

Church At The End Of The World

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

(Revelation 1:7 ESV)

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

(Revelation 2:10 ESV)

The Church In Sardis

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Revelation 3:1-6

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Revelation 3:1; that's on page 1029 in your pew Bibles. We have been working our way through these 7 letters from Jesus to the churches of Asia Minor via the Apostle John. This is the last of the letters that follows the general pattern we have been talking about over the last several weeks. The next two are exceptions. Jesus has nothing bad to say to the church in Philadelphia and nothing good to say to the church in Laodicea. But here again we follow the general pattern; we have an introduction, a commendation, an accusation, an exhortation and finally a word of promise. We will read this letter and then discuss it according to those categories. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

1 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. " '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 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. 5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' (Revelation 3:1-6 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

The Introduction

In this letter Jesus introduces himself as:

him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.... (3:1)

We remember that the seven stars represent either the pastors of the seven churches or the angels that are assigned to each of the seven churches. Jesus holds them in his right hand but here in Revelation 3 it seems as though he's got the messengers in one hand and the seven spirits of God in the other hand – what is that about?

The expression goes back to what John said in chapter 1:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and **from the seven spirits who are before his throne**, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. (Revelation 1:4–5 ESV)

As I mentioned in our first sermon in this series most scholars understand that phrase in a figurative way. G.K. Beale for examples writes that the expression is:

“a figurative designation of the effective working of the Holy Spirit.... The Spirit is what empowers the church to be effective as a burning lamp of witness in the world.”¹

The Holy Spirit is actively engaged with all of the churches and his job is to help them in providing a distinctive Gospel witness to the world. And He goes forth from Jesus.

So let's put that together. Jesus is introducing himself to this church as the one who has the power to fill them again with the Holy Spirit so as to reignite their witness to the world. That's important, because as we are about to see, these folks are almost entirely dead but Jesus is the one who can bring them back to life.

The commendation for this church is very brief, in fact, it really isn't much of a commendation at all.

The Commendation

¹ G.K. Beale, *The Book Of Revelation NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 189.

Look at the second half of verse 1. Jesus says:

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

You are a busy group. You are doing things that your culture approves of. You have a good reputation among fallen men. You are well thought of by the very people who hated me.

That’s not much of a compliment, is it? Jesus didn’t put too much stock in a good reputation. In the Gospel of Luke he says:

“Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets (Luke 6:26 ESV)

When you have a good reputation it usually means that you’ve fallen away from the faith and so it seems to be here.

Jesus moves very quickly into accusation.

The Accusation

He says:

You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead... I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. (Revelation 3:1–2 ESV)

The things you do, Jesus says, upon further inspection are essentially sub-Christian. The word he uses there for “complete” means “full” or “fulfilled”. These works are not fully Christian – there is something missing. You look like a Christian church, you are doing things that other Christians do but there is something MISSING in it all. Given how Jesus introduces himself to these folks and given the fact that they appear to have avoided any pushback from either the Jews or the Romans in their city most scholars conclude that what was missing in their WORK was a clear and courageous articulation of the WORD – of the Gospel! One commentator puts it this way:

“Although their malady can be understood as some kind of general unfaithfulness, a number of features in verses 1-5 indicate that the particular expression of their spiritual lethargy was in not witnessing to their faith before the

unbelieving culture.”²

In contemporary terms, these folks are operating a soup kitchen, these folks have a child sponsorship program offering education and nutrition and medical care to poor kids around the world, these folks have a literacy program where they help immigrants learn to read and write – but in NONE OF THESE PROGRAMS is the Gospel clearly articulated. Therefore, it is essentially SUB-CHRISTIAN WORK.

It is ultimately not for God. Jesus says:

I have not found your works complete **in the sight of my God**. (Revelation 3:2 ESV)

The people of the world LOVE what you are doing, but God knows that you aren't doing it for him. You are doing it for the glory of men. You are doing it for the praise of men. Your work does not proceed from faith. It does not ultimately seek the glory of God or the eternal good of people. Therefore it is unchristian. John Stott has the pulse of this church; he says:

“Sardis may be said to be the first church in the history of Christendom to have been well-nigh filled with what we now call “nominal Christians”.”³

That's what we are dealing with in this letter to the church in Sardis – we are dealing with nominal Christians who do good works for the approval of the culture but who do not use those good works as an opportunity to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

According to Jesus, these folks are essentially SUB-CHRISTIAN. See real Christians care about ALL SUFFERING – ESPECIALLY ETERNAL SUFFERING, as John Piper said, therefore we CANNOT do ANYTHING without ULTIMATELY USING IT AS AN OPPORTUNITY to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul – therefore what does it profit a man or a woman or a child to receive our bread, or soup, or literacy counsel or educational supplements without also receiving the life giving Gospel of Jesus? If we teach a child to read and give her an education and help her get ahead in this world and we never tell her about the life and death of Jesus Christ on her behalf then HOW HAVE WE LOVED HER? We have sent her to hell with a full belly and bag full of books. That is not

² G.K. Beale, *The Book Of Revelation NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 273.

³ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks Of The Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 86.

Christian – and that is not loving and yet that is what passes for mission in much of the “so-called” Christian church.

This is one of the most severe accusations given by Jesus in any of the 7 letters. This is a church that is almost entirely dead and yet, apparently, there are still some people alive within it. To those folks Jesus gives this exhortation in verses 2-3:

The Exhortation

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. (Revelation 3:2–3 ESV)

There are 5 imperatives – 5 commands – in these 2 little verses. Let me pull them out so that you can see them.

1. Wake up
2. Strengthen
3. Remember
4. Keep
5. Repent

This church needs revival! This church has fallen asleep. This church needs to turn back and to turn towards their former allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Now, I think I’ve mentioned this before that Jesus frequently alludes to the particular history and geography of the churches and the cities that he is writing to. Churches are often shaped by their history and by the context that they find themselves in – for better or worse. If Jesus were writing to the Church in Canada I wonder if he would refer to us as COLD and ALOOF. We think that we are “above it all” sitting up here above the madness below the border. Are we not like the place that we live? Well so it was with these folks.

The church in Sardis – like the city of Sardis has fallen from former glory. 600 years before this letter was written Sardis the city was a very important place. It had been the capital city of the

Empire of Lydia and home to one of the richest men in history. Have you ever heard the expression “Rich as Croesus?” Croesus was King of Sardis and The Emperor of Lydia. He was famously wealthy but he was also an arrogant fool. When the Assyrian Empire collapsed in the 7th century BC a number of secondary powers began scrambling for ascendancy in the region. For a while Babylon was the dominant super power, but then she fell to the Persians. Croesus thought that he and his Lydian Empire could replace Cyrus and his Persian Empire and control the whole known world. But he wasn’t sure he could pull it off so he consulted the Oracle At Delphi and he asked whether he would win in a war with Persia. The Oracle answered thusly. She said that you will surely destroy a great Empire. Croesus heard in that what he wanted to hear and he attacked Cyrus and he lost. Cyrus pursued him back to Sardis which Croesus believed to be impregnable because of its high cliffs and great walls. And so, he did not even post a guard believing that the Persians would simply try and wait them out. But they didn’t. They found a way up the cliffs and over the wall and they destroyed that city from within. The Empire Croesus destroyed WAS HIS OWN.

Croesus lost his empire through carelessness, pride and neglect. He fell asleep behind his walls and as a result he became a slave of Cyrus and of Persia. His city was sacked and diminished, it was further sacked and diminished by the Greeks under Alexander years later and then in AD 17 it was nearly destroyed by an earthquake and only partially rebuilt.

The people in Sardis receiving this letter from Jesus were living in the ashes of former glory. They had once been something but now they were nothing. These people are fading and they are almost dead.

It is very hard not to hear this letter as DIRECTLY addressing the plight of the modern day Mainline Church! They were once a going concern. There was once a time when you couldn’t be President of the United States unless you belonged to the Episcopal Church. The United Church of Canada was once the most important force of evangelism in this country! And then, because they gave themselves to works without Gospel they were at one point in the late 20th century the fastest shrinking religious body in North America according to Reg Bibby. Churches that once were packed out with 600 hundred, 800 hundred, 2000 people now are happy when 40 blue haired ladies show up for service. They sought the approval of men and they lost the approval of God and now it is open to question as to whether or not we should even refer to them as Christian

churches.

By the way, J. Gresham Machen made that argument in his book “Christianity And Liberalism”. His point was that it wasn’t so much that we had liberal and conservative Christians, as it was that the liberals – the mainline churches don’t even deserve to be called Christian – they are a whole other religion, Machen argued. Now that was offensive when he said it, but now those churches are saying it. They are saying, “Don’t call us Christian Churches, call us Community Centres”.

There is nothing new under the sun, in every generation of Christian history there have been churches that literally went over the cliff into spiritual oblivion. But what is incredible here is that Jesus is calling them back.

He is saying: “Remember who you once were. Remember what you once believed. Wake UP! REPENT! COME BACK FROM THE EDGE and COME TO ME. I have the Spirit in my hand and I can fill you again with life and power for ministry.”

For those who heed the call there is the promise of reward.

The Promise

He says in verses 4-5:

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. 5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. (Revelation 3:4–5 ESV)

The reward for the faithful few inside this largely apostate church is spoken of under two symbols. The first symbol has to do with “white garments”. White garments are frequently spoken of in the Book of Revelation. For example during the vision of the 7 seals John says:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ... **they were each given a white robe** and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. (Revelation 6:9–11 ESV)

To say that a person will be given a white robe, in Bible language, means that they will be recognized, publicly for having held fast in faith and witness against significant cultural opposition.

This goes hand in hand with the second thing Jesus says:

I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. (Revelation 3:4–5 ESV)

Those are two ways of saying the same thing. This is Jesus saying that people who hold fast their public witness against opposition will SURELY be recorded in the Book of Life and will even have their names READ ALOUD by Jesus before God and the angels of heaven. Jesus said the same thing back in Luke 12. He said:

“And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, 9 but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. (Luke 12:8–9 ESV)

According to the Bible there are Books kept in heaven. Your name and your deeds are in one of those books. You want to be in the one called “The Book of Life”. Revelation 20 says:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it.... I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.... And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11–15 ESV)

At the end of time, when all deeds have been done and all stories written Jesus will read from the books. And if your name is not read from the Book of Life then you will be thrown into the Lake of Fire. Here Jesus promises these faithful few living inside a largely dead and apostate church – if you are faithful, if you carry on in Christian faith and witness – I will never forget you. I will never disown you. No matter what happens to you on this earth, when you’re dead I will read your name out of the Book of Life before God and all the angels of heaven. If you confess me in your day then I will confess you on that day. That is the promise that is given to the faithful and it is enough.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ (Revelation 3:6 ESV)

Reflecting And Responding

As we have done in weeks past let us conclude our time this morning by heeding that call for spiritual reflection. These letters were written to real churches but they address all churches and all people in all places throughout history. So what would the Spirit have us hear in this letter today?

I think first of all we should hear and take note of the fact that:

1. Churches, cities and Empires can rise, peak and fall

History is non-linear. We always make the mistake of thinking that whatever direction we are going in at the moment is the direction we will continue on for all eternity. If we are going up then it is always onward and upward, if we are going down then the end must surely be at hand. This letter and history in general ought to remind us of the reality of collapse and decline on the one hand and revival and renewal on the other. Sometimes really vibrant churches – and nations – collapse, suddenly, due to sloth and unwariness. Sardis the city and Lydia the Empire went from competing for the top spot in geo-politics to being a footnote in The Histories Of Herodotus. How many of you have ever even heard of the Empire of Lydia? And yet, at one time, she was one of the most powerful Empires in the world.

Churches too can collapse almost over night. The United Church of Canada was in living memory the most vibrant and active force of Evangelism in this country. They now have clergy who deny the existence of God and they fly rainbow flags instead of preaching the Gospel. They fell asleep and the enemy destroyed them from within.

It has happened before and it can happen again. Let he who has ears to hear HEAR what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Let us also note that:

2. Real Christians may exist within generally apostate churches

The church in Sardis was generally dead and yet there were a few who were genuinely alive.

Jesus says that:

Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments (Revelation 3:4 ESV)

Not everyone in these churches has gone along with the revolution. There are still faithful souls inside these generally apostate churches. I think that is something we need to hear. I think as Christians – and particularly as Evangelicals – we too often assume that people are apostate because they belong to essentially apostate movements. But there are likely true born again believers inside most of the denominations of the world. God always reserves for himself a remnant and God’s people who are fighting hard to be faithful often fail to see their faithful brothers and sisters in other groups.

John Stott lived his whole life as a faithful witness inside of a largely unfaithful church. As an insider he gives this counsel to those who find themselves in a similar situation. He says:

“Do you belong to what is sometimes called ‘a dead church’, and are you tempted to leave it and to go elsewhere? Why not heed this word of Christ? Let the revived Christians come together to pray and to wait upon God. A dynamic minority of living and awakened Christians can by prayer and love preserve a dying church from utter extinction.”⁴

Churches can peak, collapse and decline – but thanks be to God they can also awaken, revive and reform – do you believe that church? Could you believe God for the revival of the United Church? There are still faithful believers there. They have great roots, historically speaking. Could God make those dry bones live?

He certainly can and only God knows whether he will. But I am chastened by this passage. I am rebuked for having assumed that no faithful person would choose to remain inside such a church. Perhaps some have been called by God to attempt reformation from within. Maybe we should pray for them, maybe we should encourage them, maybe we should help them in any way we can even as we make sure that we do not follow them into compromise and ruin.

Thirdly and lastly, let us also note that:

3. Nothing matters more than having your name written in and read from the Lamb’s

⁴ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks Of The Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 91.

Book of Life

When the disciples were excited about having cast out many demons Jesus said this:

do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. (Luke 10:20 ESV)

At the end of the day, nothing else really matters! What we do in life, how much money we have, how much success, even how much GOOD WE DO – if it doesn't ultimately lead to our names and other names being written in the Lamb's Book of Life then WHAT DOES IT MATTER? Hell is forever!

Now every church listening to this, every church reading this letter has to ask the same basic question – does our ministry ultimately result in NAMES being written in the Lamb's Book of Life? Don't tell me about your literacy program, or your single mom program or your addiction and recover program unless those programs are telling people how to get their names written in the Lamb's Book of Life – that's what ULTIMATELY MATTERS! And every individual listening to this, or reading this needs to be asking the same basic question "Is my name written in the Lamb's book of life?" Right? How could you read this letter and not ask that question?

In this letter Jesus says that it is the one who has conquered who can know that his or her name is written in that book. To conquer means to endure in faith against cultural opposition. It means to come out of the world and to cling to Christ. It means to repent of sin and to trust in the life and death of Jesus Christ for your salvation and to receive his Holy Spirit so as to live and to witness for him until you die or he comes to take you home.

Real faith – saving faith, is persevering faith, in Jesus, through hardship, against opposition, by the power of the Holy Spirit until the very end. That's what Jesus has been saying all along. In Matthew 10 he said:

Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, 22 and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:21–22 ESV)

This is what it means to take up your cross and follow Jesus. This is the path of life and this is the

Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.