

How to Kill a Church

How to kill a church. Lessons from the dead church in Sardis.

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Text: Revelation 3:1 And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art **dead**.

Intro

- A. There are seven messages that every church should be aware of, understand, and apply.
- B. These are messages that identify the most important threats to our well-being as a church.
- C. When I say church, I am addressing the entire body in general, but the application is for every member in particular.

What is a dead church?

- D. Sardis was a dead church. God called them a dead church. But He nonetheless called them a church. Revelation 3:1 makes this clear. It is the Lord speaking to His churches.
- E. Sardis is one of the seven candlesticks surrounding Christ. Revelation 1:12 – 13 says, “And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.” Who are these seven candlesticks? Revelation 1:20 says, “The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.” These seven angels are the messengers of each church who delivers the message of God to them. These are the pastors of the churches. They have the responsibility to proclaim God’s Word to their churches.
- F. This is remarkable. The church at Sardis was a dead church, not a dead group of Christians or dead organization. They were still recognized by God as being a church.
- G. How can they be dead, yet still a church? Because a dead church is a church that has stopped proclaiming the words of life. They no longer proclaim the Gospel message. they no longer train in the abundant life. They no longer have the testimony that legitimizes the message of life in Jesus Christ. Other than having a name that bears the names of life, Jesus Christ, there was nothing else about them that was alive. They were a church in name only. They were a church of life in name only. They lacked the message, the training, and the testimony of life.
- H. How did they get to be this way? I will give you a brief description of the path that leads to a dead church.
- I. Seven churches are addressed in the book of Revelation. Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.
- J. Though there are seven messages for seven churches, these messages are not exclusively for just these seven churches. After each of the messages, a declaration is made: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” 2:7; 2:11; 2:17; 2:29; 3:6; 3:13; 3:22. Every Christian is expected to be a member in a local church body of baptized believers. For this reason, the seven messages are addressed to the seven churches, not the seven Christians. Churches die because Christians do not value doing things God’s way.

K. The way to sum up the seven messages to the seven churches is to focus on what prompts the message to each one. What I mean by that is there are seven elements to each message: identification, commendation, rebuke, warning, exhortation, promise, and declaration. There is something about each church that dictates how Christ identifies Himself to each church, and what warning, exhortation, and promise they receive.

L. There is a lesson in the arrangement of these seven lessons.

1. Keep your first love
2. Continue being faithful
3. Don't compromise
4. Purge out false teachers
5. Strengthen the things which remain
6. Be faithful to His Word and to His name
7. Humbly Depend on Christ

M. Sardis is the fifth church in this grouping. So, I will highlight the significant points of the first five messages.

N. First love: first and great commandment. First and greatest of all sins. The first sin in order to commit all other sins. So each of the succeeding messages, I will precede with this first sin.

O. Continue being faithful. When you leave your first love, you are vulnerable to rejecting Christ under the stress of persecution and difficulties of life. The church at Smyrna was faithful to God but were under intense persecution by the synagogue of Satan. Without a love for God, they would have no reason to remain faithful to Him.

P. That brings us to the church at Pergamos. They were suffering intense persecution like Smyrna, but unlike Smyrna, they had the doctrines of Balaam and Nicolaitan. These two doctrines go hand in hand. Balaam is the doctrine and practice of sabotage. Recall king Balak wanted to prevent Israel from crossing his land on their way to the promised land. He called on Balak to ask God to curse Israel. Would not do it. But after persistence by Balak to curse Israel, Balaam coached Balak on how to cause Israel to bring God's curse on them. The Balaams in a church are the ones who seek to sabotage other church members. They delight in the failures, especially the spiritual failures of others. They may promote that failure by spreading rumors, being unsupportive, and working against other church members. They just do not like them. They hate them. Balaams in a church are dangerous predators that lead to the downfall of a church. They are a dark, insidious presence lurking in disguise of sheep clothing participating as a church member but are being used by Satan.

- a. 1Jo 2:9 He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.
- b. 1Jo 2:11 But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.
- c. 1Jo 3:15 Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.
- d. 1Jo 4:20 If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?
- e. The Balaams in a church are in need of God's help and the help of their Brethren to stop their hate. They are called on to repent and threatened with the coming of God to fight them with the sword of His mouth. They will surely lose this battle. It is much better to repent.

Q. The Nicolaitans are Christians who justify and excuse their indulgence in sin. We know this because the church at Ephesus hated Nicolaitans. The Nicolaitans were everything that the Ephesians were not. And since the Ephesians were commended for their love for the law, for doing things right, and exposing those who did wrong, then it is easy to figure out who the Nicolaitans were.

1. Balaam and Nicolaitans go hand in hand in a church because they Balaams seek to fall of other church members resulting in their sin, and the Nicolaitans justify the life of sin with excuses.
2. Balaams and Nicolaitans walk in darkness and contrary to Christ. This happens when they leave their first love for God. They hate their brother, so they hate God. They love sin and darkness rather than God and light.

R. But it can get worse in a church as shown by the church Thyatira. In this church they had Jezebel. Revelation 2:20 says, “Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.” Jezebel was a church member.

S. Paul warned in Acts 20:29 – 30 “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.” Jezebel was training disciples in the church for false gods!

T. And that brings us to Sardis, the dead church. A church that leaves its first love is vulnerable to attacks, compromise with sin, hate for Brethren, and the rising up of Jezebels. No wonder the church at Sardis was dead. They were no longer proclaiming the message of eternal life or living the abundant life in Christ.

U. It all began with leaving their first love.

A question of love

V. God’s solution and exhortation to the Ephesian church was to return to their first works.

W. Revelation 2:5 “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do **the first works**; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.”

X. They had left their first love because they had left their first work of nurturing the love for God.

Y. Do you feel the compromise with sin in your life? The hate or despising of other church members? The pull of false doctrines on you? Satan is all over you. Your destruction threatens the entire church. That is why we must work together, encourage one another, exhort one another unto love and good works. To paraphrase a famous quote: We will fight together, or we will die together.

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