

Brooks Hays: A Baptist Treasure **A testimonial by his "spiritual son"**

By Warren I. C Atkins

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As one who had the great privilege of being associated with the Honorable Brooks Hays of Arkansas, congressman from 1943-59 and Southern Baptist Convention president from 1957-59, I am eager that the memory of this great man's contributions to American religious life and national public life not be forgotten. He often said that there was no limit to the good one could do in this world if one did not care who got the credit. I am afraid that people have too often taken him at his word and not given him credit for many of his great achievements. Some through ignorance, prejudice or just plain jealousy have attempted to play down or even negate the significance of his achievements. Their judgment must not stand. I feel a deep moral obligation to try to the best of my ability to make sure that the record of past events, especially ones that I personally witnessed, is chronicled in an honest and forthright manner.

The philosopher John Dewey once said that history is man's recollection of what he would like to think happened in the past. That makes it all the more important that we challenge revisionist historians whose writings are designed to fit their pre-determined perspectives on the events they have chosen to write about. In setting the record straight, I hope to emulate Brooks Hays, who often quoted Paul as saying "one should speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), however difficult that may be in certain circumstances.

When I first met Hays as a 25-year-old Jewish Harvard graduate from Boston, he had hired me for six months to be his legislative assistant to research many important national matters. It was immediately obvious that he was a profoundly religious Southern Baptist who, while deeply grounded in his faith, recognized the need to keep church and state very much separated. That did not mean that he believed one in public life should not be concerned about the welfare of all citizens of whatever walk of life or status in life they occupied. This commitment was demonstrated in a book he wrote in 1958 while he was president of the Southern Baptist Convention, published by Broadman Press, titled *This World: A Christian's Workshop*. In this book he demonstrates how an elected official can apply his deep religious convictions in helping solve national problems without violations of the separation of church and state.

I came to observe in Brooks Hays a personality and a style of living that made all those around him take notice of his presence and his innate humanity and modesty. His wife, Marion, said that "Brooks loves everybody; he even loves some of my relatives that I can't stand." It was obvious that all his colleagues in the Congress—Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives alike—had the greatest respect and affection for him. It was because of this respect for him that the Congress voted to support his recommendation to create a prayer room in the U.S. Capitol for members of Congress of all faiths to use to seek spiritual guidance. He was the essence of kindness and gentility,

of civility and moderation. Here again he often quoted Paul who called on all of us to "let thy moderation be known to all persons" (Philippians 4:5).

The extent of Brooks Hays' depth of knowledge and understanding of the chapter and verse of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, was awesome indeed (as I could tell from my earlier rabbinical training on the Old Testament). Consistent with his general demeanor, he reflected this scholarship in such a low-key way that all persons, of whatever class or educational status, felt quite comfortable in listening to the many sermons he delivered.

The Lord granted him outstanding oratorical skills that he used to remarkable effect, mixing theology with gentle humor that had significant relevance. He used these talents to co-author a book in 1963 titled *The Baptist Way of Life*, which he inscribed to me as "my spiritual son on all non-Baptist matters." He recognized that he had no monopoly on righteousness and that others who disagreed with him might have more than a little validity to their viewpoints. As he saw it, it was the combined perspectives of all religious persons that would lead us to divine truths. As both a political leader and a religious leader, he felt an obligation to lead his brethren to help find those truths. Nonetheless, he often cited Edmund Burke, a British philosopher, who said that a leader must exercise his conscience and his judgment, but he must not get so far ahead of the views of those he is attempting to lead that he breaks the bond that ties him to them. I treasure a theological discussion I had with him when we could not agree, and I said I would ask the Messiah when He comes which of us is right. He agreed to that procedure but requested that I ask Him first, "Haven't you been here before?"

Brooks Hays once quoted one of the greatest Baptists, Roger Williams (1604-83), who founded the First Baptist Church in America in 1638, and commented on one of his trips back to England (as paraphrased by Hays), "On this boat returning to England, there are men and women of diverse views; we have Protestants and Catholics and Jewish adherents and a small number of Moslems, and the composite should give us assurance, since each has captured an important truth and I feel safer with the cross-section of religious devotion."

The city of Little Rock became a center of racial strife in the mid-1950s, and Congressman Hays felt he must try to find middle ground so that blacks and whites could live in peace and harmony. Attempting to bring the two sides together in a manner that both could be comfortable with turned out to be a formidable task. No other public official in Arkansas was willing to be a peacemaker between Gov. Orval E. Faubus and President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and people asked Hays why he was willing to undertake such a dangerous task. Hays answered simply, "I can do no other." When Gov. Faubus decided to fan the flames of racial hatred, he distanced himself from Hays and later engineered Hays' defeat in the next election. President Eisenhower admired Hays, even though Hays had supported Adlai Stevenson, and offered him any job in his administration he wanted. When Hays said he wanted to stay in his beloved South, Eisenhower named him to the board of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Later when John Kennedy was elected president, he brought Hays to the White House, and said to him, "If

I write a sequel to 'Profiles in Courage,' you will be Chapter One." At this time Bill Moyers, who had first met Hays when he was ordained a Baptist minister and accepted Hays' advice to work for Lyndon Johnson as a "ministry of public service," said of Hays, "Brooks' courageous stand during the 1958 school desegregation crisis cost him his seat as congressman from Little Rock, but it won for him a place in legions of hearts."

After Hays' political career had ended he spent his remaining years lecturing at several universities and preaching at many churches, with no diminution of his spiritual fervor. His proudest achievement was the establishment of the Ecumenical Institute at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C. President Ralph Scales asked him to undertake this venture, and he threw himself into it with great energy and dedication. Building bridges between different faiths was a mission he was destined to do. Back in 1963 he visited the remarkable Pope John XXIII, who greeted him as a brother in Christ, the first Catholic-Baptist exchange in many years. Until he died in 1981, he organized many ecumenical conferences not only at Wake Forest but also in many places throughout the country. As I say in my memoirs titled *In Search of Middle Ground*, published in 2005, "Brooks Hays became referred to as an 'ecumaniac,' dedicated to a course of religious outreach consistent with his profound Baptist roots." I call on the many people of all faiths whose lives were touched by Brooks Hays to join with me in ensuring that his memory is given proper reverence, even though he himself never sought such recognition.

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