

Review: Another look at 'In the Name of God'

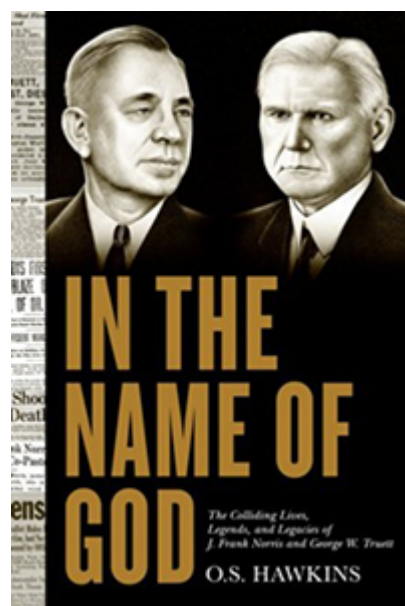
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In the Name of God: The Colliding Lives, Legends, and Legacies of J. Frank Norris and George W. Truett

By O.S. Hawkins (B&H Academic)

When someone writes a book about one of your predecessors, you probably ought to read it. J. Frank Norris became owner of the *Baptist Standard* in April 1907, privately owning and editing the paper until 1909. The *Standard* became a nonprofit organization a few years later, overseen by a board of trustees elected by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Norris was the larger-than-life pastor of First Baptist Church in Fort Worth at the same time George W. Truett was the larger-than-life pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas. Both men and their churches carried significant weight in Texas Baptist and Southern Baptist life, and both men felt the need to compete with each other for preeminence.



Norris is infamous for his fighting side, while Truett is remembered for championing religious liberty. Truett overshadows Norris at street level, his name gracing important buildings and at least one school, but Norris seems to have held the upper hand in less noticed ways.

O.S. Hawkins reports the history of both men and the mark they left on Southern Baptist life. Although Norris and Truett receive equal coverage in the first four chapters, only Norris receives praise from Hawkins for his lasting influence. Hawkins tips his hand in Chapter Five by pointing out several ways Norris left a lasting mark on Texas Baptist and Southern Baptist life.

Hawkins describes how Norris teamed up with B.H. Carroll to convince Texas Baptists Fort Worth was a better location for a seminary than Dallas. Each week, Norris used the front page of the *Standard*—a singular voice in Texas Baptist life after he bought up his competitors—to promote moving Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary from Waco to Fort Worth. His efforts succeeded, and Southwestern Seminary moved to Fort Worth in 1910, with Carroll serving as president.

Showing a clear preference, Hawkins credits Norris with: the shape and success of Sunday school in Baptist churches; the origin and success of the Cooperative Program by virtue of Norris' undermining the 75 Million Campaign fundraising effort; the so-called Conservative Resurgence, during which Norris' conservative opposition to theological liberalism in the 1920s came home to roost in the SBC in the 1980s; "text-driven" preaching in Southern Baptist churches; the predominance of premillennial eschatology in the SBC; megachurches, satellite church campuses and the use of media for church communication.

Hawkins describes Truett, on the other hand, as leading a failed effort in the 75 Million Campaign, accommodating moderate theological positions, preaching less stridently biblical sermons, and turning over a declining

church to W.A. Criswell, Hawkins' predecessor at First Baptist Church in Dallas. According to Hawkins, Truett was more concerned about denominational loyalty than theological fidelity and thereby ultimately lost to Norris.

Hawkins raises these points about Norris' influence to directly oppose Baptist historian Leon McBeth's "claim that Norris had no influence on Southern Baptist ministries" (p. 118).

Those desiring to understand why Texas and Southern Baptists are as they are will benefit from reading Hawkins description of two giants in Texas and Southern Baptist history.

*Eric Black, executive director/publisher/editor
Baptist Standard*

For another perspective on this book, [click here](#).