

Learning & Theology

This lesson is entitled “Eternal Wisdom, Learning, and Theology.” The prayer I will use is from Alcuin of York, who lived in the eighth century. He was from England but served for most of his life on the continent of Europe.

“Eternal light, shine into our hearts. Eternal goodness, deliver us from evil. Eternal power, be our support. Eternal wisdom, scatter the darkness of our ignorance. Eternal pity, have mercy upon us, that with all our heart and mind and soul and strength we may seek Your face and be brought by Your infinite mercy to Your holy presence, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

We are now in the second 500 years of the history of Christianity. I have presented another of the themes related to that long period. I do not spend as much time covering it as I did the first 500 years, nor as much as I do the third 500 years. I will examine some of the important topics of this second 500 years. I talked about the spread of the Gospel into different parts of Europe and into Asia. There was progress of the Gospel into Africa at that time. In this lesson I will focus on learning and theology. You will soon be aware when I start talking about people like Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius, and John Scotus Eriugena that this was not the great day of theology. It was not the period of Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, and Chrysostom. The people I will refer to from this period do have some significance and importance. We ought to understand what was going on in the realm of learning and theology during a period that most people refer to as the Dark Ages. I will focus first on learning and then on theology. Those two things flow together in the Middle Ages. There is little difference between them. All learning had to do with theology, and all theology had to do with learning at that time. For the sake of convenience, I am dividing the lesson into two points: first, great scholars, and second, great theologians.

The first of the great scholars of the period was a man who lived in the late fifth and early sixth century. His name was Boethius. Boethius came from a prominent Roman family. By his time, however, Rome had fallen, so Rome was no longer the city that it had been earlier. It was ruled by Ostrogothic kings, barbarian kings. Those kings often made use of people from the prominent families from Rome in their service. Boethius was one of the leaders of the state under Theodoric, the Ostrogothic king. Something happened to Boethius through which he fell out of favor with that king, and he was put in prison. We are not sure of all of the circumstances.

Boethius wrote a number of books, both before and while he was in prison. His fame rests upon those books. One book in particular that he wrote in prison, called *The Consolation of Philosophy*, was very famous. Most people have not heard of that book today. For centuries, however, *The Consolation of Philosophy* was a great text for people to read in school for studying Latin. To become at home in *The Consolation* was to become at home in the medieval Latin world. What Boethius set out to do in *The Consolation of Philosophy* was to examine the misfortune that had befallen him. He attempted to come to some resolution of that misfortune. He had been a good man, doing what was right. Then much trouble came upon him. Interestingly, he tried to do that without reference to God or the afterlife. People have puzzled over that, because Boethius was a professed Christian. Yet he wrote about trouble purely from the standpoint of philosophy. He tried to find some consolation in philosophy itself.

In my doctoral studies at Princeton University I had two seminars during my first semester. All of my work focused on those two classes, one of which was on Boethius. I was rather dismayed that I had never heard of Boethius, but I was going to spend a whole semester studying him. I wrote a long paper

on a famous sentence from Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which was “Virtue is its own reward.” It was my semester’s work to try to analyze that sentence. That is what Boethius set out to do. He tried by simple rational processes and philosophical reflection to come up with some view by which he could be consoled by philosophy. I am not sure why he did not bring up God. Perhaps he believed that if he wrote it that way he could help others who were not Christians. Perhaps it was some other reason.

For whatever reason, he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and through it Boethius became a major channel through which Aristotle and the Greek philosophers entered the Middle Ages. There were only a few of those channels. Without Boethius and a few others, Aristotle and the other Greek philosophers may have been lost to the Christian West. That was very important because the preservation and rediscovery of Aristotle was essential for the development of the scholastic method, which is so important for the study of medieval theology.

Another famous man of the time was Isidore of Seville. He wrote a book of sentences and origins, or etymologies. The *Book of Sentences* became the theological text of the middle ages until the twelfth century. After the *Book of Sentences* from Isidore came the *Book of Sentences* from Peter Lombard, and later there was Thomas Aquinas. Isidore began the progression of medieval theology. The *Book of Sentences* was his way of trying to arrange a systematic theology. He collected ideas from Augustine and the church fathers and put them together in a systematic way. *Origins*, or *Etymologies*, is Isidore’s expansion of his writing to include secular learning. So the importance of Isidore is that in one man we find theology and almost everything else. He wrote both a systematic theology and an encyclopedia. *Origins*, or *Etymologies*, became the principle source of knowledge of antiquity for the Middle Ages. These two people, Boethius from Rome and Isidore from Seville, were important educators and scholars who tried to capture something of the knowledge of the past, put it into written form, and preserve it for the future.

The third scholar was quite different. His name was Dionysius the Areopagite. Today he is known as Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. That might seem to be a rather odd name for a scholar. He used the name Dionysius the Areopagite in his writings. Dionysius was the man that Paul met in Athens, which was recorded in Acts 17. By tradition, Dionysius was the first bishop of Athens. When the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite were first found, many people thought that they were from Paul’s disciple who was traditionally viewed as the first pastor or bishop of the church in Athens. It was much later that scholars applied textual criticism to this writing and discovered that it could not be written by a first-century Greek. It was probably written by someone from Syria in the fifth or sixth century. Thus Dionysius the Areopagite became known as Dionysius the Pseudo, or false, Areopagite.

In Dionysius we find a blend of Christian and Neo-Platonic ideas. Much of the school of Neo-Platonism came into some expressions of Christianity through the writings of Dionysius. His significance can be summarized in two ways. First, Dionysius stressed that the negative is the way to do theology. That means that what should be stressed is what we do not know. Theologians often talk about what we do know about God, but Dionysius spent his time talking about what we do not know about God. That is called *apophatic*, or negative, theology. The Orthodox mainstream maintained the abiding mystery of God. Augustine and the others never said that we could completely understand God or that we could exhaust the meaning of God. Yet the Orthodox mainstream believed that there was true revelation, true knowledge. They affirmed that what we do know, we know truly, but that we do not know God exhaustively. Dionysius stressed more the side of our lack of knowledge, our ignorance, or the darkness. His negative theology became an important factor in both the East and the West. Charles Williams said in his book, *The Descent of the Dove*, “The theology of Dionysius soars into the great darkness, lit

faintly by the very phrases it rejects.” That is a good attempt by Williams to summarize what it feels like to read Dionysius. Dionysius continually rejected the knowledge he was talking about. Yet there is some faint lighting of his understanding through the very phrases that he rejected.

The importance of Dionysius was twofold. For mystics everywhere, East and West, they drew heavily from Dionysius. Mysticism would move away from a rational approach to theology to a personal encounter, to an experience. Second, the influence of Dionysius is particularly prevalent in the Eastern churches. The Eastern Orthodox Church and other eastern churches drew upon Dionysius for mystery. I will describe later that the Eastern Orthodox Church always thinks that the Western church is too rational. We are always trying to explain things, understand things, and write books of systematic theology. It does not matter whether we are Catholic or Protestant in the West; we all have the same fault according to the Eastern church. The Eastern church, which drew heavily upon Dionysius, went in the direction of mystery and the negative way to God.

The other thing that Dionysius is remembered for is his celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is probably the case that the word “hierarchy” was invented by Dionysius. He wrote two works. One was called *Celestial Hierarchy*, in which he arranged the angels into three orders of three each. It is a long book about the angels in which there are nine orders of angels. In *Celestial Hierarchy* Dionysius set forth a Neo-Platonic theory of the great chain of being. The Neo-Platonic philosophy had a way of looking at God at the top and man at the bottom with many intermediary beings between them. The angels form that ladder in Dionysian theology, a hierarchy of spiritual creatures, rank upon rank, up and down the ladder of heaven. John Calvin occasionally referred to Dionysius in his *Institutes*. Calvin did not think much of him. He said, “If you read that man’s book, you would think a man fallen from heaven recounted, not what he learned, but what he had seen with his own eyes.” Calvin said that because Dionysius was so precise and exact in the way he created the orders of the angels. It is rather curious that someone who so much emphasized a negative view of God could know so much about angels. John Calvin points that out too.

The importance of *Celestial Hierarchy* was its link to a second book called *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. In the Middle Ages it was often believed that things on earth reflected things in heaven. Thus, if in heaven there was a well-graded celestial hierarchy, so also on earth it must follow that there is the same well-graded ecclesiastical hierarchy with the pope, cardinals, arch-bishops, bishops, and so on down the line. In the eyes of the bishops and other church authorities it did not harm his cause at all that he wrote the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* after the *Celestial Hierarchy* and that he traced parallels between the celestial hierarchy and the church on earth. The church was already moving in that direction, and Dionysius’ work was another step in the direction of the evolution of the Roman Catholic Church with its great stress on hierarchy.

On the topic of learning I have talked about Boethius and Isidore. They were people through whom the learning of the past was passed on through the Middle Ages. I talked about Dionysius, an Eastern theologian who was very influential. His name will come up again later in the course. There were two great movements of education or learning in this second 500-year period of Christianity. One was Celtic Christianity. In a previous lesson I talked about Saint Patrick and the influence of the Celtic church in Ireland and from Ireland. Celtic Christianity had its heyday in the sixth and seventh centuries. Their impact was celebrated in a book by Thomas Cahill called *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, in which their story is told in a lively and interesting style.

The other movement of education occurred on the continent. We call it the Carolingian Renaissance. It had its heyday in the eighth and ninth centuries. Carolingian refers to the reign of Charlemagne, the

Holy Roman Emperor who was crowned in 800. Charlemagne, although he was not a great scholar himself—he was anything but a great scholar—had a great appreciation for learning. He tried to create in his capital at Aachen a center for study and learning. He was able to do that. Thus in the Carolingian Renaissance, as Steven Osment said, “We have a true shaft of light within the relative cultural darkness of the early Middle Ages.” One of the great teachers in Aachen was an Englishman. People from England and Ireland were going to the continent at this time in order to teach and take the Gospel to areas it had never gone before, or to areas in which it had been lost. Alcuin of York was a scholar and a Benedictine monk, and he was the head of Charlemagne’s palace school in Aachen. It was an important school, and Alcuin was an important teacher because people from all over the continent came to that school, and they were taught by Alcuin and the other scholars there. Then they went out and attended monastic and cathedral schools in other parts of Europe. It was not yet the time of the universities. But these monastic and cathedral schools were the beginnings of that trend. After the palace schools the universities would be the next step, such as Oxford and Milan. Scholars in those schools, and particularly at Aachen, studied and wrote. We do not have evidence of great books coming out of those schools. Rather they were copying the books of antiquity. The scribes of Alcuin created beautiful and effective texts that were copies of the Bible and other books.

Moving on from the general topic of learning to the specific area of theology, I want to mention John Scotus Eriugena. He was a theologian of the ninth century. The name John Scotus meant “John the Scot,” which meant that he was an Irishman, because that is where the word was originally used. He was a scholar who, like Alcuin before him, taught in Carolingian Europe. He was an impressive scholar with extensive knowledge of Greek. He attempted something like Dionysius, reconciling Neo-Platonic philosophy with Christian ideas. John Scotus Eriugena always seemed to walk on the edge of things. He walked very closely to pantheism at times, and even perhaps falling into pantheism at times.

The important debate of the ninth century was over the Lord’s Supper. There were two theologians involved in the debates. Both were associated with the celebrated monastery of Corbie, one of the most important Carolingian theological schools. One was Radbertus, and the other was Ratramnus. They debated the nature of the body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. They discussed what it meant for Christ to say, “This is My body.” They dealt with the question of what we actually partake of in the Lord’s Supper. That also became a huge debate later during the Reformation period. The first important debate on this topic, however, was during the ninth century between Radbertus and Ratramnus.

Radbertus held to the view called “real presence.” It is the view that became the Catholic doctrine. In this view the wine and the bread are actually transformed into the body and blood of Christ. It is no longer wine and bread but now body and blood. Ratramnus answered Radbertus by holding the view of the “spiritual presence” of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. This view sounds much more like the Reformed doctrine of Zwingli or Calvin than anything else we can identify it with. The view of Ratramnus was condemned by the church in 1050. The church considered the two views, and the debate took place before there was a view set in stone by the church. But in 1050 the church decided to take a stand, and the view of Radbertus became known as the Catholic view. Transubstantiation was then fixed as dogma by the Lateran Council in 1215. That meant that after 1215, if you were a Catholic, it was necessary for you to believe that you partake of the actual body and blood of Christ.

The other debate of the period is that over predestination. That debate took place during the time of Gottschalk and Florus of Lyon. Before describing this debate, I want to go back and talk about what has happened to the doctrine of grace and the doctrine of predestination since the time of Augustine. During the Pelagian controversy, Augustine rescued the biblical view of grace from obscurity or neglect and brought it back to center stage in his theology. What happened to grace since Augustine? The Council of

Orange met in 529, and it taught a view that some people think is totally true to Augustine and some people think is almost true to Augustine. I identify the Council of Orange as almost Augustinian, but not quite. Irresistible grace was omitted, although the Council of Orange did make a strong statement that prevenient grace is necessary. Reprobation was not included in the statement of the Council of Orange. Some people argue that reprobation is not included in Augustine either. In my view, the implications of Augustine's teaching clearly lead in that direction. Thus after Augustine there was a struggle in the church with the semi-Pelagians, including John Cassian. Even during Augustine's own lifetime he was fighting that battle. He had fought the battle with the Pelagians. Then he fought the battle with the semi-Pelagians. Then the Council of Orange came along and seemed to place the church on the side of Augustine in this debate. The semi-Pelagianism expressed in the writings of John Cassian, however, such as his book *The Conferences*, began to influence and undermine Augustinianism and the decree of the Council of Orange. By the time of the Middle Ages, pure Augustinianism was very scarce. It was practically unknown in the church.

One man who did stand for what Augustine also stood for was Gottschalk. He was the son of a Saxon count. It was not the last time that a Saxon would raise his voice in defense of this doctrine. Gottschalk was a Benedictine monk. He was a scholar who had studied under Ratramnus at Corbie. Mainly he read Augustine. By actually reading Augustine, not commentaries on Augustine, nor the semi-Pelagian writings, Gottschalk absorbed the teaching of Saint Augustine. Augustine was very much honored in the church, but he was not much followed by the church on this point of his theology.

Gottschalk wrote sentences such as "God, prior to the creation of the world, unchangeably predestined all His elect to eternal life, and all of the rejected who shall be condemned to eternal death for their evil deeds on judgment day according to His justice and as they deserve." That is a well thought-through sentence, and it is balanced in different ways. It is certainly double predestination. The words "double predestination" came first from Isidore of Seville, who apparently also held that view. The teaching of double predestination is also a logical inference from Augustine's teaching. It is certainly present in Gottschalk.

Florus of Lyon was a defender of Gottschalk. He wrote, "None of the elect can perish because of the hardness and impenitence of their hearts. None of the reprobate can be saved." Both Gottschalk and Florus spoke of the fact that the chosen are predestined to heaven and others to hell, though not to sin. Neither of them wanted to say that God predestines people to sin. People sin because of their own choice. Double predestination, irresistible grace, and limited atonement are present in the writings of these two theologians in the Middle Ages.

That kind of teaching fell like a bombshell on Carolingian Europe. The church would not countenance it. Gottschalk was defrocked. Not only that, but he was also severely beaten. And not only that, but he was also put in prison, where he spent the last 20 years of his life. He continued to study and write, but his writings were little known and little used until the time of the Reformation when people began to rediscover this medieval Augustinian. Interestingly, he was also a religious poet of high order. It is not common for a theologian such as Gottschalk to be able to write sensitive and beautiful poetry.

The difference between Augustinianism and Pelagianism and the various views in between came up often in church history. One might characterize it this way: Pelagius would say to a new convert, "Congratulations, you did it. You have cleaned up your life, became a Christian, and you did what was required of you." Augustine, upon meeting a new convert, would say, "Thank God, you have been saved by grace." Others, especially during the Middle Ages, would try to say something in between the two, such as, "Thank God, and congratulations. This was a cooperative effort. Praise is due all around." That

is what I call “percentage theology.” The Middle Ages struggled with how to set the percentage. They wondered how much God does and how much we are required to do. Almost everybody during that period viewed salvation as some sort of cooperative effort between God and us. With very few exceptions, such as Gottschalk and Florus of Lyon, and later Thomas Bradwardine, John Wycliffe, and John Huss, that was the predominant view. In my view, Pelagianism is the persistent heresy in church history. There may be more than one persistent heresy in church history, but Pelagianism is certainly one of them.

In the flow of church history, one can think of grace on one side and works on the other. As you go through church history, the doctrines of grace in the Old Testament were lost. That led to the works of Pharisaism. Then the doctrines of grace were recovered in the New Testament. Then they fell away into Pelagianism. Grace was brought back from its biblical foundations in Augustine. Then in the period of the Middle Ages, semi-Pelagianism brought back works. During the time of the Reformation the church was brought back to the grace side. Then rationalism during the post-Reformation period went in the opposite direction. The revivals of Whitfield and Edwards during the first Great Awakening emphasized grace again. Then liberalism took the church back to the side of works. As you think of church history you can consider how that one doctrine has been treated in different epochs.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8).