

Church History: “Spiritual Deadness” 1215 – 1500

(Part 1)

How does Jesus reveal Himself to the Church at Sardis? v.1a

“The Spirit is the key to vitality in the Christian life. Remain faithful to Jesus, and He will bring us to vital life. Desert Him and our lives will be as dead as those who lay in the vast cemetery, marked by hundreds of burial mounds, some seven miles from Sardis, but visible from that city.”

“The Bible Reader’s Commentary” Lawrence O .Richards p.910

What does He know? v.1b

“They had a reputation for being alive and apparently were regarded by their contemporaries as an effective church. Like the Pharisees, their outer appearance was a façade hiding their lack of life

“The Bible Knowledge Commentary” Walvoord and Zuck”p.938.

What are they to do? Why? v.2,3a

“The call is for constant alertness, just the opposite of the spiritual lethargy which sapped the vitality of the church at Sardis. The situation is so serious that the first order of business is to “Strengthen what remains” rather than recapture an earlier commitment. Even their past deeds are ‘not complete.’”

” “The Bible Reader’s Commentary” Lawrence O .Richards p.910

Of what are they warned? v.3b

Who are commended? v.4a

“Even in an apostate church or age, God reserves some who are faithful to Him. Soiled clothing in the 1st century kept a person from ceremonies honoring pagan deities. There is likely a touch of irony here. The pagans worried about externals. What Christ cares about is whether a person “walks with” (stays in fellowship with) Him.”

“The Bible Reader’s Commentary” Lawrence O .Richards p.910

What are they promised? Why? v.4b

What are overcomers promised? v.5

Who will listen? v.6

“The letter to Sardis is a searching message to churches today that are full of activity and housed in beautiful buildings but are so often lacking in evidence of eternal life.”

“The Bible Knowledge Commentary” Walvoord and Zuck”p.938

“Some have held that the church at Sardis is a picture of the church in the time of the protestant Reformation when a great mass of Christendom was dead even though it had a name that it lived. During those years only a small believing portion took their stand for true biblical revelation and trusted in Christ as Savior. The characteristics of the church in Sardis remarkably parallel those of the church in the period of the Protestant Reformation.”

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ” John F. Walvoord p.83

What is the significance of the 14th & 15th centuries?

“The idea of Christendom was made possible by the harmony of two ideas, the Christian empire and the Catholic Church. The image of a Christian empire, so useful in creating a unified Europe in the seventh and eighth centuries, slowly faded in importance in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as the papal influence spread. Innocent III demonstrated that papal sovereignty was far more effective in rallying princes for a crusade or defending the faith against heretics.

“The significance lies not only in the further decline of the empire, but in the dramatic loss of papal prestige.”

“Church History” Bruce L. Shelley P.226

What caused the loss of papal prestige?

“Boniface VIII (1294–1303) assumed he could impose his will upon emperors and kings because for two centuries the papacy had held an unrivaled peak of power, religious and political. In 1296 he issued a document threatening excommunication for any lay ruler who taxed the clergy and any churchman who paid taxes without papal consent.

Edward I of England threatened to strip the clergy of all legal protection and to seize their property. Philip the Fair of France placed a complete embargo on the export of all gold, silver and jewels from his domains, thus depriving the papal treasury of a major source of revenue. Boniface backed down.

In 1301 Boniface issued the most extreme assertion of papal power in all church history. "It is altogether necessary," he declared, "for every human being to be subject to the Roman pontiff." Philip of France arranged to have him taken prisoner. After being rescued, the numbed and humiliated aged pope died within weeks.

The significance of this episode reveals that papal interference was no longer accepted over a king's power in his own country. And that was new!

In 1305 the election of a Frenchman, Clement V, marked the start of the seventy-two year period of church history called, after the long exile of the ancient Jews in Babylon, the Babylonian Captivity of the papacy. He chose to reside in a little town called Avignon rather than in Rome. Surrounded on all sides by the French kingdom, it was considered to be a mere tool in the hands of the power-hungry French.

Most of the hostility aimed at the Avignon papacy was against the decline in revenues that brought the Papal States in Italy to bankruptcy. By 1360 turmoil in Italy over the Papal States plus the outcries against the French domination of the papacy made it clear that the Avignon papacy could not continue indefinitely. Pope Gregory XI died within a year after returning the papacy to Rome. Urban VI was crowned the new pope, but because of his dictatorial ways the College of Cardinals accused the people of Rome of forcing the election of an apostate to the chair of Peter and the proceedings were invalid. The French cardinals chose from their own number another pope, Clement V!!, who eventually sailed for France and Avignon.

Thus, with Urban ruling from Rome and Clement from Avignon, the murky chapter of papal history called the Great Schism of the papacy begins. It lasted for thirty-nine years. Each pope had his own College of Cardinals, thereby insuring the papal succession of its own choice. Each pope claimed to be the true Vicar of Christ, with the power to excommunicate those who did not acknowledge him.

By 1409 a majority of the cardinals from both camps met for a general council at Pisa. The deposed both claimants to the papal chair, and elected a third man, Alexander V. Neither of the two deposed popes, however, would accept the action of the council. So the church now had not two, but three popes!

In 1414 the Holy Roman Emperor assembled at the German city of Constance, the most impressive gathering of this era. For the first time voting took place on a purely national basis. Each nation had one vote. At length, in 1417, the council got one papal incumbent to step aside, deposed the other two and chose a new Vicar of Christ, Martin V. As soon as he was

pope, he repudiated all acts of the council, except the one by which he ruled. Martin had good reason to deny the work of the council for it raised a very important question: who is greater, a general council that creates the pope, or the pope who claims supremacy over councils?

His return to power plus the inability of later councils to introduce much needed reforms enabled the popes, by 1450, to discredit the conciliar movement. They busied themselves not with religious reforms but with Italian politics and patronage of the arts. Political corruption and immorality in the Vatican reached unbelievable heights under Alexander VI (1492-1503). He was grossly immoral and obsessed with his passion to provide wealth and power for his children.

Estrangement from the pope was growing."

"Church History" Bruce L. Shelley pp.225-233