# “What About Believers Who Stop Believing in Christ?”

**I saw your response to a question regarding Hebrews and the warning of falling away. The thing is, I’ve known people who stopped believing in Christ, and then were restored to faith. How does this go together with these verses? Even missionaries like Adoniram Judson, Isobel Kuhn and John Newton all had times of rebellion in their younger years. And so did I; even though I grew up in a Christian home, I denied my faith in Christ at age 17—I sort of lived as a “Secret Christian” because of my Muslim fiancée at the time. At that time I didn’t even know how bad it was. Because I wasn’t born again or knew of repentance I never felt convicted of sins before. It’s now been three years later, and I recently experienced a hatred for sin and a true faith in the sacrifice of Jesus (a faith beyond just mental acknowledgement). Does that mean I’m beyond hope?**

**I’m a little confused also because the verses you say refer to not true believers. My question also is, would a Jew really leave Judaism to become a nominal Christian at that time? I doubt one could say that they were nominal Christians who were in danger of falling away, when I know how much it means to leave one religion for Christianity in a country with mostly people who belong to false religion. To leave their faith to convert to Christ meant to sacrifice all—it would be like a Muslim converting and losing his family just by some superficial faith . . . that’s why I feel like it didn’t make sense to say the Jews who fell away were just superficial believers?**

These are some very important (but also difficult) questions. We must honestly admit the difficulty, I think, as we nonetheless strive to understand (and believe and obey) what the Bible teaches. My own view is basically this:

First you ask: “I’ve known people who stopped believing in Christ, and then were restored to faith. How does this go together with these verses?”

If these people were true believers, and have been restored to genuine faith in Christ, then they are saved. If “eternal security” of the believer is true (i.e. once saved, always saved), then they were always saved (since first trusting Christ for salvation). If this doctrine is false, then it appears that they have been graciously restored to faith (and salvation). Either way, if they are trusting Christ for salvation (and their faith is genuine), then they are saved.

Of course, it’s also possible that they weren’t initially true believers at all. Sometimes people think they are Christians because they go to church, or believe in God, or because they have been baptized, or something else. But they may never have truly trusted Christ for salvation. One cannot lose what one never had. In this case, such people are not really saved at all until they truly trust Christ for salvation. And this may not actually happen until after some period of rebellion.

Indeed, you say of yourself, “Because I wasn’t born again or knew of repentance I never felt convicted of sins before. It’s now been three years later, and I recently experienced a hatred for sin and a true faith in the sacrifice of Jesus (a faith beyond just mental acknowledgement). Does that mean I’m beyond hope?”

Of course you’re not beyond hope! You have trusted in Christ for salvation and you are saved! But it doesn’t sound like you were saved before this (even though you may have grown up in a Christian home). In other words, it doesn’t sound like you ever really left the faith, because it doesn’t sound to me like you were saved until recently. And the same would almost certainly be true of Adoniram Judson and John Newton. By the way, Christians continue to struggle with sin after salvation, but that is a different matter from completely abandoning the

faith.

Finally, no, I do not think that a Jew would abandon Judaism to become a nominal Christian (except possibly under extreme duress). But people may become lax in their faith over time. And such people could potentially abandon their faith to return to Judaism. Note: I'm not saying this actually happens. But it could. And if it were to happen, then such a person might indeed forfeit salvation (if "eternal security" is false, which is debatable).

This is how I see the matter. I tend to think that eternal security is true, and that a believer cannot lose salvation. But other disagree with this view and it is always possible that they are right and that I am wrong. Regardless, however, it is God's intention to save those who come to Him through His Son. And we are definitely secure in Christ. The only way a believer could lose salvation (if such a thing is even possible) is by committing apostasy and rejecting Christ, and then persisting in this rejection until overtaken by physical death.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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# Amazing Grace in John Newton – A Christian Witness Lived

# and Sung

## “How Sweet the Sound”

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don’t.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns. “Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound),” Newton wrote, “That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”{1} He played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton’s song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It’s loved the world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

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Jonathan Aitken has written a biography titled *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.{3} Aitken sees some parallels between his own life and his subject’s. Aitken was once a prominent British parliamentarian and Cabinet member, but

perjury landed him in prison where his life took a spiritual turn. He's now active in prison ministry and Christian outreach.

John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

## Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."{4} At times, "I pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness."{5} He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.{6}

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain.{7} Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, "I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion."{8}

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That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, “The Lord have mercy on us!” Spending long hours at the ship’s helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, “I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him.”{14}

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) particularly impressed him. He became convinced of the truth of Jesus’ message and his own need for it. “I was no longer an atheist,” he writes. “I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man.”{15}

Newton discovered that the “new man” would not become perfect. Maturation would be a process, as we’ll see.

## From Slave-Ship Captain to Pastor

After his dramatic experience at sea, Newton saw changes in his life. He attended church, read spiritual books, prayed, and spoke outwardly of his commitment. But his faith and behavior would take many twists on the road toward maturity.{16}

Newton set sail again on a slave ship, seeing no conflict between slaving and his new beliefs. Later he led three voyages as a slave-ship captain. Newton studied the Bible. He held Sunday worship services for his crew on board ship.{17}

Church services on a slave ship? This seems absolutely

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During my youth in the US south, I was appalled by racism I observed, more so when church members practiced it. I concluded that some merely masqueraded as followers of Jesus. Others had genuine faith but—by choice or confusion—did not faithfully follow God. It takes years for some to change. Others never do. Aitken observes that in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable."{18}

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Out of the slave trade, Newton became a prominent public official in Liverpool. He attended Christian meetings and grew in his faith. The prominent speaker George Whitfield encouraged him.{20} Life still brought temptations. Newton engaged in the common practice of accepting kickbacks until a business ethics pamphlet by Methodism founder John Wesley prompted him to stop, at significant loss of income.{21}

Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, but opposing church leaders prevented this for six years. Intervention by the Earl of Dartmouth—benefactor of Dartmouth College in the US—helped launch his formal ministry.{22} Newton was to significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a

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## Newton and Wilberforce: Faith in Action

William Wilberforce was a rising star in Parliament and seemed destined for political greatness. As a child he had often heard John Newton speak but later rejected the faith. As an adult, conversations with a Cambridge professor had helped lead him to God. He considered leaving Parliament and entering the ministry. In 1785, he sought the advice of his old pastor, Newton.

Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained.{23} His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and spending time with him privately. Newton became his mentor.{24}

Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.{25} During the arduous abolition campaign, Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, "trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him."{26}

Newton's biblical worldview had matured to the point that he became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me," he wrote, "that I was once an active

instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."{27} His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.{28} Jonathan Aitken says, "Newton's testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause."{29}

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

## Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace

John Newton encountered "many dangers, toils, and snares" on his life's voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a few.

*Moral maturation can take time.* Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable, but realize that blinders don't always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, "Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet."

*Humility became a hallmark of Newton's approach to life*. He learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: "What cause have I for humiliation!" he exclaimed. "Alas! . . . How defective [I am]

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*Newton related Jesus’ message to current events and everyday life.* For him, faith was not some dull, dusty, irrelevant relic but a living relationship with God, having immense personal and social relevance. He grew to see its import in fighting the slave trade. He used both the Bible and friendship to encourage Wilberforce. He tied his teaching to the news of the day, seeking to connect people’s thoughts with the beliefs that had changed his life.{32}

*Newton was grateful for what he saw as God’s providence.* Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he was nearly impaled in a riding accident.{33} Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.{34} A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.{35} He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here’s part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It’s inscribed on his tomb: “John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy.”{36}

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4. Newton, op. cit., 24.

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 34.

7. Ibid., 34-37; 40-41.

8. Ibid., 44-45.

9. Ibid., 57-64; Aitken, op. cit., 63-64.

10. Newton, op. cit., 60.

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12. Newton, op. cit., 69.

13. Ibid., 65, 68.

14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.

15. Newton, op. cit., 82-83.

16. Aitken, op. cit., 85 ff.

17. Ibid., 91, ff.; 106, 107.

18. Ibid., 112.

19. Ibid., 125-126.

20. Ibid., 127-137.

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# William Wilberforce and Abolishing the Slave Trade: How True Christian Values Ended Support of Slavery

*Rusty Wright provides an insightful summary of the journey which led William Wilberforce from unbelief to Christ and to leading the fight to abolish the slave trade in Britain. He clearly shows how true Christian values were key in inspiring Wilberforce's persistent effort to rid Britain of this shameful scourge, the slave trade.*

## Slavery's Scourge

What do you think of slavery? Are you for it or against it?

I suspect most readers would immediately denounce slavery as a scourge on humanity. But in the eighteenth century, much of western society accepted slavery and the slave trade. It took heroic efforts by dedicated leaders to turn the tide.

William Wilberforce, the famous British parliamentarian, helped lead a grueling but bipartisan twenty-year struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. His inspiring story has many lessons for today's leaders.

Abraham Lincoln acknowledged Wilberforce's significant role in abolition.{1} Nelson Mandela, addressing the British

Parliament in 1996 as South Africa's president, declared, "We have returned to the land of William Wilberforce who dared . . . to demand that the slaves in our country should be freed."{2}

The task was formidable. Eighteenth-century Britain led the world in slave trading. A pillar of colonial economy, the trade was legal, lucrative, and brutal. In one notorious episode, a ship's captain threw 132 slaves overboard, claiming illness and water shortage. British law protected the ship's owners, considering slaves property (like "horses," ruled one judge).{3}

African tribal chiefs, Arab slave dealers, and European traders rounded up Africans, stuffed them into ships' holds, and delivered them to colonial auctions for sale and forced servitude. The "Middle Passage" across the Atlantic was especially horrific. Slaves typically lay horizontal, shackled and chained to each other, packed like sardines. The air was stale and the sanitation putrid.

Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave, said the "stench of the hold," the heat, and the cramped quarters brought sickness and much death. The deceased, Equiano explained, fell "victims to the improvident avarice . . . of their purchasers." He wrote, "The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable." Some slaves, when taken up on deck, jumped overboard, preferring death to their misery.{4}

Enter William Wilberforce, young, silver-tongued, popular, ambitious, seemingly destined for political greatness. Then, a profound change led him on a path that some say cost him the prime ministership, but helped rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

## Wilberforce's "Great Change"

The transatlantic slave trade was filled with horror stories about human inhumanity. John Newton, a former slave trader, told of a shipmate "who threw a child overboard because it moaned at night in its mother's arms and kept him awake."{5}

William Wilberforce grew up among Britain's privileged, far from these horrors. Heir to a fortune, he was a slacker and socialite at Cambridge. Sporting an adept sense of humor, he loved partying and playing cards more than schoolwork. His superior intellect frequently covered for his lax academic habits. His keen mind, delightful wit, and charming personality kept many doors open.{6}

At Cambridge, he befriended William Pitt the Younger, who would become Britain's youngest Prime Minister. Both were elected to Parliament in their twenties. Wilberforce became Pitt's bulldog, using his oratorical and relational skills to advance Pitt's legislative agenda.

From 1784 to 1786, what he later called his "Great Change" would forever reshape his life's work. It began innocently enough when he invited his friend, Cambridge professor Isaac Milner, to accompany him on a journey to France. Milner was a brilliant scientist who eventually became vice chancellor of Cambridge. (That's similar to a university president in the U.S.) As they conversed during the trip, Wilberforce was surprised to hear Milner speak favorably of biblical faith. Wilberforce was a skeptic and wanted nothing to do with ardent believers to whom he had been exposed in his youth.

During their travels, Milner and Wilberforce spent long hours discussing faith and the Bible. His doubts receded as Milner answered his objections. Initial intellectual assent to Christian faith morphed into deeper conviction and a personal relationship with God.{7}

Back in England, he reluctantly consulted John Newton, slave trader turned pastor and writer of the well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace." Newton had been Wilberforce's minister for a time during his youth, before his spiritual interest waned. Wilberforce wrote that after his meeting with Newton, "My mind was in a calm, tranquil state, more humbled, looking more devoutly up to God."{8} Newton encouraged Wilberforce that God had raised him up "for the good of the nation."{9}

In time, Wilberforce grew to consider "the suppression of the slave trade" part of his God-given destiny.{10} At first he thought abolition would come quickly, but he guessed incorrectly, as we will see.

## The Battle in Parliament

When William Wilberforce first introduced anti-slave-trade legislation into Parliament, he had high hopes. He quickly learned that opposition would be fierce.

Financial stakeholders howled. Significant elements of British economy relied on slavery. Businesspersons didn't want to sacrifice profit. Their elected representatives didn't want to sacrifice votes. Some claimed slavery benefited slaves since it removed them from barbarous Africa. The Royal Family opposed abolition. Even Admiral Lord Nelson, Britain's great hero, denounced "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies."{11}

Wilberforce and the Abolitionists repeatedly introduced legislation. Apathy, hostility and parliamentary chicanery dragged out the battle. Once, his opponents distributed free opera tickets to some abolition supporters for the evening of a crucial vote, which the Abolitionists then lost. Enough supporting members of Parliament were at the opera to have reversed the outcome.{12} Twice West Indian sea captains threatened Wilberforce's life. His health faltered.{13}

Buoyed by friends and faith, Wilberforce persisted. He believed God viewed all humans as equal,{14}citing Acts 17:26, "[God] has made from one blood every nation of men." Methodism founder John Wesley encouraged perseverance, writing, "If God is with you, who can be against you? . . . Be not weary in well-doing. Go on . . . till even American slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away."{15} John Newton wrote and testified in Parliament about his experiences as a slave trader, "a business at which my heart now shudders," he explained.{16}

Finally, in 1807, twenty years after beginning, Wilberforce prevailed. Parliament erupted in cheering as the slave trade abolition bill passed.

Of course, outlawing the British transatlantic slave trade in 1807 did not immediately eradicate the trade. In fact, it continued, practiced illegally for a while by British subjects and for decades among other nations like France, Spain and Portugal. Alas, African tribal chiefs and Arab slave-dealers continued to supply captured Africans for the system.{17}

But outlawing the slave trade proved the impetus for a host of social improvements, including prison reforms, child labor laws, and abolition of slavery itself in 1833, of which Wilberforce learned only a few days before his death.

## Wilberforce's Methods: Lessons for Today

The esteemed historian W.E.H. Lecky ranked the British anti-slavery movement "among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages . . . in the history of nations."{18} While, of course, Wilberforce and his Abolitionist colleagues were not perfect, their historic effort left many lessons for today. Consider a few that could enhance your own interaction in the workplace, academia, politics, cross-cultural engagement, in your neighborhood or family.

*The value of friendships and teamwork.* Many of the Abolitionists lived for several years in the same community. They and their families enjoyed one another's friendship and moral support. This camaraderie provided invaluable encouragement, ideas, and correction.

*Bipartisan cooperation* was essential to Wilberforce's success. He set aside differences on certain issues to collaborate for the greater good. Both political liberals and conservatives joined the abolition cause. Quakers mobilized support. Wilberforce partnered with Jeremy Benthama founder of Utilitarianismon abolition and prison reform.{19} Utilitarianism, of course, favors the end justifying the means, hardly a biblical value.{20} Yet the two could work together.

*Wilberforce sought to make civil discourse civil.* Biographer Kevin Belmonte notes, "After his Great Change Wilberforce was nearly always able to dissent from the opinions of others with tact and kindness. This trait grew gradually within him; it was not instantaneous, nor did he always act as charitably as he might have wished on some occasions. But he kept trying."{21} He aimed to disagree without being disagreeable.

*Wilberforce attempted to establish common ground with his opponents.* In his opening speech on abolition before Parliament, he was especially gracious. "I mean not to accuse anyone," he explained, "but to take the shame upon myself, in common indeed with the whole Parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others."{22}

William Wilberforce was not perfect. He had fears, flaws and foibles like anyone. You likely would not agree with all his political views. But he did possess dedication to principle and to God, close friends of many stripes, a penchant for

bipartisan cooperation, and steadfast commitment to right terrible injustice. A fine example for life and work today.

## Wilberforce's Motivation: Lessons for Today

Have you ever been tempted by opposition to abandon a good cause? What motivated William Wilberforce to persevere in pursuing abolition for twenty agonizing years?

After discovering faith, Wilberforce viewed the world through different lenses-biblical lenses. He authored a popular book to explain faith's implications. Famous parliamentarian Edmund Burke, who found solace in it during his last two days of life, said, "If I live, I shall thank Wilberforce for having sent such a book into the world."{23}

Wilberforce's book, *Real Christianity*,{24} emphasized personal, life-changing faith, not mere nominal assent. He wrote, "God loved the world so much and felt such tender mercy for us that He gave His only Son Jesus Christ for our redemption."{25} He felt all humans have an innate flawself-centeredness or sin that inhibits true generosity, "clouds our moral vision and blunts our moral sensitivity."{26} He called selfishness "the mortal disease of all political communities"{27} and humbly admitted his own "need and imperfection."{28}

Wilberforce believed Jesus suffered "death on the cross . . . for our sake" so those accepting His pardon "should come to Him and . . . have life that lasts forever."{29} Don't get the cart before the horse, he warned. Good behavior doesn't earn God's acceptance; it should be a result of "our reconciliation with God."{30} Wilberforce encouraged his reader to "Throw yourself completely . . . on [God's] undeserved mercy. He is full of love, and He will never reject you."{31}

Wilberforce aspired to the Golden Rule: "doing to others as we would have them do to us."{32} He believed the faith was intellectually credible and advocated teaching its supporting evidences,{33} but cautioned that "a lack of faith is in general a disease of the heart more than of the mind."{34}

Wilberforce asked penetrating questions: "Do we love our enemies? Are we gentle even when we are provoked? Are we ready to forgive and apt to forget injuries? . . . Do we return evil with good . . . ? Can we rejoice in our enemy's good fortune, or sympathize with their distresses?"{35} Sound convicting? Join the club.

An inscribed tribute to Wilberforce at Westminster Abbey where he is buried commends his efforts, "Which, by the blessing of God, removed from England the guilt of the African slave trade, and prepared the way for the abolition of slavery in every colony of the Empire: . . . he relied, not in vain, on God."{36}

Wilberforce's legacy of faith and service persists. What will your legacy be?

*Parts of this essay are adapted from Rusty Wright, "'Amazing Grace' Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians," Copyright Rusty Wright 2007, and are used by permission.

**Notes**

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27. Ibid., 243 ff.; 246.
28. Ibid., 256-257.
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30. Ibid., 198-199.
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32. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 177; 90-91. Biblical references for the "Golden Rule" are Luke 6:31 and Matthew 7:12.
33. Wilberforce, op. cit., 18; 221-222; 285-293.
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35. Ibid., 193.
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