

J. FRANK NORRIS:  
NO INDEPENDENT

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## J. FRANK NORRIS: NO INDEPENDENT

J. Frank Norris was the harshest critics of the Southern Baptist Convention for many decades. However, this paper will show that until his exclusion in 1924 Norris showed himself to be a consistent supporter of the denomination. Though he would boldly criticize anything he perceived to be in error, he did so as a defender of true Southern Baptist life. This will be shown using his self-expression in two phases of his life, first as editor of *The Baptist Standard* and secondly as editor of *The Searchlight*. Though it can be argued that the reality of his situation was different, this paper merely wishes to demonstrate how Norris himself wished to be viewed.

### **Early Norris as Denominational Supporter**

J. Frank Norris began his remarkable climb to fame in the heart of Southern Baptist territory: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Though he would be famous in the second half of his life as a “man of the people” and would deliberately cater to the working class listener, his time at Southern Seminary gave a different impression. He arrived in Louisville in 1903 from Baylor and entered the three year Master of Theology program. His brilliant mind was revealed when he not only completed the degree in two years but did so at the top of his class.<sup>1</sup> This potential was recognized by both McKinney Baptist Church, which called him as pastor in 1905, and *The Baptist Standard*, which hired him as President and Business Manager.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, Charles. *The Ethical Vision of Fundamentalism: An Inquiry into the Ethic of John Franklyn Norris*. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary: Unpublished Diss., 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Norris, J. Frank. “Editorial.” *The Baptist Standard*. April 18, 1907.

Upon arrival at the prominent Texas denominational paper, Norris show little of his later audacity, but immediately made his lifelong connection with the people of the Convention. He declares, “In a very real sense *The Baptist Standard* is the property of the Baptists of Texas. The managers and stockholders do not consider it as personal property, but as a trust to be guarded and executed in the best interests of the cause of our common Lord.”<sup>3</sup> Norris’ commitment to the people of the Convention was evident to his colleagues well. J.B. Gambrell, superintendent of state missions for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, writes of him: “Pastor J. F. Norris, the new business manager, is young, cultured, has a good outlook, is active, has a business turn, and is committed to the whole program of the Baptists in Texas and throughout the South.”<sup>4</sup> Though it seems surprising that the man later labeled as the “Texas Tornado” would here be described as “cultured,” it displays the manner in which Norris would tailor his image to the end that he wished to achieve.

One of the influences toward Norris’ affinity with the members of the Southern Baptist Convention is seen in a man he greatly admired, J.B. Gambrell. Norris would later say that Gambrell “was never known to be in the wrong side of any moral or righteous question,”<sup>5</sup> a remarkable statement coming from Norris. Shortly after Norris’ arrival at *The Standard*, he published an article by Gambrell entitled “Some Observations Concerning Denominational Loyalty.” Within it Gambrell asserts “Denominational loyalty goes directly to matters doctrinal... Think of an army of 250,000 Baptists in Texas, everyone loyal and true to every interest of each church, and all standing for all they are worth for every interest of the

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<sup>3</sup> Norris, Editorial, *Baptist Standard*, April 18, 1907

<sup>4</sup> Gambrell, J.B. “The Growing of a Great Religious Paper.” *The Baptist Standard*. Vol. 19, no. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Norris, J. Frank. Know Ye Not that there Is a Prince and a Great Man Fallen in Israel Today.” *The Searchlight*. Vol 3, no. 31.

denomination.”<sup>6</sup> Here we see Norris’ perspective laid out clearly: loyalty to doctrine, church, and the denomination. These would be the guiding lights in the future of Norris’ career and were evident, though subdued, in his time as editor of *The Baptist Standard*. He saw himself as the champion of both the truth and the people. While announcing the purposes and character of the paper he pronounces that “the denominational paper is the greatest defender of moral and civic righteousness,” and “We are determined that the Baptists of Texas – the greatest people beneath the stars – shall have the greatest and most up-to-date paper published.”<sup>7</sup> As the head of *The Standard* Norris saw his commitment to the truth of the Scriptures as synonymous with his service to the Southern Baptist Convention. He saw no disjunction between serving the Lord and serving the Baptists of Texas. He clearly delineates this commitment to the good of the Convention, maintaining that “*The Standard* supports with equal fairness and fidelity every phase of our denominational work” while also averring that “*The Standard* is an exponent of the orthodox principles established by the Lord himself.”<sup>8</sup>

Norris’ fervor for the Baptist cause, along with his skill and ambition, soon landed him the job of editor, when J. M. Dawson left for the pastorate. From this position Norris would express himself from the editorial page and soon signs of his personal philosophy emerged. Aside from concerted efforts against the demon rum and general devotional items, Norris began to focus on what he, and others, perceived to be a troubling matter in the Southern Baptist Convention: centralization. As a denominational supporter, he was careful to define what he meant by the term. He says that while Baptists polity is against centralization of *authority*, it “demands centralization of forces.”<sup>9</sup> He cites the great central locations of Baptist influence:

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<sup>6</sup> Gambrell, “Some Observations Concerning Denominational Loyalty.” *The Baptist Standard*, 19, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Norris, “An Open Statement,” *The Baptist Standard*, Aug 1, 1907.

<sup>8</sup> Norris, “An Open Letter to Our Readers.” *The Baptist Standard*, 19, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Norris, Centralization a Supreme Necessity, *The Baptist Standard*, May 28, 1908.

Louisville, Atlanta, and Richmond, and asserts that without such groupings of efforts the cause of evangelism and Baptist effectiveness would crumble. The Convention should spend its efforts in a manner that would be the most productive. Though continual division would be conducive to independence as would sending the annual Convention meeting to every backwater town, it would be foolish. The man that holds that divisive theory “would say Pastor Truett should spend his time in Screech Owl Bend, with a population of one hundred, rather than in Dallas, with a population of one hundred thousand.”<sup>10</sup> Norris, for all his independence and ambition, was dedicated to the furtherance of the Baptist cause, and he felt that the co-operating centralization was indispensable.

However, there was another side to this coin. While Norris was an enthusiastic supporter of the denomination, he was equally committed to Baptist principles of liberty and church autonomy. These principles were being tested by the growth of the Baptists. After one particular Convention he remarks, “The Convention has grown to unmanageable proportions. It is a question which will tax the wisdom of Southern Baptists as to whether these millions of Baptists scattered over so wide a territory can continue to do business in the most expeditious and economical way. Let it be remembered that conventions and all such other organizations are wholly matters of convenience...”<sup>11</sup> Though Norris was excited that the Baptists were growing he wisely saw the problems that could arise from such success and thus reasserts Baptist ecclesiology. Nonetheless, he was cautious about any future splits. When the *Christian Index* suggested that the Convention will part ways, Norris warns against “any unnecessary anxiety about the future of the ‘Trans-Mississippi Baptists.’” He does reiterate that “Conventions and all

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Norris, *Baptists Standard*, May, 1908.

similar bodies are mere matters of convenience, not sentiment.”<sup>12</sup> At this point Norris is fully committed to the direction of the denomination while still maintaining restrictions based on church autonomy.

Norris was equally concerned with the state of orthodoxy within the Convention. As seen before, he balanced his devotion to the Baptist cause with his adherence to sound doctrine. He writes an interesting editorial on the growth of heresy that foreshadowed his turn to Fundamentalism. He stressed that “changes in the great fundamental doctrines of Christianity, changes which modified its innermost character and made it something else, came almost entirely unobserved and without arousing protest.” Norris finds the earliest cause of these heretical changes in a noteworthy place –“a tendency toward centralization.”<sup>13</sup> Norris saw the early church as a democracy, where everyone was heard equally. For him this was the true New Testament church, and thus the Baptist model. Once the bishops and hierarchies were introduced, heresy ensued. While this would be his later concern when the Convention leadership would oppose him, he saw no evidence of deviation at this time. His report on the 1909 Convention proudly declares: “There was a strong emphasis on doctrine throughout the Convention, especially was this true in connection to the Seminary. The doubting ones would have been greatly encouraged if they had been permitted to feel the heavy undercurrent back to the fundamentals.”<sup>14</sup> Norris felt that the Convention, though grown large and unwieldy, was also growing more conservative. He notes this encouraging trend in a sermon of Lens Broughton, who had apparently been looked down upon in the past as too blunt. Broughton, in a message before the Convention, proclaimed “it was easy to fight the sins of the English and took little courage to oppose gambling in Wall Street, but it took courage to oppose it at our own doors.”

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<sup>12</sup> Norris, *Baptist Standard*, July 9, 1908.

<sup>13</sup> Norris, *Baptist Standard*, Aug. 20, 1908.

<sup>14</sup> Norris, *Baptist Standard*, May, 1909.

For Norris, this was a reaffirmation of his own bold battle against these vices, and he was overjoyed to report that “When he said this the Convention broke over all rules of propriety and everything akin to it, and gave its approval in long prolonged and loud applause.”<sup>15</sup> Norris, the champion of righteousness and the people, saw himself completely at home in this environment. He comfortably supported the denomination, and while noting possible problems, felt that he shared a vision of orthodoxy, Baptist distinctives, and zeal for truth with the majority of the Southern Baptists.

Norris’ confrontational approach would strain this commonality in the future, but for now it propelled him farther into prominence. Norris soon became the controlling figure behind *The Baptist Standard*, both financially and editorially. Upon his resignation he stated that he “possessed full authority of *The Standard*, having a majority of the stocks, I congratulate myself and the brethren that no greater number of mistakes have been committed.”<sup>16</sup> His ability impelled both the paper and himself forward, and he was asked to pastor the First Baptist Church, Ft. Worth, Texas. This was a prominent position and was fitted more toward the style of Norris than the editor of a paper. He still had his hand on the Baptist pulse and stated “The First Church, Fort Worth presents a tremendous denominational responsibility now.”<sup>17</sup> Norris probably had “opportunity” in his mind more than responsibility, but he did have concerns for the health of the Convention. He says that his move to Ft. Worth was “conditioned upon the proper disposal of *The Standard*.”<sup>18</sup> Norris sold his stock in the paper to a group of men which included George W. Truett and J.B. Gambrell, who would become the editor. Showing his democratic character, he remarks, “The one man control...has been true throughout *The*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Norris, *Baptist Standard*, Oct 21, 1909.

<sup>17</sup> Norris, *Baptist Standard*, Oct 21, 1909.

<sup>18</sup> Norris, “Sale and Destiny of the Standard,” *The Baptist Standard*, Nov 4, 1909.

*Standard's* history. This has caused great anxiety. All have agreed that an enterprise so vital to every denominational interest should not be suspended on the course and life of one man.”<sup>19</sup>

Though Norris was committed to the people he almost certainly did not feel any anxiety over his own control of the paper. This tendency toward control would be exhibited throughout his life.<sup>20</sup>

Despite this personal ambition he was glad to see the power of the paper be spread about the people he served. Upon assuming the pastorate at Ft. Worth he demonstrated his continual support of the paper and the denomination by leading a campaign among the city churches to raise \$200,000 for Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>21</sup>

At the close of this period of Norris's we find him as a vocal promoter of the Southern Baptist Convention. Though he is mildly concerned for the large, centralized direction of the organization, he sees a conservative and wholly Baptist direction from the churches within. At this time, the ardent preacher and warrior against vice and heresy found an ideal place in one of the prominent pulpits of the Texas Baptist Convention.

### **Later Norris as Denominational Reformer**

Between the years of Norris's resignation from *The Baptist Standard* and his initiating a church paper, initially called *The Fence Rail*, in 1917, he had slowly found both fame and infamy. Sometime around 1910 he experienced a dramatic change in preaching and leadership,<sup>22</sup> which probably freed him from his previous restriction of Southern Baptists urbanity. He proceeded to remake his church into a working-class congregation, while he became a sensationalist preacher. Gradually, but surely, he became the 'Texas Tornado.'

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See Lyon, Matthew. *Separatism and Gender: The Unique Contributions of John R. Rice to Fundamentalism*. Unpublished Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Norris, "Fort Worth Gives \$200,000 to Seminary," *The Baptist Standard*, Nov 11, 1909.

<sup>22</sup> (Moody 2010)



In the first month of publication for his new church paper, *The Fence Rail*,<sup>23</sup> Norris declares “The pastor is going to start a warfare in dead earnest against all forms of wickedness...no favors will be shown and none will be asked. Better call in the ‘denominational bishops’ to muzzle somebody.”<sup>24</sup> Here we see a Norris far removed from the “cultured” editor of a prominent Southern Baptist paper. With a church that had outpaced First Baptist, Dallas, Norris was ready to step up his sensational campaign against whatever evil or error he could find.

Norris’ bold stand had already drawn much criticism from other pastors and Southern Baptists. One such objection is recorded in the title of an article in *The Searchlight*: “The First Baptist Don’t [sic] Give to Missions.”<sup>25</sup> One might expect that this is an indication of Norris’ departure from denominational support, but he soundly rejects this notion. He boldly asserts “The First Baptist Church is in deepest sympathy with all our benevolent and missionary enterprises. From our great seminary to the remotest mission station we are in one accord.”<sup>26</sup> To prove his point Norris produces numerous example where he and his church out-gave another prominent Forth Worth Convention church, even going as far as to list the exact amounts. There is no doubt that, though he expresses disdain when “some ‘denominational bishops’ popped the whip,”<sup>27</sup> Norris was fully and financially behind the SBC.

While Norris may have been behind the Texas Baptists he was also building relationships with other future fundamentalists. He held a Bible conference in 1917 that included prominent names such as R.A. Torrey, A. C. Dixon, Arno Gabelien, W.B. Riley, and G. Campbell Morgan. Though some did not care for his aggressive style, his popular support and phenomenal church

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<sup>23</sup> Soon to be changed to *The Searchlight*, a more fitting title for Norris’ brand of preaching and investigation.

<sup>24</sup> Norris, J. Frank. “Items of Interest.” *The Fence Rail*, January 26, 1917.

<sup>25</sup> Norris, “The First Baptist Don’t Give to Missions.” *The Searchlight*. March, 1917

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

growth made him a man of influence in the South. He would continue with men such as W.B. Riley for many years to come, and the two would be pivotal in creating the Fundamentalist movement.

In 1919 the Southern Baptist Convention began the \$75 Million Campaign, which would bring about much distress for the denomination, and in which Norris was delighted to criticize. However, at its inception, Norris backed the effort. He devoted a front page article explaining and calling for support. He even goes as far as to equate it with Scripture: “The Great Commission is a command from our Lord to send the gospel to every creature. That is the heart and meaning of this campaign. The First Baptist Church will get in the campaign and every member in it.”<sup>28</sup> Coming from the man who would develop to be the largest thorn in the side of the Convention leadership, early in the campaign Norris displayed his typical loyalty to the Southern Baptists. Even after church financial hardships made it difficult to meet the number that the denomination had given to First Baptist, Norris still displays support: “it is earnestly desired that every member shall get in and make a liberal and sacrificial gift to the cause of world-wide missions, for that is what this campaign means.”<sup>29</sup>

For about two years Norris focused his efforts against various social and religious ills, such as gambling and Roman Catholicism. However, in 1921 he caught wind of modernism within the South. A professor at Southern Methodist University, John A. Rice, had written a book advocating higher criticism. In an age where the battle between Fundamentalist and Modernists was heating up, Norris saw his chance to enter the battle like his friend to the north, W. B. Riley. Norris openly criticized both Rice, and the Methodists criticized Norris’ involvement in turn. Norris responded to the claim that it was none of his business with a quaint

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<sup>28</sup> Norris, “Seventy-Five Million Dollar Campaign.” *The Searchlight*, September 25, 1919.

<sup>29</sup> Norris, “The \$75,000,000 Campaign.” *The Searchlight*, Oct, 1919.

illustration: “A man might be foolish enough to desire to get a bad case of smallpox. He can go and get the disease and have his face pock-marked for life. But the day he gets smallpox and insists on walking about the streets of Fort Worth and coming into my congregation, then his smallpox becomes my smallpox.”<sup>30</sup> Norris felt that any purportedly conservative institution that strayed from the orthodox path became other conservative pastor’s responsibility. He cites the story of Cain and declares “It is out business to attend to each other’s business.”<sup>31</sup> Norris was right about the direction of John A. Rice, but his self-appointed license to monitor other conservative did not sit well with his denomination.

This was not the first thing that Norris had done to set his brothers against him. Earlier in the year he had rejected the use of the denominational Sunday School curriculum. Criticizing its structure and certain scriptural interpretations, he substituted it for a “Bible-only” format.<sup>32</sup> Here we find the beginning of sorrows for the relationship between Norris and the Convention. Norris piously declared that “The First Baptist Church without any effort to influence any other church...exercised its inalienable and Heaven given right to discontinue the use of all man-made literature and to take the Bible only as its textbook.”<sup>33</sup> Clearly Norris intended to send a message with this statement that flexed his denominational and independent muscles. He felt the encircling pressure from a Convention that was seeking to fulfill its responsibilities and he resented the intrusion. Though he initially stated that he did not wish to influence any other churches, by the end of the article he does just that: “They say that only First Baptist can do it...I

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<sup>30</sup> Norris, “The Inspiration of the Scriptures.” *The Searchlight*. May 12, 1921.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Norris, “Shall The First Baptist Church Study the Bible?” *The Searchlight*. Feb. 10, 1921.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

do not think to. Any church, however large or small...has sense enough to study the Word of God.”<sup>34</sup> Norris was making a statement that was clearly heard by the leadership.

With the pressure already building between a finically-pressed denominational rock and a successful, zealous Norris hard place, doctrinal deviations arise within the Convention. Of course, the first person to broadcast this news, much to the dismay of more denominationally oriented men, was Norris. In 1921, *The Searchlight* revealed that the Professor of Sociology at Baylor University, G. S. Dow, had published a book with evolutionist teachings. Norris declared that it was done under the auspices of the President, S. P. Brooks. The teaching of evolution had taken very little ground in the South and Norris must have expected the people to express outrage at such teaching in a prominent Southern Baptist school. After he reveals that Dow had been teaching these things for 15 years, he declares that Brooks is responsible too. Realizing that he is going against denominational leadership here he cleverly plays the common Baptists: “The fact that I am just an ordinary, country Baptist preacher does not deprive me of the privilege of asking a few questions. There are no big folks and folks among us Baptists. We are all just folks.”<sup>35</sup> Norris had struck two chords at once: the modernism inside the convention, and the denominational control that had begun to overshadow the church.

After *The Searchlight* broke the news, the Convention leadership was forced to act. Because the South had little sympathy for modernism, a man like Dow could not continue openly in such a prominent post as Baylor. Less than three months after he broke the story Norris crows from the front page of *The Searchlight*: “Professor G. S. Dow Resigns, Decision to Quit Follows Attack Led by Rev J. Frank Norris.”<sup>36</sup> Norris was victorious and encouraged by his influence. He knew, perhaps better than his critics, that the common people of Texas enjoyed

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Norris, “Prof. Dow and Baylor University.” *The Searchlight*, Nov. 11, 1921.

<sup>36</sup> Norris, Prof. Dow Resigns.” *The Searchlight*. Dec 11, 1921.

both his sensational style and his investigation skills. Norris saw himself as a true Baptist, unhindered by hierarchy, given to the truth, the church, and the Southern Baptists. Flush with victory he looked for his next victim.

He did not have to look far. The ambitious \$75 Million Campaign was in dire straits and the denomination was hard pressed for solutions. This was the perfect opportunity for Norris. Though he had supported the campaign, he had begun to resent the high-handed tactics the leadership was using to attain the funds. He was also going through a building campaign that was difficult for his middle-class congregation to fund. Even in the beginning of the campaign, while encouraging his people to give, he expresses displeasure. He informs his people “We have been asked to give \$100,000 dollars in the next five years...This is a heavy amount under the circumstances...We owe more money than all the other Baptists of Tarrant County put together and yet we have been asked to give nearly one-fifth of the amount of Tarrant County.”<sup>37</sup> Norris’ initial enthusiasm had been dimmed by his own financial burden, and while he did not have a reason to oppose the campaign, it is apparent he was not fully on board with the Convention’s decisions.

The \$75 Million Campaign is a clear illustration of the divide that was created by the denominational leaders, and exposed by Norris. With the pressures of debt and overextension, the Convention had to put pressure on the churches to fulfill their pledges. Norris realized early that this outside influence was negative, and that it would lead to problems. He was wise enough to see the potential of unchecked optimism in the beginning and he set in place a more conservative approach at First Baptist. “We have been asked to give \$100,000 for the next five years for world-wide missions. Without a doubt we are able to give it. We will not sign up any

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<sup>37</sup> Norris, The \$75 Million Campaign.” *The Searchlight*. October, 1919.

card as many are doing, but we will follow a better method of making cash offerings.”<sup>38</sup> By the summer of 1921 it was obvious to Norris that this plan was not followed by the rest of the Convention. To make matters worse Norris accuses the leadership that not only is there problem but is being concealed. “The Northern Baptist is millions in debt. The Southern Baptists are in the same financial predicament. We have a very strange situation here in our midst where the Board refuses to allow a contributor to see the books.”<sup>39</sup> By accusing the Board of financial mismanagement Norris once again places himself as the champion of truth and the people. He was shrewd enough to understand that the diversions of the Convention were signs of a real problem, and it reinforced his idea of centralized, denominational control. This division between people and hierarchy gave Norris room to praise the giving of the people in the campaign while simultaneously criticizing the Convention leadership. Six months after he smelled a cover-up Norris is optimistic again: “The reports are encouraging. It was and is a great campaign. It is a pity you hear so much about hard times. The men in charge of the campaign should have more faith and say less about hard times.”<sup>40</sup> Norris saw no inconsistency in his seemingly ambivalent pronouncements. He had always supported the campaign, and declared that it was tied to the Great Commission. The problem was not the idea but the management. Because a small, elite group of men, working behind closed doors and closed books, were pressuring autonomous churches while also mismanaging the funds Norris felt validated in his conflicting positions.

Despite Norris’ sharp critique of the denominational leadership throughout the years of 1920-21 he fully participated in support for the overall Convention. His dynamic personality combined with his exploding church; there was still room in the brotherhood for the most controversial Southern Baptist in Texas. In March he hosted the Texas State Sunday School

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<sup>38</sup> Norris, “The Seventy-Five Million Dollar Campaign.” *The Searchlight*. January, 1919.

<sup>39</sup> Norris, “To Avert National Calamity” *The Searchlight*. June 16, 1921.

<sup>40</sup> Norris, “The 75-Million Campaign.” *The Searchlight*. November 4, 1921.

Convention, where he proudly announces, “There will be 5,000 delegates to this convention. They are coming to visit our Sunday School. We want to cut the 3 out that day [average Sunday School attendance was at 3,000+] have 4 in its place. Not 3,000 plus, but 4,000 plus in Sunday School.”<sup>41</sup> With numbers like that Norris felt secure in his place within the Texas Baptist Convention. He was proud to be a Southern Baptist, despite its failings. And many of the Southern Baptists welcomed such a dynamic and forthright preacher. In 1920 he took a tour of Europe with the Baptist giants E.Y. Mullins and J.B. Gambrell. He was invited to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to recount his trip, and was warmly received. Introduced by a member of the faculty with “Dr. Norris needs no introduction here, we know him, we love him.” Norris proceeded to utterly captivate the audience: “It was a study of ecclesiastical psychology to note the expressions on the faces of the more than six hundred students of theology as they watched every motion and gesture and accent of the man who is planning to enlarge an auditorium that already seats 5,000 people to accommodate the Fort Worth people who sit under his ministry. They just sat there and dreamed of the day when they, too, would have ‘the largest Sunday School in the world’ and thrill audiences with their pathos and humor.”<sup>42</sup> Norris revealed in his position as the most successful and ‘Baptistic’ Baptist in Texas.

Even after he attacked the leadership for their tacit approval of Dow and the management of the \$75 Million Campaign, he wished to seem a team player. He responds to criticism from his local Baptist association “There are those who are trying to make it appear as if we are attacking the denomination, simply because we exposed the infidelity that is [word unclear here] in Baylor University.”<sup>43</sup> Norris never wished to be seen as anti-Convention, but rather as true Southern Baptist who revealed and opposed outside encroachments of modernism and un-

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<sup>41</sup> Norris, “Texas State S.S. Convention Here Mar. 31 to Apr. 3.” *The Searchlight*. March 17, 1921.

<sup>42</sup> Alldridge, J.M. “Dr. J. Frank Norris Speaks to the Seminary.” *The Searchlight*. 1920

<sup>43</sup> Norris, “The \$75 Million Campaign.” *The Searchlight*. January 6, 1922.

scriptural practices. He still wished to be seen as a leader in the denomination and petitioned for the State Convention to meet in Fort Worth in 1922. He maintained, “The convention stands for Evangelism and world-wide missions. On these great New Testament Commandments the First Baptist Church, Fort Worth, is in most hearty agreement with the convention...we have a great Baptist brotherhood in Fort Worth.”<sup>44</sup> Norris even praises the Convention meeting of that year with lofty terms: “The Baptist General Convention of Texas is the greatest deliberative religious body of its kind on earth.” Then in even more remarkable words he states “Never was there a convention more noted for its leadership.”<sup>45</sup> He even notes that his local affiliation, The Tarrant County Baptist Association was growing even stronger. In no uncertain terms he declares, “It is easy to say, as a matter of habit, that each session is greater than the preceding one, but the session held last week was the greatest in the history of the association.”<sup>46</sup> Norris loved the denomination, and he wished to be seen as its supporter.

Despite, or perhaps because of this love, Norris was quick to point out any faults he perceived. Immediately following the words of praise for the state convention and its leaders he spends column after column berating the denomination for allowing Dow to continue at Baylor. He says that when he revealed the infidelity at Southern Methodist University, all the Baptist leaders rejoiced, but when the “searchlight” was turned to Baylor opinions changed. Using his appeal as a “common preacher” he remarks,

But it all depends on whose ox is gored. I had planned to turn on the light on the same infidelity at Baptist schools for I know no infidelity after the flesh and am no respecter of false teaching, whether it comes wearing the livery of Baptists, Methodists or anyone else. I am against snakes of all breeds....I greatly sympathized and now greatly sympathize with some of our leaders who evidently wanted to feed the Baptist

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<sup>44</sup> Norris, “Invitation to the Convention to Come to Fort Worth.” *The Searchlight*. November 25, 1921.

<sup>45</sup> Norris, “The Greatest Convention in Twenty Years.” *The Searchlight*. December 9, 1921.

<sup>46</sup> Norris, “The Meeting of the Tarrant County Baptist Association.” *The Searchlight*. September 9, 1921.



snake a little more milk when some of the rest of us wanted to give him the ax just behind the head.<sup>47</sup>

Norris applies the same treatment to the Tarrant County Association, beginning with words of praise then obliquely criticizes them for falling away in two areas, church autonomy, and tolerating modernism. He coyly says “So long as we recognize the rights and privileges of the local churches that long will we, and can we, co-operate...no church...is to be controlled, ‘advised’ or ‘assessed’ by any power, organization or any other human institution whatsoever.”<sup>48</sup>

Despite Norris’ praise, this sort of constant and sharp criticism was driving the convention away from him. He forced the issue of modernism in the schools by presenting document indicating a conspiracy to conceal the matter at Baylor and was rewarded when the Convention sent out a committee to investigate.<sup>49</sup> As Norris endeavored to be more and more thorough in his search for the truth, he continued up the ladder of the denominational hierarchy, accusing L. R. Scarborough of participation. He questioned why Scarborough knew of Dow’s book for over a year but made no move to reveal it. He also asks why the financial cover-up was not revealed by Scarborough and Groner. Such accusations were beginning to pressure an already beleaguered Convention.<sup>50</sup> With the \$75 Million Campaign struggling and the denominational leaders in financial high waters, a man like Norris was creating unwelcome trouble, though the vast majority of the Convention agreed with his position. Norris recognized the pressure he was placing on the leadership and also the way they were distancing themselves from him. Rather than allow this to turn him he reveled in the attention. He proudly asserted, “J. Frank Norris has too much sense to let the issue be sidetracked by paying any attention to the misrepresentation of the First Baptist Church or himself. Both the pastor and the church thrive

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<sup>47</sup> Norris, “The Greatest Convention in Twenty Years.” *The Searchlight*. December 9, 1921.

<sup>48</sup> Norris, “Meeting of the Tarrant County.”

<sup>49</sup> Norris, “The Investigating Committee Coming to Fort Worth.” *The Searchlight*. February 10, 1922.

<sup>50</sup> Norris, “Denominational Nightmare.” *The Searchlight*. March 24, 1922.

under criticism.”<sup>51</sup> Norris loved to be the center of attention, even negative attention, and he continued to pursue tactics that would keep him there.

1922-23 proved to be a deciding year in the relationship between Norris and the Southern Baptists. He was censured by the State Convention for his “wholesale method of the indiscriminate and destructive criticism of Baptist work and workers.”<sup>52</sup> At its annual meeting his local Tarrant County Association refused to seat him, which in turn led to his removal from the State Convention. Though these were dramatic events, effectively barring Norris from fellowshiping with Southern Baptists, almost no indication is given in *The Searchlight*. Perhaps he felt that it was a temporary setback, or perhaps he was wounded by the exclusion. Realizing the seriousness of the problem he wrote to Scarborough and was readmitted.<sup>53</sup> Whether from Norris’ greater willingness to co-operate or simply a conciliatory overture, Secretary Groner invited him to preach in a Spring Mission Campaign. Groner writes, “WE would like mighty well to use you for a number of engagements at big regional conferences during our spring campaign....Our Executive Committee of sixteen, in session this Friday, upon my recommendation, voted to make this request of you.”<sup>54</sup> Norris clearly wanted to portray that he was being approached by the denomination, probably to show that they had come over to his side. He accepted the offer, but soon enough proved that his silence could not be bought.

By the fall the truce was ended, and when Norris discovered another case of denominational control and modernism at Baylor he rang out the head line: “Dr. Brooks Expels Rev. Dale Crowley for Exposing Evolution in Baylor.” The subtitle had heavy overtones

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<sup>51</sup> Norris, “Two Main Issues Admitted But Not Settles.” *The Searchlight*. October 27, 1922.

<sup>52</sup> McGlone, 55.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>54</sup> Norris, “Executive Board Asks for the Pastor’s Service.” *The Searchlight*. Jan 18, 1924.

concerning the “machine”: “Mr. Crowley Refused Hearing before the Faculty.”<sup>55</sup> Having refused to ‘co-operate’ Norris came under attack from the denomination again. Basking in the controversy, he printed “‘We Will Fix Norris’ at the Coming Convention’: Thus wrote one of the leaders a few days ago to an honored brother in Texas. But the funny thing about it is that they have ‘fixed Norris’ for the past two years. But he won’t stay fixed.”<sup>56</sup> Norris goes on to express his contempt for the politics of the “machine” asserting that “The funny thing is, nobody ever heard of ‘fixing Norris’ until Norris went to fixing evolution in Baylor two years ago.” Norris was solidly convinced that he was in the right, and that he had the conservative Baptist people on his side. Already knowing that he would be brought before the Convention because of his ‘un-cooperation’ Norris was confident that if he had a hearing “I will have my grip full, and will welcome the resolution.”<sup>57</sup>

Norris did go to the Convention and despite his best efforts his opponents managed to refuse his seat and to amend the constitution so as to make it almost impossible for him to be readmitted.<sup>58</sup> Thus ended Norris’ involvement in the Convention. Again his report after the convention did not speak to his dismissal but rather ran an extravagant headline reading, “Great Rejoicing! 100% of Baylor Faculty Sign Creedal Statement Which is 100% For Fundamentalism: Glorious Triumph after Three Years Bitter Warfare of the Bible Versus Evolution.”<sup>59</sup> Despite receiving a devastating blow Norris refused to admit defeat and implied that he had won his battle with modernism. Norris does not address the issue directly for some time.

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<sup>55</sup> Norris, “Dr. Brooks Expels Rev. Dale Crowley for Exposing Evolution in Baylor.” *The Searchlight*. October 31, 1924.

<sup>56</sup> Norris, “‘We Will Fix Norris’ at the Coming Convention.” *The Searchlight*. October 26, 1924.

<sup>57</sup> Norris, “Going to the Southern Baptist Convention.” *The Searchlight*. May 4, 1923

<sup>58</sup> McGlone, 64.

<sup>59</sup> Norris, “Great Rejoicing! 100% of Baylor Faculty Sign Creedal Statement Which is 100% For Fundamentalism.” *The Searchlight*. November 28, 1924.

It seems reasonable to say that his life-long attachment to the Convention would make such a parting extremely difficult. Evidence of such feelings is apparent in his attempt to attend the 1925 Convention as a delegate. He assures his readers that “Yes, ‘Norris’ is going to the Convention as a Delegate.”<sup>60</sup> He spends much effort afterwards to vindicate his decision and argue for his proper place within the denomination. However, he was again refused a seat, in what might have been a pathetic scene of such an influential man being rejected by his fellow Baptists.

If Norris was so attached to the Southern Baptist Convention then why did he pursue a course that would lead to such an abrupt dismissal? The best answer seems to be that Norris underestimated the power of the denomination and the negative effect he had on its leaders. Often he writes of the brotherly love he had for his opponents. He writes, “One hundred years from now when we all get to heaven, we will all have a big laugh, the brethren and I,”<sup>61</sup> and “One of the best things [at the annual Convention], if not the best, is the association and happy fellowship with men and women from every part of the battle field.”<sup>62</sup> Norris failed to realize the stakes at which he was playing, for he had a large and growing ministry that was unaffected by denominational politics, whereas the men he attacked were tied to the welfare of the Convention. Thus, though he enjoyed popular support, and was with the majority on his doctrinal issues, he was too threatening to an organization that was struggling under potential financial ruin. It is reasonable to assume that Norris was surprised that the denomination he had given his life, money and ministry to defend and promote had turned its back on him over issues where he knew he was right. His most vitriolic days would not come until after his dismissal. Until 1926 he portrayed himself as a common, country preacher, fighting for truth and authentic

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<sup>60</sup> Norris, “Yes, ‘Norris’ is going to the Convention as a Delegate.” *The Searchlight*. April 24, 1925.

<sup>61</sup> Norris, “‘We Will Fix Norris.’” *The Searchlight*. October 26, 1924.

<sup>62</sup> Norris, “Greatest Convention.”

Baptist co-operation. His warmth for the brethren is conveyed in a headline he ran after the ordeal was over: “Doctors Scarborough and Norris Clasp Hands across Pulpit at Travis Avenue Dedication.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Norris, “Doctors Scarborough and Norris Clasp Hands across Pulpit at Travis Avenue Dedication.” *The Searchlight*. March 27, 1925.

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