

PHILADELPHIA: THE CHURCH WITH AN OPEN DOOR

Rev 3:7-13 (17 March 2002)

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr.

In 1681, a London widow named Jane Lead took over the Philadelphian Society—a mystical, millennium-believing group that saw itself as “the Germ of the commencement of the sole true Church, Virgin Bride of Jesus Christ, whose members, dispersed among the diverse Religions of the World, are soon to appear and unite with them, in order to form this pure and holy Church, such as the church of Philadelphia was at the birth of Christianity” (Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-Century England* (University of California, 1980), 46-48). Even today there are preachers who view the seven churches in Revelation as a chronological portrait of the Christian church through the centuries. They seize upon the church at Philadelphia as a model for the true church which—not surprisingly—they usually identify with their own small but faithful following. Such preachers regard themselves and their followers as the pure “church of Philadelphia” in contrast to the mainstream but apostate “church of Laodicea.”

The message of the risen Christ to the Christians in Philadelphia has captured the imagination of Bible-believers since the first century because *no other message is so rich in promises*. Before we explore these promises, let’s briefly examine the history of Philadelphia.

The ancient city of Philadelphia was located about twenty-eight miles southeast of Sardis and sixty miles east of Smyrna at the foot of the Tmolus mountains. It was strategically situated in a fertile river valley on the main road from Sardis to Laodicea. Philadelphia, the youngest of the seven cities of Revelation, was founded between 189 B.C.—when the region came under the control of Eumenes II (King of Pergamum)—and 138 B.C.—when Attalus II died. The city derived its name from Attalus, whose love and loyalty to his brother Eumenes earned him the title Philadelphus—“lover of his brother.” Two stories are worthy of special notice. (1) A false rumor of Eumenes’ assassination led Attalus to accept the crown; but when Eumenes returned from Greece, Attalus relinquished the crown to his brother. (2) Furthermore, Attalus resisted the Romans when they encouraged him to overthrow his brother and become king.

There was one major drawback to living in Philadelphia: the area was subject to earthquakes. The devastating earthquake of A.D. 17 that leveled twelve cities of Asia overnight had been particularly severe on Philadelphia, perhaps because it was nearer the fault line and because it was tormented by tremors for twenty years after the disaster. Strabo (Greek geographer and traveler, born c. 63 B.C. and died after A.D. 21) reported that the city experienced earthquakes so frequently that new cracks in the city wall appeared daily and that few citizens actually lived in the city. Although Philadelphia was rebuilt after the catastrophe of A.D. 17, many Philadelphians were afraid to live within the city and so settled in the surrounding countryside. It is likely that this ever-present instability of the land and insecurity of the people is contrasted with the promise of a

stable and secure dwelling in the city of God when Christ promises to the faithful, “I will make you a pillar in the temple of My God; you will never go out of it” (3:12).

Let’s read now the message to the Philadelphian church recorded in Rev 3:7-13.

^{Rev 3:7}“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of the holy one, the true one,
who has the key of David,
who opens and no one will shut,
who shuts and no one opens:

⁸“I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. ¹⁰Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. ¹¹I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. ¹²If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. ¹³Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (NRSV).

In the twenty-second chapter of Isaiah, there is an oracle of judgment against Shebna. Shebna was Hezekiah’s “chief of staff,” the man in charge of the palace. He was to be removed from his position and replaced with Eliakim. Concerning the new chief steward, we read from verses 20-23:

^{Isa 22:20}On that day I will call my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiah, ²¹and will clothe him with your robe and bind your sash on him. I will commit your authority to his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. ²²I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open. ²³I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his ancestral house (NRSV).

In the message to the Philadelphian Christians, the language of Isaiah is used to present Christ as the Messiah of David who has the absolute power to control entrance into the Kingdom of God. This may be a deliberate contrast with the practice of the local synagogue that has closed its door to shut out Christian Jews. Verse 7 depicts Christ as possessing “the key of David,” and verse 8 describes how He uses that key. The “open door” set before the church at Philadelphia is a door into heaven or into the temple of God or into the New Jerusalem. The open door is a guarantee of salvation in the eternal Kingdom of God, like the promises to the “overcomers” in all seven messages.

We now come to verse 10, one of the most disputed verses in the Book of Revelation. Many North American interpreters have argued that this verse supports the doctrine that the church will be raptured, caught up to be with the Lord, before the final three-and-a-half or seven-year Tribulation. To miss the Rapture is to be—in the words of the popular best-selling series of books—“Left Behind.” This verse has been, and continues to be, a

battlefield for the argument between the Pretribulation and Posttribulation views on when Christ will return. According to the pretribulation point of view, Christ will return and rapture the church before the Great Tribulation. On the other hand, the posttribulation point of view maintains that Christ will return for the church after the Great Tribulation. It seems to me that both sides of the debate miss the Apostle John's point of view. In Matt 24, Jesus warned that the entire period of time between His first coming and His second coming would be characterized by trials and tribulations. He referred to this period of time—what most of us call “the Christian Age”—as “the beginning of the birth pangs” (v. 8). *The “hour of trial” of Rev 3:10 is the time of “the birth pangs” and denotes the entire period of time between the comings of Christ.* With Christ's first coming, the messianic age began, and with His second coming the age of this world will come to an end. The in-between time is the time of battle between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. You and I, then, live during the days of the final conflict: the war between the Lamb of God and the Satanic Dragon. And the promise to be preserved from the hour of trial does not mean that we will be physically absent, but rather that we will not be harmed by the judgments of God on the rebellious “inhabitants of the earth.” The protection of the church from the effects of these judgments is portrayed by a variety of images in Revelation: the sealing of the saints in chapter 7, the measuring of the altar and its worshipers in chapter 11, and the hiding of the woman in the wilderness in chapter 12. *Those who stand with the Lamb are protected through the hour of trial, not from the hour of trial.* This promise is consistent with the prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John: “I [Jesus] am not asking you [the Father] to take them [the disciples] out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15).

The “coming” of Christ to Ephesus (2:5), Pergamum (2:16), and Sardis (3:3) posed a threat to each church. At Ephesus the lampstand would be removed unless they repented; at Pergamum Christ would fight against them with the sword of His mouth; at Sardis He would come like a thief. But the “coming” to Philadelphia is different: it will bring to an end their time of trial and will establish them as permanent citizens of the eternal Kingdom of God.

To those who overcome—those who hold on to what they have (v. 11)—is given the promise of being made pillars in the temple of God. To a city whose citizens lived in such fear of earthquakes that many had fled into the countryside to establish temporary dwellings, the promise of permanence within the New Jerusalem would have a special meaning. A further promise to the overcomers is that Christ will write on them the name of His God, the name of God's city, and His own new name. This threefold inscription shows that the faithful belong to God, hold citizenship in the New Jerusalem, and are in a unique way related to Christ. The Old Testament background for such an inscription is probably Exod 28:36-38 where we learn that Aaron, the high priest, wore on his forehead a golden plate with the engraving “Holy to the LORD.”

When I think of a pillar, I am reminded that it has one primary function: to support the structure of which it is a part. There are two attitudes toward the church. Some people desire to put all they have at the service of the church; and some people never think of the church until they want something out of it. Some desire only to support the church and some desire only that the church should support them. My rather blunt way of wording this is that when it comes to the church, there are *pillars* and there are *parasites*. You and I must choose which of these we will be.

When I think of a new name, I am reminded that in the ancient world when a man became a king, or when he became a claimant to a kingdom, the first thing he often did was to issue coins with his name stamped on them. Coinage was the sign of kingship; and the name was the sign of ownership. As Christians, you and I are like the coins of God. He ought to have His name of kingship and ownership stamped upon us. Our lives should be such that when others see us they know that we are the property of God.

One day, Christ is coming to claim that which belongs to Him. Will you—will I—be claimed . . . or will we be left behind?

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