

## **T. B. Maston: The Man, His Family, and His Ministry**

*by A. Jase Jones*

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### **Introduction**

Let me introduce to you the subjects of this study. They are Thomas Buford Maston and his wife, Essie Mae Maston, née McDonald. Both were native Tennesseans but were destined to spend the greater part of their lives in Texas. They had two sons, Thomas McDonald (1925) and Harold Eugene (1928). Dr. Maston spent more than four decades as student and professor in Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas.

Who was T. B. Maston? What kind of person was he? The attempt to answer those questions has been the most difficult part of the preparation of this speech. To describe facts and events and ideas can be somewhat routine, but to put into words the essence of a complex human being can be a daunting experience. My aim, at least in this part of my presentation, is to describe Dr. Maston so accurately that he could recognize himself in that description.

He was a gentle and genial man. He could be firm when necessary, firm without being harsh or hard or overbearing. He was resilient, flexible. he had a delightful sense of humor. He could laugh at himself. He was open-minded - open to the truth, open to others. He was approachable, accessible. He was open to other viewpoints. For someone to disagree with him was not a challenge to his ego.

He was genuinely humble. He was self-effacing, without being self-conscious about it. He was responsive to others and their needs, problems, sufferings, defeats, and their calls for help. He was a man of love, the *agape* kind of love, the kind defined by Dr. W. T. Conner as "active good will." A renowned New Testament scholar wrote that the English word that most accurately expresses the meaning of *agape* is the word "selflessness." That could be the word that most completely epitomizes the character of T. B. Maston.

### **A Family Man**

Dr. Maston was a family man. His life was centered around his wife and their two sons, Tom Mc and Gene. His former students remember his stress on the home as the first institution founded by God and his admonition to them never to forget, in all their obsession with their pastoral and church duties, that their first and most important responsibility is to their families. He certainly always applied this to his own life.

I remember watching him at dinner as he held Tom Mc's head up with one hand and fed him spoonful-by-spoonful with the other, occasionally taking a bite for himself from his own plate.

Too, I remember going to their home on a hot day while Dr. Maston was cutting the grass, all the while keeping Tom Mc in the shade and on the side of the house where he was working and where Tom Mc could watch the cars and people go by. On another occasion when the Mastons were visiting us, Dr. Maston and I went to church. Mrs. Maston and Vivian stayed at home with Tom Mc. Vivian said that she and Mrs. Maston were talking and Tom Mc was sitting motionless and expressionless until he heard Dr. Maston's voice as the two of us entered the house. She said that Tom Mc straightened up and brightened markedly at the sound. Tom Mc had to be helped in everything. He could not turn over in bed, so the Mastons turned him over during the night. When the Mastons went to Beirut, Lebanon, for Dr. Maston's teaching stint there, they discovered that Tom Mc was a good traveller.

### ***Moral Integrity***

Dr. Maston's character and, as well, his approach to both the interpersonal and intergroup expressions of moral wrong was marked by (1) moral sensitivity, (2) moral integrity, and (3) moral courage. He was sensitive to every expression of moral deviance and sensitive to and sympathetic with the struggle of people to overcome their human limitations and gain control over sin's attraction and its power over them. As for integrity, one dictionary defines it this way: "adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty." (*Random House*) Another offers this: "the condition of having no part or element taken away or wanting." (*Compact OED*) The term "moral integrity" would certainly apply to Dr. Maston. Finally, to challenge the forces of hatred and prejudice in the struggle to secure justice for African Americans and for American Labor required moral courage of the highest order.

### ***Beginning of a Lifetime of Ministry***

This man whom we have been describing, T. B. Maston, was born in Jefferson County, Tennessee, on November 26, 1897. He graduated from Carson-Newman College in Tennessee in 1920. A fellow graduate was Miss Essie Mae McDonald. Both these young people had felt the call of God for special Christian service during college days. After graduation, they enrolled in Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, in the fall of 1920.

Although they were planning to be married, they thought that they should wait until they had completed their seminary work before marrying. During their first year at Southwestern, they observed that a large proportion of the student body was composed of young married couples. So, when they went back home for the summer recess, they were married on June 11, 1921, and returned to Southwestern in the fall as married students.

Little did they know that they would spend the rest of their lives in Fort Worth and at the seminary. Dr. Maston said that as the time of their graduation neared, he was walking on campus and Dr. L. R. Scarborough, Southwestern's president, walked up beside him and told him that the seminary would like for him and Mrs. Maston to consider staying and teaching. So, from that time until Dr. Maston retired at the end of the spring semester in 1963, their lives were spent on Seminary Hill close by the seminary. In retirement, Dr. Maston maintained an office at the seminary, and the family continued living in their home of many decades.

Both Dr. and Mrs. Maston taught in the field of religious education in the beginning of their careers. In a few years, they decided that they would begin their family, and Mrs. Maston retired from teaching. She had a very promising career ahead of her in her field, but they felt that that must wait.

### ***Tom Mc: Ministering in His Own Way***

Any account of the Maston family is incomplete without an introduction to Tom Mc, the elder son. Tom Mc was a vibrant human being, although severely handicapped. From birth and throughout his life, he could not talk, and he had no use of his arms or his legs. He was completely helpless. Yet, all who knew him were forever influenced by him, boy and man. Mr. Bruner Lee, whose father was a student in Southwestern Seminary in the 1920s, and whose family lived next door to the Mastons, wrote when he learned of Tom Mc's death in 1987, "How marvelous that God can use a man who never spoke a word to touch so many lives. The Lee pair are among them."

The Maston family cannot be adequately understood until one knows their lifelong care for Tom Mc and their treatment of him as a conscious human being. And this was done while both Dr. and Mrs. Maston continued to serve God, their denomination, and their country in most exemplary ways. The Mastons never institutionalized Tom Mc. God had given them this precious life, and they devoted their lives to his care, mother, father, and brother.

Mrs. Maston, naturally, spent more time with him than the others, but the other two did their part when at home. Dr. Maston was careful to take as much of this responsibility as he could, especially so that Mrs. Maston could be free to participate in outside activities. For example, he planned his schedule during the year the Baptist World Congress met in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1947 so that he could be at home and Mrs. Maston could attend the Congress and tour England and some of Europe.

Mrs. Maston was a very able teacher. For several decades, she taught an adult women's Bible class at nearby Gambrell Street Baptist Church. She faithfully visited, as Dr. Maston wrote in *Mommie* (a book he wrote as a tribute to Mrs. Maston), "the old, the ill, the lonely, the forgotten." These were not members of Gambrell Street Baptist Church only but also people of any or no religious affiliation who were in need.

To be certain that Tom Mc is seen as a real person and not as "different," be assured that he had his own attractive personality. He had a wonderfully warm and bright smile. When my wife, Vivian, and I visited the Mastons, or they visited us in Kansas City, Missouri, and Marble Falls, Texas, we greeted him as naturally as we did anyone else. Vivian, in particular, would go over to Tom Mc in his wheelchair, pat him on his shoulder, and say, looking him in the face, "Hello, Tom Mc, darling, how are you?" That smile would come on his face, and he would twist his body in pleasure.

His mind was alive, too. Mrs. Maston told Vivian that she was convinced that there was a mind locked up inside him. She also referred to the times she had stood in her garden and wept because he was unable to express himself on what must have been in that mind. His mind was active, though. He knew what television programs he liked, and he could make known his displeasure over the ones he did not like. He liked to sit in his wheelchair in the yard and watch people and cars go by while Dr. Maston worked in the yard.

### ***Essie Mae Maston: Giving All of Herself***

I have said so much about Tom Mc because I am leading up to say something about Mrs. Maston. Following its annual custom of honoring outstanding Southwestern Seminary graduates, the seminary named Mrs. Maston as one of the honorees. At the dinner when the awards were presented, I talked with Mrs. Maston. Her words went something like this, "I don't know why I'm sitting up here with all these accomplished people. I've never done anything." My response is that she is a living example of the heart of the Christian gospel. Really, she had done more than most any of us. She forgot self, or, in Jesus' words, she denied self, and this

not only in relation to God, but also in relation to other persons. She personified selflessness. She, and all of the Mastons, mustered all of their spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional resources to provide for Tom Mc a family environment as loving and supportive as humanly possible. To them, he was a person real and treasured.

Indelibly etched on my memory is an event that occurred not long after Tom Mc's passing in the fall of 1987 and Dr. Maston's passing in the spring of 1988. I forget the exact circumstances, but Vivian and I were in Fort Worth and had been somewhere with Mrs. Maston. When we returned to her home, both Vivian and I accompanied her to the door. As she started to enter her home, she turned and said, "I've lost my family," her eyes, her facial features, and her voice reflecting the wrenching pain in spirit, mind, and body caused by her new circumstances. When she said "my family," she was not deliberately omitting Gene; she was just referring to the ones left at home who had been her special care in their illness for so many years. I can never forget the look on her face that can best be described only as one of devastation. Of course, after my loss of Vivian two years ago, I can better understand that sense of irremediable loss she was feeling.

### ***Dr. Maston and Christian Ethics***

Dr. Maston's principal contribution was in the field of ethics, Christian ethics. As mentioned earlier, he taught first in the field of Christian education. Dr. J. M. Price, the professor who led in the establishment of Southwestern Seminary's School of Religious Education, taught a course in Christian ethics. When he was off-campus at times, Dr. Maston would substitute for him. This occasional activity before long resulted in Dr. Maston being designated to teach Christian ethics, and eventually being named full-time to that task. The courses and department were first called Social Ethics. This indicated the purpose of applying the principles of Christian ethics to the institutions and activities of society - marriage and the family, labor, race relations, the state, industry and commerce, for example. The department's title was later changed to the Department of Christian Ethics. Maston served as department chairman until his retirement in 1963.

Before expanding our discussion of Dr. Maston's career, I think it important to note that he was a Christian layman. At the beginning of each new class, Dr. Maston would introduce himself to new students by giving a brief description of himself and his career. There were two things he always said, at least on the occasions I heard him do this. One was a tribute to Mrs. Maston for the quality of her life. He always acknowledged that without Mrs. Maston he could not have accomplished what he had. The other was the statement that he was a layman, that he had considered himself a layman from the start, and that he had resisted every suggestion that he be ordained. He felt that this was God's will for him.

Dr. Maston was a teacher. I call him a great teacher. He knew his subject. He presented it in an interesting way, arousing the interest of his students, stimulating a desire to learn. He treated his students with respect, and they respected him. He was warm and friendly and treated his students as equals. He was approachable always. He did not have an authoritarian manner. He was flexible, yet firm.

Possibly most important, he knew he was not just teaching a subject, he was teaching people. He and Mrs. Maston annually invited his doctoral students to their lovely home for dinner and fellowship. Those were occasions to be remembered for a lifetime. He was a master of the question. He used questions to probe, in a kind and gentle way, the absolute limits of the student's knowledge, and in its stimulating, energizing way to help the student even "recall" information the student was not conscious of knowing. It is interesting to note that Socrates used the question as a teaching tool. Maston had a gentle sense of humor and an engaging chuckling laugh.

For years, the seminary students conducted a faculty take-off. Students were selected to do take-offs on faculty members. One year, I was named - by my "friend" (?) Ralph Phelps - to do the take-off on Dr. Maston. The event took place one afternoon in a nearby city park, with the "show" conducted in the park's band shell. There was general entertainment before the take-off, all by students. Paul Stevens, who was later for years the director of the Southern Baptists Radio and Television Commission, and I had a "bit." Paul told a joke, and I was his straight man. Only the joke's punch line remains in my memory. After I had set the stage for it, Paul said, "Cleopatra (*deep breath*), Cleopatra (*deep breath*), where have you been (*pronounced 'bean'*)?" It brought the house down, why I don't know. I have long since forgotten the lead-up to the punch line.

When I did my take-off on Dr. Maston, he was sitting in the front row looking up at me! I had a Social Ethics class the next afternoon. As we sat in the classroom waiting for Dr. Maston, I couldn't help but wonder how he had taken my attempt at humor the previous day. When he entered the door, he headed straight toward me on the front row, his face very solemn, and I sat there saying "oh, oh" inside. When he got to me, with a twinkle in his eyes, he held out his briefcase to me and, his other hand pointing to the teacher's desk, said, "Get up there!" The class roared, and he smiled. I tell this story to note the difference between him and a fellow professor, who was so enraged by his treatment in the take-off and raised so much to-do about it, that our take-off was the last faculty take-off of record. We killed that goose!

Maston was a wise and trusted counselor. He was not designated officially as a counselor, but students just naturally turned to him for help with their problems. He was a good listener. He was sympathetic. He could keep a confidence. He helped counselees to make their own decisions, rather than advocating his solution to their problem.

My own experience of Dr. Maston as a teacher came early in my seminary study. The introductory Social Ethics course was required for graduation. I had already chosen New Testament as my major when I took the required Social Ethics course. After the first week or two in this course, I changed my major to Social Ethics, as it was then called. One factor may have been that I had majored in sociology at the University of Texas, and Social Ethics dealt with the application of Christian ethical principles to human institutions, marriage and the family, race, labor, and others. I know, though, that the professor, T. B. Maston, was a major - if not the major - factor in my decision. During the rest of my master's program, and the doctoral program, of course, I took every class offered by Dr. Maston.

Dr. Maston was also an author. He was a skilled, gifted writer. He wrote many books, most of these after he retired. Carrying a heavy teaching load, counseling students, responding to requests from Southern Baptist Convention agencies, state Baptist agencies, state conventions and associations, learned institutions and organizations, for lectures, conferences, and addresses, he had little time to do the writing he wanted to do. That would have to wait for retirement. He had long thought of writing a definitive text on Christian ethics, but such a work requires years to write, and he had to postpone it. After he retired, he didn't think he would live long enough to write it. Actually, he lived 25 years after retirement. He once said that if he had known he was going to live so long, he would have started that book.

The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board called on Dr. Maston many times during the years. For many years, they invited him to be the speaker at the annual orientation for new missionaries. They called on him for trips overseas to various mission fields as speaker and advisor to the missionaries. Other agencies called on him for such service. The Southern Baptist Convention's Chaplains Commission sent him on a tour of U. S. military units during the Korean conflict, meeting with Southern Baptist military chaplains to observe their work and counsel with them as needed. This was done with the approval of the U. S. military, and since

he would be in military units as a visitor, it was necessary to give him military status so that military units he visited would know how to entertain him - type of quarters in which to stay, the type of military mess in which to eat, and other aspects of military tradition. So, they bestowed on him the equivalent of the rank of major-general. Well, I had been slowly climbing the ladder of rank through years of service in the Active Army and the U. S. Army Reserve, and had finally attained the rank of full colonel just before my retirement from the Reserves in 1973. Now, he just steps in and is immediately given the rank of major-general. Now, I ask you, is life fair? We got a laugh out of that. This wasn't Dr. Maston's first experience in the military, however. He was drafted into the United States Army in World War I but never saw combat duty.

Dr. Maston was not only a teacher, lecturer, and writer in the field of Christian ethics. He was an activist. He was one of the major leaders in establishing the Christian Life Commission. He led Southern Baptists to face the racial situation and their part in it, and to consider the biblical teachings and principles about this difficult problem and to apply those principles in life. This took courage, for there was bitterly strong opposition to this kind of teaching and activity. One day, in his office, we were talking about his, and he pointed to a file cabinet. "That bottom drawer is full of hate mail," he told me. "You would be surprised at the language in those letters and at the names of some of the people who wrote them," he added. Such a stand on race relations and other sensitive moral subjects could have cost him his job - and would have if some Southern Baptists had had their way. But there were thousands of his former students scattered throughout the land and around the world, and they strongly supported him and led others to do so. Dr. Theodore (Ted) Adams, pastor of First Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia, and once president of the Baptist World Alliance, said, "The progress that we have made among Southern Baptists in the matter of race is due to men like you (Maston) and O. T. Binkley." (*AACE*, p. 65) The time of the struggle over race was also a time when American labor was struggling for a stronger standing. Maston's fair and sympathetic presentation of labor's needs and rights aroused opposition in some quarters.