

PHILADELPHIA: THE SECURE CHURCH

Text: Revelation 3.7–13

Theme: We must keep the words of Jesus in order to stand firm to the end.

Charles Simeon Pastor Trinity Church in Cambridge, England, for 54 years. He preached his first sermon there on November 10, 1782. The congregation did not want him. For five years they refused to allow him to be the Sunday afternoon lecturer, giving it instead to the assistant pastor they had wanted the church hierarchy to appoint over them. When that man left after five years, the church gave the lecture to another man for the next seven years, all the time refusing to allow Simeon to lecture on Sunday afternoons. Simeon responded by holding a Sunday evening service later than the Sunday afternoon lecture people from the town began to come. The church wardens locked the doors, leaving people crowding in the street. Simeon had a locksmith open the doors, but when the wardens again lock the doors, he dropped the evening service. Only after 12 years did the church invite Simeon to be this Sunday afternoon lecturer.

On Sunday mornings, the pew holders refused to come to the church and locked their pew doors, refusing to allow others to sit in their personal pews. Simeon personally funded and set up seats in isles endocrine corners, but the churchwardens removed them, throwing them out of the building. Simeon attempted to visit the members of the church, but few doors were open to him. The opposition continued for 10 years, and the historical records indicate that Simeon was helped by a legal decision in 1792, to the effect that pew holders could not lock their pews and stay away indefinitely.

What's the stand Charles Simeon? John Piper writes, "Simeon exerted his influence through sustained biblical preaching year after year. This was the central labor of his life.... Simeon preached in the same pulpit for 54 years.... Through extraordinary opposition and trials."

Need

We need to be so rooted and grounded that when fierce winds of opposition, rejection, and persecution blow into our lives we stand like oaks of righteousness.

Main Point

Jesus commends the church in Philadelphia for keeping his word, and they're keeping of his word results in an open door and the promise that they will be kept from the coming hour of trial.

If we are to stand as oaks of righteousness, we must keep the word of Jesus.

Preview

- 3.7 Jesus Has the Key of David
- 3.8, 9 Keep the Word: An Open Door and Subjected Enemies
- 3.10, 11 Keep the Word: Kept in Tribulation and Ready for His Coming
- 3.12, 13 Hear the Promises: A Pillar in the Temple

Context

This is the second to last of the seven letters. Like the second letter to Smyrna, the church is not rebuked and is not summoned to repentance but is commended by Jesus. We should recall as we think about this letter to the church in Philadelphia that Jesus called the church in Smyrna to **“Be faithful unto death”** (Rev 2.10). Both letters also speak of **“those who say that they are Jews and are not,”** and in both letters these Jews are identified as a **“synagogue of Satan”** (Rev 2.9;

3.9). For these and other reasons, it seems that the seven letters are arranged such that the first and the last go together, the second and the second to last go together, and the middle three go together.

Let's look first at the One who is over His church. There, in verse 7, we see that...

Jesus Has the Key of David

Faith is not a vague spiritual sense. Faith is an active confidence that one does not presently see nevertheless corresponds to reality. Our faith in Jesus does not increase because we think about faith. Our faith in Jesus increases because we are made more confident in Jesus. There is a real sense, then, in which Jesus intends every one of these introductions to the seven letters to build faith in him.

Jesus announces himself to the church in Philadelphia as **“the holy one, the true one”**. This is an astonishing claim. While some may have the audacity to identify themselves in this way, only Jesus is with the Father and the Spirit in being completely holy and true. The fact that he is **“true”** speaks to his reliability. He can be trusted. The fact that he is **“holy”** speaks to his purity and total consecration to God. He will not lead his people into sin. He can be followed. Those who hear Jesus announce himself as “the holy one, the true one” have their confidence in Jesus bolstered.

This confidence in Jesus, however, is not just an abstract assurance. This confidence is practical and specific, and Jesus begins to tell us of the specific, practical nature of faith in his holiness and truth in the next words of verse 7. He goes on to identify himself as the one **“who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.”**

This statement is reminiscent of Isaiah 22:22, and the mention of “the key” calls to mind Jesus's words about **“the keys of the kingdom of heaven”** (Matthew 16.19). The point of the imagery, though, is that Jesus is unstoppable! He is **“holy.”** He will not lead his people into moral error. He is **“true.”** He will not lead his people into intellectual error. He opens and no one shuts, and he shuts and no one opens. He will not fail.

Revelation 3:7 is heralding the trustworthiness of Jesus for us. Do you trust him? Maybe you have consciously decided **NOT** to trust Jesus.

Let me ask you: is what you trust holy? Are you sure?

Is what you trust true? Are you sure?

Will what you trust prevail? Are you sure?

If you don't trust in Jesus, are you confident enough in what you do trust to bank your soul on it? Are you confident enough that Jesus is not to be trusted that you are ready to make the infinite, eternal wager of your everlasting destiny? Will you bet your life on your confidence that Jesus is not worthy of your trust?

Let me urge you today: bring all your questions to Jesus.

Bring all your objections to him.

Bring to Jesus all the things that you prefer to him — your wealth, your job, your entertainment.

Bring to Jesus all the things that tempt you to sin — your immorality, your theft, your lies, your gossip.

Bring to Jesus everything you can gather in your attempt to deny him as Lord.

Do you know what you will find?

You will find that he is **“holy,”** and everything that you prefer to him is filthy and defiled.

You will find that he is **“true,”** and everything that you believe instead of him is false and hollow.

You will find out what he opens no one can shut, what he closes no one can open, and everything that resists him will be destroyed.

Test him with your questions! Compare the delights he offers to the paltry pleasures your sins give you! You will find him to be God, the giver of every good thing. And you will find that your myths are cheap lies, and you will find that with the idols of your heart it is all take and no give. They never satisfy.

Come to the one who is holy and true, who opens and no one can shut, who closes and no one can open. Come and trust him. Come and worship him. Come and feast yourself on the richest of fare.

Now, let's see what comes from...

Keeping the Word: An Open Door and Subjected Enemies — Revelation 3.8, 9

Jesus says to the church in Philadelphia, **“I know your works”** (Revelation 3:8). There is a question as to how the rest of the first should be punctuated. The one version reads: **“Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut (comma), because you have a little power (comma), and have kept my word, and have not denied my name.”** The ESV reads: **“Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut (period). I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”**

The first takes a little word, which can mean “that,” “since,” or “because” to mean “because.” In other words, the door is open BECAUSE, or as a result of your keeping Jesus' words. The ESV takes it to mean “that” and understands the phrase about the open door that no one can shut as a parenthetical remark, with the “that” outlining what Jesus knows about the works done by the church in Philadelphia. In other words, Jesus, who holds the keys of David, opens all doors for us; and He knows that we have little power, yet we have kept His word nor denied His name.

What is this open door? Elsewhere in the New Testament an open door refers to opportunity for ministry and evangelism

And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

(Acts 14:27 ESV)

for a wide door for effective work has opened to me

(1 Corinthians 16:9 ESV)

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ...a door was opened for me in the Lord,

(2 Corinthians 2:12 ESV)

At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ

(Colossians 4:3 ESV)

The context of verse 8 seems to point to the church is having success in evangelism and conquering their enemies. Jesus has opened the door, and no one can shut it. He is greater than all.

It seems that Jesus has given them this open door in response to the three things He says about them in the rest of the verse, and the last two things are the two sides of the same coin. First, Jesus says to them, **“I know that you have that little power”** (Rev. 3.8). This probably refers to the beleaguered position of the church in Philadelphia — small, seemingly insignificant, with an appearance, perhaps, of ineffectiveness in the eyes of those who look through the lens of the Roman empire. And yet this is God’s vehicle for advancing his purposes in the world.

Against the mounting odds and the weight of Rome, this church of little power has, second, kept Jesus His word, and third, has not denied His name (3.8; cf Rev 2.13). Because this church has kept the word of Jesus, they have an open door. It seems to me that the nature of the relationship between the faithfulness in the church in Philadelphia and the open door is not one of their **earning** an open door but one of the power of the word of Jesus **producing** an open door. That is, Jesus does not give the church an open door as a **payment** in response to the service they rendered by keeping his word. Rather, Jesus gives them his word, which is living and active, powerful, life-giving, opportunity-creating, and when they keep it the word of Jesus opens doors.

The word of Jesus is powerful. Are you keeping it?

The word of Jesus is powerful in *your personal life*. Jesus said, **“If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink”** (John 7.37). If you do that, if you go to Jesus to drink, your life will be transformed.

The word of Jesus is powerful in *your relationships*. Jesus said, **“blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”** (Matthew 5:7). If you keep that word, if you show mercy, your relationships will be flavored with the very mercy of God.

The word of Jesus is powerful in the *evangelism* even of the enemies of the gospel. Jesus said, **“bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you”** (Luke 6:28). If you keep that word, you will have power. When we keep the word of Jesus, we put ourselves in position for Jesus to open doors for us.

Keeping the word of Jesus not only keeps us from denying Jesus’s name (Revelation 3:8), it honors Jesus’s name.

This power in relationship to the enemies of the gospel that comes from keeping the word of Jesus can be seen in Revelation 3:9. **“Behold,”** Jesus says, **“I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie – behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will know that I have loved you.”**

As elsewhere in these letters, the Jewish community was causing problems for the church. Anyone who has found themselves persecuted because of righteousness, opposed because of the gospel, can be encouraged by what Jesus says here to the church in Philadelphia. Jesus tells this church that keeping his word is not only the path that leads to the open door, it is also the path that leads to triumph over the enemies of the gospel.

Do you find yourself facing opposition as you pursue the health of a local church? Have you gone out to share the gospel, seeking to love and liberate people, only to be called intolerance or arrogant or to be threaded with regulations about where it is or is not permissible to share the gospel or distribute Bibles? Look at what Jesus says to the church in Philadelphia: He will make the enemies of the gospel come and bow down before the feet of those who keep the word of Jesus. The righteous conquer.

The last phrase of verse 9, **“and they will learn that I have loved you,”** calls to mind Deuteronomy 7:8, where the Lord explain to Israel that He chose them because He loved them. Ironically, the chosen people who reject the gospel are shown that God has chosen the Gentiles who embrace the gospel.

Now, let’s move on to see how, in keeping the word, we will be...

Kept in Tribulation and Ready for His Coming — Revelation 3.10, 11

Revelation 3:10 has been debated in the modern discussion of whether the rapture of the church will take place before or after the great tribulation. My purpose here is not to try to persuade you that the rapture will take place before rather than after the tribulation or vice versa. What we must see is the *reason* Jesus gives as to why his people will be protected from the tribulation. It is right there in the first phrase of Revelation 3:10: **“because you have kept my word about patient endurance...”** We have to see this, because it was precisely this that resulted in the open door and the triumph over the enemies of the gospel. Keeping Jesus’ word is what led to the open door. Keeping Jesus’ word is what led to the subjugation of the enemies of the gospel.

Whether you think this means that the church will escape before the tribulation happens, or whether you think that the verse means that the church will be preserved through the tribulation, we can all agree that Jesus says He will keep His people from the tribulation **“because you have kept my word about patient endurance.”** We should also observe that the word they are keeping is a word “about patient endurance.” Sometimes those who take a certain position can give the impression that God always keeps His people from the worst kinds of suffering. That is not the case, and from the words that Jesus says, it has not been the case in Philadelphia—they have already “kept” the word about patient endurance, which means they have been enduring something unpleasant. We can also say that whatever Christians face in this life, the means whereby Jesus intends for His people to be kept is their keeping of His word.

Again the important thing for us to see and on which we can agree is the clear commendation of the way the church has kept Jesus’ word. Also, we can agree that the text seems to indicate that Jesus will keep his people from/through tribulation *because* they have kept his word. Keeping the word of Jesus enables us to endure tribulation.

In Rev 3.11 Jesus announces, **“I am coming soon. Holdfast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.”** Are you ready for his coming? He says it will be soon. The call to **“holdfast what you have”** looks to me like a call to continue **“keeping”** the word of Jesus (cf Rev 3.8 10). Keeping the word of Jesus will ensure that we do not lose our reward.

Finally, let’s...

Hear the Promises, Revelation 3.12, 13

There may be an intended contrast between the reference to the Jews who oppose the gospel, who are called **“the synagogue of Satan”** in Rev 3.9, and the promise to the one who conquers that he will be **“a pillar in the temple of my God”** in Rev 3.12. The Jews are only a synagogue, and it is a synagogue of Satan. Christians who are faithful to the end are the new temple, the dwelling place of God. There may also be a connection between Jesus having **“the key of David,”** who wanted to build the temple, in Rev 3.7 and the overcoming Christians being made into pillars of the temple in Rev. 3.12. If the key and the Temple are images that should be interpreted together, Jesus has the key that gives him charge over the temple.

Jesus not only promises that the one who overcomes will be made into a pillar in the temple, he says, **“Never shall he go out of it”** (Rev 3.12). There will be no end to our enjoyment of God's presence. Jesus continues, **“and 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 from my God out of heaven, and my own new name”** (Rev 3.12). Those who overcome will be fully possessed by God. Those who overcome will be his possession. He will write his name on those who overcome. Jesus, too, will write his new name on those who overcome. Those who overcome will enjoy new and surprisingly delightful aspects of Jesus – which I think is why he refers to his new name.

Jesus is holy. Jesus is true. Jesus is unstoppable. Jesus promises things that will be infinitely more enjoyable than anything sin, idolatry, or skepticism could ever offer.

Conclusion

The Christian church in these letters faced opposition from Rome and from the Jewish synagogue. From what Jesus says to the church in Philadelphia, it seems that there may not position came from the synagogue. In the synagogue, the Jews were sheltered from the Roman imperial cult.

Note the contrast between what Jews in the synagogue have and what true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have:

- The Jews have the synagogue. Jesus has the key of David.
- The Jews have the synagogue. Those who belong to Jesus have and keep his word.
- The Jews have the synagogue. Jesus will make the overcomes pillars in the temple.
- The Jews have the synagogue. Those who belong to Jesus and keep his word will never be made to leave God's temple, in which they themselves are pillars.
- The Jews have the synagogue. Those who belong to Jesus and keep his word will have gods name written on them.
- The Jews have the synagogue. Those who belong to Jesus and keep his word will have the name of God city, the new Jerusalem, written on them.
- The Jews have the synagogue. Those who belong to Jesus and keep his word will have Jesus his new name written on them.

Do you see the point? What Jesus offers is better than any other place of shelter, security, confidence, or refuge. Do you want to belong to Jesus? Keep his word.

Jesus said, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life”** (John 5:24).

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 3.13).