

## **The Philadelphia Syndrome**

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Please start turning to Revelation 3, where we find the letter to Philadelphia.

As most of you know, the Worldwide Church of God saw itself in the letter to Philadelphia. Much of this belief was based on the mention of an open door in Revelation 3:8. Notice, though, that verse 8 does not identify what that open door is. However, there are several New Testament references to an open door to preach the gospel, and the WCG certainly did preach the gospel in a way that had not been done since probably the first century, so that identifier of Philadelphia seemed to fit.

Now, the Bible speaks of open doors in other ways as well. My own belief is that the open door here refers to something else entirely. Even so, that is not the topic for today. Nor is the topic whether the WCG was correct in its identification of itself as Philadelphia. Instead, the question for today is what happened as a result of the WCG identifying itself as Philadelphia. We will consider some of the fruit that was produced, and is still being produced, because of the belief that the letter to Philadelphia applied to the WCG.

In this, I will be speaking in the most general of terms. We each have our own vantage points, and if this does not match up with yours exactly, just consider it as food for thought.

The letter to Philadelphia is one of only two in which Jesus does not say anything negative. In the other five, He addresses some significant shortcomings. That percentage by itself is a good reminder that there is a decent chance that Christ evaluates our spiritual condition differently than we do. These letters show some serious controversies between the Savior and His people. But Philadelphia is clearly favored by Christ, and it is only natural to want such a glowing report to apply to oneself.

A problem develops, though, because of the tendency to think too highly of oneself after receiving God's favor. The angel Helel was clearly gifted by God, but because he could not keep this propensity under control, he imagined himself better and greater than was true, leading to rebellion. Similarly, God favored Israel unlike any other nation, but because of Israel's carnality, she forsook God. As the blessings increased, and the feelings of importance increased, the sense of obligation to the One giving the blessings decreased.

So, being favored by God is a privilege, but as we understand, privilege also puts one under obligation. And there is no doubt in my mind that God blessed and favored the WCG in numerous ways, not the least of which was the powerful preaching of the gospel of the kingdom of God. The witness that was made through the WCG could only have been done because of God's favor.

But if one receives God's favor yet does not keep one's carnality in check, what can develop is a sense of invincibility, of infallibility, and something like Eternal Security. It is quite possible to officially reject the Doctrine of Eternal Security and yet still operate as though one already has it made. The practical result is that one feels little or no need to consider one's ways and make sure one is in alignment with God. There is no urgency to rightly discern one's spiritual condition because one feels secure in God's favor.

For those of you with experience with the WCG, think back to some of the common sentiments and approaches, and how many of them could have had their root in this letter.

In verse 10, Philadelphia is promised to be kept from the hour of trial. Self-preservation is an innate response in us all, and so we naturally wanted to be Philadelphia. We wanted to be part of the organization that had an open door, the key identifier of Philadelphia, which was interpreted to mean preaching the gospel. And thus, the organization doing the preaching rose in importance. See, it was the organization with the all-important open door that would be kept from the hour of trial.

Because of this sentiment, a top priority was to stay on good terms with the organization. That certainly is not a bad impulse, because we should strive to be on good terms with those with whom we fellowship. But what it led to in later years for many—though not all—was the practice of “playing church,” because nobody wanted to jeopardize his position within the organization that had God’s favor. One might be as carnal as the day is long in one’s private life, yet expend much effort to keep up appearances, especially regarding those higher up in the organization. There may have been no active relationship with God, but one could show up at Sabbath services, and say the right things to the right people, and somehow this translated into a good standing with God, as though God was being fooled.

Again, it is a good thing to maintain one’s relationship with one’s fellowship. But the problem was that, in general, this impulse became a higher priority than maintaining the relationship with God. In practical terms, for many—though certainly not all—the organization was more real than God. What Headquarters thought mattered more than what God thought, and idolatry slipped in. In later years, the influence of Fuller Theological Seminary and Azusa Pacific crept in to the WCG’s teachings, forcing the membership to make a decision. I knew of one young couple that, rather than proving which doctrines were correct, instead proved to themselves that the WCG was the true church. After that, anything the organization taught was acceptable.

Another common sentiment had to do with Christ’s reference to the “key of David” in verse 7. In short, it is symbolic of government. So, we add government to the letter to Philadelphia. I don’t fully understand how this developed, but somehow this turned into the idea that church government was, in fact, God’s government, which is not correct. Church government is a government of fallible men, given limited authority from God and acting as His agent. But just like with the civil authorities that God raises up, this does not mean that everything that is said comes from God. Even though nobody declared it outright (hopefully), in practical terms, Headquarters was considered to be as close to infallible as you could get while still disclaiming human infallibility. So, we did not have to prove all things; we just had to be loyal to “God’s government,” as it was identified then.

As long as the organization was doing well (at least numerically), and we were in good standing with the organization, we felt secure. And, sadly, deepening one's relationship with God was not emphasized as much as loyally supporting the organization. What developed was a strong encouragement to look to the ministry and to the organization more than to look to God, and thus, there was an erosion of personal responsibility to God.

As the doctrines began to be corrupted, another part of this letter came to the fore, that of "holding fast," mentioned in verse 11. Some interpreted it to mean to hold fast to the WCG, even though its teachings no longer set it apart. It was still "God's government." Others interpreted it to mean to hold fast to what the WCG had been. For a great many, either the organization, or the organizational model, was what they held fast to. And yet the first five mentions of "holding fast" in Scripture say to hold fast to God. A couple more refer to holding fast to the covenant, which is similar. Yet because of how this letter was explained, the organization slowly gained more gravity than God's words, or even God Himself.

As the scattering continued, some tried to wrap themselves in the mantle of Philadelphia. Among those most determined to see themselves in this letter, additional fruits have been borne—most notably, competition and exclusivity. In those quarters, having the open door to continue to do God's work is paramount, and there is competition to see who can squeeze the door open even further, and thus showcase God's favor.

So, the common interpretation of this letter has put great emphasis on identifying and holding fast to the single organization that has an open door to preach, which is seen as doing God's work, and which is "God's government," and is thus favored by God, and will be protected. The wretched irony is that the word "Philadelphia" means "brotherly love," and yet those most keen on the mantle of Philadelphia seem least able to love their spiritual brethren. Yet Paul warns that we risk eating and drinking judgment on ourselves at Passover if we cannot discern Christ's Body, which is not defined by organizational lines.

Now, I have painted with a pretty broad brush here, and maybe it seems like I used more dark colors than light ones, but hopefully the picture is still recognizable. This is not intended to be a complete recounting of the history

of the WCG, nor a summary statement of other church groups. But the effect of the WCG seeing itself as Philadelphia has been profound. The Philadelphia syndrome thus serves as a strong caution against reading oneself into Scripture in self-serving ways. It also highlights the problem of allowing God's favor to overshadow our obligation to hold fast to Him above all else.