

The *SBJT* Forum: Heroes of the Faith

Editor's note: In this forum each contributor was asked to write on an individual who influenced their spiritual and theological development.

C. Ben Mitchell: One of the values of biography is encouragement. Seeing God's providence worked out in the life of another human being can often encourage us to repent, beware, or persevere. Perseverance is the lesson I learn from the biography of one of my own Christian heroes, William Wilberforce.

Elected to British Parliament at the age of twenty-one, Wilberforce felt no particular attraction to any cause until after his conversion five years later under the influence of Isaac Milner, his former tutor. Coming to faith in Christ meant a radical transformation in Wilberforce's world and life views. From his conversion forward he approached his vocation as a calling from God. His friend, John Newton, former slave trader and author of many hymns, including *Amazing Grace*, convinced the young convert to remain in Parliament despite counsel to the contrary he had received from others.

When he was twenty-seven, Wilberforce founded the Society for the Reformation of Manners. The goal of the Society was to make "goodness" respectable among the leadership class of his culture. Even though few were aware of it, King George III's "Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue" was due to Wilberforce's influence. That same year, Wilberforce became one of the prime movers in the effort to abolish the slave trade in England. He entered the following in his journal on October 27, 1787: "God

Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners." The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, warned Wilberforce in a letter: "Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by opposition from men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you?"

Although he was personally wealthy, Wilberforce often gave more than a quarter of his income to charities and paid for the education of some of his relatives. Wilberforce's son observed that "he gave more than merely money; he made his house the home of one or two youths, the expense of whose education he defrayed; all their holidays were spent with him; and hours of his own time were profusely given to training and furnishing their minds. Nor were the poor forgotten; they were invited to join his family worship on Sunday evening, and sought out often in their cottages for instruction and relief." While he might have availed himself of many of the amenities consistent with his social stature, he was quite modest in every way. In his recent profile, *Hero for Humanity: A Biography of William Wilberforce*, Kevin Belmonte points out that "In an intensely class-conscious age, Wilberforce forsook the amenities of traveling in his own comfortable and expensive carriage. Instead, he began to travel by coach, the equivalent today of taking a taxi instead of a limousine."

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Most striking, however, was Wilberforce's persevering confidence in God's power and purpose to end slavery through his efforts. In 1789, he gave a notable address before Parliament calling on his peers to pass his Abolition Bill. Newspaper accounts lauded it as one of the most eloquent speeches ever heard in the House. Nevertheless, the time was not yet right for abolition in England.

While continuing to lobby against the slave trade, Wilberforce founded The Bible Society, The Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, and published an apologetic theology, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*.

By 1804, it appeared that the tide was changing in Parliament. Wilberforce helped found the Abolition Society and reintroduced his bill in 1804 and again in 1805. The bill fell both times. Yet he persevered. In the face of defeat, Wilberforce published an influential tract against the trade of human slaves. Over and over again, Parliament resisted the inevitable.

Finally, on July 26, 1833—a full 46 years after it was first introduced—the Emancipation Bill passed. Wilberforce died three days later!

John Pollock, the great Christian biographer of both Wilberforce and John Newton reminds us of the genius of Wilberforce's life:

First Wilberforce's whole life was animated by a deeply held personal faith in Jesus Christ. Rather than ascribing to lifeless dogma or dull conventional religious thinking, Wilberforce and his colleagues were motivated by a robust personal belief in the living God who is concerned with individual human lives, justice, and the transformation of

societies. At their core was a profound sense of the presence and power of God giving them vision, courage and the necessary perspective to choose their issues and stand against the powerful interests aligned against them. Wilberforce, along with his friends, viewed himself as a pilgrim on a mission of mercy, never defining his identity of purposes by the flawed values of his age. This transcendent perspective made him the freest of men and therefore the most threatening force against the status quo. Second, Wilberforce had a deep sense of calling that grew into the conviction that he was to exercise his spiritual purpose in the realm of his secular responsibility. Too often people of faith draw a dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular. Religious activities are considered a lofty calling, while secular involvements are viewed with disdain and believed to have little to do with true spirituality.

We tend to be short-sighted when it comes to cultural transformation. If we do not see promiscuous abortion outlawed in one generation, we tend to give up. If we are not successful in turning around the militant homosexual agenda, we faint. If our culture disintegrates around us, we are tempted to acquiesce. If the church loses her power, we often contribute to her impotence by forfeiting what is necessary to her potency, personal holiness.

Wilberforce has left us a legacy of fidelity to God, commitment to the worshipping community, effectiveness in public theology, and perseverance in the face of systemic opposition. In addition, his life under God reminds us that it may take generations to see cultural transformation. We might never see it ourselves. But, we are to be faithful to do what God calls us to do, all the while remembering that God will accomplish his purpose in and through us.

Reading List

Belmonte, Kevin. *Hero for Humanity: A Biography of William Wilberforce*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002.

Piper, John. *The Roots of Endurance: Invin- cible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2002.

Pollock, John. *Wilberforce: A Biography*. London: Constable, 1977.

Gregory Alan Thornbury: When Dick Keyes wrote his marvelous book *True Heroism in a World of Celebrity Counterfeits* a few years ago, he argued that heroes are marked by conviction and accomplishment, and that our admiration of them is well-placed.¹ This stands in sharp contrast, Keyes averred, to the pure manufacture of modern celebrity, which by nature is ephemeral. Consequently, a journal such as this one is right to highlight servants of the kingdom of God who, by both confession and action, prove themselves to be true heroes of the faith.

Although choosing among the vast array of possibilities for this forum was daunting, I settled on Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). By doing so, I am not implying that Bonhoeffer is my favorite theologian or that he was entirely sound on every point of doctrine. He was, like Luther, a man of his time. But, like the great Reformer, Bonhoeffer was also a man of action. “The Christian,” he wrote in *Life Together*, “belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life, but in the thick of foes.”² One comes to know a man by his enemies. In this respect, Bonhoeffer’s foes were the right ones—those who corrupted the message of the gospel, the witness of the church, and the integrity of a nation.

Many people are familiar with Bonhoeffer’s work as a theologian through

works such as *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*. He followed the theology of Luther, and called the “alien righteousness” of Christ appropriated by faith alone the sole criterion for unity in the church.³ Still others know of Bonhoeffer’s execution stemming from an involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Far fewer casual observers of church history, however, know that the young pastor’s great sacrifice began with attempts to speak out against the German church’s near wholesale compromise with the Third Reich. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was first and foremost a church reformer.

Early in his career, Bonhoeffer and a cadre of like-minded pastors known as “the Young Reformers” protested the German Reich Church’s capitulation to “The Aryan Clause”—the Third Reich’s state rule that barred Jews from public and various kinds of private service. Dietrich urged pastors to speak out to repeal the government’s anti-Semitic program and led the way by forming “The Pastors Emergency League.” With others, he drafted *The Bethel Confession*, which unapologetically challenged the church’s accommodation to Nazi apostasy. He also publicly called Hitler an antichrist. Finally, he supported *The Barmen Declaration* in 1934—a statement that gave birth to the Confessing Church movement, which called the church to a return to the gospel and a rejection of the Aryanism of the Reichstag. Bonhoeffer knew that the good of the nation was tied to the health of the church. God’s people and the training of young gospel ministers mattered most to the young theologian. Bonhoeffer wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr on the heels of turning down a job offer to teach at Union Seminary so that he could return to Germany, “I shall have no right to participate

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in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”⁴

Despite attempts at church reform, Hitler tightened his grip on Germany. When a majority of even the Confessing Church pastors took an oath of loyalty to Hitler in 1937, Bonhoeffer started keeping a low profile, but refused opportunities to escape Germany for London and America. Upon his arrest in connection with an assassination attempt planned by two of Hitler’s top military advisors, Dietrich refused to recant before the Gestapo. In his hearing, he calmly asserted that Christianity came before Germany.

Bonhoeffer spent the last two years of his life ministering to the needy and other Christians in exile in various Nazi prisons and concentration camps. To the end, he poured his life into building up Christ’s church. On the direct orders of Heinrich Himmler, a detachment was sent to retrieve Bonhoeffer and take him to the gallows. Even as the dispatch approached, Bonhoeffer poured himself into his last sermon among his fellow believers. The text was 1 Peter 2:21-25: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. . . . He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” The next day, the SS Black Guard hung a calm, confident Bonhoeffer on April 5, 1945 at Flossenburg. This event came mere days before the liberation of the Allies in Germany and a scant three weeks before the suicide of Adolf Hitler.

A faithful example such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer inspires pastors who come after him to warn both church and nation about their obligations to God and each

other. Given clear accounts of courage, can today’s pastors fail to call the church to repentance on modern accommodation to secularity? Do believers stay silent about the oppression of the weak in society? Are church leaders vigilant about blurring the lines between national pride and loyalty to Christ? Men of God will ultimately give account for such matters—perhaps not before church tribunals or state courts—but assuredly before “the one with whom we have to do”, even Jesus Christ, our Lord (Heb 13:17).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer underscored that the theology of the Reformers was a practical theology—one of costly grace. Servants of Christ’s church would do well to remember Bonhoeffer’s dictum on law and gospel: “Only those who believe obey . . . Only those who obey believe.”⁵

ENDNOTES

¹Dick Keyes, *True Heroism in a World of Celebrity Counterfeits* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1995).

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954) 17.

³Ibid., 23.

⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as cited in Reinhold Neibuhr, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 1, no. 3 (March 1946) 3.

⁵Dietrich Bohoeffter, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller, et. al. (London: SCM Press, 1959; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1995) 69.

Chad Owen Brand: Do Christians have “heroes”? I guess that depends on what you mean by the word. Holding to the historic doctrines of human depravity and progressive sanctification, I would argue that we don’t have “heroes” who are *flaw-*

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less. In that sense, Christians revere only *one* Hero. Yet, some Christian leaders have loomed large in their ministries and have inscribed with indelible marks their impact for good on the Kingdom. W. A. Criswell was such a man.

Born in Eldorado, Oklahoma in 1909, and raised mostly in the Texas panhandle, Criswell was saved at the age of ten in a revival service in his little church in Texline, an unimaginatively-named burg that is just a stone's throw from the New Mexico state line. (I have been through there many times and I can tell you that W. A. Criswell is the *only* thing remarkable about Texline.) In 1927 the precocious young man entered Baylor University, graduating four years later Magna Cum Laude. Criswell left the Southwest only during the years he spent at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he earned the Bachelor of Divinity and the Doctor of Philosophy degrees, graduating in 1937 with a doctorate in New Testament. He studied with renowned scholar A. T. Robertson and did his doctoral work under W. Hersey Davis.

Criswell pastored churches during both college and seminary years, but it was while pastoring in Oklahoma, from 1937 to 1944, that God transformed his preaching. Like many preachers of the time, the young pastor had developed a pattern of preaching mainly textually-based, topical sermons. The question he would ask himself was, "What shall I preach about this Sunday?" After his installation as the new pastor of First Baptist Muskogee in 1941, all of that began to change. His predecessor, expository preacher A. N. Hall, had died while still pastor, and had left behind all of his written sermons, his preaching Bible, and his commentaries, all with copious notes

in the margins. Studying these in the church's "upper room," Criswell came to realize that there was a better way to pursue the preaching task.

Criswell testifies that in that little study room and behind the pulpit of that congregation, "God transformed my preaching. . . . Instead of pacing the floor, stressed and anxious, trying to find some new topic to preach, I was pacing the floor with excitement and caught up by the might and majesty of God's Word, eager to get on to the next text, to the next story, to the next book, eager to dig out the truth in every line that God's Spirit presented."¹ In 1944 the Oklahoma pastor was called to the First Baptist Church, Dallas, to succeed the pulpit giant, George W. Truett, who had led the church for forty-seven years. By the time he marked his nineteenth anniversary in 1963, Criswell had preached through every book of the Bible.

The preacher who was saved in that little church in Texline was not the architect of expository preaching, nor was he the only practitioner of it in the mid-twentieth century. Evangelical preachers such as Donald Grey Barnhouse and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, following earlier models such as Alexander Maclaren and G. Campbell Morgan, exemplified the expository method, though they differed from one another in such matters as the length of text used in each sermon and their respective rhetorical styles.² Among Baptists in the American South, John A. Broadus and B. H. Carroll had preached expositionally, carefully crafting their sermons around the contours of the text, thus giving to their sermons "direct biblical authority."³ In the 1940s and '50s Southern Baptist Robert Naylor was a fine expository preacher, and Jesse Northcutt, as pastor of First Baptist, Abilene, and as

professor of preaching at Southwestern Seminary, modeled and taught the expository method. The vast majority of even well-known preachers in the SBC in those days, though, were topical preachers.⁴

Criswell built a great church into one of the greatest churches in the nation.⁵ One of the keys to this ministry was his expository preaching. He went through the entire Bible, “book by book, chapter by chapter, line by line. It was the preaching of the Word that changed my life and the lives of the good people at First Baptist Church of Dallas.”⁶ This kind of preaching mines each text for its main emphasis, then notes the complementary elements in each passage, and finally constructs the sermon outline itself according to the contours that the Bible itself establishes.⁷ Criswell, and those others who joined him in modeling this style of preaching, such as Naylor and Northcutt, have left a legacy especially in the South, as some of the best pastor/preachers in Baptist life today follow the same general approach to hermeneutics and exposition.⁸ But in the mid-twentieth century, no one modeled it more effectively or with greater passion and impact than W. A. Criswell.

Why would such a man preach in such a manner? Because he was convinced that the Bible and the Bible alone was the Word of God written, and that it ought to be taken at face value. As he put it, the Bible is “literally true.”⁹ Criswell’s stand for biblical inerrancy was one of the catalysts for the conservative resurgence in The Southern Baptist Convention, which would begin a decade after the publication of his famous book.¹⁰ Criswell was not a vitally active participant in the conservative resurgence; he was nearly seventy years old when it began. But he

was its grandfather, its mentor, its advisor.¹¹ He persistently advocated the complete truthfulness of Scripture in its entirety. What was the matrix out of which Criswell held these views? This is an important question. The Dallas pastor was not the intellectual heir of the fundamentalist controversy in the 1920s. At a time when J. Frank Norris was inveighing against Baylor University, Criswell was quite content with his experience there.¹² No, Criswell was not the offspring of early twentieth-century inter-denominational fundamentalism. Rather, he was the child of the Baptist heritage at its best. His Baptist roots drove him to affirm that the Bible is the Word of God written and that it was to be trusted implicitly in its theology, as well as on everything else it touched. Even his Ph. D. at Southern, taken under the best teachers of the day, with full cognizance of critical theories about biblical origins, had given him no reason to reckon otherwise. Little wonder, then, that many Baptist conservatives have looked to this man, with all the faults and weaknesses of those still in the process of sanctification (and that is all of us), as a heroic figure in the battle for Christian orthodoxy that has waged in recent decades.

There is much that I have learned from Dr. Criswell. Hearing him preach, reading his books, spending brief personal moments with a man who was as personable as any pastor I have ever known—all of these things have left an indelible mark on my mind and soul. He stands as proof that one can be trained at the highest academic levels and yet still have the confidence in Scripture that a little child has, that one can be a man of the books and a man of the people, and that one can build a great church by making central the proclamation of the Word of God. I thank

God for “Dr. C.” I pray that future generations of evangelicals will discover the legacy of this great man of God.

ENDNOTES

¹W. A. Criswell, *Standing on the Promises: The Autobiography of W. A. Criswell* (Dallas: Word, 1990) 160.

²See, for example, Warren Wiersbe, *Walking with the Giants: A Minister’s Guide to Good Reading and Great Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) 35-41, 129-137; D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 64-80.

³Al Fasol, *With a Bible in Their Hands: Baptist Preaching in the South, 1679-1979* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 77-80, 84-87, quote from page 86.

⁴Fasol, 146-182.

⁵Leon McBeth, *The First Baptist Church of Dallas: Centennial History, 1868-1968* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968) 240-347.

⁶Criswell, *Standing on the Promises*, 206. In the case of a couple of Old Testament books, specifically, Leviticus and Song of Solomon, the Dallas pastor did not preach every passage individually, but gathered similar thematic sections up and covered them in one or two sermons.

⁷For a major hermeneutical volume which defends and articulates this methodology in moving from text to sermon construction, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

⁸Examples include Jack Graham, James Merritt, Jerry Vines, Mac Brunson, and O. S. Hawkins. These men all cite Criswell’s influence on their preaching.

⁹W. A. Criswell, *Why I Preach that the Bible Is Literally True* (Nashville; Broadman, 1969).

¹⁰Robert A. Rohm, *Dr. C.* (Chicago: Moody, 1990) 165.

¹¹Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000) 66-67.

¹²His autobiography gives four chapters to his experience at Baylor, and it is clear that he loved the Baylor of the 1920s. He does indicate that there were some causes for concern, but that for the most part, it was a spiritually and theologically healthy institution. Norris, of course, held otherwise. Though he respected Norris’s ability to move a crowd, Criswell considered Norris to be “diabolical.” Barry Hankins, *God’s Rascal: J. Frank Norris & the Beginnings of Southern Fundamentalism* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996) 132.

D. A. Carson: When I was asked to write on a hero of the faith of my choosing, I began by running through my mind some of my personal favorites: John Chrysostom, Augustine, John Hus, John Calvin, William Perkins, George Whitefield, Andrew Murray M’Cheyne, Adoniram Judson, the Countess of Huntingdon, Charles Spurgeon, and many more. Then I ran through some candidates for the label from the twentieth century, some of them still alive, all of them remarkable: D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John R. W. Stott, and quite a number of others. Then I thought of some gifted Christian leaders I have known from around the world, some of whom have suffered enormously, while others have exercised magnificently fruitful ministries, sometimes under appallingly difficult circumstances. Then I thought of Christian martyrs in Cambodia, among the Karen people of Burma, pastors in Iran, those

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who have suffered and sometimes died in Indonesia and southern Sudan, only very few of whom I could name. Where should I begin? How can I possibly choose one, when temperamentally I have never fixated on just one person (save Jesus), just one book (save the Bible), or just one movement?

Finally I decided that, just as God overturns many of the categories that we human beings think are so important, I would do the same. I will tell you about Tom.

I won't tell you his last name, or where he served, because some who read these lines might guess who he is. Certainly Tom never thought of himself as a hero of the faith, not once. He was a largely unknown Baptist pastor, working in a very difficult cross-cultural context. In his mid-twenties, the Lord laid such a burden on him for this largely ignored people-group that he moved there and started to learn the language. During the course of twenty-five years, he planted two tiny churches. He never wrote a book. He was not asked to preach at large conferences. He never traveled overseas as a kind of influential ambassador of the gospel to Third World countries. He wasn't brilliant at the conceptual level, though he had a careful mind that paid attention to details. Administratively he was at best a plodder.

On the other hand, every day of his adult life he prayed, on his knees, for at least 45 minutes, and often much longer. He was a man of unimpeachable integrity, and amidst extraordinarily trying denominational conflict, he chose the path of rectitude without any trace of discernible malice towards those who tried to cut him up. He and his wife reared three children in the nurture and admonition of the

Lord. Dirt poor, at certain periods of their life they depended for their meals and for their clothes on quiet intercessory prayer, and nothing else. After twenty-five years of ministry, Tom became a tentmaker, supporting himself and his family, while he continued his ministry in his chosen people-group.

When he was in his sixties, he finally witnessed something of a movement of the Spirit of God, but the leadership was in the hands of others. He rejoiced to see the church grow, but deep down inside he sometimes wondered if growth had taken so long coming because he was not a sufficiently able and spiritual leader himself, and others, more gifted than he, had to appear on the scene. In his early seventies, his wife started drifting away in the long dementia associated with Alzheimer's disease. He cared for her for nine long years. Released from this responsibility, he started preaching and visiting and serving again. Tom ran quiet regional day-sessions to encourage young pastors in his area. After three years, he fell ill with some nasty flu, and had to be taken to the hospital. There a young doctor made a mistake, and prescribed the wrong medicine. Tom died. He was 81 years old.

In some ways, his ministry was quite ordinary. He preached countless sermons, he counseled many people, he prepared and led services, he wrote letters. He was astonishingly faithful in his visitation, not least evangelistic visits. Scrupulous to a fault, he devoted himself to his study, and although he was never a gifted orator, his sheep did not come away hungry. He was a meek man, and people often took advantage of him. In the early years of his ministry among the people to whom he was sent, there was a lot of virulent

opposition, including threats to life and property. He was hauled in by the police. Some other Baptist ministers in his area spent a total of eight years in prison, but during that time Tom managed to escape such treatment, only to see one or another of his children being beaten up by neighborhood toughs who were encouraged in their violence by the local religion. His stamina and sheer faithfulness were beyond reproach. When on occasion he was driven to despair, it simply meant he was driven to his knees. Persistence, faithfulness, integrity, loving lost sinners, caring for fledgling churches, keeping his peace, thinking well of people—these were the virtues that made him a hero of the faith.

Tom stands for a lot of other heroes of the faith. They look after three demanding children under the age of five, and still love them and read to them. They persevere with trust in God's wisdom even when they are scared and debilitated by the ravages of a terminal cancer. They use their retirement to help the most disadvantaged in one of the most impoverished and dangerous countries of Africa. It is rare to hear a whining complaint escape their lips. They smile easily, laugh quickly, forgive readily, love graciously, hope for better things incessantly. You will often find them carrying the heavy end of the load. When they make mistakes, they apologize, and try to put things right. Many of them are blessed with the gift of encouragement. They are known in only a very limited circle, and they eschew the praises of people, but their names are written large in the ledgers of heaven. They are described in Scripture: they are "overcomers," not because they are wiser or more famous than others, not because they are on TV, not because they float

above the humdrum problems that afflict mere mortals, but because in persecution they endure to the end, they retain sound doctrine when others follow some foolish Jezebel, they keep rebuilding their first love, and they live with one foot in eternity. These are the overcomers, the heroes of the faith. And Tom was one of them.

Tom Carson was my Dad. R.I.P.