**James Leo Garrett Jr.**

James Leo Garrett Jr., a Southern Baptist scholar and teacher who combined evangelical fervor with deep erudition and yearnings for Christians worldwide to find common ground, died late Wednesday in Nacogdoches, Texas. He was 94.

For many decades, Garrett unabashedly promoted Southern Baptists’ educational institutions, publishing houses, foreign missions, ties to global Baptists and formation of a lobbying arm to preserve separation of church and state in the U.S.

He was, though, first and foremost a trainer of ministers. With exactingly high standards, he sought to expose students to the broad sweep of Christian history and appreciation of how the church’s beliefs developed and should be sifted in modern times.

“Dr. Garrett personified the best of Baptist scholarship for more than two generations of Baptist leaders in the U.S. and around the world,” said Preben Vang, a New Testament professor and director of the doctor of ministry program at George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco.

Garrett was a Waco native who spent nearly half his life in Fort Worth. He immersed himself in teaching and research as a systematic and historical theologian at the same time the Southern Baptist Convention grew into the nation’s largest denomination.

He exulted as membership soared and Southern Baptists commissioned more foreign and home missionaries.

In recent decades, though, he and his late wife, the former Myrta Ann Latimer, were pained by developments in church and society, as Southern Baptists fought over Biblical inerrancy and U.S. culture grew more secular.

In the late 1940s, the Garretts became teammates “in the quest for Baptist identity in the context of the wider Christian world,” he recalled in a 2005 lecture at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

It was a wistful remembrance, however, because he believed the residue of a hugely influential movement among some Baptists in Garrett’s youth – “Landmarkism,” which opposed ecumenical outreach – still had its effects. The denomination frowned on Christians with different practices of baptism and communion. In effect, decades of Garrett’s work to engage in respectful dialogues with non-Baptists were tossed. He saw them as necessary to heed Jesus’ fervent, pre-crucifixion prayer in John 17 for unity among his disciples.

On the other preeminent issue of his youth – race – Garrett grew more sanguine. Like other Protestant denominations, Baptists split over slavery before the Civil War. But unlike some others, Baptists did not reunite in the 20th century. But they came through the civil rights movement without schism and more recently have formally apologized for once being captives of Southern culture and mores, Garrett noted with approval late in his life.

Indeed, in retirement from their posts at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, where Leo taught theology and Myrta Ann headed the library’s serials department, they helped promote the growth of an interracial congregation, Meadowridge Community Baptist Church.

For Leo, it was a happy coda. As an aspiring young Baptist minister in Texas in the 1940s, he was troubled by interpretations of scripture that were used to justify mistreatment of African Americans. In 1962, as member of a faculty panel that invited Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to lecture at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., Garrett and his colleagues rejected intense pressure for the invitation to be withdrawn.

At the then-comparatively liberal Louisville seminary, though, as the 1960s wore on, Garrett emerged as somewhat conservative.

While for decades he had pursued dialogue with Roman Catholics and eagerly followed news of meetings of the World Council of Churches, he grew disillusioned. He felt the council downplayed Christian missions, too narrowly defined ecumenical success as mere acceptance of one another’s communion practices and unconscionably embraced reformist political movements that justified use of violence.

On the other hand, rifts between Protestants and Catholics narrowed.

“I was there when Pope Paul VI ratified the document on religious liberty,” Garrett recalled in 2018, speaking of his attendance at the final week of Vatican Council II in Rome 53 years earlier. Garrett shifted to emphasizing ecumenical dialogues with Eastern Orthodox Christians. At the same time, he reached out to other American Protestants, such as Mennonites, that along with the Baptists were never members of state-sponsored churches. In 2004, he was disappointed by Southern Baptists’ withdrawal from the Baptist World Alliance.

Examining what he considered the best of “Baptist distinctives,” such as believer’s baptism by immersion and no priestly intercessories between a believer and God, became a major focus of Garrett’s later scholarship.

At age 65, he published one of two magnum opuses – his “Systematic Theology,” the first by a Southern Baptist scholar since his mentor at the Fort Worth seminary, Walter Thomas Conner, published his in 1924 and Dale Moody, Garrett’s former colleague at the Louisville seminary, followed with his in 1981. At 84, Garrett finished “Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study.”

Courtly, unfailingly kind and deeply humble, he was unusually committed to both academy and church, recalled David S. Dockery, the former president of Trinity International University in Deerfield, Ill., and Union University in Jackson, Tenn.

“Not only was he a superb scholar and great teacher, but he was a faithful churchman and a person of deep and genuine piety, an exemplary ecclesial theologian with a love for the gospel and an infectious commitment to and hope for the unity of the people of God,” said Dockery, who studied under Garrett at Southwestern Seminary and is now theologian in residence there.

While three of his five academic degrees were earned at Baptist institutions, Garrett received a master of theology from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1949 and a Ph.D. in church history from Harvard University in 1966. At both places, he forged lifelong, respectful friendships with Protestants of different traditions. Princeton president John Alexander Mackay modeled “what it means to be at the same time ecumenical and evangelical,” and as a former Presbyterian missionary to South America, helped fuel Garrett’s already-strong interest in Latin America, he later recalled.

At Harvard, church historian George Huntston Williams, a Unitarian minister’s son, kindled Garrett’s curiosity about the Radical Reformation, or groups of early Protestants who repudiated Rome and Martin Luther alike for relying on princes to enforce religious conformity, which they saw as corruption. It was a subject Baptist seminarians weren’t learning enough about, Garrett believed – a concern tinged with irony as Southern Baptists more recently have come to exert considerable political clout in the U.S.

“Baptists belong to the non-establishment wing of Christianity,” he recalled in 2018. “We have not used the civil powers to enforce our beliefs on others or persecute others.”

When Garrett left Southern Seminary in 1973 to return to Texas, Southern’s president Duke K. McCall called him an “evangelical theologian.” The remark startled Garrett, who said the cleavages between mainline Protestants and Southern Baptists were not stark in his formative years. In an ensuing discussion with a former Louisville colleague, E. Glenn Hinson, published as a book in 1983, Garrett decided, though, that he was indeed an evangelical.

Four Baptist institutions received Garrett’s most impassioned loyalty: the Baptist World Alliance, to which he and Myrta Ann devoted decades of service; Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, where they met and he began his teaching career; Baylor University, beside whose campus he spent his early childhood; and Southern Seminary in Louisville.

His father, James Leo Garrett Sr., taught accounting at Baylor. His mother, Grace Hasseltine Jenkins Garrett Kee, earned two Baylor degrees and eventually taught English at Waco High.

Leo Garrett Jr. was permanent president of Baylor’s centennial class, the Class of 1945. Between 1973 and 1979, he was director of Baylor’s J.M. Dawson Studies in Church and State and professor of religion. In 2008, Baylor conferred on him an honorary doctor of divinity degree.

Garrett was an only child, and was predeceased by Myrta Ann in 2015. He is survived by three sons, James Leo Garrett III of Nacogdoches, Robert T. Garrett (Tina Hester) of Austin, and Paul L. Garrett (Nancy) of Austin; four grandsons, James Mark Garrett (Lindsay) and Will Latimer Garrett, both of Houston, Michael Thomas Garrett of Nacogdoches and Wyatt David Garrett of Lubbock; and three great-grandchildren, James Thomas Garrett, Henry Leo Garrett, and Tassie Ann Garrett, all of Houston.

Visitation will be 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Wed., Feb. 12, at Meadowridge Community Baptist Church, Fort Worth. A funeral service will be at 10 a.m. on Thurs., Feb. 13, at Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth with burial following at 3 p.m. at Oakwood Cemetery, Waco.