

# Why the Resurrection of Jesus Makes a Difference

Acts 3:12-19

Luke 24:36-48

1 John 3:1-7



When I was in my teens and early twenties, Evangelicals were not known for writing great systematic theology. What they were known for was apologetics, which fit in with their focus on evangelism. My first introduction to the realm of Christian thought was in the field of apologetics. I read everything I could get my hands on by writers like C. S. Lewis, but also by writers I'm sure most of you have never heard of. When I first started reading real Systematic Theologians, it was largely because of their apologetic value. I liked Thomas Aquinas because of his Five Ways to demonstrate the existence of God. I liked Wolfhart Pannenberg because of his arguments for the resurrection of Jesus. I was rather proud of my abilities as an apologist and was convinced that I could prove that Christianity was true based on irrefutable arguments for the existence of God and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

One summer I was working one of those temporary jobs you get to pay your way through school and I got to know a young man my own age who had grown up Episcopalian, had been an acolyte

when he was a teenager, and was now an atheist. I was trying to convince him that the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus was fairly solid, and he blurted out "What if someone could come up with a good argument that John F. Kennedy had risen from the dead? What difference would it make?" As you can imagine, my apologetic arguments had no influence whatsoever on this guy, and after the job ended, we lost track of one another, and I never saw him again.

I teach a course in Christian Apologetics here at Trinity, but my approach is now very different from what it was then. Karl Barth is supposed to have said somewhere that the best apologetics is good systematic theology, and I have come to agree. The problem with the apologetic approach that I first studied as a teenager is that it makes no real connection to the central subject matter of Christian faith. These days I am not particularly interested in the question of whether someone can make a rational argument for the existence of a first cause of the universe. I am much more interested in the question of whether the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ and who raised him from the dead exists. It's not that I think that the traditional philosophical and historical arguments don't work. They are probably as valid as they ever were. However, I also think that young man who compared my apologetic arguments for the resurrection of Jesus to the case for the resurrection of John F. Kennedy had a point. The most important question is not whether there is a strong historical argument that a first century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth turned out to be alive three days after he was crucified. The really important question is whether the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ the Son of God raised him from the dead.

This is, of course, the approach that the New Testament writings take to the resurrection of Jesus. The New Testament does not simply assert that there are good historical reasons to believe that a first century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth turned out to be mysteriously alive three days after having been

crucified, but that the God who created the entire universe, the God who delivered the nation of Israel from bondage in Egypt and spoke to them over and over again through prophets and priests, that this God has raised this man from the dead, that this God is the Father of this Jesus who is his eternal Son become a human being, and this is remarkably good news for Jews and Gentiles alike because it has to do with the purpose and destiny of the entire creation. And that makes a huge difference!

So what difference does it make if Jesus of Nazareth really rose from the dead? Why would we care about a living Jesus more than a living John F. Kennedy? Let's look at this morning's lectionary readings.

First, the resurrection means that Jesus is the clue to all of history – past, present, and future – and to the future of the entire universe. The lectionary readings this morning begin by connecting the resurrection of Jesus to Israel's past. In Peter's sermon in Acts, he tells his listeners: "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus," (Acts 3:13) and a little later "But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled" (Acts 3:18). In the gospel passage in Luke, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples and proclaims "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). So the resurrection of Jesus points back to the past of God's covenant with his people Israel. At the end of the Acts passage, Peter tells his hearers: "You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness" (Acts 3:25-26). The

resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises that God had made to his people Israel.

But the resurrection of Jesus also points to the future, not simply of Israel, but of the entire universe. Peter's sermon not only looks to the past history of Israel, but looks forward to God's promise of Christ's return and the restoration of all creation: "that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago" (Acts 3:20-21).

And then the resurrection not only points back to the past of Israel, and to Jesus' future return, but to that distant past when, according to the book of Acts, God created the entire universe through the Son who would be incarnate as Jesus. Peter accuses his hearers: "you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 3:15). The paradox in this passage was later echoed by the Anglican poet George Herbert, "Hark, how they cry aloud still, *Crucify. It is not fit he live a day*, they cry, Who cannot live less than eternally." (George Herbert, "The Sacrifice")

If this Jesus who was crucified was raised from the dead, if this risen Jesus is himself the Author of Life, then the resurrection of Jesus provides the clue to all of history and the purpose and meaning of the very universe. The resurrection of Jesus looks back to the history of Israel and the beginning of creation, but it also looks forward to the universality of the entire human race and to the future of all creation. Despair is the opposite of hope because it is the fear of non-being and purposelessness. The resurrection of Jesus leads to faith rather than despair because it is the overcoming of death and the threat of non-being. The resurrection of Jesus gives reason for hope because it says that there is a God who created the universe, and that the universe has a purpose and a future.

However, we live in a particularly hopeless time, an age of cynicism and distrust. This leads to the second reason why the resurrection of Jesus makes a difference. The good news of the resurrection is that when the risen Jesus Christ appears to his disciples, he speaks words of peace, not words of condemnation.

The resurrection is a corrective to the corrosive cynicism of our age. For the last couple of decades, we have been told that we are living in the era of post-modernity. Post-modernity was largely a reaction to the facile optimism of the era of modernity. The promises of equality and freedom that were supposed to be the inevitable consequences of modern Western democracies and modern economics never arrived. Modernity did not bring about a new world.

One of the wrenches in the tool box of post-modernity is the methodology of suspicion, distrust of those who promise to make things better. Post-modernity tells us to beware of those who claim to be high-minded. Power is about control, and promises to make things better are really disguised "grabs for power." What do those who make these promises hope to gain for themselves? Unfortunately, two decades of post-modernity has not made things better. Suspicion of those in power has only led to more suspicion. Just think of the gap between those who look forward to "Hope and change" and those who look backward to "Make America Great Again."

The resurrection of Jesus agrees with post-modernity in that it is not naïve about the corruption of power. Jesus was crucified by those who were in charge of things. Jewish religious leaders joined together with the puppet representative of the occupying Roman army to do away with a troublesome young prophet from Galilee. No doubt they thought they were making things better.

The followers of Jesus had every right to be cynical; they had every right to be disappointed, and they had every right to be

disillusioned. Their hopes had been disappointed. Jesus had failed in his mission. They were afraid for their own lives, that they could end up as Jesus did, on Roman crosses. Finally, they were disappointed in themselves. With the exception of a few women and the beloved disciple who stayed by the side of the mother of Jesus, Jesus' followers had fled and deserted the crucified Jesus in his hour of need. When push came to shove, even Simon Peter, the disciple who had confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, denied three times that he knew him.

Yet the resurrection of Jesus goes beyond cynicism and distrust and fear in a way that post-modernity cannot. Notice the first words that the risen Jesus speaks to his discouraged and doubting disciples: "Peace be with you!" (Luke 24:36). When the disciples still doubted, when they were still afraid, the risen Jesus appeared and spoke to them: "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see" (Luke 24:38-39).

And what about the Jewish religious leaders themselves, those who had conspired with the help of Pontius Pilate to do away with Jesus? The apostle Peter pulls no punches in his sermon in this morning's lectionary reading: "[Y]ou denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 3:14-15). But Peter does not leave his hearers with a message of guilt and condemnation. Instead, Peter echoes the message of peace that Jesus spoke to his followers on Easter morning. Peter says to those he had just accused of murdering the Author of Life, "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. . . . Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus . . ." (Acts 3:17, 19).

What difference does it make that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead? The difference is that the fear and doubt of Jesus' disciples, and even the unbelieving corruption of power by those who "killed the Author of life" leads not to condemnation and cynicism, but to something new, the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is a word that post-modernity does not understand and cannot use because it is a word that can only be pronounced by the risen Jesus Christ. Only the "Author of life" can restore to life those who have been either the victims of or the willing accomplices of the power of death.

And that leads to the third and the final way that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead makes a difference. The resurrection of Jesus means forgiveness not only for first century Jews, Greeks and Romans, but for everyone who has ever lived, even for you and me. The resurrection of Jesus means that all sinful human beings, those who betrayed Jesus by helping to nail him to the cross, those who have deserted and denied Christ like Simon Peter, even we ourselves who have failed, deserted, and denied Jesus Christ in so many ways, are loved by the God who created the universe, the Father who raised his Son Jesus from the dead. In the First Letter of John, we hear the words this morning: "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1).

That the Father has shown his love for us means that we who have received Jesus Christ's forgiveness, who have heard his words "Peace be with you!" have a future. The author of 1 John writes, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). We have already seen that in his Acts sermon, Peter had preached that Jesus Christ would return to restore all things.

But the resurrection of Jesus also makes a difference for the present, in this time "between the times" of Jesus'

resurrection and his return. In his appearance at the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus gives to his followers a mission, "that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). The risen Jesus said to his apostles, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). As Jesus' resurrection means that we ourselves have heard the message of forgiveness, "Peace be with you!", so, like those first witnesses gathered in that room, we have the privilege to share that word of peace and forgiveness to others. As those who were gathered in that upper room were witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, so we also are witnesses that Jesus has risen from the dead and that makes a real difference.

And so we find ourselves hearing the words of the risen Jesus Christ: "Peace be with you!" With the apostle Peter in his sermon, we find ourselves saying "We too are witnesses of these things." Like the apostles to whom Jesus appeared in the upper room, we too have received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit in our midst, and we too await that day when the risen Lord Jesus Christ will return and make all things new.

So, yes. The resurrection of Jesus Christ does indeed make a difference. If the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ has raised his raised Son from the dead, it is the most important event, not only in human history, but in the history of the universe. It makes all the difference in the world.

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**Thomas Aquinas for  
Evangelicals (Part 1)**



# Introduction



I first became acquainted with the writings of Thomas Aquinas when I was an undergraduate philosophy major. I became interested in Aquinas because I was interested in apologetics, and I thought that Aquinas would be helpful for doing things like providing arguments for the existence of God. I later shifted my academic focus from philosophy to theology, and have found Aquinas to be a lifelong companion on my theological journey. I am not a Roman Catholic but an Anglican, and I have often encountered a kind of discomfort when other Christians who stand on this side of the Reformation hear about my interest in Aquinas. Aquinas is considered to be the quintessential Roman Catholic theologian, and, accordingly, is regarded with suspicion by many non-Roman Catholic Christians – especially Evangelicals. My *ad hoc* response would be much like that of Christian Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas who, when he was first teaching at the University of Notre Dame, had to respond to concerns that a Methodist theologian was teaching about Thomas Aquinas. Hauerwas countered that Aquinas lived three hundred years before the Protestant Reformation, before there were any distinctions between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Aquinas was not therefore a Roman Catholic theologian, but a church theologian, and so a Methodist had just as much right to claim him as would a Roman Catholic. Recently D. Stephen Long, another Methodist theologian, has argued persuasively that Protestants should recognize that Aquinas actually played a significant role in the history of Reformation theology, and needs to be reclaimed by Protestants. If Aquinas can be

claimed by two Methodist theologians, I would argue that he certainly can be claimed by Anglicans. In what follows, I hope to provide an introduction to Aquinas's thought in a way that might be helpful for Reformation Christians, especially Evangelicals.

### **Who was Thomas Aquinas?**

Thomas Aquinas was born sometime around 1224 or 1225 as the youngest son of lesser nobility, related to the Counts of Aquino, in the family castle of Roccasecca (in southern Italy, halfway between Rome and Naples). His family had hopes that young Thomas would enter the Benedictine order and would perhaps eventually become an abbot, but he had other ideas. There was a new kind of religious order at the time, the friars, who differed from traditional monks in that they were not cloistered – that is, they did not live in monasteries – but lived among the laity and engaged in mission in the everyday world. Friars came in two varieties, the Friars Minor (O.F.M.) or Franciscans (founded by St. Francis of Assisi) and the Order of Preachers (O.P.) or Dominicans (founded by St. Dominic). As their name suggests, the Order of Preachers focused on preaching, but also on study and teaching, so they had a more academic focus than did the Franciscans. Against his family's wishes, the young Aquinas joined the Dominicans in 1244. His family responded by having Thomas kidnapped and held him captive for a year or so. He eventually escaped, and in 1245 the Dominicans sent him to the newly founded University of Paris, a budding intellectual center, where he studied under Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great). In Paris, Thomas studied Aristotle's ethics – Aristotle's major works were now being translated into Latin for the first time – and the writings of the Eastern Christian mystical theologian Pseudo-Dionysius.

In 1256, Aquinas received his Master in Theology (*magister in sacra pagina*); his responsibilities would have included (1) *legere* ("reading"), that is, to comment on Scripture; (2)

*disputare* (disputation), to teach by responding to objections, the teaching method of scholastic theology; (3) *praedicare* (preaching). (Around 100 of Aquinas's sermons have been preserved.) From 1259 to 1274, Aquinas taught in various places, mostly in Paris and Italy. During this time, he wrote his major theological works, and, towards the end of this period, his two major works: the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*.

On the Feast of St. Nicholas (Dec. 6), 1273, Aquinas was celebrating mass and had some kind of unusual experience. Afterwards, he told his *socius* ("secretary") Reginald, "Everything I have written seems like so much straw in comparison to what I have seen." Speculations run the gamut from the theory that Aquinas had some kind of mystical experience to his suffering a stroke. Whatever its nature, after this experience, Thomas ceased to write, and the *Summa Theologiae*, his greatest work, remains unfinished. He got as far as discussing the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, but never finished writing on the other five Catholic sacraments, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, ecclesiology, or eschatology. (Nonetheless, enough exists from his other writings that scholars can at least speculate about what his views would have been. After Aquinas's death, dedicated followers put together a *Supplement* to the *Summa Theologiae*, creating a conclusion based on one of his earliest works, his Commentary on Peter Abelard's *Sentences*.)

In early 1274, Pope Gregory X summoned Aquinas to appear at the Council of Lyons, an attempt to reunite the Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic churches. While traveling to the council, Aquinas struck his head on the branch of a fallen tree. He became ill, and was taken to a Cistercian monastery, where he died shortly after on March 7. Although dying at the age of only 49, Aquinas's written works exceeded those of any other theologian until those of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth, in the twentieth century. As with Aquinas, Barth's

master work, the *Church Dogmatics*, was never finished, ending almost exactly where Aquinas had, with the discussion of the Holy Spirit and the doctrine of the church. (Barth got as far as the doctrine of baptism.)

## **Objections to Aquinas**

Before making a positive case for Aquinas as a theologian, it would probably be helpful to address some of the numerous objections that have been and continue to be raised against Aquinas's theology. The following objections are raised often enough to list them as "standard," especially among Evangelicals. They are so prevalent that unless they are at least addressed, any positive discussion may not get off the ground.

First, it is claimed, Thomas Aquinas was not really a theologian at all, but primarily an Aristotelian philosopher, who imposed pagan philosophy on his theology. Another way of putting this would be to say that Aquinas was primarily a "natural theologian" who was interested in doing things like "proving the existence of God." (This is an objection often found among the "Reformed," especially among those influenced either by John Calvin or Karl Barth.)

Second, an alternative, but related, critique is to complain that Aquinas was a "classical theist" who believed in such things as divine "immutability," whose "static God" is distant from, does not interact with or respond to, and thus cannot love, the creation. Aquinas's embrace of "classical theism" shows again that he was more influenced by Hellenistic philosophy than the Bible. While the above objection would be found among Calvinists, this objection has been more characteristic of their opposite opponents, the "open theists." Variations of the critique can also be found in the writings of theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann or Robert Jenson.

Third, Aquinas is said to have made a false split between the one God and the Triune God leading to a neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity. Aquinas's "Treatise on the One God" is a case of "natural theology" rather than a biblical doctrine of God. (Insofar as Aquinas writes about the Trinity at all, the doctrine amounts to a kind of afterthought. He had to say something about the Trinity, but it plays no significant role in his theology.) This criticism, raised also against Augustine of Hippo, reflects the revival of Trinitarian theology in the late twentieth century, and the rediscovery of not only Eastern patristic theologians like the Cappadocians, but also Karl Barth's placing of the starting point of theology in the doctrine of the Trinity in his *Church Dogmatics*. Not only Protestants (Moltmann) and Eastern Orthodox theologians have raised this criticism, but also Roman Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner.

Fourth, Aquinas's doctrine of "analogy of being" (*analogia entis*) placed God in the same category as creatures, reducing God to creaturely status. The "analogy of being" is the fundamental heresy, and the single reason why one cannot become a Roman Catholic (Karl Barth). Conversely, Aquinas's doctrine of "analogy" ends up in equivocity, meaning that ultimately we can know or say nothing about God. Unless some kind of "univocity" lies at the basis of our language of God, we will ultimately be reduced to skepticism.

Note that this objection against "analogy" actually accuses Aquinas of mutually incompatible errors, either reducing God to the level of creatures by embracing univocity, or, rather, of making God unknowable by refusing to embrace univocity. If the former was the accusation of Karl Barth, the latter has been more the complaint of contemporary analytical philosophers of religion.

Fifth, Aquinas was a "virtue ethicist," showing once again that he owed more to Aristotle than the Bible. This objection would find its most ardent adherents among radical "Lutherans"

who would suspect “virtue ethics” of being an example of “works righteousness.”

Sixth, Aquinas had an inadequate doctrine of the fall, believing that the fall did not affect the intellect. Moreover, Aquinas’s doctrine of grace was semi-Pelagian at best. He believed that we are justified by human merit (good works). This objection would be a standard Protestant objection raised by advocates of justification by faith alone.

Last, Aquinas was not interested in Scripture and shows little acquaintance with the Bible. Reflecting this lack of interest in the Bible, Aquinas does not have a whole lot to say about Christology. Finally, Aquinas’s eucharistic doctrine can be summarized in one word: “transubstantiation.” This last objection would be a typically Protestant objection of advocates of *sola scriptura*: Aquinas’s theology is not a theology based on Scripture, but is simply an uncritical repetition of Medieval Roman Catholic dogma.

### **How to Respond?**

The first set of objections – that Aquinas was primarily an Aristotelian philosopher rather than a theologian – is partially justified insofar as it has been Catholic philosophers who were initially responsible for this misreading. Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), “On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy,” recommended Aquinas to Roman Catholics primarily for his philosophy. For much of the 20th century, a “Thomist” meant a certain kind of “Catholic philosopher” who did such things as defend Aquinas’s arguments for the existence of God (the *quinque viae* or “five ways”), the “analogy of being,” and Thomist realist epistemology over against modern secularism and skepticism. A classic example of this approach would be the twentieth-century Roman Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. While Thomists like this still exist, the beginning of the collapse of “Thomist philosophy” likely began with the debate between

“traditional” Thomists and historian of philosophy Etienne Gilson, who argued for something called “Christian philosophy.” Contrary to Thomist advocates of a clear distinction between philosophy (natural theology) and (revealed) theology, Gilson argued that Aquinas was a Christian philosopher, that his philosophy was influenced by and only possible because of premises dependent on revelation. Toward the end of his life, Gilson recognized that even this claim did not go far enough. Gilson admitted that in his attempt to distinguish between Thomas’s “Christian philosophy” and revealed theology, he had misread Aquinas. Aquinas was not a “Christian philosopher,” but a theologian from beginning to end.

Where previous generations of “Thomist” scholars had focused on only a handful of “philosophical” texts in Aquinas’s writings, in the last couple of generations, Aquinas has begun to be read for the theologian that he was. While working on my doctorate, I studied under David Burrell, who had chairs in both philosophy and theology at the University of Notre Dame, and taught what he called “philosophical theology.” Burrell argued that the doctrine of creation from nothing (known by revelation not by philosophical speculation) was crucial for understanding Thomas Aquinas’s thought. In the last couple of decades, scholars have begun studying not only Thomas’s doctrine of creation, but his doctrine of the Trinity, his Christology and soteriology, and his doctrine of grace.

The additional claims that Aquinas was a “classical theist” or that he separated the doctrine of the One God from the Triune God are largely based on misreadings – at least insofar as the critics presume that the primary influence on Aquinas’s thought here is Hellenistic (pagan) philosophy. Rather, as numerous scholars have shown in recent years, Thomas’s primary concern in his doctrine of creation is to preserve the unique distinction between Creator and creature implied in the Christian doctrine of creation from nothing (*creatio ex*

*nihilo*). Again, far from peripheral, the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation are central to and pervade the *Summa Theologiae* from beginning to end.

The criticisms of Barth and analytic philosophers concerning “analogy of being” rather cancel each other out insofar as they accuse Aquinas of opposite errors. Barth’s criticism is certainly the most serious; however, in what is arguably still one of the best studies of Barth’s theology, Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar demonstrated that Barth had simply misread Aquinas on analogy. (“Being,” for Aquinas is not an overarching category in which Creator and creatures equally share.) As for the analytical philosophers, they might well read Barth’s own defense of an “analogy of faith”; if language for both God and creatures is univocal, then God does indeed seem to have been reduced to the level of the creature.

Was Aquinas a “virtue ethicist”? Yes, but one might well argue that this is a “feature,” not a “bug.” With the rediscovery of virtue ethics beginning with Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, there has been a renewed appreciation for “virtue ethics,” not only among Roman Catholics, but also for Protestant ethicists such as Stanley Hauerwas. When one reads a Reformed philosopher like James K. A. Smith writing about “spiritual formation,” and Evangelical ethicist Oliver O’Donovan placing what would be the traditional theological virtues of faith, hope and charity at the center of his recent *magnum opus* on Christian ethics, one wonders what the fuss is about. Of course, it must also be insisted that Aquinas’s “virtue ethics” is not simply a regurgitation of Aristotle. For Aquinas, the theological virtues – which are entirely gifts of grace – are at the heart of Christian ethics. Aquinas claimed that humility was a virtue; Aristotle thought that it was a vice.

Finally, the last set of objections are not so much objections to Aquinas’s theology as they are an affirmation of Reformation understandings of the doctrine of justification



and grace against those formulated at the Roman Catholic Council of Trent, and Protestant objections to Catholic understandings of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. There is a certain amount of anachronism here. Aquinas wrote three hundred years before both Luther and Trent. He cannot rightly be accused of either holding or rejecting positions that he never explicitly encountered or addressed. However, a more careful reading of what Aquinas actually wrote about such issues as justification and grace or the relationship between Scripture and tradition might be surprising. Certainly Aquinas was no Protestant, but neither was he a Tridentine Catholic.

One of the reasons for the neglect of a careful reading of Thomas Aquinas's own theology was the Neoscholastic "manualist" tradition of Roman Catholic theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Catholic theology was taught using "manuals" that consisted of series of set questions and answers to theological topics. The assumption behind the manuals was that Catholic theology was certain and unchanging, and there was thus no real need for careful historical investigation. The Bible, the writings of the Church Fathers, and even the writings of important Catholic theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, were not actually read for themselves, but rather presented through the "manuals." The "Thomism" of this manualist tradition was more influenced by late Medieval and Reformation era writers such as Thomas Cajetan, Francisco Suarez, Domingo Báñez, and John of St. Thomas than it was by Aquinas himself. In the mid-twentieth century, manualist methodology was challenged by Roman Catholic thinkers such as Marie-Dominic Chenu, Jean Daniélou, Yves Congar, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, who insisted that a fundamental task of theology consisted of a careful reading of the historical sources, especially the Bible and the Church Fathers – a methodology they called "*Ressourcement*." Perhaps most significant for the theological study of Aquinas in this movement was the work of the Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac

and what was known as the *Nouvelle Théologie* movement. De Lubac initiated a radical change in the reading of Aquinas's doctrine of grace which was at least as critical of late Medieval theologies of grace as the Reformers had been.

Finally, equating Aquinas's understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition with what later Roman Catholics embraced over against the Protestant Reformers is not only an anachronism, but also a simple misreading.

### **Thomas Aquinas as Theologian**

As noted above, Thomas Aquinas was primarily a theologian, not a philosopher, and a clear shift has taken place in interpretation of his writing over the last half century. As noted, this happened in several stages. First was the move from an apologetic reading of Aquinas as an advocate of "natural theology" to a proponent of "Christian philosophy," one whose philosophy was influenced by principles derived from biblical revelation. Next advocates of the "Christian philosophy" reading came to recognize that the doctrine of creation played a significant role in Aquinas's thinking. Around the same period of time, Henri de Lubac and others associated with the *Nouvelle Théologie* began examining Aquinas's doctrine of grace and contrasting it with the "extrinsicism" characteristic of the late Medieval Scholasticism that dominated the period of the Council of Trent. In response to criticisms flowing out of the recent Trinitarian revival, theologians have been more carefully reading Aquinas's trinitarian theology. Similarly, the revival of virtue ethics has led theologians to discover how central the theology of grace and Christian spirituality are to Aquinas's Christian ethics. Again, in recent years theologians have begun to study other areas of Aquinas's theology, e.g., his Christology and his doctrine of grace. Finally, translations of Aquinas's numerous commentaries on Scripture have begun to appear for the first time in recent years, and this has led to a new appreciation for the central role that

Scripture plays in his theology.

A new consensus has arisen that Thomas Aquinas was primarily a theologian, not a philosopher. Aquinas's primary teaching duties consisted of lecturing on Scripture. He wrote commentaries on books of the Bible. He preached sermons. While Aquinas did use Aristotle (and Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustinian Platonism) to articulate theology, he transformed or even "baptized" them in the process. For example, the doctrine of creation from nothing is central to Thomas's theology; yet Aristotle believed that the universe was eternal, and Aristotle's Unmoved Mover was unaware that the universe existed. Friendship is important for Aristotle's understanding of ethics, but Aquinas went beyond Aristotle to say that the most important kind of friendship is friendship with the triune God. For Aristotle, not only could we not be friends with the Unmoved Mover, the Mover was not even aware that we exist. When Aquinas discussed Aristotle's notion of "happiness," he suggested that Aristotle was talking about the "happiness of this life," but Aristotle did not believe in any other kind of happiness since he did not believe in an afterlife. To the contrary, for Aquinas, to be created in the image of God means to be created for the eternal happiness that we will only have when we see God face to face in the beatific vision. Finally, at the heart of Thomas's theology is the incarnation of God in Christ for the redemption of sinful human beings – something Aristotle never imagined!

I hope in the following essays to shed some light on what Aquinas actually wrote on these matters and why he might be helpful for Evangelicals.