

Letters To Seven Churches (Part Nine): Philadelphia

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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We can all recognize just how important communication is. I think that is a no brainer. Without even simple communication, we cannot get along with one another. That is just the way it is. Without communication things do not get done. They do not get done in families, they do not get done in business, and do not get done in government. They do not get done in individual exchanges between two people. Without communication problems do not get solved. They just continue to exist. Without communication advancements in science and technology and engineering will never happen.

Things are so complicated these days, you need teams of people to be able to put something new out. Without communication there are no friendships. Try having a friendship with something that cannot communicate with you. It is impossible. Or you cannot communicate with him. There will be no agreements, no discussion of the issues, actually, no *reporting* on the issues. You will not even know what the issues are!

There is no growth in the church without communication, there is no iron sharpening iron.

Communication, in its most basic definition, if you want, makes the world go round. So if communication is so important to us, to human life actually, why do we treat it so carelessly? Why are our own communications so poor?

In many instances, we communicate without much thought. Somebody says something to us. We just blab something back without really thinking about it. We often speak merely to hear ourselves talk with nothing profitable to say. We are often reacting to what people say to us, and we give them a glib response that if we really stopped and considered what we said, we might be even ashamed or embarrassed that something like that came out of our mouth.

We may say things that are offensive. We all do, and a lot of times we say things that are offensive without even knowing that they are offensive. We quote other people, both out of context and inaccurately, and start 100 rumors or some gossip that goes around. We make things up on the fly, on the spot. In other words, let us just put it as it is—we lie when we talk to other people just to be part of the conversation or because we feel small and we want to one-up the other person with an experience that we may have had something like that, but we explode to make it sound a whole lot better than theirs. So *we* give a tall tale in response to *their* tall tale.

We do this even now, as converted members of the church of God, even though our Savior warns us very explicitly in Matthew 12:36 that in the judgment we will have to account for every idle word that we speak. I would think Jesus communicated quite well and properly here. The other part of it, though, on our receiving end, we seem not to take that seriously, and we go on speaking—blah, blah, blah, blah, blah—without much thought that we are going to have to account for the words that we are saying in the judgment.

It sounds as if Jesus believes communication is important too, very important. So we must make sure that our communication—spoken, written, nonverbal even—is true and right and good. What we say should be uplifting and edifying as much as possible. It should never be rude or crude or, as the saying goes, socially unacceptable. It should never contain curses or swearing. How many times does God say, "Don't swear."? Paul says in Colossians 4:

Colossians 4:6 Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

What he means there is that our words should always employ favor and kindness toward other people and be flavored with the character of Christ growing in us. That is, in general, our speech should be different. You might even think of the word holy here. It should be different and better than the speech of this world. People should be able to hear us speak and say, "That person is different. That person is special." Or maybe even "That person is a follower of Jesus Christ." because of the way he speaks.

One way we can do this is to be careful to include encouragement and hope and edification in our communications. I know that is not always possible, but we should try to be that way, to put those things in our speech with each other and with the world. Our speech should never tear down. It should never depress or deflate another. There are ways even to say negative things in a positive manner. All we have to do is *think* about those things. How can we put this in the best way? And of course, because of human nature, we are never sure even if we put them in the best way possible that someone is going to take it the right way. But at least we have covered our half of the communication process.

But this does not mean that we should never be negative in our speech. There is a time and a place for that. Solomon would say that there is a time for all those things. But our general attitude in our speech should be uplifting, upbuilding, optimistic, and pointing toward the goodness of God, if only in how we act while we are speaking, in our attitudes as we speak. Jesus Christ, as our example, gives a very good example of this kind of encouraging and positive speech and communication in His letter to the church in Philadelphia, which we are going to be going over today.

Among the seven letters that are there in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Revelation, it is beyond doubt the most positive and uplifting of His letters, of His personal communications to the church, even surpassing the letter to Smyrna. Now we know that Smyrna was a pretty good church. They were faithful people, and He commends them for a lot of things. But if you think about it, even though it is written to a faithful, righteous church, it is all about suffering and martyrdom and hanging on through poverty and persecution. Not really encouraging. For the situation, I guess it is. But He tells them, "Hey, some of you are going to die, you're going to have ten days of tribulation." Not totally uplifting.

But when you get to the letter to Philadelphia, it is a lot more uplifting and encouraging. It is a letter of commendation and encouragement to those in Philadelphia. We could say it is the Bible's version of "good job." "Keep it up!" because they had been a very faithful church.

So, like I said, we will be studying the letter to the church in Philadelphia today—this very positive letter. I want to, as I have done repeatedly throughout this sermon series, handle these letters as letters, as epistles, not as prophecies. I am not going to go into prophecy very much, if at all. But we want to treat them like Paul's letter to the Colossians or Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Or Peter's epistles and James' and Jude's and John's. We always read them as epistles. We do not necessarily read them as prophecy. So why not this one? Why not try to look at them from just as a communication from one person to another?

Another thing is, we are not trying to fit Christ's descriptions to churches that are around today, nor are we trying to fit them into eras. But we are trying to look at them personally as how they apply to us, how to understand and use Christ's insight into these churches to spot and overcome *our* faults. Because we still have a lot of them and we need to repent of a lot of them, and we still have a lot of growth to do, and these epistles that are found in the beginning of Revelation can help us do that. So we are going to use these in a personal way so that we could be found worthy of Him when He returns.

Please go with me to Revelation the 3rd chapter. We will read the entire letter to the Philadelphians. We will read from verse 7 through verse 13.

Revelation 3:7-13 "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, 'These things say He who is holy, He who is true, 'He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens.': 'I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.

Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.

Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

As I have been doing throughout these sermons, I want to give you a little bit of background about Philadelphia itself, the ancient city. I do this because it is very clear from the way these epistles are written that they took in mind the situation that was going on there in the city, took in mind the geography, took in mind various things in its history, and these things are reflected in the letter. So I want you to understand what the people in those cities were going through, or what was on their mind. What were their attitudes? What were they thinking about? This could help us understand what Christ is getting at here.

Geographically, the city of Philadelphia in Asia Minor is connected to both Sardis and to Smyrna. The city of Philadelphia lies at the eastern end of a broad valley, and as you go west-northwest about 30 miles along that valley, you come to the city of Sardis. So it had quite easy access to that other city. And then the valley swings around a little bit towards the southwest, kind of like a little boomerang type of valley and about 60 miles west of Philadelphia, that would make it about 30 miles west of Sardis, lies the city of Smyrna. So there is Smyrna on the coast. You go up a little bit to the east and north there is Sardis. And then you go down to the east and south and there is Philadelphia. So there is connection between those three cities.

The city itself sits on high ground south of the River Cogamis. But what makes it really distinctive and what made Philadelphia what it was is that it was at the juncture of very significant trade routes. The trade routes went to Mizia, Lydia, and Phrygia, three regions there in Western Asia Minor. Another thing that made Philadelphia significant is that the imperial mail route from Rome went through Philadelphia. It went first through Troas and then down to Philadelphia. From that point, it went east toward Babylon,

essentially, which was not part of the Empire. But Philadelphia because of this was called the gateway to the east. In fact, it was founded in about 140 ^{BC} as a kind of missionary city to bring Greek culture to the Lydians and the Phrygians. So it was a city with an open door, you might say, from the Greeks. It was a city of trade and commerce and Greek language and Greek culture spread east from Greece and Macedonia to Asia Minor and Syria. So it was very important in evangelizing in terms of Hellenism.

Commercially, the city was very important because of the trade routes and its economy was based in both agriculture and industry, and so it was a very prosperous town. One of the things that was significant about it was that the surrounding area had very rich, fertile, volcanic soil, and they grew grapes there that were known around the world. They obviously made wine and the wines were renowned across especially Asia Minor. But as the empire grew their wines went everywhere and they were quite good. One time one of the emperors told them that they had to decommission, if you will, half of their vineyards because they were vying with Italy for the wine capital of the world, and it almost came to blows. It actually ruined Philadelphia for a while that that law was on the books.

But when you have volcanic soil, that means you must also have volcanoes or had them at one point. It was a very seismically sketchy region, if you will, subject to very severe earthquakes. There was one in ^{AD} 17 that was particularly devastating. It leveled twelve cities in Asia, and the one it leveled the most was Philadelphia. It could not get back on its feet until the emperor decided to give them money and help them to reconstruct part of the city. But even then, there were many people who would have lived in Philadelphia who were afraid to go into the city because they were afraid that any kind of aftershock (and they were happening quite a lot during this period of ^{AD} 17, ^{AD} 18), could knock over a column or a wall or something.

So they did not want to live in the city. In fact, there was quite a bit of depopulation of Philadelphia at that time because people left the city and dwelled, essentially, in the suburbs, in the countryside because they were afraid, they had a phobia against living in the city. You will see, obviously Jesus in His letter to the seven churches, talks about they will have the name, they will be in the temple of God as pillars, and they will go out no more. So they will not have this fear anymore. It will be an eternal habitation, unlike

what they were used to in Philadelphia when any earthquake could come and demolish their homes and put them out on the street.

Now the name Philadelphia, obviously we know what Philadelphia means, "brotherly love." It commemorates the loyalty and devotion of Attalus II to his brother, King Eumenes II of Pergamum. When we talked about Pergamos, I talked about Eumenes II. His brother was Attalus II and he actually succeeded him as king. But Attalus II was called Philadelphus, lover of his brother.

Two incidents of note are the source of this nickname. First one is that a false rumor went around that Eumenes had been assassinated while he was off on a foreign visit. And so Attalus took the crown and ruled as Attalus II. But when his brother came back uninjured, unharmed, he voluntarily gave the throne back to his brother without any kind of reluctance. And so they saw he really loved his brother. He really respected him not only as a brother, but as king. The second one is that the Romans were at this time trying to take over the region and they eventually did. But the Romans were trying to get Attalus to overthrow his brother and Attalus steadfastly refused because he loved his brother and thought it should be the natural way. And so he came by this nickname in a good way. That is what they named the city, which we believe he built. So he essentially named it after himself, after his nickname.

Now I brought this up so we understand something. The names are very important in this letter. Clearly in verse 7 and also in verse 12, where Christ is talking about the rewards, names are very, very important here, vital. It says in verse 12 that "I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, . . . and I will write on him My new name." So we see there three different names that are given.

This is significant because Philadelphia actually had three different names. Obviously, Philadelphia was used most commonly, most often. But remember I told you the emperor gave them money after the earthquake destroyed the town? Well after that, when Tiberius gave them a large donation and also exempted them from taxes, they changed the name of the city to Neo Caesarea—New Caesar, New Caesar Town. That name lasted for a while and it went back to Philadelphia because that was its real name,

especially after Tiberius died. They did not feel like they had to do that anymore. But then it got a third name. When Vespasian became king, they were supporting him quite a bit. His family were the Flavia's so Flavia was the name of the town after him and his family, and even today it has a different name. It is Alasehir in Turkish. I do not know what Alasehir means, but it is a city whose names changed fairly frequently, and so Christ says, "I'm going to give you an eternal name. It'll be three different names, but it will be the names that you want to keep forever."

It was the center of worship for Dionysius, mainly, and you might think that goes pretty well because they had all that wine there. But it also contained temples to many other gods, especially to the Emperor cult, especially after Tiberius did what he did and their loyalty to Vespasian. They really liked the emperors. So they had a temple to Vespasian especially. The church was evidently a very small church. It was not huge, but it was faithful, as we have seen. It was a very good quality church. They were people who were willing to learn and to grow.

Its enemies, as we see from verse 9, were outside the church. They were not inside the church. There is no hint of heresy or scandal or factions in the church there in Philadelphia. Their problem was with those who say they were Jews and are not.

That is the general information that I am going to give you, and we are going to go into this letter. We will go into it verse by verse. But there is no way that I am going to be able to go through this point by point by point in terms of all that is there. It is packed full of stuff that we could talk about. I mean, it would take me two or three sermons to go through this letter because there is just so much there. But you know that the church has preached about this letter for decades, if not centuries. We know a lot about the letter to the church to Philadelphia, so I do not feel that I will be missing anything if I go over just a few of these things and not everything.

What I am going to do is I will highlight a few areas that we may not know well, that we may not have dwelled on very much, or that are especially interesting (to me, I guess), or emphasize the letter's theme. And this last one emphasizing the letter's theme is the main one because I think the theme is very important for us to grasp and then be able to see that what He says feeds

into the theme in just about every case. Let us go back to Revelation 3:7. The first verse is always very significant because Christ identifies Himself, and when He identifies Himself, He lays down the theme.

Revelation 3:7 "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, "These things says He who is holy, He who is true, "He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens."

With these three or four titles that He gives Himself, or identifications that He gives Himself, we have the theme laid out. Now I am going to take it as three, not four, even though there are four things mentioned here, I think the last two, "He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens" is essentially the same thing. He is talking about the same ability, if you will, the same power. So I am taking them as holy, true, and key of David with the description of shutting and opening there. I am going to also take the first two together, "He who is holy," and "He is true" because the text literally reads the holy One, the true One. It is kind of supposed to be together there.

Holy One is a common Old Testament title. It occurs about 20 times in the Old Testament, and I think you would probably recognize some of these verses that I am going to go to. Let us go to Psalm 78 in verse 41. Let us just go back to verse 40 to get the context.

Psalm 78:40-41 How often they provoked Him in the wilderness [speaking about the Israelites], and grieved Him in the desert! Yes, again and again, they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel.

I do not want to say too much there. Obviously we recognize the scripture.

Isaiah 40:25-26 "To whom then will you liken Me, or to whom shall I be equal?" says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these things, who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name, by the greatness of His might and the strength of his power; not one is missing.

So it is the great Holy One who did all this creating and the expanse of the stars and He knows them all by name. Let us move on.

Isaiah 43:14-15 Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "For your sake, I will send to Babylon and bring them all down as fugitives—the Chaldeans, who rejoice in their ships. I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King."

In using these titles, it is adding on to what makes this being the Holy One. He is the Creator. He is the One who can work within the Chaldean's nation and within the nation of Israel. He is the One that created them. He is their King. We are adding a lot of ideas to what the Holy One could encompass. Let us go to the book of Habakkuk. We do not go here very often. Right before Zephaniah, right after Nahum. This is in the prayer that Habakkuk gives in the last chapter.

Habakkuk 3:3 God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran.

We have got this idea of Him coming here. He is coming in judgment. He is coming to help. Let us move on to the New Testament. I just want to pick this up because it moves then from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Mark 1:23-24 [And this is a demon speaking.] Now, there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit. And he cried out saying, "Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

This demon recognizes Him as the Yahweh of the Old Testament. He was the God of Israel. He was their King. He was the One that had punished the Chaldeans and He is the One who had helped Israel. He was the Creator God. And so we have a title of Jesus. A name of Jesus, if you will, that stretches from before creation. This is the Holy One of God, he is saying now. It is an important title of God, of Jesus. He is showing who He is to these people in Philadelphia.

The main idea behind the word "holy" and thus the title, Holy One, is a mixture of things. It means things like ultra-pure, not just pure but beyond pure. Separate. In the Hebrew, the word holy has to do with cutting things apart and making them as different from the other thing that it is cut away from. And we have the expression "a cut above," which says essentially the same thing. It is a thing that has been given a special use—made special for a special reason.

So the idea of superior comes into play, and not just superior, but the most superior and maybe a definition of holy that is perhaps more modern. We have this expression "totally other." That is what Christ is. He is totally other. It is not someone that we really understand. He is beyond us. So far beyond us that He is incomprehensible in many ways in His pure state, if you will. Now He has made Himself comprehensible to us by coming as a human being. But He was holy as a human being, and sometimes even what He did as a human being seems very much beyond us because that is just the way He is. So He is incomprehensible to us, infinitely above and beyond us. He is truly exceptional.

Let us go on to the next one, which is "the true one." We did the holy one. Now we will do the true one. It is not as common an idea in the Old Testament or in the Bible, but it is there, and I would like to go to a few of those. Let us go to II Chronicles 15. Remember, we are establishing the theme here, and so we need to think of this in terms of the Philadelphians and what He is trying to get across to them. We will begin in verse 2. This is the prophet's statement to Asa.

II Chronicles 15:2 Then he [Azariah] went out to meet Asa, and said to him, "Hear me Asa and all Judah and Benjamin. The Lord is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you."

I just want you to keep that in the back of your head, because it is important to Philadelphia in the letter to Philadelphia a little bit later on.

II Chronicles 15:3 "For a long time, Israel has been without the true God, without a teaching priest, and without law."

So here the idea of the true One or the true God is found way back here in Judean history. Let us go to Jeremiah 10. He is the one and only God, the true God, the real God, the genuine God. Here we have it again.

Jeremiah 10:10 The Lord is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth will tremble, and the nations will not be able to endure His indignation.

So the true God. Not only is He living and everlasting as King, but He has tremendous power. The nations will not be able to stand against Him. Let us move into the New Testament.

Matthew 22:15-16 Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. [Now here they are digging themselves a huge hole at the very beginning by recognizing that He is indeed true.]

Another scripture is II Corinthians 1:18. Does it say true there? God is true. Mine says "faithful." "But as God is faithful," or God is true, and that is why I went there because one of the definitions of true is faithful, not just in terms of true as opposed to false. Okay, that clears that up.

I Thessalonians 1:9 For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

Here again, the definition is *genuine*, the real God. All these others are false gods. Here He is the real God.

I John 5:20 We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

So in these various scriptures that we have gone through, we can understand the meaning of this word "true" as it is used here in Revelation 3. He is the true One, that is, the One that is opposed to any kind of falsehood. He is true. He is also the genuine One, or the real One, as opposed to fake. And He is also faithful, that is, He is true to His word. He is true to His character. He does not change. He is constant, so He is eminently reliable. He is the real deal, as we would say. He always will do what He says He will do. He will always give what He promises, and He will never lead us astray.

All of these ideas are inside this title of being "the true One." It is not just a very simple thing. It is a little bit more complex. All these other ways of looking at it are also there, but especially the idea of Him being faithful.

I just realized there is one more verse I need to read. My eyes looked right over it.

John 3:33 He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true.

Let us go to Revelation 6:9-10 because there these two titles are used together. If you know your chapters, you know that the Revelation 6 is where all the seals were mentioned. And this is the fifth seal.

Revelation 6:9-10 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. [He is talking about martyrs here]. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

It is very significant that it is used here. They are talking about the Judge. The Judge, as we know, is Jesus Christ. All judgment has been given into His hand. And so martyrs are appealing to Him, asking Him, "How long is it until You will avenge us, You give us justice?"

Notice how it is placed in the sentence that they were there asking this. They say here, "How long, Oh Lord?—He is their master, He is their sovereign—holy and true." So the holy and true is used as a descriptor of the Lord. It is

almost like in apposition, where you are renaming something, like Richard the Minister, or whatever, saying "the Lord, holy and true." giving us an idea of the Lord's character and in the context of judgment. What is being said here, in a roundabout way, what it means is that the way that it is put in the sentence, they are essentially showing His qualifications as God. They can address Him as Lord and know that they will get justice from Him because He is holy and true. Those are His qualifications, His eminent qualifications, to be the Judge and to be their Lord.

These are significant qualifications or qualities, traits, character traits that He has that makes Him the perfect judge, makes Him the perfect Lord or Master because He is holy. He is beyond us. He is pure, He is something we can hardly comprehend. He is so great and He is true. He is real, He is genuine, He is trustworthy, He is faithful. All of those things come together. And because of that, He could be trusted to do His job as a judge and as Lord. He is perfect, perfect for the job that He has been given.

So Jesus is saying here when He writes to the Philadelphians something they already know. But He is telling them it is no mere man writing to them, even as Jesus, He is God. It is God Himself giving them this information. But He cloaks it in these titles so that we get more information than just "I'm God writing to you." It is not just, "This is Me, you know, the Yahweh of the Old Testament." He is saying, "I am the holy One. I am the true One. These are what make Me what I am—holy and true." Let us go back to Isaiah, this time in chapter 49. This is a Messianic prophecy.

Isaiah 49:5-7 Now the Lord says, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel is gathered to Him (For I shall be glorious in the eyes of the Lord, and My God shall be My strength), indeed He says, 'Is it too small a thing that you should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.'" [This is description of His Messianic task. He came and did and will continue to do in the second coming.] Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, their Holy One, to Him who man despises, to Him whom the nation abhors, to the Servant of rulers: "Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of

the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel; and He has chosen You."

I came here just as a backup to this idea of the holy and true One being the Messiah, being the great God that we know as Jesus Christ.

Let us go on to the key of David because time is fleeting here. Like I said before, the key of David and the rest of this opening is all one image, the idea of opening and shutting and all that. That is all one image. It comes from a quotation from Isaiah 22:22. I do not know if you are aware of the story of Shebna. You probably are. Shebna was the chamberlain or the steward of the house or the palace of David during the reign of Hezekiah and Shebna had gotten a pretty big head. He had started constructing a tomb within the area of where the kings were buried. And God said, "No. You're getting too big a head here. I'm going to replace you with My faithful servant, Eliakim."

And so this image here, where it talks about having the key of David who opens and no one shuts and shuts and no one opens, refers back to their position, both Shebna's and Eliakim's position as steward. The badge of their office was a set of keys which they had on their shoulder, I guess. They must have been bigger keys than we use today, but they had the ability, if you will, they had the charge, or the responsibility to open and close doors within the palace. That was part of their job, and no one could get in or out without their say-so.

What this tells us is that Shebna and then later Eliakim, in this position of Royal Steward or Royal Chamberlain, had the responsibility of granting access to the king, access to the throne room, or if he did not like the person or the person was in some way an enemy or what have you, he could deny access to the king or to the throne room. So he could open and no one else could shut, or he could shut and no one else could open. That was the heavy responsibility that this person had within the palace.

Eliakim in the prophecy is the type of Christ who is the faithful steward of God's House. Christ now has the position of being the One who has the key of David. He opens, and certainly no one can shut, and He shuts, and certainly no one could open. That is His job. Having the key of David, He is

the one through whom we must work to enter the Kingdom of God. Remember, it says in Matthew 28:18, that He says "All authority on heaven and earth has been given to Me." Basically what happened was He was given the key of David at that point. He had all authority to grant access or to deny access, because remember, the next thing He talked about was going out preaching and baptizing and that sort of thing, opening up salvation to others. That was all under His authority, He could accept a person or deny a person salvation. Very, very heavy responsibility.

This is very much like the other image that we see in John 10:7-10, where He says, "I am the door of the sheep. No one comes in or out except by Me." So two different images, but the same idea that if we go to Him and He accepts us and it allows us to enter in, we can have abundant and eternal life. But if He says, "No," there is no gainsaying Him. It is all under His authority. So no thieves and robbers and people who are not supposed to be there will be there because He has been given this power by the Father to accept or deny. That is all under Him. And it is part of His purview as judge as well.

So after we have gone over this, what do you think the theme of the letter is? Because remember I said these titles that He gives Himself here in verse 7 are what sets up the theme of the letter to Philadelphia. Let us read verse 8.

Revelation 3:8 "I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name."

What He says here is that He has granted the Philadelphians access to the Kingdom. He opened the door to them. And what did they do with it? Great things. Despite their personal or collective weakness or insignificance—they had little strength—they were like the proverbial people in I Corinthians 1:26. You know, "not many wise, not many mighty are chosen." That sort of thing. But what did they do when they were given this access? They were obedient. They were righteous. They were becoming holy, and they were faithful. They had not denied His name. They had taken the advantage that He had given them by opening up salvation to them, and they had made the most of it. That is what verse 8 says.

The theme, then, to me is that Christ looked on that church in Philadelphia and He said, "They're just like Me. Less strength, less power. But they are like Me." So the theme is "likeness to Christ." That is what set Philadelphia apart from the other churches. They were really trying to be like Christ. Now we have taught in the past, the Worldwide Church of God especially taught in the past, that the open door referred to evangelism, and it might. But it is a secondary one. The real thing He is talking about here is *access to God*. Salvation, their calling. Of course, evangelism has to do with going out and preaching so others could be called, so you can see how it could be a secondary application there.

The primary meaning, though, refers to their calling to salvation. And like I said, they took full advantage of this opportunity, despite having very little power, because their power came from Christ. Obviously, that is what Philippians 4:13 says. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." They banked on that and they grew and they overcame and they transformed into the character image of Jesus Christ. And when He looked down upon them, He saw people that were like Him, which is why He is willing to do so much for them. "Hey, they're just like Me. They're really trying. They're doing good with the resources they have."

Revelation 3:9 [this supports the theme.] "Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed, I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you."

Right after verse 8, where He talks about people that are a lot like Him, He then switches to people who are not like Him. Those who say they are Jews—from His own tribe!—would you not think they would be the ones who were most like Him? And He says, "No, they are lying. They are not like Me at all!" What did He say in John 8? He said that they were not like Him at all. If they were like Him, they would have believed Abraham, and you know, that sort of thing. But they did not. They were showing there that their father was the Devil. It is exactly what He says here. They are the synagogue of Satan. So He is saying that the people there in Philadelphia were more like Him than the Jews who should have physically been more like Him because they were all from the same tribe.

But we know that Israel often rebelled and went astray. You might want to jot down Isaiah 1:2-4, where it talks about Israel not knowing God even though He was their Maker, He was their Father. He had done so much for them. And, of course, Romans 9:6-8, where Paul tells us that it is not physical Israel that is really Israel. It is the ones who have the Spirit of God who are really Israelites. And, of course, Galatians 6:16, where Paul calls the church the Israel of God. And so these ones in Philadelphia were very much like Him, and their enemies, who *thought* they were people of God, were not. They were not like Him at all. In fact, their traits were more like Satan's because they were persecuting the church and persecuting Christ and all that.

Revelation 3:10 "Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial, which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth."

This is where I told you to keep this idea in the back of your head that Christ does something and we do something and He does something and then we do something. All this idea of reciprocity. Remember it says in Matthew 6 when He talks about forgiving. He said, "If you forgive others, I'll forgive you. And if you do not forgive others, I will not forgive you." But He looks at these people in Philadelphia and sees how they are so much like Him, and they are trying to do what is right and good. And He says, "I'm going to bless you for this because you're doing what is right. You're doing what I did—persevere. So I'm going to help you. I'm going to keep you from these terrible times that are coming."

Mostly, it is probably the great tribulation and the Day of the Lord He is talking about here, but it does not necessarily have to. It could be any major trial that you are going through that Jesus Christ, because you are faithful He will be faithful to you and help you persevere through that trial, and you can take that to the bank. As they had persevered in faith, He would preserve them and give them what they needed during their time of trouble. I was just going to go to I John 4:19, which is "We love Him because He first loved us." And if we love Him, He loves us. And then we love Him and He loves us, and it just goes back and forth. I mean, it might sound kind of sappy, but that is how it works. We feed off one another and show love. And then, of course, because we love Him, we love the brethren as well.

Let us go to verse 11. You can tell I am charging through this because there is just so much here. He says,

Revelation 3:11 "Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown."

This is when things get a little different here. Jesus exhorts them to continue their faithfulness and loyalty to Him all the way to the end. The time is near. Time is short. He says, "Hold fast." Do not let anybody take what you already have, what you have already built. Do not let anybody knock you off your throne, as it were. He does not want them to fall short. Falling short is a theme throughout the New Testament because there is such a danger of it. You can find places in just about every epistle where the writer says, "Watch out, "be careful," "endure," "hold fast," "stand," you know, in very different ways, but they all come around and say, "You've got to persevere. You've got to keep on going. You've got to go right to the end. You can't let down." And that is what makes this life so hard.

Now, a remarkable bit of history concerns what happened to the Philadelphia church just over 50 years after this letter. It is not good news. The primary problem the Philadelphians faced was aggressive Judaism from those "who say they were Jews and we are not." They challenged the Christians there in Philadelphia to prove their case for Jesus out of the Old Testament prophecies. They also gave the carrot of saying that they would give them sanctuary from the emperor cult if they would just accept Judaism and come back to the synagogue. Because the synagogue, the Jews, were exempt from emperor worship by law. So if they just came under the umbrella of Judaism, they would be fine. And then, of course, the other side was, prove to us that this Jesus is the Christ out of the Old Testament.

Well, what happened in Philadelphia was that they began to study prophecy very deeply, and they began to overemphasize it. And in their missionary spirit, they spread these prophecies to surrounding areas, thinking they had only a little time. It says it right there in the letter, "I come quickly." So they had this missionary spirit that they would go out into the surrounding countryside and preach these prophecies that they were learning about from the Bible. Well, in that region in the area of their missionary activity, sometime after AD 150, heresy called Montanism sprang up. Montanus and

two women, Prisca, also called Priscilla, and Maximilla claim that the Holy Spirit inspired prophecies that they received in ecstatic, convulsive visions. They turned into, essentially, Charismatics, prophetic Charismatics.

These three, Montanus, Prisca, and Maximilla taught that their new prophecy, see, they had "new truth," which included Montanus' proclamation that the towns of Papuza and Timian in West Central Frigia would be the site of the New Jerusalem. Anyway, they taught that their prophecies superseded the authority of Jesus and the apostles. So they had direct access to God through the Holy Spirit who had given them these visions. And people were to follow them rather than Scripture. Montanus also tended towards strict legalism and asceticism. They added restrictions to lawkeeping not found in Scripture and despite fasting often they added more mandatory fasts, and they may also have been Docetists. I do not know if you know what Docetism is but Docetists believe that Christ had two natures, a spiritual one and a physical one. Christ was the spiritual one. Jesus was the physical one. Jesus died on the cross. But Christ, the spiritual one, escaped that. He left Him beforehand. Obviously Docetism is not true, but these are the heirs of the Philadelphia church that was commended so well by Christ.

I think this should give us pause. Though the Philadelphians were undoubtedly faithful, they were a good group of people when this letter was written, they did not remain faithful, or at least their heirs did not remain faithful. Outside pressures turned some of them prophecy-mad where all they did was talk prophecy, and they lost their understanding and vision of doctrine and what the true God is about. Others turned to excessive lawkeeping and denial of the flesh.

By the way, the Montanus' were rather haughty and superior. They called themselves the spirit-filled, and everyone else were called the physical. Actually, the word can be translated for what these physical people were, "animal men," that they called everybody else animal men. But they were the spiritual. And of course, some of them, like these three, became charismatics.

The point is that the letter there in Revelation gives us a snapshot in time when the Philadelphians were wonderfully faithful and looked a lot like Jesus Christ Himself in terms of their spirituality. Their holiness, their righteousness, and their faith could possibly have lasted about a generation

or so. But they did not maintain it, not as a church. Many of them did not hold fast, even though that is the main command here in the letter to Philadelphia.

You have to wonder why. It could be many things. Did they grow weary in well doing as it says there in Galatians 6:9? Because Jesus did not come as soon as they thought, and they just give up. Did we see a lot of that in the Worldwide Church of God? Did they quit growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18) because they thought they had Christ's eternal approval? Another doctrinal problem, the doctrine of eternal security, which we have seen come up in the Worldwide Church of God and afterward.

Did they become so caught up in going through open doors, that is, doing the work, as they saw it, that they neglected the weightier matters of the law? We saw that a lot in the Worldwide Church of God, where people were so gung-ho about doing the work of God that they neglected quite a lot.

Did they let God's inspiration to them, God's revelation to them, go to their heads, thinking more highly of themselves than they ought, as it says in Romans 12:3? We are special. We are the spiritual people and everybody else are animal men. We saw that too, did we not?

We cannot be sure, but whatever the case, the church in Philadelphia did not maintain its faithfulness and likeness to Christ despite Christ's effusive praise in this letter. Like I said, it was a snapshot in time. That is why, as I mentioned before, this way of life is so difficult. One must build and grow and reach for the heights of spirituality and closeness of relationship to Jesus Christ. And then, after all that, maintain it to the very end, to endure, to persevere, to hold fast. That makes us ask the question, if we are serious, "Do I have what it takes to endure to the end and be saved?" Let us look at what Jesus says there in Luke the 14th chapter. This is something we read and discuss to anyone wanting baptism, but we need to think about these things every once in a while.

Luke 14:25-33 Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brother and sisters, yes,

and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'? Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple."

He is telling us that it is an all-in effort all the time, forever, in this life. You have got to be willing to commit to all of that. If you do not, you cannot be His disciple. It is not an easy road. It is something that we must commit to and recommit to all down the line because if we give up, if we let up, we are going to go backward. And as He said to the Philadelphians back there in chapter 3, your crown might be taken.

Revelation 3:12 "He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write upon him My new name."

The rewards here are all about entrance and position in God's Kingdom, as were promised to the other churches were as well. But here we see another instance of the theme: likeness to Christ. Revelation 21:22 says that God and Christ are New Jerusalem's temple and here the Philadelphian's are promised to become pillars, strong supports, major pieces in that temple. They will be identified with Christ in that temple. They also receive the name of the Father, the name of New Jerusalem, and Christ's new name. Put this all together and their reward is to be totally immersed in the identity of Christ. The identity that they will never lose throughout all eternity. They will always be with Him, they will always be known as His Bride.

Let us just finish in Colossians 3. This idea is all throughout the New Testament. But I am just going to bring it out here.

Colossians 3:1-4 If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. [We are already identified with Him so close that it is almost like we are wrapped up inside Him, totally enveloped by Him.] When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear!