

James Leo Garrett. *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009. 726 pages + xxvii. \$55.00. Hardback.

James Leo Garrett, Distinguished Professor of Theology Emeritus at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, describes his *Baptist Theology* as “a coordinated consideration” of Baptist doctrines, with attention given to “their confessions of faith, the teachings of their major theologians, and their principle theological movements and controversies” (xxv). His methodology is essentially to compile his “instructional undertakings” from teaching a Baptist theology course at both Southwestern and Southern Baptist Theology Seminary along with “four years of postretirement research and writing” (ibid). Garrett hopes that this survey of Baptist theology, from the first recognizable Baptist congregation of 1609 through the next four centuries, will “allow Baptist authors to speak authentically for themselves before assessment or evaluation is undertaken” (ibid).

Garrett begins his survey with a chapter on the roots of Baptist beliefs. After a brief treatment of the Early Church Fathers, Councils, and Reformation, he lays out the arguments for both major positions concerning Baptist origins: the Continental Anabaptist origin view and the English Separatist origin view. Chapters two and three are geographically centered on English Baptists, with Garrett dealing in the former with English General Baptists and in the latter with English Particular Baptists. Garrett focuses his attention on John Smyth and Thomas Helwys in chapter two, while chapter three is more oriented towards the First and Second London Confessions. He concludes chapter three with a section on Hyper-Calvinism, especially as seen in John Skepp, John Brine, and John Gill. Chapter four ends the geographically oriented chapters with a discussion of Early American Baptists, including Roger Williams, Francis Wayland, and Southern Baptist Calvinists.

Chapter five contains Garrett’s discussion on Awakening and missionary Baptists (e.g. Isaac Backus and William Carey), while in chapters six and seven Garrett focuses on controversies among Baptists. The author devotes chapter six to Landmarkism and chapter seven to controversies such as Campbellite theology, the Downgrade Controversy, and Fundamentalism. Garrett surveys Baptist biblical theologians like George Eldon Ladd, Dale Moody, and Donald Guthrie in chapter eight and twentieth-century Southern Baptists such as E.Y. Mullins and Herschel Hobbs in chapter nine. He also includes in chapter nine an overview of each of the Baptist Faith and Message statements as well as the Elliott and Inerrancy controversies.

Garrett moves in chapter ten to a survey of the recovery of evangelicalism in Baptist theology through theologians such as Carl F.H. Henry and Bernard Ramm, and in chapter eleven he shows some of the movements that have found their way into Baptist theology. Those covered by Garrett are modernism, dispensationalism, the English Christological controversy, and open theism. Chapter twelve contains Garrett’s overview of missions, ecumenism and globalization in Baptist theology, and he concludes the book with chapter thirteen and a survey of “New Voices in Baptist Theology. Included in this final chapter are theologians such as John Piper, Tom Nettles, D.A. Carson, and Wayne Grudem.

In *Baptist Theology* Garrett provides the reader with a cogent, comprehensive treatment of his subject. This alone is enough to commend Garrett’s work to anyone

looking to be better acquainted with the field, whether more broadly or with some of the finer details of historical Baptist theology. In addition to his comprehensiveness, though, Garrett should also be commended for the way he writes; he is fair to all of his subjects and does not allow his own personal theological convictions to overshadow his treatment of individual theologians or confessions. He also explains his subjects' theological positions clearly and concisely, which is a further reason that Garrett's work should be commended to any reader.

Another strong point of Garrett's work is his use of primary sources. While he does use secondary sources, Garrett seems to rely on primary sources whenever possible, and this is part of the reason that he is able to be so fair to each of his subjects. In describing their beliefs, he provides abundant support for his description of them using their own voices. Garrett's judicial treatment of the history of Baptist theology could be a helpful arbiter in the current debate, especially among Southern Baptists, over the theological character of Baptist roots. Finally, even though he has a vast amount of material to cover, Garrett manages to provide continuity in his coverage of Baptist theology between the sections and chapters of his book. Garrett has taken what would seem to most to be the virtually impossible task of organizing a survey of four centuries of Baptist theology across five continents and accomplished it in a coherent manner.

While *Baptist Theology* should be praised for its comprehensiveness and coherence, it is not without its weaknesses. First and foremost would be that Garrett very rarely goes beyond surveying Baptist theology. There is essentially no analysis or critique found in his book. The most obvious instance of this is in the first chapter, when Garrett surveys the two major views on Baptist roots. After showing Baptist theology's connections to both Anabaptist and English Separatist theology, he stops short of analyzing any of these connections and offers no conclusion on how the Baptist faith originated. He also evades answering the question of why John Smyth shifted from a Calvinistic understanding of salvation to an Arminian understanding (27-28), offers no critique of Smyth's shift to Mennonite theology (29-30), and leaves his section on Smyth with divergent quotes on Smyth's lasting impact on Baptist theology (31). He quotes one scholar who says Smyth is the fountainhead of the Baptist faith and another who says by the end of the seventeenth century ties to both Smyth's General Baptist compatriots and to the Particular Baptists were almost extinct. It is impossible to say with which of these views Garrett agrees because he offers no insight into the matter. He is certainly accomplishing his stated goal of presenting the beliefs of these theologians *before* offering a critique, but the critique never comes.

Furthermore, the specific lack of discussion on whether Smyth should be considered a founder of Baptist theology is evidence of a second major critique, which is that Garrett never provides a definition of *Baptist* theology or who should be included as its proponents. This leads to confusion as to why and how Garrett chose some of the theologians he surveys. He even admits to the problem with his discussion on John Bunyan, noting that it is unclear whether he should be included based on his view of membership and communion (67). This also comes to the forefront in the last chapter of the book, when Garrett surveys modern Baptist theologians. It is at times hard to tell why Garrett has considered some of the men he surveyed Baptist. He certainly draws out theological connections between Baptist confessions and these theologians' positions, but does that make them *Baptist* theologians? The reader is left to decide on the issue, and

that is an unfortunate weakness of Garrett's work. Finally, while there is one hundred pages on the Southern Baptist Convention (chapter nine), there is not a chapter on the black Baptist denominations' theologians or on the Northern Baptist Convention's theologians and confessions. Garrett does cover Northern Baptists, but it is in chapter seven on Baptists controversies. This seems odd when Southern Baptist theology has its own chapter. There is also an absence of women theologians surveyed in the book, and there is a distinct Western, American Southern, evangelical flavor to his survey.

Even with these weaknesses, though, Garrett has accomplished his purpose of surveying four centuries of Baptist theology. While there is not much that is new or innovative in his book, Garrett has provided a valuable resource to anyone desiring to gain insight into what the people called Baptists have believed over the last four centuries. *Baptist Theology* should be commended to all as an excellent overview of what Baptists have believed throughout the past four hundred years.

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