

The Nature of True Christianity by William Wilberforce

From [*A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of This Country Contrasted With Real Christianity*](#) (1797), p. 126-152.

A very erroneous notion prevails concerning the true nature of religion. Religion . . . may be considered as the implantation of a vigorous and active principle; it is seated in the heart, where its authority is recognized as supreme, whence by degrees it expels whatever is opposed to it, and where it gradually brings all the affections and desires under its complete control.

But though the heart be its special residence, every endeavor and pursuit must acknowledge its presence; and whatever does not, or will not, or cannot receive its sacred stamp, is to be condemned, and is to be at once abstained from or abandoned. . . . But the notion of religion entertained by many among us seems altogether different. They begin, indeed, in submission to her clear prohibitions, by fencing off from the field of human action a certain district, which, though it in many parts bears fruits on which they cast a longing eye, they cannot but confess to be forbidden ground. They next assign to religion a portion according to their circumstances and views, in which however she is to possess merely a qualified jurisdiction, and having so done, they conceive that without hindrance they have a right to range at will over the spacious remainder. Religion can claim only a stated proportion of their thoughts, and time, and fortune, and influence; the rest they think is now their own, to do what they will with; they have paid their tithes; . . . the demands of the Church are satisfied, and they may surely be permitted to enjoy what she has left without molestation or interference.

It is scarcely possible to state too strongly the mischief which results from this fundamental error. At the same time its consequences are so natural and obvious, that one would think it scarcely possible not to foresee that they must infallibly follow. The greatest part of human actions is considered as indifferent. If men are not chargeable with gross vices, and are decent in the discharge of their religious duties; if they do not stray into the forbidden ground, what more can be expected from them? Instead of keeping at a distance from *all sin*, in which alone consists our safety, they will be apt not to care how near they approach what they conceive to be the boundary line; if they have not actually passed it, there is no harm done, it is no trespass. Thus the free and active spirit of religion is checked. She must keep to her prescribed confines, and every attempt to extend them will be resisted.

This is not all. Since whatever can be gained from her allotment, or whatever can be taken in from the forbidden ground, will be so much of addition to that land where men may roam at large, free from restraint or molestation, they will of course be constantly pressing upon the limits of the religious allotment on the one hand, and on the other will be removing back a little farther and farther the fence which abridges them on the side of the forbidden ground. The space she occupies diminishes till it is scarcely discernible; whilst, her spirit extinguished and her force destroyed, she is little more than the nominal possessor even of the contracted limits to which she has been avowedly reduced.

This is but too faithful a representation of the general state of things among ourselves. The promotion of the glory of God, and the possession of his favor, are no longer recognized as the objects of our highest regard, and most strenuous endeavors; as furnishing to us a vigorous, habitual, and universal principle of action. We set up for ourselves: we are become our own masters. The sense of continual service is irksome and galling to us; and we rejoice in being emancipated from it. Thus the very tenure and condition by which life and all

its possessions are held, undergo a total change. Whatever we have is regarded rather, as a property than as a trust: or if there still exists the remembrance of some paramount claim, we are satisfied with an occasional acknowledgment, as of a nominal right. . . .

Accordingly we find . . . that the generality of mankind among the higher order, in the formation of their schemes, in the selection of their studies, in the choice of their place of residence, in the employment and distribution of their time, in their thoughts, conversation and amusements, are considered as being at liberty, if there be no actual vice, to consult their own gratification.

Thus the generous and wakeful spirit of Christian benevolence, seeking and finding everywhere occasions for its exercise, is exploded, and a system of *decent selfishness* is avowedly established in its stead; a system scarcely more to be abjured for its impiety, than to be abhorred for its cold insensibility to the opportunities of diffusing happiness. . . . "Surely we may be allowed to take our pleasure. We neglect no duty, we live in no vice, we do nobody any harm, and have a right to amuse ourselves. We have nothing better to do." . . .

But no man has a right to be idle. Not to speak of that great work which we all have to accomplish, and surely the whole attention of a short and precarious life is not more than an eternal interest may well require; where is it 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? . . .

Yet thus life rolls away with too many of us, in a course of "shapeless idleness." Its recreations constitute its chief business. . . . There is often a kind of sober settled plan of domestic dissipation, in which, with all imaginable decency, year after year wears away in unprofitable vacancy. Even old age often finds us pacing in the same round of amusements which our early youth had tracked out. Meanwhile, being conscious that we are not giving in to any flagrant vice, . . . we persuade ourselves that we need not be uneasy. . . . [We] glide down the stream without apprehension of the consequences. . . .

Christianity calls her professors to a state of diligent watchfulness and active services. But the persons of whom we are now speaking, forgetting alike the duties they owe to themselves and to their fellow creatures, often act as though their condition were meant to be a state of uniform indulgence and vacant, unprofitable sloth. To multiply the comforts of affluence, to provide for the gratification of appetite, . . . seems the chief study of their lives. . . .

As there is a sober sensuality, so is there also a sober avarice, and a sober ambition. The commercial and the professional world compose the chief sphere of their influence. . . . The seducing considerations of diligence in our callings, of success in our profession, of making handsome provisions for our children, beguile our better judgments. "We rise early, and late take rest, and eat the bread of carefulness." In our few intervals of leisure, our exhausted spirits require refreshment; the serious concerns of our immortal souls are matters of speculation too grave and gloomy to answer the purpose, and we fly to something that may better deserve the name of relaxation, till we are again summoned to the daily labors of our employment.

Meanwhile religion scarcely occurs to our thoughts; and when some secret misgivings begin to be felt on this head, company

soon drowns, amusements dissipate, or habitual occupations insensibly displace or smother the rising apprehension. Professional and commercial men often quiet their consciences by the plea, that their business leaves them no time to think on these serious subjects at present. . . . Thus business and pleasure fill up our time, and the "one thing needful" is forgotten. Respected by others, and secretly applauding ourselves, perhaps congratulating ourselves that we are not like such a one who is a spendthrift or a mere man of pleasure, or such another who is a notorious miser, the true principle of action is no less wanting in us, and personal advancement or the acquisition of wealth is the object of our supreme desires and predominant pursuit. . . .

The politician, . . . the scholar, the poet, the virtuoso, the man of taste, . . . in like manner are often completely engrossed by their several pursuits. . . . These men are ardent, active, laborious, persevering, and they think, and speak, and act, as those the whole happiness of whose life turns on the success or failure of their endeavors. . . . Let these have their due place in the estimation of mankind; but this must not be the highest place. Let them know their just subordination. They deserve not to be the primary concern, for there is another, to which in importance they bear no more proportion than our span of existence to eternity.

Thus the supreme desires of the heart are permitted without control to take that course, whatever it may be, which best suits our natural temper, or to which they are impelled by our various situations and circumstances. "Know thyself," is in truth an injunction with which the careless and the indolent cannot comply. For this compliance, it is requisite, in obedience to the Scripture precept, "to keep the heart with all diligence." Mankind are in general deplorably ignorant of their true state; and there are few who have any adequate conception of the real strength of the ties by which they are bound to the several objects of their attachment, or who are aware how small a share of their regard is possessed by those concerns on which it ought to be supremely fixed.

But God requires to set up his throne in the heart, and to reign in it without a rival: if he be kept out of his right, it matters not by what competitor. The revolt may be more avowed or more secret; it may be the treason of deliberate preference, or of inconsiderate levity; we may be the subjects of a more or of a less creditable master; we may be employed in services more gross or more refined; but whether the slaves of avarice, of sensuality, of dissipation, of sloth, or the votaries of ambition, of taste, or of fashion; whether supremely governed by vanity and self-love, by the desire of literary fame or of military glory, we are alike estranged from the dominion of our rightful Sovereign. Let not this seem a harsh position; it can appear so only from not adverting to what was shown to be the essential nature of true religion. He who bowed the knee to the god of medicine or of eloquence, was no less an idolater than the worshiper of the deified patrons of lewdness or of theft. In the several cases which have been specified, the external acts indeed are different, but in *principle* the disaffection is the same; and we must prepare to meet the punishment of rebels on that tremendous day, when all false colors shall be done away, and, there being no longer any room for the evasions of worldly sophistry, . . . "that which is often highly esteemed amongst men, shall appear to have been abomination in the sight of God."

These fundamental truths seem vanished from the mind, and it follows of course, that every thing is viewed less and less through a religious medium. To speak no longer of instances wherein we ourselves are concerned, what are the judgments which men form in the case of others? Idleness, profusion, thoughtlessness, and dissipation, the misapplication of time or

of talents, the trifling away of life in frivolous occupations or unprofitable studies; all these things we may regret in those around us, in the view of their temporal effects; but they are not considered in a religious connexion, or lamented as endangering everlasting happiness. Excessive vanity and inordinate ambition are spoken of as weaknesses rather than as sins. . . . The truth is, we have no solicitude about his spiritual interest. Here he is treated like the unfortunate traveler in the Gospel; we look upon him; we see but too well his sad condition, but . . . we pass by on the other side, and leave him to the officious tenderness of some poor despised Samaritan. . . .

Such are the fatal and widely spreading effects which follow from . . . not considering religion as a principle of universal application and command. . . .

But when the law, both in its spirit and its letter, is obstinate and incorrigible, what we cannot bend to our purpose we must break. Hear excuses of this nature: "Our sins, we hope, are of the smaller order: a little harmless gallantry, a little innocent jollity, a few foolish expletives which we use from the mere force of habit, meaning nothing by them; a little warmth of coloring and license of expression; a few freedoms of speech in the gayety of our hearts, which, though not perhaps strictly correct, none but the over-rigid would think of treating any otherwise than as venial infirmities. . . . We serve an all-merciful Being, who knows the frailty of our nature, the number and strength of our temptations, and will not be extreme to mark what is done amiss. . . . All men are imperfect. We own we have our infirmities; we confess it is so; we wish we were better, and trust, as we grow older, we shall become so; we are ready to acknowledge that we must be indebted for our admission into a future state of happiness, not to our own merit, but to the clemency of God, and the mercy of our Redeemer."

But let not this language be mistaken for that of true Christian humiliation, of which it is the very essence to feel the burden of sin, and to long to be released from it: nor let two things be confounded, than which none can be more fundamentally different—the allowed want of universality in our determination and our endeavor to obey the will of God, and that defective accomplishment of our purposes, which even the best of men will too often find reason to deplore. In the persons of whom we now have been speaking, the unconcern with which they can amuse themselves upon the borders of sin, and the easy familiarity with which they can actually dally with it in its less offensive shapes, show plainly that, distinctly from its consequences, it is by no means the object of their aversion; that there is no love of holiness as such; no endeavor to acquire it, no care to prepare the soul for the reception of this divine principle, and to expel or keep under whatever might be likely to obstruct its entrance, or dispute its sovereignty.

It is indeed a most lamentable consequence of the practice of regarding religion as a compilation of statutes, and not as an internal principle, that it soon comes to be considered as being conversant about external actions, rather than about habits of mind. This sentiment sometimes has even the hardness to insinuate and maintain itself under the guise of extraordinary concern for practical religion; but it soon discovers the falsehood of this pretension, and betrays its real nature. The expedient indeed of attaining to superiority in practice, by not wasting any of the attention on the internal principles from which alone practice can flow, is about as reasonable, and will answer about as well, as the economy of the architect who should account it mere prodigality to expend any of his materials in laying foundations, from an idea that they might be more usefully applied to the raising of the superstructure. We know what would be the fate of such an edifice.

It is indeed true, and a truth never to be forgotten, that all pretensions to internal principles of holiness are vain, when they are contradicted by the conduct; but it is no less true, that the only effectual way of improving the latter, is by a vigilant attention to the former. It was therefore our blessed Savior's injunction, "Make the tree good" as the necessary means of obtaining good fruit; and the holy Scriptures abound in admonitions, to let it be our chief business to cultivate our hearts with all diligence, to examine into their state with impartiality, and watch over them with continual care. Indeed it is the heart which constitutes the man; and external actions derive their whole character and meaning from the motives and dispositions of which they are the indications. . . .

Yet though this be a truth so obvious, so established, that to have insisted on it may seem almost needless; it is a truth of which we are apt to lose sight in the review of our religious character, and with which the habit of considering religion as consisting rather in external actions than internal principles, is at direct and open war. . . .

Some of the most important branches of the Christian temper, wherein the bulk of nominal Christians appear eminently and allowedly defective, have been already noticed in this and in the preceding chapter. Many others still remain to be particularized.

First, then, it is the comprehensive compendium of the character of true Christians, that "they are walking by faith, and not by sight." By this description is meant, not merely that they so firmly believe in the doctrine of future rewards and punishments, as to be influenced by that persuasion to adhere in the main to the path of duty, . . . but farther, that the great truths revealed in Scripture concerning the unseen world, are the ideas for the most part uppermost in their thoughts, and about which habitually their hearts are most interested. This state of mind contributes . . . to rectify the illusions of vision, to bring forward into nearer view those eternal things which, from their remoteness, are apt to be either wholly overlooked, or to appear but faintly in the utmost bounds of the horizon; and to remove backward, and reduce to their true comparative dimensions, the objects of the present life, which are apt to fill the human eye, assuming a false magnitude from their vicinity. The true Christian knows from experience, however, that the former are apt to fade from the sight, and the latter again to swell on it. . . . Not that he will retire from that station in the world which Providence seems to have appointed him to fill: he will be active in the business of life, and enjoy its comforts with moderation and thankfulness; but he will not give up his whole soul to them, they will be habitually subordinate in his estimation to objects of more importance. The awful truth has sunk deep into his mind, "the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." and in the tumult and bustle of life, he is sobered by the still small voice which whispers to him, "The fashion of this world passes away." This circumstance alone must, it is obvious, constitute a vast difference between the habitual temper of his mind, and that of the generality of nominal Christians, who are almost entirely taken up with the concerns of the present world. They *know* in deed that they are mortal, but they do not *feel* it. The truth rests in their understandings, and cannot gain admission into their hearts. This speculative persuasion is altogether different from that strong *practical* impression of the infinite importance of eternal things, which, attended with a proportionate sense of the shortness and uncertainty of all below, while it prompts to activity from a conviction that "the night cometh when no man can work," produces a certain firmness of texture, which hardens us against the buffets of fortune, and prevents our being very deeply penetrated by the cares and interests, the goods or evils of this transitory state. Thus this just impression of the relative value of temporal and

eternal things maintains in the soul a dignified composure through all the vicissitudes of life. It quickens our diligence, yet moderates our ardor; urges us to just pursuits, yet checks any undue solicitude about the success of them, and thereby enables us, in the language of Scripture, "to use this world as not abusing it," rendering us at once beneficial to others and comfortable to ourselves.

But this is not all: . . . nominal and the real Christian [differ not only in] the impressions produced on them respectively by the eternal duration of heavenly things [but also in their love of God's law.] . . . The true Christian . . . walks in the ways of religion, not by constraint, but willingly; they are to him not only safe, but comfortable; "ways of pleasantness as well as of peace." Not but that here also he is, from experience, aware of the necessity of constant support, and continual watchfulness; without these, his old estimate of things is apt to return on him, and the former objects of his affections to resume their influence. With earnest prayers, therefore, for the Divine help, with jealous circumspection and resolute self-denial he guards against, and abstains from whatever might be likely again to darken his enlightened judgment or to vitiate his reformed taste; thus making it his unwearied endeavor to grow in the knowledge and love of heavenly things, and to obtain a warmer admiration and a more cordial relish of their excellence. . . .

Let us appeal to the day especially devoted to the offices of religion: . . . Is the day cheerfully devoted to those holy exercises for which it was appointed? Do they indeed "come into the courts of God with gladness?" And how are they employed when not engaged in the public services of the day? Are they busied in studying the word of God, in meditating on his perfection, in tracing his providential dispensations, in admiring his works, in revolving his mercies—above all, the transcendent mercies of redeeming love—in singing his praises, "and speaking good of his name?" Do their secret retirements witness te earnestness of their prayers and the warmth of their thanksgivings, their diligence and impartiality in the necessary work of self-examination, their mindfulness of the benevolent duty of intercession? . . . Does the instruction of their families, or of the more poor and ignorant of their neighbors, possess its due share of their time? If blessed with talents or with affluence, are they sedulously employing a part of this interval of leisure in relieving the indigent, visiting the sick, and comforting the sorrowful—in forming plans for the good of their fellow-creatures, in considering how they may promote both the temporal and spiritual benefit of their friends and acquaintance; or if theirs is a larger sphere, in devising measures whereby, through the Divine blessing, they may become the honored instruments of the more extended diffusion of religious truth? In the hours of domestic or social intercourse, does their conversation manifest the subject of which their hearts are full? Do their language and demeanor show them to be more than commonly gentle, and kind, and friendly, free from rough and irritating passions?

Surely an entire day should not seem long amidst these various employments. It might well be deemed a privilege thus to spend it in the more immediate presence of our heavenly Father, in the exercises of humble admiration and grateful homage—of the benevolent, and domestic, and social feelings, and of all the best affections of our nature, prompted by their true motives, conversant about their proper objects, and directed to their noblest end; all sorrows mitigated, all cares suspended, all fears repressed, every angry emotion softened, every envious, or revengeful, or malignant passion expelled; and the bosom thus quieted, purified, enlarged, ennobled, partaking almost of a measure of the heavenly happiness, and become for a while the seat of love, and joy, and confidence, and harmony.