

Studying the Early Theologian Thomas Aquinas

Despite Thomas Aquinas being a thirteenth-century theologian, his theological works greatly impact Christianity today. Because of his devotion to the Lord and steadfast heart to keep the Scriptures true, he is worth studying. (There needs to be more education geared towards Christians on church history, as it is often seen as an unimportant topic within certain circles.)

Studying church history might feel futile to some, but understanding past scholars and theologians can help us understand present-day interpretations and the importance of maintaining loyalty to Scripture. Moreover, by studying what early theologians wrote about various aspects of theology, we can better understand these topics. Of course, we should not blindly take any person's interpretation to be gospel truth; however, we should give heed to what they have tried to teach. Once we understand what they are teaching, we can run it through Scripture and see if it aligns with the Word. If it is in agreement with the Word, we should hold onto it, but if it does not align with the Word, we need to discard it.

Teachings of Faith

Thomas Aquinas made a significant impact and contribution to theology with his teachings of faith. Aquinas believed that reason could only go so far, as only faith can answer the big questions, such as how we got here. Without understanding faith in the context of the Bible, we would never know the answers to these questions. Society teaches us that we got here by the Big Bang Theory. Within this type of teaching, everything came into being by chance.

While many people insist that atheism and the Big Bang Theory are not belief systems, they actually are. To believe that the world and everything in it just came into being by chance requires a huge leap of faith. It also requires that a person hold to the sad, heavy hypothesis that if everything is chance, nothing truly matters. How we treat others, what we do with our lives, means nothing because there is no specific purpose for anything.

But, thankfully, we are not here by chance and are called to help others come to know Jesus and the fulfillment He offers. Rather than believing the lie that the earth and everything in it sprang into being, we need to rely on the truth of

the Bible. This is what Thomas Aquinas taught throughout his life and what we still need to reflect upon in the present day.

Challenge Questions:

- What are your beliefs concerning faith?
- How would you answer if someone asked you how we got here, or other questions about God?
- If your faith is lacking, how can you strengthen it this week?

The Incarnation

Another aspect of theology that Aquinas had a major impact on was the teachings of the incarnation of God. There was discussion during Aquinas' time, as well as before his time, on whether or not there would have been a need for the incarnation of Christ if man had not sinned. By Aquinas writing on the necessity of the incarnation of Christ, he is telling the reader that the matter is not if man sinned or not, but rather that the incarnation needed to happen and was going to happen because man was going to sin.

In combating the belief that the incarnation was not needed if sin never entered the world, Aquinas writes that God is not limited: "Even if sin had not existed, God could still have become incarnate" (McGrath, Alistair. *The Christian Theology Reader*, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 246). Thus, Aquinas shows by his writing that the incarnation of God was necessary and, in fact, crucial to mankind. The truth of the matter is that mankind fell, and we needed the Savior to save us from our sin, and this Savior was and is Jesus Christ. To try to argue or discuss the idea that the incarnation would not be needed if sin did not come into the world is not relevant. Mankind was going to sin and disobey God, and that is exactly why Jesus had to come to rescue us from our sins.

I believe that this aspect, in addition to Aquinas' focus on faith, is a key aspect of his theology that has greatly impacted Christianity. Furthermore, Aquinas' teachings on the necessity of the incarnation of Christ refuted ideas promoted by false teachers. By correcting this misunderstanding, Aquinas could help more Christians understand the fact that mankind was going to sin, God was going to have to save us in His incarnate form, and He had already known from eternity past that this was going to happen. To argue that God would not have to come incarnate if Adam did not sin is an irrelevant idea because things happen exactly as they are supposed to by God's sovereign will.

Challenge Questions:

- What is your view of the necessity of the incarnation?
- Do you agree with Aquinas? Why or why not?
- Do you believe God already knew man was going to fall? If so, why do you think He still created us?

Satisfaction of Christ

Another aspect of theology that Aquinas significantly impacted was understanding the satisfaction of Christ as the ultimate sacrifice, in which he “develops the Anselmian theme of satisfaction, dealing with a number of objections which had been raised against it” (McGrath, Alistair. *The Christian Theology Reader*, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 302). In this writing from Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*, he clarifies the idea of how Christ’s suffering and death were sufficient to save mankind. Aquinas comes to the conclusion that Christ’s death is sufficient to save since He is sinless and He is God (John 1:1, 10:30). Only by God coming incarnate and dying in our place would forgiveness of sins be possible.

Aquinas states it in this manner; “the worth of Christ’s flesh is to be reckoned, not just according to the nature of flesh, but according to the person who assumed it, in that it was the flesh of God, from whom it gained an infinite worth” (McGrath, Alistair. *The Christian Theology Reader*, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 302). Aquinas understood that salvation was by faith alone; however, he did defend his faith through the understanding of Greek philosophy and thought. He did not see Greek philosophy and thought as being opposed to the Bible, but rather, he saw that it was crucial to understand and to utilize these aspects to help the lost understand the truth.

Challenge Questions:

- Do you believe Jesus’ death is sufficient to save mankind? Why or why not?
- Do you believe salvation is by faith alone?
- How can you defend the faith when others oppose Jesus’ finished work on the cross?

The Five Arguments

A final impact that Aquinas made concerning theology was his five arguments that God is real. These five arguments are known as the “five ways,” concerning change, causality, contingency, perfection, and purpose (or the teleological argument).

The first argument from change argues that “we are rationally justified in positing a prime mover, moved by no other, which all people call God” (Young, William W. “From Describing to Naming God: Correlating the Five Ways with Aquinas’ Doctrine of the Trinity,” Blackwell Publishing, 530). This states that all things move and change, which proves that there is a God over the universe.

The second argument from causality and the third argument from contingency are in connection with the first argument because they all point to the fact that independent things cannot move themselves or exist by themselves. The cause of everything traces back its origin to God Himself, and the original cause of mankind can only come from One whose Being has existed from all eternity. The fourth argument from perfection argues that there has to be an essence that possesses goodness, truth, and nobility, and this can only be found in God. Since truth, goodness, and nobility are found in human values, only God could put these original values into beings. The fifth and final argument emphasizes that there has to be an intellectual designer behind everything in the world, as everything has a purpose, which only comes from God. All of these factors have impacted theology and philosophy because they give proof for the existence of God from a philosophical viewpoint, as outlined by Thomas Aquinas.

Challenge Questions:

- Which of the five arguments resonates with you?
- Are there any that you don’t agree with? If so, explain.
- How might you use Aquinas’s five arguments to defend the faith?

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