

Florida Baptist Historical Society
MONOGRAPH

March, 2023

**George W. Truett:
Christ or Chaos**

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Published by the
Florida Baptist Historical Society
Graceville, Florida

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George W. Truett was a genuine southerner born in North Carolina, though he was an adopted Texan for most of his life. Educated at Baylor University, Truett served as the pastor at First Baptist Church of Dallas from 1897 to his death in 1944. At the time of his death, his funeral was the largest publicly attended service in the history of Dallas.

The late preacher is arguably one of the most distinguished preachers in the Southern Baptist Convention's history. Further, at one point, he served as the president of the Baptist World Alliance. Truett, known for regularly quoting the faith of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee, experienced the horrors of war himself, serving as an overseas chaplain in World War I. This unmistakably shaped him personally and impacted his preaching, including his thoughts on World War II.

This paper briefly presents his service in the Great War and his teachings during World War II. One common theme in studying his work is promoting religious liberty to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, most consequentially is the warning of destruction if one turns away from the ways of the Lord.

World War I

Truett, hand selected by President Woodrow Wilson and General John J. Pershing, volunteered seven months of his life ministering to the allied troops overseas. He was a staunch supporter of freedom of religion and viewed the central powers as a direct threat to the faith of Christianity. Supporting U.S. involvement in the war, he preached a parable:

If you and I were out here in the street and saw some bullying, braggart, boastful man trampling a helpless little woman or a helpless little child, and you and I should fold our hands and say, "I don't believe in war, I don't believe in interfering in other people's business," and let the child be slaughtered and the woman destroyed, manhood has left us, that's all. We have to have regard.¹

Truett maintained that liberty was in jeopardy, and his country had an obligation to protect nations unable to defend themselves. Like so many other preachers of his time, he felt God was with his government and proudly embraced the sovereignty of God. He argued several things were worth dying for, including "the Sanctity of womanhood, Righteousness, Defense of helpless childhood and Honor and freedom of the United States."² Truett barely escaped death himself when a "German submarine sunk a ship heading from Ireland to England."³ Biographer Leon McBeth shared the story:

Perhaps the closest call to danger that Truett experienced overseas was on his return from Ireland to England. The steamer on which he had a passage, and on

¹ George Truett, "The Lord Reigneth" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, December 14, 1941), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed September 27, 2022).

² George W. Truett, "Worth Dying For," February 21, 1919, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/634430510/?terms=george%20truett&match=1> (accessed September 27, 2022).

³ Leon McBeth, *The First Baptist Church of Dallas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 159.

which his luggage was already placed, sailed before Truett could come aboard. It was sunk by a German submarine, and Truett's luggage still rests beneath the sea.⁴

This killed some "520 people, including women, children, and several Americans."⁵ Though shaken up regarding the incident, Truett continued his journey, sharing the Gospel in record numbers. On one occasion, he preached to over "15,000 soldiers, where several members of the allied forces surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ."⁶ Interestingly, these soldiers could choose to watch a "film on screen or listen to Truett's sermon."⁷ They chose the latter.

Adhering to an omnipresent God, Truett adamantly felt autocracy led to the destruction of the Christian faith. After the war was won, he shared the following: "For once, autocracy and democracy met on a world scale. The law of the jungle dared to crawl out of its lair and say to the world, 'I will trample Right and set up the law of the tiger, Might.' But I'm thankful that I had the satisfaction of preaching Jesus Christ across the Rhine."⁸ In November 1918, New York State Headquarters shared the following message from Truett on the Allied victory:

Our multitude of sailors and soldiers overseas constitutes an incomparable challenge to patriotic and religious forces in America. These men now face the gravest test of victory – demobilization and readjustment – and urgently require the wisest and worthiest spiritual guidance. Less than our best is unworthy of our men, of our country, of our opportunity and of our God, who has saved civilization. The hour is here when America should dedicate her utmost for making a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.⁹

Truett felt God's hands guided his nation in advancing liberty across Europe. The concept of associating religious freedom with autonomy was nothing new. From the American Revolution and its connection with the Great Awakening to the Civil War and its strong relationship with Christianity, the nation had a reputation for embracing religious independence and, most certainly, faith in Christianity.

⁴ McBeth, *The First Baptist Church of Dallas*, 159.

⁵ Keith E. Durso, *Thy Will Be Done* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009), 148.

⁶ Rev. W. B. Cunningham, "Calvary Baptist Church," *The Houston Post*, November 4, 1918, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/87603628/?terms=george%20truett%20war%20ymca&match=1> (accessed September 26, 2022).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ George W. Truett, "Worth Dying For," February 21, 1919, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/634430510/?terms=george%20truett&match=1> (accessed September 27, 2022).

⁹ George W. Truett, "United War Work Campaign," November 19, 1918, *Corsicana Semi-Weekly Light*, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/legacy/42590314/?terms=george%20truett&match=1> (accessed September 27, 2022).

World War II

Truett vehemently defended U.S. intervention in European affairs when the Great War ended. However, the country mostly returned to its isolationist position, which he later reasoned led to the second global conflict. During World War II, his teachings gained popularity, promoting U.S. intervention overseas. He always correlated the will of God to the events occurring across the globe. In one sermon, he shared the story of a wounded General Stonewall Jackson. Jackson, shot by accidental friendly fire, maintained his Christian worldview, even at his death. He shared Jackson's words:

Why, gentlemen, be quiet. Don't be bothered. If I live, it'll be for the best, and if I die, it'll be for the best. God knows and directs all things for the best for those whose trust is in Him, and my trust is in Him.¹⁰

Jackson died shortly after the incident, yet his faith saved him in ultimate glory. All Christians, Truett said, could learn from Jackson. They were to live for God and the will of God.¹¹ On the evil the world was facing, he preached:

We're to remember all along that evil is here by the choice of men, not by the choice of God. God is not pleased that sin is rampant in the Earth. Oh, that heart of his suffers with the suffering of deity that sin is anywhere in the world. Men choose it, men elect to have it. By one man, sin entered into the world, and death by sin. God is not at fault for the evils that darken and distress the world.¹²

Truett taught his congregation that every human being had a purpose. According to him, they needed to cooperate with God and ensure "His will was being done on earth."¹³ Evil acts were not God's will. Truett mentioned Christians were required "to glorify God in all that they did and expected them to preach Christianity to all ears on earth."¹⁴ Instead of blaming God for darkness and the current war, he challenged his church to act on behalf of their Lord and Savior and promote righteousness.

In another 1941 sermon, his message was comparable. He preached, "Darkness was the reason for the world being at war."¹⁵ Emphasizing the sovereignty of God, he informed his church that God tested human souls and even condemned them. Citing the Bible, he explained this had always been the case.¹⁶ For many people, the judgment of God was taking place across the

¹⁰ George Truett, "The Grace of Patience" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, November 29, 1942), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 11, 2022).

¹¹ George Truett, "The Grace of Patience" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, November 29, 1942), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 11, 2022).

¹² George Truett, "God's Will Be Done" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, February 9, 1941), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 10, 2022).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

globe. Christians and their households had to ask if they had ignored their Lord and possibly caused a part of the current destruction experienced worldwide. According to Truett, Christians needed to look in the Old Testament to find out how God truly worked on Earth. He stated the following:

I've wondered if, in the providence of God, he hasn't allowed this great war to come down with its dark, desperate story and experience to come down; I have wondered if he hasn't let it come on the world, that Christian people might see, "You can't get on without me. You've tried to, and you've made a shipwreck of it. You can't get on without me; you can't get on without me."¹⁷

According to Truett, God often raised nations against each other to fulfill His ultimate will. Truett felt confident that God punished the living nations due to disobedience or lack of faith.

Adhering to similar beliefs during World War I, and expounding on the importance of patriotism, Truett shared the priority of American pride. He taught, "Every citizen should be a true patriot. He should love his country and be intensely and unceasingly interested in her highest welfare."¹⁸ The pastor mentioned that "liberty" was not to be taken advantage of.¹⁹ He commented that "lovers of liberty had confronted tyranny, darkness and driven back oppression" in this land for a long time.²⁰ Reflecting on war, Truett stated some things in life were worth dying for:

The sanctity of womanhood anywhere is worth dying for; the safety of childhood is worth dying for; the integrity of a man's country is worth dying for; the freedom and honor of a man's country are worth dying for. Very well – they are worth living for! Patriotism not only demands the sacrifice of life when the time comes, it demands the consecration of life, all the time. Every citizen is to live at the highest and best for his country all the time! In thought, in speech, in action, in service – we are to live, unceasingly, at the highest and best for our country.²¹

Truett also "demanded civilization must find a way to settle differences without war." He positioned, "guns, swords, and poisonous gasses would destroy civilization as they currently knew it unless something changed very soon."²² For Truett, believers needed to remember the foundation of Christianity. The answer, summed up in one Biblical teaching found in Mark 12:30–31: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." The term neighbor held great emphasis. He taught:

¹⁷ George Truett, "Philip at Samaria" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, March 16, 1941), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 10, 2022).

¹⁸ George Truett, "The Chief Standard of Greatness" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, July 6, 1941), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 11, 2022).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² George Truett, "The Chief Standard of Greatness" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, July 6, 1941), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 11, 2022).

Your neighbor is anyone on the face of the Earth who needs you. Maybe he lives next door to you in Dallas; maybe he's the most distantly removed citizen from you in Dallas, or the most distantly removed citizen from you in the state of Texas, or in America, or maybe he's on the other side of the world, so bedarkened and benighted and paganized that he doesn't know there's such a country as America, much less about you. Very well; wherever in all the world there's anybody who needs you and me, there's our neighbor. According to Truett, all Christians had a duty to serve humanity.²³

Humanity was the key. For Christians, the scriptures taught that God created mankind in His image; therefore, every human soul was important in the eyes of their Lord and Savior. He explained the following on the Christians' duty: "Every Christian ought to go to Africa or China or Japan or send others and support them while they're gone. The meaning and mission of life is unselfish service and salvation of humanity; that's the meaning and mission of life."²⁴

What was the Christians' duty in a time of war? Truett echoed the North Carolina Baptist publication the *Biblical Recorder's* concerns as he preached (on July 7, 1941), "Religion is the determining factor of any and every civilization."²⁵ The preacher quoted Englishman Lloyd George stating, "It is to be Christ or chaos for the world."²⁶ Citing scripture, the pastor mentioned, "Blessed are those whose God is the Lord."²⁷ He reasoned to his church that peace "would cease to exist until every soul was righteous." Truett added darkness must "be overcome with righteousness." He proclaimed, "Never was this so true in the history of mankind."²⁸ He emphasized that peace was impossible unless there was righteousness, arguing, "We must remember all the time, you can't have peace until first of all you have righteousness. Unrighteousness must be called to account. The forces of unrighteousness must be challenged. Lawlessness must be called to requisition. Lawlessness must be confronted by law and order."²⁹

Preaching in January 1943, George Truett "begged his congregation" to re-dedicate themselves to God. He acknowledged his nation's involvement in the war. There was no denying that evil was present and darkness filled the earth. He urged his congregation to "follow Christ in their personal lives, and in everything they did in life." He maintained, "If our lives are to count for

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ George Truett, "The Chief Standard of Greatness" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, July 6, 1941), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 11, 2022).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

the highest and best then these lives of ours must be unreservedly dedicated to Christ, that His will may be expressed through them in all the fullness of His great purposes of grace."³⁰

If an entire country was to change for God, Truett felt that the change could start with each person in his Dallas-based church. He proclaimed, "Christ asks for our lives; for our lives." Continuing he said, "I seek not your's, but you." This is the great test He asks from us all, Truett said. It is the supreme test: "I ask for your life. I seek not your's, but you."³¹ The preacher believed God would raise nations against one another due to their disobedience to His commands. Reflecting on the current times, he reiterated, "nations would fall who ignored the ways of Jesus Christ."³² Yet if one person or an entire government remained loyal to God, their country could prevail in times of darkness. Truett continued:

The self-centered nation is lost, and there are nations now on the toboggan slide because they're marked for doom. History will not let us forget that nations and cities, once proud and powerful, who forgot God, now sleep in the cemetery of defeated peoples because they forgot God. The self-centered city, the self-centered denomination, the self-centered local church, the self-centered family, the self-centered individual, man or woman, is going down the toboggan and is marked for defeat and doom.³³

He urged his congregation to remain strong in their faith regardless of the future. The decision was simple; one could choose "Christ, or they could choose chaos." In the end, individuals needed to decide for themselves while realizing the implications of such decisions. Truett stated:

Follow Christ; follow Christ through evil as well as good report. Follow Christ as you climb the steep hill. Follow Christ if it takes you into the dismal swamp. Follow Christ if following means suffering, yea, if it means death – follow Christ.³⁴

This sermon emphasized faith and the consequences of not having Christ. He raised the popular mindset that God's judgment rests upon peoples and nations who do not serve Him but exist in self-centeredness. At the same time, if an entire civilization remained loyal to God, it could prevail in times of darkness, similar to Israel and its path in the Old Testament. Obviously, Truett had America in mind.

³⁰ George Truett, "I Seek Not Yours" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, January 3, 1943), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 11, 2022).

³¹ Ibid.

³² George Truett, "I Seek Not Yours" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, January 3, 1943), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 11, 2022).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ George Truett, "Christ's Standard for Real Greatness" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, January 24, 1943), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 11, 2022).

The congregation knew their pastor condemned war. However, his church also understood that he supported his fellow Americans, including their soldiers. Truett felt America had no choice but to fight in this world war. The preacher declared:

We must find a way to end war, and our boys and girls going away now, to defend our country – as I think they ought to do – it's a defensive war we're waging. We're not out for anybody's land, we're not out for anybody's territory, we're not out for anybody's lust of gold: we're out for the defense of our homes, and civil government is ordained of God and every man and woman should be the best citizen possible, throwing off never on the great duties of citizenship.³⁵

Perhaps a battle of good versus evil was truly underway. For Truett, the United States had no choice but to enter the war. Regardless of one's position on the war, there was no denying that massive destruction was underway across the entire world. It was the duty of every Christian to ensure such destruction would end and the ways of Jesus Christ would prevail across their country and, ideally, the entire world.

Truett uniquely experienced both world wars, having served in one. He died in 1944, though his lessons continue to be shared today. He loved the Lord and prayerfully sought His will and guidance in all aspects of life. Likewise, he consistently supported U.S. involvement in both world wars. His position never changed, rationalizing intervention to promote religious liberty. While one may not agree with his position on warfare, we can respect his desire to advance freedom of religion, which made faith in the Lord possible.

Conclusion

Christ or Chaos. This was a common theme for the Southern Baptist Convention and, more specifically, George Truett during World War II. Europe and Asia were in turmoil, and soon the United States, the isolationist nation, found themselves attacked at Pearl Harbor.

During the war, the consensus was the country must be for Christ or chaos would overcome everyday life. Could God's judgment be carried out on countries for sin? In their annual meetings, the SBC brought up topics from sexual immorality and alcohol abuse to a lack of church involvement. The denomination as a whole felt the nation was lacking Jesus Christ. George Truett agreed.

It can be argued that Christian principles founded the government, but the country is not of the faith today. Using the Biblical interpretation of Truett, the U.S. is in trouble. Jesus is rarely discussed, and if He is, the person is often ridiculed for referencing a God active with His creation. History is studying God's involvement with His creation. Billy Graham largely came to relevance due to his Los Angeles Crusades. Graham preached L.A. was a sinful city, perhaps the worst in America, and only the Lord Jesus Christ could save the people from destruction. The people listened, and a revival began. Historians continue to study the impact of the Cold War and the fear of communism as a key part of Graham's early success.

³⁵ George Truett, "Christ's Standard for Real Greatness" (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, January 24, 1943), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed October 11, 2022).

Christians must seek revival versus destruction. Nationalism grew once the Japanese struck the U.S. at Pearl Harbor. We saw this again in 2001 with the World Trade Center and Pentagon attack. Americans united. However, throughout history, this has always been temporary. Politics and division always come knocking.

This nation still lacks hope, understanding, and guidance. After the atomic bombs hit Japan, Japan was made new. Christian missionaries were the first foreigners welcomed to the country outside of the military. President Harry Truman knew the impact of Christianity, as did General Douglas MacArthur. After the September 11 attacks in 2001, one plane traveled the skies; President George Bush allowed Billy Graham to fly.

Was Truett correct? A nation without Christ is a civilization lost? Christians acknowledge we are in a fallen world. However, the believer must not be complacent with the dark. It is our biblical duty to shine the light of Jesus. The North and South were proud to proclaim Christianity in the war between the states. Today, the South is still known as the "Bible belt." Christian principles helped shape the United States. However, like Israel in the Old Testament, generations come and go. With each new generation, God is either ignored or embraced. Truett's concerns hold true today. For many, this country resembles or is headed more toward that of a communist or socialist government. The faith is often under attack. May the Lord create a genuine revival in this land. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." (Psalm 33:12)

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