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Theologian Advances Reformed Doctrine

Oliver Crisp's new book of essays, *Retrieving Doctrine*, mines the past to keep the Reformed legacy at the forefront of contemporary theology.

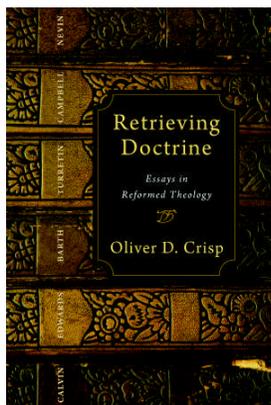
Oliver, for an analytic theologian you certainly begin this book in an evocative way! You describe the theologian's work as a kind of commerce with "the shades of dead divines." Why is the "company of the dead" an important starting place for theology today?

Theology is a subject that cannot escape from tradition. The church has been around for some two millennia, and its thinkers have generated a lot of work in that time! Spending time in the company of these thinkers, so to speak, is important. It helps develop and hone one's theological skills, furnishes one with new arguments and ideas, and helps to correct the myopia that comes from thinking that "now" is much more important than "then." I have found over the years that when one actually reads these thinkers, rather than reading what other people think of these thinkers, what really strikes me is how fresh and vibrant their work is—and (surprisingly, perhaps) how relevant. We have such intellectual riches in the Christian church! The book is one small contribution toward getting contemporary Christians to see how rich it is, by engaging with some of the theologians from one stream of the Christian church, namely, the Reformed tradition of Protestant Christianity.

Why is a "collegial approach to theology" important for the work of retrieval?

Sometimes one gets the impression that thinkers of centuries ago are so far removed from us that to read their works one has to steep oneself in history, literature, language preparation and the like before actually opening anything they have written. I want to challenge that assumption, although I don't deny that such preparations are helpful. My wanting to offer this challenge is nothing new. C. S. Lewis used to talk about how important it is to read the classics for oneself, rather than relying on secondhand reports of what other people think of the classics. I am saying, Why not think this way about theologians of the past too? The idea is to bring their ideas to the table in order to furnish our current theological

AUTHOR Q & A



*Retrieving Doctrine:
Essays in Reformed
Theology*
Available May 2011
\$22, 224 pages, paper
978-0-8308-3928-5

“It is about stealing the ideas of others and, like a theological magpie, bringing them into our modern nests as treasures that we may use and build upon in our own work today.”

thinking. Engaging with these thinkers of the past turns out to be an exciting and thrilling dialogue rather than a tedious exercise in reading the works of old, dead people. When one turns to these thinkers, one finds that they are just as excited about theology. But they often have other perspectives, angles, ideas that may not be part of our vocabulary today. Their very strangeness can be refreshing and can help us to see particular theological issues in new ways that may help us to make progress in our own thinking. So, strange to say, by engaging thinkers of the past, we can build theology for the future.

There is a surprisingly broad spectrum of Reformed thought represented here. What was your rubric for selecting these particular figures?

I did not really have a set of hard-and-fast rules by which I selected some and rejected others. It was more a case of thinking, *Who am I interested in whose work might also interest others?* Steven Spielberg says that he makes films he would want to see. I write books I would like to read, but which are not on the bookshelves. This was an opportunity to bring both familiar and unfamiliar theologians under the covers of one volume. I deliberately sought to widen the number of conversation partners because I think recent historical work in Reformed theology has shown that the tradition is broader and more variegated than might have once been thought. I wanted to show how some of the past theological voices that are less well known may have been passed over by mistake, and may still have something to say to us today. So, in addition to chapters on theological topics from John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, there are also chapters on Francis Turretin, John MacLeod Campbell and John Williamson Nevin. There were others that could have been selected. But I thought that these thinkers had particular contributions that the church could usefully listen to today.

How can you be “unabashedly Reformed” and “constructive” at the same time? How is “progress in doctrine” not a contradiction in terms?

The artist who paints without any attention to the works of other painters can produce works of art. But they may not be very good works of art. The danger is that the outputs of such activity become insular, introspective, turned in on oneself and, as a consequence, “thin” or insubstantial. Great artists are almost always people who have studied their

AUTHOR Q & A

“The real energy of Crisp’s writing lies in its restrained speculative impulse. He is drawn to the curious, untidy edges of Reformed tradition, the unexplored (or largely forgotten) tensions and problems which the tradition has produced. In the midst of these tensions, Crisp finds new possibilities for contemporary theology.”

—Benjamin Myers,
Charles Stuart University

peers and the works of great painters of the past. Doing so has provided them with a stock of ideas that they then use as the point of departure for their own creativity. Picasso is a great example of this. An iconoclast, in some respects. But his work was possible at least in part because he looked to the past to provide him with ideas that inspired his creativity. The same is true of the great artists of the Renaissance, like Michelangelo. I think something similar can be said for theology, Reformed theology included. One engages theologians of the past, dialoguing with their works, quizzing them on why they thought what they did. This does not necessarily mean we will always agree with them. Collegial theology is not about aping previous theology any more than modern art is about slavishly reproducing the work of the great masters. It is about using their works as an inspiration for one’s own. But to put it like that suggests that a cursory reading will do. I do not mean that. What I mean is that one must really submerge oneself in the works of other theologians, really inhabit their ideas, in order to furnish theology with the material for constructive work today.

Lastly, in the true spirit of reform, your book issues a call: “The challenge to contemporary divines is to take up where our intellectual forebears left off by changing what is needed, making those adjustments deemed necessary in order to make better sense of the gospel once delivered to the saints.” What are the obstacles to this kind of project catching on among Reformed theologians?

The obstacles for Reformed theologians are probably not the same as those for the average Reformed Christian. I suppose some Reformed theologians will be delighted with what I am saying because it is what they have been doing for some time. Systematic theology is all about appropriating the ideas of other people and refashioning them for contemporary thought. I recently read a short paper by the American Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson titled “How I Stole from Jonathan Edwards.” It is a delightful piece, which revels in the fact that the Lutheran Jenson found engagement with the Reformed Edwards to be of fundamental importance to the shaping of his own theology.

But some may think the collegial approach rather naive. Can we really talk to the thinkers of the past in the way that is being suggested here? Is there not a real danger of anachronism, and of failing to take seriously enough

AUTHOR Q & A

the historical, linguistic and interpretative dangers in seeking to bring the ideas of past thinkers to the table of contemporary theologizing? My answer to this is to agree that there are dangers involved, but that this should be no reason to leave off the task of collegial theology. The reason being that what is at stake is too important not to engage in theological retrieval. Scholarship on post-Reformation Reformed theology has been transformed in the last twenty years. A previous generation of scholars thought Reformed scholasticism dry, arid, hopeless, binding up the creativity of Calvin in the iron bands of logic. We now see that this was an utterly mistaken picture of the wealth of theological creativity and depth that can be found among the Reformed scholastics. Francis Turretin is one of those theologians. I have learned a great deal from this historical rehabilitation of such thinkers. But I also want to engage with Turretin's thought directly, not for purely historical purposes, but because I think his ideas have an abiding value and may be of use for contemporary theology. There is nothing amiss in such an approach. It need not be ahistorical. But it isn't history as such. It is constructive theology engaging with the past. Or, perhaps, as Jenson puts it, it is about stealing the ideas of others and, like a theological magpie, bringing them into our modern nests as treasures that we may use and build upon in our own work today. That seems like a very important reason for thinking something like theological retrieval is a vital component of systematic theology.