



“Autopsy of a Dead Church”

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I want to talk to you today about a sobering subject: the death of a church. Christianity will never die, but the sad fact is that some churches *are* dying. Some are dying painfully slow but certain deaths and they are on life support as we speak. Some are dying and don't know that they're dying or dead. Why is this the case? Could their deaths be prevented? If we look at a dead church—that is, conduct a post-mortem examination—what might we find?

When Jesus had John write to the seven Asia Minor churches in **Revelation 2 and 3**, many of those churches were in deep trouble. One of them was nearly at the point of death. The Lord's message to the church at Sardis is recorded in **Revelation 3**.

Revelation 3:1-2 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.'”

What happened to this church? The city of Sardis was the long-time capital of ancient Lydia. The kings who had ruled from there were known for their wealth and luxury, but consequently they were weak and soft. More than once they allowed the city to be taken by surprise attacks. Homer Hailey said in his commentary on **Revelation** that *Sardis was a city with a past, but no future*. That well describes the state of the church at Sardis as well. They had a name that they lived--from man's point of view, even appearing to be a model church. But in God's eyes, they were spiritually dead. What makes a church seem alive and healthy to other people doesn't make it so in the eyes of God. We would do well to remember that. Unfortunately, we see many a dead church today if we look through the eyes of God. What caused them to die? In our study today, I want us to examine the corpse of a dead church to try to determine the cause of death.

The sad fact of history is that churches, at some point, die. The church of Jesus Christ will never die; it will stand until He comes again and will dwell with Him forever in eternity in heaven. But congregations of Christ's church DO die. Not one of the congregations mentioned in the New Testament still exist today. At some point, they all faded away as time passed. New congregations were established through the preaching of the Word in other places throughout the world. Many of these churches died natural deaths, I suppose, as do some churches today. As the population moves about, circumstances change from time to time, and established churches sometimes dwindle and die. There's not much one can do to prevent it. Perhaps in a country church, the membership grows older. Perhaps there is no longer much of a community to evangelize. Young people move away for jobs, and the congregation slowly fades away. But other churches die preventable deaths. They drift away from the truth until they are no longer a church of Christ. Or they allow worldliness and sinful influences to snuff out their light and remove their candlestick. Perhaps they rest on past laurels and glory in the good old days, doing no real work in the present. Therefore, after a few more funerals, that church will die.

There are many, many churches across the land today that are in desperate need of a real revival. It's very possible for a church to already be dead while it still exists and continues meeting together. In our text, in this letter from Christ to the church at Sardis, He declares, **"I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead."** Here's a church with a good reputation. Perhaps other churches looked to Sardis as a model congregation. Maybe they had a large crowd on Sunday. They may have even looked to be busy in religious work. They lived in a time of a prosperous, enviable city, so perhaps their membership was made up of cultured, educated, and sophisticated people who were seen as successful. Whatever the case, they had a name and reputation that they were alive and maybe even vibrant and successful. But Jesus said to the contrary, they were dead. It is my suspicion—given the history of the city of Sardis—that this was a church whose spiritual life was choked out by materialism and prosperity, which more times than not will distract people from holy and spiritual living. That truth is borne out in Bible history time and time again. Whatever the case, Jesus said this church was dead.

If Jesus were to write a letter to the church that you are a part of, could He say the same thing? Would He say the same thing? Just what causes churches to die anyway? If we were to perform an autopsy on a dead church, what would we find? Well, we would find the same things that are often found in an individual who dies. The same things that lead to *physical* death lead to *spiritual* death as well. The same things that cause the spiritual death of an individual Christian are really the things that cause the spiritual death of churches because churches are a collection of individual Christians.

First of all, I think our autopsy would show that many dead churches died due to trauma. It may be that the church was spiritually sick anyway, but it merely takes some sudden calamity to bring about its ultimate demise. If that church is not built upon a solid foundation, if its faith is not strong and its allegiance true, when trouble and opposition, difficulty and distraction come along, that church isn't going to stand. This was the case with many churches of the first century: persecution came against them. We really have two pictures in the New Testament church. After the stoning of Stephen in **Acts 7**, we see the first real persecution of the early church break out. The powers that were came down hard on the apostles and the churches in Jerusalem because they were causing such a disruption by preaching Christ and converting people out of Judaism to Christianity.

Acts 8:1 "Now Saul was consenting to his (Stephen's) death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

The churches in Jerusalem were so threatened that the only chance they had to survive was to disperse. The scripture says they were scattered throughout the surrounding country. But notice that their faith was so strong and so anchored, and the church was so solidified at that point that **verse 4** tells us, **“Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.”** The church wasn’t destroyed by persecution; rather, the church thrived as a result of opposition and persecution. These churches may have had to move and reorganize in other places, but they remained faithful and true to the gospel and their mission, and work continued and, in fact, grew.

But there was a very different story several years later when Roman persecution was unleashed upon the church. Particularly, the churches throughout Asia Minor. The book of **Revelation** portended a terrible campaign of persecution against the early church that threatened to wipe it out. As John warns of the things to come, the revelation given to him begins with stern and urgent messages to the seven represented churches in the Empire. In most of those letters, Jesus admonishes them to repent. In five out of seven of those letters, Jesus finds serious fault with those churches, telling them they need to repent or else their candlestick would be removed. To the church at Ephesus, He wrote:

Revelation 2:4-5 “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place--unless you repent.”

The sad reality that time revealed was that many churches were not prepared, and they did not withstand the onslaught of opposition unleashed against them. Trying times not only reveal the depth and character of Christians; they test entire churches as well. Many churches are neither prepared nor equipped to face opposition and difficulty and when it comes, many of them die. Many churches are riding high when times are easy, but let times get hard and people’s faith and depth of commitment to Christ will be shown. Many churches compromise and give in when they’re opposed. They cower and surrender, and the devil has his way with them.

The past months have presented great challenges to churches in America and around the world. I have read articles recently predicting that the church will never again be the same after the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020. Polls show that an alarming number of people have no plans to return to public worship any time soon and you wonder if ever. One preacher told me recently that his congregation, like so many others, had begun streaming its services online for those who chose to stay at home during the pandemic. One couple told him that they had discovered they enjoyed sitting in their pajamas on the couch, drinking their coffee, and ‘going to church.’

Friend, we may live in uncharted times as far as our lifetimes are concerned, but watching preaching on a computer screen or television is not a substitute for what the Bible says Christians are to do each Lord’s Day—and that is, to come together, break bread, and worship together. This right here is NOT a television church and this shouldn’t be your church. This is simply a program where we preach the gospel and study the Bible together. This is not the assembly of the church and it cannot replace the assembly of the church. An internet connection is not the same thing as the disciples of a local congregation coming together and sharing the loaf and cup of the Lord.

Hebrews 10:25 “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some...”

I Corinthians 11:23-34 teaches us that church is to come together into one place to eat the Lord’s Supper. I’m afraid that many churches and many church leaders will come out of this trying situation

finding that they've lost people along the way, and perhaps that church will never exist again as it once did. Let it not be so in the church of which I am a member and you are a member. Our spiritual health is being tested and I wonder what that test reveals.

Then some churches die from malnutrition. The diet a church consumes is just as important as what is consumed by one's physical body. Did you ever stop to think about that? The body needs food and drink, but not just any food or drink. The body needs food that's pure, healthy, and nourishing to survive, much less thrive.

Hebrews 5:13-14 "For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

Now, there's nothing wrong with milk. Milk is a nutritious thing, particularly in the early stages of life. But the **Hebrew** writer says we have to move beyond that. Every Christian needs the milk of the Word first, then needs to progress to solid food. The food on which a Christian and by extension a church must feed is the word of God. The meat from the word of God that we eat and consume must grow stronger as time goes on.

John 6:27,55 "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him... For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed."

Simply put, a church that is not fed by Christ and His word won't survive. It can't be healthy, and it will eventually die. It may attract a carnal crowd, but it will die a spiritual death. It lives and thrives by being nourished by the word of God and that's what preaching and teaching is all about. The mission of the church is to preach the gospel to the lost and to edify itself through the teaching of the word of God. It's as simple as that. When the plain and simple gospel and the commandments of Christ and His apostles are replaced by social or political concerns, worldly philosophy, psychology, or human traditions, creeds, and doctrines, that church will spiritually die. It doesn't matter how many members it has or continues to have. That church will die. That's one of the things wrong with many churches of our day who have a great name and a large following: they don't have the truth. They don't preach the truth and they don't practice the truth.

Some churches die because of an unbalanced diet. They feed Sunday after Sunday on positive platitudes and upbeat pep talks until members are starving for the meat of God's word. They don't know how to live for Christ because they're not being taught the kind of life they're supposed to live for Christ. I like positive and upbeat preaching as much as anyone. I like to be encouraged just like you and the church needs encouragement. There needs to be the positive message of the gospel preached in this dark and gloomy world. The saints need to be lifted up by the hope of the gospel, there's no denying that. But there is also a time to point out sin. There is a time to call it by name and rebuke those who practice it.

II Timothy 4:2 "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching."

Isaiah 30:8-10 "Now go, write it before them on a tablet, And note it on a scroll, That it may be for time to come, Forever and ever: That this is a rebellious people, Lying children, Children who will not hear the law of the LORD; Who say to the seers, "Do not see," And to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us right things; Speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits."

The kind of preaching that never points out sin, the kind that bends over backwards to never upset or be in disagreement with people, the kind that rarely challenges people to holy and righteous living is a diet that will leave a church starving and eventually kill it spiritually.

Some churches are poisoned through false teaching and religious error. Therefore, the Bible warns us to be diligent about who we allow in the pulpit and to closely watch what they teach.

II Peter 2:1-2 “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.”

Friend, listen to me: false teaching will lead a church down the road of destruction and spiritual death. We need to be aware of what we’re being taught, who’s doing the teaching, and what they’re teaching. I know of churches that were led along the primrose path of liberalism with the promise of growth and a deeper spiritual life, only to eventually find that church scattered to every wind that blows, led away from the faith altogether. Shipwrecked souls washed up on the shores of time along the way. You see, what a church consumes is not only a matter of spiritual health, but of spiritual life and death.

And then, some churches die of cancer. Paul likened sin and immorality to leaven, which eventually leavens a whole lump of dough (**I Corinthians 5:6-7**). They had a man in Corinth living in an incestuous relationship with his father’s wife—an unspeakable sin. The members of the church at Corinth were looking the other way. Maybe this man had money or influence over the congregation. Whatever the case was, these people did not want to upset the boat or cause problems, so they acted as though his sin wasn’t really a big deal. They gloried in being a faithful, strong church, but Paul had a different assessment. Paul said that as long as that sin was allowed to remain in the church, it was like leaven and would contaminate the whole church. Not only would that man be lost, but the whole church could be lost as a result of his sin being allowed to go unchecked.

Cancer works the same way. It begins in one member of the body, but left unchecked and unremoved, it spreads to the rest of the body. That’s what sin does. Churches that refuse or fail to discipline the ungodly, those who turn a blind eye to sin and immorality, who don’t hold one another accountable—they will pay a heavy price. It may be tempting to look the other way because we don’t want to upset anybody or lose our crowd. But mark it down: sin will kill a church. The autopsy of many a dead church will show that to be the cause. Sin consumed it. Jesus rebuked the church at Thyatira in this way:

Revelation 2:20-22 “Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds.”

The point is, whether it be false doctrine, immorality, or whatever kind of sin you want to talk about, you either stop the cancer or the cancer will stop you. That’s true for churches as well.

Finally, some churches die because of neglect. Apathy. You might say heart disease. Maybe worldliness or materialism creeps in. Perhaps we get caught up like some of the ancient churches spoken of in the book of **Revelation**. Caught up in the times in which we live, in the rat race of everyday life, the promise of ease and prosperity, a high education, a high-paying job, culture, sophistication, a big house, a fine

car, running in the great circles of society...You know, prosperity and materialism is not a modern thing. It's always been a problem and a distraction to God's people. All the way back to ancient Israel in the Old Testament to even the church of the first century in the New Testament. When come riches, pleasure, and ease, often along with it comes spiritual neglect and apathy. Many a church dies as a result.

The church at Ephesus was told that they had *left their first love*. They had lost the fervent desire to serve the Lord that they had once had. Consequently, their spiritual life suffered. The church began to die. The same thing has happened to many churches today. I travel across the land and I visit a lot of churches. I can tell you that some of them are dying simply because their members just don't care that much about it. We are too busy to come to church services like we should. Too busy to really be committed to the work of the church. We'd rather pay a preacher to do the work of the church. Maybe appoint a few men to go about and do the work of the church while we lead worldly lives and do what we please. Consequently, the building may be somewhat full on Sunday morning, but you'll find it half full Sunday night and less than that on Wednesday.

Why is that? We just almost accept that as being the way things have always been and will be, but should it be that way? Why is it so hard to get people to attend every night of a gospel meeting or some evangelistic effort? Why is it so hard to get people committed to regular bible study and the work of the church? The answer is rather simple even though we sometimes deny it. It's because we're worldly. That's really all there is to it. We're busy getting pulled away by other things. Those things don't keep us away from the ball game, the lake, the beach, or the golf course. But they keep us away from the house of God and the duties of a Christian life.

No wonder churches sometimes die. No church will ever be any stronger or alive, any more active, dedicated or zealous than the members who make it up. Jesus told the church at Sardis, "**I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.**" Is your church dying? Is it in need of revival or else it's going to die? Is it already dead? Will the autopsy of that church one day reveal that it died because people let it die through a lack of concern, participation, and commitment? Perhaps you need to return to the church and be part of its revival and restoration to life and vitality. If so, I hope you'll resolve to do that today.

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