

The letter says, “*I know your works.*” However, five of the seven letters to the congregations in Revelation have this phrase. Now I intentionally choose to use congregation rather than church. Far too often in our world today when one says church we automatically think of a building. These letters were not written to buildings but to congregations/people—this building is only our meeting place—you/we are the Church! These congregations were probably still meeting in people’s homes and the idea of the church being a building was a concept that they would not understand. They were the church—the congregation of the people of God.

To the congregation in Sardis the living Christ says you have a name. A name that is recognized in the community but it is not your real name the living Christ reveals—to the congregation in Sardis. Now names were important and were chosen for their meaning – your name said a great deal about you. I am not sure if we pay as close attention to names today or not. I am told that Barak is now a popular name for boys. If you remember recently a bakery in the south made the news because it refused to put a boys name on his birthday cake: Adolph Hitler. Now I am not sure why a parent would place such a burden on a child, it is bad enough sharing his birthday let alone his name.

Moses wanted to know God’s name. He has not been in Egypt for forty years and doubts if anyone will remember him. How is he going to carry out the mission should he accept it (we are still in the bargaining stage at this point in the Scripture) if he does not know the name of God. What is your name? Who will I say has sent me on this mission? It is only by knowing the name of God that Moses feels he will have any success at all. God responds for Moses to tell the people “*I am that I am or I will be what I will be*” has sent him. We come to understand that no one name can adequately describe who God is.

Sardis is a city living in the shadow of its glorious past. It once had a great name but now it is known for its luxurious way of life gleaned from the past. It was basking in the riches of its past glory. The congregation in Sardis also had such an image. It was busy with all the externals but was lacking in a vibrant spiritual life. It was not changing the world. It was a hive of activity but was producing no honey. It had all the looks and appearances of being alive and a name to go with it – but “*you have a name of being alive, but are dead*” (NRSV).

For me, this raises an interesting question: Are we busy at doing something or are we just busy? Let’s face – it we seem to love committee meetings and if you want to feel like you are busy and accomplishing nothing attend committee meetings. We will form a committee for almost anything and in the process accomplish almost nothing. It is almost as if we call committee meetings to see if we need to call a committee together! We have to be busy.

We were on Dick Mann’s compound in northern Thailand, just a little northwest of Chiang Mai. I was on the deck enjoying a cup of coffee and watching one of the workers rake leaves. He would take the rake, make two or three passes—swoosh, swoosh, swoosh—lean the rake against a tree and take off his sweater. He would then take the rake, make two or three passes—swoosh, swoosh, swoosh—then lean the rake against the tree, find his sweater and put it back on. This scenario kept being

repeated for about a half hour when Dick came by. He knew what I was thinking. He simply said that by days end the yard would be raked and it was best not to watch, it would drive you crazy. Looks are often deceiving.

There was a faithful remnant in Sardis who had kept the faith alive. They had kept the Spirit and had grown in faith and service. They were more than just being busy for the sake of being busy. They still believed they could change the world and accomplish things for the Kingdom of God. Faith and loyalty to the living Christ and his mission was still on the front burner of their lives. They had not grown lethargic. To this group the living Christ gives praise. They had not lost the vision.

So the question: are we busy to be busy or are we busy accomplishing things? Our days are filled with activities. Some of you wonder how you found time to work! Your days are filled and you long for some quiet time, to put your feet up and relax. We struggle with the powerful work ethic of the past that says if we are not busy we are not being productive. We are only “being” when we are busy.

One of my first employers during my high school years did not like to see his employees not busy. Even if there were no customers in the store we needed to be busy. Thus he often had us move stock from one side of the store to the other. Now we never really knew where anything was but we were always busy!

I have a cartoon of a pastor in his office on his knees in prayer. The secretary is in the doorway and the caption reads: “O good, you’re not busy”! Doing is how we equate success and not doing means we are not being successful. We have forgotten the concept of Sabbath rest. Sabbath rest is a part of our call, our privilege in Christ. A time to rest, recharge the batteries for the work of tomorrow. In reality rest is necessary if we are going to be truly productive tomorrow.

Now I have not raised this issue with anyone yet but I have been toying with it. This summer our ABC national convention is going to be held in Pasadena. Several of us are planning to attend and will be gone a good part of late June and July. Why don’t we declare July a “Sabbatical” month? The only thing we will do in July is meet for worship on Sunday! Nothing else. No meetings, no committees, no Bible Studies, no pot luck picnics. And we commit ourselves to recharge our batteries and gain a Sabbath rest.

We keep filling our days with busy. Colleges as they screen applicants look for those who are not only good academically but also those who participate in a wide range of after school, things, sports, and community activities. Our young people need a day planner to keep track of their schedules. Parents are continually chauffeuring them from one activity to another—parents often say they drive taxis rather than cars. We keep our children busy for their future and then we wonder why some days they seem to not even know their name.

Why are we so busy and what are we busy doing are the questions that arises from this letter to the congregation in Sardis. Sardis had the look of being busy. They even had a name for being busy. But they were just going through the motions—there was no spiritual emphasis, no growth, no changing the world. A hive of activity with no honey produced. The world sees them one way, the living Christ another. Christ knows their real name!

George Eldon Ladd in his commentary on Revelation makes this comment concerning the congregation in Sardis:

The church was noted for its good works, which by men were praiseworthy but which before God stood condemned because they were imperfect. They were incomplete, inadequate. The church was not troubled by persecution; it was not disturbed by heresy; it was not distressed by Jewish opposition; it was well known as an active, vigorous Christian congregation, characterized by good works and charitable activities. But in the sight of God, all these religious activities were a failure because they were only formal and external, and not infused with the life-giving Holy Spirit. Here is a perfect example of purely nominal Christianity which in all outward and formal aspects is outstanding but which in the sight of God is a complete failure.

OUCH! How do we stand before the Living Christ?

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Ladd, George Eldon, A Commentary on the Revelation of John, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972 (p.56)