

Autopsy of A Dead Church (Revelation 3:1-6)

Introduction

- 1) It has been well said that many a church begins with a man, reaches out with a mission, becomes a movement, but ends up a monument. This is a polite way of saying many a church begins with life but ends in death. It has a glorious past, but a glorious past is all that it has. It is now a church of living dead. There are live bodies walking around with dead spirits on the inside and amazingly, astonishingly, only God has noticed. Spiritually there is no pulse, no heartbeat. Spiritually they are flat-lined. Spiritually they are a dead church. Spiritually they are “dead men walking.”
- 2) In an article entitled “When does my church need revival?”, Stevan Manley highlights 6 tell-tale signs of a church standing at death’s door:
 - 1) The church is plagued with disagreements.
 - 2) The preaching is ineffective.
 - 3) Few can remember when a person was last saved.
 - 4) God’s supernatural power is never seen.
 - 5) God is not praised regularly.
 - 6) No one is being called into God’s work.

(Church Herald and Holiness Banner, 11-3-00).

Transition

What do we discover when an autopsy on a dead church is performed? What do we discover is the cause of death? What do we find is needed to breathe life back into that lifeless body? An examination of the church at Sardis provides the answer.

I. Christ is characterized by discernment. 3:1

Angel (*Aggelo*) – messenger, pastor, representative of the church

Write (imperative) – word of command conveying a sense of urgency and importance.

Sardis – a city with a great past, long considered by the Greeks as one of the greatest of her cities. Who could imagine that by the 2nd century AD she would be in decline and near death, a mere shadow of her former glory. One historian said of Sardis, “it lived on its ancient prestige than on its suitability to present conditions.” Evidently city and church had this in common. Located 50 miles east of Ephesus the city was located on the slope of Mt. Tmolus which made it a natural citadel and virtually impregnable. Yet twice in its history, the city fell due to careless negligence on the part of its guardians. In 546 BC it was to the Persian Cyrus and in 214 BC to Antiochus III. In AD 17 the city was leveled due to a catastrophic earthquake, but it was rebuilt with considerable help from emperor Tiberius Caesar (AD 14-37). Located on 5 major trade routes, Sardis was a city of great wealth and prestige. A large temple dedicated to Artemis (Diana) was located here. Her local and popular name was Cybele. It was believed that she had power to give life to the dead!

How the church was founded we have no knowledge. Its present condition however is clearly seen by the Christ who discerns all things.

1. Christ comprehends our situation.

The 7 spirits of God – not a heavenly angelic entourage, not planetary deities! It is the complete or perfect Holy Spirit; the Spirit in all His fullness. Possibly there is an allusion to Isaiah 11:2-5 or Zech. 4:1-6. It emphasizes His omnipresence (cf. Rev. 5:6), wisdom and life giving power. The Savior has the Spirit but Sardis does not. The Savior has life but Sardis has death. Sometimes we have no idea of our true spiritual condition. If the truth be known, we are out to lunch, as to our real situation. We walk about in a fog of deception, but Christ discerns how things really are.

2. Christ cares for his servants.

The seven stars (cf. 1:20) are the angels, the pastors or leaders of the churches. In his hand means they are his possession and under his protection. He is responsible for them and they are accountable to Him. Great privilege also entails great responsibility (cf. James 3:1).

- The spiritual life or deadness of a church is often governed by the spiritual life of its leadership.
- No church rises above the level of its leadership.
- Sardis was a ship off course because its captain was asleep at the wheel.
[Where is this church in this regard?!]

Christ knows our condition. Nothing escapes the attention of the Spirit or the Savior who are in the midst of the churches.

II. Christ confronts those who are dead. 3:1

This church receives no word of commendation or congratulation. There is no word of praise. In this regard she is like her sister church at Laodicea (3:14-22). Pinpointing her condition Chuck Swindoll says, “The church at Sardis was a morgue with a steeple.” Vance Havner adds, she had it all in the show window but nothing in stock.”

1. Our outward reputation can be deceiving.

I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive. Sardis had a reputation as a beehive of activity and vitality. This was most likely a church with size, money and program that caused people to stop and take notice. She appeared to be and claimed to be a healthy fellowship.

You have a name – this is perhaps an indication of Sardis’ past faithfulness and accomplishments. In the past she was something genuine. There had been a time when reputation and reality matched up. There had been a day when she was doing great things for God. Now all they had was a name, and our outward reputation can be deceiving. We think we are one thing when actually we are altogether something different.

2. Our inward condition will be revealing.

You are dead (*nekros*) – Looks can be deceiving. A body that from all outward appearances appears strong and healthy can, upon closer inspection, be found to be racked with cancer or some other terminal disease. Our Lord performs a battery of spiritual tests on the church at Sardis. She is subjected to a divine CAT-scan, MRI and X-ray and the diagnosis is far worse than any external, superficial examination could have ever revealed: she is dead!

Infected by the disease of spiritual compromise, worldly accommodation, and satisfaction with the status quo, life had ebbed out of the body and they had not even noticed. This church was not a persecuted church because it was not bothering anyone! People may have admired it, but not for its courage, commitment or conviction.

Illustration

The story of Samson in Judges 14 – 16. Judges 16:20, “But he did not know that the Lord had departed from him.”

*Sardis was a Samson church!

What can cause a church to die? Though a number of answers can be offered, Chuck Swindoll highlights 5 of the more common:

- 1) Worship of the past (“the way we were”).
- 2) Greater concern with cosmetics than with character.
- 3) Love of tradition over love for Christ.
- 4) Inflexibility and resistance to change.
- 5) Losing evangelistic and missionary fervor.

*Being a church that is alive and living for Jesus requires more than a name on a marquee, a building with a steeple, or regularly scheduled meetings on a weekly basis. Too many churches have a name that they are alive, but they are dead.

III. Christ corrects those who are dying. 3:2-3

- Our God is in the resurrection business. He is continually active in bringing dead sinners to life (Eph. 2:1-7). He is also active in breathing life back into dead churches. When things appear their worst, God is at His best!
- An autopsy has been performed. Sardis is dead. What, if anything can be done? As our Lord looks over the body, His body, there appears a weak beat of the heart, a faint but perceptible pulse. Because this church is His church there is yet hope of recovery, restoration and revitalization. The condition is critical, but not yet terminal.
- In rapid-fire succession our Lord peppers the church at Sardis with 5 imperatives and 6 steps she must take if she is to once again be the church, the body of Christ, Jesus saved her to be. There is hope, but she must act quickly. There can be no delay. Time is almost gone. We do well to listen in on the treatment He prescribes.

1. We should renounce our drowsiness. 3:2

Be watchful – (imp.) – be alert, on guard, awake. The city had fallen twice because of military slothfulness; the church should learn from its past failure. Lit. Be continually watchful. Keep your spiritual eyes and ears open 24/7. Wake up! Be watchful. Recognize the ever-present danger of the enemy’s presence and our tendency to drop our spiritual guard.

2. We should revive our dedication. 3:2

Strengthen (aor. imp.) the things which remain ... Make firm, establish what is salvageable, but do so quickly because they are ready to die. Why? For I have not found your works perfect (complete, fulfilled) before God.

- Sardis was content with a halfway completed work.
- Sardis was content to be mediocre, O.K., alright.
God says get going, get fired up, begin again to exercise your spiritual muscles that your fat, flabby body might become the mean, lean godly fighting machine God calls you to be!
- Get moving or you will die.

3. We should remember our doctrine. 3:3

Remember (pre. imp.) ... received (perf. tense) and heard (aor.). Don't rest on former deeds, but never leave your foundational doctrine. Continually keep in mind what you received as an abiding trust (perf. tense) the moment you heard (aor.) and were saved.

- New is not always better and old is not always bad.
- You began with Jesus and the Word, stay with Jesus and the Word.

4. We should renew our devotion. 3:3

Hold fast (pre. imp.) – keep, guard. It is one thing to recall the truth, it is another thing to do it.

The truth of the Christian faith is a precious treasure never to be taken for granted. Jude says earnestly contend (fight) for the faith. Jesus says hold fast what you received and heard. Do not let it slip away.

- We slide into liberalism and compromise, we don't jump or run to it! We never drift anywhere worth going.

5. We should repent of our desertion. 3:3

Repent – (aor. imp.) – change your mind and change your direction concerning sin (omission – what to do / commission – what not to do).

Turn from:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| (1) Death → Life | (4) Slothfulness → Watchfulness |
| (2) Compromise → Conviction | (5) Weakness → Strength |
| (3) Forgetfulness → Remembrance | |

6. We should reflect on our decision. 3:3

(cf. Matt. 24: 42-44; I Thess. 5:2; II Pet. 3:10)

- This is not the 2nd coming, but a soon coming of Christ in judgment on them and them alone.
- Think carefully about what is at stake! Swift and unexpected judgment is just around the corner if you continue in your sin.
- Immediate judgment with eschatological overtones!

IV. Christ challenges those who are dedicated. 3:4-6

For the faithful few times had been tough. They were perhaps beginning to wonder “is it worth it? Has God given up on us as well?” To such questions our Lord provides a 4-fold promise of future blessings for those who stay faithful in the present.

1. We are promised His presence. 3:4

- Soiled, dirty garments disqualified a worshipper and dishonored God. Here it is used symbolically of our spiritual conduct and clothing.
- Like Enoch (Gen. 5:22-24) they will walk with Jesus. They will fellowship and be with Him.

2. We are promised His purity. 3:4-5

Walk in white ... worthy ... clothed in white

Walk justified, sanctified and ultimately glorified all in His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

3. We are promised His protection. 3:5

Not blot (lit. no not blot, uses a double negative)

(cf. Ex. 32:32-33 for the first idea of a divine ledger; see also Ps. 69:28; Daniel 12:1).

3 views: 1) Loss of salvation 2) All are in the book of life and only those who die without Christ are removed 3) Promise not a warning.

- This is not a warning but a promise that it will not never happen (the double negative).
- Background of the city register – name removed for crime or death.

4. We are promised His praise. 3:5-6

Confers – acknowledge ... Father ... angels

- Jesus will say to the Father, “Danny belongs to me” ... to the angels, “Danny belongs to me!”
- Matthew 10:32, “Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.”

Conclusion

W. A. Criswell tells the story of the Covenanters in Scotland were hunted and shot down like animals. Poor, humble people gathered together in their cottages to pore over the Scriptures, to pray to God, and to exhort one another in the faith. They were called Covenanters because they covenanted together to read the Book, to pray and to exhort one another in the faith. Isabel Weir was married to John Brown, the Covenanter. John Brown loved God and into the humble homes of the people he went to read the Word, kneel in prayer and teach them the riches of our Lord. Men hunted and tracked him down. An emissary of the church by the name of Claverhouse took six soldiers to shoot him before his own humble cottage. They brought out his wife with a baby in her arms that she could witness the execution of her husband. John Brown asked if he might pray. He knelt down and prayed and then stood up fearlessly, courageously, as a man of God ought to stand. The soldiers lined up before him to execute him. They looked at the man of God, they looked at his noble, courageous wife and the little baby in her arms. All six of the men put down their muskets. “We cannot do it,” they said. Claverhouse cursed them in the name of the Church, took his pistol, walked up to John Brown and blew out his brains. When the martyr fell in his own blood, the murderer turned to Isabel Brown and said, “And what do you think of your fine husband now?” Isabel Brown replied, “Sir, I thought much good of him in life and now much more in death.” “For they are worthy ... and I will confess their names before my Father, and before his angels.” (Criswell, p. 156-157).