

Are You Riding the Fence?

Revelation 3:14-22

INTRODUCTION

A couple of Sundays ago I gave a talk on 'Following Jesus', and today's talk is going to be in the same line of thought in regards to its subject matter. Sometimes our desire to follow is not followed up with action, and we find ourselves riding the fence.

This morning we are going to be looking at the last church mentioned in the seven churches addressed by Jesus in the book of Revelation. It is the church of Laodicea.

To give a bit of historic background to this text we must begin with the town of Laodicea.

N.T. Wright, Revelation for Everyone

At the beginning of the year 2011, there were extraordinary floods in Australia. To begin with it was part of Queensland, the vast state in the north-east of the country. Then it was more of the state, and still more. Then the floodwaters extended southwards across the border into New South Wales. Hundreds of thousands of homes were ruined, and millions of people displaced. The effect on businesses will not be known, at the time I am writing this, for some while, if ever.

In late January, the Prime Minister of Australia announced that there would be a one-off tax to help the country to rebuild after the devastation. Nobody who had been affected would have to pay, nor would the very poor. It was the least Australians could do, to reach out and help those who had lost everything.

That sense of an emergency in which the state has to come to the rescue goes back a very, very long way, at least to the Roman world of the first century. As we saw in the previous letter, Philadelphia had been devastated in the earthquake of AD 17, and had gratefully accepted help from central funds in Rome. But when a later earthquake, in AD 61, did major damage to several cities in the Lycus valley, to the south of Philadelphia, one city was able to refuse imperial help. It was a proud thing to do. Most would have jumped at the offer. But Laodicea reckoned it didn't need outside help. It was quite rich enough, thank you very much.

That tells us one of the most important things we need to know about Laodicea, which stood at the junction of important trade routes running more or less north-south and east-west across the district of Phrygia. Like many towns similarly situated, Laodicea profited from the regular traffic. It was, in fact, the banking center of the whole region, and we know today what that means. But there was more. The town boasted a fine medical school; people would come from far distances to train as doctors. In particular, the school specialized in ophthalmology, the healing of the eyes. Laodicea was a good place to get hold of a particularly popular Phrygian eye-powder.

Still there was more. The local farmers in Laodicea had developed a particular breed of black sheep whose wool was of especially fine quality. This seems to have generated a fashion, which the breeders were only too happy to support. Clothes made from the Laodicean wool were highly sought after.¹

¹Wright, T. (2011). [*Revelation for Everyone*](#) (pp. 36–37). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.

Revelation 3:14-22

“Write to the angel of the church in Laodicea:

“The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Originator of God’s creation says: I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am going to vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, ‘I’m rich; I have become wealthy and need nothing,’ and you don’t know that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire so that you may be rich, white clothes so that you may be dressed and your shameful nakedness not be exposed, and ointment to spread on your eyes so that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be committed and repent. Listen! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and have dinner with him, and he with Me. The victor: I will give him the right to sit with Me on My throne, just as I also won the victory and sat down with My Father on His throne.

“Anyone who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”

I. The Friction

N.T. Wright

The one thing the city did not have was good water. The river Lycus at that point is not strong, and sometimes it dries up altogether in the summer. There are, however, two other sources of water, one to the north and the other to the southeast. To the north, standing high on a dramatic cliff, is the city of Hierapolis. It boasts to this day a set of hot springs to which tourists come from all over the world; the hot, chemically charged water comes bubbling out of the ground (channeled, today, into the bathing pools of various hotels), and spills over the cliff, leaving a white mineral deposit visible from miles around. In the first century they built aqueducts to bring this water across to Laodicea in the centre of the valley, four or five miles away. They can still be seen today—with their insides covered in hardened mineral deposit. But by the time the water arrived in Laodicea it was no longer hot. It was merely lukewarm. What was worse, the concentrated chemicals made it unsuitable to drink, unless for medicinal reasons you wanted to make yourself physically sick.

To the south-east of Laodicea was the town of Colosse. It, too, had suffered badly in the earthquake of AD 61, but had not been rebuilt. Colosse, however, had a splendid supply of water, flowing down from high, snow-capped Mount Cadmus: fast-flowing, chilly streams of almost Alpine quality. But by the time the water reached Laodicea, 11 miles away, the normal Turkish heat meant that it, too, had become lukewarm.

It is this remarkable feature of Laodicea—hot water that has cooled down, and cold water that has heated up—which forms the most famous part of this most famous of the seven letters. Indeed, the word ‘Laodicean’ has become proverbial for ‘lukewarmness’, with the meaning of ‘apathetic’, ‘neither one thing nor the other’. So Jesus addresses the church with a mixture of sorrow and, it seems, real anger: ‘You are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, I am going to vomit you out of my mouth.’ ‘Vomit’ is not too strong a word here. Jesus is disgusted at the taste of Laodicean Christianity. It makes him sick.

II. The Foolishness

C.S. Lewis

For pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.

2 Corinthians 3:4-5

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,

Philippians 4:13

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

III. The Faithfulness

N.T. Wright's Translation of *Revelation 3:19*

When people are my friends, I tell them when they're in the wrong, and I punish them for it;

2 Timothy 2:13

If we are faithless, He remains faithful,
for He cannot deny Himself.

Chuck Swindoll

More than once Jesus deliberately addressed certain issues that quickly diminished the number of onlookers. It was commitment that thinned the ranks.

IV. The Fellowship

Alexander McLaren

Faith does not grasp a doctrine, but a heart. The trust which Christ requires is the bond that unites souls with Him; and the very life of it is entire committal of myself to Him in all my relations and for all my needs, and absolute utter confidence in Him as all sufficient for everything that I can require.

N.T. Wright

And then there come the two closing promises. I said that *verse 15* was the most famous verse in the letter, but *verse 20* runs it close: ‘Look! I’m standing here, knocking at the door.’ I must have heard dozens of talks and sermons on that verse, all encouraging the hearers to open the door of their hearts, of their lives, and to let Jesus come in. Wonderful. Vital. Absolutely necessary. But, sadly, not quite what this passage is about. The echoes of stories in the **gospels** suggest that the one knocking on the door is the master of the house, returning at an unexpected hour (as in the warning to Sardis in 3:3), while the one who should open the door is the servant who has stayed awake. It is, then, Jesus’ house in the first place; our job is simply to welcome him home. And the echoes of the ancient scriptures suggest a different but related image. This is the bridegroom, knocking on the door of the house where his beloved lies asleep (*Song of Solomon 5:2*). A glance at *Revelation 21:2* suggests that this may have been in mind as well.

And again there is more. For some reason, all those talks and sermons I used to hear never got around to the second half of the verse: ‘I will come in to them and eat with them, and they with me.’ No early Christian could have heard those words without thinking of the regular meal, the bread-breaking, at which Jesus would come powerfully and personally and give himself to his people. Such meals anticipate the final messianic banquet (see *19:9*). They are advance ‘comings’ of the one who will one day come fully and for ever.

Those who share this meal, and who are thereby strengthened to ‘conquer’ as Jesus ‘conquered’ through his death, will have the most extraordinary privilege. It is already quite mind-blowing to think of Jesus sharing the throne of God—though the early Christians saw this as the fulfilment of *Psalms 110* and *Daniel 7*. But now it appears that ‘those who conquer’ are going to share Jesus’ throne as well. They will (that is) share his strange, sovereign rule over the world, the rule to which he came not by force of arms but by the power of suffering love. This is what it means to be ‘a royal priesthood’.

Tim Keller

To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.

CONCLUSION

Kay Arthur

If you do not plan to live the Christian life totally committed to knowing your God and to walking in obedience to Him, then don't begin, for this is what Christianity is all about. It is a change of citizenship, a change of governments, a change of allegiance. If you have no intention of letting Christ rule your life, then forget Christianity; it is not for you.

²Wright, T. (2011). [*Revelation for Everyone*](#) (pp. 40–41). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.