

HT 615 D Presbyterian History and Confessions
University of Dubuque Theological Seminary
On-line M.Div. course

Faculty Information

Carlton M. Badger
Phone: 919-493-4134
Email: CBadger@nc.rr.com

Overview/Course Description

Through readings, online discussions, lectures and research, this course will consider the history and confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A). This course is strongly recommended for Presbyterian Students.

Course Objectives

1. To develop a clearer grasp of the history of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) and its predecessor bodies.
2. To gain a working familiarity with the history and contexts of the Presbyterian Book of Confessions and the theological/spiritual ethos of the Reformed tradition.
3. To develop the ability to bring Reformed Theology to bear on the life of the church today.

M.Div. Curricular Goals

1. Nurture habits and disciplines of study and prayer that increase your love of God and neighbor and shape your personal and professional life.
2. Be formed by, live in, and minister out of Scripture and the historical and theological tradition of the church.
3. Educate and equip individuals and congregations to live and minister joyfully and faithfully as part of their own denomination and the ecumenical church.
4. Integrate theology and ministry in all areas of life.

Assessment /Course Requirements

1. Conscientious prepared, regular participation in the discussion boards (30%)
2. Weekly contribution of thematic analysis (15%)
3. Book review and book/article presentation in Forum context (15%)
4. Two-part final: proctored content exam (15%) and take-home essay exam (25%)

Required Texts to be Read

- Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds*
- James Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*
- Christopher Elwood, *Calvin for Armchair Theologians*
- *Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions: Study Edition*

- Milton Coalter et al., *The Re-Forming Tradition*
- John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*
- Joseph D. Small, ed. *Conversations with the Confessions*

Recommended Reading

- Bradley Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*
- M.W. Armstrong, L. Loetscher, C.A. Anderson, eds. *The Presbyterian Enterprise. Sources of American Presbyterian History*
- Donald McKim, ed. *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology*
Homer Rice, *Reformed Spirituality*
- D. Willis & M. Welker, eds., *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*
- A book on theological introduction or *loci* (i.e., common topics) from a Reformed theological perspective, such as Daniel Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding*, *Reformed Reader* (vol. I, W.S. Johnson and J. Leith, eds; vol. II, G. Stroup, ed.), Shirley Guthrie's *Christian Doctrine*, or Donald McKim's *Introducing the Reformed Faith*.

General Orientation

This course addresses two *foci*: Presbyterian history and Presbyterian creeds. These two *foci* are certainly not unrelated: one must know the history of the church to adequately interpret its authoritative confessions found in our *Book of Confessions*, while the *Book of Confessions* itself is a witness to our on-going history as Presbyterians, and to our theological development and direction. One result of this combination is that we come to see the Book of Confessions not as the deposit of unchanging beliefs written in stone (akin to Moses' tablets), but the witness of an ongoing and growing tradition of a pilgrim people responding to God in a way that is distinctive.

But the emphasis on this course is not exclusively on our confessional beliefs. The concatenation of Presbyterian confessions, theology, and history probably is best expressed in characterizing the aim of this course as developing a good feel for the *ethos* of the Presbyterian way. *Ethos* (from which we derive our term "ethics") is defined in my dictionary in two ways, as "the disposition, character, or attitude peculiar to a specific people, culture, or group that distinguishes it from other peoples and groups; fundamental values and mores," and in a more focused alternative, "the governing or central principle in a movement, mode of expression, etc." Both of these definitions will characterize our investigation of the Presbyterian *ethos*, of what John Leith describes in the sub-title to his book as "a way of being the Christian community." So more is involved here than theology or creeds, though that focus remains essential. And while both history and confessions are the principle *foci* in coming to know this Presbyterian *ethos*, much more is involved--worship, the use of the Bible, polity, development of our own cultural forms, symbols, architecture, habits, shibboleths, taboos, the way we interact with the wider culture, etc. So as we read and discuss our history and confessions, please keep this wider sphere in mind, and bring such wider references into the discussion whenever you can. As one old teacher of mine insistently urged, "*Connect!*"

This course is not aimed *specifically* at preparing one for the Presbyterian ordination exams, though it should help toward dealing with that rite of passage. For while in this course we come to understand our creedal and historical *ethos*, our "way of being the Christian community," our other curricular preoccupation involves taking our understanding of this *ethos* to apply it to issues and events in our contemporary church and life. I will not only myself require you to deal with this aspect, but expect you to bring up such issues yourself when you feel it appropriate.

The double *foci* of history and confessions structure the course to a degree. As can be seen in the calendar below, we alternate between reading/discussing the contextual history of the Church and the individual confessions in their context. The first three weeks are devoted to the Reformation context of our tradition, rooted above all in the reforming efforts of John Calvin. Presbyterian history and theology has developed as a branch of the wider story of Calvinism, meaning those Christian groups and theological outlooks that receive inspiration from the pioneering work of Calvin in reforming the Church of Geneva, Switzerland. Much of the general *ethos* discussed earlier finds its genesis in this period. So three weeks will be spent on orientating ourselves to this foundational outlook. The next four weeks will be spent with the Reformation and 17th century confessions: the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, and the Westminster standards (the collected Confession, Larger Catechism and Smaller Catechism). Then we go back to history and trace the development of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. from colonial times to recent decades, including an in-depth look at the contemporary context of the Church in a time of transition and change. We then head back to the 20th century confessions--the Barmen Declaration, the Confession of 1967, and the Brief Statement of Faith. [We include the Nicene and Apostles creed in the first week as part of situating ourselves in the wider sphere of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, but we will not devote specific weeks to those ecumenical creeds.] These shifts are not strictly between theology and history, for the confessions will be understood in historical context (Roger's book will be supplying the historical context for each confession), while the "history" discussions will often be concerned with theological developments. But generally you can envision the course as shifting between history/context and close reading of the Confessions.

Being a web-based course, the burden of the work is on reading. There is a substantial amount of reading; but one must remember that this is, after all, a graduate level course, with all the rigor and hard work that such requires. There may be overlap in your reading that may exasperate you ("We've read about this subject already!"). Usually when there is overlap I want you to think about the different approaches the authors take to the same subject. Look ahead at the calendar of reading assignments below. You will find that there are peaks and valleys in terms of reading load. The first several weeks are heavy in background reading, then several weeks of less volume (centered on the Scots Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism), then another mountain range with the Second Helvetic Confession and the Westminster Standards; we then resume background reading on American Presbyterian developments (an "upland plateau," if you will), before descending to a softer landing in the last three weeks of the course. It would be good to keep this ebb and flow in mind and not be caught unprepared.

On Being a Web-based Course

Being a web-based course, we will not be able to interact as would be usual for a classroom based course. On-line learning requires us all to think of this class differently than a traditional class on a campus. Instead of meeting to hear lectures and to discuss things face to face, we will read assigned texts on our own and talk about them through this website. I suggest you think of it as a "slow-motion seminar." In a seminar, all the instruction happens through discussion. That will happen here too. But it will be in slow motion: You will post your responses to questions. You will read what others said, and respond to some of them. Then you will have to look back later to see what others have said back to you. Then you can add your own responses to them. That means that you will need to check in more than once per week so that the discussion is really a discussion. It won't be a discussion if people just post something without checking back. Passing this course cannot be done without regular and timely participation in discussion. I expect you to learn as much (if not more) from each other as from the readings or my input. *This is not a passive course*, but requires you to invest yourself in responding to the materials and each other.

New assignments will be posted on Monday (sometimes the night before), and should be completed by the following Sunday. The links will remain active for a few days longer to allow stragglers to get caught up (though straggling will be noted). Several points should be mentioned:

--Please note that all parts of each week's assignment need to be completed. This includes the need to respond to each question as instructed and to respond to other students as instructed. I will not be looking for volume or perfection but for good-faith effort to participate and learn, as well as engagement with the material and fellow group members. Further, tardiness in this on-line context - especially in the Forum discussions - is not only a reflection of your personal work, but a hindrance to one of the essential modes of teaching/learning in this class. If you wait until quite late in the week to post your discussion contributions, you are basically keeping your voice out of the discussion until the end, making it harder for classmates to respond to you, and leaves those who are conscientious frustrated. My experience is that around half-way through the course people begin to lose energy and slack off on response time, etc. It seems more likely to occur given the on-line circumstances (i.e., you are not showing up for a class at a specified time, with an assignment to turn in or at least pretend like you know what the discussion is about). Some people can find that they become substantially behind and without a proper channel to catch up (after all, once the discussion forum for one week is substantially covered, it does little good to show up a week late and add your two-bits). It is then that those people say that on-line learning is more difficult than they imagined, because it puts more onus on you to show up and contribute! Don't let yourself be caught in that trap!! Be forewarned from my experience.

--You will need to engage in on-line discussion in a way that reflects Christian character. Listen to others' points of view. Share your own thoughts honestly but always in kindness and love, to build up rather than to tear down. Disregard of this requirement may, at the

instructor's prerogative, result in dismissal from the class. I do not require everyone to agree with each other or with me, though coming to a consensus is often a wonderful witness to the Spirit's work among us (though not always!). And I'm not very strict on "PC" enforcement, but respect is a key determinant in our interactions, even if you think the other person is corrupting the pure faith of the church (or some such idea). Neither am I--nor do I require you to be--a relativist or "perspectivalist," where every viewpoint is of equal validity. But every participant is to be taken with the utmost seriousness. Lastly, humility is necessary in our search for the good, the true, and the beautiful: openness to the Spirit's leading is simultaneously lauded in our heritage but often lacking in practice.

--Please refer to page 100 of the student handbook (available on the Web as well) for use of gender-inclusive language. My working policy on gender and language in the class interactions follows mainly that of the NRSV: references to people in general should be inclusive (for instance, no "Man" or "Mankind") unless you are specifically quoting an older text in which such sensitivities were not on the radar screen (that is, you don't need to be so historically insensitive as to make older writers inclusive, just your own statements). Please do not use such bastardized forms as "s/he;" there are more imaginative ways of working around this issue. For pronouns referring to God, I am more flexible: I have not myself always found a happy medium in rendering God pronoun-less, and I recognize the difficulty in this area. I have no problem in one speaking of God as either "He" or "She" (or even both, which I have sometimes done). I don't mean to minimize the issue, for it is a genuine theological issue. But it still retains enough theological and social ambivalence that I will not legislate on usage here. I just think we need to adapt to each other's proclivities here on an issue where a certain approach has not yet been officially labeled as heresy (to my knowledge).

--You will need to do your own work. Cutting and pasting from websites, or copying from books, without proper acknowledgment is plagiarism, and will result in dismissal from the class. You can't "cut and paste" in your ministry, so why do it now?

Practical Considerations

If you have no experience in online learning, it is best to get some orientation by contacting SemTech1@dbq.edu. If the format here is new to you, take some time to navigate around the Distance Learning site to familiarize yourself with the layout. This year we are on a new distance learning program ("Moodle") which is substantially different (but hopefully better) from the previous programs in use. This means it will be a learning experience for both teacher and students.

In general, you will need to begin the week by looking at whatever announcements I begin with. (I also sometimes add announcements during the week.) The announcements will tell you if the assignment has been posted, whether there are other requirements for the week, and generally other comments about the progress of the course addressed to all. The assignment usually goes more in-depth than the syllabus calendar below on the specific focus of the assignment, including questions to consider during the reading and to which you should take into consideration in your responses. The assignment focuses

on the assigned readings, though there may be a "lecture" to read. I will include more information on individual requirements such as reading notes and book review as we progress.

The assignment will direct you to the forums (a.k.a. "discussion"), where you will find the specific discussion strings. I usually repeat the assignment on the Forum discussion page/string, so that you have it as the heading of the discussion string. I find that if you are going to write a long response that you will edit, it is best to write it on MS Word, then you can edit it to your heart's delight before copying it to the forum discussion. But even if you prefer to write directly into the response box on the discussion site, you can still edit it afterwards using the edit option on the page. [You may find at times that what appears on the Forum discussion page is not exactly what you wrote; the transfers are not always perfect, and it is good to read your response through on the page after you enter it.] As instructor, I have the right to edit anyone's entry if I deem it offensive or otherwise out-of-line with the tenor of the course (though this has never happened in my several years of teaching on-line -- either I'm very lenient or people have been good). The communication section will not only handle responses to the reading, but also other types of class interactions for which strings will be set up, such as dealing with general questions, prayer requests, comments, etc.

Finally, there may be links put up, either for interest or as part of the assignment. You will be notified in either case.

If you have a question, observation, or even constructive criticism that can be shared with the class, there will be an appropriate forum in the communications area. But if such an issue is personal or you want only me to hear of it, e-mailing my personal address as given above and on the website is perfectly permissible.

Readings/Topics Calendar

(Each week is counted from Monday ending the follow Sunday)

June 4 Intro/Orientation/Context.

Reading: *BoC* 353-377; Small, ch.14; Rogers, 27-36, 271-276; Leith 7-8, 17-31; *BoC* 1-21; Leith, 32-40.

June 11 Calvin's Foundation:

Reading : Elwood, 1-125.

June 18 The Reformed Tradition:

Reading : Elwood 127-172; Leith 70-127 [127-144].

June 25 Scots Confession:

Reading : Small, ch.3; Smylie, ch.3; Rogers ch.5; *BoC* 25-31; Leith ch.5.

July 2 Heidelberg Catechism:

Reading : Rogers ch.6; *BoC* 51-81.

July 9 Second Helvetic Confession:

Reading : Rogers ch.7; *BoC* 85-167.

July 16 Westminster Confession and Catechisms:

Reading : Rogers ch.8; *BoC* 173-285; Small, ch.4.

July 23 Reading Week on American Presbyterianism:

Reading : Smylie chs.4-10; *Presbyterian Enterprise*, selected pages.

July 30 Reading Week on Contemporary Context:

Reading : *The Re-Forming Tradition*.

Aug. 6 Declaration of Barmen:

Reading : Rogers ch.9; *BoC* 303-312; Leith ch.7; Small, 69-79.

Aug. 13 Confession of '67 and the Brief Confession of Faith:

Reading : Rogers ch.10-11; *BoC* 315-349; Small, 79-89; Leith ch.8.

Aug. 21 Proctored Final Exam

Aug. 24 Take-home Final and Book Review Due