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James Leo Garrett Jr. and the
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AN ASSESSMENT OF A MAGNUM OPUS: JAMES LEO GARRETT JR'S "BAPTIST THEOLOGY" AS A GIFT TO 21ST CENTURY BAPTISTS

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I. INTRODUCTION: OPENING THE DOOR

My encounters with James Leo Garrett Jr. (1925-2020) took place roughly 18 years ago whilst a new Ph.D. student at Southwestern Seminary. I worked my way through my degree in an administrative office, and it was the office Garrett would call when he needed assistance with something important. Frequently, his calls to my desk concerned a certain exterior door in the lower level of Fleming Hall that he would access on his return from Roberts Library to his office. His office was a monument to his intensity and focus for it was one of the few of the internal offices in Fleming Hall without a window, which gave Garrett more room for books and closer proximity to Roberts Library. Thus, given that his hands were often full of books, he counted on the automatic door button to function to assist him in his navigation of the elements from one building to another—and when said door did not open, I received a very kind phone call to see if I could expedite its repair. We refer to Garrett as one of the last Gentlemen Theologians, and he was that in every brief interaction I had with him, but that door, I am not sure it received the same chivalry.

C. S. Lewis, in explaining his mere Christianity, conceived of the traditions of Christianity:

like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms.
If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done
what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall,

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that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is the place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in.¹

One of the best ways to read and understand what James Leo Garrett Jr. has done with his *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study*² is to see him as one standing at the door to a room marked “The Baptist Tradition,” holding the door open and beckoning you, as a friend, to enter. For in that room there are fires and chairs and meals. And Garrett does not mind if you are not a Baptist! In fact, the more who would like to come in and have a look around and visit about Baptist Theology, the better. In one way, this idea of Garrett as a Doorman for the study of Baptist Theology best depicts his rich and full life of scholarship and churchmanship. And my purpose here, is to show how this exhaustive work, that concludes with the twentieth century, stands as a gift, a Doorman all its own (indeed, if you have seen the size and weight of it, a doorstep!) beckoning twenty-first century Baptists and Christian friends, to enter. Garrett’s door still functions well and is open.

The title of this article is “An Assessment of a Magnum Opus: James Leo Garrett Jr.’s ‘Baptist Theology’ as a Gift to 21st Century Baptists,” but technically Garrett has *manga opera*, the plural of *magnum opus*, for his *Systematic Theology*³ stands on its own as a life work of significant influence. What is more, thanks to the labors of Wyman Lewis Richardson, the multi-volume *Collected Writings* project will stand as well among Garrett’s great works.⁴ A *magnum opus* often is thought of as a pinnacle achievement, a comprehensive and exhaustive work of a lifetime, and the entry point as well as a definitive point for many students and scholars to reference and interact. Garrett’s *Systematic* did that in his own lifetime among his colleagues and students. *Baptist Theology* did that for his student’s students, and continues to serve in that way. And Lord willing, his

¹C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Preface.

²James Leo Garrett Jr., *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009).

³James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 1995).

⁴Wyman Lewis Richardson, *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr., 1950-2015* (8 vols.; Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2017-). Volumes 1-5 are in print as of the fall of 2022.

Collected Writings will do that for students to come.

Therefore, to provide a brief assessment of *Baptist Theology* is a privilege, for *Baptist Theology* is the text from which I have benefited the most from James Leo Garrett, Jr.

II. BAPTIST THEOLOGY: A REVIEW & ASSESSMENT⁵

John Albert Broadus, calling for the advancement of Baptist theological distinctives in a nineteenth century address, told the story of a United States senator visiting with a friend who casually remarked that he was a Baptist. Curious, the senator asked, “By the way, what kind of Baptists are the Paedobaptists?”

Broadus acknowledged that this account was an exception, even in his day, “but it exemplif[ies] what is really a widespread and very great ignorance as to Baptists.”⁶ If such was the case in 1881, how much more so at the early decades of Baptists’ fifth century, an era in which the rejection of theological heritage is increasingly the norm and few realize that Baptist theology has more to do historically with biblical fidelity than it does with the latest denominational stereotype or scandal. Indeed, the aim of reasserting Baptist doctrine for correcting ignorance is a fitting description of Garrett’s, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study*—and is one of the volume’s many gifts for twenty-first century Baptists.

1. *A Bifocal Vantage Point: Baptist Theology’s Methodology.* Reflecting on his life’s work in the preface to Volume Two of his *Collected Writings*, Garrett shared, “I have sought to focus both on the Southern Baptists (USA) and upon the entire worldwide Baptist community. This bifocal vantage point was, I think, reflected in my *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study* (2009).”⁷ This bifocal approach is like one keeping focus on both the tree and the forest, while not overlooking a single leaf, and describes well Garrett’s methodology.

Garrett’s seven-decade contribution to Baptist theological education is well documented and well known. His methodological approach is a descriptive and even-handed encyclopedic assembly

⁵This section is revised and expanded from Jason G. Duesing, *Review of Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study*, by James Leo Garrett Jr., *SBJT* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 92-94.

⁶John A. Broadus, *The Duty of Baptists to Teach Their Distinctive Views* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1881).

⁷James Leo Garrett Jr., “Preface,” in *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr., 1950-2015*, ed. Wyman Lewis Richardson (Searcy, AR: Resource, 2019), 2:xiii.

of both primary and secondary sources, providing the reader an opportunity to form his own opinions. Garrett has often been critiqued as many readers fail to glean the author's own opinion on any given issue. Paul Basden explains that Garrett's writing method's "goal is not to present a finely honed thesis and then to argue and prove that thesis, but to let his readers in on an inter-generational discussion of the cardinal truths of Christianity...so the readers can make up their own minds."⁸ While critique of this method is, in a broad sense, understandable, this critique is not absolute and even in *Baptist Theology* Garrett's obliqueness is not consistently the case. To learn what Garrett believes, one must (1) adapt to Garrett's style of restrained subtlety; and (2) read each and every footnote. Consequently, this assessment, in part, will seek to underscore some of the unique areas where Garrett makes his views known, while summarizing how Garrett's work helps to correct the lack of Baptist theological understanding.

Baptist Theology's stated subtitle, "A Four-Century Study," recognizes the quadricentennial (1609-2009) existence of Baptists. However, Garrett does not give equal treatment to all centuries. Within thirteen chapters of varying lengths, five address the first two centuries, while eight focus on the last two centuries with a predominant emphasis on the twentieth century. The word "study" is central to Garrett's thesis, for he describes the volume as a "study of the doctrinal beliefs of the people called Baptists" and thereby "attempts to treat responsibly each of the four centuries and the Baptists of the world."⁹ Published in 2009, this volume is the culmination of a lifetime of "study." Garrett explained,

In 1950, when I was a very young instructor at Southwestern Seminary, the faculty allowed me to introduce a new elective course in the curriculum called "The History of Baptist Theology." I taught that course at Southwestern during the 50s and again, later, in the 80s and 90s and at Southern Seminary during the 60s and early 1970s. That course involved having students

⁸Paul Basden, "James Leo Garrett Jr.," in *The Legacy of Southwestern: Writings that Shaped a Tradition* (North Richland Hills, TX: Smithfield, 2002), 142-43.

⁹Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, xxv.

write papers on many subjects. Then, after my second retirement from teaching in 2003, I began an intensive reading of all these sources and a research project which eventuated in this book.¹⁰

Of note here is the genesis of Garrett's development of his knowledge of Baptist Theology. The course that he started in the 1950s was special. A review of the syllabus for his course offered in the 1959 summer term at Southern Seminary reveals objectives that bear fruit in his 2009 work, and serve as guiding gifts for Baptists today:

1. To afford an opportunity for a study of the historical development of Baptist theology and for a study and evaluation of the concepts peculiar to or emphasized by the Baptists. [Baptist distinctives]
2. To stimulate a clearer understanding of the major doctrinal developments and controversies in Baptist history and of existing differences among Baptists themselves. [Baptist theological development]
3. To encourage the recognition of that which Baptists hold in common with other Christians and the maintenance of proper Christian attitudes toward and relationships with other Christians, churches, and denominations. [Baptist ecumenism]
4. To provide an opportunity for open, honest discussion of problems arising in Baptist doctrine, polity, and practice of issues which Baptists face in the contemporary period. [Baptist polemics]
5. To foster a growing appreciation of the significance of the Baptist movement, its total contribution to Christianity, and its responsibility in today's world. [Baptists and the Christian tradition]
6. To inspire greater fidelity to and consistency with the New Testament message and principles in the contemporary period.¹¹ [Baptist biblicism]

¹⁰Wyman Lewis Richardson, "Baptist Theology with James Leo Garrett, Jr.: An Interview and Review" in *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr., 1950-2015*, 1:117.

¹¹James Leo Garrett Jr., *A Bibliographical Syllabus in Baptist Theology* (Fort Worth, TX: Potter's Book Store, 1959), 2. The descriptive summaries in brackets are my own.

Garrett's statement that in 2003 he began "an intensive reading of all the sources," gives a glimpse at his well-known exhaustive research method deployed in *Baptist Theology*, and it was nothing less than what he expected of his students. In Garrett's "History of Baptist Theology" class, he took a unique approach to his course reading list:

No specific reading requirements for this course are prescribed. Each student is expected to read diligently and consistently in the materials listed in the syllabus and in the other materials related to the field, thus immersing himself in the literature of Baptist theology. Failure to engage in such a program of reading during the term shall itself constitute ground for failure to pass the course.¹²

This was, in part, as Robert B. Stewart explains, because "[Garrett] believed that one had no right to write on a subject if one had not read the primary sources in the field thoroughly. Furthermore, not only must one read the relevant material, one must understand it well enough to be able to place it in the context of that particular individual's life's work and able to place his life's work in the broader context of the history of Christian thought."¹³ Stewart also relates the time in class when a student asked question about John Calvin and Garrett, replied, "I believe that I have read everything that John Calvin wrote, and I don't remember anything like that." He read everything John Calvin wrote. Thus, for his *Baptist Theology*, we have a good idea of what he meant by the "intensive reading" he undertook starting in 2003.

At the time of publication, Garrett illuminated further his aim for writing *Baptist Theology*:

No book of this kind, of this nature and scope, on this subject, had ever been written in the history of the Baptists so far as I knew. I did not know when I started that William Brackney would write *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* and that it would be published in

¹²Garrett, *A Bibliographical Syllabus*, 2.

¹³Robert B. Stewart, "Foreword," in *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr., 1950-2015*, 4:x.

2004. I did not know that when I began my book and I'm sure he did not know, when he was writing his, that I would be writing mine. So these are the only two books that have attempted to cover comprehensively Baptist confessions of faith, Baptist theologians, and theological movements and controversies. There have been books on each of those three areas, many books, but only these two on the whole field.¹⁴

In addition to this comprehensive scope, Garrett explained that he sought to consult essential secondary sources in addition to prioritizing the primary sources “to let the authors speak for themselves before I make any assessment of their work.”¹⁵ As secondary sources contain “both favorable and unfavorable, both positive and negative...It's important to look at those assessments as well as what I would say in interpreting these.”¹⁶ A final important methodological decision for Garrett was his global focus. Noting that neither Brackney or McBeth include the six inhabited continents, Garrett explained that his work with the Baptist World Alliance as well a lifelong reading of Kenneth Scott Latourette's seven volume *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, compelled him to write a Baptist theology that spanned Baptists around the globe.¹⁷

2. *A Four Century Study: Baptist Theology's Historical Theology.* Garrett begins *Baptist Theology* with an overview of the roots of Baptist beliefs influenced by the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines of the early Councils and Creeds. He summarizes:

Baptists have consistently affirmed that the canonical Scriptures are always superior to and more authoritative than any or all post biblical tradition. Such a fact does not prevent or preclude evidence that certain of the church fathers ... seemed to have influenced positively the beliefs of later Baptists.¹⁸

¹⁴Garrett, “Baptist Theology with James Leo Garrett, Jr.: An Interview and Review,” 1:117.

¹⁵Garrett, “Baptist Theology with James Leo Garrett, Jr.: An Interview and Review,” 1:118.

¹⁶Garrett, “Baptist Theology with James Leo Garrett, Jr.: An Interview and Review,” 1:118.

¹⁷Garrett, “Baptist Theology with James Leo Garrett, Jr.: An Interview and Review,” 1:118.

¹⁸Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 5.

He then answers the revealing question, “Are Baptists Protestants?” in the affirmative, favoring the key doctrines of the Magisterial Reformers and the Anabaptist kinship approach for any ecclesiological connection between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He asks, “What specific Anabaptist teachings, therefore, can be identified as possibly influencing, even indirectly, the English Baptists?” and lists four:

1. Believer’s baptism as constitutive of a gathered church.
2. Church discipline as necessary to the life of the true church.
3. Elevation of the New Testament over the Old Testament, especially in matters of ecclesiology.
4. Advocacy of religious freedom for all human beings.¹⁹

Garrett’s treatment and categorization of the “soundly biblical” Anabaptists in Switzerland and South Germany are especially helpful when these are today often overlooked or deemphasized.

For Garrett’s study of Baptists’ first and second centuries, he examines the theology of General and Particular Baptists in England and of early Baptists in America. As one example of Garrett’s use of secondary sources, he offers this corrective of William Lumpkin:

Lumpkin’s statement that articles 4-16 [in Helwys’s *A Declaration of Faith*] were a “pioneer statement of the Baptist doctrine of soul competency” may be a reading back into this confession the thought of Edgar Young Mullins at the beginning of the twentieth century.²⁰

Garrett, according to his stated purpose, at times compresses the history to get to the theology, which can make for dense reading. Consider this single sentence covering the life of Hansard Knollys:

The son of a Church of England clergyman in Lincolnshire who himself was ordained at the age of thirty both a deacon and a priest on successive days, Knollys, after studying at Cambridge and becoming

¹⁹Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 15.

²⁰Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 35.

Puritan in his initial Anglican charge, had sojourned in New England as a pastor for three years before joining the JLJ Church and then becoming a Baptist about 1644 and assuming a pastorate in London.²¹

The footnote for this sentence then references the five standard works on Knollys, both well known and obscure.

Garrett makes a point to disclaim the open membership view of John Bunyan,²² and provides a correction that the first Baptist to write a complete systematic theology was Thomas Grantham, not John Gill.²³ He then reclassifies Gill as either a three-fifths or four-fifths Hyper-Calvinist, since he was not an antinomian and not clear on supralapsarianism.²⁴ Garrett also shows the intentional role church discipline played among Philadelphia and Charleston Baptists.²⁵ While Garrett's work is commendably thorough, *Baptist Theology* would have been strengthened by one or two chapters devoted to this understudied era of formative doctrinal advancement—perhaps in lieu of some of the later chapters that parse the twentieth century.

Baptists' third century provides Garrett the opportunity to explore the role and development of Confessions of Faith among Baptists as well as their differing views of soteriology as expressed in Calvinism and Arminianism. Garrett reminds readers that in addition to John Eliot and David Brainerd, William Carey was first influenced by Robert Hall Jr.'s, *Help to Zion's Travellers*.²⁶ Carey's Enquiry, while often thought of as a practical treatise helped "turn Missiology into a theological discipline," and serves as one of the first histories of Christian missions "from the New Testament era until the end of the eighteenth century."²⁷

Whereas Garrett does, at times, compress the history, he does also connect important historical events for the reader that are not widely known. For example, after surveying the life of eighteenth century English pastor Abraham Booth, Garrett concludes by showing how

²¹Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 62.

²²Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 67, n. 83.

²³Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 94, n. 249.

²⁴Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 100.

²⁵Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 118.

²⁶Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 168.

²⁷Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 174-75.

Booth's investment in educational efforts led to the formation of what would become Regent's Park College.²⁸ When reviewing the complicated theological motivations of Daniel Parker, Garrett shows his able knowledge of Ph.D. research citing fresh interpretative analysis of Parker's theology first in 1960 and then the refutation of those conclusions in a 1995 dissertation.²⁹ Likewise, Garrett's balanced and extensive treatment of nineteenth century Landmarkism functions as a readable clarification not only of the negative excesses of the movement, but also of some of the misread characters, such as J. M. Pendleton. He later explains that Landmarkism "was actually an innovation in Baptist ecclesiology."³⁰

Garrett's study of Baptists' fourth century appears in several chapters under a variety of emphases including biblical theologians, Southern Baptist theologians, global Baptist theologians, and new theologians. For all of Garrett's deftness at navigating theological nuance amid infinitesimal detail, at times in this era his description fails to deliver. For example, when speaking of Frank Stagg's denial of the doctrine of the Trinity, Garrett concludes only that Stagg "mistakenly interpreted" and "mistakenly thought."³¹ Garrett tracks the development of theology across all the centuries and notes that with the work of Dale Moody, "Southern Baptist theology came to the espousal of all five tenets of original Arminianism,"³² and that several Southern Baptist theologians increasingly rejected the penal substitution view of the atonement. As a theologian of the twentieth century, Garrett treated eschatology extensively in his own *Systematic Theology* and, therefore, provides a helpful historical note by showing how "[George] Beasley-Murray, George E. Ladd, Dale Moody, John Paul Newport, and others, helped to make historic premillennialism normative for many in Anglo-American Baptist theology during the last half of the twentieth century."³³ Garrett cites the lack of historical evidence to substantiate the rising interest in baptismal sacramentalism.³⁴ He traces the development and influence of dispensationalism

²⁸Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 189.

²⁹Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 206.

³⁰Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 715.

³¹Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 371.

³²Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 382.

³³Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 391.

³⁴Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 543.

but concludes that it is “less destructive to the Baptists” than the modernist movement.³⁵

Garrett’s review of the development of confessions of faith continues with the development of the *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1925, wherein he reviews how the prevalence of theory of evolution led the Southern Baptist Convention to require seminary faculty to sign and to give “assurance of individual acceptance.”³⁶

Garrett’s overview of the “Inerrancy Controversy” in the Southern Baptist Convention is fascinating to read, and as with all items of recent historical occurrence, the reader will no doubt wish Garrett had provided more. Two puzzling items include the four-page treatment of Walter Shurden and his freedom motif of Baptist identity³⁷ located in the middle of the controversy survey and the failure to mention the far more influential work of Russ Bush and Tom Nettles (which does appear in a section on Nettles in a later chapter; Russ Bush, as a Baptist theologian, receives no treatment).

As a member of the first generation who has benefited from the return of the Southern Baptist Convention to conservative theology, this reviewer was disappointed to find that more was not presented regarding the restoration of theological integrity in the SBC seminaries and agencies. Furthermore, Garrett’s survey of the *Baptist Faith and Message* 2000 fails to mention the widespread endorsement and adoption of the capstone confession of the Inerrancy Controversy by all SBC agencies and many state conventions and churches.

One reason Garrett gave for why he wrote *Baptist Theology* remains still a vital reason for many still who read his work today. Garrett noted that people have said that Baptists did not have theologians writing theology. Many said, and still say, that “Theology was only written by Roman Catholics or Lutherans or Anglicans or Presbyterians or somebody else.” But, as Garrett said, “this book is, I think, quite clear evidence that that is not true.”³⁸

3. *A Definitive Work: Baptist Theology’s Reception.* Baptist Theology received several notable reviews that chronicle its early reception in the early twenty-first century. Malcolm B. Yarnell III concluded that

³⁵Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 580.

³⁶Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 448.

³⁷Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 499-502.

³⁸Richardson, *Collected Writings*, 1:119.

Baptist Theology is “the most important text to have been written on the Baptist movement in the last 100 years.”³⁹ He notes that Garrett overlooks the work of Stephen Wright when considering English Particular and General Baptist theology, and does not make the organizational connection between the First London Confession and Calvin’s *Institutes*. Yarnell also commends Garrett for his treatment of controversy among contemporary theologians for “he knew many of the combatants...yet he always attempts to treat them with empathy and accuracy.”⁴⁰

Nathan A. Finn commended *Baptist Theology* when he wrote “Garrett helpfully argues that Baptists have theological roots in multiple movements, regardless of what one believes about Baptists’ historical roots...[And that] there is simply no other work that contains this much information about Baptist historical theology.”⁴¹ He notes that in *Baptist Theology* there is “little effort to synthesize material and/or draw wider implications for Baptist history and thought,” and that while Garrett “says little about Canadian Baptist thinkers and African American Baptist theologians...[t]he sections on Baptist scholars in the two-thirds world are also a helpful contribution to Baptist historical theology.”⁴²

Given all the praise and critique, it is fair to say that perhaps the volume’s greatest omission is the lack of attention paid to the theological contribution of James Leo Garrett Jr. While one would not expect Garrett to include himself, the publisher could have employed an outside author like the ones used in writing the sections on Brazil and South Korea. Perhaps a revised edition of *Baptist Theology* will appear in 2034 that updates the first twenty-five years of Baptists’ fifth century—and adds a section on Garrett’s contribution to the twentieth century? Nevertheless, as a brief aid to fill this void, William H. Brackney’s *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought*, published just a few years before *Baptist Theology*, helps the reader with an assessment of where Garrett, himself, fits in the history of Baptist Theology (as do Paul Basden’s chapters in *The Legacy of Southwestern*⁴³ and

³⁹Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “Review of *Baptist Theology*,” *SWJT* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 223.

⁴⁰Yarnell, “Review of *Baptist Theology*,” 226.

⁴¹Nathan A. Finn, “Review of *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study*,” *Themelios* 34, no. 2 (July 2009): 238.

⁴²Finn, “Review,” 238-39.

⁴³James Leo Garrett Jr., ed., *The Legacy of Southwestern*, 2002.

*Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*⁴⁴, and *Garrett's festschrifts*⁴⁵ and memorials). Brackney presents Garrett as (1) primarily a Southwestern Seminary theologian, (2) someone with a clear appreciation “for the larger world in which Baptists live,” and “a courageous witness for ecumenism,” (3) the successor to A. H. Strong in the second half of the twentieth-century as a Baptist systematic theologian, (4) a theologian with “a cooperative and engaging ecclesiology,” and (5) someone who, “more often than not, after surveying the extant literature on a particular issue, he accepts a predictable position or combines the best of several existing writers.”⁴⁶

4. *An Assessment for 21st Century Baptists: Baptist Theology's Gift.* Garrett concludes *Baptist Theology* with a statement of uncertainty about the future, asking whether Baptists today “hold to and clearly affirm and practice their distinctives” in an era where Baptist ecclesiology has “come into a state of comparative neglect or assumed irrelevance.”⁴⁷ Such describes the state of Baptists at the start of their fifth century as Yarnell notes that with this concluding statement Garrett, “has prophetically framed the contemporary question from the perspective of a grand historical-theological narrative.”⁴⁸ The idea that James Leo Garrett Jr.'s *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study* might serve as a prophetic guide is one of the main gifts this volume gives to twenty-first century Baptists. At a base level, it, at the very least, provides professors, pastors, missionaries, and students a tool to combat what Broadus termed a “very great ignorance as to Baptists.”⁴⁹ At a more intricate level Baptist Theology serves and prepares readers to answer recurring theological questions, many of which Garrett, himself, foresaw. In an article Garrett wrote in 2010, not long after the publication of *Baptist Theology*, he asks what issues of the past will have a bearing on the future and surmises:

⁴⁴Timothy George and David S. Dockery, eds., *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition* (Nashville: B&H, 2001).

⁴⁵See *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33, no. 1 (2006), and Paul A. Basden and David S. Dockery, eds., *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church* (Nashville: Broadman, 1991).

⁴⁶William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 425-27.

⁴⁷Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 725-726.

⁴⁸Yarnell, *SWJT*, 226.

⁴⁹John A. Broadus, *The Duty of Baptists to Teach Their Distinctive Views* (Macon, GA: Ragsdale, 1943).

1. Concerns about the relationship between humanity and the divine will continue to resurface because Baptists connect salvation with church membership.
2. Issues surrounding revelation and the Bible, Christology, human origins, and eschatology are likely to resurface.
3. Baptists may continue to be less effective in teaching and fleshing out their historic distinctives amid their own people. [Baptist distinctives]
4. Baptists may continue to rediscover their debt to the patristic consensus and to recognize their debt to the Magisterial Reformation and the Radical Reformation. [Baptists and the Christian tradition]
5. Perhaps the question of interdenominational Christian unity will be answered in different ways in the 21st century than in the 20th. [Baptist ecumenism]
6. It is very probable that the interactions of Missiology and theology among Baptists will markedly increase.⁵⁰

What is remarkable about these characterizing issues Garrett listed in 2010 is their similarity to his course objectives for his 1950s Baptist Theology syllabus—what he saw then as questions the study of Baptist Theology could answer, he still saw the study of Baptist Theology fulfilling sixty years later.

In that same 2010 essay, Garrett then asks these questions of twenty-first century Baptists:

1. Can Baptists in various conventions and unions find a common biblical hermeneutic, especially in reference to contemporary social and moral issues?
2. Is the Baptist embrace of the doctrine of the Trinity sufficient for an effective witness to Muslims?
3. Can Baptists agree on the destiny of the unevangelized?
4. What are Baptists to do with Dispensationalism?
5. Are many Baptist churches to adopt ruling elders? Will Baptist megachurches retain a residue of congregational polity?
6. Are Baptists to surrender or retain believer's baptism by

⁵⁰James Leo Garrett Jr., "The Future of Baptist Theology With A Look At Its Past," *JBTM* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 75.

immersion and its implications?

7. Can Baptists mend their fractured unity?⁵¹

Perhaps not all these questions land in 2022 the way they did in his mind in 2010, but several of them are descriptive of the very challenges twenty-first century Baptists are facing. Garrett concludes, “[I]t is of paramount importance that Baptists in the twenty-first century think theologically as Baptists and in reference to the Baptist heritage. I invite and challenge you to engage in Baptist theology and to make your contribution to it.”⁵²

III. CONCLUSION: OPENING THE DOOR

I never had Garrett as a professor. I came to Southwestern for my Ph.D. studies right at the time he started his “intensive reading” for *Baptist Theology*. I had read of the shirts students at Southwestern had made decades before, “I survived Theo with Leo,” and of his legacy as a lecturer as “Machine-Gun Garrett.” His peers recognized him as “the most knowledgeable Baptist theologian living today.”⁵³ He was known, as the *Christian Century* noted, as the “dean of Southern Baptist theologians.”⁵⁴ Garrett served as my professor’s mentor, Malcolm B. Yarnell III, and thus, early in my studies, I ventured to ask Garrett if he would guide me in a directed study Ph.D. seminar covering the Baptist Theologians, thinking it would be ideal to study with him while he wrote that volume. My request landed on him like Sanballat and Gresham calling up to Nehemiah on the wall, and Garrett’s response was the same, “I am doing a great work and cannot come down” (Neh 6:3). Though that door of formal study with Garrett was closed, it led to my discovery of two meaningful and longer-lasting ways that he would serve as a Door Opener for me to the Baptist Tradition.

On social media, in recent months, there was a trend of students tracing their intellectual “family tree” by tracing their professor’s professor, and their professor’s professors. Through Garrett’s student and my professor, Yarnell, I learned, not even realizing it at

⁵¹Garrett, “The Future of Baptist Theology,” 75-79.

⁵²Garrett, “The Future of Baptist Theology,” 80.

⁵³George and Dockery, *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, 298.

⁵⁴“Influential Baptist Theologian James Leo Garret Jr. dies at 94,” *The Christian Century* (February 24, 2020).

first, the Garrett method of methodical and careful scholarship, as well as receiving a challenging (and encouraging) push toward excellence in researching Baptist theology for the glory of God and his church. In addition to the gift of his student as my professor, I read *Baptist Theology* as soon as it was published. Having access to Garrett's magnum opus is better than having one seminar with him. I consult it regularly and it became the standard text I used when teaching the Baptist theologians Ph.D. seminar at Southwestern and in the new "Baptist Tradition" Ph.D. seminar I started when I arrived at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and continue to teach today. Therein, a new generation of students are meeting James Leo Garrett Jr. and are finding him standing at the door of the room labeled "The Baptist Tradition" and welcoming them as friends, to enter. For as C. S. Lewis said, in that room, there are fires and chairs and meals—good gifts of instruction and help for twenty-first century Baptists.

