

'SONS OF THE PROPHETS':  
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN CLAPHAM EVANGELICALISM

Raymond E Heslehurst

B.D. (Lon), M.Th. (ACT), Dip. A.(Th.) (MTC)

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My hope is the work may be *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*.

## Abstract

In 1785–1786 William Wilberforce recorded that he underwent ‘the great change’. This particular *experience* and his interpretation of it radically affected the way he lived the rest of his life and his expectations for his children. In 1795, Henry Thornton undertook a radical reassessment of his manner of life. In 1796 James Stephen joined Wilberforce and Thornton living around Clapham Common. All three identified as Evangelicals and were so identified by those around them, and, along with the other members of the ‘Clapham Sect’, were engaged in the ‘Public Square’.

Of their children, Robert Isaac Wilberforce, Samuel Wilberforce and Sir James Stephen were, like their fathers, engaged in the Public Square. Each adopted a different Faith profile to the Evangelicalism of their parents: becoming Roman Catholic, High Church Anglican, or holding a piety like their fathers’; but adopting a position theologically significantly different to that of members of the Clapham Sect.

Others have looked at familial factors to explain this transition from the first to the second generation, but since all the subjects of this research were ‘Public Christians’, this thesis seeks an explanation for the change in Faith position in the interaction of religious experience and public culture. It will demonstrate that while valuing highly the parents’ theological position and while maintaining many of the values of their parents, the questions and circumstances of their experience and world required a significantly different Faith profile if they were to make the public contribution they desired.

The issue of religious *experience* was critical to the self-understanding of the Clapham Evangelicals and they absolutised theirs as the only 'true Christian' mode. The parents desired the same experience for their children but the *narrative* they used to describe it did not resonate fully with the experience of the children. Further, we will show, that the shape of the Faith, taken up in any generation, will be especially responsive to the questions of that generation if one is active in public life.

In this thesis, then, two original propositions are advanced: (1) that the Clapham worthies should be understood, not only in the narrow confines of evangelical historiography, but in the broader social and cultural history of the Hanoverian Church and (2) that, while the Clapham fathers failed to pass on the spiritual experience so prized by Evangelicals, they did pass on the capacity to thrive in the new world of Victorian religious, civic and political life as Christians.

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I certify that this thesis entitled

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and submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis (or any part of the same) has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other institution.

Signed\_\_\_\_\_

Raymond Errol Heslehurst

Date 1 April 2013

## **Introduction: Social Continuity and Religious Change**

The history of the families of the Clapham Evangelicals of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries opens a window on what was taking place, not only in the evangelical world, but in the entire religious world of late Hanoverian England. The members of the Clapham Sect and their children together constitute a case study of what was going on in the Church as a whole, especially in its civic role, so integral to the State Establishment. For the purposes of this study, evangelicalism will not be studied in isolation, nor will the Church be abstracted from the society of which it was an integral part. As Noel Annan has written, these families, among others, provided the intellectual aristocracy of England in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>1</sup> Among the descendants of the Clapham Sect were bishops, lawyers, jurists, academics, colonial administrators, writers, painters, and female doctors, to name but a few. These were notable public citizens both in the United Kingdom and its colonies and dominions. Yet few of these descendants maintained the form, theology or style of the Clapham faith. There were exceptions such as Marianne Thornton, Sir George Stephen and the descendants of John Venn whose continued adherence to the Evangelical mode can be accounted for by the fact that they did not function predominantly in the Public Space.<sup>2</sup> But this thesis is devoted to exploring

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Gilroy Annan, *The dons : mentors, eccentrics and geniuses* (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Sir George Stephen, like Sir James Stephen Bart., continued the work of his father in the anti-slavery campaign. He was knighted for this work. Unlike his brother, Sir George did not engage in the complex world of imperial administration, but after the end of the anti-slavery fight and a variety of failed enterprises emigrated to the Colony of Victoria and became embroiled in the colonial context especially in the area of

the discontinuities between the original members of the Clapham Sect and their descendants. Only when that is done will it be possible to identify what the Clapham Evangelicals bequeathed to their children and what they failed to pass down. The six principal subjects of this thesis are, in the first generation, William Wilberforce, Henry Thornton and James Stephen, and in the second, Robert Isaac Wilberforce, Samuel Wilberforce and Sir James Stephen.

It will be contended here that there was in evangelicalism a fundamental *expectation* (theological in nature) which resulted in a pedagogy which compelled the scions of these religious households to develop a faith position different from that of their parents, yet intellectually connected with the history of the church and robustly able to face the issues of their day. In the strong intellectual context of Clapham, the children of Evangelicals implicitly developed the conviction that they must search for a personally identifiable faith position different to that of their fathers. While the parents explicitly impressed upon their children their longing that they would experience the same 'conversion' experience as they themselves had, as essential to the claim to be truly Christian, they implicitly communicated to their children their responsibility for reflecting on the 'great matter' for themselves. This opened an option for their children to come to different conclusions, and many of them did. They

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education.<sup>2</sup> The questions raised and the religious environment were very different as can be seen in Sir George's booklet on the fear of hell. George Stephen, Sir, 'A memoir of the late James Stephen : one of the masters in the High Court of Chancery, in relation to slave emancipation. by his son, Sir George Stephen.' George Stephen, Sir, *Heaven or Hell* (Melbourne: A.J. Smith, [187-?]) [This is the way it appears in the National Library of Australia catalogue].

commonly came to a 'faith position' which was different both from that which their parents desired for them and which most evangelicals understood as normative. Yet the attitudes they imbibed from their parents fashioned Victorian England, not only in the area of religion, which, while bigger than evangelicalism, was strongly fashioned by it.

#### THE FUNDAMENTAL PROPOSITIONS OF THIS THESIS

For the purpose of this thesis the first critical question is what was the shape or distinctive character of the 'evangelicalism' of our primary subjects: the Clapham 'Saints'? The second is, what aspects of faith and values, what traits of character and intellect were transferred to the children which enabled them to live the life of a public Christian in their own generation? Thirdly, what desires or values of the parents were abandoned or radically modified to enable the children to fulfil their public role with personal integrity?

In the process of addressing these questions, I argue two original propositions. The first is that the Clapham worthies need to be understood in the broader context of Hanoverian social and cultural history rather than through the narrow lens of the more pietistic examples of evangelical historiography. The second proposition is that, while it might be concluded that the Clapham fathers failed to pass on the 'one thing needful'<sup>3</sup> (conversion experience), they did inculcate the skills – political, social and

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:42.

religious - which enabled them to succeed conspicuously in the Victorian age.

#### EVANGELICALISM DEFINED

A reviewer of Piggin's book on Australian evangelicals<sup>4</sup> mauled him for including certain types of charismatic persons and for asserting a particular pneumatology as characteristics of the people who may also be called 'evangelical'.<sup>5</sup> The detailed use of the term has been fluid over the centuries. Francis of Assisi is described as one who is living the evangelical life, the life of the Gospel. Francis X Russo wrote:

Francis was evangelical to the core, and because he wanted his friars to share that same loving obedience to the Gospel that he had, he began his Rule (1223) for them with these words: "The Rule and life of the Friars Minor is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus..."<sup>6</sup>

Further, in *The Victorian Church* Chadwick almost exclusively uses the term to refer to a certain group of people in the Established Church of England. I have found only one reference by him to its use with reference

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart Piggin, *Evangelical Christianity in Australia* (Melbourne: OUP, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Phillip Jensen, 'A New Vision of Evangelical History,' *The Briefing*, vol. 178, 1996, pp. 3-10; for Piggin's response, see 'An Old New Vision of Evangelical History: Stuart Piggin replies to Phillip Jensen,' *The Briefing*, vol. 181, 1996, pp. 6-9.

<sup>6</sup> Francis X Russo, <http://vivificat1.blogspot.com.au/2007/07/st-francis-of-assisi-evangelical.html>. He is a Member of the Capuchin Friars Minor (established in 1525) and thus very familiar with the Franciscan rule. The order describes itself as 'an evangelical brotherhood'.  
[http://www.ofmcap.org/pls/ofmcap/V3\\_S2EW\\_CONSULTAZIONE.mostra\\_pagina?id\\_pagina=1236&rifi=guest&rifp=guest](http://www.ofmcap.org/pls/ofmcap/V3_S2EW_CONSULTAZIONE.mostra_pagina?id_pagina=1236&rifi=guest&rifp=guest).

to Dissenters.<sup>7</sup> The matter is complicated when one sees that those commonly referred to as evangelicals in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century really represent a variety of theological, experiential and epistemological shapes.<sup>8</sup>

Yet evangelicalism is not so inchoate as to defy definition. Historically It is a recognisable movement, and historiographically its definition, especially recently, has received enough precision to be of use for the purposes of analysing the main characters in this thesis. Mark Noll, the American historian of evangelicalism, has defined it as 'culturally adaptive biblical experientialism'.<sup>9</sup> This thesis will highlight how successfully the Clapham Sect adapted to late Georgian and early Victorian English culture. For all its reputed individualism, it remained remarkably engaged with English society, and for all its maligned narrowness<sup>10</sup> and want of ecclesiastical sophistication, it remained passionately wedded to the welfare of the

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<sup>7</sup> Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian church*, 2 vols. (3rd. edn., Ecclesiastical history of England ; 7-8; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971): A number of other authors also rarely identify Dissenters as evangelicals. Grayson Carter, *Anglican evangelicals : Protestant secessions from the via media, c. 1800-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p xiv, Nigel Scotland, *Evangelical Anglicans in a revolutionary age 1789-1901* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 2004), Gerald R. Cragg, *The church and the age of reason 1648-1789* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977) p 154.

<sup>8</sup> In this thesis, when capitalized the word 'Evangelical' refers to those in the Established Church. Lower case 'evangelical' refers to the movement generally.

<sup>9</sup> Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, p 2. See also Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism : The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys, A History of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp 47-50.

<sup>10</sup> Individualism and narrowness as features of evangelicalism were highlighted in the early studies of evangelicalism, favourably in the case of G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* ([S.l.]: Longmans, 1908) and critically in the case of Leonard Elliott Binns, *The Evangelical Movement in the English Church* ([S.l.]: Methuen, 1928). Evangelical historiography was enriched by the remarkable scholarship of John Walsh in Jesus College, Oxford and W.R. (Reg) Ward at Durham, both of whom focussed on the Methodist strain of evangelicalism. Studies of evangelicalism became a flood, especially in the English-speaking world, following the publication in 1989 of Bebbington's study of English evangelicalism (as discussed below).

Established Church, serving as a conduit from its Hanoverian past to its Victorian future. Most historians of evangelicalism have been concerned to demonstrate its distinctiveness, but this thesis rather emphasises its congruity with its socio-cultural context: hence the treatment of the Hanoverian background to the Clapham Sect in Chapter 3.

'Biblical experientialism' is probably as useful a characterisation of evangelicalism as may be found in the literature, and it certainly fits the members of the Clapham Sect. A major theme of this thesis will be the Clapham fathers' understanding of their own religious experience, their commitment to interpreting it biblically (chapters 1 and 2), and their concern to communicate it to their children (chapter 4). Through analysis of this concern this thesis seeks to explain the nature of the legacy which the Clapham fathers left to their sons, namely religious ambiguity and public competency.

The now most commonly accepted characterisation of evangelicalism is that advanced by David Bebbington, and his analysis has been found useful particularly in the exploration of religious experience which is a core concern of this thesis.

#### THE BEBBINGTON MODEL

In his book, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s*,<sup>11</sup> Bebbington gives us a definition of evangelicalism which includes four characteristics which have been widely used. The

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<sup>11</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain : a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).



characteristics are known, commonly, as his 'Quadrilateral': Biblicism, Crucicentrism, Conversionism and Activism. This model is one which has become the canon for 'evangelicalism' in modern discussion of evangelical history.<sup>12</sup>

Not all of the elements of the Bebbington Quadrilateral seem to apply equally to the main subjects of this thesis. For example, as we shall argue in Chapter 2, only one of our three subjects, William Wilberforce, appears to have had a 'classic crisis conversion'. By 'conversion' we understand a radical reorientation of the heart and mind of the subject from one religious position to another. This re-orientation becomes the guiding principle of life for the subject. It may occur suddenly or over an observable time period. The underlying question for us will be: conversion from what to what?<sup>13</sup>

Of the other two primary subjects, Henry Thornton, in a memoir which will be examined in Chapter 2, had an extended reassessment (over a year) and a realignment of his self-perception. James Stephen clearly held in his mature years an Evangelical theology as his grandson, Leslie Stephen, has

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Haykin and Kenneth Stewart (eds), *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008); Stuart Piggin, "'Preaching the New Birth and the Power of Godliness and not insisting so much on the Form": Recent studies of (mainly English) Evangelicalism,' *Journal of Religious History*, 33.3, September 2009, pp 366-76.

<sup>13</sup> There are a number of ways that 'conversion' can be assessed. We will have recourse in Chapter Two to look at some of these as we examine the *experience* of Wilberforce, Thornton and Stephen. One mode, which will not be tackled in this thesis but will be mentioned in the concluding chapter, is 'theological analysis'. This area has received some serious reassessment over the last 50 years by theologians and Biblical exegetes and in any final assessments of the interconnection of generation would be valuable to pursue. The question of 'taking at face value' the subject's description will be assessed in Chapter Two. This project started as a multi-disciplinary activity but has been confined, on advice, to predominantly a history exercise. In the final section we will suggest areas in which there needs to be a dialogue between the historian and the theologian.

written.<sup>14</sup> Both Thornton and Stephen, by their self-description, can be represented by the remaining three 'quarters' of Bebbington's model. Given the wide use of this model, we will use it, but will suggest in the final chapter of the thesis a modification based upon our research into the two generations. To anticipate my conclusions, amongst the Clapham Fathers a clear, personal conversion experience is not a common feature, and that, in the second generation, a shift from a crucicentric to a Christocentric emphasis is found.

In Chapter 1 we will examine the nature and shape of the 'Clapham Faith'. This will be done by using William Wilberforce's book *A Practical View* which he published in 1797. This book sold 7,500 copies in six months. It went through 15 editions in the United Kingdom and 25 in the United States in his lifetime as well as being translated in to many languages. There were critical reviews but also strong support, even from the dying Edmund Burke.<sup>15</sup>

We will see that the expectation of 'conversion' was central to both the evangelical milieu of our primary subject but also explicitly expressed as mandatory by the acknowledged doyen of Clapham, William Wilberforce. As we progress we will see that his own story and the environment in which the children of Clapham grew and adopted a different form of Christian faith will challenge this demand.

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<sup>14</sup> Leslie Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen Bart., K.C.S.I. A Judge of the High Court of Justice* (1st edn.; London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1895).

<sup>15</sup> William Hague, *William Wilberforce : the life of the great anti-slave trade campaigner* (London: HarperPress, 2007) p 268 - 271

Of those children and grandchildren of the Clapham Sect who grew up in an Evangelical environment and, by the end of their life, had adopted another faith position, Stephen Tompkins in *The Clapham Sect* wrote:

The irony is that, as the faith of the Clapham Sect won the nation, it lost many of their own children. Samuel Wilberforce was a high Church Bishop. His three brothers converted to Roman Catholicism. Henry was a close friend of John Henry Newman. Tom Macaulay grew sceptical of the evangelicals' literal faith in the Bible and rejected the renunciation of pleasure. Henry Sykes Thornton shocked Evangelical Biblical propriety by marrying Emily Delantray, the daughter of the Rector of Clapham who was, unfortunately, his dead wife's sister; it was illegal in Britain and, having failed to get the law changed, they married abroad.<sup>16</sup>

It is the seeking to understand the reason or reasons which led to this change in theological allegiance with which this thesis is engaged. It will be contended that such was the nature of Clapham Evangelicalism that it could not, by its very nature, be transferred to another generation. It called upon people to experience the faith in a certain way.

#### THE 'CONVERSION EXPERIENCE' OF OUR PRIMARY SUBJECTS

Chapter 2 deals with the experience of Thornton, Wilberforce and Stephen which led to their adoption of what Wilberforce would later call 'vital religion'. It will be argued that the nature of the interpretation of our

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Tompkins and Clapham Society (Clapham London England), *Clapham Sect : How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain* (Oxford: Lion, 2010).

subjects concerning their experiences, like all conversion narratives, is determined by their prior religious experience and the theological narrative in which their 'conversion' takes place. It will also be argued that their description of their experience is a narrative created and modified by the subjects' developing theological knowledge and environment. For example, the oscillating doctrine of the Holy Spirit, (the idea that the Holy Spirit comes and goes from the Christian depending on the rightness of their behaviour) which will be explored in Chapter 1, may be seen, in the case of William Wilberforce, to be a result of his own life experience. He did not 'invent' this position for it is seen in the contemporary hymnody of the Evangelical world in which he moved. This issue of environment is critical to the religious position one must adopt.

#### THE DESIRED TRADITION

In this thesis the expectations and desires of the Clapham Sect members for their children will be explored. It will be seen that Bebbington's quadrilateral (Conversionism, Biblicism, Crucicentrism and Activism) is reflected in their desire and that 'conversion' is central. It was a particularly described *experience* that the Clapham fathers wished for their offspring. Yet an *experience* cannot be 'handed on', that is, made an inheritable Tradition. Although a description of an experience may be a Tradition, the experience *itself* is not. When a person speaks of an 'experience' we are hearing a narrative of their experience which is meant to make sense primarily to the subject of the experience. It will be conditioned, to make the point again, by our primary subjects' prior

religious experience and the theological environment in which the experience occurred and in which it was being narrated.

The demand for the repetition of a particularly described experience may, or may not, be consistent with the needs of the children and their self-perceived world. Such a description may, or may not, provide the self-narrative for the children of Clapham. It may, or may not, assist a particular generation to respond to the theological, moral and spiritual questions of their own generation in a way which ensures a satisfactory personal perception of the Christian Faith. Clapham Evangelicalism had to be radically rearranged, truncated and expanded, and reshaped in fundamental ways, to allow the sons of Clapham to operate consistently with the values, principles and traits they had inherited from their fathers.

#### A DIFFERENT FAITH FOR DIFFERENT TIMES?

The world in which the children grew up was significantly different to that of their parents. In an accelerated way things were changing. The middle class was beginning to set the social agenda. The flowering of evidenced-based sciences in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, begun in the previous century with the work of geologists such as Hutton and Buffon<sup>17</sup>, biologists such as Erasmus Darwin<sup>18</sup>, and the higher criticism in biblical studies coming from the Germans<sup>19</sup>, seemed radically to challenge a simple 'biblicism'. The

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick Wyse Jackson, *The chronologers' quest : episodes in the search for the age of the earth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Erasmus Darwin (12 December 1731 – 18 April 1802 Desmond King-Hele, 'The 1997 Wilkins Lecture: Erasmus Darwin, the Lunatics and Evolution' *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Jan., 1998), pp. 153- 180

<sup>19</sup> The work of such scholars as Jean Astruc (mid-18th century), Johann Salomo Semler

political shifts engendered by the American War of Independence, the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, the shift in capital and the rising demands of the middle class 'Dissenters' for a role in the government of the nation raised issues of church/state relationships which the members of the Clapham Sect did not have to face as fully as their heirs.

As well as these public factors, the religious experience of the children was significantly different from that of their parents. While Henry Thornton was raised in an Evangelical family and Wilberforce had an early 'experience' of evangelical life, the children of Clapham were surrounded from birth with a positive Evangelical and Established 'Christian milieu' tolerant of Dissent. It was also an intellectually stimulating environment. It was an environment in which they heard and saw their parents seeking to be 'Public Christians' and people whose integrity was captive to their faith. As Tolley<sup>20</sup> has shown, they had a positive and loving relationship with their parents. The Clapham Sect was committed to the Establishment and the Constitution not effectively challenged until the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

There is evidence of the increasing narrowing of evangelicalism in the nineteenth century generated by both political and theological changes.

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(1725–91), Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827), Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) and Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) is representative of the approach. This literary approach challenged fundamental understandings of the Christian Tradition. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, Part 1, pp 528 – 539; S J De Vries, 'Biblical Criticism, History of', *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Ed. George Arthur Buttrick, et al, Abingdon, Nashville 1980, Vol 1, pp 413 –418

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Tolley, *Domestic biography : the legacy of evangelicalism in four nineteenth-century families* (Oxford historical monographs; Oxford [England], New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1997).

The Clapham fathers, raised in the eighteenth-century world, did not have to deal directly with these changes. But their children, in civic roles similar to their parents, were compelled to seek answers for which the private piety of Clapham was insufficient. Yet the characteristics of integrity, intellectual rigor and an understanding of divine oversight, inculcated by their parents, provided the necessary starting point. Central to these were a fresh analysis of Establishment and Constitution.

The children were given the best education their parents could obtain, and encouraged to make the most of their studies, so as not to make the mistakes in this area that their parents perceived that they and their grandparents had made.

In the new environment of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century it would be the traits of intellect, service and integrity which were instilled into the sons by their fathers' words and deeds, which would require them to develop a piety and theology different to that of their parents. Yet, at least in one of the streams of development, the piety of their parents, engendered by their 'conversion narrative', would be given an 'established' form, (in the Oxford Movement) and be the partial cause of drawing the sons to the very society which the fathers reprobated. William Wilberforce saw Roman Catholicism as a serious danger to the spiritual life of people, but three of his sons, William, Robert and Henry became, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Roman Catholics.

The value the fathers placed in the 'Establishment and Constitution' would become a challenge to the sons when the Constitution, changing as it was

in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, came into collision with the Establishment. The roles occupied by Robert and Samuel Wilberforce and the different, but equally intense, roles undertaken by Sir James Stephen, raised real issues for these three. In the first place the Wilberforce brothers were confronted by the profound question of who had the competence to determine the Faith of the Established Church of England. This raises issues of the Royal Supremacy, as well as their own integrity concerned with their ordination oaths. In the case of Sir James the questions were similar, Royal Supremacy and Establishment, but the political frameworks of the various colonial societies were not as simple. For a start, in England the Monarch was "Supreme Governor of the Church of England", whereas in Great Britain this was not true of the 'Established' Church in Scotland. Thus the question of whether English or British polity prevailed was Sir James' issue.

#### SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION?

This thesis seeks to address three questions. Did the fathers fail their sons by not managing to get them to believe in exactly the same way as they did? Did they, nevertheless, give them the tools to apply the gospel as effectively to the civic sphere in their world as the fathers did in theirs? And what of theology which apparently changes depending on the socio-cultural context? To the first question this thesis will answer, no. There may have been a perceived failure by the parents, but the majority of the children remained within the Christian Faith and even buttressed its influence for the following generations. To the second the answer will be,



yes. The core values of the parents, integrity, intellectual honesty, an evidential epistemology and a commitment not only to their own soul's health, but to the true welfare of society, allowed and encouraged the children's actions. The third question will need a much more nuanced response which our examination of the comparison between the narratives of the 'evangelical experience' of the fathers and the narratives of the children's faith position will give light.

#### THESIS

It is this change in experience and circumstance, familial, intellectual and social, that meant that the sons of Clapham, from within an Evangelical framework, were unable to face the questions of their day, raised in and by both the Academy and the political shifts of the period. They were unable to express their core personal identifications as Christians in an 'Evangelical' mode. Yet it is also clear that these same children inherited from the parents certain strong intellectual and moral positions and these only exacerbated their inability to adopt their parents' 'faith position'.

Success and failure in passing on their faith to their children probably meant as much, in their way, to the Clapham sect as the more public achievements. Both were commissions of God, and the purpose of their lives. Either way they seem to

have enjoyed the profound affection and gratitude of their sons and daughters.<sup>21</sup>

## THESIS OUTLINE

We shall proceed to examine the issues outlined above by (Chapter 1) first seeking to establish just what was the nature of Clapham Evangelicalism. We shall then (Chapter 2) go on to examine the experience of three of the leading members of the Sect which resulted in their own adoption of 'vital Christianity'. We shall seek (Chapter 3) to examine how the social and religious environment in which this 'adoption' took place and how it may have affected the choices of our subjects. Then (Chapter 4) we shall examine what the fathers sought for their children, followed (Chapter 5) by an analysis of the children's own mature faith positions. In Chapter 6 we will seek to identify the factors which made the parental expectations unsatisfactory for the children's era. An analysis of the Gorham case will commence this chapter since it provided the specific trigger to the conflict of Establishment and Constitution. Finally, (Conclusion, Inheritance and Trajectories) we shall seek to draw together the threads of the material so as to indicate the relative relationships of faith and circumstance upon each other. This may raise a challenge to the use of the term 'evangelical'. It will certainly raise pedagogical, theological and ecclesiological questions which it will warrant modern 'evangelicals' to explore. We will also suggest a different descriptor to Bebbington's

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<sup>21</sup> Tomkins and Clapham Society (Clapham London England), *Clapham Sect : How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain*, p 250.

'quadrilateral' which we feel more accurately describes the 'Evangelicalism' of the Clapham sect. But the chief purpose of this thesis is to explore how the 'prophets' of Clapham prepared their sons to do their civic duty informed by their understanding and adoption of the Christian Faith.

#### METHODOLOGY

In this thesis there is stress on the public, rather than the private, dimension of religious practice, although they are not unrelated. The methodology pursued in this thesis will be to analyse the documents (letters, journals, memoirs, books – including biographies by the children of the subjects, and advices to government) written by the main subjects of this study.

This methodology deliberately starts, where possible, with an examination of primary material. This is to seek a fresh analysis of the mind of the writers as expressed in that material as well as to bring to bear the strengths of this author as an exegete and theologian. This process does not discount the environment in which the material was penned but seeks first to assess the author's mind in that environment. This exercise is cognate with this author's training and extensive experience as an exegete of the foundational documents of the Christian faith, especially the Greek text of the New Testament, taking note of its linguistic context and the equivalent handling of the Hebrew Old Testament.

With this in mind care must be taken in the use of biographical and autobiographical material. One must look carefully at any possible bias or homiletical purpose of the writer. A case in point is the biography of William Wilberforce written by his sons.<sup>22</sup> Written very soon after his death during their developing theological re-alignment (a case that will be argued in Chapter 5) one must be careful to look for any back reading of their position onto their fathers. In one of its very first reviews, the biography was criticised for not being 'evangelical' enough.<sup>23</sup> The author there wrote, concerning a letter by William Wilberforce commending Church over Chapel, 'There are some things we would have been glad to see omitted in this otherwise interesting work.'<sup>24</sup> This accusation of a sanitised hagiography is often cast at Christian historians. I will seek to show that the continued criticism of the Wilberforce brothers by such noted scholars as Ford K Brown fails to assess the complexity of the Clapham fathers and their children. In his book *Fathers of the Victorians* (1961), Brown roundly condemns the Wilberforce brothers' work. He wrote:

The object of their biography was to record Wilberforce's Christian character and achievements insofar as it could be done while concealing his Evangelicalism; and that object was attempted so thoroughly that not only his leadership of the

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce* (London: John Murray, 1838).

<sup>23</sup> *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, 1838, Vol. XVI – New Series, Thomas Ward & Company, London, pp 266-267

<sup>24</sup> *Evangelical Magazine* 1838, Vol. XVI, p277

Evangelical reform campaign but the campaign and Evangelicals too are coolly deleted from his life.<sup>25</sup>

Brown fails to take account of the value attached to the Evangelical Revival by Samuel and Robert Isaac Wilberforce.<sup>26</sup> We shall examine their estimate in Chapter 4. Brown's assertion concerning a 'planned' or coordinated 'Evangelical Reform' originating before Wilberforce's conversion is not supported.<sup>27</sup> The evidence rather establishes the view that, unlike the 'Wesleyan movement', the first Evangelicals resulted from the discreet 'conversions' of individuals.<sup>28</sup> By the time we get to Clapham we still only have the beginnings of co-operative planning. This developed over the Wilberforce period.

Fortunately in the Wilberforce biography, their extensive quotations from the father's letters, private journals and diaries aid us in doing this. In fact, at times, their work is more chronology than biography. Such cautions will be acknowledged in the text of this thesis as it occurs.

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<sup>25</sup> Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians; the age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge [Eng.]: University Press, 1961) p 491.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation A/D/ 1850 by Robert Issac Wilberforce, M.A. Archdeacon of the East Riding* (London: Juhn Murray, 1850a) and Samuel's letter to Marianne Thornton in Reginald G Wilberforce, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, D. D. Lord Bishop of Oxford and afterward of Winchester with selections from his daries and correspondence*, 3 vols. (III; London: John Murray, Albemarle, 1882), Wilberforce, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce*, III.

<sup>27</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The rise of evangelicalism : the age of Edwards Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2004), p 241, 'for the evangelical movement in general, approaches to society tended to be tactical, personal and *ad hoc*, rather than strategic, structural and systematic'.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734-1984* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), p 10 'The majority of those who were recognized as leaders of the Evangelical movement in the Church of England in its early phases arrived at their opinions quite apart from Whitefield and the Wesleys or the revival movements with which these three were associated.'

In the case of the memoirs, the purpose of these, ascertained in the first instance from the stated and described purpose, must be used in understanding the material chosen and the structure adopted. Charges, sermons, theological writing and apologia, such as Robert Isaac Wilberforce's *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*,<sup>29</sup> and Sir James Stevens *Epilogue*,<sup>30</sup> are treated as real public statements of the author's mind revealing their considered opinions at the point of writing. Unless secondary material can demonstrate definitively to the contrary this seems, to this author, to be both wise and honest. Such an approach, however, will place limits upon this author's speculation and thus may leave some questions unanswered.

In many cases the sources here consulted have been the original manuscripts or primary editions of the books. In the case of manuscripts, the Wilberforce Correspondence and Journals held in the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford,<sup>31</sup> and the Thornton journal and memoir in the Manuscript Section of the Library of the University of Cambridge,<sup>32</sup> were used. The first edition of the life of William Wilberforce<sup>33</sup> by his sons Robert and Samuel and the first published edition of the memoir of James

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority, or, reasons for recalling my subscription to the Royal Supremacy* (2nd edition. edn.; London: Longman Brown Green and Longmans, 1854).

<sup>30</sup> James Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, 2 vols. (3rd edn., 1; London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853a) II.

<sup>31</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, Oxford, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, C 51, Wilberforce Correspondence, C 42.

<sup>32</sup> Henry Thornton, Cambridge, University of Cambridge, Thornton MSS/7674/1/R.

<sup>33</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*.

Stephen were used.<sup>34</sup> For the second generation Wilberforces we have examined the letters by Samuel and Robert Wilberforce to and from their father, Robert's charges to his Archdeaconry in 1850<sup>35</sup> and 1851<sup>36</sup> published at the time, Robert's published works on Baptism<sup>37</sup>, Eucharist<sup>38</sup> and his reasons for withdrawing his Subscription to the Royal Supremacy<sup>39</sup>, a transcription of some of Samuel's letters books as Bishop<sup>40</sup>, and printed sermons and charges of Samuel.<sup>41</sup> We have also

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<sup>34</sup> James Stephen, (1758-1832) Edited by Merle M Bevington *The Memoirs of James Stephen written by himself for the benefit of his children* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation A. D. 1850* (London: James Murray, 1850c).

<sup>36</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding Delivered at the Ordinary Visitation A. D. 1851 by Robert Issac Wilberforce, M.A. Archdeacon of the East Riding* (London: William Murray, 1851a).

<sup>37</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism with remarks on the Rev W Goode's "Effects of Infant Baptism"* (2nd edn.; London: Murray, 1849).

<sup>38</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *The doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (2nd edn.; London: J & C Mozley, 1853).

<sup>39</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce, 1843-68* (Oxfordshire Record Society ; v. 47.; Leeds: Buckinghamshire Record Society and the Oxfordshire Record Society, 1970).

<sup>41</sup> Samuel Wilberforce, *A charge, delivered to the clergy of the archdeaconry of Surrey, by Samuel Wilberforce ... at his primary visitation, in September and October 1840* (2nd. edn.; Lond., 1840), Samuel Wilberforce, *Bishop Wilberforce on 'evening communions'* (Lond., 1875), Samuel Wilberforce, *He, being dead, yet speaketh*, trans. Translator, Number of (London: Sommon & Botten, 1873b), <http://archive.org/details/hebeingdeadyetsp00wilb/>, Samuel Wilberforce, *Four sermons preached before her most gracious majesty Queen Victoria in 1841 and 1842*, trans. Translator, Number of (London: J Burns, 1842), <http://archive.org/details/a614402700wilbuoft>, Samuel Wilberforce, *Rome--her new dogma and our duties : a sermon, preached before the University, at St. Mary's Church, Oxford, on the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1855*, trans. Translator, Number of (London, Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1855), <http://archive.org/details/romehernewdogmao00chur>, Samuel Wilberforce, *A charge delivered at the triennial visitation of the diocese, November, 1857*, trans. Translator, Number of (Oxford, London: John Henry and James Parker, 1857b), <http://archive.org/details/chargedeliveredda01chur>, Samuel Wilberforce, *A charge delivered at the triennial visitation of the diocese, November, MDCCCLX (1860)*, trans. Translator, Number of J.H. and Jas. Parker ; London : J. and F. Rivington, Waterloo-Places vols. (J.H. and Jas. Parker ; London : J. and F. Rivington, Waterloo-Place; Oxford, 1860), <http://archive.org/details/chargedeliveredda00churc>, Samuel Wilberforce, ... Et Al,

used the first edition of the *Life of Samuel Wilberforce*<sup>42</sup> by Ashworth and Wilberforce. Sir James Stephen, upon publishing his essays for the *Edinburgh Review* as a book, included an 'Epilogue' outlining his position as a Christian.<sup>43</sup> This has given us a superb insight into this important scion of Clapham. In the case of the advices to government by Sir James Stephen, Bart., for practical reasons, secondary quotations have been used.<sup>44</sup>

It is evidence of the increasing narrowing of evangelicalism that these documents have not always been highly valued by evangelicals. And it is evidence of the rejection of the value and role of religion that these same documents have been, until recently, largely overlooked by social historians.

There have been a number of studies on the Clapham Sect,<sup>45</sup> and many more on its individual members. Each is valuable and is relevant to this

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*Personal responsibility of man, Sermons preached during the Season of Lent* trans. Translator, Number of (London: James Parker & Co, 1869),<http://archive.org/details/personalrespons01wilbgoog>, Samuel Wilberforce, *Essays Contributed to the "Quarterly Review"*, trans. Translator, Number of IIs vols. (Essays Contributed to the "Quarterly Review", II; London: John Murry, 1874),<http://archive.org/details/essayscontribut00wilbgoog>, Samuel Wilberforce, *Half-repentance: A Sermon Preached in the Church of St. Mary-the-Virgin, Oxford, on Ash Wednesday, 1857*, trans. Translator, Number of (London: John Henry and James Parker, 1857a),<http://archive.org/details/halfrepentancea00wilbgoog>, Samuel Wilberforce, ... Et Al, *Lenten sermons : preached on the evening of each Wednesday and Friday during the season of Lent, 1858, in the churches of St. Mary-the-Virgin, St. Giles, and St. Ebbe, Oxford*, trans. Translator, Number of (London: John Henry and James Parker, 1858),<http://archive.org/details/lentensermonspre00wilbuoft>.

<sup>42</sup> Wilberforce, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, III*.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*. See footnote 27 above.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953).

<sup>45</sup> See, for example: J. Stephen, 'The Clapham sect', *EdinR*, 80 (1844), 251–307; Ernest Marshall Howse, *Saints in politics: the 'Clapham Sect' and the growth of freedom* (Open University set book; London,: Allen and Unwin, 1971); Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'Clapham to



thesis. But this thesis seeks to take a closer look at the public role of six individuals over two generations through the study of sources written by themselves, most little used by historians, to explain the transition from the first to the second generation, and to analyse the role which these fathers and sons of Clapham played in Church and State.

This thesis, then, is not primarily a study in evangelical domesticity or of the place of Clapham in the history of evangelicalism. It is, rather, a study of the place of Clapham experience over two generations within the English Church and State. It examines the ways that the Clapham Sect members' expectations and inculcations produced a group of descendants who profoundly influenced subsequent generations. In the immediate children we see the same commitment to civic involvement in Church and State, though often based in a religious position different from that of their fathers. In the case of T. B. Macaulay the civic continues without the religious<sup>46</sup> (a harbinger?). Were we to pursue this enquiry into the subsequent generations a very different spirituality would be seen in these families. And in the Bloomsbury Set we would find the antithesis of the Clapham Sect.<sup>47</sup>

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Bloomsbury. A Genealogy of Morals', *Quadrant*, XXX/1 & 2 (1986).; Tolley, *Domestic Biography*; John Wolffe, 'Clapham Sect (act. 1792-1815)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/theme-print.jsp?articleid=42140> (which itself includes a useful catalogue of the Sect and its members); Stephen Tomkins, *Clapham Sect : How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain* (2010, Oxford: Lion).

<sup>46</sup> George Otto Trevelyan, *The life and letters of Lord Macaulay* (New edn.; London: Longmans, 1881)

<sup>47</sup> Himmelfarb, 'Clapham to Bloomsbury'; Rory Shiner, 'An Eminent Bloomsbury: Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* and the New Morality', *Categoria*, 25, 2002, 43-55.

## **Chapter 1**

### **'Vital Religion': The Clapham Fathers' Understanding of Christianity**

Above all else, as we shall see in Chapter 4, Clapham parents wanted their children to be 'vital Christians'. Yet 'Vital Christianity', the Evangelical self-description, is, by its very nature, non-transferable. It may be described, modelled or commended to others. Circumstances, teaching and encouragement may be used to attempt to reproduce it in others. Yet its very elements, heart-felt personal conviction of sin, a deep emotional dependence upon the death of Jesus in atonement for one's sins, and a clear heart-felt conversion to a 'serious' life style, can be re-enacted in others, but cannot become 'Tradition'. The 'idea' of conversion can be a Tradition, but the experience cannot. It was the *experience*, not the knowledge of such experiences, which the Clapham community sought for its children.

It is the purpose of this chapter to explore the nature of this experience as it was understood by the members of the first generation of evangelicals. It is the contention of this thesis that this understanding was the expectation which they had for their children. Yet instead of bestowing what they saw as the greatest of blessings, they left to their children a set of traits, abilities and commitments which equipped them well to meet the challenges of a new age. But the children found that to do that, they needed to make significant modifications to their parents' desired faith position.

What were the components of the narrative of the faith experience that the heads of the Clapham households saw themselves as having found and which they sought for others? In this we will see the defining characteristics of 'true Christianity' or 'vital religion', as understood by the Clapham parents. These included as critical: a heart-felt experience, central doctrines of redemption, the understanding of holiness, the role of the Holy Spirit, the necessity of conversion, the role of the Sacraments, and the relationship between intellect and faith. The Clapham understanding of Evangelical religion was essentially a matter of practical faith rather than systematic theology. It was a faith which was to be worked out practically both in domestic and public life and therefore it had implications for the children of the next generation. This chapter begins to draw out those implications before concluding with the question which is central to this thesis: Can Evangelical Christianity, as understood by the heads of the Clapham household, be transferred intact from one generation to the next?

There are a number of sources which describe what was understood by our primary subjects to be 'vital Christianity'. Sermons, books, letters and diaries all reveal the common tenets of Evangelicalism. The sermons<sup>1</sup> of the Rev. Charles Simeon, Fellow of Kings College, University of Cambridge, and a non-resident member of the Clapham Sect,<sup>2</sup> were

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Simeon, *Horæ homileticæ, or Discourses, in the form of skeletons upon the whole Scriptures. [With] Appendix* (Lond., 1819).

<sup>2</sup> The Right Honourable Sir James Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, 2 vols. (II; London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853d) p 360.

intended to be models of evangelical preaching and they succeeded in that intention.<sup>3</sup> But it is especially in the best-selling book written by William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*<sup>4</sup> that we see clearly the nature of 'Vital Christianity'. He is regarded by the Sect as its chief light.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly his *Practical View* must be the chief source for this chapter.

#### A HEARTFELT NECESSITY

'Vital Christianity' was characterized by a serious, heart-felt commitment to Christ. To use Wilberforce's description, it was the result of a 'great change'. One held this position, not as a member of a group nor by virtue of any sacrament, but because of an individual deep conviction and surrender to God. It was marked by an extensive, almost exhaustive, self-analysis involving one's time, money and, above all, motive. Of the Evangelicals' religion Sir James Stephen (a son of the community) wrote,

Their philosophy was something better than an array of hard words. Their religion was something more than a collection of impalpable essences; too fine for analysis, and too delicate for

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<sup>3</sup> Among the many who modeled their own sermons closely on those of Simeon was Samuel Marsden, pioneering chaplain in New South Wales (David Pettett, 'Was the Rev. Samuel Marsden a Plagiarist?', 6<sup>th</sup> November 2008, paper presented to the seminar group of the Centre for the Study of Christian Thought and Experience, Macquarie University, Ryde, NSW, Australia).

<sup>4</sup> William Wilberforce, *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 eighth edition. edn.; London: Printed for T. Cadell, and W. Davies ... 1805).

<sup>5</sup> James Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, London, Longman Brown Green and Longmans, 1850, II, p 300.

use. It was a hardy, serviceable, fruit-bearing and patrimonial religion.<sup>6</sup>

It was this approach which marked those at Clapham. The demand for a faith that was owned and articulate was core to this community's understanding of what it was to be truly Christian. Meacham writes of Thornton:

Henry Thornton was raised an Evangelical. Yet religion of the soul demands personal conviction and commitment, and in the tranquil way in which he thought through everything, he examined his Bible, his heart and *then accepted for himself* the religion he had inherited.<sup>7</sup>

In *A Practical View* William Wilberforce lays out in detail a comparison of the belief and practice of what he calls 'nominal Christians'<sup>8</sup> and those who truly have the right to be called Christian.<sup>9</sup> There are three matters which distinguish these two categories of people: their core doctrines, the nature of their love of God, and their manner of life. These three items are inter-related.

It is self-evident, that the corruption of human nature, that our reconciliation to God by the atonement of Christ, and that

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<sup>6</sup>James Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, 2 vols. (3rd edn., 2; London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853b), p. 308.

<sup>7</sup> Standish Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham, 1760-1815* (Cambridge,: Harvard University Press, 1964b) p 14. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>8</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 269.

<sup>9</sup> In his book there are at least 59 uses of the phrase 'true Christian' often in contrast to others who believe themselves to be 'Christian'.

the restoration of our primitive dignity by the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit, are all parts of one whole, united in close dependence and mutual congruity.<sup>10</sup>

## DOCTRINE

For Wilberforce the key doctrines are the atonement of Christ and his return as judge. Both of these are tied to a view of human sinfulness which is that it is deep and devastating. Such is the nature of the Fall (the original refusal of humanity to accept the divine government which is expressed in the Adam and Eve narrative) that no human action, no matter how philanthropic, is of any value before the judgment of God. Humanity and individual humans have sinned, both originally and in their own action, so as to warrant only the wrath of God and eternal damnation. In distinguishing 'vital Christianity' from that which he perceived as practiced by the majority of the middle and upper classes, he wrote:

Far different is the humiliating language of Christianity. From it we learn that man is an apostate creature, fallen from his high original, degraded in his nature, and depraved in his faculties; indisposed to good, and disposed to evil; prone to vice - it is natural and easy to him; disinclined to virtue - it is

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<sup>10</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 272.

difficult and laborious; he is tainted with sin, not slightly and superficially but radically and to the very core,<sup>11</sup>

The only solution he sees to this is the penal substitutionary death of Christ. Christ's death, undertaken at the behest of God the Father, is not, for him, just an example or a demonstration of divine love, but a bearing of the penalty due to 'miserable sinners'.

They consider not that Christianity is a scheme for '*justifying the ungodly*' by Christ's dying for them '*when yet sinners:*' a scheme for reconciling us to God – '*when enemies;*' and for making the fruits of holiness *the effects not the cause*, of our being justified and reconciled: that in short, it opens freely the door of mercy to the greatest and worst of penitent sinners; who obeying the blessed impulse of the grace of God, whereby they had been awakened from the sleep of death, and moved to seek for pardon, may enter in, and, through the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, be enabled to bring forth the fruits of Righteousness.<sup>12</sup>

Those who are true Christians can depend upon this 'scheme' for their vindication on the Day of Judgment.

#### MANNER OF LIFE

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<sup>11</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 21.

<sup>12</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 98 (The italics are Wilberforce's in quotations where they occur and no comment by this author is made.).

Yet, for Wilberforce, it is not a dependence which is unmatched with personal action. The pursuit of holiness is essential for one's acceptance on the Day of Judgment. Several times he reminds his readers that 'without holiness no man shall see God'.<sup>13</sup> Boyd Hilton has drawn attention to the idea of this age as probation.<sup>14</sup> Yet we need to ask of our primary source, in what way does Wilberforce think of the present life as 'probation'? He uses the phrase rarely and he seems to qualify it. In the context of talking about how, as one passes through the different stages of life from childhood to old age, and one's behaviour is modified both by the way one sees the world and the changing nature of one's responsibilities, he wrote:

Put the question to another issue, and try it upon this that life is a state of probation; (a principle true indeed in a certain sense, though not exactly in that which is sometimes assigned to it;) and you will still be led to no very different conclusion. Probation implies resisting, in obedience to the dictates of Religion, appetites which we are naturally prompted to gratify.<sup>15</sup>

To simply engage in this kind of reformatory activity will not justify one before God. Living a socially respectable life, a publicly acceptable life, is not sufficient. Of such people he wrote:

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<sup>13</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 254.

<sup>14</sup> Boyd Hilton, *The age of atonement : the influence of evangelicalism on social and economic thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford [England]: Clarendon Press, 1988) pp, 8, 178, 215, 300.

<sup>15</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 340.



These are the *ready-made* Christians formerly spoken of, who consider Christianity as a geographical term, properly applicable to all those who have been born and educated in a country where Christianity is professed; and not as indicating a renewed nature, as expressive of a particular character, with its appropriate desires and aversions, and hopes, fears, and joys, and sorrows.<sup>16</sup>

Yet despite the priority of a 'renewed nature' and the experience of the 'prompting of the Divine Spirit'<sup>17</sup> which he exhorts his readers to follow, the overall analysis of his directions imply a necessary 'achievement' of holiness and a suppression of sinfulness if one is to be acceptable on the last day.

Again, we see throughout, in the system which we have been describing,<sup>18</sup> a most inadequate conception of the difficulty of becoming true Christians; and an utter forgetfulness of its being the great business of life to secure our admission into Heaven, and to prepare our hearts for its service and enjoyments.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 551.

<sup>17</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 552.

<sup>18</sup> That of the majority of the middle and upper classes as he saw it: professing Christianity.

<sup>19</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 231.

This necessary action by the 'true Christian' is reinforced several times. It is seen in his use of the Pauline injunction to 'work out your own salvation in fear and trembling'<sup>20</sup> and in statements such as:

It is by this unceasing diligence, as the Apostle declares, that the servants of Christ must make their calling sure: and it is by this only that their labour will ultimately succeed: for 'so an entrance shall be ministered unto them abundantly, into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup>

One is to live in this world conscious that it is but temporary. The pilgrim theme, reminiscent of Bunyan<sup>22</sup>, runs through the work.

#### THE HOLY SPIRIT

It would be unfair, however, not to balance this insistence on the hard work of the pilgrim with Wilberforce's perception of the work of the Holy Spirit. He sees the Holy Spirit as being the activity of God which enables the 'true Christian' to achieve the required holiness. Yet here we face a difficulty. For him it was true that the Christian can so offend God as to cause this influence to be removed:

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<sup>20</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 344.

<sup>21</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 362.

<sup>22</sup> *The Pilgrim's Progress* was first published in two parts, part 1 in 1678 and part 2 in 1684. Its extraordinary sales, second only to the Bible, ensured that, while no English-speaking Protestant Christian could ever think of pilgrimage as a way of salvation, it was now impossible to think of being a Christian without also being a pilgrim. Significantly, one who appreciated the imaginative power of *The Pilgrim's Progress* was the essayist Thomas Babington Macaulay, another of the sons of Clapham, who wrote the entry on Bunyan for the eighth edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. It is considered one of his finest essays.

yet, having such good reason to believe that there is somewhere a flaw, could we but discern it, let us carefully scrutinise *the whole* of our conduct, in order to discover, ... whether it may not therefore have pleased God to withdraw from us the influence of his Holy Spirit; particularly inquiring, whether the duties of self-examination, of secret and public prayer, the reading of the Holy Scriptures, and the other prescribed means of Grace, have not been either wholly intermitted at their proper seasons, or at least been performed with precipitation or distraction?<sup>23</sup>

Here we see an internal problem. If the Holy Spirit is removed by God, how is he able to be the motive force for progressive holiness? Do not the practices of piety which he commends then become 'human actions'? Wilberforce, however, is not writing a systematic theology but rather what would now be described as a 'pastoral theology' or a pastoral exhortation. Indeed, this is what made it so popular. If he had written a systematic theology we would never have heard of it. Yet the effect of his writing is to imply that the Holy Spirit comes and goes depending on the piety of the 'true Christian'. We shall see below (An Earlier Example – Chapter 1, page 50) that this understanding of a 'coming and going' of the Holy Spirit was not unique to Wilberforce, but was normalised in the hymnody of the movement. It was a sad experience to which 'true Christians' were sensitive. But, given the tenor of this approach, it would not be improper

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<sup>23</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 218.

to say that Wilberforce implied that 'the influence of the Holy Spirit' was absent altogether from 'professing Christians'.

#### THE LOVE OF GOD

The third area which Wilberforce stresses is love for God. In this his key anchor is the command quoted from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy by Jesus, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength'.<sup>24</sup> He writes, 'Our review of the character of the bulk of nominal Christians has exhibited abundant proofs of their allowed defectiveness in that great constituent of the true Christian character, *the love of God*.'<sup>25</sup>

It is clear from the way he speaks that he regards the 'heart' as the centre of affection. This is common in English, but not in the languages of the foundational Christian documents (the Koine Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament). In these the bowels are the centre of the emotional world and the heart the centre of the reason or person.<sup>26</sup> We know that William Wilberforce was familiar with Koine Greek,<sup>27</sup> yet this does not seem to have influenced his understanding of the text he quotes. Rather he adopts the common English usage. 'My son, give me thine *heart*' – 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy *heart*' He continued, '... and the taking away of the heart of stone and the implanting of a warmer

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<sup>24</sup> The Gospel according to Matthew 22:37.

<sup>25</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 237.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 18.27, 20.34, Mark 1.41, Luke 1.7.8, 2 Corinthians 7.15, Philippians 2.1, Geoffrey William Bromiley et al., *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964).

<sup>27</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce* P77.

and more tender nature in its stead, are specially promised as the effects of his returning favour and the work of his renewing grace.<sup>28</sup>

Mere belief or even expressed dependence is not sufficient nor is it to be a general recognition of humanity's situation. 'But it is not sufficient to assent to the doctrine, we must also *feel* it.'<sup>29</sup> He writes of professed Christians

who feel *general* penitence and humiliation from a sense of their sinfulness in *general*, and *general* desires of universal holiness; but who neglect that vigilant and jealous care with which they should labour to extirpate every particular corruption, by studying its nature, its root, its ramifications and thus becoming acquainted with its secret movements.<sup>30</sup>

A deep individual, one could almost write, individualistic, emotional response to the Biblical narrative is required by Wilberforce to enable a person to be truly Christian. This is to be matched by an ongoing rigorous individual piety prompting the inquiry 'whether the duties of self-examination, of secret and public prayer, the reading of the Holy Scriptures, and the other prescribed means of Grace, have not been either wholly intermitted at their proper seasons, or at least been performed

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<sup>28</sup> Wilberforce *A Practical View* p68.

<sup>29</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 41. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>30</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 368.

with precipitation or distraction?<sup>31</sup> This piety included the ordinances of the Church,<sup>32</sup> but that corporate action was not, itself, sufficient.

#### AN EARLIER EXPRESSION

This approach was not unique to the Clapham community as can be seen when we look at the following advice given to Charles Simeon. It was the approach of the earlier Evangelicals. We can go back to the first generation of Evangelical preachers. The Rev J Berridge<sup>33</sup> tried to encourage Simeon to engage in a roving ministry such as he himself and men like John Wesley had undertaken. In the settled estate of the Hanoverian Church in England this presented problems.<sup>34</sup> But for our present purpose let us look at the advice of the *content* of preaching as envisaged by Berridge.

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<sup>31</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 218.

<sup>32</sup> Wilberforce baptized his children at the prescribed time in the Book of Common Prayer and had a high view of the Lord's Supper and approached it with care.

<sup>33</sup> The Rev John Berridge was born on 1 March, 1760 to a farmer and grazier in Kingston in Nottinghamshire. At the age of 19 he entered Clare Hall, Cambridge. He took the degree of BA in 1738 and MA in 1742. He became a fellow of Clare Hall. He never married. In 1749 he accepted the curacy at Stapleford near Cambridge. He was later to Rector of Everton which was in the gift of Clare Hall and remained there until his death. Though orthodox in his theology and preaching he was disappointed in the lack of change and godliness in his parishioners and about Christmas 1767, reflecting on his own life and preaching, came to understand the Christian faith in an evangelical manner. At first he preached only in his own parish but soon began to itinerate which practice he continued to the end of his life. He later became acquainted with Wesley and Whitefield and in fact preached his last sermon, in 1796, in Whitefield's Tabernacle in London. John Berridge, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Berridge, Am., Late Fellow of Clare-Hall, Cambridge, Vicar of Everton, Bedfordshire, and Chaplain to the Earl of Buchan, with A Memoir of his Life by the Rev. Richard Whittingham, Late Vicar of Potton, Bedfordshire, and previously Curate to the Author at Everton*, trans. Translator, Number of (Second Edition with Additions edn.; London: Ebenezer Palmer, 1864), <http://archive.org/details/wholeworksofrevj00berruoft>.

<sup>34</sup> The polity of the Church of England required that clergy preach only in parishes or chapels to which they were licensed unless asked to do so by the person who held the other living. Canon Law required that all building used for Divine service should be consecrated or licensed. Under the Act of Toleration dissenting preachers and their premises also had to be licensed by the Lord Chancellor.

In a letter to Simeon printed in *Simeon and Church Order*,<sup>35</sup> Berridge outlines a method of preaching for conversion. It is worth quoting at length.

When you open your Commission, begin with ripping up the Audience, and Moses will lend You a Carving Knife often whetted at his Grind-Stone.<sup>36</sup> Lay open the universal sinfulness of nature, the darkness of the mind, the frowardness of the temper: - Speak of the evilness of sin in its Nature, its rebellion against God as our Benefactor, and contempt of his authority and Love:- Declare the evil of Sin in its effects, bringing all our sickness, pains, and sorrows, all the evils we feel, and all the evils we fear:- All inundations, fire, famines, pestilences, brawls, quarrellings, fightings, Wars, - with Death, [to close] these present sorrows, - to Hell to receive all that die in Sin.

Lay open the spirituality of the Law, and its extent, reaching every thought, word and action, and declaring every transgression whether of omission or commission, deserving of Death. Declare man's utter helplessness to change his nature, or to make his peace. Pardon and Holiness must come

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Hugh Egerton Smyth, *Simeon & church order : a study of the origins of the evangelical revival in Cambridge in the eighteenth century* (The Birkbeck lectures ; 1937-8.; Cambridge: University Press, 1940).

<sup>36</sup> Luther and Calvin both saw the law as a critique of human ability, so the intellectual content here is not unusual, but the stress Berridge places on using it to sway or coerce the emotions is.

from the Saviour. Acquaint them with the searching Eye of God, watching us continually, spying out every thought, word, and action, noting them down in the Book of his Remembrance; bringing every secret work into judgment, whether it be good or evil.

When your hearers have been well harrowed and the clumps begin to fall, (which is seen by their hanging down their head) then bring out your CHRIST, and bring him out from the heart, thro' the lips, and tasting of his Grace while you publish it. Now lay open the Saviour's Almighty Power soften the heart, and give true repentance; to bring Pardon to the broken heart, and the Spirit of Prayer to the prayerless heart; Holiness to the filthy heart; and Faithfulness to the unbelieving heart. Let them know that all the Treasures of Grace are lodged in Jesus Christ, for the use of poor needy sinners; and that he is full of Love as well as Power; that he turns no Beggars away from his gate, but receives all Comers kindly, - loves to bless them, - and bestows all his blessings *Tythe-free*; Farmers and Country people chop at that. Here you must wave the Gospel flag and magnify the Saviour proudly; speak with a full mouth, that his Blood can wash away the foulest stains,<sup>37</sup>: and his Grace subdue the stoutest

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<sup>37</sup> Charles Wesley's hymn, *O for a thousand tongues...* - "his blood can make the foulest clean"; the stress on the atonement's effect on the individual is a common theme both of the earlier and later evangelicals. It is not unique to them as can be seen in the *Prayer of*

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corruptions. Exhort the people to seek his Grace directly, constantly, and diligently; and acquaint them that all who thus seek, shall find the Salvation of God <sup>38</sup>

Here is the preaching for Wilberforce's 'Vital Christianity'. This stresses the individual nature of conversion, and assumes nothing about the sacramental history of the hearer or about their prior spiritual and ecclesiastical experience or practice. Here is the stress on Providence, on the cause and effect nature of sin, on the need for individual responsibility for personal calamity. Here is an appeal not to the intellect but to the emotion and the will, the will circumscribed by the intensity of the occasion. There is also an implied criticism of the Establishment in the reference to 'and bestows all his blessings *Tythe-free*'.<sup>39</sup>

Yet it is not only in the 'field preachers' that such earlier understanding of Evangelical theology can be found, but in the settled hymnody. Hymns and songs have always played a significant role in imparting what 'Christians' have believed. Their repetition and mode are significant pedagogical tools. It was said of Arius, a major 4<sup>th</sup> Century Christian heretic, that he taught his theology to the people of Alexandria by putting it in song, to local tunes. It is also notable that in every period of what might be called 'revival' the writing of hymns and songs has expressed the

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*humble access* in the Book of Common Prayer, 1662, "that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood". The use of this theme as a call for individual conversions as opposed to the way it is used in the BCP in the context of a sacramental and ecclesial life is significant.

<sup>38</sup> Smyth, *Simeon & Church Order*, p 277.

<sup>39</sup> Smyth, *Simeon & church Order*, p 277.

'new theology'.<sup>40</sup> This was also the case with the Evangelicals and evangelical Dissent. Of the hymns written during this period those of William Cowper, the friend of the Rev John Newton, are clearly representative.

THERE is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;  
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see  
That fountain in his day;  
And there have I, as vile as he,  
Washed all my sins away.

Dear dying Lamb, thy precious blood  
Shall never lose its power,  
Till all the ransomed church of God  
Be saved, to sin no more.<sup>41</sup>

Here we see the same deep individual and emotional stress on the role of the atonement. This crucicentrism allied to conversion, two of Bebbington's 'quadrilateral of evangelical markers',<sup>42</sup> are constant markers of the Clapham material. We also see in Cowper the idea of the oscillating presence of the Holy Spirit.

Oh! for a closer walk with God,  
A calm and heavenly frame;  
A light to shine upon the road  
That leads me to the Lamb!  
...

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<sup>40</sup> Both Luther ('Great God, What do I see and hear') and Bernard of Clairvaux, the reformer of the Cistercians ('Jerusalem the Golden'), (interestingly he was commissioned to preach the First Crusade) engaged in hymn writing as they preached their respective 'Crusades'.

<sup>41</sup> Cowper, William (1779). *Olney Hymns. From The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, Benham, William, ed. New York: MacMillan, 1893. <http://www.answers.com/topic/olney-hymns-cowper>.

<sup>42</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain : a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1993) p 5f, 14f.

Return, O holy Dove, return!  
Sweet messenger of rest:  
I hate the sins that made thee mourn,  
And drove thee from my breast.<sup>43</sup>

Here, again we are faced with a view of the Holy Spirit which assumes that the 'true Christian' can both gain and lose the Spirit.<sup>44</sup> The belief here is that God cannot abide to dwell with sinners, but rather removes himself until repentance is enacted. This then, necessarily, requires passion and action on the part of the 'vital Christian'.

#### A NECESSARY CONVERSION

Conversion, the deep heartfelt change, forms the *sine qua non* of 'vital Christianity'. The beliefs concerning the atonement and the Holy Spirit, seen above, allied to the description or interpretation of their experience given by men such as John and Charles Wesley and Wilberforce to what is commonly called their 'conversions', marks one as having become a 'vital Christian' or a 'serious person'. It is paralleled in the way in which William Wilberforce wrote to his son, Samuel. On 7<sup>th</sup> September 1820 (Samuel would be fifteen), he wrote:

My dear Samuel let me not thus suffer on your account oh let  
me see & know that you are reconciled to God by Jesus Christ  
let me *feel* by daily and hourly *experiences* that you are the

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<sup>43</sup> Cowper, Olney Hymns.

<sup>44</sup> In Cowper's case this evangelical emphasis on the withdrawal of the Spirit contributed to his psychological depression, a major theme in David Cecil, *The Stricken Deer: or the life of Cowper*. ([S.I.]: Constable, 1929).

Temple of the Holy Spirit ... and if it be his will may you my dear Samuel also be a minister of his glorious Gospel.<sup>45</sup>

In another letter, which appears to be later but is undated, he writes, 'May you be what the old nurse who took you to church when you were baptised prayed you might be another Samuel.'<sup>46</sup>

Clearly the fact that Samuel had been baptised, raised in a Christian home, taught to pray to God as 'Father' and engaged in both family and private prayer, did not constitute him as a 'serious person' without the conversion *experience* demonstrable to his father.

#### WILBERFORCE AND THE SACRAMENTS

The lack of reference to the sacrament in Wilberforce's book is notable, as it is an appeal to produce 'vital Christianity' among the middle and upper classes, and he was, himself, a supporter of the Established Church. Yet an examination of *A Practical View* alone does not give one an understanding of his position on the sacraments. It is very clear from his correspondence and diaries that he valued the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper highly. The evidence for this is clearly seen in the biography of their father written by Robert and Samuel Wilberforce soon after his death.<sup>47</sup> While allowing for their own piety to colour the portrait they painted of their father (Robert was an Oxford Man who became a Roman Catholic and Samuel was to be the leading High Church Bishop of the

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<sup>45</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, C 51. p 61. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>46</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, C 51. p 97.

<sup>47</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*.

Established Church), their use of original sources still enables one to see William's position.

Wilberforce regarded Sunday as a divinely appointed day for refraining from one's normal work. He wrote, in the context of comments on Lord Londonderry's death by suicide (August 1822), that this event 'has strongly enforced on my mind the unspeakable benefit of the institution of the Lord's Day – for I do not like to call it the Sabbath, as I do not quite consider it in the light in which it is viewed by many religious men.'<sup>48</sup> He sought to use it only for Spiritual activity. This included attending church, spiritual reading and meditation and talk with like-minded people. In 1821 he wrote to one of his sons at Oriel College, Oxford, (most likely his second son, Robert), 'I hope you keep steady on your plan of spending Sunday properly, and not joining in parties on that day. Observation and experience have convinced me that there is a special blessing on a right employment of these intervals. ... Sursum corda [Lift up your hearts – *translation not in letter.*] is the Christian's Sunday motto.'<sup>49</sup> To Samuel he wrote, 'I remembered that you would receive this on a Sunday, and therefore permitted myself to fall into a serious strain.'<sup>50</sup> This is reinforced by his observation concerning Lord Londonderry's suicide. He opined that the stress which drove him to be 'deranged' would not have happened had he taken Sunday as a day of rest and worship.

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<sup>48</sup> Wilberforce & Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, V, p 143.

<sup>49</sup> Wilberforce & Wilberforce *The Life of William Wilberforce*, V, p 93.

<sup>50</sup> Wilberforce & Wilberforce *The Life of William Wilberforce*, V, p 25.

But the strong impression of my mind is, that it is the effect of the non-observance of the Sunday, both as abstracting from politics, and from the constant recurrence of the same reflections, and as correcting the false views of worldly things, and bringing them down to their true diminutiveness.<sup>51</sup>

Strict Sunday observance was accompanied by regular partaking of the Sacrament. We read in his diary, [May 1789] '31<sup>st</sup>. Received the sacrament-much affected. May this be the beginning of a new life with me.<sup>52</sup> He seems to have been a more regular communicant than was common in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>53</sup> We also find him instructing his servants on the sacrament. [1795] 'Christmas Day. Up early for prayer, and discussed to servants on the sacrament.<sup>54</sup>

While he doesn't write a treatise on the sacrament, in his letters to his family we find:

I just recollect this letter will reach you on the Sunday. Allow me, therefore, to repeat, y<sup>e</sup> emphatic valediction *Remember*.

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<sup>51</sup> Wilberforce & Wilberforce *The Life of William Wilberforce*, V, p 134.

<sup>52</sup> Wilberforce & Wilberforce *The Life of William Wilberforce*, I, p 223.

<sup>53</sup> Wilberforce's (and Simeon's) unusual faithfulness in attending services of the Lord's Supper is evidence that evangelicalism was accompanied by increased sacramental devotion. The predominant image which Charles Wesley wrote of in his many hymns on the Lord's supper was the joyful presence of the Lord among his people at his own supper:

We need not now go up to heaven,  
To bring the long-sought Saviour down;  
Thou art to all already given,  
Thou dost even now thy banquet crown:  
To every faithful soul appear,  
And show thy real presence here.

<sup>54</sup> Wilberforce & Wilberforce *The Life of William Wilberforce* II p 136.

You will be in my heart and in my prayers, and probably we shall be celebrating about the same time the memorial of our blessed Lord's suffering and the bond of the mutual affection of his disciples towards each other.<sup>55</sup>

One could take the phrase 'the memorial' to reflect a Zwinglian view of the Sacrament, but that would be unjustified under the circumstances. It would be better to assume that he held the doctrine expressed by the major Evangelical preachers such as Simeon.

As we look at the thoughts of an Evangelical clergyman such as Simeon we see this strong view of the sacraments, but the strange reticence also. Looking at his handling of baptism this becomes clear. Simeon produced *Horæ Homileticæ*<sup>56</sup> to provide for preachers outlines or 'skeletons' to aid their preaching. This grew out of his sermon classes which he held for students intending to offer for the ministry of the Church. In the outline on Galatians 3.28-29 he engages in a strong defence of the English Reformers' use of 'regeneration' language in the baptismal service, namely, 'Seeing now this child is regenerate ...'.<sup>57</sup> Simeon defended this language on the basis of the language of the Apostle Paul in the face of

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<sup>55</sup> William Wilberforce and Anna Maria Wilberforce, *Private papers of William Wilberforce* (New York,: B. Franklin, 1968) p209.

<sup>56</sup> Simeon, Charles, *Horæ homileticæ, or Discourses, in the form of skeletons upon the whole Scriptures*. [With] Appendix (1819,Lond.).

<sup>57</sup> From the post baptismal exhortation in the 'Service of the Public Baptism of Infants' in the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England contained in the *Act Of Uniformity*, 1662.

objection from some Dissenters and some Evangelicals.<sup>58</sup> Yet after such a lengthy defence he wrote of those who have been baptized:

You perceive, that, as 'baptized into Christ,' you profess to have 'put on Christ.' Now, then, permit me to ask, have YOU ever *felt* [my emphasis] your need of Christ? Have you ever been conscious of the nakedness of your soul by reason of sin; and of the utter insufficiency of the fig-leaves of your own righteousness to cover your nakedness; and of the indispensable necessity of your being clothed in Christ's righteousness, in order to your acceptance before God.<sup>59</sup>

Note the use of the word 'profess' for he goes on to make it clear that he regards the baptised, in the first instance, in the same way that William Wilberforce does in his book. While he will defend the language of the English Reformers, Simeon sees their use of such language in a figurative sense until a person has acted for themselves. He went on to write,

You will then see, that, though baptized into Christ, you have never really availed yourselves of your privilege to 'to put him on.' You are in the state of a widow, who, though entitled to a certain portion of the estate of her deceased husband, neglects to take out administration according to law; ... And so must you perish under the neglect of all your sins, if you

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<sup>58</sup> Simeon, *Horæ Homileticæ*, p 383ff.

<sup>59</sup> Simeon *Horæ Homileticæ*, p 398.



neglect to put on Christ by faith, and cover yourself with the robe of his unspotted righteousness.<sup>60</sup>

So it can be seen that, for Simeon, baptism provides a privileged *location* from which one can take up the promises of Christ but does not itself, despite the language used to encourage the congregation in the baptismal service, constitute a person as a 'true Christian'. In Chapter 5 we shall see that this approach come into conflict with the position held by Wilberforce's sons.

It is clear that William Wilberforce had his children baptised, but little reference is made to it. The only explicit reference in a letter to his children seems to be, 'May you be what the old nurse who took you to church when you were baptised prayed you might be, another Samuel'.<sup>61</sup>

In *A Practical View* there are only two references to baptism. In the text of the work he wrote:

It is the grand essential practical characteristic of true Christians, that relying on the promises to repenting sinners of acceptance through the Redeemer, they have renounced and abjured all other masters, and have cordially and unreservedly devoted themselves to God. This is indeed the very figure which baptism daily represents to us: like the father of Hannibal, we there bring our infant to the altar, and consecrate him to the service of *his proper owner*, and vow in

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<sup>60</sup> Simeon *Horæ Homileticæ*, p 399.

<sup>61</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, (C42; Bodlean Library, University of Oxford).

*his name* eternal hostilities against all the enemies of his salvation.<sup>62</sup>

This extract follows the approach of *The Book of Common Prayer* in seeing baptism as an act *in the child's name*, an act of the child. In the other reference, reflecting on the centrality of the crucifixion in the New Testament and quoting the Apostle Paul ('We preach Christ crucified'), in an extended footnote, he wrote:

The value of this argument will be acknowledged ... that a system is never designated by an immaterial or an inferior part of it, but by that which constitutes its prime consideration and essential distinction. The conclusion suggested by this remark is confirmed by the Lord's Supper being the rite by which our Saviour himself commanded his disciples to keep him in remembrance; and indeed a similar lesson is taught by the Sacrament of Baptism, which shadows out our souls being washed and purified by the blood of Christ.<sup>63</sup>

His use of the words 'remembrance' and 'shadows out' again shows ambivalence about the idea of 'effectual signs'<sup>64</sup> which for his children would become a major issue. Most, if not all, of the people Wilberforce

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<sup>62</sup> Wilberforce *A Practical View* p 118.

<sup>63</sup> Wilberforce *A Practical View* p 108.

<sup>64</sup> Church Of England., 'THE ARTICLES OF RELIGION Agreed upon by the Archbishops, Bishops, and the whole clergy of the Provinces of Canterbury and York, London, 1562', (1562). Article XXV 'sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.'

refers to as 'professing Christians' and to whom he appealed that they might become 'vital Christians' will have been baptized. He is happy to draw their attention to the appeal made *in their name* and to the action pointed to by baptism. Yet he does not regard them as 'true Christians'.

In his biography of William Wilberforce, William Hague indicates that, late in life he wrote, 'My three Oxonians are strong friends to High Church and King doctrines' and that this did not trouble him.<sup>65</sup> This relaxedness is not reflected or considered in his public indication, his book, of what constitutes 'vital Christianity'. In Newsome's *The Parting of Friends*<sup>66</sup> he quotes a letter from William Wilberforce to Robert Isaac Wilberforce on the matter. It reads:

Whatever may be the right doctrinal opinion as to baptismal regeneration, all really orthodox men will grant, I presume, that as people grow they may lose that privilege of being children of God which we trust they who were baptised in their infancy did enjoy, and would have reaped the benefits of it had they died before, by gradual development of their mental powers, they became moral agents capable of responsibility.<sup>67</sup>

He went on to assert after the point of becoming a 'moral agent' the necessity of 'converting grace'. As we shall see when we examine Robert

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<sup>65</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 491.

<sup>66</sup> David Newsome, *The parting of friends : the Wilberforces and Henry Manning* (London: Greenwing, 1993).

<sup>67</sup> Newsome, *The parting of friends*, p 48. The Letter is from *The Private Papers of William Wilberforce* by A M Wilberforce (Editor) 1897.

Isaac Wilberforce's view (in Chapter 6) on this subject there is a significant difference theologically between him and his father. William Wilberforce's *A Practical View* seems to ignore any reference to baptism as constituent of 'vital Christianity', at least of those who are 'moral agents'.

We can see that the position expressed extensively by Charles Simeon is reflected in Wilberforce's own writings. Sacrament was important in his post-conversion piety, but not in his approach to how one becomes a 'true Christian'.

#### A PRACTICAL FAITH

How did 'serious religion' manifest itself in the households of the Clapham Sect? This section of the thesis necessarily trespasses on the material in Chapter 4 where we shall look at the formation of the children's adult faith position. Here we seek to look at the practical ways in which the Clapham Faith was exercised.

One of the first things Wilberforce did after his 'conversion' was to undertake 'family prayers' in his household. He was still a bachelor at this stage. He wrote in his private journal on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1785, 'began this night constant family prayer, and resolved to have it every morning and evening'.<sup>68</sup>

This decision became a regular part of the Wilberforce household. Ian Bradley in *The Call to Seriousness* wrote:

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<sup>68</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce* - Quoted in Ian Bradley, *The call to seriousness: the Evangelical impact on the Victorians* (London 1976) p 180.

This description of the morning's devotions by a subsequent [unknown] visitor accords closely with the picture given a generation later by Samuel Butler in his painting 'Family Prayers':

About a quarter before ten o'clock, the family assembled to prayers, which were read by Wilberforce in the dining room. As we passed from the drawing room I saw all the servants standing in regular order, the women ranged in a line against the wall and the men the same. There were seven women and six men. When the whole were collected in the dining room, all knelt down each against a chair or sofa, Wilberforce knelt at a table in the middle of the room, and after a little pause began to read a prayer, which he did very slowly in a low, solemnly awful voice.<sup>69</sup>

It is too easy to accept the idea that these people were joyless puritans. The remark, after the winning of the anti-slave trade debate in Parliament in 1807, recorded by Meacham, concerning Wilberforce and Thornton, can lead to such a view. 'Well, Henry,' he asked Thornton, 'what shall we abolish next?' Replied Henry Thornton, 'The Lottery, I think.' It is tempting to let the story stand as the epitome. Even in triumph these pursed-lipped Evangelical saints refused to smile.'<sup>70</sup> Robert & Samuel Wilberforce,

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<sup>69</sup> Wilberforce & Wilberforce *The Life of William Wilberforce*, I, p 91.

<sup>70</sup> Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham*, p 2.

however, note that this repartee was said in a jocular manner.<sup>71</sup> Yet Bradley wrote:

While the Vice Society concentrated on stamping out illegal private sweepstakes, Wilberforce and his Saints organized a successful campaign in Parliament to persuade the Government to give up the national lottery. The budget of 1826 contained the last state lottery ever to be held in England.<sup>72</sup>

While they were engaged in the suppression of what were seen as evident evils (prostitution, animal cruelty, drunkenness and imprudent use of money especially but not only by the lower classes), they were not Anchorite ascetics.

The desire of these Clapham residents was to aid one another in the Christian walk and they saw an advantage in living in the country together but within what we would call commuting distance of the City and Parliament. It provided a fine domestic environment without the dilettante distractions of the City. In a letter to Grant, quoted in Meacham, Thornton wrote:

On the whole, I am in hopes some good may come out of our Clapham system. Wilberforce is a candle that should not be hid under a bushel. The influence of his conversation is, I

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<sup>71</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*.

<sup>72</sup> Ian Bradley, *The call to seriousness: the Evangelical impact on the Victorians*, p 100. That is until recent times when the national lottery was reintroduced in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

think, great and striking. I am surprised to find how much religion everybody seems to have when they get into our house. They seem all to submit, and to acknowledge the advantage of a religious life, and we are not at all queer or carrying things too far.<sup>73</sup>

Meacham's comment, 'Even in triumph these pursed-lipped Evangelicals saints refused to smile', does not really portray them correctly. Tolley in his book *Domestic Biography*<sup>74</sup> describes a much more joyful and intellectually stimulating environment:

Their approach was sensitive, affectionate, serious, and humanitarian: children inspired them to pleasure, love, and the greatest concern. 'We have been much alarmed about our baby,' Wilberforce wrote to Hannah More, 'and these infantiles begin to twine their little cords round our hearts.'<sup>75</sup>

In reading the records of domestic behaviour and of pedagogies used within the Clapham homes, we see a people keen on giving their children a sense of pleasure and a desire to explore ideas in a rigorously intellectual environment. This was true even or especially of religious opinion. Tolley comments:

In the *Practical View* Wilberforce had criticized the age for too often regarding 'pleasure' and 'religion' as contradictory

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<sup>73</sup> Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham*, p 29.

<sup>74</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography*.

<sup>75</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, p 20, the original letter referred to has been sighted by this author and the quotation confirmed.

terms; not surprisingly, he considered it an especial duty of parents to 'render religion as congenial as possible', connecting it with all the natural love that children should have towards their early environment.<sup>76</sup>

Relying on Haddon Willmer,<sup>77</sup> Tolley insists upon a strong intellectual understanding of the Faith required by the Clapham community of those it held as 'fellows' and which it sought to inculcate in its children:

The religious training over which Clapham parents took such pains had as its object the development of an articulate faith, consciously and unequivocally put into practice. In spiritual matters they despised half-formed ideas and shadowy impulses, were indeed apt to distrust the subconscious altogether. Their brand of Evangelicalism was more Augustan than Romantic, preferring clarity of the word rather than the mystery of the symbol; their language of belief was above all intelligible and confident, envisaging religious maturity in terms of an underlying simplicity and certainty.<sup>78</sup>

It is this felicitous and stimulating environment that the children and grandchildren remembered later in life even when their personal position had changed from that of their parents.

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<sup>76</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, p 23.

<sup>77</sup> Haddon Willmer, *Evangelicalism 1785 to 1835*, Cambridge University Hulsean Prize Essay (1962), unpublished typescript held in the Cambridge University Library, p 140.

<sup>78</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, p 27.



Several of them found the May<sup>79</sup> meetings (once sanctified by Wilberforce himself) distasteful as their tone grew more purely emotional with each year, and Sir James held forth to Samuel Wilberforce on the increasingly threadbare and circumscribed preaching repertoire of the evangelicals.<sup>80</sup>

And, a profoundly dissatisfied Sir James bemoaned:

'Oh where are the people who are at once really religious, and really cultivated in heart and the people with whom we could associate as our fathers used to associate with each other,' he wrote to his wife. 'No "Clapham Sect" nowadays.'<sup>81</sup>

It seems clear that Clapham domestic life was enjoyed by the children and adults alike. They engaged each other both intellectually and playfully and the children's reminiscences of family life were positive. Both Samuel Wilberforce and Sir James Stephen said they were proud to have been intimate friends of their respective fathers.<sup>82</sup> This role is one that was encouraged by their parents as can be seen in Wilberforce's letters to

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<sup>79</sup> These were meetings of missionary societies held in Exeter Hall in the Strand each May, Chadwick, *The Victorian Church* Part 1, p5.

<sup>80</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, p 19.

<sup>81</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, p 20.

<sup>82</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, p 22, 'Like Samuel Wilberforce, Fitzjames Stephen was proud to have been his father's intimate friend and from an early age to have grown up in the company of one whose talk was equal to that of Macaulay or Carlyle at their best; by comparison, those who taught Fitzjames at Eton earned only his disdain.'

Samuel, 'in short I wish my dear Lamb to communicate with me as a friend.'<sup>83</sup>

This approach is re-enforced when we see the domestic life even toward the end of Wilberforce's life. His sons recorded:

Never surely was family religion seen in more attractive colours. 'I only wish,' said a college friend who had been visiting two of his sons, 'that those who abuse your father's principles could come down here and see how he lives.' It was a goodly sight. The cheerful play of the most happy temper, which more than sixty years had only mellowed, gladdened all his domestic intercourse. The family meetings were enlivened by his conversation – gay, easy and natural, yet abounding in manifold instruction, drawn from books, from life, and from reflection. Though his step was less elastic than of old, he took his part in out-of-door occupations; climbing the neighbouring downs with the walking parties, pacing in the shade of the tall trees, or gilding with an old man's smile the innocent cheerfulness of younger pastimes. ... 'Dined by ourselves, and walked with the boys in the evening.'<sup>84</sup>

Their use of Sunday as a family day, in church and at home, provided a sure contact between the often busy fathers and their children. It was not

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<sup>83</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, Oxford, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, d 9, Wilberforce Correspondence, d 9. p 144.

<sup>84</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, V, p 103.

so much a day of 'fasting' but of 'feasting' on each other's company. They even planned the posting of their letters so as to arrive to any children away at school for reading on Sunday so as to enable the absent to feel somewhat present.<sup>85</sup> From this picture it is clear why Wilberforce was reluctant, as we have shown above, to use 'Sabbatarian' language about Sunday, the Lord's Day.<sup>86</sup>

The importance of friendship and the quality of one's friends was a significant plank of the Sect's understanding both of prudence and community in maintaining and developing 'Vital Religion'. This can be seen not only in Thornton's comment to Grant (quoted above), but also in the journals and letters of Wilberforce. Regularly he wrote of wasted social occasions and meals where there was no 'rational' conversation but only distraction. In May 1806 he wrote in his journal of a particular evening as not being used well, just looking at some books and talking with William and 'John'. He records that he had forgone exercises which help the soul: 'the fault arose from my not watching unto prayer i.e. carefully looking out for all proper opportunities to worship God & of cultivating a spiritual Taste.'<sup>87</sup>

The question of companions is raised in letters from Wilberforce's third son, Samuel. He wrote from Oriel College, University of Oxford in 1823 (aged 18), 'at Oriel there are not perhaps about two or three men whom

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<sup>85</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, p 25.

<sup>86</sup> This contrasts with the picture in Ian Bradley's *The call to Seriousness* pp 183 ff. Bradley adduces significant material for his view but our examination of the primary sources indicates that, for the Clapham children at least, his picture is much overstated.

<sup>87</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence c 42/3/1806.

you can call really religious, a great proportion of moral hopeful good sons of men'.<sup>88</sup> He pointed out to his father that Robert (his elder brother) had a large circle of friends and requested advice on the type of companions he should cultivate. He went on:

Again the men [word unclear] who are most religious belong (I believe) to Magdalen & St Edmund's Hall and are very very low by birth and equally vulgar in manners, feeling and conduct. Would you have me form acquaintance with these?<sup>89</sup>

In his correspondence he constantly appealed to his 'Papa' to write at length on this issue.

#### ANALYSIS

We will see in the next chapter that for the founders of Clapham an association with the Faith had been part of their education both in childhood and youth. Yet for them a significant change occurred which instructed their minds, warmed their hearts and enlivened their wills. While they were convinced of a view that grace was the basis of salvation they also expressed the need to see and perceive evidences. These were not the evidences of which Wesley had spoken<sup>90</sup>, ecstatic manifestations, but a conversion followed by a 'godly life' lived in subjection to the

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<sup>88</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence c51 21/6/1823.

<sup>89</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence c51 21/6/1823.

<sup>90</sup> John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley: enlarged from original mss., with notes from unpublished diaries, annotations, maps, and illustrations*, Ed. Nehemiah Curnock, Charles H Kelly, London, No Publication Date, Vol V, pp 469 – 472, [http://openlibrary.org/works/OL996934W/The\\_works\\_of\\_the\\_Rev.\\_John\\_Wesley](http://openlibrary.org/works/OL996934W/The_works_of_the_Rev._John_Wesley) Accessed 26 September 2013; Cragg, *The Church in the Age of Reason*, p 144: <http://artsweb.bham.ac.uk/aanderson/Publications/origins.htm>

Scripture. This approach is described in Meacham as he speaks of Thornton's teaching:

Faith came with conversion and regeneration as a servant of God and Christ; faith remained with the conduct of a good and holy life. ... Conversion alone did not bring ultimate salvation. ... 'No one is on the road to Heaven,' Thornton once told a women's Bible class, 'who is not striving against her besetting sin, has not a tender conscience and is not watching and praying and humbling herself before God on account of it.' Religion, he felt, 'must appear in the life; it should not altogether be hid in the heart.' ... Man was free to live as a Christian; he himself determined if he went to heaven.<sup>91</sup>

Meacham's final comment is too strong. From our analysis one ought not to conclude, as starkly as Meacham has, that a person 'himself determined if he went to heaven'. Yes, there is a semi-Pelagian tone to both Wilberforce and Thornton. Pelagius, a British monk of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, taught that a person was free to choose or deny salvation and thus that person's action contributed to and was determinative of their salvation. While many evangelicals held a similar position, there seems in the Clapham community to be a slightly ambivalent commitment to

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<sup>91</sup> Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham*, p 19.

prevenient divine action. Although they are often considered to be 'mild Calvinists' this doctrine was not one they supported.<sup>92</sup>

Allied to this there was also a strong dislike of systematised theology. Simeon again provides a model, neither wishing to ally himself by descriptive title to either evangelical or any other 'party'.<sup>93</sup> It was also a characteristic of Thornton, who, despite the presence in English Church life of Socinian or Unitarian theology, as we have noted above, wrote:

'As to the word, Trinity,' he wrote 'for peace sake I should be glad to reject. The higher Calvinistic points, not conceiving them very essential and having seen much mischief arise from too much earnestness about them, I do not very much concern myself with.'<sup>94</sup>

There is even a possible spark of Neo-Platonism in the way he speaks:

Man is not a beast, wrote Thornton, who merely eats, drinks, and then dies. We come from God and through Christ we can return to Him. 'We have a spark of immortality within us. We are to endure for ever and ever.'<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 6.

<sup>93</sup> Alexander C. Zabriskie, 'Charles Simeon: Anglican Evangelical', *Church History*, 9/2 (June 1940).

<sup>94</sup> Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham*, p 25.

<sup>95</sup> Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham*, p 13.

Yet the manuscripts and published material, which we have examined, are not systematic theology. They are memoir<sup>96</sup>, letter<sup>97</sup>, journal<sup>98</sup> or, as we have described above, pastoral theology<sup>99</sup>. It is fair to their authors to describe their overall tone as one which depends on the work of God both in history (the life, death and resurrection of Christ) and in their own lives. They saw this as requiring an energetic, consistent, intellectual and pious response on their part.

#### A POSSIBLE TRADITION?

'Vital Religion' was a serious personal orientation of life encompassing all of one's being and circumstances. It involved a rigorous piety, a constant self-assessment, a pursuit of truth and a heartfelt acceptance of one's sin, the atonement and judgment to come. It was disciplined but not ascetic except insofar as social activities (theatre, opera, racing, etc.) moved one away from the prudent use of one's time. It was entered by an act of the will, by conversion of the heart's focus. While lived in society and while it involved regular church attendance, it was essentially individual.

While the faith of the Clapham fathers was markedly individual they nevertheless saw that it was incumbent upon them to engage in the public sphere. Their faith position critically informed their behaviour and

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<sup>96</sup> These include Henry Thornton's *Journal* (1795) and *Memoir* (the manuscripts of which are held in the University of Cambridge Library, 7674/I/R, 7674/I/I) and the published version of James Stephen's *Memoir*, the manuscript of which is held in the British Library.

<sup>97</sup> William Wilberforce Correspondence (manuscripts) Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

<sup>98</sup> William Wilberforce journals (manuscripts) held in the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

<sup>99</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*.

attitudes in their civic role. Their view of Providence was such that every action of the nation, as we will be shown with Thornton, came under the scrutiny of God. This 'public responsibility' was inculcated in their children, as we shall see. Yet can such an individualised faith, as understood by the heads of the Clapham households, be transferred intact from one generation to the next? Is it necessary in order to be truly Christian that this *experience*, as understood by the Clapham fathers, be recreated in each successive generation? Will the same *experience* provide a basis to satisfy the basis for an articulate, intelligent, personal faith responding to the issues of its own time? In the next chapter we will examine and assess the faith journeys of our principal subjects, Henry Thornton, William Wilberforce and James Stephen.



## **Chapter 2**

### **'Conversion'? The Religious Experience of Wilberforce, Thornton & Stephen**

Life characterised by 'vital religion' was what the heads of the Clapham households most desired for their children. As we have seen in chapter 1, entry to salvation was seen to be by way of the experience of the 'great change', Bebbington's conversionism. Yet would the experiences of the parents, if simply replicated in the children, prove a sufficient basis for a truly Christian response to their own age? Were the environments in which the children matured and the questions which they faced significantly different to those of their parents? What, in fact, led the parents to the position, which in maturity, they held?

We have seen in the last chapter the mature position held by our primary subjects: the position of leading members of the 'Clapham Sect' on the issue of religion and the faith centred on a deep personal commitment to 'vital religion'. But what was it that led them to hold this position? One cannot understand the actions of their children without first appreciating what led the fathers, in particular, to hold and deport themselves in their Evangelical faith.

Each of the three families upon which this thesis focuses had a 'founder' with a unique story; yet the 'founders' had a common or very similar development. While they came to the point by a slightly different route, each adopted a faith position which involved a sense of sin, a commitment to radical self-assessment, and a personal reliance upon the death of

Jesus as atonement. In each case, while there is a strong intellectual component, it is the will and the affections which are central. Yet did their evangelical 'conversion' experience clearly cut them off from their past religious position?

They, themselves, give us an unusual opportunity to answer such a question, and also how they wanted their children to understand their religious convictions. Each of our subjects recorded a 'memoir'<sup>1</sup>, the ostensible purpose of which seems to have been to address such issues. Indeed, two of them – those written by James Stephen and Henry Thornton – were said to be specifically for the benefit of their children. While biographical they focus upon the value of their reflections for the benefit of their children. They are not self-justifying public presentations; they are intended for a particular familial audience. Only two have been printed and that by later generations (Wilberforce's in his biography by his sons, and James Stephen's some 125 years after his death). While using them in this chapter we will have cause to return to them when we consider the desire of the parents for their children (Chapter 4).

A primary question which we must consider in this chapter is, were any or all of them 'converted' in the sense of Wilberforce's 'great change'? And if so, from what were they 'converted'? A 'conversion' experience as normative became the *sine qua non* of the belief expressed in Clapham

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Thornton, manuscript held in the library of the University of Cambridge, Commenced 1795, MSS/7674/1/R; James Stephen, (1758-1832), *The Memoirs of James Stephen written by himself for the benefit of his children* (1954) (this was written in his later years and not contemporaneously with the events narrated); a memoir by William Wilberforce included as an appendix in Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce* 1 pp 380-384.

and evangelicals, generally, as the starting point of 'true religion'. In looking at the religious experience of each of our subjects we will try to identify the critical notes of that experience and compare these to the stated position we have seen in Chapter 1.

There has been much sociological, psychological and theological research, especially in the twentieth century, on the issue of 'conversion'. We will survey this literature later in this chapter. There has been a wide variety of approaches and results. Very influential in recent historical understanding of 'conversion' is seeing it in terms of the narrative in which it is described by the person who experiences it. For example, Anne Stott wrote concerning the way people have expressed Wilberforce's understanding of his 'conversion':

It would be a mistake, however, to see this as an unproblematic description of the rebirth of a soul. Far from being straightforward narrative, life stories are sifted and filtered over the years and given a framework that interprets what at the time can seem an inchoate jumble of events. The template of Wilberforce's understanding of his experience was provided by the spiritual autobiography, a genre that flourished in the religious revival of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

When we have examined the material and seen what Wilberforce and his contemporaries thought, we will return to the way in which this may be

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Stott, *Wilberforce : family and friends* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p 24.

assessed. We will also suggest an alternative mode of understanding Wilberforce's experience which will, in the final chapter (Conclusions and Trajectories), suggest a modification to 'What is an Evangelical?'

I intend to examine Henry Thornton's, William Wilberforce's and James Stephen's personal journeys to establish the basis upon which they held their mature position. I will begin, also, to expose some features which are relevant in their children's different religious position and affection.

#### HENRY THORNTON

Henry Thornton provides a significant starting point as he was the instigator of the Clapham arrangement. In January 1795 at the age of 35, Henry Thornton began a private journal. It is the manuscript of this journal, held in the University of Cambridge Library, which has been used in this study.<sup>3</sup> I will also use a memoir he wrote for his children which is also held in the Library at Cambridge. Both of these are original manuscripts. The pagination for the memoir is in pencil most likely added by E M Forster in whose possession both the journal and memoir were when deposited in the manuscript section of the Library of Cambridge University. The journal was intended to allow Thornton to reflect upon and improve his religious life. It resulted from the hearing of a sermon preached by the elder Henry Venn, father of John Venn, the Rector of Clapham.<sup>4</sup> Thornton heard the sermon in the beginning of that year,

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<sup>3</sup> Thornton, Thornton MSS/7674/1/R. & Henry Thornton, Cambridge, University of Cambridge, 7674/1/N.

<sup>4</sup> Historians traditionally refer to the three generations of Venns as the elder Henry Venn, John Venn of Clapham, and Henry Venn of CMS.

1795, and it generated his desire to live a more 'serious' life and it propelled him into a new behaviour of self-denial. Though the sermon itself seems to be unavailable, its content may perhaps be safely inferred from another of Henry Venn's works, *The complete duty of man: or, A system of doctrinal and practical Christianity*. It had become an evangelical classic; a new edition appeared in that same year,<sup>5</sup> and it was well calculated to inculcate serious convictions and self-sacrificing practice. Practical Christianity, beloved of Venn and of Wilberforce (as we saw in chapter 1) would become Thornton's main concern, too. It was Christianity designed for the Public Square.

Thornton maintained his journal over the following year, with some spaces of time, until his marriage in February 1796. In 1803 and 1810 he appended two further reflections.

Henry's father, John Thornton, was himself an Evangelical, a wealthy banker, a philanthropist, and a close friend of John Newton and the elder Henry Venn, two of the leading Evangelicals of the generation prior to our subjects. John Thornton was also the chief subscriber and the Patron<sup>6</sup> of the church built on Clapham Common which would become the centre of the Sect's activity. He lived on the Common, having moved from Hull to the metropolis, and his youngest son, Henry, later saw it as an ideal place

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Venn, *The complete duty of man: or, A system of doctrinal and practical Christianity*. (London & Edinburgh: J. Buckland; G. Keith 1795).

<sup>6</sup> The Patron of a church was the person, corporation or Office which could present (nominate) the incumbent of that parish or chapel to the Bishop of the Diocese in which it was found when a vacancy occurred.

to gather a group of influential Christian men to provide a nucleus for the work of the Gospel, as he perceived it, in England and beyond.

Henry had two brothers, Samuel and Robert, and all three became members of the House of Commons. In addition Samuel served as Governor of the Bank of England. While all were life-long members of the Church of England (at least until Robert's bankruptcy and flight to the USA) Henry was the 'serious Evangelical' among them.

Henry was elected to the House of Commons for Southwark in his early 20s. In describing his suitability for this role in his *Memoir* he wrote:

My advantages were these. First. I was trained in the idea that the world was corrupt and that I must differ from the world, if I would either satisfy my parents or secure my own salvation. I was indeed in some degree perplexed on the subject of religion, but I was persuaded that the New Testament taught principles altogether different from those of the world And that if Christianity was true I was undone if I lived and died like the multitude around me. I was moreover much afraid of wounding greatly the feelings of my parents, and acting on this twofold principle I feared to plunge into the company of men of the world even when I was in Parliament and when no other society of intelligent men was afforded me.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thornton, Thornton MSS/7674/1/R. p 21.

Having returned to his father's house at about the age of 19, he recorded that he had little knowledge of issues such as history, natural philosophy, literature, mathematics or politics. He went on to write, 'Of religion I knew more than of any other subject but I was perplexed about it for my father was not a [reasoning - ?] man and my own mind continually suggested difficulties which I feared to state conceiving indeed that if I were to find courage to state them I should not obtain a satisfactory answer.'<sup>8</sup>

While he was perplexed in his late teens and early 20s he wrote in his *Memoir of Roman Catholicism*, which he had seen on a trip to Paris with his family at the age of 13:

We visited the Château Convent and stared at the monks who were dressed in woollen and talked with one of them who said that he had not tasted meat nor quitted his place of abode for between 40 and 50 years. I easily discerned the religion both of the monks & of the laity to be little else than superstition. <sup>9</sup>

He clearly saw a difference between the faith of his family and what he called the superstition of the French Catholics. It is also clear that he was motivated by the need to follow the New Testament directions for his salvation and was allowing that to direct his behaviour.

In an obituary published in the *Christian Observer* in February 1815 it was said of him that:

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<sup>8</sup> Thornton, Thornton MSS/7674/1/R. p 15.

<sup>9</sup> Thornton, Thornton MSS/7674/1/R. p 11.

He loved to take no principle for granted which might be traced out into simpler elements: and his independence in pursuing such searches for himself, was not more remarkable than the patient and steady labour of thought with which he conducted them.<sup>10</sup>

The author proceeded:

Although our deceased friend had the benefit of a religious education, yet he early betook himself to an earnest deliberate, and dispassionate enquiry upon the subject of religion; an enquiry prosecuted, I have no doubt, with all the accuracy, and judicious balancing of opposite possibilities, which formed a distinguishing feature of his mind.<sup>11</sup>

The author said that the doctrines Thornton embraced with a whole heart were those of the Church of England but that he 'sincerely attached himself ... to all those who might prefer a different creed',<sup>12</sup> an interesting allusion perhaps to the warm relations which some Clapham Evangelicals (especially Wilberforce) had with Quakers, Dissenters and Methodists, which, in turn, helps to explain their wide influence in public affairs.

His journal, however, does not seem to have the characteristic of broad-mindedness referred to in the obituary quoted above. While there is

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<sup>10</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/I/69, an extract from the *Christian Observer* February 1815, the text of a sermon preach on the Sunday after Henry Thornton's funeral on the text Malachi 3.17 at Clapham. The preacher is not recorded but since John Venn is mentioned in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person it is unlikely to have been him. p 4.

<sup>11</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/I/69 p 7.

<sup>12</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/I/69 p 7.



discussion of doctrine the journal is rather a reflection and analysis of the behaviour of its author against a known standard.

In this journal Thornton was focused, one might even say obsessed, with four issues: self-denial, the control of one's imagination, religious duty, by which he meant prayer and reading, and the need for a character of serious disposition.

A particular concern with his motivation as a 'public person' brings together several of the issues above. He was constantly troubled by the possibility that his actions, even his religious and philanthropic actions, may have been motivated by or resulted in vanity and an unjustified reputation as a serious person. He constantly, over the year, berated himself with this possibility.

To this was allied the issue of his imagination. This matter is often connected with his belief that he 'lies abed'<sup>13</sup> too often, waking about seven but not getting up until eight or eight thirty. He spoke of his imagination being evil but never discloses the nature of that which impinges upon his mind. He wrote, 'In my sensual thoughts and imaginations I am far from having learnt self-denial and I trace the most dreadful evil to this source.'<sup>14</sup>

This issue of evil thoughts comes up regularly throughout the journal. In the journal he wrote, '... for my imagin (*sic*) is my strong enemy'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 7.

<sup>14</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 7.

<sup>15</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 98.

Evangelicals were suspicious of what they called 'the imagination'. For example, the archetypal evangelical, Jonathan Edwards, used the specific word 'imagination' almost universally in his writings to refer to delusion.<sup>16</sup> While I can find no evidence that, by 1795, Henry Thornton was familiar with Edward's works, it is evident that he found his imaginings to be unhelpful to his desire to be a 'serious person'. Yet just what so haunts him is not clear. It could be sexual thoughts or thoughts about power or prestige. He gives little hint of the particular issue and it comes up in various contexts. It is often referred to in connection with rising late. Power, prestige and vanity are mentioned separately as well. When we examine his desire for his children, we will see his own reflection on the vices that the young, especially young men (youths), are easily exposed to and influenced by, as he perceives he was himself. In his memoir he wrote:

He [his father] did not choose ever to accompany his wife and children to the seaside or to Harrogate or Tunbridge places which we much frequented in our youth: his taste lay another way & perhaps he indulged it too much for we were exposed when in those places to many temptations of which my mother and sister wouldn't know nothing.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Edwards, *Affections*, Yale Works of Jonathan Edwards, 2, pp.33, 149.

<sup>17</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/N, p 3.

As he approached marriage he felt himself to be in more control of this area of self-discipline. He wrote 'rising early – my time & temptations having in many respects been better regulated'.<sup>18</sup>

The question of self-denial is paramount in his journal. Staying in bed, dining too well, enjoying the company of friends and their reputation all figured in connection with self-denial. Yet the 'tenor' is almost as if 'denial' is a valuable thing in itself. There is even a sense of 'Franciscan' asceticism about the act. This theme of self-denial flows through the whole of the journal. It is even seen in his understanding of philanthropy. He records that he has spent or given too much so that he was '4 or 5000£ poorer' than in the previous year.<sup>19</sup> His largesse is even seen as a lack of self-control. This too must be made subject to the overall demands made by being a suitable 'serious person'.

He wrote often of being 'more serious' both in thought and behaviour. On the 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1795, at the beginning of his journal, he wrote:

I think I have discovered that my religion consists more in  
active Duties & in efforts to edify & convert others & too little

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<sup>18</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 151. The fact that his improving discipline seems allied to his forthcoming marriage does not necessarily mean that the nature of the imaginations and temptations was sexual. Wolffe implies that there was a sexual tension in the time before his marriage. 'The indications of sexual frustration prior to marriage of leading British Evangelicals such as Henry Thornton and Lord Ashley form evidence that they were consistent in their profession of Chastity. John Wolffe, *The expansion of evangelicalism : the age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006) In footnote 71 he wrote 'but to evangelicals it was unregulated sexuality rather than sexuality *per se* that was sinful'.

<sup>19</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 13.

in serious self-examination, attentive reading of scriptures,  
prayer & secret self-denial.

in particular I wish to begin in some measure a new life of  
self-denial.<sup>20</sup>

Thornton, reflecting on his childhood and youth, wrote that he was 'born and brot [*sic*] up' under 'many religious advantages and some worldly disadvantages' and that he had not been ideally educated for his present role and station in life.<sup>21</sup> He wrote that he was enslaved by the fear of man and by 'the influence of fear & shame [next word undecipherable] adverse to a religion of stronger self-denial.'<sup>22</sup> He wrote he was too free in speech, overawed by superiors, overbearing as an employer, ambitious and vain in becoming rich and had too much worldly acceptance.

... for in consequence of the religious strictures of my parents  
and especially my father I learnt to escape [so?] little liberty  
and indulgence when young that a small degree of it  
continued long to control me.<sup>23</sup>

Again we see the stress placed on self-denial. The privileged life of a scion of a member of the wealthy new 'middle class' was to him a trap, a distraction from a 'serious life'. He gives the impression of his youth, its holidays (the Season) as almost 'dilettante'.

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<sup>20</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 1.

<sup>21</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 2.

<sup>22</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 2.

<sup>23</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 3.

There was however this strange inconsistency in my pious mother that she saw neither perceived evil nor future danger to her young people from the introduction of them into scenes of vanity and ~~temptation~~ dissipation nor from their being brought into habits of contact & familiar acquaintance with persons of little or no religion. She forbade, it is true the play, but she carried us to the opera a place perhaps still more beautiful and ensnaring. She initiated us into those balls which gradually led to an emulation to belong to every fashionable party & having supplied us with but little mental employment or rational pursuits we naturally became frivolous in our conversation & fond of the society of those men and women by whom our vanity was flattered. <sup>24</sup>

It is this that his desire for self-denial seeks to repair.

His was, as a son of the 'Sect' will say<sup>25</sup>, a practical religion. This is clear when we come to creedal or doctrinal issues.

Early in his journal, Thornton reveals his approach to doctrine. Having heard a sermon by Thomas Scott, the Bible Commentator, he felt himself helped to understand Calvinistic doctrine but found himself 'not entirely in agreement with Mr Scott'.<sup>26</sup> He now found himself comfortable with the doctrines of human corruption, the Holy Spirit (asking the Holy Spirit to

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<sup>24</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/N, p 6. The word "temptation" has been struck through in the original manuscript.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, p 308.

<sup>26</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 5.

put life into his prayers)<sup>27</sup> and dependence upon God. Yet, as we have seen in Chapter 1, of the Trinity he wrote, 'As to the word Trinity for peace sake I should be glad to reject it.'<sup>28</sup> And of Calvinistic doctrine:

The higher Calvinistic points not [conceive them very partial?]  
& having seen much mischief arise from too much  
earnestness about them I do not very much concern myself  
with them.<sup>29</sup>

I do not think that one should think of him as 'Socinian' or 'Unitarian'. While he was not accused of this error, his contemporary and fellow Claphamite, James Stephen, was so by his son, Sir James Stephen, as we shall see below. Henry Thornton's desire was rather for a personal or practical faith and he saw engaging intellectual disputation as a hindrance to communicating such practical 'serious religion' to others. It was not a lack of concern for truth, but of hindrances to one's affections and the will being directed toward God.

Among the evangelicals the debate about the relative role and merits of Arminianism and Calvinism was rife. Wesley and Whitefield had taken opposite positions on the subject. The 'Methodists' were essentially Arminian, while the majority of the first generation 'Evangelicals' (the evangelical members of the Established Church) were Calvinists.<sup>30</sup> On the whole, the latter reflected the discussions of the Synod of Dort (1618-

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<sup>27</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 5.

<sup>28</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 6.

<sup>29</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 6.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Neill, *Anglicanism* (3rd edn.; London: Mowbrays, 1965) p 192.

1619); a stress on election/predestination and the 'perseverance of the saints'.<sup>31</sup> In his book *Fathers of the Victorians* Brown asserted, 'Like his son Henry, John Thornton was a steadfast Calvinist'<sup>32</sup>, yet it is clear from the Journal that this was not the case. Thornton wished nothing to distract people from a personal response to the claims of Christ as he saw them. This desire of Thornton's, not to allow Calvinist doctrine to hinder evangelism, can be seen in his comment about his father's approach to his children during Henry's childhood and youth.

He erred as I think so far as doctrine was concerned chiefly in the article of predestination. He appeared to have so understood this doctrine as to think that he ought to forebear on some occasions from the use of means which were proper.

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It is clear from the beginning of this journal that his desire was for a practical rather than speculative faith and that it should be one in which the affections were disciplined and directed.

Of other doctrines he wrote that he 'held these [as noted above] and other commonly received doctrine of natural and revealed Religion in a manner little pointed at my own evil propensities'.<sup>34</sup> Although in January 1795 he professed the orthodox Evangelical faith yet he felt it had little

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<sup>31</sup> In the city of Dordrecht, 1618/19, a reformed assembly was held, at which there were Anglican observers, which, in rebuttal of Jacob Arminius's teaching declared what became known as the 'Five Points of Calvinism'.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, p 82.

<sup>33</sup> Thornton, Thornton MSS/7674/1/R. p 4.

<sup>34</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 6.

real affect upon his behaviour. He clearly did not think that the beliefs held had affected what he saw as faults in his behaviour. His desire to 'personalise' or 'experience' the things he clearly held were brought to the fore.

He outlined the issues that he felt needed to be addressed. These confirm the nature of the faith he saw as important. There were six items. 1. That he tended to 'lie idly in bed too long often', 2. That he was not being steady and punctual in reading Scripture and especially neglecting the Old Testament, 3. That he was idle in prayer with no previous self-examination, 4. That he had sensual thoughts and imagination to which he traces 'the most dreadful evil', 5. That he procrastinated and paid partial attention in business, pleasing himself in the things he does, 6. And the theme which has been echoed in each of the others, and which we have explored above, a lack of self-denial of which he wrote that it leaves him 'open to temptation' and threatens his very safety as a Christian and at this point he quotes Christ's injunction to take up one's cross.<sup>35</sup>

On 14<sup>th</sup> January 1795 John Venn, the Rector of Clapham, preached on the Parable of the Talents from Matthew's Gospel and Thornton records that Venn said that it was 'the Father of all doctrine of religion'. With this

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<sup>35</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, pp 7 – 9.



Thornton agreed, although he diverged with Venn on the 'Calvinistic doctrines'.<sup>36</sup>

The parable of the Talents (Matthew chapter 25. 14-30) would have easily resonated in the mind of a banker. It concerns the use made of various amounts of 'money' given to several servants. The point generally made of the parable is the way in which each servant has worked with what his master has given him to the master's benefit. Has one acted wisely with what God has given one? Will one be seen to have been prudent given the expectations God has for one? It is a call for self-analysis and action, the very issues Thornton was considering. In the 1803 *Memoir* for his children he wrote that they should be 'looking to the approbation of God rather than to that of men, to lay out their talents whatever they may be for the public good and to the glory of him who gave them.'<sup>37</sup>

Thornton seems to mean that the essence of religion is to be found in the way one uses the particular abilities and advantages one has been given to further the cause of what he understands to be the prime aim of life. For him this appears to be the development of a serious life in oneself and the conversion of others. Here we see what was described in the sermon preached on the Sunday after his death 'that although he was very

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<sup>36</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 13.

<sup>37</sup> Thornton, 7674/1/N. p 24.

speculative, or (if I may use the word) philosophical turn of mind his religion was wholly practical'.<sup>38</sup>

Even his lack of historical knowledge Thornton puts down to lack of self-denial in his youth which for him meant that he had not then read sufficiently nor appropriately.

Thornton particularly wished to discipline himself concerning his delight in the estimations people had of him. All such estimations, either enjoyed or feared, worried him. He wrote, concerning an unnamed disaster for Great Britain:

I wish to be a true prophet in my political predictions & am secretly pleased to hear such news as I had said w<sup>d</sup> come even tho this news is unfavourable to the Country – I draw I fear almost as much satisfaction from my Prediction being fulfilled as I suffer pain from the evil that has befallen my country – O how corrupt is the heart of man, how corrupted also chiefly thro this principle of vanity! ... God knows I fight against these feelings but to suppress them is to gain a great victory.<sup>39</sup>

This battle between a desire to be an appropriate public person and to maintain a pure motivation pervades the diary. Leaving the public arena seems never to have been considered.

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<sup>38</sup> A printed copy of extract from the 'Christian Observer' February 1815, Thornton Papers A7674/I/69 Manuscript Collection, Library of the University of Cambridge, p 8.

<sup>39</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 33.

Allied to these issues in his view of faith is his fear that God will bring a judgement upon him and upon the nation. In his personal case he wonders if his failures in personal religion will bring about the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, in Chapter 1, with William Wilberforce this is a characteristic of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit held by the Claphamite Evangelicals, at least those we are examining. Thornton wrote:

The Scripture says Quench not the spirit – Grieve not the spirit & and his operations are represented to be of such a nature as ought to lead us to be exceedingly in terror & fearful of causing his influence to be withdrawn <sup>40</sup>

This idea of the Holy Spirit coming and going in the Christian life opens up the possible accusation that the Clapham Sect believed that their continuance in 'true religion' was dependent not on God's grace alone but upon their works of faith. If this is true, and it seems to be so from Thornton's writings and, as we have seen, of Wilberforce's writings,<sup>41</sup> then not only are they clearly different in their belief to the 'Calvinistic Evangelicals' of the Established Church, such as William Romain and William Grimshaw<sup>42</sup>, but clearly they have moved into a semi-Pelagian

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<sup>40</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 43.

<sup>41</sup> Several times over in the journal, which covers the year 1795 until his wedding in February 1796 he indicates that William Wilberforce, who has been his companion in Clapham and Parliament was a source of great information and encouragement. Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, pp 123, 139 and also in his memoir Thornton MSS/7674/1/?, p 32 written in 1809 – 'My intimacy with Mr Wilberforce has had an influence on many important events of my life.'

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Neill, *Anglicanism* (Revised . edn.; London [etc.]: Mowbrays, 1977) p 192.

view of salvation. Their belief seems to be that one's salvation is partly dependent upon one's own actions and not only on the death of Christ, although it would not be fair to say this was a consciously developed position.

Later in 1795 Thornton wrote:

Great pains sh<sup>d</sup> be taken not to do violence to cons<sup>ce</sup> or rather not to grieve the holy spirit by any [word scratched out] wilful toleration even of Employments which are good in the main though not befitting the time – I have lain very late in consequence of this.<sup>43</sup>

Thornton reinforced the importance of believing that the Spirit could be withdrawn. Earlier in 1795 he wrote concerning New Testament statements about the Holy Spirit:

his operations are represented to be of such a nature as ought to lead to be exceedingly in terror & fearful of causing his influence to be withdrawn. Some conceive their frames to be quite independent of all care & watchfulness in managing this point of [word unsure] & - I consider these persons (who are very confident & very numerous) to be most dangerously mistaken – They go contrary to my experience & I fear they seldom have much true comfort<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 105.

<sup>44</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 43.

Note again the primacy of experience. One must conclude that, for Thornton, there was an 'experience' of the absence of the Holy Spirit. The 'comfort' to which he refers cannot be an objective 'word' of the presence of the Holy Spirit but a subjective experience of his presence. It is unfortunate that this is not described, but our earlier citing of Cowper's hymns shows what the Evangelicals of Clapham thought.

Yet it was not just for himself and other individuals that he feared the present judgement of God. In reflecting on the fate, in 1795, of the Slave Bill in the Parliament he expressed a belief that the Parliament lacked judgement and that the country may suffer politically for its failure to pass the bill.<sup>45</sup> This may account for his comment earlier in the journal that, in certain discussions he had at his 'Business House', he was mistaken for a republican.<sup>46</sup> This view of Providence, as Boyd Hilton has pointed out<sup>47</sup>, affected all aspects of life; present experiences are the immediate judgement of God for the mode of one's life. This fits naturally with the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Century post-millennial view of Evangelicals.<sup>48</sup> To see Christians as subject to the effects of the Millennial reign of Christ was to see that period as one in which the experiences of life were, in a sense, 'probationary', to be managed in a way which showed one to be living as a 'vital Christian'. Later pre-millennial thought would see the negative experiences of this present life, not as 'probation' but as the 'birth pangs

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<sup>45</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 70.

<sup>46</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 54.

<sup>47</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people? : England, 1783-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) p 177.

<sup>48</sup> Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people?*, p 176.

of the Age to Come', the common experience of evil felt by all Christians as they live the experience of the Messiah's people.<sup>49</sup> The year, 1795, up until his marriage in February 1796, marked a turning point in his life.

From the foregoing one might be tempted to think of Thornton and others of his circle as what were called 'methodistical' or 'enthusiastical' by their contemporaries. This was clearly not his own estimation. He wrote in his Journal, 'read some of Mr Wats [*sic*] of the new [word undecipherable] – some of which seemed to me too methodist.'<sup>50</sup>

He appears, in the quotation below, to parallel the Countess of Huntingdon's Connection with the Methodists. He sees both the Methodists and the Huntingdon Connection as expressing the faith in a similar form which does not resonate with his own *experience*. Several times, in his journal, during the course of 1795, he had been critical of the Countess of Huntingdon's circle. In the early part of the journal he wrote of what he called the bigotry of the 'followers of Huntingdon.'<sup>51</sup> A little later he wrote of his dying housekeeper 'on the whole [she] has been preserved from the dangerous error of the Huntingdon party into which she had in some measure slid'.<sup>52</sup> In January 1796, writing of an unnamed person, he wrote:

having still fixed in Hunting<sup>dn</sup> of which I see the evil more &  
more – thank God my life has been toly [*sic*] free from [gt –

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<sup>49</sup> Hilton, *The age of atonement* .

<sup>50</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 84.

<sup>51</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 17.

<sup>52</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 30.

*great?*] sin and I hope a little improve partly in courage before the [*w<sup>d</sup>* –*world?*] & cander [*sic*] also – but I find myself carried further from the metodis<sup>tc</sup> world <sup>53</sup>

Thornton also criticised those for whom ‘enthusiasm’ is a mark of Divine presence.

that good man H<sup>d</sup> [*sic*] seems to mix Enthusiasm in his worldly concerns & hope for divine Direction.<sup>54</sup>

Unlike those he criticised, such as those of the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connection,<sup>55</sup> he sees himself as having progressed. On 20<sup>th</sup> September 1795 he wrote:

I think on the whole I have advanced lately in some things which I am the most desirous to improve in – especy (*sic*) in denying admition [*sic*] to evil thoughts – I am also getting more & more self-knowledge & more sens [*sic*] of what is my [*free?*] duty which I have a little mistaken in many particulars – the Extravagances of the Huntingdonians & the wickedness of the principles of some of them has taught me the duty of opposing boldly some that call themselves religious people & herewith I have learnt to oppose & contradict a little more honestly some that I think religious towards whom I feel some

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<sup>53</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 148.

<sup>54</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 115.

<sup>55</sup> He has several times in the course of the year been critical of the Countess of Huntingdon’s circle. In the early part of the journal he wrote of the ‘bigotry of the followers of Huntingdon...’ Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 98.

falsh (*sic*) shame & sinful fear – I have had some exercise of this sort with [name scratched out] Buchann - & some from on the [word unintelligible] with mcauly [*sic*<sup>56</sup>]& I have profited by his example ...<sup>57</sup>

Clearly, although it is experience which is critical to Thornton's perception of his relationship with God, it is not 'experience' which is perceived as 'enthusiastic' or what would be called by some today as 'charismatic'. Again we are led back into a deep personal private set of experiences paralleled by extensive personal scrutiny. Later authors, Chadwick, Cragg and Carter<sup>58</sup>, have followed Thornton's separation of 'Establishment Evangelicalism' from 'methodism' even if his contemporaries confused them. This separation of understanding will be important when we examine the next generation.

What then was Thornton's mature understanding of the faith which the year, 1795, of reflection and change produced? The journal breaks off on the evening before his wedding in February 1796, but on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1803 he wrote:

I see more & more that true Religion is [word scratched out] different from that Doctrinal thing which some make it – may it influence my heart my tempers my Conversation my

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<sup>56</sup> This is probably Zachary Macaulay who was a member of the Clapham Sect.

<sup>57</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 143.

<sup>58</sup> Carter, *Anglican evangelicals: Protestant secessions from the via media, c. 1800-1850*; Chadwick, *The Victorian church*; Cragg, *The church and the age of reason 1648-1789*, p 153.



particular & private conduct and may I find my Saviour to be my support both in life & in death & my portion in Eternity.<sup>59</sup>

He had earlier, in 1795, written:

The true pious [great?] consists much in a devout attention to Prayer, faith in the merits of X<sup>t</sup>, & an outwardly well regulated life, & a disposition to approve & praise good or seemingly good people & to regret and condemn the vices of the wicked & (what is fairly thought) inconsistent people.<sup>60</sup>

We see here, again, the wariness with which he approaches speculative doctrinal discussion, at least in his own mind. Again we are drawn to that private world which results in practical piety. His use of this diary and the tenor in which it is written confirms in part Boyd Hilton's statement that the Clapham evangelicals were 'enlightened, rationalist, and post-millennial'<sup>61</sup> in their approach. Yet it was not the rationalism of the Latitudinarians, but rather the use of one's mind reflecting both on Scripture and experience.

While the foregoing may lead us to think of Thornton as self-focused this is not the case. Early in 1795 in his journal he wrote 'God grant that I may neglect no opportunity for saving souls'.<sup>62</sup> We have already noted the nature of his philanthropy. In the obituary referred to above, the preacher

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<sup>59</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 163.

<sup>60</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 113.

<sup>61</sup> Hilton, *A Mad bad and Dangerous People*, p 176.

<sup>62</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 39.

said of his philanthropy that 'he acted not from romantic sensibility, but from genuine feeling, directed by sound principle.'<sup>63</sup>

His faith practice was not disconnected from the life and discipline of the Church of England. He was conscious of the significance of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. He wrote in his journal under the heading 'Good Friday', 'I am now preparing to receive the Sac<sup>t</sup> which from various causes I have for a long time not done – but there has been too little preparation – I trusted the last ng [night] to my having more time this morning –'.<sup>64</sup> He then proceeds to enumerate his failings at length. This intensity of self-examination and of personal discipline is seen again when on 13 September, 1795 he records that he turned to his journal because he was about to receive the Sacrament and so he had 'worked hard and denied myself more'.<sup>65</sup> As we have seen in chapter 1 with Wilberforce, and will see again later in this chapter, we are unable to determine with any exactitude a theology of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper for Thornton. Yet as has been observed for him, like all the first and second generation Evangelicals<sup>66</sup>, the Sacrament was important.

### *Assessment*

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<sup>63</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/69, p 6.

<sup>64</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 101.

<sup>65</sup> Thornton MSS/7674/1/R, p 142.

<sup>66</sup> Neill, *Anglicanism*, p 192. Referring of one of the early Evangelicals, Stephen Neill wrote 'With typical evangelical regard for the Holy Communion, Grimshaw introduced monthly Communion, a rarity in Hanoverian England.' In response to a question about Grimshaw's relationship to Methodist by the Archbishop of York, Neill recorded that he replied, that when he arrived in his parish that 'He had found 12 communicants', but now 'in winter, between three and four hundred, according to the weather in summer sometimes nearer twelve hundred.'

We referred earlier to what Thornton indicated, namely, in his late teens and early 20s, a certain perplexity concerning the faith. Between this period and the commencement of the journal at age 35 we know little of his thinking and reflecting. From his journal at the age of 35 he appears to have had no known problems doctrinally, but rather was dissatisfied with the practical expression of his faith. Although the picture in his obituary speaks of an analysis, a rational analysis, which he undertook, it seems unlikely that the journal represents this process. It was rather a pursuit of the internalisation of his faith so that it might find fuller expression in his life. In Bebbington's terms, was there 'a conversion'? One is on safer ground to say that Henry Thornton's faith matured over the period from his late teens to his mid-30s. By his death in 1815 his faith could publicly be described in the following way:

His religion was a devotional nature. [Not shallow enthusiasm but] ... he equally kept aloof from the error of men who would resolve all religion into a mere system of dry and cold reason. His too was a religion of reason, but it was also a religion of the heart.<sup>67</sup>

From our examination this summary seems to reflect Thornton. The characteristics seen in Thornton's religious self-understanding are his commitment to a practical religious demeanour and to rigorous self-

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<sup>67</sup> From the obituary published in the *Christian Observer* February, 1815, extract in the Thornton MSS/7674/1/69, p 8.

examination. As we shall see this accords with the attitude and values of the other two we will be particularly investigating.

#### WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

Most commonly when William Wilberforce's faith journey is described, it is taken up from the point he himself seemed to see as its beginning, namely the Summer journey on the Continent which he took with Isaac Milner, a Fellow of Queens' College, University of Cambridge.<sup>68</sup> Yet this is to discount an earlier 'evangelical phase' in his life. At the age of 8 his father died and soon after he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle (a wealthy but childless couple) in Wimbledon, then outside the metropolis.<sup>69</sup>

They were staunch Evangelicals and while there he was exposed to the preaching and writings of both the Evangelicals and the Methodists. It is in this context that he first met the Rev'd John Newton whom he would later, as an adult, consult about his spiritual future. Over a few years this worried both Mrs R Wilberforce (his mother) and his paternal grandfather and so he was removed from that household and returned to Hull. His experience and personal position at that time can be seen from the correspondence with his aunt and uncle. On 15 October 1771, aged 12, he wrote to his aunt, who had gone to Bath to take the waters for health reasons:

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<sup>68</sup> John Charles Pollock, *Wilberforce* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978) pp 32 – 39.

<sup>69</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce* pp 4-5. He passes briefly over William's time with his aunt and uncle.

I hope however you can hear the Gospel there and that is everything. Oh sometimes I have comfortable Seasons in prayer: Some time I can taste the sweetness of Redeeming Love; and when I do then I should not fear anything.<sup>70</sup>

Note here that, as we have seen with Henry Thornton, there is a visceral experience of God, 'the taste ... of redeeming love'.

On 9<sup>th</sup> August 1772 he wrote,

One of the greatest misfortunes I had whilst at Hull was not being able to hear the blessed Word of God, as my Mama would not let me go to High Church on a Sunday afternoon.<sup>71</sup>

And again in August 1773, 'As this is the Lord's Day I long much to hear the Gospel preached and I wish I was with you.'<sup>72</sup>

In writing to his uncle on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1771 Wilberforce commented on the books he was reading: Venn's *Duty of the Christian Man*, Hervey's *Meditations* and *A Drop of Honey*. In the same letter he describes, in effusive terms like those found in *A Practical View*, having a clear, certain and personal relationship with Jesus and expounds upon the consequences of this situation.<sup>73</sup> He fears that while he stays in Hull his

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<sup>70</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence c51. p 96.

<sup>71</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, C 51. p 109.

<sup>72</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, C 51. p 108-9.

<sup>73</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, C 51. p 98-99.

family may compromise his position as a Christian by forcing him to attend the plays with them.<sup>74</sup>

It is quite clear that in evangelical terms this young man, at least until he reached the age of 15, perceived himself to be and was seeking to function as a 'vital Christian'. William Hague wrote thus of what he calls the loss of Wilberforce's Methodist sentiments,

The Methodism had been drawn out of him. In 1774, with his mind no longer on his aunt or uncle, the religious sentiments expressed in his letters ceased.<sup>75</sup>

William later wrote of himself during this period of his life,

[That] abt 12 E years spent in sin & folly [word undecipherable] from abt 1771 or 1772 to abt y<sup>e</sup> close of 1785. ... God mercifly kept me from open Shame in [word undecipherable] even then ...<sup>76</sup>

Yet in 1773, as we have seen above, he was still writing to his uncle in what can only be called evangelical terms. The effect of his time with his aunt and uncle seems to have endured slightly longer than he remembered and we will suggest later that the period after his time with his aunt and uncle may have helped to develop or shape his doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>74</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, C 51. p 108.

<sup>75</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 19.

<sup>76</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, C 42. p 4.

It is worth noting here that, upon reflection, William Wilberforce saw himself during the period of 1771–1785 as a 'professing Christian'. It is to be noted here with Wilberforce that, as we have seen with Henry Thornton and will see with James Stephen, a perception that God had exercised, in their 'pre-conversion' lives, a significant protective hand.

He went up to St John's College, Cambridge, and enrolled on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1776. He described himself as living a life typical of his fellows. In 1822 in answer to a letter from Dr Frewen who had been a Fellow of St John's College while Wilberforce was there he wrote, 'You cannot but remember, what I can never review but with humiliation and shame;' and goes on to write, 'yet in justice to myself it is only fair to state, that at least as much pains had been taken by my nearest relatives and guardians to make me dissipated and vain'.<sup>77</sup> But it is clear that the more dissolute activities spoken of concerning undergraduates at the Universities were avoided. 'God had left me to myself I should have disgraced my Xtian profess[?] & have ruined my character ever.'<sup>78</sup> In a letter written after his death by a fellow undergraduate (quoted in Stott's *Wilberforce*) we read:

Wilberforce, with all his merits, lived at that time too much for self-indulgence in habits of idleness & amusement. By his talents, his wit, his kindness, his social powers, his universal acceptability, & his love of society, he speedily became the center (sic) of attraction to all the clever & the idle of his own

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<sup>77</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, V, p 145.

<sup>78</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, C 42. p 4.

College & of other Colleges. His room swarmed with them from the time he arose, generally very late, till he went to bed. He talked & he laughed and he sang & he amused and interested everyone. Nor was there wanting the great Yorkshire Pie or the jar of pickled Puffins or what ever else the good thing was, to console the hungry visitor.<sup>79</sup>

She noted further that, 'I was never conscious of any immoral conduct on his part ... I was never aware of such conduct being then imputed to him'.<sup>80</sup> His life seems then to have been that of a *bon vivant* and even what Evangelicals may see as a *dilettante*: a life depreciated in *A Practical View*. Yet we can see here, as I have written above, that even at University he considered himself to have a 'Christian profession'.

At the age of twenty-one he entered Parliament as member for Hull by the usual methods of entertaining and paying the electors, to obtain election to the House of Commons. Hague notes that in an election where each elector had two votes Wilberforce had as many votes as the two other candidates combined. He went on to write 'This meant that the vast majority must have cast one of their votes for him. It also meant a very large bill. Wilberforce noted "the election cost me 8 or 9000 £".' Reflecting on the reasons for his success Hague wrote, 'His charm, sociability, obvious intelligence and wealth had won through decisively. Now he would

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<sup>79</sup> Stott, *Wilberforce : family and friends*, p 16.

<sup>80</sup> Stott, *Wilberforce : family and friends*, p 17.



take these advantages into the far bigger world of Westminster.<sup>81</sup> At this stage his friendship with William Pitt, the Younger, commenced in their time at Cambridge developed and both at Goostree's Club and at Wilberforce's house at Wimbledon they became intimate friends.<sup>82</sup> He was well known in London's social and clubland circle. Wilberforce was developing as an active member of parliament and was an independent. Even after siding against Lord North's handling of the American War, he did not actively align himself with either political grouping, Whigs or Tories. Hague noted that the Prince of Wales (later George IV) would go anywhere to hear Wilberforce sing.<sup>83</sup> Yet despite living the life of typical upper middle class *bon vivant* Hague noted, 'But it does seem that, even at this stage, Wilberforce lived with more care and thoughtfulness than most of his social companions.'<sup>84</sup> Speaking of Wilberforce's early life in London, Hague wrote,

Wilberforce was already displaying an extraordinary facility, which he would maintain throughout his life, of being careful about his own behaviour yet simultaneously sought-after for his company and humour. As his Cambridge friend Gerard Edwards, who remained a close companion in London, put it even at this time, 'I thank the Gods that I live in the age of

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<sup>81</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce* P 36.

<sup>82</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 47.

<sup>83</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 41.

<sup>84</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 41.

Wilberforce and that I know one man at least who was both moral and entertaining.<sup>85</sup>

In the Summer recess of Parliament in 1785 he undertook a journey through France with his mother and sister. The male companion whom he took on this journey was Isaac Milner who had been usher when Wilberforce attended Hull Grammar School in his childhood. Milner was later to be President of Queens' College, Cambridge (he was at that time a Fellow of that College) and Dean of Carlisle. Milner had been asked, since the person originally expected to travel with William's party, was suddenly unavailable.

It would indicate a strange insensibility to the ways of gracious providence, if I were to suffer the circumstance of my having Dr Milner for my fellow-traveller to pass without observation. ...

To my surprise Dr Bernard declined accepting my proposal, and I next invited Dr Milner to accompany me, chiefly prompted by his acknowledged talents and acquirements, and by my experience of his cheerfulness, good nature, and powers of social entertainment. It was the more important to me to secure such a fellow traveller, because we were to have a tete-à-tete in my carriage.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 42.

<sup>86</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, Appendix, Memorandum dictated by Mr. Wilberforce, I, p 380.

He pointed out that Milner's religious position had no bearing on his choice.

They travelled through France to Nice. Because of Parliamentary business being pursued by William Pitt, the Younger, now First Lord of the Treasury (Prime Minister – although this title was not officially used until the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) Wilberforce needed to return to London. He decided he and Milner would do so, leaving his mother and sister in Nice to await their return. By chance Wilberforce picked up a copy of Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*<sup>87</sup>.

In the biography written by Wilberforce's sons this event is described in the following manner,

Just before this journey, Mr Wilberforce took up casually a little volume, (Doddridge's Rise and Progress of Religion,) which Mr Unwin, Cowper's correspondent, had given to the mother of one amongst his fellow-travellers, and casting his eye over it hastily, asked Milner what was its character. – "It is one of the best books ever written," was his answer; "let's take it with us and read it on our journey."<sup>88</sup>

During what proved to be a longer stay in London than was expected (until June 1785 rather than March) his sons record both a levity in dining and dancing as well as a range of serious discussions. Yet, of the latter, they wrote, 'But these thoughts were yet entirely speculative; exercising

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<sup>87</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 21.

<sup>88</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, I, p 76,

no apparent influence upon his conduct.’<sup>89</sup> At the end of June 1785, Parliament having risen, he and Milner resumed their journeys through Europe travelling to Genoa to which the ladies had resorted. They then travelled through Switzerland to London.

On this second journey with Milner their religious conversations continued over the reading of the Greek New Testament. In a *Memorandum dictated by William Wilberforce*, undated and appended to the first volume of the *Life of William Wilberforce*, which we have quoted above, we find:

I found on conversing with my friend on the subject of religion, that his principles and views were the same with those of the clergymen who were called Methodistical: this led to renewed discussion; and Milner (never backward in avowing his opinions, or entering into religious conversation) justified his principles by referring to the word of God. This led to our reading the Scriptures together, and by degrees I imbibed his sentiments; though I must confess with shame, that they long remained merely as options assented to by my understanding, but not influencing my heart.<sup>90</sup>

Yet this intellectual assent moved him forward by logical necessity. He continued:

At length, however, I began to be impressed with a sense of the weighty truths, which were more or less the continual

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<sup>89</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, I, p 80.

<sup>90</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce.*, Vol I, p 381.

subjects of our conversation. I began to think what folly it was, nay, what madness, to continue month after month, nay, day after day, in a state in which a sudden call out of the world, which I was conscious might happen at any moment, would consign me to never-ending misery while at the very same time I was firmly convinced from assenting to the great truths taught us in the New Testament, that the offers of the gospel were universal and free, in short that happiness, eternal happiness, was at my option.<sup>91</sup>

William Hague, reflecting on E. B. Starbuck's *The Psychology of Religion*<sup>92</sup> outlines the possible workings of William Wilberforce's mind in the period between the intellectual and emotional 'conversion' to 'vital religion'. Hague wrote:

It is impossible to know what other subconscious forces pushed William Wilberforce that November into the agony of his conversion crisis. Such was the effect, he later wrote, of the 'sense of my great sinfulness in having so long neglected the unspeakable mercies of my God and saviour... that for months I was in a state of deepest depression... nothing which I have ever read in the accounts of others exceeded what I then felt.'<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce.*, I, p 381.

<sup>92</sup> Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The psychology of religion* (Contemp. sci. ser.; Lond., 1899).

<sup>93</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 82.

Hague then goes on to hypothesise.

Having attained the great heights of becoming a member for Yorkshire, but having no expectation of becoming a minister, did he reflect, at the age of 26, that his personal ambitions had already reached their limit? Was it that the excess of the London clubland he inhabited, with its gambling, womanising, gluttony and prostitution, had finally revolted him? Had the enormous amount of time he spent travelling, and the futility of his recent efforts in the Commons, given him a stronger than usual sense of waste and lack of purpose? When was it that having discovered that obtaining his ambition and satisfying all his material needs did not lead to satisfaction, he was predisposed to search for something which could represent for him the highest ambition of them all? By November 1785 some mixture of these influences, added to his early receptiveness towards religion, the guidance of Doddridge's writing, and the force of Milner's arguments produced in William Wilberforce a true conversion crisis.<sup>94</sup>

He concludes his analysis of this phase of William Wilberforce's life thus:

One study of religious conversion contends that once conversion is complete 'there is a sensation of liberation and victory, which the convert displays by a powerful and integral joy of the spirit'. The convert also has 'a sense more or less like the sense of vision or touch of nearness to God', and of an

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<sup>94</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 82.

'answering touch which thrills and recreates him'. By Easter 1786, Wilberforce was writing to his sister from Stock in Essex on a beautiful day: ' the day has been delightful. I was out before six... I think my own devotions become more fervent when offered in this way amidst the general chorus with which all nature seems to be swelling the song of praise and thanksgiving; and accept the time which has been spent at church and at dinner... and neither in the sanctuary nor at the table I trust, had I a heart unwarmed with gratitude to the giver of all good things.' Wilberforce had found his faith.<sup>95</sup>

There is much secondary literature chronicling and describing the conversion experiences of the early evangelicals. This traditional evangelical material is well known and understood given the present author's background and education in that tradition. In this thesis, though, I have sought to bring to bear the large amount of research into the assessment of conversion narratives in general on the 'conversion' self-narratives of our principal subjects found in the primary sources. The research covers both socio-psychological disciplines and exegetical and theological analysis of the New Testament documents over the past 120 years. It is the evangelical tradition that I have sought to re-examine in order to give a fresh insight into the changed faith stance of the second generation.

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<sup>95</sup> Hague, William Wilberforce, p 89.

Hague's use of Starbuck as a tool to analyse Wilberforce's emotional state in the period just before his conversion needs to be refined by other research perspectives, both psychological and sociological, as well as by theological analysis of conversion. Since James and Starbuck a great amount of research has been undertaken, both in psychology and sociology, on the issue of 'conversion'.<sup>96</sup>

James Beckford<sup>97</sup>, using accounts of British Jehovah's Witnesses and the published material concerning the 'official' position of the movement over time, showed that "... Witness' conversion accounts should be treated as skilful accomplishments of actors who have at their disposal the official version of their movements' rationale."<sup>98</sup> He further wrote:

The argument goes beyond the commonplace that converts often reproduce a rehearsed script, for it implies that the process may be subconscious and that there is a logic of congruence linking the features of the conversion account to, among other things, the group ideological rationale.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> William James, *The varieties of religious experience; a study in human nature* (New York etc.: Longmans, Green, and co., 1902), Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The psychology of religion* (3d edn.; London, New York,: The Walter Scott publishing co. C. Scribner's sons, 1911).

<sup>97</sup> James A Beckford, 'Accounting for conversion', *British Journal of Sociology*, 29/2 (1978).

<sup>98</sup> Beckford, 'Accounting for conversion', p 260

<sup>99</sup> Beckford, "Accounting for conversion." p 260.



In a 2011 article<sup>100</sup> concerning religious content and conversion narratives Ines Jindra concludes:

The interviews I conducted clearly reveal the appeal of different religious (*sic*) in this sample, not just on the telling of one's story, but as they relate to one's life course. In this way, the results of this study suggest that specific background factors (push) and religious content (pull) matter in conversion trajectories to various religious groups, that there is often a connection between the two.<sup>101</sup>

Jindra used narrative interviews with converts to Islam, Baha'i and Christianity, the sample consisted of "26 women and 24 men, 39 whites, six African-Americans, one Jewish person, one Puerto-Rican, One Iranian, one African, and one South African of Indian origin. The youngest interviewee was 19 years old and the oldest 95."<sup>102</sup>

As we have seen in Chapter 1 'conversion' was a fundamental tenet of Clapham Evangelicalism. For Wilberforce it was a necessary factor in becoming a 'serious Christian'. Piggin wrote concerning the background of prospective missionaries to India: 'And not the least of these critical theological beliefs was the evangelical convention that conversion was

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<sup>100</sup> Ines W Jindra, 'How religious Content Matters in Conversion Narratives to Various Religious Groups', *Sociology of Religion*, 72/3 (2011).

<sup>101</sup> Jindra, 'How religious Content Matters in Conversion Narratives', p 300.

<sup>102</sup> Jindra, 'How religious Content Matters in Conversion Narratives to Various Religious Groups', p 289.

essential'.<sup>103</sup> Piggin has identified at least part of the accepted 'narrative' which was expected among evangelicals. Yet for Wilberforce there had already been a *felt experience* of 'vital religion' which showed no 'conversion' component.

Eugene V. Gallagher in *Expectation and Experience*<sup>104</sup> examines a range of approaches and uses a variety of case studies to assess the issue of the study of religion and of conversion studies. He takes as his starting point William James' and Arthur Nock's analysis of the nature of conversion. Each approached the topic with a different definition and set of questions. He then looks at a variety of scholars and conversion experiences.

Virtually all of the thinkers considered in this book set out to study something called "conversion." It has become patently apparent, however, that few, if any, of them agree on the definition of the subject they supposedly have in common. As it turns out, all of them have delimited the phenomenon of conversion in such a way as to suit their interests. What they were looking *for* or what they were trying to *explain*, be it an individual experience, a social process, the activity of God in the world, or a process of historical change, decisively influenced what they would look *at*. Once they determined what they would look at, what they saw came as no surprise.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Stuart Piggin, *Making evangelical missionaries, 1789-1858 : the social background, motives and training of British Protestant missionaries to India* (Evangelicals & society from 1750 ; 2.; [Abingdon, Oxfordshire]: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1984) p 56.

<sup>104</sup> Eugene V. Gallagher, *Expectation and experience explaining religious conversion* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1990).

<sup>105</sup> Piggin, *Making evangelical missionaries*, p 148.

At this point it is helpful to turn to Piggin's analysis of the complexity. After considering a number of approaches to conversion he wrote,

Carrier <sup>106</sup> concludes that conversion is 'a complex phenomenon in which psychological factors, collective references and elements of belief interact'. Hence conversion involves three elements: 'disintegration of a cognitive and motivational synthesis with a restructuring of the personality on a religious basis' (Thompson's psychic ordeal) 'the acceptance of a social role prescribed by a religious group' (Potter's 'conversions to conformity'); and 'as a motive, the consciousness of a call and of a divine action'. The psychologist might be content with the first element, and the sociologist with the second, but the historian must not ignore the third.<sup>107</sup>

In assessing the factors and motivations affecting William Wilberforce's actions and choices in 1785 and 1786 care is essential. The data, with which we have to work, are primarily Wilberforce's own later reflections upon the experiences and processes which he was undergoing at the time. Like Hague we may hypothesise, but such hypotheses will need to be held tentatively.

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<sup>106</sup> H Carrier, *The Sociology of Religious Belonging*, London 1965.

<sup>107</sup> Stuart Piggin, *Making evangelical missionaries, 1789-1858 : the social background, motives and training of British Protestant missionaries to India* ([Abingdon, Oxfordshire] :: Sutton Courtenay Press,, c1984), p 57.

Wilberforce said that by 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1785 he had given intellectual assent to an Evangelical understanding of the Gospel.<sup>108</sup> He perceived that he understood the faith as expressed by 'serious' or 'vital Christians' but, had he died at that time, he would have perished. 'Often while in full enjoyment of all this world could bestow, my conscience told me that in the true sense of the word, I was not a Christian.'<sup>109</sup> This statement is critical as it confirms what we have written in Chapter One that, for Wilberforce, only 'Evangelical Christians' had the right to call themselves 'Christians'. He recorded on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1785 that he began to get up early and 'In the solitude and self-conversation of the morning had thoughts, which I trust will come to something.'<sup>110</sup>

His sons recorded that over the next months he read or had read to him by his secretary the Bible and Pascal, and that he meditated for considerable time before engaging on the business of the day. He commenced a journal to assist him in reflecting on these serious things, a task which he found difficult and easily distracted by the things of the ordinary world. Wilberforce found this a time of developing spirituality. On 29<sup>th</sup> November he wrote 'I bless God I enjoyed comfort in prayer this evening.'<sup>111</sup> It was a time when he spoke with friends such as Pitt about his new religious orientation and consulted John Newton.<sup>112</sup> By 11<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> John Charles Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London: Constable, 1977).

<sup>109</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, I, p 88.

<sup>110</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, I, p 88.

<sup>111</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, I, p 91.

<sup>112</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, I, pp 88 – 110.

January 1786 he recorded in his Journal, 'to town and Woolnooth – after church, brought Mr Newton down in chase – dining and slepped (*sic*) at Wimbledon – composure and happiness of a true Christian;<sup>113</sup> His sons described the change that was taking place thus, 'it was to this gradual advance, rather than sudden changes, that he always looked.'<sup>114</sup> They continue:

He who thus sought for peace, could not fail of finding it.  
Upon Good Friday, April 14<sup>th</sup>, he for the first time communicated; and upon the following Easter Sunday enters in his Journal; "At Stock with the Unwins – day delightful, out almost all of it – communicated – very happy."<sup>115</sup>

### *Assessment*

We noted above the complexity of ascribing motive or motivation to the decisions taken in 1785 and 1786. Even taking this caveat into account it could well be argued that William Wilberforce had returned to the 'faith position' he had held as a youth. Yet he did not so describe it himself. For him it was the necessary 'great change' which he would later describe in his book, *A Practical View*.

Further, in Chapter 1, as with our description of Henry Thornton's faith journey, we have seen what may be described as an oscillating doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Although we may not be able to substantiate such an

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<sup>113</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce.*, I, p 104.

<sup>114</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce.*, I, p 109.

<sup>115</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce.*, I, p 110.

*experience* for Thornton we can see in the life of William Wilberforce a possible period which his self-assessment may have interpreted as such a withdrawal of the Spirit. The period of his life from the age of 15 to the age of 26 could have been conceived of, by him, as such a 'flight of the Spirit'. This *experience* could possibly have been interpreted by Wilberforce as confirmation of the general belief in a doctrine of an oscillating presence of the Spirit. This seems a reasonable analysis, although one could not, on the basis of the manuscript material, be absolutely asserted.

Wilberforce's 'conversion' at the age of 26 is generally regarded as his conversion to Christianity, but to be more accurate one should say to 'vital Christianity'. Yet we have shown that the earlier period of his life, by his own correspondence, is the very thing which he later describes as a result of the experience covering his life from mid-1785 until Easter 1786. If one takes as normative the subject's description of their religious experience then one must see the period of 1785-1786 as the beginning of Wilberforce's living of 'vital Christianity'. But there is significant evidence to suggest that he underwent a revitalisation of that faith which he had expressed as a young person. This raises questions for the definition of Evangelicalism suggested by Bebbington to which we will have to return in the final chapter of this thesis.

JAMES STEPHEN

James Stephen (1758-1832) had been in correspondence with Wilberforce while in St Kitts practising as a Barrister. On returning to England in

September 1796, he came to Clapham and became an intimate of the 'Saints'. His personal experience in the West Indies was valued by the circle and his ability to write exploited in the anti-slavery debate. He became more closely allied when, four years after the death of his wife, he married William Wilberforce's widowed sister. The source of our examination of his Christian understanding is a memoir he wrote, the manuscript of which, until 1947, remained in the hands of the family. In that year Miss Dorothea Stephen deposited it in the British Museum. In 1953 it was published by Hogarth Press, a publisher founded by descendants of James Stephen, himself. It is from the published version that the following is written.<sup>116</sup>

James Stephen commenced his memoir in his mature years. It was written, he wrote, so that his children and grandchildren would learn moral lessons from his reflection upon his own life story. It was intended to cover his whole life, but for unknown reasons does not appear to proceed beyond his first departure to practise law in St Kitts. He was, at that time, in his mid-20s and secretly married to Nancy Stent. A brief summary of his life until then will inform our examination of his memoir written for his prospective readers, his children and grandchildren.

James Stephen, while not as well-known as some other members of the Clapham Sect, was significant in the work of the abolitionist cause. He had come strongly to this position as a result of his time in the West Indies. He witnessed a trial of four Negroes for murder in Barbados in a manner

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<sup>116</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*.

which he regarded as completely lacking due process and justice. He heard that two of them had been sentenced to be burnt. The rest of his experience as a lawyer on St Kitts only confirmed him in his abolitionist stance.<sup>117</sup> He became a source of information for the abolitionists.<sup>118</sup> In 1794 he returned with his family to London and practised principally in the Admiralty Court. Through friendship his ability brought him to the attention of the Prime Minister, and he was made a Master in Chancery. His first wife (Anna Stent<sup>119</sup>) died in 1796 and he later married the widowed sister of William Wilberforce. He had four sons and two daughters. The eldest son was illegitimate<sup>120</sup>, the mother was a 'Miss Rivers' (see further on in this chapter) and the other children were of his first marriage. James Stephen's grandson, Sir Leslie Stephen, makes no mention of the illegitimacy of his uncle in his background chapter in the biography of his brother, Sir James Fitzjames Stephen.<sup>121</sup>

Stephen's own early life was one of family turmoil. His father failed at several businesses and eventually read for the Bar but spent most of his life in a conveyancing business. James' schooling was haphazard. He was at one stage sent to live with his grandmother in Scotland, and he wrote of her:

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<sup>117</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 13.

<sup>118</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 13.

<sup>119</sup> Anna Stent was his wife's name but he called her 'Nancy'. Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 116

<sup>120</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 366.

<sup>121</sup> Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*.



My Grandmother, whom I knew well in her old age, was a very worthy, amiable and sensible woman. She was a zealous Episcopalian of the nonjuring communion, and apparently religious, as far as might be inferred from attendance on public worship, the only evidence of religious feeling that I was likely then to observe, or which I can remember seeing any specimen of in Scotland, except among the Seceders.<sup>122</sup>

The most significant influence on him, according to his memoir, was his mother. She was raised in a religious environment and saw all as the result of particular Providence.<sup>123</sup>

The temporal providence of God was also with her a subject of frequent conversation, as it always was of her careful observation, comfort, and support. She had seen as I have done, proofs in the events of private life that the course of this World is neither left to necessity nor chance, but is under the particular, as well as general, government of infinite wisdom and goodness.<sup>124</sup>

It is clear he also followed this pattern of thought. With his mother's death he also sought to bring his regular repentance into a stronger resolve. He wrote that an even more earnest commitment to a life lived rightly before Providence was developed.

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<sup>122</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 40.

<sup>123</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 143.

<sup>124</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 140.

It is enough to say that I was a very great offender in the sight of God, sinning against his known laws, against the clear dictates of my own conscience, and contrary to solemn resolutions and vows, many times renewed at seasons of penitence and devotion. God's forbearance and mercy towards me were wonderfully great. But my case required strong and bitter medicine, which he was graciously pleased to provide for me, in the feelings excited by the loss of my beloved Mother, and by that of my own health which followed.<sup>125</sup>

This resolution was made, not because of a fear of hell, but because of a fear of never seeing his mother again.<sup>126</sup> He wrote that he, at her death, repented of an un-named besetting sin and managed to maintain this resolve. He wrote of 'my sinful passions [which] had attained to their full growth and strength, as I think they had done before my Mother's death.'<sup>127</sup> Nothing more serious seems to have been part of his behaviour. This is a reasonable conclusion given his detailed description of his other failings in *the Memoir* and his reticence in describing sexual behaviour.

It will not be expected, nor would be right, that I should be more particular and distinct upon such subject. It is enough to say that I was a very great offender in the sight of God, sinning against known laws, against the clear dictates of my

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<sup>125</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 148.

<sup>126</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 149.

<sup>127</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 148.

own conscience, and contrary to some resolutions and vows,  
many times renewed at seasons of penitence and devotion.<sup>128</sup>

Such reticence does not appear in the enumeration of other sins and behaviour. His descriptions of his relationship with 'Miss Rivers' and of his behaviour toward the mistress of the Duke of Gordon are clear. Given his description of a well maintained and honest manner up to this point, the sin was most likely masturbation. He was about 17 years of age. It is worth noting that, it is '*the feelings excited' by a particular experience* (my emphasis) which directed his action.

Through the good offices of his elder brother and the good will of an uncle (a surgeon on St Kitts), who was at enmity with his father, he and his brother were enabled to read for their respective professions, William for medicine and James for the law.

After marrying, secretly, and leaving his wife in England with her father, he went to St Kitts, for the first time, where he practised in the Admiralty Court mainly defending owners of captured ships from the United States of America which had been taken as prizes of war.<sup>129</sup> Eventually, he was in a position to return to England.

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<sup>128</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 148.

<sup>129</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 13.

Given the association with the Wilberforce, Thornton and the other members of the Clapham Sect, and his marriage to the pious Sarah (nee Wilberforce) one can assume that he had an Evangelical faith.<sup>130</sup>

Three things arise from the mature reflection of his life in his memoir. First, the abiding theme he stressed was the fact of a benevolent divine providence. This was an abiding theme of his mother's teaching to him. Each positive 'escape', from often self-generated disaster, is seen as a benign favour of Providence. Of the progress of his relationship with the woman he calls 'Miss Rivers' he wrote of support from his brother:

and it came just in time to enable me under the circumstances soon to be narrated to save the character of my dear Maria and the life of our child. It has generally been the trait in the conduct of Divine Providence towards me, on which I have frequently to look back with wonder as well as gratitude, that the deliverances I have met with in answer to prayer have not arrived till they were absolutely necessary to avert fatal or remediless evils; so that either at the moment, or afterwards retrospectively, I have seen the extremity of the dangers from which I was rescued and that further delay of providential interpositions would have been as ruinous to my hopes as its refusal.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, p 17.

<sup>131</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 363.

Even a distant death is so interpreted. The death of his uncle in the West Indies had provided his elder brother, William, with a substantial estate but only because a friend of that uncle had persuaded him to write a will in William's favour. This had happened only a few days before his death when he was seen to be in full health. Had the will not have been written it would have passed to an uncle of Stephen's in Scotland.<sup>132</sup>

It is the 'fact' of particular providence which he saw as the reason for his wealth and status at the time of the writing of the memoir, the kindness of Divine Providence.

In the Preface to the second edition of his book *Slavery Delineated* he wrote, 'When I first knew the West Indians, I was a very young man, and not less ignorant and regardless of Christianity, or of all, at least, that exclusively belongs to it, than the young men of my own sphere of life then so generally were.'<sup>133</sup> And, as I have noted, his grandson, Leslie Stephen, in his biography of his brother Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, wrote that the later encounter with William Wilberforce resulted in his adoption of an Evangelical position. Yet this memoir, though reflective of his mindset at the time of writing, stresses his belief that, at the time spoken of by him, he held a strong belief in the mercy of God upon which he rested:

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<sup>132</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, pp 363 – 364.

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 15.

As to the sin against God, which ought to have been the subject of deepest remorse, it was, tho' a painful consideration, much less so than the rest at least for a considerable time, till his mercies redeemed me from despair and led me to true repentance. ... As to the forms, indeed, of my daily intercourse with Him were I believe preserved; but I could no longer pour out my heart before Him or confide in his favour and protection.<sup>134</sup>

And writing of a black cat he saw as a superstitious sign of the result of his sin he recorded, 'Such phantoms of a guilty conscience, however, did not haunt me often or long. ...The sense of guilt and shame, however, and that of having lost the favour(*sic*) of my divine Friend and Benefactor, were painful enough independently of all the fear of consequences.'<sup>135</sup>

He later wrote:

Meantime my own conscious feelings, or rather let me say my love and fear of God, had been strongly reinforced by his conspicuous mercies in the preservation of my child, by my sense of continual dependance [*sic*] on his compassion in that and the other anxious interests of my heart.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 319.

<sup>135</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 319 – 20.

<sup>136</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 399.

During 'sinful intercourse with Maria' (Miss Rivers) he wrote that he sometime 'indulged in a murmuring and rebellious spirit' yet he continued in a fervent and positive prayer life. He wrote:

Nor were these prayers in vain, blessed be his goodness! Nor was a soothing sense of their acceptance always wanting. Often I have risen from my knees when nearly exhausted with nameless, powerful conviction that my penitence [*sic*] was accepted and that God certainly would deliver me and avert the mischiefs that I had feared, tho' in what specific manner I could scarcely form an idea or clearly direct a wish.<sup>137</sup>

So he recorded his fervent prayer life even while he engaged in a deep and passionate sexual relationship with the woman he calls 'Miss Rivers'. His chaste passion for his first love, Nancy Stent, paralleled by his sensual liaison, which he described in his maturity as love, were both the matters of his prayers.

Secondly, he did not have a view of God which excluded righteous judgement. He was constantly aware that his actions were deserving of severe retribution. When his illegitimate child, as a result of what he saw as the 'mischievous' activity of the woman to whom he had entrusted him, was ill and seemed near to death, he perceived this affliction as possible retribution for his moral failure.

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<sup>137</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 338.

Well can I recollect a little rivulet on the margin of which, unseen by mortal eye, I put down my poor, feeble, sickly child and kneeling on the grass beside him invoked with streaming eyes the Father of mercies to deliver him and me from the effects and the just chastisement of my sins.<sup>138</sup>

As can be seen at this point, he described an intense petitioning of divine grace long before he had met William Wilberforce. Even allowing for an 'Evangelical lens' through which he may have been looking, his description of his mindset as a young man seems to suggest an active Christian experience.

About the end of that dreadful period I was passing on a Wednesday or Friday by St John's Chapel in the Broadway, Westminster ... It occurred to me that I would humble myself before man as well as before God by attending these weekly devotions ... I forget what in particular there was in the psalms and lessons, but I well remember, that never in my life did I feel a greater fervour and penitential devotion.<sup>139</sup>

One of the most surprising confessions in the memoir is his admission that, even as a senior Evangelical, he prayed for the dead. His attitude toward Catholics was typical of the Evangelicals. He wrote, of an early offer for his education:

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<sup>138</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 386.

<sup>139</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 353 – 354.



Mr Clinton no doubt meant fairly, my education would naturally have been at St Omers or Paris, in one of the schools or colleges of the Jesuits, ... The utter ruin to my character, moral and religious, would probably therefore have been the result ... In how many instances has a gracious Providence controuled [*sic*] my own blind choice, and that of Friends who have desired my happiness, when we were choosing evil instead of good!<sup>140</sup>

Yet, of the practice of praying for the dead, he wrote concerning a filial failure of Nancy Stent, namely, her continued contact with Stephen in their youth contrary to her father's desire.<sup>141</sup>

Scarcely has a day passed since her death, now twenty-eight years ago, in which my prayers have not been addressed to him for her forgiveness and the felicity of her departed spirit. This may be, and probably is, unwarranted by the Scriptures; but it is a point on which like that great man Dr. Johnston I am more than half a Catholic.<sup>142</sup>

And further, speaking of his second wife, Wilberforce's sister:

I think my dear Sally's views on it were like my own. She knew that I often prayed for the former Partner of my heart

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<sup>140</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 92.

<sup>141</sup> Nancy Stent continued secretly to see James Stephen after her father had forbidden it with the aid of her brother and 'Miss Rivers' Stephen, *The Memoirs* pp 238 – 239, 266 – 267.

<sup>142</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 246.

and did not find fault with it as she always faithfully did with what she regarded as religious errors; but on the contrary once said to me 'My dear Stephen will you pray also for me when I am gone?'<sup>143</sup>

This action seems really at odds with the classic belief, seen in William Wilberforce's book, that death brings judgement in a final form. This, Stephen himself expresses to some degree.

As well as this it has been suggested that Sir James Stephen thought that his father was in fact Socinian. In the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Patrick C. Lipscomb, III has written:

Strongly influenced by his mother he had a powerful sense of divine providence watching over and guiding human affairs, and seems to have relied heavily on private prayer for guidance. According to his son Sir James, Stephen was scarcely orthodox in his religious views, perhaps a Socinian. But his views were unorthodox in other ways as well. At a time when the Church of England did not offer prayers for the dead, he strongly believed in them and apparently had his own doctrine of purgatory.<sup>144</sup>

It is more likely that he simply reflected the attitude expressed by Henry Thornton, namely, that Thornton would be glad to give up the use of the

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<sup>143</sup> Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, p 247.

<sup>144</sup> Patrick C. Lipscomb, III, 'Stephen, James (1758–1832)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Oct 2005 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26373, accessed 21 Jan 2008].

word 'Trinity' since it seemed to create so many arguments among Christians which distracted them from the task of focusing upon the need for personal salvation.<sup>145</sup>

One might expect, given Stephen's early experience as recounted in his memoir, that there would be a negative attitude towards sensuality. This, of course, is often attributed to the Evangelicals, although Boyd Hilton disputes that this was their attitude<sup>146</sup>. But a reading of the memoir does not give one this sense. Stephen seems to be suggesting, for his children and grandchildren, a sanctified sensuality. This is clearly seen in his comments on the impropriety of same-sex behaviour. The incident, he recalled of the Hon. Edward Onslow's homosexual approach to a friend of Stephen's,<sup>147</sup> shows his abhorrence of untrammelled sexual behaviour. His own behaviour with 'Miss Rivers', while seen as sinful, does not revolt him in the same way. In 1782, while still involved with Nancy Stent and 'Maria Rivers', Stephen met, through an acquaintance of Nancy Stent a Mrs B. Over time he began to believe that the woman's reputation as a paragon of virtue was undeserved. After dining one evening and somewhat under the influence of alcohol he called on this woman and there began what might be called a mutual seduction. That this did not result in sexual intercourse was due to the woman's care not to chance pregnancy as, it appears, she had given birth to an illegitimate child of the

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<sup>145</sup> John Thornton wrote in 1795 'God grant that I may neglect no opportunity for saving souls' Thornton MSS p 39.

<sup>146</sup> Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people?*, p 183.

<sup>147</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, pp 343-354.

Duke of Gordon (Alexander Gordon, fourth Duke, 1743–1827), and he was presently out of London. Even this attempted seduction<sup>148</sup> of the Duke of Gordon's mistress does not receive the same condemnation by him as that of the Hon. Edward Onslow's actions. This attitude parallels that of William Wilberforce expressed in his letter to his son, Samuel.<sup>149</sup>

While Stephen constantly asserts that the universe and individual human experience is under the control of Divine Providence he, nevertheless, seems to imply that one can live in a manner which is profligate. One must be aware of the obligations that one has to Providence. One must live one's life seeking to do that which is right. His reflections on his Irish friend, McCarthy, concerning his moral failure, leads him to the belief that this person will not find his future after death to be benign.<sup>150</sup> In the memoir there are often reflective prayers concerning the eternal future of particular persons, asking Divine Providence for their welfare. This is the content of his prayer for his dead wife, Nancy Stent and would be so for, presumably, Sarah *nee* Wilberforce.

While we do not have from Stephen the explicit desire expressed by William Wilberforce for 'the great change', we do see that James Stephen sought to encourage his children and grandchildren to depend for their future on the imploring of the divine mercy. They were to match this with

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<sup>148</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs of James Stephen written by himself for the benefit of his children*, pp 389 – 397. He does not seek to minimize the sinfulness of his relationship with either 'Maria Rivers' or Mrs B.

<sup>149</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 10. pp 205 – 7. Concerning what appears to be a juvenile homosexual activity.

<sup>150</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 414.

a clear understanding of the divine Providence and to reflect these attitudes and actions in the conforming of one's life to the divine desire. His own adoption of the Evangelical structure of life, attested by his family, implies strongly that the desires expressed in a memoir should be understood within the framework of that structure of life. He wrote in his memoir of his own theological world:

It is a truth that forms no mean argument for a future life. Philanthropy, the love of justice, the desire of knowledge, and above all the love of God, can find their full satisfaction only beyond the grave. We therefore justly reason that there they will be found. The Almighty has not given us such desires and such capabilities for happiness in the fruition of them, without providing for their full indulgence.<sup>151</sup>

#### ANALYSIS

It is clear that four particulars are seen in our subjects: the belief in Providence, the central nature of the crucifixion, the judgement and mercy of God and a life lived, privately and publicly, in reflection on these issues. In each case there is a deep-felt reflective piety. There is a perception of a felt *experience* of God.

Concerning 'the great change', of our three subjects, only William Wilberforce clearly speaks of such an event. Yet all three are viewed by their contemporaries and later historians as Evangelicals. Each expressed

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<sup>151</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 60 This position is similar to that advanced by Kant in *Critique of Practical Reason*.

a maturing of their faith perspective as a result of their reflection upon their life. In each case we see a deep sense of personal sin, the need for forgiveness, the propitiatory nature of Christ's death, the need for appropriate reflection and prayer and finally, a dependence upon divine grace. In Wilberforce and Thornton we have seen that view of the work of the Holy Spirit which implies that he comes and goes depending upon the effective piety and behaviour of the individual. We do not see this view in Stephen; in fact there is no reference to the Holy Spirit in his *Memoir*.

This raises for us the suitability of Bebbington's quadrilateral as a sufficient definition of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Evangelicalism. In Wilberforce there is a change of view and orientation which was seen to be pivotal and resulted in a new way of living. In Thornton and Stephen one is led to see an intensification or maturing rather than a radical realignment. Yet the lives of both men are changed by their reflection. One is bound to ask, in each case, was there a 'conversion' or 'great change' such as described by Wilberforce in *The Practical View* as the *sine qua non* of 'vital Christianity? If there was not in each case conversion, then was the demand placed by Wilberforce, which we shall see in Chapter 4, upon his children a valid Christian demand? And was such a demand made by our other two subjects?

May it be that the understanding of conversion expressed in Wilberforce's book is of limited use in assessing both the Clapham fathers' and their children's faith journeys despite the way it is put by him? The issue may resolve into a question of mature self-perception rather than a particular

*experience*. We will also explore, briefly, the world in which Thornton, Wilberforce and Stephen reflected upon their faith view (Chapter 3). We shall then look at the expectations expressed by the Clapham fathers for their children's faith position (Chapter 4) before turning to examine the mature faith position of the Clapham children, Robert and Samuel Wilberforce and Sir James Stephen in particular (Chapter 5). Following this we will seek to expose the factors involved in the different decisions on faith position taken by these three men (Chapter 6) and then seek to draw some conclusions about faith transfer and trajectories for further study.

## Chapter 3

### The Hanoverian Church: The Ecclesiastical Background to the Clapham Sect

No movement springs fully formed *ex nihilo* upon society. Yet it is not always easy to identify the precise factors which cause the new movement. In his book *Turning Points*<sup>1</sup> Mark Noll, writing about the Reformation, outlined the factors, causes, actions and movements which preceded it and which may be said to have contributed to its development and shape. Yet at the end of this discussion he raised two caveats. First, he reminded his readers of the way in which some scholars, reflecting on the Reformation, discount the prevenient and concurrent factors he had outlined and seek only to look at the theological issues involved in the movement. Secondly and significantly, though, he also warns those who would discount entirely the theological factors in favour of the social and political motivations.<sup>2</sup> An examination of any religious development must look at both sets of factors.<sup>3</sup> It is important, therefore, to survey the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Noll, *Turning points : decisive moments in the history of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Academic, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Noll, *Turning points : decisive moments in the history of Christianity*, p 183. An earlier iteration of Noll's perspective on this issue and his appreciation of its effective practice in Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, is found in Mark Noll, 'British Methodological Pointers for Writing a History of Theology in America', in Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory (eds.), *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp.202-225.

<sup>3</sup> One can see this expressed in the prayer book revision in Australia, the subjects considered worthy of note for prayer reflected the current issues in the society. In *The Book of Common Prayer* of 1662 prayers for the Royal family and the maintenance of 'true religion and virtue' were prominent. In *An Australian Prayer Book* of 1977 these were changed to reflect the *Australian Constitution* and a prayer for industrial peace was added, this being a time of industrial unrest in Australia. In *A Prayer Book for Australia* of 136



factors in which the Clapham spirituality developed so as to see the ways in which these factors affected both the parents and children. One must remember, though, that the Evangelical Revival in England is basically another strand of the life of the Hanoverian Church. This is not unimportant in assessing the trajectories of our two generations. As we shall see<sup>4</sup> at least Robert Isaac saw the Revival as a necessary part of the Church's development and its capacity to speak to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### OVERVIEW

It is generally acknowledged that 'evangelicalism' emerged in a number of parallel places and persons in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century: in New England described and encouraged by Jonathan Edwards, in Continental Europe associated with the Pietists, as well as in Britain with the Wesleys and others.<sup>5</sup> In England the movement had many branches reflecting different contexts and persuasions: Church of England 'revivalists', most prominently the Wesleys and George Whitefield; the 'occasional Nonconformists', William Grimshaw of Haworth, William Romain in London, Thomas Haweis, Rector of Aldwinckle, John Berridge, Vicar of Everton, Bedfordshire, and John Fletcher of Madeley; the regular clergy such as Henry Venn of Huddersfield; and, among the dissenters, the

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1995 the prayer for industrial peace was removed and prayers for reconciliation with Aboriginal Australians and a prayer for those abused by the church were added.

<sup>4</sup> This thesis p 248.

<sup>5</sup> The most scholarly study of the parallel streams within the eighteenth-century evangelical movement is W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992).

Independents Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge and the Baptist John Gill.<sup>6</sup> Yet for all its variations – a richness which has attracted the attention of most historians of evangelicalism – it was but one movement in the religious world of England. Its progress was interlinked with other social, political and religious activity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is this bigger context which shaped the Clapham Evangelicals and their sons rather more than the different expressions of evangelicalism itself.

For our purpose it is the religious and social milieu of Hanoverian England which provides the cauldron from which the 'Clapham experiment', as Henry Thornton called it,<sup>7</sup> emerged. The church of the Clapham Fathers was a national church which had experienced a Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and was profoundly involved in the Civil War of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The Restoration Settlement of the 1660s and 'Glorious Revolution of 1688', while retaining much of the Elizabethan Settlement<sup>8</sup>, reflected the political necessities of the time. The Restoration and the Revolution involved both the maintenance of Establishment and the allowance for Dissent. The Hanoverian Church also functioned in the intellectual environment of the Enlightenment and was faced with the influence of the movements and ideas which led both to the American War of Independence and the French Revolution.

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<sup>6</sup> Neill, *Anglicanism* p 191.

<sup>7</sup> Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham*, p 29.

<sup>8</sup> The arrangements and legislation for the nature and theological and liturgical shape of the Church of England put in place during the reign of Elizabeth I.

## AN ERASTIAN CORPSE?

It is often assumed that it was a passive Erastian institution, dormant in both theology and piety.

This downgrading of an Hanoverian Church was all the more plausible now that a picture of the overall structure of church life was at last available as a result of various statistical enquiries, above all those of the great Parliamentary Commissions, of which the Ecclesiastical Revenues Commission of 1835 had pride of place. Henceforth, quantifiable criteria for the 'success' or 'failure' of the church would be available, which enabled the religious life of the previous era to be shown up as demonstrably ineffective. With the formation of the Ecclesiastical Commission in 1835, a centralised and permanent agency for improvement was now in being.

As a result, the *idea* of the 'the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Church' as a definable entity, stagnant and corrupt, had been firmly created and it was a conception which rapidly gained ground. Even Sydney Smith seems to have accepted that he himself represented an era of churchmanship that was both deficient and *passé*: 'whenever you meet a clergyman of my age,' he

told the young Gladstone in 1835, 'you may be quite sure that he was a bad clergyman'.<sup>9</sup>

#### EVANGELICALISM THE ENLIVENER?

With such a backward looking view, 'evangelicalism' looks like a sudden salvation, the flowering of 'true Christianity' in a garden of weeds. Yet this view of the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century fails to understand rightly the political, theological and social framework in which this Church functioned. There are two fundamental issues which need to be recognised if one is to understand the forces which shaped the arena of spirituality from which the Clapham Sect arose. First was the fear of 'enthusiasm', which was generated or was deeply developed during the English Civil War and the Commonwealth. Second was the perceived need to defend the Christian Faith in a time of demand for demonstrable intellectual support for ideas. We will contend later, in Chapter 6, that the nature of the primary expectation of the Clapham fathers for their children would need to be radically modified to enable the children to face effectively the complex milieu of challenges which developed from the issues of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and retain any of their parents' religious values and hopes.

#### A PARTICULAR COMMUNITY

The thing, which the Clapham Fathers most wished for their children, was an *experience* of God like their own. As we have seen in Chapter 1, a

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<sup>9</sup> John Walsh, Stephen Taylor, and Colin Haydon, *The Church of England c.1689-c.1833: from Toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p 64.

profession of the orthodox faith of the Church of England was, to the Clapham luminaries, insufficient to claim one was living a 'vital Christian life'. But the Clapham fathers were committed to the Constitution and the Establishment as it was in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1790 Wilberforce was engaged in discussion with friends about the repeal of the *Test and Corporations* Act which had been raised in Parliament at the request of some Dissenters.<sup>10</sup> He feared that Latitudinarianism as displayed in the Feathers Tavern petition<sup>11</sup> would thus be strengthened and also that 'giving such an increase of influence to the dissenting party would endanger the Liturgy and Articles of the church.'<sup>12</sup>

The Hanoverian Church and society, then, was the environment from which the Clapham experiment and experience rose. Underlining our analysis of the Hanoverian Church is the question of the 'true Christian', for this is the very issue with which the Evangelicals, we are examining, engaged. For them 'professing' was not sufficient and so they saw the Hanoverian church members as not really 'Christian'. This is clearly seen in William Wilberforce's book, *A Practical View*<sup>13</sup> which we have examined in Chapter 1. It is our contention that its approach must be understood as a response to the challenges faced by the Hanoverian Church at an

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<sup>10</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce* I, pp 257 – 261.

<sup>11</sup> A petition by a group of Anglican Clergy in 1772 for relief from subscription to the 39 Articles and that clergy be allowed to interpret the Bible in the light of reason rather than creeds. Gerald R Cragg, *The Church in the Age of Reason*, p 169

<sup>12</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, I, p 259.

<sup>13</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*.

ecclesial, social and political level. If nothing else, a nation which had endured a politico-religious civil war and the following attempts by the Stuart Pretenders to the throne as late as 1745, would be very sensitive to any form of enthusiasm which tended to disturb the political and social stability of the realm. This desire to maintain social and political stability was one held by the Clapham fathers. To this issue must be added effects of the developing industrial revolution and the concomitant urbanisation of the society. In the reign of George III there also arises from the American rebellion (as the English saw it) and the French disturbances another fear of social upheaval which seemed to threaten the very fabric of society.<sup>14</sup>

The assumption that Parson Woodforde<sup>15</sup> represented the totality of Hanoverian clergy is incorrect. He may have spent his time like any gentleman of the counties, but there were many who, while enjoying the increasing status of the cleric in that period, were committed both to the intellectual defence of the Faith and to the pastoral care of the people. Yet, as Cragg<sup>16</sup> pointed out, even Woodforde was active in philanthropy as an expression of his Faith. This was not only true of the clergy as the example of the Duke of Newcastle shows.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This is shown in the change in the content of sermons over the period of the French Revolution/ Napoleonic era. This is documented in N V Murray, 'The Influence of the French Revolution on the Church of England and its Rivals', (University of Oxford, 1975).

<sup>15</sup> James Woodforde and John Beresford, *The diary of a country parson 1758-1802* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Cragg, *The church and the age of reason 1648-1789* P 133.

<sup>17</sup> The stereotype of the corrupt and lifeless eighteenth-century church was challenged by Norman Sykes, who gathered round him at Oxford a small army of scholars who sought to rehabilitate the reputation of the church. In his own major work *Church and State in*

## A LAY EXAMPLE

Thomas Pelham, Duke of Newcastle, was born in 1693. He acceded to the estates and titles of both his father and uncle while still in his minority. He held the offices of Secretary of State and for a short time First Lord of the Treasury (Prime Minister) as a Whig in a political career that lasted for some five decades. He was for the whole of his life a faithful member of the Established Church. This was not simply traditional behaviour but was marked by both private and public piety. Reed Browning in his 1975 biography of Newcastle records, 'The Duke himself was a devout churchman who attended church twice a day when possible, he had earned a deserved reputation for charitable acts.'<sup>18</sup> He was noted for his orthodoxy and this affected his recommendations for appointment to the episcopate.

From about 1730 he exercised the role of 'ecclesiastical minister of state', but in that role he resisted the bench of Bishops in its attempts to tighten the legislative limitations on Dissenters. He also assisted in the progress of a bill in Parliament to make the obligation of tithe payment simpler for Quakers.<sup>19</sup>

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*England in the XVIII th Century ... Birkbeck Lectures in Ecclesiastical History ... 1931-3* (London: University Press, 1934).), Sykes unearthed many examples of conscientiousness and diligence on the part of bishops and clergy. His work of rehabilitation never became the new orthodoxy, but it is here argued that there was a lot of truth in it as is being shown by more recent research into the Hanoverian Church.

<sup>18</sup> Reed Browning, *The Duke of Newcastle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p 79.

<sup>19</sup> Browning, *The Duke of Newcastle*, p 79.

In the years after he retired from the political sphere he faced a crisis of faith. In question was not a matter of doctrine but of the Duke's hope before God. Browning records that it was a feeling of personal unworthiness before God. This was resolved with advice from the episcopal bench. John Hume, Bishop of Oxford and later of Salisbury, was a long-time friend. According to Browning, Hume drew on both 'Latitudinarian wisdom' as well as theological reflection of one's own unworthiness as a mark of one's nearness to God. It was recorded of Hume that 'At the duke's request he sent him prayers, entreating God's aid in his efforts both to fulfil the divine will and to persevere in the faith despite the "manifold changes in the world".'<sup>20</sup> Hume also sent him suggested reading, and Archbishop Drummond 'cautioned against going "too deep" in his reading, and Hume himself had to remind him that reading was an aid to religion, not a substitute for it.'<sup>21</sup> Browning quoted from a piece of correspondence (without noting to whom) that the Duke wrote that he had reconfirmed 'a lively and unfeigned belief in the truth of the holy gospel; and that our Saviour laid down his life to save sinners, by faith and repentance.'<sup>22</sup>

Here we see an orthodox Christian facing personal questions similar to the ones posed by Wilberforce's European trip. The result is similar, but the people to whom Newcastle was directed by Bishop Hume were Addison

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<sup>20</sup> Browning, *The Duke of Newcastle* p 329.

<sup>21</sup> Browning, *The Duke of Newcastle*, p 330.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Browning, *The Duke of Newcastle*, p 330 from the Newcastle manuscripts held in the British Library MSS 33072, fol. 93 Newcastle Correspondence.



and Tillotson, not those who would be favoured by evangelicals. We are dealing here basically with Latitudinarian clergy. These are the very people against whom much of William Wilberforce's book rails as simply 'professing Christians'. An Establishment 'professed' Christian is encouraged by a Latitudinarian bishop to see himself and feel himself intimately connected to God. We do not see here a call to 'conversion' as would, most likely, have been the advice of an evangelical in the 1760s, but an encouragement to believe what one knew to be true. The Establishment seems not to have been as 'cold' as subsequent generations have been led to expect.

#### A CLERICAL EXAMPLE

Writing of an 18<sup>th</sup> Century High Church clerical dynasty, Jeffrey S. Chamberlain wrote:

The Frewens persevered in their High Church ideals for several reasons. First, they were indebted to the heritage of their seventeenth-century patriarch, Archbishop Accepted Frewen. The force of this legacy should not be underestimated. The prelate was the hero of the Georgian Frewens, and his churchmanship and politics were virtually

sacrosanct; through him Laudian principles were transmitted well into the eighteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

Chamberlain draws attention to the Frewens' perception of Dissent as a danger to the Church of England and then wrote:

... the Frewen family was close knit, and they were able to impart to each other beliefs and ideals which lasted for generations. The Frewens were able to establish a regular network of support among their kin which toughened their resistance to change and reinforced their collective perspective on the decay of church and state.<sup>24</sup>

Chamberlain pointed out that though 'they did not lose zeal for their cause', this did not mean they acted as a withdrawn group, but participated in the society around them and worked with officials and local leaders who held opposite political and religious positions.<sup>25</sup>

Chamberlain adds:

The Frewens' theology and churchmanship also remained traditional. Rationalism was not allowed to destroy the 'beauty of holiness', even if it was present in their thinking. Neither

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<sup>23</sup> Jeffery S. Chamberlain *A High Church clerical dynasty in Georgian England* p 314 in John Walsh, Stephen Taylor, and Colin Haydon, *The Church of England c.1689-c.1833 : from toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p 314.

<sup>24</sup> Walsh, Taylor, and Haydon, *The Church of England c.1689-c.1833 : from toleration to Tractarianism* p 314.

<sup>25</sup> Walsh, Taylor, and Haydon, *The Church of England c.1689-c.1833 : from toleration to Tractarianism* p 315.

was sacramentalism diminished by relatively few celebrations of communion.<sup>26</sup>

This set of essays shows that the view of the whole Hanoverian Church of England as a sterile, Latitudinarian rationalist church is not sustainable when that church is looked at in detail. The idea of a church simply given to rationally based theology and moralism, while true for many, was far from universal. Many like the Frewens 'breathed the heady air of heaven in order to survive amidst the pollution on earth.'<sup>27</sup> Dr John Frewen was tutor at St John's College at the same time that William Wilberforce was there. According to a response from William Wilberforce to a letter from Frewen, Frewen did encourage him into a wasteful life. 'I must do both you and Cookson the justice to exempt you in a good degree from this charge, though to be honest with you not entirely.'<sup>28</sup> Wilberforce suggests that everyone had failed to encourage an appropriate form of behaviour. 'Ought you not have urged me to look forward, and even on principles of sound human wisdom, much more on Christian principles, to consider what must be the issue of the course of life I was pursuing, and have the choice I was making of associates and friends?'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Walsh, Taylor, and Haydon, *The Church of England c.1689-c.1833 : from toleration to Tractarianism* p 315.

<sup>27</sup> Walsh, Taylor, and Haydon, *The Church of England c.1689-c.1833 : from toleration to Tractarianism* p 316.

<sup>28</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, V, p 146.

<sup>29</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, V, p 146.

It is a long letter covering a number of issues from Parliamentary reform to Wilberforce's failure to send Frewen a copy of *A Practical View*. It is not the only correspondence; there had been earlier letters to Dr Frewen. In this letter there is a defensive tone both as to Wilberforce's conduct and the assertions he had made in his book with which Frewen appears to have taken issue. This correspondence was in 1822, some considerable time since his leaving university. It was not the first time that Wilberforce recorded involvement with Frewen. In March 1789 he became involved in the issue of the Mastership of St Johns.<sup>30</sup> It involved Frewen who, according to his diary recorded in his sons' biography, had been forced to resign. Over the next few days Wilberforce recorded a number of times when he was involved in business concerning Frewen and the fellows. It is fair, therefore, to say that Wilberforce was familiar with the world and piety which the Frewen family represented.

The Wesleys, themselves, provide probably the best-known illustration of faith of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. They were raised in an Old High Church Rectory and educated and formed by an active pastor and a mother who took seriously the Christian formation of her Children.<sup>31</sup>

The 'Holy Club', convened by Charles Wesley at Oxford, with its strict discipline, its works of charity and its commitment to the Ordinances of the Church also show a desire for godliness among at least these sons of

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<sup>30</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, I p 211ff.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald R. Cragg, *The church and the age of reason, 1648-1789* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p 141.

the Hanoverian Church. John Wesley's work in Georgia reflected this strict approach to the faith.<sup>32</sup> Neill noted this was not a unique situation, that there were many 'small groups formed for the reformation of manners or the propagation of pure Christian zeal, each with its own rules, which were popular at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century'. 'The serious concern of the English Puritans for salvation was one of the living forces in the seventeenth century.'<sup>33</sup> Such societies are also noted by John Walsh and Stephen Taylor: 'The devotional groups known as the religious societies, which first appeared in London about 1687, aimed to stimulate reformation from within by providing voluntaristic models of piety and virtue for others to emulate.'<sup>34</sup> Among other old high churchmen in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century Samuel Wesley promoted such societies.<sup>35</sup> Such a pattern was adopted by Wesley as he set up societies and classes within the 'Wesleyan' movement. Balleine, however, attributes these (as well as, love-feasts, quarterly tickets, and day break services) to Wesley's interest in the Apostolic Fathers<sup>36</sup> and thus fails to recognise the continuity of Wesley's spirituality with that of his High Church background.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Cragg, *The church and the age of reason, 1648-1789*, p 142.

<sup>33</sup> Neill, *Anglicanism* p 188.

<sup>34</sup> Walsh, Taylor, and Haydon, *The Church of England c.1689-c.1833 : from toleration to Tractarianism*, p 17.

<sup>35</sup> Noll, *The rise of evangelicalism*, p 61.

<sup>36</sup> George Reginald Balleine, *A history of the Evangelical party in the Church of England* (new ed edn.; London :: Church Book Room Press,, 1951).p 7.

<sup>37</sup> This continuance of pattern is also noted by Noll, not only of the Old High Church practice but also with the contact he had with the Moravians. Noll, *The rise of evangelicalism*, Chapter 2, pp 43 – 68.

Throughout this period there was also the work of two mission societies, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, founded in 1701 and the Society for the Promoting of Christian Knowledge founded in 1699.

The 1744-45<sup>38</sup> anniversary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was held at St Mary-le-Bow, London, and the sermon was preached by the Bishop of Llandaff, Dr John Gilbert.<sup>39</sup> The text of the sermon was taken from St Paul's letter to the Romans, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ'.<sup>40</sup> In this sermon the Bishop tackled, in part, the issue of reason and revelation. While supporting the role of reason or natural revelation he insisted on the need for revelation and the whole action of Christ recorded in the Gospel. He said:

And thus it is, that since it has pleased God to reveal himself  
by his son and the world has been made acquainted with the  
nature of that God who before they ignorantly worshipped,

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<sup>38</sup> The double dating, 1744-45 is because the calendar revision which moves the beginning of the civil year to 1<sup>st</sup> January had not yet taken place. The New Year was still considered to take place on 1<sup>st</sup> April.

<sup>39</sup> 'Gilbert, John (1693–1761), Archbishop of York, was born on 18 October 1693, and baptized on 24 October at Christ Church Greyfriars, London. He was the son of John Gilbert of London, a warehouse keeper for the East India Company, and his wife, Martha, and grandson of John Gilbert, fellow of Wadham College, Oxford, and prebend of Exeter. He was educated at Merchant Taylors' School, London, until 1712, then Magdalen Hall, Oxford, before migrating to Trinity College, where he graduated BA on 5 May 1715. He proceeded MA from Merton College on 1 February 1718 and was granted the degree of LLD at Lambeth on 8 January 1725. ' He was chaplain-in-ordinary to George 1 and later successively Bishop of Llandaff and Salisbury and then Archbishop of York dying on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1761. 'As Archbishop of York, Gilbert seems to have been concerned not to promote those with Methodist tendencies.' M. E. Clayton, on line edition of *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au/view/article/10692?docPos=4>.

<sup>40</sup> Paul, Epistle to Romans 1:16.

men have been able by the help of that reason which God hath given them, to argue from these principles and lay together very regular and comprehensive views of the rejection between God and his creatures, and of the duties resulting from thence which we are bound to pay him. And when this duty is done, the grateful return from men are immediately apt to make, is to despise the Gospel: forgetful of the spring from whence their knowledge flows and that the merst (*sic*) structures of human reason could never have been raised, *but upon the foundation of the Gospel*.<sup>41</sup>

Challenging the ingratitude of failing to recognise the generosity of God which enabled people accurately to understand the world in which they lived, the sermon continued in an orthodox Anglican way. The content would have delighted Wilberforce and his friends. The sermon attacks any attempt to deny the atonement, the work of the Holy Spirit or the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. He then went on to apply this exposition to the work of the individual Christian and of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

Again: is the gospel an infallible and sufficient rule of faith?

Then by propagating it in this way, you not only arm those

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<sup>41</sup> John, Lord Bishop of Llandaff, *A Sermon preached before the incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts at their Anniversary Meeting in the Parish Church of St Mary-le-Bow, On Friday 17 February 1843-44*, (epub edn.; London: J H Pemberton, 1843-44), <http://www.archive.org/details/asermonepreached00britgoog>, p 6. The emphasis is mine.

who are yet ignorant of it, with a good defence against the imaginations of Religion, but with the best guard also that can be put into their hands against sincere mistake wilful corruption in the interpretation of the true one.<sup>42</sup>

He went on to speak of those persons for whom the society was established and examines the perilous situation in which they exist. He said:

So that with regard to this unhappy, unenlightened part of mankind, who are the present objects of your Christian consideration, in whatever view you consider them, the obligation is very strong upon us to communicate to them the infallible and perfect rule of Religious Faith, made known to the world by the Gospel of Christ: Which if they are not wanting to themselves in the use of it, will secure them as well against the vain imaginations of their own hearts on the one hand, as the wicked inventions of other people's hearts on the other in a word, the dangerous delusions of superstition and the wilful corruptions of Popery.<sup>43</sup>

As Archbishop of York, Gilbert opposed any appointments of 'methodistical' clergy. So it is reasonable to assume the reference to 'Enthusiasm' in the sermon is most likely a reference to the Methodists

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<sup>42</sup> John, Lord Bishop of Llandaff, *A Sermon preached to SPG*, p 21.

<sup>43</sup> John, Lord Bishop of Llandaff, *A Sermon preached to SPG*, p 23.



and other evangelicals. Yet the desire expressed in the sermon is for a wholehearted commitment to the gospel. As we have said above, the content of the sermon would have received the Clapham Fathers' approbation. And, reading the sermon, one notes that the tone is not 'dry and academic' but a reasoned and passionate exposition of the gospel.

Given that this meeting requested the Bishop to provide the text of the sermon for publication<sup>44</sup> and appended to it the minutes of that meeting, it is reasonable to suggest that those who were attending this meeting were themselves committed to the task of evangelising the heathen. Whether they did it successfully or not, is not the question. But here again we see, amongst those against whom Wilberforce's book was directed, not a formal 'profession' of the Faith but a heartfelt one, and from the minutes of the meeting a financial commitment<sup>45</sup> to the gospel. We can see that it was not only amongst Methodists and Evangelicals that concern for 'Gospel' expansion and effect arose within the Hanoverian church.

#### AN INTELLECTUAL RESPONSE

The work of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century apologists for the orthodox Christian Faith must also be acknowledged as part of the activity which created the piety of the Hanoverian Church. While we may wish to disagree with their conclusions, their attempt to provide a rational explanation for the Faith must not be discounted. Stephen Neill noted concerning the rise of Deism,

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<sup>44</sup> John, Lord Bishop of Llandaff, *A Sermon preached to SPG*, p 1.

<sup>45</sup> John, Lord Bishop of Llandaff, *A Sermon preached to SPG*, p 34.

'The biggest controversy of the eighteenth century introduced one of the greatest periods of peril through which the church, in all its long history, has been called to pass.'<sup>46</sup> He noted that the strength of the Deist position was an attempt to develop a theology based on natural revelation and rejecting the Trinitarian faith of the church (An issue reflected in the Bishop of Llandaff's sermon). He further noted:

But part of the difficulty experienced by the Church in answering the deists was that most of the champions of the Church had themselves come to think in the same categories as the deists, and were therefore at a great disadvantage in meeting an adversary whose use of the available weapons was perhaps more skillful than their own.<sup>47</sup>

He wrote that some fled to Pascal or poetry in an attempt to find a different refuge for the orthodox faith. But, Neill argued, 'it was desirable that the deists should be met on their own battleground and defeated with their own weapons.'<sup>48</sup> This Joseph Butler sought to do,<sup>49</sup> in his book *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*. Butler set out to demonstrate that there was no conflict between natural religion and revealed religion. Neill wrote of Butler:

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<sup>46</sup> Neil, *Anglicanism*, p 181.

<sup>47</sup> Neil, *Anglicanism*, p 183.

<sup>48</sup> Neil, *Anglicanism*, p 183.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Butler, *The analogy of religion, natural and revealed, to the constitution and course of nature : to which are added two brief dissertations : I. Of personal identity. II. Of the nature of virtue* (The 2nd , correct edn.; London: Printed for John and Paul Knapton at the Crown in Ludgate Street, 1736).

[Butler] was a lonely thinker, ever wrestling with the fundamental problem of the being of God and the nature of man, patient, scrupulous and exact, fair-minded towards the position of those whom he wished to confute and always inclined rather to understate than to overstate his own case.<sup>50</sup>

But it was not only the overt attacks and the drift of many in the Established Church and in Dissent into Deism, Rationalism and Socinianism that had to be faced. A more subtle approach, seen in the Feathers Tavern petition, also faced the orthodox Christians of the Established church. This approach of reducing the requirement to hold certain doctrinal positions and seeking rather a general view of God and thus a freer approach to the divine will was attractive in a world dominated by reason and natural theology. Clerics such as the Frewens, Wesley Snr. and Butler sought to defend the Faith from the ravages of a new emerging world. In the light of the controversies of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries and the use of arms in connection with them, and of the effects of the Enlightenment in the intellectual world, their attempt at a 'cool' rational justification for and a holding to the old High Church Tradition of the Faith is very understandable. Was Wilberforce fair in simply describing such people as 'professing Christians' who believed simply in generalities of the Faith? When we turn to his desire for his children (Chapter 5) we will again have to address this question.

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<sup>50</sup> Neil, *Anglicanism*, p 184.

## SOCIAL CHANGE

The greatest social change that took place in this period was the urbanisation of England. This dramatic realignment of the population with its 'new' cities with large 'working class' populations, could not have been foreseen easily. The centuries of slow growth with which the ancient and medieval parish system could just manage were followed by the sudden emergence of new industrial cities and suburbs. The fact that the 'working class' suburbs became significantly homogeneous and crowded meant that a natural leadership, present in the villages, was greatly diminished. Moreover the emerging middle class moved from 'shop front' businesses to the new 'suburbs', such as Edgbaston near Birmingham. The new houses with blank faces to the street but lovely domestic gardens behind began a trend, fully developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of the separation of work and domesticity. The family, to be lionized by the new middle class, focused on the domesticity of the 'ideal female' who lived above and beyond what Blake called the 'dark Satanic mills',<sup>51</sup> thus isolating any leadership from those who lived in more cramped and squalid industrial ghettos.<sup>52</sup> Members of the middle class, by not pursuing the landed status base of the squireocracy, moved into a domestic isolation from those whom they employed. They could not occupy the place in the more crowded

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<sup>51</sup> William Blake, *And did those feet in ancient time*, 1808: Cox, Michael, editor, *The Concise Oxford Chronology of English Literature*, "1808", p 289, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family fortunes : men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850 Revised Edition* (Revised edn.; London: Routledge, 2002) pp 357 – 396.

industrial cities that the 'squire' had in the villages. *Noblesse oblige* would not, and could not, provide for the spiritual welfare of the urban poor, nor set an agenda by attendance at the 'parish church'; this despite the attempts by many at charity in the new cities. The villages may not have been schools of Godliness, but there was a pattern of life which, even in the 'civil wars', could provide social and religious leadership. This is not to suggest some 'golden village age' but simply to identify an increasing separation of 'classes' with the emergence of a 'middle class'.

This development of a rising middle class, from the roots of trades people and merchants, spurred on by their rising wealth with the industrialisation of production, and the consequent capacity to expand markets was unable to provide a moral influence. The complexity of this social change, of the shift in political power, of the change in demographics, is explored in the opening chapter of Boyd Hilton's *A Mad, Bad, & Dangerous People?*<sup>53</sup> Comparing well-to-do people in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with those of the previous century he wrote:

... their satisfaction was tempered by an awareness of environmental squalor, by the overcrowding, putrefication, smoke, smells, noise, chaos, and intemperance that disfigured the public sphere. Even worse was an apprehension that the polite sections of society were about to be attacked by the bestial mob. Many were terrified of an ultra-radical,

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<sup>53</sup> Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people?*, pp 1 – 38.

revolutionary, and mainly artisanal tradition from 1792 onwards pursued the violent overthrow of government and corporate ownership of land<sup>54</sup>

He pointed out that on the whole this new 'middle class' sought not the pleasure made possible by rising wealth, but ' strove not for financial gratification, but to establish their families socially, which often induced them to live frugally and to reinvest profits. This may have applied especially to nonconformists, ... but it also obtained more generally in England's relatively fluid society, where status could be one through the patient accumulation of wealth.'<sup>55</sup> Though it may have worked on a concept of deferred benefit, such was not available to 'wage workers' who lived from pay to pay. What may have provided a new 'squireocracy model', and therefore an example, became separated from the workplace.

The emerging Middle Class also began to seek status and political position in the 'Constitution', a constitution dominated by the Established Church. Attempts by the Stuarts to regain the throne (as late as 1745), the American and the later French Revolution and its consequences only seemed to heighten the fear of a breakdown in the stability of the society in Great Britain.

The rapid rise of England's population especially in what had been backward regions also put enormous pressure on the Elizabethan Poor

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<sup>54</sup> Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people?*, p 37.

<sup>55</sup> Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people?*, p 3.

Law regime. Set up in a somewhat stable parish society it seems to have handled the support of the poor reasonably well. But with the great shifts of population it failed to sustain the new poor in the urban situations.<sup>56</sup> Demographically, England experienced a significant drop in the average age to 24 years. This was due to the increasing fertility of the population in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>57</sup> People like Malthus<sup>58</sup> asserted that the population was increasing geometrically and the means of sustenance was only increasing arithmetically. Whether he was correct or not, it was the generally perceived trend. The experience of the Clapham Fathers and their children thus occurred in a fast moving period of social, economic and political change.

#### CHURCH RESPONSE

Plurality and gentrification of the clergy did nothing to help bring a pastoral ministry to this situation. The requirement for ordination was usually, though not exclusively, a degree from one of the universities. Butler, trained in a Dissenting academy, was unusual.<sup>59</sup> (There were only two universities in England at this time.) While the curriculum was what would now be called a liberal education (in the Arts) and may have contained some theological reading, it was, by no means, a 'theological or

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<sup>56</sup> Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people?*, p 22.

<sup>57</sup> Hilton, *A mad, bad, and dangerous people?*, p 5.

<sup>58</sup> R. T. Malthus, *An essay on the principle of population and its affects on the future improvement of society with explanation on the speculations of Mr. Godwin, M Condorcet and other writers.* (anonymously, 1798).

<sup>59</sup> Neill, *Anglicanism*, p 184.

pastoral education' such as is now assumed to be necessary. There were longstanding clerical dynasties such as the Venns and the Frewens, but many of the clergy were either younger sons of the aristocracy or squireocracy, or sons of the new 'middle class' seeking a future. No doubt these men, generally, held a professed belief in the Faith of the Established Church yet, most likely, they did not perceive an 'enthusiastic call' to ministry. But why should they? The Church was Established, the Faith prescribed, and upon it the Succession of the Crown depended. There may have been other ways of seeing the Faith but the right to do so was 'toleration' not endorsement. Theological arguments had led, in part, to the Commonwealth and later to the deposing of James II; but now England was at peace within herself. The Faith of the Established Church and its Liturgy (which William Wilberforce was to describe as our 'excellent liturgy'<sup>60</sup>) was legally the Faith of the Nation. It had been the intent of the Crown and Parliament since the first *Act of Uniformity* to maintain both the Christian Faith and the peace of the Realm by this means. Originally there was no place for Dissent, but political need had allowed it from 1660. Yet it was always dissent from what was understood as the 'true Faith' by the Crown and Parliament.

Yet under this religious blanket theological issues bubbled, both among the Dissenters and within the Establishment. The desire for 'rational' proofs for and justification of Christian doctrine resulted in a re-

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<sup>60</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p 51.



examination of the 'Prescribed Faith'. A Unitarian or Socinian view of the Trinity became a major issue as did a re-evaluation of Christianity as the only access to God. And views of society such as Thomas Paine's<sup>61</sup> challenged the concept of the nation, of the source of political authority and therefore of citizenship, and ultimately the 'English Constitution' (again lionised by Wilberforce<sup>62</sup>).

#### ACADEMIC CHALLENGE TO BIBLICAL HISTORY

It is in this period also that the first challenge to Biblical history was taking place. The 'new science' of geology in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, led by James Hutton of Edinburgh (1726-1797) and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707–1788), was starting to ask questions about the origin of landforms and the age of the earth.<sup>63</sup> Buffon and Hutton both came, from a different base, to the belief that the age of the earth was much greater than Biblical history would allow. Buffon published his ideas on this subject in general in *Histoire de la nature* published 1749 and in 1777 published the origin of the earth material in an essay, taken from *Histoire* and later work, entitled *Théorie de la terre*. His theory of a cooling earth spun off from the sun followed Isaac Newton's calculation of

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man. For the use and benefit of all mankind* (London, 1795).

<sup>62</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 254 – 255.

<sup>63</sup> Wyse Jackson, *The chronologers' quest* Examines the quest for the age of the earth and its challenges from religious opponents to an old age theory.

the time it would take for a ball of molten iron, the size of the earth to cool, approximately 50,000 years.<sup>64</sup>

James Hutton developed his theory of the origins of landform over at least a 30 year period. On the 7<sup>th</sup> March 1785 the first part of a paper by him on this subject was read at the Royal Society of Edinburgh. In it he argued for a process of weathering and sedimentation and that the present landform was developed from previous landforms. Wyse Jackson wrote that Hutton concluded that 'The earth was of indefinite age, was ancient and its dynamic nature was cyclical.'<sup>65</sup> In Hutton's own words in the First Volume of *the Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* (1788), 'The result, therefore, of our present enquiry is, that we find no vestige of a beginning, – no prospect of an end.'<sup>66</sup> Of Hutton, Wyse Jackson wrote '[His] work was of huge significance as it allowed enlightened men of science and learning to shake off religious chronologies and dogma.'<sup>67</sup> There were of course even earlier works that presented a long history of the Earth, for example, that of fossils by the Danish Roman Catholic priest, Nikolaus Steno (1638 -1686),<sup>68</sup> but the concept was now expressed with renewed vigour.

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<sup>64</sup> Wyse Jackson, *The chronologers' quest* , p 111.

<sup>65</sup> Wyse Jackson, *The chronologers' quest* , p 92.

<sup>66</sup> Wyse Jackson, *The chronologers' quest* , p 92.

<sup>67</sup> Wyse Jackson, *The chronologers' quest* , p 92.

<sup>68</sup> Wyse Jackson, *The chronologers' quest* , p 67.

Dr Robert Young (retired Associate Professor in Physical Geography, University of Wollongong), concerning the development and effects of geology on the thought world of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, said:

The "Christian Philosophe" Jean-Andre de Luc had a considerable influence in the late 1700s, especially after he moved to England as an adviser to Queen Charlotte the consort of George III. He proposed a binary system in which the primordial Earth was distinct from the modern Earth after the appearance of man. The short history derived from Genesis, he argued, fitted the evidence for the modern age, but not the primordial age. These two "very distinct periods" were separated by "the great Revolution" in which the face of the Earth was greatly altered (largely by the Flood).-- de Luc was thus proposing a halfway-house in which Christian tradition and agnostic speculation could rub shoulders. However the case for a great age of the Earth really developed in the last decade of the 18th Century and the first 2 decades of the 19th Century as Geology was transformed from a series of speculative and deductive "Theories of the Earth" to an empirical (i.e. largely inductive) "History of the Earth". The transformation was based largely on the recognition of distinct fossil assemblages in different strata. The development of comparative anatomy (*sic*) palaeontology by Georges Cuvier was probably the chief factor in the

change, but Anglican clergymen, especially William Buckland at Oxford and Adam Sedgwick at Cambridge, made a highly significant contribution. The so-called "Scriptural Geologists", wrote books defending a young earth in the 1820s to the earlier 1840s, but were out of [favour], and regarded with scorn by, the mainstream of geology thereafter.<sup>69</sup>

The process of evidence-based science, developed during this period, would have profound effects on religious thought and on the process of Biblical understanding and interpretation. So Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species by Natural selection* in 1859, while greatly increasing the debate among both scientists and clergy, did not originate it. The 'old age earth' movement, which undercut Bishop Ussher's dating of the creation, raised issues for the way one read the Scriptures. While not moving in the direction of the Socinian/Unitarian position, it did create an uncertainty about the Bible which the development of 'Higher Criticism' in Germany and the 'evolutionary' understanding of humanity (not simply Darwinian) would expand in the next 100 years.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is in this context that Evangelicalism and Methodism find their genesis in England. They offered immediacy and clarity in one's relationship with God and of a faith which did not necessarily require one to be part of the

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<sup>69</sup> Email conversation, 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2012 with Dr Robert W Young. Email archived by this writer. Most of that email is contained in this quotation. An analysis of the detail of this question can be found in "The Pilgrim at the Abyss of Time" Assoc. Prof. Robert W Young in *The Journal of Richard Johnson College, Wollongong*, Vol 1, 1993, pp26 – 33.

Establishment. Evangelicalism seemed to offer an *affective* and *individual* relationship. One did not have to wade through Paley and Berkeley to understand God. (It needs to be noted though that our first generation Clapham subjects did read and value such works.<sup>70</sup>) It also resonated with (or perhaps generated) a sense of deferred benefit which was essential to the development of the middle class, and an emerging capitalism, now seeking an expanded role in society.

Many streams of piety, orthodox and heterodox, flowered in the Hanoverian environment. In retrospect Evangelicalism was the deepest stream, but it was only one among many. William Wilberforce's *experience* and his promotion of the evangelical faith profile, especially in *A Practical View*, must be seen as his perception and critique of the 'deadness' of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Church. While he remained loyal to the Establishment he perceived a need for a radical re-expression of the faith. His son, Robert Isaac Wilberforce, also had a similar view of the Hanoverian Church.<sup>71</sup> We will see in Samuel, in the final chapter of this thesis, a more nuanced response.

The desire for immediacy in religious experience in the Evangelical community, for an *affective* faith, was its ringing call. In a world of apparent crisis it generated a crisis of its own. Wilberforce would call it 'the great change'. It challenged all other modes of piety of the time. It

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<sup>70</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, I, p 91.

<sup>71</sup> This thesis p 248.

demanded 'conversion'. Yet from what to what, and could it be sustained, or more importantly transferred to one's children, living in a more complex and diverse social, intellectual and religious environment? Would it need to 'meld' with other streams of piety from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to enable the next generation to present a *public* Christian face and challenge their society in a manner for which 'the Saints' were renowned?<sup>72</sup> Would some of the traits and values inherited by the children actually challenge the core hope of their fathers? This will be the burden of chapter Five.

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<sup>72</sup> Ernest Marshall Howse, *Saints in politics: the 'Clapham Sect' and the growth of freedom* (Open University set book; London,: Allen and Unwin, 1971).

## Chapter 4

### Religious Expectations:

#### What the Clapham Fathers hoped for their Sons

##### INTRODUCTION

##### *Goal*

The goal of the parents of Clapham children, so much as they were able, was to ensure that their children prepared themselves for their final encounter with God. To this end they prayed for them, exposed them to the contents of the faith, and exhorted them to seek God and to act to ensure they were ready to face God on the final day. So the choice of schools and university were matters of significance. They corresponded with them and left them memoirs which, after the death of the parents, would enable the children to reflect upon their parents' lives and learn from them.

##### *False perceptions*

Popular culture and even some contemporary literature have portrayed the environment in which children of the period were raised as one of strict and feared obedience. Yet recent research has shown that, although reflecting the values of their day, the Evangelicals should not be seen as unreasonably harsh.<sup>1</sup>

##### *Need for an active education*

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Tolley, *Domestic Biography*; Doreen M. Rosman, *Evangelicals and culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

Their concern meant that the education and formation of their children was something they actively undertook. Yet we will show that a significant part of the effective formation of their children came from the inculcation of values and attitudes which undergirded their own practice and direction. The commitment and understanding of the Establishment of the Church and the Constitution of the Nation would have a profound effect on the children's faith development and final position. This understanding would, in fact, be fundamental in the reshaping of the children's faith position.

#### *Memoirs and letters*

One thing is quite clear: our primary subjects were keen to ensure that the children had access to their own convictions concerning the faith. For this purpose two of our subjects, Thornton and Stephen, wrote memoirs which they hoped their children, upon reading, would be encouraged to live the kind of life their parents desired. We see in the letters from William Wilberforce, which his son, Samuel, preserved, the same desire of the father constantly to encourage his son to live 'a vital Christian life'.

In his *Memoir* Henry Thornton wrote:

The perusal of some manuscripts of my long since departed mother has suggested to me the idea of leaving behind me some account of myself for the use of my children who may survive me. ... My design chiefly is to write for their use – to write I mean in order both to gratify their feelings, to satisfy



in some degree their curiosity and to contribute to their religious improvement.<sup>2</sup>

James Stephen, in setting out the purpose of writing his memoir, wrote:

I write for the sake of my children, I wish to inform them faithfully of the events of my own life, because I think it may be useful to them in the conduct of theirs. They may learn wisdom from what has been wrong in it, as well as from what has been right.<sup>3</sup>

William Wilberforce's letters to his son often contain direct injunctions or desires to see in his son evidences of a 'vital Christian life'. Rosman noted:

Samuel Wilberforce ... cherished over 600 of his Fathers letters. His example is informative for it confirms that evangelical children did not receive the thick didactic screeds with which their parents showered them with expressions of unrelieved gloom, pursuing them only as in duty bound.<sup>4</sup>

This approach is reflected in the relationship developed between parents and children as we shall see later in this chapter. In this chapter I will necessarily repeat some material used in Chapter One, but I will be seeking to accentuate different facets of the material.

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<sup>2</sup> Thornton, 7674/1/N., p 1.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen, *The Memoirs*, p 26.

<sup>4</sup> Rosman, *Evangelicals and culture*, p 110.

## ENCOURAGED IN THE 'GREAT CHANGE'

One of Bebbington's markers<sup>5</sup> of what it was to be an 'evangelical' is conversion. We do not find in Thornton or Stephen any direct injunction or expressed desire for conversion or evidences of conversion to be seen in the children. This is a major expectation in the letters of William Wilberforce to his son Samuel.

In writing to his son on his ninth birthday Wilberforce wrote (15 September, 1814):

Above all my dear Saml (*sic*) I am anxious to see decisive marks of your having begun to undergo the great change. ... I would willingly walk barefoot from this place [*Battersea Rise*] to Sandgate to see a clear proof of y<sup>e</sup> great change being begun in my dear Sam. at the end of my journey<sup>6</sup>

This demand for clear evidences of a true Christian *experience* is seen often in the letters. But note, it is an *experience* which is to be felt by the father, not just a report of Samuel's, that he desires. In a letter already quoted he wrote:

My dear Samuel let me not thus suffer on your account oh let me see & know that you are reconciled to God by Jesus Christ

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<sup>5</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain : a history from the 1730s to the 1980s*.

<sup>6</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 9. p 87.

let *me* feel by daily and hourly experiences that you are the Temple of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

In the Stephen *Memoir* we do not see such calls but there are, explicitly and implicitly, 'calls' to repentance and to seeking the mercy of God.<sup>8</sup> The tenor of Henry Thornton's *Memoir* is rather one of 'imitation'. He writes of his life, and like Stephen, indicates both positive and negative features. Implicit is the idea that his children should think about the things revealed and act accordingly.

As we have seen in Chapter Two, there is no indication of a 'conversion' experience in Stephen or Thornton and so, while clear in Wilberforce and referred to as a necessity in much secondary literature, it would be unwise to assert it as a demand made on all the Clapham children. Yet Wilberforce's role and status in the 'sect' would warn against any absolute dismissal of the possibility.

#### ENSURING THE HOLY SPIRIT

Again found in William Wilberforce's correspondence with Samuel is the idea of an 'oscillating' action by the Holy Spirit. He wrote 'I do hope you read your Bible and pray earnestly – do not neglect these means of grace

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<sup>7</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, C 51. p 61. Emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. Stephen, *The Memoirs* p 150.

lest God withdraw from you'.<sup>9</sup> And again later, 'nothing grieves the Spirit more than our willingly suffering our thoughts to wander'.<sup>10</sup>

The injunctions to pray, to self-examination, and to living out one's advantages, stress the need to ensure one doesn't 'grieve the Spirit'. 'Again a Christian Boy who means to imitate the example of Christ & not grieve the Holy Spirit will try to be meek and courteous'.<sup>11</sup>

As we have seen in Chapter One this understanding of the Spirit's action was common in the hymnody of the movement. One is justified in assuming that the children were familiar with these works. This was not only William Wilberforce's view of the work of the Holy Spirit. While in his *Memoir* Thornton does not broach the subject, his view is clear from his *Journal*. He wrote:

The Scripture says Quench not the Spirit – Grieve not the spirit & his operations are represented to be of such a nature as ought to lead us to be exceedingly in horror & fearful of causing his influence to be withdrawn – Some conceive their frames to be quite independent of all care & watchfulness in managing this point of [indecipherable] & – I consider these persons (who are very confident & very numerous) to be most

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<sup>9</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 9. p 148.

<sup>10</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 10. p 98.

<sup>11</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 9. p 104.

dangerously mistaken - They go contrary to my *experience* &  
I fear they have seldom much true comfort.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear from this reflection by Thornton that his understanding of the way the Spirit works is similar to that of Wilberforce and of William Cowper, the hymn writer we have quoted in Chapter One. In Thornton's book, *Family Prayers*<sup>13</sup>, the word 'spirit' is used in three ways to refer to: (1) the Holy Spirit, (2) the human spirit, (3) a principle. These prayers were prepared for use in his daily family devotions and published by his children's guardian after his death. Thornton wrote of the Spirit's work as assisting the Christian. For example, he prayed that things might occur 'through the powerful help of thy Holy Spirit'.<sup>14</sup> This type of phraseology occurs frequently. Yet there are also a significant number of petitions for the Holy Spirit himself: 'may thy Holy Spirit dwell with in us',<sup>15</sup> 'we, therefore, now pray for the *gift*<sup>16</sup> of the Holy Spirit',<sup>17</sup> 'We beseech Thee to put Thy Holy Spirit into our hearts, that we may not depart from Thee'.<sup>18</sup> While there is no reference in *Family Prayer* to 'grieving' the Holy Spirit, these latter petitions suggest that he did not consider the '*gift of the Spirit*' a once for all event, and allied with his use of experience as a test,

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<sup>12</sup> Thornton, Thornton MSS/7674/1/R. p 43. Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> R H Inglis, Sir (ed.), *Family Prayers by the late Henry Thornton, Esq<sup>er</sup> M. P.* 1 vols. (London: J Hatchard & Son, Piccadilly, 1834).

<sup>14</sup> Inglis (ed.), *Family Prayers* p 138.

<sup>15</sup> Inglis (ed.), *Family Prayers* p 2.

<sup>16</sup> The emphasis is mine – that is, this is not a reference to what is often spoken of as the *gifts* of the Spirit, but rather a petition for the *presence* of the Spirit.

<sup>17</sup> Inglis (ed.), *Family Prayers* p 16 & 98.

<sup>18</sup> Inglis (ed.), *Family Prayers* p 57.

we may assume that this understanding of the need for repeated visitations of the Spirit was conveyed to his children.

Of James Stephen's belief in this area as we have already noted there is no reference to the Spirit or his work in Stephen's *Memoir*.

#### 'MEANS' OF SURVIVAL

There were a number of practices which were encouraged as 'means'<sup>19</sup> for ensuring that a person would persevere as a 'vital Christian'.

#### *Scripture*

Among the most important of these is the serious reading of the Holy Scripture. In his *Journal*, as we have seen in Chapter Two, the disciplined reading of Holy Scripture was a task and goal which Thornton pursued. Meacham also notes Thornton's involvement with Bible study groups,<sup>20</sup> and Robert Inglis, in his introduction to Thornton's *Family Prayers*, noted 'his views on religion from the prayers now published and from some practical commentaries on the Old and New Testament ... These ... he drew up for the use of his own family'.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that the reading of Scripture, as in many Family Prayer situations, was part of his children's experience.

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<sup>19</sup> In spite of their belief in the sovereignty of God and in grace not works, evangelicals were committed to the exercise of 'means' to achieve God's will. Indeed the means were themselves the provision of God, as seen in the expression, much used by the subjects of this thesis, 'the means of grace'. The word was most meaningfully employed in the title of the manifesto, penned by the 'father' of modern missions, William Carey, namely *An Inquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* (1792).

<sup>20</sup> Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham*, p 18.

<sup>21</sup> Inglis (ed.), *Family Prayers* p vii.

In the case of William Wilberforce we see it explicitly in the letters to Samuel.

### *Prayer*

We have already seen the emphasis placed by Henry Thornton on prayer.

In his prayers for the first Saturday of each month he wrote:

Have compassion on the young in this family. Incline them to hear thy word with attention, that they may grow wiser every day that they live; and teach them to lift up their hearts in prayer, while they kneel down with us to worship Thee.<sup>22</sup>

Again he wrote, for the Second Sunday morning, of the provision of God: 'may every opportunity of holy meditation, and of public, social and secret prayer' be beneficial.<sup>23</sup> And on at least five occasions he stressed the need of daily prayer.<sup>24</sup>

William Wilberforce wrote in 1819 to Samuel (then 14 years old) of his own commitment 'by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to draw down the Blessed Spirit of God to take up residence in your heart and inspire holy discourse'.<sup>25</sup> When Samuel reported an unhappiness of soul or a feeling of unfitness toward God, his father wrote, 'and when you feel unhappy or unfit to die remember to pray – prayer is the cure of this

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<sup>22</sup> Inglis (ed.), *Family Prayers* p 153.

<sup>23</sup> Inglis (ed.), *Family Prayers* p 71.

<sup>24</sup> Inglis (ed.), *Family Prayers* pp 43, 53, 95, 109, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 10. p54.

unhappiness'.<sup>26</sup> Samuel's biographer refers to the father's letters as being instrumental in the formation of the son:

Compare these letters with his subsequent career, and it will at once be seen that Samuel Wilberforce was indeed his father's son. Nascent faults carefully marked and checked, personal habits of upright conduct strenuously enforced, showed practical councils as to social duties and conduct towards his equals constantly suggested, and all of these strong upon the one thread of ever repeated inculcation of the duty of private prayer as the one hold fast of life.<sup>27</sup>

Wilberforce was keen not only to have his children engage in a regular habit of prayer but also to encourage them to make sure it was not a formal activity. He wrote to Samuel on 13 February, 1819:

I am obliged to you for giving me an account of your daily labours. You seem to be pretty well worked. I hope my dearest boy will never suffer his unwillingness to leave his bed to seduce him into hurrying over his prayers by not leaving him time to go through them seriously.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 10. p 24.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Rawson Ashwell, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, D. D. Lord Bishop of Oxford and afterward of Winchester with selections from his dairies and correspondence*, 3 vols. (I; London: John Murray, 1880) p 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ashwell, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, I*, p 10.



In a number of other letters he not only enjoins this discipline as an occasional but as a daily necessity along with the reading of Scripture.<sup>29</sup>

### *Sunday*

As we have seen in Chapter One William Wilberforce considered Sunday a day for family and worship. This conviction is found in the three sections of Henry Thornton's *Family Prayers*, 'Sunday Morning' (pp 67-8), 'Sunday Evening' (pp 81-95) and 'Saturday Evening' (pp 151-161). To encourage the observing of this practice, Wilberforce would arrange to have letters sent so as to arrive on Sunday for readings. To Samuel he wrote, 'I remembered that you would receive this on a Sunday, and therefore permitted myself to fall into a serious strain.'<sup>30</sup> And, as we have already noted, he enjoined Robert to make proper use of Sunday, not joining in parties which would distract him.<sup>31</sup>

But it wasn't a 'dull strict Sabbath'. Tolley reports favourably:

Sunday was his own, and spent in the midst of his family. His children, after meeting him at prayer, went with him to the house of God; repeating to him in the carriage hymns or verses from his favourite Cowper. Then they walked with him in the garden, and each had the valued privilege of bringing him a Sunday nosegay, for which the flowers from their little gardens had been hoarded all week. Then all dined together,

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<sup>29</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 10. pp 49 -51.

<sup>30</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, V, p 25.

<sup>31</sup> Wilberforce and Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce*, V, p 93.

at an early hour, in the midst of cheerful yet suitable conversation ... Never was religion seen in a more engaging form than in his Sunday intercourse with them. A festival air of holy and rational happiness dwelt continually around him.<sup>32</sup>

### *Friends*

Samuel several times sought his father's advice about the kind of friends he should make. It is clear that he expects he should have 'serious' friends, but his letter also indicates that he was aware that they should be people of a cultivated aspect. Samuel wrote on 21 June 1823, in a letter which we have quoted above,<sup>33</sup> that the religious people were of very low birth and vulgar in manners, feelings and conduct.<sup>34</sup>

In *Fathers of the Victorians*, Ford K Brown makes much of William Wilberforce's desire to mix with his own class. Brown draws attention to Wilberforce's preference for genteel people of proper manners and presentation.<sup>35</sup> It seems that Samuel's question is a reflection of these views. 'Serious' friends are a priority, but are there other qualities which must also be sought?

While, in Thornton's writings, we do not find explicit injunctions as to whom one should engage in friendship, in the last page and a half of his *Memoir* he outlines the value religious friends have been to him, noting

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<sup>32</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, p 24.

<sup>33</sup> This thesis p 68

<sup>34</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, C 51.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians* p 506 and others.

William Wilberforce as chief among these. Since the *Memoir* is to encourage his children to follow his example in good things, one can assume that he saw such friends as crucial 'means' in one's earthly pilgrimage.

#### AFFECTION AND SUPPORT

From the tone of letter and memoir one might get a feeling of some distance between parents and children, but this was not so.

##### *The quality of Gentleness*

As we have noted before,<sup>36</sup> in writing to Hannah More, when his first child, William, was born, Wilberforce expresses a gentle and affectionate tone. Calling children 'infantiles' who entwine themselves around their parents' hearts.<sup>37</sup> This gentleness is further evidenced by Wilberforce's use of 'my lamb' as a form of address for Samuel.<sup>38</sup>

Rosman observed: "If Wilberforce urged Samuel 'you must take pains to prove to me that you are nine not in years only, but in head, heart and mind', he let his children celebrate Robert's ninth birthday by dressing up in his court garb to play at king and queen."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This thesis p 63.

<sup>37</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography* p 20, the original letter referred to has been cited by this author and the quotation confirmed.

<sup>38</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 9. p 144.

<sup>39</sup> Rosman, *Evangelicals and culture*, p 113.

But it is not only Wilberforce who showed a gentle side to his children. Henry Thornton on 20 June 1806 wrote to his daughter, Marianne, she being about 9 years old:

Pray can you tell Daughter dear  
What day's the longest in the year  
doubtless you'll answer very soon,  
And say "the Twenty First of June"  
But I can prove on grounds the strongest,  
The twentieth day is much the longest:  
For since I now am living here,  
Robbed of my five poor children dear,  
Stripped of my valued wife beside,  
at once my Pleasure and my Pride,  
This Twentieth day seem long indeed;  
But if thou will but make good speed  
and come this evening, as thou oughtest,  
You'll make the longest day the shortest.<sup>40</sup>

It seems that Rosman's assessment of filial relationships is correct.

Measured against that of their contemporaries the home life of these families does not merit unduly harsh judgement. The tendency to treat children as adults was a long established upper and middle class habit. Patriarchalism was not peculiar to Evangelicalism but was equally characteristic of the upbringing of the young Charles Darwin, whose father was religiously sceptical, and of many others of like social status. If, as Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt suggest, evangelicals help perpetuate these practices, they also in the anxiety to associate religion with 'domestic tenderness' did much to

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<sup>40</sup> Henry Thornton, Thornton Papers, Cambridge, University of Cambridge, 7674/I/I. p 62.

encourage a more sympathetic understanding of childhood, which, no less than their parental authoritarianism is reflected in the literature they produce.<sup>41</sup>

### *Friendship of parents*

Allied to this material we find the comments by Wilberforce concerning how he wishes his son, Samuel, to relate toward him: 'in short I wish my dear Lamb to communicate with me as a friend'.<sup>42</sup> Tolley confirmed this approach when he wrote 'Like Samuel Wilberforce, Fitzjames Stephen was proud to have been his father's intimate friend and from an early age to have grown up in the company of one whose talk was equal to that of Macaulay or Carlyle at their best; by comparison, those who taught Fitzjames at Eton earned only his disdain.'<sup>43</sup>

It is not only to Samuel, his favourite son, that Wilberforce desired to be seen as a friend. He encouraged Robert in the same way. In 1821 he wrote to Robert, 'Let me beg you always to deal unreservedly with me ... You shall always find me disposed to behave to you in all respects like a real friend'.<sup>44</sup>

### *Choice of schools*

Sir James Stephen was educated in a variety of small private schools.

Leslie Stephen wrote:

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<sup>41</sup> Rosman, *Evangelicals and culture*, p 114.

<sup>42</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 9. d 9, p 144.

<sup>43</sup> Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, p 22.

<sup>44</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Univerity of Oxford, d 16., p 157.

James, the younger, was, I believe under various schoolmasters, of whom I can only mention John Prior Estlin, of St Michael's Hill, Bristol, a Unitarian, and the Rev. H. Jowett, of Little Dunham, Norfolk, who was one of the adherents to Evangelicalism. The change probably marks the development of his father's convictions.<sup>45</sup>

Wilberforce's sons, Robert Isaac, Samuel and Henry, were educated at a number of similar schools. Ashwell recorded<sup>46</sup> of Samuel that he was schooled by the Rev. S Langston at Hastings, then by Rev. R G Marsh at Nuneham, and, just before going up to Oxford, by the Rev. George Hudson near Oxford. We know that Robert and Samuel were together at the same school, for on one occasion William Wilberforce wrote to Samuel in response to a letter Samuel had written to his father in which he explained that he was writing on behalf of both as Robert was building a house. Just how big or small we are not told. Wilberforce responded, I suspect whimsically, 'being a political economist myself I cannot but admit the beneficial effects which always flows from the division of labour.'<sup>47</sup>

One letter reveals Wilberforce's preference for private tuition for his sons. On 30 October 1821 he wrote to Samuel strongly criticising him for a failure to report 'the Vice which may be classed under the general Head of Impurity' of another two students. It is a vice 'dreadfully common I fear at

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, p 80.

<sup>46</sup> Ashwell, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce*, I p 4.

<sup>47</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 9. p 108.

School, which is once condemned by God and most disastrous to [word unsure] Body as well as the Soul'.<sup>48</sup> He then wrote:

But it is chiefly for the very purpose of providing against this double [word indecipherable], that many parents do not like to send their child<sup>n</sup> to Public Schools<sup>49</sup>

It is clear that one of the issues in the choice of schools was the effect that the school would have on the child's moral life, not only the value of the education or connection he would make.

#### *Cambridge or Oxford*

The choice of university to which Clapham children were sent presents somewhat of a mystery. With Simeon and Milner at Cambridge, this would seem the logical place, and so it was for James Stephen to send his son there. Yet Wilberforce's three younger sons were sent to Oxford and there to Oriel College rather than to Magdalene where there were Evangelical tutors.

Leslie Stephen wrote that his father enjoyed Cambridge, but said it provided him with little in the way of academic stretching.<sup>50</sup> He was at Trinity Hall where Joseph Jowett (an Evangelical) was a tutor and Leslie Stephen wrote: 'the colleges were probably selected for my father and his brother George with a view to the influence of these representatives of the

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<sup>48</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 9. pp 205 – 207.

<sup>49</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 9. p 208.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, p 31.

true faith.<sup>51</sup> Despite Sir James' comment that Cambridge in his time was akin to a residence in an expensive hotel he did graduate with a Bachelor of Laws in 1812.<sup>52</sup>

William Wilberforce's eldest son, William, went up to Cambridge, to Trinity College, after failing to obtain a place at Oriel College, Oxford. So we can see that it was not in reaction to William junior's time at Cambridge which resulted in Oxford being chosen for Robert Isaac, Samuel and Henry. William junior's father withdrew him after he failed to devote himself to his studies and spent the time like any other gentleman in college.<sup>53</sup>

Hague suggests that it was William's failure in his youth to show any development of a serious religious demeanour which encouraged his father to look toward Oxford. Ford Brown, in *Fathers of the Victorians*, suggests it was because William Wilberforce had himself moved toward a High Church form of the faith and away from the faith of his 'conversion'. Writing of the sons' (Robert Isaac, Samuel and Henry) 'king and church' stance, Brown wrote:

It may be true nevertheless that he was not troubled by his sons' apostasy from the religion they had learned in his home.

The available evidence in fact seems to point that way. But it could only be true if you'd follow them away from the Evangelical Party. There is a considerable amount of evidence

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, p 31.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, p 32.

<sup>53</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p 468.



supporting the belief that perhaps by 1830 Wilberforce had himself gone over to the High Church.<sup>54</sup>

Brown does not give 'the evidence' except for a letter from Marianne Thornton which suggests it was the 'rough' manner of evangelicals which turned the sons away from their Evangelical heritage.<sup>55</sup> Brown's use of 'apostasy' is significant in identifying his bias in this work. His assessment is postulated on his assertion that in writing their father's biography the sons had deliberately suppressed his early involvement with a 'methodist' uncle and aunt and his own Evangelical 'conversion' and life.<sup>56</sup>

If this were so then it would make nonsense of Robert Isaac Wilberforce's Archidiaconal Charge of 1850<sup>57</sup> (which we shall examine in Chapter Five) where he describes the Evangelical Revival as necessarily a divine activity. Brown's opinion would also run foul of Samuel Wilberforce's assertion that he had given up none of his Evangelical beliefs and that, in a letter to Marianne Thornton in the last year of his life, he described himself as a 'churchman and Evangelical' (we shall examine this also in Chapter Five)<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, p 499.

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, p 519 quoted from E. M Forster biography of Marianne Thornton.

<sup>56</sup> Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, p 73.

<sup>57</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation A. D. 1850*.

<sup>58</sup> Wilberforce, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, III*, p 404.

It is clear from William Wilberforce's letters and from his biography that the prospect of his sons as clergymen was a momentous matter. He wrote to Samuel, 'May you be what the old nurse who took you to church when you were baptised prayed you might be, another Samuel'.<sup>59</sup> When Samuel was sixteen, in a letter indicating he was recovering from an illness, Wilberforce wrote to his son: 'I begin to hope it may please God to spare me to see my dear Sam Minister of Christ and I think scarcely anything on this side of the grave would gratify me more than to witness him going through the various duties of the ministerial office with ability and zeal.'<sup>60</sup> He wrote to Robert (probably late in 1823), 'to see you and Sam' good clergymen would perhaps be the very greatest pleasure I could enjoy in this world'.<sup>61</sup>

### *Children in Church*

In one of his last public events with the Rural Deans of the Diocese of Winchester, in the course of discussing non-communicating attendance at the Lord's Supper, Samuel Wilberforce drew attention to his own experience of church as a child. He spoke of the habit his father had of taking him to church even when the Lord's Supper was being celebrated and he was not, at that stage, a communicant member of the church. In the published form of the charge, we read:

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<sup>59</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 10. d 10, p 97.

<sup>60</sup> Ashwell, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, I*, 14.

<sup>61</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 16. p 204.

That this custom [of non-communicating attendance at the Eucharist] is creeping into our Church is not an accident; neither is it brought in for the purpose of making children better acquainted with the service. That would be a great help. I have found the benefit of it myself when my own father used to take me to church and leave me in his seat to read hymns which he had selected for me, while he himself communicated. That, I say, was to me a very great help.<sup>62</sup>

Clearly the expectation is that the children would become familiar with the services of the church and be involved regularly in its ministries. This is seen in the way families used their Sundays.

#### CONCLUSIONS

##### *A Colony for Heaven*

The collection of families, lauded by Henry Thornton<sup>63</sup>, was not so much a colony *of* heaven but a colony *for* heaven. This is particularly seen in the habit of exposing their children to ever-present death. Lucy Thornton, Henry's daughter, was taken by her mother to see the dead Maria Venn. Henry, in a letter described it thus to Hannah More, 'Our Lucy stared rather than wept at the scene. "Why, Lucy," said Mama, "perhaps the next burial may be yours. This little girl was just your age."' <sup>64</sup> Such exposure

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<sup>62</sup> Wilberforce, *He, being dead, yet speaketh*, p 23.

<sup>63</sup> This thesis p 62.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Standish Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham, 1760-1815* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1964a) p 23.

was not unusual. Meacham wrote 'To us this macabre dialogue is little less than repulsive. To Lucy and her mother it was natural and instructive.'<sup>65</sup>

This concern for their children's eternal welfare was explicitly expressed to Robert Isaac Wilberforce in a letter from his father while Robert Isaac was at Oriel, in which he said that he was 'solicitous about the Salvation of his Children'.<sup>66</sup> Even preparation for ministry must never be allowed to distract one from this end. William Wilberforce wrote, to Robert Isaac on 13 August 1823, 'setting yourself doggedly to Study, you should not grow remiss in the pursuit of the one thing needful'.<sup>67</sup>

As we have seen in the letter from Henry Thornton to Grant, above, the Clapham arrangement was intended to encourage its 'members' to persevere in the faith, making sure their eternal life. The prayers, letters and memoirs we have examined have constant indications of a desire and commitment to work to be acceptable on the day of judgement. The use of Paul's injunction to the Philippians to 'work out your own salvation' (no matter whether this was a correct exegesis of the text) indicates the prime goal of the Clapham fathers. As many authors<sup>68</sup> have indicated this was the same goal of the Clapham families desired for their children.

### *Implicit modelling*

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<sup>65</sup> Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham, 1760-1815*, p 23.

<sup>66</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 16. p 193.

<sup>67</sup> Wilberforce Correspondence, d 16. p 192.

<sup>68</sup> for example, Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, Clifford S. Hill, *The Wilberforce connection* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2004).

As we have seen, above, the memoirs written by parents were intended as mirrors into which the children could look to see the kind of persons they should be. Yet there was already a significant factor which would have affected the children's formation. While the parents aimed explicitly at forming 'vital Christians' their implicit values were being imbibed by their children who were thus being shaped as 'public Christians'. Living as they did in the community of Clapham, involved in discussions with their parents, and also observing their parents' discussions both among themselves and their visitors, a model of the public Christian was constantly being presented. In Chapters One and Two we have seen that the support of Establishment and Constitution were significant for our Clapham subjects. We see this reflected, for example, in Thornton's *Family Prayers*:

Have mercy on our King. Direct the counsels of the nation.  
Bless our magistrates. Inspire our clergy with a spirit of true  
religion. Give to the poor, contentment with their lot; – and to  
the rich a spirit of compassion and benevolence.<sup>69</sup>

It is clear that our three primary subjects desired their children to have and develop an experience of God like their own. It is also clear that they expected a piety similar to their own to develop. They certainly wanted their children fitted for heaven, yet it was not only with the private world that the Clapham fathers wished their children to engage. The professions

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<sup>69</sup> Inglis (ed.), *Family Prayers* p 137.

encouraged and the model observed in the 'Clapham Cabinet' encouraged them to take their place in the public square. Was it the case that the desired *experience* and piety could be carried forward and, if so, in what ways?

We will see in Chapter Six that these two commitments (Constitution and Establishment), changing as each did in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and coming into conflict with each other (for example, as we shall see, the effects of the Repeal of the Test and Corporations Act and the Gorham Case) for Samuel and Robert Wilberforce and Sir James Stephen, were the triggers or arenas in which these children worked out their mature faith positions. There was a conscious and unconscious adoption of political and religious ideals by the children from their parents. These were radically modified because of the circumstances and developments in which the children moved and the issues and circumstances they had to address. The society, in fact the Constitution, in which the three men we are concentrating on lived and worked was significantly different to that which faced their Clapham parents. The issue of the relationship of the Establishment and the Constitution was challenged by these different circumstances.

Thus we have demonstrated one of the chief proposition of this thesis, namely that, the Clapham fathers did succeed in passing on the capacity to thrive in the new world of Victorian religious, civic and political life as Christians, even if they failed to pass on what mattered most to them, namely evidence of 'the great change'.

Yet, ironically, we will suggest in the final chapter that one of the children, presenting a different faith profile, represented the real continuation of the Clapham desire and commitment. To my knowledge, no-one has made such a claim for Samuel Wilberforce. In evangelical historiography he is condemned as a Tractarian and a ritualist and in the historiography of science he is mocked as an obscurantist. But it is the contention of this thesis that he embodied much that was prescient in the evangelical worldview and he was honoured by the scientific community who made him a Fellow of the Royal Society.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Mature Religious Position of the Second Generation:**

#### **R I & S Wilberforce & Sir James Stephen**

Critical to this thesis is an understanding of the nature of the faith of each of the generations under study. To see what factors affected the transmission of faith positions between generations, to understand the faith formation of each of our subjects in the next generation, one must be clear on the mature faith position of each of our subjects in the next generation. At this point self-assumed labels may be of minor assistance. Terms such as 'evangelical', 'anglo-catholic', 'high churchman', have and had a variety of nuances. Jurisdictional descriptions, 'Church of England', 'Roman Catholic' or 'Dissenter', are a little more helpful but even these will lack the precision needed for this thesis.

In Chapter Two I have sought to describe the religious position of the Clapham luminaries. I have also sought to explain their expectation of the religious behaviour and experience of their children in Chapter Four. In this chapter I will seek to identify the mature position of their children. I will focus on three people in two families: Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, Archdeacon Robert Isaac Wilberforce, and Sir James Stephen. Each has written extensively about his mature religious position.

I will seek to describe, individually, the position of each, making some comment on the difference from that of the Clapham luminaries. I will then identify more fully the ways their mature position differed from that



of their parents and from each other. This will provide the basis for the next chapter in which I identify the circumstances and influences which resulted in these differences.

#### THE GORHAM CONTROVERSY

Since it is a significant trigger for two of our subjects it is important that we describe the course of the Gorham case. In 1847 George Gorham was presented to the Bishop of Exeter for institution to the parish of Bramford Speke in Devon. The Bishop, Henry Phillpotts, considered him un-orthodox in his doctrine of baptism. This had become a significant issue for all churchmen.<sup>1</sup> It revolved around the issue of Baptismal Regeneration – whether every child was ‘changed’ by being baptised, as Phillpotts believed, or if the sacrament was only ‘promissory’ as Gorham, an Evangelical Calvinist, believed. One statement of the issue is seen in a letter to Archdeacon Bernes by Samuel Wilberforce in the House of Lords<sup>2</sup>:

If the effect of the [Gorham] judgement to which you refer be what you apprehend, I agree with you in the fear that it represents ‘the authoritative doctrine of the Nicene Creed in its natural sense as a matter of opinion and tends to destroy the authority of our articles’; for I am fully convinced that the Church has received and taught as a matter of revealed truth,

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Anglican evangelicals : Protestant secessions from the via media, c. 1800-1850*.

<sup>2</sup> At this time the House of Lords consisted of all hereditary peers of England and Scottish and Irish peers elected from among themselves and Church of England diocesan bishops and four Church of Ireland bishops.

that original sin is remitted to infants in the regeneration in Holy Baptism.<sup>3</sup>

The Bishop required Gorham to attend on him and he was examined concerning the question by the Bishop. Unsatisfied with the result of this examination the Bishop refused to institute Gorham to the Parish (that is to enable him to take up the role of minister in the parish). This decision was appealed in the Court of Arches.<sup>4</sup> After some time a decision was delivered. This was appealed to the Sovereign. In accordance with the Judicial Committee Act 1833<sup>5</sup> this appeal was heard by that committee and a decision was finally handed down. The Privy Council Committee decided in favour of Mr Gorham, but insisted that they were not making any theological decision. Their decision related only to the Law concerning the right of presentation (that is the right of a person or corporation to nominate a person to be minister to a particular parish).

By ruling this way the Committee 'effectively ruled' that two doctrines of baptism<sup>6</sup> were 'legally' allowed in the Church of England, although the issue was still 'legally' in dispute among the clergy. The problem, also,

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<sup>3</sup> Reginald G Wilberforce, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, D. D. Lord Bishop of Oxford and afterward of Winchester with selections from his daries and correspondence*, 3 vols. (II; London: John Murray, Albemarle, 1881) II, p 43.

<sup>4</sup> There are two ecclesiastical provinces in the Church of England, the Province of Canterbury and the Province of York. Each of these is made up of a number of dioceses and each has its own ecclesiastical structures. The Court of Arches is the senior ecclesiastical court for the Province of Canterbury, the province of which the Diocese of Exeter is part.

<sup>5</sup> *The Judicial Committee Act*, 1833 (3 & 4 William IV, c 41).

<sup>6</sup> The two doctrines are outlined in the discussion of the factors affecting Robert Isaac Wilberforce's decision to move to the Roman Catholic Church p 218.

was that the Judicial Committee Act had changed the way in which appeals to the Sovereign were heard. Instead of the Court of Delegates established for each case they were all now heard by the Judicial Committee who may or may not be members of the Church of England. This, for some members of the Church of England, was the effective 'Erastianising' of the Church. It was, in their consideration, the role of the 'teacher of the Church' to establish the doctrine and, therefore, the discipline of the Church. This issue was to be raised, again and again, in ritual cases over the next 50 years.<sup>7</sup> For two of our subjects, Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce, this focused significant theological and political considerations.

#### BISHOP SAMUEL WILBERFORCE

Samuel Wilberforce was the third son of William, born in 1805. He was at Oriel in Oxford and from there was ordained in 1828. He married and was appointed to the parish of Brighthelmston on the Isle of Wight. There, with his brother Robert, he wrote the biography of his father and raised his family. He became a noted speaker and came to the attention of the Prince Consort. He was made Archdeacon of Surrey in 1839 and Rector of Alverstoke and Canon of Winchester in 1840. His rise was soured by the death in 1841 of his beloved wife, Mary (nee Sargent). There were strong family and evangelical ties associated with his rise and life. The Bishop of Winchester, Charles Richard Sumner who was his cousin, and the Sargent

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<sup>7</sup> James Bentley, *Ritualism and politics in Victorian Britain : the attempt to legislate for belief* (Oxford [Eng.] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

family were also Evangelicals. By marriage he was related to Henry Manning, Mary's sister being Manning's wife, and she pre-deceased Mary. By 1868 his three brothers, two of them Anglican clergy, two sisters-in-law, his only surviving daughter and her husband had become Roman Catholics. This was in the wake of John Henry Newman's and Henry Manning's removal to the Roman Catholic Church.

Samuel Wilberforce was appointed the Bishop of Oxford in 1845 on the recommendation of Sir Robert Peel in a time of great change for that diocese and in 1869 translated as Bishop to Winchester. The Diocese of Oxford had been expanded and thus to a larger area needing greater administrative oversight than that required of his predecessor. This was a circumstance which called forth his reformist zeal and ability, both of which he inherited from his father. The colleges comprising Oxford University were still not under his jurisdiction,<sup>8</sup> but he began to use his Rural Deans in a new way treating them almost as 'vicars episcopal'. He would often use them in seeking out information about clergy of whom complaint had been made, or recommend them as mentors to other clergy. His archdeacons also were called into his confidence in such matters. He expected a whole-hearted dedication to active ministry from all clergy of his diocese.

It was a time when the effects of the Oxford Movement were being profoundly felt. Samuel himself was an Oxford man and familiar with the

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<sup>8</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 379 p 210-211.

leaders of the movement. The most troublesome component for him was the movement by members of the Church of England who followed the example of J.H. Newman and were received into the Roman Catholic Church. The whole 'schism', as he called it<sup>9</sup>, caused him great pain. This was not only because his beloved family members and many university connections had moved to *Rome* but because he saw it as a rejection of the *true Church of England*, the rightful Catholic Church of the realm. Yet while he was preferred by an Evangelical bishop and was the scion of an Evangelical house he is not usually known as an evangelical. In fact, he became the leading voice of the 'new' High Church movement. We will here seek to identify, indeed highlight, the differences between him and his father, and then in the final chapter, I will suggest that, in some significant ways, there was continuity with Clapham among the children.

The Letter Books of Samuel Wilberforce in the Bodleian Library covering the period 1843 to 1868 have been transcribed and published.<sup>10</sup> This book does not present all of Samuel Wilberforce's letters. They contain mainly those of a sensitive nature with reference to clergy and related issues. While we are usually only privy to half the conversation this gives us a good and sufficient view of his mature theological and ecclesial position. Because of this, and the importance of the subjects with which he deals, we can obtain an insight into his mature theological position.

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<sup>9</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 560, p 313.

<sup>10</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*.

A number of things stand out in his letters which demonstrate the differences between him and his father and the other second-generation Evangelicals, and even more so between him and first-generation Evangelicals such as the Wesleys and Newton. The issues of the day with which he dealt involved significant pastoral matters such as clerical residency, service schedules and forms, preaching, the celebration of the Eucharist (a term he uses), the morals and public behaviour of clergy, the trends toward 'popish' behaviour in the Church of England and sacramental theology. They also included the shift in the nature of power in England owing to the reform of Parliament and therefore his desire to revive Convocation.<sup>11</sup> In most of these areas Samuel Wilberforce differs from his father's stated position, a position which represents the Clapham Evangelicals well. It was not only the reform agenda which was at work. To that issue must be added the academic changes that were occurring both in theology and science: it is for a misreported conversation with Huxley over science for which he is usually now known.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Convocation was the assembly of the Diocesan Bishop and elected and *ex officio* clergy from each of the dioceses in each ecclesial Province in the Church of England. It was the legislative body of the Church and predated the Henrician Reformation. Its powers were curtailed by the Royal Supremacy and it had not met (other than formally) since the reign of George I because it had, in that reign, opposed a desire of the King.

<sup>12</sup> J R Lucas, 'Wilberforce, Huxley: A legendary Encounter', *The Historical Journal*, 22/2 (1979). pp 313 – 330. Lucas examines the incident and the common account which has circulated. He concludes that the common account is seriously flawed and that Wilberforce, while chastened, was not trounced by Huxley. Wilberforce's critique was based on well accepted scientific induction and there was no reference to any of Huxley's family. The meeting was split in its support for Darwin.

Yet Wilberforce was not unacquainted with the scientific world. He was, himself, Vice President of the British Association<sup>13</sup>, an ornithologist, had served on the Council of the Geological Society and well acquainted with scientists such as Richard Owen, who was a critic of Darwin. Samuel had been asked by the *Quarterly* to review *The Origin of Species*, and Charles Darwin said of the review that it was 'uncommonly clever, it picks out with skill all the most conjectural parts, and brings forward well the difficulties'.<sup>14</sup>

With this in mind it is interesting to see his own mature self-description. He called himself a 'High Church evangelical'.<sup>15</sup> He saw himself standing in the tradition of the English Anglican apologists Richard Hooker<sup>16</sup> and Lancelot Andrews.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The British Association for the Advancement of Science was founded in York on 27 September 1831. "a British Association for the Advancement of Science, having for its objects, to give a stronger impulse and more systematic direction to scientific inquiry, to obtain a greater degree of national attention to the objects of science, and a removal of those disadvantages which impede its progress, and to promote the intercourse of the cultivators of science with one another, and with foreign philosophers". <http://www.britishtscienceassociation.org> Accessed 26 September 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Standish Meacham, *Lord Bishop: the life of Samuel Wilberforce, 1805-1873* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970) p 214 from Francis Darwin *the life of Charles Darwin* 3 vols (1887) II p324

<sup>15</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 373 p 203

<sup>16</sup> Richard Hooker, *The Works of Mr. Richard Hooker, (That Learned and judicious Divine) in Eight Books of Ecclesiastical Polity, completed out of his own manuscripts; never before published. With an account of his life and death.*, trans. Translator, Number of (London: Andrew Crook, 1666), <http://archive.org/stream/worksofmrrichard1666hook#page/n5/mode/2up>, Richard Hooker (1554 – 1600) was an Anglican priest and theologian in the reign of Elizabeth I. His *Ecclesiastical Polity* was an extended defence of the Elizabethan Settlement against Puritan criticism. His defence is foundational to classic Anglican Polity,

<sup>17</sup> Bishop Lancelot Andrews, Bishop of Winchester in the reigns Elizabeth 1 and James 1, an Anglican Divine and spiritual writer whose work was widely read.

In a letter to Lord Ashley (later the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftsbury) on 3 December 1850 he sought to outline his position with particular reference to the 'Romanising tendency':

It is however natural, perhaps unavoidable, that with such a press as we have at this time; with my poor brother's notorious course & my unknown [efforts] for years with him, & with my own distinctly High Church opinions, that I should labour under the unfounded reproach of holding secretly what I have always opposed<sup>18</sup> . . . or whether it shall be a mere attempt to brand as Romanizers all those in the Church who are of the school of Andrews, Hooker, Beveridge &c. Of this school I am a member. I make no secret of it. I have as I believe dropped no one truth of my evangelical education but I hold those truths in a more consistent & therefore a firmer grasp.<sup>19</sup>

This attitude to his relationship with the Clapham position is seen clearly in a letter to Marianne Thornton in the year before his death.

Lavington, December 27, 1872.

Really as the band who knew and loved our father grows smaller and as, year by year, it seems to become for the new

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<sup>18</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce* No 349 p 187 Square brackets indicate the transcriber's best effort where the letter book is illegible to this writer.

<sup>19</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, p 415.



generation and Recordites<sup>20</sup> impossible to understand how anyone can be a good Churchman and yet an Evangelical, a believer in the Sacraments and yet abhorrer of the confessional and a scorner of the little apish Romanism of the Ritualists, I cling with an almost spasmodic tenacity to such as you. So you see you cannot shake me off by not coming. And I am here I hope for three weeks; reading imaginary letters to my grandchildren and settling what shall be grubbed and what shall be planted and yesterday, writing seventy letters, but am always very affectionately yours

S. WINTON.<sup>21</sup>

His self-description in the last year of his life is fascinating. He is never described as an Evangelical by any who take that epithet as their primary self-designation nor, as far as I can see, by any historian of the period. Yet Wilberforce's practice of weeklong missions throughout his episcopate shows his strong desire to recapture the people of England for Christ and

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<sup>20</sup> The Recordites were the conservative evangelical readers of the *Church Record*. Their conservatism has been contrasted with the liberality of the *Christian Observer* which was the preferred organ of the Clapham Evangelicals. On the development of these two distinct manifestations of evangelicalism, the most authoritative study is Ian S. Bradley's doctoral thesis, 'The Politics of Godliness: Evangelicals in Parliament, 1784-1832,' D.Phil, Oxford, 1974. Bradley actually distinguishes four groups of evangelicals in Parliament: the Whig Evangelicals, the Tory Evangelicals, the 'Saints' (the Clapham Evangelicals), and the Recordites. Using voting patterns, Bradley demonstrates the surprising liberality of some evangelicals normally branded as conservative.

<sup>21</sup> Wilberforce, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, III*, p 404. A diocesan bishop normally signs himself by his Christian name and the name of the See (or diocese) which he occupies. Here Samuel Wilberforce signs as the Bishop of Winchester using the abbreviated Latin of his See city.

his Church, like his Clapham forbears.<sup>22</sup> It was, however, a vision of 'Church' which clearly meant the 'Church of England'.

In his attitude to sermons he is significantly like the Clapham community. His father had complained in his book that the great doctrines of the Reformation were lacking in many sermons. Samuel Wilberforce, in disciplining one of his clergy, a Mr Matson, wrote to him on 26 October 1868:

That instead of your preaching prominently forward Christ & his Salvation; or even Scripture subjects you preach on mere Ecclesiastical subjects; quote fathers & *Popes* when they want God's Word & the milk of the Gospel - nay that beyond this you have preached against the Reformation.<sup>23</sup>

His father would have been delighted with this insistence.

In an age when one might not necessarily expect a sermon at every service in a parish the Bishop of Oxford demanded that there should be two sermons a Sunday to accompany the two services a day he expected of his clergy. In writing on 17 November 1854 to the Rector of Steeple Aston, Joseph Burrows, as a result of complaints from his parishioners he wrote:

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<sup>22</sup> Wilberforce held annual Lenten Missions in various places at which he preached. The topics were often recorded in his diary and show a desire to call people to a fuller relationship with God. One striking note in all the records is the phrase 'preached to working men'. This seems to have been a regular event at these missions. See Wilberforce, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, III*, pp 295 – 296.

<sup>23</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce* No 728 p 407. The italics indicate that he had underlined these words twice.

I have received complaints from your parish as to the small amount of public services in the Church, I feel bound in all such cases to *require* as the law seems to compel me to do, a second sermon on the Sunday, and this I must do in your case. But I should venture strongly to recommend to you to secure the assistance of a regular curate who both in the Services of the Church, and in visiting the Sick would be a great assistance to you.<sup>24</sup>

This is followed up and reinforced in two other letters dated 30 November 1854 and 27 December 1855.<sup>25</sup> In the days when ministers of the Church of England normally wrote the sermon text in full, Samuel Wilberforce's habit of asking for the text, when a complaint was made about false or Romanising teaching, could as easily place a person in jeopardy as exonerate them.

The constant demand of Samuel Wilberforce was that the sermon should conform to the faith explicitly expressed by the Church of England. In a letter to J Statter, the Vicar of Warminghall, concerning his preaching Samuel Wilberforce writes:

I will speak first of your own letter. I for my part am quite satisfied with the assurance you gave me: because I consider

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<sup>24</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce* No 550 p 308. The italics indicate underlining in the original.

<sup>25</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 562 p 314 & No 617 p 340.

it to be the plain limit of my duty to see that the doctrine and discipline of the Church of England are truly taught and acted on by my Clergy: but that I have no warrant for searching into their speculative opinions. I have the fullest trust in your entire integrity and I doubt not that in what you may say concerning the Second Coming of our Lord you will say nothing but what the Church of England has always allowed to be held and taught. You on your part must remember that I give you no license to hold any strange opinions: that it will be my duty even from what you have told me, to be more vigilant that nothing but the truth is taught in your parish; and that if you doubt at any time as to your being able to teach or to do all that the Church of England requires and no more, you are bound at once to give me timely warning.<sup>26</sup>

This demand for a clear, theological preaching ministry, consistent with the 39 Articles and Book of Common Prayer, was one which William Wilberforce would have applauded.

A chief area of difference seems to be in the role of sacrament and service. Like William Wilberforce, Samuel wishes the clergy to call the people under their care into the Kingdom of God. Yet Bishop Wilberforce places a stronger emphasis, in fact a *different* emphasis, on the role of sacrament and assembly. As we have seen in Chapter One the Evangelical

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<sup>26</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 542 p 303.

Revival resulted in an increase in the number of communicants and in the number of baptisms in parishes served by Evangelical clergy.<sup>27</sup> Samuel seems to have gone even further, insisting that there should be a celebration of the Holy Communion once a month in a church, if not more often. In writing to the Dean of St Asaph, R. M. Bonnor, on 24 August 1862, to assure him of a misrepresentation of his position in a journal, he goes on to write concerning Holy Communion at cathedrals:

May I hope as you have done me the honour of consulting me on this that I I [*sic*] shall not be deemed by you obtrusive if I add, that I see not how our Cathedrals can really hold their place as the Mother Church of the Diocese so long as (in direct violation of the rubric<sup>28</sup>) there is not a weekly Communion at them. If this be our highest act of united Christian worship how can we look for that full effusion of the Spirit without which all is vain whilst this is omitted?<sup>29</sup>

Later that month he wrote to The Rev Mr R Finch telling him that there should be 'on Christmas Easter & Whitsuntide'<sup>30</sup> two celebrations of Holy Communion on the day and its Octave (eight days later) so that all member of all households in the parish could communicate. He goes on to write:

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<sup>27</sup> This thesis footnote 66 on page 98.

<sup>28</sup> The directions for the carrying out of the liturgy printed in small type in red in the Book of Common Prayer, 1662.

<sup>29</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 684 p 381.

<sup>30</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 687 p 382.

I am not quite sure that you have the Monthly Communion. If you have not, that is in my judgement the *minimum provision* (emphasis mine) which should be made.<sup>31</sup>

William Wilberforce, as we have seen, like all the Evangelicals of his time, had a 'high' view of the Lord's Supper. We saw in Thornton's *Journal* the care with which he approached receiving the Lord's Supper.<sup>32</sup> It is not only in the frequency, but also in the centrality, of the Eucharist that we see a difference between Samuel and the Clapham Sect. Samuel, like his brother, Robert Isaac, held a doctrine of the real and objective presence of Christ in the Sacrament.<sup>33</sup> This concept does not appear, as we have seen, to be that of William Wilberforce. This difference of perception of objective grace is even more clearly seen in the son's approach to baptism. The whole issue of what baptism meant and achieved was a significant controversy in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England. The Gorham case (to resume my treatment of that controversy<sup>34</sup>) brought this matter into public view. Does baptism actually achieve anything or was it simply a promise or preparatory act to personal conversion? This was the core issue. Samuel Wilberforce was certain that it actually resulted in a changed state. Baptism for Samuel Wilberforce was no bare sign. It was

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<sup>31</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No687 p 382.

<sup>32</sup> This thesis p 98.

<sup>33</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 557, p 311 & No 648, p 358 'Of course our one paramount duty is the maintenance of the dogmatic truth of the Real Presence', Wilberforce, *The doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*.

<sup>34</sup> This thesis p 218.

an effectual means of grace and one was to take the words of the service seriously and literally, "seeing this child is now regenerate". This issue was one which occupied the Victorian Church and had potential to cause its sundering.<sup>35</sup> In fact many who became Roman Catholics did so over the question of baptism and the Lord's Supper.<sup>36</sup>

This is well demonstrated in a lengthy letter to J. W. Watts, Vicar of Bicester, on 22 May 1847. The Bishop calls on him to recognise that a subscription to a document made by Watts is 'a declaration by which the articles and liturgy of the Church of England are depraved.'<sup>37</sup> The substance in the declaration is that the ungodly though baptised in infancy are not regenerate, that is true Christians. Wilberforce writes:

Now this declaration is directly at variance with the words of the liturgy and the articles, both of which affirm (the catechism) that being by nature children of wrath we were hereby made the children of Grace, and as the answer (next but one) continues, this was done for them by God's goodness

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<sup>35</sup> The Oxford 'Evangelical' seceders such as Thomas Bulteel and also Baptist Noel of whom Carter wrote 'The 'mischievous' doctrine of baptismal regeneration also came under Noel's repeated attack.' Carter, *Anglican evangelicals: Protestant secessions from the via media, c. 1800-1850* p 324, for Bulteel p 276. See also J. S. Reynolds, *Evangelicals at Oxford 1735-1871* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).

<sup>36</sup> The doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament was one which the 'Church principles' men such as Samuel Wilberforce and Gladstone championed. Its clarity in the Roman Jurisdiction was attractive to others who, on a number of grounds were coming to see the Established Church as increasingly untenable. Robert Isaac Wilberforce, George Ryder, Henry Wilberforce. Etc.

<sup>37</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 153 p 84.

on the promise of a future condition by their sponsors.<sup>38</sup> The Baptismal Service takes the same ground, throwing the affirmation into the strongest form by instructing *every* minister to say of every baptised infant to the jealous God, (after the public announcement 'seeing now that this child is (regenerate) born again') 'We yield THEE hearty thanks most merciful Father that it hath pleased thee to regenerate *this* Child with thy Holy Spirit, &c.' and it follows up all this with saying 'It is certain by God's word that children *which are baptised*, dying before they commit actual sin are undoubtedly saved.' But how saved unless they be pardoned: and how then saved, unless by God's merciful act they be regenerated by His Spirit or as good old Baxter<sup>39</sup> says, unless we be Pelagians<sup>40</sup>

This is reinforced by a later letter to R. B. Fisher, Vicar of Basildon, on 13 December 1852, in what appears to be the consideration of a future curate for Mr Fisher, that 'Mr. Blomfield<sup>41</sup> expressed to me as his view,

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<sup>38</sup> In his book on Baptism, in which he interacts with one by William Goode, Robert Isaac Wilberforce repudiates this argument. Samuel seems closer, at this point, to Goode than his brother. See this thesis p 221.

<sup>39</sup> From Robert Isaac Wilberforce's book on baptism it is clear that he was familiar with, at least, a life of Richard Baxter as well as his comments on the Savoy Conference. This conference was held in the reign of Charles II of England in 1661 as a means of attempting to reconcile the Puritans objections to the Elizabethan Settlement of the Faith and Practice of the Church of England. It failed to do so.

<sup>40</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 153 p 84.

<sup>41</sup> 'According to Venn, Samuel Edward Bloomfield, 1823 - 1903.' Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, p 241.



that there were many cases, where infants were brought for Holy Baptism & Baptized rightly according to Christs appointment & where yet they were taken from the Font just as they came to it, so far as their spiritual condition was in any way concerned.<sup>42</sup> This Samuel Wilberforce declares is 'so plain and so important a contradiction of the teaching of our Church' that he cannot have this man ministering in his diocese.<sup>43</sup>

Like the evangelicals, Samuel Wilberforce did not see the sacrament operating *ex opera operato*, but he clearly held a view of baptismal regeneration which they rejected.<sup>44</sup> He did acknowledge in his letter to Watts that there are certain rejections of the use of 'baptismal regeneration' language which he is willing to accept. He writes:

many only mean to deny in their language against Baptismal regeneration such errors as these: first that the work of Grace is accomplished in baptism: or that souls are converted in baptism; or need no conversion by the Grace of God *afterwards*; or that if baptised and afterwards decent they need no deeper heart change; or that they have a robe of pardon and a stock of grace given them which they are afterwards to use and to keep clean, and that these gifts if lost cannot be renewed. Now it is right to protest against these great errors: and the only fault therefore of those who

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<sup>42</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 427 p 241.

<sup>43</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 247 p 242.

<sup>44</sup> This thesis p 56.

mean to protest against 'baptismal regeneration', is that they confound together an error their Church condemns, and a truth their Church teaches.<sup>45</sup>

Clearly Samuel Wilberforce regarded the baptised as true Christians. While, with Evangelicals he wished to discount certain errors which suggested either that no effort was required by the baptised in fulfilling their baptismal covenant<sup>46</sup> or that there was a measurable 'amount of grace' which needed to be maintained if one was to remain Christian, he clearly believed that an 'objective' change had taken place in baptism. This was contrary to the view held by most contemporary Evangelicals.<sup>47</sup> The baptised 'professors' of religion are just that class of people whom his father regarded as being not true Christians.<sup>48</sup> William Wilberforce had written of 'Professed Christians' and regarded them as not being Christian at all; in fact, he had indicated that the only true Christians were evangelicals. His son takes a very different stance. And that, not only from his father, but also from the leading Evangelical Cambridge Fellow Charles Simeon. Zabriskie writes:

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<sup>45</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 153 p 85.

<sup>46</sup> In a sermon preached at the opening of a new building for the House of Mercy at Clewer on the healing of a leper Samuel, while drawing to the congregation's attention the fullness of grace received in baptism, exhorts them to continue, like the leper, to go on seeking the work of Christ within one and to express this in our relationship with all with whom we have intercourse. Wilberforce, Samuel, *Christ the healer. A Sermon preached by the Lord Bishop of Oxford on the opening of the new buildings of the House of Mercy, Clewer, Vigil of St Andrew, November 1855*, Joseph Masters 1855, <<http://archive.org/stream/christhealerserm00wilb/page/n3/mode/2up>> p 9ff.

<sup>47</sup> Baptist Noel, William Goode et al, this thesis p 219, footnote 30 p 207.

<sup>48</sup> This thesis p 37.

Simeon discusses the relationship of this rebirth to baptism and denies that they are identical. In Baptism people receive a new *status*: a right and title to all the privileges of the New Covenant; by rebirth “they come into the actual possession of them,” and receive a new *nature*. Baptism and rebirth may be simultaneous but, as Scripture shows, they often are not.<sup>49</sup>

This stress is the same as that of William Wilberforce’s writings. While he commends the liturgy of the Church of England, it is for the truth it teaches rather than as a means of grace (to use the Anglican term). The doing of the liturgy, the doing of it well, and the doing of it in accord with the ‘rubrics’, were for Samuel Wilberforce matters of deep spiritual, pastoral and moral (legal requirements) importance. They were a significant part of the responsibility held with the ‘cure of souls’. This is seen both in his expectations of pastoral care and in his view of sacraments. It was not only the performance of the prayers, rites and sacraments that show a different spirituality to his father. The nature of what happens with the sacraments was also different.

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<sup>49</sup> Alexander C. Zabriskie, ‘Charles Simeon: Anglican Evangelical’, *Church History* 9.2, 1940 June p108, © 2003 ProQuest Information and Learning Company © American Society for Church History. Charles Simeon, *Horæ homileticæ or Discourses (principally in the form of skeletons) now first digested into one continued series, and forming a commentary on every book of the Old and New Testament; to which is annexed and improved edition of a translation of Claudes essay on the composition of a sermon. In Twent One Volumes by the Rev Charles Simeon, M.A. Senior Fellow of Kings College, Cambridge.*, trans. Translator, Number of XVI 1 & 2 Corinthianss vols. (XVI 1 & 2 Corinthians; London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1833b), <http://www.archive.org/stream/theentireworksof16simeuoft#page/n3/mode/2up>, ‘Baptism is, as we have just shewn,[sic] a change of state for by it we become entitled to all the blessings of the new covenant, but it is not a change of nature.’ p 266.

Samuel Wilberforce took the view that the presence of Christ in the sacrament was the position of the Church of England. To W.E. Gladstone he wrote 'Of course our one paramount duty is the maintenance of the dogmatic truth of the Real Presence.'<sup>50</sup> And in defending Gladstone to the Bishop of London, he wrote:

My dear Lord,

Knowing your respect for Gladstone I do not like to answer the enclosed without shewing it in confidence to you. I have not yet received your Charge and I therefore take the words only from Gladstone's letter. I could not myself doubt which interpretation to put upon your words eager as the Record has been to claim them in an antisacramental [*sic*] sense. I cannot doubt that the *first* of the two interpretations is that which you would put upon them. For (1) if Our Lord be only present as he is everywhere else by his all pervading Deity then all specialty of presence is Void; (2) if his *Body* be not given taken and received how can our article stand? I conceive you to mean to deny all *material* presence; all flesh and blood presence: but to assert that the body is present though not after a bodily manner.

I have no doubt that many do mean absolutely to deny any objective presence of Our Lord, from the same hatred to

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<sup>50</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 648 p 358.

Sacraments which leads them in like manner to reject Holy Baptism.<sup>51</sup>

Samuel Wilberforce does not simply see those with whom he disagrees as having a minor theological difference but a significant theological rejection of the very Sacraments themselves. It is fair to say that his father, from his writing, would not have thought that 'professed Christians' would be included in those who were regenerate by or feed on Christ in the Sacraments. We see this clearly, also, in the sermons of Charles Simeon. In his sermon 1573<sup>52</sup> he wrote:

Because other memorials of his love were now to be established. [The Lord's Supper was now instituted for the purpose of exhibiting to the world the wonders of his love, and of perpetuating in the Church the remembrance of it to the end of time. ...]

This is the feast which his people are now to keep of this all are to partake, provided they desire to have redemption through his blood, and can partake of it with the bitter herbs of real humiliation. The feast he will keep with us, not indeed

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<sup>51</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 557 p 311.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Simeon, *Horæ homileticæ or Discourses (principally in the form of skeletons) now first digested into one continued series, and forming a commentary on every book of the Old and New Testament; to which is annexed and improved edition of a translation of Claudes essay on the composition of a sermon. In Twent One Volumes by the Rev Charles Simeon, M.A. Senior Fellow of Kings College, Cambridge.*, trans. Translator, Number of XIIIIs vols. (XIII; London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1833a), <http://www.archive.org/stream/worksofsimeon13simeuoft#page/n7/mode/2up>, pp 95 – 96. The square bracket is in the text but the quotation does not continue to the end of the section where the closing bracket occurs.

by his bodily presence, but that which is infinitely more important, his spiritual presence with our souls:

In Simeon's *Horæ Homileticæ* he also treats the Lord's Supper in Sermon 1976<sup>53</sup> on 1 Corinthians 11, but interestingly in the previous sermon on 1 Corinthians 10.15 (Sermon 1975<sup>54</sup>) he does not deal with the following verse where the *nature* of participation in Christ in the Supper is explored. It is very clear that the Evangelicals valued the Sacraments,<sup>55</sup> but, until the understanding of these by others challenged their fundamental commitment to 'conversion' as they understood it, did not explore (at least in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and very early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) their exact mode of operation. This is more clearly seen below with the issue of baptism.

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<sup>53</sup> Simeon, *Horæ homileticæ Vol XVI*, p 266ff.

<sup>54</sup> Simeon, *Horæ homileticæ Vol XVI*, p 215ff.

<sup>55</sup> In seeking the Evangelicals earlier understanding of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper it is possibly best to look to the hymns of Charles Wesley. As we have noted above (Footnote 53) the Lord's Supper was seen as an intimate engagement with God. But the hymns also betray a doctrine of 'real presence'. For example;

Come Holy Ghost, your influence shed,  
make real for us the sign;  
your life infuse into the bread,  
your power into the wine.

Effectual let the tokens prove,  
and made, by heavenly art,  
fit channels to convey your love  
to every faithful heart.

In John & Charles Wesley's '*Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, 1745 with parts of Daniel Brevint's *Christian Sacrament*, 1673' John Wesley chose to include Brevint's words 'And thus His Body and Blood have everywhere, but especially at this Sacrament, a true and real presence.' As Colquhoun notes the doctrine the Wesley brothers maintained was basically that of 18<sup>th</sup> century High Churchmen. Frank Colquhoun, 'Charles Wesley's Eucharistic Hymns', *Churchman* (63/2, 1949).

As we have noted (this thesis p 49) at times of renewal or reform (and heresy) in the church the leaders often expressed their theology in new hymns. The singing of hymns is one way in which the members of the congregation 'imbibe' that teaching.

In dealing with his clergy Samuel insisted on their recognising that the church was the flock of Christ.<sup>56</sup> It was to them that the cleric's whole attention should be given. He would have no 'hunting' or 'cricketing' clergy in his diocese. They were also to be resident and, if not resident or if infirm, to obtain the service of a curate approved by him to ensure that the pastoral work was fully accomplished. To ensure this he encouraged the building of parsonage houses and the provision of proper stipends to curates.

### *Schism*

If he was demanding of those who took an almost Zwinglian position concerning the sacraments, he was equally scathing of those with 'Romanish' tendencies. In a letter to his sister-in-law, Mrs H.W. Wilberforce, after she and her husband, Henry, had been received into the Roman church, he writes:

My dearest Mary,

I am sorry that you could think I used 'violent language' in what I said concerning clergymen of the Church of England who have joined the Romish Schism in this country. ... I have no doubt that their going over to Rome in its pollution corruption and falsehood, does more than anything else to put off the day of *her* purification. I have no doubt that such a fall most grievously injures those souls. On all these and many

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<sup>56</sup> Wilberforce, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce*, III p 331.

more rounds I do calmly and deliberately believe that in thus acting they are doing the work of Satan.<sup>57</sup>

It is a harsh thing to say that one's brothers and friends are "doing the work of Satan". He goes on though to assure her of his prayers for them all, that they and he may be forgiven their sins and finishes the letter, "My most tender love to Henry. Let me hear of your doings. I am D.V. to be at Ellers Monday to Thursday. I am ever your most loving brother". It is clear that even strong family affection will not sway him from his opinion nor would he allow the strength of his opinion to dilute the affection he held for those family members who did not share his opinion.

He seeks a revival of Eucharistic-centred worship but does not see that this means any concession to Rome. In a letter to a clergyman, T. T. Carter, concerning a booklet on the Holy Communion and the establishment of confraternities for the Holy Eucharist, he writes:

I have looked at the little book you were so kind as to give me concerning the Holy Communion; and I am sorry to say that I do not at all approve of the idea of which it is the embodiment. It appears to me to be absolutely diverse from the tone of primitive Christianity & of our own Church. I remember no parallel save in some of the most modern Romish devotions. ... Surely our own Bishop Andrews had drawn from Gods Word & Primitive Antiquity & the inner

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<sup>57</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 560 p 313.



Teaching of the Spirit the Highest views of this blessed Sacrament & yet how utterly different is His tone from that of this proposal. ... Believing that the revival of the full Eucharistic temper in our Church, in its purity, would be as great a gift as our God could give to us I view with the utmost jealousy any tendency to ally that reviving earnestness to the unrealities & morbid developments of Modern Romanism.<sup>58</sup>

While holding a high view of the sacraments and of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, he regarded the Roman position as equally untrue as those of the Continental Reformers such as Zwingli or the contemporary Evangelicals of the Church of England.

While there can be no doubt that he was as much convinced of the need to aid men and women to reach heaven as his father and the other members of the Clapham Sect, it is equally true that he gave an entirely different emphasis to them. Describing himself as a high church evangelical may have been a true understanding of his roots, but the evangelicals of his day, and of the present, would not allow him this epithet. An examination of the Gorham case, as we have undertaken above, shows this.<sup>59</sup>

ARCHDEACON ROBERT ISAAC WILBERFORCE

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<sup>58</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No700 p387-388.

<sup>59</sup> This thesis p 218ff.

Robert Isaac Wilberforce (December 1802 - 3 February 1857), the second eldest of William Wilberforce's four sons, was educated, like his brothers, in small private schools. He went up to Oriel College, Oxford University and graduated with a Double First in 1823. He was elected a Fellow of Oriel College in 1826 and was ordained. He resigned his Fellowship in 1831 and became Rector of East Farleigh, Kent. In 1840 he moved to the living<sup>60</sup> of Burton Agnes near Hull and was made Archdeacon of the East Riding of Yorkshire in 1841.

### *Baptism*

As we have seen with Samuel the Wilberforce brothers held that grace was objectively conveyed in the sacraments. Robert Isaac defends this position against William Goode and other Evangelicals.<sup>61</sup> The Evangelical position can be clearly seen in a tract by John Charles Ryle<sup>62</sup>

2. Do all baptized persons receive inward spiritual benefit from the outward ordinance of baptism with water?

Most certainly not, to all appearance. Myriads are outwardly baptized every year, who, from the font to the coffin, and from their births to their deaths, never give the slightest evidence that they have grace in their hearts, or have

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<sup>60</sup> "the living" is the term then used for a clergyman becoming the Rector of a parish in the Church of England. He obtains the income of the parish and is responsible for the provision of liturgical and pastoral ministry in the parish.

<sup>61</sup> Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism* .

<sup>62</sup> John Charles Ryle, *Baptism and Regeneration*, trans. Translator, Number of Church Association Tract 193s vols. (Church Association Tract 193), [http://churchsociety.org/publications/tracts/CAT193\\_RyleBaptism.pdf](http://churchsociety.org/publications/tracts/CAT193_RyleBaptism.pdf),.

received any inward spiritual benefit at their baptism. They live and die apparently without knowledge, faith, repentance, obedience to God, or meetness for heaven. In fact, notwithstanding their baptism, they exhibit no more Christianity in their lives and characters than many heathens.

Judas Iscariot, Simon Magus, Ananias and Sapphira, and others mentioned in Scripture, were baptized but certainly not regenerate.

Robert Isaac completely rejects this approach. Quoting a renowned Evangelical Anglican, Baptist Noel, he wrote to substantiate his reading of the Baptismal Service in *the Book of Common Prayer, 1662*:

"I once laboured hard," says Mr Baptist Noel, "to convince myself that our Reformers did not and could not mean that infants are regenerated by baptism; but no reasoning vials – This language is too plain." "The Prayer- Book assumes clearly, that both adults and infants come to the font and unregenerate, and leave it regenerate; that the worthy recipients of Baptism are not regenerate before baptism, but come to be regenerated; that they are not pardoned up to the moment of baptism, that they are pardoned the moment after."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism* , p 113.

While Noel wished to repudiate this understanding<sup>64</sup> Robert Isaac's position was clearly different.

But, on the other hand, that Baptism is a real participation of Christ's nature, that all baptized infants are translated from death to life, and are made members by grace of the New, as by birth they were portions of the old Adam – this, likewise, is revealed in Holy Scripture.<sup>65</sup>

Robert Isaac bases his understanding of the effects of Baptism on the theology of the Incarnation of the Son of God. Since, for him, the Incarnation is the beginning of the work of the 'Recreation of all things' and since this is the work of God alone, incorporation into Christ is

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<sup>64</sup> Carter, *Anglican evangelicals : Protestant secessions from the via media, c. 1800-1850* pp 312 – 355. An Alternative approach was taken by Charles Simeon, a non-residential member of the Clapham Sect, using the mode of address to all members of the Church in the Letter of Paul (New Testament) in a sermon before the University of Cambridge in 1811. 'And if we at this day were called to use the same language under the very same circumstances, it is probable that many would feel scruples respecting it, and especially, in thanking God for things, which, if pressed to the utmost meaning of the words, might not be strictly true. But surely, if the Apostles in the spirit of love and charity used such language, we may safely and properly do the same, knowing in what manner, and with what view, they spake, we need not hesitate to deliver ourselves with the same spirit and in the same latitude, as they.' Charles Simeon, *The Excellency of the Liturgy, in four Discourses, preached before the University of Cambrisge, IX November, 1811. Also university Sermons containing I The Churchmans confession, or an appeal to the Liturgy II The Fountain of Living Waters, III Evangelical and Pharisaic Righteousness Compared IV Christ Crucified*, trans. Translator, Number of (New York: Eastbury, Kirk & Company, 1813), [http://openlibrary.org/works/OL5110219W/The\\_excellency\\_of\\_the\\_liturgy](http://openlibrary.org/works/OL5110219W/The_excellency_of_the_liturgy), p 62 & 'If they meant that infants dedicated to God in baptism may and sometimes do (though in a way not discoverable by us, except by the fruits) receive a new nature from the Spirit of God in, and with, and by that ordinance, we could cordially join with them. But they go further than all this and assert, that all persons do necessarily by a divine appointment receive the Holy Ghost in such a manner and degree as to really be changed in the spirit of their minds into the very image of God in righteousness and true holiness, and so to partake of the divine nature, that they never need afterwards to seek so great a change again. This we are constrained to combat as a fundamental error and respecting it, we now, in humility and a spirit of love, venture to make our appeal to you.' Simeon, *Horæ homileticæ Vol XVI*, p 257.

<sup>65</sup> Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism* , p 117.

incorporation into the new humanity which is the Incarnate Son. For Robert Isaac the basis of baptism of infants was the obligation that every person had to submit to the Lordship of Christ because they were creatures. At this point he disagreed with his brother Samuel as we have noted above.<sup>66 67</sup>

Samuel's position was one which Evangelicals sought to support to enable them to continue to use the service. Having dealt with a 'Calvinist' objection to Baptismal Regeneration, which we will explore below, Robert Isaac wrote:

From the harshness of his supposition men fly, not unnaturally, to the second condition assigned by Mr. Goode, and look for the qualification of baptism, not in the will of him who bestows grace, but in the condition of him who is to receive it. And since the present condition of the infant is that of unconsciousness, they refer to what his condition *will be*. According to this theory "the efficaciousness of baptism depends upon the pre-vision by God of future faith and repentance in the child at a subsequent period of life."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> This thesis, p 208.

<sup>67</sup> In a sermon preached before Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle on 26 September 1841 on the raising of the widow of Nain's son, Samuel draws attention to the effects of the Incarnation and the work of Christ as the work of the Second Adam. This theology is the same as his brother's and significant in understanding the nature of Christian life and of their doctrine of the Sacraments. It has inherent within it a strong corporate concept while not removing the individual responsibility. Wilberforce, *Four Sermons*, pp 9 – 10.

<sup>68</sup> Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism* , p 77.

The idea that the effectiveness of the Sacrament depended upon the action of the recipient for him implied Pelagianism.

For the very loss which many incurred by the Fall, was the forfeiture of that natural intercourse with God, which can only be replaced through the mediation of Christ. So that to revert to those inward channels, whereby the soil was naturally fitted to approach God, is to fancy that we can turn to God of ourselves, and thus to fall into the error of Pelagianism.<sup>69</sup>

Robert Isaac was keen to oppose Pelagianism, a heresy which suggested that the effects of the Fall did not remove the human ability of turning to God. Such a position would imply that human salvation was not a matter of divine grace but of grace and human response.

Another objection raised by Goode was the idea that the English Reformers were Calvinist. This Robert Isaac repudiated. In the book on baptism he went to great lengths to explore an alternate understanding of the 'Doctrine of Decrees'. He pointed out that 'the doctrines of Election, Predestination and Perseverance' were not novel at the time of Calvin.<sup>70</sup> For him these doctrines found their epicentre in the Incarnation of the Son of God, 'The decree was proclaimed in the promise of the woman's seed'.<sup>71</sup> It was not to be seen in 'individual' election which would imply a

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<sup>69</sup> Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism* , p 135.

<sup>70</sup> Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism* , p 145.

<sup>71</sup> Genesis 3:15.

bypassing of the significance of the Incarnation and the total redemption of creation.<sup>72</sup>

Whatever view William Wilberforce took of Baptismal Regeneration, it is fair to say that Robert Isaac's position, having a corporate and Incarnational focus, differed from that of his father's individual perspective. Like his brother, Samuel, he did speak of conversion and personal reformation. Robert Isaac wrote 'Conversion and Faith are essential to any efficacy of Baptism on the part of man, but there must be an actual gift of grace on the part of God.' And continued 'Conversion is the act by which the accountable principle in man obeys the suasion of those motives, which incline it towards its Maker's service.'<sup>73</sup> While 'Grace' was a central theme of William Wilberforce's thanksgiving to God as for his sons, in their case it was tied inexorably to baptism.

Robert Isaac and his brother, desired to maintain fundamental principles of the Anglican doctrine, a Trinitarian focus, an anti-Pelagian stance and a care in the expression of the 'Doctrine of Decrees'.<sup>74</sup> They saw the Evangelical approach to the Sacraments and especially to Baptism as threatening the very fundamentals of the Faith, hence their strong reaction to the Gorham Decision.

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<sup>72</sup> Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism* , pp 143-181, It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine in detail Robert Isaac Wilberforce's theology of the Divine Decrees but it would be a profitable area of research for a future theological and historical analysis to determine how far he reflected the ideas of the English Reformers whom the Evangelicals claimed to be representing.

<sup>73</sup> Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism* , p 47.

<sup>74</sup> See the care with which the framers of the 39 Articles crafted Article XVII on Predestination.

### *Authority and the reformation*

Robert was a member of the Common Room that included John Henry Newman, Hurrell Froude and Dr Pusey. He was also a close friend of Henry Edward Manning.

Like many members of the Church of England he was profoundly affected by the process and result of the Gorham Case. As an Anglican clergyman in England he had subscribed to the Royal Supremacy upon ordination. The passing of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council Act by the Parliament and the decision of that committee in the Gorham Case caused him to withdraw his subscription. To explain his reasons he wrote *An inquiry into the principles of church authority, or, reasons for recalling my subscription to the Royal Supremacy*.<sup>75</sup> By withdrawing his subscription he automatically lost his living in the Church of England.

In a letter to the then Archbishop of York, his bishop, on 30<sup>th</sup> August, 1854 Robert Isaac Wilberforce wrote:

It remains , of course, that I should offer to divest myself of the trusts and preferments of which this subscription was a condition, and put myself, so far as is possible, into the

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<sup>75</sup> Francis Orpen Morris and Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *A letter to archdeacon R.I. Wilberforce on supremacy occasioned by An Inquiry into the principles of Church-authority . By a Yorkshire clergyman F.O. Morris*. (Lond. &c., 1854), Robert Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority, Robert Isaac Wilberforce, An inquiry into the principles of church authority, or, reasons for recalling my subscription to the Royal Supremacy* (2nd edition. edn.; London: Longman Brown Green and Longmans, 1954).



condition of a mere lay member of the Church. I, therefore, tender my resignation to your Grace.<sup>76</sup>

The fundamental issue was that of the locus of church authority. The principle upon which the removal of the Roman jurisdiction over the Church of England in the reign of Henry VIII was the concept of empire. The argument ran that, as England was an empire and not subject to any foreign power and as no oath of fealty had been taken to any 'lord' for England the Bishop of Rome had no role in England. As an empire it warranted its own patriarch (pope). Henry VIII adopted the style of an emperor by the use of the honorific "Your Majesty" rather than that of a king or duke, "Your Grace". Upon this philosophical position the *Act of Supremacy* of 1534 was based. It was this act (as amended) which required subscription from all ordinands.

In the letter quoted above, Robert Isaac wrote '...my attention has been drawn to another part of the Church's system, with which I have become painfully conscious that I can no longer concur. I refer to the Royal Supremacy.'<sup>77</sup> He is challenging neither the monarch's role as head of state nor the constitution of the United Kingdom as such, but only that part which affects the Church of England.

Robert Isaac Wilberforce says he cannot find comfort in what may have been an 'inadventure'.

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<sup>76</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, p vii.

<sup>77</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, p vii.

If the Act of 1832 were all on which my difficulties were founded, I might justify myself, as I have heretofore done, by the consideration, that it was probably passed through inadvertence, and had received no formal sanction from the Church. But my present objection *extends to the act of 1533* by which this power was bestowed upon the King in Chancery, and *to the first article in the 36<sup>th</sup> Canon, which is founded upon it.* (my emphasis)<sup>78</sup>

In his extensive *Inquiry into the principles of church authority* he surveys and details the history of authority from the Apostolic time until his present. Wilberforce argues that the Apostles appointed bishops as their successors and that a special place was held by Peter's successor, the Bishop of Rome. In chapter X he outlines the arguments for Papal primacy and seeks to answer the objections raised by St Cyprian of Carthage's criticism of his contemporary, Callistus, Bishop of Rome. He points out that Stephen, Callistus' successor, was called in to depose a Metropolitan in Gaul.

In chapter XI Wilberforce notes that the appellate jurisdiction was settled in the successor of St Peter by the Council of Sardica. He observes that at two of the 'General Councils' convened by the Emperor, that the Pope's authority was admitted, namely at Ephesus and Chalcedon. He goes on to

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<sup>78</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, p vii.

argue that only if this Primacy is true is 'the unity as predicted in Scripture'<sup>79</sup> possible.

Wilberforce goes on to challenge the principle of Private Judgment which *assumes* the inspiration of Scripture which cannot be proved without the authority of the Church.<sup>80</sup>

In chapter XIII he challenges the argument from empire. The whole settlement of the Reformation was invalid in his eyes, based upon a false premise and arrogating to the Crown power held only by the Bishop of Rome.<sup>81</sup> In chapter XIV Wilberforce continues to answer the arguments used to justify the Roman separation undertaken by the Church of England.

Wilberforce, in the final chapter (XV), outlined his conclusions. He draws attention to the three dynasties which had occupied the Throne since the Reformation and shows how each has handled the supremacy and why. He wrote:

Since England was separated from the Successor of St Peter, the throne has been occupied successively by the Tudor, Stuart, and Hanoverian Families. The first asserted absolute authority for themselves; the second recognized the Church as a Divine institution, yet on the condition that it must

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<sup>79</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, p 210.

<sup>80</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, p 213.

<sup>81</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, pp 221ff.

receive its commission through the Sovereign, whose right was also divine; the third has allowed the principles of Private Judgment to predominate. These, therefore, have been the systems, which have severally prevailed in the Church of England, which, on the whole, has always reflected the principles of the reigning power; and the last of them has the ascendancy now.<sup>82</sup>

He then examined the way in which the Supremacy had been exercised under each family. Robert Isaac Wilberforce is slightly more approving of the early Stuarts, but does not think even they were right. Neither the Tudors nor the Stuarts countenanced 'toleration', he wrote. It was not until Toleration Act (1 William & Mary, c 8) that dissent was allowed. Thus he wrote the 'Crown gave up the right of judging in spiritual matters which Henry VIII had won from the Church, and made it over solemnly to its subjects.'<sup>83</sup>

The argument proceeded to point out that this is inconsistent with the formularies of and the statutes concerning the Church of England. Indeed Wilberforce wrote, 'the Canons affirm it to be wicked for an Englishman to dissent'.<sup>84</sup> The effect of the toleration had reached, for him, an absurd level if one was to maintain the Supremacy.

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<sup>82</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, p 273.

<sup>83</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, p 277.

<sup>84</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, p 278.

Not only does it allow Roman Catholics and Dissenters to teach their several systems; but by their admission into Parliament, they have acquired a place in the Sovereignty itself. Our Gracious Queen may be only of two religions (those which are established in England and Scotland,) but of the sects that are represented in Parliament the name is legion. To assert the Sovereign, therefore, to be "Supreme Governor" "in spiritual causes," when the Sovereign is a Parliamentary Sovereign, and Parliament represents a divided nation, is to attribute an office to the Crown which it cannot really exercise, and of which it is illusory to speak.<sup>85</sup>

Wilberforce then referred specially to the Gorham case. Pointing out that the core issue, Baptismal Regeneration, was left, by the Privy Council, an open matter upon which each person was to decide, and therefore that the principle of church authority and correct doctrine had been abrogated. He outlines the effect this has both on Baptism and the Eucharist. This means that any person may hold any position regardless of what the Book of Common Prayer and the Articles say. He then illustrated the situation using the Donatist controversy. The state may have upheld the church's decision but it did not determine what that should be: 'The doctrines of the Catholic Faith ought not to be left to bodies of lay-delegates, any more than to Kings and Parliaments; they were entrusted by our Lord to

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<sup>85</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, p 279.

the collective episcopate; and to subject them to popular vote, is only to bring the principle of Private Judgment on a large scale.<sup>86</sup>

In the last four pages Robert Isaac gathers the issues of authority, Scripture, episcopacy and primacy together. The four belong together. The Royal Supremacy, toleration and Private Judgment undercut both the unity of the Church and the access to the true Faith. The Reformation, for him, had within it the seeds of its own failure. Schism begat schism.

It was not only on the issues of ecclesiology and sacramental theology that Robert Isaac Wilberforce differed from his father. William Wilberforce had championed the Constitution of the United Kingdom and saw the Established Church as a bulwark of truth. Robert Isaac's repudiation of the fundamentals of church and state as enshrined in the Constitution and Establishment cut him off from both his father's position and that of his brother Samuel. In 1854 he was accepted into the Roman Jurisdiction. He died 3 February 1857 while studying to be ordained in that church.

#### SIR JAMES STEPHEN

Sir James Stephen (1789 to 1859) was one of six children, the son of James Stephen of Clapham and his wife Jane, daughter of the Rev John Venn, Evangelical Rector of Clapham. He was Under Secretary of State for the Colonies and later Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. His contribution to colonial administration is regarded as vast<sup>87</sup>. Like many of

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<sup>86</sup> Wilberforce, *An inquiry into the principles of church authority*, p 281.

<sup>87</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*.

his generation he also engaged in writing for the new periodicals which had emerged during late 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. A particular contribution by Sir James was a series of article for the *Edinburgh Review* on significant Christian figures and movements. These were not restricted to English or Protestant figures. He later expanded these and added an epilogue and published them in a separate volume, namely *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*.<sup>88</sup> In the epilogue to this volume he outlines his own theological position. It is instructive and also provides an interesting contrast to that of his younger contemporaries, Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce.

Sir James' approach is quite different from that found in William Wilberforce's description of 'vital Christianity'. It uses similar language and is committed to a 'Biblical' understanding, but diverges at significant points. He explicitly states why he can include people as different as 'The Founders of Jesuitism'<sup>89</sup> and 'The Clapham Sect'.<sup>90</sup> The Jesuits were of the very group whom William Wilberforce early sought to exclude from the Westminster Parliament<sup>91</sup> and whom Samuel Wilberforce regarded as

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<sup>88</sup> The Right Honourable Sir James Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, 2 vols. (Third edn., I; London: Longman, Brown, green, and Longmans, 1853c).

<sup>89</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, I, p154 – 290.

<sup>90</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 289 – 385.

<sup>91</sup> Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 35, 304, 350, 389. Initially Wilberforce was opposed to Catholic emancipation because he did not want to give any support to Catholicism in Ireland as is shown by his objection to the Maynooth Grant. After the Union of Ireland and Great Britain when Catholics were allowed to vote, but only Protestants were allowed to sit in Westminster, he regarded this as the worst of both situations. So he spoke in favour of emancipation while not supporting Roman Catholicism.

schismatic.<sup>92</sup> He wrote that he explicitly avows these opinions contained in 'The Epilogue', 'To explain why the reverence of all the members of the great Christian family, is, in his judgement, due alike to many who belong to each of the great sections of which it is composed.'<sup>93</sup>

He was, at the time of the publication of *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, accused of being heretical. In *Sons of the Prophets* Hennell wrote:

Stephen's own beliefs were akin to those of Maurice, at least on the subject of hell. ... Stephen was accused of heresy for a new epilogue in his *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, in which he suggested doubts as to the eternity of hell fire.<sup>94</sup>

Stephen, however, spoke in evangelical terms, but gave them a different meaning in the long term. He wrote:

From our Redeemer himself we have learnt what are the two commandments on which hang all the law and the prophets. From the disciple who lay in his bosom, and who he selected as the channel of his higher revelations, we have learnt what are the two truths on which hang all the other doctrines of the

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<sup>92</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No 560 p 313.

<sup>93</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 462.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Hennell, *Sons of the prophets : evangelical leaders of the Victorian church / [by] Michael Hennell* (London :: S.P.C.K., 1979) p 102.



Gospel. The first is, that God is light – the second is, that God is love.<sup>95</sup>

He then proceeded to extrapolate these two ideas. He sees all the faculties of human existence as emanating from God as light: our 'natural instincts, 'our natural aversion towards material things',<sup>96</sup> sensitive instincts, intellectual instincts, judicial instincts – 'the use of our free will and free agency which is entrusted to us'<sup>97</sup>, moral instincts – 'the law written on our hearts'<sup>98</sup>, social instincts, and the light of understanding.

From God we derive the light of Understanding – that is, of the faculty which observes and reflects, which collects, premises, and deduces inferences; which has truth for its logic and reason for its guide.<sup>99</sup>

He went on at this point to warn against an idolatrous elevation of reason. He had already written that our use of the instincts was hampered "in each by corruption of the recipients, or obscured by their infirmity."<sup>100</sup>

His final exposition of God as light is seen in "the light of Revelation".<sup>101</sup>  
He wrote:

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<sup>95</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 463.

<sup>96</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 464.

<sup>97</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 465.

<sup>98</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 465.

<sup>99</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 466.

<sup>100</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 463.

<sup>101</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 467.

The Holy Scriptures differ from other writings in kind rather than in degree.<sup>102</sup> They, and they alone, have taught us whatever it most concerns us to know of Him who made us, and ourselves – of the relationships in which we stand with Him, and of the duties which those relationships impose upon us.<sup>103</sup>

His view of Scripture is not simplistic or unalloyed. He sees it pointing to 'one great Being as the common object and centre of all revealed truth; an<sup>104</sup> incarnation of deity'.<sup>105</sup>

It is, though, not a self-explicit doctrinal document. He listed movements and persons of the Christian world and history and their opinions which were divergent but which each claimed to be the truth. He concluded:

Shall we then conclude that this celestial guide is erroneous or equivocal? God forbid! Or shall we say, that of the so many paths thus pursued by so many contending sects, there is one, and only one, which is trodden by the honest, the candid, and the upright, and that all who deviate from that one path, are victims of their own levity, or prejudice, or insincerity? Or

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<sup>102</sup> While Stephen regards the Holy Scripture as different in *kind* to other religious works his overall handling of the material shows that he does not hold the 'Reformation' idea of *sola scriptura*.

<sup>103</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 467.

<sup>104</sup> The question that must be asked here is, does he mean at this point that Jesus of Nazareth is only 'an' incarnation of deity or is he orthodox and means 'the' incarnation? Is he, in fact, Trinitarian? We have looked at this issue also with reference to Sir James FitzJames Stephen's suggestion that his father was Socinian. This thesis p 130.

<sup>105</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 468.

may we not find some other explanation of this phenomenon, compatible at once with the reverence due to the sacred canon, and with charity due by every man to his brother?<sup>106</sup>

He proceeded to rehearse the problem that the Canon entailed. Chief was the fact of the use of human language and human infirmities. Even divine communication is subject to the problems of our nature and mode of discourse. Add to this the fact that 'even the learned' only read the material in translation and you have reasons to be uncertain.<sup>107</sup> He then argues that had we the very words of our Saviour in Latin (a language he seems to regard as perfectly understood by his contemporaries) we would be held captive in our understanding to the philologist and the scholar. Then the divine communication could not be available to all people in all places.<sup>108</sup> His solution is to see the form of language in the divine communication as '... the language of parable and proverb, of metaphor and contrast.'<sup>109</sup> This being the case, the language being drawn from transferable human experience can speak to each in the situation and version<sup>110</sup> in which it is found. His conclusion is:

There are large opportunities for honest differences of interpretation of Holy Scripture, arising from the admitted

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<sup>106</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 470.

<sup>107</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 470.

<sup>108</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 471.

<sup>109</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 472.

<sup>110</sup> By 'version' is meant the translated text as opposed to the text in its original language. This is the normal way in which Bible translators speak of their work.

variations between the different books of the Bible, and the different parts of the same book ... it may sufficiently explain the disagreements of Christians in the conclusions which they gather from the Bible.<sup>111</sup>

The Bible he averred did not speak to specific cases. 'The *sortes sanctorum*<sup>112</sup> were as gross a superstition as searching the entrails of a victim, or watching the flight of birds.'<sup>113</sup> He is, therefore, not surprised that a vast variety of ideas on belief and conduct, many contradictory, are deduced from the Bible. Yet this is not a counsel of despair. He did not see this as a reason to ignore either Scripture or the Christian Faith. He wrote:

From God we derive that true light which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world – that is, the light that emanates from the person of Christ himself.<sup>114</sup>

He spoke of Christ as our 'atoning sacrifice and the High Priest by whom that sacrifice is offered'. But it is not only an external objective issue. 'From God, also, we derive that awful interior light which the dying

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<sup>111</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 473.

<sup>112</sup> 'The *Sortes Sanctorum*, or *Sortes Sacrae*, of the Christians, has been illustrated in *The Classical Journal*.

'These, the writer observes, were a species of divination practised in the earlier ages of Christianity, and consisted in casually opening the Holy Scriptures, and from the words which first presented themselves deducing the future lot of the inquirer. They were evidently derived from the *Sortes Homericae* and *Sortes Virgilanae* of the Pagans, but accommodated to their own circumstances by the Christians.' *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* Vol. 10, Issue 273, September 15, 1827: <http://infomotions.com/etexts/gutenberg/dirs/1/1/3/8/11387/11387.htm>, Accessed on 26 September 2013

<sup>113</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 474.

<sup>114</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 475.

Saviour promised, and which the ascending Saviour bestowed.<sup>115</sup> He spoke of the convergence of these divergent rays of light which focused into 'one pencil' as the chief object of the Christian. 'Yet it is an attainment indispensable to the formation in the heart of man of that living similitude to Christ himself in which all true Christianity consists.'<sup>116</sup> This is apprehended by a 'presence invoked by prayer, retained by obedience, grieved by sin, and excluded by obduracy'.<sup>117</sup> This approach reflects the ideas in William Wilberforce's book *A Practical View*. Yet there is also a difference, since the chief motive in Wilberforce is to be ready for the day of judgement lest one find oneself in eternal punishment.

Sir James did not leave it there. He had another major point to make which is the fact that 'God is love'. He did not only mean that God is loving but that 'God is love'.<sup>118</sup> This is a far greater discovery since 'It enables us to discern ... the moral nature of our Creator in the yet remaining traces in ourselves of His image and likeness.'<sup>119</sup>

He makes the unusual observation that, since God is love there must be that to love, and so 'the creation is coeval with the creator'.<sup>120</sup> In asserting the co-eternity of God and creation, Sir James is denying the all but universally-held beliefs that the creation has both a beginning and an

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<sup>115</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 476.

<sup>116</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II p 477.

<sup>117</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 476.

<sup>118</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 478.

<sup>119</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 478.

<sup>120</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 479.

ending and that God precedes the creation.<sup>121</sup> He then went on to argue that man was therefore created free so as to be able to respond with love which only a free creature can do. It would be a moral evil for a person to withhold the 'love which He demands'.<sup>122</sup> Since humans do act in this way, the divine love, for our benefit does not degenerate into 'fondness' but provides 'remedial punishment' to bring us to a better response.<sup>123</sup>

To enable humans to engage with God, our Father, in 'infinite condescension' 'the Divine Logos, his own communicative energy (is) infused into one of the children of Adam'.<sup>124</sup> This Christology was challenged at the time as his footnote on page 482-3 notes. He said in that footnote that he was not seeking to differ with the creeds and articles of the Church of England. Our knowledge, he wrote, of the Trinity and Incarnation is really dark. He seems to this writer to be seeking to avoid the issues which Christological and Trinitarian theology place in the face of a general theistic approach to God. It is communication, rationality and love rather than ontology with which he seeks to interact or express as his understanding of true Christianity.

This approach is seen when he wrote:

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<sup>121</sup> This concept of God being coeval with the universe is picked up by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Process Theologians, such as the English philosopher-mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and the American philosopher-ornithologist, Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-theism/> Accessed 8 February 2013.

<sup>122</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 481.

<sup>123</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 481.

<sup>124</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 482.

That God is love, is proclaimed from Bethlehem, and from Calvary, in a voice penetrating the inmost heart; but in a voice which addresses the heart only, and which summons us not to investigate, but to worship.<sup>125</sup>

One cannot be absolute, but on balance it would seem that his view is closer to that of Abelard – that Divine love shown in Jesus of Nazareth provokes a response of Love from us – rather than the forensic substitutionary atonement which we saw in the founding members of Clapham. This was for them necessary due to the absolute corruption of our human nature, an idea not found in Sir James' 'explicit affirmation'.

The next issue for Sir James is the primacy of the individual conscience. He is opposed to any 'fellow-men' as rulers over one's conscience, for freedom is indispensable if one is to love.<sup>126</sup> This natural or creationally-given guardian is seen even in the general consent of humanity. He wrote:

Nor is the hyperbole, *Vox populi vox Dei*, a mere extravagance, if it be understood only as recognising that beneficent constitution of our common nature which renders every concurrence of mankind in their moral judgements at once so terrible to guilt and so encouraging to good desert.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 484.

<sup>126</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 485.

<sup>127</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 481.

Yet this, for him, is but an expression of the idea that 'God is love'. Doctrinal differences between the divisions of the 'City of God' will not 'exclude any true Christian from the assurance that "God is love" which he derives from the light of understanding.'<sup>128</sup>

He offers a reason for the 'overclouding' of the spirits of many 'nominal disciples of Christ'. It is the very doctrine which was core to that held by his Evangelical forbears, that of the doctrine of hell. It 'is the hopeless dejection with which they contemplate that part of the Christian scheme which is supposed to consign the vast majority of our race to a future state, in which woe inconceivable in amount, is also eternal in duration.'<sup>129</sup>

He was keen, though, to preserve the integrity of Revelation and particularly of the words of Christ. He went on, by the use of philology and the issue of the language in which Jesus spoke (for him Syro-Chaldaic), to suggest that the 'Evangelical' meaning of eternal torment was not necessarily true. Discounting his expertise as a Biblical critic he nonetheless wrote, 'It is sufficient for the immediate purpose to say, in reference to the merely critical or grammatical inquiry, that the words in question are manifestly susceptible to the different meanings which so many scholars have at different times pointed out.'<sup>130</sup> He points out that if this doctrine were true then one should spend no time doing anything else but warning people of it. He did not challenge the nature of the

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<sup>128</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 491.

<sup>129</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 495.

<sup>130</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 498.



retribution, that it was penal, only that it was eternal, an idea which could not be held if 'God is Love' and the human constitution be as one saw it.

He justifies the amount of space given to challenging the doctrine of eternal punishment because he sees it as the cause of so many turning away from the Christian way. He wrote:

That the generally-received opinion regarding the endless duration of the state of punishment, is among the most effective of all causes which are at present inducing amongst us the virtual abandonment of Christianity.<sup>131</sup>

This view of 'God as love' and the light which each has receive by nature and by revelation pushed him to see that there was a 'catholic belief and morality' such that all those of whom he had written had a right to the title "True Christian". He finished his *apologia* exhorting:

[Any] one gifted with the requisite abilities and learning, to give to the Christian world a Protestant<sup>132</sup> Hagiology, which embraces within its folds every faithful servant of Christ, whatever may be the peculiarities of his ecclesiastical system, or of his theological creed.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography* II, p 504.

<sup>132</sup> He appears here to exclude Roman Catholics yet the context of the whole paragraph suggests that he is seeking a particular group within the whole group of 'Saints of the universal Church, which embraces within its ample fold every faithful servant of Christ, whatever may be the peculiarities of his ecclesiastical system, or their theological creed. Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, p 507.

<sup>133</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, II, p 507.

It is clear from the forgoing that Sir James, while holding himself to be a true Christian, did not believe nor hold the core doctrines of the Clapham Evangelicals. In a letter to his 25 year-old son James Fitzjames Stephen in 1847 he wrote:

I am not here to speculate but repent, to believe and to obey;  
and I find no difficulty whatsoever in believing each in turn of  
two or more doctrines which yet seem to me incompatible  
with each other ... I adopt [evangelicalism] as a regulator of  
the affections, as a rule of life, as a quietus, not a stimulant to  
enquiry.<sup>134</sup>

Smith records that in Sir James' later life when asked by Fitzjames about the 'Bible's historical validity' replied 'Well, well, my dear boy – perhaps it is as you say – but don't tell your mother and sister'.<sup>135</sup> While apparently using the appellation Evangelical, he had clearly stepped away from the description of that position used and expounded by the Clapham Community.

#### ANALYSIS

Robert Isaac Wilberforce, like his brother, Samuel, believed there could only be one church. They differed on whether the Church of England was

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<sup>134</sup> James Stephen and Caroline Emelia Stephen, *The Right Honourable Sir James Stephen* (Gloucester ,, 1906) P119-120 quoted in K. J. M. Smith, *James Fitzjames Stephen : portrait of a Victorian rationalist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p 217.

<sup>135</sup> *An Autobiographical Fragment*, Sir James Fitzjames Papers, Cambridge quoted in Smith, *James Fitzjames Stephen : portrait of a Victorian rationalist*, p 217.

that church, the Catholic Church in England. They both agreed that Dissent and Parliamentary reform had jeopardised, if not destroyed, any real authority for the Church of England established by the Reformation. They both sought to uphold the concept of Baptismal Regeneration and the Real Presence in the Eucharist against the Evangelical denial. They both saw themselves upholding the Faith once for all delivered to the saints, the Catholic Faith.

Sir James Stephen had maintained an Evangelical piety although, as his son Leslie Stephen noted, he was reticent in speaking about it. On any objective criteria, as we have seen, his theology, clearly stated in the 'Epilogue' to his book *Ecclesiastical Biographies*, was not that of either his father or of contemporary Evangelicals.

Like their contemporary, Sir James Stephen, in their mature Faith position, the Wilberforce brothers<sup>136</sup> stood some considerable distance from their father, as did Sir James from his. Both fathers had been convinced Evangelicals yet the scions of their houses had, in one generation, taken significantly different positions. These trajectories were to be followed by succeeding generations.

We are but one generation from Clapham and the children of the leading figures of the Clapham Sect are no longer evangelical. For Wilberforce three sons are Roman Catholic and one the leading High Church bishop.

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<sup>136</sup> Not only Robert Isaac and Samuel, but William Jnr and Henry who, like Robert Isaac, were received into the Roman Jurisdiction.

For Stephen, the leading public person of the family has also moved away from the Evangelical Faith. Why?

## **Chapter 6**

### **The Second Generation: Circumstance and Motive**

A number of characteristics of the fathers of Clapham recur in the sons: an almost rigid commitment to truth, a strong sense of the necessity of personal integrity and a conviction that a person's examination of all the evidence before him would lead to right conclusions about religion. Like their fathers, they had a strong sense of God's providential activity and of the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet the positions they took up with reference to the Faith were significantly different.

One of the factors which may account for this is the university to which the children went. Allied to this is the reason that parents chose a particular university and a particular college within that university. A second issue which we think important is the professional life to which each of them was exposed as children and in which they engaged as adults. The connection between the two factors is, itself, not unimportant.

The very traits and commitments which the sons seem to have 'inherited' from their fathers raised questions which, in this author's analysis, could not be answered by the nature of the Faith expressed by their fathers. William Wilberforce, for example, held a high view of the 'English constitution' and of the value of 'our inestimable liturgy'. Yet it was just the conflict of these two things, Constitution and Establishment, with which his sons had to deal. These two valuable attitudes 'inherited' from their father were now not mutually supportive, as William saw them, but

were in open conflict. Much the same can be said for the material Sir James 'inherited' from James Stephen Esq. In his memoir, written late in his life, a providential and gracious God is paramount. Sir James' son, Sir Leslie Stephen, speaks of James Stephen Esq. becoming fully 'evangelical' under the influence of William Wilberforce. Yet in reflecting on the memoir of the mature James Stephen Esq. one is conscious of an active faith prior to meeting Wilberforce. When one considers his son, Mr Undersecretary Stephen, like his father a very competent lawyer and a strong anti-slavery advocate, we also see an active faith. Yet, as we have seen, he is one whose 'Evangelical credentials' are challenged by his own faith description. Were only evangelicals as described by William Wilberforce in *A Practical View* to be considered truly Christian as that book states?<sup>1</sup>

To see how this is worked out I will examine, in particular, two representative 'sons' of whom we have already seen portraits in the last chapter. We will also make reference to Samuel Wilberforce. I will begin with Robert Isaac Wilberforce.

#### ROBERT ISAAC WILBERFORCE

We have already seen, in the last chapter, how the Gorham decision by the Privy Council affected two of the Wilberforce sons, Robert Isaac and Samuel. Both these men held significant positions in the Church of England; Robert was Archdeacon of the East Riding in Yorkshire and

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<sup>1</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View*.

Samuel the Bishop of Oxford. In his 1851 visitation address<sup>2</sup> to his Archdeaconry, Robert Wilberforce explores the two religious movements he sees as significant for the present situation and outlines their contribution to the solution of the present crisis. Interestingly, although he is often said to be a member of one of these movements, he sees himself as the inheritor rather than a member of that movement. In his Charge to his Archdeaconry in 1850<sup>3</sup> he refers at length to the two movements which he saw as preparing the way for the present conflict in which the Church of England was engaged. They were the Evangelical Revival and the Oxford movement. Most have seen him as a member of the latter<sup>4</sup> but, at least in 1850, he saw himself as simply a priest who represented the orthodox position of the Church of England.

He addresses what he sees to be the contribution to the Church of England of both the Evangelical movement and the Tractarian movement. He argued that the Hanoverian Church was dead and that it had failed to maintain a true spiritual role. Neither Wesley nor Law were welcome in its parishes and pulpits.

Such was the inheritance transmitted to us by a century and a half of worldliness, during which the Church was content to be

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851* (London: John Murray, 1851b).

<sup>3</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation A. D. 1850*.

<sup>4</sup> Chadwick, *The Victorian church*, II, p 262.

a mere tool of the State, and to cast out Canon Law on the one side and Wesley and Whitefield on the other.<sup>5</sup>

Into this situation Wilberforce saw the Evangelical Revival as a necessary precursor to the Oxford movement and both as necessary to the Church of England meeting the challenge of the day.

It was particularly, in his opinion, the men like those of Clapham, with whom he was intimate, who had rescued the Church of England from its moribund state. Their action was seen by him as divine action,<sup>6</sup> resulting in a positive change within the Established Church. This movement was "a work which consisted not so much in introducing new principles as in giving effect to old ones".<sup>7</sup> Not the introduction of new ideas but the revival of ideas long held dear by Christians. It involved no change in doctrine but was centred upon the deep-felt feelings of those who were involved. It called both clergy and laity back to their duty as Christians.

The Church was roused to its plain duty of instructing her children and converting the heathen; the gospel was again heard in our pulpits; the sacraments were more duly administered; the clergy ceased to be men of pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation*, A. D. 1851, p 4.

<sup>6</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation*, A. D. 1851. p 4 "He raises up instruments but the work is his."

<sup>7</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation*, A. D. 1851 p 5.

<sup>8</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation*, A. D. 1851 p 5.



Wilberforce saw the movement as not introducing any new doctrine.

The controversies which prevailed at that day were about feelings, not doctrine - dispositions, not opinions - earnestness not orthodoxy. The whole movement, in short, was not objective but subjective.<sup>9</sup>

He went on to write that it was aimed at the 'real and genuine conversion of individuals from worldliness to God' an emerging from a 'great spiritual slumber' not unprecedented in Christian history.<sup>10</sup> This understanding of the movement is central to his understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. The evangelical movement was for Robert Wilberforce not a change to the externals of the Church, by which he meant the Established Church, but a marker of the 'primary and irreversible principles of grace.'<sup>11</sup> It is important to note here what we have written about his idea of 'conversion' which we have addressed in Chapter Five. This seems echoed by his brother Samuel who wrote that he had given up none of his youthful evangelical learning.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike many, later High and Middle Churchmen, who may see themselves as the successors of the Wilberforce brothers and their 'Church Principles' position, they did not see the Evangelical Revival as an unfortunate or

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<sup>9</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*, p 5.

<sup>10</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*, p 6.

<sup>11</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation A. D. 1850*.

<sup>12</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*, No. 359 p 187.

unhelpful historical situation. They saw what occurred in the first quarter of the century to be a necessary precursor to the second movement, that which found its origin in an Oxford Common Room.<sup>13</sup>

Robert Isaac Wilberforce took as given that one role of government was to prescribe the religion of the nation.<sup>14</sup> This had, at least in theory, been maintained despite the convolutions of the 17th Century.

The Great rebellion and the Revolution had indeed secured toleration to individuals but political power was still confined, at least in theory, or with few exceptions, to the professors of the national religion.<sup>15</sup>

He drew attention to the idea, expressed by Warburton, that this made necessary a 'test act' whereby a person's right to hold office was circumscribed by their adherence to a national religion. The union of the Kingdoms of England, Scotland (1701) and with Ireland (1801), in his view, made the principle of a 'test act' 'inapplicable',<sup>16</sup> since it meant that the Parliament was no longer a house of Anglicans. The repeal of the 'Test and Corporations Act' in 1828, the removal of Catholic disabilities by an

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<sup>13</sup> What they thought of the evangelical movement of the later three quarters of the century can be seen in their response to the Gorham case.

<sup>14</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding Delivered at the Ordinary Visitation*, A. D. 1851. p 6. In this he is supported by the liturgy of the Established Church which prayed that the government might 'maintain true religion and virtue'. BCP *state prayers*.

<sup>15</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation*, A. D. 1851 p 6.

<sup>16</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation*, A. D. 1851 p 6.

Act in 1829 and the first Reform Act of 1833 radically altered the principles upon which the Elizabethan Settlement had rested. Of the first two acts he wrote, "it is impossible to look upon them as anything else than a fundamental alteration of the position of the Church of England" in the Constitution.<sup>17</sup>

It was this change in the church's relationship to the state which, in Robert Isaac Wilberforce's opinion, gave rise to those who became known as the 'Tractarians'. For him, they were neither following some private piety nor seeking to maintain status or dignity within the society.<sup>18</sup> The issues were fundamental to the Faith. 'The right of the clergy, therefore, to define the national faith, needed to be put upon some new ground, because the old ground had slipped away from them.'<sup>19</sup> Given that the voice of the Church and the nation were no longer one, Wilberforce asserts that the writers of the 'Tracts for the Times' sought to pursue the Church's claim to teach and define the truth of the Faith.<sup>20</sup> He referred back to the words of the Rev John Scott on 16th January 1834<sup>21</sup> that the church is an "institution in itself, dependent on its own principles, and

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<sup>17</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*. P 6.

<sup>18</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*. p 9 & p 11.

<sup>19</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*. p 8.

<sup>20</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*. p 9.

<sup>21</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*. Looking back to an earlier quotation 'For who is to define the faith of the Church but the pastors of the Church collectively considered? It belongs to their office as the interpreters of religion.' p 7.

amenable to its own laws". To hold this position is to lay claim to a divine commission which the state could not alter. Here is a fundamental challenge to any Erastian understanding of church/state relations. At this point his view of the Dissenter assemblies is made patent.

If the Church of England, therefore, had been one of those bodies which took its rise at the reformation, like various sects of Protestants, the notion of such a claim would be preposterous.

And,

She was asserted to be the Church catholic sojourning in this land, subject, therefore, to those laws, and claiming those rights which belonged to her ancient institution, which was founded by our Lord and his Apostles.<sup>22</sup>

The distinction he makes between the reformed Church of England and the 'protestant sects' is one in which he differs from those forbears in Clapham.<sup>23</sup> Recognising that Apostolic Succession<sup>24</sup> will not provide a sufficient basis in the circumstances in which the Church finds itself he proceeded to outline two possible approaches to the work of bringing people to a lively faith in God.

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<sup>22</sup>Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*. p 10.

<sup>23</sup> This thesis p 22.

<sup>24</sup> The theory that all bishops have a guaranteed authority since each has been consecrated by those to who the apostles left authority for the provision of guardians of the Faith'.

The first was that represented by the Evangelical Revival in which the individual applies the effects of the death of Christ to themselves by “an act of faith”, they “come to God as individuals”<sup>25</sup> and afterward are joined to the community of faith.

The second approach he calls the “Church system”. This varies from the first in that the movement is perceived not from the individual to God but from God to humanity. It is based on an understanding of the Incarnation of the ‘Word’ of God.<sup>26</sup> He sees himself standing in the line of teacher such as Hooker, Andrews and Law.<sup>27</sup>

And this act begins with Christ, not with men; it is not an inward movement, whereby men join themselves to Christ by an effort of the will, but an outward movement, whereby Christ bestows Himself upon them, through the ordinances of the Gospel.<sup>28</sup>

He went on to write, ‘Men are not made members of Christ by faith or repentance, or by any act of their own; but by Christ’s act, whereby he joins them to himself in.’<sup>29</sup> The detailed theological argument, which

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<sup>25</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*, p 12.

<sup>26</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*, p 12.

<sup>27</sup> Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism* In this work he constantly appeals to both Hooker and the Caroline Divines.

<sup>28</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*, p 13.

<sup>29</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*, p 14.

followed, stressed the objective nature of both Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In his book on baptism he is clear that there is a subsequent place for 'conversion' as we have seen in the previous chapter. Again, as we have seen in a previous chapter,<sup>30</sup> this is the position held by his brother, Samuel, and antithetical to that expressed in his father's book *A Practical view*. We noted, in Chapter One, that, despite the Evangelical's adherence to and support of the sacraments, there is little in *A Practical View* on their role for the 'vital Christian'. No appeal is made to them, in any real way, by William Wilberforce.<sup>31</sup>

Robert Isaac's expression on the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration grows straight out of the issue in the Gorham case and the fact that, although they denied making any ruling on doctrine, the Privy Council, by rejecting Bishop Phillpott's reason in the Gorham matter, effectively ruled that two views of the sacraments were valid within the Established Church.

But the last year has shown that since the civil power has been detached from the Church, it has acquired a right which no Christian state has either claimed or exercised - that of determining the Church's doctrine.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> This thesis p 210.

<sup>31</sup> This thesis p 59.

<sup>32</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*, p 20.

The stress in the Clapham Sects' approach to faith, as we have seen in Chapter One, was on the inward movement of the Holy Spirit resulting in a deep personal change of life. It was essentially an individual experience with consequent expressions of the divine encounter in a disciplined personal piety. That of Robert and Samuel Wilberforce is focused on the Church and its sacramental life, on doctrine rather than experience, on the ministerial office and its responsibility to maintain the Faith and administer the Sacraments. In this they do not deny an inward work of God, as we have seen in Chapter Five. While they affirm the Evangelicals of the 1790s to 1820s they are provoked into opposition to both state action and the Evangelical *doctrine* of the second quarter of the 19th Century. It is the intersection of these two things which compel them to express their position, at once both as inwardly intense, yet intellectually different, to that of their father. For them both, truth and personal integrity mean that they must 'teach the Church's teaching' both because they each eat the 'Church's bread'<sup>33</sup> but more significantly because they have assented to that teaching and order. 'Such obedience the clergy must, no doubt, desire to render, for no body of men would give a promise which they did not design to fulfill.'<sup>34</sup>

But what of our second example? Does he also show similar characteristics?

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<sup>33</sup> Wilberforce et al., *The letter-books of Samuel Wilberforce*.

<sup>34</sup> Wilberforce, *A Charge to the Clergy of the East Riding delivered at the Ordinary Visitation, A. D. 1851*, p 18.

## SIR JAMES STEPHEN

Sir James Stephen is employed in a different world: A lawyer, a public servant and a layman. Yet an examination of his situation reveals similar characteristics at work. It is particularly in the way Stephen exercises his role as Undersecretary for the Colonies which gives insight into possible motives and influence which result in the faith position seen in his "Epilogue".<sup>35</sup>

The mature religious position of Sir James Stephen has already been outlined and discussed. It was, as we have seen, significantly different to that of his Clapham predecessors and his contemporaries, Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce. The question to be asked, therefore, is "What factors may have influenced him to adopt such a position?"

For a considerable part of his adult life Sir James was associated with the Colonial Office of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. He came to this after studies at Cambridge University and the Inns of Court and work as a barrister. Like the Wilberforce sons he lived through and worked within the changes that the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century brought. Yet his focus and the arena of his activity was significantly different. He was a lawyer embroiled in the task of colonial administration of what is

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<sup>35</sup> This thesis p 232.



commonly called the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Empire. Like his father he was also passionately committed to the abolition of slavery itself.<sup>36</sup>

James Knaplund<sup>37</sup> seeks to expose Stephen's attitudes and principles in his work on Sir James' role in British Colonial administration. He describes Stephen as an Evangelical. "He represented the evangelical Christianity ... in the late Hanoverian and early Victorian England."<sup>38</sup> While Knaplund rightly describes a trend or group in the Established Church yet, despite his public and very private piety, one has to challenge his description of Sir James. He clearly believed that Stephen was committed to religious plurality and equality before the law especially within the colonies.<sup>39</sup> Such a stance was very different to the Evangelicalism of Clapham and of the early Victorian period.

Toleration and equality for all Christians ultimately came to mean the abolition of legal disabilities based on creed. With this reform Stephen has general sympathy.<sup>40</sup>

Yet it is also clear that Stephen was committed to the law as in place in the United Kingdom. In dealing with certain decisions in Upper and Lower Canada and Malta concerning Roman Catholics and their bishops'

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<sup>36</sup> Along with His brother George he continued, as appropriate, to pursue Abolition as we have seen in Chapter 5.

<sup>37</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*.

<sup>38</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*, p 17.

<sup>39</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*, pp 166-167.

<sup>40</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847* p 149.

relationship to the civil authorities, he drew attention to the effect that the Elizabethan Act of Supremacy had.

I apprehend ... that such a recognition is directly opposed to the Act of Supremacy of the 1<sup>st</sup> year of Queen Elizabeth cap 1, s 16 &17.<sup>41</sup>

In the case of the Malta Ordinance he points out that the Lieutenant Governor, the Pope and the Vicar Apostolic 'will have incurred the guilt of High Treason'.<sup>42</sup> Stephen's advice to various Colonial Secretaries to acquiesce in such legislation and proclamations seems to be based in utility in governing rather than a strict implementation of the law of the United Kingdom, even when it is clear that such law applied. In it Stephen seems to recognise an historically contingent nature to the Act of Supremacy or a difference that accords, in the fact that it was the United Kingdom not England which ruled the colonial territories. This he notes expressly in comments on the fact that in the United Kingdom there are two established churches: the Church of England in England and the Presbyterian Church in Scotland.<sup>43</sup>

In an opinion on a request of certain bishops in Nova Scotia, the underpinning of Stephen's views are clear. His motivation, even if he preferred the Established Church (*C of E*), was the maintaining of stable

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<sup>41</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*, p 144.

<sup>42</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*, p 146.

<sup>43</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*, p 141.

civil government. It seems that, in his mind, pursuit in the colonies of ecclesial particularity could only be justified if it met with civil approbation.

Whatever the decision [on the bishop's request] may be, it seems to me of importance that the Bishop's Letter should not be made public because the tone of it is such as would infallibly give great offence to those of the colonists who utterly deny the high pretensions of the Episcopal Clergy there and elsewhere. If, as Lord Galkland says, four-fifths of the population belong to other denominations of Christians they will be sour and angry at finding themselves thus spoken of as Dissenters who ought to be quite satisfied with full toleration and religious freedom without claiming to participate in the endowments of the Crown. ... Whatever it might be worthwhile to risk for the stability or promoting of the Church of England in Nova Scotia, it would seem bad policy to engage in such a contest without any definite prospect of advantage even in case of success.<sup>44</sup>

Knaplund points out that in a report on an earlier Nova Scotian Act, Stephen had written, 'it is utterly impossible to stem, on the North American Continent, the Current of popular opinion in favour of an

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<sup>44</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*, p 138 quoting a minute of the Colonial Office by Sir James Stephen of 30 June, 1842.

absolute equality amongst all Christian Societies, and in favour of equal rights of all to Legislative assistance'.<sup>45</sup>

On this issue Stephen seems to diverge significantly to the Wilberforce brothers. As we have seen, for them, the 'dissenters' and Roman Catholics, at least in England, were schismatics.<sup>46</sup>

Sir James' motivation for a broad understanding of what constituted true Christianity is not generated by, nor tied to, the legal status of various Christian groups. Sir James' underlying desire for stable government in the colonies does seem to suggest that there was a utilitarian approach in some of the advice he gave to the Colonial Secretary. Yet this line of thought is insufficient to explain his broader approach to who could be called 'Christian'. As we look at his approach to the implementation of the abolition of slavery we begin to see a basis for his attitude reflected in his *Ecclesiastical Biography*.

The son of one of the leading anti-slave proponents he, himself, also had a vehement commitment to this cause. When, in 1833, he has suddenly to take on the task of writing the bill for the abolition of slavery, his son, Sir Leslie, recalled that he did so in one weekend. Sir Leslie also noted that this was the only occasion on which he ever saw his father work on a

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<sup>45</sup>Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847* quoting a report, October 7, 1841, on Nova Scotia Act No 2186, C. O., 323: 56, folios 7-8 [C. O. refers to Colonial Office Archives.].

<sup>46</sup> This thesis, p 215.

Sunday.<sup>47</sup> The Bill, which he dictated to his secretary, in its printed form fills twenty six octavo pages and has sixty-six sections. It passed Parliament with but a few technical amendments. This alone shows his zeal for the goal and also his command of the issue and the law and practice of both the United Kingdom and the colonies.

But it is in his actions and comment upon the colonial legislation consequent upon the abolition of slavery that his own motivation is seen. He was not content to free the slaves but to see that they achieved equality before the law as subjects of his Sovereign.

Even before the abolition bill was passed he had taken up William Wilberforce's move for the registration of slaves to prevent any circumventing of the Abolition of the slave trade which had taken place in 1807.<sup>48</sup> He was involved in the House of Commons resolution on the amelioration of slave treatment.<sup>49</sup>

Two reports by Stephen, quoted by Knaplund, show his zeal in the cause of abolition. Both concern the supplementary legislation the United Kingdom Act required of colonial assemblies.

It is not to be denied that H[is] Majesty's Government have approved an Act of the Assembly of Jamaica in which is contained a provision similar to this [which makes possible

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<sup>47</sup> Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, p 48.

<sup>48</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British Colonial System, 1813-1847*. p 100.

<sup>49</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*. p 102.

changing the classification of slaves from nonpraedial to praedial]. In reporting upon my opinion on that Act, I thought it my duty to call your attention to the objection to which that cause appeared to me liable. My judgement was and is, that the King in Council has no right to assent to a colonial Enactment directly repugnant to a British Act of Parliament. Trifling as the particular contradiction may be, it is no trifling principle which is involved in the assumption by the King's Privy Council of the right to advise His Majesty to sanction that which Parliament has expressly forbidden.<sup>50</sup>

Sir James clearly wished to show that the principles of the Imperial Legislation were not to be amended, even in a minor way, by the colonial legislatures. For him this was not only a matter of policy or law but went to the heart of the philosophical reasons for the primary legislation. In 1834 he wrote:

In my report of the 31<sup>st</sup> of January last on the Jamaica Act, I expressed my opinion that the utmost confusion must ensue from the omission to make those distinctions which Parliament had called on the Colonial Assemblies to establish: & stated that in my judgement the act was not in that respect adequate and 'satisfactory'. I was corrected by far higher Authority than my own, to which I am bound to defer. Still I

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<sup>50</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*. p 108 quoting C.O., 323: 50, folio 129

must retain my original opinion however little weight may be due it, that the acceptance of the Jamaica Law in this form, will consign many a man to a Servitude, for his Redemption from which the People of England have paid so large a Price.<sup>51</sup>

For Sir James even the modified 'apprenticeships' suggested by the Jamaica Act contravened the principle of the Imperial Act. This attitude is made clear in a report by Stephen in 1837 to Lord Glenelg

It is avowed therefore that the object of this Law is to secure to the White Inhabitants of Jamaica the Political predominance which they have hitherto enjoyed. To me it appears that it is not practicable, and that if practicable, it would not be desirable or just to accomplish this purpose....

But even if this policy could be safely pursued and rendered effectual, still it would involve the infringement of good faith and national honour. When the people of this Country paid the price of Negro Emancipation it was never stated or suggested that the enfranchised population were to obtain personal only, as contra-distinguished from Political Freedom, His Majesty's Government are not I conceive at liberty so to interpret and so to carry into effect the compact between Great Britain and the Colonies. To act on that principle would also appear to

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<sup>51</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*. p 109 quoting C.O., 323: 50, folio 278 In the Abolition Act an amount of £2,000,000 had be approved as compensation to slave owners for their pecuniary loss in the abolition of slavery.

those Foreign Nations who are no uninterested observers of our Colonial Policy as an avowal that we feared to encounter the legitimate consequences of the measure we have taken.<sup>52</sup>

Knaplund's conclusion is that "Throughout his long service in the Colonial Office, he fought for the establishment of racial equality and social justice in the British Empire beyond the sea."<sup>53</sup>

Yet this does not reach the heart of the motivation for Stephen's position. Stephen commented on certain Bahamas' legislation ( Act 673 of 1821 c 2) which effectively made all ministers or clergy but the Establishment clergy (C of E) "vagabonds and rogues"<sup>54</sup>, that such a designation was odious is clear, for he continues:

On this construction of the act, therefore, the whole body of dissenting Teachers whose discipline or religious opinions require a frequent change of place are left to depend on the uncontrolled will of the Governor for liberty to exercise their office. – If, on the other hand, the act does not intend to except licensed preachers, it amounts to a total prohibition of all public religious instruction by Methodists and others, who, it is notorious, do habitually "go about as preachers of the Gospel." – On either supposition, the act is, I apprehend,

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<sup>52</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847.* , p 119 quoting C.O., 323: 52 folios 292-300.

<sup>53</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847.* p 130

<sup>54</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847.* p 137.



entirely at variance with the mild and tolerant spirit of the British Government.<sup>55</sup>

His report of a St Vincent Act of 1843 more clearly showed his heart. It concerned the right to visit hospitals and was intended to restrict this to Establishment Clergy.

If there is any one place from which polemical debate and feeling should be excluded more anxiously than from any other it would seem to be the place where all come to suffer, and very many to die. The regular attendance of a Clergyman at a Hospital is of paramount importance. His peculiar views of Church Discipline, or even of Christian truth, seem to me *comparatively* immaterial, supposing only that he is a sincere and zealous man.<sup>56</sup>

The fundamental issue for him was not what he regarded as 'comparatively immaterial' ecclesial and doctrinal matters. It was the fundamental self understanding and orientation of the person who self identified as 'Christian'. Sir James had acceded to the change in the Constitution in contra-distinction to both Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce.<sup>57</sup> He had also adopted a view of the Faith which did not accord with the 'doctrinal purity' they desired. Here, as in the issue of

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<sup>55</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847* p 137 quoting C.O., 323: 52 folio 303.

<sup>56</sup> Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British colonial system, 1813-1847*. p 140 quoting Report, March 2, 1843, on St Vincent Act No 417 of 1843, C.O., 323: 59.

<sup>57</sup> This thesis p 230.

slavery, Sir James seems to be motivated by a sense of human dignity and unity and commended a compassionate approach. Here are reflected in his actions the themes of 'light' and 'love' which, in the Epilogue to his ecclesial biographies control his theological position.

Sir Leslie Stephen wrote this about his father's theological position:

My father gave in his Essays a sufficient indication of his religious creed. That creed, while it corresponded to his very deepest emotions, took a peculiar and characteristic form. His essay upon the 'Clapham Sect' shows how deeply he had imbibed its teaching, while it yet shows a noticeable divergence.<sup>58</sup>

Sir Leslie went on to describe both the similarity and difference between Sir James and his forebears; his reticence in speaking of his deep personal positions, his willingness to accept that, working as he did among many kinds of people, he could be called a 'Latitudinarian', and his appreciation of many different 'Christians' through the ages while not necessarily approving of all their disciples did or traditions they followed. Sir Leslie wrote:

Whatever doubts or tendencies to doubt might affect his intellect, they never weakened his loyalty to his creed. He spoke of Christ, when such references were desirable, in a

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<sup>58</sup> Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, p 55.

tone of the deepest reverence blended with personal affection<sup>59</sup>

As Sir James said himself he had “passed a long series of years in a free intercourse with every class of society”. This he suggested had the effect, not only on him, but on anyone who had done so, of expanding their sympathies and affections in the religious sphere.<sup>60</sup>

A passion for the cause of abolition combined with a deep passion for the Law and a desire for stable government which resulted in equality for all his Sovereign’s subjects seem to drive Sir James Stephen. Like the Wilberforce brothers the questions that faced him and with which he had to deal seem both to have been responded to by his early religious experience and to have modified that deposit. We do not see so much a rejection of the ‘Clapham template’ as an adaptation and modification due to the issues which the ‘Clapham Saints’ did not encounter. As well, the experience of ‘the sons of the prophets’ was that of growing up within a context of Evangelical milieu with which they engaged from infancy. Yet the challenges they faced were not the supposed coldness of the early Hanoverian church but the intellectual, social and political issues of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Biblical Criticism, the demand for a place and role in government policy both at home and in the colonies by Dissenters and others, and a challenge to the rights of the Established Church to

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<sup>59</sup> Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, p 59.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*. II p 56.

determine its own doctrine and practice and the right to define the 'True Faith' for the Nation.

Yet what is clear from the foregoing is that, not only were certain intellectual and character traits maintained by the sons of Clapham, but there were a number of theological ideas also 'retained'. These were not necessarily unique to the Clapham position but did feature highly in their thought world.

Two in particular can be seen: the concepts of grace and God's love. In the case of the Wilberforce sons the idea of grace is paramount and it is prevenient grace. For the brothers it was God who took the initial and defining step. In this they resonated with the Calvinists in the Church. As we have seen in Chapter One, neither William Wilberforce nor Henry Thornton were keen on the 'Calvinist' emphasis current in their day, it seemed to them to blunt both evangelism, piety and education. The concept of prevenient grace shifts away from the idea of human initiative as we have seen in Robert Wilberforce's analysis of the effects of both the Evangelicals and the Tractarians. It answers strongly the issue of authority; in a world where there are both intellectual and political challenges to the English Church, divine priority and sacramental action provide a basis for ministerial authority. The Incarnation, seen by Robert Wilberforce as the *magnum opus* of grace, firmly grounds the 'Church

Catholic’<sup>61</sup> in the historical and social world. This emphasis is the grounding idea in Robert Isaac’s baptismal belief.<sup>62</sup>

In the case of Sir James Stephen it is not only the divine donation but the absolute commitment of God to self-revelation and overflowing love to be recognised and reflected by the Christian. Yet, for him, the individual seems paramount. It is not with the ‘church as society’ with which he is so concerned but with the individual’s response to divine love. This is seen, for him, most fully in the person of Jesus Christ.

The burning questions of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century were responded to by our second generation subjects from within their faith profile. Their responses were controlled by their integrity and their intellectual strength and reflected the core theological foci of their forebears. For the Wilberforces the chief question was raised by the changing relationship of the Church (for them the Church of England) and the Establishment. For Sir James Stephen, the lawyer and champion of colonial independence and diversity, it was the *real politic* necessitated by the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Empire from within a Christian faith which looked beyond Establishment. The world in which the second generation lived was not the world of their fathers. The answer, for them, was not “Biblical Enthusiasm” but a radical engagement with the spores of the Enlightenment growing rapidly in the English soil. Yet as their fathers appear to have been comfortable in reflecting the

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<sup>61</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *The doctrine of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ in its relation to mankind and to the church* (3rd edn.; London: John Murray, 1850b) p 10.

<sup>62</sup> Wilberforce, *The doctrine of Holy Baptism* .

individualism of the Enlightenment, so they were comfortable taking up the strong demand of the Enlightenment for rigorous intellectual justification.

## **Conclusion: Inheritance and Trajectories**

The broad-minded, genteel, conversionist temper of his [Daniel Wilson, Bishop of Calcutta] younger days was already on the wane. Wilberforce's death was certainly symbolic, but by the time of Wilson's departure [to India] in June 1832 – just as the cataclysm was concluding – it was already clear that the Evangelical 'age' was coming to an end.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Atkins ended his 2009 thesis on the 'Wilberforce' era.<sup>2</sup> Is this a fair assessment? Given the particular aspect of the Clapham Sect's public profile at least in this aspect one can agree. We have seen that for the Clapham fathers a commitment to the Establishment and Constitution was significant. They passed on at least to the Wilberforce and Stephen children a commitment to public life. (This can also be seen in the work of Lord Macaulay.) Yet, as we have seen in Chapter 6, the issues in this area, which the children faced, were significantly different to, or at least expanded from those of their parents. The form of the faith which was needed to answer these challenges and remain in the public arena would need to be different.

We asked, in the Introduction:

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<sup>1</sup> Gareth William Atkins, 'Wilberforce and his Millieux: The Worlds of Anglican Evangelicalism c1780 – 1830', (University of Cambridge, 2009) p 231.

<sup>2</sup> Atkins, *Wilberforce and his Millieux*,.

Did the fathers fail their sons by not managing to get them to believe in exactly the same way as they did? Did they, nevertheless, give them the tools to apply the gospel as effectively to the civic sphere in their world as the fathers did in theirs? And what of theology which apparently changes depending on the socio-cultural context?<sup>3</sup>

We indicated that although the children adopted a different faith profile from that of the parents, this fact did not indicate a failure on the parents' part. It may have been a disappointment for the parents, but significantly this does not appear in the manuscript evidence.

The second question we have shown also to be answered in the affirmative. They gave their children both formally and informally a confidence in God, an understanding of the link between faith and public service and a belief in the necessity of personal integrity. A strong belief in the Establishment and the Constitution was also imparted. Yet it was just this latter that necessitated a change in their theological profile, as we have seen in Chapter 6.

The third question requires, as we have said, a more nuanced answer. Many of the beliefs of the fathers were developed by the children as required by the issues that mattered to or were confronted by them. For Sir James Stephen it was the primacy of the Constitution as it was then understood which was significant. For Robert Isaac and Samuel

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<sup>3</sup> This thesis p 24.



Wilberforce it was the issue of the right of the Church to determine the 'Faith' of the Church. It was also, for the Wilberforce brothers, an unchanged conviction that there can only be one 'Faith'. Unlike the previous generation, the questions facing the children challenged the Establishment and Constitution.

#### THE ISSUE OF ESTABLISHMENT

The Establishment of the Church, stretching back as it does to Constantinian times, was a given in the English Reformation. In two of the three kingdoms which formed the United Kingdom, the vast majority of people identified with the respective 'Established' church. In Ireland this was complicated by the 'English hegemony' which, itself, would cause complications in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from the period of the Commonwealth, this position was not seriously challenged in England until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet from the Restoration there was a significant weakening of what Establishment meant. By 1830 'toleration' had become 'affirmation' in practice with the admission of all 'Christians' to the Parliament.

For people such as Robert Isaac Wilberforce this challenged the very concept of 'Establishment' and raised the spectre of Erastian control of the Church's primary obligation. For him this had begun, at the latest, with the *Act of Toleration* of William III and Mary II.<sup>4</sup> Since the Church was a transcendent, not fundamentally a mundane, institution, Establishment

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<sup>4</sup> The Toleration Act, 1689 (1 William & Mary c 18).

had 'failed' in England. As a 'Public Christian' he must oppose this trend and for him that meant rejecting the Henrician Settlement, seeing it as fundamentally flawed.

For Samuel Wilberforce, although he agreed with his brother's theology, he saw the suspended Convocations of Canterbury and York as the mode of maintaining a theologically-valid Establishment. After all it was they which had 'determined' the doctrine and discipline of the Church of England in the first instance.<sup>5</sup> Parliament's role, as he saw it, was to affirm the 'True Faith' as determined by the 'teachers of the Church'. Thus for him any Erastian tendency could be negated by the proper organs of the Church. One could maintain one's integrity as a 'Public Christian' by maintaining the integrity of the Church's institutions. For Samuel this also meant treating the Roman Catholic revival in England and Dissent as schism, the walking away from the 'true Catholic Church of England'.

The assessment of the validity of either position is a task for the theologian and the historian together. Yet even here we face the very issue on which the Wilberforce brothers diverged.

#### THE ISSUE OF THE CONSTITUTION

The cognate issue of the Constitution of the United Kingdom of Great Britain was the focus for Sir James Stephen. While the integrity of the

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<sup>5</sup> Although not without contention this principle is seen in the submission of the Clergy in the reign of Henry VIII, 1532, the establishment of the 39 Articles of Religion in 1562, the promulgation of the canons of the Church of England in 1603/4 by the Convocations of Canterbury and York. These post-reformation actions required Royal Assent.

Church and her priority were the core issues for the Wilberforce brothers, the integrity of the Constitution was Sir James' primary issue. Following the Evangelical model of an individualised and internalised mode of the Faith, Sir James was able to express the issue of 'Establishment and Constitution' very differently. We have seen that, for him, the 'expanded' nature of toleration in 19<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain was entirely appropriate. While his piety was 'Evangelical', his theology allowed for a change in the relationship between Church and State. He may be somewhat harsh on different expressions of Christian life,<sup>6</sup> but his 'light and love' theology allowed all to be part of the same family.

Since the Faith for him was fundamentally a 'personal' thing, as it effectively was for 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicals, the State's role was general rather than specific. There was for him, as seen in his arguments about the Abolition of Slavery, a deep sense of the oneness of humanity or equality which meant that the Sovereign should accord to all his subjects 'full equality'. The implications of this approach would be developed over the next 100 years as the British Constitution continued to change in a direction that the Wilberforce brothers would have found untenable.

It is probably true to say that the Clapham Sect would not have approved the Constitutional changes in their fullness, yet their *faith narrative* provided the theological basis for it. The right of individual interpretation of the Faith, of what is called 'Private Judgement', triumphed in the wider

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<sup>6</sup> see his treatment of St Francis, Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, pp 89 – 153.

society, and the Established Church position was rejected in most of the Empire necessitated by the political need to recognise Dissent.

For Sir James Stephen only this position could answer the questions of the 'pragmatic *réal politic*' of the United Kingdom and its 'second empire'. It seems that for Sir James only this approach could be managed if one was to be a 'Public Christian'. Constitution and Church are again thrown into conflict. Which should set the agenda? We are faced again with the question which the Clapham Sect did not have to ask, namely, 'Who sets the meaning or content of "The Faith"'? Here is a question on which the historian and the theologian may have difficulty in achieving a co-ordinated answer. It is, fundamentally, not an historical question but it is one which the historian must address if they wish to develop a 'Church' history. The theologian needs to examine what the historian can bring to the question to ensure that they have explored the origins of their own 'prejudice'. It, again raises for us the methodological issue of 'self-description' and 'community generated description'. Although the task may be difficult the historian and the theologian need to assist each other in their particular disciplines to try to ensure as objective a result as possible.

The chief purpose of this thesis has been to explore those factors and traits which the children of Clapham absorbed from their parents and which fitted them for their adult roles in the civic sphere. We have argued that the stress on the public, rather than the private, dimension of religious practice differentiates the treatment here from most of the

secondary literature on the legacy of the Clapham Sect. While the personal and private religious practice, inculcated by their parents, was not unrelated to public practice, and while that personal faith did foster evangelical Christianity's stereotypical individualism, these are well-canvassed matters, and so the stress of this thesis has been placed elsewhere. It is not for their personal piety and their individualism that the sons of Clapham are noteworthy, but rather for their profound grasp of the trajectories of eighteenth-century religion and the acute social and constitutional challenges of the succeeding age. This thesis, then, has sought to view the fathers and sons of Clapham in the light of their response to the Hanoverian Church and their contribution to, and reflection of, the Victorian Church. The treatment here, then, has been broader and more this-worldly than in most studies of the Clapham Sect. It has not sought to denigrate personal piety, but it has claimed for the principal actors in this drama that acute awareness of the mundane realities of their social context which enabled them to be so effective in their various civic spheres.

#### A QUESTION OF 'EXPERIENCE'

In looking at the question of *experience* we come to the heart of our analysis. Each of our subjects had a series of *experiences*. As we have shown in Chapter 2 the way such *experiences* are understood is strongly, if not definitively, controlled by the current *narrative* or *narratives* of the

faith position of the group or society in which the person moved.<sup>7</sup> In our cases the poles of interpretation are *individual/internal* and *institution/internal*; or to use Robert Isaac Wilberforce's terms – the 'evangelical' or 'church' system.

Choosing one or other of these *narratives* will determine how a particular set of *experiences* will be interpreted. For the Clapham Sect in the particular flux of the Hanoverian world the *evangelical narrative* seemed to answer the particular issues they faced. While not dislocated from the theological milieu, it represented a position of strong personal responsibility and hope. For their children, for whom the context of a strong personal, familial and institutional mode of faith was normal, the *narrative* would need to be different. As we have seen above, the accepted pairing of Establishment and Constitution was significantly challenged or altered when they moved into the 'Public Square'. One would follow a form of the *individual narrative* and move progressively away from the core of the Clapham *narrative* on which it was based. Two others would pursue a different *narrative* to their parent but stay close to the core theological issues of Clapham. In both cases the questions and circumstances in which they lived, helped form the Faith profile of our subjects. Strangely overarching all our subjects is a desire for a 'united

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<sup>7</sup> Noll, *The rise of evangelicalism* pp 55 – 57, As Noll points out this approach was not just found in the English speaking world. In Germany, Johann Arndt's *On True Christianity* provided 'pietists and evangelical with a template for analyzing the spiritual state of churches and nations'.

kingdom' one in which the Faith (as they viewed it) held the people together.

A particular area of the Clapham narrative is the doctrine of the 'oscillating Spirit' which we have identified in Introduction.<sup>8</sup> As we have suggested a number of times this seems to have arisen for experience rather than theological analysis. Even though it is attached to the Pauline text about 'grieving the Spirit' it may find its Biblical model in the Saul/David narratives of the 1<sup>st</sup> Book of Samuel and be reinforced by the last petition in the Lesser Litany in Morning and Evening Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.<sup>9</sup> This issue is one which would yield valuable information if pursued to see where else in the history of Christian *experience* it occurs and what the origin of its use, as an *evangelical narrative*, was. Both the theologian and the historian would find this valuable in the writing the history of Christian thought, experience and practice.

Again the resolution of these ideas of *experience* will be an area in which the historian and the theologian may find tension in coming to a common resolution. We are faced, as our subjects were, with the issue of the priority of *narratives*.

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<sup>8</sup> This thesis p 42ff and pp 50 & 118.

<sup>9</sup> '*Priest*: O God, make clean our hearts within us. Answer: And Take not thy Holy Spirit from us.' This is taken, as most of the petitions are, from the Psalms, in this case Psalm 51.

## A DEFINITION OF 'EVANGELICAL'

Bebbington's set of markers of 'evangelical', Conversionism, Biblicism, Cruicentrism and Activism, has become, as we said above, the normal way of identifying 'evangelical' positions and Faith profiles. The difficult issue with this is the meaning of 'conversionism'. For if our three Clapham subjects are assessed as we have done above, then 'conversion' becomes an almost portmanteau word. For, while William Wilberforce, by *his own* description, had a classic 'conversion experience', neither of our other subjects did. We have suggested in Chapter 2 that a better description would be 'an intensification or maturing rather than a radical realignment' of their Faith profile.<sup>10</sup> We have also indicated there, that even William Wilberforce's self-description has problems, given his earlier 'evangelical' phase. In his book on the expansion of evangelicalism, Wolffe indicates that as early 1846 there was a perception among some that "a truly Christian home provided an environment in which a child, rather than being perceived as a sinner who could only become a true Christian after a teenage conversion, would 'grow up Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise' ".<sup>11</sup> As we have seen this was not the position of William Wilberforce, but does reflect the position of his sons.

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<sup>10</sup> This thesis p 134.

<sup>11</sup> Wolffe, *The expansion of evangelicalism : the age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* p 150. In the footnote he wrote 'Such a perspective implied a relaxation of the traditional evangelical understanding of conversion.'



Mark Noll has suggested an alternative description, 'culturally adaptive biblical experientialism'.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as we have shown, our first generation subjects could not be described as 'enthusiasts', but rather 'convinced' and keen 'expressers' of the *narrative* they had chosen to explain their *experiences*. Do we need to modify Noll's definition by suggesting that we are looking at a particular *narrative* based upon a particular exegesis of certain Biblical material, especially those considered 'conversion' narratives in the *Acts of the Apostles* chapters 8 & 9? In much research into this material over the last 40 years, the idea that we have here *models of conversion* has been seriously challenged.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps we should describe Evangelicalism as 'experientially determined convinced Biblicism'? Yet this may prove to be too broad a definition. It would certainly include all those who are usually referred to as evangelical but might it not also include those who dispute some basic evangelical axioms?

Again we are faced with an historiographical question. Do we follow the 'self-description' of subjects or do we assess the theological interpretation of our subjects as well? We are here faced with a matter which the theologian and the historian will need to, at least, dialogue about. There is a fundamental issue for the writing of religious history in this question. As

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<sup>12</sup> This thesis p 15.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From darkness to light : aspects of conversion in the New Testament* (Overtures to biblical theology; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

a theologian and (tentatively) an historian, this will give the present writer future room for endeavour.

#### WHO WERE THE SUCCESSORS OF CLAPHAM?

One often assumes that the successors of the Clapham Sect were the next generation of Evangelicals. In some sense this may be true. Yet they don't seem to have the same breadth of engagement with the 'Public Square'. This may be because they were faced with theological issues, or rather pastoral issues, because of the rise of Tractarianism, its successor 'High Church' child, new Biblical scholarship, and the challenges of the emerging hard sciences.

Neither Sir James Stephen nor Robert Isaac Wilberforce truly could be called successors. They both involve themselves in the society as opportunity provided but, as we have seen, they diverge in their final position, from the interests and stance of the Clapham fathers. (Sir James, as we have noted was a strong anti-slavery advocate and wrote the *Bill for the Abolition of Slavery*<sup>14</sup> and so was a true son of both his father and the Sect in this aspect.) To be a true successor of the Sect one would have to follow not only their commitment to God, but also to the Establishment and the Constitution. It may seem strange to suggest it, but the candidate for recognition as the truest successor would be Samuel

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<sup>14</sup> See this thesis p 261.

Wilberforce.<sup>15</sup> The letter to Marianne Thornton, which we have quoted above, is worth repeating:

Really as the band who knew and loved our father grows smaller and as, year by year, it seems to become for the new generation and Recordites impossible to understand how anyone can be a good Churchman and yet an Evangelical, a believer in the Sacraments and yet abhorrer of the confessional and a scorner of the little apish Romanism of the Ritualists, I cling with an almost spasmodic tenacity to such as you.<sup>16</sup>

Here we have an amalgam of the orthodox streams of the 18th Century with the zeal and focus of Clapham, the more nuanced response to which we, earlier, alluded.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> David Newsome, 'The Churchmanship of Samuel Wilberforce', in G J Cuming (ed.), *Studies in Church History* (III; leiden: Brill, 1966), 23 - 47. In this chapter of Samuel Wilberforce's churchmanship Newsome explores the relationship of Samuel and his father. He sees Samuel as a holder of the core Evangelical doctrines and as a consistent Churchman. Much of what he wrote confirms our conclusion.

<sup>16</sup> Wilberforce, *Life of the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce, III*, p 404.

<sup>17</sup> In his book, *The desire of the nations*, Oliver O'Donovan has begun to explore the issues of public and political theology looking back both to the theological discourse over the ages and to Biblical studies to find a discourse which would neither force the Christian to dismiss nor subjugate to the 'present' political paradigm. An analysis of Samuel Wilberforce's approach, in the light of such work, might prove a fruitful area of study. Oliver O'Donovan, *The desire of the nations: rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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*the Old and New Testament; to which is annexed and improved edition of a translation of Claudes essay on the composition of a sermon. In Twent One Volumes by the Rev Charles Simeon, M.A. Senior Fellow of Kings College, Cambridge., Holdsworth and Ball 1833a,*  
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