

# **The sad saga of Sardis**

**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 approximate period from 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* is shown under Revelation 4:5 to represent the third person of the Godhead in his continuity and fullness.<sup>1</sup>

Why does Christ in addressing Sardis remind his people that he has the Holy Spirit?

Firstly, to declare his Godhead. As God the Son, He is equal with the Father in his person. In office or position 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, but in office or authority, he is third. He is subject to the Father and the Son. Thus Christ, having the Holy Spirit, may send him wherever he and the Father 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.*

Secondly, 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. However because Christ has the Spirit in his 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. Christ has the leaders in his right hand according to Revelation 1:20. Here it simply reads *He who... has the seven stars*. Probably it means in his right hand meaning in the place of strength and authority. This is encouraging to the leaders of a church that is dying. If a leader is faithful to Christ he will be sustained by divine power.

In this period, belief in the deity of the Holy Spirit was to be seriously challenged. Attempts were made to banish the truth of the deity of both Christ and the Holy Spirit. Thus the emphasis on the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit was most timely.

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<sup>1</sup> See the author's publication *A Glimpse of God on His Throne*

## 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 complaints of all the seven churches. Christ has nothing by which he can commend this church. Seeing this is the period commencing with the Protestant Reformation, such a complaint is quite devastating.

Did the Protestant churches have a name for being spiritually alive? Who were the churches of the Reformation?

The first church was the Lutheran, next was the Anglican or Church of England and thirdly the Reform Church established by John Calvin. These three were the main religious bodies of the Protestant Reformation which broke with the Church of Rome early in the sixteenth century.

In England the Anglican Church consisted of two main schools of thought – the Anglicans and the Puritans. The Puritans were finally forced to separate by the Act of Uniformity under Charles II when in 1662 nearly two thousand clergy, one fifth of the English clergy, were driven from their parishes as non-conformists. These were the most learned and active of their order.

Under the oppressive laws enacted by an Anglican parliament, great suffering befell the non-conformists. These comprised not only Presbyterians but also Independents who later were called Congregationalist as well as Baptists (including Seventh-day Baptists) and Quakers. Thousands languished in the loathsome prisons, the most famous prisoner being the Baptist, John Bunyan.

The Presbyterians with the rest of the non-conformists now comprised such a large number that persecution could not continue and English statesmen were obliged to pass the Toleration Act of 1689.<sup>2</sup> This Act granted freedom of religion by law for the first time in England.

The Lutheran Church comprised most of the Protestants in Germany, Denmark, Scandinavia and part of Holland. The Protestant faith in Sweden was accepted by the royal family with the result that most of the country became Protestant. This brought spiritual and political strength to the kingdom. During the Thirty Years War in which Rome endeavored to regain ascendancy in Protestant areas of Europe, it was Swedish arms, under the able Protestant leader Gustavus Adolphus, that came to the aid of the beleaguered Protestants of Germany and saved the Protestant cause.

The third main body of the Reformation churches was the Reform Church. This commenced with Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich and was established by John Calvin at Geneva. This group included the Protestants of Switzerland, France (Huguenots) many in Holland and probably all the Protestants of Scotland led by the great John Knox. In England the Puritans were of the Reform Church in doctrine and practice, although many adhered to the Anglican Church.

In addition to these three main groups were the Independents and non-conformists of England, as already mentioned, and the Anabaptists who rose in Switzerland and spread through Germany and Europe and even England.

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<sup>2</sup> JR Green, *A Short History of the English People Vol IV* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1902), 688, 691

While some may have been classed as extreme, the evangelical Anabaptists were probably closer to biblical truth than any other group of that period.<sup>3</sup> Many Anabaptists were later called Mennonites after Menno Simons, an outstanding Dutch Christian. Eventually the Anabaptists in Europe were crushed or driven out by Catholic and Protestant persecution - to the disgrace of the Protestants.

At their rise, all of the above groups were unquestionably led by the Spirit of God and were used mightily of Heaven to shed the light of truth to mankind. How then did the churches of the Reformation begin to lose their spiritual life and decline? There were five causes contributing to the decline of the church of that period:

1. The union of the main church bodies with the state – ie state churches arose
2. The formation of rigid creeds
3. Their adherence to certain unscriptural doctrines
4. The influence on the Counter-Reformation by the Jesuits
5. The rise of Deism and the Age of Reason.

## 1. The Union of Church and State

When a church looks to the state for support this hinders its spiritual development. Faith and spirituality come by the exercise of faith and self-sacrifice. State aid undermines this and thus the church becomes spiritually impoverished. Its ministry becomes subservient to the state and thereby the will of Christ is made secondary. This undermines the effective preaching of the Word of God which makes the church spiritually strong.

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

Being united with the civil power the church was enabled to enforce its dogmas. In such an environment, given the spirit of intolerance which permeated the thinking of that age, intolerance flourished. The Sardis period was a period of Protestant intolerance and the persecution of fellow Protestants.

Even Protestants themselves (the Baptists excepted) who were the victim of persecution 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.'<sup>5</sup>*

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

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

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<sup>3</sup> WL Emerson, *The Reformation and the Advent Movement* (Washington: Review & Herald, 1983), 34-125

<sup>4</sup> HS Skeats, *History of the Free Churches of England* (London: Shephard Publishers, 1891), 11

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 27

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 87

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 9

## 2. Reformation churches bound by man-made creeds

It is understandable why churches form creeds. Creeds help to keep unity. Under the Protestant principles of the Bible being its own interpreter and of every believer being a spiritual priest, the way is opened for numerous differences of opinion.

Where there is intolerance and a failure to discern between fundamentals and peripherals, between major and minor truths, serious disruption and confusion can result. This situation led to the formation of denominational creeds by the Protestant churches.

Creeds however can cause spiritual sterility. A man-made creed could be erroneous or lacking in some areas of belief. Truth is always advancing and what may appear through lack of light to be a fundamental truth today may be found to be unscriptural tomorrow.

*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 true believers continued to grow in the knowledge of Bible truth they began to discover that some of the fundamental doctrines of their creed did not accord with Scripture. This called for a revision of the creed. However the Reformation churches failed to react correctly. Instead of investigating scripture, they stuck to tradition. As the official Lutheran catechism declares:

*God's word and Luther's Doctrine pure shall to eternity endure.*<sup>8</sup>

By refusing to accept the light of truth a church is placing the opinion of men before the Word of God. This is 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. The fruit of erroneous theology

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

### a. Sacramentalism

This is the belief that by partaking of Holy Communion, salvation is administered to the believer. This view contrasts with the evangelical belief which holds that salvation is obtained by faith in Christ as our Saviour, through the proclamation of the gospel, and that the Lord's Supper is a memorial of Christ's death. Sacramentalism discourages evangelistic endeavor and thereby undermines the spiritual life in the church.

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<sup>8</sup> Dr Martin Luther, *Small Catechism* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1529), 529

## **b. Predestination**

This teaching comes from paganism. It was introduced by St. Augustine into Catholicism and continued into Protestantism through Luther and Calvin who had been Augustinian monks.

Predestination is the belief that even before birth one is chosen either to eternal life or to eternal torment - the individual has no choice. It denies individual freedom of the will regarding salvation. This view was held by the majority of Protestant believers in the Sardinian period. Such a belief inhibits evangelistic endeavour. If one's destiny is already decided there is no urgency to proclaim the gospel of salvation to the lost. Maybe this explains why the Protestant churches of the Reformation period had little or no compulsion with regard to foreign missions – a sign of spiritual death.

## **c. Original Sin**

This is the belief that at birth all infants are guilty of Adam's sin and are deserving of God's wrath and curse. This belief misrepresents God and makes him a monster. Scripture teaches that infants are counted innocent by God<sup>9</sup> until they reach the age of understanding.<sup>10</sup> The doctrine of Original Sin is a false concept of sin. Sin is the deliberate or willful transgression of God's law.

Original sin holds that sinful nature is itself sin whether one chooses to sin or not. Original sin demands that the infant be cleansed from its sin. This is the rationale for infant baptism, which is unscriptural. Once the rite is performed the infant is assured of salvation. This belief militates against spiritual growth for it tends to lessen the need for the personal acceptance of the gospel and to live a holy life.

The doctrine of original sin holds that because all are born depraved it is impossible, even by the grace of God, for any man to fully obey God. It amounts to salvation in sin, instead of salvation from sin.

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

It hinders the believer from aspiring to holy living, which is obedience to all that God commands.

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

In contrast to the general belief of the day, the General Baptists of Somerset, England agreed in 1691 upon a Confession of Faith.

In this Confession, the doctrine of original sin, considered as an inherent taint, or as a sufficient cause of eternal condemnation, is denounced as both unscriptural and irrational. The doctrine of reprobation (ie no opportunity of salvation for some) is also abjured. The grace of God is declared to extend to the whole world, and if any fall short of salvation, it is not because God wills it, but because individuals have so willed it; while the perseverance of the saints is declared to be dependent on their own conduct.<sup>11</sup>

This was a rejection of the Calvinistic doctrine permeating most churches of that period.

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<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 2:34, 19:4-5; Deuteronomy 1:39

<sup>10</sup> James 4:17

<sup>11</sup> Skeats, *History of the Free Churches of England*, 130

Personal conversion, even in the case of the ministers of the gospel, seems not to have been expected. Baptism, administered in infancy, was supposed to have magical efficacy in procuring salvation; and the partaking of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper was supposed to be a means of grace even in case of the most immoral and irreligious... the spiritual forces that were involved in the great Anabaptist movement had been crushed out.<sup>12</sup>

#### **d. An erroneous view of justification by faith**

Calvinists in particular had an erroneous view of justification by faith. This view teaches that justification by faith is forensic only – that the believer is declared judicially to be righteous without necessarily involving an inner change. Biblical justification or pardon teaches that when one accepts Jesus Christ as his substitute for sin, an inner change takes place.

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

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

Calvinism also teaches that in justification by faith one is judged righteous and that therefore there is no need of any future judgment for the believer.

This view also holds that once justification by faith is experienced it cannot be lost. Justification covers past sins as well as future sins. In principle it is *once saved, always saved*. The above views of justification play spiritual havoc with those who espouse them and were another cause of spiritual decline of the churches of the Reformation.

#### **e. Antinomianism**

This means *anti law* or *no law*. It is the belief that Christians have no need of the law. This is the natural outcome of particular tenets of Calvinism. While Christ by his atoning death delivers man from the curse or penalty of the law, he does not deliver us from the obligation to keep the law - which is the divine standard for the Christian.

While we are not under the law's condemnation, we are still under its direction. Commandment keeping does not save us from sin's guilt, but it is the outward sign that we are saved 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*

Calvinism also teaches that it is impossible for believers, even by God's grace, to keep his commandments; nor is it necessary because Christ has kept the law for us. This deadly doctrine was probably one of the chief causes for the appalling spiritual decline of the Reformation churches.

*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.<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> AH Newman, *A Manual of Church History* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Pub Soc, 1900), Vol 2, 35

<sup>13</sup> EG White, *The Great Controversy* (California: Pacific Publishing Assn, 1888), 260

## 4. The Counter-Reformation

The Counter Reformation was a powerful, concerted effort by Rome to destroy Protestantism. The Counter Reformation involved 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 false system of interpretation of Bible prophecy in order to remove the stigma from Rome as 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.<sup>14</sup>

*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.<sup>15</sup>*

When this society is examined it is clearly evident that it is the most diabolical system ever invented. The most appalling feature is that it is garbed in the pure and lowly robes of Jesus Christ.

While the Jesuits led in all five steps, the strategy which did most damage was the invention of false interpretations of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. These were deliberately designed to shift the stigma of *Antichrist* from the Papacy to someone else at some other time.

Two schools of thought were invented regarding Antichrist by the Jesuits. These were termed *Preterism* and *Futurism*. Preterism proclaimed that Antichrist applied to someone in the past such as the emperor Nero, etc. Futurism projected Antichrist away into the future, near the Second Advent of Christ. The undeniable evidence proclaimed by the Protestant Reformers that the Antichrist was 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.<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Theodore Greisinger, *A Complete History of the Jesuits* (London: WH Allen & Co, 1903), Bk2 Ch2

<sup>15</sup> G Wainwright DD, *Ritualism, Romanism and the Reformation* (London: SW Partridge, 1879), 454

<sup>16</sup> LE Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers* (Washington: Review & Herald Publishing Assn, 1950), Vol 2 485

Rome was desperate to neutralize the impact of Protestant teachings. She therefore invented these false interpretations in order to counter the Protestant attack. The Jesuits then began a campaign of infiltration - at which they are masters.

They entered the universities, seminaries and churches of the Protestants in disguise and popularized the Jesuit interpretations of prophecy and scripture. They undermined with remarkable success the true biblical interpretation of prophecy, especially concerning the Antichrist.

Dr. Froome 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.<sup>17</sup>*

The natural outcome of this clever counter by the Jesuits was that the promulgation of Rome as the Antichrist declined.

*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.<sup>18</sup>*

## 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 reception of Unitarianism (one person in the Godhead) or the rejection of the Trinity. It appears that this was an extreme but understandable reaction to the breaking of the Anglican church's authority over the minds of men around 1720 and was the first form taken by rationalism after mental freedom had been finally secured.<sup>19</sup>

*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.<sup>20</sup>*

This departure from the orthodox thinking spread through the ranks of the Anglican church as well as the dissenters or non-conformists churches.

*Unitarianism spread with unexampled rapidity.<sup>21</sup>*

*The doctrine of the great founders of Presbyterianism could scarcely be heard from any Presbyterian pulpit in England. The denomination vanished as suddenly*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 470

<sup>18</sup> TB Macaulay, *History of England Vol 2* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: JB Lippincott & Co, 1878), 53

<sup>19</sup> Skeats, *History of the Free Churches of England*, 249

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 235-236

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 247

*as it had risen; and excepting in literature, has left little visible traces of the greatness of its power.<sup>22</sup>*

*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.<sup>23</sup>*

*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.<sup>24</sup>*

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.<sup>25</sup>*

By 1700 Rationalism reached its highest development. Men of great intellectual ability, high attainments and of true virtue promoted the philosophy of Deism. Propounding the pre-eminence of reason and enlightenment, this anti-Christian philosophy swept Christendom and became a powerful instrument in undermining the Christian faith. The churches were seriously influenced by it and as a result the Christian church in general became paralysed. Faith in Christ reached an all-time low.

In England Deism made an appalling impact upon society. We can confidently hold that it was this *Age of Reason* or *Deism* that crystallized the Sardis condition of the church, ie it had a name that it lived but it was spiritually dead.

Notice what Dr Fitchett wrote concerning the 18<sup>th</sup> century – the period in which Deism swept Christendom

*In some respects the 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>*

Fitchet 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.<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 248

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 250

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 251

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 257

<sup>26</sup> WH Fitchett, *Wesley & His Century* (London: G Bell & Sons, 1906), 11-15

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 5

This prompted some of the best Christian thinkers of England to rise up in defense of the faith of Christ, and of the Bible as the Word of God. 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.<sup>28</sup>*

*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.<sup>29</sup>*

## 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 she 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 some of God's people. The Christian faith as held by the Protestant churches had received a buffeting, but all was not lost. Christ calls 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***

Probably this was a call to remember how the churches of the Reformation began. How the light of the gospel beamed through the darkness of error; of their simple faith in the Word of God and their wholehearted acceptance of Christ as Saviour and Lord; of how Christ came first in everything.

*...hold fast and repent...*

Hold fast to the Word. Repent of any departure from it. Repent of the neglect of their personal relationship with Christ which hindered spiritual growth and ended in dead formalism.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 264-265

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 266

## 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***

This means that Christ would unexpectedly visit the believers in Sardis in judgment or punishment if they failed to respond to Christ's call. This expression is sometimes applied to the Second Advent of Christ, but its primary application is to the church period when believers were on the point of spiritual death. It represents judgment or punishment.

This statement could apply to the Second Advent only in a secondary sense, but it would be out of context. 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 (2Thessalonians 2:1-5). This reign ended in 1798 and that date marked the commencement of *The Time of the End* or *the last days*.<sup>30</sup>

## 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 this description apply to in the Sardian period? Some believe that the description applies chiefly to the latter end of the period when the church was experiencing spiritual decline, but decline was the prevalent trend throughout most of the Sardian period as group after group experienced spiritual stagnation.

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

- **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.<sup>31</sup>
- **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*

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<sup>30</sup> See the author's publication *The Angel of Time* 9

<sup>31</sup> Emerson, *The Reformation and the Advent Movement*, 89-165

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.<sup>32</sup>

Spener laid down 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 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.<sup>34</sup>

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 was witnessed the greatest example of the survival of the Church of Sardis...

They promulgated the gospel among non-Christians and heathen such as had not been seen for centuries. They founded mission stations in Greenland, 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

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<sup>32</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., (London: Cambridge University Press, 1911), Vol 21, 593

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 593-594

*faith of Sardis. With them the study of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation was revived.*<sup>33</sup>

*Around 1700 many Pietists migrated from Germany and settled in Southern Russia, Transcaucasia, Hungary and Rumania.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>*

*Pietism had run its course before the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>*

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

## **Promise to the overcomer**

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

In v4 the white garments appear to represent moral purity – *not defiled*. This is the general significance of white in scripture. This involves the righteousness of Christ with which the believer is spiritually clothed. It may also represent the literal clothing of the saints in the kingdom. This is described as a garment of light (Psalm 104:3) and is a part of the spiritual body which the saints will possess in eternity. 1Corinthians 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***

What are these books which are mentioned throughout scripture? They are the records kept by heaven concerning the great controversy upon earth. The form of these books need not concern us. Scripture emphasizes that a divine record is kept.

The different books are described in Scripture:

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<sup>33</sup> Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers Vol 2*, 696-703, 709-719

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 713

<sup>35</sup> Emerson, *The Reformation and the Advent Movement*, 176

<sup>36</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol 21*, 593-594

## The Book of Life

(Philippians 4:3; Revelation 13:8; 20:15) This 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 sin record of earth's inhabitants.

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

This indicates that he whose record is not erased through the blood of Christ receives 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 of the righteousness of the saints only. There is no record of the righteousness of 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 a record? Not because the Creator needs it, but for the sake of intelligent beings whom God has created. The 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 which means 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) <sup>37</sup> 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, ie Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome and the Little Horn. It will be shown later that the Little Horn reigned from 538-1798.<sup>38</sup> This judgment involves the people of God, ie those whose names have been recorded in the Book of Life. It is a public

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<sup>37</sup> Clouds are sometimes employed in Scripture to represent the angels of God. (See the Author's publication *A Glimpse of God on His Throne* 21-22)

<sup>38</sup> See the Author's publication, *Antichrist 666*

process of investigation of the records of the saints to determine the faithfulness of each individual who professes the gospel.

*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 in this judgment.<sup>39</sup> One major feature of this pre-advent or investigative judgment of God's professed people is the procedure of blotting out of the records. For the overcomer there is only one blotting out in this judgment. For the non-believer / non-overcomer there are two blotting outs.

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

His sin record is blotted out through the priestly ministration of Christ.

*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*

With non-overcomers however, their sin record is retained, but their name and record of righteousness are blotted out of the Book of Life and the Book of Remembrance. Concerning the record of their righteousness scripture declares

*...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*

Their sin record 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*

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<sup>39</sup> See the Author's publications *The Angel of Time* and *God's Final Ultimatum*

Concerning the names of non-overcomers whose names had been originally registered 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 in the final phase of his priestly ministrations in the heavenly temple. This is the significance of the promise to the overcomer of Sardis. In the sobering investigative judgment his name will not be blotted out of the Book of Life, but Christ will confess his name before God and the attendant angels. Whoever Christ pleads for before God, that one is assured of acceptance and their sin record will be blotted out for 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. There is confusion in this area. The 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. To individuals, this is more important and more vital and must precede the blotting out of the record of sin, significant as that is. When an individual accepts the truth of the gospel, admits that they are a hopeless sinner and receives Christ as their Saviour and substitute for the penalty of sin and is born again, their guilt 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 51:1-9<sup>40</sup>*

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

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<sup>40</sup> For Spirit of Prophecy confirmation of this application of Psalm 51, see *Spirit of Prophecy Vol 4*, (California: Pacific Press Publishing Assoc, 1884), 381 *Review & Herald* 16 April 1891, 16 March 1890, 25 August 1891, 14 March 1893

*... I am He who blots out (present tense) your transgressions for my own sake; and I will not remember your sins. Isaiah 43:25<sup>41</sup>*

*I have blotted out (past tense), like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins... Isaiah 44:22<sup>42</sup>*

Maybe the procedure could be termed a spiritual blotting out of sin now at conversion and a literal blotting out of the record in the pre-advent judgment. The two phases of blotting out are also indicated by the apostle Peter. His statement has two applications.

*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<sup>43</sup>*

Undoubtedly the first application was to Peter's day, referring to the blotting out of the guilt of sin. The second application refers to the pre-advent judgment.<sup>44</sup> Other scriptures confirm the comforting and marvelous truth that God blots out the guilt of our sins when 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*

*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.<sup>45</sup>*

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

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<sup>41</sup> 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

<sup>42</sup> 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

<sup>43</sup> *SDA Bible Commentary Vol VI*, 158-159

<sup>44</sup> LB Kostenko, MA Thesis *The Blotting out of Sins* (Michigan: Andrews University Press)

<sup>45</sup> 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

In refuting the position that the Sardis period extends to 1798 AD we need to ask:

Q1. Which were the Reformation churches and how did they 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 Calvinistic or the Reformed churches. Later the Reformed were also called Presbyterian.

Q2. How did the Lord describe the church in this period of 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 spiritually decline and become spiritually dead.

This is exactly what happened to the 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 binding themselves about with creeds, they became exclusive. *Rigid and frigid* are the words of the historian in describing the Lutheran church.<sup>46</sup> These churches often became relentless persecutors of those who dissented from them. This was true of the Lutheran, Reform and Anglican churches.

Who were the dissenting groups of this period?

- There were the Anabaptists, who existed in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Poland, Moravia and even 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.
- In Scotland from 1660–1688 there were the Covenanters. Eighteen thousand of these 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 in 1572, in which upwards of 70,000 were slain. 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.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> J Bready, *England Before and After the Wesleys* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939), 194

<sup>47</sup> JA Wylie, *History of Protestantism* (London: Cassell Petter & Galpin, 1878), Vol II, 583-606; Vol III, 309-347

In the message to Sardis the Lord declared

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

Nevertheless 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, generally small in number but faithful to Christ - even to death - were the faithful few that the Lord marked out in the Sardis period. The advent of *The Age of Reason* or *The Enlightenment*, which came upon Europe from about 1680 to approximately 1750, ended the Sardis period of the seven churches of Revelation.

## **Appendix B**

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

Of the thirty-six references checked regarding Sardis, 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 local 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 begin. This condition was exactly the opposite of the Sardian period. The application of *The Great Controversy* (p309-310) applied to a local situation, but not to the Protestant churches in general.

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

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