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ST 501 Method and Praxis in Theology

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ST 501 METHOD AND PRAXIS IN THEOLOGY.

This is an introductory course relating method to practice in theology. This course will involve an examination of different ways (method) in which the Christian tradition has understood sources and criteria for the development (praxis) of church doctrine. Special attention is given to a critical analysis of contemporary theological methods and the influence of postmodern 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 preacher that the study of logic was the single, most important study next to the Bible—if they were going to understand the Bible properly and to preach it effectively. This class is similar to a course in logic because its purpose is to help students develop the categories necessary for understanding the theological implications of the Word of God. 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.

Praxis is an important component of this course. As a technical term, praxis means applying method to the concrete formulation of doctrine. What does it matter if one has a good method but does not develop an understanding of doctrine? We will examine a number of theologies, showing how various methods influenced the way theology is developed. We will particularly look at the way some of the distinctive doctrinal emphases of the Wesleyan revival in the 18th century came to be formulated. This will then serve to show what is distinctive about Asbury Theological Seminary as a confessional school of theology in the Wesleyan tradition.

LEARNING GOALS:

Upon completion of this course, students 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. 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.
3. Describe the rise of the modern historical consciousness, particularly the relation between critical history and Christian faith;
4. Understand the significance of the transition from premodern to modern and postmodern thought, with special reference to the shift from ontology (premodern) to epistemology (modern) to hermeneutics (postmodern);
5. Identify the key points in the transition from modern to postmodern paradigms, especially hermeneutical phenomenology, postliberalism, and deconstructionism;
6. Articulate the influence of postmodern science upon theological method;
7. Appreciate Wesley's methodical use of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience;
8. Understand theological praxis in early Methodism;
9. Apply critical theological method to the effective practice of Christian ministry in the postmodern age.

TEXTS AND REQUIRED READINGS

1. L. Wood, *Faith, History, and Hermeneutics*. This work is being made available in manuscript form on the library reserve shelf and online in the ST501-LW File, which can be located on each student’s Desk Top of First Class. Learning to think theologically assumes that one has a basic grasp of the substantive issues in theology. This means one must be acquainted with the way that theology has been done since the earliest days of Church history. The key methodological issue of Christian theology is the relationship of faith and history. This work is being written specifically for this new core course. It will be receiving further “finishing touches” during this semester. Your suggestions would be appreciated.

2. L. Wood, *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism, Rediscovering John Fletcher As John Wesley’s Vindicator and Designated Successor* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002). This book will serve primarily as a praxis component of the course, reflecting a style of theologizing different from the more academic and formal methods. It will be seen in this study that Methodism developed its theology out of the experience of the great revival in England in the 18th Century. Its preaching themes consisted of the practical concerns of evangelism and implementing the kingdom of God on earth. On occasions, this created debate and conflict, not only between those with different theological orientations as Calvinism and Arminianism, but between Wesley and his preachers. As John Fletcher once remarked, conflict is not a bad thing, but it needs to be managed appropriately. This work will illustrate how theology is normally developed out of one’s conversations in life with other significant persons. One of the characteristics of the philosophy of Socrates was his belief that one comes to an understanding of truth through engaging in conversation with others. For him, philosophy was a very practical matter of asking the right questions, and he believed these questions grew out of real life situations. The formal study of academic philosophy has strayed a long way from this original insight of Socrates. Likewise, contemporary theologies often reflect academic abstractions, and its ideas are often far removed from the real life-orientation of the Bible. By the time the syllabus takes us to this section, students may well feel they that have been given a dose of intellectual abstractions instead of a dynamic faith centered in Jesus Christ. However, one of the practical requirements of Christians is that we develop a theology that is responsive to the intellectual and spiritual climate of the times in which we live, if we are going to have “a Spirit-filled, evangelistic ministry.” Both Wesley and Fletcher were effective evangelists because they were academically trained and knew the significant theological issues of their day.
They were thus able to identify the central issues of the Christian life and connect with the people in a practical way. In this respect, it will be seen that Wesley and Fletcher were exemplary models who integrated sound learning and vital piety.

**HERE ARE SOME “RECOMMENDED READINGS” THAT WILL OCCasionally BE REFERENCED**

2. Robert M. Augros and George N. Stanciu, *The New Story of Science*, preface by John Eccles (Chicago: Gateway Editions, 1984), chapter iv, pp. 53-82. Available only on the library reserve shelf. This book offers a postmodern discussion of the idea of God, showing how “the new story of science” is friendly toward the traditional view of God as Creator. It is an easy-to-read explanation of recent developments in science and their implications for theology. It is excellent for those who have no scientific background.
6. John McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology*, Second Edition (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998). This book is a study in the doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ, incorporating contemporary perspectives as well as highlighting the classic tradition. Chapter 1, 2, and 3 (pp. 3-80) offer various methodologies for determining the meaning of Jesus’ personhood.
8. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991). This is a helpful introduction to the relevance of systematic theology, emphasizing the importance of coherent models of reality that assist in understanding the Triune Faith of the Church.

**REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS**
1. Each student will read all the daily assignments prior to class sessions. It is expected that each student will stay up-to-date in assignments.
2. There are no formal tests.
3. Each student should invest between seven and one half to nine hours per week in outside preparation for this class, as stipulated by the ATS Catalog (see section entitled “Academic Information,” subsection, “Preparation”).
4. Each student will be given a structured opportunity to develop more fully their understanding of the issues by being placed on a team discussion group. Each team will have five members. The meeting place for these team discussions is online. Go to the First Class Desk Top and click on ST501-LW. You will find your TEAM ASIGNMENT listed under that file name. You will also find a file called TEAM ACTIVITIES that will list study guide questions from each chapter of the text, Faith And History. Each team member will answer the respective questions before each class session. Team members may offer a brief response to each other, although this is not required. You may also ask questions of each other, although this too is optional. The importance of posting your answers to the study guide questions prior to class is very important.
5. Each student (who contract at least for a “B” in the course) will write an interpretative term paper on theological method (approximately 8-10 pages). It is assumed that each student knows the mechanics of a term paper. Please follow The Chicago Manual of Style. Be sure to organize the paper around a purpose statement with supporting documented sources. Each student should use at least three sources, which may include the assigned readings and texts for this course. An interpretative paper means each student will engage personally with the implications and applications of theological method. For example, you may choose to write on any of the theological methods, or a combination of them, discussed in the course as the way you think theology should be done.
6. Each student will be asked to participate on a panel discussion on the praxis of theology based on the text, The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism. It is important for everyone to read the assignments prior to each class period in order that meaningful dialog takes place as the panel members lead us. In order to insure the integrity of this process, each student will sign the class roster indicating that they have faithfully read the assignment. Panel assignments will be made on the first day of class.
7. It is recommended (not required) that each student develop “A Dictionary of Terms” as an ongoing process throughout the weeks of the course. This dictionary should consist of terms and ideas which are new to you and which will help you to gain a better understanding of theological method and praxis.
GRADES:

For a grade of “C”—
1. Answer the study guide questions on time, which means answering them before coming to class.
2. Participate in a panel discussion on the praxis of theology.

For a grade of “B”—
1. Answer the study guide questions;
2. Participate on a panel discussion;
3. Write an interpretative term paper on theological method (approximately 8-10 pages).
4. Due date is Dec. 3.

For a grade of “A”—
1. Watch the video, “The Creation of the Universe,” produced by PBS and available in local video stores in their educational division. A special viewing will be arranged for those interested in this very timely topic, followed by a discussion.
3. Write a six to eight page essay, summarizing your understanding of the implications of contemporary science for faith, using the concept of eternity and time as the focus. This is not a research paper, but an essay based on the video and the ATJ article.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

MODULE 1 – SEPTEMBER 3

Topic:
1. Introduction to theological method with a focus on the relation of faith and history

SECTION ONE:
THEOLOGICAL METHOD
IN THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS
AND THE PRE-MODERN PERIOD

MODULE 2 – SEPTEMBER 3

Topics:
1. The Ancient and Pre-Modern Background
2. The Emergence of Historical Consciousness with the Hebrews and Critical Thinking with the Greeks

MODULE 3 – SEPTEMBER 10
Topics:
1. Athens or Jerusalem? The Academy or the Church? Christology and Cultural Forms and Ways of Thinking
2. The “Invention” of Scientific History with Herodotus. Is Biblical History “Scientific”? 

SECTION TWO:
THE MODERN HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

MODULE 4 – SEPTEMBER 10
Topics:
1. Epistemological Dualisms in Modern Philosophy
2. The Beginnings of the Modern Historical Consciousness: So-Called Cartesian Historiography

MODULE 5 – SEPTEMBER 17
Topic:
1. Can A Single Event in History Entail Universal Significance? Special attention to be given to Lessing and Leibniz.

MODULE 6 – SEPTEMBER 17
Topic:
1. Kant: The Fact-Value Dichotomy of Enlightenment Thought

MODULE 7 – SEPTEMBER 24
Topic:
1. Hegel: Absolute Knowledge and World History

MODULE 8 – SEPTEMBER 24
Topic:
1. Martin Heidegger: Truth as the Self-Disclosure of Being. An examination of existentialism as a transitional movement between modern and postmodern thought. Particular attention will be given to the philosophical sources of existentialist theology.

SECTION THREE:
EPISTEMOLOGICAL DUALISMS IN MODERN THEOLOGY
MODULE 9 – OCTOBER 1
Topics: Modern Religious Epistemological Dualisms
1. Theological Alternatives to Kant
2. Kierkegaard’s Contrast between Socrates and Jesus
3. Is universal reason or historical particularity the decisive element of Christian faith?

MODULE 10 – OCTOBER 1
Topics: Modern Religious Epistemological Dualisms (Con’t):
1. Martin Kähler, The Historical Jesus vs. the Historic, Biblical Christ.

SECTION FOUR:
THE INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND HISTORY—BEYOND MODERNITY AND POST-MODERNITY

MODULE 11 – OCTOBER 8
Topics:
1. The Postmodern Challenge:
2. Beyond the Modern Idea of Self-Revelation

MODULE 12 – OCTOBER 8
Topic:
1. Historical Criticism and Biblical Inspiration
2. Beyond the Modern Concept of the Self—A Relational Ontology

MODULE 13 – OCTOBER 15
Topic:
1. Beyond the Modern Concept of Truth
2. A Theology of Universal History

MODULE 14 – OCTOBER 15
Topic:
1. Pre-Critical, Modern, and Post-Critical Hermeneutics
2. Phenomenological Hermeneutics

MODULE 15 – OCTOBER 22
Topic:
1. Postliberal Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology
2. Hermeneutics, Ideological Criticism, and Liberation Theologies
MODULE 16 – OCTOBER 22
Topics:
1. Eschatologicalism As a Paradigm Replacement for Supernaturalism
2. Moltmann’s Concept of The Trinitarian History of God

MODULE 17 – OCTOBER 29
Topics:
1. Faith And The Criteria of Truth
2. A Recapitulation of Theological Method

SECTION FIVE:
THEOLOGICAL METHOD AND PRAXIS IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

MODULE 18 – NOVEMBER 5—
TEXT: The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism

Topics:

Panel #1—Preface:
1. Rediscovering Our Theological Grandfathers and the Praxis of Theology
2. The Possible Loss of a Theological Tradition
3. A Reader-Response Interpretation of Pentecostal Perfection
4. The Hermeneutical Link between the Past and Present
5. The Three Phases of Wesley Studies and Theological Praxis
6. Conflict and Debate in Theological Praxis

Panel #2—Chapter 1:
1. Biography as Theological Praxis
2. Theology As A Growing Tradition
3. The Three Stages of Wesley’s Theological Development

Panel #3—Chapter 2:
1. The Importance of Relationships in Developing One’s Theology
2. Verbal Differences as opposed to Substantive Differences in Theology

Panel #4—Chapter 3:
1. Differences and Misunderstandings Among Friends on Theological Interpretation

MODULE 19 – NOVEMBER 12

Panel #5—Chapter 4:
Reconciling Differences Among Friends
Panel #6—Chapter 5:
1. Mentoring And The Making of A Theologian
2. Writing Theology—The Power of The Pen

Panel #7—Chapter 6:
1. Reformers and Theological Praxis
2. Language As Metaphor

Panel #8—Chapter 7:
1. The Idea of Stages of Growth in Grace As Theological Praxis
2. Exodus-Conquest, Easter-Pentecost As Means of Grace
3. Pastoral Implications of Theology
4. Theological Orthodoxy and Pastoral Graciousness

Panel #9—Chapter 8:
1. Testimony As Theology
2. Revivalism As Theology

Module 20—November 19

Panel #10—Chapter 9:
1. Sermons As Theology

Panel #11—Chapter 10:
1. Religious Magazines As Theology
2. Women Preachers and Women Theologians in Early Methodism
3. The Mix of Romance, Marriage, and Theology

Panel #12—Chapter 11:
1. Diaries As Theology
2. Conversations and Inter-personal Relationships as a Basis for Doing Theology

Panel #13—Chapter 12:
1. A Collection of Letters As Theology
2. Saintliness and Theology

Module 21—December 3

Panel #14—Chapter 13:
1. Transitions, Revisionism, and Dispute As Theology

Panel #15—Chapters 14 and 15:
1. Ritual As Theology.
DECEMBER 9-13 – FINAL EXAM WEEK