

# “TO BE A TRULY RELIGIOUS MAN”

## Piety & politics in the life and thought of William Wilberforce

“The best preparation for being a good politician...is to be a truly religious man.”—*William Wilberforce* <sup>1</sup>

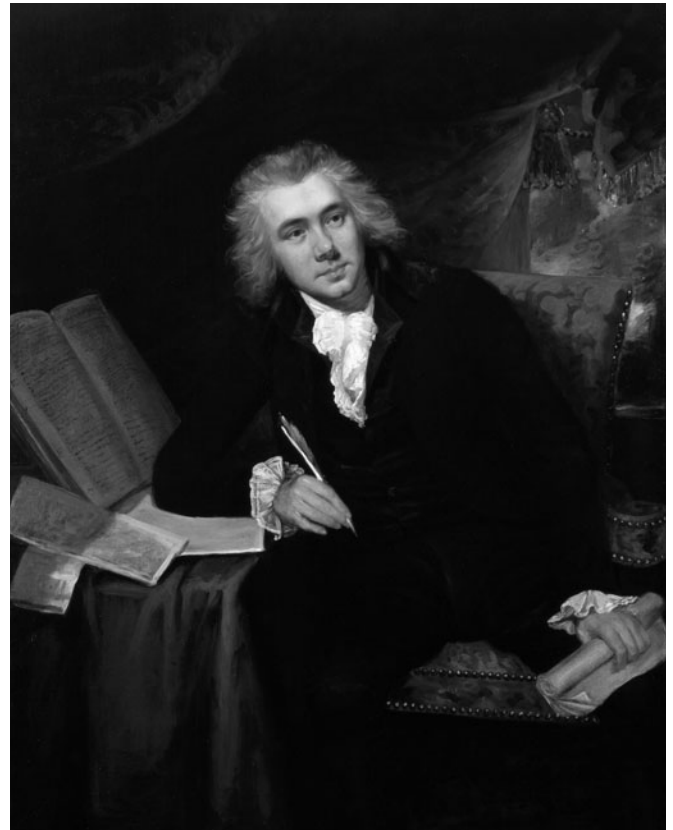
**O**ne of the great complaints among evangelical Christians is the way that the media frequently portrays Christianity and evangelicals. Far too frequently, for example, committed Christians are depicted in movies as ignorant fundamentalists out of touch with reality or deeply-disturbed fanatics whose thinking, when translated into action, poses a clear danger to society. In other words, contemporary film portrayals of Christians are simply another variant on the old adage of serious Christians being “too heavenly-minded to be any earthly good.” What a delight then it was to view Bristol Bay Productions’ film *Amazing Grace* (2007) in which the story of the Christian politician William Wilberforce (1759-1833) and his campaign to end the slave trade and slavery are treated with seriousness and respect. The movie depiction of Wilberforce well bears out some remarks once made about Wilberforce by the American painter Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872). He is “an excellent man,” Morse remarked after meeting Wilberforce, “his whole soul is bent on doing good to his fellow men....He is



BY MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN

always planning some benevolent scheme or other, and not only planning but executing... Oh, that such men as Mr. Wilberforce were more common in this world.”<sup>2</sup>

The movie depicted the way that Wilberforce’s genuine concern for the plight of the African slaves led to concrete political action that persevered over the course of twenty years and



eleven defeated bills in the House of Commons till it finally bore fruit in the abolition of the slave trade in early 1807, exactly two hundred years ago this year. Here then is a contemporary depiction of a genuine Christian whose holy life made a remarkable difference in the life of a nation, namely, England, and in the future of a continent, namely Africa. If I were to raise one criticism of the movie it would be this: not enough is made of Wilberforce’s walk with God as the taproot of his public achievements.<sup>3</sup> And it this subject that this article especially seeks to explore. Thus, after outlining Wilberforce’s life, his values and achievements, the way in which his walk with God lay at the foundation of all that he did is considered.

### EARLY YEARS AND CONVERSION

Born into a well-to-do mercantile family in the northern English seaport of Hull in 1759, Wilberforce was raised by an aunt and uncle who were friends of George Whitefield (1714-1770) and John Newton (1725-1807), two of the key leaders in the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century that led to a remarkable transformation of whole sectors of

British society during that era and the century that followed. Though Wilberforce probably never heard Whitefield preach, he used to listen with rapture to the preaching of Newton. This boyhood openness to evangelical Christianity was lost, though, by the time that he went up to Cambridge University. He was at Cambridge from the fall of 1776 to the summer of 1780, but made little constructive use of the academic opportunities afforded him there. He idled away the four years in self-indulgence and the pursuit of pleasure.

Before he left Cambridge University in the summer of 1780, though, Wilberforce had decided to enter politics. That September he was elected Member of Parliament for his home town of Hull. His first four years in the political realm saw one little change from the self-centred existence that he had led as a student. To the pursuit of pleasure he added as a goal in life the advancement of his career. As he remarked later of these years, “my own distinction was my darling object.”<sup>4</sup> But in 1785, during a tour of the European Continent, Wilberforce happened to read *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745) by the Congregationalist divine Philip Doddridge (1702-1751). According to William Hague, in “the whole course of Wilberforce’s life, no volume would be more influential in determining his conduct” than this book.<sup>5</sup>

The book provoked a prolonged spiritual crisis, from which Wilberforce emerged with a heart and a mind devoted to Christ. Later in life he would write of his conversion experience: “It was not so much the fear of punishment by which I was affected, as a sense of my great sinfulness in having so long neglected the unspeakable mercies of my God and Saviour; and such was the effect which this thought produced, that for months I was in a state of deepest depression, from strong convictions of my guilt.”<sup>6</sup> By the end of November of 1785, though, Wilberforce was seeing light at the end of the tunnel. As he wrote in his diary on November 28, 1785:

True, Lord, I am wretched, and miserable, and blind, and naked. What infinite love, that Christ should die to save such a sinner, and how necessary is it that he should save us altogether, that we may appear before God with nothing of our own.<sup>7</sup>

Here, Wilberforce expresses what was one of his foundational theological convictions. Salvation—being brought into a living relationship with God—is rooted in God’s grace and mercy, and is, in the final analysis, not at all based on human endeavours.<sup>8</sup> In the form that Wilberforce expressed it in this diary entry, it was a perspective that went back to the thinking of the sixteenth-century Reformers and their heirs in the following century, the English



Puritans. Moreover, although Wilberforce refused to consider good works as a cause of salvation, it will be quite evident that he was equally persuaded that salvation necessarily issues in good works.

## A DEFINING FRIENDSHIP: JOHN NEWTON AS A CHRISTIAN MENTOR

John Newton, his boyhood hero, played a vital role in his early Christian experience, but at first it took all the courage Wilberforce could muster to go and call on him. By this time Newton had become a well-known figure in the evangelical movement, largely through his hymns, which included the iconic “Amazing Grace” (1773). In the fashionable circles in which Wilberforce moved Newton and evangelicals like him were regarded with utter disdain and contempt. Writing to Newton on December 2, 1785, Wilberforce stressed that any visit to the well-known evangelical minister had to be kept secret.<sup>9</sup> In fact, when Wilberforce went to call on Newton, he walked around the block twice before knocking on Newton’s door.

The meeting between the two men would be a true turning point in the social and political history of Great Britain. Wilberforce was contemplating leaving the realm of politics. For a number of eighteenth-century evangelicals, particularly the Methodist followers of John Wesley (1703-1791) and those outside of the Anglican fold like the Baptists, politics was a “worldly” occupation from which the believer was best to separate himself or herself.<sup>10</sup> Anglican evangelicals like Newton, however, did not view their Christian discipleship in such a counter-cultural light and Newton wisely encouraged Wilberforce to stay in the world of politics. Some words that Newton wrote to him a couple of years later well capture the essence of his advice to the young convert: “It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation.”<sup>11</sup> Newton was well aware of the challenge of being a Christian and a politician. As he wrote



of Wilberforce to his good friend William Cowper (1731-1800) the year after Wilberforce came to see him: “I hope the Lord will make him a blessing both as a Christian and a statesman. How seldom do these characters coincide!! But they are not incompatible.”<sup>12</sup> It needs to be noted that Newton did not simply direct Wilberforce into the calling God had chosen for him, but over the next couple of decades the Anglican minister proved to be the ablest and most devoted of spiritual mentors.

Wilberforce’s conversion and John Newton’s mentoring gave the Christian politician the dynamism to lead the campaign against the slave trade. He now had a profound awareness of life as a preparation for eternity and the importance of using his time on earth for good. “A man who acts from the principles I profess,” he wrote in 1789, “reflects that he is to give an account of his political conduct at the Judgment seat of Christ.”<sup>13</sup> And as he wrote ten years later in his most well-known book, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1797): “It is the true duty of every man to promote the happiness of his fellow-creatures to the utmost of his power.”<sup>14</sup> So it was on Sunday, October 28, 1787, that Wilberforce wrote in his diary these words as he contemplated his future service for God: “God Almighty has placed before me two great objects, the Suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners.”<sup>15</sup> The first of these objects would occupy Wilberforce for the next twenty years.

## THE SLAVE TRADE

The central ethical dilemma for eighteenth-century, transatlantic British society was, without a doubt, the ethics of running the slave-trade and of owning slaves. When Wilberforce was born in 1759, England had been heavily involved in the slave trade for about a hundred and fifty years. By the final decades of the eighteenth century they were engaged in transporting around 45,000 slaves a year

from the West African coast to the Caribbean and the American South. Throughout their rapacious slave-trading history, the British were responsible for transporting some 3 million enslaved Africans to the New World.

British involvement in the slave trade was primarily linked to their desire to encourage the rapid economic development of their colonies in the New World. The key event that drew Britain into this pernicious trade was the introduction of sugar plantations to the West Indies. The British had tried to grow sugar without any real success in Bermuda and Virginia in the first few decades of the seventeenth century. The turning-point came on Barbados, which they settled in 1625. Within thirty years they had made sugar a thriving industry on the island and set the course of development for the rest of their island holdings in the Caribbean. Sugar soon became the main export of these islands. By 1730 the British were annually importing 100,000 hogshead of sugar to satisfy what would become known as their “sweet tooth.”

The growing and harvesting of sugar, though, required prodigious numbers of workers, and Britain soon followed the example of the Spanish and Portuguese in manning their sugar plantations with armies of black slaves. Take Jamaica for example. It was seized by the English from the Spanish in 1655. By the turn of the century the island had become home to 45,000 slaves and it was the world’s largest sugar producer. Seventy-five years later the island contained close to a quarter of a million slaves—the white population numbered but 18,000 or so—on more than 750 plantations and its sugar revenue was estimated at £1.6 million a year. Not surprisingly, by Wilberforce’s day, the slave trade had come to be regarded as absolutely vital to the prosperity of the British Empire and was frequently defended on political and economic grounds.

## “THE SUPPRESSION OF THE SLAVE TRADE”

Four years after Wilberforce launched his campaign against the slave trade, he brought the first bill to abolish the trade before Parliament. It met with a crushing defeat. It was rejected on April 20, 1791, 163 votes to 88.<sup>16</sup> Over the next sixteen years bill after bill was brought by Wilberforce before Parliament to secure abolition of the British slave trade, but all were to no avail.<sup>17</sup>

Given the length of this political and legal struggle it is vital to recognize that Wilberforce could not have waged this struggle alone. As Garth Lean has noted, a key “reason for Wilberforce’s astonishing persistence and steadiness in his campaigns” was the fact that “he never worked alone.”<sup>18</sup> The band of like-minded friends in concert with whom he laboured for the abolition of the slave trade became known

as the “Clapham sect”—so-called because a number of them lived in what was then the fashionable village of Clapham, three miles outside of the city of London. Among them was Henry Thornton, a wealthy banker and philanthropist on whose estate the friends met to pray and plan. Others included the clergymen John Venn and Charles Simeon, and the authoress Hannah More. Their opponents, who included members of the royal family and some of the most powerful individuals in Parliament, thwarted and sabotaged the bills proposed, and covered Wilberforce and his friends with savage ridicule and abuse. On a couple of occasions Wilberforce was actually physically assaulted.

Finally, after twenty years of tireless political struggle, the slave trade was formally abolished by Parliament on February 23, 1807. Wilberforce’s bill was carried by 283 votes to 16. When it was announced and the House of Commons erupted in cheering, Wilberforce sat with his head bowed and his face drenched in tears. Interestingly enough, when Wilberforce began the crusade against slavery twenty years before, he knew of only two other members of Parliament who were Evangelicals. By the time that he retired in 1825 more than a hundred of his colleagues in the House of Commons and a hundred members in the House of Lords shared his commitment to Christ.<sup>19</sup> His struggle for justice for the slaves had clearly borne another type of fruit.

Though the slave trade had been abolished in 1807, slavery continued to exist within the bounds of the British Empire. Wilberforce had hoped that once the slave trade was abolished, the plantation owners would free their slaves. But it was not to be. So he continued to labour for the full emancipation of the slaves for the rest of his political career. By the late 1820s, most of his closest friends had died and he was in constant ill-health, but he continued to fight. However, he had to wait till but three days before his death to hear the news that the slaves throughout the dominion of the British Empire had been freed. “Thank God,” he said when he heard the news on July 26, 1833, “that I have lived to witness a day in which England is willing to give twenty millions [pounds] sterling for the Abolition of Slavery.”<sup>20</sup> Three days later he fell into a coma, and at 3 a.m. on Monday morning, July 29, 1833, he went to be with the God he had so faithfully served.

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A circle of friends, we have seen, was critical to enabling him to persevere through this long political struggle. But there was also his walk with God, what today we would call his spirituality. He once stated: “The best preparation for being a good politician...is to be a truly religious man.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, despite the pressures and temptations of political and

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public life,<sup>22</sup> he sought to maintain a life of prayer and meditation. He was convinced that when prayer is neglected, the “life of God in the soul stagnates” and that there is “nothing which makes God more certainly withdraw his grace” than lack of prayer.<sup>23</sup>

What this entailed in terms of time is known since Wilberforce kept detailed schedules of how his time was organized from 1789 onwards. When Parliament was in session, he would normally spend three to eleven hours in the House. His time for Bible reading, meditation on what he read, and prayer during such periods of intense political activity was never less than thirty minutes a day and frequently ranged up to an hour a day.<sup>24</sup> On one occasion, for instance, in January 1789, he spent eleven hours in the House. But he had spent an hour before going to Parliament that day in spiritual exercises.<sup>25</sup> In the summer of 1812, to refer to but one more example, he made a resolution to “take an hour, or at least half an hour, for private devotions, including Scripture reading and meditation, immediately before family prayers.”<sup>26</sup>

He especially sought to spend Sundays as a time of spiritual refreshment as well as rest through the pleasures of family life. An heir of the Puritan commitment to the necessity of Sunday as a time of worship and rest, Wilberforce believed that keeping the Lord’s Day sacrosanct was vital to the health of Christianity.<sup>27</sup> Along with the Lord’s Day, Wilberforce also took days of solitude in the country away from the hurly-burly life he led in London. During such times of solitude in the countryside, Wilberforce once commented that he was enabled “through nature I look up to nature’s God.”<sup>28</sup> Again he could tell his son Samuel: “I think a solitary walk or ride now and then would afford an excellent opportunity for cultivating spirituality of mind, the grand characteristic of the thriving Christian.”<sup>29</sup>


## CONCLUSION

If one goes out to Clapham today, where Wilberforce and his friends laboured, there is not much that honours the

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memory of these men. Charles Colson, when he went in search of some tangible evidence of Wilberforce in the summer of 1978, recalls being taken to an “old soot-stained Anglican church” in Clapham, which has long been swallowed up in London’s urban sprawl. In the church there was an ornately carved pulpit from which it was said Wilberforce had once preached, a poor likeness of him in a stained glass window, a small brass plaque commemorating the Clapham “saints,” and a pile of booklets about Wilberforce and his friends under a sign “50p apiece.” Colson felt cheated. “After all those men accomplished,” Colson mumbled to himself, “surely more could have been done to honour their memory.”<sup>30</sup>

As Colson goes on to note, though, Wilberforce and those who laboured for the extinction of slavery in that generation do have a monument: the great spiritual tides that subsequently had such a cleansing influence on the life of Victorian England as well as the legacy of freedom enjoyed today by millions. For Evangelicals who are caught up in the illusion that politics is the main way to ethically renew a nation, Wilberforce has also left a vital spiritual legacy, one that points them to the supreme importance of prayer. In the words of Wilberforce:

My only solid hopes for the well-being of my country depend not so much on her fleets and armies, not so much on the wisdom of her rulers, or the spirit of her people, as on the persuasion that she still contains many, who, in a degenerate age, love and obey the Gospel of Christ, on the humble trust that the intercession of these may still be prevalent, that for the sake of these, Heaven may still look upon us with an eye of favour.<sup>31</sup> 

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1 Cited Kevin Belmonte, ed., *365 days with Wilberforce: A collection of daily readings from the writings of William Wilberforce—‘the friend of humanity’* (Leominster, England: Day One, 2006), 12 January [there is no pagination, only the dates of the calendar year].

2 Cited Kevin Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity. A Biography of William Wilberforce* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2002), 212.

3 For an excellent study in this regard, to which this article is indebted at various points, see John Piper, *Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2006). See also Murray A. Pura and Donald M. Lewis, “On Spiritual Symmetry: the Christian Devotion of William Wilberforce” in J.I. Packer and Loren Wilkinson, eds., *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality presented to James Houston* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 176-189; and Murray Andrew Pura, *Vital Christianity: The Life and Spirituality of William Wilberforce* (Fearn by Tain, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus/Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2003).

For two older studies of the life of Wilberforce, see especially Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974) and John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (1977 ed.; repr. Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2001).

For more recent biographies of his life, see Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*; Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); and William Hague, *William Wilberforce* (London: HarperCollins, 2007).

4 Cited Furneaux, *William Wilberforce*, 71.

5 *William Wilberforce*, 73. Murray A. Pura and Donald M. Lewis claim that probably “the greatest

single influence in Wilberforce’s spirituality and theology” was Doddridge (“Christian Devotion of William Wilberforce”, 179).

6 Cited Furneaux, *William Wilberforce*, 36.

7 Cited Furneaux, *William Wilberforce*, 36.

8 Pura, *Vital Christianity*, 88.

9 For the letter, see Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, 56-57.

10 See, for example, Pura, *Vital Christianity*, 37-38.

11 Cited Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 38.

12 Cited Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 88.

13 Cited David Bebbington, “Abolition: William Wilberforce and the Slave Trade” in John D. Woodbridge, ed., *More Than Conquerors: Portraits of Believers from All Walks of Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 242. For a synopsis of Wilberforce’s religious views, see Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 149-153; Pura, *Vital Christianity*, passim.

Pollock classifies him theologically as an Arminian (Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 152-153). However, he was most indebted to the seventeenth-century Puritans, especially John Owen, John Howe, John Flavel, and Richard Baxter, and to men influenced by them, such as Philip Doddridge and Jonathan Edwards. See Pura and Lewis, “Christian Devotion of William Wilberforce”, 177-181.

Wilberforce appears to have been a Calvinist, though not a thorough-going one. He rejected, for instance, the idea of particular redemption.

14 Cited Belmonte, ed., *365 days with Wilberforce*, 10 June.

15 Cited Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 69.

16 Hague, *William Wilberforce*, 196-198.

17 For a succinct account of Wilberforce’s campaign for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery,

see John Pollock, “A Man Who Changed His Times” in Os Guinness, ed., *Character Counts: Leadership Qualities in Washington, Wilberforce, Lincoln, and Solzbenitsyn* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 81-90.

18 *God’s Politician* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), 104.

19 Charles W. Colson, “William Wilberforce” in Charles Turner, ed., *Chosen Vessels: Portraits of Ten Outstanding Christian Men* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 1985), 66.

20 Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 308.

21 Cited Belmonte, ed., *365 days with Wilberforce*, 12 January.

22 As he said on one occasion: “How many and great corruptions does the House of Commons discover to me in myself! What love of worldly estimation, vanity, earthly-mindedness!” (cited Belmonte, ed., *365 days with Wilberforce*, 3 June).

23 Cited Belmonte, ed., *365 days with Wilberforce*, 1 June; and Pura and Lewis, “Christian Devotion of William Wilberforce”, 183.

24 Pura, *Vital Christianity*, 59.

25 Pura, *Vital Christianity*, 59.

26 Pura, *Vital Christianity*, 63.

27 Pura, *Vital Christianity*, 60.

28 Pura and Lewis, “Christian Devotion of William Wilberforce”, 183.

29 Cited Belmonte, ed., *365 days with Wilberforce*, 17 August.

30 “William Wilberforce”, 67-68.

31 *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity.*