



Grace Communion Seminary

CM549 Christian Ministry Thesis

Short Syllabus

Instructor: To be arranged, based on your primary area of interest and instructor availability.

GCS Mission Statement

“Equipping the Saints for Pastoral Ministry.” We are committed to equip the saints for pastoral ministry through graduate-level distance education programs in biblical, theological, ministerial and pastoral studies informed by Incarnational Trinitarian faith.

Course Description

This course integrates learning from biblical, theological, and ministry studies into a research thesis that explores one aspect of ministry. This three-unit course often covers two semesters, and it is conducted as an independent study under the guidance of the professor. **Prerequisite:** Student must have at least 36 units, and must pass a summative exam.

Course Requirements

This is a capstone course for the Master of Pastoral Studies.¹ You must pass a summative exam *before* you register for this course.² This exam may be taken after

¹ The MPS degree requires either CM549 or TM501. Students who want to eventually get an MDiv degree are encouraged to take this thesis course, since this thesis will meet one of the requirements for the MDiv. Students who wish to stop with the MPS degree may take TM501, which does not require a research thesis.

² The summative exam is graded pass or fail; it does not carry any credit. Contact the Dean of Faculty for further guidance when you are close to taking the exam.

you have earned 36 units, or with permission of the Dean of Faculty, dean@gcs.edu. The summative exam will include four essay questions – one on biblical studies, one on theology, one on church history, and one on Christian ministry. Sample questions may be obtained from the Dean of Faculty. The exam must be proctored, and must be completed within three hours. For details on proctoring, see the *Academic Catalog*, section VI.B. Since it may take a week for the exam to be graded, you should take the exam at least a week before you want to register.

1. Even before you register for the course, select a topic for your paper. This may be a ministry that you are already involved in. Develop a one to two-page synopsis and a brief outline of the ideas you plan to develop in your paper. We recommend that you do this before registering for the course. It is important to have a narrow, well-defined topic – do not try to cover “Preparation and Procedures for Christian Pastors.” Feel free to discuss your topic ideas with GCS faculty before you register.
2. Also before you register: List 15-20 books that are relevant to your paper. Most of these texts will probably be part of your previous coursework. You will need to expand your research a little beyond the books you have already read. For example, depending on your area of focus, you may want to read Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, or Andrew Root, *Taking Theology to Youth Ministry*, or Kevin Navarro, *The Complete Worship Service*. Do not attempt to read too many new books – there is not enough time to master a new field of study. Focus on something you are already doing and already know something about.
3. You may request a specific GCS faculty member to be your primary advisor for this project, but we reserve the right to assign a different advisor, based on your topic and the workload of the faculty members.
4. Register for the course and pay the tuition. You will be given access to the course website, which includes a “forum” that you will use for all communications. (Other students cannot see what is in your forum.) You can then upload (in Word format) your list of books. For all future submissions, click on “reply” rather than creating a new topic. This will keep all the communications on the same page.

5. Your advisor will comment on your list of books, perhaps suggesting a small number of additional books.
6. Prepare an annotated bibliography of these books, with a one-paragraph analysis for each book of how it is relevant to your paper. You can often describe how the book is relevant even before you read it.
7. Write your thesis. **Do not write it all at once!**³ It should be done in stages, as outlined below. The final paper will be **no less than 13,000 words, no more than 22,000 words**, double spaced, with one-inch margins, Times New Roman font, 12 point.⁴ It must have a works cited section at the end and appropriate citations throughout. Use footnotes for citation references.⁵ This paper will be added to the GCS library, and will be available to other students. As a contribution to pastoral scholarship, it should reflect academic excellence not only in what you write, but also in the appearance of the material. *Formatting and citation details are important.* This requires careful proofreading and attention to punctuation details. For examples, see the theses posted at

³ If you write the entire paper before submitting any of it, you risk wasting a lot of time. You may be writing in the wrong style, or using a lot of space for a topic that is not important for your thesis. By submitting the paper a bit at a time, your adviser can provide “course corrections” for your research and writing.

⁴ The word count does not include the title page, table of contents, footnotes, or the works cited section. This will be about 40-70 pages.

⁵ For formatting details, you may consult a style guide, such as

- 1) Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020).
- 2) Kate Turabian et al., *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. For a brief guide, see http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html; use style N for footnotes and B for the Works Cited section. More information can be obtained from the Purdue University Online Writing Lab: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/01/>.
- 3) If you are already familiar with MLA style, you may use it. owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/
- 4) Students from other nations may use a style appropriate to their own nation. You must tell us what your manual of style is.

<https://learn.gcs.edu/course/view.php?id=47>; ask the Registrar for access to this part of our website.

8. As you are doing the research and the writing, you are required to give updates to your advisor at least every 30 days. If we do not hear from you in any 30-day period, we may initiate some communication. Tardiness in this matter can affect your grade, and if we do not hear from you for an entire semester, you will automatically receive a grade of W for “withdraw.”
9. If the final paper⁶ is not uploaded by the end of the 12th week of the semester, you will remain enrolled in the course for the second semester. The fee for a third semester extension is one-third the regular tuition.
10. If you do not complete the project by the end of the third semester, you will be given a grade of W, and you will not be able to proceed unless you re-register for the course and pay the full tuition.
11. There will be an oral defense of the paper, in which you explain the results of your research and answer questions from three GCS faculty members. This may be done in person, but it is usually done by a video connection. We ask you to give a 10-minute overview of your research and the paper, and then the faculty will ask questions about the paper.
12. The committee has a range of possible responses:
 - a. Rejection of the paper, usually with a suggestion that additional research be done and the paper extensively revised. (This is rare. You will not get to the oral defense unless your advisor believes that your paper is acceptable.)
 - b. Accepting the research and the conclusions, but with a requirement that the paper must be edited. This is by far the most common response, so it is wise to allow two weeks for this additional work. Edits may be extensive, or much more limited.

⁶ Simply because you *hope* that it is the final does not mean that it *is* the final. Major revisions may still be needed. It is final only if the advisor says the version can be used for the oral defense. Even then, more edits are likely after the oral defense.

- c. Acceptance, with recommendations for minor edits before the paper is finalized.

13. After the paper is finalized, *it will be edited further* to make it conform to academic standards,⁷ and it will be placed in the GCS library, and may be accessed by GCS students and faculty. The paper is not a place to air private misgivings or grievances. It is a public contribution to scholarship that may help others. As the *Academic Catalog* notes, the acceptance of a paper as sufficient for the program does not necessarily imply that the conclusion has been accepted by the instructor, the seminary, or the sponsoring denomination.

Suggested schedule

Although we have some deadlines for communication, as mentioned above, you have to set your own pace. With two semesters and a break between, you have 25 weeks to do the paper. Here are some targets that might help:

Before registration: Send an email to the Dean of Faculty stating 1) your proposed topic, and 2) if you have a preference for a particular advisor for your project. Do not register if you do not have a topic in mind.

Right after registration: Upload your preliminary list of books (you should have been thinking about this even before you register), and a preliminary thesis statement. Your advisor will comment on these within one week. In the meantime, you should be reading and/or preparing the annotated bibliography.

Week 2: Your advisor will comment on your list of books and your preliminary thesis statement. Use this week for preparing the annotated bibliography.

Week 3: Upload the annotated bibliography. It is often wise to turn this in even you have not yet read two or three of the books.⁸ Your advisor will respond to it

⁷ Students should do their best to conform to a published academic style, such as that given in Turabian's *Manual*. However, even scholars find it difficult to get all the details right, so we will correct whatever irregularities we notice.

⁸ Your advisor may have recommended a couple of books you were previously unaware

within a week. (All response times are contingent on the instructor's schedule, travel commitments, etc.) In the meantime, you should work on your outline.

Week 4: Upload your tentative outline. You may expand the outline presented below, or you may suggest a modification due to the needs of your paper.

Part 1: Introduction: statement of the topic, survey of some of the literature that has been done on this topic, and comment on why further analysis will be helpful.

Part 2: Theological foundations of the topic. How does the doctrine of God, Christ, salvation, etc. provide a foundation for the type of ministry you are writing about? Ministry always begins with God, and what he has done.

Part 3: Biblical foundations. What passage of Scripture best addresses your ministry? What passages provide additional support? Are there passages that might give evidence against your view?

Part 4: Contemporary situation. What is the social setting of the ministry you are involved in? What concerns do the people have, and how may they be addressed?

Part 5: Application in ministry: How do the theological and biblical principles inform what you are doing in ministry?

Part 6: Conclusion. A summary of the paper and perhaps a suggestion for where further research may be helpful.

Part 7: Works cited. List the documents you referred to in your paper. This must be done in a consistent style.

There is no structure that fits every topic, so there is flexibility in the way that the

of, but you can't put your project on hold until you have read everything. The annotated bibliography is not graded, so it is better to turn it in incomplete, than to delay everything in the schedule. We do not allow much time for this because we expect that you have already read the parts that are pertinent to your paper, and all you have to do it write a paragraph of annotation for each book. Write one paragraph per day and you'll be on schedule.

paper is written.

Week 5: Review the comments your advisor made on your annotated bibliography. This may help you as you write the introduction, which would include a “survey of the literature.” You do not have time to survey everything that is written about your topic, but you can survey what has been said *in the materials you have read*.⁹

Week 6: Upload your introduction and literature review. Do not wait until the whole paper is “done” before you submit it. *We know* it is not finished yet, but we prefer to get it in smaller pieces, rather than one large piece. That is because the feedback we give you on the initial sections can help you write subsequent sections in a better way. Problems are easier to fix it when they are small.

Week 9: Upload the theological section, which may include some historical background as well. This will lay a foundation for further sections.

Week 12: Upload the biblical analysis, including the exegesis of your primary passage and a survey of other relevant verses.

Week 15: Upload the sections on the current setting, and how your ministry is done in this setting. Explain why this topic is pastorally important.

Week 18: Draft of complete paper, with conclusion and works cited. This step requires that you have a good grasp of your paper overall, integrating editorial suggestions in all sections, perhaps doing some additional research. Devote a significant block of time in which this is your main task. Don’t try to do it in odd moments squeezed between your other responsibilities. Work on the introduction and the conclusion.

Week 21: Upload the final draft.

⁹ Your annotated bibliography does not become your literature review. The annotated bibliography is generally too fragmented, with no transition statements between the books. The annotated bibliography may also include books about biblical interpretation, for example, that are not directly about your topic, but are relevant to your biblical analysis, and their contributions to your study are best addressed in a later section. Your survey of the literature should have smooth transitions and be topically organized.

Week 22: If your paper is ready, the advisor will schedule an oral presentation for your paper; the schedule depends largely on the availability of the faculty.

Week 23: Oral presentation. This is generally done by video conference. We'll ask you to give a 10-minute introduction to your paper (why you chose the topic, why you developed it the way you did, etc.) followed by 50 or 90 minutes of comments and questions from the three faculty members on your committee. It may take a couple of weeks to arrange a time suitable for all four people involved.

Week 25: Upload the finalized paper. Although it is theoretically possible to finish in one semester, the process usually takes two semesters: you will register for the course in the first semester, and remain in the course for the second semester. You may obtain a course extension of a third semester to complete your thesis. Contact the Registrar at 800-851-2611 or registrar@gcs.edu. The fee for a third semester extension is one third of the normal tuition. If a fourth semester is needed, the student must register for the course again and pay the full tuition amount.

Week 26: The oral defense and revising the paper.

Estimated hours

Assignment	Hours *	Percentage of grade
Reading the syllabus and instructions	4	
Studying for the summative exam	16	
Taking the summative exam	4	0
Reading books	100	
Writing the annotated bibliography	30	
Writing the final paper	200	100
Preparing for the oral defense	4	
The oral defense	2	0 ¹⁰
Total	351	100
The number of hours is more than double what other GCS courses require.		

¹⁰ The grade for the course is based on the written paper, but the student must pass the oral defense.

Library resources

For your paper, you will need some modern academic resources. Some students already have access to appropriate books; others will need to obtain books at a local seminary library, or plan ahead to get them through interlibrary loan at a public library, or by mail from the GCS library. Our library catalog is listed at <https://www.gcs.edu/resources/student-resources/>. We'd be happy to share our resources with you. For details on how our library works, see the *Academic Catalog*, section VI.H.

See also a document titled "Research Resources Available off Campus." <https://learn.gcs.edu/mod/book/view.php?id=5048>. A large amount of good material is available on the internet.