

Sardis: The Dying Church

Revelation 3:1-6

(Inspiration, illumination, spotlight)

A few weeks back I mentioned “mystery guests” who show up and offer feedback on your church service. These are often unexpected and unsolicited guests.

Well, my good friend David Platt had an unexpected visitor at his church last week (McLean Bible Church in the D.C. area). President Trump showed up (!) which David only knew was going to happen just minutes before the President arrived. Maybe you heard about this. It generated just a bit of discussion in the news, and quite a bit of banter on social media (which is where the most reasonable and gracious conversations always take place.)

That would be something wouldn't it!? I'm sure we'd never forget the POTUS, (whoever it might be at the time) appearing at IDC!

I have never had the president attend a church service where I was preaching, but I have preached in front of other significant political figures, professional athletes, coaches, actors, and quite a few well known pastors.

I think it's the last group that generates most of my nerves.

- I remember preaching once at **Alistair Begg's church**, Parkside in Cleveland, and I double checked my notes thinking, “**I wonder if I have any of Allister Begg's illustrations in this sermon!?**”
- On another occasion, I was speaking after **Noel Piper** delivered a testimony about adoption. She's the wife of **John Piper**. I was asked to preach on Romans 8. **I thought, “Is John Piper going to hear me preach on Romans 8?”**
- **We often wonder what visitors will think about our church (Friendly? Welcomed? Find parking? Kids treated well, and so on. Which I hope happens.)**
- **And we might wonder what surprise, famous guests would think about our church.**

But the question we have been considering - in this series of messages on the Seven Churches in Revelation - is this: “What does Christ think of our church?”

- **The assessment that matters most concerning our lives and our church is not what the President thinks about it; what famous Christians think, but ultimately, what does Jesus think?**

The Church in Sardis would have have received a good review from many people because externally it looked impressive.

They had a “**reputation [a “name”] for being alive**” but they were in fact, “**dead.**” (3:1).

- **Sardis would have been on the cover of magazines; their leaders speaking at church growth conferences.**

- **If they were living in our day, their social media game would be off the chain, their website ballin, and their overall PR game would make it seem like Sardis was the epicenter of Christianity.**
- **But Jesus (with eyes like fire) sees through it all and makes a piercing evaluation.**

In each of the churches thus far something **positive** has been said, but here it is “I know your works” and then **nothing positive**.

- Their works are “**incomplete in the sight of God.**” (V 2)
- In the sight of people they may look good.

People revered the church in Sardis, but Jesus rebuked it.

It had accolades from everyone except the one that mattered: Jesus.

It’s quite a contrast to **Philadelphia**, a church with “**little power**” but receives nothing but commendation from Jesus.

The question for us is: Do we want the reality or just the reputation?

- **Do we really want to be alive or do we only want name recognition?**
- **Do you care more about what people think about you than what Jesus thinks?**
- **I pray that we as individuals and as a church would say, “We are living for the Lord’s pleasure, not the approval or praise of others.”**

**For it is before the sovereign Lord Christ that we stand,
and to him alone that we will one day give an account.**

The opinion of others is not unimportant, but we should not rate it too highly.

- **Their praise should not inflate us, and their criticism should not crush us.**

Let’s look at what Jesus says to this:

#1: The Authoritative Introduction (3:1a)

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis...”

Sardis was about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira and one of the oldest cities in the province of Asia, having been founded around 1200 BC. (Pics)

- **It was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia.**
- **It was virtually destroyed by an earthquake in AD 17 but was rebuilt and given new life with the aid of Emperor Tiberius (AD 14–37).**
- **The city had fame and wealth, and it took pride in its **acropolis**; temple to Cybele (“the Great Mother”).**
- **It also took pride in it’s **necropolis**, the “cemetery of a 1,000 hills”**
 - **Hundreds of burial mounds were visible from some seven miles away.**
- **The city, however, had seen its best days and was living on its past reputation.**
 - **The **church was like the city**, living off past glory while decaying.**

- It was a spiritual graveyard though it looked alive, reminiscent of what Jesus said about the Pharisees (whitewashed tombs).
- Further, the city boasted in its **natural defenses**.
 - It sat atop a hill, surrounded by unscalable cliffs (or so they thought).
 - Their arrogance led to their defeat twice, as they failed to post guards at the most dangerous precipice.
 - This too was parabolic of the church, who is urged to be alert/awake.

Christ is fully aware of their condition....

“The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars”

The seven spirits of God refers to the complete or **perfect Holy Spirit**. (1:4)

- Not 7 Holy Spirits, but the Perfect Spirit; the Spirit in all His fullness.
- Perhaps it's an allusion to Isaiah 11:2-5 and Zechariah 4:1-6.
- The phrase emphasizes the Spirit's **manifold power**; his **omnipresence** (see Rev 4:5; 5:6), and his **wisdom**.
- **As we recite in the Nicene Creed, The Spirit is “The Lord and Giver of Life.”**
- **He makes dry bones come to life!**

The **seven stars** are angels, the personification/representations of the churches.

- **“He has them”** – This is a reminder that the churches are in Christ's possession.
- Oh that **Jesus would bring his two hands together!**
- **Through the life-giving Spirit Jesus has the power to give life into this church.**

Stott: “We must pray in the Spirit, preach in the Spirit, worship in the Spirit, live in the Spirit, and walk in the Spirit (Ju 20; 1 Thess 1.5; Jn 4.24; Phi 3.3; Gal 5.16,25). A stale church can be refreshed by Him, a sleepy church awakened, a weak church strengthened, and a dead church made alive.”

The point is: Church revitalization requires spiritual intervention!

The Risen Christ can raise dying churches by the power of the Spirit.

The Risen can do it however he pleases. It doesn't always look the same.

- It may be through new leadership in the church.
- It may be that a faithful few are used to bring about renewal.
- The Lord may sovereignly wake everyone up through a whole-church awakening!
- It may be that those who profess faith but who do not possess it, actually get saved!
- It may come through the youth ministry.
- Or, it may come through physical deaths...

D.A. Carson: His seminary teacher had been a pastor for a long time. He told the class of many hours of pastoral experience....

When he was a young man, pastoring a Baptist church, where the only church in the village was the Baptist church. It was a community place. Everyone went. 70-80% of community went.

- The church was very political.
- There was no church discipline.
- The people weren't really interested in the gospel.
- They didn't want him involved in their lives.
- He tried everything to reform this church but nothing happened.

He went prostrate before the Lord in tears, day after day saying,

“**Lord take me out of here, or you clean it up. Put me as an assistant. Or in a small church. Or you clean it up. We confess Jesus as Lord and yet this church is filled with corruption and immorality.**”

In the next three months, he had 34 funerals.

In the next year, he baptized 200 people.

Carson: “Now I'm reluctant to tell you this story. You don't want to pray that too quickly. You might be the first to go. And I don't want to give the impression that the gospel is a bit of magic – prayer the prayers, get prostrate enough, and everything will be hunky dory. Yet at the same time, understand this: this is the church of Christ.”

This is Christ's church. He can bring judgment; He can bring life from the dead.

#2: The All-knowing Evaluation (3:1b)

“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (1b).

It's a brief introduction, but it's penetrating.

Notice: **They have no deeds. Just a reputation.**

You have a name for being alive. Name only.

“Reputation of being alive” (they have a “name”)

- Probably a church with size, money, activity that caused people to take notice.
- It was a “flagship church”
- But looks can be deceiving!
- **Like a body covered in cancer; the person can look healthy but be dying.**
- Many churches focus on their **reputation, only to lack the reality.**

There are many visible features that may look impressive but do not actually guarantee of vitality. Here are 8 kinds of churches that could look impressive:

1. **High Church Formalism** - High church liturgy, with vestments, chanting, etc. Looks inspiring. I like a lot of it. But it doesn't necessarily mean the Lord is on the move.
2. **Low Church Informalism**. “Come as you are” attitude. It's casual. So it must be a church alive with the Spirit, right?

3. **Bible Belt Traditionalism** - Everything can look and sound very “Christiny” but actually be full of hypocrisy.
4. **Vague Spiritualism** - The Scriptures are not expounded; there are no absolutes; no certainty; it’s experienced-based. This group always emphasizes life “as a journey” but it has no destination. The Christian life is a journey but it is a journey somewhere. It’s cool today to seek but it’s not as cool as to find.
5. **Happy-Clappy Emotionalism, or Quiet Non-Emotionalism.** I’m not not against emotion and passion, I’m for it! I’m for what the old divines called “the affections.” But an enthusiastic style is not an indicator of spiritual life. And I’m for quietness and reverence.
 - Sometimes you hear someone say of a quiet church, “**WOW, they’re so reverent.**” Or, “**they’re so meditate and thoughtful.**” Maybe. Or they could be bored.
 - Or, “**Wow that church is alive because they’re so energetic.**” Maybe. But a big Christmas production (or **singing the Days of Elijah!**) does not necessarily mean that the Spirit is at work. It’s a non-sign.
 - Sometimes churches may even put a word like “**Exciting**” as part of their name! Exciting Imago Dei or “**Exitando Imago Dei**”
6. **American Entertainmentism** - A slick production is no indicator of vitality.
7. **Social Activism.** Sometimes we assume the “alive churches” are those that are doing stuff in the public realm. Maybe.
 - Older evangelicals tend to emphasize engaging in the political realm, while younger evangelicals are often more interested in social justice.
 - Both may be tempted to think these alone are indicator of spiritual life.
8. **American Bigism.** — I’m not against mega churches. In Acts 2, the Lord added daily; at least initially it was big. Spurge had a big church. But in America we think bigger is better. We can think either bigger or smaller is more spiritual.

It’s easy for people to think more highly than they should about churches simply by their observation of external features.

A church may be alive spiritually and be formal or informal; enthusiastic or subdued; big or small. Jesus knows. He sees.

Sardis - for a variety for variety of reasons — had the reputation of being alive (“**check out Sardis, there’s no church like it!**”) but they did not have the reality.

“You are dead” (*nekros*)

- You can trace this tendency right through the Bible (hypocrisy; pious exterior)
- **Pastors** are vulnerable as well — preaching with little awareness of the greatness of God and the sacredness of the task.
- Christians can have “an appearance of godliness but devoid of power” (2 Tim 3)
- **Minor Prophets** address this regularly (assemblies but no obedience)

- **Stott: “Sardis may have been the first church in the history of Christianity to be characterized by ‘nominal Christianity. It’s members belonged to Christ by name, but not in heart.’”**

What was the cause of this dying state?

I think the answer can be discerned by various clues in the next few verses (let’s peak at them before we look at the “Appropriate Exhortation”):

Revelation 3:1–4 (ESV): ‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 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. 3 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.

4 Marks of a Dying Church (which is made up of Dying Christians)

#1: Arrogance

- They lived on previous glory. They lived on reputation.
- They were not humbly desperate for the Spirit’s work among them.
- Dying churches are filled with arrogant people.

#2: Spiritual Lethargy

- I get this from “wake up” that’s coming.
- They lost their hunger for the things of God.
- **One of the signs of death in a person is that of a loss of appetite.**
- Churches that are alive are hungry!
- Christians that are alive want to know more of God’s Word!
- A person with little vitality or no vitality sits in a a worship service and thinks, compared to everything else in life, **“This is of very little importance.”**
- They had not sought the Spirit’s filling.
- **Is there a more urgent message for 21st century Christians than: “Be filled with the Spirit.”?**

#3: A Loss of Gospel Amazement

- “Remember what you received” — the gospel! That’d lost the wonder of it.
- Philippians 3:12: “I press on ... **because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**” Never lose the wonder of that! That’s what inspires perseverance.
- Paul never got over the wonder of Christ making him his own.

#4. A Lack of Missional Engagement.

I get this from what is not said: What’s not said is this: Nothing about persecution.

- There’s no opposition mentioned at all.
- Why? They were too inoffensive to generate any opposition.
- They had compromised their witness in order to fit in.
- The offense of the cross ceased to exist.
- They were too harmless to be persecuted.

- **Verse 5 hints** at the problem when Jesus says that he will confess the names of the conquerors before the Father; that is, those who were not ashamed to confess him as Lord in the culture.

To put it another way, **they'd drifted from their purpose.**

- It's easy to drift away from one's purpose.
 - Institutions, Denominations, (the original positions jettisoned), Universities
 - Churches can go from a rescue ship to a cruise ship.
 - **When this happens, death is coming.**

Many think the church is like going to the movies.

- **But it's not. It's like joining the army.**
 - If we don't live on mission, we will cease to exist.
- We must plant churches and raise up and send missionaries...
 - The church that is not sending is ending.
 - It is Sardis.

Put those four positively:

A living church is humble before Christ, hungry for the Spirit of Christ, in awe of the gospel of Christ, and faithful in bearing witness to Christ.

Humility.

Hunger.

Amazement.

Faithfulness.

- It may look liturgical or low church.
- It may be a small church or a big church.
- It may have a well known preacher or an unknown preacher.
- It may have a lot of programs or few programs.
- It may be in our country or another country.
- But according to this letter, these are four signs of real spiritual life.

#3: The Appropriate Exhortation (3:2-4)

The good news for a dying church is that Jesus has a resuscitation plan!

Jesus doesn't give up on this church!

- He doesn't say, "**Let it die,**" but in great compassion gives instruction for revitalization.
- **There's hope for any dying church if they will pay attention to these instructions.**
- Remember, God's specialty is raising the dead!

The advice is so simple for each of these churches.

- It's not a mysterious message that requires a special decoder ring. r

The main instruction here is "Wake up!"

- I say main because it's repeated in verse 3.
- What's in the middle is the manner of this waking up.

One or two word summary for each church:

- Ephesus - Love
- Smyrna - Be faithful!
- Pergamum - Discern.
- Thatira — Think.
- Sardis - Wake up!

5 commands

1. Wake Up (be watchful) (v. 2)

- This implies there's hope. They have time to wake up!
- Recognize the problem! Realize there's a war on! Realize there's a mission!
- Don't coast; don't drift asleep!
- Don't live off of yesterday's victories!
- Get your game face on; strap it on! Let's go!
- **Coaching Players:** "Wake up! Get your head in the game!"
- Often this phrase is used with the return in Christ in mind (eg, Matt 24:42); and here Jesus warning has a similar warning with an immediate judgment in mind.
- **Wake up to**
 - **What's important! The gospel! The Spirit's work! Mission!**
 - **The enemy's attack! They were not ready as a city previously for an attack.**
 - **The return of Christ is real.**
- **Sardis could be likened to a sleepy Bible Belt church; with a lot of cultural Christians.**
- **It could be likened to a mega church that has a a lot of anonymity and no accountability, no sense of community, nor any real discipleship.**

Based on the witness of Scripture, it is safe to assume that some of you are asleep.

- **I don't mean you are taking a nap during my sermon.**
- **I don't have a person in mind specifically.**
- **Whoever you are, **hear this: Wake up!****
- **Are you attending sporadically, but not engaged completely?**
- **Do you have no passion for Christ and for his church?**
- **The most dangerous place to be is in this place: to be in a religious atmosphere but have no spiritual life!**
- **It's dangerous because it's deceiving.**
- **It can give you a false assurance.**

Friend, the gospel is true, embrace Christ and live!

Hell is a real place.

Jesus is coming back, and you don't want to be asleep!

2. Strengthen what remains (v. 2)

- There was a living remnant at Sardis.
- There was some life; they were to strengthen what was present.
- There was time - **down 3-1 like the Warriors, but it's not over.**
- Those who were alive were to nourish weaker Christians, not despise them.
- We are to encourage the weak by word and example and prayer.
- An awakened minority can be used to lead the sleepy majority!
- Often a weakened minority can feel like giving up when the majority is disinterested, grumpy and secular.
 - But they are told her to stay at it!
 - Jesus doesn't tell them to leave the church in Sardis!

3. Remember what you have received and heard (v. 3)

- That was *the gospel!*
- Not just the content of the gospel message, **but the manner in which it was received with joy in the Spirit!**

1 Thess 1:4–6 (ESV): For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit...

- He tells them to keep on remembering how you received it.
- **A church will die if they don't receive the gospel gladly – over and over again.**

4. Keep It (v. 3)

- Keep what? The gospel.
- Keep treasuring it; keep being thankful for it; keep guarding it; keep proclaiming it!

5. Repent (v. 3)

- Repent of your cowardice.
- Repent of your secularism.
- Repent of your lack of commitment to the Great Commission.
- Repentance is a gift; it's an invitation to get right with God.
- It's his kindness that leads us to repentance.

How Series Is Jesus? (3b)

- If you do not wake up... **I will come like a thief...**
- **They are in danger of receiving an unexpected visitor; not a mystery worshiper, not a famous leader, but the Lord of heaven!**
- **This is not a statement about the second coming** (though this idea is used in other texts talking about the second coming).
- **This text is about a visit in judgment against this church.**

- It's an urgent call to repent – do it now!

“Yet you have still a few names in Sardis... not soiled their garments ... walk with me in white and are worthy” (v. 4)

- Some had not soiled their clothes – that is, blended in with the culture.
- A small minority was boldly standing for Christ.
- “Walking in white” – they are justified
- They are “worthy” – they have believed in the one who is worthy.

So this the resuscitation plan.

#4: The Awe-Inspiring Conclusion (3:5-6)

“The one who conquers” – That is,

- If you will maintain a Christian testimony in a pagan culture....
- If you will repent of arrogance and seek the Lord in humility
- if you will wake up and regain a hunger for the things of God
- If you will regain the wonder of the gospel....

Then, you will receive these glorious rewards:

A. Clothed in white

- This symbolizes righteousness of Jesus Christ, by the blood of the **lamb (Rev 7:14)**
- Those who persevere in faithfulness show that they were truly justified; converted.

B. Never blot out his name

- You have access to Heaven.
- But there will be some who have the reputation of being alive but actually will not enter the kingdom.

**Many have their names on a church roll,
but are not registered in the book of life.**

- Numerous references to the Book of Life: Exodus 32:32; Psalm 69:28; Isaiah 4:3; Daniel 12:1, 2; Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Hebrews 12:23.
- Luke 10:20: “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

- **Lloyd-Jones’ – quoting this verse when he was dying.**

C. Confess his name before my Father and before his angels

- Reminds me of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7).
 - He sees heaven opened and standing there, is Jesus, standing as his witness.
 - Jesus says, “He’s mine.”
- To the faithful, Jesus says, “he/she’s mine.”

- The world may reject you, **but if you belong to Jesus, you have something infinitely more important than people's approval: Union with Christ.**

So the word goes out to Sardis and us and every other church across time – wake up and declare your devotion to Jesus Christ!

He is worthy of our devotion!

- **Let us treasure his gospel!**
- **Let us live by his Spirit!**
- **Let us bear witness to His Name.**
- **Let's pursue the reality of spiritual life, not just the reputation of life.**

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.