



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

A Communion
of Churches

lutheranworld.org

MODULE 1: INTRODUCTION TO LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

What is “Lutheran” theology?

Chad Rimmer, Lutheran World Federation / US

Theology is many things. It is a field of study. It is a collection of systems of thinking about God and the world. It is faith meeting reason. Theology is the way in which we conceptualize our being in the world. Theology provides us with the tools to give a constructive account of our faith within our different contexts, and to critique the logic of social theories, cosmologies, and economic or political paradigms that might contradict conditions for the life and wellbeing of creation. And that task of doing theology begins with questions about God. Theology is the Logos of God – knowledge about God. And in theology, we do not just ask questions about who God is. Rather, theological questions are about who God is for us and how we know that. For Lutherans, it is also important to talk about how we have knowledge of God.

In today’s ecumenical theological milieu, we talk about contextual theology. It is another way of saying that we have many different perspectives from which we experience who God is for us. Our context is made up by many different political, historical, racial, and economic realities, and each one of us lives at a different intersection of our culture, gender, language, economic and social reality. Because each of us thinks about God and our being in the world from a unique intersection, we have a great diversity of contextualized theology across our communion.

But before we talk about those different ways of knowing God, we can also think about a common Lutheran theological perspective. In other words, we don’t merely come to know God through our different perspectives. As Lutherans, we have the gift of sharing a framework which can help us to ask theological questions. According to our diverse intersectional identities (as a woman, as an Asian, as a person from a lower social class, etc.) we are sure to arrive at different answers from time to time, and this is part of the beautiful contextual harmony that is our communion. However, part of our shared Lutheran identity relates to how we ask theological questions.

For Luther, and the Lutheran reformers, learning to ask good theological questions was an important part of arriving at good theological ideas. The first task was to return *ad fontes*, to the source. This was a call to leave behind accrued ecclesial and philosophical systems, and return to the sources, which for the humanists meant to the original languages of the scriptures and teachers. For Luther, this meant returning to Scripture,

translating it from the original languages and being able to read it in one's own language, but also reforming or "purifying" sources of the faith, sacraments and ecclesial practices. What are good theological ways to approach these sources?

Lutheran theological questions

For Luther, theological questions were not philosophical pursuits about who we think God is. Rather, theological questions should focus on how God has revealed God's self to us. In other words, philosophical questions are based on mere reason, but theological questions should be based revelation. This is the meaning of **Theology of the Cross**. A theology of glory begins with our own reasoning about what God should be. Perhaps we think God should glorify us, or that faith should end in all manner of power or material blessing. Our reason will always follow our will, which may not (and indeed normally does not) end up knowing anything about God. We only come to know what we want to know about God. But a theology of the cross begins with the ways in which God has chosen to reveal God's self. God has ultimately revealed God's self through creation, in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Scripture bears witness to the ways in which God has chosen to be revealed in history, and so we read the Bible as the manger which bears the Christ child to us. Scripture reveals the Word of God that is Jesus. We interpret the Bible with the hermeneutical lens of Christ, which helps us distinguish between **Law and Gospel** - another key element of Lutheran theology.

The dialectic of Law and Gospel does not mean that the Old Testament is Law and the New Testament Gospel. Nor does it mean that there are some verses that pertain to the law or condemnation and some that pertain to Good News. Rather, the Gospel refers to those things that pertain to our salvation, and the Law describes all that which does not relate to our salvation, or is a consequence of our salvation.

In other words, in matters of church life, marriage, social peace and justice, politics and the well-being of all creatures, these are matters of the law, which is to say, because of what we believe about the Good News of what God has begun in Christ Jesus, therefore we can engage in our life of faith and seek to live out the fruit of our faith in good works. But, our salvation is not merited by those works. Rather the Gospel is precisely that our salvation is a gracious gift from God.

Reading scripture, particularly Romans, in this theological, dialectical manner was the key for unlocking several ideas that became central to a Lutheran hermeneutic, or perspective on faith: ***Simul Justus et peccator*** – We are simultaneously saint and sinner: In our human condition, we remain in bondage to sin, or separated-ness from God, which includes dimensions of personal sin but also our captivity to structural sin through which we participate in all sorts of violence and neglect for life. However, we are simultaneously justified and being sanctified by the Spirit to live out this faith, for the well-being of all creatures.

But that we are **justified by grace through faith** - salvation could not be earned by our own merit, but is a righteousness received from God as a gift.

That gracious gift of justification liberates us from bondage, so that we can live into new life giving relationships. Luther understood that this was the **Freedom of a Christian**, to be free to live out the love of God in right relationships with our fellow creatures.

Being liberated from our bondage, we are free to embrace new right relationships with God and creation, in which we find the power of the Holy Spirit to generate deeds of love towards our neighbor (which is the second kind of righteousness at work in us). **Good works** are the ethical fruit of faith and the sacramental life. A Christian is freed and empowered to bear this fruit in the public sphere, through our families, our church, and in our socio-political life for the peace, justice and well-being of all creatures. Our participation in the renewing, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit will help us to learn to engage our world and its logic with a constructive and critical theological eye.

During the reformation, there were several documents that were written to help us develop our theological understanding. Today, they make up the Book of Concord. These confessional documents are not to be held in equal esteem as the Bible as a revelation of God, rather, documents that guide our interpretation of Scripture, or, that help us ask good theological questions. They are:

The *Confessio Augustana*, which makes affirmations of faith and suggests ways that the Church should be reformed from certain 16th century practices is one of the documents that constitutes our Lutheran Communion. The small catechism is a tool for families to teach children the meaning of key elements of our faith contained in the Ten Commandments, the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sacraments. And there are other documents such as the Large Catechism, and the Smalcald Articles, which clarify aspects of Christian faith, the life of the Church and of Christians, many of which we have named above.

But Luther and the reformers knew that before anyone could even read Scripture, confessional documents, and learn to ask good theological questions as a priesthood of all believers, every child of God must be well educated. For that reason, Luther and Melanchthon aimed at reforming the social system of education as much as the Church. A public liberal arts education for every child provided the foundation for equipping the saints to engage in this theological pursuit, to come to know the ways in which God revealed God's self in history, and interpret what that means for our ethical life. But Luther's new understanding of the ordained ministry also meant that he placed a high importance on theological education. For Lutherans, theological education continues to be an crucial way to participate in the Holy Spirit's transformative work in the world today.

Transformative theology

So, today, we ask these theological questions in our contexts. We ask them not as 16th century Germans, but as women and men in every region and social location around the globe in our age. From this diversity of contexts, we can use the dialectical tools of our shared Lutheran heritage to help us ask, who is God for us today, and how are we being equipped to critique the narratives and logic at work in the world which impede abundant life. We perceive that revelation of God in our contexts, different intersectional identities and social locations. We have different genders, cultures, languages, social locations, injustices, powers and poverties that determine how we interpret the revelation of God in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit today. Sometimes we arrive at different concepts or language about God, some of which you may encounter among the teachers and students gathered in this online course. But we each stand at a different intersection of those realities, and that provides a beautiful harmony of diverse perspectives.

However, our contextual perspectives are also transformed by that theological discovery of how God is being revealed. In other words, our contexts provide us with different

perspectives, but our perspective is also transformed by the God's revelation in Christ, and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. This is why a Theological Conference held in Windhoek, Namibia in 2015 spoke of transformative theology. How are we being transformed, reformed today by the Spirit's teaching when we ask good theological questions, and open ourselves up to follow those questions into new answers and new perspectives on how we are being called to live out this faith in our world today for the well-being of creation?

That is the goal of these modules in this course, to ask good theological questions together, from a Lutheran perspective, but from across the diverse contexts of our communion. If we do that together, we can come to know who God is for us, and why that matters today. That is a theological task that can lead us into the next 500 years of faith in our global Lutheran communion?