

THE SEVEN CONGREGATIONS ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD - continued

Revelation chapter 2 and chapter 3 belong together

PART 5. THE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION OF SARDIS (3:1-6)

PART 6. THE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION OF PHILADELPHIA (3:7-13)

PART 7. THE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION OF LAODICEA (3:14-22)

PART 5. THE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION OF SARDIS (3:1-6)

a. The city of Sardis

3:1a “To the angel of the church (congregation) in Sardis write:”

The city of Sardis. Sardis was founded before 1000 B.C. It was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, whose last king was Croesus. Subsequently it came under Persian, Seleucid and Roman rule. It was an impregnable city, built upon a nearly inaccessible hill. Although there was only one narrow access to the south of the city and it could easily be fortified, the city was twice captured in 549 B.C. and 218 B.C. due to the citizens not being watchful. The people were proud, arrogant, over-confident and sure. In A.D. 17 the city was partly destroyed by an earthquake. The new city arose in the vicinity of the acropolis, but when the book of Revelation was written, the city was facing decay and a slow but sure death.

The congregation in Sardis. We do not know anything about the congregation, except this letter and that Melito was bishop of Sardis in the second half of the second century A.D. This congregation was apparently not threatened by Jews (2:9; 3:9) or by Gentiles (2:13) or by heresy or heretics (2:14,20). This congregation was dying due to a lack of inner spiritual life. It had the appearance of life and was a nominal Christian congregation.

b. Christ's self-designation

3:1b “These are the words of him who continually holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars”¹. Because the congregation of Sardis was sinking into spiritual lethargy, Christ introduces himself as holding (having) the seven spirits of God (1:4) and the seven stars (1:20). Christ possesses the sevenfold Holy Spirit, present and active in the seven congregations, that is, in all the congregations in the world. The Spirit is the Representative of Christ in Christians (John 14:18-18) and in the Church on earth (Ephesians 2:22). The Holy Spirit is and does everything Christ would be and do if he were still on earth. He speaks the words of Christ and applies the completed salvation work of Christ in Christians and the Church (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-15).

The seven lampstands (congregations) and seven stars (leaders of the congregations) can only shine and sparkle through the sevenfold Holy Spirit, that is, through the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26) and the manifold works and gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4-6), in short, through being Spirit-filled (Ephesians 5:18). And this new life is found only with Christ, because only he sends the Spirit to apply his completed salvation work in every congregation world-wide. Only when this nominal Christian congregation converts and turns to Christ will he revive the congregation through the manifold work of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Bible by Spirit-filled leaders of the congregation! Lampstands can only give light by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit and people can only be converted after the preaching of the gospel! This is the only answer for all present-day congregations struggling with spiritual lethargy and spiritual decline! The only thing this congregation needs to do is repent, that is, convert to Christ and Christ will change the whole dead situation into new life again!

¹ Ταδε λεγει (vira) ο εχων (vrra) τα επτα πνευματα του θεου και τους επτα αστερας

c. Christ's condemnation

3:1c "I continually know your deeds²; you have a name (reputation) to be alive, but you are dead"³. Christ condemns the congregation as having the reputation that she lives, but in reality she is dead. Sardis enjoyed a good reputation within this world, but did not deserve this reputation. The recommendation of the world is not necessarily the recommendation of the living Christ! The outward appearance may fool outsiders, but not the Lord. He looks at the inner being and sees the truth. In the congregations of Pergamum and Thyatira a small number of members of the congregation had fallen into the temptation of the world, but in Sardis the majority of the congregation had soiled their clothes (3:4). The congregation at Sardis was still a lampstand and her calling and task was still to be a light in this dark world, but it seems that the Jews and Gentiles in Sardis did not see much of that light and therefore did not bother the congregation. Sardis was a peaceful congregation, but it was the peace found in a cemetery.

3:2b "I have not found your deeds complete (they are lacking continually) in the sight of my God"⁴. Christ has not found the deeds of the leader of the congregation or of the congregation as a whole complete in the sight of God. Very much was lacking! The congregation possessed deeds, but in God's view these deeds were incomplete. While the deeds of Christians will always remain incomplete in the sense of *spiritually imperfect*, here the issue is incomplete in the sense of *spiritually lacking*. It is not the judgement or opinion of people (non-Christians or Christians) that matters, but the judgement and opinion of God. Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks into the heart (2:23; 1 Samuel 16:7; Isaiah 11:3-4; John 7:24; 8:15; 2 Corinthians 10:7). The congregation possessed the outward Christian activities, forms, ceremonies, religious customs, traditions and services, but the real inner essence and spiritual truth was lacking! They lacked real knowledge, real faith, real hope, real love, real sincerity and real power. Christ does not look at the outward forms and activities of a congregation, but at genuine rebirth and lasting fruit in the Christians. He does not look at the quantity of statistics, but the quality of life!

d. Christ's injunctions

3:2a "You must continually be wide awake people!"⁵ You must strengthen what remains and is about to die"⁶. Christ commands (exhorts) the congregation to become alert (watchful, have their eyes open) and wake up from their self-satisfaction and boasting. As a whole, the members of the congregation did not even realise their condition, because they were not paying attention. They probably even regarded themselves as a good congregation and were over-confident and sure. This congregation of Christ needed a clear awareness of conditions and an active watchfulness concerning events. It needed a spiritual awakening!

Christ commands (exhorts) the congregation to strengthen (fix firmly, establish, support) what remains and is about to die! Not everything had wilted yet, but what remained needed immediate fixing and strengthening. Those Christians who remained standing needed the fullness of Christ's Spirit. The institutions, activities and forms of the congregation needed the creative renewal of Christ's Spirit in order to survive as a congregation! The people, activities and forms of the congregation needed a spiritual renewal in which the Spirit blows new life into them!

3:3 "Keep on remembering, therefore, what you possess and heard; keep on obeying, and once for all time repent"⁷. Christ commands (exhorts) the congregation to remember continually what they once heard and had received and now possess. He commands (exhorts) them to once for all time repent (change their thinking and reform their behaviour) and he commands them to keep on obeying. Like the congregation in Ephesus, the congregation in Sardis must recall the past: the zeal and sincerity with which they had received the gospel. They must return to a life of obedience to the gospel as it was preached to them by the apostles, not as it was interpreted to them by modern teachers and leaders. They must not devise a new gospel (cf. Galatians 1:6-9) or new plans, but return to what they had possessed in the past.

² Οἶδα (vira) σου τα εργα. The perfect of the stem εἶδ- Latin 'video', but used as a present

³ ὅτι ὄνομα ἔχεις (vira) ὅτι ζῆς (vira), καὶ νεκρὸς εἶ (vira)

⁴ οὐ γὰρ εὐρηκα > εὐρισκῶ (vira) σου τα εργα πεπληρωμένα (vprp) ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ μου. The perfect tense emphasises the fact that this condition is all the time continuing.

⁵ γίνου (vmpm) γρηγορῶν > γρηγορεῶ (vpra) = "You must continually be wide awake people!"

⁶ καὶ στηρισθῶν (vmaa) τα λοιπα α εμελλον (vira+) ἀποθανεῖν (+vnaa)

⁷ μνημονεύετε (vmpa) οὐν πῶς εἰληφάς > ἐξάλειψῶ (vira) καὶ ἠκούσας (vira), καὶ τηρεῖ (vmpa), καὶ μετανοήσῶν (vmaa)

“But if you do not wake up, I will *certainly* come like a thief and you will not know at what time I will come to you”⁸. Christ warns the congregation that if it does not wake up, then he will *come* suddenly and unexpectedly like a thief at night and punish them. Just like the city was twice captured suddenly and unexpectedly, so Christ’s coming to them will be suddenly and unexpectedly. They will not and cannot know the time Christ is coming to them (cf. Matthew 25:43; 1 Thessalonians 5:2)! See the different ways in which Christ is ‘coming’ in the introduction to chapter 2 and 3.

e. Christ’s commendation

3:4 “Yet you have a few names (that is: people) in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes”⁹. Christians are not simply people, but specific individuals with names in the sight of Christ. People are known as individuals by Christ and will be judged as individuals. An inscription found in Asia Minor announced that soiled garments disqualified the worshipper and dishonoured the god of his religion. Christ however commends the few individual members in the congregation who have not soiled their lives with unholy living! They need not fear Christ’s warnings and threats in these letters.

“They will *certainly* walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy”¹⁰. That they are worthy does not mean that they deserve something. In themselves they and their accomplishments are never worthy, but with respect to having responded to Christ’s completed work of salvation, they have proved that fellowship with Christ is their highest goal. For his sake they have been willing to leave everything. By grace they have been *declared* righteous and are now *regarded and treated* as righteous and as worthy of walking with Christ in white clothes, which represent holiness, purity, perfection and festivity (Isaiah 61:10; Revelation 19:8).

f. Christ’s promise

3:5 “He who *continues* to overcome will, like them, be dressed in white.”¹¹ The person that overcomes is he who repents and does the things he did at first, who remains faithful until the end, who never renounces Christ’s name, who holds on to what has been entrusted to him by God, wherever and whenever he may live.

They are *regarded and treated* as worthy of walking with Christ in white clothes, which represent holiness, purity, perfection, festivity and heavenly glory (Isaiah 61:10; Revelation 19:8).

“I will *never* blot out his name from the book of life, but will *certainly* acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”¹² Christ promises that the name of that Christian will never be erased from the book of life (Exodus 32:32-33; Daniel 12:1; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 13:8; 20:15; 22:19)! When the people on earth die, their names are erased from the records on earth. But the names of those who overcome, the conquerors, will never be erased, never blotted out of the book of life in heaven! When they die, they will never be forgotten, because Christ himself will acknowledge them as belonging to him before God the Father and all the angles (Matthew 10:32-33).

g. Christ’s exhortation

3:6 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (congregations).”¹³ Literally: “He who has ears (and all people have ears) *must* hear what the Spirit *continuously* says to the churches (congregations)!” Note the words: *must*, *continually* and *churches (congregations)*. The word ‘congregations’ is in the plural. Each letter of Christ *must* be read in *all the congregations* in the history of the world and they should be read *again and again*, because *the Spirit keeps on and on speaking* to the congregations through them! Also this letter is intended to be read by all the congregations in the world throughout the whole New Testament period.

⁸ εαν ουν μη γρηγορησας (vsaa), ηξω > ηκω (vifa) ως κλεπτης, και ου μη γνωσ (vsaa) ποιαν ωραν ηξω (vifa) επι σε

⁹ αλλα εχεις (vira--2s) ολιγα ονοματα εν Σαρδεσιν α ουκ εμολυναν > μολυνω (viaa) τα ιματια αυτων

¹⁰ και περιπατησουσιν (vifa) μετ εμου εν λευκοις οτι αξιοι εισιν (vira)

¹¹ ο νικων (vppa) ουτως περιβαλειται (vifm) εν ιματιοις λευκοις

¹² και ου μη εξαλειψω (vifa) το ονομα αυτου εκ της βιβλου της ζωης, και ομολογησω (vifa) το ονομα αυτου ενωπιον του πατρος μου και ενωπιον των αγγελων αυτου

¹³ ο εχων (vppa) ους ακουσατω (vmaa) τι το πνευμα λεγει (vira) ταις εκκλησιας

Although it is *Christ* who speaks, he says that it is *the Spirit* speaking. Thus, the Lord Jesus Christ is the Spirit (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:17; 1 Peter 1:10-11) and he speaks through the Holy Spirit to Christians (John 16:13-14). And the Bible is the Word of Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 6:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21).

h. A possible application¹⁴

The congregation of Sardis is an example of a sleeping congregation, a congregation absorbed by ordinary secularised life (a life not lived from, with and for God). This is the problem of a dead congregation.

The congregation of Sardis represents all the congregations that have to make the choice to live the extraordinary Christian life amidst the very ordinary secularised life of everybody else.

Sardis was such a provincial town with textile industry, spinning and painting wool and printing cloth. There was a little industry and a little commerce. But there was no news to tell, no shocking world events, no spiritual or political persecution and no social boycott of believers. There was nothing to break the monotony of every day. Every day was as the day before. So the Christians talked about their jobs and clothes, because there was nothing else to talk about! They did not realise that their congregation and they themselves were like soiled and worn-out clothes in the eyes of Christ. Therefore Christ speaks to such congregations in the language of clothes. Although they live in cities of textiles, they are either naked like Adam and Eve or have soiled their clothes (3:4-5). They are not wearing the righteousness and holiness of Christ as a robe (cf. Matthew 22:11; Romans 13:14; 1 Corinthians 1:30).

Congregations like the congregation of Sardis are asleep. Spiritually the Christians there have a reputation to be alive, but in the eyes of Christ they are dead (3:1)! Such Christians may be occupied with worship services, preaching and social activities, but none of their works are regarded as full or complete in God's eyes (3:2). It is not easy to say what is lacking, but such Christians do not shine, sparkle or glow. They are not motivated by holy enthusiasm or zeal. They are not wholeheartedly submitted or dedicated. They have no wholehearted love. Because they possess the Holy Spirit, there is no reason to be mediocre and sink down in stuffy meaninglessness. But they have shut the windows and doors of their life for God. There was no oxygen, no place for the wind of God's Spirit to break into their stuffy lives!

Christ rebukes congregations like the congregation of Sardis. These Christians face the monotony and superficiality of daily life with its apparent innocent occupations, but there is no dynamic movement: they get up in the morning, have breakfast, go to work and relax in the evening. The danger of ordinary secularised life is that there is no need to pray. There are no miracles and unexpected blessings and therefore there is no need to thank God. In ordinary life of going to work and returning home to read the newspaper or watch TV there is no need to fight spiritual battles. But the Christian life described in the Bible has purpose. It has vision to realise a dream or goal. It has perspective how to go about realising it. And it tackles it with enthusiasm, zeal, acceleration and excellence.

Christ reveals himself as the One who has the seven spirits (1:4) and the seven stars (1:20). What congregations like the congregation of Sardis need most of all is that they throw open their closed windows and allow the fullness of God's Spirit to blow the suffocating air and dusty stuffiness away. They must allow the Holy Spirit to change their lethargy and insignificance into congregations that are on fire and spread that fire all around! Christ has not yet given up congregations like the congregation of Sardis. There is still hope for such congregations!

Christ commands the Christians of such congregations to wake up from their spiritual sleep, to rededicate themselves to Christ and to allow the Spirit to strengthen them. Christ calls them to wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die.

Christ warns the Christians of such congregations to remember to keep (obey) what they have received as a trust from Christ when they heard the message. They must obey it and repent (change their thinking) with

¹⁴ cf. Bavinck, pp. 90-97

respect to the truth of the message. They must repent from their moral and spiritual lethargy, because there is always the possibility to be found naked (2 Corinthians 5:3; Matthew 22:11-12). Their names may be written in the membership register of the congregation, but that does not mean that they are written in the book of life in heaven (cf. 3:5)! This they must make very sure (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:5)! A struggling Christian life is a greater threat than false teaching and certainly more dangerous than persecution! However, if they do not repent, Christ will suddenly and unexpectedly come, break into their lives and judge them (3:3)!

Christ promises to those who repent and overcome that they will be dressed in white clothes and walk with Christ in white clothes. The white clothes are a symbol of Christ's righteousness and holiness that is credited to them by grace (Romans 13:14). And he promises that their names will never be blotted out of the book of life. This does not mean that the names of some people who call themselves 'Christians' have been blotted out of the book of life, but rather that it will become clear at the last judgement that their names had never been registered in the book of life.

PART 6. THE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION OF PHILADELPHIA (3:7-13)

Note that the seven parts of this letter (a to g) are present, but the promises (verses 9, 10b and 12) are spread haphazardly.

a. The city of Philadelphia

3:7a "To the angel of the church (congregation) in Philadelphia write:"

The city of Philadelphia. Philadelphia was situated in Lydia in a valley at the foot of the Tmolus mountain range and on an important road. It derived its name from Atallus II (159-138 B.C.) whose loyalty to his brother Eumenes won him the epithet 'brother-lover'. It was founded with the mission to spread the Greek language and manners in Lydia and in Phrygia. Hence from the beginning it was a missionary city and very successful in its purpose. It was not a big city due to the danger of earthquakes. There was also a Jewish community in the city. In the 14th century, it was conquered by the Turks and is called Ala-Sheher today.

b. Christ's self-designation

3:7b "These are the words of him who is holy and true."¹⁵ Christ introduces himself as holy and true, which are pre-eminently divine characteristics: the characteristics of the Sovereign Lord (6:10)(19:11; 1 John 5:20)¹⁶. Christ is holy. The word 'holy' means perfect in character, completely separated from everything that is wrong, evil and hateful and completely dedicated to everything that is right, good and love. He acts in accordance with his nature and character and destroys everything that is unholy and untruthful. Christ is truthful. He always is and does what he says (cf. Numbers 23:19; John 14:6) and therefore people can always rely on him. His nature and character is absolutely the opposite of the unbelieving Jews. They claimed to be something they were not (2:9; 3:9), while Jesus claimed to be someone he really is! He exposes the claims of unbelieving Jews that they are the so-called people of God and that they are a synagogue of God as false pretensions, as lies (cf. John 8:44). He exposes all lies and pretensions. Only those who keep his teachings will be set free (John 8:31-32,36).

"who continually holds the key of David. What he again and again opens certainly no one can shut, and what he again and again shuts no one can open."¹⁷ Christ reveals himself as the absolute sovereign God, who has power to make and execute his decrees over everyone and everything. This sovereignty is expressed in the symbolism of opening and closing doors. He is the absolute disposer of God's eternal decrees (cf. Job 12:14). This is another characteristic that enables the congregation to rely on him.

The key of David is a symbol of the highest power and authority in the kingdom of God (Isaiah 22:22). It is the symbol of the authority and exalted position of the Messiah King. Keys are to open and shut the kingdom of God (Matthew 16:19; 28:18). He holds the keys of death and Hades (1:18). He only has the power and

¹⁵ Ταδε λεγει (vira) ο αγιος, ο αληθινος

¹⁶ ο δεσποτης

¹⁷ ο εχων (vpra) την κλειν Δαυιδ, ο ανοιγων (vpra) και ουδεις κλεισει (vifa), και κλειων (vpra) και ουδεις ανοιγει (vira)

authority to open the scroll and its seven seals, that is, only he reveals and realises the eternal plan of God on earth (5:5). He reveals the glory of God to all creation, he rules the history of every nation in this world, he brings people to eternal life and he guides the kingdom of God to its final completion in a new heaven and a new earth.

Only Jesus Christ opens and closes doors in a sovereign way, that is, he opens wonderful opportunities to preach the gospel and he opens hearts to receive the grace of God. God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27). A great door for effective work had opened to Paul in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:9). Paul found that the Lord had opened a door for him in Troas (2 Corinthians 2:12). He asked that Christians pray that God may open a door for the Christian message (Colossians 4:3). And the Lord opened hearts to respond to the Christian message (Acts 16:14).

3:8a “I continually know your deeds.”¹⁸ Christ is all-knowing. He knows the deeds of the leaders and the members of the congregation or the lack thereof (Hebrews 4:13). He knows how they have remained faithful in keeping his word.

“See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut”¹⁹. By saying, ‘See’, he focuses their attention on what he was promising and doing right at that time in a way people could see what he was doing. Christ has given this congregation an open door, which no one is able to shut. He has opened that door and it still remains open! He has given this congregation an opportunity and it still is an opportunity! There is no person, government or circumstance that can close that door of opportunity or that can prevent God’s blessing on their ministry! Again and again they will not be able to frustrate Christ’s purposes!

“(I know) that you have little strength.”²⁰ Christ knows the condition of the congregation: that they have little strength, that is, that they were of small account in human eyes (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

c. Christ’s commendation

3:8b “Yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”²¹ Christ commends the congregation for keeping his word and not denying his name in the face of the onslaughts of especially the Jews, whom Christ a second time calls the synagogue of Satan (cf. 2:9).

3:9 “I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars”²² – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.” See Christ’s promise.

3:10a “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently.”²³ Literally: “You have kept the word of my endurance.” Christ does not commend the patient endurance of *Christians*, but the fact that they kept his word. This may mean either one of two things:

They have kept the gospel that speaks of Christ’s patient endurance on the cross. It does not mean that they have kept Christ’s *command* to endure patiently the onslaughts of the enemies, but rather that they have kept the *gospel* (the word, the command, the message) concerning *Christ’s* patient suffering on the cross over against especially the Jewish scoffers and accusers. The Jews then and today expect a royal reigning Messiah, not a humble suffering Messiah! The message that Jesus Christ died on the cross has always remained a stumbling block for Jews and other religions (Luke 2:34; 1 Corinthians 1:23-24; Matthew 21:42-44; 1 Peter 2:6-8). Even today Jews and other religions keep saying that God never required a human sacrifice! But God required animal sacrifices as an atonement for sins (Exodus 12:23; Leviticus 1:3-5;

¹⁸ Οἶδα (vira) σου τα εργα. The perfect of the stem εἶδ– Latin ‘video’, but used as a present.

¹⁹ - ἴδου, δεδωκα (vira) ἐνώπιον σου θυραν ἠνεωγμενην > ἀνουγω (vprp) ἣν οὐδεὶς δύναται (vprn) κλεισαι (vnaa) αὐτην – The perfect tense indicates the continuing condition, that is, the door remains open!

²⁰ ὅτι μικραν εχεις (vira) δυναμιν

²¹ καὶ ἐτηρησας < τηρω (viaa) μου τον λογον, καὶ οὐκ ἠρνησω < ἀρνεομαι (viam) το ονομα μου. The verbs in the aorist refer to some distinct occasions in the past when, being put to the test, they had proved themselves faithful (Rienecker p. 820).

²² ἴδου διδω > διδομι (vsra) ἐκ της συμαγωγης του Σατανα, των λεγοντων εαυτους Ιουδαιους ειναι, καὶ οὐκ εἰσιν ἀλλα ψευδονται (vprn)

²³ ὅτι ἐτηρησας (viaa--2s) τον λογον της υπομονης μου

4:35b), which Jews today do not keep. God also prophesied the final human sacrifice in Isaiah 53, which Jews between then and today did not believe and still do not believe (Hebrews 9:11-14,22-28)! Nevertheless, for all Jews who believed in Christ (the Messiah) the gospel has become God's power to save them (Romans 1:16)! Christ commends them for not denying his name even when many others do so and try to pull them away from their faith in Christ.

They have kept the admonition that speaks of the need to wait with patient endurance for Christ's second coming. In the light of Revelation 1:9, it may mean that the Christians kept Christ's word (command) to wait patiently for his second coming, to expect with perseverance his coming, as John himself was also doing (Matthew 24:42-44; 25:13).

3:10b "Also I will certainly keep you from."

See Christ's promise.

d. Christ's condemnation

None.

e. Christ's injunctions (3:11)

3:11 "I am coming without delay"²⁴. In Mark 9:39 the word in the original language means 'soon', 'in a short time'. But here it means 'without delay', 'quickly', 'at once'. Christ warns the congregation that he is coming without delay. People might contradict this by saying that he has not yet come for twenty centuries (2 Peter 3:4)! But *in one sense, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is for every individual the moment he dies!* No matter how old a person becomes, life is always too short and death is always too sudden! This statement is not simply to threaten, but above all to comfort those who endure trials and persecution. And if it seems such a long time before Christ comes, then we must realise that there is very much that need to be done before he comes. For example, there are still millions of people in Asia, in the Middle East, in Europe, in Africa and in the Americas that have never heard the Good News about Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:9).

"Hold on continually to what you have, so that no one will take your wreath of victory"²⁵. Christ commands (exhorts) the congregation to continually hold on to what they have. Divine protection and human exertion always go together! Christians have a personal responsibility to hold on to their faith, their love and their hope; to hold on to the gospel and the Bible entrusted to them. They have a personal responsibility to persevere in their obedience to Christ. Only through God's protection *and* their own exertion will they be able to gain the wreath of victory. This statement does not mean that born-again Christian can lose their salvation, because born-again Christians will persevere (John 10:27-28; Romans 8:37-39; Philippians 1:6). It is an exhortation that Christians must get involved in the spiritual war and that they must fight right up to the end. The temptations (seductions) and trials (persecutions) and their fighting against such seductions and persecutions will not diminish until the end has come.

f. Christ's promise

3:9 "I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars"²⁶ – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you."²⁷ The Jews called themselves the people of God, beloved of God and the chosen of God, but Christ says that their claims are lies! The Jews claimed to be the synagogue of God, but in reality they were the synagogue of Satan, the assembly gathered by Satan to oppose Christ (2:9; John 8:44; cf. Luke 11:44)!

Like the congregation in Smyrna, the congregation in Philadelphia would prevail against the Jewish scoffers and accusers (2:9-10). Christ would cause their bitter opponents to be converted and become their friends.

²⁴ ερχομαι (vīpn) ταχυ

²⁵ κρατει (vmpa) ο εχεις (vīpa), ινα μηδεις λαβη (vsaa) τον στεφανον σου

²⁶ ιδου διδω > διδωμι (vsra) εκ της συμαγωγης του Σατανα, των λεγοντων (vpra) εαυτους Ιουδαιους ειναι (vnpa), και ουκ εισιν αλλα ψευδονται (vīpn)

²⁷ ιδου ποιησω (vīfa) αυτους ινα ηξουσιν (vīfa) και προσκυνησουσιν (vīfa) ενωπιον των ποδων σου, και γνωσιν (vsaa) οτι εγω ηγαπησα (vīaa) σε

By saying, ‘See’ a second time, Christ explains what that open door in their case means: it means that God would change the heart and behaviour of their enemies, the Jews. Christ would cause some (many, but not all) of those Jews to realise their mistake (lies), to acknowledge that God indeed also loves and saves Gentiles and to acknowledge God’s plan to save both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 10:12-13; Galatians 3:28-29; Ephesians 3:6; Colossians 3:11)! Thus, these former Jewish enemies would be vanquished through their conversion to Christ! The congregation in Philadelphia would gain the victory and their former enemies would through their conversion to Christ and through their membership of the congregation share in that victory (Proverbs 16:7; Romans 11:11,30-32)!

Christ reveals that even the hardest hearts of stone can be turned into hearts of flesh again (Ezekiel 36:26) and the most closed hearts can be opened again! Thus, the congregation can see Christ’s absolute sovereignty at work. To bow the knees down before someone was a Semitic expression of showing honour and of making a humble request, for example, a request to join the Christian congregation.

3:10b “Also I will certainly keep you from.”²⁸ Christ promises that he will keep Christians from, not away from the hour of trial. There is a great difference between these two expressions:

- To keep away from (Greek: apo)²⁹ means to keep someone away from something, so that he may never come into that. For example, James 1:27 says, “to keep oneself unstained (away) from the world”³⁰, so that Christians may never get polluted by the world. Although Christians are in the world, they *must stay away from* the sin and injustice of this world. Another example, Romans 15:31 says, “to rescue (away) from the unbelievers”³¹, so that Paul may not be hindered by unbelievers in Judea in carrying out his work. Although there are unbelievers who want to hinder Paul’s work in Judea, he prays that he may be kept away from meeting them. Thus, the emphasis is on the keeping away from and not meeting the pollution or unbelievers (enemies) of this world.

- To keep from (Greek: ek)³² means to protect someone from something, so that he remains preserved!

Christ does not mean to say that Christians would never come ‘in’ the hour of trial! This is what the futurist view proclaims. According to the futurists, the rapture would remove all the believers from the earth so that they would not come into the great tribulation! But the futurist view is not correct. If Christ had meant to say that Christians would never come into the hour of trial, he would have used the word ‘away from’ (‘apo’).

“To keep someone from (Greek: ek) something” does not mean to keep someone away from something, but means to protect someone from something! The emphasis is not on removal, but on protection! For example, 2 Peter 2:9 says, “to rescue the godly from (Greek: ek) trial”³³. Christians certainly face trials and are going through these trials (Romans 5: 3-4; James 1:2-4), but God will protect them throughout these trials and finally rescue them from or out of these trials! Likewise, Revelation 3:10 says, “to keep (protect) them from (Greek: ek) the hour of trial”³⁴. Christians will certainly face the hour of trial and go through the great tribulation, but God will protect them throughout the hour of trial and finally rescue them from the great tribulation (cf. Deuteronomy 1:29-31; Isaiah 43:2).

“the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world, to test those who live on the earth.”³⁵ The hour of trial is a reference to great tribulation for this historical congregation under the Roman rulers. This is true for all historical congregations throughout the whole New Testament period. But here Christ is particularly speaking about *the great tribulation* under the final antichrist that is coming upon the whole inhabited world before Christ’s second coming. ‘The hour’ expresses the fact that every single detail about this trial has been decreed (determined ahead of time): its nature, its beginning, its duration and its end. The hour of trial will not be long (cf. 2:10; 11:7-11; Matthew 24:21-22). While the hour of trial is from Satan’s point of view a temptation or seduction³⁶ to cause people to fall into sin or to deny Jesus Christ, from God’s point of view it

²⁸ καγω σε τηρησω (vifa) εκ

²⁹ τηρεω τινα απο τινος

³⁰ ασπιλον εαυτον τηρειν απο του κοσμου

³¹ ινα ρυσθω απο των απειθουντων εν τη Ιουδαια

³² τηρεω τινα εκ τινος

³³ εκ πειρασμου ρυεσθαι

³⁴ τηρησω εκ της ωρας του πειρασμου

³⁵ της ωρας του πειρασμου της μελλουσης (vppa+) ερχεσθαι (+vnpn) επι της οικουμενης ολης, πειρασαι (vnaa) τους κατοικουντας (vppa) επι της γης

³⁶ πειρασμος

is a trial or test³⁷ to bring to light what really is in the hearts of people and to purify Christians from all impurities. Thus, the purpose of the great tribulation will be to test all non-Christians and Christians at that time in the world according to their inner being, so that they will be judged accordingly.

3:12 “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it.”³⁸

Because the people who overcome reveal steadfastness and constancy in their present trials, they are rewarded with a permanent place and task in God’s presence. A pillar is a symbol of stability and permanence with the function to support or to lead (Galatians 2:9). God entrusts the faithful and steadfast Christians with a task in his kingdom and Church. The people who overcome receive a place in God’s earthly temple (Ephesians 2:18-22) and they will not lose their place or meaningful task at any time. They will also obtain what David desired: they will forever dwell in the presence of the living God and behold his beauty (Psalm 27:4)! No earthquake will drive them out of God’s eternal city (Hebrew 11:10) or eternal temple (21:22). Never again will they leave it!

“I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem, which is continuously coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”³⁹ The name in the Bible expresses the nature or character of the person bearing the name. By the names they are given, the conquerors are given the assurance that they *belong* to God, *belong* to the New Jerusalem, which is a picture of the Church (the Body of Christ) and *belong* to Christ (the Head of the Church). They are given the assurance that they will forever share in all the blessings and privileges of all three. God the Father or Christ the Son is never ashamed to call the people who overcome as his own (Matthew 10:32). Openly and in the most glorious way he will reveal that they are his own!

The New Jerusalem is a symbol of the assembly of the righteous in the presence of God and all his angels. Both in Revelation 3:12 and 21:2 the same words are used: ‘The New Jerusalem is *continuously* coming down out of heaven from God’. The New Jerusalem is both *the present ideal community* of born again people of God before Christ’s second coming and *the future perfect community* of born again people of God after Christ’s second coming (Galatians 4:26-27; Hebrews 11:10,16; 12:22-24; 13:14). The fact that it is coming down out of heaven from God shows that the genuine born again people on earth are the result of God’s sovereign and transforming work. The heavenly Jerusalem is the spiritual mother of all Christians on this present earth (Galatians 4:26). Rebirth is never the result of people’s own will or effort (John 1:13; 3:3-8; Romans 8:7-8; Titus 3:5-6). The fact that the New Jerusalem is *continuously* coming down is a symbol depicting the continuous growth of Christ’s kingdom or Church on this present earth until it has reached its final phase of the New Jerusalem on the new earth.

The new name of Christ represents his glorious resurrected and enthroned character. God has predestined all Christians to be conformed to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29-30; 1 John 3:1-3).

The four references Christ makes to “my God” (3:12) emphasises the close relationship between God the Son and God the Father (cf. John 20:17). The term ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3) does not say that Jesus Christ is not God, but rather expresses the fact that the God who speaks in the Bible has revealed himself only in and through Jesus Christ (John 1:1,14,18; 14:9; Colossians 1:15; 2:9; Hebrews 1:3)! Any ‘god’ of any religion that is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not God at all! The expression emphasises the close relationship between God the Son and God the Father in all eternity and the fact that besides the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ no other God exists at all (Isaiah 43:10b-11a).

g. Christ’s exhortation

3:13 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (congregations).” See Revelation 3:6.

³⁷ πειρασμος

³⁸ και εξω ου μη εξελθη (vsaa) ετι

³⁹ και γραψω (vifa) επ αυτον το ονομα του θεου μου και το ονομα της πολεως του θεου μου, της καινης Ιερουσαλημ, η καταβαινουσα (vrpa) εκ του ουρανου απο του θεου μου, και το ονομα μου το καινον

h. A possible application⁴⁰

The congregation of Philadelphia is an example of a missionary congregation, a congregation that is on the offensive, saving the lost and building up the saved.

The congregation of Philadelphia represents all the congregations that have to make the choice between being occupied with itself and being occupied with the lost and the weak in the world. Christians in such congregations are not so busy with themselves that they let the rest of the world go lost! They reach out to the lost and to the weak and to the persecuted. But because such congregations proclaim the good news and live it out, they experience opposition, defamation, enmity and persecution, especially by the other religions in the world. Although the Jews and their followers regard themselves as the meeting place (synagogue) of God, they are in fact the meeting place of Satan (3:9).

Christ reveals himself as the One who holds the key to close or open any door in any nation, community or heart! True ministry for Christ is always fully dependent on Christ's sovereign power. He promises to give an open door which no-one and nothing on earth can shut. He even promises to bring their enemies to acknowledge the truth, because they are not proud and also not afraid. They do not depend on their own human resources, but they also do not allow themselves to get intimidated by their opponents.

Christ promises to give them open doors. The hard walls of opposition would change into doors that would turn on their hinges to open up new opportunities to proclaim the good news. Christians do not need to be afraid of the opposition and intimidation of the world. They only need to be compassionate towards the lost! In God's Book (the Bible) things are turned around: the people of the synagogue (the meeting place) of Satan repent and become the people of the temple of God. And those who have little power among the Christians become strong pillars in the temple of God, the stable and permanent co-bearers of the community of God's people. These who overcome, that is, those who hold on to what they have received from Christ, receive the name of God. Not their own name, because in themselves they are not important. They are absorbed in God's great plan and work and Community that does not crucify its King.

PART 7. THE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION OF LAODICEA (3:14-22)

a. The city of Laodicea

3:14a "To the angel of the church (congregation) in Laodicea write:"

Its citizens. The city of Laodicea lies in Phrygia near the city of Colosse (Colossians 2:1; 3:13-16). Laodicea was situated near hot springs, and the emission of lukewarm water from these springs was a picture the citizens could easily understand. There was a famous medical school that produced salve for weak eyes. The citizens wore clothes made of the soft wool of black sheep grazing in their valley. There were theatres, a stadium and a gymnasium equipped with the hot-spring baths.

Its commerce. Laodicea was situated at the cross-roads of three highways, became a great commercial centre and was the home of bankers, finance and millionaires. Although the ordinary things in life can be good (James 1:17), the citizens took pride in their riches and adopted a defiant and conceited attitude. Once when the city was partly destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60, the citizens refused to receive aid from the government and rebuilt their city from their own means.

Its religion. The congregation was founded during the time the congregation of Colosse was founded, but we do not know by whom. Epaphras worked hard for the congregations in Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis and always wrestled in prayer for them (Colossians 4:12-13). We also do not know whether the letter of Paul to the Laodiceans was the same as the circular letter to the Ephesians or a separate letter (Colossians 4:16). Almost two generations later, even the Christians at Laodicea boasted like the non-Christians about their material wealth and they may have imagined that their wealth was a sign of God's special favour. The Christians thus breathed the same worldly spirit that imbibed the city as a whole. They also boasted of their spiritual riches and thought very highly of themselves. They were not bothered by a consciousness of sin and were always ready to make compromises. There is no mention of persecution by Jews or Gentiles or of being troubled by heresy and heretics. The congregation seemed to enjoy a great measure of self-sufficiency and an

⁴⁰ cf. Bavinck, pp. 97-102

unhindered existence, without struggle. It was very much a congregation like modern congregations in affluent countries. In reality, however, the congregation was pitiable!
In later times, Laodicea became the centre of a bishopric and some historical Church Councils were held in the city.

b. Christ's self-designation

3:14b "These are the words of the Amen". Because the congregation of Laodicea did not realise its pitiful state and did not evaluate itself truthfully, Christ introduces himself as the Amen, that is, as the One who is true and reliable. He is the Truth (John 14:6), sees the truth (also the truth about the Laodiceans), speaks the truth, and executes the truth, either as a promise or as a threat. His evaluation of the Laodicean congregation is the truth.

"the faithful and true witness."⁴¹ Christ introduces himself as the One who not only sees exactly what is going on in the hearts and lives of the members of this congregation, but as the One who declares the exact truth of what he has seen. He exposes their pretence, their imagination and their self-delusion (1:5; 3:7). Because he is the Truth, he demands truth from the congregation: the congregation must realise their true state and stop imagining and pretending. David said, "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts" (Psalm 51:6) ... "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

"the ruler of God's creation."⁴² He introduces himself as the ruler of the creation, that is, the source (beginning, ruler) of the entire creation. Christ is the One who calls the whole creation into existence, who maintains the whole creation, who rules in a sovereign way over the whole creation, and who will also be the end⁴³ of this present creation (cf. 21:6; 22:13; John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15-18; Hebrews 1:3). Because Christ is the Creator, he can re-create these Christian to become what he intended them to be!

c. Christ's commendation

None.

d. Christ's condemnation

3:15 "I know your deeds⁴⁴, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!"⁴⁵
3:16 "So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth"⁴⁶. The contrast is between the hot medicinal waters of Hierapolis and the cold, pure waters of Colossae. Thus the congregation of Laodicea was providing neither healing for the spiritually sick nor refreshment for the spiritually weary. The congregation was totally ineffective and thus distasteful to Christ.

The congregation had heard the gospel. But it did not allow the gospel to set them on fire so that they would burn with love for the Lord. It also did not turn away from the gospel in enmity, hatred or opposition. The Christians in this congregation were neither hot nor cold. Christ condemns them to be lukewarm, as half-hearted and compromising, as indifferent and listless.

With cold heathen you can do something: the ignorant can still be won for Christ. And with hot Christians who are humble and sincere you can work with joy. But with lukewarm (self-sufficient: we-are-all-such-very-good-people; self-deluded) members of the congregation you cannot do anything! Through their self-sufficiency and self-delusion they have become as it were invulnerable to God's Word. They are neither moved by the fear of God nor by the love of God. Christ is so thoroughly disgusted with such people, that unless they repent, he will vomit them out, reject them with disgust!

⁴¹ ο μαρτυς ο πιστος και αληθινος

⁴² η αρχη της κτισεως του θεου

⁴³ το τελος

⁴⁴ Οιδα (vira) σου τα εργα. The perfect of the stem ειδ- Latin 'video', but used as a present

⁴⁵ οτι ουτε ψυχρος ει (vira), ουτε ζεστος. οφελον ψυχρος ης (vira) η ζεστος.
οφελον = a particle that introduces an unattainable wish, "Would that".

⁴⁶ ουτως, οτι χλιαρος ει (vira) και ουτε ζεστος ουτε ψυχρος, μελλω (vira+) σε εμεσαι < εμεω (+vnaa) εκ του στοματος μου.

In Romans 1:18, we read that God is *angry* about the godlessness and wickedness of all people. In Ephesians 4:30 we read that Christ's Spirit is *grieved* about the sins in Christians. But only in Revelation 3:16, we read that Christ is *disgusted* with lukewarm, self-sufficient and independent Christians! Christ sees through their hypocrisy and knows that their entire religion is a sham and pretence. The patience of Christ is coming to an end and he is about to spit them out of his mouth.

3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’”⁴⁷ Christ condemns their pride (opinion of themselves that they are so good) and he condemns their independence and self-sufficiency. The leader and the members of this congregation are so deluded that they confidently assert that they are rich; that they have acquired and now possess wealth and that they do not need a thing – they lack nothing!

“But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”⁴⁸ The word ‘wretched’ also means miserable, distressed (Romans 7:24). The leader and the members of the congregation at Laodicea are threatened by all kinds of dangers and disasters and do not even realise it!

The word ‘pitiful’ also means pitiable (1 Corinthians 15:19). The word does not mean miserable here, but pitiable! Members of any congregation, who live in the pretence and delusion that they are fine Christians while Christ is in reality disgusted with them, are really to be pitied! Nobody is as pitiable as a self-deluded Christian!

The word ‘poor’ also means beggarly, impotent. In Matthew 5:3 the word has a positive sense: poor in spirit, sensing their own need. In Revelation 3:17 the word has a negative sense: beggarly. When the congregation does not possess anything that Christ deems as worthwhile, even when it possesses all material wealth, it is really poor!

The word ‘blind’ is meant symbolically and figuratively. The members of this congregation are mentally, morally and spiritually blind (Matthew 15:13-14; John 9:40) to the real condition of their lives as God sees it. They do not see their sins, their guilt and shame, their corruption, their powerlessness to free themselves from this pitiable condition or even their need for a Saviour.

The word ‘naked’ also means stripped or bare (16:15; 17:16). The members of this congregation are not clothed with Christ's righteousness and holiness (Matthew 22:11-12; Romans 13:14; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10). In short, they do not possess anything that was good!

e. Christ's injunction

Although the members of this congregation are in a very deplorable condition, Christ does not reject them yet, but seeks their salvation! He calls them to repentance and conversion. With his Word (in this letter) and his Spirit he desires to touch their unfeeling hearts and make them realise their real condition.

3:18 “I counsel you⁴⁹ to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes so you can see.”⁵⁰ Christ warned the members of this congregation that he is about to reject them. But he sends them a last letter to give them counsel how they can be saved from their pitiable condition. His counsel is that they become serious and change. They should seek Christ's righteousness instead of their own self-justification! Salvation is like gold: it makes the Christian really rich. Not material wealth and success, but genuine salvation through Jesus Christ makes a person really rich!

Laodicea was famous for its garments made of glossy black wool. Salvation is like white clothes: it really covers the nakedness of the Christian's guilt and shame and makes him genuinely righteous (Isaiah 1:18). Their own self-righteousness is like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6) and will never be able to cover their sins.

⁴⁷ οτι λεγεις οτι πλουσιος ειμι (vira) και πεπλουτηκα < πλουτεω (vira) και ουδεν χρειαν εχω (vira)

⁴⁸ και ουκ οιδας (vira--2s) οτι συ ει (vira--2s) ο ταλειπωρος και ελεεινος και πτωχος και τυφλος και γυμνος

⁴⁹ συμβουλευω (vira) σοι

⁵⁰ αγορασαι (vnaa) παρ εμου χρυσιον πεπυρωμενον < πυρωω (vgrp) εκ πυρος ινα πλουτησης (vsaa), και ιματια λευκα ινα περιβαλη (vsam) και μη φανερωθη (vsap) η αισχυνη της γυμνοτητος σου, και κολλη[ο]υριον εγχεσαι (vnaa) τους οφθαλμους σου ινα βλεπης (vspra)

Laodicea was known for its medical school and particularly for its eye-salve made from Phrygian powder mixed with oil. Salvation is like eye-salve: it takes away mental, moral and spiritual blindness. If these so-called Christians at Laodicea would continue to claim that they can see, their guilt would remain (John 9:40-41). Only when they realise and acknowledge that they are spiritually blind, they would see the truth about themselves and would be ready to repent and receive the righteousness of Christ!

Salvation must be 'bought'. Salvation 'bought' does not contradict salvation 'received by grace'! 'Salvation bought' is a figure of speech derived from Isaiah 55:1-3 and means that a person must 'acquire' salvation "without money and without cost". He must acquire salvation as a personal possession and a rightful possession. He cannot acquire salvation by gaining, earning or producing his own righteousness in his own way. He must acquire ('buy') it from the only One who has rightfully earned it on the cross and can give it as a gracious gift free of charge.

No so-called prophet or so-called saviour of any religion can promise people salvation or paradise if he has not rightfully earned it himself or if the salvation he promises is not based on any sacrifice of atonement that removes God's holy and righteous anger against sin!

Jesus Christ earned salvation for the people that believe in him because he paid a price! Christian grace is not cheap grace. It cost God the life of his Son. It will cost a person the price of humbly acknowledging that he is blind with regard to his own condition, that he is depraved and lost and poor. It will cost a person the price of self-denial and submission to Jesus Christ. A person can only be saved or justified when he believes in Jesus Christ and his completed work of salvation on his behalf (Romans 5:1).

3:19 "Those whom I love continually I rebuke continually and discipline continually. So be earnest continually and repent."⁵¹ Christ continually loves his genuine people. Therefore he rebukes them continually.

The word translated with 'rebuke' has several different meanings in the Greek original. Because Christ loves us continually, he continually *exposes* our sins (Ephesians 5:11,13); continually *convinces* us of his truth and our need (John 16:8); continually *convicts* us that we are wrong, guilty and should be ashamed (John 16:8); continually *rebukes* us in the sense of reproof, scolding or correcting our wrong behaviour (Matthew 18:15; 2 Timothy 4:2; 1 Timothy 5:20); continually *refutes* (confutes) the arguments we use to justify ourselves, thus *proving* that we are wrong (Titus 1:9); even sometimes *punishes* or disciplines us. In Hebrews 12:5 the word 'rebuke'⁵² is parallel with the word 'discipline'⁵³.

The word discipline. In Hebrews 12:6 the word 'discipline'⁵⁴ is parallel with the word 'punish'⁵⁵ (to whip, flog, lash) (cf. Proverbs 13:24). Although what Christ says causes genuine pain, the pain is afflicted not in anger or out of revenge, but in love and mercy. His rebuke and discipline are expressions of his love, because it is *the only way* that leads to salvation.

Those whom he loves he commands to be earnest or zealous continually and to repent (change their mind and transform their behaviour) once for all time. They should not simply flame up like a fire of straw, but keep glowing in holy love for the Lord.

3:20 "Here I am! I am (now) standing at the door and am knocking again and again. If anyone once for all time hears my voice and once for all time opens the door, I will certainly come in and eat with him, and he with me"⁵⁶. Christ invites the members of this congregation not only to open the door of their congregation for him, but also to open their hearts and lives for him! In the matter of salvation, Christ has taken the

⁵¹ εγω οσους εαν φιλω (vspra) ελεγχω (vira) και παιδευω (vira), ζηλευε (vmpa) ουν και μετανοησον (vmaa)

⁵² ελεγχω

⁵³ παιδευω

⁵⁴ παιδευω

⁵⁵ μαστιγωω

⁵⁶ ιδου εστηκα (vira) επι των θυραν και κρουω (vira). εαν τις ακουση (vsaa) της φωνης μου και ανουξη (vsaa) την θυραν, εισελευσομαι (vifm) προς αυτον και δειπνησω (vifa) μετ αυτου και αυτος μετ εμου

initiative. He came and stood and is now standing at (pressing on)⁵⁷ the door, because he really wants to enter. He is again and again knocking on the door.⁵⁸

In the first place the door is the door of this congregation. The congregation is gathered together as Christians and worship together as Christians, but it is not genuine! These Christians pretend to be Christians, because Jesus Christ himself is standing OUTSIDE the congregation and is knocking at the door to enter into the congregation!

In the second place, the door is the door of the heart of each person inside that congregation, because Jesus promises that if anyone (singular) hears his voice, he would come into his heart and life (of course: through the Holy Spirit)! The promise is given to anyone of the people inside that congregation, no matter their past history or present condition!

Jesus Christ is standing outside the congregation and outside the hearts of the people belonging to that congregation. He is knocking and calling *again and again*. He is knocking and calling, because he desires to enter their congregation and their personal lives! He calls them to repent from their self-righteousness as so-called Christians and to really believe in him and his righteousness. Christ is addressing individuals, “If anyone ...”. Salvation is first of all not a matter of the group, the congregation, but a very personal matter. If anyone “hears my voice and opens the door”: *When the mind and heart itself has been opened (the individual has been convinced, convicted) by the knocking and voice of the Lord, the individual becomes active, opens the door of his heart and life and receives Christ into it.* The sovereign work of Christ is called *regeneration* (John 3:3-8; Acts 16:14) and the responsibility of the individual is called *conversion* (Mark 1:15). A person repents in response to the rebuke and discipline of the Lord and opens the door in response to the continual knocking and calling of Jesus Christ. Therefore the opening of the door cannot refer to regeneration, but refers to conversion. Regeneration is entirely God’s work, but in conversion man takes an active part.

The result of regeneration and conversion is that Christ comes into the heart and life of the convert and fellowships with him (John 14:23; 1 John 2:24-25). Eating together in the East is the expression of intimate fellowship (Luke 14:12-14). The very first thing Christ desires after conversion is personal fellowship with the new Christian on a regular (daily) basis. Practically this can be done by having a regular quiet time

f. Christ’s promise

3:21 “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.”⁵⁹ With this congregation there was nothing to commend, only to condemn. Yet it was not too late to repent. It almost seems that the worse the condition of the congregation, the more wonderful is Christ’s promise for those who repent, fight the good fight and persevere to the end!

Christ promises to those who continue to conquer in that congregation that they will be given the right to sit with him on his throne, just as Christ overcame and sat down with his Father on his throne. Christians will reign with Christ over this present earth after their death (20:6) and Christians will reign with Christ over the new earth for ever and ever (22:5).

The activities of the saints in heaven and on the new earth in the book of Revelation are the following: The ransomed souls *sit* with Christ on his throne (3:21) or *stand* with him on Mount Zion (14:1). They *serve* him day and night (7:15). They *sing* before his throne in heaven (14:3; 15:3). They *praise* Christ for his true and just judgements (15:2-3). They are given authority to *judge*, that is, to share in the final judgement of the Jews and the nations (20:4; Matthew 19:28; Luke 22: 28-30; 1 Corinthians 6:2). Thus, they participate in the *reign* of Christ. How, is not specified (20:6).

⁵⁷ εστηκα < ιστημι (vira). The perfect tense indicates the continuing condition.

⁵⁸ κρουω (vira). The present tense indicates the continual knocking.

⁵⁹ ο νικων (vpra) δωσω (vifa) αυτω καθισαι (viaa) μετ εμου εν τω θρονω μου, ος καγω ενικησα (viaa) και εκαθισα (viaa) μετα του πατρος μου εν τω θρονω αυτου

g. Christ's exhortation

3:22 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (congregations)." See Revelation 3:6.

h. A possible application⁶⁰

The congregation of Laodicea is an example of a congregation locked in deadly self-deception, a congregation threatened by materialism, affluence and worldliness.

The congregation of Laodicea represents all the congregations that are constantly in danger of being overwhelmed by materialism, affluence and general worldliness. This threat can come to any congregation and it can come again and again to the same congregation!

It's possible that important things like love, hope, convictions and dedication to our life-task can slip away almost unnoticeably. Laodicea had science and technique, a medical school and textile factories. She was materialistically very prosperous, but spiritually poor. Its citizens were worldly and completely self-satisfied, and its congregation conformed to this worldliness and self-satisfaction. They members of this congregation enriched themselves by buying and possessing everything, but at the expense of selling whatever they had: their spiritual and eternal life!

Christ exposes the real condition of such congregations: materialistically they wear rich clothes, but spiritually they are naked. Medically they have medicines like eye-salves, but spiritually they are blind. In the eyes of the world they are rich, but in the eyes of God they are poor!

Christ reveals himself as the One who sees and exposes pretence and self-delusion within the congregation and creates the new life he intended for the congregation.

Christ exhorts congregations like the congregation of Laodicea to allow Christ to expose and unmask their real identity and their real needs. He exhorts them to repent from their self-sufficiency in the present world and their independence from him.

Christ promises to those Christians that overcome, that is, those who repent from their materialism and self-satisfaction, that they will share in Christ's reign over the present and future new earth and that they will sit with him in his never ending feast (Matthew 8:11-12).

i. Different views about the messages to the seven congregations

There are two views. See supplement 6.

First view. (The futurist view.) The messages to the seven congregations describe Church history in seven periods (dispensations) and prove *the continual decline and degeneration of the Church*. Instead of increasing in spiritual and world converting power, the Church becomes lukewarm, faithless, and Christless.⁶¹

Second view. (The correct explanation.) The messages to the seven congregations are Christ's messages to all the congregations in the world and in world history. They teach *recurring positive conditions in congregations, which Christ commends, and recurring negative conditions in congregations, which Christ condemns*. All the conditions described in the seven letters actually existed in the time just after Christ's first coming. All these conditions have existed in different combinations and at different times in all congregations throughout the centuries and will continue to exist up to Christ's second coming. Christ's purpose is to continually call the congregations to be lampstands, the light of the world (Matthew 5:14-16).

The seven letters do not represent seven periods (dispensations) of Church history, nor are we living in the so-called last period of Church history as if the second coming is therefore 'imminent'. No one can predict whether Christ's second coming will take place at any moment or whether it is still a long time away. Each individual has just one lifetime to live before Christ's second coming and therefore must make most of the

⁶⁰ cf. Bavinck, pp. 102-108

⁶¹ Larkin, Revelation p. 29

given opportunities! For every human being, the end is very close by, because the end of his life on this earth is very close by!

Summary

The Church throughout all the ages faces the same struggles. We Christians go through the same difficulties. Christ's seven letters are meant to speak to each one of us every day! The Church travels along her way with difficulty and with care, age after age. Every day she is faced with the trials and temptations, the persecutions and seductions of this world. Every day she is called to stand courageously against its slogans and deceitful lies.

The conditions described in the seven letters actually existed in the time just after Christ's first coming. These conditions have existed throughout the centuries, now in this congregation and then in that congregation, until today and will continue to exist up to Christ's second coming.

The big question is, "Are the congregations of Jesus Christ in the world faithful to Christ and their task?" "Are the congregations lampstands that spread the light of Jesus Christ and his message in the Bible to the whole world (cf. Matthew 5:14-16)?"

The big warning is that Jesus Christ has made the congregations responsible for their task and he will unexpectedly come (not necessarily only at his second coming!) to bring to light what they have done (2:5,16; 3:3,11)!

The big promise is that Jesus Christ is all the time standing amidst the congregations in this world and that nothing and no one can separate the true Christians from his love, protection and final victory (cf. John 10:27-28; Romans 8:37-39)!