



To the Church in Philadelphia

Revelation 3:7-13

It's hard not to read these letters to the seven congregations located in first-century Asia without feeling a sense of awe at the power and holiness of the Jesus who speaks to his church, often with uncompromising clarity about issues which need to be addressed. But it is also important to remind ourselves that we are presented here with a God who is not looking for any reason he can find to judge us. Among these seven churches are two which receive no word of condemnation, those found in Smyrna (2:8-11) and in Philadelphia (3:7-13).

This week's reading also stands out because of the description of Jesus we find at the beginning of the letter, the only one to contain imagery not taken from the description of him found at the end of Chapter One. In 3:7, he is described as the one 'who holds the key of David.' This description is also found in Isaiah 22:22 where it refers to Eliakim, appointed to the role of chief steward to the household of King Hezekiah and therefore with the right to grant access to the king and his palace. One commentator, Ben Witherington, writes: 'the verse means that Christ has the key to the royal household, referring to the New Jerusalem. In all likelihood the open door mentioned in v8 refers to the door into the heavenly city or royal and heavenly mansion.'¹

Further similarities with the situation faced by the Church in Smyrna appear in the verses that follow. The suffering being experienced by the Church in Philadelphia is also caused by the 'those who are of the synagogue of Satan' (3:9). The implication is that the Jewish community in Philadelphia have excommunicated the Christians who were among them – the door has been shut in their face! Jesus, however, promises an eventual vindication for those who remain faithful to him. One day, those in the synagogue will have no other option but to acknowledge his lordship and his approval of his church. We should not take the phrase 'synagogue of Satan' to mean literally that satanic worship was taking place. Rather, it is a reminder of the power which ultimately lies behind all forces which come in opposition to Jesus and his Church.

Once again Jesus offers a vivid and memorable promise to those who remain faithful to him. As with the other letters, the imagery would have been especially meaningful because of its link to the city where the church was located. 'The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God' (3:12). Tom Wright notes that, 'Central Turkey, in the first century as much as in any other time, was notorious for its earthquakes. Philadelphia had suffered one of the worst ones, fifty or more years before this book was written... Imagine the tall pillars shaking, cracking and then

¹ Ben Witherington, *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Revelation*, 2003, 106

buckling as a huge marble pediment came crashing down. Not a good place to be.’² Jesus holds out to the Philadelphian Christians a security and stability far greater than anything they could imagine in their present reality, the promise of being a ‘fixture’ in the heavenly temple. The assurance offered also picks up the language of being ‘named’ which is found later in Revelation. In 7:3, a seal is placed ‘on the foreheads of the servants of our God’ and in 22:4 we are told that God’s servants ‘will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.’

1. We often excuse the failures and weaknesses in our current congregations with the saying that ‘there’s no such thing as a perfect church.’ What can we learn, then, from the fact that Jesus has no words of condemnation for at least two of these seven churches?
2. Jesus speaks with approval of the church in Philadelphia while also saying, in verse 8, ‘I know that you have little strength.’ What lessons might this teach us about which churches or ministries we think of as successful and significant?
3. How might the language of doors being shut on us by others and doors being opened by Jesus speak to you about the way God can work in your life in spite of opposition?
4. How helpful do you find the idea that those who oppose the church will one day have no choice but to acknowledge Jesus’ love for those who were faithful to him?
5. In a world in which we often find it hard to see beyond the pressures and demands of the coming days or weeks, how can we help each other to retain a focus on the heavenly reward which awaits us?

² Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, 2011, 33