

## REVELATION 3:20: IMAGERY AND LITERARY CONTEXT

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Reflection on Biblical imagery is always a valuable exercise. This is particularly true in the case of an image heavily used in preaching and teaching, such as that contained in Rev 3:20. The present study will proceed with the concerns of expositors especially in view, offering three principal suggestions. (1) The most common understanding of the imagery of Rev 3:20—namely, that it pictures Jesus seeking entry into the human heart—can be modified and significantly enriched by reference to incidents in the ministry of Jesus that portray him receiving hospitality from a sinner (e.g. his entering the home of Zacchaeus). (2) The reality pictured by Jesus' knocking includes as one of its elements a call to repentance. (3) Though originally addressed to a church, the form of Jesus' words in Rev 3:20 suggests that he is stating a general truth that applies in other contexts as well. It is thus quite legitimate to present this verse as Jesus' promise to those who are unsaved.

### I. IMAGERY

Following the introductory *idou*, Rev 3:20 presents a unified picture easily visualized in three scenes: (1) Jesus standing before a door knocking, (2) the person within hearing and opening, and (3) Jesus entering and eating with the one within. An implied house or room is basic to the imagery. But what kind of situation, with what attending nuances, does this simple picture represent? There are other pictures within the Bible that to varying degrees parallel the language and imagery of Rev 3:20. These may give us help as they show some of the ways the original readers could have understood scenes involving a door, entrance and a meal. Two cautions must be kept in mind, however. (1) Before letting similar imagery found elsewhere in the Bible influence our interpretation of Rev 3:20 we must be sure that true parallelism actually exists. (2) Scripture and early Christian teaching is not the only background to be considered when determining the meaning of an image, since general cultural context may be equally important. How would church members in Asia Minor, influenced not only by Christian tradition but also by the whole cultural milieu of the first-century Mediterranean world, most readily have understood the imagery of Rev 3:20?

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1. *≥The eschatological door?* James 5:9 portrays the nearness of Christ's return using the image of a judge standing at the door.<sup>1</sup> Several commentators interpret Rev 3:20 as a similar picture of "the eschatological door through which Christ will enter at His second advent."<sup>2</sup> According to this interpretation the words "I stand at the door and knock" amount to a warning of imminent eschatological judgment. As R. L. Thomas points out, this fits the Laodicean context and the specific call to repentance in v. 19b very well, all the more so when one recognizes that warnings of judgment repeatedly follow calls to repentance in the messages to the seven churches of Revelation 2–3 (cf. 2:5, 16; 3:3). The meal portrayed in 3:20 is then linked to another series of NT texts that speak of a "messianic banquet" or believers eating together with Christ in the coming kingdom (Matt 8:11; 26:29; Luke 14:15; 22:30; Rev 19:9).<sup>3</sup>

Despite the background provided by Jas 5:9 and the "messianic banquet" passages, and despite the appropriateness of a warning of judgment in the Laodicean context, an eschatological interpretation of the imagery in Rev 3:20 involves serious difficulties. It must be remembered that 3:20 presents one unified picture. Between the scene of Jesus at the door and that of the shared meal lies the scene of the person within the house hearing and opening. One's interpretation of this middle scene must be consistent with one's interpretation of the first, and this is extremely difficult to do if that refers to Christ's return. The middle scene emphatically pictures an element of individual human response. This is totally lacking in the pictures presented in Jas 5:9; Mark 13:29, which certainly do not portray Jesus waiting for anyone on earth to open the door for his return. In Rev 3:20 individual hearing and opening and the conditional and individualized entry of Christ make it clear that something other than the eschatological return of Christ is in view.

2. *≥The returning master?* The parable of the watchful servants in Luke 12:35–40 pictures servants waiting within a house for the owner's return. If they are ready to open the door when he knocks he will reward them by serving them a meal. Like Jas 5:9 this parable highlights the imminent nature of Christ's return and the need for readiness. But though this text is sometimes listed together with Jas 5:9; Mark 13:29 as an example of eschatological door imagery, Luke 12:35–40 actually presents a distinct picture, one in which the picture of a door is used differently. In James the picture of the judge standing at the door is a way of saying that the decisive event of

<sup>1</sup> Mark 13:29 and its parallel in Matt 24:33 employ a similar image, though here the grammar may intend to picture the event of Christ's coming rather than his person as that which is right at the door.

<sup>2</sup> R. L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 321; cf. H. B. Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977) 63. If on this view one visualizes a door in heaven through which Christ passes to return to earth, then it is interesting to note that just three verses later, in Rev 4:1, a door in heaven is described. In 4:1 of course the movement through the door is from earth to heaven.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, *Revelation* 324.

Christ's coming could happen at any moment, and therefore people should get ready. But in the Lukan parable the master's knock means that the decisive event has now arrived. The wait is over, and there is no longer any opportunity to get ready. This alone makes it impossible to find in Luke 12 an adequate model for interpreting Rev 3:20. In 3:20 Jesus' knocking is a present reality for the Laodiceans, not a symbol of the future event of his arrival. It is an action that leaves them time to consider and respond, not a signal that their time has run out. So despite some impressive parallels—the knocking, the opening of the door, the meal—the door scene in the parable of the watchful servants depicts quite a different situation from that described in Rev 3:20. It should also be noted that even the meal is not the same as that pictured in 3:20. In the parable Jesus is pictured as a host who offers hospitality. In Rev 3:20 he is a guest who receives it. I will suggest below that this may be a point of some significance.

3. *The lover at the door?* Commentators sometimes cite Cant 5:2–8 as a source for the imagery in Rev 3:20.<sup>4</sup> But it is doubtful whether any useful clues for interpretation can be discovered through such a connection. The scene in Song of Solomon involves a lover knocking on his beloved's door at night. She delays, so he tries to work the latch open. She finally opens the door, but by then he is gone. She goes out to search but does not find him. Even if the Song of Solomon as a whole is read as a picture of Christ and his Church, the details of this particular passage do not match the scene portrayed in Rev 3:20, and its playful tone is hard to relate to the serious tone of the message to the Laodiceans.

4. *The door to the human heart.* The picture of Jesus seeking entry into the human heart dominates the exposition of Rev 3:20 today. When the verse is preached or taught from this interpretive position, three points are commonly stressed: that Jesus takes the initiative in approaching individuals with a call or invitation, that each person must positively respond in order to receive the benefits of that call, and that positive response brings a person into close personal relationship to Christ. That such points are stressed is the strength of this interpretation, for in succession they bring out the force of the three scenes of Rev 3:20: Jesus knocking, the person within opening the door, and the meal together. But in expounding these points is it necessary to think of the imagery of Rev 3:20 strictly in terms of the human heart and the doctrine of Christ's indwelling? The text itself contains no reference to the heart or the inner person. The fact that the wording of the KJV and RSV—"I will come in to him"—when spoken aloud sounds like "I will come into him" should not mislead one at this point. The expression does not mean "enter into" a person. Rather, it means "enter a house or room to where a person is" (cf. Mark 15:43; Acts 10:3; 16:40; 17:2;

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 321; Swete, *Revelation* 63; R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1920) 1.101; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1974) 107.

etc.).<sup>5</sup> The decision to interpret Rev 3:20 in terms of indwelling, then, will depend largely on the degree to which the use of indwelling imagery elsewhere within the NT pushes us to think in those terms when confronted by the picture in this verse.

There is no direct NT parallel that portrays Jesus seeking entry into a person's heart. There are, however, the building blocks for such a picture. Ephesians 3:17 speaks of Christ dwelling in the believer's heart by faith, and several other passages speak of him being "in" the believer (e.g. John 14:20; 15:4–5; Rom 8:10; Gal 2:20; Col 1:27). In addition there are the many texts that speak of "receiving" the Spirit, or of the Spirit being "in" the believer (e.g. John 14:17; 20:22; Acts 2:38; 19:2; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Within this latter group of texts Gal 4:6 makes specific mention of the heart ("God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts"). Further, there are passages in 1 John that speak of God "living in" or "abiding in" the believer (1 John 3:24; 4:12–13, 15–16).

A survey of these "indwelling" passages leads to the following observations. (1) Most references to Christ's indwelling come in contexts that also speak of the indwelling work of the Spirit (note the relation of John 14:17 to 14:20 and 15:4–5; Rom 8:9 to 8:10; Eph 3:16 to 3:17; exceptions are Gal 2:20; Col 1:27). In light of the close connection made by NT writers between the person of the risen Christ and the Spirit,<sup>6</sup> the indwelling of Christ can be seen to occur through the indwelling of the Spirit and to depend on it. When the Spirit is in the heart, Christ is in the heart. The passages in 1 John referring to God indwelling the believer are also closely connected to references to the work of the Spirit.<sup>7</sup> (2) In general the texts that speak of Christ's indwelling do not refer specifically to his act of coming to the believer. Rather, it is the Spirit who is often mentioned when coming or reception is in view.<sup>8</sup> Further, personal fellowship between Christ and the believer generally does not receive strong emphasis in the texts that speak of Christ's indwelling. John 14:16–24 stands as an exception to these points. (3) The texts that speak of Christ's indwelling make only limited use of house imagery. Ephesians 3:17 uses the verb *katoikeō*; John 14:23 uses the expression *monēn poieō*. It will be seen that Rev 3:20, when compared with this general pattern, reflects distinctive emphases: (1) It contains no reference to the Spirit, (2) it focuses on Jesus' entry, along with the collateral themes of his call and the need for human response, (3) it highlights Jesus' active, personal fellowship with the one who responds, and (4) it contains developed house imagery.

The one text related to the indwelling theme that does bear strong literary affinity to Rev 3:20 is John 14:23: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Charles, *Revelation* 1.101.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. John 14:16–20; Rom 8:9–11; 2 Cor 3:17–18.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. 1 John 3:24; 4:13.

<sup>8</sup> In connection with the doctrine of Christ's indwelling we often speak of "receiving Jesus into one's heart." While this is perfectly appropriate, it is perhaps worth noting that the actual gospel texts that speak of "receiving" Jesus (Matt 10:40; 18:5; John 1:12) have a more general reference to favorably responding to his message or offering him welcome in a home or a village. In Col 2:6, which speaks of receiving Christ as Lord, the focus seems to be on receiving the teaching that Jesus is Lord.

teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” Here as in Rev 3:20 it is Jesus who speaks. Here too he makes a conditional promise beginning with *ean tis*. There is reference to his coming to the believer, and house imagery is used. Certainly these words of Jesus must influence our understanding of Rev 3:20. But should we therefore conclude that 3:20 speaks precisely and exclusively of indwelling? Not necessarily. For one thing, along with the parallels there are also dissimilarities between John 14:23 and Rev 3:20. In 3:20, for instance, Jesus’ coming is not linked to the coming of the Spirit, and the imagery of house and fellowship is more developed. Secondly, while John 14:23 probably refers to indwelling (following as it does v. 20, which speaks of Christ’s indwelling, and v. 17, which speaks of the Spirit’s indwelling) it does so in language that reminds us that this is part of a yet larger strand of Biblical teaching concerning God’s dwelling with his people. The verb *erchomai* is used rather than *eiserchomai*, and the promise is to live “with” (*para*) rather than “in” (*en*) the believer.<sup>9</sup> The theme of God dwelling with his people runs throughout Scripture, from his presence in tabernacle and temple (Exod 29:42–46; Ps 84:1) to his coming through the Word who dwelt among us (John 1:14) to his indwelling of both Church and individual believer as a temple through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21–22) to his final dwelling with his people in the new creation (Rev 21:3, 22). It is best to say, then, that John 14:23 and Rev 3:20 share a common reference to God’s dwelling with his people—a reality that includes Christ indwelling the heart through the Spirit but is not limited to it.

5. *The house of a sinner.* Another set of texts contributing to the Biblical theme of God dwelling with his people can be found in the gospels, where several passages describe scenes in which Jesus eats and drinks with sinners. It is widely recognized that through this activity Jesus was deliberately communicating something about his attitude toward these people. The significance of table fellowship within the ministry of Jesus has received a good deal of scholarly attention, though it probably deserves more precise analysis than it is usually given. One important question that needs to be asked when looking at any particular narrative or saying involving a shared meal relates to the background that gives the meal special meaning. Does the meaning attached to the meal derive from Jewish religious expectations concerning a messianic feast (in which case table fellowship with Jesus would be a forward-looking sign of participation in eschatological blessings),<sup>10</sup> or

<sup>9</sup> B. F. Westcott argues that the language does not indicate indwelling (*The Gospel According to St. John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 208), though most commentators hold that it does (e.g. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII–XXI* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1970] 647–648; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991] 504; B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* [London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1972] 482–483).

<sup>10</sup> J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1971) 1.113–116 (though recognizing a more general cultural background as well); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 208; W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1991) 2.101. Within the context of Judaism another proposed aspect of Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners relates to Jewish ritual purity. But Sanders presents evidence that this was not the central issue (*Jesus* 177–187).

does it derive more from general social customs prevalent throughout the first-century Mediterranean world, where a shared meal implied acceptance, honor or obligation?<sup>11</sup> A second question that should be asked is whether it is the mere fact of a shared meal that carries meaning or whether the significance of table fellowship depends as well on who gives the hospitality and who accepts it. Would a meal at which a sinner hosted Jesus have communicated something different than a meal at which Jesus hosted a sinner? If so, which would have given greater hope to the sinner and offense to religious leaders?<sup>12</sup>

The whole area of table fellowship in the ministry of Jesus is complex. I would like to make three limited affirmations as a basis for comparing some of the gospel material with the imagery in Rev 3:20.

(1) Prevailing cultural values relating to table fellowship rather than thoughts about an eschatological feast were probably the main force behind the reactions created when Jesus ate and drank with sinners. For one thing the gospel accounts record no explicit word from Jesus linking his table fellowship with sinners to the messianic feast expectation.<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to imagine observers or participants quickly making such a connection on their own every time Jesus sat at table with sinners. Secondly, there is no clearly emphasized account of Jesus hosting sinners,<sup>14</sup> which would seem to have been a necessary feature of any meal designed to symbolize the messianic feast. Certainly those instances where it is emphasized that Jesus was a guest (Luke 5:29–32; 19:1–10) should be interpreted primarily in light of the general cultural implications of such an act. Values associated with meals and hospitality were strong in Semitic cultures (and remain so today).<sup>15</sup> They were also widely shared throughout the ancient Mediterranean world<sup>16</sup> — including, presumably, Laodicea.

(2) Within this cultural milieu a shared meal implied friendship, agreement, acceptance, and commitment to act in a trustworthy manner toward one's table companion.<sup>17</sup> This explains the strong negative reaction on the

<sup>11</sup> S. S. Bartchy, "Table Fellowship," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. J. B. Green, S. McKnight and I. H. Marshall; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 796–797; D. M. May, "Mark 2:15: The Home of Jesus or Levi?," *NTS* 39 (1993) 147–149; B. J. Malina and R. L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 69, 135–137.

<sup>12</sup> K. E. Bailey feels that for Jesus to host a sinner would have made the stronger statement (*Poet and Peasant* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 143), as does E. S. Malbon, "*TH OIKIA AYTOY*: Mark 2:15 in Context," *NTS* 31 [1985] 284). But see May, "Mark 2:15," and my comments below.

<sup>13</sup> Though some of his sayings and parables (Matt 8:11–17 and parallels; Matt 22:1–13 and parallels) do refer to an eschatological feast.

<sup>14</sup> Malbon, "*TH OIKIA*," has argued that the expression *tē oikia autou* in Mark 2:15 refers to Jesus' house, not Levi's—despite Luke's indication that Levi was the host (Luke 5:29). See the counter-argument by May, "Mark 2:15." Luke 15:2 speaks of Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them, but it is not certain that this means that Jesus was the host for their common meals. See the comments by I. H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 599. Of course there are examples of Jesus hosting crowds (the feedings of the five thousand and the four thousand) and his disciples (the last supper; John 21:1–14).

<sup>15</sup> Bailey, *Poet* 142–144.

<sup>16</sup> Bartchy, "Table" 796; Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science* 3–4, 135–137.

<sup>17</sup> See nn. 15–16 *supra*.

part of the religious leaders when Jesus ate with sinners (Mark 2:16 and parallels; Matt 11:18–19 and parallel; Luke 15:2; 19:7).

(3) It is quite likely that, in those instances where it was Jesus who went to be the guest of a sinner, the cultural dynamics involved in the acceptance of hospitality would have heightened the above-mentioned implications of a shared meal. In addition to expressing general friendship, accepting an offer of hospitality honored the host and might well have implied that the guest was willing to accept certain reciprocal obligations to the host.<sup>18</sup> In the account of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10) it is the fact that Jesus went as his guest that is highlighted. This is what provokes Zacchaeus' glad response. The text does not specifically mention table fellowship, though of course this would have been a part of staying at Zacchaeus' house.

Social customs still observable today in societies that share similar roots with first-century Mediterranean cultures can provide illustrations suggestive of how accepted or rejected hospitality might have been perceived in NT contexts—though given the distance between then and now, such illustrations must be used with caution. My own thinking in this area has been stimulated by experiences from a period spent in Algeria, an Arab nation in which Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultural influences are strong. One such experience involved a Palestinian working in Algeria. After he had made a verbal agreement to purchase a car I was selling I invited him into my apartment for a cup of coffee. According to my perceptions of the culture this was the normal thing to do, so I was faintly surprised when he turned me down. When the day came for handing over the car and receiving payment it turned out that what I had thought to be an agreement was not really settled yet. My interpretation of his earlier reluctance to accept my offer of hospitality is that for him such acceptance would have implied a higher level of commitment and obligation to our business agreement than he was ready to make at that point.<sup>19</sup> A second experience occurred when I visited the rather traditional town where one of my students lived. I was reluctant to accept his invitation that my family stay at his home, preferring to stay in a hotel. (Rightly or wrongly, I wanted to maintain a certain distance in our teacher-student relationship.) He made it clear through his persistence that it would have meant a lot to him to have us stay at his house. His comment when he finally gave up trying to persuade me was instructive: “You see, sir, the poor have no voice.”

At the simplest level the imagery of Rev 3:20—the knocking, opening, entering in and eating—depicts Jesus as a guest entering a house. Against the background of Jesus' table fellowship with sinners, and in view of the general cultural context, this simple picture carries powerful implications.

<sup>18</sup> B. J. Malina speaks of “dyadic contracts” (*The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1981] 80–81). Cf. May, “Mark 2.15.”

<sup>19</sup> A friend who has lived in the Middle East has since informed me that among Palestinian Arabs to take coffee (as opposed to any other food or drink) symbolizes agreement to a deal. Perhaps, then, this man's unwillingness to accept my invitation had a more specific focus than just a general reluctance to receive hospitality. In any case it is a reminder that even within a common cultural milieu specific actions can take on a different nuance from one region to another.

Should we not give such implications primary place in our exposition?<sup>20</sup> It is instructive to compare the account of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10)—the most fully drawn description in the gospels of Jesus receiving hospitality from a person identified as a sinner—with the picture in Rev 3:20. Jesus took the initiative in asking to stay at Zacchaeus' house. In terms of social dynamics this is very similar to knocking on the door. Zacchaeus gave Jesus a glad welcome. This finds its parallel in the picture of the person within hearing and opening the door. What is most distinctive in the Zacchaeus incident is the fact that Jesus went to be his house guest. This of course corresponds with Jesus' promise in Rev 3:20 that he will enter as a guest and share a meal. Finally, there is a parallel between the condition of the Laodicean church and that of Zacchaeus: Both had a need for Jesus to deal with the issue of their sin and relationship with God. Jesus' action made a clear impact on Zacchaeus himself and on the people who observed it. We may presume that Luke's original readers in the wider Mediterranean world would have also felt that impact. Would not the image Jesus used in Rev 3:20 have provoked similar thoughts and feelings among the first readers of the letter to the Laodiceans?<sup>21</sup>

When this approach to the imagery of 3:20 is compared with the "human heart" interpretation, it will be seen that the two views are not so much contradictory as complimentary. Both connect the imagery with the Biblical theme of God dwelling with his people. But whereas exposition in terms of the human heart will focus attention primarily on the doctrine of Christ's indwelling of the believer, the "sinner's house" approach will lead to exposition that gives priority to the theme of God's grace to sinners—grace that breaks down barriers and treats the spiritually poor as spiritually rich.<sup>22</sup>

## II. LITERARY CONTEXT

1. *Grace and repentance.* The many parallels that can be drawn between gospel accounts of Jesus going to be the guest of sinners and the situation portrayed in Rev 3:20 have led us to see in this verse a powerful image of God's grace, an offer of friendship and acceptance. In one respect, however, the Laodiceans differ radically from the sinners with whom Jesus shared

<sup>20</sup> With reference to the shared meal in Rev 3:20, commentators will often mention the significance of table fellowship in the ancient Near East. But this is given only a small place in the overall exposition and is usually limited to the thought that a shared meal implies close fellowship and affection. W. Hendricksen comes closest to expressing the thought that the total image of this verse is a picture of God's grace to a sinner (*More Than Conquerors* [London: Tyndale, 1940] 79).

<sup>21</sup> This is not to imply that Luke 19:1–10 forms the direct literary background for Rev 3:20. I am suggesting that the general cultural background of the Laodiceans (and other original readers of Revelation), strengthened by an awareness of Jesus' actions in accepting hospitality from sinners, would have led to an interpretation along these lines.

<sup>22</sup> Another positive result of interpreting Rev 3:20 in light of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus is that it can enrich one's exposition of Luke 19:1–10. The words of the ascended Jesus in Rev 3:20 show that what Zacchaeus experienced through his encounter with Jesus, though in some ways unique to the period of Jesus' earthly ministry, is not something out of reach today.

table fellowship. Zacchaeus and others like him were recognized by all to be sinners. We may assume that, like the tax collector in the parable that shortly precedes Luke's account of Zacchaeus (Luke 18:9–14), they sensed their unworthiness before God.<sup>23</sup> They stood in need of a sign of God's acceptance. The Laodiceans, in contrast, were blind to their spiritual poverty. What they needed was a strong warning. And in fact it is warning and a call to repentance that dominate the Laodicean message. This comes to its climax in v. 19, immediately before Jesus' words about knocking on the door. Is it appropriate, then, to relate 3:20 to gospel passages that describe Jesus' accepting sinners and to interpret it in a way that puts such emphasis on grace? Should not the stress rather be on repentance?

In light of the context leading up to v. 20, and in light of the entire Laodicean attitude, it is necessary to recognize in Jesus' knocking a note of rebuke and warning. In this respect, at least, the eschatological interpretation makes a valid point. But the promise that ends the verse forces us to see in that knocking an offer of amazing grace as well. When Jesus describes himself standing at the door he is portraying the totality of his approach to the Laodiceans. This includes both a call to repent and an offer of acceptance and fellowship. The element of rebuke in no way dampens the element of grace. On the contrary it causes it to shine more brightly and warmly. In fact when vv. 19 and 20 are taken together they reveal a striking movement from tenderness ("those whom I love"<sup>24</sup>) to rebuke and demand, then back again to tenderness ("I will go in and eat with him, and he with me").

In preaching today, Jesus' knocking is often presented solely as his gracious, even gentle, offer of a gift: himself. But in fairness to the text the element of warning should be made plain. The person who hears Jesus' voice at the door is not a consumer whose only choice is to decide whether Jesus' offer is worth accepting. If such an impression is given in preaching, then not only concern over sin but also a true sense of God's grace will be lost. Occasionally the picture of Jesus' knocking at the door may even be presented in a way that suggests that Jesus is the one who stands in need and that the person to whom he comes is the one who has something to offer. Perhaps in the background lie thoughts of Mary and Joseph knocking on doors in Bethlehem seeking shelter for Jesus' birth,<sup>25</sup> or Jesus' words in Matt 19:35: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." It would be a mistake to let these scenes influence our interpretation of Rev 3:20, where the one who speaks is the glorified Lord—and not in disguise.

<sup>23</sup> I think Malina and Rohrbaugh press their evidence from anthropological study of Mediterranean cultures too far when they suggest that a member of first-century Palestinian society would not have experienced feelings of individual guilt and unworthiness in the way that we understand them in modern western culture (*Social-Science* 113).

<sup>24</sup> The verb *phileō* is used here, perhaps a deliberate choice to emphasize strong affection. Cf. Charles, *Revelation* 1.99; Thomas, *Revelation* 318–319.

<sup>25</sup> The Christmas carol that describes how there was no room in the inn and then concludes, "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee," depicts a situation different from that portrayed in Rev 3:20.

2. *Revelation 3:20 and evangelism.* Can Rev 3:20, words addressed to a church, appropriately be used in presenting the gospel to unbelievers? Christians have almost always answered yes, but expositors have sometimes struggled to reconcile this conviction with their desire to be faithful to the Scriptural context. Some have concluded that even in its original context 3:20 comes as an evangelistic appeal, arguing that the Laodicean church members were in fact not genuine believers at all,<sup>26</sup> or that two distinct groups are addressed: believers in a verse like v. 19 (“Those whom I love I rebuke”), and unbelievers in v. 20.<sup>27</sup> Most interpreters, however, recognize that the promise of 3:20 was originally spoken to a group of Christians. Is there exegetical or hermeneutical reason, then, to apply it evangelistically today?

An examination of the distinctive form of Jesus’ words within their literary context may provide help at this point. Each of the seven messages to churches in Revelation 2–3 follows a set pattern containing six sections: (1) an address to the angel of the church, (2) a command to write, (3) a description of Jesus, (4) the main body of the message, beginning with the words “I know,” (5) a promise to the one who overcomes, and (6) a command to hear what the Spirit says. Revelation 3:20 fits into this pattern as part of the fourth section of the message to Laodicea, the section containing the main body of the message. Two features characterize the fourth section of each of the seven messages to the churches: (1) Jesus always speaks directly to the church using the second person,<sup>28</sup> and (2) everything is situational, describing people, circumstances, promises and warnings specific to the congregation addressed. These two features hold true for the fourth section of the letter to the Laodiceans (3:15–20) except for two statements: vv. 19a and 20. These statements are distinctive in that Jesus uses the more general third person. The effect of this is that neither of these statements need be tied in exclusively with the Laodicean church. Jesus states a general principle when in v. 19a he says, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline”—though of course that principle has a specific application to the Laodiceans. Equally in 3:20 when Jesus says, “I stand at the door” (not “your door”), he is describing an approach he makes to individuals in many places and at many times. The promise made to “anyone” applies wherever Jesus’ voice is heard, not just in Laodicea. Certainly that includes evangelistic situations.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Thomas, *Revelation* 308.

<sup>27</sup> J. F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 96. Cf. Heb 12:4–8.

<sup>28</sup> Though specific individuals (2:20–23) or subgroups (2:16; 3:4b) within a particular church are at times referred to in the third person.