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Letters to the Churches V: Sardis – Revelation 3:1-6

Notes on the lesson: Sardis was another major city in this region, and interestingly enough, had an active, wealthy, important Jewish presence. The largest synagogue of the era has been excavated there, along with significant evidence of Christian presence. Both Christian and Jewish communities flourished, in fact, until 616 when the city was taken by the Seleucids. There is much important early Christian writing that comes from Sardis. It was a vibrant place – which makes this letter even more interesting:

Lesson.

“You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” Wow, what an assessment!

This got me to thinking, as I read the words of the ancient writers who first taught the message of Revelation to the early church.

The church in Sardis has the *reputation* of being alive. Sort of like Mark Twain’s famous line: “The reports of my death have been

exaggerated,” but a lot less funny: this church has been reported to be thriving, but is, in fact, dead.

What can that mean? Well, one thing it *could* mean is that they’ve been so successful that their success has compromised “what [they] received and heard.” Remember, please, this is important: there was no Bible to turn to in order to get the message of Jesus straight; many if not most of them couldn’t read it if they had one. They learned by word of mouth: teaching and sharing and experiencing.

But how does one tell who is speaking God’s truth and who is not? Surrounding them were all sorts of stories and beliefs, all kinds of mixtures of whatever flavor of local religion was already there, some that made a great deal of sense, and others that just seemed worth a try. Who was truly and faithfully doing what Paul does when he introduces his teaching about the Lord’s Supper in his first letter to the Corinthian church, writing: “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you...”, and who was just building a following?

A very wise theologian often asked her students, “How do you know that it’s God that you know when you think that you know God?” She said it to challenge our assumptions, push back against what we *thought* we knew and what we *really* knew. After all, a thousand years ago everyone “knew” there were dragons somewhere “out there,” that you would sail over the edge of the world if you went far enough, that

the earth was the center of the universe, and the largest physical thing in that universe. How *do* you know that it's God that you know? It surely seems the church in Sardis was having trouble with exactly that question, and didn't even realize it.

This was not a new issue for those who would follow our God: the people Moses led out of Egypt had the same problem, confusing their liberating God with the pagan deities of Egypt and Canaan and wherever else their travels took them. There was always *something* that needed to be added or subtracted from the ways of the God they'd promised to follow.

Could this be true of us?

Isn't this one of the classic problems of faith? Even the simplest understanding brings questions, and one old question persists: what is authentic witness to Jesus Christ? That question's still alive – just look at the History Channel on TV. They try to get you to tune in by saying, “What great secrets were kept hidden by the early Christians? Come see our new series on the books no one was allowed to see!” and things like that. Guaranteed audience!

Of course, as witnesses and others wrote down what they had seen or heard, there were still others who wrote down what they had been told by those who had, perhaps, added a bit there or left out a bit here. Some,

like we read about in the book of Acts, even tried to make the Christ the center of business schemes, eternal life and salvation for sale.

It was a wild-west of Jesus-stories in the early days of the church, and it took quite literally centuries for the collective wisdom of the church, often meeting in councils, to settle on what was worthy and what was not. Much of what is dredged up today is what got winnowed out in the process. There's always a reason why some gospel got "lost" – because its witness was NOT authentic.

It looks like this is what was happening in Sardis. Lots of energy, lots of excitement, lots of material that may have led people away from the message of Jesus.

That is difficult enough. We Protestants have always leaned on Paul in his letters to the young churches to set us straight on what's right and what's not. But Paul never met the human Jesus: he was confronted and converted by his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ as he made his way to Damascus to arrest more people who were messing around with what Paul (then Saul) *had* believed God had revealed to his people, in what was then known as Judaism. The Gospels we have now record Jesus' teachings, his life, death and resurrection, but those needed explanation even to Jesus' closest followers.

And the question that echoes down the ages remains, one that is implied but not asked in this message for Sardis: What sucked the life out of your witness to Jesus Christ? And, why haven't you noticed it?

This question remains for us. Since God has created each of us uniquely, so each of us has, in some way, a unique experience of God, moreover, one that changes as the events that God places in our lives shape our souls. That's a very important reason for the variety of expressions that we have in our denominations and, on a local level, in our churches. We either find a church where we like the people, the spirit those people embody, or the beliefs that they hold.

On a really good day, those three will be the same.

Still, there aren't that many "good days," even in sun-drenched Arizona. We will – actually, if we ARE uniquely crafted by the Master Creator, we must – be a little dissonant, a little conflicted, a little uncomfortable with at least *some* of our corporate beliefs or practices – even if it's only the hymn choices.

Yet, there remains one great Church, a church that encompasses all those who truly believe. Jesus promised us this himself, and calls us to it, to believe in him and his life's message of reconciliation with God. Not only is that Church universal, it is invisible.

But what is it we're to believe and follow? The things Jesus did and said, or the things we've built from (and, sometimes, in spite of)

them? More than one faithful church member has told me, “Jesus was wrong.”

Are we – were the good people in Sardis – living this life of God’s freedom, redemption, and gentle forgiveness – and especially love – that Jesus modeled, taught, and lived for and among us, or are we –were the people in Sardis – caught up in rules and tests and such? After all, the Jewish Law was strong there in Sardis, and laws are about what is right and what is not. Is the Gospel lived in opposition to rules, to the Law that Jesus took such frequent delight in breaking in order to be authentic to the message given by his father to pass on? Or is that Gospel itself subject to checklist and rulebooks, but ones that we find amenable to ourselves, what we *think* we know, creating an inevitable division between those who are like *us*, and those that are damned because they aren’t? Isn’t that the opposite of – almost said, evangelism, but let’s say outreach? Jesus’ deeds? The principles of our nation, even? One of the surest ways to destroy the spirit of a church is to breed an us-versus-them culture; people would much rather leave than fight, because, as we say every Sunday, we are united in our baptism to the one Body of Christ.

The Risen Christ identifies himself to Sardis as the one who holds the seven stars – the light – in one hand; in the other, God’s seven spirits. Now, what are those? According to the early church, they are: Wisdom, Understanding, Right choices, Courage, Knowledge,

Reverence or faith, and Awe or fear of God – some have called this the fear of separation from God.

It seems to me that we would do well to pray for all of these seven gifts as we seek to be faithful to the one who proved his faithfulness to us, Jesus Christ. So, may we be blessed with the seven spirits of God:

God, grant us wisdom: to know you truly.

God, grant us understanding: to find you, and accept you.

God, grant us to know what is true and of you, and what is false and threatens us.

God, give us courage to resist what must be resisted – and tolerate what must be tolerated.

God, give us knowledge to be your faithful witnesses.

God, give us faith.

God, let us never, ever, be apart from you.