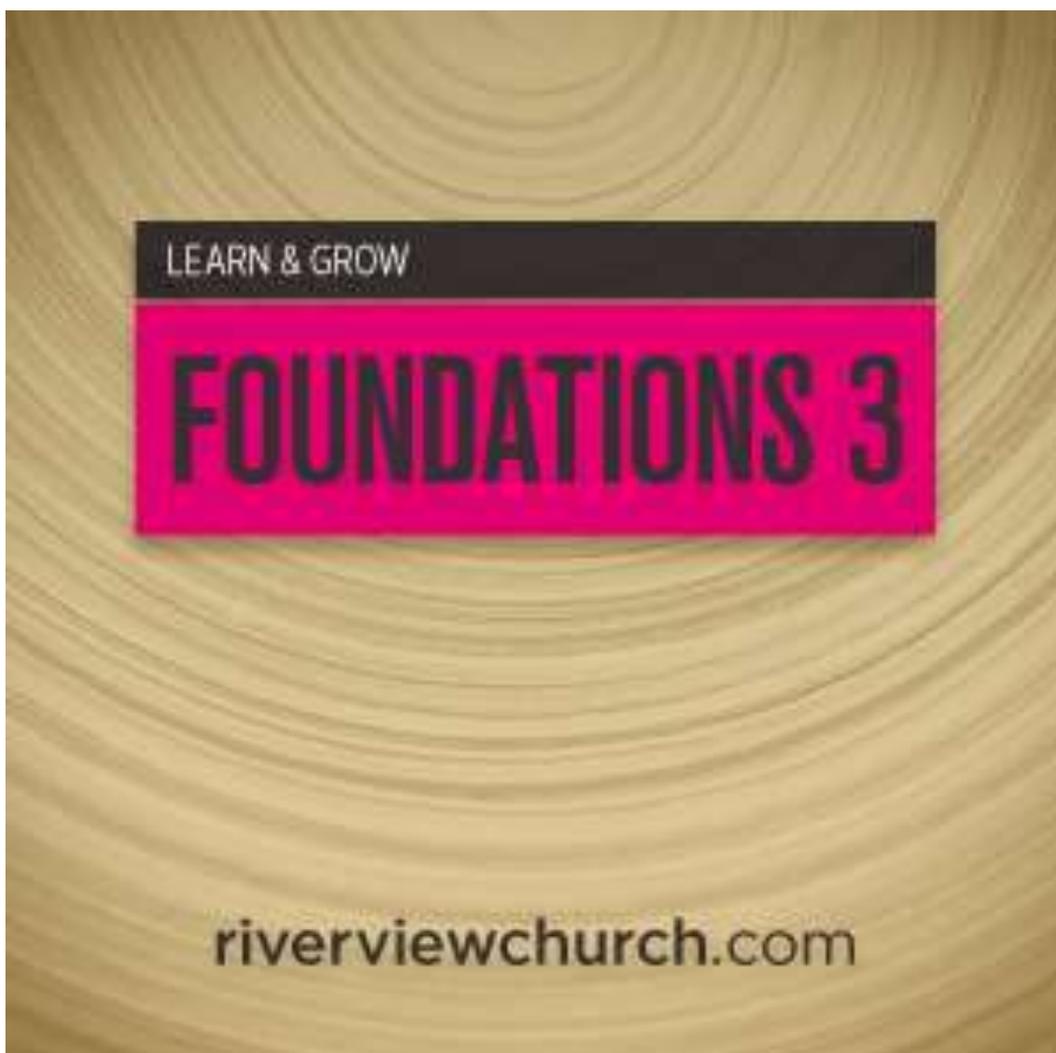


The Development of Western Thought

Church History 1 (306) – Week 6



Plato 400 BC

The son of wealthy and influential Athenian parents, Plato began his philosophical career as a student of *Socrates*.

It is thought that Plato was influenced in his worldview by Orphism.

Origin - According to this view, God did not bring the world into existence; he merely *shaped* the matter that was already there.

Meaning - Influenced by Socrates, Plato was convinced that knowledge is attainable.

Nature of Forms

The theory of Forms may best be understood in terms of mathematical entities. Material objects are merely representations of the real essence of the thing. This real, changeless form of the object will only exist as an idea and only be knowable through reason.

For Plato, therefore, the Form “circularity” exists, but not in the physical world of space and time. It exists as a changeless object in the world of Forms or Ideas, which can be known only by reason.

Morality – for Plato the road to moral correctness was via intellectual debate.

Destiny – For Plato ultimate existence was in the Forms and with the influence of Orphism, Plato believed that the ultimate destiny of mankind was to escape the cycle of reincarnation and become the Form.

Aristotle 384 to 322 BC

Origin – did not believe in God as the creator but used the term ‘Prime Mover’ to describe what he believed to be the original cause of all other causes.

Meaning - Aristotle regarded the world as made up of individuals (substances) occurring in fixed natural kinds (species).

“There is nothing in the intellect,” he wrote, “that was not first in the senses.”

Morality – Because the purpose of every specific kind is to become the fullness of that which the Prime Mover placed within it, the purpose of moral decisions is to allow mankind to be happy.

The highest virtue is justice.

Destiny – While Aristotle believed that the world was everlasting and there was not ‘other world’ he did have a sense of ‘soul’.

Hebrew Thought

Origin – the world came from the creative work of God not as a result of a conflict between good and evil but as an act of love by a loving God.

Meaning – all meaning is connected with God. The creation has meaning and value because God is its architect and sustainer; because the creation story has a plot and it is going somewhere; a beginning middle and end if you will.

Even more importantly meaning for the Hebrew was totally concerned with ‘doing’.

The world of the Hebrew is concrete—it is “doing” oriented. This perspective helps explain why the lawyer in Luke 10:25 comes to Jesus and asks *what must I DO to inherit eternal life* (emphasis added). The world of the Greek is cerebral and conceptual—it is “knowing” oriented. The world of the Hebrew is about function. The world of the Greek is about form. These knowing/doing, form/function differences inherent in these two worldviews manifest themselves in very different ways when it comes to engaging the Scriptures.¹

Morality – right actions came from the words of God via the prophets. These were not divorced from the culture but were often more than the culture.

Destiny – like other belief systems the Hebrew understanding of future destiny changed over time.

‘Resurrection’ was a life *after* ‘life after death’, the second of two stages in the post-mortem programme.

¹ Doug Greenwold, *Reflections, A Digging Deeper Faith Study* (Gaithersburg, MD: Doug Greenwold, 2011).

Resurrection was, more specifically, not the *redefinition* or *redescription* of death, a way of giving a positive interpretation to the fact that the breath and blood of a human body had ceased to function, leading quickly to corruption and decay, but the *reversal* or *undoing* or *defeat* of death, restoring to some kind of bodily life those who had already passed through that first stage. It belonged with a strong doctrine of Israel's god as the good creator of the physical world. It was the affirmation of that which the pagan world denied.²

Augustine

Augustine's careful exposition of the NT, particularly the letters of Paul, gained him a reputation that continues today, as the 'second founder of the Christian Faith'.

According to Augustine, it follows that all human beings are now contaminated by sin from the moment of their birth.³

From this position Augustine developed the idea of *original sin* and the doctrine of *Grace*. It was Augustine who first penned the phrase 'salvation by faith'.

Because of his neo-Platonic worldview, Augustine argues that the human mind is to be regarded as the apex of humanity. It is therefore to the individual human mind that the theologian should turn, in looking for "traces of the Trinity" in creation.⁴

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas, (28 January 1225 – 7 March 1274) was an Italian Dominican priest, and an immensely influential philosopher and theologian in the tradition of scholasticism.

He was the foremost classical proponent of natural theology, and the father of Thomism. His influence on Western thought is considerable, and much of modern philosophy was conceived in development or refutation of his ideas, particularly in the areas of ethics, natural law, metaphysics, and political theory. The works for which he is best known are the *Summa Theologica* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*.

² N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), 201.

³ Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology*. (Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 35.

⁴ *Ibid* 68