

Christ's Letter to the Churches: Philadelphia

Don Fortner | Added: Dec 28, 2005 | Category: Theology

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Revelation 3:7-13

‘That which is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God’ (Luke 16:15). I wonder if we will ever learn that fact. Those things which men value most, esteem most highly, and to which they attach the greatest honour, God despises. And that which men ridicule, belittle, and despise, God honours. The wisdom of this world, the pride of this world, the moral righteousness of this world, the honour of this world, and the religion of this world God almighty holds in utter contempt. We see this fact throughout the Scriptures. We see it plainly in Christ’s letters to the churches.

The Church at Sardis was great in name and reputation. Men approved of her and honoured her. But Christ looked at that church and said, ‘Thou art dead.’ The Church at Laodicea was rich and increased with goods. It

appeared that she lacked nothing. But that church was so nauseating to the Son of God that He was ready to spew it out of His mouth. He said, 'Thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.' You see God looks on the heart. He is not, in the least degree impressed by those things that impress and deceive men. 'That which is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.'

The Church at Philadelphia was not like the ones in Sardis and Laodicea. C. H. Spurgeon wrote, 'The Philadelphia church was not great, but it was good; it was not powerful, but it was faithful.' The Lord Jesus commended this church for its faithfulness. Men might have looked at the little church in Philadelphia, as they do the many like it today, with contempt. It did not meet in an elaborately decorated, impressive building. So far as I have been able to discover, there were no men in this church of great political, economic, or academic power and influence. But it was a church known for its faithfulness.

Faithfulness honours God and is honoured of God. And faithfulness, like slothfulness, has a way of rubbing off on others. Hence, we read of faithful men and women in the Church at Philadelphia for many centuries. The pastors of this church were consistently influential (not in the world, but in the kingdom of God) for eight hundred years. We read in church history of their influence from the first through the eighth centuries. Let us ever be found faithful to our God. He alone knows what influence our faithfulness, or lack of faithfulness will have upon the generations to come.

The Lord Jesus found nothing in this church to rebuke, or even to correct. He gave no word of reproof to the saints at Philadelphia. That is a remarkable testimony to these people whose names are known only in heaven. To this congregation, the Son of God spoke nothing but words of praise and encouragement¹.

In Revelation 3:7-13 the Lord Jesus Christ holds the Church at Philadelphia before us as an example of what every believer and every local church ought to be. A careful reading of the Saviour's letter to the Church at Philadelphia ought put a prayer in our hearts, crying, 'Lord, make me faithful.' Read the Saviour's words and learn this: — God honours faithfulness.

A DIVINE PERSON

In verse seven, our Lord Jesus describes Himself as a divine person. This letter was dictated to John by one who is Himself God. This God is our Saviour. 'These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the keys of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.' Here are three divine attributes, or characteristics, of our Lord Jesus Christ.

First, the Lord Jesus Christ is holy. He is the holy God. 'Holy and reverend

is his name' (Psalm 111:9). He is the Holy One of Israel. Being God, He is 'glorious in holiness' (Exodus 15:11), in every way equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Specifically, this text has reference to Christ's holiness as the God-man, our Saviour. It is not our Saviour's divine, essential holiness that comforts and encourages His people. That terrifies any man who has any sense of it (Hebrews 12:21; Judges 13:22). It is our Redeemer's representative, mediatorial, vicarious holiness that gives us comfort and encourages us to trust Him.

Our Saviour was Himself 'holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners' while He lived as a man in this world (Hebrews 7:26). He had no sin, no original sin and no actual sin. Though He was made to be sin for us by divine imputation when He died as our Substitute, Christ had no sin of His own. He knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). As our Representative and Substitute, the Son of God lived in this world as a man in perfect holiness.

This mediatorial holiness, this representative righteousness of Christ as our Mediator is the basis of our acceptance with God (Romans 5:19). Be sure you understand this. It will help you. If you are a believer, if you trust Christ, His blood washed away your sins. His sacrifice paid your debt and satisfied the law and justice of God that demanded death. His death removed your guilt before God. But the righteousness of Christ is just as necessary for our salvation as His blood. His righteousness (His complete obedience to God as a man), being imputed to us, just as our sins were imputed to Him, gives us merit with God. Therefore he is called, Jehovah-tsidkenu, 'THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS' (Jeremiah 23:6).

Christ is our righteousness, our holiness, and our sanctification. He is that 'holiness without which no man shall see the Lord' (Hebrews 12:14). He is that exceeding, perfect righteousness, without which we cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20). Christ, who is holy, and who is our holiness, is our Sanctification. His holiness was imputed to every chosen sinner in justification when He accomplished our redemption at Calvary. And His holy nature is imparted to every chosen, redeemed, justified sinner in the new birth. Salvation, in the experience of it, is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory.'

We have no holiness of our own. We have no ability to produce holiness, or do anything that is truly holy. All the holiness we have is what we get from Christ. As John Gill put it, — 'Christ is the Cause and Author of holiness to his people. We are sanctified in him. We have our sanctification from him. And we are sanctified by him.'

Those who talk about sanctification by degrees, or sanctification being accomplished by the works of a man, simply do not understand the doctrine of sanctification, or for that matter the totality of grace in salvation. Christ is our Sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30; Hebrews 10:10-14).

Second, we read that Christ is true. He is truly God and truly man. Our

Lord Jesus Christ is true and faithful in all mediatorial offices and covenant engagements. He is true to God the Father and true to His people. In fact, Jesus Christ is Truth itself (John 14:6). Apart from Him there is no truth. Christ is the Truth of which all the types and prophecies of the Old Testament were just pictures. Christ is the Truth of God, the embodiment of Truth, the Sum and Substance of all gospel truth. As the embodiment of Truth, Christ is the Revelation of the invisible God. He is the living Word of whom the written Word speaks (John 1:1-3, 14-16, 18).

Third, the Lord Jesus Christ is the sovereign King. He describes Himself here as ‘he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth and no man openeth.’ With those words our blessed Saviour describes His sovereign power and absolute authority over all things as the Son of David, the Messiah, the King. He who is the Christ of God is Lord over all things. This dominion is not something that Christ shall have some day. It is His right now! Our crucified, risen, exalted Saviour is now sitting as King upon the throne of David, which is the throne of God (Isaiah 22:22; Matthew 28:18; John 17:2; Acts 2:34-36; Hebrews 1:3; Revelation 5:5).

Here is one example of His absolute sovereignty: — He opens, and no man shuts. He shuts, and no man opens. Christ opens the Scriptures to His elect, giving us the light and knowledge of gospel truth by the power of His Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 16:13). But He shuts the Scriptures to others, giving them blindness and hardness of heart (John 12:39-40). The Son of God opens a door of utterance for the gospel in one place, and shuts it in another, according to His own sovereign will (Acts 16:6-10). The Good Shepherd opens the door for His sheep and leads them in the way of life everlasting (John 10:3,9). And He shuts the door against those who will not obey His voice (Luke 13:23-30).

We worship Him that is holy. We trust Him that is true. We bow before Him that is sovereign. Our divine Saviour is the Holy, True, Sovereign Son of God.

A DIVINE PRAISE

When the Lord of Glory spoke to the Church at Philadelphia, as I said before, there is no word of reproof, warning, or correction, but only a divine praise (v. 8). — ‘I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.’

Imagine that! The Son of God Himself bends over from His lofty throne to speak a word of praise to a band of faithful believers on the earth! I sure would like to be in that crowd. Wouldn't you?

Certainly, He is here giving us an example to follow. We are usually quick to point out one another's faults and failures. But love is always quick to

forgive and quick to praise. A little praise is a great means of encouragement. Some people seem to think that kindness is blasphemy. But if the Son of God speaks an encouraging word of praise to His church, surely we will be safe in giving a little praise to one another.

What was there about these Philadelphian believers that the Son of God saw fit to commend and praise? The matter of commendation and praise was their works, works of faith, love, and patience.

The Lord God had set before this church an open door, which no man could shut. He does not tell us what this open door was, but generally this language is used to describe a door of utterance for the preaching of the gospel (2 Corinthians 2:12). Apparently, the Lord gave these men and women an opportunity to serve Him in the furtherance of the gospel; and they seized the opportunity He gave them. They faithfully performed the work God put into their hands. They did not talk about what they wanted to do, what they had done, what they used to do, or what they would do if they had more money and people. They simply did what they could for the glory of Christ and the furtherance of the gospel. It may be that their labour was insignificant in the eyes of men. But Christ looked upon it as an honourable thing. Nothing done for Christ is insignificant or meaningless to Him (Mark 14:6-8).

The one thing God requires of His people is faithfulness (1 Corinthians 4:2). The one thing God honours in His people is faithfulness (Matthew 25:23; Luke 19:17). When the Lord Jesus Christ opens a door for us, as we faithfully follow Him, no man can shut the door, and He will not shut it.

The faithfulness of these saints at Philadelphia was especially commendable because they had very little with which to work. The Master said, 'For thou hast a little strength.' This is not to be taken as a word of reproach, but as a word of praise. They had been faithful in their service to Christ, even though they had little strength. Many of the Lord's churches are like this Church at Philadelphia: they have 'a little strength,' but only a little.

They had little numerical strength. The Church at Philadelphia was a small church. Therefore they had very little strength for taking on any great work. But their lack of numbers did not deter them. They just rallied together and did what they could. And Christ commends them for it. God thinks more of quality than of quantity. He has much greater regard for obedience than for tally sheets and numbers. Denominations, denominational representatives, religious businessmen, and politician preachers take polls and count noses. 'The Lord looketh on the heart!'

Because they were small in number, like most small churches, this church had little monetary strength. When money was required, they could do very little. This was, for the most part, a band of poor people. There were no men of means among them. But they were precious to Christ, who counts

sincerity of greater value than all the gold in the world.

And, again like most small churches, this assembly had very little strength in the area of talents and gifts. At Corinth, the church had talents and gifts running out its ears. They had an abundance of teachers, miracle workers, and wealth. But very little was done. They were rich in ability, but poor in grace. Not this church. No one here seems to have had any great talent or ability. But the people were full of grace. Grace made them faithful. Much was done for the glory of Christ, the souls of men, and the furtherance of the gospel. They had 'a little strength', but used every ounce for Christ.

'Thou hast a little strength'. Someone said, 'That was, perhaps, their misfortune, but not their fault.' Therefore they were not blamed for it. The Lord does not blame us for having little strength, but for having little faith, little love, little devotion, little zeal, and little consecration. If our strength is little, let us pray for grace, that our little strength may be used entirely for Christ.

The saints of God at Philadelphia were faithful and persevering in the midst of great opposition. The Lord Jesus gave them this word of praise and encouragement: 'Thou hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.' These men and women simply could not be driven away from the word of the gospel. They could not be persuaded to forsake the gospel. They would not allow anything to come between them and Christ. They had a little strength; but with all the strength they had they kept God's Word and held fast to Christ.

What is the word which they kept? We do not have to guess. It was the word of the gospel. Our Lord says, 'Thou hast kept the word of my patience' (v.10). That is the gospel of Christ and Him crucified, in which His patient sufferings as our Substitute are set forth (1 Peter 2:21-24). The sinner's only hope before God is the gospel of substitutionary redemption (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is the word we must hold fast.

How did these Philadelphian believers keep the word of the gospel? They believed it (1 John 5:6-13). They loved it (1 John 5:3). They obeyed it (Romans 16:26). And they defended it (Jude 3; Philippians 1:7, 17). Though they were weak, few in number, and a people of worldly insignificance; they were ready at all times and against all odds to hold to and defend the truth of God. Most men are like spiders, (who spin their webs out of their own bowels). They spin their theology out of their own feelings, their own wisdom, or their own experiences. These Philadelphian saints took nothing to be truth but the truth of God revealed in Sacred Scripture. And, with regard to the truth of God, they valiantly refused to budge an inch. They had no regard for current trends in theology and the wisdom of infidels. They walked in the old paths of everlasting truth (Jeremiah 6:16).

May God give us grace, in these days of Arminian, free will, works

religion, while nearly the whole religious world teaches and embraces that which the apostle Paul calls 'will worship', to hold fast the gospel of His free and sovereign grace in Christ (2 Timothy 1:9-10).

Either God is totally, absolutely, universally sovereign, or He is not God (Psalm 135:6). Either man is totally depraved, guilty, and helpless, or he needs no Saviour (Romans 5:12; 3:9-19). Either God chose and determined to save his people in eternal, unconditional election, before the world began, or He has no people to save (Ephesians 1:3-6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). Either Christ effectually redeemed God's elect by His death on the cross, or He failed in His work and there is no such thing as blood atonement and substitutionary redemption (Matthew 1:21; Galatians 4:4-6). Either God the Holy Spirit regenerates and calls dead sinners to life and faith in Christ by effectual, irresistible power and grace, or man is saved by his own will, his own effort, and his own work (Romans 11:6; Ephesians 2:1-10). Either all God's elect will persevere unto the end, or none of them will (John 10:27-30).

These truths by which we live; and if need be, God helping us, these truths we will die by. But we will not, we cannot give them up. This is more than mere doctrinal accuracy. This is the very fabric of our salvation. To deny these things would be to deny our only hope before God and to blaspheme His name, whom we most desire to honour. To deny these doctrines of the gospel is to deny Christ who taught them. Those who embrace these gospel truths are our brethren. Those who are enemies to these truths are the enemies of our God; and that makes them our enemies (Psalm 139:19-22; 2 Chronicles 19:2).

Do you keep the word of the gospel? Do I? Perhaps we have no great talents, perhaps we have little strength, maybe we have little influence over other people, and we may always be numbered among a small group of people who are looked upon by the world as narrow-minded fanatics, but the simple fact is that the salvation of our souls depends upon our persevering adherence to the truth of the gospel (Colossians 1:22-23).

The saints in the Church at Philadelphia were commended and praised by Christ because they kept and denied not the word of His grace and truth in the gospel. Blessed is that man, blessed is that woman who cannot be induced by Satan to forsake the gospel for any reason.

A DIVINE PROTECTION

Inasmuch as they were faithful to Him, our Lord assured the saints at Philadelphia that He would be faithful to them and declared that He would keep them with a divine protection (vv. 9-11). — 'Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall

come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.'

Those who keep God's Word shall be kept by God. Those who hold fast the truth of God shall be held in truth by the grace of God. Those who persevere in faith shall be preserved by grace.

Our Lord will always separate the wheat from the chaff and the precious from the vile (v. 9). He says, 'Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.'

The Jews, who are Abraham's physical seed, claimed to be God's people exclusively; and many to this day regard them as the people of God's choice. But in this ninth verse our Lord calls those who yet worship according to the customs of Judaism and the law of Moses, 'the synagogue of Satan'. It is not Abraham's physical seed, but his spiritual seed who are the people of God, the Israel of God, for whom the promises and the covenant were made. The Church of God is the Israel of God (Romans 2:28-29; 11:25-26; Philippians 3:3). Abraham is the father of all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 4:1, 16, 22-25; Galatians 3:6-7). Today Judaism is an apostate religion.

There are many who, like the Jews, claim to be God's people who are not. They say they are Jews (Christians, children of God), but they lie. All who hope for acceptance with God because of a decision they made for Jesus, because of their baptism, their church membership, their good works, their taking the sacraments, their experiences, or their personal holiness are hypocrites. They may be called a church. They may think they are the house of God. But our Lord here identifies all such as 'the synagogue of Satan'. God's elect, the true people of God, are circumcised in their hearts by the Spirit of God, not in their flesh (Colossians 2:10-14). We worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ alone, and have no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:3).

In the end the despised people of God shall be exalted over their enemies. Our Lord will make our enemies to bow before our feet and know that He loved us, chose us, redeemed us, called us, and saved us by His grace (Matthew 25:31-34, 41).

As long as we live in this world, Christ will keep His own in the hour of temptation (v. 10). — 'Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth' (John 10:27-30; 17:11-15; 1 Corinthians 10:13). He will preserve all His own from apostasy. Though heresies come and abound, God's elect shall not be deceived. The ever-increasing acceptance of freewillism, legalism, works religion, and sheer ritualism will not affect the saints of God (1 Corinthians 11:19; 2

Thessalonians 2:7-13; 1 John 2:19-20). The Lord Jesus Christ will graciously preserve His elect in the midst of their trials (Isaiah 43:1-5). The Son of God will preserve all His elect in the way of faith, grace, and obedience unto life everlasting (Psalm 37:23-24; Jeremiah 32:38-40). God's elect cannot and shall not perish. Not even one of the chosen shall be lost. We are kept by the power of His grace in the hands of an omnipotent Saviour.

It is our Lord's promise of preservation that inspires us to perseverance (v. 11). — 'Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.' It is upon the basis of His promise to preserve us from temptation that our Redeemer admonishes us to persevere. Contrary to popular religious opinion, the promise of absolute, unconditional grace does not promote licentiousness, but devotion and godliness. In fact, that is the very basis of godliness and the motive for it (Titus 3:4-8).

These two things are facts so plainly revealed in Holy Scripture that they simply cannot be denied: 1. All God's elect shall be preserved unto eternal glory. 2. But only those who persevere in faith, who go on in the way of grace and righteousness, and who hold fast the gospel unto the end shall be saved (Matthew 10:22; Colossians 1:22-23; Hebrews 3:6, 14; 10:26, 38, 39).

A DIVINE PROMISE

In verse 12, our Lord Jesus Christ gives a divine promise to all who hold fast and persevere in the faith of the gospel. — 'Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.'

Those who persevere in the faith shall conquer all their enemies in the end and be gloriously triumphant in Christ (Romans 8:35-39).

The Son of God says, 'Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God.' A pillar is a permanent structure in a permanent place. So Christ is here promising us a place of permanent, eternal residence in heaven itself. And while we live here below, while we go on persevering in the faith, holding fast the gospel, clinging to Him as our only hope and our only Saviour, He gives us assurance of our interest in Him. This is what He says, 'I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and I will write upon him my new name.' In a word, our Saviour is saying, I will make you to know that you belong to me. I will make it evident that you belong to God, to the New Jerusalem, and to me, and that all the blessings and privileges of the sons of God are yours forever.

Our Saviour's new name, His acquired name, which He promises to write upon His people is: Jehovah-tsidkenu, 'THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS' (cf. Jeremiah 23:6 and 33:16). Let us give ourselves whole-heartedly to Him who promises us such grace (Romans 12:1-3). I urge you, hold fast the hope of the gospel. Let nothing and no one either drive you from it or entice you to forsake it (1 Corinthians 15:1-3). The Son of God will hold us in His grace. Let us therefore cling to Him. 'He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.'

- i. Certainly, we must not honour the flesh and become flatterers of men. But those who think that serious Christianity forbids complimentary words for a job well done, and that expressions of gratitude and appreciation are out of place in the kingdom of God, need to read this epistle. Here the Son of God Himself applauds the faithfulness of His people! I suspect that it will be all right for us to do the same.

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