

The High Priest Speaks To His Brothers In The World

John has received a revelation of Jesus Christ and we have seen that the revelation was intended for those whom Jesus made ‘a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father’ (Rev. 1:6). We have also seen that Jesus is presented as high priest, and that that picture is consistent with the nature of Man as created and with the role of Israel in the history of redemption.

Of course the way that Jesus is presented goes far beyond a mere literal image: the language is highly symbolic and we are intended to understand it as such. The language is ‘visual’ as well as addressing our ability to reason things through. Thus John turned to ‘see the voice’ (Rev. 1:12) and the impact of seeing was that he was physically overwhelmed by the one he saw (Rev. 1:17). We must note his description.

Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. ¹⁹Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. ²⁰As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. (Rev. 1:12-20)

This high priest holds seven stars and stands among seven lampstands and has a sharp two-edged sword issuing from his mouth (cf. Heb. 4:12) and his face was radiant (Rev. 1:16). It is hard to begin to imagine what this would have looked like and, to the one who saw it, it was a mystery which demanded not the unravelling of clues but the word of Christ declaring the meaning (so verse 20).

Why did John fall ‘at his feet as though dead’? Was it because of the splendor of the vision or was it, perhaps, that he recognised the one whom he saw, the one whom he knew but who now was appearing in such glory? Jesus, the one who died and who was raised, now controls death and the grave. That declaration was far more than a religious statement, it was the announcement that nothing human rulers could do would ever separate the church from her destiny. What is and what is to take place are all under Christ’s authority.

And he holds the seven stars, which are the angels of the seven churches, in his right hand. The word ‘angel’, sadly, conjures up images for us which are more derived from works of art than from the scriptures. The word means ‘messenger’ and imagining angels as winged beings probably misses the point. Isaiah uses ‘seraphim’ for the winged beings that announce God’s holiness (Isa. 6:2) ; elsewhere it is the ‘cherubim’, initially guarding the way to the garden in Genesis 3:24 then later with wings outstretched over the mercy seat in the holy of holies, who are described as winged (Ex. 24 and 37 etc.). But angels are not defined. Sometimes they are even unrecognised, as in Hebrews 13:2. Various angels appear in Revelation, and even the dragon of chapter 12 is said to have angels who unsuccessfully fought with him

against Michael and his angels (Rev. 12:7-8). So who the angels of the seven churches are we simply do not know. All we can say is that they represent the seven churches and, as such, must hear what Christ is saying.

Each of the seven churches receives a direct communication from the high priest. But the communication is something that every one who has an ear to hear must listen to. So while seven churches are addressed, these are messages that affect all the priestly community and not only members of these particular groups. At the same time, these seven churches were real communities, and the way the seven communications are structured indicates that real people in real places with real problems or real causes for commendation are being addressed. They are the priestly community in the world and the high priest is fully aware of their situation. 'I know' prominently introduces what is said to each group. The one with eyes like a flame of fire sees and knows all that is taking place. Where there is suffering and persecution, it is seen, and where there is sin being treated lightly, or worse, that too is not hidden. The priestly community has a role given to it which cannot be ignored, either by the members of the community or by the one who has purchased them for himself and for his Father.

TO THE SEVEN CHUCHES

All the churches mentioned were real places. Occasionally knowing something of the history and geography of the Roman province called 'Asia' even sheds light on some of the statements in the various sections. However, we need to be aware that a history lesson, while interesting and informative, is not the goal. The issues were too serious for that. Besides, for the various churches these things required no explanation; these people were there and needed a word from God himself.

And that is precisely what they received. Those who were familiar with the Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, would have quickly recognised what John had written. The self description by Jesus in Revelation 1:17 (cf. 2:8) is plain, and was also repeated in 22:13, 'I am the first and the last'. What is conspicuous, though, is that Isaiah twice presents this as the self description of God.

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. (Isa. 44:6)

Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called: I am He; I am the first, and I am the last.
¹³My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they stand at attention. (Isa. 48:12-13)

Added to other similar elements, such as God being called Alpha and Omega in Revelation 1:8, and then the same title coupled with 'the beginning and the end' in Revelation 21:6, with all these titles given to Jesus in Revelation 22:13, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that John sees Jesus as God. Of course he does not give a definition of this; he simply says things in a way that confronts our limited understanding with the vast revelation of who Jesus really is.

But not only is there this, perhaps, subtle reference to what is said being the word of God, there is the plain, inescapable statement directed to each church, 'Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches'. None of this is a 'doctrine' of the Trinity, but it does cause us to take note of the new revelation that

has come through Christ. Even more than that, it leaves us no excuse for ignoring or treating lightly what is being said.

TO EPHESUS

The work of salvation, by which we have been liberated from our sins by the blood of Christ and made a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, has to be seen in all its fulness. It is far more than an accounting adjustment, whereby Christ's righteousness and our guilt have been laid the account of the other. That is true, but hardly the whole story, especially since such a transaction need have no personal effect on us. But the redeemed have been made a new creation, not merely born through the word of truth (James 1:18) though that is undoubted, but actually set to hear and to respond to every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD (Deut. 8:3). That means that those who are in Christ, the last Adam, have their capacity to accept moral responsibility re-established. It is this which makes sense of the many exhortations which address us as sons (Heb. 12:5) (because we are in *the* Son). While the moral responsibility of humanity has not been removed through its sin, the fact of its slavery to sin and other demeaning elements, has meant that men and women could not, because they would not, hear the word of God. Certainly the word was always present, and was especially so through Israel (though Israel itself in general refused the word; cf. Acts 7:51-53), but always the word was filtered to remove anything which would expose guilt before God (Luke 11:49-51).

The church is morally responsible to hear and to joyfully respond in obedient love (so Deut. 6:4-5; 28:47). That is our dignity. It is the dignity of created humanity restored in Christ. The image of God is again, in Christ and so in those who are in him, fully functional. Ephesians 4:17-24¹ sets the moral responsibility of Christians in the context of the image of God (verse 24; cf. Col. 1:15). It is in this way that the Ephesian church was in need of correction. It has its doctrine correct and could detect and condemn sinful behavior with ease. But the great fault, so great that if left uncorrected it would eventually cause them to lose their identity as a genuine church, was that their restoration into the image of God was being suppressed under a cloak of religious rectitude. God is love (1 John 4:8, 16) and thus all things must be done in love. In fact, what is not done in love is not truth, not authentic (Eph. 1:15-16; 1 Cor. 13).

The horror of the Ephesian failure was that they had known love and left it (Rev. 2:4), so they must remember from what they have fallen, which demands from them a re-responding to the love which was poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5), the same Spirit who is presently speaking to them. And it is a re-responding to the love with which Christ freed them from their sins and made them to be his priestly brothers (Rev. 1:5-6). Of course, re-responding is never a one-off matter, since love is to be continually lived in, literally it is to be 'walked in' (Eph. 5:2), it is to be the *way* of living because it is the truth of God.

¹ Note the language used by Paul. First, there is, in the *NIV* and *NRSV* etc, the addition of the word 'of' or 'about' in verse 21, whereas Paul only said 'you heard him' which is startlingly different. Then, translations such as 'old self' and 'new self' actually obscure what was written. Paul wrote of the old 'man', meaning corrupt Adam, as he did in Romans 5:12-21 and 6:6, the new 'man', meaning Christ.

Those who overcome, who conquer, in this matter will discover what it is to be in the last Adam. All that the first Adam lost will be restored, and the cherubim with their flaming swords withdrawn.

TO SMYRNA

Smyrna was founded as a Greek colony on the summit of the hill of Pagos about 1000 BC, but was captured and destroyed by hostile forces about 600 BC. The Greek city ceased to exist and the site was left to local village people until it was rebuilt under Lysimachus during the years 301 - 281 BC.²

When Jesus was called ‘the first and the last, who was dead and came to life’ (Rev. 2:8), the words were drawn from the description of the high priest in chapter 1 (vs. 18). Perhaps the choice of epithet was determined also by the location of the recipients, since Smyrna had also been dead and returned to life though, even if it was, that would hardly be of any comfort to the believers at that time. True comfort could be had only in knowing that Christ had defeated death.

The historical situation of these Christians has parallels with the experiences of many today. Paul Barnett writes of Smyrna:

He speaks of the *slander* of those who say they are Jews (v.9). The Jewish people had suffered a crushing defeat from the Romans in Palestine 30 years earlier, the climax of which was the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem AD 70. An added humiliation was that the tax previously paid by Jews for the upkeep of their Temple was now to be contributed for the temple of Jupiter in Rome. The large Jewish community in Smyrna, like others in the Roman world of the time, was deeply embittered in these circumstances. However, the Jews retained their protected status within the empire, the price for which was the temple tax. They were not compelled to participate in the numerous (pagan) religious ceremonies which were inherent in every aspect of domestic and municipal life. It appears from the Revelation that, in their bitterness, then took action against Christians both in Smyrna and Philadelphia (2:9; 3:9).

Christians were extremely vulnerable at that time since they could not, in conscience as Christians, participate in municipal pagan religion nor in worship of the emperor. From their protected position, however, Jews were able to “slander” the Christians as disloyal to the authorities and to Rome. John writes that they are not, in truth, Jews, not truly the people of God. Theirs’ is a *synagogue of Satan*. In their rejection of God’s messiah, Jesus, and in their collaboration with pagan authorities against Christians they are really in league with Satan, not God.

In consequence of Jewish slander, Christians in Smyrna are about to *suffer*. *Prison, persecution and death* are mentioned by Jesus (vs.10-12). Presumably John has received up to date information on Patmos about the sufferings which are about to occur in Smyrna.

One who witnessed these events in Smyrna was Polycarp, a man then in his mid 20s, who had been taught the faith by the Apostle John. Within a few years he would become bishop of the church at Smyrna. Sixty years later, when he refused to renounce Jesus his king, he was condemned to the flames by the provincial governor. It is probably significant that the local Jewish community were actively involved in the burning of this Christian leader. Their bitterness against Christ and Christians was longstanding.³

Then, for example, on June 1st 2006, the following paragraph appeared in an email from *The Barnabas Fund*.

A Christian school master [in Pakistan] who was arrested and jailed after false accusations of “blasphemy”, has been released after spending five years in prison. It is believed that a rival

² Marcus Loane, *They Overcame*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971, pg. 46.

³ Paul Barnett, *Apocalypse Now and Then: Reading Revelation Today*, Anglican Information Office, Sydney, 1989, p. 52f. (italics his).

school instigated the accusation of blasphemy after becoming jealous of the success of Parvez Masih's school. On 1st April 2001 he was arrested. During his imprisonment he has been threatened at gun-point while his captors demanded he deny his Christian faith, and has also endured beatings from cell mates and police. Parvez, who faced the death penalty if found guilty of "defiling the name of Muhammad", was accused under Pakistan's notorious "blasphemy law", by which an allegation alone, without any evidence, is enough to have a Christian arrested. In April 2006 Parvez was finally found not guilty and released. However, he is not out of danger, as many Christians found not guilty of blasphemy have been attacked by zealous Muslims who want to fulfil what they believe to be Allah's will.⁴

Certainly, both situations are distressing, and the call for endurance and faith is plain. But what does this say to those of us who are not in a similar situation?

There is no criticism of the church at Smyrna. Perhaps that might actually tell us something that we have not noticed. Without any suggestion of being sinless, could we say that there are men and women in Christ who are just 'battling on'. The 'just requirement of the law' is genuinely being fulfilled in them as they 'walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit' (Rom. 8:4). So often the teaching concerning salvation stops with the assertion of our sinfulness and our need of Christ, but says little of the affect of his work in us.

There is a sense in which the constant repetition of the weakness of humanity in its guilt might be an unintentional denial of the very work which Christ has done and which by our sinfulness we needed. One of the reasons why there is no criticism of the church at Smyrna is that the guilt which called forth the work of Christ is no longer an issue. Of course the Christians of Smyrna are sinners; who would question that? But who would dare bring any charge against God's elect since God has justified them? The great high priest 'who is at the right hand of God ... intercedes for us' (Rom. 8:33-34). What is more, the great vindication of God's holiness at the cross has had immense affects, all of which were anticipated, for example, in Ezekiel 36:25-27.

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

'I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances', when matched with Ezekiel 36:31,

Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds.

removes any likelihood of sinless perfection, but does indicate that even when sin is present the new inclination is to obedience. The Lord looks on the heart, the new heart which he has given.

One thing remains vital: 'Be faithful unto death' (Rev. 2:10). The reason for this lies in our union with our high priest:

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and *faithful* high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ... [Jesus] was *faithful* to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also "was faithful in all God's house". ... Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was *faithful* over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong

⁴ 'Prayer Focus Update 116'; see the Barnabas Fund web site, <http://www.barnabasfund.org>

to hope. ... Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is *faithful*. (Heb. 2:17; 3:2-6; 10:23).

The issue is not our suffering; it is our conformity to the calling to be the priestly community.

TO PERGAMUM

To be a Christian in Pergamum would not have been an easy matter. Perhaps a little like being a Christian in Mecca! Paul Barnett wrote of this:

In 29 BC Augustus permitted a temple for Rome and for himself to be erected in Pergamum. The worship of the Roman emperor as a living deity, which rapidly spread throughout the whole province, probably arose in Pergamum. The emperor-cult quickly gained acceptance and was happily amalgamated with existing local cultic activities. It was in Pergamum that the high-priest of Asia was elected from the delegates of the other Asian cities. Fifteen years later in the nearby province of Bithynia the Governor Pliny describes the procedure for testing the loyalty of citizens to Rome. According to Pliny “they recited a prayer to the gods at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to [the emperor’s] statue, which I had ordered to be brought in to the court for the purpose together with the images of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ ...” Pergamum was the cult centre of the province.⁵

That was, no doubt, the reason why Jesus said they lived ‘where Satan’s throne is’ (Rev. 2:13). What, though, does this say to those who do not live under such a regime as that? Much in every way!

For example, as for those in Pergamum, syncretism is a significant problem for the church in any age. But the status of the church cannot be ignored. If we are a priestly community, then how much more seriously will the great high priest regard this laxity?

Now Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the LORD, such as he had not commanded them. ²And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. ³Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD meant when he said,

“Through those who are near me I will show myself holy, and before all the people I will be glorified.”

And Aaron was silent.

⁴Moses summoned Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, “Come forward, and carry your kinsmen away from the front of the sanctuary to a place outside the camp.” ⁵They came forward and carried them by their tunics out of the camp, as Moses had ordered. ⁶And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, “Do not dishevel your hair, and do not tear your vestments, or you will die and wrath will strike all the congregation; but your kindred, the whole house of Israel, may mourn the burning that the LORD has sent. ⁷You shall not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting, or you will die; for the anointing oil of the LORD is on you.” And they did as Moses had ordered. (Lev. 10:1-7)

Here was a wanton disregard for those things God requires of his priests. There is also the account of the sons of Eli:

Now Eli was very old. He heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. ²³He said to them, “Why do

⁵ *Apocalypse*, p. 54f.

you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people. ²⁴No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear the people of the LORD spreading abroad. ²⁵If one person sins against another, someone can intercede for the sinner with the LORD; but if someone sins against the LORD, who can make intercession?" But they would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of the LORD to kill them. (1 Sam. 2:22-25)

These two men had passed the point of exhortation and were violating their whole calling from the LORD. The sons of Aaron had *seen* all that the LORD had done in their redemption from Egypt; they were not simply heirs of a long tradition. But, then, neither were the sons of Eli. The time of the judges was one of the dynamic intervention by God on behalf of his people on numerous occasions and the Law was never a mere document to be recalled or forgotten at will. It was always the words of God to his people and, if heard in faith, the dynamic of the grace of that Law would be known in all of life.

Just as the Law was dynamic, how much more the powerful gospel of Christ? So while the detail of the gospel may be held, and by many held genuinely, the pressure to hold that alongside sexual immorality and worship of other 'gods' besides the God and Father, of whom we are priests, comes as a constant threat. The teaching of Balaam was not to deviant doctrine but to impure living. And who can doubt that this is an issue now?

We know nothing about the Nicolaitans, except that the Ephesians, like Jesus, hated their works, while there were some in Pergamum who held to their teaching. Teaching and works go together. We cannot preach 'grace' if we do not live 'grace', and the grace which has appeared, bringing salvation to us teaches us

to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:12-14)

For a church which tolerates ungodliness, it may come as a shock to learn that, without repentance, the church will have it's own great high priest as the one who makes war against it!

TO THYATIRA

Thyatira is addressed by 'the Son of God' (Rev. 2:18). This is the only occasion when Jesus is addressed by that title, but it is noteworthy that the climactic vision of what will be, in chapter 21, records the promise: 'He who conquers will have this heritage' that is, the full riches of the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1-6), and will do so because 'I will be his God and he will be my son'. *The Son* is and will then be seen to be 'the firstborn among many brothers' (Rom. 8:29).

The Ephesians had left their first love and needed to do again the works they did at the beginning;

the church at Thyatira works by love, and ... its second works are greater than its first. We can deduce that 'first works' come from the 'first love' (cf. 2:4-5). If we can speak about 'second love', i.e. maturing love, then works can increase in excellence with maturity (cf. Phil. 1:9-11; I Thess. 3:12-13).⁶

⁶ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1993, p. 39.

It is probably a good thing that sometimes particular identities are unknown, so that we do not only give attention to precise correspondences. We have the answers but not the exact questions in so many places in the New Testament. By this we are caused to focus on the broader perspective rather than the historical detail.

In this case, we know little of the problem in Thyatira other than that the title 'Jezebel' is highly appropriate for a woman who was evidently a very 'charismatic' personality. Whoever she was, and by whatever means she used, she was able to entice my 'servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols' (Rev. 2:20).

As with the church at Pergamum (Rev. 2:14), idolatry and fornication go together. Of course there was a conspicuous link in the Roman world, where idolatry and fertility rites were in common. But Romans 1:24ff. would indicate that wherever the creature is worshipped rather than the creator, there is a horrible perversion within creation itself. Man is made as the image of God, but if he will not be what he is then the truth of what he is cannot be expressed in rich purity. That is not a mere accident of nature; it is the deliberate action of God in judgment and wrath, so that the horrible aspects of fallen sexuality must be understood as God's personal judgment of human rebellion. Wherever men and women will not *be* the image of God, they will find God himself actively opposing every attempt to find fulfilment in a substitute image.

The great tragedy is that men and women who know Christ and his redeeming work should *tolerate* that woman Jezebel. Far from being repelled by such behavior as she stimulates, they are quiescent and accepting of her deviant activities. Such cannot be! Where such acceptance is found, the deep things of God (see 1 Cor. 2:10) are overwhelmed by a pseudo knowledge, 'the deep things of Satan' (Rev. 2:24). What seems to be gentle, accepting wisdom, toleration and broadmindedness, is really an accommodation to the spirit of the age.

The promise to the church at Thyatira:

To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; ²⁷to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered — ²⁸even as I also received authority from my Father. (Rev. 2:26-28)

indicates that the goal is participation in the triumph of Christ. While the negative aspect is not to be ignored ('He who does *not* conquer ...'), the promise, and those to the other churches also, is a rich stimulus to perseverance and faith. It is a precious and very great promise, and hence the exhortation of Hebrews 10:24, that we should consider how to provoke one another to love and good works, the good works for which we have been saved, the good works of the new creation, is apt. The good works are the works of the high priest and are themselves a participation in all that he himself is doing.

TO SARDIS

There is a problem faced by modern Christians and that is that 'the church' is so easily regarded as 'them' in distinction from 'me', even when we are active members of congregations. The result of not recognising the problem is that a word such as that addressed to Sardis is, perhaps, not seen as confronting 'me as part of the church'. But the word to Sardis is a word to all (the Spirit speaking to the churches) from the one with the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. Even if we are among those 'who have not soiled their clothes' (Rev. 3:4), there must be an acute sensitivity to what is

being said, not with a view to criticism, but with a view to restoration in a spirit of gentleness (Gal. 6:1).

Here is a church that is evidently full of action. They have the name of being alive, but they are in fact dead. Under all the busyness, the works, there is a church that is moribund. It is as if we were to ask ‘how are you?’ only, in reply, to be given a list of things that are being done. These works, however, are not perfect, not meaning that the only acceptable works are those without any hint of fault of any kind. Rather ‘perfect’ works are those which flow from what was received and heard (Rev. 3:3). So there must be a remembering, as in Ephesus, and a renewal in obedience.

They, as we, received the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-4) and that was a proclamation which called for and which evoked the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5; 16:26 etc), and that obedience is not exhausted by the initial response but is the heart of all that flows from it.

For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3)

The command to ‘Wake up!’ is gracious. We should note 2 Peter 3:9:

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

The issue there is not a general unwillingness of God to punish the finally unrepentant; it is his unwillingness to see those in Christ — ‘patient with *you*’ — fail to persevere in the faith.⁷ In both the word to Sardis (Rev. 3:3) and the statement in 2 Peter (3:10) there is the strong reminder not to presume on such grace: ‘the day of the Lord will come like a thief’, ‘I will come like a thief’.

TO PHILADELPHIA

Here is a church like Smyrna; it does not receive any rebuke or correction. And like Smyrna, it is confronted by ‘a synagogue of Satan’. Their opponents claim to be ‘Jews but are not’ (Rev. 3:9), not meaning that they are not ethnically Jewish but that their claim to be the elect people of God is not true, at least not true any longer. It is possibly of little consequence whether we say that the church is the new Israel or that the church, as the fulfilment of all that Israel was intended to be, a house of prayer for *all* peoples (Isa. 56:7; Rev. 5:9; 7:9), has assumed all the prerogatives that Israel once knew as the priestly people (Ex. 19:5-6; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; Rev. 1:5; 5:10). Nevertheless, a glance at the book of Acts will show the often violent reaction of the Jewish people of that day against those who claimed to be the fulfilment of their Jewish hope.

That is hardly an issue today. Often, for whatever reason, the Jews have been the ones who have been persecuted. But, still, there are believers who are also faced with

⁷ Cf. Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WMC 50, Word, Waco, 1983: ‘τινας (“any”) does not take up τινες (“some people”) in v 9a, but contrasts with πάντας (“all”): God desires all, without exception, to repent and escape damnation, But πάντας (“all”) is clearly limited by ὑμᾶς (“you”). There is no thought here of the Christian mission.... The author remains close to his Jewish source, for in Jewish thought it was usually for the sake of the repentance of his own people that God delayed judgment. Here it is for the sake of the repentance of 2 Peter’s Christian readers. No doubt repentance from those sins into which some of them have been enticed by the false teachers (2:14, 18; 3:17) is especially in mind. We need not suppose that the author put the false teachers themselves entirely beyond possibility of repentance and salvation, but here he addresses his readers, who are distinguished from the false teachers (3:5, 8, 17)’ (p. 313).

the claims of those people who argue against them for their sole legitimacy. However, there is the promise:

I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying — I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. (Rev. 3:9)

This might be more strongly presented if the word ‘you’ were to be stressed. To bow before *your* feet would indicate that these people of Christ were like Joseph (Gen. 37:7); to learn that I have loved *you* would point to a contrast with Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you — for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Those who persevere, who conquer, in the face of such arrogant opposition, have this promise:

If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. (Rev. 3:12)

The language is priestly. There are those who deny any right to be present in the holy of holies, or actually to be the dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:22) but the right to be a fundamental part of that great temple can never be in doubt. Finally, it does not depend on arguments or persuasive powers. They may be quite ineffective. But they do have the promise that it will be Christ who vindicates his own, and that is sufficient.

TO LAODICEA

The lowest common denominator may well be the easiest choice and it seems that the Laodicean church had opted for that. But in doing so it had become, in eternal terms, completely ineffective. In our terms, cold and hot imply disinterest or passion, but in their terms the picture was far simpler. In nearby Hierapolis there were hot springs while Colossae had cool refreshing water. Mounce writes:

In an important article, Rudwick and Green argue that the adjectives ‘hot’, and ‘cold’, and ‘lukewarm’ are not to be taken as describing the spiritual fervour (or lack of it) of people. The contrast is between the hot medicinal waters of Hierapolis and the cold, pure waters of Colossae. Thus the church in Laodicea ‘was providing neither refreshment for the spiritually weary, not healing for the spiritually sick. It was totally ineffective, and thus distasteful to its Lord’. On this interpretation the church is not being called to task for its spiritual temperature but for the barrenness of its works. Among the several advantages of this interpretation is the fact that it is no longer necessary to wonder why Christ would prefer the church to be ‘cold’ rather than ‘lukewarm. It should be noted that although the Lord was about to spew them out of his mouth, there was yet opportunity to repent.⁸

⁸ Mounce, *Revelation*, pg. 125f.

There are other factors about Laodicea which influence the language used,⁹ but the principle was that the Laodicean church was completely unaware of its tragic state. In the eyes of Christ they were ‘wretched, pitiable, poor blind and naked’ (Rev. 3:17), in stark contrast to their own self evaluation. What is needed is a cry to Christ for his supply, and thus repentance for their wrong-headedness.

Possibly, the Laodicean church is best known for the appeal of Christ made to it in Revelation 3:20.

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

It may be tempting to use this as an appeal for a response to the gospel, but that was not its plain purpose. Rather, the church was being addressed and called to pay attention to the voice of the one who is the origin of God’s creation (Rev. 3:14).¹⁰ They should hear him and look to the goal, and act in accordance with that. The church is the eschatological community, meaning that our self understanding can only be clear in the light of where we are going. Emulation of the first century church is neither possible nor desirable. The only standard is the one set before us as the goal. And that is the great marriage feast of the Lamb and his bride, anticipated in Revelation 19:6-9.

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. ⁷Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; ⁸to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure” — for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. ⁹And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.”

The concluding promise, a place with Christ on his throne (Rev. 3:21) captures all that scripture reveals of God’s creative purpose: humanity created to have dominion, but humanity lost and defeated by its sin, then the Son of Man revealed in Christ and the dominion restored in him and therefore promised to the new and priestly humanity in him. ‘They shall reign on earth’ (Rev. 5:10; also Rom. 5:17), with Satan crushed beneath *their* feet (Rom. 16:20).

Then high priest of the sanctuary will have his priestly community, whole and pure, standing with him, lost in wonder love and praise. To achieve the goal, he speaks to the sevenfold, complete church, in words of encouragement, rebuke and warning as appropriate. The call is for the churches to hear what he says and to rise up in faithful obedience, and for them to be all that they have been redeemed to be, a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.

⁹ See Barnett, *Apocalypse*, pp. 62-64.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Bingham expresses it: ‘I am constantly knocking. Can you hear the sound of it? Can you hear my voice speaking to you? I am locked out of your life as a church. Do I stand as an intruder or as the Lord of the churches, the true and faithful one, the very creator of all things?’ (*The Revelation of St John*, p. 50).