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THE GOSPEL, RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, AND SOCIAL DUTY: The Holistic Theology of George Washington Truett

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George Washington Truett (1867-1944) is most well-known as the pastor who developed the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, into the large and important church it remains today. Truett was, moreover, a leading trustee at Baylor University, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, a trusted speaker for President Woodrow Wilson, and the president of the Baptist World Alliance. He has been compared both to William Jennings Bryan and to Charles Haddon Spurgeon for his rhetorical ability and was highly successful as an evangelist among the cowboys of West Texas. Closer to home, Truett was the leading trustee for Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary from its foundation in 1908 until his death in 1944.

Truett's best-known address is his dramatic sermon on "Baptists and Religious Liberty." Delivered from the eastern steps of the United States Capitol on May 16, 1920, the audience of 15,000 included many Baptists alongside presidential cabinet officers, senators, congressmen, journalists, and a variety of religious leaders and intellectuals. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Lee Canipe gathered evidence of the original excitement and continuing importance of that address in "The Echoes of Baptist Democracy."¹ *The Baptist Standard* in 1920 described Truett's address as "the greatest hour ever witnessed in the SBC."² The Baptist historian Walter Shurden said it remained "one of the most often quoted

¹Lee Canipe, "The Echoes of Baptist Democracy: George Truett's Sermon at the U. S. Capitol as Patriotic Apology," *ABQ* 21 (2002): 415–31. Cf. Canipe, *A Baptist Democracy: Separating God and Caesar in the Land of the Free* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011).

²"The SBC," *Baptist Standard*, May 20, 1920, 1.

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Baptist statements on religious liberty of the twentieth century.”³ The sermon continues to be reprinted in full and in excerpt, physically and digitally, and continues to be lauded by both Southern Baptist moderates and conservatives in the twenty-first century.⁴

Because of the dominance of religious liberty in the title and in the first part of Truett’s long address, it is easy to forget Truett was equally interested in aspects of what today might be called “social justice.” His passion for Baptists to exercise their social responsibility indeed dominated the second part of his most famous address. In Truett’s day, the typical terminology, originally fostered and consistently advanced by Walter Rauschenbusch, was the “Social Gospel.” Truett shared the platform of the Second Congress of the Baptist World Alliance in Philadelphia with Rauschenbusch.⁵ He also shared many of the same social concerns as the pastor from Hell’s Kitchen, but it would be inappropriate to categorize the pastor from Dallas as a participant in the Social Gospel movement. His definition of “gospel” was thoroughly evangelical, even as his passion for the Christian life was thoroughly integrative.

Truett was a gospel preacher who demanded Christians live with integrity. He coupled the priority of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ with political theology. His political theology combined widespread evangelical

³Walter Shurden, *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Religious Liberty* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1997), 5.

⁴More recently, see Charles W. DeWeese, “George W. Truett, the Baptist World Alliance, and Freedom,” Texas Baptists Committed, August 2004, <https://www.txbc.org/2004Journals/August%202004/Aug04GWTruett.htm>; “Truett’s Famed Religious Liberty Speech Recreated at D.C. Event,” Baptist News Global, June 28, 2007, <https://baptistnews.com/article/truetts-famed-religious-liberty-sermon-recreated-at-dc-event/>; Sam Hodges, “Truett Speech Remembered,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 29, 2007; Rob Sellers, “Religious Liberty, Our Forgotten Baptist Heritage,” Good Faith Media, November 3, 2011, <https://goodfaithmedia.org/religious-liberty-our-forgotten-baptist-heritage-cms-18774/>; George W. Truett, “Baptists and Religious Liberty” (Transcript), Baptist Joint Committee, March 2014, <https://bjconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Baptists-and-Religious-Liberty.pdf>; David Roach, “Truett’s Religious Liberty Legacy Celebrated,” Baptist Press, July 7, 2014, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/truetts-religious-liberty-legacy-celebrated/>; Danny Akin, “Religious Liberty: A Baptist Distinctive,” Baptist Press, January 29, 2016, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/religious-liberty-a-baptist-distinctive/>; Ken Camp, “George W. Truett on Religious Liberty,” *Baptist Standard*, August 22, 2016; George W. Truett, “Baptists and Religious Liberty” (Digital Copy), Baylor Digital Collections, <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/baptists-and-religious-liberty/820079>; O.S. Hawkins, “The Legacy of George W. Truett,” Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, August 30, 2021, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/the-legacy-of-george-w-truett/>.

⁵Keith E. Durso, *Thy Will Be Done: A Biography of George W. Truett* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 107. Truett spoke twice and served on the Resolutions Committee of the meeting. The Baptist World Alliance, Second Congress, Philadelphia, June 19-25, 1911 (Philadelphia: Harper, 1911), xv, 89.

invitations to faith in Christ with appeals for both universal religious liberty and for Christians to fulfill their social duties. His vision for politics and for Christian involvement drew upon Scripture, history, and contemporary crises to address the churches, the nation, and the world. Our goal here is to provide a sketch of Truett's holistic and integrative political theology, a political theology which included both a grand hope for individual religious liberty and Christian involvement in education, politics, and society. We shall begin with a review of his famous Capitol speech.

I. RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Two weeks after Truett delivered his address, it was published by the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. James Bruton Gambrell, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and a retired professor from Southwestern Seminary, contributed an effusive preface. He compared it to Paul preaching in Rome and argued it demonstrated how Baptist ideas about personal religious liberty had been largely responsible for the United States becoming "the greatest and freest nation on earth."⁶ Gambrell believed Truett's address made the Baptist logic abundantly clear to every listener. The first half of Truett's *Baptists and Religious Liberty* develops the Baptist theology of religious liberty. The second half of the sermon develops his view of what it means for Baptists to take their beliefs into the public square. Religious liberty and social ethics are tightly correlated, the second deriving from the first.

This correlation between religious liberty and social ethics is so tightly presented that postmodern Baptist scholars detect a melding of American patriotism with Baptist identity. According to Canipe, "Truett seamlessly weaves Baptist theology and American democracy together to the point that the two are virtually indistinguishable."⁷ Truett's mixture, Canipe says, means he has sublimated freedom in Christ to American ideas. He accuses Truett and other early twentieth-century Baptists of deriving religious liberty from state patronage, "a notion at odds with an historical Baptist theology that locates the source of religious freedom in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."⁸ Canipe interprets Truett with a deconstructionist hermeneutic, ascribing hidden motives to power, but

⁶George W. Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty* (Nashville, TN: Baptist Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1920).

⁷Canipe, "The Echoes of Baptist Democracy," 416.

⁸Canipe, "The Echoes of Baptist Democracy," 423. Cf. Greg Wills, "Review of A Baptist Democracy," by Lee Canipe, *Journal of Church and State* 55 (2013): 355–58.

his contention is proven false from the very beginning of Truett's address.

This postmodern reading of Truett and other early twentieth-century Southern Baptists is exposed as fallacious through two important moves those theologians make. First, Gambrell recognized in his preface the division which must be maintained between Baptist beliefs and their positive influence on wider society. Both Gambrell and Truett faithfully maintained the difference between church and state and the difference between the goals of each institution. They rejoiced that while Baptist beliefs in Christian freedom and "spiritual democracy" contributed to the development of human freedom and "American democracy," they nonetheless strongly maintained a difference between church and state. Our twentieth-century Southern Baptist forefathers exalted that difference to the point of "strict separation," according to a prominent Southwestern Seminary historian.⁹

The first half of Truett's address is addressed to "fundamental Baptist principles." There are nine identifiable principles in Truett's presentation. The first, which explains all the others, is "the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. That doctrine is for Baptists the dominant fact in all their Christian experience, the nerve center of all their Christian life, the bedrock of all their church policy, the sheet anchor of all their rejoicings."¹⁰ Contrary to Canipe's postmodern reading, wherein Baptist principles are grounded in American polity, Truett stations everything manifestly in Jesus Christ. The importance of this first principle ought not be understated. From the absolute Lordship of Christ over church and state, as well as over every individual, the rest of Truett's political theology develops.

The eight remaining ground principles include everything from epistemology to personal salvation to separation of church and state. The second principle is epistemological: "The Bible, and the Bible alone, is the rule of faith and practice for Baptists."¹¹ Third, Baptists reject every effort of "lording it over the consciences of men." "Freedom of conscience" is diametrically opposed, for instance, to Roman Catholic sacerdotal, sacramental, and ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹² Fourth, the absolute Lordship

⁹Jim Spivey, "Separation No Myth: Religious Liberty's Biblical and Theological Bases," *SWJT* 36.3 (1994): 15.

¹⁰Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 9.

¹¹Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 10.

¹²Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 10–12. Truett did not foresee the rise of Baptists who would construct their own cultural "hierarchies," such as those of elders over laity or of males over females.

of Jesus Christ shows itself in the individual's "direct, personal dealings with God."¹³ Fifth, Christ commanded not multiple priestly sacraments conveying grace but two ordinances which are symbolic.¹⁴

The sixth foundational Baptist principle concerns the conviction that "the New Testament clearly teaches that Christ's church is not only a spiritual body but is also a pure democracy, all its members being equal, a local congregation, and cannot subject itself to any outside control."¹⁵ This important principle is key not only for the development of congregational polity but also for the remaining principles which ensure the untrammelled Lordship of Christ over each person and each church. The seventh principle derived therefrom is "a free church in a free state." Against the Roman Emperor Constantine's "apostasy," Truett says, "Christ's religion needs no prop of any kind from any worldly source, and to the degree that it is thus supported is a millstone hanged about its neck."¹⁶

The eighth Baptist principle intersects with the modern American ideal, taking a circuitous and tortuous route through the Magisterial Reformers and early Puritan persecutions of the Baptists. The relevant ideas are set in dualistic terms. On the one side, there is "individualism" and "democracy;" on the opposite side, "absolutism" and "autocracy." The ninth and final Baptist principle is a necessary consequence of the absolute Lordship of Christ in the distinct realms of life. Church and state must "be forever separate and free, that neither may trespass upon the distinctive functions of the other."¹⁷

II. SOCIAL DUTY

After establishing the ground principles from which Southern Baptist ideas about social duties emanate, Truett discussed some of those derivative social responsibilities. In the second half of his famous address. After the "fundamental Baptist principles," there "comes now the clarion call to us to be the right kind of citizens."¹⁸ There are seven social priorities for Christians seeking to be the right kind of citizens, the first being the need to serve one another in love and not abuse the wide civil liberties

¹³Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 12–15.

¹⁴Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 15–16.

¹⁵Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 16.

¹⁶Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 16–17.

¹⁷Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 19–22.

¹⁸Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 25.

available to Baptists in American society.¹⁹ Second comes the Baptist need to encourage the adoption of “laws humane and righteous” within the nation. Third, the Christian must not only be a national citizen but a “world citizen,” being particularly concerned for the pursuit of peace among the nations.²⁰

Fourth, Truett considers the ways in which Baptists must prepare their people to lead in the new environment. He again distinguishes between the “civil” and “religious” forms of “democracy.”²¹ While the Dallas pastor allows a place for secular universities, he is convinced by his theological anthropology that “the only complete education, in the nature of the case, is Christian education, because man is a tripartite being.”²² Fifth, as always giving priority to the gospel, Truett asserts, “we must keep faithfully and practically in mind our primary task of evangelism, the work of winning souls from sin unto salvation, from Satan unto God.” The primary task of evangelism likewise fosters concern for worldwide missions.²³

The sixth social duty first turns inward critically. To be a faithful witness to the world of biblical principles, Baptists must pursue holiness. “Surely we should be a holy people.”²⁴ Finally, as with the strict separation of church and state, which provided a capstone for the fundamental Baptist principles, Truett concluded with a capstone for the social duties incumbent upon Baptists, indeed upon all Christians. “Let us today renew our pledge to God, and to one another, that we will give our best to church and to state, to God and to humanity, by his grace and power, until we fall on the last sleep.”²⁵

Truett’s logic in *Baptists and Religious Liberty* is both clear and compelling. From the single great principle of the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ, Truett calls Baptists to be true to their derivative principles, such as direct, personal responsibility before God and the strict separation of church and state. Operating from these principles, he then calls Baptists to be good citizens of both the nation and of the world, even as they carefully maintain their distinctions from them. Baptist principles, grounded in the lordship of Jesus Christ, issue forth in social duties. We now turn to

¹⁹Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 24–26.

²⁰Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 26–30.

²¹Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 30.

²²Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 31–32.

²³Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 32–34.

²⁴Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 35.

²⁵Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, 36.

other relevant works to provide more detail regarding Truett's social and political theology.

III. FAITH THEN WORKS

Truett's sermons can be paired thematically, along similar lines to his famous Capitol address. On the one hand, he emphasized the Word of God in order to save souls through personal faith in the atoning death and justifying resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. On the other hand, he emphasized the thorough impact the gospel should make upon the Christian life, including all of a person's responsibilities in the home, the church, and the society. Take, for instance, two sermons Truett preached during a June 1917 revival in Fort Worth, Texas. The first considers the gospel of Jesus Christ. The second considers the effect of the gospel upon the Christian life.²⁶

In the first sermon, "How To Be Saved," Truett addresses unbelievers. Truett outlines three simple steps for salvation: seek Jesus's help, take Jesus at his Word, and trust Jesus will do what he says.²⁷ He called for simplicity: Preachers should make it clear exactly what salvation entails. And unbelievers should pray in the simplest of terms, "Lord, help me! Lord, forgive me! Lord, save me! Do for me what needs to be done, I humbly pray."²⁸ The New Testament describes personal salvation in various ways, but for Truett the dominant idea within the pivotal moment is an entire personal yielding to Jesus as Master: "Yes, Jesus, I yield. I give up. I trust. I surrender. Save me your way."

Such yielding is only possible when one admits personal sinfulness and inability while receiving the Word of Christ being proclaimed. "Lord Jesus, here I am, a sinner, and I cannot save myself."²⁹ The effective agent in salvation is the Word of God itself, and the sinner's role is limited to reception. "The very essence of faith is taking Christ at His word."³⁰ The hearer must respond to Christ. "Christ does the saving, and does it all. But the sinner has to give up to Christ, and then when the sinner does

²⁶I systematized Truett's Christ-centered doctrine earlier in this journal and refer the reader there for details about both his dogmatic theology and practical theology. Malcolm B. Yarnell III, "A Theology for the Church: George W. Truett and the Southwestern Tradition," *SWJT* 63.1 (2020): 4–19.

²⁷George W. Truett, *A Quest for Souls: Comprising all the Sermons Preached and Prayers Offered in a Series of Gospel Meetings, Held in Fort Worth, Texas* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1945), 275.

²⁸Truett, *A Quest for Souls*, 277.

²⁹Truett, *A Quest for Souls*, 279.

³⁰Truett, *A Quest for Souls*, 284.

that, Christ takes such sinner, forgives and guides and keeps such sinner for all the afterwhile. How simple and how glorious! Come, now.”³¹ The pastor called new believers to make their confession public. His editor notes, “Numbers came forward, confessing Christ, while the song was being sung.”³²

In the second sermon, “The Supreme Offering to Christ,” Truett addressed a lunch audience, whom he presumed to be “Christian men and women.” While Christ performs the work of salvation in the sinner’s life, from beginning to end, the Christian carries a responsibility for practical Christian living. Yielding in faith begins the Christian life and yielding to Jesus as Lord continues the Christian life. “Would you have your life to count for the highest and the best? Then such life cannot count for the highest and best if it be not yielded to the guidance and mastership of the Lord Jesus Christ.”³³ For the Kingdom of God to triumph, emphasis must not be placed upon numbers, nor upon finances, but upon surrender. God works through those who “put God’s cause as the first thing in his life.”³⁴ Family and business come after God.

Truett described the Christian life metaphorically as a trust. A “trustee” prudentially stewards the estate of another. The transformative discovery of a West Texas cattleman served as an example. The cattleman confided, “Now I see that every hoof of all these thousands of cattle belongs to Christ, and every acre of all these lands over which they browse belongs to Christ, and I want to take my true place in God’s cause. I want you to tell God for me that I will be His trustee from this day on. I will be his administrator on His estate.”³⁵ The Christian who approaches life in a selfish or hedonistic way simply does not understand Christianity. “One of two factors dominate every life. Either self is the dominating factor in life, or God. Mark it! The self-centered life is doomed.”³⁶ Selfishness dooms not only individuals, but also families, organizations, and nations.

IV. “WE ARE ALL DEBTORS TO OUR FELLOW HUMANITY”

According to Thurmon Earl Bryant, the principles of “stewardship” and “debtorship” anchored Truett’s concept of the Christian life. Service

³¹Truett, *A Quest for Souls*, 284.

³²Truett, *A Quest for Souls*, 288.

³³Truett, *A Quest for Souls*, 196.

³⁴Truett, *A Quest for Souls*, 198.

³⁵Truett, *A Quest for Souls*, 202.

³⁶Truett, *A Quest for Souls*, 203.

is the task of the Christian life.³⁷ And radical service to Christ, according to Truett, manifests itself in every arena. “It is by service that we vindicate our faith in any and every realm of life, in business, in literature, in statecraft, in religion.”³⁸ Jesus, moreover, upends the standards of success. Truett subordinated the martial standard of greatness, as well as the financial and intellectual: “War must cease unto the ends of the earth.”³⁹ “The true wealth of a country is not financial and material, but moral and spiritual.”⁴⁰ And while the intellectual standard supersedes other standards, it too must serve.

All Christians must subordinate themselves to Jesus Christ, and our Lord calls us to serve him in the world. “The Great Saviour and Master tells us that he who would be the chiefest of all must be the servant of all. He teaches us that all power is under inexorable bonds to serve humanity—all power, whether it be physical, financial, social, intellectual, moral or spiritual.” The first principle within Christian service is, therefore, “debtorship,”

The correct life-principle for every life is thus stated by Paul: “I am debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians; both to the wise and to the unwise.” “I am debtor” means just what the words declare. We are all debtors to our fellow humanity. We owe ourselves to mankind.⁴¹

How does a Christian pay the debt he owes, first, to Christ, and thence, to others? By service through the whole of life. A person can invest her life in one of three ways: As a miser, refusing to invest in others; as a prodigal, spending everything upon oneself; or, as a debtor, serving others.⁴² One can live life either as “a tramp,” “a thief,” or “a trustee.” Make your choice now.⁴³ The spheres of service include, first, the home, but also society. Every human being is our neighbor. “We must not, dare not, be indifferent to any human life, anywhere. As we can help humanity, we are constrained by

³⁷Thurman Earl Bryant, “The Ethics of George Washington Truett” (Th.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1959), 96.

³⁸George W. Truett, “The Making of a Life,” in *Follow Thou Me* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1932), 117.

³⁹Truett, *Follow Thou Me*, 118.

⁴⁰Truett, *Follow Thou Me*, 119.

⁴¹Truett, *Follow Thou Me*, 120.

⁴²Truett, *Follow Thou Me*, 121.

⁴³Bryant, “The Ethics of George Washington Truett,” 102.

bonds inexorable to render such help.⁴⁴ And if you refuse to help, you are sinning.⁴⁵ For Truett, theology and practice are inextricably intertwined. Doctrine must be expressed in duty, and “duty is the unfailing test of doctrine.”⁴⁶ Faith and works coinhere.

V. HIGH THEOLOGY, HIGH ANTHROPOLOGY

To be honest, Truett’s humanitarian vision not merely refreshes but shocks, for a different spirit is evident today. In the last few years, the Southern Baptist Convention’s repeated resolutions regarding the problems of misogyny and racism, alongside continuing news stories exposing ecclesiastical misdeeds, remind us that a deficient anthropology is our most significant problem. In the Conservative Resurgence, while we emphasized institutional respect for the Word of God, did we forsake personal respect for the image of God? To his credit, George W. Truett had a high anthropology at the same time he maintained a high bibliology, theology, and Christology along with a sober hamartiology and passionate soteriology. Truett’s anthropology is high, precisely because his theology is high. He grounded his anthropology, and thereby his ethics, in the *imago Dei*. And his doctrine of the image of God was compelled by his high regard for the Word of God.

Regarding the doctrine of revelation, Truett consistently stood against both liberalism and its modernist soulmate, fundamentalism. On the one hand, against liberalism and the historical critical method, Truett proclaimed, “This holy Bible is the infallible rule of faith and practice.” He believed in the utter truthfulness of Scripture because it was inspired by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ On the other hand, against those consumed with defending the Bible rather than preaching and living it, Truett said, “Let not the last blatant attack against the Bible be noticed overmuch. It is not the chief business of God’s minister to answer the last fool who has escaped from the mortar in which he was brayed. The Gospel faithfully preached is its own best defense.”⁴⁸

Regarding the doctrine of humanity, Truett argued human life is

⁴⁴Truett, *Follow Thou Me*, 122.

⁴⁵“To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (James 4:17). Bryant, “The Ethics of George Washington Truett,” 100.

⁴⁶Bryant, “The Ethics of George Washington Truett,” 105.

⁴⁷George W. Truett, “The Bible Lost and Found,” in *George W. Truett Library*, ed. Powhatan James (1950; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 1.2:69.

⁴⁸George W. Truett, “The Subject and Object of the Gospel,” in *We Would See Jesus and Other Sermons* (New York: Revell, 1915), 202.

supremely valuable on the basis of its relationship to God. In a 1907 sermon in Waco, Texas, Truett asserted: “Next in importance to a right conception of God, is a right conception of man. To think meanly of human life is to live meanly.”⁴⁹ This foundational truth grounds the Baptist concerns for human liberty, free speech, and freedom of conscience.

Warning America, Truett exposed the significant errors of civilizations past and present. Ancient Rome and ancient Egypt held humans as slaves. France’s Napoleon considered 100,000 human lives trivial. Contemporary Russia struggled with anti-Judaism. And America? “That terrible trinity of horrors—suicide, lynching, murder—still mock us, with their awful carnival in every section of our great country.”

If this nation is to be saved from the doom of the proud nations of the olden days, we must learn from the Son of God himself the priceless value of human life. We must see in humanity, with all of its races and classes, the image of God, despoiled and defaced to be sure, but see that image sufficiently to know that a man, any man, anywhere, is infinitely more precious than fine gold, even than the golden wedge of Ophir. We must see that the value of the meanest human life in the earth is wholly irreducible to terms of silver and gold. This is the doctrine that needs profoundest emphasis today, the dignity and value of human life.

Truett’s declamation against the inhumanity of America was just beginning. He called America to tame its commercial and martial spirits.

No country can be truly called rich where human life is held as a cheap thing; where vast plague spots are willingly allowed to infect her cities; where conditions are such that hordes of defenceless [*sic*] women and children live in squalor and sordidness, dwarfed in body and mind, with life’s horizon little larger than that of the beasts that perish. Any and every civilization is a dismal failure, even though its commerce is in every market, and its ships on every sea, and its banks glutted with gold, if the end of such civilization

⁴⁹George W. Truett, “Why Save Human Life?,” *The Baptist Standard* (December 26, 1907): 1. All further quotations in this section come from this source.

is the making of money, rather than the making of men.

Truett called for his hearers (and *The Baptist Standard* for its readers) to remember, “Next to God, in dignity and value, let it be said with reverence is man.” Of course, Truett, as a good Bible reader and evangelistic preacher, recalled humanity’s fall, continuing sinfulness, and need for salvation. Yet humanity retains its value. “He was made in the image of God, and though fallen and marred by sin, he still retains traces of his wonderful creation. The tiniest babe, therefore, that ever cooed in its mother’s arms, is intrinsically more valuable than the whole material universe.”

Truett’s lofty theological rhetoric was not exaggerated “preacher talk.” He meant every practical word with every doctrinal fiber of his entire Christian being. The value of the *imago Dei* extends to the community and the individual. What gives human life practical value today ought not be found in some measurable ability or accomplishment, but in the fact that each life was created in order to render God his glory. “Infinite dignity and value is therefore given to human life, because of its exalted office. The humblest peasant in this way becomes a king.”

Truett also called for practical legislation to preserve social life. God, both in nature and by grace through Jesus Christ, demands that we seek the welfare of every human being. Laws must be passed to protect children from abusive labor practices; the ghetto landlord must provide safe housing. “The voice of human blood crieth against us on every side, if in any wise we disregard the safety and the preciousness of human life.”

The requirement to seek the welfare of our fellow human beings is laid upon every preacher, every educator, every journalist, every politician, every businessman, and every labor leader. “Christ’s conception of human life and His Spirit toward it must be ours. He magnified the dignity of the individual. He gave constant emphasis to human brotherhood. He practiced a pure democracy.” Rather than self-centered tyrants who abuse humanity, this revered pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, asked Christians to place their hope in the Prince of Peace.

VI. WHERE IS THIS BAPTIST VOICE TODAY?

George Washington Truett’s evangelical doctrines of the Lordship of Christ and of personal salvation compelled his beliefs about religious liberty and social ethics. His list of accomplishments is akin to that of Spurgeon. To advance human education, he pulled Baylor University

back from the brink of insolvency, surrendering his own college savings to see the job completed. He made Texas Baptist medical facilities his pet project, providing the vision and raising the funds for what was formerly called Baylor Hospital system, including advocacy for African American medical care.⁵⁰ He helped build orphanages. He preached peace passionately and supported war only in absolute necessity. He made sure African American Baptists were neither segregated nor otherwise discriminated against during the 1939 Atlanta meeting of the Baptist World Alliance.⁵¹ He denounced lynching, when few Southern Baptist leaders, save Joseph Martin Dawson of the First Baptist Church of Waco, the “Mother Church” of Texas Baptists, dared say anything.⁵²

During his 1911 sermons to the Baptist World Alliance, Truett called for “heroic” and “sacrificial” service. For him, there were Christians, and then there were “the right kind of Christians,” those who “literally re-live Christ” and “give Christ their best.”⁵³ This was the type of Christian Truett respected. As a Baptist, Truett was a passionate advocate of religious liberty in the United States and around the world, but he was more than that. He wanted America to be a Christian nation, but he was under no illusion it ever was. Our cities had too many divisions; gambling was rampant; the press was venal; and there was an “awful gulf between labor and capital.”⁵⁴ “In our great country the social world is filled with frivolities and vanities, and the business world crowded with dishonesties, and the political world

⁵⁰George W. Truett, “Address at Banquet in Behalf of Baptist Sanitarium and Hospital, Houston, Texas” (Manuscript, 28 January 1915), 11.

⁵¹Durso, *Thy Will Be Done*, 234-35.

⁵²James Leo Garrett Jr., “Joseph Martin Dawson: Pastor, Author, Denominational Leader, Social Activist,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 14 (1973): 8-9, 14. Scholars diverge over how Truett’s views of race should be evaluated. In the most detailed study of Truett’s ethics, Thurman Earl Bryant argued the Dallas pastor recognized racism is a problem and believed it remains the duty of every Christian to address. Truett said that the stronger races should help the weaker, that racial similarities rather than dissimilarities should be emphasized, and that the “Christian must look on all races as did the Savior.” There are two ways in which racial problems can be addressed, socially or individually. Truett believed the individual approach was more effective. Bryant, “The Ethics of George Washington Truett,” 125-28. Otis Swofford Hawkins highlighted the difficulties in Truett’s legacy on race at the First Baptist Church of Dallas, concluding Truett possessed an “underlying racism,” while alleviating criticism of Truett’s successor, Wally Amos Criswell. O. S. Hawkins, “Race and Racism in the Southern Baptist Convention: The Lost Legacies of George W. Truett and W. A. Criswell,” *SWJT* 63.2 (2021): 119-26. Curtis Freeman, however, believes Criswell’s conversion from racism was marked by ambiguity and compelled by political advantage. Curtis W. Freeman, “‘Never Had I Been So Blind’: W. A. Criswell’s ‘Change’ on Racial Segregation,” *The Journal of Southern Religion* 10 (2007): 1-12.

⁵³The Baptist World Alliance, Second Congress (Philadelphia: Harper, 1911), 95-99.

⁵⁴George W. Truett, “The Coming of the Kingdom in America,” in *The Baptist World Alliance, Second Congress*, 424.

bathed with graft, and the religious world mocked by formalism that is never to bring Christ's people to their knees."⁵⁵

However, Baptists are not without resources to bring change. Truett lauded Anglo American Baptists for their numbers, but he reminded them that their African American Baptist "brothers" were one of the "chiefest and most glorious assets in winning America and the world to Christ."⁵⁶ He called for ecumenical union where possible. But the greatest asset for Baptists in bringing the Kingdom of God into this world remains the Word of God. Bowdlerizing Cardinal Manning, Truett declared, "Let all the world go to bits and we will reconstruct it on the authority of Jesus Christ voiced in the New Testament." We Baptists must "come back to the word of God as the absolute and ultimate authority for the people of God."⁵⁷

And the Word of God calls us to correct our doctrine and to correct our social problems by means of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We advance as we obey Christ's call to preach and live the gospel before all people. Universal religious liberty provides the space in which the gospel can be compellingly proclaimed. Our social and political activities ought to derive from fundamental Baptist principles. Truett denounced orthodoxy which refuses to live life in service to God and humanity. That type is a "dead, dry orthodoxy out of which has gone the heart-beat and passion for a lost world.... The only thing that can save our churches is a living orthodoxy."⁵⁸

When the chairman of the Baptist World Alliance introduced Truett for the first time to that august body, he said, "I have no hesitancy in saying the best-beloved Baptist minister in all the South is Pastor George W. Truett." Somebody behind him then said, "Or the North either."⁵⁹ Truett was widely beloved as he simultaneously evangelized the lost, advocated for universal religious liberty, and proclaimed a compelling social ethic. So, where is our Truett today—that heroic pastor who was so selfless his people wouldn't give him the deed to his house because they knew he would likely give it away to poor people?⁶⁰ Where are our George Washington Truetts today? Where are those Christian leaders who wish so deeply and

⁵⁵Truett, "The Coming of the Kingdom in America," 424.

⁵⁶Truett, "The Coming of the Kingdom in America," 425.

⁵⁷Truett, "The Coming of the Kingdom in America," 426.

⁵⁸Truett, "The Coming of the Kingdom in America," 428.

⁵⁹The Baptist World Alliance, Second Congress, 95.

⁶⁰Durso, *Thy Will Be Done*, 90.

passionately to be like Jesus in every word and in every deed that the world will want to follow their Master?

