

“The Power of the Weak on Behalf of the Helpless”

Revelation 3:7-13

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We are taking up this morning the letter to the church in Philadelphia, the sixth of the seven “Letters to the Churches.” Remember, we have said that the fact that there are seven such letters indicates that these seven congregations are taken to be representative of the whole church. We know how significant the number *seven* is in the Bible, how often it represents completeness and entirety and perfection. Taken together, these seven letters seem in John’s presentation of them according to the vision the Lord gave him, to represent the life of the church in the world and, in a way, the life of every congregation of that church. And so the features commented on in each letter and with respect to each church are therefore the features of the church of God in the world. That is true both in respect to these churches’ sins and in respect to their virtues. They are representative. In other words, we will find the same things wherever we look in the church. We turn now to see in what way the church in Philadelphia was representative of the entire church. It was a healthy church. No criticism of the congregation is included in the letter to it. There are a number of similarities between this letter and the one to Smyrna in 2:8-17. Both deal with the opposition of the Jews and in neither is there any criticism of the churches.

Text Comment

v.7 The identification and description of Jesus Christ in this letter, taken as in the other letters from the vision of chapter one, is as the Messiah, an apt identification because the letter concerns the church’s relationship to the Jews of the city. The key of David, an OT idea, is the key to the messianic kingdom. Insofar as the letter will be taken up in part with the relations between the church and the Jews in Philadelphia, it is natural that it should open with the affirmation that Jesus is the true Messiah, the one who holds the key of David. The Jews in Philadelphia were, of course, claiming that *they* were the true people of God; but, in fact, the followers of Christ were the true Jews and the true citizens of God’s kingdom. This is not anti-Semitism; it is simply the Christian affirmation that Jesus was and is the Messiah and that, therefore, any Jew who does not recognize him as such has, in the nature of the case, betrayed his or her calling. If Christ is indeed the Messiah, the logic of that position is irrefutable.

The reference to the power of the keys, the authority to let in and cast out of the kingdom, may be due to the fact that a number of the Christians in Philadelphia had been excommunicated from the Jewish synagogue there once they became Christians. But the Jews of the synagogue do not hold the true key to the kingdom of God and cannot let in or cast out. Only Christ has that authority.

v.8 There are two very different interpretations of the “open door.” Some take it to mean that the believers in Philadelphia will not fail to enter the eschatological kingdom of the Lord, will not fail to enter heaven; in other words, Jesus has opened the door for them and no one can shut it. Others, building their case on the use of this imagery elsewhere in the Bible, take it to mean that the Lord has set before the Philadelphian Christians a great opportunity to make the gospel known to their contemporaries. I’m not sure that we

actually have to choose between the two; the same door that the Philadelphian believers have entered through is open to others. But, all in all, the latter interpretation is more likely, I think, partly because the statement about the open door immediately follows the Lord's statement that he knows their works or deeds—the open door has to do with what these Christians are doing and ought to do—and partly because of v.9 and the prospect of the salvation of the Jews which is mentioned next. The church's witness will lead to the salvation of others.

- v.9 John seems to be mainly referring to the final salvation of the Jews, the great host of Jews joining the Christian church through faith in Christ at the end of time, something prophesied elsewhere in the Bible. But, as so often in Revelation, the great events at the end of time are anticipated again and again along the way. People becoming Christians today, leaving death and entering life, are anticipations of the great age and great day of salvation. It is the same salvation after all, only the scale is different.
- v.10 In this verse we have the only mention in the seven letters of the coming worldwide ordeal which is a major theme of the rest of the book. This does not seem to be a local and temporary judgment such as the one referred to in 2:10; this is worldwide, embracing all men. In the context the reference seems to be to a great tribulation at the end of history also prophesied in other places in the Bible. These particular Christians, as it happened, did not experience it, but Christians will in large numbers and, as we said, Philadelphia is here representative of the entire church. And as with salvation itself, so also with their troubles, what Christians experience in this life is always to be viewed as an anticipation of, as the birth pangs of the climactic troubles the church must endure at the end of history. It is a good way to think about your troubles: as anticipation of far greater troubles that the church must face at the end of the age.

You may be aware that this is a verse often referred to as evidence for the idea of the rapture, the sudden and unannounced removal of all believers from the world before the great tribulation at the end of the world, seven years before the Second Coming of Christ. Indeed this verse is the most important verse in the book of Revelation for the dispensational scheme of biblical interpretation. The *Left Behind* books trade on this expectation of a rapture of the church. But the language employed here does not mean – and the rest of the Bible never teaches – that the church will be evacuated before the tribulation. It means that she will be kept, preserved, protected *in and through* all her trials and especially the last and greatest trial. Remember the Lord's prayer for his disciples in John 17: "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." Interestingly, the words the NIV renders "protect them" that is, "*keep them* from the Evil one" in John 17:15 are the same words used here in Rev. 3:10 where we read that the Lord will "keep them from the hour of trial." But in John 17 *keeping* them explicitly does *not* mean taking them out of the world. Nor does it mean that here in Rev. 3. Or think of the very characteristic statement of Jeremiah (49:12), contemplating such a time of terrible judgment: "If those who do not deserve to drink the cup must drink it, why should you go unpunished." The church in Smyrna, in a letter so much like this one, is told that she will have to endure persecution even to death but that the Lord will sustain her through it and reward her for her faithfulness.

In other words, the promise the Lord is making to the Philadelphian Christians here in v. 10 is that their faith will not be overturned or their salvation lost or their eternal life put in jeopardy by the trials and persecutions that must come. Even death would not separate them from the love of Christ and the certainty of eternal life. As Augustine would famously put it, “Hack me, hew me, burn me here, but spare me hereafter, spare me hereafter.”

The phrase “those who live on the earth” occurs a number of times in Revelation and always refers to the church’s enemies. So while the time of trouble at the end of the age will be a time of affliction for the church it will also be a time of judgment for the world.

- v.12 There is an interesting tension between this verse and 21:22 where we read that there will be no temple in the new Jerusalem. Here the conqueror will be rewarded by being made a pillar in the temple of the new Jerusalem. Apocalyptic imagery is fluid. [Mounce, 121] The reference to the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven links this early part of the book to the end (21:2, 10) and is another reminder that the theme of these seven letters and that of the remainder of the book is the same.

In 14:2 and 22:4 we learn that those who have the Lord’s name on their foreheads are identified as belonging to him in the same way that those who have the mark of the beast upon their foreheads are identified as belonging to the beast. Speaking of Christ’s new name, we read in 19:12 of a name the Lord has that no one knows but himself. Someday we will all find out what that name is!

Now, we return to the question of the interpretation of the statement in v. 8: “See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut”? He is obviously referring to the sentence just before it in v. 7:

“What he – that is Jesus Christ who holds the key of David – what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.”

But what is opened? The key of David has already opened a door and that door stands open before the church; but what door and in what sense is it open? Regarding John’s words here, we do not have, if you pardon the pun, an open and shut interpretation. I will not trouble you with all the details of the arguments for various understandings of this “open door” that stands before the church in Philadelphia. There are a number of different ideas as to what it means. But let me explain the sense that seems right to me. [Cf. especially Colin Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*, 161-163]

The *open door* is the door of missionary opportunity that stands open before the church in Philadelphia: opportunity to reach both Jews and Gentiles. This explains the surprising reversal in verse 9. Again and again in the ancient prophets we are told that the day would come when the nations of the earth would submit to the God of Israel and come to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh. In some cases it is explicitly said that the Gentile nations would come to the Jews and acknowledge “Surely God is with you and there is no other, there is no other God.” [Isa. 45:14] In other words, “you were right about God and we were wrong.” There is no doubt that v. 9 here borrows from the language of texts in Isaiah and Ezekiel. John is applying those prophecies to the situation faced by the church in Philadelphia. But here, in a striking reversal, the unbelieving

Jews will come and fall down at the feet of the church – Jewish and Gentile Christians together – and acknowledge that *their* God is the true God and that Christ is the Messiah. It is a grand picture of the progress of the gospel penetrating even the most determined and obstinate resistance. And what is true of the unbelieving Jews is no doubt true as well of the Gentiles in that region and – given that Philadelphia here stands for the entire church in the world, as do the other six churches – true of all the nations of the world.

There may be a reason why this particular characteristic of the true church – missionary action and missionary success – should have been linked to Philadelphia and not some other church. This city was known in its day as “the gateway to the East.” Its founder intended it to be a center of missionary activity for the Hellenistic way of life – bringing the enlightenment of Greek civilization to the Eastern peoples. The position of Philadelphia on the borders of Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia and “on the threshold” of the Eastern countries gave the church in Philadelphia unusual opportunities for spreading the gospel. [Swete, 54]

In any case, an “open door” is a familiar way of speaking about missionary opportunity. When Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary tour the church rejoiced to learn, as we read in Acts 14:27, that God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. In 1 Cor. 16:9 Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that “a great door of effective work has opened to me” in Ephesus, necessitating a longer stay in that city. When later he left for Troas, he says in 2 Cor. 2:12, that there “the Lord had opened a door for me” as he preached the gospel. He asks the Colossian Christians to pray “that God may open a door for our message...” [4:3]. There are other arguments in favor of this way of taking the “open door” but I won’t weary you with those. [Cf. Hemer, 168-177]

Remember, the Lord saying he had placed before them an open door comes right after he says, “I know your works.” He is talking about what they are *doing* and what they need to continue to do when he talks about placing before them an open door. The fact that the door is open means they have work to do!

So it seems likely that the reference to the *open door* in v. 8 is to the opportunities for missionary work that the Lord had given to the Philadelphian Christians which they, in turn, had faithfully availed themselves of and were being urged to continue to avail themselves of. Of course that door that they were to invite others to walk through was the same door that stood and would stand open for them.

In any case, the Philadelphia church was an active, eager, entrepreneurial missionary church! Far from denying the Lord’s name, they had proclaimed it far and wide. And what is still more noteworthy they had done so though the church *was small*. As we read in v. 8, it had little strength. This was not Corinth with its large and influential congregation or Rome with its burgeoning numbers of Christians, including some who were prominent among the rich and powerful of the greatest city in the world. This was a smaller town, devastated some years before by a great earthquake, having then suffered numerous aftershocks, still only recovering from that catastrophe most of a century later, with the population still spread out over the surrounding countryside because life in the city was deemed by many people still unsafe. And in that smaller city was a smaller Christian church; and yet it had done its best to spread the good news to those in the town, in the surrounding countryside, and to travelers coming through – both Jews and Gentiles alike.

Now remember: what is being said about Philadelphia as one of the seven churches is being said about the whole church of God. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ, considered as a community of those genuinely devoted to Christ and his cause, is almost always comparatively small. It is always comparatively small in numbers, in wealth, in power, and in prestige. There has scarcely been a time in human history anywhere when the true church of God was a dominant power in this world. But small or not, weak or not, the church is to trying with might and main to reach others, to invite others to walk through the open door into the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

What is it that makes evangelism so difficult for most Christians; for most of us? Isn't it that there are so many more *unbelievers* than Christians and that we serious Christians represent a distinctly minority viewpoint. If most people were convinced and sincere Christians, if most of the wealthy, powerful, and successful people were devout followers of Jesus Christ, and if only a minority were unbelievers, it would be much easier to speak confidently of Christ even to those who despise the message. It would be easy to have the confidence of our convictions, much as anyone has the confidence of his or her convictions who lives in a society where those convictions are widely held. Peer pressure is one of the most powerful influences in the world and works on adults surely as powerfully as it does upon children. So when most people are not believers and do not welcome the message about Christ and salvation, it is much harder to be as bold and as fearless as the gospel requires. It requires us to stand out, to be different, and to risk disdain and humiliation. Is it not so with you? We lack confidence because of our lack of size and influence.

I may have told some of you before of a delightfully honest confession of Alvin Plantinga, now professor of philosophy at Notre Dame and one of the most influential and respected philosophers in America today. In a piece of intellectual autobiography Plantinga once wrote:

“A few years back I several times found myself thinking about a certain person, and feeling obliged to call him and speak with him about Christianity; this was a person for whom I had a lot of respect but who, I thought, had nothing but disdain for Christianity. I felt obliged to call [him], but always did my best to put the thought out of my mind, being impeded by fear and embarrassment: what would I say? ‘Hello, have you found Jesus?’ And wouldn’t [he] think I was completely out of my mind, not to mention really weird? Then later I heard that during this very time the person in question was in the process of becoming a Christian. I had been invited to take part in something of real importance and refused the invitation out of cowardice and stupidity.” [*Philosophers Who Believe*, 279-280]

That confession is interesting in two different respects. First, Alvin Plantinga is a man possessed of a very powerful mind. Peers remember that in philosophy classes he attended as a student, the professor would visibly wince when he raised his hand for fear that it would be clear once again that the student knew more and thought more powerfully than the professor. He sits now at the pinnacle of his profession, a profession famous for the intelligence of its members. He is the sort of man who, one would think, could talk about Christianity to the most violent and abusive skeptic with complete confidence simply because of who he is and what he is. Alvin Plantinga would know, the other person would know, and the conversation would prove that the case for Christianity the famous philosopher would mount would be much more impressive than any objections the skeptic might propose. Surely the skeptical friend was the one who should have been worried and embarrassed in an exchange with Plantinga on the Christian faith. What had

Alvin Plantinga of all people to fear from an unbelieving friend? And yet he was embarrassed and held back nonetheless. And was not the reason at last the smallness and the weakness of the Christian faith in the world. We lack confidence because we lack size and influence among men. We are timid in the face of those whom John describes as “those who live on the earth.” The church in Philadelphia was like that but had faced its fears and temptations squarely and had not let those fears distract them from their duty and their privilege to call others to faith in Jesus Christ.

In the second place Plantinga’s confession is interesting because it is a reminder that it is the Lord who opens the door and that no one can shut that door when the Lord has opened it. The person Plantinga feared to talk to was drawn to the faith anyway. His skepticism was overcome and he found himself a follower of Christ when before he had no sympathy with the Christian faith. He didn’t need one of the world’s great philosophers to convince him; the Lord did that himself. How many times has *that* happened! The servant, after all, just holds the flashlight; the master does all the real work.

The most unlikely people believed on that long ago Sunday when Peter preached Jesus Christ in Jerusalem to the thousands who had gathered for the Feast of Pentecost. Three thousand Jews who had either showed themselves not only uninterested in but overtly hostile to the proclamation of Christ as the Savior of sinners and King of Kings or who had never heard of any such Jesus of Nazareth realized in a moment of shattering illumination that all that they were being told about him was true and believed in Jesus Christ on the spot. Humanly speaking, perhaps no more unlikely thing has ever happened in the history of the world! And following that day many others in Jerusalem also believed, including a large number of priests who had been defiantly unwilling to submit to Jesus when he was among them preaching and working his miracles. Not everyone in Jerusalem believed by any means. There was still fierce opposition. But thousands did believe and the church was off and running on its course of conquest through the world.

And in the years that followed, hardly everyone believed when the gospel was preached, but many people did believe everywhere the gospel was proclaimed and churches were established and the number of Christians in the world swiftly multiplied. The church wasn’t strong enough to carry the day. It was as a whole what Philadelphia was by itself. Weak and small. The influence it wielded could only be attributed to the Holy Spirit. Jesus was a better preacher than Peter was and his words were backed by the authority of a perfect life. But Peter did greater things as an evangelist than Jesus did because the Holy Spirit empowered him to that end in a way, however mysterious, that he did not empower the Son of God. It was God’s plan and God’s goodness that the great work of calling the world to salvation in Christ should be given to the Lord’s people, his disciples, and his church. And the Holy Spirit’s strength was made perfect in the believers’ and the church’s weakness. So much so that even a small congregation, such as the one in Philadelphia, even a group of Christians with little strength could be effective in persuading otherwise disinterested or hostile people to surrender their lives to Jesus Christ.

Different results would be given at different times and different places. Many more became Christians in Corinth and Rome than in Philadelphia to be sure. But the transformation of a human heart and life, the gift of faith in Christ, a person’s embrace of Christ when he or she hears the good news – all of this being the Holy Spirit’s achievement not the evangelist’s or the church’s – all the Lord has ever asked of his people is that they be faithful as the missionaries he

has called them to be. All he has asked of them is that they look away from their own weakness and smallness and look to the one who has opened the door that no one can shut. All they have ever had to do was to point to the open door. When they are faithful, they will have some measure of happy results, to be sure, but they will get a crown from the Lord Christ, no matter the numbers.

Sometimes we can be discouraged by how few walk through that door. Samuel Rutherford spoke of the spiritual coldness of a particular Scottish town and its church when he said, “In these twenty-eight years the grass is grown long betwixt Jedburgh and heaven.” [*Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, 749] The Holy Spirit, for reasons known only to God, was not calling large numbers of people to faith in Christ in that particular place at that particular time. It was not as it was those years long before in Philadelphia. Well the grass is hardly trampled down, still less worn down between Tacoma and heaven. That is not our business. Our business is to be pointing everyone to the open door and inviting them to enter.

There is an old book on personal evangelism by C.G. Trumbull entitled *Taking Men Alive*. In that book the author tells of a rule his father made for himself in the matter of speaking to others about Christ.

“Whenever I am justified in choosing my subject of conversation with another, the theme of themes [he is speaking of Christ] shall have prominence between us, so that I may learn of his need, and, if possible, meet it.” [Cited in Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 81]

That is, he would not be discourteous or rude. He would not force the subject on someone in a way calculated to embarrass or offend the person; but in the way of friendship, he would speak of Christ when and how he could. Whether getting to that moment when you can speak as a friend to someone about Christ takes five minutes or five months, you are looking for the moment. You want to be as the Philadelphians. You want to be utterly uncaring of *your* smallness or that of the church, of *your* weakness or that of the Christian cause in our society. You want to keep your eye fixed on the open door and the one who has opened it. All you have to do is point to the door. He *can* do, he *will* do what we cannot.

Lord, lay some soul upon my heart
And love that soul through me;
And may I bravely do my part
To win that soul for Thee.

And when I come to the beautiful city,
And the saved from all round me appear,
I want to hear somebody tell me,
“It was you who invited me here.”