

The Seven Letters (6): The Church in Sardis

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 July 2026

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0:00] Let's read now from God's Word in the book of Revelation and chapter 3. Revelation and chapter 3. Revelation and chapter 3. You'll find this on page 1029 of your new Bible.

Revelation 3. And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you're dead. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

Remember then what you received and heard. Keep it and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life.

[1:20] I will confess his name before my Father and before the angels. He who is anear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence.

May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

According to my computer, there are over 150 evangelical churches in Glasgow. So, ourselves and next door make up two of them. Now, I'm sure there are far more, but let's say this is an accurate figure.

Every one of these 150 churches is preaching the same gospel, worships the same Jesus, but they all feel different from each other. I'm not talking here about the liveliness of their worship, or the buildings in which they worship, but their feel, what some people call their culture.

The culture or feel of a church goes beneath what it looks like, or all it does. It's not about activities. It's the way it feels.

[2:39] The culture of a church can't be defined as much as it can be felt. You can't put your finger on it. You just know it's either healthy or unhealthy. It is alive or it's dead.

And again, I'm not talking about the feel of a church as representing our personal preferences for how we worship or the kind of preaching we like, nor is the feel a mere subjective impression.

It's more the spiritual awareness that God is at work in this place, that the Holy Spirit is active. This awareness can't be faked. It can't be worked up.

It just is. I know I'm not explaining this very well because by definition, these spiritual things can't be explained. The culture of a church is the supernatural presence of the supernatural God.

It can't be theologized. It can't be rationalized. It just is. Two churches can look exactly the same, do exactly the same things, worship exactly the same way, be in the same denomination, preach the same message, but one has the feel of God and the other doesn't.

[3:57] Two churches can be very different, look very different, do very different things, worship in very different ways, be in very different denominations, preach the gospel in very different ways, but both have the feel of God.

So our prayer is to be a church with a healthy culture, that indefinable feel of the Holy Spirit about us.

Of all the seven churches to which Jesus wrote letters in Revelation, I don't know how we would rank them in terms of their cultural health. Perhaps, as we'll see in a couple of weeks' time, Laodicea would be at the very bottom, but it would be only slightly below the church in Sardis.

In Revelation 3, 1 through 6, Jesus writes a letter to a church which has the reputation for being alive, but it's dead. It's a church which does all the right things, but it's got no feel.

The Holy Spirit has left the building, and the sad thing is that the Christians in Sardis haven't even noticed his absence. Now, Sardis was a very ancient city.

[5:19] It reached its highest point in the 6th century BC, when it was one of the wealthiest cities in the world. In the centuries following, Sardis lost its influence, but it continued to trade on past glories.

It had the reputation for wealth, but by the 1st century AD, when this letter was written, it had become the same as every other city.

Sardis also had a mighty fortress on a hill, which its inhabitants thought was impregnable. They thought it could not be taken by force. Sardis was a commercial city, trading in wool, and boasting on being the first city in the world to sell wool, which had been colorfully dyed.

So the overall impression is that Sardis was a city of glory, but a fading glory, a decadent city, filled with proud people.

And the culture of the church reflected the culture of the city. It was a church whose glory was fading, a dying church, a decadent and proud church, trading on past glories, rather than pressing ahead to new heights of spiritual experience.

[6:42] The watchword of Jesus' letter to the church in Sardis is this, you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Our congregation is over 200 years old. We have a glorious history, and much of which to be thankful. Oh, but Lord, save us from trading upon past glories.

Rather, we pray that the Lord, that our best days would be ahead of us, not behind us. We want to pray for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us, so that we have the feel of God about us, the healthy culture which presses us on to new depths of Christian experience, and a new vigor for the gospel of Christ among the churches and peoples of Glasgow.

The letter itself can be divided into two themes, a warning to the spiritually lifeless and a promise to the spiritually alive.

Of all the churches to whom Jesus wrote letters in Revelation, the letter to the one in Sardis is the one I believe we, in our setting, tradition, and situation, must listen to you most keenly.

[8:10] For we, more than any other church, may be in danger of falling into its errors and becoming a church with a reputation for being alive, but in reality is dead.

So, first of all then, we have a warning to the spiritually lifeless. A warning to the spiritually lifeless. They say that death has a stench all of its own, and in the same way, a dead church has a uniquely repugnant stench.

It's not about activities, but attitudes, not about size, but about spirit. It's not about morality, it's about mindset. Big churches, medium churches, or small churches, they can all be dead and not know it.

A few years ago, I worshipped in a church roughly the same size as ours, worshipping in a very similar situation, doing the very similar things to the things we do, but it had no feel to it at all. It felt to me like a ghostly ship, like the Mary Celeste. It felt to me like the Holy Spirit had left the building, but no one had noticed. The church where I worshipped had a reputation for being alive, but it was dead.

[9:34] And with horror, I saw our fate as Crow Road Free Church unless the grace of Christ should give us new life and the Holy Spirit should be continually with us. That was the church in Sardis, a church trading on past glories, trying to work up what only God can give, and Jesus says to them, I know your works.

The Lord of the church sees beneath the surface of things and He knows the reality of the heart. When He looks at the church in Sardis, He sees that they are working, they're engaging in the same activities they always have.

Their church calendar is full, they're not poisoned by the same impure teaching as the other churches. But for all that, Jesus says to them, I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

Verse 2. What does this mean? I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Some commentators suggest that this means that they have been imperfect in their obedience to God, that they have not been diligent to do everything according to the Word of God.

Now, of course, while we should do everything we can to obey everything within the Word of God, I don't believe this is what Jesus is referring to when He says, I have not found your works to be

complete.

[10:55] Complete translates the Greek word *pleroma*, which means fullness. Jesus here is saying, I have not found your works to be full.

The Jesus who knows their heart is saying to them that they are not fully engaging in the work of the gospel, that despite all their appearances, their hearts are not engaged.

On the surface, they look the same as every other Christian, but dig deeper, you'll find that whatever obedience they're offering God, whatever works they're doing, they're doing because they must, not because they want to.

They're working as slaves for a master, not as children for a father. They're working out of duty, not out of joy. That's the sense in which their works are incomplete and not full because their whole beings are not engaged in the work of the gospel.

And when I refer to gospel work here, I'm not talking about the church activities in which we engage. I'm referring more to growing as Christians in holiness, knowledge, grace, love, compassion, Christ-likeness, what we call sanctification.

[12:14] Sardis is a church which on the surface looks the real deal, but it's like an iceberg with nothing underneath the water. In the mid-19th century Scottish church, our free church forefather Hugh Muller from Cromarty had an expression to describe ministers who for all their fine appearances and high status were evangelically useless.

He called them fine bodies, fine bodies. He criticized the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for being filled with fine bodies, men who had a great appearance but didn't really know Jesus Christ and weren't willing to speak out on behalf of Jesus Christ.

Sardis was a fine-bodied church full of Christians with fine appearances and a reputation for being alive but in reality evangelically useless.

They were serving God not from a place of gratitude to Christ and His gospel grace but out of a sense of duty. They were trading on past glories of things that had been true about them 20 years before.

Dame Vidalin sang the song *There Will Always Be in England* and the church in Sardis sang *There Will Always Be a Church in Sardis*. Jesus, however, tells them different.

[13:45] He warns them saying If you will not wake up I will come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Verse 3 Remember the city of Sardis prided itself on this mighty fortress at the top of the hill this impregnable city which couldn't be taken by force.

It couldn't be taken by force but it could be taken by stealth by an unexpected attack. It had twice before in its history and Jesus is promising that like what happened to the city He would come stealthily and unexpectedly upon the church.

He would come against it. The sad thing as we'll see in a moment should Jesus come against them He wouldn't even have noticed it.

That He's coming not with promises but with warnings. It's a really sober warning that the Lord of the church should come in judgment against it and at a time it does not expect snuff it out destroy it. What this means in practice I don't care to speculate but you know it when you see it. A church which is dead because it's lost the joy of the Lord the centrality of the gospel and its discipleship and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

[15:08] You cannot kill a church like this it is already dead. All that's left is to conduct its funeral service and commit it to history. I know that Evan and myself also we have spent many many hours in the Mitchell Library scouting the records of churches in Glasgow long gone.

They once lived and were filled but they're long dead. They had lost the joy of the Lord the centrality of the gospel and their discipleship and the presence of the Holy Spirit and Jesus came against them in judgment.

Lord save us from this that in a hundred times our church records should be kept in the Mitchell Library but our church be no more.

The issues the church in Sardis faced were twofold. First of all although on paper it believed the gospel in practice it wasn't living the gospel out and Jesus commands it saying wake up strengthen what remains and about to die remember then what you received and heard keep it and repent verse 2 what remains to them what they have what they have received and heard is the simple truth of the gospel.

The love of God demonstrated in time and space in the Lord Jesus Christ and how for us he gave himself on the cross that we might be forgiven saved from eternal death.

[16:46] The issue for the people in Sardis was that on paper they believed that gospel but it wasn't impacting their lives in any meaningful way at all the cross and resurrection of Jesus wasn't front and center and that's what rendered their works incomplete that their hearts weren't bursting with the gospel.

It is entirely possible for a church to preach grace but not live grace to preach the forgiveness of our sins through Christ but to be the most judgmental and harsh of all institutions for a church to go through the motions of everything an evangelical church should be but it's little more than a gathering of fine bodies.

Let me ask us all a question this morning. What is motivating? What is motivating your Christian life and service? Is it the grace of Christ in the gospel?

Is it mere duty? Is it how you appear to be to others? You know it is the difference between life and death light and dark power and exhaustion. If that's us today we need to hear heed the words of Jesus strengthen what remains and is about to die remember then what you received and heard keep it repent get back to the basics of the cross and resurrection get back to the centrality of Christ and His grace get back to those four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John get back to the epistles of Paul learn and relearn pray it in deep the depths of God's love and the heights of God's grace.

But the second issue the church in Sardis faced was that the Holy Spirit was no longer present in the church. The Holy Spirit was no longer present in the church. In verse 1 Jesus describes Himself as being Him who has the seven spirits of God.

[18:46] The seven spirits of God is a reference to the Holy Spirit of God the third person of the Trinity the powerful presence of God among His people. And Jesus' reference to Himself in this way is an indication that for all its works for all its appearances the church in Sardis lacked the Holy Spirit's presence among them.

He wasn't in the building He wasn't infusing the hearts of believers with spiritual life and power. Without the Holy Spirit they were fine bodies only but with the Holy Spirit they could diffuse the glory the beauty and the love of God in Christ.

The church is not full because the Holy Spirit is absent. He is the supernatural person who gives the church its feel and inhabits its culture.

We can't forge the Holy Spirit's presence among us. We can't force the Holy Spirit to be among us. He blows with His wills and He graces us with Himself. The Holy Spirit does not the preserve of the charismatic church.

In fact many charismatic churches I visit have been entirely as empty of His presence whereas many quiet and orderly churches have been full of Him. the word I'm looking for I think is the word liminality.

[20:12] Liminality. The Holy Spirit brings the realities of Christ close to us and He makes our churches places of a genuine spiritual encounter with the living and risen Christ.

What then shall we do? We shall remember what we received and going back to the gospel repent. By definition repentance is about the church doing business with God Himself of denying our own strategies and planning and embracing the freedom of God's sovereign promise that in the words of 2 Chronicles 7 precious words these if we shall humble ourselves and pray and seek God's face and turn from our wicked ways He will hear from heaven and will forgive our sin and heal our land and church.

This calls us to soul work the basics of the gospel applied by the basics of gospel teaching faith in the gospel and repentance toward the gospel who cares what kind of reputation we have as a church what matters isn't what Insta says about us but what Jesus thinks of us.

Many churches have a reputation for being dead but are alive others have a reputation for being alive but are dead who cares what other people think of us if the Jesus who knows us knows we are dead or knows we are alive.

The last thing we want is to have that stench of death about us rather we want the aroma of gospel life and the beauty of the glory of Christ and for that reason that's why we plead in our prayer meetings of church and that's what we aspire to be before anything else as a church.

[22:14] Secondly and very briefly we have a promise to the spiritually alive a promise to the spiritually alive. Not only are there differences between churches but there can be differences within

a church in Sardis the majority of Christians were spiritually dead their hearts no longer moved by spiritual gospel truths but there were a few who had remained as they once were a few who had never lost their sense at wonder at how the Son of God had loved them and given himself for them and Jesus says of them they have not soiled their garments verse 4 they have not soiled their garments remember Sardis was famous for its decadence its defences but it was also famous for being the first city in Asia Minor to sell wool which had been dyed soiled garments were garments which had been destroyed in the dyeing process the dye had not taken and they were a mess of colours rather like my watercolour pictures spoil on the whole garment and the garment could not then be sold these select

Christians had not allowed their zeal for the gospel to fade or spoil they were not relying upon past experiences and long lost glories as the basis for their faith they kept on pressing on in their faith and the way they went forward was by going back the way they went forward was by going back back to the cross that's always the way forward in the Christian life the way forward is always the way back to Calvary to the cross of Jesus and they Jesus says are the worthy ones not those whose worth is in themselves but those whose worth is in the cross of the Lord and as such Jesus presents them with four beautiful promises he says first of all they'll walk with me in white verse 4 they'll walk with me in white white the image of purity while walking with us reminds us of how Jesus walks among the seven golden lampstands and of how

Jesus walked with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden it's this picture of intimate fellowship with Jesus it's this picture of knowing him as he really really is and then secondly Jesus says in verse 5 he'll clothe them in white garments clothe them in white garments no stain no pollution just the startling purity of his cleanness covering them from head to toe like wool dyed whiter than the snow Jesus shall on the day of fulfillment remove every stain from them and make them then what they long now to be pure in heart and then thirdly Jesus promises verse 5 never to blot their names from the book of life the book of life you know is a register of the people of God to blot something out just to cover it with the dye they used in Sardis and Jesus says to those who have not lost their heart zeal for him that their names are indelibly written in the Lamb's book of life the register of heaven that their place can never be taken away from them for all that the city of

Sardis may have thought itself to be heaven and earth these believers have a real heaven to look forward to and fourthly Jesus will confess their names before his father and the holy angels verse 5 imagine the names of these people on the lips of the Lord even as his name was on their lips in prayer imagine this those very lips which framed the words my God my God why have you forsaken me shall one day speak your name and confess it before the father and the holy angels imagine that one day those lips which spoke those words come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest shall confess the name of Ruth and Caitlin and Samuel and the two reasons this one is mine this one's mine too such promises go beyond anything we could have deserved or merited for we were saved by the grace of

Christ and that grace alone but the Lord is the God who delights in the extravagance of grace here then are promises directed to the spiritually alive but it would seem from the context as if these promises are also for those who having recognized that for long enough their hearts have not been in it but the Holy Spirit has been absent from them and their church that the gospel has not been central to them it's for them to repent and to turn again to Christ for restoration and renewal these are promises for us if today we will but hear the voice of Christ and respond in faith and trust resting on past glories is the path to spiritual death prizing a reputation before men above a reality before God is the path to spiritual morbidity I don't believe in perfectionism don't like the kind of higher life movement but from an early age one of the hymns born out of that movement taught to me by my uncle Ross has always been in my mind listen to it

[28:11] I'm pressing on the upward way new heights I'm gaining every day still praying as I onward bound Lord plant my feet on higher ground there's time for all of us to avoid the warnings of Sardis there's no city in Sardis anymore there's no church there anymore there are only ruins bleached white in the Mediterranean sun does that not serve as a warning to us there may be 150 evangelical churches in Glasgow today but if we but repent renew our pursuit of Christ and his spirit if we but cling to his promises who knows but in 10 years there may be 1500 churches in Glasgow and every one of them spiritually vibrant and alive and that is for what we work and that is for what we pray let us pray

Lord we're so excited by the promises of you made to this church in Sardis but also deeply challenged as we reflect on how if we're being honest there are times our hearts aren't in the work of the gospel that our bodies may be here and our tongues may be active but our hearts are very far away Lord we pray that you would grant us repentance we pray that you would give us renewal we pray that you would send your Holy Spirit upon us again that we may know refreshing times from on high and Lord we ask for our church and for every other gospel preaching church in our city that you would send your spirit we long for our churches to be known as being places of spiritual life in a world which is spiritually dead in Jesus name we ask these things Amen