

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Servant of the Church

A note of personal appreciation, with a focus on his service to the
General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

My introduction to Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., involved the proper use of circumflex and acute accent marks and other details of Greek grammar. Yes, I knew the name. Growing up in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church I had learned to pray for his parents, foreign missionaries in Taiwan (after mainland China closed), and their children, but had not met any of the family. Having struggled with learning Greek in my college years, I opted to take the one-quarter, non-credit, bonehead Greek review course when I began my studies at Westminster Theological Seminary (the course had a more dignified name, which I do not remember). But I do remember the care with which Teaching Fellow, Richard Gaffin, himself completing his Th.D. dissertation at Westminster, approached not only the finer points of the Greek language, but also the text of Scripture.

Gaffin first taught, not in the Systematic Theology Department, but as an instructor in New Testament. He teamed with older members of the New Testament faculty to teach some of the basic required courses in that area. During the third quarter of my first year at Westminster he offered for the first time a graduate level course, “Studies in New Testament Biblical Theology: The Theology of Paul,” which was open to undergraduates. It proved to include substantial material based on his nearly completed dissertation. (I remain grateful to my classmate, Jack Smith, who persuaded me to adjust my library work schedule to take the class, which was offered in the late afternoon.) The examination consisted of four questions (two of them multi-part), including: “‘His resurrection and that of his people form an unbreakable unity.’ (H. Ridderbos, *Paulus*, p. 601). Discuss fully this statement as an evaluation of Paul’s teaching.” My notes of the final day of lecturing reflect Gaffin’s summary: “All the particular soteriological categories, justification, adoption, and sanctification, as applied to the individual believer, are to be seen as explicatory of the resurrection of Christ.”

That course, supplemented by others which Gaffin taught, had a profound impact on how I would approach the understanding of Scripture in my own ministry. Notes from those courses, now more than 35 years old, are still consulted as I prepare a sermon if he touched on the text in the lectures. Gaffin, of course, was heir to a strong tradition at Westminster of basing systematic theological reflection and structure on exegetical work. That came through in his unpacking of Paul’s dealing with the event of the resurrection of our Lord. A comment of my father’s made when I was in high school helped make Gaffin’s approach click for me. He, a graduate from Westminster in 1944 under the original faculty, once remarked that the resurrection of Christ held a much more prominent place in apostolic preaching and writing than it did in our theological thinking. Gaffin’s course provided a systematic development of the centrality of the resurrection, and it seemed to fit together. In the interplay of exegesis, Biblical theology, and systematic theology, all three worked together, stimulating and checking one another, a balance reflected in Gaffin’s teaching and writing.

As a teacher, Gaffin was always careful to seek the balance of Scripture. He was patient in listening to questions and responding, sometimes to the question behind the question, which the struggling student had not articulated clearly. Of course his own deep appreciation for the work of Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos proved infectious. Even at this point in his teaching Gaffin was giving thought to the relationship between the classroom and the church. In mid-November, 1969, while teaching the Gospel History course, he used the adjective “heretical” to describe the naturalistic theology of higher critic H. E. G. Paulus (1761-1851), and was challenged by a student as to the appropriateness of using that term from the classroom podium, though it might be appropriate from the pulpit. Gaffin calmly responded that he *had* reflected on the distinctiveness of the pulpit and podium, and while recognizing their differences, what they had in common was the instruction of God’s people, and given that, the adjective was still appropriate.

Throughout his academic career Gaffin has maintained a balance of serving his church as well as the seminary. He was licensed by the Presbytery of Philadelphia on May 27, 1961, and, pursuant to a call to teach at Westminster Theological Seminary, was ordained as a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church on June 15, 1965. A few weeks later he served for the first time as a commissioner to General Assembly, attending the 32nd General Assembly (GA), which met in Portland, Oregon. He has participated actively in many General Assemblies since. The 51st (1984) Assembly elected him as its moderator. Gaffin was nominated, and in the absence of other nominations, was declared elected. Important issues at that assembly included wrestling with funding for the major program committees through Worldwide Outreach, revisions to the *Book of Discipline*, and matters relating to the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. In 1985, as moderator of the previous assembly, Gaffin constituted the 52nd General Assembly “with a worship service and delivered a sermon on the subject ‘On Being Like-Minded,’ based upon Philippians 2:1-5” (*Minutes*, p. 1). As the OPC celebrated its semi-centennial in 1986, Gaffin delivered an address at the 53rd GA, “Some Reflections on the Theological Identity of the OPC.”

Not all theologians are willing to take the time from research and teaching to work extensively in the church, but Gaffin has functioned on all the levels of the church. For many years he served as an advisor to the session of Calvary OPC, Glenside, meeting with the body that provided oversight to the congregation where he worshiped and in which his family was actively involved. More recently (after helping to plant the home mission work) he has been a member of the session of the Gwynedd Valley OPC in Gwynedd, Pennsylvania, where he serves, for the first time in his life, as clerk of session. He is also active in the Presbytery of Philadelphia, but it will take someone more familiar with that presbytery than I to detail that aspect of his labors.

One of the areas in which Gaffin’s service to the broader church has been particularly notable is in the area of foreign missions. Perhaps it is in his blood - - Gaffin was born in

Peiping, China, of parents who were foreign missionaries, first serving under the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, and then, after the formation of the OPC, under the oversight and support of its Committee on Foreign Missions. The 36th (1969) GA elected Gaffin to the Committee on Foreign Missions. That committee, like the other program committees of the OPC, consists of 15 members, nine ministers and six ruling elders, divided into three classes, each class serving a three year term. The OPC has traditionally allowed re-election of members to subsequent terms, recognizing that as one way of ensuring that at least some of the members have experience in the work of the committee. Although the Committee on Foreign Missions has seen a substantial infusion of new blood in its membership over the years, subsequent general assemblies have consistently re-elected Gaffin to that committee, where he continues to serve as of this writing in 2007. For much of that time he has served as the president of the committee, moderating its meetings and introducing its work on the floor of the General Assembly. Within the committee he has often served on subcommittees overseeing work in the Far East, and on the Candidates Subcommittee.

Looking beyond the bounds of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Gaffin has served in a variety of ecumenical activities of the OPC. These involved working with the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES), a body organized to promote unity and cooperation among reformed churches throughout the world, and following difficulties with that organization, with the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) Within this continent he has been involved in the work of the North America Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC). At the 36th GA it was reported that Gaffin had been appointed to the Committee on the Sabbath of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, “a committee for the study of the Fourth Commandment in all its exegetical, doctrinal, and pastoral aspects in order to provide a basis for agreement among the various Reformed traditions” (*Minutes*, p. 150).

At the same assembly (*Minutes*, p. 157) the recommendation of the Committee on RES matters was adopted: that a theological committee [the *Committee on Scripture and Inspiration*] consisting of two other men and “Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (convener) be erected to prepare a reply to the questions on Scripture and inspiration raised by the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, and requested by the Reformed Ecumenical Synod.” That assignment presaged some of the tensions which would eventually lead to the OPC withdrawing from the RES, a story beyond the scope of these notes. The committee reported to the 39th (1972) GA, and was dissolved after its report was ordered sent to the member churches of the RES.

In 1972 Gaffin served as an alternate OPC delegate to both the RES meeting and to the RES Sydney Missions Conference. At the 45th (1978) GA the report of the Committee on Baptism and Gifts of the Holy Spirit was sent to the churches and to the RES. Gaffin had been elected to that committee in 1975. He served as a delegate to RES Capetown in 1976, and the 1976 General Assembly appointed him, along with the other delegates, as a Committee on RES Matters. He was a voting delegate of the OPC to RES Nimes, France

in 1980, and to the RES Chicago in 1984. At the 1988 RES Harare the OPC withdrew from membership in the RES.

In 1989 the 56th General Assembly elected Gaffin to the Committee on Ecumenicity and Interchurch Relations (CEIR), on which he served until 2004, when he requested that he not be nominated for re-election. During that time the OPC became an active member of the International Council of Reformed Churches, consisting in part of churches which had withdrawn from the RES. The CEIR also wrestled with the issue of the fraternal relationship between the OPC and the Christian Reformed Church of North America. Gaffin took part in several OPC and NAPARC study committees. He helped produce a “Reformed Testimony on Hermeneutics” (1984). From 1993 to 1996 he served on a subcommittee of the CEIR which was considering adding the Three Forms of Unity (the Belgic Confession, the Canons of the Synod of Dort and the Heidelberg Catechism) to the confessional standards of the OPC. Relationships with the Canadian Reformed Churches were an area in which he was particularly involved, including serving on a committee to study admission to the Lord’s Table. He served as an observer (until the OPC’s application for membership was approved during the meeting) and then a delegate to the meeting of the ICRC in Zwolle, the Netherlands, in 1993. He presented a paper at the 1997 ICRC in Seoul, Korea, on “The Challenge of the Charismatic Movement to the Reformed Tradition.”

In addition to his published writings Gaffin has left an enduring legacy to the church in the work of study committees elected by the General Assembly. Although he is not the sole author, his influence can be seen in a number of reports, most of which can be found on the OPC website, www.opc.org.

The 36th (1969) GA elected Gaffin as a member of the Committee on Sabbath Matters, to “to study the extent to which the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms faithfully reflect the Scripture teaching in regard to the Fourth Commandment” (*Minutes*, p. 119). Although the impetus for the study rose out a complaint concerning a judicial matter, one of the principals in the case left the OPC and the committee was under less time pressure. It reported in 1973 to the 40th GA (<http://opc.org/GA/sabbath.html>). Gaffin’s earlier work on his master’s thesis and work he was doing for a committee for the RES dovetailed with this assignment. It is likely that the portions of the report dealing with the exposition of Hebrews 3 and 4 and the enduring character of the Sabbath rest particularly reflect his influence.

The 38th GA elected him to a Committee on Proof Texts for the Catechisms, which reported in 1977. In 1973 Gaffin was one of the members elected to a Committee on Gifts of the Holy Spirit. That committee presented its report two years later and recommended that it be dissolved, but that Assembly, the 42nd, expanded the committee and its mandate. The Committee on Baptism and Gifts of the Holy Spirit presented its report to the 45th (1978) GA (<http://opc.org/GA/giftsHS.html>). The 47th GA elected Gaffin to a committee to study diaconal ministries, but he was unable to serve on that

committee. The 49th GA (1982) elected him to a Committee to Study the History and Development of the OPC, a committee that experienced difficulty in meeting and was eventually dissolved by the 51st GA.

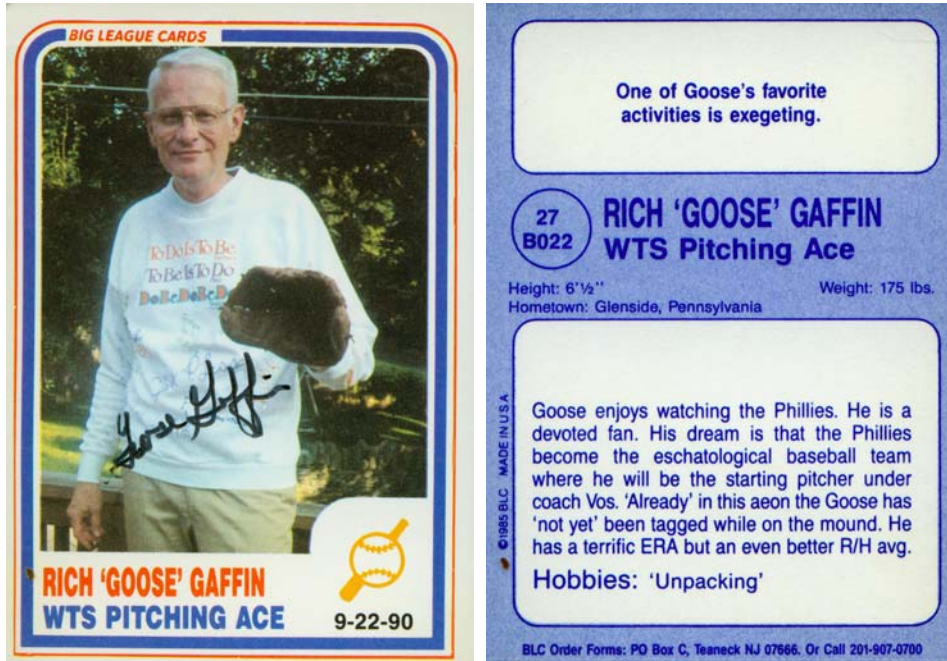
In the 1980s the OPC wrestled with the Biblical teaching concerning women in ecclesiastical office as questions arose, both from within the OPC and from churches with which the OPC had fellowship. The 51st GA elected Gaffin to a Committee on Hermeneutics. A year later (1985) the 52nd GA recommitted the report of that committee to an enlarged Committee on the Hermeneutics of Women in Ordained Office, to which it also named Gaffin. The committee presented a partial report in 1987 (<http://opc.org/GA/hermeneutics.html>), and asked that it be continued to complete its assignment, which it did in 1988 (http://opc.org/GA/women_in_office.html). Although his hand can be seen throughout the report of the committee, he also prepared a response to a minority report, focusing the question of the ordination of women to the diaconate. On a related issue, Gaffin was also a member of the Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship Services of the Church, to which he was elected in 1988 by the 55th GA, and which presented a divided report in 1991 (<http://opc.org/GA/unordained.html>).

The 71st (2004) GA elected Gaffin as one of seven members of the Committee to Study Justification. Two years later the committee presented an extensive report to the 73rd GA (<http://opc.org/GA/JustificationBook.pdf>).

Although some of the committee work which Gaffin has undertaken coincided with study that he was doing for other reasons, he has been willing to take on difficult issues which confront the church. His committee work, like his teaching and writing, has been marked by balance and careful expression, though often dealing with issues on which strong opinions were being expressed. In addition to formal committee work, Gaffin has proved to be willing to help with questions that former students or others in the church have raised. He has taken the time to be involved in more than one judicial case as it has worked its way through the courts of the church.

Richard Gaffin is a servant of the church as well as an accomplished theologian. He is also a man marked by humility. I was privileged to have E. J. Young for introductory Hebrew at the time of his death in 1968. His son-in-law, Richard Gaffin, reflects the same reverence for God's Word that I observed in Dr. Young. The way in which Richard Gaffin and his wife Jean, sustained the loss of their daughter (and mother of two of their young grandchildren) to cancer, has been a testimony to the grace of God in their lives. The Gaffins exercise the gift of hospitality. And although this piece focuses on Richard Gaffin's service, he would be the first to acknowledge the role which Jean has played. She has been active in the work of the local church, often serving on pastoral search committees. Jean served on a committee of the GA which made preparations for the semi-centennial celebration of the OPC. She is an author in her own right, and is in

demand as a speaker. She typed his doctoral dissertation, which included multiple carbon copies, in the days before wordprocessing. For both Dick and Jean I give thanks to God.



In addition to his teaching and service of the church, Gaffin loves sports. He played in basketball and touch football games with Westminster students. And he continues to be a fan of the Philadelphia

Phillies. In 1990 a student had a baseball card made up. He conspired with Jean to get a picture of Dick with his glove, and published the Goose Gaffin baseball card. The shirt he is wearing on the card reflects Gaffin's emphasis on the connection between the indicative and the imperative in Paul's writing: "To do is to be" and "To be is to do," which, of course, was Sinatraized into "DoBeDoBeDo." An autographed copy of the card serves as a treasured bookmark in my University Microfilms copy of his doctoral dissertation.

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