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Church in Edinburgh

PASTORAL LETTER, CHRISTMAS 1957

MY DEAR FRIENDS,

The season again draws near when we celebrate with joy and gladness the first advent of our Lord, looking back to all the wondrous benefits which that has brought to us, and looking forward with steadfast hope to His second appearing, that great joy which is set before us, and for the sake of which we endure our present state of humiliation with patience.

The Lord's word to Philadelphia is "Hold fast." To what are we to hold fast? To the Truth, the Truth of Christian doctrine, as delivered to us by the Apostles of the Lord; and the Truth of holy living, as required of those who abide in the fellowship of Apostles. Holding fast to these precious things, and forgetting those things which are behind, we press forward towards the mark of our high calling.

It is worthy of note that this command, "Hold fast," is also given in the two preceding epistles, those to Thyatira and Sardis. Let us see whether there is a message for us in these words also.

Like Thyatira, do we not find in the various sections of the church at the present time doctrine which has been leavened by error concerning the coming of the Kingdom, error falsifying her outlook and hindering her hope? And in the world we are surrounded by antichristianity. But to the faithful in Thyatira the Lord says: "I will put upon you none other burden, but that which ye have already (*i.e.*, that measure of holy truth and holy living) hold fast till I come." "Hold fast till I come!" Is this not a word straight to our own hearts?

To Sardis the message was: "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore *how* thou hast received and heard, and *hold fast, and repent.*" Does not the Lord seem to press these words upon us at the present time? And is it not a reminder to us of the danger of losing much of what we have learned from the Lord's Apostles and of lowering the standard which has been set before us?

We have been taught to regard these epistles to the seven churches as having reference to seven distinct periods in the Church's history, and that to Philadelphia as referring to the period of the Lord's work by His restored Apostles. Philadelphia means "love of the brethren," that love even to the laying down of our lives for them which the Lord so desires to see in us. And His word to Philadelphia is: "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly; hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." These are encouraging

words, but they do not lack a warning. We can be led astray, we can give up our precious things in exchange for worldly allurements, we can settle down into a lower standing unworthy of the crown of Philadelphia.

The warnings and exhortations of the season of Advent seem to be summed up in the Epistle for Christmas Eve, when, as it were, expectation reaches its greatest intensity.

“The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.”

How can we be sufficient for these things? By holding fast till the Lord come, trusting in Him alone to supply all our need, “in everything, with prayer and thanksgiving, making our requests known unto God.” So shall the peace of God, which passeth understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

May that peace be with you always.

Yours faithfully and affectionately,

JOHN D. STEWART,
(*Pastor*).