

THE CHURCH THAT WAS DEAD

Revelation 3:1-6

In a series of sermons based on Christ's letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, which epistles are recorded in the second and third chapters of Revelation, I have spoken on four subjects: "A Church That Has Been," "A Church That Suffered," "A Church Where Satan Dwelt," and "A Church That Was Run By A Woman." Now we shall center our thoughts on "A Church That Was Dead," using Revelation 3:1-6 as a text.

I. The Christ. Revelation 3:1.

Our Lord referred to Himself as "He that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars." This description indicates His fulness of power and fulness of wisdom. He challenges all readers of this letter to look at three striking details of His character:

1. The Possessor Of Spiritual Perfection.

"These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God." Throughout the Scriptures the number seven is used as a symbol of completeness and perfection. In His possession of spiritual perfection Christ is the hope of the churches.

2. The Protector Of Pastoral Privilege.

Christ wanted the church in Sardis to see Him as the Protector of Pastoral Privilege. "These things saith he that hath the ... seven stars." In Revelation 1:20 He said, "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches." The word which is here translated "angels" means "messengers." Very clearly the reference is to the pastors of the churches, who are the official messengers of God. The symbolism of the seven stars in the right hand of our Lord is beautiful. The pastor is in the hand of Christ and is responsible to Him.

3. The Provider Of Church Power.

Christ wanted the church in Sardis to see Him as the Provider of Church Power. With Him a church lives. Without Him a church dies. Without Him a church may have a name in the world, but it will be without power. With Him a church may not have a big name in the world, but it will have power with God and for God. If churches are powerless, it is simply because their members are not drawing upon His all-mighty power; it is because Christ does not have the first place in their hearts and lives.

II. The City. Revelation 3:1.

"And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write." Sardis was the ancient capital of the kingdom of Lydia. It was the residence of the famous King Croesus, who was proverbial for his enormous wealth. When Cyrus captured the city of Sardis in 548 B. C. he took the treasures of Croesus, which amounted to more than \$600,000,000. Even though Sardis was sacked by Antiochus the Great, and later was destroyed by an earthquake, it rose Sphinx-like after each disaster.

Located where five different roads converged, Sardis profited greatly from the trade of the rich Hermus Valley. The art of dying wool was discovered there, and the city became a great center of the woolen industry. Many of the people who resided in this great commercial city became extremely wealthy. It was a place where wealth and

worldliness had set the standard for society and the pace for business. Because so many of the people were lovers of money the city became a place of foul heathenism and idolatry.

Sardis was a name of contempt, even on pagan lips. Its people were notoriously loose-living, pleasure-loving and luxury-loving. Due to the wealth and worldliness of the people, the city sunk into a voluptuous decadence. During its long existence Sardis suffered various catastrophes, but each time it was rebuilt and again prospered, until it was finally destroyed by Tamerlane in 1402. Today only its ruins can be seen amidst which there now stands a small village or town called Sert Kalesi. All that can be seen there are a few mud huts inhabited by a group of ignorant and filthy Turks. It gives one the impression that God cursed the place and turned it over to Satan.

III. The Church. Revelation 3:1.

We do not know when nor by whom Christianity was introduced in Sardis. Nevertheless, there was a strong and influential church there in the days of the Apostle John. Concerning this church Christ said, "I know thy works." Christ always knows what people have been and have done, what they are and are doing, as well as what they will be and do. Of all church members He knows their dispositions, thoughts, affections, aims, motives, words and deeds. His knowledge of every one is perfectly clear. He is never influenced by their appearances, but sees through every disguise and appraises things at their true value. He cannot be deceived or mocked.

IV. The Complaint. Revelation 3:1.

1. Fatal Formalism.

"Thou hast a name, that thou livest, and art dead." A dead church is not necessarily one that has disbanded and the doors have been locked. Rather, it is one which continues to carry on the functions of an outward organization, but is lifeless within. Its services are purely formal and ritualistic. They are maintained for the sake of respectability. The members do not have any real love for or fellowship with each other. They do not put forth any real effort for the salvation of others.

Sardis was not an idle church, but a dead one. There was much in it to please observers, but nothing that satisfied Christ. They had a variety of plans and programs, but they were not growing in likeness to Christ. They did not have any compassion for souls. They were more concerned about their reputation in Sardis than in heaven, more desirous of the good opinion of others than of the commendation of Christ.

This church was reputed to be alive. Services were conducted as in other churches. Orderly forms of worship were maintained. The members prided themselves on their refinement, their orthodoxy, their collections and their charitable deeds, but Christ knew that they were not what they appeared to be. He knew that they were joyless and powerless. Frequently outward appearances are notoriously deceptive. Often churches seem to be alive when they are actually dead. Their duties are not performed so as to fulfil God's purpose and pattern.

The church in Sardis was filled with what we now call "nominal Christians." They were physically alive, but spiritually dead. Through His prophet Isaiah God described them in these words: "This people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me" (29:13).

Do not conclude, however, that Sardis was a defunct affair with the building a wreck, the members scattered and the pastor ready to resign. It was a busy church with numerous meetings. There was something going on all the time. People considered it to be a wide-awake and going concern. The church was doing plenty of things, but falling short of the real objective. The members prayed, but their prayers did not get through to God. They worshiped, but their worship did not rise higher than the ceiling. They sang, but it was just singing and not the incense of heart-praise to God. They gave, but their gifts without the givers were bare. They had a form of godliness, but they lacked the power thereof.

The correct word for this sort of behavior is "hypocrisy." It is makebelieve or the assuming of a role which is not real. It is the "let's pretend" of religion. Hypocrisy can invade worship and permeate the life of a church. Activity without an inner love for God and men is hollow mockery and an empty pantomime.

The church had acquired a name with men, but not with the Lord. He, Who looks beneath the surface and surveys our thoughts, desires and motives, could not find anything for which He could commend the church as a whole. What a pity that any church would be in such a condition that the omniscient Saviour could not find anything to commend! Christ had praise for a few of the members who were faithful, but to the church He said, "Thou hast a name, that thou livest, and art dead."

2. Fearful Failure.

"I have not found thy works perfect before God." Services were conducted in the church, but they were not satisfactory to the Lord. Works were done by the members but they were not pleasing to the Lord. Their works stopped short of completion. They had committee meetings, made many plans and did a lot of talking, but they did not finish any of their programs. Everything else was put ahead of God and His service. They considered anything to be good enough for Him.

3. Feeble Footing.

Any church is in danger of death when its members begin to worship its own past, when they live on their memories instead of finding a challenge in their hopes, and when they are more concerned with the material than they are with the spiritual.

Members of the church at Sardis were good hearers, but poor doers. They looked into the perfect law of liberty, but were not blessed in doing it. They learned the truth, but refused to be governed by it. They listened to the preaching of the Word and went out to forget it as quickly as possible. They knew far better than they were willing to do.

V. The Correction.

Christ called for the correction of these faults in the lives of the church members.

1. Remember.

"Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard." Christ thus exhorted them to remember the good teaching which they had received and to put it into practice.

2. Repent.

Change your mind about sin and your attitude toward it. To repent means more than to be sorry for sin. It means to be sorry enough about it to do differently, to do right.

3. Retain.

"Hold fast". Keep what you have heard and received. Hold it fast. Keep it by doing it. Grasp with all the tenacity of your being the good that comes up to memory as the drowning man lays hold of the rope thrown out on the surging waves.

VI. The Compensation.

We must not overlook the fact that Christ praised the faithful few in that church. A few names on the church register represented upright and active Christians. They had not defiled their garments by participating in the sins of the community. Their characters were unstained by the defilement of the city and the times. God had a faithful few, even in Sardis. They were the few among the many. The spiritual among the worldly, pure among the vile, the saved among the lost, the living among the dead, the active among the inactive, and the victorious among the defeated.

Christ promised a wonderful compensation for the overcoming. "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the Book of Life, but I will confess his name before My Father." Not a single name of any regenerated person will ever be blotted out of the Book of Life, neither will the name of any person who is only a professed follower of Christ ever be found in the Book of Life.

Concerning the overcomers Christ said, "They shall walk with me in white." White speaks of purity and joy and victory. No matter what the world around us may be like, and no matter what other Christians may do, we, ourselves, can still, if we wish, walk in happy fellowship with our precious Lord. And some day we shall exchange this walk of faith for the walk of sight, and our eyes shall behold the King in His beauty.