

The Acts of the Apostles

NT 2XA3

McMaster Divinity College
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Fall 2010 (Term 1)
Tuesday 7:00-9:00pm
Compass Point Bible Church

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is primarily an exegetical study of the book of Acts. It will examine the book's historical, literary, and theological qualities, and will situate these within the social context of the early church. It will also involve a sustained discussion of how the message of Acts can be heard, considered, and integrated into the life of the church today.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

In this course, students will be encouraged to:

Knowing

- Remember the story told in the book of Acts
- Become familiar with introductory issues and scholarly debates concerning the book of Acts
- Understand the major theological themes of the book of Acts

Being

- Appreciate the importance of participating in critical and respectful discussions concerning biblical texts
- Become sensitive to the historical and cultural environment in which the early church first proclaimed the gospel
- Become competent interpreters of the biblical text
- Embody the mission that is so central to the book of Acts

Doing

- Read books that engage with Acts in a careful and critical manner
- Take time to reflect on the meaning of the book of Acts
- Talk intelligently about the book of Acts
- Discuss relevant pastoral topics by drawing upon the book of Acts

COURSE PROCEDURE

In order to accomplish the objectives of this course, we will follow a simple plan.

At the outset of the course, and then again at its conclusion, students will submit a brief reflection paper that summarizes their perspective on the book of Acts. These papers will allow students to assess how they are embracing Acts as a part of Christian scripture, and how their ability to understand and receive the message of Acts has grown over the course of the semester.

Each week, students will read an assigned passage from the book of Acts along with an accompanying commentary. The commentary is non-technical, although it does address the most significant critical issues. Students will also read additional material related to the theology of Acts, its major themes, and/or its significance for contemporary Christianity. After completing their weekly assigned reading, students will write a brief email that reflects upon what has been read.

During each class session, we will consider an assigned passage from Acts. Lecture material will cover various facets of the text (e.g. historical, sociological, linguistic, literary, theological dimensions), and will form the basis for class discussions. In small groups, students will discuss amongst themselves the theological ideas, themes, or ministry issues covered in the supplementary reading. We will conclude each evening as an entire class by drawing together the questions and insights developed in the smaller discussions.

The first major assignment for the course will be centered around the socio-cultural context of the book of Acts. It will explore how familiarity with the ancient world enhances our understanding of biblical passages, and how cultural changes across time and space can complicate our attempts to apply biblical passages.

The second major assignment for the course will be centered around a pastorally-relevant question that will be chosen by the student in consultation with the professor. Its written component will be a formal research essay that argues a thesis in response to the question. Its oral component will be a conversational presentation that condenses and simplifies the research essay so as to resemble the kinds of personal discussions that are characteristic of pastoral ministry.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Note: Students are required to complete all of the following assignments. No unfinished assignments are permitted. *All assignments must be submitted in hard copy*, excluding the weekly email assignment.

1. Class Participation. Students are expected to complete assigned readings on schedule, to attend class, and to participate in class discussions.
2. Reflection Papers (20% total). At the beginning of the semester, each student will briefly describe how they view the book of Acts and how they understand its relevance for Christian theology, for the Christian life, and for Christian ministry (5%). At the end of

the semester, the same assignment will be repeated, with emphasis falling on how the student's understanding has been challenged and refined (15%). The initial paper should be roughly 600 words and is due on **September 21**; the concluding paper should be roughly 1,200 words and is due on **December 7**.

3. Weekly Emails (20% total). For each week with assigned reading in Acts (i.e. for 9 weeks), students will write a brief email that reflects upon both the passage and the assigned supplemental reading. These emails must demonstrate familiarity with what has been read, and they should describe how the ideas presented in the assigned readings have informed or challenged the student's understanding of the book of Acts and its significance today. The emails should be no less than 150 words, but they need not be lengthy. They should follow the casual style of an email, but must avoid abbreviations and use standard punctuation/capitalization. Emails are due at **9:00am each Tuesday** according to the schedule below.
4. (Con)text-Oriented Paper (25%). Students will study some socio-cultural feature of the first-century world and then explore how familiarity with that feature enhances their understanding of a specific passage (or group of passages) from the book of Acts. The results of this exercise will be written up in a paper that is 3,000 words in length and that follows the "McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses." Topics and passages should be approved by the professor no later than **October 19** (a list of examples is below). Students should cite appropriate scholarly resources, and should conclude their papers by briefly considering any differences between the ancient context of Acts and our contemporary context and how these differences should factor into practical applications of the passage. Papers are due on **November 2**.
5. Issue-Oriented Paper and Presentation (35% total). Students will intelligently respond to a question of pastoral relevance, drawing upon the book of Acts. They will do this in two formats. First, each student will write a formal research paper that addresses their question by means of an argumentative thesis (25%). Second, each student will present, in a conversational manner, an oral response to their question that effectively communicates the results of their research in an intelligible and non-technical manner (10%). Questions are to be chosen in consultation with the professor by **November 16** (a list of examples is below). Papers should be 3,000 words in length, and should follow the "McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses." They must incorporate appropriate scholarly resources concerning the book of Acts, and should be firmly grounded in an exposition of relevant passages in Acts. Presentations may not be longer than 10 minutes, and should not involve visual aids. Presentations will take place on **November 30** and **December 7**. Papers are due on **December 14**.

COLLEGE STYLE FOR SUBMISSION OF WRITTEN WORK

All written work is to be submitted in accordance with the *McMaster Divinity College Style Guide for Essays and Theses*, available on the McMaster Divinity College website.

GRADING SUMMARY

Participation	---
Initial Reflection Paper	5%
Concluding Reflection Paper	15%
Weekly Emails	20%
(Con)text-Oriented Paper	25%
Issue-Oriented Paper	25%
Presentation	10%

TEXTBOOKS

Students are required to possess the following:

An English translation of the New Testament.

Marshall, I. Howard. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Downer's Grove: IVP, 1980.

Additional text(s) to be determined.

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College's book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 218, McMaster Divinity College. Texts may be purchased on the first day of class. For advance purchase, you may contact READ On Bookstores, 304 The East Mall, Suite 100, Etobicoke, ON M9C 5K1: phone 416-620-2934; fax 416-622-2308; e-mail books@readon.ca. Other book services may also carry the texts.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Dates	Class Topics	Assigned Reading (to be completed before the class session listed)	Assignments Due (* indicates optional assignment)
Sept 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome & Introduction to the Course Introduction to Exegesis 		
Sept 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction to Acts (Part 1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acts 1:1–28:31 (in no more than two sittings) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial Reflection Paper

Sept 28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Acts (Part 2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Introduction” to the commentary (33 pages) • Supplemental reading (To Be Determined) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email (9:00am)
Oct 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Beginning of the Church” (1:1–2:47) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts 1:1–2:47 • Commentary on 1:1–2:47 (31 pages) • Supplemental reading (TBD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email (9:00am)
Oct 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Church and the Jewish Authorities” (3:1–5:42) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts 3:1–5:42 • Commentary on 3:1–5:42 (38 pages) • Supplemental reading (TBD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email (9:00am)
Oct 19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Church Begins to Expand” (6:1–9:31) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts 6:1–9:31 • Commentary on 6:1–9:31 (53 pages) • Supplemental reading (TBD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Con)text-Oriented Topic and Passage • Email (9:00am)
Oct 26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Beginning of the Gentile Mission” (9:32–12:25) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts 9:32–12:25 • Commentary on 9:32–12:25 (36 pages) • Supplemental reading (TBD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email (9:00am)
Nov 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Mission to Asia Minor and Its Aftermath” (13:1–15:35) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts 13:1–15:35 • Commentary on 13:1–15:35 (43 pages) • Supplemental reading (TBD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Con)text-Oriented Paper • Email (9:00am)
Nov 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Paul’s Missionary Campaign in Macedonia and Achaia” (15:36–18:17) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts 15:36–18:17 • Commentary on 15:36–18:17 (43 pages) • Supplemental reading (TBD) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email (9:00am)
Nov 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Paul’s Missionary Campaign in Asia” (18:18–20:38) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts 18:18–20:38 • Commentary on 18:18–20:38 (38 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question for Issue-Oriented Project

		pages) • Supplemental reading (TBD)	• Email (9:00am)
Nov 23	• “Paul’s Arrest and Imprisonment” (21:1–28:31)	• Acts 21:1–28:31 • Commentary on 21:1–28:31 (90 pages) • Supplemental reading (TBD)	• Email (9:00am)
Nov 30	• Summary and Implications for Theology, Life, and Ministry • Oral Presentations (if necessary)		
Dec 7	• Oral Presentations		• Concluding Reflection Paper
Dec 14	No class (Exam Week)		• Issue-Oriented Paper (9:00am)

EXAMPLE TOPICS FOR (CON)TEXT-ORIENTED ASSIGNMENT

- Food and social dining
- Jewish customs (e.g. dietary restrictions, Sabbath, circumcision)
- Roman citizenship
- Rome’s system of governance
- Roman law
- Roman political figures
- Roman cities
- Travel
- Health and healing
- Greco-Roman religious beliefs and practices
- Social structure and/or social classes
- Magic
- Visionary experiences

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR ISSUE-ORIENTED ASSIGNMENT

- What's the deal with the so-called differences between Acts and Paul's letters? Is the Paul depicted in Acts different from the real Paul?
- What's with the baptism of the spirit in Acts? Does it still happen today? Are people lacking something if they haven't experienced it?
- What's up with Ananias and Sapphira? Did God really strike them dead for telling a lie? And what relevance does the story have for the church today?
- What was Paul's mission strategy? Is it supposed to be a paradigm for mission work today?
- Are we really supposed to believe that Jesus floated up into the sky, as though heaven is "up there" somewhere? How are we supposed to understand the ascension?
- Some people say that Acts is a second-century book that makes up a story about the early church. Is it true that Acts is not historically reliable?
- Does Acts really say that the early Christians sold everything they had and enjoyed a communal lifestyle? Should Christians live in communes?
- I've heard that the church in North America isn't being persecuted because it isn't as faithful as the early church. Is that true? Should we expect persecution to result from faithful witness?
- If Acts says that the apostles focused on teaching the word of God, should pastors today be responsible for so much administrative work?
- Since the book of Acts makes so much of miracles as a confirmation of the gospel and a powerful evangelistic tool, should we expect miracles to play an important role in our evangelistic witness today?

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC HONESTY

Academic dishonesty is a serious offence that may take any number of forms, including plagiarism, the submission of work that is not one's own or for which previous credit has been obtained, and/or unauthorized collaboration with other students. Academic dishonesty can result in severe consequences, e.g., failure of the assignment, failure of the course, a notation on one's academic transcript, and/or suspension or expulsion from the College.

Students are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty. Please refer to the Divinity College Statement on Academic Honesty at www.macdiv.ca/regs/honesty.php.

GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all of its publications. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected. The NRSV and TNIV are examples of the use of inclusive language for human beings. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments.

This syllabus is for information only and remains the property of the respective professor. This syllabus is prepared with the best information available, but the professor reserves the right to change the content and format of the course.