

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

A Friendly Response to Dr. Shawn Wright

Part 2: The Reformed Tradition

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In the [previous post](#), I outlined why I believe Dr. Shawn Wright's faculty address at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary misrepresented John Calvin's relationship to Thomas Aquinas and medieval theology. In this post, I will examine Dr. Wright's claims concerning the Reformed tradition and medieval theology.

After arguing that Calvin did not hold Thomas Aquinas in high regard, Dr. Wright turns to the Reformed tradition to argue that a "decline narrative" of the Middle Ages extended beyond Calvin. The decline narrative simply says that the first six centuries of the church were purer than the corrupted medieval period, which was in turn corrected by the Reformation. Thus, the church Fathers through Augustine and the Reformation are the more important periods of church history when it comes to theological study and formulation. Dr. Wright suggests emphasizing these two periods (patristic and Reformation) can safeguard retrieval theology. He lists four figures who supposedly agree with the decline narrative. We will examine just two of them here.

TURRETIN AND MASTRICHT

First on Dr. Wright's list is Francis Turretin. Dr. Wright states,

In the seventeenth century, Francis Turretin highlighted the significance of the fathers of the early church going up to Augustine, but included no one after him.

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He referred to the first six centuries of the church's history as "the period of purer (or at least less impure) Christianity."

The first quote from Turretin arises from the question, *Where was our church before Luther and Zwingli, and how was it preserved?* Here are Turretin's words with fuller context:

Where was the papacy in the first six centuries of purer (or at least of less impure) Christianity? For although various errors began gradually to creep into the church, still it is certain that far more numerous and grievous errors were introduced in the following ages or received strength: the worship of images, transubstantiation, communion under one species, the infallibility and monarchy of the pope, the use of foreign language in the sacred service, etc.¹

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Obviously Turretin highlights specific impurities in the medieval church that are associated with Roman Catholicism. But recognizing impurities in the medieval church is not the same as calling the medieval church irrelevant or unimportant for theological formulation—a conclusion which Turretin does not even address here.

Later in the same question which Dr. Wright quotes, Turretin compares the popish church to Socinians and concludes that the Socinian error is worse because it "directly destroys the foundation of Christianity by denying the mystery of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ and the truth of his satisfaction." On the other hand, the popish church "did not destroy the foundation formally by denying and opposing it, but by adding other things to it which were incompatible with it." He concludes by asking, "who does not see that it is far easier to reject what exceeds by separating the true from the false, than to supply, not only what is deficient, but also what is rejected and attacked by any ministry?"² In short, Turretin says the popish medieval church did not destroy the foundation of the church (the Trinity, the Incarnation, etc.) and that we are able to separate true from false in their doctrine. This is a far cry from teaching that the medieval period lost the truths of Christianity entirely or that it is less worthy of study (even though Turretin never diminishes his attacks on popish errors).

Next, quoting from another passage in Turretin's *Institutes*, Dr. Wright says,

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, [Turretin] argues, is nothing else than the purging of corruptions and errors wrought by the papacy into the doctrine of faith and practice delivered by Christ.

¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1993), 3:59.

² Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:68.

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This quotation comes from Turretin's question, *Is the Reformed Church the True Church?*³ However, I think Dr. Wright demands too much from this quotation. A recognition that the papacy wrought errors in the medieval church is not the same thing as dismissing the entire medieval church as unimportant or practically useless for theological formulation in the present. On the contrary, as Turretin himself says above, there was truth mixed with error in the medieval church.

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This is precisely how Turretin approached a figure like Thomas Aquinas. Consider the following citations by Turretin.

- Turretin recognizes that “Thomas Aquinas aptly expresses” an aspect of the definition of “theology.”⁴
- On providence, Turretin states, “Thomas Aquinas well remarks, it is essential to a first principle that it can act without the help or influence of a prior agent.”⁵
- On another fine point of the doctrine of providence, Turretin notes, “The sounder Scholastics agree with us. Thomas Aquinas says . . .”⁶ Here Turretin refers to the “sounder scholastics” as Calvin did, but he clearly includes Thomas in their number.
- Still further on the doctrine of providence, Turretin references Thomas along with “Thomists” and “Dominicans” as whole categories that agree with the Reformed on a particular issue.⁷
- Turretin cites Thomas with a bevy of other scholastics to criticize a certain Jesuit practice.⁸
- Turretin quotes Thomas favorably alongside Durandus or Saint-Pourçain (1275–1332), a later Dominican, in his exposition of the ninth commandment.⁹

³ Turretin, *Institutes*, 3:142.

⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:2.

⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:503.

⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:510.

⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:530.

⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:72.

⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:130.

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- Turretin approvingly cites Thomas's interpretation of verses like [Romans 1:4](#), [Hebrews 1:9](#), and [1 Timothy 3:16](#) to support his own interpretation of [1 Peter 3:19](#).¹⁰
- Turretin positively quotes Thomas's commentary on Romans while explicating justification apart from works.¹¹

This brief and incomplete survey shows that Turretin regularly cited Thomas positively on a variety of doctrines, from theology proper to justification, and from a variety of sources, such as Thomas's *Summa Theologica* and his commentaries. To say that Thomas and medieval theology were insignificant for or not useful in theological formulation to Turretin is simply incorrect and only possible through misleading and cherry-picked quotations. Obviously Turretin *disagreed* with Thomas often, but he also *agreed* with him often. This is to say nothing of Turretin's non-explicit allusions to Thomas or his informed and critical use of other medievals like Lombard and Durandus.¹² Sadly, Dr. Wright distorts the image of Turretin by only highlighting Turretin's affirmation of a "decline narrative of the Middle Ages" due to popish influence.

The next example Dr. Wright gives is Petrus van Mastricht. Dr. Wright states,

Petrus van Mastricht . . . also posited a decline narrative: "The New Testament marked the beginnings of the six pure centuries of the church's history. The period from the sixth to the bleak tenth century was a rapid decline interrupted in the centuries before the Reformation only occasionally by reform movements like the Waldensians."¹³

Here again Dr. Wright mistakes (1) the fact that errors were introduced in the medieval church for (2) a devaluing of the usefulness of this entire era. Mastricht, like Turretin, does not make this claim. Also, like Turretin, Mastricht cites Thomas regularly—both positively and negatively. One could create a survey for Mastricht like the one listed above for Turretin.¹⁴

¹⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:360.

¹¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:641, 644.

¹² For a recent study showing non-explicit influence of Thomas on Turretin, see Toni C. Saad, "Francis Turretin's Thomistic Theory of Natural Law," in *Journal of Reformed Theology* 16 (2022): 27–47.

¹³ I am not sure if this is a direct quotation or a gloss by Dr. Wright.

¹⁴ For instance, see Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, trans. Todd M. Rester, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2019–2024) 1:68; 2:414–415; 2:517–518; 4:466; **2:518**.

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As you would expect, Mastricht's use of Thomas and other medieval sources is sophisticated and precise. Adriaan Neele notes Mastricht's positive use of both Thomas and Scotus, then writes,

both are used in a critical way by Mastricht. This critical and positive use of the schoolmen is also noticed when Mastricht cites Anselm (1033–1109), Bonaventure, and Gabriel Biel (1425–1495) but especially when he refers to Bernard of Clairvaux. Contrary to this, Mastricht is rarely negative towards the schoolmen—the doctrine of transubstantiation excluded. Thus, Mastricht attests to a vast reservoir of medieval scholastic works, which he uses according to the 'middle way' of his scholastic method.¹⁵

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Dr. Wright gives the impression that Turretin and Mastricht were not particularly interested in medieval theology—that they would rather simply study the more important parts of history like the Fathers and the Reformation. But, considering this cursory survey of Turretin and Mastricht's actual interaction with medieval sources, is it fair to summarize their views by merely stating, "they believed in a decline narrative?" Is that a faithful representation of their approach to the Middle Ages? Given Turretin and Mastricht's sophisticated and near ubiquitous use of the medieval theological milieu—including Thomas—I believe Dr. Wright's comments are misleading and present a superficial reading of these Reformed titans. Ironically, this kind of shallow interaction with great thinkers of the past is part of what drives young men to retrieval theology in the first place.



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¹⁵ Adriaan Neele, *Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706)* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 92.