

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

BAPTIST THEOLOGY: A FOUR-CENTURY STUDY

A BOOK REVIEW

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BY

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Garrett, James Leo. *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009. 340 pp. \$12.99.

Biographical Information

James Leo Garrett Jr. was born in Waco, TX in 1925, and at the age of 10, he became a follower of Christ and was baptized at the Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, TX. Garrett graduated from Baylor University and then earned a Bachelor of Divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He then earned a Master of Theology from Princeton in 1949, completed a Doctor of Theology from SBTS in 1954, and then earned a Doctor of Philosophy in Church History from Harvard in 1966.¹

Dr. Garrett was also an educator and writer. He taught at three institutions during his life, Baylor University, the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His writings include *Systematic Theology* (two Volumes), *Baptist Relations With Other Christians* (1974), and he was the co-author with Hinson and Tull of *Are Southern Baptists Evangelicals?*. With the help of Wyman Lewis Richardson, Malcolm B. Yarnell III, Dr. Garrett produced a book in 2017 titled, *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr., 1950-2015: Volume I*. Dr. Garrett died in February of 2020 at the age of 94.²

¹ “James Leo Garrett, Jr., ThD, PhD.” *Marquis Who’s Who Milestones* (blog). Accessed August 21, 2021. <https://milestones.marquiswhoswho.com/milestone/james-leo-garrett-jr/>.

² “James Leo Garrett, Theologian Who Influenced Two Generations of Baptist Scholars, Dead at 94.” *Baptist News Global*, February 13, 2020. <https://baptistnews.com/article/james-leo-garrett-theologian-who-influenced-two-generations-of-baptist-scholars-dead-at-94/>.

Synopsis

Organization

Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study was published in 2009, approximately at the four hundredth anniversary of the movement. The book is organized into thirteen chapters by Garrett tracing key Baptist developments by examining the theologians in specific eras and their doctrines. The book is developed according to the chronological order of these Baptist leaders and the movements they represented. However, in some places, Garrett draws attention to several centuries instead of staying focused on a specific movement because he emphasizes the theological and thematic matters as important. For instance, in the second chapter, he explains the way General Baptists developed confessions, covering about two hundred years. This is a helpful device used by Garrett to emphasize the theological development of Baptists.

Thesis

James Leo Garrett wrote this book as a study of the doctrinal beliefs of Baptists of four centuries. In his effort to study the doctrinal beliefs he intends to gather and analyze Baptist confessions, consider principal movement, and examine controversies. Threaded through all of these efforts he also intends to consider the teachings of their prominent theologians as they relate to the historical points in the treatment.

Overview

In the first chapter, Garrett provides a historical backdrop of the Christian faith. Garrett identifies how the Baptists were “indebted” to the earliest councils for the orthodoxy that was established on matters of the deity of Christ and incarnation of Christ (3). In this same chapter, Garrett emphasizes the foundations laid for the Baptist movement in the various historical movements such as the pre-Reformation era, the Magisterial Protestant Reformation, the

Anabaptists, and through English Separatism and Puritanism. Garrett points out that these movements provided the roots for what was more clearly defined by the works of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys as the English General Baptist movement developed at the turn of the 17th century.

In his address of the English General Baptist movements, Garrett explains that through the development of early General Baptist's doctrine specific groups composed confessions of faith pertinent to their nuances of doctrinal beliefs. Oftentimes confessions, for the General Baptists, included aspects of Calvinistic interpretations.

The Particular Baptists developed a few years later based on the influence of Independents, who were Calvinistic in their theology. Beginning with the London Confession of 1644 (revised in 1646), which was written to refute accusations that the Particular Baptists were Arminian in their theology, Garrett again traces the development of confessions in the Particular Baptist tradition through later centuries. While tracing the confessions, Garrett identifies elements of the lives of key individuals who impacted the Baptist movement in those related eras.

After completing his historical analysis of the English Baptists, Garrett turns his attention to the Early American Baptists. Garrett again traces key figures like Roger Williams (originally a Particular Baptist) and their influence on the earliest days of the movement before moving to the importance of the confessions themselves as they develop through the centuries in America. Garrett also exposes the shift of some towards universalism that occurred as beliefs progressed.

As Baptist life developed in both England and America, the Evangelical Revival and the Great Awakening impacted both countries. In the fifth chapter, Garrett predominantly focuses on the 18th Century which encompassed those movements. Garrett emphasizes how the revivals of

the earliest part of the century produced a missionary fervor in America. Once again, the inclusion of key leaders and their contributions help to convey the progressing emphases and practices in Baptist life during the 18th Century.

In the mid 19th Century Landmarkism began to shape Baptist life. Garrett points out that that shape was oftentimes one that was like a house divided. Landmarkism created four controversies among Baptists. Garrett explained the controversies that impacted missions, seminaries (by the relationship of seminaries it impacted churches), Baptist bodies within states, and convention membership.

In the next chapter, Garrett addresses controversies that impacted Baptists throughout their history. The controversies are those that address key doctrinal issues like the Campbellites' views on baptism, Bible translations, and The Down Grade Controversy of the Baptist Union in England. Garrett further identifies the challenges that took place because of Darwinism, historical criticism, the Industrial Revolution, and the philosophical influences of Scottish commonsense. Garrett documents the Baptist theologians who were attempting to shore up the doctrines of the faith during this era and categorizes them according to conservative, mediating, and liberal categories. Garrett includes a brief explanation of Rauschenbusch's social gospel before looking at Fundamentalist theologians of the north and Canada. He concludes the chapter focusing on the Baptist Congress and the Northern Baptist Convention Controversy from 1920-1950.

In Chapters 8-10, Garrett summarizes the theological positions of key figures in the Baptist life. He starts with Ezra Gould (1841-1900), a proponent of Biblical Theology from a position that was strongly influenced by historical criticism. Garrett's goal in Chapter Eight seems to be none other than identifying key Baptists of the 20th Century who made important

contributions through their emphasis on the discipline of Biblical Theology. In Chapter Nine, the theme is strictly important 20th Century Southern Baptists. Garrett is focused more narrowly on the SBC and its leadership. The nature of his approach affords him the ability to examine the leaders, institutions (seminaries, conventions), and key events by which the SBC influenced the overall life of Baptist churches.

Having demonstrated some of the controversial issues that shaped Southern Baptists, Garrett takes Chapter 10 to identify key figures who influenced the process of recovery for Evangelicals. The recovery was necessary because evangelicalism had been tarnished by events like the Scopes trial that demonstrated Evangelicals' alienation from the culture. Garrett addresses key figures like Carl F. Henry, Bernard Ramm, and Millard Erickson. He then explains how there was a clarifying process that took place as Baptists learned to express their identity as Evangelicals.

In Chapter Eleven, Garrett explains four influences that have impacted Baptists in the 20th Century: modernism, dispensationalism, the English Christological controversy, and open theism. Garrett addresses these influences and includes explanations about the key influencers of each movement, presenting solid yet concise explanations.

Chapter Twelve contains an accounting of the influence of Baptist life through missions from a global perspective. In this section, Garrett accounts for Baptist movements in other areas of the world (having focused primarily on America in the latter half of the book). He includes an examination of several important figures like Billy Graham because of his evangelistic theology that extended from America. Furthermore, Garrett provides explanations on prominent influencers in various countries as they relate to nuances of Baptist theology and life.

In the Thirteenth Chapter Garrett examines “New Voices in Baptist Theology.” Theologians of the late twentieth to twenty-first centuries are included. These short treatments provide excellent synopses and overviews of the contributions of the figures. Though only writing on ten leaders, Garrett was able to aptly provide a broad range of theological influence on Baptists in the most recent years.

Critical Evaluation

Praises

Garrett’s effort in *Baptist Theology* is to be commended. He wisely argues that Baptists have roots in other movements, despite some who might argue differently. He appropriately identifies the subcategories of theological development that transpired throughout Baptist history. His comprehensive understanding and awareness of the developments of Baptist theology are unmatched. Garrett is both a historian and a theologian, which proves extremely helpful as he carefully addresses the theological issues of individuals and events. His theological prowess provides careful and evenhanded analysis of moments, their impact, and influence.

It is worth noting that the book contains a glossary of terms by Dongsun Cho. This glossary is a beneficial tool for the reader who may not have a vast knowledge of theological terms and systems of beliefs. The inclusion of the glossary will make the reading more understandable for any reader who may need a quick orientation to the numerous complex ideas that will be encountered by the sheer amount of information covered in a work of this magnitude.

Another strength that Garrett offers is found in his ability to include a record of some key event in the life of individuals. He was not merely focusing on their contributions. Instead, he was setting their influence in the context of Baptist life and history. Though his contributions on

individuals are often concise, they provide a worthwhile complement to other works that are more exhaustive.

It is important to acknowledge how Garrett approached this work from a strong scholarly position. He relied on and referenced many scholars in this work to support his claims and conclusions. The scholarly emphasis means the value of *Baptist Theology* is guaranteed to be impacting, historically and theologically. The scholarly nature of the work is identified in the sheer number of Baptists he does identify, at times even some works of individuals that might seem obscure to some readers.

One final note of appreciation is due to Garrett's ability to treat the controversies addressed in an even-handed manner. Oftentimes writers will allow their beliefs or interpretations to shape the reader's perception of the facts. Whether Garrett was addressing the criticism of a key figure like Toy and the 1925 BFM or a key event like the inerrancy controversy, he was able to maintain a mostly neutral stance.

Critiques

Though *Baptist Theology* is comprehensive, there are some unfortunate omissions. Garrett fails to say much about Canadian Baptists, African American Baptist Theologians, or the Free Will Baptist movement that has influenced America. He also omitted references to some key theological works that have made significant marks at the turn of the 21st Century, like Thomas Schreiner's *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*, published in 2008, or *Old Testament Theology*, by Paul R. House, published in 1998.

There is a lack of treatment of the educational institutions that produced much of the theological influence in Baptist life throughout the most recent centuries. Had Garrett included a greater focus on the trends within education and the importance of seminaries it would have

proved most helpful. Garrett addressed leaders like Carl F. Henry who were deeply devoted to the education of ministers. By noting Henry's relationship with Billy Graham and others, he could have strengthened the book's explanation regarding theological distinctions, and notable influences that educational institutions had in Baptist life. For instance, Garrett ought to have included an account of the influence of R. Albert Mohler as one who has impacted Baptist life by his leadership at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the SBC.

This writer noted that Garrett occasionally oversimplified his explanation and interpretation of issues. This was evident in the early treatise on Baptist development between Particular English Baptists and it was observed in Garrett's treatment of some individuals who were included in the chapter on Twentieth-Century Southern Baptists. Though this stands as a critique it would likely be difficult to accomplish because of the amount of information already included in the volume. Garrett may have determined that he must rely on others to cover those areas in greater detail.

The final critique of this work is regarding the sheer amount of information Garrett included. Though Garrett makes a tremendous effort to accomplish his primary goal, it may have been better to have refined that goal in some way that would have reduced the volume or to have written two volumes with complementary goals. In the preface, Garrett identifies the areas to which he will attend, "the study of doctrinal beliefs of Baptists" as his central focus that will be accomplished by "coordinated consideration of the major sources for such a study, namely, their confessions of faith, the teachings of their major theologians, and their principal theological movements and controversies." (xxv) The demands to include these many elements requires minimal treatment in certain areas. For instance, had Garrett narrowed the geographic area he addresses and excluded areas outside of England and America he would have reduced

information that seemed outside of his greater focus. Likewise, had he focused on a shorter period by excluding the information on the Anabaptists and pre-Reformation, he might have overcome a few of the shortfalls identified in this critique.

Garrett would have been better served to have refocused some of his efforts on the Early English Baptists and American Baptists alone. Though the chapter on Missions, Ecumenism, and Globalization was enlightening, had the chapter been included in another work, Garrett may have been more able to address some of the aforementioned areas like education, key leaders from Canada, and African American Baptists. Unfortunately, the task was so great topics had to be glossed over.

Conclusion

Simply put, Garrett's work is impressive. His ability to address four centuries of history, as comprehensively as he did, is remarkable. Furthermore, his ability to address the multiple confessions of faith effectively is to be commended. The interpretive value by which he evaluates the various scholars and situations is fair and unbiased. Thus, Garrett provides a resource that is a beneficial tool to be applied in a classroom setting. For anyone interested in a strong single-volume overview of Baptist life, Garrett's volume is worth its weight. For the layperson greatly interested in Baptist history this book should be recommended. The glossary provides a wonderful tool to make unfamiliar theological terms and concepts extremely accessible and easy to understand. In sum, *Baptist Theology* is an excellent volume that should be included in any class that specifically addresses Baptists in either a historical or theological context.

Questions for Discussion

1. Garrett's goal was to study the doctrinal beliefs of Baptists. What do you think his most successful contribution was through this effort? Where did he fall short or stumble?
2. Why does it seem that the early influences of English Baptists on American Baptists dramatically changed after the late 1700's? Why would that have happened? Or did Garrett not explain how the English Baptists influence on American Baptists continued?

The influence is observed in Benjamin Keach's influence on the Philadelphia Confession (115ff). Influence was also felt among Free Will Baptists from General Baptists in England (120).

3. Looking at the historical account of Baptists in the 19th Century and noting that there were theological and philosophical trends that impacted Baptists in that era, what are the most pressing issues and what correlations are there between them? What could Baptists have done to prevent the compromises and struggles?