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DO 501 Basic Christian Doctrine

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BASIC CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

DO 501

SPRING 2001

Professor Chuck Gutenson

Office AD 408

I. Introduction

Welcome to DO 501, Asbury Theological Seminary's introductory course to Basic Christian Doctrine. I look forward to our work together this semester as we seek to develop an understanding of not only certain aspects of certain of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith, but also of the processes whereby these doctrines were established as normative. Given this emphasis, a fair portion of our work will focus on the time period from the initial rise of the Church through roughly the middle of the fifth century.

Our study will begin with a brief consideration of certain issues relating to theological method. By theological method, I mean that we will examine the manner in which the theologian proceeds with the theological enterprise. This study will consider those things which the theologian takes as normative for his work as well as that which is taken as constituting the sources from which doctrine may be extracted. These matters are particularly relevant for the question of how specific doctrines developed.

The format of the course is intended to be dialogical more than lecture--though some topics may require employing more lecture; so our format will vary somewhat as appropriate to the material. Since our learning will proceed largely by dialogue, it is particularly important that you come to class having read the assigned material and prepared to discuss it. It would be helpful, as well, if you kept notes from your readings which identified particular areas of concern or issues about which you have more questions.

II. Course Rationale

Since you are studying to engage in Christian ministry of one sort or another, the importance of the study of Christian doctrine should be obvious. Unfortunately, however, we seem to live in an age when many significantly underestimate the importance of developing a correct understanding of the essential Christian doctrines. In fact, many erroneously cite Wesley in support of the claim that the specific details of Christian doctrines are unimportant. While Wesley clearly recognized that there were aspects of the Christian faith about which we might legitimately disagree without undue concern, there can be no doubt that he believed that there is a core of doctrines

that are essential. Under the heading of “negotiable doctrines”, Wesley would have included modes of baptism, worship formats, etc. However, he took doctrines such as the trinitarian nature of the Godhead, original sin, the deity of Christ, justification by faith, etc. as constitutive of Christianity. Hopefully, either now or by the end of the course, you too will sense the importance of “getting the doctrine right”.

Obviously, one of the important aspects of this course will be to develop an awareness of what constitutes sound doctrine and what constitutes heretical doctrinal positions. The distinction between the two is often very subtle; for example, much of Christianity in America today fails to maintain the proper balance between the deity and the humanity of Christ. By examining some of the positions held to be heretical by the early Church, we will gain insight into better ways to maintain an appropriate balance in our own ministries. In a sense, then, we will be examining both *what is* and *what is not* correct Christian doctrine.

As I mentioned above, a second emphasis of our class, and the one which we will address first, will be an examination of theological method. For example, we will have to consider the relative roles of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in theological methods. I do not mean to copy the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral in this discussion. However, these are the four sources that seem most frequently to play a part in the development of Christian doctrine. We will give brief consideration to individuals who have stressed each of these elements in their theological method, with the goal of developing a better grasp of the issues relating to doctrinal development.

Before moving on, let me briefly mention three reasons why Christian doctrines are of such critical importance. First, we must recognize that Christian doctrines are, generally speaking, merely the propositional form of the truth claims that Christianity embodies. One very important element of Christian doctrine, and one which will gain a good deal of attention this semester, is the doctrine of God. In the doctrine of God, we make certain claims about the existence of God and about his nature. If, however, we are wrong about those claims, can we realistically call upon others to join us in faith? As Pannenberg has said, if the story of Jesus (and thus the claims he makes about God, humans, himself, etc.) are not in some sense true, then it is not clear why one would become a Christian.

Second, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has made the distinction between personal sins and doctrinal sins and their relative importance in the following way. He argues that the doctrines of the Christian faith along with the content of the Gospel are there precisely for those who have committed personal sins. In other words, the purpose of the Gospel is to offer newness of life to the sinner. However, he who perverts the doctrines of the faith robs the Church of the very beliefs that God has provided as a means to cure the sinsick soul. We must be careful not to separate doctrinal truth from the transformative effects of the Gospel.

Third, I ask you to consider the following quote from Pannenberg which stresses the importance of taking the truth claims of the faith seriously. In this quotation, Pannenberg focuses upon the importance of the theologian's work; however, you may easily see how these concerns translate into your own ministries as preachers and teachers:

[P]roclamation of the Christian church, asserting that the God of Jesus is the one and only true God and that he truly raised Jesus from the dead, entails a need for theological reflection, a need for an examination and confirmation of its truth claims on the level of reflection. If theology properly faces that task, it can be of invaluable help in encouraging the preacher and in strengthening the good conscience of every individual Christian that the teaching of the church is true. If theology does not properly face its particular task regarding the truth claims of the Christian tradition, then it easily happens that the clergy of the church are the first to become insecure and evasive about the message they are supposed to preach. When they become doubtful about the truth of the gospel, they will tend to replace it by other "causes," and the believers will be disturbed, because they no longer get to hear in church what they rightfully expect to be taught there. (An Introduction to Systematic Theology by W. Pannenberg, p. 6)

I believe that our parishioners are hungry sound doctrine; let's feed them!

III. Course Objectives

In light of the discussions above, the following are the objectives to be accomplished in the course of the semester:

1. You will be able to identify the important elements of a particular theological method and to provide a critique of it from a Wesleyan perspective.
2. You will be able to identify certain heresies which have had particular historical significance.
3. You will learn to utilize the information gained from our study of heresy in order to assess modern construals of specific doctrines.
4. You will be able to articulate the manner in which doctrinal development occurred within the early church, including being able to identify the role played by certain Church Councils.
5. You will be able to present certain of the central arguments employed by the early Church Fathers in defending such doctrines as the deity of Christ and the trinitarian nature of God.

6. You will be able to clearly articulate at least one of the creeds from the first five centuries and to give a defense of its claims.
7. You will learn to develop sermons and/or church school lesson plans which are designed to help church members appreciate the importance of selected doctrinal issues.

IV. Course Requirements

As mentioned above, in light of the fact that I intend to maximize in-class interaction and minimize “mere lecture”, it is extremely important that each of you prepare carefully for each class period. This includes reading the material thoroughly and critically as well as making notes of your readings identifying areas that you wish to discuss in class.

As we will be covering a good deal of information during the course of the semester, class attendance is of utmost importance. If you must miss class for a legitimate reason, please be sure to advise me in advance if possible. Further, I would like to have a **written record** of an absences which you believe have legitimate reasons which warrant your being excused from class. E-mail notes are acceptable, hard copy notes are preferred. **More than three unexcused may result in grade reduction.**

The texts required for this course are as follows:

The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God by Hanson

Catechetical Oration by St. Gregory of Nyssa

On not Three Gods by St. Gregory of Nyssa (on reserve)

On the Holy Spirit by St. Basil the Great

On the Incarnation of the Word of God by St. Athanasius

A History of Heresy by David Christie-Murray

The Apostle’s Creed by Wolfhart Pannenberg

Also on reserve will be certain selected readings on theological method.

See the last section of this syllabus for a more detailed breakdown of specific reading assignments.

V. Evaluation Methods

Following are the assignments for this class and their relative weights in determining the final grade for the course. **Please note that assignments not turned in by the due date will be subject to grade reduction at the rate of 3 points per business day, unless prior approval is obtained.** (See Appendix A on “Grading Procedures” for more detail on how the final grade will be determined.)

First, each student will provide a critical essay dealing with one of the theological methods studied. The specific method to be reviewed by each student will be assigned during the first week of class. The goal of this exercise is twofold: 1) to understand the examined method and 2) to critique it from a Wesleyan perspective. This exercise is to be not less than three and not more than five pages in length. This assignment will contribute 20 percent of the final grade.

Second, each student will provide an annotation of one of five Creeds, to be assigned during the course. The purpose of the annotation is to clarify and explain the different truth claims made by the Creed. In addition to the annotation, a defense of the truth claims made by the Creed will be provided. The purpose of the defense is to answer one question for the non-believer: what warrants belief in these doctrinal claims? This exercise is to be not less than eight nor more than twelve pages in length. This assignment will contribute 35 percent of the final grade.

Third, each student will write either a sermon or prepare a Church School lesson which aims to educate parishioners on the importance of doctrine in general and of the truthfulness of one particular doctrine. I will assign the doctrine, you will decide upon sermon or Church School lesson based upon your ministry plans. This sermon or Church School lesson is to be not less than four nor more than eight pages in length. This assignment will contribute 30 percent of the final grade.

Finally, there will be a final exam which will be a combination of objective (true/false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank) and very short (two or three sentences) questions. The final will contribute 15 percent of the final grade.

Schedules will be determined during the first week of class.

VI. Reading Assignments

The following general schedule will be followed during the semester.

First two weeks: Theological Method--see resources on reserve.

Next seven weeks: Doctrinal development in the Early Church--Hanson, St. Athanasius, St. Gregory, and St. Basil.

Next two weeks: Heresy--Christie-Murray.

Final two weeks: Modern assessment of the Apostle's Creed--Pannenberg.