

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

Chapter 3:1-6

“SARDIS: The Alive, but Dead Church”

> The seven churches and their historical reference:

(2:1-7) *Ephesus*- The Apostolic Church (1st Century)

(2:8-11) *Smyrna*- The Martyr Church (A.D. 100 – A.D. 314)

(2:12-17) *Pergamum* - The Worldly Church (A.D. 314 – A.D. 590)

(2:18-29) *Thyatira*- Church of the Dark Ages, “Romanism” (A.D. 590–1517; continues today)

(3:1-6) *Sardis*- The Protestant Church, “Reformation” (A.D. 1517 – A.D. 1800; continues today)

(3:7-13) *Philadelphia*- The Revived Church (A.D. 1800 to Rapture)

(3:14-22) *Laodicea*- The Apostate Church (Last Days & into the Great Tribulation)

(3:1-6) *Sardis*- The Protestant Church, “Reformation” (A.D. 1517 – A.D. 1800)

> **Sardis** - means **“a remnant”** or **“those who have escaped.”**

- **Sardis, the city:** Sardis was the capital city of Lydia in the province of Asia, in western Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Sardis was situated on the east bank of the Pactolus River about 80 kilometers (50 miles) east of Smyrna; it occupied a rocky spur of Mount Tmolus and a valley at the foot of this mountain. In ancient times Sardis was well fortified and easily defended. It became the capital of the ancient Lydian empire, then passed successively to the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans during their respective dominance of the ancient world. During its days as a Roman city, Sardis became an important Christian center. The most impressive building of ancient Sardis must have been its magnificent Temple of Artemis, built in the fourth century B.C., which was the goddess Cybele (goddess of the moon), whose worship resembled that of Diana of Ephesus. The temple was 100 meters (327 feet) long and 50 meters (163 feet) wide and had 78 Ionic columns, each 17.7 meters (58 feet) high. Some of these columns remain standing until this day. The people of Sardis also worshipped at another temple dedicated to Apollo (god of the sun). In 295 AD, after the Roman province of Asia was broken up, Sardis became the capital of Lydia, and during the early Christian age it was the home of a bishop. The city continued to flourish until 1402, when it was so completely destroyed by Tamerlane that it was never rebuilt. Among the ruins there now stands a small village called Sert, a corruption of its ancient name. The ruins may be reached by rail from Smyrna, on the way to Philadelphia. The ancient city was noted for its fruits and wool, and for its wealth was also partly due to the gold which was found in the sand of the river Pactolus, and it was here that gold and silver coins were first struck.

- **Sardis in Church History:** It is believed that the church in Sardis was established through Paul’s missionary work and ministry in Ephesus, which probably spread throughout Asia Minor to the city of Sardis. The most prominent person from the church at Sardis known to history is Melito. He was an apologist (one who wrote in defense of Christianity) who served as bishop of Sardis in the late second century. In the panorama of church history, Sardis represents the Protestant church during the period between A.D. 1517 and approximately A.D. 1800. It’s possible beginning may have been when Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* onto the chapel door of the church at Wittenburg, Germany. It is an era, which started with the Reformation and takes us into the beginning of the great missionary movement in the history of the church.¹

- **What was the Protestant Reformation?** In understanding the history of Protestant Church and the Reformation, it is important to first understand that one of the claims that the Roman Catholic Church makes is that of apostolic succession. This simply means that they claim a unique authority over all other churches and denominations because they claim the line of Roman Catholic Popes back throughout the centuries, all the way to the Apostle Peter. In their view, this gives the Roman Catholic Church a unique authority that supersedes all other denominations or churches. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, this apostolic succession is only “found in the Catholic Church” and no “separate Churches have any valid claim to it.”

It is because of this apostolic succession that the Roman Catholic Church claims a unique

¹ J.Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, pg. 912.

authority to interpret Scripture and to establish doctrine, as well the claim of having a supreme leader in the Pope who is infallible (without error) when speaking “ex cathedra”—that is, in the exercise of his office as pastor and teacher of all Christians. Therefore, according to the Roman Catholic view, the teaching or traditions of the Roman Catholic Church as they come from the Pope are equally as infallible and authoritative as the Scriptures themselves. This is one of the major differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants and was one of the foundational reasons for the Protestant Reformation.

Of course, the Roman Catholics are not the only ones who try to claim unique authority through apostolic succession or by tracing the roots of their church back to the original apostles. The Eastern Orthodox Church also claims apostolic succession, although their claim is very similar to the Roman Catholic view. The split between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism did not occur until the “Great Schism” in A.D. 1054. There are also some Protestant denominations or groups that will try to establish a “Trail of Blood” that can be traced back through the centuries to the first century church and the apostles themselves. While these Protestants do not hold to apostolic succession in order to establish the authority of a “Pope” as an infallible leader, they still look to that connection to the early church in at least some small degree to establish the authority of their doctrines and practices.

The problem with any of these attempts to trace a line of succession back to the apostles, whether it is Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant, is that they all are attempts to derive or support the authority of what they believe and teach from the wrong source, that of some real or perceived connection with the apostles, instead of deriving it from the Word of God. It is important for Christians to realize that direct apostolic succession is not necessary in order for a church or denomination to have authority. God has given and preserved the supreme authority for all matters of faith and practice in His Holy Word, the Bible. Therefore, an individual church’s or denomination’s authority today does not come through some tie to the first century church and the apostles. Instead, it comes only and directly from the written Word of God. A church or denomination’s teachings are authoritative and binding on Christians only if they represent the true meaning and clear teaching of Scripture. This is important in order to understand the connection between Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church, and the reason that the Protestant Reformation took place.

In regards to the history of Christianity and the claims of apostolic succession, as well as the Roman Catholic Church’s claim of being the one true Church with unique authority, it is important that to understand a couple of key points. First, we must realize that even in the days of the apostles and the first century church, false teachers were a significant problem. We know this because warnings against heresies and false teachers are found in all the later New Testament writings. Jesus Himself warned that these false teachers would be like “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 7:15), and that there would be both “tares and wheat” that would exist together until the day of judgment when He separates the saved from the lost, the true “born again” believer from those that have not truly received Him (Matthew 13:24-30). This is important in understanding church history, because from almost the very beginning false teachers and false teachings have been invading the church and leading people astray. Despite this, there have also been true “born again” believers who held fast to the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, throughout all ages, even in the darkest period of the dark ages.

The second thing to realize to correctly understand church history is that the word catholic simply means “universal.” This is important because in the early Christian writings of the first and second centuries, when the term catholic is used, it is referring to the “universal church” or “body of Christ” that is made up of “born again” believers from every tribe, tongue and nation (Revelation 5:9; 7:9). However, like many other words over time, the word catholic began to take on new meaning, or came to be used in a new sense. Over time, the concept of a “universal” or “catholic” church began to evolve into the concept that all churches formed together one church, not just spiritually, but also visibly, extending throughout the world. This misunderstanding of the nature of the visible church (which always has contained both “wheat and tares”) and the invisible church (the body of Christ which is only made up of born again believers) would lead to the concept of a visible Holy Catholic Church, outside of which there is no salvation. It is out of this misunderstanding of the nature of the universal church that the Roman Catholic Church evolved.

Prior to the Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in A.D. 315, Christians had been persecuted by the Roman government. With his conversion, Christianity became an allowed religion of the Roman

Empire (and later became the official religion), and thus the “visible” Church became joined with the power of the Roman government. This marriage of church and state led to the formation of the Roman Catholic Church, and over time caused the Roman Catholic Church to refine its doctrine and develop its structure in a way that best served the purpose of the Roman government. During this time, opposing the Roman Catholic Church was the same as opposing the Roman government and carried with it severe penalties. If one disagreed with some doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, it was a serious charge that often resulted in excommunication and sometimes even death.

Yet throughout this time of history, there were true “born again” Christians who would rise up and oppose the secularization of the Roman Catholic Church and the perversion of the faith that followed. Through this church-and-state combination, the Roman Catholic Church effectively silenced those who opposed any of its doctrines or practices, and truly became almost a universal church throughout the Roman Empire. There were always pockets of resistance to some of the unbiblical practices and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, yet they were relatively small and isolated. Prior to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, men such as John Wycliffe in England, John Huss in Czechoslovakia, and John of Wessel in Germany had all given their lives for their opposition to some of the unbiblical teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

The opposition to the Roman Catholic Church and its false teaching came to a head in the sixteenth century, when a Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther posted his 95 propositions (or theses) against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on the Castle Church door at Wittenberg, Germany. Luther’s intention was to bring reform to the Roman Catholic Church, and in doing so was challenging the authority of the Pope. With the refusal of the Roman Catholic Church to heed Luther’s call to reformation and return to biblical doctrines and practices, the Protestant Reformation began. From this Reformation four major divisions or traditions of Protestantism would emerge: Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and Anglican. During this time God raised up godly men in different countries in order to once again restore churches throughout the world to their biblical roots and to biblical doctrines and practices.

Underlying the Protestant Reformation lay four basic doctrines in which the reformers believed the Roman Catholic Church to be in error. These four questions or doctrines are How is a person saved? Where does religious authority lie? What is the church? And what is the essence of Christian living? In answering these questions, Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and John Knox established what would be known as the “Five Solas” of the Reformation (sola being the Latin word for “alone”). These five points of doctrine were at the heart of the Protestant Reformation, and it was for these five essential Biblical doctrines that the Protestant Reformers would take their stand against the Roman Catholic Church, resisting the demands placed on them to recant, even to the point of death. These five essential doctrines of the Protestant Reformation are as follows:

1—“Sola Scriptura,” or Scripture Alone: This affirms the Biblical doctrine that the Bible alone is the sole authority for all matters of faith and practice. Scripture and Scripture alone is the standard by which all teachings and doctrines of the church must be measured. As Martin Luther so eloquently stated when asked to recant on his teachings, “Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”

2—“Sola Gratia,” Salvation by Grace Alone: This affirms the Biblical doctrine that salvation is by God’s grace alone and that we are rescued from His wrath by His grace alone. God’s grace in Christ is not merely necessary, but is the sole efficient cause of salvation. This grace is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ by releasing us from our bondage to sin and raising us from spiritual death to spiritual life.

3—“Sola Fide,” Salvation by Faith Alone: This affirms the Biblical doctrine that justification is by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone. It is by faith in Christ that His righteousness is imputed to us as the only possible satisfaction of God’s perfect justice.

4—“Sola Christus,” In Christ Alone: This affirms the Biblical doctrine that salvation is found in Christ alone and that His sinless life and substitutionary atonement alone are sufficient for our justification and reconciliation to God the Father. The gospel has not been preached if Christ’s substitutionary work is not declared, and if faith in Christ and His work is not solicited.

5—“*Soli Deo Gloria, For the Glory of God Alone*: This affirms the Biblical doctrine that salvation is of God and has been accomplished by God for His glory alone. It affirms that as Christians we must glorify Him always, and must live our entire lives before the face of God, under the authority of God, and for His glory alone.

These five important and fundamental doctrines are the reason for the Protestant Reformation. They are at the heart of where the Roman Catholic Church went wrong in its doctrine, and why the Protestant Reformation was necessary to return churches throughout the world to correct doctrine and biblical teaching. They are just as important today in evaluating a church and its teachings as they were then. In many ways, much of Protestant Christianity needs to be challenged to return to these fundamental doctrines of the faith, much like the reformers challenged the Roman Catholic Church to do in the sixteenth century. (From: *The Gospel According to Rome: Comparing Protestant Reformation and The Word of God* by James McCarthy.)

> **Nine “BE” Points for Protestants:**

- Point #1 – Be Complete in Christ!

(v1a) **Once again notice how Jesus describes himself- “seven Spirits”** - *seven* represents **completeness**; whereas, *Spirits* speaks of the **Holy Spirit**, **this church lacked the Holy Spirit and His full, complete work** (i.e. **to be born again, empowered, and sanctified**). We also see the ***seven stars***, representing the full and complete message of the Word of God, which many in this church rejected or compromised.

- Point #2 – Be Alive, Revive from the Dead!

(v1b) **“a name that is alive, but you are dead”**- The church name is alive, but the true work of Christ and His name is dead. There are four stages in the rise and fall of a work of God, 1st - God finds a **man** of faith and a good work begins; 2nd – the work turns into a **movement**, many are saved and discipled; 3rd - the work cools as man turns it into a **machine**, God is programmed out; 4th – the church becomes spiritually dead and becomes a **monument**. **H.A. Ironside** writes, “Sardis brings before us, prophetically, the great State-churches of the Reformation, who escaped from Rome, only to fall eventually (alas, that it should be so) into cold, lifeless formalism The State-churches were, from the first, intended to include all the population of a given country, who were supposed to be made members of the church and kingdom of Christ by baptism in infancy, one can readily understand why such churches, though, possibly, strictly orthodox, may yet be largely composed of persons still dead in trespasses and sins. Nothing can be much sadder than vast congregations of people, baptized, banded together as Christians, “taking the sacrament” of the Lord’s Supper, zealous for church and Christianity, and yet largely devoid of personal, saving faith in Christ – trusting rather in forms and ceremonies, and what some have called “birth-right membership,” than in new birth through the Word and Spirit of God.”

- Point #3 – Be Watchful and Strengthen!

(v2) **“Be watchful and strengthen”**- The NIV’s translation reads, “*Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.*” **Strengthen** is *sterizo* in Greek, meaning *to establish; to set fast, i.e. (literally) to turn resolutely in a certain direction, or (figuratively) to confirm: to establish the truth which is with you.*

- Point #4 – Be Biblical!

(v3a) **Remember—Hold fast—Repent** - Remember the great “reformers” who brought you the Word of God, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Bunyan, John Wesley, John Moffat, David Livingstone, William Carey, Henry Martin, Titus Coan here in the Hawaiian Islands, and many, many others. **Remember and hold fast to Acts 2:37-47; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-21.**

- Point #5 – Be Ready!

(v3b) ***“Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief”***- In other words if your Protestant church will not wake up to the Word of God, I will come to you as a thief and take what you have, much like the *“Parable of the Talents”* (Matt. 25:24-30), the individual with one talent hid it in the ground and the Lord took it away, then cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness, where there’s weeping and gnashing of teeth. We see our Lord use the term ***thief***, as well as Paul the apostle in some other passages, let’s see what they have to say, **Matthew 24:36-51; 1 Thess. 5:1-11.**

- Point #6 – Be Pure!

(v4) ***You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments*** – **The word defile in Greek is *moluno*, which means, “to stain,” “to smear,” or “to pollute.”** There’s a remnant that lives for Christ!

- Point #7 – Be an Overcomer!

(v5a) Let’s be ***overcomers*** (**1 John 5:1-4**) and have our names ***confessed*** - In order to get your name ***confessed*** you must first ***confess His name*** - **Matt 10:32-33- *whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.*** Read **Rom 10:8-13. *All true Christians will be clothed in white garments*** - **Rev 19:7-9 – *Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.*** *And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!'" And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God."*

- Point 8 – Be found in the Book of Life!

(v5b) ***“I will not blot his name out of the book of life”?*** - The phrase is derived from the custom of the ancients of keeping genealogical records (Neh 7:5,64; 12:22-23) and of enrolling citizens for various purposes (Jer 22:30; Ezek 13:9). So God is represented as having a record of all who are under His special care and guardianship. To be blotted out of the ***Book of Life*** is to be cut off from God's favor, to suffer an untimely death, as when Moses pleads that he be blotted out of God's book-that he might die, rather than that Israel should be destroyed (Ex 32:32; Ps 69:28). In the New Testament it is the record of the ***righteous*** who are to inherit ***eternal*** life (Phil 4:3; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 21:27). (From *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.)

- Point #9 – Be a Hearer and a Doer!

(v6) Let’s hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, **AMEN!**