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The Theology of Thomas Aquinas, Selected Topics

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Christ and the World

After having established in III, 8, 1-2 that Christ is the head of the Church, St. Thomas, in III, 8, 3, address the question of Christ's headship in relation to all people, including those outside the Church. He quotes two verses, 1 Tim. 4:10 and 1 Jn. 2:2, which indicate that there is a sense where the salvation that comes through Christ is applicable to the whole world. Thomas attempts to explain how this implies that all men are in some sense members of the Body of Christ, while maintaining that such membership is by faith and according to predestination.

The key to Thomas' explanation is the fact that the body of Christ is spread out through time, with various members in various states at any given time. For example, right now there are some members of the body of Christ who have completed their earthly life, and are united with their Head in glory. There are also those who are living the fullness of the Christian life in this world, united to Christ by charity. Then there are those in an earlier stage of the Christian life, united to their Head by faith. Finally, all those who are currently alive, but not in the faith, are united to Christ in potentiality. As long as they are alive, they have the potential to come to faith, which would reduce their potential membership to actual membership in the body of Christ. In this way, He is the head of all men and thus fulfilling the Scriptures that say he is "the Savior of all men" (1 Tim 4:10), and "the propitiation for our sins ... [and] for those of the whole world." (1 Jn. 2:2)

If one of these potential members is predestined to eternal life, then at some point in their earthly life, they will move from potential to actual members of Christ's body.

However, if they are not predestined for salvation, when they end their lives, their potential membership in the body of Christ will end.

This is a point where St. Thomas differs from five-point Calvinism, which asserts that Christ's atonement is only ever for those predestined for salvation, so there is no way that the non-predestined could be potential members of the body of Christ. The Calvinist emphasis on God's sovereignty tends to take away all possibility of contingency. However, such a view does not have a good explanation for the verses quoted in this article.

In contrast, St. Thomas maintains the tension between what is clearly revealed in Scripture about predestination in Romans 9 and the universal aspect of salvation indicated in 1 Timothy and 1 John. Such a tension is difficult for us to understand, but it is one of the mysteries which we must maintain lest we stray from the truth.