

Letter to Philadelphia
Revelation 3:7-13

Introduction

If Sardis received unqualified condemnation, Philadelphia received unqualified commendation (like Smyrna). Philadelphia lay 28 miles SE of Sardis and 80 miles E of Smyrna. Roman armies, caravans of merchantmen, and now Christian missionaries walked those roads. Philadelphia was known as “little Athens” because of all the festivals and temples found there. In the centre of a large grape-growing area, it produced many famous wines.

Some of its history is reflected in the letter. It was the youngest of the seven cities, founded by colonists from Pergamum during the reign of Attalus II (159-138BC). He had such a love for his brother Eumenes that he was called Philadelphus, and the town was named after him. (Philadelphos meaning “one who loves his brother”, coming from φιλεω, same root from which we get philanthropy, philharmonic, philosophy). It was founded to be a missionary city to spread the Greek language and culture in the surrounding area.

The ancient historian Strabo called it the “City of Earthquakes” because earth tremors plagued the place. The earthquake in AD17 which destroyed Sardis, almost destroyed Philadelphia. Most of the population went to live in huts outside the city as the after-shocks went on for days. But with the aid of an imperial subsidy from Emperor Tiberius, the city was rebuilt. In gratitude the city changed its name to Neo Caesarea – the New City of Caesar. Later it was renamed Flavia in honour of Emperor Vespasian, but later still reverted to the original Philadelphia.

The church in Philadelphia was established in AD90. We do not know anything about the origins. There had been some persecution, but the Christians had stood firm and been faithful. When Mohammed Turks invaded the area, Philadelphia was the last bastion of Christianity, and did not fall till the fourteenth century. To this day there is a Christian bishop and about 1000 Christians in the city.

In the course of the letter, three important symbols are used – a key, a door and a pillar. The church had set before it an open door. Christ held the key of David. The overcomer would be a pillar in the temple of God.

The church and the open door

I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut (Revelation 3:8). What is this open door that cannot be closed? Often in scripture the door is the door of opportunity (C.f. **I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me** (Revelation 3:20).) While this could be the door of salvation in this verse, it is unlikely since the letter is written to church members who are obviously real. It is more likely a reference to the opportunity of service. C.f. Paul used a similar expression while he was in Ephesus: **a great door for effective work has opened to me** (1 Corinthians

16:9). Also in Troas, **the Lord had opened a door for me** (2 Corinthians 2:12), and when he was a prisoner in Rome he asked the Christians at Colosse, **pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message** (Colossians 4:3).

We are saved to serve. “Unless our faith saves us out of selfishness into service, it will certainly never save us out of hell into heaven” (Mark Guy Pearce). The door stood open for the Philadelphian church for effective service. There were many openings in the Roman Empire for the spread of the Gospel. Just as in the past people had spread the Greek culture and language, now it was time for the Christians to spread the Christian Gospel. There were good roads, a common language, safe travel, groping minds and hungry hearts everywhere. The Holy Spirit was stirring the thoughts and desires of ordinary men and women.

The opportunity for service was laid before them, but they were not without problems. Firstly they were a weak church, **I know that you have little strength** (Revelation 3:8), probably because the congregation was small and mainly from lower classes with little influence in society. Also there was opposition from those claiming to be Jews, **the synagogue of Satan** (Revelation 3:9), but were not the true people of God. The Christians may have been tempted to keep quiet, but this is not what God wanted – He wanted them to be bold, and some of those enemies would come to Christ. There was also wider persecution of Emperor Tiberius. Thunderclouds were gathering, and outreach work may have looked dangerous. But the promise was for them: **I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth** (Revelation 3:10). They had been faithful to Him, so He would keep them from harm. If they suffered, they would be upheld in it.

There is something to learn here. How easily we despair. We are so small and feeble. We face opposition, indifference and rejection. We are tempted to wait till circumstances get better. But the Lord has opened the door of opportunity to serve Him. Every local church, and every individual Christian, should realize that doors are opened for them, and they should enter. Also in the wider world, enormous doors stand open. But who will pass through them? Some doors to some countries are closed, or may close at any time, but others are wide open. There are more vacancies than can be filled. There is great need in missionary societies for people who are trained and competent, yet also wholly committed and spiritually minded. There is a need for people with apostolic zeal who will hazard life, comfort, career and reputation for Him.

I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest (John 4:35). **When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd** (Matthew 9:36). There are enormous needs. Everyone has a part. If we cannot go ourselves, our gifts, prayers, encouragement and interest must ensure these open doors are entered.

Christ and the Key of David

Before telling the church about the open door, the key of David is mentioned. **These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open** (Revelation 3:7). The very one addressing them is the Holy One. He shares the life and being of God. He is

true, genuine and real, completely reliable. The key of David denotes His authority. Just as Eliakim was the steward of King Hezekiah's household and therefore possessed the key of David (2 Kings 18:17,18), so Jesus Christ is the head of God's household, the Church, and He has all authority in heaven and earth. No one can enter till Christ has opened the door. No one can enter once He has closed it.

He, of course, has the key of salvation, through His sin-bearing death. But one day that door will be shut by Christ Himself. Both admission and exclusion are in His power alone. When people ask later to be let in, the reply will be **"I don't know you or where you come from"** (Luke 13:25).

But this is more likely to refer to Christ having the key of service. Christian service is not someone having a bright idea that they will serve God, making plans and pushing ahead as best they can. The missionary expansion recorded in Acts was entirely in God's hands. The Apostles were merely pawns in the hands of the master player. When Peter was in prison, it was the Lord's angel that freed him (Acts 12). The Holy Spirit dictated that Paul and Barnabas be set apart for the work (Acts 13:1). The Holy Spirit forbade them to preach the word in Asia (Acts 16:2).

Christ has the keys. He opens the doors. We do not have to barge our way and gate crash into situations. Wait for Him to make the openings. Much damage is caused by unwise and tactless testimony. We are right to seek to win others, but sometimes we are in a greater hurry than God. The bull in a china shop approach can set back Christian work for months or years. We need to be patient, pray hard, love much, and wait expectantly for the God-given opportunity.

So with seeking God's will for the future. Impatience and impulsiveness can cause such damage. If a door is shut it is foolish to push our shoulder against it. We must wait till Christ takes the key and opens it. There are three ways of working for God, according to Hudson Taylor: "Make the best plans we can and carry them out to the best of our ability; Or carefully lay our plans and ask God to help us; Or we can begin with God, ask His plans, and offer ourselves to carry out His purposes." When Hudson Taylor was seeking to find out from God whether he should go to China when he was 20 years old, he wrote,

*"Enough that God my Father knows.
Nothing this faith can dim.
He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice to Him."*

The overcomer as a pillar in God's Temple

Finally the Lord announces that He is coming soon, therefore the church much hold on to what it has so that no one will take its crown. They need to stand firm as well as move forward. The Lord's coming, both at special times in life and at the Second Coming, is to encourage believers and ensure they are ready and prepared to meet Him. So they need to persevere and maintain loyalty to the end, otherwise they were in danger of losing their reward.

Then there is a special pledge to the overcomer: **Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God** (Revelation 3:12). The Philadelphian Christians might have lived in fear of earthquake shocks, but when they get to heaven they were assured that they would be like pillars, unshakable and unmoveable, and permanently in God's presence.

Each Christian will have three names written on him: (1) God's name, because he is a member of God's family, (2) the name of the City of God, the New Jerusalem which is heaven, because that is the permanent address of the saved, and (3) Christ's name. Philadelphia knew all about taking on a new name, as the city's name had changed several times over the years. So bearing Christ's name was a sign that they were His, and they would share in His triumph.

If then we are pilgrims in this life, we will be pillars in the next. If we risk our name for Christ in this life, there will be three names permanently engraved on our pillar in the next. We shall belong to God, and to His Christ, and be His people for ever and ever.

Conclusion

How relevant this is to us today. The open door is still held before us – the church's opportunity to serve and evangelise. Christ holds the key of David – we are still under His authority. And the pillar is the Christian's security. It urges us to see life and all that happens in the light of eternity. How will our service, loyalty, decisions, choices and whole life look on that great day and coming eternity? The world's opinion of us, which we are so afraid of, will be worth nothing on that day. Christ's commendation will be everything.