



McMaster Divinity
College

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

NT 3XA3 (BS/CW/PS)

McMaster Divinity College
Dr. Christopher D. Land
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Fall 2023
Wednesday 11:00am–12:50pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The book of Acts tells the story of a bunch of people trying to make sense of what God is doing. The book has played (and continues to play) an important role in shaping the church's sense of its identity and mission. 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 relevant first-century contexts. 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.

SPECIALIZATIONS

NT 3XA3 is available as a Biblical Studies (BS), Christian Worldview (CW), or Pastoral Studies (PS) specialization.

~ Students taking 3XA3 as a Biblical Studies (BS) course will be encouraged to explore the historical and cultural settings of Acts, as well as recent discussions surrounding the interpretation of its contents.

~ Students taking 3XA3 as a Christian Worldview (CW) course will be encouraged to explore Acts from a sociological perspective, to better understand how its outlook on the early Jesus movement situates the Christian church relative to other first-century groups.

~ Students taking 3XA3 as a Pastoral Studies (PS) course will be encouraged to explore how the Acts is relevant for Christian faith and practice in the 21st century, with special emphases on mission, pneumatology, and ecclesiology.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Through their active participation in this course, students will:

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 respectful discussions about biblical texts;
- Become self-aware as a modern reader of the Bible, recognizing both the antiquity of the texts and the various ways in which contemporary life influences our understanding of it;
- Embody the mission that is so central to the book of Acts;

DOING

- Have the ability to quickly locate reliable scholarly resources that discuss a particular NT book or passage;
- Have the ability to ask key questions in order to explore the meaning of a NT book or passage;
- Have the ability to reflect canonically, theologically, and contextually so as to explore how people can/should understand the New Testament today.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Note: Students are required to complete all of the following assignments. No unfinished assignments are permitted. *Written assignments must be uploaded to Avenue to Learn either as Word documents (.doc, .docx) or in Rich Text Format (.rtf). Unless alternative arrangements are made in advance, a penalty of 2% per day will be applied to all late assignment. Assignments cannot be submitted after December 8th without written permission from the Office of the Registrar (mdcreq@mcmaster.ca).*

CLASS PARTICIPATION

Students are expected to complete weekly readings and assignments on schedule, to attend class, and to participate in class discussions. No grades are allotted for this, but it is an essential part of the learning experience.

REFLECTION PAPERS (5% INITIAL + 10% CONCLUDING = 15% TOTAL)

At the beginning of the semester, each student will *briefly* describe how they view the Acts of the Apostles and how they understand the book's relevance today. Please note the first person is an integral part of these assignments. You should not just talk about Acts; the goal is to self-reflect on the state of *your understanding of Acts*.

At the end of the semester, the same assignment will be repeated. Your concluding reflection need not offer a totally changed perspective on Acts, but it should somehow convey the influence that the course has had on your understanding. To prepare for your concluding reflection, I suggest that you re-read or re-watch your original reflection. Then, take a moment to reflect on your own learning, to observe how you have matured in your understanding, and to ponder how you might continue your learning after the conclusion of the course. Please point to specific areas of (past, present, or future) growth in your understanding of the book of Acts and its implications for today.

Your reflections can be submitted either as written posts or as video posts. While your reflections must be thoughtful, they need not be long. **Your initial reflection must be no longer than 750 words or 5**

minutes. The concluding reflection must be no longer than 1,500 words or 10 minutes. Videos can be recorded in any format that can be posted to an A2L discussion forum

(<https://avenuehelp.mcmaster.ca/exec/how-do-i-use-the-avenue-to-learn-macvideo-integration>).

READING RESPONSES (3% EACH = 15% TOTAL)

For each assigned reading report, students will report their completion of the assigned reading in *Called to Be Church* by writing a *brief* one-paragraph response to the reading (approx. 150–200 words). This paragraph must demonstrate familiarity with the content of the assigned material (i.e. reference to specific points made, *brief* quotations of the material, etc.). Your main goal should be to articulate how the ideas presented in the reading have informed or challenged your understanding of Acts or the contemporary significance of the book of Acts. Reading responses are due according to the schedule below. They should be typed into the relevant text box in A2L.

MAJOR PROJECT (60% TOTAL)

The main assignment in this class will be a staged project. You will complete each stage in order, building on your previous work. The overall goal of the project is to better understand: (a) the world depicted within the narrative of Acts; (b) the voice of Acts both historically and canonically; and (c) the world today and the ways that Acts speaks to it. You will accomplish these goals with respect to a selected passage (or group of passages) from Acts, using the same passage(s) for the entire major project.

Detailed instructions and rubrics for this assignment will be made available on A2L. What follows is a summary of the key stages in the assignment and their weight in the overall course grade. Please note that all reports must be formatted according to the MDC Style Guide (i.e. standard page layout, appropriate citation formatting, proper spelling, etc.).

RESEARCH PLAN (10%)

Your first task will be to select some passage(s) from Acts that you wish to explore. You should select at least an entire pericope (i.e. “scene” or “episode”). If you wish, you may select a handful of related scenes, but be careful not to overreach.

Having chosen your passage(s), you will next develop a bullet-point outline of the main questions you will need to ask (and ideally, answer) in each of your three reports. To do this effectively, you will need to read the instructions for those reports.

By submitting a research plan before beginning your main project, you will have an opportunity to receive very early feedback from your instructors. We will also have some in-class breakout discussions in which you can share your plan with other students and receive constructive comments and questions from your peers.

NARRATIVE CONTEXT REPORT (5% DRAFT OUTLINE + 15% FINAL REPORT = 20% TOTAL)

In your first report, you will investigate the world “behind” the narrative of Acts. This includes the general sociocultural environment of the first century (e.g. Roman law and governance), particular historical or geographical facts relevant to your specific passage (e.g. Gallio the Roman senator, the city of Corinth),

and the specific events depicted in Acts (e.g. Gallio as proconsul of Corinth, Paul's appearance before Gallio in Corinth). Your goal is to better understand the story of Acts by better understanding the geographical, social, and historical world in which the events of Acts unfold. *Your thesis statement should state how exactly your research into the ancient world clarifies the narrative of Acts.*

Before submitting your report, you will first submit a draft outline of it. Your outline must contain an opening thesis statement, a heading for each main section of your report, bullet points sketching each section's content, an overall concluding statement, and a bibliography.

Your final written report should be approximately 2,500 words in length. It must contain a bibliography of at least 10 academic sources.

NARRATOR CONTEXT REPORT (5% DRAFT OUTLINE + 15% FINAL REPORT = 20% TOTAL)

In your second report, you will investigate the world "within" the narrative of Acts and "within" the Bible more generally. This includes the immediate literary context of your passage (e.g. the story of Paul's time in Corinth in Acts 18:1–21), the wider literary context (e.g. the story of Paul's mission work as part of Acts), the social function of the narrative (e.g. Luke's purpose in telling these stories in the way that he does, particular the story of Paul and Gallio), and the canonical context of the Bible as a whole (e.g. the way these stories compare with other biblical stories in which people are accused before political rulers). Your goal is to better understand the story of Acts as a voice that speaks from a certain perspective, offering a certain way of making sense of God, the universe, and human beings. *Your thesis statement should state how exactly your research into the biblical book of Acts clarifies the message of Acts.*

The requirements for the second report are identical to those for the first report, including both the draft outline and the final written submission.

RESEARCHER CONTEXT REPORT (5% DRAFT OUTLINE + 15% FINAL REPORT = 20% TOTAL)

In your third report, you will investigate the world "in front of" the narrative of Acts. This is *your* world. You will be investigating sociocultural and history factors that influence how modern people hear the story of Acts (e.g. the so-called "parting of the ways" between Judaism and Christianity, the rise of modern democracies, modern separation of church and state) as well as particular biographical factors that influence how you yourself hear the story (e.g. the way your denominational tradition views evangelism or political authority, your own experiences with religious insiders who refuse to accept something new as the work of God). Your goal is to think about the established convictions, questions, and concerns that you and your communities bring into the reading of the book of Acts. *Your thesis statement should state how exactly your research into the twenty-first century clarifies the meaning and significance of Acts.*

The requirements for the third report are identical to those for the first report, including both the draft outline and the final written submission.

GRADING SUMMARY

Reflection Papers	5% + 10% = 15%
Reading Responses	5 x 3% = 15%
Research Plan	10%
Report #1	5% + 15% = 20%
Report #2	5% + 15% = 20%
Report #3	5% + 15% = 20%
Total	100%

TEXTBOOKS

All students are required to possess the following:

An English translation of the New Testament.

Robinson, Anthony B., and Robert W. Wall. *Called to Be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

All required textbooks for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, you may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416.620.2934 or 416.668.3434 (mobile); or by email at books@readon.ca. The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week	Class Meeting Topics	Assignments Due (Sunday @ 11:59pm)
Sept 11–17	Introduction to the Course	Initial Reflection & Research Plan
Sept 18–24	Introduction to Acts	Reading Response (Chs. 1–3)
Sept 25–Oct 1	“The Beginning of the Church” (1:1–2:47)	Report #1 Outline
Oct 2–8	“The Church and the Jewish Authorities” (3:1–5:42)	Reading Response (Chs. 4–6)
Oct 9–15	Reading Week (No Class)	Report #1
Oct 16–22	“The Church Begins to Expand” (6:1–9:31)	Report #2 Outline
Oct 23–29	“The Beginning of the Gentile Mission” (9:32–12:25)	Reading Response (Chs. 7–9)
Oct 30–Nov 5	“The Mission to Asia Minor and Its Aftermath” (13:1–15:35)	Report #2

Nov 6–12	“Paul’s Missionary Campaign in Macedonia and Achaia” (15:36–18:17)	Reading Response (Chs. 10–12)
Nov 13–19	ETS/SBL Conferences (Optional Tutorial)	Report #3 Outline
Nov 20–26	“Paul’s Missionary Campaign in Asia” (18:18–20:38)	Reading Response (Chs. 13–15)
Nov 27–Dec 3	“Paul’s Arrest and Imprisonment” (21:1–28:31)	Report #3
Dec 4–8	Summary and Implications for Theology, Life, and Ministry	Concluding Reflection

EXAMPLE TOPICS FOR FIRST REPORT

- A specific Jewish custom or belief (e.g. dietary restrictions, Sabbath, circumcision);
- The place of the early Jesus movement within early Judaism;
- The life of a particular early Christian leader (e.g. Peter, Paul);
- Roman citizenship;
- Rome’s system of governance;
- Roman law;
- A specific Roman political figure;
- A specific Roman city;
- Modes of travel within the Greco-Roman world;
- Social structure and/or class in the Greco-Roman world;
- Food and social dining;
- Greco-Roman “religious” systems (e.g. imperial cult, ethnic religions, mystery cults, freelance religious experts, philosophical schools, etc.);
- Ideas and practices surrounding the structure of the cosmos;
- Ideas and practices surrounding health and healing;
- Ideas and practices surrounding magic;
- Ideas and practices surrounding visionary experiences;
- Ideas and practices surrounding spirits/demons;
- Etc.

EXAMPLE TOPICS FOR SECOND REPORT

- The date of Acts;
- The author of Acts;
- The genre and purpose(s) of Acts;
- The extent to which Acts is historically accurate;
- The relationship between the narrative of Acts and Paul’s letters;
- The structure of Acts;

- The place of your chosen passage within Acts;
- The message of Acts regarding the identity of the “Christian” movement;
- The message of Acts regarding the Jewish Scriptures and the Jewish people;
- The message of Acts regarding the mission of God;
- The message of Acts regarding political powers;
- The role that authenticating spiritual experiences play in Acts;
- The role that Paul plays in Acts;
- Etc.

EXAMPLE TOPICS FOR THIRD REPORT

- Contemporary views/experiences regarding the existence of god(s);
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding spirits/demons;
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding divine judgement;
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding the baptism of the spirit;
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding evangelism and mission;
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding money and poverty;
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding sickness and healing;
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding Judaism and the modern nation of Israel;
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding apostolic leadership in the church;
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding the identity/unity of “the Christian church”;
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding political authorities in relation to religious ideas/practices;
- Contemporary views/experiences regarding persecution and (non-)violence;
- Contemporary views regarding the structure of the universe and the ascension/return of Jesus;
- Etc.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC HONESTY

Academic dishonesty is not qualitatively different from other types of dishonesty. It consists of misrepresenting the ownership of written work by deception or by other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include any number of forms such as: copying or using unauthorized aids in tests, examinations; plagiarism, i.e., submitting work that is not one's own (regardless of the means of its production) but passing it off as if it is; submitting work for credit in a course for which credit is being or has already been given, unless the previously submitted work was presented as such to the instructor of the second course and has been deemed acceptable for credit by the instructor of that course; aiding and abetting another student's dishonesty; giving false information for the purposes of gaining admission or credit; giving false information for the purposes of obtaining deferred examinations or extension of deadlines; forging or falsifying McMaster University or McMaster Divinity College documents.

Students are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty. For more information, please refer to the Divinity College Statement on Academic Honesty at:

<http://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/programs/rules-regulations>

In this course, we will be using a web-based service (Turnitin.com) for plagiarism detection and the student's continuation in the course represents his or her consent to the use of this service.

A useful guide to avoiding plagiarism is the Harvard Guide to Using Sources:

<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do>

STYLE

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses:

<https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>

Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the content of this course is intended to be accessible to all students who are enrolled in the course, including those with disabilities. If a student requires accommodation to participate fully in this course, that student is to contact SAS at McMaster University, who will then work directly with the McMaster Divinity College Registrar to negotiate reasonably appropriate accommodation for the student. The MDC Registrar will communicate with faculty regarding necessary accommodations. Please note that an accommodation is not retroactive and must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation.

GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as, for example, the following: NRSV (2021), NCV (1991), TEV/GNB/GNT (1992), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

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.