

Scholasticism & the High Middle Ages

Anselm, Bernard, the universities, the friars, Aquinas — when faith sought understanding • 1050–1350

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: Lesson 30 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — the theological development that filled the gap between [the Benedictine era](#) and [the Reformation](#). Between 1050 and 1350 the Latin West rediscovered logic, built universities, produced the four great mendicant orders, and in Thomas Aquinas gave medieval Christianity its towering theological synthesis. See the full [Series Timeline](#).

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

When most Protestants think of the Middle Ages they picture indulgences, relics, and superstition — the dark backdrop against which the Reformation then shone. That picture is a caricature. Between roughly 1050 and 1350 the Latin-speaking West underwent one of the most extraordinary intellectual and spiritual renewals in the history of civilization. Cathedrals rose in every major city. Universities were founded at Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Salamanca. Whole libraries of Greek and Arabic philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and law, lost to the West for six centuries, were translated into Latin. Two brand-new preaching orders — the Franciscans and the Dominicans — swept across Europe, and in their ranks rose the greatest theological mind of the Middle Ages, **Thomas Aquinas**.

The word for this movement is *Scholasticism* — from the Latin *schola*, “school.” At its heart Scholasticism was a method: read the authoritative texts (the Bible, the Church Fathers, Aristotle, the decrees of councils), identify the places where they appear to disagree, and use the tools of logic to reconcile them. The method produced the *Summa* — a genre of comprehensive, question-and-answer theology — and it produced a confident conviction that faith and reason are allies, not enemies.

Martin Luther would later attack late-medieval Scholasticism fiercely (his 1517 *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* preceded the 95 Theses by seven weeks). But Luther was formed by medieval Augustinianism and never rejected the earlier Scholastics wholesale. Protestants who want to understand their own theological grammar — the doctrines of the Trinity, the atonement, divine simplicity, the sacraments, the nature of faith — must understand the century of Anselm, Bernard, Peter Lombard, Francis, Dominic, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas.

LXX (Isa 7:9 end): καὶ ἐὰν μὴ πιστεύσητε, οὐδὲ μὴ συνῆτε.

Isaiah 7:9 (ESV): “If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.” — The Old Latin version (*nisi credideritis, non intelligetis*, “unless you believe, you will not understand”) was Augustine’s — and later Anselm’s — banner verse.

PART 1 — THE BACKGROUND: FROM THE DARK AGES TO 1050

For nearly six centuries after the fall of Rome in the West (AD 476), Latin Christendom was a thinly populated, non-urban, agrarian world of monasteries, parish churches, and small towns. Learning was preserved almost entirely in monastic scriptoria. A monk copying an Augustine manuscript, teaching the seven liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy) to novices, and chanting the Psalter through each week was about the sum total of “Christian intellectual life” for centuries.

Three things changed that around 1050–1100:

1. Demographic recovery. After 1000, Europe’s population began a steady climb that would nearly double by 1300. New towns grew, old towns revived, cathedrals became bishops’ schools again, and city-based urban life began to require a kind of learning monasteries alone could not supply.

2. The Gregorian Reform (c. 1050–1122). Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–1085), following earlier reforms by Leo IX, forced the conflict of *investiture* — who appoints bishops, the pope or the emperor? — and won it (the Concordat of Worms, 1122). The result was a Church that understood itself as a sovereign international society with its own law, courts, taxation, and education system.

3. The translation wave. Between roughly 1085 (fall of Toledo to Christian forces) and 1250, a century-and-a-half of sustained translation work in Spain, Sicily, and southern Italy brought the lost Greek corpus back into Latin. **Aristotle**—almost unknown in the Latin West for eight centuries except for a handful of logical works — was translated in full, with the Muslim commentators **Avicenna** (Ibn Sina, d. 1037) and **Averroes** (Ibn Rushd, d. 1198) and the Jewish philosopher **Moses Maimonides** (d. 1204). Greek medicine (Hippocrates, Galen), Greek mathematics (Euclid, Ptolemy), Arabic algebra (al-Khwarizmi), and the Justinianic Roman law code all re-entered Latin libraries within roughly a hundred years. Western Christian thinkers woke up to a library they hadn’t known they’d lost.

PART 2 — ANSELM OF CANTERBURY — “FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING”

Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109)

BORN AOSTA, NORTHERN ITALY • BENEDICTINE MONK OF BEC (NORMANDY) •
ABBOT OF BEC 1078 • ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY 1093–1109

Anselm left his native Italy as a young man, wandered for three years, and eventually settled at the Benedictine abbey of Bec in Normandy under the famous teacher **Lanfranc**. Here he spent nearly thirty years as monk, prior, and abbot, producing a series of theological treatises that opened a new era in Western Christian thought.

Three works changed the landscape. In the *Monologion* (c. 1076) Anselm offered a chain of arguments for God’s existence and attributes without quoting any Scripture or authority — the first time a Christian theologian had attempted to reason his way to the doctrine of God by logic alone, not in the belief that Scripture was unnecessary but to show that Scripture’s claims were reasonable. In the *Proslogion* (c. 1078) he gave the famous **ontological argument**: God is “that than which nothing greater can be thought,” and such a being must exist in reality and not merely in the mind, or we could think of something greater. The argument has been debated by every major Western philosopher since — Aquinas rejected it, Descartes revived it, Kant attacked it, Plantinga reformulated it in the 20th century. It is the one philosophical argument that has never gone away.

In *Cur Deus Homo* (“Why God Became Man,” 1098) Anselm produced the **satisfaction theory of the atonement** that would become the dominant Western account for the next thousand years, and from which the later Reformed “penal substitution” developed.

Anselm argued that human sin created a debt of honor that no mere creature could repay; only a divine Person could offer satisfaction, but only a human Person owed it — therefore the incarnation was *necessary* for redemption. The book moves step by step with rigorous argument, and though Protestants later corrected Anselm on several points (especially on the language of “honor” rather than “justice”), the foundation of Reformed atonement theology is here.

Anselm’s motto, *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”), is the Scholastic program in three words. Believe first. Then use your mind to understand what you already believe.

I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand. For this also I believe, that unless I believe, I shall not understand.

PART 3 — THE BIRTH OF THE UNIVERSITIES (1100–1250)

Alongside Anselm’s theological revival, a new institution was being born. The great cathedral schools of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries (Chartres, Laon, Reims, Paris) attracted students from hundreds of miles away. By the late twelfth century these loose groupings of masters and students had begun to formalize into legal corporations — *universitates*, Latin for “the whole body” — with statutes, buildings, faculties, degrees, and privileges protected by popes and kings. Four of the greatest:

Bologna (c. 1088). The first university, founded by law students who hired Roman-law professors. Bologna became the West’s greatest center of canon and civil law for the next four centuries.

Paris (c. 1150–1200). Grew out of the cathedral school of Notre-Dame and rapidly became the intellectual capital of Latin Christendom. The Paris faculty of theology — its four colleges, later the Sorbonne — produced nearly every major Scholastic theologian from Peter Abelard through William of Ockham. Pope Gregory IX’s 1231 bull *Parens Scientiarum* (“Parent of Sciences”) ratified Paris’s privileges.

Oxford (c. 1167). English scholars returning from Paris during an Anglo-French quarrel founded what became Oxford’s federation of colleges. Cambridge followed around 1209 after a riot at Oxford drove some masters east.

Salamanca (1218). Founded by Alfonso IX of León, it became the theological powerhouse of Iberian Catholicism and the major training ground for the 16th-century Spanish missionary expansion to the Americas.

Each university had a characteristic method: the *lectio* (reading of a set text with running commentary), the *quaestio* (a posed question with arguments *pro* and *contra*), the *disputatio* (a public debate before masters and students), and the *summa* (a comprehensive, question-ordered textbook).

One set of Paris textbooks above all defined the theology faculty for four hundred years: **Peter Lombard's *Four Books of Sentences*** (c. 1150). Lombard (c. 1100–1160), bishop of Paris, collected roughly a thousand “sentences” or authoritative statements from Scripture, the Fathers (Augustine heavily), and later writers, grouped them into four books (God, creation, incarnation and the virtues, the sacraments), and posed the theological questions each raised. Every medieval theologian from 1200 to 1500 earned his mastership in theology by writing a commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*. Aquinas, Bonaventure, Scotus, Ockham, and a young Martin Luther all wrote *Sentences* commentaries.

PART 4 — BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX — THE MONASTIC ALTERNATIVE

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

BORN FONTAINE-LÈS-DIJON, BURGUNDY • ENTERED CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF CÎTEAUX 1113 • FOUNDED CLAIRVAUX 1115 • DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH • CANONIZED 1174

Cistercian

“Honey-mouthed”

Mystic

Not every great medieval theologian was a university master. Bernard was a monk, and the most influential Christian of the twelfth century was made by the cloister, not the classroom. The son of a Burgundian knight, he entered the austere young Cistercian order at twenty-two, bringing with him five brothers and twenty-five friends. Three years later he founded the abbey of **Clairvaux** (“Clear Valley”) and governed it for thirty-eight years. Under his leadership the Cistercian order exploded from a handful of houses to more than three hundred by his death.

Bernard was a preacher, a letter-writer, and a Scripture-saturated theologian of love. His *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (86 sermons on Song of Songs 1:1 through 3:4, still

unfinished at his death) are one of the great monuments of Christian mystical theology, and his treatise *On Loving God* remains required reading. He defended Christian orthodoxy against the innovations of Peter Abelard at the Council of Sens (1141), preached the Second Crusade (disastrously, as it turned out, 1146), and served as the unofficial spiritual director of popes, kings, and nobility across Europe.

Luther treasured Bernard above almost any medieval writer. “If there has been a pious and truly Christian monk in this monkish order,” Luther once said, “it was Bernard of Clairvaux, whom alone I hold in such high esteem that I put him above all the monks and priests of the whole world.” The Lutheran and Reformed traditions sing Bernard still: “Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee,” “O Sacred Head Now Wounded,” and “Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts” all derive from texts associated with him.

The reason for loving God is God himself; the measure, to love him without measure.

— Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, ch. 1 (c. 1128)

PART 5 — THE FRIARS — FRANCIS, DOMINIC, AND THE MENDICANT REVOLUTION (1210S)

By the early thirteenth century Europe’s monasteries had become wealthy, rural, and often remote. Urban Europeans — merchants, craftsmen, the new university students — needed Christian ministers who lived among them, preached to them, heard their confessions, and were credibly poor. Within two decades, two towering figures founded the two religious orders that met that need: the **Franciscans** (Order of Friars Minor) and the **Dominicans** (Order of Preachers).

Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226)

BORN ASSISI, UMBRIA, CENTRAL ITALY • SON OF PIETRO BERNARDONE, A CLOTH MERCHANT • FOUNDED ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR 1209 • CANONIZED 1228

Franciscan founder

Stigmata

“Lady Poverty”

Francis Bernardone was the son of a wealthy Assisi cloth merchant. He was a popular, carefree young man, went to war against Perugia in 1202 as a young knight, was captured, held for ransom for a year, and came home a changed man. After a long period of illness and prayer, he began to care for lepers, rebuild broken-down chapels with his own hands, and preach repentance in the streets. In 1206, publicly summoned by his angry father before the bishop of Assisi, Francis stripped himself of every garment he owned and gave them back to his father, declaring, “From now on I have only one Father, who is in heaven.”

In 1209 Francis and eleven companions walked to Rome and asked Pope Innocent III for permission to live a life of radical poverty, preaching the Gospel. The pope granted a provisional approval, and within twenty years the Franciscans numbered more than five thousand across Europe. In 1212 his friend **Clare of Assisi** (1194–1253) founded the women’s branch, the Poor Clares. In 1224 Francis received the *stigmata* — bleeding wounds matching those of the crucified Christ — on Mount La Verna, the first recorded case in Christian history. He died two years later, aged about 45, having composed the *Canticle of the Creatures*, the earliest surviving poem in any Italian dialect.

Dominic de Guzmán (c. 1170–1221)

BORN CALERUEGA, CASTILE (SPAIN) • CANON OF OSMA CATHEDRAL • FOUNDED ORDER OF PREACHERS 1216 • CANONIZED 1234

Dominican founder

Order of Preachers

Albigensian mission

Dominic was born in Castile a decade before Francis, entered the cathedral of Osma as a regular canon, and in 1203 traveled to southern France where he encountered the **Cathars** or *Albigensians* — a Manichean-influenced dualist movement strong in Languedoc. Dominic’s response was not military (though others pursued that path in the brutal Albigensian Crusade of 1209–1229) but educational and pastoral: preach better, live more simply, and argue more carefully than the Cathar *perfecti*. In 1216 Pope Honorius III confirmed Dominic’s small community as the Order of Preachers (*Ordo Praedicatorum*, hence “OP”).

Dominican formation was rigorously academic from the start. Every province of the order maintained a *studium* (school); the friars went to Paris, Bologna, and Oxford in large numbers; and within thirty years the Dominicans produced the two most influential

theologians of the Middle Ages: Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. Where Franciscan spirituality tended to emphasize poverty, humility, and the affective love of Christ crucified, Dominican spirituality from the start pursued truth — *veritas* is the Dominican motto — through rigorous study, preaching, and theological precision.

PART 6 — THOMAS AQUINAS (1225–1274)

Thomas Aquinas, O.P. (1225–1274)

BORN ROCCASECCA, KINGDOM OF SICILY • BENEDICTINE OBLATE AT MONTE CASSINO 1231–1239 • UNIVERSITY OF NAPLES 1239–1244 • JOINED DOMINICANS 1244 • PARIS & COLOGNE UNDER ALBERT THE GREAT • REGENT MASTER OF THEOLOGY, PARIS, 1256–59 AND 1269–72 • DIED AT FOSSANOVA, ON THE WAY TO THE COUNCIL OF LYON

“Angelic Doctor”

Summa Theologiae

Canonized 1323

Thomas was the youngest son of Count Landulf of Aquino, a minor Italian noble family related distantly to the Hohenstaufen emperors. At age five he was sent to the great Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino as an oblate, where his family expected him to become abbot and so bring ecclesiastical prestige to the family. At nineteen he changed course spectacularly by joining the new Dominican order. His family was appalled — the Dominicans were mendicants, begging friars, a disgrace to aristocratic expectations — and his brothers kidnapped him, held him prisoner in the family castle for a year, and even sent a prostitute to his room to break his resolve. (He drove her out with a firebrand, knelt, and asked God for the grace of chastity; he was never again, according to his earliest biographers, tempted in that direction.) After a year his mother quietly let him go. At Paris and Cologne he studied under **Albert the Great** (c. 1200–1280), the polymath Dominican who had set himself the task of making all of Aristotle available and intelligible in Latin. Aquinas was large, quiet, and slow-speaking; his fellow students called him “the dumb ox.” Albert’s judgment: “We call him the dumb ox, but the bellowing of this ox will yet be heard to the ends of the earth.”

Aquinas taught at Paris (twice) and at papal studia in Italy. In twenty years of teaching he produced a body of work whose sheer scale is almost incredible: a commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (his young master's thesis), commentaries on most of the books of the Bible, commentaries on most of Aristotle, some fifty disputed questions on various topics, two great *Summae* (the *Summa contra Gentiles* for Muslim and Jewish readers, and the unfinished but monumental *Summa Theologiae*), hymns and prayers — a corpus running to some eight million words. His method in the *Summa Theologiae* is the mature form of the Scholastic *quaestio*: each article poses a question, presents arguments for the wrong answer (“Objections”), then “On the contrary” gives an authoritative text, “I answer that” gives Thomas's own resolution, and the final section answers each objection in turn.

On 6 December 1273, saying Mass in Naples, Thomas had some kind of mystical experience. He refused to write anymore, saying simply, “I cannot go on. All that I have written seems to me like straw compared to what has been revealed to me.” Three months later, traveling to the Second Council of Lyon, he struck his head on a low-hanging tree branch and shortly after died at the Cistercian abbey of Fossanova, aged 49. He was canonized fifty years later.

Aquinas's central synthesis can be put in a few theses:

1. Grace perfects nature, it does not destroy it. Natural human reason can know some real truths about God (existence, unity, goodness, causality); special revelation teaches what reason cannot reach alone (Trinity, incarnation, the sacraments). The two are compatible and complementary, never contradictory.

2. Being (*esse*) is the deepest category. God is “He who is” (Exodus 3:14, *ego sum qui sum*), Being itself, the source from which all creatures receive the act of existing. Creatures have being by participation; God is His own being.

3. The “Five Ways” (*Summa Theologiae* I q. 2 a. 3): five arguments for the existence of God, from motion, causation, contingency, degrees of perfection, and the ordering of nature to ends. Each is compressed to about a hundred Latin words. None is intended as a

complete apologetic; all are meant to show that natural reason can conclude that God exists.

4. The distinction of the theological and cardinal virtues. The “cardinal” virtues — prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance — can be acquired by repeated good action even by those without the gospel. The “theological” virtues — faith, hope, charity (1 Cor 13:13) — are infused by grace and cannot be developed by natural effort. Christian ethics is both/and: gospel virtues perfect the natural virtues, but do not replace them.

5. The sacraments as instrumental causes of grace. The seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, holy orders, matrimony) are signs that really convey what they signify. Aquinas’s eucharistic theology (*ST* III qq. 73–83) is the classical account of *transubstantiation*. Luther and Calvin would reject this account, but every Protestant sacramental theology — Reformed, Anglican, Lutheran, even Baptist — is developed against the detailed Thomistic background.

Sacred doctrine does not depend on the other sciences, except the way a master uses the work of his pupils — not because it lacks something in itself, but because of the weakness of our intellect.

— Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2

PART 7 — BONAVENTURE, SCOTUS, OCKHAM — THE FRACTURE

Aquinas did not win the field. Three further giants complicated the Scholastic synthesis, each pushing it in a different direction.

Bonaventure, O.F.M. (1221–1274) — “the Seraphic Doctor”

BORN BAGNOREGIO, CENTRAL ITALY • FRANCISCAN • PARIS THEOLOGY FACULTY 1253 • MINISTER GENERAL OF THE FRANCISCANS 1257–1273 •

CARDINAL 1273 • DIED AT THE SECOND COUNCIL OF LYON, 1274

Franciscan synthesis

Augustinian

Mystic

Bonaventure entered the Franciscans around 1243 and studied at Paris alongside Aquinas; they lectured in the same building for the same years. But where Aquinas looked back to Aristotle and Augustine, Bonaventure looked to Augustine through the mystical tradition of the abbey of St. Victor. His greatest work, *The Soul's Journey into God (Itinerarium Mentis in Deum, 1259)*, traces the soul's ascent through the created world, through the image of God in the mind, to ecstatic union with God in Christ crucified. He also served thirteen years as Minister General of the Franciscans, steering them through a crisis over poverty and writing the order's official *Life of Francis*. Bonaventure and Aquinas died within weeks of each other in 1274, both at the Second Council of Lyon.

John Duns Scotus, O.F.M. (c. 1266–1308) — “the Subtle Doctor”

BORN DUNS, SOUTHERN SCOTLAND • FRANCISCAN • OXFORD, PARIS, COLOGNE
• DIED AT COLOGNE 1308

Franciscan

Haeceitas

Univocity of being

Scotus, trained at Oxford and Paris, is the most technically demanding thinker of the Middle Ages. Two contributions define him. First, against Aquinas, Scotus argued that “being” is used *univocally* of God and creatures — we mean the same thing when we say that God “exists” as when we say that a rock “exists.” Aquinas had insisted on *analogy*: God exists in a way only analogous to creatures' existence. Whether “being” is analogous or univocal sounds technical, but it is arguably the deepest question in Christian metaphysics and shapes everything downstream. Second, Scotus articulated a doctrine of individual natures (*haecceitas*, “thisness”) that anchored the reality of individual persons in a way the earlier tradition had struggled to do. Scotus also argued for the Immaculate Conception of Mary — that she was conceived without original sin — against the majority Thomist view; his position eventually became official Roman dogma in 1854.

William of Ockham, O.F.M. (c. 1287–1347) — “the Venerable Inceptor”

BORN OCKHAM, SURREY, ENGLAND • FRANCISCAN • OXFORD 1300S •
SUMMONED TO PAPAL AVIGNON 1324, FLED TO EMPEROR LOUIS OF BAVARIA

Nominalism

“Ockham’s Razor”

Conciliarism

Ockham took Scotus’s emphasis on individuals and pushed it to its limit: universals (the idea of “humanity” shared by every person, or “redness” shared by every red object) have no reality outside the mind. They are merely names (*nomina*, hence *nominalism*). Only individuals exist. His famous methodological principle — “entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity,” known as “Ockham’s Razor” — follows from this: prefer the simpler explanation that requires fewer metaphysical commitments.

Ockham’s nominalism, combined with his strong doctrine of the absolute power of God (*potentia absoluta Dei*), opened a path to Luther. If there are no universal natures, then “righteousness” cannot be infused into human nature as a habit; it must be something external, imputed by God’s sovereign decree. Luther, formed in the late-medieval *via moderna* that descended from Ockham, took exactly this step when he formulated justification by faith. Whether Ockham’s nominalism was a disaster for theology (as the Thomist Catholics usually argue) or a providential preparation for the Reformation (as some Protestants claim) is one of the great questions of this era.

PART 8 — THE END OF THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES (1309–1378)

The intellectual world that Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham built up was shaken by three catastrophes in the fourteenth century.

The Avignon Papacy (1309–1377). Pressured by the French king, Pope Clement V moved the papal court to Avignon in southern France. For nearly seventy years the popes lived there rather than Rome; the papal curia swelled, papal taxation intensified, and ordinary Christians across Europe began speaking of the “Babylonian Captivity of the Church” — a phrase Luther would later reclaim for his own attack on the sacramental system.

The Black Death (1347–1353). Bubonic plague killed somewhere between a third and a half of all Europeans in six years. The plague hit the mendicant orders especially hard — friars who visited the sick died in enormous numbers — and the surviving friars were often new recruits hastily trained. The quality of pastoral care collapsed in many regions for a generation.

The Great Western Schism (1378–1417). After the return of the papacy to Rome (1377), disputed elections produced first two, then three simultaneous popes (Rome, Avignon, Pisa), each with his own curia, college of cardinals, and European allies. The situation was resolved only by the Council of Constance (1414–1418), which deposed all three claimants and elected Martin V. The same council burned Jan Hus at the stake (6 July 1415) — the story covered in Lesson 31.

Scholasticism did not die. It continued powerfully into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the great Spanish Scholastics — Francisco de Vitoria, Domingo de Soto, Francisco Suárez — wrote some of the finest Thomistic theology ever composed). But after 1350 the great creative age of the medieval university was past, and by 1500 the pressure that would produce the Reformation was already building.

PART 9 — HOW PROTESTANTS SHOULD READ SCHOLASTICISM

1. It gave Protestants their theological grammar. Every Protestant confession (Augsburg 1530, Westminster 1647, London Baptist 1689) uses vocabulary developed at medieval Paris. When we say “Christ has two natures in one Person” or “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable,” we are speaking Scholastic Latin translated into English.

2. Luther’s quarrel was with *late* Scholasticism, not with the whole tradition. Luther repeatedly praised Bernard and had qualified respect for Aquinas. His 1517 *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* was chiefly an attack on Gabriel Biel and the late *via*

moderna's account of human preparation for grace, not a wholesale rejection of medieval theology.

3. Calvin was a humanist-trained reader of the Fathers and of the early Scholastics.

The *Institutes* quote Bernard favorably some 35 times, Aquinas occasionally, and Peter Lombard without dismissal. Reformed theology is more continuous with the medieval synthesis than 19th-century Protestant polemics suggested.

4. Thomistic metaphysics is experiencing a Reformed revival. Since roughly 2000, Reformed theologians (Michael Horton, Matthew Barrett, James Dolezal, Steven Duby, Craig Carter) have been reclaiming what they call “classical theism” — divine simplicity, impassibility, aseity, eternity — from the medieval tradition, over against modern revisions. The 13th century has unexpectedly become contemporary again.

5. Still, the Reformation's central disagreements remain. The doctrine of justification, the authority of Scripture over and above ecclesiastical magisterium, the denial of transubstantiation, the rejection of merit, and the priesthood of all believers were not simply updates to Aquinas; they were a genuine restructuring of Catholic medieval theology. Honest evangelical engagement with Scholasticism welcomes what is true and names what is still disputed.

Greek NT (Col 2:8): βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων... καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν.

Colossians 2:8 (ESV): “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition... and not according to Christ.” — A verse quoted by both supporters and critics of Scholasticism.

Eternal God, you are “He who is,” the Being from whom all beings derive. You have given your Church through the centuries teachers of astonishing depth and intellect, and Christian thinkers to whom we owe doctrines and vocabulary we take for granted. We thank you for Anselm and his faith that sought understanding, for Bernard whose pen and prayer never strayed from the name of Jesus, for Francis and Clare with their love of holy poverty, for Dominic and his order of preachers, and for Thomas Aquinas whose “ox’s bellow” still echoes. Give us minds to understand what we believe and hearts that never stop short of loving you with mind and strength and soul. Keep us from the pride that turns theology into sport and from the false humility that refuses to think hard about you. Draw all your people, in every age and tradition, into the knowledge of your Son, who is the Truth, the Way, and the Life, and in whose name we pray. Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Anselm’s motto was “faith seeking understanding.” Is Christian theology a matter of proving what we believe from neutral ground (“reason to faith”) or of reasoning from within the household of faith (“faith to understanding”)? Read Hebrews 11:1, 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, and Proverbs 1:7.

2. Aquinas held that grace perfects nature but does not destroy it. Protestants have often disagreed over how much human reason can know about God apart from special revelation. Where on that spectrum do Romans 1:18–20 and Acts 17:22–28 place us?

3. Francis and Dominic both founded mendicant (begging) preaching orders in 1209–1216. What do their combined gifts — Franciscan love of Jesus crucified, Dominican commitment to careful preaching — suggest our churches today still need?

4. Luther was formed in the nominalist (Ockhamist) tradition before breaking with it. Was nominalism a catastrophe for theology, a preparation for the gospel, or both? What is at

stake when we say that justification is *imputed* rather than *infused*?

5. Should modern evangelical pastors and teachers read Aquinas? What could we gain, and what risks would we run?

FURTHER READING

- Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 3rd ed., Baker Academic, 2012 — esp. Chapter 6 on medieval Christianity
- Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* and *Cur Deus Homo* — in the Oxford World's Classics *Major Works* volume
- Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God* (short — a single afternoon's reading)
- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, questions 1–13 — on the knowledge and nature of God (start here, not at the beginning of book 1)
- G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (1923) and *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1933) — brilliant, opinionated, short introductions by a convert Catholic
- Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, Ignatius Press — the best short introduction to the *Summa*
- Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (Gifford Lectures 1931–32) — still the classic overview
- Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, Harvard 1963 — on late-medieval nominalism and its shaping of Luther
- Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, Baker Academic, 2021 — a Reformed Baptist recovery of classical Thomistic-Augustinian trinitarianism
- James Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, Reformation Heritage, 2017 — divine simplicity for contemporary Reformed readers

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A complete, print-ready version of this lesson for classroom or personal study.

Next: Lesson 31 — *Waldensians, Wycliffe, and Hus — The Pre-Reformation Reformers*, the morning-star figures of the 12th–15th centuries who anticipated Luther by generations.

[← Benedict & Monasticism](#)

[Series Timeline →](#)

Pleasant Springs Church • Henderson / Pinson, Tennessee • Church History Series • Lesson 30
Prepared by Shane Gunn • Scripture: LXX + ESV (Old Testament) • Greek NT + ESV (New Testament)