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ST 501 Method and Praxis in Theology

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SYLLABUS FOR ST501
SPRING 2006
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 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 ought to 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.

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. There is a special ST501 icon on your First Class Desktop with a list of the modules for this class with assignments.
2. Each module has a list of questions based on the assigned readings. These are intended to be guides for learning and class discussion. You must write down your answers each week to these questions and turn them in at the end of each class, *unless you are willing to mark up a book*. The online materials in First Class (Module 00 - Syllabus) includes an excellent article by one of the leading university teachers/philosophers, Mortimer Adler, the late professor of philosophy from the University of Chicago (he died in 2001 at the age of 98!). He has shown how marking up a book makes its contents a part of your intellectual makeup and is an invaluable learning tool. Students have a choice: (1) writing out detail answers to these questions on separate pieces of paper, or (2) students can mark up their books. Cf. <http://radicalacademy.com/adlermarkabook.htm>. The obvious purpose of this assignment is to hold students accountable for their learning and to insure a careful reading of the texts. If students mark up their books, the books will be by examined by the professor after each test. If students write answers to the questions, students will turn these assignments in weekly, and they will be returned the following week with the earned points marked on the paper.
3. Each student will be assigned to a class-led panel discussion for each week. The names of the panel group members are posted in First Class. (See the ST501 icon). Panel members should meet together to plan for their class presentation and decide who will be the moderator. The online questions for each assignment will serve as the basis of the panel's presentation; however, panels are not limited by these suggested questions. Students may wish to use power point slides for their presentation. The professor will serve as a secretary and resource person and will record and review the issues and major points presented by the panels. Each participant should plan to give a five-minute presentation. Class members should come to each class prepared to discuss the assigned questions.
4. Students may request to write a research paper relating theological method to a special area of interest in lieu of taking the two tests. For example, one may write a paper on "The Trinity and Christian Therapy," or "The Concept of Salvation History as a Teaching Method for Church School programs," or "Truth as Relational or as Absolute?," or "A Theology of Personhood in the Postmodern world." The focus of a research paper for this course will be on methodological considerations. For example, if the student writes a paper on "The Trinity and Christian Therapy," he/she will take the doctrine of the Trinity as a method for explaining the meaning of healthy human relationships. If one writes a paper on "The Concept of Salvation History as a Teaching Method for Church School Programs," one may use the progressive development of God's revelation in history as a narrative educational model for showing how there are different stages in one's spiritual growth and understanding of the Christian life. One may also choose to write on the theological method of a particular theologian.

- ✓ The length of the research paper should be between 20-25 pages, using *The Chicago Manual of Style*.
- ✓ The paper is due May 5.

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

(Grades are based on a point system).

1. Written answers are to be turned in on the day of each class. Each written assignment is worth up to 2 points for a total of 50 points for the course. Late assignments will be marked down 1 point. If you choose to mark up your books instead of writing out the assignments, you will sign a statement each week that you have read and marked your books according to the suggestions made in Adler's *How to Mark a Book* in order to receive the 50 points. Failure to read the assignments in advance of each class session and to mark up the books will result in a loss of 1 point for that day's assignment.
2. Class attendance will be checked for each session. Students will receive 1 point for each day of class attendance up to 22 total points for the course. This allows 3 unexcused absences. Students who do not miss any classes will receive 2 extra points to their total points. Students will still receive 1 point for each excused absence. What is an excused absence? Personal or family illness or death in the family. Overwork, family responsibilities, and schedule conflicts do not count as excused absences.
3. Each student will be assigned to a panel, and each panel will lead three class discussions. Each panel presentation is worth 5 points per student. Total possible points are 15.
4. There will be two objective tests. The tests are already placed in the course center online. You are free to prepare for the web-based tests as you read through the materials, although the order of items on the tests is not necessarily the order in which they appear in the texts. This re-ordering of the test items is deliberate because the assumption is that searching for answers enhances the learning process. If you make printed or electronic copies of the tests, you must protect them with confidentiality and destroy them after each test has been taken. You must work alone on these tests with no conversation about the tests with others. Each question on the first test is worth 3 points (35 questions = 105 points). Each question on the second test is 2.5 points (40 questions = 100 points).

Students may earn up to 292 points for the class.

A = 273 - 292 points
 A- = 269 - 272 points
 B+ = 265 - 268 points
 B = 253 - 264 points
 B- = 249 - 252 points
 C+ = 245 - 248 points
 C = 233 - 244 points
 C- = 229 - 232 points
 D = 210 - 228

Office Hours

Students should feel free to email me to make an office appointment.

Weekly Schedule

(See the weekly assignments and list of panel members online in First Class)

Feb. 8

God and History, x-xiii

Feb. 10

God and History, pp. 1-50

Feb. 15

God and History, pp. 51-92

Feb. 17

God and History, pp. 93-100

Feb. 22

God and History, pp. 103-123

Feb 24

God and History, pp. 125-150

March 1

God and History, pp. 151-169

March 3

God and History, pp. 171-189

March 8

God and History, pp. 191-230

March 10
God and History, pp. 231-258

March 15
God and History, pp. 259-276

March 17
God and History, pp. 276-308

March 22
First Test (over *God and History*)
This is a Web-based, open-book test.

March 24
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. vii-xii, 1-26.

March 29
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 27-45

March 31
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 45-60

April 12
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 61-90

April 14
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 91-104

April 19
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 105-128.

April 21
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 129-152

April 26
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 153-171

April 28
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 173-196

May 3
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 197-224

May 5
Theology as History and Hermeneutics, pp. 225-242

May 10

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, pp. 1-91

May 12

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, pp. 93-164

FINAL EXAM - May 17

Second test (over *Theology as History and Hermeneutics* and Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*). This is a Web-based, open book test.

To be completed by midnight.