

Department of Theology

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE DESCRIPTION

Term: **Fall 2008**
Instructor: Michel Barnes
Course #: THEO 135
Sections: 1001 and 1002
Course Title: Theology of the Early Church

Description:

The course covers Christian doctrine and life from the late first century to the sixth century. This era is important because it was the time in which Christians worked out in some precise ways the content and form of their faith. Special attention will be given in the course to those events and concerns in the history of Christianity which have given Christianity its distinctive identity and which have provided later Christians (and non-Christians) with a sense of what Christianity is. Theo 135 will give the student an understanding of the following: 1) the content of the most important Christian beliefs and structures; 2) the historical circumstances in which those beliefs and structures developed; and 3) why those beliefs and structures were judged by the believing community to be essential to their experience of Christ. For example: the course will examine the transition from temporary to permanent offices in the church (i.e., the rise of the bishop-based church), the selection of inspired writings as normative for belief (such as the Christian decision to continue to use Jewish Scriptures or the development of a four Gospel canon), and the circumstances leading to the use of the "Nicene" creed as a statement of the fundamental belief of Christians regarding the Trinity. Thus, at the end of the course the student will understand, among many other things, why there are bishops, what are the circumstances that produced a Christian "Bible", and what the creed recited in most Christian liturgies means (and why).

Such a history of the theology of early Christianity is discovered by reading texts written by authors who were important for the self-definition of Christianity. Class readings will thus be drawn from Christian writings of the early church as well as from modern scholarly writings. *The daily reading assignments for the course are specified on the "Reading Schedule". Class lectures & discussions and the exams are based on these readings. Course work will require significant amounts of reading.* If you don't like to read, take another course.

Course Goals:

- To give the student a knowledge of the theology of early Christianity and of the significance of that early theology for Christian self-definition.
- To direct the student in the skills of reading a text from the distant past.

Required texts:

A detail list of required readings will be given the first day of class. Although the majority of required texts will be available on reserve in the library to read or photocopy, *you must purchase*: M. Barnes, Theo 135 Lecture Notes; Athanasius, On the Incarnation (SVS Press); and Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Macrina (SVS Press). These books are at the BookMarq. Other required texts will be announced later. *The daily reading assignments for the course are*

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