

INTERVIEW

Interview with Dr. Richard B. Gaffin Jr.

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(December 8, 2015)

PETER LILLBACK: It is a privilege today to interview Dr. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. He has been a professor for many years at Westminster Theological Seminary here in Philadelphia, known for his work in New Testament, biblical theology, and systematics. He has been very active in the church and in the overseas missions committee of his denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Our interview celebrates his work as a theologian, Bible scholar, and exegete, and it is part of the broader remembrance of the five-hundredth anniversary of Erasmus's publishing of the first Greek New Testament in 1516. This year, 2016, is the five-hundredth anniversary of the original published version of the New Testament that is used around the world. It is quite a milestone.

RICHARD GAFFIN: Thank you, Peter. Great to be with you!

PL: *How many years in all did you teach at Westminster, and what were the primary fields in which you spent time in instruction?*

RG: I began teaching in the Fall of 1964 as a teaching fellow, and in that year I taught New Testament studies. At that time my former teacher and the primary New Testament teacher was John Skilton, and I served with him in the New Testament department. In the following year, I received a tenure track appointment as an instructor and taught New Testament topics for about twenty years till the mid-eighties, and at that point I made the transition to teaching systematic theology primarily, although my first love was

and continues to be New Testament theology, especially Paul's theology. I taught the course on Acts and Paul, and I continued to teach that after moving into systematic theology and until my retirement in 2008.

PL: *So have you enjoyed being retired?*

RG: I am retired with quotation marks and enjoying it very much. It's a more flexible schedule and a blessing because of the nature of the career I have had and continue to have. There are plenty of things to do, and I am not sitting around complaining or wondering what to do in "retirement." My wife would really laugh at the idea that I was hanging around the house looking for something to do.

PL: *What has been your main project in your retirement years?*

RG: Some writing. I will be brief, because I could speak at length on this. One of the servants of the Lord who has been of great influence, shaped my teaching and my understanding of the Scriptures, and also, as I have read his sermons, has been a rich blessing personally in my spiritual growth, life, and development, is Geerhardus Vos.

Anybody who knows me at all knows the high regard for Vos I share with many other people. Vos is primarily known for his work in biblical theology, which he taught at Princeton. And then Vos was very much influential on Westminster Seminary's curriculum. The teachers I had, Ned Stonehouse, Edmund Clowney, John Murray, Cornelius Van Til, and Meredith Kline, were all very much influenced by Vos's biblical theological approach. Vos was born in the Netherlands into a family that migrated to Western Michigan and belonged to the Christian Reformed Church in North America; he taught systematic theology at what is now Calvin Seminary at a time when the instruction was still in Dutch, before he made the move to Princeton and worked in biblical theology. His lectures were transcribed first in handwritten form, in Vos's own hand apparently; then a number of years later they were put into typescript in 1910 and have been around now for more than a century. At the initiative of the Logos Bible software people, I have been involved in translating them and finding that very rewarding. The first four of five volumes have already been published, and I am in the midst of translating the last volume. I could go into much more detail.

PL: *You have spoken of systematic theology, biblical theology, and also New Testament studies. What makes each of them distinct, and how are they connected?*

RG: What unifies them is that they are all ways of giving appropriate attention to the Scriptures as God's Word, which is ultimately one Word, his Word;

God is the primary author of the Scriptures. Now, of course the Bible, unlike the claims of Muslims for the Koran or of Mormons for the Book of Mormon, is not dropped straight down out of heaven, as it were. It was given on earth in history through a variety of human authors, true authors, engaging their personalities fully and in a variety of genres, different literary types, history, poetry, and epistles, just to mention some.

This model is given by the Bible itself in the opening words of Hebrews [1:1–2]: “God, having formerly spoken to the fathers, through the prophets at many times, in various ways, has in these last days spoken to us in his Son.” So revelation comes to us not at one shot, as it were, but over a long history, reaching its culmination in Christ. Systematic theology and biblical theology are not in any way competitive. Even when giving very careful attention to human authorship, ultimately you are dealing with one author, God and his total truthfulness, a unity in diversity. You can say biblical theology explores the diversity that is given its shape by the various human authors; systematic theology under appropriate topics brings to light the unity of the Scriptures, what God’s Word says overall about God, about creation, about man—male and female, created in God’s image—sin, salvation, the church, and eschatology as culminating God’s purposes in history. So those are some things that come to mind initially in answer to your question.

PL: *Even if Erasmus, a forerunner of the Reformation, did not see eye to eye with Luther on some key doctrinal points, the emphasis on the Scriptures in the original languages was very important for him. From your vantage point some five hundred years after his publication, how important is it for the church that there be pastors, Bible scholars, and teachers still wrestling with the original text? The Bible has been translated into English and so many languages—why do we still need the Greek Bible?*

RG: Important question. Before I address it, can I give a personal anecdote? Charles Ryrie, a professor at Dallas Seminary, was a collector of books and ancient copies of the Scriptures. On one occasion, in the early seventies, I was in Dallas, and a student arranged for us to meet. It turned out that he had an original 1516 Erasmus New Testament in his house, in a room with climate control. He made me put on gloves, so I held Erasmus’s 1516 edition in my own hands!

The God-breathed biblical materials have their origin as Scripture, as the Word of God, and come globally in Hebrew or Greek. So Paul as an apostle of Christ, writing the Word of God, expressed it in Greek, and the church must appreciate God’s wisdom in giving us the Scriptures, in the way he

has, in the original languages. With the Westminster Confession we can be assured that God intends that they be translated [WCF 1.8], but for them to be translated, there has to be a base from which the church begins. So whether the Bible is translated into English, Korean, Dutch, or Indonesian, all translations need a point of reference, which is the original text. We don't claim, for instance, that the current English version used by a lot of folk, the ESV, is the Word of God in the sense that Galatians was when Paul first wrote it. If the ESV translation and other translations are reliable, it is as they are true to what we call the autographa, the original text.

At the time of the Reformation, there was renewed competence in and awareness of the original languages, Hebrew and Greek. The Bible translation that had been dominant in the church for a thousand years, the Latin Vulgate, was a reliable translation in many ways. If Erasmus was not committed to the Reformation in the way that Luther and others were, he served the cause of *sola Scriptura* by drawing attention to the need to go back to the original languages and make sure that the translations we have are true to them.

PL: *Those who have studied in the New Testament field realize that there are multiple texts and variations between them and the original. The autographa, as far as we know, do not exist anywhere, or at least if they exist, we do not know them, or they have long since vanished. So for the student who is wrestling, maybe in the early part of his studies, how do we know that we do have a reliable text if we do not have the original and if there are so many variations? How does a biblical scholar, let's say a New Testament scholar, address those issues?*

RG: I will stress two points. Not having taught in this area for a number of years, I hope not to miss something. Speaking of the New Testament in Greek, our earliest documents are from the second century, and they are just fragments; the fullest versions are from the fourth century, and it's a challenge to scholarship to reconstruct from the evidence that we have in hand. When a person is first told that there are all these variants, it can shake confidence in the Scriptures. In the course on New Testament Introduction I had as a student, Dr. Skilton put it in a way that left a lasting impression and put things into perspective. He said that if you apply any set of principles that are used to determine the original text, no matter how much they differ from each other, the result will be the same New Testament, except for a minimal number of differences that don't affect any substantial doctrine or the central message of the Scriptures. So we can confidently say, with the Westminster Confession, that God has kept the Scriptures pure and entire [WCF 1.8].

Another example is the way Van Til put it. He liked to use illustrations from the Second World War; he described how when the German army had occupied land west of the Rhine River and then had to retreat, they blew up the bridges. So when the Allies came, all you could see was water, but underneath the surface were the supports of the bridges, so they put down temporary tracking on what was below the surface and were able to drive across. So Van Til would say, that's the way the original text is: we can't see it, it's under the surface, but what is most important, it's there, so we can drive across on it. I think that's a helpful illustration.

PL: *As we think about New Testament studies, some say that all we really need is the New Testament, almost a New Testament-only Christianity. And biblical theology seemingly emphasizes the unity of the Bible, from Old to New Testament. What are the principles at work that create that unity of the testaments?*

RG: Well, in principle the Bible is a book about Christ. The central thread of the biblical message—the narrative theme, as a number of people have put it—is creation, fall, and redemption, and with redemption there is consummation, a new creation. The New Testament by itself would simply be a conclusion without what leads up to the conclusion. The Old Testament by itself would lack that conclusion and be without a clear statement of it, although it is unmistakable in pointing forward to Christ by way of promise, even though the fulfillment hadn't yet taken place. Hebrews 1:1–2 again shows a distinction, “God, having spoken to the fathers formerly in the past at different times and in various ways, has in these last days spoken to us in his Son.” The writer makes a distinction, which he will make clearer later in his letter, between old covenant (v. 1) and new covenant, what's arrived in Christ (v. 2), or the Old Testament and New Testament seen as an organic whole. The various parts of Scripture are an organic, unfolding historical whole.

PL: *So in covenant theology, the new covenant continues the covenant with Abraham as the covenant with the Christian. How does biblical theology demonstrate such a concept? How would you argue for that?*

RG: I think that as you look at the Scriptures, you can't help but be impressed by this. Look at the teaching of Jesus. The controlling theme, particularly clear in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) is the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus as an eschatological reality that *was not* before the coming of Christ and now *is*. Jesus maintains that the kingdom that has finally arrived with him is the fulfillment of the promises made to the fathers. Think, for instance, of Matthew 13:16–17, where Jesus is saying to the disciples, “Your eyes are blessed ... your ears are blessed because of what you

hear; what the many prophets and righteous men of old have desired to see but did not see and did not hear but they desired it.” The context that shapes their desires is the covenant that God makes with his people, particularly the covenant that structures the whole of Israel’s history, beginning with Genesis 12. You can even take it back to the inauguration of the covenant of grace given to Adam and Eve following the fall, which reaches its culmination in Christ.

So if I were to develop things biblically, theologically, making sure to do justice to the diversity, I would highlight the connection between kingdom and covenant and say that covenant and kingdom entail each other. Kingdom means basically the lordship of God, God as Lord over his creation, particularly as he exercises lordship in a saving way in Christ, in which his kingdom, his eschatological rule in creation, comes to its culmination. And what leads up to that is the promises God has made, which are covenant promises. The book of Hebrews is very helpful, particularly from a biblical theological or exegetical point of view, in bringing out a controlling common covenant idea.

PL: *You mentioned Adam and Eve. There are many today who say that this is a concept we can no longer maintain. Would you say theologically that this is a safe position, and if not, why not?*

RG: It is decidedly not a safe position. I don’t want to oversimplify the issue of the relationship among various sciences, what the Bible teaches and how theology appropriates that teaching, or science and faith, as it is sometimes put. Studies in genetics claim to show that we can no longer believe in the common descent of all human beings from an original first pair, as the Bible very clearly teaches. From the science side of the discussion, we need people competent to address those issues. In this discussion I believe myself to be quite competent where I remain true to what the Bible clearly teaches.

I don’t think that there can be any question as to what the Scriptures claim—not so much by simply going back to the opening chapters of Genesis, but by keeping in mind that what the Bible gives us is a history of revelation in which the later revelation interprets earlier revelation. The apostle Paul in Romans 5 and in 1 Corinthians 15 is absolutely clear about the matter of descent. You cannot explain human sin, original sin, apart from the descent of all human beings from an original first pair, and that in Adam all sin and fall. That is a nonnegotiable; it becomes clear in 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul connects Christ as not only last but also as second in relationship to Adam as first. If you try to relinquish Adam as a

real historical being and not only a real historical being but the first, then Paul's argument unravels as to the significance of Christ's person and work. The common descent of all human beings from Adam and Eve, particularly the understanding of sin that comes with it, sets the agenda for the work of Christ as our Savior, and without it the gospel begins to unravel. Scientists who assure us that we can abandon common descent without it affecting the gospel really need to look more carefully at their Bibles than they have. They need to recognize that they cannot do with the Scriptures what they want to do.

PL: *The Old and New Testaments both speak about man being justified before God. Is the justification of the Old Testament the same as that of the New Testament? How are they connected and how are they different, looking at it from the vantage point of the history of redemption?*

RG: A number of people reading this are aware of John Murray's very helpful book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. As we look at our salvation, we have to make a distinction between what Christ did, a once-for-all redemption accomplished, a finished salvation, and then the ongoing application of that salvation.

More recently, in terms of biblical theological developments, the distinction between redemption accomplished and redemption applied has been formulated by Herman Ridderbos in terms of a distinction between *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis*. *Ordo salutis* is a classical theological term for describing the order of salvation, how salvation is applied; *historia salutis* has the advantage of describing the once-for-all work of Christ as accomplished in history. Coming back to the opening verses of Hebrews again, the work of Christ comes at the end of a long history, the consummation of history. So if that *historia/ordo* distinction is applied to the question about justification, when it comes to application, justification in the Old Testament has the same structure as in the New Testament.

The clearest evidence for this is when Paul argues for justification and how justification is solely by faith. I am thinking of Romans 4 and Galatians 3, and the examples he chooses, although he could have well chosen a New Testament believer as he does in choosing himself in Philippians 3. However, the examples he chooses are David and Abraham; the structure of justification is the same, as it involves faith resting in the salvation that God provides, not anything that we do ourselves. What marks Reformed theology is a common *ordo salutis*, a common application for the Old and New Testaments. The difference comes in at the dimension of *historia salutis*, or once-for-all fulfillment.

In an old Presbyterian catechism I was taught as a little kid (it's not the Shorter Catechism), a question reads: "How were pious persons saved before the coming of Christ?" and the answer is, "By believing in the Savior to come" [*Catechism for Young Children*, 61]. And there is the difference: Abraham and Old Covenant believers had their justification by mode of promise, by believing in the promised Messiah who would come and provide the propitiatory sacrifice that Isaiah 53 identifies, by looking forward to it. We are privileged, living as we are between the resurrection and the return of Christ, because our faith is in the same promise, but in that promise as it has now been fulfilled. Christ is always at the center. He is our justification.

PL: *That's great. We sometimes hear in biblical theology that somehow eschatology, end things, is already at work in the beginning of things and eschatology almost precedes salvation. What does a biblical theologian mean by that?*

RG: Let's be very careful. When God creates and looks at his finished creation in Genesis 1:31, he looks at the whole and says *tov meod*, very good. I like to say in light of the whole of Scripture, "That was very good, but that was not yet the best." And this is where covenant theology is helpful. There was a pre-fall covenant, often called, as the Westminster Confession does, the covenant of works [WCF 7.2], in which there was a well-meant offer of confirmed blessedness, which Adam did not yet have. As we know from the history that sadly follows, he falls, and so he fails the test of absolute fidelity, complete obedience, that God put him to. Obedience was to bring Adam, with whatever posterity he might have—we have to be careful not to get into undue speculation on this point—into a state of confirmed blessedness that could never be lost. An eschatology was held out to him and the fall involves forfeited eschatology.

So when people talk about eschatology preceding soteriology, what they mean is that there is an eschatological goal for the creation before sin enters the picture. Sin does all too sadly enter the picture, but as Paul says, "where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more" [Rom 5:20]. And that's where Christ comes in his Adamic identity as the second and last Adam, bringing the consummation, the eschatology he secures for his people. This has been discussed by any number of Reformed theologians: because Christ is now at its center, the consummation is greater than anything that Adam would have achieved if he had not fallen. The consummation now has a christological coloration, and it can't get any better than that.

PL: *Does the idea of the "already but not yet" character of the kingdom fit here or not?*

RG: Yes. This is why Vos's work is so helpful, as was Herman Ridderbos's a generation later—thinking of two people in the Reformed tradition, and there are others outside from whom you can learn in this regard—in pointing to a weakness in traditional systematic theological presentations. Eschatology tends to be the last chapter, dealing with undeniable eschatological realities, the return of Christ, the bodily resurrection, and what happens to believers at death. But Vos and Ridderbos and others have shown that the kingdom that Jesus comes to proclaim as present in his earthly ministry is an eschatological kingdom. So the eschatology has already arrived. It is a present reality for us living between the resurrection and the return of Christ, but it is yet to come in its fullness. So eschatology is to be defined not only by a future point of reference, what takes place when Christ returns, but also by the salvation Christ has already brought in his first coming. So our privilege is living as the church between the resurrection and the return of Christ.

PL: *So to my last question: It's clear that you care very much about the truthfulness of Scripture. You are part of a 1,400-page book called Thy Word Is Still Truth that I had the joy of editing with you. I think your last words are very sobering. The article that concludes actually says that as we look at the future of the church in regard to the Word of God, it is not a very rosy picture [p. 1348]. At the five-hundredth anniversary of the publishing of the first Greek text, is the church giving away a love of the Bible and belief in its authority and infallibility?*

RG: A statement like that needs to be kept in the larger context, which is ultimately very rosy: the gates of hell, as Jesus puts it, the opposition of the evil one, the kingdom of Satan, will never prevail against the church [Matt 16:18]. The concern is particularly in circles—and you wish it were not the case—where folk have lost confidence, and the Bible becomes a collection of documents by human authors who may or may not be right, and so we have to decide for ourselves whether or not they are speaking the truth. But God will preserve a church that recognizes what the Scriptures are. As the Westminster Confession has put it classically, God is the primary author and the Scriptures are God speaking [cf. WCF 1.4, 10]. It's a very sad situation where we see declension and decline, and that's not rosy at all, and it is a challenge to all of us not to become so preoccupied with the Scriptures as a collection of historical documents that we lose sight of their overall unity. And particularly that when you pick up your Bible and, for instance, read Galatians, ultimately it's not Paul but God talking to you, and you don't question that.

PL: *That's great. So as you think about the privilege you had to lead and teach and serve in so many ways and in your concluding years of ministry, what words would you like to share with those who have been blessed by your work, perhaps maybe in terms of the legacy you would like to leave with your work for the years to come?*

RG: First, I cannot begin to thank the Lord enough for the privilege that I have had of being part of this community, having studied at WTS first as a student, appreciating the unique tradition true to Scripture that the Lord has established in this institution, and building on the work of my teachers and those that preceded them. My legacy—and in a way, it is not the best comparison—would be like Paul with the Bereans: Do these things square with Scripture [Acts 17:11]? And then I pray that whatever the Lord has given me to say and the church to hear—true to his Word—I trust a rising generation will do it even better, with the Lord's blessing and grace.

PL: *Would you give us a concluding prayer, including what you mean by the usefulness of the cross and how you saw the cross as useful for the church?*

RG: [Prayer] Lord, we thank you for the privilege of belonging to you, the true and living God in our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for our union with him. We thank you for all that that union brings us: that we know ourselves to be brothers of the Lord Jesus, your firstborn, your only begotten Son, and that you are at work in your church, taking those that you have justified, for the sake of our Savior, and conforming them to his image. And we thank you, our God, that because of that, we are your heirs, coheirs with the Lord Jesus Christ, recognizing, as you have taught us, that this is the case only as we suffer with him. We thank you that we can be sure that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed to us [cf. Rom 8:17–18] when our Savior appears and fully completes our salvation. In the meantime, we pray that our lives might be shaped as you desire them to be, by the Lord Jesus, that we might, wherever we are serving in your church, be found in Christ, and as we do not have a righteousness of our own, but the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, that we might know him, the power of his resurrection [cf. Phil 3:9–10]. Particularly, as you have purposed that resurrection power take shape in the sharing of his suffering, may our lives be crossed, stamped, and shaped by you in every way. And we know that as you, Lord Jesus, are fulfilling the claim that all power in heaven and on earth has been given to you and that therefore we as servants go about confident that you are with us to the end of the age in building your church and discipling your nations [cf. Matt 28:18–20], we pray above all that you, our God, will continue to bring honor to yourself. In Jesus's name. Amen.

PL: *Dr. Gaffin, thank you so much for your long and faithful service and this wonderful interview today. We are greatly appreciative.*

RG: My privilege.