

Some thoughts on Rennie's review of Oliphint's *God with us*  
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by Richard Ostella, March 13, 2021

I. On an infinite regress (R, p. 6)

Where is the language in Scripture that pertains to the discussion about God relating to creation? It is not in Gen 1.1, perhaps it is in 1.2 on the Holy Spirit? Does the Spirit take on creational properties or is this simply metaphor? The Holy Spirit acts within the creation and oversees it, but there does not seem to be some kind of appearance that involves taking creational properties to Himself (as say the properties of an eagle in some way similar to the dove of Jesus' baptism).

Direct relation by taking on human properties could be in 1.3, "God said." This is before He created man with the capacity of speaking (by a real event in space and time, Poythress, *In the Beginning*, p. 23 fn.1). If we assume for sake of argument that this involves adding something to Himself that He did not have before, i.e., the created property of speaking by the use of words, would this lead to an infinite regress and thus a *reductio*? In other words, would it have to be that He already created this human property in order to adopt it and use it to create this property in the creation of humans? But must we think this way? Since He is about to create humans with these properties, need it cause us any wonder if He chose to take them to Himself by an act of creation at the moment He spoke? This would not involve infinite regress: it would simply be the beginning of a particular human property of speech, its creation, that is entailed in the way God chose to create according to His plan to do so in steps leading up to the creation of man. Then, the fact that this human property is created before the creation of man means that man's ability to speak is fashioned according to God's use of it before man existed. Man's use of speech follows after and images God's use of it.

II. On "several unhappy consequences," Rennie begins with a good summary (p. 4):

According to Oliphint, christology provides the paradigm for theology and for our understanding of all forms of divine condescension. Just as God the Son took on human covenantal properties without changing what he essentially was, so also God has taken on created covenantal properties from the foundation of the world without changing what he essentially is. Oliphint uses the Reformed *communicatio idiomatum*, that the properties of each nature of Christ may be communicated to the person, to explain how God can be said to repent, grieve, and so on, without ceasing to be the eternal, immutable, and independent God. For example, just as the Scripture states that the Son grew in wisdom, according to his human nature, without implying any change of wisdom in his divine nature, so it may be really and truly said that God, according to his covenantal properties, repents without implying any change in his divine essence. In short, God has taken on created properties from the foundation of the world in the same way that the Son of God took on created human properties in the incarnation. "What is true of the incarnation is true also of other 'incarnations' of God in Scripture" (192).

Therefore, covenantal properties are created “incarnational” properties and attributes that God really and truly takes on prior to the incarnation in order for him to relate to that which is not himself.

Then Rennie says, “Such a proposal raises several unhappy consequences” (p. 4).

1. One is that in the incarnation (R. p. 4): “the Son of God did not merely take on accidental properties but rather assumed a substantial union of two natures in one person (152-54)... If this is so, then we are led to the unfortunate conclusion that all three Persons have had two substantial natures, one created and one divine, from the foundation of the world. It would seem difficult, therefore, to escape the conclusion that all three Persons, to a greater or lesser extent, have been incarnate at one point or another.”

In reply, something is amiss here. It seems sufficiently clear to say that on 152-54 there is no claim made that the Son assumed a substantial union of two natures in one person. Quite the opposite. The claim is that He assumed accidental properties (i.e., covenantal properties), which means contingent and not necessary because the Son of God took on a human nature “as a result of his free decision. Surely, if those properties are contingent (freely chosen and not a result of any necessity in him), then they are not essential to who he is (viz., the Son of God) and thus could be construed to be accidental” (*God With Us*, 154).

2. A second unhappy consequence for Rennie per Oliphint’s proposal is: “in order for Israel to really and truly ‘grieve His Holy Spirit’ (Isa. 63:10), the Person of the Spirit would also have to take on created covenantal properties... permanently,” otherwise “the Spirit could not be said to be capable of grief in the Old and New Testaments alike (cf. Eph. 4:30). Therefore, in order for his proposal to accomplish what he intends, it must apply equally and personally to each Person of the Trinity, both in the New Testament as well as the Old—an untenable position indeed!” (R, p. 4)

Two comments in reply: a) But why must the Spirit’s taking on the quality of grief be permanent? His basis seems to be that if not permanent then the Holy Spirit's grief could not be in both the OT and NT. But if it is permanent then the grief of the Spirit with saints must continue forever! b) For Oliphint, all the persons of the Godhead may at times take on human properties before and after the coming of Christ (and we might call this “incarnational”), but only the Son took them to Himself permanently in the incarnation historically through birth to Mary. He did so by His free decision to be our high priest forever in the power of an indestructible life.

3. Is there some real and fundamental sense in which God can have human experience?

R, quotes O, p. 87: “Christ, the Son of God in the flesh, suffered; he died, and he did that as the God-man, the quintessential covenant person. Since that is true, there must be some real and fundamental sense in which God can have or experience passions.”

R says, “We may wonder how far he would have us press this formula. Hunger, temptation, exhaustion, death, and the like are all predicated of Jesus. Are we to assume that there is ‘some real and fundamental sense in which God can have or experience’ such

things?” or “that what may be predicated of Christ incarnate may also be really and truly predicated of God apart from the incarnation” (p. 5).

Reply: a) It is not that God in His essential properties without passions can have them “apart from the incarnation.” It is that in the incarnation Christ added them to Himself without change. b) It seems best to say that Oliphint is affirming the reality of the experience of these things *by God* because the second person in fact took these things to Himself; He experiences them by the communication of the experiences He has in terms of His human nature to Himself personally. Then, if we deny that *God* can have and experience passions this way, we deny the incarnation itself. Surely, this is what John means when he calls Jesus (1 Jn 1.1) **the eternal life** and **That which was from the beginning, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands**. With their own eyes and hands the apostles saw and touched *the eternal God* who has become incarnate to be the source of life.