**The Doctrine of God and the Christian Life**

**Scott R. Swain**

**RTS Orlando**

**Summer 2021**

**Dates and times**

July 19-23, 2021. Monday 1:00 PM – 6:00 PM; Tuesday thru Thursday 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM;   Friday 9:00AM – 1:00 PM.

**Course description**

The past two decades have witnessed a significant retrieval of historic Christian teaching about God in academic theology. This course aims to extend that retrieval to the church by providing advanced training to its leaders on the doctrine of God and God’s attributes.

The focus of the course will be the relationship between the doctrine of God and the Christian life. There is a natural connection between these topics. God is not only the supreme being, the source and end of all things (Rom 11:36). God is also the supreme good of the human soul (Ps 16).

We will attend to the entirety of Scripture’s teaching on these two topics, and also to several classic texts of the Christian tradition. We will focus especially on how the Psalms address our two themes.

**Course objectives**

* To acquire advanced understanding and appreciation of historic Christian teaching about God and God’s attributes
* To gain greater fluency as readers of scriptural teaching (especially the Psalms), and also classic Christian texts, related to God and Gods attributes
* To acquire greater fluency in communicating historic Christian teaching about God and God’s attributes in the church
* To attend to the formative dimensions of Christian teaching about God and God’s attributes
* To glorify God and enjoy deeper fellowship with God

**Required textbooks**

Students will read ***all*** of the following textbooks before the first day of class.

Anselm, *Proslogion* in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford University Press, 1998)

John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace* (Eerdmans, 2020)

James Dolezal, *All that is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2017)

Maximus the Confessor, “Ambiguum 7: On the Beginning and End of Rational Creatures” in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Christ* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003)

Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Baker Academic, 2003)

Gavin R. Ortlund, *Anselm’s Pursuit of Joy: A Commentary on the* Proslogion (The Catholic University of America Press, 2020)

Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 2 (Reformation Heritage Books, 2019)

*Prayers on the Psalms: From the Scottish Psalter of 1595* (Banner of Truth, 2010)

Students will read ***300 pages (of their choosing)*** from the following textbooks before the first day of class.

Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* (New City Press)

Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Psalms*, in *Luther’s Works*, vols. 10-13 (Fortress Press)

**Assignments**

***1. Reading (25 % of final grade):*** Students will complete all assigned reading from the textbooks before the first day of class and will be prepared to discuss the assigned reading in class.

***2. Participation (25 % of final grade):*** As fellow pastors and teachers, and under the guidance of the professor, students will contribute to our common learning by leading class discussions. Upon the close of registration, students will be assigned specific topics and dates on which they will lead class discussions. My assistant, Mr. Tyler Freire, will coordinate this assignment ([tfreire@rts.edu](mailto:tfreire@rts.edu)).

***3. Psalms notebook (25 % of final grade):*** Students will compose a “commonplace notebook” on the Psalms that collects observations, quotations, illustrations, outlines, and prayers related to the doctrine of God as presented in the Psalms. The notebook should be organized canonically (with separate entries for Psalms 1-150) and thematically (with separate entries for different aspects of the doctrine of God and God’s attributes). Students will turn in their Psalms notebooks to the professor for a grade and share their notebooks with their fellow students for their mutual edification and use in pastoral ministry.

***4. Research paper (25 % of final grade):*** Students will write a 12-15 page research paper the doctrine of God and the Psalms. Papers may trace one or several divine attributes through the Psalms or focus on one particular Psalm in which the doctrine of God is prominent. Papers will be evaluated based on their ability (1) to articulate a clear thesis that rests upon sound biblical and theological argumentation and that addresses the strongest counterarguments to the thesis; (2) to engage with appropriate scholarly resources (at least ten, with bibliography attached); (3) to follow the prescribed format (double spaced, Arial font, Turabian format). For more details on the research paper, see below: “How to research and write a research paper.”

All assignments are ***due on October 30, 2021*** by 11:59 pm (EST) and should be uploaded on Canvas.

**Academic Policies**

**1. *Late assignments:***Apart from exceptional circumstances, I will not accept late assignments for credit.

**2. *Plagiarism:*** Plagiarism, whether intentional or unintentional, will result in a failing grade for the course.

**How to research and write a research paper**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**I. Elements of a sound theological argument**

**A.** **Introduction**

**1. The major elements of a sound theological argument** **include the following**[[2]](#footnote-2)

a. Thesis/claim

b. Grounds

c. Warrants

d. Backing

e. Qualifier

f. Rebuttal

\* **Note:** These are *elements* of a sound theological argument, not *sections* of your research paper.

**2. More briefly put, those elements include**

a. Thesis/claim

b. Arguments and evidence that support your thesis

c. Arguments and evidence that rebut objections to your thesis

**B. Thesis/claim:** A thesis statement is the *major claim or assertion* of your research paper. The entire research paper is devoted to *establishing* your thesis through sound biblical and theological argumentation and to *defending* your thesis against objections.

**1. Diagnostic questions**

a. Is my thesis statement significant?

b. Is my thesis statement specific?

**2. Examples of good thesis statements**

a. “Although the Westminster Standards do not refer explicitly to the doctrine of the *pactum salutis*, the substance of the doctrine as taught by many 17th century Reformed divines is affirmed therein.”

b. “In his controversial redefinition of the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification, N. T. Wright confuses the general issue of covenant membership with the particular issue of justification, which does not connote one’s covenant membership but one’s legal right to covenant blessings.”

c. “Although Reformed systematic theology is sometimes accused of neglecting the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the triadic structure of the Reformed doctrine of salvation (i.e., *pactum salutis*, *historia salutis*, *ordo salutis*) provides a robust framework for appreciating the Holy Spirit’s role in saving sinners.”

d. “The grace of adoption is the temporal term (i.e., goal) of the Son’s incarnate mission.”

**3. A good resource for developing a theological thesis: the “*quaestio*”** (see, for example, Zacharias Ursinus’ *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* or Francis Turretin’s *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*)

**4. Distinguishing the “order of discovery” from the “order of composition”: a good *plan of research* that leads to a good *research paper***

a. Usually, one develops a thesis *very late in the process of researching a topic*.

b. Thus, one’s research strategy should not be first to devise a thesis and then to do one’s research.

c. Rather, one should (i) find a topic that interests you, (ii) research it thoroughly, (iii) gather a broad understanding of the issues, questions, debates, and arguments related to your topic, and (iv) finally construct a thesis that one can argue on the basis of the research you have undertaken.

d. You can then structure a paper around proving and defending your thesis statement on the basis of your research.

**C. Grounds:** Groundsprovide the *reasons and evidences* used to support the paper’s thesis/major claim

**1. Note**: The *type* of theology paper that you are writing (see II. below) will determine the *type* of grounds to which you must appeal in establishing your thesis.

**2. Potential sources for grounding a theological claim include:**

a. Biblical exegesis

b. Ecclesiastical authority (creeds, confessions, trusted doctors of the church, ecclesiastical consensus); in classical dogmatic reasoning, these subordinate authorities provide “probable” arguments in doctrinal argumentation

c. Historical evidence

d. Rational arguments[[3]](#footnote-3)

e. Reliable scholarship (primary and secondary sources)

**D. Warrants:** Warrants (which often remain implicit in your paper) connect your *grounds* to your *thesis/claim* by explaining the *logical relevance* of your grounds to your thesis. In other words, warrants answer the question: “Why do *these* arguments or *this* evidence ‘count as’ support for *this* thesis/claim.”

**1. You do not always need to state your warrants explicitly.** Sometimes warrants are shared by you and your reader or by the persons whose claims are being debated in your paper.

\* **For example:** A paper criticizing N. T. Wright’s view of justification would not necessarily need to explain why biblical exegesis must be determinative for one’s view of justification. That is not a point of dispute between Wright and confessional Protestants.

**2. You may need to spell out your warrants when they are not shared by all parties in a debate, or when the particular relevance of an argument or piece of evidence may not be self-evident to your reader.**

\* **For example:** A paper defending the practice of infant baptism might need to explain why it is that an OT passage would bear on the discussion of a NT sacrament.

**3. In the process of your research, you should *always* ask yourself whether or not your arguments and evidence are warranted, i.e., *whether and how* they provide support to your thesis/claim.**

**E. Backing:** Backing provides *further support for your warrants*, though it may not support your thesis directly.

\* **For example:** In trying to explain the warrant for using OT texts in an argument for infant baptism, you might appeal to the sound hermeneutical practice of building *other* doctrines via redemptive-historical exegesis, i.e., by reading the Bible from beginning to end.

**F. Qualifiers:** Qualifiers put limitations on your thesis/claim and protect you from overstating your case.

**1. Sample thesis:** “Although Reformed systematic theology is sometimes accused of neglecting the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the triadic structure of the Reformed doctrine of salvation (i.e., *pactum salutis*, *historia salutis*, *ordo salutis*) provides a robust framework for appreciating the Holy Spirit’s role in saving sinners.”

**2. Sample qualifier:** “Although Reformed systematic theology is sometimes accused of neglecting the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the triadic structure of the Reformed doctrine of salvation (i.e., *pactum salutis*, *historia salutis*, *ordo salutis*) provides a robust framework for appreciating the Holy Spirit’s role in saving sinners. *To be sure*, *Reformed Christians have sometimes failed to appreciate the significance of the third person of the Trinity, but this occurs as a result of neglecting their system of theology and not as its natural consequence.*”

**G. Rebuttal:** In your rebuttal, you *acknowledge, accurately summarize, and refute objections* to your claim, as well as the grounds (and sometimes warrants) upon which those objections are based.

\* **Note:** ***Strong thesis statements*** are built upon the acknowledgment, fair summarization, and cogent refutation of the ***strongest possible objections*** to the thesis.

**II. Types of theology papers**

**A. All papers in this course must articulate and defend a *thesis statement* related to *one of the doctrines discussed in this course*.**

**B. Nevertheless, you may approach your topic from one of the following different perspectives:**

**1. The primarily *exegetical* theology paper:** Focus on a particular biblical text or series of biblical texts which articulate the biblical “grammar” of your doctrine.

**2. The primarily *historical* theology paper:** Focus on a historical figure(s), text(s), or event(s) related to your chosen doctrinal topic.

**3. The primarily *dogmatic* theology paper:** Focus on expounding a particular doctrinal *locus*, providing a summary of the biblical and theological grounds upon which that *locus* rests, and refuting the major objections to it.

**III. Research paper format**

**A. There is a difference between *constructing* a sound theological argument (= logic) and *presenting* a sound theological argument (= rhetoric).** Through your *research*, you will construct a sound theological argument. In your *paper*, you will present that argument in rhetorically fitting, clear English prose.

**B. Paper structure**

**1. Introduction:** The first 2-3 paragraphs of your paper should:

a. Pique the reader’s interest in your topic 🡪

b. Provide a brief introduction to the problem (*quaestio*!) which your paper seeks to address 🡪 [Note: your work in I.B.4.c.(iii) provides the basis for this.]

c. Clearly state your *thesis*—*the specific, significant claim* that your paper seeks to prove through sound argumentation and evidence and to defend against objections (note: your thesis is a *claim* that *addresses or answers* the problem/*quaestio* you raise in your introduction [see sample theses above]) 🡪

d. Provide a brief overview of the structure of your paper.

**2. Body:**

a. In the body of your paper, you will elaborate upon your thesis, adequately furnish grounds that support your thesis, discuss and defend warrants as necessary, and deal with objections fairly and decisively.

b. The *structure* of the body of your paper will vary depending upon the type of paper that you are writing (e.g., exegetical, historical, dogmatic, etc.).

c. Nevertheless, the structure should be transparent to your reader and should be written in such a way that the reader can follow your argument as easily as possible.

**3. Conclusion:** In the last paragraph of your paper, you will restate/summarize your thesis and its supporting argumentation, and briefly point to the relevance of your thesis for the church’s thought and/or life.

**4. Sample structure for the body of a paper written to support the following thesis:** “Although the Westminster Standards do not refer explicitly to the doctrine of the *pactum salutis*, the substance of the doctrine as taught by many 17th century Reformed divines is affirmed therein.”

a. Introduction

b. Body

i. Briefly trace the *historical development* of the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* and summarize the major *elements* of the doctrine as presented by 17th century Reformed divines.

ii. Demonstrate that the *term* “*pactum salutis*” (or its terminological equivalents) does not appear in the Westminster Standards.

iii. Demonstrate that the *elements* of the doctrine do appear in the Westminster Standards; discuss the *places* where those elements do appear; discuss any *terms* that appear in the Westminster Standards and that typically appear in discussions of the *pactum salutis* (e.g., “surety,” etc.).

iv. Discuss reasons (found in your research and/or offered by other scholars) why the *pactum salutis* is not explicitly mentioned in the Westminster Standards, including suggestions that the Westminster divines either *objected* to this doctrine or found it otherwise *unworthy of inclusion* in the Confession and Catechisms.

v. Discuss corroborating evidence for believing that the Westminster Standards affirm the substance of the doctrine (e.g., explicit mention of the doctrine in “The Sum of Saving Knowledge”; explicit mention of the doctrine in The Savoy Declaration; explicit defense of the doctrine by Westminster divines in other publications; etc.).

c. Conclusion

**IV. Other requirements**

**A.** The paper should be 12-15 pages, double spaced, 12 pt Arial font, Turabian format

**B.** The paper should be written in *clear, interesting, formal* English prose (use a proofreader!), without any grammatical or spelling mistakes.

**C.** The paper should interact intelligently and fairly with at least 10 scholarly (non-internet) resources.

**V. A note on authorial point of view**

**A.** In this research paper, you are not expected to make an original contribution to scholarship or to change the landscape of academic theology in the 21st century.

**B.** One of the main goals of this paper is to help you become a *thoughtful and articulate representative* of the church’s confession. In other words, this paper should help you become someone who speaks eloquently *for* the church on the basis of an *intelligent, well-instructed grasp* of the biblical and theological foundations of the church’s confession (cf. 2 Pet 3.16).

**C.** This goal is not a roadblock to true theological creativity but a means of empowering and enabling true theological creativity: One must *first* have a profound grasp of the “grammar” of theology before one can compose “creative” theological statements (in prayer, sermons, papers, etc.). Too often, we skip the foundational step of mastering our theological “grammar,” and that is why we often stutter.



**DMin SLOs Chart**

Course: The Doctrine of God and the Christian Life

Professor: Scott R. Swain

Campus: Orlando

Date: Summer 2020

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| **DMin Student Learning Outcomes**  *In order to measure the success of the DMin curriculum, RTS has defined the following as the intended outcomes of the student learning process. Each course contributes to these overall outcomes. This rubric shows the contribution of this course to the DMin outcomes.*  *NOTE: DMin Emphases are:*   1. *Reformed Expository Preaching (REP), and* 2. *Reformed Theology and Ministry (RTM)* | | **Rubric**   * Strong * Moderate * Minimal * None | **Mini-Justification** |
| **Biblical/**  **Theological Foundations:** | Significant knowledge of biblical and theological foundations for pastoral ministry. (This includes interaction with Biblical texts, as well as awareness of Reformed Theology.) | Strong | Reading, lectures, class discussions, Psalms notebook, research paper |
| **Historical/**  **Contemporary Practices:** | Significant knowledge of historical and contemporary practices of pastoral ministry. | Strong | Reading in primary and secondary sources from the tradition, class discussions |
| **Integration:** | Ability to reflect upon and integrate theology and practice, as well as implementation in a contemporary pastoral setting. | Strong | Focus of course is the relationship between doctrine and life |
| **Sanctification:** | Demonstrates a love for the Triune God that aids in the student’s sanctification. | Strong | Reading, class discussions |
| **Hermeneutical/**  **Homiletical Analysis** | Demonstrates ability to interpret a text and apply homiletical principles to the text. | Strong | Reading, lectures, class discussions, Psalms notebook, research paper |

1. For further guidance on this topic, see Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adapted from Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Chapter eight of John Frame’s *DKG* provides a helpful introduction to the use of rational argumentation in theology. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)