



TEACHERS AS SPIRITUAL LEADERS AND THEOLOGIAN

Teachers and small-group leaders are spiritual leaders who pay attention to their relationship with God and others and who seek to live out their faith every day. They have knowledge and skills to create safe, healthy settings for people to seek God, respond to God's grace, and find support and encouragement for living as disciples in the world.

Becoming a spiritual leader is a transformational experience, which is the work of God. The work of the congregation is to support teachers and group leaders by providing opportunities for spiritual growth, opportunities for ongoing learning, resources, and other materials needed to be effective.

These two paragraphs describe the role of teachers and small-group leaders: Teachers are spiritual leaders. Teachers value their relationships with God and other people. Teachers experience God's transforming presence through the ministry of teaching and learning. Teachers talk to others about God, what God is like, what God does or intends. The church word we use to describe all this is *theology*—the study of God and things related to God.

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

"Who, me? Know about theology?" may be your reaction when you think of yourself as a theologian. If so, you're not alone. The very word *theology* can transform the most confident teacher into a cowering mass of gelatin. Not to worry. It's not nearly as hard to be a theologian as you might think. As a matter of fact, as a Christian you are already a theologian. To say, "God bless you" is a basic theological statement because it reveals our assumption and belief that God cares about us and wants us to be whole. (Just think; you're a theologian when someone sneezes!)

Defining Theology

In simple terms, *theology* means the study of God (*theos*). The way we think about God, how we talk about God, and what we believe about God make up our theology. We can use complex language to express our theology. For example, in the Christian church, theology also includes what we believe about who Jesus is and how we understand Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection (*Christology*). Theology also explores the nature of the church (*ecclesiology*), the saving act of Jesus Christ (*soteriology*), the Holy Spirit (*pneumatology*), and the communion of saints (*hagiography*). But all these big words mean is how we think about important "God stuff" and what significance and meaning we attach to it.

Each of us has a theology. We may not spend much time consciously thinking about our beliefs. We may not feel comfortable talking about what we believe. But we do have beliefs, values, and assumptions that have been shaped since our childhood. We respond to the world through the lens of these beliefs, values, and assumptions, even if they are not overtly conscious.

We know that there is great diversity in theological understandings of God, of faith, and of Christian discipleship. This diversity has existed since the church began. Take a look at the Book of Acts for some of the arguments about whether Gentiles had to be circumcised and to follow the Jewish law in order to be Christian (for example, Acts 15:1-35). These arguments were not philosophical debates; they were grounded in the theological viewpoints of the various members of the emerging Christian faith. The outcomes of the disputes were important to each person involved, and they shaped the church as we have come to know it.

We can easily be swept up in theological debates over issues in today's church. We are called as individuals and as faith communities to engage in serious study, reflection, and prayer as we clarify, test, and renew our interpretation of the gospel for today's context. Our deep yearning for God sustains our efforts.

BASIC THEOLOGICAL BELIEFS

As stated in the previous section, there are many different expressions of theology. However, throughout the centuries the Christian church has attempted to describe the basic doctrines of our faith. Here is a brief listing.

Trinity

- We describe God in three persons. *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* are commonly used to refer to the threefold nature of God. Sometimes we use other terms, such as *Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer*.

God

- We believe in one God, who created the world and all that is in it.
- We believe that God is sovereign; that is, God is the ruler of the universe.
- We believe that God is loving. We can experience God's love and grace.

Jesus

- We believe that Jesus was human. He lived as a man and died by crucifixion.
- We believe that Jesus is divine. He is the Son of God.
- We believe that God raised Jesus from the dead and that the risen Christ lives today. (*Christ* and *messiah* mean the same thing—God's anointed.)
- We believe that Jesus Christ is our Savior. In Christ we receive abundant life and forgiveness of sins.
- We believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and that we are called to pattern our lives after his.

The Holy Spirit

- We believe that the Holy Spirit is God with us.
- We believe that the Holy Spirit comforts us when we are in need and convicts us when we stray from God.

- We believe that the Holy Spirit awakens us to God's will and empowers us to live obediently.

Human Beings

- We believe that God created human beings in God's image.
- We believe that humans can choose to accept or reject a relationship with God.
- We believe that all humans need to be in relationship with God in order to be fully human.

The Church

- We believe that the church is the body of Christ, an extension of Christ's life and ministry in the world today.
- We believe that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.
- We believe that the church is "the communion of saints," a community made up of all past, present, and future disciples of Christ.
- We believe that the church is called to worship God and to support those who participate in its life as they grow in faith.

The Bible

- We believe that the Bible is God's Word.
- We believe that the Bible is the primary authority for our faith and practice.
- We believe that Christians need to know and study the Old Testament and the New Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures).

Talking About God

You may have heard words used to describe God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures contain many words and phrases that people used to name or describe the fullness of God's nature, Christ's identity, or the Spirit's work. The most common Hebrew names for God are Yahweh or Jehovah. We see numerous images for God in the Psalms, for example, such as rock, shield, king, light, Just One, and so on. In the gospels, Jesus is called Teacher, the Good Shepherd, Mother hen, and Lord. The Holy Spirit is referred to as the Comforter and the Advocate. These terms are not simply artistic or fanciful; they convey a sense of how people know and experience the persons of the Trinity.

Affirming Our Faith

Throughout the centuries as people discussed and debated matters of faith, various church councils created written statements of belief. These statements, or creeds, provided a concise record of mainstream theology of the time.

Perhaps the most familiar creed today is the Apostles' Creed. This creed was based on similar statements of faith used in baptism rituals as early as the second century. The current form of this creed was written in the eighth century. Notice how the opening affirmation from this creed reflects the biblical understanding of who God is: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." The creed continues with affirmations about Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life.

We are surrounded by words and symbols that are our attempt to name the reality of God's love and grace in our lives. Our context influences how we interpret faith language, rituals, symbols, and practices.

The importance of such written statements of faith grows out of the thought and prayer that goes into their formation. At their best they represent our ongoing dialogue about the reality of God. They are not static definitions, but dynamic thought processes taking shape in our midst and encouraging us to join in the dialogue.

KNOWING OUR THEOLOGY

Our theology is shaped by the Bible, by our Christian traditions, by our experiences, and by how we interpret these things. The hymns we sing, the prayers we utter, the rituals we participate in, and the creeds we profess are some of the ways we express our understanding of the Christian faith. We are surrounded by words and symbols that are our attempt to name the reality of God's love and grace in our lives. Our context influences how we interpret faith language, rituals, symbols, and practices. The particularities of who we are affect the value and degree of importance we assign to these practices.

Reading Scripture

The Bible, of course, is a book about God and God's relationship with human beings. As United Methodist Christians we believe that Scripture is our primary source for faith and practice. The Bible bears witness to the reality of God in our midst.

Genesis 1:1 begins the story of God's self-revelation with the words, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. . . ." The story continues in verses 26 and 27: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'; . . . in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This ancient narrative of our origins concludes with the awesome testimony: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (1:31). As a Christian people we proclaim that before there was anything, there was God. The essence of God's nature is creative and relational. We have been created in God's image. What God has created is good.

The rest of the Bible recounts how often human beings failed to live up to God's image within them; how often they worshiped success, wealth, or power instead of worshiping God; and how often they devalued, oppressed, and killed one another. The Scriptures also witness to God's steadfast love and forgiveness. Again and again God reestablishes God's relationship with humanity. Again and again God shows the way to union—or reunion—with God. This witness is most evident in Jesus Christ, who came that we might be reconciled and reunited with God.

In the church we use the word *sin* for actions and attitudes that separate us from God and God's will. We use the word *grace* for God's generosity and unconditional love toward us. And we use the words *reconciliation* and *salvation* for God's action in Jesus Christ. These concepts are basic to the Christian story. Indeed, the story of the church, including today's church, is the ongoing story of God's reconciling work through Jesus Christ.

Paying Attention to Jesus

In order to know what God is like, we can pay attention to the life, ministry, and death of Jesus. Take a look at Mark 8. In many ways this

chapter is a microcosm of Jesus' ministry. The chapter begins with Jesus feeding four thousand people. It continues with Jesus healing a blind man. Then Jesus has a conversation with his disciples about what people are saying about him, and Peter professes his faith that Jesus is God's chosen Messiah. The chapter concludes with Jesus calling the disciples to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (verse 34).

Feeding, healing, teaching, calling—these are the essential elements of Jesus' ministry. If we agree that we can know God through Jesus, then these actions provide clues to who God is and what God wants from us. God cares about our physical needs as well as our spiritual needs. God provides for our needs. God wants us to live as Jesus did, not focusing on our own needs but trusting that God will provide all we need, and living a life of service to the world in the name of Jesus.

Praising God Through Singing

Think back to the earliest song you remember singing in Sunday school or church. What was the song? What words did it use to describe God? What clues to the Christian life did it hold?

Our worship life is rich with hymns and songs that express our faith in God through Christ. Whether we are singing an old hymn, such as "This Is My Father's World," or a contemporary praise song, such as "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High," the words express our understanding of who God is, what God has done for us, and how we choose to respond.

Participating in the Life of the Church

Consider a typical Sunday in your congregation. More than likely, there are practices that happen each week. These practices may include lighting candles on the altar, greeting one another and offering the peace of Christ to one another, and sharing prayer concerns with the congregation.

Now think about a typical month in your congregation. More than likely, the congregation will celebrate Holy Communion, baptize a child or adult, and/or extend the "hand of fellowship" to a family who desires to take the vows of church membership.

Each of these occasions is marked with familiar words and actions, called rituals. From a practical standpoint, rituals help us know what to do because we've done them before. From a theological standpoint, rituals express our faith. Lighting candles reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world. Sharing prayer concerns reminds us that we are the body of Christ, and if any member of the body suffers, we all suffer (1 Corinthians 12:26). Gathering around the Lord's Table for Holy Communion reminds us what God has done for us through Jesus Christ, and that Christ is present with us through the sacrament. Baptizing a child reminds us that we all have a place in the household of faith.

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What you believe about God has been shaped by the practices of the congregations of which you are or have been a part. Since most of the practices are not explained during a worship service, their purpose is most likely understood implicitly. As a teacher, part of your responsibility is to reflect on these practices, to bring their significance to a conscious level, and to provide space and opportunity for your group members to do the same.

Understanding Our Context

Each of us is born into a particular family, community, nation, and culture. These units of society include values, customs, priorities, standards, and expectations. As we grow up, we discover what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in our family, congregation, community, and culture. We learn the "rules" for success, as well as the boundaries that we should not ignore.

In addition to these overarching societal factors, there are additional variables that define our context, such as gender, education, income, race/ethnicity, or geographic location (rural, suburban, urban), or social location (professional, working class).

We can continue to focus the description of our context. Individuals may live alone or may live with a spouse, children, a friend, or other relatives. A family may be living temporarily in a country in which they were not born. A person living alone may have always been single or may be divorced or widowed.

Our cultural context and our personal experiences shape our theology and how we view the world. We need to understand our context in order to understand the values we hold dear, the assumptions out of which we operate, and the factors that most often influence our decisions and our behavior.

A THEOLOGY OF GRACE

Our United Methodist heritage is rooted in a deep and profound understanding of God's grace. This incredible grace flows from God's great love for us. Did you have to memorize John 3:16 in Sunday school when you were a child? There was a good reason. This one verse summarizes the gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The ability to call to mind God's love and God's gift of Jesus Christ is a rich resource for theology and faith.

Grace can be defined as the love and mercy given to us by God because God wants us to have it, not because of anything we have done to earn it. We read in the Letter to the Ephesians: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, described God's grace as three-fold: *prevenient* grace, *justifying* grace, and *sanctifying* grace, which together describe a flow to Christian development and maturity.

***Prevenient* Grace**

Wesley understood grace as God's active presence in our lives—God going before us to prepare us for a life of love of God and neighbor. This presence is not dependent on human actions or human response. It is a gift that is always available, but that can be refused.

God's grace stirs up within us a desire to know God and empowers us to respond to God's invitation to be in relationship with God. God's grace enables us to discern differences between good and evil and makes it possible for us to choose good. In this dimension of God's grace we see the initiative that God takes in relating to humanity. We do not have to beg and plead for God's love and grace. God actively seeks us!

***Justifying* Grace**

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). And in his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul wrote: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Grace can be defined as the love and mercy given to us by God because God wants us to have it. Prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace together describe a flow to Christian development and maturity.

These verses demonstrate the justifying grace of God. They point to reconciliation, pardon, and restoration. Through the work of God in Christ our sins are forgiven, and our relationship with God is restored.

According to Wesley, the image of God—which has been distorted by sin—is renewed within us through Christ's death. In justifying grace, the Christian acknowledges his or her human situation, makes a conscious decision to turn toward God, and takes appropriate responsibility in shaping a life of discipleship. "Righteousness" is a typical Bible term for one who so repents. As a friend so aptly stated, God's grace is freely given for our repentance and salvation, but to grow, we have to cooperate!

Again, this dimension of God's grace is a gift. God's grace alone brings us into relationship with God. There are no hoops through which we have to jump in order to please God and to be loved by God. God has acted in Jesus Christ. We need only to respond in faith.

Sanctifying Grace

Salvation is not a static, one-time event in our lives. It is the ongoing experience of God's gracious presence transforming us into whom God intends us to be. John Wesley described this dimension of God's grace as sanctification, or holiness.

Through God's sanctifying grace we grow and mature in our ability to live as Jesus lived. As we pray, study the Scriptures, fast, worship, and share in fellowship with other Christians, we deepen our knowledge of and love for God. As we respond with compassion to human need and work for justice in our communities, we strengthen our capacity to love neighbor. Our inner thoughts and motives, as well as our outer actions and behavior, are aligned with God's will and testify to our union with God.

A THEOLOGY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Theology is not just about God. It is also about us. We live out of our understanding of who we are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world. The Christian faith is grounded in the love and grace of God, experienced through Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is our response to God's love and grace.

The church calls our response to God *Christian discipleship*. Discipleship focuses on actively following in the footsteps of Jesus. As Christian disciples, we are not passive spectators but energetic participants in God's activity in the world. Because of what God has done for us, we offer our lives back to God. We order our lives in ways that embody Christ's ministry in our families, workplaces, communities, and the world.

Loving God

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was, his response was: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38. See Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28).

Discipleship is about loving God. It is more than an acknowledgment of God's existence or a statement of belief regarding God. It is

total devotion, head-over-heels-in-love-with adoration. It is the deep desire to know God, to be one with God, and to worship God.

There are a variety of ways that we can develop our knowledge of and love for God. These include prayer, Bible study, worship, fasting, and conversation with other Christians. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, called these practices the *means of grace*. They are means for developing our relationship with God and for experiencing God's presence in our lives. These practices help us spend time with God, a significant factor in loving God.

Loving Neighbor

Jesus responded to questions about the most important commandment by quoting the Hebrew Scripture's admonition to love God with our whole being. (See Deuteronomy 6:4-9 as well as the gospel passages listed above.) Then immediately he broadened the meaning of this admonition: "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mark 12:31).

These verses about loving God and loving neighbor as ourselves are known as the Great Commandment. Again and again the Bible teaches us that loving God and loving neighbor are two sides of the same coin. We cannot do one without the other. Numerous passages, give us a glimpse of how prevalent this understanding of Christian discipleship is.

A witness of Christian discipleship.

- ***Matthew 5:43-48***
- ***Matthew 25:31-46***
- ***Luke 10:25-37***
- ***John 15:12-17***
- ***Romans 12:9-18***
- ***1 Corinthians 13***
- ***1 John 4:19-21***

From these passages and others we can draw several conclusions about what it means to love our neighbors. First of all, loving our neighbor means responding to specific needs—hunger, illness, imprisonment, loneliness, and so forth. Love is more than a feeling; it is behavior. It is practical and concrete.

Secondly, our neighbors include many people. Within the context of the Christian community, our neighbors are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Neighbors may also refer to the contemporary understanding of those who live near us. However, from a biblical perspective, neighbors often include people whom we might not normally consider.

Therefore, loving our neighbors requires attention and sacrifice. We have to pay attention to what is happening around us in order to see our neighbors and to recognize their needs. We must also consider their needs to be as important as our own in order to live faithfully. Loving neighbor is more than random acts of kindness. It takes time, energy, and commitment. It is a lifestyle carefully cultivated in response to God. Finally, these passages emphasize that loving our neighbors is not optional; it is mandatory. It is what Christians do and who Christians are. Our lives are a testimony to our love—our love for God and our love for neighbor.

Making Disciples

The last verses of the Gospel of Matthew are known as the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

These words are significant for the church’s understanding of its mission. In this last conversation Jesus has with his disciples (according to Matthew), he sends them into the world to share the good news of God’s love and grace. He calls them to the ministry of proclamation, teaching, baptism, and obedience. He describes their ministry as making disciples.

Back up a few verses to find where and when this conversation took place. The resurrected Christ met the eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee. (At this point Judas Iscariot had hanged himself.) Now look at Matthew 5, which is one of the earliest accounts that Matthew gives of Jesus’ ministry. In this passage, known as the Sermon on the Mount, where do we find Jesus? There he is—up on a mountain. And what is he talking about? Discipleship!

Jesus speaks to the crowd: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16). Jesus is on a mountaintop teaching about discipleship—about loving God and loving neighbor—at the beginning of his ministry and at the end of his earthly life and ministry. Matthew frames the life and ministry of Jesus with these stories to emphasize his theological understanding about who Jesus is.

Who is my neighbor? People who are

- ***Strangers***
- ***Prisoners***
- ***Enemies (or who mistreat us)***
- ***“Foreign” (from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds)***
- ***Non-Christian (from different religious traditions)***
- ***Political opponents***
- ***“Inferior” (from a different social class)***
- ***Irritating or push the boundaries of our patience***

Think for a moment about who else in the Bible went up a mountain and came back down with a word from the Lord. (Hint: Look in Exodus 19 and 20.) In obedience to God’s command, Moses met God on Mount Sinai after leading the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. There in the wilderness God gave the Ten Commandments to the Israelites through God’s spokesperson, Moses. These commands became the centerpiece of the Jewish law that defined God’s covenant relationship with the people.

Matthew’s Gospel implicitly establishes a parallel between Moses and Jesus as prophets and spokespersons for God. Just as the Hebrews of long ago believed that God acted through Moses to free them from slavery and teach them about life in relationship with God, so we believe that God acted through Jesus to free us from the slavery of sin and death and

teach us about life in relationship with God. That life, for Christians, is based first on the love of God through Jesus Christ. The Law matters, of course, but a stringent conformity to rules and regulations yields to grace. Discipleship is our response to this great gift.

The Christian community is a teaching and learning community. Our learning is lifelong and ongoing. Together we develop knowledge and skills, experience God's presence and the fellowship of Christian community, and learn to listen to God. We discover God's call to us as individuals and as members of the faith community. Together we discern meaning and purpose for our lives.

As a teacher, you have the extraordinary opportunity to provide settings for these experiences to occur. You can lead your group members as they study together, serve in the community, and reflect on what they are learning. You can develop your ability to ask questions, value differences of opinion, and encourage inquiry and exploration. You can help class members examine their values, identify sources of authority, and test their assumptions. You can learn to listen to the hunger for truth in the people of faith you have been called to teach.

How you take advantage of this opportunity will be theology in action. And remember, as you respond to this call, you will be following in the footsteps of Jesus, who was also called Teacher and who promised to be with us always, to the end of the age.

THEOLOGY IN THE CURRICULUM

As a teacher of children, youth, or adults, you select, adapt, and/or write curriculum resources. You choose which learning activities to use with your group. You decide which teaching methods to employ. You build relationships with class members. You consider yourself to be the group's facilitator, or mentor, or teacher, or coach, or friend, or all of the above.

Each of these decisions and choices reflects a particular theological understanding of what your purpose is, of who you are in relationship to God, and of how you view your class members. To a certain extent, someone other than you has determined these theological understandings. If you have purchased curriculum resources, the writers and editors have shaped the material from a particular theological viewpoint. However, the way you use the curriculum resources and design the learning environment reflects your theological viewpoint, consciously or unconsciously.

Each of these decisions and choices also has an impact on your class members' theology. What you teach and how you teach can reinforce or contradict learners' own understandings of self, God, the church, and so forth. Our life as a faith community shapes and is shaped by our theology.



For more information about curriculum visit

<http://www.gbod.org/atf/cf/%7B3482e846-598f-460a-b9a7-386734470eda%7D/CURRICULUM.PDF>

For another article about the teacher as theologian, visit

<http://www.gbod.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=nhLRJ2PMKsG&b=6053319&ct=7303573>

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For more information about the needs and requirements in specific ministry areas, see the leadership series *Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation*, which includes

- * Christian Education
- * Children's Ministries
- * Youth Ministries
- * Adult Ministries
- * Family Ministries
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