

Doctrine of Sardis

Sardis is not only a local assembly but a representation of the universal church of the twenty-first century. In Rev 3:1-6 we have what Christ told John to write about us.

NIV

Rev 3:1 "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.

Rev 3:2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

Rev 3:3 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.

Rev 3:4 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.

Rev 3:5 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.

Rev 3:6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Sardis was but one of seven churches used by Christ to foretell seven periods of time through which the universal church would go. The seven are Ephesus (32-100), Smyrna (100-300), Pergamos (300-800), Thyatira (800-1517), Sardis (1517-now), Philadelphia (at the time of the Rapture) and Laodicea (the church of the Tribulation).

Our interest this morning will center only on Sardis, the universal church from the Protestant Reformation to 2011.

Sardis was located about 50 miles east of Smyrna. The earliest city stood on a 1,000-foot hill five miles south of the Hermus River, the basin of which was the broadest and most fertile of the river valleys of Asia Minor. The city commanded the great trade and military roads from the Aegean islands to the interior of the Roman provinces of Asia and Galatia.

As the city grew it spread northward into the valley of the Hermus, where ruins of great structures of the Roman period may still be seen. The site first achieved greatness as the capital of Lydia, which fell to Cyrus of Persia in 546 B.C.

Sardis was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 1 and was rebuilt by Tiberius to become a thriving city by the time John wrote the Apocalypse. The city of John's day was famous for the great temple of Artemis (160 by 300 feet) with its 78 ionic columns, each 58 feet high.

The city was home to a large Jewish synagogue; it's wealth and size indicate a rather large and prosperous Jewish community in the early Christian era.

Sardis was not only a local assembly but the Sardis of Revelation also represents the reformed church, a church soon to find itself in need of further reformation.

A map of Asia Minor showing the seven churches will provide a painless way to quickly review Ephesus to Laodicea. When you look at the general trend indicated, it shows rather than a progressive improvement as many theologians might claim, on the contrary the trends lead instead to a most nefarious deterioration.



Sardis, unlike Thyatira, its immediate predecessor, was said to be alive but dead. Interestingly, the Church at Thyatira (800 to 1517) was classified early on as being dead in the sight of God but it is obvious there were some in this pre-Reformation Church who were positive to the Word.

There were also many who were outside the popular world church who were positive and though greatly persecuted or perhaps, because they were greatly persecuted, these saints of Thyatira left their mark on the Christian world. Many became martyrs whose testimony we revere today.

Accordingly John in his message to Thyatira left complimentary words but there is little good said of the church which began the Reformation and extends even until now. Since Sardis is us, let's analyze in summary fashion what Christ ordered John to write in Rev 3:1-6:

People think we are alive but we are really dead. The reputation is there but the substance is gone.

It would seem those in Sardis and modern Christianity are well-known and purport to be ambassadors of Christ but in reality are Christian in name only; all meringue but no meat, all sugar but no protein or better said billowing clouds with promise but no rain.

The deeds of those in Sardis and Christianity today are said to be partial but incomplete in the eyes of Christ.

There is a special caveat for us to recall that which we have heard and to get serious about the message received or else be ready for severe and quick discipline.

The church at Sardis and Christianity today are said to be asleep and in need of a wake-up call.

There is said to be a remnant and, together with those in Sardis, we are warned to strengthen that which remains.

There is said to be a cadre of mature believers who together with John and Christ will walk the streets of heaven in a uniform of glory.

There is also the promise for others in the church, an apparent reference to immature believers, who will wear the uniform of glory in heaven but not walk with them.

Those in uniform but not walking with Christ are the overcomers who elected to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ but thereafter rejected the promises of God.

Time certainly does not permit a detailed exegesis of Rev 3:1-6, but I do think it wise to at least provide you with an expanded translation from the Greek. Let's first look at an expanded translation of verses one and two.

Rev 3:1 "To the pastor responsible for the church at Sardis write: These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ Who is now endowed with, and in His incarnation benefited from, the seven-fold ministry of God the Holy Spirit. He is also the one Who holds the destiny of the seven churches. As to the church at Sardis, Jesus Christ knows your production. You have a reputation of being alive but you are temporally dead.

Rev 3:2 "You must right now wake up and be vigilant, be watchful and be circumspect. You must keep on stabilizing yourself by the consistent use of the two power options; for you see I have carefully evaluated your production and found little divine good. All your works lie stagnant and incomplete in the sight of the Father.

Sardis as we have noted was an important city. Much of its wealth came from its textile manufacturing and dye industries. Most of the city practiced pagan worship and there were many mystery cults or secret religious societies. The most despicable practices were common-place in Sardis. The church had to live in the midst of temptations and attacks against God's ethical imperatives.

The universal church today also suffers from similar distractions as did the church at Sardis. Plays depicting debased activities were regularly staged at various religious festivals in Sardis. Andrew Tait has written, "It may be wondered that the few members of the church in Sardis were not drawn away altogether, and swallowed up in the great vortex."

And so today standards have been lowered as never before and young people are being urged to sink to the most immoral practices. People of all ages are using our latest communication techniques such as Facebook, Twitter and e-mails to debase their minds and bodies.

In particular we find the four divine institutions being attacked: volition, marriage, family and nationalism. Choice is no longer something to be held in esteem as a divine institution; instead we look to the government for programs to sustain us when we make bad choices. Marriage and family are just nuisances imposed by religion. Children are as disposable as the diapers they wear. Children who survive are abandoned to their own impulses. Nationalism is a dirty word that our last four presidents chose to disregard and thus we build nations with money the government doesn't have. The major problem remains--people without doctrine are still permitted to vote.

But God is a God of grace, and from His great mercy he has blessed us with unprecedented material wealth. But of far greater value, He has given the universal church many spiritual assets. And to whom much is given, much will be required.

Let's look (at least in part) at what we have been given in the way of spiritual assets. Our foremost claim is perhaps the universal indwelling of the Holy Spirit but running a close second is the mystery teachings--a body of information about which only we are privileged.

Col 1:26 the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.

There was only an inkling of the concept in the Kingdom Age though Christ did reveal how positive people of our age would be taught by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Thus believers would be able to operate as priests before God.

Mar 4:10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.

Mar 4:11 He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.

Joh 16:13 Therefore when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come.

Joh 14:26 But the Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.

The importance of the mystery doctrines was emphasized by Peter when he revealed even the angels desired to know what the universal church has been given.

1Pe 1:12 It was revealed to the prophets of old that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

1Pe 1:13 Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Every pastor-teacher is a steward of the mystery doctrines and therefore each pastor-teacher of every local assembly is responsible for feeding his sheep. And though worthy of double honor, each will most certainly receive double discipline if he fails to perform his assigned task--to teach the Word of God.

John Walvoord has written: "Not only are they exhorted to be watchful and strengthen the things which remain, but they are also warned to remember the truth that they have received and heard, and to hold it fast and to turn away from any defection from it. If they refuse to heed the exhortation Christ promises He will come upon them as a thief, meaning that He will come upon them unexpectedly with devastating suddenness and bring judgment upon them ..."

With that said let's see how Rev 3:3-4 look by way of expanded translation.

Rev 3:3 "Therefore in view of your present state of reversionism you must begin the process of remembering and recalling when and in what way you received the Truth. I urge you to safeguard that Truth which you earlier received and have a change of mind at once concerning the importance of it. If you do not wake up to the importance of doctrine I will come quickly upon you and you will not know the time of your discipline nor will you know the type, manner or nature of your calamity.

Rev 3:4 "Fortunately there are some in Sardis who have not been polluted by negative volition to the Word. This remnant will walk with Me in the Third Heaven dressed in a uniform of glory, for they have by their positive volition made themselves worthy of future reward in heaven.

G. Campbell Morgan observes that there is a change in approach beginning with this letter. "There is a marked change in our Lord's method of address to the church at Sardis ... In the other churches, evil had not been the habit, but rather the exception,

and therefore it was possible to commend. Here the case is reversed, and no word of commendation is addressed to Sardis."

We are called to be royalty just as were the saints at Sardis. To fail as did Sardis is shameful given the fact that both they and we are royal family. Regeneration occurs in every age but only Church Age saints are said to be royal family of God.

1Pe 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

And now for an expanded translation of the last two verses of Christ's message to the Sardisians and the universal church.

Rev 3:5 "There will be many other Sardisians in heaven; these shall also be dressed in a uniform of glory though not walking with Me. Because of their faith in Me, however, I will never blot out their names from the book of life but will acknowledge them before My Father and His angels.

Rev 3:6 "Since you all have equal opportunity to cycle the Word, be sure you listen to what I am saying to the churches."

Let's review some of what we have learned about Sardis. There were in Sardis believers who were positive and will one day walk with Christ wearing their uniforms of glory. These people are said to have "not soiled their garments."

The "soiling of one's garments" is a metaphorical reference to negative volition to the Word of God thus resulting in no love of God. Because doctrine has been left on the table the believer is a casualty in the angelic conflict or, better said, an underemployed Christian. Spiritual food left uneaten results in no metabolized doctrine in the soul and thus an undernourished Christian.

Undernourished bystanders, though they will wear uniforms of glory, will not walk hand in hand with Christ in heavenly places. Another example of the Biblical truth: there will be relative rewards in heaven. Heb 8:11

Heb 8:11 And they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest.

Unfortunately, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 1Co 3:11-15, there will be believers entering heaven without any divine good, i.e., no rewards or, as Christ said to John, there will be those in heaven dressed in white but not walking with Me.

This is a terrible oxymoron--a believer in dress blues without decoration, no medals on a uniform of glory, a bystander not walking with Christ. The bystanders will be those who chose not to cycle the Word.

It would seem there are many in Sardis and many in modern Christianity who openly purport to be ambassadors of Christ but in reality are Christians in name only. The deeds of those in Sardis and Christianity today are said to be partial, thus incomplete in the eyes of Christ.

There is in Rev 3:1-6 a special caveat for us to recall that which we have heard and to get serious about the message received or else be ready for severe and quick discipline.

The church at Sardis and Christianity today are said to be asleep and in need of a wake-up call.

However, there is said to be a remnant in both Sardis and in the church today; both are warned to strengthen that which remains. Those dressed in white but not walking with Christ are the overcomers who chose to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ but thereafter reject the love of God expressed in His promises.

Let's see how the entire message to the church at Sardis looks by way of an expanded translation.

Rev 3:1 "To the pastor responsible for the church at Sardis write: These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ Who is now endowed with, and in His incarnation benefited from, the seven-fold ministry of God the Holy Spirit. He is also the one Who holds the destiny of the seven churches. As to the church at Sardis, Jesus Christ knows your production. You have a reputation of being alive but you are temporally dead.

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The Book of the Revelation is special. It is a message from the Christ delivered by an angel and it is the only book in the Bible with a promise of blessing to those who read

and study it. There may be those who feel like all is lost because they have not overcome the world; be aware you are not alone. And who is he who has overcome the world? Listen to the words of John, the same writer of the Apocalypse:

1Jo 5:5 Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?