

# **Voices: I survived Leo's Theo: A reflection on James Leo Garrett**

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Southwestern Seminary in its heyday sported some of the best minds, teachers and preachers—and a boatload of characters. Russell Dillday's faculty resembled the crew on Captain Jack Sparrow's *Black Pearl*. All were stars, but all equally cantankerous.

Curtis Vaughn detested committee meetings as much as he loathed giving an exam. Jack McGorman craftily employed his Scottish accent and impish looks every chance he could. Leon McBeth thundered about a Baptist tradition now all but forgotten. Robert Sloan and Bruce Corley, consigned to the Annex, banded together and plotted. Etched in stone and memory is the day Joel Gregory led a solemn procession to establish the Bill Bellinger Memorial.

James Leo Garrett quietly towered over them all—and it all. He was a teacher and a preacher, no doubt. But Leo Garrett was a scholar's scholar. Leo Garrett, in many ways, stood alone.

## **The Leo I survived**

Rounded moon face. Wispy eyelashes framing his horn-rimmed spectacles. Balding, closely cropped hair. Sartorially perfect: brown or black wing tips, straight collar single color shirt, a single colored tie, a subdued sport coat.

His voice was mid-range and raspy, at times melodic. His style halting, sputtering, but always careful, encircling. He exuded personal warmth. Not a whisper of arrogance—though there was clear room for that. Kind, loving, pastoral.

But my, oh my, a scholar's scholar. He inspired the academic imagination of a whole generation.

Hardly anyone who later earned a Ph.D. did not choose to run the gauntlet that was Leo's Theo. Everyone, with fear and trembling, measured themselves by him. Every lecture was an exercise in having his massive learning perform an "Occupy Classroom." Surviving classes had T-shirts made to memorialize their rite of passage.

## **James Leo Garrett, master theologian**

He loved the Church Fathers, and that love was infectious. His command of Patristics was sovereign. His lecturing on them, a Gatling gun. The buzzer would sound, he opened one of the (in)famous "little black books" and began. He did not stop, did not pause, never answered a question, because there was so much for him to say.

"Today, we will study Theodore of Mopsuestia—better known as Ted the Mop."

Tests were a nightmare, for it was all about detail. He expected so very, very much. Pedagogical torture. He demanded his students bathe their minds in the eccentricates of the grand tradition.

Leo Garrett accomplished something no Baptist and no Southern Baptist—then or now—ever dared. He demonstrated how a perpetually rootless, post-Reformation tradition could find a legitimate theological grounding in pre-Constantinian Christianity. He showed how Baptists did not need to invent or ignore history. He proved Baptist theology lived in a deep analogical relationship with an ancient, Patristic theology.

Leo Garrett loved his family. He loved his local church, and he loved the Church. He loved his seminary. He loved his students. Leo Garrett loved his

God.

Leo Garrett was a gentle giant of a teacher, not unlike some the Fathers he so fondly taught. He will be missed, and greatly so.

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