

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 intense 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.'* He was, in a very real sense, God's Politician!

## 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.

A year after the death of his father William was sent to live with his uncle and aunt, William and Hannah Wilberforce. Whilst in that home the young lad was exposed to the preaching of George Whitefield and John Newton and was particularly enthralled by the latter's sermons! His mother, thoroughly opposed to evangelical religion (*'what she considered was little less than poison'*), spirited him away from London in order to rescue him from the *'enthusiasts'*! Years later William's sons would comment on a *'rare and pleasing character of piety'* that marked him during his twelfth year, but whatever religious concerns he had were throttled by his mother and his friends who *'spared no pains to stifle them'* As a result, as he grew into young manhood, he gave himself to the theatre, balls, great suppers and card parties!

At age seventeen Wilberforce entered Cambridge University. His academic career was less than sterling. The Wilberforce of Cambridge and of his early years in politics was a feckless, frivolous, fun-loving young man. *'I used to play cards and nothing else,'* he would say later. His gregarious nature, his *'talents, his wit, his kindness, his social powers...and his love of society'* (made him) *the centre of attraction to all the clever and idle of his own college* (St. John's)!

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'*. 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!'*

**CONVERSION**

That self-deprecating reference aside, in 1784-5 Wilberforce was *'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.'* At this point in his life, God laid hold of him! He would admit that, at the time, in the true sense of the word, he was no Christian. He would also insist that evangelical views were held only by *'vulgar or at least uninformed enthusiastic persons.'* However two vacation trips to the continent in the company of Isaac Milner, an evangelical Christian, would prove to be the decisive turning point in Wilberforce's life. In the course of their holidays the two would read and discuss Philip Doddridge's ***The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul***, as well as study the Greek New Testament. Profound conviction of his *'great sinfulness in having so long neglected the unspeakable mercies of my God and Saviour'* would follow until finally the gloom lifted on Easter 1786. The change is evident in his diary. Instead of *'darkness', 'coldness', 'weakness' and 'wretched'* we begin to read about *'peace' and 'hope'*. 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 in truth!'*

It was at this point that John Newton was of immense help to Wilberforce. The fashionable world looked upon evangelicals like Newton with contempt and suspicion and consequently Wilberforce had *'ten thousand doubts'* about making contact with him! Eventually he plucked up the courage and visited the erstwhile slave trader. 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.'* 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.

**CALLING**

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.'*

There were several other factors that influenced Wilberforce: 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 he died), brought pressure to bear upon Wilberforce to take up the cause; Thomas Clarke's book *Slavery and Commerce in the Human Species* and frequent visits by the author to Wilberforce played a significant part; the continued influence, friendship and advice of John Newton. In these and other ways God brought William Wilberforce 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.'*

**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 there was more to his agenda. 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'*. Though England was flourishing in many ways, and though 'the 18th 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.'* John Stott quotes J. Wesley Bready's scathing indictment of 18th Century England – Bready describes the *'deep savagery of much of the 18th 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.'* Bready goes on to argue that *'then things began to change. And in the 19th 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, practical Christianity... The Evangelical Revival did more to transfigure the moral character of the general populace than any other movement British history can record'*. In that movement, William Wilberforce played no small part! While he recognized that *'regulating the outward conduct did not change the hearts of men,'* he enthusiastically used the political means that were at his disposal to regulate that conduct and *'make goodness fashionable again'*. Ever the evangelist, 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.'* To give 'teeth' to the proclamation Wilberforce set up societies to promote virtues at a local level, and addressed issues such as justice, drunkenness, lewdness, literature, and the like; enlisted the aid of the 'movers and shakers' of his day (not all of whom were overtly religious) to promote the movement; gave direction to *'the many thousands whose lives had been transformed by the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley and enabled them to get involved in the campaign to clean up and reshape the nation.'*

It should be noted that Wilberforce led by example. His involvement in philanthropic endeavours was monumental. It was said that *'factories did not spring up more rapidly in Leeds and Manchester than schemes of benevolence beneath his roof.'* John Pollock's chapter entitled 'Prisoners and the Poor' provides a dizzying survey of Wilberforce's multitudinous activities! He was: involved in prison reform along with Jeremy Bentham and Elizabeth Fry; governor of St. Bartholomew's Hospital; 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; generous to a fault and

before his marriage he regularly gave away one quarter of his annual income (he also gave an annuity to Charles Wesley's widow from 1792 until her death in 1822).

Wilberforce was founder of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He 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...he established orphanages for 'criminal poor children' He helped form the British and Foreign Bible Society (1803), and assisted in the launching of the Church Missionary Society (1798). He was involved in sending missionaries to Tahiti and regularly supported William Carey's Baptist Mission in India. He was involved in the founding of the Society for the Education of Africans and involved too 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). He was president, vice-president or committee man of no less than sixty-nine societies!

Two hundred years ago Britain was the world's largest slave trading nation. This 'execrable villainy' involved purchasing human beings (for beads and the like), transporting them to the West Indies and the Americas (a trip characterized by unspeakable suffering and during which approximately ten percent of the slaves perished), and upon arriving at the destination, selling these human beings into a life of servitude (strong men for forty pounds each, while the sick and injured were lumped together with women and children and sold off at a discount)!

Opposition to the abolition of the slave trade was considerable! This was so for at least two reasons. First, the trade was profitable. The profit was often over 100% of the initial outlay. The trade constituted 4.4% of British exports. Furthermore, 18,000 people in England were involved in making goods to trade for slaves, and upwards of 5500 sailors manned 160 ships. A second argument was the matter of national security. The trade provided training ground for British seamen. Furthermore, were the British to 'cease to carry slaves, her continental rivals would merely wax rich on her restraint.' How much wickedness is justified in the cause of profit and self-interest!

Many had already raised their voice against the slave trade, but the efforts at abolition would be galvanized under the leadership of Wilberforce. The battleground would be the British parliament. The movement had found its champion in the member from York, and he would lead the charge by doggedly introducing bills for abolition into parliament year after year – the first coming in May of 1789.

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.' 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?'; 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.

John Pollock makes the telling observation that Wilberforce was 'a proof that a man may change his times, though he cannot do it alone.' Indeed he did not. Henry Thornton, Granville Sharp, John Venn, Hannah More, James Stephen, Thomas Clarkson, and Zachary Macaulay were William's gifted and godly co-labourers in the cause. Under the gracious, diplomatic and deeply spiritual leadership of Wilberforce, these varied personalities and talents were blended to form a formidable force for good to their generation. 'No prime minister had such a cabinet as Wilberforce could summon to his assistance,' opines one writer. 'It was a unique phenomenon – this brotherhood of Christian politicians. There has never been anything like it since in British public life,' writes another. A sad commentary indeed on the English political scene!

The final push in the campaign came 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'. The bill passed with a tremendous majority – 283-16. Applause rained down upon Wilberforce as he sat, head in hands, tears streaming down his face. *'Well, Henry, what shall we abolish next,'* he would later say to Thornton. *'The lottery, I think,'* was the humourless reply!

The last eighteen years of Wilberforce's life would be a sustained effort to bring about the total emancipation of existing slaves. Tracts would be distributed, Wilberforce would write, Thomas Foxwell Buxton would be brought in to take over from the aging and infirm Wilberforce to spearhead the movement. Finally, three months before he died, an ailing Wilberforce was persuaded 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!'* On July 29, 1833, just three days after the bill for the total abolition of slavery was passed, William Wilberforce, the 'Washington of Humanity', died

## **HIS CHARACTER**

### **A Christian Man**

Wilberforce was, above all, a Christian man. The fruit of the Spirit was abundantly evident in his life. He was a humble man. He was able to take criticism and also sought to avoid taking credit. He considered himself unworthy of a title. Throughout his life he saw the need to cooperate with other men, realizing he could not do it alone. He was humble enough to see the need to 'network'. How often zealous pastors fail here! He was a prayerful man. The morning hours were particularly precious to him as he considered them seasons of *'unusual importance for communing with God'*.

He was a joyful man, and people enjoyed being around him. He was described as both the most religious man in England as well as the wittiest! He was a man of great faith. He laboured faithfully and fervently and left the results with God. His faith was resilient because it was not a faith in himself, but in God. As he said after one of his defeats, God, *'has given the very small increase there has been thus far and must give all if there be more.'* That faith was nurtured by his favourite authors, Philip Doddridge, Richard Baxter, John Owen, John Flavel, John Howe and Jonathan Edwards.

Wilberforce was a man of endurance. In 1791 John Wesley, from his death bed, warned him in a letter: *'Unless the Divine Power has raised you up to be a "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.'* And face opposition he would! 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!' He was accused of beating his wife (while he was still single!). Lord Nelson called him a hypocrite and others accused him of inciting insurrection in the West Indies.

### **A weak vessel**

In addition to persecution Wilberforce had to deal with tremendous health difficulties, and among other things, because of curvature of the spine, had to wear a steel frame for support during the last fifteen to eighteen years of his life. 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'*. Regarding his steel frame he wrote: *'How gracious is God in giving us such mitigations and helps for our infirmities'*.

## A zealous evangelist

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 which to turn the conversation in a spiritual direction and bring the claims of Christ to bear upon those with whom he was speaking. Here indeed was a Christian man.

## A Family Man

In an age when marital infidelity amongst politicians was frequent and appalling, it is encouraging to read about the Wilberforce home. A whirlwind romance with Barbara Ann Spooner 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. Wilberforce was an exemplary father who resigned his Yorkshire seat for a seat in the smaller borough of Bramber so that he might spend more time with his growing family. What an example and rebuke to every Christian father too busy to care for his own children! Above all he was concerned for the souls of his offspring. He wrote with much tenderness to his son Samuel: '*I would be willing to walk barefoot from this place to Sandgate to see clear proof of the great change being begun in my dear Saml at the end of the journey!*' Nonetheless, while he could say that '*the spiritual interests of my children is my first object*', he also loved playing with them and closed one letter by saying, '*I am irresistibly summoned to a game of marbles!*'

## LESSONS

Surely the life of Wilberforce should stir the souls of Christian politicians to '*attempt great things*' and to remain faithful to God in the often sordid world of politics. God never changes and he is still able to use weak men to accomplish great things! Where are the men of faith who will labour for the good of the Church and the good of the nation?

Let us seek to 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). Too often invective is found more readily upon our lips than intercession!

The 'slavery' issue of our day must be vigorously addressed. The grotesque violence of slavery is matched by the vile, wholesale slaughter of the unborn in our own day. If Wilberforce could not be silent while the slaves needed him, surely our mouths must not be silent for those who cannot speak for themselves! Shame on evangelicals who waffle on this issue, or who, while they wag their tongues, will not lift a finger in the fight!

We ought to be thankful for the long and well documented 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 the uninformed speak of the withering impact of hypocritical Christians upon the world. No. Christians have indeed been light and salt in every generation.

Let Christian leaders follow in the footsteps of this man. Let them humbly and enthusiastically work together, esteeming the gifts of others and eschewing a 'lone ranger' mentality; let them press on in the face of opposition and persecution, disappointment and even disaster; let them seek glory for God and not a name for themselves; let them be inflamed with a love for all God's people and a desire to do good to all; let them throw themselves into their life's work with passion and with faith. '*It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His Church and the good of this nation.*'