

Richard Hooker: A Primer in Theological Method

Dr.. Bradford Littlejohn, Instructor

Course Description

“The mind of man always desires to know the truth with as much certainty as the nature of the subject permits,” wrote Richard Hooker in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. The craving to know, and to know for certain, is a temptation for Christians as much for anyone. In fact, because God’s Word is sure and certain, Christians are particularly tempted to imagine that we can be sure of ourselves in anything we set our minds to. False certainty, however, leads either to disastrous pride or crippling doubt. The task of Christian hermeneutics and Christian ethics, argues Richard Hooker, is that of rightly attuning our level of certainty to what the matter permits: acting in confidence but not presumption; deferring to authority without blindly trusting either it or our own reason.

In this course, we will study the first four books of Hooker’s *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity in Modern English* for a primer in Hooker’s theological and ethical method, a method as urgently needed today as it was in the 1590s.

Course Format

The format of the course will be predominantly one of guided discussion. The instructor will often be doing most of the talking, but generally to illuminate and draw out themes from the text for discussion, rather than in straight-up lectures. Thus, students will be expected to come having read and engaged with the text selection for the week, and with thoughts prepared to contribute.

Classes will meet via Zoom for one hour each week and will be recorded for later viewing by students who cannot participate. Additional student participation and instructor interaction can take place on our private Davenant Commons discussion board.

Course Objectives

Objectives for this course include: (1) to grasp the difference between the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* and the American evangelical habit of “solo Scriptura”; (2) to understand the proper role of reason and tradition in Protestant theology; (3) to explore the difference between doctrines we can/should be certain about and those we can/should not expect certainty on; (4) to learn more about Richard Hooker’s contributions to these questions in his historical context; (5) to draw parallels between Hooker’s context and forms of Protestant “biblicism” today.

Course Requirements

1. Weekly readings (due before our meeting each week).
2. Weekly interaction with fellow participants and the instructor in live class sessions.

Additional Recommended Course Elements:

1. Weekly submissions of reactions to/questions about the readings.
2. Participation on the course discussion board on Davenant Commons.

Course Texts

Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity in Modern English*. The Davenant Press, 2019 (provided with course registration payment).

Course Schedule

Week	Dates	Discussion Topics	Reading
1	2/2-8	The Quest for Certainty and the Psychology of Religious Radicalism	Hooker, <i>Laws</i> , Preface.1-4 (pp. 2-23)
2	2/9-15	The Indispensability of Fallible Authorities in Religious Debate	Hooker, <i>Laws</i> , Preface.5-9 (pp. 23-46)
3	2/16-22	Natural Law: the Metaphysical Foundation	Hooker, <i>Laws</i> , I.1-7 (pp. 48-70)
4	2/23-29	Natural Law Discerned and Applied (Reason and Human Law)	Hooker, <i>Laws</i> , I.8-10 (pp.71-91)
5	3/1-7	The Relationship of Special Revelation and General Revelation	Hooker, <i>Laws</i> , I.11-II.2 (pp. 92-125)

6	3/8-14	<i>Sola Scriptura</i> , Uncertainty, and the Sufficiency of Scripture	Hooker, <i>Laws</i> , II.3-8 (pp. 126-50)
7	3/15-21	The Two Kingdoms Doctrine as Hermeneutical Necessity	Hooker, <i>Laws</i> , III.1-7 (pp. 152-75)
8	3/22-28	The Proper Role of Reason in Hermeneutics	Hooker, <i>Laws</i> , III.8-9 (pp. 176-92)
9	3/29-4/4	Timeless Truth vs. Temporary Commands: a Two-Kingdoms Hermeneutic Applied	Hooker, <i>Laws</i> , III.10-11 (pp. 193-216)
10	4/5-11	Liturgy as Case Study	Hooker, <i>Laws</i> , IV.1-2, 12-14 (pp. 218-24, 261-81)