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James Leo Garrett Jr. and the
Southwestern Theological Tradition



LESSONS JAMES LEO GARRETT TAUGHT ME ABOUT LIFE, SCHOLARSHIP, AND THEOLOGY

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Several professors and scholars have positively influenced my life. Among those that must be named are former Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary professors John Newport, Steve Lemke, Bert Dominy, Millard Erickson, Tommy Lea, and Curtis Vaughan, as well as others beyond Southwestern like Tom Wright, Alister McGrath, Gary Habermas—and quite unexpectedly—John Dominic Crossan. But nobody has been as instrumental in my life as a student and professor as James Leo Garrett Jr.

God used Garrett to change the course of my life. When I began my studies at Southwestern in 1986, I had no intention of earning a doctorate of any sort, much less becoming a professor. Garrett's impact on me was a major influence in redirecting my perception of God's plan for my life. I first met Garrett at a party for the staff of Roberts Library of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, which I attended because my wife, Marilyn, worked with his wife, Myrta, in the serials department of the library. I recall several student workers whispering as they spoke of him as if in awe. After he introduced himself to me, I found myself wondering why they were seemingly so intimidated by such a sweet man. At that point, I had yet to take a course with him. I would soon learn the reason.

Gentleman is a word that comes to mind when thinking of Garrett. One lesson Garrett taught me is that you can retain your convictions without having to destroy those whose convictions differ from your own. On Wednesday morning, March 9, 1994, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Russell Dilday was fired by

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the trustees of the seminary. The attitude of most of the students and faculty was one of anger and dismay. Some, however, were jubilant and triumphant. Nobody seemed to have moderate feelings on the matter. I remember well Garrett's message to us that afternoon in our Ph.D. seminar on the theology of Augustine. He said that it was a moment of profound grief for him and encouraged us to trust in God. Then he put his head in his hands and began to weep. No anger, no triumphalism, no attacks on anyone's character. We prayed together and then left because at that point none of us was emotionally capable of spending three hours discussing Augustinian theology. This depth of character and well of concern coupled with his refusal to attack anyone regardless of their position on a controversial matter led to Garrett being held in high esteem by those on both sides of our denominational controversy.

Garrett believed in me before I believed in myself. He caught me off guard when he called me aside on the final day of my systematic theology course and offered me the opportunity to grade for him. Perhaps no student in the history of Southwestern was ever more overjoyed to enter a period of indentured servitude. Observing how he went about the task of Christian scholarship and instruction was a blessing for which I will forever be grateful to God.

Another lesson he taught me was that you should not separate academics from discipleship. A revealing memory I have from my time as his grader is of him calling me into his office and telling me how disappointed he was with how one of his theology classes had performed on a midterm exam. It was as though he held himself responsible for their poor performance. He understood his role as a professor as one of academic discipleship. I was stunned when he asked my advice as to how he could responsibly bring their grades up on the final, and extremely pleased when he considered a suggestion of mine and adapted the final exam to implement it. His primary concern was to teach to the best of his ability, not to lord it over lowly students. This brings to mind 2 Timothy 2:2, where Paul states: "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." In that one verse there are four generations of believers:

Generation 1: Paul

Generation 2: Timothy (and others)

Generation 3: The faithful men Timothy would teach, and
Generation 4: Timothy's disciples who would teach others.

I am always pleased when I see my former students teaching, publishing, or presenting in academic conferences, in addition to ministering to and through the local church. A scholar's legacy is not only written in books and articles, it is also passed on through the lives of his students. If a professor's work is only inscribed in literature, it has been aborted. It must be passed on and incarnated in the lives of those he taught.

Reflecting on those days when I first began to think that perhaps God was leading me to pursue a doctorate, I recall being not only surprised to find myself at such a point—when I came to Southwestern, I had no intention of doing so—but also lacking confidence that I would be able to complete the course. My journey into and through the program was thus a pilgrimage that proceeded in one-step increments. I told myself that I would take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), and if I didn't make the required score, that would be a word from God that I should not pursue a doctoral degree. I would take the entrance exam, and if I were not accepted, then I would know that God had other plans for my life. Step-by-step I traveled through the process. Each step of the way was one of faith. Yet my faith was mingled with doubt. Some might find it odd to read of faith mingled with doubt, but doubt is not the opposite of faith; unbelief is the opposite of faith. My doubt was not in God—I knew that if God were calling me into the doctoral program, then he would sustain me in it. My doubt was in myself; I feared that it was my flesh, working through my pride that was driving me where God was not leading me. Ultimately, the reason that I applied for admittance into the program in the first place was that as a result of studying with Leo Garrett I came home every day from class eager to read more and to study theology more deeply. Eventually, I realized that I would be reading the same books and studying the same topics even if I were not a Ph.D. student. I also came to realize that a doctorate in theology was not the goal of my life and ministry, but rather the means by which I would conduct my ministry and seek to glorify God. Such was the impact that James Leo Garrett, Jr. had on my life; with or without a terminal degree I knew that for the rest of my life I would be a student of theology.

Professor Garrett reinforced in my life the importance of the local church. Too many scholars are prone to isolation; they insulate themselves from the outside world, even from the local church. Such was never Garrett's practice. At heart he was a true Baptist, and as a Baptist he was committed to the local church in practice as well as in theory. For Garrett the local church was the instrument through which God would change the world by making disciples and sending out ministers and missionaries to fulfill our Lord's Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). So I was not overly surprised when in 1995, over lunch at an associational Sunday School training conference, he informed me that he and Myrta were now part of a church plant led by a pastor ten years *my* junior. He shared excitedly about the joy he received from teaching a Bible study for young couples. For this reason and more it was appropriate that the festschrift for him—edited by Paul Basden and David S. Dockery, is entitled *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church*.¹ Simply put, Garrett believed that to be a Baptist scholar one must be active in a local church, not simply affirm the local church in one's theology of the church.

For all these reasons and many more, I owe a debt to Garrett that I hope to repay in part through my own teaching ministry. God willing, this article will be one small payment on that debt. These are some of the life lessons that Garrett taught me, but he also taught me much about how to conduct a ministry of scholarship. Allow me to share some of those lessons.

I. READ THE PRIMARY SOURCES

Every student in every class taught by Garrett was challenged; they were also blessed. His knowledge of all the subjects on which he taught was voluminous and precise. When he lectured it seemed like he did not need to stop to catch his breath, hence his nickname of "Gatling Gun Garrett." But the feeling that I had as a student under him was not one of fear or intimidation but instead one of respect and inspiration. I remember a day in the course systematic theology 2 when a student asked a question that started with, "Didn't Calvin say...?" Garrett's answer to the student was, "I believe that I

¹Paul Basden and David S. Dockery, *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church* (Nashville: Broadman, 1991). A second festschrift in Garrett's honor was published in the spring 2006 issue of *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, the journal of the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion.

have read everything that John Calvin wrote, and I don't remember anything like that." I thought to myself, "You've read everything that John Calvin wrote?" It was an atmosphere of unrelenting precision and thoroughness that one breathed from studying with Garrett. Arguably the most difficult classes I had at Southwestern were with Garrett; there is no doubt, however, that his classes required the most reading. He believed that one had no right to write on a subject if one had not thoroughly read the primary sources in the field.

II. HISTORY MATTERS

One must not only read the relevant material, but one must also place it within the context of that particular writer's life and culture, as well as the broader historical context of Christian thought. Garrett consistently provided the life dates of those he referred to in parentheses. In this way, his two-volume *Systematic Theology* not only serves to situate doctrines into their respective categories, but also to place significant thinkers related to particular doctrines into their respective eras in the development of the doctrine being considered. In some ways Garrett's *Systematic* is as useful as a sourcebook, or starting point, for deeper research on a doctrine as it is as a systematic treatise.

III. EVERY DOCTRINE MUST BE TESTED AND SUPPORTED BY SCRIPTURE

All evangelical theologians give lip service to this truth, but this is easier done in theory than in practice—especially when the doctrine being discussed is one which tends to stir the emotions.

The question of the destiny of the unevangelized serves to offer an example of how he allowed the authority of Scripture to dictate how he would handle what is for many a controversial issue. Fair-minded scholars have taken differing positions on this question, some being inclined to soteriological exclusivism, others to inclusivism, and still others to universalism, to name only a few broad positions on a spectrum.² While respecting each person's right to hold one's own view on the matter, and seeking to understand their reasons

²For a more extensive, though still not all-inclusive sampling of positions presently held on the matter, see Robert B. Stewart, "Can Only One Religion Be True? Surveying the Answers," in *Can Only One Religion Be True?: Paul Knitter and Harold Netland in Dialogue*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1-16.

for doing so, Garrett understood the matter as one of what the Bible permitted us to teach, and put it thus:

We have no permission to tell the Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu that he/she can be reconciled to God through a savior other than Jesus. We have no mandate to tell any human that the *Logos* for certain apart from any gospel story will eternally save him. . . . We have no right to say what God in his free and sovereign grace can or cannot do, or will or will not do, in freely bestowing and lavishing his grace. But our proclamation must be clear: Jesus is the only Savior of humanity!³

I recognize myself as somewhat of a theological amphibian in that I teach in two fields: philosophy and theology. As a class philosophers are prone to speculate about matters that Scripture does not directly address. For this reason, I am grateful for his commitment to biblical authority because I am regularly reminded that although philosophical speculation is often theologically profitable, it must never go against the clear teaching of the Bible.

But the clear teaching of Scripture only comes from good hermeneutical practices. Together, Garrett, John Newport, and Bert Dominy led me to see that hermeneutical questions were of fundamental importance in theology. My dissertation was on the intersection of contemporary hermeneutics and historical Jesus research.⁴ I investigated how the hermeneutical presuppositions of those searching for the historical Jesus influenced how they understood Jesus as a figure in history. I looked closely at the Jesus research of two very different scholars: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright. Both have written widely on hermeneutics and also on the historical Jesus. I asked a series of hermeneutical questions concerning the work of both men—and shared my answers with each of them to see if I accurately portrayed them—and found out that I did. My

³James Leo Garrett Jr., “Should Southern Baptists Adopt the Synod of Dort?” *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr. 1950–2015*, ed. Wyman Lewis Richardson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 2:191.

⁴Robert B. Stewart, *The Quest of the Hermeneutical Jesus: The Impact of Hermeneutics on the Jesus Research of John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008).

questions were: (1) What is a text? (2) What is the role of a reader? (3) What counts as a legitimate reading of a text? and (4) What is the relationship between Jesus and history? Then I traced out how their respective answers to those questions influenced their answers to a set of questions concerning Jesus: (1) Who did Jesus believe himself to be? (2) What was Jesus' message? (3) Why did Jesus die and was he raised from the dead? (4) What is the relationship between Jesus and the church? and (5) What is the relationship between Jesus and the Gospels?⁵

What was confirmed to me throughout this time was the fourth lesson that Garrett taught me—first, as a result of grading Cult Theology for him—and then when he turned that course over to me.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF WORLDVIEWS

1. *Theology is an exercise in worldview thinking.* Just as worldviews are fundamental to human life—they are like navels; everybody has one—worldviews are fundamental to the task of theology. Every worldview tells a story that is about each of us individually, all of us taken together, and life as a whole. Human beings are story-telling creatures. After serving as a pastor for over two decades, I never cease to be amazed at how quickly my sermon points are forgotten, yet how well stories about my family and personal experiences are remembered.

Worldview stories will answer five questions:⁶

- (1) Who am I?
- (2) Where am I?
- (3) What's wrong?
- (4) What's the solution?
- (5) What time is it (in the story the worldview is telling)?⁷

Note well: a supposed worldview that does not answer these questions is not a worldview, however much one would protest to the contrary.

⁵In actuality I posed six questions of Crossan and Wright concerning Jesus because question three (Why did Jesus die and was he raised from the dead?) is a compound question.

⁶N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 138, 467-72.

⁷The fifth question, "What time is it?" is not really a "what" question at all; it is a "where" question. But it is a where question that is asking for a chronological rather than a geographical location, i.e., that is asking, "Where in the flow of cosmic history, i.e., the worldview story, am I?" rather than "Where in the world am I?" or "What time does the clock say it is?" or "What is the date on the calendar?"

Christian theologians consider questions like these:

- Who is God, and what is God like (theology proper)?
- How should I understand the natural world (creation)?
- Who am I (anthropology)?
- What's wrong with the World (hamartiology)?
- Who is Jesus (person of Christ)?
- What did Jesus do (work of Christ)?
- Who is the Holy Spirit, and what does he do (pneumatology)?
- What does it mean to know God/be saved (soteriology)?
- How should I live in my faith community and the world (ecclesiology)?
- When and how will God ultimately fix what's wrong in the world (eschatology)?

2. *The task of the Christian theologian is to tell a story that weaves the answers to all these questions into a coherent whole.* Theologians should tell a story about God and creation (where am I?), about humanity (who am I?), about sin (what is wrong with the world?), about Christ, salvation, the Holy Spirit, and eschatology (what has God done, what is he doing, and what will he do to set the world right?), and do so in such a way that we can find our place, both historically and existentially, in God's story (what time is it?).

When theology is done without a concern for the big story that worldviews express, the result is a collection of disconnected scenes of theological content, but the story as a whole is unresolved and, at best, only partially satisfying. In fact, even when the pieces themselves are for the most part true, we are still left asking this question: "So what?" Meaning and purpose remain elusive apart from a worldview.

3. *There is also a symbolic aspect to worldviews.* Symbols capture our shared experience in a form that communicates the stories in a glance. Symbols need not be visual, although frequently they are. Symbols must, however, summarize the story, or key points in the story, and the answers to the questions that are supplied in the story, or at its most important moments, into a sign, a ritual, or a relevant expression. We communicate our most important beliefs through symbols.

For example, the ring on my left hand is a symbol that tells the world that I belong to my wife, Marilyn, and only to her, as long as we both are alive. This ring is not my marriage, but it reminds me, and informs anyone with eyes to see, that I am a married man living in a covenant relationship.

Understanding symbols should not be difficult for a culture in which everyone has a smart phone. We do not read through a list of titles of digital applications to use our phones; we simply glance at a screen populated with icons—symbols—that picture what the function of the respective app is. On Facebook we enjoy stories of significant events in the lives of our friends, such as births, weddings, graduations, promotions, and other milestones, by sifting through a series of pictures—symbols—that communicate the essence of these events in a glance.

Jesus gave his disciples two monumentally important symbols in the Lord's Supper and Baptism—rituals that communicate the heart of the Christian story, crucifixion, and resurrection—in visual rather than verbal form.

4. *The doctrine of the atonement is an ideal theological subject to demonstrate what I mean.* For Christians, the cross is, after all, the crux of the matter (no pun intended). But doesn't the fact that the cross is at the center of the Christian story seem, if I may say so, a bit odd?

Does it not seem odd that Paul came to Corinth resolved not to preach the greatness of God, or the law of God, or even the love of God, but rather the crucifixion of Jesus, a messianic claimant who had been brutally killed like so many other "messiahs" before him? Does it not seem odd that near the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "For what I received I passed on to you *as of first importance*: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures"?⁸ What of the sort of death that Jesus died? Crucifixion, one of the lowest forms of death in the ancient Greco-Roman world—so low that Roman citizens were almost never crucified!⁹ Crucifixion was

⁸1 Corinthians 15:3. Emphasis added. Many have thought that this section is a creed, or ecclesial formula of the early church. If this is the case, then the oddness of the claim is heightened even more by the fact that the early church from the first proclaimed the death of their leader.

⁹Cicero refers to a Roman citizen, one Publius Gavius, being crucified by Verres in *In Verrem* 2.5.63. The fact that this is mentioned in a speech by Cicero against Verres at the trial of Verres indicates that it possibly was illegal. (Any conclusions drawn from this must be made with the awareness that Cicero was the consummate politician.) Thanks to Simon Gathercole for pointing

a notoriously inefficient form of execution, nevertheless it was a powerfully effective form of intimidation. Not only did victims of crucifixion die a humiliating and excruciating death, they were frequently denied a proper burial.¹⁰ In a culture where the majority of the religions had strict guidelines for what to do with a body after death, it was Rome's way of saying, "not only can we kill you in a very dehumanizing fashion, we can also ruin your hereafter." Crucifixion was in effect a declaration: "You may choose your preferred deity but remember this: Caesar is Lord!" Yet Jesus turned this declaration on its head by dying on a cross and then rising from the dead, as if to say, "Is that the worst you can do?" As a result, his disciples boldly proclaimed that Jesus, not Caesar, was Lord by celebrating his crucifixion! Does that not seem odd?

Does it not seem odd that the *earliest apostolic teaching on the atonement was performative, rather than propositional*? Simply put, Jesus's earliest disciples were engaging in atonement theology every time they took the Lord's Supper.

Before any of the Gospels were written, before any book of the New Testament was penned, even before Paul's Damascus Road experience, Christians regularly met and engaged in a ritual meal filled with atonement metaphors. Furthermore, if one takes the breaking of bread mentioned in Acts 2:42 and 46 to be references to the Lord's Supper, then Luke tied the presence and power of the Spirit to the Eucharist equally as much as he did the Spirit's power to apostolic teaching and conversions. The Lord's Supper was practiced from the birth of the Church.

Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 11:23, Paul stresses that he and Jesus taught the same thing concerning the meal, when he states: "I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you . . ." ¹¹ Perhaps, then, the place to start in understanding the atonement is

me to this outlier.

¹⁰For an informative essay on post-crucifixion burial of Jews being a somewhat frequent exception, see Craig A. Evans, "Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right," in *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature—A Response to Bart D. Ehrman*, ed. Michael F. Bird (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 71-93. It is not insignificant that for Jews crucifixion, dying on a tree, was enough to curse the victim (Deut 21:22-23; Gal 3:13).

¹¹There is a disagreement over whether or not the words, "I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you," mean that Paul had some direct revelation concerning the Lord's Supper or whether he meant that Jesus taught Peter and others this, and then they instructed Paul. In either case, Jesus would be the authoritative source of the teaching.

the Lord's Supper, the worldview symbol that Jesus gave us.¹²

Disconnected from the Lord's Supper, reflection on the atonement easily falls into the trap of dueling theories. Theories may be useful as heuristic devices so long as we remember that they are shorthand terms for ease of reference, not first-order theological statements. We should never make the mistake of thinking that arriving at the meaning of Christ's death is a simple matter of comparing, contrasting, and choosing between "theories," like choosing one flavor out of many at an ice cream shop.¹³ To my knowledge, no pre-enlightenment theologian ever spoke of his teaching on the cross as a "theory." Instead, they professed what they understood Scripture to teach concerning the significance of Jesus's death.

The theology present in the Lord's Supper may have been the reason that the early church, to say nothing of the earliest church, apparently thought that the work of Christ was clear but that the person of Christ was mysterious! Council after council addressed the Son's nature and constitution, yet no ecumenical council dealt primarily with Christ's work. Perhaps the reason the Fathers did not address the work of Christ was not because they were clear on it but rather that there simply was not much controversy where it was concerned. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and they celebrated Christ's reconciling work in the practice of the Lord's Supper.

At the end of the day, when we consider the cross of Jesus, we are faced with a mystery that is too great to be fully comprehended but one that may be apprehended.¹⁴ We cannot entirely understand what God has done for us through the cross because of our human limitations. Such a thing is to be expected, however; why should we expect fully to comprehend what God does when we know that we cannot understand fully who God is?¹⁵

¹²For a significantly fuller development of the ideas presented in this essay, see N. T. Wright, Simon Gathercole, and Robert B. Stewart, *What Did the Cross Accomplish? A Conversation about the Atonement* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 1-19.

¹³A systematic theology text that is limited in terms of space must survey theories of both the atonement and the Lord's Supper rather than holistically present them. This is understandable given the introductory nature of a systematic theology course. For a brief annotated bibliography of works on the atonement see Wright, *What Did the Cross Accomplish?*, 91-102.

¹⁴Comprehension is understanding a matter in detail. Apprehension is simply to understand that a matter is true. It is the difference between understanding how and that.

¹⁵Here I am affirming something consistent with Calvin's idea of divine condescension. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke, 1962),

The Lord's Supper prompts Jesus's disciples to reflect on the cross, where we see both God's holiness and his love. At the cross, God's glory and grace meet. Perhaps what we need most is not comprehension but rather participation in this glorious ritual that Jesus gave us. At least I know this: when I take the Eucharist, I am truly grateful. Perhaps the best response is not theology, but rather doxology. Maybe Isaac Watts's classic hymn says best where our doctrine of the atonement should end.

When I survey the wondrous cross
 On which the Prince of glory died,
 My richest gain I count but loss,
 And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
 Save in the death of Christ my God!
 All the vain things that charm me most,
 I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
 Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
 Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
 Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
 That were a present far too small;
 Love so amazing, so divine,
 Demands my soul, my life, my all.¹⁶



1.13.1.

¹⁶Watts simply says that awe, humility, and devotion are proper responses to the cross, which I cannot imagine any Christian denying.