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# Reading Galatians 3:28 from a congregational perspective

## ABSTRACT

*How would reading a biblical text (Gal. 3:28) be interpreted from a congregational perspective? First, the article uses a model of African hermeneutics to develop a more contextual reading of a text. Secondly, it discusses the utilisation of congregational hermeneutics in reading a text. This is followed by an empirical reflection to understand the role of reading the biblical text in a congregation. The article identifies themes that may assist in applying the Galatians 3:28 text. African hermeneutics, as a hermeneutical model, assists in having a more contextual reading of a text within an African context. The value of congregational hermeneutics involves the congregation and its members reading the text together. In reading Galatians 3:28 as an “open” text, different congregations may discover the meaning and application of this text for their specific context. It challenges congregations to have a more inclusive identity.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I am a practical theology theologian focusing on the study of congregations and their role and ministry as communities of faith. Congregations form their identity in their relationship with the Triune God, their understanding of tradition, and their reading of the biblical text. Congregational studies need to reflect on the relationship with biblical studies as a subdiscipline of practical theology. It is thus important for practical theology and congregational studies to enquire about the relationship between practical theology and biblical studies. Ward (2017:121-123) discusses



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the relationship between biblical studies, focusing on the biblical text and practical theology, using the Bible as a key reference point for a normative voice in the current situation. The biblical text cannot be confined to the historical meaning of the text. However, the interpretation also needs to

foreground the idea that the primary purpose of the Scripture is to inform and generate theological perspectives for the Christian community in the present (Ward 2017:122).

The question of the present-day role of the biblical text is important for both practical theology and biblical studies and opens a meaningful conversation between the two disciplines.

Hermeneutics may broadly be described as the science and art of interpretation. Rogers (2016:e-source) emphasises the following aspects: the critical role of the Holy Spirit in the process of interpretation, although it may differ from other Christian traditions; hermeneutics is not the same as exegesis, but it reflects more on how we interpret the Bible; it is not only a rational process, but also an art of innovation and imagination. It is a formal and informal way of learning from Scripture.

The biblical text, or Scripture, plays what Ballard (2012:163) calls an elusive role in practical theology. The authority of the Bible is interpreted in different ways in the Christian tradition. In Catholicism, the Bible is a fundamental witness interpreted through the teaching authority of the church, and Protestantism refers to the slogan *sola Scriptura*. The fragmentation of academic and practical theology into different disciplines, methodologies, and literature further contributed to a much more nuanced way of using a biblical text and sometimes even a gap between biblical studies and practical theology. The role of a hermeneutical process emphasised the distance between the ancient world and the current context and, in practical theology, pointed towards the use and interpretation of the text with the current context. The developments in practical theology lead to “more diverse and diffuse understandings of the place and use of the Bible” (Ballard 2012:164).

This article focuses on the congregation and the reading and application of the biblical text. The Bible plays a vital role in forming the Christian community of faith (Kim-Cragg 2022:504). The biblical text is the most prominent in a worship service on a Sunday, especially during the preaching of the text. The biblical text is implied in the discernment process that takes place in the congregation and within the lived religion and spiritual life of the congregation’s membership. The following research question may be formulated: How would the reading of a biblical text (Gal. 3:28) be interpreted from a congregational perspective?

The congregation's Christian identity is formed by the Bible's message, where it is

openly acknowledged and the congregation and individuals place themselves deliberately before God, who is mediated in and through the Bible (Ballard 2012:167).

This may happen using different practices during a worship service (preaching, celebrating the sacraments, and liturgy) or the private devotions and prayers of the members.

Theological reflection as a deliberate process, therefore, aims to enable us to discern the wisdom of God in the scriptures for faithful living in the present (Ballard 2012:169).

Prof. Francois Tolmie made a significant contribution towards the study of Galatians.<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on the interaction between the text and congregation, and I chose to use Galatians 3:28 as an example of the argument I want to pursue in this article. Tolmie (2014a:105) indicated that this verse received the most attention within research on Galatians. Tolmie (2014a, 2014b, 2023b) wrote extensively on the interpretation of Galatians 3:28, and I want to use his contributions as a reference point. The conclusion is that we may read this as an open text and as the critical question of who to include or exclude in the community of faith. This poses a few relevant questions to a community of faith: What are the implications of a self-critical reading of the text? In what way could a congregation be involved in the reading of the text? What are the implications of bringing the congregational members into interaction with the text? Would it suffice to preach a text on a Sunday morning and leave it there?

The article aims to reflect on a more contextual reading of the text from a congregational perspective. The reading of the Galatians text should inform the development of a congregational ministry and its members who listen to the text from their specific context. This would imply that the following three aspects need attention:

- The model of African hermeneutics, as developed by Mburu, is used to develop a more contextual reading of a text. Galatians 3:28 is used as an example to illustrate the different aspects of the model.
- The utilisation of congregational hermeneutics to understand the role of a congregation and its members reading a text. The reader is part of a congregation from a specific context. What happens when the text is read together with other believers?

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1 See Tolmie (2023a, 2023b) and various other articles over the past few decades.

- An empirical reflection to understand the role of the reading of the biblical text in a congregation and identifying themes that may assist in the application of the Galatians 3:28 text. Use an empirical lens to help understand a Biblical text's role in the community of faith.

## 2. AN AFRICAN HERMENEUTICAL MODEL AND READING GALATIANS 3:28

This article focuses on the hermeneutical process from an African perspective. The question is: How are we reading a biblical text from an African context? I want to use the work of Mburu (2019) on African hermeneutics in this regard. She proposes a four-step model as a theoretical and conceptual framework.

This method is interdisciplinary in methodology and recognises the importance of culture and worldview, as well as the theological, literary and historical aspects of the text (Mburu 2021:94).

The model consists of the following five steps.

### 2.1 Parallels with the African context

The interpretation starts with an analysis of parallels between the text and the African context, seeking an understanding of the cultural and theological assumptions of the reader. This step helps understand the biblical text from a familiar position, and in examining the world view and context of the reader, a critical reflection opens to note where the current assumptions do not fit well with the text (Mburu 2019:67). The context of the text and the context of the reader need to engage with one another.

Galatians 3:28: Diversity within the African context is well known, and gender, ethnicity and social class differences are part of the African context. As viewed through an imperial and colonial lens, the history of Africa places differences and inequality on the table. Societies and communities across the continent struggle to build peaceful and cohesive communities. The acceptance or not of a stranger or migrant may illustrate the point. Focusing on South African society may highlight the point even more. In reading the Galatian text, the critical question would, therefore, be: How do we build an inclusive Christian community where strangers are welcome within the community of faith?

## 2.2 The theological context of the text

The theological emphasis of the text provides essential information for the reader to understand. This step is vital from an African perspective because

when we as Africans read the Bible, we tend to look for issues that relate to God and faith and how these affect our everyday lives (Mburu 2019:70).

A theological context is formulated before moving to the other aspects of interpretation.

Galatians 3:28: The text speaks to the faithful relationship of the believers with Christ as their Lord and their relationship between themselves. The verse may propose a new reality among the believers that differs from the social relationships within the Hellenistic-Roman society. Many studies focus on the role of women in the church, but this is not the focus or aim of this article (see Tolmie 2014:108-112; Tolmie 2023b:175-213).

## 2.3 Literary context

The next step is to identify the literary context of the text, because the biblical text is a work of literature. In the analysis of the text,

we need to establish the genre of the passage we are reading, what literary techniques are being used, details of the grammar and syntax of the language being used, and how this passage fits together with the surrounding text (Mburu 2019:73).

The literary context analysis informs and clarifies not only the preliminary interpretations of the previous two steps, but also what will follow in the continuation of the hermeneutical process.

Galatians 3:28: The work of Tolmie may be used for a more comprehensive discussion, but the translation of “it is” (ἐστὶ) could also be better translated as “it is valid/of significance”, meaning that class, gender, and ethnicity are not more of significance in the community of faith (see Tolmie 2014a:106; Tolmie 2023b:175-213).

## 2.4 Historical context

Step four is the analysis of the historical and cultural context of the text. The aim is to uncover the meaning of the text as it was informed and influenced by the social, political, and cultural circumstances in which the text was conceived.

Once we understand what the writer was saying and what his message would have meant to the original readers, we can more accurately interpret the message of the text for our times (Mburu 2019:84).

Galatians 3:28: The verse may be associated with a pre-Pauline baptismal context (Tolmie 2014a:107). The context of the Hellenistic-Roman culture and society is the background for the congregation. However, the context of their faith relationship as Christians with one another and with Christ constitutes another reality (Tolmie 2014a:108). Tolmie (2023a:7) indicates that the congregation of the Galatians “consisted entirely of Gentiles who had prior connections to synagogues”.

## 2.5 The seat: Application

The final step is the application of the text within the present context of the African reader in bringing the four steps together as a process of integration. The biblical text’s meaning is closely related to the understanding of the author(s) of the text and the first readers. “Application refers to the significance of the text for a modern audience.” (Mburu 2019:85). The meaning of a text may be limited. However, the text may have multiple applications within the current context.

Application, therefore, requires that we separate the message from the cultural form in which it is communicated so that we can understand what the text signifies in our modern African contexts (Mburu 2019:86).

The challenge is to reframe the application in such a way that it is relevant and significant for a congregation and its membership living on the African continent.

Galatians 3:28: The following two quotes from Tolmie illustrate the fundamental and significant meaning of this text and indicate a way forward in the application of the text:

[T]his overview has shown that Galatians 3:28 is indeed an ‘open text’. It can be interpreted in diverse and even in opposing ways, depending on the particular perspective from which it is interpreted, the social location of the interpreter, and the interests served by the particular interpretation.

Finally, to my mind, the most important development in the interpretation of the verse is the value added by new interpretative approaches. These include – to mention only a few – constructivism, feminism, intersex readings, queer readings, postcolonial readings,

intersectional approaches, and readings in terms of ethnicity or modern views of equality ... In diverse ways, these approaches have helped us to realise the immense depth of this verse and the importance of approaching it from different perspectives (Tolmie 2014a:121).

The application of the text may be made from different perspectives, and different concepts may be used as an entry point to describe the application of the text. A few will be discussed below to illustrate the point in an attempt to translate the application of the text to the current context.

Slater (2014) uses “freedom” as a concept to explain the implications and possible application of the text. Slater (2014:50) states that Christians have a high stake in defining Christological freedom, and for this reason, the salvation of the human person is understood in terms of freedom. When Paul used the terms “slavery” and “freedom” to address the Galatians, he did so to describe God’s salvation in Jesus, although the institution of slavery itself was of secondary importance in his argument, in this instance. The pattern of God’s action in the history of Israel at the time of the exodus from Egypt was more essential for him. “Christ has set us free for freedom” means that God’s decisive salvation has been accomplished, and a complete change of allegiance has been effected (see Salter 2014). The people of God, including Jews as well as Gentiles, are no longer bound to sin, to the law, and consequently to death because they are, as the followers of Christ, now free in the service of God.

Scott (2021) refers to cosmopolitanism as a way to understand the application of the text and asks about the vision of Paul looking to the world through the lens of Galatians 3:28:

a world in which all merely local attachments and identities are relativised and transcended by the loftier ideal of a single humanity living in harmony with a unified, divinely ordered cosmos (Scott 2021:181).

The concept of “cosmopolitanism” may be used to describe

a complex of practices and ideals that enabled certain individuals not only to cross cultural boundaries but also to establish an enduring normative framework across them (Scott 2021:184).

The understanding in the 1st century A.D. was that cosmopolitan practices should enhance imperial cohesion and elite integration in forming a common culture. However, there was a difference between rhetoric and practice on a local level (see Scott 2021:184-185). Scott (2021:190)

describes Galatians 3:28 as a performative speech-act that refers to a situation in which the speaker intends to create an alternative reality that derives from the speaker's authority. Scott (2021:193) illustrates this with the link with Genesis 1 and concludes:

Gal 3:28a-c implies the results of socio-political performatives, and v.28d constitutes a reiteration of the divine performative through Paul's proclamation of the gospel.

The teleological goal is the formation, in contrast with the political cosmopolitanisms of the day, of a new creation through the salvation of Christ,

the declared unity and equality between all those who are in Christ Jesus stands in tension with the hierarchical world as it is known to exist at present. The new world order is, in part, aspirational, a process that is still underway until its consummation at the Parousia (Scott 2021:199).

In seeking the relevance of the text within the South African context, Van Rensburg and Möller (1998) focus on intergroup relationships as a lens. The pericope (3:26-29) refers to Jew (obedience to the law) and non-Jew (non-obedience to the law) that do not constitute two groups but one according to the gospel (see also Gal. 2:16; 3:16) (Van Rensburg & Möller 1998:70-71). The 1<sup>st</sup>-century society had ascribed roles attached to women and slaves, and prejudice existed between Jews and non-Jews that resulted in ethnocentrism and discrimination in intergroup relationships (Van Rensburg & Möller 1998:80). The conclusion of Galatians 3:28 may have led to a reaction of surprise by the first hearers/listeners of the text. Van Rensburg & Möller (1998:82), therefore, conclude, with reference to the South African context, that the text's message excludes religious chauvinism, discrimination, or a privileged position towards the other person.

Concerning intergroup relationships, Vorster (2019) explores the theological-ethical implications of Galatians 3:28. As a general principle, it could be stated that

the equality of all people is a basic principle that could be derived from what people have in common by their human nature (Vorster 2019:1).

Would it be possible to build a cohesive and equal society, given the current inequalities and difference in society?



Emerging extremist theologies pose a threat to the human rights discourse because of its religious justifications for inequality relating to religion, race, gender, class and the resurgence of patriarchal systems (Vorster 2019:2).

This is also accompanied by a greater focus in the recent context on patriarchy, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Vorster (2019:3) selects Galatians 3:28 as a reference point to argue in favour of the equality of human beings.

The conclusion in Galatians 3:28 can be seen as the foundation of human relationships under the reign of Christ in the present dispensation. The equality of all people in Christ is the heart of all human relationships in the new covenant (Vorster 2019:6).

An important critical question would be if this could be translated into an ethical norm for relationships in the church and congregations.

This equality must be realised among the people of God (church) and must be pursued as a universal principle for all human relationships (Vorster 2019:8).

Vorster's conclusion may be too general to apply to a specific context or situation. Punt (2010:143) uses a post-colonial, queer reading of the text to avoid generalisations

a postcolonial queer reading provides the necessary impetus and [has] the ability to move us beyond the dominance of the reception history of the text and its expectations imposed upon the understanding of this text. ... In short, all interpreters understood Gal 3:28 to be a statement about Christian perfection, resolving differences in unity with Christ. If nothing else, Gal 3:28 was evidently considered to be a text with considerable importance for the social life of (early) Christian communities since its early times (Punt 2010:143).

A post-colonial reading of Galatians 3:28 makes a plea for "unity in Christ" over and above differentiations of race, social status, and gender (David 2018:41). The question is: What binds the Christians together in unity? Their love of God and neighbour, and not a colonial or superior world power (David 2018:43).

The context plays a vital role on different levels in the hermeneutical process. The world of the text is the historical context of the given text. This is clearly illustrated in the discussion earlier. The reader of a text stands with a given context and tradition, also described as the world in

front of the text (see Mburu 2021:87-88). This asks for a critical dialogue between the author, text, and reader. Mburu (2021:88) identifies an essential implication that “the world of the reader cannot be handled uniformly across the globe because cultural contexts are not identical”. Readers read and interpret text using different assumptions and frameworks, be it an individual or within a community. An understanding of the contextual situatedness of readers of texts is, therefore, of critical importance as part of a hermeneutical process. The local faith community plays a significant role:

Today much biblical interpretation in Africa is done by ordinary Christians or church leaders at the ‘grassroots’ level. This is generally seen in worship, prayer, and preaching (Mburu 2021:89).

This leads towards the exploration of congregational hermeneutics.

### 3. CONGREGATIONAL HERMENEUTICS AND THE READING OF A TEXT

What connections are the members of congregations and churches making between their context and the Bible? This approach asks for a broader hermeneutical approach, which is usually the focus of biblical studies and includes a description of what people do with the Bible in a community of faith. Congregational hermeneutics may be defined as

the hermeneutical practices of all using the Bible in churches, whether academically trained or not, and thus emphasises ‘ordinary’ Bible readers (Rogers 2013:490).

The congregational members were part of the first readers and listeners of the text, and they still are, although from a different context.

What happens in the congregation is more than passing the text on from member to member.

The biblical text belongs to the congregation and must, as it were, be passed on from member to member, to be inspected and heard from all angles, until all agree by saying: ‘We have heard God’s voice.’ To preach is not to be a theological dictator, or a winged orator, or a holy ascetic who wants to live outside or above the congregation; it is rather finding concurrence with the congregation around a biblical text (Cilliers 2004:131).

The biblical text is embedded within a discourse in the congregation and, therefore, more than a sermon as a communal activity.

The congregational hermeneutical process is a movement from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the reader, not as a one-way process but as a two-way interaction between two horizons (Rogers 2013:496). The ecology of the congregation and its membership, its culture and tradition, as well as current challenges and struggles are voices speaking alongside the voice of the text and the voice of the congregation as a second horizon. Within a congregation, members should read a text together while reflecting on the understanding and application of the text.

Reading a text together is an essential aspect of congregational hermeneutics. The role and effect of reading a text together in a congregation may be explained and motivated with a few examples. The main focus is not on the worship service but on what happens if a biblical text is read, discussed, and lived within a small group context.

The first example is from a multicultural urban congregation where three membership groups (Afrikaans, Sotho, and Chinese) read Acts 10:1-43 to explore the meaning and application of this text for them and the congregation. This text was selected because

it depicts a moment in the life of the early church where the Jewish believers and Peter were confronted with the reality of the radical change that the gospel of Jesus brings to one's views and understanding of people who are ethnically different from oneself. It confronts the fear, prejudice and conflict that were instilled by the old Jewish way of doing hermeneutics (Mostert 2019:143).

Members from the three groups were asked to read the text in preparation for a small group meeting. The members knew each other, and some contact and friendship existed, but this was their first cross-cultural Bible study experience (Mostert 2019:237). Mostert (2019:264) found, among others, that the members established the text as a biblical norm for multicultural congregations or for mono-cultural congregations to become more inclusive.

For existing multicultural congregations, the normative of Acts 10 provides a source for intercultural Bible reading that has the aim of furthering congregational inclusivity (Mostert 2019:264).

Reading and discussing the text together in a multicultural small group led to an improved understanding of the application of the text for the congregational members. Mostert (2019:260) identifies intercultural Bible reading as a necessary competency for congregations to understand the message and application of Acts 10.

The second example is from the work of Engelbrecht (2020). He used the Emmaus narrative in Luke 20 to explore the understanding and application of the text regarding discipleship in a congregation. The study included two small groups from different congregations. The first group consisted of active Afrikaans-speaking churchgoers in a more affluent suburb, and the second group consisted of active African churchgoers in a township suburb. Luke 24:13-35 was discussed with each group, and they were challenged to embody and live the various markers for discipleship in the text. The two groups met separately after one month to ascertain and measure the shifts in their understanding of discipleship. It was clear that Scripture played an essential role in the self-understanding of discipleship in the first group but that, at the beginning, they

did not have a well-rounded understanding of Scripture at this stage, because they applied it only in their own safe spaces, familiar relationships and contexts. It was removed from their day-to-day realities (Engelbrecht & Schoeman 2021:5).

After a month, as they were “living” the text and creating a space for strangers, it was concluded that

it was now easier to open space for the Scriptures around the table and to be more open to God’s presence. This shift enabled the coresearchers to view hospitality towards strangers as an integral part of discipleship (Engelbrecht & Schoeman 2021:6).

The second group also indicated that the text was an essential foundation for understanding discipleship. They emphasised a relationship with God obtained through knowledge, and in a

revised understanding of discipleship, the emphasis was now even stronger on applying the Bible as part of their daily lifestyle (Engelbrecht & Schoeman 2021:8).

The shift may be explained as a shift from theoretical knowledge to heart knowledge, as described in the Emmaus narrative.

Another shift was noted in terms of applying and embodying the Scripture in the presence of others (as an active deed), instead of merely using the Bible as a static text or a religious manual to ‘obtain theoretical knowledge’. The co-researcher’s understanding thus shifted decisively to an act of followership, one that included being more open towards strangers and non-believers. Thus, also more missional (Engelbrecht & Schoeman 2021:9).

The findings from the two small groups from different congregations from different locations illustrate the importance of “living” and embodying a text and the influence thereof on their understanding and application of the Emmaus narrative.

Luke 24:13-35 clearly extended the co-researchers theological understanding and existing expression of discipleship to a new theological interpretation of ‘lived followership’ (Engelbrecht & Schoeman 2021:10).

West (2014:2) developed the Contextual Bible Study framework that seeks

the inclusion of so-called ‘ordinary’ readers of the Bible, privileging both the non-scholarly dimensions of ordinary readers and the contexts of a particular sector of ordinary readers, the poor and marginalised.

The hermeneutical focus of West’s work

extends the dialogue between socially engaged exegetes and ordinary, socio-economically poor readers to others. At the core of this hermeneutics is an ‘intercultural’ dialogue (West 2014:3).

Reading the text from a particular context is an essential and integral part of the reading process. It is further evident that this framework emphasises liberation and intercultural hermeneutics within the African context. For West, the ordinary reader is marginalised and brings an important voice to the table in reading the text in a pre-critical way (see Akper 2005:4-9). The critical point is that the voice and interpretation of ordinary readers should not be ignored as part of a hermeneutical process within a congregation.

Forster also contributed towards the understanding of the way in which a text is read within different communities of faith. He works with Matthew 18:15-35 as a text that is read by two different groups from different congregations. One group is mostly a Coloured middle-class Christian community, and the other group is a White, Westernised upper middle-class Christian community. The assumption is that the two groups would have a different hermeneutical understanding of forgiveness in reading and interpreting the text because they read the text from a different cultural and individual perspective (Forster 2017:8). Forster (2017:142) focuses on the response of the “reader” of the text as “reading the Bible in the community can be liberating and life-giving in many communities”. Two groups read the text separately and together, and their responses were then analysed (Forster 2017:156-163). In reading and discussing a text

together, the group members experienced a shift in their understanding of the text, and the following primary conclusion was made:

more integral theological understandings of forgiveness were evidenced among the majority of participants in the intercultural Bible reading process which is conducted under the conditions of positive intergroup contact (Forster 2017:216).

The participants valued the hermeneutical process of reading a text together, and they expressed a wish that

they may find further opportunities to read the text together and in so doing come to a deeper and fuller understanding of both the texts under consideration and one another (Forster 2017:218).

This finding underlines the need for congregational members to read texts together as a significant part of a hermeneutical process in the congregation.

#### 4. AN EMPIRICAL REFLECTION ON THE CONGREGATIONAL READING OF A BIBLICAL TEXT

Understanding a congregational hermeneutical process could benefit from an empirical lens. Ballard (2012:170) refers to the relationship between the Bible and empirical research:

Practical Theology has a responsibility to the theological enterprise and to biblical studies, in particular, to inquire into how the Bible is received and regarded in the church and world.

He refers to topics such as the relationship between Scripture and the ordinary reader in private devotion but also in the worship service. What does it mean to read the biblical text in a pluralistic and changing context? Empirical information on the congregational hermeneutics and the application of a text in the congregation may assist in this regard.

Using an analytical lens to look at a congregation, empirical quantitative surveys form an essential part of the analysis. In this instance, the focus will be on the voices of the congregational members. This article will present findings from the 2018 South African National Church Life Survey (SA-NCLS).<sup>2</sup> The data is from the mainline, charismatic/Pentecostal, and Africa Initiated Churches membership.

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2 For a discussion of the methodology of the National Church Life Survey, see Schoeman (2010, 2015, 2020:chapter 8).

The first five tables focus on the involvement and value the congregational members attach to practices in the congregation (for example, their own private devotions, attending worship services, and small groups). The last table focuses on the broader South African context from a more thematic perspective regarding possible themes that relate to the application of a text such as Galatians 3:28.

What is the role of the Bible and personal devotional practices in the life of congregational members? It is clear from Table 1 that most of the respondents (nearly 70%) spent daily time in private devotions. The reading of the Bible plays a significant role in this regard. What is the place of Scripture in the congregation? The theological tradition may also place a high value on the authority of Scripture (Rogers 2013:491-492).

**Table 1:** Private devotions

How often do you spend time in private devotional activities (for example, prayer, meditation, Bible reading alone)?	N	%
Every/most days	6603	69.2
A few a week	1484	15.5
Once a week	247	2.6
Occasionally	920	9.6
Hardly ever	204	2.1
Never	87	0.9
Total	9545	100

What is the role of the worship service in a community of faith or congregation? According to Table 2, most of the members (nearly 60%) attend a worship service in the congregation on a weekly basis.

**Table 2:** Frequency of worship attendance

How often do you go to church services (worship services) at this local church?	N	%
This is my first time	108	1.1
Hardly ever or special occasions only	92	1.0
Less than once a month	209	2.2
Once a month	411	4.3

How often do you go to church services (worship services) at this local church?	N	%
Two or three times a month	3005	31.3
Usually every week	5468	57.0
More than once a week	305	3.2
Total	9598	100

Why do we listen (hermeneutical goal) – they hear the voice of God? (Rogers 2013:495). According to Table 3, the congregational members view their experience of the presence of God during the worship service as an essential aspect of the worship service; nearly two-thirds (always, 65%) experience a sense of God’s presence. The respondents experience the preaching as helpful (always, 52%), and they also experience growth in their understanding of God because of their attending the service (always, 52%). They experience, to a lesser extent, that they are challenged to act as a result of being part of the worship service. The question may be whether the context is playing a significant enough role to challenge them to be involved in the community.

**Table 3:** Experience during worship service

How often do you experience the following during church services at this local church?		Always	Usually	Sometimes	Rarely/ Never	Total
1. Preaching very helpful to life	%	52.0	37.0	9.8	1.2	100
	N	4838	3447	908	112	9305
2. A sense of God’s presence	%	65.4	26.0	7.4	1.2	100
	N	6070	2414	687	110	9281
3. Growth understanding God	%	51.7	38.3	8.9	1.2	100
	N	4748	3517	813	107	9185
4. Challenged to take action	%	27.5	37.6	28.9	6.0	100
	N	2456	3361	2586	533	8936

The congregational members (nearly 50%) value the sermons (including preaching and Bible teaching), but they value small or Bible study groups in the congregation to a lesser extent (12.5%). Less than a third (28.1%)



are actively involved in small groups in the congregation. This may be an indication of lesser involvement in the hermeneutical process with the congregation in the discussion of a text.

**Table 4:** Aspects of value in the local church

Which of the following aspects of this local church do you personally most value?	No		Yes		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Sermons, preaching or Bible teaching	4852	51.5	4571	48.5	9423	100
2. Small prayer, discussion or Bible study groups	8244	87.5	1179	12.5	9423	100

**Table 5:** Small groups

Are you regularly involved in any small prayer, discussion or Bible study groups	N	%
No	6765	71.9
Yes	2647	28.1
Total	9412	100

Table 6 provides a perspective on the view of the congregational members regarding their context and the role the church may play in the South African society. Reading and reflecting on the application of the Galatians 3:38 text, the expectation would be that the text should encourage believers to build a more inclusive church, community, and society.

**Table 6:** Church and society

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral/ Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
1. We, as citizens, have made progress in reconciliation since the end of apartheid	%	8.1	30.7	24.3	24.0	12.9	100
	N	747	2843	2244	2222	1193	9249
2. Churches play an important role to improve race relations in our country	%	31.0	42.4	17.6	6.5	2.5	100
	N	2890	3947	1637	608	229	9311

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral/ Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
3. Language and cultural differences hinder cooperation between believers in our community	%	20.4	44.6	17.5	14.8	2.7	100
	N	1880	4118	1618	1363	251	9230

Less than a third (30.7%) of the respondents are of the opinion that progress in reconciliation has been made since the end of apartheid. There is a need for progress in terms of reconciliation.

The church should play an essential role in improving race relations in the country; 31% strongly agree, and 42.4% agree that this should happen. Over 70% of the congregational members would encourage the church to play a constructive role in improving race relations. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the respondents strongly agree or agree that language and cultural differences hinder the relationship between believers in their community.

The need among congregational members for reconciliation, an improvement of race relations, and better cooperation between believers of different cultural and language groups are evident from their responses in Table 6. Galatians 3:28 may, therefore, assist in facilitating such a process. It is also clear that a congregational hermeneutical process is needed that involves more than simply a sermon during a Sunday morning worship service. The interaction between believers from different language and culture groups within a small group setting is crucial.

## 5. CONCLUSION

African hermeneutics, as a hermeneutical model, assists in having a more contextual reading of a text within an African context. The value of congregational hermeneutics involves the congregation and its members reading a text. The congregation may use the African hermeneutical model to ensure a contextual approach to reading the text.

In reading Galatians 3:28 as an “open text”, different congregations may discover the meaning and application of this text for their specific context. This text challenges the inclusive identity of congregations, and “congregational hermeneutics inform and interact with the identity of the congregation” (Rogers 2013:502).

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