

**A Letter to the Church at Philadelphia**  
Revelation 3:7-13  
Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

Philadelphia Presbyterian Church

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One of the questions that I am frequently asked about our church is “How did it get the name Philadelphia?”

Since nobody really knows the answer to that question, we are free to come up with our own guesses about what might have been the reason for this name: Philadelphia. One guess, of course, is that many of the people who settled here in the Clear Creek area of North Carolina had come down from eastern Pennsylvania, and they brought with them a little piece of home in the name Philadelphia.

My favorite answer to the question is that our forefathers and foremothers chose the name Philadelphia because they wanted our very name to be a description—almost a mission statement (if they had things like mission statements back in the 1770’s)—of who we are as a church: a community of brotherly and sisterly love. That’s what the word “philadelphia” means. They chose the name because they wanted everyone to know that we are a church family that cares for each other and even cares for people who are not a part of our congregation. We are doing our best to practice Christian love. I like that answer, but I don’t know if that’s the reason the name was chosen.

Another possibility for this name Philadelphia comes from our scripture reading for this morning, which I’ll get to in a minute. As you know, last Sunday Lee kicked us off in a series of sermons that is going to last for the next several Sundays on the book of Revelation. We decided to tackle this mysterious and often misunderstood book precisely because it is mysterious and often misunderstood. We also decided to undertake this series of sermons because during our Wonderful Wednesday Bible Study that has just concluded we studied Revelation, and we discovered some wonderful words of good news and hope that are often missed because they are obscured by the strange symbolic language of beasts with seven heads and ten horns, with fire-breathing dragons and the rest.

What we are going to see as we go through this sermon series is that Revelation is a book for the church. It’s about how to be the church in a world that is often dark and dangerous and threatening. And the message of Revelation is clear: Jesus is going to win. In fact, Jesus has already won, and we are simply in a mop-up campaign; the final victory is certain. Revelation is a book about the end of time because the writer of Revelation, a guy named John, believed that if we know how things are going to end, it shapes the way we live in the meantime. Revelation is a book of good news and hope for churches trying to be the church in a sometimes ugly and mean world.

John is describing for us the church—what the church can be and what the church is. In Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, there are seven letters addressed to seven churches. There’s a letter to the church at Ephesus, to the church at Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to the church at Laodicea and to the church at Philadelphia.

Here is the letter he writes to the church at Philadelphia, and you can see why our ancestors might have chosen this name for our church.

There are seven letters to seven churches. Real churches in real places. Ephesus, Smyrna, Philadelphia and the rest were cities along an old postal route in what used to be called Asia Minor; in what is now Turkey. That's where the church is. The church is not an abstract idea that exists in the mind; it is a gathering of real people, living in a particular place.

So in Revelation, John gives his message to these churches. Each message is unique, because each church is unique. But there is a common form that each letter follows. Even though each church is unique with its own unique set of strengths and problems, there is a common thread that ties all churches together. The outline of the seven letters is the same. Each one begins with the reminder that the church is Christ's church...and each letter ends with the call to listen, to pay attention to what the Spirit is saying and doing. Although there may be many differences among churches that make each one unique, there is one constant about all churches: We belong to Christ, and the Holy Spirit is a work.

So if you read these seven letters to the seven churches, you see a common form, a similar beginning and ending. But between this beginning affirmation and this ending call to pay attention to the Holy Spirit, the message to each church is different. John lists for each church that church's particular gifts and strengths. And he also lists the church's shortcomings and what they need to do to address those shortcomings. The churches that are addressed in these seven letters are commended for various things: their untiring work, their brave suffering, their growth in discipleship. They all have certain strengths. But because churches are made up of people—sinful people like you and me—they also need correction. One seems to have abandoned its enthusiastic love for Christ and have become lukewarm; another appears to be tolerant of immorality.

One interesting fact about the letter to the church at Philadelphia is that it is one of only two churches in this list about which he doesn't really have anything bad to say. So maybe that's the reason our ancestors chose the name Philadelphia.

If you look at all these seven letters to the churches, what they show us is a picture of the church in every place. The church is the means that God uses for calling people together, and through their common experience as a church, as a community, they come to know who God is and what God is calling them to do. Here in Revelation John is realistic about the church. He does not ignore the problems that are found in churches, but he addresses them head on. As someone has said, 'churches are not Victorian parlors where everything is always picked up and ready for guests. They are messy family rooms. Things are not always in order; but that's what happens in churches that are lived in. They are not show rooms, but living rooms' (Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p. 54. I want to acknowledge that much of what is said here comes directly or indirectly from Peterson's work.)

Now when we were studying this book in our Wonderful Wednesday Bible Study, one of the homeless neighbors, named Morris, who came to our Room in the Inn program often attended the Bible study. And the week we were talking about these letters to these seven churches, Morris asked, "Does this say anything to the church today?"

What do you think? What might a letter addressed to our church say? Now I know that this is somewhat presumptuous of me, but I think that if John were writing to our church, perhaps he might say this:

To the angel of the church at Philadelphia write: “These are the words of the one who lived for you and died for you and now reigns in power for you:

I know your works. I see that you are alive, growing, moving. I see how you minister not only to those of your fellowship but also to those outside your number. You have heard God’s call to reach out in love, and you have done that, giving of yourselves in service in the place where you live. You have worked to make the lives of your neighbors better. You have helped the poor with food and housing and basic human needs. You have opened the doors of your church to people of all ages and have welcomed them warmly. You have understood the importance of worship, and in your worship, you offer praise to our heavenly Father through your music and prayers.

In one thing I do not commend you, however. While there are many among you who are active in living and practicing your faith, there are others among you who remain on the sidelines, not fully using the gifts the Holy Spirit has given you. It is as if you have lost sight of the fact that all good gifts come from God, and that the gifts with which God has blessed you are for you to use for the good of others and the world. Sometimes you are timid disciples, reluctant to stretch out in faith and to trust that God, who has provided for you in the past, will indeed provide for you in the future. It appears that your vision is often limited to what you can do, rather than envisioning what Christ can do through you.

Remember this: God is with you. God was with you in the beginning, and God will be with you as you move into the future. The promise is that the rewards of faith and trust and hope and love are beyond your wildest imaginings.

Are your ears awake? Listen to the words of the Spirit who is blowing through the churches.

Prayer: Loving Lord, speak your word to us so that we may live as your faithful people. Draw us together into a loving community and remind us of your constant presence with us, guiding, leading, drawing us forth to where you already are. Amen. †