

**LAODICEA:  
THE TRAGEDY OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY**  
Rev. Lawrence Baldrige  
December 14, 2008

The greatest thing in the world is to know how to be self-sufficient. -- Montaigne.

**REV 3:14-22 NIV – To the Church in Laodicea**

<sup>14</sup> To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.

<sup>15</sup> I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!

<sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

<sup>17</sup> You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

<sup>18</sup> I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see.

<sup>19</sup> Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.

<sup>22</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Self-Sufficiency is one of the values most often mentioned by writers who write about Appalachian people in their books and sociological studies. Most of us who live in this section of the world, and who were born and raised here, know that self-sufficiency is a passing, perhaps, a passed value. Since the inception of the 'great society,' the people of Appalachia, are a too-dependent society with very little self-sufficiency. Thank God, however, for those who still follow the values of their parents and grandparents. But even Self-Sufficiency, though a good thing, can be carried too far. For example, if we think we can live without the help of others we are thoroughly mistaken. Listen to these two quotes from Gandhi and Joseph Addison:

“Interdependence is and ought to be as much the ideal of man as **self-sufficiency**. Man is a social being.” --Gandhi

“Prejudice and **self-sufficiency** naturally proceed from inexperience of the world, and ignorance of mankind.” --Joseph Addison

The church of Laodicea was infected with spiritual self-sufficiency. Such a state is extremely dangerous for any church, and for any person.

The writer of one commentary says, “If the angel at Philadelphia was given an ‘open door’ (3:8), individuals at Laodicea are told of another door, one that *they* must open: 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 (v. 20). These words have often been romanticized in popular religious art, in pictures of Jesus ‘knocking at the heart’s door.’ What is wrong is that Jesus is standing *outside* the door, excluded from the banquet like a homeless stranger... The poignant plea, though directed first to the church at Laodicea, is strategically placed near the end of the series of messages as Christ’s last appeal to *any* congregation that has shut him out. The beautiful ‘invitation’ is at the same time a severe indictment of a church that is self-sufficient, complacent and only marginally Christian.”

What an indictment of the church in Laodicea! What an indictment of any church throughout history! What an indictment of the churches in America today!

In effect, Christ is saying, “You have left me outside the church! It is my church, but you have shut me out of my own house. You have made your decisions without listening to Me. You have gone through the routines of worship without the help of My Spirit. You think you are sufficient, but you are sadly deficient in all the important things. You have gone through the week without praying to me and seeking my guidance, or even living for Me. I am disgusted with you. I am knocking this one last time, and if you don’t open the doors of this church to Me, the Lord of the Church, I am going to spit you out of My mouth. You are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked; but you, unfortunately, do not realize your plight. Open the door!”

Laodicea, the 7<sup>th</sup> church, about whom nothing positive was spoken by the Christ, was a church in the city by that same name, southeast of Philadelphia in the Lycus River valley. This church alone, as far as we know, had communication from both Paul and John. Laodicea, along with Colossae and Hierapolis, formed a cluster of three churches in that same area. Paul writes, “For you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally” (Col 2:1). In Col 1:7, Paul mentions his friend, Epaphras, who first preached the Christian message to the region, and who was still “working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis” (4:13). In Col 4:15, Paul sends greetings “to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.” He also requests in 4:16 that “this letter be read also to the church of the Laodiceans...” requesting that “after this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans.” And in Col. 4:17, Paul sternly warns Archippus, the first Bishop of the church in Laodicea, “Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it.” Barclay reminds us Colossians that this was written 30 years before the Book of Revelation, and probably points out that the leadership at Laodicea was flawed because of Archippus. Philemon 1:2 tells us that the book Philemon was addressed to Philemon, Apphia and Archippus, so Archippus could have been the son of Philemon.

According to Barclay, the city’s water supply, a long way from the city itself, was always vulnerable to an enemy, who could ‘cut their water off’ literally, and bring them to their knees. To become a great city, all Laodicea needed was the Pax Romana, the

Roman peace, brought about by Tiberius, as I recall. No enemies meant Laodicea could develop a good economy, which it did. Under the protection of Rome, like the city itself, the Christian community in Laodicea grew wealthy financially and materially, but extremely impoverished in spirit. The Pastor at Laodicea is described as boasting, “*I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.*” What a contrast with Smyrna, who was materially poor but rich in God’s sight (2:9)! Rich in material prosperity, Laodicea was, “*wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked!*” God says, “*You are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth (vv. 15-16).*” Perhaps this lukewarm water is reminiscent of the water that Laodicea acquired from the distant water supply.

The Great Tragedy of Laodicea is simply this: In their rise to the top they had become so self-sufficient that they forgot God. The *Bible* declares, “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.”

## **I. THE TRAGEDY OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY IS, FIRST, THAT IT CAUSES A CHURCH OR INDIVIDUAL TO FORGET ABOUT THE SUFFICIENCY OF GOD.**

Harold C. Phillips, one of America’s renowned preachers, who was visiting professor of homiletics at Southern Baptist Seminary, said, “We are all weak, finite, simple human beings, standing in the need of prayer. None need it so much as those who think they are strong, those who know it not, but are deluded by **self-sufficiency.**”

Barclay tells us that Laodicea was the only church about which Jesus did not say something good. There were six ancient cities named Laodicea, but this Laodicea on the Lycus River was founded about 250B.C. by Antiochus of Syria, and named after his wife Laodice. The city was astride the great road to the east that led to Syria. Having a problem water supply, since most of the water around them came from hot springs, and, as previously noted, any ‘good’ water was a long way off, made it vulnerable to the enemy forces. Sir William Ramsey remarked that it “only needed peace to make it a great commercial and financial centre.”

1. It was a great banking and financial centre. Cicero, traveling through Laodicea, cashed his checks here. When the earthquake hit Laodicea in 61 A.D., though devastated, Laodicea refused the help of Rome. As Barclay notes, Tacitus, the Roman historian, writes: “One of the most famous cities of Asia, Laodicea, was in that same year overthrown by an earthquake, and, without any relief from us, recovered itself by its own resources.” Laodicea was a wealthy city.

2. Laodicea was the center of clothing manufacture. The sheep that grazed around Laodicea had a much-softer, black, glossy wool, and most writers say this itself made them very wealthy as all people wanted their product. Laodicean garments were famous throughout that world.

3. Laodicea had a great medical center. At a temple to the Carian god Men was a

great medical school. Two doctors there were so famous that their images were on coins. The medical school was famous for two things, ointment for the ears and ointment for the eyes. The *Interpreter's Bible* tells us the salve came from, "a popular eye medicine called Phrygian powder."

4. According to Barclay, Laodicea also had a large Jewish population, and that population was quite wealthy owing to the Jewish propensity to gain wealth as entrepreneurs and lenders.

Laodicea had so much material prosperity that they simply forgot about God. Like us, I suppose, they looked at all the material mess they had, and said, "Look at all the blessings we have. Surely we must be blessed by Zeus, or Apollos." The gods have blessed us. In America today we see all that we have made by our own ingenuity, by our own techniques, by our own technological genius, and we simply forget God. Who needs God? I have all I need! I have all I want! I am Rich! I become like a little child on Christmas day with toys strewn all around me; and like a little child I toss them about to see if they are made well enough to last. Now listen to the Living God: (v. 17) You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, **poor, blind and naked**.

(v.18) I counsel you to buy from me **gold refined in the fire**, so that you can become rich; and **white clothes to wear**, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and **salve to put on your eyes**, so that you can see.

One commentary says, "They must 'buy' from Jesus other things--pure gold, white clothing and eye salve. Probably *gold refined in the fire* had already come to suggest to the early Christians faith tested by persecution (compare 1 Pet 1:7), while white clothing calls to mind here, as at Sardis, the purity of those who pass the test and 'overcome' (compare 3:4-5; also 6:11; 7:9, 13-14). The message to Laodicea is that the congregation needs, for its own sake, to face persecution so as to shatter its complacency and test and shape its faith. Behind this need is the principle, rooted in the experience of Jew and Christian alike, that 'those whom I love I rebuke and discipline' (v. 19; compare Prov 3:12; Heb 12:6)."

Whatever we do, church, let us not forget that we are totally dependent upon the power of God in Christ. Whatever we do, whatever we think, wherever we go, whenever we speak, whenever we think, whenever we breathe, we are dependent upon the power of God; and whenever self-sufficiency leads us away from God and into self-indulgence, we have some very serious problems as individuals and as a church. Self-sufficiency caused them to leave the Living Lord outside the church.

The great Scottish preacher Alexander Maclaren once said: "A man cannot get these Divine blessings if he does not want them. You take a hermetically sealed bottle and put it into the sea, it may float about in mid-ocean for a century, surrounded by a shoreless ocean, and it will be as dry and empty inside at the end as it was at the beginning. So you and I float, live, move, and have our being in that great ocean of the

Divine love in Christ, but you can cork up your hearts and wax them over with an impenetrable cover, through which that grace does not come. And you do do it, some of you.”

“One cause, which is not always observed, of the **sufficiency** of riches, is that they very seldom make their owner rich.” --Samuel Johnson

## **II. THE TRAGEDY OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY IS THAT IT, NEXT OF ALL, LULLS INTO SELF-SATISFACTION AND HUMANISM.**

Phillips Brooks once said: “God is the only final dream of man. Door after door opens; there is no final chamber till we come where He sits. All that ought to be done in the world has a right to know itself as finally done for Him. It is God, and the discovery of Him in life, and the certainty that He has plans for our lives, and is doing something with them, that gives us a true, deep sense of movement, and lets us always feel the power and delight of unknown coming things.”

Originally, humanism was not a bad thing. Some of the world’s greatest people have been humanists, but they also believed in and depended upon the Living God. But the Godless humanism of today, the atheistic humanism, the self-sufficient humanism, puts man at the center of life and leaves out any possibility of God. One of their kind said, centuries before, “Man is the measure of all things.”

Today’s ‘godless’ humanists define themselves by these terms: “Humanism is a philosophy of life inspired by humanity and guided by reason. It provides the basis for a fulfilling and ethical life without religion.”

- Humanists make sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values.
- Humanists see no convincing evidence for gods, the supernatural, or life after death.
- Humanists believe that moral values are properly founded on human empathy and scientific understanding.
- Humanists believe we must live this life on the basis that it is the only life we’ll have – that, therefore, we must make the most of it for ourselves, each other, and our world.

(Psa 53:1 KJV) The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. Corrupt are they, and have done abominable iniquity: there is none that doeth good.

(Psa 53:2 KJV) God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God.

(Psa 53:3 KJV) Every one of them is gone back: they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Humanism today is simply self-sufficiency run amok – nothing more. I am afraid God is going to send a real depression on America to show us that we are simply

creatures who must depend upon Him. I fear that God will take away our toys, and our ability to buy them, and our jobs, and our food, and perhaps, even our lives. He holds that power. The world is in His hands. The church in Laodicea was basking in their wealth, their health, their self-sufficiency, and God said, “You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. (v.18) I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see.”

### **III. THE TRAGEDY OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY IS THAT IT ALSO LEADS TO SPIRITUAL PRIDE AND DEATH.**

God warned His own people Israel not to break the Covenant. If they did:  
(Lev 26:17 KJV) And I will set my face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you.

(Lev 26:18 KJV) And if ye will not yet for all this hearken unto me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins.

(Lev 26:19 KJV) And I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass:

(Lev 26:20 KJV) And your strength shall be spent in vain: for your land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruits.

(Lev 26:21 KJV) And if ye walk contrary unto me, and will not hearken unto me; I will bring seven times more plagues upon you according to your sins.

Pride is the most destructive sin in man. No wonder it is considered one of the deadly sins by the church. Listen to what the *Bible* says:

(Psa 10:4 KJV) The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts.

(Prov 11:2 KJV) When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom.

(Prov 16:18 KJV) Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

We all know the results of pride. It is the sin that caused the fall of man, that caused the fall of kings, that caused the fall of kingdoms; and it is the sin that causes the death of churches. It is said that: The Emperor Justinian built the Church of St. Sophia, that gem of human architecture. He collected marble and treasures from all over the world to make it beautiful. At last, the moment for dedication arrived. The words uttered by Justinian seemed full of humility as he said that all had been done for the glory of God. But as he allowed his eyes to drink in the beauty of the building, he could hardly contain himself. Someone heard him whisper, “Solomon, I have surpassed thee.”

God has given Caney Baptist Church a wonderful Christmas present. He has given us a new church, a beautiful church. We are rich. But our Church, our riches, and our blessings this Christmas come from Him.

There is the story of the young girl who went to her priest and confessed her sin of vanity. “What makes you think that?” asked the priest. “Because every morning, when I look into the mirror,” she replied, “I think how beautiful I am.” “Don’t worry” said the priest, “that isn’t sin; that’s just a mistake.”

We must not make the mistake of thinking, “My hands have built this church; my planning has built this church; my labors have built this church. We must instead, keep on thanking, and thanking, and thanking God for His great Love for all we have.

Yesterday I watched the interview with Tim Tebow, quarterback for the Florida football team. He made a statement that should be true of all Christians. In effect he said, “I am thankful to God for the honors bestowed upon me. But I don’t take them for granted. I know that God has endowed me with the talents I have. I also know He could take them away from me at anytime, if He so chose.” Tim Tebow was not basking in pride and self-sufficiency, but spoke with the humility becoming a Christian. Martin Luther did the same in his last will and testament: “Lord God, I thank Thee, for that Thou hast been pleased to make me a poor and indigent man upon Earth. I have neither house, nor land, nor money to leave behind me. Thou hast given me wife and children, whom I now restore to Thee. Lord, nourish, teach, and preserve them, as Thou hast me.”

This church, like the other six churches in Asia Minor, are examples to us. God the Spirit has given us an Open Door to our community; but Christ stands before the closed door of our hearts and of our churches and says:

(v. 17) You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

(v. 18) I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see.

(v. 19) Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.

(v. 20) 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.

We cannot afford to ignore the Risen, Living, Omnipotent, Holy, Christ, who alone is Lord of the Church. Nor can we afford the luxury of the tragedy of self-sufficiency. Only He is Sufficient. Amen.