

A Rancher's Rumbblings, July 23, 2009

WALTER CRONKITE – EARNING OUR TRUST, IN KINSHIP WITH TRUSTED BAPTIST JOURNALISTS

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Walter Cronkite died last week. I had the pleasure of meeting him on several occasions, as a result of my service on the Board of The Interfaith Alliance. Walter strongly supported our work there, out of a deep commitment to religious liberty, and his respect for various viewpoints and the need for persons to cooperate for the common good despite their differences. In my office hangs an autographed photo of Walter and me together.

What made Walter Cronkite so special was the trust that people placed in him. He earned America's trust by reporting the news in a nonpartisan manner that was both challenging and comforting. We witnessed his emotion when he had to report the death of President Kennedy, his elation and awe when Neil Armstrong became the first person to set foot on the moon, and the pain that he expressed upon realizing that America's effort to win in Vietnam was becoming a failure.

I frequently write about the importance of religious liberty and the First Amendment. As we reflect on the life of Walter Cronkite, we need to remember that freedom of the press is also a part of the First Amendment. I read several articles in *Newsweek* this past week that related that, in many countries, the only news that the people receive is what the government wants them to hear. Everything else is censored.

Sometimes the press angers me, with its seeming disregard for a person's privacy. But when all's said and done, a free press is essential in the life and history of America. A free press is essential to our own day-to-day freedom.

I think that we Texas Baptists – far too often – take for granted our own [Baptist Standard](#). In fact, although I may call it “our own” because it is a long-time Texas Baptist institution, the truth is that what makes the *Baptist Standard* so special is that no one “owns” it. The *Baptist Standard* is independent of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and tells Texas Baptists “the truth with the bark on it,” as James Dunn would say. Marv Knox, editor of the *Standard*, is worthy of being mentioned in the same sentence with Walter Cronkite as a man I trust, admire, and value. He also “tells it the way it is,” with integrity and courage.

The reality is that, in many state Baptist conventions, the convention itself controls the Baptist press in that state. The press is merely a mouthpiece for the convention leadership, as is true with the Southern Baptist Convention's own mouthpiece, Baptist Press. So, what readers in those states get is the “news” that the Fundamentalist leadership permits to be published. That is why practically the first thing the SBC leadership did – after consolidating Fundamentalist control of the convention in 1990 – was to [fire Dan Martin and Al Shackleford](#). Those two men had refused to bow down to the Fundamentalist leadership of the SBC, especially Judge Paul Pressler, and lost their jobs because of their integrity.

After the Fundamentalists took control of Baptist Press, Baptists nationwide needed a new, independent news organization to provide them with accurate, factual stories of what was

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happening in Baptist life. The result was Associated Baptist Press. For many years, Greg Warner gave wonderful leadership to this organization, which is now led by David Wilkerson, a long-time friend with whom I worked at the old Christian Life Commission in Nashville in the late 1970s. Attending the ABP banquet was a highlight for me while attending CBF in Houston a few weeks back.

The Texas *Baptist Standard*, Associated Baptist Press, along with [Baptists Today](#) – a monthly publication on whose Board I proudly serve – are all ministries worthy of your financial support. They all help us to stay informed on the real, authentic, traditional Baptist story.

We in Texas need to remember and cherish how special it is to be a part of a free Baptist convention – and to have an independent news source that provides us with all of the news accurately, good and bad, gratifying and heart-breaking.

And I am grateful and thrilled that I had the privilege of getting to know – even just a little bit – the courageous and gracious Walter Cronkite. He loved America and freedom, and he celebrated it with a life of integrity and service to the truth.