



The Lawyers' Christian Fellowship

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Wilberforce connection

John Scriven (Autumn 2006)

In 1789 William Wilberforce, five years after accepting Christ as his Lord, wrote 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.”

As the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade fast approaches, it seems very apt for us to reflect upon what lessons we can learn from the role William Wilberforce and the Christian network played in the eventual abolition of slavery in all British dominions.

Wilberforce was actually an MP before he became a Christian. When he found his faith he almost gave up his seat. Like many enthusiastic young believers he considered entering Christian vocational ministry. But, thankfully, he was persuaded to stay in politics by John Newton, the writer of *Amazing Grace* who had been one of the cruellest of slave traders. Newton persuaded Wilberforce to stay in politics and champion his Christian views in parliament.

Where would we be if Newton had not persuaded Wilberforce to stay in politics? It is perhaps difficult to say but we can be fairly confident that the abolition itself may not have taken place without the political action of dedicated Christians like Wilberforce. Their political activity, however, came at a fortuitous time in Britain; they almost certainly would have not been as productive if the campaign to end the slave trade had not taken place at a time when the Christian faith was re-establishing itself as a mainstream of British society and culture.

The change on the culture of the country was profound: the Scottish novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott's great aunt, an intelligent old lady renewing her acquaintance with the novels of Mrs Aphra Behn in the 1820s, remarked how strange it was that she now blushed to look at books which, as a girl, she had heard read aloud to large family circles.

This cultural change flowed from a Christian focus on the personal conversion of individuals (as opposed to a focus on the social transformation of society). In 1797 Wilberforce published a book emphasising the importance of personal conversion: ‘A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System...contrasted with Real Christianity’. His concern for evangelism was also expressed in his involvement in the founding of the Church Missionary Society (1799), the Sunday School Union (1803) and the British and Foreign Bible Society (1804).

But Wilberforce, whose judgement he told a friend rested “altogether on the word of God” did not narrow the focus of his life on the personal conversion of individuals, if I can put it that way. He believed in good Christian works as an integral part of his faith and witness. In 1796, together with Thomas Bernard, he founded the ‘Bettering Society’ – a clever pun and impressive organisation – aimed at investigating the problems of poverty and the circulation of information about ways of improving living conditions. As Bernard put it “in pauperism as in slavery, the degradation of character deprives the individual of half his value”. Six years after its founding, one of its vice presidents, Sir Robert Peel, father of the future Prime Minister, pushed through Parliament with Wilberforce's help an act to limit the excessive hours of children working in cotton mills. From a meeting of the Bettering Society in January 1799 the British (later becoming the Royal) Institution was founded, dedicated to teaching the application of science to the common purposes of life. This was where Faraday, another Christian believer, was to discover electromagnetism.

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In 1795, at a Select Committee, Wilberforce argued for cheap food for agricultural labourers as an alternative to higher wages which would increase prices and hardship for the manufacturing poor. The health of the population was a great concern of Wilberforce and his Christian friends. Between 1800 and 1815 in London alone there they were influential in establishing a cancer hospital, a fever hospital, two eye clinics, two societies for the treatment of hernias and a number of dispensaries.

The great cause for Wilberforce was, however, the Abolition of the Slave Trade. "Before this cause", he wrote in 1796, "all others dwindle in my eyes." The campaign to abolish the slave trade was a long and hard one with many discouragements and disappointments along the way. On many occasions Wilberforce was seriously ill and was not expected to live, nevertheless he and his team persevered. The first resolution was put to the House of Commons in 1788 but the final abolition did not take place until 1807.

A central part of the abolition movement was a media campaign and the mobilisation, through their churches, of evangelicals throughout the country. The tactics were surprisingly modern. There was a logo: Josiah Wedgwood, the Industrialist, designed one showing, on a white background, a manacled negro slave on his knees beseeching his captor, with words to become famous: "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" This was copied on articles such as snuff boxes and hairpins (specimens can be seen in the British Museum). There were petitions, rallies, book tours, mass letter writing to MPs and a national organisation with local groups. There was even a boycott of consumer goods; 400,000 Britons stopped buying rum and sugar from slave plantations in the Caribbean.

Behind the scenes, solid and painstaking research was being conducted by men such as Thomas Clarkson. Clarkson's travels would take him 35,000 miles around the country and make him one of the best known men in the kingdom. He would spend the summer and autumn months touring the slave ports and drumming up support for the anti-slavery cause in towns across the country, often facing threat of death. The rest of his time was spent writing up his findings and keeping in touch with local anti-slavery groups. Clarkson also attempted to try and find witnesses that would appear before parliament; he often struggled, of course, to find people who were willing to give evidence against the slave trade. However, he was very determined and refused to give in. Once, when trying to get crucial evidence about the capture of slaves he needed from a sailor he had once seen, but whose name he did not know, Clarkson systematically searched the ships of port after port till at last he found the sailor on the 317th ship he had visited.

So what can we learn from all of this?

It has been said that courage springs from convictions. The conviction of the reformers in their faith and their trust in the personal guidance of God in what they did was vital to the success of their political activities.

The organising committee involved in the political process also met frequently as Christian friends, usually in their houses in and around Clapham (hence the name coined after abolition, 'The Clapham Sect') to discuss tactics and crucially to pray together. Close and selfless relationships, founded upon their personal faith, were a key to their unity and success. There were also "co-belligerents", non-Christians who aided them in their public activities, but they only met to pray with those who trusted in the Holy Spirit to guide them.

Wilberforce and the abolitionists used arguments that would appeal to their audience in highlighting the cruelty of the trade, emphasising for example that the mortality rate of slaves during the passage and the period after landing was approximately fifty percent. They were not afraid to appeal to moral arguments, even in the face of justifications put forward by parts of the Christian community. As Wilberforce put it: "As soon as I had arrived thus far in my investigations of the slave trade...so enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition." Commercial livelihoods might be lost but the evil had to be extinguished; Wilberforce and the abolitionists used whatever human methods of communication that were available to them to the utmost degree. Doing all that they could do humanly, they relied on God to intervene.

We should pray that we do the same in the challenges which face us.

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