

Text: Rev 3.2

Debbi and I are glad to be back home, we had a wonderful time away, walked and walked all over the place, and are looking forward to getting back into the work as we arrive home.

I think I might have given a similar message some years ago following a similar trip. When we are in the UK, one of the things we do is look into some of the old churches that are everywhere over there.

In the old churches there we find various things preserved. Ancient buildings, ancient rituals (some of them), ancient and famous decorative features (again in some churches), and old styles of worship.

The preservation of old things is not necessarily bad. It is not true that the new is always better than the old. Often, the old is better than the new.

In Revelation 3, the church at Sardis receives a command to “strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.”

God called the church to preserve the old things in this verse.

Let’s read the whole passage:

Read Rev 3.1-6

There were people in this church who had “not soiled their garments” and were standing true to God. The command, I think, is primarily their burden.

Those with soiled garments have already abandoned the things that remain; they are the innovators, those who seek “new things” to replace the old.

As we think about this topic, though, what is it that God wants us to preserve?

We could compare our church to some of the old churches in England and find out that we have little in common. We could compare ourselves to Baptists of one hundred years ago and find that we don’t do things the way they did.

Are we in the wrong for changes we have made? (I don’t think so.)

But this brings us back to the question, what does God want us to preserve?

I am going to give an extended illustration of two churches that are preserving aspects of their past to help us think about this question.

Proposition: We must preserve what we have received.

I. Sardis and the things that remain

A. The reputation of Sardis (1)

1. The church is active: "I know your deeds"
2. Activity ≠ Life: "but you are dead"

Because the church is called to "wake up" and some saints are found in her (v. 4), dead is figurative, but also prophetic

- a. The church is well-nigh dead (it's busy-ness amounts to no spiritual life)
- b. The church slumbers the sleep of spiritual death

B. The call to action (2-3)

1. Wake up! (2, 3) – book-ends to the remedy
2. The Lord calls them to wake up and take action to preserve that which remains
 - a. There remain some things that hold life ("which were about to die")
 - b. Their deeds are not completed (still something to do)
 - c. Remember what you received (3)
 - 1) Keep it
 - 2) Repent of your lethargy
3. Those that slumber on will suddenly awaken to the Lord's return: "like a thief"

Here we see the emphasis on preserving something precious, given in the past, it holds life, and it is the key to spiritual survival.

C. The fate of the few (4-5)

1. The few have not soiled their garments (they are still awake)
2. The few will walk in white (the Lord's approval in the end time)
3. The few will not find their names erased from God's book
4. The few will hear their names commended to the Father

It seems that these few are among those who give any hope of life in this seemingly dead congregation

They have not abandoned their former position, their relation to God, founded on the gospel they received.

D. The warning (6)

1. Listen to this lesson!
2. Our world is full of churches, which more-or-less listen or don't listen to the One who speaks to the churches

What will our church be in the days to come?

What are we now?

II. Two examples and the things they preserve

A. St. Mary the Virgin in Shrewsbury

1. The church is built on the remains of an Anglo-Saxon church dating back to at least AD 960 (and perhaps older)
2. After William the Conqueror came in, the old church was replaced by a new Norman church
3. After a couple of hundred years, the church expanded (growing congregation)
4. The church is one that is a "Royal Peculiar" church: directly under the Crown, not under the Anglican hierarchy
5. In the history of the church, the worship combined the message of the gospel with all kinds of ritualism
 - a. Partly in imitation of ancient Israelite rites
 - b. Partly an incorporation of indigenous (English) superstition and paganism
6. Today, no congregation meets there, but it is under the care of the "Church Preservation Society"
 - a. The Society allows hosting special services and other events
 - b. Their object is the preservation of the structure and its renowned stained-glass windows

7. One stained glass window in particular: the center piece of the South Transept
 - a. Acquired in the mid-1800s from a monastery or abbey in Europe
 - b. The donor (I think it was Sir Brooke Boothby) was a companion of philosophers and an unbeliever [friend of Charles Darwin's grandfather]
 - c. The glass originally depicted the Trinity, but the donor wanted that changed
 - 1) The Father became Joseph of Arimathea (by adding the hat)
 - 2) The Spirit (a dove) was removed from the center and placed high above the whole
 - d. These changes were expressive of Unitarianism, the anti-trinitarian doctrine that began liberal Christianity¹
 - 1) Unitarianism formed in the late 18th c. (1700s)
 - 2) "Enlightened religion"
 - 3) Considered themselves Christians "You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead"
 - 4) But did not believe in
 - a) The Trinity
 - b) The deity of Christ
 - c) The existence of hell

Here, in the church of St Mary the Virgin of Shrewsbury, since the mid-1800s, we find a church preserving beautiful heresy instead of truth, and having no ministry at all.

¹ Roger E. Olson, *Against Liberal Theology: Putting the Brakes on Progressive Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 12.

B. Rock Baptist Church in Llandrindod Wells

1. This is the church where Rory and Amy are members (Rory is a deacon)
2. The church has been a Baptist chapel for over 300 years
3. The building is in much need of repair, which they are working on this year
4. They continue to conduct services, faithfully preaching the gospel with the services of their deacons and visiting speakers from the area
 - a. Deacons:
 - 1) Reg Meredith (a year older than me)
 - 2) Steven Davies (in his mid-fifties)
 - 3) Rory Johnson

All these men are faithful believers and leaders
 - b. There is a core of three young families
 - c. There are other older believers connected with the church
5. The church preserves the gospel witness
 - a. I encourage you to listen to their sermons online (or download) [www.rockbaptistchurch.co.uk]
 - b. They maintain faithful doctrine and preaching
6. There are things that need updating
 - a. The furnishing and arrangement of the auditorium (in the works for later this year)
 - b. They need more workers, and if the Lord grants growth, more room for children's ministries
7. One thing they won't likely ever have: tourists
 - a. Those who come to this church will come for the message
 - b. Those who stay will embrace the ministry

III. Our mission in preserving the right things

A. The call to Sardis was “remember what you received and heard, and keep it, and repent”

1. We’ve seen words like these in Hebrews recently

Heb 2.1-3 ¶ For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away *from it*.
2 For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty,³ how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard,

2. Jude talks to us about “the faith once delivered”

Jude 1.3 Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

3. Paul testified in his last letter:

2 Tim 4.7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;

What we received, we keep. This is a non-negotiable.

B. The development of “church or chapel” in the UK

1. “Church” meant the established church

- a. First the Catholic church until Henry VIII, then Anglican thereafter
- b. The Church had an eclectic approach, often *absorbing* folk beliefs (paganism) into the belief system

Example: In 1349, the Black Death arrived in Shrewsbury. “There was a rapid decline in the population, sparking a recession, and people developed an obsession with the Last Judgement, damnation and purgatory. Masons sculpted monstrous gargoyles on the outside of churches

to ward off evil and people believed that the holy water in the baptismal font possessed powers for good.”²

- c. Many other practices, centered around the centrality of the “Church” for salvation, and mostly a departure from the faith, the word received from the Lord and the apostles
 - 1) The Reformation recovered the gospel in portions of the Anglican church for a time
 - 2) But Church emphasized the preservation of tradition, rituals, priesthood, buildings, vestments, over the pure gospel once received
 - 3) The Church today largely has very little gospel any more, if at all (but beautiful old buildings and impressive liturgies)
2. “Chapel” meant the fruit of the Puritan, Separatist, and Baptist movement
 - a. First the Puritans, post-Reformation, seeking to purify the Church
 - b. Then the Separatists, abandoning hope in reforming the Church, establishing separate congregations
 - c. And then the Baptists, emphasizing key elements of the faith for preservation, including:
 - 1) Regenerate church membership
 - 2) Believer’s baptism
 - 3) Separation of church & state

Note: the Baptists weren’t the only groups emphasizing these ideas, but they had a pioneering influence.

Methodism and revival preaching followed in the UK, leading to many separate chapels flowering all across the land, especially in Wales.

Faithful Christians labor to revive the little churches that remain across the land, not by liturgy, but by preaching

² Amanda Kay, *Church of St. Mary the Virgin* (Peterborough, UK: Jarrold Publishing & The Churches Conservation Trust, n. d.), 11.

C. Our mission remains the same: keep the faith, not the trappings

Conclusion:

Proposition: We must preserve what we have received.

Rev 16.15 (“Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame.”)

Rev 3.3-5 ‘So remember what you have received and heard; and keep *it*, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.’⁴ ‘But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.’⁵ ‘He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.’