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Bridgeway Church
Revelation #8

A Tragic Embodiment of Nominal Christianity Revelation 3:1-6

One of the more important lessons I've learned through the years, especially when it comes to church life, is that *seeing isn't always believing*. I don't want to sound cynical or pessimistic, but you shouldn't always trust your eyes. What I'm trying to say is that I'm not as impressed as I used to be when I hear of a church with a surging membership, multi-million dollar budget, expansive facilities, and a reputation for programs, ministries, and a growing influence in the community.

The problem I have in mind isn't restricted to the so-called "mega-church," it's just more conspicuous in their case. Even small congregations can be widely known for countless religious activities yet devoid of authentic commitment to Christ as Lord.

One of my hobbies, if you can call it that, is reading church websites on the internet in an effort to learn more about what other local church communities are doing and what they believe. It can be quite discouraging. Some of the sites look like a promo for the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus. They've got gimmicks, gadgets, celebrity guest speakers and goodies of all sorts, most of which are designed to sell you an image of being alive and worthy of your attendance (and money, of course).

The church in first-century Sardis was just such a congregation. Let me illustrate. Try to envision the scene at a typical funeral with its sprays of flowers, and bright, vivid colors, all of which is designed (at least in part) to divert one's attention from the dark reality of death. ***The church at Sardis was like a beautifully adorned corpse in a funeral home***, elegantly decked out in the visible splendor and fragrance of the most exquisite floral arrangement, set against the background of exquisite drapery and soft, but uplifting music. Yet beneath the outward façade was death and spiritual putrefaction of the vilest sort. I don't recall who said or wrote it, but here is one pastor's exhortation to his own church to avoid the errors of Sardis:

"Ecclesiastical corpses lie all about us. The caskets in which they repose are lined with satin and are decorated with solid silver handles and abundant flowers. Like the other caskets, they are just large enough for their occupants with no room for converts. These churches have died of respectability and have been embalmed in self-complacency. If by the grace of God this church is alive, be warned to our opportunity or the feet of them that buried your sister (Sardis) will be at the door to carry you out too."

Sardis was a city trying to live in the wake of its past glory. It had at one time been the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia and reached its pinnacle of fame and influence in the 6th century

b.c. But it was suffering from serious decline, aggravated by a devastating earthquake in 17 a.d. (described by Pliny, early in the 2nd century, as the greatest disaster in human memory). Despite the generous aid granted by the emperor Tiberius, “no city in Asia presented a more deplorable contrast of past splendour and present unresting decline” (R. H. Charles, I:78).

It comes as no great shock, then, when we discover that the letter our Lord addressed to the church in Sardis is one of the most severe of the seven. ***It is, in point of fact, along with the letter to Laodicea, the only church for which the Lord has no words of commendation. Simply put, Jesus had nothing good to say about the church in Sardis!***

This letter stands out in sharp contrast to the four which have preceded. To Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira our Lord sends his greetings followed by a word of encouragement and praise. Their faults, as bad as they were, do appear to be *exceptions* to the general spirit of obedience and growth. But in Sardis there is no word of praise: obedience and growth, at best, are the exception, not the rule. Furthermore, we note that although Sardis is similar to Pergamum and Thyatira in that they all have mixed membership, in the latter two churches the faulty members are in the minority, but at Sardis they predominate. ***Only a “few names” in Sardis “have not soiled their garments” (v. 4). The majority had incurred defilement, which is to say, they had given themselves over to idolatry and immorality.***

We might also ask why both Jews and Romans apparently left this church untouched when they so vigorously persecuted their neighbors. The answer may be its lack of lack of spiritual integrity and whole-souled devotion to Christ. As G. B. Caird notes, “content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and the depth of conviction which provokes intolerance, it was too innocuous to be worth persecuting” (48). Simply put, ***Sardis was the classic embodiment of inoffensive Christianity.***

The church in Sardis had acquired a ***reputation*** (v. 1b) in Asia Minor as a superlative congregation. To all external appearances, as far as what could be seen and heard, Sardis was a progressive church, first among its sister congregations to initiate a new program, full of vitality, overflowing with zeal, no doubt quite large. As you read John Stott’s description of the church in Sardis, ask yourself whether it applies today. The answer could be painful.

“[Sardis] was positively humming with activity. There was no shortage in the church of money or talent or manpower. There was every indication of life and vigor. . . . 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. Its works were beautiful grave clothes which were but a thin disguise for this ecclesiastical corpse. The eyes of Christ saw beyond the clothes to the skeleton. It was dead as mutton. It even stank” (85).

There are numerous mega-churches, mini-churches, and everything in between that are not only outwardly active but also inwardly vibrant, genuine, and Christ-exalting in every way. We should

thank God for them. But there are just as many churches in which the relentless swirl of religious activity is designed to divert attention away from the hypocrisy and spiritual sterility that exists within. We simply can't afford to be fooled into concluding all is well based *solely* on what we see or hear of them. A reputation without a corresponding reality is worthless in the eyes of Jesus Christ. His words of warning are forceful and to the point. We would be well-advised to heed them.

If the surrounding culture declares that we are alive but Jesus says we are dead (Rev. 3:1), something's seriously wrong with our standard of success. Our discernment is seriously flawed. Worse still is when *we ourselves* think we're alive but in fact are dead. All too often, the criteria by which we judge success and the criteria employed by God are vastly at odds. What constitutes good, effective, Christ-exalting ministry is one thing to the world, even the church, and another thing altogether to God.

Reputation vs. Reality

This was the case in the church at Sardis, where Jesus declared that they had the "reputation of being alive" but in fact were "**dead.**" By "dead" Jesus didn't mean altogether lifeless or utterly hopeless. Later, in v. 4, he indicates that the church in that city still has "a few . . . who have not soiled their garments." And his appeal to the church that it "wake up, and strengthen what remains . . . and repent" indicates that all is not lost. There is one final chance for renewal and life and hope for the future. But the church is in a sorry state: filled with religiosity, hypocrisy, in many respects only nominally Christian.

That a church could be widely known for its activity and influence, all the while "dead" in the estimation of Christ, is a frightening, sobering reality. Obviously, what impresses men does not necessarily impress God!

Let's get right to the point. ***This letter to the church in Sardis ought to alert us to the fact that a church can be confident of its place in the community, increasing in membership, energetic in its religious activities, liquid in its financial assets, fervent in its outreach to the broader culture, and yet dead!***

Those who hear this will respond: "Yes, but that's not us." They are particularly in jeopardy. It is the ***unsuspecting*** church, the ***unexamined*** church, the ***spiritually smug*** church that simply can't believe a congregation that *appears* to have been so richly blessed by God could possibly be the focus of a divine rebuke such as we find in the words to Sardis.

The Indictment

The particular problem that moved our Lord to speak in such forceful terms is found in the phrase: “I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God” (v. 2b). What is Jesus saying? A brief glance at the list of works in 2:19 will help: love, faith, service, patient endurance. All these were no doubt evident in Sardis, but in a hypocritical, haphazard, half-hearted, or again, “incomplete” way.

Perhaps their motives were wrong. Perhaps they performed the deeds well enough, but did so for selfish, even mercenary reasons. The words “*in the sight of my God*” indicate that whereas their deeds may gain human approval, God’s evaluation was another matter. Their efforts were perfunctory, lacking that zeal informed by knowledge, noted for beginnings that rarely came to anything of lasting worth. They were the works of a church that had become *addicted to mediocrity*. They were, in a word, wishy-washy!

This is stunning! The world looked at this congregation and said: “Wow! What impressive works you’ve performed. What a powerful impact you’ve had. You’ve done so much for so many.” God looked at this congregation and said: “You’re dead! I admit, your works are many, but they are motivated by pride, greed, and are driven by a desire that *you* be known as great rather than that *I* be known as great.”

Sardis may well be the first church in history to have been filled with what we call today *nominal Christians* (see Isa. 29:13; Mt. 15:8-9; 23:25-28; 2 Tim. 3:5). Thus far we have noted the marks of the church of which Jesus approves: doctrinal orthodoxy, suffering for Christ’s name sake, love, growth, and now at Sardis we learn of the importance of reality, genuineness, authenticity, a life-style that matches profession.

The Exhortation

Our Lord’s instruction begins with the exhortation, “wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die.” Such words leave room for hope, for they indicate that, although death is near, *the possibility for renewal remains*. There is an ember, so to speak, which is quickly cooling off, but may yet be fanned into flames of life if only the appropriate action is taken. There’s a slight possibility that “what remains and is about to die” is a reference to individual members of the church, making this a call to the faithful few to minister to those who are languishing in spiritual lethargy.

The exhortation to “wake up” suggests that a church can experience “spiritual slumber,” having fallen asleep and thus inattentive to what matters most. “You’re in a dream state,” says Jesus. “You’re living in an unreal world created by your own false criteria of what is pleasing to God.

Shake yourself awake and return to reality.” Being asleep, the church is oblivious to its perilous condition, unaware of the threat it faces. This is no time to take a nap.

If one sleeps incessantly, one becomes weak: sluggish, with slow reflexes, incapable of resisting temptation or fighting the onslaught of the enemy. Not everything has altogether died. But much is on life-support, hanging on in spiritual intensive care. Therefore, “strengthen” what remains of what is good. Apply yourself to revitalize your commitment to Christ and your pursuit of all things holy.

There are three ways this can be done. **First, remember.** Just as Jesus exhorted the Ephesians (2:5), so also those in Sardis. Past history should challenge them (us) to present endeavor. Recall the blessings of divine grace and be strengthened by the assurance that what God once did he can certainly do again.

Second, hold fast (“keep it”; cf. 2:24b-25). You don’t need anything new; simply hold firmly to what you’ve already received. The terms used here (“received and heard”) probably refers to the theological truths transmitted to the believers in Sardis when their congregation was founded.

Third, repent. Stop sinning! Start obeying! When was the last time you witnessed (or participated in) a church that repented corporately, confessing its failures without pretense or pride, and committed afresh to the “main and plain” of Holy Scripture?

The Threatened Discipline

The threatened discipline for failure to do so is vivid (see v. 3b). It’s unclear whether this refers to an impending “coming” of Christ in judgment and discipline against the church in Sardis or a broader reference to the second “coming” of Christ. In either case, the emphasis is on the unexpected (“like a thief”) nature of the coming. It would seem, however, that, since repentance would forestall the need for Christ’s “coming,” a historical visitation in the first century is in view, not the second coming at the end of history.

Most churches rarely if ever consider the potential for Jesus himself taking disciplinary action “against” (v. 3) them. We envision ourselves solely as individuals who are accountable to him, but rarely do we think in **corporate** terms. The church is more than a collection of individuals: it is a *community*, in which spiritual solidarity of vision and mission must be embraced and nurtured. There were a few faithful folk in Sardis who hadn’t yielded to the problems that plagued the congregation as a whole. But they will inevitably suffer from whatever disciplinary action the Lord might take against the public witness and financial stability and very existence of the church as a whole.

So, in what ways is the contemporary church asleep, on the verge of death, facing the sure disciplinary visitation of Christ himself?

It is enough that I point to *the abandonment of the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ*. Most churches would scoff at the suggestion they are anything less than Christ-centered. But how does our professed commitment to being Christocentric express itself in how we worship, in the frequency and fervency with which we celebrate the Eucharist, in what we sing, in how firmly we embrace and how loudly we publicly confess our theological convictions and how faithfully we share the gospel with our friends, neighbors, and co-workers?

How does our alleged Christo-centricity make itself felt in the way we instruct (or merely entertain) our children on Sunday morning, or the way we evangelize our community, or how consistently we unpack in our preaching the inspired and authoritative word that Christ himself has given us in Scripture?

If we are as energized and driven by the supremacy of Christ as we allege, would visitors to our Sunday service, or to a small group meeting on Wednesday night, immediately recognize it? When our annual report is published in January, would the centrality of Jesus Christ be seen in how funds were used, in how missionaries were supported, in the sort of literature we make available in the bookstore, in the criteria by which Elders are selected to serve?

This letter was then and is now a literal “wake up call” for the Church of Jesus Christ. If unheeded, we may well experience a “visitation” from the Lord, but unlike what we hoped for.

The Wrong Response

But it would be a mistake to throw in the towel when it comes to the local church or to conclude that it is irredeemable or that its influence is so minimal as to justify the creation of a new model or new expression for being the people of God.

This, it seems, is what George Barna suggested in his book *Revolution*. He documents the exodus from the local church of countless folk he calls “Revolutionaries”. Finding the local church to be excessively authoritarian, out of touch with the spiritual needs of its members, devoted primarily to its own preservation and comfort, and without much of a witness or influence in the surrounding society, many are simply walking away and allegedly finding satisfaction for their spiritual needs through other expressions of religious life.

Nowhere in these seven letters in Revelation 2-3 does Jesus even remotely suggest that the local church is dispensable. Notwithstanding his promised disciplinary visitation to those congregations that refuse to repent, there is no indication he envisioned his people living out their lives together and pursuing the values and goals of the kingdom of God any other way than through the ministry of the local church.

We see this in his letter to the church at Sardis. As bad as it was, and it was *really* bad, there were still “a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments” who are promised that they “will walk” with Jesus “in white, for they are worthy” (v. 4).

In a word, there was in the church at Sardis, as there is (most likely) in all churches, ***a faithful, believing, godly remnant*** who have refused to compromise their convictions and whom the Lord is determined to bless and favor with his manifest presence and goodness. This is an important point to remember. Our tendency is to pronounce an irreversible judgment on churches that we believe have abandoned the gospel or have compromised in some way. But Jesus here reminds us that even in the most lifeless churches, churches whose “works” fall far short of what God expects of us, there is often a faithful, godly remnant of true, Christ-exalting, gospel-centered people. It is primarily for them that we should pray.

Our Lord uses an interesting word in v. 4, declaring that these of the remnant have not “soiled” or “stained” (Gk., *molunō*) their garments. G. K. Beale believes this term is evidence that the sin of the majority was either idolatry or a decision to suppress their witness by assuming a low profile in idolatrous contexts of the pagan culture in which they had daily interaction. He points out that “soiled” (*molunō*) is used elsewhere in Revelation for the threat of being polluted by the stain of idolatry (see 14:4,6-9).

There is another important lesson for us here. I see nothing in this passage or anywhere else in the NT that would lead me to believe that the solution to idolatry or immorality or any other pervasive problem is the abandonment of the local church or the decision to “seek God” via some alternative movement. Yes, sometimes it is necessary to leave a particular local congregation. But this must always be with a view to planting or joining another one. We are not required to remain in a church or denomination that has abandoned the gospel or has seriously compromised its ethical posture or refuses to acknowledge the supreme authority of Scripture (although I think, at times, Christians are too quick to leave; church hopping is not a sanctioned biblical sport!). What is clear is that we are *not* free to ignore the NT witness concerning the necessity of involvement in a community of Christians whose corporate life is consistent with the principles of a local church as found, for example, in the pastoral epistles of Paul.

As bad as it was in Sardis, Jesus does not counsel the faithful few to depart. There’s a slight possibility that our Lord’s exhortation to “strengthen what remains and is about to die” (v. 2) is a reference to individual members of the church, making this a call to the faithful few to minister to those who are languishing in spiritual lethargy. Even if not, Jesus envisions them remaining within the church at Sardis and laboring for its renewal.

The Promised Reward

The reward promised to those who persevere is four-fold, two of which I’ll note briefly here and two of which I’ll save for the next message.

First, in v. 4, they will “walk” with Jesus “in white, for they are worthy.” Some see a reference here to the resurrection body, but this is more likely a promise of victory and irrevocable purity both in the intermediate state and in the messianic kingdom when those who have remained faithful will experience the consummation of fellowship with Jesus. The reference to “white” probably refers to the righteousness imputed to us in the act of justification, although we can’t dismiss the possibility that Jesus has in mind the experiential purity of life for which he in v. 4, and elsewhere in these seven letters (cf. Rev. 2:2-3; 2:9-10; 2:13; 2:19; 3:8,10), commends them. This is confirmed by what we read in Revelation 19 concerning the Marriage Supper of the Lamb:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints” (Rev. 19:6-8).

What does he mean when he says “they are worthy” (v. 4b)? He doesn’t mean that because of their personal godliness they have become worthy in the sense that they now have earned or merited salvation. They are “worthy” in two senses. First, God has made them worthy by imputing to them the righteousness of Jesus. Their “worth,” our “worth” is a gift of God’s grace, not a reward for our obedience. Second, at the same time Jesus calls on us to walk in a way that is “worthy” of our calling (cf. Eph. 4:1), which is to say, we are to live in a way that accurately reflects the glory, beauty, holiness, and great privilege of being a child of God.

Second, the “overcomer” or “conqueror” will be “clothed in white garments” (v. 5a; cf. 3:18; 6:11; 7:9-14; 19:13). Again, this refers both to the experiential holiness of life now, by virtue of the gracious, sanctifying work of the Spirit (cf. Rev. 19:6-8), as well as the righteousness of Christ himself that is imputed to us by faith.

Conclusion

I’ll close with two important comments. First, the language of the saints being clothed in white garments is consistently used in Revelation for those who have *persevered through suffering* (see especially 6:9-11; 7:9,13-14). In other words, refusing to accommodate or conform to the behavior of the crowd came at a high price. It’s rarely easy to be in the minority, especially when it costs you a job, or a promotion, or popularity, or perhaps even your physical safety and freedom. These “few” in Sardis no doubt suffered intensely for their commitment, but the reward made it all worthwhile.

I also believe Jesus wants us to understand and appreciate the emotional, perhaps even psychological, implications of this truth. What I mean is this. All too often those who know

Christ and by grace whole-heartedly desire to walk in purity of life fail to fully embrace and enjoy their status as God's forgiven children. They wallow in shame over sins long since confessed and of which they've sincerely repented. Contrary to their status as the adopted and justified children of God, they feel condemned and struggle to walk in the liberty and joy of the elect.

If that is you, remember this: ***God sees you in his Son!*** Although your clothing in white will be consummated in the age to come, you are now and forever will be a pure, spotless Bride in his sight (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:26-27; Rev. 19:7)! This glorious truth is not to be perverted into an excuse to sin, but is an incentive, by God's grace, to live passionately and resolutely in the pursuit of a practical purity that conforms ever more to the standing we already have in him.