

Scholastic Theology

One of the great scholastic theologians is Anselm. I will talk about Anselm a little later in this lesson, but we will begin now with a prayer from the church leader and theologian, archbishop of Canterbury, Saint Anselm. Let us pray.

“My God, I pray that I may so know You and love You that I rejoice in You. And if I may not do so fully in this life, let me go steadily on to the day when I come to that fullness. Let me receive that which You promise through Your truth that my joy may be full. Amen.”

You all have heard the question, “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” Perhaps you do not know the answer to that, but there is a pin and a sign that says, “Occupancy by more than 3,820,712,681 angels on the head of this pin is unlawful.” That question is not going to be on the exam, so you do not need to try and memorize that number. That is my introduction to this lesson on scholastic theology. It is probably not a very fair introduction, but nonetheless it is an introduction.

The question that we want to start with is, “What is scholastic theology?” A simple answer is that scholastic theology was the way that theology was done in the Middle Ages. It was the approved method, the standard approach to theology. Theology had not always been done this way, in fact this is a creation of the Middle Ages. It would have great impact, not only on its own time, but all the way down throughout the rest of church history. Let us try to understand what it is, first of all. Then we will talk about some famous scholastic theologians.

When we get into the matter of scholastic theology, we have to get into the whole matter of philosophy. Scholastic theology was very concerned to relate its work to a philosophical system. Philosophy was viewed as a valuable asset to Christian theology in a couple of ways. One, it could demonstrate the reasonableness of faith and thus defend the Christian faith against non-Christian critics. By using philosophy, theologians hoped to be able to show that Christianity really had some rationality to it. It made sense; it was not ridiculous. It could answer these questions, and it could answer them in terms of the philosophical system that was being employed. Another reason that Christians wanted to use philosophy was that it enabled theologians to systematically arrange and order their theology. When you are going to write theology you have to have some sort of order, some kind of outline. The Bible does not give us that. To make a systematic theology, there has to be some way of putting it all together in a coherent and organized form. Philosophy seemed to offer some help in enabling Christian theologians to systematize their writings. Their purpose in all of this was to set forth theology in a systematic, orderly way so that Christians could better understand it. Philosophy was viewed as an ally, as something important to be used. It was to be studied and used by theologians. The problem, of course, was which philosophy?

Early on the teaching of Plato appealed to theologians, and Plato was often used in some way as a philosophical background or context for the teaching of Christian theology. The appeal of Plato for Christian theologians is clearly seen in the very first sentence under Plato in the *New Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. The first sentence under Plato says this, “Plato was a preeminent Greek philosopher whose chief contribution consists in his conception of the observable world as an imperfect image of a realm of unobservable and unchanging forms. And his conception of the best life has one centered on the love of these divine objects.” I will not take time to exegete that sentence, but I think you can see in my reading it how Christian theology would find some sort of affinity with the philosophy of Plato.

Aristotle was not well known in the early Middle Ages. Plato was the philosopher. Aristotle was, in many of his writings, unknown in the West. Those writings had not come over into the West. They had not been translated into Latin. So the full corpus of Aristotle who is, of course, viewed as the second of these great Greek philosophers was not known. He was known in part. *Boethius*, you remember we mentioned for a couple of minutes, was a channel through which part of Aristotle was transmitted into Western culture. But the full understanding of Aristotle and his philosophical system was not known until the Middle Ages. It came into the West in a rather strange way. Aristotle's teaching, unknown to the West, was known to the Muslims who had conquered much of the East. So the study of Aristotle was taking place in Persia when Aristotle was not being studied in Rome and Paris and Oxford. As the Muslims conquered other areas, they took their knowledge of Aristotle with them all the way to Spain. Muslim philosophers in Spain became the preeminent channel by which the full understanding of Aristotle was then brought into the Christian West. When people began to read Aristotle, they discovered a different sort of philosophy at work. It was a rational, empirical, hard-headed concentration on the data. It was a more scientific approach to philosophy as over against Plato's more mystical, subjective approach. Reality, according to Aristotle, is explained by observation and by logic. It is not so much by meditation as by study of the data. Many people in the West adopted Aristotle then. The Aristotelian system, particularly Aristotelian logic, became very important for the expression of Christian theology for presenting, organizing, and defending Christian truth. The problem with Aristotle, though, was that Aristotle was not a Christian. Plato was not either, although some people tried to get him very close if not into the kingdom of heaven because he was saying so many things that seemed right to Christians. So he must have been a Christian if he got that right. But Aristotle is more of a problem because in Aristotle's teaching there is some very definitely, strongly stated non-Christian positions like the eternity of the world. Aristotle believed in the eternity of the world, he seemed to believe in the mortality of the soul. He does not have a high view, if any view at all, of providence. His concentration on empirical, visible reality could be opposed to an acceptance of tradition and authority in God and the Scripture. Christian theologians, as much as they could Christianize Aristotle, took his system, tried to adjust his teaching, and overlooked some things. But in terms of how to think, how to do philosophy, which in this period is the same thing as doing theology, Aristotle became the philosopher. Not everybody was happy with that. I have included in the syllabus a long quotation from the library in the novel by Umberto Eco, *Name of the Rose*, (I will not give the plot away because it was a very exciting book), but the whole plot has to do with this man's hatred for a certain book written by Aristotle. It was the second book of Aristotle. The book was already out, but he was trying to stop the damage. He feels that if that book gets in the library, gets out to people, and they start reading Aristotle, they will lose sight of some of the wonderful truths of the Christian faith. This man felt that Aristotle, rather than being an ally, was really an enemy of the Christian faith. But nonetheless, there he was. Aristotle had come back in. He was the big name. His system of philosophy was the going system of the day. Most Christian theologians accepted it and used it.

While all this was going on, we have the rise of the universities. At first there were no universities. There were monastic schools where the monks taught groups of students. Out of the monastic schools grew the cathedral schools in the large cathedral towns where people would come and study. Out of those cathedral schools came the universities. By the time we come to the high Middle Ages, which we are talking about now, the university is part of the landscape of Europe. In the monastic schools, and somewhat in the cathedral schools, the way of study could be described as devotional. It was like going to chapel all the time and hearing the Word of God read, hearing devotional writings read. They studied these things with a view to one's own heart and the application of all of this to one's life. In the universities, that began to shade over into scientific theology, philosophical theology, and academic theology. The method that was used in the universities was the dialectical method. That was in large

measure based on Aristotle's way of doing philosophy and based on Aristotelian logic. It was a certain prescribed method. If you wanted to do theology you did it this way. You learned how to do it in the university this way. Books were written this way. Everything was set up this way. It was a formal procedure in which a question was posed. That question became the issue of debate. Theology really became a matter of debate. A question is proposed like, "Is the world eternal?" Then answers would be given on both sides of that issue. Of course Aristotle could be quoted on one side and the Bible could be quoted on the other side. The authorities, philosophers, and theologians would be lined up on the two sides of a question like that. Arguments would be given for and against those positions. Finally there would be some sort of conclusion. If you were studying to be a theologian in a university, this would be the way your classes would be conducted, and this would be the way that you would be expected to perform as well. State the question, give the arguments on both sides, and come up with a conclusion. That was the dialectical method. Not everybody thought that was a good idea, but it was the prevalent approach to theological work in the Middle Ages. One Christian writer of the 11th century said, "That which is from the argument of the dialecticians cannot easily be adapted to the mysteries of divine power." He was not sure that you could take what he called the mysteries of the Word of God and fit it into that kind of straight jacket approach of question, countering arguments and conclusion. But most theologians thought it could be done that way, and they did it that way.

Who were those theologians? Let us start with Anselm. Anselm was an Italian monk who went to the Abbey of Beck in Normandy. Then from Normandy he became archbishop of Canterbury. He can be considered the first truly great theologian of the period. In some ways he is the greatest name between Augustine and the Reformers. Anselm carried on the older devotional approach to theology, but he combined it with the new scholastic approach. So with Anselm you get a bridge from the older way of doing theology to the newer way. He wrote his theology in the form of a prayer. That certainly reflects the older approach. He said, "I am not trying, oh Lord, to penetrate Thy loftiness." But then he goes on and seems to try to penetrate God's loftiness. So he has those two sides to him: the devotional side in which authority in the Word is so prominent, but the scholastic side in which rationality and logic are becoming more and more significant.

Anselm is known for two great contributions to theology. The first is found in his book called *Proslogion*, in which his starting point is "I believe in order to know." He did not create that statement. Saint Augustine and many other theologians had said the same thing, but you see what he is saying there. It starts with faith: I believe in order to know. He starts with faith, with belief, and then in the context of faith and belief he moves to heaven and earth to use logic and rationality in order to better understand what he already believes. From *Proslogion* we get the great cosmological arguments for the existence of God. Those are arguments that move from the creation to the Creator. Anselm was not the first person to think of all of this, but he organized it and stated it in a very compelling way. You start with creation, with what is here, and then you argue to the Creator. There are various ways to do that. For instance, you can start with the idea of design. As we look around us things seem to have some pattern, some organization, some design. It is not haphazard. It is exquisitely put together. Then you can argue from that idea found in the created world to the fact that there must be a designer, someone to put it all together. It could not have happened accidentally. Thomas Aquinas will say the same thing. People had said this before and after Anselm, but Anselm is famous for his emphasis on these arguments from creation to the Creator.

Anselm wanted to go further. He wanted to see if he could "prove" the existence of God by just shutting his eyes and not looking out at the creation. From thought alone could he prove that God exists? He thought he could. That is a famous argument from Anselm: from thought to God. It is called the ontological argument. Sometimes it is called Anselm's argument. Anselm reflected on how self-evident

the idea of God had become for him. It was just there in his thought. He wondered if he could move from the self-evidence of that idea to some proof of the existence of God. He wanted to see what the implications of the fact that God was self-evident to him would be. Crucially important to his argument is his definition of God. "God is that then which nothing greater can be conceived." He thought starting with that definition he could prove the existence of God. I am not going to try to explain that, mainly because I cannot! If I tried I would get into a hopeless morass and spend the rest of the class trying to get out of it. Let me read a couple of sentences from our textbook because Gonzalez does the same thing I am going to do: he avoids the whole issue and tries to come up with a sentence or two that shows the significance of what is going on. Gonzalez says the exact interpretation, significance, and validity of this argument have been discussed by scholars and philosophers through the ages. Book after book has been written on the ontological argument of Anselm. What is important for our purpose, however, is to note the method of Anselm's theology, which applies reason to a truth known by faith (that is the key) in order to understand it better. Anselm by faith knows that God exists, and then he applies reason to what he knows in order to try to understand better what he already believes.

There is another important contribution of Anselm to theology on quite a different level. It comes out in the famous book that he wrote *Cur deus Homo* (Why the God-man). It deals with the matter of atonement. Ideas of atonement in church history up to this point had varied greatly, and after this point they vary greatly too. *Cur deus Homo* is a classic on attempting to understand why God became man and how that is necessary for our salvation. One of the older views was the ransom to the devil view. As far as the atonement is concerned, there was a ransom paid to the devil, and that was the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. So the devil would let people go who could then be redeemed through Christ. Some of the church fathers held to that in a rather crude way. The more sophisticated approach was the *Cristus Victor* approach. Christ simply overcomes by His power over the forces of evil. He conquers hell and Satan and wins a great victory. Church fathers held that too, and that view can be held in connection with other views of the atonement. I think when we are finished studying Anselm we would say he has a very clear insight into what the atonement means, but it means even more than this. So *Cristus Victor* and the substitutionary concept of Anselm do not need to be held as opposites but as complimentary views of the atonement.

I will talk about Abelard in a moment. Abelard came up with a moral influence view. He said the atonement was simply a great example of Christ's love which then passes onto us and influences us to love God and man as well. But it is Anselm who makes crystal clear the important biblical concept of Christ's death as payment for our sin. Christ's death is payment to the Father for the people, the elect. That was not new. Others had said it before Anselm, but Anselm put it together in a very compelling way. It is the classic formulation of Christ's death as a work of deliverance from the penalty of sin. Man must pay because man is the sinner. But only God can really pay because He is sinless and infinite. So salvation depends upon the God-man. Man has obligation but no ability. God has ability but no obligation. So in Christ, who is the God-man, both obligation and ability come together. Anselm sets forth wonderfully His perfect infinite sacrifice on the cross for His people. I was reading recently in *Books in Culture* an article by Jacob Neusner called "The Cross and the Holocaust." Neusner is a Jewish scholar. He was criticizing a series of sermons preached by the pastor in the Episcopal cathedral in Glasgow. It was preached during Easter season in 1995 by the pastor of that Episcopal Church in Scotland who was also a Jew converted to Christianity. Neusner says, "For a Jew who practices Judaism, the book called *Jesus and the Holocaust, Reflections on Sufferings and Hope* by Joel Marcus, (the Episcopalian priest in Glasgow) constitutes unrelieved blasphemy, committing a profound offense against the sanctity of the unique suffering of holy Israel. One man, that is Jesus, against six million. If that is Marcus' ratio, it is beyond this Jew's comprehension." But what Anselm says in *Cur deus Homo*, that is not a ridiculous idea if the one man is God. That is exactly what *Cur deus Homo* says.

While Anselm is writing great books and teaching theology in Normandy and in Canterbury, to read what was going on in Paris about this time makes one's head spin. At the center of it was the brilliant, enigmatic figure of Peter Abelard. He was the invincible arguer, the magnetic teacher. Abelard was the star. Like a great prizefighter, he expressed his contempt for anyone who met him in the ring of open discussion. He would win these debates hands down. This was the most exciting show in town. People would turn out to hear Abelard debate theology. The older medieval philosophers like Anselm said, "I must believe in order that I may understand." Abelard took the opposite course. He said, "I must understand in order that I may believe." He said by doubting, not by reciting, affirming or quoting, but by doubting we come to questioning. And by questioning we perceive the truth. You can see how Abelard has made a massive shift in the way theology was being done. These are strange words to have been written in the year 1122. Of course they got him into trouble. Abelard was good at getting into trouble. His life that he wrote, his autobiography, is called *History of Calamities*. He summarizes his whole life that way. You will have heard about his love affair with Heloise, his student and the niece of the canon of the cathedral in Paris. This resulted in Heloise's pregnancy and Abelard's castration by Heloise's enraged uncle. That is just the beginning of the calamities that happened to him.

His book on theology has a strange name. It is called *Sic et Non*. It means "yes and no." What Abelard does in this book is follow the dialectical method of setting up questions and giving lists of contradictory answers to those questions. But he does not try much to resolve it all. He is better at setting up the questions and letting people wrestle with those questions. It is probably a very modern idea, but certainly not an idea that was prevalent in the high Middle Ages. The emphasis now is more on the fact that perhaps we cannot know. The Bible contradicts itself, or it seems to. The church fathers contradict each other. What are you going to do? Here is an Abelardian pig resolving a yes and no question. It is not exactly the way Abelard did it, but nonetheless you can see that approaching theology this way, he has moved it away from the realm of authority and moved it much more into the realm of rationality. We have got to do the best we can to try to decide these matters. Abelard's purpose may have been to force deeper reflection and so greater understanding. But it had the effect of prizing theology away from authority and exposing it to the scrutiny of reason. All of this kept getting him into trouble with other theologians and with the church. Personally, deep down he would continually express his submission to the Bible, to the tradition, and to the church. In fact, he wrote to Heloise after she had become a nun, "I would never be a philosopher if this is to speak against Saint Paul. I would not be an Aristotle if this were to separate me from Christ." But despite statements like that he keeps on doing it. He finally died a rather friendless man and a rather sad man in a Cluniac monastery in 1142.

Let me talk about a number of other important scholastic theologians just to get their names before us. Another very important figure is Peter Lombard. His book of theology is called *Four Books of the Sentences*. In it he divides theology into God, creation and Old Testament, salvation through Christ, and sacraments and last things. Lombard simply organizes theology this way: he collects a lot of references from a lot of sources and tries to come up with some kind of understanding of theology through this approach. Alister McGrath says that *Four Books of Sentences* is perhaps one of the most boring books that has ever been written. I must admit I have not read much of it but enough of it to see what is going on. It may have been a very boring book, but at the same time it was a pretty important book. Lombard became the standard theological text for the Middle Ages. If you wanted to be a theologian, you had to master Lombard and you had to produce something similar to Lombard. There were numerous commentaries on *The Sentences*. All of this set forth, as you would expect, standard medieval Catholic theology. I am going to talk more about that later when we come to the sacramental system. Exactly what was that theology, and how did people view the church's answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" You can find all of that in a highly organized system in Peter Lombard. Calvin in the

Institutes refers to Lombard at least 100 times, but he does not quote Lombard the way he quotes Augustine. He quotes Augustine hundreds of times, almost always favorably. Calvin says about Lombard, “When Augustine says anything clearly, Lombard obscures it. And if there was anything slightly contaminated in Augustine, Lombard corrupts it.”

Another medieval theologian was the Franciscan minister General Bonaventure. After the death of Saint Francis, the Franciscan order fell into turmoil. This is because there were different ideas as to how the order could and should continue. It was Bonaventure who led in settling the internal dissensions of the order. He was a great Franciscan theologian, faithful to the Augustinian-Anselmic tradition with some sympathy for the new Aristotelian philosophy. Bonaventure’s greatest influence as a writer was as a spiritual writer. He was one who dealt with matters of faith and love to God as so many of the monastic writers did. Bonaventure constantly treated the matter of the relation between philosophy and theology in setting forth his spiritual writings. One of his most interesting books is *Retracing the Arts to Theology*. Like Augustine, like Anselm, he begins with faith. His premise stated in his own words in this book is, “The manifold wisdom of God, which is clearly revealed in sacred Scripture, lies hidden in all knowledge and in all nature.” It is a rather striking and important sentence. You can find the same kind of sentiment in the church fathers and in Saint Augustine. But when Bonaventure deals with this in *Retracing the Arts to Theology*, he attempts to prove all of this with some pretty hefty intellectual arguments.

Next is Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas is such a big name that I am going to skip him altogether and dedicate the next lesson to him. I am not ignoring Aquinas but putting him off because in so many ways he is the culmination of this whole process that I have been talking about.

I would like to come to reflect with you for a few minutes on this whole matter of scholasticism. Was it a good thing or a bad thing? People have argued about this for a long, long time. You can get different views depending on how you look at scholasticism. Theology during the scholastic period certainly was center stage. It was the queen of the sciences. Medieval universities did not have separate buildings for separate departments, but if these universities had done that the department of theology would be right in the center of the campus. They did not have campuses either, but that building would have been a massive building. And the administration building would have been a little shack around back and the other departments small buildings surrounding this great center building dedicated to the study of theology. The brightest and best minds of the period went into theological study. So with scholasticism we have a sophisticated theological system. At the end Gil Saul has described it as a cathedral of the mind. About the same time all of this is going on, there are people building all those wonderful cathedrals in Chartre and other places in Europe. Scholasticism is like a cathedral of the mind: massive, impressive, and powerful. In many ways theology greatly benefited through all of this—the attention of the best minds of the age on every conceivable question related to the Bible and to theology and the production of precise, thorough, and detailed answers. Of course, one of the problems is that much of this was in the service of a church that had moved away from the authority of Scripture as its center and as its reason for existence.

If we can say some good things about scholasticism, there were also some problems. That is that under the scientific, university-led, dialectical, scholastic method theology could move away from the church. It could move away from the monastery. It could move away from the common people and become a domain of the intellectuals. It could become, as it did, academic and abstract. How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Not really a burning question that the average person wanted an answer to. It could well be that that question was never debated in the universities, although some people think that maybe it was. After all, it has to do with the whole idea of the immateriality of the angels in the spiritual

world. I suppose if you conceive of it that way, then the answer that I gave earlier was not accurate because there would be no limit to the number of angels that could dance on the head of a pin. But if that question was never really raised or debated, there were other questions that people spent a lot of time talking about. In fact, at the university in Belgium in 1493 there was a debate over this question, "Do four five-minute prayers on consecutive days stand a better chance of being answered than one 20-minute prayer?" And some very great scholars spent eight weeks debating that issue! That was longer than it took Christopher Columbus to sail to America the preceding year. All of this, and perhaps I am exaggerating a bit, all tended to tie theology too much to philosophy and to rationality. In some ways it made it a game and removed it from its service to the church and to the Gospel. There was one late medieval thinker who compared the scholastics to physicians, who having learned their trade then sit down and talk about it while people are dying of the plague. The plague was the big problem during this time too.

Again, I am trying to balance this somewhat. There are some good things about it, but it could easily lead to excesses and to problems. This was a great period of theology. Unfortunately it was not a great period of preaching. I think that was the problem. The theology stayed in the universities, in the textbooks, and in the academic circles. People were beginning to become interested in preaching. There were some great preachers. Some of the Dominicans and others and great preachers were well respected and well known. But there were not many of them, and the average person in his or her parish never heard a sermon, at least not a very good one. And there were some questions about the theology, too, because it was producing some wrong answers as well as many right answers. There was no way for that theology to get to the people. So *the grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever.*