

# Hawkins' biography introduces Criswell to new generations

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For 50 years, W.A. Criswell reigned as pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas. In a recently published biography, *Criswell: His Life and Times*, O.S. Hawkins aims to acquaint a new generation with this man, whom Hawkins held so dearly he regarded him as a father.

The biography, published by B&H Publishing Group, draws on numerous primary sources, including interviews with eyewitnesses to the accounts in the book, Criswell's oral histories maintained by Baylor University, various dissertations, previous biographies of Criswell, and the more than 4,000 sermons of Criswell available online.

But the new, never-before-published information—including Criswell's three regrets—came from a lengthy interview Hawkins conducted in 1994, “with the promise that I would not make it known and would not write this book until 20 years after his death,” Hawkins said.

“In many ways, he was a polarizing figure in Baptist life,” said Hawkins, Criswell's chosen successor to the First Baptist Dallas pastorate and former GuideStone president and CEO.

“I wanted to bring a semblance of balance into both streams of perception, as well as introduce him to new generations of evangelicals and church leaders who may not have known much about him.”

Hawkins said he sees this biography as a natural sequel to his earlier book, *In the Name of God: The Colliding Lives, Legends, and Legacies of J. Frank Norris and George W. Truett*, rewritten from his dissertation on these “two types of Baptists.”

“Since it is a well-known fact that Criswell grew up in a home where his father was a fierce supporter of Norris and his mother was a devotee of Truett,” when the agreed-upon time frame expired, Hawkins dug in to their impacts on the life of Criswell.

“Criswell lived his entire life with the two warring influences of Norris and Truett fighting for control within the inner recesses of his own heart and mind,” Hawkins said. He asserts Criswell was outwardly Truett, but inwardly, “where it counted,” he was Norris.

The book discusses matters ranging from Criswell’s Panhandle upbringing, in near poverty, to his strained family-life and his wife’s spy-network within the church, to Criswell’s magisterial approach to church leadership.

Hawkins also discusses Criswell’s leadership in producing what critics call a fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention from within, having learned a lesson from Norris’ unsuccessful efforts from without.

Hawkins agreed to answer questions raised by his book by email. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**How did you come to be close enough to the Criswells to accompany them on the European vacations the book mentions?**

I was pastor of First Baptist Church in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., for 15 years (1978-1993). The church there saw rapid and explosive growth that became known through evangelical circles.

During the 1980s, the Criswells came to an antique show in Miami and called to see if we could join them for lunch after they attended our Sunday services. At lunch, I mentioned that I exchanged pulpits with the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London each summer in August.

He mentioned they were vacationing that same time in London that year, so

we spent several days together in London that summer.

From that experience, we began to travel each summer together to various places in Europe and the Middle East and developed a true father/son relationship, enjoying time together with our wives.

**You write about the warring influences of Norris and Truett on Criswell, describing him as a confluence of two lives into one—that he was Truett on the outside, but Norris on the inside.**

**You make this observation only a paragraph removed from a lengthy quote of Criswell giving his opinions of his two mentors where he says, “... Norris could do anything with a crowd... he was a gifted man, and knew crowd psychology ... how to manipulate people, but oh, underneath Frank Norris, there were personal attributes that were diabolical.”**

**Did you ever see Criswell display similar ability and willingness to influence—even manipulate—a crowd?**

Criswell readily recognized the strengths, as well as the weaknesses, of both Truett and Norris, discarding the worst and seeking to incorporate the best traits of both men.

No one could “rise to the occasion” like Criswell. Whether it was his message on the communist threat the Sunday after the Kennedy assassination [or] his message of the open door when he publicly acknowledged the church’s long history of racial injustice and declared without question its repentance and open-door policy, he challenged people without the tinge of manipulation, but also built on a solid biblical basis. For example, simply listen to his message “Whether We Live or Die” from the SBC Pastor’s Conference, available at [wacriswell.com](http://wacriswell.com).

**What is your perspective on what led to Criswell’s change-of-mind**

## **on race relations and abortion?**

Dr. Criswell, in the midst of his greatness, possessed the unique ability to own his own mistakes, readily admit them, correct them and move on. As to the race issue, he began his ministry with stellar convictions regarding this—as evidenced by his telling the church he pastored at White Mound if they did not allow him to baptize the Sandoval family simply because of the color of their skin, they could find a new pastor.

What happened was that he inherited a church from George Truett that was deeply imbedded with the stain of white supremacy. ... Sadly, he allowed himself to fit into its mold, and a few years later delivered the infamous speech on segregation to the South Carolina legislature. He called it the greatest mistake and most colossal blunder of his life and spent his last decade trying to atone for it, as documented in the book.

## **What other issues do you think Criswell would view differently today if he were still living?**

I feel certain he would weigh in on the women in ministry debate going on today. While he strongly believed that the office of senior pastor was scripturally defined for men only, he built the church with women staff members who labored tirelessly at their assigned ministries. These included the likes of Millie Kohn, Libby Reynolds, Ann Hood, Edith Marie King, June Hunt, Jane Mann and countless others.

Libby Reynolds directed the children's ministries at [First Baptist Dallas] for decades and was still here upon my own arrival. I have never known anyone who "shepherded" those children and their parents in the tender, yet bold, way she did, leading literally thousands of whole young families to faith in Christ.

**Given the way prime actors—Paige Patterson, Paul Pressler—in the conservative resurgence have fallen so far from grace, what do you**

**think his thoughts/feelings would be about the lasting legacy of that movement and/or those men?**

Any serious student of Baptist history would, or should, attest to the fact that the SBC was in need of a theological course correction during the 1960s and 1970s. This was always Criswell's focus. For him, it was never about people or personalities, but about principle.

He lived to see the lasting legacy of the conservative resurgence in the fact that every single professor in all six SBC seminaries unashamedly adheres to the Baptist Faith & Message 2000 and holds to biblical inerrancy. To Criswell, this was the lasting legacy of the conservative movement.

**You clearly loved W.A. Criswell. What did you love most about him, and what do you consider to be the most valuable contribution he made to the world?**

What I loved most about him was that in the midst of his accomplishments and recognized achievements, all the success of his books and his far-reaching influence, he never lost the wonder of it all. He maintained a childlike faith.

He brought a respectability to fundamental scriptural truth that had been lacking. Known primarily for his pulpit prowess, his greatest strength was his pastoral heart and his love for his people. And they loved him back.