

ST 5300 – Covenant Theology

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RTS Dallas, Spring 2026

*“All the word of God appertains to some covenant;
for God speaks nothing to man without the covenant.”*

—Robert Rollock

Course description

An examination of covenant theology from exegetical and historical perspectives. Consideration is given to such issues as the relation of the Old and New Testaments, the significance of the covenants for sacramental theology, and the hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Theonomy. Emphasis is placed on the role of the biblical doctrine of the covenants in preaching and pastoral ministry (2 credit hours).

Class Meetings

Friday and Saturday, February 27-28, 2026; Friday and Saturday, April 10-11, 2026

Required textbooks

Jonty R. Rhodes, *Covenants Made Simple: Understanding God’s Unfolding Promises to his People* (P & R, 2014). Please read before February 27, 2026.

Petrus van Mastricht, “The Covenant of Nature,” *Theoretical-Practical Theology* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), vol. 3, chap. 12. Please read before February 27, 2026.

Petrus van Mastricht, “The Covenant of Grace,” *Theoretical-Practical Theology* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2023), vol. 4, chap. 1. Please read before April 10, 2026.

Cornelis P. Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants* (P & R, 2017). Please read before April 10, 2026.

Geerhardus Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (P & R, 1980), chap. 7. Please read before February 27, 2026.

Assignments

1. Reading report (40 % of final grade): Students will submit a reading report in Canvas that states the percentage of the assigned readings they have completed **by May 8, 2026**.

2. Research paper (60 % of final grade): Students will write a 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, 12 point font, Turabian format). For more details on the research paper, see below: “How to research and write a research paper.” The research paper is to be uploaded in Canvas **by May 8, 2026**.

Though it is not a required assignment, I highly recommend listening to Dr. Ligon Duncan’s lectures on covenant theology in the RTS Mobile App.

Contact

If you have any questions about the course, please email my assistant, Mrs. Matti Horton, at mhorton@rts.edu.

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.

3. Artificial intelligence: Students are prohibited from using *any form* of artificial intelligence in completing assignments for this course.

Select bibliography

Richard Baxter, *An End of Doctrinal Controversies*, Book 12, Of the Several Laws or Covenants of God (John Salusbury, 1691)

J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007)

Lyle Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Baker, 1997)

Daniel I. Block, *Covenant: The Framework of God's Grand Plan of Redemption* (Baker Academic, 2021)

Sam Bostock, *The Rise of the Covenant of Redemption in the Theology of Samuel Rutherford* (Brill, 2025)

Heinrich Bullinger, "A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God," in Charles McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (Westminster John Knox, 1991)

Johannes Cocceius, *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2016)

Brian Estelle, John Fesko, and David VanDrunen, ed., *The Law is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant* (P & R, 2009)

Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Crossway, 2018)

Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Baker, 2006)

Meredith Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Eerdmans, 1968)

Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Baker Academic, 2001)

Glenn A. Moots, *Politics Reformed: The Anglo-American Legacy of Covenant Theology* (University of Missouri Press, 2010)

John R. Muether, J. Nicholas Reid, and Guy P. Waters, *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Crossway, 2020)

Harrison Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction* (Lexham Academic, 2024)

John Preston, *The New Covenant or the Saints Portion* (Nicolas Bourne, 1629)

O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (P & R, 1987)

Robert Rollock, "Robert Rollock's Catechism on God's Covenants," *MJT* 20 (2009): 105-29

James B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract: A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 51-76

Carl Trueman, "From Calvin to Gillespie on Covenant: Mythological Excess or an Exercise in Doctrinal Development?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (2009): 378-397

Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols. (P & R, 1992)

Willem van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius: (1603-1669)* (Brill, 2001)

Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 5— vols. (Reformation Heritage Books, 2018—)

Rowland Ward, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (New Melbourne Press, 2003)

Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (IVP Academic, 2007)

Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, 2 vols. (den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990)

Andrew A. Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly* (Reformed Heritage Books, 2012)

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

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*.

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* regarding the topic 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 by name to 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*.
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 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*

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

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 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.



Course Objectives Related to MDiv* Student Learning Outcomes

Course: ST5300

Campus: Dallas

Professor: Swain

Date: Spring 2026

MDiv* Student Learning Outcomes <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> <i>*As the MDiv is the core degree at RTS, the MDiv rubric will be used in this syllabus.</i>		Rubric ➤ Strong ➤ Moderate ➤ Minimal ➤ None	Mini-Justification
Articulation (oral & written)	Broadly understands and articulates knowledge, both oral and written, of essential biblical, theological, historical, and cultural/global information, including details, concepts, and frameworks.	Strong	Research aper
Scripture	Significant knowledge of the original meaning of Scripture. Also, the concepts for and skill to research further into the original meaning of Scripture and to apply Scripture to a variety of modern circumstances. (Includes appropriate use of original languages and hermeneutics; and integrates theological, historical, and cultural/global perspectives.)	Strong	Focus of all ST courses
Reformed Theology	Significant knowledge of Reformed theology and practice, with emphasis on the Westminster Standards.	Strong	Focus of all ST courses
Sanctification	Demonstrates a love for the Triune God that aids the student's sanctification.	Moderate	Emphasized in lectures
Desire for Worldview	Burning desire to conform all of life to the Word of God.	Strong	Focus of all ST courses
Winsomely Reformed	Embraces a winsomely Reformed ethos. (Includes an appropriate ecumenical spirit with other Christians, especially Evangelicals; a concern to present the Gospel in a God-honoring manner to non-Christians; and a truth-in-love attitude in disagreements.)	Moderate	Focus of all ST courses

Preach	Ability to preach and teach the meaning of Scripture to both heart and mind with clarity and enthusiasm.	Minimal	ST provides deeper understanding of Scripture
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