

RIGHT NAME, BUT DEAD CHURCH

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In Revelation 3:1, Jesus described himself to the church at Sardis as “he that has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars.” There are “seven Spirits” before God’s throne in heaven (Rev 1:4). These seven Spirits of God are represented by seven lamps before the throne (Rev 4:5) and also by the seven horns and seven eyes of the Lamb who has sent these seven Spirits into all the earth (Rev 5:6). Since there is no other reference in the Bible to these “seven Spirits of God,” we really do not know exactly what they are. The seven stars in the right hand of Christ are the messengers of the seven churches of Asia (Rev 1:16,20). But the point here in Revelation 3:1 is not what the seven Spirits and the seven stars are, but rather who has them. The emphasis here is on the authority of Christ. Christ has all authority in heaven and in earth (Matt 28:18). Thus, everything is under Christ’s authority, including the seven Spirits and the seven stars. This reminder of the authority of Christ in the introduction of the letter to the church at Sardis is tied in with the warning given in verse 3. If Sardis did not repent, Jesus would come upon them suddenly by his great authority and punish them.

The works of Sardis

As in all the letters, Jesus told Sardis that he knew their works (Rev 3:1). In five of the letters, the statement “I know your works” is followed immediately by a commendation of the good works being done by the church. An unusual aspect of the letter to the church at Sardis is that Jesus did not commend this congregation for anything. Jesus had many good things to say about the church at Ephesus, and even pointed out some good works being done by the churches at Pergamos and Thyatira in spite of all their wickedness. The Lord had nothing but commendation about the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia. But there is nothing commendable about the church at Sardis. The Lord did commend a “few” in the Sardis congregation who had not defiled their garments and said they were worthy to walk with him in white (Rev 3:4), but the church as a whole received only rebukes and admonitions.

Is the name everything?

The Lord rebuked Sardis for having a name that they were alive, while they were in fact dead (Rev 3:1). Even the things which remained were ready to die (Rev 3:2). This teaches us an extremely important lesson. This was the Sardis “church of Christ,” but that name alone was not enough to save them. Wearing an unscriptural name will surely cause us to be condemned, but we must have more than the right name for the church. There is no real practical difference between an unfaithful church of Christ and a denominational church, because neither are alive to God and both will be eternally punished if they do not repent. The only difference is that the punishment will be worse for those who turn from the truth (Luke 12:47-48; 2 Pet 2:20-22). Some

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(continued)

brethren will fellowship any preacher, any brother, or any congregation that is of “the church of Christ,” but we must not be like that. *“Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father which is in heaven”* (Matt 7:21). The letter to the church at Sardis emphatically demonstrates that our “standard of fellowship” must not only include the right name, but also everything that is taught and practiced. *“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another”* (1 John 1:7). Sardis was not walking in the light. Their works were not perfect before God (Rev 3:2). Therefore, Jesus warned Sardis to watch (Rev 3:2-3), and to strengthen what remained (Rev 3:2). The Lord told them to remember how they had received and heard, and to hold fast and repent. If they did not prepare themselves, Jesus said he would come on them as a thief and they would not know the hour.

A faithful few

There were a few in Sardis who were innocent in spite of the majority of the church who were in the wrong (Rev 3:4). This was also the case in Thyatira (Rev 2:24-25). Similar situations exist today and they are becoming even more common as more and more churches of Christ depart from the faith and embrace error. This brings up an important question. If there is a church where only a few are righteous and the rest will not repent, what should the righteous do? The Lord grants a period of time for repentance (Rev 2:21). But the Lord’s “space to repent” is not indefinite and does not last for years. Sardis was obviously still within that space when they received their letter. During that time the righteous could remain in the congregation. What about when that period of time expires? In view of the scriptures, if the majority are in error *and refuse to repent*, then the righteous must leave. We must only have fellowship with those who are walking in the light (1 John 1:7). We must not have fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness (Eph 5:11). Two cannot walk together except they be agreed (Amos 3:3). That statement by Amos was actually applied by God to His relationship with apostate Israel. God’s unfaithful children will lose their fellowship with God. That is what Jesus warned the church at Ephesus, if they did not repent (Rev 2:5). An unrepentant apostate church of Christ will lose their candlestick. At that point, they are no different than any denomination or false religion. No faithful Christian can be a part of a religious group that Jesus is not “walking in the midst of” (Rev 1:13; 2:1). When it reaches that point, they must leave. Of course, if the majority repents, then there is no need for the few to separate themselves. We need to learn from the example of Sardis to have *all* of our works right before the Lord, to be worthy to walk with Christ in white!