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Founder's Scholarship Essay

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Wilberforce: Christ's Ambassador

When I was 12, I read a biography by Eric Metaxas on William Wilberforce. It was the first non-fiction book I ever read willingly, and it also was the first time history actually felt like it was real. I remember staying up late into the night, hanging on to every word and feeling stirred and thrilled by the story of the man who abolished the slave trade in England. I still think of Wilberforce often; his leadership inspires me to this day. When I read the mission of the King's College, to train up principled leaders that transform society, Wilberforce immediately jumped out to me as a perfect candidate for the namesake of an 11th house. His actions and impact on culture are almost unbelievable; this man took the Bible seriously and as a result he changed the world. Let me tell you about him.

Wilberforce met with political success at a very young age, but his early years were wasteful and unguided. At age 20, William Wilberforce won a seat in Parliament. He quickly rocketed up through the ranks of power and prestige; at age 24, he won one of the most significant and visible seats in Parliament ("Met" 38). He was described as an "oratorical genius" and as "the wittiest man in England" (Hochschild), and his quick intelligence made him very popular. He was the perfect picture of sophisticated worldliness, often drinking and gambling into the wee hours of the morning. Wilberforce confessed that, during those years, "...my own distinction was my darling object" ("Wilber").

Then came what Wilberforce called "the Great Change" (Metaxas 167). He was confronted with the gospel and the question, "Can one serve God and one's nation in parliament?" ("Wilber") He almost quit politics to become a priest, but as he prayed, Wilberforce began to realize God had a plan to use his political influence. This was in 1785; Wilberforce was 26 and at the height of political fame. God opened his eyes to the horrors of the slave trade and the other moral atrocities that were rampant in

England at the time. He wrote in his journal this famous quote, “God Almighty has set before me two Great Objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners” (Harry et al. 49).

In 1791, Wilberforce and his team of supporters entered their first, fiercely unpopular, bill to Parliament regarding the abolition of the slave trade. It was defeated 163 votes to 88. He entered his bill 10 times over the next two decades, and he was defeated again and again (Guinness). Remember, slavery was completely acceptable in British culture. England was the greatest empire in the world at the time, and it had been built on the back of slaves. Also, the institution of slavery was historically embedded into civilization. Every major ancient civilization had slaves, from Babylon and Assyria to Egypt (remember Joseph?) and Greece (Perry). Wilberforce wasn't just standing up against a determined populace. He was engaged in a battle against an entire way of seeing the world.

And here we come to the reasons why William Wilberforce was such an exceptional principled leader. The first is his faith in God. Wilberforce didn't fight this immense battle on his own strength; he understood God had called him to this end. That's why he wasn't a quitter. In fact, Wilberforce said, “a man who fears God is not at liberty” to give up (Colson). He believed to the core of his being he was a vessel of his creator, and this was God's battle, not his. God would bring victory in His timing, Wilberforce was only to obey.

The great preacher and revivalist John Wesley heard of William Wilberforce's efforts against the slave trade and wrote a letter to Wilberforce containing these words: “Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing. Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might” (“Met” 47). Wilberforce believed these words, acted on these words, and had extraordinary endurance and faith even in the face of failure.

Another thing that really stood out to me about William Wilberforce was his self-sacrifice. For 20 years, he surrendered his health and time for people he would never meet. Wilberforce never grew over five foot three in his life, and his body was very frail. He constantly suffered from bad health and

had chronically weak eyesight. Wilberforce was twice attacked in the streets. Yet he was not deterred from working with all of his energy. Wilberforce was ridiculed as being a fanatic by a great many of his fellow politicians, but responded by saying, “If to be feelingly alive to the sufferings of my fellow-creatures is to be a fanatic, I am one of the most incurable fanatics ever permitted to be at large” (Gay). He was truly the voice of the voiceless, despite his great personal sufferings.

William Wilberforce stood up to incredible peer pressure. He wasn't just standing up to the hall of parliament; he was battling an entire nation. My question is, what kept him going? The answer: Wilberforce regarded God's opinion higher than man's. Offending God through inaction was the essential consideration, not offending an entire nation through action. The root of his endurance through defeat was a true and radical affection for God. In his words, “A private faith that does not act in the face of oppression is no faith at all” (“William”). He wasn't just a radical politician. Wilberforce was a radically God-centered Christian. That is the reason why God used him to transform society.

And indeed, he was eventually successful in transforming society. On March 25, 1807, Wilberforce's bill titled “An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade” was passed by a resounding 283 votes to 16 (Perry). The entire hall of parliament, friends and enemies alike, stood and applauded the great man, who, thin and frail after 20 years of fighting, sat humbly in his seat, head bowed, tears streaming down his face (Piper 38).

That's what he is chiefly known for – abolishing the slave trade. But as he worked to abolish slavery itself, he also set about his second “great aim”, the reformation of manners. Not manners like don't chew with your mouth open; what Wilberforce meant by this was a moral transformation of society. Here, the battle was much less quantifiable, and this is where I find Wilberforce's impact on society most surprising. The moral state of England in the early 1800's was atrocious. One out of every four women was a prostitute (“Met” 45), drunkenness was extremely common, and gambling was so ubiquitous among the well-to-do that the city of London was referred to as “one vast casino” (Harry et al. 43). Wilberforce set out among this darkness to “make goodness fashionable”. In

Parliament, he passed bills reforming education, health care, prisoner treatment, alcohol consumption, and even animal cruelty. Many children were forced to work 18 hours a day in dangerous conditions; Wilberforce outlawed child labor. He participated in over 60 charities and supported many foreign missionary efforts (Colson). Wilberforce came to be known as the “conscience of Parliament”, and the impact of his moral example extended outside of the bills he passed. He used his widespread fame to set an example as a family man. He spent every Sunday with his wife and six children, and memorized the entirety of Psalm 119 (“Met” 51). His principled leadership was almost exclusively responsible for the change in mindset of an entire nation.

All of these accomplishments have caused some people to refer to William Wilberforce as the greatest social reformer in the world. The world in 1759, when Wilberforce was born, was substantially different than the world in 1833, when he died at age 74. This man took his faith seriously, and as a result, quite literally transformed society through principled leadership. Every one of the words of the King's College's mission applies to Wilberforce.

We, today in our modern society, can learn a lot from Wilberforce as well. His situation begs the question, “What can I do today?” We have faith in the same God, so let's act! That's why I love the goal of this school. To be bold, in the world and yet not of the world. I see King's as a platform, a springboard, for young people like me to learn to be leaders with selflessness and faith. Let's pull America back to the moral principles on which it was founded with William Wilberforce as our example and God as our guide. Wilberforce gives us some advice in his book titled Real Christianity. He says, “Let true Christians then, with becoming earnestness, strive to...boldly assert the cause of Christ in an age when so many, who bear the name of Christians, are ashamed of Him” (Wilberforce 30). When we live out this charge to be Christ's ambassadors, we, like Wilberforce, will become principled leaders to transform society.

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