

Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Course No.: TS-510 (3 units)

Semester: Fall 2009

Class sessions: Wednesdays, 8:30 – 11:30 a.m.

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Office Hours: As posted or by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is an introduction to the study of Christian thought as well as the nature and task of theology in relationship to the use of Scripture, to the major themes of the Christian faith, and to a confessional understanding of theology.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To demonstrate familiarity with the church's history, confessions and heritage.
2. To explain the central themes/doctrines of the Christian faith.
3. To describe personal and denominational theological positions in dialogue with the Christian tradition.
4. To develop skills in theological reflection on personal, social and philosophical issues.

RELATED DEGREE OBJECTIVES

Within the larger curriculum goals of the Seminary this course should facilitate growth in the following areas:

1. Articulate commitment to a biblical theological Christian perspective.
2. Analyze, synthesize, and engage contemporary church and world issues from a biblical theological position.
3. Identify ways in which the institutional church has both shaped and been shaped by society.

TEXTS FOR THE COURSE

Required texts:

Alister E. McGrath. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 3rd or 4th edition. Blackwell, 2001, 2006.

Alister E. McGrath, ed. *The Christian Theology Reader*. 2nd or 3rd ed. Blackwell, 2001, 2006.

Stanley J. Grenz. *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*. Baker Books, 1996.

Please note that used copies of the McGrath texts are widely available via internet sites. Older editions are acceptable for class use. Please see me if you are using a 2nd edition of the primary textbook as the reading assignments will need to be slightly altered.

NATURE OF THE COURSE

Our goal in this course is both to understand the development of Christian thought over the last 2000 years and to develop practical skills in theological reflection. McGrath's *Christian Theology: An Introduction* will provide the framework for our study of theology, its history, sources and methods, as well as its basic doctrines. *The Christian Theology Reader* will be used

as a source book providing critical examples of how men and women of the church have thought theologically. Grenz's book, *Created for Community*, provides a specific systematic approach to theology. The assignments in this class have been designed to help students develop practical skills in theological reflection. The course will rely on these assignments, regular discussions sessions, lectures and reading assignments to explore the nature of the theological task as well as the art of theological reflection.

REQUIREMENTS

All Students

1. **Lectures.** Lectures will be given on topics related to our study. Attendance is expected.
2. **Readings.** Students are expected to read the assigned texts in a timely fashion.
3. **Discussions.** Regular discussion periods will be used to examine assigned topics and questions that arise. Successful completion of the course will require participation and adequate preparation for the sessions by careful reading and consideration of the assigned texts.
4. **Theological exercises.** Students will be expected to participate fully in a variety of exercises designed to stimulate discussion and the development of basic skills in theological reflection.

Two-Unit Students (Class schedule and due dates to be published)

Written Assignments

1. **Study questions.** A list of study questions chosen from those provided at the end of each chapter in the McGrath textbook is attached (Attachment A). Students are expected to provide short answers for the questions chosen and to submit the answers on the last day of class but no later than the end of the semester.
2. **Essay/reflection** on the nature of God (3-4 pages) – See Attachment B. for details
3. **Book review.** Students will write a 2-3 page review of *Created for Community*. The review should identify the organizing principle of Grenz's work and the way that idea shapes his work. It should also assess the effectiveness of his argument.
4. **Essay/reflection** on church/denominational position (3-4 pages). Students will collect a confessional statement from either their local congregation or denomination. Choosing one or two doctrinal positions from their confessional statement, students will write an essay that demonstrates how that statement interprets scripture within the larger Christian tradition and the theological implications of that reading. Students should seek to demonstrate what is unique or particularly illustrative of their denominational (or congregational) heritage. A close reading of the relevant chapter in McGrath should aid your work.
5. **Confessional statement and Theological reflection/commentary.** Working in assigned groups you will write a 1-2 page confessional statement on an assigned topic. As a follow-up to the group assignment you will write a 5-6 page theological commentary on that statement. (See class handout for further information.)

GRADING – 2 units

Study questions	20%
Essay (God)	15%
Essay (Denom. Position)	15%
Book review	20%
Confessional article	10%
Reflection/commentary	25%

Three-Unit Students – (Class schedule and due dates to be published)

Written assignments

1. **Study Questions** – A list of study questions chosen from those provided at the end of each chapter in the McGrath textbook is attached (Attachment A). Students are expected to provide short answers for the questions chosen and to submit the answers on the last day of class but no later than the end of the semester.
2. **Essays/reflection pieces** on the following topics
 - a. Nature of God (3-4 –pages) – See Attachment B for details
 - b. Reflection on a biblical text (6-8 pages) – See Attachment C for details
 - c. Church or denominational position (3-4 pages). Students will collect a confessional statement from either their local congregation or denomination. Choosing one or two doctrinal positions from their confessional statement, students will write an essay that demonstrates how that statement interprets scripture within the larger Christian tradition as well as the theological implication of that reading. Students should seek to demonstrate what is unique or particularly illustrative of their denominational (or congregational) heritage. A close reading of the relevant chapter in McGrath should aid you in your work.
 - d. Reflection on a cultural text (3-4 pages) – (See Attachment D for further information)
3. **Comparative book review** - Students will choose a one-volume theological work on a subject of personal interest and submit the title to the professor for approval. A bibliographic guide will be distributed in class. Students will write a 5-6 page review of the book reflecting the student's close reading of the text as well as the student's personal interaction with the material. The review should include a comparison of the chosen author's approach to that of Grenz in *Created for Community*, as well as a close evaluation of at least one doctrinal theme or category in relation to the comparable section in Grenz and the appropriate chapter/section in McGrath.
4. **Confessional statement and Theological reflection/commentary.** Working in assigned groups you will write a 1-2 page confessional statement on an assigned topic. As a follow-up to the group assignment you will write a 7-8 page theological commentary on that statement. (See class handout for further information.)

GRADING – 3 units

Study Questions	15%
Essay One	10%
Essay Two	10%
Essay Three	10%
Essay Four	10%
Book Review	15%
Confessional Statement	10%
Theological Commentary	20%

POLICY NOTES

Grading. Papers will be graded on clarity of thought, comprehensiveness and originality. Plagiarism is unacceptable and work deemed as such will be given a grade of F. I will accept and grade a rewrite of the essay on the nature of God if submitted by October 7. The original essay must be handed in along with the rewritten version. **Absences/class participation** will be noted and may affect the student's final grade. **Late work:** Percentage points will be deducted

for work turned in late. “Late” is defined as any time after I have graded the class assignment
Skipped Assignments will be factored into the final grade.

Academic Policies. MBBS academic policies (as well as other school policies) are described at <http://www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies/>. These policies provide guidance on academic integrity and plagiarism, accommodation for disabilities, incomplete course work, extensions, dates for changing registration, non-discriminatory and inclusive language, appeals, etc. Students are expected to be familiar with these policies and will be held responsible for adhering to them. If you have questions about how these policies relate to you or to a situation that you face in your studies, please speak to the professor or consult the Registrar.

COURSE SCHEDULE – to be published

ATTACHMENT A: Study Questions

ALL STUDENTS

Please provide short answers (approximately a paragraph) to the following questions selected from the questions at the end of each chapter in *Christian Theology: An Introduction* by Alister McGrath.

Chap. 1-4

1) The English historian Thomas Carlyle once suggested that history was basically the biography of great individuals. On the basis of your reading of these first chapters, who do you think was the most significant person in relation to the shaping of Christian theology? Why?

Chap. 5

2) What difficulties with the idea of theology as an academic discipline lie behind the growing interest in spirituality within the churches and seminaries?

Chap. 6

3) Why did narrative theology become so attractive to many theologians in the late twentieth century?

Chap. 7

4) Many theologians argue that theology is fundamentally an exposition of the revealed truths found in the Bible. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this position?

Chap. 8

5) What theological issues were at stake in the Copernican debate?

Chap. 9

6) "God can do anything." How would you respond to this definition of divine omnipotence?

7) What is distinctive about the Holy Spirit?

Chap. 10

8) Many theologians prefer to speak have "Creator, Redeemer, and sustainer," rather than the traditional "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." What is gained by this approach? And what difficulties does it raise?

9) Why did the twentieth century witness a renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity?

Chap. 11

10) Explore the use of one of the major New Testament titles for Jesus. What are the implications of speaking of Jesus in this way?

11) What theological insights are linked with the belief that Jesus Christ is “God incarnate”?

Chap. 12

12) In what ways does the “quest of the historical Jesus” reflect the agenda of the Enlightenment?

Chap. 13

13) How are Christian understandings of the person of Christ related to understandings of the work of Christ?

14) Assess the importance of one of the following approaches to the meaning of the cross: a victory over sin and death; forgiveness of sin; a demonstration of the love of God toward humanity.

15) How are the cross and resurrection related to Christian understandings of salvation?

Chap. 14

16) Give a concise summary of the main issues at stake in the Pelagius controversy.

17) Martin Luther is associated with the doctrine of “justification by faith alone.” What did he mean by this? And what were the alternatives he rejected?

Chap. 15

18) The doctrine of the church is often described as “the Achilles’ heel of the Reformation.” Why?

19) “How can anyone speak of one church, when there are dozens of Christian denominations?” Summarize and assess the answer that could be given to this objection.

Chap. 16

20) Give a brief summary of the main arguments for and against the baptism of infants. Does it make any difference to the infant concerned?

Chap. 17

21) Why was Dietrich Bonhoeffer so attracted to the idea of a “religionless Christianity”?

22) How helpful and persuasive do you find Karl Rahner’s idea of an “anonymous Christian”?

23) Why have ideas such as the resurrection and divinity of Christ proved to be such a hindrance to inter-faith dialogue? Is there a case for their elimination, in order to make such a dialogue more fruitful?

Chap. 18

24) Give a brief summary of the way in which either Rudolf Bultmann or Wolfhart Pannenberg interpreted the resurrection. (You will need to turn back to chapter 12 – *or chapter 10 in earlier editions* - to find some of the material you require for this answer.)

25) Does the Christian hope relate to the present or to the future?

ATTACHMENT B: Essay One: Reflection on the Nature of God ALL STUDENTS

The assignment is to write a 3-4 page essay in which you explore some aspect of your understanding of the nature of God which has grown out of a significant life experience. **Please note:** You are welcome to choose almost any experience in your life with one exception. Please do not choose your conversion experience or the essay will be returned to be rewritten. You will be invited to share the story with several other classmates.

Begin by choosing an experience that will serve as the take-off point for your theological reflection. This might be an event in your life in which you felt God's presence in a particularly meaningful way, a life experience which gave you new insight into the character of God, or an experience which raised questions for you about the nature of God or God's activity in the world. Begin your essay by *briefly* narrating the experience and your response to it. Try to limit your narrative to one page. Then, try to identify the question or issue that is at the heart of your experience and focus your theological reflection around it. What is the issue or question you want to explore in relationship to understanding the nature of God? What have you learned about God's nature through this experience? What are the implications of this understanding of God?

As you begin your reflection choose a passage of scripture that helps you think about this issue or question. It might be a passage that confirms your experience or one that seems to call it into question. Use this scripture to aid your theological reflection. Using the skills learned in *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* identify the textual unit, outline it so that you understand its structure, examine key words and try to identify the author's intent in writing. (For example, is the writer writing to encourage, to admonish, to offer hope, to instruct, etc.)

Now that you have studied the biblical text go back to your personal experience and use what you have learned to think about your experience of God. The following questions are offered as starting points for your reflection.

1. How does your experience point to God's work in your life, in your faith community or in the world? Does it provide a new or different perspective on God or some aspect of the Christian life? Is it consistent with your understanding of scripture? How?
2. What does this passage of scripture reveal about God? How does it help shape your understanding of the experience you have described? Does your experience call into question something the Bible seems to teach about God's nature? Does the scripture call into question some aspect of your understanding of the experience?
3. What are the implications of your reflection on the nature of God? How does this lead you to a new understanding of God or a deeper understanding of the biblical text? Are you left with questions? Are there possibilities for healing or renewal? Does it suggest a need for action or change on your part? If so, what might that be?

ATTACHMENT C: Essay Three, Theological Reflection on a Biblical Text

(3-unit students only)

In this essay you are to write a 6-8 page essay that uses the biblical text as a starting point for theological reflection.

There are multiple parts to this essay. First, you are to listen and take notes on a sermon so that you can outline the main points of the message (taped sermons are acceptable for this assignment). Begin by evaluating the sermon.

What was the sermon about? Was there a central theme or statement? Is there something being preached against or position that is being advocated? Can you identify a theological or doctrinal category (i.e., God, Christology, Nature of the Church, The Christian Life, the Work of the Holy Spirit, etc.).

Develop your essay by exploring the way the preacher worked with the biblical text, the central theological points of the sermon, the doctrinal framework that supports the sermon (if you can identify it), and your response to the sermon. Finish your essay by examining the same text yourself. Identify its textual unit, outline it so that you can understand its structure, identify and research key words and try to determine the rhetorical aim of the text.

What kind of theological reflection does this text prompt you to do? In other words, how would you preach this text? The following questions are starting points for your reflection.

1. How did the preacher use the Bible to shape the sermon? Did the sermon grow out of the text, or did the text get applied to a theme or issue?
2. Using the appropriate chapter from the McGrath textbook, Part III (if you can identify it), try to determine the preacher's theological orientation to this issue. What ideas might be shaping the preacher's development of the sermon? Can you identify a theological imprint (i.e., Calvinist, Lutheran, evangelical, Anabaptist, Catholic, etc.)? Do you think this was conscious or unconscious on the part of the preacher?
3. Were there elements of the service that helped make a theological statement related to the sermon (e.g., music, additional scripture reading, drama, etc.)?
4. As you study this passage of Scripture can you identify other ideas that could have been developed or strengthened? Is there an alternative way to read the text?
5. What are ways to bridge the distance between the biblical text and our contemporary context?
6. What kind of theological reflection does this prompt in you? Does it suggest a need for change? Does it encourage or admonish?

Note: Please attach a copy of your sermon outline to your essay (rough notes are fine).

ATTACHMENT D: Essay Two, Reflection on a Cultural Text

(3-unit students only)

In this essay I want you to choose a cultural text as the beginning point for reflection. A cultural text is an idea or a way of thinking that is presented through some element of culture. For example, a point of view or a situation reported on a newspaper article, an idea presented in a short story or novel, a movie or a political event, the messages present in advertising campaigns—all offer potential insight into the values and structures of our society and can be a catalyst for theological reflection. Your assignment is to write a 3-4 page essay in which you identify and then reflect on a “cultural text.” How should we as Christians think about the issue or “text” you have identified?

Begin by identifying the heart of the matter in your cultural text. What is at its center that draws you into theological reflection? How does this text or its underlying assumptions reflect elements of culture or our social structures? In other words, what is the message? Once you have identified this central focus choose a passage of scripture that you think will help you in your reflection. Again, using the skills learned in *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* identify the textual unit, outline it so that you understand its structure, examine key words and try to identify the author’s intent in writing.

Now that you have studied the biblical text, go back to the cultural text you have identified and use what you have learned to interact with the cultural text. The following questions are offered as starting points for your reflection.

1. Does the message of the cultural text challenge or affirm a Christian worldview? In what ways does it do this?
2. How does your study of scripture and your knowledge of the Christian tradition help you assess the truthfulness of this message?
3. What have been the influences in your own culture or personal experience that shape the way you understand scripture in relation to this cultural text? How do these materials challenge or reinforce each other? Are there differences or similarities?
5. Does your theological work challenge us to change our behaviors or attitudes, or does it confirm them? What do you take away from this reflection?