

**Commissioned Ministry Training Program
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma**

Introduction to Theology Syllabus

[revised 6/8/12]

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[Notice to the students: this syllabus has been deliberately constructed to provide you with clear instructions about the course and its requirements. Please read the syllabus carefully and completely, including the specific instructions for the requirements, before undertaking to meet the requirements. If you have any specific questions regarding interpretations of the requirements, please feel free to contact the instructor directly.]

The purpose of this course is to introduce the student to the discipline of theological reflection in the context of the church. It will explore some of the large issues, agreements, and differences that have shaped the ecumenical traditions of the church, with special reference to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The course is divided into two seminars that must be taken in succession. It is not permissible to take the second seminar without having taken and passed the first. Both seminars must be passed to receive a passing grade in the course.

Overview On Theological Reflection:

If we think of the church as that:

liberative and redemptive
community of persons
called into being
by the Gospel of Jesus Christ
through the Holy Spirit
to witness in word and deed
to the living triune God
for the benefit of the world
to the glory of God,

then we can see that all of the language and practices of the church, as intending to witness to God, should be construed as **theological: about the reality of God and its bearing on the world and human life.** Hence, theologizing is already going on in the

life of the church. It is not, therefore, something that is invented by theologians as specialists and remains their privileged domain. All Christians are doing theology when they speak and enact Christian witness to God, and thereby all Christians are theologians.

But the church is called to be responsible for its witness, and this requires **theological reflection as a disciplined activity**. This activity is an inherent movement of **faith seeking understanding**. It requires becoming clear about the defining themes of Christian faith and witness, their rationale, and the authority by which those themes should be present in the church's witness.

This course is itself a disciplined theological inquiry into the large issues that have shaped the witness of the church over the centuries, asking as well about the appropriate content of the church's witness today. Hence, the student is being asked to read, think, and write about the following sorts of questions: 1) what are the authoritative sources and norms for Christian witness? 2) who is God? how is God known? 3) who is Jesus and why is he important to the church? 3) how are sin and salvation related? in and for what do we hope? 4) what is the church and what is its central mission? 5) how should we understand ministry and the sacraments?

I. Required Texts:

- A. **Alister McGrath, *Theology: The Basics*, 2nd ed., Blackwell, 2008.** A widely used, even-handed, and accessible introduction to the basic doctrinal themes, issues, and differences in Christian theology. Hereinafter referred to as **MGT**.
- B. **Alister McGrath, ed., *Theology: The Basic Readings*, Blackwell, 2008.** A useful selection of reading from various writings throughout the history of the church. Hereinafter referred to as **MGBR**.
- C. ***The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to Be Truly Church Today*, ed. Robert K. Welsh, Lucas Parks Books, 2008.** Contains the reports to the church by the Commission on Theology—under the Council on Christian Unity—from 1979 to 1997 on the nature of the church. It is important for understanding contemporary and historical construals of the church in the Disciples tradition. Hereinafter referred to as **CDC**.
- D. **Joe R. Jones, *On Being the Church of Jesus Christ in Tumultuous Times*, Wipf and Stock, 2005.** A collection of essays, sermons, and prayers, many bearing directly on the author's work as a Disciples theologian. Hereinafter referred to as **Jones**.

II. Written Assignments:

A. Reflection Essays: Each student will write a total of **6** reflection essays of 2 to 3 double-spaced pages in length [i.e., about 300 words a page] on the topics below in reference to the assigned readings. The essay should reflectively engage one or two aspects of theological reasoning expressed in the assigned reading and interesting to the

student. The student should try to stay focused, related to the text, and indicate his/her own thinking about those aspects of the general topic he/she has chosen to discuss. It will be helpful for the student to discuss some or all of the essays with his/her mentor. **All essays will be due to the instructor—by mail or e-mail or fax—no later than one week before the seminar meeting.**

Reflection Essays for First Seminar:

1. **Authority, sources, and norms in Christian theology.**

Read: MGT, pp. vii-xxviii, Chapter 1; MGBR, pp. x-xxi, Chapter 1; CDC, pp. 83-93; Jones, Introduction, Chapters 2,3,4,14.

2. **Doctrine of God.**

Read: MGT, Chapters 2,3,6; MGBR, Chapters 2,3,6; Jones, Chapter 4, might try Chapter 8.

3. **Jesus Christ.**

Read: MGT, Chapters 4,6; MGBR, Chapters 4,6; Jones, Chapters 9,10,12.

4. **Sin, Salvation, and Hope.**

Read: MGT, Chapters 4,5,9; MGBR, Chapters 4,5,9; Jones, Chapter 7.

Reflection Essays for Second Seminar:

1. **Disciples Ecclesiology.**

Read: CDC, pp. x-xii, pp. 68-93 [Commission on Theology Reports on Ecclesiology (1979) and on the Witness, Mission, and Unity of the Church (1981), pp. 1-67 [Final Report on The Church (1997)]; Jones, Introduction, chapters 1-4.

2. **Disciples on Ministry, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper.**

Read: CDC, pp. 94-151 [Commission on Theology Reports on Ministry (1985), Baptism (1985), Lord's Supper (1991)]; MGT, Chapter 8; MGBR, Chapter 8; Jones, Chapters 13, 14.

- B. Credo: for the Second Seminar:** Each student will write a Credo—what I believe—of 8 to 10 double-spaced pages. The Credo should show **what the student construes as central and essential to Christian faith, life, and witness and why**. Or, how does one construe and answer such questions as expressed in the topics of the reflection essays: who is God? who is Jesus Christ? how do we know? what is sin? what is salvation? what is the mission of the church?

The student should discuss the Credo with his/her mentor.

The Credo will be due at the beginning of the Second Seminar, and the student should be prepared to explain and defend his/her Credo.

III. Course Seminars: Each seminar occurs over a Friday evening and Saturday. The aim of each seminar is to discuss the issues and concerns that have emerged for the students in the course of doing the assigned readings and writing the reflection essays and the credo. The Credos will be discussed in the **Second Seminar**.

IV. Mentors: Each student is expected to be in regular communication with a **mentor**—preferably an ordained Disciples minister approved by the Director of the Commissioned Ministry Program—throughout his/her studies in the program. In line with this expectation, the student must remain in regular conversation with his/her mentor throughout both seminars on theology. At least one week prior to the **Second Seminar**, the student should have his/her mentor submit to the instructor a written statement briefly describing the meetings with the student and assessing the student's grasp of the readings and issues and his/her theological reflection. No credit will be given for the theology seminars in the absence of such a letter from the mentor.

V. Communicating with Instructor: The instructor is open to the students communicating with him by any of the following means: mail, fax, e-mail, and telephone. [The use of carrier pigeons will also be entertained!] It is especially important that the student contact the instructor if he or she is finding it difficult to get started in writing the reflection essays. The instructor should also be contacted if the student has any questions about the course organization and assignments. The instructor is a retired seminary professor who enjoys talking with folk who are concerned about Christian faith and the witness of the church. To get a flavor for the instructor's theological concerns, the student may want to visit his website: www.grammaroffaith.com

VI. Other Bibliographic Resources:

Students are encouraged to read as widely as possible both during and after the course. The following suggestions might be helpful.

Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel, Chalice Press, 2008. [A recent collection of essays on traditional theological topics by wide range of current Disciples theologians exhibiting the extraordinary diversity of viewpoints—for good or ill—within the Disciples at the beginning of the 21st century.]

Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: The Shaping of Contemporary Disciples Identity*, revised and expanded, Chalice Press, 1997. [An attempt by a Disciples church historian to trace and describe a set of themes that he contends provide identity and coherence to the Disciples movement over time.]

The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement, eds. Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, D. Newell Williams, Eerdmans, 2004. [A thick and useful volume of entries on the Stone-Campbell Movement.]

Ronald E. Osborn, *The Faith We Affirm*, Christian Board of Publication. [A useful explanation of distinctive Disciples beliefs and practices by one of the great teachers in the Disciples tradition.]

- Stephen V. Sprinkle, *Disciples and Theology*. Chalice Press. [Controversial but useful critical survey of theological reflection among Disciples by a contemporary seminary professor.]
- Michael Kinnamon, ed., *Disciples of Christ in the 21st Century*, Christian Board of Publication. [Contains engaging essays produced for and by a conference in 1987 on the future of the Disciples.]
- D, Newell Williams, ed., *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989*, Chalice Press. [An important scholarly collection of essays describing, analyzing, and critiquing the Disciples life in America.]
- Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th ed, Blackwell, 2007. [A large but useful introduction, formerly used as a text in this LMTP seminar.]
- Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., Eerdmans. [A highly engaging introduction to theology—more advanced than McGrath—by a Reformed theologian. Lively exploration of contemporary theologizing.]
- Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, 2 vols., Rowman & Littlefield. [This publication by the instructor, containing the fruits of teaching systematic theology in a seminary over many years. Not quite an introductory text, but negotiable by laity who have an appetite for serious reflection on Christian faith.]
- Clark M. Williamson, *A Christian Theology: Way of Blessing, Way of Life*, Chalice Press, 1999. [An accessible systematic theology produced by my former colleague at Christian Theological Seminary, from the perspective of process theology and a deep concern for Jewish-Christian dialogue.]
- [It might be interesting to note that Williamson's and my systematic theologies are the only systematic theologies produced by Disciples theologians to date since the days of Alexander Campbell.]