Introduction to Theological Hermeneutics
Dr. Adonis Vidu
TH617

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) the relationship between exegesis and theology,
   (b) the pastoral and homiletical uses of Scripture, and finally,
   (c) missiological, contextual and translational practice. These two components will be structurally embedded in individual lectures.

Learning outcomes

(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 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, as well as translation.
(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

* Thiselton, A.C., Hermeneutics: An Introduction (Eerdmans, 2009)
* Vanhoozer, Kevin J., Is There is a Meaning in this Text? (Zondervan, 1998)
* Mueller-Vollmer, Kurt, Hermeneutics: A Reader (Continuum, 1988)
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)
* Frei, Hans, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Excerpt (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)
* Ong, Walter J., excerpts from various texts (CAMS)
* Vanhoozer, Kevin, ‘God’s Mighty Speech-Acts’ in *First Theology* (CAMS)

Evaluation

- The student will submit at the end of the class a reading journal, which should include both a summary of the assigned pages, as well as his/her own critical reflection on the reading. Weight: 30%
  - The journal should contain synopses of each chapter of the assigned reading.
  - At the end of each week’s report, the student will record his critical reaction to the reading (at least 4 pages, double spaced). Due at the end of the semester, last day of written work.
- Contextualization paper. Weighed at: 35%
  - In a 1,500 words paper, the student should reflect on one particular example of contextualization, from a list that includes these possible topics (specific casuistry will be provided during the course):
    - Homosexuality, human nature, and the relativity of culture
    - Head coverings, angels, and social convention
    - Polygamy and missionary practice
    - Languages of atonement in relation to Asian and African cultures
  - Due last day of written work.
- One of two options:

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1 Each component of the evaluation must be completed in order to receive a passing grade.
Final research paper on a topic that must be suggested by the student. Weighed at 35%. Length: 3,000 words. Due last day of written work.

Final exam. This will be a multiple choice exam, which will test the student’s understanding of basic concepts, issues, and options. Weighed at 35%. Date to be determined.

Provisional Outline

   Thiselton 1-124;

The world behind the text

2. **The Bible and History.** What is the relationship between the meaning of the texts and their historical reference? Bultmann?
   Frei, *Eclipse*, pp. 86-124
   Thiselton, pp. 124-148, 166-185

3. **Authorial intention.** The critique of authorial intention hermeneutics. The possibility/ desirability of recovering intentions. Understanding vs. explanation.
   Schleiermacher; Dilthey. A defense of authorial sense hermeneutics.
   Vanhoozer, pp. 9-98; 197-281
   Thiselton, 148-166
   Mueller-Vollmer, 72-118, 148-165

The world within the text

4. **Structuralism, formalism, new criticism.** What is a text (Ricoeur, Gadamer)?
   The author and textual clues (W. Iser). The text as a work of art (Gadamer’s hermeneutics).
   Mueller-Vollmer, 256-293
   Thiselton, 206-255
   Vanhoozer, 98-148, 281-367
   Ricoeur, ‘What is a Text?’ (CAMS)
   Ricoeur, ‘Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics’ (CAMS)

5. **Narrative and canonical theology.** The Gospels as realistic narratives. The Gospels and history. Ricoeur’s critique of narrative theology. First and second naivete.
   Frei, ‘Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative’ (CAMS)
   Frei, ‘The “Literal Reading”...’ (CAMS)
   Ricoeur, ‘Toward a Narrative Theology’ (CAMS)

The world in front of the text


Further issues


10. Conclusion and final remarks. 20 theses on Evangelical theological hermeneutics. Stout

Suggested further reading

* Cosgrove, Charles, Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules
* Braaten, Carl, History and Hermeneutics, Westminster Press, 1966
* 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.
* Childs, Brevard
* 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 is expected to have read and understood the seminary’s plagiarism policy. If unsure about particular cases (paraphrases etc.), contact the instructor.