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“CHURCH HEALTH AWARD” FROM RICK WARREN OR JESUS CHRIST?

A Study of the Seven Churches in Revelation

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“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 3:6)

We are awash in information about how to have healthy and successful churches. Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven church movement claims to have trained many thousands of pastors around the world. The website for this movement states the vision: “Our vision is to see healthy, balanced congregations producing Purpose Driven lives of all ages everywhere.”¹ This movement is being called a new reformation: “Saddleback Church is now but one among thousands of Purpose Driven churches – the vanguard of a new reformation.”² The churches who most successfully copy Rick Warren’s pattern are honored with a “Church Health Award.”³

As contemporary evangelicals attempt to get on board with the new reformation and become “healthy,” one important fact is being overlooked: Jesus has already spoken about what He approves and disapproves in churches. Shall modern technocrats like Rick Warren set the standards for what is pleasing to God in a local church or should Jesus Christ Himself set these standards? We need to listen to Jesus.

In the Book of Revelation, Jesus addresses seven churches in Asia Minor. These churches are presented in the order of their geographical location, going from Ephesus to the south, northward then back south and east.⁴ Though some have held that the churches are representative of stages of church history, there is nothing in the context to support this theory. These were literal churches that existed at the time John

wrote the book of Revelation. I believe that Jesus addressed these churches at that time so that for all subsequent generations of church history, we would know what Jesus commends and what Jesus condemns in His churches. Lenski comments, “They are typical of the conditions obtaining in the churches of all time irrespective of the number that at any time may belong to one type or to another.”⁵ I agree with this.

The material in Revelation 2 and 3 provides a precious opportunity to find out what Jesus, the true owner of His churches, uses as criteria for evaluation. What modern marketing experts deem “healthy” is of no significance in the eyes of Christ. The seven churches reveal the virtues and vices of all churches throughout the church age. We can learn from these churches and thereby “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”⁶ The reason we need to listen to what God says is that we are being given an opportunity to correct what is wrong before Christ comes in judgment. There is no reason to be in the dark about what Jesus approves or condemns.

In this article I am going to discuss the virtues and vices that Jesus identifies in these seven churches. There is no room for an exposition of every issue that arises in these two chapters of Revelation. We will concentrate on what is commended and what is rebuked. Then we will summarize these matters and apply what we learn to the church today, to see what Jesus thinks is “healthy.”

THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS

Jesus begins His address to the church in Ephesus with a commendation: “I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary” (Revelation 2:2,3). Contrary to what some people think, this is a commendation. They had obeyed Paul’s former words precisely: “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:28,29). Jesus commended them for obeying the words of Paul and guarding the flock against false “sent ones” (apostles).

This church had a long history of apostolic teaching, beginning with Paul himself (see Acts 20:18-35 for Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders which describes his previous ministry there). Timothy was told to correct false doctrine in Ephesus: “As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines” (1Timothy 1:3). John was likely in Ephesus before his exile to Patmos. Never has there existed a church that had a history of greater leadership: Paul, Timothy and John. This apostolic teaching had born the good fruit of discernment. They refused to tolerate evil men or false apostles.

Given this backdrop, Jesus’ rebuke is stunning: “But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you,

and will remove your lampstand out of its place— unless you repent” (**Revelation 2:4,5**). How could it be that a church that had profited from the ministries of Paul, Timothy and John be so severely rebuked? This shows how quickly a church can fall from the fervency of love for God and neighbor that characterizes those who have been truly converted! Here we have a church that defends herself against false apostles and endures for the sake of Christ, but has left her first love.

Some have used this passage to warn about those who correct error. They suggest that somehow the process of withstanding evil and error makes a person unloving. There is nothing in the text that says this. The word “but” in the Greek is a strong adversative. That means that the rebuke is in stark contrast to the commendation. The praise and rebuke are both strong. The idea is that the church **should** reject false teachers practicers of evil **and** have a strong, heartfelt love for God and neighbor (see **Matthew 22:37-40**). This “first love” that had characterized this church earlier in its existence is love that is demonstrated through action. We know this because Jesus said, “do the deeds you did at first.” In the New Testament, love for God is shown by one’s love for the brethren (**1John 4:20,21**). Love for one’s neighbor is shown by the one who takes concrete action to help those in need (**Luke 10:27-37**).

Correcting error and showing love to God and neighbor are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps the tendency is for those who battle false teaching and practices to become battle “hardened” and unloving. George Eldon Ladd comments, “. . . their struggle with false teachers and their hatred of heretical teaching had apparently engendered hard feelings and harsh attitudes toward one another to such an extent that it amounted to a forsaking of the supreme Christian virtue of love.”⁷ Those of us in “discernment ministries” do well to ask God to graciously preserve us from becoming this way and to kindle the flame of Christian love that is expressed in practical ways.

Jesus has a further commendation for the church at Ephesus: “Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (**Revelation 2:6**). No one knows exactly who the “Nicolaitans” were, but clearly they were a heretical sect. It is noteworthy that the Nicolaitans who were hated by the Ephesian church were embraced by the church at Pergamos (**Revelation 2:15**). Jesus’ words to the church at Ephesus show that it must be possible to simultaneously hate the “deeds” of evil doers and love God and neighbor. We can hate the wicked deeds of those around us yet lovingly preach the gospel to them, hoping that God grants repentance.

THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA

The short message to the church in Smyrna contains no rebuke, only commendation. Smyrna was a very wealthy city that is not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture. It was known for its wickedness and opposition to the Christian gospel.⁸ In this wealthy and wicked city existed a small, poor, persecuted church: “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (**Revelation 2:9**). The term for “poverty” here means “abject poverty.”⁹ They were likely in this condition because of the extreme persecution they were under. They may have been deprived of jobs or perhaps their goods plundered (**Hebrews 10:34**). Whatever the cause of their physical poverty, they were spiritually rich in the sight of Christ.

Not only was there pagan persecution of these Christians, but there was Jewish persecution as well. These persecutors were Jews by birth but because they rejected Messiah and persecuted His followers, Jesus said that they were of the “synagogue of Satan.” When Jesus said they were not Jews, He did not mean they were not descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but that they were not fulfilling their spiritual calling. The term “Jew” comes from “Judah” which means “praise.” These

Jews who persecuted Christians in Smyrna were not bringing praise to God (See **Romans 2:28,29**), thus the strong words from Jesus.

Jesus then tells the Smyrna Christians that they would be going through more suffering, imprisonment, and tribulation (**Revelation 2:10,11**). He promises them the crown of life and that as overcomers they would not be hurt by the second death. In Revelation those who “overcome” are those who do not compromise with the world, who are willing to suffer for their faith, who confess Christ and refuse to deny him under persecution, and who resist false teachings. The little, poor church in Smyrna was a church of overcomers. As such they are pleasing to Jesus and receive no rebuke, only commendation.

THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM

Pergamum was a prominent city that from an early time supported the cult of emperor worship.¹⁰ The city was famous for the various pagan gods, one of the more famous being Asclepius who was a serpent god of healing.¹¹ Thus Jesus says this about the dwelling place of this church: “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells” (**Revelation 2:13**). Perhaps “Satan’s throne” is a reference to the famous serpent god Asclepius. There were many pagan temples and pagan cults operating in Pergamum; yet there was a Christian church there.

The Church in Pergamum was commended for holding fast, not denying the name of Christ, and for having a martyr who stood up for the Christian faith. In the Greek, Jesus said that they, “did not deny the faith of Me.” The definite article would indicate the content of the body of Christian truth.¹² Here was a little church existing in a horrible, hostile, pagan environment which held firm in her faith and confession even under persecution. But there was trouble as well.

Jesus further said to the church in Pergamum: “But I have a few things

against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality. Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans" (**Revelation 2:14,15**). The doctrine of Balaam is a reference to **Numbers 31:16**. Though Balaam failed to curse Israel as Balak had requested earlier in Numbers, Balaam came up with a better plan. The problem was that God had blessed Israel and Balaam could not change that (**Numbers 23:20**). So Balaam came up with solution. He knew that if Israel would compromise with the pagans in their religious practices they would put themselves under God's curse. That is just what they did as recorded in **Numbers 25:1-3**. The teaching of Balaam was to promote compromise with the religious practices of paganism. In the case of Pergamum, it was to participate in the pagan religious services which included eating meat offered to idols and committing fornication.¹³ Some members of the church had listened to this teaching and claimed the liberty to participate. Those who did probably found it much easier to fit in with the citizens of the city and avoid persecution.

As mentioned earlier, whatever the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was (possibly the passage here is linking the Nicolaitans with Balaam, implying they taught the same thing¹⁴), Christians in Ephesus hated it and some in Pergamum embraced it. The former were commended and the latter rebuked.

This church likely had two types of Christians within: those who confessed the faith and resisted the world who were persecuted and even martyred and those who compromised with the pagans for their own pleasure. This means that Biblical church discipline was not being practiced. They tolerated what they should not have.

THE CHURCH IN THYATIRA

Thyatira was a wealthy city known for its trade guilds, fabric industry, and purple dye.¹⁵ Outside of Revelation, the

only mention of this city concerned the fact that Lydia, a key person in the church of Philippi, was a seller of purple from Thyatira (**Acts 16:12-15**). That Acts mentions the selling of purple and Thyatira shows the historical accuracy of the Bible. The trade guilds and wealth that accompanied them most certainly contributed to the serious problems in the Thyatiran church. Those who belonged to the guilds were expected to participate in common meals dedicated to pagan deities.¹⁶ These meals often ended in what Ladd calls, "unbridled licentiousness."¹⁷ Thus the members who became Christians would likely be faced with a very difficult choice between retaining their economic prosperity or maintaining the purity of their Christian faith. Jesus' message to the church shows that they chose the former with the blessing of a false prophetess called "Jezebel."

The church in Thyatira receives a brief commendation followed by a lengthy, stern rebuke. Here is the commendation: "*I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first*" (**Revelation 2:19**). That these qualities existed would not seem remarkable if it were not for the fact of the scathing rebuke that follows. The church was progressing in the key Christian virtues of faith and love which were being manifested in Christian service. One would think that this was an exemplary church if no more were said. It is noteworthy that this church had the type of love that the Ephesian church lacked. From what follows we see that the condition of this church is the opposite of that in Ephesus. Thyatira had love but tolerated false teaching; whereas Ephesus did not tolerate false teaching but lacked love.

Jesus goes on to rebuke the church of Thyatira for tolerating a false prophetess: "*But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols*" (**Revelation 2:20**). These sinful acts were likely linked to the pagan feasts of the trade guilds.

In 1Corinthians Paul allows eating meats offered to idols if the meat were merely bought in the marketplace (**1Corinthians 10:25**). In a city like Thyatira, any meat found in a marketplace would likely have been offered to idols. However, Paul forbids eating such meat in connection with the idol worship itself: "*But if anyone should say to you, 'This is meat sacrificed to idols,' do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake*" (**1Corinthians 10:28**). Also, since the eating of the meat is coupled with immorality, the evidence points to participation in the pagan feasts.

The problem was that several lusts were being satisfied with prophetic endorsement: the lust for money and prestige and the lust for immorality. Ladd writes, "The reason why the problem assumed such acute form in Thyatira was that membership in the trade guilds involved participation in pagan meals and often led to immorality."¹⁸ In the gospels, Jesus required people to lay aside everything for His sake, to take up their cross and follow Him. The church in Thyatira gave no heed to that part of Jesus' message. They enjoyed their relationship with the world too much.

Jezebel who encouraged these sins is likely a real person in Thyatira who is called Jezebel because of her spiritual relationship to the Jezebel of the Old Testament. The Old Testament Jezebel attempted to integrate Baal worship into the practices of Israel. She hated the prophets who pointed out her sin and killed as many of them as she could, though God spared Elijah from her.

Another aspect of the problem in Thyatira is revealed in this verse: "*But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them— I place no other burden on you*" (**Revelation 2:24**). Jezebel's teaching is called, "the deep things of Satan." It is not clear from the grammar whether this is irony (they claim to know deep things of God but these are actually from Satan, according to Ladd) or a literal claim (that they gain some benefit from knowing details of the

Satanic system, according to Lenksi). In either case, there is a spiritual side to this immorality. They had a sensual spirituality that they actually thought made them superior.

Jesus addressed a remnant, “the rest” who have not known the supposed superior spirituality advocated by the prophetess. That He placed no other burden is possibly a reference to the determination of the Jerusalem council which forbade fornication and eating things strangled. The remnant was to not listen to Jezebel and refuse to participate in the pagan feasts or seek the secret, “deeper” spiritual knowledge that the others claimed. Thus their faith, love and service would be unsullied and praiseworthy.

THE CHURCH IN SARDIS

Jesus called the church in Sardis “dead”: “I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (**Revelation 3:1b**). This alarming diagnosis from the Lord shows that what others think of a church has no bearing on what God thinks of it. This was a church that had a reputation (“name”) of being an “alive” church. However they were spiritually asleep: “Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God” (**Revelation 3:2**). There is no indication that this church was persecuted or that she embraced false doctrine. The church was satisfied to be known as alive by others and to be content with her peaceful situation. The incomplete deeds show a lack of living out all the implications of the gospel. Had this church been fervent and faithful in its response to the gospel and outreach with the gospel, she would likely have faced the hostility of the pagan world.

The church at Sardis coexisted in the city with the cult of Cybele,¹⁹ a pagan goddess whose worship included horrid and disgusting practices.²⁰ Also, later in Sardis a large synagogue was built which has been excavated and is very impressive.²¹ What is interesting about the church at Sardis is what is

lacking compared to several of the other churches: compromise with the pagans and hostility from the Jews. There are possible reasons for this. For one, the practices of the cult of Cybele involved self-mutilation and other revolting practices that were unlikely to be attractive to outsiders (unlike the feasts and immoral parties of Thyatira). For another, the outwardly popular but inwardly dead church at Sardis was unlikely to have been bold enough to preach the gospel to the Jews and pagans and thus bring persecution. They were content to have the name of being alive and relative peace with the society around.

Jesus further said, “Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you” (**Revelation 3:3**). They were to call to mind the truths of the gospel that had caused the church to come to be in the first place. They were to repent of their satisfaction of being popular with man, “alive” in reputation, and return to the only thing that can truly make anyone alive which is the work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel to regenerate sinners. George Eldon Ladd comments, “Here is a picture of nominal Christianity, outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power.”²²

Revelation 3:4,5 shows that there was still a faithful remnant in Sardis. Often when a church comes to exist for other reasons than why it existed in the first place, there remain people who truly know the Lord. Such individuals often know that something is wrong but are not sure what to do. Jesus comforted them with the promise of white garments and their names in the book of life.

THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA

The Lord had no words of rebuke for the church in Philadelphia. This church was under Jewish persecution as shown by the reference to the “synagogue of Satan” (discussed in the section about the church in Smyrna). Lord gives them

this commendation: “I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name” (**Revelation 3:8**). To understand the church we need to understand the phrase, “a little power.” The NIV and ESV translate this, “I know you have little strength” and “I know you have but little power” respectively. Ladd also translates it that way and comments, “The emphasis is not on the little strength that the church possess, but upon the fact that she has only a little strength. Apparently this church was small, poor, and uninfluential.”²³ Like with Smyrna who was also commended only, Jesus did not see poverty or lack of size as a sign of malaise.

The key of David mentioned in verse 7 and the open door in verse 8 concern the means of entrance into the Messianic kingdom. This small, poor church had in its possession the keys to the kingdom. The only means of entrance to the Messianic kingdom is through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ladd comments on this, “The thought may well be that though the church is small and weak, Christ has set before her a great opportunity to make the gospel known.”²⁴ Perhaps compared to the prospering synagogue, the church seemed to have little going for it. But those in the synagogue did not have the key of David (an allusion to **Isaiah 22:22**) because the Son of David is Jesus the Messiah and He gave the key of entrance to the Davidic kingdom the church (**Matthew 16:16**). The open door given to the church cannot be shut by man because the church has entrance through the gospel.

The commendation is that they have “kept My word” and “not denied My name.” They not only had the keys, they were using them. They actively confessed Christ and His gospel even in the face of persecution. The pattern emerging from the commendations in the letters to the churches is that nothing is more important than confessing. This is probably because of the persecution in the first century. A church like Sardis could avoid conflict with the

pagan society by keeping quiet and not actively confessing the gospel before the pagans. Confessors were often martyred as we saw in Smyrna and Pergamum. Confession offended the Jews and the Pagans because it meant telling them that unless they repented and believed on Christ, they would perish under God's judgment. The church in Philadelphia was poor and small, but they confessed, thus using the keys of the kingdom.

THE CHURCH IN LAODICEA

The church in Laodicea is the most famous one in the minds of most Bible believing Christians because of two famous passages, the one about being lukewarm and the one about Jesus standing at the door and knocking. It is interesting that both of those passages are usually misunderstood or misused. The church in Laodicea was rebuked only and received no commendation. The one "attribute" that this church possessed was a positive self image: "Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Revelation 3:17). The Laodicean church boasted of being healthy and prosperous. Ladd translates this, "I have gotten riches" pointing out that they did trust their own successful efforts.²⁵ They were a strong, wealthy, successful church, at least in their own eyes. This attitude reflects the local attitude of the city, which was a very wealthy city that prided herself in having been rebuilt after an earthquake with no outside help.²⁶

The Laodicean church was self-deluded. Perhaps the most dangerous time for the church (as is born out by church history) is when the church is wealthy and successful. It does not necessarily follow that an outwardly successful church must of necessity be one that has compromised. We need more information before we can make such an assessment (like whether the law and the gospel are being preached without compromise). However, the key problem is the **thinking** that because we are successful, therefore we must be

pleasing to God. The Laodicean church makes it clear that such thinking can be the result of tragic self-delusion. This shows how badly we need objective criteria from God Himself to determine if what we are doing is pleasing to Him.

Here is what Jesus said to this seemingly "successful" but self-deluded church: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth" (Revelation 3:15, 16). The common interpretation of this is that cold signifies the lost or spiritually dead, the hot signifies fervent Christians, and the lukewarm are complacent Christians.²⁷ However, the passage is more likely a reference to local water supplies. Just north of Laodicea was Hierapolis famous for its hot springs that were deemed medicinal.²⁸ Colossae was known for cold pure waters.²⁹ Laodicea did not have a suitable water supply: "The city's lukewarm, mineral-laden water was suitable only as a means to induce vomiting."³⁰ So the cold water was useful as was the hot water, but the Laodicean water was useless. The church was being rebuked for the spiritual uselessness of her "deeds." Jesus was saying that the deeds of the Laodicean church were as nauseating to Him as their own local water was to them. What a graphic and stunning rebuke!

Jesus instructed this church, "I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see" (Revelation 3:18). Jesus spoke to their real needs which were many, not to their "perceived needs," which were none. Refined "gold" would be spiritual wealth that has been through the refiner's fire of testing and discipline.³¹ White garments are the righteousness of Christ which, if they had received it by faith, would cover the embarrassment of their spiritual nakedness. The eye salve is another local allusion. Laodicea was famous for producing eye salve that was said to have curative power.³² They were spiritually blind and did not know it. Here

was a church with a total lack of discernment, particularly concerning their own condition. Their wealth and success had blinded their eyes to their beggarly spiritual reality.

There is another passage in Jesus' address to this church that needs comment in regard to the virtues and vices of churches. It is this famous passage: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20). This passage is not an evangelistic verse about a sinner asking Jesus into his or her heart as it is so often misused. It is an ironic rebuke to the Laodicean church. Dining should be understood in the context of Jewish table fellowship. Jesus used this concept to rebuke others who, like these Laodiceans, were self-sufficient and blind to their spiritual condition. For example He said this to His Jewish brethren who were not believing in Him: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast out. And they will come from east and west, and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:28,29). When we receive communion in the manner the Lord prescribed we, "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1Corinthians 11:26b). True Christian fellowship is centered about the person and work of Christ, and His spiritual presence in our midst. In Laodicea, the Lord Himself was excluded from their table fellowship. He asked to be brought back in. Mounce comments, "In their blind self-sufficiency they had, as it were, excommunicated the risen Lord from their congregation."³³

THE KEY VIRTUES ACCORDING TO JESUS OVERCOMING

There are seven promises to overcomers found in the section of Revelation containing the messages to the seven churches. The promises have to do with eternal life, escaping punishment, ruling with Christ, and having a new name.³⁴

These promises are summarized at the end of Revelation, "*He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son*" (**Revelation 21:7**). Nothing is more important than being an overcomer. Let us discuss this matter first and then survey what we have learned about Jesus' assessment of the virtues and vices in His churches.

An overcomer is one who has maintained his confession in the face of persecution and or temptation. We have seen how some in the church had so compromised with the world they avoided persecution or rejection. Though they appeared successful, powerful and popular, they were rebuked by Christ. Others, though small in number, lacking in power and persecuted by both pagans and Jews, maintained their confession and refused to compromise. These are the ones who are overcomers.

Revelation contains a passage that describes the essence of being an overcomer: "*And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death*" (**Revelation 12:11**). It was Satan, the "accuser of the brethren," who was thus defeated. Satan holds people in bondage not because of his great power, but because of their sins before God. If their sins remain unforgiven, then people remain in his power.

The blood atonement is absolutely necessary for anyone to be an overcomer. The blood of Christ was poured out "once for all"³⁵ to avert God's just wrath against sin. People need to know that they have offended a Holy God and that they are facing God's wrath.³⁶ Without the blood atonement which is provided by Christ for all who repent and believe the gospel, there is no escape from the wrath of God. The "blood of the Lamb" is not a incantation, the utterance of which will scare away Satan, but it is the once for all shed blood of Christ which simultaneously delivers sinners from God's wrath and from Satan's kingdom.

The "word of their testimony" concerns the confession of the Christian. Those who willingly and openly confess Christ are never popular in the world

and often persecuted. They are not just "confessing" in the sense of "saying something nice about Jesus." They are confessing the uniqueness of Christ, the deity of Christ, the humanity of Christ, the sinlessness of Christ, the cross of Christ and the resurrection of Christ. This type of confession brings division between true Christians and nominal ones. The word "testimony" is *marturia* in the Greek, from which we get our word "martyr." Many who "testified" were killed for their confession of Christ. This is expressed in the phrase, "*did not love their life even unto death.*" Nothing is more important to overcomers than their relationship with Christ which is based on His shed blood, expressed in their confession, and demonstrated in their willingness to lay aside their own self-love.

PERSEVERANCE

Four times in the addresses to the churches Jesus commends perseverance. Later in Revelation there is as description of perseverance: "*Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus*" (**Revelation 14:12**). Those who persevere have genuine faith and this faith is demonstrated in obedience. This is a virtue that shows a genuine work of grace in one's heart: "*And the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance*" (**Luke 8:15**). Perseverance is shown by how one reacts to trials: "*therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure*" (**2Thessalonians 1:4**).

REJECTING AND HATING FALSE DOCTRINE

Jesus commends those who refuse to tolerate false prophets, false apostles, and false teaching. Clearly Christ's apostles were like this as seen in the many warnings against false teaching found in the New Testament. Local churches are responsible to stand for sound doctrine

and correct false doctrine. Paul laid down this standard for elders: "*holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict*" (**Titus 1:9**). Paul also predicted a time when many will refuse to embrace sound doctrine or correct false doctrine: "*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires*" (**2Timothy 4:3**).

BEING FAITHFUL WHEN WEAK

The two churches that were only commended and not rebuked were both small and lacking influence. The church in Smyrna was poor and suffering. The church in Philadelphia had but "little power." But those highly commended churches were faithful to Christ and would not let anything allow them deviate from their confession of Christ. They faithfully used the "keys" to show people the way of entrance into the Messianic kingdom.

THE WORST VICIES ACCORDING TO JESUS LACK OF LOVE

The Ephesian church, though commended for orthodoxy, was rebuked for a lack of love. This has many possible applications in all churches. For one, there are those who have hung onto orthodoxy in spite of their spiritual coldness. Perhaps orthodox truths are deemed worth fighting for because of sectarian considerations. So called "dead orthodoxy" is usually descriptive of a group that would never tolerate any tampering with their historical, doctrinal formulations or statements, but who show little evidence of the love for God and neighbor that is the true keeping of the commandments. Such orthodoxy could possibly be no more than mental assent to truths that are not fully grasped by life changing faith. We need to remember Paul's admonition to "*speak the truth in love.*"³⁷ I believe that in the case of those who defend orthodoxy

but demonstrate little love for God and neighbor, the problem is not orthodox truth, but a lack of a genuine, vital faith in Christ.

TOLERATION OF FALSE DOCTRINE

One church tolerated the teaching of the Nicolaitans and another the teaching of a prophetess of the ilk of Jezebel. We live in a time where “tolerance” is considered the ultimate virtue. Jesus denounced such “tolerance” as spiritual wickedness. In too many churches today, everything is tolerated except sound doctrine! We need to listen to what Jesus has already said about this matter before it is too late.

COMPROMISE WITH THE PAGAN CULTURE

The sharp rebuke about the teaching of Balaam shows the danger of compromise with the pagans. Jezebel also counseled such compromise. The churches who found it convenient to keep pagan practices and thus keep their wealth and avoid persecution in the process are sternly rebuked by our Lord. Those churches learned what many today know so well – the more you blur the line between the pagan culture and the church, the more people you attract to your church. The world will never reject or persecute a version of “Christianity” that reflects its own wants, needs and values. A non-confrontive “gospel” is a popular gospel. The world will reward what it favors and persecute what it hates.

DELUDED SELF-SATISFACTION

The church in Laodicea thought she had it all. Her true spiritual needs were many, but she was unaware of them. Like the city in which she was located, this church had the same signs of “success.” She had power, wealth, influence, and a strong self confidence. This happy ignorance of spiritual poverty brought on the most stunning rebuke Jesus offered any of the churches. If there is any church that epitomizes the

condition of many churches in America today, this is the one. We have it all: power, money, popularity, success, influence, and often the accolades of the society around us. But what does Jesus think?

WHAT IS NOT IMPORTANT: SIZE OR GROWTH

As we have seen, the two churches that were praised by the Lord and not rebuked were small churches. Clearly Jesus is not impressed with large numbers. More significantly, He never addresses church growth. How big these churches were compared to earlier times in their history was of no consequence to Jesus. Sometimes under severe persecution churches shrink because only those who are “overcomers” are willing to remain and pay the price. When Christianity is popular, churches grow for reasons other than true conversions. Therefore, what is essential is maintaining the true confession of the church regardless of whether it is being received or rejected. The only way to become an overcomer is through the blood of the Lamb. If the blood atonement is not proclaimed, the church cannot possibly overcome. Size or growth in numbers of people is not important. If the church is a confessing church, God will add to it those who are being saved. Noah was faithful to God and preached 100 years with no converts. Jonah was an unwilling preacher and God saved an entire city through his preaching. Noah is commended in the Bible and Jonah portrayed in a bad light. We need to rid ourselves of thinking about numbers.

RICK WARREN’S “HEALTHY CHURCH”

Earlier we discussed the wildly popular Purpose Driven movement that claims to be bringing a reformation to the church. “Healthy churches” as defined by Rick Warren are being duly honored.³⁸ Given what we have learned from Jesus’ assessment of His churches, would He deem these churches “healthy”? I think not. Let me explain.

Rick Warren claims that doctrine

is so unimportant that God will not even ask about it: “God won’t ask about your religious background or doctrinal views.”³⁹ Jesus made doctrine very important and rebuked those who tolerated false doctrine: “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.” (2John 1:9 NKJV)

Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven life never explains the blood atonement in the context of the gospel or salvation. Jesus commended overcomers – people are overcomers because of the blood of the Lamb. Since Warren’s readers and followers do not hear anything from him about the blood atonement or the wrath of God against sin, they have no way to become overcomers.

The church leaders who follow Rick Warren are told that if they follow his campaign and are typical of other churches that do, they will grow 20 percent in attendance and 20 percent in money. Jesus doesn’t care about attendance or money. Those who follow Rick Warren are investing in that which does not matter.

Rick Warren sets up his Saddleback Church as the role model for others to follow if they wish to be “healthy.” His positive self-assessment rivals that of the Laodicean church. He tells his followers of his many achievements as proved by numbers and the accolades of man. Jesus called another church like that “lukewarm” and threatened to spew it out of His mouth.

Rick Warren compromises with the pagans like the churches Jesus rebuked. He uses pagan principles in his SHAPE program which was inspired by Carl Jung’s questionable theories.⁴⁰ He teaches pagan “prayer” practices such as “breath prayers” which are designed to induce altered states of consciousness.⁴¹ He consults compromisers such as Robert Schuller and encourages others to do the same.

Rick Warren ultimately fails to “confess” in a manner that would set his teaching apart from the beliefs of the world. His non-offensive gospel is not the one Paul preached. He has opened the wide gates of compromise and

obscured the narrow gate that leads to salvation. There is no such thing as a non-confessing overcomer.

CONCLUSION

The church belongs to Jesus, not to man. Jesus, as the head of the church, will ultimately judge His church. In order to make it possible to repent before it is too late, Jesus gave us the seven inspired messages to the seven churches so that we might know what He commends and what He condemns. The great danger for each of us is self-delusion. We tend to not see ourselves realistically. Instead we think that surely we epitomize the virtues and avoid the vices. The only way to avoid such self-delusion is to carefully and objectively study what Jesus has said. Having made such a study, we need to look at ourselves and our churches, humbly asking how these things apply to our own situation.

We are getting a lot of bad advice from the contemporary, evangelical culture. This bad advice virtually ignores everything Jesus said was important to Him in His churches. What He cares about is deemed irrelevant for popular, "healthy" churches today. In closing, let us consider the words of our Lord as spoken to the Laodicean church: "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent" (Revelation 3:19).

END NOTES

¹ <http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/AboutUs/WhoWeAre/Welcomes.htm>

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 51.

⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *Revelation in Commentary on the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998 originally published 1943, Augsburg Publishing) 82.

⁶ This phrase is found at the conclusion of the message to each of the seven churches. It is a call to listen to God who is speaking authoritatively to His people.

⁷ George Eldon Ladd, *Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 39.

⁸ Walvoord, 59.

⁹ *Ibid.* 61.

¹⁰ Ladd, 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 46.

¹² Walvoord, 67.

¹³ See Ladd, 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Walvoord, 71.

¹⁶ Ladd, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 55.

²⁰ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 225-229 describes the Cybele and Attis mystery cult and the celebrations & practices associated with it.

²¹ *Ibid.* 399, 400. Ferguson includes a picture of the synagogue as it is now. It likely dates from 270 ad.

²² Ladd, 56.

²³ *Ibid.* 60.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 59.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 66.

²⁶ <http://www.ourfatherlutheran.net/biblehomelands/sevenchurches/laodicea/laodictxt.htm>

²⁷ See Ryan Habbena's article published in CIC issue 59:

<http://www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue59.pdf>; Ryan corrects this misinterpretation.

²⁸ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation in The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans revised edition, 1998) 109.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ <http://www.ourfatherlutheran.net/biblehomelands/sevenchurches/laodicea/laodictxt.htm>

³¹ See Malachi 3:3 and 1Peter 1:7.

Genuine faith will stand the test of fire that burns up dead works and leaves only that which is pure.

³² Mounce, 111.

³³ *Ibid.* 113.

³⁴ See Rev. 2:7; 2:11; 2:17; 2:26; 3:5; 3:12; 3:21.

³⁵ See Heb. 9:12.

³⁶ Consider Revelation 6:17: "and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb'"

³⁷ Ephesians 4:15.

³⁸ One church that received this award tells about it on this website:

<http://www.northway.org/nwccweb/pages/PurposeDrivenChurchAward/PurposeDrivenChurchAward.asp> They got the award by following Rick

Warren's processes and principles. Evidently a "healthy" church is one that most perfectly replicates Rick Warren's ideas.

³⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2002) 34.

⁴⁰ James Sundquist, *Who's Driving the Purpose Driven Church?*; (Bethany, OK: Bible Belt Publishing, 2004) 149-171 establishes the connection between SHAPE and Carl Jung. Jung was an occultist.

⁴¹ Warren, 89.

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