

## Seven Churches of Asia & Church Identity

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In Revelation 2 and 3 we read about the evaluation of seven congregations of Christ located in Asia. This is a very important passage, as it gives us a very direct insight into the mind of our head, Christ, and what He expects from churches to whom He has given His name.

There are several important things we learn from the Seven Churches of Asia

We learn what pleases Jesus in a local church:

1. Not tolerating (hating) evil men and doctrines
2. Testing all things and rejecting falsehood
3. Remaining true to Jesus and His name
4. Not denying Jesus in difficult times
5. Doing good works

We learn what displeases Jesus in a local church:

1. Not having love
2. Permitting members to hold false doctrines
3. Tolerating a false teacher
4. Being apathetic and dead

We learn the consequences of being firm:

Jesus will write on them the Name of God  
(Members) obtain the crown of life  
(Members) receive the manna of God  
(Members) have their name confessed before God  
God will bring your enemies to defeat  
(Members) will sit with Jesus in heaven

We learn the consequences of becoming unsound:

*"I will remove your lampstand out of its place"*  
*"I will make war against them"*  
*"I will come like a thief"*  
*"the shame of your nakedness will ...be revealed"*

One of the things that is hard for us to understand is how the local church is related to the universal church, and the expectations of a local church. Perhaps the best comparison for us to consider is that of a Franchise. In business terms, a franchise is a local person or people who have (purchased) the right to do business of a specific sort in the name of a larger organization. A good example of this system is the restaurant McDonalds. There is a corporate McDonald's organization, with a company president and overseers. Then local people purchase a franchise from McDonalds. They are given the ability to do business in that name. However, there are very strict guidelines they must follow as franchisees. They must have a specific menu, specific standards, and while there are some variations in this, even some specific appearances.

Of course, just because a restaurant claims to be McDonalds does not mean it is. Usually though you can see the distinctions in them. It is also possible that a local franchise might lose the franchise license

because they did not follow the pattern established. Maybe they changed the purpose (from selling burgers to selling shoes or chicken). Perhaps they failed to have the quality standards that are required.

Consider that what we are seeing in Revelation 2 and 3 is the main corporate head (by the way, corporate means “body”) is inspecting the franchisees. He calls the franchise license a “Lamp Stand”. Two of them are approved. Three of them are given red flags of warning. Two of them are told that they are losing their franchise. This is an important point; just because a church claims to be Christian does not mean it actually is right with Christ. It may have lost its candle stand and it may be full of lost people. Like a restaurant serving bad food, it may be poisoning those who are right. Jesus praised the church in Philadelphia for keeping His word, which He equates with not denying His name. Jesus’ church has one identity, and that is Christ Himself.

The identity of the church is something most do not realize is very important. We are told that the church is the Bride of Christ (e.g. Revelation 21:2). The church has no name of itself, as she is the Body of Christ; therefore, as a bride changes her last name to her husband, the church bears His name (Romans 16:16).

Along the same line, Jesus’ Church is not right of itself. A McDonald’s restaurant does not get to decide what makes it McDonald’s; this is something that is given to them. We are told that the church is established by Scripture, and that the church is established to uphold Scripture (I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. 1Timothy 3:15).

There are two common problems in the world and even among brethren. First, we see the church as its own thing, like a denomination. But we can see now that the church is not identified by a name for itself; the church is identified by Christ. Second, we struggle in seeing the church as right, when the church is not right of itself. Like Jesus viewing the seven churches, we are examined by the Spirit of God (Scripture) and Christ Himself.

There is no church identity beyond us; as far as we are concerned, there are other Christians, and they assemble as churches, but they and we are not linked as churches in our purposes. One McDonalds does not say to another “you make the burgers, we make the fries”. Each one stands alone in its purpose. In a sense, there is no church (identity) beyond us. This is called autonomy.

There is no rightness in the church itself. Instead, the church is entirely conformed to the concept of the Head. There must be a willingness to do whatever we are told and to change whatever is damaged. A franchise owner, when warned of error, would change their actions out of fear of losing the franchise, which was purchased at a great cost. Paul told the Ephesian franchise supervisors *“be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood”* (Acts 20:28). Our franchise cost far more than anything else.

Do not be deceived; many say that no church can be pleasing to God. Revelation 2 and 3 tell us otherwise.