

**Corporate responsibility before God?**  
**An examination of the seven letters to Asia Minor**  
**in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.**

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## Abstract

Revelation chapters 2 and 3 appear to contain language that refers to the corporate deeds, the corporate faithfulness and the corporate perseverance of the recipients. Does this indicate that the members of a local church bear responsibility as a group before God for how their local church, as a body, measures up to expectations of the Lord? Is Jesus expecting a local congregation to respond together in unity? The purpose of this study is to answer these questions by seeking to identify the presence of corporate language in Jesus' directives of Revelation 2:1-3:22. Following an exegetical research model, this study utilizes a review of scholarly literature, a study of context as well as various analyses to determine the pericope's meaning.

The findings of this research point to a presence of corporate language in the pericope. This is evidenced by whom Jesus addresses the letters to and by the way Jesus uses singular and plural pronouns in his communications within each letter. Although it appears that Jesus is directing all communication to the angel of each church, the context and details of each letter relate to the earthly realm rather than the heavenly realm. Communicating such practical and earthly information, using pronouns set in the second person singular, indicates that the heavenly perspective of a local congregation is that of a "body of one". Since Jesus presents the majority of his directives in Revelation 2:1-3:22 to a singular "body of one", it is the finding of this study that Jesus is therefore expecting a corporate response from each of the seven congregations of Asia Minor. Building on the significance of the use and meaning of the number seven in Revelation, the seven churches represent all churches everywhere. Therefore, the heavenly perspective of all contemporary local churches is that they too are "bodies of one". As Jesus directed the seven congregations of Asia Minor to respond with corporate repentance, corporate deeds and corporate perseverance, Jesus requires contemporary congregations to respond in the same corporate manner.

## Table of Contents

I. Introduction	6
1.1 Background	6
1.2 Problem statement	9
1.3 Objectives	9
1.4 Hypothesis statement	9
1.5 Research design and methodology	10
1.5.1 Determining context	10
1.5.2 Determining meaning	12
II. Literature review	13
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 Church	13
2.2.1 Church as community	14
2.2.2 Local church	14
2.2.3 Belonging to the church	14
2.2.4 Connecting church body to city	15
2.2.5 Inter-changeability of term: believers / church	15
2.2.6 Assessment of contributions – Church	16
2.3 Addressees	18
2.3.1 Corporate body	18
2.3.2 Individuals	19
2.3.3 Assessment of contributions – Addressees	20
2.4 Corporate action	22
2.4.1 Repentance	22
2.4.2 Collective responsibility	22
2.4.3 Perseverance	23
2.4.4 Spiritual practices	23
2.4.5 Other corporate actions	23
2.4.6 Assessment of contributions – Corporate action	24
2.5 Purpose of the Apocalypse	25
2.5.1 Transformation of churches	25
2.5.2 Shaping the community of believers	26
2.5.3 To be read aloud	26
2.5.4 Assessment of contributions – Purpose of the Apocalypse	26
2.6 Angels of the churches	27
2.6.1 Ethos or spirit of the church	27
2.6.2 Literary device	28
2.6.3 Heavenly identification	28
2.6.4 Assessment of contributions – Angels of the churches	28

2.7 Solidarity	29
2.7.1 Lack of unity	30
2.7.2 Presence of unity	30
2.7.3 Assessment of contributions – Solidarity	30
2.8 Conclusion	31
III. Context of the seven letters	33
3.1 Introduction	33
3.2 Section context	33
3.2.1 Introduction	33
3.2.2 Various divisions offered	34
3.2.3 Four sections	34
3.2.4 Summary – Section context	36
3.3 Book context	37
3.3.1 Introduction	37
3.3.2 Author	37
3.3.3 Date of writing	39
3.3.4 Addressees	40
3.3.5 Essential message of the book	42
3.3.6 Summary – Book context	42
3.4 Immediate context	43
3.4.1 Introduction	43
3.4.2 Imperial cult	44
3.4.3 Trade guilds	45
3.4.4 False teachings	45
3.4.5 Historical-cultural allusions	45
3.4.5.1 Ephesus	46
3.4.5.2 Smyrna	46
3.4.5.3 Pergamum	46
3.4.5.4 Thyatira	47
3.4.5.5 Sardis	47
3.4.5.6 Philadelphia	48
3.4.5.7 Laodicea	49
3.4.6 Summary – Immediate context	50
3.5 Conclusion – Context	51
IV. Meaning of the seven letters	53
4.1 Introduction	53
4.2 Preliminary analysis	54
4.2.1 Introduction	54
4.2.2 Textual criticism	54
4.2.3 Translations	55
4.2.4 Summary- Preliminary analysis	57
4.3 Literary analysis	57
4.3.1 Introduction	57
4.3.2 Structure	58
4.3.2.1 Internal structure	58
4.3.2.2 U-shaped structure	58

4.3.2.3 Paired structures	59
4.3.2.4 Chiastic structure	59
4.3.2.5 Summary – Structure	61
4.3.3 Genre	65
4.3.3.1 Apocalypse	65
4.3.3.2 Prophecy	65
4.3.3.3 Letter	66
4.3.3.4 Imperial edict	67
4.3.3.5 Combination	67
4.3.3.6 Summary – Genre	67
4.3.4 Summary – Literary analysis	70
4.4 Verbal analysis	70
4.4.1 Introduction	70
4.4.2 Angel of the church	71
4.4.3 Remnant or portion of the church	72
4.4.4 “The one who is victorious”	73
4.4.5 Summary – Verbal analysis	74
4.5 Conclusion – Meaning of the seven letters	74
V. Conclusion	80
5.1 Introduction	80
5.2 Contributions from chapter II – review of literature	81
5.3 Contributions from chapter III – study of context	82
5.4 Contributions from chapter IV – study of meaning	84
5.5 Summary of contributions from chapters II, III, IV	86
5.6 Application of findings to contemporary congregations	87
5.6.1 Introduction	87
5.6.2 Corporate filters vs. individualistic filters	88
5.6.3 Specific corporate communications with “ <i>sou</i> ”	89
5.6.4 Contributions from other Scripture verses	92
5.6.5 A practical method of applying Revelation 2:1-3:22	94
5.6.6 Summary – application to contemporary congregations	95
5.7 Thesis Conclusion	96
5.8 Areas of further research	97
VI. Works cited	98

## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Background

Revelation chapters 2 and 3 appear to contain language that refers to the recipients' corporate deeds, their corporate faithfulness, their corporate perseverance and their corporate tolerance of sinful behaviour. Does this indicate that the members of a local church bear responsibility as a group before God for how their local church measures up to or meets expectations of the Lord? This research project addresses this aspect of the seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3.

Scholars have recognized and addressed Christ's corporate addresses in this pericope. In his commentary on Revelation Magina presents that corporate and individual language are both found throughout the seven letters; the Lord who is concerned not only for the individual disciple also addresses the welfare of the local church as a single body (2010:53-70). Another example is found in Moore's work on Revelation; he raises the point that the Lord speaks to each of the churches with the transliterated Greek word *sou* rather than *humeis*. Moore notes that *sou* is only used when the author is speaking to a body of one whereas *humeis* is used when speaking to a body of many (2010:28-31). Edwards' commentary on Revelation 2 and 3 includes the idea that obedience and faith are exercised corporately (2008:61). Another reviewed study that probes the communal essence in this pericope is a work by Daniels (2009); local churches are formed as communities and these communities take on their own spirit or ethos. Smalley touches on the expectation of corporate repentance and corporate works (2005:n.p.). Reddish makes a statement regarding Rev 3:20 that this promise is perhaps best understood as a promise addressed to the corporate church rather than a promise to individuals (2001:n.p.). When Bauckham discusses Christ's exhortations to the specific churches, he seems to approach

the exhortations as being directed to the church body rather than only to the members that make up that church (1993:125). In the same way, Bennetch highlights that each assembly was expected to triumph. In his phrasing he differentiates between the performance of an individual believer and that of congregation (1939:364). Wainwright, offers that down through the centuries interpreters of Apocalypse have often related it to the corporate life of the church (1993:161).

In these above examples from Magina, Moore et al, their notations indicate that they acknowledge the presence of this corporate nature of Christ's addresses in the seven letters. Of note, Fee takes the corporate nature of these letters another step beyond the scope of this research proposal in that he points out the circular nature of the 'seven letter' communication. He maintains that the Book of Revelation is not only addressed to seven distinct congregations but the book is presented in such a way that each of the seven addressees is expected to read what has been written to the others (2011:22). Thus, not only do the exhortations seem to be directed beyond each individual believer but also towards each gathered congregation and also to the group of congregations.

However, from the works reviewed for this research, many scholars appear to interpret the censures and commendations of Christ to the churches as being directed only towards individuals. They do not acknowledge or focus on the corporate addresses in the seven letters. For example, Goldsworthy sees the seven churches as being made up of responsible people who are thus answerable for their actions (1984:80). He appears to view a local church more as a collection of members rather than as a corporate entity. Although he does go on to make the point that Christians do not function in isolation but function rather in the context of a local congregation (1984:84) he may not give enough weight to the role of the corporate body. Wilcock, in his explanation of the letter to Ephesus, seems to apply Christ's statement regarding the church's corporate lack of love, to the individual church member's lack of love (1975:44). An important aspect is being overlooked, as the Messiah seems more to be directing

his statement to Ephesus towards the gathered congregation. Gutzke appears to handle the first letter in a similar way to Wilcock; he sees Christ's rebuke to the Ephesians as being a rebuke to the individuals who make up the body (1979:30). Kraybill does the same when he firstly speaks of action being the accent of Christ's messages to the seven churches then he interprets that action as relating to being faithful by showing with their own lives that they follow the Lamb (2010:166). Kraybill offers a true statement – however, it may not be complete; the Messiah may also be encouraging the local church body to have expressed action that shows itself corporately.

This therefore formed part of the basis for undertaking a study of the corporate language of the seven letters. Although scholars, such as Magina, Edwards, Moore et al have specifically identified the presence of corporate language, a study specifically targeting this aspect of the seven letters could prove important. If, as a result of this focused study, a contribution is made to modern-day understanding of the role and activities of a local church and the corporate responsibility that the collective members of a local church may bear together, then this research project will be useful to the Kingdom. Repp offers that the seven letters to Asia are sources of great power for the Christian life; a continual study will be rewarded with new aspects to strengthen, encourage and warn the faithful (1964:148).



## **1.2 Problem statement**

In what ways might the Messiah expect corporate responses from each body of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3?

## **1.3 Objectives**

1) To review what scholars have written regarding the presence and application of corporate language that may be located in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

2) To determine the message of the seven letters to the churches through an examination of the context of Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

3) To further refine the understanding of the meaning of the seven letters through a preliminary, literary and verbal analysis of the pericope.

4) To synthesize the findings of the research and to determine the relevance of the conclusions for the evangelical church today.

## **1.4 Hypothesis statement**

It is the thesis of this writer that within each letter the Messiah views and addresses the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 as seven unified local bodies, expecting corporate repentance, corporate faithfulness, corporate perseverance and corporate works.

## **1.5 Research design and methodology**

The research commenced with a substantive literature review to glean information as to how other scholars treated and interpreted this aspect of the seven letters in its context of the Book of Revelation. After a literature review, an exegetical research model was employed. This required research on two main fronts in order to determine context and to determine meaning.

### **1.5.1 Determining context**

To effectively receive the information communicated, it was necessary to firstly understand the message consistent with the indicators that the original writer used to express himself (Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard 1993:156). Establishing the overall context of the letters involved determining the context on three levels: section, book and immediate. Researching the section context commenced with an overall reading of the Book of Revelation. Recognizing and identifying the different sections within the book that are marked by changes in topic, tense, time, location and subject, became a key exercise at this stage (Kaiser 1981:71-72). Once a basic understanding of the delineations and overall contributions of each section to the book was determined, the next step was to proceed to research the book context.

Understanding the context of the book was partly achieved by examining the results of the previous section research - any book itself can be said to be a collection of the sections that comprise it (Kaiser 1981:77). The goal at this stage was to use methods to determine the overall purpose and plan for the book. This was done by looking at how the purpose and plan of each separate section flowed together to contribute to the major theme of the book. For example, there was observed some close connections between the target pericope for this proposed study and the rest of the book of Revelation. Although the structure and content of the pericope appear far different from chapter 1 or from chapters

4-22 the pericope does not stand in isolation in view of the interdependence displayed. Chapter 1 contains statements about the characteristics of Christ and these are repeated in the target pericope (Witherington III 2003:90). Yeats makes the point that there is also interdependence between the target pericope and the last few chapters of the book; the exhortation to overcome is not only clearly repeated in the target pericope but it is also found in chapters 19-22 (2003:53). This ties the book together: the first three chapters create the context in which the later visions can be understood (Koester 2001:42). Even the material itself in the target pericope is not completely focused on the present (Lioy 2003:90). Like the balance of the Book of Revelation, the target pericope has elements that also point towards the future.

Examining the general background of the book was also a useful exercise. This involved seeking to understand: who wrote it, when it was written, who it was addressed to, what was going on that occasioned the writing of the book, the flow of thought, the themes and the motifs (Smith 2008:172). Once a clear relationship between the target section and the whole book was determined, research narrowed to the immediate context of Revelation chapter 2 and 3.

The final examination of context related to the immediate historical-cultural situations of each of the seven communities where the seven churches were located. The research methods involved: examining the geographical setting of the text, examining the historical-cultural background, determining who comprised the immediate audience and determining how the text contributed to the theme and threads of the surrounding sentences and paragraphs within the purpose of the section. Researching and gleaning information about the context of the target text assisted the subsequent process of beginning to understand the meaning of the text.

### **1.5.2 Determining meaning**

Smith offers an analysis process and its applicable principles were utilized for this study (2008:173-176). The study commenced with a preliminary analysis to examine textual variants and weigh them for their effect on the overall meaning of the pericope. Twenty-one English translations of the pericope were also compared with each other and the differences examined. A literary or grammatical analysis was undertaken next. Here, the literary features of the target text were scrutinized for clues to see if they influenced the interpretation of the text. Specifically the text's structure and genre were examined. A verbal analysis was then performed. In this exercise, key words in the target text were examined to establish their individual meanings and their contribution or significance to the text.

By giving respect to the findings of each analysis, a clear meaning of the text emerged (Smith 2008:175). Through detailing analysis methods and presenting the logic trail (Vyhmeister 2001:117), an understandable conclusion was drawn. This was the goal of addressing the meaning of the pericope. By gleaning what other scholars have discovered, by examining the context of the pericope and by subjecting the research to various analyses to determine meaning, this contributed to solving the research problem of the ways the Messiah expects corporate responses from each body of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3. To commence the process and nest this study on the foundation laid by scholars, a literature review was performed. This is the focus of the next chapter.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The goal of this chapter is to present a review of literature that examined existing research bearing relevance to the ways the Messiah views the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 as seven local corporate entities. Of the large corpus of studies focussed on the seven letters in Revelation, some of the reviewed studies directly support the idea that the Messiah views a church as a corporate entity. However, there are various angles of approach. The scholars presented below have identified different facets through their interpretations of: the essence of a church, how the letters are addressed, particular actions being called for, the overall purpose of the Apocalypse, why each church is addressed through its angel and the solidarity of each church. Examining the way these scholars view a congregation as a corporate body helps to build a picture of the Lord's expectations in the seven letters.

#### **2.2 Church**

Underlying the pursuit of the ways in which the Messiah might view the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 as corporate entities are foundational questions regarding defining the church or understanding the role the church: 'What is the church?' 'How is a church presented in the Book of Revelation?' 'How is a church related to the members who comprise it?' This literature review identified the positions of seven scholars whose arguments point to the church as a single corporate body. They contribute through their understandings of: church as community, congregation as local, belonging to a church, connecting church to community, believer as a church.

### **2.2.1 Church as community**

Mangina clearly defines the church as a community that is held and sustained by Christ (2010:64). Doyle also adopts this definition. Regarding the letter to Thyatira, Doyle points out that Christ addresses the church as a single community (2005:34) and he also holds that the critiques found in all the letters are foundationally meant to help the entire community of believers get in shape for the challenges that are upon them (2005:23).

### **2.2.2 Local church**

Yeatts focuses on understanding the meaning of the word for church as it is used in the Book of Revelation. He holds that in the context of the usage of this word throughout the book, the local body of believers is being addressed. He indicates that the Book of Revelation is talking about congregations or groups of congregations that typically met in homes in the province of Asia at the end of the first century. When this word *ekklesia* is used in Revelation it is thus seen by Yeatts as not necessarily referring to all believers across the world (2003:55). Mangina (2005) does not intentionally differentiate between the local church and the church universal on this point but in his arguments, his emphasis also seems to fall towards the side of the usage of *ekklesia* in Revelation as meaning a local church.

### **2.2.3 Belonging to the church**

Boring sees the two questions of “what is the meaning of belonging to the church?” and “who are the people of God?” as being the critical issues for the readers of the Apocalypse. Rejected by the Jews of Asia Minor, and outside of the protection of the synagogue, the Christians of Asia Minor faced a serious crisis of community and of personal identity. Boring believes that the Apocalypse addresses these very issues (1989:13). Revelation was not written for an individual who is concerned with getting to heaven. Instead, Boring holds that it

was written to Christian communities of people, who were deeply involved in the social and political structures and struggles (1989:60).

#### **2.2.4 Connecting church body to city**

Ramsay offers a perspective on the local body of believers from another angle. In speaking of Asia Minor at the time of the writing of the Apocalypse, an ancient city was never simply a sum of its citizens. Rather, its citizens were groupings of tribes (1994:105). For Ramsay this forms the starting point of all reasoning on the subject since the city of that day was more accurately described as an association of groups not of individuals (1994:106). With regard to the local church, Ramsay also strongly connects each local church to each city where it is found. For Ramsay, the church is very much the heart and soul of the city and its members the city's true citizens (1994:202).

Caird reiterates Ramsay's position and carries it one step further. He understands the audiences of the oral readings of the Apocalypse scroll as being responsible not only for their own congregational body but for the earthly communities they represent (1966:293).

#### **2.2.5 Inter-changeability of term: believer / church**

Gutzke also offers an important aspect regarding the exhortations and rebukes directed towards the churches or individuals in Revelation. By comparing things said in the Bible about the church to things said about the individual believer, Gutzke concludes that from the perspective of Christ, each believer is also the church. He draws this conclusion by pointing out that both the church and the individual believer are said to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. He holds that not only is the church the body of Christ but individual believers are members of the body of Christ. Gutzke rounds out his argument by pointing out that Christ is said to dwell in the church and that Christ is also said to dwell in believers. Therefore each believer is also the church (1979:27).

## 2.2.6 Assessment of contributions - Church

Mangina and Doyle's position, that a church is a community of believers, is well supported elsewhere in Scripture. An example is found in 1 Corinthians 12:4-31 where Paul likens a body of believers to a human body needing all the requisite parts to function as it should. Romans 12:4-5 speaks of the idea that together we are a communal body of one. Mangina and Doyle's position directly supports the thesis statement in that when Christ is addressing churches, they are being addressed primarily as a single entity rather than as a collection of individuals.

Yeatts argues that in the Book of Revelation a local congregation is in view when the word *ekklesia* is used. Certainly with regard to the letters to the seven churches, each church was addressed by its own peculiarities. There are clearly seven different sets of commendations and condemnations being directed to the seven churches. Although together the seven congregations formed part of the universal body of believers in the world, they are being identified by Yeatts as local congregations: each local church was facing its own circumstances and each was corporately called to respond. One thing that must be kept in view however is that the letters are not necessarily individual letters in the typical sense of letters. Rather, the seven were all put together in one scroll. Each church therefore read and benefitted from everyone else's mail. The fact that there are seven churches addressed seems to mean that this communication is for the benefit of all congregations that together do form the worldwide universal church. So, although Yeatts' point is well made, there is another level of corporate response expected.

Boring's argument might be too strong when he states that the Apocalypse was not written for the individual concerned with getting to heaven. Portions of the seven letters do appear to contain specific directives to individuals in the church. The concluding statements of each of the seven letters seem to be focused on individual victors or individual conquerors rather than the whole



church. Although Boring's argument supports the hypothesis of this thesis, that the letters are written primarily to corporate bodies with the expectation of corporate response, it is also must be recognized that portions of the letters seem to address individuals rather than the whole church.

Ramsay's point seems accurate that an ancient city was an association of groups not individuals. This certainly matches modern day situations in parts of the world where life is lived more communally. Today's cities and villages in West Africa clearly demonstrate this. Ramsay seems to be putting forth the caution that to interpret the seven letters through a Western lens of individualism might overlook the tribal nature of the time and location where the Apocalypse was written. To overlook this corporate nature of the letters is to overlook the potential corporate response expected.

In the life of the seven churches, not all corporate responses are godly, however. Ramsay's second point regarding church and city may misapply his first point. He takes the idea that a city is a collection of groups and concludes that in a positive sense the church, in the city, is the heart and soul of that city: its members the true citizens. This will be the case with the New Jerusalem. However, in Asia Minor at the writing of the Apocalypse, Christ is steering people away from assimilation with the practices of the city. For example, in the letter to Laodicea, the root problem appears to be that the whole church is completely and inoffensively assimilated, heart and soul, into the society and cultural practices. While the assimilation is evident, in this case it is not a desired outcome from heaven's standpoint. Romans 12:2 also speaks against being conformed to this world.

Caird's position, that a church body is responsible for the community it represents, seems a more accurate way than Ramsay's to state the connection that a body of believers is to have for its community. None of the seven letters speak of Christ rescuing the congregation from persecution or shifting them away from the challenges to be faced in their respective cities. Rather, they are

addressed together to be faithful witnesses to Christ, even to death. To witness is to be purposeful in standing for what God calls believers to stand for and to draw others around to God through testimony. Matthew 5:14-16 emphasizes that believers are the light of the world and that their lights should shine forth to those around. The open door to the church at Philadelphia in 3:8 could be speaking of this very responsibility that the Philadelphia church has for its surrounding community.

Gutzke's understanding of a believer also being a church considers that directives to the corporate body should be heeded by the individual and vice versa. If imperatives to individuals are seen in the seven letters, Gutzke's position indicates that the corporate body should also heed these imperatives as well.

### **2.3 Addressees of the letters**

Within the corpus of literature reviewed there was discovered some discussion by seven scholars as to whether the letters were addressed generally to each congregation as a whole or addressed specifically to the individuals that made up the membership.

#### **2.3.1 Corporate body**

Boring holds that prophecy, which reveals itself in the Apocalypse, is never a gift to an isolated individual but rather that it was to be critically evaluated and appropriated within the context of a community's worship (1989:82). He also makes the strong statement that Revelation concludes with the profound vision of a redeemed city. This would be in contrast to a conclusion depicting isolated individuals, each on their own cloud (1989:60).

Osborne summarizes that the letters to the seven churches are addressed to the churches as a whole rather than just to the individuals that make up the church (2002:99). With a similar position, Sweet observes that the messages to

the churches are really messages to corporate communities that are to be thought of as singular spiritual entities (1979:80).

Boxall (2006:125) understands the Apocalypse call to faithful witness in the promise of white robes as a general call to the churches rather than a vocation of individuals or of a particular group within the church. He observes this in the letter to Sardis (Rev. 3:4-5).

Mangina offers a slightly different perspective on some of the implications of this same letter to Sardis. After identifying the small group within the church at Sardis, a group that has not yet lost its passion, Mangina explains that their continued existence as a church is justified only to the extent that they live “for the good of the entire church. To the extent that they seek a private salvation on their own terms, they will suffer the same fate as everyone else” (2010:65).

### **2.3.2 Individuals**

Fee balances the argument by providing the reminder that portions of the seven letters are addressed to the corporate congregation and other portions of the letters are addressed to individuals. For example, he writes that all seven of the letters are firstly addressed to the communities as a whole since Christ speaks to them in the second person singular. Fee notes that sometimes there is a change of addressees within a letter. Offering the example of the letter to the church at Laodicea, Fee identifies a change from community focus to individual focus when Christ declares he is standing at the door knocking. Although Fee holds that this particular invitation of Christ’s is actually to the whole church, it is now pictured at the individual level (2011:60). Morris agrees and further offers that in this instance Christ is indicating that even if the church as a whole is not heeding the warnings, the individual should heed them (1978:84).

Mangina does not believe that the Apocalypse minimizes the importance of the corporate congregations or that it encourages believers to be busy saving themselves in spite of their hopeless congregations (2010:69). He reconciles the

presence of both the corporate and individual language in the seven letters by offering that the more faithful a corporate body is, the more likely it will spawn disciples, each with their own clear witness to Christ (2010:70).

### **2.3.3 Assessment of contributions - Addressees of the letters**

The Apocalypse itself follows the procedure that Boring lays out for the typical method of exposure of prophecy to God's people. For example, in Revelation chapter 1, clear guidance is given to read the words of the prophecy aloud to the seven worshiping congregations. The addressees are groups, not individuals; this supports the thesis hypothesis of corporate response expectations.

As well, Boring's contrast of isolated clouds for individuals vs. the togetherness of the New Jerusalem paints a distinct picture. The conclusion of the Book of Revelation certainly describes the New Jerusalem as the future dwelling place of God together with men. Individualism is not primarily in view here.

Osborne's and Sweet's observations, that the letters are addressed to the church as a singular spiritual entity, support the points made by Mangina and Doyle regarding church as community and assessed above under 2.2.6. If the body is seen to be a singular spiritual entity it is logical to expect a corporate response to what is being communicated within the letters.

Boxall's understanding that the promise of white robes is a general call to the churches does not seem to be supported by the verses he refers to. Although his point is true, the reference to white clothes in the letter to Sardis is addressing only the worthy remnant of the Sardis church that has not soiled their clothes: not the whole body. In Revelation 3:5, we see an even further reference to individuals rather than the corporate church; persons who are like the faithful remnant, will also be dressed in white.

Mangina's position regarding the continued existence of Sardis being justified only to the extent that this remnant lives for the good of the entire church supports the idea that a church is a community. The flow of logic unveils that if a congregation is simply a gathering of individuals who have no connection to one another, no "living for one another", they therefore are not a community and not a church.

Fee's point that there are portions of the seven letters that are addressed to individuals supports the argument that the seven letters do not contain directives exclusively addressed to the corporate body or exclusively addressed to individual members. They contain both. This was posited against Boring's position above in 2.2.6.

Morris' position provides a caution against holding up all corporate responses as the ideal; in other words he is against the position that a church response should only be undertaken if it is done together as a group. Morris demonstrates that Christ is calling the individuals of Laodicea to heed the warnings even if the church as a whole is not heeding them. Morris' argument is supported by the presence of the positive responses of Christ that are clearly made to the faithful remnants of believers in Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis. In other words, if these faithful few had gone along with the rest of their church bodies, there would be no faithful few for Christ to commend.

Mangina's point is accepted in that the Apocalypse is not generally seen to encourage believers to be busy saving themselves in spite of their hopeless congregations. In light of this and of Morris' position above, God's ideal seems to point towards a body of believers, living their lives out together, on a good and godly path. The churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia exemplify this.

## **2.4 Corporate action**

Within the target pericope, each of the seven churches is given imperatives to respond to: repentance, responsibility, perseverance, spiritual practice, etc. Eight scholars offer the following contributions as to how these imperatives are to be responded to corporately.

### **2.4.1 Repentance**

Sweet notes that the call for repentance, found in the letter to Pergamum, is put forward in a tense that demonstrates the whole church is called upon for corporate repentance (1979:80). In examining this same letter, and in particular Christ's statement regarding the Nicolaitans, Osborne also observes a switch from the pronoun in second person to third person. This switch in addressee indicates that Christ's coming will be to the whole Pergamum church; the wrath will be especially addressed to the heretics. If the church had taken a stronger stand there would have been far fewer members embracing the Nicolaitans' teaching (2002:146). The church is being called upon to repent and the expectation is that the entire congregation will rebuke the false teachers and their followers. Mangina indicates that corporate repentance is a common expectation in the seven letters; most of the seven churches are called to repentance (2010:68).

### **2.4.2 Collective responsibility**

With regard to the letter to Sardis, Aune highlights the collective responsibility of the congregation to strengthen what remains. He points to Ezekiel 34:4 as a possible allusion to Christ's directive in this letter to Sardis: the directive is to strengthen the weak among them (1997:219). In another of the letters, Aune points out that by the syntax in the letter to Thyatira the essential meaning is unmistakable: the whole community at Thyatira is responsible for allowing Jezebel to teach what she teaches and for leading some astray (1997:204, Elliot 2012:5).

### **2.4.3 Perseverance**

Boxall recognizes a corporate aspect to perseverance; the entire church's vocation is to follow the Lamb even if death becomes a possibility (2006:125). In discussing Antipas of Pergamum, Gutzke supports this idea through his comments that though one member of the congregation lost his life for the faith, the congregation, together, did not waver. It stood steadfast and was an example of a church body that acted together and remained faithful under persecution (1979:49).

### **2.4.4 Spiritual practices**

The closing declarations in the seven letters "whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (NIV Rev. 2:7,11,17,29, 3:6,13,22) are interpreted by Daniels as imperatives to hear the Scriptures in community (2009:136) and to form together the dispositions and virtues that make it possible for us to embody the proper spirit of Christ in the world (2009:137). Spiritual practices done in Christian community are what help a congregation become complete in Christ (2009:138). For example, he offers that the letter to Philadelphia points to a spirit of fear that can be overcome by the power of communal prayer (2009:140).

### **2.4.5 Other corporate actions**

Boring sees love, faith and deeds being called for corporately. He evidences this through the presence of the very intentional listing of words of Revelation 2:19 spoken to the church body (1989:95). Mangina notes that since the scroll was to be read aloud in each congregation, this points to each particular church being asked to act together. They were to re-kindle their lost love, abstain from idolatrous actions and guard against false teaching (2010:68). They were truly to act in communion. It is Mangina's position that not only the seven letters display communion, the whole Apocalypse exhibits this same expectation of communion. This communion or solidarity is related to joint

poverty and suffering in Christ (2010:67-68) and he notes that the church is the primary addressee.

#### **2.4.6 Assessment of contributions – Corporate action**

Pergamum's call for repentance being set in the singular tense is a strong argument of Sweet's regarding the corporate nature of this imperative. This supports the argument of Osborne regarding Christ coming to the whole Pergamum church, or Mangina's indication that most of the seven churches are called upon to repent corporately. As well, this directly supports the hypothesis statement of this thesis.

Ezekiel 34:4 does support Aune's idea that a congregation has responsibility for its corporate health: to strengthen the weaker members of the body. This seems to be the very downfall of Thyatira, as Aune points out. A church body is not a loose collection of individuals. Rather, the corporate performance or strength seems to be of importance.

Gutzke's example demonstrates the idea of corporate action by indicating that the whole church at Pergamum stood fast during the difficult days of Antipas' martyrdom. However, Gutzke's argument really depends on the reason Antipas was martyred. There were clearly some in the Pergamum church who participated in the activities that led them to eat food sacrificed to idols, commit sexual immorality and follow the teachings of the Nicolaitans. If Antipas was martyred for refusing to participate in these immoral activities, then it is unlikely that the whole church could be said to have stood together as one. If Antipas was martyred for other reasons, Gutzke's argument is more probable.

Daniels interprets the closing of each of the seven letters to be an imperative to corporately listen to the reading of Scripture. Although such a practice would certainly help in the spiritual formation of any church community, the words regarding hearing what the Spirit says to the churches probably are there for a different purpose. They seem, rather, to be echoing the intent of Jesus



in Matthew 11:15, Matthew 13:9 and Mark 4:23 namely: “Whoever has ears let them hear” (NIV). It is essentially a call to pay close attention. Jesus’ words in Revelation appear to be there for the same purpose. Daniels’ interpretation, though beneficial under practical application, may not be correct.

Boring’s argument about corporate deeds seems true. Although there is no imperative found in 2:19, certainly the fact that Christ dictates this list suggests that Boring is correct. Christ is praising the whole church. The same could be said of the deeds and hard work being praised in the church in Ephesus. In both churches, Christ doesn’t single out only a remnant that is doing these deeds. The whole church appears to be engaged. As well, Christ addresses the whole congregation when he calls for the Ephesians to do the things they did at first. This is in support of the hypothesis statement that there is found in the letters expectations for corporate works.

Mangina’s position that the Apocalypse exhibits an expectation of communion as it relates to joint poverty and suffering is strongly supported in the high praise given the church at Smyrna.

## **2.5 Purpose of the Apocalypse**

Three scholars noted that the Book of Revelation appears to carry an overall purpose from a corporate standpoint: to transform the church, to shape the community and to accomplish this by being read aloud to the congregations.

### **2.5.1 Transformation of the churches**

Daniels’ understanding of the overall purpose of the Apocalypse is the encouragement of the transformation of the church into a community that correctly bears the name “the body of Christ” (2009:127). This transformation is said to begin when the congregations, such as the seven in Asia Minor, are able to identify the spirit of the church through hearing the words of Revelation read from the scroll.

### **2.5.2 Shaping the community of believers**

Gorman summarizes the message of the Book of Revelation in a similar but slightly different way. Gorman sees the book ultimately as a community-forming document that is intended to shape communities of believers that follow Jesus as the Lamb of God. This shaping involves becoming faithful as worshipping and witnessing communities of God. Gorman presents the agenda of the author of the Apocalypse as being that of forming victorious communities, which remain faithful even to death (2011:176-177). Gorman also notes that in the big picture, the entire book is a script for the victorious church and it is not necessarily a script for the future (2011:189).

### **2.5.3 To be read aloud**

Boxall emphasizes the original intention of the scroll of the Apocalypse as a document to be read aloud to a group or groups of Christians. He holds that this contrasts dramatically with a highly individualized silent reading approach to the book (2006:15). The seven congregations were not the readers. Rather, as a group, they were the audience.

### **2.5.4 Assessment of contributions – Purpose of the Apocalypse**

Daniels' understanding of the overall purpose of the Apocalypse is supported in Revelation. This expectation of the transformation of a community of believers is uncovered immediately in chapter 1. Transformation, through putting into practice what is written, is very much called for in the beatitude of verse 3. Also, the document is directly written to seven churches as evidenced in verse 4. That Christ is among his churches and molding them is seen in verse 13 as well as throughout chapters 2 and 3. Together this upholds Daniels' position.

Gorman's view of the Apocalypse as being for community shaping for victory can be clearly seen within the letters. Each church is given specific imperatives to follow in order to be shaped, as Christ would have them shaped.

Since Christ often addresses the whole congregation for this shaping, Gorman's view supports the hypothesis of this thesis in that a corporate response to this shaping is expected.

Boxall's position that the scroll is to be read aloud is lifted from Revelation 1:3 and it is not a stretch to understand that the audience is to be groups. This wouldn't preclude individuals from hearing it too, but the intention seems firstly to the congregations.

## **2.6 Angels of the churches**

One of the mysteries of the Book of Revelation is why Jesus addressed each of the seven churches through its "angel". The thesis problem statement is very much concerned with the addressees of the seven churches. Therefore, information is important with regard to the identification of the 'angel of the church' and how this aspect then relates to a possible corporate nature of the seven letters. Scholars highlighted three opinions with regard to the angel of the church: the angel is the ethos of the church, the use of angel is a literary device and the angel connects the church to heaven.

### **2.6.1. Ethos or spirit of a church**

Mounce offers an interpretation of the seven letters that is based on the identification of the angel of the church as being the general ethos or spirit of the church (1977:82). Daniels holds the same position. He maintains that the angel of the church was formed in mysterious ways from life together in Christian community (2009:141). This spirit or ethos can be formed to give life such as it was doing in Smyrna and Philadelphia or it can be deadly as it was in the other five congregations (Daniels 2009:141).

Daniels offers that learning to interpret the culture of the church involves listening to both the macro and micro stories of the community. To support this idea he points out that each of the seven letters to the churches in Asia have

stories not only of each particular city but also of the overall controlling empire (2009:129). By calling that corporate spirit to repentance and embodying a new spirit in community, this transformation can take place (2009:128).

### **2.6.2. Literary device**

Aune sees addressing the 'angel of the church' as a literary device of John's. Aune notes that several times within the letters the author of Revelation forgets or temporarily abandons the literary device of directing comments to/through the angel of the church; the author changes to addressing the congregation directly and uses the second person plural form. Aune cites Revelation 2:13 and 2:20 as examples (1997:120). To Aune, this suggests that the letter is actually being addressed to the congregation as a whole.

### **2.6.3. Heavenly identification**

Osborne agrees that the letters seem to address the churches as a whole but concludes that the angels are heavenly beings. As stars of the churches, they were in charge of each church. They are seen to be identified with the church body; they are asked to intervene in the spiritual needs of the church and they also represent the church to heaven (2002:99).

### **2.6.4 Assessment of contributions – angels of the churches**

Mounce and Daniels' interpretation that the angel is the general ethos of the corporate church is an interesting position. The seven churches certainly did express seven different corporate characters or corporate spirits. No church was identical with another. Through life experience, living together in Christian community and interacting with situations inside and outside, contemporary churches often seem to produce a prevailing spirit that affects the function and feel of any body of believers (Mangina 2010:54). However, if Christ had intended to address his letters to the ethos of a church, it seems more likely he would have indicated that clearly. To connect the church to an angel, where the word

angel in Revelation is always used to refer to a heavenly being (Boring 1989:86-87), seems to point the interpretation away from the church's corporate ethos or prevailing spirit.

Aune's argument states that since the author of the letters sometimes changes from addressing the angel of the church to addressing the congregation directly, to address each letter to an angel must therefore be simply a literary device. Since it is ultimately the human congregation that will hear these commendations and condemnations to put them into practice, not an angel, Aune's point has some validity. However, there seems more to the angel reference than simply being used as a literary device.

Osborne's position may be more on the right track. Addressing each letter to its angel indicates that there is some sort of heavenly connection to each local body. Christ is seen to be intimately connected to the seven stars (angels), as evidenced in Revelation 1:16, 20, 2:1 and 3:1. This supports Osborne's view. If a church body is directly connected to heaven through an angel, this puts added seriousness on the corporate life and corporate health of the congregation. If heaven, through the angel of the church, views the congregation as a body of one then it follows that there is probably an expectation of corporate response in all aspects of the life of that body of believers.

## **2.7 Solidarity**

One of the ultimate implications of discovering the ways that the Messiah views the seven congregations as seven corporate entities may very well be related to congregational one-mindedness or its lack thereof. Solidarity within a congregation seems important and scholars have identified it as an issue being addressed by Christ in the seven letters.

### **2.7.1 Lack of unity**

Yeatts offers an explanation of the main issue in the church in Ephesus: corporate Christian fellowship and brotherly love are gone. Conflict and dissension may have killed their mutual love (2003:58).

### **2.7.2 Presence of unity**

Yeatts also highlights that Smyrna and Philadelphia were not fragmented congregations i.e. not having only a residue of the faithful amid the unfaithful. This was the opposite of what seemed to be the case at Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis. Life was promised to Smyrna and honour/dignity was promised to Philadelphia. These were promised to the whole congregation. Ramsay's research leads him to note that down through history these two churches became the "bulwark and glory of Christian power in the country since it became Muslim" (Ramsay 1994:295).

### **2.7.3 Assessment of contributions – Solidarity**

Yeatts essentially interprets that the love that the Ephesians had at first was corporate brotherly/sisterly love being expressed to each other rather than corporate love being expressed together to God. The Scripture doesn't provide further details regarding this forsaken love but Yeatts' position is most likely correct. Conflict and dissension would definitely have affected their love. Yeatts' point regarding disunity is valid as well and is reinforced by Ramsay's research, which showed strength and longevity from the two congregations that seemed to display a unified front. Unity in itself is not in view here, however. Certainly a group can be unified and heading in the wrong direction. For example, the letter to the church at Laodicea does not show a fragmentation of the body of believers yet Christ's condemnation is upon them. Godly one-mindedness is what Yeatts has in view if this healthy one-mindedness can lead to healthy corporate action and healthy communal life in the body.

## 2.8 Conclusion

The goal of this literature review was to search for, present and assess scholarly research that contributes to understanding the ways the Messiah expects a corporate response from each of the seven churches of Revelation 2:1-3:22. Of the works reviewed, sixteen scholars identified some aspect of corporate nature within the seven letters. Each approached this corporate aspect from a slightly different angle. Presented here are some highlights:

Mangina and Doyle contributed that a church should be viewed as a community. Yeatts offers that each time the word *ekklesia* is used in the Apocalypse it describes a local body of believers rather than the church universal. Ramsay and Caird both connected the local church body to its surrounding community and Caird further declared that a church body bears some measure of responsibility, before heaven, for the community it represents. Gutzke contributed that a believer can somehow also said to be a church since both are described in Scripture as the temple of God and both are indwelt bodies of Christ. Boring noted that, in Scripture, prophecy is given to a community rather than to an isolated individual. Osborne and Sweet hold that the seven letters are addressed to the churches as a whole: each body being a singular spiritual entity. Fee and Mangina recognize that portions of the seven letters address individuals who make up that church but also that portions address the church as a whole. Sweet and Mangina posit that within most of the letters there are calls for the repentance of the whole local church. Aune adds that churches bear a collective responsibility for the health of their corporate body. Boxall and Gutzke note that aspects of corporate perseverance are clearly present in the letters. Boring holds that by the presence of Christ's listing of love, faith, deeds, and service in the letters it indicates that bodies are to act together in engaging in acts of love, faith, deeds and service. Mangina determines that it is taught in the seven letters that together a local body is to re-kindle their lost love, abstain from idolatrous actions and guard against false teaching. Daniels and Gorman believe that the Apocalypse purposefully encourages the Christ-like transformation and

shaping of each community of believers. Osborne presented that a church is not only an earthly body but that it is also somehow connected to heaven through its angel. Yeatts position offers that godly one-mindedness is critical for a congregation.

Most of the gleanings from the sixteen scholars reviewed, directly or indirectly support the hypothesis statement that the seven churches are being called upon to repent corporately, remain faithful corporately, persevere corporately and to collectively live out their deeds of love and service. Thus, these above results of the review of literature justified moving forward in pursuit of further research of the target pericope. In order to illuminate the gleanings from the scholars and to further understand corporate expectations in light of the context of the Apocalypse, an overview of the information flow through the sections or divisions of the Apocalypse was undertaken. This information is presented in the next chapter. The broad purposes of the Apocalypse were also established and presented. Finally, each of the seven letters was scrutinized for information of their local historical-cultural context.



## **Chapter III**

### **Context of the seven letters**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Seeking to understand the pericope and the Book of Revelation from a contextual perspective was essential to helping solve the thesis question of the ways the Messiah may expect a corporate response from local congregations. The contributions from context ensured that any conclusions reached regarding a corporate nature were in accord with the overall and specific messages of the Apocalypse. The seven letters to the seven churches are not each separate letters but rather are positioned alongside each other and are also placed inside the greater work of the Book of Revelation.

The Apocalypse contains different themes and scenes so firstly identifying the internal sections helped to determine the parts of the book that form the whole. The connections between these divisions were also looked at. Secondly, scrutinizing the overall book context assisted in gaining an understanding of who wrote the document, when it was written, to whom it was addressed and the essential message of the book. The immediate context was then examined by researching to know the history and culture of the locale of each of the seven churches. Together these three contexts of section, book and immediate developed the message being communicated to the churches.

#### **3.2 Section context**

##### **3.2.1 Introduction**

If Kaiser is correct in that any book itself can be said to be a collection of the sections that comprise it (1981:77) then an important exercise in determining context is to attempt to firstly identify the internal divisions of this book. Smith, in describing critical scholarship, states that consensus has not been reached on

the sectioning of Revelation (1994:373). Felise concurs with Smith and notes that there are almost as many outlines as interpreters (2005:47). However, most of the scholarly debate revolves around the appropriate sectioning of 4:1-22:9 (Pattemore 2004:63) rather than around the earlier portions involving the targeted pericope of this thesis, namely Revelation 2:1-3:22. To illustrate a sampling of some of the different sectioning conclusions, the positions of four scholars are identified here. This writer also offers a position and details the connections between the sections.

### 3.2.2 Various divisions offered

Spilsbury offers a division of the Book of Revelation that results in three sections as follows: a) Introduction 1:1-3:22 b) Main vision 4:1-22:7 c) Conclusion 22:8-21 (2002:42). Korner views the sections a bit differently and notes that the text of 1:9-22:21 qualifies as a single uninterrupted vision episode (2000:171-172). Korner further divides this long uninterrupted vision into six vision blocks. With the addition of what he refers to as the prologue, his result is seven distinct sections. Felise considers chapter 1 as the prologue, chapters 2-3 as the first part of the main body, 4:1-22:7 as the second part of the main body and 22:8-21 as the epilogue (2005:49). Sweet offers a prologue of chapter 1, an epilogue of 22:6-21 and four septets of letters, seals, trumpets and bowls set in-between the prologue and the epilogue (1979:44).

### 3.2.3 Four sections

Chapters 2-3 set the stage for the visions that follow, so including them as Spilsbury combines them in the introduction, would not be incorrect. However, the seven letters bear a far different format than chapter 1. They also carry messages that are distinct from what comes before or after them. This warrants a separate section for 2:1-3:22; on this point it differs from Korner's position. Felise's offering of chapter 1 as the prologue, chapters 2 and 3 as the first part of the main body, 4:1-22:7 as the second part of the main body and 22:8-21 as the epilogue seems to recognize the main features of the book without

oversimplification. Felise identifies 2:1-3:22 as a distinct entity more definitively than do Spilsbury, Korner or Sweet. However, Sweet's position regarding the end of the heavenly vision at 22:5, is preferable to Felise's of 22:7 because the verses 6-7 fit better with the closing statements of the epilogue than with the preceding description of the New Jerusalem.

There is rationale for delineating the Apocalypse into the four sections of a) chapter 1 as the introduction b) 2:1-3:22 as part 1 of the main body c) 4:1-22:5 as part 2 of the main body d) 22:6-21 as the epilogue. Chapter 1 essentially establishes whom the revelation is coming from, how it is being made known and what the hearers are to do with it. Additionally, it contains a formal greeting to the intended recipients. Although the greeting expands somewhat into a doxology about Jesus, it still contributes to the introduction. The remaining half of chapter 1 introduces the scribe to Jesus in a vision. The information in this encounter provides introductory detail about: the intended audience, Jesus himself, his appearance, his garments, his voice, the connection between Jesus and the churches, the stars he held and the lampstands he was amongst.

Revelation 2:1-3:22 is easily placed together into another section. The information in chapters 2 and 3 contain detailed commendations and condemnations to the churches; this information is presented in a far different style than any other chapter in the book. Although the information is slightly different for each church addressed (or angel of the church addressed), the greeting, the speaker and the closing statements are presented in an almost uniform format and warrant being categorized together into one section.

The third division of 4:1-22:5 can be considered as a section. It is consistently characterized not by Jesus' dictation, as in the previous section, but by the record of John's observations. These observations are captured from a heavenly perspective as he is taken and shown things by an angel.

Concluding words and summarizing statements characterize the epilogue. John, the angel and Jesus all offer final words and explanations. This change from the immediately preceding heavenly vision of the New Jerusalem marks the final section of 22:6-21.

Of note, Ramsay contends that the pericope of 2:1-3:22, due to its perceived genre, was developed and inserted as an afterthought, after the rest of the book had been conceived (1994:26-27). However, the information flow from section to section seems to discount Ramsay's position. The four sections are not independent of one another; all portions of the book are well connected. They are clearly meant to be presented as one entity and show no signs of "forced placement".

The storyline flows from introduction -- to earthly realities -- to heavenly realities -- to conclusion. The author's use of common symbols and images helps to achieve a unitary composition (Fiorenza 1985:171). For example, the titles, which identify Christ to John in section one at 1:13-18, are mostly repeated in the addresses of the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. As well, some of these titles also find expression within 4:1-22:5. The first three chapters create the context in which the visions of 4:1-22:5 can be understood (Koester 2001:42). Like the content of the seven letters, the vision of 4:1-22:5 contains themes of perseverance, repentance, suffering, endurance, victory, white garments, faithful witness, new name, idolatry, immorality, open door, New Jerusalem etc. The epilogue points back to all sections. Some examples of this are: Alpha and Omega is referenced in both 1:8 and 22:13, the morning star is referred to in both 2:28 and in 22:16, and washed robes are found in both 7:14 and 22:14.

### 3.2.4 Summary – Section context

In summary, the Apocalypse is seen to contain four sections that are made distinct from each other through changes in topic, terms or location. These four sections could be named: a) Introduction b) Body – Part 1 c) Body – Part 2 d) Epilogue. These four sections offer a context. The introduction functions to

establish who is at the root of the communication, to whom it is being addressed, and by whose authority. The earthly realities of the seven churches form the first part of the main body. Jesus, the one who “knows” what is going on in each church, is the one who is dictating the words to John for each church. The second part of the main body, 4:1-22:5, records John’s observations of heavenly realities. The final section of 22:6-21 contains explanatory and concluding words. All four sections are connected by themes, phrases and topics. The Book of Revelation is not a random collection of documents or visions. It has specific themes and it carries these from one end to the other.

### **3.3 Book context**

#### 3.3.1 Introduction

The entire Book of Revelation offers a macro context for the target pericope and so it was examined for information as to who wrote it, the time of writing, to whom it was addressed. The overall message of the book was also considered. The findings contributed to helping solve whether there is a presence of a corporate nature in Jesus’ messages to the seven churches.

#### 3.3.2 Author

Who is the writer of the Apocalypse? Christian tradition understands it to be John the apostle (Mangina 2010:33), who moved to Ephesus at some point to become a pastor to the Christian communities in Asia Minor and who was eventually exiled to Patmos because of his faith (Spilsbury 2002:24). Not all scholars agree. Koester points out that John was a common name of the era and that the John of Revelation does not claim to have seen Jesus during his time of earthly ministry (2001:47-48). Also, John does not lay claim to apostolic authority nor does he speak as if he were one of the twelve apostles (Caird 1966:4). Boxall offers other suggestions: John the Baptist, John Mark, John the Elder or perhaps an anonymous author writing in the apocalyptic fashion by using the name John as a pseudonym (2006:6).

Although scholars are divided as to the identity of John there seems to be a general consensus that John of Revelation came from a Jewish background (King 2001:28) whose first language was Hebrew or Aramaic. This is evidenced by the way he writes in Greek. It is as if it were being written in one's second language (Vinson 2001:16, 28-29). Callahan holds that John's vocation was that of scribe (2009:48) although there is no evidence in the Apocalypse beyond Jesus' command to John to write down what he saw. It would be more accurate to say that John writes because he has been commanded to (Morris 1978:51).

Since he tells us nothing about himself beyond his mission (Mangina 2010:33) Revelation was written by someone who identifies himself simply as John. How much does it matter? Caird holds that if it could be demonstrated unequivocally that the writer of Revelation was also the hand behind the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John, this would give "very deep insight into the working of his mind" (1966:4). Mwombeki disagrees and states that the effectiveness of the composition is not affected whether it was authored by the apostle John or not (1995:149).

A number of scholars such as Okoye (2005:116-117), Fee (2011:22), Carey (2001:89), Frankfurter (2001:415), Jeske (195:186), Royalty (2004:286-288) and Ruiz (2006:107) hold the position that the mastermind behind the content of the target pericope was John rather than Jesus. Although John may certainly have been acquainted with the happenings and attitudes in each of these seven churches, the information in the seven messages has a distinct heavenly origin rather than an earthly one. The specific foreknowledge of Smyrna's upcoming imprisonments or of Jezebel's punishment points to all-knowing God as the author. In 2:1-3:22, consequences lead to a visitation by Christ to rectify the situation. Victorious believers are promised specific rewards. These are things that only Christ has the authority to enact or promise.

Who is perceived to be authoring the messages affects the meaning assigned them. For example, if the railings against the self-proclaimed prophet

named Jezebel are seen to originate from John, as viewed by Koester (2001:62) or Blount (2009:10), then the strength of the meaning of the condemnations may diminish as this could be seen simply as John deriding the competition. If however it is clearly Jesus condemning Jezebel, the church must sit up, take notice and collectively act because God himself has spoken against what is taking place. This writer understands the ultimate author of the entire book to be God himself, so the details in its messages and visions are both serious and reliable.

To this writer, the most important understanding is not whether the same person authored Revelation, the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John. The most important understanding with regard to the Apocalypse is that there is a difference between a scribe and an author. A person named John, or someone, who called himself John, wrote down the words of the Apocalypse. John penned the book -- firstly as he was intentionally commanded to write and secondly as things were intentionally revealed to him. However, is he the true author? According to the words of Revelation 1:1 the revelation is actually from God through Jesus Christ.

### 3.3.3 Date of writing

Knowing when a letter was written can be useful in the process of interpreting it (Boring 1989:9) however, Blount states that dating the Book of Revelation can be as challenging as determining its author (2009:8). Boring indicates that most scholars hold to either a time during the reign of Nero 54-68 AD or a time during the reign of Domitian 81-96 AD. The majority accept the latter over the former (1989:10). He supports his argument by the indication that the Jewish and Christian literature written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD used the term Babylon as a symbol for Rome. This was a practice that did not become common until after the destruction of Jerusalem (1989:10). Barr points out that the earliest comment on the document of the Book of Revelation comes from the following generation (2003:11) and Blount indicates that these

very comments from Irenaeus claim that John's visions were witnessed at the end of the reign of Emperor Domitian (2009:8). Additionally, Hemer holds that the time in history where the Jews in Asia Minor had a peculiar power over the Jewish Christians, as evidenced in the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia, was what was experienced during the reign of Domitian (2001:67). However, the evidence may be far from conclusive. John does not state which emperor is reigning at the time of his writing – his audience didn't need to be told as they would already have known (Sweet 1979:21).

### 3.3.4 Addressees

Who was this book addressed to? There are verses in the book that answer that question. It was written to God's servants (Rev 1:1). These servants were connected to seven churches in Asia (Rev 1:4). These servants were the spiritual brothers, sisters and companions of John (Rev 1:9). These servants were involved with specific congregations at these locations: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

There is another factor at work here, however. These seven congregations were not the only ones present in this area at that time. Other churches existed. A prominent example could be pointed to at Colossae (Boring 1989:87). The seven listed churches only represent a selection. The purpose behind this is most likely rooted in the idea that number seven is an important symbolic value in Revelation itself or in the Bible in general. It represents wholeness or completeness (Spilsbury 2002:25). The series of septets throughout Revelation suggest that there is something behind the choice of addressing seven churches. It points to the idea that God is speaking to all churches, everywhere. Spilsbury notes that this is reinforced through the repeated phrase "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" found at or near the end of each of the seven letters (2002:25). In the big picture, the audience of the Book of Revelation is all Christians, everywhere.



There are also clues that leave something of a mystery regarding the intended audience of some of this book. Each of the seven letters addressed in 2:1-3:22 are addressed to the 'angel of the church'. Farmer offers a collection of viewpoints: the angels are the bishops of the churches, the angels are the prophets of the churches, the angels are the guardians of the churches or the angels are heavenly counterparts of the churches (2005:39). Also, as mentioned in the literature review, Mounce holds that by addressing the angel of the church, Christ is addressing the 'prevailing spirit' or 'ethos' of the church (1977:82): a position that forms the basis of Daniels' work as well. There does not appear to be scholarly consensus regarding the identity of the angels of the churches or the exact purpose of addressing commendations and condemnations to them. It is very unusual usage since the details within each letter relate much more to human experience and their action/inaction.

Aune views it as a literary device and points to lapses of its use within the letters that suggest that, in essence, it is really to the gathered congregations that each letter is directed (1997:120). Why would Christ direct John to address the letters so? Daniels and Mounce's position seems too much focussed on the human or worldly side of things and Aune doesn't give enough weight to the heavenly side. To view the angel as an actual angelic being seems consistent with other usages of the term 'angel' in Revelation (Boxall 2006:44) but does not take into account the details in the letters that are very much of human experience. By Christ addressing each church through its angel is an excellent indication that there must be a close interplay between heaven and the earthly congregations (Kovacs & Rowland 2004:53), a potentially contributing factor that will receive additional scrutiny in the analyses of the following chapter of this thesis.

### 3.3.5 Essential message of the book

Revelation is about who God is and what it means to worship him; these are the issues at the heart of this book (Spilsbury 2002:11). It is also about the past, the present and the future in that it looks back at the faithful witness of the Jesus through his death, it is concerned for the state of the believers and churches of its time, and it demonstrates God's intended future (Kovacs 2005:259). The book is certainly about the confrontation of powers and it oscillates between images of oppression/despair and symbols of victory/hope (Yarbro 1986:239-240). The images of God and the Lamb are vivid and forceful. They are presented in opposition to Satan and his forces (Homcy 1995:193). Homcy also holds that the book is not written simply to inform believers about the victory of the Lamb but it is much more an exhortation for believers to 'overcome' (1995:193). As the book generally addresses groups of believers, as seen in 1:3-4, 11 and through the angels in chapters 2 and 3, Gorman presents the agenda of the author of the Apocalypse as being that of forming victorious communities, who together remain faithful even to death (2011:176-177).

### 3.3.6 Summary - Book context

A man named John recorded the Book of Revelation. It was written near the very end of the first century. He wrote because he encountered Jesus on Patmos and was commanded to write. John tells us that the revelation came from God through Jesus. The authority of Jesus can be seen by the descriptors John uses and by the words he recorded that Jesus spoke. Expecting positive reaction and transformation, Jesus dictated to John seven specific messages to the angels of seven specific churches. These angels somehow represent or connect the churches to heaven. Although the directives are to the seven specific churches, these churches represent all churches everywhere; all are expected to read each other's mail. In the Spirit, John is given glimpses of heaven and its perspective. He records these in writing. He further writes concluding statements from himself, from the angel and from Jesus. The entirety of this book is tied

together by repeated ideas and themes. As a whole, the book is about the Lamb and what it means to worship him or oppose him. The goal of the book points towards victorious communities of followers. As an encouragement to Christ's followers, the book speaks of his defeat of evil, his vindication of believers, his promises fulfilled and his consummation of history.

### **3.4 Immediate context**

#### 3.4.1 Introduction

Under the umbrella of the overall intent of the Apocalypse and with consideration of the information flow from book section to book section, this examination of the immediate context of the pericope focused more specifically on what was being said by Christ to the recipients of the Apocalypse. The seven churches are commended for twenty-one different positive characteristics and they are castigated for six different negative characteristics. If no repentance takes place in the targeted churches, Christ identifies four specific ways that he will come and deal with the situation. He also declares more than seventeen different promises to those who are victorious to the end.

The prominent themes in the context of the seven letters are: love, perseverance, repentance, faithfulness, suffering, patient endurance, service, earnestness and victory. The victor is the one who perseveres to the end doing the will of Christ without counting his life too dear to surrender (Caird 166:33). Victors will be given the right to eat from the tree of life and be in paradise with God: a message that bookends the Bible since both the start of Genesis and the end of the Apocalypse also contain "tree of life" verses (Fee 2011:28). Three things in the letters are alluded to that hinder victory. These three aspects, namely emperor worship, trade guild activities and the embracing of false teaching will be examined in this section. Additionally, Christ alludes to numerous historical-cultural aspects of the cities that also relate to the victory of the churches. These are presented in this section since these allusions relate to

detailed and practical directives. The details within this pericope point to the high level of importance of the entire 2:1-3:22 section (Humphrey 2003:85).

### 3.4.2 Imperial cult

The cultural context of Asia Minor at the approximate time of writing of the Apocalypse was largely about Roman imperialism that called for gratitude and loyalty: subject people could enjoy prosperity and security through cooperation with Rome (deSilva 2009:63, Thompson 2003:39). Rome positioned itself in provincial and civic cultures as a means of celebrating the so-called divinely appointed rule of Caesar (Gonzalez 2005:71). A strong presence of emperor worship activities was in the communities of most of the seven congregations (Blount 2009:49, Cory 2006:27,54, Farmer 2005:50); the strongest cult activities were located in Pergamum (Boxall 2006:58).

There were local Jewish populations in the communities (Boxall 2006:52, Hemer 2001:182) and they were exempt from having to declare Caesar as lord (Hemer 2001:39). Christians did not enjoy this protection if they were seen to be a separate group than the Jews (Mangina 2010:60) and thus they faced serious economic implications (Fee 2011:31) and punishments. The warning of prison, such as is found in the letter to Smyrna, is a serious statement (Boxall 2006:56) because Roman prisons were not simply used as a tool of punishment (Aune 1997:176). Prisons were only used to hold people awaiting trial or death (Ramsay 1994:199). Therefore, those imprisoned would most likely be executed.

Although the extent of persecution cannot be determined from the text of Revelation, there is an influence of the emperor cult as evidenced by the titles used for Jesus that appear to be in direct contrast to the claims of the Roman Emperors (Cukrowski 2003:61). So although Christians may not have been actively hunted down, they could be accused and executed if accusations were brought against them for their failures to participate in worshipping the Emperor or failing to pay homage to the trade guild deity (Thompson 2003:37).

### 3.4.3 Trade guilds

In some of the locations of the seven churches, trade guilds existed complete with patron deities and festivals to honour their gods (Koester 2001:60). These festivals involved sacrificing the festival food to the deity before it was consumed at table. Sexual activities were also part of the guild festival (Fee 2011:38). For a Christian, to opt out of the guild and cult infrastructure was to reject the gods and the state (Blount 2009:9). Blount notes that the riches of the Laodiceans suggest that they have been partaking in the social and economic aspects of Greco-Roman society (2009:82).

### 3.4.4 False teachings

False teachings are also condemned in the letters. Balaam, Jezebel and the Nicolaitans are identified as such and they feature in at least three, and possibly four, of the seven letters. These false teachings specifically embraced the eating of food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. Connecting them to the Old Testament characters of Balaam and Jezebel (Doyle 2005:34) indicates the seriousness of the offense of propagating, embracing or tolerating such teaching. Farmer indicates that any teaching that is contrary to God's is rooted in Satan (2005:50) as is implied in the letter to Thyatira. The teaching of the Nicolaitans is unknown (Fee 2011:28) but most likely was similar to Balaam's and Jezebel's (Osborne 2002:144).

### 3.4.5 Historical-cultural allusions

Christ had many specific things to say to the seven churches in the pericope. There are allusions in the messages that appear to relate to the physical or historical characteristics of the very city each church is located in. Since these historical-cultural allusions form a significant portion of the seven messages and they appear to contribute to meaning of the immediate context, an examination and presentation of them is warranted. Presented here are the

historical-cultural features which scholars believe Christ alluded to in the pericope in order to reveal, strengthen and tailor his imperatives, commendations, condemnations and promises to each recipient church:

#### 3.4.5.1 Ephesus

The important contextual features of this message may include the element of change coming to the city due to the gradual silting up of the harbour; this change is connected to potential change coming to the church due to Christ removing the lampstand if the forsaken love is not restored (Ramsay 1994:169).

#### 3.4.5.2 Smyrna

The victor's crown mentioned may allude to the appearance of the city from the water: the buildings on the cliffs looked like an adorning crown (Daniels 2009:49). The crown could also allude to a victor's crown won in the famous Smyrna athletic games (Farmer 2005:45). Faithfulness of the church may connect to the faithfulness of the city when once the citizens stripped off their own clothes to send to Roman soldiers who were suffering from the cold while out fighting winter campaigns (Ramsay 1994:200-201). Christ's statement of dying and coming to life again may allude to the city's resurrection from the ruins centuries before (Boxall 2006:52).

#### 3.4.5.3 Pergamum

From a distance, the city had the appearance of a throne (Osborne 2002:141) and this could allude to Christ's comment regarding the place where Satan had his throne. To the angel of Pergamum, Christ identifies himself as one with a double-edged sword suggesting judgment on the city, on the church or on both (Cory 2006:25). Jesus is positioning his authority above the throne of Rome and his sword above the resident Roman proconsul's sword (Farmer 2005:46).

#### 3.4.5.4 Thyatira

Christ's self-identifying title appears to be offered here in sharp contrast to a local entity; Jesus is titled the Son of God as opposed to the local deity known as the sun god Helius (Cory 2006:27). A further contrast to the local deity's statue may be implied by the self-description of Jesus' burnished bronze feet. Christ sees with eyes like blazing fire and this could also relate to the furnaces of the trade guild. Through these eyes Christ knows both the good works and the downfalls of this church (Resseque 2009:92). The reference to the iron sceptre may allude to the city's trade guilds.

#### 3.4.5.5 Sardis

The Spirit is the giver of life and so the reference to the Spirit may be in contrast to the lack of life of the church and city (Fee 2011:47). The reference to this church's reputation of once being alive but now is dead may refer to the city's past glory (Osborne 2002:171-172). The imperative to 'wake up' may allude to the two major historical military defeats in 586 BCE and 14 BCE when the city's almost impenetrable citadel fell due to overconfidence by defenders (Farmer 2005:50). These attacks were done at night (Ramsay 1994:264). This may also be why Christ spoke of coming like a thief in the night in Revelation 3:3. The reference "about to die" alludes to the Sardian's special interest in immortality (Hemer 2001:151) and to the nearby necropolis mountain that contained the cave tombs of the kings (Boxall 2006:68, Osborne 2002:174).

The metaphor of white clothes may allude to a Roman triumphal procession whereby citizens dressed in white lined the streets to honour their conquering heroes. Some in Sardis will be worthy to join in the Lord's procession, of Revelation 19:14, as conquerors (Fee 2011:48). The imagery of unsoiled garments could also allude to the wool industry of Sardis.

Ancient cities maintained a register with the names of its citizens written in it. Greeks had their names deleted from the civic register if they were convicted of a serious crime. Removal of a name is also connected to capital punishment as evidenced in Deuteronomy 29:20 and with it the blotting out of national memory (Osborne 2002:180). The book of life reference may also allude to the synagogue register. Jews embracing Christianity may have faced deletion from the synagogue register (Hemer 2001:151). The promise that their names will never be blotted out of the book of life serves in contrast to the church's current state of death (Fee 2011:48). For Christ to confess a believer's name before God and the angels might be stated in contrast to the verdict of guilty in a Roman court for a believer refusing to confess that Caesar is Lord (Farmer 2005:51-52).

#### 3.4.5.6 Philadelphia

The "holy and true" reference commencing this letter may be stated in contrast to the Emperor Domitian's "untrue" action and edict to destroy half the area's critical vineyards and have them replaced with grain crops (Hemer 2001:175). The "key of David" is also referred to in Isaiah 22:22 and Jesus' emphasis on David may point to an issue in Philadelphia of Christ's messianic status (Boxall 2006:71). Jews claimed they were the sole possessors of the key of David (Daniels 2009:107). The phrase "the synagogue of Satan" most likely refers to a body of ethnic Jews who rejected Christians being part of spiritual Israel (Hemer 2001:175).

As an outpost city to secure influence over the local people (Fee 2011:50), the city existed to disseminate Greek culture in Lydia and Phrygia (Boxall 2006:71). The open door allusion may be connected to Philadelphia's already established "missionary" role in Lydia and Phrygia or, it could be stated as a contrast to the closed door of the synagogue (Mounce 1977:117). However, as Trafton notes, the Book of Revelation, in general, doesn't focus on missionary activity (2005:48), suggesting the essential meaning to be that Christ controls the entrance to God's kingdom: a position that Yeatts supports (2003:73).



As a symbol, pillars mentioned in this letter would be particularly significant for the earthquake-spooked people of Philadelphia. Never again having to leave the heavenly temple makes connection to the history of the city during and after earthquakes (Fee 2011:55-56). When Philadelphia was rebuilt after the earthquake it changed its name to Neocaesarea, and later to Flavia. It did this to honour the emperors. The believer's name will also be changed, not for patronage, but as children (Osborne 2002:198). Victorious believers will receive the name of God, the name of the city of God and Christ's new name (Farmer 2005:54).

#### 3.4.5.7 Laodicea

The reference to 'ruler of God's creation' may connect Laodicea to the natural phenomena of the nearby hot springs (Fee 2011:58); the petrified cascades at Hieropolis were unique in the world (Hemer 2001:182). Christ portrays the cold and refreshing water from Colossae as life giving and the hot medicinal waters from Hieropolis as healing (Daniels 2009:119-120). Any piped waters coming to the city became tepid by the time it arrived in Laodicea. Tepid water was of little value (Resseque 2009:101) and was used as an agent used to induce vomiting (Daniels 2009:119).

Christ's words reverse the value of what the Laodiceans are most proud of (Daniels 2009:120): they were spiritually poor in spite of their banking successes, blind in spite of their famous medical entities and naked in spite of their booming garment industry (Farmer 2005:55). The "self-sufficiency of riches" allusion may be a connection to the city refusing assistance from Rome and rebuilding the city themselves, after the 60 CE earthquake (Boxall 2006:77).

The city's monumental triple-gate may have been alluded to when Christ stands at the door knocking (Hemer 2001:208). Christ has been excluded from their midst and he seeks permission to re-establish fellowship (Mounce 1977:129). That Christ is pictured on the outside, not the inside, supports this. Hemer also suggests that there was exploitation of locals by corrupt Roman

officials. This exploitation included enforced hospitality for the Roman staff and stands in contrast to Christ's knocking for willing hospitality (Hemer 2001:209).

#### 3.4.6 Summary - Immediate context

Jesus' commendations and condemnations in the pericope are tailored to the behaviours of each church and there are often allusions presented relating to the physical or historical characteristics of the very city each church is located in. At the time of the writing of the Apocalypse, the population of the Roman province of Asia Minor can generally be said to have embraced the imperial cult. Local Jewish populations were exempt from having to declare Caesar as lord. Christians did not enjoy this protection if they were seen to be a separate group than the Jews.

In some of the locations of the seven churches, trade guilds existed and were complete with patron deities and festivals to honour their gods. These festivals involved sacrificing the festival food to the deity before it was consumed at table. Sexual activities were also part of the guild festival. In the seven letters, Jesus calls Christians to remain faithful to him rather than declare Caesar as lord. There seems also to be a call not to participate in the trade guild activities that gave honour to the patron guild deity and involved sexual immorality. The teachings of Balaam and Jezebel specifically embraced the eating of food sacrificed to idols and sexually immoral practices. The teaching of the Nicolaitans is unknown but most likely was similar to Balaam's and Jezebel's.

The churches are commended for many positive characteristics and they are castigated for some negative characteristics. If no repentance takes place in the targeted churches, Christ identifies ways that he will come and deal with the situation. He also declares many promises to those who are victorious to the end. Christ uses historical-cultural allusions that help to tailor each message to each church in ways that add significance and strength to what he is saying. These allusions place Christ's authority above that of Rome or local deities and they illustrate his right to call his followers to victory and his right to grant promises.

The prominent themes in the immediate context of the seven letters focus on Christ's expectation that his churches would: love, persevere, repent, be faithful to his name, endure patiently, serve, and be zealous.

### 3.5 Conclusion – Context

Pursuing information about the ways that the Messiah might view the seven churches as corporate local entities involved gaining a foundational understanding of the section context, the book context and the immediate context of the letters. Of primary importance was determining what Jesus was saying to the churches.

Four sections were identified where major changes in the topic, location or format suggested logical divisions. All four sections were found to be distinct from each other and yet connected by themes, phrases and topics. The Book of Revelation was discovered to be not a random collection of documents or visions but rather one having a logical flow of information. The first section formed an introduction to what would follow. The second section presented the divine perspective of seven actual congregations. The third section presented John's observations of heavenly realities. The fourth section presented concluding information from John, from an angel and from Christ.

As a whole, the book context is about God, what it means to worship him and what it means to overcome as a follower of Jesus. God gave the revelation to Jesus for his servants. A man called John was involved in recording what he was commanded to write and what he saw. The book was addressed to seven churches in the province of Asia and these seven churches represent all churches everywhere. These churches were to take to heart what was to be read to them. Through John they were offered a "behind the scenes" look into what was happening then and what was about to happen: both in heaven and on earth. This "behind the scenes" glimpse was to bolster their faith and to offer them encouragement of the ultimate victory of the Lamb.

The immediate context determined specific things that were said to each of the seven churches: words of encouragement to persevere, words of rebuke, calls to repent and words of promise. Using authoritative titles, detailed information about the characteristics of each church and physical or historical characteristics of each city, Christ called for a transformation of the churches to become, or to persevere as, faithful witnesses of him. In the cultural atmosphere of the adversarial dynamics with the Jews, the false teachings of so-called apostles or prophets, the imperial cult expectations of citizens, or the immoral trade guild practices, Christ expected his followers to be faithful witnesses even to the point of death. As encouragement, Jesus offered more than fifteen promises to those who would be victorious. The themes of the letters clearly establish repentance, perseverance and service as the expected responses.

All these findings were beneficial to this study in that they detail the specific things Jesus said to the churches and provide the umbrella under which any final conclusions of this thesis must fall. To continue on the journey of solving the thesis question of the way the Messiah might view the churches as local corporate entities and therefore expect corporate response, the next chapter focused on refining the meaning of the pericope and it presents information of whether Jesus was addressing these detailed communications in Revelation 2:1-3:22 to the entire corporate body of a local church or whether he was directing them to the individuals who make up the congregation.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Meaning of the seven letters**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, the study of the context of the pericope established the overall message by examining how it was placed in, and connected to, the Book of Revelation. As well, research into the historical-cultural background revealed many allusions each of which contributed to the understanding of Jesus' specific imperatives, commendations, condemnations, exhortations and promises to the seven churches. It was found that underlying the Book of Revelation is Jesus' call and encouragement for a transformation of the churches to become, or to persevere, as faithful witnesses of him – even in challenging times of temptations and false teachings.

With the foundational message of Revelation 2:1-3:22 established through the examination of context in the preceding chapter, the focus of this chapter was to analyse particular elements of the pericope that affected its meaning and ultimately affected the hypothesis of this thesis namely, that Jesus is directing his seven messages to corporate congregations. These analyses commenced with a preliminary analysis; textual variants and translation differences were examined and discussed. A literary analysis followed and this sought to understand the author's potential internal and external structuring of the seven letters; the intentional structuring has the potentiality to add particular emphasis to the meaning of some parts of Jesus' messages over other parts. The literary analysis also included a look at the genres used in the Book of Revelation in order to weigh their inherent effect on the meaning of the pericope. Finally, a verbal analysis was presented. This verbal analysis discussed the pronoun choices that are used in the seven letters and helped establish who the intended recipients were. Pronouns set in the singular have a different intention from those set in the plural. The findings are then summarized.

## 4.2 Preliminary analysis

### 4.2.1 Introduction

The goal of this preliminary analysis was to see if textual variants or translation differences exerted significant effects on the meaning of the pericope as related to the corporate nature of the seven letters. The strength of any conclusions of this thesis would be diluted if they were to be based on verses where textual variants exist or on verses where significant translation differences showcase uncertainties.

### 4.2.2 Textual criticism

Within the verses of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 a total of 59 variants were identified by Zeolla (2004:1) and Terry (1998:1). A sampling of three of these variants is presented to illustrate their minor nature: A) In the letters to Smyrna and Pergamum, the Byzantine Majority Text and the Textus Receptus contain words that can be translated “I know your works and affliction”. The Critical Text however, omits the Greek word rendered as “works”. B) The words that can be translated “which I hate” are omitted from the Textus Receptus in Revelation 2:15 of the letter to the church at Pergamum. C) The Byzantine Majority Text and the Critical Text contain the words that offer a rendering of Revelation 2:1 translatabe as “the assembly in Ephesus”. The Textus Receptus offers “the Ephesian assembly”.

Regarding A) above, given the presence of the statements of Christ “I know your works” found near the beginning most of the other letters, it is understandable why a copyist might insert the missing word to establish a phrase that is consistent across all seven letters. For all the letters where “I know your works” is present, this elicits either a sense of praise or a sense of rebuke from Christ. Thus the phrase must be understood as Christ being aware of all the things that the local church is doing. Whether “works”, the transliterated Greek

word *ergon*, is present in the text or not, it remains clear from the content of the letters to Smyrna and Pergamum that Christ is fully aware of the activity and character of each church. With or without the word “works, the root meaning of these verses is therefore not affected. Regarding B) above, the context of “which I hate” is Christ’s reaction to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Since the reader is already aware that Christ hates the teachings of the Nicolaitans, as evidenced in earlier letter to Ephesus at 2:6, the omission of “which I hate” in 2:15 makes little difference to the meaning. Regarding C) above, “the assembly in Ephesus” or the “Ephesian assembly” both convey similar meanings. The nature of each of the 59 textual variants that were examined is similar to these three presented above. They are minor. If one variant is chosen over another, little effect will be made on the ultimate meaning of the text.

#### 4.2.3 Translations

A comparison of twenty-one different English translations was performed to search for significant alternate renderings. A cross-section of six samples are presented here to illustrate the nature of the differences discovered: a) Revelation 2:1/2:8/2:12/2:18/3:1/3:7/3:14 – The International Standard Version and three other translations interpret *aggelos* as messenger. In addition, the Weymouth New Testament translates *aggelos* as minister. b) Revelation 2:4 -- The New Living Translation renders “But I have this against you. You don’t love me or each other as you did at first”. c) Revelation 2:9 -- In this letter to Smyrna some translations render the transliterated word *blasphemia* as “blasphemy”. Some render it as “slander”. d) Revelation 2:20 -- NASB renders *doulos* as bond-servants. The Holman Christian Standard Bible renders it as slaves. Most other translations render it as servants. e) Revelation 3:5 -- The New Living Translation offers “all” who are victorious rather than “the one” who is victorious. f) Revelation 3:9 -- The King James Bible and a few others contain ‘come and worship before thy feet’.

Regarding a) above, since *aggelos* refers to a heavenly being in each other instance of use in Revelation (Boring 1989:86-87), the rendering of *aggelos* as “angel” is preferred. Any other supplied word may lead a reader/listener to an interpretation beyond what was intended by the author.

Regarding b) above, The New Living Translation specifically identifies the “forsaken love” as being towards both Jesus and man. Although love for Jesus and love for man is connected, whom the love is to be directed to is not clearly shown in the original texts (Boxall 2006:49-50). To guard the remaining uncertainty, to this writer the preferred rendering is therefore “you have forsaken the love you had at first”.

Regarding c) above, If those of the ‘synagogue of Satan’ were specifically directing evil words against God, then “blasphemy” would be the better translation for *blasphemia* since it particularly defines vilification against God. However, since a similar occurrence can be seen in the letter to Philadelphia, and the resulting action is that God will force the so-called Jews to bow down before the Christians, the evil words of the Jews seem to be directed against the Christians not God. “Slander” is thus the better choice for *blasphemia*.

Regarding d) above, given that Christ is calling for voluntary rather than forced submission or repentance throughout the letters, it is more appropriate to translate *doulos* as “bond-servants” or “servants” rather than “slaves”.

Regarding e) above, the NLT is based on the Critical Text, which omits *HO* altogether -- so “all who are victorious” could very well be a legitimate offering. However, similar expressions about the victorious occur in most of the other letters and all contain *HO*. This article is set in the third person singular form so therefore a better rendering for 3:5 is “the one” rather than “all”.

Regarding f) above, the context of Revelation 3:9 is that those who are of the synagogue of Satan will be forced by Jesus to acknowledge, before the feet of the Philadelphia church, that Jesus has loved the Christians. Since worship is



reserved for God, as evidenced in Exodus 20:3-4, 'bow down' or 'acknowledge' is the better translation since the obeisance by the so-called Jews is to be towards fellow humans, not towards God.

#### 4.2.4 Summary – Preliminary analysis

The two translation differences with potential to affect the argument of a corporate nature of the seven letters are the rendering of *aggelos* as minister by the Weymouth New Testament and the treatment of 3:5 by the New Living Translation creating "all who are victorious" instead of "the one who is victorious". With reasoning offered above, these two renderings by the Weymouth New Testament and the New Living Translation do not offer the preferred interpretations of the respective verses. Therefore, after examining the identified 59 textual variants and twenty-one different translations, it can be said that the differences are minor and offer little effect to the general meaning of the text or to the thesis question at hand regarding the corporate nature of the seven letters.

### 4.3 Literary analysis

#### 4.3.1 Introduction

The pericope of the seven letters to the churches was examined to determine the influence of structure and genre on the meaning of the passage. Intentional internal and external structuring of the passage by the author can give more weight to a particular part of the communication. If there is a clear presence of a corporate nature in Christ's communication within the weighted portion, this would add strength to any thesis conclusions. In this sub-section, an examination of the internal structure is presented. Additionally, the external structure was looked at for a potential U-shaped structure, significant pairings or a chiasmic structure.

The question of genre can also be critical since genre has the potential of affecting the root meaning of a document in general (Gorman 2011:13) and of our pericope in particular. Within the opening chapter of Revelation, the three

different literary conventions of apocalypse, prophecy and letter are immediately presented; the reader is somehow expected to hold all three at the same time (Linton 2006:26). This sub-section on genre examines the effect of these three genres of apocalypse, prophecy and letter on the message of the book and pericope. As well, a fourth genre, namely imperial edict, was also considered.

#### 4.3.2 Structure

##### 4.3.2.1 Internal structure

Each of the seven messages displays a fairly similar internal structure. While not every church is communicated to in exactly the same way, at least eight different components can be identified: 1) address to that church's angel 2) description of Christ taken from the vision of Jesus in the first chapter 3) commendation 4) condemnation 5) consequence 6) exhortation to act 7) exhortation to hear 8) promises to those who conquer. In itself, such a tangible repeated structure offers the overall sense of a "mid-term operational audit" to each addressee; the components are presented in a fairly consistent checklist format and directives are put to each church regarding its future.

Since the seven letters are gathered together into one scroll and everyone is reading everyone else's mail (Fee 2011:22), the repeated internal structuring provides an effective way for readers/hearers to gain understanding by comparing one church against another. The structure helps to bring forth the information of what each church does well or what they are challenged by. As a document to be read aloud, according to Revelation 1:3, the fairly repetitive internal structure would enable a hearer to comprehend the meaning easier.

##### 4.3.2.2 U-Shape structure

Resseguie views the structure of the entire Book of Revelation as containing a U-shaped plot and offers that the plot of each of the seven letters bears this same shape. In other words, beginning with a stable condition the storyline descends towards disaster and then is averted when a reversal occurs

sending the plot on an upward and hopeful course (2009:84). The “I know” statement of Jesus is represented by the top of one of the legs of the “U”. The statement “But I have this against you” is represented by the downward turn of the “U”. The reversal is a call to repentance, remembrance or endurance. The rising turn is a call to listen and the top of the second leg of the “U” is a promise (2009:85-86). This would put the emphasis of the root meaning of the letters on the call to make the upward turn, namely: the call to repentance, the call to remembrance and the call to endurance.

#### 4.3.2.3 Paired structure

In addition to a U-shaped structure, scholars offer other plans. Both Hemer (2001:21) and Ramsay (1994:149) offer three pairings of churches that share points of similarity. Ephesus and Sardis have both changed and deteriorated. Smyrna and Philadelphia, having both suffered from the Jews and being poor and weak are praised and not condemned. Pergamum and Thyatira have been affected by the teachings of the Nicolaitans, and both of these churches are compared and contrasted with the imperial powers. Laodicea is without a pair; it stands by itself and cannot decide whether it is one thing or another (Ramsay 1994:149). Osborne sees it differently and connects Ephesus to Thyatira due to the seriousness of their problems and their extensive list of good works (2002:154). Duff sees one legitimate pairing in that of Smyrna and Philadelphia since they alone did not display internal heresies like the remaining five churches. These two churches also lack a call to repentance (2006:155-156). Duff thus connects the structure to the presence or absence of internal heresies.

#### 4.3.2.4 Chiastic structure

There is also the potential for a chiastic structure of the letters due to similarities in the contents and placement of the letters. With regard to levels of spiritual health or other similar characteristics, scholars such as Farmer (2005:42) and Lioy (2003:85-86) present a chiastic pattern that pairs Ephesus with Laodicea, Smyrna with Philadelphia and Pergamum with Sardis. In

explanation, Lioy notes that firstly, Ephesus and Laodicea both demonstrate decreasing zeal and increasing apathy. Secondly, Smyrna and Philadelphia are both enduring affliction while attempting to remain devoted to Christ. Thirdly, portions of the churches Pergamum and Sardis are being tempted to compromise their faith (2003:85-86). This places the letter to the church at Thyatira, the longest letter of the seven, in the central position. Boxall posits that this church is an unlikely choice even for inclusion with the other six (2006:62); this “unlikeliness” may be all the more reason to pay very close attention to what is happening in this particular message. If there is truly an underlying chiastic structure then this definitely impacts the key places to look for the pericope’s meaning and it points to the contents of the letter to Thyatira. Lioy holds that Thyatira was neither spiritually mediocre nor striving for excellence nor conflicted in its objectives; the key issue in Thyatira was that some in the church were compromised and tolerating false teaching (2003:86).

Shubert (2005:1) and Beale (1999:226) also identify this same chiastic pattern but more heavily weight the three churches at the centre of the pattern: Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis. Shubert holds that Pergamum firstly introduces the beginning of apostasy, then Thyatira practices full-scale apostasy and finally Sardis suffers from spiritual death. This, he claims, is a natural descending sequence of a church in trouble and thus the central message of the seven letters. Beale posits that portions of the membership of the three central churches have compromised themselves to the surrounding pagan culture and that Jesus is exhorting them to purge the elements of compromise from their midst. Beale calls the church at Pergamum the best of the three with Sardis being the worst (1999:226). To Beale a chiastic pattern seen here indicates that the Christian church as a whole is perceived by heaven as being in poor condition; firstly the healthy churches are in the minority, secondly the two churches on the outside flanks of the chiastic pattern are in the worst condition and thirdly the three churches with the serious problems form the central core of the chiasm (1999:226).

#### 4.3.2.5 Summary - Structure

In light of the different offerings for the structure of the seven letters, do they have merit and if so does the structure impact the meaning of the text? Regarding Resseguie's position, it can be said that a U-shaped plot describes some of the letters. However, contrary to Resseguie's position, it does not apply to all. Not every church is commended for its deeds; the "I know" statement to the Sardis church or to the Laodicea church is not positive and does not describe a stable starting condition. For Smyrna and Philadelphia, there is no "but I have this against you" statement to be represented by the downward turn of the U. The last four letters would have their rising turn above the top of the second leg of the U since "whoever has ears to hear" concludes the last four letters instead of the promise. The U-shaped plot order has merit in some letters but it doesn't consistently reflect the structure in all seven letters. Neither does it represent the overall plot of the Book of Revelation. Though the book ends with stability, it doesn't necessarily start from a position of stability; the book commences with addresses to seven churches that are not in a static positive situation; persecution is present and false teaching is rampant. Also, some believers are capitulating to the pressures of the culture around them; this is not easily represented as the top of the starting leg of the U-shape.

The church groupings of Duff (Smyrna + Philadelphia as one group and then a second grouping of the remaining 5 churches) or Ramsay (3 sets of 2 churches and Laodicea on its own) or Osborne (Ephesus + Thyatira) each show a measure of logic but do not demonstrate a clear impact on meaning unless Duff is claiming that the key messages are to Smyrna and Philadelphia, Ramsay is claiming that the key message is to Laodicea or Osborne is claiming that Ephesus and Thyatira bear the penultimate meaning. Under Duff's, Ramsay's or Osborne's offerings the detailed content from the non-highlighted churches is ignored or given a lighter weighting.

If in fact there is a chiastic structure in the positioning of the letters, special attention needs to be made of the parallel pairings and of the church in the central position, namely Thyatira. Its immediately flanking churches would be of some interest as well particularly since a portion of each church has compromised; in Pergamum some have embraced the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, in Thyatira some follow Jezebel and in Sardis some have soiled their clothes. By contrast, the next two churches that flank the middle three are not said to have any division or remnant; Smyrna and Philadelphia are united and seem pointed in a positive direction. The final two churches that are in the “outside position”, Ephesus and Laodicea, do not seem to be internally divided either, however, they are not headed in a positive direction. One-mindedness in itself would have little value if together the church was headed for destruction, but godly one-mindedness may be a desired characteristic in view here.

A solid argument for a chiastic structure must rest on solid pairings. However, there does not appear to be consensus with regard to all the pairings. Ramsay and Hemer pair Ephesus with Sardis and Pergamum with Thyatira. Beale, Farmer and Liroy pair Ephesus with Laodicea and Pergamum with Sardis. Osborne pairs Ephesus with Thyatira. Each scholar has his or her own rationale. For example, Liroy couples together Ephesus and Laodicea as both are seen to demonstrate decreasing zeal and increasing apathy. However, this is not a solid pairing. Ephesus’ problem wasn’t a general decreasing of zeal; the church is actually commended for deeds, and hard work. Their problem wasn’t a general apathy; they intentionally tested self-proclaimed apostles for truth, they persevered and they endured hardships in Jesus name without flagging. Rather, the issue Jesus had with Ephesus was specifically their lack of love -- either for fellowman or God -- perhaps both. This is a far different issue than that facing the self-sufficient church at Laodicea that didn’t receive any commendation at all. Ephesus and Laodicea have few similarities.

Beale believes that the significance of a chiastic structure seen here is that it points to the Christian church as a whole as being in poor condition since the healthy churches are in the minority, the outer flanking churches are in the worst condition and the three central churches have serious problems. In response to Beale's position, his first statement is not dependent on a chiastic structure: observation of the seven messages, presented in any order, will lead to the same conclusion that the healthy churches are in the minority. Beale's second statement is questionable; Ephesus received strong commendation and thus it may not be fair to pair it with Laodicea as a "worst" church. That the three central churches have serious problems is a true statement. However, the two outer flanking ones equally have serious problems, particularly Laodicea. Beale notes that the key and central message to Thyatira contains the general statement that "all the churches will know" that Christ is the all-knowing judge of his followers. While Beale is correct that Thyatira's is the only message where this statement is found in this specific internal position of the seven messages, Jesus makes essentially the same point of knowing and judging in the messages to Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis and Laodicea as evidenced in 2:2, 2:5, 2:12, 2:16, 3:1, 3:3 and 3:15.

Some scholars, such as Farmer (2005:42) point to Thyatira as the key message since it is the longest. It is true that this message contains the most words, however it is only the longest because Jesus uses many words to speak about what Jezebel and her followers will soon suffer. The letter to Smyrna is the shortest which under Farmer's logic could relegate this message to that of least importance. Yet, the message to Smyrna might be the most important message to the original church receiving these words; it might be the most important message of the seven for another church in another era to receive at that time. Each letter bears characteristics unique from the other six. The letter to Philadelphia contains the most promises. The letter to Sardis may contain the most allusions to their historical-cultural situation. The letter to Pergamum has

probably the most powerful commendation for proven faithfulness. The letter to Laodicea contains the most counsel and hope. The point being made is that any of the seven messages could be championed as the most important or the “key” to understanding the meaning of the pericope.

To uphold the chiasmic weighting may yield a focus on one message over another: something that does not seem to have been intended by Jesus. The lessons from the one-minded churches that receive only commendation would be side lined. The message from the church that receives only censure would also be minimized. The love lesson from Ephesus or the “do not fear” lesson from Smyrna or the “hold on” lesson from Philadelphia or the “lesson against self-sufficiency” from Laodicea – also seem to be invaluable lessons. Jesus selected the specific seven churches addressed. They represent all churches everywhere and therefore all seven of the messages must bear significance in the document. The messages are together in one scroll for the benefit of those who have ears to hear what the Spirit says to them.

In light of the valuable teachings and exhortations found throughout the positive and negative components of all seven letters, the message and meaning of the letters unfolds through examining the whole rather than by isolating significant groupings, pairings or chiasmic patterns that may highlight a particular message. Although it cannot be refuted that there is some evidence of patterns and pairings in the order of placement of the pericope, it is not seen to have a definitive external structure that, by its very presence, identifies, weights or contributes to identifying the key message of the pericope. All the seven messages bear great importance. The highly visible and repeated internal structure of each letter provides strength, comparability and accountability to the underlying meaning of the pericope.



### 4.3.3 Genre

#### 4.3.3.1 Apocalypse

The consensus of scholars holds that the majority of Revelation represents many formal features of early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature (Herms 2006:145, Smith 1994:378). Readers in John's time would recognize in Revelation a familiar literary form (Koester 2001:28). In a flight from the realities of history and society (O'Donovan 1985:61), an apocalypse could contain: visions, journeys, conversations with angels, hidden worlds of angels and demons, nations depicted as animals, the domination by evil, the wicked defeated and a world transformed (Koester 2001:27-29). Using materials of pictures and symbols rather than logically constructed arguments (Sweet 1979:35) this cryptic imagery was designed to reveal truth (Blount 2009:14). Is the Book of Revelation therefore an apocalypse?

It certainly exhibits some characteristics common to the apocalyptic genre: it reveals heavenly mysteries, it is set within a narrative framework, it is mediated by other worldly beings, it promises privileged access to the supernatural world, it has a focus on eschatology, it distinguishes between heaven and earthly realms and it describes a cosmic triumph of God over his opposition (Cory 2006:8-9, Boxall 2006:2). It also contains elements of traditional mythologies such as the birth of the divine child, a sacred marriage, the divine city, the divine warrior and the use of sacred numbers (Fiorenza 1985:167).

#### 4.3.3.2 Prophecy

Farmer views Revelation not as apocalyptic but rather as early Christian prophecy (2005:26). There is support for Farmer's position within the verses of the Book of Revelation. The title Apocalypse suggests its genre but Beale notes

that the word *apokalypsis* could merely mean “make known” or “communicated” (2006:54-55). The scribe of the book believed himself to be a prophet as evidenced in 10:8-11 and 22:8-9. A biblical prophet is one who sees into the realities that lie behind the appearances of this world. He communicates these realities so that people can act according to the will of the God they cannot see. Acting according to God’s will puts eternal destiny ahead of present security or prosperity (Sweet 1979:2).

The book and the pericope is a “word from the Lord”, written to inform churches and their present situations and written against the backdrop of future judgment and salvation. The book refers to itself as prophecy in 1:3 and 22:6-7, 22:10, 22:18 and 22:19. Some, if not all of the seven churches are on the brink of holocaust coming towards them in the Roman Empire and this prophetic word provides encouragement to the recipients to stand firm (Fee 2011:xiv). Of the pericope specifically, its proclamations to the seven churches bears a prophetic shape as evidenced by calls to repent, consequences and future promises. Therefore even though the book and the pericope bear some apocalyptic form and style, they are prophetic in content and mentality (Stam 2011:292).

#### 4.3.3.3 Letter

In addition to its characteristics as prophecy, the Book of Revelation also has the nature of a personal and intimate letter (Callahan 2009:49). The book starts and ends in the standard way that ancient letters started and ended (Spilsbury 2002:22-23); it bears the characteristics of a greeting, it has identified recipients and it possesses an ending. As a letter it must have had to make sense for its original readers and therefore attention must be paid to the issues relating to its history; it was written to a particular audience, at specific locations to address particular circumstances (Spilsbury 2002:23, 27-28).

As a circular letter encompassing multiple circumstances, the prophecy is even more firmly rooted in place and time (Cory 2006:9-10). Although preaching was transmitted by letters among early Christians as evidenced in 1

Thessalonians 5:27 and Colossians 4:16, to incorporate a letter format into a book's structure is unusual for both apocalyptic works and prophetic works (Linton 2006:31). The command of Christ's to write to the angel of each specific church of 2:1-3:22 also suggests something of a letter format.

#### 4.3.3.4 Imperial edict

Aune notes that the literary device of writing seven proclamations to seven churches, and packaging them together, has no parallels in other apocalypses. He holds that the early Christian readers would have recognized the seven messages as being related to royal or imperial edicts; these were proclamations of laws or policies enacted by the emperor and preserved in stone in key cities throughout the Roman province of Asia. Revelation's author's strategy is then understood as contrasting God and Christ with the pseudo-kingship of the Roman Emperor (Aune 2006:50-51, Beale 1999:228).

#### 4.3.3.5 Combination

Bauckham captures the idea of a combination of genres as he describes Revelation as an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter (1993:2-6). It is a careful blend of different types of literature (Fee 2011:xii) each carrying some measure of importance (Boxall 2006:1). Linton holds that although the book has a mixed genre and offers multiple possibilities it does not support any particular one. He sees the book as an open text that allows its reader to participate in producing multiples of meanings (Linton 2006:40-41).

#### 4.3.3.6 Summary – Genre

Both the book and the pericope bear characteristics of apocalypse in that there are heavenly mysteries revealed, information is set within a narrative framework, there are other worldly beings involved, there is a focus on eschatology, there is a distinguishing between heaven and earthly realms and presented is the cosmic triumph of God over his opposition. To ignore the apocalyptic nature in the target pericope or of the book may lead to faulty

explanations (Lioy 2003:44). Taking it to the other extreme would distort its meaning as well; scholars who uphold Revelation as strictly apocalyptic in nature by its use of apocalyptic language and imagery, overlook that God can also be seen in the book and the pericope as acting within history; not just at the end of history.

Hemer holds that the connection between Revelation and earlier works of this genre is overstated. If John used the traditional form, he invested it with new things so that it cannot be tied to the convention (2001:12). Important differences exist between Revelation and typical apocalypses. John wrote under his own name, he called his book a prophecy, he was concerned with ethics and he often called for repentance (Farmer 2005:26). An apocalypse was written with a pessimistic overtone (Osborne 2002:13) and answers the question “why God’s people should suffer so?” On the other hand a prophecy was written with an optimistic overtone and a prophet’s concern was “why should people live so wickedly?” (Farmer 2005:25).

The book and the pericope also bear characteristics of prophetic genre in content and mentality. They contain the words from the Lord, they are written to inform churches of their present situations with a call to repent or persevere and they are written against the backdrop of future judgment and salvation. There are numerous declarations within the document that claim that the work is prophetic. This aspect also cannot be ignored.

The book and the pericope bear the clear characteristic of letter in that there are greetings, identified recipients, endings, specifics earthly details and specific earthly locations. Each message to each church contains specific details, like a letter might have. Campbell holds the position that the seven messages are only representative or symbolic, they are not seen to be of historical value (2012:75). Campbell overlooks the detail within each letter and the specific challenges the churches were facing. These things point to the opposite position; that the seven messages accurately describe the situation at the time of the

writing of Revelation and the presented details root the messages in reality. As specific letters they are a significant key to understanding the overall book.

Aune's or Beale's position that the target pericope resembles imperial edicts has validity yet it would be incorrect to equate the pericope entirely with imperial edicts because a large part of the target pericope presents a distinct heavenly perspective: there is intimate knowledge of each specific church, prophecies of specific things coming, eschatological promises, heavenly disciplines and encouragements. Such heavenly information cannot be said to be the same thing as the law or policy information proclaimed via an emperor's imperial edict. However, that being said, throughout the seven messages Jesus can clearly be seen speaking as a royal figure and Jesus speaks God's words with the expectation for the hearers to pay attention and to obey; these aspects point to some measure of similarity to imperial edicts (Broome 2011:1).

Linton's position, where he sees the book as an open genre that allows its reader to participate in producing multiples of meanings however, goes against the core of the book. The meaning of any text is not dictated by genre. Nor can it be an "open text" subject to all interpretations. Rather, it is a revelation of Jesus, from God. Therefore it is God's mind that needs to be sought. The genre of a text simply helps contribute clues that may help to establish meaning.

This examination of genre finds evidence that the book and the target pericope bear a hybrid genre: there are aspects of apocalyptic, prophetic, letter and imperial edict. This contributes to the understanding of the target pericope in that God clearly controls the present and the future of the seven churches in Asia Minor. The temporal temptations to conform to ungodly demands are endurable with the realization that the same God who controls the end of the age is still in control of the present. From one end of the book to the other, the hybrid genre of Revelation points to the book being an exhortation to be an overcomer. The genres within provide the vehicle to root the meaning of the pericope in the present, with an eye to the future and the overall reassurance that the true King

is God. He is in control right through to the consummation of history. The readers of the Revelation are encouraged to see their current situation in the light of the revealed glimpse from a heavenly perspective.

#### 4.3.4 Summary -- Literary analysis

Without a definitive external structure, the message and meaning of the letters unfolds through an examination of the whole rather than through an identifiable structure. To this writer there is not seen a weighted portion or particular letter that carries the main meaning of the pericope. Corporate directives in any of the letters are equally as valuable. The highly visible and repeated internal structure of each letter provides strength, comparability and accountability to the communication to the churches.

The presence of the distinct genres of imperial edict, letter, prophecy and apocalypse, together provide the vehicle to securely root the meaning of the pericope in the present, with an eye to the future and in the overall reassurance that God is in control right through to the consummation of history. Since the pericope's meaning is rooted in the present, any corporate directives within are expected to be responded to with obedience through practical action.

### **4.4 Verbal Analysis**

#### 4.4.1 Introduction

The key words examined in this exercise are related to the question that is central to this thesis: "Is Jesus addressing the entire congregation or individuals?" The answer to this question partially resides in the grammatical entities that are present in the seven letters. There are essentially three different situations: 1) Jesus specifically addresses the angel of the church 2) Jesus specifically addresses a remnant or portion of the church 3) Jesus specifically addresses 'the one who is victorious'. By examining the pronouns at these crucial points of the pericope, clues are gleaned.

#### 4.4.2 Angel of the church

Brighton notes that when God wanted to speak to someone in a personal way, he did so through an angel (2008:295). When dealing with each of the seven churches, Jesus certainly addresses its “angel”. The noun transliterated as *angelos* is set in the singular. Each particular communication, to each specific church, is thus being given to one angel. That each angel is attached to a church is evidenced by the possessive case being utilized for the article. Therefore the seven local churches each have an angel--or perhaps the angel has the church! Bientenhard (n.p.:1980) notes that *angelos* is found 67 times in the Book of Revelation and Boxall (2006) contributes that *angelos* is never used in this book to refer to men; rather, heavenly beings are always in view. This is a strong argument against interpreting the “angel” of the church as a human officer such as a minister or pastor. It is also an argument against Aune’s (1997:120) interpretation of the use of “to the angel” as simply a literary device.

The English translations of this pericope do not differentiate between “you/your” when addressed to one or to more than one person. With the original Greek however, there is capacity to differentiate personal pronouns “you/your” as either singular or plural. By examining the letters, it was observed that the majority of the information in Revelation 2:1-3:22 is directed towards the singular angel of its church. This is evidenced through the use of singular “you”, transliterated as *sou*. Moore posits that *sou* is used when the author is speaking to a body of one (2010:28-31). A reading of a letter containing “I know your deeds” could point towards the deeds of the singular angel itself. When Jesus says “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire”, the reading would then be understood to be Jesus counselling the angel of the church to buy the refined gold.

Jesus' counsel, however, does not seem to be something for angels to act upon. The actions are in the earthly realm; the ultimate recipients are much more likely to be earthly congregations (Bucur 2008:193, Friesen 2006:133). The presence of practical and earthly commendations and condemnations in the letters, plus the overall call for repentance or action, suggests that the human membership of the local church is somehow being addressed as well, albeit through its representative angel. By Christ addressing each church through its angel, Kovacs & Rowland hold that this is an excellent indication that there must be a close interplay between heaven and each earthly congregation (2004:53). The context and statement of Christ's that whatever is bound on earth is equally bound in heaven, found in Matthew 18:18, also suggests something of this close interplay between earth and heaven (Yoder 2001:1). Another New Testament reference in this regard is found in Ephesians 5:25-32; although these verses offer the mystery of a husband and wife becoming one flesh, in doing so they also highlight the intimate connection between a church and Jesus. Wink posits that all churches exist on both an earthly and spiritual plane; one cannot exist without the other and the angel is the spiritual representation of the totality of its congregation (1986:70).

The nature of the information in the seven letters certainly suggests that it is being directed to the earthly side of things. However, as Jesus intentionally addresses each letter to its angel there is also a heavenly component to a local congregation. Without fully understanding the interplay between an angel and its church, it can only be said that from a grammatical perspective, there are many verses of the seven letters addressed to a body of one.

#### 4.4.3 Remnant or portion of the church

Though most of the seven letters are addressed in the singular, it would not be fair to say that all communications in the letters are addressed in the singular. Jesus changes to the plural when speaking to, or about, a portion or remnant of a church. In the target pericope, any portion or remnant of the church



is referred to in the second or third person plural. For example, in the letter to Thyatira, part of the congregation does not embrace Jezebel's teachings. When speaking to these people, Jesus addresses them in the second person plural. The plural usage seems indicate that these people, although a group, are a collection of individuals; in some way they are different than a single body. The plural form is also used when Jesus addresses those people of the Smyrna church who will soon be put into prison. Equally it is used of the remnant of the Sardians, who have not soiled their clothes.

#### 4.4.4 "The one who is victorious"

There is one more way that Jesus addresses. In addition to speaking to a single body and to a collection of individuals, Jesus also addresses comments to and about victorious individuals. In the concluding statements of each of the seven letters, the articles are set in the third person singular. Is this a return to Jesus speaking about a body of one, i.e. the angel of the church? The context of each of concluding paragraph in the seven letters suggests otherwise. Due to the nature of the rewards and promises listed in the seven letters, it is better understood that Jesus is speaking about a victorious individual here.

Some of the rewards and promises include: the right to eat from the tree of life, not being hurt by the second death, receiving the right to rule over the nations, not having one's name blotted out of the book of life, having one's name acknowledged before God the Father and the angels, and receiving the right to sit with Jesus on the throne. These rewards and promises are appropriate things for the human realm rather than the angelic realm. Individuals, not angels, can be seen in view in 2 Timothy 2:12 where victorious believers will reign with Jesus. Equally, individuals are also in view regarding receiving the right to the tree of life as evidenced in Revelation 22:14, or regarding their names in the book of life as evidenced in Revelation 20:11-15. Therefore, Jesus is addressing single victorious individuals.

#### 4.4.5 Summary – Verbal analysis

Through an examination of the grammar in the pericope, it can be seen that Jesus uses both singular and plural forms in directing his thoughts to the recipients of the seven churches in Asia Minor. There are primarily three different addressees: a) Jesus offers promises to victorious single individuals b) he speaks to collections of individuals and c) he addresses singular bodies of one. Most of the target pericope is addressed via c). Where he speaks to a body of one is of particular interest for this study. The usage of *angelos* strongly indicates a heavenly connection, however, this “oneness” is more than simply one angel. By the context and content of all the letters, Jesus’ commendations, condemnations and imperatives are rooted in earthly action and earthly character. The local congregation is part of this “oneness” as well. Therefore, when Jesus is speaking of “your deeds” or using an imperative like “repent” he is speaking to the whole congregation together. Since the body of one is called by Jesus to respond to what he tells them, this supports the thesis hypothesis that the acts are to be done by the whole congregation, together.

#### 4.5 Conclusion – Meaning of the seven letters

In this chapter examinations have been made with the purpose of further clarifying the meaning of the message of the pericope. Three analyses were performed to see what effect they might have on the underlying messages being communicated by Jesus in Revelation 2:1-3:22. These analyses included a preliminary analysis, a literary analysis and a verbal analysis. The preliminary analysis focussed on examining textual variants and translation differences. The literary analysis focussed on genre as well as gaining an understanding of the structure of each message: both of the internal structuring of the pericope and of the external placement patterns. The verbal analysis rounded out the study and focussed on Jesus’ choice of pronouns to address the recipients.

To accomplish the preliminary analysis, 59 different textual variants and 21 English translations were examined. It was determined that all 59 are minor in nature; none changed the essential meaning of the text. The review of 21 English translations of the pericope uncovered mostly insignificant differences as well. However, one interpretation that could alter the root meaning of the text and affect the conclusions of this thesis was the rendering of *aggelos* as minister as found in The Weymouth New Testament. The conclusion reached in the analysis above was that *aggelos* should not be translated as minister but rather as angel since a heavenly being is in view everywhere else in Revelation where *aggelos* is used. The New Living Translation's offering of "all" who are victorious rather than "the one" who is victorious, in the letter to Sardis, seemed to be a rendering that would support the hypothesis statement of this thesis that there is a corporate nature to the seven messages, but in the end it was hard to add the NLT rendering to the argument. The NLT translation as is not supported in the instances where similar statements are made at the end of all six of the other messages. It is concluded that the textual variants and the translation differences do not exert an effect on the overall meaning of the pericope and therefore no effect is exerted on the thesis question of whether there are corporate expectations to Christ's communications in Revelation 2:1-3:22. Any conclusions drawn as a result of this study will therefore not be clouded by the presence of insurmountable textual variants or translation differences.

A literary analysis was performed subsequent to the preliminary analysis. This involved firstly looking at the highly visible and repeated internal structuring of information. It was concluded that this internal structuring provides an effective way for readers/hearers to compare one church against another through bringing forth the information of what each church does well or what they are challenged by. The internal structure provides accountability, comparability and offers the sense of a mid-term audit rather than a final judgment.

An examination of the external structure included looking at offerings of a U-shape, some pairings of churches and a chiasm. The argument for a U-shaped structure of the pericope was rejected because it cannot be consistently applied across all seven messages. As well, some of the churches are not starting from a static stable position. Regarding pairings of certain churches, there isn't consensus amongst scholars except with the pairing of the Smyrna and Philadelphia congregations. For the scholarly offerings of pairings for the remaining five churches, to this writer, any of the rationale offered is not convincing. The proposed chiastic structure certainly does recognize that the central three churches have all had portions of their congregations compromised by false teaching and that the next two flanking churches are the ones in the best shape. However, to this writer, the argument for chiasm is weakened through a forced pairing of the two churches that are on the outside flanks, namely Ephesus and Laodicea. These two do not share many similarities: one church is commended for a number of things, the other is not commended at all – one church has fallen down with respect to its former love, the other church is so self-sufficient that it has even excluded Christ from its midst. Without solid pairings across the entire chiasm, this structure was rejected.

Seeking a chiastic structure or seeking to combine the messages into church pairs is essentially searching for an intended pattern that points to a heavier weighting of one message over another by the author. Although it is recognized by this writer that there are glimpses of patterns in the current order of placement of the letters, the point can be made that the root meaning of the messages or entire pericope would not be significantly altered if the seven messages were presented in a different sequence. The number of churches, seven, is significant. Bearing the number of completeness, they represent all churches everywhere. Since the messages to the seven churches are positioned side by side in the same scroll and all addressees listen to everyone else's message, all seven messages carry different specific details and all the details

are valuable. Seeking to give one or some messages more significance over the others minimizes the value of the side lined messages. Jesus carefully dictated them all. It is concluded that the meaning of the pericope unfolds through examining all of the seven messages. Each contributes to the meaning of the whole.

An examination of genre was also undertaken within the literary analysis. It was discovered that the Book of Revelation is affected by the presence of at least four different genres. The apocalyptic genre and prophetic genre are very obvious throughout. The apocalyptic is characterized by revelations of heavenly mysteries, a narrative framework, mediation by other worldly beings, a focus on eschatology, a differentiation between heaven and earthly realms and descriptions of the cosmic triumph of God over his opposition. The book and the pericope also have a prophetic genre in content and mentality. They contain the words from the Lord, they are written to inform churches of their present situations with a call to repent or persevere and they are written against the backdrop of future judgment and salvation. There are numerous declarations within the document that claim that the work is prophetic.

The book and the pericope also display the nature of a personal and intimate letter. The book starts and ends in the standard way that ancient letters started and ended. As a letter it must have had to make sense for its original readers and therefore attention must be paid to the issues relating to its history. Just like most other letters it was written to a particular audience, at specific locations to address particular circumstances. The pericope itself displays some of the characteristics of an imperial edict. Jesus can clearly be seen speaking as a royal figure; he speaks God's words with the expectation for the hearers to pay attention and to obey.

It was concluded that there is the marked presence of four genres in both the pericope and in the overall book: apocalypse, prophetic, letter and imperial edict. Each exerts some measure of meaning on the text. This combination of

genres within the pericope and within the Book of Revelation provides the vehicle to root the meaning of the pericope in the present and the practical. It also encourages an eye to the future in the overall reassurance that the true King is God. The one who controls the end of the age is still in control of the present. The genre mix helps readers/hearers of the Revelation to be encouraged to see their current situations of temporal temptations with pressure to conform to ungodly demands, in the light of the revealed glimpse from a heavenly perspective; they are encouraged to overcome.

The verbal analysis revealed that there is a direct connection between heaven and church. Since *aggelos* is translated as angel everywhere else in Revelation, Jesus is addressing each message to a heavenly counterpart of each church. The context of the messages of 2:1-3:22 is practical and earthly. The recipient is not seen to be just the angel of the church but rather the recipient is seen to be the whole congregation. In the pericope, Jesus chose to address most of his communication in the second person singular -- to the recipients as a "body of one". Therefore, for most of the delivery of details of the characteristics, commendations, imperatives, condemnations and expectations of the seven earth bound churches, Jesus deliberately chose to address with the second person singular form. This is significant and indicates that from heaven's perspective a local church is here viewed as a body of one rather than as a collection of individuals. Jesus is intentionally talking to the whole body of the church; he addresses the church as a corporate entity and the expectation therefore is a corporate response.

To summarize chapter IV, the undertakings of a preliminary analysis, a literary analysis and a verbal analysis produced the following five findings: 1) the textual variants and the translation differences do not exert a significant effect on the meaning of the target pericope 2) the strong and repeated internal structure emphasizes the churches' accountability, the comparability of one church to another and as well it offers the sense that Jesus is communicating the results of a mid-term audit rather than a final judgment 3) a consistent external structure

was not seen and it was thus rejected that one or some messages of the seven have more significance than the others – rather, the meaning of the pericope unfolds through examining the contributions of all of the seven messages 4) there is a marked presence of the apocalyptic, prophetic, letter and imperial edict genres in both the pericope and in the overall book; these serve to root the meaning in the present and practical and to offer encouragement to the obedient that God is the true King with controls both the present and the age to come 5) Jesus addresses most of his communications in the messages using the second person singular; the context of earthly details indicates that the human members of the congregation are also included in the address to the angel and that therefore Jesus views the congregation as a body of one.

In the next chapter, the significance of the findings from this chapter is related to the primary research question, namely “ In what ways might the Messiah expect a corporate response from each body of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3?” As well, the findings of chapter II and III, which respectively presented the literature review and the study of context, are discussed in light of the primary research question. Following this, the significance of conclusions of this thesis for the contemporary evangelical church, is presented.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusion**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter brought forward the collection of contributions from aspects previously determined in chapters II, III and IV namely, the literature review, the study of the pericope's context and the study of the pericope's meaning. Research in these three areas sought to satisfy the secondary research objectives of 1) what other scholars have discovered and written about regarding the presence and application of any corporate nature found in target pericope 2) what the message of the pericope contains through the examination of its context 3) what the meaning of the message is through the avenue of preliminary analysis, literary analysis and verbal analysis.

The importance of performing the literature review was to establish a foundation of scholarly research upon which to build this study. The examination of context was important to establish the message of the target pericope in the greater work of the Book of Revelation. The examination of meaning was important to narrow the focus of research to test whether the messages of context were being directed to individuals or rather to a corporate congregational body. In this chapter, the presentation of the contributions of chapters II, III and IV are followed by a summary of findings. These findings are related to whether the study solved the primary research question, namely the ways the Messiah expects corporate responses from each body of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3.

A significant outcome of this study was how its findings relate to contemporary congregations. To undertake this, a discussion was offered regarding corporate and individualistic filters. This helped to establish the perspective needed to assimilate the tabled information that follows. This table



summarizes the communications in the pericope where Jesus specifically uses the second person singular form in address. After the tabled information, a selection of New and Old Testament references was presented to illustrate that corporate action is not a rare theme of Scripture. There was also included a presentation of one method of how to approach the application of this study's findings in a contemporary local church setting. An overall thesis conclusion was also offered. This was then followed by a brief presentation of two perceived opportunities for beneficial and related studies.

## **5.2 Contributions from chapter II - Review of literature**

The research presented in chapter II of this study sought to answer the secondary research question of whether other scholarly works acknowledge a corporate nature to Revelation 2:1-3:22. It was discovered that sixteen scholars reviewed do see a corporate aspect to Jesus' words. Their positions were identified and presented. Each scholar approached this aspect from a slightly different angle. A sampling of their positions is listed here to illustrate the various aspects of corporate nature acknowledged in the pericope: a local church should be viewed as a community not as a collection of individuals, when the word *ekklesia* is used in the Apocalypse it describes a local body of believers, the local church body is somehow connected to and responsible for its surrounding community, scriptural prophecy is given to a community rather than to an isolated individual, the seven letters are addressed to the churches as a whole and each body is a singular spiritual entity, within most of the letters there are calls for the repentance of the whole local church, churches bear a collective responsibility for the health of their corporate body, corporate perseverance is clearly present in the letters, by the presence of Christ's listing of love – faith – deeds - and service in the letters it indicates that bodies are to act together in engaging in these, a church is not only an earthly body but it is also somehow connected to heaven through its angel, and godly one-mindedness is critical for a congregation.

Here stated is the primary thesis research question: “In what ways might the Messiah expect corporate responses from each body of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3?” In response to this question, the findings of the literature review indicated that the sixteen scholarly works examined do present positions on Revelation chapters 2 and 3 that generally and specifically acknowledge that a local church is a singular body of believers; Jesus is dealing with them on that basis. It can therefore be clearly stated that some scholars recognize that the Messiah addresses a congregation as a singular community. The implication follows that a corporate response is expected.

### **5.3 Contributions from chapter III – Context of the seven letters**

Chapter III of this study presented research that sought to meet the secondary research objective by determining the message of the pericope. Of primary importance was to determine what Jesus was saying to the churches. Three different contexts were examined in order to make that determination. The study of section context revealed that the Book of Revelation was not a random collection of documents or visions but rather it is one having a logical flow of information. All sections were found to be inter-connected with shared themes and allusions. The study of the book context revealed that the overall message of the book is about what it means to worship God and what it means to overcome as a follower of Jesus. The book was addressed to seven churches in the province of Asia and these seven churches represent all churches everywhere. These churches were to take to heart what was to be read to them. Through John they were offered a “behind the scenes” look into what was happening then and what was about to happen: both in heaven and on earth. This “behind the scenes” glimpse was to bolster their faith in their present reality and to offer them encouragement of the ultimate victory of the Lamb.

Through the study of the immediate context of the pericope, it was discovered that the culture of Asia Minor at the approximate time of writing of the Apocalypse was largely about Roman imperialism that called for gratitude and

loyalty: subject people could enjoy prosperity and security through cooperation with Rome. Rome positioned itself in provincial and civic cultures as a means of celebrating the so-called divinely appointed rule of Caesar. The extent of persecution, for refusing to participate in imperial worship, cannot be determined from the text of Revelation however; the titles used for Jesus appear to be in direct contrast to the claims of the Roman Emperors. There were also trade guild expectations and a greater and greater disconnection of the Christian churches from an exempt Jewish population. Christians may not have been actively hunted down, but they were accused and executed if accusations were brought against them for their failures to participate in worshipping the Emperor or failing to pay homage to the trade guild deity.

The study of immediate context also determined specific things that were said to each of the seven churches: words of encouragement to persevere in faithfulness, words of rebuke, calls to repent and words of promise. Using authoritative titles, detailed information about the characteristics of each church and physical or historical characteristics of each city, Christ called for a transformation of the churches to become, or to persevere as, faithful witnesses of him. Even in the cultural atmosphere of the adversarial dynamics with the Jews, the false teachings of so-called apostles or prophets, the imperial cult expectations of citizens, or the immoral trade guild practices, Christ expected his followers to be faithful witnesses. He expected this even to the point of death. As encouragement, Jesus offered more than fifteen promises to those who would be victorious. The themes of the letters clearly establish repentance, faithfulness, perseverance and service as the expected responses.

These findings of section, book and immediate context contributed to this study in that they detailed the specific things Jesus said to the churches; they provided the umbrella under which any final conclusions of this thesis fall. The primary research question asks: "In what ways might the Messiah expect corporate responses from each body of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3?" The results of this study of context, as evidenced by the inter-connected

themes and allusions throughout the book, indicate that Jesus expects a response of things such as: faith, love, service, repentance, perseverance, discernment, endurance and zealous witnessing. However, in relation to the primary research question, the study of context did not specifically uncover a differentiation whether the response expected was to be by the collection of individuals who made up the church or by the whole congregational body acting as one. That differentiation was determined by the contributions from chapter IV.

#### **5.4 Contributions from chapter IV – Meaning of the seven letters**

The focus of chapter IV was to answer the secondary research objective that sought to refine the understanding of the meaning of the pericope. To accomplish that, a preliminary analysis, a literary analysis and a verbal analysis were undertaken. These analyses produced a number of findings. The first finding determined that textual variants or translation differences of the target pericope were minor in nature and do not exert significant effect on the pericope's interpretation.

The second finding determined that the strong and repeated internal structure served as a form of an "easy to hear/understand" checklist with regard to a church's accountability. Christ started each letter with self-identification and ended each letter with hope and exhortation. In-between these were various commendations, condemnations and imperatives; the details of each were dependent on the situation of the local church. The repeated internal structure assists the hearer/reader in the comparison of one church's performance with another; this would be of significance since all the congregations were reading each other's mail. Overall, the repeated internal structure offers the sense that Jesus is communicating the results of a mid-term audit rather than a final judgment. There is a sense of hope that with repentance or perseverance, the addressees could be victorious.

The third finding was the absence of a consistent external structure, or specific ordering of the seven messages. This led to a rejection, by this writer, of

any pairings or chiasm that might weight the significance or value of one message over the others. Rather, the meaning of the pericope is seen to unfold through examining the contributions of all of the seven messages.

The fourth finding was that there is a marked presence of the apocalyptic, prophetic, letter and imperial edict genres in both the pericope and in the overall book. These serve to root the meaning in the present and practical and to offer encouragement to the obedient follower that God is the true King who controls both the present and the age to come.

The last finding from the study of meaning in chapter IV was the result of a verbal analysis of the pericope's pronouns. It yielded that Jesus addressed much of each letter in the second person singular. It could be argued that Jesus was simply addressing the church's angel and connecting heaven with each local congregation. It is accepted that each local congregation has some direct connection to heaven, but the context and content of the letters points to more than simply relating to angels. The pericope is clearly about earthly action and earthly character. It is therefore not just the angel who is being addressed – or being commended or being condemned -- the local congregation is definitely being included as a recipient when Jesus addresses the church. Together an angel and the membership form the “oneness” of a local church. For the majority of the seven messages Jesus chose to address the recipients with this singular form of “you”. There are therefore significant parts of the messages where he is clearly addressing a body of one.

The primary research question is here posed again: “In what ways might the Messiah expect corporate responses from each body of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3?” The findings of chapter IV offer answers to this primary research question by pointing specifically to those communications of Jesus that are delivered in the second person singular. Those communications comprise most of the directives of the pericope. Since they are addressed to a body, there is an expectation that the entire body will respond. The specific imperatives,

condemnations and commendations in the pericope, which are directed to a body of one, are listed below in *Table 1*.

### **5.5 Summary of contributions from chapters II, III and IV**

The following statement summarizes what has been discovered in the research of chapters II, III and IV: In light of the contributions and foundation laid by sixteen reviewed scholarly works, and under the umbrella of the context of both the greater work of the Book of Revelation and of the target pericope 2:1-3:22, Jesus communicated to seven corporate church bodies the idea that God is in control of both the present and future. These church bodies were to therefore repent, remain obedient and stay true to Jesus even though facing temptations to succumb to, or tolerate sinful practices. Jesus delivered seven unique and valuable messages to seven local congregations; together the seven represent all churches everywhere. The majority of Christ's communication in 2:1-3:22 is clearly addressed to singular bodies of one. Where this occurs in the messages, the local recipients were to receive the complement of commendations, condemnations, imperatives and exhortations with the expectation of their practical, corporate, and obedient response to them. These responses are detailed in the seven letters as relating to and including: faith, love, works, repentance, perseverance, discernment, endurance and zealous witnessing.

To state examples of the above list more definitively in accordance with the findings of chapters II, III and IV, Jesus expects: corporate repentance, corporate faithfulness, corporate perseverance and corporate works. Jesus is not simply calling each member of each local body to respond, he is clearly calling them to respond together as a unified congregation. The body of scholarly works reviewed supports this statement by the foundation laid through the identification of the presence of corporate language in the pericope. As is demonstrated in the upcoming application section, this summary is also supported by themes found in other books of the Bible; bodies of believers are expected to function together, churches are essentially communities, faith is communal, there is an underlying

corporate responsibility for the overall actions of the group and groups have received corporate punishment for the sinful behaviour of the body.

The following questions frame the discussion of the application of these findings: “Do contemporary churches bear this same corporate responsibility as the ancient congregations in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea?” “Is a contemporary local church collectively responsible for the character and life of its corporate faith community?” “What intentionality is being applied to growing in Christ as a body of one, serving community as a body of one, standing against false teaching as a body of one and repenting as a body of one?” The sections that follow in this chapter present the application of this study’s critical finding.

## **5.6 Application of findings to contemporary congregations**

### **5.6.1 Introduction**

This portion of the chapter now focuses on the application of the study’s findings. These findings are critical for the healthy, godly life of contemporary congregations. In Revelation 2:1-3:22 is found the only place in the Bible where Jesus himself directly reveals specific and valuable information of heaven’s divine perspective of congregations. Thus, the application of the truths found in this pericope is invaluable to a contemporary congregation. Although there are condemnations contained within the pericope, Jesus’ information is not offered in a sense of final judgment. Rather, a “mid-term audit” is more in view. Revelation 3:19 expresses it in this way: “Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent” (NIV). From this verse it is clear that it is not Jesus’ desire to remove the church’s lampstand; rather, it is his desire that the congregation move forward from this point – in a good, repentant and godly direction. Moving forward on a journey with Christ is to become more and more Christ like. Quanstrom notes that this is not an individual endeavour; it is a communal

responsibility. Without this communal application, growth is impossible (2011:114).

To understand the application of the study's findings, firstly a presentation was undertaken regarding corporate and individualistic filters. This helped to establish the perspective needed to assimilate the tabled information that follows. The table summarizes the information in the pericope where Jesus specifically used the second person singular form in address; where Jesus addresses a body in such a manner there is the expectation of a corporate response. After the tabled information, a selection of New and Old Testament references was placed to illustrate that corporate action is not a rare theme of Scripture. This sub-section also included the presentation of one method of approaching the application of this study's findings in a contemporary local church. The application sub-section was then summarized.

### **5.6.2 Corporate filters vs. Individualistic filters**

Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard's offer a statement that is sobering: "...individualism so pervades our thinking that even in the church we encounter interpretations that focus on individuals and never think about testing whether the text may actually have more corporate intentions" (1993:15). If readers of 2:1-3:22 only view the information in the pericope through an individualistic filter, a serious aspect of the seven messages will be overlooked. Not all world cultures can be described as having individualistic filters. Contrary to a foundation of individualism, life in some places is founded on community: there are very strong communal connections, the community lives by maxims such as "it takes a village to raise a child", people come to faith as a community, people practice communal accountability and people problem-solve by communal consensus rather than democratic voting.

This writer's experience in West Africa points to a general biblical interpretation process there that asks the application question, "how do these verses affect us?" In contrast, the contemporary Western cultural perspective



seems far different and very much centred on individualism. The church is often viewed as nonessential to the individual relationship with Jesus Christ (Quanstrom 2011:121). To this writer, a Western individualistic perspective often asks the question “how do these verses affect me?” In some instances this would not be an incorrect approach, but if Jesus intended a corporate application in much of Revelation 2:1-3:22, then much of the value of the communication would be overlooked because of this individualistic filter. The individual is not the pivot of change; rather, the pivot of change is the believing community as a body (Yoder 2001:76). Before attempting to interpret a portion of Scripture, it is therefore important to consider the cultural filter through which it is being examined. As was discovered, the grammatical wording of much of the target pericope demands a corporate filter.

### **5.6.3 Specific corporate communications with “*sou*”**

Extracting from the pericope the pertinent corporate communications of imperatives, commendations, condemnations and actions not only revealed the divine perspective for the seven recipient churches but by extension there is some measure of similar application for all churches down through time. Where Jesus utilized the singular transliterated Greek word “*sou*” for “you” in his communication to the seven churches, it is the finding of this study that this implies that whatever is being communicated is being communicated to a body and therefore the response is expected to be corporate. Presented in *Table 1* below are the corporate words Jesus spoke to the churches of Asia Minor using “*sou*”. They need to be intentionally read with a corporate filter rather than an individualistic one.

*Table 1: Jesus' communications utilizing the second person singular "sou"*

<b>Imperatives to:</b>	<b>Commendations for:</b>	<b>Condemnations for:</b>	<b>Jesus' Responses:</b>
Repent	Deeds	Forsaking the love you had at first	I will come and remove your lampstand
Do the things you did at first	Hard work	Tolerating the teaching of Balaam	I will give you life as your crown
Fear not	Perseverance	Tolerating the teaching of the Nicolaitans	I will come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth
Be faithful even to the point of death	Not tolerating wicked people	Tolerating the teaching of Jezebel	I will come like a thief and you will not know at what time I will come to you
Wake-up	Testing the claims of the apostles	I know your deeds (evil or lack thereof)	I will make those of the synagogue of Satan fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you
Strengthen what remains	Enduring hardships	You are dead	I will keep you from the hour of trial
Remember what you have received and hold it fast	Not growing weary	Your deeds are unfinished in the sight of my God	I am about to spit you out of my mouth

<b>Imperatives</b>	<b>Commendations</b>	<b>Condemnations</b>	<b>Jesus' actions</b>
Hold on to what you have	Hating the practices of the Nicolaitans	You are neither hot nor cold	
Buy gold refined in the fire	Enduring through afflictions	You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked	
	Enduring through poverty		
	Remaining true to Jesus' name		
	Not renouncing faith in Jesus		
	Love		
	Faith		
	Service		
	Doing more now than at first		
	Keeping Jesus' word		
	Not denying Jesus' name		
	Patient endurance		

Each church down through history can glean lessons and directives from this table listing from Revelation. Although circumstances vary from era and church, there is a divine call nested within 2:1-3:22 to pay close attention to the responsibility a congregation has for its life and character. This study discovered that the corporate nature has been intentionally placed therein. Jesus speaks to the congregation as a whole, expects a corporate response and places collective responsibility on the local body's shoulders. With a nod of acknowledgement to African brothers and sisters, the specific application questions must arise in the form of: How does this affect us? How is this table information to be applied to

our body? How can principles therein be incorporated in the life of contemporary congregations? Can a congregation repent together? How does a congregation stand or persevere together? In what ways might a congregation serve together? The specific answers to most of these questions require specific responses tailored to the local context of each contemporary congregation. Other answers are more general in nature. For example, a corporate stance against the generally rampant and false 'prosperity gospel' teaching across West Africa would certainly involve a local corporate conversation involving the whole congregational body examining together what the prosperity gospel claims, what aspects of it are contrary to Scripture and harmful to faithful communities, as well as a discussion of ways in which the whole body of believers can test its claims and stand against it. Part of the answers to these questions can also come from information found in other Scriptural passages.

#### **5.6.4 Contributions from other Scripture verses**

Some of the previous sub-section's application questions receive guidance from other Scripture verses outside of the Book of Revelation. For example, Paul speaks to the Philippian church in 2:1-4 of pursuing unity of spirit and purpose. Galatians 5:13-14 teaches about believers loving each other and serving each other. Ephesians 4:11-13 indicates different roles of the members within the unity of the body and 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27 indicates that the body is a unit even though it is made up of many parts. 1 Peter 4:10-12 instructs those of a body to use their gifts to serve one another. Acts 2:42-47 contains information that serves as an example of a healthy, serving, growing, sharing and seeking corporate body. Jeremiah 18:7-8 talks about nations repenting and Jonah 3:5 illustrates that the entire city of Nineveh participated in corporate repentance. In Ezekiel 34:4 is found the directive to strengthen the weak among the body. The corporate singing in heaven is described to be heard as one singular voice (Nakhro 2001:174) and can be seen in Revelation 5:12, 7:10 and 19:1. These scripture references offer guidance to corporate response. They demonstrate that it is not an uncommon biblical theme that followers of Christ are

to gather with others to encourage one another, employ their special gifts for the benefit of the body, stand together, worship together, love each other and serve each other.

Not only does the Bible encourage the positives of living out faith in community, the lessons for application from Revelation 2:1-3:22 seem to go beyond that. Before God, a congregation also bears responsibility together for its character and actions. The beginning sentence of the Book of Revelation indicates that something concealed is going to be revealed (Noe 2006:785). There are realities to be unmasked; the readers/hearers are about to receive a completely different perspective from their own: a divine perspective. Jesus' "mid-term audit" is part of what is being revealed in the book. Jesus has intimate knowledge and concern for his bodies of believers. He desires that they move forward as victorious communities. With the seven stars in his right hand, Christ symbolically shows that as Lord of the whole church he has the authority to speak (Fennell 2005:22-23). So when Jesus tells the church in Ephesus that he will come and remove their lampstand if they do not do the loving things they did at first, this is a serious corporate charge. When he expresses his disfavour with the congregation at Thyatira because they together have tolerated Jezebel and her teaching, the way it is written points to the whole congregation as bearing the responsibility.

There are other instances in Scripture where corporate responsibility is expected and corporate punishment is expressed. The exile of Israel to Assyria and Babylon is a macro example. The situation with Achan and his family in Joshua chapter 7 also demonstrates this. In light of the instances and lessons of expected corporate responsibility from the target pericope and from other places in Scripture, it can be said that not only do we need each other, but also that together we must apply the directive of Revelation 1:3 to "take to heart" the lessons since we bear the responsibility for the character and actions of our local congregation.

### **5.6.5 A practical method of corporate application**

Jesus' desire for the Asia Minor congregations was clearly for their victory over all the challenging things of their time; they were to live out the gospel in a hostile world (Jeske 1995:186). There were different challenges experienced by different churches; not all churches were marginalized or victimized by the Roman Empire. Some were living a comfortable existence as participants in its economic and cultural systems (O'Day 2005:251). To penetrate the fog, Jesus' words are strong. He is communicating the divine perspective and he expects the recipients to pay close attention; that is the main point of the "he who has ears" saying at the end of each letter (Beale 2006:61). It was all to be taken seriously. Since Jesus is speaking to the representative seven of all churches of all time, contemporary congregations must therefore also take the directives and application seriously.

What approach can a local congregation take to seriously apply the corporate directives found in Revelation 2:1-3:22? One practical method to determine what Jesus might be calling a contemporary congregation to, is by the practice of seeking the mind of Christ together. John 16:8-15 demonstrates that the Holy Spirit's role is to guide a follower or a body in truth. The Quakers, for instance, understand that the Spirit of Christ is present in all members in order to shape and guide the local church. As a congregation body, they practice seeking consensus via unscripted openness and by hearing all members. They intentionally listen for what the Spirit may be speaking through each other (Yoder 2001:68). If it is recognized that the Spirit speaks to and through everyone, then applications are sought through listening to what the Spirit is saying to members of the body. As Jesus is always and everywhere the same, this procedure of listening to what he is saying through the members creates unity. Consensus is arrived at without manipulation. Yoder notes that seeking unity and consensus ensures that a majority does not overwhelm or overrun a minority (2001:70). Pursuing an open corporate conversation, that together seeks the mind of the Holy Spirit, is then one practical method of examining and determining the

specific application of any repentance, faithfulness, perseverance or works that a body of believers may sense Christ calling them to.

#### **5.6.6 Summary – Application to contemporary churches**

This chapter has sought to bring forth aspects of applying the findings of this study in a contemporary local church setting. Firstly, a caution was presented regarding the cultural filters through which readers/hearers might view the target pericope. Most of Revelation 2:1-3:22 was addressed with the second person singular “*sou*” therefore, recipients were to receive it and ask “what does this mean to us?” “How can we apply it?” .... Rather than “what does this mean to me?” “How can I apply it?” Also in this chapter a table was presented with all the imperatives, commendations, condemnations and actions of Jesus from the pericope; only the directives where Jesus utilized “*sou*” were included in the table of information. Jesus was calling the congregations to corporately apply these imperatives: repent, fear not, hold fast, wake-up, do the things you did at first etc. Similarly he commended bodies for their corporate expressions of love, faith, service, testing the claims of so-called apostles, endurance and perseverance. He condemned the congregation bodies for things like their corporate toleration of false teaching, their lack of corporate deeds and for corporately forsaking their first love. Not every specific directive to the seven churches of Asia Minor will be applicable to every contemporary local church. However, the principles will apply across the eras; followers are to remain faithful to Jesus and are to respond together as they grow as victorious communities of Christ.

Also in this section, some references from Scripture, outside of the Book of Revelation, were presented. These can guide a local congregation with wisdom as examples in applying such things as repenting together, or serving together. The application contribution from these other portions of Scripture is clear; we need each other and we bear a corporate responsibility together. A method of intentionally listening together in open conversation for what the Spirit may be speaking through each member of the body was presented as a practical

way a contemporary congregation can together apply the findings of this study. The expectation is that congregational bodies will apply the lessons of Revelation 2:1-3:22 as the Spirit reveals them to the attentive gathered congregation.

## **5.7 Thesis Conclusion**

The title of this thesis was framed as a combination of a question and a statement: Corporate responsibility towards God? - An examination of the seven letters to Asia Minor in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. This study sought to examine the seven letters to Asia Minor in Revelation chapter 2 and 3 and to test them for corporate intentions. Through a review of literature, an examination of context and an analysis of meaning, this study has come to the point where it answers the question posed in the thesis title that is expanded here: Did the seven local congregations in Asia Minor have a corporate responsibility towards God? The answer to the question is “yes” – each of the seven local churches addressed in the target pericope bore collective responsibility before God for the character, stance and actions of their local body of one. This confirms the hypothesis statement which posits: “The Messiah views and addresses the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 as seven unified local bodies, expecting corporate repentance, corporate faithfulness, corporate perseverance and corporate works”. Jesus speaks to a body of one and expects a corporate response. Other scholarly works support this and Scriptural themes from other books of the Bible also support this.

The overall message of the pericope and the Book of Revelation is to encourage victorious communities of faith. A victorious community must have oneness of spirit and intent – and be on a good and godly path like the unified churches of Smyrna or Philadelphia, not divided and splintered as those in Pergamum, Thyatira or Sardis. Jesus expected godly corporate response even during the challenging times when the seven churches of Asia Minor faced the cultural atmosphere of the adversarial dynamics with the Jews, the false teachings of so-called apostles or prophets, the ungodly imperial cult duties of



citizens, or the immoral trade guild practices. Through it all, Jesus expected his followers of Asia Minor to be one in faith, love, perseverance, service, repentance, discernment and zealousness. Jesus viewed and addressed the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 as seven unified local bodies. He expected a corporate response to his directives and he expects no less from our contemporary congregations. Therefore, does a contemporary local church bear corporate responsibility before God? Yes it does!

### **5.8 Areas of further research**

Research performed to solve the problem statement of this thesis has uncovered two further topics that may be valuable to pursue. The first topic is a comparison of the role of angels with the role of the Holy Spirit as it relates to the life of a local congregation. With Christ addressing the seven messages of 2:1-3:22 to the angel of the church, he is indicating that an angel is connected in some way to the local church body. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 demonstrates that the Holy Spirit is connected to the local body as well. A further examination of this may be helpful to clearly understand the different roles.

The second topic is a study of the connections between earthly action and heaven. Christ connects earth and heaven by addressing the seven churches through their seven angels. In Scripture there are other earthly activities that seem to directly connect with heavenly ones. The sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism are two prominent examples. The binding and loosing exhortation from Matthew 18:18 is another example. A study of the verses in Scripture that shed more light on the connections between other earthly activities that affect heaven, may be helpful.

## Chapter VI

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