

ACTS AND ROMANS (06NT5250) SYLLABUS, SPRING 2026

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION

The goal of this course is to better understand the authorial purpose, historical context, and contemporary relevance of the book of Acts and the book of Romans.

We will pursue this goal by looking at each of these books as separate entities, as is proper since there is no obvious connection between the two. However, we will also have occasion to note an unanticipated connection between them. The significance of, and theology behind, the Gentile mission is a common concern for both books, as is the redemptive-historical continuity of God's overarching Old/New plan for his people. The two books nicely coordinate and offer correlative perspectives on pivotal events in the early Church, and both flow from a common theological concern.

At the same time, they are very different. Acts, so grounded in historical events, can seem too "occasional" for modern readers and the modern church—how is what happened then relevant to us? Should we seek to model our churches after the ancient pattern, or should do what we think is best for our own culture and times? By contrast, Romans seems so abstract and theological—a treatise that is always applicable in all ages—that relevance is often regarded as a much simpler matter. But what was the situation that called forth this letter, and what was Paul's purpose in writing it? The particularity of Acts and the generality of Romans both present challenges to modern readers, and it will be part of the goal of this class to explore those challenges and make some suggestions for moving forward.

The goal of all of this is to serve God's church. That is why these books were given to us, and that is how we should read them—as pastors and servants of God who seek to build up God's people, the Jew first, and also the Greek.

B. DATES AND TIMES.

We will meet from 7:00 – 9:00 AM from February 3 – May 12th. NOTE: this is a morning class!

Unless otherwise noted, all assignments will be due the Friday after the last week of courses, May 22nd.

C. INSTRUCTOR

Thomas Keene

email: tkeene@rts.edu (this is the fastest way to reach me)

Net: <http://twitter.com/tommykeene> <http://facebook.com/keenetommy>

<http://signandshadow.com>

II. REQUIRED READING

The following readings are required and are a graded portion of the class. At the end of the term you will fill out a "reading completion form," stating on-your-honor the percentage of each reading that you completed. Partial credit will *not* be given for article-length readings.

Many of the readings are article or chapter length, and will be provided to you (no need to purchase). I have used a star (*) to indicate books (or articles in books) that I recommend purchasing (they will not be provided online).

Note: These readings are not being assigned to give you “the right answers” but rather to call you to engage in an ongoing dialog with Scripture and with those who interpret the Scriptures. Please read with humility and “critical appreciation.”

It is a good idea to get ahead in your readings. Those wanting to do so should start with the Bible reading, followed by the Special Introduction reading. Everyone should finish the Bible reading as soon as possible, as it will help you better engage the lecture material. It is best to stay just ahead of the lecture material in the readings.

A. BIBLE READING

Read (or listen to) each book in a single sitting, preferably from a Reader’s Bible (<https://www.crossway.org/bibles/esv-readers-bible-cob/>) or using an audio bible. **For intensives, please have this read before the start of the first class.**

Read through each book a second time, this time making a list of as many distinct textual and exegetical questions you can think of. You will turn in this list as part of your reading report. (For purposes of this assignment, aim for a **minimum** of 5-10 questions per “chapter”).

B. PRIMARY SOURCES

You will be assigned short primary source readings throughout the semester at critical junctures (ie, when we get to the portion of class for which that reading is relevant). This may include selections from Pliny, Trajan, Cicero, Greek Philosophers, among others. You will be assigned these selections at least a week before we discuss them in class, and they will be made available to you online. (For intensive versions of the class, we will discuss these together during class time).

Though many of these sources are patterned after Scripture, they are not inspired. They provide the background within which the Biblical books that we are studying were written and understood. Our goal is to read them critically but appreciatively, and then to discuss them as a class to gain insights in reading the NT.

C. SPECIAL INTRODUCTION

*Kruger, Michael J., ed. *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016. The chapters on Acts and, well, Romans.

D. THE EARLIEST CHRISTIANS IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

Wright, N. T., and M. F. Bird. *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*. Illustrated edition. Zondervan Academic, 2019. PAGES 142-169

OPTIONAL: Wright, N. T., and M. F. Bird. *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*. Illustrated edition. Zondervan Academic, 2019.

E. ACTS

Gaffin, Richard B. *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2022. PAGES 1-184.

OPTIONAL: Gaffin, Richard B., Jr. *Perspectives on Pentecost*. Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1979.
*Johnson, D. E. *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption*. Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1997.

F. ROMANS

Bird, M. F. "‘Raised for Our Justification’: A Fresh Look at Romans 4:25." *Colloquium* 35, no. 1 (2003): 31-46.

Hays, R. B. *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. PAGES 34-83.

Ridderbos, H. N. *When the Time Had Fully Come: Studies in New Testament Theology*. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2001. Pages 44-60.

-----, "Professor Ridderbos on Romans 11:25-32." In *Israel*, translated by R. B. Gaffin. Available online only.

Westerholm, S. *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. Pages 261-296.

Wright, N. T. *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991. Pages 18-40, 231-257.

III. ASSESSMENT

Your final grade will be determined by three factors: (1) your completion of the required reading, (2) a 10-15 exegetical paper on a text of your choosing, (3) a three-question final exam.

A. BIBLE READING (8%)

B. GENERAL READING (7%)

On the day you take the final exam you will also be required to fill out a form stating the percentage of reading that you completed. Each of your required reading assignments will be listed and you will be required to estimate, on your honor, the percentage of each you completed. I consider a book “read” if you have made every effort to understand its main points and the various justifications offered for that point. This usually requires reading and comprehending each paragraph, but not necessarily each word or sentence. In short: skimming is permissible at certain points and in certain cases, but not skipping.

Partial credit will NOT be given for the Bible Reading assignments or for article/chapter length material.

C. DISCUSSION (10%)

You are expected to be actively engaged in class. This of course includes regular attendance, but in addition you should be interacting with readings, asking questions, sharing your insights, and debating the issues. Discussion will be a regular part of the course rhythm, in addition to lecture material. There were also be dedicated time to discussing the “Primary Sources” material described in the reading list, and you will be expected to have critically engaged that material and be prepared to discuss it on the appointed day.

D. PAPER (40%)

1. OVERVIEW

You are required to write a 10-15 (double-spaced) page exegetical research paper on a text of your choosing. You can choose any text in Romans or Acts. The paper should be submitted by email no later than midnight on the due date listed above.

What follows is some guidance in writing an exegetical paper. For a more thorough and general discussion of seminary paper writing, begin with Part 1 of my paper writing guide online: <http://www.signandshadow.com/2017/11/02/how-to-write-a-seminary-paper-part-1-the-thesis/>

2. TEXT SELECTION

Text selection can make or break an exegetical paper, so choose your text carefully. Your text needs to be short enough that you can do it justice in the space of 10-15 pages, but long enough that it can stand on its own and has its own integrity. Aim for about a paragraph, maybe two if necessary. It is not always easy to determine where your paragraph begins and ends—different English translations and Biblical commentaries divide the text differently (there are no paragraphs in the “original,” at least not as we might consider them), so you will need to do a little research before coming to a final decision. I suggest you pick a section of Scripture (a verse or two) that seems interesting to you, then do a little research on those verses to determine the beginning and ending of the paragraph in which they occur. That final paragraph (or two) should be the center-point of your paper.

3. HOW TO WRITE AN EXEGETICAL PAPER

An exegetical paper, unlike a theological or thematic one, is centered upon one particular pericope of Scripture (a paragraph or two, depending on genre). That text is the heart of your paper, and your goal should be to explain what that text means in both its immediate and canonical context.

Once you have picked a text that interests you (see above), begin your research by reading your text (and its surrounding context) over and over again. Go verse by verse and ask yourself tons of questions (and write them all down). No question is too simple (or too complex)! Sometimes the key to a text is found in the questions that seem “too obvious.” Make sure at least one of these questions is “What is the point?” In fact, several of your questions should be variations on that all-important idea. Why does Peter say it that way? Why does John include this in his argument? Why does the author of Hebrews go there? These are all purpose questions, and they are the most important ones to ask.

Now start answering your questions. Don't pick up a book or a commentary quite yet. Answer your questions first by prayerfully and humbly looking at the text itself. You will need to look at the immediate context of your passage. How does it fit into the flow of the book as a whole? How does it further the author's main point? Outline your text, and outline the book in which it occurs. These types of activities help you view the text as a small piece of a larger whole.

Once you have started to explore your text a little more a “main point” should begin to coalesce in your mind. Try to write down that main point in a sentence or so. Aim for a “tweetable” main point. Then broaden your horizons. What is the main point of this section of the book? What is the main point of the book as a whole? And how does this book contribute to our overall understanding of the canon, of redemptive history, and of the Christian life?

Only after you have at least preliminary answers to these questions are you ready to crack open a commentary. Start researching your passage in reliable commentaries and articles (the Word series of commentaries usually have excellent bibliographies you can consult). In the course of your research you will be able to refine and develop (or reject) the ideas you have already come to on your own.

Now it's time to start writing. Sketch up a preliminary outline. Your organization will of course be dependent on your passage and the main point you want to make, but I suggest you start narrow (that is, with the details of your text) and work your way out (that is, with the literary and then canonical context of your text). After a brief introduction, start by explaining the immediate concerns of the text you picked. Are there any translation issues to note? Any strange words? Describe the flow of the argument and tell us the main point being made. Next, describe how your passage fits into the broader context of the book—start with the immediate context and then increasingly “zoom out” until the whole book is in view. As a final concern, show how your passage deepens our understanding of the Bible as a whole, how it fits into the Gospel of our redemption (this is not the major emphasis of an exegetical paper, but it's good to do). Along the way, or at the end, you can feel more than free to make some “practical applications.”

4. GREEK REQUIREMENT

If you have taken Greek please use it in your paper. Provide your own translation of the passage that you picked and justify that translation when appropriate. Use Greek when appropriate throughout. You do not need to be detailed here, but if you know Greek use it!

5. FORMAT

Your paper should be double spaced with 1-inch margins. Use Times New Roman or equivalent font, 12pt. Cite all your sources following the guidelines laid out in the SBL Handbook. or the Chicago Manual of Style (I'm fine with either the “standard” method or the newer author-date format) You might want to consider using bibliography software, such as the free Zotero plugin for Firefox (<http://nerdlets.org/2008/11/20/setting-up-zotero-link-by-link/>) to make this process easier. Include a bibliography with all the works you cited in your paper as described in the aforementioned guides.

E. MINISTRY APPLICATION PROJECT (20%)

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, etc. from Acts or Romans (yes, this can be the same text as your paper but [don't preach your paper](#)).
- Use passages from Romans in pastoral counseling. Develop a counseling “program” from one of these books
- Start up an evangelistic conversation with someone that focuses on a passage from our material.
- Conduct a debate or “disputatio” on some controversial subject matter that we have been discussing in the class, such as whether or not Acts provides a “model for doing church.”

- Write a hymn or poem or other creative work derivative of these books that can be used liturgically.

Once you have completed your project, you will report out about it in a 500-1000 word 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?

A. SELF STUDY (15%)

Complete ONE of the following, either:

1. BOOK REVIEW

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 your sources, use formal language, etc.), great papers will use external sources (but this is not a research paper).

2. POSITION PAPER

Write a 5-6 page *researched* position paper on an important issue covered in course lectures that was not adequately “resolved” (for you, at least). For example, perhaps our discussion of the New Perspective on Paul left you with unanswered questions. In your paper you will state the question, then provide your own answer to that question. Your answer should include *independent* research on the topic beyond the material assigned in class. However, this is a position paper, not a research paper, the main purpose of which is to state your settled opinion on the topic.

F. GRADING SCALE

96-100	A	87-89	B+	Etc.
90-95	A-	83-86	B	<60 F
		80-82	B-	

IV. OUTLINE AND FURTHER READING

An outline of lecture material will be provided on the first day of class to assist you in studying. I will also provide slides of my lecture material as we proceed in class. An extended bibliography will also be provided.