

THE PERIL OF THE SUCCESSFUL CHURCH

by Carter Conlon

In the book of Revelation the apostle John wrote a letter to seven churches of his day. The church in Sardis was the fifth church he addressed. Sardis was a city of incredible wealth and commerce, and the congregation which had been founded there had a reputation of enjoying a prosperous life. The short history of this particular body of believers was but a stone's throw away from when Christ walked on earth. They were privileged to have had the apostle John, one of the original disciples, write to them. They could possibly also have heard the preaching of the apostle Paul.

This was a church that had a testimony of knowing God, but over time they had begun to run the church by their own wisdom. The bottom line was, they had learned to do religious things instead of depending on the Spirit of God. These practices were so close to the truth that the casual worshipper could easily have been fooled by their religious performances. People who attended this church probably said, "Wow, what a place. The worship is incredible and the musicians are really professional; the preaching will definitely touch your heart." However, the Spirit of God reprimanded them: "And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If

therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy. He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Revelation 3:1–6).

■ ALIVE BUT DEAD

The Holy Spirit's message to them was, "You have a reputation of being alive, but I know your works. Although you think you are living, you are actually dead." The word *dead* in the Greek is *nekros*, which means to be cut off from the vivifying, enlivening work and influence of the Holy Spirit. This was serious; only a few left in this church had not defiled themselves but had kept themselves pure. If the present declension of this church was not checked and stopped, Christ would come to them quickly and decisively, as the Scripture says, "I'll come on thee as a thief." This implied He would remove His presence from them, and in their current state they would not even be aware that He had left.

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A close inspection of history reveals this has happened again and again

throughout the ages. In the past, great movements of God had been started by men like John and Charles Wesley, Whitfield, Moody and many others, all of which experienced God's power and glory. Tragically, though, many of these same movements and places where these men once preached are now empty and powerless. They have become mere relics of a glorious past. Beloved, we too stand on the threshold of knowing that same power and glory in our generation. If we do not want history to repeat itself with us, there are pitfalls we need to watch out for.

■ MOVING FROM THE SUPERNATURAL AND INTO THE NATURAL

The church in Sardis had moved from the supernatural and into the natural. We have to ask the question, How did this happen? Since this church lived in times of great prosperity, it had access to more talent and resources than other churches. A degree of professionalism had come with this prosperity. While churches in other cities still had to depend on the Holy Spirit for every song they sang and every word they preached, this church, unfortunately, had become too polished in its services.

Many congregations today are just like the Sardis church. The band knows what songs to play if the crowd is restless. They know what part of the song will cause the people to rise to their feet and clap their hands. Before long they fall into the trap of professionalism and begin to move out of the supernatural and into the natural. This is the peril of the

successful church. The danger in the long run is this: They end up knowing exactly what to do and exactly how to run things, thus losing sight of the fact that it is God who initiates and gives the ability to do everything.

For instance, they can lead a prayer meeting in such a way that everybody gets excited and begins to shout. They know all the right levers to pull and all the right whistles to blow, and this looks like life to the new person coming into the church. However, the awe and reverence of God has been lost. Casualness has entered the sanctuary and gone right on up to the platform. The sense of the supernatural has gone. The church's dependency on God has slowly been replaced because they have known so much success. This is one of the greatest dangers to the church. If God has used your church in a mighty way, beware of these traps in the future. None of us are qualified to be His ministers without His grace—we continually need the touch of His hand upon our lives. God forbid that you and I should ever forget our dependency on Him, and become casual in His presence.

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■ WHEN CASUALNESS LEADS TO CASUALTY

Think of what happened to Israel in the days of Moses, coming through the seas of impossibility, having the glory of the Lord leading them every day. The leaders under Moses became too familiar with the supernatural presence of God and they lost sight of His glory. Those 250 men of renown stood before the tabernacle of old and challenged the very authority of God. With time they had learned what steps to take and how to do things without waiting on God; but God's Spirit will not strive with man

nor will He share His glory. When this begins to happen and it is left to run its course, it produces a people who are separated from the Spirit of God, walking in their own natural senses. The Scripture says in Jude verse 19, *"These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit."* How many churches does this describe today? They have it all figured out. Committees and men with degrees run the church of Jesus Christ. They do not need the Holy Spirit anymore.

When a church begins to move in the natural, it starts to resent authority. *"Likewise also these filthy dreamers defile the flesh, despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities"* (Jude, verse 8). They speak without any fear of consequence or spiritual repercussions. Jude goes on to say that since they don't see immediate judgment, they become emboldened to go deeper into the flesh, unafraid to speak against God-ordained authority. Their religion, continues Jude, takes them in the way of Cain who resented his brother; they, too, now live with deep inner resentments toward people and leadership. This is one of the early warning signs that a church is moving into the flesh. Jude gives another warning sign: they run greedily into the error of Balaam, who was avaricious for financial gain. The church is now serving God for personal advantage, instead of taking up Christ's cross and asking God for His compassion for a fallen world.

■ CHURCHES WHICH THINK GAIN IS GODLINESS

In much of America today, many churches are walking in the natural, not the supernatural. Church has become a place where people show up for their own personal gain, instead of giving their body as a living sacrifice for the purposes of God, as the Scripture says is our reasonable service. Jude says the consequence of walking in the natural is the attitude of, "What's in it for

me?" The end result of this kind of blindness is that God withdraws His presence from a person, or from the whole assembly. So many of these churches today are not even aware He has withdrawn His presence. All that is left is resentment, selfishness and rebellion, and all this in the name of God. This was the parable of the church of Sardis.

We continually need the Holy Spirit to govern, lead and guide us. In confronting spiritual religiousness in Galatia, Paul said to the church, *"You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?"* (Galatians 3:1–5, New American Standard). Paul's question to the Galatian church was simply this, "Has God brought you this far, only to have you stumble now?"

■ IS VICTORY CAUSING YOU TO STUMBLE?

The Galatian church was stumbling over the victories given by Christ. Many people think defeat is the thing they must overcome, but success is a much greater battle. God's victories come from allowing the Holy Spirit to work in and through you, and the struggle for the Christian is not to allow your flesh or works to take the place of faith. Paul's question to them was simply, "The Holy Spirit which works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" The ones who do not falter in times of success are those who choose to live by faith. They start by faith, walk by faith, and continue by faith, and therefore have and keep the victory.

■ A CALL TO BE WATCHFUL

When the apostle John was writing to the church in Sardis, he cautioned them to *“be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die”* (Revelation 3:2). So again we need to ask ourselves, “What were they to watch for?”

They were to watch and avoid becoming so familiar with God that they lost the sense of awe and reverence of His presence.

Not only should they stand in awe, but we too need to keep the deep sense of His presence in our lives. People who know you should see Christ in you and desire what you have.

They were to guard against a loss of determination in their hearts to do all for the glory of God.

Our heart’s desire is not performance; rather, we want Jesus to be glorified. Further, our heart’s desire should be for people to see our life and have something begin to burn within their hearts, with a cry that says, “Oh, God, I want You to come and work in my life as You have worked in them. I want You to mold me and use me, too, for Your glory.”

They were to watch and strengthen the bending of their knees to the sovereignty and rightness of the ways of God.

This would keep them, and consequently us, from any and all worldly presumption. It will keep us from rebellion and the flesh. This is not a “think and feel” kingdom; we must bend our knee to what the Bible says. It will keep you from grievances, rebellion and pride. It will keep you from the pitfalls of the enemy set before a church that has known His presence.

■ A CALL TO OVERCOME NATURAL ABILITY

In Revelation 3:5, the Holy Spirit says, *“He that overcomes, the same will be clothed in white raiment.”* This raiment is the righteousness of Christ without a mixture of my own natural

enthusiasm and talent. It is Christ and Christ alone! The Spirit goes on to say that those who overcome this fervor and ability to take over from God, as it were, will not have his name blotted out of the book of life. Now this is incredible, because when you look at the word “life” as used in the New Testament, it means those who are quickened by the Spirit. It’s a life given by Christ, and the actual definition is “those who became the highest and the best they could be” because of the life of Christ within them.

Those who overcome will be given courage when things are not going their way. He will give power to worship leaders to stop—just stop—instead of pulling any religious levers. He will give you the grace to ask the Holy Spirit, “What are You doing? Where are You taking us in worship?” You might be trying to get people to clap their hands, but the Spirit of God is leading deeper into worship, and suddenly you will be given the strength and courage to say, “God, I want to be the best that You will make me because Your life is being lived within me.”

Preachers in the pulpit will be given the courage to quit speaking even if it has only been twenty minutes. They will be given the courage to say, “It’s over,” and then close the book and let the Holy Spirit begin to minister to the people. He will allow them to come to the altar and let the Spirit of God begin to touch His church again.

■ THE SONG OF TRUE HUMILITY

I was privileged to be in Burundi, Central Africa, recently with a team from our church and we visited a village of the poorest of the poor. Most of the children were dressed in rags; honestly, these people had absolutely nothing. We brought with us a truckload of goats and chickens for these impoverished people, but before we even got there, they had begun singing and praising God. When we arrived, our team quietly

sat down and listened to the singing and as they listened, people in our group began to weep uncontrollably. This was a holy moment, and we all knew it. The Africans sang the song over and over, clapping their hands, but it wasn’t for us, it wasn’t a show—this was pure worship. These people were Christians, and here was their song: “Only God could do this, only God could do this. We asked Him to help us and help has come! Only God could do this.” They sang for twenty minutes, “Only God could do this.” I sat there on a bench looking at these people, and all of a sudden it dawned on me. “God, when we get to heaven, these people will be right at the throne.” If there is any such proximity to God based on purity, they will be the closest. All of a sudden I had a vision in my mind. “There’s a mansion being prepared for them now, and they’re not even aware of it; they have no concept of these things.” All they knew is that God, who had just come with two goats and five chickens for every family, was worthy to be praised. They didn’t praise Times Square Church, they didn’t praise America, and they didn’t praise us. They just sang, “Only God could do this; Only God could do this.”

■ A SPIRITUAL LESSON LEARNED

Later when the missions team arrived in England, I began to meditate on what we had witnessed. I said, “Oh, God, I’ve never seen anything like that before. There was something holy and supernatural happening there.” And then I had the deepest impression to ask God, “As a church, where would we fit in Your throne room? If there is any order, where will we be?” And I felt the Lord clearly answer, “You could be right there with them. But to be with them, you have to be singing the same song. It’s not an issue of whether you have material goods, or whether you have a big church, or whether you have a great choir. No, that is not the issue. The question is simply, What are you singing? And their song was the song

that will put them at the front of My throne. Only God could do this. Only God could do this.”

■ ONLY GOD CAN DO THIS

I want that to be my song and the song of the church from now until Christ comes. Only God could open up prison doors and set people free. Should we live to see revival in New York City and the sanctuary filled with kids from the inner city, baptized in the Holy Ghost, going to Bible school, and heading out into the world, our song must never change. “Only God could do this.” Should people ask how we did this, we need to quickly reply, “We didn’t do it—only God could do this.”

David Wilkerson has always said, “We are the church that seems to do everything wrong according to modern standards, and yet for the past twenty years God has been here with us.” Only God could bring a hundred nationalities together in one sanctuary who love each other, fellowship and eat with each other, worship and do missions together. “Only God could do this.” You didn’t figure out how to free yourself from thoughts of suicide; you didn’t get yourself delivered from the addiction of lust and pornography or drugs and alcohol—no! “Only God could do this.” Your marriage did not get put together by human wisdom, or your heart get healed by human effort. No. “Only God could do this!”

■ STOP TRYING TO WORK THINGS OUT IN YOUR OWN STRENGTH

Now listen to me. If you want this to be your song today, stop trying to work it out in your own strength! Some of you are battling with a besetting sin; you have tried a thousand times to lay it down but

can’t. Many are struggling in your minds with a fear, and then there are those who are tormented about the future. Today, would you give it to God? Would you let Him set you free? Would you let the shed blood of Christ on Calvary set you free? Would you allow the anointing of the Holy Spirit to open your prison door, heal your wounded heart, and give sight to your blinded eyes?

■ GOING FROM THE NATURAL TO THE SUPERNATURAL

If you are struggling in the natural and want to get back into the supernatural, would you just let God do what God does best? Only God can settle deep issues in the mind. Only God can heal a body wracked in pain and only God can set you free from all you are going through. If this is what you want as your testimony, then let God be God in your life. It gives the Lord great joy to set you free and it gives Him great delight to bring glory to His own name. He does this by releasing the supernatural into our lives. He’ll take you where you can’t go. He’ll make you what you could never be. He’ll let you out of prisons you could never open in your own strength. Don’t ever let your song change.

Would you give Him all the glory now with your whole heart? Would you simply rise up and sing songs of faith to Him, and glorify His name? “Only God could do this; Only God could do this!”

Carter Conlon
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TIMES SQUARE CHURCH

Times Square Church was founded in 1987 by Pastor David Wilkerson, author of “The Cross and the Switchblade.” It is an interdenominational church located in the heart of New York City.

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WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

Sunday	10:00AM	3:00PM	6:00PM
Tuesday	7:00PM	Church Service	
Thursday	7:00PM	Prayer Meeting	
Friday	7:00PM	Church Service	

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