

SYLLABUS: COVENANT THEOLOGY (ST5300)
FALL 2025, RTS DC

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE

God speaks to us because he has established a relationship with us. This relationship, or “voluntary condescension on God’s part” (WCF 7.1) is what we call a covenant. Covenant therefore circumscribes and conditions every aspect of our relationship with God and His world.

Covenant Theology is often described in antithetical ways to other theological “systems,” such as dispensationalism. It also intersects with a variety of specific topics and controversies, like paedobaptism, the role of the law in the life of the believer, the nature of creation, and the role of the church in the world. These are all very important “advanced” aspects of Covenant Theology, but in reality the topic is much more basic, fundamental, and simple. Covenant Theology is, to put it simply, the study of a *relationship*. When we study the covenants, we are studying the dynamics of God’s relationship with us, his chosen image bearer.

This class therefore has a two-fold purpose. The first is to better understand the nature of our relationship with God, the dynamics of his “voluntary condescension.” During the course of that study we will come to appreciate that there are actually *two* covenants, not just one, and that the second is further subdivided into “various dispensations” or administrations (WCF 7.6), the dynamics of which subtly but profoundly impact the way in which we relate to our God.

However, since the point of *studying* a relationship is to cultivate and better it, our second ongoing purpose will be to apply our learning to the task of loving God. We will do this by applying Covenant Theology to the interpretation of God’s words, to the workings of the church, to the means of grace, and to daily life.

B. LEARNING GOALS

Upon conclusion of this course, the student will:

- Understand the fundamentals of Covenant Theology and its implications for hermeneutics and theology
- Describe the continuity and discontinuity involved in the various administrations of the Covenant of Grace
- Be able to articulate the differences between similar and competing approaches to Reformed Covenant Theology
- Apply what they have learned in class within the church through a Ministry Application Project

C. INSTRUCTORS

1. THOMAS KEENE

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D. CLASS TIME AND DUE DATES

Class will meet from 1:00 – 4:00 pm on Tuesdays from August 9th to November 11th 2025.

Unless otherwise noted in the course schedule, all assignments are due one week after the last day of the Fall Semester (11:59pm on Dec. 19th).

E. COURSE WEBSITE

The RTS course website will contain the latest version of this syllabus, selected course readings, and outlines, slides, and notes related to the course. All assignments should be submitted via Canvas.

II. READING ASSIGNMENTS

Either: (1) Robertson, O. Palmer. *The Christ of the Covenants*. P&R Publishing, 2017. OR (2) Belcher, R. P. *The Fulfillment of the Promises of God: An Explanation of Covenant Theology*. Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2020.

Robertson is the “classic” text and is probably the one to go to if you haven’t read it before. Belcher is the more recent contribution and is more up-to-date.

Selections from *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*. Edited by Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether. Annotated edition. Wheaton: Crossway, 2020. Chapters 14-17, 20-22.

Either: (1) Poythress, Vern S. *Understanding Dispensationalists*. 2nd ed. edition. P&R Publishing, 1993. Available online: <https://frame-poythress.org/ebooks/understanding-dispensationalists/> or (2) Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, eds., *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2022).

Both of these are excellent resources for understanding and dialoging with the alternative tradition. Poythress is more hermeneutically attuned and is aiming at understanding and cooperation, rather than polemics, but he is in the Covenantal tradition and this was written prior to more recent developments in “progressive covenantalism.” The *Four Views* book is more polemically oriented and up-to-date.

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 7

Other shorter articles will be assigned throughout the term (no more than 100 pages total).

III. ASSESSMENT AND ASSIGNMENTS

A. READING RESPONSE: 10%

There is a lot of reading. I am not requiring you to turn in notes or digests or “book-reports,” but I do expect you to engage the readings. To that end I will require you to fill out a form listing the percentage

of reading that you completed and a one or two sentence description of what you “got out of it.” This is really to help you—I want you to get credit for the work you put into this material.

B. CLASS ENGAGEMENT: 10%

Discussion and conversation will be a major component of this class. There will also be occasions throughout the class when you are given brief “preparation for next week” homework assignments. Your general class participation and engagement with assignments is assessed here.

C. BOOK REVIEW: 25%

Provide an “appreciatively critical” review/response to an additional book-length reading of your choosing (there’s a bibliography in Canvas). The requirements are as follows:

- First and foremost, your review should be “appreciative.” You may not agree with the author, but you should engage their argument, accurately represent their viewpoint in your analysis, and seek to learn from their perspective in substantive and tangible ways.
- Secondly, your review should be “critical,” by which I mean “probative and investigative” (rather than “polemical and argumentative”). Your goal here is not to demolish but to critique and improve. What about the argument is praiseworthy? Are there flaws in the overall argument? How might those flaws be addressed? What was missing that can be added? What was lacking that could be improved? If you are reading something you disagree with, you should avoid a “take-down” rebuttal, but it is appropriate to state the nature of the disagreement and provide an argument for an alternative.
- 1000 words (+/-), standard academic formatting (cite +/-, use formal language, etc.), great papers will use external sources (but this is not a research paper).

D. MINISTRY APPLICATION PROJECT (25%)

Apply what you are learning by intentionally and substantively using it to serve the church. This is a fairly open-ended assignment and can be accomplished in several ways:

- Preach sermons, teach Sunday School classes, guide an inductive bible study, that self-consciously engage “covenantal-theological” issues
- Write up devotional material for your study group about the “stages of redemption”
- Conduct a debate or “disputatio” on some controversial subject matter that we have been discussing in the class.
- Write a hymn or poem or other creative work that thoughtfully utilizes material from class
- Council a family through concerns they might have with infant baptism (be careful here though; don’t make people your project)

Once you have completed your project, you will report out about it in a 500-1000 well-written document that addresses the following:

- What was your project?
- To what extent did you draw on material from the class in your endeavors, and how was it helpful (or why was it not helpful)?

- How did it go?
- What did you learn? What would you like to do differently? What do you need to learn or study or meditate on or practice to do what you did better?

E. POSITION PAPERS (EXAM) (30%)

There will not be a traditional final exam for this class. Instead you will be given the opportunity to respond to four technical or controversial matters related to Covenant Theology. The responses should be no more than three pages in length and should follow all of the ordinary expectations for academic paper writing. The intent is to give you an opportunity to carefully work through some of the knotty problems we will encounter along the way.

You can approach this assignment as an “open note, open book, take home exam,” though, as mentioned above, it should be formatted like an academic paper. Good answers will reflect an integration and appropriation of material derived from lectures, course readings, primary sources, and personal reflection and critique. Great answers will additionally utilize independent research, and to that end a Bibliography of helpful resources will be provided for each topic above. The use of independent research is not required, but it will assist you in working through the issues.

F. GRADING

96-100%: A

90-95%: A-

87-89%: B+

84-86%: B

80-83%: B-

Etc.

>60%: Fail