

“A Spiritual Check Up” or “Listen Up”

Revelation 3

Contemporary Contact – **BLANK1**

We’re all familiar with getting a check-up. It could be a check-up at your doctor (**Maxine Cartoon2** – finds out even her blood is negative!). Sometimes it’s an evaluation or performance review at school or at work or in sports (**Herman3**). Less formal but more frequent evaluations often happen at home. Not all evaluations are “good” in terms of why or how they’re done, yet without honest feedback, we can never improve or grow. We all have blind spots that we need help seeing, including blind spots in our relationship with God (less than expected and/or better than expected). In Revelation we find Jesus Christ pulling back the curtain to reveal the true health and vitality of his people in order to prod and inspire them to carry on his light bearing and life-giving work for the world.

Christ’s Spiritual Direction

So far over the past few weeks we’ve sat in on Christ’s spiritual check up with four first century churches. Today we’ll take a brief look at the final three churches (**SLIDE4**) and what this exposes for us as well. The spiritual direction Christ gives each church usually begins with a positive **affirmation**, followed by a word of **correction**, and then concludes with a motivational **promise** (or warning).

In spite of various faults, all the churches addressed by Christ so far have received words of commendation. Imagine you’re the next church on the list, tuning into this highly anticipated letter from pastor John in prison. “We’ve got a good reputation. I wonder what he’ll say about us.” **Read Revelation 3¹⁻⁶**

Well, what words of **affirmation** did Sardis get? Not much, which is surprising given their good reputation with others, a reputation for being very much alive. Christ’s **critique** is devastatingly brief: in the eyes of others “alive”, in my eyes, dead. Gulp! Things are not always as they seem. That is why the church was in need of an apocalypse, an unveiling, a drawing back the curtain

so she could see herself as she really was, not as she hoped she was (the opposite of Elisha's servant...Remember 2 Kgs. 6¹⁷).

Maybe they felt like the man on a long journey camping for the night. Feeling hungry he lit a candle, and grabbed the bag of dates he had packed. Unfortunately the first date he pulled out was wormy, so he threw it aside, and tried another, and it also had worms. So did the next one. What to do? He decided to blow out the candle and ate his remaining dates in the dark.¹ Rather than face unpleasant realities, we often find it easier to remain in darkness.

In some ways the city of Sardis at this time had everything: a great location, good climate, healthy economy and culture. But the both the city and the church had perceptions of themselves that were more illusionary than real. For example, what was most visibly striking to visitors of the city **SLIDE** was the great acropolis with its sharp cliffs that many thought made them impossible to attack. Yet the city was taken over by surprise attacks twice in its history.² Both times the attackers scaled its cliffs at points considered impregnable. Christ's wake-up call is very appropriate: (1) "Wake up" = be vigilant; "I will come like a thief"

Satan can topple us even in areas we think are our strengths (1 Cor. 10¹² – "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"). None of us is strong enough to withstand temptation in our own strength. We need to be ever vigilant to overcome the schemes of the devil (Eph. 6¹¹; James 4⁷; 1 Pet. 5⁸). In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught how to get to the root of problems that grow into murder, adultery, divorce, dishonesty, and enmity—Matt. 5²¹⁻⁴⁸; esp. vv.29-30. (2) "Strengthen what remains" but need urgent attention to keep from dying.

a) **Personally,**

- e.g. Still have some hope vs. lost all hope...
- e.g. Still have some sensitivity to sin vs. a dead conscience,
- e.g. Still have an urge to share your faith at work vs. falling silent

How to strengthen what remains is in the next three imperatives.

(3) "Remember what you have received...(4) "Hold it fast" and (5) "Repent".

- E.g. Perhaps you have only a small flame, a pilot light of the Holy Spirit's empowering presence...Then fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you...^{2Tim.1:6},

¹ William Beckham, The Second Reformation, p. 38.

² For the details see Robert Mounce, Revelation (NICNT), pp. 110-111.

b) Corporately – Christ also knows that there are still “*a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes.*” (= moral & ethical purity or impurity...James uses the language of “being polluted by the world” (1²⁷).³ In a church like Pergamum only “some”^{2:14} were soiled. In Sardis, only a few aren’t. But lest we be tempted to despair, to think things in my life or church or marriage are beyond recovery, we need to remember that Christ has in his hands *both* the needy church and the life-giving sevenfold Spirit. “He can bring the two together, not only to diagnose but also to revive the dead.”⁴ And we may be sure that if Sardis like churches and people listen up and act on Christ’s counsel, he will indeed revive them. (e.g. Holy Trinity Brompton story)

1) PHILADELPHIA: A Faithful Church (Read **Revelation 3:7-13**)

a) CONTEXT – This city, **SLIDE** founded in c. 140 B.C. at a junction of trade routes, was called “the gateway to the East” and was designed to serve as a missionary centre for the spread of the Greek language and culture (which was so successful it replaced the local language. Hundreds of years later it was called “little Athens”).⁵ Its economic prosperity was partly from its strategic location and partly from the grape-growing that flourished in the volcanic soil of that area. It was, as one might have guessed, a centre of worship for the god Dionysos (god of the grape harvest, wine & winemaking, religious ecstasy & unrestrained consumption).

b) Christ’s Intro – Christ addresses himself to the church in Philadelphia with two main descriptions: (1) “him who is holy and true” (“**Holy One**” is used of God 12x in Isaiah—e.g. Is. 1⁴; 5^{19,24}; 12⁶; cf. Hab. 3³; Mk 1²⁴; Jn. 6⁶⁹; and here it is joined with “**True One**”—genuine and/or faithful) , and (2) “who holds the key *of David* (in addition to “the keys of death and Hades” in 1¹⁸), the keys to the royal kingdom, the kingdom of God (ultimate authority & supremacy). The “open door” they are given

³ What this kind of spiritual deadness looks like is probably best illustrated in 2 Timothy 3:2-4, “*People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power.*”

⁴ Michael J. Wilcock, The Message of Revelation, p. 53.

⁵ Leon Morris, Revelation, p. 77. Yeatts, Revelation, pp.72-73. Mounce, Revelation, pp. 114-115.

was very important to people who had the door of the synagogue closed in their faces and were powerless to change it. (e.g. rejected by your peers???)

c) Commendation(s) – Christ recognizes that although they have little power (small, no prestige or influence), they have faithfully kept his word and not denied his name (i.e. identified themselves with him and his ways when it was unpopular to do so...At the office, in school, in business).

d) Critique(s) – like Sardis, this church receives no word of critique.

e) Motivational Promise(s) – He knows the strength & persistence of the opposition they are facing and promises them: (1) the ultimate vindication before those who have condemned them^{v.9}, and (2) deliverance from⁶ “the hour of trial [& testing] that is going to come on the whole world”^{v.10}, and (3) eternal certainty & security^{v.11} (no one is going to take their crown, the wreath awarded to the winner of an athletic contest...An appropriate metaphor in a city known for its games and festivals). To this athletic metaphor is added a further promise to Christ’s “victorious” followers; the promise of being made a doorkeeper in the temple of God. No, “a pillar”. Elsewhere in the NT James, Peter and John were “reputed to be pillars”.^{Gal.2:9} Being a pillar conveys significance, stability and permanence (notice the remaining parts from the ancient temples = pillars!; contrast the “peg” of Eliakim—Is.22²³⁻²⁵). To a city that had experienced devastating earthquakes which caused people to flee into the countryside and live in temporary shelters, the promise of permanence within the earthquake free New Jerusalem would have a special meaning. A further promise to the faithful is that Christ “will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God...and... also...my new name.”^{v.12} No ban placed on these refugees for they are marked as true citizens of the kingdom.

⁶ As Mounce notes, “The major question is whether Christ is promising deliverance from the period of trial or safekeeping through the trial. The preposition “from” (*ek*) is inconclusive.” Throughout the NT the promises are frequently given to keep his disciples *through* troubles & trials (e.g. Jn. 17¹⁵; Rev. 6⁹⁻¹¹). “In fact, all the judgments from 6¹ onward relate to this final hour of trial....The hour of trial is directed toward the entire non-Christian world, but the believer will be kept from it, not by some previous appearance of Christ to remove the church bodily from the world, but by the spiritual protection he provides against the forces of evil.” (pp.119-120)

2) LAODICEA: A “Lukewarm” Church (Read **Revelation 3:14-22**)

- a) **CONTEXT** – Laodicea was located at the junction of two important imperial trade routes. Its sister cities were Hierapolis (10 kms to the north, famous for its hot springs—like Harrison), and Colossae (16 kms to the south near majestic mountains 2500m high).⁷ **VIDEO** **SLIDE** Laodicea’s major weakness was its lack of an adequate and convenient source for water. Its location had been determined by the road system rather than natural resources. Thus cold water had to be brought in from springs to the south through a system of stone pipes, and hot water from the hot springs near Hierapolis.
- b) **Christ’s Intro** = “The Amen” (Is. 65¹⁶) In the OT = primarily the acknowledgement of that which is valid and binding, so as a personal designation it = “the one in whom perfect conformity to reality is exemplified” further expressed by the accompanying phrase “the faithful and true witness”. (completely authentic and trustworthy)^{Mounce, 124}
- c) **Commendation(s)** – Once again we hear the familiar “I know your deeds” but is what follows going to be a positive word of commendation like Philadelphia or a negative word of critique like Sardis? We soon find out.
- d) **Critique(s)** – Their “deeds” show they are...neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm and Christ can’t stomach it. Why? Two interpretations:
- An indication of their spiritual fervor (or lack of it)? (“*lukewarm* toward the call to vigorous spiritual activity”) ^{Beckwith} But how would being totally cold be better than lukewarm?
 - Perhaps the contrast is between the hot medicinal water of Hierapolis and the cold, pure waters of Colossae? ^{Rudwick & Greene} (“providing neither refreshment for the spiritually weary, nor healing for the spiritually sick”)
- e) **Correction(s)** – The saddest thing for this self-professed “rich, well-dressed, insightful” church was that they did not realize their true condition as being spiritually “poor, naked, and blind” (the emperor has no clothes idea). Christ’s critique must have been embarrassing & hard for them to swallow,

⁷ Westwood Plateau = 400m; Golden Ears = 1700m; Mt. Baker = 3286m

which is probably why Christ underlines in verse 19, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent”. Indeed there is good news in this harsh critique for Christ did not say “*I have spit you out of my mouth*” but rather “*I am about to*”; there is still an opportunity to repent (vv.18-20). The irony is that they are counselled to buy the things they are confident they have no need of. But the prepositional phrase that points to the source of these purchases is emphatic; “*from me!*” (genuine, purified faith^{1Peter1:7}; clothed in Christ’s righteousness^{Rom.13:14} rather than the filthiness of our own works^{Is.64:6}; cf. Col 3⁹⁻¹⁰).

- V.20 = “Let me in”...Spoken to lukewarm *believers* (and unbelievers since they have been acting & living like unbelievers).

f) Motivational Promise(s) = to sit with Christ on his throne...which the disciples all wanted^{Mk.10:37} (cf. Mt. 19²⁸ and the **scene** in the Chronicles of Narnia when they become kings & queens) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlcBb7tfvos>

Implications & Applications

- 1) For a Dead/Dying Faith** (no substance, no relationship, no holiness) – No more “playing church”. Revive & re-sensitive us, O Lord. (e.g. Neh. 8; Ezek. 37)
- 2) For a Battered Faith** – those who feel they don’t have the strength to persevere through the particular trials battering them, “Keep holding one” to the one who is the great promise keeper.
- 3) For a Lukewarm Faith** – Shock therapy, a shake up,
 - E.g. unplug the plug in drug (drop the TV & open up the good book)
 - Option #1 = Drop ½ hr of screen time & read or listen to the entire book of Revelation this week. With 22 chapters that = 3 chapters/day since we already read ch. 3 today.)
 - Option #2 = Drop all TV this week & read a book from our church library
 - Option #3 = Drop all TV for an evening & phone or visit someone to encourage them in their faith.)
 - E.g. Buy nothing day/week & invest in God’s work (e.g. Speisers, Guinea, food bank)

