

ACTS Seminars

THS 680: Christianity and Culture: Critical Assessment and Engagement

Professor: Bruce L. Guenther, Ph.D.
Fall 2008, 3 credit hours
Monday, 11:30 am - 2:10 pm

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I. DESCRIPTION

The course is designed to help students, as one theologian put it, learn to “read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other!” It is about understanding the ongoing relationship between Christianity and culture, and how cultural awareness along with critical skills for critiquing culture from a Christian perspective enhances ministry and leadership effectiveness both in the church and within society at large. The purpose of the course is to help students obtain an integrated understanding of God, humanity, culture, gospel, world, kingdom and church, and then apply this perspective to their specific occupational and ministry context. The first half of the course lays the biblical, theological and historical foundations for a Christian understanding of culture, while the second half of the course is a more practical exploration of specific spheres of Christian involvement in culture. The seminar-style course will feature an interdisciplinary range of lectures, readings, and group discussions.

Prerequisites: Students must have as a pre-requisite at least two undergraduate courses in the area of theological studies, or at least one graduate level course in theological studies. In addition, only students who have taken RES 500 “Research Strategies” prior to registering for this course or who are taking “Research Strategies” concurrently with this course may register.

II. OBJECTIVES

The course will help Christian leaders to:

- * identify the different ways in which the relationship between Christianity and culture has been understood by Christians throughout the history of the church.
- * clarify the relationship between gospel, kingdom of God, church and culture.
- * assess different models of cultural engagement in light of Scripture and their effectiveness in helping the church fulfill its mission.
- * understand the place of cultural analysis for identifying and responding to some of the contemporary issues and challenges facing the church and Christian leadership today.
- * recognize the way North American culture has shaped the evangelical expression of Christian faith
- * obtain a theological foundation from which to understand better the relationship between ecclesiology

and ethics

- * obtain a broader cultural awareness, to become more sensitive and critical interpreters of culture.
- * enable students to identify and respond from a Christian perspective to the tensions between Christianity and culture which surface in their vocational and leadership context.

III. TEXTBOOKS

The following books will be required. Students will also need to obtain one of the books listed in the book review assignment.

Snyder, Howard A. *Models of the Kingdom*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991.

Guder, Darrel L., ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Van Gelder, Craig, ed. *Confident Witness – Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J., and Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, eds. *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007.

Course-pac of readings (available from the TWU bookstore).

IV. COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

1. Reading and Class Participation (10% of final grade)

A considerable portion of our weekly time together will be related to the readings assigned each week. Except for the required texts, these readings will be distributed in class each week. Short assignments will sometimes accompany these readings. It is **essential** that these readings and assignments be completed prior to our meeting each week. Not only will this reading enable you to participate in an informed manner in classroom discussions, but it will also serve as an invaluable foundation from which to complete additional assignments such as the Integrative Paper.

The grade for this component will be based on the degree of preparation for, and participation in, each week's class sessions. Consideration will be given to patterns of attendance, evidence of completion of the assigned readings, regular attempts to be involved through contributions to discussions and the raising of questions, the quality of contributions (i.e., indications of careful reading, thought, insight and interest in issues, etc).

Warning: if you do not contribute to classroom discussions there will be no basis upon which I will be able to determine whether you have read the assigned material!

2. Movies and Faith (25% of final grade): DUE DATE: 20 October 2008

Most people in North America, including Christians, spend more time watching movies and television than they do reading books. The entertainment industry exerts enormous influence on social attitudes

and perspectives in North America and beyond. Its pervasive impact, therefore, needs careful critique.

Write a short essay (1,500 word max) that would be suitable for publication in a denominational magazine (for example, the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, the *PAOC Testimony*, or the *Evangelical Baptist*) in which you use specific observations from at least four movies to give guidance to Christians for why and how to watch movies. The primary objective is to help your audience learn how to watch movies, not present five movie reviews. Carefully avoid being “preachy.” At least three of the four movies need to be taken from the list attached as an Appendix to the syllabus. One of the four may be movies or television sitcoms/series of your own choice. Be sure to identify clearly your intended denominational audience (in a footnote). Books such as the following will be helpful for you to consult (limited copies of these will be available in the bookstore).

Anker, Roy M. *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

Detweiler, Craig and Barry Taylor. *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003.

Godawa, Brian. *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films With Wisdom and Discernment*. Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006.

Johnston, Robert K., ed. *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

Romanowski, William D. *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007.

3. Research Essay: (two parts for a total of 42.5% of final grade)

Each student will prepare a research essay of approximately 3,000 words that analyses a fairly recent cultural “text” or trend (you cannot select a movie or television show). Use the three-part methodological pattern for cultural hermeneutics outlined in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* as a guide (e.g., offer a respectful description of the cultural text or trend that demonstrates a thorough understanding; assess it in light of the biblical story line and Christian theology; and outline some suggestions for how Christians might wisely respond [p. 11]). Many of the essays in this book exemplify the pattern outlined in the first and last chapters.

The **first** part of the assignment requires the preparation of a short oral presentation in class that features your selected text or trend. Feedback from your presentation may be used to refine your final essay. The presentation is to be no longer – and I mean NO LONGER – than 10 minutes. In addition to a brief description and analysis of the selected aspect of culture, the presentation must explain why it is important for your Christian colleagues to know something about this facet of culture. You need to bring a one-page outline of your presentation as a hand-out for your fellow students. Try also to be as creative in your presentation as possible. **DUE DATE: 10 November 2008**

The **second** part of the assignment is to submit the finished essay. **DUE DATE: 24 November 2008**

Please note: This assignment represents a significant proportion of the final grade indicating the level of research and general quality expected. Begin work on this project as soon as possible by selecting a topic and assembling resources. Be sure also to browse the bibliography distributed in class. An essay grading template, which outlines the specific criteria used for evaluating essays, will be included as part of the course pac.

4. Integrative Response Paper (22.5% of the final grade): DUE DATE: 8 December 2008

Write a short (6-10 pages) integrative response paper – this is like an open-book exam – that identifies and discusses what you considered to be the three most important themes (not topics) addressed by the course. Be sure to integrate specific insights from your assigned readings and classroom presentations/discussions into your response. The paper should end with a brief summary of the student’s understanding of the relationship between the church and culture.

Letter Grade to Percentage Correlation

Outstanding	Competent	Minimal Pass
A+ = 97-100	B+ = 85-89	C+ = 70-74
A = 93-96	B = 80-84	C = 65-69
A- = 90-92	B- = 75-79	C- = 60-64

V. MISCELLANEOUS NOTES/POLICIES (The fine print!)

1. All written work must be type-written, ***double-spaced*** and submitted on clear print on white paper. Font size of the body of the paper must not be less than 11 pt. Page-bottom footnotes are preferred (but not mandatory). Bibliographies with complete citations must be attached at the end of each paper.
2. The style guide of choice at ACTS is Turabian. Grades ***WILL*** be reduced if the Turabian style format is not used (take special care with bibliographies and footnotes). Students may find the following websites helpful:
http://library.dts.edu/Pages/RM/Write/turabian_sup.pdf
http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html
3. Develop the habit of using inclusive language. Failure to do so in writing or in public speaking is often considered offensive in North America, and it is impossible to publish material without using inclusive language. It is therefore a useful habit to develop during graduate studies.
4. Students are expected to be familiar with the ACTS policy concerning plagiarism and academic dishonesty. Plagiarism will be treated as a serious offense and ***WILL*** result in the failure of the specific assignment and possibly also in a failing grade in the course. ***EVERY*** instance of plagiarism without exception (even minimal plagiarism) ***will be reported*** both to the registrar and the Academic Committee of ACTS, and will result in a letter included in your permanent student record. Further details about this subject can be found in the ACTS Student Handbook (see section 4:12 in www.acts.twu.ca/Handbook.html), and at <http://www.acts.twu.ca/lbr/plagiarism.ppt>).
5. Students who use the assistance of tutors must indicate that they have done so, must describe the nature of the assistance, and must include full contact information of the tutor. Failure to disclose the assistance of a tutor will result in the rejection of assignment, and may also result in having the

assignment categorized as plagiarism. Students will be exempt from this disclosure requirement if they use the TWU Writing Centre.

6. Extension & Late Assignment Policy: Late assignments will be reduced by one letter grade, and will not be accepted if more than seven days late except in the case of extenuating circumstances.

VI. TENTATIVE LECTURE & READING SCHEDULE (Subject to Change)

Monday, 8 September 2008 - Getting Acquainted, Introduction to the Course

Recommended readings

Ryan, Bramwell. "Christians in Wonderland." *Faith Today* (November/December 1997): 25-31.

Shenk, Wilbert K. "The Culture of Modernity as a Missionary Challenge." In *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, eds. George R. Hunsberger, and Craig Van Gelder, 69-78. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Shenk, Wilbert K. "The Church in Pluralistic North America: Decentering Conviction." In *Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in our Pluralistic World*, eds. David W. Shenk and Linford Stutzman, 156-170. Waterloo: Herald Press, 1999.

Newbigin, Lesslie. "Can the West be Converted?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11. No. 1 (January 1987): 2-7. See also: <http://www.deepsight.org/articles/westcon.htm>

Monday, 15 September 2008 - Culture and Contextualization in Biblical Interpretation

Readings

Marshall, I. Howard, "Culture and the New Testament," in *Gospel and Culture*, eds. John Stott and Robert Coote, 21-46. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979; republished as *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.

Brownson, James V. "Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic." In *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, eds. George R. Hunsberger, and Craig Van Gelder, 228-259. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Monday, 22 September 2008 - Ways of Understanding the Church & Culture in the Past

Readings

Snyder, Howard A. *Models of the Kingdom*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991.

Niebuhr, H. Richard. "Christ and Culture: Five Types of Interpretation." In *Religion and Contemporary Western Culture*, ed. Edward Cell, 47-64. Abingdon Press, 1967.

Monday, 29 September 2008 - Towards a Theology of Ordinary Christian Ministry

Readings

Sine, Tom. "Seeking First the Future of God through Creative Vocation." Chapter Seven in *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, 134-156. Waco: Word Books, 1981.

Towards a Theology of Culture

Readings

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. "The World Well Staged? Theology, Culture and Hermeneutics." In *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of C.F. Henry*, eds., D.A. Carson, and John D. Woodbridge, 1-30. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

Monday, 6 October 2008 - A Missional Church Ecclesiology

Readings

Guder, Darrel L., ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Monday, 13 October 2008 - Thanksgiving - No Class

Monday, 20 October 2008 - Lessons from Missiology: Contextualization

Readings

Whiteman, Darrel L. "Contextualization: The Theory, The Gap, The Challenge." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21, No. 1 (January 1997): 2-7.

Schineller, Peter. "Inculturation and Syncretism: What is the Real Issue?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, No. 2 (April 1992): 50-53.

Optional: Codman-Wilson, Mary Lou. "Witness in the Midst of Religious Plurality: The Model of E. Stanley Jones." In *Confident Witness – Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, 203-218. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Culture Expressing Theology: Christianity and the Arts

Readings

Sayers, Dorothy. "Towards a Christian Aesthetic." In *Christian Letters in a Post-Christian World: A Selection of Essays*, 3-20. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969.

O'Connor, Flannery. "Novelist and Believer." In *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken, 315-326. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981.

Optional: Van Gelder, Craig. "Reading Postmodern Culture through the Medium of Movies." In *Confident Witness – Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, 39-63. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Monday, 27 October 2008 - Reading Break - No Class

Monday, 3 November 2008 - The Cultural Character of Evangelical Protestantism

Readings

Lints, Richard. "The Face of Evangelicalism and the Task of Evangelical Theology." Chapter Two in *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*, 29-56. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

Levin, Rick. "Christapalooza." *The Stranger.Com* 8, No. 48 (19-25 August 1999).

Saltman, Bethany. "A Jealous Buddhist in God's Orange County." *Geez* (Winter 2006): 58-63.

Hobbs, Walter C. "Faith Twisted by Culture: Syncretism in North American Christianity." In *Confident Witness – Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, 94-109. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Monday, 10 November 2008 - Class Presentations

Monday, 17 November 2008 - Christianity and Public Life

Readings

Chaplin, Jonathan. *Faith in the State: The Peril and Promise of Christian Politics*. Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 1999.

Monday, 24 November 2008 - The Challenge of Pluralism

Readings

Stiller, Brian. "Is Pluralism Just a Modern Babel?" Chapter in *From the Tower of Babel to Parliament Hill: How to be a Christian in Canada Today*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1997, 156-172.

Posterski, Don. "Pursuing Principled Pluralism." In *True to You: Living our Faith in our Multi-minded World*, 154-183. Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1995.

Dawn, Marva. "Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Church in Postmodern Times." In *Confident Witness – Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, 270-282. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Monday, 1 December 2008 - Modern Idolatries: Cultural Challenges Facing the Church

Readings

Beukema, George D. "The Prophetic Voice of Poverty." In *Confident Witness – Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, 219-231. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Stockwell, Clinton. "Cathedrals of Power: Engaging the Powers in Urban North America." In *Confident Witness – Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder, 80-93. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Clapp, Rodney. "Why the Devil Takes Visa: A Christian Response to Consumerism." *Christianity Today* (October 7, 1996): 18-33.

Appendix I: List of Movies

About Schmidt (2002)
Amadeus (1984)
Amazing Grace (2006)
Amistad (1997)
An Unfinished Life (2005)
At Play in the Fields of the Lord (1991)
Babette's Feast (1987)
Billy Elliot (2000)
Bucket List (2007)
Chariots of Fire (1981)
Chocolat (2000)
Cider House Rules (1999)
Dead Man Walking (1995)
Dead Poets Society (1989)
Dogville (2003)
Finding Forrester (2000)
Forrest Gump (1994)
Fried Green Tomatoes (1991)
Gandhi (1982)
Hotel Rwanda (2004)
I Am Sam (2001)
Jesus Camp (2006)
Jesus of Montreal (1989)
Killing Fields (1984)
Kingdom of Heaven (2005)
Life is Beautiful (1997)
Mr. Holland's Opus (1995)
O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000)
Patch Adams (1998)
Pleasantville (1998)
Rabbit-Proof Fence (2002)
Repentance (Monanieba) (1987)
Romero (1989)
Rosetta (1999)
Saved (2004)
Saving Private Ryan (1998)
Schindler's List (1993)
Simon Birch (1998)
Spitfire Grill (1996)
Tender Mercies (1983)
The Apostle (1997)
The Big Kahuna (1999)
The Diary of a Country Priest (1951)

The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert McNamera (2003)
The Green Mile (1999)
The Kite Runner (2007)
The Matrix (1999)
The Mission (1986)
The English Patient (1996)
The Power of One (1992)
The Shawshank Redemption (1994)
The Spitfire Grill (1996)
The Thin Red Line (1998)
The Truman Show (1998)
Trip to Bountiful (1985)
Ulee's Gold (1997)
Waking Ned Devine (1998)
We Were Soldiers (2002)
Wit (2001)
Witness (1985)

The following websites may be helpful in selecting additional movies:

Movie Theology: Movie Reviews and Resources
<http://www.cmu.ca/library/faithfilm.html#best>

Top 100 Spiritually Significant Movies
<http://artsandfaith.com/t100/>

150 Soul Food Movies
<http://soulfoodmovies.blogspot.com/2006/08/150-soul-food-movies-list.html>