

SEVEN: Pursuit of the Perfect Church

"SARDIS: LESSONS IN DISCONTENTMENT"

REVELATION 3:1-6

This Week's Core Competency

Church – I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish his purposes on earth today. Ephesians 4:15, 16 *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

Indicators of physical death are more or less evident and agreed upon: the cessation of all vital functions—no pulse, no respiration, no brain activity. The Uniform Definition of Death Act defines "death" this way. "An individual who has sustained either (1) irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions, or (2) irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem, is dead." And yet, the introduction of life support devices makes this definition somewhat problematic in that in some cases these devices make it possible to, ironically, prolong the life of the physical body long after the clinical death of the person. The irony of death in life is a familiar one that is often expressed figuratively. People are called "dead" that are very much alive. Take inmates on death row, for example, who are commonly referred to as "dead men walking." So are organizations—especially

The ABC church is alive and well in the United States.

-Glenn McDonald

churches. Take the church in Sardis, for example, which Christ called "dead" even though it had a reputation of being alive. Evidently, that reputation was based on misleading vital signs.

The ABCs of church—attendance, buildings, and cash—are today's most misleading ecclesiastical vital signs. Pastors and parishioners alike can easily fall into the trap of assuming that a great church is big church, with buildings for every purpose filled with the latest technology, that seldom needs to beg for money from its members. Glenn McDonald was a pastor like that who "saw the light." In his book, *The Disciple Making Church*, he writes, "At the end of year four [as pastor of a new congregation on the suburban fringe of Indianapolis] by God's grace a few dozen pioneers had grown into a flock of three hundred. Along the way, however, our attention had become increasingly riveted to the ABCs of congregational life—attendance, buildings, and cash. How many people are on site and is that number increasing? Is there room for everyone to park, and when can we upgrade our nursery facilities. What was last month's bottom line, and will we have the money to pay next month's bills? Without even noticing it we were paying more attention to structure than vitality. Our lip service to 'releasing God's transforming power' had become swamped by our let's keep the place under control behaviors. We instinctively began to keep score on the basis of externals—the institutional surface of the body of Christ—and awarded ourselves high marks for our apparent health.

con't pg. 2

"The ABC church is alive and well in the United States—if we can bring ourselves to use the words 'alive' and 'well.' It's safe to say that a large majority of Protestant congregations have made attendance, buildings, and cash—as opposed to Christ's Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 to be and to make disciples—their organizational bottom line. Without question, effective institutional management honors God. Every gathering of Christians, large or small, has to manage an appropriate agenda of 'business.' But business is not why we are in business. Some of the fiercest blasts in Scripture are reserved for those who would hold back the rush of God's Spirit for the sake of polishing the organizational apple" (4).

It's easy to get caught up in the routine of the church whatever that routine may look like and lose sight of the mission of the church, i.e., to be and to make disciples. Churches that do that are "dead" no matter how busy their members might be. The church in Sardis may have been a church like that, a church with a reputation for vitality that belied its true condition.

Situation for Discussion

The Crane family is looking for a church home. This family of four has been on the prowl for a new church for a number of months. Don and Donna have two children, one in elementary school and one in high school. They heard about the church they've been attending for the past month from one of Don's coworkers who goes there. So many of the churches they've visited proved to be "dead." Either the worship was uninspiring, or there was nothing for children, or the student ministry was sub par. But not this one. This one is "alive" and bustling with activity. It has everything: inspiring worship, sound preaching, a good program for children, a big student ministry, and small groups for adults. In addition there's a women's ministry with small groups for women and a men's ministry with small groups for men. What's more, the church has a "Family Center" and enough competitive people to make year-round recreational sports leagues for kids and adults possible. The church sees itself as "the family church" because it's large enough and has ample facilities to offer something for every member of the family. One look at the church bulletin makes this perfectly clear. The campus is center of church life; there's something going on there practically every night of the week.

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Revelation 3:1-6

1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake

up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. 4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Circle "seven spirits" in v. 1.
- * Circle "dead" in v. 1.
- * Box "but" indicating *contrast* in vv. 1, 3, 5.
- * Circle "wake up" in v. 2.
- * Underline the commands in vv. 2, 3.
- * Box "for" indicating *reason* in vv. 2, 4.
- * Circle "complete" in v. 2.
- * Box "therefore" indicating *result* in v. 3.
- * Box "like" indicating *comparison* in vv. 3, 5.
- * Bracket "soiled their clothes" and "dressed in white" in v. 4.
- * Bracket "dressed in white" in v. 5.

day 2

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Christ is he "who holds the seven spirits of God" in verse 1. What makes that description apropos to the situation in Sardis?
2. Explain the *contrast* in verse 1.
3. The church is "dead" but not "dead as a door nail." Explain.
4. What would you say is near death in the church?
5. Their works are not "complete." What does that mean?
6. Outline Christ's prescription for the church.
7. Explain the *comparison–simile*—in verse 3.
8. Do you think the *many* that have "soiled their clothes" are saved?
9. Two groups of people are dressed in white. Identify them.
10. Describe the reward in store for overcomers.
11. **Discussion:** Do you think those that do not overcome stand to lose their salvation?

Finding a good church isn't easy. If you've ever moved to a new community and had to look for a new church home, you know how difficult it is. cursory examinations and evaluations of churches and their ministries can be misleading. Imposing buildings may house dead congregations while more modest ones may be home to vibrant assemblies. Rich churches in our sight may turn out to be poor in God's while the ones that look poor to us may turn out to be rich in his eyes. Those that we consider vibrant, he may consider dead (Re 3:1). Only the head of the church, Jesus Christ, knows for sure the condition of his churches because he sees what may not be readily apparent to us. In seven messages to seven churches in Asia Minor, the Lord gives us a glimpse into what makes a church truly rich or truly poor. These letters while written to individual congregations at the end of the first century were intended to benefit all the churches. What's more they were intended to benefit the individuals that made up those churches and us too.

The old adage about literature, "You can't judge a book by its cover," goes for churches, too. Take the church in Sardis for example. It had a "name," a reputation for being alive. How it earned that reputation is unclear. Maybe it was based on what once was or on what appeared to be, but in any case, its reputation belied reality. In reality, the church was dead. Its reputation was all it had going for it. To Thyatira Christ said, "I know your deeds" and then proceeded to mention the church's "love and faith," "service and perseverance." The church there was doing more than it did at first (2:19). Not so in Sardis. The church there was all leaves, no fruit. Their works did not measure up to God's righteous expectations for them in either quantity or quality. They had adapted to life in a pagan world.

The church in Sardis was "dead" but not "dead as a door nail." There was a remnant of faithful people there, people who had not "soiled their clothes," that is, people who had not been contaminated by their

pagan environment. Rather than let the world squeeze them into its mold, they chose instead to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Ro 12:2). There was hope, too, for those who were nearly dead spiritually speaking. Christ told them to bear in mind what they had heard, to obey what they had received at first, and to repent of their half-hearted ways. Then he warned them what would happen if they did not "wake up." He would wake them himself. When they least expected it, he would come suddenly in judgment—not eschatological judgment but temporal judgment (cf., 2:5, 16, 22-23).

To those who had "not soiled their clothes" and to "him who overcomes" Christ promised future rewards. He said, "They will walk with me, dressed in white" (vv. 4, 5). The imagery is rooted in national celebration when Roman citizens wore white robes and joined in the triumphal procession of their victorious military leaders. It anticipates the day when those who overcome join in the messiah's procession to celebrate his victory in the kingdom age. And to the one who overcomes he says, "I will never blot out his name from the book of life." In other words, his name will gloriously appear in the book of life for ever. Litotes, the figure of speech used here, is defined as "an affirmative expressed by a negative to the contrary." For example, when God says, "I will never leave you; never will I forsake you" (Heb 13:5), he means "I will most certainly be with you always." By the way, Christ says nothing in verse 5 about the fate of those who do not overcome.

Unfortunately, there are dead churches today—even entire denominations that have so compromised their beliefs and practices by accommodating to the fad of intelligentsia or the ways of the world that they have virtually ceased to be Christian. In such churches the righteous few, as in Sardis, must stand up and be counted. They must consider themselves missionaries to their own church and wake up those who are on spiritual life support while there is still time.

The Message of the Passage

Replace your half-hearted ways with complete obedience to what you first believed if you want to reap the rewards promised to overcomers.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you through his word.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James suggests in James 1:22. Try some of the challenges below to apply what you have learned this week.

- **Give Yourself Some Good Advice Based on the Message of this Passage.**

- **Pick a verse or verses from the passage to memorize or think about this week.**

- **Relate the message of this passage to any of the following:**
 - o Belonging
 - o Becoming
 - o *going* Beyond

- **Journal your thoughts on the passage.**

- **Home Group Discussion** (for those involved in the deeper connections of a home group)
 - * Home Group Discussion (for those involved in the deeper connections of a home group).
 - If "attendance, buildings, and cash" are not the vital signs of a vibrant church, what are? Identify five vital signs of a vibrant church and discuss the vitality of your church and your home group in light of them.

“Sardis: Lessons in Discontentment”

(Use the space below for Sunday’s message notes)

notes **N** **STUDY** – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 1 **Sardis**

"Situated at the junction of five roads, and commanding the Hermus valley, Sardis was an active commercial city and very wealthy. It had been the capital of Croesus who was proverbial for his riches. The city's easy wealth seems to have made for slackness. It was captured by Cyrus the Persian (549 BC) and by Antiochus (218 BC), both times because of its slackness. The city was built on a hill so steep that its defenses seemed impregnable. On both occasions enemy troops scaled the precipice by night and found that the overconfident Sardians had set no guard. A great earthquake in AD 17 made a profound impression. But the city was soon rebuilt, partly owing to generous aid from the emperor Tiberius.

"The most important religion at Sardis was the worship of Cybele. John does not mention anything like the persecutions at Smyrna and Pergamum or the heresies of the Nicolaitans. It may be that this church had not suffered disturbance from without and that its troubles stemmed from its comparatively sheltered existence. The temptation for the sheltered is always to take things easy, and they readily become slack. Like the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira this one has a mixed membership. But in those the faulty members are a minority. At Sardis they predominate. Only 'a few people' have not 'soiled their clothes'" (Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, TNTC, 74, 75). "Sardis had a significant and powerful Jewish community. When they later built a new synagogue next to the city gymnasium (a center of pagan Greek culture), the synagogue was roughly the length of a football field, certainly one of the largest in antiquity. In contrast to churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, however, (cf. 2:9; 3:9), Jesus' followers seem to have coexisted peacefully with the synagogue community, and therefore likely coexisted peacefully with the city establishment as a whole. Lacking the world's opposition, they may have grown comfortable in their relationship with the world" (Craig S. Keener, *The NIV Application Commentary: Revelation*, 143).

v. 1 **seven spirits**

I.e., the Holy Spirit. "On the whole it seems most probable that we should see seven as signifying perfection or the like, and the whole expression as pointing to the Holy Spirit. The number may derive from Isaiah 11:2-3, and be meant to remind us of the seven modes of operation of the Spirit" (Morris, 49). "A likely reference to the 'sevenfold Holy Spirit' (from Zech. 4:2, 10). As in 1:4, this details the complete and adequate work of the Spirit in the community. The church of Sardis, nearly dead (3:1-2), can be revived only if the Spirit takes over, and Christ has the power of the Spirit available for them" (Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT, 175).

v. 1 **dead**

Sardis was an irony. "The spiritual decay in the church at Sardis was not obvious to outward observation. In fact, it was a church well known for good works. It had the name of being alive; it had an outstanding reputation for life and vitality, but in the sight of God it was dead. Here is a picture of nominal Christianity, outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power" (George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 56).

v. 2 **die**

"Most of the church is dead but a small minority remains with some life. However, even that small bit is on the verge of dying. Act fast while there is still time!" (Osborne, 175).

v. 3 **remember**

Or "bear in mind" (Morris, 75). "The present imperative demands a continual recall and actualization of the past truths they had been taught. It is not just bringing these realities to mind but putting them into practice in their lives" (176).

v. 3 **what . . . received**

I.e., the Christian truths they received when the church was established. "Go back to what you heard and believed at first" (NLT).

v. 3 **like a thief**

I.e., "unexpected" (cf., Mt 24:43).

v. 4 **soiled**

The imagery builds on one of the major sources of wealth at Sardis, its wool industry. Unlike the garments they make, their spiritual garments are 'soiled.' The term means 'unwashed' and can have a strong religious connotation of one 'defiled,' for instance by eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:7) or by immorality (Rev. 14:4). Moffatt (1983:364) speaks of 'votive inscriptions in Asia Minor, where soiled clothes disqualified the worshipper and dishonored the god.' By accommodating themselves to their pagan environment, the Sardis church had contaminated themselves and become 'unclean.'" (Osborne, 178).

v. 4 **dressed in white**

"In a city and a church that has primarily known defeat and only the bitter memory of past triumph, it would be exciting to think of oneself as part of the few 'who would walk with Christ in the triumphal procession of his final victory' (Hemer: 1986:147)" (Osborne, 179).

v. 5 **name**

"We should not infer from this statement in verse 5 that some believers will lose their salvation (John 5:24; 6:35-37, 39; 10:28-29). The figure *litotes* [an understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of the contrary (as in "not a bad singer" or "not unhappy")] here (cf. 2:11) means the overcomer's name will be especially glorious forever" (Thomas L. Constable, "Dr. Constable's Notes on Revelation," 37, www.soniclight.com/constable/notes.htm). It says nothing about the fate of those who do not overcome.

v. 5 **acknowledge**

Jesus will affirm the ones who overcome with a view to them being rewarded by the Father. Christ is saying the Sardian faithful of 3:4 are "overcomers" and will receive the rewards promised to the victorious in 3:5.

Connect the **FAMILY**. During this series, Bible stories appropriate for children will be used that complement the adult teaching.

Experience it!

Experience scripture through the activity-based learning exercise. Dinner is a perfect time to engage the family.

Describe a time you wanted something. How did you go about getting it? Read Acts 8:26-40. The Ethiopian eunuch that Phillip met wanted to understand the Bible more, and even more, he wanted everything God had for him. God's people want more of God and all he has to offer.



Pray it!

Pray God's will for your child by praying scriptures. Insert your child's name in the blanks as you pray.

Father, I pray _____ will stand firm and hold to the (biblical) teachings that I have passed along to her by word of mouth. 2Th 2:15

Post it!

Post the kid-friendly Core Competency and the memory verse throughout the house. Lead your children to interact with them as they memorize.

Church – I believe God uses the people in the church to do His work.

Memory verse – "So then stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed along to you . . ." 2Th 2:15

Discuss it!

Discover biblical truth by discussing the scripture. Reflective questions are great with older kids.

- *How might the story have ended if Phillip hadn't obeyed the Spirit and approached the chariot?
- *What was the eunuch needing explained?
- *How would you have explained to the eunuch what he was reading?
- *Why did the eunuch want to be baptized?

Live it!

Live out the Core Competency and build deeper relationships by doing this activity.

Thousands of dollars were collected for the Crisis Pregnancy Center through filling baby bottles with change. God wants your family to join with others to continue to do his work. Decide on something you can do with other families in October in order to share God's love with someone else.



Challenge

Kids preschool through sixth grade receive Kid Pix Tokens for each discipleship activity completed.

Family completes **Experience It** _____ Child memorizes kid-friendly **Core Competency** _____

Family participates in **Live It** _____ Child memorizes **Memory Verse** _____

Kids can earn extra tokens on Sunday morning by:

Bringing a friend to **The Kid Connection** _____ Completing **KIDZ Bulletin** _____

Child's name _____ Parent's signature _____

30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

Tom Bulick (M.A. in Educational Leadership, Eastern Michigan University, Th.M. in Old Testament, and Ph.D. in Bible Exposition, Dallas Theological Seminary). For more than thirty-five years, Tom has served as pastor, faculty member, and administrator. Tom was Vice President for Student Life and Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Trinity Western University (Vancouver, B.C.) for twelve years before accepting the position of Spiritual Formation Pastor at Pantego Bible Church. He and his wife Ruth have been married forty years and have one son, Zach.

Keith Smith (B.A. in Speech Communication, Texas Tech University and M.A. in Religious Education, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the Family and Children's Pastor at Pantego Bible Church. Keith is a featured communicator for Song of Solomon for Students and speaks at children/student camps across the country. He has developed a number of relational parenting seminars designed to motivate parents to empower their parenting by emotionally connecting with their kids. Keith lives with his wife, Denise, and their two children, Jordan and Alex.



8001 Anderson Blvd.
Ft. Worth, TX 76120
1-866-PANTEGO
Fax 817-275-6403
www.pantego.org

The mission of THE SCROLLS is to help you develop the beliefs, practices, and virtues of a follower of Jesus Christ called The 30 Core Competencies through your own active reading of the Bible. Send any questions or comments you may have about this lesson to Tom Bulick. His e-mail address is tbulick@pantego.org.