

*“The unweary, unostentation, and inglorious crusade of England against slavery may probably be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations.”*

**W. E. Lecky<sup>1</sup>**

*“His standing in the country and in Parliament was unique. No man before, and no one since, has held quite his position. Unconnected to any great family, belonging to no party or faction, holding no office or official position, he was yet regarded by all as among the foremost men of his time, and by many in Parliament as the living embodiment of the national conscience.”*

**Sir Patrick Cormack, M. P.<sup>2</sup>**

A remarkable moment in a remarkable life occurred on Sunday, October 28, 1787 when William Wilberforce penned these words in his diary: “*God Almighty has set before me two great objects, **the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners***”. Indeed, the Lord had set before him two great goals and these goals were to provide the impetus for a life of almost frenetic activity – however it is vital to understand that the man who in these words articulates what would be his life’s work wrote as a man fully and fervently committed to Jesus Christ. If this was a defining moment in his life, his conversion to Christ was the great turning point! This man’s faith was a faith that worked (James 2:1-18). After his death the York Herald of August 3, 1833 said: “*His warfare is accomplished, his cause is finished, he kept the faith. Those who regarded him merely as a philanthropist, in the worldly sense of that abused term, know but little of his character.*”<sup>3</sup> He was, in a very real sense, *God’s Politician!*<sup>4</sup>

## **EARLY LIFE.**

William Wilberforce was born on August 24, 1759, the only son of Robert (a very successful businessman) and Elizabeth (who “enjoyed society”). Of William’s three sisters, only one, Sarah, would reach maturity. William’s father died when he was only nine years old and as a result of the inheritance he received (along with a bestowment from his uncle William) Wilberforce was independently wealthy throughout his life. However, despite being “rich in this present age” William was not “haughty”, nor did he trust in “uncertain riches”. In fact, he would epitomize the apostolic injunction to “do good...be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share” (**I Timothy 6:17-19**). He would, in later years, regularly give a quarter of his annual income to the poor.

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<sup>1</sup> *Christian History*, Issue 53, Vol. XVI, No.1, 1997, p. 2

<sup>2</sup> Tim Montgomerie, “William Wilberforce: Lessons for Today”, Website: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/CCFHUB/WILBERF.HTM>, p. 1

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Garth Lean, *God’s Politician* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, 1987).

The actions of his mother, at this point, bring to mind the words of Jesus: “*whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck... (Mark 9:42)!*” A year after the death of his father, William was sent to live with his uncle and aunt, William and Hannah Wilberforce. He was well treated and well taught but most importantly was thoroughly exposed to the gospel. His aunt was an admirer of George Whitefield and her half-brother John had been converted under Whitefield’s ministry. William was also privileged to sit under the preaching of John Newton, and was enthralled “*by his sermons and stories, even ‘reverencing him as a parent when I was a child’*.”<sup>5</sup> Years later Williams sons would comment on a “*rare and pleasing character of piety*” that marked him during this his twelfth year.<sup>6</sup> His mother was unimpressed and sped to London from Hull to rescue him from the “*enthusiasts*”! She spirited him away from the great city lest he should further imbibe “*what she considered was little less than poison, which indeed I at that time had done.*”<sup>7</sup> To further insulate him from the influence of the gospel she placed him in a new school since the master at his former school, Joseph Milner, had “*unexpectedly turned ‘Methodist’ too!*”<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, when Wilberforce was eventually converted to Christ his mother, “*though alarmed by reports of his return to ‘Methodism’, was pleasantly surprised by his cheerfulness and the disappearance of his quick temper. ‘If this is madness,’ said one of her friends, ‘I hope he will bite us all!’*”<sup>9</sup> In the meantime, however, Wilberforce grew into young manhood delighting in the “*theatre, balls, great suppers and card parties*” and all the fun and frivolity that Hull (“*as gay a place as could be found outside of London*”) could offer. Religious concerns dissipated thanks to his mother and “*my friends who spared no pains to stifle them*”.<sup>10</sup>

At age seventeen Wilberforce entered Cambridge University. His academic career was less than sterling. He was possessed of a prodigious intellect and memory, a quick wit and a nimble mind and so could have done very well. However, the Wilberforce of Cambridge and of his early political career was a feckless, frivolous, fun-loving young man. He was physically small (about five foot three inches tall), had a remarkably ugly nose, but had a wonderful smile, laughed a lot and possessed a beautiful singing voice that made him the life of the numerous parties he attended.<sup>11</sup> “*I used to play cards a great deal and nothing else!*”<sup>12</sup> He was naturally gregarious and “*by his talents, his wit, his kindness, his social powers, his universal acceptability, and his love of society, he speedily became the centre of attraction to all the clever and idle of his own college (St. John’s) and other colleges,*” observed a fellow student, “*He was so winning and amusing that I often sat up half the night with him, much to the detriment of my attendance at lectures the next day.*”<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, this winsome personality, in a saved and sanctified

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<sup>5</sup> John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London, England: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1977), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Oliver Warner, *William Wilberforce and his Times* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1962), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> Warner, *William Wilberforce and his Times*, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> John Pollock, “The Little Abolitionist, William Wilberforce”, *Christianity Today*, April 21, 1978.

<sup>12</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 12,13.

<sup>13</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 13.

Wilberforce, would, in years to come, be a mighty instrument in the hands of God!

At Cambridge Wilberforce met and became a lifelong friend of William Pitt, the future prime minister of England (in 1783 at the age of 23!). Pitt described Wilberforce as one who possessed the “*greatest natural eloquence of all the men I ever met*”.<sup>14</sup> This was no mean compliment from a man of Pitt’s extraordinary oratorical skills! Both men were amply endowed with the requisite talents for the parry and thrust of parliamentary debate and it seemed inevitable that they would enter politics. And so it was that Pitt was elected to represent the borough of Appleby and Wilberforce, at the tender age of 21, was elected to represent his hometown of Hull. Later William would become the representative for the powerful region of Yorkshire and would serve his nation in Parliament for the next 45 years. William’s early days of service were by no means exemplary. “*The first years I was in Parliament I did nothing – nothing that was to any purpose. My own distinction was my darling object!*”<sup>15</sup> John Newton would later say that there was nothing Christian left in Wilberforce at this point except for an unusually high moral tone.<sup>16</sup> His speeches in Parliament were pedestrian – though eloquent, they lacked focus and passion.<sup>17</sup> What he did attack with fervour was London society! He was a favourite at parties (the Prince of Wales loved to hear him sing!) and had a social calendar that would bring lesser men to their knees! Typical entries from his diary for 1874 read as follows:

- Feb. 21           Continued thaw – dined Lord Camden’s. Prince of Wales Levee – Opera – supped Goosetree’s (*a club at which he and Pitt regularly dined*) – took off (i.e. *mimicked*) people – Bed 3.
- Feb. 24           Very tired – walked (*he loved to walk and talk for hours*) – dined Mr. Smith’s – then Lady Howe’s ball, danced till ½ past 4.
- Aug. 5           Dined Pitt’s – jolly large party – at night returned to Wimbledon. Bed ½ past 4.

The change that God would bring about in him and the impact that God would have through him are particularly astounding in light of the fact that a significant portion of his time in these days was given over, among other similar things, to the practice of “*foining*” – a common 18<sup>th</sup> Century term for contesting (verbally in this case), jesting, the exchanging of witty repartee! He and his circle of friends were known as the “*foinsters*”. A note from Pitt concludes: “*Adieu, I must conclude, having no time for foining.*”<sup>18</sup> Of the abundant life he knew nothing!

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher D. Hancock, “The Shrimp who Stopped Slavery”, Christian History, Issue 53, Vol. XVI, No.1

<sup>15</sup> Hancock, “The Shrimp who stopped Slavery”, Christian History, p. 14

<sup>16</sup> Pollock, “The Little Abolitionist, William Wilberforce”, *Christianity Today*.

<sup>17</sup> Hancock, “The Shrimp who stopped Slavery”, *Christian History*.

<sup>18</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 21.

## CONVERSION

Wilberforce would, on occasion, vacation on the continent. In 1783 he and Pitt were in France and met Benjamin Franklin, Marie Antoinette (“bewitching”), and Louis XVI (“strange”). But his holidays in 1784-5 proved to be of the most significance for it was then that he met the Saviour. He was, at this point, “*at a pinnacle of achievement. At twenty-four, he had won an unassailable position both in politics and society. Office could not long be delayed and the future was bright with opportunities.*”<sup>19</sup> He was an intimate friend of the Prime Minister and deemed by many to be Pitt’s natural successor in the office. But then he went on holiday with *Isaac Milner*, the brother of the aforementioned Joseph. Had Wilberforce known that Milner was an evangelical Christian he would not have invited him along. Evangelical views were only held by “*vulgar or at least uninformed enthusiastic persons*”. Wilberforce’s favourite preacher was Theophilus Lindsey, the “father” of modern Unitarianism.<sup>20</sup> As they travelled across Europe in the little chaise, Wilberforce ridiculed the Methodists and the conversation that would change his life began. On the first of two trips they would make together they read and discussed together Philip Doddridge’s *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. At the end of the trip religious concerns were pushed aside and Wilberforce got back to his round of eloquent parliamentary speeches and dancing till five in the morning! On their next trip, in June of 1785, the ladies who accompanied them complained that they were too preoccupied with their study of the Greek New Testament, but by now these religious issues were becoming a matter of grave concern for Wilberforce. He began to realize that “*in the true sense of the word I am no Christian*”! A protracted struggle began as Wilberforce wrestled with God: “*I was filled with sorrow. I am sure no human creature could suffer more than I did for some months.*”<sup>21</sup> Evaluating the tenor of his life and the state of his heart in the light of gospel truth proved a torturous experience – so much so that for a time he feared for his reason. “*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.*”<sup>22</sup>

Excerpts from Wilberforce’s diary at this time give us glimpses into the heart of the man:

- “For months I was in the deepest depression from strong conviction of my guilt.”
- “All religious thoughts go off in London.”
- “I must awake to my dangerous state, and never be at rest till I have made my peace with God.”
- “My heart is so hard, my blindness so great, that I cannot get a due hatred of my sin.”
- “True, Lord, I am wretched, and miserable, and blind, and naked.”
- “I am intent on shining in company, and must curb myself here.”

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<sup>19</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Hancock, “The Shrimp who stopped Slavery”, *Christian History*.

<sup>22</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 35.

- “Sunday...felt sometimes moved in church, but am still callous.”<sup>23</sup>

Wilberforce’s “gloom finally lifted on Easter 1786 ‘amidst the general chorus with which all nature seems on such a morning to be swelling with the song of praise and thanksgiving!’”<sup>24</sup> The change is evident in his diary. Its pages had been strewn with words like “coldness”, “darkness”, “weakness”, “wretched”. But now he had found rest in Christ and we read of “peace” and “hope”. The feckless, frivolous Wilberforce was no more – he was a new creature in Christ and wrote to his sister that “if gravity should be the business of life, gaiety should be its relaxation...I will give it a more worthy epithet than gay. Let me call it serenity, tranquility, composure which is not to be destroyed.”<sup>25</sup> The absence of old prejudices indicate the radical nature of the change God had wrought: “Expect to hear myself now universally given out as a Methodist: may God grant it may be said with truth!”<sup>26</sup>

It was during the period of struggle that the erstwhile slave trader came to the rescue of the future abolitionist. The fashionable world, in which Wilberforce had been such a vibrant participant, looked upon evangelical Christians like John Newton with contempt and suspicion and consequently Wilberforce had “ten thousand doubts” about making contact with him. He debated with himself as to whether he should visit Newton and seek spiritual counsel. He writes in his diary: “Resolved again about Mr. Newton...It can do no harm for this is a scandalous objection which keeps occurring to me, that if ever my sentiments change, I shall be ashamed of having done it...Kept debating.”<sup>27</sup> He wrote Newton a letter to try and arrange a meeting but urged the latter to “let no man living know of it,” and even went so far as to tear his signature off the bottom of the page! When finally he did visit Newton at his home he circled the block twice before he had the nerve to enter! He was not disappointed. He describes the impact of the visit: “When I came away I found my mind in a calm and tranquil state;” he found in Newton “something very pleasing and unaffected”, still humorous and quaint yet with the marks of sainthood. The salient point in the guidance offered by Newton was in the area of Wilberforce’s involvement in politics. William had become increasingly convinced that if he were to serve God he would have to withdraw from the world! Newton disagreed. Words that he would write to Wilberforce two years later are actually a pithy summary of what was said on that first visit: “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>28</sup> Pitt would offer the same advice, and so the “old Africa blasphemer” and the future prime minister were instrumental in thrusting Wilberforce back into the arena where his life’s work would be performed.

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<sup>23</sup> Reginald Coupland, *Wilberforce*, (London: Collins, 1945), p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Hancock, “The Shrimp who stopped Slavery”, *Christian History*.

<sup>25</sup> Coupland, *Wilberforce*, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 38.

## CALLING

The man who had sought only his own distinction was now a new creation and his life had changed. He was serious about practical godliness, keeping a list of his “*chief besetting sins*” and “*the chief Christian virtues which I want to cultivate*”. He was attempting to get to bed by eleven and up by six. He was fighting valiantly to avoid the “*temptations of the table*” hitherto indulged with wild abandon but now seen as that which would “*disqualify me for every useful purpose...waste my time, impair my health, fill my mind with resistance before and self-condemnation afterwards*”!<sup>29</sup> It was also at this point that God directed him to the areas where his boundless energy and effervescent personality would bring good to church and nation.

There is an oak tree that still stands on the Holwood Estate (Pitt’s home) in Kent, which bears the plaque: *Wilberforce Oak*. It was there that William sat with Pitt (by then resident at 10 Downing Street) and a future prime minister, William Grenville, when those two gave Wilberforce a providential push in the direction of his great work. “*Wilberforce,*” said Pitt, “*why don’t you give notice of a motion on the subject of the Slave Trade.*”<sup>30</sup>

Sir Charles Middleton, one of only two publicly known evangelicals in the House of Commons at the time of Wilberforce’s conversion (there would be about 100 when Wilberforce died!), and his wife were ardent opponents of the slave trade. Lady Middleton practically forced her husband, over breakfast one morning, to go through a list of possible parliamentary sponsors for an anti-slavery bill. Their eyes fell upon the name of Wilberforce, a friend of their son-in-law. They immediately sought to bring pressure upon Wilberforce to take up the cause!

The book written by Thomas Clarkson entitled Slavery and Commerce in the Human Species<sup>31</sup> and frequent visits paid to Wilberforce by the author; the example of and the books written by a surgeon who became a pastor and who had seen first hand the evils of the slave trade; the continued influence, friendship and advice of John Newton – this is the way God “*set before*” Wilberforce the two great goals of his life. God used His people to set aflame the conscience and set in motion the Herculean efforts of William Wilberforce and bring him to the point where he would write: “*God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners*”. He would later reflect: “*So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the trade’s wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would; I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition.*”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> Clarkson would eventually be part of the “Clapham Sect” and become renowned for his copious research on the subject, which was invaluable in the fight against the slave trade.

<sup>32</sup> Hancock, “The Shrimp who stopped Slavery”, *Christian History*.

## CAREER

### *Reformation of Manners*

As is clear from Wilberforce's "mission statement" the cause of the slaves was not his only concern. He is known for the former but the latter is also profoundly significant. By the "reformation of manners" Wilberforce meant "morals". He would seek to change the face of the nation and address the profligacy of the upper classes and the suffering of the lower classes. Wilberforce's gospel was not a social one – he understood clearly the need for a saving relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ as the root of true reformation of life – yet nonetheless he and his associates exerted "an increasingly strong moral pressure on the political arena of the day" in an effort to "clean up society's blights".<sup>33</sup> Though England was flourishing in many ways<sup>34</sup>, and though "the 18<sup>th</sup> Century may have been no more vice-ridden than many others", it was nonetheless true that "no other age has ever paraded its weaknesses quite so openly or excessively."<sup>35</sup> John Stott quotes J. Wesley Bready's scathing indictment of 18<sup>th</sup> Century England – Bready describes the

*"deep savagery of much of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, which was characterized by the wanton torture of animals for sport, the bestial drunkenness of the populace (even Pitt did not hesitate to show up drunk in the House of Commons!), the inhuman traffic in African Negroes, the kidnapping of fellow-countrymen for exportation and sale as slaves, the mortality of parish children, the universal gambling obsession, the savagery of the prison system and the penal code (it was said that there was no country in the world that had so many actions which were punishable by death!), the welter of immorality, the prostitution of the theatre...political bribery and corruption...such manifestations suggest that the British people were then perhaps as deeply degraded and debauched as any people in Christendom."*<sup>36</sup>

Bready goes on to argue that "then things began to change. And in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century slavery and the slave trade were abolished, the prison system was humanized, conditions in factory and mine were improved, education became available to the poor, etc. etc."

*"Whence, then, this pronounced humanity? – this passion for social justice, and sensitivity to human wrongs? There is but one answer commensurate with the stubborn historical truth. It derived from a new social conscience. And if that conscience, admittedly, was the offspring of more than one progenitor, it nonetheless was mothered and nurtured by the Evangelical Revival of vital,*

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (US: Zondervan/Morrow, 1987), p. 106.

<sup>34</sup> This was, after all, the age of Pitt, Burke, Fox (politics), Bentham (philosophy), Gibbon (historian), Gainsborough (art), Johnson, Boswell, Scott (literature), Garrick (theatre), Malthus (economics), Wesley, Wordsworth and Cowper!

<sup>35</sup> Lean, *God's Politician*, p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Basingstoke, UK: Marshalls Paperbacks, 1984), p. 3.

*practical Christianity... The Evangelical Revival did more to transfigure the moral character of the general populace than any other movement British history can record*".<sup>37</sup>

In that movement, William Wilberforce played no small part! While he recognized that "regulating the outward conduct did not change the hearts of men"<sup>38</sup> he enthusiastically used the political means that were at his disposal to regulate that conduct and "make goodness fashionable again".<sup>39</sup> Ever the evangelist<sup>40</sup> Wilberforce was nonetheless a politician whose passion it was to alleviate suffering and expunge immorality wherever he found it.

To that end the first thing he did was to encourage the king, George III, to reissue the "Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue and for the Preventing of Vice, Profaneness and Immorality." Every British king issued this proclamation on his accession, but it was merely a formality. The proclamation addressed a massive range of issues: the Lord's Day, the justice system, drunkenness, cursing, lewdness, literature, and encouraged virtue as regarded all of them. Once having had the proclamation reissued, Wilberforce encouraged the setting up of "societies" for the promotion of these virtues at a local level. Wilberforce enlisted the aid of the "movers and shakers" of his day, not all of which were overtly religious (though evangelical Christians were the "guts of the movement"<sup>41</sup>), in order to promote the movement! "Thus he began to give the trendsetters of society a strong social conscience and eagerness to help the poor. The movement caught on."<sup>42</sup> The time was ripe for reformation at every level of society. "Many thousands whose lives had been transformed by the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley got involved in the campaign to clean up and reshape the nation. Magistrates throughout the nation eagerly responded...the seriousness of the crime wave provoked a groundswell of support for Wilberforce's campaign."<sup>43</sup>

It needs to be noted that Wilberforce led by example. His involvement in philanthropic endeavours was monumental and he was dubbed "**the prime minister of a cabinet of philanthropists**" (in reference to the "Clapham Sect"). It was said that "factories did not spring up more rapidly in Leeds and Manchester than schemes of benevolence beneath his roof."<sup>44</sup> John Pollock's chapter entitled "Prisoners and the Poor" provides a dizzying survey of Wilberforce's multitudinous activities!<sup>45</sup> He was:

- involved in prison reform along with Jeremy Bentham and Elizabeth Fry;
- governor of St. Bartholomew's Hospital;

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<sup>37</sup> Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Lean, *God's Politician*, p. 81.

<sup>39</sup> Os Guinness, Editor, *Character Counts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1999), p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, it was Wilberforce's conviction that the **conversion**, not the **manipulation**, of Pitt would be of "incalculable benefit to Britain". See Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> Lean, *God's Politician*, p. 86.

<sup>42</sup> Guinness, *Character Counts*, p. 86.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Hammond, "Setting the Captives Free", p. 4. Frontline Ministries. Website: [www.frontline.org.za/articles/articles/set\\_cap.htm](http://www.frontline.org.za/articles/articles/set_cap.htm)

<sup>44</sup> Hammond, *Setting the Captives Free*, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, pp. 137-144.

- involved in the training of men for the ministry (in the Church of England);
- involved in the education of the poor and the Sunday school movement;
- involved in the education of the deaf;
- was generous to a fault and before his marriage regularly gave away ¼ of his annual income (he also gave an annuity to Charles Wesley's widow from 1792 until her death in 1822);<sup>46</sup>
- was a founder of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals;
- fought the cause of "*chimney sweeps* (boys sent naked up chimneys to clean them) and *single mothers*. He sought the welfare of soldiers and sailors...established orphanages for 'criminal poor children';<sup>47</sup>
- helped form the **British and Foreign Bible Society** (1803), helped launch the **Church Missionary Society** (1798), helped send missionaries to Tahiti and regularly supported William Carey's Baptist Mission in India;
- involved in the founding of the **Society for the Education of Africans**;
- involved in the founding of the **Society for the Relief of Debtors** (which over a five year period obtained the release of 14 000 people from debtor's prisons);
- was president, vice-president or committee man of no less than sixty-nine societies!

The man who in his early political career "*did nothing*" was no more. In his place was one who was "*zealous for good works*" (Titus 2:14).

The impact of the movement, which he inspired and in which he participated so wholeheartedly, was phenomenal. "*Between 1780 and 1850 the English ceased to be one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, outspoken, riotous, cruel and bloodthirsty nations in the world and became one of the most inhibited, polite, orderly, tender-minded, prudish and hypocritical* (no movement is perfect!)." Evangelicalism was "*perhaps the most formative power behind the eminence of the eminent Victorians*" and one writer described it as "*the rock upon which the character of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Englishman was founded.*"<sup>48</sup>

### ***The Abolition of the Slave Trade***

"*The grand object of my Parliamentary existence,*" however, remained the abolition of the slave trade! "*Before this great cause all other causes dwindle in my eyes.*"<sup>49</sup> Understandably, for the slave trade was an "*execrable villainy*"!

### **The Villainy**

The slave trade was a "*profitable little business*",<sup>50</sup> but an inhuman one. Two hundred years ago Britain was the world's largest slave trading nation. The trade involved a triangular voyage.<sup>51</sup> Slave ships sailed from Bristol or Liverpool loaded with cloths, beads, musket, iron bars and brandy. This merchandise was traded in West Africa

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<sup>46</sup> Hancock, "The Shrimp who Stopped Slavery", *Christian History*.

<sup>47</sup> Hancock, "The Shrimp who Stopped Slavery", *Christian History*.

<sup>48</sup> Lean, *God's Politician*, p. 91.

<sup>49</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 143.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Galli, "A Profitable Little Business", *Christian History*, Issue 53, Vol. XVI, No. 1.

<sup>51</sup> The following description is Peter Hammond's, "Setting the Captives Free".

for slaves. Some African chiefs captured and sold their own people, while others engaged in wars and slave raids against neighbouring tribes to capture victims for the trade. The *middle passage*, so called, transported the slaves to the West Indies and America. Here the slaves were sold and the ships loaded with spices, rum, molasses and sugar. The third leg of the journey was the return to England.<sup>52</sup> The middle passage was a brutal experience.<sup>53</sup> Ships would carry around 500 slaves. Slaves were flogged if they resisted, branded with hot irons if they were fit, killed if they were not, and “*chained in pairs between decks on shelves with only two and a half feet head-room...the crew generally took their pick of the women.*” The food was coarse, dysentery was rife, and the suffering unspeakable. A description was given to Parliament by a certain Mr. Norris of Liverpool and includes the following excerpt: slaves were stowed so close together “*that there is no room to tread among them...the stench is intolerable (they slept at times in their own excrement); they are fed, forcibly if necessary, on horse beans; for exercise, forced to dance and sing in their chains, if necessary under the lash; chained together so that they are unable to end their misery by throwing themselves into the sea.*”<sup>54</sup> John Newton told of a sailor who “*threw a child overboard because it moaned at night in its mother’s arms and kept him awake!*”<sup>55</sup> Thomas Clarkson’s book, Slavery and Commerce in the Human Species, estimated that approximately ten per cent of the slaves perished during the middle passage.<sup>56</sup> Those who survived were sold in the new world – strong men for forty pounds each, while the sick and injured were lumped with women and children in a batch and sold off at a discount. “*Then began the next chapter in a life of servitude.*”<sup>57</sup>

### The Opposition

Opposition to the abolitionist movement was considerable.<sup>58</sup> This was so for at least two reasons. First, the trade was profitable. Between 1783 and 1793 “*Liverpool slavers alone transported 303 737 (slaves) to the West Indies, selling them for 15 186 850 pounds (roughly 250 million pounds at today’s values). The profit on the triangular voyage...was often over 100% of the original outlay.*”<sup>59</sup> It was argued that the abolition of the trade would devastate the economy of the West Indies. Furthermore, 18 000 people in England were involved in making goods to trade for slaves. The trade employed upwards of 5 500 sailors and 160 ships. The trade constituted 4.4% of British exports.<sup>60</sup> A second argument was the matter of national security. The trade provided “*admirable training*” for British seamen and an “*essential recruiting ground*” for the

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<sup>52</sup> The numbers of slaves “transported” is hard to estimate. In 1770 British ships carried more than 50 000 slaves across the Atlantic. One authority suggests that Britain supplied French, Spanish and British colonies with 3 million slaves by 1776! See Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> See Lean, *God’s Politician*, pp. 1,2.

<sup>54</sup> Warner, *William Wilberforce*, p. 57.

<sup>55</sup> Galli, “A Profitable Little Business”, *Christian History*.

<sup>56</sup> Other estimates are as high as 25%.

<sup>57</sup> Galli, “A Profitable Little Business”, *Christian History*.

<sup>58</sup> For instance, Lord Nelson railed against “the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies.”

<sup>59</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Hammond, “Setting the Captives Free”, and Galli, “A Profitable Little Business”.

British navy. Furthermore, were the British to “*cease to carry slaves, her continental rivals would merely wax rich on her restraint.*”<sup>61</sup>

### **The Approach**

Many had already raised their voice against the evils of slavery. The Quakers had spoken against it as early as 1724 and John Wesley had written a pamphlet in which he called slavery “*the execrable sum of all villainy*”! Efforts at abolition would, however, be galvanized under the leadership of William Wilberforce.

The battleground was the British Parliament. The movement had found its champion in Wilberforce and he would lead the charge by doggedly introducing bills for abolition into parliament year after year - the first coming in May of 1789. When he introduced the bill, he prefaced it with an extemporaneous speech which (though he was unwell) lasted for three and one half hours. (Edmund Burke said that it was “*the equal of anything he had heard in modern oratory and perhaps not excelled by anything to be met with in Demosthenes.*”<sup>62</sup>) Yet year after year these motions were defeated, “*thwarted and sabotaged by political pressures, compromise, personal illness, and continuing war with France.*”<sup>63</sup> Occasional slave uprisings hindered the cause as well.

Though Wilberforce and his companions were on the front lines, they knew that they needed the good will of the English people to give teeth to their efforts. “*It is on the general impression and feeling of the nation we must rely...so let the flame be fanned.*”<sup>64</sup> This they did in a variety of ways. The print of Clarke’s model of a slave ship and its tragic cargo was widely circulated; a cameo was produced by Josiah Wedgwood which put this plaintive question into the mouth of a slave, “*Am I not a Man and a Brother?*”<sup>65</sup>; a boycott was organized against slave-grown sugar; a total of 519 petitions, signed by thousands of British subjects, was presented in the House of Commons; thousands of pamphlets were produced and distributed.

This multifaceted campaign offers proof of the diverse talents available in the “Clapham” community.<sup>66</sup> “(Wilberforce) was a proof that a man may change his times, though he cannot do it alone.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed he did not! There was **Henry Thornton**, a highly successful merchant banker who gave practical advice and financial support as well as direction to the efforts to establish a colony for freed slaves in Sierra Leone; there was **Granville Sharp**, who was instrumental in winning a famous 1772 legal ruling which declared that any slave who set foot in English territory had become free; there was **John Venn**, rector of the parish church in Clapham, who was a spiritual guide to the group;

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<sup>61</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 53.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Colson, “Standing Tough Against All Odds,” *Christianity Today*, September 6, 1985. On one occasion, when it seemed as if victory in the House of Commons was certain, the abolitionists lost the vote 70 to 74 because six of their number had opted to attend an opera rather than fill their seats in the Chamber!

<sup>64</sup> Colson, “Standing Tough Against All Odds,” *Christianity Today*.

<sup>65</sup> A Member of Parliament, arguing for the slave trade, suggested that while the trade was not an amiable thing, “neither was the trade of a butcher...and yet a mutton chop was, nevertheless, a very good thing”!

<sup>66</sup> Clapham was a little village about four miles south of Westminster and became the centre of activities for the group of politicians and philanthropists who became known as the “Clapham Sect” (though the name was not used till twelve years after the death of Wilberforce.

<sup>67</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 307.

there was **Hannah More**, a poet, playwright, and witness to the upper classes and an angel of mercy to the lower classes; there was **James Stephen**, a fiery legal mind gripped with a passionate hatred for slavery; there was the aforementioned **Thomas Clarkson** as well as **Zachary Macaulay**, who were the principal researchers in the group – the latter’s encyclopaedic knowledge was legendary and if any member of the Clapham Sect was unsure about a fact or figure, he was told to “*Look it up in Macaulay!*”<sup>68</sup> “*No prime minister had such a cabinet as Wilberforce could summon to his assistance,*” writes one historian.<sup>69</sup> “*It was indeed a unique phenomenon – this brotherhood of Christian politicians,*” writes another, “*There has never been anything like it since in British public life!*”<sup>70</sup> When Wilberforce died in 1833 this remarkable group “*lost its animating centre*”,<sup>71</sup> and the “Clapham Sect” was no more. Under the gracious, diplomatic and deeply spiritual leadership of this one man these varied personalities and talents had been blended to form a formidable force for good to their generation.

It should be noted that not only was the Clapham group concerned to abolish the trade and free the slaves, but they sought valiantly to make reparations to Africa for wrongs done, going to far as to seek to establish a colony for freed slaves in Sierra Leone. Under the leadership of Granville Sharpe and then Zachary Macaulay the colony progressed until in 1799 when Macaulay returned to England the capital of Freetown was a thriving community of 1 200. The day that legal slave trading ended in 1807 the Sierra Leone Company, organized by the group, handed the colony over to the British Crown.

### **The Triumph**

The final push in this “*unweary, unostentatious, and inglorious crusade...against slavery*” was administered on January 2, 1807 when a bill was read in the House of Commons which provided that, after May 1, the African slave trade “*and all manner of dealing and trading in the purchase of slaves or their transport from Africa to the West Indies or any other territory is utterly abolished, prohibited and declared to be unlawful.*” Ships continuing to trade, if caught, would be forfeit to the Crown.<sup>72</sup> The bill passed with a tremendous majority – 283-16. Wilberforce was lauded for his “*humane and unceasing labours*” and the Attorney-General Sir Samuel Romilly said that innumerable voices “*will be raised in every quarter of the world to bless him!*” While applause rained down upon him Wilberforce sat, head in hands, tears streaming down his face. Later that day Wilberforce reportedly said to Thornton: ***Well, Henry, what shall we abolish next?*** Thornton, somewhat challenged in the area of humour, replied gravely: *The lottery, I think!*

The last eighteen years of Wilberforce’s life would be a sustained effort to bring about total emancipation of existing slaves. Tracts continued to be produced, Wilberforce himself penning a fifty-six page one entitled *Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire on behalf of Negro Slaves in the*

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<sup>68</sup> Bruce Hindmarsh, “Aristocratic Activists”, *Christian History*, Issue 53, Vol. XVI, No. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 104.

<sup>70</sup> Coupland, *Wilberforce*, p. 204-205.

<sup>71</sup> Hindmarsh, “Aristocratic Activists”, *Christian History*.

<sup>72</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 67.

*West Indies!* By 1821 he felt that he was too old and infirm to spearhead the movement any longer and brought in a younger man to replace him, Thomas Foxwell Buxton. An ailing Wilberforce was persuaded, just three months before his death, to present a last petition for abolition before the House of Commons. *“I had never thought to appear in public again, but it shall never be said that William Wilberforce is silent while the slaves require his help.”*<sup>73</sup> On July 29, 1833, just three days after the bill for the total abolition of slavery was passed, William Wilberforce, the *“Washington of Humanity”*<sup>74</sup>, died.

## CHARACTER

### *A Christian Man*

Wilberforce was, above all, a man of Christ-like character. The fruit of the Spirit of Christ was abundantly evident in his life.

He was a ***humble man*** who could take criticism. James Stephen, one of the group, wrote to him: *“Your great defect has always been want of preparation....you could stand much higher...if you could and would take time to analyze your material.”* Stephen *“frankly and kindly reproved me,”* says Wilberforce. Repeatedly he is found thanking those who rebuked him considering their efforts proof of true friendship. *“I thank you for your truly friendly conduct and beg you to join my dear and excellent brother-in-law in helping me correct my infirmities,”* he writes to another who took him to task.<sup>75</sup> While able to take criticism, he avoided taking the credit. He considered himself unworthy of a title, and rejoiced when he felt his presence in parliament no longer necessary given the powerful representation by like-minded men. Throughout his life he saw the need of cooperation with other men, realizing that he could not do it alone!<sup>76</sup> How often zealous pastors fail here!

He was a ***prayerful man***. *“I have always found that I have the most time for business, and it is best done, when I have most properly observed my private devotions.”*<sup>77</sup> The morning hours were particularly precious to him as he considered them seasons of *“unusual importance for communing with God and with yourself.”* He is often found seeking the prayers of others, reminding them that success in their efforts at reform and philanthropy will come to naught if not blessed by God. With regard to the neglect of prayer, he said: *“There is nothing which makes God more certain to withdraw his grace.”*<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Guinness, *Character Counts*, p. 89.

<sup>74</sup> The words of an Italian diplomat. Guinness, *Character Counts*, p. 90.

<sup>75</sup> Lean, *God's Politician*, p. 105-106.

<sup>76</sup> *“In contemporary parlance Wilberforce would be called a ‘networker’; he had the attribute of great men that he labelled ‘the power of gravitation’. He naturally drew people to himself and when he needed assistance, talent and fortune were at his command.”* Donald M. Lewis, “The Moses of These Israelites...Courtier of Pharaoh – Wilberforce and Shaftesbury as Evangelical Lay Leaders”, *Crux*, Sept. 2000, Vol. XXXVI, No. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Lean, *God's Politician*, p. 98.

<sup>78</sup> Murray A. Pura and Donald M. Lewis, “On Spiritual Symmetry: The Christian Devotion of William Wilberforce”, p. 183. In *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality*, Edited by J. I. Packer and Loren Wilkinson.

He was a *joyful man*. People enjoyed being around Wilberforce. A Madame De Stael, just over from the continent, remarked after meeting him: “*I have always heard that he is the most religious, but now I know that he is the wittiest man in England.*”<sup>79</sup> Wilberforce had a bright and pleasing personality, but beyond natural temperament was Christian joy, which he considered one of the choicest fruits of the Spirit. This joy was what made Wilberforce such a fine witness: “*I think you are serving God by making yourself agreeable ... to worldly but well-disposed people, who would never be attracted to religion by grave and severe divines.*”<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless, in this matter, Wilberforce counselled balance. Of the Christian he wrote: “*Let neither his joys intoxicate him nor his sorrows too much depress him!*”<sup>81</sup>

He was a man of *great faith*. It was his faith in God and his relationship to God that was “*the secret of Wilberforce’s indomitable perseverance.*” His relationship to God and his walk with God became an “*almost indispensable tonic for his mercurial temperament. They steadied, refreshed and inspired him.*”<sup>82</sup> He laboured faithfully and fervently and left the results with God. “*His faith was resilient because it was not in himself, but, as he said after one of his defeats, in God ‘who have given the very small increase there has been thus far and must give all if there be more.’*”<sup>83</sup>

Wilberforce was, in his own words, “*no Calvinist!*” He would even joke with Hannah More, “*vile Calvinist you, my very blood rises at the sight of you.*”<sup>84</sup> At the age of sixty-three he observed that “*every year I live I become more impressed with the unscriptural character of the Calvinistic system.*”<sup>85</sup> He held to a general atonement. What offended him most about the Calvinists he knew was what he perceived to be a cold and intellectual interpretation of God that left no room for the mysteries of God.<sup>86</sup> Yet on the other hand, his favourite writers were Philip Doddridge, Richard Baxter, John Owen, John Flavel, John Howe and Jonathan Edwards. He had vigorous views on human sin, divine grace, justification by grace through faith in Christ alone, providence and the sovereignty of God. He believed that God ordained and controlled every detail of human existence. In response to a clergyman who maintained that providence controlled the “*great occasions*”, he said: “*Must not the smallest links be as necessary for maintaining the continuity of the greatest? Great and little belong to our littleness, but there is no great or little with God.*”<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, John Newton’s tremendous influence on Wilberforce has already been noted. Suffice to say then, with John Pollock: *he had no gift for systematic theology.*<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 123.

<sup>80</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 119.

<sup>81</sup> Pura and Lewis, “On Spiritual Symmetry: The Christian Devotion of William Wilberforce”, p. 182.

<sup>82</sup> Coupland, *Wilberforce*, p. 187.

<sup>83</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 100.

<sup>84</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 153.

<sup>85</sup> Pura and Lewis, “On Spiritual Symmetry: The Christian Devotion of William Wilberforce”, p. 177.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177. He read William Romaine and said: “Oh how unlike this is to the Scripture! He writes as if he sat down at the Council Board with the Almighty!”

<sup>87</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 99.

<sup>88</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 145.

He was a *man of endurance*. In 1791 John Wesley, from his death bed, warned him: “*Unless the Divine Power has raised you up to be as ‘Athanasius against the world’, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing this execrable villainy... Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of god and devils.*”<sup>89</sup> Indeed he would face opposition and tribulation in his “glorious enterprise” – Boswell would write:

“Go Wilberforce, with narrow skull,  
Go home and preach away at Hull.  
No longer to the senate cackle  
In strains that suit the tabernacle,  
I hate your little wittling sneer,  
Your pert and self-sufficient leer,  
Mischief to trade sits on your lips,  
Insects will gnaw the noblest ships.  
Go, Wilberforce, begone, for shame,  
Thou dwarf with big resounding name!”

He was slandered in the press – “*If all that was published about me was true, nothing but a special providence can have prevented my being hanged thirty years ago!*”<sup>90</sup> He was accused of beating his wife, who, it was said, was a freed Negro slave – in fact he was a single man at the time. Lord Nelson called him a hypocrite and others accused him of inciting insurrection in the West Indies. In addition to persecution Wilberforce had to deal with tremendous health difficulties. He was afflicted for what today would be called ulcerative colitis. The remedy, which was also prescribed for severe pain, loose bowels, sleeplessness, or distraught nerves, was opium. Wilberforce became a life long user of opium at the direction of his doctors.<sup>91</sup> Later he would suffer from lung problems, eye problems and eventually would need a brace to keep his head up.<sup>92</sup> Despite all of this, he endured to the end and was faithful in the cause to which God had called him. Wesley had said to him: “*Go on, in the name of God, in the power of His might, till even American slavery... shall vanish away!*”! And he did. The trial of his faith produced endurance!

He was a man of *evangelistic zeal*! After he died a sheet was found amongst his papers. It was entitled: “*Friends Paper.*” It was a list of thirty of his friends, and beside each name were thoughts of how to best press the gospel home to each. Wilberforce spent a good deal of time trying to come up with what he called “*launchers*” – ways in

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<sup>89</sup> See attached the full text of the letter. What an encouragement it must have been!

<sup>90</sup> Warner, *William Wilberforce*, p. 134.

<sup>91</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, pp. 77-82 for his interesting discussion of Wilberforce’s opium use.

<sup>92</sup> He had curvature of the spine. “One shoulder began to slope; his head fell forward, a little more each year until it rested on his chest unless lifted by conscious movement....he was obliged to wear a ‘steel girdle cased in leather and an additional support for the arms’...he lived in a steel frame for his last fifteen or eighteen years.” Regarding his steel frame Wilberforce wrote: “How gracious is God in giving us such mitigations and helps for our infirmities.” Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 234.

which to turn the conversation in a spiritual direction and bring the claims of Christ to bear upon those with whom he was speaking. He wrote a big book with a big title for the express purpose of reaching William Pitt and other friends.<sup>93</sup> His efforts at witness were sometimes misunderstood and unappreciated but it is plain to see that like his Lord, he wept over sinners!<sup>94</sup>

### ***A Family Man***

Wilberforce had resolved never to marry, but after meeting Barbara Ann Spooner, he fell head over heels in love. A whirlwind romance led to a wedding in 1797 and a marriage that was pleasant and happy. Hannah More said that she had never seen an honest gentleman more desperately in love. Friends were not entirely impressed with Barbara, though one did note that “*no one would have known how much of an angel was in him if they had not seen his behaviour to one whose tastes must have tried his patience so much.*”<sup>95</sup> Others noted that she was slow, whiny, fussy and altogether a poor housekeeper. What Wilberforce described as her “*excessive affection*”, friends called “*over-protectiveness*”! Yet this “*over-protectiveness*” is perhaps what helped to preserve her husband’s life.<sup>96</sup>

Marianne Thornton, daughter of Henry, comments on Wilberforce and his children. “*I know one of my first lessons was I must never disturb Papa when he was talking or reading, but no such prohibition existed with Mr. Wilberforce. His love for, and enjoyment in, all children was remarkable.*”<sup>97</sup> While he felt that “*the spiritual interests of my children is my first object*”, he also loved playing with them. “*I am irresistibly summoned to a game of marbles, he terminated an early letter!*”<sup>98</sup>

Though the Wilberforce home was a happy one, and William himself an “*adored and adoring*” father, domestic life was not without its trials. William Jr., the oldest son, moved from one financial disaster to another, leading his father to send good money after bad in an effort to assist. One of his two daughters died young while Lizzy, the surviving daughter, caused some consternation by falling in love with a debt-ridden West Indian slave owner!! Thankfully, the affair came to nothing! Though Wilberforce was an evangelical<sup>99</sup> and by no means sympathetic to the Roman Catholic religious system, he did fight for religious freedom for Catholics in England. Three of his four sons, however, turned to Catholicism after his death.

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<sup>93</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*. (Peabody, Mass., Hendriksen Publications, 1996). The full title is: “*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>94</sup> At the time of Pitt’s death he wrote: “I have a thousand times wished and hoped that a quiet interval would be afforded him, perhaps in the evening of his life, in which he and I might confer freely on the most important of all subjects. But the scene is closed— for ever.” Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 132.

<sup>95</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 144. Lean notes that Wilberforce “showed no signs of being conscious of such a martyrdom!”

<sup>96</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 161.

<sup>97</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 183.

<sup>98</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 183.

<sup>98</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 149.

<sup>99</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain— A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1988), see pages 1-19 for his description of evangelicalism as being characterized by *conversionism, activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism*.

Be that as it may, during the time he had with his children he sought to be a faithful father. He resigned his Yorkshire seat for a seat in the smaller borough of Bramber so that he might spend more time with his growing family. He urged parents to “labour to render religion as congenial as possible” to their children, and he himself wrote with much tenderness to his son Samuel: “I would be willing to walk barefoot from this place to Sandgate to see a clear proof of the **great change** being begun in my dear Saml at the end of the journey!”<sup>100</sup> The fruit of his labours will be revealed on the last day.

### ***A Man of Broad Vision***

Wilberforce was not provincial. His vision was broad and all encompassing. He was criticized in his own day for being concerned about slaves half way around the world but unconcerned about wage slaves in England. One would have thought that his record of philanthropic activity, the numerous benevolent causes he championed, would speak volumes about his concern for and his efforts on behalf of the oppressed and under-privileged in the England of his day. Indeed, as Lean writes:

*“Wilberforce and his friends established the charitable society as the principal means of doing good in the Victorian era. To them Britain owes the tradition, still strong today, of voluntary service by unpaid workers supported by voluntary gifts from individuals.”*<sup>101</sup>

No, Wilberforce was “zealous for good works” at home and abroad.

The broadness of his vision, however, appears with stark clarity when one considers his involvement with the work of God in India. By the late 1700s it was still the policy of the East India Company not to “interfere” with Indian beliefs and practices. It was feared that “missionary attempts to reform the host country would incite revolts and thus harm the company’s bottom line!”<sup>102</sup> Consequently the company refused to give licenses to prospective missionaries. In Wilberforce, Charles Grant (a Christian member of the company) and William Carey (in India illegally as a missionary) had an ally. Wilberforce was touched with the plight of the Indian people. He read out the names of woman who were victims of *sati* (the ritual burning of widows) and prayed for India at his dinner table. He fought valiantly to force the East India Company to legally permit missionary activity in India. After unsuccessful attempts in 1793 and 1795, Wilberforce, in 1813, armed with documentation supplied by Carey, pushed in Parliament for what became known as the “**pious clause**” to be added to the Charter Renewal for the company. The “**pious clause**” required that it was the duty of Britain to take “*such measures...as may tend to the moral improvement*” of India and that facilities should “*be afforded by law to persons wishing to go to India for that purpose*”. The bill was passed and the first person to be granted that license was Carey’s nephew Eustace!<sup>103</sup> The implications were enormous. “*The precedent was set for missionaries to go not only to*

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<sup>100</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, p. 232.

<sup>101</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 165.

<sup>102</sup> Bruce Hindmarsh, “A Long Reach”, *Christian History*, Issue 53, Vol. XVI. No. 1.

<sup>103</sup> Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi, *The Legacy of William Carey: A Model for the Transformation of a Culture*. (Wheaton, Ill. Crossway Books, 1993), pp. 63-67, 72-84.

*India and China, but anywhere Britain had an international presence. And in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, that meant a lot of the world.”*<sup>104</sup>

“***The Washington of Humanity***”? Perhaps that is overstating the case – but thank God for such a man whose love for men drove him to seek to “*do good to all men*” and “*by all means to win some*”.

## **LESSONS**

### ***1. Let us draw inspiration from this story.***

The account of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Awakening in England and its impact upon society should be tremendously encouraging as to what God is able to do by way of transforming a nation from the inside out. Speaking about England under the ministries of Whitefield and the Wesleys, one historian has written this:

*“A religious revival burst forth ... which changed in a few years the whole temper of English society. The church was restored to life and activity. Religion carried to the heart of the people a fresh spirit of moral zeal, while it purified our literature, infused clemency and wisdom into our penal laws, abolished the slave trade, and gave the first impulse to popular education.”*<sup>105</sup>

Equally inspiring is what God did through Wilberforce and his companions.

*Wilberforce, by his persistence, but above all by the spiritual element at the root of everything he did, again and again made possible in the future what had seemed impossible when he first tackled it. Such is the statesmanship need in his and every age.*<sup>106</sup>

More importantly, such faith is needed. Reading Wilberforce ought to inspire us to “***attempt great things***” and “***expect great things***” because we serve a great God. The God who moved through the land of England in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century is able to sweep through our land with similar power and transforming effect. Let us never forget that “*nothing is impossible with God*”!

### ***2. Let us encourage and support Christians in politics.***

How vital was the ministry of Newton in giving direction to the newly converted politician. How encouraging must have been a letter from an esteemed man of God such as Wesley. Surely we should seek educate our people as to the legitimacy of involvement in politics, the necessity of maintaining integrity once in politics, and of the need to remain faithful to Biblical principles in the face of the onslaught of secular philosophy and practice. And how we ought to encourage Christians to pray for all who are in places of governmental authority (**I Timothy 2:1-3**). While we might agree that Christians ought to be involved in politics, we tend ‘*to be somewhat*

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<sup>104</sup> Hindmarsh, “A Long Reach”, *Christian History*.

<sup>105</sup> Roger Ellsworth, *A Promise is a Promise*. (Durham, England: EP, 1996), p. 146.

<sup>106</sup> Lean, *God’s Politician*, p. 183.

*sceptical about the possibilities of effective, righteous action by Christians in the often sordid world of politics.”*<sup>107</sup> Perhaps such scepticism is healthy, but let it drive us to our knees with the confidence God never changes and He can still use weak men to accomplish great things.

**3. *Let us address the “slavery” issue of our day – abortion.***

As with Wilberforce, ours must be a faith that works. The grotesque violence of slavery is matched by the vile, wholesale slaughter of the unborn in our day. If Wilberforce could not be silent while the slave needed his help surely we must do whatever we can to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves!

**4. *Let us be those who truly understand the brotherhood of Christianity.***

If, in fact, there is neither Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, neither male nor female because we are all one in Christ, let us live like it. ***Am I not a man and a brother?*** Indeed! I suppose that the real test for a Christian as to whether he believes this is when his daughter comes home and wishes to marry a man of a different race. What shall we say then? What shall we say when Christians talk about “Jewing someone down”, or criticize the “frogs”, or discuss the “darkies”. Segments of the Christian church lag far behind Wilberforce in their appreciation of our oneness as creatures and more importantly, our oneness in Christ.

**5. *Let us be thankful for the long and storied history of Christian philanthropy.***

The work of the Christian church has so richly benefited society. Let us be quick to set the record straight when opponents speak of the withering impact of hypocritical Christians upon the world. No. Christians have indeed been light and salt in every generation.

**6. *And finally, let Christian leaders follow in the footsteps of this man*** who, though lacking the finely nuanced theologies with which we pride ourselves, was nonetheless so mightily used of God in his day that we are still talking about him in ours! Let us humbly and enthusiastically work together, esteeming the gifts of others and eschewing a “*lone ranger*” mentality; let us press on in the face of opposition and persecution, difficulty, disappointment and at times even disaster; let us seek glory for God and not a name for ourselves; let us be inflamed with a love for all God’s people and a desire to do good to all; let us throw ourselves into our life’s work with passion and with faith in the Mighty God who grants us the privilege of serving Him by serving our generation – ***“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.”***

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<sup>107</sup> Dr. Sally Davey, “Christian Politicians in English History”, Faith in Focus, New Zealand Reformed Church. <http://www.reformed-churches.org.nz/resources/fnf/ar4.htm>

# **WILBERFORCE: A TIME LINE**

- 1759 Born in Kingston-upon-Hull, Yorkshire
- 1768 His father dies; sent to live in Wimbleton with an aunt and uncle
- 1776 Studies at St. John's College, Cambridge (until 1780)
- 1780 Elected Member of Parliament for Hull
- 1784-85 Experience conversion to Christ
- 1784 Becomes MP for Yorkshire
- 1787 Helps found Society for the Reformation of Manners
- 1788 Introduces his first bill to abolish the slave trade
- 1796 "A Practical View..." is published
- 1797 Marries Barbara Spooner
- 1804 Helps found the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Church Missionary Society
- 1807 British Parliament abolishes the slave trade
- 1813 Helps convince Parliament to permit missionaries to India
- 1822 Helps form the Anti-slavery Society
- 1823 Retires from the House of Commons
- 1833 Emancipation Act is passed; all slaves in the British Dominions granted freedom; Wilberforce dies and is buried at Westminster Abbey

From "*Christian History*", Issue 53

# WESLEY LETTER

On February 24, 1791, at age 88, six days before his death, this last letter was addressed to William Wilberforce. The “tract” he refers to was written by a former slave, Gustavus Vassa, who was born in 1745 in Africa, kidnapped and sold as a slave in Barbados. In 1757 he was sent to England and was converted to Christianity.

Dear Sir:

Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as “Athanasius against the world”, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of god and devils. But if God be for you, who can be, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God, in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.

Reading this morning a tract wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by the circumstances, that a man who had black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being LAW in our Colonies that the OATH of a black man against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this!

That He who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and in all things is the prayer of, dear sir,

Your affectionate servant,

John Wesley

[http://forerunner.com/forerunner/XO554\\_Wesley\\_to\\_Wilberforce.html](http://forerunner.com/forerunner/XO554_Wesley_to_Wilberforce.html)

CHECK OUT:

Wilberforce’s gravesite at Westminster Abbey:

<http://www.findagrave.com/pictures/6170.html>

Wilberforce’s birthplace, the Wilberforce House, on High Street in Hull:

[http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/wilberforce/explore\\_birthplace.html](http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/wilberforce/explore_birthplace.html)

The Wilberforce Forum – a forum designed to “foster the renewal of culture with a well-seasoned worldview apologetic”:

<http://www.christianity.com/wilberforce>

William Cowper (1731-1800)  
Sonnet to William Wilberforce

Thy country, Wilberforce, with just disdain,  
Hears thee, by cruel men and impious, call'd  
Fanatic, for thy zeal to loose th'enthralled  
From exile, public sale, and slav'ry's chain.  
Friend of the poor, the wrong'd, the fetter-gall'd,  
Fear not lest labour such as thine be vain!  
Thou has achiev'd a part; hast gain'd the ear  
Of Britain's senate to thy glorious cause;  
Hope smiles, joy springs, and tho' cold caution pause  
And weave delay, the better hour is near,  
That shall remunerate thy toil severe  
By peace for Afric, fenc'd with British laws.  
Enjoy what thou hast won, esteem and love  
From all the just on earth, and all the blest above.

<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/rp/poems/cowper4b.html>

FELLOWSHIP FOR REFORMATION  
AND PASTORAL STUDIES

WILBERFORCE

**“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”**

John Newton

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Carl Muller  
Trinity Baptist Church, Burlington

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