

Sermon: Autopsy of a Dead Church

July 19, 2020

Text: Revelation 3:1-6

Introduction:

Back in 2014, Thom Rainer (writer, researcher, speaker, and former CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources) wrote a book called "[Autopsy of a Dead Church](#)." His research indicates that only 10% of the roughly 400,000 churches in America are what could be called "healthy." Sadly, 40% of churches are exhibiting "symptoms of sickness," 40% are "very sick," and 10% are "dying."

So **how can you tell if a church is "sick"**? Rainer boils it down to five basic symptoms:

- Ministries and programs are shifting towards those inside the church rather than those outside the church.
- Some people may be added each year, but no sense of true disciple making is taking place.
- No clear plan for making disciples who are disciple makers.
- Lots of programs and ministry clutter but many contribute little or nothing to making of disciples.
- Lots of busyness and activities but much of it has no sense of a real purpose.

He goes further in the book by outlining **10 Factors that lead to the death of a church** (And yes, an average of 7,500 churches close their doors every year in America...about 150 per week. I wonder if that number won't increase in 2020 given the lack of gathering). There is nothing "scientific" about Rainer's list of factors. However, they are definitely worth reading and considering. Are these things true of some churches you know about? Are any of these things true about our church? Take some time to read and discuss these ten points.

1. **Slow Erosion.** Some in facilities, some in ministries that once had impact, but mostly in the prayer life of those in the church.
2. **The Past is the Hero.** There are several points in decline where the church can turn around, but the key influencers refuse to listen. They are blind to the reality of the declining church. Areas we cling to: worship styles, facilities, pastors of the past, our own needs rather than the needs of those without Christ, the way we have always done things so we are comfortable.
3. **Refusing to Look Like the Community.** The church becomes a fortress, keeping people and possessions on the inside safe while keeping people on the other side out. Church stops reaching and caring for the community.
4. **The Budget Moves Inwardly.** The basic pattern is funding to keep the machinery of the church moving and members happy rather than funding for the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.
5. **The Great Commission Becomes the Great Omission.** The methods we use for reaching out become the focus rather than the Great Commission itself. The church decides not to act on the Great Commission commandment to make disciples by their actions. The church stops going, stops making disciples, stops baptizing, stops teaching people to obey.
6. **Preference-Driven Church.** Attitude is self-serving, self-giving, self-entitled. A church by definition is a body of believers who function for the greater good of the congregation. When church members increasingly demand their own preferences, the

church is steadily not becoming the church. The church dies because its members refuse to be the church.

7. **Pastoral Tenure Decreases.** The pastor comes to the church and leads in a few changes. The members don't like the changes and resist. The pastor becomes discouraged and leaves. The cycle repeats.
8. **The Church Rarely Prays Together.** Prayer becomes routine and ritual. "Prayer meetings" are not really times of prayer. Prayer and the health of the church go hand in hand. Failure to pray is tantamount to a failure to breathe. Prayer is the lifeblood of the church.
9. **Church Has No Clear Purpose.** Routines, traditions and rituals replaced the original purpose of being a gospel-driven, disciple-making people.
10. **Church Obsesses Over Facilities.** Memorials, pulpits, rooms, etc become more important than the Great Commission. Severe battles emerge over windows, pews, paint color, carpet, etc. Business meetings bring back those who have left the church to deal with the threat of change, then these people leave again.

Examination:

- Read **Revelation 3:1-6**
 - How is Jesus described in this letter to the church in Sardis? The footnote on the term "seven spirits" is that it might actually be translated "the sevenfold Spirit." What do you know about how the number 7 is used in Scripture? What does it say about Jesus in describing Him as the sevenfold Spirit?
 - Can more devastating words be spoken to a church? "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead." Talk about what you think this means. Look back over Rainer's 10 factors of a dying church—how many of these do you think applied to Sardis?
 - Is the church beyond hope?
 - What five things does Jesus say needs to be done for the church to turn things around? (vv. 2-3)
 - What does Jesus say He will do if they fail to repent? (v. 3)
 - There are a handful of people in the church who are spiritually alive. What have they done to maintain their spiritual vitality, and what will Jesus do for them? (v. 4)
 - What does Jesus promise to do for us when we remain faithful to Him?
 - Do you believe that there is a Lamb's Book of Life? Is your name written in that book? Why or why not?
 - What does Jesus promise He will do for the person who remains steady in their faith—even when the church they belong to is dead?

Application:

The message this week is serious indeed. Sadly, thousands upon thousands of people attend church. They look good on the outside. They seem to be doing all the right things. They have a reputation for being "a good Christian." But the reality is—they are spiritually dead. Take some time this week to examine your heart and your life. Are you truly in love with Jesus?