

Revelation 2-3: The Seven Churches in Asia – Pictures of Fellowship

Attention

- 1) The Revelation of Jesus Christ is addressed to seven churches in Asia (Minor).
 - a. These were not the only churches in the province in the latter part of the first century.
 - b. They are, however, representative of the whole, not just of the Asian churches but of all churches of Christ.
- 2) Christ sent a letter to each of these churches at the beginning of the Revelation to address particular needs.
 - a. Many lessons should be learned from these letters which were attached to the book for the benefit of all.
 - b. In this lesson we will consider the portraits of fellowship we observe in Revelation 2-3.

I. The UNIVERSAL Picture of Fellowship

A. *No Unifying Organization*

- i. The Church of Jesus Christ answers only to Christ; it is composed of Christians, not churches.
 - a) Unlike the OT lamp with seven branches, each NT church is represented by a single lamp. **1:12, 20**
 - b) The churches are addressed individually, not as the Church of Christ but as the churches. **2:7a**
- ii. There is no ecclesiastical hierarchy in evidence, no inter-church organization or alliance.
 - a) The church has no governing body, no denominational association, no seminary to train its teachers.
 - b) The church of our Lord has one Head, Christ, and many members, saints not congregational units.

B. *One Unifying Message*

- i. The word of Christ is to govern all the churches; the same message is sent to every congregation.
 - a) Though congregations are addressed individually, the message for each was sent to all. **1:4; 2:7a**
 - b) These letters were circular, shared among many; the lessons were for the benefit of all God's people.
- ii. In modern religion denominational names, creeds, and associations create religious unity, and division.
 - a) Since every denomination has the Bible, it takes more than the Bible to create distinctive groups.
 - b) But in the Church of our Lord, the word of God is the sole basis for unity among believers.

II. The CONGREGATIONAL Picture of Fellowship

A. *Autonomy of the Assembly*

- i. Each congregation is an independent unit, able to make its own decisions for better or worse.
 - a) One church was not responsible for another, though one man might teach more than one assembly.
 - b) Each group determined its own fellowship, its own teaching, and its own work. **2:6w2:15; 2:19w3:1**
- ii. Congregational autonomy does not imply the absence of a standard for religious practice.
 - a) The Lord's rebuke indicates most of these churches had erred in their judgments and practice.
 - b) There was no man-made institution to enforce standards; the word is the guide. **1:3; 2:7; 22:10-17**

B. *Accountability of the Assembly*

- i. Each church would be judged for its fellowship, teaching, and work observed as a group. **2:2-4**
 - a) The local church has no identity apart from its members, but it has identity as a sum of the members.
 - b) What the members tolerate or do, the church tolerates or does, and those choices will be judged.
- ii. The church will be judged by God for the decisions it makes as an assembly of God's people.
 - a) The church is composed of individuals, but they must take a stand for what they will do collectively.
 - b) The church cannot allow unlimited personal freedom; some things must not be tolerated among us.

III. The INDIVIDUAL Picture of Fellowship

A. *Personal Participation*

- i. Every Christian operates in two religious spheres: congregational and individual.
 - a) I am accountable for the way I live my life, irrespective of the church among whom I worship.
 - b) I am also accountable for those things I participate in or allow, irrespective of personal convictions.
- ii. I am a part of the church I worship among; therefore, I partake of their decisions and judgments.
 - a) The decision of the elders or majority does not absolve me if the church tolerates sin. **2:15, 20**
 - b) I may not agree with everyone about everything, but I cannot have fellowship with what is sinful.

B. Personal Potential

- i. Repentance and righteousness is practiced individually; ultimately, each one stands or falls alone.
 - a) An entire congregation may be guilty of sin, but repentance is purposed and practiced individually.
 - b) The church cannot be righteous for me, labor for me, or repent for me; I have a personal obligation.
- ii. I cannot fellowship with sin, but I can remain in fellowship with lifeless Christians. **3:4** (cf. Eph. 5:11)
 - a) If the church persists in embracing sin, I cannot repent of sin and continue in their fellowship.
 - b) But I can (must) endure shortcomings in my brethren and remain faithful despite discouragements.

IV. The Pictures of Fellowship We Must Learn From

A. When a Church Loses Its Love (2:1-7)

- i. The church in Ephesus had left its first love; it was no longer doing the “first works.” (cf. Mt. 22:37)
 - a) The church was doctrinally straight and morally pure, but it lacked sincere love. (cf. 1Co. 13:1-3)
 - b) Jesus threatened to remove its lamp; it would no longer be recognized as one of Christ's churches.
- ii. Loveless religion devoid of spiritual fervor is just as deadly as false doctrine or immorality.

B. When a Church is Persecuted (2:8-11)

- i. The church in Smyrna was a poor and persecuted church, but they were rich in the things of God.
 - a) Their physical circumstances could not take away from their spiritual wealth and well-being.
 - b) The challenge for such a congregation is to press on, to remain faithful in the face of continuing trial.
- ii. The crown of life is not for those who suffer for a little while; it is for those who endure to the very end.

C. When a Church Tolerates Ungodly Members (2:12-17)

- i. The church in Pergamos existed in a difficult environment, but climate is no excuse for compromise.
 - a) The church tolerated within its fellowship some who practiced sins of idolatry and immorality.
 - b) The local church is not to fellowship those who practice what God has said He hates. (cf. 2:6, 15)
- ii. Unity is not established at the cost of purity; our fellowship must reflect God's choices about fellowship.

D. When a Church Tolerates Ungodly Teaching (2:18-29)

- i. The church in Thyatira was an active church; but activity is not the only measure of a church's strength.
 - a) Thyatira was weakened by its use of false teachers who taught the saints to commit sin.
 - b) This teaching was not merely incorrect; it persistently and openly advocated what God hates.
- ii. Local churches must police their own teachers to ensure sound doctrine is delivered from God's word.

E. When a Church is Dead (3:1-6)

- i. The church in Sardis was dead, but there is no mention of ungodliness or unscriptural teaching.
 - a) What killed this church is unknown; perhaps they represent the last state of an Ephesus or Laodicea.
 - b) Though the church was dead, a few remained alive, which may be why the church still had a lamp.
- ii. Just because a church is dead doesn't absolve saints from remaining steadfast and working to revive it.

F. When a Church is Small (3:7-13)

- i. The church in Philadelphia had a little strength, but it had used its abilities well and kept Christ's word.
 - a) The most faithful church is not always the largest, richest, or busiest; sometimes it is the smallest.
 - b) Neither size nor contribution nor even religious activity is a sure indicator of a church's faithfulness.
- ii. Small churches shouldn't be discouraged; neither of the faithful churches were outwardly impressive.

G. When a Church is Worldly (3:14-22)

- i. The church in Laodicea had nothing to commend; it was worldly, prideful, and spiritually indifferent.
 - a) The congregation had no sense of its need for God; it was self-sufficient and self-assured.
 - b) Indifference disgusts the Lord; He won't tolerate apathetic religion. (cf. Ma. 1:10-14)
- ii. Sincere, humble zeal is a requirement in the Lord's service; without it we will be rejected.

Action

- 1) What destroys a church: lack of love, unrighteous conduct, false teaching, worldly pride, and spiritual apathy.
- 2) What does not destroy a church: poverty, persecution, physical weakness.
- 3) My relation to Christ is individual; my standing before Him depends on *my* beliefs, motive, and behavior.
 - a. The Lord expects me to be part of a faithful local church; if it is not faithful, I must seek a godly solution.
 - b. I cannot blame the local church for my shortcomings; their errors do not mitigate my involvement.
 - c. Neither can I easily abandon my brethren; even a dead church needs a living, spiritual influence.