J. Frank Norris: Violent Fundamentalist

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J. Frank Norris, prominent first-generation fundamentalist of Fort Worth, Texas, was one of the most violent and controversial figures in the history of religion in America. The account of right-wing religion in this country (and perhaps right-wing politics) is incomplete without an examination of his life and thought. Furthermore, a review of his turbulent seventy-four years is important because of the extent of his influence, the illustration he provides of variation within the ultraconservative ranks, and the case study in violence he affords for a nation which increasingly is analyzing its own stormy backgrounds. In addition, there is need of a critical essay on Norris, since, to this author's knowledge, the only two published works about him have been written by former associate ministers and are highly laudatory in nature.[1]

It is difficult to comprehend the turmoil which engulfed the man who claimed he served the largest churches in the world. It began

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[1]Two books have been written about Norris. Louis Entzminger, *The J. Frank Norris I Have Known for 34 Years* (n.p., 1946), is unsatisfactory because of its entirely panegyrical and devotional nature. E. Ray Tatum, *Conquest or Failure? Biography of J. Frank Norris* (Dallas, 1966), overstresses the maternal influence on Norris. Furthermore, Tatum makes minimal reference to the division in Norris' Fellowship in the early 1940's and, surprisingly, no mention of Norris' death. Norris, himself, "wrote" several books, although the reader will invariably discover that these are collections of sermons and debates stenographically recorded. These include his *Inside History of First Baptist Church, Fort Worth, and Temple Baptist Church, Detroit: Life Story of Dr. J. Frank Norris* ([Fort Worth? 1938?]). Four theses have been written about Norris: D. J. Bouldin, "The J. M. Dawson-J. F. Norris Controversy: A Reflection of the Fundamentalist Controversy among Texas Baptists" (M.A. thesis, Baylor University, 1960); B. E. Burlinson, "The Ecclesiology and Strategy of J. Frank Norris, from 1919 to 1950" (M.A. thesis, Baylor University, 1960); Kenneth Connolly, "The Preaching of J. Frank Norris" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1960); Homer Ritchie, "The Life and Career of J. Frank Norris" (M.A. thesis, Texas Christian University, 1967). Bouldin's work is handled especially well, although all four theses and the books of Tatum and Entzminger are noticeably lacking in their references to Norris' correspondence covering the years 1928–1952.

The standard secondary sources dealing with fundamentalism are Norman F. Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918–1931* (New Haven, 1954); Stewart G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (New York, 1931); Louis Gasper, *The Fundamentalist Movement* (The Hague, 1963); and Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago, 1970). For an excellent monograph on religion in the South during the period of this study, see Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1964).

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early in his life. J. Frank Norris was shot and wounded at the age of fifteen. During his years in college he led a student uprising which contributed to the resignation of the president of the institution. In the midst of his ministry he was indicted and tried for arson, for perjury, and for murder. Nourished in the free-church tradition of Southern Baptists, the independent Norris later fought the "denominational machine" indefatigably both before and after his expulsions from a local pastors' conference, the county association of which his church was a member, and the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The churches Norris served suffered major splits, one of them losing 600 members in a single year. Beset by enemies without and, it would appear, psychological problems within, the hard-working pastor-evangelist, publisher-editor, radio preacher, world traveler, and perennial politician became the leader simultaneously of two huge congregations, 1,200 miles apart, as well as the head of a seminary and the founder of his own Fellowship of churches. A self-appointed foe of alleged social evils, theological liberalism, Roman Catholicism, and political communism, Norris toured the nation and the world, leaving in his wake, in addition to converts by the thousands, a record of acrimony, strife, and division. Ironically, his public ministry began in a place called Mount Calm, Texas. That was the closest J. Frank Norris ever came to serenity.

At the conclusion of his tumultuous career, Norris' friends hailed him as a great preacher of unmatched courage, an incisive modern prophet, and a reformer of his own denominational family. His opponents no doubt agreed with Ralph McGill, editor of the Atlanta *Constitution*, who declared on one occasion that "The Rev. J. Frank Norris, and others like him, is one good, sound reason why there are 50,000,000 Americans who do not belong to any church at all."[3] A review of Norris' ministry and the violent controversies it precipitated will indicate why men held such opposite interpretations. Few people could appraise Norris neutrally. He was loved or hated, with passion. This article will review highlights of Norris' life and ministerial characteristics, and then focus primary attention on his role as a man of controversy—in local church, in denominations, and in wider areas.

John Franklyn Norris was born September 18, 1877, at Dadeville, Alabama, seventy-five miles southeast of Birmingham, the son of James

[3]Atlanta *Constitution,* May 8, 1947.

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Warren and Mary Davis Norris. Eleven years later, with the promise of cheap land and new beginnings on the frontier, the family moved to Hubbard, Texas, where Norris' sharecropper father gave more heed to alcohol than to agriculture. Poverty, punishment, and pain characterized his youth and appear to have molded his personality significantly. The parents and three children lived in a dilapidated, unpainted shack where they eked out a minimal existence. On one occasion Norris' father disciplined his son so severely that the boy's nose was broken and his body severely lacerated.[3] Yet when horse thieves threatened his father's life, young Frank went to his aid—and was shot three times. Gangrene set in, followed by inflammatory rheumatism which left Norris voiceless and paralyzed. Three years of recuperation ensued, two of them in a wheel chair. During this trying time, Norris' mother nourished his nascent faith (he had been converted at the age of thirteen at a brush arbor revival service) and instilled within him the conviction that he was "someone of great worth who would be a leader of men."[4]

After a brief experience as a teacher, Norris felt called to the ministry. Accordingly, assisted by a loan from the family doctor, Norris enrolled as a student at Baylor University in Waco. To the consternation of his classmates and some members of the faculty, Norris announced that his goal in life was "to preach in the greatest church and pulpit in the world." With a conservative theology given him by Dr. B. H. Carroll of the University and a talent for speaking and persuasion that appeared to be inborn, Norris set himself toward the attainment of his objective. At the age of twenty-two, he accepted the pastorate of the country church in Mount Calm. Serving this parish until he graduated from Baylor, Norris spent his weekends making innumerable visits to homes of prospective members and preaching his dramatic sermons to as many as 800 people, twice the number who lived in the township.[5]

Norris' aggressive spirit also revealed itself in the midst of a tragicomedy of errors at the University. The president at the time was O. H.

[3]Entzminger, *The J. Frank Norris I Have Known*, 34. Norris was without question the source of such information. He also told the story of his mother's literally horsewhipping the local bartender because of his refusal to cease selling whiskey to her husband. While not denying the problem of alcohol in the Norris home, this writer speculates that these stories may have been embellished for homiletical purposes.

[4]Ibid.; Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 27–29, 31; Bouldin, "Dawson-Norris Controversy," 16. The quote is from Bouldin.

[5]Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 42, 47, 50–51, 56–57.

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Cooper, a former Yale professor who was respected in the academic community. Several prankish students smuggled a howling dog into the midst of a chapel service being conducted on the third floor of the administration building.[6] Infuriated at the interruption, the president seized the animal (instead of the students!) and hurled it through a window to the ground below. The embarrassed Cooper apologized the next day for his regrettable loss of control, but Norris would not let the matter lie. He led a student revolt which informed the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals as well as the trustees of the University concerning the unhappy incident. Other issues may also have been at stake, but it was this event and the protest which followed that forced the resignation of the president.[7] Thereafter, young J. Frank Norris was a person "to be reckoned with."

After his graduation from Baylor in 1904, Norris enrolled as a student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He completed the three-year course in two years, and then launched upon his full-time professional career.[8] He pastored the McKinney Avenue Baptist Church at Dallas until 1908, driving himself to near exhaustion in building its attendance from thirteen to nearly a thousand members.[9] While serving this congregation Norris became the business manager of *The Baptist Standard,* the voice of Texas Baptists, although not owned by them.[10] When tension developed between Norris and the editor, Joseph Martin Dawson, the latter resigned and Norris assumed full leadership of the journal.[11] He

[6]Joseph Martin Dawson, *A Thousand Months to Remember: An Autobiography* (Waco, 1964), 57.

[7]Ibid., 52; Bouldin, "Dawson-Norris Controversy," 20. Cooper later became a teacher at and president of Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas.

[8]Norris accelerated his study at the Seminary because he had the responsibility of supporting a family. He had married Lillian Gaddy on March 5, 1902. At the time of their wedding her father, J. M. Gaddy, was the general missionary for the Texas Baptist General Convention. The Norrises became the parents of four children: Lillian, Jim Gaddy, J. Frank, Jr., and George Louis. *The Watchman-Examiner,* August 28, 1952; Norris, *Inside History,* 23; Tatum, *Conquest or Failure,* 67.

[9]The keys to Norris' numerical accomplishment was the gaining of "decisions" in the home, and his insistence that a public declaration of faith follow—in his church, of course.

[10]Ritchie, "Life and Career," 10. He purchased a controlling share of stock in the publication with the insurance money his wife received at the time of her father's death. The death of Norris' father-in-law was shrouded in mystery. Norris and J. M. Gaddy were riding on the rear platform of a train near San Marcos, Texas, in 1906, when the latter fell off and was killed. For further discussion see Bouldin, "Dawson-Norris Controversy," 20.

[11]The major source of irritation, according to Dawson, *A Thousand Months,* 97–98, was Norris' refusal to confine himself to the business side of the paper. On one occasion,

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introduced sensational articles and conducted a bold campaign against alleged social evils, especially racetrack gambling in the Lone Star State.[12] Despite an increase in circulation, Norris failed to receive the support of denominational leaders who disapproved of his showmanship. In turn, he felt that these men were "mechanical" in their spiritual expression, devoid of imagination and vitality. Disgruntled and disillusioned, Norris resigned his editorial post in 1909 and gave serious thought to pursuing secular work. The following year, however, he accepted a rather surprising call to the rich and influential First Baptist Church of Fort Worth.[13] Drawing the largest salary of any pastor in the South, Norris carried on a perfunctory ministry for two years until his own spirits were revived at a series of meetings which he conducted in Owensboro, Kentucky, for the Reverend Charles Carroll, the son of his former professor at Baylor. Thereafter he became the flamboyant, aggressive, controversial minister of what grew to be the largest church in the United States. He served it until his death forty-three years later, brandishing "not a little pearl-handled knife, but the broad axe of John the Baptist."[14]

During his pastoral career, Norris edited his own tabloidlike newspaper, *The Fundamentalist* (earlier known as *The Fence-Rail* and *The Searchlight*). This publication, which proved to be a fierce competitor to *The Baptist Standard,* developed into the religious journal most widely circulated in the South, with approximately 80,000 subscribers. As a pioneer radio preacher, Norris, at the peak of his ministry, conducted weekly broadcasts over twenty-seven stations, reaching most of the nation with his rhetoric.[15] In 1931, when separated from the Southern Baptist Convention (for reasons to be discussed later), Norris founded the "Premillennial, Fundamental, Missionary Fellowship," a loosely knit organization which sponsored an enthusiastic program of foreign missions and a Bible Institute designed to prepare

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Norris smuggled to the printer a lengthy article filled with "damaging insinuations about Baptist leaders." The editor did not see it until it was in print. Ibid., 98.

[12]As the result of Norris' crusade, racetrack gambling was made illegal in Texas in 1909. *Journal of the Senate of Texas, being the Regular Session of the Thirty-First Legislature* (Austin, 1909). The governor presented to Norris the pen which had been used in signing the antigambling bill into law.

[13]The church had called another man, but when he accepted the invitation of a congregation elsewhere, the people turned to Norris who had served them as a supply preacher on several occasions. Norris, *Inside History,* 37; Tatum, *Conquest or Failure,* 101.

[14]*Time,* LX (September 1, 1952), 73.

[15]Ritchie, "Life and Career," 2.

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young men for ministries in fundamentalist churches.[16] In 1935 Norris became pastor of the Temple Baptist Church in Detroit, a congregation which he served simultaneously with his church in Fort Worth for sixteen long years.[17]

In addition to these many responsibilities, Norris journeyed overseas seven times, usually on behalf of the missionary program of his rapidly growing Fellowship. He also traveled widely in this country conducting revivals in forty-six states and speaking as a debater and preacher on behalf of fundamentalist causes and conservative politics. His most dramatic successes as an evangelist were in Houston and San Antonio in 1924 where some 2,000 converts were added to the churches. Speaking in Georgia in the late 1930's, Norris influenced a student at Mercer University, John Birch, to become a missionary to China. Young Birch followed Norris to Fort Worth, joined his church, studied one year in his seminary, and in July, 1940, left for China under his personal sponsorship and under the auspices of his Fellowship.[18]

Exhausted by his labors and controversies, the ubiquitous fundamentalist monarch died of a heart attack on August 20, 1952, while attending a youth rally in Keystone Heights, Florida. The funeral service, attended by 5,000 people, was broadcast from his home church in Fort Worth. He was buried in a red tie, a white shirt, and a blue suit; and an escort of eighteen policemen led the miles-long procession to the cemetery.[19] There was a bit of color to the very end.

An analysis of the ministerial characteristics of J. Frank Norris reveals him to have been many things to many men. In perspective it seems accurate to view him as a fundamentalist, a sensationalist, a politician, and a controversialist. He was many things more, but these at least.

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[16]Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 259–260.

[17]*The Watchman-Examiner*, August 28, 1952. This arrangement seems to be unique in American church history. Norris traveled by train and plane between his two congregations. When in one pulpit he would send lengthy telegrams to his other congregation describing his numerical and spiritual successes. Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 272, 275, 288.

[18]J. Allen Broyles, *The John Birch Society: Anatomy of a Protest* (Boston, 1964), 24. There has been much speculation about the relationship between fundamentalism and radical-right politics. A contemporary scholar believes that while the radical-right political posture "appeals to many Fundamentalists, the identification of the two movements now seems unlikely." Ernest R. Sandeen, "Fundamentalism and American Identity," *The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion*, Volume 387 of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Philadelphia, 1970), 63.

[19]Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, August 23, 24, 1952; *The Fundamentalist*, August 29, 1952.

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At the turn into the twentieth century, religion in the South—especially among the predominant Southern Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians—was characterized by orthodoxy of belief, a preoccupation with individual repentance rather than social change, and a tendency toward overt expression of intense religious emotions.[20] With the gradual rise of industrialization and the growth of theological liberalism on the American scene, however, these traditional emphases came slowly to be challenged.

Religious liberalism, in adjusting to culture, endeavored to hold beliefs in harmony with science and, at the same time, to preserve the core of religious truth. Moderate liberals viewed the Bible as an historical record of a people's religious development, rather than an infallible collection of proof texts, direct from God. They favored Biblical criticism, convinced that the most reverent attitude toward the Bible was to take it for what the critical and scientific study of its text and history indicated it to be.[21] Placing heavy emphasis upon reason, and convinced that all events were controlled by natural processes, the liberals disbelieved in miracles. They championed the social gospel, proclaimed freedom from domination by creeds, councils, or members of a religious hierarchy, and asserted that theirs was the religion of Jesus, not the religion about Jesus. Essentially, liberalism was an attitude rather than a credo.

When religious liberalism of this type began to infiltrate the colleges and seminaries of America, to make its impact upon the thinking of denominational officials, and to take root in some of the mission fields, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fundamentalism arose in the major denominations as a reaction to it. Fundamentalism referred not only to an ultraconservative theological tendency, but to an intransigent attitude as well.[22] In each instance—theology and attitude—J. Frank Norris fitted the mold. In fact, he helped to shape it.

[20]Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism*, 1–24. Other characteristics included ecclesiastical independence, racial segregation, and an all-pervading poverty which made difficult, in many instances, the training of an educated ministry.

[21]Robert G. Torbert, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia, 1950), 442.

[22]Cole, *History of Fundamentalism*, 52–62, 65–91, 281–297; Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 188–232; Furniss, *Fundamentalist Controversy*, 3–45; Robert T. Handy, "Fundamentalism and Modernism in Perspective," *Religion in Life*, XXIV (Summer, 1955), 390. The theological foundations of fundamentalism came to include a belief in the inerrancy of the Scriptures in the original documents, the deity of Jesus including His virgin birth, His vicarious atonement, His physical resurrection and bodily return, and His miracle-working power. Ibid.

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The cornerstone to Norris' religious position lay in his belief in the infallible, verbally inspired Bible. This crucial conviction as well as his "either-or" mentality, were reflected in words to a friend: "The big issue is the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures and if there is no verbal inspiration we have no inspiration." These Scriptures he interpreted literally, declaring that

> whenever you find a preacher who takes the Bible allegorically and figuratively . . . that preacher is preaching an allegorical gospel which is no gospel. I thank God for a literal Christ; for a literal Gospel; for a literal salvation. There is literal sorrow; literal death; literal hell; and, thank God, there is a literal heaven.[23]

Central to his understanding of the Bible, literally interpreted, and crucial to his preaching was a firm belief in the premillennial coming of Jesus. Early and briefly in his ministry he had been a postmillennialist, but Louis Entzminger, his ministerial associate, persuaded him of the error of this position. Although not a dispensationalist in the usual sense of the word ("Law and grace are enough dispensations—keep them simple," advised the defender of the faith[24]), Norris set forth in meticulous detail what he believed to be the substance of Biblical eschatology.

> . . . the Scriptures are very clear that before Armageddon there will be the first resurrection, the translation of the living saints, and the marriage of the Lamb, and then for a period of time, the duration of which we do not know, the great tribulation will be on earth, the beast or the anti-Christ will hold sway, and at the close of the Tribulation, Armageddon, and then the second stage of His return, the Revelation in glory and power with his saints, the overthrow of the beast and his armies, the conversion of the Jews, the chaining of Satan and the establishment of his throne.[25]

Holding this view, Norris felt it was the purpose of the church to prepare individuals for the bodily, personal, and visible coming of Christ and the first phase of these final events. He minimized any effort at reforming society, asserting that "our motive is not to redeem America, China, or Russia, it is to get ready the Body of Christ, the Bride . . . for the coming of the Bridegroom. . . . It [the premillennial

[23]Norris to Charles Alexander, December 20, 1929, Norris Papers (Dargan-Carver Library, Nashville, Tennessee); J. Frank Norris, *The Gospel of Dynamite* (n.p., n.d.), 6. The second quote is from *Gospel of Dynamite*.

[24]The Reverend Homer Ritchie quoted Norris on dispensationalism. Ritchie to C. A. R., interview, June 8, 1970.

[25]Norris, *Gospel of Dynamite*, 168.

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view] is the only missionary motive . . . not to clean out the stables, but to redeem the individual man and woman."[26]

Contrary to those who accused him of being anti-Semitic, Norris had a high evaluation of the role of the Jew in Biblical history, contemporary society, and future events. He envisioned the conversion of the Jews as part of the Divine plan and spoke specifically against anti-Semitic propaganda, believing this to be dangerous (because of God's judgment upon those who disseminate it), un-Christian, and un-American.[27] Unlike W. B. Riley, his fundamentalist colleague from Minneapolis, Norris was an outspoken Zionist. He also held that the Scriptures taught there would be an Anglo-Jewish alliance in the final days. Here, his intention was probably better than his hermeneutics.

Norris' views on Biblical inspiration, premillennialism, and personal rather than social salvation, reflected normative fundamentalist theology. Where he differed with some of his brethren in addition to his espousal of Zionism, was in his ecclesiology, his Calvinistic attitude toward the security of the believer, and the personalization he brought to the doctrine of retribution. Norris affirmed the complete independence of the local church to a greater degree than many of his ultraconservative colleagues. As a body of baptized believers, the church had, in his judgment, the absolute right of self-government, free from the interference of any hierarchy of individuals or organizations. It might voluntarily cooperate with other similar bodies, but each congregation was the sole judge of the measure and method of this cooperation.[28] On all matters pertaining to membership, polity, discipline, and benevolence, the will of the local group was final. Repeatedly, Norris taught that the one and only superintendent of the church was Christ through the Holy Spirit. In turn, Jesus worked His will through the human agency of the pastor. This interpretation gave Norris justification for his rejection of denominationalism in general and the Southern Baptist Convention in particular. It also gave him an independent hand in his own congregation, free from the checks and balances of official boards.

Like John Calvin, Norris asserted the eternal spiritual security of the true elect. In popular parlance this meant, "once saved, always saved." When obvious backsliding occurred, Norris interpreted this

[26]Ibid., 7.

[27]Ibid., 135.

[28]*The Fundamentalist,* January 25, 1929.

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as being either temporary or reflecting the fact that true salvation had not taken place originally. To deny the everlasting security of the Christian, he affirmed, was to place in doubt the efficacy of the atonement itself, as well as the power of God to keep the individual.[29] When it came to retribution, Norris not only held this doctrine but saw it work when tragedy, including death, came to his personal enemies.[30] This made several of his sermons all the more dramatic to some—and repulsive to others.

Norris was a fundamentalist in attitude as well as in belief. He was dogmatic, aggressive, stubborn, and more militant than most of his theological stripe. Furthermore, he was a fundamentalist in the company he kept, especially men like W. B. Riley, John Roach Straton, T. T. Shields, Mordecai Ham, A. C. Dixon, and, to a lesser extent, Billy Sunday.[31] Norris joined several of his colleagues in founding the World's Christian Fundamentals Association in 1919, and, in addition, was a charter member of the Baptist Bible Union, established in 1923. Despite Norris' efforts, few Southern Baptists joined the latter organization.[32]

Any doubts about his own high evaluation of the fundamentalist movement were dispelled when "the Texas cyclone" stated in the midst of his ministry:

> I believe with all my soul that future generations will write about this Fundamentalist Movement as historians now write up the Reformation and [the] Wesley Revival and other great awakenings. And as the revolutions have rent and torn to pieces all political alignments and governments of the world, so we are now in the greatest religious revival that time has ever witnessed since, perhaps, Pentecost.

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[29]For Norris' full argument on eternal security see [J. Frank Norris,] *Norris-Wallace Debate, Delivered in Fort Worth, Texas, November 5th, 6th, and 7th, 1934* ([Fort Worth,] 1935), 164–167.

[30]In *Inside History*, 11–20, Norris devotes a complete chapter to this theme, entitled: "The Fate of the Conspirators." For example, the district attorney who pressed charges against Norris in 1912 died in a violent traffic accident in Fort Worth. A half-broken bottle of liquor, found near the scene of the crash, was brought to Norris. He took this into the pulpit, preaching on the text: "Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting." Ibid., 11–12.

[31]W. B. Riley served for a time as associate editor of *The Fundamentalist*. Straton was pastor of the Hubbard (Texas) Baptist Church when Norris was a young man in that community and was professor of oratory and literary interpretation at Baylor during Norris' junior and senior years.

[32]W. S. Taylor, "Norris, John Franklyn," *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (2 vols.; Nashville, 1958), II, 983.

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What if the present-day denominations are smashed to smithereens? It ought to be. They are unscriptural.[33]

In addition to being a fundamentalist, J. Frank Norris was perennially the sensationalist. This attribute of showmanship was probably innate, but he also cultivated it shrewdly, for it kept the crowds flocking to the growing churches under his colorful leadership. Norris was as unorthodox in his pulpit conduct, places of meeting, and general methods of "churchmanship" as he was fundamentalist in his theology.

His sermon titles illustrated this flair for the dramatic. When America moved close to active participation in World War II, Norris' subject was: "Shall Uncle Sam Be Made an Ass Again?"[34] An early topic at Fort Worth bore the peculiar homiletical caption: "If Jim Jeffries, the Chicago Cubs, and Theodore Roosevelt Can't Come Back, Who Can?" Norris' pulpit mannerisms matched his bizarre sermon topics. With a newspaper in one hand and a Bible in the other, he roamed the platform, gesturing with conviction, shouting to emphasize a point, and weeping—on occasion—to move the emotions of his listeners. Then frequently he would leap from the pulpit platform to the level of the congregation, concluding his discourse there by inviting members of his audience to join him in an act of dedication.

Norris held services wherever people would gather—theaters, taverns, night clubs, schools, street corners, and baseball parks. During his ministry at Fort Worth he conducted 103 open-air and tent revivals, while the largest tent meeting of his career (a five-poler!) was held at Cadillac Square in the heart of downtown Detroit with the mayor of the city and the governor of the state attending one of the services.[35] Norris also conducted outdoor baptismal rallies—from the Detroit River (with 40,000 present) to the banks of the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea.

Norris' methods on special occasions were as unique as his pulpit mannerisms and places of meeting. During the controversy over evolution he brought monkeys and apes into the pulpit to introduce his members to the "kinfolk" of those who accepted Darwin's thesis. When the World's Christian Fundamentals Association met in his church, Norris turned the sanctuary into a courtroom and placed

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[33]Norris, *Inside History*, 194.

[34]*The Fundamentalist*, April 14, 1939.

[35]Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 264, 279–280.

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three Methodist institutions on "trial" for teaching evolution.[36] When the eighteenth amendment was passed, Norris conducted a public funeral for "John Barleycorn," actually burying a casket of unvarnished pine filed with empty whiskey bottles. The church band played "Dixie" and other lively tunes at the committal services. When a famed cowboy "champion of the world" was baptized by Norris, his trick horse watched the proceedings from inside the church auditorium. When European dictatorships appeared to threaten American democracy, Norris burned Nazi and Soviet flags at outdoor rallies.[37] Stunts such as these accounted in large measure for the turnover in the congregations at both Fort Worth and Detroit. The pastor-preacher justified the histrionics by the number of people drawn by them and the conversions resulting. At the same time some church members were revolted by such theatrics, resented the types of people they attracted, and quite understandably left the church—including the 600 members at Fort Worth in 1911.[38] Norris, however, never wavered. He viewed their departure as a purifying process enabling him to carry on a greater—and larger work!

There was no question about the increased numbers attracted by Norris' methods. His church at Fort Worth grew from 1,200 members in 1909 with an average attendance of 500 to over 12,000 in 1928 with an average attendance of 5,200 on Sunday mornings. At Detroit, he began with 800 members in 1934 and counted 8,597 in 1943. When Dallas Billington's mammoth Akron Baptist Temple finally surpassed the First Baptist Church at Fort Worth in the 1940's as the "largest church in the world" with 21,000 members, Norris worked a little harder and by 1946 boasted that his two congregations totaled a membership of 25,000 persons, "the largest congregation ever under a single pastor in the history of the church."[39] Norris' statistical triumphs were not limited to the membership of his churches. His Sunday school at Fort Worth was the world's largest, frequently sur-

[36]W. B. Riley acted as the presiding judge and six students from Southern Methodist University, Southwestern, and Texas Woman's College appeared as witnesses. Norris, *Inside History*, 10; Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy*, 122.

[37]Ritchie, "Life and Career," 35, 195, 196. The cowboy was Jack "Red" Thompson; the horse, "Hogeyes."

[38]Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 121.

[39]Ibid., 116, 281; Ritchie, "Life and Career," 16; *Newsweek*, XXXIII (April 11, 1949), 76; Ralph L. Roy, *Apostles of Discord* (Boston, 1953), 352; Norris to Harvey Campbell, March 24, 1947, Norris Papers. The quote is from Roy. The membership at Fort Worth eventually reached 13,000; at Detroit, 12,000. In the latter city Norris drew many displaced southerners who had been attracted to Detroit by the automobile industry. Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 5, 269.

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passing 5,000 in attendance. The enrollment of the Baptist Bible Institute came to exceed 500 students, and estimates of the churches in his Fellowship ranged from "several hundred" to 3,000. Furthermore, Norris, claimed that his radio broadcasts "reached more people than all the daily newspapers of Texas combined."[40]

These numerical successes did not come by accident. Many, of course, were drawn by the sensationalism and personal magnetism of the champion of the fundamentalist way of life. Norris, however, shrewdly followed up the masses with a program of home visitation so thorough and persistent that teams of men and women from his congregation frequently made as many as 1,000 calls weekly in each of the cities in which he served. One person in Fort Worth said with conviction: "The only way to get rid of that First Baptist Church is to join it."[41]

As a preacher-politician, Norris' influence was wider than most of his enemies cared to admit. He cast his weight on issues of national importance, had contact through correspondence and personal interviews with many of the prominent leaders of the world, jockeyed his own followers to the advantage of the causes he espoused, and developed a particular strategy of his own.

The aggressive role Norris played in the presidential election of 1928 illustrates his involvement with politics at the state and national

[40]Norris to Hon. Alva Bryan, May 4, 1928, Norris Papers.

[41]G. B. Vick, "The How-Methods of Enlisting Members," printed as a chapter in Norris, *Inside History*, 277–278; *The Watchman-Examiner*, April 20, 1922. It was not unusual for as many as 100 persons to join each of Norris' churches on a given Sunday. A key individual in "banking the fires" which Norris lit was the Reverend Louis Entzminger, a converted lumberjack and former pastor of the First Baptist Church of New Orleans. He joined Norris at Fort Worth in September, 1913, as his full-time Sunday school superintendent. Entzminger brought a measure of organization to the crowds, especially through the church school which he divided into departments, classes, and groups. He also supervised the burgeoning visitation program. Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 163–167.

Norris' insatiable thirst for numbers was probably evidence of his own insecurity. The teeming throngs were necessary to bolster his own ego and to prove his success to himself and to others, especially to denominational leaders with whom he had broken. Once Norris' life had run its span, without the stimulus of his leadership, the membership of his churches declined rapidly. There was also some evidence to question the veracity of Norris' numerical reporting. This was reflected on one occasion in a letter from his personal friend, John Roach Straton. After a series of meetings which Norris had conducted for Straton at Calvary Baptist Church in New York City in 1922, Norris reported through *The Fundamentalist* that there had been 500 conversions. With singular bluntness and courage, Straton wrote his fellow-pastor: "Brother Frank, why don't you stop lying? It is not good for your health and it confuses the brethren, especially when you put it on too heavy. Stop lying and learn simply to handle the truth economically." Straton to Norris, June 8, 1922, Straton Papers (American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, New York).

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level. He campaigned arduously against Al Smith and on behalf of "that Christian gentleman and statesman, Herbert Hoover," speaking 119 times in 30 cities over a span of 3½ months. Although he opposed Smith because of his "wet" record, "pork-barrel" politics, and Tammany Hall associations, Norris, unlike John Roach Straton, boldly asserted that the basic issue was the Roman Catholic question.[42] Norris feared the dominance of "foreign control," the destruction of religious liberty, and the threat to the morals of the people which he thought a Roman Catholic president would bring. When Texas, despite a Democratic majority of 400,000 voted for Hoover, political leaders, including the chairman of the state anti-Smith Democratic campaign in Texas, credited Norris with being primarily responsible for the victory.[43] The exultant clergyman attended the inauguration ceremonies in Washington at the invitation of the President-elect himself. Recent studies, however, have indicated there was more to southern restiveness than religious prejudice against Smith and the so-called liquor and metropolitan issues. The Democrats had to struggle against Hoover's personal popularity. Their own party was in chaotic condition when Smith assumed leadership. Most of all, the economic prosperity of the time worked to the distinct advantage of the Republicans. Other factors included the high tariff policy of Hoover's party at a time when the textile industry was moving south and the inability of the Democratic candidate to find a good issue.[44]

As a preacher-politician, Norris appeared to relish his contact with the world's great men. He carried on correspondence with numerous men of influence in Washington, although one gains the impression

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[42]*The Gospel Witness*, November 29, 1928; Norris to W. H. Brockman, December 11, 1928; Norris to Rev. J. R. Bennett, December 31, 1928; Norris to H. Beauchamp, September 29, 1928, Norris Papers.

[43]Henry Zweifel to H. W. Buckholz, undated telegram, ibid. A democrat from Wichita Falls, writing to a friend, declared that they had the Al Smith campaign going fine until "that damn Norris came up here and [made] it three-to-one for Hoover." J. E. Boyd to Norris, October 25, 1928, ibid.

[44]Ruth C. Silva, *Rum, Religion, and Votes: 1928 Re-Examined* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1962), 15–49; Richard Hofstadter, "Could a Protestant Have Beaten Hoover in 1928?" *The Reporter*, XXII (March 17, 1960), 31–32; Edmund A. Moore, *A Catholic Runs for President: The Campaign of 1928* (New York: 1956), 195; Roy V. Peel and Thomas C. Donnelly, *The 1928 Campaign: An Analysis* (New York, 1931), 71; Richard O'Connor, *The First Hurrah: A Biography of Alfred E. Smith* (New York, 1970), 225. One student sets forth the thesis that "the whites of the black-belt counties [in the South] were bound in loyalty to the Democracy by a common tradition and anxiety about the Negro. Whites elsewhere could afford the luxury of voting their convictions on the religious and prohibition issues." V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York, 1949), 319.

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that it was largely at his own initiative. He did have personal contacts with Presidents Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower; and, while overseas, held interviews with such foreign dignitaries as David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, the Lord Mayor of London, Benito Mussolini, and Pius XII, among others. As Norris sought these men, so a host of individuals looked to him, requesting a variety of favors to meet personal needs. His Papers have records of office-holders and would-be office-holders requesting his support; the poor asking for money, prisoners seeking parole, men and women desiring counsel, the unemployed seeking employment, relatives hunting for missing persons, businessmen advertising their products, pastors wanting churches, and churches wanting pastors.

It was as a preacher-politician that Norris developed a few basic principles by which he governed his own strategy. He learned early in his career to emphasize only his successes; he remembered his friends with adulation and gifts; he practiced the wise use of his victories; he appealed to his people's sympathy, frequently picturing himself as the tired, persecuted, lonely prophet of God, whose legs would hardly carry him, whose head was about to burst, and whose nerves were ready to give way; and, he taught himself and others not to worry. Concerning this latter axiom, Norris once declared: "If you want good health, don't worry—go to bed, pull up the windows and let the world go to hell until daylight."[45]

Norris succeeded so well as a preacher-politician that in 1929 a member of the state legislature introduced a bill prohibiting a minister from becoming governor of Texas. This was a thinly disguised slap at the pastor from Fort Worth. Norris replied with customary acidity that the step would not have been necessary if "those little peanut politicians . . . those little simlin-headed sawdust-brained grafters . . . had stood like they ought to have stood.[46]

Of the many aspects of the life of J. Frank Norris upon which one may choose to concentrate, certainly his place as a man of controversy is the most obvious. The coalescence of his other roles—fundamentalist, sensationalist, and preacher-politician, kept him constantly in the spotlight where his leadership and person were hotly debated. The controversial nature of this self-proclaimed prophet manifested

[45]Norris, *Inside History,* 116; Norris, *Gospel of Dynamite,* 56; Norris to Mrs. A. L. Bryan, October 30, 1944; Norris to J. W. Amerman, May 23, 1930; Norris to R. J. Barber, August 23, 1949, Norris Papers.

[46]*The Fundamentalist,* February 1, 1929.

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itself at the level of the local church and community, at the denominational level, and on the national scene.

When Norris was called to Fort Worth, one of the members who opposed his coming said: "this church is not in condition for his type of ministry. If he comes there will be the all-firedest [*sic*] explosion ever witnessed in any church. We are at peace with the world, the flesh, and the devil, and with one another. . . . I just want to warn you."[47] Norris saw to it that the placid state of the congregation did not last long. The immediate causes of the disturbance were his sensational methods, his dictatorial qualities, his unrelenting attacks upon the vices of the day, and the personal charges which he brought against "corrupt" city officials.

Believing that a congregation patterned after the New Testament should not be run by the church boards or "any official clique," Norris early assumed complete control at both Fort Worth and Detroit. In each congregation he dismissed the chairman of the Board of Deacons for what he termed "interference" with his work, replacing each with an individual loyal to his own cause. A dramatic illustration of his spirit is contained in his own account of opposition at Fort Worth:

> . . . we had a nice little choir—one woman who would start in G and end away up in Gee Whiz, and a beer-guzzling Dutchman for a choir conductor—he had hair as wide as the top of this desk, and he would shake it to the right and to the left. He had been there twelve years . . . [one night] the crowd [at the evening service] had gotten there ahead of time, and I started them to singing some old songs, and this Dutchman came and he couldn't get in, and he wrote me a note and said: "Please open the way so the choir can get in." I wrote on the bottom, "Wait until I send for you." If he had waited he would have been standing there yet. The next morning that beer-guzzling bunch of hair came around and he shook that head of hair east and west, and north and south, and up and down . . . I stood there and watched him shake and tell me what he wasn't going to stand for until the old windmill run down, and I said, "Are you through?" And I said, "Professor, so we can understand each other, you have resigned." . . . He said, "I will take it up with the deacons."[48]

The deacons held a secret meeting to consider the situation. Norris learned of it and fired the deacons! He told them heatedly: "We will understand whether or not I am going to be pastor or janitor."[49]

[47] Norris, *Inside History*, 38.
[48] Ibid., 82–83.
[49] Ibid., 83.

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The larger church voted to accept the "resignations" upon Norris' recommendations. Officers of various church groups at both Fort Worth and Detroit received similar treatment. Such arbitrary actions by Norris resulted in large and quick turnovers in membership, but other people, usually of lower social and economic backgrounds, were speedily drawn to the message and church of the fiery fundamentalist.

When Norris aggressively attacked the evils of alcohol, prostitution, and municipal corruption, the tensions began to encompass the larger community. They reached a boiling point one Sunday evening when, before an overflow congregation, the preacher spoke on the subject: "The Ten Biggest Devils in Fort Worth, Names Given." The ten men, notified in advance, were invited to dispute the charges, but only one of them, a lawyer, appeared. He was hooted off the platform upon admission that the liquor interests controlled a share in one of the city's newspapers. The opposition, however, could not remain silent long. Angered by their minister, church officials sought to dismiss him—but in vain. Community leaders, including the mayor, met to determine strategy to force Norris out of town—but unsuccessfully. One attempt was made to blackmail him; another to assassinate him. Newspapers declined to print his name, even in reports of weddings and funerals. (Norris responded by printing and distributing thousands of weekly handbills advertising his services.) Merchants refused Norris credit and clerks declined to wait on him.[50]

Eventually, physical violence broke out. Fire of undetermined origin caused damage amounting to $10,000 to the auditorium of the First Baptist Church of Fort Worth in January, 1912. One month later, the church was totally destroyed by fire. Norris, through spirited attacks, charged that his enemies were responsible. The district attorney of Tarrant County, acting after investigation by a private detective, accused Norris of committing arson in order to build a larger church. A grand jury agreed with the judgment and Norris was tried—and acquitted—for perjury and arson in April, 1912.[51]

Such events failed to dim the ardor or change the methods of "the Texas cyclone." Norris refused to trim his message or to accept invitations to other fields of service. In the 1920's he drove himself with renewed energy and became more dogmatic than ever, espe-

[50]Entzminger, *The J. Frank Norris I Have Known*, 25, 91, 95, 101, 103; Norris, *Inside History*, 56, 57–58, 89, 91–92, 93, 108, 111, 113–114.

[51]Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 133–136, 137–138, 155; Ritchie, "Life and Career," 47–48, 50; Norris, *Inside History*, 63–65.

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cially in his anti-Catholic statements. Late in that decade occurred the most memorable and tragic event of his stormy life.

In the spring and summer of 1926, Norris increased his verbal attacks against "Rum and Romanism" which, he asserted, formed a conspiracy designed "to elect a Catholic president to overthrow the Constitution, and control this government."[52] Norris personalized the charges in Fort Worth against H. C. Meacham, Roman Catholic mayor of the city and owner of a large department store. His words on Sunday, July 11, were especially inflammatory. He accused Meacham of misappropriating city funds for the benefit of Roman Catholic institutions and also attacked his personal integrity, claiming that some years previous the businessman had been forced to pay a young woman employee $12,500 in order to avoid further charges. Norris concluded his impassioned discourse by shouting, "He isn't fit to be manager of a hog-pen."[53] That same day Norris introduced from the pulpit six members of the First Baptist Church who had worked at Meacham's store, but had been dismissed because of their membership in the First Baptist Church. Norris' newspaper, *The Searchlight*, dated Friday, July 16, carried a full account of both the sermon and the testimony of the former employees. Copies of these papers were distributed widely throughout the city, and to customers entering Meacham's store. Norris announced his plans to continue the exposé the following Sunday. That intention, however, was dramatically interrupted.

While Norris was in the midst of preparing his sermon on Saturday afternoon, July 17, D. E. Chipps, a lumberman-friend of Meacham made a threatening telephone call to the fundamentalist leader. Shortly thereafter Chipps entered Norris' second-floor study. Sharp words were exchanged. Soon four shots rang out and Chipps fell mortally wounded. A biographer of Norris has stated, "The life of one man was gone, the life of the other [was] never to be the same."[54]

J. Frank Norris was taken to the office of the district attorney where he told his account of the tragedy. After he was released on bond, the preacher offered his resignation to officials of his church, but they speedily declined to accept it. Then he returned home to revise his sermon for the next day. The following morning a capacity congregation, some of whom had come as early as dawn, heard the sober

[52] *The Searchlight*, July 21, 1926.

[53] Ibid., July 16, 1926.

[54] *The Press* (Fort Worth), July 17, 1926; Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 221.

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pastor preach on the subject, "There Is Therefore Now No Condemnation to Those Who Are in Christ Jesus," words taken from the writings of Paul (Romans 8:1). Norris made no reference to the calamity of the previous day, although *The Searchlight* of that week stated that it was not strange, "in view of the series of sermons that Dr. Norris had been preaching against Romanism and bootleggers[,] that certain parties should desire to prosecute him." A front-page announcement declared that "Dr. Norris acted in . . . necessary self-defense and did nothing but what any other reasonable, sensitive man would be compelled to do." One week later the same publication charged that "every Roman Catholic church in the city raised money for his [Norris'] prosecution."[55] In all of the excitement Norris' congregation stood by him loyally, crowding his services and, on a single Sunday, raising $16,000 for his defense.[56]

A grand jury indicted Norris for murder. In January, 1927, after a change of venue, he was tried in Austin. The state charged that Norris' rabid sermons had provoked the confrontation with Chipps and that the clergyman had shot an unarmed man. His attorneys argued that Norris had shot in self-defense when a stranger of unsavory reputation, under the influence of alcohol, provided an "apparent danger."[57] The only witness to the deed was one of the deacons of the church, L. H. Nutt, a bank teller and a devoted follower of Norris. The jury which tried the case deliberated only forty minutes. They found Norris not guilty, on the first ballot.

The controversial fundamentalist returned immediately to Fort Worth to be greeted by 8,000 persons who gathered spontaneously in the big grey stone church to welcome their leader. Congratulatory telegrams were read from W. B. Riley, Billy Sunday, Congressman W. D. Upshaw, and others. Then dramatically

> . . . The throng stood and cheered as the Rev. Mr. Norris, clad in a business suit and dark overcoat, walked across the platform, his light gray Fedora hat in his hand. As he peeled off his topcoat, he seemed to be undergoing an emotional storm. There were tears in his eyes. He asked his hearers to join him in prayer. He asked . . . that each member . . . refrain from holding malice against anyone, no matter who had persecuted him. He then requested his flock not to applaud

[55] *The Searchlight*, July 23, 30, 1926.

[56] Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 226. This amount of money was raised on August 2, 1926, through contributions placed in a galvanized washtub located on the platform of Norris' church.

[57] Ritchie, "Life and Career," 172–173. For full contemporary newspaper accounts of the trial see Austin *Statesman*, January 14–28, 1927; New York *Times*, January 10–28, 1927.

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him, but they interrupted his talk with handclapping, being unable to constrain their joy at having their pastor back after three weeks' absence.[58]

Despite Norris' efforts to prevent a celebration, a reporter for the New York *American*, one of thirty who had covered the trial, wrote that "it was a jubilee, no question about that."[59]

Trouble was not over, however. Two years later, the massive church building in which the Texas fundamentalist preached, was totally destroyed by fire of undetermined origin.[60] In the depression it took Norris years to rebuild. The trial and the second fire left him personally exhausted but undaunted so far as the public was concerned, and more controversial than ever.

The controversy of J. Frank Norris with the Southern Baptist Convention was lengthy, bitter, and, as usual, spectacular. The roots were deep, dating from 1909 when Norris, as editor of *The Baptist Standard*, felt that he did not receive the support of denominational leaders in his showy, but victorious, campaign against racetrack gambling in Texas. The overt reasons for Norris' vigorous and noisy opposition to the Convention were basically twofold. Initially, he charged that the denomination failed to respect the complete independence of the local church. Repeatedly he emphasized that there is no power of authority, ecclesiastical or otherwise, which has the right to interfere with any church or even advise a New Testament church how to order its own affairs.[61] In the "gospel according to Norris," the denomination had violated this ideal through its cooperative programs. He resented, for instance, the "inclusive policy" whereby monies given to the denomination supported "secular education" (he had in mind schools like Baylor University) as well as the direct preaching of Christianity.[62] Norris was especially incensed by the Seventy-Five Million Campaign, sponsored by the Convention in 1919. This major effort was a carefully planned financial drive designed to liquidate all the indebtedness of the Southern Baptist Convention and simultaneously to launch a program of advance in every area of work. Ninety-two million dollars was subscribed, but only fifty-eight million was actually raised. This was accounted for in part by a postwar reaction to missionary outreach, and in part

[58]New York *American*, January 28, 1927.

[59]Ibid.

[60]This second conflagration occurred January 18, 1929.

[61]Norris, *Inside History*, 160.

[62]Ritchie, "Life and Career," 73.

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by a pall of confusion over the general program, the result of a series of embezzlements.[63] Norris characterized the campaign as "dictatorial, unscriptural, a foolish waste of hard-earned Mission money," and capitalized upon the shortcomings of the few by ascribing their failures to the many. The fundamentalist pastor declined to accept an apportionment of $100,000 for his own congregation. Years later he took great delight in telling the story of his rejection of this suggested sum.

> They sent out this unscriptural demand, dictating to the churches how much money they should raise, in a large envelope. . . . I had received that letter some few days before the excathedra demand of this coterie of . . . ecclesiastical dictators. I reached over on my desk and took the envelope with this demand and tore it to pieces without saying a word, and then crumpled the pieces in my right hand and cast the pieces at the feet of these dictators, and said: "That's my answer to your papal demands."[64]

Holding to his belief in the extreme autonomy of the local church, Norris castigated any efforts of the Southern Baptist Convention to cooperate with the Northern Baptist Convention, the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, and the Baptist World Alliance. He referred to such actions as "unionizing" tendencies and sarcastically called the latter organization the "Baptist World Entangling Alliance" and "the biggest cuckoo framework ever known among Baptists."[65] Even in the free-church tradition, Norris found too much control from the "hierarchical" leaders of the Southern Baptist "machine" whom he consistently called "The Sanhedrin."

The second major reason for Norris' firm opposition to the Southern Baptist Convention was the supposed existence of modernism in the denomination, especially among its leaders. These men, in Norris' judgment, were drifting away from evangelism and spiritual power and needed to be freed from the "graveclothes" of liberalism. Norris felt himself called to bring this about. He aggressively attacked Baylor University, a denominationally controlled institution, charging the teaching of heresy, by which he meant Darwinian evolution. He conducted such an arduous campaign that he claimed credit for crowding out of that institution eight "anthropoid apes" (profes-

[63]Ibid.; Joseph Martin Dawson, *A Century with Texas Baptists* (Nashville, 1947), 88.
[64]Norris, *Inside History*, 161.
[65]Ibid., 158.

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sors) for their purported teaching of "animal ancestry."[66] Norris' attacks upon individuals were angry and many, but the denunciation of Joseph M. Dawson as "the Fosdick of the South" was the most persistent.[67]

Dawson, minister of the First Baptist Church at Waco from 1915 to 1946 and a strong spokesman for the Convention, read a paper at a meeting of Texas Baptists in 1925 in which he affirmed belief in the plenary rather than verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. According to this view, the ideas of the Bible were inspired rather than the individual words. Norris asserted that this was no inspiration at all and accused Dawson of denying the faith. When Dawson's interpretations of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the turning of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt were not as literalistic as Norris believed they should have been, this gave the crusading fundamentalist additional ammunition for his vocal warfare. Norris further criticized Dawson for his position as a contributing editor to *The Christian Century* and his public expression of appreciation for Toyohiko Kagawa, the Japanese evangelist. Norris asserted that *The Christian Century* was "the rankest modernistic paper on the American continent" and alleged that secret archives in Tokyo had revealed Kagawa to have been an official spy of the Japanese military machine. Norris' campaign against Dawson reached its height in 1945 following the latter's review in the Dallas *Morning News* of a book by John Erskine, *The Human Life of Jesus.* Erskine, a professor at Columbia University, had written a liberal interpretation of the life and teaching of Jesus which Dawson perceptively noted might "dominate the future judgment of mankind."[68] By a skillful selection of portions of Dawson's review, Norris made it appear that Erskine's views belonged to Dawson. As a result, Norris charged Dawson with "an endorsement of infidelity," the kind taught at Columbia "where

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[66]For a fuller account of the controversy over evolution at Baylor University see the personal papers of President S. P. Brooks in the Texas Collection, Baylor University. For an excellent general account of fundamentalism and evolution see Willard B. Gatewood, Jr. (ed.), *Controversy in the Twenties: Fundamentalism, Modernism, and Evolution* (Nashville, 1969).

[67]Norris' opposition to Dawson may have been rooted in a personal slight. At the time of their graduation from Baylor in 1904, President Brooks publicly expressed words of appreciation for Dawson, the class valedictorian, but noticeably ignored Norris, the class orator, whom Brooks distrusted. "This merest incident may have accounted in some degree for the subsequent bitter hostility of Norris toward Baylor and toward [Dawson] personally." Dawson, *A Thousand Months,* 68.

[68]Dallas *Morning News,* November 11, 1945.

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professors openly advocate companionate marriage."[69] The stormy petrel of the Southwest was so persistent with his attack that eventually the Sunday School Board of the Convention withdrew Erskine's volume from active distribution in order to still the storm.

Norris' sharp-edged tongue, however, kept the controversy simmering. He referred to Dr. George W. Truett, distinguished minister of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, as "the Infallible Baptist Pope"; "His Allhighness"; "The Great All-I-Am"; and, "The Holy Father."[70] He called the Reverend Wallace Bassett of Dallas, "The Old Baboon"; and labeled F. M. McConnell, one of his successors as editor of *The Baptist Standard,* "The Old Woman Who Does the Best She Can." When Dr. Louie D. Newton, minister of the Druid Hills Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, became president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Norris proclaimed loudly: "The Prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled—'children shall be your leaders and babes your rulers.' We no longer have statesmen in the Southern Baptist Convention."[71]

The denomination and allied groups felt forced to take early and stern action. A number of its important leaders resigned their membership in the First Baptist Church of Fort Worth, including Lee R. Scarborough[72] and B. H. Carroll. Norris claimed this was the result of denominational pressure. The Pastors' Conference of Fort Worth expelled Norris in 1914 because of his radically independent spirit and his constant criticism of fellow ministers. The Tarrant County Baptist Association excluded him in 1922 for being a threat to the "peace, harmony, and unity" of that body.[73] The Baptist General Convention of Texas censured Norris in 1922, declined to seat his delegate the following year, and in 1924 ousted both minister and church from the state organization. The basic reasons given were Norris' "unBaptistic and non-cooperative" actions. By the former they meant the admission of non-Baptist clergymen to his pulpit and the "alien immersion" of certain members of his congregation.[74]

[69]Norris, *Infidelity among Southern Baptists Endorsed by Highest Officials* (n.p., n.d.), 181.

[70]Truett endeavored to ignore Norris, although this was difficult to do when the latter sent accusatory telegrams designed to arrive just before Truett began important speaking engagements. There is, however, no mention of Norris in Truett's authorized biography. See Powhatan W. James, *George W. Truett: A Biography* (New York, 1945).

[71]Norris to O. K. Armstrong, June 4, 1948, Norris Papers.

[72]Scarborough was president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

[73]Ritchie, "Life and Career," 61.

[74]*Minutes of the 39th Annual Session of the Tarrant County Baptist Association,* September 10–11, 1925, pp. 12–15, as cited in Ritchie, "Life and Career," 93; ibid., 97; Tatum, *Conquest or Failure,* 191–192.

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Norris basked in the limelight of the publicity which the controversy with the denomination brought, and, in addition, developed his own strategy of response. He declined to use the literature of the denomination in his Sunday school and proudly announced far and wide that his church would teach "the Bible only." Each week Norris spent an hour instructing 250 of his own teachers in an exegetical study of the Scriptures and they, in turn, taught their pupils without any lesson helps.[75] Norris held rallies and preaching services simultaneously with the annual meetings of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptist Convention. He rented halls, theaters, or churches, wherever he could gather a crowd, and then would denounce the denomination and its representatives. Eventually, in 1931, with all hope gone of any kind of amiable relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention, Norris organized his own loosely bound "Fellowship" of churches.[76]

His antipathy to denominationalism was not limited to the Southern Baptist Convention. One month after assuming his pastorate at Detroit, he withdrew that church from the Northern Baptist Convention, claiming interference with his local congregation by the "communistic, unscriptural, and socialistic leaders" of that body and of the Detroit Baptist Union.[77] In fact, Norris affirmed, it was precisely because of such intrusion that he was led to accept the pastorate of the Temple Baptist Church. The disdain which this champion of ultraconservative Christianity felt for representatives of denominations in general and the Southern Baptist Convention in particular was expressed forcefully in 1931: "Once I had a contempt for them, then I had a pity for them, and now as they cut and lance themselves, tear their hair and froth at the mouth, I feel sure the Lord gives me permission to enjoy a good laugh at them."[78] With such an attitude Norris created a chasm between himself and Baptist denominations that was never bridged throughout his turbulent career.

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[75]*The Watchman-Examiner*, January 27, 1921; April 20, 1922. Even this conservative publications felt that Norris, in reacting from a dangerous course (over-reliance on lesson helps instead of the Bible itself) had swung to a course more dangerous still.

[76]Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 198–205. The original name of this "Fellowship" of churches was the "Premillennial, Fundamental, Missionary Fellowship." Later it assumed the title, "Premillenium Baptist Missionary Fellowship." In more recent years, the movement divided into the "World Baptist Fellowship" and the "Baptist Bible Fellowship." See Ritchie, "Life and Career," 118.

[77]Norris, *Inside History*, 229. See also *Time*, XLIX (May 19, 1947), 70.

[78]*The Fundamentalist*, January 23, 1931.

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J. Frank Norris saw no need to limit himself to local and denominational matters. From his own pulpit in Texas and from various platforms throughout the country he waged war on broader issues. In the last decades of his ministry the colorful Norris gave less attention to liberalism and increased attention to Russian Communism, vilifying the movement itself as well as those whom he believed to be Communist or Communist sympathizers. By Norris' definition, this latter group was exceedingly large.

Norris saw Communism as denying the Scriptures, ruling God out of the universe, leading men to immorality, and advocating a "mongrel race."[79] He preached passionately that Communists had filtered into the federal and state governments, labor unions, educational institutions, and even churches, thereby threatening the stability of society and destroying traditional values. The "answer" which the apostle of fundamentalism brought to combat such an influence was fourfold. He suggested the cutting off of appropriations to schools which tolerated Communistic professors, the sending of "the commies back to Russia where they belong," the separation of "true" Christians from those who taught the "Social Gospel," and a return to the simple but effective preaching of "old time, personal religion."[80]

As in his verbal warfare against other "isms," Norris personalized his charges. He believed Franklin Delano Roosevelt had "sold out" at Yalta, and referred to his follow-Baptist President Truman as "Harry S. Truman and his crowd of Communists in Washington." Norris declared that the Northern Baptist Convention of which Albert W. Beaven was president at the time, "comes with the hands of 'Baptist orthodoxy,' but with the voice of Russian Sovietism."[81] The impatient preacher was especially incensed that ministers like Edwin T. Dahlberg should dabble in the social, political, economic, and international questions of the age. On one occasion he drew

[79]J. Frank Norris, *"Americanism": An Address to the Texas Legislature* (Fort Worth, 1949), 24. This address was delivered by Norris to the legislature in open session, April 20, 1949. Sandeen, "Fundamentalism and American Identity," 63, states that "For a time . . . there was serious danger that anti-Communist hysteria might actually sweep Fundamentalism off its feet."

[80]Norris, *"Americanism,"* 16, 22, 26. Norris criticized the preachers of the Social Gospel declaring they would send the prodigal son a new suit of clothes and a ham sandwich and tell him to stay in the hog pen when he ought to come home and start a new life. Although opposed to the Social Gospel, during the bleak winter of 1932–1933, Norris' church provided food, clothing, shelter, shower baths, and medicinal supplies for the destitute. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism,* 112–113.

[81]Norris, *Inside History,* 225.

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laughter from his right-wing congregation and wrath from his opponents when he asserted:

> . . . these preachers who masquerade under the livery of heaven—I don't care how many degrees they have after their names—LL D's, DD's, Asses, they are infidels when they deny the Word of God . . . I have more respect for Tom Paine in his grave, and Bob Ingersoll—at least they had self-respect enough to stay out of the church and out of the pulpits—they were not like these little modernistic, lick-the-skillet, two-by-four aping, asinine preachers who want to be in the priest's office so they can have a piece of bread, and play kite tail to the Communists . . . 'Oh!' some sister will say, 'I don't think that's the Christian spirit.' —Honey, you wouldn't know the Christian spirit, any more than a bull would know Shakespeare.[82]

By such tactics, Norris cast his mantle of condemnation over Samuel McCrea Cavert, general secretary of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America; Bishops G. Bromley Oxnam and Francis J. McConnell of the Methodist Church; Ralph McGill, editor of the Atlanta *Constitution;* and Louie D. Newton, president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Most men endeavored to ignore his accusations, but at times this was difficult. The case of Newton provided a classic example.

Newton, minister of the prosperous Druid Hills Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, along with a group of six other distinguished Americans visited Russia during the summer of 1946, on behalf of the American Society for Russian Relief. Upon their return, Newton, who also served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, reported favorably concerning some of the conditions he found in that country. Specifically, he noted that there was a wide degree of religious freedom in Moscow and that Baptists along with people in the Soviet Union agreed in the renunciation of, and resistance to, coercion in matters of belief. Religiously, he added, we should regard Russia as an ally. Newton's remarks gained wide publicity and were circulated by the American Russian Institute. All of this infuriated Norris, who cried out that Newton was either naive or a cold-blooded propagandist.[83]

The day before the meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention at St. Louis in May, 1947, Newton arose in the Second Baptist Church to address 1,000 ministers about his visit to Russia. As he did

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[82]Ibid.

[83]*Time,* XLVIII (August 26, 1946), 68; Ralph Lord Roy, *Communism and the Churches* (New York, 1960), 176–177; *The Fundamentalist,* April 18, 1947.

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so, up stood J. Frank Norris, who had "purchased" his way as a messenger to the Convention, the result of a $250 donation, which met the denominational requirement. Craggy-faced Norris, in a penetrating voice, began reading a list of seventeen embarrassing, intimidating questions. The presiding minister, M. E. Dodd of Shreveport, Louisiana, raised a forbidding hand, but Norris continued undaunted. In desperation Dodd led the ministers in the singing of a hymn, but grinning, heckler Norris was right with them on the second verse, bellowing the words louder than anyone. When Norris resumed his interruptions at the conclusion of the song, various members of the clerical congregation shouted, "Throw him out." At the same time "a menacing knot" of young ministers gathered around Norris. Eventually several policemen appeared, explaining that they had been summoned to quell a riot. By that time, the uproar had quieted, and Newton continued his report, and Norris proclaimed he had achieved his objective: the exposure on the spot of "Newton and his henchmen as a bunch of appeasers with Moscow."[84] One of Norris' followers claimed later that Norris' actions prevented "poor old Louise" [Louie D. Newton] from being elected president of the Baptist World Alliance.[85]

Ralph McGill, editor of the Atlanta *Constitution*, rose to Newton's defense. He characterized Norris' charges as cheap and false, and called the latter a "Ku Klux yelper and a loud-mouthed shouter in many demagogic political and hate rallies." He also termed Norris a "pistol-toting divine" who needed to be shouted down ("I regret I could not be there shouting with them, and I am a calm man"). Norris brought charges against McGill for referring to him as a "pistol-toting divine," forcing the Atlanta *Constitution* to make a public retraction and apology. When paying his lawyer's fee of $500 for handling the case, Norris wrote: "I consider this the best investment I ever made." He then proceeded to secure 35,000 to 40,000 photocopies of the retraction made by the newspaper, and sent one to every pastor in both the Northern and Southern Baptist Conventions.[86]

[84]The account of this "confrontation," including quotes, is taken largely from *Time*, XLIX (May 19, 1947), 70. Norris' questions included the following: "Why have you [Newton] not said one single word in defense of . . . Greek-Turk Aid to stop Communism? In all your writings and talks about Russia, why have you not said one word . . . condemning the atheistic-communistic tyranny of Joe Stalin and his Polit-Bureau of fellow-gangsters?" Norris to Newton, May 7, 1947, Norris Papers.

[85]Armstrong to Norris, February 27, 1948, Norris Papers.

[86]Atlanta *Constitution*, May 8, 1947; Norris to Samuel D. Hewlett, March 15, 1948, Norris Papers. After the tragedy in his study in 1926, Norris was extremely sensitive

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The unrelenting fundamentalist continued his flagellations at Rochester, New York. He had harsh words for both Toyohiko Kagawa and the Federal Council of Churches. He assailed Kagawa as an "Apostle of Socialism and a Duke's mixture of every 'ism,'" while he charged that the Federal Council was led by a small coterie of men who labored hand in glove with the Communists of Russia.[87] When Norris was invited to address the Texas legislature at an open session in April, 1949, he ripped into American educational institutions, especially condemning their practice of "academic freedom." He said of the latter that it was "the greatest misnomer and the most dishonest thing" ever perpetrated on the American people.[88] Norris suggested that one must "fight fire by fire" not giving an inch to the professors with Communist sympathies who had filtered into the schools. It was on this occasion, to the accompanying applause of the legislators and their friends, that he proposed the severance of state and federal funds from those institutions which tolerated subversive teachers.

In the late 1940's Norris viewed Communism as the great rising power threatening the very existence of western democracies and the Christian religion. The man who two decades earlier had been so critical of Roman Catholicism now had strange words of praise for the hierarchical head of that faith. He referred to Pius XII as "the only power in Europe standing like Gibraltar against communism." If it hadn't been for the pontiff, Norris asserted, "Joe Stalin would be at the English Channel." Sensing that he might be criticized for such warm words of approval (as he was by T. T. Shields, fundamentalist leader from Toronto), Norris added: "Never mind the religious side of it—I will make an alliance with the devil if he is going my way and when he gets through I will say, 'This is as far as you and I go.'"[89]

about being called a "pistol packin' preacher," or words of similar meaning. Since the gun with which he shot Chipps was taken from the drawer of the desk used by the night watchman and there was no evidence that the minister himself ever carried a gun, Norris was successful in forcing retractions from at least five different newspapers. The Norris quote is from the Norris to Hewlett letter.

[87]Rochester *Evening Journal*, April 15, 1936.

[88]Norris, *"Americanism,"* 17.

[89]Ibid., 20. Norris made his comment about Pius XII after a fifteen-minute interview with the Pontiff during the summer of 1947. Shields, Norris' long-time friend and his former associate in the Baptist Bible Union, "deplored" his conduct. The Canadian Baptist wrote in his own religious paper: "We repudiate his whole action as being . . . unworthy of any minister of the gospel, who calls himself Protestant . . . we know of no living man who can talk more nonsense in five minutes on world affairs than

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Such an attitude was typical of the peripatetic Baptist pastor, whether on local, denominational, or wider issues. He was an outspoken, hard-hitting, ruthless leader who employed almost any means to champion his particular position. In the end, this severity boomeranged. Before his death in 1952, his Fellowship had broken over his dictatorial policies and his church at Detroit had severed all relations with him by an overwhelming vote, 3,000 to 7.[90] It was a melancholy, although perhaps deserved, conclusion for the violent preacher from Fort Worth, the most colorful figure in the history of the "modernist-fundamentalist" controversy.

In retrospect, the friends of J. Frank Norris viewed him as a man of God with obvious strengths. They honored him as a preacher of great ability with unquestioned powers of persuasion and imagination; a courageous critic of personal and social wrongdoing who spared no one in his denunciation of evil; and, an administrator with unmatched promotional and fund-raising talents.[91] Others interpreted Norris as a self-centered, inflexible, impatient, hot-tempered, and belligerent tyrant who maligned those persons who differed with him, divided churches, disrupted denominations, and castigated a variety of movements with equal acidity. They remembered him as an exceedingly poor representative of religion, one who gave to fundamentalism much of the odium that is associated with it. The combination of these negative qualities caused Ralph McGill to write: "I would be willing to wager the good Lord winces every time J. Frank Norris mentions His name or climbs up in a pulpit."[92]

Dr. Norris. His action in Rome, while it will serve the purpose he had in view, namely spreading himself in the public press, in our judgment was the essence of folly." Roy, *Communism and the Churches*, 355. The quote about Stalin is from Norris, *"Americanism"*; all other quotes are from Roy.

[90] *Baptist Bible Tribune*, June 23, 1950. Other clergymen in Norris' Fellowship came to resent his completely arbitrary decisions, ranging from setting the time and place of the meetings of the organization to selecting those who would serve as the officers of the group. G. Beauchamp Vick, co-pastor of the Temple Baptist Church at Detroit, led an uprising which resulted in the formation of a splinter group known as the Baptist Bible Fellowship, with its own seminary in Springfield, Missouri. Norris, in failing mental and physical health the last two years of his life, castigated this group unmercifully, charging them with everything from disloyalty to sexual immorality.

[91] Late in his life, Norris told the Reverend Homer Ritchie that he regretted spending so much time on social issues (his campaigns against the liquor interests, Sunday commercialism, prostitution, and gambling, for instance), since his efforts had effected no change. Sandeen, "Fundamentalism and American Identity," 59, points out that men like Norris faced an unresolved tension between their premilleniarian views and their efforts to change society. "Millenarians have consistently taught that nothing can save this world from destruction, and that attempts to ameliorate the condition of man . . . are all doomed."

[92] Atlanta *Constitution*, May 8, 1947.

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This author sees Norris as an independent spirit whose stubborn individualism, nourished on the Texas frontier during the early years of his life, never left him. This individualism set him apart from even his fellow fundamentalists in selected areas of belief, as we have seen, but it also manifested itself in his personal style of ministry.[93] While most of his fundamentalist contemporaries were outspoken and forward, Norris outdid them all in aggressiveness. A born fighter, he craved and loved controversy. He spent much of his time deliberately stirring up strife, with or without provocation, and became a master of acrimonious and caustic verbal tirades. When linked with his theological dogmatism and dominant personality, this made for a perilous combination. But it did not frighten Norris, who became the suspicious, accusative, inquisitorial "defender of the faith," the religious Joseph McCarthy of his generation.

The extent of Norris' influence is as debatable as his person. It is recognized that he built a remarkable organization and a sizeable following about the cornerstone of his own personality.[94] The number he frightened away because of his extremism is more difficult to gauge, although the exodus of 600 members from his church in 1911 is probably representative of a larger throng of conservative Christians isolated by his tactics. Some individuals attributed to his pressure the 1925 revision and enlargement of the Articles of Faith by the Southern Baptist Convention in a more orthodox direction. Others claimed that the strong appeal of the militant minister to ordinary people gave a new voice to "folks from the fork of the creek," part of the needful transition for those moving from rural to urban settings.[95] And even today, the fact that substantially over

[93]In addition to differences previously discussed, Norris' advocacy of military intervention by the United States in World War II set him apart from W. B. Riley; and his rigid antidenominational stance placed him in opposition to J. C. Massee. Riley had already broken with Norris in 1927 when the latter, in an apparent power grab, changed the name of his paper from *The Searchlight* to *The Fundamentalist*. Norris' strategy was to make it appear that his paper was the official organ of the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, of which Riley was the executive secretary. *The Canadian Baptist*, May 5, 1927.

[94]Among Norris' converts was a lawyer who had become addicted to drink. After the reformation of his ways he became wealthy. In gratitude for the change in his life he gave Mrs. Norris $175,000, of which $40,000 was used for the building of the home in which the preacher and his wife lived. Norris took great delight in telling this story to his astounded congregations. Tatum, *Conquest or Failure*, 264–266.

[95]Taylor, "Norris," II, 983; Ritchie, "Life and Career," 193. Fundamentalism should not be considered a phenomenon exclusively of small town and rural environments. Paul Carter points out that although one cannot deny a natural kinship between the

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50 percent of the 260 Baptist churches in Fort Worth are not members of the Southern Baptist Convention, is attributable in part to Norris' antidenominational invectives.[96]

These factors, however, do not obliterate the disturbing evidence that the ministry of J. Frank Norris was a one-man show where the preacher who castigated denominations for failing to respect the autonomy of the local church completely dominated his own congregation and the Fellowship he established. At the level of the local church this prevented the development of a responsible laity. At the level of the Fellowship it hindered his own brand of fundamentalism from exercising a more effective influence. And at the level of wider conservative concern, Norris' self-absorption undercut any enthusiastic support of other prominent conservative leaders. When it was announced that Billy Graham would conduct a campaign in Fort Worth in 1951, Norris wrote languidly: "I am very happy over Billy Graham's coming because he is preaching the same gospel that I preached before he was born." At the conclusion of Graham's crusade, Norris commented wryly: "It was quite encouraging that Billy Graham took a month in confirming the confession of faith that we hold at the First Baptist Church." With such attitudes Norris hurt the very movement he claimed to love and provided Sinclair Lewis, who visited his church, with additional ammunition for his critical novels.[97]

In conclusion, one suspects that (1) the problems of J. Frank Norris were more psychological than theological, rooted in the deprivations of his own unfortunate childhood; (2) fundamentalism was undercut, not only by the incoming tide of theological liberalism, but by the refusal of its independent leaders to work together as a team; (3) Norris' ministry is painful evidence of the price of Baptist autonomy and a strong argument for relinquishing some of that self-government; (4) part of the strength of religion in America has been its ability

old-time religion and the rural mind, it was in the great urban centers that fundamentalism had its birth and carried on its strongest program. For a fuller discussion of the "rural mentality" in the urban environment, see Paul Carter, *The Twenties in America* (New York, 1968), 81.

[96]The Reverend Omer Ritchie to C. A. R., interview, June 7, 1970.

[97]*The Fundamentalist*, February 16, March 30, 1951. After visiting Norris' church Sunday morning, October 31, 1937, Lewis told reporters: "I admire the eloquence and vigor of Dr. Norris and have wanted to hear him. I have never seen before so many people at church at once." Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, November 1, 1937.

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to absorb the kind of blatant extremism generated by the ringleader of fundamentalist extremists, the colorful but irascible J. Frank Norris.[98]

[98]It is interesting, although dangerous, to speculate on the motivations and environmental factors which influenced Norris. Some factors were probably the sense of independence inherited from the frontier; the maternal influence which gave him the drive to excel; the need to compensate for three years lost to illness; the revivalist environment in which he was raised; his ultraconservative religious training which equipped him with a rigid "either-or" mentality; the fear of change and the resulting insecurity it would bring; and the dread of becoming "anonymous" in the whirlpool of denominational activism.

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C. Allyn Russell

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