



# VITAL CHRISTIANITY

THE LIFE AND SPIRITUALITY  
OF  
WILLIAM WILBERFORCE



MURRAY ANDREW PURA

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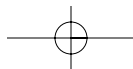
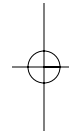


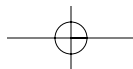
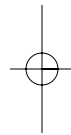
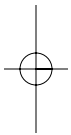
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*For Donald Munro Lewis  
teacher, scholar, friend  
non verba sed tonitrua*





## Foreword

Little William Wilberforce, like little John Wesley, his older contemporary, was a great man who impacted the Western world as few others have done. Blessed with brains, charm, influence and initiative, much wealth and fair health (though slightly crippled and with chronic digestive difficulties), he put evangelicalism on Britain's map as a power for social change, first by overthrowing the slave trade almost single-handed and then by generating a stream of societies for doing good and reducing evil in national life. Beside his own track record as a visionary in Parliament, he became more than anyone else the architect of mainstream nineteenth-century evangelical Anglicanism, just as Wesley, the visionary shepherd of religious societies, became the main architect of nineteenth-century worldwide Methodism. To forget such men is foolish; their lives need to be written afresh for each new generation. In the last century Coupland and Pollock, among others, wrote well of Wilberforce's public life, and now comes Murray Andrew Pura's brief but well-judged portrayal of the man himself and his personal style. I welcome this work, for Pura's picking up of the important things about Wilberforce and the wisdom he lived by is insightful and inspiring.

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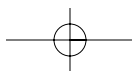
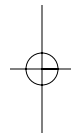
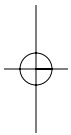
British evangelical piety in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was essentially Puritan piety, as taught by seventeenth-century pundits like Baxter and Owen and Bunyan, and by their faithful next-century disciples, Philip Doddridge, Jonathan Edwards, John Newton and other such. Pura shows how the writings of these men, plus personal ministry from Isaac Milner, Newton and others, shaped Wilberforce's faith and devotion. We learn how wrong we would be to suppose that any of these men expected sound conversions to be sudden, as moderns tend to do, and also how wrong Wilberforce's sons were to imply in their biography of him that his distinctive evangelicalism faded at the end of his life, as their own had done. On all aspects of Wilberforce's "vital Christianity" Pura is a sure guide.

Some books, said Bacon, should be tasted (and then left), some swallowed (that is, read casually), and "some few chewed and digested," that is read through with care and thought. This book flows so smoothly that it could easily be swallowed, but with Christian role-models of stature currently in such short supply I believe it belongs in Bacon's third class; and it is as such that I recommend it to you.

J. I. Packer  
Board of Governors' Professor of Theology  
Regent College

## Acknowledgments

The core of this book was established fifteen years ago. For that I must thank the encouragement and wisdom of Donald M. Lewis who oversaw my thesis work from start to finish. I must also thank the librarians of both Regent College and the Vancouver School of Theology in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada for their kind assistance. That it sees the light of day in its present incarnation is due to the hard work and expertise of my editor, Rob Clements. I am grateful for his belief in this work and in his persistence in ensuring it saw publication.





CHAPTER I

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**William Wilberforce**  
*An Introduction*

By the time of his death in 1833, William Wilberforce had exerted a tremendous influence on English society, an influence which would extend well beyond his own generation. His impact was such that one historian, Ford K. Brown, has termed his period “The Age of Wilberforce.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, his political involvements and his leadership in the fledgling Anglican Evangelical Movement have caused Brown to contend that he, not John Wesley, deserves the credit for the moral reformation that swept Britain.<sup>2</sup> These are not idle claims. Wilberforce was a man very much involved with social change. It was his concern that Great Britain become holy and he set out to make her so. He not only fought slavery and the slave trade but also worked for penal reform and for changes in a British criminal code which he considered inhumane. He desired education and medical treatment for the poor. He wanted laws to protect children employed in factories and as chimney sweeps. He wished to see Sunday respected as a Christian Sabbath. He hoped that the Christian scriptures would be distributed throughout the British Empire. He worked to establish Christian missionaries in India. There was no aspect of British life or influence that he did not want to see affected by the Christian gospel.

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Christianity had changed him, and he knew it could change society.

William Wilberforce certainly would have maintained that the greatest single influence on his life was his religious faith and it is with this presupposition that this writer approaches his subject. In the words of the late Sir Reginald Coupland, Beit Professor of Colonial History at Oxford University, Wilberforce's religious faith was the "secret of Wilberforce's indomitable perseverance," bracing him "for the business of the active world outside."<sup>3</sup> Ernest Howse has argued that Wilberforce's deeds of social reform were "inspired almost wholly by motives of pietistic origin."<sup>4</sup> James Houston has asserted: "The main credit for the abolition of the slave trade belongs to William Wilberforce. Behind that lay his consuming desire to manifest real Christianity."<sup>5</sup> It is axiomatic that the motivation for such an influential life ought to be studied, and if that motivation lies in a man's religious faith and thought then these ought to be understood.

Wilberforce, while raised an Anglican, underwent a conversion experience at the age of twenty-six and embraced an Evangelical understanding of the Christian faith which he championed to his dying day.<sup>6</sup> He became the most important leader of Evangelical Anglicanism and sought to commend a moderate and cultured version of evangelicalism to Britain's middle and upper classes. To understand his faith is in some large measure to understand early Evangelicalism. It is the purpose of this biography to examine the influences upon Wilberforce's spiritual development and to assess their importance. It will also seek to demonstrate how his spirituality affected his personal life, his political commitments, and his social consciousness, and thus, in turn, influenced Wilberforce's world. It may be that here, at an early stage of the Evangelical Movement, something of evangelicalism's true soul can be rediscovered.

### **A Definition of Spirituality**

*Spirituality* is a term used to describe how an individual or group relates to God as God is conceived to be. It is concerned primarily with how humans are to commune with God through prayer and worship. Inevitably, however, these concerns become all-inclusive as

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every aspect of a person's life is brought into relationship with God. Spirituality asks, "How is one to understand and out of this understanding live a life of communion with God?" This "life of communion" ought to be outlined in the broadest terms, not just in respect to verbal prayer or formal worship in a sanctuary.

"How is one to understand and out of this understanding live a life of communion with God?" This same question can be asked by the Buddhist, the Muslim, and the Christian, but the answers will not be the same. Indeed, among different groups within the Christian consensus the answers will not be the same. Therefore the application of the term "spirituality" to any individual or group implies specificity. The definition of spirituality as the way in which one communes with God with the whole of one's life remains the same. The difference lies in the manner and the quality of that all-inclusive communion.

### **A Definition of Wilberforce's Evangelical Spirituality**

Once William Wilberforce became converted to the Christian faith, a particular Christian spirituality began to develop within him which increasingly reshaped his personal life and his political commitments. It arose out of the teachings of the Evangelical Movement, a group within the Anglican Church of which Wilberforce became a key figure.

In embracing an Evangelical understanding of the Christian faith Wilberforce had inherited two spiritual traditions, one rather older and the other quite new. The older spiritual tradition was that of the sixteenth century Reformation. In fact, "evangelical" was the earliest word in English for adherents of that Reformation.<sup>7</sup> According to Donald G. Bloesch:

In its historical meaning evangelical has come to refer to the kind of religion espoused by the Protestant Reformation. It is also associated with the spiritual movements of purification subsequent to the Reformation—Pietism and Puritanism. The revival movements within Protestantism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have also been appropriately termed evangelical.<sup>8</sup>

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The newer spiritual tradition Wilberforce fell heir to was that of the Evangelical Movement, comprised of those influenced by the eighteenth century Evangelical (or Methodist) Revival who chose to remain, like John Wesley and George Whitefield, within the Established Church, as opposed to the movement of evangelical Dissent (and eventually of Methodism) which consisted of those who felt that to remain within the Established Church was to compromise their Christian faith.<sup>9</sup> These two movements of evangelicalism shared a mutual animosity for one another. Many Anglican Evangelicals felt that evangelical Dissent damaged the cause of Christ in Britain. Wilberforce wrote in the fall of 1789, four years after his conversion, that “the increase of dissenters, which always follow from the institution of unsteeped places of worship, is highly injurious to the interests of religion in the long run.”<sup>10</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century Anglican Evangelicalism had distanced itself from both evangelical Dissent and Methodism (which had by then cut ties with the Church of England).<sup>11</sup> It did so because Dissent and Methodism were both politically suspect, because Dissent was hostile to the Church of England and Methodism was expected to become so, and because Anglican Evangelicals wished to be viewed as legitimate and loyal members of the Church of England. W.J.C. Ervine comments: “It was...expedient for Anglican Evangelicalism to dissociate itself from all taint of ‘novelty,’ ‘enthusiasm,’ or political non-conformity, and to strengthen the movement’s Anglican pedigree.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore the Evangelical Movement’s periodical, *The Christian Observer*, retained an Anglican flavor and usually ignored the activities of evangelical Dissent, a number of Anglican Evangelical and Dissenting (or Nonconformist) clergy saw themselves in distinct rivalry with one another, and the Anglican Evangelicals preferred to start up their own missionary society with an Anglican orientation rather than support the London Missionary Society which was founded along Dissenting lines.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, Anglican Evangelicalism and evangelical Dissent still had common roots. Both were rooted in that older spiritual tradition of the Protestant Reformation and shared its theological and spiritual distinctives: the supreme authority of Scripture, *sola scriptura*,

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salvation by grace alone, *sola gratia*, through faith alone, *sola fide*, in Christ alone, *sola Christus*. Moreover, both were rooted in eighteenth century evangelicalism and, theoretically at least, Anglican Evangelicals could not sever themselves completely from their Dissenting brothers and sisters, for they themselves “firmly held that ultimate truth did not lie in one Church order or another, but in the gospel itself.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the British and Foreign Bible Society, which Wilberforce played a major role in founding, became one area of strong co-operation between the two evangelical factions.<sup>15</sup> This theological stance cost Anglican Evangelicals a great deal in terms of abuse from and unpopularity with Anglican High-Churchmen, but they did not change their minds about it.<sup>16</sup>

As an Anglican Evangelical, therefore, Wilberforce developed a spirituality basically consistent with the sacramental claims of Anglicanism, as well as with the spiritual claims of the Protestant Reformation, particularly the English Reformers, which were imbedded in eighteenth century British evangelicalism. What made Evangelical spirituality especially distinctive in this period was its particular emphases in the areas of soteriology and pneumatology. “Evangelicalism centred upon soteriology,” states Doreen M. Rosman, “and its soteriology centred upon the Cross.”<sup>17</sup> Thus in 1811 Charles Simeon, the most influential of all Evangelical clergymen, entitled a university address, “Christ crucified, or evangelical religion described,” and proposed that the description “evangelical” could only properly be applied to those who like St. Paul “determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified.”<sup>18</sup> The work of the Holy Spirit was considered crucial both in the salvation of the human soul and in the Christian’s ongoing spiritual growth: “This emphasis upon the activity of the Spirit...most obviously differentiated evangelicals’ beliefs from those of their fellows.”<sup>19</sup> These spiritual distinctives Anglican Evangelicals shared with evangelical Dissent. What particularly differentiated the spirituality of the two evangelical groups in this context was the fact that most Anglican Evangelicals played down any teaching stipulating the crucial nature of a violent and sudden personal conversion experience, whereas evangelical Dissent and Methodism played this up.<sup>20</sup>

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William Wilberforce was both a loyal Anglican and a staunch Evangelical. Anglican Evangelicalism formed the hub around which every aspect of Wilberforce's religious life turned. By virtue of the fact that his relationship with God affected everything else he did, this Evangelicalism also influenced all the activities of his extremely busy life. Everything centred on Wilberforce's redemption from eternal damnation by Christ's sacrificial death at Calvary. All was seen in light of the work of the Holy Spirit who labored daily to make the reality of that redemption part of Wilberforce's personal experience. Wilberforce shared these spiritual emphases with thousands of other Evangelicals both in England and overseas. The hallmarks of his religious life and thought, they were the mainsprings to his political career.

**Notes**

1. Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 4.
2. Ibid.
3. Reginald Coupland, *Wilberforce* (Collins, 1923), p. 190.
4. Ernest Howse, *Saints in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1952), p. 182.
5. James Houston, ed., *Real Christianity* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1982), p. xii.
6. Wilberforce's sons and some historians, such as Brown and Robin Furneaux, claim otherwise. They argue that in his later years Wilberforce turned increasingly to the High Church Anglicanism. The issue will be discussed at the end of Chapter III.
7. G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911), p. 37.
8. Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978-9), 1:7.
9. Balleine, p. 37. Though the term "Methodist Revival" has often been used in conjunction with the revival sparked by the preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley, "Evangelical Revival" is closer to the truth since not every person affected by the revival became a

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Methodist. The use of *Evangelical* with a capital *E* will be used to denote Anglican Evangelicals, while evangelical with a small *e* will denote its generic use unless accompanied by the term Dissent or Dissenting. This is in conformity with standard academic practice in this field.

10. William Wilberforce, quoted in Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1838), 1:248.

11. William Joseph Clydesdale Ervine, "Doctrine and Diplomacy: some aspects of the life and thought of the Anglican Evangelical clergy, 1797-1837" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1979), p. 27.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30

14. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

15. *Ibid.*, p.30

16. *Ibid.*

17. Doreen M. Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 10.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12

20. Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 60.