

PHILADELPHIA: LACKING STRENGTH
Revelation 3:7-13
July 27, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

We are familiar with the term “megachurch” in our church culture today. “Megachurch” is defined as “a church having around 2,000 or more attendants for a typical weekly service.”¹ According to some data at present there exists over 1,300 megachurches in the United States. These statistics show that 50 of these churches have an attendance that ranges from 10,000 to 45,000. Hence the term “megachurch.”

What is interesting is that as more megachurches come on the horizon, the average attendance and professions of faith in churches across the United States continues to decline. Further, for every megachurch that springs up, numerous churches close their doors. Statistics now show that currently there is 1 church for every 10,000 people in our nation, down considerably in just 50 years. Phil Newton estimates that we currently need 27,000 new churches in the Deep South alone to keep up.

One of the criticisms of the megachurch is that it draws members away from smaller churches, sometimes causing those congregations to fold. While this might be true in some cases, statistics show that the majority of faithful churchgoers still attend churches of 200 or less, a church that Sam Storms classifies as a “mini-church” by way of contrast to a “megachurch.”² The danger in the classification of *megachurch* is that size is used to measure success. However, as Storms points out, vastness of size is no measure of success nor does lack of size mean lack of success.

This morning we look at a church that our culture would classify as a *mini-church*. Philadelphia was a small church when compared to those around them. They did not have the numbers or the resources of a church like Ephesus or any of the others we have seen so far in our study of these letters. If Sardis that we looked at last week represented a *culture* much like we find ourselves today, then the church at Philadelphia certainly represents a *church* much like Grace Covenant in the culture that Christ has placed it. What we learn from the letter to the church at Philadelphia is that *it is not the numerical size of the church that determines its success, but its faithfulness to its calling in this world*. And this success is not according to man’s measurements, but Christ’s. May this letter serve as an encouragement to us as we press on in the work that Christ has called us to in Birmingham and beyond.

I. The Character of Christ (3:7)

It is remarkable that there are but two churches of all the seven churches addressed in these letters to the churches in Asia Minor who receive no rebuke or condemnation but only praise and commendation from our Lord. These two churches are the congregations of Smyrna and Philadelphia who are similar in a number of ways. While we can’t be certain, it appears that Philadelphia was a bit low emotionally because of their status as a church. Perhaps they had begun to feel as if they weren’t quite measuring up when compared to churches around them. Whatever the case might have been, it is apparent from the tone of this letter that they needed some encouragement. What better place to receive such encouragement than from Christ Himself? And not only that, but specific words concerning His person and character given to

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Megachurch>, accessed 07/26/2008.

² <http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/34-on-behalf-of-the-mini-church-revelation-37-11>, accessed 07/26/2008.

enflame their passion for Him and assure His calling for them. Further, these attributes were not taken from chapter 1 as the earlier descriptions of Christ, affirming how unique they were for the church at Philadelphia.

1. His holiness

“**He who is holy**” is descriptive of the deity of Christ. God alone possesses absolute holiness. His holiness has been described as His supreme attribute, referring to His “otherness.” Everything about God is in reference to this holiness, which is His very nature. His holiness also refers to His being totally separate from sin itself and the taint of sin in this world. In other words, He is totally and absolutely pure. The thought that God’s holiness is His supreme attribute stems from the fact that the Old Testament speaks of His holiness more than any other aspect of His being. Further, God’s very presence made a place holy (Ex. 3:5).

R.C. Sproul speaks at the wonder of God’s holiness this way:

The biblical word *holy* has two distinct meanings. The primary meaning is “apartness” or “otherness.” When we say that God is holy, we call attention to the profound difference between Him and all creatures. It refers to God’s transcendent majesty, His august superiority, by virtue of which He is worthy of our honor, reverence, adoration, and worship.

The secondary meaning of *holy* refers to God’s pure and righteous actions. God does what is right. He never does what is wrong. God always *acts* in a righteous manner because His *nature* is holy. Thus, we can distinguish between the *internal* righteousness of God (His holy nature) and the *external* righteousness of God (His actions).³

Jesus’ identification of Himself as “**He who is holy**” then reveals that He possesses both of these aspects of the holiness of God. He has the holy and sinless nature of God. As John MacArthur suggests, “His character is absolutely flawless.”⁴

2. His faithfulness

Flowing from the truth of His holiness is He “**who is true.**” “**Holy**” and “**true**” is prominent in the book of Revelation, a couplet used five other times (6:10; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2, 11). The two are inseparable attributes of the majestic Christ. “**True**” means the opposite of that which is fake. It refers to that which is genuine, real, or authentic.⁵ His truthfulness refers to His faithfulness, His trustworthiness. Jesus never breaks His word but fulfills all that He says. We have read often recently of the fickleness of political candidates. What is true of them is true of all men because of our bent to sin. Man can be trusted only inasmuch they are in Christ, the true One. Not so with Christ—He is always true and faithful. This is great encouragement to those who serve in a fallen world. Christ’s promises are sure, and all that He said He has done and will do for His own glory.

3. His sovereignty

Christ is further described as He “**who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens.**” In Isaiah 22:22 we read earlier of the prophecy related to Christ as the holder of the key, “Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, When he opens no one will shut, When he shuts no one will open.” These words were spoken to Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who served as a prototype of Jesus as Messiah. The definite article

³ R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 47.

⁴ John MacArthur, *Because the Time Is Near*, 88.

⁵ William Hendriksen, *Revelation*, 157; John MacArthur, 88.

designates a particular key that Jesus holds. It is the key to the kingdom which fits the door that He alone has the authority to open and shut. He alone holds the key to salvation, and for those who the door is opened, no one can shut. And to those whom it is shut, no one can open.

His sovereign rule and reign as the Messiah was disputed by those who called themselves Jews but were only liars (v. 9). These thought that they themselves had more to do with salvation and the kingdom than Christ taught while on this earth. They denied His sovereign rule and had Him put to death for His claim to be their sovereign King. These who called themselves Jews had a problem with Christ's authority. Here Jesus reminded the church at Philadelphia, who had these presumptuous Jews in their midst, that He alone granted salvation, and that it comes through faith in Him alone by grace, not according to the works that the Jew said one needed to be made right with God. He is holy, He is true, and He is sovereign. He alone chooses who will enter His kingdom and who will not. You see, Jesus Himself is the door!

II. The Character of Philadelphia (3:8, 10a)

Jesus now turns His attention to what He knows to be true of this church, **“I know your deeds.”** While there is not now nor has there ever been a perfect church, Philadelphia, like Smyrna, was a church that Christ only commended. He does not point out their faults, which must have been minor compared to the others with no need of repentance. There is no word of condemnation, only commendation. He first points out their...

1. Significance (v. 8b)

He says, **“You have a little power”** or “little strength.” You might ask, “How does this show their significance?” I am glad you asked. If Smyrna was a church that was poor but rich, then Philadelphia was a church that was weak but strong. Jesus emphasized the word **“little,”** relating to the size of the church. From the world's perspective, and especially of the Jews, this church was considered insignificant. But when Jesus said that they had **“a little power,”** it was not a negative comment, but a positive. As John MacArthur notes, “The Philadelphia church was small in numbers, but had a powerful impact on its city. Most of its members may have been from the lower classes of society. Yet despite its size, spiritual power flowed in the church at Philadelphia.”⁶

Smaller churches today can take great encouragement from this. This is the purpose that Jesus wrote to them. They might have slipped into doubt and discouragement, thinking that somehow they had failed in their mission because other churches in well-to-do cities were growing in number. But Jesus commended them – not because they were small, mind you, but because they had not lost their focus. In fact, they were fulfilling their calling just as Christ commanded. Notice what else Jesus knew about them.

2. Obedience (v. 8c)

Having pointed out that He knew that they were considered insignificant to others, which was an incorrect assessment, Jesus further commended them. He knew that they had been faithful to His word, they had **“kept My word.”** This is certainly no small commendation from our Lord. Unlike many churches today that almost go in panic mode when they don't feel they are keeping up with other churches in the community, Philadelphia stayed the course. They did not jump on the latest church growth bandwagon and try to somehow find the purpose for their existence. They were driven by the Word of God. They did not succumb to some canned

⁶ *Because the Time Is Near*, 91.

approach to evangelism in an effort to add numbers to the flock. They simply did what God's Word told them to do.

While we don't have it spelled out for us in detail, we would be right to deduce that the supreme purpose of this church, what was central in their worship and ministry, was the faithful proclamation of the gospel. They remained faithful in preaching the Word of God in a manner that brought glory to He who is holy and true. William Hendriksen had this very thought in mind when he wrote, "Keeping the word of Jesus implies not that it should be *hidden from view* but that it should be *guarded from subversion*."⁷ This is where some of the other churches, some we have seen in these letters, had failed. They were growing numerically, but at what cost? The gospel had been so diluted and their doctrine so poisoned that they tolerated anything and gave signs of life but were dead. Not so with Philadelphia, who preached sin and the need for repentance and a salvation that was found in the gospel of Christ alone. There was no candy-coated gospel message made easy to swallow. They preached the joyful benefits of the gospel *along with its demands*. Does this mean they were satisfied in being small in number? Not at all. It only intensified their burden and passion for proclaiming the whole counsel of God. They kept His word.

3. Loyalty (v. 8d)

Christ also commended them because they had not denied His name. They remained loyal to Christ regardless of the cost. This was tremendously difficult because of those who said they were Jews, but were not. These would not have been in the church, but without. Early on in the first century church, Jewish people who converted to Christianity were no longer tolerated in synagogues. Christianity was referred to as "the Nazarene sect" (Acts 24:5). To Judaism, Christianity was a cult. Their vehemence is seen in a statement taken from the Eighteen Benedictions formulated by Jewish leaders in Jamnia around the time of this letter:

For apostates let there be no hope, and the kingdom of insolence mayest thou uproot speedily in our days; and let Christians and the heretics perish in a moment, let them be blotted out of the book of life and let them not be written with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the insolent.⁸ [see Revelation 3:5]

This is the environment that those who professed Christ found themselves in Philadelphia. Becoming a Christian meant being ostracized from society and family. The Jews prided themselves on being God's chosen people with whom He had made a covenant. They would not listen to Jesus when He warned them of their error. Nor did they listen to Paul when he proclaimed that they were not all Israel who descended from Israel, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God" (Rom. 2:28-29; see also Rom. 9:6). Because of their hardness of heart some, not all, forfeited the right to be called His people. They became instruments in the hands of the evil one, seeking to undermine the church and Christ. That is why Jesus called them the synagogue of Satan and liars.

However, in the midst of it all, Philadelphia remained loyal to Christ. They did not deny His name no matter how difficult it got. They did not deny their faith. And they did so patiently. Jesus commended them for keeping "**the word of My perseverance.**" While there are varying interpretations of what this means, it seems to indicate something different than the word they

⁷ Revelation, 159, italics mine.

⁸ From various sources.

kept in v. 9, which indicated obedience. Here the idea is more of enduring suffering, of persevering through persecutions and trials. The ESV and NIV translations capture this in rendering “**perseverance**” as “patient endurance.” For these things, their obedience, loyalty, and patient suffering, the church at Philadelphia would be blessed.

III. The Rewards to Philadelphia (3:8-13)

1. Present rewards (vv. 8-10)

There are three immediate rewards that the church would receive for their faithfulness. First, there would be greater *evangelistic opportunity*. “**Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut**” (v. 8a) provided both assurance of their salvation because He who opened the door to the kingdom was Jesus Christ and no one could shut it as well as expanded opportunities for the gospel as long as the door was open. Paul understood this when he wrote to the Corinthians, “A wide door for effective *service* has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Cor. 16:9) and to the Colossians, “Praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ” (Col. 4:3).

This blessing was significant for two reasons. First, Christ was assuring them that He was opening the door to the kingdom for Gentiles. Contrary to the accusations of the Jews, salvation had been made available because the Jew had rejected Christ. Second, this great work of missions and evangelism would take place in the midst of persecution. Sufferings tend to add fuel to the fire of missions, to stoke the flame. Some of the greatest mission endeavors bear fruit in trying times.

Another present reward they would receive was *an evidence of Christ’s love* (v. 9). This evidence would come from a divine humbling of those who now persecuted them. In four different texts in the book of Isaiah we see the prophecy of the Gentiles bowing down before Israel after the exile and acknowledge that God is with them (Is. 43:4; 45:14; 49:23; 60:14). In this letter Christ reverses these roles: His followers are the people of God, and these Jewish unbelievers are the pagans who come and acknowledge the love of Christ for His church, that God and Christ is with them.⁹ This suggests a passing of the torch. The promises to Israel have now passed on to Jesus’ followers, the people of God. Of course, Jews then and now can partake of God’s promises if they repent and trust Christ by faith.

The final present reward is *protection from testing* (v. 10b). The promise to “**keep you from the hour of testing**” is somewhat problematic on two fronts: (1) What is “**the hour of testing**?” and (2) What does it mean that they would be kept from it? Some assume this refers to the great tribulation from which the church will be spared. However, this time of testing could refer, and I would submit likely does, to the same hour of persecution which would come over the church of Smyrna, a church likened to that of Philadelphia. It would sweep over the entire then-known world, and try men with a view to their loyalty to Christ Jesus. I agree with Dennis Johnson who identifies three certainties in this text. First, the use of “hour” “points to a brief time of trauma.” Second, the aim of this “hour of testing” goes beyond Asia Minor to “the whole world.” This includes “God’s human enemies, who murder the martyrs (6:10; 11:10), worship the beast (13:8), and get drunk on the harlot’s wine (17:2).” Third, Christ shows the divine restraint in keeping His people. Johnson explains, “Given Revelation’s penchant for paradox and the fact that God promises to protect his church not from suffering but from apostasy, we should not

⁹ Alan F. Johnson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Revelation*, 57.

assume that Jesus will keep believers from this trial by removing them from the scene or shielding them from pain” [*Triumph of the Lamb*, 88]. Instead, Christ preserves His people in the midst of trials. While the world faces God’s judgment, the church is purified for greater service and preserved from apostasy.¹⁰

2. Future rewards (vv. 11-12)¹¹

There are two promised future rewards for those who “**hold fast**” and “**overcome**”:

(1) **Eternal stability** – “**I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore.**” In a city that had large temples to different gods, the image of “a pillar” offered a vivid picture of what Christ does in preserving us. The pillars served to stabilize the roof of the temple. Additionally, Christ insists that once they had entered into God’s temple, the believer would never go out from it again. In 17 AD, Philadelphia was destroyed by a massive earthquake and aftershocks. Though rebuilt by the generosity of the emperor, many were afraid to live again in the city. They would conduct their business in the city but lived beyond its walls in the countryside. The picture that Christ gives for overcomers assures the believer that nothing can crumble or destroy their relationship to the Lord. No earthly or devilish power can take away what Christ has given the Christian through faith.

(2) **Eternal relationship** – The idea of writing a “**name**” on the believer offers another metaphor to demonstrate the believer’s security in his relationship to the Lord. “**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 out of heaven from My God, and My new name.**” The high priest had an engraved golden plate on his forehead with the words, “Holy to the Lord,” showing that He belonged to the Lord God. That same image is offered in the words of Christ to these believers. You belong to the Lord God. You also dwell with Him, so the name of “the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God” is written on the believer. Paul expressed it to the Philippian believers: “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20).

Christ’s “**new name**” refers to the full revelation of His character. Christians are marked by the character of Jesus Christ in this life (Gal. 5:22-23). But there is yet more to come, as evident in the scene of His coming in Rev. 19:12. “His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself.” In other words, we do not yet have the capacity to grasp the glory and majesty of Jesus Christ. Yet the day will come when He will begin to unfold to us throughout eternity, the wonder of His “**new name.**”

Only those who overcome, those that Christ has secured and preserved for Himself will be marked with “**the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God...and My new name.**” Later, we find the unbelieving marked with anti-Christ’s name. Their identity is bound up in his unholy character. But the believer has been marked by Christ, even as we see the throng of believers in 14:1, “having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads.”

¹⁰ http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/revelation_03.07-13.html, accessed 07/26/2008.

¹¹ I am indebted to Phil Newton for this section, sermon link footnote 10.