

THE SOUNDING MEGAPHONE



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William Wilberforce led a tremendous fight in the 1800s to abolish slavery. I love to tell the story of it. God sustained him and so many others who threw themselves into the fight. They would not accept injustice in their society. My we gain courage from their example and from their victory. God bless you.

Shawn Stevens

P. O. Box 933,
Lynden, WA 98264,
U. S. A.

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John Newton, William Wilberforce and the Abolition of Slavery

“I have borne thirteen children and seen ’em mos’ all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard”¹ These words were lamentably spoken by Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), a Negro woman who was born as a slave to slave owners in New York. She was separated from her family, being sold twice before the age of twelve. She was eventually freed by her master in 1827.² The African slave trade involved 11, 313,000 Africans being sold as slaves between the years of 1450 and 1900.³ Africans, both male and female, were violently captured through warfare, slave raiding and kidnaping. They were crowded into large ships and sent to the New World, as well as to Europe, to be sold as property. Many slaves felt that their sufferings were ignored by

everyone. However, Jesus did hear the cries of multitudes of slaves, slaves just like Sojourner Truth. He began raising up leaders, kindling a righteous anger within them to war against slavery, and to act as the conscience of a nation.

The story of the abolition of slavery is the story of committed, conscience-sensitive Christian leaders such as John Newton, John Wesley, Thomas Clarkson, James Ramsey, William Wilberforce, and others, who preached passionately and argued convincingly for an end to slavery. In visiting this time in history, I would like to begin with the story of John Newton.

John Newton was born in London, in 1725. His Christian mother taught him her faith, but she died suddenly when Newton was only seven years old. Newton then came under the influence of his much less devout father. His father was a

sea captain and taught Newton seamanship. However, at age seventeen, Newton was distracted from his training in seamanship by a Miss Mary Catlett, age thirteen, whom he fell in love with. His father had arranged for Newton to work for a prosperous shipping company that dealt in slaves and sugar. He was to go on a trip to Jamaica to gain valuable experience. However, Newton intentionally missed the ship so that he could be with Mary. Upset, his father sent Newton to work as a common sailor on a different ship.

In this environment, Newton conformed to the rough living and sinful habits of his fellow seamen. In 1744, Newton gave up an opportunity to be a ship's officer by missing a second voyage, again to be with Mary. At this time, he fell victim to a naval press-gang. These groups would forcibly kidnap poverty-stricken young men and enlist them into the navy. That same year, after some short-term service, Newton was told that he was being sent on

a five-year return voyage to the East Indies. Determined to stay with Mary, he fled the ship, only to be arrested and dragged back in chains. He was stripped and flogged. Arrangements were made for him to serve on a slave trading ship instead of a naval vessel, and this led to him working at a slave factory on the Plantain Islands near Sierra Leone. During the next two years, Newton sunk into terrible poverty. He eventually rose out of this situation to work for a new employer, again on a slave ship. Newton was on his way to becoming an owner of his own slaving operation. 4

Unexpectedly, Newton's slaving operation, as well as his very life, became threatened on March 21, 1748. While traveling from Brazil to Newfoundland with a cargo of slaves, Newton encountered a violent storm. The ship took on water as part of it began to split apart. Newton and the crew pumped and bailed exhaustively all night. The

threat of the ship sinking was very real and Newton began to reflect upon his life. At first, he felt that he had sinned too greatly for God to forgive him. Then, he began to remember scriptures that taught of God's grace towards sinners. In the midst of this desperate situation he began praying to God, pleading for mercy. The ship made it to port and Newton's life was spared. Although he had turned to God, for the next year Newton seemed to stumble back into his old lifestyle. Again, he was endangered by contracting a serious illness. Again, Newton turned to God in prayer, and this time seemed to establish a serious relationship with God. From then on, he developed a consistent habit of prayer. Newton and Mary were married on February 1, 1750. Surprisingly, he did not leave the slave industry immediately, however, with each passing day he developed a stronger distaste for this industry. In 1754, Newton made the break and left slave trading forever. Newton is best known for the famous hymn,

“Amazing Grace”:

*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.
T'was grace that taught
my heart to fear, and
grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that
grace appear the hour I
first believed.*

He went on to become a minister, and became very zealous in this calling, travelling throughout England, holding services, doing visitations and working with children. 5

One important life that crossed paths with John Newton was William Wilberforce. Wilberforce was born on August 24, 1759, and spent much of his childhood in Hull, England. When he was nine his father died and he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle. In this family, Wilberforce gained

exposure to evangelical ministers such as George Whitefield and John Newton. His mother disliked evangelicalism and when she discovered this influence, she removed Wilberforce from his aunt and uncle's home. In 1776, Wilberforce enrolled in St. John's College, Cambridge. Not long after graduation, Wilberforce ran for election for member of Parliament, representing Hull. He was only twenty-one years old and, though running against a strong political opponent, he won the election, beginning his political career. In 1784, he won the election again to Parliament, this time for Yorkshire, one of the most coveted seats in the House of Commons.

Despite all of his outward success, Wilberforce was inwardly wrestling with spiritual issues. In 1784, he decided to visit a former tutor named Isaac Milner. Through the witness and influence of Milner, as well as by reading the Bible and another book, called "The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul,"

Wilberforce had a deep spiritual conversion to Christ. ⁶ This resulted in profound changes in his way of life. He began starting his days with prayer and recorded his meditations. He also quit gambling and resigned from clubs that he had been attending. ⁷ Not long after this, Wilberforce sought out John Newton whom he had met and learned from as a child.

Wilberforce found Newton pastoring a church in London. By this time, Newton was known throughout England for his piety and zeal.⁸ Having been converted out of a life of slave-trading, Newton spoke out against the slave trade with much conviction. He cried out for justice for the "pitiableness" slaves "who are torn from their relatives, connections, and their native land ..." and declared that "the blood of many thousands of our helpless, much injured fellow creatures is crying against us." ⁹ Newton had great influence upon Wilberforce. In Wilberforce's

journal, there are frequent references saying “go and converse with Mr. Newton.” 10 Likely, it was during these times that Newton instilled in Wilberforce his convictions concerning the evils of the slave trade. Wilberforce was seriously considering leaving politics before Newton convinced him that God had placed him there. 11 So, we see the influence of Newton on Wilberforce and how, because of Newton’s advice, Wilberforce remained in politics, eventually fighting the slave trade in Parliament.

Wilberforce’s fight in Parliament shows us the link between his mission of the abolition of the slave trade and his Christian faith. He did not try to separate faith from politics. For example, he wrote that if “a principle of true religion [ie, true Christianity] should in any considerable degree gain ground, there is no estimating the effects on public morals and the consequent influence on our political welfare.” 12 Wilberforce felt a

responsibility to do what he could to see that true Christianity would take ground, and felt that God had assigned him to this task. He said on one occasion, “My walk I am sensible is a public one, my business is with the World, and I must mix in the assemblies of men or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me.” 13 Wilberforce looked to the Bible for direction in all areas of life, including politics. 14 He believed that social reform must have a spiritual base, and that those who would attempt reform without this base would flaw in their efforts and in the end, do harm. 15 He said, “My judgment ... rests altogether on the word of God.” 16 Realizing the responsibility that goes with making such statements, he further said, “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.” 17 He taught that the gospel of Christ could never “be too

strongly insisted on.” 18
Wilberforce did not simply believe and teach these things in a general way; he applied his faith to the issue of the abolition of slavery. He made the famous declaration that “God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners” (reforming morally). 19 He taught that the abolition of the slave trade was “the grand object of my parliamentary existence,” and that “before this great cause all others dwindle in my eyes.” 20 Wilberforce boldly declared that “in the Scripture, no national crime is condemned so frequently and few so strongly as oppression and cruelty, and the not using of our best endeavors to deliver our fellow creatures from them.” 21 He believed that the slave trade was not only terrible for the suffering slaves, but it was also bad for England because it brought England under God’s judgment. He plainly stated:

You still don’t understand. I have not fought the slave trade just

because it is terrible or because it haunts me. I’ve fought it because it’s wrong. I have done it for the sake of this nation and our people just as much as for the African slaves. I have done it because I know that God will not allow a people to prosper who deliberately condone evil and hide their faces from [H]is judgments. 22

So it is clear that, while Wilberforce was combating the slave trade for the sake of the slaves, as well as for the sake of England, his underlying motivation was his faith.

Many other abolitionists shared Wilberforce’s motivation, and Wilberforce did not combat the slave trade alone. He was well aware of the Quaker’s stand for abolition and, in 1787, Wilberforce consulted the Quaker’s Abolition Committee, seeking advice on how he could

best initiate parliamentary action against the slave trade. 23 Their advice became useful to Wilberforce in constructing some of his arguments. On one occasion, Wilberforce engaged in an attempt to persuade William Eden, a high-ranking government minister, of the injustice of the slave trade. He based his arguments largely on the writings of a Quaker named Benezet. 24

Wilberforce not only received encouragement from Quakers, but also from the revivalist John Wesley. Wesley was a life-long opponent of slavery. He spoke against it, and wrote against it, in a short pamphlet called “Thoughts Upon Slavery.” 25 Wilberforce greatly admired John Wesley and met him on one occasion. In a letter to Wilberforce just six days before Wesley’s death, Wesley said:

*... if God is with you,
who can be against you?
Are all of them stronger
than God? Oh, be not
weary in well-doing. Go*

*on, in the name of God
and in the power of His
might, till even
American slavery, the
vilest that ever saw the
sun, shall vanish away
before it ... that He who
has guided you from
your youth up, may
continue to strengthen
you in this and in all
things, is the prayer of
Dear Sir, your
affectionate servant,
John Wesley. 26*

Being the last letter that Wesley wrote before his death, this was an especially great inspiration for Wilberforce in his battle against the slave trade.

As well as Wesley being an inspiration to Wilberforce, so was Thomas Clarkson.

Clarkson was a committed Christian who found the slave trade revolting. In 1785, in the early days of abolitionism, Clarkson wrote an essay called “Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species” and read his essay

before the Cambridge University Senate. 27 This essay became famous and it was officially published in 1786. 28 Clarkson knew of Wilberforce, who had not yet entered the abolitionist cause and, in 1787, visited Wilberforce's home and left a copy of his writing. 29 This essay greatly impacted Wilberforce. 30 This book was the first piece of what would be volumes of abolitionist literature written by Clarkson. In a conversation with Prime Minister William Pitt, Wilberforce promised to examine the abolitionist evidence which Clarkson had amassed. Clarkson also formed an organization called "The Committee for Abolition of the African Slave Trade." 31 Wilberforce joined the group, and through this involvement was brought into close contact with other leading abolitionists such as Granville Sharp and James Ramsey. Much of Clarkson's material was used by Wilberforce in Parliament. 32 Prior to meeting Clarkson, Wilberforce was influenced by the minister, James Ramsey.

Having boarded a slave-trading ship, while working as a doctor, Ramsey had first-hand knowledge of the horrifying conditions slaves were subjected to. In 1784, he wrote a book titled, "Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies." 33 Wilberforce had met Ramsey in the previous year and, in 1784, read Ramsey's book with much interest. 34 That same year Ramsey wrote another book, titled "An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade, and of Granting Liberty to the Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies." In this book, he proposed a way of abolishing the slave trade, and how to improve conditions in Africa. This book had a considerable influence upon Pitt and Wilberforce. 35 In his deliberations with Eden, Wilberforce referenced Ramsey's writings and said that he had found them to be accurate. 36

As well as being assisted and encouraged by the Christian counsel of individuals such as Newton, the Quakers, Wesley, Clarkson and Ramsey, Wilberforce worked with a small group of colleagues that became known as the Clapham Community. The group began in 1792 when Wilberforce's friend, Henry Thornton, invited Wilberforce to share a place of residence with him in an area of south London called Clapham. 37 Wilberforce accepted the invitation and the two lived together as bachelors for five years. 38 Before long, many other abolitionists were visiting this home, and even moved into the area. Their homes became headquarters for many abolitionist efforts. They held "cabinet councils" where they worked out their strategies for combating the slave trade. 39 The evangelical scholar, Granville Sharp, who is regarded by some as the father of English abolitionism, also joined the group. His writings and his encouragement were of great help

to Wilberforce. 40 For the most part, the members of this group had in common strong Christian faith. Garth Lean says that "they aimed to make every decision on a basis of what, as far as they could see, God desired for the whole fellowship and for the country; they believed this perspective was not best found alone." 41 Lean further says that this nucleus of Christian abolitionists "sustained him [Wilberforce] in his struggles as he did in theirs." 42

Having found a motivation for abolitionism within his own spiritual experience, as well as being aided by the Christian abolitionist encouragement of others, Wilberforce engaged in an unrelenting war against the slave trade. In 1789, Wilberforce began putting forward motions in Parliament for the banning of the slave trade. His first motion took the form of a three-and-a-half-hour speech before Parliament in which he condemned the trading of slaves. 43 This was a

courageous endeavor that he was embarking on, one that could cost him his political career.

Prior to his abolitionist stand, Wilberforce had gained much popularity in England. Many historians believe that Wilberforce was a likely candidate to succeed William Pitt as Prime Minister, had he not embarked on a public fight against the slave trade. 44 But Wilberforce's mind was made up. He declared, "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." 45 Soon, Wilberforce found himself standing against a wave of opposition that would continue for the duration of his life. There was much public criticism and vicious slander directed at him. West Indian sea captains threatened his life. The royal family, along with other

powerful political individuals, opposed him. The famous admiral, Lord Nelson, viciously spoke out against him. 47 Prime Minister Pitt, who initially encouraged Wilberforce, eventually withdrew his support for abolitionism. Even Wilberforce's wife was pessimistic and critical towards Wilberforce for not spending enough time with her. 48 Wilberforce faced physical hindrances as well. At the outset of his battle in Parliament, he began experiencing eye problems that increased to the point at which he could hardly write. 49 However, even with all of these obstacles, Wilberforce could not be dissuaded. He was labouring for a cause that many thought was unachievable. Yet, with a bottom-line mentality, Wilberforce declared to the House of Commons that, regardless of the consequences, he had determined that he would never rest until he had effected the abolition of the slave trade. 50 One man in

London commented, “It is necessary to watch him, as he is blessed with a very sufficient quantity of that enthusiastic spirit, which is so far from yielding that it grows more vigorous from blows.” 51 Wilberforce continued to bring forward motions in Parliament for abolition. With great fervour and intensity, he debated with pro-slavery forces who opposed his motions. On April 18, 1791, Wilberforce’s debate lasted until 3:30 A.M., only to have his motion rejected. Sometimes Wilberforce’s motions lost by large margins. Other times, the votes were close. In 1793, his motion, on a third reading, lost by three votes. On several occasions, in 1793 and 1804, Wilberforce’s motion for abolition was passed in the House of Commons, only to have it overturned in the House of Lords. 52 In 1805, Wilberforce put forward his thirteenth motion for the abolition of the slave trade, only to have it again rejected. Mr. Hatsell, the clerk of the House of Commons, said to him, “You ought not to expect to carry a

measure of this kind.” 53 Wilberforce responded, “I do expect to carry it, and, what is more, I feel assured I shall carry it speedily.” 54 Finally, in February of 1807, a motion in favour of abolition was carried in the House of Commons, winning by the huge majority of 283 to 16. 55 Wilberforce’s long, hard battle had succeeded. However, now addressing slavery in the whole of the British Empire, Wilberforce and the abolitionists continued their fight. In 1833, just three days before Wilberforce’s death, the Emancipation Act was passed, officially banning slavery in the British Empire. 56 Christopher D. Hancock said that “[t]he most malignant evil of the British Empire ceased largely because of the faith and persistence of William Wilberforce.” 57

Through the faith and persistence of Wilberforce, the slave trade was overturned. The fact that the battle was long does not testify to the ineffectiveness of Wilberforce,

but rather, it testifies to the opposite, that neither his motivation nor efforts could be dissuaded. Committed, conscience-sensitive Christian leaders, from John Newton to John Wesley, from Thomas Clarkson to James Ramsey, stood with Wilberforce in his battle. Having achieved the abolition of the slave trade, Wilberforce and the Christian abolitionists fought on to see slavery within the British Empire abolished. That abolishment aided not only Blacks in the West Indies, but those in Africa as well. The slave trade was aborted as a result of the living Christian faith within William Wilberforce finding expression in the abolitionist cause. Wilberforce clearly linked his mission with his faith. Knowing that he would one day give an account of his political conduct before the judgment seat of Christ, he set about the two great goals before him, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners. He reasoned his case, sometimes from Scripture, and sometimes

from the research of other strong Christian leaders who stood behind Wilberforce, adding to his zeal. Whether from his home in Clapham, or before statesmen in the House of Commons, Wilberforce led an unrelenting war against the trading of slaves. In debates that lasted for hours, Wilberforce pressed upon the consciences of his parliamentary audiences the moral obligation to end the slave trade. He endured the criticism and vicious slander that was hurled against him, and he persevered through the opposition of powerful political figures with an enthusiastic spirit that grew more vigorous from blows, and lived to see the official abolishment of both the slave trade and slavery within the British Empire.

APPENDIX

The abolition of slavery was not the only battle that Wilberforce fought. In 1797, he wrote a book called “A Practical View of Christianity.” One theme in this book was about how Christianity should guide politics. 58 Another theme that was strongly developed was the concept of duty. This book became a best seller and, according to Donald M. Lewis, “probably did more than any other single publication to promote the revival of evangelical Christianity in the early nineteenth-century Britain.” 59 Wilberforce gave away a fourth of his annual income to the poor, as well as partially supporting Charles Wesley’s widow from 1792 until her death in 1822. 61 He, and the Clapham Community, stood for education for the masses, prison reform and improvement in factory conditions. They fought child labor, savage game laws and flogging in the army. They even intervened on behalf of persons outside of Britain, including the American Indians. They founded

the Church Missionary Society as well as the British and Foreign Bible Society. Their religious tract society published five thousand different articles, reproducing them in 500,000,000 copies. 62

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