

June 11, 2023 by Steve Brandon



Are We Alive?

Revelation 3:1-6

1. A Diagnosis of Death (verse 1)
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In 2014, Thom Rainer wrote a book entitled, "Autopsy of a Deceased Church."^[1] The book aims to point out the common characteristics of churches that are in decline, on their way to dying. Rainer had the opportunity to look closely into fourteen churches that died. These 14 churches were diverse. They were diverse in their denominational or non-denominational backgrounds. They were diverse in their locations. They were diverse in their local and regional demographics. But they were all similar in one significant way, These churches once were alive, but now are dead. And as Rainer said, "they followed paths that caused them to die."

That's what the book is about, the common characteristics of all churches that die. In his book, he points out nine characteristics of churches that die.

First off, the church looked to the good old days. They tell stories of the past, not looking for vision for the future. Some churches held on to the worship style of the past. Some churches held onto buildings or rooms. Some churches held onto their former pastor, not accepting their new one. It was all about the past glory, not the future aspirations.

Second, the church doesn't change with the community. Where once, many were coming to the church from the community, but because of some change in the community, ethnic, racial, age, economic, the church moved out. Many traveled to the church, but the church was no longer like the community.

The third characteristic of a dead church: the budget moves inward. Thom Rainer writes, "When you conduct the autopsy of a church, you must follow the money. For where the money of the church goes, so goes its heart. ... For the [dying] church cared more for its own needs than the community and the world."

The fourth characteristic of a dead church: "The great commission becomes the great omission." They forgot that their purpose in existence was the make disciples. Jesus said, Matthew 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Matthew 28:20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." This, the church neglected. Rainer writes, "Members of the dying church weren't willing to go into the community to reach and minister to people. They weren't willing to invite their unchurched friends and relatives. They weren't willing to expend the funds necessary for a vibrant outreach. They just wanted it to happen. Without prayer. Without sacrifice. Without hard work."

The fifth characteristic of the dead church is that they became a "preference-driven church." Rainer writes, "My music style. My desired length and order of worship services. My desired color and design of buildings and rooms. My activities and programs. My need of ministers and staff. My, my, my "

This sixth characteristic of the dead church is that pastoral tenure decreases. New pastors came every two or three years. They followed a similar pattern. Rainer writes, "The cycle was predictable. The church was declining. The church would call a new pastor with the hope that the pastor could lead the church back to health. The pastor comes to the church and leads in a few changes. The members don't like the changes and resist. The pastor becomes discouraged and leaves. In some cases, the pastor was fired. Repeat cycle."

The seventh characteristic of the dead church is that the church rarely prayed together. Rainer notes that there were often forms of prayer. but little meaningful prayer together. Where once the church would gather together and pray regularly, the prayer meeting would become a routine. The same people prayed the same old way about the same old things. There was no New Testament feel of people of the church "devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

The eight characteristic of the dead church is that it had no clear purpose. They were going through the motions. They were in a rut with a bad routine. They were more interested in doing things the way that they had already done it, rather than seeking the Lord for direction. They were playing this game called, "Church." They stopped asking what they should be doing, fearing it might require too much effort to change.

Ninth, the dead church obsessed over the facilities. The mission of the church became about the building, not the people. The people argued about the pulpit, and the windows and the pews and the paint color. The church building was deteriorating, and the church could only argue about it. So, after looking at that list, you have to ask yourself, "What about Rock Valley Bible Church?"

1. Do we look to the glory days of the past rather than the future?
2. Are we changing with the community around the building?
3. Has our budget turned inward?

4. Are we neglecting the great commission?
5. Are we driven by our preferences?
6. Are pastors here lasting only a few years?
7. Are we really praying together?
8. Do we have a purpose in existing?
9. Are the facilities our main obsession?

As I look through this list, there are definitely some things that apply to us. There are others that don't. I can see the slow death of our church. I so don't want our church to die. But it begs us to ask the question: "Are we alive?" Is Rock Valley Bible Church alive? Or are we dead?

This morning, as we continue in our series in the books of Revelation, we will look at a dead church: The church in Sardis. This church is described in the following words:

Revelation 3:1-6

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Again, this is a letter to a real church with real people in Asia Minor. John is a prisoner on the penal island of Patmos. He is writing to the church in Sardis. We have already looked at John's letters to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira. And now, we are looking at the leader to Sardis. This letter begins like all of the letters to the churches in Revelation begin. It begins with Jesus speaking to John, telling him to write to the angel of a church, giving a description of himself.

Revelation 3:1

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

To the church in Sardis, Jesus points out that he has "the seven spirits of God." This is a reference to chapter 1 and verse 4, in which the "seven spirits of God" are mentioned. It's probably a reference to the perfect Holy Spirit. The Spirit who gives life!

Jesus also mentions that he has "the seven stars." This is a reference to Revelation 1:16, which indicated that Jesus had the seven stars in his hands. These stars are the "angels of the seven churches" (Revelation 1:20). Whether these angels are leaders of the church or guardian angels over the church, they are given for the health and life of the church. And so, with this description of Jesus, I believe that Jesus is saying that he holds the power in his hands to give life to the church, or to remove the life-support from the church.

I say this, because life and death is the issue with the church in Sardis. We see this in verse 1, where we see

1. A Diagnosis of Death (verse 1)

Verse 1 continues,

Revelation 3:1

I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Now, in every one of these seven letters to the churches, Jesus commends the church. The church in Ephesus was commended for its discernment. The church in Smyrna was commended for the hardship they were enduring. The church in Pergamum was commended for holding fast the name of Jesus. The church in Thyatira was commended for their love, faith, service, and patient endurance. But, the church in Sardis isn't commended for anything. Jesus simply says, "I know your works," and then, after that, without giving them any encouragement of what Jesus sees that's good about their works, Jesus goes straight in with his criticism, "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Literally, the Greek text reads, "you have a name that you are alive." It's not that they are called, "Life Church in Sardis." as opposed to "First Baptist Church" down the street. No, it is rightly translated, "You have the reputation of being alive." That is, when people thought of the church in Sardis, they didn't think, "Oh, that church over there? That's a dead church." No. They didn't think that. They thought, "That church? Looks like a lot going on at that church." This was their reputation. Sadly, the reputation wasn't correct. The human evaluation of the church is that "All is well." The divine evaluation of the church is that "All is not well."

The words of Jesus are echoing in my ears, "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you" (Luke 6:26). This was the case for the church in Sardis! All spoke well of the church, "You are alive!" But the divine judgment was different. The Lord said, "you are dead."

As Chuck Swindoll said, "The church was a morgue with a steeple." The outside of the church communicated life, but there was death within the church. It seems as if the people of the church didn't even know that they were dead. The church had a good reputation of being alive. Both those on the outside and those on the inside thought that the church was alive. But the church was dead. And few seemed to notice.

Thom Rainer noticed this when talking with those whose churches had died. Rainer writes, "It is rare for a long-term church member to see erosion in his or her church. Growth may come rapidly, but decline is usually slow, imperceptibly slow. This slow erosion is the worst type of decline for churches, because the members have no sense of urgency to change. They see the church on a regular basis; they don't see the

gradual decline that is taking place before their eyes. Often the decline is in the physical facilities, but it is much more than that. The decline is in the vibrant ministries that once existed. The decline is in the prayer lives of the members who remain. The decline is in the outward focus of the church. The decline is in the connection with the community. The decline is in the hopes and dreams of those who remain. Decline is everywhere in the church, but many don't see it."

This is the case of the church of the church in Sardis. Many didn't see their decline. They had a reputation that they were alive! But they were dead. Few noticed the decline before their eyes. But they were in decline. But, all was not lost. Jesus said that there was hope. This is what we see in our next point. Though Jesus did give (1) A Diagnosis of Death. There was

2. A Hope for Healing (verses 2-3a)

Revelation 3:2-3

Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.

Jesus here gives five clear commands of what the church should do. I trust that you can see them there. Jesus says:

1. Wake up.
2. Strengthen what remains.
3. Remember what you received
4. Keep it
5. Repent.

Let's just walk through these commands of Jesus. First, he says,

1. Wake up.

The people in the church were in a slumber. They needed to realize the danger at hand! They needed to come to reality. They needed to accept the fact that the church, despite its reputation of being alive, it was actually dead. This is what Thom Rainer was trying to do with the book I mentioned in the beginning of my message, "The Autopsy of a Dead Church." The book has two parts.

The first part puts forth NINE characteristics of the churches that have died. The purpose of the first part is to awaken his readers, to the realities of where your church is dying. That's what Jesus is doing here with the first command. "Wake up!" "You are dying!" "You need to grasp what's going on in your church!" But the second part of Rainer's book gives hope. Rainer gives counsel to those who realize that the church is in trouble. Rainer breaks up the responses into three categories.

The first category is the church that has symptoms of dying.

The second category is the church that is very sick.

The third category is the church that is dying.

Rainer's counsel falls well under the second command that Jesus gives. Jesus says,

2. Strengthen what remains.

That is, whatever hope remains of the church, focus there and strengthen it. That's exactly what Thom Rainer says in his book. He says, focus on what's important. To the church that is dying, Rainer says, "Die with dignity." Sell your property and give your funds to another church. Or give your building to another church. Or transition your church to those who reside in the community. Or merge with another, healthy church, handing over the leadership to the healthy church. To the church that's very sick, Rainer says, Admit where you are, and confess your need to the Lord. Pray for wisdom and strength. Be willing to change radically. Take action with an outward focus. To the church that shows signs of dying, Rainer says, Pray for opportunities to reach into the community where the church is located. Take an honest audit of how involved church members are. Take an audit of how you spend your money. Make plans to minister and to evangelize your community.

Sardis had their own things that needed to be strengthened. We have our things that need to be strengthened. Let us do what we can do. OK, the third command that Jesus gives:

3. Remember what you received and heard

I love this point. Because it's the gospel! What have you received and heard? Is it not the gospel? The good news that Jesus came in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, to be our Savior. He saved us by dying upon the cross in our place. So we, who are sinful, can be reconciled to God through faith. Not by works that we do. Not by being good enough before God. But through faith alone. And as we believe and trust in Jesus, God will give us his righteousness, that we don't deserve, so that we stand perfect before him. And God will strengthen us to do his will! We are saved by grace to do the works that he has prepared for us to do! And in that way, Jesus builds his church. And I think that key to Christ building his church, is all of us remembering the gospel, and letting it do its work in our lives.

4. Keep it.

Keep what? That is keep what you have received and heard. Keep the gospel and follow after the ways of the Lord. Walk in those ways. Bear fruit. Show yourself as a light to the world. These are the type of things that Sardis is being commanded.

5. Repent.

Confess those ways in which you haven't. It's interesting here, this is written to a church, to repent. Martin Luther, in the first thesis of the 95

Thesis he nailed to the door at Wittenberg was this that "repentance is a way of life." You should constantly be in an attitude and perspective of repentance. Turning from and confessing your sin. And that's the idea here. These people are in the church, they've heard about Jesus, there's lots of activity on this, but he said "you're dead. So turn." And turn from whatever ways you need to to from. Whether that's a cold heart, or sin. Whatever way, just turn to the Lord.

But there is hope for healing. Though this church is dead, there is hope.

Let's move on.

3. A Surprise for Sleepers (verse 3b)

This comes in the last half of verse 3,

Revelation 3:3b

If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

For those who don't wake up. For those who don't realize that the church is dead. For those who don't (1) Wake Up; (2) Strengthen What Remains; (3) Remember the Gospel; (4) Keep It; (5) Repent; Jesus is coming. He will come like a thief. The idea of a thief is that he comes upon you in the dark, when you are sleeping, without you aware of it. A surprise, if you will.

The Bible often uses this imagery of Jesus coming like a thief. Jesus said, "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matthew 24:42-44). This is talking about his return to earth, when he will come and judge and set up his kingdom.

The coming here in Revelation 3 is different. It's not the second coming of Jesus. It's Jesus coming to Sardis. Much like Jesus said to Pergamum, "Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth (Revelation 2:16). That's not the second coming of Jesus to the world. It's the coming of Jesus in judgement to Pergamum. So likewise here in verse 3. If you are still sleeping, Jesus will come with a surprise. That's why Revelation 3 is good for us, to look and think about the state of our church. "Are we alive?" Are we thinking about it? Are we praying about it? Is it on our mind? Are we awake?

One of the things that I appreciate about Thom Rainer's book, is that throughout the book, he puts forth prayers to pray. He includes more than a dozen prayers in his book. One is this, "Lord, let me see my church with honesty and open eyes. Help me to grasp where we have gotten out of balance with inward and outward ministries. And give our church a vision to make a difference in our community. Even more, God, use me to be a catalyst and instrument for the changes that must take place in our church."

That's a great prayer. It's a prayer for awakening! It's a prayer for revisioning. It's a prayer for God's revival. It's a prayer of personal commitment. "Even more, God, use me to be a catalyst and instrument for the changes that must take place in our church." This is where Jesus goes in verse 4.

Revelation 3:4-5

Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

I'm calling this,

4. A Word for the Worthy (verses 4-5)

Even within this dead church, there is life. This is true of every church in Revelation. For all the problems in all the churches, there are still those who conquer. We see this phrase, "The one who conquers" in every church. And every time, Jesus promises some sort of reward. The reward here in Sardis is "white garments." You see in verse 4, they have "not soiled their garments." You see in verse 5, they will be "clothed...in white garments."

Soiling their garments is symbolic of sin. White garments are symbolic of righteousness. We will see this several times in Revelation. In Revelation 4:4, we see the 24 elders seated on their thrones near the heavenly throne. They are "clothed in white garments." In Revelation 6:11, we see the martyrs given a white robe to wear, emblematic of the righteousness they have in heaven. In Revelation 7:9, we see the multitude that comes out of the great tribulation, "standing before the throne, ... clothed in white robes." And Revelation 7:13 makes the symbolism clear, "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." I love this about Revelation, the imagery is wild. You don't wash your robes in blood, only to have them turn out white! Unless you understand the symbolism.

The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin! So, in the apocalyptic literature, you can wash your robes in the blood of Jesus, and you will come out pure white! Similarly here, we see those in the church in Sardis, clothed in white garments, symbolic of their purity in Christ.

This is the reward of the gospel. Notice who receives such garments. It is those 4 who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. In some way, these are those in Sardis, who didn't go the way of others in the church. They didn't engage in the sins of the church, like prayerlessness, or heartless activity, or indifference or apathy. No. They were alive, walking worthy of the gospel.

For them, the word comes a word of promise,

Revelation 3:5

I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

As we work our way through the book of Revelation, we will read more about this book. It's the book of true and eternal life! To have your name in the book, is your entrance into the kingdom of heaven. "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done" (Revelation 20:12). "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). So this promise here to have your name written in the book of life, is essentially a promise of salvation. "Your name is the book! I'm not erasing your name! You won't be thrown into the lake of fire! You will stand before me in white garments!"

Jesus says, "I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels" (Revelation 3:5). Do you remember what Jesus said during his days on earth? "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven. 33 But whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33). This gives a clue to what it means to be worthy. The worthy ones have been faithful witnesses to Jesus. They have confessed his name on the earth. They have shared his name before others. And Jesus will confess his name before his father. It's at this point, that my message changes title.

It's not "Are We Alive?" as a church. But it's "Are You Alive?" as an individual? Notice, there aren't many of those in Sardis who are alive.

Revelation 3:4

Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments.

You have "a few names" in Sardis who are alive. If there were "many" in Sardis who were alive, then the church would not be dead!

What about you? Are you alive? Is your faith alive and growing? Are you in the word of God, meditating upon it? Thinking upon it? Praying through it? Are you actively sharing your faith? Or, are you resting on your old theology and your habitual patterns of life?

Finally, my last point:

5. A Call for Consideration (verse 6)

Revelation 3:6

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

This is a call for you to consider your own life. Though this was written some 2,000 years ago, the Spirit is still speaking. The message is still the same to churches today. "Are You Alive?" Perhaps even this list might be helpful for you to look at one more time.

Is there any way that you see a trend in our church?

Is there any way for you to change to help turn our church around?

One of the last prayers that Thom Rainer shares in his book is this: "I believe all things are possible through You, God. Show me what I need to do to lead my church from hopelessness to hope. And give me the courage and strength to make those changes, even those changes that will be very painful."

May that be our prayer? To close, I want to read these 14 prayers that Thom Rainer put in his book. May God work in our hearts.

Prayer 1: "O God, open my eyes that I might see my church as You see it. Let me see where change needs to take place, even if it is painful to me. And use me, I pray, to be an instrument of that change whatever the cost."

Prayer 2: "God, please let me be part of the solution and not the problem. Show me what I need to see. Open my eyes to Your reality. And give me the courage to move forward in the directions You desire."

Prayer 3: "God, give me the conviction and the courage to be like the heroes of Hebrews 11. Teach me not to hold onto those things in my church that are my personal preferences and styles. Show me not only how to let go, but where to let go, so that I may heed Your commands more closely."

Prayer 4: "God, give my church and me a heart for our community. Let me see the people through Your eyes. And give me the courage and the wisdom to let go of this church, so that others who best reflect this community can lead us and teach us."

Prayer 5: "Lord, help me to grasp that all the money I think I have is really Yours. Help me to grasp that all the money our church has is not the church's, but Yours. Give us healthy giving hearts to use these funds according to Your purpose."

Prayer 6: "Lord, remind me that I am to be a Great Commission Christian in a Great Commission church. Remind me that, in Your strength, I am to do whatever it takes to reach out into my community with the transforming power of the gospel."

Prayer 7: "Lord, open my eyes to the needs of others. Show me how to live more like Your Son, who always put others' interests first. And especially show me that attitude as I serve in my church."

Prayer 8: "God, please give our pastor a heart and a vision to reach and minister to people beyond our own walls. Teach me to be the kind of church member who encourages and supports our pastor, so discouragement and disillusionment does not lead to departure."

Prayer 9: "Lord, teach me to pray. Teach me to pray consistently. Teach me to be a leader in prayer in my church. And teach me to keep passionate and believing prayer as the lifeblood of this church."

Prayer 10: "God, reignite the hearts of our church members, including me, to have a passion for the gospel. Teach our church to share the

gospel with others. Teach us to live as men and women who are true bearers of the good news of Jesus Christ. Remind us of our purpose. Convict us of our purpose. Empower us to live our purpose."

Prayer 11: "Lord, teach me the proper stewardship of all the material items You give me personally and in my church. Help me never let that stewardship evolve into obsession and idolatry, especially where I lose my perspective on what really matters."

Prayer 12: "Lord, let me see my church with honesty and open eyes. Help me to grasp where we have gotten out of balance with inward and outward ministries. And give our church a vision to make a difference in our community. Even more, God, use me to be a catalyst and instrument for the changes that must take place in our church."

Prayer 13: "I believe all things are possible through You, God. Show me what I need to do to lead my church from hopeless to hope. And give me the courage and strength to make those changes, even those changes that will be very painful."

Prayer 14: "Lord, if it is Your will for our church to die, please let me know. And give me the courage and the strength to let go. For Your glory."

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on June 11, 2023 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] Thom Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* (B&H Books; First Edition: 2014).