# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 TITLE

The title for the study is:
**Restoring communication in problematic interpersonal relationships in the family system. A pastoral study.**

## 1.2. KEY WORDS

family system, problematic interpersonal relationships, communication, pastoral study.

## SLEUTELWOORDE

familiesisteem, problematiese interpersoonlike verhoudings, kommunikasie, pastorale studie.

## 1.3 BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

### 1.3.1 Background

Whenever two or more people get together, interpersonal relations come into play (Collins, 1988:230). The family system, according to Avis, Pauw and Van der Spuy (2000:130), is the primary system that every individual interacts with and also the primary system in which all people live. Avis, Pauw and Van der Spuy (2000:130) go further by stating that individuals are born into a family and 'leave' that family to start a new one. Jordaan and Jordaan (1998:705) pinpoint the family context as the usual place where man first experiences interpersonal relationships. Within the family the life story of the individual is written of which the parents are the primary authors, with the individual, siblings and other family members as co-authors.

As stated, the family is the primary system, with its attendant interpersonal relationships, in which the individual interacts with other members (Avis *et al.*, 2000:130). When problems arise in these relationships it can have a negative effect on the family as a whole and individual family members, often severely impeding the member's ability to successfully negotiate the challenges and pressures of life in society at large.

In this study the interpersonal relationships and especially problematic communication within the family context is of paramount concern. Family issues and concern about it is, according to Patton (1993:188), not only a modern one, but states that the Bible tells stories of incest, adultery and marital conflict.

Crabb (1977:22) identifies as a major counselling goal the spiritual and psychological maturity in the Christian. The Biblical counsellor assists the Christian to maturity in order

to reach his ultimate purpose in life, namely, worship and service to God. Christian (Bible-centred) counselling is concerned with whether or not the client is responding (according to Scripture) to whatever circumstances he is facing or experiencing. The same goals will be applicable to the counselling of the Christian family, in order to gain maturity, worship of God and responding to life's crises according to Scripture and not worldly standards for living.

Collins (1988:39, 40) puts forward a list of Christian counselling goals that can also be applied to a counselling focus on problematic interpersonal relationships in a family system:

- Self-understanding – Helping individual members of a family and a family as a whole to understand themselves is a first step to healing
- Communication – Many families are unable or unwilling to communicate
- Learning and Change – Most, if not all, behaviour is learnt. Counselling means teaching families to unlearn ineffective behaviour and re-learn effective behaviour
- Self-actualization – Helping a counselee and the family as a whole achieving their optimal potential
- Support – Families can benefit from support, encouragement and temporarily being helped to carry their burdens (help by the counsellor and help from other members in the family system)
- Spiritual wholeness – The Christian counsellor is a spiritual leader who can guide spiritual growth, who can help families deal with spiritual struggles and help them find meaningful beliefs and values.

Tan (2003:224) adds to the above by stating that one of the focus areas of family therapy should be the improvement of the quality of relating among family members by finding ways for the family to find closeness and cohesiveness, to interact as one instead of living as separate individuals. These and other markers for the family counselling process will be investigated during the course of the study.

Frey (2006:1) states that family therapy is a relatively recent development in secular psychotherapy and is even more recent in terms of Bible-centred family therapy. According to Schoeman (2004:79) it is important to recognize the role secular psychology has to play in Christian Counselling (Pastoral Theology). Schoeman (2004:79) further states that psychology has developed a number of diagnostic tools that the pastoral counsellor can use. This means to say that researching the material on family systems theories and communication in problematic interpersonal relationships from the human sciences (Psychology, Sociology) and any addition in terms of the development of the theory of Bible-centred family counselling can only be a positive addition to the field.

**1.3.2 Validity and value of proposed study**
The focus on communication, specifically in the family system, with a view to Biblically restoring communication in problematic interpersonal relationships gives the present study validity and value; this is especially true in the context of family systems in South Africa. The family system in South Africa is under pressure and the pastoral care giver is, subsequently, also under pressure to provide accurate counselling and intercession when

needed to the family as a whole. This study aims to satisfy that need in focusing on restoring communication in problematic interpersonal relationships in the family system from a Bible-centred (Christian) perspective.

### 1.3.3 Problem statement

The areas that the researcher intends to investigate centres on communication in problematic interpersonal family relationships and the way in which communication problems in a particular family system may contribute to the potential problems that the family as a unit may have to cope with. This lies in the fact that all people are imperfect and that when imperfect people interact (communicate) with each other, including within the family context, their faults as imperfect people can and do cause imperfect relationships (Collins, 1988:232). For the purpose of the research a particular family was selected that displayed the profile of communication problems and problematic relationships. The aforementioned family seemed to experience difficulties with self-serving attitudes, being hypercritical of each other, insecure and so forth. The researcher works with the hypothesis that problematic communication in interfamilial relationships may severely impede the family system in functioning as an allied unit against the pressures of life (for instance financial challenges, work stress). If family communication patterns were healthy or at least functional, the hypothesis is that all other problems that a family might face could be handled more easily by a family as an allied unit.

With regard to the development of effective Bible-centred counselling guidelines for restoring communication in problematic interpersonal relationships, the following problem areas in the family system will have to be concentrated on:

- The first problem area involves the major communicative patterns evident in a particular family system: A focus on communication or a lack of, or inadequate, communication between family members will be needed in attempting to restore clear communication channels in the family system. Matthews (1996:1) states that especially when a family is experiencing stress it is important for family members to communicate well. Effective, high quality communication is a character of strong families. Ineffective or poor quality communication may cause a breakdown in interpersonal relationships. Certain elements in the family system may influence the way in which a family communicates and the effectiveness/quality of that communication. Verbal and non-verbal elements are present in communication; these may include verbal elements such as talking (Dobson, 2000:311) and voice related behaviour such as tone of voice, pitch, volume and so forth and non-verbal elements such as listening and silence (Fallon, 2005:1). Collins (1988:410) states that communication is a learnt behaviour and it may be that a family member has learned to communicate ineffectively and this may influence the effectiveness/quality of the communication in the family system at large in a negative way. Communication is the key to building lasting relationships (Parrot & Parrott, 1999:1), if effective and high quality communication is absent it would appear from Parrott and Parrott that good relationships in the family system would be difficult.

- In a second problem area research will need to be focused specifically on destructive patterns in communicative practices: Insecurities, self-centredness, gossiping and hypercritical attitudes (Collins, 1988:233) are some of the attributes in a family system that will need to be addressed during the counselling process in an attempt to restore security and trust in interpersonal relationships. When these destructive factors are present in the family dynamic, interpersonal relationships will be strained and the family as a whole (husband, wife and children) left with a sense of lack of security and stability.

- In a third problem area the lack of proper communication as major contributing factor to conflict in interpersonal relationships, will need to be addressed: A therapeutic focus on conflict between family members as a contributing factor in problematic communication and problematic interpersonal relationships will be needed in attempting to restore unifying factors in the family system. Conflict occurs when family members have different views or have different beliefs, and when there is also a lack of proper communication in these respects it renders another potential for conflict. Rinaldi and Howe (2003:442) distinguish between constructive and destructive conflict. When conflict is handled in a destructive manner the bonds that create and keep the family system intact will be affected in terms of the strength of those bonds and the unity (kinship) experienced.

- A fourth problem area involves communication in the marriage relationship: A therapeutic focus on the disturbance of the God-given pattern for communication in a marital relationship. This focus will be needed in attempting to restore communication in the marriage and the place of the marriage at the heart of the family system. Men and women need each other in unique ways and can therefore satisfy each other so that those needs are met (Dobson, 2000:308). God ordained the marriage and bestowed His blessing on it (Dobson, 2000:308; Barnard 1982:8), but due to sin marriages are breaking up and destroying families. In modern society the roles of the husband and wife has changed dramatically. Modern norms and values are often diametrically opposite to the traditional/biblical norms and values for husbands and wives, which includes communication in the marital relationship. All roles between husbands and wives that were once differentiated have become meshed and ill defined. Wives are seen as equal partners to their husbands. Wives, for example, are no longer only the keepers of the household and have become part of the workforce. Husbands, on the other hand, are no longer only the providers for the household, but also have to take responsibility for its maintenance. These and other facets involved in the marital system make it therefore a pertinent field of enquiry in the study of family systems.

- A fifth problem area involves wrong notions of communication between parents and children in the family system: A therapeutic focus on communication in the interpersonal relationships between parents and children will be needed in attempting to train parents and children towards a balance between love and righteousness in this particular relationship. Where parents and children differ when it comes to values, a child's need for and a parent's willingness to accede to

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more independence (especially during adolescence) (Stahl, 2006:10) and general differences in opinion when a child is becoming more mature, are areas in which potential interpersonal relational problems may occur. Factors such as respect and rebellion may also influence the relationship between parents and their children; the levels of respect, for instance, that children have for their parents will influence the severity of the communicational difficulties and conflict experienced. Lackey (2004:7) states that the heart of every child has the seed of rebellion in it, this lack of respect for the authority of the parents will also influence the interpersonal relationships between parents and their children and the problems/conflict experienced in those relationships.

These and other communicative relational difficulties as experienced to some greater or lesser extent by the family will become evident in the family case study that will be conducted in the research project. Possible counselling guidelines might be obtained, developed and put forth in terms of restoring communication in problematic relationships and helping relationships heal and grow to positive outcomes (the counselling method or design), with a positive impact on the individual family members and the family as a whole.

### 1.3.4 Research Question
The overarching research question of this study amounts to the following:
How can families, with problematic interpersonal familial relationships, be counselled from a Biblical perspective with the primary objective of restoring communication in the family system?

Can effective Bible-centred counselling guidelines be set down and developed from a study of family systems as depicted in Scripture, the human sciences and an empirical study in order to restore communication in problematic interpersonal relationships in the family system?

Questions flowing from the central research question can be formulated as follows:

- What can be learned from what the Bible teaches about the family and communication in problematic interpersonal relationships?

- What can be learned from a study of the material from the human sciences on family systems theories and communication in problematic interpersonal relationships?

- What can be learned from an empirical study on communicative patterns in a dysfunctional family system?

- How can the results from the research be utilized to develop and present Bible-centred counselling guidelines?

## 1.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

### 1.4.1 Aim

The overarching research aim of the study will be to obtain, develop and put forth Bible-centred counselling guidelines on restoring communication in family systems caught up in problematic interpersonal relationships.

### 1.4.2 Objectives

The specific objectives of the study will be the following:

- To research what the Bible teaches about the family system and communication in problematic interpersonal relationships by consulting exegetical resources, exegeting relevant scripture passages and studying the relevant Biblical/Christian literature. With due consideration to the fact that the Bible originated in a time and for a "world" very different from our modern (Western oriented) societies, a specific question would be as to how relevant the Biblical view and precepts of proper familial relationships is for, and could it be applicable to, families in our world and the times we live in.

- To research the material on family systems theories and communication in problematic interpersonal relationships from the human sciences. It will have to be determined whether such theories correlate with the teachings of the Bible, as this is relevant for the successful development of guidelines for a family systems praxis model for the Bible-centred counsellor.

- To conduct an empirical study on a family system with dysfunctional elements in the communicative relationships between family members as area of focus. For this purpose a standardized ecometric assessment scale will be utilized as primary measure instrument. This particular assessment scale will be utilized in conjunction with a series of interviews with the particular family members on a one-to-one basis. The ecometric assessment scale will be in the form of the Personal Multi-Screening Inventory (PMSI), as used by Perspective Training College, which is a self-report assessment that can measure an individual's strengths and problems in various areas of functioning including personal, emotional, interpersonal, spiritual and physical functioning (Faul & Hanekom, 2004b.:43)

- To develop theory on the function of Biblical counselling in the situation of a family system hampered by problematic interpersonal relationships. Is it possible to develop and propose efficient Bible-centred counselling guidelines from a correlation between Scripture, the human sciences and the results of an empirical study on a practice theoretical level and how can it be applied to restore communication in problematic interpersonal relationships in the family system?

## 1.5 CENTRAL THEORETICAL ARGUMENT

The central theoretical statement is that effective Bible-centred guidelines for counselling on communication in problematic familial relationships can be obtained, developed and presented in the study.

## 1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 1.6.1 Basis theoretical research

According to the action scientific model developed by Zerfass (cf. Louw, 1993:75) for Practical Theology, Scripture renders the basis for Bible-centred counselling. This model proposes a research method in which a problematic praxis is corrected by means of inter-action between basis-theoretical, meta-theoretical and empirical considerations, which lead to a new theory for praxis.

Furthermore, ambient to the Scriptures, ecumenical Christian literature that is congruent to the Scriptures, that is to say Christian literature that may have emanated from various church traditions, but that is deemed Biblically sound through the direction of the Holy Spirit will be studied in order to ascertain what Biblical scholarship determines in certain subjects relevant to this study.

### 1.6.2 Meta theoretical research

Another facet in Zerfass' model, the meta-theoretical, focuses on research of relevant fields of study from the human sciences that may be engaged in counselling and can be deemed relevant to the aims of this study. Searches will be conducted in available literature (books, articles and electronic/internet sources) with regard to psychological, sociological and related fields and will be presented in the form of general perspectives from the sciences that research humanity.

### 1.6.3 Empirical research

Zerfass' model also incorporates the empirical dimension (Zerfass, 1974:167). The researcher is interested in the actual experience of the selected family and in order to try and access their experiences he will join them in an attempt to become part of (or at least) understand their "world" and experience their realities. This access into their lives will take place with their full consent and complete knowledge about the ambient reasons in regard to the study and with full consideration for the ethical issues involved in research of this nature. The necessary application to authorize this empirical research will be submitted to the relevant Ethics committee of the North-West University. Research will be in the form of one-to-one interviews and questionnaires.

A standardized, ecometric assessment scale as used by the Perspective Training College, in the form of the Personal Multi-Screening Inventory (PMSI) will be utilized in conjunction with interviews of the family members on a one-to-one basis in the form of a semi-structured ("in-depth" - De Vos *et al*, 2002:302) interview. The interview will guide the participant in terms of the relevant subject in order to obtain a thorough idea of the experience of the individual family members. Thus a type of interview will be conducted with elements both of the subjective relaying of ideas and topical questioning by the researcher to expedite the interviewing process when necessary and in the desired direction (also when necessary) to accomplish the aims of the interview and the aims of the re-

search. Wherever possible all the immediate family members will be interviewed and further in-depth interviews (compare De Vos *et al.*, 2002: 302) will be done with all of the family members willing to participate further. Research findings from this empirical study will be interpreted with the findings in the basis-theoretical and meta-theoretical research as point of reference.

### 1.6.4 Practical-theoretical facet

From the foregoing basis-, meta-theoretical and empirical study a correlation of the results will be drawn to develop and present a workable praxis in terms of Bible-centred guidelines to address the problem statement. The formulation of a praxis theory may arise from firstly, the solutions that can be proposed by results obtained from studying family systems in general (from the Scriptures and the human sciences) and secondly findings from the empirical study that have been discovered from studying the members of the relevant family system.

### 1.7. CHAPTER DIVISIONS

Chapter 1:   Introduction.

Chapter 2:   Basis theoretical study: a Biblical perspective on the family and communication in interpersonal relationships.

Chapter 3: Meta-theoretical study: data from the social sciences on the family system and communication in interpersonal relationships.

Chapter 4:  Empirical research: empirical study on dysfunctional elements in the communicative system of a selected family

Chapter 5:  Practical Bible-centred counselling focus on restoring communication in problematic interpersonal relationships within the family system and final conclusion.

## 1.8. SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE CORRELATION BETWEEN POINTS 3.3, 4 AND 6

| PROBLEM STATEMENT | RESEARCH OBJECTIVES | METHODOLOGY |
|---|---|---|
| What does Scripture teach about communication in interpersonal family relationships? | To show from a Scriptural perspective what the interpersonal family relationships should be and how a family should function. | Selection, study and exegesis of relevant Scripture portions and available literature. |
| What does research from the human sciences reveal about communication in family systems? | To study perspectives from the human sciences on the subject of proper functioning of the family. | Research and study of subject, textbooks, articles and available data. |
| What can an empirical study reveal about familial relationships in general and problematic relationships in particular? | To do an empirical study with the subject family. | Utilization of a standardized, ecometric assessment scale in conjunction with a series of personal interviews with the members of the subject family. |
| Can Bible-centred therapeutic guidelines for problematic interpersonal familial relationships be obtained, developed and put forth? | To obtain, develop and put forth Bible-centred counselling guidelines to restore communication in family systems caught up in problematic interpersonal relationships. | A correlation between the studies of the Scriptures, results from the human sciences and the empirical study. |