COM 803-22: Hermeneutics and Communications

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The study of Hermeneutics serves as a vital gateway to understanding complex texts, bridging ancient wisdom with contemporary thought and offering more profound insights into academic and spiritual realms. This course establishes a solid foundation for graduate students in advanced research, addressing critical historical contexts, significant themes, and various interpretive approaches. Originating from Classical Hermeneutics, which includes Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament and contributions from Greek philosophers like Aristotle, this discipline has evolved through methods established by the Church Fathers, who distinguished between Antiochene's literal and Alexandrian allegorical interpretations. Today, the focus has shifted to relativism, fostering research-based, faith-integrated insights. For instance, biblical hermeneutics enhances spiritual formation through engagement with scripture, while general academic hermeneutics explores literary works like Shakespeare’s plays. Additionally, social science hermeneutics tackles urgent issues such as poverty and institutional racism, encouraging critical engagement and reflection on spiritual progress.

As a critical component of the graduate program, this course lays the context for the literature review process, which is required for scholarly research, and emphasizes integrating hermeneutical concepts into literature reviews, allowing students to understand existing scholarship and its connection to their research topics. For example, when investigating the impact of faith on mental health, students can use hermeneutical tools to analyze how different studies express the relationship between spirituality and psychological well-being. The Hermeneutics course also promotes scholarly solid writing skills by APA guidelines, ensuring that students can effectively and thoroughly articulate their research interests, which is vital for both academic success and spiritual reflection, which is especially relevant when researching juvenile offenders, as it allows for a deeper understanding of their circumstances and the societal factors at play.

This course has been instrumental in helping me achieve my professional, religious, and educational goals, especially as an OGS scholar and researcher. My role as an administrator at a Juvenile Detention Center involves working with young boys and girls who have committed serious crimes, including four boys who tragically killed a college football player for his car. The emotional toll of understanding their actions is profound; I often grapple with the pain of their choices and the impact on the victim's family, in addition to their own families. This class has provided me with tools to analyze their motivations and the context surrounding their actions, helping me approach these difficult conversations with empathy rather than judgment. This deeper understanding has given me a more meaningful dialogue, allowing me to guide their reflections on morality and responsibility.

Spiritually, hermeneutics connects with my life by encouraging me to seek wisdom in understanding complex human behaviors and experiences. The insights gained from this course have brought me closer to my educational aspirations, emphasizing the importance of interpreting texts and contexts accurately. As I continue my journey in this program, I recognize that the ability to discern meaning is crucial for academic growth and positively impacting my community. The wisdom of Proverbs 4:7 rings here: *"The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding."* Wisdom highlights the interconnectedness of my professional responsibilities, spiritual growth, and educational pursuits, reinforcing my commitment to a path of deeper understanding.

This course has shaped my academic journey and personal growth and equipped me with essential interpretive skills critical for my studies and understanding diverse perspectives. A standout aspect was the exploration of biblical hermeneutics, particularly the framework outlined in the readings of Hays and Duvall (2012). This background emphasizes crucial steps such as grasping the text in its original context, measuring the cultural and temporal gaps between the biblical audience and our own, and identifying the theological principles that transcend those differences. Engaging with these steps has enhanced my ability to critically analyze texts, enriching my academic work while deepening my spiritual insights and appreciation for the tones of faith in everyday life.

Strategically positioned within the graduate program, this course significantly improved my research skills. I learned valuable techniques for engaging with scholarly materials, particularly those integrating faith-based perspectives. The *"crossing the provincializing bridge"* method to derive theological principles has been particularly impactful. This approach allowed me to connect biblical texts to contemporary issues, providing a meaningful context for applying these principles today. By consulting the broader biblical narrative, I gained a holistic understanding of how theological principles fit into the biblical map, empowering me to address pressing social issues through a faith-informed lens.

The emphasis on scholarly writing, particularly adherence to APA style, has been instrumental in my development as a researcher. Engaging with seminal texts and employing critical interrogatives helped refine my analytical skills and synthesize complex information effectively. Applying these principles to contemporary contexts—*"grasping the text in our town"*—has instilled confidence in my ability to communicate my ideas clearly and relatedly. Overall, this course has laid a strong foundation for my academic pursuits and personal reflections, reinforcing the importance of interpretation as a vital tool in scholarly inquiry and social engagement.

Hermeneutics has vividly improved my critical reading and writing skills, which are essential in my work with juvenile offenders, many of whom come from fatherless families. One of the most important lessons has been the value of slow reading and re-reading, which promotes a deeper grasp of the content. For example, while dealing with complex texts, I learned to deconstruct each paragraph, determining the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the arguments provided. This strategy explained complicated ideas and allowed me to interact critically with the information and better grasp the backgrounds and challenges these young people experience. Initially, I struggled to slow my reading rate because I was used to skimming. However, with practice, I learned to recognize the nuances and subtleties that only emerge with careful attention, which is critical for comprehending the personal histories of the youngsters with whom I work.

Another essential part of the course was the emphasis on formal writing and the avoidance of slang. I discovered that employing informal language can reduce the credibility of scholarly work. Phrases such as *"you know"* or *"kind of"* might reduce the clarity and professionalism of an argument. This lesson echoes well with my contacts with young offenders when straightforward and courteous communication is essential. Using exact language allows me to develop trust and express authority in my interactions, whether writing reports or helping them through their tales. Initially intimidating, this change in my writing style eventually increased the quality of my conversations, making them more effective and impactful.

The course required me to combine complicated ideas from multiple scholarly sources. Working with thick theoretical materials required me to synthesize several points of view into coherent arguments. For example, I had to reconcile opposing viewpoints while researching interpretive theories. This synthesis process was initially challenging but instilled a more robust understanding of the multidisciplinary conversation, which is critical when dealing with juvenile offenders' intricate difficulties. Understanding and presenting sophisticated arguments allows me to advocate for their needs and build relevant programs effectively. This program has significantly improved my reading and writing abilities, allowing me to better connect with and support the young people I work with.

Reflecting on what I have learned from this course, I see a thoughtful connection between the interpretive skills I have developed and working with juvenile offenders. Contextualization in this field requires understanding the behaviors and circumstances of these young individuals and interpreting their experiences through a lens that considers both their backgrounds and the broader societal narratives at play. The principles of biblical hermeneutics have provided me with a framework, particularly the importance of comprehending the text in its original context and identifying the cultural and temporal differences that shape our understanding.

Through my studies in this program, I have become aware of several questions and concerns relevant to my field. First, how can I ensure that my approach to juvenile offenders respects their unique worldviews, especially in a diverse community where faith plays a significant role in their lives despite their criminal mindsets? Understanding their perspectives is essential for effective communication and rehabilitation. Second, how do systemic issues, such as poverty and lack of access to education, influence the behaviors of these youths, and how can I advocate for change while remaining sensitive to their individual experiences? This concern emphasizes the need for empathy in my practice. Lastly, what theological principles can inform my work to provide a holistic approach that integrates faith and rehabilitation, ensuring that I do not impose my beliefs but rather facilitate a space for their spiritual growth?

Just today, I sat across from a 14-year-old white boy who frequently comes to lockup because he finds it fascinating to be sexually inappropriate toward young Black females. During our conversation, I asked him why he engages in this behavior, and he responded that it made him feel *"cool"* and more accepted by his peers. When I inquired how old he was when he first began this behavior, he admitted it began around age 12. He also shared that he sometimes used drugs before these incidents but never felt remorseful afterward; instead, he described a sense of thrill. I gently probed if anything inappropriate had ever happened to him, and he hesitated, ultimately revealing that he had directly witnessed troubling behaviors by his uncle while growing up, which influenced him. I was left speechless by the end of the conversation. Thankfully, he leaves for long-term residential treatment on Friday.

The said experience connects deeply with hermeneutics, highlighting the importance of understanding the context behind such actions. In addressing these questions, I have learned the importance of reading, researching, and analyzing information while remaining open and empathetic despite cringing internally. Engaging with various texts—from scholarly articles to personal narratives of juvenile offenders—allows me to appreciate the complexities of their situations. This multifaceted approach informs my practice and offers a deeper connection with those I serve. By approaching each individual with curiosity and compassion, I can better understand their unique circumstances and help guide them toward positive change. Ultimately, this hermeneutics course has equipped me with essential tools to navigate the particulars of my field. By applying the principles of interpretation and remaining open to diverse perspectives, I can engage more meaningfully with juvenile offenders, ensuring my work is relevant and transformative.

Reflecting on my profession, I have other pressing concerns. How do I, as a juvenile justice professional and research scholar, account for the absence of father figures in many of these youths' lives, particularly in cases like four of my boys charged with killing a college football player for his "cool car"? Since adolescent brains are not fully developed until their late 20s, how do I interpret their impulsive decisions, often made without considering the consequences? What specific challenges do pregnant female detainees face, and how can they be better supported while recognizing their unique circumstances?

This class has effectively met my professional, religious, and educational goals. While it was a course requirement, the class opened my eyes to the depth and significance of hermeneutics, a term I grew up hearing as a pastor's daughter but never fully understood. Through exploring the various methodologies of interpreting scripture, I have gained a clearer perspective on applying biblical principles in my personal life and professional endeavors. Such understanding has enriched my educational experience and deepened my relationship with God, allowing me to engage with scripture more.

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation, especially of biblical texts, and it has significant implications for working with juvenile offenders. By understanding context, intent, and the all-embracing messages of scripture, I can communicate effectively with young people who often seek hope and guidance. For example, I use scripture to illustrate forgiveness, redemption, and personal responsibility concepts. By applying hermeneutic principles, I can offer subtle interpretations of verses that resonate with their experiences, such as the story of the Prodigal Son, which emphasizes the possibility of transformation and acceptance. This approach offers connection and helps instill values that can guide them on their journeys.

Furthermore, integrating hermeneutics in my work with juvenile offenders has revealed how intensely biblical narratives can speak to their struggles. The story of David, for instance, shows that even those who make mistakes can be chosen for greatness. I am a HOPE dealer, and thus, by applying hermeneutics, I can convey that their past does not define their future, offering a sense of hope and encouraging them to seek a path of positive change. This way, the insights gained from this class have empowered me to bridge my faith and professional responsibilities, creating meaningful dialogues supporting personal growth and spiritual development.

**Works Cited**

Duvall, J. S., & Hays, J.D. (2012).*Grasping God's Word: A hands-on approach to reading, interpreting, and applying the Bible, 3rd. Ed*. Zondervan.