

CHRIST'S COMMENTARY ON CHURCH HISTORY
"Sardis: God's Directives Regarding Reformation Churches"
(Revelation 3:1-6)

Introduction: (To show the need for the message...)

(1) We learned last week that Martin Luther, the Great Protestant Reformer, led the way for others to see theological errors in Roman Catholicism to find salvation by faith in Christ. Therefore, does that mean that if we are Lutheran in heritage, God smiles upon us?

(2) Harvard Divinity School was established by Puritans only 18 years after landing at Plymouth Rock. Since these godly puritans were recipients of the Reformed theology taught by Calvin and Luther, should we expect Harvard Divinity School graduates to possess God's richest approval for the ministry?

Congregational Church. Does the word, "Congregational" on our Church banner automatically indicate divine approval? After all, Rev. William Zito, pastor of the UCC Congregational Church in Watertown thinks so. In an interview with the Waterbury paper, he said, "...our Pilgrim forebears had the vision and the courage to set forth a 'government of the people...'...It is a rich heritage indeed!...There was the great spiritual awakening and the sending forth of the first missionaries overseas (by Congregationalists)."

Since the word "Protestant" was coined to picture the protests of reformers like Luther and Calvin and Zwingli against the errors in Roman Catholicism, does attending a "Protestant" church like Nepaug Congregational or any other Congregational Church automatically signal divine blessing?!

(We turn to our "Need" section in the sermon...)

Need: "Having learned last week that error in Roman Catholicism was exposed by the Reformers, are we to assume that if we hail from a "Protestant" church, we have God's automatic blessing? Why?!"

- I. **As we learned in previous messages, Revelation 2-3 contains Christ's comments for the welfare of Christians in Church History:**
- II. **Christ's message to the Church of Sardis reveals His guidance for those with Mainline Protestant Denomination heritage:**
 - A. Though the meaning of "Sardis" is uncertain, it was a city that rested upon its past name though it drifted into decay, Ramsay, The Letters to the Seven Churches, p. 354. This group had a **name** that it was "alive" though was "dead," Rev. 3:1b. This identifies Mainline "Protestant" Denominations that arose from the Reformation (Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregationalism, etc.) that came to assert creeds of past **real** "Protestants" of Catholic error instead of really believing upon Christ for salvation.
 - B. Christ's claim of possessing the seven Spirits of God with the seven stars in Rev. 3:1 decodes as follows:
 1. Isaiah 11:1-2 pictures the sevenfold qualities of the Holy Spirit that are respectively emphasized in the respective overcomers of the seven Churches of history, Rv. 2-3.
 2. The seven stars represent Christ's possession and control of pastors throughout Church History, cf. Rev. 1:20b.
 3. Thus, the dead creedalism of Mainline Protestant Denominations arose out of a lack of faith in Christ to preserve the doctrinal purity of future pastors independent of creeds; this Church needed to look to Christ for spiritual awakening instead of leaning upon creeds to enter heaven!
 - C. For those with this heritage, the Lord's call for them to remember what they had received (v. 2-3) was a call to remember and apply the **foundation** calls of salvation by faith alone and truth by Scripture alone that were pushed by the Reformation forefathers.
 - D. A warning about being overcome as a thief overcomes at night for not watching is decoded as follows (Rev. 2:3b):
 1. Historically, the city of Sardis, built on a mountainside, had a wall upon a cliff that was **considered** so impregnable that soldiers didn't **guard** it. Yet the cliff decayed so that Cyrus could send a climber up a crevice in it by night and open the city gates from within for an easy invasion, Mounce, Revelation, p. 110-111.
 2. Christ warned that if Mainline Protestant Denominations did not apply their former doctrines, but continued to "rest" on their past creeds, He would rout them as a thief in the night.
 3. This was fulfilled largely in the days of Wesley and Whitefield:
 - a. When Mainline Protestant churches in England did not let them preach in their pulpits, John Whitefield and Charles Wesley preached in open fields, and throngs of people saved!

- b. In America, Jonathan Edwards preached in Enfield, CT., affecting a whole town, and Mainline Protestant Denominations were deeply changed in Britain and America.
4. Jesus promised continual historical influence to Mainline Protestants who heeded His call for conversion, Rev. 3:4-5a:
- a. The ones who are dressed in white garments are those who have works that are really righteous, Rev. 19:8b.
 - b. They will "walk," or traverse history with Christ Who moves among the seven churches, cf. 3:4b with 1:13.
 - c. Because of such obedience, the hymnals we use are full of works by the Wesleys, and our theological writings dealing with conversions are affected by Jonathan Edwards to this day!
 - d. Christ's promise of not removing one's name from the book of life, but of confessing his name before the Father portrays salvation blessings offered to those who no longer rely on creeds, but on Christ to enter heaven:
 - e. Christ's confessing one's name to His Father (v. 5c) reflects Luke 10:32-33's reference to genuine conversion.
 - f. The book of life is a record of those who are converted, cf. Rev. 13:8; 20:15, and Christ promises eternal security to those who switch from dead credalism to true conversion! (Note how this checks Wesley's conditional security error!)

Application: *If we come from a Mainline Protestant Denomination heritage, we must (1) believe on Christ ourselves to receive eternal life, for allegiance to the externals of even Reformers does not save! (2) Then we must fellowship with Christ through obeying His Word and depending on the Holy Spirit for genuine spiritual vitality, Gal. 5:16-23; John 15:1-12.*

Lesson: *Those in Mainline "Protestant" Denominations cannot be saved by relying on past true protesters of Catholic error. God's salvation comes by personal faith in Christ even according to Martin Luther!*

Conclusion: (To illustrate the message...)

(1) Henry Stewart used to pastor the Congregational Church in Sharon, Connecticut. While there, he was encouraged by Dave Caranci and other pastors in the area to believe in Christ for salvation from sin -- a novel thought for Henry Stewart at the time!

One day, Henry believed in Christ as his Savior. Realizing that he had not given his people all of the truth to date, the next Sunday, Henry Stewart preached the Gospel from the pulpit of his church. He admitted that he had been wrong all along, and that his people needed to receive Christ by personal faith or they would not have eternal life. For preaching this way, Henry Stewart was immediately voted out of the pastorate in Sharon.

Henry Stewart did not stop, though. He decided to attend Dallas Theological Seminary to be "re-trained" in the truth of Scripture. While he attended Dallas Seminary, I met with him briefly and he encouraged me to take the call from Nepaug Congregational Church in New Hartford as God needed His messengers back in old New England.

I took Nepaug Church, and Henry Stewart accepted the call to pastor an Evangelical Congregational Church in southern Connecticut. Today, he preaches the gospel there, and his people love it! Henry Stewart is a modern Overcomer who will walk with Christ in white!

(2) When Nepaug Church was still part of the Old Town Church up on the hill on Route 9, Reverend Edward Griffin, a student of Jonathan Edwards, was called to pastor. His first sermon as pastor was on June 4, 1795. In November of 1798, a spiritual awakening broke out in the church, and many people were converted to Christ. Our history book, written to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the New Hartford Congregational Church, says simply: "...they had many religious conferences in different part of town. They were attended by deeply affected crowds which witnessed divine presences manifested to a degree never before known."

May this spiritual legacy again become ours as people in Mainline Protestant Denominational Churches in Litchfield County go beyond their heritage and actually believe in Christ!