

“Dead or Alive?”  
Sardis  
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I was in another city and it was Sunday morning.

The night before I looked through the “yellow pages” and found a church relatively close to my hotel.

So that Sunday morning I left the hotel with sufficient time to arrive early and participate fully in the worship.

As I arrived at the church building I was pleasantly surprised - the facility looked, to me, like a church ought to look.

I was seeking a time of just meeting with God and just being in his presence - and even the architecture lifted my eyes upward and gave a sense of grandeur - something of a reflection of the greatness of my God.

Waiting for the service to begin I sat down and paged through the hymnal - and to my delight the hymns and readings accurately described the great gospel truths of the Bible.

Since it was a more formal, liturgical denomination I looked forward to the next minutes of speaking, singing and thinking through a recitation of greatness and glory of my God, with the rest of the congregation.

But I found myself quickly and increasingly distressed.

The person who stood to lead us in worship verbally and non-verbally expressed no emotion, no conviction in the things he said.

There was an air of the mechanical, just going through the motions.

And then when the congregation responded in singing or in spoken words - it seemed flat, routine, thoughtless.

I could see people in front of me talking, looking around as if bored, or what, at least appeared to be, only absently-mindedly saying the words.

The words of the hymns were so biblically accurate, the words of the liturgy were so beautifully reflective of the truths of God and our relationship to him - but it felt lifeless.

When the pastor stood up to preach - he took only about 10 minutes and the essence of his message was that animals are God’s creation also and therefore we must treat them with respect.

And since animals, too, will be in heaven, we must treat them here as we would expect to be treated.

Though treating animals in a humane manner is certainly appropriate - I thought to myself, when do we hear from God's word?

When do we hear the gospel themes, the claims of Christ on our lives, the call to repentance and faith?

Animals are fine but there are much larger issues to deal with - when do we hear.

IN fact many of the things said he went on to say, were an outright contradiction of the songs that had been previously sung and the liturgies just intoned.

Again I couldn't help but notice by seeing the expressions on the faces of those near me - it was as if nothing was being said.

No one seemed to be paying any attention AND worst of all I got no sense either then or after, as I listened to people's comments, that anything was wrong with what had been said or not said.

The conversations I overheard going out were no different than the ones I overheard coming in - the service of worship was nothing more than a brief interlude in an otherwise uninterrupted focus on their own agendas.

I couldn't help but ask - "Did God ever show up in this place this morning?"  
"Did anybody notice?" "Did anybody care?"

I walked away with an empty feeling.

The architecture said to me that this was a place for meeting with God.

The printed material said God would be experienced here.

The people went through all the motions as if God was truly listening and speaking - they spoke, they sang, they nodded, they said "amen" at the right times, they stood, they knelt, they sat - but it was as if there was no life - just form.

Have you ever had the uneasy feeling of walking into a house with the lights on, the fire burning in the fireplace, the dishes on the table, as if just used, and finding no one there?

Something clearly was missing? The essential element to make it a home was missing - the people.

I walked out of that church feeling the lights were on, the table was set, but there was nobody truly there.

All the structures, the forms, the appearances of religion were there but it felt spiritually dead.

Is it possible for a church to have all the outward appearances of spiritual life but be dead?

Is it possible for a person to have all the outward appearances of spiritual life but be spiritually dead?

In our on-going look at the Book of Revelation we come to, what I think is, a very disturbing text.

As most of you know, in these opening chapters of Revelation Jesus is addressing 7 churches in what was then Asia minor and is now called Turkey.

These churches were probably started during the days of the Apostle Paul' ministry some 30 years earlier.

Jesus writes a brief letter to each of these seven churches - four of which we have already discussed and now we come to the letter to the church in the city of Sardis.

Look at it with me, and read it aloud with me and see why it is such a disturbing letter: Rev 3:1-6 READ with congregation.

When Jesus wrote to the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira, which we looked at last week - he said, "I know your deeds - I know your love and faith, your service and perseverance, I know you have remained true to my name."

Even though Jesus goes on to tell them very forcefully that there are things that need changing - he nonetheless affirms them for what is right in their church.

But look at this letter to Sardis - what does Jesus say of them?

Verse one: "I know your deeds, you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Verse two: "I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God."

There is no affirmation here!

It isn't a matter of some things are going well but they need to make some adjustments.

This church is in serious trouble!

And Jesus' description of the trouble is penetrating:

"You have a reputation of being alive but you are dead"

The word "reputation" can also be translated "name" -

"You have a name of being alive but you are dead."

The church was known for being truly Christian.

The people of the church would gladly own the name "Christian" - yes, I'm a Christian!

The reputation was that they belonged to the family of God.

The expectation of them from their reputation was that these people were Christ-followers.

But what does Jesus say? "You are dead"

They had the name "Christian", they were nominally Christian, in name, Christian but they were not.

Notice please there is no reference here to persecution of the Christians,  
 no reference to the emperor worship,  
     no reference to idol worship or overt immorality,  
     no reference to the Balaamites or Nicolaitans or other false teachers here.  
 By many outward appearances this was a good Christian church made up of good  
 Christian people - but they were dead.

Donald Barnhouse said it this way:

"It was not scandalous wickedness, but decent death;  
 the form retained, the heart gone;  
 Christ owned in word, ignored in deed;  
 creeds correct, conduct respectable, life departed;  
 sound doctrine and outward propriety...affections not only waning but gone. His name  
 held, His word read, His truth owned, Himself forgotten"  
 (in Barnhouse p66)

A few years ago the Lusanne Congress on Evangelism offered a definition of a church  
 and people that are Christian "in name only" - nominally Christian.

"A nominal Christian is one who... would call himself a Christian, or be so regarded by  
 others, but who has no authentic commitment to Christ based on personal faith. Such  
 commitment involves a transforming personal relationship with Christ, characterized by  
 such qualities as love, joy, peace, a desire to study the Bible, prayer, fellowship with  
 other Christians, a determination to witness faithfully, a deep concern for God's will to  
 be done on earth, and a living hope of heaven to come." (In Gibbs p21)

In the church in Sardis all named the name but few had an authentic commitment to  
 Christ.

Oh yes, there were some who were authentically Christian - V 4

"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."

There were some who had not compromised their faith by only retaining an outward  
 form of Christianity while disregarding God in the rest of their everyday life.

Those few who were walking with Christ would eventually wear white - symbolic of the forgiveness and thus the clean hearts they possessed by God's grace.

Their names would be in the book of life (symbolic of belonging to God's family) and Jesus would say their names (admit that they belong to him) just as they, by their lives, have acknowledged his name.

But in contrast to the "few", what about the most?

They are Christian in "name" only.

What is a Christian?

By that question I am not asking "How does one become a Christian?"

A person becomes a Christian solely by God's free grace through faith in Jesus and what he has done to forgive our sin and give us his life.

But what is a Christian?

Yes, it is one who trusts in Jesus but listen to the New Testament's description of a Christian.

If a person is a Christian not only in name but in actuality - what will it look like according to God?

Here's the way the Apostle John said it:

I Jn 3:9-10

"No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother."

In its context the verses do not say that only the perfect belong to God but they do make unmistakably clear that when a person is a Christian their lives will change - they will increasingly obey God.

I Jn 2:3-6

"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to lie in him must walk as Jesus did."

Doesn't get much clearer than that does it?

Christianity that not "in name only" consciously, deliberately follows Christ and does what he would do.

Here's the way the Apostle James said it:

Jas 1:27

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Genuine Christianity results in life change.

Here's the way the author of Hebrews said it:

Heb 12:14

"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."

Real Christianity is concerned with holiness - holy living.

Here is the way the Apostle Paul said it:

Ephesians 5:3-5

"But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person...has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

Elsewhere he wrote:

Gal 5:19-21

"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Authentic Christianity results in a different life.

Here's the way Jesus said it:

Luke 6:43-45

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit."

Genuine Christianity is known by the fruit of the life.

Jesus also said,

Luke 14:26

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters - yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Jesus is saying that anyone who values anything else more highly than they value their relationship to him is not a disciple.

What is a Christian?

A Christian is a Christ-follower.

In Sardis there were only a few Christ-followers even though many called themselves Christian.

There were a only a few branches but many birds.  
The branches are truly connected to Christ.  
The birds just show up and rest on the branches.

Eugene Peterson wrote:

"The church attracts to itself persons who like to live in the atmosphere of the holy but have little interest in being holy themselves. They find delight in working on committees and find security in ordering their lives within the reassuring traditions of the fathers. They are faithful in showing up in church on Sundays and are fortified by listening to the moral instruction of their leaders. But they have no appetite for holiness, or joy, or love. They are wholly conventional and entirely dull. The church is sought out as a sanctuary for living in pious sloth." Reversed Thunder p51-2

When the church in Sardis received this letter can you imagine what they thought? (and to make matters worse they could see the other letters and know that every other church saw the letter to them).

Jesus is saying that their church is largely made up of people who are Christian in name only.

Yes, there's a message to those who show up, go through the motions, even try at times to act the part, but don't know Jesus.

But there is more here - what about the church as a whole?

Jesus says, "I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God."

Were they doing the right things but for the wrong reasons and in their own wisdom and strength?

Did they have a correct doctrinal statement?

Did they conduct proper worship services?

Did they engage in a certain amount of good religious behavior - giving money to missions, helping the poor, providing wholesome activities for the children and youth? Yes, Yes, and Yes.

But their correct doctrine had more to do with heritage and pride than with orthodoxy. Their proper worship had more to do with wanting to feel good than with honoring God. And their religious behavior was motivated more by self-interest (them, their families, and feeling good about themselves) than about advancing the kingdom of God.

This is sobering stuff to me.

What about our own church.

To what extent do we have all the forms of evangelical Christianity but we don't have the life - we don't have the power?

We like to sing about the presence of the Holy Spirit but is he here?

Do we truly just come into His presence when we worship or do we try to manufacture a mood, create an atmosphere, or work ourselves into a feeling of spirituality?

Are we going through the motions or are we meeting with God?

Is much of our church activity little more than a "Christianized" version of the Boy Scouts, United Way and the Kiwanis club OR is it actually led and energized by the Spirit of God and focused on the Kingdom of God?

To what extent do we have all the appearance of the real thing but it is in Name only?

Folks we ought not to come into this place to just have a worship service but to meet with God.

We ought not go to our Sunday school classes just to be with friends but to pay careful attention to what Jesus is saying in his word.

We ought not have Tuesday night or Wednesday night student activities to keep kids off the streets but to engage them in a dialog with Jesus about why he created them and what he is calling them to do with their lives.

Oh God, may it not be true of us - "In name only".

Oh God, may it not be true of anyone after this day that they personally are Christian "in name only."

What does Jesus tell them to do?

"Wake up!"

"Strengthen what remains and is about to die"

"Remember therefore what you have seen and heard; obey it and repent."

The "wake up" is a call to pay attention, to become aware again, to look, to think and to act.

Rouse yourself out of the sleep you've been.

Consider that your religion may be nothing but a facade.

"Strengthen what remains".

This is the greatest news in this entire letter - hope is not gone.

There is time - it is right now - there is time to respond.

I think his statement that they are to “remember what (they) have received and heard” is what remains.

They are to consider what they know to be the truth.

They are to rouse themselves and think about what they have been taught from God’s word - salvation is by grace through faith only and to be a Christian is to be a Christ-follower.

Christian in name only is not Christian.

And what are they to do with what they remember? “Obey it and repent!”

What does that mean?

Some here need to be saved - you need to be born again.

For those who have been Christian “in name only” - this is the time to become a genuine Christian.

Others of us need to get on our knees and invite the Spirit of God to take control - yield our lives to him - decisions about jobs, hobbies, recreation, money, relationships - give it all to him and start obeying one step at a time. We realize this change is by grace - but we ask for such grace and act in such grace.

Others need to repent of a slothful, lazy, just sliding along Christianity and get into a small group, a Sunday school class, a huddle - someplace where you can begin to think about how God’s word intersects with your life - lived in the everyday.

I don’t know where this message to the church in Sardis intersected with your life but if it did will you take the first step now?

Will you use these next couple of minutes to respond personally to God.

Some of you now or after this service need to get up and go into the prayer hall to get some things straightened out with God before you leave this place.

A prayer of confession:

Forgive me for mainly meeting with other Christians to get a blessing rather than being or giving one to you and others.

Forgive me for coming to worship to get something from you, or earn favor with you rather than coming to express my joy in you.

Forgive me for serving because of social obligation, or institutional pressure, or to gain favor for myself with others rather than a love for those I serve.

Forgive me for desiring to see our class, our small group, our church grow in size largely because of how successful it will make me the leader appear, or how proud I can be of our group rather than desiring mostly to see Jesus lifted up.

Forgive me for giving not because I want to but because I feel I must or I might fall out of favor with you - My giving is too often out of a desire to earn or a fear of retaliation rather than out of a love that wants to take what is most precious to me and give it to you.

Forgive me for thinking of the financial support of missionaries, the building of new buildings or my service to others mostly in terms of how negatively it will affect my time or financial situation instead of how it will affect the kingdom of God.

Forgive me for tolerating simply a measure, a modicum, a respectable amount of morality and ethics so that I don't feel guilty and I am perceived as reasonably conformed to Biblical standards instead of having a desire for holiness that is willing to give up all forms of sin - no matter how small I want to think of them.

Forgive me for indulging in any manner of sin and help me to call it what it is.

Forgive me for using the name of Jesus and then so carelessly ignoring his will for my life and his desire for my conduct.