

# William wilberforce

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## The Man Who Stopped England's Slave Trade

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

William Wilberforce was one of the greatest abolitionists in all of history. He fought for what he believed in. He believed in freedom for all people, no matter what they looked like. He thought that all people are to be valued and that they are important, even if they were different. He spent all of his life trying to get freedom for slaves. He completely stopped the slave trade into England by The Slave Trade Act of 1807(sparticus. com). After stopping the slave trade act, he continued to pursue the freedom of slaves until his death (BBC. com). William Wilberforce was born August 24th 1759 in Hull, England. When he was nine his father died and Wilberforce was sent to live with his aunt and uncle. His aunt and uncle were active in the Methodist movement and supported their teachings. During this time, he met John Newton, who would eventually play a big part in his life. His mother disliked evangelicalism and when she discovered this influence, she brought him back to Hull. In 1776, Wilberforce enrolled in St. John's College, Cambridge (Hague, 5-25). Not long after graduation, Wilberforce ran for election for Smith, 2

Member of Parliament, representing Hull. He was 21 years old. Although running against a strong political opponent, he won the election. This was beginning of his political career. He was the youngest man ever to be elected into parliament. (Tomkins, 33) Even with all this success, William Wilberforce was having a spiritual controversy. He enjoyed the usual pastimes of dinners, cards, and gambling that he had with his friends. (Hague, 97) Wilberforce

was shocked by the behavior of his fellow students at the St. Johns College and later wrote: "I was introduced on the very first night of my arrival to as licentious a set of men as can well be conceived. They drank hard, and their conversation was even worse than their lives." (sparticus. com) He wanted clarity. He decided to visit a former tutor named Isaac Milner. Through the witness and influence of Milner, as well as by reading the Bible and another book, called "The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul", Wilberforce had a deep spiritual conversion to Christ. This resulted in profound changes in his life (BBC. com) After his conversion, he again sought out the man he met as a child in the Methodist movement, John Newton. Newton was a great influence on Wilberforce. It was during these times that Newton told Wilberforce about his convictions concerning the evils of the slave trade and how it needed to be stopped. This made Wilberforce interested in social reform and a desire to stop the slave trade. Wilberforce was seriously considering leaving politics and joining the church, but Newton told him that

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God had placed him there for a purpose. Wilberforce stayed in politics and worked on fighting to stop the slave trade in parliament. (Pollock, 50-56) Wilberforce's effort to stop the slave trade shows us the link between his goal for the abolition of the slave trade and his Christian faith. He did not try to separate faith from politics. For example, he wrote that "a principle of true religion [ie, true Christianity] should in any considerable degree gain ground; there is no estimating the effects on public morals and the consequent influence on our political welfare." (Wilberforce, 422) Wilberforce thought he was given a responsibility to do what he could to see that true

Christianity would take ground. With that, Wilberforce looked to the Bible for direction in all areas of life, including politics (Pollock, 145). He believed that social reform must have a biblical foundation, and that those who would attempt reform without this foundation would flounder in their efforts and in the end, do harm (Pollock, 87). William Wilberforce entered bills into parliament with this goal on many occasions but all were denied. (Metcalfe, 91-115) He wrote a number of speeches and spent years fighting and making people realize the evil in the slave trade. In his most famous slave trade speech that he gave to parliament Wilberforce said, “ When we think of eternity, and of the future consequences of all human conduct, what is there in this life that should make any man contradict the dictates of his conscience, the principles of justice, the laws of religion, and of God? Sir, the nature and all the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us; we can no longer plead ignorance, we can not evade it; it is now an object placed before us, we can not pass it; we may spurn it, we may Smith, 4

kick it out of our way, but we cannot turn aside so as to avoid seeing it; for it is brought now so directly before our eyes that this House must decide, and must justify to all the world, and to their own consciences, the rectitude of the grounds and principles of their decision...You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know.” (Wilberforce) Finally, in February of 1807, a motion in favor of abolition was carried in the House of Commons, winning by the huge majority of 283 to 16. His battle against the slave trade was won. But William Wilberforce did not stop there. He continued on to fight the abolition of slavery in the whole British Empire.

In 1833, just three days before Wilberforce's death, the Emancipation Act was passed, officially banning slavery in the British Empire. (Mextas, 205-210) Christopher D. Hancock said " The most malignant evil of the British Empire ceased largely because of the faith and persistence of William Wilberforce."

Although he spent most of his time working on the abolition of the slave trade, Wilberforce also spent time fighting for social reform and other causes. He tried to get congress to limit the number of hours that children spent working. He appealed for amendments to the Poor Law and fought for prison reforms. In 1796 Wilberforce became a founding member of the ' Society for the Bettering Condition and Increasing Comforts of the Poor'. This organization worked to change Parish's Relief and Workhouses for the poor and improve their overall living conditions. He worked

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changing policies, education and healthcare. Wilberforce was one of the founders of the RSPCA (The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). Wilberforce believed that he should put forth strong effort to work on solving every social problem in the country because this is what God called him to do. Wilberforce was also generous with his money and donated most of his money to charity, as well as decreasing the rent for people who lived on his land (BBC. com).

William also wrote a book A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity. He used his book so he could tell people about God and how to live a true christian life in an unchristian world. He

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denounced the Christianity among his fellow countrymen, most of who thought it was enough to go to church and to be called Christians. He respectfully contrasted their mistaken suppositions with scriptural truth. He was talking about England in the early 18th century; however, these truths still apply today. William Wilberforce was determined to draw people back into the Christian faith. However, he didn't just want people to return to Christianity and only go to church on Sundays; he wanted them to accept Christianity fully. He thought that would change the whole fabric of British society. In his book, William Wilberforce said this, “ 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

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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?” Through William Wilberforce’s life one can see that God gives each of us a purpose. Once he became a christian, Wilberforce wanted to follow God’s plan for his life. He had difficulty deciding if he should stay in politics or become a clergyman. John Newton told him his place in politics and he then worked very hard to make better life for people who need it. Wilberforce was 100 percent committed to God and he would have done anything for Him. He was a man who pursued God’s will and was subsequently blessed by God. God gave him a purpose and once he knew what it was, with incredible focus and determination, he pursued it

vigorously for twenty years. Without knowing this purpose from God, he could not have accomplished all that he did. I think that is interesting to think about what would not have happened if God had not called him to this.

Another quality that Wilberforce had was determination; he just wouldn't give up. He started as a politician who just wanted to stop the slave trade and he spent seventeen years fighting it. He made speech after speech over myriad years and never gave up. After the bill did pass, then he spent the next twenty five years working on abolishing slavery as a whole. In today's society I think it is really easy to give up and give in to things. I know that I give up on things easily when I am under pressure and I know that I am not succeeding. I have a fear of failure and I know I need to pursue my goal and not give up on things. I think what Wilburforce did was Smith, 7

commendable because not only did he free slaves, but he spent his whole life fighting for the cause (spartacus.com). I think what I liked most about studying William Wilberforce was how compassionate and selfless he was. He did little things to make a difference in the world that led to big things. Also, he never took any credit. He gave God all the glory, and said he was only pursuing God's will. He did what ever he could to help those around him. I think more people need to be like him, myself included. There are days that I do not want to do things, and I give in to my selfish desires. Also, at times when I do things for people, I expect a thank you or acknowledgement of my "good work", when in reality I only did what I am supposed to be doing. William Wilberforce was a great man who did a lot of good for England while he was alive. He should be admired. He made a difference when most people wanted change, but didn't care enough to do it. He gave up many

things along the way: he gave up his time, energy, money, and his political career without a care for worldly things; he cared only about doing right and what God had called him to do.