

Ian Wilson
Founder's Scholarship, The King's College
February 15th, 2016
Word Count: 1,700

Am I not a Man and a Brother?

It is 1787 in England. Widespread economic expansion and industrialization sweep across the nation. Protecting and increasing this opulence are the driving forces of the day. The foundation of this prosperity is a ruthless slave trade. For nearly two centuries, thousands of British slave ships made the voyage to Africa. These ships were rank with the stench of excrement, vomit, sweat, and death of over 3 million slaves. The insatiable hunger for progress and security led to the apathy or ignorance of horrors and the blind consumption of land, morals, and lives. On the backs of slaves Britain expanded.

With the growth of the economy, conversations of human rights and morals were drowned out by conversations of style and gossip. At a time when the hierarchy of England was turning a blind eye to the sufferings of those who were "lesser," William Wilberforce undertook the challenge of reforming the morals of a lost nation, and "making compassion fashionable."

Wilberforce saw two objectives in his fight to reform Britain. Although the atrocity of the slave trade demanded its abolishment, Wilberforce saw slavery as an effect, not a root of evil. The problem with England did not lie within the slave trade, but within the hearts of men. Wilberforce understood that evil would manifest itself through the hearts of men regardless of the state of the slave trade. For this reason, Wilberforce's primary objective was to change the hearts of the men around him. Wilberforce fought for the rest of his life for the "reformation of

manners,” but before Wilberforce took up reformation and abolition, he himself would have to be reformed.

William Wilberforce was born in 1759 in Hull, England. Although Wilberforce grew up under the influence of evangelical Christianity, it would be many years before he embraced it. Wilberforce attended St. John’s College, Cambridge where he was popular, friendly, and known to be a good conversationalist. Wealthy and unconcerned about his future, Wilberforce spent most of his time at St. John’s socializing. He met many friends at the university, including future Prime Minister and ally, William Pitt. These connections became increasingly vital to Wilberforce’s political ambitions. In 1780, Wilberforce’s political career began, culminated by his election as Member of Parliament in the same year. Well-known for his eloquent speech and independency from any political party, Wilberforce established himself as a successful and well-liked politician in Parliament, making as few enemies as possible in a political scene.

Wilberforce quickly achieved what many go without in life: success and respect. However, Wilberforce found no satisfaction in politics. In 1784, Wilberforce entered a period of reflection and self-examination. Wilberforce saw no accomplishments of value in his life, and he became intensely discouraged by this. He would later write: "The first years in Parliament I did nothing—nothing to any purpose. My own distinction was my darling object."¹ But in this darkness, his faith began to form. Wilberforce earnestly began to pursue the religion that had always been present.

Wilberforce was initially concerned that his rediscovered faith would demand his removal from public life. At the time, religious beliefs were kept quiet and private: polite society

¹ “William Wilberforce,” christianitytoday.com

discussed faith in small doses with no excess. Hymn writer and clergyman John Newton counseled Wilberforce to remain in politics. Newton told Wilberforce: “God has raised you up for the good of the church and the good of the nation, maintain your friendship with Pitt, continue in Parliament, who knows that but for such a time as this God has brought you into public life and has a purpose for you.”² Wilberforce chose to remain in Parliament, but would no longer expend breath on trivial arguments. Wilberforce began to fight for the return to good morals. He strove to integrate the Christian values of brotherhood and equality into his politics.

William Wilberforce’s faith convicted him to pursue two intrinsically connected, “great objects” in politics: social reform (or, as Wilberforce later coined, the “reformation of manners,”), and the abolishment of the slave trade. In his biography about Wilberforce: *Amazing Grace*, writer Eric Metaxas says:

To our modern ears, the phrase “reformation of manners” sounds merely quaint, but what Wilberforce meant by the phrase was different from what we think when we hear it. By “manners” he did not mean anything having to do with etiquette but rather what we would call “habits,” or “attitudes”; there was also a distinctly moral aspect to his use of the phrase, though not in the puritanical sense. He wished to bring civility and self-respect into a society that had long since spiraled down into vice and misery...” (p. 85)

² “Wilberforce: Greatest Works,” Wilberforce/Hildebrand

Wilberforce's ultimate goal was to see society return to long forgotten Christian values. This "reformation of manners," hinged on Britain's perception of the slave trade.

Britain's perception of slavery was challenged by a simple line on anti-slavery propaganda: "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" This was a radical question to pose to the realm of England. England saw slaves as men, but men—and men's sufferings—are easily forgotten or belittled. British society beat, pounded, and cemented the idea of inferiority into every slave to ever be chained. Persuading Englishmen to not merely consider slaves as men, but as brothers would be pivotal in returning to the Christian habits and attitudes Wilberforce so passionately believed in.

In 1787, Wilberforce began the challenge of accomplishing his first "great objective," and introduced legislation to Parliament that would abolish the slave trade. Although initially optimistic, even naively so, about successfully ending the slave trade, Wilberforce had no reason to anticipate abolition. In the 1700s, Britain was profiting from a well established, and lucrative slave trade business. After taking a stand against slavery, Wilberforce came under heavy criticism. Wilberforce's critics accused him of trying to weaken Britain by creating economic instability and limiting expansion, exports, and Britain's way of life. Wilberforce saw only his duty to his brother, 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." Britain was eager to protect its way of life; Wilberforce asked if Britain's way of life was worth protecting.

The weight of challenging a country's perception of wealth and prosperity was not lost on Wilberforce. The horizon set before Wilberforce would build no tangible treasure; it would instead bring enemies, long nights, and hard choices. Abolition demanded that Wilberforce be

willing sacrifice his distinction, career, and status. Wilberforce would sacrifice it all saying: "so enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the [slave] 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."

Wilberforce would not have an opportunity to rest for a very long time. The next twenty years would be spent relentlessly fighting in Parliament for the abolition of slavery. Time and time again Wilberforce proposed legislation only to have it voted down. Finally, in 1807, the abolition bill passed through the upper House of Lords, and was introduced before the lower House of Commons. Tears streamed down Wilberforce's face as the votes on the Abolition Bill came in. 283 votes for, 16 votes against. The ugly slave trade stood abolished.

The end of the slave trade marked Wilberforce's successful completion of his first objective. However, what made Wilberforce's life so incredible was his continual, and simultaneous fight to reform the root of evil in Britain: the dark, uncouth hearts of men. In his second great objective: "the reformation of manners," Wilberforce had been, and would continue to use the grassroots approach he had used to abolish slavery. A catalyst for reform, Wilberforce was instrumental in organizing support and giving direction to reformation until his death in 1833. Wilberforce's name will forever be synonymous with the abolition of the slave trade, but Wilberforce's distinction was his seamless integration of the convictions of his faith into his work.

William Wilberforce is an example of why Christian values are needed in all professions. Wilberforce himself summarized what he believed a Christian should exemplify saying:

Let true Christians then, with becoming earnestness, strive in all things to recommend their profession, and to put to silence the vain scoffs of ignorant objectors. Let them boldly assert the cause of Christ in an age when so many, who bear the name of Christians, are ashamed of Him: and let them consider as devolved on them the important duty of suspending for a while the fall of their country, and, perhaps, of performing a still more extensive service to society at large; not by busy interference in politics, in which it cannot but be confessed there is much uncertainty; but rather by that sure and radical benefit of restoring the influence of Religion, and of raising the standard of morality.

It is not unusual to find a man willing to fight for what he believes in. It is unusual to find a man who can fight for what he believes in with grace and eloquence. 54 years after Britain's abolishment of slavery, the Union and Confederate States found roughly 800,000 men willing to fight, and die for what they believed in. The horrific outcome of America's bloody, painful civil war and subsequent reconstruction showcases a less eloquent approach to reforming society. Civil wars and new laws only change the circumstantial symptoms, not the hearts of a country. The moral state of an individual's heart, not state given rights, will govern and drive brotherhood. America struggled for another one hundred years to recognize the slave as a brother. It would take another eloquent catalyst grounded in Christian morals to begin to change America's perception of brother: Martin Luther King Jr.

Wilberforce elegantly and peacefully ameliorated his country. He showed his fellow-men the sickness in their hearts, and in turn, convinced his country that men were brothers, not

commodities. William Wilberforce is known for his fight against the symptom of slavery, but his legacy lies in the roots of something deeper. William Wilberforce taught those who were once blind to see.

Bibliography

christianitytoday.com. "*William Wilberforce*." ChristianityToday.com. 8 Aug. 2008. Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

Metaxas, Eric. *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*. New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007. Print.

Wilberforce, William, and Lloyd Hildebrand. *William Wilberforce: Greatest Works*. Orlando, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2007. Print.