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James Leo Garrett Jr. and the  
Southwestern Theological Tradition



## THE SOCIAL THEOLOGY AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF JAMES LEO GARRETT JR.

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To read James Leo Garrett's theology properly requires practice, for he was always careful to let others speak amply for themselves before he dared draw any conclusions. He is famous for telling his research doctoral seminar students, "Only when you can state your opponent's position so well that they themselves say, 'Yes, that's what I believe,' can you then begin to debate."<sup>1</sup> That sense of reserve characterized his entire *oeuvre*. Reserve extended from his rehearsal of the data into his conclusions about what he had discovered. Most, if not all, Christian doctrines garnered the interest of Garrett as a systematic theologian. However, these doctrines normally elicited only a chaste judgment from him, even after his herculean reviews of their biblical foundations and historical outworking. It is therefore noteworthy when certain doctrines animated "the dean of Southern Baptist theologians,"<sup>2</sup> either eliciting strong statements of affirmation or, even more uncharacteristically, denunciation. His momentary flashes of passion are, therefore, especially noteworthy.

In this essay, we highlight one of those rare areas of emphatic doctrinal declaration. His contributions from the 1960s through the 1980s to the larger arena of society and the narrower field of politics have not been reviewed prior to now. But Garrett's thoughts about these aspects of practical theology are worthy of our recollection, precisely because his interactions elicited flashes of passion from this most careful and generous theologian. In this essay, we shall examine Garrett's social theology and political theology. To meet this larger

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<sup>1</sup>Via the recollection of Christopher Bart Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church of Farmersville, Texas, and president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

<sup>2</sup>"Influential Baptist theologian James Leo Garrett Jr. dies at 94," *The Christian Century* (February 24, 2020).

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objective, we must consider his teachings on evangelism, on social involvement, on human welfare, on the image of God, on the human conscience, on the liberty of conscience, on the separation of church and state, and on religious freedom.

Garrett was thorough in his research of the various loci which make up the systematic theologian's task. He crafted and followed a method which has proven itself as the appropriate theological procedure for Christians seeking a biblically grounded, historically informed, and evangelically focused result in today's world. Most often Garrett first abridged the Bible's teaching on his subject with reference to its history and grammar in the context of the whole canon. Second, he surveyed major commentators and controversies in Christian history regarding various interpretations of the Bible's teaching in this area. Finally, he summarized his analyses, perhaps offering a brief judgment. While pursuing this approach with certain social and political issues, Garrett pushed the boundaries of his typical restraint in judgment. The motivating issue for Garrett concerned the way in which Christians treat human beings in society and politics. His motivation was sharpened through a crisis on a mission trip.

### I. PERSONAL CRISIS

As many have noted, Garrett was a most humble and gentle theologian and churchman. The ground for this character was laid at his conversion, but a profound crisis of conscience prompted him to turn increasingly outward and consider the welfare of his fellow human beings. His little work, "Recovering My Priesthood," published in the *Home Missions* magazine in 1965, reveals a new resolve to develop a compassionate understanding of humanity. First, he studied Scripture and recalled the universality of the Christian priesthood. Second, he was challenged to shift from a modern individualistic understanding to a corporate understanding of that doctrine in his study of the relevant biblical texts.

But "a third and more crucial issue confronted me," he said. Traveling to "one of our most developed Baptist mission fields," he found the believers there ill-equipped to deal with the grave social issues facing their agrarian society.<sup>3</sup> Their struggles prompted his

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<sup>3</sup>I have not established this yet, but he may have been referring to Nagaland in India. He once

question, “Had I cared enough and loved sacrificially? Had I offered spiritual sacrifices of devotion and sealed my witness for my Lord with deeds of mercy and compassion?” He next found himself in the United States Capitol, witnessing preparations for a “massive march for civil rights.” He, therefore, also began to question whether he was doing enough to address racism. Upon return to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and his home church, he was again confronted with the need not merely to think, but to act for others through his pastor’s sermon and through a faculty colleague’s exemplary concern for the poor of that city.

Garrett addressed the problem of racism in the Southern Baptist Convention most powerfully through his theological lectures, but he also addressed the dominant culture’s continuing challenge to orthodox anthropology through displaying personal and professional courage in a daunting environment. He stood boldly with several other professors and received Martin Luther King Jr. at the Louisville seminary. He supported King in spite of their seminary president’s warning that the professors’ actions would cost the seminary thousands of dollars, in spite of controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention, and in spite of security concerns seen visibly in the police presence guarding King.<sup>4</sup> In his systematic lectures, typically capped by doctrinal subtlety, Garrett became quite frank and roundly condemned southern white interpretations of the curse of Cain, the curse of Ham, and the confusion of tongues in Scripture: “Such exegesis of texts in early Genesis in behalf of racism stands as a model of genuine eisegesis, or the reading into the text one’s presuppositions, biases, and prejudices, instead of reading out of the text its intended meaning.”<sup>5</sup>

James Leo Garrett Jr.’s heart’s desire became not only to teach Christian doctrine but to live out that doctrine in his life. “Such deeds were demonstrations of faith that issued in love, of love that was not limited to words, of service to ‘one of the least of these my brethren.’”<sup>6</sup> When he began to share with me his desire for me to

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glowed with love for those Baptist people in a conversation about the success of the Baptist witness there.

<sup>4</sup>Jeff Hood, *Love Remains: Prophetic Writings* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 77.

<sup>5</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (2 vols.; North Richland Hills, TX: Bibal, 2000), 1:482.

<sup>6</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., “Recovering My Priesthood,” *Home Missions* (February 1965): 15. This

speaking at his funeral and to dwell upon his life as an academic, he handed me the original manuscript for this very article. Garrett learned through his study of Scripture and through the providential arrangement of his life that faith must be demonstrated in love. The universal priesthood of all believers calls for spiritual sacrifices. “Our highest priestly function is the bearing of the burdens of our broken, oppressed, and suffering brethren.”<sup>7</sup> Loving others is integral to true Christian faith, and this ought not be confused with the dreaded “social gospel.”

## II. SOCIAL THEOLOGY

Because of his transformation while serving at Southern Seminary, Garrett began to address Baptist involvement in social issues. For instance, he felt led to evaluate the fraught relationship between “two aspects of the mission of the Christian *ecclesia*.” The correlation between Christian evangelism and Christian social involvement had reached a “critical” and “acute” point by 1970.<sup>8</sup> For many Christians at the time, these two aspects seemed to exist as “either/or tendencies.” On the one side some took the stance of “only evangelism.” On the other side some advocated “only social involvement.” After evaluating biblical guidelines, Garrett provided six arguments favoring each position followed by three warnings against each position. His warnings against tendencies within his own denomination included reminders that saving souls “must mean the total lives of human beings,” that evangelism should be followed by “instruction, nurture, worship,” etc., and that “the primacy of evangelism does not necessarily preclude Christian helping ministries or Christian action for social change.”<sup>9</sup>

Attempting to bring theological clarity to his Christian readers, Garrett rehearsed the biblical witness regarding the necessity for both evangelism and social action. For instance, the prophets of the Old Testament preached against the evils of idolatry “but also against the

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essay is scheduled to be published in the eighth volume of Garrett’s *Collected Writings*. Five of the volumes of Garrett’s miscellaneous essays have been published to date. *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr. 1950-2015*, ed. Wyman Lewis Richardson (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2017-) [herein *Collected Writings*].

<sup>7</sup>Garrett, “Recovering My Priesthood,” 14.

<sup>8</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., “Evangelism and Social Involvement,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 12 (1970): 51.

<sup>9</sup>Garrett, “Evangelism and Social Involvement,” 58-59.

exploitation of the poor, dishonesty in business practices, and selfish luxury.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus defined his own coming in two ways: first, “not to be served but to serve,” and second, “to give his life for the ransom of many” (Mark 10:45). The disciples of Jesus are called to teach everything Jesus commanded, including his social teachings (Matt 28:19-20).<sup>11</sup> As for the apostles, they declared Christian ministry includes not merely the proclamation of the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection but also “good deeds” (1 Pet 2:12), “making peace” (Eph 2:15), “lay[ing] down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16-17), and “to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (Jam 1:27).<sup>12</sup>

After moving to Baylor University in 1973, Garrett addressed the church relations advisory group of the Texas Department of Public Welfare. He carefully rehearsed the biblical requirements for advancing “human welfare.” “The Old Testament is quite specific in its commandments and provisions concerning the less privileged in Hebrew society.”<sup>13</sup> He pointed to the general commands for love of family and neighbor (Prov 17:17; Lev 19:18) as well as specific commands to liberate and provide for slaves (Exod 21:2; Deut 15:12-18) and to care for widows and orphans (Exod 22:22-24). Aliens from other lands are “not to be oppressed” (Exod 22:21; 23:9), and the poor are to be protected from perverse justice (Ex 23:6) and perverse lending practices (Exod 22:25; Deut 14:7-11). The poor are, moreover, supposed to be enabled by landowners to procure provision for their basic needs through allowing access to fallow fields (Deut 14:28-29).<sup>14</sup>

“Early Christianity had an even more acute sense of neighbor love and compassion for the weak, the physically handicapped, and the less privileged in society.”<sup>15</sup> Garrett noted that Jesus engaged in the ministry of healing as well as teaching. Moreover, Jesus elevated the old covenant command to love one’s neighbor to second place

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<sup>10</sup>Garrett, “Evangelism and Social Involvement,” 54.

<sup>11</sup>He also noted that the prophecies of Isaiah concerning the coming Messiah focused upon his bringing justice to and liberation for the oppressed (Isa 42:1-4; 60:1-3). Garrett, “Evangelism and Social Involvement,” 55.

<sup>12</sup>Garrett, “Evangelism and Social Involvement,” 55-56.

<sup>13</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., “State, Church, and Human Welfare” (Austin, Texas, 12 January 1977), 5. This address is scheduled to be published in volume 8 of Garrett’s *Collected Works*. Thanks to Wyman Richardson for providing a manuscript copy.

<sup>14</sup>Garrett, “State, Church, and Human Welfare,” 5-6.

<sup>15</sup>Garrett, “State, Church, and Human Welfare,” 6.

among the commandments (Mark 12:28-34). Jesus then gave his own life and called his disciples to do the same (Mark 8:31; John 15:12-13). The love of his disciples for one another was declared their hallmark (John 13:34-35), and the early church took this call seriously through such activities as the voluntary communion of possessions (Acts 2:44-45), the election of seven to serve the widows of the congregation (Acts 6:1-6), as well as the establishment of a male and a female diaconate focused on “ministering, service” (1 Tim 3:8-13; Rom 16:1-2).

Garrett did not merely review the biblical case for social involvement in the pursuit of human welfare. He also summarized the rich history of Christians providing for others. With its Christianizing, the Roman Empire began the promulgation of laws which aided the difficult lives of people. And in the long run, Christianity prompted Western civilization in “the amelioration and ultimate abolition of slavery; improved conditions for laboring people; the upgrading of the role and rights of women; the rejection of infanticide and cruelty to children; the abhorrence of suicide; the care of the hungry, the homeless, the naked, the prisoner, and the refugee; hospitals for the sick; orphanages; institutions for the insane; homes for the aged; and the just war theory.”<sup>16</sup> Garrett was convinced by Scripture and history that Christians must show acute concern for human welfare.

Garrett also provided several definitions to clarify the debate over the relationship between evangelism and social involvement. “Evangelism” means “Christians bearing witness to the good news of God’s action in man’s behalf in Jesus Christ.” Evangelism should not be equated with “high pressure salesmanship” or coercion. On the other hand, neither should evangelism be equated with “any Christian deed, duty, or action in behalf of others.”<sup>17</sup> “Social involvement” means “Christians individually or corporately operative in human society (or outside the churches) for the purpose of human good or well-being.” There are two kinds of social involvement: First, “diakonal service” includes “Christian ministries of helping” such as “healing, caring, sharing, etc.” that result in such active institutions as hospitals, orphanages, and schools. The second kind of social involvement, “social action,” seeks to “change the patterns or structures of

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<sup>16</sup>Garrett, “State, Church, and Human Welfare,” 7-8.

<sup>17</sup>Garrett, “Evangelism and Social Involvement,” 56.

the political, economic, or social order so that these may conform more fully to what they understand to be the good and well-being of mankind in the light of the purpose of God.” Examples of social action include the revivalist-inspired social reforms of the nineteenth century and the civil rights movement of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

Southern Baptists’ foremost systematic theologian concluded that evangelism and social involvement are “not contradictory” but “complementary.” He noted three probable consequences of neglecting evangelism, including “a decadent, and ultimately dying, church.”<sup>19</sup> He then identified three probable consequences if Christians neglect social involvement, including “the absence of clear and palpable evidence that Christians really do love their fellow men in all circumstances and conditions with the love that they claim to have received from their Lord and Saviour.”<sup>20</sup> He continues, “Today’s need is for both evangelism and the social involvement of Christians, i.e., helping ministries and societal change. Christians must engage both in proclamation by word and enactment by deed.”<sup>21</sup> The social theology advocated by James Leo Garrett Jr. was grounded in Scripture and history and manifested itself in personal conviction through public proclamation.

### III. UNDERDEVELOPED ANTHROPOLOGY

If there is a weakness in Garrett’s theologies of society and politics, I would argue it resides in his underdeveloped theological anthropology. Examples of his relatively thin formal doctrine of humanity can be seen in two important areas, primarily in his doctrine of the image of God but also in his doctrine of the human conscience. Although Garrett noted the importance of “liberty of conscience” in the Baptist tradition, he did not dig a foundation for the doctrine of the conscience in his systematic theology. Scattered though incomplete references to the human conscience in his first *magnum opus* can be found in his discussions of general revelation,<sup>22</sup> the image of God, and the knowledge of sin.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Garrett, “Evangelism and Social Involvement,” 56-57.

<sup>19</sup>Garrett, “Evangelism and Social Involvement,” 60-61.

<sup>20</sup>Garrett, “Evangelism and Social Involvement,” 61.

<sup>21</sup>Garrett, “Evangelism and Social Involvement,” 61.

<sup>22</sup>Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:51-58.

<sup>23</sup>Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:576-80.



This critique should not be taken as an argument even hinting that Garrett somehow lacked a sensitive conscience. God forbid that that idea would ever be ascribed to such a highly conscientious human being. Rather, we are concerned about what he failed to formalize in his systematic corpus, not with what he did in his life. Much can be known about a man not only by the words he writes in his major works, but also by the admiration he holds for others in scattered writings. Unlike some scholars I have known, who carelessly exalt unsavory thinkers, Garrett chose to write biographies about and provide responses to particularly virtuous and courageous people. For instance, he had this to conclude about the Russian dissident Aleksandr Isaiyevich Solzhenitsyn, “But that Solzhenitsyn is a major witness against the oppressive totalitarian state and for the morality of conscience and the freedom and worth of human beings is seemingly beyond dispute.”<sup>24</sup>

Garrett also highly respected Joseph Martin Dawson. Dawson was ordained by Benajah Harvey Carroll, who charged his successor at the First Baptist Church of Waco to “know your flock and never let anything come between you and the least one, or the most powerful one of them.”<sup>25</sup> Dawson took Carroll’s ordination charge to be concerned for each person in his care quite seriously. Dawson was one of the few Southern Baptist pastors to stand publicly and squarely against the lynching of African Americans in the early twentieth century. Dawson later founded the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, where he boldly advocated for the separation of church and state, defended religious liberty, and was a highly visible “spokesman-activist for social justice.”<sup>26</sup> Garrett concluded his review of Dawson’s life and legacy with an uncharacteristically vigorous affirmation: “Joseph Martin Dawson, pastor-preacher, author-editor, denominational leader with far-reaching fraternal relationships, and prophet and activist for social justice, was a man of God for his time and indeed ahead of his time.”<sup>27</sup> I am not aware Garrett ever referred so positively to another Christian with the weighty biblical

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<sup>24</sup>Garrett, “Solzhenitsyn: Literary Prophet for the Human Conscience,” in *Collected Writings*, 5:98.

<sup>25</sup>Garrett, “Joseph Martin Dawson: Pastor, Author, Denominational Leader, Social Activist,” in *Collected Writings*, 5:101.

<sup>26</sup>Garrett, *Collected Writings*, 5:107-9.

<sup>27</sup>Garrett, *Collected Writings*, 5:110.

term, “prophet.” Garrett was delighted to serve as director of the J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University.

It is fascinating that, although his theological mentor at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, W. T. Conner, developed the aspects of the human person being made in the image of God, Garrett discounts Conner’s doctrine. Conner believed the image of God could be seen in certain capacities which human beings retain even after sin. These include “intelligence,” “freedom,” “rational affection,” “conscience,” and “a spiritual affinity for God.” Garrett responded that Conner’s doctrine “appears to be incompatible with the Pauline texts relative to the *imago Dei*, which uniformly presuppose that the image must be renewed or restored.”<sup>28</sup>

With deference, I would challenge my mentor to recall the Genesis texts after chapter 3 indicate the *imago Dei* continued. The image was conveyed by human generation (Gen 5:1-3), and penalty came upon those who “shed man’s blood,” because God made them in his image (Gen 9:6). Moreover, the terms “renew” and “restore” imply a continuing existence of some nature. Conner’s doctrine might also have provided Garrett with the substantial core for the high anthropology Garrett himself manifested.<sup>29</sup> While Garrett does not provide a clear definition of the human conscience, he does believe the doctrine results in several “implications,” succinctly described as “the uniqueness, accountability, and worth of human beings.”<sup>30</sup>

Despite the merely suggestive nature of his doctrine of the image of God and its corollary in the human conscience, a high anthropology is suggested in, among other places, Garrett’s review of the literature of religious freedom in his 1976 Day-Higginbotham lectures. In these lectures presented before the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Garrett summarily defined “religious liberty” with reference to the conscience. “Religious liberty” is, according to his 1964 definition, “freedom of conscience in the full exercise of religious faith and practice.”<sup>31</sup> Finally, Garrett recognized a substantial view of

<sup>28</sup>Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:460-61.

<sup>29</sup>Garrett wrote his first dissertation on the theology of Walter Thomas Conner.

<sup>30</sup>Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:464. He concluded systematically that there are three implications of the image of God: “human beings as religious beings, human beings as valuable to God,” and “human beings as never permanently satisfied with any of the reductionist views of humankind.” Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:465-67.

<sup>31</sup>Garrett, “Religious Liberty, Vatican Council II, and Baptists,” *Review and Expositor*, 175.

the divine image was an important, even if by his reckoning minor, strain in the Baptist understanding of humanity during his 1995 review of Baptist “emphases.”<sup>32</sup>

While I may criticize my own theological mentor for not following his mentor into a fuller definition of the *imago Dei*, and while I will propose a fuller doctrine of conscience in my own forthcoming systematic theology, my criticism is friendly. This is because, despite his meager formal treatment of theological anthropology, an underlying strength in his view of humanity compelled him to speak forthrightly, indeed courageously. This truth leaps out when one considers how he chose to address such “hot topics” as social justice and racism, as we have already seen, to a fairly conservative evangelical, American, and southern cultural audience. We must laud Garrett’s continual manifestation of a deep respect for his fellow human beings.

Moreover, Garrett’s underdeveloped anthropology was, to a great extent, offset by his unusual emphases upon other important dogmatic loci. As Paul A. Basden indicated, “Garrett treats in detail some topics not discussed by earlier systematic theologians, for example, discipleship, stewardship, prayer, and missions.”<sup>33</sup> These examples show that Garrett was already pushing the boundaries of theology toward discipleship and ethics, and that his ethics were not merely personal but corporate. That Garrett did not develop a full theological anthropology which might have assisted his entire audience toward reclaiming the necessary coalescence of evangelism with social involvement speaks more to his foresight regarding what his audience needed than to any improper desire on his part.

Garrett likely did not sense a need to develop a fuller anthropology because he moved directly from a divine ontology and economy of love to the human economy of responsive love. Although Garrett bypassed human ontology in his doctrine of love, Garrett treated people with love via an appeal to the very nature of God. In an important essay on divine love, he argued first that God is love. Second, God acts in love, not only in creation and providence but supremely in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Third, due to his divine nature and divine activity, God requires responses of

<sup>32</sup>Garrett, “Major Emphases in Baptist Theology,” *Collected Writings*, 1:51n.

<sup>33</sup>Paul A. Basden, “James Leo Garrett, Jr. (1935-): Theology,” in *The Legacy of Southwestern: Writings that Shaped a Tradition* (North Richland Hills, TX: Smithfield Press, 2002), 142.

love from his people.<sup>34</sup> Garrett's deep respect for other people was thus directly grounded in the nature and activity of the God of the Bible. We believe the application of Garrett's divine ontology to human ontology through a Trinitarian definition of the *imago Dei* and the human conscience will prove helpful. Nevertheless, Garrett's underdeveloped anthropology did not keep him from developing deep respect for other human beings. That deep respect manifested itself not only in his social theology but also in his careful political theology.

#### IV. POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Garrett's political theology may be considered distinct from yet a subcategory within his social theology. It will be remembered that social theology has to do with Christian involvement in many forms of ministry to human beings for their welfare, whether those activities are classified as "diakonal service" or as "social action." In his political theology, Garrett was primarily concerned with how the Christian and the church relate to the state. Political theology is thus one aspect of social action. Garrett laid the foundations for his political theology in a review of Scripture and history. On that basis, he constructed a political theology which emphasized religious liberty and appreciated the formal separation of the church from the state.

In an essay entitled, "Foundations for Christian Citizenship," Garrett listed 30 truths which enable us "to understand our role as Christians in the civic order today."<sup>35</sup> Ten of these lessons were derived from the Old Testament, ten from the New Testament, and ten from Christian history. Among the most fascinating of his findings from the Old Testament were that "Israel was a people in covenant with the Lord (Yahweh) before it was a nation in a governmental or political sense," that "Israel did not deify its kings," and that the prophets "protested social injustice and called for righteousness in society."

In his synopsis of the New Testament's political theology, Garrett detected that Jesus "turned away from an earthly, political messiahship and kingdom" in his earthly ministry, that Jesus was "tried and put to death under both Jewish and Roman authorities," and

<sup>34</sup>Garrett, "God's Loving-Giving Nature," in *Collected Writings*, 4:15-26.

<sup>35</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., "Foundations for Christian Citizenship: Understanding Our Role as Christians," *Baptist Standard* (December 8, 1982): 14.

that “the central conflict portrayed in the apocalypse was/is/will be between the religious and the political.” In the historical section, he noted that the Anabaptists “formed congregations apart from the political structures,” that “religious freedom for all men” was advocated among Christians primarily by theologians affiliated with the believers’ churches, and that “Christians—both evangelicals and the advocates of the social gospel—have been in the vanguard of great societal reforms in the modern era.”<sup>36</sup>

Paralleling his move in social theology vis-à-vis the human conscience, Garrett was more concerned with religious liberty and the separation of church and state than with defining the liberty of the conscience. Of the three political doctrines emphasized most often by Baptists,<sup>37</sup> religious liberty remained most important for Garrett, because it is more central and may arise without the formal separation of church and state. He wrote in 1964 that religious freedom “to a considerably high degree may exist even where established churches still survive.”<sup>38</sup> He provided the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries as examples. History thus demonstrates that religious freedom could develop by degrees, even in states with official churches. Garrett discerned various “patterns or types of church-state relations” and was careful to avoid overstating the cases for and against each type.<sup>39</sup>

Despite his effective diminution of the doctrine of the separation of church and state, Garrett affirmed in his 1976 Day-Higginbotham Lectures it remains “the corollary of religious freedom.” Moreover, an institutional division between the state and the church “needs to be implemented wherever possible.”<sup>40</sup> During the 1970s, when Garrett directed the J. M. Dawson Institute, edited the prestigious *Journal of Church and State*, and served as religion professor at Baylor University, he reviewed numerous books regarding church-state

<sup>36</sup>Garrett, “Foundations for Christian Citizenship: Understanding Our Role as Christians,” 14-15.

<sup>37</sup>Liberty of conscience, religious freedom, and the separation of church and state.

<sup>38</sup>Garrett, “Religious Liberty, Vatican Council II, and Baptists,” 175.

<sup>39</sup>He listed four principal types: “the state’s domination of the church or churches,” “one church’s domination of the state and indeed of society,” “collaboration between an established church and the civil state,” and “a high degree of separation between the churches and the civil state with considerable freedom for each.” Sub-categories are needed, however, for the different types, including the last. Garrett, “State, Church, and Human Welfare,” 1-4.

<sup>40</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., “Religious Freedom: Why and How in Today’s World,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 18 (1976): 20.

issues. He also wrote a series of substantial editorials on civil religion, bureaucratic governmental regulation of the churches, and the “no ... establishment” and “free exercise” clauses of the Constitution of the United States.

For instance, Garrett examined the problem of the “privatization” of religion, which the American system may encourage. He admitted the problem exists, but he remained convinced that the separation of church and state was necessary for Baptists to advocate. The answer to the problem of privatization is not state support but active Christian love. Christians are called by Christ to be “salt” and “light” in the world. Their history of active social love, from Tertullian of Carthage to Walter Rauschenbusch to Martin Luther King Jr., demonstrates the continual need for Christians to engage fully in human society. Retreat into a voiceless ghetto is simply not an option. “Now, therefore, the very implication that religion as ‘private’ is to be detached or disengaged from society seems to deny the prophetic, society-changing role of the churches.”<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, as Christians strive to make a difference in society, they must take caution to remember the church’s separate nature and distinct purpose. The “undue interlocking” of government and religion should, therefore, be avoided. “Christians need clearly to differentiate the hand of Caesar, even when covered with the velvet glove of Washington bureaucracy, and the hand of Christ extended by those who believe in, love, and serve him.”<sup>42</sup> Garrett died less than a year before the tumult of January 6, 2021, in Washington DC. What might he have thought about seeing crosses advance on the Capitol building, or about hearing the name of Christ sung by protestors fighting police, or about watching politicians say they were there to “defend the Christian worldview”? A half century ago, Garrett argued for “the clear detection and resolute avoidance of the dangerous and maleficent form of what many identify as ‘civil religion.’”<sup>43</sup> The church of Jesus Christ must engage in “vital religion” rather than

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<sup>41</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., “Does Church-State Separation Necessarily Mean the Privatization of Religion?” *Journal of Church and State* 18 (1976): 216. Garrett provided a judicious and friendly review of Rauschenbusch in his second *magnum opus*. James Leo Garrett Jr., *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 314-18. While recognizing the social and political importance of King, he found the liberation theology of James Deotis Roberts the more substantial as well as “profound.” Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 612-16.

<sup>42</sup>Garrett, “Religious Freedom,” 22.

<sup>43</sup>Garrett, “Religious Freedom,” 22.

“civil religion.” And Christians must avoid “culture-religion on the one hand and exclusivist, other-worldly withdrawal on the other.” The way forward is serious “discipleship” to Jesus as Lord.<sup>44</sup>

We noted that the conscience and its liberty are muted in Garrett’s presentation, though they could perhaps have been drawn toward a fuller expression. We saw that church-state separation should be advocated but as a corollary and supportive doctrine rather than a central one. We should also note why and how religious liberty is central to Garrett’s formal political theology. Among the three “distinctives” or “emphases” to “which Baptists have borne a unique testimony,” the second is “religious freedom and the separation of church and state.”<sup>45</sup> Baptists “have deplored as evil the persecution of human beings for the sake of religion and have boldly advocated the principle of religious freedom, often called ‘soul freedom,’ not for themselves only but for all human beings.”<sup>46</sup>

Garrett first treated the doctrine of religious liberty from a biblical perspective during the eleventh congress of the Baptist World Alliance in 1965.<sup>47</sup> He added to those findings by comparing the teachings of Romans 13 with Revelation 13. His summary of the “dialectic” between the thirteenth chapter from Paul’s greatest epistle and the thirteenth chapter of John’s apocalypse may jolt those committed either to establishment or to revolution. Romans 13 and Revelation 13, he said, “afford distinctive emphases within the New Testament canon: the one of submission, obedience, taxation, respect, honor, and acceptance of the God-ordained and God-serving establishment and the other of the omniscient, Satanic, and persecuting state—now a beast or monster—that calls unto itself divine worship and is hostile to the Christians, although ultimately subject to the victory of Jesus Christ.” Christians should not assume one is relevant today and the other is not. “Both belong to the New Testament canon.” The “dialectical obligations of obedience and of disobedience” must

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<sup>44</sup>Garrett, “Religious Freedom,” 23.

<sup>45</sup>Garrett identified three “Baptist Distinctives or Emphases.” They are “congregations gathered around believer’s baptism by immersion,” “religious freedom and the separation of church and state,” and “evangelization and missions as the task of all churches and all Christians.” Garrett, “Major Emphases in Baptist Theology,” 61-65.

<sup>46</sup>Garrett, “Major Emphases in Baptist Theology,” 64-65.

<sup>47</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., “The Biblical Basis of Religious Liberty,” in *The Truth that Makes Men Free: Official Report of the Eleventh Congress, Baptist World Alliance*, ed. J. Nordenhaus (Nashville: Broadman, 1966).

be implemented today.<sup>48</sup>

In his 1976 Day-Higginbotham Lectures, Garrett reminded his listeners at Southwestern Seminary that when told by errant authorities “not to teach in this name [of Jesus],” the apostles responded, “We must obey God rather than men.” Indeed, those were the first words of the lecture: “We must obey God rather than men.” I have periodically drawn conviction from those same words when some overwrought authority sought to keep me from speaking the Word of God to whomever God the Father puts before me and however the Spirit leads me.

Garrett’s Southwestern Seminary lectures began by evaluating some 50 key theological documents written during the early modern period for the advocacy of religious toleration. First, he covered the witness from the time of Peter Chelcicky to that of Thomas Helwys. Next, he covered testimony from Roger Williams to the Second Vatican Council. Garrett distinguished religious toleration from religious freedom. “Religious toleration” allows religious dissent but not as a matter of principle. “Religious freedom” or “religious liberty” recognizes the final responsibility of each person to answer to God himself or herself. Especially noteworthy to Garrett in the first lecture were the writings of Sebastian Castellio, who challenged John Calvin’s defense of the execution of Michael Servetus: “To kill a man is not to defend a doctrine, but to kill a man.” After Castellio, Garrett lauded Thomas Helwys for issuing “the earliest appeal for universal religious liberty,” both in England and “indeed all Europe.”<sup>49</sup>

Noteworthy in the second lecture were the contributions of Roger Williams, the Anglo-American Baptist whom Garrett classified as of seminal importance alongside Helwys. Williams defined “conscience” as “a persuasion fixed in the minds and heart of a man, which enforceth him to judge . . . and to doe so and so, with respect to God; his worship, etc. This is found in all mankinde.” He also lauded William Penn, the Quaker, who defined “liberty of conscience” as freedom to worship as God persuades. Penn also noted, “Force may make a hypocrite; ‘it is faith grounded upon knowledge,

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<sup>48</sup>Garrett, “The Dialectic of Romans 13:1-7 and Revelation 13: Part Two,” *Journal of Church and State* 19:1 (1977): 20.

<sup>49</sup>See James Leo Garrett Jr., *Advocates of Religious Toleration and Freedom* (Fort Worth: Seminary Baptist Bookstore, 1978).



and consent, that makes a Christian.” While many traditionally laud John Locke for his contributions, Garrett was less than sanguine, noting the famous philosopher held to a “considerable, although limited, ‘toleration.’”<sup>50</sup>

In his third and final Day-Higginbotham Lecture of 1976, Garrett brought together his previous work in answers to why and how we should continually promote religious liberty. First and foremost, religious freedom was the practice of Jesus and the early church. Second, religious liberty is “an implication of the Christian faith.” Third, persecution for the sake of religion remains a problem around the world. Fourth, religious liberty includes “not only freedom of worship but also of witness, education, ministry, publication, and conversion.” Fifth, majority religions, sporadically including some Baptists, “tend to repress” minority religions. Sixth, we live in an increasingly connected world where “new ideas” will spread quickly. Seventh, the Christian mission is “generally able to thrive where religious freedom exists.” Finally, by advocating religious liberty, Christians demonstrate they are “truly dependent upon the gospel, the Bible, and the power, gifts, and leadership of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>51</sup> Garrett concluded his third lecture with six ways American Christians can advance Christian liberty. He focused primarily upon maintaining the separation of church and state, but he also noted that Christians should help Americans achieve political “consensus.”<sup>52</sup>

Garrett’s writings on social theology and political theology are replete with biblical depth, historical breadth, and immanent practicality. Even while contemporary readers will update his applications to fit an ever-changing cultural context, and while this student hopes to deepen his mentor’s dogmatic presentation of the *imago Dei*, the human conscience, and liberty of conscience, Garrett’s doctrines retain both validity and value. Garrett’s ruminations from Scripture and history about difficult matters in society and politics will offer sage guidance to Christ followers in the pulpit and in the pew who seek to remain faithful to Christ in our own deeply divided society with its own fractious political culture. James Leo Garrett Jr. retains the honor of being the premier writing systematic theologian in the

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<sup>50</sup>Garrett, *Advocates of Religious Toleration and Freedom*.

<sup>51</sup>Garrett, “Religious Freedom,” 10-16.

<sup>52</sup>Garrett, “Religious Freedom,” 19-24.

history of Southern Baptists, and those interested in his legacy must now include the loci of social theology and political theology as *sine qua non* Baptist theology.

