

Hold Fast (Scriptures quoted from the JND Translation)

Many commentators regard John's letters to the seven assemblies in Asia (see Rev.2,3) as being prophetic of the Church's history. In this view: *Ephesus* represents the post-apostolic period of severe persecution which followed; *Smyrna*, the period of severe persecution which followed; *Pergamos*, the alliance between the church and the world from the Emperor Constantine onwards; *Thyatira*; the Roman Catholic system fully formed; *Sardis*, the low state of Christianity post-Reformation; *Philadelphia*, the subsequent reaction to Sardis, recovering saints to Christ and His Word; and *Laodicea* the final, Christ-less phase of the professing Church—fit only for judgment. In each of these seven letters, there is a specific word to the overcomers—one who, despite the difficulty with which he was faced, was expected to rise above it in victory. In Ephesus, the issue is the failure of first love; in Smyrna, persecution; in Pergamos, worldliness; in Thyatira, evil doctrines and deeds, in Sardis, spiritual decline; and in Laodicea, lukewarmness. This leaves Philadelphia. **But what was to be overcome there?** Overcoming implies an obstacle to be surmounted or a foe to be defeated, but the Lord's message to Philadelphia contains no rebuke, only commendation. Where then the overcoming?

Now the Lord's commendation of Philadelphia was not because of some latter-day outburst of Pentecostal energy. We know this from verse 8: "*thou has a little power*". Indeed, there is a link between this little power and the blessing assured to the overcomer there: "*He that overcomes, him will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more at all out*" (v. 12). The reference is to 2 Chronicles 3:17 and the pillars in Solomon's temple: Jachin ("*He will establish*") and Boaz ("*In Him is strength*"). Thus he who has a little power becomes in the end a pillar of strength. But I come back to the question. Here in an assembly marked by the Lord's approval, and with no obvious persecution to endure, **what was to be overcome in Philadelphia?**

There is only one answer. While there is nothing but commendation in the letter, there is warning, and **it is this warning that the peril that threatens is shown**. It is the only danger pointed out, and therefore clearly makes known to us what is to be overcome. The warning word is "*hold fast what thou hast, that no one take thy crown*" (v11). Here, then, is the overcoming. The peril is **in not holding fast**.

It is not the crown that is to be held fast—the crown here is the crown of reward **for** holding fast. Holding fast is a position of defense and implies an adverse pressure seeking to sweep away what is of value. Now in order to understand what Philadelphia was to seek to hang on to, we must first look at what is represented by Sardis—the assembly that precedes it. Sardis stands for the national churches of the Reformation, in which the mass of the people, though Christianized externally, were spiritually dead, possessing but a name to live (see Rev.3:1). Thankfully, among these were a few who were not only living, but faithful—men who, in spirit, if not in actuality, walked apart and did not defile their garments. They were in Sardis, but not of it, men of whom their Lord says "*They shall walk with me in white, because they are worthy*" (V4). Yet their presence did not alter the general character of where they were: Sardis remained a **mixed** fellowship of living and dead. By contrast, Philadelphia, in keeping with its meaning of *brotherly love*, is where the brotherhood of **genuine** saints is recognized and found. It represents a movement of the Spirit to recover the children of God, lost amid the confusion of Sardis, where living and dead are mingled together. In Philadelphia the members of Christ are united in one outside of what is merely profession and so delivered from the unequal yoke of Sardis. As 2 Cor. 6 tells us: "*Be not diversely yoked with unbelievers; for what participation [is there] between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship of light with darkness?*" (v14).

Thus in every true revival the faithful heed the Word of the Lord to "*come out from the midst of the*" (v17) and separate from the established churches and their mixed communions of 'believer along with unbeliever' (v15). Such movements are marked by a fervency of spirit, zeal and earnestness and their first generations are men of power. Purified by the opposition they necessarily have to endure from the establishment, the true saints are brought together. Consciences are exercised, the Word of God is heeded, Christ's presence becomes more real, and the fellowship of saints is valued. In short, the character of the movement manifests itself to be Philadelphian. So

far—wonderful!

yet it is in **such** a scene—a scene of rich blessing and real power—that the exhortation to “*hold fast*” finds its true place. Search and see: has there ever been a true revival of the Spirit that has not deteriorated over time into what is merely of the flesh? Through lack of care, the lamp that once burned so brightly begins to flicker. Eventually all real progress in the movement is at an end, and the adherents become merely conservators of a golden age now gone. Instead of holding fast, things were let slip and the crown is lost, or give to others. Doubtless many remain earnest in clinging to the teachings of their forefathers, just as the Pharisees did to the Law of Moses, but the living vitality has departed. The brethren have, in spirit, slipped back to Sardis or, worse, fallen away to Laodicea.

But then what, actually, was to be held fast? The Lord’s commendation furnishes with the answer: “*thou hast...kept my word, and not denied my name*” (Rev.3:8). Obedience and devotion, expressed in keeping His Word and not denying His name—these two things give Philadelphia its character.

The first thing to be held fast then is the Word of God. Not a bit of it here and there, not following it until the cost becomes too much, **but all of it**. In days of revival, the Word has power with many, but in subsequent declension, the pressure to effectively jettison the less agreeable portions becomes immense. Nominal adherence to the whole of Scripture may remain, but it is shorn of its convicting power. It is in such a day that the overcomer in Philadelphia is exhorted to hold fast. All around are those who, in effect, tell the Lord whom they profess to serve, that they will heed this part of His will but not that part. Thus Philadelphia is followed by Laodicea—whose name is literally *the will of the people*. Again, how often is it man’s interpretation of the Word rather than the Word itself that is to the fore? This is not keeping **His** Word, however great or godly the interpreter! The end result is that one doctrine is emphasized here and another there, as if there were many Words instead of **one**!

Immediately connected with “*thou hast kept my word*” is what follows: “*and not denied my name*” (v8). This is the second part of holding fast. It is not enough to be Scriptural in our walk, we have to be devoted as well. His **name** would remind us of the fact that He is no longer here **personally**, and this on account of the fact that He has been cast out. This is where devotion is so important. Everything in this world is calculated to pull the saint in the direction of denying his allegiance to Christ. Peter found that out (see Mark 14:66-72).

How then can we be kept and preserved as those that confess His name in a dark and evil world? Only by walking with Him. The more I keep company with Him, the more I will love Him, and the more I will be enabled to make a stand for Him.

It is often said that what gives a particular glow to the picture of Philadelphia is that it is Christ personally who fills the scene of their vision (the word *my* occurs eight times in the address). Indeed, this is surely what gave them their name—*brotherly love*—for never was Christ welcomed into a heart but where room was also made in it for all His people. There is a true linking with one another when we are united **by the center**—when our allegiance is first of all to Christ, and this determines the character of all our other associations. How great then the need to hold fast to Christ’s Name—to be devoted to Him in the scene of His absence! What a difference exists between those who would seek to bring God’s saints into ecclesiastical bondage, and the simplicity of hearts gathered after Christ! Yet how many a Philadelphian revival has, in time, slipped back to conformity with the ritualism and legalism once abandoned! The form may be different but the spirit is identical. Playing at Church, clerisy in all but name, the substitution of corporate for individual conscience—these are all elements of a return movement, the ebb of a tide which once seemed as if it could never fail. How easily, if we get out of communion, do we fall back into a kind of Judaistic spirit, maintaining in the flesh what was once held in the power of the Spirit!

Yet not only is it Christ personally who fills the vision of the Philadelphian, but it is Christ as “*the holy, the true*” (Rev.3:7). Thus there is no way of nearness to Him but by separation from the evil that He hates, and by being formed by the truth He reveals. Thus the mark of truly keeping **His** Word is the abandonment of **all** iniquity, not merely the selective separation so prevalent today, and the heeding of **all** that He has been pleased to reveal, not picking and choosing what we like. In Philadelphia (which, as we have seen, signifies *brotherly love*) fellowship is thus based on holiness and truth. Of course the difficulties attending such a path are considerable, and it is tempting to

mitigate these by deviating a little from the path He has laid down in His Word. Holding fast, however, implies *total* commitment to Christ. The moment the fingers begin to loosen, then, in reality, everything is lost—it becomes only a question of *when* not *if*.

How blessed to experience revival—the Spirit of God moving, the Word manifesting its power, conscience responding—and yet how solemn and testing the ebb after the flow, the trial which separates and individualizes! Some go with the current; the overcomer holds fast.

None must think that Philadelphia is a haven of refuge where souls may lie unaffected by the return tide. That is the fatal delusion of Laodicea itself. Oh “*hold fast what thou hast*”! But hold *what* fast? The *Word*, and the *Name* of Christ! Not even the word or name of the leaders God has raised up. The truth must ever commend the man, never the man the truth. Our great danger is, lest, having begun with the former principle, we slip into the latter. Even the truth they teach is not truth received until it has been taken up at the Master’s feet.

Hold fast—though those who have held it with you give it up, and it separates you from everyone. Hold fast—though it is dishonored by the evil of those who profess it. In the face of the world, in the face of the Devil, even in the face of saints, “*hold fast what thou hast, that no one take thy crown*” (v11)! For many a crown has been lost, and many crown will be lost in the time of Christ’s absence! Let us not be overcome, but be overcomes—let us **HOLD FAST!**

S. Noble, “*Jude Verse Three*”, No. 115 □