



TH519 Theological Thesis

Short Syllabus

Instructor: To be arranged, based on your area of interest and instructor availability.

GCS mission statement

“Equipping the Saints for Pastoral Ministry.” We are committed to equip the saints for pastoral ministry through quality graduate-level distance education programs in biblical, theological, ministerial and pastoral studies informed by Trinitarian Incarnational faith.

Course description

This course integrates learning from biblical, theological, and ministry studies into a research thesis on a theological topic. This three-unit course normally covers two semesters, and it is conducted as an independent study under the guidance of the professor as the capstone course for the Master of Theological Studies degree.

Prerequisite

Student must be within six units of completing the Master’s program and must pass a summative exam *before* registering for this course.¹ This exam may be taken after you have earned 36 units, or with permission of the Dean of Faculty, dean@gcs.edu. The summative exam will include four essay

¹ The summative exam is graded pass or fail; it does not carry any credit. Contact the Dean of Faculty for further guidance when you are close to taking the exam.

questions – one on biblical studies, one on theology, one on church history, and one on Christian ministry. Sample questions may be obtained from the Dean of Faculty. The exam must be proctored, and must be completed within three hours. For details on proctoring, see the *Academic Catalog*. Since it may take us up to one week for the exam to be graded, you should take the exam at least a week before you want to register.

Recommended textbooks

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. Expanded edition. San Francisco: Harper, 1951, 2001. 978-0061300035. About \$10.

Stone, Howard W. and James O. Duke. *How to Think Theologically*, 3rd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013. ISBN 978-0800699321. About \$12. Older editions are also acceptable.

Turabian, Kate L., and others. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers*. 9th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0226430577. New as low as \$15; older editions cost less.

Course requirements

1. Even before you register for the course, choose a topic for your paper. Develop a one to two-page synopsis and a brief outline of the ideas you hope to develop. Narrow your topic – do not try to cover “God’s Plan of Salvation” in a 70-page paper. Have a specific focus. Feel free to discuss your topic ideas with GCS faculty before you register.
2. Also before you register: Draft a list of 15-20 books that are relevant to your paper. Some of these texts will probably be part of your previous coursework (see Appendix F). You will probably need to expand your research a little beyond the books you have already read. But do not attempt to read too many new books – there is not enough time to master a new field of study. Focus on something you have already studied and already know something about. In

some cases this research can be integrated into an independent study course that you take for credit before you take TH519.

3. You may request a specific GCS faculty member to be your primary advisor for this project, but we reserve the right to assign a different advisor, based on your topic and the workload of the faculty members.
4. Register for TH519 and pay the tuition. You will then be given access to the TH519 website, which includes a “forum” that you will use for all communications. (Other students cannot see what is in your forum.) You can then upload your list of books. For all future submissions, click on “reply” rather than creating a new topic. This will keep all the communication on the same page. At the top of the forum, you can change the display so that the most recent reply is on top, for example.
5. Your advisor will comment on your list of books, perhaps suggesting a small number of additional books.
6. Prepare an annotated bibliography of these books, with a one-paragraph analysis for each book of how it is relevant to your paper.
7. **Do not write your paper all at once!**² It should be done in stages, as outlined below. The final paper will be **no less than 13,000 words, no more than 22,000 words**, double spaced, with one-inch margins, Times New Roman font, 12 point.³ It must have a works cited section at the end and appropriate citations throughout. Use footnotes for citation references, as described in Turabian’s manual, or use the MLA style.⁴ This paper will be added to the GCS library,

² If you write the entire paper before submitting any of it, you risk wasting a lot of time. You may be writing in the wrong style, or spending a lot of time on a subtopic that is not needed for your thesis. By submitting the paper a bit at a time, your adviser can provide “course corrections” for your research and writing.

³ The word count does not include the title page, table of contents, footnotes, or the works cited section. This will be about 40-70 pages.

⁴ For formatting details, you may consult a style guide, such as

- Diana Hacker, *A Writer’s Reference*. Available in several editions.

and will be available to other students. As a contribution to pastoral scholarship, it should reflect academic excellence not only in what you write, but also in its appearance. *Formatting and citation details are important.* This requires careful proofreading and attention to punctuation details. See Appendix H.

8. As you are doing the research and the writing, you are required to give updates to your advisor every 30 days. If we do not hear from you in any 30-day period, we may ask you for an update. Tardiness in this matter can affect your grade, and if we do not hear from you for an entire semester, you will automatically receive a grade of W for “withdraw.”
9. If the final paper is not uploaded by the end of the 12th week of the second semester, you will be given a grade of I (incomplete), and you must pay a continuation fee. That is one third of the class tuition, but the continuation does not carry any credit.
10. If you do not complete the project by the end of the third semester, you will be given a grade of W, and you will not be able to proceed unless you re-register for the course. All coursework for the MTS degree must be completed within ten years of when you began as a GCS student. If you encounter health problems or other emergencies that prevent you from making progress for a substantial amount of time, you should request a leave of absence in advance. No fee is required for the leave of absence, but you must communicate with us. A formal leave of absence may allow you to extend the length of time you have

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- Kate Turabian et al., *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. For a brief guide, see http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html; use style N for footnotes and B for the Works Cited section. More information can be obtained from the Purdue University Online Writing Lab: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/01/>.
 - Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology*.
 - You may use MLA style if you are already familiar with it. <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>
 - Students from other nations may use a style appropriate to their own nation. Please tell us the name of the style manual you wish to use.

to finish the degree.

11. There will be an oral defense of the paper, in which you explain the results of your research and answer questions from three GCS faculty members. This may be done in person, or by a video connection. We ask you to give a 10-minute overview of your research and the paper, and then the faculty will ask questions about the paper.
12. The committee has a range of possible responses:
 - a. Rejection of the paper, usually with a suggestion that additional research be done and the paper extensively revised. (This is rare. You will not even get to the oral defense unless your advisor believes that your paper is acceptable.)
 - b. Accepting the research and the conclusions, but with a requirement that the paper must be edited. This is by far the most common response, so it is wise to allow time for this additional work. Edits may be extensive, or much more limited.
13. After the paper is finalized and the advisor has accepted it and given it a grade, it will be edited further to conform to academic standards,⁵ and it will be placed in the GCS library, and thus may be accessed by students and faculty. The paper is not a place to air private misgivings or grievances. It is a public contribution to scholarship that may help others. As the *Academic Catalog* notes, the acceptance of a paper as sufficient for the program does not necessarily imply that the conclusion has been accepted by the instructor, the seminary, or the sponsoring denomination.

Suggested schedule

Although we have some deadlines for communication, as mentioned above, your progress is based primarily on the pace you choose. With two semesters and the

⁵ Students should do their best to conform to a published academic style. However, even scholars find it difficult to get all the details right, so we will fix irregularities that we notice.

break between, you have 25 weeks to do the paper. Here are some targets that might help:

Before registration: Send an email to the Dean of Faculty stating 1) your proposed topic, and 2) if you have a preference for a particular advisor for your project. Do not register if you do not have a topic in mind.

Right after registration: Upload your preliminary list of books (you should have been thinking about this even before you register), and a preliminary thesis statement. Your advisor will comment on these within one week. In the meantime, you should be reading and/or preparing the annotated bibliography.

Week 2: Your advisor will comment on your list of books and your preliminary thesis statement. You should use this week for preparing the annotated bibliography.

Week 3: Upload the annotated bibliography. It is often wise to turn this in even you have not yet read two or three of the books.⁶ Your advisor will respond to it within a week. In the meantime, you should work on your outline.

Week 4: Upload your tentative outline. You may expand the stock outline presented below, or you may suggest a modification due to the needs of your paper.

Part 1: Introduction: statement of the topic and survey of some of the literature that has been done on this topic.

Part 2: Theological foundations of the topic. How does the doctrine of God, Christ, salvation, etc. provide a foundation for the question you are writing

⁶ Your advisor may have recommended a couple of books you were previously unaware of, but you can't put your project on hold until you have read everything. The annotated bibliography is not graded, so it is better to turn it in incomplete, than to delay everything in the schedule. We do not allow much time for this because we expect that you have already read the books, or at least the parts that pertain to your paper, and all you have to do is write a paragraph of annotation for each book. Write one paragraph per day and you'll be OK.

about? Everything begins with God.

Part 3: Biblical foundations. What passage of Scripture best addresses your topic? What passages provide additional support? Are there passages that might give evidence against your view?

Part 4: Application: How do the theological and biblical principles affect what people do or think?

Part 5: Works cited. We do not need an exhaustive list of all books ever published about the topic – you should list only the documents you referred to in your paper. This must be done in a consistent style – see Appendix H.

There is no structure that fits every topic, so there is some flexibility in the way the paper is written. Your advisor will respond to your outline within a week.

Week 5: Review the comments your advisor made on your annotated bibliography. This may help you as you write the introduction, which would include a “survey of the literature.” You do not have time to survey everything that is written about your topic, but you can survey what has been said in the literature you have read.⁷

Week 6: Upload your introduction and literature review. Do not wait until the whole paper is “done” before you submit it. *We know* it is not finished yet, but we prefer to get it in smaller pieces, rather than one large piece. That is because the feedback we give you on the initial sections can help you write subsequent sections in a better way. This is also to help you stay on schedule rather than procrastinate.

Week 9: Upload the theological section, which may include some historical background as well. This will lay a foundation for further sections.

Week 12: Upload the biblical analysis, including the exegesis of your primary

⁷ Your annotated bibliography does not become your literature review. The annotated bibliography is generally too fragmented, with no transition statements between the books. The annotated bibliography may also include books about biblical interpretation, for example, that are not directly about your topic, but are relevant to your biblical analysis, and their contributions to your study are best addressed in a later section. Your survey of the literature should have smooth transitions and be topically organized.

passage and a survey of other relevant verses.

Week 15: Upload the section on application.

Week 18: Draft of complete paper, with conclusion and works cited. This step requires that you have a good grasp of your paper overall, integrating editorial suggestions in all sections, perhaps doing a small amount of additional research. Devote a significant block of time in which this is your main task. Don't try to do it in odd moments squeezed between your other responsibilities. Make sure that the paper flows well from start to finish.

Week 21: Upload the final draft. Your advisor will have one week to review it.

Week 22: If your paper is ready, the advisor will then schedule an oral presentation for your paper about a week later, giving the other two committee members a week to read the paper. Due to vacations and holidays, it sometimes takes a couple of weeks to arrange a time suitable for all four people involved.

Week 23: Oral presentation. This is generally done by video conference. We'll ask you to give a 10-minute introduction to your paper (why you chose the topic, why you developed it the way you did, etc.) followed by 50 or so minutes of comments and questions from the three faculty members on your committee.

Week 25: Revise and upload the finalized paper. Although it is theoretically possible to finish in one semester, the process has always taken two or more semesters: you register for TH519 in the first semester, and you are automatically continued for the second semester. If you need a third semester, you must pay a continuation fee.

Assignments, estimated hours, and grade weighting

Assignment	Hours *	Percentage of grade
Reading the syllabus and instructions	4	
Studying for the summative exam	16	
Taking the summative exam	4	0
Reading books	100	
Writing the annotated bibliography	30	

Writing the final paper	200	100
Preparing for the oral defense	4	
The oral defense	2	0 ⁸
Total	351	100

⁸ The grade for the course is based on the written paper, but the student must pass the oral defense.

Appendix A: What to Include

1. Your paper should include a carefully stated thesis (position statement) that concretely expresses where you see your ministry or theological perspective fitting within your culture. See Appendix B.
2. A brief introduction that succinctly places you as author in the context of a theological perspective; your paper is written from within this context.
3. Development of a theological rationale for your topic. This should take into account the biblical text, Incarnational Trinitarian theology, and a broader Christian perspective.
4. A passage from the Bible should be analyzed as foundational to your presentation. Select a passage that provides an adequate basis for your topic. You will probably refer to other passages as well; whenever you make a statement about what the Bible says, you should include the biblical reference.
5. Research and critical response should be included in your paper. Include authors who support your position and some who argue against it. Evidence from church history should be included with the development of your topic.
6. Bridge the gap from the Bible to theology. You should explore what the Bible says, but do not stop there – you should also investigate what how theologians have analyzed and interacted with the biblical data. What larger principles are involved in the discussion?
7. State the strengths and weaknesses of your conclusion. State the problem, and the varying responses to it (both Christian and otherwise), and develop your position with support.
8. Conclude with a summary of your paper.