

## Aquinas and Nature and Grace

“When asked for what he thanked God most, he answered simply, ‘I have understood every page I ever read.’”<sup>1</sup>

### I. The Life

**Thomas Aquinas.** Thomas Aquinas was the pinnacle theologian of the Middle Ages. Roman Catholics call him the “Angelic Doctor”, for he—more than anyone else—did more to shape the theology of the Roman Catholic Church than Thomas Aquinas. That said, many protestants consider him to be one of the fathers of the faith because he lived and worked some 300 years before the events of the Reformation took place.<sup>2</sup> He is placed alongside Augustine as one of the most significant theologians of the Latin speaking church.<sup>3</sup> That said, his works were used extensively to combat the efforts of the Reformation to reclaim the pure gospel. As such, he has a very mixed reputation among protestants.

*Regardless, he is a significant figure in church history and today we’ll be getting to know him a little bit and seek to understand a couple of his positive contributions.*

**Early Life.** He lived from 1225 to 1274. He was the youngest son of the count of Aquino—who was descended from the princely house of Lombardy.<sup>4</sup> He spent his first few years in the castle and then was sent to school at the nearby Monte Cassino monastery at the age of five.<sup>5</sup> Monte Cassino was founded by Benedict of Nursia—the guy who threw himself into the thorn bushes to combat his temptation—some seven centuries earlier.<sup>6</sup> At the age of fourteen he went to the University of Naples.

**Student of Aristotle.** It was in Naples that he was likely introduced to the study of Aristotle. Only recently had Aristotelian philosophy become of interest in the West. In fact, it was the work of Muslim and Jewish scholars that brought the work of Aristotle—a pagan Greek—to the Roman Catholic West. It would become a major achievement of Aquinas’s life to reconcile the philosophy of Aristotle with Christian theology. *Explain scholasticism—When all of learning came under the authority of theology; philosophy as the handmaiden to theology.*

**Dominican.** At the age of nineteen, Aquinas resolved to pursue an intellectual career by entering into the Dominican order—a sect of Roman Catholic monks who were especially inclined to studying and teaching.<sup>7</sup> However, his family wasn’t thrilled about his choice to become a monk. They had intended for their youngest son to replace his uncle as the abbot of

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<sup>1</sup>G.K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1933), 3.

<sup>2</sup>R. C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas*, episode 12, “Thomas Aquinas,” video lecture, Ligonier Ministries.

<sup>3</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 5, *The Middle Ages, A.D. 1049–1294* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910; repr., 1959), 661.

<sup>4</sup>Schaff, 662.

<sup>5</sup>Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 485.

<sup>6</sup>Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Introduction,” in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 30–31.

<sup>7</sup>Ferguson, 485.

Monte Cassino—a prestigious position. Knowing that Thomas would receive significant pushback from his family, the Dominicans organized safe travel for Thomas from Naples to Rome and then from Rome to Paris.

However, Theodora, Thomas's mom, had another plan in mind. She ordered her other sons, who all had careers in the military, to abduct their own brother on the road from Rome to Paris.<sup>8</sup> This they did successfully as he was drinking from a spring on his long journey. They stripped him of his monastic garments and took him captive in his family's own castle for fifteen months. His family tried to persuade him to turn back in every way they knew how but their efforts failed. Eventually, Thomas was allowed to escape and pursue the monastic life he desired.

**Life in Paris.** In 1245, at the age of Twenty, Thomas moved to Paris. Where he was a student under his teacher Albert the Great. Albert was one of the greatest medieval thinkers of his day and saw great promise in Thomas. In fact, Thomas's classmates called him a dumb ox because of his appearance. Coming to his pupil's aid, Albert responded to these harsh caricatures by saying, "He will make such a roaring in theology that he will be heard through all the earth."<sup>9</sup>

**Thomas the Teacher.** Thomas accompanied his beloved teacher from Paris to Cologne in 1248 and then returned to Paris as a professor himself in 1252.<sup>10</sup> This began his long career as a teacher, professor, lecturer, and advisor:

- 1252-1259: professor in Paris
- 1259-1268: theologian to the papal court, living in Rome
- 1268-1272: professor in Paris
- 1272-1274: professor in Naples

**Last Days.** In 1274, the Pope asked Thomas to be present as a theologian at the Council of Lyon. There, Thomas was to present the disagreements of the Roman Catholic Church with the Eastern Church in an attempt to reconcile the two. However, Thomas never arrived. He fell ill along the way, some say because he hit his head while riding along on his donkey<sup>11</sup> while others do not hazard a guess. Regardless, he was taken to the Fossonova Abbey where he breathed his last after having the Scripture read to him.

*So goes the man. The resonance of Thomas's life was not due to his adventurous exploits, chiseled jaw line, or immense wealth. Rather, he is remembered for his writing.*

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<sup>8</sup>Renn Hampden, *The Life of Thomas Aquinas* (London: John J. Griffin & Co., 1848), 23.

<sup>9</sup>Schaff, 663. Eleanore Stump records the longer quotation of Albert in her work *Aquinas*: "You call him the dumb ox [*bos mutus*], but in his teaching he will one day produce such a bellowing that it will be heard throughout the world."

<sup>10</sup>Ferguson, 485.

<sup>11</sup>Nicholas M. Healy, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2003),

## II. The Writing

**Nature and Grace.** Nature is what can be observed through our five senses. By using our powers of observation we can determine how a dolphin breathes, the molecular structure of gold, we can measure the distance of the earth from the sun, etc. By the reasoning powers that we have been given, we are able to observe true things about our world. Simply put, by observing nature we can know things that are true.

Grace, on the other hand, is Thomas's shorthand for divine revelation. That is, all the blessed truths that we receive from the Holy Scripture, the Bible. Grace reveals to us who God is, what he is like, and what his plan of redemption is among many other things. However, if you search the Bible in search of a molecular model of gold, you'll strike out. So, nature and grace both reveal truth but of generally different sorts.

**Distinguished, not Separated.** Aquinas wanted to distinguish these sources of truth but he didn't want to separate them. You see, Thomas believed that all truth is God's truth and that, ultimately—when all the information is known—no truth found by observing nature will contradict what is found in the Bible. Nature and grace, reason and revelation “are both fountains of knowledge; both come from God”<sup>12</sup> and they do not contradict each other.

**Mixed Articles.** Now, within this discussion, there was a third category that Thomas was particularly interested in called mixed articles. These are subjects that are revealed by both nature and grace. Mixed articles fall between nature and grace—They're the middle of the venn diagram. Let's look at one very important example: the existence of God.

Now, we know from [Genesis 1:1](#) onward that the existence of God is assumed in the Bible. God is, therefore he does not need to be proven; the Bible simply asserts that he exists. Further, if we go to [Romans 1:18-22](#), God tells us through Paul that all people know that God exists but that they suppress this knowledge in unrighteousness. The point is this, the Bible teaches that all people know that God exists.

Secondly, Thomas will argue that nature also reveals that God exists. Obviously, this truth is affirmed by Romans 1, but he wants to prove it using only what he can observe from nature. To prove that God exists, Thomas provides what he calls the five ways.<sup>13</sup> These are logically sound arguments that give proof from the creation that there is a Creator.

Consider this heavily simplified argument that he offers from motion:

1. Things are in motion.
2. Nothing can move itself; it must be put into motion by something else.
3. If there were no “first mover, moved by no other” there would be no motion.
4. But there is motion.
5. Therefore there is a first mover, God.

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<sup>12</sup>Galli and Olsen, 31.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, n.d.).

**Natural Theology.** When humans observe nature, extract truth from it, and then formulate those truths into knowledge about God—for example, that he is the almighty Creator—that knowledge is called natural theology.

**Limitations.** Thomas is quick to make a vital concession, though you can prove that God exists from nature, you cannot prove that the Trinity exists. Galli and Olsen summarize Thomas’s insight, “While reason can lead us to believe in God—something that other theologians had already proposed—only revelation can show us God as he really is, the triune God of the Bible.<sup>14</sup> Simply put, by nature you can prove *that* God is but you cannot prove *what* God is.<sup>15</sup>

Thomas remarked, “In order that men might have knowledge of God, free of doubt and uncertainty... it was necessary for divine truth to be delivered to them by way of faith, being told to them as it were, by God himself who cannot lie.”<sup>16</sup>

Nature cannot reveal to you the triune God’s gracious plan of redemption to you, though it does reveal that God exists. “Furthermore, though a person apart from Christianity can practice certain ‘natural virtues,’ only a believer can practice faith, hope, and love, the truly Christian virtues.”<sup>17</sup> This is because they have no true knowledge of what God is like or what his plan of redemption is.

**Significance.** This sharp understanding and distinguishing between nature and grace is insightful for us as we endeavor to be faithful Christians. It helps us to understand how science (nature) and the Bible (grace) interact. Applying ourselves to the study of science can reveal truths to us that we would otherwise not know. For example, how dolphins breathe. However, science—that is, nature—is not autonomous from grace. Remember, nature does not exist by itself; it always coexists with and submits to grace.

There are undoubtedly times when it seems like what is observed in the natural realm and compiled into the sciences contradicts what the Bible teaches. I can think of no greater examples of these than the existence of God and God’s account of the Creation. What Thomas’s clear thinking helps us to do is to remember that God’s truth always wins out. In nature, we work from observation to try to make sense of the big questions. In grace, through God’s Word, the Creator of the universe speaks to us directly and clearly about what he has done. In short, he answers the questions and does so authoritatively.

God assumes his own existence and he tells us that he made the universe and all that is in it in six days. How? At present, we might not be sure. But we can be confident that when all the evidence is gathered it will be abundantly clear that what God said was right. “Let God be true though every one were a liar...” (Rom 3:4). In the meantime, between our wondering and our knowing in full, we are to apply the principle of faith seeking understanding. We should have confidence in our God that he will not ever lead us astray.

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<sup>14</sup>Galli and Olsen, 31.

<sup>15</sup>Sanders, Fred. *CH261 History of the Doctrine of the Trinity (Videos)*. Logos Mobile Education. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019.

<sup>16</sup>Galli and Olsen, 31.

<sup>17</sup>Galli and Olsen, 31-32.

The World and all that is in it is God's. Let's embrace this truth of faith seeking understanding. On the other hand, the danger we need to avoid is allowing nature to operate on its own. If nature is not checked by grace, you will end up forsaking God and making a ruin of yourself and the world. Without the grace of God, people revert to their Romans 1 depravity. They forsake God and suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened in and after the enlightenment. Philosophy was no longer the handmaiden to theology, instead, men chose to suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness and elevate themselves instead. Though we'll cross that bridge when we get there!

**What about Thomas's Other Views?** We can thank God for Thomas's clarity in this area, but he was seriously short-sighted in others. Truly, he was a man of his time. He believed in the traditional Roman Catholic doctrines: the papacy, the place of tradition as authoritative interpreter of the Bible, purgatory, the intercession of saints and Mary, transubstantiation, and baptismal regeneration. Thomas accepted the papacy and the tradition of the church as authoritative. In other words, he did not live by the truth that the Scripture provides the Christian with everything pertaining to life and godliness through the knowledge of Christ (2 Pet 1:3). Instead, he followed the mainstream Roman Catholic teaching and all the errors that went along with it. We will be considering those errors more closely in coming weeks as—at least for us—the Reformation begins to dawn.

Today, let's remember that all truth—in the realm of nature and grace—is God's truth by reflecting on the words of the hymn *This is My Father's World*:

"This is my Father's world,  
And to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and round me rings  
The music of the spheres.  
This is my Father's world:  
I rest me in the thought  
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas—  
His hand the wonders wrought."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Maltbie D. Babcock, "This is my Father's World".