

## “Nominal Faith”

Revelation 3:1-6

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### Text Comment

- v.1 As in the other letters, the identification of Jesus, drawn from the vision of chapter one, is followed by the disclosure of what the Lord *knows* about this particular congregation. Then as now churches are not all the same, some are healthy, some are sick. Some are faithful, some are not. In the case of this congregation there is nothing to say in the way of commendation. They claim to be Christians and others take them to be so, but the Lord knows that they are or are near to being his followers in name only. Their reputation was built upon what used to be true of the church not what was now the case. This church was more a cemetery than a nursery of faith. [Osborne]

But Christ holds the Spirit in his hand (we said before that the “seven spirits” are a way of speaking of the fullness of the Holy Spirit); he is therefore able to revive, to bring back from the gates of spiritual death those who are willing to turn to him. [Trench, 164]

- v.3 There remains a kernel of spiritual life – a remnant of faithful folks and the church apparently remains outwardly committed to right doctrine and ethics – but this also will die if it is not immediately nourished and made the foundation of the church’s spiritual renewal. At the moment their works were incomplete, that is, they did not rise to God’s standard, either in quantity or quality. So there was religious activity in the church, enough to convince themselves and others that they were Christians, but it was superficial and perfunctory; a triumph of form over substance. There was a great temple to Artemis in Sardis that had for some years lain unfinished. It was a sore point in the town. Perhaps that had something to do with John’s choice of words. The church is like that temple: incomplete, a construction site with no workers, no activity, and no progress being made.

The fortress of Sardis was so situated on a high precipice that it was regarded as virtually impregnable. In the Greek world of the time “capturing Sardis” was a saying that meant achieving the impossible. Nevertheless, in the past the city had been taken twice, both times by stealth. Soldiers climbed what had been thought to be unscalable cliffs, opened the city gates, and let the attackers in. There had been a lack of vigilance on the part of the defenders and the city had fallen. It is perhaps that history that accounts for the Lord’s saying that he would come *like a thief* and overtake them by surprise.

- v.4 There were some in the church of Sardis who had more than the *form* of godliness; they had the *power* of it. The “...walk with me dressed in white” probably refers to the custom of citizens wearing white robes in parades celebrating military victories. The idea is that the faithful remnant will have a place in Christ’s triumphal procession at the end of history.

We are not used to thinking of Christians as *worthy*. Aren't we all unworthy and righteous only insofar as Christ has made us righteous? Well, obviously there is a sense in which Christians can be said to be worthy or the Bible would not read as it does, not only here but in many places. There may be none worthy according to the rules of strict justice; but there are those who are worthy according to the rules that prevail in the kingdom of God's grace. [Trench, 175] It is, we might say, a *relative* worthiness, not an *absolute* worthiness.

v.5 “White” is an important term in Revelation (*leukós*), occurring fourteen times in the book. It occurs only nine other times in the rest of the New Testament. It signifies not only victory and celebration but purity and glory. Here it is found in contrast with the “soiled clothes” of the merely so-called Christians. No doubt the clothes were “soiled” in the sense that a Christian of weak and superficial commitment will inevitably live a life of compromise with the world. Moral contamination from the world is inevitable if it is not mightily resisted.

The “book of life” is also an important idea in Revelation. All ancient cities kept a civic register in which were recorded the names of a town's citizens. So God's book contains the names of the saints. Here, however, the book includes all who profess faith in Christ though only the names of those who remain faithful to him remain in it and are not erased from it. Elsewhere in Revelation (e.g. 13:8; 17:8; 20:15) reference is made to those whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world. In other words, there seem to be three groups of people: people who were never in the book; people who were once in it but are no longer; and people whose names are destined to remain in the book of life. The middle group seems to be those who professed faith in Christ but whose profession did not last or did not lead them to a faithful, persevering Christian life. Some have drawn from this statement in 3:5 the conclusion that it is possible for a believer to lose his salvation. It would, I think, be possible to draw that conclusion from this statement except for the fact that the Bible teaches unequivocally that those who are elect of God, redeemed by Christ, and recreated by the power of the Holy Spirit cannot lose that salvation. However, we must face the obvious fact that a great many people who belonged to the church and who were enrolled in its membership by baptism and profession of faith did not persevere and so their names were not found at last in the book. There is a real writing in and a real writing out. That much must be admitted. We Calvinists are inclined to think, well the elect will last and the non-elect will not. True enough. But that does not do adequate justice to the fact that a serious warning is being issued to a Christian church here. One can lose what one has. We cannot know God's decree and whether or not a person is chosen by God cannot be the basis of our judgment. We must hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches and he is warning us of the possibility of losing what one once we had. People who are *in* the book, absent repentance and new obedience, may soon no longer find their names there. From the human point of view – the only viewpoint available to us – this is to be the basis of our hearing and responding.

When I was in graduate school in Scotland I would preach from time to time in Church of Scotland congregations round about Aberdeen. Many of them did not have their own minister or

shared a single minister with one or sometimes two other churches. These were depressing places. A small group of largely older folk scattered about a sanctuary that could hold hundreds if not a thousand more people than ever came to Sunday worship. It was easy to imagine what the church must once have been: crowded on a Sunday morning, perhaps again full or nearly full on a Sunday afternoon or evening. But no more. Most of those churches no longer exist or are soon to expire. The buildings have been closed and in many cases sold: turned into clubs or condominiums or razed to make way for another sort of building. For a serious Christian it is unspeakably sad. A landscape dotted with used-to-be churches.

I have told you before of my visits to St. George's in Edinburgh, the church pastored by Alexander Whyte for almost fifty years. It is still today a large, impressive church, with a towering spire, in the fashionable West End, not far off the fabled Princes Street and only a stone's throw from Edinburgh's central landmark, the Castle. It was known as Free St. George's in Whyte's day, because it was a congregation that, influenced by the evangelical revival, had left the Church of Scotland in the Disruption of 1843 to become part of the Free Church. The building it presently occupies was built by the congregation during its Free Church days. With most of the Free Church it returned to the Church of Scotland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is now known simply as St. George's. It is a church with a history of great ministers. Andrew Mitchell Thomson pastored the church before the Disruption. Thomson was a great preacher and a great musician and wrote the tune, appropriately entitled "St. George's Edinburgh," that we use to sing the verses of the 24<sup>th</sup> Psalm that begin, "Ye gates, lift up your heads on high." Thomson was followed by Robert Candlish, the leader of the Free Church in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a theologian of international significance, and principal (we would say "president") of the Free Church's theological seminary. Candlish was then followed by the greatest preacher of all of St. George's pastors, Alexander Whyte, who held the large congregation spellbound for nearly 50 years. During the century that spanned the ministries of Thomson, Candlish and Whyte, St. George's was an immense congregation chock full of spiritual vitality. Young adults by the hundreds attended Whyte's Sunday evening classes on John Bunyan or the Christian mystics.

Some of you will remember that the congregation of this church gave me as a gift, in June of 1995, on the seventeenth anniversary of my ordination and installation as the pastor of this church, a volume of handwritten transcriptions of sermons delivered by Whyte in Free St. George's in October and November of 1881. Interestingly, at the beginning of several of the sermons the transcriptionist entered a note right beside the text and title of the sermon and the date on which it was delivered. In one case it reads "church full," in another, "church very full." It was one of the most celebrated congregations in the Scottish church and it was full almost every Sunday. Today it is but the palest shadow of its former self. A little congregation of social-gospelers – a hundred or less of a Sunday, a tiny fraction of the immense crowds that used to gather for worship there twice on Sunday – mostly older, nothing distinctively Christian in the church's message and a community irrelevant to the life of the city.

How did this come to be? There was no disaster in the church's past. The people didn't leave in a rush as the result of some controversy. They just faded away. They became a shadow of a true Christian church and *a shadow cannot produce a shadow*. Each generation of the church grew smaller and weaker. Only the sunshine can produce a shadow! And what has happened at St. George's has happened all over Scotland. And, for that matter, it has happened all over Tacoma.

The older church buildings in our town are largely empty of a Sunday morning. Some have been razed to make way for other buildings; some have been turned to other purposes. Where are the congregations that once inhabited those sanctuaries? It would be comforting to think that they have all simply moved to other believing churches and are worshipping Christ faithfully elsewhere. The church, after all, is not the building. It would be comforting to think that only the building is empty; the church continues to be full; but it is not so. How did it happen? Well, the churches first collapsed as places of earnest gospel preaching and sincere gospel living. The Christian witness was muted and the congregation withered away to nothing. I visited last year the congregation my father pastored years ago north of Dallas, Texas. It was, in its day, a church full of spiritual vitality and Christian life. It is today a small congregation, like so many others, spiritually adrift and soon to die.

What has happened to these churches? I will tell you; they stopped being spiritually vigilant; the Lord came as a thief; and he judged those congregations and removed their lampstand, in most cases without their even knowing it. The church in Sardis was in a fair way of bringing that same judgment upon itself, but it had not done so yet. There was still hope. A flame still flickered in that church; there was still a pulse, however weak. The congregation was not yet like those I have described: small and largely elderly, pale shadows of their former selves, dead but not yet fully aware of it. Quite the contrary. Appearances in Sardis continued to be impressive. The meeting places were full. There continued to be a great deal of activity. But a man can be sick unto death and not yet know it. The symptoms have not yet surfaced. He remains unaware of his danger. He looks healthy, feels healthy, but the fact is he harbors a disease that, unless it is cut out, will certainly kill him. And, very often, by the time the symptoms appear, by the time the man learns that he is sick it is too late. The disease has gained such a foothold that it cannot be dislodged. By the time my sister learned that she had cancer – we didn't know this at the time but it was the brute fact we all had to face eventually – by the time she knew she had cancer she was dead. All that remained was the dying. All the treatment in the world served only to make the dying more painful. We don't even know if the chemotherapy and the bone marrow transplant and all the rest even prolonged her life. However well meant and however necessary to try, the tipping point was reached before we even knew she was sick.

Well so it often is with spiritual death. When is the tipping point reached? Where is the point of no return? Who can say? That is why it is so necessary for Christians and for Christian churches to keep moving forward, to keep building the life of faith in themselves. I can tell you for a certainty that the Christians in Sardis certainly did not think they were dying and that a process was underway that, left undetected and uncorrected, would ensure that their children would have no church when they had become adults and, worse, wouldn't care.

The spiritual decay was not obvious to outward observation. The church still had a name for faithfulness and good works. There were no false teachers in Sardis; no fraternizing Nicolaitans, no Jewish accusers; no obvious compromise with the world; no failure of profession and confession; there was none of that. [Caird, 48] In Sardis there was no perverse overturning of gospel truth; but there was a *heartless* holding of the truth. [Trench 169] What once had excited them and moved them and inspired them and motivated them and nerved them and got them up and doing for the Lord now they took entirely for granted. Sardis still looked like a Christian church and thought of itself as a Christian church and was confident in its Christianity. *But*

*comfortable, confident Sardis comes under the most severe condemnation of any church among the seven. It is dead; or about to die. Both things are said.* Their Christian faith remained as a body but the energy was gone, the color, the heat, and almost all the life. A living body and a corpse have many similarities but the vital thing is what is different about them! “Content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and the depth of conviction which provokes intolerance, the church in Sardis was too innocuous to be worth persecuting.” Sardis was the “[the] perfect model of inoffensive Christianity.” [Caird, 48]

You have all heard of the *second law of thermodynamics*. A technical definition is that in closed systems and in the universe as a whole entropy is always increasing. Entropy is the amount of unavailable energy, so when entropy increases it means the system is running down. In general it is the assertion that things in general fall apart, decay, and run down. Unless energy is put in, any system will run out of it and all will finally come to a state of inertia, of cold, motionless death.

Well there is such a law in the spiritual universe as well. The tendency of every soul is in the direction of spiritual entropy: lethargy, indolence, disinterest, and powerlessness. Left to itself, untended, the soul never moves closer to God and deeper into life, but always the other way! It always loses spiritual energy. Even when the soul is wonderfully alive, spiritual enervation and decomposition can be held at bay only by effort. Unless there is an injection of heat and energy and nourishment into the soul, that soul will grow gradually cold, it will gradually become inactive, until it is finally inert and then dead. Every Christian knows this as the experience of his or her daily life. And what is true of the life of the soul is true of the life of churches as well, for churches are a community of souls. We are tempted to think that things will continue as they are, but they will not; they will certainly decay, unless effort is made to ensure that they do not. And once great churches whose sanctuaries are being turned into condos or night clubs are only one of many demonstrations of this.

This congregation in Sardis had the *name* of Christian but it was lacking the thing itself. That is what is meant by nominalism. *Nomen* is the Latin word for name; so a nominal Christian is a Christian in name only. The Romans had a proverb: *nomen est omen*, literally, a name is a sign. And they meant by it that a name was often a person’s destiny; it would prove to be fitting for a person. Names were more important in the ancient world than they are today. A person’s name was often thought to determine something about his life. The Lord sometimes made use of this idea as you know. The baby born to Mary was to be called Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. Jesus means savior. His name was a sign of the meaning of his life. But often the name is *not* a sign. The *nomen* proves *not* to be an *omen*. You can be called a Christian and not be one. You can call yourself a Christian and not be one. So it was, or was very near to being the case in Sardis.

Thankfully, however, it was not yet irreversibly the case. These people in the church at Sardis are addressed as Christians. Their names seem to be still written in the book. There is still *something* to their name. There is something in the church to be strengthened. They are asleep. As Miracle Max put it so eloquently in *The Princess Bride*, they are only mostly dead, and there is a big difference between mostly dead and all dead! There is still hope. They are asleep, but they can wake up. There is something that remains and it can be strengthened. The fire of grace is burning very low but it can be blown into heat again.

The happy fact is that apparently it was. In the middle, later years of the second century, we know of a man by the name of Melito who was bishop of the church in Sardis. He was a godly man. One of his contemporaries said of him after his death that he was a man “full of the Holy Spirit” and that “he sleeps in Sardis awaiting the visitation from heaven on the day of the resurrection.” Tertullian speaks of his eloquence and Eusebius mentions some eighteen books that he wrote, unfortunately now all lost. To Melito we owe the first Christian list of the Old Testament books, interestingly his list did not include what is now called the apocrypha. He also wrote a commentary on Revelation which would be fascinating to read if only we could. What would he have said of the response of the Christians in Sardis to the letter that they received from John?

We wish we knew more about Melito of Sardis, but we know enough to know that the church he pastored some fifty or sixty years after John wrote Revelation was a faithful Christian congregation and full of spiritual life. The church *had* wakened. It *had* strengthened what remained.

We don't live in Sardis in the later first century. We live in Tacoma, WA in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. What is there for us in this letter? There is this. The name of Christian is to designate those and only those *who are alive!* Alive in the knowledge of God and his Son Jesus Christ. Alive to the influences of the Holy Spirit. Alive to the presence of Jesus Christ, so present that it may be said that we are every day *walking with him*. At every point, every hour, every day, we are to be *living* our faith in Jesus Christ. We are to be making our deeds complete in the sight of God, doing what we know Christians ought to do, for the reasons Christians ought to do them, whether in the privacy of our own hearts, in the fellowship of the saints, or in the world. There is to be a deep-seated sincerity and integrity to our profession. Every day we are to be strengthening what remains. Every day we are to be waking up. In that way and only in that way does a Christian never slip into a spiritual sleep from which he or she may never wake up. *The fact that it is possible for one's name to be blotted out of the book of life is supposed to make us determined that ours will never be.*

And what will be the result of that? Walking with the Lord dressed in white on the great day! I tell you, in Jesus' name, brothers and sisters, on that day you will not regret any hour lost to sleep for the purpose of remaining spiritually awake, any wearying effort that was required to strengthen what remained, any vigilance with which you watched your soul and all of us together watched the spiritual life of our church. Just to hear the Lord Christ acknowledge your name before the Father and his angels. It will be overwhelming; the joy and the triumph and the satisfaction and the fulfillment of that incomparable moment.

Be *alive* as a Christian every day, alive to the Word of God, alive to prayer, alive to the grace of God and the forgiveness of your sins, alive to God's love, alive to Christ's presence, alive to the insupportably wonderful fact that the Holy Spirit lives within you, and alive to your future in the kingdom of God. And be alive to the works that are before you to complete.

D.L. Moody once told a great congregation, “Some day you will hear that D.L. Moody is dead. Don't you believe it! I will then be more alive than ever before.” Absolutely. Wonderfully true.

And the way to that fullness of life and the only way is to *live* now as someone with the name of a Christian is supposed to live!