

“The Church Is Elementary”  
 Pastor Sam Richards  
 Sermon for 16 June 2024  
 Texts: Revelation 3:20

**Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.**

If we parse this verse, the first thing we face is that “presentness” of the Lord—I **stand at the door**. He is near, He is at hand. That aligns with **the kingdom of God is at hand** and with **today is the day of salvation**. It also aligns with the billboard I saw on my trip to Mississippi: “Your moment is now!” As I related the billboard sported the picture of woman seated on a throne, as if she were “Queen for a day!” I found the message hilarious. But I also commented on how Jesus’ declaration: **The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news of the gospel of God.** (Mark 1:15) The sense of moment, of now is foremost! That is what John the Baptist also preached and that is the significance of Revelation 3:20. Next, the Lord’s action given His position **at the door** is that **He knocks**. That one word should evoke in us another famous passage:

Matt. 7:7 “[a]Ask, and it will be given to you; [b]seek, and you will find; [c]knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or what man is there among you [d]who, when his son asks for a loaf, [e]will give him a stone? 10 Or [f]if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? 11 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!”<sup>1</sup>

As well as another, more enigmatic declaration:

**John 10:9 I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and [a]have it abundantly.**

Taking the second scripture first, we note that the figure of speech has altered significantly. Jesus is no longer the one knocking, and the action is not knocking and seeking entrance, rather is it one of passage, of entering. **Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father except through Him.** And the movement is both in and out, like sheep going forth and returning to the fold from abundant pasture.

The Matthew 7 passage is rather more apt, for there we find: **knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.** The imagery is united with that of John 3. We see that knocking is seeking entrance, to requesting entrance. But it is not Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Footnotes

- a. Matthew 7:7 Or *Keep asking*
- b. Matthew 7:7 Or *keep seeking*
- c. Matthew 7:7 Or *keep knocking*
- d. Matthew 7:9 Lit *whom his son will ask*
- e. Matthew 7:9 Lit *he will not give him a stone, will he?*
- f. Matthew 7:10 Lit *also will ask*

seeking entrance, rather it is the believer's request—and it is connected to a promise of availability: for him who knocks, **it will be opened**. God is available to those who seek Him. This coming human experience is taken to a whole new level when we ponder the absence of the calling. For it is the voice of the Master, **“hears my voice” (Rev. 3!)** That matters more than the knocking. Hearing His voice identifies us as the sheep, the knocking merely makes us aware of His proximity—or notifies us, gets our attention.

Subsequently, the person who hears His voice, opened the door to Him and He comes in to him, and fellowships with him, dines with Him. If we missed the repeated connections of dining and teaching, banquets and conversations—then the significance of this figure may be somewhat lost on us. Jesus practiced hospitality in His own home, and in the homes of those who invited and hosted Him! This is elemental. Or, to state it plainly, church is our spiritual ecosystem, the place **where we live, and move and have our being**:

**Acts 17:27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and [a]exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ 29 Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.**

Let's flesh this analogy out a bit: it is as if we are fish, and the church is the sea in which we swim, feed, live and fellowship with Christ Jesus and each other. If we are not in church, we are like fish on dry land; we are out of our element. Our “gills” prove useless outside our element, we have no lungs to breathe in the oxygen we need to live! And, after flopping about a bit, we shall surely die. Consider how serene our environment is! We, as fish, were among the living creatures who did not die in the Flood—unless of course, one supposes that the saline content of the sea was altered toxically by the deluge of fresh water—which is possible. We are created first and we did not perish as land creatures did, including the evil human race. Most storms pass over our heads, we are safe and sheltered in the deep—protected and provided for in our element! The effects of earthquakes are muted, though real. Sometimes we are beached by high surf and storm waves—but not often. We swim down deeper where the turbulence remains above. We are sustained and we find our sustenance in the sea<sup>2</sup>. We are protected in church, and we are provided for there, too.

The church is our ecosystem. And, over the years, through the centuries, we have learned a lot—we have also forgotten a lot. As I met with a brother, I began sharing some of the elementals of our faith life. For the better part of two centuries, in the English Reformation, we had a wonderful effulgence of theology related to pastoral care. We had biblically centered pastors, ministers and preachers opening up the elements of pastoral care—men like, Richard Baxter, William Gouge, Richard Hooker, John Cotton, Cotton Mather, John Bunyan, John Donne, John Milton, John and Charles Wesley, John Owen, Isaac Watts and John Newton, right on up to Jonathan Edwards, Matthew Henry, John Gill, Albert Barnes—all the Bible

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<sup>2</sup> The Beatles played around imaginatively with ideas like this in their 1966 song, “Yellow Submarine.” I didn't make that connection until fairly late in the writing of this sermon.

translators, all beneficiaries of John Calvin, John Knox and Martin Luther, the apex reformers. They all affirmed the centrality of the church in the believers' life—in this they were aligned with the Christian classicists like Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine and Ambrose, Dante, Chaucer and even my beloved Shakespeare. And all of these receiving from the Lord's apostles, the early church fathers, great pastors, apostolic fathers and patristics—all the holy apostolic church are present. Bringing breadth and depth to our engagement with revelation truth!

These Christian believers/writers, theologians and divines provide a spiritual sustenance in the ocean wherein we all swim together—the spiritual ecosystem of which I speak. We should liken it to a banquet hall, a place of fellowship, spirited discourse and theological exchange. *Yes, everyone wants to be right; but more than that they want to be truthful, clear and informed.* Jesus, seated as host and as the chief expositor of the word, presides over the feast, this vast dialogue(!), a world full, not a roomful—which gathering is at times actually described as **a wedding banquet**. This suggests a festive, joyous time as the proper atmosphere! Jesus, as the **bridegroom** and we, the invited guests, are also present, happily honored, **as His bride!** His wedding banquet is our banquet as well. Everyone is married here to our one groom.

And all our spiritual fathers, the men I mentioned above and myriads besides, are present as well. The conversation will be great then, but the best news is that it proceeds even now. We read their works and discuss their books and get to consult with the authors firsthand. There is so much to discuss as our spiritual knowledge is fleshed out and perfected in the church eternal—our truest home as prepared for us by Him who knows us best! And this I must say, these writers are more perfect in person than we would ever gather from the imperfect medium of their writings! Yes, both better and greater—especially those we thought we were at odds with—such is our mutual respect, our **reverencing of one another**. Or, more simply, our love towards one another. They remain our teachers, so the question remains are we willing to be instructed, tutored, or taught by them *which*, it would appear, *we needs be and shall be?*

Over four centuries have passed since, William Gouge first published Of Domestic Duties (1622) an exposition of Ephesians directives for domestic life. Harrison Butler, kicker for the Kansas City Chiefs demonstrated how controversial a topic this is in our enlightened and liberated culture. Astounding actually. Building a Godly Home (2013) is a modernized version of the original (the sections on servants and masters have been excised because of their irrelevance to twenty-first century households; the language has been modernized and explanatory footnotes added for challenging words communicating theological/historical ideas that are valuable though unfamiliar. (From the biographical introduction, pp. xii and xii) A second Puritan pastor worthy of mention, Richards Baxter (1615-1691) published, fifty years later (1673), A Christian Directory which serves as a reference book on practical theology, or soul care—it is well-indexed and accessible.

According to Gouge, “It has pleased God to call everyone to two vocations. One vocation is *general*, in which certain common duties are to be performed by all men (as knowledge, faith, obedience, repentance, love, mercy, justice truth etc.) The other is *particular*, in which certain specific duties are required of individual people, according to the distinct places where divine governances has set them in the nation, church and family.” Gouge divides Ephesians between these two vocations: general duties (Ephesians 4:1-5:21) and particular callings and conditions (Eph. 5:21-6:9) with special attention paid to duties that God has established in a family. And Gouge transitions between these two fields with the pivotal verse: **Submitting your selves one to another in the fear of God.** It is a matter of spiritual fathering for me to pass on to you the wisdom of paying attention to this transitional verse, *forgetting not what lay before in general duties, as we move on to the particular duties.* The challenge here is retention—retaining what we have heard and refusing to let that slip as we listen in to what follows. A second precept should not obscure, eliminate, or displace the first precepts. To wit, it is our duty to set forth the praise of God (Eph. 5:19-20) if our hope is to be serviceable one to another. *The love of our neighbor flows from our love of God* as well as **we love God because He first loved us.** (1 John 4:19) In parallel fashion, the first table of the Ten Commandments is followed by the second table: **Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the great commandment. And a second is like unto it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.** (Matt. 22:37-39) Hence we are to both love God and do good to our fellow man and, if we do so out of respect of God, we demonstrate that respect practically. It honors God for us to submit in this way. Good. Now that is both foundational, and a foretaste of what’s to come in the vein of spiritual fathering.

In Chapter 9 of Baxter’s Directory, of “Christian Ethics,” p. 342, we are given “Directions for the government of the tongue.” “Understand in general of what moment and concernment it is, that the tongue be well governed and used. For they that think words inconsiderable, will use them inconsiderately.” The conceit that words are of small moment (as some say of thoughts, that they are free) doth cause men to use their tongues as if they were free, saying, **Our lips are our own, who is lord over us?** (Psalm 12:4—the context reads, v. 3 **The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips and the tongue that speaks proud things;** v. 4 **who have said, With our tongues we will prevail, our lips are our own, who is lord over us?** This is the seat of the oppression of the righteous by the wicked! The fifth estate, the “free” press,” and social media, monitored by those who censure and control speech (governmental efforts to control the narrative and fit the “news” to conform to their views are expressions of proud, loud and flattering lips) are forms of social control and oppression. And advocates of “free speech” should similarly be on notice to guard against presumptuousness! Free speech is not free if you consider accountability!

**...Matt. 12:35 The good man brings good things out of his good store of treasure, and the evil man brings evil things out of his evil store of treasure. 36But I tell you that men will give an account on the day of**

**judgment for every careless word they have spoken. 37For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”**

Baxter writes: 1. “The tongue of man is his glory; (Pss. 57:8; 16:9 and 30:12) by which expressly he excels the brutes; and a wonderful work of God it is, that a man should be able to articulate such an exceeding number of words; and God has not given so admirable a gift for vanity and sin; the nobler and more excellent it is, the more it is to be regarded, and the greater is the fault of those who abuse it.” (p. 342) . . . “so it is the office of the tongue to be excellently serviceable to the good of others, and to the glory of mankind; ***the shame therefore of its faults is the more unexcusable.***” 2. The tongue is made to be the index, or expresser of the mind; ***therefore if the mind be regardable, the tongue is regardable. . . . Therefore by vain, or sinful words, you tell men the vanity and corruption of your minds.***” 3. “Deeds are stirred up or caused by words. Daily experience telleth us the power of speech. A speech has saved a kingdom and a speech has lost a kingdom. Great actions depend on them and greater consequences.” Good. Again these three introductory points are a tantalizing taste of fatherly counsel: words disclose the quality of your mind, and the content of your heart. **The good man brings good things out of his good store of treasure, and the evil man brings evil things out of his evil store of treasure.”** As a good father, I should pass such things on to you. What do you think?

**Amen**