

MY JOURNEY WITH HERMEN

The highways and byways of hermeneutics

Neil Stiller

“ As a kid, I learnt about hermeneutics from my parents and close relatives. I wasn't really aware of that, and nor were they. I'm aware that this spontaneous learning about hermeneutics was a rare occurrence then, and is probably even rarer now. So people have become more unaware of Hermen's influence in their lives. This has made them unaware of the great influence that their biases and presuppositions have in their life. They're unaware of how much their assumptions about all kinds of things influence what they allow into their minds and thinking, and influence the opinions they form and the decisions they make. And most folk are not even aware of their unawareness. Learning about hermeneutics helps people to be far more aware of their presuppositions and biases. Learning about hermeneutics makes them, whether they are aware of it or not, more willing to reach a consensus on contentious issues. ”

Neil Stiller
the second last paragraph of *My Journey with Hermen*

Quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version

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PREFACE

Being realigned

This booklet describes something of my personal journey as a pastor where I was often required to look at the past – at the stories about God’s actions for his people in the Bible. When that process made an impact on me I often found that I didn’t return to exactly the same position as before. God’s message had realigned me. It had turned me, I believe, more closely in the direction he wanted me to go. Whether I ended up going that way is another story.

This journey includes trying to understand what God was saying and doing *then*, and what this means for me as I try to serve him in the kind of world and society in which we all *now* live.

Of course, many other people find themselves in exactly the same situation as I do, and it’s great to be able to offer one another support and encouragement. But there is one special companion who has always provided invaluable help. This account of my personal journey is really about him. I’m going to call him Hermen.

As I now look back (I have recently turned 70) and try to describe this journey from my childhood onwards, I know that my memory will play its usual tricks. It will get some things wrong, I’ll impose what I now know on events in the past, I’ll fill gaps in my memory with hopes and dreams and fantasy, and so on. As a result, I can hardly vouch for the truth of anything I’m about to write. But, truth or fiction, it’s as good as anyone’s able to get; and it is my journey!

WARNING

If you come with me as I recount my journey, please be aware that you risk the possibility of having to cope with a realignment by God. You run the risk of getting to know something about my friend Hermen. You may even come to adopt him as your personal friend.

If you accept these conditions please click this box. I accept Thank you!

MY SECRET FRIEND

When I was a kid I . . . Ah, it seems such a long time ago. Life, the world, was so different. I lived on a small-crops farm, with five other farms in easy walking distance each inhabited by a tribe of cousins. Right in the middle of this tribe lived Dad's mother, Fat Grandma (named to distinguish her from our other grandma, Skinny Grandma or Town Grandma, who lived 20ks away in the suburbs).

As a kid I needed nothing. I was overrun with playmates. Somewhere to play? There was a choice of all kinds of places on all these farms. When I felt like offering my farming experience, there were more than enough uncles who would let me do some task for ten minutes or so. When I needed a bit more understanding than I felt I got at home, there was a choice of aunties I could go to for a snack and a chat. When I wanted some entertainment there was Uncle Walter's practical jokes to hear about or be involved in.

This family tribe was where I lived my life. It's where I learned my values and beliefs. It gave me my interpretation of the world. It helped to determine my attitudes to others.

I'm at the age now where many people notice the differences between the kind of life we lived as kids and the life that seems to loom for our grandkids. There are so many changes, some quite big ones. I'm noticing these changes because ageing makes you evaluate life and dwell more on the things that really matter. And I want my grandkids to know about the things that really matter, too.

I also notice some of the ways in which I've changed. I'm grumpy and cranky about older people (including myself) who won't change and move more with the times. And I'm cranky about younger people who move with the times so much that they don't realize how this is affecting their life. I'm amazed at how much I'm becoming my father – in attitudes, and especially mannerisms – and find I can do little more than just chuckle about it.

But, back to what I really wanted to say. When I was a kid I had a secret friend. Not a made-up imaginary friend. I had too many cousins to need that. This was a secret friend – so secret that I didn't even realize he was there. I knew nothing at all about him. It's only recently that I've become aware that he has accompanied me throughout my life – as a really important and influential companion.

I'm calling this friend Hermen (it's not his real name, of course – or is it?).

In my younger years I identified this secret Hermen with Dad. Or, maybe I couldn't see him because of Dad, who kind of blotted him out. Interestingly enough, although Dad wasn't aware of Hermen either, he introduced me to him, and actually lived out what Hermen was doing for me from behind the scenes.

My uncles, too, without being aware of it, reinforced what Dad did. This influence from Hermen was just normal behaviour in our family tribe.

Here are some of the things I learnt from Dad and the family relatives as a child and teenager – things that Hermen didn't have to tell me himself (and enabled him to remain hidden).

- I learnt the difference between fairy stories and real life. I learnt that it was okay for animals to talk, for scary monsters to exist, and to have my imagination pushed to the limit – as long as this was confined to what were called fairy stories. It was lying to say that I didn't eat the topping off the iced vovo biscuits. But it wasn't lying to say that an old woman could, and did, live in a shoe. It took some time for all this to fall into place for me, but it opened my mind to the concept of appropriateness, the possibility that something could be acceptable here but not there.
- I learnt the difference between an instruction and a suggestion. *I think you should tidy your room*, for example, could be either. I had to take careful note of the tone of voice and the facial expression that accompanied sentences like that. If I didn't there was more than a 50% chance that I could be in serious trouble.
- I learnt the difference between what my parents allowed me to get away with at home and what behaviour they expected at Grandma's – especially Town Grandma's. For example, I had to work out, usually by trial and error, how sick or tired she felt and adjust the volume of my voice accordingly. And playing cards was something to be avoided if this Grandma was around, while at Fat Grandma's we couldn't step up on her verandah until we had agreed to play cards, and continue to play until she got tired of the game. Again the concept of appropriateness came to the fore, as it did whenever we were anywhere away from home.
- I learnt about the fun you could have with words. I remember those meal times when words were bounced back and forward like balloons. But on the way they had their meanings, their pronunciations, their connections with other words, twisted in such a way that the table was covered with shattered and broken words. These were gathered up with the dishes and given time to reassemble and repair themselves so the process could be repeated again at some later meal. Mealtime guests usually didn't know what on earth was going on – and we were sorry they didn't know about the extreme flexibility of words, and weren't able to join in the fun. Then along came Peter Sellers and *The Goons* to show us that there were others who could have fun with words, too – and to open our eyes to even wider horizons.
- I learnt about the difference that a wink, a hand gesture, or an eye-twinkle made to a statement. Sometimes Dad and his brothers liked to sound very angry about something I'd done. This was confusing because I didn't really think they ought to be so upset about it – good grief, I've done far

worse than that! But then they sneaked in something like a sort-of-a smile, or contradicted themselves by saying something like *well done*, and I knew they'd pulled my leg – again. Those experiences made me feel like their equals. They treated (or trained) me to be mature enough to pick up on their leg-pulling, to read what was going on behind their words. And often, I suspect, they kept on providing hints and clues until I did pick up on it. In the end we shared a good laugh – they had the fun of pulling my leg, and I had the accomplishment of (eventually) seeing through their game. And I took the freedom – and daring – of pulling their legs, too – which was to me a sign of our equality.

Dad taught me the wonderful confusion and joy and daring of giving and receiving a mixed message (which is what a leg-pull is) – within a good relationship. Still today I find that when my relationship with someone is free and easy I can't help daring a leg-pull or two, and waiting for one in return. Of course, it becomes obvious that some people are not used to this kind of thing, and they even don't like it, so I have to discipline myself and hold back. Despite all the practice I've had holding back, it's still very hard to do – thanks to Dad!!

- I learnt about the role of laughter in communication. Laughter was (and still is) a frequent occurrence in my family's tribal life. For us laughing at someone was perfectly normal; it was human. All of us – kids, parents and grandchildren – made mistakes, acted in stupid ways, made fools of ourselves. We all deserved to be laughed at! But someone could always see the funny side of what happened. When I was laughed at the message I received was: *You remind me of a stupid thing I did, only you did it better, you were funnier.* Or: *I remember being just as stupid, only I did it better, I didn't make such an utter fool of myself.* So the feeling of being laughed at was transformed into laughing with. My family showed me that one role of laughter was to communicate acceptance of failure, and of normal, foolish behaviour.

Above all, my family provided me with an environment that was accepting and loving, that provided encouragement and the freedom to make mistakes and to fail. That's why I became familiar with what I think was a wide range of communication styles and techniques. And I came to understand how each worked. Learning about communication styles and how to use them is a trial and error process. That's why Hermen needs an accepting environment. I know that my childhood in my family tribe was a rare upbringing. I assume, too, that the other cousins, even my brothers and sister – wouldn't've had exactly the same memories or the experiences of Hermen that I had. His influence is there in everyone's upbringing – everyone learns from their family circle about different types of communication.

Of course, Hermen isn't responsible for, or involved in, the way any of us are brought up. What he does for each one of us is this: he makes us aware of the

different kinds of communication (like fairy stories, jokes, poetry, sarcasm, outbursts of anger, just to mention a few) that we all experience. And having made us aware, he teaches the special techniques that help us to understand the intended meaning of a message – and to convey our intended meaning when we send a message.

The use of this knowledge is meant to make relationships closer and deeper. But it's also possible to use this information to hurt others. Having learnt about sarcasm I can now inflict pain on those whom I think may deserve it. Or I can choose to receive a sarcastic message in a way in which it wasn't really intended. Having learnt about the way practical jokes work I can now humiliate someone. Or I can choose to interpret a practical joke played on me as a humiliation when that wasn't its intended purpose. Hermen isn't responsible for the use we make of what he reveals to us. He just tells us: *Here are the different types of communication that you will meet in your daily living, and this is how each one works.* The rest is up to us.

If I could have identified Hermen at that time, I would've thought he was a great person to be with. I'd've thought he was a fun-loving and joyful character, promising a life of relative freedom without too many rules. He helped me to enjoy the interactions with the rest of my family tribe. But at the same time he was a friend who tried to keep me aware (if only I took notice of him) of the real message that often lay behind the words of others. He also made me aware of the message I could give – not just by words, but by the way I used my words – to make for enjoyable encounters.

MY ESTEEMED COMPANION

In my early twenties I entered the Seminary (Sem). And for the first time I heard about Hermen. He was introduced to all students. I finally got to know him and learn about him; he was no longer secret and hidden. He was described, explained, defined, expounded. And his name wasn't Hermen (did I warn you?). His name was *Hermeneutics*. His task was to give skills to aspiring pastors to help them understand and interpret the Bible. They in turn could then assist the members of their congregations to use those skills too. Hermeneutics was a teacher. He was as deep, as complicated, as profound, as scholarly, as his name suggests. He hardly knew what it was like outside of a theological institution. No one even thought to call him Hermen. That would be disrespectful. He was Hermeneutics.

So I lost my secret friend. In his place, I had gained an esteemed and scholarly companion. Together with the subjects studied at the Sem, he opened the Bible and helped to make it alive for me.

A book that's really a library

Hermeneutics taught me about all the different styles of communication in the Bible. Sure, I knew there were letters and Gospels and psalms and historical writings and stories in its pages. But I discovered now that there's far more to it than that. I'd already been told that the Bible was really a library, now I started to realize what this meant. Now it started to click in my mind that each of the communication styles in the Bible had to be read in different ways. The letters, for example, couldn't be read as if they were Gospels, and the psalms as if they were history.

As a library, the Bible contains a whole host of different styles of writing. And since the writers of each style use different techniques and methods to get their message across, I needed to know something about those techniques and methods. Otherwise I'd be likely to misunderstand what a writer really wanted to say.

I was taught, too, that bits and pieces in books could be written in a style different from the paragraphs that surround them. For example, there are parables in the Gospels; there's poetry (Romans 11:33-36), and perhaps even a hymn or two (like Philippians 2:6-11) in letters; there's a fable in the book of Judges (9:7-21); and so on. I needed to know about the different styles of all those bits and pieces.

Fortunately there are techniques used by all writers – irrespective of what style of communication they use. These are the basic techniques of communication that all of us know and use. Yet, even though I was familiar with them, I discovered that I could read the Bible and take little or no notice of them. That

careless reading made it more difficult for me to understand what the writer was saying. Here are some of the things Hermeneutics did to increase my attention as I read.

Just to be sure, let me say it again

As a young kid I discovered that when Dad said, *Okay it's time for bed*, I could take that announcement seriously or I could ignore it. If I chose to ignore it I knew I had to keep my ears open for any follow-up announcements. Because if he felt the need to repeat those few words it didn't pay to ignore him a second time. I had to keep my ears tuned in to **repetition**.

Hermeneutics taught me to tune my ears to repetition whenever I hear or read the Bible. Repeated words are a dead giveaway as to what the writer is trying to say. The trouble with the Bible, of course, is that (unlike Dad) there's no increasing volume that accompanies the repetition. So I found I frequently missed it – it's there, it's obvious, it sticks out a mile – but often I just don't see it. That's why I have made it a practice to underline or draw a circle around words I find more than once.

One of the most 'decorated' paragraphs in my Bible is 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. My underlining highlights the most significant word (*comfort* – it actually appears 9 times). The underlining also highlights some 'insignificant' words (*we/our/us* and *you/your*) that are scattered around – but they turn out to be not so insignificant after all. The result of my underlining and circling is the visual presentation it gives (if I can put it this way) of what Paul is trying to say.

Then in Romans 6:5-8 Paul repeats a very 'insignificant', but vital, word *with*. It is central to what this paragraph is all about.

Finding repetition – whether it's words, or words with similar meanings, or phrases, or sentence construction, or whatever it may be – finding repetition is an important key to hearing what the writer is emphasizing.

Examples of repetition:

2 Cor.1:3-7

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

Romans 6:5-8

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

There's no need to shout, I hear you

Hermeneutics trained me at the Sem to look and listen for significant words. These may not always be important words, but they sure carry a lot of weight in the paragraphs in which they appear. If a person is speaking these are the words that usually call for a rise in volume, or a hand gesture, or a foot-stamp, or a pause, or lengthened vowels, or spat-out consonants – all meant to say *you'd better listen to this!* Over the years I've built up a list of these significant words. Those right at the top of my list are: *but, yet, then, therefore, however, if, since*. As I read the Bible I put a bold rectangle around them wherever I find them so that they jump out at me from the page. This enables me to hear the writer's raised voice or gesture – which helps me to listen more closely to what he's really saying.

Now don't be surprised, but this is going to come as a surprise

There's one communication technique that I enjoy looking for most of all. It's what I like describing as 'being led down the garden path'. The writer (or is it just me?) gets me thinking: *ah, yes, I know where this is heading, I know how this is going to end* – only to find that I've been delivered to a completely different destination. The ending comes as an utter surprise.

My favourite example of this is Hosea 11, one of God's messages to his disobedient people. First God outlines his people's increasing unfaithfulness to him. He describes the loving care *he* constantly showered on them – but his people thanked their idols for this care. Then he outlines the punishment he has in mind for them because of their refusal to turn to him. And then comes the surprise, the complete surprise. The expected isn't going to happen. God doesn't act like human beings. Even though his people have broken his heart, he's the God of compassion and he will act in mercy.

An example of a surprise ending:

Hosea 11:8-9

"How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, Israel?

How can I treat you like Admah?

How can I make you like Zeboiim?

My heart is changed within me;

all my compassion is aroused.

I will not carry out my fierce anger.

nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim.

For I am God, and not man –

the Holy One among you.

I will not come in wrath. . ."

That's just one example of this technique. In this way the writer can really drive home the message he's trying to make. However, what really amazes me is how often I fail to realize that I've been led down the garden path. I fail to see many of the unexpected surprises that fill the Bible. What I've heard over so many years has become so familiar that it all sounds so reasonable and expected and common sense and predictable – and that attitude makes me miss so much.

Romans 5:8 is an example of this: *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were sinners, Christ died for us.* And I nod, thinking *it's obvious that God's love allowed his Son to die for us, the Bible is full of predictable*

statements like that. But I'm missing all the surprises Paul is proclaiming, all the unexpected actions of God. God demonstrates his love for us? – who on earth should expect that! Jesus died for us? – that's an unbelievable surprise! Jesus did this while we were sinners, while we were actively rebelling against God? – that's unexpectedly surprising (to say the least)!!

When I look for the surprises in the Bible I find that invariably I end up amazed, flabbergasted, knocked over, because God is such a surprising, unimaginable, beyond-our-comprehension God. He never does what we humans do. And if my reading and hearing of his Word doesn't open my eyes to his completely unexpected and always surprising actions of love then I reckon I'm missing something very important.

A unique version of history

At the Sem it struck me strongly that the truth of history (if there is such a thing) depends on who writes it. I was already aware that there were varying accounts of the history of the European settlement of Australia – the disagreement depending on who wrote that history. The European traditional interpretation of Australia Day, for example, is that it was a defining day for the establishment of Australia. The Indigenous interpretation is that it was a day (for them) of defeat and loss of their land. I've also found that this difference in interpretation is there in regard to past events in our family's history – even among us brothers and sisters it's staggering how many versions of the 'truth' there are. The conversation surrounding the writing of Dad's obituary showed very clearly that there was quite a degree of disagreement about some of our memories of Dad's doings, and what was where in our backyard.

Hermeneutics taught me that the Bible has its own special and unique version of our world's history. That's because the history it records speaks about the Lord of history. No other history does that. This doesn't mean the Bible *corrects* what appears in our history books. It simply means that the Bible adds an important dimension that other histories ignore. Nor does it mean that the Bible's version is the only version of history that's possible. Other people with different beliefs and world-views are free to offer their own versions of what happened in the past.

So, thanks to Hermeneutics, when I read my Bible now, I try to understand what the writers are saying about the Lord of history, and about his involvement in the events that make up that history. What a wonderful difference that makes to what I hear.

If it wasn't for Hermeneutics I'd ask about *human* involvement in history. I'd ask questions like: how come Noah was the one chosen to build the ark?; why was it Mary who was chosen to be the earthly mother of Jesus?; how come Judas was chosen to be one of the disciples? To answer questions like that I have to read the Bible in such a way that God's choice of Noah is well and truly justified. I have to do the same for Mary, even though the Bible gives not even a hint as

to the reason (though I'm aware that folk have found a hint or two in Luke's Gospel to justify the choice). And I have to leave the question about the choice of Judas unanswered, because all I can find in the Gospels is reasons for Jesus NOT to have chosen him. Or I have to suppress the question and act as if it's not there at the back of my mind.

BUT, if I listen for God's involvement in history then my questions become: What is God doing by choosing Noah to build the ark, by choosing Mary to give birth to Jesus; and by choosing Judas as a disciple? And the answers become something like this: He chose Noah to provide a way for the human race to survive his judgment on what they were doing on his earth. He chose Mary because someone – preferably female – was needed to allow the entry of his Son into the human race, into human history. Jesus chose Judas because that's the way Jesus acts – he doesn't require references, or police checks, or a good reputation, or anything else, to limit the complete freedom of his choice and of his actions.

When I ask about *human* involvement in history and life, the answer invariably centres on justification, and worthiness, and deserving, and me understanding, and even

Repetition in historical writings

*Here are some examples of the use of **repetition** in historical writings to show that the writers' chief concern is God's involvement in history.*

In the story of Abraham (Genesis 12:1 – 25:11) the writer repeatedly states that God is involved. God, again and again, speaks with Abraham, at times even dropping in for a friendly visit. He makes a covenant with Abraham with great promises – of land, of descendents, and of being a blessing to all nations. This covenant, mentioned again and again, determines and directs everything that happens in Abraham's life and history.

Part of Abraham's story deals with the sending of his servant to find a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24). Here the repetition of God's involvement by guiding and giving success (verses 12, 21, 27, 40, 42, 48, 56) appears as a kind of chorus.

*The Joseph story (Genesis 37- 50) doesn't contain frequent mention of God. In fact you could be forgiven for thinking that there's not much room for God at all. But his involvement is made obvious – in statements that are easily missed, and even in some by-the-way comments (39:2-6,9,21,23, 40:8, 41:16,25,28, 32,39, 42:18, 43:14,23,29, 44:16, 45:5-9, 46:1-4, 48:3,9,11,15,20,21, 50:17-20,24-25). The Lord of history **is** busy.*

In David's story (in 2 Samuel) God may seem to be even more remote. But, here and there, in by-the-way statements (11:26, 12:24, 17:14) the writer reveals who's behind what goes on, and why.

I think it's fascinating to see God's role in the story of Jonah. He gives instructions to Jonah (1:1, 3:1), sends a great wind (1:4), provides a great fish to swallow Jonah (1:17), orders the fish to vomit up Jonah on dry land (2:10); provides a vine to give shade (3:6), a worm to wither the vine (3:7), and scorching east wind (3:8). The Lord of history has at his disposal everything in creation as he carries out his purposes – his merciful purposes to the Ninevehites AND to Jonah. Then this book ends with a question mark – prompting me to wonder about his mercy in my own life and history!

me approving what God does. When I ask about *God's* involvement, the answer will centre on grace, mercy, undeservedness, grace, unworthiness, love. Oh, did I mention God's freely given grace?

When I come to the Bible asking: *what does this say about me?* I get lost in my unworthiness, and failures, and lack of faith – even when the passage is proclaiming to me God's undeserving grace! When I come to the Bible asking: *what does this say about God?* I get lost in his unwavering faithfulness to me, his undeserving love to me, his free grace to me, his he-shouldn't-do-this acceptance of me – even when the passage is proclaiming his judgment on sin!

I keep looking and listening for the involvement of the Lord of history right through the Bible's version of Israel's history. This looking and listening continues to open my eyes to the fact that God doesn't have just one way of working in human history. He acts in a *great variety* of ways. At times he seems to interact directly with people and events, initiating things or bringing an end to events (whether we humans want that to happen or not). At times he seems to work along with the history-makers – they co-operating with him, and he with them – as his purposes are carried out. At times he seems to remove himself from an individual's history, refusing for the time being to be involved, even letting humans do their worst. At times he chooses people, directing and guiding them, so they can be his agents in carrying out his gracious will. I know I'll never appreciate or understand all the surprising and unimaginable ways in which the Lord of history interacts within his creation. And, of course, he's free to do as he chooses.

Hermeneutics is training me to look and listen to the Bible for what God is doing in world history, in human history, and in the history of every human.

Rhymes of a different kind

Poetry never really grabbed me in my school years. Some teachers tried to fire me up with their rhapsodies about poems written by Wordsworth and Keats; but to no avail. It just didn't interest me. Though some of the poems I had to study then seem to strike some chords now as memorized lines come back to me – so maybe something did get through.

Hermeneutics, however, raised my interest in poetry. Perhaps because he taught me about poetry that was different. I knew there was poetry in the Bible. Many versions of the Bible even set out sections in a way that to me look like poetry. And I knew poetry's about metre (the pattern of stressed syllables) and rhyming at the end of lines. But there isn't an end-rhyme in the whole Bible – not anywhere – to say nothing of a regular metre. And yet Hermeneutics showed me that Biblical poetry is really chock full of rhyme. Not the rhyme I was used to, of course. It's called **line rhyme** – the whole of one line, or the thought presented in that line, is rhymed with the next.

This rhyme can happen in three ways.

One line can **repeat** the thought of the previous one. This is by far the most common type of rhyme. The poet reinforces what he's saying by doing this.

One line can contain a thought that's the **opposite** of the previous line. Now the writer uses a different technique to reinforce what he's saying. This rhyme is also an ideal way to sum up what has gone before, or to conclude a poem or psalm.

One line can continue the thought of the previous line by **adding** to it. This rhyme gives more movement and urgency to the psalm. And it packs in more meaning than the first two kinds of rhyme.

These three ways of rhyming interested and fascinated me. Now I realized I wouldn't understand the poetry in the Bible if I just look at individual words or even individual sentences. Since Biblical poetry is **line pairing** I need to think in lines, pairs of lines.

But, as is often said, rules are meant to be broken. It's not uncommon for people to do what they're not meant to do – and this includes the writers of Biblical poetry. Now and then they abandon the practice of line pairing. Instead they tie three lines together.

That caught my attention, perhaps because it reminded me in some way of my childhood practice of playing with words. This breaking of the rules is saying that there's something unusual, special, significant, going on here – so please pay attention – especially to the words. A **three-liner** usually wants to add an extra dimension to the meaning of the line or lines.

Psalm 1 begins with a three-liner. The endings of each line describe the wicked with different words. But the beginnings! The words are chosen to indicate movement – from walking with the wicked, to standing with them, to sitting with

Examples of line rhyming.

*Psalm 2 has a whole series of pairs of lines in which the thought is **repeated**:*

*The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together
against the Lord*

and against his Anointed One.

*"Let us break their chains," they say,
"and throw off their fetters."*

*The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.*

*Then he rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath. (Ps.2:2-5)*

*Psalm 1 ends with two **opposite**-thought lines:*

*For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

*The conclusion to Psalm 132 is a pair of lines that **repeat** the same thought, followed by a pair of lines that contain an **opposing** thought:*

*Here I will make a horn grow for David
and set up a lamp for my anointed one.*

*I will clothe his enemies with shame,
but the crown on his head will be resplendent.*

*Psalm 1 gives three examples of rhyme that **adds** to the thought (v.2-3):*

*But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither.
Whatever he does prospers.*

*Psalm 1 has an example of a **three-liner**. After the opening words 'Blessed is the man. . .' are these three lines:*

*who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers.*

them. The poet is describing a growing comfortableness with the life style of those who are wicked, an increasing fitting in with their ways. It's done by breaking the rule of pairing. It's done to make the reader sit up and take notice – particularly of the words being used. Hermeneutics has opened my ears for three-liners.

Life wasn't meant to be easy – especially for a prophet!

Hermeneutics taught me about the special way the people who are called prophets write. He has made me look carefully at the accounts some of them give about their decision to be a prophet (if you can call it their decision).

Right from the start let me say that I sympathize with prophets. I'm certainly glad I didn't get a job like that. Of course, there were times when I've said, *If only God would choose me and speak directly to me. If only he had a special task for me and told me exactly what he wants me to do for him!* I had the impression that this would bring me a life of the greatest pleasure and happiness and contentment and daily joy that anyone could ever have. But I've come to see the distress people go through just because God has a special task for them! This distress happens because God's work is invariably the opposite of what we humans *want to do* – even *for him*.

I see **Amos** happily caring for his sheep and his fruit trees, and out of the blue God *takes him* (kicking and screaming? – it wouldn't surprise me at all if that was the case) and says, *Hey, I've got a job for you. You're now a prophet! So off you go – speak my message to my people. When you've done that you can come back to your sheep and fruit trees.* (See Amos 7:14-16.) I read the very unpleasant things he was told to say, a message he knew wouldn't go over very well at all. He'd rather keep messages like that to himself. But,

The lion has roared –
 who will not fear?
 The Sovereign Lord has spoken –
 who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:8)

I'm struck by the irresistible inner compulsion that drove him to speak out, no matter what the consequences. I imagine him muttering to himself, *If only I could sit quietly with my sheep under my trees! But no!! God has made me a prophet.*

I see **Jonah**, as the word of the Lord *comes to* him: 'Go to Nineveh and preach against it.' I see him *run away* to the nearest port, *find* a ship, and *pay the fare*. No effort or expense is spared to get away from the prophet-making God. But God has other ideas. He gives him a second chance. I see Jonah there in the fish vomit (I assume) hearing the word of the Lord come a second time – the same command as before. I see his defeated look as he obeys and goes. No fuss this time, no complaining, no muttering to himself. Well, not until the people of Nineveh listen to his message and repent. Now I hear him

complaining loudly to God – *God, this isn't fair. I proclaimed the city's destruction, and now because of your great mercy you've changed your mind! Just like I thought you would. God, I look like a fool – what I said didn't happen – I can hear them down there laughing at me – what a prophet I turned out to be! I wish I was dead!! Yes, really! You've made me a laughing-stock, a laughing-stock of a prophet.*

I see **Hosea**. I can't imagine how he feels as God tells him to marry a harlot and rear a family of illegitimate children. And as three children are born God even tells him what to name them – Jezreel, to remind King Jehu of a massacre he masterminded and of the coming punishment; Not-Loved; and Not-My-People. Wherever Hosea goes (it seems his wife keeps on with her harlotry) he and his kids are living messages from God. For the nation of Israel, (God's wife) is a harlot too, leaving God to have affairs with other gods. Their unfaithfulness to him is going to bring unwelcome consequences – Jezreel-like reprisals, a sense of being not-loved by God, and of losing their status as God's own people. I try to imagine the contempt Hosea picks up from his fellow citizens as his three living reminders of their unfaithfulness to God play (on their own?) on the streets of their town.

And I feel pity for him as he's told to live what he proclaims. His task is to free his wife from her harlotry – not by forcing her, but by the power of his love. In doing that he's a living proclamation of God's love, a love that always seeks to re-establish a faithful relationship between God and his people.

Most of his proclamations are superb! – some of the most surprising and moving statements of God's unconditional love for his people in the whole of the Bible. And nowhere do I hear him making any reference to the difficulties and pain in his life, or what he undoubtedly went through because God chose him to be a prophet.

I see **Isaiah** in the temple, granted a vision of God seated on his throne. He's bowled over by God's mighty glory, and struck with a sense of his own, and his people's, unworthiness and unclean-ness before God. I hear God remove his guilt and call for a volunteer. I hear Isaiah say, *Send me*. Well, what else could he do? Put yourself in his shoes, how on earth could you NOT say, *Send me!* Then I hear the job he's volunteered for – and it's a cracker (see box)!

What an unbelievable message to be given, to 'volunteer' for – to *make* people deaf and blind – and do it until they are destroyed. And I see him go off and do it! After all he's now a

God's message to Isaiah:

Go and tell this people:

*"Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving."*

*Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.*

*Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.*

Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?"

And he answered:

*"Until the cities lie ruined
and without inhabitant,
until the houses are left deserted
and the fields ruined and ravaged,
until the Lord has sent everyone far away
and the land is utterly forsaken. . . (Is.8:9-12)*

prophet.

Yet included in his proclamations are wonderful, grace-filled messages for his people and prophecies of the coming Messiah and Saviour.

I see **Jeremiah**, faced with the word of the Lord that came to him:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. (Jer.1:5)

I see the joy and hope on his face – *I've got a special task from God; I've been chosen by him; this really is my purpose in life.* But I see consternation, too – a prophet to the nations? I hear his resistance – *I'm not a good speaker, I have no experience.* I hear God's answer, leaving no room for any further discussion:

You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you. . .

Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but you will not be overcome, for I am with you and will rescue you. (Jer.1:7b-8, 18-19)

I sense Jeremiah's feelings of being trapped. God's assurances only make the task seem even more daunting. He knows there's no way out – whatever opposition he meets God will make him even stronger. It's no use trying to stand in the way of God's purposes. Neither he nor the people who will hear him are a match for God. So off he goes. He's a prophet.

Jeremiah's complaint to God:

*O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived;
you overpowered me and prevailed.
I am ridiculed all day long;
everyone mocks me.
Whenever I speak, I cry out
proclaiming violence and destruction.
So the word of the Lord has brought me
insult and reproach all day long.
But if I say "I will not mention him
or speak any more in his name,"
his word is in my heart like a fire,
a fire shut up in my bones.
I am weary of holding it in;
indeed, I cannot.
I hear many whispering,
"Terror on every side!
Report him! Let's report him!"
All my friends
are waiting for me to slip saying,
"Perhaps he will be deceived;
then we will prevail over him
and take our revenge on him." . . . (Jer.20:7-10)*

*Cursed be the day I was born!
May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!
Cursed be the man who brought my father the news,
who made him very glad, saying,
"A child is born to you – a son!"
May that man be like the towns
the Lord overthrew without pity.
May he hear wailing in the morning,
a battle cry at noon.
For he did not kill me in the womb,
with my mother as my grave,
her womb enlarged forever.
Why did I ever come out of the womb
to see trouble and sorrow
and to end my days in shame? (Jer. 20:14-18)*

But at times, God bless him, I hear Jeremiah letting God know what he thinks about the opposition he has to face – through no fault of his own! – and the frustration and distress he feels about doing this task for God (see box previous page). And I feel like clapping him loudly for his honesty and daring – but I’m afraid God may hear me

I see **Ezekiel**, and imagine the impact on his ears and heart of the word God repeats as he tells him, and repeats, his task and his message – *rebellious, rebellious, rebellious*:

I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says.” And whether they listen or fail to listen – for they are a rebellious house – they will know that a prophet has risen among them. And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words . . . You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. (Ezek.2:3-7)

I can’t believe it when God imposes dumbness on this messenger whose task is to speak, proclaim, tell. And I feel his aching limbs as, day by day, month by long month, he mimes, acts out, messages from God (see chapter 4 for one example). He does it all because he’s a prophet. Ah, no – life wasn’t meant to be easy for prophets.

All of this provides the background for understanding the way in which prophets write. Probably the most distinctive thing they do, Hermeneutics taught me, is to write something like *This is what the Lord says* quite a lot.

One thing that was impressed upon me at the Sem is that there’s something very special about the Word of God, which God speaks, and prophets proclaim. It’s a Word that has to be spoken – that’s how it’s activated (as we say these days). By being spoken it’s released, released so it can happen, come about. That’s what happened when God spoke his creative Word to bring about light, sky, earth, vegetation, in fact the whole of creation. He said it and it happened! Of course, not every Word of God happens straight away, as it did in the creation story. But at some time, in God’s good time, it will come about! And once spoken, that Word may even keep on happening, as it echoes on down through history. God’s Word is always an active Word accomplishing what it says – the prophet’s task is to say it, for God, and for people to hear.

It was fascinating to learn from Hermeneutics that prophets have a few ways of hearing God’s Word so that they know what needs to be passed on to others. Most commonly they say that the Word *comes* to them from God himself. Or they claim they are *given a vision* in which they see or hear (or see and hear) the message God wants them to make known. Sometimes, though – and I think there’s something mysterious about this – they are allowed to be present at God’s ‘council’ – a kind of meeting of the board – in which God discusses the situation on earth and gives his instructions to his angels and helpers. By being

there prophets know what's on the mind of God, what his plans are, and what message he wants them to proclaim.

So since they get their message from God in these direct ways prophets are confident of the truth and the power of the word entrusted to them. That's why they repeat over and over: *This is what the Lord says.* And every word is important: This. Is. What. The Lord. Says.

Hermeneutics also made it clear to me that prophets usually write about the future in a special way – *as if it's already happened.*

The Word, or message, given to them is to be spoken into a very specific situation, for specific people, at a specific time. Prophets do not predict the future; they speak *about* the future. And only to give the people a message for their present life.

It's similar to the message I might give to my son whom I know is speeding or drink-driving. *When you drive like that, I might say, you're very likely to injure or kill other drivers and land yourself in hospital for a long time, or in the cemetery for a longer time.* In saying this I'm not predicting the future, I'm just speaking about a likely future which may have an impact for the present.

That's the kind of message the prophets pass on for God. Only they make it far more dramatic than that. Since God has actually told them about the future, or even given them a vision of it, they speak as if it was a past event. So in speaking to my son a prophet may put it something like this. *The car is wrapped around a tree. The noise of the flying gravel, and of the sickening bang of the impact, has been replaced by silence – a deathly silence. Three young people have missed out on so much living; two families have so much pain to face. Oh, you idiots, give up your speeding and drink-driving and live!* Someone has said that prophets speak about the future as though it was the past in order to bring a message for the present. That hits the nail on the head.

Here are two passages that refer to God's council:

One of Job's friends accuse him of speaking about things he doesn't really know about. He says to Job:

Are you the first man ever born?

Were you brought forth before the hills?

Do you listen in on God's council?

Do you limit wisdom to yourself?

What insights do you have that we do not have? (Job 15:7-9)

In one of Jeremiah's confrontation with false prophets he says to the people:

This is what the Lord Almighty says:

"Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes.

They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. . .

But which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or to hear his word?

Who has listened and heard his word? . . .

I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message;

I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied.

But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds." (Jer.23:16,18,21-22)

Because the prophets address present situations, very little, if any, of their prophecies apply to people other than those who first heard it. I guess if I were to be in an *identical* situation to the original hearers (and that would be very rare), maybe, just maybe, I could hear the prophet's *this is what the Lord says* as addressing me. But it'd be far more likely that God would have a different message for me. Of course, I'm convinced the writings of prophets still have a great deal to tell us thousands of years later. A great deal about *God* – who he is, what he does, his unimaginable love, his unpredictable mercy, his unwavering faithfulness to his promises and his people, his unending and nothing-can-stand-in-the-way-of pursuit of the human race to reveal and prove his boundless love for each one of us. Without the prophets our awareness – certainly my awareness – of God's grace and mercy wouldn't be as broad and multi-faceted as it is, or as it will become.

The wonder of prophecy and fulfillment

Hermeneutics taught me about a wonderful and even mysterious way of writing that has an important place in the Bible. It's a kind of double meaning, as a new interpretation is hung on the original message. The writer intends one thing, but other Bible passages allow me to hear another meaning that wasn't intended by the writer. This can happen because the ultimate purpose of the Bible is to proclaim, or at least point to, Jesus. This is usually called *prophecy and fulfillment*, and I like to see it as one result of the Spirit's inspiration.

The first sentence of these verses from Isaiah is usually read at Christmas time as a prophecy of the virgin birth of Jesus. But that reading doesn't include the two sentences that follow. This is understandable because if these verses are read it becomes clear that this paragraph is not about the virgin birth of Jesus at all. This is a sign given to King Ahaz,

An example of prophecy and fulfillment

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. (Is.7:14-16)

who was reluctant to take God's offer of a sign especially for him. But God gave him one anyway. *A maiden (this word can mean both virgin and maiden), a maiden living at the moment, Ahaz, will give birth and call her son Immanuel. And, take note Ahaz, by the time this boy has reached a certain stage in his growth, the kings, of whom you are so terrified, will no longer be a threat to you. They will be defeated.* Quite an encouraging sign for the terrified Ahaz.

Why then is this sign to Ahaz used as a pointer to the birth of Jesus? Because, Hermeneutics says, this is what happens in prophecy and fulfillment. This first sentence is given a double meaning, a two-dimensional meaning. The fact that Jesus was given the name Immanuel (meaning 'God with us') and that Mary was a virgin, brought to the early Christians a new understanding of this passage – not a replacement understanding but an additional one. It's a new

fulfillment of God's words that were originally fulfilled for Ahaz. It even involved the changing of the word 'maiden/virgin' to 'virgin'. God is acting again to assure humankind of his presence with them in a special way.

Here are a few verses from Ps.8 in which this concept of prophecy and fulfillment also works mysteriously and amazingly to point to Jesus.

Since this is poetry line-pairing and line-rhyming are in place. The middle pair of lines is a rhyme that expresses the same thought. So *man* and *son of man* mean the same thing.

The writer's intended meaning in these verses could be summed up in this way (if I dare to remove the poetry from it). *A consideration of the vastness and the detail of God's creation makes me*

wonder why God cares so much for humankind. He has given us humans an honour almost as glorious as that of the angels, because he has placed us in the position of taking care of his creation for him. That's what the writer of this part of the psalm is saying - no more, no less.

But *son of man* is also used as a name for Ezekiel; Daniel in his vision sees someone *like a son of man* in the presence of God in heaven; and when Jesus comes to the earth, one of the names he gives himself is *the Son of Man*. So it's no surprise that when the early Christians, including the writer to the Hebrews, and you and I as well, hear *son of man* we can't stop ourselves thinking of Jesus. He IS the Son of Man.

So now prophecy and fulfillment kicks in. Those two lines: *what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?* are no longer just a thought rhyme saying the same thing. The second line is about Jesus. The book of Hebrews (2:5-9) says that Ps.8:4-6 is a prophecy which Jesus fulfilled. Jesus was made a little lower than the angels for a brief time (while he was on the earth) and then exalted to a position of glory over everything (even the angels – the whole of Heb.1 makes this point) because of his death on our behalf. Now that's certainly not the meaning that the writer of the Psalm 8 had in mind.

Hermeneutics says that in prophecy and fulfillment a Bible passage can have more than one meaning. And it's important that those two meanings are distinguished and not confused. The original meaning stands, then another is added because of who Jesus is and what he's done. A two-dimensional reading of scripture is the result. Now and then a scripture passage can even be fulfilled more than once, giving a three-dimensional reading. It's as if that active Word of God, once spoken, can come to life again in later times of

Another example of prophecy and fulfillment

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
You have made him a little lower than the
heavenly beings,
and crowned him with glory and honour.
You have made him ruler over the works of
your hands;
you put everything under his feet . . .
(Ps.8:3-6)*

history, with a slightly different interpretation being given to the original message. All this leads me to stand in the wonder at the Inspiration of Scripture – and the working of prophecy and fulfillment!

The challenge of double-meanings

It was pretty exciting for me to understand the wonder of double meaning that lay behind prophecy and fulfillment. It took me some time to get my head around it all, but certainly many of my questions about prophecy and fulfillment were laid to rest. But Hermeneutics had more examples of double meaning. These double meanings tended to complicate the interpretation of the Bible for me. They highlighted some of the problems all of us face as we try to work out what the Bible writers meant then and what their message means for us today. Here are a few examples:

- I find I constantly need to reckon with the confusion that comes from the fact that the Bible was written in old and different languages. To be understood, it has to be translated into English, even constantly into current-day English. That can lead to strong disagreements about how we should understand words in the Bible today – is our nearest word to *that* Biblical word *this* or *that*? It seems to me that the best advice Hermeneutics gives to double meaning problems like this (and it certainly doesn't solve all the problems) is: The most critical indication of the meaning of any word is the context in which it appears. What meaning does this paragraph suggest for this word here; what meaning does that paragraph suggest for the same word – is it identical, or slightly different, or quite different?
- I'm confused by the symbolism in the Bible. Oh, sometimes I relish the added meaning and the richness of symbolism. This is especially the case in John's Gospel. A lot of words carry symbolic trappings there. One I find especially rich is his use of *darkness*. It symbolizes the darkness of unbelief, of opposition to Jesus, of life lived without God's light/Light. So when Judas leaves the last supper to arrange the details of the betrayal, John's added statement: *and it was night*, says so much.

But the symbolism that leaves *me* in the dark, is that connected with numbers, and beasts, and wars in the heavens, and mountains falling, and plagues – things like that. All this appears in the style of communication that Hermeneutics calls *apocalyptic*. It appears in books like Daniel and Revelation and even in small sections of the Gospels. I was taught not to worry too much about apocalyptic writings – and that suited me fine. After all, it's usually written to people who are suffering persecution, and it's dealing with the end of time, and the return of Jesus, and what's going to happen then. Not that it's unimportant to know about the end of the world; but the symbolism that's used is strange and foreign to us today. Of course the people to whom these writings were addressed

were in the know, they understood.

The ultimate purpose of apocalyptic writings is not to frighten and scare, but to point to the secure hope and comfort and victory in Jesus that's there even in the worst suffering. No matter what may be coming, apocalyptic's message is: don't be afraid, God has not lost control, he's doing what needs to be done to bring his victory and his eternal life to fruition – even in the face of powers that don't want that victory to happen. When I read apocalyptic material with that in mind it's amazing what comfort jumps out. I also have the feeling that if we Christians were ever to be faced with serious persecution these writings would suddenly speak to us in a new way.

There are a couple of other challenges I want to mention. Challenges that, despite the hints, insights, and advice Hermeneutics gives, still make it difficult to understand, or to know for sure, what the writers of the Bible meant, and what their message means for us today.

➤ **The challenge that chapter and verse divisions throw up**

Hermeneutics revealed to me the potential dangers of thinking in chapters and verses. One of the best pieces of advice I received at the Sem concerned the version of the Bible I was using at that time. It was the version from which I gained much of my knowledge of God's Word, and from which I memorized verses and psalms. It was the version contained in the two valued Bibles I received as Confirmation and 21st birthday gifts. The advice was: *don't use that version of the Bible.*

That advice was given – and this was quite apart from the use of old-fashioned language – because every verse was set out as if it was a separate paragraph. That made it harder to see if a verse was connected with the previous one, or if it had moved on to a new topic. I was advised to use versions in which the verses were grouped in paragraphs. That certainly made it a lot easier to follow what the writer was saying.

It came as a real surprise to learn that not one of the books was originally written with chapter and verse numbers. These numbers are a fairly recent addition (considering the age of the Bible). By Luther's time the chapter divisions had been made, the verse numbers only came later. Chapter and verse numbers were added ONLY as a means of locating far more quickly specific sentences or words. None of those numbers helps me to gain a clearer understanding. Instead they tend to distract from, or even ruin, the picture the writer is painting. I want to read and hear the books as they were written – in paragraphs, not verses.

➤ **The challenge of not being able to hear and see the writer**

As I learnt (from that hidden Hermen) early in life, it's so important to see and to hear the one who is speaking to me. Then I can catch a voice intonation, a slight pause, a hint of anger, an eye-twinkle, just the touch of

a smile – things that are such a vital part of any communication. As I read and hear the Bible I have nothing of that. The best I can expect may be some of those indications from the person reading the Bible – but that will reflect the reader's understanding, and perhaps not the writer's. Despite Hermeneutics' learning he could give me no way of dealing with that problem. Therefore some questions about what the writer means are going to remain unanswered.

I was taught a fair bit by Hermeneutics at the Sem. He really enabled me to see the Bible with new eyes and to hear it with new ears. For that I'm exceedingly grateful, especially to the lecturers and theologians who introduced him to me. I left the Sem aware that the lecturers and Hermeneutics himself had placed a very serious task before me, had laid a heavy burden on me. I was expected to introduce Hermeneutics to the members of the congregations in which I served, so that they might come to know what God was saying to them. I was expected to keep learning so that I could understand the Bible correctly myself – but if I was confused there were statements made by the church to sort out my thinking. This was heavy stuff. But I left the Sem eagerly looking forward to the challenge. I had with me my companion Hermeneutics.

MY REDISCOVERED FRIEND

When I was a kid I had, at least for a while, two Grandpas. Of course, that's no surprise. But it may be surprising that I didn't mention them when I spoke of my up-bringing. One reason for this lies in the fact that they died earlier than my Grandmas, and I have to do more digging to uncover my memories of them. But the main reason has to do with their 'distance' from my life, certainly in comparison with my uncles and aunties. They didn't interact with me with winks and eye-twinkles and other life-engaging habits when I was at an age to be looking for that kind of thing. And now as a grandpa myself I can understand the desire to withdraw somewhat – or even a whole lot – from the life of grandkids, even if that makes me appear as a stuck-in-the-mud fuddy-duddy. That's not to say my Grandpas were straight faced and withdrawn. To have produced the uncles and aunties I had, they must have been very involved with the rough and tumble, and the everyday fun, of life. It was through their children that they had an influence in my life.

But for me my two Grandpas were relatively boring and quiet and not a central part of life. I could happily leave them there on the edge of life and feel I wasn't missing anything.

As the years went by in my parish life I felt more and more that Hermeneutics was like my Grandpas. He taught me much about what to look for to help me to understand the Scripture, but he became a stuck-in-the-mud fuddy-duddy. He was academic, scholarly, predictable. Most of the members of congregations didn't relate to him at all, couldn't understand what he was trying to do for them, and didn't want to have anything to do with him. And I came to feel that despite his insights he was quite removed from life and didn't really help much in relating the Bible to our current day issues. He was too formal, too straight-laced, too tied to the written-down and the defined.

I started to pine for Hermen. For the risk-taking, the surprise-giving, the eye-twinkling Hermen. I missed what I thought he could tell me about the God who laughs and jokes, who accepts all, who uses the mistakes we make, who delights in wonderful, practical surprises. That was the kind of God I was used to from Hermen. Despite all the wonderful and insight-giving help Hermeneutics had given me, I didn't really hear from him about a God like that. Despite the love of learning he instilled, I craved a love that related my learning to the people around me with problems – their problems with the church, the problems in their lives, their problems with all the issues life threw at them. Hermeneutics didn't seem to help much with all that.

So during the years of trying to make God real and personal to people, Hermeneutics kind of faded into the background. I'm not sure where he went –

perhaps he retreated back into the Sem, went back to his books and papers and theses, back to the fine theoretical debates he could have there. I believe Hermeneutics enjoys life at the Sem far better than in the parish.

But now a wonderful thing started to happen. As Hermeneutics withdrew, Hermen returned. I gradually rediscovered my now not-secret and not-hidden friend, Hermen! And rather than teaching me like Hermeneutics did, he helped me learn! And the things I learnt about God . . . !!

The God who created such a contradictory world and life for us

I'd always thought that the book of Proverbs was a pretty heavy and serious book. I wasn't sure how seriously to take its advice and proclamations. However, Hermen's involvement in the rough and tumble of life brought to light new clues about this book. These clues enable me to see the playfulness and the twinkling of eyes that lie behind these ancient proverbs – even behind their origins long before they were gathered together and written down in one book.

On the basis of what Hermen helped me learn about proverbs I imagine – and maybe I'm letting my imagination run away with me just a little bit – I imagine that the art of proverb-composing began during that evening relaxation time around the camp fire as the men enjoyed their pre-meal or post-meal home-made beer or red wine. Of course it was a male dominated society then (unlike today!) and around that fire wives came up as a topic of conversation fairly often (unlike today!).

I can see old widowed Jacob winking at his neighbour sitting a bit further around the circle, and saying with sympathy, *Ah, my ears have had a serious going over today. You know, I reckon I'd think seriously about living up on the roof rather than sharing all the comforts of home with a constantly arguing wife. Yeah, I know what you mean*, said the recently married Joash, after the chuckling had died down, *but I'd rather set up a tent right out in the desert where it's nice and quiet.* More laughter. *If you only could,* was the next comment, *but you can't – well I can't. Some wives are like the drip, drip, drip, of a rainy day, and about as hard to control as the wind or a handful of oil.* Stifled laughter as Miriam, still arguing with Mary, comes out to check the roast.

This camp fire banter went through a refining and adaption process at subsequent camp fires, and after passing the test of time was eventually recorded in the book of Proverbs as:
Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife. (21:9)
Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife. (21:19)
A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand. (27:15-16)

On another occasion the camp fire conversation is about coping with folk who see themselves as being really wise, but who are really foolish and stupid. What's the best way of dealing with dills like that? After some opinions are

heard the men agree to make it into a game. Whoever gives the best answer to this question is to be given a prize any loving husband would be keen to pass on to his wife – his wife will be excused from helping the women gather the firewood for the next week. Aaron's contribution is: *Don't talk to a fool as if you were a fool – if you do, that makes you just as silly as he is.* Benjamin who has said little so far says, *No, no, do talk to a fool as if you were a fool – otherwise he'll think he's wise.* [Isn't inspiration amazing? Here are two verses, side by side, saying the opposite thing, both the inspired Word of God!] But the judge of this competition went for this statement: *I reckon you should keep right away from foolish people – I'd rather tackle a bear robbed of her cubs than deal with a dill.*

This camp fire banter was eventually recorded as:

Do not answer a fool according to this folly, or you will be like him yourself.

Answer a fool according to this folly or he will be wise in his own eyes. (26:4-5)

Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than a fool in his folly. (17:12)

Then, of course, the laziness of loafers, slackers, and dole bludgers is a good topic. *I had a workman who never got around to doing the jobs I gave him; he was as irritating as a mouth full of vinegar or eyes full of smoke.*

That's nothing, I had a neighbour once who was so lazy he couldn't be bothered lifting his filled spoon to his mouth; he only survived because his wife fed him.

Well, I heard of a bloke who was called 'The Door' – it looked like he was hinged to his bed as right through the day he rolled from one side to the other.

This camp fire banter was eventually recorded as:

As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send him. (10:26)

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth. (19:24)

As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed. (26:14)

Hermen has helped me to learn that the book of Proverbs doesn't contain truths that apply to all occasions and all times. It doesn't contain teachings on which to build doctrines and philosophies. Proverbs like, *Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die.* and *Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death. (23:13-14)* are not meant to provide the basic foundation for good parenting. *Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it (22:6)* isn't meant to be universally true.

These proverbs are Israel's attempts to come to terms with the rough and tumble of the life God gave to us all. They create an awareness of life's inconsistencies and contradictions, and perhaps even begin to make some sense of them. They help with living life wisely and well – and having some fun along the way. Thanks to people like Solomon who collected these proverbs, we continue this search for meaning and mystery, for sense and nonsense, in our daily lives.

The God who pulls your leg

One outstanding insight for me into the way God works came by way of Martin Luther's experience of Hermen. I was preparing a sermon on God's testing of Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as a burnt-offering to God – an extremely fascinating account in Gen.22:1-9. Looking at what Luther says about this story in his commentary on Genesis, I noticed he wrote that here God is *playing with Abraham, sporting with him*. That caught my attention! Luther explained it's like a mother giving her son a lolly (for example) and asking him to share it by giving it to his sister. Of course, she has a whole packet of them, but the son doesn't know this. If he's prepared to give up his one lolly, showing he trusts his mother's love, it enables him to experience the joy of being given a whole packet full – and to enjoy the parent's little game.

Luther is describing the game of leg-pulling. He imagines that God's instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his son was accompanied by at least the touch of a smile, at least a slight wink. I could understand that. God had already told him that his son was the promised heir through whom a large nation would come. He couldn't, he wouldn't, go back on that promise. So, somehow, somehow, he didn't intend Isaac to die. All Abraham had to do was to trust God and play along with him to see how this game ended. Now, maybe this is a pretty serious and beyond-a-joke kind of leg-pull, but the closer the relationship is between two people the more serious a leg-pull can be. God and Abraham are so close (and the Bible reveals as much) that even a request like this could be seen as a leg-pull. And Abraham plays along, convinced he saw the wink, and comes out the other side even closer to God.

The Hermen I was rediscovering gives clues to winks and leg-pulls in Bible stories. In fact, he has let me see that God is still pulling people's legs. He's certainly pulling mine. For example, he tells me that I must die. And I know I can't avoid it. But it's a leg-pull – a wonderful leg-pull! Look at God winking! He has already given the promise that I'm NOT going to die – I'm just going to be placed in a grave. Jesus has died in my place. I will share in his death-defeating eternal life. I see that wink when he says: you must die! – a wink that really means: you'll live forever! The whole of my life is lived within that wink. The whole of my life is a game of leg-pulling initiated by the God who has defeated death! ANYTHING at all in my life that tells me God doesn't love me, or isn't working things for my ultimate benefit, or isn't holding out to me the gift of eternal life in Jesus (no matter what it is or where it comes from) is a part of that leg-pulling. Ah, I love to see God winking!

The God who uses stories from way back to reveal himself

During my years at the Sem and my early years in the parish the story of creation in Genesis 1 produced quite a bit of controversy and tension – for me, and for many folk who read it. And it has done so for centuries. Like many others, I used to read it as if it was part of a novel or an historical account and

wondered how it could be harmonized with the evolutionary claims of science. Is it teaching a 7-day creation, proving that all the theories and evidences of evolution are bunkum? Similar to the way the Bible's previously accepted 'teaching' that the earth is flat, and that the earth is the centre of our universe, proved science had got it all wrong!! Or does Genesis 1 support science and some kind of evolutionary process – despite its insistence that *there was evening and there was morning, the first/second/etc. day?* Or is it best to treat it as some old-fashioned writing and just ignore it until it goes away? And how do I help ordinary church members understand what the Bible is saying here? When I don't think I'm entirely sure?

For me the breakthrough came when Hermen's lightheartedness overpowered the controversy and tension that enveloped this story. He informed me about the background, the history, that accompanies some of the stories in the Bible – stories that originated during the time before the advent of writing. Stories that were constructed in such a way that memorization of them was made very easy. Stories that were passed on by word of mouth from parent to child for years and years without being changed. Stories that had a long history before they were written down.

From the clues Hermen gives about the composition of pre-literary stories, I had no hesitation seeing this account of creation in Genesis 1 as one of them. And in doing that the tenseness dissolved and a childlike joyfulness took over.

If I were to make a comparison I'd liken this story to one of the stories I came to know before I could read and write, a story from my own personal pre-literary history. That story is *The three little pigs*. *The three little pigs* and the creation account in Genesis 1 have the same structure. I feel compelled to jump in here straight away and underline the fact that I'm NOT saying the creation account is something like a fairy story, or that the two stories are so close to being on the same level that one can be compared with the other. I am just saying that the STRUCTURE of these two stories is similar. Both have repetition that makes memorization easy. Both have sections that repeat what has gone before and sections that introduce new material to advance the story. And, of course, in this structure the new material is far more important than the repetition (without new material there would be no story). The repetition provides the background (and partly it can be quite irrelevant and by-the-way) for what is really going on. [Jesus' parable of the *Good Samaritan* is another story that shares this same kind of structure.] It's important to distinguish between the story Genesis 1 is telling and the structural elements which simply put the story in a form that makes memorization easy and serves to preserve the story for future generations.

So the structural chorus-like elements of this story (and others like them) are not parts on which doctrines and teachings can be based. I was content not to base teachings on the structural elements in the parable of the *Good Samaritan* – you know the chorus: *now a (Levite/priest/Samaritan) came along and saw the man lying beside the road*. But I fell into the trap of trying to do this with the

chorus in Genesis 1 – specifically with *there was evening and there was morning, the first/second/etc. day*. Now I realize it's quite inappropriate even to ask *How long are the days here?* or *How old, according to this account, is the earth?* They are the kind of questions these structural elements weren't designed to answer, and aren't meant to answer.

I'm thankful to Hermen for pointing out the special characteristics of stories that were meant to be memorized rather than written down (at least initially). He removed the tenseness I had at first and helped me to listen as I did to my favourite fairy stories when I was a child. I made a distinction between the structure and the story itself, and looked for the point in the story and not in the structure holding it together.

The God who tells stories to give you a kick in the pants

Hermen brought my attention to the stories (or parables) Jesus told – and helped me to take into account what goes on before and after the story. I found that invariably Jesus' parables are directed to people who had gotten things wrong. They were misunderstanding what God expected of them, they were acting in ways that didn't match up with the faith they professed, they were holding to incorrect beliefs about the God they claimed to be serving and following. So Jesus told them a story to get them back on the right track – to give them a gentle kick in the pants. But invariably many objected to the point Jesus was making in the story. Some, of course, missed the point, but usually they had at least a vague idea about the correction Jesus was giving them. They just didn't like it. They objected to a God who would dare to give them a kick in the pants. They didn't want a God like that. They even thought they knew God so well that this kind of treatment by Jesus was totally uncalled-for – and it was a major reason for their desire to have Jesus put to death.

I need the same treatment from God. I drift off in the same ways God's New Testament people did. Probably I need a harder kick in the pants. So to avoid that I looked for what the parables of Jesus say about God. Jesus tells us they are stories about the Kingdom of God – thanks to the introduction he gives to most of his parables. But I was looking at the wrong end of the Kingdom, if I can put it this way. I thought the

Some examples of the seemingly-foolish actions of God as announced in the parables:

The parable of the sower (Matt.13:3-8) announces the gracious foolishness of a God who scatters the seed of his word in such a wasteful way that he doesn't care if much of that seed is wasted.

The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) announces the gracious foolishness of a God who welcomes all his wayward children back home inviting them to a feast of forgiveness and mercy.

The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) announces the gracious foolishness of a God who rescues people facing death no matter what the cost is to himself.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt.20:1-16) announces the gracious foolishness of a God who acts so unfairly by giving all of us what we don't deserve in any way at all.

And so on – always a God who acts way beyond my understanding and comprehension!

parables were mainly speaking about *this* end, about my actions as a member of the Kingdom of God, about my behaviour here in this world. But, thanks to Hermen, I now see that the chief purpose of Jesus in telling these stories is to tell me about God's end, about his behaviour, about the kind of God I have and how he always acts towards me in grace and mercy.

Hermen helped me learn the art of looking for what the parables say about God. And God being who he is, that will invariably be something that is going to surprise me. I've found that God's nature and love and grace always comes as a shock, a wonderful shock – because it is such an un-human-like way to act, such an unheard-of course of action, such a stupid (certainly in my opinion) thing to do. I've come to realize that unless I see the stupid, the surprising, the foolish action of God that's described in each parable I haven't understood it. I still haven't been opened to the only power that can do anything about causing me to react in a positive way to the kicks in the pants I receive.

So the kicks I get from the parables aren't the kicks of threatened punishment, the kicks of an angry God – they're the kicks of grace, of love, of forgiveness and mercy. They are kicks that motivate change and work love and mercy for those around me. Now that's a kick in the pants to welcome!

The God who reveals himself as three-dimensional

Hermen became a great help to me in getting my head around the problems I face when I mistakenly read the four Gospels as if they are just objective historical accounts. He helps me to understand that none of the Gospel writers intended to say everything there was to say about Jesus. Each writer is presenting to their own different group of readers what is relevant and appropriate for those readers. And in the process they are also saying something about their own personality and their own faith in this Jesus. Each is painting his own individual picture of Jesus. AND when these are put together I found they give me a unique and exciting three-dimensional view of Jesus and who he is!

My wife likes to know which houses are for sale in our suburb, what is the asking price for these properties, and how the trend for house values is going. To understand the asking price for a certain home, it's a real help to know as many details about the house and the yard as possible. Certainly a photo of all four sides of the house is valuable. If these photos were to be laid out side by side, I don't know anyone who'd expect those photos to be identical, with no differences. You'd expect each photo to show, for example, a difference with regard to exterior doors – and a different number of windows, and a different shape to the roof, and a different look to the garden and vegetation outside the house, and so on. When I put those different photos together with their differences of detail I can gain a fairly accurate three-dimensional picture of the home.

At one time I was puzzled – like many members in the congregations in which I

served – at the differences in the accounts of the four Gospels. I just assumed that they would be very easy to harmonize, that there wouldn't be any differences between them, that they would paint exactly the same picture. In other words, that they would depict Jesus in the same way – as if he was a one-dimensional person. But Hermen gave me clues to help me see that viewing Jesus by means of the four pictures painted by the four Gospel writers was like looking at the four sides of a house. I was being given a three-dimensional view of Jesus. So if there were differences – any kind of difference – between the Gospels it was important to take note of them. And to ask myself, why did this Gospel writer put his Gospel together in *this* way, when the other writers did it that way? What is this writer saying about Jesus? What is he saying about his own experience of, and faith in, Jesus? What contribution is he giving for a fuller, richer, and more realistic three-dimensional picture of Jesus as God's Son? Certainly if I'm trying to understand *God*, a one-dimensional picture will be a miserable failure. I need to look at him from as many points of view as possible – if only to see how different he is from the human and mortal world to which I'm confined.

Here are a few brief examples of distinctive features that contribute to the unique picture of Jesus painted by each particular Gospel.

Matthew has by far the most references to Old Testament prophecies that found fulfillment in the life of Jesus. Some events recorded by Matthew and the way his Gospel is structured also seems to bring to the attention of readers the content and structure of the Old Testament. Matthew repeatedly speaks about the *kingdom* (or the *kingdom of God* and the *kingdom of heaven*) – an important theme in the Old Testament. Because of all this some people claim Matthew wrote his Gospel for Jewish readers – a logical assumption, but still no more than an assumption.

Mark is the shortest Gospel, his favourite word is *immediately*. Jesus is usually depicted as doing (especially performing miracles) rather than speaking. One assumption that has been made – and again it is no more than that – is that Mark got his material from Peter.

Luke's interest in *outsiders* (the weak, the outcast, women, Gentiles) shines through in the way in which he writes his Gospel. Because he does that Jesus is drawn with the colours of compassion and gentleness. As you read you can't miss the humanity of Jesus.

John's Gospel has a very different tone from the other three. The content is assembled around themes rather than following any chronological order. Many of the themes are introduced by a miracle of Jesus (only John calls them *signs*) setting the scene for Jesus to speak, teach, and explain more about the particular theme. John uses words that are crammed full of meaning (for example, *word, glory, light, darkness, life, world, flesh, believe, sign, testimony, I am, counselor*, and so on). The whole Gospel can be regarded as a series of testimonies to Jesus as the King, with his death on the cross as his coronation. It's full of rich, poetical, and theological language.

John (like Mark) leaves out all references to the birth of Jesus. But he does 'hint' at it. In an amazing way! In just one sentence! – *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us* (John 1:14). Really, there's the whole Christmas event! – what more needs to be said?

I think a really special picture of Jesus is painted in this Gospel.

So it's very important to see the differences in the Gospels, to work out what it is about Jesus that has captured each writer's attention, to see each Gospel's unique contribution to my own relationship with God. Come on, Hermen, keep giving me clues to prompt me to grow in my appreciation of the Gospels!

The God who says different things to different people to say the same thing

Hermen helped me learn more about the letters in the New Testament. I knew they weren't written directly to me, but I wanted to be clear about what relevance they had for me and for all readers today. Probably the most important questions Hermen got me to ask were: *who wrote this letter? to whom did he write it? and what's going on to make the letter necessary?* I found these questions very helpful as I worked through probably the biggest difference (at least for Lutherans) between different writers of letters in the Bible. Two inspired writers come to directly opposing conclusions:

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. (Rom.3:28)
You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. (James 2:24)

Now instead of an approach which tries to determine which writer is right and which is wrong, Hermen got me to look at the situation into which these two writers said what they did. Apart from a serious fight against a whole host of presuppositions (on my part), I didn't really find this difficult. All it means is listening closely to what is being said in the paragraphs surrounding these two statements, and to the way in which words have been used by the writers.

It's very similar to the way in which words are used differently in different states in Australia. For Queenslanders looking for the port means searching their house for the suitcase in which to pack their clothes for a holiday. For South Australians looking for the port means trying to locate where your wife put the bottle of wine after her big clean-up. If you are a Queensland living in South Australia, or a South Australian living in Queensland, it means listening to the sentence(s) surrounding the word *port* to let you know what it is you're looking for – and enjoying the fun that can surround the search.

And it did involve some fun as I applied that listening to the two opposing statements written by Paul and James.

When I look at the paragraph surrounding James' use of the word *faith* (beginning at v.14) I notice he speaks about *faith with no deeds* (v.14) and goes on to give an example of a person (with faith) doing nothing to help a cold, starving person. For this he uses the terms *such faith* (v.14) and *faith by itself* (v.17). He even speaks of demons *believing* that there is one God (v.19). So James is using the word *faith* to mean nothing more than acknowledging God and his oneness – most probably because that's the way those to whom he's writing speak about faith.

However, looking at what Paul writes (in all his letters, but especially Romans

and Galatians), I could never imagine him using the term *faith* in the way James does. *Faith* with no deeds! – demons *believe!* – never!! For Paul *faith* is nothing less than an active love-showing and trusting relationship with Jesus. And his addressees understand his usage perfectly.

What James means by his *by what he does* is not the same as what Paul means by his *observing the law* – even though they are both speaking about actions of obedience to God. James' *what he does* are the actions of love and compassion arising from an obedient and trusting relationship with Jesus – which his hearers are not showing in their lives. And that's why their acknowledgement-of-God faith is dead and useless. Paul's actions of *observing the law* are actions done by people to gain God's approval and acceptance, it's what they're doing to try to deserve God's love, and therefore a place in heaven.

So, I find I can reword Paul's statement (*we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law*) in this way: We maintain that a person is justified by a trusting-and-love-showing faith relationship with Jesus and not from efforts of obedience designed to earn or to deserve salvation. He's speaking to people (obviously Jews) who believed their keeping of the God's laws guaranteed their place in heaven.

And I can reword James' statement (*You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone*) in this way: It's obvious that a person is justified by a trusting-and-love-showing faith relationship with Jesus and not from a bare acknowledgement, no matter how sincere, that God exists. He's speaking to people who believed that it didn't matter if their belief in a God had no impact on the way in which they lived.

Both are in fact saying exactly the same thing, only addressing different situations, in which words were used differently. I just love Herman's advice to listen closely by asking: *who wrote this letter? to whom did he write it? and what's going on to make the letter necessary?*

So then, since my time at the Sem I've come to know Herman once again. He has led me on a journey of discovery – discovering a God who laughs and jokes; a God who accepts all people; a God who uses the mistakes I make and my muddling about; a God who surprises me at almost every turn by what he does around me, in me, and in the people with whom I live; and a God to whom congregation members can relate to, experiencing his presence with them in life.

NOW THE SPIRIT STEPS IN

I've been telling the story of the influence of my friend, Hermen – and to a lesser degree, of that scholar, Hermeneutics – in my life. I've tried to trace their influence as I muddle around trying to understand what the various writers of the books in the Bible are trying to tell me as I read their books today. I've referred to some of the types of communication and writing that were used, and the clues hermeneutics gives to help identify these types. Picking up on these clues has been important to put the writer and me on the same page. I'm far more likely to gain some inkling of things like the mood, the facial expressions, the gestures, the tone of voice of the writers as they dictated or wrote their words. All that helps to hear the meaning the writers intended to give to the people to whom they originally wrote – and to understand what that message means for us today.

Now, I know I have missed some of these clues, I have probably misinterpreted many of them, I have 'seen' some that weren't really there at all, I have let my biases, my presuppositions, all the traditions that played into my upbringing, colour what I think the writers are saying. And exactly the same thing happens to every other person who reads or hears God's Word. None of us can prevent those influences from working in our lives, our thinking, and our judgments. What a potential muddle that provides for our understanding of the books in the Bible.

That's why God has given to his church the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit takes over once hermeneutics has given all the clues it can. And although I like to think that I probably have more of the influence of the Spirit in my understanding of the Bible than others, that's not the case. The Spirit is given to all believers. He belongs to the church; he influences us all. So while I'm free to share what I believe Scripture is saying, ultimately I have to – and I'm happy to! – submit to the Spirit as he works in all of us together. I'm happy to let the consensus of my fellow believers in the church have more authority than me in telling me what the Spirit is revealing about what this paragraph or that book is saying.

To reach that consensus I need to share my understandings and opinions with others, and I need to listen closely to their opinions. That helps me see where I'm wrong and how my personal biases and presuppositions have twisted my outlook. At the same time I need to be sure that those who are sharing their insights with me are listening closely to my opinions and are willing to examine their biases and presuppositions, too. I've found, through quite a bit of trial and error, that the conditions that make a discussion like that possible, and open the way for consensus under the Spirit, are these (maybe these won't work for everyone, but they sure help me a great deal):

- The discussion takes place, preferably informally, in a one-to-one situation, or in a small group. I don't think written correspondence or

papers and essays work very well, as they tend to harden the position of those on both sides of the issue.

- The atmosphere is, above all, one of acceptance. Every person, with all their opinions, presuppositions, and biases, feels totally accepted and willing to open up.
- At times the discussion gets somewhat argumentative and confronting. I've found that my biggest insights into my errors and presuppositions come as I'm forced to defend my position, or make an off-the-cuff response. And this can certainly happen effectively (maybe *only* happen effectively) within an atmosphere of real acceptance.
- There's a willingness to let go of personal convictions, especially if the only justification for them is: *but this is what I've always believed* or *this is what I've been taught*.
- There's a willingness to give up all thoughts of winning or losing in pursuit of the greater goal of consensus under the Spirit.

Once Hermen has started Bible readers on this journey to consensus, he can step back, hand over to the Spirit, and watch the show with enjoyment and pleasure and hope. AND wait to be called on for his assistance and help, whenever that journey winds through a tricky and controversial spot.

I have referred to this process of working with Hermen, with the Spirit, and with fellow believers, as muddling around. And that's what it has seemed like to me. But it isn't a muddling around in the dark. I see it as a muddling around in the light. The Light of the Spirit, coming through the Word (Jesus) and through the Word of God (the Bible) challenges my thinking, and shows up my biases and prejudices. The light that Hermen brings to bear on God's inspired Word confronts me with the presuppositions and traditions I have been brought up with, and accepted without question. New discoveries about life in this universe, shine light on what I had accepted about God and this world. Of course it's a muddle, but it's muddling around in the Light/light.

Looking for the teaching in the Bible

All that I've been looking at so far has been preliminary to another and more difficult task that confronts the church. You and I, and the church as a whole, want to move beyond trying to understand what each writer is saying. We want to work out what the Bible as a whole says about individual issues. What *teaching* does it give, what *doctrines* does it proclaim?

What a hornet's nest of a muddle that can be! Church members (including myself) aren't so willing to let go of what *they* think are, or should be, the teachings and doctrines of the church in order to submit to what the Spirit is saying through the consensus of the church. Some folk even feel compelled to leave a denomination or start a new one over issues such as these.

Denominational differences foster and maintain conflicting teachings and doctrines. Not only that, each denomination argues that its teachings are the correct understanding of the Bible. And the process (a necessary one) through which a denomination goes every so often, as it re-considers its teachings, doesn't help in maintaining stability in that denomination.

I'm able to muddle and weave my way through all this disagreement only by acknowledging that each denomination has, and works within, its own biases, traditions and presuppositions. My birth placed me at a specific time in history within a specific Lutheran tradition; it provided an upbringing within a specific time-bound understanding of Lutheranism within that Lutheran tradition; it aligned me with a congregation holding to specific traditions and presuppositions within that version of Lutheranism. The birth of the Lutheran Church also means that it carries within itself the biases and traditions and presuppositions of that time in the history of the church. The rationale for its existence together with its statements and confessions and style of worship all reflect the conditions of the times and the issues that were current then.

As the years go on relationships between denominations change. The relationship between the church and the world in which it exists changes. As these things change light is cast on some of the biases that drove the church in the past. And the church reacts to that. History shows that some of the statements and confessions that were of crucial relevance at the time of the birth of the Lutheran Church have come to hold a *less important* place now (like its disagreement with the Roman Catholic view on purgatory). Some confessional positions held by the Lutheran Church in Australia (LCA) have been *modified* to meet the changing situation (like whether the Pope is the Antichrist). And other confessional statements have been *added* by the LCA to address new situations. Issues raised by modern science or by changes in the values of our society challenged the church to define, or re-define its position, its faith. (The LCA's statements on Genesis 1 and on Homosexuality are examples of this.)

Some modifications to teachings of the church, or the LCA, which intrigue me – especially because of the reasons for these modifications – are:

➤ Changes brought about because of a new scientific world-view.

Scientific discoveries about this world have influenced the church's teaching in the past. They have cast light on certain aspects the church had gotten wrong about God's creation. And, of course, that's to be expected. After all, the writers in the Bible are addressing the people of their time, with the science and world-view that was held at that time.

I think way back to the issues of whether the earth is flat or spherical, and whether the sun moved around the earth or the earth around the sun. Despite the church's assertion at that time that there are verses in the Bible that 'taught' both a flat world and the sun's movement around the earth, eventually after considerable muddling around, these 'teachings' succumbed to the light of science. And the church realized

that these Biblical references didn't have the status of teachings, anyway.

I think back to the creation/evolution conflict, which is still an alive issue for some Christians today. Again the evidence of science is undermining the 'teaching' that proponents claim disproves any kind of evolutionary theory. I find myself wondering if the proponents of a 'strict creationism' are aware that our understanding of the world has changed considerably since the Bible was written. Surely this needs to be taken into account if I want to know what the meaning is now of what was written then.

Sometimes I let my imagination run away with me. Suppose civilization advances way beyond all the scientific discoveries and technological inventions that we have now. Suppose only some of the things sci-fi writers have been predicting (a world that depends on computerization, electronic communication, robotics, space travel, things like that) – suppose it actually happens. It's possible. IF that were to come about what would the people living in the world then (especially the equivalent of our teenagers) say about the Bible and its relevance (in *their* opinion, not ours)? I really can't see it being of any contemporary relevance or value at all – UNLESS we Christians worked very hard (starting now?) at bridging the colossal cultural chasm between the era in which the Bible was written and the era of that time. For some people the distance between the Bible's era and this present age is too great to make the Bible relevant – let alone any futuristic era. My question is: does the church need to look ahead at the possible (probable?) future and start the process of making the Bible's teachings and message as up-to-date now, and in this possible future, as it was in Jesus' time?? Surely we have to make it obvious that whatever direction life on this earth takes, the Bible has a vital relevance to the human race and to whatever life-style it adopts!

➤ Changes brought about by new society values

I think back to the issue of slavery as faced by the church in America. The church muddled over that issue for many years. On the one hand there are passage in the Bible that at that time offered support for the concept, and even the practice, of slavery (for example Eph.6:5-8, Col. 3:22, Tit.2:9, 1 Pet.2:18). On the other hand the practice of slavery raised serious questions about the moral validity of treating other human beings as slaves and degrading them in such a way (even if they were well-treated as slaves). I'm fascinated to see that the church (I'm not sure whether it happened willingly, or was due to the pressure of public opinion) – the church came to a decision not advocated by Scripture, and maybe wasn't even thought of then. The societal values accepted in Scripture were trumped by the principles of respect for other humans, anti-discrimination, and the equality of all. The abolition of slavery was seen as showing the love and respect and humanity that was in accord with the new life Jesus came to bring. What a bold move for the church

of that time to take – to consider the new values and world-view that had developed, and to let those values show up the deficiencies in the church's traditional practices. Surely that needed to happen.

There are issues we face today that are also based on the principle of respect, anti-discrimination and equality. Issues that fall within this scope include the ordination of women and our attitude to homosexuals. I wonder whether we should follow the precedent set by those who went before us by putting a stronger emphasis on societal values that reflect a greater appreciation of basic human rights. Should we make decisions that support those values – whether the Bible contains 'teachings' that support those values or not? At the very least, the societal values that were in place when the Bible was written need to be placed alongside our present societal values to help us in our decision-making. I'm finding it harder to dismiss the valid modern-day stress on equality and anti-discrimination with their calls for change of church teaching, simply because of a valid teaching/doctrine made in the past for a society with different values.

A few years ago when the teaching and practice of Islam was becoming known in this country, the first thing that struck me was the fact that in traditional Islam women are not given equality with men – and how irrelevant that made Islam to Australian society. I was happy to realize that, while the church at one time held to practices similar to (but different from) the Islamic put-down of women, at least we have advanced beyond that now. Very quickly, however, I realized that the church today must seem to our society to be failing in giving women equality with men (along with so many secular organizations) – and how irrelevant that makes the church. But I don't think it's just a matter of seeming – the church, in its teaching and practice, doesn't give women equality. I know our traditional answer is that the sexes are in fact equal, but they have different Biblical roles (which only makes it seem like inequality). But I don't think that argument holds water any longer – not for me, and not for our present day society. Gender equality is a far too important God-given value to be compromised. So can we as a church repeat what happened with slavery? Can we let the present day values of gender equality trump the not-so-recent valid teaching of almost-equality because of different roles and embrace something a bit closer to equality and relevance in our society? Maybe we can even lead the way in showing our society how gender equality really works! But here I'm dreaming, aren't I? Aren't I?

The church has been open to modification of its teachings. It has reacted as the Light/light revealed traditions and teachings that needed some kind of adjustment or change. It will be faced continually with demands and pressures for change. The pressures will arise from all the changes that will keep going on in our ever-developing (and perhaps more godless) civilization.

Help from the Spirit

Changing situations in our world challenge the church to clarify its position, its teaching. God's gift of the Spirit works with and within the church to guide it in this process. This doesn't mean God's answer just drops into our lap as an appropriate perfectly-worded statement. The church can't avoid muddling through issues – even with the Spirit's guidance and help. Besides, this muddling around is a blessing. It helps us to know and understand each other better – and to know and understand God better, as we listen to him and speak to him in prayer. It has helped the church develop principles and resources that can guide the process of arriving at doctrine that both reflects what the Bible says and has relevance to the world in which we live.

The principles include:

- When I want to find out from the Bible what its *teaching* is on a certain topic my muddling has taught me that not all Bible passages should be given the same weight. There are passages that describe what happened, or tell the story, or simply refer to the topic I'm interested in. And there are passages that contain specific teaching on this topic, giving great detail as to what it is and what impact it has on us as Christians. I'm convinced that of these two kinds of passages, those that *contain the teaching* are far more important than those describing what happened. That something happened in a certain way at a certain time doesn't mean that's the way it should always be.

So to discover the Bible's *teaching* on a particular subject I give priority to those passages claiming to be teaching, and give a supportive role to those that describe what took place.

For example, regarding baptism:

Passages that describe what happened at and around a baptism include Acts 16:29-34 and 19:1-7.

Passages that present teaching on baptism, what it is and what impact it has on those who are baptized, include Romans 6:1-11 and John 3:1-15.

Passages giving teaching on baptism need to be given far more attention than those describing what happened at a baptism *if a person wants to arrive at the Bible's teaching, or doctrine, on baptism.*

- When comparing verses that speak about the same topic, the meaning of a word is rarely obtained *just* from the verse in which it occurs. Hermen has made me aware that I need to look at the whole paragraph (or even the whole book) to understand what words mean. I become very uneasy when I hear people connecting one verse in some way with another verse *before* the meaning of each verse is determined from its place and context within the verses that surround it. I'm afraid that without doing that my personal biases and preconceptions and inherited traditions will twist what I read, preventing me (even more than usually happens) from gaining an accurate impression of the Bible's teachings.

- I am aware, too, that the Lutheran Church has developed a theological principle which is meant to assist when determining the Bible's teachings. It's a presupposition or bias adopted by Lutherans because of the way in which we view Scripture and its purpose as God's Word. It goes something like this: *The ultimate purpose of Scripture is to proclaim and point to Jesus Christ.* It's saying that unless I work inside that boundary I can easily miss the most important thing the writers want to say. All of them, in all they are saying, are pointing to Jesus. I think this is a great presupposition – but maybe that's only because I'm a Lutheran.
- And there's a second theological principle or presupposition. It goes like this: *Scripture has two sides, one is called law, the other Gospel. The law says that I'm always completely a sinner, the Gospel that I'm always completely a forgiven and sinless saint. The law describes me as a member of God's fallen creatures, the Gospel as a member of God's community of faith. I am always at the same time under both law and Gospel.* And again all teachings should reflect and proclaim this principle because it sums up what is for Lutherans the ultimate message of the Bible. And because I'm a Lutheran I really love that over-riding doctrine.

Those who serve as pastors

There is another resource that helps me as I muddle through issues that affect the church. This is another specific gift God gives to his church – the gift of people to proclaim the Gospel, to announce the Word of God and the promises it makes, into our ever-changing world and society. These are the theologians and pastors of the church. They play a leading role in the church as they listen to Hermen and Hermeneutics and open their minds and hearts to the guiding of the Spirit. They have the special privilege of working with the Spirit as he guides the church 'into all the truth'. The goal of their calling is to proclaim the message of the Gospel so that the inherent power of that spoken Word may work in the hearts of all who hear.

Of course, as a pastor, it is easy to become critical of the pastors I hear. Especially since retirement has given me more opportunities to hear preaching in our congregations – and to listen a little more closely to the sermons I preach. I'm afraid that often I miss the announcement of the Gospel. I don't mean miss it in the sense of not hearing it because my mind drifts off (though that can often happen), but in the sense that it isn't there. The sermons I hear tend to be all kinds of things except proclamation. To give some examples:

- I hear sermons that simply present what the Bible says or teaches. This is really the task of Bible study and Bible education courses. Preaching is announcing God's Good News to people – whether they have knowledge of the contents of the Bible or not.

- I hear sermons that explain what the pastor, or the church, regards as the meaning of a particular Bible passage. Preaching is really nothing less than releasing the power of God's Word through the announcement of God's mercy, so that that announcement works in the hearts of the hearers to bring understanding of the Scripture.
- I hear sermons that look back in order to explain in great detail what the Bible meant then. Preaching is proclaiming the Gospel of God's grace into the present lives of the hearers, engaging not just their minds, or hearts, or will, but the total person, their whole being. Preaching doesn't *have* to explain what Bible passages mean – there are other occasions for that.
- I hear sermons that *speak about* the Gospel, instead of proclaiming, announcing, the Gospel itself. Only that proclamation frees the Gospel to do its task of working in the hearers.
- I hear sermons that present a really inspiring message meant to promote a stronger faith and a more devoted faith-life. The task of preaching is to proclaim the Gospel message – this alone has the power to create and strengthen faith.
- I hear sermons that give the hearers something to think or pray about, tell people what they should be doing, or call them to a better obedience to God. The task of preaching is to announce the Good News from God, which allows that powerful and active Word to do God's work in the hearts and lives of the hearers.

I can understand why I hear sermons like that. I'm pretty good at thinking that the power is with me, instead of with the Word of God and the Spirit. The power is there in the announcement of God's grace and love and mercy. I suppose I'll continue to muddle along with my preaching in the hope that the Light of the Spirit will continue to show up my deficiencies. I'll muddle along in the hope that God will use the simple proclamation of his Gospel to unite his church around that Gospel and to further the work of the Spirit as he leads his church into his truth.

It's important for all of us to persevere in praying for all the pastors in the church, as they serve God by carrying out the special role they've been given.

In conclusion

Although the clues Hermen gives to the interpretation of old writings are widely acknowledged, the conclusions reached by individuals who use these clues don't necessarily agree. Individual members of the church have such varied backgrounds, traditions, biases, presuppositions, engrained ways of thinking, pivotal experiences. That's why some members may reach conclusions that may be regarded by others as ill-informed, suspect, wrong, or even heretical.

That's part of the climate, the depend-on-the-Spirit's muddle, that Hermen produces in the church. So I can never rely on the conclusions I arrive at as being the 'Gospel truth'. Nor can you. We all need to examine the assumptions, the traditions, the biases, which lie behind every opinion we may reach about what the Bible is telling us. And we need the help of each other to do that. I can only examine my presuppositions as I hear about yours. And you need to hear about mine. Then listening to all those presuppositions, we can together listen better to God (and not without loving and respectful argument, and loving and respectful throwing up of hands in horror, and loving and respectful moments of agreement and awe, and loving and respectful – well anything's possible, really).

Nor, on the other hand, can the church jump in quickly and label any individual's conclusion as suspect or wrong or heretical (maybe I should have underlined the word *quickly*?). The church needs to acknowledge that its decisions (its teachings and doctrines) have also been made at a certain time in history. There are assumptions, presuppositions, traditions, biases that lie behind all those decisions. All this needs to be acknowledged and taken into account as the church listens to the one Spirit – who is there in all denominations – to guide it towards the truth.

FINALLY

As a kid I learnt about hermeneutics from my parents and close relatives. I wasn't really aware of that, and nor were they. I'm aware that this spontaneous learning about hermeneutics was a rare occurrence then, and is probably even rarer now. So people have become more unaware of Hermen's influence in their lives. This has made them unaware of the great influence that their biases and presuppositions have in their life. They're unaware of how much their assumptions about all kinds of things influence what they allow into their minds and thinking, and influence the opinions they form and the decisions they make. And most folk are not even aware of their unawareness. Learning about hermeneutics helps people to be far more aware of their presuppositions and biases. Learning about hermeneutics makes them, whether they are aware of it or not, more willing to reach a consensus on contentious issues.

If this booklet serves the goal of consensus-reaching in regard to disagreements about Biblical interpretation I'll be delighted, whether anyone else is aware of my joy or not. If this booklet doesn't reach that goal I don't mind readers being aware that I had great fun muddling my way through this brief examination of God's wonderful, gracious Word.