

## THE CASE OF THE EXCLUDED KING

REVELATION 3:14-22

I was astonished this past week when an article was given to me about what may be the most influential church in America. The article is entitled, “Willow Creek Repents!” Willow Creek Church has been one of the most successful and influential churches in America over the last thirty years. It is big, flush with programs, financed by a multi-million dollar budget. By every standard of measurement, according to commonly accepted church growth principles and practices, Willow Creek has been an unqualified success. They thought that through their people’s participation in all their programs and activities, the outcome would be one of spiritual maturity.

Recently, however, they conducted a study in an attempt to get a measure of their people’s spiritual maturity. Bill Hybels (the senior pastor) summarized the findings this way:

**“Some of the stuff that we have put millions of dollars into, thinking it would really help our people grow and develop spiritually, when the data actually came back it wasn’t helping people that much. Other things that we didn’t put that much money into and didn’t put much staff against is stuff our people are crying out for.”**

Hybels has called this the “wake up call” of his adult life. He makes this confession:

**“We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and became Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become ‘self feeders.’ We should have ... taught people how to read their Bible between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.”**

What Hybels is saying now is this: spiritual growth does not happen best by becoming dependent on elaborate church programs, but through the age-old spiritual disciplines of Bible study, meditation on the Word, and prayer. Greg Hawkins, one of Hybels’ staff, concludes with this as he discusses where Willow Creek intends to go from here:

**“Our dream is that we fundamentally change the way we do church. That we take out a clean sheet of paper and we rethink all of our old assumptions. Replace them with new insights. Insights that are informed by research and rooted in Scripture. Our dream is really to discover what God is doing and how he is asking us to transform this planet.”**

This is remarkable! I applaud Bill Hybels and his people for their openness and honesty before God and the world. Sometimes the people of God have to step back and look at their own footprints in the sands of time, and discern where they have been taking them. I’m sure that is why the Lord wrote his letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor.

Here we have the seventh and final letter that our Lord wrote to these seven churches. The Apostle John was the one who actually penned them, but let us make no mistake; the messages were given to him by the Lord. Of these seven letters, this one to the church in Laodicea is the most colorful and concrete in the way it reflects certain attitudes prevalent both in the city and in the church.

This city was located some ten miles west of Colosse and six miles south of Hierapolis. We shall see the importance of this. Laodicea was a centre of pagan worship, especially of Zeus but also of such deities as Dionysus, Helios, Hera, and Athena. There was a significant Jewish community there, but it seems to have blended right in with the surrounding Greek culture. That, by the way, should give us pause to think about our relationship with our surrounding culture. Do we blend right in? We must not! We cannot!

Well how does the Lord introduce himself to this congregation? First, he calls himself the “Amen.” This is a unique word. First it was transliterated directly from Hebrew into Greek, then into Latin and English, and finally into many other languages. It has become an almost universal word; in fact, it has been called the best-known word in human speech. It can mean *firm*, *faithful*, *surely*, or *truly*. At the end of a prayer, it expresses absolute trust and confidence in the One to whom we have prayed.

Jesus is the great Amen of life; he is the “faithful and true witness.” Moreover, he is the Origin and Ruler of God’s creation. Therefore, when he says, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other!” he speaks as the final authority. His word is the final word, just as *amen* is the final word in a prayer. So listen!

Laodicea was the wealthiest of the seven cities, known for its banking industry, woolen industry, and famous medical school that produced a world-renowned eye salve. They were so wealthy that in the aftermath of a powerful earthquake that had devastated the city, they actually refused economic aid from Rome. Can you imagine New Orleans saying to Washington, “Thank-you, but we do not require Federal aid? Hang on to you disaster relief funds!” So self-sufficient were the Laodiceans that this is just what they said.

But the city had always had a problem with its water supply. Colosse, ten miles away, was famous for its ice-cold drinking water, while Hierapolis, six miles away, was renowned for its hot springs. The weary traveler in those cities could have their thirst quenched or their tired, aching bodies soothed in the hot springs. But in Laodicea they could do neither! The Laodiceans had built aqueducts to bring water in from the cold reservoirs of Colosse, but by the time it reached Laodicea it had picked up limestone contaminants and become luke-warm. It was useless for quenching one’s thirst.

In fact, travelers to Laodicea would often vomit after drinking the water! Moreover, it had none of the soothing, healing qualities of the hot springs in Hierapolis. Those who wished to soak their arthritic bones and aching muscles could not do it in Laodicea. So their water was good for nothing! Even the Laodiceans would complain about it.

Jesus looks at their church and he sees little or nothing refreshing about it; little or nothing to quench the spiritual thirst of the traveler through life. Neither is their much about the church to soothe and heal those who have been spiritually wounded and whose hearts ache. He tells them, “**I want to see water that refreshes and soothes, but you remind me of the water you always complain about. You make me feel like throwing up!**” As I hear these words, I immediately think of Jesus Himself as the water of life. Our Lord had said to the woman at the well, “**Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life**” (John 4:14). Later, at the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus had said, “**If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me ... streams of living water will flow from within him**” (John 7:37-38). By this, we are told (John 7:39) Jesus meant the Holy Spirit who would be given to all who believe.

It seems, therefore, that as the Lord surveys the church in Laodicea, he does not see the Spirit of God at the centre, perhaps not even at the periphery. They are complacent, self-satisfied, and self-reliant. They apparently do not need the Lord. They have taken on the attitudes of their fellow Laodiceans. They think they are rich because of their lucrative banking and commerce industry; they take pride in their renowned woolen industry, especially noted for its black wool from which garments and carpets are woven; they are also famous for their pharmaceutical industry that produces eye salves used throughout the entire region. In short, they are loaded, dressed to kill, and they see with 20/20 vision!

Jesus, however, does not see things that way. Speaking with the greatest irony, he says that they are “**poor, blind, and naked.**” Buy gold refined in the fire of the Holy Spirit, white clothes to wear – not black – and the salve of God to put on your eyes so you can see.

Do you see what our Lord was saying? “O my people, everything you think is a sign of your strength or an asset has become a sign of your weakness and even an idol! You have everything except Me!”

We need to pause here and remember that our Lord is not railing against them in anger. Verse 19 reminds us of his amazing grace and boundless love. “**Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.**” He loves them! They are doing church without him, the One *by* whom and *for* whom the church exists. They have taken his name but excluded *him*. He has every right to be angry and to spew them out of his mouth. Yet he loves them! What follows is the most gracious invitation you will find in Scripture:

**“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (3:20).**

I find it fascinating that in chapter one the picture is of the Lord standing in the midst of the churches. In 1:13 he stands among the lamp-stands, which represent the churches. Now, at the end of chapter three, he stands outside at the door and knocks, trying to get back in.

Have we become Laodicea here in the West, with all our affluence and worldly wealth, expensive church properties, ornate cathedrals and impressive buildings? Have we, with all our sophisticated church programming, with all our technology to aid in worship, with all our church growth principles and practices, seeker-sensitive services, infatuation with being contemporary, have we left out Jesus Christ? Is he outside, knocking, trying to get back in?

Have we removed him from the centre of our individual and corporate lives? Have we taken him off the throne and enthroned cultural philosophies with their vogues and styles? I am not against programming, technology as an aid to worship, being seeker-sensitive, or using the best of contemporary (and traditional) music, but these are a poor substitute for the presence and power of the Spirit of God.

What would Jesus say if he were to write a letter to the church in America? His words would strike like thunder those churches that are self-satisfied and secure in their own accomplishments. The only solution to Laodicean-style Christianity, wherever it may be found, is repentance. I see signs of it beginning to happen here and there. Hallelujah!

If Jesus has been knocking on the door at Willow Creek, then it seems that they have opened it. Now if one of the largest and most influential churches in America can look at itself, repent, open the door to Christ, and invite him into the centre, then should not every church do the same? If Willow Creek is willing to reexamine its most basic assumptions to see if they line up with the Word of God, should not every church do the same?

Think about what our Lord has done. Putting aside his radiant royal glory, he took on the humble clothing of human flesh and walked among his enemies, holding out the promise of complete forgiveness and co-rulership with him - if they would surrender to him by faith. He is knocking on the doors of churches all across the Western world. Can you hear it? Can you hear him knocking? He wants to have his rightful place; that is, right at the centre of our individual lives and right at the centre of our congregational life.

This morning, the King is not among us physically, but he is still present, and his offer remains the same. We must take him up on it. Listen to him as he knocks. We must open the door! Every one of us must open the door to our heart.