

The Blind Ophthalmologist: A Theological Study of Revelation 3:14-22

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Abstract: The only church Jesus does not commend among the seven churches of Asia is the Church of Laodicea. This is as strange as it calls for a critical look at the problem of the church. As an expansion of the existing studies on the text to Laodicea, this theological study investigates the content of the letter to the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:14-22 to identify the church's core problem and the central message it carries. The study examines the theological understanding of the key imagery Jesus employs to describe Laodicea's church. The main argument is that the major problem of the church is the lack of perception, and the focus of the message lies in the caution that being spiritually indifferent is perilous, but even worse is the peril that lies in being oblivious to one's spiritual state due to a shift of focus from Jesus.

Keywords: *Laodicea, Lukewarm, Vomit, Hot or Cold, Seven Churches.*

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Citation: Korsah, EK & Boaheng, I. (2023). The Blind Ophthalmologist: A Theological Study of Revelation 3:14-22. *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)*, 4(3), 568-579.



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INTRODUCTION

To the seven churches in Asia (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea), Jesus addresses through John, “things which are” and “things to follow hereafter” (Rev 1:19). To each church, a peculiar message befitting its situation is given, though the messages have some similarities and are probably shared across the churches (Osborne, 2002).¹ The curiosity about the absence of any commendation to the Church of Laodicea has warranted scholarly investigations and commendable analyses into the core problem of the church and the message it is given. These studies, nonetheless, have by no means been exhaustive in evidence and perspective. This study offers additional insight and perspective to expand the existing theological understanding of the text concerning the fundamental problem of the church and the core message Jesus communicates to its members.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

Through theological analysis, the text of Rev 3:14-22 is explained in the context of the messages to the seven churches and the entire book of Revelation. By employing the appropriate theological tools, a contextual analysis of the text is done in light of existing scholarly studies on the text to uncover its message. The text is analyzed against the socio-historical and political settings of Laodicea and its church by examining biblical and extra-biblical sources including scholarly commentaries and studies on the text, the city of Laodicea, and the church in the city. The data are derived from secondary sources including Bible

¹ Osborne suggests that because each letter ends with “*hear what the Spirit says to the churches,*” all the messages and warnings are meant for heading and self-application by the seven churches.

Commentaries, Greek Lexicons, Dictionaries, Encyclopedias and scholarly journal articles about the text. The study is organized this way: The background, significance, and methodology of the study are followed by the context of the text and the socio-historical context of the passage before reviewing relevant literature on the passage. The analysis of the core problem(s) and message and the contemporary theological implications and conclusions follow in that order.

The Context of the Text

Revelation, the last book of the Bible, written in an apocalyptic genre, is an inspired prophetic book (Rev. 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19) (Boring, 1989; Stefanovic, 2002; Garland, 2004). That the author employs the apocalyptic genre in writing this prophecy should not give readers and interpreters the occasion to categorise it with other apocalyptic literature as uninspired, non-canonical pseudonymous writing (Garland 2004). The book is written by John who identifies himself as a brother and companion of the churches he addresses (Rev. 1:9). The debate as to who this John is has existed since the Church Fathers. Doubts from questioning scholars have not quenched the belief of optimistic ones in line with early Christian authors such as Irenaeus, the Muratorian Canon, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian, that John (son of Zebedee), the apostle who authored the Gospel of John and three epistles, is the author of the book of Revelation (Walvoord and Zuck, 1983; Boring, 1989; Stefanovic, 2002; Osborne, 2002). John identifies his location as the island of Patmos, where, it is believed, he may have been exiled as a prisoner by Emperor Domitian in A.D. 81-96 (Stefanovic, 2002; Walvoord and Zuck, 1983). John’s immediate audience and readers are the seven churches of Asia, a province of Imperial Rome.

Based on the different traditional schools of interpretation

(Preterism, Futurism, Idealism, Historicism) or other hybrid forms, however, the book has been assigned various audiences and purposes by different interpreters (Garland, 2004). In pointing out and contending the motives of some of these interpreters, Garland argues that “if it were possible to restrict the role of the book of Revelation to a particular audience or narrow purpose, then its relevance to believers occupying other geographic or historic positions will necessarily be reduced” (p.36). Because each method of interpretation seems to contribute some truth and yet have some weaknesses, it might be appropriate to consider Stefanovic’s suggestion that none of the traditional approaches of interpretation should be favoured; and that the reader should allow the text to rule the interpretation (Stefanovic, 2002). In line with this broader approach, many either identify or allude to the purpose of the book as including, though not limited to, (1) revealing the divine glory of Jesus Christ (2) addressing the current needs of the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 1:4) and (3) continuing the presentation of the gospel message about how the battle between good and evil finalises in the eschaton (end) with the saints as winners with Christ (Stefanovic, 2002; Garland, 2004). These purposes pertain to both the contemporary issues that need attention in the churches (things which are) and the happenings of the future about how God’s plan of salvation unfolds till the end of the world (things to come hereafter) (Rev. 1:19).

In the socio-political and religious contexts of the churches of Asia are internal and external challenges. Also troubling were internal issues of apostasy and false teachings regarding involvement in pagan religious festivals, eating food offered to idols, and sexual immorality (e.g., engaging in temple prostitution) which are deepened by the false theology of the Nicolaitans, the Baalamites and the Jezebel-inclined

factions to compromise to enhance their economic and socio-political statuses. Externally, persecutions by the authorities of Rome on the demand for emperor worship, partaking in religious pagan festivals, accusations of cannibalism (because the Christians are perceived to be eating human flesh and blood during the Lord's supper) and opposition from the Jews threaten their very lives (Stefanovic, 2002). Given these internal and external difficulties, Christians in this area have become extremely concerned and worried about their security and what the future holds for them. Most, probably, the book of Revelation serves as a response to these troubling circumstances of the churches, offering hope to the despondent and giving direction to the confused and misguided. This hope is also relevant to and meant for the Church at large and the Church beyond John's era.

The message to the church of Laodicea, the last of the seven churches addressed by Jesus, is preceded by the message to the church of Philadelphia and followed by the visions of the throne room of heaven. The message is presented by Jesus, inscribed by John and sent to the church through its angel. The Greek word “angelō”, angel or messenger (vs. 14) has been interpreted by some scholars (e.g., Stefanovic, 2002) as the bishop or pastor of the church though others (e.g., Boring, 1989; Osborne, 2002) have contended that this angel rather refers to a representative or guardian angel of the church in the heavenly realm. It was to these messengers (angels) of the seven churches that all the letters were addressed so they could relay the content to the members of the churches in question. With some uncertainty, scholars who think these are bishops of the churches, have either suggested the bishop of the church of Laodicea as Archippus (probably, the son of Philemon) (Garland, 2004, p. 268; Walvoord and Zuck, 1983, p. 940) (cf.

Col. 4:17; Philemon 2); or Epaphras (Col. 1:7; 4:12, 13) (Osborne, 2002).

The Socio-historical Context

In the area of now Eski-hissar, a modern village near the Denizli Province of Turkey, was located Laodicea, a metropolis of Phrygia Pacatiana (Garland 2004; Stefanovic, 2002). The city, colonized by Antiochus II, the Syrian king, between 261 and 246 B.C.E was originally called Diospolis and then Rhoas (Pétridès, 1910; Easton's 1897). It was Antiochus II who gave Laodicea the name of his wife, Laodice, whom he would later divorce, and by whom he would be poisoned (Garland, 2004). The Greek word "Laodikeia" from which we have Laodicea is a compound word coined from "Laos" (people) and "dikē" (judgment; rule) (Garland 2004). Interpretations given to the name include: "justice of the people"; "just people" and "people judged". Others still say that in the city's name lies the thought that it ruled itself instead of being ruled by the spirit of God. (Smith's Bible Dictionary; Hitchcock's Bible Names Dictionary; Garland, 2004). The city had been known as an independent, wealthy city that prospered in the wool and garment industry from which it adorned its people. It was also notable for its prominent banking industry (most probably for storing gold) (Stefanovic, 2002). Its location at the intersection of three major roads passing through Asia Minor might have favoured the commercial endeavours of the city (Carson, 1994). It was a city which suffered wars and, at least, two earthquakes, after none of which it asked for or accepted any external relief. This self-sufficient attitude seemed to have been owed to her wealth which further fuelled her complacency and pride. In his commentary on Revelation, Garland (2004, p. 69) alludes to Hemer and Trench's observation about the city as follows:

The city suffered grievously in the Mithridatic war, but presently recovered again; once

more in the wide-wasting earthquake in the reign of Tiberius, but was repaired and restored by the efforts of its citizens, without any help asked by them from the Roman senate. The prosperity of the city was illustrated following a great earthquake of A.D. 60, which destroyed the city and other cities around it. As was its habit, the Roman government offered substantial aid in rebuilding the devastation. Yet Laodicea was not among those cities that received help. Whether the government refused to offer it because of their great wealth, or Laodicea refused it because they did not need it, is debated. Whatever the case, the reason was wealth.

One of the most preeminent exploits for which Laodicea was known was in medicine. At the temple of Asclepius, it operated a medical school which produced medicines, notably an eye ointment, a Phrygian eye salve—some scholars add ear ointment made from a pulverized rock in the area. This could even be powdered and compressed into tablets for easy export (Carson, 1994; Walvoord and Zuck, 1983). Besides Zeus, the patron god of the city, there were temples for Appolo, Dionysus, Hades, Hera, Serapis, Athena, and others including Asclepius, the god of healing (Keener, 2014). No wonder their medical school was built in Asclepius Temple.

The city's lack of natural water supply was compensated for by the hot mineral spring water from Hierapolis obtained through the constructed aqueducts which also cooled the water on its way to Laodicea. However, upon reaching Laodicea this water was distasteful, tepid (lukewarm) and emetic (vomit-inducing) (Carson, 1994). In Addition to the indigenous Hellenized Syrians, the population of Laodicea comprised Greeks, Romans, and Jews

(Pétridès, 1910). The evidence of early Christianity in the city is clear, though there's no consensus on who established the church there. For instance, Paul's concern for the church in this city and the probable sharing of his letter with the church of Colosse is evident from Col. 2:1-2; 4:16. What is worth noting, however, is that the three things that made Laodicea most popular and complacent, viz, wool and clothing industry, banking in gold, and the attainments in medicine, also, were the depiction in which the spiritual picture of the city's church was contained (Carson, 1994). In what follows, these imageries and the messages they carry are analyzed:

PRELIMINARY DISCUSSIONS

Jesus brings to bear the irony of the poorest church in the richest city in his message to Laodicea. As Keener (2014, p. 737) summarizes, "[e]verything in which Laodicea could have confidence outwardly, its church, which reflected its culture, lacked spiritually" (see Dave Burke's reflection on that thought). The moral character of the Laodicean church is described as reflecting its socio-economic environment, with each of the city's distinguishing features turned against the church as an example of failure rather than success" (Burke, n.d). Perhaps, it is only the lukewarm condition of Laodicea's water that the city shares similitude with the spiritual state of its church. Jesus adopts the imagery familiar to the church of Laodicea to paint their loathsome spiritual bankruptcy to elicit the right appreciation of their spiritual state (vs. 15-17). A crucial part of the message could be summed up as *serving God and mammon is as good as (or worse than) not serving Him* (see Luke 16:13; Matt 6:24). Unfortunately, it is in this state that the church of Laodicea boasts and flaunts its riches. Therefore, Jesus assesses her, rebukes her, laments the danger of her poor spiritual condition,

and points out to her the best solution available. This section engages current scholarly analysis, thoughts, and commentaries of the key imageries used and their understanding, and shows the need to expand on the existing scholarly thoughts on the subject.

Key imagery and understanding

"The Amen, faithful, and beginning"

Preceding the assessment is the identity and credibility of the assessor (vs. 15). Jesus assures that the assessment about to be given comes from a competent, reliable and trustworthy source. He is *the Amen*, denoting firmness, certainty; affirmation of God's truth (Garland 2004, p. 269; Keener, 2014, p. 732; cf. 2 Cor. 1:20); *the faithful and true witness*, denoting a sincere and accurate person; and *the ruler of God's creation*, or as some versions render it, *the beginning of God's creation*. The Greek word "arché", translated passively, as "beginning" could also be translated actively, as 'origin', 'source', 'beginner' or 'principle of creation' (Stefanovic, 2002, p. 144; Garland, 2004, p. 270). It is argued that this phrase is not to be (mis)understood as the first created being. It is rather to be understood in the context of John 1:1-3 and Col. 1:16, where Jesus is shown as the beginner or originator of God's creation, by whom all things were created. This is the reason He must be seen to be trustworthy in his assessment role.

"Cold or hot"

"Cold or hot" relates to the water conditions around Laodicea: Hierapolis (about 6 miles away) has hot springs; Colosse (about 10 miles away) has cold, drinkable and refreshing water. Hot water is good for bathing and therapeutic use; cold water is good for drinking. Laodicea has none of these. The Lycus river dries up in Summer, forcing them to rely on the water sourced from Hierapolis (which turns tepid on arrival) (Keener, 2014; Carson (1994). Whereas the cold could typify

unbelievers, the hot could represent Christians who are not only saved but who reflect this salvation by bearing fruits (vs. 16). Although the reason for Jesus' preference for either hotness or coldness is hotly debated, it makes sense to say that the hot represents spiritually vibrant and the cold represents those who have not tasted the saving-grace yet. For people with these two conditions, there is hope because the hot is producing fruits of their saving grace; and to the cold, heaven always provides abundant grace to which they could positively respond and be saved. Laodicea, however, is neither a missionary nor a mission field.² Supposing it has not received the gospel, it can be identified as a mission field for the gospel and reached by a missionary, but it has already received the gospel; yet it does not reflect the goodness of the gospel, making it neither hot nor cold, a perilous position to assume.

"Lukewarm"

In the lukewarm lies a danger. The effect that the water in Laodicea has on its people is similar to the effect the spiritual life of the church has on Jesus (Carson, 1994). The Lukewarm imagery depicts indifference and compromise, and this makes Jesus vomit. The lukewarm seem to be people who profess God's name in vain because they bear His name (Christians) but lack His spirit and character (vs. 17). They profess Christ, but they are not truly *regenerate* or faithful believers (Fruchtenbaum cited in Garland, 2004). The Laodicean church has a form of godliness but denies its power and vigour thereof, without sensing it (cf. 2 Tim 3:5). The danger is that it is not seen as unchristian to require the "kerygma" (the gospel message for the unbelievers) nor does it have the spirit of Christ to manifest His fruits thereof. Based on Rev. 2:10, 13; 3:10, Stefanovic alludes to local persecutions of the

Christians by Rome leading to John's exile to Patmos; though the Jews enjoy "*religio licita*" (a legal religion) status from Rome (Stefanovic, 2002). This is worsened by the fact that Christians in Asia are persecuted by the Jews (or so-called Jews) (Rev. 2:9; 3:9) who have been estimated by Trench and Mills, as alluded to by Garland, to be over 7500 (excluding women and children) by the time John writes this letter. Based on these premises, Garland maintains that there should be a mention of some persecution of the Christians in Laodicea if they are true to their faith and not regarded as *benign* (p.272). Their faith has been too compromised to be offensive to other religious groups who are otherwise antagonistic to their Christian principles and practices.

"Vomit you out"

Laodicea will be vomited out if it maintains its temperature (lukewarm) (vs. 17). Salvation is full and free for everyone, but not everyone accepts or keeps it. Probation may close for the church of Laodicea and their doom will have been due to their choice to reject the gift of salvation (cf. Rev 2:5; Rom. 1:20-28). Laodicea's indifference cannot be contained forever: their probation may, sadly, close.

"Wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked"

Contrary to her arrogant brag (I need nothing), the Laodicean church lives in a rather pitiful and sad spiritual condition (vs. 17). The depravity and wretchedness of the church must be understood only in the spiritual sense. The use of the Greek word "ptóchos" (poor, destitute), denotes extreme poverty, as of a pauper or a beggar as against "penia" which is used in a general sense of poverty (Walvoord and Zuck, 1983). Because Laodicea's economic condition should not make her beg for alms, it is obvious that Jesus' use of the word naked is about the church's dire spiritual need which should compel her to beg (ask) for spiritual help. To be naked is to be under judgement and

² "Loren Cunningham Quote: 'You're Either a Missionary or a Mission Field.'"

extreme humiliation (Stefanovic, 2002). What worsens her case is her blindness (oblivion): the fact that she has, in ignorance, buried her head in the sand like an ostrich, thinking all is well. It is a pity that sin itself could blindfold the sinner to the extent they are completely unaware of sin's sinfulness or grip.

"Refined gold"

In place of the ordinary gold and material wealth that Laodicea prides herself on (vs. 18), Jesus admonishes the church to buy from him refined gold. This is about the true spiritual wealth the church so woefully and obliviously lacks, which only Jesus could give (Walvoord and Zuck (1983, p. 940). This, refined gold, Stefanovic explains, figuratively stands for the faith which has been tested (p. 147) (cf. 1 Pet. 1:7). This faith is absent in the church of Laodicea.

"White clothes"

Instead of the beautiful clothes provided by the city's wool industry, the church is asked to buy righteousness from Jesus to cover its nakedness (vs. 18). The needed righteousness is symbolized by white clothes as against the 'black wool' (Walvoord; Zuck, 1983) the city proudly produces (cf. Rev 3:4). The focus of the church has to change from the physical to the spiritual and more needful, the righteousness of Christ.

"Repent"

The church is asked to repent of its condition (vs. 19). This rebuke, however, is motivated by love (Heb. 12:5, 6) and needs to be accepted in good faith. Unfortunately for Laodicea, some scholars conclude that it could not awake from its slumber or respond to the rebuke and the call to repent. Garland cites Trench, for confirmation, that indeed, *'Recent travellers with difficulty discovered one or two Christians in the poor village of Iski-hissar, which stands on the site which Laodicea occupied of old'* (Garland, 2004, p. 283). Although other factors such as resettlement could account for the

absence of Christians in Iski-hissar, it speaks volumes that a city that was once a hub of Christianity could be virtually devoid of any Christians.

"I stand at the door and knock"

Interestingly, Jesus is the one knocking at Laodicea's door. Therefore, it is not Jesus who has closed the door of salvation to Laodicea; it is rather Laodicea that has shut its door to Jesus, and it is she who has the responsibility and the choice to open it for him to come in. Garland, 2014; Wendland, 2014) argue that the language used "hestēka" (I have stood) and "krouō" (I am knocking) shows that the standing has been done for a long time and the knocking is ongoing (vs. 20). Wendland adds, however, that this call is not a Gospel call to open their heart but an appeal for repentance as to a Christian who has gone lax or a hypocrite. Jesus is not only gentle and patient towards Laodicea but he assumes the responsibility that should be Laodicea's. Instead of Laodicea knocking at his door (Matt 7:7), Jesus waits on his church to be invited in. This irony corroborates his condescension and the fact that He first loved us.

"The Overcomer"

The one who overcomes will also have opened the door and invited Jesus into his heart as the ruler of their lives (vs. 21). To such is the promise of dining with Jesus and he with them. In Jewish thought, this feast gives an idea of privilege and intimacy in a feasting situation as in the promised marriage supper (Luke 19:5-7; John 13; Matt. 22:1-14 (Keener, 2014; Wendland, 2014). The victor is also promised a seat on the Father's throne as Jesus, the Son, also sits with his Father. What an honour that would be.

What will be expanded by this study based on what the scholars have done so far bothers on the theological interpretations and perspectives on the imageries Jesus employed. The theological interpretations of these imageries and expressions including

“But you do not realize”, “buy from me”; “salve...so you can see”; and “if anyone hears”, form the content of the analysis of the core problem and message to Laodicea discussed in the next section.

ANALYSIS OF THE CORE PROBLEM AND MESSAGE

“Blindness unrealised”

The Greek word “typhlos” (from taphoo; opaque) has been translated as “Blind, physically or mentally” (Biblehub.com). It is obvious that the use of *blind* (adjective), in this case, describes the lack of mental or spiritual perception since we have no reason to connect the members of the church of Laodicea to any physical blindness. In using this metaphor, we can say that “blind” in this context pertains to the church's lack of true knowledge of her miserable condition and where to find a solution. Based on this premise, this study suggests that among the ills Jesus laments and yearns to undo for the church, her blindness, probably, is the foremost. The irony in a poor, wretched, pitiful and naked *person* claiming, “I... do not need a thing”, could be either because they are too arrogant to admit their weakness or they are too blind to perceive their condition or both. It is the position of this paper that even though the church is both boastful and blind, the foremost problem which also informs her pride is her blindness; thus, taking away her blindness will bring her to her senses and make her humble. This stance is assumed based on Jesus' adoption of several imageries for the church's lack of vision and right perception. Laodicea's mental blindness and lack of the right perception seem to run through the entire message in imageries and expressions such as *blind*, *But you do not realize*, *buy from me*; *salve...so you can see*; and *if anyone hears*. In what follows, the study briefly analyses how each of the imageries and expressions emphasizes this ignorance and lack of sight.

“But you do not realize”

Jesus' use of the clause “...*But you do not realize...*” (vs. 17) contrasts what the church claims she is and what she really is. Here, Jesus shows Laodicea's obvious lack of knowledge and state of oblivion regarding her state and spiritual standing. She sees herself as rich when she is, in reality, poor, wretched, miserable and naked. Being so unaware of one's need when it seems abundantly manifest could be attributable to ignorance caused by the lack of sight or the inability to correctly perceive.

“Buy from me”

Laodicea's blindness (i.e., lack of true knowledge) is clothed in the commercial language, “buy from me” (vs. 18). Garland rightly observes that in a language familiar to the merchants of Laodicea, some of whom may have been members of the church, Jesus speaks to them to buy from Him. Jesus puts forth himself as the source of the best merchandise that cannot be corrupted by the allurements of the world (vs. 18). Even though Jesus uses the word “buy”, with what can one buy something as priceless as the righteousness of Jesus? This righteousness can only be accepted in faith and for free (Is. 55:1). That Jesus (the seller of true wealth) admonishes Laodicea, filled with experienced traders, to buy from him, signals ignorance and lack of true knowledge on the part of Laodicea. It must be noted that Jesus is not enticing Laodicea as a seller would entice a prospective buyer for the seller's economic interest.³ Jesus, on the contrary, persuades Laodicea to buy from him because he has the best goods and Laodicea is truly in need of those goods. If Laodicea's experience in commerce does not give her this

³ Sellers in the market normally lure buyers to buy from them not because such sellers have the best goods on the market, nor because the buyers necessarily need the goods: they entice them to buy from them mainly to profit from the buyers.

information and she is still buying from the wrong places, then she must be truly blind and ignorant.

Moreover, "Buy from me" could be an invitation to a wandering trader. In this invitation, the cause of Laodicea's poor spiritual condition is uncovered. This trader (Laodicea's church) patronizes goods of the world market where alluring items have, for some years, shifted her focus from Jesus, the merchant who has the goods of real value in life. In this invitation, Jesus calls for attention to Himself, not because she needs Laodicea but because Laodicea needs Him, and the cause of her blindness is the change of focus from Jesus to the world. The focus of the church is now on trading for the glamour, fame, and luxury of this world which cannot save her (cf. John 2:15, 16; Luke. 12:15).

"Salve...so you can see"

Regarding the church's need of salve (eye salve) to see, Jesus had addressed a similar spiritual need back in his day, as recorded in the Gospel of John: "For judgment, I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?" Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that **you claim** you can see, your guilt remains" (John 9:39-41, NIV, emphasis mine) (cf. Matt 15:14). Just like the Pharisees, the Laodicean church is not only *wretched, pitiful, poor, and naked* but also blind. Although they live in a city famous for its ophthalmological prowess, the church is spiritually blind; and her situation cannot be salvaged by the popular Phrygian powder or oil produced in the ophthalmological city of Laodicea. Jesus wishes for them a real vision, not a claim to see like that of the Pharisees. Indeed, the church's spiritual blindness is the truest picture Jesus can paint about it; for if it is not so blind, it can see that it is, at best, wretched, poor, pitiful and naked. Whether the eyesight

Jesus wishes for Laodicea is for perceiving her poor state or to see Jesus, her major problem is the lack of sight (perception) leading to ignorance about her true condition and greatest need. She may be an eye doctor but a blind one.

"If anyone hears"

In the expression "If anyone hears" (vs. 20) sits two important ideas. These ideas have been explained below. First, the inability to hear leads to ignorance and lack of knowledge. Perception comes not only through vision but also hearing (and other senses). Conversely, ignorance and the inability to perceive come not only through the lack of sight but also through the inability to hear or due to some psychological noise such as the unwillingness to hear. It is worth noting that the contents of the letters to the churches are, probably, read or communicated by the angels or messengers of the churches (or others) and heard by the members who may not have the opportunity to read for themselves. The church members may listen but not hear. Since everyone in the church has a physical ear (at least, most people do), the expression, "If anyone hears" should be understood in the context of individuals perceiving what is read, understanding it, accepting it and responding to it with obedience. If this is not done, it also leads to ignorance and mental "blindness", resulting in dire consequences (cf. Prov. 15:31, 32). It is intriguing that even though Jesus ends each of the messages to the seven churches with "He who has an ear", Laodicea alone receives an additional caution and invitation to hear: "if anyone hears". This puts an additional emphasis on the spiritual blindness of the church of Laodicea which is absent in all the other six messages. Probably, Laodicea did not just produce eye salve but ear salve too as observed by some scholars. If the city gave physical healing to people with ear and hearing problems, its church now needs to focus

on "hearing" spiritual truth from the living word of God.

Second, there is hope beyond the church's collective spiritual bankruptcy. The singularity of the Greek word [tis] (vs 20), translated as "anyone" (ESV, NIV) or "you" (NRSV, NLT), offers hope for each member of the church. As a nominative masculine singular interrogative/indefinite pronoun, it refers to "any one", "some one", and "a certain one or thing" (Biblehub.com). The singular use of the word, here, indicates that God is speaking to individual members of the Laodicean Church. Despite the general lukewarm, poor, wretched, pitiful, naked, and blind state of the church, God refuses to give a blanket judgment where everyone in the church is judged according to the state of the church.⁴ Instead, He gives each individual in the church of Laodicea (anyone) an opportunity to disassociate themselves from the spiritual state of the church. From blindness and ignorance to the knowledge that Laodicea's church lacks, Jesus calls each individual in the church. To such individuals is the admonishing to hear and humbly claim the offer and relief package from Jesus (faith as refined gold, the righteousness of Christ as white clothes, spiritual sight as salve). The light of the world (John 8:12) invites the spiritually blind of the church into his light. The vine beckons the withering branch to reconnect with it, bear fruits (cf. John 15:1-6), and be counted among the victors in the end.

Contemporary Theological Implications

Craving for the wealth and fame of this world is either the root of one evil or the route to another. Nevertheless, Laodicea's wealth was not a problem in itself. Money is not evil; the love of money is the root of evil (1 Tim 6:10). In the Gospels, Jesus admonishes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the

kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3, NIV). The financially poor can be poor in spirit, and the financially rich can be poor in spirit. This encouragement from Jesus is not about the financially rich or poor; neither is the poverty in this case one perceived or ascribed to anyone by another person. This is the poverty of one's innermost heart recognised by themselves. Coming to the reality of one's utter lack and need for spiritual vitality is what Jesus calls for. To anyone beyond the geography and era of Laodicea with a similar condition, this message of hope for Laodicea can be a lesson. In the classic book, *Steps to Christ*, the author puts it this way: "The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty [sic] you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature. This is evidence that Satan's delusions have lost their power; that the vivifying influence of the Spirit of God is arousing you" (White, 1892 p. 64). The closer we are to Jesus, the filthier we appear to ourselves.

An African proverb⁵ literally says, "if you sell⁶ your sickness, you obtain a cure for it" meaning, solutions lie in accepting our needs and calling for help. The realisation of one's self-deprivation leads one to desire spiritual growth and tap into the source of all spiritual wealth, God. Upon hearing the gospel, people realise their spiritual poverty; they mourn that poor state, seek divine help, and bear much fruit. What they become, sometimes, leads them to be persecuted, insulted and lied about as might have happened to some of the churches in Asia. These attributes Laodicea lacked, and many professed Christians are short of today. Light aids vision; Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12). Therefore, the lesser one depends on Jesus, the lesser one's vision

⁴ Spiritually poor and indifferent but ignorant of her state

⁵ The proverb is from the Akan ethnic group of Ghana

⁶ "Sell" here means to announce

and perception. The question to ask one's self is: Do I see (sense) my spiritual poverty in God's presence or do I see myself as righteous before him? One's answer to this question tells how far or how close they are from the Saviour and what their focus is. Nonetheless, Jesus keeps knocking at everyone's door. To put this in commercial parlance to resonate with the modern Laodicean Christian, each person is being invited to file for bankruptcy and ask for a bailout from Jesus. It is our choice to feel duly invited or unduly insulted.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the message given to the church of Laodicea has been examined from the context of Rev 3:14-22 and scholarly expositions and commentaries on it with the view to identifying the core problem of the church and the central theme of the message. An examination of the socio-historical setting of the city of Laodicea, the socio-religious context of the church, and the contextual meanings of the imageries and expressions employed bring out the church's blindness or lack of true knowledge as the main problem of the church. The study concludes, therefore, that the indifference and loss of faith of the church of Laodicea which puts her in great danger of losing salvation are, most probably, owed to her blindness or lack of true knowledge of her condition which is also owed to her shifted focus and abandoned patronage of Christ. "The hearing ear, and the seeing eye, the LORD hath made even both of them" (Prov 20:12, KJV). Even though Laodicea gave physical vision to people, it could not give spiritual light to Asia Minor as expected (cf. Matt 5:14; 6:22-24) because it did not look up to or reflect Jesus, the light of the world, hence the invitation to change focus.

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