

Oliver D. Crisp. *Deviant Calvinism: Broadening Reformed Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014. xi+240 pp. \$34.00 (paper).

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Oliver Crisp's *Deviant Calvinism* is an elegant exercise in minding the gaps in Reformed theology, examining questions that are often assumed to be places of departure and finding the boundaries somewhat less rigid than is often thought. This is a book of essays, eight chapters that can stand alone but which taken together address questions relative to salvation and justification, free-will and determinism, and the nature of the atonement. The questions addressed, for the most part, concern the scope of salvation. While addressing some of the central concerns of theologians within the Reformed tradition, Crisp sets out to remind his readers that being Reformed has less to do with adhering to a particular set of doctrines, and more to do with a way of engaging the discipline of theology and the church as a whole.

Crisp reminds his readers that all too often "Reformed" theology has come to stand in for a particular brand of Calvinism, one spelled out like a certain flower (t-u-l-i-p). Crisp's understanding of what it is to be Reformed, laid out in the first chapter of his book, describes as much a set of doctrinal affirmations as a disposition toward the ongoing, ever reforming work of theology. He notes the momentous influence of John Calvin not begrudgingly, but adds appreciation for other less known voices in the tradition. These two motivations—decentering a certain version of Calvinism and rehabilitating lesser known voices and opinions—work together, as the book brings to light unfamiliar and sometimes unpopular positions as a way to honor the ever-reforming character of the Reformed church. He calls this approach a task of "theological clarification," not the endorsement of particular positions, and his treatment throughout remains even handed (183).

Chapters 2-4 address a cluster of questions surrounding the divine decree, the freedom of the will, and the scope of human salvation. In all three chapters, Crisp takes an approach opposed to what is often viewed as the typical Reformed perspective on an issue. In Chapter 2 Crisp addresses two versions of eternal justification, and he seeks to make a theological case for the view against the more widely accepted justification-in-history view. The latter maintains that justification does not obtain for an individual until God performs a special act in history and imputes Christ's righteousness to her, whereas according to the former there is no time when an elect individual is not justified, even if the individual has not yet been baptized or exercised faith. What seems to be at stake here is the implication that an individual, prior to the temporal moment of justification is "outside the bounds of salvation" (58). Whether the divine decree of election is completed in eternity or

realized in time for Crisp seems to hold implications for how we think about the meaning of justification itself. Put another way, if the elect are justified *in* or *from* eternity, then “the change [faith] effects is epistemic, not ontological” (48). It is important to note that the change faith effects is not *merely* epistemic, and Crisp illustrates this with a wonderfully apt story of the heir to a royal throne. As with the pauper who realizes a royal status that had previously been hidden from him, the believer who comes to faith experiences a true and perception-altering change of his or her status in relation to God. The difference is that the new believer, according to the eternal justification view has *always* been God’s, whether or not she knew it. So, as Crisp quotes John Gill, “Justification may well be considered as a branch of election,” instead of as logically separate from it (46).

In Chapter 3, Crisp is again minding the gap between a form of compatibilism that understands human freedom to be consistent with divine pre-ordination, and a more “folk view” of hard determinism.¹ This folk view assumes that free will is the ability to do otherwise at any moment of choice, and understands that insofar as God has preordained human acts, then humans do not have free will. Crisp’s distinction, as per usual, is deft and subtle. He suggests a version of what he calls “libertarian Calvinism,” wherein humans possess libertarian freedom in all areas except those pertaining to salvation. So, Adam and Eve were free to choose to sin or not to sin—as are we—but the state of the human will is such that fallen humans cannot freely choose salvation.

Crisp’s version of libertarian Calvinism suggests that free will does, in fact, pertain in every area of human life *other* than salvation; in Crisp’s words, “fallen human beings are still free in making choices for which they are morally responsible in areas of their lives other than those that have to do directly with their own eternal destiny” (84). This for Crisp is commensurate with the Westminster Confession which states that “although God eternally ‘ordains whatsoever comes to pass,’ God does so in such a way that no ‘violence [is] offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established” (85). The instincts here—to affirm human freedom, diminish the view of freedom as simply “the ability to choose otherwise,” and retain a strong view of election—seem to be accomplished with this articulation of free will.

Though the topic is quite different, in Chapter Four Crisp addresses what he calls “Augustinian Universalism” and, similar to the previous chapter, argues for the compatibility of two views that are often thought to be competing—universalism and an Augustinian theological framework. That “Augustinianism and universalism are compatible” is either a siren song or a sweet relief, depending on where you stand (97). For Crisp, the matter concerns whether the conditions of Augustinianism could be met by a universalist instead of a particularist account. This chapter seems to be the heart of the book, both in terms of its method and content. Crisp distinguishes between contingent universalism, in which hell is a possibility, and necessary universalism, in which hell is inconceivable due to the “essentially benevolent nature” of God (98). Crisp argues that most traditional Augustinian theists are committed to

¹ I appreciate Crisp’s use of “folk view” as a way of addressing what many tulip- adhering Calvinists do, in fact, believe, without relying on condescending language.

the belief that there is a set designated “elect,” whose final destination is heaven, who are distinct from a set designated “reprobate,” whose ultimate destination is hell. (Crisp includes a commitment to the fixed state of one’s “postmortem destination” as also shared by traditional Augustinians, 101).

Where Crisp attempts to open the conversation is over the question of whether both of these sets must be actualized in order for both God’s mercy and grace to be displayed. Contra Jonathan Edwards, Crisp finds separable the claims that, on the one hand, essential divine attributes such as grace, mercy, wrath, and justice must be exemplified, and, on the other hand, that these attributes must be “exemplified in a particular set of God’s creatures” (106). The problem that Crisp raises with this claim is that of arbitrariness, in addition to the soteriological problem of evil: if God could have chosen to elect one more creature than God does indeed elect, God is at best behaving arbitrarily and at worst he is morally implicated.²

What Crisp wants his reader to consider is that the range of God’s attributes might indeed be displayed without a set designated “reprobate” that experiences divine wrath and judgment (104). This would entail God creating and electing *all* human beings, and then decreeing that the scope of the atonement is universal. Under such a view, election still pertains and so God authors salvation, the sin of human agents is dealt with in the atonement, and God’s justice is displayed through the mechanism of the cross. God, however, does indeed save all whom God *intends* to save—which might, in fact, be all.

In Chapter 5, Crisp sets in on what might seem an abrupt about face as he presents a rejoinder to the just-argued Augustinian universalism. This is perhaps the weakest chapter of the book, if only because the necessity of the counter-claim Crisp seeks to provide is a bit opaque. Crisp desires to set out a version of Augustinian particularism that is compatible with divine benevolence. To do so he calls up the “hoary old chestnut” of whether God must create the best of all possible worlds, which relative to soteriology would suggest that a world where $n+1$ persons is saved is morally better than a world where n persons is to be saved. The heart of Crisp’s argument countering Augustinian universalism is based on what it is to be God: “The fact that God could do so does not mean God *must* do so” (Crisp’s emphasis, 148-9). This is indeed the case. But as a counter-argument to the extremely compelling version of universalism Crisp offers in Chapter 4, this falls a bit flat.

In his chapter on Barthian Universalism (Chapter 6), Crisp seeks to clarify one of the twentieth century’s preeminent theologians on one of the century’s most contentious issues. Instead of arguing that Barth is for or against universalism, Crisp concludes that Barth’s theology can both imply and not imply universalism. He argues this without undermining the genius of Barth’s theology—instead, Crisp actually attributes this non-determinate aspect of Barth’s theology to its genius. It is hard to “pin down” Barth on universalism precisely *because* “his theological method draws deeply upon philosophical and theological sensibilities at odds with those prized by analytics” (153). Such attention to theological method is often missed by analytic approaches, and well appreciated here.

² According to Crisp, the free will defense is not open to those Augustinians who are also theological determinists.

In Chapter 7, Crisp discusses hypothetical universalism in order to reconsider this view against the more well-known definite-atonement view. According to Crisp, though Calvinism is often assumed to entail double predestination there were other more universalistic forms of early Reformed theology (175-6). Hypothetical universalism is one such view, whereby Christ's death is believed to be sufficient for all but applied only when the conditions of faith are met. Yet, in keeping with much Reformed thought, faith is an unconditional gift that derives from God. Crisp notes that the hypothetical universalist view attempts to hold together two sorts of data in Scripture: those passages which talk of a universal scope of the atonement and those which speak of its limited character. By making faith the condition that distinguishes the elect from the reprobate, both of these kinds of passages can be honored.

Crisp is clear that he is not seeking to rehabilitate this view per se—what he is after is a “theological clarification [which] involves setting forth a doctrine in the best light and attempting to account for objections that have been raised against it, in order to understand and explain its importance as a contribution to Christian theology” (183). This is as it should be since the gains of hypothetical universalism over a definite-atonement view are limited at best. For if, as the advocate of hypothetical universalism claims, God makes provision for the salvation of all and “elects *independent of any knowledge God has concerning foreseen faith*” (Crisp's emphasis, 188), then why wouldn't everyone be saved?

In Chapter Eight Crisp addresses the double payment objection, which suggests that sins are paid for twice if eternal punishment exists for the existence of sins which have been addressed already in Christ's death. Crisp again seeks not to bolster traditional critiques but rather to undercut them at their root. He notes that all he seeks to accomplish in this chapter is a rebuttal to the claim that the double-payment objection undercuts an understanding of universal atonement. He does this with the incisiveness we have come to expect, but what is most worth noting at this point of the review is his strategy. Crisp is seeking throughout this book not to convince his readers of a particular perspective on the scope of salvation. Indeed, one leaves this book without knowing for sure *what* Crisp thinks. Instead he is carefully exposing traditional arguments for and against universalism at their root. He is, for instance, asking us to consider the benefit of adopting a species of universalism, and then asking us to consider arguments for a definite atonement. He is also introducing us to conversation partners we likely do not know, in order that we would not only consider their opinions but also consider them as “ours,” as fellow Reformed theologians working to articulate the meaningfulness of the work of Christ.

On the whole, Crisp has succeeded in locating what he calls “a softer face to Calvinism,” a face which as far as I can tell has two distinct qualities (237). The first is a reminder that to be properly Reformed is to remember the fundamental dependence of all creation upon God, and also that the work of salvation is properly God's. Accordingly, the task of the Reformed theologian for Crisp is a task of ever listening with Christian doctrine regarding how best to speak of this dependence. The second aspect of this “softer face” suggests that God, indeed, is *desirous* that all might experience the salvation that is best exemplified by this dependence. (How have we allowed this insight to fall out of Christian thought?) Crisp's Calvinism is “devious” in subtly, quietly and always carefully calling us to reconsider what we know about the

God we claim to know. Its elegance lies in its ability to remind us to consider presuppositions we had forgotten we held, and to attempt always to move the work of theology toward speaking clearly about the God who is the author of *all* salvation, whatever the scope of it might be in the end. I commend the book to you heartily.