

The Key of David

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Jonathan Wilson

Introduction

We are now to the sixth of the seven letters that Jesus Christ dictated to the Apostle John as a means of introducing the Book of Revelation. This series on the Seven Letters is the capstone to our theme in 2016, of how the New Testament describes problems that appear in churches, and how to solve them. We will conclude this theme next week, on Reformation Sunday, with the seventh letter.

The problem with the Church in Philadelphia is that they do not have much strength left, and Jesus knows it. Yet they are not succumbing to false doctrine, instead they are holding on to their faith in the power of Jesus' name. This becomes the very solution to their problem. He does not promise them a return to strength on the world's terms, a return to influence and popularity. Instead he points them to the promises they will inherit as they hold on to their faith despite feeling like they are at the ends of their ropes. In this letter Jesus first of all validates the experience of the Philadelphia Christians; Second, he promises them vindication, and third, he promises them the rewards that come with victory.

Let us pray: God our Heavenly Father, you have given all things to Jesus Christ, whom you validated in raising from the dead, whom you vindicated in making him judge over the whole Earth, whom you crowned with victory as your right hand of power. Grant us to live with his Spirit in our hearts that we might share in all that you have given him. In his name, Amen.

1. Validated

The city of Philadelphia was near the coast of modern-day Turkey; the city that grew up

in Pennsylvania 16 centuries later is named after it. In Greek it means the City of Brotherly Love. There is irony in that, because the Christians in Philadelphia were not experiencing brotherly love from fellow residents – even those most like them in world-view and culture. His first words are a validation of them and their experience, and a comfort to them in their weakness.

Jesus describes a “synagogue of Satan” whose members called themselves Jews, but were liars. This might connect to the way Jesus identifies himself as the “key of David.” Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth, is the Christ of Israel, and his historical ancestor is King David. In Jesus of Nazareth God’s promises to Israel concerning the Christ are fulfilled. More deeply, the truth is that the Christ of Israel is the Christ of God, divine and without beginning, who as the Word of God is the author of the promises concerning himself throughout the scriptures. The Key to David is this knowledge, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of Israel, the Christ of God, who saves Israel and the whole world through himself, and there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.

The synagogue in Philadelphia disputed those claims. In all the writings of John Jesus is very clear that either a person stands for true faith, or, they are deceived in themselves and are children of the Devil. Therefore, that Jesus calls the hostile group a “Synagogue of Satan” does not imply anything about idolatry, or the occult, or some kind of inherent spiritual malice. To confess that Jesus is Lord, or to reject that confession, is the ultimate test of faith and judgment.

When Jesus describes a synagogue of Satan, he means a religious group that used its power to exclude Christ-followers from their assembly. When Jesus describes the Philadelphia Christians, he knows that they have little power in and of themselves. That makes all the

difference to his choice of words. Satan is all about pulling the strings of power to pull down the confession of Christ.

So, there were times that Satan pulled the strings in powerful synagogues in order to persecute believers. But by five hundred years later, self-described Christians in Europe had power and were pushing Jews to the margins of society. And so Satan, for the last 15 centuries, has been pulling the strings of so-called Christians to persecute Jews: This also pulls down the confession of Christ because it blights the testimony to God's grace and mercy that Christians are to show. Christ is not about using worldly power to get his way; nothing this text hints that followers of Jesus are to use worldly methods to defeat their enemies, to defend themselves, or to promote their own doctrines. Rather, they are to take comfort that Jesus understands their struggles and their weakness, having himself gone to the cross, and he validates them and their experience.

To the person who has been excluded or picked on or given the raw deal of injustice because they are weak, to be validated is a huge step in being healed and restored. It means having their story heard with empathy. We have seen how important these kinds of conversations are in society in order to keep our nation from unraveling, and we have seen what sorts of abuses and tensions ensue when these conversations are ignored or belittled, and when the stories are left unheard.

2. Vindicated

In the promises of Jesus vindication follows after validation. To be vindicated is to be validated in the presence of one's detractors, opponents, and persecutors; it is a public testimony, and Jesus promises to make that testimony himself. Those whose faith is valid because it is Christ-centered, will be declared in the right in such a way that detractors and opponents

themselves will admit they were wrong. Validation is the empathy of Christ for those who are following him and suffering for it. Vindication is the judgment of Christ entered on their behalf.

In western civilization, in which Christian faith held a privileged position for so many centuries, we have taken validation and vindication for granted. Instead we focus on our own personal sins. That focus on personal sin and the personal awareness of God is a non-negotiable element of faith, but in privileged contexts it can come at the expense of other important truths. Communities that are dragged to the margins look to the Bible's promises of the vindication of the righteous. Some communities inherit a legacy of being deeply wounded by majority society and still feel the lingering effects. Such communities look to these texts of vindication, where those who have milked the system and abused their power are going to have to admit, to the face of God, that *we* were wrong.

But God is doing a new thing among us. God is bringing Christians in western civilization to a new place of empathy with New Testament believers and with the people on the margins of society in our own generation. It may be that as we take comfort in our validation, and learn to hope in our vindication, that God will raise up believers from the groups we once thought were marginal to become our overseers. Evangelicals from Latin America understand persecution, Christians from sub-Saharan Africa understand the whimsical abuses of idolatrous and godless governments, Christians from China are living the New Testament, and the minority poor of our own nation know the raw end of oppression. I firmly believe that it is from these that the believers of today and tomorrow will turn to for leadership, and no longer the academics with all our erudition, and the pundits with all their opinions, and the bleached Mega-Church superstars with all their amusing polish.

3. Victorious

Vindication is, in one sense, the victory itself. But Jesus describes here that moment that the champion is crowned. In the Olympics the victors are put on pedestals to the applause of everyone else. After a Stanley Cup or a Super Bowl the different players on the team are allowed to put their hands on the prize. It is too soon to speak of World Series Championships – only God knows which set of suffering fans he will validate and vindicate.

The crown of victory in the ancient games was simply a laurel wreath, designed to be impermanent, to fade and dry up. Since then the Olympics and other leagues have created permanent mementos for champions. And the crown promised by Jesus Christ is permanent, for after the crowns are bestowed to those who have followed Jesus faithfully, there will be no other contest, there will be no way for the losers of that battle to come back and steal from the victors.

The way to lose the crown of victory is to give up on the contest. Feeling weak can become a temptation to give up. My first time back-packing the Grand Canyon, down the South Rim Hermit's Trail, I reached that point where I did not think I was capable of carrying that pack another step. But giving up on a desert trail is not an option. You keep in fluids and you stagger on. That is what I did. I have also experienced exhaustion in the opposite extreme, when as a child I delivered newspapers in the dark of the afternoons in sub-zero temperatures in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I knew then why it is that sometimes people just want to lie down in the snow.

In both the Grand Canyon and in Saskatoon I was never in any real peril of my life. I was with a group of back-packers, and in Saskatoon I was in the middle of a city the size of Aurora. If we feel weak in our faith, overwhelmed by the direction of American society and the general tilt of the world, let us first of all remember that none of us are alone. We have each other. We are the church. And when we collect ourselves together in our weaknesses, confessing them to each other, there God is in our midst. There is no reason to give up on the faith, there is no

reason to give up on being the Church, there is no reason to give up our immortal crowns. There is every reason to persevere, and to discover, the more that we live into our calling as the church, the more akin our walk becomes to those of the New Testament saints who have gone before us into glory, who have received the victory now promised to us.

Conclusion

Of the seven churches, I think the Philadelphia Church is most like Elgin Covenant in its situation. We have little strength and we know it; on paper it doesn't look like we have much on which to stake a future. Yet despite social and cultural pressures, Elgin Covenant has remained true to faith in Jesus Christ; we have not become a storm-tossed ship, blown about by every wind of doctrine. But I believe that if the letter to Philadelphia's Christians describes us, then it also calls us: We are called by Jesus Christ to hang on, to persevere even in our weakness, and to keep being the church in the midst of a society that is forgetting what churches are about.

We are also reassured that we will be vindicated. For some of us this is a new kind of promise, because we are used to a self-image in society where Christian values and hopes were sort of assumed, they were vindicated automatically. This is where many of us will find ourselves growing in new awareness of what most Christians in most non-Western contexts have looked forward to all along, and it also helps us hear the voices from the margins in our own nation in a new way. Listen again to the testimonies of Latin American evangelicals from the perspective of the hope of being vindicated. Listen again, or read again, "I Have a Dream" from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., from the point of view that he represented an evangelical community looking forward to its vindication.

As we are seeing the Church of the majority society being pushed onto the margins of that same society, I discern that that we are experiencing the hand of God at work. Maybe God in

providential care and love is either causing this or allowing this for a reason. Maybe the reason is that for all our scholarly erudition, political opinions, and our flare and polish, God knows that America's evangelicals still have a lot to learn about the faith of the Apostles, the faith revealed to John when he was exiled from society. I cannot decide for you whether that is good news. That is up to you and your faith. What I can do is reassure you that God never stopped being in charge, and never will, and victory belongs to those who will not quit. Amen.