

Wesley Theological Seminary Course of Study School
March 2– April 9, 2026 (asynchronous)
April 10-11, 2026 via Zoom (synchronous)

Syllabus *(submitted 5 Feb 2026)*

424 Ethics

Instructor: Gary MacDonald

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Course Description

This course introduces the biblical and theological bases for Christian behavior, emphasizing the pastoral skills needed for moral leadership in the congregation and community.

Course Objectives

Upon successful completion of this course the student will be able to:

1. Articulate a biblical and theological basis for ethical thinking and moral behavior, and distinguish major approaches to ethical reasoning.
2. Comprehend the relationship between their personal stories, pastoral vocation, local contexts, and responsibility as moral leaders.
3. Develop a Christian framework for moral reason and action, and apply it to the use of power and the setting of boundaries in ministry.
4. Demonstrate familiarity with and make use of the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church as a resource for ethical reflection and action

Textbooks

Birch, Bruce C., Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, and Larry L. Rasmussen. *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life: A New Conversation. Third Edition*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018. (ISBN: 978-0800697617)

Lovin, Robin W. *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: Goals, Duties, and Virtues*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2011. (ISBN: 978-0687467365)

Miles, Rebekah L. *The Pastor as Moral Guide*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999. (ISBN 0-8006-31366)

The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church: 2020/2024. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2024. (ISBN: 978-1791010966).

(Additional material may be posted on the Blackboard platform.)

Video Lectures

Video lectures will be posted on Mondays for students' access on the following schedule:

March 2 – The Search for the Good Life

March 9 – Goals, Rules and Virtue

March 16– Sources of Ethics

March 23– United Methodist Social Thought

Technical Instructions

All Wesley courses use Blackboard. Some are web enhanced, hybrid or fully online. It is essential to have the right tools to participate fully. You must have a computer or regular & reliable access to a computer. Many items on Blackboard can be accessed using a mobile device, but you will be expected to complete tasks that require a computer or robust tablet. Minimum technical requirements are listed below. If your system does not meet minimum requirements or you do not have the necessary tools and you will not be able to complete your courses.

Microsoft Windows

- Windows 10 or higher
- Intel Core i5 or higher or AMD equivalent
- At least 16GB of free storage space

Mac

- OS/XMac OS X 10.14 or newer
- Intel processor and at least 4 GB of RAM

- Up-to-date browser: Firefox, Chrome, Safari, Edge ([click here for Blackboard browser checker](#))
 - Up-to-date PDF reader ([Adobe](#) or [FoxIt](#))
 - Up-to-date video player:
 - Windows Media player or
 - [VideoLAN VLC media player](#)
 - Up-to-date Word processor and presentation package ([Wesley Theological Seminary offers free Office 365 Basic for students click here for instructions on how to download](#))
 - High speed internet connection (10 mpbs or higher is required)
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Written Assignments

Birch/Lovin Reflection	Friday, March 13 @ 11 p.m.
Topic Statement	Wednesday, March 25 @ 11 p.m.
Miles Reflection	Friday, April 3 @ 11 p.m.
Ethics Research Paper	Sunday, April 12 @ 11 p.m.

Birch/Lovin Reflection

Due Friday, **March 13 @ 11 p.m.**

Read the Birch et al. and Lovin texts in their entirety and prepare a paper responding to the five questions below, drawing particularly from your understanding of the readings, the video lectures, and your own experience. It is expected that each answer be 500-600 words long, about two pages each, for a total of approximately 10 pages. Please number your answers and format papers with one-inch margins, double-spaced, using 12-point type with a font such as Times New Roman. Include your name, the class name and date in your heading. Papers are submitted through Blackboard online learning platform under the *Assignments* tab.

1. Summarize Birch et al.'s understanding of the authority of the Bible for Christian ethical formation and discernment.
2. What is the place of "social sin" in moral formation, according to Birch et al.?
3. Define "Christian stance" and compare and contrast two of its variations, as presented by Lovin.
4. Summarize one of the primary ways of moral reasoning discussed by Lovin – deontology, teleology or virtue ethics – including the thought of at least one of its prominent theorists, and, from your experience, provide one example of how the theory has influenced Christian practice.
5. Choose a moral dilemma that has presented in your ministry past or present (you are invited to change names as appropriate). What specific insights from these texts are helpful in discerning how you as a Christian leader might respond? What challenges do the texts illuminate?

Research Paper

Topic Statement Due: Wednesday, **March 25 @ 11 p.m.**

Paper Due: Sunday, **April 12 @ 11 p.m.**

Class Presentations to be scheduled Saturday, **April 11**

The Research Paper is an opportunity for you to engage in a depth examination of a practical moral issue addressed within the United Methodist Social Principles and to

provide a constructive response from a Christian perspective. It is recommended that you choose a topic that has a level of moral ambiguity in your initial assessment, however you are free to choose a topic that reflects your practical interests in ministry, or one that relates to a particular moral or theological problem of interest to you. The paper will be evaluated primarily on the clarity of the writing and the quality of the thinking evident in your analysis and arguments. The paper should also give evidence of reading in sources (beyond Wikipedia or generative AI) related to your topic, in addition to the required reading for the course. Be sure to cite your sources. The paper should be no less than eight and no more than 10 pages in length (approximately 2750 words).

Students will provide the instructor a one-paragraph summary of the topic to be addressed. The summary should include a one-sentence statement of the question to be addressed; an indication of the social category as defined by the Social Principles to which the question pertains, such as the *Community of All Creation*, *The Economic Community*, *The Social Community* or *The Political Community*; and at least two sources that the student will utilize beyond the course materials. You might find specific resolutions from *The Book of Resolutions* to be suggestive of possible topics, but are free to explore topics of particular relevance and interest to you. The instructor will approve or suggest revisions to students by the weekend following the statement's due date. Students will post topic statements on the respective Discussion Board following approval by the instructor.

Based on the topics selected, a schedule of class presentations will be developed. Guidelines for these presentations will be provided students following the finalization of topics.

You will want, in your paper, to provide a clear statement of the question you are working to answer, along with an analysis of the question, identifying inherently the key elements calling for ethical investigation, analyzing these with the help of your course materials and research. Identify the sources for ethics on which you rely and how these sources operate, and then draw on these sources for your own ethical analysis. Analyze how the various approaches to ethics you have read about have any bearing on the issue. In addition, ensure that you consider both your own viewpoint and possible alternative or contrary viewpoints from an ethical and theological perspective. Ensure that you give reasons for the position at which you arrive; do not simply state your position and assume the reasons behind it are obvious. Finally, make sure that you properly cite references, using footnotes or endnotes. A bibliography of all sources consulted, regardless of whether you quote from them or not, should also be included.

Miles Reflection

Due Friday, **April 3 @ 11 p.m.**

Read the Miles text and write a reflection paper in which you evaluate the principles and guidelines presented for pastoral ministry. Be sure to address the content of Miles’ understanding of the role of the pastor in moral guidance; the use of “The Guiding Questions,” the place of responsibility in pastoral care settings as it relates to moral guidance; and sexual accountability in ministry. What did you find particularly helpful in the text? Is there any critique you might offer? The paper should be no less than three and no more than five pages (825 – 1375 words).

Discussion Boards

During the course, students will be asked to respond to a question or topic within a discussion forum on Blackboard. Students are asked to make an initial post and to respond to at least one colleague according to the schedule below, and are encouraged to dialogue with additional students as well.

Opening Date	Initial Post Due	Response Due
Sunday, March 1	Monday, March 2 @ 5 pm	Wed., March 4 @ 5 pm
Friday, March 6,	Monday, March 9 @ 5 pm	Wed., March 11 @ 5 pm
Friday, March 20	Monday, March 23 @ 5 pm	Wed., March 25 @ 5 pm
Monday, March 30	Wednesday, April 1 @ 5 pm	Friday, April 3 @ 5 pm

Discussion Board One

Opens Sunday, **March 1**

The first step in establishing an online community is to get to know each other. In the Discussion Board introduce yourself to your colleagues in one paragraph of no more than 200 words. In your introduction, briefly describe your ministry; introduce your family, if you desire; and present one or two core questions you bring to this course. Post your initial comments by 5 p.m. Monday, March 2. Post initial responses to colleagues' introductions by 5 p.m. Wednesday, March 4.

Discussion Board Two

Opens Friday, **March 6**

In the Discussion Board comment on your initial reflections on the Birch and Lovin texts with a one paragraph response of no more than 150 words. Post your initial comments by 5 p.m. on Monday, March 9. Post initial responses to colleagues' posts by 5 p.m. on Wednesday, March 11.

Discussion Board Three
Opens Friday, **March 20**

Read in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*:

- The Contents and User's Guide (pages 7-32)
- Social Creed (pages 33-34)
- The Social Principles, including:
 - Preface and Preamble (pages 35-39)
 - Community of All Creation (pages 40-46)
 - The Economic Community (pages 92-99)
 - The Social Community (pages 173-187)
 - The Political Community (pages 393-405)

In addition, within each section of the Social Principles, read at least two of the Resolutions pertaining to each category and at least two of the Resolutions listed under "X. Other Resolutions," for a total of at least 12 resolutions.

In the Discussion Board answer the following questions with a one paragraph response of no more than 150 words each (three paragraphs total). Post your initial comments by 5 p.m. on Monday, March 23. Post initial responses to colleagues' posts by 5 p.m. on Wednesday, March 25.

1. What does it mean for your ministry that the Social Principles "are a call to faithfulness and to social engagement and intended to be instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit" (p. 36)?
2. How have you, or might you, utilize the Social Creed within the life of your congregation? If the Creed was unfamiliar to the congregation, how would you prepare for its introduction?
3. How might you utilize particular resolutions in the practice of your ministry. What challenges might be presented and how would you address or respond?

Discussion Board Four
Opens Monday, **March 30**

After receiving approval from the instructor of your Research Paper Topic (see above), post your topic summary in the Discussion Board by 5 p.m. on Wednesday, April 1 and make a brief comment on why you chose this subject. Initial responses to colleagues' posts will be due by 5 p.m. on Friday, April 3.

Synchronous Class Sessions (via Zoom)

Live class sessions will be conducted via Zoom from:

~ **10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Eastern Time (US and Canada)**

~ **1:30 to 4 p.m. Eastern Time (US and Canada)**

On the following dates:

~ **Friday, April 10**

~ **Saturday, April 11**

(Our goal will be to have a short break each hour. Exact times are subject to adjustment.)

You may join the sessions at Zoom.us directly [here](#) or use on Zoom.us:

Meeting ID: 895 7581 0524

Passcode: **GoodLife**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89575810524?pwd=IiYK9q70AEX2GiLEcfYqPEp4o8utlh.1>

Grading

Grades will be calculated as follows:

Birch/Lovin Reflection	25 %
Discussion Boards	15 %
Miles Reflection	20 %
Research Paper/Presentation	30 %
Class Participation	10 %

Grade Scale:

A	93-100
A-	90-92
B+	88-89
B	83-87
B-	80-82
C+	78-79
C	73-77
C-	70-72
F	69 or below

Grades will be reduced a step (e.g. from B to a B-) for assignments submitted in late, but within 24 hours after the assignment was due. Grades will be reduced a full letter grade for any assignments 24 hours past due. Students submitting assignments 48 hours or more past due should immediately set a time to conference with the instructor.

The final grade will be reduced a full letter grade for an unexcused absence from a zoom session. Students will not receive credit for the course with two or more unexcused absences from a required zoom session.

Inclusive Language

In both oral and written contributions to the course, students are expected to be conscious of the power of language in theology. Inclusive language respects both gender and racial diversity, and students should demonstrate awareness that language about persons and God expresses values and impacts theological ideas in the details of race and gender connotations. Both gender and race are socially-constructed categories, and changing language is part of bringing justice to theological discourse.

Academic Policies

Attendance

Students are expected to attend all classes in their entirety. Faculty members have the authority to set attendance policies for particular courses and those policies will be included in the course syllabus. Deviation from the attendance policy may result in reduction of grade or loss of credit for the course.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is regarded as a serious offense and will result in substantial penalties, including the possibility of academic dismissal. The faculty regards the following as form of plagiarism or dishonesty:

- Copying from another student's paper.
- Giving or receiving unauthorized assistance to or from another student during an examination.
- Using unauthorized material during an examination.
- Borrowing or presenting as one's own (i.e. without proper attribution) the composition or ideas of another.

Please refer to your Wesley Student Handbook (on-line) for more information about Wesley's academic policies or contact the Course of Study office 202-885-8688.

Generative AI

Part of the goal of graduate school, and especially seminary, is to help you strengthen your own voice in your speaking and writing. None of us is a writer on an island; we all stand on the shoulders of those who come before us. This means that writing without citations, using (stealing) the ideas of others without crediting them, is plagiarism. Generative Artificial Intelligence or "AI" (such as ChatGPT, Bard, Claude, Wordtune, and more) is a resource that is subject to and contributes to the unjust structures of the world, advancing the technological prowess of billionaires by depending upon exploitative labor models in the global south, stealing creative workers' intellectual property, and exacerbating the ecological crisis with its energy needs, in order to summarize and compile information. It does not vet that information. It is not an expert.

It compiles inaccurate information as well as factual information. It does not value and cannot replicate knowledge gained in embodiment in the world. But most importantly for your class experience, it shortcuts your learning and thinking process, which is about knowledge and wisdom, not information. Your goal, as a seminary student, is knowledge and wisdom. God has called you, not a computer. Generative AI will often get in your way.

Policy

If a professor suspects that an assignment is AI-generated:

1. The student will receive a preliminary failing grade for the assignment.
2. The professor will invite the student for an opportunity to provide evidence which clearly demonstrates that the student did in fact produce the content using the students' own abilities and scholarly research.
3. If the student is unable to provide a satisfactory explanation for the creative process, and/or does not demonstrate fluency and sophistication with the material that evidences the student's grasp of the text in question, the failing grade for the assignment will be final. Furthermore, the incident will be flagged as an instance of academic dishonesty and reported to the Dean's Office.
4. If multiple offenses are reported, whether by the same professor, or a different professor, the student will be invited to a conference with the Dean's Office and may be at risk of expulsion.

(updated 14 April 2025)

Permissible Uses of AI Tools (subject to the discretion of the faculty member; some faculty members may not allow any of these uses, so please verify with them)

Students may use AI tools in limited ways, such as:

- Preliminary Research: AI may be used as a supplementary tool to gather ideas, identify initial sources, and explore introductory concepts on a topic.
- Writing Support: Students may use AI for grammar checking, paraphrasing single sentences for clarity, and suggesting synonyms to improve language accuracy.
- Outlining and Brainstorming: AI tools may assist in generating basic outlines or brainstorming ideas for non-graded, preparatory work.

These uses are intended to support, not replace, the student's engagement with the material. When AI is used within these permitted contexts, it must be explicitly acknowledged in the submission.

Prohibited Uses of AI Tools

The following uses of AI are prohibited in all deliverables and submissions:

- Content Generation: Students may not use AI to generate substantive content for essays, research papers, assignments, reflections, or any form of graded and nongraded writing or deliverables.
- AI-Authored Work: Submitting work that has been partially or fully written by an AI

tool is considered plagiarism, as it undermines the student's own critical thinking and theological analysis.

- Unattributed Paraphrasing or Summarizing: Any ideas, arguments, or text generated by AI must be fully attributed. Presenting AI-generated content as one's original thought is a violation of this policy.
- Automated Responses to Exam or Quiz Questions: Students may not use AI tools to formulate answers to exam questions, quizzes, or other assessments designed to evaluate individual comprehension and synthesis of material.

Syllabus subject to change.
(5 February 2026)