

What Christ Expects of His Church

5. The Letter to Sardis: Spiritual Vitality and Vigilance

Revelation 3:1-6

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina
July 19, 2020

What does Christ expect of his church, of people who are called by his name? That has been the substance of our search in this series of sermons investigating the letters addressed in good apocalyptic style to the seven churches of Asia near the close of the first century. The letters grow out of John's vision of the risen Christ who dictates, as it were, these messages through the hand and heart of John to the designated churches. And what we have learned thus far in summary fashion is that Christ expects his followers to love fervently (Ephesus), to suffer courageously (Smyrna), to be people characterized by the truth as they are given to understand it (Pergamum), and fourthly to be a people of holiness who stand out from a corrupt culture (Thyatira). Today we will learn that Christ also expects his church to be real as opposed to artificial, or genuine as opposed to superficial or even hypocritical. Another way of saying this is that the church should exhibit both vitality and vigilance. And we learn this from the fifth letter to the church of Sardis found in Revelation 3-6.

Thus far, in spite of their failings and the unique challenges of their local situations, all of the churches thus far have still received accolades from Christ for some aspect of their life or faith. So we might well ask what Jesus found in the church of Sardis that was commendable? And the answer is hardly anything at all! Here is a church seemingly alive from the world's perspective but according to Jesus' assessment it is basically dead. Here is a church whose best days are behind her. She has a great reputation because of her past, but her future is in jeopardy, unless she can somehow do those things that will revive and renew her life and her faith. Sir W. M. Ramsey says of Sardis that here is a "melancholy contrast between past splendor and present decay."

Indeed, the history of Sardis should have provided the church in that location with a profound lesson, and that is the point of the language being used in this letter. Seven hundred years before its reception of John's letter, Sardis had been one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. From there the king of Lydia ruled over a vast and famous oriental empire, magnificent in its luxury and wealth. In fact, its wealth was legendary. My mother often used a figure of speech referring to someone of great wealth as "rich as Croesus." Well, Croesus was actually one of the greatest of the Sardinian kings. He and his kingdom benefited from all the gold that was carried by the river Pactolus through the valley beneath them.

Sardis itself was really two towns, one down lower in the valley and the other high upon a mountainous plateau where it stood as a fortress and had a seemingly impregnable position, safe from all invaders and enemies or so it assumed.

The problem was that with its wealth and assumed safety Sardis had become the victim of her own good fortune. According to William Barclay, Solon, the wisest of the Greeks, had come to visit Sardis in the midst of the opulent reign of King Croesus. But what he had observed however was a people blinded by their own wealth and splendor and unaware of the seeds of softness and degeneration that had been sown among them. It was then that he uttered his famous saying, "Call no man happy until he is dead," because Solon realized how quickly and how likely the fall of Croesus was because circumstances could well change overnight. Is this not true today? What we think is a strength can often become a weakness and what we regard as an asset may prove in time to be an unforeseen liability.

Croesus confidently decided to engage Cyrus, king of Persia in a war. (You may remember Cyrus as the ruler who conquered Babylon and allowed the Jewish exiles to return to their home after seventy years in captivity.) At any rate, prior to undertaking this battle, Croesus sought the counsel of the famous oracle at Delphi and was told, "If you cross the river Halys, you will destroy a great empire." Croesus mistakenly assumed this meant that he would annihilate the Persians but in truth it proved to be the destruction of his own empire. Thinking himself and his kingdom to be invincible Croesus crossed the river, attacked the Persians and then withdrew to his safe fortress on top of the mountain to recuperate and resupply his forces. Cyrus followed and surrounded the city and laid siege to it, but Croesus wasn't worried, thinking no one could scale the walls of his fortress or gain entrance. Cyrus waited for fourteen days and offered a special reward to any of his troops who could discover a way to enter the city. According to Herodotus, the Greek historian, one of the Persian soldiers observed that one of the Sardians had accidentally dropped his helmet over the wall and then he watched as the man climbed down the precipice and then carefully made his way back up into the city. The Persian concluded that there must be a crack in the rock somewhere which would allow the soldier to climb back into the fortress. And so, at night he led a party of Persian troops up the mountain to the crevice which they found, and they entered the city and discovered that it was completely unguarded. Like many Americans prior to 9-11 like many younger Americans during this Covid-19 pandemic, they felt themselves invulnerable and overly secure. And so did Sardis and Croesus fall. Their lack of vigilance, their overconfidence and their sense of invincibility proved to be their downfall. Their reputation failed to save them.

For two centuries thereafter Sardis disappeared from the pages of history only to be resurrected by Alexander the Great to become a city of Greek culture and prominence once again. But when Alexander died many commanders sought to capture and claim Sardis for themselves. Acheaus vied with Antiochus. Acheaus sought refuge in the fortress of Sardis and once again the city was besieged, this time by Antiochus. But the Sardians had forgotten their own history apparently because once again brave soldiers scaled the walls at night, found an

entrance into the fortress and discovered as before that no troops were on guard. Once again, Sardis fell. There is a common saying that “Eternal Vigilance is the price of liberty.” It is equally true that eternal vigilance is the price of a vital and lasting faith.

Now by the end of the first century when the book of Revelation was being composed Sardis was now a part of the Roman Empire. It had even survived and been reconstructed following a devastating earthquake in A.D. 17, thanks to the generosity of the Emperor Tiberius. As John was writing, Sardis had become primarily a center of the woolen trade and had developed the art of dyeing wool to make fine clothing and fabrics. Sardis was, in effect, a city with a name and a reputation, a city with a glorious past but a future in doubt. It was a mere shadow of the great city it had once been. Sardis remained a city of wealth but in John’s day it was degenerate and in decline. It was more like an ancient monument on top of a hill but largely devoid of life and vitality and spirit.

We may have missed their significance, but when the risen Christ uses words like wake-up, watch, be on guard, because he will come at an unexpected hour the Sardians who knew their history would have recognized a familiar refrain in those words and a stern warning. Don’t be so sure that you are safe and secure, alive and well. The fact is, says Jesus to the church of Sardis, you are living on your name and reputation and are on the verge of destruction. Indeed, you may be dead already.

The church of Sardis must have resembled the city. They mirrored each other. The church too had a reputation for being alive also, but it was lethargic and lax morally and spiritually and needed desperately to be aroused to be revived, revitalized if it was to survive.

The letter to the church of Sardis prompts me to ask of myself, of our church and of our denomination --- are we alive or dead? Are we living off our past and our reputation? I can talk for hours about the glorious history of the Presbyterian and Reformed faith. I can tell you how our ancestors risked their lives and fortunes in defense of the Gospel and in pursuit of liberty. I can tell you how our forbearers shaped this republic and its laws and institutions, how they built churches, schools and colleges throughout the land and equipped women and men to give distinguished leadership in all areas of our national life --- law, politics, the military, business and commerce, international relations, the arts, and various liberating movements that changed the lives of minorities and women. But ask me about our history and not our future because I have more confidence in where we have been than in where we are going. Yes, we have a glorious reputation, but it belies our current malaise. In some ways the church is like an old dowager who still retains her titles and her properties but has long since stopped attempting new things or pursuing new goals. She is alive in name only having lost all vitality.

A few years ago, we celebrated 325 years of witness as a Presbyterian denomination in America. But will the Presbyterian Church USA be here another 300 years? In 2024 this

congregation will celebrate its Bicentennial of life and service to Greensboro and the world. But will we still be here serving faithfully, glorifying God and following Jesus Christ in the year 2124? Well, in my view it all depends on whether we're willing to do the things that Jesus expects the Sardian church to do --- to wake-up to remember what we have received and what has been entrusted to us, to obey what we have been taught and to repent of our failings. Consider the imperatives here. There are Christ's commands to the church of Sardis and I dare to say to us as well.

Let us ask of ourselves: Is our faith genuine? Is it real or only a pretense? Are we actually striving to follow Jesus or are we merely admiring him from afar? Paul warns Timothy (II Timothy 3:5) about those who someday will have only the "form of Godliness" but will deny its power. They will go through the routines and the rituals of religion but their discipleship will be a show. Their membership in the church of Jesus Christ matters little more than their membership in any other club or organization. It doesn't really affect their living. They resist its demands and they violate its standards. Are they merely deceived? Or are they frauds and hypocrites? Why is there such a disconnect between what they profess and how they perform? Is our vitality gone? Are we no longer alive and have we ceased to be vigilant of our faith and work?

The lone redeeming feature of the church of Sardis is that a small remnant, a few people, had remained faithful and not "soiled their clothes" or contaminated themselves by adopting the ways of the world or what benefits them personally over the ways of God. Isn't that always the case? It seems in scripture there is always a faithful remnant. Back in Sodom and Gomorrah there were some who remained unsoiled by the world. If we can believe Ezekiel they not only abstained from the sexual abuse of others, but they cared for the poor and the needy and were humble and self-disciplined. In Israel and Judah there were faithful remnants as well despite the failings and the eventual fall of those nations. But the fact that some remained unsoiled did not prevent God's judgment from descending.

Now the problem in Sardis wasn't heresy so much as it was lethargy, superficiality and self-satisfaction. Heresy at least suggests that people are thinking and are passionate. Obviously they care about what people believe and what they do and are not afraid to risk confrontation. To quote William Barclay. "There is nothing worse than a state in which a man is orthodox because he is too lazy to think for himself. A man is actually better with a heresy which he holds intensely and personally than with an orthodoxy about which in his heart of hearts he does not care."

Thankfully this church and others have a minority of members who do care, and yes more than a remnant. They care about its mission, its education, its facilities, its fellowship, its faith and so they give of their money sacrificially and of their time and talents and energies generously. They pray for one another and study to become well-equipped and effective as disciples. Nevertheless, they remain a distinct minority. Too many of us in this church and too

many members of other churches are Christians in name only and are frankly indistinguishable from those about them who make no claim to follow Jesus.

The letter to Sardis concludes, as do others, with a promise to those who have not “soiled their clothes” but continued their walk with Jesus. Keep in mind that these followers live in a city which like Greensboro was very conscious of clothing and textiles in demand and they are assured that they will be dressed in “white robes.” White robes were festival garments, a sign of victory and celebration. And white, of course, is used as the color of purity throughout the book of Revelation and was appropriate for those who remained unstained by the world. So, John speaks of white robes, white stones, white clouds, white horses, and even a great white throne.

What is more, the names of the faithful will not be blotted out of the book of life. Having confessed Jesus’ name, he in turn would be privileged to confess their names before his father. In conclusion, I ask again whether we are genuine disciples vital and vigilant or disciples in name only? Our names are on the church rolls to be sure, but are they on that roll that finally matters? Time and eternity, I suppose, will finally tell.

Until then, let us heed the commands of Jesus to “wakeup;” strengthen what remains; remember what has been given to us; obey and repent.

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.