

perhaps we should invite people – *in our theology courses* – to reflect not, in the first place about epistemology, the Trinity, or even the saving work of the cross of Christ, but on a series of questions about their own lives’ (p. 100; italics original). In the final chapter, Clapper explores how the practical theology just articulated works its effects on preaching, counseling, and evangelism. It is particularly pleasing to find examples from the world of the arts being used in this chapter.

What is to be made of the book as a whole? Clearly, it will work well for contemporary Methodists around the world, to get them thinking about key features of the theology of their (secondary) founder with respect to the challenges of today. But it is to be hoped that not just Methodists will listen to what Clapper has to say. The task of developing a contemporary reasonable (though not rationalistic) theology which also takes bodies and emotions with equal seriousness is a major one for Christians in any tradition. That said, there is perhaps – as is often the case with historical theology (even if with practical bent, as here) – a tendency to assume or conclude too easily that Wesley had things neatly wrapped up. Yes, Bonhoeffer gets Wesley and Methodists badly wrong (p. 87), but the same Wesley who, as Clapper rightly emphasizes, gets us to think through affections (emotions, feelings, the heart) is also the Wesley who has influenced a tradition of Christians who sometimes find silence and stillness problematic. If undue inwardness is not a charge to be leveled against Wesley and Methodism, this does not mean that the (sometimes restless) action which counters the charge is the best outworking of the ‘vision of the right heart’. But that is more a quibble with Wesley than with Clapper. In the meantime, Clapper can be applauded for having asked, in a helpful, practical way, telling contemporary questions of a past theological giant, whether or not he is right about Wesley, or whether Wesley was himself right.

Clive Marsh
University of Leicester



Revisioning Christology: Theology in the Reformed Tradition,
Oliver D. Crisp, Ashgate, 2011 (ISBN 978-1-4094-3005-6), 166 pp., pb
£17.99

Oliver Crisp is a leading contemporary theologian and his contributions are always thought provoking. In this clearly written book, a companion to his ‘Retrieving Doctrine’, he gives his readers a look at

how six theologians within the Reformed tradition thought about Christology from various angles. These theologians are Donald Baillie, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, William Shedd, John Owen, and Kathryn Tanner. However, this is not simply an overview of how these persons contributed to Christology. Rather, Crisp tells us in his introduction that he is taking a particular approach to this subject, and has chosen these theologians for a reason. Rather than recount here what he says about each of these thinkers, it will be more valuable to focus our attention on the philosophical assumptions that shape his approach to history and to theological traditions. It is within that framework that we can then make sense of how he understands the contributions of the theologians he chose.

In his Preface Crisp explains this book's approach to the study of theology and why this is the best approach to help us glean insights from the past and apply them today. His approach is what he calls a bottom-up approach, in contrast to a top-down approach. The top-down approach is one which considers the creeds/confessions of the Reformed faith and from them extrapolates a theology that defines what it is to be Reformed. Crisp considers this an anemic approach that is too abstract to help us understand how what it means to be 'reformed' developed. This approach has the tendency to become prescriptive rather than descriptive.

The alternative is to study particular theologians within the tradition and consider what they said about a particular doctrine or what it means to be reformed. This approach has the benefit of providing a considerable body of information that actually shows what it was like to live within a given reformed denomination. Crisp takes this latter approach because he believes it will tell us how a given thinker shapes, and challenges, the paradigm within a given tradition, although he sees room for both approaches working together. 'It helps us to see how particular representatives of a given theological tradition can have rather different approach to, and doctrines about, exactly the same area of Christian theology' (p. xii). One senses in this an emphasis on difference and particularity rather than an affirmation of the nature of what it is to be 'Reformed'. This is not surprising given the postmodern milieu, but it does raise questions that Crisp does not answer about whether there is such a thing as the Reformed tradition, or only particular persons who self-identify as Reformed. If there is no essence of the Reformed tradition, how can we identify Reformed theology (beyond self-identification, as if someone is something because they say they are). Crisp is not denying that there is a confessional core to Reformed theology; however, exactly what this means for him can be seen in what aspects of this theology can be questioned without having left behind the core. If these thinkers are challenging the bounds established by the top-down approach then

the question is whether these bounds actually do identify the essence of 'Reformed'.

Crisp gives us a further glimpse that confirms his interest in questioning the bounds of what it means to be Reformed. 'One of the motivations for writing this book was to test this thesis [toleration of difference was restricted to first two generation of Reformed theologians], by considering how a number of important or interesting Reformed theologians tackled key issues in Christology, a central and defining doctrine for Christian theologians' (p. x). This illustrates for us, Crisp says, the manner in which a theological tradition can range over a variety of views within a certain dogmatic constraint (p. x). 'Such views are part of a living, developing set of beliefs that have grown up around a hardcore of doctrines found in Scripture, the catholic creeds, and confessional standards such as the *Heidelberg Catechism* or the *Westminster Confession*.'

This could be taken in two ways. One is that there is no actual meaning or essence discovered by the work of a theologian, but rather merely difference that proceeds through a dialectic process to give us, at any given time, a record of what theologians believed. This is certainly a popular view particularly among liberal theologians. The other view, and the one I suspect Crisp holds, is that there is a progressive orthodoxy. However, this raises problems for his bottom-down approach. I suggest this is because he has the pattern backwards. Rather than a creed being written, and then theologians challenging its bounds, I would suggest the contention and challenging happens and then a creed is written. The writing of a confession does not end discussion, but it does illuminate where a given thinker is at in understanding the issues and debates. The time after a creed is a time of challenges and contentions as preparation is made for a new creed or confession. Crisp is studying one such period. The time after the *Westminster Confession* (as the last of the Reformed creeds) is one of divergence from orthodoxy, and challenges as new questions are raised that must be addressed in a later council. It tells us the extent to which post-WCF theologians understood the Confession.

If we take this interpretation of how the history of theological ideas works then we would not look to individuals, however notable, such as Calvin or Zwingli, to define what it means to be Reformed. Nor would we look at theologians living after the *Westminster Confession*, to answer this question as opposed to tell us how well the *Westminster Confession* was understood. Thus, Crisp's book does not actually test the thesis he presented, but rather could be taken to explain how well the Confession (or other Reformed statements) was understood and to what extent and in what way theologians diverged from orthodoxy. This need not be understood in frozen standard because the challenges that arise after a given confession/creed are indications of what works remains for

future confessions. If a thesis is to be tested it must be done in a manner that does not leave alternative possibilities or else it has not really been tested. I would conclude that what this study shows us is either pre-WCF debate that eventually solidified, or post-WCF struggle to understand the Confession or to depart from it.

These considerations about Crisp's methodology are not intended to subtract from the valuable and interesting overview he gives about each theologian. As a philosopher of religion I was particularly interested in his presentation of Donald Baillie and the latter's understanding of paradox. Crisp defines 'paradox' as involving self-contradiction, such as the Liar's Paradox, although he also notes that there are apparent paradoxes. This might appear to involve a contradiction but do not, rather they could simply be about subjects that are beyond human cognitive capacities. He does not believe the incarnation involves such a paradox. Indeed, he affirms that the law of non-contradiction cannot be violated without losing meaning (p. 6). If applied, this means that the problem with cases such as the Liar's Paradox is that although they appear to have meaning, upon examination they are meaningless.

Nevertheless, he also considers the possibility that in cases like the Incarnation the human cognitive faculty is unable or not equipped to understand. In order to support this he gives examples of theologians who have maintained that God is incomprehensible. Of course this is true, indeed, trivial, where 'incomprehensible' means not fully knowable. However, what subject can be fully known? Yet Crisp considers the possibility of the *via negativa* where incomprehensible means not knowable in a more important sense.

With regards to the Incarnation I do not see where the traditional doctrine fits either definition. Christ is one person with two natures. The problem seems to arise when a theologians expects further definition, as opposed to clarification of the terms. However, such an approach would be lost in an endless regress. Any answer would require further definitions. Its far from clear that there are any actual philosophical problems about the Incarnation that have not been answered by the WCF. This is not to say that no interesting and important nuances remain, but it is to warn against the straining out of gnats while swallowing camels.

The sense of unknowability given in the *via negativa* raises problems that undermine the considerations studied in this book about Christology. While Crisp himself does not endorse this view, it appears in his book because important theologians do believe it. The person and work of Christ relates to the Christian teaching about redemption. The need for redemption presupposes the reality of guilt and sin. However, if God is unknowable then failing to know God cannot be a sin. This is contrary to the first and second Commandments, as well as the

admonition throughout Scripture to know God (Psalm 19) and the definition of eternal life given by Christ (John 17:3).

It was because of these considerations that I found his chapter on Baillie, as well as the others, so interesting. For me they were a well-written presentation revealing the extent to which Reformed thinkers have grappled with why Christ is needed, and how the need for Christ is expressed to Christians and non-Christians alike by Reformed theologians and preachers. It demonstrated for me that the opening lines of the WCF, 'the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God so as to leave man without excuse' were a significant development over pre-WCF theologians, and have not been much developed or relied upon by the post-WCF theologians Crisp presents us with. I would conclude by asserting that this insight of the WCF is perhaps the most important and therefore essential aspect of the Reformation.

Owen Anderson
Arizona State University



The Social Mission of the U.S. Catholic Church: A Theological Perspective, Charles E. Curran, Georgetown University Press, 2011 (ISBN 978-1-58901-743-6), xi + 196 pp., pb £20.75

In the recently concluded election cycle in the United States, Catholics found themselves playing a nearly unprecedented role in the political discourse. As US Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) president Cardinal Timothy Dolan both called for demonstrations of civil disobedience in response to perceived governmental threats to religious freedom and offered the benediction at both the Republican and Democratic party conventions, many women religious took time out from confronting heavy criticism from both the USCCB and the Vatican to embark on a whistle-stop bus tour opposing a federal budget proposal that they claimed failed to adequately provide for the needs of the poor. To these institutional voices were added those of the candidates themselves, as for the first time both Vice Presidential contenders, Paul Ryan and Joe Biden, were Catholic and were asked to speak to how their faith informs their public life in the one televised debate in which they participated. All the while, rank-and-file Catholics, considered by some to be a significant block of 'swing votes', presented anything but a unified front as their allegiances were often pulled in different