

Revelation 3.1-6 The Church at Sardis

The Dead Church

Introduction

People often say, "I wish we could have church like they did in the first century." Which church? Their churches face all the problems we face today. We are not called to be a first century church, but the church in the 21st century. This is why Jesus' messages to the church are so important. We must be faithful to Jesus now, and present a witness to the society we find ourselves in. We must learn as we look backwards, and grow as we look upwards. Astronomers tell us that the light from the stars arrive here from hundreds of billions of miles from here. The light from the polar star comes from 33 light years. It may have been plunged into darkness yet we are still getting the light from the past. The church at Sardis was like that. It had a name but was dead, it was shining on its past light.

A man had a friend who enlarged his business. His sales had increased to the point that a larger warehouse and sales office were needed. Even though the move was a rather complicated and burdensome process, it was really a thing to be celebrated. For this reason, the man sent his friend some flowers on the day of his grand opening. The flowers, however, were poorly handled and the businessman received a bouquet that was intended for a funeral. It was accompanied with a card which said: "My deepest sympathy during this time of sorrow." When the man called his friend on the phone to wish him well, he was confronted with the error, "Why in the world," said the businessman, "did you send me these sympathy flowers?" The man went immediately to the florist to demand an explanation. The florist met him outside the shop and was obviously upset. "I am terribly sorry about the mixup with the flowers," he said, "but I hope you will be understanding. Your situation is not half as bad as the one down at the funeral home. The folks there received your flowers accompanied by the card which said: BEST WISHES IN YOUR NEW LOCATION."

We have a word for something dead-yet alive. Zombie. They allegedly have dine on the flesh of the living to survive.

Churches then as well as now are composed of human beings. Times change, but human nature, sin and God's provision for sin have not changed.

The Commission To Sardis Historical Background

1. Sardis was very wealthy, and its people were known for luxury and loose living. Sardis was a kind of Beverly Hills of the ancient world. There was a social atmosphere, which led to selfishness, apathy and lethargy. Sardis was the ancient capitol of Lydia. It was an important city. 50 miles east of Ephesus, it was at the junction of five main roads. It was a center of trade. It was also a military center, it was located on an almost inaccessible plateau. The acropolis of Sardis was 1500 feet above the main road. and it

formed an impregnable fortress. The main religion was the worship of Artemis (Sybil)

Sardis was known for the manufacture of wool garments, (clothes) The message to Sardis is one to churches that are resting on past glory (or individuals past accomplishments). Dr. Vance Havener reminds us that spiritual ministries go through four stages; a man, a movement, a machine, and then a monument. Sardis was at the monument stage. Yet there is still hope because Jesus is still the head of the church and he can make dead things alive.

The Christians in Sardis faced no threat of persecution and were not experiencing hostility from the Jews, and it seems not faced with severe heretical teachings. They had none of the opposition that the other churches faced, yet the Lord says "you are dead".

We can see that opposition and pain and persecution are sometimes signs that you are alive! I have noticed something about dead people, you can't offend them!

Sardis was wealthy but degenerate. The citizens of the city were wealthy and lazy, the church in this kind of atmosphere had lost its vitality, its zest for living. The church became conformed to the world rather than transformed. We become conformed to the world when we allow its values and attitudes to dictate our behavior rather than the transformation by the Holy Spirit.

2. Man's life is made up of 20 years of his mother asking him where he is going, 40 years of his wife asking him where he has been and one hour at his funeral when everyone wonders where he is going.

The Character of Christ (3.1)

1. Remember, Jesus presents himself or describes himself in terms of what the church needs. What does this church need? Life! The Spirit gives life--remember the church began on Pentecost with the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. There is only one Holy Spirit. In chapter 1 "the seven Spirits could be translated "the seven-fold Spirit of God." This was a symbolic way of speaking of the Spirit. This comes from the prophecy of Isaiah 11:2 where the Messiah is spoken of as one on whom the Spirit of the Lord came to rest Isa 11:2 "The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD". Seven characteristics are attributed to the Holy Spirit. This is the Holy Spirit in all His fullness and life.

Man made church programs cannot bring life to the church or the individual. When the Spirit is grieved the church begins to lose power and life. When sin is confessed and church members get right with God and with each other, then the Spirit infuses new life--revival!

2. **Jesus is the one who holds the seven stars.** Remember, 1:20 "the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels or messengers of the seven churches." These are the pastors and leaders responsible for the oversight of the flock. The church is dead, apathetic and lethargic--Jesus says the leadership must bear some of responsibility. The leaders must confront the people about their condition, Jesus says He Himself has control over the Spirit and the one who has control over the leaders.

The Commendation to Sardis

1. When you read Jesus' message, there is not word of commendation for this church. Two churches, Jesus has nothing "nice" to say. Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira had problems, but at least with all their problems there was some evidence of spiritual vitality.

Which church in the NT do you think had the most problems? Most would say Corinth, yet Paul has many good things to say about the church. However, when he writes to Galatia, he has nothing good to commend them. We might think that Galatia was more on target, but they were trapped in legalism which is spiritually devastating. Jesus seems to care more about spiritual life than problems, problems can be dealt with, but when you're dead you're dead.

Sardis had one main problem--they were dead. Compare Smyrna that was facing difficult problems, persecutions, poverty, and they receive no criticism. On the other hand you have Sardis, no persecution, hostility, no pressures and no commendation.

They would have been better off, with suffering, because they had grown comfortable and content living off the past reputation. "There was reputation without reality, form without force. Like the city itself, the church at Sardis gloried in past splendor, but ignored present decay" (Warren Wiersbe)

2. **There is a little light in verse 4.** "You have a few people in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; or soiled their drawers. Up until now, the church has been at least in the ballpark, there has been some small faction, some splinter group causing problems, now the situation is reversed, **the church as a whole is dead.** Now there is a small remnant within the church walking with God.

The Condemnation to Sardis (vv.1-2) HOW did I get Here!!!!

Harry Truman loved to tell the story about a man who became rather disoriented, yet philosophical after a drinking binge. It was the fourth of July and the man had "toasted" the Statue of Liberty once too often. As he staggered out of the bar, he wandered into a nearby funeral parlor and fell headlong into an open casket. There he spent the night. When he awoke the next morning he looked carefully at his surroundings and asked, "If I

am alive, what am I doing in this thing? But if I'm dead, why do I have to go to the bathroom?"

1. Jesus' main criticism is their dead. The life that Christ is here talking about is real life. In Greek there is *bios and zoe*. *Zoe is real life, spiritual life, eternal life*. This word shows up over and over again in John's gospel. *Zoe* is the uncreated life that God gives. This is the original life man was created to possess. When Jesus uses the expression "I am the way the truth and the life " the word is *zoe*. When Adam and Eve sinned, they died spiritually (*zoe*). The consistent teaching of Jesus is that you must be born again. The issue is always life and death. In 1 John 5 we are told clearly that we are given "eternal life" *zoe*. He who does not have the son does not have *zoe*; if Christ is outside your life you do not have *zoe*.

2. Sardis looked alive on the outside but was dead on the inside. In organization, maybe even confession they were a church, but they had lost the vitality of life that comes from having the Holy Spirit working. So Jesus confronts them, "you have a reputation of being a live, but you are dead.

The Correction to Sardis

Jesus gives 5 directives to the church to correct their situation.

1. **"wake up!"** The church was asleep at the wheel. They were not even aware of the problem. The first step in problem solving is recognizing and defining the problem. Have you ever had God hit you between the eyes to get your attention? **Sardis was dying!** Twice before in its history, the citadel at Sardis had been captured. Each time because sentires failed to do their job! When church leaders get complacent and accustomed to blessings the enemy finds a foothold.

2. **"strengthen what remains and is about to die"**. I believe life that is given by Jesus is not taken away by Jesus. As Walter Martin was fond of saying, "there is no such thing as a spiritual abortion in heaven. God does not undo the work of salvation in the life of the believer. What then is He talking about? I believe Jesus sees a little spark within this church that needs to be fanned into a flame. **Yet the church was not aggressive in its witness to the city.** The reason there was no persecution or hostility, they had done nothing to overturn the enemies territory! "The unsaved in Sardis saw the church as respectable group of people who were neither dangerous nor desirable. They were decent people with a dying witness and decaying ministry." (Warren Wiersbe) A church that is alive will have growth, repair, reproduction and power. If they are lacking than the church is either dying or dead.

3. **Remember what you have received and what you've heard.**

4. **"Repent"** When you recognize the poverty of your spiritual existence, Jesus says

turn, change, the futile life you are leading.

5. "if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come for you". This is a warning. 1 Jn. 2:28 "and now dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming." Believers do not need to fear the coming of the Lord Jesus. Why? Because we belong to Jesus. There are areas in our life, that may need to change, that we are ashamed of, that we would not like to be engaging in when Jesus shows up. This warning is to help avoid future embarrassment. **These five things also provide the formula for revival.** If all the sleeping folk will wake up,

If all the lukewarm folk will fire up,
If all the dishonest folk will confess up,
If all the disgruntled folk will cheer up,
If all the depressed folk will cheer up,
If all the estranged folk will make up,
If all the gossipers will shut up,
If all true soldiers will stand up,
If all the dry bones will shake up,
If all the church members will pray up...
Then we can have a revival!

-- R.G. Lee

I can give a prescription that will bring revival -- revival to any church, or community, or any city on earth.

First: Let few Christians get thoroughly right with God. If this is not done, the rest will come to nothing.

Second: Let them bind themselves together to pray for revival until God opens the windows of heaven and comes down.

Third: Let them put themselves at the disposal of God for His use as He sees fit in winning others to Christ. That is all. I have given this prescription around the world... and in no instance has it failed.

It cannot fail.

-- R.A. Torrey

The Challenge to Sardis (vv.4-5)

1. "defiled garments" are symbolic of acts of unrighteousness. There seems to be a strong possibility that the believers in Sardis were allowing themselves to indulge in the sinful activities of the city. The primary worship in Sardis was to the goddess Cybele (the mother goddess). Her worship involved many depraved acts. There is some evidence from antiquity that people could not worship gods or

goddess' with soiled or dirty clothes.

2. To be dressed in white is a common symbol in Revelation. Chapter 6 the martyrs are dressed in white clothing; chapter 7, the great multitude are dressed in white, chapter 19 the wedding feast of the lamb, those present are dressed in white; and the armies of the Lord are dressed in white.

3. Jesus promises to the overcomers they will "walk with me" to walk with God meant to possess an intimate relationship with the Lord. In Micah 6:8: "He has shown you O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." To walk with Christ is the promise of intimate fellowship.

4. The final promise: He will never erase the overcomer's name from the Book of Life. This book contains the names of all people. In chapter 20:15 "If anyone's name was not found in the Book of Life he was thrown into the Lake of fire". It would appear having your name in that book is very important. When we come to Christ our name is written in the lambs book of life. It may also be that everyone name's is written, and if they fail to appropriate the provision of God in Christ, their name is blotted out.

Conclusion

In Sardis, they professed Christianity but did not possess Christ. Jesus Christ demanded a personal commitment. Not a commitment to a church or a creed (either is fine) but a relationship with Christ. If you have never made a personal commitment to Jesus your name will be blotted out of the book of life. Jesus' survival message is stay awake and stay alive.

Dear Ann Landers: