

WHEN A SMALL CHURCH IS A GREAT CHURCH
THE CHURCH OF BROTHERLY LOVE – PHILADELPHIA
Rev. Lawrence Baldrige
December 7, 2008

REV. 3:7-13 NIV – To the Church in Philadelphia

⁷ To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

⁹ I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.

¹² Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.

¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Let me ask you a simple question: When is a Small Church a Great Church? The spotlight of the media is on the super-churches that dispense religion much like Super-Wal-Marts dispense foods, auto supplies, electronics, clothing, and many other things. The Super-Church, or the so called **megachurch**, not only gives away religion, but also tries to meet all the needs of the targeted members, usually young families that want a great degree of luxury, and a social setting where their young can fraternize with other young people much like them. With the many good things about the megachurches, they simply try too hard to be a smorgasbord of services to their constituents. Of course these churches are very influential, and often do a great deal of good, but the danger is that they will lose their stated purpose as a church of Jesus Christ, which is calling back a sinful world to a suffering Savior who arose and is the Living Lord of the Church.

Certainly a megachurch can be great in the sight of Christ, also. But when is a small church great? When is any church great?

From studying this particular church, the church in Philadelphia, one can assume that they were a small church, but they were indeed great. The City of Philadelphia, 28 miles SE of Sardis, was founded about 150 B.C. by King Attallus of Pergamum. He loved his brother Eumenes so much that he named this city in

honor of him. In 17 A.D. Philadelphia along with nine other nearby cities, including Sardis, was devastated by an earthquake. Tiberius Caesar helped this city out as well, and they named their city after him, calling it Neocaesarea. Unfortunately, the city of Philadelphia was founded upon an earthquake fault-line, and earthquake after earthquake kept occurring years after the other cities had theirs, causing the historian Strabo to label it “a city full of earthquakes.” The people had to run from the city time after time, and the walls of the buildings in one part of the city would crack, then after a while, the same thing happened to another part of the city.

But Philadelphia was very successful in the clothing trade, and especially in the wine-making trade, as the grapes grew better and sweeter in the volcanic soil in the plains that bordered the city.

Attalus founded Philadelphia for the purpose of converting the regions beyond this city to Greek culture, or what we term Hellenism. So successful was the venture that by A.D. 19, the Lydians lost their language entirely and spoke only Greek; however, the Phrygians weren't so easy to convert to Hellenism. Until the Ottoman Turks gained control of Asia Minor, Greek culture and Greek language dominated.

The little church of Philadelphia, founded by colonists from Pergamum, was, according to Dr. Barclay, the youngest of the seven churches. The little church in Philadelphia is the only church that Jesus finds rather faultless. They were a small church, but they were a great church. As the *Believer's Bible Commentary* says, “There is no word of rebuke, though Christ said, **I know that you have little strength.**” You see,

I. A SMALL CHURCH IS A GREAT CHURCH WHEN IT HAS A GREAT CHRIST.

Listen to the words of the Living Lord. ⁷“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.”

The Bible Knowledge Commentary says, “Christ described Himself as the One **who is holy and true, who holds the key of David**, and who is able to open or shut a door which no one else could open or shut. The holiness of Christ is a frequent truth in Scripture (1 Peter 1:15), and being holy He is worthy to judge the spiritual life of the Philadelphia church. “The key of David” seems to refer to Isaiah 22:22, where the key of the house of David was given to Eliakim who then had access to all the wealth of the king. Christ earlier had been described as the One who holds “the keys of death and hades” (Rev. 1:18). The reference here, however, seems to be to spiritual treasures.

A. IN THIS VERSE, CHRIST IS DECLARING HIS DEITY AS THE RISEN SON OF THE LIVING GOD. To the Jews, 'holiness belonged only to God.' Isaiah and the other prophets declared God's holiness. Job saw that holiness, as did Moses, as did Isaiah in the 6th chapter. God's people were urged to be holy, just as He was holy, but they never achieved it. The word holy, in both Hebrew and Greek, has the idea of being separate from, being different than human beings. Jesus is Holy! Even before His resurrection, His holiness was seen in His transfiguration. Peter cried out before Him, 'depart from me for I am a sinful man.'

A great church, whether small or large, has a Great Savior and a Great Lord. No wonder the hymn writer, Edward Perronet, would compose the great hymn: *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*:

- 1 All hail the pow'r of Jesus' name!
Let angels prostrate fall;
Bring forth the royal diadem,
And crown Him Lord of all.
Bring forth the royal diadem,
And crown Him Lord of all.
- 2 Ye chosen seed of Israel's race,
Ye ransomed from the fall;
Hail Him who saves you by His grace,
And crown Him Lord of all.
Hail Him who saves you by His grace,
And crown Him Lord of all.
- 3 Let ev'ry kindred, ev'ry tribe,
On this terrestrial ball,
To Him all majesty ascribe,
And crown Him Lord of all.
To Him all majesty ascribe,
And crown Him Lord of all.
- 4 O that with yonder sacred throng
we at His feet may fall!
We'll join the everlasting song,
And crown Him Lord of all.
We'll join the everlasting song,
And crown Him Lord of all.

Jesus is the totally other, the Holy One, the Righteous One, the Just One. His Name is Wonderful Counselor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. He is HOLY! The Small church that preaches and teaches that is

a Great Church. The church that realizes it is not about the church or the members of the church, but about Jesus – that is the great church.

B. HE ALSO CALLED HIMSELF TRUE. Hagios is the word for Holy. The word for true, used here, is Alethinos, meaning Real or Genuine, as opposed to the shadowy or the unreal.

The world of mankind is made up of the unreal. We fantasize about reality. We struggle with the meaning of life. We grapple with our consciences about right and wrong. We wear our finest clothes to church, and, as the poet T.S. Eliot said, “We prepare a face to meet the faces that we meet.” We look in the mirrors with the question Who am I? We look into the faces of the people we meet and ask Who do you think I am? We look into the future and we ask Where am I going, and what will I do when I get there? We don’t have the answers, do we?

The idiot world of the pop-culture-idols tells us what to drink and what to think, where to go and what to show, what is fact and how to act. But when we see their real lives we know they have become lost in the web of the fatuous fantasies they create for others. They are unreal, they are fantasies, they are illusions, they are drunken with their own bloody egos, and yet they try to influence us with their own destructiveness. When they realize how bogus they have become, unfortunately, they take the path most traveled by such travelers, find their gurus, their guides and their gods somewhere apart from the one who is Truth, the Way, the Life. But despite our lost culture, and it is lost today, terribly lost, a small church is indeed a great church when it preaches Christ as the Truth, and the only Truth. Truth is not in fashion today.

C. JESUS ALSO CALLED HIMSELF “HE WHO HAS THE KEY OF DAVID.” The *Believer’s Bible Commentary* says, “The possession of the ‘Key of David’ (Revelation 3:7) alludes to Christ’s absolute Power over His Church to open and shut without hindrance. Notably, this Power was offered to the Apostle Peter, as well as to every living Saint. Of the Apostle Peter it is said: ‘And I [Jesus] will give unto thee [Peter] the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on Earth shall be bound in Heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on Earth shall be loosed in Heaven’ (Matthew 16:19). And, for the rest of us, this magnificent Prayer Promise is recorded: ‘If two of you shall agree on Earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in Heaven’ (Matthew 18:19).”

Barclay says that Jesus has the final authority that no one can question; and he writes: “Jesus, and Jesus alone, has authority to admit to the New Jerusalem, the new city of David; He alone can admit to the Presence of God just as, the faithful steward can admit to the presence of the King...He is the new and living way into the Presence of God. Through Jesus Christ the door to God is unlocked, and He has the key to the Kingdom.”

The church, small or large, must admit that Jesus is the Lord of the Church, and the Lord of Creation. The small church that believes in the absolute authority of the Lord Jesus Christ is a great church even if it is small. And that church must go ‘in His authority.’

The small church is a great church when it preaches, teaches, and promotes to the world A GREAT CHRIST!

II. AGAIN, A SMALL CHURCH IS A GREAT CHURCH WHEN GREAT CHRISTIANS ARE MEMBERS OF THAT CHURCH.

Thank God for our little church, for I believe it has some of the most wonderful Christians in its membership that I have ever known, people who are genuine and holy in Jesus Christ.

A. IN THE FIRST PLACE, THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA HAD JUST A ‘LITTLE STRENGTH.’ One interpreter got it right when he said, “Possessing-a-Little-Strength Philadelphian Christians are blessed with the opportunity of proving the strength of God.” I believe it was that self-educated shoe cobbler, William Carey, who said that he just plodded along and that he kept on plodding until he got things right. Another famous Christian was complimented for having such great faith. He answered, “No! You are wrong! I don’t have great faith. I have small faith in a Great God.”

This church was small, and its strength was small. But its Christ was omnipotent; its Father in heaven was Omnipotent; its Holy Comforter was Omnipotent. Christ knows our weaknesses, and He knows if we have any strength at all. But He also knows that He is our strength and our strengthener. Great Christians know where their strength lies. They know the *Bible* says, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit saith the Lord.” They know the *Bible* says, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” They know that Jesus said in John 15, “I am the vine, ye are the branches, he that abideth in me and I in him beareth much fruit; for without me, ye can do nothing.” In 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, Paul puts it best: (v. 9) “And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (v. 10) Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”

Great Christians give God, not their strength, but their weaknesses: and God uses their weaknesses for His glory: “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

B. A SMALL CHURCH IS A GREAT CHURCH WHEN ITS GREAT MEMBERS ARE KEEPERS OF THE WORD. Jesus said: “I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name (v. 3:8).”

“As in the messages to the other churches,” says the *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, “Christ stated, ‘**I know your deeds.**’ In keeping with the description of His authority to open and close doors (v. 7), He declared, ‘**See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.**’ These words, however, become a basis for His commendation that ‘**you have kept My word and have not denied My name.**’ ”

The small church that keeps the Word of God will never be denied by the Lord Jesus Christ. He said Himself, “He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me, and he that loveth me shall be loved of my father, and I will love him and will manifest myself to him.” We cannot say we truly love Jesus if we do not keep His words. These Christians in Philadelphia, not only had brotherly love, they loved Jesus and they showed it by doing his commandments.

One of our former Baptist preachers died in Louisville recently. This was said of him: “He didn’t just believe the *Bible* was the Word of God. He went out and did the *Bible*. He put it into action in racial reconciliation when that was not a popular thing to do.” A small Church is a Great Church whenever it is a Doer of the Word of God!

C. A SMALL CHURCH IS A GREAT CHURCH WHEN IT BEARS FAITHFULLY, THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST. The good Christians that make up a great church are happy to be called Christians. In fact, like the Apostle Paul, they are willing to live, and if need be, die for the Name of Jesus Christ. They sing with the hymn writer:

- ¹ All praise to Him who reigns above
In majesty supreme,
Who gave His Son for man to die,
That He might man redeem!
- ² His name above all names shall stand,
Exalted more and more,
At God the Father’s own right hand,
Where angel hosts adore.
- ³ His name shall be the Counselor,
The mighty Prince of Peace,
Of all earth’s kingdoms Conqueror,
Whose reign shall never cease.

Chorus Blessed be the name,
Blessed be the name,
Blessed be the name of the Lord!
Blessed be the name!
Blessed be the name,
Blessed be the name of the Lord!

Listen to the words of Philippians 2: ⁵ Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: ⁷But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: ⁸And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. ⁹Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: ¹⁰That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things* under the earth; ¹¹And *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I love to confess the name of Jesus, don't you? I want to confess that Name as many times on earth as I can, so that my Master will not be ashamed of me when He comes in glory with all his holy angels. Perhaps he will confess me before them. I hope so, but I am not worthy to be mentioned.

A small church is a great church when it has great Christians as members, Christians who have little strength, Christians who keep the Word, and Christians who, like Paul, were saved to bear the name of Jesus.

III. FINALLY A SMALL CHURCH IS A GREAT CHURCH WHEN IT HAS THE ASSURANCE OF THE PROMISES OF JESUS.

A. HE FIRST GIVES US AN OPEN DOOR. To me that means every day is a new opportunity to do His will; means that there is an open door to Heaven every time I pray; means that I have Christ's perfect Presence beside me all the day long, for He said, "I am the door."

B. A SMALL CHURCH STANDS ON THE PROMISE OF THAT OPEN DOOR, AND ON THE PROMISE OF A DEFEATED FOE: ⁹I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.

“Christ referred to their enemies” says one commentary, “as the **synagogue of Satan** (cf. 2:9). They were Jews who opposed the believers’ Christian testimony. False religion has always been a formidable antagonist against true Christian faith. The day will come, however, when all opponents of the faith will have to acknowledge the truth (cf. Isa. 45:23; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10-11). Then Christ declared, ‘**I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.**’ ”

Christ will one day make all our enemies recognize that we were right and they were wrong. We need to be patient with unbelievers. God will give us the total victory. A church that believes that, though small, is a great church.

C. FINALLY, A SMALL CHURCH IS A GREAT CHURCH WHEN ITS MEMBERS GAIN A DECISIVE VICTORY OVER THE GREATEST ENEMY OF

ALL, OVER SATAN. Listen: ¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

Christ will keep His family, His brothers and sisters, whom He loved with His Life, and rose again to justify, and to send them the Holy Spirit.

But look what else He will do: ¹¹ **I am coming** soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take **your crown**. ¹² Him who overcomes I will **make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.** ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. NIV

A great church filled with great Christians will receive the great promises of God. Be consoled, He is coming soon. And when He returns to this earth He will give you the status you deserve as children of the Living God! Even so, come Lord Jesus!