

Amazing Grace in John Newton – A Christian Witness Lived and Sung

“How Sweet the Sound”

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don't.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns. “Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound),” Newton wrote, “That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”[\[1\]](#) He played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton's song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It's loved the world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

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John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."^{4} At times, "I pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness."^{5} He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.^{6}

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain.^{7} Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, "I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion."^{8}

In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated with African chiefs to obtain slaves.^{9} Life was good, he recalled. "We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied."^{10} Aitken, the biographer, says Newton engaged in sexual relations with female slaves.^{11}

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, “to pass away the time”—an edition of Thomas à Kempis’ classic, *On the Imitation of Christ*. He wondered, “What if these things were true?” Dismayed, he “shut the book quickly.” {12} Newton called himself a terrible “blasphemer” who had rejected God completely.{13} But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, “The Lord have mercy on us!” Spending long hours at the ship’s helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, “I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him.”{14}

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) particularly impressed him. He became convinced of the truth of Jesus’ message and his own need for it. “I was no longer an atheist,” he writes. “I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man.”{15}

Newton discovered that the “new man” would not become perfect. Maturation would be a process, as we’ll see.

From Slave-Ship Captain to Pastor

After his dramatic experience at sea, Newton saw changes in his life. He attended church, read spiritual books, prayed, and spoke outwardly of his commitment. But his faith and behavior would take many twists on the road toward maturity.{16}

Newton set sail again on a slave ship, seeing no conflict between slaving and his new beliefs. Later he led three

voyages as a slave-ship captain. Newton studied the Bible. He held Sunday worship services for his crew on board ship.[\[17\]](#)

Church services on a slave ship? This seems absolutely disgusting today. How could a dedicated Christian participate in slave trading? Newton, like many of his contemporaries, was still a work-in-progress. Slavery was generally accepted in his world as a pillar of British economy; few yet spoke against it. As Aitken points out, this cultural disconnect doesn't excuse Christian slave trading, but it does help explain it.

During my youth in the US south, I was appalled by racism I observed, more so when church members practiced it. [I concluded](#) that some merely masqueraded as followers of Jesus. Others had genuine faith but—by choice or confusion—did not faithfully follow God. It takes years for some to change. Others never do. Aitken observes that in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable."[\[18\]](#)

Two days before he was to embark on his fourth slave-trading voyage as ship's captain, a mysterious illness temporarily paralyzed Newton. His doctors advised him not to sail. The replacement captain was later murdered in a shipboard slave uprising.[\[19\]](#)

Out of the slave trade, Newton became a prominent public official in Liverpool. He attended Christian meetings and grew in his faith. The prominent speaker George Whitfield encouraged him.[\[20\]](#) Life still brought temptations. Newton engaged in the common practice of accepting kickbacks until a business ethics pamphlet by Methodism founder John Wesley prompted him to stop, at significant loss of income.[\[21\]](#)

Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, but opposing church leaders prevented this for six years.

Intervention by the Earl of Dartmouth—benefactor of Dartmouth College in the US—helped launch his formal ministry.[{22}](#) Newton was to significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

Newton and Wilberforce: Faith in Action

William Wilberforce was a rising star in Parliament and seemed destined for political greatness. As a child he had often heard John Newton speak but later rejected the faith. As an adult, conversations with a Cambridge professor had helped lead him to God. He considered leaving Parliament and entering the ministry. In 1785, he sought the advice of his old pastor, Newton.

Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained.[{23}](#) His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and spending time with him privately. Newton became his mentor.[{24}](#)

Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.[{25}](#) During [the arduous abolition campaign](#), Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, "trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him."[{26}](#)

Newton's biblical worldview had matured to the point that he

became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me," he wrote, "that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."[\[27\]](#) His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.[\[28\]](#) Jonathan Aitken says, "Newton's testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause."[\[29\]](#)

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace

John Newton encountered "many dangers, toils, and snares" on his life's voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a few.

Moral maturation can take time. Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable, but realize that blinders don't always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, "Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet."

Humility became a hallmark of Newton's approach to life. He

learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: "What cause have I for humiliation!" he exclaimed. "Alas! . . . How defective [I am] in observing myself the rules and cautions I propose to others!"[\[30\]](#) Near the end of his life, Newton told a visitor, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."[\[31\]](#)

Newton related Jesus' message to current events and everyday life. For him, faith was not some dull, dusty, irrelevant relic but a living relationship with God, having immense personal and social relevance. He grew to see its import in fighting the slave trade. He used both the Bible and friendship to encourage Wilberforce. He tied his teaching to the news of the day, seeking to connect people's thoughts with the beliefs that had changed his life.[\[32\]](#)

Newton was grateful for what he saw as God's providence. Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he was nearly impaled in a riding accident.[\[33\]](#) Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.[\[34\]](#) A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.[\[35\]](#) He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here's part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It's inscribed on his tomb: "John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."[\[36\]](#)

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5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 34.

7. Ibid., 34-37; 40-41.

8. Ibid., 44-45.

9. Ibid., 57-64; Aitken, op. cit., 63-64.

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14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.

15. Newton, op. cit., 82-83.

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32. Ibid., 293-296. See also Newton, op. cit., 154.
33. Newton, op. cit., 23.
34. Ibid., 23, 66-67, 94-95.
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Amazing Grace Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians

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William Wilberforce and Abolishing the Slave Trade: How True Christian Values Ended Support of Slavery

Rusty Wright provides an insightful summary of the journey which led William Wilberforce from unbelief to Christ and to leading the fight to abolish the slave trade in Britain. He clearly shows how true Christian values were key in inspiring Wilberforce's persistent effort to rid Britain of this shameful scourge, the slave trade.

Slavery's Scourge

What do you think of slavery? Are you for it or against it?

I suspect most readers would immediately denounce slavery as a scourge on humanity. But in the eighteenth century, much of western society accepted slavery and the slave trade. It took heroic efforts by dedicated leaders to turn the tide.

William Wilberforce, the famous British parliamentarian, helped lead a grueling but bipartisan twenty-year struggle to

outlaw the trading of slaves. His inspiring story has many lessons for today's leaders.

Abraham Lincoln acknowledged Wilberforce's significant role in abolition.[{1}](#) Nelson Mandela, addressing the British Parliament in 1996 as South Africa's president, declared, "We have returned to the land of William Wilberforce who dared . . . to demand that the slaves in our country should be freed."[{2}](#)

The task was formidable. Eighteenth-century Britain led the world in slave trading. A pillar of colonial economy, the trade was legal, lucrative, and brutal. In one notorious episode, a ship's captain threw 132 slaves overboard, claiming illness and water shortage. British law protected the ship's owners, considering slaves property (like "horses," ruled one judge).[{3}](#)

African tribal chiefs, Arab slave dealers, and European traders rounded up Africans, stuffed them into ships' holds, and delivered them to colonial auctions for sale and forced servitude. The "Middle Passage" across the Atlantic was especially horrific. Slaves typically lay horizontal, shackled and chained to each other, packed like sardines. The air was stale and the sanitation putrid.

Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave, said the "stench of the hold," the heat, and the cramped quarters brought sickness and much death. The deceased, Equiano explained, fell "victims to the improvident avarice . . . of their purchasers." He wrote, "The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable." Some slaves, when taken up on deck, jumped overboard, preferring death to their misery.[{4}](#)

Enter William Wilberforce, young, silver-tongued, popular, ambitious, seemingly destined for political greatness. Then, a profound change led him on a path that some say cost him the

prime ministership, but helped rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

Wilberforce's "Great Change"

The transatlantic slave trade was filled with horror stories about human inhumanity. John Newton, a former slave trader, told of a shipmate "who threw a child overboard because it moaned at night in its mother's arms and kept him awake."[\[5\]](#)

William Wilberforce grew up among Britain's privileged, far from these horrors. Heir to a fortune, he was a slacker and socialite at Cambridge. Sporting an adept sense of humor, he loved partying and playing cards more than schoolwork. His superior intellect frequently covered for his lax academic habits. His keen mind, delightful wit, and charming personality kept many doors open.[\[6\]](#)

At Cambridge, he befriended William Pitt the Younger, who would become Britain's youngest Prime Minister. Both were elected to Parliament in their twenties. Wilberforce became Pitt's bulldog, using his oratorical and relational skills to advance Pitt's legislative agenda.

From 1784 to 1786, what he later called his "Great Change" would forever reshape his life's work. It began innocently enough when he invited his friend, Cambridge professor Isaac Milner, to accompany him on a journey to France. Milner was a brilliant scientist who eventually became vice chancellor of Cambridge. (That's similar to a university president in the U.S.) As they conversed during the trip, Wilberforce was surprised to hear Milner speak favorably of biblical faith. Wilberforce was a skeptic and wanted nothing to do with ardent believers to whom he had been exposed in his youth.

During their travels, Milner and Wilberforce spent long hours discussing faith and the Bible. His doubts receded as Milner answered his objections. Initial intellectual assent to

Christian faith morphed into deeper conviction and a personal relationship with God.{7}

Back in England, he reluctantly consulted John Newton, slave trader turned pastor and writer of the well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace." Newton had been Wilberforce's minister for a time during his youth, before his spiritual interest waned. Wilberforce wrote that after his meeting with Newton, "My mind was in a calm, tranquil state, more humbled, looking more devoutly up to God." {8} Newton encouraged Wilberforce that God had raised him up "for the good of the nation." {9}

In time, Wilberforce grew to consider "the suppression of the slave trade" part of his God-given destiny. {10} At first he thought abolition would come quickly, but he guessed incorrectly, as we will see.

The Battle in Parliament

When William Wilberforce first introduced anti-slave-trade legislation into Parliament, he had high hopes. He quickly learned that opposition would be fierce.

Financial stakeholders howled. Significant elements of British economy relied on slavery. Businesspersons didn't want to sacrifice profit. Their elected representatives didn't want to sacrifice votes. Some claimed slavery benefited slaves since it removed them from barbarous Africa. The Royal Family opposed abolition. Even Admiral Lord Nelson, Britain's great hero, denounced "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies." {11}

Wilberforce and the Abolitionists repeatedly introduced legislation. Apathy, hostility and parliamentary chicanery dragged out the battle. Once, his opponents distributed free opera tickets to some abolition supporters for the evening of a crucial vote, which the Abolitionists then lost. Enough supporting members of Parliament were at the opera to have

reversed the outcome.{12} Twice West Indian sea captains threatened Wilberforce's life. His health faltered.{13}

Buoyed by friends and faith, Wilberforce persisted. He believed God viewed all humans as equal,{14}citing Acts 17:26, "[God] has made from one blood every nation of men." Methodism founder John Wesley encouraged perseverance, writing, "If God is with you, who can be against you? . . . Be not weary in well-doing. Go on . . . till even American slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away." {15} John Newton wrote and testified in Parliament about his experiences as a slave trader, "a business at which my heart now shudders," he explained.{16}

Finally, in 1807, twenty years after beginning, Wilberforce prevailed. Parliament erupted in cheering as the slave trade abolition bill passed.

Of course, outlawing the British transatlantic slave trade in 1807 did not immediately eradicate the trade. In fact, it continued, practiced illegally for a while by British subjects and for decades among other nations like France, Spain and Portugal. Alas, African tribal chiefs and Arab slave-dealers continued to supply captured Africans for the system.{17}

But outlawing the slave trade proved the impetus for a host of social improvements, including prison reforms, child labor laws, and abolition of slavery itself in 1833, of which Wilberforce learned only a few days before his death.

Wilberforce's Methods: Lessons for Today

The esteemed historian W.E.H. Lecky ranked the British anti-slavery movement "among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages . . . in the history of nations." {18} While, of course, Wilberforce and his Abolitionist colleagues were not perfect, their historic effort left many lessons for today. Consider a few that could enhance your own interaction in the workplace,

academia, politics, cross-cultural engagement, in your neighborhood or family.

The value of friendships and teamwork. Many of the Abolitionists lived for several years in the same community. They and their families enjoyed one another's friendship and moral support. This camaraderie provided invaluable encouragement, ideas, and correction.

Bipartisan cooperation was essential to Wilberforce's success. He set aside differences on certain issues to collaborate for the greater good. Both political liberals and conservatives joined the abolition cause. Quakers mobilized support. Wilberforce partnered with Jeremy Bentham founder of Utilitarianism on abolition and prison reform.[{19}](#) Utilitarianism, of course, favors the end justifying the means, hardly a biblical value.[{20}](#) Yet the two could work together.

Wilberforce sought to make civil discourse civil. Biographer Kevin Belmonte notes, "After his Great Change Wilberforce was nearly always able to dissent from the opinions of others with tact and kindness. This trait grew gradually within him; it was not instantaneous, nor did he always act as charitably as he might have wished on some occasions. But he kept trying."[{21}](#) He aimed to disagree without being disagreeable.

Wilberforce attempted to establish common ground with his opponents. In his opening speech on abolition before Parliament, he was especially gracious. "I mean not to accuse anyone," he explained, "but to take the shame upon myself, in common indeed with the whole Parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others."[{22}](#)

William Wilberforce was not perfect. He had fears, flaws and

foibles like anyone. You likely would not agree with all his political views. But he did possess dedication to principle and to God, close friends of many stripes, a penchant for bipartisan cooperation, and steadfast commitment to right terrible injustice. A fine example for life and work today.

Wilberforce's Motivation: Lessons for Today

Have you ever been tempted by opposition to abandon a good cause? What motivated William Wilberforce to persevere in pursuing abolition for twenty agonizing years?

After discovering faith, Wilberforce viewed the world through different lenses-biblical lenses. He authored a popular book to explain faith's implications. Famous parliamentarian Edmund Burke, who found solace in it during his last two days of life, said, "If I live, I shall thank Wilberforce for having sent such a book into the world."[\[23\]](#)

Wilberforce's book, *Real Christianity*,[\[24\]](#) emphasized personal, life-changing faith, not mere nominal assent. He wrote, "God loved the world so much and felt such tender mercy for us that He gave His only Son Jesus Christ for our redemption."[\[25\]](#) He felt all humans have an innate flawself-centeredness or sin that inhibits true generosity, "clouds our moral vision and blunts our moral sensitivity."[\[26\]](#) He called selfishness "the mortal disease of all political communities"[\[27\]](#) and humbly admitted his own "need and imperfection."[\[28\]](#)

Wilberforce believed Jesus suffered "death on the cross . . . for our sake" so those accepting His pardon "should come to Him and . . . have life that lasts forever."[\[29\]](#) Don't get the cart before the horse, he warned. Good behavior doesn't earn God's acceptance; it should be a result of "our reconciliation with God."[\[30\]](#) Wilberforce

encouraged his reader to “Throw yourself completely . . . on [God’s] undeserved mercy. He is full of love, and He will never reject you.”[\[31\]](#)

Wilberforce aspired to the Golden Rule: “doing to others as we would have them do to us.”[\[32\]](#) He believed the faith was intellectually credible and advocated teaching its supporting evidences,[\[33\]](#) but cautioned that “a lack of faith is in general a disease of the heart more than of the mind.”[\[34\]](#)

Wilberforce asked penetrating questions: “Do we love our enemies? Are we gentle even when we are provoked? Are we ready to forgive and apt to forget injuries? . . . Do we return evil with good . . . ? Can we rejoice in our enemy’s good fortune, or sympathize with their distresses?”[\[35\]](#) Sound convicting? Join the club.

An inscribed tribute to Wilberforce at Westminster Abbey where he is buried commends his efforts, “Which, by the blessing of God, removed from England the guilt of the African slave trade, and prepared the way for the abolition of slavery in every colony of the Empire: . . . he relied, not in vain, on God.”[\[36\]](#)

Wilberforce’s legacy of faith and service persists. What will your legacy be?

*Parts of this essay are adapted from Rusty Wright, “‘[Amazing Grace’ Movie: Lessons for Today’s Politicians](#),” Copyright Rusty Wright 2007, and are used by permission.

Notes

1. Abraham Lincoln, Speech fragment concerning the abolition of slavery, c. July 1858. The Gilder Lehrman Collection; tinyurl.com/2cs99u, accessed April 6, 2007.

2. "Address of the President of the Republic of South Africa, Nelson Mandela to the Joint Houses of Parliament of the United Kingdom," 11 July 1996, Issued by: Office of the President, www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1996/sp960711.html, accessed July 23, 2007.
3. Garth Lean, *God's Politician* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1987), 1-6; Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) 103-107.
4. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, (first published in 1789), Chapter Two; excerpted in Ted Baehr, Susan Wales, Ken Wales, *The Amazing Grace of Freedom: The Inspiring Faith of William Wilberforce, the Slaves' Champion* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press, 2007), 62-63.
5. Mark Galli, "A Profitable Little Business," in Baehr, et al., op. cit., 58.
6. Metaxas op. cit., 17-22.
7. Kevin Belmonte, *William Wilberforce: A Hero for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002, 2007), 21, 69-81 ff.; Lean, op. cit., 32-40.
8. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 80.
9. Lean, op. cit., 33-40.
10. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 97.
11. Lean, op. cit., 50-51.
12. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 134.
13. Lean, op. cit., 51, 60, 93.
14. Kevin Belmonte, "William Wilberforce," www.wilberforce.org/Bio.asp?ID=1016, accessed April 6, 2007.
15. Lean, op. cit., 58.
16. Marylynn Rouse, "John Newton: Mentor to William Wilberforce," in Baehr, et al., op. cit., 105-106.
17. William Law Mathieson, *Great Britain and the Slave Trade: 1839-1865* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929) 1, 3, 5, 7-10 ff., 170-171, 185-186 ff.
18. Lean, op. cit., 69.
19. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 95, 164-165, 167, 174.

20. Kerby Anderson, "Utilitarianism: The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number," 2004, www.probe.org/utilitarianism-the-greatest-good-for-the-greatest-number/; accessed April 6, 2007.
21. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 212.
22. Metaxas, op. cit., 133.
23. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 245.
24. *William Wilberforce, Real Christianity*; Abridged and updated by Ellyn Sanna (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 1999). The original was published in 1797 with the ponderous title, *The Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*.
25. Ibid., 50.
26. Ibid., 29, 256.
27. Ibid., 243 ff.; 246.
28. Ibid., 256-257.
29. Ibid., 50-51.
30. Ibid., 198-199.
31. Ibid., 269-270.
32. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 177; 90-91. Biblical references for the "Golden Rule" are Luke 6:31 and Matthew 7:12.
33. Wilberforce, op. cit., 18; 221-222; 285-293.
34. Ibid., 289.
35. Ibid., 193.
36. Baehr et al., op. cit., 140.

Slavery, William Wilberforce and the Film “Amazing Grace”

The transatlantic trade in slavery was outlawed 200 years ago. This anniversary is marked by the release of Amazing Grace,^{em>} a feature film about abolitionist William Wilberforce. Byron Barlowe argues that his life is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action—even against tough odds—to transform culture for good.

You may have caught the buzz surrounding the film *Amazing Grace*, still in theaters nationwide at this writing. It premiered just in time to celebrate the anti-slavery campaign led by William Wilberforce, which outlawed[\[1\]](#) transatlantic slavery 200 years ago.

Culturally active Christians, especially, hail the film as a refreshingly well-done cinematic rendering of a historical hero that will be worth viewing and, if you’re so inclined, owning. Wilberforce’s story is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action to transform culture for good.

Slavery then & now

The term “slavery” usually evokes images of forced-émigrés from Africa in the American South from the advent of the American colonies. Yet, slavery in some form is a feature of life in much of the world’s history and may be more rampant today than ever before. From indentured servants who willingly pledged submission to their masters to those bought and sold as property—as in the American and British systems—to those held in present-day fear and financial bondage right under our modern noses, slavery is simply a hard fact.

According to Probe writer Rusty Wright, the 18th Century British slave trade “was legal, lucrative, and brutal.”[\[2\]](#) Altering that reality was a life-cause for Wilberforce and his abolitionist brethren.

This was not always the sentiment among Christians, going back to the early Church. Although their ancient slavery was often more benign than in Wilberforce’s day, it surprises many to discover that such notables as Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna), Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras (Second Century Christian philosopher), and Origen held to slavery as a God-given right. Later Church luminaries such as St. Bonaventure agreed. Pope Paul III even granted the right of clergy to own slaves.[\[3\]](#)

Latin America’s pre-Columbian slave-based culture was prodigious, but how much does one hear of this or the claim that the Church ended it? Author Nancy Pearcey tells of a Mexican man [who] spoke from the audience at a recent conference:

My ancestors were the Aztecs. We were the biggest slave traders, and the slaves were used for human sacrifice—to make the sun rise each day! Our Aztec priests ripped out the beating hearts from living slaves who were sacrificed in our temples...

I don’t like it. I am not proud of it... It is part of our history. We have to face up to it.

Pointing out the unique ameliorative influence of the Christian faith as contrasted with Islam, he added:

And the slavery and human sacrifice in Mexico only stopped when Christianity came and brought it to an end. That is the fact of history. When are the Arabs going to face up to the facts of their own history, and to what is going on in many Muslim countries today? When are they going to rise up like the Christians to bring this slavery in their own countries

to an end?[{4}](#)

Using the film as a launching pad, present-day abolitionist groups continue a campaign to publicize and eradicate modern-day slavery. According to *World* magazine, “today 27 million people live on in captivity, their lives worth far less than any colonial era slave.”[{5}](#) “About 17,000 are trafficked annually in the United States.”[{6}](#)

Relative to the *chattel* slaves of Wilberforce’s day, for which owners paid heavy prices and held title deeds, today’s illegally held human “property” comes cheap—and blends in. Most are in debt bondage, some are contract laborers living under harsh conditions, and others are forced into marriage and prostitution. “Human trafficking, which ensnares 600,000 to 800,000 people a year, is the newest slave trade and the world’s third-largest criminal business after drugs and arms dealing.”[{7}](#)

Contemporary abolitionist, hands-on human rights campaigner, member of the British House of Lords and professed follower of Christ, the Baroness Caroline Cox points out that obliteration of the white slave trade lends hope to modern-day campaigns. “There have been many slaveries, but there has been only one abolition, which eventually shattered even the rooted and ramified slave systems of the Old World.”[{8}](#)

An “alliance of modern Wilberforces” includes “lawmakers, clergy, layers, bureaucrats, missionaries, social workers, and even reclusive Colorado billionaire Philip Anschutz,” who bankrolled the film *Amazing Grace*.[{9}](#) They seek to repeat Wilberforce’s success.

Opposition in Wilberforce’s day

Wilberforce and his compatriots faced an entrenched pro-slavery culture. “...The entire worldview of the British Empire

was what we today call social Darwinism. The rich and the powerful preyed on and abused the poor and the weak.”{10}

The British royal family sanctioned slavery. The great military hero of the day, Admiral Lord Nelson, denounced “the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies.”{11}

Once again, the religious climate of the day tolerated institutionalized evil. In a chapter entitled “Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement” in his sweeping book *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt writes, “A London church council decision of 1102, which had outlawed slavery and the slave trade{12}, was ignored.” Schmidt continues regarding religious hypocrisy, that the “revival of slavery” in Wilberforce’s time in Britain, Spain, Portugal and their colonies “...was lamentable because this time it was implemented by countries whose proponents of slavery commonly identified themselves as Christians, whereas during the African and Greco-Roman eras, slavery was the product of pagans.”{13}

Most compellingly, Wilberforce’s convictions put his own welfare at risk. Twice, West Indian sea captains threatened Wilberforce’s life.{14} This campaign was not a casual *cause célèbre* to him.

Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas states:

...The moral and social behavior of the entire culture...was hopelessly brutal, violent, selfish, and vulgar. He hoped to restore civility and Christian values to British society, because he knew that only then would the poor be lifted out of their misery.

Wilberforce's Secret: learn to disagree agreeably{15}

It has been fashionable, on occasion, to lionize William Wilberforce to the point of exaggeration. However, we can legitimately extract godly, courageous and wise principles from his life's story.

Holding fast to a distinctively biblical worldview will often come smack into conflict with the most cherished societal sins of one's day. It was slavery then, you name the issue today: abortion, gluttony, gambling, pornography, human trafficking. Yet, many a well-meaning activist has fallen prey to a crass loss of civility in the long battle to turn the tide of public opinion and policy.

Metaxas contrasts:

Wilberforce understood the Scripture about being wise as serpents and gentle as doves. He was a very wise man who worked with those from other views to further the causes God had called him to. Because of the depth of his faith, Wilberforce was a genuinely humble man who treated his enemies with grace—and of course that had great practical results.

Just as Cambridge professor Isaac Milner, his mentor to faith in Christ, had once stood against Wilberforce's skepticism agreeably, so he learned to do politically. He was relevant, shrewd, yet genuine. "Wilberforce wasn't full of pious platitudes. He really had the ability to translate the things of God in a way that people could really hear what he was saying," Metaxas says.

Even privately, his actions forcefully, yet humbly, disagreed with prevailing cultural winds. Metaxas describes his serious conviction to spend significant time raising his six children,

certainly uncommon for fathers in his day. One lasting result: “because of his fame [this] set the fashion with regard to family togetherness and being together on Sundays that lasted far into the 19th and even 20th centuries.”

The Christian worldview drove Wilberforce and his predecessors to oppose slavery and its effects

Wilberforce gained a reputation as a man of faith. Sir Walter Scott credited Wilberforce with being a spiritual leader among Parliamentarians. Biographer John Stoughton wrote that his effectiveness as speaker was greatest when he “appealed to the Christian consciences of Englishmen.”[\[16\]](#) Nonetheless, Wilberforce was his own biggest proponent of his need for grace.

The doctrines of *sola fide* (“by faith alone”) and *sola gratia* (“by grace alone”) formed the foundation of Wilberforce’s theology, or how he viewed God and His relation to the world. Metaxas relates, “He really knew that he was as wicked a sinner as the worst slave trader—without that sense of one’s own sinfulness, it’s very easy to become a moralizing Pharisee.”

Author and pastor John Piper writes:

...The doctrine of justification is essential to right living—and that includes political living... [The “Nominal Christians” or Christians in name only, of Wilberforce’s day] got things backward: First they strived for moral uplift, and then appealed to God for approval. That is not the Christian gospel. And it will not transform a nation. It would not sustain a politician through 11 parliamentary defeats over 20 years of vitriolic opposition.[\[17\]](#)

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."[\[18\]](#) Sometimes it takes 20 years or much longer for the Spirit to move an entire culture! God is patient and works with our free wills, but accomplishes His purposes in the end.

Paul wrote several other times in Scripture regarding slavery. He told Philemon to treat his own slave as a brother. That is, lose the slave, gain a spiritual brother.

To the church in Galatia, Paul wrote that there was "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free...for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[\[19\]](#) The status of slave was subsumed under the category of *believer*, where all are equal. "...Given the culturally ingrained practice of slavery...in the ancient world, Paul's words were revolutionary. The Philemon and Galatians passages laid the groundwork for the abolition of slavery, then and for the future."[\[20\]](#)

Anti-Slavery positions were commonplace in the Early Church. Slaves worshiped and communed with Christians at the same altar. Christians often freed slaves, even redeemed the slaves of others[\[21\]](#) (much like contemporary believers who buy freedom for Sudanese slaves). This equal treatment of slaves sometimes set Christians up as targets of persecution.[\[22\]](#)

Christianity is no stranger to abolition throughout history. Schmidt writes:

...The effort to remove slavery, whether it was Wilberforce in Britain or the abolitionists in America, was not a new phenomenon in Christianity. Nor were the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights laws of the 1960s to remove racial segregation new to the Christian ethic. They were merely efforts to restore Christian practices that were already in existence in Christianity's primal days.[\[23\]](#)

The film *Blood Diamond* graphically portrays child soldiers brutally manipulated to do the killing for a rebel group in Africa, an actual contemporary tragedy. In the story's only bright spot, a gentle, fatherly African offers an apologetic for his work to rescue and rehabilitate boy warriors. The message is straightforward: do what you can in the moral morass, for "who knows which path leads to God?"

Wilberforce found the path—the Way, the Truth and the Life{24}—and it continues to light the way for people in bondage today. But it's only just begun, once again.

Notes

1. The 1807 Act of Parliament outlawed the trade in the British Empire. In fact, the trade continued among other nations and illegally among British outlaws.
2. "Amazing Grace Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians," by Rusty Wright, www.probe.org/amazing-grace-movie-lessons-for-todays-politicians/, accessed 3-22-07.
3. "Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement," chapter 11, in *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt, 276. Note: read further for examples of early Church Fathers and laypeople who opposed slavery and aided slaves.
4. From an email report entitled "Slavery and Its History," sent on behalf of author Nancey Pearcey to Phylogeny.net list 12/11/06.
5. *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, "Let my people go," by Priya Abraham, www.worldmag.com/articles/12700, accessed 3-21-07.
6. "Free at Last: how Christians worldwide are sabotaging the modern slave trade," Deann Alford, *Christianity Today*, March 2007, p. 32.
7. *World*, Abraham.
8. Ibid, "Whale of a man" (article sidebar). Quote from *This Immoral Trade: Slavery in the 21st Century* (Monarch Books, 2006), "a 175-page textbook, in a sense, featuring the history, the politics, the economics, and the present-day

reality of forced servitude around the world” according to World. Co-written with Cox by John Marks, a human-rights advocate, researcher who advocates for slaves regularly with Cox.

9. Alford, *Christianity Today*, p 32.

10. “Doing good and helping the poor,” interview with Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007: www.worldmag.com/articles/12703, accessed 3-22-07.

11. Wright, accessed 3-21-07.

12. “The legal force of the event is actually open to question. The Council of Westminster (a collection of nobles) held in London issued a decree: ‘Let no one hereafter presume to engage in that nefarious trade in which hitherto in England men were usually sold like brute animals.’ However, the Council had no legislative powers, and no Act of law was valid unless signed by the Monarch.” From Wikipedia entry, “History of Slavery,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave_trade#_note-2, accessed 3-23-07.

13. Schmidt, 276.

14. *World*, Metaxas interview, accessed 3-22-07

15. Ibid, entire section.

16. Schmidt, 277.

17. “Joy in the battle: Abolition and the roots of public justice,” John Piper, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, www.worldmag.com/articles/12691, accessed 3-22-07.

18. 2 Corinthians 3:17

19. Galatians 3:28

20. Schmidt, 273.

21. Ibid, 274.

22. Ibid, 289.

23. Ibid, 290.

24. John 14:6