Theological Hermeneutics

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TH918
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Course description
‘Theological Hermeneutics’ introduces the student to the fundamental categories of the theory of interpretation. In keeping with the historical trajectory of hermeneutics, its scope expands beyond questions about the rules for textual/biblical interpretation, towards the question of the nature of meaning and understanding as such. I will give a description and an explanation of various hermeneutical emphases: on the world behind the text (history, authorial intention, allegory), the world in the text (structuralism, narrative theory, poetics), and the world in front of the text (reader-response, community-response, deconstruction, liberationist, feminist, queer, postcolonial).

The student will have to do a substantial amount of rather difficult reading in preparation for each class. Class time will be taken up with explaining difficult concepts and answering questions that arise from the reading. Diligence at reading, attention in class, and willingness to ask the right questions are the conditions for obtaining a good grade.

Objectives and rationale
The class will focus on close readings of the assigned texts. Its purpose is twofold:
1) to give an introduction to the various options in philosophical hermeneutics and the theory of interpretation; and
2) to spell out their implications for the theological interpretation of Scripture, with a particular interest in
   (a) current hermeneutical options in biblical studies
   (b) the relationship between exegesis and theology,
   (c) the pastoral and homiletical uses of Scripture, and finally,
   (d) missiological, contextual and translational practice. These two components will be structurally embedded in individual lectures.

Learning outcomes

1 The present version is still provisional; the definitive version of the syllabus will be available on the first day of class. No changes will be made to the required reading, or the evaluation.
(1) Students will understand the ‘mechanics’ of interpretation from a philosophical as well as a theological standpoint.
(2) Students will acquire a sense of the importance of non-Scriptural concepts and information (philosophical concepts, scientific theories, historical information) in understanding the very meaning of Scripture. In particular, the unfortunate dichotomy between exegetical studies and systematic theology will be critiqued from the perspective of the dynamics of interpretation.
(3) By reflecting on ‘the meaning of meaning’, the student will be in a better position to distinguish between and evaluate competing theories of interpretation.
(4) She will also be in a better position to understand what is at stake in debates about the relativity and conflict of interpretations. To this extent, the student will be encouraged to develop mature responses to contemporary issues such as cultural relativism, pluralism, deconstruction, feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory etc.
(5) By explaining the process of meaning formation and communication, the student will be better prepared to communicate the Gospel today. He or she will also have a solid grasp of the issues involved in missional contextualization.
(6) The student will learn to integrate exegetical, systematic, and practical theology.
(7) Finally, she will have a robust appreciation and understanding of authorial sense hermeneutics, together with the place and importance of historical-grammatical methods.

**Required Books**

* JKA Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Baker, 2006)
* Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Yale University Press, 1997, 0300070896)

**Required articles**

* Stout, Jeffrey, ‘What is Meaning’, in *New Literary History* (to be supplied through CAMS)
* Fish, Stanley, ‘Working on the Chain Gang: Interpretation in Law and Literature’
* Frei, Hans, ‘The “Literal Reading” of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?’, in Frei, *Theology and Narrative* (CAMS)
* Guder, Darrell, ‘Missional Hermeneutics: The Missional Authority of Scripture’ (Internet, CAMS)
* Ricoeur, Paul, ‘Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics’, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (CAMS)
* Vanhoozer, Kevin, ‘God’s Mighty Speech-Acts’ in *First Theology* (CAMS)
Interpretive grid for reading
As you read the assigned pages, formulate answers to the following questions. The quizzes will contain these questions.
- What is the thesis of the author?
- Where does he locate meaning (behind, within, in front of the text)
- Does the author, or the person whom the author is describing, believe in authorial intention?
- Does language play a part in the formation of meaning for this author?
- What kind of epistemology is assumed?
- What kind of role do the reader’s presuppositions have?
- What kind of ‘thing’ does interpretation aim to recover? (mental contents, thing in the world, subjective experience, etc.)
- Summarize the original contribution each writer makes to the history of hermeneutics

Evaluation

- Three quizzes
  o 30% of the final grade
  o These will verify the student’s reading of the assigned bibliography for those respective weeks.
  o They will comprise of short essays, based on the above Interpretive Grid.

- Final research paper. Weighed at 70%. Length: 5,000 words. Due last day of written work.

Outline

   Thiselton 1-124;

   2. Schleiermacher.
Thiselton, pp. 124-148, 166-185
Gooder – relevant pages
McKnight – relevant pages

Quiz 1

Thiselton: 185-201
Frei, ‘The “Literal Reading”...’ (CAMS)
Aichele – relevant pages
Gooder – relevant pages
McKnight – relevant pages

5. The Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer
Thiselton, 206-255
McKnight – relevant pages
Gooder – relevant pages

6. Paul Ricoeur on the nature of metaphor
Ricoeur, ‘What is a Text?’ (CAMS)
Ricoeur, ‘Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics’ (CAMS)
McKnight – relevant pages

Quiz 2

7. Reader-response, speech-act theory.
Thiselton, 185-195; 255-279; 306-327.
Vanhoozer, ‘God’s Mighty Speech-Acts’ (CAMS)
Gooder – relevant pages
McKnight – relevant pages
Aichele – relevant pages

8. The interpretive community.
Fish, ‘Working on the Chain-Gang’
Gooder – relevant pages
Thiselton 327-349
Moore – excerpt
Gooder – relevant pages
Aichele – relevant pages
J. K. A. Smith – excerpt (CAMS)

Quiz 3

10. Feminism and postcolonialism
Stout
Sugirtharajah
Kwok-Pui Lan
Fiorenza
* Achieving clarity about meaning and interpretation
* Theses on Evangelical theological hermeneutics
* Recap

Suggested further reading

* Cosgrove, Charles, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules*
* Kelsey, David, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*
* Zimmermann, Jens, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*
* Sanneh, Lamin, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*
* Torrance, T. F., *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics*
* Simonetti, Manlio, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*
* Froehlich, Karlfried, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*
* Barr, James, *Semantics of Biblical Language*
* ____*, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*
* Dawson, John David, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*
* Ong, Walter J., *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*
* ____*, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.*
* Dworkin, Ronald, *Law’s Empire*
* Watson, Francis, *Text and Truth*
* ____*, *Text, Church, and World*
* Kermode, Frank, *The Genesis of Secrecy*
* Kort, Wesley A., *Story, Text, and Scripture: Literary Interests in Biblical Narrative*

**Plagiarism**
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary considers plagiarism to be a grave academic offense. All instances of plagiarism will automatically result in a failing grade. The student it assumed to have read and understood the seminary’s plagiarism policy. If unsure about particular cases (paraphrases etc.), contact the instructor prior to submitting the paper.