

## IN RESPONSE - TO PHILADELPHIA, PART II

by Dennis Prutow

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We return to a discussion of Philadelphia. As you may recall, the church at Philadelphia was one of the two churches out of seven which received no word of condemnation. This does not mean the church was perfect. The two to five ratio does remind us praise without correction is rare. It is not the norm. We should therefore not think our congregations are above average and automatically fit in the category of Philadelphia.

Revelation 3:11, Christ says to the church, "I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown." There are three ways in which to interpret the coming of Christ in this text. First, Christ may come in death. Jesus reminds us in John 14:1-3, "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also."

Christ comes at death to receive the souls of those who belong to Him. His angels ascend with the souls of the saved (Genesis 28:12, John 1:51) and escort them into heaven (Luke 16:22). Christ may come at any time for us in this fashion. Psalm 139:16 exclaims, "In Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them." Although this is the case, we must pray to God, "Teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). We do not know when we will be called upon to depart this veil of tears and enter glory.

Christ will also come a second time in glory to judge the earth. This day will come suddenly, unexpectedly, without warning. "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Paul reminds the Thessalonian Christians, "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief" (1 Thessalonians 5:4). And Christ adds these telling words, "Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and

drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap" (Luke 21:34).

This day is unknown to all except the Father. He will send Christ at the time He has appointed. "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matthew 24:36).

Preparation is therefore of the utmost importance. "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.... For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will" (Matthew 24:42-44).

Finally, Christ visits the world with various judgments. Death is final. Christ's second coming ushers in the consummation of all things. As we await these final acts of God, Paul reminds us, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18).

As an example, because of their disobedience, Christ said to the Jewish nation and people, "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!" (Matthew 23:38). Christ removed Israel's lampstand (Revelation 2:5) in 70 A.D. The judgments of God are warnings and calls to repentance (Revelation 9:20-21).

Churches should especially take heed today. You must "hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown." What do you have? You have the good news of gospel of grace. You have the precious gift of the Holy Spirit. You have forgiveness on the basis of the work of Christ through faith in this Savior. You must persevere in this faith before God and never turn back to a trust in your own goodness or supposed good works. To do so is to risk the censure Paul gives the Galatians, "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4).

The crown represents the rewards of grace. It is a crown of life; we are crowned with life (James 1:12). It is a crown of righteousness; we receive righteousness from Christ through faith (2

Timothy 4:8). To step back from the truth of justification by grace through faith is to forfeit the crown.

Christ therefore promises in verse 12, "He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name." We overcome through faith, an indication of our own emptiness and dependence upon God (1 John 5:4).

A pillar is a monument. The temple is the church. God makes believers monuments of grace within the church. These monuments are permanent. There is no going out. The Name on the monument is the Name of God and the name of the City of God. The temptation is to build empires, cities and names for ourselves. This was the fault of the people of ancient Babel (Genesis 11:4). We are not to make a city for our selves nor a name for ourselves.

The New Jerusalem is the spiritual body of Christ. Where the visible church and the spiritual body coincide, the church, New Jerusalem *is coming* down out of heaven. The church in the world is an outpost of heaven. We are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). We are ambassadors from heaven for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). It is essential that men and women be incorporated into this spiritual body by the Holy Spirit (John 3:7, 1 Corinthians 12:13). One enters New Jerusalem only by way of Christ (John 14:6). Both the true nature of this spiritual body and the great Name of Christ must be set before the lost world.

Believers bear the Name of Christ. They are Christians. They must therefore live as those who bear The Name. The letter ends with the familiar exhortation, verse 13 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Are *we* listening?

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# IN RESPONSE - THE LETTER TO LAODICEA, PART I

by Dennis Prutow

The position I take regarding Revelation is that it is divided into seven parts. Each section recapitulates the period between the first coming of Christ and His second coming from a different perspective. In addition, as we move through the book, more emphasis is placed upon the circumstances surrounding the second coming of Christ whereas the first section views circumstances close to the first advent. This sevenfold approach gives us a complete and adequate view of the interadvent period.

The number seven is also prominent in section one. The letters to the seven churches give us a comprehensive, complete, and adequate view of the church. The letter to the church at Laodicea does not represent the church in this latter age, close to the second coming. Rather, combined with the other letters, it pictures the church in all ages.

Revelation 3:14, "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this." Again, the angel is the messenger of God among God's people. This is the pastor of the church. He receives the Word of God from Christ and is responsible for faithfully transmitting it to the church.

Laodicea is about fifty miles south and east of Ephesus. Wilson notes, "Prosperous Laodicea was famous for its banks, its clothing and carpets made from the local glossy black wool and its medical school which produced a noted ear ointment and eye salve (v. 18)."<sup>1</sup>

Christ shows Himself as the Beginning of creation. The word translated *beginning* is the root for our word architect. Christ is the designer and fabricator of creation. This is not a text showing Christ to be a creature. Far from it, Christ is the origin and source of creation. Christ gives Laodicea the sharpest of the rebukes given to the churches.

Verse 15, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot." It is always best not to be fanatical. Correct? Moderation is the byword. This life calls for moderation in all things. This is not the case

according to Jesus Christ. Christ is not looking for moderation. He is especially not looking for moderation in faith and life. "I wish that you were cold or hot." It would be far better that you were either red hot or ice cold than merely tepid. One thing we despise is tepid coffee or tea. So it is with Christianity. Christ commended John the Baptizer for his white hot zeal. "He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light" (John 5:35).

Verse 16, "So because you are luke-warm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth." The word translated *spit* is rendered *vomit* in the margin of the New American Standard Bible. The picture is vivid.

I once tried to illustrate this text to a group of high school students. I placed a chair in the front of the platform to represent a toilet. I threw myself in front of the chair and began to wretch. My effort was to portray what we sometimes call the heaves. We end in dry heaves. Our bodies reject the contents of our stomachs. The demonstration must have been a success. When I turned around and sat in the chair the small auditorium was filled with groans of disgust.

This is the whole point. Christ is filled with disgust for the church at Laodicea. He says this church is tepid. The church makes Him wretch. The very thought of this church makes Him ill.

What of our congregations? Are we luke-warm? Are we too content with moderation before God and Christ. Do we speak against sin? Do we declare the wrath of God against sin? Are we full of compassion for the lost? Do we proclaim the verities of Christ fully, without reservation or shame? Perhaps political correctness carries the day rather than biblical correctness. Perhaps a desire not to offend rules our thinking.

The words of the apostle Paul ring clear and true. "Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). Being a man-pleaser is incompatible with service to Christ. Hence the indictment against luke-warmness. Of course, we must ex-

tend common courtesies to all people. These are the courtesies due to others because they bear the image of God. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"; and "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27). At the same time we must speak the truth. As we do so, we must speak the truth with love (Ephesians 4:15).

The problem with the Laodiceans was their apparent wealth and the apparent blessing of God attending that wealth. Verse 17, "Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked."

The riches of Laodicea were material. Such is the case with many people today. Too often, outward wealth is taken as an undoubted indication of spiritual blessing. Even God's covenant blessings have two sides. Look at the situation with Isaac and Ishmael. Genesis 21:9-13 & 20, "Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. Therefore she said to Abraham, 'Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.'" The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant." . . . God was with the lad. . . .

Ishmael was blessed in a tangible and material way because of his connection to Abraham. *Outward* benefits of the covenant were his. The *spiritual* benefits of the covenant were not his. God said to Abraham, "Through Isaac your descendants shall be named." *Physical blessing* does not necessarily indicate *spiritual blessing*. Those of Laodicea thought differently. "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing."

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Wilson, *Revelation* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1985), 48.

## IN RESPONSE - THE LETTER TO LAODICEA, PART II

by Dennis Prutow

The church at Laodicea was deceived. The people thought their material wealth indicated eternal security. Such was not the case. Christ speaks pointedly, "I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see" (Revelation 3:18). We dare not be similarly deceived. We need to take the advice of Christ.

Real wealth is eternal. God refines your faith like precious metal so that "the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7). With faith in tact, you inherit real wealth.

White garments represent the righteousness of Christ. This is the perfect life lived by Christ on behalf of His people. God says, "So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord" (Leviticus 18:5). Christ did what are unable to do. Christ fulfilled the requirements of the Law and procured life. Because His works are of infinite value as the Son of God, these good works purchase heaven for all those who trust in Him, all the elect.

We *purchase* these white garments, not with our works. Jesus accomplished all. We purchase these white garments by abandoning hope and reliance in self and trusting solely in the work of Christ.

If we do not trust Christ, the shame of our nakedness will be revealed. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, "The eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Genesis 3:7). Their nakedness was both physical and spiritual. They were without clothes. They were without a covering for their sin. Hebrews 4:13 says, "There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." So it is for all of us. Matthew Henry observes,

We have reason to be afraid of approaching to God if we are not clothed and fenced with the righteousness of Christ, for nothing but this will be ar-

mour of proof and cover the shame of our nakedness.<sup>1</sup>

Nakedness, a symbol of sin, was not permitted at God's altar. The Lord commanded Moses, "You shall not go up by steps to My altar, so that your nakedness will not be exposed on it" (Exodus 20:26). The nakedness of sin must be covered with the righteousness of Christ.

At the same time, where there is sin, there ought to be shame. We should understand that it is far better for us to experience deep shame for sin in this life rather than in the life to come. In this life there is opportunity for repentance. In the life to come there is no such opportunity. There is only punishment for sin. "Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming" (1 John 2:28). Hell is a place of deep and abiding shame from which there is no release for all eternity. The shame of sinners will be revealed to all but most fully to themselves.

The Laodiceans also needed more than eye salve made in their own clinics. They needed spiritual eyes. They needed eyes open to the spiritual truths of the Word of God. Recall the disciples on the Emmaus road after the Passion of Christ. "While they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself approached and began traveling with them. But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. Later, when the risen Christ broke bread with them, "then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him" (Luke 24:31).

Were the eyes of the Laodiceans prevented from recognizing spiritual things? Did their affluence blind them? "A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Corinthians 2:14). Were their eyes blinded by Satan? "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4). Christ must open their eyes.

One way He does this is through reproof. Reproof for sin is therefore a sign of the love of God. Verse 19, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent." The thought comes from Proverbs 3:12, "For whom the Lord loves He reproveth, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights." The writer to the Hebrews reminds his readers suffering under persecution is a form of discipline. It manifests the love of God (Hebrews 12:4-13).

Reproof is often needed in the church. Paul tells Timothy, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). It is the Word of God which is fit for such activity. "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Verse 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 will dine with him, and he with Me." Christ stands at the door of the church in judgment, the third scenario suggested in the exposition of Revelation 3:11. Christ is outside the church in judgment where faith, the righteousness of Christ, and spiritual eyesight are all absent. See the previous exposition. Compare verse 17.

Verse 21 relates God's promise to those who heed the reproof. "He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne." Only faith born of the Spirit overcomes the world (1 John 5:4). To sit with Christ on the Father's throne is to rule with Christ (Revelation 20:4). Pastors rule with Christ when they preach the Word of God. Elders reign with Christ when they guide the church with the rule of His Word. Believers rule with Christ when they implement His Word in their homes, work places, and within the general culture. Are we listening? Verses 22, 19, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." "Be zealous therefore, and repent."

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Nutley, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 1:27.

# IN RESPONSE - APPREHENSION OF THE MAJESTY OF CHRIST

by Dennis Prutow

One of the objectives of reading the Bible, of knowing God and of worshipping together is to obtain an adequate understanding of the majesty of God and of Christ. This is true of the Book of Revelation. As we read this great book, we must come to grips with the majesty of Christ. This is one of the great themes of the book. I think this is also one of the blessings promised to us, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it" (Revelation 1:3). This is certainly one of the great lessons for the churches in chapters 2 and 3.

As noted, Revelation begins with a greeting, a description of Christ, and John's reaction to Him. Revelation 1:4-5, "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth."

Revelation 1:12-16,

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

In each of the letters to the seven churches, Christ immediately refers to these descriptions and visions. These churches must grasp the majesty of the Lord, King, and Head of the church.

Revelation 2:1, "The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this." The ever present and omnipresent Majestic One upholds the ministry of His church. Revelation 2:8,

"The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this." The Majestic One reveals the eternal character of His life in resurrection.

Revelation 2:12, "The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this." The Majestic One comes with the Word of consummate blessing and judgment.

Revelation 2:18, "The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this." Know this: the eyes of the Majestic One pierce the heart and His steps are sure.

Revelation 3:1, "He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this." The Majestic One possesses the Spirit of perfection. He upholds His ministry with this Spirit of perfect power.

Revelation 3:7, "He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this." The majesty of Christ includes perfect holiness. He alone opens heaven to some and closes eternal bliss to others. He does so with perfect justice and righteousness. Revelation 3:14, "The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this." The Majestic Christ is the Amen, the final Word of God, and the architect of truth.

Churches and individuals must come to grips with the majesty of God, the Creator, and Christ, the Redeemer. Christ introduces Himself to each congregation, relating His majestic power and glory, to emphasize this. We take it as central to Christianity, if men and women are to properly serve Christ, God must press home to their hearts the greatness of this Majestic One. For this reason too, the message of each letter corresponds to the revelation or vision of Christ given to that church. In Ephesus, there is a loss of love. Christ reveals Himself as the One who is the fulfillment of covenant love. He walks in the midst of the church.

In Smyrna, the danger is fear of impending persecution. Christ manifests Himself as victor over death itself. Do not fear! In Pergamum, Christ detects worldliness infiltrating the church. Christ shows Himself as the One with both the word of blessing and the sword of judgment. In Thyatira, the church tolerated

heresy while others in her midst rejected these false teachings. Christ shows Himself with feet of bronze fully able to sternly tread the wine press of wrath. He has the power to rule. Some reign with Him as they implement His Word.

In Sardis, the problem was a good reputation with no life from the Spirit. Christ has the only Spirit, the perfect Spirit, from whom we must gain strength and life. Esprit de corps may win favor with the world but it is not the Spirit of God. Philadelphia has an open door of ministry and service before her. Christ therefore displays Himself as the One who wields the Key of David. He has the ultimate power to open and close heaven. Finally, in Laodicea, the problem is lukewarmness. Christ makes himself known as the Amen. There is nothing tepid in God's exclamation point.

Churches and individuals must know the majestic attributes of Christ whether gracious or judgmental. We sometimes demur at the thought of doctrine. The attributes of Christ display His person. We fail to know Him if we do not understand or recognize His attributes. How is it possible to serve the Christ we confess without an appreciation of his Majesty? The Book of Revelation and the pictures of Christ given to the seven churches answer the question plainly. We cannot.

God impresses us with the majesty of Christ to change our hearts, alter our behavior, and temper our attitudes. When John saw the vision of Christ, his heart failed. Christ raise him up. Revelation 1:17, "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last.'" The same was true on the Sea of Galilee. "When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid'" (Matthew 14:26-27). The church needs to hear the Word of Christ. The church also needs an apprehension of the greatness and majesty of Christ.

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