

SILENT WITNESSES

*Lessons on Theology, Life, and the Church
from Christians of the Past*

Garry J. Williams



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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To my parents
David and Dorothy Williams,
with
gratitude, love, and affection.

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>To the Reader</i>	xi
<i>On the Essentials</i>	
1. Prizing the Bible: <i>William Tyndale (1494–1536)</i>	3
2. Who is Jesus? <i>The Council of Chalcedon (451)</i>	17
3. The Cross and Its Caricatures: <i>John Owen (1616–83)</i>	31
4. The Infinite Love of the Dying Christ: <i>Jonathan Edwards (1703–58)</i>	43
5. The Grace of God: <i>Augustine of Hippo (354–430)</i>	61
6. Justified before God’s Throne: <i>John Calvin (1509–64)</i>	73
<i>On the Christian Life</i>	
7. Loving God with All Your Heart: <i>The Puritan Psychology</i>	91
8. Trusting God in Trials: <i>John Calvin</i>	113
9. Identity and Loss on the Edge of the World: <i>Anne Bradstreet (1612–72)</i>	127
10. Working for Christ: <i>John Laing (1879–1978)</i>	141
	vii

SILENT WITNESSES

Primarily for Pastors and Elders

11. Priorities for the Church:
John Calvin 157
12. Preaching the God-Man:
Chalcedon Revisited 181
13. Preaching the Word:
Martin Luther (1483–1546) 189
14. Feasting with the Lord:
Nicholas Ridley (c. 1500–55) 205

Epilogue

15. Making the Case for Christian History 221
- Bibliography* 231

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TO THE READER

Mention of ‘history’ evokes different responses from different people. For the older generation it may recall lessons spent learning rather uninspiring lists of dates and facts. For those educated more recently it may bring to mind very little specific information, just vague memories of exercises in empathy (‘How did it *feel* to be there?’), or the study of photographic sources. Either way, the memory is not exactly gripping, and for many history is something that they happily leave behind in more than one sense. The extent to which history is widely equated with irrelevance is highlighted by Mark Steyn:

The past is history. That’s to say, it’s history in the sense of that robust and revealing American formulation: ‘Bob Dole? Aw, he’s history!’—as in fuhgeddabout him, he’s through, he’s washed up, he don’t mean diddlysquat, he won’t trouble us no more, we need pay him no further heed. He’s history.¹

Preachers sometimes point out that it is dangerous to neglect the ultimate future that we all face. It is true that the world lives without regard to the coming day of judgement. In one sense, however, we live in a culture that is very preoccupied with the future rather than the past; it is preoccupied with the immediate future. Steyn points out that this is a feature of the way in which technology so readily offers something new in the very next moment:

A modern, electronic culture exists in a state of perpetual anticipation: even as the credits of your favourite sitcom start to roll, the screen consigns them to a tiny corner and a trailer commends the delights of the next, even funnier sitcom.²

¹ *The Future of the European Past*, ed. by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), p. 157.

² *Future*, p. 160.

SILENT WITNESSES

In the midst of this orientation to the short-term future, some do still think more positively about history. Indeed, measured by the amount of historical drama on British television, we might think that history in Britain is enjoying a mini-revival. There is some truth in this, but there is a big difference between the immediate gratification of watching television and the slower labour of reading and studying books. Television history is often convenience-history, much like convenience-food: easy to prepare but not always the most nourishing.

Some conservative philosophers and cultural commentators do maintain a serious enthusiasm for the past, but they know they are in the minority. At the end of a celebrated Dutch television series on consolation and beauty, the philosopher Roger Scruton expresses his concern for the loss of the past:

I think one of the saddest things about the modern world, partly a result of television, is that people live in a tiny time slice of the present moment, which they carry forward with them, but nothing remains and there's nothing in their experience which reverberates down the centuries, because the centuries to them are completely dark, just un-illuminated corridors from which they stagger into the single little sliver of light.³

Why bother with history?

If you are a Christian, then reading a book like this is a little like finding out about your ancestors. In fact, it is more like finding out about your ancestors than finding out about your biological ancestors would be. You are spiritually united to dead Christians, the silent witnesses with whom we are concerned. They are closer to you as a Christian than your own deceased non-Christian biological ancestors. The bond that we have in Christ is stronger than the bond of flesh and blood. It is said that blood is thicker than water, but the bond created by the Holy Spirit is thicker than both.

Imagine, then, how intrigued you would be if you found out that you had a famous relative, perhaps a relative who did something singularly brave or who endured extraordinary suffering. Genealogy is fascinating

³ The documentary was made in 2000 by Wim Kayzer and is entitled *Van de Schoonheid en de Troost* ('Of Beauty and Consolation'). The words are spoken over the closing credits.

to many people, at least in part because they hope they might find some such relative with a fascinating story or a degree of historical significance that might leave its after-glow on their own lives. Sometimes genealogists strike gold. A chance find in a library led my father-in-law to discover that my wife's family can be traced back to the Emperor Charlemagne the Great and three of the wives of Henry VIII (a fact that he reminds us of only very occasionally!). That may be an unusually lucky strike, but all Christians have such an array of significant relatives in Christ Jesus.

The good, the bad, and the ugly?

I am concerned that unequivocally positive portrayals of Christians from the past may leave us with highly unrealistic expectations for our own lives. If our spiritual ancestors seem never to have sinned, then why do we sin? Is there something wrong with us alone? Are important details being left out of Christian biographies? Did Charles Spurgeon really only ever sin by smoking tobacco? We can be left with an acute and destructive sense of inadequacy by relentlessly positive Christian biography. To avoid these kinds of effects, I do not wish to white-wash the sins of our Christian ancestors. Every Christian is a sinner. In principle there can be no objection to the claim that any Christian hero sinned. For example, one recent biography of John Calvin tells us that he 'was the greatest Protestant reformer of the sixteenth century, brilliant, visionary and iconic. The superior force of his mind was evident in all that he did. He was also ruthless, and an outstanding hater.'⁴ To a contemporary Calvinist these may be shocking words. We may be so used to thinking of Calvin as a hero that the very statement jars. Yet Calvin was a sinner like all the other children of Adam, and the statement that he sinned is one that we not only can but must believe. How ironic if Calvinists, who believe in the total depravity of human beings, refused to admit the sinfulness of Calvin! We do the Saviour no favours by diminishing the sins of the people he came to save and the burden that he therefore bore for them. Christians of the past were new creations who lived with the sinful nature at war with the Spirit. As such, their lives exhibit a mix of the fruit of the Spirit and the fruit of the flesh. It would be as wrong to pretend that they had no sin as it would be to pretend that they had no holiness. To adapt the words of 1 John 1:8, if we say they had no sin, we

⁴ Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. vii.

SILENT WITNESSES

deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. This does not of course mean that we must automatically approve any *particular* negative verdict on a Christian's conduct, but it would be unbiblical to maintain a principled aversion to *any* claim that he sinned.

It is interesting to ask what kind of historical writing about the Lord's people the Bible itself both models and enjoins. In terms of modelling, we find frank descriptions of the sins of Israel and her kings. It is important to note why it describes their sin. It does so not for the sake of a journalistic exposé, but to highlight the patience, justice, and forgiveness of God. There is no mandate in Samuel and Kings, for example, for any attempt to slur the character of a great Christian leader. But the sins even of the greatest kings, such as David and Solomon, are plainly set forth. As they are framed in the biblical narrative, they serve to vindicate God's justice in punishing his people (for example, in the collapse of David's kingdom), or to magnify his mercy in forgiving them (for example, in its restoration). Who has not been warned by reading about how even the great King David fell into sin? And who has not been encouraged by reading of the Lord's mercy to him? If we did not know about his sin, we would have neither the warning nor the encouragement.

On the other hand, when the biblical writers seek the edification of their readers, the emphasis seems to fall on paying attention to the holiness of our Christian ancestors. Scripture itself focuses on the work of Christ in individuals when it provides examples for us to imitate. This is clear, for example, in Luke's account of the Apostle Paul in Acts. Indeed, Paul himself commands his readers to imitate what is good in him: 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' (*1 Cor.* 11:1; cf. 4:16; *Phil.* 3:17). If we are to incline in any direction in writing for the edification of Christians, it should be toward focusing on the work of the Spirit, not the flesh. Where the sins of our ancestors are described, it should be within the positive framework of God's redemptive grace, for our warning and encouragement, not to satiate our prurience. This suggests that in the context of a book about historical figures written to help Christians the emphasis should be on the good example of our spiritual ancestors. When their sins are described, it should be in order to warn and to encourage and not to ogle.

The balance and indeed the aims would be different in an academic historical work. It is important for Christian scholars to produce such books, but that is not my aim here. In fact it is often difficult for the

writer of any kind of book to find out much about the sins of a famous Christian. The intention of eye-witness writers, such as Theodore Beza in his sketch of John Calvin's life, was to describe the ways in which their subject was a good example, not a bad one. Beza mentions Calvin's own apologies for his failures of duty, his vehemence, and his peevishness, but we do not see much more of his sin than that.⁵ On the other hand, where there are negative accounts of Christian heroes, they are often written by those who were further away from the subject, both relationally and theologically. Their criticisms are often more theological than personal, and sometimes the former fuels the latter, producing unreliable results. The other factor that obscures our knowledge of the sins of our ancestors is the often private nature of sin. Most Christians live lives that appear to be more holy than they are, not necessarily because they are deliberate hypocrites, but because many of their sins are committed in the mind and will and affections, but do not come to fruition in visible actions. It is no surprise that the heroes of the past appear more holy than they were, or that we cannot document most of their sins. The same is true of each of us. This is one reason why Augustine's *Confessions* is such an unusual work: it describes Augustine's sins from his own perspective, and it is written by the only person who had direct access to that perspective. Not many famous figures provide such a window into their inner lives. And even in Augustine's case, we will see that there are writers who point out how carefully he controls his self-presentation in the *Confessions*.

You are you

As a reader of this book, you need to avoid thinking that you are called to *be* any of these people. You are not to long to reproduce their lives or their ministries in your own. God has called you to be who you are, where you are. Let me put this more strongly: it would be a sin for any Christian to expect himself to be, for example, John Calvin. Calvin was there and then with the gifts and responsibilities that God gave him. We are here and now with a quite different set of gifts and responsibilities. As we study history it is a distracting and dangerous fantasy to dream of being someone else, the kind of fantasy that we can use to

⁵ *The Life of Calvin*, ed. and trans. by Henry Beveridge, in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 7 vols (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 1: lxxxvii, xc, xciv.

SILENT WITNESSES

evade the urgent call to obey the Lord Jesus Christ in our own skin. Just as we are called to obey the Lord today and not to be preoccupied with fantastical plans for a future that will probably never happen, so we are to hear the Lord's voice addressing *us*, not to avoid his call by pretending we are someone else. This means that learning from any other Christian's example requires careful thought. I should not read about Calvin and then think 'So let's have a Genevan Reformation here and now'. A moment's thought tells us how different Geneva was from today's London or New York, let alone from rural Somerset or Montana. Certainly we can learn lessons from Calvin in Geneva, but they must be carefully filtered and adapted to today's context.

Sources and selection

Before we plunge in, a word is necessary about my use of sources and the selection and arrangement of the chapters. I make no claim to originality for the narrative sections of this book: they are entirely derivative. In most cases, they draw extensively from a single secondary source, such as a reliable biography, referenced near the start of the chapter. In academic writing it is presumed that material is original unless otherwise stated: please presume the opposite for the narratives here. Further references in footnotes are therefore usually given only for quotations. If there are any original elements in the book, they are to be found in the direct interaction with primary sources and in the applications made from the material.

The selection of topics is unrepresentative in a number of ways: there are more men than women, there are more pastors and theologians than lay people, and the coverage of different periods of church history is uneven. How then have the individuals and topics been chosen? The figures included are among the silent witnesses with whom I have spent time over the last twenty years, those I have studied formally, and those about whom I have been asked to speak. They have been chosen to fulfil the aim of the book: to provide a primer in theology, life, and the church from Christians of the past for Christians of the present. They are arranged not chronologically, but to reflect those three areas. The first part covers some of the essentials of theology: the Bible, the incarnation, the cross, grace, and justification. The second looks at issues in the Christian life: loving God with the heart, suffering, identity, loss, and work. The third section is addressed primarily to pastors and elders and concerns

priorities for the church, preaching, and the Lord's supper. By the time you reach the Epilogue I hope that you will already be persuaded by the preceding chapters of its argument for a distinctively Christian account of history.