

A Study in Colossians 4:15–16

Nymphas, the Assembly in His House, and the Epistle to Laodicea — March 19, 2008

We are reading Colossians chapter 4, beginning at verse 15.

"Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house."

"And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea."

The Pattern of Two and Three Throughout the Chapter

At the end of Colossians 4, there is a series of names arranged in a pattern worth noticing. In verses 7 and 9, there were two: Tychicus and Onesimus, sent by Paul. They are explicitly described as those who will tell you all things: they had a witnessing function. Then in verses 10 and 11, there were three: Aristarchus, Marcus, and the brother called Justus. These three were of the circumcision and were Paul's fellow workers unto the kingdom of God. Then in verses 12 and 14, three more: Epaphras, Luke, and Demas. Now here at the end, two more are singled out by name: Nymphas in verse 15, and Archippus in verse 17.

Two, then three, then three, then two at the close. This recurring pattern of two or three is suggestive of Matthew 18:20 — where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. Two or three is the number of witnesses. The first pair, Tychicus and Onesimus, stand as witnesses: they will make known all things. The next three stand as witnesses to the things of the kingdom of God. The three after that teach by fervency, prayer, and the sobering silence of Demas. And these last two are spoken to rather than from, receiving a word rather than sending one. Two or three, gathered in His name. Throughout the chapter, that pattern quietly reasserts itself.

Demas and the Attraction of the Present Age

Before moving to Nymphas, it is worth noting what it was that drew Demas away — because 2 Timothy 4:10 is precise about it. It was not the gross evils of the world that attracted Demas. It was the present age — the present order of things, the course of things going on around him. There were wider circles of activity, legitimate engagements, the general life of his time. It is said of another person in

Scripture that they loved the present world, but the word used of Demas in 2 Timothy is age — the present age, the present system of things.

This is more cutting than ordinary worldliness. We can be drawn away from Paul — from his prison, his rejection, his heavenly standpoint — not by anything openly sinful, but simply by the pull of what is legitimate and going on around us. Agriculture, employment, fellowship in wider circles, engagement with the moving currents of the age — none of these are evil in themselves. But they can become the occasion of forsaking Paul and all that he stood for. The most important things of all are not what men of this world count as important. They have to do with our Lord Jesus Christ, with the gospel of His greatness, and with the truth of the assembly gathered in His name. Those must not be crowded out by the present age, however attractive it may be.

Nymphas and the Assembly in His House

Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house. About Nymphas we know only this one thing: the assembly of God was in his house. He is not called a fellow prisoner; there is no record of great zeal or fervent prayer attributed to him by name. He is simply the man in whose house the assembly met. That is what attaches itself to his name in Scripture.

The assembly in a house is not unique to Nymphas. Philemon 1–2 speaks of the church in Philemon's house; Romans 16:5 and 1 Corinthians 16:19 speak of the church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla. So there were several such assemblies. This is not a peculiarity but a pattern of the early churches.

In more recent times a movement has arisen — sometimes called the Home Church Movement — which treats the house as the defining and essential feature. That is a cargo cult form of Christianity: fixing on the external feature while missing the point. There are also references in the New Testament where the assembly met in what appears to have been other arrangements — an upper chamber at Troas, for instance. The house was not the principle; it was the circumstance.

That said, there are real lessons in these references, and real dangers on both sides. When the assembly meets in someone's house, the man of the house can be puffed up by it. Pride is the failure on one side. But the opposite failure is equally possible: an obsequious, ostentatious humility — proud of one's humility, which is a worse pride. There is also the matter of social class. Some souls may feel unwilling to come to a man's house because of personal history with him, or because of the discomfort of class difference — whether the house seems too grand or not grand enough. All these things show how much the wrong focus can intrude. The secret against all of them is the same: the focus of the soul must be on the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name the assembly is gathered. What does it matter whose name is on the mailbox? In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together — that is what constitutes the assembly. That is what made the assembly at Nymphas's house an assembly of God. The

name written over it was not his.

There is a contrast here also with Demas. Demas was attracted to the present age — the going concerns, the wider things, the legitimate engagements all around him. Nymphas had found his focus, and it was in an entirely different direction. Not with the mainstream culture of his day, and not in reaction against it either — but orthogonally, looking upward where Christ is, in the midst of the assembly. Culture looks one way; counterculture looks the opposite way, but its frame of reference is still the culture. The Christian looks in a third direction altogether: not sideways, but up, where Christ sits at the right hand of God. That is where Nymphas's house was pointed.

The Epistle to Be Read to the Laodiceans

Verse 16: And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. This instruction has a double significance.

First, as to the epistle from Laodicea: this was a separate letter, not the letter of Revelation 3 written to Laodicea, which would not be written for another thirty years. One careful commentator notes that the phrasing from Laodicea — rather than to Laodicea — is itself one of the indicators that it is not the same letter. This was a correspondence that was in circulation in those days, and the Colossian assembly was to read it. The books of the New Testament were not published like modern books; they were hand-copied and passed from assembly to assembly. Someone would copy a letter and send it on. The various books of the New Testament circulated that way through the early churches.

This raises a question of responsibility for us. Christians are to be conduits of truth — like water pipes through which the truth of God flows. What comes to us in the word of God is not meant to stop with us. It ought to be received in the heart and sent on again: spreading outward from every assembly, from every Christian house, from every believer in the world. The word of God is not junk mail to be moved from the mailbox to the wastebasket. It is the most precious communication that exists, and it ought to spread. A brother who taught at a large university and found himself surrounded by those who were deeply interested in the counterculture and nothing of God — he did what he could. He printed Bible verses on brightly colored slips of paper and put them in the hands of those he met. He could not do more; he did not claim the gift to do more. But he knew the word of God was to be spread, not sat on.

Second, as to Colossians being read to the Laodiceans: this instruction implicitly identifies the epistle to the Colossians as the antidote for the Laodicean condition. Colossians is the epistle of Christ as head, as all in all, as the fullness of the Godhead dwelling bodily — the epistle that directly addresses the tendency to be occupied with philosophy and vain deceit, with the elements of the world, with anything less than Christ Himself as the sum of all things. If I were a Laodicean in the condition described in

Revelation 3, and conscience was working in my heart toward repentance, the book I would want to read is Colossians. The Colossians themselves received a humbling message in this instruction — that what they needed was the same thing Laodicea needed. Their capacity for high theological discussion was not a mark of health. It could be entirely compatible with Laodicean apathy toward the things that truly matter.

The assembly of God, in whatever house or place it meets, is constituted by one name alone — the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. May that name be the only one that matters.