

Medieval Church History
(Part 8: Medieval Learning and Worship, 1054-1305)

Synopsis: “The church can practice *diastasis*, i.e., separation from culture, or it can practice synthesis. The Scholastics did the latter. The Scholastic intellectual movement developed between 1050 and 1350 and paralleled the development of the mendicant and heretical movements of the same period” (231).

I. Scholasticism.

A. What is Scholasticism? When did it start?

1. The words Scholasticism and Scholastic both come from the Greek word *schole*, which means “a place where learning takes place” (Carnes, 231).
2. The movement developed between 1050 and 1350.
 - a. At first it found its home in the cathedral and monastic schools, but later in the universities of the thirteenth century.
 - b. It eventually became so popular, that its teaching dominated the university curriculum.
3. After 1050, the Scholastics replaced the fathers of the church as the main guardians of the truth.
 - a. The title *doctor*, which means teacher, “became as great a term of honor as *father* had been earlier in the history of the church” (Carnes, 231).
 - b. The reason it did, was not so much that the doctors replaced the teaching of the fathers, but that they took the teachings of the fathers and organized them in a more reasonable way.

B. What were the Scholastics all about? What were they studying and teaching?

1. Simply put, they worked on how to make all truth – the truths of philosophy and the truths of theology – harmonize together.
 - a. There are always two choices the church has to face in any age: whether to separate itself from the culture it’s a part of, or whether to become a part of it.
 - (i) In other words, whether to retreat into the monasteries, form its own communities, and remain separate while living among others in the world; or whether to take the truth of the Bible and try to reconcile it with the ideas of the world.
 - (ii) The Scholastics took the second option (Carnes 231).
 - b. What they actually did was to take the philosophy that was in fashion at that time – Aristotelianism, or Aristotelian logic, the method of learning and categorizing things that Aristotle, the pupil of Plato, had developed – and wed it to theology – or to the teaching of Scripture – to make them harmonize, to prove that the Christian faith was reasonable, that it didn’t contradict the things that philosophy taught.
 - c. They believed that truth, if it is truth, should always agree – the book of nature should always harmonize with the book of God’s revelation.
 - (i) If they understood this correctly, they were right – God’s special revelation should never contradict what He reveals in His creation.
 - (ii) And so the Scholastics didn’t set out to replace the teaching that already existed in the church, but instead to show that that faith was reasonable, that it agreed with reason.

- d. Earl Carnes, in his *Christianity Through the Centuries*, writes, “The student of church history must always remember that the Scholastics were not so much seeking truth as they were trying rationally to organize a body of accepted truth so that truth, whether it came by faith from revelation or by reason from philosophy, might be a harmonious whole” (Carnes 233).
 - e. The reason they used Aristotle’s philosophy was that it was rediscovered at that time, with Latin translations being made available from Jewish and Arabic sources in the twelfth century (Carnes, 233).
2. Using certain elements of philosophy to understand theology isn’t bad, if you’re using a sound philosophy. Problems can arise, however, if it’s faulty.
- a. You don’t have to go very far to find examples of this.
 - (i) After the Enlightenment of the 18th century, when man gave up the possibility of revelation and turned strictly to reason, observation and experimentation to find the truth (Concise, 140), there were several new theologies that emerged, not the least of which was Neo-Orthodoxy, which still exists in many main-line denominations today.
 - (ii) They asked the question, If the Bible isn’t the Word of God, what is it?
 - (iii) Bultmann answered by saying that the Bible really is a true story about a real man named Jesus, but that the truth it contains about Him had become embellished by the church.
 - (a) The Christ of the Bible was no longer the true Christ, but a Christ of faith. In other words, the supernatural things that Jesus was said to have done were really just myths created by the church to make their hero look more heroic.
 - (b) The job of the Christian scholar was now to peel through all those layers of myth to find the reality, to find the kernel of truth.
 - (iv) Karl Barth, on the other hand, answered the question by dividing history into two categories: what we might call ordinary history and supra-history.
 - (a) Ordinary history is what happens in time and space – what really takes place.
 - (b) But supra-history doesn’t really happen, except in the eyes of faith.
 - (c) This really seems to amount to nothing more than what Bultmann believed.
 - (v) Of course there were also those who tried to wed evolution to theology, some even within our own church, creating the doctrine of Theistic Evolution, or the belief that God used the so-called process of evolution to create man and all things. Not too long ago, a ruling elder in our own denomination was teaching that man and guinea pigs must have a common ancestor, because both of them lack the gene that is necessary to synthesize vitamin C.
 - b. Of course there are also some positive examples of how secular thinking has helped our understanding of the Bible.
 - (i) Meredith Kline has taken the findings of Form Criticism – which is the study of the Bible from the aspect of the form it was written in – to understand its meaning better.
 - (ii) Granted that there are some places where we may strongly disagree with his applications and conclusions, such as with the Framework Hypothesis. But there are other places where he has made some insightful breakthroughs, especially in the area of Covenant Theology.

- (iii) Most of these weddings between the world's ideas and Christianity have not been good, especially those in the modern world. But there are those that have been, because the principles the world was working with were actually true.
3. At this point, we might ask the question, "If there is a danger of going astray when using the world's ideas, why use them at all?" More specifically, why should philosophy ever be used to study the Bible?
- a. The answer is that philosophy provides a tool to help our understanding, not only of the Bible, but also in all areas of learning.
 - b. There is a branch of philosophy called Epistemology, which is the study of how we know what we know.
 - (i) It helps us to understand the learning process, how to group ideas together and understand their relationships.
 - (ii) Logic falls into this category. Logic, if it is true logic – that is, if it agrees with the way God made us to think, if it is consistent with the way He wants us to think – can be very useful in understanding the Scriptures.
 - (iii) It can help us ask the right questions that we might not otherwise have asked, and of course it can give us the answers that we might otherwise not have known – not answers that God didn't intend for us to have, but answers that He knew we could only arrive at by using our minds.
 - (iv) Our Puritan forefathers used logic to study the Scripture with great success.
 - (a) Many of their sermons were based on the methods Ramus outlined in his treatise on Logic.
 - (b) Jonathan Edwards, while he was still in his youth, read a book by John Locke called *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He enjoyed its pages so much that he felt like a greedy man gathering up handfuls of gold, because it gave him some of the necessary tools of learning.
 - (v) All of us use logic, all of us use principles of reasoning, whether we realize it or not. The question is really whether our logic is sound or faulty. If it's faulty, we need to learn how to think correctly.
 - c. Now we need to understand that these men didn't look at logic as a substitute for the Bible.
 - (i) Logic was simply a way of organizing the facts. It helped them to understand the relationships between the different ideas the Bible taught.
 - (ii) Logic doesn't provide you with the ideas, but only helps you work with the ideas you have. When you apply it to the Bible, it helps you uncover the truth that is already there.
 - (iii) This is what the Scholastics were doing. They weren't exclusively studying the Bible, but they included it. Earl Carnes writes, "The content of their study was the Bible, the canons and creeds of the ecumenical councils, and the writing of the fathers of the church. The question that they wished to settle involved whether or not the faith was reasonable" (Carnes 233).
 - (iv) What the Scholastics did was to take the body of truth that was accepted by the church and subject it to Aristotle's logic.
 - (a) Aristotle's logic was deductive, rather than inductive, which means that instead of collecting information through study or a series of experiments and then arriving at a principle that explains all the particular facts, he started with a general

truth or law that he took for granted – a presupposition, if you will – and then tried to understand its relationship to a particular fact, and from that formulated a new general law.

- (b) The classic example of this procedure, which uses the form of reasoning called a syllogism, goes like this, “All men are mortal.” That is the law or general principle. “Socrates is a man.” That is the particular fact that is to be related to that law. And from this, the conclusion is drawn, “Therefore, Socrates is mortal.”
- (c) Carnes writes, “The general truths of philosophy were taken from revealed theology; and using Aristotelian methodology, the Scholastics sought to draw legitimate conclusions in order to develop a harmonious system. Passages from the Bible, the Fathers, the canons and creeds of the councils, and papal decretals were concatenated [or put together] in logical order” (Carnes 233-34).
- (d) It’s interesting that Augustine was the father they drew upon the most. This is interesting because he was also the theologian who would be most frequently made use of by John Calvin and the Reformers.

C. Who were the major Scholastics? Let me give you just a few of the names associated with Scholasticism:

1. Anselm, who wrote *Cur Deus Homo*, or *Why Did God Become Man?*, a classic work on the incarnation.
2. Peter Lombard, whose book called *The Sentences* became required reading in the universities, was studied carefully by Martin Luther (*The Sentences* was really a collection of the teachings of the church fathers and later scholars [Concise, 232]).
3. And Abelard, who was not only known for his tragic relationship with Heloise, but who also developed the very strange view of the atonement, called the Moral Influence Theory, which taught that God had Jesus crucified merely to show us His love, and not because justice demanded it. Of course, if justice didn’t demand it, it wasn’t really an act of love, for why would the Father make His Son suffer for no reason?
4. Other great Scholastics include Albertus Magnus, or Albert the Great, the teacher of Thomas Aquinas; William of Ockham, John Duns Scotus, and Roger Bacon (Carnes, 234-39).
5. But by far the most famous Scholastic was Thomas Aquinas, who lived from 1225-1274.
 - a. Aquinas wrote a tremendous amount of literature during his life, including commentaries on just about every book of the Bible.
 - b. But he is best remembered for his *Summa Contra Gentiles* and his *Summa Theologiae* or *Summary of Theology*.
 - c. “One defended ‘the truth of the Catholic faith against the pagans’ by clearly distinguishing between reason and faith; the other summarized all that was known about God and man” (Concise, 33).
 - d. His *Summa Theologiae* became the classic exposition of the system of theology held by the Roman Catholic Church.
 - e. Aquinas actually represents what was good and bad in Scholasticism.
 - (i) Because he made use of the Bible, of Augustine’s writings, and of those elements of the creeds and fathers that were sound, his work actually helped to further the Protestant cause.
 - (ii) Francis Turretin – whose *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* we have in the library – and other Protestant theologians who studied and taught after the Council of Trent, were indebted to Aquinas not only for his methods of study, but also for his detailed arguments on the points they agreed on.

- (iii) His very well known contributions in the area of apologetics have also been felt throughout the centuries (Helm, 61).
- (iv) There was, however, also a downside. Aquinas apparently had a faulty view of the nature of man. He believed that man's will was "bent" by sin but not completely determined to do evil, as Augustine had taught. In other words, Thomas did not believe in total depravity. Man's moral nature was injured, but not destroyed, by the fall. Therefore, man could do something towards his justification.
- (v) Aquinas also justified indulgences by teaching that the extra merits of Christ and the saints could be drawn upon by the church for those who were penitent (Carnes 238).
- (vi) His emphasis on the sacraments as *the* channels of grace also strengthened the hold of the Roman church on the individual, for there could be no salvation apart from the sacraments dispensed by the church hierarchy (Carnes 239).

D. Evaluation.

1. There was both good and bad that came from the Scholastic movement.
 - a. It actually helped to further the education of Luther and the other Reformers – since it formed the content of learning at the universities they studied in – as well as contributed to the methods and understanding of later Protestant Theologians.
 - b. But it also helped to cement Rome in some of her more serious errors.
 - c. "Above all," Carnes writes, "in the *Summa Theologiae* of Aquinas, Scholasticism furnished the medieval and modern Roman Catholic church with an authoritative, integrated synthesis that harmonized philosophy and religion" (Carnes 240).
2. But there was one other danger associated with Scholasticism.
 - a. Not only did it come to some very wrong conclusions about what the Bible taught, but also its emphasis on knowledge had a tendency to dampen the relational aspect of Christianity.
 - b. This is still a very real danger today.
 - (i) If we divorce our study of the Bible from our hearts, we will end in *formalism* – we might have right beliefs and go through the right motions, but if our hearts are not filled with love for God, everything we do will be worthless.
 - (ii) As Paul tells us, "If I have *the gift of* prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2-3).
 - (iii) It's interesting to note that some forms of Scholasticism actually moved in the direction of mysticism – which sought after a more direct contact with God – because of their desire to live in the presence of God (Carnes 239-40). This is really what our study of the Bible should move us to do.
 - (iv) Aquinas himself was said to have left his *Summa Theologiae* unfinished in 1273, for after a spiritual experience, probably of the same kind the mystic sought, he said, "All I have written seems to me like so much straw compared with what I have seen and what has been revealed to me" (Concise, 33).
3. Scholasticism provided the content and method of the Reformation.
 - a. It showed us that reason does play a role in understanding the Scripture. We must use our minds to understand what it says.
 - b. We mustn't forget that Luther had been schooled in the university and was a *doctor of* theology. Perhaps this is why Luther, at the Diet of Worms in 1521, told his examiners

that unless he could be convinced by the testimony of Scripture, *or by reason*, he would not recant.

c. Scholasticism helped us to see that Christianity is a reasonable faith.

II. The rise of universities. “The university as a center for teaching and research developed about 1200. By 1400 there were over seventy-five European universities. In these schools Scholastic studies formed a large part of the curriculum. Most of the great universities of modern Europe had their beginnings in this period. Teaching on the higher level had gone on before the development of the universities, but after their rise most of the higher education which had centered in monastic and cathedral schools, was given in university classrooms” (Carnes, 240).

III. Medieval worship.

A. “All the ceremonies important to the religious life of the individual occurred in the cathedral, and one who lived in a cathedral town was considered fortunate. He was baptized, confirmed, and married in the church. He was buried from the church in the cemetery within the ground of the church. But the most important part of worship, whether the building was a cathedral or a simple church, was the Mass. After the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, it was a part of Roman Catholic dogma that the priest’s works of consecration changed the bread and the wine into the actual body and blood of Christ. Christ was sacrificed afresh by the priest for the benefit of the believers. It did not matter that the cup was withheld from the believer after the twelfth century, for the body and blood were, according to Roman dogma, in each element. The practice of elevating the elements by the priest became a custom in the thirteenth century in order that the faithful might worship Christ in the Mass” (243).

B. “The development of polyphonic music, which consisted of many melodic lines and hence was better sung by trained choirs, ended the practice of congregational singing in unison. Music became elaborate and colorful as a proper accompaniment to the sacred mysteries of the Mass” (243).

IV. Conclusion: “One cannot overlook the real and positive contributions of the Roman church between 590 and 1305, despite the many evidences of failure in personal and institutional practices. It gave Greco-Roman culture and the Christian religion to the Germans who took over the Roman Empire. It provided the only real culture and scholarship, which kept leaning alive through the work of such scholars as Bede, Alcuin, Einhard, and others. The moral tone of society was improved by the mitigation of the evils of slavery, the elevation of the position of women, and the softening of the horrors of feudal war. The Roman church sponsored what relief and charitable work was done in the Middle Ages. It provided an intellectual synthesis for life in the theological system that the Scholastics developed and it impressed on men their solidarity as members of the church, despite the decentralizing tendencies of feudalism. God used the Roman Catholic church to further His own ends in spite of its failure at so many points when it is compared with the true church, depicted in the New Testament” (243).