

Baptist statesman James Wood dies at age 96

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James E. Wood Jr., former executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and longtime director of Baylor University's J.M. Dawson Center for Church-State Studies, died March 24 at age 96.

Wood was born on July 29, 1922, in Portsmouth, Va., and served as a Baptist missionary in Japan before joining the Baylor faculty in 1955 as an associate professor of religious history.



James E. Wood Jr.

After publishing the landmark book *Church and State in Scripture, History and Constitutional Law* in 1958 with Baylor colleagues E. Bruce Thompson and Robert T. Miller, Wood became director of the Dawson Institute.

He led the Dawson Institute to develop several undergraduate and graduate programs, launched the *Journal of Church and State* and opened the J.M. Dawson Church-State Research Center in Carroll Library on the

Baylor campus.

“Dr. James Wood certainly put the academic study of church-state relations on the map at Baylor and beyond,” said Doug Weaver, current director of the Dawson Institute and professor of Baptist studies at Baylor.

“As a Baptist, Wood understood the importance of the separation of church and state and how that separation was good for both. As he noted that spread of authoritarian governments in his day, he strongly advocated for the religious liberty ‘as an axiomatic principle basic to all human rights.’”

Wood left Baylor in 1972 to lead what then was called the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., for eight years.

In his inaugural address as head of Baptist Joint Committee, Wood said the concern of the church for religious liberty “must necessarily include the concern of the church for all civil liberties as inalienable rights of all men.”

Wood viewed the issue of religious liberty through the lens of God’s care for every human.

“To be true to its mission, therefore, the church must be involved in public affairs because it seeks to minister to the whole man in the world, and no aspect of life can be regarded as outside of God’s concern, dominion, and power,” he said.

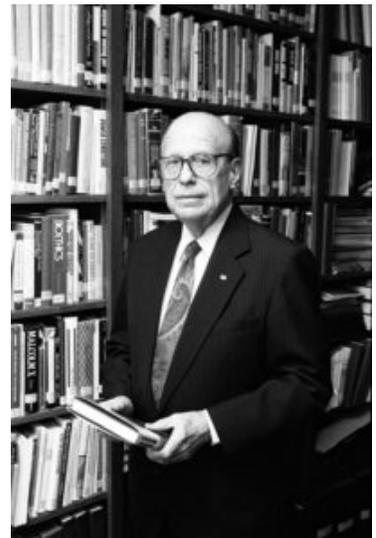


James E. Wood Jr. addressed a 1980 meeting of the Baptist Joint Committee board. (BJC Photo)

During his tenure at the Baptist Joint Committee, he led the agency to expand its mission to include issues such as international human rights and seeking an end to the nuclear arms race.

“It is safe to say that James Wood’s views were known inside the White House and the Department of State and that they helped the Carter Administration lay a sound foundation in formulating an international policy based in large measure on the bedrock commitment of Baptists and others to freedom of conscience,” said Stan Hastey, who worked with Wood at the Baptist Joint Committee.

For example, Hastey remembered Wood’s impassioned pleas on behalf of the imprisoned Soviet Baptist dissenter Georgi Vins were instrumental in securing Vins’ release from the USSR.



James E. Wood Jr. was director of the J.M. Dawson Institute for

Church-State Studies at
Baylor University.
(Photo courtesy of the
Texas Collection at
Baylor)

“James Wood was indefatigable, working tirelessly on a wide range of public policy issues he considered the rightful agenda of the Baptist Joint Committee,” he said.

Wood returned to Baylor in 1980, serving both as director of the Dawson Institute and as the Simon and Ethel Bun Professor of Church-State Studies. He retired from Baylor in 1999.

Wood served on various religious liberties committees, such as the World Council of Churches Committee on Religious Liberty, the First World Congress on Religious Liberty and the International Academy for Freedom of Religion and Belief, of which he was president.

He served as a consultant to many Eastern European countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union, advising them on the creation of new religious freedom laws. He received many awards, including the Religious Liberty Award by the Alliance for the Preservation of Religious Liberty and the Abner V. McCall Religious Liberty Award from the Baylor Alumni Association.

Wood was preceded in death by his wife of 58 years, Alma McKenzie Wood. He is survived by their son, James E. Wood III.

Compiled from reports by the Baptist Joint Committee and Baylor University.