

IN RESPONSE - CHRIST KNOCKING, PART I

by Dennis Prutow

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Revelation 3:20 is of great interest and of supreme importance in the minds of many. For this reason, I am skipping ahead to expound this single text. My exposition of the great book of Revelation maintains the chief theme of this book is the majesty of God and of Jesus Christ, His Son. We will look at how the first three chapters of Revelation relate this theme in a wrap up of these chapters.

The ordinary way we come to grips with the majesty of God and of Christ is through the word of God and the application of that word to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The *best* place for the Spirit empowered word to take root in our hearts is within the worshipping community. Personal Bible reading is not excluded nor is family worship.

The picture of the church used in Scripture is a temple. "The whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:21-22). The presence of God in His temple differs from His presence elsewhere. We may speak of it this way. God is present in both heaven and hell. "If I ascend up into heaven, thou *art* there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou *art there*." (Psalm 139:8, KJV). God is present in heaven is in love and blessing. God is present in hell in wrath and judgment.

Francis Turretin describes the situation this way,

God is far off from the wicked (as to the special presence of his favor and grace), but is always present with them by his general presence of essence. Where God is, there indeed is his grace originally and subjectively, but not always effectively because its exercise is perfectly free.... Although he is differently in heaven and in hell (here by grace, there by justice; here as blessing, there as punishing), yet he can be in both places as to the immensity of his essence."¹

Stephen Charnock adds:
Good men have not only the essential presence, which is common to all, but his gracious presence; not only the presence that flows from his nature, but that which flows from his promise; his essential presence makes no difference between this and that man ...; his nature is the cause of the presence of his essence; his will, engaged by his truth, is the cause of the presence of his grace."²

To what do believers come as they gather for worship? Hebrews 12:18-23 declares.

For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind.... But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood.

When we worship with God's people, we enter the outer precincts of heaven:

The gospel church is called *mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, which is free*.... This was the hill on which God set his king the Messiah. Now, in coming to mount Zion, believers come into heavenly places, and into a heavenly society.... God has taken up his gracious residence in the gospel church, which on that account is an emblem of heaven.... Here believers have clearer views of heaven, plainer evidences for heaven....³

Those who come to worship therefore enter the outer regions of heaven. R. B. Kuiper affirms,

byterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), 1: 200.

² Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock Christian Publishers, 1977), 176.

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary, 6 vols.* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 6: 959.

When God's people assemble for worship they enter into the places where God dwells. God meets them, and they meet God. They find themselves face to face with none other than God himself. Their worship is an intimate transaction between them and their God. If the church were fully conscience of that truth, what dignity and reverence would characterize its worship!⁴

We should therefore desire Christ in our midst in worship. "Worship is *special*.... The distinction between general service and specific worship can be illustrated by the fact of God's special presence."⁵ James Bannerman teaches us,

The outward provision of the visible church of Christ is mysteriously impregnated with Divine grace. The church itself is, in an especial and supernatural manner, the residence of the Holy Spirit; and in the right and faithful use of the ordinances the spirit of man meets the Spirit of God, and finds a blessing beyond the reach of ordinances.⁶

This is the overall biblical context of Revelation 3:20. The text stands in a letter written to a specific church. The church at Laodicea is representative. We see a church in which Christ ought to richly dwell (Colossians 3:16, 4:16). The lesson we learn from her is therefore applicable to us. It ought to be taken to heart by us. We must relish Christ in our midst. We must cherish the voice of the Savior speaking to us as we worship together. We must treasure His holy oil fueling the lamps of our congregations to make us light in and to a sin filled world.

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⁴ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, n.d.), 347.

⁵ Frank J. Smith and David Lachman, eds., *Worship in the Presence of God* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1992), 12.

⁶ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ, 2 vols.* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1960), 1:89.

¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, George Musgrave Giger, trans., James T. Dennison, ed., 3 vols. (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Pres-

IN RESPONSE - CHRIST KNOCKING, PART II

by Dennis Prutow

Jesus says to the church at Laodicea, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20). What is the door? Is Christ knocking at the door of the unbeliever's heart? This is a standard interpretation.

Geoffrey Wilson says, "'Behold' is a summons to each individual to heed the promise of Christ, who condescends to stand at the heart's door and seek admittance."¹ Wilson then adds, "He not only knocks but also speaks and by his gracious words he awakens a responding love which enables the sinner to open the door and let him in."² Matthew Henry takes the same view.

Here observe, [1.] Christ is graciously pleased by his word and Spirit to come to the door of the heart of sinners; he draws near to them in a way of mercy, ready to make them a kind visit. [2.] He finds this door shut against him; the heart of man is by nature shut up against Christ by ignorance, unbelief, sinful prejudices. [3.] When he finds the heart shut, he does not immediately withdraw, but he waits to be gracious, even till his head be filled with the dew. [4.] He uses all proper means to awaken sinners, and to cause them to open to him: he calls by his word, he knocks by the impulses of his Spirit upon their conscience. [5.] Those who open to him shall enjoy his presence, to their great comfort and advantage.... Alas! what do careless obstinate sinners lose by refusing to open the door of the heart to Christ!³

Is this the proper view of the text? I do not think so. First, Jesus Christ is concluding His remarks to seven churches in seven letters. Each letter is addressed specifically to the angel of the respective church. Angels are messengers. Jesus calls John an angel (Mark 1:2,

Luke 7:27, Greek New Testament), these angels are likely the pastors of the churches. Christ delivers His message to the church through His pastors and teaches (Ephesians 4:11). The pastors are also shepherds of local flocks. All of this has significance for our interpretation.

Second, Scripture never likens the heart to a door the sinner must open. If it is a door, Christ must open it. An example is the work of Christ when He opened Lydia's heart (Acts 16:14). Christ does this through the ministry of the word. He commissioned Paul to preach to the Gentiles and "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18). William Holman Hunt's famous picture of Christ before a door is an interesting portrayal. As I recall, the door is hinged to swing toward Christ. The front doors in our homes swing in. Not so the door in this picture. The latch is also on Jesus' side of the door. Jesus must open this door.

Third, the language of the text does not carry with it the force of entering *into* the human heart. Perhaps this is too subtle. The verb used in the text is properly translated *come in*. The pronoun used indicates movement *toward*. The New American Standard Bible reads, "I will come in to him." The reference is to entering a room to dine with someone. The text does *not* say, "I will come *into* him." The original language does not bear this latter meaning.

To what does the door refer? The door is an entrance. Christ is outside the door. Based also upon the general biblical background given in Part I and other considerations to follow, I think the symbolism is clear. Christ is outside the door of this church. Christ is *outside* this church *not inside* in fellowship with the people. This is a serious indictment. The situation portrayed is all too common.

During a Sabbath School class regarding worship, one of the elderly men said, "We do it right, we sing psalms; we have no problems." My response was simple. We are discussing spiritual matters here. We may have all the proper forms and the church can be sterile. Jesus put it this way, "This people honors

Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me" (Matthew 15:8).

The Westminster Confession of Faith 25:5 reminds us some so-called churches are actually gathering places with Satan. "The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan."

Why is Jesus at the door of the church at Laodicea? His presence may indicate impending judgment. "Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door" (James 5:9). The context of James 5:9 is quite similar to Revelation 3:20.

The Laodiceans thought they were rich. They did not recognize their spiritual poverty. Jesus reproves them and calls them to repent. "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent" (Revelation 3:19). With this same reproof and call for repentance, Jesus says He is standing at the door. The message in James 5:9 is similar. Reject sin. Jesus is right at the door.

In this context, we recall the words of Peter, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:17). What of the church which is not a temple of the Holy Spirit? What of the church in which Christ does not dwell richly? Christ is at the door. Judgment is near.

Pastors and elders bear great responsibility before God in this matter. Elders should be desirous of hearing the word of God taught. They should be anxious that their pastor teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26-27). The people should expectantly attend the public worship of God. They should listen to the word of God with anticipation. We should gather to draw near to God and to meet with God. We should gather for worship with Jesus Christ in our midst. *If He is not in our midst, He is outside knocking.*

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¹ Geoffrey Wilson, *Revelation* (Welwyn, England: Evangelical Press, 1985), 31.

² *Ibid.*

³ Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers) 1997.

IN RESPONSE - CHRIST KNOCKING, PART III

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“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20). We said the door in our text symbolizes entrance to the church. Symbolically, Christ is outside the church. Jesus uses similar imagery in John 10:1-4.

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

The faithful church of Jesus Christ is a sheepfold. As mentioned in the previous lesson, some sheepfolds become synagogues of Satan. This occurs when a thief enters the fold and subverts and deceives the sheep.

The Good Shepherd comes by way of the door. There is an under-shepherd who is a doorkeeper. Actual entrance into the fold is by the word of God proclaimed by the under-shepherd. He opens the door in his faithful teaching and preaching. Of course this assumes the blessing of Christ in the midst of the people of God as they worship together.

Scripture mixes metaphors. In John 10:1-4 the door is the entrance to the church as in Revelation 3:20. Christ enters through the door. However, the door is also Christ Himself. “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7). “I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:9). This is not incompatible with the earlier figure of speech. I emphasize this simply to show the door is *not* the entrance to the sinner’s heart.

The sayings of Jesus in John 10 are quite compatible with our interpretation of Revelation 3:20. In John 10, the sheep of the fold hear the voice of Jesus and follow Him. This is the need in Laodicea, “If anyone hears My voice,” says Jesus. The great need of the church as a whole

and of the individual members is to hear the voice of Christ. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27).

We know there is hearing and then there is hearing. Jesus ends each of His letters in Revelation 2-3 with these telling words, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The letter to the Laodiceans, and to all of us, may be heard as it is read. But do we hear the voice of Jesus Christ in the words read? This seems to be a “Catch 22” situation. Christ is *outside* the church. Those inside need to truly hear the voice of the Savior. But only the sheep recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Resolution comes in the faithful preaching and teaching of the word of God. Jesus promises, “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd” (John 10:16). Jesus must bring people into His flock. Individuals do not have the power in and of themselves to open their hearts to the word of God. Christ must open their hearts to the gospel (Acts 16:14). Christ must open their eyes to see Him as the Savior (Luke 24:31). Christ must open their minds to grasp the truth of God in Christ (Luke 24:45).

How does Christ do this? When Christ approaches the sheepfold, the faithful under-shepherd opens the door. Faith is dispensed in and through the word of God. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). This is the case because the new birth is sovereignly granted through, not independent of, the word of God. “For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). This means the pastor must not only preach the word (2 Timothy 4:2), he must understand the work of the Spirit in sovereignly granting new birth through the word. This was Jesus’ question to Nicodemus before he was born again. “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” (John 3:10). Not only do

some teachers in the Israel of God not understand these things, they teach doctrines contrary to the word of God.

The letters to the seven churches are addressed to the angels, pastors, of these churches. These shepherds of local flocks have the duty and privilege of being doorkeepers. Faithful preaching and teaching opens the door to Christ. Men and women, young people and children may then gain spiritual ears from Christ. When they are born again, they hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. Heretical teaching, which serves the wisdom of men rather than the counsels of God, closes the door to Christ. Christ stands at the door and knocks. His presence indicates impending judgment.

Let’s apply the text at this point on two levels. Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door....” Is there anyone who hears the voice of the shepherd? Does even the under-shepherd, the doorkeeper, know and hear His voice? Does he rush to open the door to communion with the Savior through the word of God and prayer and song?

I think of myself in this light. The Good Shepherd comes faithfully to meet with His people gathered for worship. Do I lead the people of God into His presence? Too often worship is a mere formality. It is a duty we accomplish, the sooner the better, and we are off to other things, the meal at home, the afternoon nap. Am I conscious of my duty, my privilege, to open the door to Christ for the people gathered for worship? May God grant me grace in this regard.

What about the congregation? When Jesus enters the sheepfold, He calls the sheep by name (John 10:3). Do the people hear Jesus call them each by name? Or is this an empty figure of speech? The Good Shepherd cares for His sheep (Ezekiel 34:12). He surveys the flock. He assists the wounded and injured (Isaiah 61:1; Psalm 23:5). We should purposely gather for worship to meet with Jesus, to hear His voice, to greet Immanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23).

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IN RESPONSE - CHRIST KNOCKING, PART IV

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“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20). When the door of the word of God opens, Christ enters freely into the midst of His people and dwells among them. The people of God follow the injunction of James 4:8. “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” Matthew Henry exhorts, “Draw nigh to God, in his worship and institutions, and in every duty he requires of you.”¹

This was the perspective of the Old Testament saints. Sinning Levites were warned not to draw near to God in ceremonial worship. They faced judgment. “And they shall not come near to Me to serve as a priest to Me, nor come near to any of My holy things, to the things that are most holy; but they will bear their shame and their abominations which they have committed” (Ezekiel 44:13). In like manner, as James exhorts us to draw near to God, he also warns, “Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8).

Exodus 19:22 is similar. “Let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, or else the Lord will break out against them” (Exodus 19:22). We are all priests of God (Revelation 1:6). We must all draw near to God in His spiritual temple, the church. This is His *special* dwelling place on the earth. Why should we draw near to God in worship? We draw near for salvation. “He [Christ] is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). We draw near to gain mercy and grace. “Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). We may only draw near through the faith in Christ. “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:22).

My point is that the true sheepfold never shuns Christ but heeds the Savior and draws near to Him. The church at Laodicea was in a dangerous position because it had no will to draw near to God. However, if we draw near to God through Christ, the promise is, God will draw near to us. Jesus says to the church, “If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.” Christ will not be outside the church, knocking and threatening judgment. He will be inside the church animating the body, giving life to the body.

The result is the church’s fellowship with Christ. In fact, Jesus promises intimate table fellowship. Matthew 22:1-4,

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. Again he sent out other slaves saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, “Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.”’”

Fellowship with Christ is pictured as a feast, a banquet, a wedding celebration.

Family fellowship around the table is a time for family conversation, planning, and counsel. It is no different with God’s family. We draw near to Him for communion with Him. We draw near to dine with Christ and to feast on His word. We seek His face in corporate worship to gain counsel and be sustained Him.

Communion with Christ is epitomized in the Lord’s Supper, Communion. Here we find union and communion with Christ on its highest earthly plane. Our greatest privilege is not voting on the church budget. Participation in the Lord’s Supper is our highest privilege. This is why we have *communicant* church membership. This is why the unrepentant, rendered unworthy because of sinful conduct, are *excommunicated*. Jesus says in Revelation 3:20, “I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.”

Why does Jesus use the singular at this point rather than the plural? I think He does so for an important reason. We may have our most personal and pointed encounters with Christ in the corporate setting. If the church is the temple of the Spirit where God is present in an especially gracious manner, the result will be profound, intimate and personal communion and fellowship with Him.

In addition, in the Lord’s Supper each individual partakes of the bread and drinks of the cup. He or she dines with Christ. By faith there is a feasting on the true bread of heaven (John 6:51). There is an intimate abiding in the vine (John 15:5). We are fed for our arduous journey in the wilderness of this life just as Israel was nourished by manna. Jesus says, “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread out of heaven to eat’” (John 6:31). Jesus goes on to say, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh” (John 6:51). In Revelation 3:20 He promises, “I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.”

This fellowship with Christ as He dwells among us and walks in our midst in worship, this communion epitomized in the Lord’s Supper, is a foretaste of heaven. This is true because the church is the threshold of heaven (Psalm 84:10). When we gather, we come to the “heavenly Jerusalem” (Hebrews 12:22). Therein we have a taste of the age to come (Hebrews 6:5). We anticipate the wedding feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7). Jesus Christ is in our midst. We hear His voice in the reading of Scripture, in the singing of Psalms and in the preaching of His word. The words of Jesus are fulfilled, “I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.”

By grace, Christ present in the church. In the proper use of the means of grace, Christ is present in the midst of our worshipping body. Revelation 3:20 points us to His gracious presence with us.

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¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, 6 vols. (Westwood, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 6: 990.