

56TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE GOSPEL STANDARD TRUST HELD AT EBENEZER CHAPEL, MATFIELD ON 21 MAY 2022

Address by Mr Rowland Wheatley on

“A church with little strength but an open door set before it”

Well, the Lord be pleased to help me speak to you this afternoon. The subject is based upon the portion we read in Revelation – the church of Philadelphia – verse 8 “I know thy works: 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.”

I want, with the Lord’s help, to divide this subject into five points.

Firstly, this is speaking of a church. These are letters to the churches. So we need to ask ourselves what is the church?

Secondly the reason for an open door being set before this church is given in this verse and I want to look at that reason “for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.”

Thirdly, what is meant by an open door? What is being set before this church?

Fourth, the blessing of an open door set before a church and the emphasis is on the word set, set there by God, and the assurance that no man can shut it.

Lastly, some examples from our own experience at Cranbrook, how the Lord has set before us an open door and the encouragement that that has been to us.

But firstly, what is a church?

In Revelation 2 and 3 we have a sevenfold picture of the church of God in all ages. It is based upon the Asiatic churches, they existed at the time John was inspired to write this book. But what is the true church of Jesus Christ? There is the universal church which consists of people chosen in Christ from the foundation of the world, the whole elect. Then there is the church on earth and at a particular time, the local church and that is what we are talking about here. A true church is what God describes in the Holy Bible. Everything to do with the church is Biblically based. Christ is the head of the church which is his body. We can say five things about a true church:

- (1) The church gathering will be of those called out, called with a holy calling, met together in a local assembly having covenanted to walk together and with the Lord in love and to regularly meet together for worship.
- (2) Then there are the offices of the church that are prescribed by God himself. In 1 Timothy 3 we have that description of bishops or elders, some as pastors and the deacons. Really two offices in the church. In those persons the church will recognise that God has done three things: he has called them by his grace, he has called them to that office and he has given them gifts for the work they are called to do. I will just pause here a minute. We are thinking of these churches, these seven churches and then it is emphasised this church is a little church or without much strength, all of them had an angel, all of them had a pastor. And I would really encourage those amongst our churches that are small churches to not think “we are small, we can’t support a pastor, we won’t call a pastor”. Do not ever walk down that path. Your exercise as the Lord’s servants come and preach to you, is this the

man that God has appointed for us? Can we feed under his ministry? Do we love him? Does he move in and about with us and we know him and he delights in us? I would really encourage our small churches to be exercised in this matter. We are thankful that there are some that have been called and are exercised at this time. We wish them every blessing.

- (3) Going on from the offices of the church there is a gospel that is preached. And that will be according to the Bible. What is found in the Old and New Testaments. He preaches the sovereign will of God, not of man. A God-centred gospel. A powerful God. Not a God that is preached in some circles that is helpless and desperately needs people to come and if they don't then his church will fall apart. As if God wasn't in control, man was in control – no, God is in control. He will build his church, the gates of hell will not prevail against it and the gospel centres in the mighty God who created the earth and who is the God of salvation. He will preach Christ and him crucified. That our salvation is by grace alone, through faith, which is the gift of God.

I will just say as an aside on this, when we are thinking of open doors, if we are thinking of bringing the Word of God outside our church doors, may there be one message, one picture of that church. Not one picture in the church building but outside leaflets that almost tend to a free-will idea. If we are sober in our churches, sober in our message and our preaching, then all our evangelistic work will be as sober, will directly reflect what we are. So if someone sees some of our material, hears us speaking in the street and they come into the chapel they say "that's what I thought they would be" because we are bearing a uniform witness, the same inside and outside. The gospel that is preached in every aspect of the work of the church of God should be the same.

- (4) Then the church, in the fourth place, observes the ordinances that our Lord has instituted in his word. That is believers' baptism on profession of faith and the Lord's supper.
- (5) Lastly, a true church practices Biblical loving discipline according to Matthew 18. The church uses discipline to form its members, keeping them in a holy walk with the Lord and with each other. There can always be restoration and as a last resort, withdrawing from any who will not hear the church. I would strongly recommend all church members and all who are interested in the church to get a copy of the book *New Testament Church Order* from Gospel Standard Publications [available online [here](#)]. This is a summary of an address Mr Ramsbottom made to one of these annual meetings in 1976, forty-six years ago, but he describes very clearly the church of God. The whole address was on the church of God, my address this afternoon is not. But it points out very clearly the relationship of the members one to another and to the pastor and the whole aspect of the church. I would really recommend it, it's only £1.50. The other book I would recommend is this one, they've been around for a little while but I found it very helpful and helpful for young ministers as well, *Sin and Salvation* by J C Philpot [available online [here](#) from Gospel Standard Publications]. I like J C Philpot, and in this book he has selections, or Mr Ramsbottom has selected parts from Mr Philpot's writings, and it covers his own testimony briefly, then doctrine, experience, the Christian life, Holy Scripture, the ministry and the church and there's various subjects. The ministry and the church is very good reading for a pastor and for those who are hearing the message. Very good. So again I would recommend you get hold of that and may you profit from it. Another reading for looking at what the church is of course is the 1689 Baptist Confession and chapter 26. I wonder how many of us really think, what is a church? What does it consist of? What makes that church? Can just a gathering of the Lord's people just meet down the road and say, well, we're a church. Can this gathering now be said to be a church? No. The church is defined by the word of God. It's not just one or two things, it's all put together. Christ has shown that very clearly in the word of God.

Secondly, the reason given for an open door set before this church.

"...for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name." It had strength - though it was a little strength - and we may ask ourselves in what way was this church's strength little? In five of the other churches, those that were written to at this time, there were things that weakened their strength, that brought reproof not encouragement in their little strength. At Ephesus, they had left their first love to Christ and his people. At Pergamos, they had those in the church that held error in

doctrine and were lax in discipline for that error. At Thyatira they had those who taught error and seduced the people to commit fornication, a church inclined to mysticism placing experience of their members above the word of God. Particularly on that point I believe many of our churches need to be very careful of this. Never put experience or exercises or words from the Lord or supposedly from the Lord above the word of God. In Sardis they had many that had defiled their garment of profession to such an extent that although the church still had a name that they lived, it was ready to die. While the church at Laodicea were lukewarm towards the Lord and increased in worldly goods. Now however big in numbers and financially a church might be, if these things are in it, it will weaken that church. But it won't be something the Lord approves of and blesses.

But this church at Philadelphia were not reprov'd for anything. So they weren't of little strength because of those things. Their little strength appears to be in numbers and in material wealth, its outward position in the world. It was a small church. But though it was a small church and could not muster many members or much money it had the strength of having kept the word of God and not denied Christ's name. Spiritually it was strong. Herman Hoeksema says in his exposition of the book of Revelation (and I would recommend that book, my dear brother Jabez Rutt gave it to me when I first went into the ministry, and it's been a good help to me then and since) but I quote him concerning this church: *"From an outward aspect one would judge that the church could exert no influence at all. If Philadelphia existed in our day, she would no doubt receive the advice to unite with some other church as soon as possible. In her small and isolated condition, so we would judge, she can be of no influence and power in the world. The sooner she becomes member of a larger body, the better it will be for her."*

But Philadelphia did not think so. At least, from the letter we receive the impression that the church had been busy preaching the gospel and witnessing for Christ. No doubt, they had witnessed for the name of the Lord also with a view to gaining converts, and that especially among the powerful and influential Jews in the city."

What an encouragement to those small churches. Amongst our Gospel Standard churches many are small in an outward way, like the church of Philadelphia was. May we have the strength spiritually that she had. Strong in the Word and not denying the name of their Lord before an ungodly world.

In the third place, what is meant by an open door?

The church exists for three main reasons:

Firstly, for the glory of God.

Secondly, for the edification and sanctification of the people of God.

Thirdly, for the evangelisation of the lost.

Our Lord's commission to the church in Matthew 28:18-20 is "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen."

When Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey we read in Acts 14:27 "And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles." Paul tells the Corinthians in both of his letters to them what happened in his second missionary journey. We read one of those portions in 1 Corinthians 16:9 "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries." Don't ever think an open door will mean no adversaries, no troubles.

I've often thought with dear Nehemiah what a wonderful, clear direction and open door and help he had to go to Jerusalem but when he got to Jerusalem how many adversaries he had there. And Ezra before him had the same. And Paul has the same here. And when he writes to the Corinthians the second time he says "Furthermore, when I came to Troas to *preach* Christ's gospel" - note that - to preach Christ's gospel - "and a door was opened unto me of the Lord" 2 Corinthians 2:12. And when Paul writes to the Colossians he says "withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also *in bonds*" Colossians 4:3. When the apostles were arrested and charged not to speak in the name of Jesus we read in Acts 5:42 "And daily in *the* temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." That was the commission they had and that's what they were doing whether men told them not to or not they kept on their way.

Clearly an open door, the open door, is an opportunity to preach the gospel and to preach it to the unconverted as the church is commanded to do unto the end of the world. While the church at Smyrna was very similar to the church at Philadelphia in that nothing was said against it. It was different in that Smyrna was in great tribulation and persecution such that theirs was not an opportunity to preach the gospel but to suffer for the Lord's name.

Fourthly the blessing of an open door set before a church and the assurance that no man shuts it.

Many years ago, Mr Seth Mercer preached at Cranbrook from the words my address is based on this afternoon, and we felt the Lord spoke to us through him. We have often pleaded this word in prayer "I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it:". Sometimes when the Lord's servants bring a word, and the years go by, but you never forget it. You go back, might not remember the text, the time and in this case, yes, the text, but you always remember it and you plead it in prayer. And there's other ones as well the Lord's servants have brought.

We might ask and ask the churches represented here: do you as a church have a love to souls and pray for an opportunity to speak to those around you of the worth of their souls? An opportunity to warn people of their danger and the judgment to come. An opportunity of then being the means of bringing the good news of what Jesus has done on Calvary to those who are concerned and feel their need as a sinner. If we do, then we will pray that the Lord will set such an opening before us. We will watch to see when such an opening is presented to us and pray for grace to take that opening.

Paul to Macedonia is a good example of two shut doors followed by an open one. In Acts 16:6-10 we read "Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia," - it's interesting isn't it, the seven letters written by the Holy Ghost they were all in Asia but at that time Paul was forbidden to preach there. That door was shut. "After they were come to Mysia, they assayed [tried] to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not." What does that mean? Some of us know what it is, that we had an opportunity set before us, it might even be a simple thing like buying a house, the price is right, the situation is right, we can do it, everything is right, but our spirit is so restrained we cannot move, we cannot do it. So, we don't do it. The Spirit suffered him not, he couldn't make that move and do it. When the Lord will have his people do something he will make them willing in the day of his power. Not only an open door but he will make the people willing. Then we read "And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas." - which we've already mentioned - "And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us. And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them." He saw that open door and so immediately they were taking steps to go in that way to take that opportunity and yes what trials were there! They ended up in the prison there but that is how the church at Philippi was begun.

It is good to see there are shut doors. That makes the open ones even more conspicuous. I must say that in all our experience at Cranbrook we have had many shut doors but then it makes the open ones even more clear. There is a big difference between a church with the attitude that “all I need to do is to gather at the set times of worship and the Lord will bring people in” and a church that knows that the Lord has made them custodians of the truth, with personal experience of the remedy for sin-sick souls and longs to share that with whoever will hear it and is testing doors like the Apostle was, finding some shut but one open, very clearly of the Lord. Where the Lord has opened the door we know that work will not be in vain. We will know also that when that door does eventually close it is the Lord who has closed it, not man, however it may look like man has been the means of closing it. Our work is done in that place.

I would say here that we are called to be faithful and to leave the issue with the Lord. We are not to be discouraged by a lack of fruit that we can see. We may never see it and if we know that we are doing what the Lord would have us to do then that in itself is a great encouragement. We should rather be encouraged by seeking the Lord to set before us one opportunity after another and speaking to his honour and glory. A church with the light of the gospel and the Lord directing where that light shines.

Lastly,

I want to look at some examples of how the Lord has set before us an open door at Cranbrook.

I cannot really convey to you just how encouraging it has been to see the Lord set before us at Cranbrook the opportunity to bring the word of God to those outside of our chapel doors. I want to try and share how these doors have been set before us over the years. The Lord has done it and we would give the glory to God and leave the outcome to Him. We know He will use his word as he sees fit whether it be as planting or watering, we are sure that bread cast upon the waters will be found after many days.

The first one I would mention is an open door into local schools through our children. In the millennium year, 2000, one of our children’s teachers started to read her class Mary Jones and her Bible [available online [here](#)]. We actually gave her a copy from Gospel Standard Trust Publications as well. But then the class gave an assembly of the story before the whole of the school and we offered to give a Bible to all the school. The offer was taken by the class only and I presented the Bibles to the students in front of the whole school after the assembly. So that was where we began and from then on up until this year when that door was closed, we have given Bibles to the year 6 students in that local school for twenty years. I have always taken a full lesson – a whole hour – teaching the students about the Bible and the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just through that one opening of one of our children and the teacher reading Mary Jones and her Bible to the class.

Then we have had an open door through people that we know. In the school just referred to there was another teacher who in 2007 was promoted and made head teacher of another one of our local schools. So we approached her to see if we could introduce Bibles in year 6 of her new school. And this she was happy to do and we are still supplying Bibles to that school though she’s not the head anymore the opening is still there. And of course, there are openings in giving the talks to the students. I ask them a lot of questions, and they respond and ask me a lot too. Sometimes the questions are openings in themselves. I remember at that school talking to them of our Lord Jesus Christ and one of the children, she said something which the others found quite amusing, she said “so, would it really matter whether the Son of God came to this world as an octopus or as a man?” Of course, the children thought it was quite amusing and I said well, that’s a very good question and I was able to set before them the vital necessity of being the same as those that he was to redeem. Truly man in body and in soul and that the animals or fishes did not have a soul and they are not to be redeemed but man is to be redeemed.

And another time at that school – I think that was what stopped me for a year or so going in and speaking to them – one of the children said, “so what you’re saying is if I don’t believe in the Lord Jesus Christ then I will go to hell?” I could have answered in many different ways, but I just said “yes”. And there was a gasp from the students and the teachers, I don’t think I’ll forget, you could have cut the air with a knife. But we are still bringing Bibles into the school. It was a Church of England school but it’s an opportunity, an opening to counter the godless teaching that there is not a need to have a vital, personal belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. These are openings the Lord has given to us. We can see the links and how it was planned.

Another opening was through a mistake on our part. Remember there are no mistakes with the Lord. He overrules us. But in 2011 you will remember it was the 400th Anniversary - it was a red Bible and some of you have got them – the Authorised King James version which was published in 1611. We wrote to schools - as we are doing now actually with the Platinum Jubilee one – wrote to several schools offering the TBS commemoration Bible. And a school near us had a similar name to a school thirteen miles away. We had sent out the letters and then we got the requests back, yes, we would like the Bibles, come, and bring them. And I looked at this request and thought where is this? Why have we sent to that school and not this one that is nearer? And yet this led to an open door in that school and that is still open to regularly bring in Bibles and again speak to them in class. But you know it’s not been just the Bibles. In that school, and in many of the schools that we give Bible to, they’ve had class sets of Mr Ramsbottom’s books, the Miracles, the Parables, sometimes fifteen of each one for a class. And that opening through a mistake! We would never have approached that school.

Just an aside to the Lord setting an open door before us – do we set an open welcoming door before visitors to our chapels? Are we able to have the main door literally open when we are in worship?

I know we at Cranbrook and other chapels give no indication that the Chapel is open except lights are on, because the doors need to be shut to keep out road noise or cold. Do we give a friendly welcome to anyone venturing inside? At one school visit years ago, a lad asked me if he was to visit the chapel would there be someone at the door to greet him? I said, no, but I will make sure there is by the next time we meet, and we have had someone at the door before the service ever since.

Another open door is the twenty-two-year ministry we have had at Milward Pilgrim Home in Tunbridge Wells. This came about through Mrs Dulcie Jellis and her husband Ron moving into that home following Ron’s hip operation and stroke in 2001. Their son Paul is a member of our congregation and has been since before that I’ve been in the pastorate. Dulcie who was a member at Jireh, Tenterden at that time, joined us in Cranbrook in 2004 after Ron passed away. But it was through visiting them in that home that that door was opened, and we regularly minister to the Lord’s aged people from many churches including some from our own denomination.

We have been given open doors through people walking past the chapel. In 2010, one Thursday evening I was preaching about the Apostle Paul being given the opportunity to give his call by grace before King Agrippa and Festus (Acts 26) Festus had said at the end that much learning had made Paul mad, but Paul had answered in a sober, reverent way. In my sermon I said “Would we count it a privilege if we were given the opportunity to give our testimony? And if while doing so we were derided as mad, would we answer so graciously?” Well, when the congregation had left and just myself and my daughter were locking up, I went to the front gate to shut it just as a group of about seven youths walked by. The eldest, a young lady, said to me, “you don’t believe in God, do you?” in a deriding sort of way. I said that I certainly did believe in God. “Why” she said, “you cannot see him” So I pointed to her mobile phone, and said, “you cannot see the signal going to that either, but you believe there is one.” Upon that we started talking, invited them into the chapel and had an hour with them and both my daughter and I were able to tell them how we came to faith. Some of the young people had had Bibles from me at the school. Who can tell how the Lord will use this occasion in time to come?

On another occasion a week before our Thanksgiving services in, I think 2012, I was walking up to our chapel gate and the local Roman Catholic priest was just in front of me. We knew each other so I called out to him and invited him to look round the chapel, which he did. Then I invited him to come along to our thanksgiving services. Which those of you who were there will remember he did and heard Mr Philip Pont in the evening.

Another door was opened in 2017 through a local historian. He emailed me thus: *"I'm the author of 'A history of Cranbrook' (published 2008).*

I've been asked to give unpaid help to a local history group from Cranbrook's 'University of the Third Age' organisation. In particular, I've been asked to talk to them on Wednesday, March 15, about the Nonconformist tradition/history in Cranbrook, and I've said I will do so. It's a group of about a dozen fairly elderly, but not too elderly, local inhabitants, interested in Cranbrook's past.

They are able to do some walking round central Cranbrook. I thought, how splendidly interesting for them it would be, if I could take them inside your beautiful ancient Chapel, and they could learn just a little about the Strict Baptist faith."

After the date and time were set, he emailed me and said they probably would not stay long, and please could I not talk much on doctrine but mainly on history. He did not think they would stay more than 10 minutes. Well, when the time came, I interwove the doctrine with the history, opened the baptistery and showed them that too. After 50 minutes my historian friend was saying they really must go, which the group reluctantly did. Two years later in 2019 he approached me for another visit. This time asking for an hour. It has been a God given open door to speak to some of the older residents of Cranbrook about the Gospel and their need of salvation.

Late in 2020 we installed two weatherproof and self-closing Bible boxes. One outside our home and one outside the chapel carpark gate. At the time of doing so we wondered whether there would be any interest, and whether the 50 Bibles we had bought would be wanted. Our poor prayers were perhaps not very believing ones. Now after 17 months, 421 Bibles have been taken together with the leaflets and bookmarks we put with each Bible. Dust bin men, Asda drivers, boarding school children from other countries have all taken them.

At the same time, we started the UK wide Web offer of a free Bible. TBS said most chapels gave the requests to them to send the Bibles direct, but we wanted to send leaflets too, and have the opportunity to point people to a local chapel if needed. We were told that some chapels had as many as 10 requests a week. We thought that was a lot. Well for the first 7 months - up to June - we only had a total of 40 requests. Then in July 42 in one month, 63 in August, 111 in September, and over 100 a month since. January 127 and February 129. To date a total of 1105 Bibles have been sent throughout the UK in 18 months.

With postage, packing and leaflets the cost per Bible was about £7.50 and now with an increase in the cost of the Bibles the cost is £8.30 - a total cost to date of about £10,000. When the demand suddenly increased, we were very anxious to know how we would fund this and find the time to process all the requests. Much prayer was put up, but the Lord has supplied our needs. The James Tilden's Charities for Baptists have been able to help with funding for Bibles for Kent while the Bible Spreading Union have supplied 128 Bibles to us, and Hope Chapel Redhill kindly gave us a gift of £500. Then at the GST AGM in September last year Mr Playfoot drew attention to the Providence Chapel Croydon Charity and the availability of funds for distribution of Bibles. The congregational and online giving to our free Bible fund has also been very encouraging. The door has not been shut through lack of funds or time. My dear wife does the processing of the Bibles and has help in packing the Bibles from two of her sisters at East Peckham. The Post Office supplies us with large sacks to put the Bibles in.

We regularly pray for the Lord's blessing on his word sent forth in this way. Sometimes we get emails of thanks and some people have contacted us for help in finding a sound chapel in their locality.

Another open door has been to minister to a visitor from the local Church of England. He came to us some six years or so ago and he's come more and more regularly attending but often now confined to home. He's had serious operations, but he loves the Bethel Pulpit and prayer meeting addresses. And we arranged for the Bethel Pulpit to be regularly sent to him just over a year ago. He couldn't get out to chapel and he can't join electronically so I visit him every few days and have reading and prayer with him*. But Bethel have started their new website and you can download as a pdf the Bethel Pulpits and more importantly the prayer meeting addresses. I print them out, not in the booklet form, but in the A4 so it's a bigger print and I print a few at a time and take them up to him and he loves them. Because you've got a short reading and a short address, they are so suitable for the elderly (he's over ninety). I wonder how many of you here know of people that maybe can't go to the house of God and they can't concentrate much but you can be the means of going to the website, downloading them, and distributing the addresses to them.

The Lord may open very different doors to other churches. Your church might be very, very different but the important thing is: do we look for an opportunity? To bring the light of the gospel into a dark world? We see the Lord setting the open door before us as our encouragement to go on although we may not see the fruit. I think of one of Gadsby's hymns 554, based upon "I will make all my goodness pass before thee" [Exodus 33:19]:

Though we walk through this wilderness
God's promise is our stay;
His goodness he will make to pass
Before us in the way.

And may we each as members of our churches want to be a help, however small. With time, or finance, or prayer. Never forget prayer. Lifting up the hands of the church and its officers, praying for the Lord's blessing on his word.

I hope that what I've said may be a special encouragement to our small churches with little strength. The Lord bless each of us and help us to do, with open doors set before us, what the Lord would have us to do. Count it a privilege that the Lord gives us these open doors.

* Our dear friend passed away 19 August 2022, we trust to be with his Lord.