

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

A Friendly Response to Dr. Shawn Wright

Part 1: Calvin and the Medievals

JACOB TROTTER, PHD

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On February 4 of this year [2026], Dr. Shawn Wright delivered a faculty address at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary titled “[The Reformation, Baptists and Biblical Retrieval Theology](#).” Dr. Wright chose this topic, no doubt, because of rising interest in retrieval theology among Baptists and the sad departure of some to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. His overall argument is not that retrieval theology is inherently bad, but that it sometimes runs amok. To this end, he gives six cautions for “aggressive” retrieval theology.¹

There are several points in his lecture that any Protestant should be able to affirm (and I am happy to stand with Dr. Wright on those points). I appreciate his charge to do retrieval theology without abandoning Protestant convictions. However, the lecture as a whole was marked more by historical and theological imprecision than practical caution. In his handling of Calvin, the Reformed tradition, and medieval theology, I believe Dr. Wright’s imprecision paints an incomplete and misleading picture. In this post, along with two others, I hope to highlight some key points of this faculty address that I believe lack necessary clarity.

¹ Dr. Wright does not define what he means by “aggressive” retrieval theology. I think he intends to criticize “uncritical” retrieval theology.

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CALVIN AND THE MEDIEVALS

After noting that many retrievalists show appreciation for Thomas Aquinas, Dr. Wright states that this lauding of Thomas “has not been the view of many significant Protestant thinkers.” Chief among his examples is John Calvin.

Dr. Wright begins by noting who Calvin *does* appreciate—certain church fathers (like Augustine and Chrysostom) and the first four ecumenical councils. He also quotes Anthony Lane: “The significant figures to whom Calvin appealed had all died by the middle of the fifth century.”² This is indisputable and understandable since Calvin used these early sources polemically to prove the legitimacy of Protestantism. His frequent use of the Fathers and early councils was a strategic response to those who claimed Protestantism had no historical pedigree.

Next Dr. Wright, following Lane, notes the two medieval sources that Calvin most appreciated: Bernard of Clairvaux and Gregory I. This is another indisputable point—Calvin’s appreciation for Bernard grew over time and overshadowed any other medieval source. Dr. Wright again quotes Lane, “Calvin judges that *only* Gregory I and Bernard of Clairvaux were great champions of truth in the Middle Ages.”³

After noting the theologians that Calvin appreciates, Dr. Wright turns to Calvin’s non-use of Thomas Aquinas. He states, “Absent from Calvin’s consideration is Thomas Aquinas, whom Calvin only cited four times.” And again, “To Calvin, it seems that Thomas and most of the medieval period was [sic] quite irrelevant.”

But is it true that the *only* theologians Calvin appreciated from the medieval period were Bernard and Gregory? And is it true that Calvin considered Thomas to be irrelevant? We can address these questions in order.

First, Calvin did not teach that Bernard and Gregory were the “only” worthwhile medieval theologians. Dr. Wright misrepresents Lane on this point. Dr. Wright says, “Calvin judges that *only* Gregory I and Bernard of Clairvaux were great champions of truth in the Middle Ages.” However, this is a misquotation of Lane, who writes, “For Calvin, Gregory and Bernard are the two great champions of the truth in the Middle Ages.” Dr. Wright inserts the word “only” where Lane does not. Dr. Wright’s gloss emphasizes exclusivity (there were *no other* champions of truth apart from Gregory and Bernard) but Lane’s original quote emphasizes supremacy (Bernard and Gregory were

² Anthony N.S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 41.

³ This is Dr. Wright’s gloss of Lane. Lane, *John Calvin*, 43. Emphasis added.

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the *greatest*). I believe this was an honest mistake by Dr. Wright, but it was a flub that bolsters his thesis.

Furthermore, Lane documents Calvin's nuanced interaction with Peter Lombard (1100–1160), author of the most important medieval theology textbook. Lane writes, "[Lombard] is repeatedly attacked as the spokesman for scholasticism. But Calvin was also aware of the contrast between Peter Lombard and later scholasticism and noted occasions where Lombard was sounder than his successors."⁴ And again, in his more recent work, Lane analyzes Calvin's category of *saniores scholastici* (sounder scholastics), which Calvin likely learned from Martin Bucer and referenced on three occasions. Lane concludes that "Lombard is likely included in each of the three references to *saniores scholastici* (sounder scholastics)."⁵

So not only did Calvin *not teach* that Bernard and Gregory were the "only" worthwhile medieval theologians, but he also affirmed a category of "sounder scholastics," which almost certainly included Peter Lombard. Calvin was far more critical of Lombard than he was of Bernard or Gregory, but he was not wholly critical. We might even say that he exemplifies a healthy model of retrieval by both affirming and denying Lombard when necessary. In short, Dr. Wright's presentation of Calvin's relation to the medieval period flattens out the historical record and, I think, misreads Lane. Dr. Wright is correct that Calvin highly favored Bernard and Gregory, but that is not the whole story.

Our second question, *is it true that Calvin considered Thomas to be irrelevant*, also requires a bit of nuance. It might be true that Calvin considered Thomas to be irrelevant, but stating it this way without any further explanation is very misleading. The truth is, *Calvin never even read Thomas*. Unlike Peter Martyr Vermigli, Martin Bucer, or some other Reformers, Calvin did not receive a theological education that would have included Thomas Aquinas.⁶ Additionally, Calvin's four citations of Thomas (which Dr. Wright references) are sloppy and indicate that Calvin did not have direct knowledge of Thomas.

In fact, just four pages after the quotation Dr. Wright uses from Lane, Lane writes, "It is possible that Calvin never read Thomas for himself and that the two citations in the *Institutio* are derived from intermediate sources."⁷ Indeed, in his more recent work from 2026, Lane claims the idea that "Calvin was familiar with Thomas and regularly

⁴ Lane, *John Calvin*, 44.

⁵ Anthony N.S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, Vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2026), 163.

⁶ Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 8 and David Sytsma, "Sixteenth-Century Reformed Reception of Aquinas" in *The Oxford Handbook of The Reception of Aquinas*, eds. Matthew Levering and Marcus Plested (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 127.

⁷ Lane, *John Calvin*, 45.

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interacted with him” is “now widely recognised to be a fallacy.”⁸ And again, “The evidence suggests that Calvin’s knowledge of Aquinas was minimal, inaccurate and mediated and that Thomas meant very little to him.”⁹

This is where Dr. Wright’s claim lacks precision. On the one hand, it may be correct to say that Calvin did not have high regard for Thomas. On the other hand, it is spurious to say that Calvin’s rejection of Aquinas was an *informed* rejection. It may be said that Calvin disagreed with or rejected Aquinas if that simply means he came to contrary conclusions independent of any interaction with Aquinas. However, it is wrong to say that Calvin knowingly rejected Aquinas. Perhaps Dr. Wright did not intend to imply this. But he seems to paint a picture of a Calvin who was *acquainted with* Aquinas and *knowingly* rejected his theology. At a minimum, Dr. Wright overstates the significance of Calvin’s non-use of Thomas.

One final significant nuance that I believe Dr. Wright overlooks is *how* Calvin interacts with Bernard. Calvin does not merely reference Bernard’s more palatable work *On Grace and Free Choice*—he most frequently cites Bernard’s quite fanciful sermons on Song of Solomon.¹⁰ I cannot imagine that Dr. Wright would approve of Bernard’s medieval method of interpretation of Song of Solomon (perhaps I am mistaken). Yet, this is the medieval author and work which Calvin most approves.

In summary, all of Dr. Wright’s claims concerning Calvin and medieval theology require much greater nuance. First, Calvin highly favors Bernard, but he also recognized “sounder scholastics” like Lombard and did not fear using them critically. Second, Calvin’s *non-use* of Thomas must be understood through his *non-understanding* of Thomas. It is not that Calvin had an informed rejection of Thomas, but an uninformed non-use. Finally, even Calvin’s use of Bernard must be nuanced—Bernard was a medieval man, and he wrote like one. Yet Calvin did not hesitate to use Bernard’s sermons which were marked by a medieval approach to biblical interpretation.



Jacob Trotter is assistant professor of historical theology at Founders Seminary. He is a graduate of The Master’s Seminary (MDiv) as well as Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (ThM) and is pursuing a PhD at the University of Aberdeen, where his studies focus on the Italian Reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli.

⁸ Lane, *John Calvin*, Vol. 2, 161.

⁹ Lane, *John Calvin*, Vol. 2, 172.

¹⁰ Lane, *John Calvin*, 57.

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