

Medi Ann Volpe. *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 263 pages. \$94.95.

In this contribution to Blackwell's *Challenges in Contemporary Theology* series, Medi Volpe raises critical issues regarding contemporary theories of Christian identity. In doing this, her aim is both scholarly and personal. Volpe's daughter Anna has Down Syndrome, and this has led Volpe to seek an understanding of Christian identity that is "faithful to classical descriptions of faith and practice, and uses the language historically used in the church, but that stretches to include those whose ability to practice or express the faith is limited – however severely" (2). The book fits within the realm of technical academic theology for which this series is known and assumes a familiarity with postliberal and Anglican ecclesiologies. Nevertheless, Volpe raises questions that should have broader appeal to pastors, practical theologians, and others concerned that the focus on practice in contemporary accounts of Christian identity may have excluded members of actual congregations who might find such practice impossible.

In the first three chapters of the book, Volpe evaluates three accounts of Christian identity: those of postliberal theology (initiated by George Lindbeck and modified by Kathryn Tanner), Rowan Williams, and John Milbank. While she discerns inadequacies in each of these accounts, she finds a positive quality in each that she wishes to retain: the language of *habitus* and rule-governed practice in postliberalism, Rowan Williams' call to recover the language of "soul" as the mysterious locus of the *imago Dei*, and John Milbank's account of "active reception" in which Christian identity is tied to receiving the image of Christ and acting in accordance with that image in turn. All three suffer, however, from deficiencies. Postliberal accounts (and Tanner's in particular) assume and require a particularly abled subject to participate fully in the life of the church whose focus is on practice, but they do not pursue the question of how such a subject is formed. Rowan Williams points toward the language of soul, but does not develop it himself. And finally, John Milbank underestimates the effect of sin that prevents us from fully receiving or mirroring the image of Christ. Volpe suggests that these three elements—formation, the soul, and sin—must be part of a complete account of Christian identity.

In the last three chapters, Volpe performs a retrieval of the theology of Gregory of Nyssa to address these three shortcomings. Gregory's account of Christian identity resonates strongly with that of Milbank (who draws heavily from Gregory's writings), yet overcomes Milbank's shortcomings. Gregory understands the soul as ultimately mysterious (152), and yet it is the unity in which reason, memory, the senses, emotion, desire, and the *imago Dei* intersect. The soul acts as a mirror that receives the image of Christ and reflects it into the world (156), but this mirror must be properly oriented and 'clean' for that reflection to occur. The purpose of Christian formation and doctrine is to overcome the sinful appetites for things of this world so that the soul is oriented toward God and, through ascetic practice, to further purify the soul for reflectivity. Volpe links these concepts together under the heading of identity as "discipleship" (228-229).

Volpe presents a compelling case for rethinking contemporary accounts of Christian identity, but questions remain. First, while Volpe is correct that greater attention is needed to the question of formation, it is also true that this issue has been addressed—from the perspective of postliberalism—in homiletic and practical theological literature. One might point toward Charles Campbell's proposal that we narrate Christ's identity or Walter Brueggemann's goal of "rescripting" reality, to name two examples that provide more concrete proposals for preaching and ministry than Volpe's conclusions. Volpe's argument would be stronger for considering such

practical theological writings. Second, Volpe comes to the role of the Holy Spirit late in the work, despite the fact that Rowan Williams (for instance) has described Christian identity as constituted by the Spirit in his essay “Word and Spirit” (in *On Christian Theology*). Finally, the definition of Christian identity as discipleship (and hence as an activity) is developed independently of the limit cases (such as Volpe’s daughter) that prompt her inquiry. It is only near the end of the work that Volpe gestures toward fitting these cases into the account, with the hint that future writings will address these questions.

Nevertheless, Volpe presents a strong argument for the importance of formation, the soul, and an account of sin in Christian identity. One hopes that she will continue to explore these questions in dialogue with practical theological literature in future works.

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