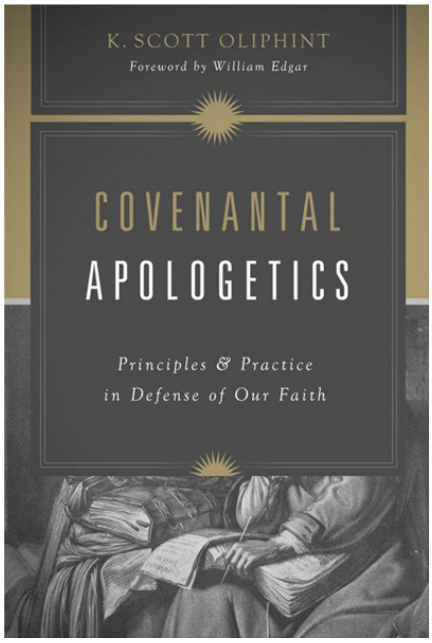

PUTTING THE COVENANT BACK INTO APOLOGETICS:

K. SCOTT OLIPHINT'S CONTRIBUTION TO DEFENDING THE FAITH

by Derek Brown

If the practice of apologetics is primarily a theological venture—and there is good reason to believe that it is—then K. Scott Oliphint has provided the church with an exceptional resource with which to defend and commend the Christian faith. Working within the Reformed tradition and drawing on the work of Cornelius Van Til, Oliphint presents a compelling case for a presuppositional approach to apologetics in his new book, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of our Faith* (Crossway, 2013). Only, as he suggests, we should consider dropping the "presuppositional" nomenclature.

To be sure, Oliphint does not suggest that Reformed apologists abandon Van Til's basic methodology where one begins to defend the faith by first assuming the triune God and the truth of divine revelation. Rather, in light of the varying "presuppositional" approaches and the truth that any *apologia* worth its biblical salt must consider of utmost importance man's relationship to God, Oliphint suggests we change the terminology from *presuppositional* to *covenantal* apologetics (38-39).

This minor change in vocabulary is meant to signal far more than a semantic preference. When apologetics are placed explicitly within a covenantal framework,

we find that our practice of defending and commending the faith is less likely to drift from its biblical-theological moorings or degenerate into intellectual gamesmanship. Accordingly, Oliphint begins the book by establishing ten theological tenets that must inform a covenantal approach to the apologetic enterprise (48-55).

The covenantal apologist will begin his work by assuming basic Reformed doctrines about God, man, the pervasive character of sin, and the nature of divine revelation. Most importantly, the Christian will reckon with the truth that all men have a covenantal relationship with God, whether "in Adam" or "in Christ." Thus, as he approaches unbelievers with the truth of the gospel, the apologist proceeds with an understanding that those who reject the gospel do so because they suppress the truth in unrighteousness, not because God's revelation in creation or Scripture is obscure or hidden.

Yet, Oliphint is not interested in the simple recitation of doctrinal fundamentals; he desires that Christians learn how to *apply* these truths consistently in their work of defending the faith. To aid readers in the use of these theological principles, Oliphint provides in subsequent chapters lengthy dialogical examples of how one might answer potential unbelieving interlocutors. For example, he shows how a covenantal apologist could handle a conversation in which he is presented with scientific objections to biblical truth (117-122), or how a discussion might go if a Christian were confronted with questions pertaining to the problem of evil (180-191). In the latter third of the book, Oliphint includes a lengthy example of a possible dialogue between a covenantal apologist and a Muslim (236-257). In each of these examples, Oliphint presents the apologist as one who is able to show the unbeliever why his worldview does not account for the way the world really is. In his labor to dismantle the unbeliever's claims, however, the apologist steeps his argument with biblical truth in order to provide the necessary theological structure for his claims and persuade the unbeliever to repent and believe the gospel. Commendably, Oliphint keeps biblical content central in all of these apologetic "conversations."

As he explains, the covenantal apologist seeks to *persuade* the unbeliever rather than provide demonstrative *proofs* for God's existence (126). The reason for a shift in focus from proofs to persuasion is grounded in Oliphint's second theological tenet: "God's covenantal revelation is authoritative by virtue of what it *is*, and any covenantal, Christian apologetic will necessarily stand on and utilize that authority in order to defend Christianity" (49). Although Scripture is never opposed to God's revelation in creation, Christian apologists must remain tethered to God's authoritative *written* revelation as they defend the faith. "Scripture," Oliphint comments, "is our most basic and solid foundation for all that we want to say in

apologetics" (127). Scripture is "most basic" because it does not require external evidence to establish its authority.

By acknowledging Scripture as most basic, Oliphint consciously rejects the notion that human reason is the final arbitrator of truth—a maxim that crystalized during the Enlightenment and now "holds sway in (much of) theology and apologetics" (137). While he recognizes as admirable the motives of those who "attempt to show Christianity (or theism, more generally) to be rational and not opposed to reason," their emphasis on reason, "when not properly scrutinized, can sacrifice basic and central truths of the Christian faith" (137). Specifically, to offer proofs for God's existence without assuming the truth of Scripture is to concede to the unbeliever's assumptions about God and his revelation, suppositions that the Christian *knows* are wrong. Such an approach is inconsistent at best and unbiblical at worst.

In order to develop a "theology of persuasion," therefore, Oliphint appeals to the Aristotelian categories of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. *Ethos* relates to the character of the apologist and requires that personal holiness, kindness, and gentleness mark the Christian's life and apologetic conduct. Likewise, the Christian should be concerned with the *pathos* of persuasion. That is, believers must conduct themselves, as Paul instructs, with wisdom toward outsiders (Col. 4:5-6), characterized by thoughtful engagement with and appropriate responses to unbelieving arguments. With these two components in place, the apologist will be able to rightly deliver the *logos*. However, because Scripture is the foundational principle of apologetics, its content must serve "as the primary and preeminent *logos* of persuasion" (156). Despite our best efforts, though, Oliphint correctly notes that the work of God's Spirit is finally decisive in the conversion of any unbeliever (199-202).

Despite the commendable quality of this work, some dialogical sections are, in my judgment, overly technical. His imaginary conversation with the Muslim, for example, is laden with highly technical concepts, and seems to represent the kind of conversation a professor of apologetics would have with a philosophically competent Muslim, rather than a typical exchange between most Christians and their religious neighbors. But this is a small quibble. In the end, Oliphint not only establishes a convincing case for embracing a covenantal approach to apologetics, he provides Christians with valuable resources to defend and commend the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

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