

“ARE YOU LOSING YOUR CROWN?”

by Bob Eichholz

“Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.” Revelation 3:11

A crown of righteousness is reserved for those who will be in the first resurrection, those who will reign with Jesus Christ, as kings and priests to our God (Rev. 1:6 & 5:10). We should be aware; however, that this crown, and our eternal life, requires that we both grow in grace and knowledge and endure to the end of our natural life.

Because of inaccurate teaching and doctrine, many are lulled into a sense of complacency and receipt of their crown is even now in jeopardy. When we do not prove all things we are taught, by the very scriptures that God provides for our edification, we expose ourselves to the deceit of those who are unknowingly being used by Satan the devil.

Philadelphia Church Era Doctrine

One of the greatest dangers to the elect of God, those called into His church, is a doctrine that claims to be something that the Bible does not verify or substantiate in any manner. For over fifty years now, various professing Churches of God have advanced the premise that they are the Philadelphia era of the church. This is supposedly based upon Christ’s commentary about this church in Revelation 3:7-12, in which He greatly praises this Church of God.

It is a quite natural human response that drives everyone to want to be among those who are the chosen few that are going to inherit the crown of righteousness, which God has promised to those who love Him. False ministers have used this human weakness to draw people into their congregations with exhortations of promises that are not actually contained in the scriptures.

Yes, Christ does praise the church in Philadelphia; however, if we carefully read each of these five verses, we find only four specific qualifications are praised in His comments. These are the conditions that will determine if we can be truly identified with the Philadelphia church.

Let’s take a look at those comments, as recorded in Revelation 3, and in verses 7-12, which read:

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, ‘He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens: ⁸I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name. ⁹Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie-- indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. ¹⁰Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. ¹²He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. 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 I will write on him My new name.’”

In verse eight Christ gives us three of those attributes, saying they have “a little strength”, they have “kept His word” and they have “not denied His name.” Then in verse ten He adds one more when He says they have “kept My command to persevere.” Finally, in verses eleven and twelve is gives a command that includes two more vital components, which are: “hold fast what you have” and “he who overcomes.” In summation, the Philadelphia church already had the four required elements and needed only to hold fast and overcome to retain their crown.

You Have A Little Strength

Having a little strength does not seem like much of a qualification, especially to our human and worldly way of thinking. However, a biblical explanation will give us proper understanding of Christ's comments on the performance of that church in Philadelphia.

A scripture that should begin to open our eyes to God's truth about strength of man is found in I Samuel 2:9, which reads:

*He will guard the feet of His saints, but the wicked shall be silent in darkness.
"For by strength no man shall prevail."*

In this verse we can readily see that God considers man's strength to be inadequate for prevailing against the evil in this world. Our strength, by itself, is insufficient and therefore is but a "little strength" in the eyes of God.

However, the command to "hold fast" and "overcome" indicates that some kind of strength is required to retain our crown and we are directed to the source of that strength in a scripture found in I Chronicles 16:11, which reads:

Seek the LORD and His strength; seek His face evermore!

God alone must be the source of that strength and this is confirmed in many other verses, but no better example than this one found in II Samuel 22:33, which reads:

God is my strength and power, and He makes my way perfect.

King David spoke these words in a song he wrote to praise the LORD and these words are just as applicable to our needs as they were to David.

God's strength led Israel out of Egypt and His strength will also lead us out of the Egypt in this present sinful world, as is described in a scripture found in Exodus 15:13, which reads:

You in Your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; you have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation.

The bottom line is this: We, His redeemed in this age, must never depend upon our own strength to endure against the forces of evil in this world. Neither should we cease striving to build the character that God requires for those of us who would be priests and kings in the first resurrection. Our strength for each of these purposes must come from the LORD alone and that strength is found nowhere but in His Word. God's truth is His strength and our strength!

You Have Kept My Word

This attribute is one that few people have ever really taken into serious consideration as they go along life's way... even some in the Church of God. In the world, we prepare for our career by going to school and some feel that graduating high school will fit their need to acquire a decent income. Others want more financial security and we go on to college for a bachelor's, a master's or even a doctorate degree. Armed with the level of preparation we deem adequate for our needs, we head out into the world and labor for the rest of our natural lives.

The qualifications and requirements for becoming priests and kings of God are not determined by anyone but God alone. He sets the standards and He alone will judge whether or not we will have met them... and if we have overcome the world!

A scripture that we must forever keep in the back of our minds, when gauging the progress of our character building, is found in Matthew 5:48, which reads:

"Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

When we have become perfect we will have completed our education in qualifying for the works God has in store for us in His kingdom... not any time before! Perfection, as God the Father is perfect, means living our lives in the same manner as Jesus Christ lived His life on earth, in complete obedience to His Father. Jesus is the only example we have to go by and to emulate.

Keeping His Word means keeping every letter of the Bible, which is the Word of God in its entirety. Jesus should have left us with no doubt when He made this statement found in Matthew 5, and in verses 17-18, which read:

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.”

Not only must we learn and know every aspect of His Law and the scriptures of the Prophets; we must have a complete SPIRITUAL understanding of every word contained therein. If we believe that all we need to hold fast to, is the teaching of some church professing to be a Church of God, we are in danger of losing our crown! Nowhere does the Bible confirm that any man’s teaching meets the requirements for salvation, let alone the qualifications for becoming priests and kings.

The Bible and every scripture contained therein, remains the sole authentic Word of God and, therefore, the primary source for our education in righteousness. Failure to continue in our learning and character building and we will have failed to keep His Word!

You Have Not Denied My Name

There is another qualification that the ministry, in the professed Churches of God, has overlooked, to the detriment of each person in their respective congregations... not denying His name. It may seem inconceivable that anyone that keeps the Sabbath Day would deny the name of Jesus Christ, but that is only because we fail to understand what denial really entails.

A great number of ministries take pride in expounding in detail how they are faithful to the teaching of a man, their mentor in the world, even though he is long dead. They usually justify their following of this man’s works by a scripture found in I Corinthians 11, and in verses 1-2, which read:

Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. ²Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.

In these verses, the apostle Paul is seemingly admonishing his congregation in Corinth to imitate his works and the traditions he had delivered to them. What too many of us miss is the next verse that is found in I Corinthians 11:3, which reads:

But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

This verse clarifies the understanding that they are only to follow Jesus Christ as the head of His Church... and not any man! In fact, if you go back to the initial chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, you will find a better understanding of what Paul really means with his controversial statement about imitating his works.

This letter was initially written because the church was becoming divided. Why? Because they had begun to FOLLOW MEN! We find Paul addressing this problem in a scripture found in this first chapter of I Corinthians and in verses 12-13, which read:

Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." ¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Paul continues his instruction on correcting of this problem in another scripture found in the third chapter of I Corinthians and in verse 21-23, which read:

Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come-- all are yours. ²³And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

It should be plain that when you take all of these verses into consideration, Paul was actually decrying the following of any man, including himself. We are to follow no one but Jesus Christ!

When we follow men we are following sinners, for all men are prone to making error, if we believe this scripture found in Romans 3:23, which reads:

"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."

There is no doubt that the words of Paul, as recorded in the Bible, are true, but that is only because God inspired those specific scriptures. We can have no confidence in the words of men that are not confirmed by God in His Word. Men in the world of this age have written not one word of proven God-inspired scripture and we should not treat their words as such.

This sinful nature of men is revealed in yet another scripture, which builds on this theme, and is found in I John 1:8, which reads:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

When we follow men we are in fact denying the name of Jesus Christ as the head of the Church of God... His Church! To belong to a ministry that professes to follow or hold fast to the works of any man is denying Jesus Christ by any acceptable definition of denial. The congregation in Philadelphia followed no one but Jesus Christ and for that He gave them praise for their efforts.

You Have Kept My Command to Persevere

The word, "*persevere*", in Revelation 3:10, is translated from the Greek word "*hupomoneés*" and is Strong's number 5281, which is defined as follows:

hupomone (hoop-om-on-ay'); from 5278; cheerful (or hopeful) endurance, constancy: KJV-- enduring, patience, patient continuance (waiting).

The primary definition of this word is to endure and Jesus gave that command in a scripture found in Matthew 24:13, which reads:

"But he who endures to the end shall be saved."

Jesus was talking about the trials and tribulations that His followers would have to undergo, but enduring also means to persist in our character building regardless of these hardships. It means continuing these developmental works right up to either the end of our natural lives or His Second Coming... whichever occurs first!

This also implies our continued adherence to all of the commandments and the entirety of the instructions that are outlined in His Word. We must continue to develop our hearts and minds as directed in this scripture found in II Peter 3, and in verses 17-18, which read:

You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; ¹⁸but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

Far too many people in the Church of God congregations have been lulled into complacency and are not really growing in the additional grace and knowledge that this scripture commands us to acquire. If we limit our spiritual education to the works of a worldly ministry, the works of men, we are not persevering in the manner of learning that we are commanded to undertake in God's Word.

Keep in mind that only when preparing for a worldly career is there an end of schooling and an entering of the work force. In the Church of God, the learning process must continue right up to the time of the resurrection!

Hold Fast to What You Have

This command to hold fast is another terribly misunderstood passage in the Bible and the ministry is sadly lacking in correcting the problem. People have come to believe that, “*holding fast*”, means to retain what you have already learned, at the expense of growing, which the previous segment covered in detail. This faulty definition is leading many otherwise sincere followers down the path of destruction.

The term, “*hold fast*”, is generally thought of as a New Testament instruction; however, it is also recorded in more than a few Old Testament scriptures. One good example is found in a verse from Deuteronomy 13:4, which reads:

“You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him.”

Take notice that this usage of the word is dynamic, not static, and denotes action on the part of the one that would be obedient to the LORD. God did not call Israel out of Egypt to merely live a passive existence; He wanted them to actively pursue a life in obedience to His covenant with them. That is precisely the same active part God expects from each person that He has called into the Church of God in this age. Daily active work is required on our personal character development!

Then we have a New Testament example of this word usage in a scripture that is found in the fifth chapter of I Thessalonians and in verse 21, which reads:

Test all things; hold fast what is good.

To “*hold fast what is good*” implies that we should reject what is not good. Once again that is a dynamic action and not the passive definition that many would like to apply to the term as used in these scriptures. The command to “*test all things*” carries the connotation that we should be searching for new knowledge, as it would be ludicrous to suggest testing something that has previously been learned and proven.

Many times the only way to detect wrong or false teaching is through investigation of new sources of biblical instruction. God has never limited His revelations to single sources and neither should we limit our learning in that fashion. Prove all things, but keep an ongoing active search for the truth!

He Who Overcomes

The crown of glory will come only to those of us who overcome all of the obstacles that Satan places in our path. We cannot just ignore these problems; we must prevail in correcting each one as the Holy Spirit brings them to our attention.

Jesus Christ gave us an example of overcoming by the life He lived on this earth, in the flesh, and we have His statement found in John 16:33, which reads:

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

Jesus overcame the world and He expects us to follow His example and live our lives in the same manner.

The church in Philadelphia received praise for having a little strength and we see that they relied upon the strength of God in overcoming their problem areas. Therefore, self-reliance is just one more of the obstacles we need to overcome if we are to equal their efforts.

The congregation in Philadelphia kept the Word of Jesus Christ, meaning they obeyed all of the words in His Bible, a book to live by. This required their keeping all of the commandments of God and we must do the same if we are to also overcome.

That church did not deny the name of Jesus Christ, in that they did not follow other men or credit their salvation with the works of any other men. Jesus Christ will certainly not praise us,

for holding fast to the teaching of anyone but Him alone. What we must overcome is this human propensity to want to follow other men.

The church in Philadelphia was a persevering congregation, one that continued to grow in grace and knowledge against all odds in their day. We must be equally persistent in striving to become perfect in wisdom, knowledge and understanding of God's Word. We need to overcome the limitations we place upon ourselves when we refuse to seek new sources of truth.

Another revealing statement, about overcoming, is found in the scriptures of I John 5, and in verses 4-5, which read:

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world-- our faith. ⁵Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Our overcoming is wholly dependent upon our faith and faith and belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, which entails much more than simply making a confession that we believe this is so. True belief requires acting upon that knowledge by obeying Jesus in the same manner as He obeyed His Father.

Perfection Required

Some will become discouraged by a few of the comments made, thus far, in this study and this is understandable in light of the stringent qualifications God has set for those called to be in the first resurrection. However, we sometimes overlook or minimize a vital process that God has provided for those of us with a "little strength."

A lack of strength is the major cause of our sinning against God and we sometimes get the feeling that we will never live up to the task of overcoming. This provision for correction of this sinful nature weakness is outlined in a scripture found in I John 1:9, which reads:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

While we will never be completely sinless, prior to our resurrection change into a spirit body, through the proper confession of our sins and sincere repentance WE ARE CLEANSED OF ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. At that point we are PERFECT! That was a major purpose for His coming into this sinful world. Confession is a process because it must be completed each and every time we fail along life's path.

We are assured that this process is available on a continuing basis by a scripture found in Matthew 18, and in verses 21-22, which read:

Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" ²²Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

The same Jesus Christ who will forgive us, and cleanse us of all unrighteousness, tells us that forgiveness must be given "up to seventy times seven." We should know that seventy times seven denotes forever... eternally! Would He do any less in forgiving our sincere confession and repentance?

The Summary

In this study we have seen the attributes of the church in Philadelphia brought to the forefront, so there can be no doubt about what Jesus Christ was praising. We have also seen that even as He praised their efforts, He still cautioned them both to hold fast to the truth and to overcome the world.

While I have no doubt there are individuals in the present day Church of God that will exhibit these same attributes, as did the congregation in Philadelphia, I have personally never observed an entire church congregation that has met this standard in the past seventy odd years.

All of the slogans, mottoes, clichés and lofty platitudes made by the ministry are not going to qualify a church as Philadelphian or make one iota of difference to our God. WE CANNOT JUST TALK THE TALK; WE MUST WALK THE WALK!

God has given us His Word, the Bible, which contains every qualification that is required for those who would be priests and kings in His kingdom. Plainly, the church in Philadelphia was following God's instruction to the spiritual letter; otherwise they would never have received Christ's praise.

The message is clear: We should not be looking for salvation in any church congregation, as there is no alternative to meeting the standards that God requires of us. Church membership is no guarantee that we will retain the crown of righteousness, but it could very well be a factor in losing that crown. Complacency, inaccurate doctrine and even false teaching can rob us of that crown.

A seldom-studied warning is given to each one of us in a scripture found in Philippians 2, and in verses 12-13, which read:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

This admonition to “*work out your own salvation*” should make it clear to each one of us that we are personally responsible for our crown of righteousness. No other person, or church, can develop the perfect holy righteous character that God requires in each one of us, who would be in His kingdom.

Daily we must be searching our hearts and asking ourselves: **AM I LOSING MY CROWN?**