

**William Wilberforce**  
**presented by Ray Martin to the Academy, 05-17-2007**

“God almighty has placed before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of morals.” - William Wilberforce

**His Life: Providential**

William Wilberforce was born on August 24, 1759 in Hull, England. Just before Wilberforce turned nine years old, his father died, and he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle. It was with his uncle and aunt that he came under evangelical influences. He began to take an interest in the writings of John Wesley, John Newton and George Whitefield, but soon abandoned the influences of evangelicals.

While at St. John’s College at Cambridge, he lived off his parents’ wealth and began to circulate among the social elite. There he became friends with William Pitt, who became the Prime Minister of England just years later.

Wilberforce stood for the seat of the House of Commons for his hometown in 1780 at the age of twenty-one. This is when he began his forty-five year investment in the politics of England, in which he never lost an election.

At the age of 25, Wilberforce on an impulse invited Isaac Milner, his former schoolmaster, to go on a vacation with him and his mother to the French Riviera. Milner turned out to be a convinced Christian who talked with him for hours about the Christian faith. The following summer Wilberforce traveled again with Milner, and they discussed the Greek New Testament for hours. Slowly his “intellectual assent became profound conviction.”<sup>1</sup> Immediately after what Wilberforce called “the great change” he developed a passion for helping the poor and spreading the good news.

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Amazing Grace in the life of William Wilberforce*, Page 29

Wilberforce was single until the age of thirty-seven. He married his wife Barbara only a month and a half after meeting her. During the first eight years of their marriage they had four sons and two daughters.

After his conversion, Wilberforce struggled with whether or not he should continue in politics. He secretly sought council from John Newton, who told Wilberforce, “It is hoped and believed that God has raised you up for the good of His church and the good of the Nation.”<sup>2</sup>

Wilberforce fought in Parliament for forty-five years, and died in 1833.

### **His Theology: Practical**

Wilberforce did not separate his concern to live a life of personal holiness from the concern of national holiness and reform. He had no room in his theology for isolation from the world. His faith was relevant to say the least. While his theology was practical, and for the most part simple, it was not shallow. He spent hours upon hours laboring over the Word of God. He is a great example of a Christian who was well balanced, and his life destroys any argument that a relational, loving Christian cannot be a theologically sound and trained Christian as well.

### ***Anglican, reformed, Puritan***

An Anglican, Wilberforce had a place in his theology for the importance of the liturgy, the sacraments of the Eucharist and child baptism. He was adamant though, in declaring that a true Anglican faith had to be based upon what he called “vital Christianity” or evangelical doctrines.

Wilberforce held to a reformed theology. He believed that God is just, smiling upon the righteous while punishing the unrighteous. He believed that humans are born depraved, dead in their trespasses, incapable of doing any good apart from the saving grace of God. This though, was the extent of his Calvinism. Though Wilberforce believed strongly in human depravity,

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<sup>2</sup> *Amazing Grace*, Page 32

substitutionary atonement, salvation by grace, justification by faith, and the sovereignty of God, he held to unlimited atonement. He seemed to be offended by cold, intellectual Calvinistic interpretations of God that left no room for the mysteries of God and providence and the fallibility of human reason.<sup>3</sup>

At age sixty-three, Wilberforce said of Calvinism, “Every year that I live I become more impressed with the unscriptural character of the Calvinistic system.”

Though not strict in his Calvinism, Wilberforce was influenced strongly by Puritan writings, and was even labeled a Puritan himself by many.

Wilberforce’s theology was practical above anything else. He was most interested in living out a spirituality that influenced the world around him for the cause of Christ.

“The grand characteristic mark of a true Christian ...is his desiring to please God in all his thoughts, and words, and actions; to take the revealed Word to be the rule of his belief and practice; to ‘let his light shine before men; and in all things to adorn the doctrine which he professes.’”<sup>4</sup>

Wilberforce hated complacency and ignorance among Christians perhaps as much as the slave trade. He held a high biblical allegiance to what he called the “peculiar doctrines”. These were the essential doctrines of the Christian faith that made Wilberforce tick, and of which he was heavily burdened that so many professing Christians throughout England neglected. These “peculiar doctrines” of Christianity, he said, break the power of pride and greed and fear and lead to transformed morals, which lead the political welfare of the nation.<sup>5</sup> Wilberforce believed that from these “peculiar doctrines” came new affections for God and the reformation of a society.

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<sup>3</sup> Murray, Andrew, Pura, *Vital Christianity*, page 89

<sup>4</sup> *Vital Christianity*, page 92

<sup>5</sup> *Amazing Grace*, page 20

“If...a principle of true religion (new affections) should...gain ground, there is no estimating the effects on public morals, and the consequent influence on our political welfare.”<sup>6</sup>

Here are a few of what Wilberforce considered “peculiar doctrines”.

### ***The Holy Scriptures***

From the time of Wilberforce’s conversion at age twenty-five, to the time of his marriage at age thirty-seven, he would often spend ten to twelve hours each day studying. Most of this was personal devotional time studying the Word of God. Wilberforce felt that he was to make up for the time that he wasted partying and carousing among the social elite in the early years of his life.

The Scriptures were the driving force of Wilberforce’s life and his endurance in fighting for the abolition of slavery. Wilberforce adamantly expressed his disgust with Christians (or at least those who claimed to be Christians) who knew little or none of the scriptures, and who neglected God’s revelation. He understood that with God’s revelation comes much responsibility and that at the time of judgment no plea can be made in our defense if we remain ignorant of God’s Word and the way that leads to life.

“How criminal, then, must this voluntary ignorance of Christianity and the Word of God be in the sight of God. When God of His goodness has granted us such abundant means of instruction, how great must be the guilt and how awful must be the punishment, of voluntary ignorance!”<sup>7</sup>

### ***The depravity of man***

The depravity of man is what revealed to Wilberforce why the majority of people throughout the world accepted something as barbaric as selling and trading God’s image-bearers

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<sup>6</sup> William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, page 51

<sup>7</sup> *Real Christianity*, page 40

into slavery. He was not surprised that people who were in bondage to sin could be so accepting to something so horrific.

He exclaimed that most educated, professing Christians either overlooked or denied the “corruption and weakness of human nature” and that it is the “basis and groundwork of Christianity” that the scriptures teach so clearly.<sup>8</sup>

Wilberforce said that the majority of professing Christians usually view man as a naturally pure being that is inclined to do and act good. They view evil as an accidental or temporary event that manifests itself on occasion rather than a natural disorder that because of the fall, all humans are born with.

“He (man) is tainted with sin, not slightly and superficially, but radically, and to the very core of his being. Even though it may be humiliating to acknowledge these things, still this is the biblical account of man.”<sup>9</sup>

Wilberforce said that only those who understand depravity truly appreciate and understand the value of deliverance from this helpless state. He insisted that deliverance from sin and regeneration are tasks that only God himself is capable of performing. Since man is capable of doing nothing right, Wilberforce says, only God by His grace can save someone and remove his or her heart of stone.

The reason that Wilberforce was so passionate about depravity is because this is what he knew he was up against in the fight for the abolition of slavery. He was not merely going to battle with another political party, he was fighting against Satan and the work he was doing through depraved, sinful men. He admits that the reason so many self professing Christians saw

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<sup>8</sup> *Real Christianity*, page 45

<sup>9</sup> *Real Christianity*, page 47

nothing wrong with the slave trade, and in fact preferred it for economic and other political reasons is because they did not understand the doctrine of depravity.

Because of Wilberforce's accurate understanding of the condition of the human heart, he took spiritual warfare very seriously. Wilberforce could hardly tolerate the fact that so many professing Christians in England neglected the reality of Satan.

"...we have universally abandoned the devil as a reality. We regard him as a vanishing prejudice and a doctrine that is a discredit for any man of understanding to believe."<sup>10</sup>

He battled with this from the time of his conversion to the time of his death. Early in his Christian life, Wilberforce doubted whether or not he should abandon politics for full-time ministry. He doubted whether or not he should seek the advice of John Newton, who encouraged him to stick with politics. He considered giving up on more than one occasion during his lifelong battle with slavery. He considered this spiritual warfare, and was aware that though he was converted, and was no longer a slave to sin, his fallen humanity would tempt him to be ineffective.

"But the Word of God tells us that we are to contend not only with our own natural depravity, but also with the power of darkness, the Evil Spirit, who rules in the hearts of the wicked."<sup>11</sup>

### *An eternal perspective*

Death threats to both Wilberforce and his family were frequent. Many advocates of slavery expressed their disgust with him and his family by consistently threatening his life unless he resigned from parliament. Despite the hostility, Wilberforce continued to labor on behalf of the slaves. The thought of death had no effect on Wilberforce because he longed to be with God,

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<sup>10</sup> *Real Christianity*, page 54

<sup>11</sup> *Real Christianity*, page 53

and to be “fit for heaven”.<sup>12</sup> He was most like a Puritan in this regard. Wilberforce’s life was a constant pursuit of holiness, in which he sought to be adequate for both God and heaven before his death.

### **His Influence: Profound**

While his theology was simple, Wilberforce understood the nature of man, that he is depraved, and created in the image of God. He understood that God had placed him on earth to share those truths with others. He contended for the faith in a way that changed the world forever, and provided a model for how Christians today are to be fearless in engaging a culture that is hostile to the truths of God’s Word.

#### ***The “two great objects”***

God’s call upon Wilberforce’s life was apparent about one year after his conversion.

He wrote in his diary on October 28, 1787, “God almighty has placed before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners (morals).”<sup>13</sup>

Wilberforce fulfilled both of the responsibilities God had placed before him. Just after Christmas, 1787, a few days before the parliamentary recess, Wilberforce made it known in the House of Commons that early in the new session he would bring forth a motion for the abolition of the slave trade.

“I confess to you, so enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did its 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.”

Opposition raged for twenty years until he could carry the House of Commons and the House of Lord into putting the abolition into law. This was mainly because of the financial

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<sup>12</sup> *Vital Christianity*, page 97

<sup>13</sup> *Amazing Grace*, page 35

benefits of slavery to traders and the British economy, because of what plantations in the West Indies produced, and because of political ramifications that the West Indies would declare independence with Great Britain and federate with the United States. Wilberforce's life was threatened frequently during this time, and many of his friends were lost.

Wilberforce endured the opposition, and eventually the moral vision and political momentum for the abolition was irresistible. Victory finally came in the early morning of February 24, 1807. At 4:00 a.m., the house divided, 283-16 in favor of the abolition. In the midst of a burst of parliamentary cheers, with tears streaming down his face, Wilberforce attributed the abolition to the "immediate interposition of providence".<sup>14</sup> He turned to his friend and colleague Henry Thornton and said, "Well, Henry, what should we abolish next?"<sup>15</sup>

Of course, the battle was not over. The abolition law abolished the slave trade, not slavery itself. Wilberforce carried on the fight until his death in 1833, twenty-six years later. On July 26, 1833, only three days before his death, the decisive vote of victory came, and slavery itself was outlawed in the British colonies.

When Wilberforce was persuaded to propose one last petition against slavery he exclaimed, "I had never thought to appear in public again, but it should never be said that William Wilberforce is silent while the slaves require his help."<sup>16</sup>

Ending slavery was not the only way in which Wilberforce's spirituality impacted people and the culture around him. He devoted himself to a number of evangelistic causes, which makes his dedication to the abolition of slavery even more impressive. Most Christians today make the multiplicity of demands an excuse for not giving ourselves to any one great cause during the long, but this was not the case with Wilberforce. He was involved in a wide range of clubs and

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<sup>14</sup> *Amazing Grace*, page 38

<sup>15</sup> *Amazing Grace*, page 39

<sup>16</sup> *Amazing Grace*, page 40

societies including the British Foreign Bible Society, the Church Missionary Society, the Society for the Manufacturing Poor and the Society for the Better Observance of Sunday. He worked for the alleviation of harsh child labor conditions, agricultural reform, and the prevention of animal cruelty. Since he wasted his wealth early in his life, he devoted the latter part of it to the poor. Each year he would give a minimum of one fourth of his income to feeding the poor, and often welcomed more strangers into his home than space would allow.

Meanwhile, Wilberforce held a steady relational ministry, and sought to win his unbelieving colleagues for Christ. He was an evangelist. The diversity of the needs and crimes and injustices confirmed his evangelical conviction that Christians must deal with the root of the problem (which is depravity) if they are to influence a culture for good.

Wilberforce said that God had placed before him two great objects, the abolition of slavery and the reformation of morals. The latter is an object that God has placed before all Christians. Wilberforce understood that changing people's minds about slavery does not save them. He understood that depravity, not slavery, was the underlying issue. Today, Christians should likewise remember that crime, abortion and homosexuality are direct results of depravity. Our goal should not merely be to convert pro-abortionists to pro-life advocates, but to be Wilberforce-like in the winning of depraved souls.

## Sources

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