

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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PHILADELPHIA: THE PERSEVERING LITTLE CHURCH OF THE OPEN DOOR (Part 1)

If you had taken a poll among the churches of John's day, you might have found the church at Philadelphia at the bottom of the list of achievers. If we gauge a church's "success" in terms of numbers (along with expanding buildings, pastoral staffs that number 20 or 30 or more, bus fleet, etc.), the church at Philadelphia, by today's standards, would be castigated as a failure. This church didn't have a lot going for it if compared to the "super-churches" of the 21st century. This is not to say that numbers are to be despised, and that smallness automatically meets with God's approval. Size is simply not a good indication of effectiveness and spiritual reality, and the one thing the church at Philadelphia possessed was an effective spiritual reality. It caused problems in the community. It didn't pack people into the church's meetings, but it did meet with Christ's approval, and that is all that really matters in the beginning, middle, and final analysis.

- I. ***HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.*** The city of Philadelphia derived its name from Attalus II (ca. 159-138 B.C.) who displayed such loyalty and love for his brother Eumenes that he was called "Philadelphus" (*philos*, love; and *adelphos*, brother). It stood on the banks of the river Cogamus. Philadelphia was in many ways ideally located. Travel and trade were in abundance, but there was one major problem. The region was dangerously volcanic, and earthquakes were common, so much so that one ancient writer, Strabos, called Philadelphia "the city full of earthquakes." In A.D. 17 the same earthquake that destroyed most of Sardis (located only about 28 miles northwest of Philadelphia) demolished Philadelphia. The local deity was Bacchus, the god of wine and drinking. The city became synonymous with wine and festivity (like New Orleans and jazz, or Las Vegas and gambling). How the church was started we have no Biblical information. The earth church father Ignatius (d. A.D. 138), wrote a letter to this church making special mention of "the beloved disciple" (John) and of Paul, Timothy, and Titus with the complete assurance that the church knew these men by way of the Scripture or through direct contact in years gone by.
- II. ***CHRIST'S DESCRIPTION.*** As in all of the letters, the opening words of describing the Lord Jesus are important, instructive, and particularly related to the situation of the church being addressed. Three distinct things are declared about the glorified Christ to the Philadelphians:
 - A. ***He Is the Holy One.*** "In Scripture, the quality of holiness applies first of all to God, and as applied to Him its fundamental idea is that of unapproachableness. And this unapproachableness is based on the fact that God is divine and therefore absolutely distinct from the creature. Holiness in this sense is not merely an attribute to be coordinated with others in

God. It is rather something that is predictable of everything that is found in God. He is holy in His grace as well as in His righteousness, in His love as well as in His wrath.”¹ This title was familiar to the Jews as belonging only to God (Habakkuk 3:3; comp. also Acts 3:14; Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34). Trench notes that when the term is “applied to God, as in Deut. 32:4; Rev. 15:4; 16:5, and here, He is One in whom these eternal sanctities reside; who is Himself the root and ground of them all. The *hagios* is the one separate from evil, with the perfect hatred from which he is separate. But holiness in this absolute sense belongs only to God; not to angels, for *He charged his angels with folly* (Job 4:18), and certainly not to men (Lam. 3:2; Gen. 6:5; 8:21). He then that claims to be *The Holy One* – a name which Jehovah in the Old Testament continually claims for his own (Isa. 6:3; 40:25; 43:15) – implicitly claims to be God; takes to Himself a title which is God’s alone, which it would be blasphemy for any other to appropriate, and unless we are prepared for the alternative that He is guilty of this, can only be accepted as Himself God.”²

- B. ***He Is the True One.*** Christ is the *alēthinos*. The word conveys, not only the idea of genuine and authentic, but complete truthfulness as over against any deceit or falsehood. Christ is the truth, He will accomplish all that He says (note that in Revelation 6:10 both terms are applied to God. He is faithful and completely trustworthy (Lam. 3:22, 23; 2 Tim. 2:13).
- C. ***He Is the Sovereign One.*** “. . . who holds the key of David. What He opens, no one can shut; and what He shuts, no one can open.” The term “key of David” occurs in Isaiah 22:22. “The words teach that to Christ belongs complete authority in respect to admission to or exclusion from the city of David, the new Jerusalem. The admission referred to may primarily have to do with the Gentiles and the exclusions with unbelieving Jews . . . But their scope is universal. As Eliakim carried the keys of the house of David in the court of Hezekiah, so does Christ in the Kingdom of God: cf. Eph. 1:22. He has the same authority in regard to Hades, 1:18, and supreme authority in heaven and earth, Matt. 28:18, and is *as a son over his own house*, Heb. 3:6.”³

III. ***CHRIST’S COMMENDATION.*** The Sovereign One who is holy and true knows the church at Philadelphia in a way that only He can.

- A. ***The Church’s Condition.*** “You have little strength.” A better translation would be “little power” or “little ability.” The idea is not that of spiritual weakness, but of influence or ability. This was probably a small church composed of the poor without much prominence in the city.⁴
- B. ***The Church’s Fidelity.*** “. . . yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”⁵ Though small and insignificant by the world’s standards, this church stood the test – no compromise. Despite their size and strength, they were true to the One who is true. Notice the twofold commendation “kept my word” and “have not denied my name.” Keeping Christ’s word means first of all knowing it, and in knowing it, obeying it. “No man keeps the word of Christ in duty unless he keeps it as doctrine; and yet no man keeps the word of Christ as doctrine unless he possesses it in all the details of duty. If life is to be according to the will of the King, there must be knowledge of His teaching. Knowledge of the teaching is only evident as life harmonizes therewith.”⁶ Likewise, “not denying Christ’s name implies a whole-hearted willingness to be associated with the Lord Jesus Christ in all the circumstances of life.” **(To be continued.)**

ENDNOTES

¹L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1949), p. 531.

²R. C. Trench, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. James Family, 1978), p. 182.

³R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John I* (T and T Clark, 1956), p. 86.

⁴“We are not to suppose that these good souls in Philadelphia lived angelic lives of unbroken holiness because Jesus Christ has nothing but praise for them. Rather we are to learn that great thought that, in all our poor, stained service, He recognizes the central motive and main drift, and, accepting these, is glad when He can commend,” Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, “Revelation” (G. H. Doran Co., 1937), p. 259.

⁵“The aorists, *etērēsas, ouk ērnēsō*, refer to some distinct occasions in the past, when, being thus put to the test, they had approved themselves faithful to Him,” Trench, p. 187.

⁶G. Campbell-Morgan, *A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians* (Revell, 1921), p. 169.