

Book Review: God with Us by K. Scott Oliphant

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Book: K. Scott Oliphant, *God with us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). PDF

What is the impact of a book? In the case of K. Scott Oliphant, this book would be a primary cause for accusations of theological error, charges of which he was subsequently acquitted.¹ The controversial book, since withdrawn from publication, is hard to obtain. Thankfully, I managed to get a softcopy of the book, and am thus able to do a brief review of this book.

The book is written as an exploration in the doctrine of God from a biblical theological and systematic perspective. Split into an introduction and five chapters, Oliphant attempted to formulate a theology of God that takes into account motifs of incarnation and accommodation, linking his doctrine of God and his doctrine of Christ. A key point of Oliphant's view formulated here is using Christology to guide Theology Proper (the headings in one of his chapters), in which his unique spin on the doctrine of God is being presented.

Oliphant's incarnation motif

As the title suggests, Oliphant saw the act of divine condescension as the key towards what he believed to be a more biblical doctrine of God. Oliphant looked along the line of "being" and saw that the relationship between the "being" of God and created being must be iconic, what he called the "*eimi/ eikon* distinction of being" (p. 84); God is the "I am"; we are the "image." Oliphant used this biblical truth to launch into discussions concerning how God can indeed interact with Man. Divine condescension shifts from an act of God to the incarnation as an act of divine accommodation (p. 83), and thus Theology Proper shifts to Christology.

To justify this transition from Christology to Theology Proper, Oliphant used the idea that "to understand the relationship of God to the world is to look at Christ himself" (p. 123). Therefore, we need to look at Christ in His person to understand God. Specifically, we are to look at the *Communicatio Idiomatum* (communication of properties or "idioms") (p. 97-8, 133) and the *Extra Calvinisticum* (the Calvinistic "outside") (pp. 98-102). The Reformed version of the *Communicatio Idiomatum* states that what is predicated of the two natures of Christ can be predicated of the one person

¹ Staff, "Update on Charges against Dr. K. Scott Oliphant," *The Aquila Report* (May 16, 2019). Accessed July 11 2022 (<https://theaquilareport.com/update-on-charges-against-dr-k-scott-oliphant/>)

of Christ.² The *Extra Calvinisticum* states that God the Son transcends the creaturely limitations of the flesh even while incarnate, and therefore He exists out of the body of Jesus Christ even while his full person is incarnate as the God-man.³ In Oliphant's system, the *Communicatio* shows how God can be said to partake of created properties, while the *Extra Calvinisticum* shows how Jesus can be said to be fully divine even while He has created properties. Both of these serve to buttress Oliphant's view of covenant properties, which will be looked at shortly.

In response, it must be said that the Incarnation is a unique event, and it only applies to God the Son for a specific purpose. In other words, the ontological event of the Incarnation is one specific divine accommodation. The accommodation of revelation in revelation by the prophets and then finally in Scripture is by the entire Trinity, not just God the Son.⁴ In fact, in revelation, it is the Spirit's primary role to inspire the words breathed out by God (2 Tim. 3:16), bringing forth the Word in the vessels prepared to pen them down (c.f. 2 Pet. 1:21).

Thus, while it is true that we must look at Christ to understand Scripture, that means that Christ is the center of God's plan in redemptive history. It does not mean that Christology is the entry point for approaching Theology Proper. Oliphant's point here is a confusion of categories, and thus errant.

Oliphant's view of "covenantal properties"

Using Christology to peer into the Godhead, Oliphant put forward the novel proposal that God took up covenantal properties in order to interact with creation (p. 27). God has His essential properties, what properly belongs to Him as God, and "covenantal properties" which are present given creation. These "covenantal properties" are totally separate from His nature, and their presence is "antinomic" (p. 83)

In a bid to ward off criticism, Oliphant asserts that these properties are not of nature. The *Communicatio* is utilized to show that there is nothing wrong in predicating created things of God, in the same way as there is nothing wrong in predicating created properties of the Son in His incarnation.⁵ The *Extra Calvinisticum* on the other hand is

² C.f. Richard A. Muller, "communicatio idiomatum/ communicatio proprietatum," *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 72-4

³ C.f. Richard A. Muller, "extra calvinisticum," *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 111

⁴ It is true, as argued by Oliphant, that the Son has always existed prior to the Incarnation, and that John 1:9 does show the Son's activity of illumination in the world prior to His incarnation (Oliphant, 105-11). However, the other persons of the Trinity are equally involved, and therefore the point stands that the other persons, without incarnation, reveal God.

⁵ "What about the reduplicative strategy? As we have seen, the reduplicative strategy in a Reformed context could be viewed as a subset of the *communicatio* in that it affirms that opposing propositions can be legitimately applied to the same person, given that that person contains constituent parts that pertain to the whole, in this case, to the person himself. So, to repeat, we may properly speak of God as not knowing and knowing at the same time, of his being limited in space and infinitely omnipresent, of his lacking the power to do something and being omnipotent at the same time." (Oliphant, 133)

utilized to state how a divine person having created properties does not actually affect the divine nature (c.f. p. 80). In other words, these are properties, which one would think would be ontological, yet they are not to be considered really ontological.

What is the problem Oliphant perceives that traditional views are unable to address? According to him,

Briefly put, explanations of God's interaction with creation have tended in one of two directions. Either God gives up aspects of his essential character and is, thereby, essentially constrained by his creation, or those passages in Scripture that indicate constraint or limitation in God as he interacts with creation are metaphorical or somehow "improper."

Neither of these tendencies allows the proper, gospel emphasis of Scripture to shine. The first option detracts from the glory of God in that man, and not God, becomes the sovereign in his own affairs. Because God is thought to have given up something of his "Godness," it is man, not God, who determines by virtue of his own choice just what happens. Man is thought to be self-determining; God, therefore, cannot be sovereign. Neither can he be omniscient, nor omnipotent. Exactly which essential attributes are thought to be forsaken by God depends on how radically free man is thought to be. Whatever the case, God has to give up something of who he is essentially in order for man to be free.

The second option seems akin to theological docetism, in which Scripture's ascription of God's interaction with creation is relegated to an appearance of such interaction, rather than something that really takes place. In attempting to avoid both of these tendencies, we will take what we have learned thus far and apply it to our understanding of God throughout covenant history. (p. 124)

Oliphant wants a real interaction, and he finds traditional theism lacking in this regard. Oliphant therefore uses the motif of covenant to assert that God takes on covenant properties in order to relate truly to the world. As he states:

Examples could easily be multiplied. In fact, the entirety of history, and into eternity, to be understood properly, presupposes God's covenantal properties, in that he, from the beginning, works with his creation and his human creatures in order to accomplish his sovereign purposes. In his condescension, he never denies his essential character, but neither is his essential character that which alone is predominant in his interactions with creation. (p. 127)

To summarize, Oliphant's views can be summarized as stating that God takes on properties stemming from His covenantal dealings because of creation, in order to interact with the world, but these properties are not ontological and do not affect the divine nature at all.

Evaluating Oliphant's "covenant properties"

It is indeed true that one problem the traditional view with its view of anthropopathism struggles with is a seeming “docetism.” While the category of anthropopathism itself is not meaningless, it is problematic to deploy the category every time the “emotions” of God are present without doing the proper exegesis of the biblical passages. Oliphant’s unease with the traditional tactic of dealing with divine interaction with creation is thus legitimate. It is indeed right as well that Oliphant turns to the notion of covenant to understand God’s interaction with the world, as indeed the entire Scriptures are all about the covenants of God.

That said, one should feel discomfort as well with Oliphant’s torturing of language and logic. “Properties” are normally understood to be ontological, and if one is asserting that they are not ontological, then one should specify what they are and how they are not ontological. It is possible to talk about non-ontological properties, as for example the speed of a moving shadow, but such properties are specified in ways that make it clear what they are and therefore in what sense they are not ontological. Oliphant instead asserts that these properties are non-ontological, claims antinomy, and seemingly thinks that is sufficient; it is not. We must remember that these “covenantal properties” are indeed to be truly predicated of God, so how is it possible for them to be both substantially predicated, and yet non ontological?

These “covenantal properties” are taken up by God due to creation. That might seem like this involves change in God, but Oliphant uses the *Communicatio* to assert that God does not change in the same way that Christ did not change in his deity due to the Incarnation.⁶ The problem is that Christ did change in His person in the Incarnation. He did not change in His deity as God the Son, but His person is changed in the Incarnation as He is now forever the God-Man, whereas previously He was not. To assert an analogy to the entire Godhead is to assert that the Father and the Spirit went through a process similar to incarnation. Scripture however is silent about this, and this detracts from the uniqueness of the Incarnation. There is only one incarnate, not three. Furthermore, if all three persons underwent a form of incarnation, then the orthodox teaching that the Father sends the Son and the Spirit becomes nonsense, for reciprocal sending and begetting erases the relations between the persons (Filiation, Spiritation, etc.).

Oliphant’s view of “covenantal properties” is fraught with theological problems, albeit perhaps not the ones that people might think of. It suffers from logical incoherence and outright contradiction. By viewing theology proper through the lens of Christology, it seems to demand a form of incarnation of the other two persons of the Trinity as well, thus undermining the relations between the persons of the Godhead. Without seeking to do so, it sets out a slippery slope towards a God both mutable and immutable, passible and impassible.

⁶ Invoking the *Communicatio* protects Oliphant from the charge that God becomes dependent on creation when he takes on “covenantal properties,” because Jesus did not become dependent on creation when He became incarnate.

The concern of the book is to portray a God that is relatable to us yet still immutable and impassible. It is a laudable goal, but the proposal fails to keep the tension biblical. Oliphant is on the right track in looking at God's covenants, but he should have eschewed all talk of properties or being. God relates to creatures not by relation of being, but by relation of act. The thing to go should be an Aristotelian view of *actus purus*, rather than attempting to fiddle with ontology and properties.

Conclusion

This book by Oliphant is an interesting proposal on the doctrine of God, yet highly flawed. Removal from circulation may be in the best interests of Westminster Philadelphia and K. Scott Oliphant, but it is certainly not in the best interest of intellectual inquiry. Oliphant's proposal of "covenantal properties" is interesting, heterodox, yet certainly not as heretical as many might make it out to be.

I have every confidence Oliphant would mature in his view beyond this, especially due to the level of discourse concerning the Trinity in these current times. Thus, I would be looking forward to see what he would have to offer us in the future on this topic, in due time.