

# Real World Church

Introduction: too

1. As we talk about being family focused this year, it is crucial that we remember the local church is a family. God meant for us to have the kind of bonds in the church that you see in a physical family, in fact, our bonds should be closer since the blood that runs through this family is so much greater and the family carries on through eternity. This family will be our greatest source of edification and encouragement, but sometimes it will also be our greatest source of disappointment and discouragement. This is because this family is made up of people that have problems and yet we are closer to each other and expect so much more of each other. It can feel like a rollercoaster ride **(2 Cor 11:28)**
2. Years ago, the TV network MTV ran a show called "The Real World." The idea was to take a group of people with very different views, interests, & backgrounds and stick them all in one house and watch what happens. They were intentionally presented with different things that would challenge them and their relationships. The show was a huge hit. Why? It lifted the veil and showed real people living real lives. It was all out in the open
3. What if God did that for this local church? Here we come together under one roof with incredible differences & incredible problems and we work and worship together. There are times it may be a thing of beauty, there are times it is painful to watch. We would probably find some things out about ourselves that would be awesome & some things that would completely embarrass us. Hopefully, we would be driven to excellence.
4. Well, that won't happen for us. We won't get our own spiritual reality show. But it did happen in the Bible for a group of church families. As we look at those scenes unfold, it is not hard to see ourselves and imagine ourselves as part of the narrative. What can we learn about ourselves, about the local church family, and what would we change?

## Seven Real Churches From Asia

### A. Scene One: The Camera Is On

1. One of the fascinating aspects of reality television is catching life as it really happens, to see life as it really is. While reality TV is popular today, it's not all that real. So much of it is staged. Situations are set up for entertainment. Real TV isn't all that real! But when Jesus speaks to the seven churches of Asia, nothing is faked or staged. All is in the open, naked a bare. No secrets. Why? Jesus is there, Jesus walks among them **(Rev 1:10-16)**
2. Addressing the individual churches, Jesus speaks with intimate knowledge of them
  - a. Every letter contains the same expression. Jesus says, "I know..." – Jesus isn't aloof, distant or removed. He sees them. He knows. He isn't just watching, He is there.
  - b. Jesus saw their deeds **(Rev. 2:2-3, 19)** → To some this was joyous but for others it was stinging rebuke. Jesus saw their service, stands of faith, love, teaching. At times he commends what was good even after rebuke for what wasn't good
  - c. Jesus saw their circumstances **(Revelation 2:9, 13)** → Some of these churches were having to endure great persecution. Some were suffering physical hardship. Some were trying to live holy in very ungodly places. Jesus understood.

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- d. Jesus saw their hearts (**Revelation 3:14-17**) → Looks can be deceiving. Jesus saw past the outward things to who they were. He saw their motivation, trust, love.
- 3. Jesus knew them. It did not matter what men thought of them. What mattered was what Jesus thought. These churches could not let appearances or reputation mean too much
  - a. The Church At Ephesus (**Revelation 2:2-4**) → Many believers would have praised this church for its strong & uncompromising stance against false teaching. To some, that's the only thing that matters. But Jesus said they left their first love. They majored in one area to the neglect of others... Likely their zeal in serving.
  - b. Church At Sardis (**Revelation 3:1-2**) → This church had a great reputation. People said this church was ALIVE. They were likely a very active group and growing in number. Things seems right... but they weren't. We can't be sure exactly what their problem was, but Jesus doesn't praise this church as a whole for anything!
  - c. Church at Philadelphia (**Revelation 3:8**) → There's a town called "Little Hope" and the local church is the "Little Hope Church." This church is the Little Power Church. People didn't think much of them because they were weak. Maybe they didn't have the large numbers, the prolific preachers, or the big money. Maybe it seemed they missed out on opportunities because of this. They weren't little to Jesus. He would open a door no one would shut. Likely growth by evangelism
  - d. Church at Laodicea (**Revelation 3:17**) → Physically, this church was blessed with great prosperity. Churches like this have numbers, money, and nice facilities. They began to equate their physical blessings with spiritual success. Even outsiders would have been impressed. Yet, Jesus would spew them out of His mouth
- 4. As we go about serving God, we are not alone. The Lord is with us. He sees us, He is with us, & He knows us. Whether His presence is a great comfort or a great disturbance depends on how we are living. It does not matter what we think of ourselves as a local church or what other people think of us... What matters is what Jesus thinks! (**Hebrews 6:10-12**)

## **B. Scene Two: Satan Will Make His Presence Known**

- 1. One way Satan fought against these churches was the presence of bad theology and false teachers. Some churches were fighting & some were giving in (**Revelation 2:6; 14-15**).
  - a. Who exactly these false teachers were and what they taught, we don't know. The indication is this teaching made sin, especially sexual immorality, of no consequence. Perhaps like Gnosticism which was so prevalent in their day.
  - b. Throughout the New Testament there are warnings about the concept that one can live in sin because God's grace is greater. There were also false teachers with who advocated for permissive promiscuity. It sounds strange, but it was real.
  - c. These Christians also faced very heavy pressure from Jewish sources. These would infiltrate the churches and push Jewish customs and laws onto Christians.
- 2. Satan also brought intense persecution (**Revelation 2:9-10, 3:9-10**). Look at this... the only two churches that Jesus only had words of praise for are also the ones Jesus says were being persecuted hard. The words used carry the idea of pressure & being worn down. Things were bad. Jesus doesn't say, "Don't worry it will get better." In fact, Jesus says to get prepared, it would get worse. As with Job, Satan thinks suffering will break them!

3. Satan also made his presence known through temptation (**Revelation 2:13, 20-21**). These Christians existed in culture that worshipped not only idols, but also men... particularly the emperor. Those who refused faced social pressure, loss of opportunities, and yes... even death. The reference to Jezebel may be about someone introducing idolatry and the sexual immorality that went with it. It was being tolerated in some churches!
4. From the time God created this world Satan has been trying to fight against God. He knows he has lost the ultimate war, but he still fights hard. He seeks to win the battle over each one of us. One thing he knows works well... attack people in their safe place... attack them within the local church. He is the accuser. He is the great destroyer. It seems he works hardest when things are going well. Are we ready? Is your faith deeply rooted, mind spiritually focused, your heart truly devoted? (**Revelation 12:9-12**)

### C. Scene Three: Christians Behaving Badly

1. Some reality shows find their success in showing things going completely wrong. The cameras capture the rawness of the moment. Sure, sometimes we enjoy watching the chaos... but we also are drawn to the realness of it. Life as it really is! People put on nice clothes, paint the house and fence white, and drive fancy cars but what happens behind the door is often chaos. People aren't perfect. Local churches are this way too. We put on nice clothes and a smile. We shake hands and tell each other we good. But sometimes things are anything but good. We struggle in many ways, sometimes with great battles with sin. On the outside, some churches look like they've got their act all together. They appear to be the perfect church. But the reality is often so different.
2. All but two of the churches Jesus spoke to had major things wrong with them. Some he commended before rebuking, others He just rebuked, but they all had issues:
  - a. Ephesus (**Revelation 2:4**) – They left the love they had at first. You know all the stuff a person does when they first become a Christian? They quit all that. They still fought for truth, but the first works zeal was gone. Repentance, evangelism, etc
  - b. Pergamum (**Revelation 2:14-15**) – They were tolerating false teaching. This wasn't just differences of views, but things that contradicted clear scripture. Nothing was being done about it and so more and more were influenced by it.
  - c. Thyatira (**Revelation 2:20-21**) – They were tolerating sexual immorality. Like the church at Corinth, they did nothing about it. It was spreading around the church
  - d. Sardis (**Revelation 3:1-2**) – Their works in the Lord's service were incomplete. Jesus says this church DEAD! Their reputation among men meant nothing. It sounds like this is an issue of partial obedience... obeying only where they want to.
  - e. Laodicea (**Revelation 3:15-16**) – They had become lukewarm in their faith. They were spiritually complacent & indifferent. Sadly, they thought everything was great!
3. Within those churches there were people who were faithfully doing what is right. What was Jesus' message to them? Don't give up, stay faithful and true! (**Revelation 2:24-26; 3:4-5**)
  - a. In these letters every time Jesus rebukes a whole church, He speaks to the individual. He makes a promise to the one who is faithful, to the one who chooses to do right. Even in the worst of these settings there were faithful people serving God!

- b. Jesus does not tell them to give up on the church, to throw in the towel on their brethren. If there was going to be change in these churches, they needed the presence and strength of these faithful Christians. They were their hope!
  - c. Jesus' words also reminds them that the unfaithfulness of those around them would not hurt their salvation. Jesus says, "They will walk with Me in white!"
  - d. Can you imagine how discouraging it had to be to try to be faithful and serve God in the midst of some of these churches? Jesus does not just see the problems. Jesus sees these people too & wants them to know they make a difference!
4. Imagine getting such a letter from Jesus. Getting ripped into with such stinging rebuke would have to hit really hard... Especially when Jesus says He would remove their place from His presence. But Jesus did not leave them without hope. With each rebuke came a call to repent met with a promise of forgiveness & restoration **(Rev. 2:16-17; 3:19-21)**
5. Local churches are not perfect. Those churches that seem to be perfect are either fake or dead... which are huge problems in themselves. Churches are the people. People have problems. This isn't an excuse to live in sin or accept problems, but it is reality. We are all at different places in our spiritual growth and our walk with God. Add to this the struggle of not always being on the same page in how we understand issues of scripture. How do we handle this? First, we cannot be afraid of facing our problems. They cannot be ignored or accepted. Jesus' message is simple: Repent! To those who are doing what is right... Don't stop. I know it can be discouraging when you see people not being who they are supposed to be. Remember, Jesus sees you and will reward! Don't give up on others... Those who are faithful are the hope for change! **(2 Corinthians 7:8-11)**