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# ST 501 Method and Praxis in Theology

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*Please note that this is a preliminary syllabus intended to communicate course objectives and required texts. Additional readings (which will be posted on reserve) will be included in the final form of the syllabus—along with details, such as course assessments.*

**ST 501**  
**METHOD AND PRAXIS IN THEOLOGY**

**Fa. 2003**

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**I. Introduction**

Perhaps the most frequent question that I get with regard to this class is: “Theological method, what in the world is that?” However, if one engages in reflection about God, and of course all of you have or you would not be here, then one engages in theology. After all, “theology” is merely the attempt to understand all about God that one can. And if one engages in theology, one inevitably utilizes a method for that engagement. Upon beginning theological engagement, one of the first questions that you have to ask is: “where are the authoritative sources for information about God?” No matter how you answer this question, the question itself is a methodological one, as are questions concerning the purpose and nature of theological inquiry. So, even if one merely says, “I just believe what the Bible says”, one has made a methodological statement about the sources that are to be taken as authoritative for inquiries related to the life of faith.

Notice in the last sentence, I wrote “related to the life of faith.” You should know in advance that I see the tendency to strongly distinguish between “theory” and “practice” as a false dichotomy. Therefore to say that systematic theology is a purely theoretical discipline while, say, pastoral counseling is a purely practical discipline is to fail to recognize the extent to which the sort of pastoral counseling

God calls us to must be undergirded by sound theology. All of our work as pastors, teachers, counselors, evangelists, etc. is profoundly influenced by the way we understand God, the created order, human nature, fallenness, etc. Consequently, I will be encouraging you throughout this semester, as the course title suggests, to see the profound inter-connections between method and practice.

There are two additional comments that are necessary before we begin our study together. First, as you may have noticed, this course is foundational for all other theology and doctrine courses. Being able to think theologically--to be able to make appropriate extrapolations from the biblical witness and to see the implications of theological study for your own explicit ministry--is perhaps the most important thing we can teach you here at Asbury. This is not to say, of course, that this course is the only "really important" class, but it is to say that what you will learn in this class has implications for all the other work you will do here. Second, this will be a rather difficult course. This should serve as an advisement, not as a warning. In other words, expect the material to be difficult and expect the readings to stretch you. As a consequence, it will be imperative that you keep up with the readings, that you attend all classes except for serious emergencies, and that you be prepared to ask questions about all that is unclear in what you read.

Let me conclude by saying that I am delighted to work with each of you this semester, and that I am very excited about the potential this course of study has for your ministries. Let the fun begin!

## **II. Course Description**

This is an introductory course relating method to practice in theology. This course will involve an examination of different ways in which the Christian tradition has understood the sources, norms, and criteria for the development of church doctrine. Special attention is given to a critical analysis of contemporary theological methods and the influence of post-modern science. The connection between theological method and Christian doctrine, especially the doctrine of divine revelation, will serve as the foundation for developing an Evangelical/Wesleyan theology in the postmodern world. This class is designed for beginning students, and it serves as preparatory study for all course offerings in theology and doctrine.

Wesley once said to his preachers that the study of logic was the single, most important study next to the Bible, if they were going to be effective in ministry. This class is similar to a course in logic, in the sense that Wesley means, in that is foundational to thinking theologically. If the Bible is to be understood in a thoughtful and practical way, theological method is helpful because it is like a tool

that enables the Scriptures to be user-friendly as we study and interpret them for our day.

### **III. Course Learning Objectives**

Upon completion of this course, the student will have an introductory knowledge of critical theological method, enabling them to:

1. Describe how classical Greek/Roman philosophy influenced the manner in which the Early Christian Apologists and the Early Church Fathers did theology.
2. Sketch, in broad terms, the development of the canonical heritage of the Church and draw out the appropriate theological implications.
3. Describe, again in broad detail, the manner in which the Church has undertaken doctrinal development.
4. Articulate the impact of the Enlightenment upon modern theology, particularly the influence of Kant's philosophy and its contribution to such movements as liberalism, existentialism, and neo-orthodoxy.
5. Describe the rise of the modern historical consciousness, particularly the relation between critical history and Christian faith.
6. Understand the significance of the transition from premodern to modern thought, with special reference to the shift from ontology (premodern) to epistemology (modern) to hermeneutics (postmodern).
7. Identify the key points in the transition from modern to postmodern paradigms, especially hermeneutical phenomenology, postliberalism, and deconstructionism.
8. Articulate the significance of narrational methods for grasping the biblical story in its fullness.
9. Articulate the influence of postmodern science upon theological method.
10. Articulate the relation between various methods and Wesley's methodological commitment to Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.
11. Apply critical theological method to the effective practice of Christian ministry in the postmodern age.

The readings assigned throughout the semester will deal with the matters represented in these learning objectives, though on occasion the lectures will draw in important components that extend beyond the direct scope of the readings. Additionally, please review the bibliography at the end of the syllabus for further readings on the topics we will be discussing in class.

#### **IV. Required Readings**

Many of the readings for this class are selections from a variety of different works. You will find two copies of each of these readings on the reserve shelf under this class number and my name. So, you merely need ask for "Gutenson's materials for ST501". Please do not mark on the copies and be sure to return them to the folder in a timely fashion to make sure they can be available for all your classmates. I am checking into making them available electronically and will advise you once this is complete. Since our first few lectures utilize one of the three assigned texts, you may want to work ahead in order to make sure all will have access to the material once we get into those readings.

Texts required are as follows and should be readily available in the ATS bookstore:

Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God by Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, IVP, 1996.

The Genesis of Doctrine--A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism by Alister E. McGrath, Eerdmans, 1997.

Beyond Foundationalism, Grenz and Olson,

Beyond Fundamentalism and Liberalism, Murphy,