

## **Sermon Text Revelation 3:7–13**

**7** “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this:

**8** ‘I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have followed My word, and have not denied My name.

**9** Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and make them know that I have loved you.

**10** Because you have kept My word of perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of the testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who live on the earth.

**11** I am coming quickly; hold firmly to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.

**12** The one who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; 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.

**13** The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

**The Faithful Church Jesus Approves**

**Daniel Cote**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Congregational Church—Winsted**

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Scripture Reading Acts 2:36-47

Sermon Text Revelation 3:7-13

In 1854, The United States Congress said, “The Congress of the United States recommends and approves the Holy Bible for use in our schools.” This is recorded in the Congressional Record. Our nation’s rejection of the Bible as the Word of God did not begin in our government. Surprisingly enough, it began in Mainline church pulpits and in the seminaries that trained pastors for mainline churches. By 1994, when Mainline clergy were asked if they believed that the Bible is the inspired inerrant Word of God, 95% of Episcopalians said "No." 87% of Methodists said "No." 82% of Presbyterians said "No." 77% of American Lutherans said "No." 67% of American Baptists said "No." The results would have been similar if the United Church of Christ had been polled. Not surprisingly, all these Mainline denominations and their seminaries are near death or are on the fast track to extinction. Furthermore, I believe it can be shown that the failure of the Mainline churches to uphold the Word of God has led to many of the problems we currently face in our country as we have become an increasingly Godless society. It is fortunate for our church that we parted ways with the United Church of Christ over 20 years ago.

How many of you want this church to be here in 100 years? Please raise your hand. Just as I thought, You all want this church to continue to thrive in the future. It is also a good sign that you are all awake. All kidding aside, I know that many of you deeply love this church, as do I. We need not look too far to find failing and closed churches. They are right here in Winsted. Yet, by the grace of God, we are thriving and growing when the reality is that more than 4000 churches close every year in America. A very good question for us to contemplate as a thriving, growing church is what we must do to continue to grow and thrive and to avoid becoming a statistic.

Let’s begin by considering the characteristics of a church that is faithful to Jesus Christ. The best place to look for that is in the Book of Acts, Chapters 1 & 2, where the church is born by the coming of the power of the Holy Spirit and led by Jesus’ apostles who walked with Him during His Earthly ministry. There, we find a church that is deeply devoted to God’s Word and the words of Jesus. We find a church that reaches the community and world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We find a church that has genuine love and concern for their brothers and sisters

in Christ. The church described in Acts 2 is continually devoted to prayer and knows that apart from God, it is nothing. The Acts 2 church joyfully worships and praises God and is willing to sacrifice for God and others. The early church of Acts 1 and 2 is the church we must emulate. It loved God, loved its neighbors, proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ, and made disciples of Jesus.

Our sermon text comes from two of the Bible's most informative, inspirational, and powerful chapters: Chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Revelation. It gives us perfect insight into the church that Jesus approves. The Book of Revelation was written by the Apostle John, who was exiled on the island of Patmos off the coast of modern-day Turkey. The book was written toward the end of the first century and contains a vision that John received from Jesus regarding the churches of his time and the events that would unfold in the end times.

In Revelation Chapters 2 and 3, Jesus describes the circumstances of seven first-century churches and speaks correction or commendation to them. I have been blessed to visit the magnificent ruins of Ephesus, Smyrna, and Sardis, three of the seven churches, and since then, I have been captivated by these two chapters from the Book of Revelation. Red-letter Bibles have the words of our sermon text in red because they are clearly spoken by Jesus. Let me summarize the circumstances Jesus' words describe in the seven churches.

The church in the wealthy city of Ephesus, where the streets are paved with white marble, is the church that has lost its love of Jesus. The church at Smyrna is a faithful but persecuted church. The church at Pergamum is compromising with the world. The church at Thyatira is the corrupt church. The church at Sardis is the dead church. The church in Philadelphia is the faithful church. The church at Laodicea is the lukewarm church that is unsure of what it believes. Now, there were many more churches than these seven by the end of the first century. So, why are these seven churches singled out and appraised by Jesus? I think the best answer is that they represent the spectrum of local churches throughout the ages. In addition to the church of Acts 1 and 2, we here at Second Congregational want to emulate the church in Philadelphia, which is praised by Jesus, and we will focus on that passage today.

The message of our sermon text is addressed to the angel of the church in Philadelphia. The Greek word translated as angel can refer to a heavenly messenger or an earthly messenger. For instance, the same word refers to John the Baptist. So, the angel or messenger described is either a guardian angel or a human leader of the church, which, in our modern context, we would call the pastor. Philadelphia is about 28 miles southeast of Sardis in modern-day Turkey. Although Turkey was overrun by Muslims in the 1400s, Christians can be found there in small percentages to this day.

The one conveying the message to the church at Philadelphia, according to verse 7, is, "He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens...." Only Jesus is holy and true because He is the divine Son of God, and thus, Jesus is the one conveying the message. This is additionally confirmed because the Messianic prophecy found in Isaiah 22:22 indicates that the Messiah will possess the Key of David and thus control or have authority over David's household, which refers to Israel. Furthermore, only a divine supernatural being can open such that it can never be shut.

Here is Jesus' message to the church in Philadelphia. Jesus is aware of their deeds, and because of that, Jesus placed an open door before them that no one can shut. The Apostle Paul says something very similar in Colossians 4:3, where he prays that God will open a door for the proclamation of the gospel. Jesus' message here to the church in Philadelphia is that he has permanently opened a door for the church to proclaim the gospel, which speaks to Jesus sustaining the Philadelphian church in its gospel ministry.

Why is Jesus promising to sustain the gospel ministry of the Philadelphian church? Even though they have little power, meaning that they are probably a small church, they have

followed Jesus' word and have not denied His name. One of the Southern Connecticut churches that many of my students attend has 13 campuses. They are a mega-church, and we see mega-churches popping up nationwide. However, the church in Philadelphia was not a mega-church. Like we here at Second Congregational, they were a small church, not a big, powerful church. Yet the church in Philadelphia, along with the church in nearby Smyrna, are the only two churches that Jesus does not rebuke or correct.

Just as the Apostle Paul and James were persecuted by the Jews, the church in Philadelphia was under attack by the synagogue of Satan. Jesus is referring to Jews who had rejected Jesus as the Messiah under the influence of Satan, who were persecuting the church. They were not true Jews because if they were true Jews, they would have searched the Scriptures and understood that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah, ensuring that He was God's long-promised Savior for the Jews and also for the entire world. These unbelieving Jews were enemies of the Philadelphian church who resisted the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Christian testimony of the believers there. The promise of Jesus is that one day, these antagonists of the faithful church at Philadelphia would be made to bow down before them as Jesus made His love for the Philadelphian church known to them.

In verse 10, Jesus makes another amazing promise to the Philadelphian church. Because they had persevered in their faithfulness to Jesus and His words, they would be spared the terrible trial that will come upon the Earth described just a few chapters ahead of our text in Revelation 6. The message here is that the faithful church in Philadelphia will be spared the terrible events of the tribulation when God pours out His wrath on the world to bring sinners to repentance. But remember that I said that the seven churches described in Revelation 2 and 3 are representative of the types of churches we find in the present and in the past.

Some churches are better than others because they are more faithful to their Lord. The church at Philadelphia represents the faithful churches throughout the ages, and therefore, the promises made to it also pertain to and will be provided to the faithful churches throughout the ages. I believe Jesus' promise to spare the faithful churches from the wrath and testing that will come upon the world at the tribulation will be fulfilled at the rapture of the church described in Paul's First and Second letters to the Thessalonians.

Jesus' message to faithful churches in Revelation 2, verse 11 is to hold on to what they have and to remain faithful to Him because He will come soon, as is often repeated in the Book of Revelation. The text implies the suddenness and swiftness of His Coming and that it will be unexpected. Thus, the faithful must always be ready for the return of their Lord.

Those who overcome, meaning those who truly believe in Jesus, will become pillars of the temple of God in the new Jerusalem, God's eternal city, which they will never leave. The imagery here conveys the truth that believers will have a permanent place in heaven before God and His Son. Jesus will write His name and the name of God on true believers. Because believers have identified with Jesus through their faith in Him, Jesus will identify Himself with them, and so, we as believers will become God's own possession for eternity, loved by Him and protected by Him.

Jesus' message to the church in Philadelphia closes with the familiar warning repeated eight times in the Book of Revelation: "The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Jesus is calling our attention to His message to the churches in a dramatic and powerful way by repeating this warning eight times. The message we can easily discern from Jesus' words spoken over the church in Philadelphia is His message to the faithful church throughout the ages, and it is this. Jesus will sustain the ministry of faithful churches that follow His word and do not deny His name.

How does what we read and understand from the Book of Revelation apply to our modern age? In the late 1800s into the 1900s, modernism found its way into seminaries and

churches. The influential Presbyterian pastor, Harry Emerson Fosdick, embraced and promoted liberal Christian teaching seeking to reconcile the church to the science of the day, much of which was false, and the worldly modern thinking of the time. He rejected the sinful nature of human beings and embraced the notion that humanity was making progress. Of course, that was before the onset of endless world wars, the rise of godless communism, weapons of mass destruction, 9/11, and our present age, where the world appears to be a powder keg about to ignite.

When I speak of liberalism, I am not speaking in terms of politics but with respect to Christian theology. Liberal theologians and pastors rejected the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. They regarded the virgin birth of Christ as a mythological and false teaching. They rejected the deity and physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. They accepted, like Thomas Jefferson, that Jesus was a great moral teacher, but they rejected the supernatural miracles that He did. They rejected the sinful nature of humans and rejected the existence of hell. They rejected the traditional authors and dating of the books of the Bible and assumed that the prophecies were written after the events occurred. So, they denied the prophetic nature of the Bible. In short, liberal theologians rejected most of the truths we hold dear in the statement of faith of this church.<sup>ii</sup> These were men who lost their faith, or perhaps never had it.

What was the result of the rise and proliferation of liberal theology in the church? It is a cautionary tale for any church that desires to continue future ministry. Liberal theology infected the seminaries of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, along with many others, and as a consequence, the mainline denominations they served, which are the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Methodist Church, The Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the American Baptist Church. These denominations are on a path to extinction, and even with the rapidly growing US population, their membership has declined rapidly. While the US population has doubled, these liberal denominations have seen their membership decline by 40 to 75%. The mainline denominations are on a path to extinction. Meanwhile, the statistics and research show that congregations like ours, which hold to the historic, orthodox beliefs of the Christian faith, are most likely to grow, and many are growing rapidly.

The sad news is that the skepticism and archaic science upon which theological liberalism was founded have proven to be false and have been debunked by archaeology, history, and modern science at the hands of Christian apologists and conservative theologians over the last 75 years. The Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1947 predated the birth of Christ by 150 years or more and showed that the Messianic prophecies were made long before Jesus was born and lead us to the conclusion that Jesus is the divine Son of God and that the Bible is the divine Word of God. If stacked, the available ancient manuscript copies of the Old and New Testament would rise 2.5 miles, and cross-comparison has shown that transmission accuracy is over 99% with no variations affecting Christian doctrine.

Logical arguments advanced by the great skeptic of the 1700s, David Hume, against the possibility of miracles have been shown to be fallacious. Medically documented miracles resulting from prayer and pointing to divine intervention have been documented throughout the world and in the mission field. One hundred and sixty-five years after Darwin, The Theory of Evolution is being debunked by the fossil record, and in the academy, scholars seek a new theory because evolution by natural selection has been found to be incapable of producing the diversity of life we see all around us.

Furthermore, those who have contemplated evil and the perfect nature of our God recognize that a perfect God must banish evil from His presence in a place called hell. In Darwin's time, scientists believed that the universe was eternal. Now, the overwhelming conclusion of the scientific community is that the universe had a beginning, just as the Book of Genesis written by Moses has stated for 3500 years. Anything that begins to exist needs a

creator, and so too, it is obvious that the universe requires a very powerful, knowledgeable, personal Creator who would be free to intervene in His creation to perform miracles, including the virgin birth of His Son. I could say much more about this, but if you are interested, you can read my book's concise defense of Christian beliefs.

Theological liberalism was founded on human skepticism and the outdated science of the 1800s, much of which is proving to be false. Consequently, theological liberalism is imploding, as are the denominations and churches that are wedded to it. The clear message for us is that God's truth revealed in the Bible should never be changed or set aside to accommodate worldly beliefs and unproven theories.

Over twenty years ago, even before I came, this church left the United Church of Christ, which is on a rapid path to extinction, along with liberal seminaries, because they have denied Christ and have not kept His word. Unlike the church in Philadelphia, they have forsaken Christ. As I said earlier, I have been blessed to travel to Turkey and to walk the marble streets that Paul walked for over two years. It was a surreal experience. I sat in the Great Theater at Ephesus, the location of the awe-inspiring events of Acts 19. Ephesus was a prosperous city at an important crossroads of the Roman Empire, but like the liberal churches of our day, it was conflicted in its beliefs. Jesus' message to the Church at Ephesus is dire in comparison to the church at Philadelphia. Jesus says to the church in Ephesus:

**Revelation 2:1–5 (NASB 2020)**

**1** “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

**2** ‘I know your deeds and your labor and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people, and you have put those who call themselves apostles to the test, and they are not, and you found them to be false;

**3** and you have perseverance and have endured on account of My name, and have not become weary.

**4** But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

**5** Therefore, remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and I will remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.

The seven stars are the messengers to the churches, and the golden lampstands represent the seven churches described in Revelation, Chapters 2 and 3. A church is supposed to bring the light of the gospel to the world, and the possession of a lampstand allows a church to continue in the ministry of the gospel. If Christ removes the lampstand from a church, the church will die. Let's consider the problem at the church in Ephesus. They had persevered, and they had rejected false apostles, just as in our day, we have rejected the theological liberalism of the Mainline churches, but sadly, they had left their first love, meaning that their love for Jesus had diminished. Perhaps the church at Ephesus had lost sight of its complete dependence on Jesus for its existence. That is a mistake we must never make because the church at Ephesus lies in ruin today. It seems that Jesus removed the lampstand from the church at Ephesus, for there is no church there today. It suffered a major earthquake in 262 AD and was destroyed by the Goths in 263 AD.

I agree with everyone who believes that we must wisely manage our programs and finances, but we must never believe that the right programs and finances will ensure that this church will be here in 100 years. If we want this church to be here in 100 years, we must never forget Jesus, and He must be our first love. The church is a divinely ordained institution, and any local church will only survive if it loves Jesus and honors and obeys God's Word. Only in knowing and understanding God's Word can we be faithful to it. I challenge all of you to attend

our Bible studies, where we study God's Word in depth. I would love it if our studies were so well attended that they needed to be held here in the sanctuary, yet they fit in much smaller rooms. No trust fund, fundraiser, or human-instituted program will ensure a local church's survival. I believe that if our church is faithful to the Word and Jesus, the finances will take care of themselves. Only Jesus can guarantee the survival of a local church.

As your Senior Pastor, one of my most important jobs is leading this church in a biblical direction that is faithful to the Word. I spend a lot of time thinking about that. Do you want this church to be here in 100 years? If so, join me in searching the Scriptures and conforming all that we do to the Word of God, fully understanding that the long-term survival of any church will only occur because that church faithfully follows and loves Jesus, adhering to His Word. The church that truly loves Jesus will be loved by Jesus, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Amen.

### **Benediction**

We invite all to join in a time of fellowship. Our New member's meeting will begin in the parlor about 20 minutes from now.

Brothers and sisters, do you remember when you first believed in Jesus? Do you remember when you repented of your sin, and you knew that you needed Jesus more than anything else? Do you remember the answered prayers over the years? We as a Church must never forget or cast aside Jesus, our first love, who loved us by His willingness to enter this broken world and die on a Roman cross, at the hands of evildoers, for our salvation.

Receive the benediction. May the Lord bless you and keep you: may the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you: may the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. **Numbers 6:24-26**

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/b/bible\\_inerrancy\\_of.htm](https://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/b/bible_inerrancy_of.htm)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/liberal-Christian-theology.html>