

File 0709T.B. MASTON: ON CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

by Gary E. Farley

Howbeit slight of stature, still Thomas Buford Maston was seen as a spiritual giant by thousands of Southern Baptists during the difficult days of the Civil Rights Movement. He served as the conscience of a denomination whose roots were deep in the culture of a segregated South.

In *THE BIBLE AND RACE* (1959) Maston presents a biblical argument against racial segregation and violence. On the one hand, he appeals to the evangelistic impulse of Baptists contending that the gospel must be shared with all people regardless of race and that segregation stands in the way of this. On the other, he answers the contentions of segregationists that the Bible supports racism by careful and kindly exegesis of the various passages they were employing.

Wisely, the leaders of the Baptist student movement in the South widely used Maston at retreats and in conferences to address the race issue. He was immensely popular with students. He had that rare quality of being a friend of the high and the low, the wise and untutored, the strong and the weak, disciples and even adversaries. Maston was ever the genuine Christian with every person in every situation.

His constant instruction was to “deal with the issue, not personalities.” While attacking segregation from a Biblical base, he did not condemn the segregationist. And that is how he lived. I would contend that the current growth of Southern Baptist churches and adherents among African-Americans in the United States builds upon the foundation that T.B. Maston laid in the hard days of the 1950s.

Yet Maston was not a one-dimension scholar, teacher and prophet. He taught and wrote not only on race, but also concerning family relations, mass movements, economics, church and state relationships, rural life, church life, the problem of suffering, and of course, basic ethics. In each area he worked from a biblical base. This is to say that he very honestly sought to discover what the Bible had to say on the subject. He approached the Bible not to find proof-texts to support a position he had already taken, but rather in an open, seeking way to learn the principles found therein. For him, the highest revelation of God and his will was found in the life and teaching of Jesus. All Scripture was to be understood in light of what Christ taught. And while Maston was appreciative of philosophy and of the social sciences and their findings, he never allowed them to usurp the position of Scripture at the center of his understanding of the Christian life. His hermeneutic is developed in *THE BIBLE AND FAMILY RELATIONS* (1983) and the fruit of his studies is presented in *BIBLICAL ETHICS*

(1967).

Maston lived a long and useful life. He was born in 1897 and lived 90 years.

He taught perhaps 10,000 students at Southwestern seminary from 1924 to 1963 when he retired. He continued after retirement to teach in conferences with foreign missionaries, chaplains, and student mission volunteers. He also served as visiting professor in colleges and seminaries for two decades more. He published more than 20 books and hundreds of Sunday School lessons, state convention newspaper articles, and SBC periodical pieces.

Maston was ever the optimist. Across the years, he repeatedly saw God at work, bringing good out of evil and suffering. In the 1920s and 1930s it was the personal experience of having a child who suffered from cerebral palsy and his own near death experience from an illness while a graduate student at Yale. Out of these experiences came a focus on the related issues of understanding suffering and the discovery of God's will for one's life. In the 1940s it was the unjust attacks by J. Frank Norris, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Ft. Worth, upon the seminary and its faculty. In the 1950s it included personal attacks for his stand on the civil rights issue. In the 1960s and 1970s it was church and state, and war and peace issues. Then in the 1980s it was the conflict within his beloved Southern Baptist denomination. My last visit with Dr. Maston came shortly before his death. He saw our denominational energies as being deflected from the goals of Bold Mission Thrust. Maston had former students in leadership roles on both sides of the controversy. He had talked with and written to them. He expressed disappointment, but hope. He had seen God work in the past to bring victory out of seeming defeat and loss. He anticipated some good would come, finally, from all of this.

Maston was ever the evangelist. He longed to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ. Consequently, he seemed to have a special love for the foreign missionaries as they carried the light of the Gospel around the world. But he was insistent that conversion is only the beginning of a life of discipleship and spiritual growth. On several occasions I heard him declare that we do not need more Christians so much as we need better Christians. Then, he would go on to explain more attention must be given to assisting Christians to take on the characteristics of Christ in personality and in the conduct of everyday life. He saw the virtues of a transformed life as a most effective evangelistic tool.

And Maston was ever the conservative as evidenced by his use of the Bible, his life long political registration as an Independent (a kind of compromise between his East Tennessee Independent raising and his concern for social justice as championed by the Democratic party), and his practice of listening to Paul Harvey during lunch each

day. Yet he warned the victorious West not to see the collapse of Russia as vindication of the Capitalist economic system and fail to critique its many un-christian abuses. And he warned those who have gained control of the denomination not to slip into an “easy Gospel” which multiplies conversions but fails to do the hard work of discipling in such a way that the convert experiences the full joy of spiritual liberation and the challenging responsibility of living the Christian life. The conservative Maston ever stressed the freedom and the responsibility of every person before God. The evangelistic Maston stressed that conversion is the beginning of a life of growth toward spiritual maturity with Matthew 5:48 as the goal, howbeit never fully attainable in this life. And the optimistic Maston found God to always be victorious, often in surprising and unexpected ways, bringing triumph out of apparent tragedy.

Whenever some of “his boys”, the affectionate term that was applied to the more than 50 men and women who did graduate studies with him in ethics, became a little elitist or etherial in their thinking, Maston would work around to asking them to ponder the admonition his father gave to him when he left the farm for college, “Don’t let them put your fire out, son.” Maston would then ask, with a characteristic wink, “What do you reckon my father was telling me?” We understood it to mean that we should not lose the common touch. Our focus should be on the plain folk and their everyday lives. Our audience was not to be the elite of the faith, but rather the masses. This was not a welcome admonition in the heady days of graduate study. And some of us have wished that Maston had written more for the spiritually mature or elite. But he was ever the common man as will be seen the summary of his teachings about the Christian life which follows. For further study of Maston’s basic ethic I would direct you to WHY LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE? (1974), REAL LIFE IN CHRIST (1974), GOD’S WILL FOR YOUR LIFE (1964) and TO WALK AS HE WALKED (1985). One might also look at RIGHT OR WRONG (1955 and 1971).

BEGINNINGS AND PROCESSES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

The Christian life is for Christians. Sin has defaced the image of God in each person. Salvation, an act of grace and of faith, initiates a process of restoration. Salvation impacts the mind, the understanding and the will (Phil. 1:6). But the experiences are only the beginning of a life-long process of growth and maturing. Maston taught that there is both an automatic and a reflective element here.

With salvation one is changed and takes on the characteristics of God. In one sense these qualities flow naturally from this new union with Jesus:

*faithfulness

*fairness and justice

*love and mercy

*self-sacrifice

*relationship with God

*worship

But there is more. As one acts, he or she makes choices that are understood as being in keeping with these qualities, and then one reflects upon the action and its consequences to discern if indeed the act measured up to being “like God”. In this process of discernment, action, and reflection, the conscience serves as a helper, although a fallible one. Ideally, one grows more like God through this process. Decisions that might have been difficult early in the Christian’s life become almost automatic in time. However, this growth also opens up new areas of ethical sensitivity. For example, Maston would declare in class that while the segregationists of the 1950s were immature in that area of their lives, perhaps they were more mature than many of their critics in other areas of life.

So, growth has an ideal model, a reflexive mode, and a contextual expression in that some facets of the Christian life remain unexamined until some crisis comes which causes one to reflect. It is here that the indwelling Spirit of God speaks through the conscience. But one must be listening. For Maston, then, the spiritual life is rooted in “union with Christ”. But in the union, the believer retains both his or her uniqueness and elements of the sinful past.

Maston was generally critical of current American culture with its emphasis upon the sensate and upon power, position and prestige. He warned Baptists concerning how easy it was for the Christian, for a church, or for a denomination to take on these values of the world which are in conflict with the values of the Christian life. Consequently, it is necessary for the believer to be very serious about living the Christian life. It is so very easy to be deflected from the goal of glorifying God and extending his kingdom.

He was also critical of “The New Morality” or “Situational Ethics” in that it presupposed a level of spiritual maturity that has not yet been achieved by most Christians. While he freely acknowledged the importance of the context for moral decision making, he found more substantive guidance in the Bible than did Joseph Fletcher and his followers. Frankly, most common folk, and I suspect others as well, need more guidance than “doing the loving act.” Commands and principles are also required.

The motive of the Christian life journey is obedience and gratitude. Salvation has already been assured. Seeking spiritual maturity is a consequence of what God has done, not a means to get God to grant salvation. One has become a child of the king, a citizen of the kingdom. So, he or she is only being a good child and an obedient

subject as the Christian life is lived out.

Maston agrees with Reinhold Niebuhr that the command of Matthew 5:48 to be “perfect like the Heavenly Father” always remains an “impossible possibility” even for the most mature. Life is ever changing. It is never static. New temptations, challenges, conflicts, opportunities, and suffering come. We should grow as long as we live, but only as we pass into the life beyond will we be truly perfected. In the meanwhile, we grow and we glorify God.

MAKING EVERYDAY LIFE DECISIONS

Maston’s primary audience was students. While they were greatly concerned about choosing a vocation and selecting a life’s mate, they were also struggling with lifestyle decisions. Here he most often offered an apologetic for traditional virtues over against vices.

Three principles are presented to these young people. Interestingly, two come from philosophical ethics and one from biblical.

First is the “laws of nature” principle. Maston argues that God has ordered the world in terms of basic laws which support the common good. These make it possible for life to be regular and predictable. Included would be physical laws which govern the health and well-being of the physical body. If one elects to violate these laws, by, for example, abusing alcohol, then there are consequences to pay. Maston allows for miracles but advises against counting on one to save a violator. Maston also uses this principle to explain the handicapped condition of his older son, Tom Mac. In his case, the unnecessarily extended and resultant deep trauma of the birth experience was the probable cause.

There are also laws of social relationships which Maston sees as being built into the world that God made. Violation here also brings hurtful consequences. Infidelity would be an example.

Second is the principle of universality. This is drawn from the ethics of Kant. Essentially, it argues that for an act to be moral for you, you must be willing to allow everyone else to perform the same act. Here, too, infidelity, petty theft, and falsehoods might be cited as examples.

Third is the principle of the character of God. Maston instructs his readers to ask the question is the proposed act in keeping with the character of God for this context? This is the most basic principle for Christians. Would God lie, steal or be unfaithful? No. Then neither should one of his children. In addition, Maston takes very seriously the direct commandments and implied principles of the Bible. In Biblical Ethics, he does a survey of these commandments and principles.

Elsewhere in his writings and teachings, Maston often addresses the concept of

accommodation. Central in his teaching was the notion that God has an ideal will for every life, for every institution, for every conscious act, for every event. Maston termed this the perfect will of God. However, given the sinful and immature nature of persons and of social institutions, this perfect will is seldom achievable. So, Maston postulates a less-than-perfect, situational will of God which he terms circumstantial. By this he means, the best that can happen at this time. However, Maston does not see God as pleased with this circumstantial or less-than-best. God keeps on the tension to move the circumstantial will's outcome closer to the perfect will's outcome. Likewise, the child of God is not satisfied with the circumstantial will of God for this event or institution or person. So, he or she exercises leadership by reminding himself and others that this condition is less than perfect and that he/they are responsible to keep on seeking the perfect will of God.

An example comes easily from the Civil Rights Movement. Maston believed God wants an integrated society in our nation. Maston saw desegregation as a step in this direction. But it was less than perfect. It was the circumstantial will of God. So, while Maston embraced desegregation, it was not as an end in itself. It was a means toward the achievement of God's perfect will. Consequently, Maston could counsel Christians to make accommodations and compromises which were less than perfect with others, because that was as much as was possible for the present. However, he would not allow a believer to rest in this very long. The tension of moving on toward the perfect must remain central. To illustrate, Maston was sensitive to the pastor in the segregated South. He recognized the need to accommodate for the time to the culture. But he expected them to preach Biblical truth and maintain tension for change.

This is the reason that Maston's approach to ethics has been termed "transformational". While allowing persons, groups and institutions to act in the here and now in terms of the circumstantial will of God, Maston would maintain the tension to work for transformation in the future that allows the perfect will of God to be more nearly realized. Note further that this was never allowed by Maston to slip into an easy "the ends justifies the means" ethic. Maston always insisted that the means must also be just.

Some of Maston's students wish that he had given more attention to the decision making aspect of ethics. To rely on understanding the character of God and applying it with the freedom of contextual accommodation seems to call for a lot of maturity. The "principled" side of his approach and the "union" with Christ side are never as fully harmonized as some would have liked. Also, Maston seems to fail to distinguish in his counsel about decision making between reactive decisions and proactive decisions.

(The first three principles seem to relate mostly to reactive and the

accommodation/tension/transformation principles more to proactive decisions.)

THE CRUCIFIED AND RESURRECTED LIFE

Maston notes how, toward the end of his ministry, Jesus shifted from announcing the coming of the kingdom to talking about the cross. Of central importance is the concept of cross bearing. Maston dismisses the traditional interpretation that equates cross bearing with some misfortune like Paul's thorn in the flesh. Rather the cross must be some voluntary ministry one assumes personally, a ministry that one does regularly, and faithfully to meet some significant need. Further, this command is for all Christians.

This interpretation of Matthew 16:21-25 gives ministry back to all believers, not just to a professional class. Each believer is to be a minister. Each one, under God, should elect to develop a ministry. While Maston discusses this concept most often in terms of an individual ministry, he was such a churchman that a ministry that included a small group of like-minded workers is certainly implied.

My point here is, however, that a personal ministry is seen by Maston as a crucial element in growth toward spiritual maturity. By sacrificing self, one discovers real life. By coming to know others, one can be more reflective about himself. By blessing others, one can be blessed. I know that Maston would reject much of the paternalistic ministry of this day that serves others without really dying to self (or which is critical of the object of ministry; or which serves others really to serve self).

A recurring refrain in his writing is the truth that "there is not resurrection without crucifixion, but there is not real crucifixion without resurrection." (p. 89 WLTCL.) Maston believed that joy and peace are a vital part of the Christian experience and that they come like resurrection with the crucifixion to self.

Among my special remembrance of Dr. Maston was accompanying him on a speaking engagement for a parents group at a school for retarded children. As he shared his experience with his own Tom Mac, the parents were blessed. Here was a special man of God suffering as they had suffered, working through hard questions of faith as they had, anguishing as they too had done. After his talk, they asked if we would like to meet their children. As we went into the room, Maston reached out in love to the children, and they responded in kind. It was a high moment. His suffering had prepared him to minister to others who suffered in a similar fashion. This experience ministered to me too, because it revealed the shallowness and selectivity of my love. But Maston experienced joy and peace.

Love is, of course, the crowning Christian virtue. Love is a gift of grace. It is not something one sets out to obtain. Love comes as one dies to self and experiences the resurrected life.

THE MARKS OF THE MATURE LIFE

One of the areas in which Maston's understanding of the spiritual life differs from much of traditional Christian spirituality, is in the notion that maturity is more a by-product of ministry than the result of spiritual exercises or effort. Another is that he ties spiritual growth to work in and through the church. He had little place for "Lone Ranger" Christianity.

In a brief study of Ephesians 4:11-15, Maston identifies several marks of the mature life. (RLIC, pp. 63-75). They can be summarized as follows: to recognize that our maturity is dependent upon our union with Christ; to be actively involved in the ministry of the body of Christ, happily playing the role given to us; to adjust to the inevitabilities of life; to possess a vital faith which issues in a principled life; to experience a daily walk motivated more by love than by fear; and to enjoy a continuing awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit and the leadership of God over one's life. Many of us who sought out Maston as a teacher did so because we saw in him these very marks of a mature Christian. As with any great Christian, he was always aware of his shortcomings, far more than any of us, I suppose.

How did Maston do ethics? He would go to Scripture reverently. He would read, reflect, listen and expect the Holy Spirit to use it to teach him. He treated scripture with real integrity. He sought its truth, rather than searching for something that might lend support to what he already thought to be true. The commands and the principles therein give truth which illumined life, convicted the believer, and enabled one to rightly interpret the leading of God's Holy Spirit.

Again, many of us wanted him to address the subject of maturity more than he did. In 1977, Dr. Maston served as guest professor of Baptist studies at Carson-Newman College. It was his alma mater, and I was a faculty member. I recall his doing a Bible study on Christian maturity at First Baptist Church, Morristown, Tennessee. He dealt with the book of Philippians. What he had to say was simply good basic insights drawn specifically from the Scripture and applied to the context in which we were. This was vintage Maston. Now 80, he had indeed run the good race. He had done so to glorify God and to extend His kingdom. Reward would undoubtedly come. But it was not the crown he sought. Rather he was simply being obedient.

DISCOVERING THE WILL OF GOD

Central both to the mature and to the maturing is knowing and doing the will of God. This major theme in the life of the church in the 1950s and 1960s seems to have been lost in an age when many sermons focus on psychological and self-help themes. For me, one of the hopeful signs of recent times has been the popularity of Henry Blackaby's EXPERIENCING GOD seminar. It appears to be addressing a felt need for

getting back to concerns about spiritual growth and maturity. Interestingly, Blackaby's understanding of the meaning of "the will of God" follows that of H. Richard Niebuhr, Maston's graduate professor at Yale; i.e., discover what God is doing and cooperate with him. While this is an appropriate approach to social ethics, it leaves the issues of basic and personal ethics unaddressed. Maston's basic ethic would add, "in the way God would act."

A review of Maston's writing identifies five sources from which one might learn of God's will. The first is the Bible. Maston was, above everything else, a biblical ethicist. As stated earlier, Maston sought to listen to the plain teaching of the Scripture. He did not approach the Bible like a lawyer or a debater. He simply wanted to understand its spirit. He often said the Bible provides a direction more than directions.

It seems to me that it is just here that both church and society need to hear Maston again. Turn on the mass media talk shows. Read the editorial pages. Analyze the values being expressed in the world of entertainment. Is it not the world of Israel in the age of the judges revisited. Everyone is doing what is right in his or her own eyes. Values are cited out of context and relationship to other values in order to legitimate all kinds of strange things. We need a stackpole. We need an authority. We need some absolute values which can guide us. This is what Maston found in the Bible, particularly in the Christ.

Second, he had a place for the teachings of the church. Persons have long studied Scripture. They have shared their understanding in written and spoken word. Maston learned from others, acknowledged his debt and shared his understanding of biblical teachings with others. Closely related to this thinking was the counsel of others. Maston often cited the teachings of his father, his professors (particularly Jeff Ray and W.T. Conner), his wife, and even some of his students. He both sought and gave good counsel. (One story goes that a female student asked his advice about marrying a preacher boy. He advised against it, saying that he would never amount to much. The woman married him anyway. Later the preacher became an important denominational leader. But to some this did not necessarily negate the correctness of his assessment or of his advice.)

Fourth, Maston acknowledged the importance of the indwelling Spirit. While recognizing that the conscience was subject to error on specifics, he contended that persons are born with a sense of oughtness to which and through which the Holy Spirit of God can speak with conviction. Certainly a part of the maturing process is to inform and strengthen the moral sensitivity of the conscience. Maston also taught and practiced the concept that the Holy Spirit speaks to believers through prayer. He

encouraged times of contemplation and quiet listening to God for direction.

A fifth and related source is worship. Certainly he meant by this that one does not run to God to get the “orders of the day.” Rather he is speaking of an awesome encounter with God that involves motivation to do as well as information about what to do.

For Maston, the perfect will of God is pretty much obvious from Scripture. His circumstantial will and one’s role in relationship to it may be more difficult to fathom. Maston notes that given the sinful nature of persons, God’s will for you might be thwarted by the sinful action of others. But God always has a “plan B” for Christians. Of course, being in the will of God is no guarantee of problem-free living.

Actually, many of God’s most faithful have suffered greatly. However, his will always provided peace, joy, and growth.

Maston has been termed a mystic by some. He certainly believed in encounters with God and in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. However, the Scriptures, not special revelations, were most basic in his quest for knowing the will of God. And he never presented himself as being more mature or more spiritual than another. He was always a fellow pilgrim, although a wise and experienced one.

CONCLUSION

As you have undoubtedly sensed it is not easy for me to evaluate T. B. Maston objectively. He was hero, teacher, and friend. If he had feet of clay, I never saw them. He came as close to being an authentic disciple of Jesus as anyone I have known.

I have tried to faithfully present his approach to spirituality. To my mind, it is biblical, Baptist and down-to-earth. It gathers up elements that are identified both with pietism and with the social ethics of the Niebuhrs. Certainly, it is informed by the theology of salvation of W. T. Connor which saw it as both an event and a process. It comes out of his personal struggle with understanding the birth of a handicapped child, the rugged individualism of his Appalachian Mountain heritage, and the covenanted nature of the church he experienced as a child. It is also grounded in his concern that the Gospel be shared with all humankind in an effective, winsome way. If one wants to get serious about living the Christian life, then a careful study of Maston is in order.

Note: Gary E. Farley is National Program Leader for Town and Country Missions for the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1962, he was the last graduate student admitted into the graduate studies with T. B. Maston. He completed his work in 1966. Farley, on the recommendation of Maston, joined the faculty of

Carson-Newman College in 1965. In 1978 he moved to Oklahoma Baptist University. Then in 1984, Farley came to the Home Mission Board. Maston, in the 1950s, served on a Southern Baptist Convention committee that developed the "Four Star" Rural Church Program. So, Farley, like many others Maston students, is giving his life to one aspect of the varied contributions of T B Maston to Baptist life.

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