

Understanding Revelation – Topic 4

The Reformation churches

From triumph to defeat

An exposition of Revelation Chapter 3:1-6

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Time period of Sardis

To the angel (leader) of the church in Sardis write...

Students of Revelation generally agree that Sardis is associated with the churches of the Protestant Reformation and covers the period from approximately 1517-1750 AD. There is a minority who hold that the Sardis period extends until 1798 AD and even beyond. (For a refutation of this position see Appendix A). Others claim that the Spirit of Prophecy applies the Sardian church period to the Protestant churches prior to 1844. (See Appendix B for a response to this claim).

Significance of Christ's titles

These things says He who has the seven spirits of God...

The term *seven Spirits* in Revelation 4:5 is seen to represent the third Person of the Godhead in terms of His fullness and continuity.¹

Why is it that when He addresses Sardis, Christ sees it as important to remind His people that He possesses the Holy Spirit?

First, He does this to declare His Godhead. As God the Son, He is equal with the Father in His person. As far as His office and position are concerned, however, He is the second Person of the Godhead. The Holy Spirit likewise, as the third Person of the Godhead, is equal with the Father and the Son. Consequently Christ, having the Holy Spirit, may send the Spirit wherever He or the Father may determine.

And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you for ever. John 14:16

But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father...he will testify of me. John 15:26.

Second, the seven spirits represent the Holy Spirit in His fullness. Only through the power of the Spirit would it be possible to bring life to Sardis. Because Christ has the Spirit in its fullness He is able to bring hope and comfort to the Sardians.

...and the seven stars...

The stars are the angels or leaders of the church. Previously in Revelation 1:20 we read that Christ holds the church leaders within His right hand. In this passage, however, it simply reads *He who... has the seven stars*. Stating that Christ has them in His right hand conveys the sense that they are held in a place of strength and authority. This notion provides what must be the ultimate encouragement to the leaders of a church that is dying. Even in these circumstances, if a leader is faithful to Christ he can be assured that he will be sustained by divine power.

¹ A.P. Cooke, *Lightnings, Thunderings, Voices - a Glimpse of God on His Throne*, (Sydney: Self-published, 1985), 9-10.

During this period, belief in the deity of both Christ and of the Holy Spirit was seriously challenged when attempts were made to undermine these great truths. Thus the emphasis on the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit was most timely.

Christ's complaint

...I know your works that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. v1

This is one of the most serious charges that Christ lays against any of the seven churches. There is no characteristic that this church possesses that Christ can commend. In view of the fact that this passage refers to the period when the Protestant Reformation commences, such a complaint has to be seen as potentially devastating.

Who were the Protestant churches of the Reformation and did they have a reputation for being spiritually alive?

The first church on the scene was the Lutheran Church, named for its founder, Martin Luther. The next Reformation church to emerge was the Anglican Church, which was the national Church of England. The Protestant reformation in England was brought about mainly by the circulation of the scriptures in the English language. These were produced by William Tyndale who had been forced to leave England. On the continent he translated the New Testament and smuggled the printed copies into England. This laid the foundation for the Reformation in England. Tyndale was martyred for his faith.



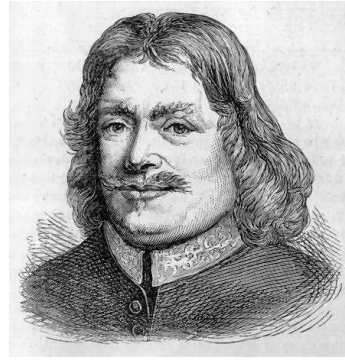
William Tyndale

The third Protestant church on the scene was the Reform Church, established by John Calvin. These three institutions were the main religious bodies of the Protestant Reformation, breaking from the Church of Rome early in the sixteenth century.

The Lutheran Church comprised most of the Protestants in Germany, Denmark, Scandinavia and a segment of the Dutch nation. For instance, the Protestant faith was accepted by the royal family in Sweden, with the result that most of the country followed suit and became Protestant. This fortuitous move brought both spiritual and political strength to the kingdom. During the Thirty Years War, in which Rome endeavored to regain ascendancy over the Protestant regions of Europe, it was Swedish arms which came to the aid of the beleaguered Protestants of Germany. The able leadership of Gustavus Adolphus of the Swedish forces saved the Protestant cause in Europe.

In England the Anglican Church diverged into two main schools of thought: the Anglicans and the Puritans. The Puritans were ultimately forced to separate by the Act of Uniformity, passed under Charles II in 1662 when almost two thousand clergy, one fifth of the nation's church ministers, were deemed non-conformists and were driven from their parishes. The irony was that they were the most learned and active members of the Church's order of ministers. These came to comprise the Presbyterians and the Independents who later were called Congregationalist, as well as Baptists (including Seventh-day Baptists) and Quakers.

Under the oppressive laws enacted by the Anglican parliament, great distress befell these non-conformist brethren. Over time thousands came to languish in loathsome prisons. The most famous prisoner held under these repressive measures was the Baptist, John Bunyan, author of the Christian classic *Pilgrim's Progress*.



John Bunyan

This persecution could not be sustained because the Presbyterians, as well as the rest of the non-conformists, now comprised congregations of such numbers that the English statesmen were obliged to pass the Toleration Act of 1689.² This Act granted freedom of religion, by law, for the first time in England.

The third major body of the Reformation churches was the Reform Church. It began under the tutelage of Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich and was established by John Calvin in Geneva. This group included the Protestants of Switzerland and of France (the Huguenots), as well as many of the Protestant congregations in Holland. It possibly included all the Protestants in Scotland, who were led by the great John Knox. The Puritans of England were of the Reform Church in terms of both doctrine and practice, although many still adhered to the Anglican Church.

In addition to these three main groups, however, were the Independents and non-conformists of England which have already been mentioned, as well as the Anabaptists who rose in Switzerland. The Anabaptists spread throughout Europe and even entered England; however it was in Germany that they had their greatest impact.

While some Anabaptists may legitimately be regarded as extreme in their beliefs, the Evangelical Anabaptists were probably closer to actual scriptural truth than any other group of that period.³ Many of these Anabaptists were later termed Mennonites because they were followers of Menno Simons, an outstanding Dutch Christian. Eventually, the Anabaptists in Europe were crushed or driven out by either Catholic or Protestant persecution. The treatment of the Anabaptists by their Protestant brethren in this regard is a disgrace they must live with to this day.

Causes of the decline of the church of Sardis

Subsequent to their rise, all of these Protestant groups were unquestionably led by the Spirit of God and used mightily by Heavenly powers to shed the light of truth to benighted humankind. How was it then that the churches of the Reformation began to lose their spiritual vigour and fall into decline? There are five primary causes which contributed to the decline of the church of this period:

1. The union of the main church bodies with the powers of the secular State – ie, the establishment of State churches
2. The formation of rigid creeds
3. Adherence to particular unscriptural doctrines

² J.R. Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1902), 4:688, 691.

³ W.L. Emerson, *The Reformation and the Advent Movement* (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1983), 34-125.

4. The Jesuit impetus through the Counter-Reformation
5. The rise of Deism and the Age of Reason.

1. Union of Church and State

The unhappy fact is that when a Church looks to the political strength of a secular State to support its viability that very action serves to hinder the spiritual development of the whole undertaking. Spirituality arises from the exercise of faith in a divine power outside of oneself, as well as an attitude of submission to that divinity and a willingness to offer oneself in a spirit of self-sacrifice to that cause. The solicitation of state-sponsored assistance and a reliance on temporal rather than spiritual power undermines the very principles upon which a church must be founded. The church that finds itself in this position of compromise becomes spiritually impoverished as a consequence. The effective preaching of the Word of God, which is fundamental to a church's spiritual strength, is undermined to produce a mere hollow profession of faith. The church's total ministry runs the risk of becoming subservient to the dictates of the State. Thereby the will of Christ becomes only a secondary consideration for the church's hierarchy.

*The Primates (leaders) of the English church have always been selected for their willingness to be the passive instruments of the government.*⁴

The unfortunate truth is that being united with the civil powers the Church was enabled to enforce its dogmas. Coercion or threat replaced genuine faith as the stabilizing force within the fellowship. In such an environment, given the spirit of intolerance which permeated the thinking of that age, oppression flourished. It was a sad development in light of the fact that the Reformation had heralded much needed hope. Protestants were persecuted during the Sardis period, but it was due to intolerance shown by fellow Protestants against their own, rather than through Catholic machinations.

Even the Protestants who were the victims of persecution themselves (Baptists excepted) generally believed that it was

*the official duty of princes and magistrates to suppress and root out, by their authority, all false ministries... to enforce all their subjects whether ecclesiastical or civil to do their duties to God and men.*⁵

*Ecclesiastical intolerance in the clerical order is generally... co-existent with negligence in the performance of religious duties.*⁶

*Times of persecution and periods distinguished by an intemperate zeal for external uniformity have been characterised by a prevalence of immorality.*⁷

2. Formation of rigid creeds

It is not difficult to understand why churches establish creeds. Creeds promote unity among adherents. However, under the Protestant principle that the Bible is its own interpreter and that every believer is a *spiritual* priest, the way is open for numerous differences of opinion on a range of spiritual topics.

⁴ H.S. Skeats, *History of the Free Churches of England* (London: Alexander and Shephard, 1891), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, , 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, , 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, , 9.

When intolerance arises, therefore, and there is a failure to discern between major and minor truths; with fundamental issues clouded by merely peripheral matters; confusion and serious disruption of the whole process can result.

The situation that arose led to the formation of denominational creeds within the Protestant churches. Creeds, however, tend to result in spiritual sterility. Man-made creeds run the risk of lacking in some areas of belief or even being altogether erroneous. What needs to be recognised is that truth is always advancing: what may appear to be a fundamental truth today, by virtue of a lack of adequate spiritual light, may be found to be wanting at some future time.

But the path of the just is like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day. Proverbs 4:18

*...but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ...
2 Peter 3:18*

As a consequence, as true believers continued to grow in their knowledge of Bible truth they began to discover that some of the fundamental doctrines of their creed did not accord with Scripture. This meant that there was need for a revision of the creed. However the Reformation churches failed in their duty to God and to their congregations. Instead of studying Scripture to uncover new light they stuck with their traditions. As the official Lutheran catechism declares:

*God's word and Luther's Doctrine pure shall to eternity endure.*⁸

By refusing to accept the light of truth a church places the opinions of humans above the Word of God. This, ultimately, manifests itself in disloyalty to Christ.

...if you abide in My word you are My disciples indeed. John 8:31

A church must continue to advance in truth: failure to do so results in spiritual death.

3. Adherence to unscriptural doctrines

The main false doctrines adhered to during the Sardian period are as follows:

Sacramentalism

Sacramentalism holds that by partaking in Holy Communion, salvation is administered to the believer. This doctrine discourages evangelistic endeavor and thereby undermines the spiritual life of the church. Evangelical belief, on the other hand, holds that the Lord's Supper is simply a memorial of Christ's death and that salvation is obtained solely by faith in Christ as our Saviour. This faith is sparked by the good news received through the proclamation of the gospel.

Predestination

The concept of predestination derives from paganism. It was introduced into Catholicism by St. Augustine and marched into Protestantism through both Luther and Calvin who had been Augustinian monks.

⁸ Martin Luther, quoted in C.F.W. Walther, "Why Do We Call Ourselves Lutherans?," *The Lutheran Witness* No.12, May 7, (1894), 529.

Predestination teaches that even before birth one is chosen to either enjoy eternal life or suffer eternal torment - the individual has no choice in the matter whatsoever. This belief, therefore, denies the individual freedom of the will in the attainment of salvation. This view was held by the majority of Protestant believers in the Sardian period. Such a belief, tragically, inhibits evangelistic endeavour. It would stand to reason that if one's destiny was already decided there need be no urgency in proclaiming the gospel of salvation to lost souls – their fate was already sealed. Perhaps this explains why the Protestant churches of the Reformation period had almost no compulsion to engage in foreign missions. It was surely a sign, above all others, of spiritual death.

Original Sin

The doctrine of Original Sin is a false concept. This belief misrepresents God and ultimately portrays Him as a monster. Essentially it states that all infants are guilty of Adam's sin from the time of their birth and as a consequence are deserving of God's wrath. Scripture, on the other hand, emphatically teaches that infants are counted innocent by God⁹ - until they reach the age of understanding.¹⁰ Sin is, and has always been, the deliberate and willful transgression of God's law.

The doctrine of Original Sin holds that our sinful or fallen nature is itself sin, whether one chooses to actively transgress or not. It holds that we are born sinners instead of born with a sinful nature, that we are born depraved, whereas Scripture declares that we are born innocent. *Suffer little children...to come unto me for such is the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 19:14). It is claimed that because all humans are born in a depraved state it is impossible, even by the grace of God, for any person to fully obey God. This concept provides the rationale for infant baptism, the cleansing of the infant from its inherited sin. Once this rite is performed the infant is supposedly assured of salvation. However this belief is unscriptural and militates against spiritual growth because it denigrates the necessity for a personal acceptance of the gospel and the possibility of the joyful fulfillment inherent in living a holy life.

The absurdity of the doctrine of Original Sin was demonstrated by the fact that personal conversion, even as it related to ministers of the gospel, seems not to have been anticipated as a necessary requirement of devout service. It was a similar case with infant baptism, supposedly providing an almost magical efficacy that enabled the procurement of salvation. It also extended to the sacraments, the partaking of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper which supposedly was a means of grace even for the most immoral and irreligious individuals. The spiritual forces that were involved in the great Anabaptist movement had been crushed out.¹¹

In essence, the doctrine of Original Sin amounted to the concept of salvation *in* sin, instead of salvation *from* sin.

...He will save His people from their sins. Matthew 1:21

This pernicious doctrine is stultifying because it hinders the believer from aspiring to holy living in obedience to all that God commands.

For this is the love of God that we keep His commandments... 1 John 5:3

⁹ NKJV - Jeremiah 2:34, 19:4-5; Deuteronomy 1:39.

¹⁰ James 4:17.

¹¹ A.H. Newman, *A Manual of Church History* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1900), 2:35.

One heartening development, in contrast to the general belief of the day, saw the General Baptists of Somerset, England agreeing in 1691 upon a Confession of Faith which has had long-standing ramifications. It was a rejection of the Calvinistic doctrine permeating most churches of that period.

This Confession denounced the doctrine of Original Sin as an inherent trait as both irrational and unscriptural. It also abjured the doctrine of Reprobation (ie, the concept that there is no opportunity of salvation at all for some individuals). Further, the General Baptists pronounced that the grace of God extends to the whole world and the perseverance of the saints is declared to be dependent on their own conduct.¹² If any individual falls short of salvation, it is because they have so willed it; not God.

An erroneous view of justification by faith

Calvinists in particular have had an erroneous view of justification by faith from the very outset. Their view propounds that justification by faith is only forensic— that the believer is declared to be righteous only in a judicial sense, without the necessity of a mental and spiritual transformation. Biblical justification, which results in a divine pardon, teaches that when an individual accepts Jesus Christ as their substitute for sin this inner change necessarily follows when it involves genuine conversion.

...be transformed by the renewing of your mind... Romans 12:2

I will give you a new heart (mind)... Ezekiel 36:26

Calvinism also holds that once justification by faith is experienced it cannot be lost, that justification covers all *future* sins as well as those that are past. In principle the doctrine of justification by faith is reduced to a simple and inadequate formula: *once saved, always saved*. Also, in the Calvinistic view, justification by faith means that because the individual has already been judged righteous, there is no need of a future judgment that involves the believer.

These views about justification by faith were another cause of the spiritual decline of the churches of the Reformation and continue to play spiritual havoc with those who espouse them to this day.

Antinomianism

Antinomianism means *anti-law* or *no law*. It is the belief that Christians have no need of the law of God as a guide in their lives. Not surprisingly this view is a natural outcome of particular tenets of Calvinism. However, what should be considered is that while Christ through His atoning death delivers a person from the curse or penalty of the law, He does not deliver them from the obligation of keeping the law - the divine standard of Christian behaviour. While Christians are not under the law's condemnation, they are still under its direction and while commandment keeping does not save anyone from sin's guilt, this is the outward symbol of the individual's salvation by grace.

If you love me, keep my commandments. John 14:15

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. 1 John 5:3

¹² H.S. Skeats, 130.

Calvinism's doctrine that it is impossible for believers, even by God's grace, to keep His commandments was one of the chief causes for the appalling spiritual decline of the Reformation churches. The false idea that Christ has kept the law on our behalf, abnegating our need for obedience to His statutes, has denied many people the spiritual joy inherent in devout faithfulness.

*The spiritual declension which had been manifest in England just before the time of Wesley, was in a great degree the result of Antinomian teaching.*¹³

4. The Counter Reformation

The Counter Reformation was a powerful, concerted effort by Rome to destroy Protestantism. The Counter Reformation utilised five strategies:

1. The recognition and employment of the order of the Jesuits
2. The convening of the Council of Trent
3. The invention of a false system of interpretation of Bible prophecy in order to remove from the Roman Church the stigma of being the Antichrist.
4. The establishment of the index of prohibited books.
5. The renewal of persecution.

The main agency employed in the Counter-Reformation was the Society of Jesus – the Jesuits. This organization originated with Ignatius Loyola of Spain (inspired by occult powers) with the express purpose of destroying the enemies of the Catholic Church, especially Protestantism.¹⁴

*The Jesuits maintain ignorance and oppose light... They know but one law... they call 'authority'. To a superior they submit life and conscience. To their order they sacrifice individuality... They have but one family, one fortune, one end and all three are included in the word 'community'. And this 'community', as its whole history attests... is nothing less than 'a universal conspiracy' against all rights and every power in the world.*¹⁵

When this organisation is carefully investigated it is evident that it is one of the most diabolical systems of human invention. Perhaps the most appalling feature is that it garbs itself in the pure and lowly robes of Jesus Christ.

The evidence proclaimed by the Protestant Reformers that the Antichrist applied to the Papacy impelled millions to forsake Mother Church.

*It was this united Protestant stand on the Papacy that became the spring of their reformatory action. It was this clear understanding of the prophetic symbols that led them to protest against Rome with such extraordinary courage and effectiveness, nerving them to break with her and to resist her claims, even unto death.*¹⁶

¹³ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1898), 260.

¹⁴ Theodor Greisinger, *The Jesuits - a Complete History* (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1903), 2:Ch.2.

¹⁵ G. Wainwright, *Ritualism, Romanism and the Reformation* (London: S.W. Partridge and Co., Ltd., 1879), 454.

¹⁶ Le Roy Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1954), 2:485.

Rome was desperate to neutralize the impact of these Protestant teachings. The Jesuits counterattacked and while they led in each of the five counter-reformation initiatives, their most effective strategy, the one which did most damage, was the creation of false interpretations of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. These were deliberately designed to shift the stigma of *Antichrist* from the Papacy and to apply it to other epochs.

Two schools of thought regarding the Antichrist were formulated by the Jesuits in order to shift the focus away from Rome. These were termed *Preterism* and *Futurism*. Preterism proclaimed that Antichrist applied solely to a figure in the past, such as the Emperor Nero, while Futurism projected Antichrist into a future era, closer to the time of the Second Advent of Christ.

The Jesuits then began a campaign of infiltration, at which they are masters. They used subterfuge to attend the universities, seminaries and churches of the Protestant churches and attempted to popularize Jesuitical interpretations of prophecy and Scripture. In the end they achieved remarkable success in undermining true biblical interpretation of prophecy, especially concerning the identity of the Antichrist.

Dr. LeRoy Froom records the result as follows

The Jesuits became entrenched in the universities. They were among the best teachers in the land and held public disputations. Even Protestants began to send their children to them because of the scholastic progress they could make. Thus the great Reformation began to be outflanked in its own fastnesses and its conquests were checked.¹⁷

The natural outcome of this clever counteraction by the Jesuits was that the promulgation of the notion of Rome as the Antichrist diminished in importance over time.

When the Jesuits came to the rescue of the Papacy, they found it in extreme peril, but from that moment the tide of battle turned. Protestantism, which had during a whole generation carried all before it, was stopped in its progress and rapidly beaten back from the foot of the Alps to the shores of the Baltic.¹⁸

5. The Age of Reason

The fifth cause of the decline of the Reformation churches was the advent of the Age of Reason. In the religious realm it began with the favorable reception given to Unitarianism (there is only one Person in the Godhead) and the rejection of the Trinity. It followed in the wake of an extreme but understandable reaction to the sundering of the Anglican Church's authority over the minds of men around 1720¹⁹. It was the first form taken by rationalism after intellectual freedom had finally been secured.

There was no class in England which did not feel relief from the removal of the weights which had been placed on the free movement of human thought. In no direction was this more visible than in theology. Men everywhere felt that they were at liberty to think for themselves. The natural and immediate result of this feeling was... the apparently sudden growth at this period of Unitarianism in England.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., 470.

¹⁸ T.B. Macaulay, *History of England* (Philadelphia, PA.: J.B. Lippincott & Co.), 2:53.

¹⁹ H.S. Skeats, 249.

²⁰ Ibid., 235-236.

This departure from orthodox thinking even spread through the ranks of the Anglican Church as well as to the dissenters and non-conformist churches.

*Unitarianism spread with unexampled rapidity.*²¹

*The doctrine of the great founders of Presbyterianism could scarcely be heard from any Presbyterian pulpit in England. The denomination vanished as suddenly as it had risen; and excepting in literature, has left little visible traces of the greatness of its power.*²²

*Religion, whether in the Established Church or out of it, never made less apparent progress. The churches were characterized by a cold indifferentism. The zeal of Puritanism was almost as unknown as it was un-imitated... Everything was changing and until the change was completed... they seemed half-paralyzed.*²³

*If they thought much of the deadness, ignorance and corruption around them they never thought of removing it... nothing that required great exertion or great sacrifice was either attempted or done during this period.*²⁴

At this time (1723) it was admitted by the Baptists that

*There was a 'great decay' of the Baptist interest in some parts of England.*²⁵

By 1700 Rationalism had reached its highest stage of development. Men of great intellectual ability, with lofty attainments and who were of true virtue promoted the philosophy of Deism. Propounding the pre-eminence of reason and enlightenment, this anti-Christian philosophy swept through Christendom and became a powerful instrument that undermined the Christian faith. The churches, consequently, were seriously affected by it and the Christian church in general suffered paralysis. Faith in Christ as humanity's Saviour reached its nadir.

Deism had an appalling impact particularly upon English society. We can confidently hold that it was this *Age of Reason* and *Deism* that crystallized the Sardis condition of the church, ie that it had a reputation that it lived but was in fact spiritually dead.

Notice the following remarks from Dr Fitchett concerning the 18th century – the period in which Deism swept Christendom

*In some respects the 18th century is the most ill-used period in English history. It is the 'Cinderella of the centuries'. No one has a good word to say about it. Carlyle sums it up in a bitter phrase: 'Soul extinct – stomach well alive'... The real scandal of England in the 18th century... is the general decay of religion which marked its first fifty years... only by an effort can we realize the condition of England in 1703... Christianity came near its death swoon in that sad age.*²⁶

²¹ Ibid., 247.

²² Ibid., 248.

²³ Ibid., 250.

²⁴ Ibid., 251.

²⁵ Ibid., 257.

²⁶ W.H. Fitchett, *Wesley and His Century* (London: G. Bell, 1906), 11-15.

Fitchett also states:

There was open revolt against religion and against churches in both the extremes of English society...the poor... were ignorant and brutal to a degree which it is hard to conceive. The rich, to an almost utter disbelief of religion, linked a foulness of life now happily almost inconceivable'... The fatal thing in the religion of that age, was that it had ceased to be a life, or to touch life...Christianity in England, at the beginning of the 18th century was... a circle of dead fibres.²⁷

Happily, this eventuality prompted some of the best Christian thinkers of England to stand up in defense of the faith of Christ, and of the Bible as the Word of God. Their efforts were not in vain because their success was unrivalled.

With such an exhibition of power and scholarship arrayed against it, it is not surprising that Deism, as an intellectual theory, was quickly beaten from the field of controversy and that practical and vital religion did not gain from its defeat.

They forgot the internal evidences of the truth of Christianity... they neglected to a lamentable extent, one of the chief means of saving souls... of treating Christianity as an intellectual creed, a system of morals and a means of virtue... Christian preachers exercised little influence on either the morals or the religion of the people... faith as a vital power scarcely existed in less degree, preaching... was cold and heartless.²⁸

As it is impossible for Nonconformity... to live and extend without its adherents possessing in an unusual measure, personal piety and the spirit of self-sacrifice, its comparative decline, under the influences of the age of reason, was obvious.²⁹

Christ's admonition

Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found your works perfect before God...hold fast and repent... v2-3

This immediately indicates that though the church was dying, there was hope for Sardis.

The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church of Christ. Matthew 16:18

...the things which remain...

No doubt this referred to the elements of true Christianity that still existed in the minds of a remnant of God's people. The Christian faith as held by the Protestant churches had received a buffeting, but all was not lost. Christ called them to remember how they had been led initially into the light of truth.

Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent... v3

In all likelihood this was a call to remember how these churches of the Reformation had commenced and how Christ was to be the first principle in their lives. They were to remember how the light of the gospel had beamed through the darkness of error and

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁸ Ibid., 264-265.

²⁹ Ibid., 266.

were to reacquaint themselves with their simple faith in the Word of God and their wholehearted acceptance of Christ as Saviour and Lord.

...hold fast and repent...

Hold fast to the Word: repent from any departure from it, repent of the neglect they had shown to their personal relationship to Christ with its resultant stunted spiritual growth and dead formalism.

Christ's warning

...Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. v3

The meaning of this statement is unequivocal: Christ, seated in judgment would call upon the believers in Sardis without warning and mete out punishment if they failed to respond to His call. This event is often applied to the Second Advent of Christ, but its primary application is always to the church period when believers were on the point of spiritual death. It represents judgment or punishment within the contemporary context. This statement, therefore, could be applied to the Second Advent only in a secondary sense. God's people were instructed not to expect the Second Advent until after *the man of sin* – the Papacy – had reigned in the Christian church (2 Thessalonians 2:1-5). The Papacy's reign ended in 1798 and that date marked the commencement of *the time of the end or the last days*.³⁰

Promise to the faithful

You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. v4

Who could these worthies be who had not *defiled their garments* during the Sardian period? Some commentators believe that the description applies chiefly to believers during the latter end of the period when the church was experiencing spiritual decline, but spiritual decline was the prevalent trend throughout most of the Sardian period as fellowship after fellowship experienced spiritual stagnation.

The following groups may be seen as representing the few that walked in white. These were the overcomers in this trying period of intolerance, controversy and persecution.

- **Anabaptists** - faithful evangelicals who laid down their lives rather than reject truth and disobey God.
- **The Early Puritans**
- **The Brownists** who became the Congregationalists and included the Pilgrim Fathers.
- **The Baptists**, including Seventh-day or Sabbatarian Baptists. The Sabbatarian Baptists were quite numerous in England at this time.³¹

³⁰ A.P. Cooke, *Time No Longer*, (Sydney: Self-published, 1985), 7.

³¹ W.L. Emerson, 89-165.

- **The Pietistic Movement** in Germany.

The name of Pietists was given... by its enemies, as a term of ridicule, like that of Methodists somewhat later in England... The Lutheran church...by the 17th century had become a creed-bound theological and sacramentarian institution, with almost the absolutism of the Papacy. Christian faith had been dismissed from its seat in the heart, where Luther had placed it, to the cold regions of the intellect.... dogmatic formularies... usurped the position...assigned to the Bible alone, and as a consequence... the Bible was neglected in the family, the study, the pulpit and the university.

Instead of... the priesthood of all believers, the Lutheran pastors had made themselves a despotic hierarchy. ...In the Reformed church...(there was) a dogmatic legalism which imperiled Christian freedom and fostered self-righteousness.

As forerunners of the Pietists...(were) powerful voices...bemoaning the shortcomings of the church and advocating a revival of devout and practical Christianity. Amongst them were Johann Arndt (author of) "True Christianity" and other theologians inclined to practical Christianity. The direct originator was Philip Spener (1635-1705). He was influenced initially by Arndt's writings. At Geneva he was greatly moved by the preaching and piety of the Waldensian professor, Antoine Leger.³²

Philip Spener submitted six proposals for religious reform

1. The study of Scripture in private meetings
2. The laity sharing in church government
3. The practice of Christianity must attain knowledge of it
4. A sympathetic and kindly treatment of dissidents and unbelievers
5. Re-organization of theological training in the universities, giving prominence to devotional life
6. A different style of preaching: instead of mere pleasing rhetoric, the implanting of Christ in the new man by faith.

Spener deeply offended most Lutheran theologians and pastors but some adopted his proposals. The fundamental difference between Lutheranism of the day and Pietism was their conception of Christianity. Pietism held that it chiefly consisted of a change of heart and holiness of life, while the orthodox held that it consisted mainly in correctness of doctrine. August Franke succeeded Spener and the Pietists spread over all middle and northern Germany. They shunned all common worldly amusements, such as dancing, the theatre and public games.³³

³² *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Pietism." 21:593.

³³ *Ibid.*, 594.

The new university at Halle under Franke and other Pietists became Pietism's educational centre and wielded great spiritual influence. Count Zinzendorf (1700-1760) was converted to Pietism at Halle. He set up a Pietistic centre at Herrnhut where the persecuted Bohemian and Moravian Brethren found refuge and revival. These were the remnant of the Hussites of Bohemia who had been driven out of their country by cruel and prolonged Catholic persecution. They formed the United Brethren and in them we witness the greatest example of the survival of the Church of Sardis.

Pietists promulgated the gospel among non-Christians and heathen as had not been seen for centuries. They founded mission stations in Greenland, the West Indies, South Africa and America. Eternity will reveal the true extent of their influence. Pietism produced other great Christian leaders who helped revive the faith of Sardis. With them the study of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation was revived.³⁴

Around 1700 AD, many Pietists migrated from Germany and settled in Southern Russia, Transcaucasia, Hungary and Rumania.³⁵

By 1735 persecution broke out against the Pietists and Moravians in Germany from the Lutherans. This led many to migrate. A colony settled in Georgia, America and later when the Moravians were expelled from Germany (1740) large numbers arrived in Pennsylvania where they established their churches. Some of these in their spiritual advance were led into the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath, including Zinzendorf himself.³⁶

Pietism had run its course before the middle of the 18th century...it could claim to have contributed largely to the revival of Biblical studies in Germany and to have made religion once more an affair of the heart and the life and not merely of the intellect. It likewise vindicated afresh the rights of the laity in regard to their own beliefs and the work of the church against the assumptions and despotism of an arrogant clergy. It was...the last great surge of the waves of the ecclesiastical movement begun by the Reformation; it was the completion and the final form of the Protestantism created by the Reformation.³⁷

In other words, the conclusion of Pietism finalized the Sardian period.

Promises to the overcomer

White garments

He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments...

In v4 the white garments appear to represent moral purity by the use of the expression *not defiled*. This is the overwhelming connotation of the use of white garments in Scripture. During the Christian era it represents the righteousness of Christ with which the believer is spiritually clothed. It could also represent the literal clothing of the saints once they attain the Kingdom. The clothing the saints ultimately wear is described as a

³⁴ Le Roy Froom, 2:696-703, 709-719.

³⁵ Ibid., 713.

³⁶ W.L. Emerson, 176.

³⁷ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 593-594.

garment of light (Psalm 104:3) and is part of the spiritual body which the saints will possess in eternity (1 Corinthians 15:42-44; Philippians 3:20-21).

Heaven's records

...and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before my Father and before His angels. v5

The Book of Life which is mentioned throughout Scripture pertains to the records kept by heaven concerning the great controversy upon earth. The form that these records take need not concern us: Scripture simply emphasizes that a divine record is kept.

There are a number of different books described in Scripture which relate to the heavenly records.

The Book of Life

(Philippians 4:3; Revelation 13:8; 20:15). The Book of Life is the birth register of all who are born again as sons or daughters of God (Luke 10:20).

The Book of Death

This is the record of earth's inhabitants' sins.

For the wages of sin is death... (Romans 6:23).

This passage indicates that those who do not have the record of their sins erased through the blood of Christ will receive the ultimate penalty.

...your iniquity is marked before Me, says the Lord God. Jeremiah 2:22

Now go, write it before them in a tablet, and note it on a scroll, that it may be for the time to come (margin: the latter day)... Isaiah 30:8

Behold it (Israel's sin) is written before Me ... Isaiah 65:6

The Book of Remembrance

This is the record solely of the righteousness of the saints. There is no record of righteousness for anyone who is not a true believer (John 3:18).

...a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord, and who meditate on His name. Malachi 3:16

...Put my tears into your bottle; are they not in Your book? Psalm 56:8

Why does heaven need records?

Why is there a need for records in heaven? Not because the Creator needs permanent minutes of what has occurred. Records are kept for the sake of intelligent beings that God has created. These records will be required when this world comes under judgment. The Old Testament source from which John borrows his imagery is the book of Daniel, the meaning of which is *God is Judge*.

I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated: His garment was white as snow and the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, its wheels a burning fire ... A thousand thousands (of angels) ministered to him; Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the court was seated, and the books were opened. Daniel 7:9-10

...And behold, One like the Son of Man (Jesus Christ) coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days (the Father) and they (the clouds)³⁸ brought Him (Jesus) near before Him. Daniel 7:13

This is a judgment scene enacted after the reign of the four beasts or kingdoms of prophecy - Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome - and the reign of the Little Horn. It will be shown later that the Little Horn reigned from 538-1798.³⁹ This judgment involves the people of God, ie those whose names have been recorded in the Book of Life. It is a public process of investigation of the records of the saints to determine the faithfulness of each individual who has professed gospel truth.

For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God (the church); and if it begins with us (believers) first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? 1 Peter 4:17

Dealing with sin (blotting out)

Other scriptures give glimpses of Christ's ministry relative to this judgment.⁴⁰ One major feature of the pre-advent, investigative judgment of God's professed people is the process of the blotting out of the records. For the non-believer/non-overcomer there is a sequence of two 'blotting outs'. For the overcomer there is only one 'blotting out' which applies to this judgment.

Some men's sins are clearly evident (by confession), preceding them to judgment... 1 Timothy 5:24.

The overcomer's record of sin is blotted out through the process of the priestly ministration of Christ on their behalf.

He who overcomes... I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. Revelation 3:5

...if he (the believer) turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right,... he will surely live; he shall not die. None of his sins which he has committed shall be remembered against him.... Ezekiel 33:14-16

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord. Acts 3:19

The sin record of non-believers/non-overcomers, however, is retained, while their name and their record of righteousness are blotted out of the Book of Life and the Book of Remembrance. Concerning the record of their righteousness Scripture declares:

³⁸ A.P. Cooke, *Lightnings, Thunderings, Voices - a Glimpse of God on His Throne*, 17: The term *clouds* is sometimes employed in Scripture to represent the angels of God.

³⁹ A.P. Cooke, *Antichrist 666*, (Sydney: Self-published, 1985), 13-14.

⁴⁰ A.P. Cooke, *Time No Longer*, 21.

...the righteousness of the righteous man (professing Christian) shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression;... (if he) commits iniquity (and does not repent of it) none of his righteous works shall be remembered. Ezekiel 33:12-13

*But he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.
Luke 12:9*

The record of the sin of non-believers is retained and they will be punished according to that record in the final judgment.

When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die because of it. Ezekiel 33:18

...Provide no atonement for their iniquity, nor blot out their sin (record) from Your sight.... Jeremiah 18:23

Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You.... Nehemiah 4:5

Concerning non-overcomers whose names had been originally recorded in the Book of Life, their names will be blotted out of that register.

Let them be blotted out of the book of the living (of life), and not be written with the righteous. Psalm 69:28

...whoever has sinned against Me (and not repented of it), I will blot him out of My book. Exodus 32:33

...let their name be blotted out. Psalm 109:13

Let me alone, that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven... Deuteronomy 9:14

...and the Lord would blot out his name (who turns from Christ to other gods) from under heaven. Deuteronomy 29:20

Jesus' ministry

All of the above procedures are part of the heavenly ministry of Jesus Christ during the final phase of His priestly ministration in the heavenly temple. This is the significance of the promise to the overcomer of the Sardis period. In the investigative judgment their name will not be blotted out of the Book of Life. Rather, Christ will confess their name before God and the attendant angels. Whoever Christ pleads for before God is assured of divine acceptance and their sin record will be blotted out for all eternity.

In the light of the evidence for the pre-advent judgment, it may be relevant to discuss the two phases of the blotting out of sin as considerable confusion still exists on this matter.

What we have detailed above refers to the blotting out of the sin record by Christ in the heavenly assize. However Scripture also emphasizes another blotting out of sin: this concerns the guilt of sin. As far as the individual is concerned, not only is this more important and more vital, it must also precede the blotting out of the *record* of sin, significant as that maybe in the end. What occurs when an individual accepts the truth of

the gospel and is born again; receiving Christ as his Saviour - the substitute for the penalty of their sin - is that the guilt for his past sins is blotted out.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

...the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. 1 John 1:7

...according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin....Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow...Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Psalm 51:1-9⁴¹

There is a present, current blotting out of sin for the believer.

... I am He who blots out (present tense) your transgressions for my own sake; and I will not remember your sins. Isaiah 43:25⁴²

I have blotted out (past tense), like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins... Isaiah 44:22⁴³

Perhaps this procedure could be termed a *spiritual* blotting out of sin at the point of conversion, while there is also a literal blotting out of the record during the pre-advent judgment. These two phases of the 'blotting out' are indicated by the apostle Peter. His statement has dual application.

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord. Acts 3:19⁴⁴

Undoubtedly the first application was to Peter's day, referring to the blotting out of the guilt of sin. The second application applies to the pre-advent judgment.⁴⁵ Other scriptures confirm the marvelous and comforting truth that God blots out the guilt of our sins at the time we surrender to Christ.

...He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. Micah 7:18-19

⁴¹ For Spirit of Prophecy confirmation of this application of Psalm 51, see Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy* (Mountain View, CA.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1884), 4:381. See also Ellen G. White, "Meeting Trials," *The Review and Herald* (1891), 1. See also Ellen G. White, "Entire Consecration Necessary," *The Review and Herald* (1893), 1.

⁴² For Spirit of Prophecy confirmation of this application see

Signs of the Times 9 April 1894; *Review & Herald* 1 July 1915, 19 March 1895, 21 April 1910.

⁴³ For Spirit of Prophecy confirmation see *Review & Herald* 17 Feb 1885, 17 March 1890, 14 July 1891, 25 March 1915, 19 Jan 1911, 8 Oct 1914.

⁴⁴ F.D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1957), 6:158-159

⁴⁵ Larre B. Kostenko, "Desmond Ford and the Blotting out of Sins in Acts 3:19" (Andrews University, 1982), n.p.

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Psalm 103:10-13.⁴⁶

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. v6

⁴⁶ At least 16 times the Spirit of Prophecy indicates that our sins (*guilt*) are blotted out when we accept Christ as our Saviour.

Appendix A – A time period claim refuted

In a refutation of the position which holds that the Sardis period extends to 1798 AD we need to consider, then answer, the following questions:

Q1. What constituted a Reformation church and how did it fulfill the conditions that were predicted of them in the Sardis prophecy?

A. The Reformation bodies that arose at the beginning of the sixteenth century were the Lutheran, the Anglican and the Reformed (Calvinistic) churches. Later the Reformed was also called the Presbyterian Church.

Q2. How did the Lord describe the church during the period known as Sardis?

A. Revelation 3:1 tells us that they had *...a name that you are alive but you are dead.*

In other words, these churches of the Reformation would inevitably decline spiritually and become regarded finally as spiritually dead.

This is exactly what happened to the Reformation churches of that period. They commenced in glorious fashion when they broke from the Church of Rome, but in time, because of their refusal to walk in the full light of the Word of God, and involving themselves in inflexible creedal statements, they became exclusive and inward-looking. *Rigid and frigid* are the words of the historian when describing the Lutheran church.⁴⁷ The irony was that the Lutheran, Reform and Anglican churches in turn often became relentless persecutors of those who dissented from them.

Who were the dissenting groups of this period?

- These were the Anabaptists, who existed in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Poland, Moravia and England. They were a staunch body of believers who suffered great persecution from their fellow Protestants as well as from the Roman Catholics. Many were martyred for their faith.
- In England there were the Puritans. These were Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists and Quakers. The Independents were later called the Congregationalists.
- The Covenanters existed in Scotland from 1660–1688. Eighteen thousand of them were martyred by the Stuart Kings, aided and abetted by the Anglican Church.
- In France there was a branch of the Reformed Church – the Huguenots – who, under the reign of their Catholic kings and aristocracy, suffered some of the worst persecution of any Protestant group since the Reformation began. This persecution included the massacre of St. Bartholomew when upwards of 70,000 were slain in 1572. Later, when the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685, all Protestants were outlawed; about half a million fled France while thousands of others were martyred.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ J. Bready, *England Before and After the Wesleys* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939), 194.

⁴⁸ J.A. Wylie, *History of Protestantism* (London: Cassell Petter & Galpin, 1878), 2:583-606; 3:309-347.

In the message to Sardis the Lord declared

You have a name that you are alive but you are dead.

The Lord also said

You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. Revelation 3:4

No doubt those dissenting groups, faithful to Christ 'even unto death', although generally small in number, were the faithful few that the Lord marked out in the Sardis period. The advent of *The Age of Reason* and *The Enlightenment*, which came upon Europe from the 1680's to the middle of the eighteenth century, ended the Sardis period of the seven churches of Revelation.

Appendix B – A further time period claim refuted

How do we respond to the claim that the Spirit of Prophecy applies the Sardis period to the Protestant churches prior to 1844?

Of the thirty-six references checked regarding Sardis in the Spirit of Prophecy, thirty-five are applied to the Laodicean church or to individuals in the church period of Laodicea.

Only once does the Spirit of Prophecy apply Sardis to the Protestant churches prior to 1844 and that was to the churches of North America in 1780. These comprised only a minority of the Protestant churches of the period. The bulk of Protestantism was situated in the British Empire and northern Europe. At that time the great Evangelical Revival was in full bloom and the remarkable era of missions was about to commence. This situation was exactly the opposite of these described for the Sardian period. The application made by *The Great Controversy* (p.309-310) applied to a local situation in North America, however not to the Protestant churches in general around the globe.

For an accurate application of the Church of Sardis, see pages 251-257 of Ellen G. White's book *The Great Controversy*. This was the period prior to the great Evangelical Revival.

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