

Lutheran Theology: How is God at Work in the World?

Author*: Dr. Jeremy Myers (www.augsburg.edu)

Overview

This lesson will present participants with a handful of ideas that are central to Lutheran Theology. These ideas will help the participants interpret and understand their experiences in a particular way. They will also help participants in assisting students in the interpretive process of their own experiences; helping them articulate God's presence and activity in a way that (we think) gives faithful witness to how God works in the world.

Learning Objectives

Participants will . . .

1. Know and understand a handful of ideas that are important to Lutheran theology.
2. Be able to use these ideas when attempting to interpret, understand and explain how God is at work in the world.
3. Know of a few questions to use when attempting to accompany students through a process of theological reflection.
4. Be comfortable using these questions.
5. Be confident and excited to use these theological ideas and questions when attempting to interpret, understand and explain how God is at work in our lives.

Opening Exercise I: Defining Theology

1. Open the session by asking the participants these questions.
 - a. "What comes to mind when you hear the word 'theology'?" (*Hopefully this question will help them start to get at any anxiety they might have around this subject.*)
 - b. How do you define theology? (*Offer up these "classic" definitions if others do not bring them up.*)
 - i. "God talk" (The Latin word *theos* means God, and the Latin word *logos* means word)
 - ii. "Faith seeking understanding" (St. Anselm from the 11th century)
 - iii. ". . . that ongoing activity of the whole church that aims at clarifying what 'gospel' must mean here and now." (Douglas John Hall, 2004)
 - c. Who does theology? (*The leader's role in this conversation will help the participants begin to see theology as something we all do together. It happens whenever God's people gather together to talk about God.*)
2. *Transition* - Say this: "Today's training is going to focus on Lutheran theology and how it can help us articulate good news (or gospel) to our youth."

Opening Exercise II: Personal Reflection

1. Take a few minutes to write about an experience in your life that you would consider religiously/ spiritually meaningful. Just write about 1 paragraph describing that experience.
2. *Transition* - Say this: "Set these aside and we will come back to them later. Theology is not meant for the classroom it is meant for life. It should not be something that is talked about but something that is done. Theology can help us understand and explain the experiences we just wrote about. Theology can help us understand and explain how God is at work in our world."

Video

1. *Introduce video* – Say this: "Today's video will give us an overview of Lutheran theology. Again, the point of this video is not to teach you big fancy words that you should go and teach to your youth. Instead, the goal is to help you see how Lutheran theology explains God's work in our world."
2. Prior to showing the video, each participant should be given a copy of the "Lutheran Theological Terms" handout (see attached) so that they can take notes while listening – Justification, Two Kingdoms, Simultaneously Sinner and Saint, Law and Gospel, Means of Grace, and Vocation.
3. *Play video* – 12 minutes (see attached "Theology Video Transcript")

Discuss Video

(Note to leaders: You will want to preview this video and do a little of your own research on the terms mentioned in the video so you are prepared to answer any questions the participants might have.)

1. Are there any questions about the video? Are there any parts of it that are not quite clear to you?
2. What was familiar to you?
3. What was new?
4. Did you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with the video? Why?

Practicing Theology

Ask participants to find a partner – try to keep the groups to only two people. Ask them to use the concepts covered in the video to interpret and explain the experience they wrote about at the beginning of this session in the Personal Reflection. They do not need to use the exact same words from the video (i.e., justification) but try to use the concept itself (i.e., forgiveness/ grace).

1. Give the first person in the pair five minutes to use the concepts from the video when describing the experience they wrote about to their partner.
2. After 5 minutes, tells the pairs to switch so the other partner now has 5 minutes to talk about his or her experience using the concepts from the video.

3. *Process*: Ask the entire group to share what this was like for them. Was it easy? Difficult? Clumsy? Did you find it helpful? Meaningless? Did it help you understand your experience differently?
4. *Encouragement*: Say this – “Just like anything else we do, this will take practice. Again, we don’t do this in order to be a ‘part of the club’, we do this because we believe these ideas help us say some important things about who God is and how God is at work in our world. It is important to help our youth think about God in these ways as opposed to some of the alternatives that are floating around out there such as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”
5. *Transition*: Say this – “Theology should never be one-sided, it should always be a conversation. So, we are now going to practice using certain questions that might help you engage your youth in the process of theological reflection.”

Powerful Questions

Introduce the questions, asking each participant to reflect on each question on their own for a moment. Encourage them to rephrase the questions so they sound more natural to them. Challenge them to try and use these three questions with at least one person in the next two days.

1. Tape three large sheets of paper on the walls with one of these questions on each sheet.
 - a. How have you experienced God’s grace recently?
 - b. Has there been a time recently when you felt like God was absent? Explain this experience.
 - c. What do you think is Christ’s invitation to you in these situations?
2. *Say this*: “Here are three questions that you can ask the youth you work with at any given time to encourage them to begin to think theologically about the things that go on in their lives – good and bad. Again, the point is not to use these questions exactly as they are phrased here, but to phrase them in a way that is natural and still gets at to the point.”
3. Ask the participants to move around the room to each sheet of paper on their own. Ask them to ponder the question on the sheet of paper and then write their own version of that question on the same sheet of paper. Allow about 5 minutes for this exercise.
4. Share some of the alternative questions with the group.
5. Ask the participants to find a new partner. Have one partner choose a question to ask the other partner. They should then listen to the partner’s response for a couple minutes before they switch and repeat this process.
6. Discuss this question as a large group: How could you see yourself using these questions with your youth? If the participants are resistant and express a fear of feeling awkward or uncomfortable asking their youth these questions, then challenge them by asking them what would need to happen in order for them to begin asking these questions of their youth.

Closing Group Exercise

1. Say this: “To close this training session, I want us to practice thinking theologically together. I want us to think about service projects – mission trips, local projects, etc. How do we think theologically about service projects in youth ministry? Why do we do them? What do we do with our youth before, during and after service projects in order to keep this particular theological perspective in front of them and us?”
2. Allow this discussion to move freely. There is no intended outcome other than to practice these news skills on an actual task most of your participants would have experienced.

Closing

1. Close by asking the group to stand in a circle and allow each person to say one theological truth about God that they want the youth in their group to know, experience and understand.
2. Close with a prayer and the sharing of the peace after everyone has shared.

**This curriculum was developed for the Practice Discipleship Project, an initiative of the 2012 ELCA Youth Gathering (www.elca.org/gathering) in partnership with the ELCA Youth Ministry Network (www.elcaymnet.org). While primary authorship belongs to the author noted above, this is a collective work of the Practice Discipleship writing team: Dr. Terri Elton (Luther Seminary: www.luthersem.edu), Dennis “Tiger” McLuen (Youth Leadership: www.youthleadership.org), and Dr. Jeremy Myers (Augsburg College: www.augsburg.edu). Permission is given to use these resources in your local context, so long as no organization or individual profits from the use of these materials.*

