

25 March 2007

“Sardis: The Dying Church that Rested on its Laurels”

Reading: Rev 3:1-6

Of late, the congregation has been asked to participate in a number of surveys. Imagine, for a moment, that the church at Sardis was about to embark upon a strategic plan and that the members were asked just four simple questions:

- *Do you feel the church is in good spiritual health?*
It is likely that they would have answered positively. Things were going well at Sardis.
- *Do you believe that the church has a promising future?*
Again, my guess is that there would have been optimism about the church's future.
- *Does the church enjoy the respect of the secular community?*
From all we can tell, the church was more comfortable in Sardis than in the other cities. The community seems to have accepted its existence.
- *On a scale of 1 to 10, comment on the spiritual vitality of the church.*
Here we have every reason to believe that the majority would have rated the church highly – perhaps at eight and above. This church was known for its vitality.

We know nothing about the origin of the church at Sardis, but the words of this message indicate that, to all intents and purposes, it was in good shape. It certainly enjoyed a good reputation.

Allow me to use my imagination a little. Here's what a 21st century counterpart of the church at Sardis would probably look like:

It would be known for its stability. Its sensible structures would help it to run smoothly. It would probably be attracting well-educated, respectable members. Its proud record would be evidenced by the pictures of the previous pastors that adorned the walls of its main corridor or boardroom. It would have a strong and varied music programme and enjoy good preaching. There would be no shortage of activity. Every year it would meet its budget and give a sizeable gift to missions. And exuberance – you couldn't visit the church without feeling that this is a “happening” place.

We cannot presume too much since our knowledge of the state of the church at Sardis comes entirely from this brief message. But good reputations are usually earned. Here was a church that found it easy to rest on its laurels.

As we have seen in the messages to the other churches, there is only one opinion that counts. What did the risen Lord think of this church? And what does he think of our church?

I HE ADMINISTERS A CRUSHING BLOW TO THEIR COMPLACENCY.

Listen to these chilling words:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

And we have to ask, as we do with each of these messages, might he say something similar to us? I have to ask, might he say something like this to me?

- A. In his excellent book on Revelation, Craig Koester categorises the seven churches in an interesting way. The churches, according to him, were facing three major pressures. There was the peril of *persecution*, the more subtle danger of *assimilation*, and the debilitating effect of *complacency*. The churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia were facing the intense heat of persecution. The churches of Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira were facing unrelenting pressure to be assimilated and absorbed. And, the churches at Sardis and Laodicea were feeling the mesmerising effects of complacency.¹
- B. We cannot argue from silence. But, interestingly, there is no mention of persecution and no trace of heresy. There is no Balaam to seduce them (as at Pergamum), no Jezebel to beguile them (as at Thyatira); there are no Nicolaitans, no false apostles, and there are no martyrs.
- C. Here we have one of those “chicken and egg” situations. Why had the church at Sardis escaped persecution? We notice that usually spiritual health and persecution go together. A spiritually healthy church earns respect *and* it arouses opposition. At the same time, persecution prunes the church and helps it to focus. But apparently the city of Sardis was happy to let this church be. George Caird is perhaps a little hard on the church here. He says that it was “content with mediocrity,” and that “it was too innocuous to be worth persecuting.”²
- D. We have to ask how it was possible for them to be so mistaken about their condition. It is easy to mistake natural liveliness for spiritual life. We can do many things to create a “vibe”. It is possible to imagine that all is well because

¹Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 54-69.

²“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 persecution.” G B Caird quoted by Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 75.

there is an abundance of activity, the singing is bright, and there is some excitement in the air.

I remember about fifteen years ago coming to a rude awakening one Sunday evening. I had commenced my ministry at a church that had an exciting evening service. It was the “in” place for students and young adults. Before the service began and after the service ended, there was an animated buzz in the foyer. Hoards of lively young people brought their bustling energy into the service. I looked on with grateful satisfaction. Then it suddenly dawned on me as I looked across the crowded foyer that the exuberance was not *necessarily* a sign of spiritual life at all. The “Twenties”, as they were known, had a reputation of being alive, but if the Lord had to address the situation and evaluate it as only he can, would he have to say, “You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”?

Where there is true spiritual life, there will be joy and enthusiasm; there will be growth and liveliness. But there can also be a sociological explanation for these things. We must not assume they necessarily indicate that there is spiritual life.

What then do we mean by spiritual life? I can think of no better explanation than the one we find in John 15. Jesus said:

‘I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener . . . Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing’ (John 15:1, 4-5).

Let’s be careful not to confuse the issues here. It makes little difference whether we sing old hymns or new spiritual songs, whether the service is liturgical or non-liturgical, whether it is marked by catholic ritual, protestant austerity or charismatic exuberance; style of service is not necessarily a sign of spiritual vitality. There simply is no substitute for spiritual life.

It seems so simple. It all comes down to our relationship with the Lord. We can go through all the motions. We can look alive; others can think we are alive and yet we can be moribund.

II THE LORD’S REPRIMAND SEEMS RATHER SUDDEN AND EXTREMELY SEVERE.

- A.** The Lord does not gently ease into a reprimand, acknowledge some of the church’s strong points and then say, “Nevertheless I have something against you.” He did so in the case of Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira and he had no criticism

for the church at Smyrna. Why then does he cut to the quick and administer this blatant rebuke to the church at Sardis?

- B. It's because they had pulled the wool over their own eyes. That's not to say there was nothing good in the church. But they were not in need of commendation. Had they been complimented for this or that aspect of their church life, they would probably have smiled contentedly. They were quite pleased with themselves. They were resting on their reputation. A commendation, at this point, would only have confirmed their faulty self-evaluation. Compliments to a complacent church like this would have been counter-productive. They needed to be confronted.

III **FORTUNATELY ALL WAS NOT LOST. THE CONDITION WAS NOT IRREVERSABLE. THE DISEASE WAS TREATABLE, NOT TERMINAL.**

And, if we find ourselves in this state, there is a remedy. The Lord spells it out for us in "five staccato imperatives."³

A. **Be Alert!**

²Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. ³Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard: obey it and repent.

"Wake up," is actually not the best way to translate this word. It really means, "Be watchful!" It refers to a continual state rather than a sudden action. In this context, it means "Keep your wits about you. Do not be lulled into a dream world of complacency and spiritual lethargy by apparent success. Don't rest on that good reputation." In the spiritual world, yesterday's manna is full of maggots and begins to smell (Ex 16:20). Our deeds may look fine to others but may be sadly lacking in the sight of God.

This imperative may have come to the Christians in Sardis with extra force. The citadel of Sardis was well nigh impregnable. Behind the city was Mount Tmolus and there were sheer cliffs on three sides that dropped some fifteen hundred feet to the valley below. Despite this, twice the all but impregnable city had been overtaken on account of the complacency of its citizens.⁴ These humiliating defeats were etched on the collective memory of the city. They understood the value of vigilance.

³ John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 86.

⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 38. William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 81-2.

Gerhard Krodel describes the condition of the Christians at Sardis as “ecclesiastical sleepwalking”.⁵ It is so easy to settle for less than God intends for us. Good facilities, security and ease can lull us into a sense of complacency. We wouldn’t be the first to rest on reputation and succumb to “ecclesiastical sleepwalking.” So let’s keep alert to the danger that ease and complacency bring.

B. Attend to the really important matters!

Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

Apparently there was no shortage of activity in the church. But, from God’s perspective, not much of value remained, and that which remained was about to shrivel and die. This is a call to be give attention to the really important matters. Before we can do that, we have to decide what they are. Apparently they had filled the calendar with activities but many of these were of no real value. The Lord had not found their deeds “complete” in the sight of God. They didn’t register on heaven’s spiritual metre. At Sardis, they needed to ask what was really important in the life of their church that was possibly being strangled by all the “stuff”. And we need to do exactly the same.

Darrell Johnson makes a good suggestion:

I think it would be healthy for every congregation to periodically (say, every five years) declare that all programs and activities stop and only be started up again if it can be demonstrated that they are in fact accomplishing a biblical purpose. Perhaps we ought to do the same with our own personal lives. Periodically stop everything and only start up that which keeps us in relationship with Jesus and fulfills his purpose for us. Strengthen what remains.⁶

C. Get back to basics!

³*Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard: obey it and repent.*

1. There are two ways in which we use the word ‘remember’ in the English language. It may refer to reminiscence: “Remember when we used to do such and such?” Or it may be more like an instruction. I grew up in a home where we were quite competitive about our sport. Before playing a tennis match as a junior, I can recall my father giving me advice. “Remember,” he would say, “take your racquet back early, watch the ball right on to your racquet and don’t try to hit the cover off every ball. Rally for the points. Remember, to concentrate!” Do you

⁵ Gerhard A. Krodel, *Revelation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 132.

⁶ Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 101.

see how he was using the word? That's exactly how it is used here. The word translated, 'remember' is an instruction about the present, not a reflection on the past. It is a present imperative and it means 'bear in mind'.

2. A few writers believe that there are good grounds for believing that the words "what you received" refer to the Holy Spirit. While I am not sure we can be dogmatic about it, I think they have a reasonable case. Darrel Johnson points out that "throughout Scripture the word 'received' is associated with the Holy Spirit."⁷ John Stott concurs and adds: "That this is the right interpretation is suggested by the first verse of the letter. Here Jesus describes himself as the one who holds the seven spirits of God."⁸
3. Of course, this makes a great deal of sense. The Holy Spirit is the source of our spiritual life. Without him, no one really calls Jesus Lord and no one is born into God's kingdom. Without him we cannot know God or understand him (John 3:1-5; 1 Cor 2:10-16; 12:3). It is through his activity that we are able to remain in the True Vine and so bear much fruit. "We may well have a reputation of being alive, but if our 'liveliness' is not the life that is imparted by the Spirit, we are as good as dead.
4. So this is a call for a simple reliance on the Holy Spirit. Of course, we know that we can't get along without him. But, in practice, we so easily assume that we can substitute learning and structures and programmes and paraphernalia. They may give the appearance of life but, without the Spirit, they have the musty smell of death.

D. Hold firmly to what is really important!

³*Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard: **obey** it and repent.*

1. The word translated "obey" means literally "to keep" or, as it is translated in the New Living Translation, "hold to it firmly". Again, this refers to a continuous state, not a 'once off' action. We have to realize that God doesn't give us an option here. He doesn't say, "Take your pick. You can choose to have a successful church your way or you can opt for my way if you like. I'd suggest that you do it my way." He says, "You have a reputation of being alive but you are dead . . . If you do not stay attentive, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what time I will come to you."

⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁸ John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 91. In keeping with the symbolic use of numbers in the book, this reference to "the seven spirits of God" is a way of referring to the Holy Spirit in the perfection of his manifold unity.

2. He says, “Irrespective of what you think of yourself and irrespective of what others think of you, you will never be what I intend you to be unless you keep this in mind.

E. Make a change!

³*Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard: obey it and **repent**.*

Here the action required is urgent and decisive.⁹ Repentance always starts with an acknowledgement. In this case, it is an acknowledgement that we lack spiritual life. The problem arises when our good reputation is intact and everyone thinks that because things look good on the surface, we are spiritually alive? But repentance is the action of those who are not prepared to settle for a façade of spiritual vitality and are willing to let God reverse the effects of spiritual decadence.

IV WHAT STARTED WITH SUCH A SOBERING JOLT ENDS WITH A WONDERFUL PROMISE.

It is only right that we today, sitting in this comfortable church, with its good reputation, its tidy structures and its many activities, ask ourselves about our true spiritual state. That can be disturbing. Perhaps you are deeply troubled about your own spiritual condition. The Lord’s statement to the church at Sardis may have come to your own heart with a stunning effect. But his message is not over. He has to jolt us out of our complacency, but listen to the positive ending.

⁴*Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.*

- A. Not everyone in the church was in this moribund condition. Most were. But there were some who were not satisfied with appearances and had not succumbed to mediocrity. They had not soiled their clothes and they were experiencing the life of the Spirit. And they will walk with the Lord dressed in white, depicting purity and possibly festivity.
- B. But the offer was open to everyone in the church – “He who overcomes will, *like them*, be dressed in white.” This promise is addressed to the very people whom the Lord had described as “dead”. They too can wear the festal garments.

⁹ Instead of a present imperative, the aorist imperative is used. This calls for decisive and urgent action. See Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 75.

- C. What's more, the Lord promises: "I will never blot his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels." This would have had a double significance for a Christian living in Sardis. Registers were kept in the city containing the names of the citizens. Upon the death of a citizen or if a citizen was convicted of treason, the name would be removed.¹⁰ There is a more important book than that. We read about it in Exodus and Psalm 69, in Daniel and Malachi and Luke and Philippians and Hebrews (Ex 32:32-33; Psalm 69:28; Dan 12:1; Mal 3:16; Luke 10:20; Phil 4:3; Heb 12:23). We read about it three more times in the Revelation (13:8; 20:15; 21:27). Here there is a double negative: "I will never *be any means* blot out his name from the book of life." Jesus had promised that whoever acknowledged him before men, he would acknowledge before his Father and the angels (Mt 10:32; Luke 12:8). Here he repeats that great promise.

So, what started out as a shocking exposé of complacency and lifelessness ends on such a positive note of hope.

Conclusion

I have a simple appeal this morning. I address it to myself, as I always seek to do when I preach. I address it to us as a church and to you as an individual. Let us never settle for appearances or rest on reputation. If, for whatever reason, we are lacking spiritual life, let's not compound the problem by trying to look lively. Rather, let's come to the Author of life and allow the Spirit of Life to enliven us again.

"Sardis: The Dying Church that Rested on its Laurels"
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¹⁰ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 40.