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EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

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Christian Responsibility to Reform Society: the Example of William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect

John White

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'AMAZING GRACE!—how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.' These famous words of John Newton point to the way that God changed this former slave trader into a Christian and a pastor. And although this man himself was changed, the horrific practice of slavery continued. Yet the Reverend Newton was introduced to a young man who would, based on his Christian conviction and calling, lead the charge to end slavery. This man's name was William Wilberforce. In considering the role that Christians should play in the face of moral atrocities, it is valuable to look at the life of this important man in history.

I The Man and his Times

Wilberforce lived in pre-Victorian England from 1759-1833, and was a member of parliament from 1780-1825. He lived in a time when the upper class of society expressed an outward Christianity but still participated in such practices as duelling and gaming.¹ In factories, children sometimes worked up to eighteen hours per day,² national drunkenness in the 'Gin Age' was rampant,³ and the crime level was extremely high with horrible punishments for even small crimes. For example, pick-pocketing could carry the death penalty.⁴ This was all in addition to the unspeakable cruelty of one race

1 David Bebbington, 'Abolition: William Wilberforce' in John Woodbridge, editor, *More than Conquerors* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), pp. 242-245.

2 Clifford Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2004), p. 76.

3 Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, p. 69.

4 Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, pp. 81-82.

to another in the form of slavery throughout the British Empire.⁵

Wilberforce was already a member of parliament when in 1786 he converted to Christianity, in what he referred to as his 'great change'.⁶ On the advice of John Newton, he decided to stay in politics, but now realized that he must dedicate his political service to Jesus Christ.⁷ On 28 October 1787, Wilberforce wrote in his diary, 'God almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.'⁸ That year he convinced the king to 'issue a proclamation which would urge magistrates to enforce existing legislation against drunkenness, blasphemy, and similar misdemeanors'.⁹ In this first action, Wilberforce showed that what he meant by 'the reformation of manners' was the need to morally reform society. Over the course of his career, Wilberforce would continually seek to obtain both of these 'two great objects'.

Wilberforce was certainly not the first to speak out against slavery. In the eighteenth century, Quakers had taken a stand against slavery, and thus there was already a base of support for

the anti-slavery movement.¹⁰ But Wilberforce was uniquely positioned to challenge slavery in parliament, being a long-standing friend of William Pitt, the Prime Minister during most of Wilberforce's years in parliament, and being a compelling speaker from the upper class.

II The Motivations of a Christian Politician

First, it is important to consider Wilberforce's motivations. Wilberforce saw that it was his calling to be a Christian politician, and not just a politician who happened to be Christian. He wrote to a constituent in 1789, 'A man who acts from the principles I profess reflects that he is to give an account of his political conduct at the Judgment seat of Christ.'¹¹ This view is clearly reflected in his voting record, in which he often voted against the ruling Tory party of his friend, Prime Minister Pitt. Some thought that Wilberforce would have succeeded Pitt as Prime Minister if he would have voted in line with the Tory Party. Yet, Wilberforce often drew his greatest support against slavery from the opposition party, and so often voted with them against the Tories.¹²

Over the course of his forty years in parliament, there were at least 112 ministers of evangelical faith who voted with Wilberforce, either occasionally or often. There were thirty

5 Kenneth Scott LaTourette, *A History of The Expansion of Christianity*, Volume 4 (1800 A.D. to 1914 A.D.) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1941), p. 158.

6 Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, p. 49.

7 Bebbington, 'Abolition: William Wilberforce', p. 242.

8 Robert Isaac Wilberforce, and Samuel Wilberforce, editors, *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce (Vol. 1)* (London: John Murray, 1838), p. 149.

9 Bebbington, 'Abolition: William Wilberforce', p. 242.

10 LaTourette, *A History of The Expansion of Christianity*, p. 158.

11 Bebbington, 'Abolition: William Wilberforce', p. 242.

12 Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, pp. 57-58.

ministers that formed his core of support, and they all put their Christian faith above their political party affiliation.¹³ This desire to vote in the name of principle over party surely cost Wilberforce and those who voted with him dearly in terms of political gain. Yet, it is precisely these actions which show the true nature of a *Christian* politician.

Furthermore, Wilberforce himself took personal responsibility for the corporate sin of slavery. Whereas politicians often seek to contrast their proposals of improvement with the evils of the status quo, Wilberforce identified himself with the evils of his time and the people more directly involved in them. Instead of speaking as judge, he spoke as convict, showing the way to open the prison door. For example, Wilberforce said in his speech to parliament for abolition on 12 May 1789,

I mean not to accuse any one, but to take the shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty—we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others...¹⁴

He said further that he, 'came not to accuse the Merchants, but to appeal to their feelings and humanity'.¹⁵ This

method of persuasion is clearly a Christian one, recognizing that all human beings are sinners before a holy God. As was the case of Jesus himself, Wilberforce interceded on behalf of his people, willing to identify with even their actions in order to change them. This example of accepting personal responsibility for the moral failings of government is another important characteristic of the Christian politician.

III Doing Research and Reaching Out to All Classes

Next, it is important to consider Wilberforce's methods of seeking moral change. Although he was a gifted orator, Wilberforce did not wish to convince the government to abolish slavery based on rhetoric alone, but based upon the facts. In his speech to Parliament for abolition on 12 May 1789, he said: 'It is not their passions I shall appeal to—I ask only for their cool and impartial reason; and I wish not to take them by surprise, but to deliberate, point by point, upon every part of this question.'¹⁶ Further, Wilberforce claimed that,

It was no party question, and he flattered himself that the voice of reason and truth would be heard. He was resolved to be regulated by temper and coolness, and challenged a fair discussion. It was not a proposition grounded upon particular motives of policy, but founded in principles of philanthropy. It was no idle expedient or speculation of

13 Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, p. 61.

14 William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England. From the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the year 1803* (Vol. 28) (London: T. Curson Hansard, 1806-1820), Cols. 41-42.

15 *The Morning Star*, 13 May 1789, p. 78.

16 Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England*, Cols. 41-42.

the moment, but derived from the most mature deliberation.¹⁷

Rhetoric can be a powerful instrument that can be used for good or evil. But ultimately, facts determine whether a cause is right or not. Wilberforce insisted on seeking and deliberating upon the truth instead of merely appealing to emotion.

In order to seek the facts and properly interpret them, Wilberforce clearly needed help. So, he helped organize a group of people that became known as the 'Clapham Group' or 'Clapham Sect.' It included politicians, businessmen, lawyers, churchmen, and researchers who each played a part in rallying support behind moral reform. Of this latter group, field researchers compiled detailed information on the condition of slavery and the slave trade.¹⁸ Armed with this information, Wilberforce worked towards convincing Parliament of the evils of slavery. For example, referring to the transit of slaves to the West Indies, Wilberforce said,

Upon the whole, however, here is a mortality of about 50 per cent, and this among negroes who are not bought unless (as the phrase is with cattle) they are sound in wind and limb. How then can the House refuse its belief to the multiplied testimonies before the privy council, of the savage treatment of the negroes in the middle passage? Nay, indeed, what need is there of any evidence? The number of deaths speaks for itself, and makes

all such enquiry superfluous. As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave trade, I confess to you sir, so enormous so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished, let the policy be what it might,—let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition.¹⁹

Toward this end, in 1797 Wilberforce wrote the book, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious Systems of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*. Although the evangelists John Wesley and George Whitefield had had great success at changing society among the lower classes of England, the upper class remained largely unaffected. It was Wilberforce's aim to reform the middle and upper classes, and thus end slavery and improve morality. Coming at the time of the French Revolution and overthrow of the French upper class, the English upper class were ready to listen to the voice of reform. Thus, Wilberforce's book about 'vital Christianity' sold over 7500 copies in six months and the call to hold to 'spiritual values' spread quickly through the upper class.²⁰ Contrasting the atheistic nature of the French revolution

17 *The Morning Star*, 13 May 1789, p 78.

18 Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, pp. 63-64.

19 Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England*, Cols. 41-42.

20 Bebbington, 'Abolition: William Wilberforce', pp. 242-3.

and the political turmoil that ensued for years to come in that nation, the effect of Christianity on politics in England was remarkably positive, and a force that should be seriously considered in all nations.

Wilberforce also raised support from among the masses. The Clapham Group used newspapers and other forms of public media to bring pressure on the members of parliament to vote with Wilberforce on different moral issues, including slavery. This method of lobbying was unknown in that day, and it proved to be quite effective. On the issue of allowing missionaries to work in India through the East India Company, the Clapham Group gathered more than 500,000 signatures at a time when the total population was only nine million. Wilberforce hoped not just to change the law, but to change the conscience of his nation.²¹ He believed that ultimately culture needed to change if politics were to change. And only in this cultural change would a society have hope for its future.

IV Wide and Lasting Impact

Because of these moral changes in English society, England prospered. R.C.K. Ensor said that the key to understanding Victorian England and its success was to understand its faith:

if one asks how the 19th century English merchants earned a reputation of being the most honest in the world (a very real factor in the 19th century primacy of English trade), the answer is: because hell

and heaven seemed as certain to them as tomorrow's sunrise, and the Last Judgment as real as this week's balance sheet.²²

Because Wilberforce was successful in bringing his cause to the grassroots level, the work to improve morality in England continued long after those in the Clapham Group had passed away.²³ Bishop J.C. Ryle of Liverpool in 1885 commented on the great changes that had taken place.

I ask my readers to remember that the good works with which everyone is now familiar did not exist 100 years ago. Wilberforce had not yet attacked the slave trade. Howard had not yet reformed prisons. More had not established Sunday Schools. We had no Bible Societies, no ragged schools, no city missions, no pastoral aid societies, no missions to the heathen. The spirit of slumber was over the land. From the religious and moral point of view, England was sound asleep.²⁴

It is clear that Wilberforce's work had a lasting effect, encouraging others of a similar mind to pursue further social and moral reforms. The key to this appears to be his effectiveness in persuading the masses of his cause—changing the underlying culture of England in order to change its laws and government for the long term.

²² R.C.K. Ensor, *England (1870-1914)* (Oxford: n.p., 1936), p. 137.

²³ Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, p. 166.

²⁴ Ryle, J.C. *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*, (first published in Edinburgh, 1885, reprinted by Banner of Truth, 1997), pp. 18-19.

²¹ Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, pp. 65-66.

Finally, it is important to consider some of the important accomplishments of Wilberforce's work to reform society. Wilberforce's crusade to improve morality and end slavery lasted his entire career in the parliament. In 1788, Wilberforce played a large role in the passing of a law to reduce the exploitation of children.²⁵ He continually worked to pass laws to improve the conditions of the poor and to provide education for children of the poor.²⁶ His group had international influence as well, affecting international conferences, councils, and peace treaties.²⁷

Wilberforce also worked to create change outside of parliament, establishing the Society for Carrying into Effect the Enforcement of His Majesty's proclamation Against Vice and Immorality in 1788. This society served as a model for the establishment of numerous other reform-minded societies over the next fifty years. These included hospitals, educational work, missions, relief of distress and poverty, and other kinds of social reform.²⁸ In 1807, Wilberforce finally succeeded in passing a law to end the slave trade. But, his work came to full fruition only in the year of his death, 1833, when all slaves in the British Empire were emancipated.²⁹

His perseverance was certainly a key factor in his eventual success.

Considering the many facets of his work, both within and outside of parliament, it is clear that Wilberforce did not limit his work to only one issue, even as important an issue as slavery. It seems that his goal was always a broad one, to reform society in all directions. He worked on behalf of the children, the poor, the uneducated and the slaves. He strove to convince the upper class to personally reform and to use their wealth and power for good. He worked to promote missions work throughout the world. His willingness to cross party lines and to take such extraordinary ends of gathering years of research show the depth of his conviction. Wilberforce appeared to be interested to work in all areas where he saw moral deficiency, in contrast to the compartmentalization of Christianity in many parts of the world both then and today.

V Summary and Application

In summary, William Wilberforce's example shows that Christianity can be a powerful and guiding force in politics. The Christian should be motivated by principle, and be willing to lose political power and work with political enemies in order to keep one's principles. The Christian who gains political authority should accept responsibility for both the good and the bad of the government he joins. Identifying with the problems of the nation allows one to consider the facts more fairly and to persuade people to change—not as opponents, but as colleagues.

Furthermore, the Christian should be guided by truth, and this requires

25 Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, p. 149.

26 Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, p. 153.

27 Ernest Marshall Howse, *Saints in Politics: The Clapham Sect and the Growth of Freedom* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952), p. 177.

28 Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, p. 170.

29 Bebbington, 'Abolition: William Wilberforce', p. 242.

working hard to research problems and discuss the results of research with others. It is important to change the minds not just of the members of government, but of all people in society. To do this, it is wise to publish books and use the media to explain one's position and convince the masses of it. All levels of society should be addressed and convinced. Broad, popular support is the key to lasting change. Those that pass laws but ignore the opinions of the masses will make only short-term changes. As Wilberforce showed, convincing the masses of society to follow Christian morality led to changes that lasted long after his death.

In order to apply Wilberforce's principles and methods, one must consider the issues that society and politicians struggle with today. In some countries, an issue such as abortion would be considered by Christians analogous to slavery in Wilberforce's day. Yet in other countries, this is not an important political issue. Issues such as government corruption, injustices in the use of taxes, poor health care, and failure to care for orphans, the handicapped and the elderly stand as much more important. International issues such as political alliances abroad and the use of military force are also hotly debated.

If Wilberforce were alive today, it is probable that he would have a say on all of these issues. Some Christians focus entirely on one issue for change, such as abortion. Even though Wilberforce became famous for his stand on slavery, he realized that being a Christian meant that he must seek to influ-

ence all levels of society, making government a force of good for all. He would certainly seek to pass laws and help establish social organizations that would help improve health care, house orphans and reduce government corruption.

On the other hand, Wilberforce would surely speak up on the issue of abortion, even if he lived in a society where many Christians ignored this issue in the political arena. He would conduct research to determine all of the medical facts and present this information both to the government and in publication for the masses. He would attempt to change public opinion, so that both Christians and non-Christians would see the truth of his argument, and demand legal changes.

Wilberforce did have the advantage of working in a time following Christian revival under Wesley and Whitefield's influence, so there were more Christians in pre-Victorian England than there are in many parts of the world today. Yet, the forces of revolutionary France pushed for atheism to gain political primacy. Conditions in times and places will inevitably vary, but ultimately the Christian must choose to take responsibility to morally improve the world around him. From Wilberforce's example, one must dedicate oneself to Christian principle over party, to seek help from other Christians, both politicians and others, and one must persevere. Change always takes time, but as has been clearly shown, even vast political changes are possible through faith, teamwork, and patience.