

Forgotten Voices

The church today is dangerously close to forgetting the past.

During a recent visit with my parents in Georgia, two of my daughters asked if they could listen to a tape recording my father made in 1962 when I was only 4 years old. So my dad rummaged through some drawers and found the old reel-to-reel tape. Then he went to the garage and found an old tape player that no one in the family had used since the Nixon administration.

To our surprise the scratchy tape actually played without breaking, and my girls laughed when they heard me—in a babyish Southern drawl—describing a fishing trip with my grandfather. After my “interview,” it switched to an older recording that included comments from my four grandparents—all of whom died years ago. The sound of their voices unearthed random memories of family reunions, porch swings and big Sunday dinners.

It’s weird how a voice from the past can whisk you back in time. Lately I have been listening to the words of some dead Christian heroes—not by way of a tape player or an iPod, but by reading their classic books. It has made me realize that the church today is dangerously close to forgetting the past.

Their names are probably familiar to you. Andrew Murray. Charles Spurgeon. Fanny Crosby. Watchman Nee. A.W. Tozer. William Seymour. Corrie ten Boom. Leonard Ravenhill.

These people knew a spiritual depth that is on the verge of extinction. They challenged the Christians of their generation to embrace repentance and humility. They understood a realm of spiritual maturity and godly character that few of us today

even aspire to obtain. What was their secret?

They considered brokenness, selflessness and sacrifice the crowning virtues of the Christian journey. They called the church to die to selfishness, greed and ambition. They knew what it means to carry a “burden” for lost souls. They challenged God’s people to pursue obedience—even if obedience hurts.

Even their hymns reflected a level of consecration that is foreign in worship today. They sang often of the cross and its wonder. Their lyrics focused on the blood and its power. They sang words of heart-piercing conviction: “My richest gain I count but loss / And pour contempt on all my pride / Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast / Save in the death of Christ, My God.”

In so many churches today the cross isn’t mentioned and the blood is avoided. Worship is a canned performance that involves rhythm and orchestration but offers no substance. We produce music that is trendy but lacks heart and cannot evoke tears.

In the books Christians buy today you will find little mention of brokenness. That isn’t what sells. We are not interested in a life that might require suffering, patience, purging or the discipline of the Lord. We want our blessings and we want them now. So we look for the discounted brand of Christian self-help that is quick and painless.

We’re running on empty. We think we are sophisticated, but like the Laodiceans we are actually poor, blind and naked (see Rev. 3:17). We need to return to our first love but we don’t

know where to begin.

These voices from the past will help point the way. Recently I've found myself drawn to read Ravenhill, ten Boom, Murray and Tozer. I've even dusted off an old hymnal and rediscovered the richness of songs that I had thrown out years ago—because I thought anything old was just religious and traditional.

Of course we need today's fresh revelation. But we also must dig for the timeless treasure buried by faithful saints who paid a high price to know Jesus intimately. We will never effectively reach our generation if we don't reclaim the humility, the consecration and the travail that our spiritual forefathers considered normal Christianity.

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