

Autopsy Of A Dead Church

Revelation 3:1-6

Introduction: 1) My very good friend Thom Rainer, president of LifeWay, wrote a highly acclaimed book entitled *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*. Its genesis was a popular blog article with the same title. In this book Rainer identifies several fatal causes that put once alive and vibrant churches in the grave. These include: 1) the past is the hero, 2) refusing to adapt to the needs of the present community, 3) moving the focus of the budget inward, 4) The Great Commission becomes the Great Omission, 5) the church became preference-driven that grows out of selfishness and personal agendas, 6) the tenure of the pastors decreased, 7) absence of regular, corporate prayer, 8) no clear purpose or vision, 9) obsessions over the facilities.

2) Let me build on these excellent points by Rainer with a simple observation.

Many a church begins with a man, reaches out with a mission, becomes a movement, but ends up a monument or in the mortuary. 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 zombie church, a church of living dead. There are live bodies walking around with dead souls on the inside. Amazingly, astonishingly, sometimes only God notices. Spiritually there is no pulse, no

heartbeat. Spiritually they are flat-lines. Spiritually they are a dead church.

Spiritually they are “dead men walking.”

3) Complementing Rainer’s excellent analysis, 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.

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4) Autopsy studies of modern churches is popular, even helpful. However, it is not new as Revelation 3:1-6 makes clear. Here the exalted and glorified Christ performs an examination of His church at Sardis and the result are painful: “you are dead.” The death was spreading and endangered the whole body, but the situation was not past salvaging if they would listen to the Great Physician’s diagnosis and remedies for healing. Hope was fading and time was running out, but it was not yet beyond a cure. Christ is exactly who they need and his prescription for a possible recovery is what they definitely must hear.

I. Christ is characterized by His knowledge and care 3:1

- The heavenly watcher, the angel, over the church at Sardis receives a message from Jesus by the pen of the apostle John. Sardis was approximately 30 miles SE of Thyatira and one of the oldest cities in the province of Asia. It was founded c. 1200 B.C. It was virtually destroyed (dead?!) by an earthquake in A.D. 17 but was rebuilt and given new life with the aid of Emperor Tiberius (A.D. 14-37). The city had fame and wealth, and it took pride in its temple to Cybele, its acropolis and its very famous necropolis or cemetery of “a 1000 hills,” because of “the hundreds of burial mounds visible on the skyline some 7 miles from Sardis” (Johnson, *EBC*, rev. ed., 626). The city however, had seen its best days and was living on its past reputation. William Ramsay said that Sardis, “was a relic of the period of barbaric warfare, which lived rather on its ancient prestige than on its suitability to present conditions” (Quoted in Mounce, 91), indeed “no city of Asia at that period showed such a melancholy contrast between past splendor and present decay” (quoted in Johnson, *EBC*, 627). It is fascinating to see a church mirroring the history and culture of the city where it is located! Christ is fully cognizant of the church’s condition. What He sees draws His serious concern.
- Jesus is simply described as “The One who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” The 7 spirits of God are not a heavenly angelic entourage

nor planetary deities! (Mounce, 93). This is the complete or perfect Holy Spirit; the Spirit in all His fullness. I think there is an allusion to Isaiah 11:2-5 and Zechariah 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 is dead. Sometimes we have no idea of our true spiritual condition. We walk about in a fog of deception, but Christ discerns how things really are. His perfect Spirit sees everything. The seven stars are angels, the “angelic representatives who report to Jesus” (Hamilton, *Revelation* in “Preaching the Word,” 105). That He has them is a reminder that they are in His possession and under His protection. They belong to Him and so do the churches over which they serve. He is responsible for them and they are accountable to Him. He sees, He knows, He cares. Through His life-giving Spirit He has the power to breathe new life, resurrection life, into this church. Church revitalization will always begin in heaven with the glorified Christ who longs to raise to new life a church where “rigor mortis [has] set in.” (Swindoll, 64).

II. Christ confronts those who have a reputation but are dead 3:1

- This church receives no word of commendation or congratulation. There is not a single word of praise. In this regard she is like her sister church at Laodicea (3:14-22). 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.” “I know your works, you have a reputation for being alive.” Sardis had a reputation as a beehive of activity and vitality. This was most likely a church with size, money and ministries that caused people to stop and take notice. She appeared to be and claimed to be a healthy fellowship, a successful church. You have a reputation is 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 truly doing great things for God. Now all they had was a name, an outward reputation. Often we can think we are one thing when actually we are altogether something different.

- “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. He subjects her to a divine CAT-scan, MRI and X-ray. The diagnosis is far worse than any external, superficial examination could have ever revealed: she is dead!

They were a zombie church!

- What was the cause of her demise? Though we cannot be sure it may be they had compromised their public witness to Jesus to avoid opposition and

persecution. They were trying to blend in with the culture and go along to get along. Jesus promises the victors in verse five that He will confess, acknowledge, us before His Father and the angels. Is there a hint here that this was a large part of their problem? They were unwilling to confess their allegiance to Christ? (Hamilton, 106). Osborne succinctly spells out the tragedy of Sardis and those who follow in her deadly footsteps: “It is a sad thing when the only accomplishment (“deed”) of a church is what it names itself, especially if the reality shows that name to be a lie, as here. Their past deeds gave them a reputation among other churches for being alive for Christ, but their present deeds show a quite different picture (in accordance with their city’s history)....Just outside their city was a famous necropolis, or cemetery, with the graves of long-dead kings. The assembly at Sardis represented that cemetery more than a living church.” (174).

III. Christ corrects those who are dying but not yet dead 3:2-3

- The love that our Savior has for His church is utterly amazing. Not only has He redeemed her, He again and again goes out to rescue her from self-inflicted wounds. Even when others would walk away saying let the patient die, she can’t be saved, He reaches out in love and compassion to save her yet again.

- Our God is in the resurrection business. He is continually active in bringing dead sinners to life (Eph. 2:1-7), and He is active in breathing life back into dead churches. When things appear their worse, our Savior 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; not as long as He is present.
- In rapid-fire succession our Lord peppers the church at Sardis with 5 imperatives and 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 would all do well to listen in on the treatment He prescribes.

1) Command #1: “Be alert”

The first thing Jesus says is “wake up” (*ESV*). Historically the city of Sardis had fallen twice due to military slothfulness. Jesus urges them to not suffer the same fate. They should learn a lesson from their city’s history. “Be alert” is an imperative with a durative force. Stay alert! Stay awake! Ladd says, “This admonition suggests that the church was not yet entirely beyond hope. It was not too late to awaken from spiritual

lethargy; there still remained a residuum of life which could be revived.

But unless such a revival occurs, this small remainder will also fall subject to spiritual death” (56). I doubt a more needful word could be uttered for and to the 21st century church in the western world. That includes the American church! A lack of faithful vigilance is a certain recipe for disaster. Yesterday’s victories are of little value for today’s battles.

2) Command #2: “Strengthen what remains”

What little that remains must be strengthened, built back up. Why?

Because it “is about to die.” Specifically Jesus says, “I have not found your works (which “I know,” v. 1) complete before My God.” Though the quantity of their works were deficient, it is more likely that it was the quality of their works that was most lacking. They had grown content with a mediocre, halfway, comfortable and convenient Christianity. Their faith wasn’t radical, it was almost invisible. The lost among whom they lived, worked and prayed saw nothing different or unique about them. The culture did not oppose them, it simply ignored them as of no real consequence or significance. They were so weak in their confession of Christ they bothered no one. Like the unfinished temple of Cybele in their city, they too were incomplete in what Christ saved them and called them to be.

3) Command #3: “Remember what you have received and heard”

Like the church at Ephesians (2:5), our Lord calls those at Sardis to “remember.” The idea is that they will continually call to remembrance. And, what are they to remember? The gospel! They need to continually recall the truth of the gospel they had “received and heard.” The church “had received the faith as an abiding truth at the moment faith came by hearing” (Mounce, 94). Again and again, daily, they need to preach the gospel to themselves! Again and again they needed to remind themselves of what Christ had done for them thru His bloody cross and glorious resurrection. He lived the life they should have lived. He died the death they should have died. He experienced the wrath of God that should have been theirs. He paid the penalty for sin that they should have paid. And, He gave them the gift of eternal life they do not deserve and wrote their name in the book of life where it can never be erased” (v. 5). Why hesitate to confess, such a Savior? Why compromise gospel truth and shame this King? Remember! Remember! Remember!

4) Command #4: “Keep it.”

The idea is hold on, guard what you received and heard. The truth of the gospel and the truths that flow from it are easily lost. It is a precious treasure that should never be taken for granted. Don’t let it slip away.

The fact is we never drift toward anything worthwhile. Never. We never slide into truth, but we can slide into error. You slide and slip into theological liberalism. You slide and slip into moral compromise. No, we never drift anywhere worth going. Furthermore, you do not want to drift and add to the gospel. And, you don't want to slip and subtract from the gospel. Stay where you are! Keep it! Hold on. Guard it! Never let it go. Stay with what you received and heard when you put your faith in Jesus.

5) Command #5: "Repent."

I fear many Christians have, not a faulty, but an inadequate understanding of biblical repentance. They know they repented from their sin when they were converted, but they fail to understand its ongoing place in a healthy Christian life. Repentance, a change of mind resulting in a change in attitude and action concerning sin, is to be our companion throughout our Christian life and pilgrimage. We never grow out of it or mature beyond it. If you thought that then you need to repent! Now! It appears the church at Sardis had forgotten the grace of repentance. As a result, they were in danger of receiving an unexpected visit from Christ. This imagery of Jesus coming like a thief is found several times in Revelation (3:3, 16:15) and other places in the Bible (Matt. 24:42-44; Luke 12:35-40;

1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10). Here it is not His 2nd coming for all. Rather, it is a coming in judgment against His church. What a striking image. What a powerful but grace-filled warning. Repent now! There is no promise that you will have time later. His surprise coming in judgment may catch you unprepared.

IV. Christ commends those who are holy and worthy of His praise 3:4

- Our Lord provides an accurate and honest evaluation of His church thru the omnipresent and omniscient Holy Spirit, as well as His own eyes which “are like a fiery flame” (1:17). He identifies some, not many, who have not defiled their clothes (*ESV*, “soiled their garments”). The picture is one of spiritual contamination of their Christian witness by accommodating to the current and faddish trends of the pagan culture and its city life. A small minority stood strong for Jesus both in confession and conduct. They bucked the trends, swam against the current that was engulfing members of their community. Taking this stand most certainly would be costly in the days to come. However, it will be gloriously worth it in the new age that is coming. They will walk in the purity of white clothing provided by Christ, symbolic of their justification and holiness of life. “In Revelation 7 the great multitude wearing white robes (vs. 9-10) is led by the Lamb to springs of living water (v. 17), and in chapter 14 the 144,000 “follow the Lamb

wherever he goes (v. 4)...it would appear walking “in white” is a way of describing those who are justified” (Mounce, 95). They are His and He knows them by name, one by one.

V. Christ confesses those who have His righteousness and are written in the Book of Life 3:5-6

The “victors,” “conquerors” (*ESV*), “overcomers” (*NKJV*), “victorious” (*NIV*) are provided a 3-fold promise for their fidelity to Christ. First, they will be clothed in His perfect righteousness symbolized by their white clothes (cf. 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:14). This is their justification accomplished, their sanctification in progress, and their glorification that is soon to come. He will dress us for we could never dress ourselves. Once more He does for us what we do not deserve and cannot do for ourselves!

Second, He promises never to erase our name from the book of life. Jim Hamilton speaks to this issue with clarity and insight and writes, “To be faithful to confess Jesus’ name, whatever it costs, is to conquer. Jesus promises white garments, and he promises that those who conquer will never have their names blotted out of the book of life. There are a number of references to the Book of Life in the Old and New Testaments (cf. Exodus 32:32; Psalm 69:28; Isaiah 4:3; Daniel 12:1, 2; Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Hebrews 12:23). The value of having one’s name written in the book of life is seen in what Jesus said to his

disciples in 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.” In the curse on the Minim, the Jews in the synagogue may call for the names of Christians to be blotted out of the book of life, but Jesus promises the church in Sardis that those who confess his name will never have their names blotted out of that book.” (109).

Third, Jesus promises to confess these who are clothed in His righteousness before the Father and His angels. He will acknowledge their name as evidence that He knows them and claims them as His own. They were not ashamed of Him and He is not ashamed of them. Jesus will tell His Father, “Danny belongs to me. He is mine.” The angels of God will hear the same message. The promise that our name is a permanently affixed signature in the book of life is a promise that should move us, motivate us and compel us, out of “grace gratitude”, to complete our works, bear our witness, stay clean and pursue purity that reflects the transforming work of Christ. After all, coupled with the promise of verse 5, we have the wonderful declaration of Matthew 10:32, “Therefore, everyone who will acknowledge Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven.” However, go on and read verses 33-34 for good measure! They provide the warning often neglected that is the companion to the promise: “But whoever denies Me before men, I will

also deny him before My Father in heaven. Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."

Conclusion

I close our study of this letter with the insights of one of my favorite Bible teachers, Chuck Swindoll. He is a fountain of wit and wisdom. So often he is "spot on" in his exposition and application even when there is necessary pain involved. Listen carefully to what this faithful Bible teacher has to say: "Finally, a dead church lacks evangelistic and missionary zeal. Turned inward on their own needs, preferences, and comfort, unhealthy churches give halfhearted attention to the conversion of the lost. In contrast, living churches devote time, resources, and energy to both local evangelism and worldwide missions.

In the message to Sardis, we saw Christ revealed as the Life-giver. He alone grants spiritual vitality to those with a comatose or dying faith. In light of His urgent alarm to Sardis, all of us who tend toward spiritual stupor must turn from stale religious routine and embrace the abundant life only Jesus Christ can provide. He extends a sincere invitation to you right now. If you feel the stiffness of spiritual rigor mortis setting in, take Christ's words to heart: wake up and declare your devotion." (70).

Swindoll is right. Wake up! Now! Declare your devotion to Christ. Now!

Please don't delay. Don't wait until it is too late.