

The Cloud of Witnesses

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” – Galatians 3:28

“I appeal to you on the basis of love...for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains....Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.” – Philemon 9a, 10, 15-16

William Wilberforce



- William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was born into a wealthy family in Hull, England. After studying at Cambridge, he decided to enter politics and won a parliamentary seat in 1780, at the age of 21. At the time, he was only a nominal Christian, but in 1785 he experienced a conversion to personal faith in Jesus Christ.

- Beginning in 1787, Wilberforce became the voice of abolitionism in Parliament. He worked tirelessly, presenting bills to the House of Commons year after year. Finally, in 1806, Parliament passed a bill to abolish the slave trade. In 1833, one day before he died, Wilberforce received word that Parliament would abolish slavery altogether.

- Wilberforce was also active in promoting new movements for moral reform, social welfare, Christian education, foreign missions, and the prevention of cruelty to animals.

“God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.”

- *The Slave Trade: An overview of what Wilberforce was up against:*

Slavery had been a part of human civilization for all of recorded history. Until the abolition of slavery in Britain, there had never been any Western nation that opposed it. In the 1780s, Britain was the greatest superpower in the world, and 80% of its foreign economy depended on the slave trade (and the use of slaves for sugar production in the Caribbean). British ships were the primary source of slaves not only for British colonies, but also for American, French, Dutch, and Spanish colonies. They transported 40,000 slaves per year from Africa. (Of the 11 million slaves shipped during the slave-trade period, 1,400,000 died in transit.)

- *The Reformation of Manners (Moral Values): An overview of British morality at the time:*

Britain in the late 1700s had hit a moral low point. Many Christians were only nominal adherents to the faith. Gambling and heavy drinking were common, even among the leaders, and prostitution was rampant. There was little emphasis on human rights or even civility.



[Seal of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade]

“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.”

“Is it not the great end of religion, and, in particular, the glory of Christianity, to extinguish the malignant passions; to curb the violence, to control the appetites, and to smooth the asperities of man; to make us compassionate and kind, and forgiving one to another; to make us good husbands, good fathers, good friends; and to render us active and useful in the discharge of the relative social and civil duties?”

“Can you tell a plain man the road to heaven? Certainly, turn at once to the right, then go straight forward.”

Wilberforce's Legacy: It is clear that, astonishingly, he accomplished both of his goals. By the time he died, slavery was abolished and England was entering the Victorian age, awakened to a new sense of moral, social, and civil uprightness. Through his example and his writings (including a bestselling book, *Real Christianity*), he became a leading light of evangelical Christianity.

William Cowper's Tribute to Wilberforce:

“To take for truth what cannot but be true...
And bind the task assign'd thee to thine heart:
Happy the man there seeking and there found,
Happy the nation where such men abound.”

Lessons from the Life of William Wilberforce:

- Never give up (It took WW 20 years of fighting to see the slave trade abolished, and nearly 50 years to see the end of slavery.)
- Take the duty of your role in life seriously (WW accepted his role as a politician despite its difficulties, and even though he would have rather pursued Christian ministry.)
- Do your greatest work in community with others, because you can't do it alone (WW was a member of a tight-knit group of Christian friends, including Thomas Clarkson, the abolitionist, and Hannah More, the education reformer—together, they literally changed the world.)
- Make time for your relationship with God (Despite his busyness, WW always practiced a strict Sabbath, even observing a “Sabbath hour” each day.)
- Live generously (WW gave away millions of dollars for education, philanthropy, and payment of other's debts. Even though he could have bought himself a peerage of nobility, he preferred to spend his money on others.)

[Picture: the House of Commons in Wilberforce's day]

