</sup> **This is picked up again at the end of the letter in the promise to the overcomer** (cf. 20:4-6; 22:1-5).

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<sup>1</sup> Fanning, “Revelation,” 107-108 – ECNT - Zondervan; R. Mounce, “Revelation,” NICOT - Eerdmans

<sup>2</sup> Fanning, p. 116

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 184

<sup>4</sup> Holladay, “A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament,” Eerdmans, p. 20

<sup>5</sup> Fanning, 185

As you reflect on who we are as a church (or you as an individual), consider the titles ascribed to Jesus in this letter and the previous 6. How might He describe Himself in giving us a status report for our church in preparation to speak encouragement, indictment and counsel to us?

***Jesus' Status Report on the Condition of Church*** – 3:15-20 – This status report is without any mention of commendable works of faith. It begins as each of the previous 6 letters with the phrase “I know...,” which in some instances brings encouragement and others penetrating indictment. He knows because He walks among us – He sees our hearts and knows our struggles.

- 3:15-16 – Jesus says that He knows their “deeds” – that they are “neither cold nor hot,” rather they are “lukewarm.” This serves as a grim and graphic metaphor for their distasteful condition.

**Note:** There is much discussion surrounding the meaning of “hot” and “cold” in this passage. Much of the recent discussion seems to focus on natural water supplies in the region, of dining customs which imply that both hot and cold are good and desirable and lukewarm is distasteful – even vomit inducing.<sup>6</sup>

I am about to swim against the current looking at this passage in the light of 3:17-19. I’m going to say that hot reflects the zeal to which Jesus counsels them in 3:19 and that cold reflects conscious indifference to the things of God/gospel. They are not hot – no zealous repentance and pursuit of the riches of Jesus (cf. 3:18). They are not cold rejecting the things of God, in that they are ignorant of their condition and *believe themselves* to be “rich” and in need of nothing.

**Ultimately it is a metaphor with the weight of the metaphor placed on Jesus’ response to their condition. They, in that condition, are about to be spewed/vomited out of the Lord’s mouth** (μέλλω σε ἐμέσαι ἐκ τοῦ στόματός μου). Depending on the punctuation in the Greek text - this seems to be the implication of 3:17 beginning with “because” (μέλλω... ὅτι λέγεις ὅτι πλούσιός εἰμι...).

- 3:17-18 – It seems that these verses serve as a unit with 3:17 beginning with “because” (ὅτι) reading “because...I counsel you...” Jesus says that their “lukewarm” state is seen in their fundamental ignorance of their condition. He describes their ignorance by contrasting what they believe to be true with what He “knows” to be true of them.

1. They see themselves as rich in the “wealth” they have acquired (πεπλούτηκα) and in need of nothing. Their self-perception has both a real and metaphorical weight to it. They are likely a prosperous church but it is likely that they also see their material prosperity as indicative of lasting prosperity that leaves them without a sense of need for God.

2. Their real condition is 180 degrees from their self-perception. It is true that they are “prosperous” but Jesus tells them that though they do not “know” it, they are in fact – “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.”

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<sup>6</sup> See discussion in Fanning and Mounce

This is an ominous and horrible indictment (the opposite of Smyrna – 2:9). How does a church (or individual) arrive at that place? How are they so sadly unaware of their horrible and wretched spiritual condition (cf. 3:1b)? I believe on the level of church (as well as the individual) it happens incrementally (cf. Ephesians 4:17-19 – Paul warns against something similar). It is interesting when you look at the various indictments in the previous letters – look at them together – you can see how it might incrementally impact a church or denomination (cf. 2:4, 14-15, 20; 3:1b). First you lose your sense of the supreme beauty and majesty of Jesus **and your eyes drop** to “truth” without pre-eminent love for Him (and others). Then the “truth” without relationship becomes empty and you begin to tolerate error within the church. That would move easily to sweeping in cultural offerings of meaning and purpose – of spirituality – to augment biblical truth. Then before you know it you are raising up a generation of “church” that has no spiritual life AND you’ve arrived at this place of Ephesians 4:17-19.

3. 3:18 – However they have arrived at this place of woeful ignorance of their wretched condition – Jesus’ counsel makes very clear that there is just one way forward – through Him. There are 3 cures offered up by Jesus specifically address the final three ills or pitiable conditions of the church. There are 3 things made clear in Jesus’ counsel – a. They don’t have any of the things Jesus is offering them and b. they cannot provide them from their own resources, so c. they must go to Jesus for these things.

They are invited – encouraged – to come to Jesus and “buy” these things. However, they don’t have the “wealth” or means to purchase them – cf. Isaiah 5:1-2. Each purchase remedies a specific ill – **a)** They are counseled to buy gold – pure gold refined by fire - in order to address their spiritual poverty, that they might be *truly* rich. This of course pictures the true and lasting riches of life in relationship with Jesus (cf. Phil. 3:7ff; 1 Peter 1:3-9 – esp. 6-9). **b)** They are counseled to buy “white garments” in order that they may no longer be naked – “the shame of their nakedness may not be exposed/seen.” This goes back to the beginning (cf. Genesis 2:25; 3:7-11, 21). The white garments are the righteousness of Jesus (cf. Isaiah 61:10; Revelation 3:4-5; 4:4; 6:9-11; 7:9-14). This is free to those who pursue Him in faith (cf. Romans 3:21-24; 5:17, 21; 10:4; 1 Cor 1:30; Phil 3:7-9). **c.)** They are counseled to buy from Jesus “salve” to anoint their eyes” “in order that” they may see – free from darkness and no longer be spiritually blind. This is the spiritual illumination which is part of new birth. Jesus is that light and He provides that light through the Spirit – (cf. John 1:4-5; 8:12; 9:39-41; 12:46; 2 Cor. 4:4, 6).

4. 3:19-20 – After such a stinging rebuke and the gracious counsel to “buy” from Him what they are truly lacking – Jesus finishes with the reassurance of His active love them (He walks among the churches and holds their angels in His hand) followed by a sweet invitation to intimacy with Him.

a. The Lord’s discipline is an act of His love for the church. This includes His strong indictment of their sin. The verb for “love” here is has the connotation of “love and affection based on close

interpersonal association”<sup>7</sup> “to have a special interest in someone freq. with focus on close association, *have affection for*”<sup>8</sup> (ἐγὼ ὅσους ἐὰν φιλῶ ἐλέγχω καὶ παιδεύω): ***He is the one who walks among the churches and holds the angels of the churches in His hand*** (Hebrews 12:4-6, 10; Proverbs 3:12). ***He calls them to respond to His “loving discipline” zealously, eagerly in repentance.***

b) Jesus then issues a sweet invitation to intimacy with Him – and His Father for those who turned to Him (John 14:1-4; 23). Note the endearing picture of Jesus in kindness knocking on the door and waiting to be invited in – ***this is issued to the church*** (as well as to each individual).

This no doubt alludes to the wedding banquet parable in Luke 12:35-37 and calls for anticipation and readiness. It likely has those end times implications of the wedding supper of the Lamb and the sweet fellowship with the Lord in that day (cf. Rev. 7:14-17; 19:6-9; 21:3, 7).

***The Call to “Hear” the Spirit’s Words with a Promise to the Overcomer – 3:21-22***

- 3:21 – We enter with Jesus into the victory He won at the cross – and was raised and exalted to glory (cf. John 16:33; 17:20-26; Phil 2:5-11; Hebrews 1:1-3; 8:1; 10:11-14; 12:1-2).

We will share in the victory won by Jesus – seated with Him – reigning with Him – exalted with Him – kept in Him – blessed as a “son” of God with Him (cf. Rom 8:16-17, 34; Eph. 1:18-23; 2:6-7; Col. 3:1-4; 2 Tim 2:11-12; Rev. 5:5, 9-10; 20:4, 6; 21:1-7; 22:1-5)!!

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<sup>7</sup> Fanning, 189

<sup>8</sup> BDAG