THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA.

THE address of the Philadelphian letter is conceived with evident reference to the topics mentioned in the body of the letter, and to the character and past history of the Church. The writer is "he that hath the key of David, that openeth and none shall shut"; and the history of Philadelphia and its Church has been determined in the past, and will in the future be determined, mainly by the fact that "I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut."

The writer of the letter is "he that is true"; and the Philadelphian Church "kept my word and did not deny my name," but confessed the truth, whereas its enemies are they "which say they are Jews, and they are not, but do lie." The writer of the letter is "he that is holy"; and the picture of Philadelphia that is given in the letter marks it beyond all others of the Seven as the holy city, which "I have loved," which kept my word and my injunction of endurance (a commendation twice repeated).

It may fairly be considered a complimentary form of address when the writer invests himself with the same character that he praises in the Church addressed. That is also the case in the Smyrnaean letter: there he "which was dead and lived" addresses the Church which, as he anticipates, will suffer to death and thereby gain the crown of life. But it is hardly the case in any other letter. In addressing Ephesus and Pergamum and Thyatira the writer speaks as holding that position and authority and power, which they are by their conduct losing. The writer to Sardis occupies the honourable position which Sardis has lost beyond hope of recovery. The writer to Laodiceia is faithful and true, addressing a Church which is reproached for its want of genuineness.

In this respect, then, the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia form a class by themselves; and the analogy extends to other characteristics. These two Churches are praised with far more cordiality and less reserve than any of the others. They have both had to contend with serious difficulties. The Smyrnaean Church was poor and oppressed, the Philadelphian Church had but little power. Before both there is opened a prospect of suffering and trial; but in both cases a triumphant issue is confidently anticipated. Life for Smyrna, honour and dignity for Philadelphia, are promised—not for a residue amid the unfaithful, as at Thyatira or Sardis, but for the Church in both cities. It is an interesting coincidence that those are the two cities which have been the bulwark and the glory of Christian power in the country since it became Mohammedan; the two places where the Christian flag floated latest over a free and powerful city, and where even in slavery the Christians preserved cohesion among themselves and real influence among the Turkish conquerors.

Another analogy is that in those two letters alone is the Jewish Nationalist party mentioned. Now the Nationalist party existed wherever there was a body of Jews settled, either as resident strangers or as citizens of the town; and there can hardly be any doubt that in every important commercial centre in the Province Asia there was a body of Jews settled. In every one of the Seven Cities, we may be sure, there was a Nationalist Jewish party, opposing, hating and annoying the Jewish Christians and with them the whole Church in the city. If that difficulty is mentioned only in those two cities, Smyrna and Philadelphia, the natural inference is that it had been more serious in them than in the others; and that can only be because the Jews were, for some reason or other, specially influential there. Doubtless the reason lay in their numbers and their wealth; and hence the weakness and poverty of the Chris-

tian party is specially mentioned in those two Churches.

The body of the letter begins with the usual statement that the writer is familiar with the history and activity of the Philadelphian Church: "I know thy works." Then follows, as usual, an outline of the past achievements and conduct of that Church; but this outline is couched in an unusual form. "See, I have given before thee a door opened, which no one is able to shut." There can be no doubt what the "opened door" means. It is a Pauline metaphor, which had passed into ordinary usage in the early Church. At Ephesus "a great door and effectual was opened" to him (1 Cor. xvi. 9). At Troas also "a door was opened" for him (2 Cor. ii. 12). He asked the Colossians to pray "that God may open unto us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ" (Coloss. iv. 3). In these three Pauline expressions the meaning is clearly explained by the context: a "door opened" means a good opportunity for missionary work. In the *Revelation* this usage has become fixed, and the word "door" is almost a technical term, so that no explanation in the context is thought necessary; unless the Pauline use had become familiar and almost stereotyped, the expression in this letter would hardly have been possible.

The history of Philadelphian activity had been determined by its unique opportunity for missionary work; there had been given to it a door opened before it. The expression is strong: it is not merely "I have set before thee a door"; it is "I have given (thee the opportunity of) a door (which I have) opened before thee." This opportunity was a special gift and privilege and favour bestowed upon Philadelphia. Nothing of the kind is mentioned for any other city.

The situation of the city fully explains this saying. Philadelphia lay at the upper extremity of a long valley, which opens back from the sea. After passing Philadelphia

the road along this valley ascends to the Phrygian land and the great Central Plateau, the main mass of Asia Minor. This road was the one which led from the harbour of Smyrna to the north-eastern parts of Asia Minor and the East in general, the one rival to the great route connecting Ephesus with the East, and the greatest Asian trade-route of later times, when the harbour of Ephesus had been completely destroyed. The Imperial Post-Road from Rome to the East also passed through Philadelphia.

Philadelphia, therefore, was the keeper of the gateway to the plateau. It had been founded, doubtless, to guard the door and to keep it closed against the enemy; but the door had now been permanently opened before the Church, and the work of Philadelphia had been to go forth through the door and carry the gospel to the cities of the Phrygian land.

It is not stated explicitly that Philadelphia used the opportunity that had been given it; but that is clearly implied in the context. The door had been opened for the Philadelphian Church by Him who does nothing in vain: He did this, because the opportunity would be used.

Here alone in all the Seven Letters is there an allusion to the fact which seems to explain why those special Seven Cities were marked out for "the Seven Churches of Asia." But it would be wrong to infer that Philadelphia alone among the Seven Cities had a door before it. Each of the Seven stood at the door of a district. In truth every Church had its own opportunity; and all the Seven Churches had specially favourable opportunities opened to them by geographical situation and the convenience of communication. But it lies in the style and plan of the Seven Letters to mention only in one case what was a common characteristic of all the Seven Cities; and Philadelphia was selected, because in its history that fact—its relation to the cities on the near side of the Central Plateau—had been the determining factor. Philadelphia

must have been pre-eminent among the Seven Cities as the missionary Church. We have no other evidence of this; but the situation marks out this line of activity as natural, and the letter clearly declares that the Philadelphian Church acted accordingly.

The construction of the following words in the Greek is obscure, and it is possible to translate in several ways. But the rendering given in the Authorized Version (abandoned unfortunately in the Revised Version) must be preferred: "I know thy works; see, I have given thee the opportunity of the opened door, because thou hast little power, and didst keep My word and didst not deny My name." The opened door is here explained to have been a peculiar favour granted to Philadelphia on account of its weakness combined with its loyalty and truth.

If the Philadelphian Church was weak, so also was the city. It had suffered from earthquakes more than any other city of all Asia.

In A.D. 17 a great earthquake had caused very serious damage; and the effects lasted for years after. The trembling of the earth continued for a long time, so that the inhabitants were afraid to repair the injured houses, or did so with carefully studied devices to guard against collapse. Two or three years later, when Strabo wrote, shocks of earthquake were an everyday occurrence. The walls of the houses were constantly gaping in cracks; and now one part of the city, now another part, was suffering. Few people ventured to live in the city; and Strabo expresses his astonishment that any were so fond of the place as to live there, since their houses were so dangerous, and still more that any one had ever been so foolish as to found the city. Most of the population then spent their lives outside, and devoted themselves to cultivating the fertile Philadelphian territory; and there is an obvious reference to this in a later sentence of the letter, where the

promise is given to the faithful Philadelphians that they shall go out thence no more. Those who stayed in the city had to direct their attention to the motions of the earth, and guard against the danger of falling walls by devices of building and propping.

Such a calamity, and the terror it had inspired, naturally hindered the development and prosperity of Philadelphia. The Emperor Tiberius indeed treated Philadelphia and the other eleven Asian cities, which suffered about the same time, with great liberality; and aided them to regain their strength both by grants of money and by remission of taxation. Though at the moment of the great earthquake Sardis had suffered most severely, Philadelphia (as is clear from Strabo's account) was much slower in recovering from the effects, owing to the long-continuance of minor shocks and the terror and apprehension which was spread by the reputation of the city as a place of danger. The world in general thought, like Strabo, that Philadelphia was unsafe to enter, that only a rash person would live in it, and only fools could have ever founded it. No coins appear to have been struck in the city during the twenty years that followed the earthquake; and this is attributed by numismatists to the impoverishment and weakness caused by that disaster.

Gradually, as time passed, people recovered confidence. Subsequent history has shown that the situation about A.D. 17–20, as described by Strabo, was unusual. Philadelphia has not been more subject to earthquakes in subsequent time than other cities of Asia. So far as our scanty knowledge goes, Smyrna has suffered more. But when the Seven Letters were written the memory of that disastrous period was still fresh. People remembered, and perhaps still practised, the camping out in the open country; and they appreciated the comfort implied in the promise, verse 12, "he shall go out thence no more." They appreciated,

also, the guarantee that, as a reward for the Church's loyalty and obedience, "*I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.*" The Philadelphians who had long lived in constant dread of "*the hour of trial*" would appreciate the special form in which this promise of help is expressed.

The concluding promise of the letter resumes this allusion. "*He that overcometh I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out thence no more.*" The pillar is the symbol of stability, of the firm support on which the upper part of the temple rests. The victor shall be shaken by no disaster in the great day of trial; and he shall never again require to go out and take refuge in the open country. The city which had suffered so much and so long from instability was to be rewarded with the Divine firmness and steadfastness.

That is not the only gift that has been granted the Philadelphian Church. "See! I am giving of the Synagogue of Satan, who profess themselves to be Jews, and they are not, but do lie: see! I will make them come and do reverence before thy feet and know that I have loved thee." This statement takes us into the midst of the long conflict that had been going on in Philadelphia. The Jews and the Jewish Christians had been at bitter enmity; and it must be confessed that, to judge from the spirit shown in St. John's references to the opposite party, the provocation was not wholly on one side. The Jews boasted themselves to be the national and patriotic party, the true Jews, the chosen people, beloved and favoured of God, who were hereafter to be the victors and masters of the world when the Messiah should come in His kingdom. They upbraided and despised the Jewish Christians as traitors, unworthy of the name of Jews, the enemies of God. But the parts shall soon be reversed. The promise begins in the present

tense, "I am giving"; but it breaks off in an incomplete sentence, and commences afresh in the future tense, "I will make them (who scorned you) to bow in reverence before you, and to know that you (and not they) are the true Jews whom I have loved."

In Philadelphia, as in Smyrna, it is clear that the Jewish Christians must have been a comparatively numerous body, more so than in the other five Churches; and there was a correspondingly large number of Jews in the city.

Another indication that the great disaster was long remembered in Philadelphia may be perhaps found in the same verse 12. In gratitude for the liberal help which the city received from the Emperor Tiberius, the New Caesar (Neos Kaisar), it had sought permission to take a new name from the Imperial title, and the Emperor had crowned his kindness to the city by granting it leave to take the name Neokaisareia. It wrote on itself the name of the Imperial God, and called itself the city of its Imperial God present on earth.

Such a permission was esteemed a very great honour; and there can be no doubt that a shrine of the New Caesar, with a priest and a regular ritual, must have been established in Philadelphia at that time, soon after A.D. 17. This was a purely municipal foundation, quite different in character from the provincial temples established in Pergamum to Augustus, in Smyrna to Tiberius, and in Ephesus to Nero. The one was established by the city at its own cost, and for its own benefit and glorification. Those others were established by the Provincial Council, and the whole province shared in the expense and took part in the ritual, though the selected cities undoubtedly bore a large proportion of the expense of maintenance in acknowledgment of the honour of being selected as representative cities of the Province.

There is no evidence to prove the statements which we have

just made as to the origin of the name Neokaisareia. Coins furnish almost the only evidence in such cases; and (as has been stated) Philadelphia was too poor to strike coins during the reign of Tiberius. Only under Caligula, did coins begin once more to be struck at Philadelphia: some of these bear the name Neokaisareia. As the series begins only under Caligula, the great Swiss numismatist, M. Imhoof-Blumer, considers that the name Neokaisareia was assumed in his honour in 37 or 38 A.D. But no reason is known why the name should have been taken under Caligula, while there was an excellent reason for assuming it in the time of Tiberius. Sardis, in commemoration of the same event, assumed the epithet Kaisareia; other cities which had been relieved by Tiberius then took the names Hierokaisareia and Kaisareia.[1] The lack of proof that the name Neokaisareia is as old as Tiberius is inevitable, since no coins are known under that Emperor. It is a familiar and accepted principle that names and titles of cities are in many cases found on coins only a considerable time after they were bestowed: thus, for example, the name Claudio-Derbe is not found on coins of Derbe earlier than the time of the Antonines, but it was obviously bestowed on the city a full century earlier under Claudius: Smyrna becomes Neokoros of the Emperors under Tiberius, but the title is first found on coins under Trajan, sixty years later.

When a Philadelphian read in this letter the words, "he that overcometh . . . I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and mine own new name," he could not fail to see a reference to the history of the city. The form of expres-

[1] Kyme and Mostene, like Sardis, assumed the additional title Kaisareia: Hierakome changed its name to Hierokaisareia. Tiberius is styled in an inscription of Mostene *conditor uno tempore XII. civitatium.* He was therefore the founder of Philadelphia as one of the twelve; and the city which he founded was no longer called Philadelphia, but Neokaisareia.

sion usual throughout the Seven Letters is here exemplified. Whatever the enemy can do for the pagan city, the Author of the letter will do far better for his own. If Philadelphia was honoured with an epithet embodying the name of the Divine Flavian Family, He will write on His own "the name of my God." If Philadelphia once assumed the new name of "the city of the Imperial God, the New Caesar," He will write on His own "the name of the city of my God, and mine own new name."

It is often incorrectly said that the victor receives three names—of God, of the Church, and of Christ; but the real meaning is that a name is written on him which has all three characters, and is at once the name of God, the name of the Church, and the new name of Christ. What that name shall be is a mystery, like the secret name written on the white tessera for the Pergamenian victor.

None of the Seven Cities except Philadelphia had ever given up its own name, and substituted the name of the reigning Imperial God. The other great cities of Asia were too proud of their own ancient names to abandon them even for an Imperial title. Sardis, indeed, which also suffered from the earthquake of A.D. 17, had assumed the epithet Caesareia at that time, but that was only an epithet, which never replaced the old name; it soon fell into disuse, and is never found on coins later than Caligula A.D. 37–41. But Philadelphia in its hour of weakness may perhaps have felt that the Imperial title was a source of strength; and, as it began to recover, it recurred to its own name.

Under Vespasian the Imperial epithet Flavia was added to the name Philadelphia; and the double name was in ordinary use when the Seven Letters were written.

As in the Smyrnaean letter, so in the Philadelphian, there is no word of blame; there is nothing but approval of the past and promise for the future. The Philadelphian Church, weak and persecuted, had imitated Christ's ex-

ample, and His teaching, of patient endurance; and when the dread hour of universal trial comes to them, Christ will keep them from being overwhelmed by it.

The one word of advice and counsel is the same as in the Smyrnaean letter: "hold fast that which thou hast," continue to do as you are doing; and the crown (of life) which was promised to Smyrna, and which Philadelphia also has won, shall remain in your possession.

History has justified the promise. On those occasions when we can catch a glimpse of the state of things in the city, it was surrounded by increasing alarms, of old from earthquakes, at a later time from the attacks of the Turks; but through all it endured. It was long the solitary Christian city in a country which had passed entirely into Turkish hands (with the distant exception of the harbour of Smyrna, which was held by the Knights of St. John after the acropolis had become Turkish). Yet Philadelphia struggled on, a little weak city against a whole nation of soldiers. It alone upheld the Christian flag in a Moslem country. It did not deny the name. It was patient to the end. It stood siege after siege, reduced to starvation, but maintaining its independence. It was deserted by the Christian Empire of Constantinople, and at last by the Christian West; but still it fought on. Finally, at the end of the fourteenth century, it yielded to a coalition between a Turkish Sultan and a Byzantine Emperor. What the Turks could never do by their unaided strength, they achieved by turning to account the divisions and jealousies of the Christians. The Emperors had no sympathy for the city which maintained its independence after they had abandoned it. There has been written on the history of Philadelphia a name that is imperishable so long as heroic resistance against overwheming odds and persevering self-reliance amid desertion by the world are held in honour and remembrance.

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