



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

January 10, 2002

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Nashville, Tennessee

(02-02)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- W.A. Criswell dead at 92
- Cutbacks in religion reporting temporary, says media watchdog
- Supreme Court declines to hear evolution case

W.A. Criswell dead at 92

By Toby Druin and Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) – W.A. Criswell, the legendary pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas for more than 50 years, died Jan. 10 at the home of longtime friend Jack Pogue. He was 92.

Pogue was reading to Criswell from the 14th chapter of John when he took his last breath, reported Paige Patterson, former president of Criswell College in Dallas, who now serves as president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina.

Funeral services are scheduled for noon Jan. 16 at First Baptist, where for decades Criswell's booming voice called sinners to salvation, defended the Bible as God's inerrant word, blasted "modernism" and challenged Christians to live more devoted lives.

Criswell had been in ill health since fighting off colon cancer in 1998.

The fiery preacher was among the best-known Baptist pastors in America in the latter half of the 20th century. Some compared his fame to that of evangelist Billy Graham, a friend whom Criswell enlisted as a long-distance member of the Dallas church years ago.

Criswell was the author of 54 books, including "Why I Preach That the Bible is Literally True," a volume considered to have helped launch the conservative movement that shook the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and '90s.

In his trademark white suit, Criswell was seen in televised church services broadcast nationally. He was heard on numerous radio programs as well.

He was a little-known pastor from Oklahoma when the church called him to succeed the legendary George W. Truett as pastor in 1944. In a 1985 interview with the Dallas Morning News, Criswell recalled how he had a vivid dream in which the deceased Truett urged him to "go down and preach to my people."

He initially declined an invitation to preach a sermon at the Dallas church, however, saying he was "nothing of the stature of Dr. Truett." His wife did not share his reservations, he said, explaining that she accepted the church's invitation for him.

"There wasn't anything for me to do but come down here and preach," he said. A few weeks later, the church called him as pastor.

During his tenure at First Baptist, the church grew in influence, membership and funding. In its heyday, First Baptist Church of Dallas was the largest congregation in the SBC, boasting nearly 30,000 members, five blocks of property in downtown Dallas and nearly 30 mission congregations.

Over the years, several U.S. presidents and would-be presidents made a point to visit the church when Criswell was preaching. When Gerald Ford visited the church in October 1976, he got a sermon on stewardship and an endorsement for his election, although Ford was running against Criswell's fellow Southern Baptist, Jimmy Carter. When the Republican Party re-nominated Ronald Reagan for president in Dallas in 1984, Criswell closed the convention in prayer.

In 1968, he was elected to the first of two one-year terms as president of the SBC, which he later described as a highlight of his ministry. He served on many boards of both the SBC and Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Because of the influence of his church and his reputation as a preacher, Criswell was known around the world. A staunch defender of Israel, he was honored by Prime Minister Menachem Begin for his support of the Jewish state in 1988, and in 1971 his tour group was given an audience by Pope Paul VI.

But Criswell was best known in the pulpit of his own church and on the platform of the SBC, state conventions and evangelism conferences as simply a preacher of the gospel and defender of the Bible as God's inerrant word.

In the pulpit, he wept, laughed, shouted and smiled. He waved his Bible in the air, sometimes ripping pages from it to make a point about those he said didn't believe all the Bible. He blasted "infidels" and "liberals" and warned sinners to turn from their path toward hell.

He was colorful and charismatic in the pulpit, and he was beloved by many as a pastor and as a mentor in the faith.

A native of Oklahoma, Criswell grew up on a farm near Texline. His father was a cowboy and then a barber. Criswell's mother moved to Amarillo during his last two years of high school so he could get a better education. He graduated from Amarillo High School in 1927 and then earned a bachelor's degree at Baylor University and master's and doctor of philosophy degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

His earliest recollection of being called to the ministry was when he was about 6 years old, he said. He made a public profession of faith in Christ when he was 10 and two years later committed his life to the gospel ministry. He began preaching at 17.

While attending Southern Seminary, he was pastor of two small churches and at one met and married his wife, Betty. They had one daughter, Mabel Ann. The Criswells later adopted their grandson, Chris, and raised him.

Criswell's ministry took a turn in 1990, when the church called Joel Gregory as pastor and heir apparent to Criswell. That rocky relationship lasted only 21 months, ending with Gregory abruptly resigning. In 1992, Criswell was named pastor emeritus as the church called O.S. Hawkins as pastor. Criswell had continued to maintain a presence in the church, to the extent his health has permitted, alongside current pastor Mac Brunson.

Interviewed on his 50th anniversary at the church in 1994, Criswell laughed at the mention of retirement and said his role of raising money for Criswell College was his idea of retirement. He earlier had said he desired to be called to heaven while he preaching in the pulpit at First Baptist.

"Wouldn't that be a glorious place from which to ascend into heaven?" he asked.

Patterson said Criswell deserved much of the credit for the conservative shift in the SBC.

"The old adage is Dr. Criswell preached the crusade and others carried it out," Patterson said. "That's pretty accurate. He was definitely my inspiration and that of many others.

"Probably, I could not have done what I did if I'd been at any other church," said Patterson, a former associate pastor of First Baptist Church for 17 years who helped launch the so-called "conservative resurgence" in the SBC beginning in 1979.

Hawkins lamented the loss of "a mentor and icon of the faith and a loving prayer partner."

"It can be said of him what was said of good King Josiah, 'Before him was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and soul and might . . . nor after him did any arise like him,'" Hawkins said.

"W.A. Criswell was a larger-than-life figure who left his indelible brand on Texas and on three generations of Baptists. His extraordinary gifts in the pulpit, his steadfast pastoral commitment to a great downtown city church, his leadership by example in church growth, his fervent dedication to missions and evangelism, and his unswerving commitment to proclaiming the truth of the Bible will long be remembered," said Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Wade particularly praised as "highly influential in Southern Baptist life" a 1968 sermon by Criswell, "Church of the Open Door," in which he made it clear that First Baptist Church of Dallas was open to people of all races.

"We celebrate with First Baptist Church of Dallas all the good that he brought to our lives," Wade said.

-30-

Cutbacks in religion reporting temporary, says media watchdog

By Bob Allen

HARTFORD, Conn. (ABP) -- An observer of religion coverage by the secular media says he believes recent cutbacks in the beat, blamed on a sluggish economy, will be temporary.

"Recession or no recession, the salience of religion in the news seems, if anything, higher than ever," wrote Mark Silk, director of the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life.

"From faith-based social service provision and embryonic stem cell research to the campaign against terrorists committed to a radical form of Islam, journalists continue to need all the religious sophistication they can muster," Silk wrote in a recent newsletter.

Even before Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, which took a devastating toll on the economy, religion writers at secular newspapers lamented cutbacks.

The Indianapolis Star canceled its Faith and Values section after three years. The Omaha World-Herald earlier joined a series of major newspapers to "temporarily suspend" the religion beat. Knight-Ridder decided to stop carrying a weekly column by longtime St. Paul (Minn.) Pioneer-Press religion reporter Clark Morphew, citing "economic pressures."

Reporters and editors at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, San Jose Mercury-News and other papers said space for religion had decreased. Other papers left vacancies for religion writers open or cut budgets for free-lancers, according to a newsletter published by the Religion Newswriters' Association.

Television, which has traditionally lagged behind newspapers in covering religion, took a visible step backward when ABC News let go Peggy Wehmeyer, the first full-time religion correspondent for a major TV network.

Despite those setbacks, Silk observed that cutbacks in religion reporting were not disproportionate when compared to other areas of coverage, but they attracted greater attention because of recent gains in the field.

In a 1993 study funded by the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center, "Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media," authors Jimmy Allen and John Dart argued that religion was under-covered in the

media. In a 2000 update, however, Allen and Dart found that news organizations had expanded coverage significantly.

Motivated by "two parts self interest and one part enlightenment," Silk said, editors and publishers beginning in the mid-1990s expanded religion sections or created new ones, often described as "Faith and Values" sections. Worried about long-term declines in subscriptions, and noticing the continuing propensity for people to attend houses of worship, newspaper executives believed that more religion coverage might attract more readers and improve the image of journalists as being indifferent or hostile to faith.

Results of the boon in religion coverage were mixed, Silk said. While the public-relations concerns behind the change often fostered a softer, feature-oriented approach, he said, "Nevertheless, the fat years were good for religion coverage."

Silk's 5-year-old organization, which is affiliated with Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., publishes "Religion in the News," thought to be the world's only magazine dedicated to examining news coverage of religion. It has held workshops around the country bringing religious journalists together with religious scholars.

Recently, with a grant by the Lilly Endowment, the Greenberg Center in 2003 plans to begin a comparative study of religion's role in public life by region of the United States.

While optimistic about the future, Silk said the nature of the center's work is evolving. "Early programs to introduce news editors to the range of religious phenomena in today's world are no longer in order," he wrote. "Instead, we are turning to projects ... designed to help journalists -- and the rest of us -- make better sense of the very different politics and public cultures that exist around the country."

-30-

Supreme Court declines to hear evolution case

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Supreme Court has declined to hear a case that could have decided if public school teachers have a First Amendment right to contradict their school district's policy on the teaching of evolution. The court refused, without comment, to review a Minnesota court decision that dismissed a lawsuit by a high school science teacher.

Rodney LeVake was removed from his position as a 10th-grade biology teacher in the southern Minnesota town of Faribault in 1998 after a colleague raised concerns about LeVake's thoroughness in teaching the theory of evolution. He was then reassigned to a lower-level science class that did not involve the teaching of evolution.

LeVake had told the colleague that he couldn't teach evolution in good conscience, and when the fellow teacher informed administrators, they initiated the process that ultimately led to LeVake's removal.

LeVake also presented a "position paper" in which he noted what he believed were faults with the theory of evolution and said he merely wanted the right to teach these. LeVake said he only wanted to take "an honest look at the difficulties and inconsistencies of the theory without turning my class into a religious one."

With the aid of the American Center for Law and Justice, LeVake sued the school district for discrimination, saying the district's actions violated his First Amendment rights to free expression of religion and free speech.

A three-judge panel of the Minnesota Court of Appeals, however, ruled unanimously that a lower court was correct in dismissing LeVake's lawsuit against the district because, in the court's opinion, LeVake did not prove a legitimate claim to discrimination.

"It is unclear on what basis LeVake argues that his right to free exercise of religion was violated," the Minnesota judges wrote in their opinion. "LeVake does not contend that [the school district] prohibited him from practicing the religion of his choice. He does not assert that [the school district] demanded that he refrain from practicing his religion outside of the scope of his duties as a public school teacher in order to retain his teaching position, and he does not assert that the curriculum requirements incidentally infringed on his religious practice."

In the past, the Supreme Court has declared state laws requiring the teaching of creationism in public schools were unconstitutional. Since that time, many advocates of creation science have embraced a less religiously specific philosophy of creation called "intelligent design" theory. The theory doesn't deny that species have evolved or that the earth is older than a few thousand years, but suggests that an "intelligent force" guided the process. LeVake used ideas from intelligent design in his proposal to teach ideas contradicting evolution.

Wayne Holstad, LeVake's attorney, told the Supreme Court that the teacher "was silenced, not for anything he said in the classroom, but merely for holding a contrary viewpoint and expressing a desire to say certain things which the school district deemed out of step with its officially imposed orthodoxy."

-30-

END
