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RACE AND RACISM IN THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION: The Lost Legacies of George W. Truett and W. A. Criswell

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On a crisp December afternoon in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, Rosa Parks, a forty-two-year-old seamstress, boarded a city bus and took a seat en route home following a normal workday. What happened a few minutes later became the spark that ignited the Civil Rights Movement. Parks refused to relinquish her seat on the bus to a white man who stood over her demanding it. Within days, the entire world took note. This simple act of resistance by a then-unknown African American woman would result in a sweeping cultural change in America.

Two months later, on February 22, 1956, W. A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, stood before the gathered joint assembly of the South Carolina legislature and delivered a passionate plea for segregation that would become a sobering and defining moment in his life and ministry. At the invitation of Governor Strom Thurmond, and agitated by the infiltration of those from the North infusing themselves into Southern segregation, Criswell gave an impromptu speech arguing that the privilege to worship in a segregated church was something that not only the people of the South but also Southern Baptists viewed as an integral part of their heritage.¹ Moved and motivated by the cheering legislators, he moved to more caustic rhetoric that he would regret the rest of

¹ An address by W. A. Criswell, Pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, to the Joint Assembly, Wednesday, February 22, 1956, Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Rubenstein Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; "Criswell Rips Integration," Dallas Morning News, February 23, 1956.

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his life. Referring to those in the North, he continued, "Let them integrate, let them sit up there in their dirty shirts and make all their fine speeches. But they are all a bunch of infidels, dying from the neck up."² This divisive language and apparently oblivious awareness of the real sufferings of Black Americans became an ongoing issue.

Looking back on this signal event years later, Criswell acknowledged the speech was "unwise and untimely."³ He referred to it as "one of the colossal blunders of my young life." He continued,

Looking back I wish with all my heart that I had not spoken on behalf of segregation in any form or in any place. In the following weeks, months and years, as I prayed, searched the holy Scriptures, preached the gospel, and worked with our people, I came to the profound conclusion that to separate by coercion the body of Christ on any basis was unthinkable, unchristian, and unacceptable to God.⁴

Repeatedly throughout his remaining years, Criswell made statements of regret over his words in South Carolina. In his oral history recorded in 1973 and housed at Baylor University, he said, "I made some extreme statements there that I would have never made in a thousand years if I were really to study it through. ... The whole thing was a colossal blunder and mistake on my part. ... It did not represent my heart. I was defending a position that did not represent my heart, my soul."⁵

To be fair, in 1944, Criswell inherited a church from George W. Truett that had become steeped in a spirit of Southern culture, deeply imbedded with the stain of white supremacy. While Truett is virtually revered by the masses and his name is etched in stone over the entrances to public schools, colleges, seminaries, hospitals, and the like, his record on race and segregation is one that should cause deep concern for anyone studying his life and legacy. By almost every

² Editorial, "Dallas Pastor Stirs Controversy with Statements on Integration," *The Baptist Messenger*, March 1, 1956.

³ W. A. Criswell, *Standing on the Promises: The Autobiography of W. A. Criswell* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 203.

⁴ Criswell, *Standing on the Promises*, 204.

⁵ W. A. Criswell, *Oral History Memoir* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 1973), 266-67.

measure, Truett lived a life of impeccable integrity and enjoyed a near spotless reputation that has endured across the decades. Perhaps no one in Baptist lore has enjoyed in death the adoration and near human worship as he. However, in a day when the founders and namesakes of a multitude of institutions across the country have come under greater scrutiny, George W. Truett's lost legacy is not exempt.

Truett lived within a systemic racist culture that saw Whites as superior, and his silence on racial issues, which frequently arose during his life and ministry, are an anathema to anyone who has seriously studied his life. The attitude of most Texas Baptists in the early years of the twentieth century toward the African American community was this: "Texas Baptists were paternalists who believed the presumed superiority of whites carried with it responsibilities. Allegedly inferior and childlike blacks, instead of being humiliated, were to be under the watchful tutelage of superior Saxons."⁶ Although no records indicate that Truett felt Blacks were inferior, indications are given in his referring to them in such condescending terms as calling one man an "old darkie" and his mother "an old black mammy."⁷

In Truett's famous religious liberty address on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., in 1920, he stated, "Whoever believes in Christ as his personal savior is our brother in the common salvation. ... God wants free worshippers and no other kind."⁸ Yet, even as those words escaped his lips, Blacks in Dallas were not welcomed as "free worshippers" within the membership of the First Baptist Church. Leon McBeth speaks of Will and Agnes, "a Negro couple who helped the Truetts for thirty-five years."⁹ Agnes cooked all the meals, and Will took care of the daily chores. The Truetts kindly cared for them in their declining years, yet Will and Agnes could never be "free worshippers" at the church where George W. Truett preached Sunday after Sunday.

Perhaps this inherent racial insensitivity on Truett's part is most

⁶ John W. Storey, *Texas Baptist Leadership and Social Christianity, 1900-1980* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986), 96.

⁷ Keith Durso, *Thy Will Be Done: A Biography of George W. Truett* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 119.

⁸ George W. Truett, "Baptists and Religious Liberty," May 16, 1920, accessed February 8, 2021, <https://bjconline.org/baptists-and-religious-liberty-2/>, 3.

⁹ Leon McBeth, *The First Baptist Church of Dallas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 209.

revealed in the founding of Baylor Hospital, the direct result of his vision and effort. At the conclusion of a banquet honoring the world-famous Austrian physician Adolf Lorenz held at the Orient Hotel in 1903 in downtown Dallas, Truett rose to the floor with a challenge to build “a great humanitarian hospital” in the city of Dallas.¹⁰ He stated, “Whatever makes for the benefit of the race has its origin in Christianity . . . a great humanitarian hospital would illustrate the glorious result of Christian influence upon the community.”¹¹ Truett served on the board of Baylor Hospital for decades after its founding and was its most influential and prominent voice. Since not a single African American physician was given hospital privileges there during his entire lifetime and tenure of board leadership, it appears Truett was simply speaking of the benefit of the White race and the glorious result of Christian influence in the White community. It was not until 1968 that the first African American physician was given hospital and staff privileges at Baylor Hospital.¹²

As the decades unfolded, the Ku Klux Klan began to grab a foothold in Dallas. By the early 1920s, Dallas Klan #66 was the largest in the country, boasting over 13,000 members, including one of every three eligible men in the city.¹³ The bulk of Dallas’s Klan membership was made up of “Protestant church men, especially those with a more fundamentalist outlook.”¹⁴

Black lives matter today, but the initials BLM had little meaning in Dallas in the days of George W. Truett. Two horrible events took place within the sight of the steeple of Truett’s First Baptist Church. In 1910, over five thousand people gathered in a frenzy at the intersection of Akard and Main Street to witness the brutal public lynching of a sixty-five-year-old African American man by the name of Allen Brooks. In 1921, another African American, Alexander Johnson, was taken from his home around the corner from the church

¹⁰W. A. Criswell, “Dr. Truett and Baylor Hospital,” W. A. Criswell Sermon Library, June 6, 1980; accessed February 8, 2021, <https://www.waccriswell.com/sermons/1980/dr-Truett-and-Baylor-hospital/>, 3.

¹¹Durso, *Thy Will Be Done*, 69.

¹²Michael Emmett, “An Introduction to the Elgin Ware Lectureship” (Dallas: Baylor University Medical Center, July 25, 2012), <https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3377295>, accessed February 8, 2021.

¹³Darwin Payne, “When Dallas Was the Most Racist City in America,” *D Magazine* (June 2017), accessed February 8, 2021, <https://dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/2017/June/when-DALLAS-was-the-most-racist-city-in-America/>.

¹⁴Payne, “When Dallas Was the Most Racist City,” 3.

on Ross Avenue to the Trinity River Bottoms where he was beaten, scourged, and had KKK engraved with acid on his forehead. There is no record of Truett ever speaking out publicly against these and other atrocities taking place in his city. When many of the city leaders finally took an open stand against this radical group and were called upon to sign a statement publicly in the local newspaper denouncing the Klan, many prominent clergyman and leaders of the city added their name to the list—with one glaring exception, George W. Truett. His silence on these atrocities was not golden. J. M. Dawson, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Waco and the most outspoken Southern Baptist in opposing the Klan, lamented the “silence of his peers” and expressed “disappointment in the silence of a particular friend.”¹⁵ Because Truett was well known for his warm relationship with Dawson and because little record exists of his speaking out against the evils of racial hatred, people likely assumed that Dawson’s “special friend” was George W. Truett.

But why such silence against such evil on the part of this man of otherwise remarkable reputation and stature? Perhaps the answer can be found in a careful reading of the listing of the Dallas Ku Klux Klan’s “Steering Committee of 100” in 1921.¹⁶ It reveals that an alarming and embarrassingly significant percentage of the steering committee were members and deacons of Truett’s church. The list contains the names of prominent First Baptist members and leaders like physicians Henry Clay, A. M. Gantt, and C. C. Holder, and lawyers N. L. Leachman, Robert Allen, and W. L. Crawford, to name just a few. The list continues, containing many more of Truett’s members who were business owners, city employees, and others with virtually every vocation known to the city. And this list includes only those on the local Ku Klux Klan steering committee. It is impossible to know how many rank and file members of Truett’s church were also dues-paying members of the Klan. He stood by

¹⁵Joseph Davis, “Embrace Equality: Texas Baptists, Social Christianity and Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century,” (Master’s thesis, University of North Texas, 2013), 75.

¹⁶Darwin Payne, *Big D: Triumphs and Troubles of an American Supercity in the 20th Century* (Dallas: Three Forks Publishers, 1994), 512-14. For a further understanding of this list naming the steering committee, see page 87 of *Big D* for a detailed description of this document in a long footnote. It can also be found in the archives of the Dallas Historical Society. This list contains the names and occupations of many prominent citizens and church members and constituted the decision-making process of the Ku Klux Klan cell #66 in Dallas, the largest single Klan organization in the country.

silently as he watched those under his pastoral watch-care become actively involved in the promotion of the vilest expression of racial hatred in our nation's history. His wealthy deacon Cullen Thomas, with whom Truett is pictured in a well distributed photograph, standing in front of Thomas's mansion, publicly endorsed Earle B. Mayfield, the KKK candidate for the U.S. Senate from Texas in 1922. Mayfield, with the support of Thomas and the masses of Klan members throughout Texas, was soon off to the United States Senate with a two-to-one margin of victory.¹⁷ Throughout his life, George W. Truett met one controversy or conflict after another, always attempting, in Keith Durso's words, to remain "serenely above the fray."¹⁸ However, in our modern world of healthy and heightened racial sensitivity, attempting to stay "serenely above the fray" is an indictment and no badge of honor.

Truett's underlying racism was more "condescending than malevolent."¹⁹ His racial sins were more sins of omission than commission, but glaringly so. It is not what he said, but what he did not say in the face of such flagrant disregard for human dignity and life. Truett spoke many poignant and powerful words from some of America's greatest platforms, but in the end, in his quest to stay "serenely above the fray," what he did not say in the face of the blatant and brutal White supremacy that permeated his culture speaks louder than the rest.²⁰

Through the ensuing decades, after Truett's death, First Baptist Church has swung its doors wide open to "whosoever will, may come." Criswell, acknowledging the church's racial sins of the past, said, "We knew that racism was wrong, but we had never taken a stand to right the wrong ... we had never made it an official stated policy that any believer, black, white, or yellow could become a member of the church."²¹ Thus, in 1968, Criswell addressed the

¹⁷Editorial, *Hays Free Press News-Dispatch*, Kyle, TX, August 11, 2016, accessed February 8, 2021, <https://haysfreepress.com/2016/8/11/texans-elect-closet-klansman-to-represent-us-as-senator/>.

¹⁸Durso, *Thy Will Be Done*, 70.

¹⁹Michael Phillips, "You Get What You Pray For," <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/03/reverend-Robert-Jeffress-Donald-trump-homophobia>, accessed February 8, 2021.

²⁰Although there is little record of any public statements, in a private, secret meeting of the Dallas Masonic Lodge, there is the record that George Truett joined Rabbi David Leftkowitz during a discussion led by lodge members in expressing their views against some of the Klan's activities and did so in a "most expressive manner." This can be found in archives of the Dallas Masonic Lodge #760 in the minutes for the meeting of October 14, 1921.

²¹Criswell, *Standing on the Promises*, 210.

deacons of the church, some of whom were former Klan sympathizers under Truett's pastorate. With passion, through tears, he told them, "I am done with preaching and worrying, even as I preach that someone who is black might respond to my invitation." He recounted, "Suddenly my eyes filled with tears ... I didn't know what those deacons would say."²² One after another, the deacons stood to their feet until all were standing in unanimous support of their pastor, who stood before them in repentance and remorse in public confession. The next Sunday morning, Criswell took his text from Revelation 3:8, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door." This sermon, "The Church of the Open Door," was one of the defining addresses of his life. It left no doubt that the First Baptist Church in Dallas was not simply remorseful but repentant of its former silence on race, having now publicly swung open its doors to anyone and everyone.

Criswell spent the rest of his life seeking to make amends for his past racial sins. After being accused of suggesting that the curse of Ham in Genesis was a life sentence of servitude for the black race, he made certain in his *Believer's Study Bible* that the notes bore out his true feeling on the matter. The note under Genesis 9:25 in the study Bible plainly states, "Contrary to some misinterpretations of the past, the reader should note that neither Ham nor Canaan and the Canaanites were black. This passage cannot be used as a basis for the reprehensible attitudes and actions of racism."²³ He opened a ministry to the homeless that still today sleeps over 400 men, women, and children of all races each night, feeds over 2,000 hungry people daily, provides medical and dental help at no charge, and trains multitudes of people for job placement. When he saw that the African American community in the poverty pockets of south Dallas would not come to the downtown church, he took the church to them, opening over thirty "chapels" in neighborhood church buildings that had been abandoned; First Baptist purchased these and provided myriad of social ministries. The fruit of Criswell's repentance can also be seen in the fact that, across the years, minorities have made up approximately one-third of the student body of First Baptist Academy while the Criswell College continues to educate and graduate a significant

²²Criswell, *Standing on the Promises*, 211.

²³W. A. Criswell, ed., *The Believer's Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 21.

percentage of African American students.

A walk through the young married and children's areas in the First Baptist Church of Dallas today looks like a journey through the United Nations. Red and Yellow, Black and White are not just precious in God's sight, but they are all on full view in this growing multiracial congregation of today. And George W. Truett? Most of our heroes and giants have a way of dwindling into ordinary men when we learn enough about them. It is without excuse to argue that Truett was simply a victim of his culture and was no different from most of the other pastors in his snapshot of time. His voice, above all others, could have meant much to social justice in his time. But, when speaking out about so many social ills of his day, sadly, Truett's voice fell almost totally silent when it came to racial concerns. In the end, those of us who have come to know and love him by studying his life and legacy can rest in the hope that he is among those in heaven rejoicing at the present journey of the church where he invested a half-century of gifts and ministry.

As one of his pastoral successors, having preached hundreds of sermons from the same pulpit from which Truett preached thousands, I can attest personally to the greatness of his stature and the deep love and respect held long after his death in the hearts of those who knew and loved him. Stories abound of how, on many occasions, he would arrive home without his overcoat, only for his wife, Josephine, to find out he had given it to someone on the street who was in need. The fact that in the midst of all his greatness he joins generations of our spiritual forefathers who remained "serenely above the fray" regarding the racial issues of their day remains one of the imponderables of Almighty God.