



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

The Letter to the Church at Sardis
Revelation 3:1:6

During July and August we were looking at the series of letters written to seven churches in Asia Minor. These letters are found in Revelation 2 and 3. This morning, I will be picking up where we left off, but before I do, it is time for the light bulb test.

So, how many Charismatics does it take to change a light bulb? It takes one to change the bulb and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.

How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb? None, they don't change.

How many independent fundamentalists does it take to change a light bulb? It only takes one, for more than one may result in too much cooperation.

How many Unitarians does it take to change a light bulb? At least ten, as they need to hold a debate on whether or not the light bulb exists. Even if they can agree upon the existence of the light bulb, they still might not change it, to keep from alienating those who might use other forms of light.

How many Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? They don't worry about light bulbs for they use candles.

How many members of an established Bible teaching church that is over 20 years old does it take to change a light bulb? This is another group where it only takes one to change the bulb, but they need nine others to say how much they liked the old one.

How many Amish does it take to change a light bulb? Actually, first they need to learn what a light bulb is.

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? 72. Seven to serve on the Light Bulb Task Force Subcommittee, who report to the 12 on the Light Bulb Task Force, appointed by the 9 on the Nominating Committee. Their recommendation is reviewed by the Finance Executive Committee of 5, who place

it on the agenda of the 18 member Finance Committee. If they approve, they bring a motion to the 16 member Session. If approved the Session will then appoint a task force of 5 who are to research where the best deal can be found for light bulbs. If all is in order, the Session may vote to purchase a new light bulb and order the church Custodian to make the change. Unfortunately by then the Custodian discovers that three more light bulbs have burned out.

Even in the first century different churches did things differently. The church in Ephesus erred on the side of legalism over love. The church in Smyrna was very poor but they were faithful to Christ and rich in their living. The church in Pergamum allowed their culture to shape the church rather than work as agents of change in their surroundings. And in Thyatira the church was tempted to compromise their beliefs. All churches are different, and they all have their own set of problems. Or should I say, they all have different ways to change a light bulb.

Today we come to Sardis. So hear the word as I read Revelation 3:1-6:

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Sardis. This is the message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars. I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive -- but you are dead. Now wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is at the point of death. Your deeds are far from right in the sight of God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly and turn to me again. Unless you do, I will come upon you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief.

“Yet even in Sardis there are some who have not soiled their garments with evil deeds. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before my Father and his angels that they are mine. Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

This letter is troubling. It describes a church that has a great reputation, yet in the eyes of God it is dead. That is what the text said: **“You have the reputation of being alive—but you are dead.”**

The church looked good on paper. They may have had a beautiful church building (though they probably met in a home). I would guess they ate together and played together. Everyone got along. But something was wrong. And I wonder what happened?

Some of the other churches were persecuted. In Pergamum, Antipas was killed, but there is no hint in the text that the church Sardis was persecuted. Even if the Sardis church was persecuted, history instructs us that Christian churches typically thrive when they are persecuted.

Did you know that in the late 1800's and early 1900's when churches all over our nation sent missionaries to China, the number of Christians grew into the hundreds of thousands?

When the communists took over, all the foreign missionaries were expelled, and people cried in American churches thinking all their work was wasted, only to find out that when China opened its doors to the west the church had grown into the millions.

Maybe the church in Sardis was dead because of heretical teachings. But once again there is no evidence in the text that this was happening.

I for one do not think that heresy is such a bad thing. A little heresy floats around every active church. I'm not saying that heresy is good, but heresy is always a product of an active mind. Heresy may be proof that there is thinking going on within the church.

Once again, I am not saying that heresy is good, but it is an indicator that Christians are thinking, and it is better to have an occasional wrong thought than to have no original thoughts at all.

Maybe the lack of life in the Sardis church was caused by its prosperity. Prosperity is the one thing that makes us think we can do it on our own, and we become lazy Christians, and our witness becomes ineffectual.

We should enjoy the blessings of God, but the simple matter is that when humans become prosperous and look to their possessions for comfort and security, they are inclined to only give lip service to an active faith in Jesus Christ. And this is a deadly adversary in the church.

Sardis was a wealthy commercial community. Even the river that ran through the city produced large quantities of gold. Sardis was a city with little religious activity. No one cared whether or not someone was a Christian, so Christians were not persecuted.

The church in Sardis was not threatened by the Romans. They were not slandered by other faiths. It was an untroubled church; it was a church at peace. And according to John it was a dead church.

I think what happened is what happens to other well-meaning institutions where people can get fixed and hardened in place and lose their original purpose. It can happen to a temple, it can happen to a church, it can happen to a school, it can happen to a government. The organization starts out serving the needs of people, and something happens in the course of time and now the people are serving the institution and you never remember what day it was when it happened, you just drifted into it and somebody has to come along and say, “What’s the point again?”

It’s the legitimate question, “Why do I financially support keeping the electricity connected to the church building?” I hope the answer is so the church can be more effective shining the light of Christ in a tragic world.

A group of dedicated Christian people work hard to establish a church to the glory of God, and in the beginning they are bringing others to Christ. They are serving the poor. Feeding the hungry and providing shelter for the homeless, they give their resources to send out missionaries. Then somewhere along the way they find that their interest has changed.

They now spend all their time in committee meetings to decide whether or not to order the changing of a light bulb, and they have little time and “spizz” to be about what they were doing in the beginning.

No one can point to the time when the change took place; it just happened over time.

I know we complain about how hard it is to make ends meet, but compared to 99% of the rest of the world we are doing pretty good. And the good news is that a prosperous people and a prosperous church do not have to be on the critical list. With God's help we can be fully alive.

I spend some of my time day dreaming about what a church can be and do if it will combine its prosperity with a commitment to Jesus Christ. The mission possibilities are endless and fill my thoughts.

I think we have the resources to dig a well, provide a generator and a pump and provide clean drinking water in the name of Jesus Christ to a village that has no decent water to drink. We have the resources to easily do it. It is just that the resources are in our personal bank accounts, but the time, leadership and talents are here.

I'm not saying we should dig a well somewhere, I am simply letting my mind consider the possibilities of what a church can do that combines its resources with a dedication to Jesus Christ.

I am concerned that four years ago our church gave \$70,000 to the mission, but over the past two years that amount has been cut to about \$25,000 and I wonder what happened.

I did some math, which is always dangerous, but did you know that if each giving unit in our church gave an average of \$20 a week more to the work of the church we would have over \$100,000 to do mission work? We could certainly do more for the orphans in Romania as well as care for the needs of folks here in Nacogdoches.

And what about giving our time to God's work? Could you give an hour a week, maybe another hour for preparation? But you could offer hope to a child through our mentoring program. We can use all the folks who will volunteer to

help a child who needs a mentor at school. Someone to help them learn math and become better readers. Call me and I will send you to the right place to sign up.

I hope we go on at least one mission trip next year, maybe two. Would you commit your time and resources to helping others in another community? Maybe some of us could spend another week in those infamous blue pods and work on houses of hurricane victims through the ministry of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

I don't want to put anyone on the spot, but there is always work to do for God's people through the ministry of Love in the Name for Christ.

We were talking about the church in Sardis, but I am now talking to a church that is very much alive.

I don't recall the year, but in the mid 1990's Marj Carpenter, a journalist from West Texas, served the church as the Moderator of the General Assembly. During those years she set a goal to visit as many Presbyterian foreign mission sites as she could and then write about her experiences.

One of her favorite places she visited was Korea where there are more Presbyterians than there are in the United States. Maybe you already knew that. South Korea is more Presbyterian than the United States.

During Marj's travels she visited North Korea, not really knowing what to expect, but one thing she taught the church is that, "Once the church is in a place, it is never gone," and this is true even in North Korea.

Marj wrote, "If the seed of Christianity is brought into any country in the world, it is never lost. If we do it right or if we do it wrong, if the country lets us stay, even if they throw us out. It doesn't matter; the church will always be there.

Marj wrote, "I was the first Moderator to go to North Korea, but I probably will not be the last. . . I applied for a visa, and it took them five months to decide it was all right for me to come. I guess they decided an old woman like me was harmless.

“But not too harmless - they met me at the airport when I entered the country. They put me in a government car driven by a government agent. They put us in a government guest house, and every time I would step out the door, the government man was there.

“I saw a lot of things I wanted to see and some things I didn’t care to see. But my visit caused that government man to go to church. You know, before he died, Kim Sung, the man whom the North Koreans called “Our Great Leader” allowed three public Christian churches in Pyongyang. One is a Catholic church and two are Protestant. He did this partially in memory of his mother, who was a Presbyterian. The “Great Leader” himself was educated in a Presbyterian mission school. But now that he is dead, his grandson is in charge, and he has no Christian roots whatsoever. It is a whole new ball game.

“On Easter Sunday, when I went to church in Pyongyang, I felt very humbled about being able to attend one of the only Christian churches allowed in the entire nation. I went first to the Catholic Church to bring greetings. There weren’t very many people there. This Catholic congregation is having a terrible time because they are not allowed to have a priest. Having a priest, it seems, would ‘tie them to the West.’ I felt very sad as I left there and remembered hoping that there would be more people at the Protestant Church.

“I need not have worried. When we arrived at the largest Protestant church, people were standing out on the steps and looking in the windows. The church was full. It was wonderful. As with the Catholics, they are not allowed to be tied to the West, but it doesn’t matter.

“Because the Presbyterian Church had a seminary in Pyongyang, that Protestant church has two of the finest Presbyterian preachers you ever heard. It was a magnificent day. It was Easter, and the congregation sang the same songs we sang—in Korean, of course. I could certainly recognize ‘Jesus Christ, Is Risen Today’ and ‘How Great Thou Art.’ They read the Easter scripture and had a sermon. I presented the pastor a robe as a gift, and they asked me to stay and answer questions through a translator.

“The first question did me in. A woman in the back got up and asked, ‘Is there a church in the world?’ Where is it? Do our friends and neighbors in South Korea get to go to church?’

“Do they go to church? The South Koreans fill the churches. There are nine million Presbyterians in South Korea. One congregation in Seoul has over 68,000 members. It is incredible to me that those two capitals, Seoul and Pyongyang, are only about 120 miles apart, and yet they had absolutely no contact with each other except propaganda from the government.

“The *North Koreans* had no knowledge of the rest of the world and whether there was a church still out there. I answered questions for over an hour and finally could say no more. We joined hands in a double circle around the room and sang, ‘God Be with You Till We Meet Again,’ and we all wept.

“As I walked out, they reached out to touch me when I went by. Not because I was Moderator, but because I represented the church in the world and the church was still there.

“It was a powerful moment, and I remembered that during the Korean conflict, one of our missionaries stood in the pulpit in Pecos, Texas, and wept because we had bombed *the seminary in Pyongyang* and wiped it out of existence. I recall that he said, ‘Our seminary is flattened and it will never rise again.’ But it did, it was moved to Seoul and is now the largest Presbyterian seminary in the world.”

What did the letter to Sardis say? **“I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive -- but you are dead.”**

Brothers and sisters, this is not a dead church. I believe we have a good reputation, but we are not dead. What are we going to do to stay alive? Amen.