

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Sardis: Dead or Alive?

And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. (Revelation 3:1-2, KJV 1900)

I was once criticized for saying that there are no perfect churches on earth. Although I affirm with conviction that the New Testament describes the perfect church as our model, I will stand by my belief that no local church body exists—or ever did—that is flawless. A reading of the Lord's letters to the seven churches in Asia should confirm that point quite clearly. One of my fathers in the ministry was once preaching at a church several states away from his home. A local preacher approached him with the question, "Preacher, is your church in order?" My father in the ministry immediately replied, "No sir, it is not." The man who asked the question was surprised by the answer, and asked, "Why? What is wrong with it?" And my father in the ministry again replied without hesitation, "I am a member of it." The conversation ended.

Sinful pride may prompt us to gloss over errors and pretend to be more than we in fact are, but God is not impressed by pride and gloss.

Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12 KJV)

We may think far too highly of ourselves and allow pride to supplant godly humility and godly reliance on the Lord and His word.

The letters to these seven churches contain several instructive patterns. The Lord always begins His message to each church with a reminder of His authority and power over the church. A church in trouble needs this reminder, because a church in trouble has forgotten her Head and has chosen to go her own way rather than following the leadership of her Head.

These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know.... Although I do not subscribe to a convoluted theory of Biblical numerology, I do hold to the commonly believed principle that at least some numbers in the Bible take on symbolic value. Seven is probably one of the most common numbers in this category. It appears in Scripture often to take on the meaning of completeness. In our study passage, John does not imply that seven Holy Spirits exist. The Holy Spirit is always referred to in Scripture in the singular. He is One. The significance of "...seven

Spirits..." in our study passage likely refers to the Holy Spirit's divine attribute of omniscience, possibly omnipresence as well. Fully God and fully personal (Not an impersonal force or an "It"), He shares the unique and incommunicable divine attribute of all-knowingness. He learns nothing. No one can teach Him anything, and no one can hide anything from Him. Possibly this last point is most pertinent to the church at Sardis. A church whose sins have brought her to death has undoubtedly followed her own ways and deceived herself into thinking that she can hide her sinful ways from God. The Lord's first point to such a church, Sardis or a church in our day is the same, "I know...." She can't hide her sins from God, and she can't whitewash them so as to convince Him to ignore or to tolerate them.

These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know.... He who knows all also holds the seven stars in His hand. Who or what are these seven stars? John tells us before he begins to write the seven letters.

The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches. (Revelation 1:20, KJV 1900)

The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.... As previously noted, the angel or messenger to these churches is the pastor, the man whom the Lord has called to serve as each church's messenger, delivering the Lord's message to the church that he serves.

Another common error of a decaying or dead church is that the ministry belongs to them. They "Employ" him. He reports to them. They effectively own him, so he must do their biddings or face their ire. The Lord must therefore "Pull the rug" on yet another false notion in this dead church. They do not own the minister. The Lord holds him in His own hands. No preacher should exhibit a stubborn or arrogant attitude toward the church he serves, not the point here at all. We need to examine two points to get the full landscape of this truth.

1. ***The preacher or pastor's attitude toward himself.*** *For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.* (2 Corinthians 4:5 KJV) A man in ministry must live comfortably with the idea that he is both God's servant and the people's for Jesus' sake, or he destroys his value to both. When a man so compromises his ministry that he barely reads a passage before investing his preaching hour in telling the congregation about all the great things he has done, he has lost his ministry and his blessing.
2. ***The church's attitude toward her pastor or other ministers who preach to her.*** Here the analogy of our passage explains the proper perspective. A church that thinks she owns her ministry and demands that they please her, or face her fury is dead set on a course to face the Lord's righteous judgment. Every church should prayerfully regard her pastor as God's appointed messenger to her.

I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. A church's reputation may not at all agree with the Lord's opinion of her. Others may look at this church and think she has everything together and going steadily on the right course. The Lord knows her collective heart, as well as the individual heart of every member. Sardis apparently had a good reputation among other churches in Asia, but the Lord didn't share their opinion. In His view, she was dead.

Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Even in a dead church, the Lord may have a few people who remain faithful to Him and to His word. A church may so rebel against the Lord's leadership and the teaching of Scripture—always in harmony with each other—to the point of spiritual suicide, but a few people remain in the church who hold fast to their faith. These words are addressed to just such people.

I have encountered a number of notable situations over the years that beautifully illustrate this truth. First, we should note that God never "Kills" a church. A dead church always commits suicide by knowingly choosing to depart from God's teachings in Scripture, or by choosing simply to ignore the teachings of Scripture in favor of her own ways. I will share two church stories with you.

A church near where I grew up met in a very large building, able to comfortably seat over a hundred people. At the time I started preaching, this church had declined to eleven or twelve members who met one Sunday afternoon a month. My father told me that he remembered attending this church in his youth when every seat was

occupied every time the church met. What happened? We can't always know for certain, but no doubt the Lord knows, and I am equally convinced that the Lord makes the problem known to that church. Their demise reveals their conscious choice to ignore His will in favor of theirs. Dad observed what may well have been the cause of this church's effective death. The time came when a member of this church started ignoring Biblical morality; this person's ungodly conduct became a public scandal against the church. Eventually, a godly member of the church raised the question and suggested that the church needed to confront this sinful situation and deal with it in some way to communicate both to the Lord and to the community that she didn't approve. The erring member belonged to a family that had a significant number of members in the church. They pretty much thought that the church belonged to them, and that they could "Run" the church as they wished. They flatly refused to consider any form of rebuke against their sinning family member. Dad said that within six months of this episode the church's attendance plummeted. A house full became half-full, a quarter full, until the decline that I witnessed resulted. Like Sardis, this church still met and had a reputation as a good living church, but apparently she had not convinced the Lord, and His judgment prevailed.

My second observation is more positive. In my youth, I visited a church in northwestern Alabama. The weekend I visited this church the building was packed full at every service. On a warm spring Sunday morning, the building couldn't contain all the people, so the deacons opened the windows, and all around the building you could look out the windows and see only more people standing by the window anxious to hear the preaching of the gospel. The pastor told those of us who were visiting that weekend about the church's history. For reasons not then known, this church had once been active, but she had declined to the point that the only people who were members of the church were two women, sisters and widows. They loved the Lord, and, despite having no one else in attendance, every Sunday these two dear saints would take their Bibles and their hymnals, and walk to the church early on Sunday morning. They would spend some time weeding the grounds, sweeping and dusting the auditorium. At the appointed time for worship, they would sit down in a pew, sing a few hymns, one of them would quietly pray for the Lord to revive their church, the other would read some Scriptures, and they would sit quietly for a while in solemn worship. They always prayed for the Lord to send them a pastor who would work with them and not give up. After several years of this status, a local preacher was in process of arranging some preaching appointments for a visiting preacher. The visiting preacher made an interesting request of the local pastor. He wanted to visit every single church in the

association. The local pastor arranged the appointments, but he did not include this little forgotten church with the two widows. When he sent the visitor a list of his preaching appointments, the preacher sent a note back. "Are you sure you've included every church?" The local pastor then replied that he had not included one little church that was all but dead, having only two old widows now members and attending. The visitor immediately wrote back, "I want to preach at that church." The widows, ignored in preaching arrangements for so many years, were elated. They spent days before the preaching appointment making sure their grounds and church building were in their best condition. They visited their neighbors and invited them to join them to hear the visiting preacher. A good number of people attended the preaching appointment. After that appointment, the visiting preacher met with the two widows. In the end, he moved to the community, became pastor to two old widows, but, in a few short years, that little church had revived and began to prosper.

Whatever the problem that caused the earlier demise, the Lord had urged these two widows to "*Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain...*" and those dear widows listened and worked faithfully to obey. In the end, the Lord revived a dead church and blessed them with a new life.

We live in an age where churches in many conservative denominations are in serious decline. Never more than today, people in small, struggling churches need to study these letters to seven imperfect churches, and take the Lord's message to heart. We serve in the Lord's church at His hospitality. We hear His "angels" deliver His message to us in preaching. We need to take His message to heart and to confess our sins to Him, seek His way and will, and obey it, for it is truly His church, not ours. There is hope in the Lord for small struggling churches. Pray, serve, and obey. Do not give up. Call on the Lord to heal your past failures, to lead you to repentance where that is appropriate, and to restore spiritual vitality to your church. Despite being a dead church, there was hope for Sardis, and there is hope for you.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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