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# ST 501 Method and Praxis in Theology

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# ST 501

## METHOD AND PRAXIS IN THEOLOGY

Spring, 2004

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### SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS:

**Distance Learning:** This course will be offered on the Wilmore campus in the Distance Learning Room (BC157), with additional students located on the campus of Spring Arbor College, Spring, Arbor, MI.

**Mixed Media:** This course will be offered through *mixed mode delivery*—with use of ExL technology integrated into the instruction of the course, and with networking activities constituting a regular part of the course grade. Additionally, course materials as well as conferencing, web links, and a chat room will be available on-line through an icon (“PH 501-CG”) placed on each student’s desktop, using the Seminary’s FirstClass Client program. This means that every student will need access to the Seminary’s e-mail system; access is possible through use of computers available on the Wilmore or Orlando campus Media Center, through dialing into the system from a home computer, or via the World Wide Web (and thus through any computer, such as those available at public libraries).

For assistance with all technical matters related to access to course materials, send your questions by e-mail to [ExL\\_Support@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:ExL_Support@asburyseminary.edu).

### 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. **Please note: in the module schedule, some readings overlap two modules. In these cases, the reading should be completed by the end of the module wherein the reading appears last.**

**IV. Modules/Lectures/Schedule** (Each module covers approximately one week. Please note that there may be some variation from the posted schedule, as all classes have their own specific areas wherein additional time may be required.)

### **Module 1: Introduction to Course and Syllabus Review**

**Module Description:** In this first session, we lay out the objectives for the course, establish means of assessment, and discuss the inter-relation of the various parts of the course. We also begin to establish a common language from which to engage in discussion of theological method, and we undertake a quick examination of the nature of language.

#### **Primary Issues:**

1. Introduce the course and examine the significance of theological method.
2. Begin the development of a "theological dictionary" from which to discuss theological method.
3. Engage in a first-order examination of linguistics and issues related to the use of language.

**Assigned Readings:**

Who Needs Theology? by Grenz and Olson

Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation by Cotterell and Turner, p. 11-33 and 293-315 (on reserve)

**Media:** Clip from *The Matrix*

**Assignments Due:** None

**Module 2: Theological Method--Establishing the Terrain**

**Module Description:** This module expands the introduction to theological method started in the first module. Here, we discuss and examine six of the central concepts that constitute theological method.

**Primary Issues:**

1. Relate the tasks and purposes of systematic theology to theological method.
2. Examine the impact upon our theological conclusions of the presuppositions that we bring to the task, and relate these to the procedures we follow during theological reflection.
3. Discuss two issues central to the theological enterprise: the thoughtful and adequate identification of the norms and sources for theological inquiry.

**Assigned Readings:**

Who Needs Theology? by Grenz and Olson

Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation by Cotterell and Turner, p. 11-33; 297-315 (on reserve)

**Media:** *Darmok*, STNG

**Assignments Due:** None

**Module 3: Establish the Contemporary Situation**

**Module Description:** In the pre-modern period, the emphasis was upon ontology; in the modern, upon epistemology; and in the contemporary period, upon hermeneutics. In this module, we examine these transitions in order to establish the contemporary situation and the impacts upon the manner in which theological inquiry is carried out.

**Primary Issues:**

1. The demise of classical foundationalism and its impact upon theology.
2. The transition from modernity to post-modernity.
3. Discussion of the so-called “hermeneutics of suspicion” and the implications for theological method.

**Assigned Readings:**

God: The World’s Future by Ted Peters (on reserve)

Beyond Fundamentalism and Liberalism by Murphy

**Assignments Due:** None

**Module 4: The Implications of Epistemology for Theological Method**

**Module Description:** Many theologians have spoken of theological method as the “epistemology of theology.” In this session, we undertake to overview the field of epistemology with particular attention to the manner in which the field impinges upon theological inquiry.

**Primary Issues:**

1. Discussion of the key concepts in epistemology and certain epistemic proposals.
2. Examination of post-foundationalism, fallibilism, and uncertainty as they relate to theological method.
3. The changing face of “historical study” and the meaning of “history.”

**Assigned Readings:**

Beyond Fundamentalism and Liberalism by Murphy  
Beyond Foundationalism by Grenz and Franke  
The Genesis of Doctrine, McGrath, chapter 4

**Assignments Due:** First reflection paper (To be submitted electronically per instructions in description of assessments.)— **March 2, 2004**

**Module 5: Hermeneutics and Theological Method**

**Module Description:** The question of meaning has become central to the theological enterprise in the contemporary setting. In this session, we extend beyond epistemology to undertake certain fundamental questions of hermeneutics.

**Primary Issues:**

1. Examination of the central factors influencing the manner in which humans “discern and create” meaning.
2. Consideration of the constructive and important role of “imagination.”

**Assigned Readings:**

Beyond Foundationalism by Grenz and Franke

**Assignments Due:** None.

**Module 6: Down the Rabbit Hole We Go: Method, part 2 and Scripture**

**Module Description:** In this session, we move directly to the heart of theological method: the question of norms and sources. In particular, we provide an overview of the four common norms/sources of theology, and then begin to consider the one commonly considered most important: Scripture.

**Primary Issues:**

1. Identification of the norms/sources of generic theological method: Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason.
2. The appropriation of Scripture as norm and source.

**Assigned Readings:**

Beyond Foundationalism by Grenz and Franke  
Between Two Horizons by Green and Turner, Chapter 5 by Walls (on reserve)

**Assignments Due:** None

**Module 7: The Relation Between Scripture and Tradition**

**Module Description:** The relationship between Scripture and Tradition is a good deal more complicated than the stark demarcation that is often presented. In this session, we begin to examine that relation in more detail.

**Primary Issues:**

1. Identification of the “canonical heritage” of the church

2. Examination of the relationship between Scripture and this canonical heritage.
3. Discussion of the “Rules of Faith” and their relationship to the canonical heritage.

**Assigned Readings:**

Between Two Horizons by Green and Turner, Chapter 5 by Walls (on reserve)  
Canon and Criterion by Abraham, chapters 1,2, and 5 (on reserve)  
*The Canonical Heritage as Means of Grace* by Gutenson (on reserve)  
The Genesis of Doctrine by McGrath, chapter 1-3

**Assignments Due:** Second reflection paper. (Submitted as indicated)—**March 23, 2004**

**Module 8: The Role of Tradition, part 2**

**Module Description:** We consider to examine the role of tradition within theological method. In this session, we examine the creeds, the role of doctrine, and other resources within the canonical heritage of the church.

**Primary Issues:**

1. The role of the creeds as norm and as source
2. Identification of other canonical resources.
3. The role of Christian doctrine and doctrine as partial deliverance of theological inquiry.

**Assigned Readings:**

The Genesis of Doctrine by McGrath, chapters 1-3  
**One** of the following:  
On the Holy Spirit, St. Basil (on reserve)  
On the Incarnation of the Word of God, St. Athanasius (on reserve)

**Assignments Due:** Optional: Rough Outline of Final paper.

**Module 9: The Appropriation of Experience as Norm and Source**

**Module Description:** Classical liberal theology since Schleiermacher has made experience (in a variety of different forms) normative for the theological enterprise. While such an emphasis upon experience is viewed by non-liberals as extreme, most theological methods utilize experience in some capacity.

**Primary Issues:**

1. Examination of experience as norm and/or source for systematic theology.

**Assigned Readings:**

Review: Beyond Fundamentalism and Liberalism by Murphy

**Assignments Due:** None

**Module 10: Reason in Theological Method--Norm, Source, Other?**

**Module Description:** In this session, we consider the role of reason in theological method, and we shall argue that rather than seeing reason as a “norm” or “source,” we should understand reason as “tool.” We also consider one proposal for a “full blown” theological method--that of Wolfhart Pannenberg.

**Primary Issues:**

1. Examination of what it means to say that reason is a “tool” for theological inquiry.
2. Examination of Pannenberg’s methodological proposal.

**Assigned Readings:**

The Being and Nature of God in the Theology of W. Pannenberg by Gutenson, chapter 2 (on reserve)

**Assignments Due:** The third reflection paper. (Submitted as indicated.)— **April 13, 2004**

Optional: Annotated outline and bibliography of final paper.

**Module 11: The Greatest Story Ever Told, and How We Forgot It's a Story**

**Module Description:** In this session, we examine narrative theology and its implications for theological method. We consider the philosophical underpinnings of the proposal for narrative theology presented by Michael Goldberg.

**Primary Issues:**

1. Identification and description of “narrative theology.”
2. Examination of the philosophical warrants for so undertaking theology.

**Assigned Readings:**

Narrative Theology by Goldberg, selections as indicated (on reserve)

**Assignments Due:** None.

**Module 12: The Cultural Situatedness of All Theological Inquiry**

**Module Description:** In this session, we examine the claim that all theology is culturally situated, and then consider certain examples of the impact of cultural factors on theological method.

**Primary Issues:**

1. The inevitable influence of our socio-cultural commitments to our ability to “do” theology.
2. Consideration of African-American theology as undertaken by James Cone.

**Assigned Readings:**

Theology Without Foundations, by Hauerwas, et al, chapters 3 and 5 (on reserve)

A Black Theology of Liberation by Cone, selections as indicated (on reserve)

**Assignments Due:** None.

**Module 13: Summary and Conclusions**

**Module Description:** In this session, we tie together any loose ends, and consider one last warning.

**Primary Issues:**

1. Methodology, a caution.
2. An example outline of systematic theology in total
3. Final summary and conclusion.

**Assigned Readings:**

Theology Without Foundations by Hauerwas, et al, chapters 4 and 5 (on reserve)

**Assignments Due:** Final reflection paper (Submitted as indicated)

Final paper on theological method (Submit as indicated)— **May 11, 2004**

**V. Required Readings**

As you can see from the individual modules, most 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,

Please see the last section of this syllabus for a bibliography of other titles and authors you may wish to consider relative to theological method.

## **VI. Assessments**

Following are the assignments which will be utilized in order to determine a grade for this course. See Attachment 1 for my grading methodology/policy.

1. Value: 10 points. Product: Theological Dictionary--Each student will be responsible for development of a dictionary of theological terms, concepts, and movements. This dictionary will serve as resource in your future ministries. Grades will be assigned on the basis of thoroughness--in other words, is this a dictionary that would really serve as an aid for Christian ministers. Full points will be awarded for dictionaries of 200 or more terms, adequately defined, and fewer points will be awarded on a pro-rated basis.

2. Value: 10 points. Substantive engagement in the course discussion center using the First Class Client. Specific details for assessment will be determined at the beginning of the course.

3. Value: 15 points. Product: Successful completion of the final exam. At the assigned time for this class period, I will give a final exam which will cover all of the material covered for this semester. Expect it to be somewhat difficult, as I will peg all scores to the overall average. There will be a combination of various forms of objective questions as well as a few short answer questions from which you will select a subset to answer.

4. Value: 20 points total, 5 points each. Product: Each student is to provide four two-page reflective pieces that are to be done with regard to four of the readings from four separate modules that we cover during the semester. See Attachment 2 for the outline to be used for these pieces. You may select the modules/readings. **Please note due dates in module schedule.**

5. Value 45 points. Product: A 12 (+/- 2) page paper on the current state of your own theological method. Note that this is the major assignment for the semester and that it counts nearly one-half of your final grade. You will want to start early in beginning to formulate your position with regard to the various methodological issues we consider during the semester. See Attachment 3 for the format and content for this paper.

**Submission of assignments: All assignments submitted this semester are to be made electronically to the “course office” on First Class. They must be submitted by the due date, and late submissions may be graded for reduced credit, but will receive no written feedback. All submissions are to use the following format: ST501nameassignment. So, for example, if I were submitting my first reflection paper, I would submit it as “ST501gutenson1” For reflection papers, you only need put the number at the end. For the dictionary, use a “dict” suffix (hence, ST501gutensondict), and for the final paper, use a “method” suffix (hence, ST501gutensonmethod). When they are returned, I will use the same name with “grd” added at the end to indicate the paper has been graded.**

## Attachment One

### GRADING PROCEDURES

I am including this document with the class syllabus in order to provide clarification regarding the manner in which grades for this class will be determined, including the level of work which corresponds to various grades.

First, in accordance with the seminary catalog, please note that a grade of B is given for work which satisfactorily meets the parameters of a given assignment. More specifically, let us assume that in response to a particular assignment a paper is handed in which satisfactorily answers the questions raised by the assignment and which does so in a clear and articulate fashion and which, further, has relatively few errors in spelling or grammar. Such a paper would receive a grade of B. Please note that this means that I might return a paper with a letter of B assigned which has few or no errors marked and which has an ending comment such as “good, solid work”. In other words, the starting point for a relatively error-free paper is a grade of B.

Obviously, in the course of examining the response to a particular assignment, there are specific aspects of the work which I consider in determining whether a higher or lower grade is appropriate. First, I consider the standards identified by the seminary for the relationship between assignments and their responses. Those standards are summarized below:

- A Exceptional work; outstanding or surpassing achievement of course objectives.
- B Good work; substantial achievement of course objectives.
- C Acceptable work; essential achievement of course objectives.
- D Marginal work; minimal or inadequate achievement of course objectives.
- F Unacceptable work; failure of course objectives.

(Specific descriptions of “-” and “+” grades are not given, but may be judged to fall appropriately between the descriptions given above.)

While I cannot, for a number of reasons, give a precise indication of the number of points that would be deducted for specific ways in which a paper might be lacking, the following list summarizes certain things which might potentially result in a reduction in total score.

- +Misspellings
- +Incomplete sentences
- +Grammatical errors
- +Punctuation errors
- +Poor overall structure
- +Awkward constructions
- +Failure to interact critically with the material (if part of the assignment)
- +“Stream of consciousness” writing
- +Answering a different question
- +Presentation of a weak conclusion
- +Presentation of a weak argument
- +Faulty logic

Similarly, I cannot give a precise indication of the number of points that would be added

to a paper for going beyond “good, solid work”. However, following is a list of the sorts of things that would evidence going beyond the basic assignment and would, therefore, warrant a higher total score for the response.

+Writing that is particularly articulate and/or worded with exceptional clarity and concision.

+Particularly insightful interaction with the material, including exceptional criticisms or the recognition of the more profound implications of certain positions.

+Presentation which moves beyond mere repetition of the arguments of others.

+Evidence of research that goes beyond what is required for the assignment.

+Conclusions which effectively summarize criticisms and which proposes solutions.

+Critical interaction which probes deeply into the arguments at hand.

Some assignments lend themselves better to scoring by numerical assessment rather than by assigning a letter grade initially. Of course, these numerical scorings must be converted to letter grades for recording at the end of the semester. I offer the following breakdown of my numerical scoring system to allow you to track their correspondence to letter grades as you wish.

A = 95-100

B = 83.4-86.6

C = 73.4-76.6

A- = 90-94.9

B- = 80-83.3

C- = 70-73.3

B+ = 86.7-89.9

C+ = 76.6-79.9

D = 60-69.9

F = less than 60

With these guidelines in place, I commit to give my best effort to assessing your work in accordance with these standards and in a fair and impartial fashion. In the course of the semester, if you should have any questions about the grade assigned for any particular assignment, please do not hesitate to contact me for further discussion.

## **Attachment Two Reflection Papers**

These short papers (two pages) are comprised of three parts: an abstract, the highlight, and the effect. Following is a description of the content, length, etc. for each of these parts.

**Abstract:** The abstract is a one page summary of the content of the reading you have selected. You might want to take a look at several short book reviews as contained in any one of a variety of theological journals. In these reviews, the authors are able to summarize an entire book in only a page or two. The primary difference between such a book review and your abstract is that book reviews generally contain critical interaction with the book in question, and in your abstract I am only looking to see that you understand the material and that you can report it articulately.

**Highlight:** The highlight is up to one-half of a page and it deals with that aspect of the selected reading which you found most striking. It may be that you found the point in question striking either for a positive or a negative reason. So, report the highlighted point, and give the reason(s) that you found it so.

**Effect:** Well, as I am sure you all agree, we do not engage in the study of theology merely in order to know more in the abstract sense. Rather, our goal is to develop spiritually and to become better able to serve in the roles to which God has called us. Consequently, I am interested here in hearing how you expect your ministry to be different as a consequence of reading this piece. Questions to consider are: how will this effect my ministry? what will I see differently as a consequence of this reading? Etc.

**Other:** You should exercise your normal cautions with regard to grammar, spelling, coherence of presentation, etc.

### **Attachment 3 Term Paper**

The term paper (12 pages, +/- 2), as noted in the syllabus, counts nearly one-half of your grade for this course. The important considerations for the development and writing of your paper are outlined in the following.

**Purpose:** To develop a formal statement of your own theological method as of the completion of this course of study. This may serve as a document which you could update from time-to-time as you theology develops through the time you are engaged in theological study.

**Format:** This paper is to be constructive in nature. In other words, this paper is not primarily a critique of some other persons method nor is it merely a reporting of the theological method of others. Rather, you are engaged in constructing a positive statement of your own theological method. You may, of course, interact with the thought of other theologians, for example, to the extent you appropriate the work of others. Please note that you are to provide the rationale for the various aspects of the method that you embrace. The work of the theologians we will study this semester will provide a model of what it means to engage in the development of supporting rationale.

**Questions:** Questions that you might consider in the course of developing your method are:

What are the sources for theology?

What are to be taken as the norms for theological discourse?

What are the tasks and the purposes for systematic theology?

What warrants/justifies the claims that you develop in your paper?

How does your theological method impinge upon your various roles as pastor/teacher/etc.?

**This paper is not:**

-a “stream of consciousness” paper. This means please organize carefully.

-an “op-ed” piece. In other words, this is not merely an opinion piece. You must document your work, research appropriately, etc.

-a critical examination of the work of others.

**Issues to keep in mind:**

I will expect the paper to be clearly and articulately written. All of your research must be well documented. Please use the school’s accepted style manual. It is important that you make sure your argument is coherently constructed--which almost certainly means that you need to develop an outline, etc. to track the various steps of your argument. Likewise, it is important that you demonstrate a keen awareness of the relevant issues for method, particular as relate to your own position.