

William Wilberforce: The Little Man Who Changed the World

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Steve DeWitt

For many years we have taken one weekend a year to focus on the history of the church and how God worked providentially through people, people just like us, to fulfill his purposes and will. We normally do this Reformation weekend but our Mission Them 2.0 pushed it back a few weeks. Our church history weekends are among my favorites because they have been an occasion for us to live vicariously through the lives of our fathers and mothers in the faith.

I really recommend the reading of Christian biography! Few things have been more of a blessing to me. Scripture urges us to do so. The Old Testament is filled with biographies: Moses, Abraham, Esther, Daniel and so forth. Hebrews 11 is the great chapter of faith recounting the example of the saints.

Hebrews 13:7 (NLT) exhorts us, *Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith.*

This weekend we are focusing on a Christian hero who is probably the most influential Christian in history that you have maybe never heard of or know little about. William Wilberforce. "Taken all together, it's difficult to escape the verdict that William Wilberforce was simply the greatest social reformer in the history of the world." (Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, p. xvii)

William Wilberforce. The greatest Christian you've never heard of. He was a little man, and a wee little man was he. He stood five feet tall and was a slender waif of a man. But inside that little man was a huge heart for God which transformed Western Civilization and the world we live in today. I want to tell you his story. As I tell it, please realize that we merely want to "imitate the outcome of his life." He was a sinner just like us. If we knew him personally, we would have seen faults and contradictions in him. So let's not hold him too high. Let's just imitate the outcome of his life.

Childhood

He was born in northern England on August 24, 1759. To give this a historical context, Wilberforce was born 17 years before the American Revolution in 1776. He was British. He was born into a family of business and wealth.

Like most of England at the time, his parents were as religious as they had to be to keep up appearances, but there was no reality to it. These were days in England when culturally people affirmed being Christian in a general sense but it was very looked down upon to take your faith seriously—especially in high society.

There were exceptions to this. They were known as the Methodists. Methodist was a term of derision, kind of like "Bible thumper" is today. Evangelists George Whitfield and John Wesley had created a wave of authentic Christian expression, mostly in the lower class. Most were appalled that anyone would take their faith that seriously or let it interfere with their immoral lifestyles.

When William was 9, his father died and he was sent to live with his even wealthier aunt and uncle. Unbeknownst to the rest of the family, this aunt and uncle were not only Methodists, but close personal friends with George Whitefield. They used their vast wealth to finance Christian ministries in England. Wilberforce never met Whitefield, but the passion his aunt and uncle had for Jesus made a strong impression on him. Through them, he also connected with the well-known pastor, John Newton. Newton is the famous author of the song *Amazing Grace* and was himself a former slave owner and trader.

Eventually, William's mother found out that the aunt and uncle were "crazy" Methodists and influencing dear William and rushed there to take him back home before he became like them. Those two years planted seeds in William's heart. We could ask, if a child spent two years living in our homes, what seeds would be planted in his or her heart?

The seeds were there, but like the Parable of the Sower, there were no roots and Wilberforce became a typical rich partying brat of a teenager.

Then William went to Cambridge University. While there, his natural gifts flourished. By all accounts he was incredibly gifted as a communicator, conversationalist, thinker, humorist, and even singer. People were drawn to him. He was a friendship force of nature. Like he did with the Apostle Paul, God would use those natural gifts to confront the greatest evil of his day and one of the most grievous in all of human history.

The other thing that happened at Cambridge that would define his life is that he became friends with William Pitt. Little did these teenagers know that one day, they would both be given the highest honor in England, both buried at Westminster Abbey in London. Friends entombed only yards apart.

William Pitt was the son of the Prime Minister of England. Remember, the US was a colony in formation. The superpower of the world was Great Britain. Like the US does now, Britain set the tone and policy for the world. The Prime Minister of Great Britain, along with the King, ruled the world. Wilberforce became close friends with William Pitt (to be known in history as William Pitt the Younger). They were a match for each other in intellectual curiosity, cleverness, and eloquence. Although both held talents in them that would shake the world, William Pitt said of Wilberforce, "the greatest natural eloquence of all the men I ever knew."

In his Cambridge days, William Pitt would take Wilberforce with him to London and attend sessions of Britain's Parliament. Watching these made the ambitious Wilberforce consider a career in politics.

He wasted no time. At the age 20, somewhat on a lark, he ran for parliament. He was only two weeks past the allowable age by law and yet he won the seat. A few months later William Pitt also won a seat. This is like two sophomores at Purdue becoming US congressman. Within four years, Wilberforce won the most powerful seat in all of Parliament. It was the equivalent of being the senior US Senator from New York.

How did he do it? He had a gifted tongue and his interest in everything and everyone drew people to him. At 24, he was famous all over London and Britain. He was rich, powerful, single, sought out by all in higher society. So why are we talking about him 250 years later?

Wilberforce's Conversion

In God's providence, Wilberforce went on a tour of Europe and invited Isaac Milner to accompany him in the carriage. Milner was a great man himself. He held the professorial position at Cambridge later held by Stephen Hawking. Milner might have been the smartest man in all of England, and unbeknownst to William, was a Methodist Christian. This was discovered in the course of their tour and they debated Christianity while driving through the Alps by carriage. By the time they arrived back in England, Wilberforce had changed his mind about Christianity. In fact, he had come to believe basic Christian doctrine to be true.

But now what to do? He was the famous Wilberforce. He was famous for his partying and socializing. Yet God was working on his heart and Wilberforce was bewildered with what to do about it.

Taking a page from Nicodemus who went to Jesus in the night, Wilberforce reached out to the pastor from his childhood, old Pastor John Newton. He went to meet him secretly and poured out his heart. He was now a Christian but what should he do? Should he quit politics? Should he do something else? Can a Christian be a politician? Wise old Pastor Newton has a biblical worldview. He knew that every vocation can be done to the glory of God; even one in Parliament. Newton encouraged him to remain in his position and do all the good he could in it.

Wilberforce referred to his conversion as "*The Great Change*;" a good description of salvation don't you think? Two years later he wrote a personal vision statement which would be his life's work and which would shake and change the whole world.

God Almighty has set before me two Great Objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners. (William Wilberforce, age 26)

We will spend most of our time on his work on the abolition of slavery. But the other commitment needs note. The reformation of manners meant the reformation of culture and society. Britain at the time was a cesspool of debauchery, crudeness, and filth. In London alone, 25% of all the women in the city were prostitutes. It was a decadent society and the social ills suffered by all including children were heartbreaking to Wilberforce. At one time, he was personally involved in 69 separate ministries and enterprises seeking to alleviate suffering and misery in the country.

"His new perspective made him about as zealous to improve the social conditions of the world around him as anyone who as ever lived." (Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, p. 64)

Wilberforce and the Slave Trade

The bull's-eye of Wilberforce's life work was the horror and atrocity of slavery. It is nearly impossible for us to understand the magnitude of what he was considering. The African Slave Trade was a key part of the whole British economy with huge influence and a lobby in Parliament. Further, it was a trade Britain's enemies would be all too happy to take over and prosper from. It was nearly unthinkable that it would ever be eliminated.

But Wilberforce was not looking at this as a Brit, or a politician. He was doing what real Christians do—he was looking at his world like a Christian.

Trading slaves wasn't like trading wheat—every one of those slaves was a person, a human being made in the image of God. Their capture, kidnapping, and slave ship transports to a

life of servitude was as anti-Christian love as anything Wilberforce could think of. It was certainly the antithesis of loving your neighbor as yourself. In this way, it's not that different from how we look at a baby in her mother's womb. An image-bearer of God. The Christian worldview loves God's image everywhere, no matter the skin color, age, disability, or whether it's in the womb or not.

Further, the conditions on the slave ships were so ghastly as to be beyond fathoming. Only a small percentage of Africans put in the ships survived the experience alive. Add to that the beatings, rapes, and further deplorable treatment; slavery was a moral cancer on the whole country and Wilberforce would spend the rest of his life fighting it.

I don't have time to go into the details of how he did it other than to remark on the incredible perseverance he showed us for 20 years as he introduced bill after bill to abolish the slave trade. Year after year he suffered defeat. Yet he continued to try and prick the conscience of the social elite. A recent movie about Wilberforce called *Amazing Grace*, reenacts some of his passion....

Amazing Grace clip #1: <https://vimeo.com/80014979>

For 20 years he stirred the conscience of the nation. He was a solo voice. Slowly things began to change. This was no doubt part of Wilberforce's influence beyond legislation. His own life modeled this. He married at 37 and went on to have six children. He was a doting father and even this was an example to the upper class who largely ignored their children.

It was slowly becoming fashionable for the upper society to see themselves as having a responsibility to others; to use their wealth and influence to alleviate the suffering of others. That wasn't at all part of society before Wilberforce. The whole philanthropic world of today—the hospitals, orphanages, and compassion ministries funded by people with money—owes their source to Wilberforce.

Finally, in 1807, when he was 48 years old and after 18 years of struggle, a vote was made by both houses of Parliament, abolishing the slave trade in all British colonies. This was the major breakthrough William and so many other Christians had labored for....

Amazing Grace clip #2: <https://vimeo.com/80015756>

The struggle for abolition would go on. While the *trading* of slaves was abolished, slavery was not. Wilberforce continued the struggle. At last, in 1833, 26 years later, three days before Wilberforce died, and the day before he lost consciousness, Parliament voted and abolished not just the trade of slaves, but all slavery in all British colonies. Thirty years later the United States would have a bloody war over the same issue and Abraham Lincoln would draw inspiration from a little five-foot tall man who had taken on the British Empire for love of God and man, and had won.

It's safe to say, if there was no Wilberforce, there would never have been a Lincoln, and if there was no Lincoln, what kind of world would we live in today?

Lessons from the Life and Example of William Wilberforce

Wherever true Christianity goes, it changes the world like salt to food and light to darkness

Here I am quoting Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. I emphasize “true” Christianity. Britain had libraries filled with doctrine, but the truth was not in their hearts. Then along came a little fellow named Wilberforce. His generosity of spirit and sincerity shamed the most powerful nation in the world. Light does that to darkness. It changes things. We can think of this in terms of our church and Mission Them 2.0, but I’d like us to think about it primarily personally. How is my faith changing *my* world? If we say that it is not, we cannot hide behind our quiet personality or that society doesn’t want to hear about it. Britain had no ears for what Wilberforce was saying, yet his life was so indomitable and his spirit so refreshingly sincere, even mighty Britain crumbled before it.

Sanctification and gospel transformation usually comes incrementally

So many times along the way, Wilberforce could have been called a failure. He was mocked and scorned. Yet, things were changing and each change was a necessary step along the way. Wilberforce showed that change happens slowly and the race of righteousness often goes to the turtle and not to the hare. He persevered for the cause through personal pain as well. He suffered tremendous physical problems: he was nearly blind and his body and spine were severely contorted. He had children whose spiritual choices and the death of one daughter broke his heart. As joyous as William was, his wife was melancholy and given to depression. All this he bore on his back.

As we look at our lives and our church, are we a failure because 500,000 people in our region don’t yet have a discernable faith in Jesus or even go to church, any church? Should we be discouraged? Not if we see incremental change. This family here. This ministry start up there. Slowly, over time, the mustard seed of the kingdom of God grows.

The necessary motive: Love for God overflowing with love for man

Why would a rich white aristocrat politician in England care about an African teenager on a slave ship? Their worlds could not be more different. Most politicians did not care. But the great change that came into Wilberforce’s life, this love for God through Jesus, produced the greatest social reformer in the history of the world. How?

Wilberforce had experienced God’s love for him. That love in him produced an enduring compassion for humanity. Children. Blacks. Whites. He was instrumental in opening India to the gospel, personally doing the legislation that allowed William Carey to take the gospel there. All people. All backgrounds. All races. *When God’s love to us through Jesus is treasured in us, it produces great love for others through us.*

*“Taken all together, it’s difficult to escape the verdict that William Wilberforce was simply the greatest social reformer in the history of the world. The world that he was born into in 1759 and the world he departed in 1833 were as different as lead and gold. Wilberforce presided over a social earthquake that rearranged the continents and whose magnitude we are only now beginning to fully appreciate.” (Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, p. xvii)*

What are we to do? Consider the outcome of his life and imitate his faith. May our church reflect Wilberforce-type love of others because we have experienced the amazing grace of God to us.

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