

Look! Listen! - And Overcome!

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

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Look! Listen! – And Overcome!

"Reputation Without Reality"

-or-

"An 'Alive' Church that Was Dead"

Lord's Day Morning

November 25, 2007

Pastor Jeff Crippen

"Justification is totally against formal religion. God has no room for those who persist in relying on forms or ceremonies."
Robert M. Horn

"The more exalted pomp there be of men's devising, there will be the less spiritual truth." George Hutcheson

"Our whole problem is that we meet, and go through the motions, and the Lord is not there." Rolfe Barnard

"A self-satisfied church is either dead or dying." R.B. Kuiper

"I have no hesitation again in asserting that the failure of the church to have a greater impact upon the life of men and women in the world today is due entirely to the fact that her own life is not in order." Lloyd-Jones

Introduction

NKJ 1 Corinthians 3:10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. 11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Sermon Text: Revelation 3:1-6

"It is a poor worship to move our hats, not our hearts." Thomas Adams

"God hates the sanctimonious hallelujah more than He hates the godless curse."
Donald Grey Barnhouse

"Men may hasten to perdition with the name of Jesus upon their lips." Friedrich W. Krummacher

"Painted fire needs no fuel; a dead, formal profession is easily kept up." Thomas Manton

"That man must famish at last who always feeds upon the dish instead of the meat."
William Secker

The fifth church the risen Christ addresses is that in the ancient city of Sardis. In many ways, I believe that this letter is particularly applicable to the western church of our day. The North American church. Here is the kernel of the message –

“I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”

Let me restate this charge this way –

“What appears to be a vibrant, living, breathing body of Christ can in fact turn out to be a cold, dead, corpse.”

As we are about to see, this deadness is frighteningly easy to descend into.

Let me state the point once more in still different terms –

“If I am not keeping what Christ has delivered to me, then no matter how busy I may be in His name, I am not serving Him.”

Do you begin to see it? I have no doubt at all that we see in this country today many, many Sardian “churches.” And we must be on guard that we never become one. Busy places. Places that have a reputation as “happening” churches. Churches with “ministries” beyond number. Churches with huge, impressive

buildings, large staffs, mega-congregations, worship services that brim with emotion and move people to excitement and tears. Churches that publish books and have a *name*, you see. Churches that, well, everyone knows about. And yet, and yet – Christ’s letter to them is this –

“I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”

Do you grasp the shock of this statement? There will be people on that Day who were all their lives quite confident that they, above all others, were examples of living, serving, true Christianity. How BUSY they were!! Their entire lives, it seems, were given to “the church.” And yet, at best –

NKJ 1 Corinthians 3:15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

...and at worst –

NKJ Matthew 7:22 "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

These then are the matters that Christ would call to our attention in this letter to Sardis. May we have ears to hear and eyes to see what He is telling us.

I. The City of Sardis

We begin once again with an examination of the historical, geographical, and cultural setting of the city of Sardis. Follow as we read this entry from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE) –

SARDIS

Sardis is of special interest to the student of Herodotus and Xenophon, for there Artaphernes, the brother of Darius, lived, and from there Xerxes invaded Greece and Cyrus marched against his brother Artaxerxes; it is also of interest to the student of early Christian history as the home of one of the Seven Churches of Revelation (1:11; 3:1ff). It was moreover one of the oldest and most important cities of Asia Minor, and until 549 BC, the capital of the kingdom of Lydia.

It stood on the northern slope of Mt. Tmolus; its acropolis occupied one of the spurs of the mountain. At the base flowed the river Pactolus which served as a moat, rendering the city practically impregnable. Through the failure to watch, however, the acropolis had been successfully scaled

in 549 BC by a Median soldier, and in 218 by a Cretan (compare Revelation 3:2,3).

Because of its strength during the Persian period, the satraps here made their homes. However, the city was burned by the Ionians in 501 BC, but it was quickly rebuilt and regained its importance. In 334 BC it surrendered to Alexander the Great who gave it independence, but its period of independence was brief, for 12 years later in 322 BC it was taken by Antigonus. In 301 BC, it fell into the possession of the Seleucidan kings who made it the residence of their governor. It became free again in 190 BC, when it formed a part of the empire of Pergamos, and later of the Roman province of Asia.

In 17 AD, when it was destroyed by an earthquake, the Roman emperor Tiberius remitted the taxes of the people and rebuilt the city, and in his honor the citizens of that and of neighboring towns erected a large monument, but Sardis never recovered its former importance (compare Revelation 3:1-2).

Again in 295 AD, after the Roman province of Asia was broken up, Sardis became the capital of Lydia, and during the early Christian age it was the home of a bishop. The city continued to flourish until 1402, when

it was so completely destroyed by Tamerlane that it was never rebuilt. Among the ruins there now stands a small village called Sert, a corruption of its ancient name. The ruins may be reached by rail from Smyrna, on the way to Philadelphia.

The ancient city was noted for its fruits and wool, and for its temple of the goddess Cybele, whose worship resembled that of Diana of Ephesus. Its wealth was also partly due to the gold which was found in the sand of the river Pactolus, and it was here that gold and silver coins were first struck. During the Roman period its coins formed a beautiful series, and are found in abundance by the peasants who till the surrounding fields. The ruins of the buildings which stood at the base of the hill have now been nearly buried by the dirt washed down from above. The hill upon which the acropolis stood measures 950 ft. high: the triple walls still surround it. The more imposing of the ruins are on the lower slope of the hill, and among them the temple of Cybele is the most interesting, yet only two of its many stone columns are still standing.

Equally imposing is the necropolis (cemetery) of the city, which is at a distance of two hours' ride from Sert, south of the Gygaean lake. The modern name of the necropolis is Bin Tepe or Thousand Mounds, because of

the large group of great mounds in which the kings and nobles were buried. Many of the mounds were long ago excavated and plundered.

We quote the following from the *Missionary Herald* (Boston, Massachusetts, August, 1911, pp. 361-62):

‘Dr. C. C. Tracy, of Marsovan, has made a visit to ancient Sardis and observed the work of his countryman, Professor Butler, of Princeton University, who is uncovering the ruins of that famous city of the past. Already rich “finds” have been made; among them are portions of a temple of Artemis, indicating a building of the same stupendous character as those at Ephesus and Baalbec, and a necropolis from whose tombs were unearthed three thousand relics, including utensils, ornaments of gold and precious stones, mirrors, etc.

What chiefly impressed Dr. Tracy was the significance of those “Seven Churches of Asia,” of which Sardis held one. “When I think of the myriads of various nationality and advanced civilization for whose evangelization these churches were responsible, the messages to the Christian communities occupying the splendid strategic centers fill me with awe. While established amid the splendors of civilization, they were set as

candlesticks in the midst of gross spiritual darkness. Did they fulfill their mission?”

One of Dr. Butler’s recoveries is the marble throne of the Bishop of Sardis; looking upon it the message to Sardis recurs to mind. A fact of current history quickened the visitor’s appreciation of the word to “the angel” of that church. “Yonder among the mountains overhanging Sardis there is a robber gang led by the notorious Chakirjali. He rules in the mountains; no government force can take him. Again and again he swoops down like an eagle out of the sky, in one quarter of the region or another. From time immemorial these mountains have been the haunts of robbers; very likely it was so when Revelation was written, ‘I will come upon thee as a thief.’ In each case the message was addressed to ‘the angel of the church.’

Over every church in the world there is a spirit hovering, as it were — a spirit representing that church and by whose name it can be addressed. The messages are as vital as they were at the first. ‘He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.’”

E. J. Banks

Dennis Johnson’s historical information is also helpful to us —

“Sardis was a city with a golden past and misplaced security. The gold in Sardis’ past was reputed to extend back to King Midas of Phrygia, who, as the story went, ‘rid himself of the Golden Touch by washing it off in the springs of Pactolus,’ a stream near Sardis that had gold dust in its silt. Later, Sardis was the capital of King Croesus, whose wealth was also legendary. Croesus’ reign ended, however, with an event notorious as an example of misplaced security. As the forces of the Persian empire pushed westward, Cyrus and his troops caught Croesus’ army by surprise in the field of battle and then besieged Sardis. The fortress of Sardis was surrounded on three sides by sheer cliffs, so apparently impregnable that ‘to capture the acropolis of Sardis’ became a maxim for achieving an impossible feat.

Herodotus recounts, however, that on the fourteenth day of the siege a few Persian troops climbed the cliff at a point where no guard was stationed, for there was no fear that it would ever be captured at that place, for the acropolis is sheer and impregnable there. The city fell quickly into Persian hands. Ancient commentators blame Sardis’ tragic fall on a lack of vigilance in its defenders.” The Triumph of the Lamb

II. You Have a Name... 3:1-3

NKJ Revelation 3:1 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. 2 "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. 3 "Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.

What strikes us about this letter immediately is the absence of any *commendation* – which is so characteristic in most all of the other letters. Ephesus has her problems, but she is commended for testing false apostles. Pergamum is tolerating the teaching of Balaam, yet she holds fast to Christ's name. And so with Thyatira. But this letter to Sardis does not open with any commendation (there is some later in vs 4 for a few individuals in the church). It is scathing right off –

"I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead."

Can we imagine the shock upon the audible reading of these words in that church? There is the whole congregation gathered, the reader steps up and begins...*to the angel of the church in Sardis write...*". Is it not very likely that this was a self-satisfied, self-congratulating bunch of people who were confident the Lord could only have commendation for them? They had a name! They had a reputation! A reputation – among whom? Perhaps among their entire city? Did they enjoy a good name and popularity among the pagans? If so, how could that be? Pagan worship was present in Sardis as in the other cities of Asia – yet most of the other churches were hated by those idolaters and false Jews. Why then did this church at Sardis enjoy popularity?

Or perhaps, and even in addition, the reputation of the church at Sardis as being "the church that is alive" – was a reputation among the other churches? "Boy, if you want to see a church that is alive and on fire and that is really happening, just go to Sardis!" That kind of thing. They had a name. They had a reputation. And they rested on it.

Contrasted With Smyrna

How ironic! The church that had the reputation was Sardis. The church with no reputation was Smyrna. And

yet, we put on the Lord's spectacles and see each church as they really were –

NKJ Revelation 2:9 "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and *I know* the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but *are* a synagogue of Satan.

We must see ourselves through Christ's eyes! We must NEVER be impressed with man's criticism or with his flattery. Did you hear this? *We must never be elated nor puffed up when we receive the approval and flattery of men.* Man's judgment really means very little.

"So the church of great reputation is of no repute to Christ, while the small, weak, hated church is of great reputation in Christ's judgment."

How did Sardis obtain this reputation for being "alive"? We don't know. But it seems probable, does it not, that they must have been doing things. They had "deeds" - and yet the irony is that Christ tells them *"I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of God."* In their eyes, in their judgment and apparently in the judgment of other Christians and even in the judgment of the pagan world – this was a church of "doing." Of

works. Of deeds. Did they have various ministry programs? What was their preaching like? How is it that they were able to claim the name of Christ and yet retain this "reputation" and popularity? Surely compromise of Christ's gospel had to be in their midst.

Listen to John Stott comment –

"Only a few simple words were needed by which to expose this church's spiritual bankruptcy, but they were as devastating as the earthquake of 17 AD: *I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.* The church of Sardis had acquired a name. Its reputation as a progressive church had evidently spread far and wide. It was well regarded in the city and in the neighborhood. It was known by the other six churches in the province for its vitality. No false doctrine was taking root in its fellowship. We hear of neither Balaam, nor Nicolaitans, nor Jezebel. 'What a live church you have here in Sardis!' visitors would exclaim with admiration when they attended its services or watched its activities; and so no doubt it appeared. Its congregation was probably quite large for those days and growing, while its programme doubtless included many excellent projects. It had no shortage of money, talent, or human resources.

There was every indication of life and vigour.

But outward appearances are notoriously deceptive; and this socially distinguished congregation was a spiritual graveyard. It seemed to be alive, but it was actually dead. It had a name for virility, but it had no right to its name...There were deeds done in the church, but they were not complete...they were a routine of duties, but they did not begin to fulfill God's purpose or pattern.

The reputation that Sardis had acquired was a reputation with human beings – but not with God.

It was in the sight of God, Christ said, that he had found this church's works deficient. They seemed solid and worthy enough to onlookers, but in God's sight they were thoroughly defective.

This distinction between reputation and reality, between what human beings see and what God sees, is of great importance to every age and place.

Although we have responsibilities to others, we are primarily accountable to God. It is before Him that we stand, and to Him that one day we must give an account.

We should not therefore rate human opinion too highly, becoming depressed when criticized and elated when flattered.

We must remember that the Lord does not look at the things man looks at. "...man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). He reads our thoughts and knows our motives. He can see how much reality there is behind our profession, how much life behind our façade." What Christ Thinks of the Church, by John Stott.

Sardis' sin was the same as that of ancient Israel -

NKJ Isaiah 48:1 "Hear this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, and have come forth from the wellsprings of Judah; who swear by the name of the LORD, and make mention of the God of Israel, *but* not in truth or in righteousness; 2 for they call themselves after the holy city, and lean on the God of Israel; the LORD of hosts *is* His name:

What a danger we have, constantly, of thinking too highly of ourselves! Of slumbering the sleep of self-confidence and self-assurance just as ancient Sardis did, trusting in her reputation as an impregnable, unconquerable fortress.

Wake Up!

The church of Sardis was slumbering. She was like a fire that had burned down until only a small, tiny coal remained – and it was about to go out. She was as good as dead – yet there is still a chance for her if she will wake up and repent, strengthen the life that remains, remember what Word Christ had entrusted her with and *set about keeping and doing that Word*.

The Sardinian church of any age or era is a church of tragic and dangerous irony. She appears to be awake and alert, but in fact she is asleep. She appears to be alive and vibrant and busy, but in fact she is on the verge of death. She appears to be most victorious against the enemy, but in fact he is right at her door, ready to come in and destroy her in just a moment.

Remember What You Have Received

Here in verse 3 is a hint concerning where Sardis had gone wrong – and where we can go wrong if we do not remain awake and watchful. Listen to it again –

“So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it and repent.”

See it? Sardis’ sin and problem was that she had strayed from that only foundation upon which we are to build – the Lord Jesus Christ and His gospel. They, like all believers, had once received Christ and His Word. But somehow, at some point, they had ceased to keep it. They had remained busy. They thought themselves quite secure and safe in Christ’s estimation all because of the work they were doing and for which they had gained this “reputation/name.” But they had ceased to keep and proclaim that Word which is the power of God to salvation, and that Cross which is a stumbling block and foolishness to the unsaved man.

Sardis professed Christ but they did not obey Him. Sardis professed Christ but had really forgotten Him.

See it then? Let’s not miss this – what a jolt this must have been for that self-secure congregation as they heard these words –

Sardis, you need to repent of your deeds and your reputation. All that you have been doing in My name has not been in My name at all. I reject it. Your programs. Your message. Your deeds. All need to be repented of. You need to go back to My Word that was originally preached to you, obey it, keep it, and proclaim it. And

you must not delay or all of your life will go out and it will be too late.

Can you put yourself in their pews? Just imagine Christ coming and telling a self-satisfied, proud congregation sitting in a new building, overseeing all kinds of “ministries” – repent of all of it! Get rid of your assets! Stop waffling and take a stand for truth. Deal with sin in your midst.

“But, but, but....that will ruin everything!”

Understand? *Sardis was a church that had set aside the Word of God. She was functioning according to the devices and imaginations of men.* This is why she enjoyed popularity with men and had a reputation with them. The offense of the Word of God and of the Cross of Christ was not present in their lives nor in their message.

If You Do Not Repent –

It is not a good thing for a thief to come to us in the night. Unexpected loss is the result. And so, as He has done elsewhere in the Scriptures, the Lord Jesus warns these people at Sardis that if they do not repent, His second coming will not be a good thing for them – he will come to them like a thief and take them unawares. They will not be prepared for that meeting. They have grown like the

Sardinians of old – confident in their security when the enemy soldiers are creeping up the slopes. Only in this case, it is Christ coming to judge them.

Christ’s true people will not be taken by His coming as if He were a thief in the night –

NKJ 1 Thessalonians 5:2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. 3 For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. 5 You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. 6 Therefore let us not sleep, as others *do*, but let us watch and be sober. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. 8 But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and *as* a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

A Few With Unsoiled Garments

NKJ Revelation 3:4 "You have a few names even in Sardis who have not

defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

Here we are given a further indication of the sin that characterized the church at Sardis. It was a sin that entailed defiling one's garments, as opposed to being clothed in white garments. These few at Sardis who had not soiled their garments are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. This is a matter of salvation/justification – as we see again in verse 5.

NKJ Revelation 3:5 "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

So the sin must have been something that entailed apostasy. Those guilty of it had forgotten the Word of Christ and had not kept that Word. Their garments were soiled and if that defilement were not cleansed by repentance, their names would be erased from the Book of Life.

What was the defilement? Perhaps some related Scriptures might help answer that question -

NKJ Revelation 6:10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long,

O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" 11 Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both *the number of* their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they *were*, was completed.

NKJ Revelation 7:13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" 14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

NKJ Revelation 19:7 "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." 8 And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

NKJ Revelation 19:14 And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses.

All who are saved, in other words, have white robes. No one in heaven will have soiled garments. It is a

symbol of salvation, of the righteousness of Christ.

Therefore, here is the incredible thing:

There were only a FEW people in the church at Sardis – this church of the great name and reputation – who were truly in Christ.

This is the sad end and result of compromising the Word of God so that we gain a name and reputation with the world. It is the sad end of not obeying the Gospel of Christ in order to build buildings or bring in money to support our so-called Christian programs. The church becomes a thing unknown to Christ, filled with people whose names Christ will not confess before His Father and the angels on that Day.

“Sardis was in the world. It should have been a light-bearer. It failed its duty. Neither the Jews nor the Gentiles seem greatly to have troubled the people of Sardis. Sardis was a very ‘peaceful’ church. It enjoyed peace, but it was the peace of the cemetery! William Hendriksen, More Than Conquerors

Conclusion

Is it not very, very probable that many of the churches of repute in our day are Sardinian? That in their throngs there are in fact only “a few people” who are

truly Christians? What would happen if such a letter were read to them? What would happen?

What does a Sardinian church need? Above all else, what is she lacking? Christ’s appearance to Sardis contains the answer –

NKJ Revelation 3:1 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.”

Christ holds in one hand the ministers of His Word and in the other He holds the seven Spirits of God – the Holy Spirit. If Sardis will repent – if any Sardinian church or Christian today will repent –

Jesus will bring His hands together, and His messengers will bring His Word to those who repent, and He will bring it in the power of His Spirit. There will be life where there was near death. Dry bones will live once more.

What is the work Christ calls us to in His Word? It is to love Him, to love one another, to persevere in faith and in hope, to preach His Word, to be always repenting and putting to death

the deeds of the flesh by the Spirit. THIS is our work. It is to confess Christ before a hostile world even to the death.

“The church [at Sardis] failed to walk in those works which were required of them. There was no interest in Sardis in the things of the kingdom of God, no searching of the Scriptures, no daily prayer, no confession of the name of Christ, no testimony for the truth, no zeal in proclaiming the gospel, no instruction of the youth, no battle of faith, no patience and suffering for Christ’s sake, no manifestation of sorrow after God, of true repentance, of the love of God and of the brethren. Instead, there was a seeking of the things of this world, friendship with the world, as striving after the treasures and pleasures of Sardis. A dead minister and a dead church.”
Anthony Hoekema, Behold He Cometh

alternate, valid choices – and who are we to judge after all? Join hands with everyone who professes to be Christian. Buildings will go up. More bodies will fill the pews. The bank accounts will fill. Persecution will cease. We will have a reputation.

But Christ, who walks among His churches, will see it. He will know it. And on that Day, Sardinians will find that He does not know them at all.

May the Lord deliver us from the spirit of Sardis and fill us with the seven Spirits of God. “Lord, in this church, for Your name and glory, please *bring your hands together.*”

How easy is it for this church to become Sardis? Frighteningly easy. All we have to do is begin to ignore the Scriptures. To change our message so that it appeals to men. Stop confronting our sin. Stop obeying Christ. Stop practicing church discipline. Start preaching sermons that make us feel quite good about ourselves. Begin to flatter people and cater to their desires. Accept the popular sins of the world as simply