

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

Number 314 © 2013 The Trinity Foundation Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692 November-December 2013
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Richard Gaffin's New Perspective on Paul by Paul M. Elliott

Editor's Preface: Since at least 1969 (when he wrote his doctoral thesis under the tutelage of Norman Shepherd), Dr. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. has been a thought leader of the postmodern Biblical Theology movement, also known as Redemptive-Historical Theology. He has also been the leading academic advocate of the heresy of a "second justification" by works in order for sinners to obtain eternal life at the Last Judgment, rather than justification once for all at conversion by faith alone, in Christ alone. Today this false gospel poisons Gaffin's own Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC), Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, and many other churches and institutions.

Gaffin's lifelong commitment to heterodoxy, exposed in books and essays by several writers for over a decade, is abundantly evident in his own words in the two books which bracket his 40-year teaching career at Westminster Theological Seminary – *Resurrection and Redemption* (1969) and *By Faith, Not By Sight* (2006):

...According to Romans 8:34, justification depends not simply on an action in the past experience of the believer but on his present relation to the person of the resurrected Christ (cf. I Cor. 15:17).

....

...[F]or Paul the justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification of the believer are future as well as present. (*Resurrection and Redemption*, 133, footnotes omitted)

In *By Faith, Not by Sight*, Gaffin's thesis was that justification is now by faith, but a future justification will be by sight:

[A]s believers are already raised with Christ they have been justified; as they are not yet resurrected they are, in some respect, still to be justified. (86)

[B]elievers are already justified—by faith. But they are yet to be justified—by sight. (88)

I am justified "by faith," but not (yet) "by sight." (92)

Gaffin claimed that his conclusion that there is a "future justification" was a deduction from the Scriptures and the *Westminster Confession* (12, 81-82). But then he admitted the Scriptures do not mention a future justification, and in the first of four arguments he made for a future justification, he expressly stated that he was *presuming on the Scriptures*, *not* making deductions from them:

At the outset, it should be noted that explicit references in Paul to a still-future justification for believers, if present at all, are minimal.... Romans 2:13; 5:19; Galatians 5:5; 2 Timothy 4:8, but all are contested. My own view is that at least some of these passages and perhaps others are plausibly, even most likely, to be read as

referring to an actual future justification for believers....

[T]here is value in bracketing the passages noted in the preceding paragraph from our consideration in the interest of showing, as the following discussion seeks to do, that the case for a future aspect to the Christian's justification or, put another way, for a decisive future aspect to the forensic side of salvation that is tantamount to justification, does not rest on such passages alone or even primarily. That case, as I will make it here, has four components: a *presumptive* consideration stemming from the structure of Paul's soteriology and eschatology.... (*By Faith, Not by Sight*, 80-81, emphasis added)

Under the heading "Justification as future," Gaffin wrote as his first argument for a future justification:

A presumptive consideration

But now, what about Paul? How does this confessional position square with his theology? We can begin addressing that question with what might be viewed as a *presumptive* consideration, bound up with the structure of his theology....

This observation, I recognize, is one that may not be persuasive.... But we are not left only with this *presumption*. (*By Faith, Not by Sight*, 83-84, emphasis added)

Gaffin also asserted that *Romans* 2:13 teaches a future justification by works for believers: "The broader biblical context suggests that the positive outcome in view in *Romans* 2:5ff, at least in verses 5-11, if not verses 12-13 as well, is best seen as describing what will be true of Christians at the final judgment" (*By Faith, Not by Sight*, 97).

Yet, despite the evidence that Gaffin teaches the same doctrine of justification as Norman Shepherd, many in Evangelical and Reformed churches still consider him to be a leading theological voice of reason whom the church must hear and heed. Since his elevation to emeritus professorship at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 2008, Gaffin has continued to speak at church and seminary conferences in the United States and overseas – in numerous cases, despite protests from

those who still hold to Biblical orthodoxy. At this time, he is scheduled to speak on March 21, 2014 as part of the James Montgomery Boice Center Lecture Series at Tenth Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Philadelphia. Ironically, his scheduled topic is "Inerrancy and Inspiration."

Exactly what does Richard Gaffin believe about "inerrancy and inspiration"? How have those beliefs poisoned his approach to the Scriptures and salvation? Dr. Paul M. Elliott, president of TeachingtheWord Ministries, examined these questions in chapter six of his book, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism: The Spiritual Crisis in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Beyond* (Trinity Foundation, 2005). We reproduce that chapter as a warning, in the spirit of Charles Spurgeon who wrote:

Numbers of good brethren in different ways remain in fellowship with those who are undermining the Gospel; and they talk of their conduct as though it were a loving course which the Lord will approve in the day of His appearing. The bounden duty of a true believer towards men who profess to be Christians, and yet deny the Word of the Lord, and reject the fundamentals of the Gospel, is to come out from among them (II Cor. 6:14-18)....

Complicity with error will take from the best of men the power to enter any successful protest against it. If any body of believers had errorists among them, but were resolute to deal with them in the Name of the Lord, all might come right, but confederacies founded upon the principle that all may enter, whatever views they hold, are based upon disloyalty to the truth of God. If truth is optional, error is justifiable....

It is hard to get leaven out of dough, and easy to put it in. This leaven is already working. Our daring to unveil this deep design [that is, this deep-laid scheme] is inconvenient, and of course it brings upon our devoted head all manner of abuse. But that matters nothing so long as the plague is stayed. Oh, that those who are spiritually alive in the churches may look to

this thing, and may the Lord himself baffle the adversary!¹

At any rate, cost what it may, to separate ourselves from those who separate themselves from the truth of God is not alone our liberty, but our duty. I have raised my protest in the only complete way by coming forth, and I shall be content to abide alone until the day when the Lord shall judge the secrets of all hearts; but it will not seem to me a strange thing if others are found faithful, and if others judge that for them also there is no path but that which is painfully apart from the beaten track.²

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“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines.” (*Hebrews 13:8-9*)

One of the principal Shepherd supporters who remained on the Westminster Seminary faculty and in the OPC after his departure was Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that he held views similar to Shepherd’s, and openly defended him throughout the controversy, no charges were brought against Gaffin. The OPC, in its negligent handling of the 1977 charges against Shepherd, had abandoned its responsibility to oversee its ordained ministers who served on the Seminary faculty. Thus Richard Gaffin, undisciplined by church or seminary and unencumbered by presbyterial oversight, has been free to perpetuate Shepherd’s teachings down to the present day.

Eighteen years after Shepherd’s 1982 departure, Gaffin’s loyalty to him remained unchanged. In 2000 he glowingly endorsed Shepherd’s proclamation of another gospel in *The Call of Grace*. Richard Gaffin continues today as the leading theologian of Westminster Theological Seminary and of the

Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In his forty years at Westminster he has played a major role in the training of most of the ministers presently serving in the OPC, as well as those of many other churches in North America and overseas. It is from Richard Gaffin that they have learned much of their theology.

From his earliest days as a Westminster professor, Gaffin along with Shepherd championed what they termed “progress in theology.” It is now clear that this was not merely their way of restating the venerable Protestant motto *Semper Reformanda* – “always re-forming,” that is, seeking an ever-deeper conformity to Scripture. Rather, it has meant the deconstruction of authentic Biblical Christianity. Richard Gaffin, like Norman Shepherd, proclaims a gospel that is not in accord with Scripture.

### **Gaffin’s Own “New Perspective on Paul”**

Gaffin first enumerated his views in his doctoral dissertation, for which Norman Shepherd was a faculty advisor, in 1969. Gaffin’s dissertation was published in 1978 as *The Centrality of the Resurrection*, and was republished under the title *Resurrection and Redemption* in 1987. The subtitle of the book is “A Study in Paul’s Soteriology.”

Richard Gaffin has stated publicly that he is opposed to the New Perspective on Paul of Wright, Dunn, and Sanders. But *Resurrection and Redemption* is Gaffin’s own “new perspective on Paul,” and it is just as heterodox. While Gaffin’s doctrine of salvation is couched in the language of orthodoxy, it is in fact radically revisionist, since he deconstructs and redefines not only the key doctrines of salvation – including faith, redemption, justification, sanctification, and adoption – but also the way of salvation itself. Gaffin’s most recent public statements, including his lectures at the Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference in January 2005, show no fundamental change in his views. In fact, the lectures Gaffin delivered at Auburn contained large sections lifted almost verbatim from his 1969 doctoral thesis. Gaffin and Wright (who also spoke at Auburn 2005) each presented his own New Perspective on Paul. Neither presented the authentic Gospel.

It is important to understand how Gaffin redefines the way of salvation. The main theme of *Resurrection and Redemption* is that people are

<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, in “Notes,” *Sword and Trowel*, October 1888.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Attempts at the Impossible,” *Sword and Trowel*, December 1888.

<sup>3</sup> Born 1936 in Beijing to missionary parents; undergraduate studies, University of Southern California; B. A., Calvin College, 1958; B. D., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1961; Th. M., 1962; Th. D., 1969; graduate studies at Georg-August Universität, Göttingen, Germany, 1962-1963; Professor of Biblical & Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1965-2007; ordained minister, Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Presbytery of Philadelphia.

saved, not through belief in Christ alone, but through an “existential” and “experiential” union through which believers achieve “solidarity” with Christ.<sup>4</sup> (He uses these three terms frequently.) Gaffin states plainly that the instrument of this saving union is water baptism. His statements regarding the nature of baptism echo those of Norman Shepherd, who writes that baptism “is the moment when we see the transition from death to life and a person is saved.”<sup>5</sup> Gaffin writes:

Baptism signifies and seals a *transition* in the experience of the recipient, a transition from being (existentially) apart from Christ to being (existentially) joined to him. *Galatians* 3:27 is even more graphic: “Those who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (*cf. I Cor.* 12:13).<sup>6</sup>

Here Gaffin eliminates the distinction between the sign (baptism) and that which it signifies (salvation). Emphasizing his assertion that baptism marks the point of saving transition, Gaffin quotes the Irish theologian Ernest Best: “Those who are baptized into Christ are those who afterwards are *in* Christ.” Gaffin continues:

Consequently, the transition described in [*Ephesians* 2] verses 5*f.* as being made alive with Christ, etc. pivots on being joined to Christ in an existential sense.... The transition from being an object of God’s wrath (v. 3) to experiencing his love (v. 4) takes place at the point of being joined (existentially) to Christ.<sup>7</sup>

A few pages later Gaffin calls this “union with Christ” commencing with water baptism “the inception of the individual Christian existence, the

moment of being joined existentially to Christ.”<sup>8</sup> In Gaffin’s teaching, all of salvation – including redemption, justification, sanctification, adoption, and glorification – comes by means of this “union with Christ” through baptism.

In response to a question at the 2005 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference, Gaffin admitted that his teaching implies a different method of salvation for Old Testament versus New Testament saints. He said that it would be “redemptive-historically anachronistic to say that an old covenant believer like Abraham or David” was “united with Christ, because the Christ who is in view, and union with Christ, is specifically the exalted Christ, the redemptive-historical Christ if you will, the Christ who is what He is now by virtue of His death and resurrection, and He did not exist...in the situation of Abraham or David.”<sup>9</sup> But Jesus says, “Before Abraham was, I AM” (*John* 8:58); He is the Word from the beginning (*John* 1:1); His “goings forth are from of old, from everlasting” (*Micah* 5:2); the Israelites “drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (*I Corinthians* 10:4). Gaffin avoided the question of how he thinks saints were actually saved under the Old Covenant, and he does not address this critical issue at all in *Resurrection and Redemption*. However, he does say this:

Only by virtue of the functional identity of the Spirit and Christ, effected redemptive-historically in his resurrection, is Christ the communicator of life. No principle in Paul’s soteriology is more fundamental.<sup>10</sup>

Note carefully that Gaffin is saying that Christ was not the “communicator of life” before His resurrection. How (or if?) spiritual life *was* communicated to believers before Christ’s resurrection, he does not say.

Redefining the *way* of salvation – perhaps we should say *ways* – involves redefining the *terms* of salvation, which Gaffin proceeds to do.

*First, Gaffin redefines redemption.* He claims that Christ Himself was redeemed, and that Christians are

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Shepherd also teaches union with Christ through baptism. See his “Justification by Works in Reformed Theology” in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, Andrew Sandlin, editor (Nacogdoches, Texas: Covenant Media Foundation, 2004), 118-119.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2000), 94.

<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1987), 50-51. Emphasis and parentheses in the original.

<sup>7</sup> Gaffin, 51. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>8</sup> Gaffin 58.

<sup>9</sup> Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference 2005, transcript of Session 13, response to the fourth question from the audience. Audio of the conference is available from the church.

<sup>10</sup> Gaffin, 89.

redeemed by participating in Christ's own personal redemption through union with Him in baptism.<sup>11</sup> Gaffin says plainly that when he calls the resurrection Christ's redemption, he means His "deliverance or salvation."<sup>12</sup> He says that the resurrection is "the point of his transition from wrath to grace"<sup>13</sup> and that "what characterizes the redemption of Christ holds true for the redemption of the believer."<sup>14</sup>

*Second, Gaffin redefines justification.* He claims that Christ Himself was justified, and that Christians are justified by participating in Christ's own justification through union with Him in baptism.<sup>15</sup> He insists that the word "justified" as applied to Christ in *1 Timothy* 3:16 (where we read that He was "justified in the Spirit") must have the same meaning that it does when applied to sinful men in passages such as *Romans* 4:25, where we read that Christ was "raised for our justification." Gaffin says that "to eliminate the usual forensic, declarative meaning" of "justified" when interpreting *1 Timothy* 3:16 "is wrong." "The constitutive, transforming action of the resurrection is specifically forensic in character. It is Christ's justification."<sup>16</sup>

What, then, is the nature of the "justification" that Gaffin has in mind? He makes it virtually synonymous with sanctification. Justification and sanctification, he says, cannot and should not be distinguished as separate acts of God. To say that justification and sanctification are ever spoken of as distinct acts of God makes the words, Gaffin says, "permanently unintelligible." He rejects the idea that justification by faith alone is central to the epistles of Paul to the Roman and Galatian churches. In Gaffin's false gospel, justification is not a once-for-all distinct judicial act of God at the sinner's conversion, based on the merits of Christ and applied through the act of believing. Rather, it is an "existential" and "experiential" union with Christ through baptism. And in this union both justification and

sanctification, Gaffin insists, "are future as well as present."<sup>17</sup> God's "not guilty" declaration is both "already" and "not yet."

*Third, Gaffin redefines sanctification.* He claims that Christ Himself was sanctified, and that Christians are sanctified by participating in Christ's own sanctification through union with Him in baptism.<sup>18</sup> Gaffin moves back and forth, at times almost without distinction, between discussions of the believer's *definitive* sanctification (that which Scripture describes as being constituted holy based on the merits of Christ) and the believer's *progressive* sanctification (that which Scripture describes as putting to death the deeds of the flesh and growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, by the power of the Word and the indwelling Spirit).<sup>19</sup> However, Gaffin makes it clear that he sees both aspects of sanctification coming through "the solidarity factor" of union with Christ through baptism. This union, he says, "involves possession in the inner man of all that Christ is as resurrected"<sup>20</sup> including both definitive and progressive sanctification. This is a doctrine of infused righteousness, an error of Roman Catholicism.

In *Resurrection and Redemption* Gaffin's meaning in this last statement is unclear. But he gives a more definite indication of his position on sanctification in his unequivocal endorsement of the following theological statement, written by OPC ruling elder John O. Kinnaird:

It is not possible that any could be a brother to Jesus Christ and enjoy with Christ, in the Kingdom of Heaven, the presence of God the Father except that one be fully conformed to the image of Christ in true and personal righteousness and holiness.... [T]he imputation of the righteousness of Christ, which all Christians receive at justification...can[not] suffice for that purpose. Christ does not have an imputed righteousness; His righteousness is real and personal. If we are to be conformed to his

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<sup>11</sup> Gaffin, 114-117.

<sup>12</sup> Gaffin, 114.

<sup>13</sup> Gaffin, 116. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>14</sup> Gaffin, 130.

<sup>15</sup> Gaffin, 119-124.

<sup>16</sup> Gaffin, 121. Note that "justification" is both "constitutive," "transforming," and "forensic." This is the view of both Roman Catholic theologians and Karl Barth, as Gaffin admits on page 131.

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<sup>17</sup> Gaffin, 133.

<sup>18</sup> Gaffin, 124-126.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the nature and importance of the distinction between definitive and progressive sanctification, see Robert Reymond, *New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 756-759 and 767-781.

<sup>20</sup> Gaffin, 138.

image, we too must have a real and personal righteousness.<sup>21</sup>

Of this statement – that believers must have a righteousness of their own in addition to the righteousness of Christ in order to inherit eternal life – Gaffin says:

[W]e see nothing in the above...which would lead us in any way to question that Elder Kinnaird has continued faithfully before God in his sworn commitments to the Scriptures, to the System of Doctrine taught therein, and to the Reformed Faith.<sup>22</sup>

*Fourth, Gaffin redefines adoption.* He claims that Christ Himself was adopted, and that Christians are adopted by participating in Christ's own adoption through union with Him in baptism.<sup>23</sup> Gaffin says that this is what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote that Jesus was "declared (from the Greek *horizo*) to be the Son of God...by the resurrection" (*Romans* 1:4). Gaffin asserts that "the resurrection of Jesus is his adoption (as the second Adam)." He offers no Scriptural support for this interpretation, despite the fact that the word translated adoption (Greek *huiothesia*, "to be placed as a son") is never used of Christ but only of believers (see *Romans* 8:15, 23, 9:4; *Galatians* 4:5; *Ephesians* 1:5).

*Fifth, Gaffin does not merely redefine regeneration, but eliminates it from salvation.* He claims that "Paul explicates the inception of the application of redemption without recourse to the terminology of regeneration or new birth understood as 'a communication of a new principle of life.'"<sup>24</sup> Gaffin alleges this despite Jesus' unequivocal statement to Nicodemus in *John* 3:3 – "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" – and Paul's repeated references to believers' having been made alive (*Romans* 6:11 and 13; *1 Corinthians* 15:22; *Ephesians* 2:1-5; *Colossians* 2:13). In Gaffin's "new perspective on Paul" there is really no need of regeneration as a unilateral act of God. As

we have seen, Gaffin asserts that baptism, not regeneration apart from works by the power of the Holy Spirit, is the point of transition from death to life.<sup>25</sup>

### **Problems with Gaffin's "New Perspective"**

What is wrong with these teachings? There are a number of serious problems, all of which strike at the heart of the Gospel.

*First and most obviously, salvation by "existential" and "experiential" union with Christ through baptism is not the way of salvation that Scripture teaches.* It is "another gospel." In *Resurrection and Redemption* Gaffin often (and misleadingly) speaks of "believers" but hardly ever speaks of faith. This is telling. "Belief," in his system, is not a matter of believing Biblical propositions but of experiential "uniting." In contrast, the Scriptures unambiguously teach that salvation is by the instrument of unadorned faith. Faith means believing that the Gospel of salvation by the merits of Christ alone is true. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* rightly calls faith itself "the act of believing"<sup>26</sup> and affirms that "the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace."<sup>27</sup> Faith looks entirely away from human effort to the full sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Faith itself is the gift of God, and not of works. We have no reason to boast of our faith, much less of our baptism. Baptism *signifies* our relationship with Christ; it is neither the *instrument* by which we are united to Him, nor our relationship itself.

As we have already noted, Gaffin and Shepherd are on the same theological ground in viewing baptism as the "point of transition" from death to life. Their teaching on the way of salvation also finds its place in Federal Vision theology. Federal Visionist Steve Wilkins says of baptism:

It's like a wedding. There is a transformation that takes place because of the ritual. A single man becomes a married man. He is transformed

<sup>21</sup> *Kinnaird Declaration and Theological Statement*, reproduced at [www.trinityfoundation.org/KinnairdDeclarationTheologicalStatement.php](http://www.trinityfoundation.org/KinnairdDeclarationTheologicalStatement.php).

<sup>22</sup> Preface to *Kinnaird Declaration and Theological Statement*.

<sup>23</sup> Gaffin, 117-119.

<sup>24</sup> Gaffin, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Gaffin, 51. Here he makes explicit reference to the opening verses of *Ephesians* 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* chapter 11, paragraph 1.

<sup>27</sup> *WCF* chapter 14, paragraph 2.

into a new man, with new blessings and privileges and responsibilities he didn't have before. A similar thing happens at baptism. The one who is baptized is transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, from Adam into Christ, and given new privileges, blessings, and responsibilities he didn't have before.<sup>28</sup>

Gaffin's teaching also coincides to an alarming degree with the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. Rome also teaches that union with Christ through baptism is the way of salvation, the means of redemption, and it condemns those who teach otherwise.<sup>29</sup> Rome teaches that baptism marks the transition from death to life, and that baptism effects union with Christ, "a permanent community of man with God."<sup>30</sup> Rome teaches that justification "cannot, according to Christ's precept, be effected except at the fountain of regeneration, that is, by the baptism of water." Rome says that baptism confers sanctification, and that no distinction can be made between justification and sanctification. The Vatican condemns those who teach such a distinction.<sup>31</sup> Rome teaches a "first justification" at baptism as well as a "final justification" at the Last Judgment in which believers lay claim to entry into the kingdom of Heaven based on their works plus Christ's.<sup>32</sup> Rome also teaches that adoption comes through union with Christ in baptism.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, Gaffin makes Christ the recipient of the saving acts of God that only sinners need to receive. In this vein he speaks of the "passivity" of Christ and of His "solidarity with believers."<sup>34</sup> But Christ the Redeemer did not need to be redeemed. The Propitiation for our sins needed no propitiation of His own. The giver of grace, God coming in flesh in the ultimate act of grace, did not need to make a

"transition from wrath to grace" Himself. Biblical redemption (Greek *apolytrosis*) speaks of the payment of a ransom. The sinless Christ needed no ransom to be paid on His behalf. In *Ephesians* 1:7 the Apostle Paul writes that it is believers in Christ who "have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace." In *Romans* 3:24-25 we read that believers are "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith." Biblical redemption is tightly connected with the forgiveness of sins through the propitiation of the wrath of God by the blood of Christ. It has nothing to do with a supposed redemption of Christ Himself.

Likewise, Christ the Justifier did not need to be justified as sinners do. Jesus was declared to be the Righteous One, not because the righteousness of another was imputed to Him, but because He was the only man ever to possess a righteousness of His own. His sinless life, perfect atonement, and resurrection from the dead demonstrated that fact. Gaffin, contrary to this, bases his doctrine of justification largely on a wrong interpretation of *1 Timothy* 3:16, where we read that Christ was "justified in the Spirit." Protestant exegetes, comparing Scripture with Scripture, have long understood that the usage of the word "justified" (*dikaioō*, "declared righteous") must of necessity be different when applied to the sinless Son of God than when it is applied to sinful men. In support of this they cite numerous passages which set forth the system of Bible doctrine concerning the person and work of Christ. These passages include *Matthew* 3:16 (where the Spirit testifies to the deity of Christ); *Romans* 1:4 (Christ is "declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness"); and numerous passages, many in *Isaiah*, where Christ was declared to be the promised Holy One, the one who even the demons acknowledged (*Mark* 1:24, *Luke* 4:34) but the nation of Israel denied (*Acts* 3:14).

Because Jesus Christ is the Holy One of Israel, He did not need to be justified or thereafter be sanctified as sinners do. Jesus does say, in *John* 17:19, "for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth." But this is in the context of verse 17: "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." It is also in the context of the Son of God

<sup>28</sup> "The Monroe Four Speak Out," *Christian Renewal*, April 28, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> "Baptism" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton, 1907; 2003 Online Edition at [www.newadvent.org/cathen/](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/)); Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1974), 356.

<sup>30</sup> *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 251.

<sup>31</sup> "Justification" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

<sup>32</sup> *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 251, 264.

<sup>33</sup> "Supernatural Adoption" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

<sup>34</sup> Gaffin, 65.

being glorified (verses 1-2). As the Lord says through the prophet Ezekiel, “‘And I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you [Israel] have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord,’ says the Lord God” (36:23). The sanctification of the Son of God is not the same as the sanctification of sinners. Therefore sinners cannot be sanctified by union with Christ in His sanctification.

Likewise, the only begotten Son of God did not need to be adopted. Only those who are aliens from the household of God need to be adopted. The benefits of adoption – access to the throne of grace, God the Father’s pity, protection, provision, and correction, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption – are gifts of God that sinners need, not the only begotten Son.

Gaffin’s doctrine of salvation reduces Jesus to little more than the first Christian. In an exposition of *Romans* 6:1-11, Gaffin not only echoes Shepherd’s doctrine of “experiential” union with Christ through baptism,<sup>35</sup> but also demonstrates a faulty conception of Christ’s person. He says that “the plain implication” of *Romans* 6:10 (“For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all”)

is that prior to his resurrection (*cf.* v. 9) Christ was alive to sin. The preceding verse confirms this by stating that death (which is the exponential of sin, *cf.* v. 23) *no longer* rules over him. It is likewise plain from verse 10 that his present life to God (subsequent to the resurrection) has its distinguishing character in contrast to his former life to sin. Further, this aspect of his resurrection, that is, his having died to sin and his living to God, provides the pattern for the experience of believers in their having died to sin and their living to God.<sup>36</sup>

It is an incredible thing to say that Christ was ever “alive to sin,” that He had a “former life to sin,” or that there was a time when, as Gaffin implies, sin “rule[d] over him.” These things are true of sinners prior to their conversion, but were never true of Christ. In fact, Scripture never speaks of believers themselves as having been alive to sin. Believers are

made alive, having been “dead in trespasses and sins” (*Ephesians* 2:1 and 5).

Thirdly, but certainly not least, Gaffin’s way of salvation makes redemption depend on something other than the perfect righteousness of Christ, the alien righteousness that is imputed to, not infused into, those who believe the Gospel. Instead, Gaffin substitutes existential, experiential union with Christ – “the solidarity factor” – a merger of sinners and Christ.

Our salvation is a legal matter – but not, as Gaffin teaches, the cosmic equivalent of a corporate merger. Rather, our salvation concerns a *criminal* case of universal proportions. Mankind has been found guilty before the judgment bar of God, and is under the sentence of eternal death. But God’s only Son has paid the death penalty for sinners as an innocent substitute. The Apostle Paul’s doctrinal exposition, beginning in *Romans* 5 and continuing into chapter 6, is not that believers are united “existentially” or “experientially” with Christ, but *legally*. As John W. Robbins writes, believers are united to Christ legally,

because Jesus Christ is the legal representative of and substitute for his people, the federal head of his race.... What Jesus Christ did in his life, death, and resurrection is imputed to believers, as if they had done it, and their sins are imputed to him as if he had done them. Believers do not die with Christ “existentially” or “experientially,” but legally. They do not possess Christ’s perfect righteousness “in the inner man.” Christ’s righteousness is imputed, not infused. His act and righteousness are legally, not experientially, theirs. Their sins are legally, not experientially, his. Christ’s suffering and death are imputed to believers, and we are freed from the penalty of death for our sins. By substituting “existential” and “experiential” union with Christ for the Biblical doctrines of intellectual and legal union, Gaffin has fabricated an entirely un-Biblical soteriology. Tragically, he has been indoctrinating future pastors in this heterodox nonsense for at least three decades.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, 101.

<sup>36</sup> Gaffin, 125. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>37</sup> John W. Robbins. “In Christ,” *The Trinity Review*, September 2004, [www.trinityfoundation.org/PDF/235-InChrist.pdf](http://www.trinityfoundation.org/PDF/235-InChrist.pdf).



### **The Fault Lines Beneath Gaffin’s “New Perspective”**

One cannot arrive at such heterodox views without a faulty beginning. What are the fault lines running beneath Richard Gaffin’s teachings? What leads him to un-Biblically redefine the way of salvation, and the terms of Scripture? The first section of *Resurrection and Redemption* is titled “Methodological Considerations” and deals primarily with Gaffin’s approach to Scripture. Here we find three underlying problems that color Gaffin’s handling of Scripture through the rest of the book.

The first factor is Gaffin’s commitment to the alleged superiority of modern “Biblical Theology” (which is actually the postmodern counterfeit of a valid theological discipline) over systematic theology.<sup>38</sup> The Biblical Theology movement, also known in Reformed circles as the Redemptive-Historical movement, has many adherents among neo-liberals in the OPC and at Westminster Seminary, and even among conservatives.

The legitimate discipline of Biblical theology takes the Bible “as it comes” – book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse. The study of Biblical theology results in an understanding of each book of the Bible in terms of its divine and human authorship, setting, literary form (history, poetry, *etc.*), use of symbolism, outline, main messages, relationship to other books of the canon, and so on. The legitimate discipline of systematic theology looks at the Bible topically, collecting and organizing – not capriciously, but according to sound principles of interpretation – all the Scriptures pertaining to a particular question. What does all of Scripture say about the nature of God? What does all of Scripture say about the nature of Scripture itself? What does all of Scripture say about the way of salvation? What does all of Scripture say about the covenants? How are those doctrines progressively revealed? Systematic theology, legitimately practiced, does not impose a system upon Scripture but seeks to understand and articulate the system of doctrine that Scripture already contains.

Both Biblical theology and systematic theology require a proper approach to Scripture. This approach entails recognition of several facts that Scripture tells us about itself:

- God the Holy Spirit is the Author of every word of the Book, and He infallibly employed human writers as His instruments.
- The Bible, as a divine Book, is therefore inerrant and internally consistent from beginning to end.
- The Bible, as the *only* divine Book, is therefore its only infallible interpreter. Traditions and the words of men are not.
- God’s Word is intelligible. God intended to communicate truth to mankind at large, and to instruct His church specifically, through His Word and through the illumination of Scripture by the Holy Spirit.
- God did not communicate in an analogous or indirect manner. He communicated His own thoughts directly. Man can understand such direct communication of God’s thoughts because he is created in God’s image.

The approach to Scripture which recognizes these facts requires submission to God, an attitude of servanthood toward the Book.

In contrast, the modern Biblical Theology movement does not take the Bible “as it comes” nor does it adhere faithfully to these five principles. As a result, it builds from Scripture an artificial system, actually multiple systems. One of the principal dangers of the Biblical Theology movement is that it focuses on the study of “theologies” in the plural – a “theology of Moses” – a “theology of David” – of Isaiah – of Matthew – of Paul – of James – and so on. Thus we have, in the writings of Richard Gaffin, N. T. Wright, and the Federal Visionists, studies of the “theology of Paul” in semi-isolation from the rest of Scripture. This is a reflection of religious academia’s embracing the postmodern concept of “truth” as the product of the individual functioning within a “historical community of interpretation.” This leads quite naturally to the false notion that Paul’s “truth” can be different from that of James or Matthew or John, or even Jesus.

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<sup>38</sup> See chapter eight of *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism* for additional discussion of the pitfalls of the Biblical Theology movement.

A companion danger of the modern Biblical Theology movement is that it relegates the doctrine of the Holy Spirit's primary and comprehensive authorship of *all* of Scripture, through His supernatural inspiration of the words themselves, to secondary status. Though proponents of the movement deny it, their handling of Scripture constantly demonstrates that human rather than divine authorship has become their primary focus, and that they primarily view the Biblical writers as functioning within a "historical community of interpretation."

Gaffin revealed both dangers in a lecture at the 2005 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference:

Let me begin by saying [that] by Biblical Theology I have in mind giving attention to the *distinctive contributions* of each of the Biblical writers, *within his immediate historical circumstances or situatedness*, and as that involves taking into account the *fully occasional character* of their writings, as especially [is] the case with Paul. And I'm using the word "occasional" here in the sense that many if not all of us are familiar with, that is, these writings are addressed to *particular groups or individuals in specific situations* with concrete concerns or problems.<sup>39</sup>

This reflects Gaffin's thinking as he opens *Resurrection and Redemption* with a section describing his interpretive methodology:

To approach Paul as a theologian means that no encyclopaedic [that is, comprehensive] structure or set of distinctions may be allowed to make the situation in which he developed the teaching of his epistles incommensurable in principle with the various contexts in which the later church has hammered out her doctrines.<sup>40</sup>

Unpacking this statement discloses a defective view of the inspiration of Scripture and of the system of doctrine it sets forth. Gaffin is asserting that the

teachings given to us through Paul are not to be approached, first and foremost, as integral parts of a fixed and transcendent system of doctrine, revealed by one Divine Author in a comprehensive and structured ("encyclopaedic") manner across the whole of Scripture. Rather, in Gaffin's view, we must approach Paul's writings in semi-isolation. "Encyclopaedic" considerations must not be allowed to violate "the continuity between Paul and his interpreters."<sup>41</sup> The continuity between Paul's epistles and the rest of Scripture is less important than an alleged continuity between Paul's writings and sub-sequent church interpretation. In Gaffin's view, Bible doctrine continues to "develop" in the subsequent history of the church because of this "continuity." And thus we have the basis for the Shepherd-Gaffin motto of "progress in theology." It is thoroughly postmodern. But there is more.

The second and third factors influencing Gaffin's theology are interrelated: His implicit denial of the perspicuity (intelligibility) of Scripture, and the rejection of the principle that Scripture is its own interpreter.

These factors spring from a third danger of the Biblical Theology movement of which Gaffin is a leader. This is the movement's insistence that *revelation consists of events, not dogma*. To Gaffin and others, Scripture consists of stories or narratives, not systematic doctrine. This is exceedingly dangerous, because proponents of the Biblical Theology movement claim the right to engage in the "interpretation" of "redemptive events" just as (they claim) the New Testament writers "interpreted" them.

Gaffin, quoting Geerhardus Vos, says that "Paul's is 'the genius of the greatest constructive mind ever at work on the data of Christianity.'"<sup>42</sup> What are "the data of Christianity"? For Gaffin, Vos, and others of this school, the data are the events. And how, according to Gaffin, are we to interpret those events? He says this:

[T]he exegete, despite every cultural and temporal dissimilarity, stands in principle...in the same situation as the writers of the New Testament and, therefore, is involved with Paul

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<sup>39</sup> Richard B. Gaffin "Paul's Perspective: The Apostle and His Theology," 2005 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference, Session 2, January 3, 2005. Transcribed from the lecture video. Emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup> Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 26. Emphasis added.

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<sup>41</sup> Gaffin, 23.

<sup>42</sup> Gaffin, 19.

(and the other letter writers) in a common interpretive enterprise.<sup>43</sup>

Expanding on this statement, Gaffin uses an illustration from differential calculus:

Redemptive events constitute a function (f), the authentication and interpretation of the New Testament its first derivative (f') and the interpretation of the later church its second derivative (f''). F'', to be sure, is of a different order than f', since the former, the infallible verbal revelation (Scripture) which has God as its primary author, is the basis (principium) of the latter. But both, as derivatives, have a common interpretive reference to f. Indeed, it may be said that...f'' "goes beyond" f' by seeking to make more explicit the structure implicit in the latter.<sup>44</sup>

Unpacking these statements, we find Gaffin saying that "the data of Christianity" consist of the "redemptive events." The writings of Paul, Peter, James, *et al* in the New Testament are the "first derivative" interpretations of those events – not the revelational events themselves, but "interpretations" of them. The commentaries, councils, creeds, and confessions of the church from the post-apostolic period to the present day are "second derivatives" – interpretations that are also based on the "redemptive events" themselves as well as on the "interpretations" of the New Testament writers.

Gaffin thus replaces an authoritative word from God with a series of "interpretations." All of them have a common reference to the redemptive-historical events themselves, which he alleges constitute the actual "revelation." These begin with the "interpretation" of those events by Paul and the other New Testament writers, and continue through the "interpretations" of the present-day church. Men of the church today, according to Gaffin, are engaged in a "common interpretive enterprise" with Paul and the other writers of Scripture.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Gaffin, 24.

<sup>44</sup> Gaffin, 25. Italics in the original.

<sup>45</sup> Richard L. Pratt, chairman of the Old Testament Department at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida and a former Westminster student, echoes this theme in his book, *He Gave Us Stories* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P

What is sorely lacking in this line of thinking is any credible commitment to the doctrine of the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture. Richard Gaffin pays lip service to it, but he denies it in practice. In his view, Scripture is "interpretation." It is not in itself revelation, but one step removed from revelation.

But the Apostle Paul and the other writers of Scripture were not "interpreters" of events; they were pen-men for the Holy Spirit. What Paul wrote was not an "interpretation" of a "revelation" consisting of "redemptive events." What Paul and the other penmen of Scripture wrote down *is* the revelation (2 *Peter* 1:20-21, 2 *Timothy* 3:14-17).

Gaffin's line of thinking leads him to imagine great difficulties in the interpretation of the writings of Paul:

The real difficulty for interpretation lies in the fact that in Paul's writings we encounter a thinker of constructive genius, with a dogmatic bent, but only as he directs himself to specific situations and questions, only as he expresses himself in "occasional" fashion.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, Gaffin is alleging that Paul himself is no more committed to a systematic view of Biblical revelation than Gaffin himself. For Gaffin, Paul's "theology" is really Paul's alleged situational "interpretation of events." Because of this, Gaffin insists that Paul is systematic only within the context of his own writings, and "only as he directs himself to specific situations and questions."<sup>47</sup> Gaffin continues:

In short, the true problem in understanding Paul is that he is a theologian, a careful and systematic thinker, accessible only through

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& R Publishing, 1993). Pratt views the Old Testament as largely a collection of stories, and promotes what he calls an "authority-dialogue model" of Biblical interpretation that is less "like a lecture in which we simply listen to the text" and "more like a classroom discussion where both *we and Scripture make contributions to the final outcome*" (23, emphasis added). Vern S. Poythress and John M. Frame also echo this approach in their "perspectivalist" model of Biblical interpretation, which we shall discuss at length in chapter eight.

<sup>46</sup> Gaffin, 28.

<sup>47</sup> The phrase used by Neo-orthodox theologians for this idea was *Sitz im Leben* (situation or setting in life). Gaffin avoids the phrase but makes the idea basic to his thought.

pastoral letters and records of his sermons. His writings are obviously not doctrinal treatises; but neither do they consist in a variety of unrelated, ad hoc formulations or in an unsystematic multiplication of conceptions. They reflect a structure of thought. The Pauline epistles may be aptly compared to the visible portion of an iceberg. What juts above the surface is but a small fraction of what remains submerged. The true proportions of the whole lie hidden beneath the surface. The contours of what can be seen at a first glance may also prove deceptive. Put less pictorially, that conception or line of thought having relatively little explicit textual support, on reflection may prove to be of the most basic, constitutive [that is, essential or defining] significance. This state of affairs makes the interpretation of Paul, particularly a comprehensive attempt, an inherently difficult and precarious undertaking.<sup>48</sup>

In Gaffin's approach to Biblical interpretation, since the writings of the New Testament are only "interpretation" of the "data of Christianity," and not the data themselves, human authorship is the primary consideration. Gaffin's alleged difficulty springs from his assumption that we only have "the tip of the iceberg" of Paul's "theology." The pages of the Bible only give us so much information to work with. Besides, Gaffin continues, Paul's writings "are obviously not doctrinal treatises" (an amazing and unsupportable assertion) although they do, he says, reflect a "structure." But according to Gaffin we only have so much of that structure, the tip of the iceberg. Therefore, he asserts, the writings of Paul that we do have in the Bible "may prove deceptive."

This is a deeply disturbing assertion. There is no thought here of God's purpose for humanity to have, in the pages of Scripture, just what He *intends* us to have – no more, no less. We know there was more material, because Scripture itself tells us so (*John* 20:30, 21:25). "But *these are written*," the Holy Spirit says through John, "that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that *believing* you

may have life in His name" (20:31). God has given us all we need, and calls upon us merely to believe in Him.

Not so, says Richard Gaffin. We have only "the tip of the iceberg" and that limited body of information in the pages of Scripture "may prove deceptive." How then shall we avoid being "deceived"? Gaffin offers the solution: The "conception or line of thought" that has "relatively little explicit textual support" becomes the consideration "of the most basic, constitutive significance" – that is, it becomes the controlling factor – in interpreting Paul's writings. In other words, we must interpret what we have of Paul's "theology" in light of what is least supported by the text. We must interpret what is there based on what is not there. This, says Gaffin, makes the interpretation of these portions of the Word of God "an inherently difficult and precarious undertaking." Indeed it would be, if anything that Gaffin has just said were true.

If we are to believe Richard Gaffin, Christians have been ill-equipped by God to understand the epistles of Paul. The plain sense of the Apostle's writings is not enough, is not comprehensible, and "may prove deceptive" because we only have the "tip of the iceberg" of Paul's thinking. Paul's writings are unintelligible without expert help.

And who are the experts who will lead ill-equipped Christians through this interpretive minefield? Who will describe for them the great mass of Paul's "theology" that allegedly lies unseen below the tip of the iceberg, the hidden part that must govern the interpretation of the Pauline writings that we do have in our hands? According to Richard Gaffin we are to rely upon neo-liberal theologians like Norman Shepherd and himself, whose interpretive methodology has already disclosed thoroughly defective views of the inspiration, systematic nature, and comprehensibility of the Scriptures. If we rely on Shepherd, Gaffin, and their cohorts, we do so at the peril of our souls. By denying the perspicuity of Scripture, Gaffin here lays the foundation for a new priesthood – the academic theologians – and all that priestcraft implies.

A few paragraphs later Gaffin pays lip service to the principle that Scripture "by virtue of its divine origin

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<sup>48</sup> Gaffin, 28. Notice that the Reformation's emphasis on the clarity of Scripture plays no part in Gaffin's method of interpretation.

is self-interpreting.”<sup>49</sup> But he does this only after he has explicitly denied that principle by saying that we lack, in the Biblical text, most of what we need to interpret the epistles of Paul.

From this dubious starting point Richard Gaffin writes the rest of his book, which is hailed in some conservative circles as a classic treatise on the subject of how sinners are saved.

In marked contrast to Gaffin’s assertions, the Psalmist writes, “The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (*Psalms* 119:130). Paul himself by the Holy Spirit writes, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (*2 Timothy* 3:16-17). In contrast to Gaffin’s methodology the Holy Spirit says, “Every word of God is pure [tested and proven true]; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar” (*Proverbs* 30:5-6).

Gaffin describes the Apostle Paul thus: “In his writing and teachings we encounter a mind of unusual constructive energy with an unparalleled capacity for synthetic thinking, in a word...a ‘mastermind.’” But the Apostle himself debunks this view that his words are inaccessible and incomprehensible except to the theologically initiated. He tells the Corinthian church that he came to them, “not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect” (*1 Corinthians* 1:17). In fact, Paul is careful to emphasize that his words are not even his own. In *John* 7:16-17 even Jesus himself says the same: “My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.” For the Apostle Paul the matter of first and greatest concern is not human authorship – not the “theology of Paul” – but the inspiration of his words by the Holy Spirit:

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak,

not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For “who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?” But we have the mind of Christ [*1 Corinthians* 2:12-16].

Richard Gaffin’s theology is couched in the language of orthodoxy, but he employs a methodology that violates the most basic principles of sound Biblical interpretation. On that crumbling foundation Gaffin erects a counterfeit salvation through existential solidarity with a counterfeit Christ. While purporting to exalt Christ, his theology actually debases the Son of God. Gaffin depicts a Christ who is no better than the Levitical high priests, who had to repeatedly offer blood atonement for themselves as well as for the people (*Hebrews* 9:6-7, 23-27). It was they who needed and received redemption, justification, sanctification, and adoption, not Christ. If Gaffin’s depiction of Christ and salvation were true, Reformation Christianity would be a monumental lie.

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## 2013 Christian Worldview Essay Contest Winners

Congratulations to the winners of the 2013 Christian Worldview Essay Contest!

The first prize of \$3,000 and 15 books are awarded to C. Jay Engel of Folsom, California for his essay, “Gordon Clark on Science and Behaviorism.”

There is no second prize awarded this year.

The third prize of \$1,000 and 5 books are awarded to Conrad Martin of Ephrata, Pennsylvania for his essay, “Behaviorism: The Broken Machine.”

All contestants had to read *Behaviorism and Christianity* and *The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God* by Gordon Clark and write an essay on the books.

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<sup>49</sup> Gaffin, 30.