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ST 501 Method and Praxis in Theology

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SYLLABUS FOR ST501
SPRING 2008
Larry Wood, Professor

METHOD AND PRAXIS IN THEOLOGY

Welcome to this 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 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.

Learning Goals

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. 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. Apply critical theological method to the effective practice of Christian ministry in the postmodern age.

Texts and Reading Assignments

1. L. Wood, *God and History, The Dialectical Tension of Faith and History in Modern Thought* (2005). 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. Because the key methodological issue of Christian theology is related to its historical claims, the focus of this work is on the relationship of faith and history.
2. L. Wood, *Theology as History and Hermeneutics, A Post-Critical Conversation with Contemporary Theology* (2005). There are many competing theological alternatives in the contemporary world, presenting evangelical thought with a challenge on how to learn from them while remaining true to the Scriptures. This work will introduce students to the representative theologians and movements of the 21st century. The uniqueness of evangelicalism is its commitment to the authority of Scripture, while at the same time being willing to dialog with opposing points of view in order to learn further insights on how to relate the enduring message of the Bible in today's world.
3. Donald Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral* (2005). This is the classical work on Wesley's methodological assumptions. Asbury Theological Seminary is a confessional school of theology. Although we do not think that all schools must be confessional, the founding fathers decided Asbury would be established primarily to train students in the Wesleyan tradition and hence we have chosen to be confessional. Thorsen is a distinguished alumnus of Asbury, and his work on Wesley's methodology will introduce the student to the distinctive features of the Wesleyan way of doing theology.
4. Barry L. Callen, *Caught Between Truths, The Central Paradoxes of Christian Faith* (Emeth Press, 2007). This is the work of a seasoned scholar who reflects the generous spirit and balanced methodology of the Wesleyan tradition.
5. James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). This Reformed author shows how Evangelicals can learn from postmodernism while remaining faithful to the Bible. He particularly shows how some of the insights of postmodernism contribute to a renewed understanding of the Trinitarian orthodoxy of the Early Church Fathers.

Online Help

Here is a website that provides you with immediate and free access to any technical term, subject, or person of international significance including living philosophers and theologians: <http://dictionary.reference.com/>. Be sure to click on the encyclopedia selection to use this comprehensive resource. This resource makes it unnecessary to purchase a hard copy of a philosophical/theological dictionary.

Here are other useful sources:

<http://www.philosophypages.com/dy/index.htm>.

<http://newadvent.org/cathen/>

<http://regina.stmarytx.edu/search/d?SEARCH=theology+dictionaries> (A list of theological dictionaries)

http://ipac.asburyseminary.edu:8078/uPortal/Initialize?uP_sparam=activeTab&activeTab=2&doSearch=true&showBrief=true&indexes=GW&GW=Theological%20Dictionaries&uP_tparam=props&props=ATS (Asbury's catalog list of theological dictionaries).

Just a reminder that you can also Google any term, name, or theme on the Internet, although you must determine the reliability of the webpage.

Assignments

1. Each module has a list of questions based on the assigned readings, which are located at <http://virtual.asburyseminary.edu>. These are intended to be guides for learning and class discussion.

Hours per Week

The ATS catalog specifies that "students in masters level courses at the Seminary will normally expect to invest two and one-half (2.5) to three (3.0) hours of work per week outside of class in preparation for every hour of credit to be earned." (See catalog section entitled "Academic Information," subsection, "Preparation"). For a three-hour class on-campus, this would be seven and one half to nine hours per week, plus three hours inside the classroom, for a total of ten and one-half to 12 hours total hours per week. Normally a three-hour class will have approximately 1200 - 1400 pages of assigned readings. Because of the challenging level of subject material for some students without a philosophy or religion major in college, this course has fewer pages.

Grades

Students have two options for being graded in this class.

Option 1

Students will contract for the grade that they wish to receive for this course.

Grade "C"

1. Students will faithfully do the weekly assignments of answering the study guide questions (approximately 75 words answers for each assigned question) and attending class. These assignments are to be posted in Moodle (<http://virtual.asburyseminary.edu>) and the student will be asked to read them in class. This is a basic requirement of the course, and the student who fails to fulfill this assignment will be subject to a grade reduction for the course.
2. Students will take detailed notes on each of the assigned readings (approximately 350 words for each twenty pages read) OR students may mark up their pages according to the general guidelines of Mortimer Adler, who was one of the leading university educators in America and the late professor of philosophy from the Univ. of Chicago (he died in 2001 at the age of 98!). He has shown that marking up your pages makes its contents a part of your intellectual makeup and

is an invaluable learning tool. See his guidelines:

<http://radicalacademy.com/adlermarkabook.htm>. Students who choose to mark-up their books will sign a statement at the end of the course that they have faithfully (each week) marked up their books using Adler's guidelines.

Grade "B" or Grade "A"

- (1) Students will do all the above work for a "C" grade.
- (2) Students will take a midterm and final objective-type tests. This is not an open-book test. The tests will be based on the study guide questions and class lectures/discussions. This is a time-limited exam and will be available at: <http://virtual.asburyseminary.edu>.

Option 2

- (1) Students will faithfully do the daily assignments, including answering the study guide questions.
- (2) Students will write a serious research paper (25 pages) on theological method. Proper thesis format must be followed, using the Chicago Manual of Style. Either footnotes or endnotes must be used. It is recommended that a student write a critical paper on the theological method of a contemporary theologian. Topics should be discussed with the professor in advance.
- (3) This paper is to be posted in <http://virtual.asburyseminary.edu> in the section entitled "To the Professor."

Office Hours

My office hours are normally on Monday afternoon from 2:00-4:00, or by appointment. Please feel free to email or call me.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1

Caught Between Truths, The Central Paradoxes of Christian Faith

Week 2

God and History, x-xiii, 1-42, 51-92

Week 3

God and History, pp. 93-123

Week 4

God and History, pp. 125-150-169

Week 5

God and History, pp. 171-187, 204-228

Week 6

God and History, pp. 231-258

Week 7

God and History, pp. 259- 305

First Exam

Week 8

Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. vii-xii, 1-54

Week 9

Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 61-122

Week 10

Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 129-193

Week 11

Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 197-240

Week 12

Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*

Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*, pp. 1-91

Week 13

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, pp. 93-164

Test Week

Second Exam