

# Stokes' *Apparent Danger* Discredits J. Frank Norris and Fundamentalism

By DR. SHELTON SMITH

J. Frank Norris (1877–1952) was the principal figure in the rise of Baptist fundamentalism in the first half of the twentieth century. About that there is no debate. Argument could easily be made that he and Dr. John R. Rice were fundamentalism's two most prominent players for decades.

For forty-three years, Norris was pastor of the First Baptist Church of Fort Worth, Texas. Sixteen years of that time (1935–1951), he was also pastor of the Temple Baptist Church of Detroit, Michigan.

Flamboyant, controversial and powerful, Norris did have his critics. Undoubtedly, he provided fodder for many of them with

some of his antics. Like all men, including the great ones, he was not a perfect man.

But let there be no mistake; his life and ministry were extraordinary. With a powerful voice, he wielded his influence with an intensity that was far-reaching.

Dr. Homer Ritchie served alongside Dr. Norris for a time, succeeded him at his death and was himself the pastor of First Baptist Church, Fort Worth, for thirty years. In a recent interview with the *SWORD OF THE LORD*, Dr. Ritchie said,

Dr. Norris once said, "When I die, let it be carved on my tombstone, 'Here lies a man who never

turned his back in the day of battle or feared to face a foe.'

A newspaper reporter once wrote, "There is an eleventh commandment in Fort Worth: Thou shalt not mess with J. Frank Norris." He fearlessly exposed the social evils of society. He aggressively probed issues, investigated improprieties and publicly exposed and castigated the offenders.

## New Book Released This Month

Dr. Norris has been dead now for fifty-eight years. This month a new book about "The Texas Cyclone" has been published. Entitled *Apparent Danger*, it is written by David Stokes. Although the book is presented as if it were a product of a major publisher, a spokesperson at Beacon Hill told us that the book is actually self-published.

With a deliberate negative spin on events in Norris' life (particularly a trial for murder and the church burning), Stokes disparages the preacher. In so doing, he predisposes the reader to believe Norris was guilty and poisons today's audience in regard to him. With a methodical pen, Stokes paints Norris in a very unfavorable light.

In essence, Stokes "convicts" Norris of the charges for which a jury found him not guilty. Stokes' analysis strongly suggests that the trial went awry and that Norris got away with murder.

## Who Is David Stokes?

David Stokes is a pastor associated with the Baptist Bible Fellowship International (BBFI). Formerly a pastor on Long Island (New York), in 1998 he moved to Fairfax, Virginia to become pastor of the Bethlehem Baptist Church.

Stokes, like so many of his peers in the BBFI, led his church into a contemporary ministry shortly thereafter. He would be described within the BBFI as a progressive. In the book, he describes himself as "an evangelical" (not a fundamentalist).

We also interviewed David Stokes. He told us, "I love history. I wrote this for a larger audience than fundamentalism. I grew up at Temple Baptist in Detroit [under Dr. Vick], and I am fascinated with the character of J. Frank Norris. History is not well served by ignoring facts."

## *Apparent Danger* Discredits Norris, Dismissive of Fundamentalism!

In his preface (p. viii), he says, "The movement known as Fundamentalism, the remnants of which survive to this day, was flawed." In other words, fundamentalists today are "flawed," according to Stokes.

He says, "Fundamentalism... had much in common with the Klan" (p. 51).

He further says, "A case has been made that fundamentalism's most critical impact on our social and political history was that, without it, the Ku Klux Klan would never have enrolled the fantastic numbers nor gained the

remarkable power it wielded between 1922 and 1925" (p. 52).

That is to say, Stokes associates fundamentalism with the Ku Klux Klan and thereby taints fundamentalism in the minds of his modern readers.

In the interview with the *SWORD OF THE LORD*, Dr. Ritchie reacted strongly to any suggestion that Dr. Norris was engaged with the Ku Klux Klan. "To the contrary," he said, "Dr. Norris opposed the KKK because of their radical statements especially in regards to the race issue."

Stokes says, "Fundamentalism itself drifted in two directions after the 1920s. The die-hard devotees retreated to their churches and homes, emphasizing the separatist elements of the mind-set, moving from counterculture to subculture" (p. 365).

This comment is clearly dismissive of fundamentalism. It demeans historic biblical fundamentalism.

In the preface (p. viii), Stokes warns of the dangers of a "cult of personality." The phrase "cult of personality" is historically associated with the great dictators such as Joseph Stalin and Fidel Castro. Certainly the word *cult* itself is extremely negative and serves to poison the reader against Norris well in advance of providing the details about the murder trial at which Dr. Norris was exonerated.

In "An Answer to David Stokes," Dr. Ritchie says: "Dr. Norris was never proven guilty of anything! He was found innocent of first-degree murder, second-degree murder or even manslaughter. Now, David Stokes comes along and tries and convicts Dr. Norris eighty-four years later—and tries and convicts the whole Texas law system as well!..."

"It doesn't seem right to me that one guy...should be able to spit in the eye of the whole state of Texas and get away with it without somebody answering him!



preached the same glorious Gospel.

Whether he stood in a courtroom or a state legislation hall, he was listened to as a man who knew his subject and sensed the needs of his audience. Crowds sat in rapt attention to hear the man who came from the farm to the forefront of American religious life.

In a few short years, he arose from the status of most despised and defeated preacher to that of the pastor of the two largest churches in America.

Stokes describes supporters of Norris as "Baptists on steroids" and "fundamentalists, J.-Frank-Norris-idolizing Baptists" (p. 103). So Norris, according to Stokes, led a "cult of personality" (p. viii), and his followers were fanatics who idolized their leader.

On page 6, Stokes notes that Sinclair Lewis went to hear Norris and used him as the model for his book, *Elmer Gantry*. Once again, Norris is set up in advance for the reader as an Elmer Gantry-like preacher, a flamboyant and self-promoting fake.

To discredit Norris, he frequently associates him with the Ku Klux Klan. He says there were members of the KKK in Norris' church (pp. 12, 53), that Norris' church was filled with Klan members (p. 53), that Norris was friendly to the Klan (p. 102) and that the Klan defended Norris after he was accused of murder (p. 170).

So Norris is depicted by Stokes as being thick with the Klan. The consequent conclusion for the reader is then that Norris was as

bad as the Klan. There probably were some Klan members in his church, but the men we interviewed (some of whom asked for anonymity) who were there in the church in the 1940s and 1950s are livid about how Stokes has tied Dr. Norris to the Klan.

Dr. James Combs, the retired editor of the *Baptist Bible Tribune* (the news magazine of the Baptist Bible Fellowship International), gave the SWORD OF THE LORD an interview about Stokes' book on Dr. Norris. Combs also graduated from the Bible Baptist Seminary when Dr. Norris was there.

When asked about whether there was a friendly connection between Dr. Norris and the KKK, Dr. Combs quickly responded, "Absolutely not! There was nothing that even hinted that Dr. Norris was involved with them. He tried to win them to Christ just as he did with everyone, but there was no collusion between them."

It seems that Stokes overplays

the role of the Klan and uses it as guilt by association.

Stokes says that Norris was frequently in fights against gambling, whiskey (p. 27) and against the vice and liquor of "Hell's Half Acre" (pp. 22-25). But Stokes fails to make it clear that those running "Hell's Half Acre" were literally the Texas "Mafia."

Stokes fails to make it clear that Norris was taking on a very powerful group of men who wanted Fort Worth to be an early version of Las Vegas. It was right (as it is for any preacher) for Norris to take these stands and fight the whiskey crowd and the Texas "Mafia." But Stokes uses this to blacken Norris' character and make him out to be a vicious man who was always in a fight.

Stokes describes how Norris was indicted and then acquitted for the arson of his own church building (pp. 42-44). The fact that Norris was proven innocent should count to his credit, but again Stokes uses suggestion and association to make Norris appear as a bad guy who should not be trusted or believed.

Dr. Combs was upset that Stokes' book went into such detail page after page about the trial over the Chipps killing and then in one half-page reported the jury's not guilty verdict.

The jury only deliberated one hour and ten minutes. Such a short time of deliberation is typically a clear indicator that the jury had no doubts as to the guilt or innocence of the accused.

These men who were associates of Dr. Norris (which Stokes was not) and who knew many of the other principal players in these events, believe it is very likely that the Texas "Mafia" burned both his house and the church. It's a wonder they didn't kill Norris!

Stokes quotes a sociology professor who described Norris as a "paranoiac" (p. 144). Of course, this sociologist from a little town in the Texas panhandle made this evaluation based on newspaper stories. For such a judgment to be made by a man hundreds of miles away who never personally examined Dr. Norris seems to be a totally unreliable stretch.

Yet Stokes uses this man's off-the-cuff comment to make people think Norris was paranoid and to poison them against him. In other words, he *has* to be guilty. After all, he was paranoid, according to the sociologist who never met him!

As to the killing of Mr. Chipps, Dr. Ritchie said, "Chipps came to Dr. Norris' office. He was drunk, cursing loudly and threatening the preacher. He reached for a gun in his hip pocket, which prompted Dr. Norris to shoot first."

According to Dr. Ritchie, Dr. Norris said that the day of the shooting was the saddest day of his life. Ritchie said, "I worked for him. I knew him. He was a compassionate man, a giving and caring man, a good and truly great man. He was a great defender of the Faith. He fought his opposition aggressively, and he would strike back when they attacked him."

Notably, Stokes does not present a closing chapter of summary and conclusions. He gives what happened in the later lives of the major participants. But he never sums up his case against Norris. He does not make a summary of why he thinks Norris was guilty,

why the witnesses were wrong, why the judge was wrong or why the jury was wrong!

Instead, people who read his book are left to be the judge and jury and to convict Norris because they don't like his personality or some of his traits! It seems that Stokes wants the reader to ignore the judge, the jury and the testimonies.

In America a person is innocent until proven guilty, but Stokes treats Norris as guilty—after he was adjudged innocent in a court of law.

The injustice is not done in the court, but by the pen of David Stokes. Stokes stands as judge and jury of the whole Texas court system, as well as the judge of the people on the jury in the case of the shooting of D. E. Chipps.

In the interview with David Stokes, we asked him, "Is this book designed in a clandestine way to take a swipe at fundamentalism?" He indicated it was not his intent; nonetheless we believe most of his readers will see it as such.

Of course, we do not commend and we do not recommend Stokes' book.

That's why I am standing up for Dr. Norris."

In a view of Norris that also stands in stark contrast to the view Stokes presents, Dr. Raymond Barber, the nationally known, longtime pastor of Worth Baptist Church in Fort Worth, a graduate of Dr. Norris' Bible Baptist Seminary and one who knew him well, said of him:

Explosive! Enigmatic! Indomitable! These are but a few choice adjectives one might use to describe the man who has been hated, loved, revered, despised, praised and maligned by people who knew him, to say nothing of those who only knew what they had heard.

This man among men did as much for Baptists as any man in his generation, and he paved the way for thousands of Bible-believing Baptists to identify themselves as a spiritual entity to be reckoned with, known as independent, fundamental Baptists.

The preaching of Norris was one of his finest assets, and in it he excelled more than in any other area of his many-talented life. Possessed of a God-given ability to speak, his messages held his audiences spellbound, motivating them to yield to the moving of the Spirit.

Norris was unsurpassed in eloquence. His messages appealed to the rich and the poor, the learned and the unlearned, the good and the bad.

His personal contacts included interviews with such notables as prime ministers and presidents. He spoke the languages of the commoner and the king, feeling equally at ease with both. In the archives are autographed pictures of Norris and Churchill, together with letters from Truman and Speaker Rayburn. Whether he was in the office of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, the pope in Rome or the prime minister in London, he was capable of leading the conversation in political and religious topics of international interest.

Whether he was preaching in an open-air meeting in Detroit or in the spacious Spurgeon's Tabernacle in London, he spoke with the same clarion voice and