

Revelation 3:1-6 “Sardis: The Church of Cultural Accommodation”

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In Greek mythology, King Midas was known for his folly and greed. Due to a special kindness, he was rewarded by the god Dionysius with a wish. Midas wished that all which he touched would turn to gold. It was a stupid wish that he would regret, for it almost costs him his life. Midas nearly starved to death, for even the food that he touched turned to gold, leaving it inedible and him hungry. So Dionysius released Midas from his wish by having him bathe in the Pactolus River. Where? At the ancient city of Sardis—the event which supposedly turned the silt of the river into gold dust. Making Sardis one of the wealthiest cities in the world.

In our text today, we find the ancient city of Sardis. When we examine the text, we learn *since Jesus expects the Church to be not of the world—identifiably distinct from the world—then you and I should repent of cultural accommodation.*

Context

The *Apocalypse* is a series of seven visions that span the entire time from the 1st coming of Christ until the 2nd coming; parallel visions. Each of these seven cycles portrays the same spiritual war, each from a different vantage point, a different camera angle. Yet they are not boring reruns. There is a progression in the parallel visions; taking us deeper and deeper into the mysterious, eternal plan of God. We are in the first vision which runs from chapters 1-3. A shocking, traumatizing vision of the resurrected and glorified Christ among seven golden lampstands, identified as seven churches to which Jesus commands John to write. These seven churches are historical congregations—in the days of the Roman Empire—located in the province of Asia, modern Turkey. The questions addressed in the letters are not limited to the actual seven churches, but relevant to all churches in the 1st century. The number seven is symbolic, conveying the idea of perfection, completion. So the principles apply to all churches in all times and places: from ancient Turkey, to the modern U.S.

The City and Church of Sardis

We have seen the first four churches. 1st, Ephesus: the church of loveless theology. 2nd, Smyrna: The church of looming death. 3rd, Pergamum: the church of moral laxity. 4th, Thyatira: the church of idolatrous Tolerance. Now we come to the 5th of these seven. Verse 1, *“To the angel of the church in Sardis write: The city of Sardis is located 50 miles to the east of Ephesus. Situated on a major interstate that runs through Asia Minor. Bringing commerce and trade, merchants and money. Sardis is an incredibly wealthy city. Silver and gold coins are first stamped at Sardis. Modern currency begins in Sardis. Sardis is one of the richest and most famous cities of the ancient world. The city enjoys a very distinguished history dating back to 1,200 BC. Most relevant to our text, Sardis was destroyed in AD 17 by a catastrophic earthquake. Referred to by Pliny as “the greatest disaster in human memory” (Mounce, 92n3). Emperor Tiberius rebuilt the city with an aggressive stimulus plan, eliminating taxes for 5 years, which caused the economy to flourish. But by the time John writes (AD 95), Sardis is “a relic...which lived rather on its ancient prestige than on its suitability to present conditions”*

(Ramsay in Mounce, 91). The city is living on its ancient prestige, past famous reputation that doesn't apply to the present situation.

As the city is living on its ancient prestige, so too is the church in Sardis. Living on its past reputation. What is that reputation? Verse 1, ...*I know your works; you have the reputation of being alive*. The congregation in Sardis is known as the church that is *alive*! Thriving, flourishing, booming, bustling with activity. The most *alive* of the 7 churches, the most vibrant. Sardis is the flagship church of the province of Asia. Just planted some decades ago, the sanctuary was built in the most strategic location of the city. Midtown, Main Street. It is the envy of all the other churches in the region. Multi-million-dollar budget. Diverse programs. Art gallery. Coffee shop. Christianity Explored. When the denomination wants stock photos for its brochures and publications, the photographer comes to Sardis and takes pictures of the congregation in the sanctuary, gallery. Its elders are known nationally. Other pastors in the region, consider Sardis as the coolest, most cutting-edge church to serve Christ. What a reputation Sardis enjoys. "Sardis is *alive*."

Criticism

Yet reputation and reality are not always the same. People may confuse them, but Jesus views them quite differently. Verse 1, ...*I know your works; you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead*. Blistering criticism. Important to recall the structure of these letters. Though each a unique letter to particular congregation, they all follow the same format. There is an evaluation, then a commendation, criticism, command, then promise. As we have seen, of the seven churches only two receive no criticism. Smyrna, the persecuted church; Philadelphia, the impoverished church. Two churches which receive no criticism, only commendation. On the flip side, there are two churches which only get criticism, no commendation. There is nothing commendable about them. Jesus only criticizes them. Church number seven, Laodicea. Church number 5, Sardis which receives the most severe criticism: *you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead*. Surprisingly, Jesus doesn't think of them as they think of themselves. He doesn't view them as they view themselves. For they have an over-exaggerated view of their own prominence, status. An over-inflated view of their own spiritual condition. But they are merely riding on the reputation of those before them who planted the church. A past reputation that does not apply to the present reality of the church. The believers in Sardis assume that they have the most glorious reputation of any church: *alive*. The stock photo of vitality, activity. But they are wrong! In reality, the church is dead. Scathing criticism. Notice the danger of this condition of spiritual death. The church is dead and she doesn't even know it. Such is spiritual death, deceptive. Dead churches do not realize that they are dead. How can they? Death affords no self-consciousness, no self-awareness. In death, they are unable to properly diagnosis their own spiritual condition. Though dead churches *assume* that they are alive. They are dead wrong. Such is the condition of spiritual death, dangerously deceptive.

What happened? How could a church with such a famously prestigious reputation as *alive*, find itself trapped in spiritual death? The answer lies in what is missing in the evaluation of Sardis, that we find in the evaluation of all the other churches. Remember, when Jesus evaluates the other churches, He says, "I know how you stood up to false apostles. I know your suffering. I know your poverty. I know the persecution. I know that Antipas was killed among you." But in the evaluation of Sardis, there is no mention of opposition, suffering, tribulation, martyrdom. Nothing. Yet these Christians are immersed in the same pagan culture as the other churches of

Asia Minor. In Sardis, there are trade guilds like in Thyatira, labor unions that require allegiance to the local pagan deity. In Sardis, there is emperor worship like in Pergamum. In Sardis, there are Jewish enemies of the gospel just in Smyrna who conspire against that church and scheme to rid Smyrna of Christians. But in the evaluation of Sardis, no mention of any antagonism toward the church or conflict with pagan authorities. In other words, the Christians in Sardis blend in with the unbelieving world around them. There is no visible distinction between the church and the world. Although in this vision of Christ, Sardis is described as one of the seven lampstands, whose mission it is to shine the light of Christ into the utterly dark world of unbelief. Yet in Sardis there is no collision of light and darkness. No contrast. Nothing distinct about the believers that draws any attention. There is no witness to the unbelieving culture. The believers in Sardis stay below the radar, stealthy, too undetectable to persecute.

Perhaps when they heard of the death of Antipas in Pergamum (2:13), someone suggested that they learn to get along with the Roman authorities. “After all, Jesus taught to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. Maybe that means we should burn a little incense to Domitian? What would it hurt to eat at an idol feast, then you’re not blackballed by the labor union, don’t lose your job. You can provide for your family, even support the church financially. Surely that is what God wants.” Or maybe the reason for the lack of witness lies with the fundamental feeling that all Christians experience, being ashamed of the gospel. How is the gospel perceived? *Jews ask for signs, Greeks search for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, A stumbling block to the Jews, foolishness to the Greeks* (1 Cor. 1:23). *Scandalous* to the scientists, *moronic* to the philosophers. The self-respecting intellectual unbeliever rejects the gospel. Who are those who receive it? Not many powerful according to worldly standards, not many of nobility, celebrity, sophistication. The Christians in Sardis are slaves, servants, low-class, women, children. When confronted with unbelief, in a moment of shame, some believers want to be accepted as cool, open-minded, relevant. Instead of witnessing to their faith, they remain silent and don’t speak up. They don’t confess Christ before the watching world. Consequently, in Sardis, there is no witness to the pagan culture. Rather, the church in Sardis accommodates itself to the culture. the church conforms to the culture, and in so doing becomes thoroughly secularized. In accommodating itself to the culture, the life of the church is choked out. The heartbeat of the congregation flat-lines. The believers no longer assemble in a sanctuary, but a mortuary. The sanctuary in Sardis is a morgue with a steeple.

Command

What is such a congregation to do? *Verse 3, Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.* Same command given to the church in Ephesus (2:5). Remember and repent: turn back, reverse course. In this instruction, there is more condemning analysis of their spiritual fall. What is it that they are to remember? *Remember, then, what you received and heard.* What is it that these former unbelievers received and heard?—the *gospel*. The people receive and hear the gospel, then respond to it in faith. That is what constitutes these believers as a church. The gospel! The good news of Christ, the infinite and eternal Son of God who came to earth, was born into the human race in order to redeem mankind by paying the penalty for sin to satisfy divine justice and absorb the wrath of God. *That* gospel is no longer even heard in the church.

What happened? Again, in the evaluation of Sardis there is no mention of persecution, suffering, opposition, no antagonism from enemies of the gospel. The only information provided

is the mention of a congregation with an over-inflated view of its own spiritual status. That is what causes the preaching of the gospel to eventually cease. The congregation itself. The blindingly prideful congregation influences the message in such a way that eventually the preaching of the gospel ceases. Or in all fairness, perhaps the fault lies with the pastor. Maybe he finally capitulates to complaints about the sermons being too long, too intellectual. Don't know. The general pressure to accommodate to the pagan culture leads to decreasingly shorter sermons—which evolve into messages of just therapeutic moralism devoid of substance, eventually even devoid of Christ. Now, the gospel is no longer even heard or received in the church. Like so many other churches built in Midtowns on Main Street, once gospel-centered, thriving, *alive*. In time, the church devolves into another civic club where believers are more concerned about their social life than spiritual life. Sardis is the “perfect model of inoffensive Christianity” (Caird, Mounce, 92n6). Inoffensive, the church so downplays the gospel that the offense of the cross is removed. Why? Because the church is consumed by its own need of cultural relevance, social acceptance that it minimizes the gospel and in so doing the church dies the death of a civic club. As have countless churches since then, entire denominations, Christian ministries, institutions.

For example, a Christian school. Hear the mission statement, expressed by the original board of trustees, “Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well that the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ and therefore to lay Christ at the bottom as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning.” What school is this? Harvard. The bastion of unbelief. Who today is aware of Harvard's historical legacy in the gospel? Or that of Yale or Princeton? Schools established to educate and train ministers of the gospel. But the early years known for fervor for Christ pass, the gospel is abandoned in an idolatrous pursuit of cultural relevance recognition. The narrative of Sardis is the history of cultural accommodation that has spread like gangrene through all mainline Protestant denominations. Abandoning the gospel because of a desperately idolatrous need of cultural acceptance. Leaving the world with a Christless Christianity. Thoroughly secular church. Which assumes it is alive, but doesn't know what it doesn't know—because as dead it cannot know that it is dead.

Does it matter? Clearly not to the church. But it does to Jesus. Verse 3, ...*If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.* Jesus threatens to come *against* the church. Not *to* the church, but *against* it. That means that this coming is not a reference to the His Second Coming at the end of the age when Jesus will so shockingly return in glorious majesty to establish heaven on earth. This coming refers to a secret coming in judgment. *I will come against you.* Jesus reserves the right to exercise His divine freedom to remove the lampstand and relocate it. Therefore Jesus exhorts the church to watchfulness. Verse 3, ... *If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief.* Notice this warning, *wake up*. Already mentioned in Verse 2, *Wake up, and strengthen what remains... Wake up*, verse 2, *Wake up*, verse 3. The repeated exhortation provides emphasis to draw attention to the theme. *Wake up!* Literally, be watchful, ever diligent, ever alert. Be on guard. For if they don't repent of their dead secularism and cultural accommodation, then Jesus will come in judgment like a thief in the night. In the parables, Jesus uses this thief imagery to describe His second coming at the end of the world. Coincidentally, this thief imagery also refers to the most famous event in the history of Sardis, 546 BC.

The original city was built inside of a fortress atop Mt. Tmolus overlooking the Hermus valley. The sides of the mountain were totally perpendicular, sheer cliff rising 1500 ft., creating a

fortified city, unconquerable. King Croesus—blinded by his own pride—stopped posting guards along the city wall inside the fortress. For the citadel city was impenetrable, except for a small crack in the rock wall. Through which, one night, infiltrated Persian paratroopers. Elite forces in the army of Persia led by Cyrus. Skilled mountain climbers, who scaled the 150-story skyscraper citadel to open the gates from within. So Cyrus—king of the Persian Empire—overthrows Sardis in 546 BC. Sardis was destroyed by an army that came like a thief in the night. So it will be with the church if they are not on guard and diligent and repent of their dead secularism. The church—like the city—has a way over-exaggerated view of its secure condition, a hyper-inflated view of her own vaulted status. But its blind pride will lead to the church’s ruin if it does not wake up and become alert and see itself as it really is, not alive—dead.

Promise of Blessing

Thankfully, there are some though in the church who have remained faithful. They don’t accommodate themselves to the cultural standards of a pagan city. They refuse to conform to the pagan culture. To them Jesus makes a promise. *Verse 5, The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out from the book of life. I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.* Again, the seven letters to the seven churches follow a similar format. Each end with a promise of blessing to suit the particular church situation. A unique allusion to life eternal. So too here. A promise of blessing expressed three ways.

First, white garments? Clothes manufacturing is a major industry in Sardis. White clothes. Some scholars see this as a symbol of justification. The blessed double exchange; our filthy robe stained with sin for Christ’s pure robe of righteousness. The exchange is the taking of our iniquity for His imputed righteousness. Within the immediate context, however, white clothes relate to the imagery of *Verse 4, Yet you have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white.* White clothes are the reward for unsoiled garments. These few believers didn’t soil their garments. There is no exchange for filthy garments stained by sin. In this case of Sardis, soiled garments symbolize compromise, cultural accommodation. White garments are a reward for the conqueror, the one who does not conform to the world, the conqueror does not accommodate himself to the culture. Third aspect of blessing, *I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.* For the one who conquers, Jesus will confess his name before God the Father—which corresponds to the problem of witness in Sardis. The conqueror is not ashamed of the gospel. He remains bold in his own personal witness to a watching world. She confesses Christ’s name before family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, even random strangers at the dog park and gym. For that boldness, Jesus is not ashamed to confess her name before His Father. The reason for which we have a Confession of Faith as an element of worship. We confess our faith, corporately because *He who confesses Me before men, him will I also confess before My Father who is in heaven* (Matt. 10:32). We assemble to confess Christ before the watching world so that He might confess us before the Father in heaven. Conversely, Jesus says, *whoever denies Me before men, him will I also deny before My Father in heaven.* There is a second aspect of the promise of blessing. But contained therein is a sobering warning. Notice the reference to a book, *Verse 5, The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out from the book of life.* Jesus promises to never erase the name of the conqueror from the book of life. The book of life records the name of all genuine believers. Which brings us back to the problem in Sardis.

People who are Christian in *name* only. *So-called* Christians who are not witnesses to Christ before the watching world, whose names are recorded only in the *church's* book. The membership roll, register in the foyer. But there is a difference. For there are two distinct books. The book of life, on one hand, the church's book on the other. Not every name listed on the membership roll of a dead secular church will be found in the Lamb's book of life.

Reputation and reality are not the same. That is the message to the church in Sardis. Whenever a church begins to accommodate itself to the cultural norms of a secular society that church is perilously close to spiritual death while never aware of it. Wake up. Jesus warns, *If the salt loses its savor it is fit for nothing but to be cast out and trampled underfoot by men.* Wake up. A secularized social club is not a church. It may have a reputation as such. But long was the church already dead. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* Amen.