

ST 5250 – Ecclesiology and Sacraments

Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

Spring 2026

January 28 – April 29, 2026, Wednesdays 9:00 – 11:00am

Scott R. Swain

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Course Description

In this course we will study the doctrines of the church and the sacraments. We will seek to contemplate, appreciate, and apply these doctrines as they are revealed in Holy Scripture and summarized in the Reformed confessions to the end that God might be glorified “in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations” (Ephesians 3:21). (2 credit hours)

Office Hours

To schedule an appointment with me, please contact Mrs. Matti Horton: (mhorton@rts.edu).

Required Reading

Ephesians (Students are required to read Ephesians slowly and prayerfully at least four times over the course of the semester)

Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, ed., *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (Baker Academic, 2016). ISBN 13: 9780801048944 (Assigned Chapters)

Herman Bavinck, *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion*, trans. and ed. Gregory Parker Jr. and Cameron Clausing (Hendrickson, 2022). ISBN 13: 9781683072997 (Assigned Chapters)

Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Volume 5: The Application of Redemption and the Church*. (Assigned Chapters)

William Perkins, “A Reformed Catholic,” in *The Works of William Perkins*, pp. 134-138. (Available from the professor)

Johannes Polyander, “On the Civil Magistrate,” Disputation 50 in *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, vol. 3, ed. Harm Goris (Leiden: Brill, 2020). (Available in Canvas)

Gregg Strawbridge, ed., *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (P & R, 2003). ISBN 13: 9780875525549 (All)

Scott Swain, “To maintain piety, justice, and peace” (WCF 23:2): A study in American Presbyterian Political Theology.” (Available from the professor)

Note: Other short articles and essays will be made available over the course of the semester.

Assignments

1. ***Ephesians report (5% of final grade):*** Students are required to read Ephesians slowly and prayerfully at least four times over the course of the semester. Students will provide a reading report in Canvas indicating whether or not they have done so. Due May 15, 2026, at 11:59pm.
2. ***Reading report (20% of final grade):*** Students will turn in a reading report in Canvas stating the percentage of the assigned readings that they have read with reasonable care over the course of the semester. Due May 15, 2026, at 11:59pm.
3. ***Westminster Catechism Exam (10% of final grade):*** Students will memorize and be tested on WSC Q&A 91-97. Due May 15, 2026, at 11:59pm.
4. ***Exam (40% of final grade):*** Students will take one exam that will test students' critical grasp of doctrinal topics covered in class lectures, readings, and the Reformed confessions as well as their ability to communicate doctrinal topics in a clear manner. Due May 15, 2026, at 11:59pm.
5. ***Research Paper (25% of final grade):*** Students will write 12-15 page research paper on one of the topics treated in the course. 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, Times New Roman font, Turabian format). For more details on the research paper, see below: "How to research and write a research paper." Due **May 9, 2026, at 11:00am**.

Academic Policies

1. ***Late assignments:*** Apart from exceptional circumstances, I will not accept late assignments for credit. Please contact me by email and copy my assistant, Matti Horton (mhorton@rts.edu), if you need to request an extension.
2. ***Plagiarism:*** Plagiarism, whether intentional or unintentional, will result in a failing grade for the course.
3. ***Artificial Intelligence:*** Students are prohibited from using any form of artificial intelligence in completing assignments for this course.

Schedule of Assignments

Jan 28	Spring semester begins
Feb 4	Bavinck, chaps 18-19; Mastricht, book 7, chap 1 "The Nature of the Church"
Feb 11	Mastricht, book 7, chap 2 "The Ministers of the Church"
Feb 18	Mastricht, book 7, chap 6 "Church Discipline," chap 7 "Church Government"
Feb 25	Horton, "The Church," in <i>Christian Dogmatics</i>
March 4	Polyander, "Civil Magistrate"; Swain, "To maintain piety, justice, and peace"

March 11 **NO CLASS MEETING** – Strawbridge, introduction; Billings, “Sacraments,” in *Christian Dogmatics*

March 18 **NO CLASS MEETING – Spring Break**

March 25 Mastricht, book 7, chap 3 “The Sacraments of the Church”; Perkins, “A Reformed Catholic”

April 1 Mastricht, book 7, chap 4 “The Sacraments of Regeneration”

April 8 Mastricht, book 7, chap 5 “The Sacraments of Nourishment”

April 15 Strawbridge, chaps 1-5

April 22 Strawbridge, chaps 6-10

April 29 Strawbridge, chaps 11-15

May 8 **Research paper due at 11:00am**

May 14 **Exam due, Ephesians report due, reading report due at 11:59pm**

How to research and write a research paper¹

I. Elements of a sound theological argument

a. Introduction

i. The major elements of a sound theological argument include the following²

1. Thesis/claim
2. Grounds
3. Warrants
4. Backing
5. Qualifier
6. Rebuttal

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

ii. More briefly put, those elements include

1. Thesis/claim
2. Arguments and evidence that supports your thesis
3. 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.

i. Diagnostic questions

1. Is my thesis significant?
2. Is my thesis specific?

ii. Examples of good thesis statements

1. “Although the Westminster Standards do not refer specifically to the doctrine of the *pactum salutis*, the substance of the doctrine as taught by many 17th Century Reformed divines is affirmed therein.”
2. “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.”
3. “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.”
4. “The grace of adoption is the temporal term (i.e., goal) of the Son’s incarnate mission.”

iii. 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*)

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

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

¹ For further guidance on this topic, see Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*.

² Adapted from Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument*.

2. Thus, one's research strategy should not be first to devise a thesis and then to do one's research.
3. 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, (iv) finally instruct a thesis that one can argue on the basis of the research you have undertaken.
4. You can then structure your paper around proving and defending your thesis statement on the basis of your research.

c. **Grounds:** Grounds provide the *reasons and evidences* used to support the paper's thesis/major claim

- i. **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.
- ii. **Potential sources for grounding a theological claim include:**
 1. Biblical exegesis
 2. Ecclesiastical authority (creeds, confessions, trusted doctors of the church, ecclesiastical consensus); in classical reasoning, these subordinate authorities provide "probable" arguments in doctrinal argumentation
 3. Historical evidence
 4. Rational arguments³
 5. 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?"

- i. **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.
 - ii. **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.
 - iii. **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 principle of building *other* doctrines via redemptive-historical exegesis, i.e., by reading the Bible from beginning to

³ Chapter eight of John Frame's *DKG* provides a helpful introduction to the use of rational argumentation in theology.

end.

- f. **Qualifiers:** Qualifiers put limitations on your thesis/claim and protect you from overstating your case.
 - i. **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.”
 - ii. **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 acknowledgement, 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:
 - i. **The primarily exegetical theology paper:** Focus on a particular biblical text or series of biblical texts which articulate the biblical “grammar” of your doctrine.
 - ii. **The primarily historical theology paper:** Focus on a historical figure(s), text(s), or event(s) related to your chosen doctrinal topic.
 - iii. **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**
 - i. **Introduction:** The first 2-3 paragraphs of your paper should:
 1. Pique the reader’s interest in your topic.
 2. 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.]
 3. 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]).
 4. Provide a brief overview of the structure of your paper.

ii. **Body**

1. 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.
2. 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.).
3. 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.

iii. **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.

iv. **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."

1. Introduction
2. Body
 - a. 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.
 - b. Demonstrate that the term "*pactum salutis*" (or its terminological equivalents) does not appear in the Westminster Standards.
 - c. 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.).
 - d. 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.
 - e. 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.).
3. Conclusion

IV. **Other requirements**

- a. The paper should be 12-15 pages, double spaced, 12 pt. Times New Roman 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.

Select Bibliography

Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*

Guilielmus Apollonii, "A consideration of certaine controversies at this time agitated in the kingdome of England, concerning the government of the church of God..." Accessible at: <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A75492.0001.001>. (PDF Available from professor)

James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2 vols.

Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols.

Herman Bavinck, *Saved by Grace: The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration*

G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*

Roger Beckwith, "The Age of Admission to Communion," *Churchman* 85, no. 1 (1971): 13-31

J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church*

Matthew Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

John Calvin, *Treatises on the Sacraments The Catechism of the Catholic Church*

John Cotton, *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven: and the Power thereof, according to the Word of God*

Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission*

Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*

George Gillespie, *Aaron's Rod Blossoming, or, The Divine Ordinance of Church Government...*

Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*

Michael Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology*

Hans Küng, *The Church*

Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship*

James K. Lee, *Augustine and the Mystery of the Church*

L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?*

Hunter Powell, *The crisis of British Protestantism: Church power in the Puritan Revolution, 1638–44 (Politics, Culture and Society in Early Modern Britain)*

Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel*

Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright, ed., *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*

Timothy Tennant, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*

Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*

Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols.

James Ussher, *The Power Communicated by God to the Prince, and the Obedience Required of the Subject*

Cornelis Venema, "The Doctrine of the Sacraments and Baptism according to the Reformed Confessions," *MTJ* 11 (2000): 21-86.

Cornelis Venema, "The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions," *MTJ* 12 (2001): 81-145.

Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*

Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*

Thomas Witherow, *I Will Build My Church: Selected Writings on Church Polity, Baptism, and the Sabbath*

Johannes Althusius, *Politica*



Course Objectives Related to MDiv* Student Learning Outcomes

Course: ST5250 – Ecclesiology and Sacraments

Professor: Scott R. Swain

Campus: Orlando

Date: Spring 2026

MDiv* Student Learning Outcomes		Rubric	Mini-Justification
<p><i>In order to measure the success of the MDiv 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 MDiv outcomes.</i></p> <p><i>*As the MDiv is the core degree at RTS, the MDiv rubric will be used in this syllabus.</i></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong • Moderate • Minimal • None 	
Articulation (oral & written)		Strong	Exams, research paper
Scripture		Strong	Focus of all ST courses
Reformed Theology		Strong	Focus of all ST courses
Sanctification		Moderate	Focus of all ST courses
Worldview		Strong	Focus of all ST courses
Winsomely Reformed		Strong	Careful engagement with other views of church and sacraments
Pastoral Ministry		Moderate	Sound understanding of church and sacraments promotes wise pastoral ministry