

Thomas Aquinas

We are going to talk today about Thomas Aquinas. We will begin with a prayer from Thomas as it appears in the syllabus. Let us pray.

“Grant me grace, oh merciful God, to desire ardently all that is pleasing to Thee, to examine it prudently, to acknowledge it truthfully, and to accomplish it perfectly. For the praise and glory of Thy name, Amen.”

This lesson is going to be on the angelic doctor, and the first point is the dumb ox. So you might wonder, which was he? Was Thomas a dumb ox or was he an angelic doctor? His early schoolmates called him the dumb ox. Fellow students sometimes have a way of giving one another uncomplimentary names. Thomas' schoolmates gave him this nickname. It was because he was a very large man, so he looked like an ox. He was big. He really was not dumb, but he did not say much. He was very quiet. So he became known as the dumb ox. But the Christian world today, certainly the Catholic Christian world, knows him as the angelic doctor.

I would like to talk a little bit about the life of Thomas Aquinas, and then we will try to understand something of the thought of Thomas. As we think about this man's life, we need to go back to a wealthy and prominent family in southern Italy. Thomas was born in the town of Aquino, so the Aquinas part of his name simply refers to the town he came from. That town was very close to the famous Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino, and Thomas grew up in that monastery. He was taken there by his parents so that he could have first-class education. He studied there, but when he got a little older he decided to join a new order. It was not the Benedictines. The Benedictines were, by this time, a famous, established, historic order with that splendid house at Monte Cassino. And some reputation would come to a person who was a Benedictine. The new order was the order of the Dominicans, and we have studied that so you know something about the order of the preachers. This was new and untried, not nearly so famous, but Thomas wanted to be a Dominican. His parents, who had a great deal of desire that he excel in this world, as parents always do for their children, did not like that decision. They felt that Thomas was consequently going to be unknown as part of a new, rather nondescript order in the Catholic church. So they tried everything they could to keep him out of the order. In fact, they arranged to kidnap him for a year. They took him away and tried to discourage him from joining the Dominicans. The Dominicans had been given papal approval in 1216, so just a few years before Thomas was born this order had come into existence. But Thomas could not be dissuaded. The ox part certainly comes out here—he was very stubborn. He was determined to become a Dominican, which he did. He studied in Paris under the great Dominican, Albert the Great of Germany. Then Thomas began his career as a Dominican scholar and teacher. He taught in Paris, and he taught in Italy.

We have the dumb ox, the Dominican scholar, and the third point in this outline of Thomas' life: the systematic theologian. If everybody could read Thomas, they would understand what systematic means in “systematic theologian.” Of all the theologians that I ever look at, that word comes to mind when I look at Thomas Aquinas. I read recently that a Lutheran said that Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther are arguably the greatest theologians in the history of Christianity. I would like to expand that list a little bit; certainly Augustine has to be in there somewhere. And, as a Calvinist, I would want to put John Calvin in that list. Maybe Jonathan Edwards should be on the list, and some people would argue that Carl Barth should be there. But rather than trying to decide who the greatest theologians in the history of the Christian church really are, maybe we should just say anybody's list should have Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas wrote a lot of books, but the two that are the most famous are the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*, the summa against the Gentiles and the summa of theology. The word *summa* simply means “summary,” so these are summaries. One of these summaries, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, is more of a work of apologetics. You might say that the emphasis in this summa is philosophical and theological. The *Summa Theologiae*, the summary of theology, is a book not primarily about apologetics but primarily about theology. The emphasis there is theological and philosophical. You can see what I have done there. Thomas operates in a similar manner in both books, but when he is writing a book of apologetics, the emphasis is on philosophy and theology. When he is writing a book on theology, of course, the emphasis is on theology and philosophy. There is the same cyclical pattern that is obvious in both of these great works. A systematic theologian always has a kind of way of thinking about theology. John Calvin begins the *Institutes* by saying it is knowledge of God and of ourselves. That is what he is going to talk about. Whenever Thomas does theology, it is always the going out from God; God is the origin of all things. He tries to show how everything derives from God. Then there is the return to God. The cyclical principle is the methodological principle that Thomas uses in his writing. It is the principle of departing and returning, the issuing of all things from God and the return of all things to God. You might say there are always two points in Thomas. One is God as origin of all things and the other is God as the goal of all things.

Even though the general outline is the same for both of the summas, Thomas has quite a different purpose in mind. When he wrote the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, he was really writing a book that Christians could use to debate Christianity with opponents of Christianity. By Gentiles, he had particularly in mind the Muslims, but also the Jews and heretical groups. In this summa Thomas operated largely on the level of natural reason. This is because these people would not accept the revelation of the Scripture. The *Summa Theologiae* is the greater, more famous of the two great books. When I say these are two books, I do not mean two single volumes. The *Summa Theologiae* is many volumes. One rough translation of the title *Summa Theologiae* is “everything you ever wanted to know about theology” is found in Thomas’ work. The thing that always amazes me as I stand before those books somewhat staggered by the size and number of them is the fact that Thomas said he was writing a book for beginners in theology. There are 512 questions. Thomas operates according to the scholastic, dialectical style. He is the prince of the scholastics. He took these 512 questions and answered them in more than 4,000 pages. I am thankful that Peter Kreeft has recently written a book called *The Summa of the Summa* (the Summary of the Summary). So with Peter Kreeft you can get a more manageable version of Thomas’ summa.

Let me talk a little bit about the first summa, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and then we will come back to the second summa. Here Thomas sets forth the famous five arguments. He did not invent these. We saw already that Anselm used these same five arguments, but Thomas does go into this in some detail. He is famous for the five ways to argue for the existence of God. You can find that in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. The basic thought in these five arguments is that creation mirrors the Creator. God, who made all things, stamped His image in some way upon all these things that He made. So you have the five arguments. I will read them briefly as they are stated in the syllabus. Things in this world are in motion, everybody admits that. So Thomas says that there must be a cause for that motion, maybe a lot of causes. But there is a final cause, something that gave it the first “push.” Things began to move, and the word that Thomas uses for that final cause is the word “God.” Then he says effects have causes. Any effect has behind it a cause, perhaps a series of causes. But there is an original cause that starts the whole thing. Thomas calls that original cause God. Then he says we are contingent beings; we are not necessary beings. It is not necessary in a philosophical sense that we bare here. Why are we here then? Contingent beings must have or must depend on a necessary being. There cannot be contingent beings without a necessary being somewhere. That necessary being, Thomas says, is God. He also talks about

values, human values, like truth, honesty, integrity, nobility, and the like. Where do all these things come from? Thomas says they come from an original truth or goodness. That, we call God. Then Thomas says as we look around in the world we see traces of intelligent design. It does not appear that things are made in an unintelligent way. Things work together; there is evidence of design. There must be a designer. That designer we call God. You can see all five arguments are basically the same. All five depend on taking a causal sequence back to its origin and identifying this origin as God.

There have been, since Thomas' time, many arguments against the arguments. People have disagreed with Thomas that this can actually be done or should be done. From the medieval period we will study Duns Scotus and the late medieval nominalists who opposed Thomas on this point. They felt that reason could not be used in this way at all. Down to the present, there have been many people who have not liked the so-called theistic arguments. Many Christians feel that these are not worthy or useful. I would suggest that you read in the syllabus the statement from the Notre Dame philosopher Alvin Plantinga concerning the argument from design. In addition, Richard Muller, who teaches at Calvin Theological Seminary, has written a defense of Thomas' arguments. As Muller puts it, demonstration neither replaces nor subverts faith (so Thomas is not saying we can just forget about faith, and we can argue about these things), but demonstration rather shows us that faith is capable of sustaining itself in argument. That is Muller's way of trying to understand what Thomas is up to. It is not that we start with this and this helps us into faith. But we believe, and because we believe we can talk about it in a rational way.

Thomas completed the *Summa Theologiae* in 1272. Most lists of important dates in church history will have that date, 1272, the completion of the *Summa Theologiae*. If you were doing a timeline it would be a good idea for you have that date in your timeline. Let me try to characterize the *Summa Theologiae* in three ways. I am not going to tell you Thomas' theology but something about his methodology. First, it is true that Thomas attempted to use both faith and knowledge, or reason. To do that, he depends a great deal on Aristotle. Aristotle, according to Thomas, got a lot right. But he did not know everything. He started along the way, but he did not go all the way. That is not the same thing as going the wrong way, so Thomas can place a great deal of value in reading Aristotle. For example, it is not wrong to say that Athens is in Europe. It is not particularly precise. People can do better than that, but it is not wrong to say Athens is in Europe. Thomas would say that Aristotle could make and did make some basic, true statements about how to understand things.

There are many questions about which the Bible and reason say exactly the same thing. Here Thomas was quite willing to argue philosophically and to use the philosophers like Aristotle to try to argue for the existence of God, His nature, His providence, the immortality of souls, and certain ethical insights. Thomas was also aware that the philosophers, even if they start along the right path, cannot go very far. Philosophy, reason, does have its own authentic sphere, but so do faith and authority. The Bible tells us many things that the philosophers could only dream about. They could not even imagine these things. As Thomas works this way, he does have two separate spheres of authority and knowledge. It is a two-story view, the lower story and the upper story. The one level you can understand through reason, philosophy, and rationality. The other level you can only understand through faith and through the revealed truth of the Bible. There are natural truths and there are revealed supernatural truths such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the incarnation, our first and last state, the Fall, redemption, and the like. Thomas saw this second-level truth as beyond reason. It could not be proved rationally. We accept it on the basis of the authority of the Bible. But all that is not irrational, and so it cannot be refuted rationally.

I could sum up all of this briefly by saying what Thomas was struggling to have a place for human learning, rationality, and philosophy. He wanted a real place for all of that but also an essential and

dominant place for revelation and authority. It is philosophy and theology. When you think of Thomas' teaching, you need to stress both. They are not to be separated since they speak of the same God. But they are to be distinguished because they speak of that same God from different standpoints. They are to support each other. They are compatible. They are both ultimately from God. I think I can sum this up by quoting from Etienne Gilson, the famous Thomist philosopher who said, "In Thomas' thought, reason and revelation can neither contradict each other nor ignore each other nor be confused with each other." Not everybody would agree that Thomas was successful in this. But a Thomist like Gilson praises Thomas for understanding the role of reason and the role of revelation.

I will come back to that point in a few minutes as we look at some Protestant critiques of Thomas, but let us move on to a second principle or characteristic of Thomas' methodology. The first principle is a great emphasis on both theology and philosophy. Second, Thomas struggled with the problem of how we can talk about God at all. How is it possible for us to use human language to say anything significant or meaningful about God? Someone once said, "If human words are incapable of describing the aroma of coffee, how can we explain anything really complicated?" It shows something of the problem that we have with language. Philosophers and theologians are always struggling with this. Teachers struggle with this, too. How can words communicate truly, particularly, when the subject is God? Thomas developed and used what he called the principle of analogy. It is similar to John Calvin's use of the principle of accommodation. By "analogy," Thomas meant that God can and does reveal Himself in ways that we can understand by using analogous statements. These are statements that tell us something about God, but statements that also have very definite limitations as to what they tell us about God. For instance, God says that He is our father. That tells us something about God that is very important, but it does not tell us everything about God. And there are some things about fathers that would not be true about God. Saying that God is like a father communicates to us in some way, but at the same time it does not completely tell us who God is. God reveals Himself in images and ideas that lie within our world, and yet we must not reduce God to that world. The principle of analogy is always at work. This is important because we can understand these things. It is also important because the way God puts it in the Scripture is memorable. For instance, think of the expression, "The Lord is my Shepard." That is an analogy. Think of how much that communicates to us. We have to draw certain limits there, but it is so memorable. If God had tried to describe Himself to us in more direct language, you can see how difficult it would have been for us to grasp that language. It would not have been nearly so memorable. If God had tried to speak to us in direct language it may have meant that the Bible would have read much more like Thomas' *Summa*.

A third methodological principle from Thomas is his love for and use for precise definitions. Thomas loves to have headings and subheadings. He gives very clear, terse, precise definitions. You may have noted that one of the brief sermons that I included in the syllabus, the one on the armor of God, is only a page and-a-half. It has 3 main points and 15 subpoints! So you can imagine what Thomas would do with 4,000 pages in the *Summa*. He is concerned to speak very clearly, technically, and scientifically. There is one rather amusing distinction that Thomas tries to make when he is deciding if there is a difference between perfect obstinacy and ordinary obstinacy. He works on those two concepts with definitions. He decides that perfect obstinacy is found only in hell. That is where a person is totally and perfectly stubborn. But there is an obstinacy in this life as well on the part of those who become so stubborn against grace that they have hardly the slightest impulse to repent and turn to the good. I do not know that it is a particularly significant distinction, but you can see that Thomas is interested in definitions. Thomas and the *Summa* is a perfect example for the scientific university theology that we have been talking about. It is scholastic theology. As you read Thomas, you will get the impression that it is rather impersonal and monotone. You will certainly think this as you compare Thomas to Luther and Calvin, and even as you compare Thomas to Augustine earlier. It is scientific, it is academic, it is scholastic. It is

great theology, but not much comes through in terms of a warm, living, personal faith. Luther said that “Experience alone makes one a theologian.” He perceived in Thomas’ theology the total absence of any experiential dimension. So Luther felt that Thomas was powerless to speak to real spiritual needs. That aspect of his theology is so totally missing; it is almost mathematical. It is dialectical and scientific in the way that it is set forth. It is interesting that Luther, who could criticize Thomas’ theology this way, knew that Thomas in his own life was a man who did experience the spiritual presence of God. Thomas tried to live that out as best as he could.

Let us come to the next point: Thomas the Christian. Luther held up Thomas for his students as a model of humility. Luther would often point out to his students that when Thomas Aquinas heard himself praised as a great scholar or a great thinker or a great theologian, he would secretly make the sign of the cross under his cowl in order to remind himself of the sin of pride. Luther also spoke of the fact that, according to one of the stories that was circulated, God said to Thomas, “You have written well concerning me, what will you now have as a reward?” Thomas is supposed to have replied, “Only Yourself, Lord.” This story about Thomas Luther told at least five times in a couple of years. He told about how the great Thomas Aquinas at the time of his death felt that he could not hold out against the devil until he said, picking up his Bible and holding it, “I believe what is written in this book.” Whether Thomas had a *sola scriptura* view or not, we could talk about in some detail. I doubt that he did, but at least at this point, according to this story, which Luther loved, Thomas relied upon the Bible and the Bible alone. For Luther, Thomas seems to have been an example of how a great person can be seriously mistaken.

On December 6, 1272, after morning Mass, Thomas stopped writing the *Summa*. The *Summa* is really not complete. He did not get through the third part; he stopped in the middle of his discussion of the sacrament of penance. He was not yet 50 years old, yet he had written many, many books. But he told a friend that he could not go on any longer, he could not complete this book. “Why?” said the friend, “Why can you not write it? You must write it.” Thomas said, “I can do no more, for all I have written seems to me like straw.” It seemed worthless. So he stopped. He only lived another four months, but he did not write another word of theology. What happened? Historians and scholars of Thomas have puzzled over this experience. Did he have a nervous breakdown that kept him from continuing because of the vast demands that this effort had put upon his mind and his soul? Or was it, as some Catholics maintain, an ecstatic experience in the Mass he had received? Did he have a divine vision in which he had seen God in some way so that anything he would produce and write would seem inadequate and meaningless? His *Summa* is certainly a tremendous piece of thought about God, but Thomas constantly was aware of the limits of his understanding.

Let me finish this up with some evaluations of Thomas. First we will discuss some Catholic evaluations before we talk about Protestant evaluations. Of course, Catholics are going to be very high on Thomas Aquinas. We can expect that. In 1567, about 300 years after his death, Thomas was formerly elevated to the status of Teacher of the Church. Not too many people have received that honor in the Catholic Church. But 300 years after he died, Thomas was one of the Teachers of the Church. In the 20th century, Thomas has become *the* Teacher of the Church. He is not one among several, but he is the preeminent theologian of Catholicism, like John Calvin is the preeminent theologian of the Reformed faith. Let me quote two modern Catholics on Thomas Aquinas. The first one is the short story writer and novelist from Georgia, Flannery O’Conner. Flannery O’Conner wrote, “I could not make any judgment on the *Summa* except to say this: I read it every night before I go to bed.” That says something about Flannery O’Conner and her ability to grapple with theological issues. She said, “If my mother were to come in during the process and say, ‘Turn off that light, it is late,’ I, with lifted finger and broad, bland, beatific expression would reply: ‘on the contrary, I answer that the Light being eternal and limitless cannot be

turned off: shut your eyes!” She learned to talk like that from reading Thomas. Flannery O’Conner said she feels she can personally guarantee that Saint Thomas loved God because for the life of her she cannot help loving Saint Thomas.

Another Catholic evaluation is from Peter Kreeft in *The Summa of the Summa*. He says, “Saint Thomas Aquinas is certainly one of the greatest philosophers who ever lived. To my mind he is the greatest for at least eight reasons: truth, common sense, practicality, clarity, profundity, orthodoxy, medievalism, and modernity.” If you want to understand all that, you can read *The Summa of the Summa*.

Now let me give a few comments on how the Protestants view Thomas Aquinas. We have already seen that Luther admired the Christian but did not think much of the theologian. John Calvin amazingly was able to pretty much ignore Thomas altogether, although some of Calvin’s followers began to study and use Thomas. Somebody has called him peeping Thomas because it was not really acceptable for Reformed theologians to be reading Thomas Aquinas, but they did it anyway. One of the most famous evaluations of Thomas Aquinas came in recent years from Francis Schaeffer. If you have read much of Francis Schaeffer, you will know that he does not agree much with Thomas Aquinas. In *How Should We Then Live*, Schaeffer says, “Aquinas held that man had revolted against God and thus was fallen. But Aquinas had an incomplete view of the Fall. He thought that the Fall did not affect man as a whole but only in part. In his view the will was fallen or corrupted, but the intellect was affected. Thus people could rely on their own human wisdom, and this meant that people were free to mix the teachings of the Bible with the teachings of the non-Christian philosophers.” That is a pretty strong indictment against Thomas. Schaeffer was saying that Thomas did not think that the will is affected so that reason can operate. We can pull in truth from many sources and mix those statements of philosophy with the teachings of the Bible. Schaeffer later said in *How Should We Then Live*, “Thomas’ view, the will was fallen but the mind was not, eventually resulted in people believing they could think out the answers to all the great questions beginning only from themselves.” This is an even stronger indictment on Thomas. Schaeffer was saying that to follow Thomas will eventually lead to people being able to answer the questions without the Bible, using only their unfallen reason. Is this what Thomas really did? Did he fragment reality the way Schaeffer said that he did? He certainly had an upper story and a lower story. But did this result in Thomas mixing Christian and pagan ideas? There was a cartoon that appeared in *Christianity Today* sometime ago with Francis Schaeffer reaching heaven and Saint Peter there at the gate. “Oh, yes, Schaeffer, Dr. Francis, I believe Thomas Aquinas would like to have a word with you!” I am going to leave it up to Schaeffer and Aquinas in heaven to work all that out. But be aware of Schaeffer’s critique and of some others who feel that Schaeffer has not properly understood Thomas Aquinas.

Other conservative Protestants, Presbyterians even, view Thomas Aquinas as a hero. If Thomas Aquinas was the problem to Francis Schaeffer, he was a hero to John Gerstner and to R. C. Sproul. You can often hear R. C. Sproul say that Thomas was a great theologian. I think he even says he is his favorite theologian. John Gerstner wrote an article for *Table Talk*; it came out in 1994 before Dr. Gersner died, and the title of the article was “Aquinas was a Protestant.” That struck a lot of people as a surprising sort of thing for John Gerstner to be saying. This is what he said, “Thomas taught the biblical doctrine of justification so that if the Roman church has followed Aquinas, the Reformation would not have been absolutely necessary.” Others disagreed rather vehemently with that assessment of Thomas Aquinas, particularly Robert Raymond. He answered Gersner in an article that he wrote in the *Westminster Theological Journal* entitled “Dr. John H. Gersner on Thomas Aquinas as a Protestant.” Raymond tried to prove that Thomas was a long way from being a Protestant in his view of justification by faith.

What is my experience with Thomas? I am constantly surprised when I read Thomas on election and grace, that he is so good. He teaches election, he says some wonderful things about grace. And on many other things, Thomas is so good. But I am almost always disappointed in the end. Thomas may reduce the human part in salvation to 1% and attribute 99% to God, but in the end it is still percentage theology. And it will take Luther and Calvin and the Reformers to get rid of that remaining 1%. Salvation is indeed a free gift of God; it is all of God. Thomas was a great mind, and he was a great heart. I would like to close this lesson with another prayer from Thomas Aquinas.

“Give me, oh Lord, a steadfast heart which no unworthy affection may drag downwards. Give me an unconquered heart which no tribulation can wear out. Give me an upright heart which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside. Amen.”