

The Congregation of the Dead

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Before the Ephesians were converted, they could have been described as “the living dead”—people who were physically alive, but “...*dead in trespasses and sins*” (Eph. 2:1; cf. 2:5). After their conversion, they could have been described as “...*alive from the dead...*” (Rom. 6:13).

What does it mean to be dead? Death can be defined as a separation. Physical death is when the spirit separates from the body (James 2:26), and spiritual death is separation from God because of sin (Isa. 59:1, 2). When Paul brought the Gospel of Christ to those spiritually dead Ephesians, they believed and were baptized into Christ (Acts 19:1-5; cf. Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 1:3). They then were “*quickened*” (made alive spiritually; reconciled to God), and became a living congregation of the Lord’s church existing in Ephesus (cf. Rom. 16:16).

What would have happened if one of those Ephesians decided to leave the Lord’s church? He would have ceased to be spiritually alive (Heb. 10:23-31), and if he remained in that state, he would find himself in “the congregation of the dead:” “*The man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain in the congregation of the dead*” (Prov. 21:16). He would experience spiritual death at the point of departing from faithfulness, and would later experience eternal death, being gathered with all those separated from God in eternal punishment (Matt. 25:41, 46; 2 Thess. 1:7-9).

Paul also told the Ephesians that Jesus is the Savior of only one body, which is His church (Eph. 5:23; cf. 1:22-23; 4:4). Therefore, to be outside of that one body (the one church) is to be outside of salvation. The conclusion is that every accountable person on earth is either a faithful part of that one church of the living, or he belongs in the congregation of the dead. Being a faithful member of that one church of the living also means that he will become an active member in a local congregation of the living.

In another sense, there are “congregations of the dead” all over the world today, in the form of religious bodies who claim to be spiritually alive, but are dead. They have never truly obeyed what Christ commanded in His Word to be forgiven and to be added to His church (Matt. 7:21-23; Acts 2:36-41, 47; Rom. 6:3-5, 16-18; Col. 3:17; 1 Pet. 1:22); therefore, those religious people are just as dead spiritually as any atheist or completely immoral person.

There are even some churches of Christ that were once alive, but are dead, like Sardis was: “*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*” (Rev. 3:1). Even though Jesus said that about the church as a whole, He also said this: “*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*” (Rev. 3:4). How could Jesus say what He did in verse one if there were still some faithful members? Why did the “living” members remain there if they knew about the problems? There are several possibilities, including: 1) The faithful may not have known about sins going on behind the scenes in the leadership of the congregation; 2) The faithful may not have known about private, personal sins of other members; and 3) The faithful may have been aware of such things, but they may have been trying to turn the situation around. Surely these faithful ones would not have ignored sins that had come to their attention. Children of God ignoring sin is what caused Paul to rebuke the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5; cf. 2 Cor. 2, 7).

Another example of a living congregation gone bad would be the church at Ephesus, which started out strong, with the apostle Paul himself converting them (Acts 19:1-ff). They soon established an eldership (Acts 20:17), and they received no real rebuke in six chapters of inspired Text written to them (Ephesians 1-6). However, Paul had warned the elders at Ephesus about the dead coming to attack the

living:

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears (Act 20:28-31).

By the time Revelation was written, Jesus said the Ephesians had left their first love and had “fallen” (Rev. 2:4-5). How sad, to read with joy about people in Ephesus first being converted to Christ, becoming strong and faithful, only to read of them succumbing to the wolves who sought to destroy them.

What is the application for us today? First, accountable people who are dead in sin should die to sin and become alive in Christ: *“Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Rom. 6:11; cf. 6:1-23). They can either become an active part of a congregation of the living, or they will find themselves in the congregation of the dead (Heb. 10:23-31).

Those in congregations of the dead (as in false religions of the world) need to seek the kingdom of God and discover the true church that belongs to Christ (Matt. 16:18; Acts 20:28). They should seek Bible authority for all things in religion, and specifically in such matters as the founder of the church, the date founded, the place founded, the organization, the plan of salvation, the ways of worship, and the doctrines taught. They will be added to that one true church, if they will do what the Holy Spirit commanded through the apostles in Acts 2:

...Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved (Acts 2:38, 40, 41, 47; cf. 8:12, 35-39; 10:34-35, 48; 16:15, 30-33; 22:16, etc.).

How can today’s living congregations prevent themselves from becoming “congregations of the dead”? They also need to follow a pattern found in Acts 2, which begins with continuing steadfastly in sound doctrine, leading to fellowship with God and faithful Christians, and continuing in true worship: *“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers”* (Acts 2:42). Being a living congregation also involves helping others with their physical needs as necessary, encouraging one another, maintaining a proper Christian influence, and being evangelistic (2:44-47). Leadership in faithful congregations of the living must be vigilant and extremely cautious when it comes to protecting the flock of Christ from dangers like wolves, apathy, and ignorance, lest they become congregations of the dead.

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