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The Door No Man Can Shut*

Rev. 3:7, 8

By E. J. FRIEDRICH

WE have come this morning to honor three eminent servants of the Word for their many years of faithful service in the kingdom of God. Being partakers of their joy, we unite with them in thanking God for the manifold blessings which He has for so many years bestowed upon them and upon their ministries. We also take pleasure in commending them for their faithfulness, congratulating them upon their achievements, and thanking God for the enduring benedictions which have come to our church through their dedicated services. And so the keynote of our celebration is joy—the hallowed spiritual joy which finds its highest expression in praise and thanksgiving to God.

And yet, if we could look down deep into the souls of the men whom we are honoring, we should, I am sure, discover that their joy and perhaps also their gratitude are somewhat tempered by an undertone of sadness. This is altogether natural. After all, an important chapter in their lives is now being brought to a close. Before the day is over, another door will have been shut after them—shut never to be opened again. And somehow there is always something disconcerting and depressing in the sound of shutting doors—a cold, hard note of uncompromising finality. We who have come down through

the years in the service of the church are gradually becoming accustomed to this sound, for we have heard it many times before. But for some time we have been hearing a new sound of shutting doors. Doors are beginning to shut ahead of us—doors of opportunity and service which we should like to enter but which are being shut against us because we are too old. People say that our future lies in the past and that we have nothing to look forward to but the doleful experience of having one door after another shut in our faces. But what these people say is wrong, altogether wrong, for there still remains one open door for us, the door no man can shut. And with this great door wide open for us to enter, we can press onward with glad anticipation, for we still have a future, a future with wonderful opportunities.

This comforting truth is brought to our attention through the exalted Christ's announcement to the church at Philadelphia—

"BEHOLD, I HAVE SET BEFORE THEE
AN OPEN DOOR, AND NO MAN
CAN SHUT IT"

Without any further reference to the church at Philadelphia or to Christian people in general, I should like to apply this word of Christ to my esteemed friends of more than half a century.

I

The exalted Christ says, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it; for thou hast a little strength and hast kept My Word and hast not denied My name." This makes it very

* A sermon delivered by the former professor of homiletics of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, Mo., on Nov. 4, 1960, in a chapel service celebrating the 40th anniversary of Dr. John Theodore Mueller as professor at Concordia Seminary and the 50th anniversaries of the ordination of Dr. Alfred M. Rehwinkel and Dr. Frederic Niedner.

clear that the open door which no man can shut is the Lord's gracious reward here on earth for a steadfast faith and faithful service in His kingdom.

The men whom we are honoring today are known throughout our church and far beyond her boundaries as sound theologians, fearless confessors of the truth, hard and aggressive workers in the Kingdom, and faithful servants of Christ. Of course, they are far from perfect. They too are handicapped by spiritual idiosyncrasies, defects in character, infirmities of the will, and the downward tug of the old Adam. They too have made many mistakes and committed many sins. Nevertheless, Christ's remarkable commendation in our text belongs also to them, for by the blood of atonement all their sins have been washed away, and all their weaknesses and shortcomings have been buried forever under the unsullied and perfect righteousness of Christ. Therefore Christ says to them as He said to the Philadelphians 19 centuries ago, "I know thy works . . . for thou hast a little strength and hast kept My Word and hast not denied My name."

My reverend brethren, little did you know what lay ahead of you when you as teen-agers dedicated your lives to the ministry of the Gospel, but you took this step gladly because you loved your Savior. He had richly endowed you for this blessed work, but in comparison with the tremendous power and vast resources of the enemies of the Cross, you certainly had but "little strength." Notwithstanding, you have with the help of God worked hard and long and very successfully in strategic positions in His kingdom, always standing up boldly for what is right, and that not only face to face with the hostile world but

again and again under the blistering censure of your own brethren, the very men who should have supported you. In an age in which it is not at all popular to be orthodox, you have remained loyal to the Holy Scriptures, cheerfully subjecting your thinking and your judgments to the inspired Word. Above all, you still love your Savior after these many years and continue boldly and joyfully to confess His holy name, and that not only by the spoken word but through the printed page as well. Truly, "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." And yet He graciously commends you for it.

God's commendations, however, are always accompanied by extraordinary bestowals of divine favors. Contrary to popular opinion, steadfastness in the faith and faithful service in the Kingdom are never without their temporal rewards.

But what reward has Christ given you? Listen!

II

"These things saith He that is holy, He that is true, He that hath the key of David, He that openeth and no man shutteth, and shutteth and no man openeth: I know thy works. Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

The open door no man can shut is a symbol of the future with which the exalted Christ rewards His faithful servants in the course of their earthly life. The open door also reflects the spirit of the Apocalypse. This magnificent vision is anchored securely in the eternities before the foundations of the earth were laid. It draws life and strength from the Manger, the Cross, the Empty Tomb. It comes to grips with the problems of the church and the world. But all the while it thrusts out

boldly, almost defiantly, into the future, even into the eternities which lie beyond the realms of time. Thus it is a blueprint of theology at its best. Also an outline of the theologian's philosophy of life and his program for action. Faithful veterans of the Cross may have eyes dimmed by the dust and smoke of battle, and their aging knees may be weary from long marches down through the years, but like the aged John they look into the future with apocalyptic vision and stride bravely and expectantly through the open door no man can shut.

The door no man can shut is the open door to a healthier and more pronounced spiritual growth, the cultivation of which most of us so sadly neglected during our years of active service. Year after year we were so occupied with the spiritual welfare of others, or at least thought we were, that we lost sight of our own desperate spiritual needs and often failed to provide adequately for our own souls. Having been relieved of our pastoral and professorial responsibilities, we have now been given plenty of time to meditate without interference upon His Word and to strengthen and deepen our spiritual lives. In other words, He is giving us another opportunity to become more like Him before we meet Him face to face.

The door no man can shut is the open door to theological maturity, a goal which most of us set for ourselves years ago, but which few have fully reached. Liberated from rigid schedules and professional pressures, we veterans now have a wonderful opportunity to penetrate deeper into the profound mysteries of theology and to develop keener insights and sounder theological judgments by actually fusing together

into one spiritual entity the substance of our theology and our faith in Christ.

The door no man can shut is the open door to opportunities for new and mature types of Christian service. In the kingdom of God on earth there are no "emeriti," no superannuated pastors and professors, no retired workers. Our commission does not expire with our 70th birthday or our golden anniversary, but continues as long as we have life and breath and a sound mind. No matter how old we may get, there will always be opportunities for us to serve God and our fellow men — either by the spoken or the written word, or by the kindly deed, or by the impact of a noble character and a truly godly life.

The door no man can shut is the open door to a closer fellowship with God, that blessed communion with our Father in heaven which is the goal of all Christian aspiration and the fountainhead of God's choicest benedictions upon His faithful servants.

This then is the message of the open door no man can shut, a message of particular significance for you, my esteemed colleagues whose anniversaries we are celebrating today. Our future does not lie in the past, but stretches out before us with challenging incentives toward a more sincere consecration, a richer spiritual growth, genuine theological maturity, generous works of Christian love, and a closer fellowship with God. Doors may be shutting all around us, but this door will be kept open. The years which still lie ahead of us may indeed be few in number, but He who has redeemed us with His own blood does not want them to be dreary, empty, unproductive, wasted years — a wretched anticlimax to what has gone before. On the

contrary, He wants to help us make them years of new adventures — rich, beautiful, productive, a source of heavenly benedictions for ourselves and many others, a happy culmination of a long and faithful life through service. Therefore He says to you and to me, "Behold, I have set be-

fore thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

And at last, in the supreme moment of our lives, when His own tender hand quietly closes also this open door behind us, He will open another door for us to enter — the last one — and the best.

PAULINE ALLUSIONS TO THE SAYINGS OF JESUS

The *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (January 1961), under this heading, subjects the problem of Paul's allusions to sayings of Jesus to a critical but constructive scrutiny, examining not only specific allusions to some *logia* of Jesus but also entire doctrinal parallels to *logia* of our Lord, finding a rewarding field especially in the apostle's allusions to Christ's parables. The conclusion the writer reaches is both interesting and, as we believe, sound. He says:

These are some of the allusions found in the Pauline epistles to the sayings of Jesus which we possess in our written Gospels. While admittedly some are less clear and convincing than others, still they occur in sufficient numbers to warrant the conclusion that Paul was familiar with the materials preserved in the oral evangelical tradition and that, moreover, he must have made use of these illustrations and metaphors (even perhaps of the parables) in his own preaching and teaching. To appreciate the value of such allusions as we find, however brief, it must be remembered that they are not references in the literary sense and that, moreover, they have been incorporated by Paul into the exposition of themes which differ markedly in scope and in vocabulary from the type of literature to which our Gospels, especially the Synoptic Gospels, belong.

The fact that Paul preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ is clear from many passages in which he emphatically states this fact, such as 1 Cor. 2:1 ff.; 15:1 ff.; Gal. 1:11 ff.; and others. The Galatian passage interests us especially, since there he tells us that he received his Gospel not from men but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. The tradition therefore that Luke's Gospel is essentially that of Paul, with, of course, many supplementations secured by special research (Luke 1:1-4), is well founded. The matter is of special interest to us because of the "yet not I, but the Lord" passage (1 Cor. 7:10) and again because of the "I, not the Lord" passage (1 Cor. 7:12). These passages do not declare that some parts of the Pauline epistles are divinely inspired while others are not, but 1 Cor. 7:10 obviously declares that for the command in v. 10 Paul had a *logion* of the Lord, namely, that recorded in Matt. 19:6, 9, while for his command in v. 12, which treats of mixed marriages, namely, marital unions of a Christian and a heathen, he had no *logion* of Jesus, who never had occasion to instruct his hearers regarding mixed marriages, because He, with rare exceptions, addressed only Jews, who were bound to the Mosaic law. I believe that the article in the CBQ deserves careful study.

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER