

HOW TO REVIVE A DEAD CHURCH

Revelation 3:1-6

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I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God (Rev. 3:1-2).

There is an expression, “as rich as Croesus,” that comes to us from an ancient king of Sardis. This famed city in Asia Minor was once the capital of the kingdom of Lydia and was made wealthy by the gold that flowed in its river. Croesus went to war against the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great, after consulting the oracle at Delphi to be sure of his success. The oracle declared, “If you cross the River Halys, you will destroy a great empire.” Croesus assumed that Cyrus’ empire would be destroyed, but when his army was crushed he learned that it was his own. From that time forward, Sardis was the story of a city famed for wealth and power that lost both. Among its features was a necropolis known as “the city of a thousand hills,” so named because of the burial grounds that marked its skyline. Jesus picks up on this history in rebuking the church of Sardis in Revelation 3:1: “You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” Just as Sardis’s famous cemetery had a thousand hills, Jesus reminds us “that a church can have a thousand (or more) members and still be as dead as the inhabitants of a cemetery.”¹

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 10:2.

A DEAD CHURCH

Seeing how Jesus uses the local history and terrain of the churches in Revelation as material for his letters reminds us that these messages were intended for actual churches in the time of the apostle John. Some scholars treat Revelation as only speaking to the distant future before Christ's return, but the seven messages of chapters 2 and 3 remind us that his first audience was the one noted in the opening greeting: "John to the seven churches that are in Asia" (Rev. 1:4).

In challenging the church at Sardis, Jesus uses the well-known history of that city. "And to the angel of the church in Sardis," he wrote: "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive" (Rev. 3:1). Sardis was known for being over-confident and boastful. Yet behind the reputation there was no substance. This church was all name, no reality; all reputation and no life. Perhaps it was the financial stature, or the worldly influence of its members, or a great deal of activity and programs that gave the church in Sardis its reputation for life. The reality, however, was very different: "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead." (Rev. 3:1).

In considering this fifth of the seven letters of Revelation, we find no threat of persecution, as at Smyrna, and no false teaching, such as at Pergamum. Evidently, Satan did not consider Sardis worthy of spiritual assault. William Hendriksen writes: "Sardis was a very 'peaceful' church. It enjoyed peace, but it was the peace of the cemetery!"² Sardis was what we refer to today as a "nominal" church. It was Christian in name, but name only. The members professed faith in Jesus, but in reality their hearts were turned from him.

Jesus goes on to say, "Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments" (Rev. 3:4). This indicates that most of them had defiled themselves with sin. Simon Kistemaker writes: "Almost the entire church had capitulated to the surrounding world of pagan religion and Judaism, and instead of being an influence on the culture, it had become influenced by that culture."³

Moreover, Jesus complains, "I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God" (Rev. 3:2). The word for "complete" (Greek,

² William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 73.

³ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 150.

pleroo), is elsewhere used by John to mean “full” (see Jn. 3: 29, 16:24). While their works may have been spiritually impressive to men, in God’s sight they were empty of substance. This may involve a reference to a gigantic temple to Artemis begun in Sardis but never finished. In the Old Testament, God rejected blemished lambs offered for sacrifice (Lev. 1:3; Dt. 15:21). Likewise, Christ saw that the religion in Sardis was empty of real devotion or thanks to God.

This portrait of the church in Sardis reminds us of the apostle Paul’s warning to Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:1-8. Paul warned Timothy that “times of difficulty” would come, characterized by selfishness, arrogance, disobedience, ingratitude, unholiness, and treachery. The church would be attacked by charlatans, false teachers, and slander. Reading Paul’s description we might think he was describing the world around him, except that what Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:5 can only be said of people within the church: they have “the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” It seems that despite its works and reputation, this was the situation in Sardis. George Elden Ladd described this church as “outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power.”⁴

HOW CHURCHES DIE

This dreadful portrait raises a question as to how once lively churches die. How did such a church with a reputation for life fall into a state of death?

There are at least three explanations for how the church in Sardis died that may be drawn from well-known events in its history. I mentioned earlier that Sardis’ King Croesus fought a losing battle against Cyrus the Great of Persia. After the battle, Croesus returned to his city and its hilltop fortress, 1500 feet above the plain, which was thought to be impregnable. Cyrus besieged the city and offered a reward to anyone who could devise a way of entry. A Persian soldier named Hyeroeades was watching when a Sardian soldier knocked his helmet over the city wall and then climbed down the precipice to retrieve it. Hyeroeades spied out the way and that night led a party of Persian troops up the cliff and over the unguarded walls. Two hundred years later, the same thing happened. Sardis was besieged by one of

⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 56.

Alexander the Great's generals, who sent a small force up the cliff. Once again, the Sardians were unwatchful, thinking themselves secure, and their fortress was overthrown.⁵

Just as Sardis was overthrown because it did not watch for enemies, churches may be overcome because they are not watching against spiritual attacks. Churches must be on guard against false teaching. Paul warned the Ephesian elders to expect doctrinal attack, urging them, "Therefore be alert" (Acts 20:31). Christians must be awake against the temptation to sin. Jesus said, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Mt. 26:41). Churches must guard against assimilation into the spiritually dead state of the world. "Watch yourselves," Jesus warned, "lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life" (Lk. 21:34). If we are not vigilant, we may find that an enemy has scaled our walls, opened our gates, and brought us destruction. Not only are churches overthrown when pastors and elders do not watch, but families are conquered when fathers and mothers are not diligently on guard against sinful influences. Moreover, individuals are overthrown by careless neglect, having failed to be watchful for the devices of the enemy and on guard against temptations to sin.

Second, like Sardis, churches can die when they rely on their impressive name, spiritual legacy, or rich heritage, but do not tend to their actual spiritual vitality. Dennis Johnson writes that "Sardis was a city with a golden past and misplaced security."⁶ Churches today may try to coast on a reputation earned in past times. But no reputation can save us from our sins. Our baptism alone cannot save us. Our church membership cannot save us. Only a living faith in Jesus Christ can save any sinner. Therefore, even if we have a strong Christian reputation, we must tend to the reality and strength of our faith. James 4:8 outlines our daily calling: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

Third, churches fall away by pursuing vain and empty things in place of the true spiritual riches of salvation. Under King Croesus, Sardis exulted in wealth and ease but failed to cultivate virtues like courage and strength. Likewise, today, churches may focus on their finances, their music program, their ministry programs, their lavish facilities,

⁵ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976, 2004), 1:126.

⁶ Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 82.

and many otherwise good things. Yet, with all these, any church is empty without the glory of Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. The substance of a church must be the gospel of Jesus and the salvation life that flows through true faith in the living Lord. Faith in Christ, worship through Christ, and genuine service to Christ must always be the primary focus of a true church. Focusing on anything else will lead to a church losing its vitality and perhaps even its life.

CHRIST'S CALL TO REVIVAL

Sardis not only shows us how churches die, but Jesus' message sets an agenda for how to revive a dead or dying church. Verses 2 and 3 provide five imperatives for church revival, coupled with a warning if the church is not revived: "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."

Christ's first command is for the slumbering believers at Sardis to awaken: "Wake up" (Rev. 3:2). This call shows that there was a remnant of true, if slumbering, believers in the church, since Christ would not command those who are dead to awaken from sleep. Boice comments that this command "suggests that revival begins with a few individuals who wake up to the condition of those around them and begin to be concerned for them."⁷ Sardis twice fell to the sword because watchmen were asleep; its revival would correspondingly begin with Christians who woke up and began to stimulate new life.

Second, awakened Christians are to "strengthen what remains and is about to die" (Rev. 3:2). When a Christian or a church is weak, it needs to be strengthened by God's grace. The primary means of grace is God's Word. Peter wrote that we are born again only by "the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). I mentioned earlier that the description of Sardis is similar to Paul's warning in 2 Timothy. Paul advised Timothy not to seek some worldly solution but to "continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed... the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:14-15). Paul added that God's out-breathed

⁷ Boice, *Revelation*, 10:8.

Word is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). This was God’s command to Ezekiel when that faithful prophet was summoned to minister in the Valley of Dry Bones. Facing a grisly scene of decomposed bodies – symbolic of the situation in Sardis and many other places – God told the prophet: “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD” (Eze. 37:4). As Ezekiel preached God’s Word, “the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army” (Eze. 37:10).

Here we see not only a mandate for preaching and teaching in the church, but also the way that any Christian with God’s Word can make be used of God. In 2006, the freestyle motorcycle champion Brian Deegan nearly lost his life in a horrible crash. Previously, his girlfriend had become pregnant and went home to live with her Christian parents. This family reached out to Deegan for his long rehabilitation and while there he began attending their evangelical church. Hearing the gospel there, he came to faith in Jesus Christ. When his physical recovery was complete, Deegan returned to the Moto-X club he had founded, named the Metal Mulisha, which under his leadership had gained a reputation for drugs, alcohol, sexual abuse, and violence. Returning as a Christian, Deegan began inviting his fellow bikers to study the Bible. “He kept telling us how much the Bible changed his life,” one recalled. “I felt like I had to listen.” One after another of Deegan’s biker friends came to a saving relationship with Christ and now the Metal Mulisha is known not for riotous mayhem but for evangelism and Christian discipleship.⁸

In addition to God’s Word, Christians may strengthen the church through the vital ministry of prayer. In September 1857, Jeremiah Lanphier responded to America’s economic collapse by starting a prayer meeting in his Dutch Reformed Church in New York City. He printed a bulletin inviting businessmen to come pray at noon. The first meeting began with Lanphier praying alone for the first half hour, then joined by six men for the second half hour. A week later he had twenty for prayer and three weeks later there were forty. By the next spring there were scores of similar prayer groups throughout New York and others that spread to other cities. By Easter Sunday, New York City had to shut down every day at noon because of the tens of

⁸ Cited in Chris Palmer, “Reinventing the Wheel,” in *ESPN The Magazine* 11.15 (July 28, 2008), 52-58.

thousands gathering for prayer, with multitudes converted to Christ. Starting with the prayers of a few awakened believers, the 1858 Laymen's Prayer Revival spread throughout the country resulted in hundreds of thousands of conversions to faith in Christ.

In addition to Christ's command to awaken and to strengthen what remains, Sardis was to remember: "Remember, then, what you received and heard" (Rev. 3:3). They were of course to remember the gospel truths that brought them salvation. They were also to remember Jesus himself, the grace of his salvation, and the power for new life he gives through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is probably the significance of the opening words of this letter: "The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars" (Rev. 3:1). Jesus holds in his hand the manifold gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit – this is the meaning of "the seven spirits of God" – just as he holds "the seven stars" of the churches in his hand. The point is that Jesus is able to grant reviving power through the Holy Spirit. Discouraged Christians are to remember this so as to go forth ministering with the Word and calling on God in prayer. The same Jesus who called his friend Lazarus out from the grave possesses power to raise spiritually dead churches back to life (Jn. 11:43-44). If we remember our own conversion as Christ's Spirit blessed the gospel, we will be encouraged as we seek to serve others for salvation and labor to strengthen the church with the grace of God in Christ.

Lastly, Jesus commands that his Word be obeyed and that sin be repented: "Keep it, and repent" (Rev. 3:3). Boice writes: "It is not sufficient only to hear the Word of God. We must obey what we hear."⁹ We show our faith in the Bible by our obedience to the Bible's teaching and to the command of Jesus Christ. Moreover, a nominal church must repent of whatever it had placed before God and turn from actual sins that had entered in. Obedience and repentance are not optional but are reinforced by a dire warning from Christ: "If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you" (Rev. 3:3). Christ will visit disobedient Christians and give them painful discipline. Churches that will not obey or repent may suddenly find that their lampstand has been removed and the light has fully gone out.

⁹ Boice, *Revelation*, 10:10.

This warning was vividly displayed when I ministered in downtown Philadelphia, which is filled with cathedrals and preaching palaces built in former times, but which now bear testimony to death by their emptiness on Sundays. In fact, the service station where I bought gas occupies the location of one once bustling church. The wall next door bears a mural of the lovely church that used to be there, but now is just “a shadow in the city.”¹⁰ Jesus warns that churches which will not obey his Word and repent may experience the same fate, as indeed ultimately happened in Sardis.

WALK WITH CHRIST IN WHITE

Christ’s revival program shows the value of every single Christian, especially when awakened to serve the cause of Christ in the church. It is with this calling in mind that godly Christians often decide to remain in weak or dying churches, so long as that church has not entirely rejected the authority of God’s Word, hoping to be used by God to stimulate new spiritual life.

Another way we can see the preciousness of every faithful Christian is the fervor shown by Christ in the concluding verses of this letter. Even though the church as a whole was dead, there was a remnant of a living and holy faith: “Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy” (Rev. 3:4). Here we see that true believers are those who had not fallen to secular influences and who had abstained from the gross sins into which nominal Christians fall. When he says that “they are worthy,” he is not declaring them to be perfect, sinless Christians any more than he is suggesting that they have earned salvation by their own good works. These were, however, Christians who lived a faithful biblical lifestyle and who cleansed their daily sins by confessing them and trusting in Christ (see 1 Jn. 1:9). Thus Paul urged the Ephesians “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1). This worthiness is “the response of gratitude and devotion to God for the new life in Christ,”¹¹ and is the product rather than the cause of God’s saving grace in their lives.

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Jeremiah & Lamentations* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001), 126.

¹¹ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 56.

What a blessing it is to read of Christ calling believers “worthy” – not perfect Christians, but sincere ones who earnestly live out their faith and are accepted by the Lord. Many of us struggle with the sense that we never measure up so as to be pleasing to the Lord. Yet all through the letters of Revelation we have found Jesus searching out things to praise because of his love for his people. Even in the dead church of Sardis, the faithful remnant is praised as “worthy.” If you have held fast in faith to God’s Word and if you are leading a sincere biblical lifestyle, then be encouraged that the Lord says that you are “worthy,” all because of the mighty work of the Holy Spirit which God has bestowed on you for the eternal glory of his saving grace (Eph. 1:6).

Not only may sincere and faithful Christians rejoice to be called “worthy” by the Lord, they may especially exult in his promised reward to those who conquer by trusting and obeying his Word. Jesus concludes with three great promises, urging: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 3:6).

First, Jesus says, “they will walk with me in white” (Rev. 3:4). He emphasizes this emblem of purity again in verse 5: “The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments.” The white garments connect with several ideas, including the white baptismal robes sometimes worn to signify union with Christ in faith, together with the heavenly clothing described later in Revelation for those victorious souls who worship around the throne of God in heaven (Rev. 7:9-14).¹² Most important is the imputed righteousness of Christ with which believers stand justified before the holy God. This pure garment is manifested in the practical holiness of a faithful, godly life, turning increasingly from sin by Christ’s power. The Christian’s robe is made white by the cleansing application of Christ’s atoning blood. Thus the last beatitude of Christ is given in Revelation 22:14: “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.”

Not only may faithful Christians wear a white robe in the presence of God, but Jesus says, “they will walk with me in white” (Rev. 3:4), signifying the highest blessing of communion with Christ, begun in this life and perfected in the unending glory of the age to come.

¹² Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 179.

Second, Jesus promises, “and I will never blot his name out of the book of life” (Rev. 3:5). It is important to note that this verse does not say that some elect may lose their salvation and have their names blotted from God’s book, as many writers have claimed. Jesus’ point is to amplify the security of true believers. To be sure, our name may be on the rolls of an earthly church without being in the book of life above. But Jesus assures those who have truly believed in Christ and persevered in obedience to God’s Word that their membership in the rolls of heaven is eternally sure. Here believers have the strongest assurance of salvation: “I will never blot his name out of the book of life” (Rev. 3:5). Jesus said of his true sheep in John’s Gospel: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (10:28). Revelation 13:8 states that believers’ names were “written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (Rev. 13:8). Unbelievers’ names were never written in God’s book so as to be blotted out; believers’ names were inscribed by God’s sovereign election in eternity past and they will remain written there forever.

Finally, Jesus declares, “I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels” (Rev. 3:5). Here we truly see how precious is the name of everyone who possesses not merely a Christian reputation but actually enjoys eternal life through faith in Christ. His or her name was foreknown by God in divine predestination for salvation (Rom. 8:29). That name was born on Jesus’ heart as he died on the cross to atone for sins (Mt. 1:29). That name will be confessed by the lips of Christ when he stands before the Father on the last day, saying, “Behold, I and the children God has given me” (Heb. 2:13).

How can we know that Christ will confess our name before his Father on the day of judgment? The answer is by God’s grace, through a true, living, obedient, and persevering faith. Jesus said: “I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God” (Lk. 12:8-9).

Do we realize how important it is that we not dabble in a nominal Christianity, one that for all its reputation before men may actually be empty and dead? Let us therefore believe in Christ’s perfect work so as to receive white robes before God. Let us not soil those robes with the sins of the world. Let us confess Christ’s name as courageous

witnesses. And let us walk with him now in those white garments, rejoicing to know that when all is perfected in the glory of his soon return, we will walk with him in glorious white forever.