

Review: In the Name of God

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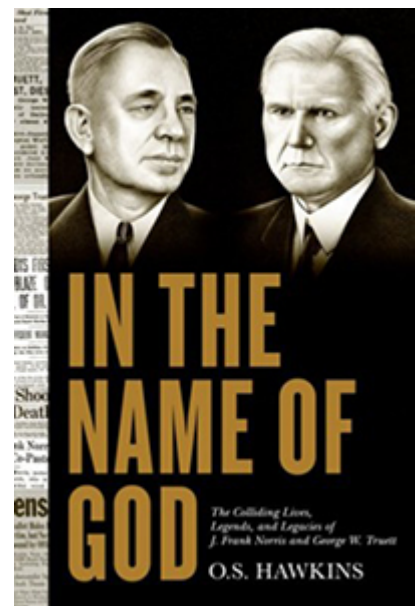
In the Name of God: The Colliding Lives, Legends, and Legacies of J. Frank Norris and George W. Truett

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

George W. Truett's name is on schools, one of the state's largest hospital towers, even an auditorium at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

J. Frank Norris' name does not appear on much of anything.

Truett is generally venerated, and Norris is generally vilified in Baptist history. The two—contemporaries from pulpits barely 30 miles apart who led the two largest churches in the world at the time—cared little for the other during their ministries. Given Norris' and Truett's legacies, it would be easy to dismiss Norris and to put Truett on a pedestal.



The truth, GuideStone President O.S. Hawkins said, is more nuanced.

Hawkins tells the tales of the two larger-than-life North Texas pastors in his newest book, *In the Name of God*. The book seeks to look objectively at the

two who led their larger-than-life congregations.

Both Norris and Truett were charismatic and winsome. Both pastors killed men—Norris in his study in self-defense, Truett in an accident on a hunting trip in the Texas Hill Country.

Truett prized denominational loyalty above all; Norris felt doctrinal unity was more important. Both proved to carry those beliefs to the extremes, Hawkins noted. Truett, so determined to make the 75 Million Campaign a success, would not address the evolution controversy at Baylor University. Norris drew the circle of cooperation more narrowly until he cooperated with virtually no one.

Hawkins weaves in plenty of the espionage and intrigue of the two pastors. Their distaste for each other began when Norris left the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1905. He went first to the McKinney Avenue Baptist Church in Dallas, where 13 members met. On his first anniversary, more than 1,000 were attending, many of whom left First Baptist Church of Dallas to join the young and growing church. The dislike between Truett and Norris began to fester then and only grew once Norris moved one county west to take over First Baptist Church in Fort Worth.

Norris was active in bringing Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary from Waco to Fort Worth, helping to raise the \$200,000 needed to build Fort Worth Hall, the seminary's first building. Half the amount came from members of his own church. Meanwhile, Truett worked behind the scenes to keep the seminary attached to Baylor University—and Waco—afraid a move north would siphon fundraising Truett was eyeing for Buckner Orphans Home and a sanitarium in Dallas.

While they were at odds, they both greatly influenced one of the second half of the 20th century's great preachers—W.A. Criswell.

“Dr. Criswell grew up in a home where his father was a devout follower of

Norris, and his mother was a passionate devotee of Truett,” Hawkins said. “As a young boy, he sat at a multitude of dinner tables listening to the debate that would inevitably ensue between his mother and father as to whether Norris or Truett was the greatest preacher.

“As a pastor, in theology, scriptural affinity, and practice, he aligned with Norris. He employed Norris’s strident fundamental theology but managed to wrap it in Truett’s more compassionate and relational ministry philosophy, thereby leading First Baptist Church in Dallas to become the father of all modern megachurches. He ascended to become the undisputed leader of the ‘Battle for the Bible’ in the Southern Baptist Convention.”

“The first half of this book reads like a page-turning novel; the second half of the book offers a hermeneutical guide to the diverse and distinctive contributions of Truett and Norris, as well as to the longer-term implications of their approaches to life and ministry,” David Dockery, distinguished professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote.

In the Name of God demonstrates Norris is not a force of evil some in the 20th century made him out to be, and despite Truett’s hard work on behalf of Southern Baptists, he was far from perfect.

“One of the goals I have in writing *In the Name of God* was for readers to see that there is good even in those for whom we may think the worst and that for some we tend to put on pedestals actually dwindle into ordinary men when we learn more about them,” Hawkins said. “We are all crippled and need a crutch, Jesus himself, to guide us along the way.”

Roy Hayhurst, director of denominational and public relations
GuideStone