

John Piper writes with a pastor's heart and a scholar's pen. This concise study makes for compelling reading, with its eloquent exploration of Wilberforce's Christian faith and the first principles that flowed from it. One cannot rightly understand Wilberforce's legacy as a reformer without understanding how his faith informed that legacy. Such a faith and such a legacy have much to say to us still. This is a book to savor and treasure.

—KEVIN BELMONTE, author of *William Wilberforce: A Hero for Humanity*, and lead historical consultant for the motion picture *Amazing Grace: The William Wilberforce Story*

BOOKS BY JOHN PIPER

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Desiring God

The Dangerous Duty of Delight

Future Grace

A Hunger for God

Let the Nations Be Glad!

A Godward Life

Pierced by the Word

Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ

The Legacy of Sovereign Joy

The Hidden Smile of God

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Contending for Our All

What Jesus Demands from the World

When the Darkness Will Not Lift

Amazing Grace in the Life of
William Wilberforce

John Piper

FOREWORD BY JONATHAN AITKEN

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The fatal habit of considering Christian morals as distinct from Christian doctrines insensibly gained strength. Thus the peculiar doctrines of Christianity went more and more out of sight, and as might naturally have been expected, the moral system itself also began to wither and decay, being robbed of that which should have supplied it with life and nutriment.

—WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

We can scarcely indeed look into any part of the sacred volume without meeting abundant proofs that it is the religion of the Affections which God particularly requires. . . . Joy . . . is enjoined on us as our bounden duty and commended to us as our acceptable worship. . . . A cold . . . unfeeling heart is represented as highly criminal.

—WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

If we would . . . rejoice in [Christ] as triumphantly as the first Christians did; we must learn, like them to repose our entire trust in him and to adopt the language of the apostle, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Jesus Christ. . . . Who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.”

—WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

His presence was as fatal to dullness as to immorality. His mirth was as irresistible as the first laughter of childhood.

—JAMES STEPHEN

Foreword

Jonathan Aitken

*E*ven in the hands of a talented biographer, William Wilberforce is a difficult subject, for the story of his life can only be told with insights that transcend the writing of political history. The extraordinary tenacity he displayed over forty-six years of legislative warfare before the slave trade was abolished was an epic of Parliamentary perseverance. However, the real wellsprings of this momentous achievement are to be found not in votes counted, speeches delivered, or bills passed but in a far deeper level of spiritual and moral conviction.

John Piper has written a brilliant book because he so clearly understands that capturing the spirit and soul of William Wilberforce is crucial to portraying the man and his mission. The historical and political narrative of this account is impeccable, but the reader is also given a profoundly perceptive picture of how Wilberforce lived his life spiritually, from the inside. The artistry of this portrait results in a superlative biographical study that demonstrates the truth of the old adage: “A well-written life is as exceptional as a well lived one.”

William Wilberforce did not always live his life well. In his youth he was a spoiled, selfish libertine who spent much of his time at the gaming tables playing poker. Having inherited a large fortune from his father, he could indulge his tastes for gambling as well as wining and dining in fashionable London clubs where he was also well known for his fine singing voice. Although he was more of a dilettante than anything else, he had some interest in politics. So when he was just twenty-one years old, he spent eight thousand pounds (equivalent to well over half-a-million dollars in today's money) on fighting and winning his home Parliamentary district of Hull in the 1780 general election. This was the start of a political career that was to change Britain and the world.

Having sat in the British House of Commons myself for nearly a quarter of a century, I know how easy it is for a young member of Parliament to fritter one's time away on empty debates and frustrating votes. There was nothing in Wilberforce's early days as a Parliamentarian to suggest that he was avoiding this familiar fate. As he himself described this period in his life, "The first years I was in Parliament I did nothing—nothing to any purpose. My own distinction was my darling object."

However, when Wilberforce was twenty-five years old, the whole direction of his life changed, not because of some new political appointment but because of a spiritual conversion that was so dramatic that he initially considered leaving Parliament to become a clergyman. Fortunately, a wise mentor, simply called "Old Newton" by Wilberforce, advised him

against such a career change and urged him to remain in the House of Commons serving God through politics.

“Old Newton” was John Newton, the reformed slave ship captain who had become a minister in the Church of England, an author and writer of legendary hymns such as *Amazing Grace*, and a leader of the growing evangelical movement in eighteenth-century England. Newton had known William Wilberforce since Wilberforce was a thirteen-year-old school-boy. After the death of his parents, the orphaned Wilberforce was brought up by his aunt Hannah who was a close friend of Reverend and Mrs. Newton. Hannah was such an admirer of John Newton’s sermons that she often went to hear them at his church in Olney, Buckinghamshire, sometimes staying in the vicarage accompanied by young William. So if the question is asked, who planted the first seed of Christian faith in the heart and mind of William Wilberforce, John Newton would be the most likely nomination. It seems inevitable that Newton’s colorful life story and conversion would have made its mark on the teenaged Wilberforce during his visits to Olney and when Newton visited Hannah’s hospitable home at Greenwich in South London.

As Newton’s biographer, I fully concur with John Piper’s assessment of the pivotal importance of the meeting between Wilberforce and Newton in December 1785. After a period of drifting away from the Christian faith in his locust years of idleness and gambling as a young man, Wilberforce was converted by his old schoolmaster, Isaac Milner, an evangelical friend of Newton’s, during summer vacations on the French

Riviera in 1784 and 1785. But although he was on fire as a new convert, Wilberforce was disoriented. The culture of Parliament and the Church of England were hostile to evangelicals. Most of the high society to which he belonged sneered at the enthusiasm (a pejorative word in eighteenth-century English religion) with which evangelicals proclaimed the truth of the gospel. Yet this very truth and enthusiasm, which had brought Wilberforce into a relationship with Jesus Christ, was so powerful that he wanted to become an evangelical minister himself.

No wonder Wilberforce felt confused. He decided to pay a secret visit—secret because respectable members of Parliament should not be seen with despised evangelicals—to his aunt’s old friend John Newton, who had recently been appointed Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth in the city of London. He was one of only two evangelical clergymen in the established church allowed charge of a London parish north of the River Thames.

Wilberforce’s letter of December 2, 1785, to Newton requesting a meeting reads almost as if it comes from a spy making an undercover assignation with his controller.

I wish to have some serious conversation with you. . . . I am sure you will hold yourself bound to let no-one living know of this application or of my visit till I release you from the obligation. . . . PS: Remember that I must be secret and that the gallery of the House is now so universally attended that the face of a member of parliament is pretty well known.

Wilberforce kept the appointment he had requested on

December 7, first taking the precaution of walking twice round the square in which Newton lived before knocking on the door of his home. Despite these cloak-and-dagger preliminaries, the meeting had transparent consequences in both the short and long term. According to Wilberforce, “When I came away I found my myself in a calm tranquil state, more humbled and looking more devoutly up to God.” According to Newton, he advised Wilberforce to remain in Parliament, later writing to tell him: “It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation.” John Piper’s comment on this crucial conversation cannot be bettered:

When one thinks what hung in the balance in that moment of counsel, one marvels at the magnitude of some small occasions in view of what Wilberforce would accomplish for the cause of abolition. (pp 30)

Abolishing the African slave trade became for Wilberforce “The grand object of my parliamentary existence. . . . If it please God to know me so far may I be the instrument of stopping such a course of wickedness and cruelty as never before disgraced a Christian country.”

Wilberforce launched his campaign for abolition in 1787. He lived to see it finally succeed in 1833. For the first twenty years of his Parliamentary struggles he suffered nothing but defeats, insults, rejection from his friends, vilification from his enemies, and even threats to his life. In the history of British politics there has been no comparable display of moral

courage over such a prolonged period by a single campaigner. Perhaps Winston Churchill's lonely opposition to the appeasement of Hitler's Germany in the 1930s comes close, but his wilderness years were shorter than those endured by Wilberforce and were thwarted by fewer defeats.

The bills to abolish the slave trade that Wilberforce presented to Parliament between 1787 and 1807 were voted down no less than eleven times. Moreover, the outside pressures on him to drop his campaign were formidable, for Wilberforce was challenging the vested interests of an immense trade that was vital to the British economy because of the wealth and jobs it created for ports, ship owners, shipbuilders, seafarers, traders, exporters of manufactured goods to Africa, and importers of cargoes from the West Indies. There was also fierce international opposition to Wilberforce from plantation owners and slave traders in America and from the West Indian colonial assemblies, which threatened to declare independence from England and to federate with the United States. The political hostility to Wilberforce sometimes erupted into personal hatred. He had to endure insults, slurs, slanders, and even threats on his life from one enraged slave ship captain.

Edmund Burke, Wilberforce's Parliamentary contemporary, once said: "One man with conviction makes a majority." It was a remark tailor-made to suit Wilberforce, for by the courage of his convictions he gradually swung Parliamentary and public opinion around to support the abolitionist cause. As Piper emphasizes, Wilberforce was blessed by the support

of many staunch Christians among his allies, notably the influential members of the Clapham Sect in South London. He was also assisted by expert eyewitnesses who could testify about the horrors of the slave trade. John Newton's memorable evidence to the Privy Council, as the Cabinet was called in those days, was one of the leading testimonies that helped to turn the tide of the abolitionist campaign towards success.

The great breakthrough came in February 1807 when, at the twelfth attempt, the Bill for Abolition was carried in the House of Commons by the unexpectedly huge majority of 267 votes. As a prominent member of Parliament praised him for "having preserved so many of his fellow creatures," Wilberforce sat amidst the loud "hurrahs" and "hear hears" of his colleagues with head bowed, tears streaming down his face. After twenty years of defeats, with this victory he had changed the course of history.

There was still more work to be done, for although the slave *trade* had now been made illegal, slavery itself remained lawful for another twenty-six years. But Wilberforce remained a determined campaigner, and three months before his death he lived to see slavery outlawed by the final piece of abolitionist legislation, which was passed in 1833.

John Piper writes in his assessment of Wilberforce's amazing perseverance: "What drew me to Wilberforce in the first place [was] his reputation as a man who simply would not give up when the cause was just" (pp. 43). Because of this fundamental attraction of the author to his subject, perhaps the most fascinating chapters of this biographical study are those

which focus on Wilberforce's motivation and dedication for his cause. Unlike most previous Wilberforce biographers, John Piper begins the account of his subject's life with an illuminating answer to the question: what made him tick? According to Piper, it was "a profound biblical allegiance" (pp. 20). Piper adds, "He was not a political pragmatist. He was a radically God-centered Christian who was a politician" (pp. 24). This explanation of Wilberforce's character and convictions is borne out by a careful analysis of the book he wrote at the age of thirty-seven, *A Practical View of Christianity*. It becomes clear from this work that the primary driving force behind Wilberforce's legislative perseverance was not, like most politicians before and since, to pass laws that would bring benefits to society; it was to pass laws to eradicate the activities of society that were offensive to God.

Once this great passion of Wilberforce's life is understood, everything about his campaign to abolish slavery falls into place, especially his extraordinary endurance in the face of disappointments, defeats, illness, and family problems. But perhaps the most enthralling chapter in this book is the penultimate one titled "The Deeper Root of Childlike Joy." For what Piper captures here is the infectious effervescent joy in Christ that radiated from Wilberforce, touching the hearts and lifting the spirits of almost everyone around him from his own young children to the establishment grandees of church and state. Inevitably Wilberforce was human enough to have his occasional down periods. Yet he was such a fighter for joy that he never ceased to win his battles and make his sacrifices as

he reached the highest realms of all happiness—spiritual contentment in Christ.

John Piper's succinct and superbly perceptive study of William Wilberforce deserves to become an acclaimed best-seller, for it not only tells the story of a great man's life—it also tells us how to understand the ultimate source of his greatness and happiness. Moreover, that understanding goes far deeper than the abolitionist achievements for which Wilberforce is honored, astounding though they were. William Wilberforce's secret, as revealed in this book, was that he made the journey from self-centeredness, achievement-centeredness, and political-centeredness to God-centeredness. And he made it with Christlike joy.

Introduction: Enduring for the Cause

*A*gainst great obstacles William Wilberforce, an evangelical member of Parliament, fought for the abolition of the African slave trade and against slavery itself until they were both illegal in the British empire. The battle consumed almost forty-six years of his life (from 1787 to 1833). The defeats and setbacks along the way would have caused the ordinary politician to embrace a more popular cause. Though he never lost a parliamentary election from age twenty-one to sixty-five, the cause of abolishing the slave trade was defeated eleven times before its passage in 1807. And the battle for abolishing slavery itself did not gain the decisive victory until three days before he died in 1833. What were the roots of this man's endurance in the cause of public righteousness?

What Made Him Tick?

To understand and appreciate the life and labor of William Wilberforce, one of the wisest things to do is to read his book

A Practical View of Christianity first and then read biographies. The book was published in 1797 when Wilberforce was thirty-seven years old and had been a member of the British Parliament already for sixteen years. It proved incredibly popular for the time, going through five printings in six months and being translated into five foreign languages. The book makes crystal-clear what drives Wilberforce as a person and a politician. Hearing it from his own mouth, as it were, will make the reading of all the biographies more fruitful. They don't always put a premium on what he does. So it can easily be missed, if we don't read Wilberforce first.

What made Wilberforce tick was a profound biblical allegiance to what he called the "peculiar doctrines" of Christianity. These, he said, give rise in turn to true "affections" for spiritual things, which then break the power of pride and greed and fear and lead to transformed morals, which lead to the political welfare of the nation. No true Christian can endure in battling unrighteousness unless his heart is aflame with new spiritual affections, or passions. "Mere knowledge is confessedly too weak. The affections alone remain to supply the deficiency."¹ This is the key to public and political morality. "If . . . a principle of true Religion [the Spirit-given new affections] should . . . gain ground, there is no estimating the effects on public morals, and the consequent influence on our political welfare."²

¹ William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, ed. Kevin Charles Belmonte (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 51.

² *Ibid.*, 211.

The Great Doer

But he was no ordinary pragmatist or political utilitarian, even though he was one of the most practical men of his day. Yes, he was a great doer. One of his biographers said, “He lacked time for half the good works in his mind.”³ James Stephen, who knew him well, remarked, “Factories did not spring up more rapidly in Leeds and Manchester than schemes of benevolence beneath his roof.”⁴ “No man,” Wilberforce wrote, “has a right to be idle.” “Where is it,” he asked, “that in such a world as this, health, and leisure, and affluence may not find some ignorance to instruct, some wrong to redress, some want to supply, some misery to alleviate?”⁵ In other words, he lived to do good—or as Jesus said, to let his light shine before men that they might see his good deeds and give glory to his Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

There is little doubt that Wilberforce changed the moral outlook of Great Britain. . . . The reformation of manners [morals] grew into Victorian virtues and Wilberforce touched the world when he made goodness fashionable. . . . Contrast the late eighteenth century . . . with its loose morals and corrupt public life, with the mid-nineteenth century. Whatever its faults, nineteenth-century British public life became famous for its emphasis on character, morals, and justice and the British business world famous for integrity.⁶

³ John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London: Constable and Company, 1977), 223.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, 90.

⁶ Pollock, “A Man Who Changed His Times,” in *Character Counts: Leadership Qualities in Washington, Wilberforce, Lincoln, and Solzhenitsyn*, ed. Os Guinness (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1999), 87.

But he was practical with a difference. He believed with all his heart that new affections for God were the key to new morals and lasting political reformation. And these new affections and this reformation did not come from mere ethical systems. They came from what he called the “peculiar doctrines” of Christianity. For Wilberforce, practical deeds were born in “peculiar doctrines.” By that term he simply meant the central distinguishing doctrines of human depravity, divine judgment, the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross, justification by faith alone, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and the practical necessity of fruit in a life devoted to good deeds.⁷

The Fatal Habit of Nominal Christians

He wrote his book to show that the “bulk”⁸ of Christians in England were merely nominal because they had abandoned these doctrines in favor of a system of ethics and had thus lost the power of ethical life and the political welfare. He wrote:

The fatal habit of considering Christian morals as distinct from Christian doctrines insensibly gained strength. Thus the peculiar doctrines of Christianity went more and more out of sight, and as might naturally have been expected, the moral system itself also began to wither and decay, being robbed of that which should have supplied it with life and nutriment.⁹

⁷ “The grand radical defect in the practical system of these nominal Christians, is their forgetfulness of all the peculiar doctrines of the Religion which they profess—the corruption of human nature—the atonement of the Savior—the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit.” *Ibid.*, 162-63.

⁸ His favorite word for the majority of nominal Christians in Britain in his day.

⁹ Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, 198.

He pled with nominal Christians of England not to turn “their eyes from the grand peculiarities of Christianity, [but] to keep these ever in view, as the pregnant principles whence all the rest must derive their origin, and receive their best support.”¹⁰

Knowing that Wilberforce was a politician for most of his adult life, who never lost an election from the time he was twenty-one years old, we might be tempted to think that his motives were purely pragmatic—as if he should say, “If Christianity works to produce the political welfare, then use it.” But that is not the spirit of his mind or his life. In fact, he believed that such pragmatism would ruin the very thing it sought, the reformation of culture.

The Decisive Direction of Sin: Vertical

Take the example of how people define sin. When considering the nature of sin, Wilberforce said, the vast bulk of Christians in England estimated the guilt of an action “not by the proportion in which, according to scripture, [actions] are offensive to God, but by that in which they are injurious to society.”¹¹ Now, on the face of it that sounds noble, loving, and practical. Sin hurts people, so don’t sin.

Wouldn’t that definition of sin be good for society? But Wilberforce says, “Their slight notions of the guilt and evil of sin [reveal] an utter [lack] of all suitable reverence for the Divine Majesty. This principle [reverence for the Divine Majesty] is justly termed in Scripture, ‘The beginning of wis-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

dom’ [Ps. 111:10].”¹² And without this wisdom, there will be no deep and lasting good done for man, spiritually or politically. Therefore, the supremacy of God’s glory in all things is what he calls “the grand governing maxim” in all of life.¹³ The good of society may never be put ahead of this. That would dishonor God and, paradoxically, defeat the good of society. For the good of society, the good of society must not be the primary good.

What’s Wrong with Dueling?

A practical example of how his mind worked is shown in his approach to the practice of dueling. Wilberforce hated this folly—the practice that demanded that a man of honor accept a challenge to a duel when another felt insulted. Wilberforce’s close friend, the Prime Minister William Pitt, actually fought a duel with George Tierney in 1798, and Wilberforce was shocked that the Prime Minister would risk his life and the nation in this way.¹⁴ Many opposed it on its human unreasonableness. But Wilberforce wrote:

It seems hardly to have been noticed in what chiefly consists its *essential* guilt; that it is a deliberate preference of the favor of man, before the favor and approbation of God, in *articulo mortis* [“at the point of death”], in an instance, wherein our own life, and that of a fellow creature are at

¹² *Ibid.*, 149.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁴ Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 162.

stake, and wherein we run the risk of rushing into the presence of our Maker in the very act of offending him.¹⁵

In other words, offending God is the essential consideration, not killing a man or imperiling a nation. That is what made Wilberforce tick. He was not a political pragmatist. He was a radically God-centered Christian who was a politician. And his true affections for God based on the “peculiar doctrines” of Christianity were the roots of his endurance in the cause of justice.

¹⁵ Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, 115-16.