

We've Got Mail
Central Baptist – June 4 2023
Church at Sardis: Revelation 3:1-6

THE CHURCH THAT DIED IN ITS SLEEP!
By Tom Cowan

(SHOW VIDEO TITLE as Tom walks up) Let me say right at the outset – so that I am not misunderstood in any way – I believe that there is a great deal of spiritual health here at Central Baptist Church – Harriet and I believe that this is where God would have us be for this time in our lives.

However as we say that – we also need to acknowledge that we cannot be smug or complacent – any church is no more than a few years away from spiritual death if it loses its authentic spiritual life. We must never become self-satisfied and contented. This will be our death.

Reader up/ PEOPLE STAND

(SHOW SLIDE 01)

Revelation 3:1-6

To the Church in Sardis

1 "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.

2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

(SHOW SLIDE 02)

3 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.

(SHOW SLIDE 03)

4 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.

5 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.

6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

So on the outside this church looked pretty good - - you can imagine the people of Sardis passing by this church and thinking that everything was going pretty well – in fact these people were pretty good citizens of the city. They did not rock the boat. They took part in city life.

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But the Lord is always able to see a different perspective – Jesus is always able to see what the inside is really like. Jesus does not mince words. Jesus' frank and blunt diagnosis is this – this church may look pretty good on the outside – but in reality – on the inside – in his post-mortem Jesus the Great Physician declares that this church is actually dead!

Jesus says -- You have a reputation for being alive – you look alive – lots of things going on – the lights are on every night of the week – committees keep meeting - you must be alive - but in fact – you are dead. It had died in its sleep.

What kills a church? It is not always heresy – or scandal – or false doctrine. Sometimes churches are slowly killed by things much more subtle than that.

(SHOW SLIDE 04) Churches die when they live in the glory of the past.

There are two sides or dimensions to the past --

[A] – there is the positive sense of the past which is vital and important for understanding who we are today – and what got us to where we are today. Without this sense of the past we become social orphans.

Israel had a positive view of its history. It looked back to the saving acts of God – the flight from Egypt – the escape through the Red Sea – water from the Rock – manna in the wilderness – the memorial stones set in the river Jordan – and they said God was there – our God did that. In this way the past was to inspire and give hope for the future. God was there then and God will be there again. History moved them forward into the future.

We need to know the history of Central Baptist almost 100 years ago – we need to know and tell the story of the faith and dedication of the people who started this church – their commitment – their sacrifice – their heart for God – we need to know the history of the pastors and the people who have stood in this place and to know that we take the baton and carry it forward as we run our leg of the race. –

[B] – but there is a negative side to history that stifles and suffocates. It is expressed in the attitude – Remember the Good old days! It takes us back to live in the nostalgia of

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the past. History then becomes our jailor – casting long shadows behind us that darken our hope for the future.

Someone has suggested that the 7 last words of the church are – ***we've never done it this way before!***

Imagine if the pioneers of faith of Central Baptist Church had said that – we would never be where we are today – and they have left us a legacy of faith for today and hope for the future. Their faith blazed the trail for the future. When we hesitate and mumble – we've never done it this way before – we need to hear them say to us from the past – why are you hesitating – get on with it! That's what we did.

Let me take you back into the Old Testament – remind you of two great pictures and metaphors we find. When Israel traveled in the wilderness – the presence of God was with them in the Tabernacle – the unique thing about it was that it was portable – it moved as the cloud and the pillar of fire moved. God was moving with his people. In the middle of supper – or getting kids ready for bed – people heard – the cloud is moving! And so they started to pack up.

Then they became settled – the Tabernacle became the Temple. The presence of God settled upon it. But something happened that was beyond the physical buildings. We move from buildings to attitudes – I made up new words. **(SHOW SLIDE 05)** There was a move from what I call “tabernacleness” to “templeness”. That transition is spiritual transition.

(SHOW SLIDES 06-08 he will talk about each pair of points one at a time)

TABERNALENESS	TEMPLENESS
People watch the cloud and pillar of fire; where is God moving; what lies ahead.	People watch the past; where have we been; they glory in the past;
Needs pioneers	Gate-keepers and rule-keepers
Mobility; are we ready to pack up and move	Stationery; we do not move

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Someone once asked Gretzky what makes him a great hockey player – he said most players skate to where the puck is – I skate to where the puck is going to be.

There were men and women who started this church saw where the city was going to be – and they skated there! This is why this church is alive today and not dead! So we need to skate where the puck is going to be.

We always need to be asking – where is God moving? If we do not ask that – we will die in our sleep.

(SHOW SLIDE 09) Churches die when there is accommodation without engagement.

We have seen that some churches in this postal route that these letters took faced some tough opposition from their culture – they faced Caesar worship – economic hardship – internal disruption – false teaching.

The church at Sardis did not face any of the external pressures that some of the other church we have studied faced. It did not know the pain of internal upheaval and disunity. Everything at Sardis was peaceful. That was the problem.

(SHOW SLIDE 10) William Barclay describes the condition of the church –

The strange fate of Sardis was that life had been too easy for it. It had grown flabby and had sunk into an easy and voluptuous decadence. And the fate of the Church at Sardis was the same. When we read this letter, we see that the Church at Sardis was not threatened by any of the dangers or perils which menaced the other Churches. **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** There was no threat from Caesar worship and from persecution; there was no threat from the malignant slanders of the Jews; these was not even any threat of internal heresy from within the Church. The Church of Sardis was completely untroubled from without and from within. The Church of Sardis was at peace—but it was the peace of the dead.

The church had become a spiritual graveyard. That kind of church will never upset anyone.

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When we first came to Canada we lived in a parsonage close to our church in Toronto – right behind us was a large cemetery. Sometimes people would say to us – do those people ever bother you. No they never bothered us at all! There is always peace in a cemetery.

The church in Sardis had silently accommodated itself to the injustice and immorality of the city. In particular, it had silently accommodated itself to the sexual mores of the city.

John White argues that the single biggest reason why the church in North America is not effective in evangelism is that we have silently accommodated to the sexual morality of our time; he says that far too many disciples of Jesus are trapped in secret sexual sins. The Sardis church was not facing persecution because it was not raising its voice. It was “too innocuous to be worth persecuting.” The church had become a social club.

The church is not the church when it accommodates to the voice of society – it is the church when it hears the pain of society and then engages with its culture. That engagement may not be easy – at times it will be messy – at times it will create tension – but it is that tension which gives it life.

We need to understand that our culture deforms us – so we will not engage ourselves or people in a life process of spiritual transformation without tension.

Chuck Colson writes – **think about this** -- the church is not a tool to rebuild society – the church is simply called to be the church – to live like the church – to act like the church – simply to BE the church - and it does its greatest impact when it lives and acts like the church. When the church is truly the church – it will be in tension with its culture – but it will also change its culture.

John Neuhaus (Roman Catholic theologian) – the church best serves the world when it is most distinctively and most unapologetically the church . . ., when the church dares to be different.

There are issues and times when we will be supportive of what culture and society does. But there will be and there must be issues and times when the church – if it is alive to the Word and the Spirit – must be in tension with its culture.

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If that is not the case – we are asleep – and it is the sleep of death. We are not being a church -- we are running a cemetery.

(SHOW SLIDE 12) Churches die when there is activity without the presence and the power of the Spirit.

Jesus said that the ministry of this church was a list of fruitless deeds.

Sometimes the work of the church and the council or board becomes just keeping the machinery of the church going. The agenda of the Board or Council has moved from mission to maintenance – how do we keep this thing going.

It is the quiet but deadly seduction of **doing without being**. This church at Sardis had lost sight of the fact that the heart of its life lay in its relationship to Christ who was the head of the church. The presence and the power of the Spirit was missing – but things just kept going on.

When that happens and we realize that – we need to stand in the gentle rain of the Spirit of God – take time to stop – lift up our hands and ask the fresh touch of his grace to come upon us. This is what calls us back to the centre of our lives – back to Christ.

When the Spirit is present – the Spirit makes a difference.
He makes a difference between just singing and worship –
between just getting wet and being baptized - When I baptize someone – I put my head on their head and say – I affirm in you the presence and the power of the Spirit -
between information and the power of the transforming Word – between just a crowd of people and the gathered Body of Christ.

When the Spirit is missing – the church is suffocating – it is grasping for the breath of God.

Ministries used to have a life span of many years – they continued year after year – often decade after decade – do you know that the life span of many ministries today is under 3 years?

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That means we have to be seeking new ways of reinventing ministries to do the mission of the church which never changes – which is to see the lives of people transformed by the love of God – by the work of Christ and by the power of the Spirit. Programs change – they will come and go -- but the mission never changes.

Darrel Johnson -- - has a thoughtful suggestion along these lines – he says -- I would think it would be healthy for every congregation to periodically – say every 5 years – declare that all programs and activities stop and only be started up again if it can be demonstrated that they are in fact accomplishing their biblical purpose in the power of the Spirit.

Churches can become bloated and stagnant because they do not have the ability to purge themselves of extra baggage that they have gathered over the years.

We need to see that it is easy to add programs without subtracting some – and as a result – ministry becomes diluted because it is flowing in too many different directions. Most churches can only do a few things well. The real struggle and the harder choices is not between the good and the bad – but always between the good and the best.

So churches die when they live in the past – churches die when they lose touch with their mission – churches die when they become lost in activity without the power of the Spirit. These things fall like acid rain – it is silent but deadly.

So what does Jesus suggest? Close the doors of a church like this – in a unique location in downtown Victoria? Sell the property? Abandon the city? Flee to the suburbs? NO!

The gospel is always about resurrection – not about disposal. It is always about recovery – never about removal. It is about re-building – not about demolition. 5 commands encourage and tell us what we have to do.

(SHOW SLIDE 13) #1 – waken up! That means we waken up to the reality of the situation – we get real – we see things as they really are – let's stop playing games. We must be vigilant because we are always on the edge of irrelevance.

(SHOW SLIDE 14) #2 – strengthen what remains –

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If the church is dead – what remains – what is still going on? Probably the committees – the Board – the staff – the meetings. Jesus does not say they have to be thrown out – rather their purpose needs to be renewed – they need to be revitalized – they need to be re-energized.

(SHOW SLIDE 15) #3 – Remember –

Jesus calls us back to the essentials of the Christian life – remember what this is all about – remember why this church started – remember the goodness of God.

(SHOW SLIDE 16) #4 – Keep it –

don't let go of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

(SHOW SLIDE 17) #5 – repent – turn around from the path you are on and start on a new direction. Make new decisions starting today – write them down – put them into an action plan – start afresh.

I will say at the end as I said at the start -- I believe that there is a great deal of spiritual health here at Central Baptist Church – Harriet and I believe that this is where God would have us be for this time in our lives.

However as we say that – we also need to acknowledge that we cannot be smug or complacent – any church is no more than a few years away from irrelevance if it loses its authentic spiritual life. We must never become self-satisfied and contented. This will be our death. We always need to keep our eyes on the cloud and the pillar of fire. All that we do – every service – every program – every ministry needs the breath of the Spirit.

Communion Time: We do this every Sunday in the prayer time and once a month here – but like everything we do – it needs the fresh breath of the Spirit.

Bread

Wine

**As I finish communion – and start here – with no introduction -- worship team moves up quietly to take their place on platform –
WORSHIP TEAM QUIETLY UP TO PLATFORM**

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In the Book of Ezekiel there is a well-known picture – reminding us of how things that are dead can come back to life again when the Spirit of God blows into them.

(SHOW SLIDE 18)

Ezekiel 37

1. The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.
- 2 He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.
- 3 He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

(SHOW SLIDE 19)

- 4 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!
- 5 This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.
- 6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'"

(SHOW SLIDE 20)

- 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone.
- 8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

(SHOW SLIDE 21)

- 9 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'"
- 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and ***stood up on their feet***-- a vast army.

CLOSING SONG: