

Getting Back to 'Classic' Christianity

We need voices from the past—like Andrew Murray, Corrie Ten Boom and Charles Spurgeon—to help us find our way to the future.

During a 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, which was amazingly still intact. Then he went to the garage and found the old Realistic 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 Florida vacation and a fishing trip with my grandfather. After my “interview,” it switched to an older recording made in 1956. It included a conversation with my dad’s mother, who died before I was born.

“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!”

It was eerie to hear her voice. I’d never heard it before yet it sounded hauntingly familiar. After that brief segment of the tape ended we listened to comments from my other three grandparents—all of whom died in the 1960s or 1970s. Their

voices unearthed long-buried but fond memories.

These sounds from the past reminded me of some other distant voices I have been listening to recently. They are the voices of dead Christians—writers of classic books and songs that we are close to forgetting today.

Their names are probably somewhat familiar to you. Jonathan Edwards. John Wesley. Charles Finney. Catherine Booth. Andrew Murray. Evans Roberts. Charles Spurgeon. Fanny Crosby. E.M. Bounds. Watchman Nee. A.W. Tozer. William Seymour. A.B. Simpson. Corrie Ten Boom. Leonard Ravenhill. Fuchsia Pickett.

All of them could be labeled revivalists. All challenged the Christians of their generation to embrace repentance and humility. They understood a realm of spiritual maturity and a depth of character that few of us today even aspire to obtain.

When I read their words I feel much the same way I did after hearing my grandparents' voices on that old tape. I feel as if I am tapping into a realm of spirituality that is on the verge of extinction.

What was the secret of these great Christians who left their legacies buried in their books? They considered humility, 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 saw the glories of the kingdom and demanded total surrender. 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 worship 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 is not mentioned. The blood is avoided because we don't want to offend visitors. And worship is often a canned performance that involves plenty of rhythm and orchestration but little or no substance. We can produce noise, but often there is no heart ... and certainly no tears.

In the books Christians buy today you will find little mention of brokenness. 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 Christian brand of spiritualized 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. We need to return to our first love but we don't know where to begin the journey.

These voices from the past will help point the way. I've found myself drawn to reading books by Ravenhill, Ten Boom, Murray and Spurgeon in recent days. I've even pulled out an old hymnal and rediscovered the richness of songs that I had thrown out years ago—because I thought anything old couldn't possibly maintain a fresh anointing.

I realize now that I must dig for this buried treasure. We will never effectively reach our generation if we don't reclaim the humility, the brokenness, the consecration and the travail that our spiritual forefathers considered normal Christianity.

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