Doting Thomists: Evangelicals, Thomas Aquinas, and Justification

Francis Beckwith

Francis Beckwith is Professor of Philosophy and Church-State Studies, Baylor University, where he also serves as Resident Scholar in the Institute for Studies of Religion.

KEY WORDS: Thomas Aquinas, Evangelicalism, justification, Council of Trent, Council of Orange, R. C. Sproul, Norman L. Geisler, John Gerstner, Catechism of the Catholic Church

In 1946, Carl Henry captured the near unanimous judgment of his Evangelical contemporaries about the thought of Thomas Aquinas (1225–74): 'T]he acceptance of Thomism at the University of Paris in 1275 marks the real break from historic Christianity in the Medieval Church.' Others voicing negative judgments about the Angelic Doctor and his intellectual legacy include a veritable Who's Who in Evangelical theology and philosophy, including Edward John Carnell, Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, Bruce Demarest, and Colin Brown.

Times, however, have changed. Over the past several decades a growing number of Evangelical philosophers and theologians have described their views, on a variety of issues and arguments, as Thomistic. That is, they claim to be followers of Aquinas, almost exclusively on questions in philosophical theology, metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and apologetics. A few of them have gone so far as to claim that Aquinas's views on justification are either (1) consistent with, or not obviously opposed to, a Protestant perspective, or (2) inconsistent with the doctrine of justification expounded by the Council of Trent and in the 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church. Among the writers who embrace this understanding of Aquinas are Norman L. Geisler, R. C. Sproul, and John Gerstner. I will call them Proto-Protestant Thomists. In this article, I argue that their reading of Aquinas is mistaken and that in fact Aquinas's soteriology is nearly indistinguishable from both the Council of Trent's and the Catechism's accounts of the doctrine of justification.

1 Carl F. H. Henry, Remaking the Modern Mind (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 283.
2 Edward John Carnell, An Introduction to Christian Apologetics: A Philosophical Defense of the Trinitarian-Theistic Faith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 150.
5 Bruce Demarest, General Revelation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 40.
Although this article touches on issues over which Protestants and Catholics disagree, I have no intention of refighting the Reformation in these pages. My purpose, I am happy to say, is embarrassingly modest. It is to offer a correction of one reading of Aquinas—though no doubt borne of a deep respect and appreciation of him—that cannot be reconciled with what he actually believed.7

The Proto-Protestant Aquinas

The champions of proto-Protestant Thomism make their case by both citing Aquinas's writings as well as arguing that there is an historical continuity between Aquinas's view of justification and those of his predecessors, like Augustine, and his successors in the Reformation.

In Part One of his 1995 book, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*, Geisler and his co-author, Ralph McKenzie, present in several chapters those areas on which Catholics and Evangelicals agree. One of the issues is 'salvation'. Quoting extensively from Aquinas, Geisler concludes that Aquinas 'clearly believed that salvation is completely dependent on God's grace'. Qualifying his comments by saying that Aquinas's work is 'not infallibly normative for Catholics', Geisler explains that what the Angelic Doctor means is that our salvation 'is by grace alone (sola gratia) in the sense that every human action connected with salvation is not only prompted by but is produced by God's grace. Grace is operative, not merely cooperative, in effecting our salvation.'8 Geisler concedes that Aquinas, unlike the Protestant Reformers, did not write of forensic justification in his account of salvation. And thus he did not distinguish between forensic justification and progressive sanctification as did the Reformers. Nevertheless, writes Geisler, 'this does not mean that the Reformers' distinction is incompatible with Aquinas's view, but simply that Aquinas did not state it that way.'9 Although, as Geisler points out in a footnote, Aquinas's embrace of the doctrine of merit and the necessity of good works means that 'he would fall short of the Protestant understanding of salvation by faith alone', nevertheless, 'some Evangelicals have embraced Aquinas as "Protestant" because 'these good works come in the overall context of God's operative grace'.10 Gerstner goes so far as to claim that 'with Augustine' Aquinas 'taught the biblical doctrine of justification so that if the Roman Church had followed Aquinas the Reformation would

---


9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., fn. 51.
not have been absolutely necessary'.

In Volume Three of his *Systematic Theology*, Geisler argues that there is a pre-Reformation historical basis for the Protestant belief that 'works are not a *condition* of salvation'. This claim is echoed by both Sproul and Gerstner as well. As the Proto-Protestant Thomists see it, what the Protestant Reformers were attempting to do was to help return the Church to the proper view of justification that Western Christianity had largely abandoned by the time of the late Middle Ages. Thus, the burden for the Proto-Protestant Thomists is to show that there is an historical continuity between Scripture, the Early Church Fathers, Medieval writers like Aquinas, and the Protestant Reformers on the matter of faith, works, and justification. In making his case, Geisler contrasts this apparent Christian consensus with the view he claims is presently held by Catholics, who 'argue that performing good works is a *condition* for salvation rather than a *consequence* of it', the latter of which he attributes to both the Council of Trent (1545–63) as well as the present teaching of the Catholic Church. Sproul mentions Trent as well as the 1994 *Catechism* as unequivocal evidence that the 'Roman Catholic Church...[has] denied the gospel and ceased to be a legitimate church'. But Aquinas, according to Sproul, stands in the tradition of those who now stand on the outer shore of the Tiber, those who embraced the biblical doctrine that 'regeneration precedes faith'. And the reason for this, writes Sproul, is that 'Aquinas insisted that regenerating grace is operative grace, not cooperative grace. Aquinas spoke of prevenient grace, but he spoke of a grace that comes before faith, which is regeneration.'

Gerstner, offering greater detail, makes a similar claim when he argues that 'Aquinas taught a doctrine of *iustificatio impii*, a justification of the impious', which Gerstner says 'means that a sinner is justified while yet in himself he is a sinner', echoing Luther's proclamation that 'redeemed man is *simul justus et peccator*, at the same time just and sinner'. Not surprisingly, Gerstner maintains that 'justified' for Aquinas means """"reckoned just"" based on union with Christ'
and not 'made just'. But, writes Gerstner, like the Protestant Reformers, Aquinas believed that once the 'the justified impious' are justified they 'begin the process of being "made just", or sanctification', and thus 'it necessarily follows' that 'our being reckoned just is fully and finally settled by Christ'. Consequently, proclaims Gerstner, Aquinas's justification of the impious, 'is essentially the biblical (and Reformation) doctrine'. Although Gerstner admits that Aquinas did not employ the language of 'the "imputation" of Christ's righteousness', he nevertheless claims that it 'is implied by the infusion of sanctifying grace which would never be infused into an unjustified soul'.

Although the Proto-Protestant Thomists disagree with each other on how close Aquinas came to a Reformation view of justification, it seems fair to say that for them, Aquinas held a view of justification that was within the boundaries of legitimate Christian opinion as they understand it. That is, Aquinas may have gotten some things wrong about justification, but because he did not embrace the semi-Pelagianism that many Protestant writers claim would be taught by Trent and the Catechism, Protestants can rightfully claim Aquinas as an ancestor that contributed to the Reformers' theological patrimony.

Although an entire generation of Evangelical Thomists, influenced by Geisler, Sproul, and Gerstner, has largely accepted this narrative, it is spectacularly false. To explain why, I cover two topics: (1) Aquinas and his Catholic predecessors; (2) Aquinas and his Catholic successors in Trent and in the Catechism.

Aquinas and his Catholic predecessors

There is little doubt that Aquinas's writings on justification were consistent with those held by his theological and ecclesiastical predecessors, especially Augustine. In that sense, the Proto-Protestant Thomists are correct. But, unfortu-

---

22 As we have seen, Gerstner maintains that Aquinas's view is practically indistinguishable from views embraced by the Protestant Reformers, whereas Geisler takes the more modest view that Aquinas's position though not fully Protestant did not fall prey to the semi-Pelagianism of late Medieval Catholicism, the Council of Trent, and contemporary Catholicism.
23 For example, Geisler, Sproul, and Gerstner each connect Aquinas's view with Augustine's account of justification (see Geisler, Systematic Theology, 291-93; Sproul, Faith Alone, 135-39; Gerstner, 'Aquinas Was a Protestant', 14). Geisler places Aquinas in continuity with not only Augustine, but with John Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Irenaeus of Lyons (Systematic Theology, 289-91). Gerstner mentions Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) as a 'solafidean', quoting A. H. Strong's citation of Anselm (Gerstner, 'History of the Doctrine of Justification').
24 For example, Aquinas employs two of Augustine's distinctions on the nature of grace in his account of grace and justification. The first is the distinction between operating and cooperating grace: 'Augustine says (De Gratia et Lib. Arbit. xvi): "God by cooperating with us, perfects what He began by operating in us, since He who perfects by cooperation with such as are willing, beings by operating that they may will. But the operations of God whereby He moves us to good pertain to grace. Therefore grace
nately, they often quote from these sources selectively, taking them out of the context of the ecclesiastical and liturgical infrastructures in which these writings were penned. In order to appreciate this problem, consider Geisler’s use of the Early Church Fathers. The following are four patristic quotations that initially seem ‘Protestant’, and thus can be read as if they support Geisler’s case for Proto-Protestant patristics:25

**Irenaeus:** Vain, too, is [the effort of] Marcion and his followers when they [seek to] exclude Abraham from the inheritance, to whom the Spirit through many men, and now by Paul, bears witness, that ‘he believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness.’26

**Cyril:** For as a writing-reed or a dart has need of one to use it, so grace also has need of believing minds.... [I]t is God’s to grant grace, but thine to receive and guard it.27

**John Chrysostom:** In order then that the greatness of the benefits bestowed may not raise you too high, observe how he brings you down: ‘by grace you have been saved’, says he, ‘Through faith;’ Then, that, on the other hand, our free-will be not impaired, he adds also our part in the work, and yet again cancels it, and adds, ‘And that not of ourselves.’28 But this he calls God’s righteousness, that from faith, because it comes entirely from the grace from above, and because men are justified in this case, not by labors, but by the gift of God.29

**Augustine:** [Grace] is bestowed on us, not because we have done good works, but that we may be able to do them, – in other words, not because we have fulfilled the law, but in order that we may be able to fulfill the law.30

---

is fittingly divided into operating and cooperating”” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II.I, Q111, art2, 2nd and rev., literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province [1920]. An online edition is available from www.newadvent.org/summa). The second is the distinction between prevenient and subsequent grace: ‘And hence grace, inasmuch as it causes the first effect in us, is called prevenient with respect to the second, and inasmuch as it causes the second, it is called subsequent with respect to the first effect. And as one effect is posterior to this effect, and prior to that, so may grace be called prevenient and subsequent on account of the same effect viewed relatively to divers others. And this is what Augustine says (De Natura et Gratia xxxi): “It is prevenient, inasmuch as it heals, and subsequent, inasmuch as, being healed, we are strengthened; it is prevenient, inasmuch as we are called, and subsequent, inasmuch as we are glorified”” (Ibid., II.I, Q111, art3).

25 The following quotes are employed by Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 289-91. However, because I contrast them with another set of quotes from the same Church Fathers, I am using the versions published on the New Advent Catholic Website (www.newadvent.org/fathers/). I chose Geisler’s book because my endorsement of it appears on its back cover.


29 John Chrysostom, *Homily 17 on Romans*, ver. 3.

If all one had were these quotes, one may be persuaded to accept Geisler’s thesis, that the Reformation attempted to restore what the Church had embraced, or at least implicitly held, from its earliest days through the Middle Ages. One would, of course, be partly right, since, as some Catholic writers have noted, the Protestant Reformers did in fact attempt to retrieve something of that Catholic tradition that had been obscured by the abuses of late Medieval Catholicism. But the difficulty for Geisler is that the Church Fathers whom he quotes affirm beliefs and practices, uncontroversially and widely embraced in both the Eastern and Western Churches, that Geisler asserts elsewhere are contrary to the ‘biblical’ doctrine of justification.

Consider just these passages, penned by the same Fathers quoted above:

**Irenaeus**: This able wrestler, therefore, exhorts us to the struggle for immortality, that we may be crowned, and may deem the crown precious, namely, that which is acquired by our struggle, but which does not encircle us of its own accord (sed non ultero coalitam). And the harder we strive, so much is it the more valuable; while so much the more valuable it is, so much the more should we esteem it. And indeed those things are not esteemed so highly which come spontaneously, as those which are reached by much anxious care.

**Cyril**: For as a writing-reed or a dart has need of one to use it, so grace also has need of believing minds. You are receiving not a perishable but a spiritual shield. Henceforth you are planted in the invisible Paradise. Thou receivest a new name, which you had not before. Heretofore you were a Catechumen, but now you will be called a Believer. You are transplanted henceforth among the spiritual olive-trees, being grafted from the wild into the good olive-tree, from sins into righteousness, from pollutions into purity. You are made partaker of the Holy Vine. Well then, if thou abide in the Vine, you grow as a fruitful branch; but if thou abide not, you will be consumed by the fire. Let us therefore bear fruit worthily. God forbid that in us should be done what befell that barren fig-tree, that Jesus come not even now and curse us for our barrenness. But may all be able to use that other saying, But I am like a fruitful olive-tree in the house of God: I have trusted in the mercy of God for ever, – an olive-tree not to be perceived by sense, but by the mind, and full of light. As then it is His part to plant and to


32 For example, Geisler and MacKenzie critique and reject the Catholic views on sacramentalism, ecclesiology, and purgatory, even though, as we shall see, the Early Church Fathers that Geisler procures to demonstrate the historical continuity of a non-Catholic view of justification seem to accept the Catholic views on these topics that the Catholic view on justification requires. See Geisler and MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*, 249-97, 331-55. See also Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 106-07.

33 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.37.7.
water, so it is thine to bear fruit: it is God's to grant grace, but thine to receive and guard it. Despise not the grace because it is freely given, but receive and treasure it devoutly.\textsuperscript{34}

Then, we pray [in the anaphora] for the holy fathers and bishops who have fallen asleep, and in general for all who have fallen asleep before us, in the belief that it is a great benefit to the souls on whose behalf the supplication is offered, while the holy and tremendous Victim is present.... By offering to God our supplications for those who have fallen asleep, if they have sinned, we... offer Christ sacrificed for the sins of all, and so render favorable, for them and for us, the God who loves man.\textsuperscript{35}

**John Chrysostom:** Let us then give them aid and perform commemoration for them. For if the children of Job were purged by the sacrifice of their father, why do you doubt that when we too offer for the departed, some consolation arises to them? [For] God is wont to grant the petitions of those who ask for others. And this Paul signified saying, that in a manifold Person your gift towards us bestowed by many may be acknowledged with thanksgiving on your behalf (2 Cor. 1:11). Let us not then be weary in giving aid to the departed, both by offering on their behalf and obtaining prayers for them: for the common Expiation of the world is even before us.\textsuperscript{36}

Mourn for those who have died in wealth, and did not from their wealth think of any solace for their soul, who had power to wash away their sins and would not. Let us all weep for these in private and in public, but with propriety, with gravity, not so as to make exhibitions of ourselves; let us weep for these, not one day, or two, but all our life. Such tears spring not from senseless passion, but from true affection. The other sort are of senseless passion. For this cause they are quickly quenched, whereas if they spring from the fear of God, they always abide with us. Let us weep for these; let us assist them according to our power; let us think of some assistance for them, small though it be, yet still let us assist them. How and in what way? By praying and entreaty others to make prayers for them, by continually giving to the poor on their behalf.\textsuperscript{37}

**Augustine:** We run, therefore, whenever we make advance; and our wholesomeness runs with us in our advance (just as a sore is said to run when the wound is in process of a sound and careful treatment), in order that we may be in every respect perfect, without any infirmity of sin whatever result which God not only wishes, but even causes and helps us to accomplish. And this God's grace does, in co-operation with ourselves, through Jesus Christ our Lord, as well by commandments, sacraments, and examples, as

\textsuperscript{34} Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 1.3, 4. (The words in italics are those of Cyril's quoted in the first set of quotes.)

\textsuperscript{35} Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech. myst.* 5.9, 10; PG 33.1116-17, as quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1371.

\textsuperscript{36} John Chrysostom, *Homily 41 on 1 Corinthians*, 8.

\textsuperscript{37} John Chrysostom, *Homily 3 on Philippians.*
by His Holy Spirit also; through whom there is hiddenly shed abroad in our hearts... that love, *which makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered*, ... until wholeness and salvation be perfected in us, and God be manifested to us as He will be seen in His eternal truth. 38

Some specific points from these quotes are worth singling out. John Chrysostom, for instance, writes of praying for the dead so that the living through their prayers and charity may affect the dead's purification in the afterlife. This is reinforced by Cyril's description of the Catholic Mass in which prayers are said for deceased bishops and fellow believers, because these prayers are 'a great benefit to the souls on whose behalf the supplication is offered, while the holy and tremendous Victim [Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist] is present.' The comments by both John and Cyril are consistent with the *Catholic Catechism* and found deep in Christian history, 39 and thus it is not surprising, as Robert Wilken points out, that 'all the ancient liturgies included prayers commemorating the "faithful departed"... [who] were not simply remembered, they were welcomed as participants in the liturgy.' 40 Cyril explains justification by the metaphor of being grafted onto a vine, bearing fruit, and continuing to abide in the vine, though he warns of the possibility of our ceasing to abide and being 'consumed by the fire'. And yet, Cyril clearly affirms that one's abiding is the result of grace 'freely given' and that one should 'receive and guard it' and 'treasure it devoutly', which implies the believer's lifelong cooperation in justication, something we will see is affirmed not only by Aquinas but by Augustine, the Council of Orange, Trent, and the *Catechism*. Irenaeus refers to 'the struggle for immortality' as a 'crown' for which 'we strive'. Augustine echoes Irenaeus and Cyril when he speaks of our moving toward perfection by God's grace through Jesus Christ and 'by the commandments, sacraments, and examples, as by His Holy Spirit'.

Geisler and Sproul cite the Canons of the Council of Orange (AD 529) as precursors to Protestantism and thus in line with Aquinas. 41 Although they are right

---

38 Augustine, *On Man's Perfection in Righteousness*, 20 [43].
39 One finds prayers for the dead inscribed in the catacombs (1st through 4th centuries), in the earliest liturgies, as well as in the works of many early Christian writers dating back to the mid 2nd century (P. J. Toner, 'Prayers for the Dead', transcribed by Michael T. Barrett, *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume IV* [New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908]). According to Robert Louis Wilken, 'Early in the church's history Christians gathered at the tombs of martyrs to pray and celebrate the Eucharist. The faithful of one generation were united to the faithful of former times, not by a set of ideas or teachings (though this was assumed), but by the community that remembered their names.... The communion of the saints was a living presence in every celebration of the Eucharist' (*The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003], 46).
about the council’s continuity with Aquinas, a careful reading of its canons reveals an understanding of grace, the sacraments, and the life of faith that is more Ratzinger than Reformed.

The Council, with papal sanction, rejected Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism as heretical doctrines. The first, having its origin in the Catholic monk Pelagius (ca. 354–ca. 420/440), affirms that human beings do not inherit Adam’s sin (and thus denies the doctrine of original sin) and by their free will may achieve salvation without God’s grace. On the other hand, semi-Pelagianism maintains that a human being, though weakened by original sin, may make the initial act of will toward achieving salvation prior to receiving the necessary assistance of God’s grace. The Council of Orange, in contrast, argued that Adam’s original sin is inherited by his progeny and can only be removed by the sacrament of Baptism. By the means of Baptism God’s unmerited grace is infused for the remission of sins. According to the Council, justification is not the consequence of our initiative and then God assisting us by extending to us his mercy. Rather, ‘God himself’, writes the Council, ‘first inspires in us both faith in him and love for him without any previous good works of our own that deserve reward, so that we may both faithfully seek the sacrament of Baptism, and after Baptism be able by his help to do what is pleasing to him.’ Thus, the Christian’s inner transformation continues throughout his lifetime, entirely the work of the infusion of grace with which the Christian cooperates, for the Christian ‘does nothing good for which God is not responsible, so as to let him do it.’

It is not surprising, then, that one finds in Aquinas an account of grace and justification that embodies what his predecessors, including Augustine and the Council of Orange, embraced. Like the Council, Aquinas rejected Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism and affirmed baptismal regeneration:

According to the Catholic Faith we are bound to hold that the first sin of the first man is transmitted to his descendants, by way of origin. For this reason children are taken to be baptized soon after their birth, to show that they have to be washed from some uncleanness. The contrary is part of the Pelagian heresy, as is clear from Augustine in many of his books.

As the Apostle says (Romans 5:15-16), the sin of Adam was not so far-reaching as the gift of Christ, which is bestowed in Baptism: ‘for judgment was by one unto condemnation; but grace is of many offenses, unto justification’. Wherefore Augustine says in his book on Infant Baptism (De Pecc. Merit. et Remiss. i), that ‘in carnal generation, original sin alone is contracted; but when we are born again of the Spirit, not only original sin but also

43 Canons 4 and 5, Orange.
44 Conclusion, Orange.
45 Ibid.
46 Canon 24 and Conclusion, Orange.
47 Canon 20.
48 Aquinas, Summa Theologica, VII.I, Q81, art1.
wilful sin is forgiven’.\textsuperscript{49}

Like the Council of Orange (along with Augustine), Aquinas maintains that regeneration is wholly gratuitous,\textsuperscript{50} or in the words of Sproul, ‘regeneration precedes faith’. But Aquinas does so in line with his predecessors’ understanding of the role of sanctifying grace in both conversion and the Christian life. This means that infused grace is not only required for the Christian’s entry into the family of God at Baptism but also for her subsequent movement toward being conformed to the image of Christ. Consider, for example, Aquinas’s explanation of sanctifying grace as ‘habitual grace’. It has, he writes, ‘a double effect of grace, even as of every other form; the first of which is ‘being’, and the second, ‘operation’. For example, ‘the work of heat is to make its subject hot, and to give heat outwardly. And thus habitual grace, inasmuch as it heals and justifies the soul, or makes it pleasing to God, is called operating grace; but inasmuch as it is the principle of meritorious works, which spring from the free-will, it is called cooperating grace.’\textsuperscript{51} Because God is the sole mover in the infusion of habitual grace, it is entirely attributable to Him. This is called operating grace. But if habitual grace is supposed to heal and justify the soul, and the soul has by nature certain powers to think and act, then this healing and justification must manifest itself in the activities of the soul. Thus, these acts allow us to cooperate with God for our inward transformation. This Aquinas calls cooperating grace, since any meritorious acts performed by a soul infused with habitual grace by God would lack merit without that grace and thus without God’s cooperation. He writes: ‘God does not justify us without ourselves, because whilst we are being justified we consent to God’s justification (justitiae) by a movement of our free-will. Nevertheless this movement is not the cause of grace, but the effect; hence the whole operation pertains to grace.’\textsuperscript{52}

For Aquinas, justification refers not only to the Christian’s initial entrance into the family of God at Baptism – which is administered for the remission of sins – but to the intrinsic work of both the infusion of that grace at Baptism and all the subsequent graces that work in concert to transform the Christian from the inside out.\textsuperscript{53} This is possible only because the baptized Christian literally partakes in the Divine Nature as a consequence of being infused with sanctifying grace.\textsuperscript{54} Consequently, for Aquinas, justification and sanctification are not different events, one extrinsic and the other intrinsic, as the Protestant Reform-

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., III, Q69, art1.
\textsuperscript{50} For example, ‘We must needs say that in some way the sacraments of the New Law cause grace. For it is evident that through the sacraments of the New Law man is incorporated with Christ: thus the Apostle says of Baptism (Galatians 3:27): ‘As many of you as have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ’. And man is made a member of Christ through grace alone’ (Ibid., III, Q62, art1).
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., II. I, Q111, art2.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., II.I, Q109, art9.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., II.I, Q112, art1.
ers taught.\textsuperscript{55} Rather, 'sanctification' is the ongoing intrinsic work of justifying, or making rightly-ordered, the Christian by means of God's grace, the same grace that intrinsically changed the believer at the moment of her initial 'justification' (i.e., at Baptism) into an adopted child of the Father.\textsuperscript{56} Writes Aquinas, 'Augustine says (De Gratia et Lib. Arbit. xvii): "God by cooperating with us, perfects what He began by operating in us, since He who perfects by cooperation with such as are willing, begins by operating that they may will". But the operations of God 'whereby He moves us to good pertain to grace. Therefore grace is fittingly divided into operating and cooperating'.\textsuperscript{57} For Aquinas, justification is as much about getting heaven into us as it is about getting us into heaven.

Not only is Aquinas's account of justification consistent with the accounts proffered by Augustine, the Council of Orange, Irenaeus, and Cyril, but one finds in Aquinas's writings a place for praying for the dead,\textsuperscript{58} the sacraments as means of grace,\textsuperscript{59} and belief in the Eucharist as the literal body and blood of Christ,\textsuperscript{60} just as we have seen are found in some of the Church Fathers quoted above who are sometimes cited as proto-Protestant in their soteriology.

\textbf{Aquinas and his Catholic successors: Trent and the \textit{Catechism}}

Although it is clear that Aquinas's account of justification is in historical continuity with those of his predecessors, what about its continuity with his successors in the Catholic Church? According to the proto-Protestant Thomists, the accounts of justification articulated by the Council of Trent and in the Catholic Church's 1994 \textit{Catechism} are not only inconsistent with the views of the Protestant Reformers – as one would expect – they are also inconsistent with Aquinas's perspective. In fact, as I have already noted, Gerstner went so far as to say that Aquinas 'taught the biblical doctrine of justification so that if the Roman Church had followed Aquinas the Reformation would not have been absolutely necessary'.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{56} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, II.I, Q114, art3.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., II.I, Q111, art2.
\textsuperscript{58} 'Further, Augustine says (De Cure pro Mort. i): "Of no small weight is the authority of the Church whereby she clearly approves of the custom whereby a commendation of the dead has a place in the prayers which the priests pour forth to the Lord God at His altar". This custom was established by the apostles themselves according to the Damascene in a sermon on suffrages for the dead [De his qui in fide dormierunt, 3], where he expresses himself thus: "Realizing the nature of the Mysteries the disciples of the Saviour and His holy apostles sanctioned a commemoration of those who had died in the faith, being made in the awe-inspiring and life-giving Mysteries" (Ibid., Supp., QT1, art2).
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., III, Q60-Q90.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., III, Q73-Q83.
\textsuperscript{61} John Gerstner, 'Aquinas Was a Protestant', 14.
Sproul, for instance, claims that Trent’s account of justification ‘appeared, at least to the Reformers, to retreat to the semi-Pelagian position that, though the human will is weakened by the fall, it still has the spiritual power to incline itself toward grace’. In making his case for Tridentine semi-Pelagianism, Sproul quotes the following passage from chapter V of Trent’s sixth session:

It is furthermore declared that in adults the beginning of that justification must proceed from the predisposing grace of God through Jesus Christ, that is, from His vocation, whereby, without any merits on their part, they are called; that they who by sin had been cut off from God, may be disposed through His quickening and helping grace to convert themselves to their own justification by freely assenting to and cooperating with that grace; so that, while God touches the heart of man through the illumination of the Holy Ghost, man himself neither does absolutely nothing while receiving that inspiration, since he can also reject it, nor yet is he able by his own free will and without the grace of God to move himself to justice in His sight.

Commenting on this passage, Sproul writes: ‘Here Rome makes it clear that fallen man cannot convert himself or even move himself to justice in God’s sight without the aid of grace. Again Pelagianism is repudiated.’ Thus, it seems that Sproul is saying that Trent, like Aquinas and Orange, maintained that regeneration precedes faith. Nevertheless, Sproul goes on to claim: ‘This predisposing grace, however, is rejectable. It is not in itself effectual. Its effectiveness depends on the fallen person’s assent and cooperation. This sounds very much like semi-Pelagianism, which had been condemned at Orange.’

As for the Catechism, Sproul offers this passage from it as evidence of its semi-Pelagianism: ‘God’s free initiative demands man’s free response, for God has created man in his image by conferring on him, along with freedom, the power to know him and love him.’ Commenting on this passage, Sproul writes that ‘to avoid the Reformation and Augustinian view of the enslaved will, Rome speaks of the power of fallen man to assent to and cooperate with prevenient grace. That grace is not effectual without the sinner’s response.’

Although what Sproul is affirming may be good Reformed theology, his reli-

---

62 Sproul, Faith Alone, 140.
63 Ibid., 140, quoting The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, trans. and intro. Rev. H. J. Schroeder, OP (Rockford: Tan Publishing, 1978), 31-32. In quoting this passage, Sproul leaves out the two Scripture quotes the Council cites as part of its conclusion in this chapter: ‘Hence, when it is said in the sacred writings: Turn ye to me, and I will turn to you, [Zachariah 1:3] we are reminded of our liberty; and when we reply: Convert us, O Lord, to thee, and we shall be converted, [Lamentations 5:21] we confess that we need the grace of God’ (Ibid., 32).
64 Sproul, Faith Alone, 140.
65 Ibid.
67 Sproul, Faith Alone, 140.
ance on Trent and the *Catechism* to make his case undermines his Proto-Protestant Thomism. First, the Council of Orange, whose canons Sproul embraces as orthodox and biblical,\(^{68}\) treats God's grace in a fashion almost identical to the way Trent understands it: 'According to the catholic faith we also believe that after grace has been received through Baptism, all baptized persons have the ability and responsibility, *if they desire to labor faithfully, to perform with the aid and cooperation of Christ what is of essential importance in regard to the salvation of their soul*.\(^{69}\) (emphasis added) This is because, according to Orange, 't[he] freedom of will that was destroyed in the first man can be restored only by the grace of Baptism',\(^{70}\) which, like Trent and the *Catechism*,\(^{71}\) presents Baptism as the instrumental cause of justification. So, if a free Adam can reject God, and our liberty has been restored to be like Adam's, then it makes sense for Orange to declare that the salvation of our souls is conditioned upon our 'desire to labor faithfully, to perform with the aid and cooperation of Christ what is of essential importance in regard to the salvation of their soul'. And yet, the council proclaims, 'for as often as we do good, God is at work in us and with us, in order that we may do so'.\(^{72}\) And like Trent,\(^{73}\) Orange employs the language of infusion to describe how grace works in Baptism and the subsequent life of the believer including his cooperation.\(^{74}\)

Both Orange and Trent employ Jesus's vine and branches account of his relationship to his Church (John 15:1-17) in order to explain the relationship between operating and cooperating grace and the role of faith and works in a believer's salvation. The Council of Orange declares: 'Concerning the branches of the vine. The branches on the vine do not give life to the vine, but receive life from it; thus the vine is related to its branches in such a way that it supplies them with what they need to live, and does not take this from them. Thus it is to the advantage of the disciples, not Christ, both to have Christ abiding in them and to abide in Christ. For if the vine is cut down another can shoot up from the live root; but one who is cut off from the vine cannot live without the root (John 15:5ff)'. And given that grace, we 'have the ability and responsibility, if [we] desire to labor faithfully, to perform with the aid and cooperation of Christ what is

\(^{68}\) Sproul, 'Battle for Grace', *Tabletalk*.

\(^{69}\) Conclusion, *Orange*.

\(^{70}\) Canon 13, *Orange*.

\(^{71}\) "[T]he instrumental cause is the sacrament of Baptism, which is the sacrament of faith, without which no man was ever justified finally..." (The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, 33 [note omitted]).

'The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us 'the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ' and through Baptism' (*Catechism*, 1987 [note omitted]).

\(^{72}\) Canon 9, *Orange*.

\(^{73}\) From chapter V of Trent's sixth session, as quoted by Sproul (*Faith Alone*, 140) and reproduced above (see text associated with footnote 63).

\(^{74}\) Canons 4, 5, and conclusion, *Orange*. 

of essential importance in regard to the salvation of [our] soul.\textsuperscript{75} Over a millennium after Orange, the Council of Trent affirmed:

For since Christ Jesus Himself, as the head into the members and the vine into the branches, continually infuses strength into those justified, which strength always precedes, accompanies and follows their good works, and without which they could not in any manner be pleasing and meritorious before God, we must believe that nothing further is wanting to those justified to prevent them from being considered to have, by those very works which have been done in God, fully satisfied the divine law according to the state of this life and to have truly merited eternal life, to be obtained in its [due] time, provided they depart [this life] in grace....\textsuperscript{76}

Not surprisingly, the \textit{Catechism} offers an understanding of justification that is consistent with both Orange and Trent. Like the two councils, the \textit{Catechism} affirms the absolute gratuitousness of God’s movement of the human will: ‘The first work of the grace of the Holy Spirit is conversion, effecting justification in accordance with Jesus’s proclamation at the beginning of the Gospel: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” [Matthew 4:17]. Moved by grace, man turns toward God and away from sin, thus accepting forgiveness and righteousness from on high.’\textsuperscript{77} And like Orange and Trent, the \textit{Catechism} uses the language of cooperating grace in its account of human merit and the role it plays in justification: ‘The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that \textit{God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace}. The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man’s free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful. Man’s merit, moreover, itself is due to God, for his good actions proceed in Christ, from the predispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit.’\textsuperscript{78} Oddly, Geisler quotes a sliver of this passage – ‘\textit{the merit of good works is attributed} in the first place to the grace of God, then \textit{to the faithful}’ (his emphasis) – and then concludes, ‘Hence, it is grace \textit{plus} good works,’\textsuperscript{79} even though in context that is not what the \textit{Catechism} is saying.

It seems to me that Geisler’s blind spot, one he shares with Gerstner and Sproul, is the consequence of abandoning the idea of participation in the Divine Nature, a view more explicitly taught in the Eastern Churches, though certainly essential to the West’s idea of justification as well.\textsuperscript{80} According to the Catholic

---

\textsuperscript{75} Canon 24 and conclusion, \textit{Orange}.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent}, 41 (notes omitted).

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Catechism}, 1989.

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Catechism}, 2008 (emphasis in original).

\textsuperscript{79} Geisler and MacKenzie, \textit{Roman Catholics and Evangelicals}, 231.

\textsuperscript{80} ‘Through the power of the Holy Spirit we take part in Christ’s Passion by dying to sin, and in his Resurrection by being born to a new life; we are members of his Body which is the Church, branches grafted onto the vine which is himself [Cf. 1 Cor 12; Jn 15:1-4]: “[God] gave himself to us through his Spirit. By the participation of the
view, sanctifying grace allows us to participate in the divine life. Thus, when we act in charity, we do not contribute to our justification, as if it were merely a case of God adding up our deeds on a cosmic balance sheet. This is why the *Catechism* teaches, 'The merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness'.

(Does that sound like 'grace plus good works'? Consequently, one's cooperation does not take away from the fact that justification is a work of God, just as Christ's human nature does not take away from the fact he is also fully God, and just as the Bible being authored by human beings does not diminish its stature as entirely God's Word.

Second, because neither Trent nor the *Catechism* departs from Orange, and because Aquinas's account of justification is in line with Orange as well (as I noted earlier in this article), it should not surprise us to learn that Trent, the *Catechism*, and Aquinas are in agreement on the doctrine of justification.

As we have seen, Aquinas held that one’s entry into the Body of Christ is the consequence of operating grace, wholly the work of God, and Trent and the *Catechism* maintain that position as well. The effect of grace, according to Aquinas, is to heal and justify the will so that the human being may freely partake in the Divine Nature and undergo transformation. Thus, any meritorious acts in which a soul infused with God's grace freely engages could not be meritorious without that grace and thus without God's cooperation (hence Aquinas calls it 'cooperating grace'). For this reason, as I have already noted above, Aquinas writes that 'God does not justify us without ourselves, because whilst we are being justified we consent to God's justification [*justitiae*] by a movement of our free-will. Nevertheless this movement is not the cause of grace, but the effect; hence the whole operation pertains to grace.' Hence, Sproul's claim that such grace is 'not effectual without the sinner's response' begs the question, since its intended effect is to heal and justify the soul of a particular sort of being, one that is a moral agent with the intrinsic power to respond or not to respond. In that sense, the grace is most certainly effectual. Unsurprisingly, Augustine concurs with the *Catechism* and Aquinas, but according to Sproul the purpose

---

*Spirit, we become communicants in the divine nature... For this reason, those in whom the Spirit dwells are divinized" [Athenasius, *Ep. Serap.*, 1, 24; *PG*, 26.585 and 588]* (Catechism, 1998).

81 Catechism, 2009.

82 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Q62, art1, and II.1, Q111, art2.

83 'It is furthermore declared that in adults the beginning of that justification must proceed from the predisposing grace of God through Jesus Christ, that is, from His vocation, whereby, without any merits on their part, they are called... (The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, 31)' (Catechism, 1989).


85 Ibid., II.I, Q113, art6.

86 Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 140.

87 See Aquinas's citation of Augustine in *Summa Theologica*, II.I, Q111, art2, quoted in footnote 24. Also, 'But God made thee without thyself. For thou didst not give any consent, that God might make thee. How didst thou consent, who wast not? He then
of the *Catechism*’s account of grace was ‘to avoid the... Augustinian view of the enslaved will’. So, apparently, either it did not succeed or Augustine is not Augustinian.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that Aquinas (following Augustine), Trent and the *Catechism* are in continuity in their understanding of the relationship between justification, sanctifying grace, and the infusion of faith, hope, and charity. The *Catechism* declares: ‘Justification is at the same time the acceptance of God’s righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Righteousness (or ‘justice’) here means the rectitude of divine love. With justification, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts, and obedience to the divine will is granted us.’ Consistent with this, Trent affirms: ‘[M]an through Jesus Christ, in whom he is ingrafted, receives in that justification, together with the remission of sins, all these infused at the same time, namely, faith, hope and charity. For faith, unless hope and charity be added to it, neither unites man perfectly with Christ nor makes him a living member of His body’. And for Aquinas, ‘charity denotes union with God, whereas faith and hope do not,’ and ‘grace is neither faith nor hope, for these can be without sanctifying grace.’ Aquinas writes in his *Commentary on Romans*: ‘The act of faith, which is to believe, depends on the intellect and on the will moving the intellect to assent. Hence, the act of faith will be perfect, if the will is perfected by the habit of charity and the intellect by the habit of faith, but not if the habit of charity is lacking.’ The indwelling of Christ ‘is not perfect, unless faith is formed by charity, which by the bond of perfection unites us to God, as Col 3:(14) says’.

---


Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 140.

‘Now what shall I say of love? Without it, faith profits nothing; and in its absence, hope cannot exist. The Apostle James says: ‘The devils also believe, and tremble’; — that is, they, having neither hope nor love, but believing that what we love and hope for is about to come, are in terror. And so the Apostle Paul approves and commends the “faith that works by love;” and this certainly cannot exist without hope. Wherefore there is no love without hope, no hope without love, and neither love nor hope without faith’ (Augustine, *Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. J. F. Shaw, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887], chapter 8, revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight).


91 *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 34 (note omitted).


93 Ibid., II.1, Q110, art3.


95 Ibid., 108.
And finally, Aquinas believed, like Trent and the *Catechism*,\(^{96}\) that one can lose the grace of one's justification, that it is, in the words of Sproul, rejectable. Writes Aquinas: 'Now the effect of virtuous works, which are done in charity, is to bring man to eternal life; and this is hindered by a subsequent mortal sin, inasmuch as it takes away grace.'\(^{97}\)

**Conclusion**

It is abundantly clear that Thomas Aquinas was more a proto-Tridentine Catholic than a Proto-Protestant. What then accounts for this misreading? I suggest it is love. No serious Christian – especially one with philosophical dispositions – can read Aquinas without being impressed by not only his intellect and philosophical acumen, but his encyclopedic knowledge of Scripture, which permeates virtually every page of his monumental *Summa Theologica*. This no doubt has enkindled in even the coziest of Protestant hearts a warm affection for Aquinas that one is reluctant to extinguish. Because love, in this case, is less than blind, since it sees through a glass darkly, the proto-Protestant Thomist finds it difficult to believe that such an historically imposing figure whose work came to dominate Western Christendom during the Middle Ages, someone so theologically insightful, philosophically compelling, and intellectually attractive, could be so wrong about the doctrine on which Luther boldly claimed the Church rises or falls. Thus, these smitten scholars unconsciously find creative ways to make it seem as if a 13th century Dominican Friar was a lonely beacon in a papist fog destined to be vindicated by a 16th century Augustinian Monk. Unfortunately, it is not so.

**Abstract**

Over the past several decades, some Evangelical philosophers and theologians have embraced the metaphysics, epistemology, and natural law theory of Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), despite that fact that historically some of the leading lights in Evangelicalism have rejected Aquinas's views because they believed these views are inconsistent with classical Reformation teaching. Some of these Evangelical Thomists have argued that on the matter of justification Aquinas is out of step with Tridentine and post-Tridentine Catholicism though closer to the Protestant Reformers. This article argues that such a reading of Aquinas is mistaken, and that Aquinas's understanding of justification is of a piece with his both his predecessors (Augustine, Council of Orange) as well as his successors (Council of Trent, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)

96 *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 32; *Catechism*, 1855.