CDS 790: READINGS IN THEOLOGY & DEBT  
Spring 2014  
Wake Forest University School of Divinity

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Office Hours: By appointment. Sign up here or email for a time.  
Course Meetings: Monday 11-11:50

Course Description: “Debt” has been a potent metaphor in Christian thought from the beginning. But debt is also a pressing social problem – and, for many Americans, an urgent legal problem. This readings course surveys both the Biblical literature on debt and the landscape of consumer debt in the 21st-century United States. In the context of reflection papers and class discussion, participants will consider the relationship between “debt” as theological symbol and debt as economic-justice problem, as well as implications for parishioners and other constituents.

Course Objectives:

- To explore biblical texts relating to debt and economic justice.  
- To explore key legal concepts about debt in American law.  
- To examine the role of consumer debt and educational debt in students’ own lives, ministry contexts, and the larger American society.  
- To develop strategies for preaching and teaching about economic issues and establishing economic justice ministries in local parishes.

Required Texts:

- Selected legal opinions, scholarly articles, and journalistic articles on reserve through ZSR.

Assignments:

- Attendance and Discussion Participation (25%): Students are expected to come to class ready to ask questions and discuss the reading assigned.  
- Reflection Papers (25%): Each student will write 4 reflection papers throughout the semester on days to be assigned the first day of class. Two papers will relate readings to personal experience, and two will relate readings to ministerial contexts. Each reflection paper should engage assigned course readings by at least two different authors.  
- Final Integrative Project (50%): Students will prepare a 10-page (or equivalent) project. This project will construct a ministerial tool (sermon series, workshop, financial strategy
plan, council retreat plan, adult or youth education curriculum, etc.) that addresses one of
the main issues around debt and economic justice presented by the course.

**COURSE POLICIES**

**Late Work:** Generally speaking, it is just not accepted, particularly for assignments with limited
time allowed for all students. If you foresee a problem with the timing of assignments, please
speak with the instructor immediately.

**Electronic Devices:** Laptops, iPads, etc., unless used exclusively as learning tools, can be
disruptive not only to your own learning but also to your class-mates’. Pedagogical studies show
that note-taking by hand, in your own words, remains the most effective way of synthesizing and
learning class material. If you must use an electronic device, it should be used only for note-
taking and accessing course readings if necessary. Your grade depends on appropriate and
professional participation in class. Social media, chat, email, texting, and phone calls all inhibit
this participation. Furthermore, you are preventing your colleagues from appropriate
participation as well. There will be times during the course when the instructor will require
“screens down” time. Bring paper and writing implement for such times. It should go without
saying that cell phones need to be turned off while in class.

**Accommodations:** Any student who needs an accommodation based on the impact of a medical
condition or learning difference disability should speak with the instructor at the beginning of the
course and provide documentation for the specific accommodations necessary. Students are only
granted accommodations for which they have an official letter from one of the following two
University offices:
- Student Health Services: Cecil Price, M.D., 336-758-5218.
- Learning Assistance Center and Disability Services: V. D. Westervelt, Ph.D., 336-758-5929.

**Honor Code:** Upon enrollment you each subscribed to the Graduate Honor Code of the
University. Please refer to the Divinity School Bulletin and Student Handbook. Please read it
carefully and at least remember its existence (and consequences) while quoting sources, copying
someone else’s work, or turning in a paper you’ve already used for another class.

**Hospitality and Language:** Theological commitments lead the faculty to identify language use
as one way we embody and practice hospitality. We invite all members of our learning
community to join us in paying attention to how we use language and in exploring new language
practices that cultivate hospitality. Each faculty member approaches language in different ways
depending on our areas of academic expertise and our individual theological perspectives and
commitments. We write and speak with an awareness of the historical, political, and societal
contexts out of which theological language emerges and how language can impact readers and
listeners. Out of this diversity, faculty conversations about language are lively and vibrant. We
invite students to participate in these intentional conversations and to learn to think theologically
and creatively about language.

The following suggested practices represent academic expectations for language use in
public speech and writing, including scholarly activity (lectures, presentations, discussions,
handouts, and publications), communications (official and internal), and worship (sermons, liturgy, and music). The faculty offers these expectations in order to educate leaders who practice hospitality in a range of settings.

Language about God: Theologians, ministers, and worship leaders have an opportunity to give voice to the variety and richness of God’s presence with God’s people. Language used in preaching and worship as well as in academic writing acknowledges and cultivates this richness when it explores diverse ways to write, speak, pray, and sing about and to God.

Examples:

- Varied metaphors can be used to speak to and about God. We can name God’s attributes. Examples: Rock of Salvation, Fountain of Life, the First and the Last, Refuge and Strength, Shelter from the Storm.
- We can address God out of our experience of God. Examples: Creator, Mother, Giver of All Good Things, Teacher, Father, Guardian, Redeemer, Friend, Healer.
- We can seek balance when using pronouns to refer to God, for example, alternating between gendered pronouns.

Language about Creation and Humanity: Hospitable language acknowledges and affirms the value of all creation and the humanity of all people. While language about God is a theological choice, language about people needs to reflect standard grammatical practices of inclusivity.

Examples:

- Words like “people,” “us,” “humanity,” “humankind,” etc., should be used in place of words that identify all human experience with the experience of men.
- Non-gendered language should be used whenever possible in reference to persons; for example, should use “clergy” or “clergy person” instead of “clergyman.”
- Person-first language such as “enslaved persons” instead of “slaves,” “persons with disabilities” instead of “the disabled,” or “people who live in poverty” instead of “the poor” is encouraged.
- Language should affirm diverse and multiple racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, and sexual identities by acknowledging varied life narratives. Avoid language that generalizes human experience (e.g., “all” or “we”) and that stereotypes persons or groups. Use specific examples, rather than generalizations about people or groups, when illustrating a point.

(Adapted from the faculty’s guidelines, “Hospitality and Language at Wake Forest University School of Divinity.”)

Documentation and Plagiarism: When you use the words and ideas of others, you are taking part in an ongoing scholarly conversation. It is always necessary to identify the other speakers in the conversation. Therefore you must cite the source of any material, quoted or paraphrased, you have used. Different disciplines and various journals use different citation methods. To learn more about the different styles of citation and help you document your research properly, click on http://zsr.wfu.edu/research/guides/citation.html. The absence of such documentation constitutes plagiarism, perhaps the most serious academic offense. Proper documentation requires a bibliography of any texts you have consulted (both traditional sources and on-line sources) as well as individual notes that demonstrate your
debts to outside sources. For a tutorial on plagiarism see the following link:
http://zsr.wfu.edu/tutorials/plagiarism/

SYLLABUS

26.Jan.2015: Debtors’ Prison, from Jesus to Dickens to the 21st Century

- Bible: Matthew 18:21-35
- Graeber, pp. 1-20, 82 (last paragraph) – 84 (through last full paragraph)
- Reserve Materials:

2.Feb.2015: Transactional Language in Theology & Law

- Bible
  - Romans 5–6
  - Luke 7:36-46
- Reserve Materials:
  - Kirksey v. Kirksey, 8 Ala. 131 (1845).
  - Oliver Wendell Holmes. The Path of the Law, 10 Harvard L. Rev. 457 (1897)


- Rebecca Todd Peters, “Examining the Economic Crisis as a Crisis of Values,” Interpretation 65 (2011): 154-166. Found at:
• Reserve Materials:

16.Feb.2015: Usury

• Bible:
  - Exodus 21–22 (focus on 21:2-11 and 22:15, 16, 25-27; skim the rest for context)
  - Deuteronomy 23–24 (focus on 23:19-20 and 24:10-13; skim the rest for context)
  - Psalms 15, 112
  - Ezekiel 18, 22 (focus on 18:5-18 and 22:6-12; skim the rest for context)
  - Nehemiah 5:1-13 (skim Ne. 1, 2 for context)
  - Matthew 5 (focus on vv. 21-26 and 38-42)
  - Luke 6:17-49 (focus on vv. 27-36)

• Oakman, pp. 1-41


• Reserve materials:

Additional Optional Readings on reserve:


23.Feb.2015: Debt Forgiveness
• Bible/Early Christian Texts
  - Deuteronomy 15
  - Leviticus 25
  - Matthew 6 (focus on vv. 7-15; skim the rest for context)
• Oakman, pp. 42-91.

2.March.2015: Bankruptcy
• Reserve materials:
  - U.S. CONSTITUTION, Art. I, sec. 8, cl. 4.
• Porter, pp. 1-64.
• Oakman, pp. 92-121.

9.March.2015: Spring Break

16.March.2015: Debt Collection
• Bible
  - 2 Kings 4:1-7
  - Luke 12 (focus on vv. 13-15, 57-59)
- Matthew 5, especially vv. 21-26, 38-42
- 1 Cor. 6:1-11
- James 2 (focus on vv. 1-7).


- Reserve materials:
  - *Jeter v. Credit Bureau, Inc.*, 760 F.2d 1168 (11th Cir. 1985).

Additional Optional Readings on reserve:
- Excerpts from the Congressional floor debates leading to passage of the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act.

23.March.2015
- Atwood, pp 1-121.

30.March.2015
- Atwood, pp. 122-204

6.April.2015
- Graeber, pp. 21-164 (skim pp. 1-20 to review).

13.April.2015
- Graeber, pp. 165-306.

20.April.2015
• Graeber, pp. 307-392.

27.April.2015
• Porter, pp. 85-100, 136-156, 195-234.

Finals Week: TBD meeting time @ the Shaner/Miller/Bark home
How We Talk about Debt at Church
• Reserve materials:
  - Skim Strike Debt’s *The Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual*.