

Early Christian Theology

CH 3P1050

McMaster Divinity College

Winter term 2025

Wednesday 2:00pm–3:50pm

Instructor: James R. Payton, Jr.

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course examines how the early Church articulated and presented Christian theology. We will read an introduction to Christian theology which builds on how the Church fathers approached theology, what they emphasized, and how they set it forth. We will also read the first great theological treatise produced in the post-apostolic Church and will consider and discuss an extensive collection of excerpts from the Church fathers' works, seeking to understand the Church fathers on their own terms. With all this we will go on to reflect on the significance of early Christian theology for later theology and for life in the Church today.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

Knowing...

- to acquaint students with the approaches to and emphases in early Christian theology
- to enable students to develop basic familiarity with the Church fathers' writings
- to help students appreciate the significance and importance of early Christian theology for the history of theology

Being...

- to stimulate an appreciation for the theology articulated within early Christianity
- to develop a sense of being rooted today in and indebted to the theology set forth in Christian antiquity

Doing...

- to develop in each student an ability to assess theological writings from a historical perspective
- to help students acquire the ability to enter into and express in a historically responsible fashion the ways the Church fathers viewed and taught the Christian faith

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Textbook:

- Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (IVP Academic, 2009).

Primary sources:

- James R. Payton, Jr., *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of "Against Heresies"* (Pickwick Publications, 2011).
- James R. Payton, Jr., ed., *A Patristic Treasury: Early Church Wisdom for Today* (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2013.) [Abbreviated as *APT* in readings assigned in class schedule.]

*All students are expected to complete all assignments based on the instructions provided in Gordon L. Heath, *Doing Church History*, and well as the MDC Style Guide.

SPECIALIZATIONS:

This course and all of the requirements are designed to serve students taking the CC (Church and Culture) specialization and the CW (Christian History and Worldview) specialization. Students may also take the course as an elective.

METHOD:

Instructor's Presentations:

The instructor will offer a presentation in the introductory class. In subsequent classes, presentations will add to or offer background for the materials being discussed in that class, as well as elaborating on significant foci, concerns, and developments in early Christian theology.

Readings:

All assigned readings are to be completed before the class begins. Students should bring their copies of the assigned readings with them and be prepared to discuss them in class. These readings are the foundation of the class: we will discuss them in almost every class session.

Discussions:

In each class, students should be prepared to discuss the readings insightfully, bringing questions and offering comments about them. Sometimes the instructor will offer questions to provoke further reflection on the readings or will point to implications of a reading which have not yet come up in that class's discussion. On days when papers are due, students will be invited (and expected) to discuss, informally, what they have found and/or learned in preparing their papers. Participation in all these discussions will be counted toward the discussion/participation grade.

Format:

This class will meet in person at McMaster Divinity College, with livestream available for those residing more than 80 km from the campus (and in case of illness or emergency).

REQUIREMENTS:

Expectation Paper: Students will prepare (and discuss in class) a **2-3 page paper** laying out what they expect in this class. Dig down into your sub-conscious assumptions about studying the theology taught in Christian antiquity, recognizing that it may well not be the same as what you personally hold today—and identify what you think or imagine (or fear!) could, should, or might happen as you engage in this study. **Due January 22.**

Irenaeus Paper: Students will prepare a **5–6 page paper** presenting Irenaeus’s teaching on one of the topics listed below. Citations are expected to *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith* (and should be made in the body of the paper, rather than as footnotes); citations should follow the system used in the book (book number: chapter, section), rather than page numbers. **Due February 12.**

Topics:

- (1) The importance of the apostolic tradition
- (2) The Adam/Christ parallelism (cf. Romans 5 & 1 Corinthians 15)
- (3) Sin and its consequences
- (4) The significance of the incarnation
- (5) How Christ accomplishes salvation

Literature Review: Students will develop an annotated bibliography of **8–10 journal articles** (whether scholarly journals or Christian/denominational magazines) **or chapters in edited volumes** related to either: (a) the challenge of “deconstruction/reconstruction of faith” and how early Christian theology could serve that struggle; or (b) what the recent and ongoing interest in recovering early Christian teaching has to offer Christianity in the present day. Each annotation should be approximately 100 words, so the completed assignment should be approximately 1000 words. (The annotations should be single-spaced.) **Due March 12.**

Patristic Perspective Paper: Students will prepare an **8–10 page paper** on one of the topics listed below. Students should read through *A Patristic Treasury*, finding the selections relevant to the topic they choose, and write a paper setting forth the Church fathers’ views on that topic. (Citations should appear as footnotes for this paper.) **Due April 9.**

*N.B.: This paper must include, on the last page, a list of the selections the student has identified as relevant to the topic treated; those selections are to be listed in the following format: name of the Church father, title of work and location (i.e., section/chapter/paragraph, etc.), and (in parentheses), page in *A Patristic Treasury* (abbreviate to: *APT* followed by page number[s]).*

Topics:

- (1) Divine Incomprehensibility
- (2) Division and Unity in the Church
- (3) The Cross (of Christ, and the sign)
- (4) Faith and Works
- (5) Sin and Temptation
- (6) Baptism
- (7) The Lord’s Supper (the Eucharist)

Discussion/Participation: Students will be expected to participate regularly, extensively, and insightfully in class discussions.

GRADING:

- **Expectation Paper: 5%**
- **Irenaeus Paper: 25%**
- **Literature Review: 20%**
- **Patristic Perspectives Paper: 35%**
- **Discussion: 15%**

GENERAL COMMENTS:

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.

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.

-- **A special note about AI:** You are expected to do your own thinking and to write your own papers, etc., and not to have AI do this work for you. There may be value in using an AI tool to help you locate and collate resources or to help you "tidy up" your English grammar, usage, and mechanics, especially if English is not your native language. However, using AI to create content for you and then submitting that content as if you created it is considered plagiarism (i.e., submitting work that is not one's own as if it is one's own) and is a violation of the academic honesty policy.

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).

Bookstore

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.

Submitting Papers

Papers must be submitted *at least 30 minutes before the beginning of the class on the day they are due*. Late assignments will lose one letter-grade “step” (e.g., A- to B+) for each day, beginning already with the due date and each subsequent day. Students may be exempted from the late penalty if they attach to their paper a letter explaining the genuine emergency that delayed them. Late assignments (even ones with an extension) will not receive comments and constructive criticism from the professor.

All written work must conform to the *McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses*. Failure to use appropriate form will result in grade reductions. Further, failure to abide by the “Usage Guidelines” posted on Avenue to Learn by the instructor will result in grade reductions.

- Please turn off your cell phone and/or pager before the class begins.
- Please do not attend class if you are ill and contagious (e.g., the flu or symptom of Covid 19).

CLASS SCHEDULE (dates when assignments are due are marked with an asterisk [*]):

Jan. 8	Introduction to the class
Jan. 15	Fairbairn, “Preface” (5 pp.); “Explanation of Patristic Citations” (6 pp.) Fairbairn, Ch. 1—“Introduction: Getting Started in Christian Theology” (12 pp.) <i>APT</i> 11–58
Jan. 22	Expectation Paper due <i>APT</i> 59–106

- Jan. 29 Fairbairn, Ch. 2—“The Heart of Christianity: The Son’s Relationship to the Father” (25 pp.)
APT 107–159
- Feb. 5 Fairbairn, Ch. 3—“From the Father-Son Relationship to the Trinity, and Back” (21 pp.)
APT 163–225
- *Feb. 12* Irenaeus Paper due**
- {Feb. 19: no class [MDC Reading Week]}
- {Feb. 26: no class [Professor away]}
- Mar. 5 Fairbairn, Ch. 4—“Life as It Was Meant to Be: A Reflection of the Father-Son Relationship” (26 pp.)
Fairbairn, Ch. 5—“What Went Wrong? Our Loss of the Son’s Relationship to the Father” (23 pp.)
APT 226–265
- *Mar. 12* Literature Review due**
- Fairbairn, Ch. 6—“The Promise: God’s Preparation of the World for His Son” (22 pp.)
Fairbairn, Ch. 7—“The Incarnation: The Only Son Becomes the Firstborn Son” (27 pp.)
APT 266–297
- Mar. 19 Fairbairn, Ch. 8—“Redemption: God’s Gift of His Son’s Relationship to the Father” (27 pp.)
APT 298–344
- Mar. 26 Fairbairn, Ch. 9—“Becoming Christian: Entering the Son’s Relationship to the Father” (20 pp.)
APT 345–410
- Apr. 2 Fairbairn, Ch. 10—“Being Christian: Another Look at Reflecting the Father-Son Relationship” (30 pp.)
APT 411–465
- *Apr. 9* Patristic Perspective Paper due**

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