

THE CHURCH OF THE ZOMBIES

by Ray C. Stedman

Some years ago I was in the city of Adelaide in Australia, and found I was scheduled to preach in a certain church on Sunday evening. I had never been there before, and had no idea what the service would be like, but I can say that it was so terrible that I have never forgotten it. It was an old-fashioned church building, with a spire reaching up into the heavens and a great pipe organ in the auditorium. Although it could seat about 800 people there were only around 35 present. Most of them must have been well over 60 or 70. They had hired an organist to play for them who was visibly gay, and when he had finished he gathered up his music and left. The choir consisted of seven old ladies, all in their 80's it seemed, led by a cheerful old lady who tried her best to get everyone to sing but without much success. As I waited for my time to preach I was aware of the life of the city streaming by outside, with people totally unaware of and untouched by this church. Whenever I read of the church of Sardis, I think of that congregation in Australia.

Sardis was once one of the greatest cities of the world. It had been the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, and in the 6th century B. C. was ruled by a fabulously wealthy king whose name, Croesus, became a byword for uncounted wealth. When I was young I remember hearing rich people described as being "as rich as Croesus." (You do not hear that proverb much anymore, now it is "as rich as Merv Griffin!") Sardis was built on a mountain spur about 1500 feet above the valley floor. It was regarded as virtually impregnable to military assault.

Several times armies had tried to overthrow it but were unable to do so. But twice in its history it had fallen to foreign assault, once by the Persians, and once by the Greeks, and both victories were achieved by stealth. Sardis was so confident it could not be overcome that it failed to guard its walls adequately. In the dead of the night a band of brave soldiers climbed up the sides of the ravine and entered an unwatched gate and overthrew the city. Thus, Sardis was a city characterized by a complacent spirit.

The church in this city is the least attractive of the seven churches to whom these letters are written. Our Lord finds nothing to commend about it. Here is his appraisal of it, given to us in the first verse of Chapter 3:

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

"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." {Rev 3:1 NIV}

The way the Lord presents himself to each of these churches is a clue as to what the church needs. Here he calls himself "him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." These symbols were identified for us in the first chapter of Revelation. The "seven spirits" are a symbol of the Holy Spirit in his fullness. What this church at Sardis desperately needed was the Spirit -- life by the Spirit. They needed also to remember that Jesus is Lord of his church. It is not left to the members to run the church, to set up its form of government or to determine the nature of its ministry, but it is the prerogative of the Lord in their midst. These were truths they had forsaken or forgotten in Sardis.

As in all these letters, the life of the church is revealed in its deeds. Our Lord says, as he does in most of the letters, "I know your deeds; I know your works." In Sardis these were works that were done to impress people. They gave this church a name to live. They had a good reputation, but it was actually a dead church. The members of it were for the most part not even believers. They were not spiritually alive.

They were what we would call "nominal Christians." *Nominal* comes from the word "name" -- someone who has a name for something. Our Lord has declared, "You have a name to live, but you are not alive. You are dead!" This indicates a church made up of people who outwardly professed Christ -- probably many of them thought of themselves as believers -- but who actually possessed no spiritual life. They were Christians in

name only. A contemporary poet has described churches like this in these words:

Outwardly splendid as of old,
Inwardly lifeless, dead and cold.
Her force and fire all spent and gone,
Like the dead moon, she still shines on.

Unfortunately there are thousands of churches like that around the world today. It is what gives non-Christians such a negative impression of Christian faith. They see the profession, they hear the wonderful words, but there is no life in them. Nothing backs them up. These churches consist largely of what someone has described as

"Mild-mannered people,
meeting in mild-mannered ways,
striving to be more mild-mannered."

Hollywood has given us a name for people like that: it calls them "Zombies" -- corpses that are alive, that walk about as though they are living but they are really dead. As we read this letter, we are looking at the First Zombie Church of Sardis!

That word has been updated a bit recently. I ran across a quotation from our friend Calvin Miller, of Omaha, Nebraska. Some of you know his poem "The Singer." He says:

Many Christians are really Christaholics and not disciples at all. Disciples are cross-bearers; they seek Christ. Christaholics seek happiness. Disciples dare to discipline themselves, and the demands they place on themselves leave them enjoying the happiness of their growth. Christaholics are escapists looking for a shortcut to Nirvana. Like drug addicts, they are trying to "bomb out" of their depressing world.

The church at Sardis, says our Lord, is a church that has a reputation to live, but is really dead. It is a church of Christaholics!

But there was a time, apparently, when this church was alive, when it was filled with people who knew the Lord. Because they knew him, they served the homeless and the needy of the city. That is the way they won a reputation. They appeared to be a people committed to good works, but now there was no life there. Remember that Paul warns us of that condition in his great 13th chapter of First Corinthians. He says, "Though I speak in tongues, have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and knowledge, and have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal," {cf, 1 Cor 13:1-2 NIV}. Here was a church that once had a great ministry but it had slipped away from them. It once had much impact in the city of Sardis, but now nothing is happening.

Dr. William Barclay has said: "A church is in danger of death when it begins to worship its own past; when it is more concerned with forms than with life; when it loves systems more than it loves Jesus; when it is more concerned with material than it is with spiritual things." This church in Sardis was so devoid of life that it actually had no struggles going on within it.

Notice the difference between it and the other churches. There are no Jewish accusers of this church even though there was a large colony of Jews in the city of Sardis. They ignored the church, or perhaps did not even know of its existence. There were no false apostles here. There were no domineering Nicolaitans who needed to be guarded against. There were no female seducers, as at Thyatira. There was nothing! Zip -- that was the ministry of the church at Sardis!

What does a dead church need? Our Lord wastes no time in telling them. It is interesting, is it not, that he still owns this church? He does not say, "I have nothing to do with you." He gives them a way of recovery, and he still reveals himself as Lord of the church. As we look at these steps to recovery, they will also help us to identify a condition of death in a church.

The first thing a dead church needs is to wake up. Jesus says:

"Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you." {Rev 3:2-3 NIV}

The first need of a church that is dying or dead is to awaken to its condition. These words in Greek are staccato commands, sharp words, like a slap in the face, designed to stimulate, to wake up. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul says,

**"Wake up, O sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you," {Eph 5:14 NIV}.**

This was the need of the church here in Sardis. Wake up! Honestly face your failure! Feel the dullness of your services! Smell the deadness of your life! Ask yourself, "What has gone wrong? Why are our services so dreary, so dull, so unattractive? Why do people not want to come?" A church in this state needs to ask itself some very serious, sobering, honest questions. "Wake up!" says Jesus.

Second, "Strengthen what remains." What was that? Jesus has already told them what there is of value in the church. "I know your works," he says. They were good works, in a way, but they were incomplete. "Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God." Their works were incomplete, unfinished. The actions were right, but the motives were wrong. They were not doing them for the right reason.

As you read this you can see that here is a church that is busy doing good things, but doing them to impress people. They were trying to display and enhance a reputation they had. They were concerned as to whether people around would see, and know what they were doing. But Jesus says even those good deeds were about to die. "Strengthen them," he says. How? By putting their motives right!

All through the Scriptures we are told that God judges, not the things we do, but the reason we do them. He reads our hearts. He is judging whether our work is done out of love for him and gratitude for what he has done for us, and not caring whether people see them or not, whether we are praised for them or not. They are done because we want to please him. What this church needed was to capture again the meaning of the words, "for the Lord's sake," and, "as unto Him."

I noted last week in *Time Magazine* an interview with Mother Teresa, who is doing such a wonderful work in the city of Calcutta, India. Among other things she said were these words, "We try to pray through our work by doing it with Jesus, for Jesus, to Jesus. That helps us put our whole heart and soul into doing it. The dying, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unwanted, the unloved -- they are Jesus in disguise." What a wonderful spirit! That is what this church in Sardis so desperately needed.

Third, they needed to remember what they heard; to obey it, and to repent. At this particular point the New International Version, from which I am reading, is not accurate. It says, "Remember, therefore, what you have received," but, in Greek it is not *what* but *how* -- "how you have received." What they heard, of course, was the gospel. They had heard the message of Jesus: his crucifixion on behalf of sinners, of his resurrection, of his availability to human beings by the Spirit to strengthen them and impart to them his own righteous life and position. They had heard all that, but the important thing was, *how* did it come to you? "Remember how you received and heard this." What he is referring to is the ministry of the Spirit. Remember, he is the One who holds the seven spirits. When these people had first heard the gospel they had heard it by the Spirit. The Word came to them in the power of the Spirit.

Many years ago I was in Chicago, and one Sunday morning I slipped into the great Methodist Temple in the Loop. As I was waiting for the service to start, I read in the back of the hymnal the doctrinal statement of the church, a statement that originated largely with John Wesley. It came out of the days of the great Evangelical Awakening in Britain when the Wesleys and George Whitfield preached to tens of thousands in fields and

streets throughout the British Isles. That gospel was the same gospel the church has always preached, but in those days it came with unusual power because of the Spirit. The creed of the church in Chicago was still unchanged, but the spirit of the service I watched was cold and formal. There was little of life in it. That church may have recovered now, I hope it has, but then it had a name to live, but was spiritually dead.

How do you lay hold of the Spirit? How do you bring the Spirit's life back into a church which has the gospel? Scripture only suggests one way. It is very simple. In its briefest form it is, "Repent and believe."

- Repent! Look at yourself and see your wrong attitudes, your wrong outlook, your self-appraisal as unacceptable before God.
- Then believe! Cast yourself upon the grace of Jesus. Receive from him the word of grace. Let it take deep root in your heart. He will impart to you the life of the Spirit of God. That is what the members of this church needed -- to repent and believe.

As I sat reading that doctrinal statement in Chicago, I rejoiced over the fact that the Methodist denomination has held to the creed that John Wesley formulated, but my heart was saddened as the service went on. I went away, not warmed and cheered but saddened by what I beheld. True repentance brings about conversion and allows the Spirit to impart the life of Christ. That is why our Lord says to Sardis, "Remember how you have received and heard, and obey it and repent." That is the place of new beginning.

The fourth thing they needed was to recover the hope of the Lord's return. "If you do not wake up," Jesus says, "I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you." We have already seen in the first chapter and in several of the letters the hope of the coming of the Lord described. It is the great hope toward which the church has been headed since its very beginning. But here is a church that has lost its expectation of that coming. The aspect of our Lord's coming that they particularly needed was not his visible appearing in glory to establish his kingdom, when every eye shall see him, as described in the first chapter, but rather that aspect of his second coming that our Lord described in his great Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:43. There he says that he will come suddenly, without warning, like a thief comes to steal away the treasure of a home.

Some friends of mine were once sleeping in their house upstairs and when they came down in the morning they found their home had been ransacked and their silverware, their treasure, was gone. They had heard nothing because a thief does not announce his coming. He comes silently and takes what he wants and then disappears again.

That is the way the *parousia*, the coming of the Lord, will begin. He will take his church suddenly out of the world. It will disappear from the world's sight. Paul describes it in wonderfully exciting words in First Corinthians 15, the great resurrection chapter. There he says, "Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep (i.e., die) but we shall all be changed; in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye," {cf, 1 Cor 15:51-52}. He holds that forth as the special hope of the church. The church is the unrecognized treasure of the world, but the Lord will come as a thief and take it to himself. That is his description of what we call, in theology, "the rapture" of the church (*the departure* of the church is perhaps a better term).

When the Lord comes as a thief, if a church is made up of members who are not believers, who have a name to live but have no spiritual life, they will be left behind. Thus our Lord warns here. "If you do not wake up I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you." As we have said, there are many churches like this today throughout the world. I have been in many of them in different countries, and many also here in the United States. It is sad to see them so lifeless and dull when they could be so alive and vital.

There is a period of church history which is predominantly characterized by Sardis conditions. It extends from the last half of the 16th century, immediately following the Reformation, to about the middle of the 18th century, to the beginning of the Evangelical Awakening.

The Reformation, of course, was a time when the church came out of death into life. When Luther discovered

the great truth of justification by faith alone and began to preach throughout Germany, the good news spread like wildfire throughout the nations of Northern Europe. People realized afresh the greatness, the liberty of the gospel. All Europe was aflame with freedom.

As you watch your television sets today and see the cities of Eastern Europe filled with excited, turned-on people, caught up with the thrill of being set free from conditions of bondage and depression, you are seeing again what must have happened in Europe during the early days of the 16th century. There has not been so much excitement over the toppling of a wall in Berlin since Joshua brought down the walls of Jericho.

So also in Luther's day, the gospel spread like wildfire throughout that area and the cruel walls of spiritual bondage fell before the power of God's word.

The Reformers preached again the truth about Jesus. They preached in the power of the Spirit. Martin Luther in Germany, Count Zwingli in Switzerland, Calvin in Geneva, John Knox in Scotland -- all of them preached justification by faith; that Christ was the sufficient Savior of men and they needed to believe that and receive it individually. This good news spread quickly, but it only lasted a relatively short time.

Anyone familiar with church history must wonder at the way the great fires of the Reformation began to cool so quickly after the Reformers had gone. A fatal error had been made. The churches began to fail even while the Reformers were still alive because they neglected large areas of theology and centered upon the way of salvation largely.

Thus these men came to make a great and serious mistake. They began to link the oversight and leadership of the church with the government of the country in which they lived!

- Luther did it when he looked to the German princes for protection against the power of Rome.
- Zwingli did it in Switzerland because he was associated with the government of the country and brought the churches under his oversight into a direct tie with the state.
- Calvin did it in Geneva when he sought to turn the city into a theocracy.
- Knox did it in Scotland as well.

The system of State churches was adopted. This practice proved to be a very dangerous and destructive error and it ultimately drained the gospel of its spiritual content. There was no longer life within the great words. The creed was right -- and these creeds remain to this day -- but in most places where this occurred the vitality of the churches has disappeared.

In 1965, I traveled with a group of businessmen from this area all through northern Germany, Denmark, Holland, England and Scotland. We had the opportunity to meet with the lay leaders of the state churches in these countries. Invariably they told us how unattractive church life was to them. Many of them were attending regularly but not getting any enjoyment out of it. Only loyalty to a system kept them involved at all.

The reason for this death was that the pastors of the state churches were commissioned by the state to act as civil servants. They had to do all the baptizing, the marrying and the burying of everybody in the parish (a geographical area that was assigned to them, often consisting of tens of thousands of people). That meant they had no time left for proper study and preaching of the Word. The result was that the churches were deprived very quickly of the hearing of the Word and the power of the Spirit. Life drained away from their midst.

In Copenhagen, a pastor said to me, with tears in his eyes, "Oh, I wish I could preach the Word like you do in America, but I have no time. I have to marry everyone. I have to baptize all the babies that are born and bury everyone who dies in this whole parish, and I simply have no time to study." (They often describe it as having to hatch, match, and dispatch everyone!). He longed to study, but he was unable to impart the truth of the Word to his congregation because of the tie to the state.

This is still widely true in Europe today. Churches there are almost totally empty. There may be a few believers among those present, but the membership of the church is made up of people who have a name to live but are spiritually dead.

But now a promise is given to the individuals who are faithful to the Lord even in dead churches, in Verses 4-6. Our Lord says:

"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. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." {Rev 3:4-6 NIV}

White garments are always in Scripture a symbol of redemption. In the seventh chapter of this book we read of a great multitude of people who come out of the great tribulation and who have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb," {Rev 7:14}. Clearly, white garments are a sign of being redeemed, being saved by the grace of God. Remember Isaiah's great word in his opening chapter. The 18th verse says,

**"Come now, let us reason together,"
says the Lord,
"though your sins be as scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they be red like crimson,
they shall be as wool." {Isa 1:18 KJV}**

That is what the blood of the Lamb can do. These are said to be "worthy," not because they have lived good moral lives -- many of them very likely had not -- but because they had washed away their sins in the blood of the Lamb. They were worthy because God had imparted to them the righteousness of Christ. That is the gift which he gives to all who come by faith to him. You need no longer to try to earn your way, or work your way, into a good relationship with God. You can never do so, but you are given it by believing his Word and receiving his forgiveness.

These, then, are the overcomers who are mentioned in Verse 5. The Lord promises them three specific things:

First, they will be "dressed in white," i.e., they will be given his own righteousness. Many of the hymns reflect this great truth:

Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
'Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

Second, he promises: "I will never blot out his name from the book of life." That promise has bothered many people because they immediately think, "That implies that some can be blotted out of the book of life. If I am once given the righteousness of Christ does this mean I can lose it again? If I do not live up to what I should, or walk rightly before the Lord, can I lose it again?" But notice the way the Lord puts it. He does not say anything about anyone's name being blotted out. His words are simply assuring that those who trust him will never be blotted out.

I think he is addressing himself to the fears of the redeemed. Many Christians are troubled by the thought that perhaps they can lose their salvation. Sometimes when we have misbehaved badly, when we have done things we are ashamed of, we ask ourselves, "What has happened to me? Am I no longer a Christian? Have I lost my salvation?"

When I was a young pastor I remember being called one day by a beloved old Presbyterian pastor, Dr. Francis Russell, one of the men who ministered at PBC in those early days. He lived here in town, and in his 90's, this godly old man called and asked me to come over to see him. I found he was deeply troubled by the fact

that as he was nearing the end of his life he wondered if he was really a Christian after all. People are often troubled by such thoughts. Our Lord knows that, and he is here reassuring such. "No, you need not be disturbed. If you are really a believer, if you have come to Christ, if you have been born again, and have my life in you, I will never blot out your name from the book of life." That word *never*, is the strongest negative in the Greek language. It should be translated, "I will never, ever, under any circumstances, blot out your name from the book of life." What wonderful reassurance!

"On the contrary," says Jesus (and this is the third thing), "I will acknowledge you before my Father and the angels in heaven." When we arrive in glory our lives will be visible to everybody. Nothing is hidden then. Jesus tells us, "That which you have done in secret will be shouted from the house tops," {cf, Matt 12:13 KJV}. Everything is wide open. No aspect of life can be hidden away. Knowing that, many of us are a little afraid to appear in glory. We know truths about ourselves that we do not want known. But Jesus says, "When you stand there with your entire record exposed for everybody to see, I will look at you and say, 'You are mine.' I will acknowledge your name before the Father and all his angels. This sinner, this defiled person, this unworthy character -- I want the universe to know -- he is mine!" That is what he promised to do in the 10th chapter of Matthew.

So the closing word, as always in these letters, is to the one who has ears to hear. "Listen," he says, "to each letter." All of Scripture is profitable to someone who has the life of Christ within.

As we draw this service to a close it may be that there are some here who have never really come to life in Christ:

- Church attendance is excellent, but it will never save you.
- Church membership has value, but it will never save you.
- You are saved when:
 - You repent of your self-dependence,
 - Your hope that you can get by on your own character, and
 - Believing that Jesus has settled it for you by the sacrifice of himself,
 - You receive him as Lord and Savior.

That is when the life of the Spirit is imparted -- and that is what the church at Sardis required.

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for those ringing words of assurance that we have security in our Lord Jesus; that he holds us by his mighty hand, and we shall never perish but have eternal life as he has promised. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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