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IS 501 Christian Formation: Kingdom, Church, and World

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Please note this is not a final copy. It accurately reflects the texts and assessment tools to be used. Schedule will be presented in the final syllabus.

Kingdom, Church, and World

IS 501

Fall, 2003

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Introduction and Course Description: Welcome to the Kingdom, Church, and World. I am associate professor of philosophical theology at Asbury Theological Seminary, and this course is one about which I am very passionate! There are few courses that give one an opportunity to critically examine one's presuppositions and commitments regarding the nature of the Kingdom of God and its relatedness to the concepts of Church and World. These are three distinct, but intimately related aspects of the reality in which we all engage in ministry-- whether we be laypersons or clergy-- yet, how can one successfully engage that ministry without thoroughly examining these aspects of that reality? In this course, we will have opportunity to consider a number of questions and issues including:

1. What is the Kingdom of God?
2. What is the Church?
3. How is the Kingdom present in the World through the Church?
4. What does it mean to be a part of the Church that is in the World?
5. What does it mean to **be** the Church?
6. What does it mean to **engage in** Churchly activities? (And, these last two questions are asking very different things!)

By the end of the course, we will have examined these matters and we shall have given first-order attempt at theologically sound and praxis-oriented answers to these questions. Let the fun begin!

Course Rationale: It is altogether reasonable to ask, with regard to a given course, why a particular course is required, and so it is here. There is a sense in which this entire syllabus is intended to answer that question, but I would characterize this course as having at least two over-arching intentions. First, an essential skill for all engaged in Christian ministry is the ability to “think theologically.” To think theologically is not merely to be able to appropriate certain proof texts in order to give “biblical” answers to given questions. Rather, it involves the ability to begin to “get our arms around” the biblical message as a whole, to be able to inquire of the biblical narratives in an integrative way, and to be able to develop our answers in a more holistic fashion. Already, I have referenced our ability to properly appropriate the biblical texts, and this brings us to the second over-arching intention: to begin to see the Scriptures as organized around certain integrative motifs. In this regard, this course brings together the disciplines of biblical study and systematic theology in a way that demonstrates the practical integration of the two. Issues of importance include:

1. What constitutes a biblical “meta-narrative”? Is there only one or are there multiple ones?
2. What role do these meta-narratives play?
3. How is one to understand the relation of “part” and “whole” when interpreting the biblical narratives?
4. What does it mean to refer to the biblical materials as “narrative”?
5. How does the biblical narrative subvert normal ways of “being” in the world?

By engaging these questions, we will be undertaking a critical examination of some of our fundamental assumptions about who we are and what God calls us to be as his Church. For example, I fear that one of the most dominant “heresies” in play in the church today is the docetic heresy--the one wherein the deity of Christ is allowed to completely swallow up the humanity of Christ. This can have devastating effects upon our daily life of faith, and N.T. Wright will help us begin to see the significance of this issue, which just so happens to rest particularly well within a Wesleyan framework. Similarly, Rodney Clapp will challenge us to reconsider the tendency to “bifurcate” the world into “religious” and “secular” realms--each of which operates largely autonomously and with very different rules. And, again, John Howard Yoder will challenge our understanding of the political implications of following Jesus. You may find all this a bit dis-orienting from time to time, but keep in mind our end goal: to understand more fully what we understand ourselves to be as people of God and to understand what it means to be in His service in the World as representatives of his Kingdom.

As you can see, this will be a course that will invite us all to re-think a good many things--in some cases, our positions upon particular issues and in others, the very way in which we read the Bible. Hopefully, we will re-examine our presuppositions about a good many things, and will make modifications where appropriate. Of course, the challenge is mostly to learn to “think theologically”--to be able to appropriate the Scripture holistically and rightly.

As we proceed with our discussions, I invite each of us to argue passionately for our positions, but with respect and love due a brother or sister in Christ. One of the great lost arts of the Church is its ability to disagree passionately and yet love and respect each other. Too often, our disagreement ends in schism, rather than in deepening the bonds of love. Our goal will be to learn to argue both passionately and respectfully. With these observations behind us, let us turn our attention to the course objectives.

Course Objectives: Having successfully completed this course, students will be able to:

1. Articulate an understanding of the biblical meta-narrative that comes to focus for us best in Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God;
2. Identify the particular contribution of the Wesleyan tradition to our understanding of this meta-narrative;
3. Draw out major theological, moral, and philosophical implications of this meta-narrative, especially as these are related to the nature and mission of the people of God;
4. Evaluate cultural products (e.g., literature, television, movies, advertisements, print media, music) in light of major theological, moral, and philosophical implications of this meta-narratives;
5. Exercise criticism with respect to one’s own cultural context and discernment with respect to the context of others vis-a-vis major theological, moral, and philosophical implications of this meta-narrative;
6. Articulate the ecclesial and missional implications of this meta-narrative--specifically for one’s own context and generally for our shared global context; and
7. Exhibit a heightened sense of commitment to serving the kingdom of God in mission in the world (the *missio dei*).

Required Texts:

Clapp, Rodney. *Border Crossings*. Brazos Press, 2000.

Hauerwas, Stanley and Will Willimon. *Resident Aliens*.
Donovan, Vincent. *Christianity Rediscovered*.
Wright, Tom. *The Challenge of Jesus*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999.
Yoder, John Howard. *The Politics of Jesus*. Wm.B.Eerdmans, 1972 (or the second edition, 1994).

Please note: these readings may be supplemented from time-to-time with materials made available via electronic media. Advance notice will be given.

Collateral Reading: (purely optional, but related material)

Brimlow and Budde, *Christianity Incorporated*

Hauerwas, Stanley. *The Peaceable Kingdom*

McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*

Ramachandra, Vinoth. *Gods that Fail*

Snyder, Howard. *God's Kingdom Now*

Course Assessment: Determination of grade for this course will utilize a variety of assessments. The individual assessments and their weighting are as follows:

1. Participation in on-line discussion-- up to 10%. I will place an icon for IS501 on each of your desktops on First Class. Students will be evaluated with regard to their active and substantive participation in on-line discussions--primarily within your small groups, but also within the course-wide discussion center. I will be looking for thoughtful, succinct questions and commentary upon the questions of others. *Please note that this includes providing comment upon each small group's "kingdom project."* (Randy, thoughts? Do we need a rubric?)

2. Participation in small groups--up to 10%. Students will be evaluated with regard to their active and substantive participation in small Groups. Each group will use specific materials, and specific assignments will be included in the weekly module assignments. The purpose of these groups is to provide an opportunity for students to "meet together" and to share insights from the weekly disciplines, to hold each other accountable, and to encourage each other to live faithfully as children of God's kingdom. Each student will be assigned to a small group with at least three other students. During the course of the week, each member of each small group is to read through the material and engage in dialogue with all other members of his/her small group. Prayer and other forms of mutual support is strongly recommended. This semester, Mr. Randy Shrauner will be guiding and attending to small group interaction. The course packet identifies the materials that will be covered, and Randy will supplement this material with

reflection questions from time to time. (*Randy, how do we determine evaluative measures? Do we need a rubric?*)

3. Kingdom Projects--up to 20%. Students, as a part of their small groups, are expected to participate in a “kingdom project.” These projects are aimed at involving each student with active participation in some form of outreach ministries. I will provide a list of examples of the type of projects that would be acceptable, and each student will indicate his/her selection by the end of the third week of class. Each kingdom project will include the student’s posting a brief presentation upon the nature and theological significance of his/her project, including a two page reflection paper. The goal of this brief paper is to integrate practice and theological reflection with regard to the kingdom project. The rubric that will be used for grading this essay is Attachment 1.

4. Mid-term essay--up to 15%. At roughly the mid-point of the course, each student will provide a four to five page response to an essay question. This essay will deal with some form of cultural critique regarding the successes/failures of the church in presenting the Gospel in today’s world. The rubric that will be used for grading this essay is Attachment 2.

5. Final essay--up to 25%. At the end of the course, each student will provide an eight page response to an essay question. This essay will deal with some aspect of the relationship between the Kingdom, the Church, and the World. The rubric that will be used for grading this essay is Attachment 2.

6. Quiz at the end of each text--up to 4% each, up to 20% total. Some modules will engage the texts directly, and others more indirectly. However, all of the assigned texts are very important to our undertaking the issues set before us this semester. Consequently, at the end of the class period wherein a particular text is to be completed (see the course schedule), the last ten minutes will be spent in taking a brief quiz of 10 objective questions based on gaging your grasp of that particular text.