

# Introduction to This Edition

*Dr. Bob Beltz*

In the following pages I am going to introduce you to a classic book by one of the most amazing figures in British history. His name was William Wilberforce. Perhaps you are reading this book because you are already familiar with the man but have never read his writings. That was certainly the case in my own experience. Then, several years ago, I had the good fortune of becoming part of the team that began production on the feature-length film *Amazing Grace*, which is based on the life of William Wilberforce. Early in the process of working on this film, I decided to read an abridged version of Wilberforce's classic work on Christian faith.

As you can see from the title page, this was a work written at a time when publishers believed that you should deliver as much information in the title of a book as was humanly possible. In 1797, the year the book was first published, catchy titles were not in vogue. Since that time, I have often seen the title condensed to *A Practical View of Real Christianity*. But the intention of Wilberforce was much more focused: He addressed his work to a particular group of people, living at a particular time and place, embracing a unique religious system, which produced a specific religious experience. Hence, to create an accurate and complete title for his book, Wilberforce himself wrote that his text was intended to be *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians* – not of just any group of professed Christians, but specifically professed Christians who were to be found *in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country* (i.e., England in 1797). It was the belief system of this specific group of people that was to be *Contrasted with* what Wilberforce called *Real Christianity*.

Because of the specificity of the book, it is difficult to fully appreciate the work at hand without some knowledge of the author and his times. It is not my intention in this volume to write a biography of Wilberforce. Others much better qualified to do so have already undertaken that task. I refer you to the postscript, where a brief biography adapted from Kevin Belmonte's *Hero for Humanity* is included, and the bibliography, also graciously compiled by Mr. Belmonte.

My goal in this book is to “translate” Wilberforce's classic work out of the linguistic style of the late eighteenth century into a book that captures Wilberforce's

message for a twenty-first-century audience. Wilberforce purists will cringe, I'm sure. But for those who do, it should be noted that Wilberforce, in his book, recommended doing exactly this with works from previous generations that had become inaccessible to the common man because of language or style. For instance, in chapter 6 of the 1824 edition of *A Practical View*, Wilberforce makes the following remark in reference to the 1707 four-volume set of books by Presbyterian pastor Richard Baxter:

The 1707 edition of Baxter's *Practical Works* are a treasury of Christian wisdom, and it would be a most valuable service to mankind to revise them, and perhaps to abridge them, so as to render them more suited to the taste of modern readers.

My hope and intention in revising and updating this book is that a new generation of modern readers will discover this wonderful man and the timeless message he delivered.

Before you move on to Wilberforce's own introduction, let me inform you that I worked from the fifteenth edition of the complete text of *A Practical View of Real Christianity*. This edition, printed in London by T. Cadell in 1824, is acknowledged as the last version of the book Wilberforce himself edited. The title page of this edition contains two quotes under its lengthy title. I'll present them here as they appeared on the original page:

*Search the Scriptures! -----*

John 5:39.

*How charming is DIVINE PHILOSOPHY!  
Not harsh and crabbed, as dull Fools suppose,  
But musical as is Apollo's lute,  
And a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets,  
Where no crude surfeit reigns.*

John Milton

Wilberforce knew that his readers would do well to follow John's command in order to reap the rewards implied by Milton. I hope this modern version of Wilberforce's work will have the same effect.

# Contents

## **Introduction to This Edition**

*By Dr. Bob Beltz*

## **William Wilberforce: A Man for All Seasons**

*By Kevin Belmonte*

## **Wilberforce's Original Introduction**

### **Chapter One**

The State of Contemporary Christianity

### **Chapter Two**

Current Ideas About the Nature of Man

### **Chapter Three**

Understanding Cultural Christianity

### **Chapter Four**

True Standards of Christian Behavior

### **Chapter Five**

Arguments for True Christianity

### **Chapter Six**

The Current State of Christianity

### **Chapter Seven**

Practical Hints About Authentic Faith

## **Recommended Bibliography**

*Compiled by Kevin Belmonte*

## Chapter One

# The State of Contemporary Christianity

## Cultural Christianity, What the Bible Says, the Problem of Ignorance

Before looking at the specific problems posed by what I am from here forward going to call cultural Christianity, I would like to address the problem of the faulty ideas many people have regarding the importance of authentic faith. You might think that if you consider yourself a “good” person and are against “bad” things, your faith is adequate. The fact is, you might not be a Christian at all but simply a moral person. You might understand the Christianity our culture has adopted without understanding what constitutes authentic faith. You might know some of the basic facts about Christianity but have no idea how those facts should apply to your life.

I hope you don't think I am being arrogant or overly harsh on cultural Christians. Look at the facts. Do cultural Christians view Christian faith as important enough to make it a priority when teaching their children what they believe and why they believe it? Or do they place greater emphasis on their children getting a good education than on learning about the things of God? Would they be embarrassed if their children did not possess the former while basically being indifferent about the latter? If their children have any understanding of Christian faith at all, they probably have acquired it on their own. If the children view themselves as Christians, it is probably not because they have studied the facts and come to a point of intellectual conviction but because their family is Christian, so they believe they must be Christians also.

The problem with this way of thinking is that authentic faith cannot be inherited. When Christianity is viewed in this way, intelligent and energetic young men and women will undoubtedly reach a point where they question the truth of Christianity and, when challenged, will abandon this “inherited” faith that they cannot defend. They might begin to associate with peers who are unbelievers. In this company, they will find

themselves unable to intelligently respond to objections to Christianity with which they are confronted. Had they really known what they believe and why they believe it, these kinds of encounters would not shake their faith one bit.

I fear for the future of authentic faith in our country. We live in a time when the common man in our country is thoroughly influenced by the current climate in which the cultural and educational elite propagates an anti-Christian message. We should take a look at what has happened in France and learn a lesson from it.<sup>1</sup> In that country, Christianity has been successfully attacked and marginalized by these same groups because those who professed belief were unable to defend the faith from attack, even though its attackers' arguments were deeply flawed. We should be alarmed that instruction in authentic faith has been neglected, if not altogether eliminated, in our schools and universities.

Is it any wonder then that the spiritual condition of our country is of little concern to those who don't even educate their own children about true Christianity? Their conduct reflects their absence of concern, not only for the state of Christianity in our own country, but also for the need to communicate the message of Christ to those in other parts of the world who have not heard this truth.

Some might say that one's faith is a private matter and should not be spoken of so publicly. They might assert this in public, but what do they really think in their hearts? The fact is, those who say such things usually don't even have a concern for faith in the privacy of their interior lives. If you could see their hearts, you would find no trace of authentic faith. God has no place among the sources of hopes, fears, joys or sorrows in their lives. They might be thankful for their health, success, wealth and possessions, but they give no thought to the possibility that these are all signs of God's provision. If they do give credit to God, it is usually done in some perfunctory way that reveals that their words have no sincerity.

When their conversations get really serious, you will see how little of their Christianity has anything to do with the faith taught by Jesus. Everything becomes subjective. Their conduct is not measured against the standard set by the gospel. They have developed their own philosophies, which they attempt to pawn off as Christian faith.

The big problem in these cases is the fact that these men and women have arrived at their conclusions apart from any study of the Bible. The Bible sits dusty on the shelf. These people are biblically illiterate. Their knowledge of the Bible is that of a child.

What a difference it would be if our system of morality were based on the Bible instead of the standards devised by cultural Christians. It would be interesting to see the response of men and women who have set their behavior based on the latter when they were confronted with the standard set by God in the former. Some writers of our time have attempted to illuminate this paradox. Even though they have pointed out the lack of substance of superficial religion, they often have dealt with the issue as one of inadequate information without addressing the more serious issue of the danger this inadequate faith presents. These are eternal issues. The stakes are high.

You have to wonder what God thinks about all of this. I previously made the observation that one day we will have to give an account of how we have lived and what we have done with what God has given us. Because God is concerned about these issues, surely He will also hold us accountable for our stewardship of all the potential instruction we might have taken advantage of to learn the truths of authentic faith. I have to wonder what God thinks of our voluntary ignorance of these matters.

Understanding Christianity is not something that comes without effort. Almost every example in the natural world teaches us this principle. The very way we must exert effort to enjoy all the good things God has provided illustrates this lesson. No one expects to reach the heights of success in education, the arts, finance or athletics without a great deal of hard work and perseverance. We often use the expression "You have to really want it!" Growing in our faith requires the same. Christianity is based on a revelation from God that is filled with information that the natural mind could never have imagined. The wealth of this knowledge will never be mastered without diligent effort.

Carefully studying the Bible will reveal to us our own ignorance of these things. It will challenge us to reject a superficial understanding of Christianity and impress on us that it is imperative not to simply be religious or moral, but also to master the Bible intellectually, integrate its principles into our lives morally, and put into action what we have learned practically.

The Bible is one of God's greatest gifts to humanity. It tells us of the greatest gift that men and women have longed for throughout the ages and of which the prophets spoke about for centuries. When Jesus finally came, His arrival was hailed by the angelic host with the exclamation, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). How can you measure the value of the good news of Christ? It is spoken of in the Bible as light in the darkness, freedom from

slavery and life from death. Look at how much the Early Church valued the message. They received it with great joy and overflowing gratitude.

Surely all these things should help us come to terms with the inexpressible value of true faith. The greatest gift of God is often either rejected outright or treated as if it is of little worth. But if we really began to study the Bible, we would be impressed with the proper value of this gift. It seems ludicrous that we have to exhort people to study the Bible. The Bible itself speaks words of challenge to us such as, "Be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet. 3:15). Those who have done so tell us of the immense value of such effort. And yet, though many have the Bible on the shelf in their homes, for most the content of the Book remains a mystery. The result is that in the Christian world in the West, we settle for a cultural version of Christianity that is far from the real thing.

I'm not talking about unbelievers here. I am speaking of those who say they believe the Bible is the Word of God and who claim to have committed their lives to Jesus Christ. They have given in to a nominal faith. They agree with statements such as, "It doesn't matter what you believe; it is how you live that counts" and "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere in your belief." How absurd!

What we believe determines how we live. Men who sincerely believed that what they were doing was right have perpetrated many of the most hideous crimes against humanity. Again, the recent events in France serve as a clear example of this fact. Almost all people believe they are living good and moral lives. Yet they measure their lives against some subjective criteria without realizing that vice is often the product of ignorance or error. Such people often lack the ability to distinguish right from wrong or truth from error.

This is one reason why the diligent study of the Bible is so important. It is here that God has given us the instruction we need to be able to tell right from wrong and truth from error. Without understanding its principles and precepts, we become victims of our own subjectivity. How profitable is subjectivity if our conscience has been seared, our heart hardened, and our mind blinded to all moral distinctions?

An authentic faith requires an honesty of mind, the consistent use of the means of knowledge and instruction, the humility that fosters a desire to be instructed, and an unprejudiced conclusion about what this inquiry reveals. If we approach the study of the Bible this way, God fulfills His promises. If we seek and keep on seeking, we will find; if we ask and keep on asking, we will receive; if we knock and keep on knocking, the door to truth will be opened. How can we refuse an offer like this?

Yet such opportunity is accompanied by responsibility. If we have settled for cultural Christianity and remained ignorant or unresponsive to authentic faith, what kind of justification will we be able to give to God?

### **Note**

1. Wilberforce repeatedly uses France as an example of a sick society. In 1797, when this book was originally written, England was still battling French revolutionary forces that were attempting to conquer Europe. The French Revolution had radically impacted the culture and values of France. Wilberforce uses this as an illustration of what could happen in England.