

## The Seven Letters of Highly Effective Churches – Philadelphia<sup>1</sup>

Reformation Sunday

October 25, 2009

Good morning and welcome to God's house on this Reformation Sunday. Today we are able to witness the Confirmation of four of our five students as they take their vows, and by so doing, take that next step in their journey of faith. That journey never ends, and today is just a step – albeit a big and important step – in that journey.

It's a "God-thing" too, because when this current series was planned out, I didn't realize the church we would be looking at today was the church at Philadelphia. The message Jesus gave to that church fits in perfectly with our Confirmation group here today. I invite you to open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 3, beginning with verse 7.

The city of Philadelphia was located southeast of Sardis, and was known for its excellent wine. It was also noted for earthquakes that ripped through the area. Throughout history, the city had a hard time keeping itself together because of its location on a fault line. Yet, at the same time, it was also located on the main route from Rome to the far East, and had the nickname of 'The Gateway to the East.'

The church at Philadelphia was also the only other church besides Smyrna who did not receive a rebuke from Jesus for anything. Rather, it was encouraged, lifted up and given direction for the rest of its life.

It's fitting, then, that this should be the passage we look at today as we praise God for those who are about to be Confirmed in the faith this morning.

You have come a long way to this celebration this morning, and like the church at Philadelphia the same thing said to them is said to you and to the all Christian churches. *I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.*

I have said this before and I will say it again: you four do not have to be here today. In fact, no one who is worshipping in any church this morning 'has' to be there. Oh, it may not be the best thing for the four of you at home if you chose not to be here this morning, but look around: there's no gun pointed at your head today, or the heads of anyone else. A door was placed before you, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, you walked through it. A door was placed in front of everyone here this morning, and by the leading of the Holy Spirit, they all walked through it to come here today. Praise God for the Holy Spirit's leading!

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted from "A little strength goes a long way" a sermon by Pastor Jim Drake, July 2008

But now that you have ‘come through’ so to speak, what’s next? As I met with each of you I asked that question that makes most Confirmands a little uncomfortable: why do you want to be confirmed? You all gave me various answers, all of which were good. I just want to remind you of one thing today: a door has been placed in front of you that no one can shut, but at the same time no one can walk through except you.

Will you walk through it, and continue in what you have learned after today? This is the question to the church in Philadelphia and to the church today. You see, you can be faithful, you can be loving, you can be kind, but if that’s all you are, you’re missing so much more. You would be missing what is waiting on the other side of that door: a relationship with Jesus unlike you will ever experience.

Jesus gives three promises to this church, and He gives them to everyone who calls on His name. First, He promised He would take care of their enemies. One day, those who laughed at, harassed, and made fun of and tried to undermine the true, pure Word of God with their own opinions and thoughts at the church in Philadelphia, as well as those who do that today, are going to have to acknowledge that the Christians were right! That is also your promise and the promise made to highly effective churches.

Second, He promised He would keep them from Tribulation. The immediate reference would be to the official Roman persecutions that would come, but the ultimate reference is to the Tribulation that will encompass the earth before Jesus Christ returns to establish His kingdom. Folks, you know I don’t sugar-coat things – it’s going to get worse before it gets better. Now this whole promise of being kept from the Tribulation can be taken in a few different ways, but here’s what I want you to know today: the faithful Christian, the highly effective Christian in a highly effective church, is never promised an easy life. What they are promised is Jesus will be with them through the hard times. Will those who call on Jesus’ name as their Lord and Savior be spared all the end-times ‘stuff’ we hear about? I’m not going to say ‘yes’ to you, but rather no matter what happens, the Christian is promised the Holy Spirit will remain and strengthen ... *as long as we are walking through that door!*

The third promise to Philadelphians is that God would honor them. Again, this is His promise to you this morning and to all who call on the name of Jesus as their Lord and Savior and take the lessons we’ve seen from the churches in these opening chapters and applied them. God will honor those who honor Jesus, who read, listened to, and obeyed His Word. He will not honor those who tried to undermine the Word of God; who refused to read His Word or be in an ever-deepening relationship with Him; who refused to walk through that door of opportunity that was opened to them.

What will you do?

Romans 1:16 says, *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”*

God tells us in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:15, “*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*” Are you ready to do that? Or as so many people who call themselves Christians, are you happy to claim the name of Jesus as some sort of get out of Hell free card without claiming His name any other time or for any other purpose?

Today you take a step that the Christian church of all time has had to decide whether or not to take. But you don't take that step all by yourself, because you can't. As part of your Confirmation you learned the meaning to the Third Article of the Apostles Creed:

“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

In the *same way* He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth...”

Will you walk through that door? Will you be a highly effective Christian populating highly effective churches who have walked through that door?

One last promise from God to you this morning, and to all of us. It's from Romans 8:31: “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” That is a promise of God to a highly effective Christian. That is Jesus' promise to a highly effective church. When you face opposition in living the Christian life, face it head on. Face it head on, knowing that God is bigger than any opposition that stands in your way. And know this – even if that opposition comes against you so strong that it kills you... know this – Jesus wins. That opposition will one day bow the knee before Jesus and declare His lordship. And when they bow in agony and defeat before the King of kings and Lord of lords, they will know that Jesus has loved His highly effective churches. Churches like the one at Philadelphia.

How does the church become a highly effective church like Philadelphia was? It's real simple. In verse 11, Jesus said, “*Hold fast to what you have.*” Hold fast to truth. Hold fast to the Word of God. Hold fast to Jesus. Hold fast and be faithful to God's Word.

When we see something that is contrary to the clear teaching of God's Word, we need to apply that pure Word of God to it in order to bring it in line with God's Word. We need to not only profess the Word of God with our lips, we need to practice the Word of God with our lives. Hold fast, be faithful to God's Word, and be faithful to Jesus' name.

Remember that if you claim the name Christian, you're carrying the name of Christ. Be faithful to the name of Jesus that you're carrying. Hold fast, be faithful, and walk. Just like the church at Philadelphia, Jesus has set before us an open door. He expects us to walk through it. He has given us a neighborhood to evangelize. He has given us a town to evangelize. He has given us a

county to evangelize. He has given us a state and a nation and a world to evangelize. But where does it start? It starts with highly effective churches full of highly effective people.

Are you going to walk through that door?

The first lesson for a highly effective church is from the letter to Ephesus and it was love Jesus for who He is and what He's called us to.

The second lesson for a highly effective church was from the letter to Smyrna, and it was don't compromise.

The third lesson for a highly effective church was from the letter to Pergamum, and it continued the theme of not compromising: overcome the world.

The fourth lesson for a highly effective church was from the letter to Thyatira, and it was hold on. Hold on to the truth of the Word of God.

The fifth lesson for all Christian churches around the world from the letter to Sardis is stay awake; don't rely on the past.

This sixth lesson for a highly effective church is walk through the door Jesus has opened before you! Walk through and continue to grow in knowledge and in love with Jesus. Today is the first step for you, and for Christians and the Christian church around the world it continues every day.

Would you pray with me, please?

Lord Jesus, thank You for these young men and women who are here today and ready to take the next step and walk through the door you've placed in front of them. I pray for each of them: for Derek and Lyndsay and Kayla and Tom and for Davis who could not be here today. They cannot go through the door you've placed in front of them alone. They need You. Send Your Holy Spirit to them today to continue what was started at their Baptism that they continue to grow in their faith and become highly effective Christians.

Jesus, thank You for Your church. Thank You for the opportunity You give us to become highly effective churches right where You have placed us. You've given us the opportunity; help us to take it! Let Your churches walk through the door that You have placed before them. Give us the courage to reach out to a dying world with the truth of Your Gospel. Move us, motivate us, help us to ask, "do you want to become His disciple, too?"

Lord Jesus, our Christ, our Messiah, our Savior, we pray this in Your name,

Amen