
What Our Worship Means:

Learning to Do Liturgical Theology in and for the Congregation
MS 3P1260 (PS/CC)

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Course Description

The aim of this course is to help you study and interpret the theological meaning of worship in your own church or ministry context. We will be asking questions like, “How has my own faith been shaped by what happens in my church on Sunday morning?” Or, “What are we saying about God when we gather for worship? And what is God saying about us?”

Whether or not you describe your church as being a “liturgical” church, the things you do when you gather for worship have a deep theological meaning—a meaning that has shaped and given expression to your faith. This course is about learning to discern and articulate that theological meaning, in order to deepen our understanding of faith and our love for the Lord and his church.

To do this, we will be learning about the questions and methods of what is known as *liturgical theology*. Liturgical theology approaches worship *as* theology. That means that this is not a course that applies an existing systematic theological framework to the study of worship. Rather, this is a course that seeks to understand Christian worship of all styles and traditions on its own terms, as theology. We will consider questions like: What does it mean that many evangelical churches worship with contemporary music in darkened rooms? What does it mean that a small Baptist church might approach the Lord’s Supper with great solemnity, and a potluck with great enthusiasm? What does it mean that one congregation comes to worship wearing their “Sunday best” while another says, “Come as you are”? These and many other questions are not merely stylistic or procedural questions—they are theological. The ways that we worship together are ways of putting into action what we really believe about God.

The questions and methods at the heart of this course are relevant to researchers in practical and historical theology, pastors who want to care for their congregations, and Christians who want to think deeply about their own experience of prayer, worship, and the church. In this course, we will consider how other scholars have studied the meaning of Christian worship, and we will begin to do liturgical theology ourselves by working to make plain the theology of our worship practices.



Course Objectives

This course is designed to help you as ministry students and researchers to approach a particular kind of worship tradition on its own terms, as a meaningful theological act, in order that congregants will be allowed to engage more fully with their own worship practices. The end goal of liturgical theology is not only to understand, but to worship, and so liturgical theologians must be worshippers themselves.

Knowing

1. You will become familiar with major ideas and thinkers in liturgical theology.
2. You will be able to articulate how liturgical theology relates to your own worship tradition.
3. You will learn and employ a basic methodological framework for research in liturgical theology.

Doing

1. You will learn to relate your own worship practices to those studied by leading liturgical theologians.
2. You will be able to research, and discern key aspects of the theology that is enacted in your church's worship practices, and you will be able to articulate this theology to others.
3. You will be able to write in a practical and scholarly way about how you and/or your congregation might enter more meaningfully into these practices.

Being

1. You will be challenged to relate your academic work to your life as a believer, taking a wholistic approach to scholarship, ministry, and faith.
2. You will be challenged to approach research as a worshipper, assuming a from-the-pews perspective in your research and writing, meaning that your scholarly writing will involve personal vulnerability and theological reflection.
3. You will be encouraged to reflect deeply on the Lord's work in your life and in your congregation. While your final paper may involve recommendations for reforming worship in some way, the ideal outcome of this course would be awe and thanksgiving.

Required Reading

Participation in this course means that you must read the following:

1. Kavanagh, Aidan. *On Liturgical Theology*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992. (There are multiple printings of this, choose whatever version is most affordable.) *Try to read this as early as possible. It is not difficult reading, but it has had a far reaching impact on liturgical theology in general.*

3. Ross, Melanie C. *Evangelical Versus Liturgical? Defying a Dichotomy*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014. *Focus particularly on how Ross makes theological insights from her two case studies. This will be helpful as you think about how to do your final paper.*

Course Outline

Week 1a—Course overview, syllabus, major assignments. A basic overview of what we will cover in this course, as well as your major assignments. This is a condensed, intensive course, so you will need to begin working on your assignments immediately.

Week 1b—What is liturgical theology? An introduction to the field of liturgical theology, how it works, who the major figures are, and the questions it is trying to answer. The key idea here is the phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief). This will help you to start thinking about how you and your work relate to this discipline, and will introduce some of the issues you should be concerned about for your final assignment.

Week 2—Liturgical Forgetfulness. Liturgy has not always been approached *as* theology. Instead, many liturgical studies have focused on matters of style, procedure, and history, leaving theology to other disciplines such as systematic theology, sacramental theology, and so on. The Belgian Liturgical Movement of the early twentieth century began to change all that, introducing a return to liturgy along with a return to questions about the theology of liturgy.

Week 3—An Ecumenical Conversation: How an Orthodox priest helps us to think about liturgy. Alexander Schmemmann is arguably the first scholar to treat liturgical theology as its

own academic discipline. Schmemmann developed his ideas in conversation with Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran theologians, developing a new way of thinking and writing about liturgy, history, and the Christian life.

Week 4—The Deep Shape of Worship. Schmemmann’s development of the *ordo* has been a major theme for subsequent theologians, especially for Gordon Lathrop and Melanie Ross. Does worship have a “deep shape” or pattern? And if it does, is it the same for every Christian tradition? What sort of a pattern or shape do you find in your church’s worship?

Week 5—Mrs. Murphy at the Brink of Chaos. Aidan Kavanagh focuses on the role of the individual congregant as a “primary theologian.” Following in his footsteps, David Fagerberg views a person’s participation in liturgy as ground zero for theological study. How do liturgical theologians attempt to view liturgy from the first-person perspective of a congregant? What might you find in your church if you took this approach?

Week 6—Liturgical Frontiers: How does evangelical or low church worship fit into all this? Melanie Ross studies contemporary evangelical worship as a liturgical theologian, arguing that Schmemmann, Lathrop, and White should nuance their understandings of the deep shape of worship by considering the informal practices of evangelical churches. How can you follow Ross in using liturgical theological methods to study your own congregation?

Week 7—Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Liturgical Theologies. In this final week, we will spend time learning from each other. What did we discover about theological meaning in our own liturgical practices? What might this class contribute to the field of liturgical theology? And what can we contribute to our own churches? How has your study in this course influenced your own life as a worshipper?

Assignments

1. Field Study/Reflection. Visit or watch a worship service in a tradition that is significantly different from your own. Write a reflection paper considering your own experience as a visiting worshipper. Was there anything that was new to you? Was there anything that was familiar? What did this worship say theologically? Was this service meaningful? How? What would you like to take back to your home church, if anything? Note: You **do not** need to cite any external works in this paper, as it is a personal reflection. If you do choose for some reason to cite an external work, please cite your sources according to the MDC style guide. Also note: You **do** need to provide the name and location of the church

that you visited/ viewed, as well as the date and time. I strongly encourage an in-person visit if possible, but if you choose to view an online service, please provide a link to the service where possible. **500–1000 words. Due at end of week 2. Worth 15% of final grade.**

2. Discipline Paper: “What is Liturgical Theology?” Write a research paper that in some way answers the question, “What is liturgical theology?” Because this is a research paper, you should incorporate insights from our required reading list as well as other scholarly sources. See the bibliography below for book suggestions. Peer-reviewed journal articles are available through the McMaster Library and through the DTL. I do not expect groundbreaking, original insights from this paper, but rather a thoughtful overview of the state of the discipline to the best of your abilities. You will be graded on the quality of your writing and your grasp of the general history of ideas within liturgical theology. **3000 words. Due at end of week 5. Worth 30% of final grade.**

3. Final Paper: What Our Worship Means. For the final paper, you are going to consider the liturgical practices of your own congregation—whatever they might be—in order to write about them theologically. Your paper must contain four components, although you can arrange these in any way you like, or even meld them together: 1. A description of how your church worships, with specific citations wherever possible. 2. An insightful application of liturgical theological methods and ideas to some aspect of your church’s practices (please cite your sources; see the bibliography below for suggestions). 3. An elucidation of the theological meaning of these practices (or practice, if you choose to focus on a single element) 4. Suggestions for how you and /or your congregation might move toward a deeper engagement with these practices. Your work here should reflect your chosen specialization. Please be in touch with me about your topic early in the course. You will be graded on the quality of your writing, as well as how deeply you have integrated liturgical theology into your understanding of your church’s worship and its meaning. **4000 words. Due at end of week 7. Worth 40% of final grade.**

4. Engaging with Fellow Students. This course will involve interaction with your fellow students. You will be asked to share insights and findings from your assignments along as a way of contributing to our learning community, **including updates and comments on the course Padlet.** These will be informal updates, and you will be free to share as much or as little as you like (a few sentences all the way up to sharing your whole assignment, if you like) but you must engage by posting your own material (ideally by Tuesday of each week) and commenting on fellow students’ posts (ideally by Friday of each week). The key here is to share what you are learning and thinking about, and to interact with other students. Discussion prompts will be provided at the end of each video lesson. **Worth 15% of final grade.**

5. Optional Extra Credit. For those who are so inclined, you can earn optional extra credit by writing a sermon based on the findings of your final paper. This would be a sermon where you encourage your congregation to lean in to the theology of their worship practices, or possibly to reform something about their worship practices. You do not need to follow the MDC style guide for this, but you do need to write out an actual sermon manuscript (not just an outline) so I have something to read. Note that this is a sermon, not a presentation of academic research. Think about what you would really want to say about worship to your congregation on a Sunday morning. **2500-3000 words. Due one week after end of class. Worth up to 5% extra.**

Course Policies

Due dates: Assignments are due by midnight on Monday evenings.

Late assignments will be subject to a 5% deduction per day. This is a condensed, intensive course, so you will need to work very hard to stay on schedule! It would be wise to plan on completing your assignments in advance of the due date. If you need an extension, please contact me as soon as possible.

Office hours: Because this is an asynchronous, online course, I do not have office hours. I do check my email twice per day, with the exception of Saturdays when I am not online at all. If you have an assignment emergency and need me to answer a question, please note that I will not see your messages on Saturday, and realistically not until Sunday afternoon! I do want you to excel in this course, and am happy to answer questions by email or to chat on Zoom anytime. Usually weekday afternoons are best for a zoom call, but I can be flexible if this does not work for some reason.

Assignments can be submitted via email in this format: last name.assignment title.worship.pdf. Note that .pdf is the preferred format. Please do not submit word documents.

Style matters so please use the MDC style guide in all written work. Failure to do so will negatively impact your grade, regardless of how brilliant and insightful your writing might be.

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, including AI) 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.

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.

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: NRSVue (2022), TEV / GNB / GNT (1976), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

Bookstore

All required and recommended books 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.

Presence and Meaningful Participation

Presence and participation in this course are expected. Faculty know from many years of experience that a student's level of presence and participation in the course will impact how well she or he will score in the course. Although there are exceptions to this rule of thumb, low levels of presence and participation tend to translate to low grades; mediocre presence and participation tend to translate to mediocre grades; and high levels of presence and participation tend to translate to higher grades.

A word needs to be said about what constitutes "presence" (attendance) and "participation" in an asynchronous course. Students must establish a record of participation in academically related activities to meet the expected level of attendance and meaningful participation. Be aware that merely logging into the online class is not, by itself, sufficient as a demonstration of attendance and participation by the student. "Academically related activities" certainly includes participation in and completion of the course requirements that are described below. Additionally, just as students are expected to engage with the course content/materials throughout the week outside of the learning management system (A2L), so also students are expected to engage one another in formative dialogue "outside of class." This is an important part of belonging to and maintaining a community of learning and is a staple ingredient in what constitutes "presence."

Online Etiquette

It is critical in any MDC class that students show respect for classmates and the instructor. This is even truer in the online environment because many of the non-verbal cues that we use to interpret what a person is communicating to us are not present online (except, perhaps in video posts). Therefore, it is especially critical that we be mindful of how our words will be interpreted by those who are reading them. As the instructor of the course, it is my responsibility to monitor communications to ensure that all students feel comfortable expressing their views in a respectful manner. Most if not all courses at MDC are devoted to the interpretation of Scripture. Invariably there will be disagreements; these disagreements must be discussed and negotiated in a respectful manner. This applies to individual and group communications involving the instructor and the others enrolled in the course. The instructor will expect that you will give some thought to your postings. Excessive postings are also frowned upon because these amount to dominating the discussion. Please limit your postings to less than 200 words. Instructors reserve the right to ask students to take a step

back to allow others discussion time if she or he feels that an individual is dominating the discussion. In your responses, please try to be clear which point your response refers to. Students who violate these guidelines may be dismissed from class.

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