



PREFACE

HENDRICKSON CHRISTIAN CLASSICS EDITION

William Wilberforce
(1759–1833)

I must confess equally boldly that my own solid hopes for the well-being of my country depend, not so much on her navies and armies, nor on the wisdom of her rulers, nor on the spirit of her people, as on the persuasion that she still contains many who love and obey the Gospel of Christ. I believe that their prayers may yet prevail.

—*William Wilberforce*

The congressman's face betrayed his anger. "The Republicans accept the religious right and their tactics at their own peril," he thundered. "These activists are demanding their rightful seat at the table—and that is what the American people fear most." And then Representative Vic Fazio¹ ominously asked, "Should they attempt to impose their personal religious views and ethical beliefs on the party system?"

Sounds pretty scary, doesn't it? You can almost see "these activists" tossing the Constitution into the trash with one hand while shoving other people's kids into Sunday School with the other. How intolerant. How dogmatic. And how utterly ridiculous.

As we enter the twenty-first century, Christians are increasingly—and rightfully—taking their place in the public square. But we're discovering that plenty of people want to roll up the sidewalk when they see us coming. "Bigot." "Zealot." "Extremist." Many sling these verbal stones at us whenever we invade what they consider *their* turf.

But this is not new. These strident voices echo those of an earlier generation of politicians—politicians who accused the Christians of *their* day of "imposing their morality" when they dared to carry their faith into public life. And at no one did they hurl that accusation more vociferously than the great abolitionist, William Wilberforce.

Old Palace Yard, London, October 25, 1787: A slight young man sat at his oak desk in the second-floor library. As he adjusted the flame of his lamp, the warm light shone on his piercing blue eyes, oversized nose, and high wrinkled forehead. His eyes fell on the jumble of pamphlets on the cluttered desk. They were all on the same subject: the horrors of the slave trade, grisly accounts of human flesh being sold, like so much cattle, for the profit of his countrymen.

The young man would begin this day, as was his custom, with a time of personal prayer and scripture reading. But his thoughts kept returning to those pamphlets. Something inside him—that insistent conviction he'd felt before—was telling him that all that had happened in his life had been for a purpose, preparing him to meet that barbaric evil head-on . . .

Wilberforce was born in Hull, England, in 1759, the only son of prosperous merchant parents. Though an average student at Cambridge, his quick wit had made him a favorite among his fellows, including William Pitt, with whom he shared an interest in politics.

After graduation Wilberforce ran as a conservative for a seat in Parliament from his home county of Hull. Though Wilberforce was only twenty-one at the time, the prominence of his family, his speaking ability, and a generous feast he sponsored for voters on election day carried the contest.

The London of 1780, when Wilberforce arrived to take office, was described as "one vast casino" where the rich counted their profits through a fog of claret. Fortunes were lost and won over gaming tables, and duels of honor

were the order of the day. The city's elegant private clubs welcomed young Wilberforce, and Wilberforce happily concentrated on pursuing both political advancement and social pleasure.

Far from the homes of the rich, the poor were crammed together in grimy cobblestoned neighborhoods. They were living cogs in Britain's emerging industrial machines. Pale children worked as many as eighteen hours a day in the cotton mills or coal mines, bringing home a few shillings a month to their parents, who often wasted it on cheap gin.

Newgate and other infamous prisons overflowed with debtors, murderers, children, and rapists. Frequent executions provided a form of public amusement. In short, London was a city where unchecked passions and desires ran their course. Few raised their voices in opposition.

So it is not surprising that few argued against one of the nation's most bountiful sources of wealth—the slave trade. Political alliances revolved around commitments to it. In a celebrated case in England's high court only four years earlier, slaves had been deemed “goods and chattels.” They could be thrown overboard and drowned by sea captains, all within the law.

Government corruption was so widespread that few members of Parliament thought twice about the usual practice of accepting bribes for their votes. The same attitude reigned in the House of Lords. Their political influence in Parliament grew until a large voting bloc was controlled by the vested influence of the slave trade.

The horrors of the trade were remote and unseen, the cotton and sugar profits they yielded very tangible. So most consciences were not troubled about the black men and women suffering far away on remote Caribbean plantations.

Early in 1784, Wilberforce's friend William Pitt was elected prime minister at the age of twenty-four. This inspired Wilberforce to take a big political gamble. He surrendered his safe seat in Hull and stood for election in Yorkshire, the largest and most influential constituency in the country. Thanks in part to the power of his oratory, Wilberforce was elected.

Shortly afterward, Wilberforce agreed to take a tour of the continent with his mother, sister and several cousins. When he happened to run into his old schoolmaster from Hull, Isaac Milner, Wilberforce impulsively invited him to join the traveling party. That invitation was to change Wilberforce's life.

Isaac Milner was a large, jovial man whose forceful personality had contributed to the spread of Christian influence at Cambridge. Not unnaturally, then, he raised the matter of faith to his former pupil as their carriage ran over the rutted roads connecting Nice and the Swiss Alps. Wilberforce initially treated the subject flippantly, but eventually agreed to read the scriptures daily.

The summer session of Parliament forced Wilberforce to make a break in his travels. When he and Milner continued their Continental tour in the fall of 1785, Wilberforce was no longer the same frivolous young man. He returned to London in early November, feeling weary and confused. In need of counsel, he sought advice from John Newton, the former captain of a slave ship and now a committed Christian.

By the time Wilberforce knew of him, Newton was a clergyman in the Church of England, renowned for his outspokenness on spiritual matters. He counseled Wilberforce to follow Christ but not to abandon public office: "The Lord has raised you up to the good of His church and for the good of the nation," he told the younger man. Wilberforce heeded his advice.

Thus Wilberforce sat at his desk at that foggy Sunday morning in 1787 thinking about his conversion and his calling. Had God saved him only to rescue his own soul from hell? He could not accept that. If Christianity was true and meaningful, it must not only save but serve. It must bring God's compassion to the oppressed as well as oppose the oppressors.

Wilberforce dipped his pen into the inkwell. "Almighty God has set before me two great objectives," he wrote, his heart suddenly pumping with passion, "the abolition of the slave trade and the reformation of manners."

Wilberforce knew the slavery issue had to be faced head-on in Parliament. Throughout the damp fall of 1787 he worked late into the nights on his investigation of slavery, joined by others who saw in him a champion for their cause.

But in February of 1788, Wilberforce suddenly fell gravely ill. Doctors predicted he would not live more than two weeks; however, Wilberforce recovered. And though not yet well enough to return to Parliament, in March he asked Pitt to introduce the abolition issue in the House for him. On the basis of their friendship, the prime minister agreed.

Pitt moved that a resolution be passed binding the House to discuss the slave trade in the next session. The motion was passed. But then another of Wilberforce's friends, Sir William Dolben, introduced a one-year experimental bill to regulate the number of slaves that could be transported per ship.

Now sensing a threat, the West Indian bloc rose up in opposition. Tales of cruelty in the slave trade were mere fiction, they said. Besides, warned Lord Penrhyn ominously, the proposed measure would abolish the trade upon which “two thirds of the commerce of this country depends.” Angered by Penrhyn’s hyperbole, Pitt pushed Dolben’s regulation through both houses in June of 1788.

By the time a recovered Wilberforce returned to the legislative scene, the slave traders were furious and ready to fight, shocked that politicians had the audacity to press for morally based reforms in the political arena. “Humanity is a private feeling, not a public principle to act upon,” sniffed the Earl of Abingdon. Lord Melborne angrily agreed. “Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life,” he thundered.

But Wilberforce and the band of abolitionists knew that a private faith that did not act in the face of oppression was no faith at all. Nonetheless, despite the passionate advocacy of Wilberforce, Pitt, and others, the House of Commons voted not to decide.

Early in 1791 Wilberforce again filled the House of Commons with his stirring eloquence. “Never, never will we desist till we . . . extinguish every trace of this bloody traffic,” he declared. The opposition was equally determined, pointing to the jobs and exports that would be lost. And when the votes were cast, “commerce clinked its purse,” as one observer commented, and Wilberforce was again defeated.

As the abolitionists analyzed their battle in 1792, they were painfully aware that many of their colleagues were puppets, unable or unwilling to stand against the powerful economic forces of their day. So Wilberforce and his friends decided to go to the people, believing, “it is on the general impression and feeling of the nation we must rely . . . so let the flame be fanned.” The abolitionists distributed thousands of pamphlets detailing the evils of slavery, spoke at public meetings, and circulated petitions.

Later in 1792, Wilberforce brought to the House of Commons 519 petitions for the total abolition of the slave trade, signed by thousands of British subjects. But again the slavers exercised their political muscle, and the House moved that Wilberforce’s motion be qualified by the word GRADUALLY. And so it was carried.

Though Wilberforce was wounded by yet another defeat, he retained a glimmer of hope. For the first time the House had actually voted for an

abolition motion. That hope was soon smashed by events across the English Channel. The fall of the Bastille in 1789 had heralded the people's revolution in France. By 1792 all idealism had vanished. The September massacres loosed a tide of bloodshed as the mob and the guillotine ruled France.

Fears of a similar revolt abounded in England until any type of public agitation for reform was suspiciously labeled "Jacobinic," after the radicals who had fanned the flames of France's Reign of Terror. Sensing the shift in the public mood, the House of Commons rejected Wilberforce's motion.

Weary with grief and frustration, Wilberforce wondered whether he should abandon his seemingly hopeless campaign. One night as he sat at his desk, flipping through his Bible, a letter fluttered from between the pages. The writer was John Wesley. Wilberforce had read it dozens of times, but never had he needed its message as much as he did now.

Unless God has raised you up . . . you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils, but if God be for you, who can be against you? Oh, be not weary of well-doing,

Wesley wrote. Wilberforce's resolution returned, and for the next several years he doggedly reintroduced, each year, the motion for abolition; and each year Parliament threw it out.

And so it went—1797, 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801—the years passed with Wilberforce's motions thwarted and sabotaged by political pressures, compromise, personal illness, and the continuing war in France. During those long years of struggle, however, Wilberforce and his friends never lost sight of their equally pressing objective: "the reformation of manners," or the effort to clean up society's blights. It was the great genius of Wilberforce that he realized that attempts at political reform without, at the same time changing the hearts and minds of people, were futile. The abolitionists realized that they could never succeed in eliminating slavery without addressing the greater problems of cultural malaise and decay.

But it was a difficult concept to explain. As Garth Lean writes in his book, *God's Politician*,

It was largely in the hope of reaching Pitt and others of his friends—some of whom had strange ideas of what he really thought—that Wilberforce wrote his book.

Wilberforce finished the book in 1797 and called it *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*.

The title itself was a scandal to the established religion, a direct challenge to the corrupted church of his day. But the book's impact can scarcely be overstated. It became an instant bestseller, and remained one for the next fifty years. Lean quotes one observer who wrote: "[if the book] was read at the same moment, by all the leading persons in the nation. An electric shock could not be felt more vividly and instantaneously."

A Practical View is credited with helping spark the second Great Awakening (the first was begun by Wesley) and its influence was felt throughout Europe and rippled across the ocean to America.

In 1806 Wilberforce's decades-long efforts finally began to pay off. His friend Pitt died that year, and William Grenville, a strong abolitionist, became prime minister. Reversing the pattern of the previous twenty years, Grenville introduced Wilberforce's bill into the House of Lords first. After a bitter, month-long fight, the bill was passed on February 4, 1807.

On February 22, the second reading was held in the House of Commons. There was a sense that a moment in history had arrived. One by one, members jumped to their feet to decry the evils of the slave trade and praised the men who had worked so hard to end it. The entire House rose, cheering and applauding Wilberforce. Realizing that his long battle had come to an end, Wilberforce sat bent in his chair, his head in his hands, tears streaming down his face.

The motion carried, 283 to 16.

Later, at Wilberforce's home, the old friends exuberantly crowded into the library, recalling the weary years of battle and rejoicing for their African brothers and sisters. Wilberforce looked into the lined face of his old friend Henry Thornton. "Well, Henry," Wilberforce said with joy in his eyes, "what do we abolish next?"

In the years that followed that night of triumph, a great spiritual movement swept across England, launched in great part by Wilberforce's book. With the outlawing of the slave trade came Wilberforce's eighteen-year battle toward the total emancipation of the slaves. Social reforms swept beyond abolition to clean up child labor laws, poorhouses, prisons, to institute education

and health care for the poor. Evangelism flourished, and later in the century missionary movements sent Christians fanning across the globe.

The eminent historian Will Durant once wrote that the great turning point of history was when “Christ met Caesar in the arena—and Christ won.” Well might he have added that fifteen centuries later, Christ met vice and vested interests in Britain—and Christ won.

Wilberforce’s success is all the more amazing when we consider that in his day, Britain was, spiritually speaking, sinking sand. The church was apostate, and the whole nation wallowed in self-indulgent decadence. But it was there that Wilberforce and his companions took their stand, clinging to biblical truth, resisting barbaric injustice, and striving to change the heart of a nation.

That’s the rich heritage of Christian activism in the public square. And it’s one we ought to recall whenever today’s politicians accuse Christians of wanting to “impose their personal religious views” or when they claim, as the *New York Times* recently did, that conservative Christians involved in politics pose “a far greater threat to democracy than was presented by communism.”

In America, as in England, it was Christians who led the fight against slavery. It was Christians who enacted child labor laws, opened hospitals, and ran charitable societies to aid widows and orphans, alcoholics, and prostitutes. And it is Christians who are acting as salt and light in our culture today.

Have we really “come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life?” as Lord Melborne complained more than two hundred years ago? Is Christian influence truly “a far greater threat to democracy than was posed by communism?” Nonsense.

William Wilberforce is a great hero of mine, because I have come to see the same thing he saw: that you can’t get rid of social scourges without the reformation of manners. In Wilberforce’s day, that scourge was slavery. Today, it’s crime. We have to understand that we’ll never clean up the crime problem without reversing the rot of our own decaying culture. And we have to recognize that a decaying church that has lost its vibrancy can never be an effective tool in reforming our own society.

William Wilberforce is a special inspiration for today’s politically incorrect, “religious right activists”: to stay in the public square, to keep fighting the battles despite debasement, derision, and defeat, as long as we believe that’s where God wants us.

Preface to the Hendrickson Christian Classics Edition

As the aging Wilberforce wrote in the conclusion to *A Practical View of Christianity*:

I must confess equally boldly that my own solid hopes for the well-being of my country depend, not so much on her navies and armies, nor on the wisdom of her rulers, nor on the spirit of her people, as on the persuasion that she still contains many who love and obey the Gospel of Christ. I believe that their prayers may yet prevail.

Wilberforce's confidence was not misplaced. May the same hope prevail for us today, and this book, as you read it, inspire you to action—to a bold affirmation of your faith, as it did for tens of thousands of Christians in Wilberforce's day.

—Charles Colson
Washington, D.C.
December 1995

Notes

- ¹ 1. Representative Vic Fazio (D-Calif.), "Democrat Fazio Assails Religious Right in GOP," *Washington Post*, June 22, 1994, p. A-6.