

The Life of William Law: A Timeline

1686–1761

- 1686 Born, the fourth of eleven children, to Thomas and Margaret Farmery Law, at King's Cliffe, Northamptonshire.
- 1705 Entered Emmanuel College, Cambridge, as a student.
- 1708 Earned a bachelor of arts degree.
- 1711 Elected a fellow of Emmanuel College and ordained to holy orders.
- 1712 Received his master of arts degree, having studied Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, as well as the Bible, Christian history and doctrine, philosophy, and logic.
- 1713 Deprived of his fellowship for delivering a speech in which his rhetorical questions appeared to support the "Stuart pretender" rather than the future George I of Hanover.
- 1714 George I (the House of Hanover) crowned upon the death of Queen Anne (the last of the House of Stuart). Loyal to the Stuarts, Law refused to take the oath of allegiance and was therefore forbidden a career in the Church of England or any state appointment. Death of father, Thomas Law.
- 1717–19 Wrote and published *Three Letters to the Bishop of Bangor*, an attack on the bishop's disregard for church authority and tradition, such as apostolic succession and the role of priests and the sacraments.
- 1723 Published a philosophical pamphlet, *Remarks upon a Book, Entitled The Fable of the Bees*, masterfully refuting the contemporary fable's view of man as mere animal.
- ca. 1723 Moved to Putney, Surrey, and served as tutor to Edward Gibbon (father of the famed historian) for more than ten years—"the

- much honored friend and spiritual director of the whole family.” Among the people who sought his spiritual counsel were John Byrom and brothers John and Charles Wesley. As tutor, Law followed Gibbon to Cambridge, and then stayed on with the Gibbon family at Putney.
- 1726 Published *A Practical Treatise upon Christian Perfection*—perfection referring to “the right performance of our necessary duties.” This, his first and most austere practical treatise, presented life as a vale of tears and recommended self-denial and spiritual devotion.
- 1727 Received a substantial donation and used it to found a school for impoverished girls in his hometown of King’s Cliffe.
- 1728 Published *The Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, Law’s “master work,” in which he commended a life devoted to God, often relying on elaborate portraits to illustrate exemplary and deficient lifestyles. The second half of the book gave its reader practical advice concerning prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. It is said that this book, more than any other, contributed to the eighteenth-century evangelical revival, though in itself it does not present a clear Gospel-salvation message.
- 1731 Wrote the first of three *Letters to a Lady Inclined to Enter the Church of Rome*, in which he tenderly but firmly urged her to “resign yourself to God instead of the Church of Rome.” The letters were published as a volume after his death.
- ca. 1734 Discovered the writings of Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), a German mystic, whose work Law described as a “pearl.” Boehme drew Law’s spirituality toward the inner life of communion with God—Christian mysticism.
- 1737 Remained at Putney, even after the death of the elder Mr. Gibbon and the household dispersal.
- Wrote *A Demonstration of the Errors of a Late Book Called A Plain Account of the Nature and End of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper*.

- Law defended the traditional Anglican view, that the Eucharist is more than a memorial; it embodies the “real presence.”
- 1739 Lived in London. Published *The Grounds and Reasons of Christian Regeneration, or, The New Birth, Offered to the Consideration of Christians and Deists*, in which he discussed the sacrament of baptism and distinctions between “original Christianity” and “gospel Christianity.”
- 1740 Retired to King’s Cliffe, having inherited a house and property—and near his eldest brother’s home.
Published *An Earnest and Serious Answer to Dr. Trapp’s Discourse on the Folly, Sin, and Danger of Being Righteous Overmuch*.
Published *An Appeal to All That Doubt or Disbelieve the Truths of the Gospel, Whether They Be Deists, Arians, Socinians, or Nominal Christians: In Which the True Grounds and Reasons of the Whole Christian Faith and Life Are Plainly and Fully Demonstrated*. Here Law masterfully harmonized his views as a High Churchman with those of his mysticism.
- 1744 Opened his home to two women: Mrs. Archibald Hutcheson, the wealthy widow of an old friend, who on his deathbed advised her to take Law as her spiritual advisor; and Hester Gibbon, sister of Law’s pupil Edward. Until Law’s death, these three lived a celibate, communal life wholly given to devotion, study, and charity.
- 1745 Mrs. Hutcheson established a school for boys in King’s Cliffe. Later she enlarged the school and established a home for aged widows, and Law established a second school and a home for aged women.
- 1749 Published the first volume of *The Spirit of Prayer, or The Soul Rising out of the Vanity of Time and into the Riches of Eternity*. Here Law presented prayer as being synonymous with a life of devotion.
- 1750 Published the second part of *The Spirit of Prayer*, written in the format of a dialogue among speakers with differing views. Law

- laid out three levels of prayer, dealing with penitence, thanksgiving, and spiritual delight.
- 1752 Published *The Way to Divine Knowledge*, a continuation of the dialogues of *The Spirit of Prayer*. This volume included sections that mirror Law's own spiritual journey.
- Published the first part of *The Spirit of Love*, in the form of a letter to a friend challenging Law's opinion that there is no wrath in God.
- 1754 Published the second part of *The Spirit of Love*—again in dialogue format—which laid out Law's theology of Atonement. Law suffered visual impairment.
- 1757 Published *A Short but Sufficient Confutation of the Reverend Dr. Warburton's Projected Defense (as He Calls It) of Christianity*. Law argued that an afterlife—immortality of the soul—was evident even in the Old Testament, and the promise of eternal life was fulfilled in Jesus.
- 1760 Published *A Collection of Letters*, twenty-five edited missives, most of them written in the 1750s, many of them giving spiritual advice.
- Published *Of Justification by Faith and Works: A Dialogue between a Methodist and a Churchman*—Law being the Churchman, taking issue with Wesley's views.
- 1761 Published *An Humble, Earnest, and Affectionate Address to the Clergy*, in which he upholds the authority of Scripture and role of the Holy Spirit: "Nothing godly can be alive in us but what has all its life from the Spirit of God living and breathing in us."
- At age seventy-five, died on April 9, after a brief but painful illness. Hester Gibbon wrote that on his deathbed "with a strong and very clear voice," he sang "The Angels' Hymn" and "expired in Divine raptures."