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Reviving a Dead Church

Revelation 3:1-6

An invitation to preach came out of the blue. The church was located in a suburb of a large city, and my first impression was very positive. The leaders of the church welcomed us, the facilities were inviting, and the congregation was warm. They listened attentively and responded enthusiastically to my ministry that Sunday, but I dreaded the call I would receive later that week.

The pastoral search committee wanted me to accept their invitation to become their next senior pastor. Karen and I prayed about it, but God had already made it clear to us that we were not to go in that direction. The church body seemed to be alive and anxious to reach their community with the message of the gospel, but underneath we had sensed deadness, resistance to change, pride in the church's past, and reverence for tradition.

When I said I did not sense God's leading to come to that congregation, one leader persisted in asking why. Finally I said, "Are you sure you want to know?" He said seriously and humbly that he did. So I shared what we had sensed as we had been with them. "You appear like you are following the Spirit," I said, "but you are locked in dead tradition and performance."

GROUP DISCUSSION. What are the marks of a dead (or dying) church?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. How do you keep your relationship with Jesus fresh and alive?

The church at Sardis had the reputation of being alive—vibrant, Spirit-filled, open to God's work, obedient to God's Word. But as Jesus looked at this church, he saw a deeper reality. The church was not wicked or immoral, but dead, unresponsive to Christ. *Read Revelation 3:1-6.*

1. What was Jesus' evaluation of this church (v. 1), and how did he arrive at that evaluation?

Do you think you would have arrived at the same conclusion if you had been part of the church in Sardis? Why?

2. Jesus gives five commands to the people in this dead church (vv. 2-3). List the commands and explain what obeying each command might involve.

A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

3. Which of these commands would Jesus speak to your church, and why?

Which command would Jesus speak personally to you?

4. Is the visitation Jesus promises if the church does not wake up (v. 3) a good thing or a not-so-good thing?

What might such a visit from the Lord look like in a church today?

5. Some students of these churches believe that the problem at Sardis was the church's unwillingness to break away from traditional Judaism. Since Jews were not required to declare publicly that Caesar was Lord, most of these Christians were reluctant to declare their belief that Jesus was Lord in front of their Jewish friends and families. Following Jesus as the promised Messiah meant having your name blotted from the synagogue membership roll and being removed from the protections that Judaism provided. What is Jesus' promise to those who faithfully follow him (v. 5)?

6. What is implied about those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus publicly?

7. In what situations today might a Christian be reluctant to declare loyalty to Jesus rather than seek the approval of those around them?

8. In what area or situation is Jesus calling you to new boldness in declaring and demonstrating your allegiance to him?

What are the risks?

What are the rewards?

Spend a few minutes in quietness before the Lord. Ask him to reveal to you any areas of deadness in your relationship with him.

Now or Later

The "book of life" (or the "Lamb's book of life") is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments. Read the following verses and summarize what each reveals about the book of life.

- Exodus 32:32
- Psalm 69:28
- Daniel 12:1-2
- Luke 10:20
- Philippians 4:3
- Hebrews 12:23
- Revelation 20:12, 15
- Revelation 21:27

Christian theologians have proposed several views on the book of life, but the view that seems to fit most closely with Scripture is that the book lists the names of every person who has ever lived. Those who die trusting Christ for salvation live forever and their names remain in the book. People who die outside of Christ will experience the second death, separation from Christ forever, and their names are blotted out or erased from the book. Only those whose names remain in the book of life experience the glory of heaven.