# Church or Ecclesia Revelation 3:14-22

Many commentators agree that the seven churches of Revelation describe not just those existing in the first century but also seven periods of history up to the end times. The church of Laodicea describes the present-day church and on until the return of Christ. At first it reads as a scathing rebuke – lukewarmness provokes the Lord to vomit out of His mouth. A graphic metaphor and a solemn warning indeed. But it goes on to offer a threefold glorious promise and the often-quoted picture of Jesus desiring our intimate fellowship in a warm family setting.

Let us begin with the condition of the church at Laodicea and see what parallels we can draw for today’s church. Three industries powered the economy of Laodicea and made them wealthy. These were their banking industry, medical school (especially an eye salve), and also a textile industry. With these commercial strengths came a reliance on the wealth they generated and an identity of themselves based on these industries. In this environment the church at Laodicea shared these strengths and this identity. However, the writer of Revelation rebuked them for a shift in their dependence from God onto the ‘strengths’ enjoyed by the society they dwelt in. Scathingly he uses the very strengths as in fact being weaknesses, with the summary description of them as ‘lukewarm’. This stage is repugnant to Christ and comes with dire warnings.

What about the 21st century church? I would like to propose that there are also three elements which pervade our societies and have made us strong. These are the corporate entity, hierarchical leadership and money. Corporate entity takes many forms: business companies, institutions, organisations, NGOs, colleges, societies, clubs, and church and so on. They are the way we organise ourselves to produce the goods and services we need. This structure is all pervasive. They are defined by a legal framework, marketed by branding and advertising. They are run by hierarchical leadership which are rewarded according to their position by money and status. Large corporates offer ladders to climb at the pinnacle of which is the CEO.

One common feature of the subculture of these entities is that, when a member is ‘at work’, usually in a place controlled by that entity, it is expected there that the interests of the entity take priority over ones’ personal interests. Or, put another way, each person is primarily a role and only secondly a person. So, if someone gets sick and can’t fulfil their role, they are sent home where their personal needs come first.

The home is the only place where your personal needs come first. Home then is not an institution. It stands in contrast to the institution. You leave home to go to work where you are expected to give your services to advance the goals of the entity you work for. Then you return home to the place where it is people first. Home is the place where people come first.

You say, “What about a hospital?” It is no different. Doctors, nurses and administrators must give their services according to their contracts. They are staff as in any institution. Patients are ‘customers’.

What has all this got to do with the church? Everything. The model of organisation or entity is so pervasive that the church simply copies it. The New Testament is clear that the metaphor of body is to be used by God’s people to arrange themselves. But we loathe this model in the same way the people of Israel loathed having God, whom they could not see, as their king. They wanted to follow the pattern of the surrounding nations[[1]](#footnote-1). Both they and us have preferred the model of the surrounding society instead of having Christ as the head, according to the body metaphor. We form legal entities, apply for tax rebates, appoint and pay hierarchical leadership, have buildings and property where we centralise our activities. According to Rev 3:16 in copying the society structures we have become weak and ‘lukewarm’,. Why? What is it about the current day church that produces lukewarm saints?

The answer lies not in what is done but in what is not done. Derek Prince once said, “There is nothing wrong with the prevailing format, it just doesn’t have scriptural support.” Suppose we take a ‘good’ church where worship is uplifting and the sermon edifying. So far so good. The leaders are doing their job well. But now let us take a view from the pews. That has been my view for 30 years. My call has been to evangelism, not church leadership. During the many services I have attended I have been uplifted by good corporate worship and edified by good sermons. I have preached some of them myself. I have never fallen out with anyone at church, not been embroiled in conflict and, as far as I know, enjoyed a good reputation in the various churches I have been involved in. Any discussion I have about church does not come out of hurt or any personal grievance. If I have felt those things in the past, I have dealt with them and left them far behind. The critique I offer has nothing to do with the good people I have mutually supported along the way. My critique is about the system. My hypothesis is this.

 **When church models itself by the surrounding society it dilutes its capacity to fulfil the mandate it was given by Jesus.**

What is that mandate? Keeping it simple:
1. Go into all the world and preach the gospel.
2. Make disciples[[2]](#footnote-2)
3. Love one another[[3]](#footnote-3)

What are the characteristics of the entity structure and why does it compromise the church’s ability to fulfil its mandate.

An entity[[4]](#footnote-4) - is a legally defined group of people who function together to achieve a service
- has hierarchical leadership rewarded by status and money
- usually operates in a certain place
- participants contribution to the entity is more important than their own personal interests when they are at that place or ‘at work’
- the entity is larger than the individual and endures longer

This is not a legal definition but a sociological perspective.

To make my case I would like to recall some of my personal experiences of church as illustrations of what typically happens. The point of these examples is not to beat up on the church but to support my hypothesis that the entity structure compromises the church’s ability to fulfil its mandate.

Example 1
Early in my Christian life I went overseas to a developing country for four years. I returned from that assignment worn out, used up and feeling damaged. To my home church I was now the ‘missionary’. So, they got me involved in various ministries – seven in fact. I had nothing left in my personal resevoir to give to any of these. I became more depleted and my internal pain festered. During that 18 months I fully participated in the ‘life of the church’ but no-one asked me about my needs nor how they could help me. All I needed was a listening ear – but there was none[[5]](#footnote-5).

* In terms of my hypothesis the contribution I could make to the entity was more important than my personal needs.

Example 2
In a second overseas assignment I had been involved in an intense spiritual battle with others in support of the mission vision of the school where I taught. I returned home to find my then home church embroiled in a church split. People were leaving. The issue seemed to be about control. I was not offered any opportunity to report back to the church who had given me a wonderful send off, because, ‘you might leave and that would not be a good look’. I didn’t get involved in the conflict but just quietly left.

* In terms of my hypothesis. Leadership controls the entity. The sustenance of the entity is more important than the needs of the person.

Example 3
I have always that my personal call is to evangelism, and have found various ways of doing this in the community. I cannot recall a single church that has shown the slightest interest in my endeavours. My experience has been that if I told someone at church what I had been doing evangelistically I got this awkward look and a change of the subject. I can’t recall being prayed for from the front nor given opportunity to share.

* In terms of my hypothesis. What happens in the place of the entity is what happens in the entity. The mandate to ‘go’ is replaced by ‘come’. Evangelism and the evangelist are awkward side-lines.

Example 4
My wife and I were asked by the leadership to start up and run an afterschool kids club. We said it should be at a community venue, not a church venue. They insisted it be at the church basement as a step towards getting people into the church. We ran it and, predictably, got mostly churched kids. It was exhausting.

* In terms of my hypothesis. Place is all important to entity builders. Building the entity is more important than fulfilling the mandate of the kingdom. Members are used to serve the entity.

Example 5
In every church I have attended the service has been the main activity of the week. Yet in the service the few leaders up front lead, and the majority of the congregation sit passively in the pews. They compliantly sit, stand, sing, listen, give and pray on cue. This stage performance model does not make disciples.

I have not known any church that has any form of intentional discipleship. Making disciples is personalised, tailored to the individual and modelled by the one making the disciples. When asked about their plan for young believers’ growth I have often heard the reply, “If they get involved in the ‘life of the church’ they will grow.” That, in my view, is a cop out. What actually happens when people get involved in the life of the church is that they become absorbed into the subculture, lose their ability to relate to the non-churched, and give off the flavour of church which the unchurched keep well clear of.

* In terms of my hypothesis. Sustaining the numbers coming to the entity is more important than the tough personal work of making disciples one at a time. Cynically, keeping the congregation immature and dependent on the leadership serves the goal of size and numbers which are all important to the entity.

Example 6
Fellowship: Imagine a fictional post service conversation.
 ‘Hi Kate, how are you? How is the Sunday School going?”
 Now Kate has had a tough week, she is drained out, she has things to offload. It would take time. Which of the two questions does the person want an answer to in that context? The second one. In that setting Kate is the Sunday School teacher, which she faithfully does week in and week out. But in that post service conversation she needs someone to care about her and her needs. It just doesn’t happen in the ‘fellowship time’ before and after the main event of the week. Fellowship is surface.
In a church I have attended an electronic timer ticks down the seconds on the big screen starting five minutes before the service begins. The message is clear. In this entity the service is more important than fellowship.

What is the point of this discussion? And where do we go from here? I am not suggesting anyone should set out to reform the church. Jesus said, “I will build my church”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Jesus will do what only He can do.

However, we do need to be ready to face a post Covid-19 world with our eyes open and with clear goals. Here are two highly probable conditions that will shape our world.

1. Economic hardship
2. A further slide of the surrounding society back to its pagan origins.

In this environment institutional church is likely to struggle. We need to be ready, and not caught by surprise. Our God is fully in control and He will build His church. But it will likely take a different form than church of the ‘good times’. According to Jonathan Cahn, ‘At the same time society is returning to its pagan origins, the church will return to the Book of Acts. This return will culminate in the return of Christ in power and glory.’ [[7]](#footnote-7)

**Returning to Revelation 3:14-22 the Laodicean/end times church.**

I have so far built a case that lukewarm Christians are the product of affluent, institutionalized churches. The warning of staying in this condition are dire. But the remainder of this passage offers a wonderful path of victory to those who take the counsel God offers. There are three sides to this counsel which parallel the rebukes but use the same metaphors in a positive way. Each relate to that society’s ‘strengths’.

Society Rebukes Counsel

1. Wealthy poor buy gold refined in the fire
2. Eye salve industry blind anoint eyes with salve to see
3. Textile industry naked white garments to be clothed

Gold, refined in the fire speaks of the condition of saints who survive the fires of persecution. The position of the church in Western society has moved from being the foundation to being a respected voice to being moved to the margins and disregarded to…………..

The next step along this continuum is to be actively persecuted. It is likely that as economies decline and governments become more autocratic, persecution of Christians will become the new norm. In this environment no one stays lukewarm. The ‘hot’ stay true and go on to enjoy sweeter fellowship with Jesus as in the famous Revelation 3:20 picture.

This process of distinction has already been happening in mainstream denominations. The surrounding society has put pressure on to promote unbiblical standards of morality. Some refuse to compromise on the grounds of the authority of scripture. They have paid the price in loss of church building and tax status and have distinguished themselves from the mainstream. This has been a test of faith.

White garments that you may be clothed speaks of the honour bestowed on repentant sons and daughters as was bestowed on the returned prodigal.[[8]](#footnote-8) It also speaks of *putting on* the fruits of the spirit of kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, forgiving one another and above all, love.[[9]](#footnote-9) Those who maintain faith, refuse to yield to the negativity, derision and despair through troubled times, to them God will pour out His Spirit in abundance and they will shine brightly in dark times. Through these ones God will bring in the end times harvest of souls.[[10]](#footnote-10) This will forge bonds of unity and the world will see the fulfilment of Jesus’ purposes for His saints; “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another[[11]](#footnote-11).” This test produces love.

Anoint your eyes with eye salve that you may see speaks of sight, of forward seeing believers who have their eyes fixed on Jesus. Though He endured the cross yet he was sustained by the joy before Him and now sits at the right hand of the throne of God.[[12]](#footnote-12) When trouble comes blind people focus on the trouble and feed on a diet of bad news. But the believer focuses on God’s Word, endures in grace, produces character and fruit and, ultimately, hope, which does not disappoint.[[13]](#footnote-13) This test results in hope.

Revelation 3:18 is a counsel to turn to afresh in the face of troubles to the centuries-old three-word summary of the Christian life: faith, love and hope. These three have sustained Christians through many a fiery trial in centuries past and they will sustain us again.

We resolve to cling to Christ whatever troubles confront us – faith.

We will meet trouble in the power of the Spirit and exude the fruit – love

We will endure with our eye on the promise of heaven – hope

It is out of His great love for us that He rebukes us, chastens us, and calls us to repent, to turn our hearts from complacency, ease and smugness and turn back to God and all He has for us. Rev 3:19

Those who choose this path move from lukewarm to hot. Hot for Jesus. We open wide our hearts and Jesus comes in to share in our lives v20. As Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego discovered in their fiery furnace, the son of God accompanied them.[[14]](#footnote-14) That same Son of God, Jesus, comes afresh into our lives, our circumstances, our trials, our homes and our fellowships and He dines with us. We are not alone. He accompanies us and enjoys sweet, intimate fellowship with us as he promises in v.20

Just as those three emerged from their trials unscathed and victorious, the same promise applies to us. We will overcome. We will emerge. We will sit with Him on His throne just as Jesus overcame and sat down with His Father on His throne v21.

Let us now return to our discussion of church.

 I have argued that the institutional church of prosperous times produced lukewarm Christians. So, what will be the form of church in difficult times. What form produces and sustains ‘hot’ Christians?

Ecclesia

A word study of ‘church’ in the New Testament reveals nothing. That’s right, it is not there at all. It is derived from old English ‘cirice’ and middle English ‘chirche’. The Greek ‘kuriakos’ means ‘pertaining to a lord’, any lord. Old English came to use this word as ‘cirice’ (keereekek), then kerke and eventually ‘church’. Translators later inserted this word for the Greek word ‘ecclesia’ which is an entirely different word with a different meaning than ‘kuriakos’. So “…eventually, through the manipulation of organised religion, ‘church’ came to replace ‘ecclesia’ by popular acceptance.[[15]](#footnote-15)”

The word ‘church’ is not a useful term to use in an answer to the question, “What will be the form of ‘church’ in difficult times?” For two reasons:
 1. It is not a translation of any biblical word.
 2. It comes loaded with meaning from common usage, rather than from scripture.

I suggest that instead we return to the biblical word ‘Ecclesia’ It literally means *ek* – out of and *klesis* – a calling. As used in the New Testament *ecclesia* means an assembly of people who have been called out. It is used for the whole company of the Redeemed. “I will build my assembly.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The assembly which is His Body.[[17]](#footnote-17) A company consisting of professed believers which He purchased with His blood.[[18]](#footnote-18) An assembly of believers in a district for example in Thessalonika.[[19]](#footnote-19)

I will now offer a list of characteristics of *ecclesia* as described in the New Testament.
 I will suggest that each one contrasts with the same function within institutional church.

1. The identity of ecclesia derives from their relationship with Christ their head, not with institutional structures. This is the Body metaphor.[[20]](#footnote-20)
2. Connections within ecclesia are formed by the Spirit who gives gifts to each one. As each uses their gifts, bonds of unity are formed, and maturity and growth occur.[[21]](#footnote-21) These are administered by the prompting of the Spirit rather than by institutionalised positions.
3. Relationships are empowered by the command of Jesus to love one another as He loved us.[[22]](#footnote-22) The ‘one-anothers’ of the epistles can empower relationships.[[23]](#footnote-23) In the institutional church relationships can often be somewhat shallow. Instead the performing of roles drives the wheels of institutions.
4. Money and property make no demands on members of ecclesia. Giving and generosity are an individual activity led by the Spirit.[[24]](#footnote-24) Gone are legalistically driven Old Testament demands of tithing.
5. Splitting an ecclesia group is a cause for celebration in the same way a marriage of a matured child is celebrated and released to begin a new family unit. Gone are politics and leadership clashes. Multiplication is how the Kingdom of God grows.[[25]](#footnote-25)
6. Evangelism is supported by the members of ecclesia who take a direct interest in the call and pursuits of other members.[[26]](#footnote-26)
7. Unbelievers find ecclesia to be a natural, warm, inviting context.[[27]](#footnote-27) They don’t find there the aroma of an alien subculture but rather the aroma of Christ.[[28]](#footnote-28) Why? Because members of ecclesia are in the dynamic process of growth as we minister to one another.[[29]](#footnote-29) We are not stuck passively in pews forever dependent on the professionals.
8. Making disciples is as natural within ecclesia as bringing up a child is to a family.[[30]](#footnote-30) Any and every parent already comes with practical training from their own parenting experience. In ecclesia discipling is the norm. It is done out of necessity for survival in a hostile world.

You may object, ‘aren’t we already doing all these?’ Yes and no. Trying to do these things in an institutional environment is like clay mixed in with gold. The gold is blemished, it is impure. So should we dismantle the institutions? No. That is the job of the head of the church.[[31]](#footnote-31) This is most often achieved by hostile, secular governments. When and if this happens know this, God is in control – fully. All is not lost – it is a purifying process and pure gold will emerge.

But isn’t this a fictional utopia? No. God put this blueprint in the scriptures, and He will bring it to pass. The trouble with us is that, if we look back over 16 centuries of church history, since the decree of Emperor Constantine, we see church as institution. The pure gold was always there. God will restore his church in the last days.

So, what is the answer to our question? What does *ecclesia* look like? Family.
*Ecclesia* looks like family.

In an institution the contribution of the person to the entity is primary. Their personal needs are secondary. But in the family, the personal needs of each individual is primary. The head of the family, the father, is primarily concerned for the welfare of his family members. In the same way the head of the Body, Christ, gave His life blood for the redemption of the members of His body. There are no conflicting interests.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Where to from here?
Don’t set out to redesign the church. Constantine tried this and what a mess he made. However, his job came with a claim to divine status. Don’t go there.

Do strengthen the ties you have with fellow believers. Get face to face, online if need be and pray together, minister grace and encouragement to one another, discuss scripture together. Build one another up. Exercise your spiritual gift to edify others. As we do these things, Christ will build His church, as He has been doing for centuries and we will be strengthened and ready together for whatever is up ahead. When the going gets tough and you need something simple to grasp remember the tried and proven summary of faith, love and hope. We will get through all this together as we all keep our eyes ahead to the glorious and victorious return of Jesus Christ our king.

CHURCH OR ECCLESIA

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What has your experience of church been?
2. Identify elements of your church experience which have been, ‘hot, cold or lukewarm.’
3. In your church experience in what ways has it felt more like an institution?
4. In your church experience in what ways has it been more like a family?
5. How have evangelism and disciple making been regarded in your church experiences?
6. How much freedom and encouragement have you experienced to grow in your gifts?
7. What do you consider are the most important elements of an assembly of believers?
8. What is the role of the Sunday service?
9. What changes would you like to see in your corporate experience as believers?
10. What do you believe the Spirit is saying to the church of today?
1. 1 Sam 8:6,7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matt 28:19,20 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John 13:34,35 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Or organisation corporate structure etc [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I left to go to Bible College, joined a church and the assistant pastor visited us one day and asked us what we needed. So we shared in detail all our confusion and hurt. He gave a verdict and that conversation was the beginning of our healing. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Matt 16:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘The Oracle’. Jonathan Cahn, Frontline Charisma Media. Fl.2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Luke 15:22 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Col 3:12-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Matt 24:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John 13:35 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Heb 12:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Romans 5:1-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Daniel 3:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Help! The Sheep are Escaping”, Selwyn Stevens PhD Pub, Jubilee Resources Int. 2018, p26 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Matt 16:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Eph 1:22 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Acts 20:28 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 1 Thes 1:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Eph 5:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Eph 4:11-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. John 13:34,35; 1 John 4:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Col 3:12-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 2 Cor 9:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Matt 13:33 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Luke 10:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Matt 5:16; 1 Pet 2:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 2 Cor 2:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Eph 4:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Matt 28:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Matt 16:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Eph 5:25-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)