

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study in particular sought to investigate, from one particular angle, why there is an apparent failure on the side of Zulu people to embrace the gospel wholeheartedly, and to discover what is involved in reading in a Zulu context an ancient document which was conceptualised and reached concretisation in another cultural environment, with the view to pointing out hermeneutical issues that are raised by this kind of venture. Our contention as stated in this dissertation is that in order to understand any document one has to take a hermeneutical trip to the world or context within which a document such as 1 John, arose. Biblical writers were also persons who belonged to particular contexts and wrote to address issues pertinent to their context.

In order to provide the necessary background to our reading we started by first conducting a discourse analysis of 1 John in order to discover the main themes and the basic framework within which the author's thought and argumentation operated. We also offered brief comments on how the text hangs together. In order to put this research into perspective, we moved on to reading 1 John using insights gleaned from Berger and Luckmann's theory of the symbolic universe. Our examination of 1 John revealed that he author employed conventional symbols taken from familial language to express his understanding of the gospel and the new reality within which his community found itself.

The abundance of symbolic language in 1 John, made it necessary to examine some of the symbols and why the author found them to be suitable vehicles

for conveying his thoughts. Familial symbols, which dominate in 1 John include the following: father, son, children, fellowship, love, sin, forgiveness, and mediation.

We noted also that it is against the familial background that 1 John should be understood. As Shorter pointed out symbolic language is the only way of expressing the divine reality. We became aware also of how the author had imbued with meaning some of the above symbols for God, and applied them metaphorically, as well as express the new reality obtaining as a result of the believer's relationship with God.

The author represented God as Father; Jesus as Son and believers as children of God. The new relationship that exists is expressed in terms of fellowship; being born of God, and being children of God. Being members of the family of God has profound ethical implications, that is, it brings discontinuity to the believer's inclination to committing sin, it results in obedience to God's commands especially the command to love and in imitating Christ, that is, walking as He did (1 Jn 2:6).

Chapter five covered in a broad way a number of aspects of African culture. This was necessary in order to provide the necessary background for our discussion in chapter seven, where a synthesis of some aspects covered in 1 John, in chapter five and the responses from interviews is done.

For the purpose of this dissertation and in order to deal with people's present day perceptions, it became necessary to conduct interviews. A qualitative method was employed for that purpose. People were interviewed using the focus group interview method. Their responses were written in Zulu and later

translated into English and have been included as annexure three. The sample constituting focus groups was carefully brought together so that it is represented of a wide spectrum of Zulu people in Empangeni. The participation of more people than the number envisaged was viewed as a bonus factor. We are therefore confident that the results and views of the participants are representative of a wider spectrum and could therefore be generalised.

In formulating questions, we were directed by the picture that emerged from our reading of 1 John especially family language. In order to place 'reading' in context, we explored similar symbols within Zulu cosmology as those found in 1 John. The research confirmed the fact that community of which the family is but a microcosm, is still central in Zulu society.

Personhood is still defined in terms of who your parents are and what your family's standing in the community is. The comparison we drew with regard to symbolism in 1 John and Zulu society revealed that some correlation existed in a number of areas as well as differences. The symbols that are referred to here are those that get triggered as the reader encounters the text and a dialectical process of interaction gets underway.

Essentially we sought the following through focus groups:

- 1) To discover current understanding of the various themes and symbols we put forward for discussion.
- 2) To identify differences as well as similarities between the world of 1 John and that of the Zulu people, and
- 3) to determine whether any measure of congruency exists between the two worlds.

In this dissertation we also wanted to investigate the influence of symbolic universes on a people's perception of all reality around them and the way they interpret anything conceptualised outside their universe. Our contention is that understanding of the dynamics of a people's symbolic world enables one to discover whether any measure of congruency exists with regard to symbols within both worlds. Establishment of such congruency enhances the construction of a hermeneutical bridge leading to greater interaction of cultural scripts of each with the other and a rich and informed reading of 1 John within the Zulu context. Any attempt to read a document from the context of one cultural group and milieu to another context that does not seek to understand both contexts will lead to an arbitrary reading of scripture and the attribution of meanings contrary to what the text seeks to convey.

Our hypothesis was that there exists a measure of congruency between the worlds of 1 John and Zulu people, which if properly identified, investigated and exploited could enhance a smooth construction of a hermeneutical bridge of understanding of 1 John's message within a Zulu context. This study has

been able to confirm our hypothesis that there exists a measure of congruency between 1 John and the world of Zulu people, which if properly identified and exploited could enhance a smooth construction of a hermeneutical bridge of understanding.

Our investigation revealed that some of the conventional symbols, which closely correlate those in 1 John have already been identified but we believe that there is a need for serious theological discussion regarding their suitability to represent biblical symbols and concepts obtaining in 1 John. As Verry (1982:3) asserts, for symbols to work it is necessary for the society which will use them to accept a set of rules of meaning. A discussion of this nature should engage not only those with theological skills at their disposal but also rich information bearers from within Zulu society. In fact a quest for meaningful symbols that appropriately correlate biblical symbols encapsulated in the text is deemed a matter of urgency.

There is also a need, however, to admit that there is a bankruptcy and handicap weighing upon the stock of images and symbolical expressions we use in expressing the divine reality. With regard to divine reality, there is always an element of mystery surrounding the symbol, an opacity, a surplus of meaning, an enigma, which no interpretation should attempt to eradicate (Wright 1988:139-140). In most cases conventional symbols lack the mysteriousness that surrounds the divine reality.

Conventional symbols belong to the historical realm and enable to explain the divine in existential terms. The attempt to explain the divine in terms of conventional symbols is an old one. Conventional symbols are a necessity on

the existential level but once they are employed to define transcendent reality they are imbued with new meaning. For instance with the rise of dogma in the early church, concrete and existentially significant symbols tended to be edged out in favour of an abstract vocabulary of 'substance' and 'nature' and the like (Macquarrie 1977:185), a vocabulary which though useful tended to obscure and complicate what was being explained.

All conventional symbols that have been tried in this study to represent God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, that is, Father (God); the Black Messiah, the Elder Brother, and the Ancestor (Jesus); and ancestral spirit (Holy Spirit), do express something of the reality we seek to represent. However, as it has been admitted above, language (whether symbolic or otherwise) is inherently inadequate and religious truth ultimately, if not immediately, transcends human words (Sanneh 1993:143).

Having said this we would like to emphasise that there are no other symbols available at present that best represent the biblical symbols as found in 1 John than these symbols, inadequate as they may be. Until a new indigenous terminology comes into being, these symbols will remain useful vehicles for communicating the Gospel for generation to come. This raises a very serious hermeneutical dilemma: Are we suggesting that symbols should uncritically be employed because of lack of symbolic stock from which to draw? Definitely not! What we are calling for here is a hermeneutic of dialogue in the broadest sense (Combrink and Muller 1991:45). In order for our reading venture to be truly incarnated and yield relevant result, serious dialogue is the only possible way forward. However a differentiation has to be made here regarding the symbol and what it stands for. One is not interested so much in the symbol per se and what it stands for but in its communicative significance,

that is, is the symbol able to convey the basic meaning of divine reality, which we seek to communicate? Our contention is that if the symbols have the capacity to do that, they should be used. This should not be done arbitrarily, without due and critical discussion. Clarity as to what is being conveyed through the symbol can only enhance our reading venture rather than hinder it.

Another area, which merited comment in this thesis, concerns the identity of the reader. Who does the reading becomes an important hermeneutical question in the context of this dissertation. We believe we have been able to point out the advantages and disadvantages regarding each of the three kinds of readers identified and how each reader could enrich the process. The disadvantages with regard to each reader are very serious. If each reader fails to exercise his/her role in an objective way, he/she could compromise the whole process. Criticalness should undergird the whole process, without it we are prone to sacrificing the wealth of centuries biblical scholarship. Understanding a people's language, especially the language of the recipients is a hermeneutical requirement for reading in a different context. No one can claim to have communicated sufficiently if one is not sure whether people have understood one's message.

This study has also been able to confirm that a sufficient understanding of a people's symbolic universe, including their language as well as symbols that appropriately correlate with biblical ones enables one to feel that he/she has the inside of that particular world. It also gives one the confidence to know that he/she has done sufficiently to make his/her communication easily accessible.

This study has also affirmed our belief that especially in a country like South Africa, it is possible to reactivate and reinforce biblical principles that will have a strong bearing on the country's morality. Each individual has to be understood in terms of the world from which each comes. The influence of all our great great great mothers and fathers is with us and continues to exert pressure on us without our knowing it.

## **8.1 RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study demonstrated that congruency of some kind exists between the various symbols found in both the world of 1 John and the Zulu world. As we explored some of the symbols, problems began to surface with regard to their appropriateness in representing or encapsulating the meaning inherent in biblical symbols. Also the fact that automatic transfer of meaning of symbols across the cultural divide is impossible since each culture attaches to each symbol meanings pregnant of their whole understanding of reality. Hence we believe further comprehensive research or even a theological symposium to investigate this area in depth is necessary.

Further study on the paradigm shift that has taken place among young Zulu women and men regarding the roles at home and in society, is necessary, that is, how does their understanding of democracy impacts on the Zulu cultural context as well as on their understanding of the bible and what are the hermeneutical issues raised by this emerging self discovery.