

THE CHURCH THAT WAS DEAD

Revelation 3:1-6

Frequently someone says, "What is wrong with the church?" Human judgment would give various answers, many of which would be incomplete and others would be incorrect. In answer to this question, Heaven's judgment alone is to be trusted. That judgment is given in a series of seven scriptural messages. Four of these messages have been considered on the last four Sundays. Their titles were: "The Church That Left Her First Love", "The Church That Suffered", "The Church Where Satan Dwelt", and "The Church That Was Run By A Woman". Today we shall consider the fifth of these messages, "The Church That Was Dead."

I. The Christ.

Christ Jesus presented Himself to each of these churches in that special aspect in which it was most appropriate for that particular church to regard Him. In this case He is described as follows: "These things saith He that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars." This description indicates His fullness of power, and also His fullness of wisdom.

In His message to the church in Sardis Christ has them 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. "The seven Spirits of God" is but another way of referring to the Holy Spirit in His fullness of perfection. The blessings which we receive are from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. Our access is by the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father. In each case the Energizer is the Holy Spirit, whose energy is infinite, both in vanity and in measure.

Christ is not interested with the world's financial, political, educational, or civic centers as such, but He is vitally interested in His churches. We must never forget that in His possession of spiritual perfection, Christ is the hope of the New Testament 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 officially the messengers of God.

Considering the matter in this light, the symbolism of the seven stars in the right hand of our Lord becomes very 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. If churches are powerless, it is because they are not drawing upon His all-mighty power; it is because Christ does not have the first place in the hearts of the members.

II. The City.

Sardis was a city of considerable eminence, nearly equidistant from Smyrna and Thyatira. It was formerly the capital of the kingdom of Lydia. It is celebrated in profane history as the residence of Croesus, proverbial for his great riches. To aid in his expedition against Babylon about the middle of the sixth century before Christ, Cyrus conquered the city and plundered it, and took the treasures of Croesus which amounted to about six hundred million dollars. The city was also sacked by Antiochus the Great. Later it was destroyed by an earth-quake. However, it rose Phoenix-like after each disaster. It was a place where wealth and worldliness had set the standard for society and the pace for business. Factories made the city prosperous. The art of dying wool was discovered there. It was a place of foul heathenism and idolatry. Its people were great lovers of money.

Sardis was one of the oldest and most important cities of Asia Minor. During its long existence it suffered various catastrophies, but each time the city was rebuilt and again prospered, until it was finally destroyed in 1402 by Tamerlane. Today only the ruins of Sardis are to be seen, just a little distance to the south of the present village or small town called Sert Kalesi. Nothing is now to be seen except a few mud huts inhabited by a group of ignorant and filthy Turks. Everything seems as if God had cursed the place, and turned it over to Satan.

III. The Church.

When Christianity was introduced into Sardis, we do not know, nor do we know who introduced it. However, we do know that there was a strong and influential church there in the days of the Apostle John.

Concerning this church, at the time when this message was sent to it, Christ said, "I know thy works." Christ knows what men have been, what they have done, what they are, and what they will be. He knows all their dispositions, thoughts, affections, aims, motives, words, and works. The knowledge which He has of the works of man is perfectly clear. He is not influenced by appearance, but sees through every disguise, and considers things as they really are. He cannot be deceived, and will not be mocked.

IV. The Complaint.

1. Fatal Formalism.

"Thou hast a name that thou livest." A dead church is not one that has been disbanded and the doors locked. Rather, it is one which continues to carry on the outward organization, but is lifeless within. It does not take long to detect when a church is just "carrying on" without any real life being present. Its services are purely formal and ritualistic, and they are maintained for respectability's sake. There is no love, no real fellowship, and no passion for souls.

The church in Sardis was not an idle church, but it was a dead church. There was everything in it that would satisfy the outside observer, but there was nothing in it that could satisfy Christ. There were plans, schemes, and programs, but there was no growth into the likeness of Christ, no enlargement of the church through the propagation of the Christ-life, no compassion for souls, and no fellowship with the sufferings of Christ. In all probability the members of the church were more concerned about their reputation in Sardis than about their reputation in Heaven, more desirous of the good opinion of other churches than for the commendation of Christ.

This church was reputed to be alive. Services went on as in other churches. Orderly forms of worship were maintained. It prided itself on its orthodoxy, its discipline, and its refinement. It may have boasted of its collections and charitable deeds, but as it was seen by Christ, it was not what it appeared to be. As this church appeared to the eye of Christ, it was devoid of the essential element of the Christian nature. It was powerless. It was joyless. It was impossible for it to make progress, because anything that is dead cannot grow. It could not be used of the Lord. Men instinctively dislike death, and prefer not to go where it is.

This church was very active in various ways. It had big concerts, big socials, and little prayer meetings. The services held for the salvation of lost souls, if any, were not popular. Evangelism was dead. There may have been a gorgeous ritual, artistic singing, and a splendid display, but there was no real life. It was simply a galvanized corpse.

2. Fearful failure.

"I have not found thy works perfect before God." In all probability, the church had a good reputation, but it had a poor character. At least, it had a name among men of being alive. Services went on in it, but they were not satisfactory to God. Works were done by it, but these works were not pleasing to God. They worked, but not as God wanted. They prayed, but not to God. They gave, but not as God commanded. They sang, but not to the glory of God. There was no soul-surrendering and no soul-winning in the church. There was great promise, but no desired results. Everything stopped short of completion. They had committee meetings, made many plans, did a lot of talking, but finished none of their programs.

Failure was written over everything in that church. Before God's court of appraisal, their best was far below the standard. Weighed in the balances, Sardis was found wanting. The church as her members saw it was not the church as God saw it. Sardis Church had a reputation for being what it was not.

3. Feeble Footing.

It was a church of forgetful hearers. "Remember how thy heart received and heard, and hold fast." They were good hearers, but poor doers. They looked into the perfect law of liberty, but were not blessed in doing it. They came to know the truth, but not to do it. They listened to the preached Word and went out to forget it. They knew far more than they were willing to do.

The evidences of life in a church are at least four-fold:

(1) Growth.

The principle of life makes stagnation impossible. It is exceedingly important that there shall be growth in the individual members of the

church—not merely by accessions from without, but by expansion from within. If none are born again directly through the working of the church, the church is either rapidly dying or is already dead.

(2) Compassion.

The church which has no compassion for the lost is dead.

(3) Unity.

If there be love, there will also be unity.

(4) Emotion.

Where there is life, there is emotion. Because I am alive, I can laugh and weep. It is the dead that have no laughter and no tears. I have no patience with one who boasts his religion lacks emotion. A church without laughter and tears is dead.

Sardis Church was absorbed in the acquisition of wealth and swallowed up in worldly-mindedness. Most of the members were not only destitute of spirituality, but had defiled their garments by worldly conformity. They had engaged in the world's pleasures of sin and practiced the world's tricks of trade, and naturally they were devoid of spiritual power.

V. The Correction

Christ called for the correction of these faults in the church at Sardis.

1. Remember.

"Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard." It was apparent that no false doctrine had been taught in Sardis. On the contrary, God's truth was evidently well-known. But, sad to say, these good doctrines were having no practical effect on life. Sound doctrine is of tremendous importance, but if it has no effect on our lives, then it becomes of little profit. Christ exhorted them to remember the good teaching which they had received and to put it into effect.

Memory plays a big part in the matters of the soul. Man may stifle memory of sin for a while, but not forever. The lost in hell will remember and hell's horror will be the greater. Saints may forget the truth they have heard to their injury. They need to go back to the days when they heard and were blessed.

2. Repent.

This means more than sorrow and more than an expression of sorrow. It means sorrow enough to do different, sorrow enough 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.