

# Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



## **Revelation 3:14-22** **“Who’s That Knocking”**

June 25, 2016  
(6<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost)

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## **“Following Christ From City Center!”**

# REVELATION 3:14-22 "WHO'S THAT KNOCKING?"

80km, 50 m. S.E. of Philadelphia, 3 Roads Converge, Lycus Valley

**1) v.14a Introductory "Angelic" Formula.** Major Commercial City, Opulent City, 10 Miles To Colossae (letter)  
Famous Banking, Textiles, Medical School, 2 Theaters, Large Jewish Community

14 And to the angel of the **church** in Laodicea write: Col. 1:7, 4:12-16 (Read In Laodicea), Epaphras Founder?  
Polytheistic City, Many Temples, Phrygia's Lycus Valley, See Acts 19

**2) v.14b Characterization of the Lord (3 Christological Titles) Not From Earlier Vision.**

a 'The word of the Amen, II Cor. 1:9, 20; Is. 65:16 (MT), "God of the Amen," Certainty/True/Trustworthy  
b the faithful and true witness (martyr), Three-Fold Assertion Of Truthfulness, 1:5, 3:7, I Tim. 6:14  
c the beginning (origin, principle) of God's creation. Agent/Mean, 22:13, Col. 1:15-20, 18, 4:16; Jn. 1:1-2, Rom. 8:29  
What Jesus Is For God, They Are Not For Him!

**3-4) vv.15-18 Praise Formula, "I Know," Heavy On Censure.**

15 a1 "I know your works: 6 Miles To Hierapolis Hot Lime/Sulphur Springs, Lukewarm At Laodicea By Aqueduct  
2 you are neither cold nor hot. No Bad Doctrine/ No Immorality/ Factions, Colossae's water pure and cold  
3 Would that you were cold or hot! Tepid, Half-Hearted, Complacent, Comfortable, Blase  
16 3' So, because you are lukewarm, Flowed Over White Cliff Opposite Laodicea, Nauseating  
2' and neither cold nor hot, Complacent/ Apathetic/ Half-hearted, Cold And Hot Water Are Both Useful  
1' I will spew (vomit) you out of my mouth! Your works vs. His works, Emeo = emetic, Warning from Christ!

**2 Differing Assessments: Prosperity Gospel!**

17 b1 For you say, 'I am rich, Actions And Attitudes, Self-Sufficiency  
2 I have prospered, Inherited The American Dream!  
3 and I need nothing'; Last Statement Is The Sin Of Pride, City & Church Life = 3 Claims, Self-Sufficient (1)  
Church As A Whole Is Out Of Touch With Reality

a'1 not knowing that you are wretched, Loss Of Engagement, Mere Reflections Of The Surrounding Culture, It's Values  
2 pitiable, 5 Alternative Realities, Not Self-sufficient, Christ's Opinion = Miserable (2)  
3 poor, What Is It About Prosperity That Dulls Our Hunger For God?  
4 blind,  
5 and naked.

Local Sarcasm: Christ Mocks Them Sharply!

Tacitus, *Annals* 14.27.1 (Proud = Refuse Roman Aid After 60AD/100AD earthquakes), "We take care of ourselves."

**5) v.18-19 Call to Repentance (3 Well-Known, Local Items, Culture)** Wealth Not Through Oppression

18 a Therefore I counsel you to buy gold from me refined by fire, Need To Do Your Shopping Elsewhere, From Jesus!, Is. 55:1b-2  
b that you may be rich, Pure Faith For Spiritual Poverty  
a' and white garments to clothe you Chap. 18, (1) Banking Industry, I Pt. 1:6-7  
b' and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, Holy Character For Nakedness: 3:4, 4:4, 19:7-8  
a'' and salve to anoint your eyes, Clear Vision For Spiritual Blindness, Phrygian Powder  
b'' that you may see. A Blind Church In A (3) City Known For Eye Salve/Treatments, Medical School  
Gift of Divine Correction = God's Stern Love

19 Those whom I love (*philo* = affection) I reprove and chasten; Reprove = Shame By Exposure, Their Witness Is Weak  
so be zealous and repent. Stir Up Regret, Overcome Lethargy, Prov. 3:12, Heb. 12:5-1, Rom. 12:11  
Ephesus Lacked Love, Laodicea Lacked Zeal/ Passion

**7) v.20-21 Two Promised Rewards.**

Compromised Church Receives Most Loving Promise

20 a Behold, I stand at the door and knock; (Knock From Outside, Continual!) Restored Fellowship (1)  
if any one hears my voice and opens the door, (Call, Voice Added) From Inside  
I will come to him, and eat with him, and he with me. Fellowship, Eucharist, Song Of Solomon 5:2 [LXX], Jn. 14:23  
No Forced Entry Like Roman Soldiers, Leisurely Evening Meal, Lk. 24:13-43

21 b He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, Resist The Culture, Victory, Shared Rule (2)  
as I myself have conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Claim To Deity, Cross/New Life/Ascension  
Lk. 22:28-30, Mt. 26:64, Rev. 20:5, 22:1-3, Eternal Fellowship

**6) v.22 Call to Hear What the Spirit Says.**

Last Letter Is Full Of Emotion

22 He who has an ear, Issue = Christian Faith And Roman Imperial Culture Are Incompatible!  
let him hear what the Spirit says to the **churches**." Brings The Vision Of Seven Churches To A Close

Our Ears: What Have We Heard? A Compromised Church Can Be Renewed

HOW DO CHURCHES TODAY STRUGGLE WITH THE THREATS AND PRESSURES OF  
APATHY, MATERIALISM, SENSUALITY, IDOLATRY, THE PRESSURES OF PERSECUTION,  
FALSE TEACHING, AND FORMALISM?

## WHO'S THAT KNOCKING?

*“I will spew you out of my mouth.”*

What the patient Jesus will stomach has limits.

### REVELATION 3:16b

Something new is in the air; rather, something old and nearly forgotten and little talked about has made a surprising comeback, and the new-old thing is political *populism*. *Vox populi* in Latin, *the voice of the people*, and to it some dare add a second phrase, *Vox populi, Vox dei*: “the voice of the people is the voice of God,” and if the roar get’s loud enough, it’s easy for some to confuse the two. Political movements often borrow the symbols and cadences of religion to stir devotion and claim a loyalty that goes beyond wisdom. It’s a perpetual temptation to mistake my cause for God’s.

In a sense, populism is the demand we pay attention to the first two words of The Constitution before we go on to the particulars, “We, the people....” The opinions of ordinary citizens matter greatly. “There’s a growing sense that self-serving elites are running things without regard to the welfare of ordinary folk, and if you just elect me President, we’ll take on the whole crowd and make this country great again.” And if that sounds a bit Trumpish and triumphalist, it is, but Sanders also has his version of the populist message, a not-so-soft socialism that’s attracted lots of young people with its idealism, it’s echoes of inspirational social justice themes from the 1960s, as well as its new list of freebies.

Just a short year ago, no one saw this coming from either side, not the pundits and not the politicians, but there it was, under the surface, bubbling and brewing and boiling in the recesses of national consciousness, waiting for someone to put their finger on the pain and the fear and the hopes and give it a bombastic voice. Surprise to America! Your political map is now redrawn by

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the power of resurgent populism fueled by social media.<sup>1</sup>

Populism is built on a sense of resentment, and the cleverest politicians find ways to get out in front of a crowd. “William Jennings Bryan, the populist icon at the bridge of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, once explained his support for the free-silver movement by saying, ‘The people of Nebraska are for free silver, so I am for free silver. I will look up the arguments later.’”<sup>2</sup> What a powerful thing to have a candidate speak your language and voice your hopes and fears with passion and flair, especially if you’ve grown weary of political correctness and want a straight-shooter for a change. People get mad and find their voice again, thus vox populi, the voice of the people, left and right.

Populism is not so much about specific policies as about neglected folk getting heard because no one’s been taking them seriously, which is often true. Populism is a poke-in-the-eye to elites and insiders who’ve lost the common touch, and if you don’t think this has renewed appeal on the right and the left, how do you explain that *The Donald* routed the deepest and widest Republican field in memory or than Sanders made Hillary miserable week after week, and in some sense still is by his refusal to quit and his intent to carry his Progressive agenda forward to the convention? It is something to behold! Politics has become wild and wooly again. I’ve never seen the likes of it, and it’s left me politically a bit off balance and thankful for our three co-equal branches of government. Our founders were wise in their restrictions on the raw majoritarian impulse.

Just this Friday we saw another form of populism rise like a wave as the

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<sup>1</sup> For a sampling, see Julian Bagini, “How Rising Trump and Sanders Parallel Rising Populism in Europe,” *The World Post*, 1/10/16, [www.huffingtonpost.com/julian-baggini/trump-sanders-populism-europe\\_b\\_9197234](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/julian-baggini/trump-sanders-populism-europe_b_9197234); Kathleen Hennessey, “The populist sentiment fueling both the Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump Campaigns,” 8/14/15, [www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-trump-sanders-20150814-story](http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-trump-sanders-20150814-story).

<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Tanner, “Trump and Sanders: True Populists,” [www.cato.org/publications/commentary/trump-sanders-true-populists](http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/trump-sanders-true-populists); Michael Kazin, “How Can Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders Both Be Populist?” [www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/magazine/how-can-donald-trump-and-bernie-sanders-both-be-populist.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/magazine/how-can-donald-trump-and-bernie-sanders-both-be-populist.html?_r=0).

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**Revelation 3:14-22..... 5**

U.K. voted in a national referendum to withdraw from the European Union after forty-three years in the family.<sup>3</sup> Local identity, being distinctively British and sovereign as an island people who control their borders and guard their culture trumped a continental identity of being *generically European* and of surrendering government at arms length to Brussels. The vote to file for a political separation shocked the political and financial worlds.

After two world wars ending in 1919 and 1945, you can appreciate how a new Europe with its vision of a common market, no real borders, and shared sovereignty came about, “No more Hitlers or Mussolinis; no more world wars on our soil; no more tens of millions dead; no more Auschwitz ovens, and everyone with a range of social supports. Take away the discontent, and you take away the demagogues!” It was a grand, noble idea, a humane way to check the violent excesses of nationalism between close neighbors. And in one form or another it worked for six decades, but now a crack is showing as our closest cousins off the coast rise in protest, “We’ve lost too much, and you’ve gone too far. Stop the euro train; we want to get off!”

*Vox populi* is always a threat to large collectivist projects that quit listening to people at ground level; sometimes they rumble like tectonic plates grinding beneath our feet, then break loose in a great shaking that changes the landscape. Large scale social engineering and a *we know better than you* attitude are vulnerable to such sudden upheavals. The simple insight is that normally invisible people want to be heard, listened to, not patronized; they want to know their leaders take them seriously. Populism and nationalism and local identities are on the rise again. Already we hear of Brexit wanna be’s in Scotland, France, the Netherlands and even in our own Republic of Texas! The rise of populism is a new opportunity. It’s time to listen to one another and find common cause, time to relearn that we are the culture and that all life is local. At best it may lead to a new wave of popular civic engagement, at its worst devolve into another round of bigotry and ugly divisions.

An even more immediate example of *vox populi* for me is our recent

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<sup>3</sup> See Gerard Baker, “Britain Fires Shot ‘Heard Round the World.’” 6/24/16, [www.wsj.com/articles/britain-fires-a-shot-heard-round-the-world-1466773072](http://www.wsj.com/articles/britain-fires-a-shot-heard-round-the-world-1466773072).

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**Revelation 3:14-22..... 6**

United Methodist General Conference where we as a church said No to the agenda of our former colleagues in the mainline churches: the Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians. We said, “We will go with you no further. We are a holiness renewal movement within the church catholic; we are now about the business of repentance and the recovery of our distinctive Wesleyan identity. We are pulling back from a once common American civil religion which sets its sails to the shifting winds of culture and made claims to new sources of divine revelation. We serve in the world and over against the world as a life-giving alternative.

Under pressure, we United Methodists did not change our ordination standards or our moral expectations of members. We backed up from the agenda of permissiveness and repudiated a forty-three year association with a church led abortion lobby we helped found, which was a major reversal of course, a stunning act of ecclesial repentance which no one anticipated but in which we said, “How wrong we have been,” and said it publicly.<sup>4</sup> And it would not have happened without the growing number of delegates from Africa.

Two centuries ago Methodist missionaries— some of whom, like Melville Cox, packed their belongings in a simple wooden coffin for the journey to Africa and died there.<sup>5</sup> They took with the Christian faith, the Bible, and a vision of transformation and holy living through God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and now the Africans come back to us in growing number demanding we not surrender the same gospel that saved them and gave them the tools both to critique their cultures and offer a genuine alternative on another continent.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> See Tom Lambrecht, “GC 2016 Legislative Summary,” *Good News*, May/June 201, 8-13; “Church ends membership in abortion lobby,” *Ibid.*, 20-25.

<sup>5</sup> Read the inspiring story of Melville Cox at [www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/c-d/cox-melville-beveridge-1799-1833](http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/c-d/cox-melville-beveridge-1799-1833); also Dan Graves, “Sickly Melville Cox Accepted Liberia’s Challenge,” [www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1801-1900/sickly-melville-cox-accepted-liberias-challenge-11630419](http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1801-1900/sickly-melville-cox-accepted-liberias-challenge-11630419).

<sup>6</sup> Heather Hahn, “African bishops speak out on terrorism, sexuality,” 11/14/15, [umc.org/news-and-media/african-bishops-speak-out-on-terrorism-sexuality](http://umc.org/news-and-media/african-bishops-speak-out-on-terrorism-sexuality). For their document, see [http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website\\_Properties/news-media/documents/africa-college-of-bishops-press-release.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/news-media/documents/africa-college-of-bishops-press-release.pdf); also Emily Miller, “African Methodists

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**Revelation 3:14-22..... 7**

children of mission have come back across the Atlantic to correct and save the parents; such is the wonder of God’s good providence. I take this turning point as a sign of hope God is not yet through with us. Our ship is slowly turning to a better course. It is a hopeful time to be United Methodist Christian.

I am not a trained political scientist or cultural historian, but I am an observer and a reader like many of you, and at this point I want to make a distinctly Christian move, which is my job. I hear the rising roar of *Vox Populi* as one of the surprised, but I do not make a simple equation with *Vox Dei*, the voice of God. In the church, and in whatever political culture it’s planted, only the voice of Christ, the *Vox Christi*, is the voice of God and it is to him that we listen over all other voices. Not to a mob, but to Jesus Christ. In a remarkable letter written to his patron Charlemagne in 798, the Anglo-Saxon scholar and deacon Alcuin<sup>7</sup> wrote:

“And those people should not be listened to who keep saying the voice of the people is the voice of God, since the riotousness of the crowd is always very close to madness,”<sup>8</sup> and that, my friends, was twelve hundred years ago. What wisdom!

It is not our job in the church just to listen to people and give them what they want as demanding religious consumers, because what they often want is spiritual and theological junk food: say a constant supply of inspirational feelings, or four techniques in prayer to get what I want from God, or happiness without holiness, or to wrap Jesus in the flag of my ideology of the left or right, or a quick fix of any kind. Instead, as we listen to the pains and hopes and aspirations of people, we also turn an inner ear to the *Vox Christi*, to the living voice of the risen Jesus Christ as echoed in Scripture and particularly the four gospels. His is the person and voice we seek. He is not dead and not distant; he is risen and fully alive and everywhere available if we seek and listen and obey. Jesus Christ is still speaking, and not all his words are easy ones.

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worry about Church that bought them Christianity,” *Good News*, May/June 2016, 22-24;

<sup>7</sup> en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcuin.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vox\_populi.

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**Revelation 3:14-22..... 8**

What we have to offer the broken world is a community of Christians that takes its cues, not from the prevailing winds of culture— whichever way the vox populi leans at the moment— but from Jesus Christ who is immediately relevant to every age. We are, in this sense, our own peculiar politic, a colony of God scattered amidst the nations of the world and calling them to turn to him for life and wisdom because he alone is Lord and rightful ruler.

And that is precisely what happened towards the end of the first century in Asia Minor as strange new document, The Book of Revelation, made its way from John on the penal island of Patmos round a circuit of seven churches on the postal route out of Ephesus. And for each of them Christ had a particular word depending on their setting and struggles, and it is to the last of the seven, the church in Laodicea, that we turn, not for the vox populi, the voice of the people, but for the vox Christi, the voice of the risen Jesus to his church through the prophet John. And just perhaps, if we listen to what he said then, we can begin to hear what his word is to us now.

The day the letter arrived and was read in the house churches, everything changed. They'd been addressed; Dr. Jesus delivered a diagnosis and call to new health. And nothing is more sobering than to find ourselves addressed by him. When I speak, you are free to disagree; sometimes I even disagree with myself! But when his voice is heard, it has immediate power and authenticity. It cuts through the fog of opinions and lays us all bare before God.

Laodicea was prosperous. More than prosperous, rich. When severe earthquakes came, in 60AD before John wrote and again in 100AD a few years after, the city fathers rejected the offer of Roman Imperial aid and rebuilt quickly out of the overflow of city coffers. Imagine Charleston rejecting FEMA aid after Hugo in 1989, "Charleston is rich and self-sufficient. Charleston needs none but it's own." Didn't happen, did it? The resources were not there. But it did in Laodicea, so prideful was their independence, so deep their coffers. And if you lived in such a setting, it would affect you, and it did the church.

Banking, specialized textiles, and medicine were sources of Laodicean pride. Three major roads converged there. An especially soft, glossy black wool developed through expert local breeding techniques furnished the garment

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**Revelation 3:14-22..... 9**

industry with high-end goods for haute-couture. There was money from trade and fashions for the fashionable, also a special powder from which famous eye and ear salves were made at the medical school and shipped across the ancient world. Laodicea was diversified: pharmaceuticals, fashion, finances, transportation and trade. And in the midst of this templated pagan city of human prosperity was a young church that was both *in the world* (which is always necessary) and *of the world* (which is a sell-out).

The church in America has many Laodicean tendencies because we live in a free, prosperous land to which we accommodate. We are too often the chaplain of the culture instead of its critic because of the benefits. It's as if we're saying to the world, "You can come back to church now. It's safe; we're just like you. Jesus is queasy about such a pitch claiming to come from him.

One thing Laodicea was missing, however, and that was a reliable water supply.<sup>9</sup> It was stressful during times of drought when cisterns ran low. Ten miles away was the city of Colossae with its famed water, cold and clear, great for drinking. Six miles up in the highlands stood Hierapolis with its ninety-five degree lime-and-sulphur-laden hot springs. If you've ever luxuriated in a hot, mineral bath with something cold to drink, then you know the delight of having the right things hot and the right things cold. But by the time the springs of Hierapolis flowed to Laodicea and poured over a cliff in sight of all, it was tepid, lukewarm, and made those who drank it without warning sick to their stomachs. It was useful only as an emetic or laxative.<sup>10</sup> Neither cold, which is refreshing, not hot, which is relaxing and healing. And the church in that city was like the water, said Jesus, lukewarm and useless. "Go drink the water," he said, "then you will feel as I feel. Not pleasant, is it? To think of a church making Jesus nauseous, or, as a pastor, contributing to such a state.

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<sup>9</sup> Craig Keener, *Revelation: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 158.

<sup>10</sup> For geography and culture, see James L. Blevins, *Revelation as Drama* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1984), 45; Robert Mulholland, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 130-132; Colin Hemer, *The Letters To The Seven Churches Of Asia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989)..

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**Revelation 3:14-22..... 10**

For centuries preachers of all stripes have beat up on the supposed Laodicean churches of their day.<sup>11</sup> No church has been pilloried as this one. Mocked, scolded, ridiculed. If a pastor was mad at his people or felt them growing slack, he could always measure them against Laodicea and level the score. “Oh, brothers and sister, if you were only hot and zealous like the Pentecostals, or if you were only cold in unbelief like the atheists, then at least the Lord would have something to work with, but you bunch of lukewarm, apathetic, bored believers are nearly worthless.”

I understand the temptation; it also misses the point. The issue is not emotion versus rationality, charismatic versus liturgical, or even fervent belief versus committed non-belief. In this case hot is not better than cold or cold than hot because in that specific setting both were eminently useful, though for different purposes. The comparison is not about temperature but the use of extremes to make a comparison between usefulness and uselessness. Hot and cold are both *useful*; lukewarm is *useless*. The waters of Colossae and Hierapolis are useful; Laodicea is not. Listen again with this clarified comparison in mind:

“I know your works: you are neither cold (and useful like the waters of Colossae) nor hot (and useful like the springs at Hierapolis). Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot (repeated a third time for emphasis), I will spew you out of my mouth.”

When, I ask you, does a church become essentially useless to Christ? When does it make him queasy? Answer: when it merely mirrors the priorities and prejudices of the world around it. The salt has lost its savor. In the war of who would influence whom the most, the church in Laodicea had lost, and the culture had won. The city was rich and prideful and self-sufficient; so was the church by a slow osmosis of alien values. Others met under the pagan banner

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<sup>11</sup> The scheme of the dispensationalists who take the seven churches each for an age of church history and who label as *Laodicean* the church from 1900AD to the Tribulation only worsen this tendency by giving theological cover to pulpit malpractice. See Tim LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 35-36, 84-91 for an uncritical presentation of this tradition at its worst.

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**Revelation 3:14-22..... 11**

of Zeus or Aphrodite or Hermes; the church met under the banner of Jesus, but if they didn't think and live differently than their fellow citizens, then they were no different and therefore useless for God. For them Jesus Christ made little difference. His death and resurrection were empty and vain. Dorothy Sayers, the Christian mystery writer, put it this way:

“Not Herod, not Caiphas, not Pilate, not Judas ever contrived to fasten upon Jesus Christ the reproach of insipidity (being insipid); that final indignity was left for pious hands to inflict. To make of his story something that could neither startle, nor shock, not terrify, not excite, nor inspire a living soul is to crucify the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame.”<sup>12</sup>

So if there is as much residual prejudice inside these hallowed walls as outside, the world has won and can safely ignore us and use the church for ritual and ceremonial purposes only, saying wedding and funerals. And if we are watching as much TV as they are and reading as little as they are, they win the influential battle for the mind. And if there is as much immorality and low marriage loyalty inside these walls as outside, they win again, and families everywhere lose. And if we have as much credit card debt as they do because we're not tithing and spending the rest with discipline under God, they win the money round. And if the accumulation of always more is our god as well as theirs, they win the priority round. And if we are as busy and breathless as they are, they win the calendar round as well. And if these things are true, and if the gospel makes no more difference in us as a church than that, guess what? We make Jesus queasy, says John, and risk him— in an even more graphic image— spewing us out. Remember what we have forgotten; the world as presently structured is our mission field; it is not our friend.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are related to the world but different from it, and the primary marker of that ongoing tension is Christian baptism. We drown you to one world and raise you to another. We ask you to take public vows that you will *reject* spiritual evil, *resist* a fallen culture and *repent* of your

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<sup>12</sup> *The Man Born to Be King, Christianity Today, Vol. 36, No. 13.*

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**Revelation 3:14-22..... 12**

own sinful complicity in anything not of God.<sup>13</sup> From just out of the womb to anywhere along the way we find you we warn against compromise, mark you as a soldier of Christ and a combatant in the longest running guerilla war in history. In baptism we tell you that the world is not your home and that if you get too comfortable here you will lose whatever you know of Jesus and suffer judgment with a lost world. So don't tell me how much you are like other people; tell me how you are different. Don't impress me with your worldly sense of style; show me the inward beauty of your Christian character.

First Methodist Laodicea was growing useless precisely because they had merged with the culture around them. And worst of all, they didn't even know it. They thought they were rich and prosperous and needed nothing, just like the surrounding city. Dr. Jesus said that they were absolutely out of touch with reality because in his sight they were *wretched, poor, pitiable, blind and naked*.

This is the danger of being church in America; and if we do not watch it and constantly patrol the borders of our minds, we can become merely a reflection of the world around us and lose our reason for existence, which is to reflect the life of Jesus Christ and continue his battle for the loyalty of all people. It's about so much more than the *be nice and come to church on Sunday* minimal requirement of southern folk religion. Jesus was radical, and if there is not something of the radical left in us as a people, it shows how perilously close we are to ending up in heaven's emesis bag.

Is Main Street a Laodicean Church? No, I don't think so, but the temptation is always there. The fundamental issue is witness. Will we remain faithful to the faith, or will we knock off the sharp edges, round all the corners, fit in at all costs and not make anyone uncomfortable ever?

It is no accident that the titles John uses to reintroduce Jesus to his supposed friends all point to the theme of faithful witness, which is precisely what they had lost. When God the Father gives a command, Jesus says *Amen* and carries it out in word and deed. He is thus *the faithful and true witness*. And there is nothing in this world, not the soft black wool of the Laodicean

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<sup>13</sup> "The Baptismal Covenant," *The U.M. Hymnal*, 34.

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**Revelation 3:14-22..... 13**

herds, not the powder for the eye salve and not the potential riches of trade that does not find its origin in him since he is *the beginning of God's creation*. Jesus is related to it all and claims it all; he is reality with a capital R, and when we give him free reign to make his case, first *with us* and then *through us*, it puts us in tension with the world around us. It is no accident that the word *witness*, when transliterated from Greek into English, comes out as *martyr*. A martyr is someone with a truth worth dying for, and thus something worth living for.

The pressure on the church in every age is always to conform and thus forfeit its distinctive witness. And in Laodicea we have the extreme example of a church that sold-out to the surrounding culture and went blind to its own condition. They decided to *fit in* rather than *stand out*. They installed Jesus in the local pantheon of multiple choice polytheism rather than standing over against the worship of all false gods and alternative paths of salvation. They chose comfort over confession and worldliness over witness. It didn't happen all at once. It happens, gradually, one little compromise at a time till Jesus was edged out. That is why in verse 20 he is pictured as knocking on the door of his church *from the outside*, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." He threatens to expel them by spewing them out, but they have already expelled him by neglect.

I will never forget a particular scene from the movie *Souder*. Two black men are strolling by a clapboard country church. One says to the other, "Do you think they'll ever let us in that place?"

"Naw," says his friend with a slap on the back, "I talked to the Lord just this mornin'; he said he's been trying to get in there for years." Both chuckle, and the point is made.

To put it simply, what we need is what Jesus has. I do. More of him is the cure for what ails us all, as individuals and as a church. I keep going back to the basics, "It's you I need, Lord. Not just your stuff or help, but you." We need to start shopping with him for the true riches of purified faith and the white garments of holiness and eye treatments that give us true spiritual insight. Whatever ails the church in any age, the answer is to return to him and welcome him back into his church. Let him set the agenda and sit at the head of the table. We live in Greenwood, praise God! But we are to be *Jesus' people*. Our denominational flavor is *United Methodist*, but we are *Jesus' people*. And when

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**Revelation 3:14-22..... 14**

prosperity comes and options multiply, we remind ourselves that we are *Jesus' people*. We belong to him; he created us for himself. A church that loses its radical sense of dependence on the Lord is headed for trouble. Independence is not a virtue in a church but a vice. Self-sufficiency and the pride it entails is death to a church, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing," they said, but then they heard a knock and had a choice.

"Behold," he announced, "I stand at the door and knock...." It's not Bob Dylan singing "Knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door." It's not us knockin' on his door but his knockin' on ours! It's not us seeking him but him seeking us out. To a church that had fallen into the arms of the culture with a protest, the risen Jesus offered the most amazing invitation. Dinner table for two: him and them! A long leisurely feast with time for conversation and listening. Friendship. Intimacy. A chance to get reacquainted. "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come to him, and eat with him, and he with me." Despite the oft-repeated proverb, absence does not always make the heart grow fonder. Sometimes it's *out of sight*, then *out of mind*. I'm glad he loves us enough to rebuke and correct us, that he keeps knocking on the door, "Will someone please get up and let me back into my church?"

**CONCLUSION**

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Holman Hunt painted the famous portrait of Christ standing in the night with a lamp and knocking at a door nearly overgrown with brambles. It was while painting the image of Revelation 3:20 that the artist was converted to Christ.<sup>14</sup> In 1911 the *Encyclopedia Britannica* noted:

"This work produced perhaps the greatest effect of any religious painting of the century." "For the first time in England," wrote William Bell Scott, "a picture became a subject of conversation and general interest from one end of the island to the other, and indeed continued so for many years."

A life size copy by Hunt was so popular it made a world tour and drew

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<sup>14</sup> Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 83.

**Revelation 3:14-22..... 15**

large crowds. It moved people; it was art in service of evangelism. The original now hangs in the chapel of Keble College Oxford, tucked round a corner to the right, and I remember the effect it had on me when I visited it eighteen months after my conversion. “Is that me, Lord? Have I already pushed you outside?”

“But Mr. Hunt,” someone complained, “there’s no knob on the door.”

“The latch,” he replied, “is on the inside. The door must be opened from within.”

We all have our politics, our prejudices, our preferences, our likes and dislikes, our holy and unholy habits. We are people of our own times, but could that gnawing hunger we feel for more be a sign of his fresh approach. What if Jesus came knocking for a fresh entry? Would we open the door?

