

## WHERE ARE YOU, HERMEN? WE NEED YOU!

We need you, Hermen – I hope you don't mind if I don't use your full name; I find Hermeneutics such a clumsy mouthful. We need you because the LCA is having discussions about the ordination of women. I guess you need to know that I regard myself as little more than a sideline watcher of these discussions. So perhaps I don't really know what is going on. However . . . let me stick my neck out. From what I gather here on the sidelines, most of these discussions are of a theological (or doctrinal) nature. And they seem to me to be going around in ever-repeating circles. I reckon that's happening because most participants think the ordination of women is a theological (or doctrinal) issue – and only a theological issue.

And that's why we need you. Because, as you are aware, this issue also has very important hermeneutical (or interpretative) implications. It is basically a hermeneutical issue with doctrinal implications. So it falls within your domain.

As I see it (if you'll pardon me telling you your job) we need you for the following reasons:

- 1 The initial major point at issue, which needs to be sorted through (and a consensus reached) before any further steps can be taken, is this: What do the Biblical writers say about the ordination of women and what is the situation they are addressing?

You see, Hermen, the trouble with us Lutherans is that we are so good at theology that we can never think or say or write anything unless it can be proved to be doctrinally correct. So we find it very hard just to listen to the Bible.

That happens, too, when we speak about *Lutheran Hermeneutics*. Help us to see that there is no such a thing. Hermeneutics is the art of understanding as accurately as possible what someone else has written. There is no Lutheran way of listening – listening influenced by theology or beliefs is not accurate listening.

We need you to help us to listen to the writers, to each writer separately – and to stop us theologizing – and even to stop us from jumping straight to the conclusion that this paragraph is saying exactly what I thought it said last time I read it. And that's your forte! I've heard you tell me again and again: *No, forget what you think that word means. Just listen. Clear your mind; imagine you've never read this bit before – now, what is the writer saying? And to whom is he saying it? No, don't guess, listen; maybe look at the rest of the book. What is going on, what are the readers being told? Why?* (I just hope, Hermen, you can do a better job with us as a church than you seem to be able to do with me.)

So we need you to help us to look and listen once again to the writers so we can hear what they are saying to their first readers.

- 2 Then you need to help us to gather a picture of what the general society was like into which the writer proclaims God's message. And to compare that society with the one in which we are living. Again you will have to come down hard on us as we immediately jump to theological and doctrinal observations. We will quickly speak about the things that are the same in both societies (like sin and attitudes to God). But you will want us to look for the differences, too – if there are any. And since we are dealing with the ordination of women, I suppose you will want us to do some research about the differences between the standing and role of women in their society then and in our society now. I know, I hear you: *No theology yet. No doctrinal considerations yet. Just keep listening.*

- 3 Then you can sit back for a bit. We will have to decide if there are any major differences in our respective societies. Differences that may suggest our societies are so different that we have to think about what God said to people then and how it really applies to us now.

IF we come to the opinion that there are no major differences and the Word that applied then still applies in the same way now, then you can leave, Hermen. You have given us the help we needed. We appreciate your time with us.

- 4 However, IF our present society is such that we are scratching our heads to appreciate what God's word is saying to us in a different, a new, situation, then we ask you to stay with us and patiently continue your work.

First we will need the assurance that it is possible – and even desirable – for our doctrine to change when the Gospel message confronts new situations. Because God's Word is always relevant no matter what new situation it faces, it speaks into every new situation. We also have the help of the Spirit. We have God's gifts of unity and of mutual trust in each other as fellow believers. And it's not as if the church hasn't faced situations like this before. Having all these gifts we need your assurance that we can work our way through.

It occurs to me that the church actually arose because the Jews were confronted with a new situation. It was an historical event, the coming of God's Son into our world. The Jews were faced with Jesus' claims that all the promises of their Scripture pointed to him. But they reacted by turning this historical event into a doctrinal issue. They said that according to their teachings it was impossible for Jesus to be God's Son, and they used all their theological skills to prove it. Their doctrines remained unchanged. But those Jews who became the first Christians put their doctrines aside and let the claims of Jesus re-interpret their understanding of the OT Scriptures. They now gained a new understanding of the OT. They developed new doctrines, a whole new theology. The historical event of Jesus was the cause of changed doctrines and brought about the existence of the church.

Almost two thousand years later scientific discoveries resulted in a change of doctrine. It was proved that the earth was in orbit around the sun (not the other way around, as claimed by the church). The church of that time turned this into a theological debate and said that the teaching of the church proved that this scientific discovery must be wrong – the Bible doesn't agree with the view of scientists. Eventually, however, the church had to submit to scientific discoveries. And they were able to accept that the doctrines they gained from the Bible prior to this discovery could be re-interpreted to take cognizance of the newly discovered facts of the universe. A scientific discovery was the cause of changed doctrines.

At present the question we are facing is this: Has a social revolution (for want of a better term) taken place that includes a new equality, and a new role, for women, and a new use of their skills? And is this social change of such significance that a re-interpretation of some Biblical passages is needed to take account of this new situation? The church may not agree with these social changes – but that is not the point. Changes have happened, and will continue to happen. The point is: how will the LCA choose to react to these changes? It can remain with its current doctrines and criticize society for its godlessness. Or it can re-interpret its teachings so that they address and engage the new situation, letting its doctrine change accordingly.

So, Hermen, IF we choose the first alternative you are free to go. But IF we think we need to opt for the second alternative, I think you can free us enough from the overriding hold of our theology to make us comfortable with this alternative. You can make us willing to accept a re-interpretation of our present teaching – even if this re-interpretation is caused by an undeniable social change over which we have no control, and with which we may not agree. We may even enjoy the challenge of working on a changed theology that may very well speak a little better and a little more directly to the world in which we find ourselves.

Neil Stiller  
(pastor emeritus)  
Feb. 2015