



# The Force Behind Wilberforce

by Jonathan Aitken

**M**ARCH WILL BE A MONTH of Wilberforce mania as the world commemorates the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade by the British Parliament on March 25, 1807. In the United States the event will be marked by congressional ceremonies; numerous books, lectures, services, and TV programs; and by a new Hollywood movie, *Amazing Grace*. All these productions will glorify William Wilberforce for his tenacity in leading the abolitionist movement to success through 46 years of legislative warfare. But how many of these new interpretations will find the key, let alone unlock the door, to the spiritual forces that inspired and motivated Wilberforce throughout his campaign?

It is possible to present the saga of William Wilberforce simply as a secular political success story. This version goes as follows: A talented and well-connected young MP became horrified by the brutalities of the slave trade. With great moral courage he launched a humanitarian campaign to abolish it. He confronted the vested economic interests of the time, primarily the shipping industry, and gradually wore down the opposition in Parliament. He made alliances with the leading politicians in the House of Commons, notably William Pitt and Charles James Fox. He swung public opinion over to his side by joining forces with the Clapham Sect and the Anti-Slavery Society, two formidable teams of 18th-century spin doctors. He converted a sufficient number of MPs to his cause by calling good witnesses in committee hearings and

by the usual black arts of political deal making in smoke-filled rooms. Even so, the abolitionist campaign failed for its first 20 years. Then it had a major breakthrough when Wilberforce's bill prohibiting slave transportation in Bristol ships was passed on the 12th attempt. Eventually, after 46 years of parliamentary struggle, Wilberforce lived to see slavery outlawed completely. He died a national hero and now, 200 years later, he is about to be venerated as a humanitarian saint.

The above summary is more or less the consensual judgment of history on Wilberforce. What it omits or at least downplays is that the real motivation for the campaign to abolish slavery came from Wilberforce's passionate Christian faith. To understand what a powerful driving force this was in his life, a reader should put aside the popular biographies or histories and instead concentrate on Wilberforce's less well-known spiritual writings, particularly his *A Practical View of Christianity* (1797). Even more revealing are Wilberforce's letters, especially those written to his spiritual mentor, the Rev. John Newton.

The importance of the Newton-Wilberforce relationship has been underestimated by historians and indeed by Philip Anschutz's new movie, *Amazing Grace*. Newton, who wrote the original hymn, is an important figure in the film, but he is played in the key scenes by Albert Finney as a croaky, crumbling old monk swabbing church floors in his bare feet as he mutters sepulchral asides to Wilberforce. The acting is

brilliant but the history is bosh. To understand what really made Wilberforce tick, a far better starting point is his correspondence with Newton, much of it hitherto unpublished.

John Newton, who in the 1780s was the Vicar of St. Mary Woolnoth in the City of London, enjoying a status equivalent to Norman Vincent Peale in New York during the 1960s, received a strange letter from William Wilberforce on December 2, 1785. Its emphasis on secrecy was so mysterious that it could almost have come from a spy seeking to arrange a clandestine assignation: "I wish to have some serious conversation with you," wrote Wilberforce. "I have had ten thousand doubts within myself whether or not I should discover myself to you, but every argument against it has its foundation in pride. I am sure you will hold yourself bound to let no-one living know of this application or of my visit.... Remember I must be secret."

The secret Wilberforce divulged was that he was in emotional turmoil as a result of a recent religious conversion. A few months earlier his old schoolmaster, Isaac Milner, had converted him to evangelical Christianity. The zeal that flowed from this conversion was so passionate that 26-year-old William Wilberforce MP wanted to give up his promising career in politics and enter the church. He had already explained this in a letter to the prime minister, William Pitt. Now he was explaining it to Newton, an old family friend whom Wilberforce had met as a schoolboy.

The Rev. John Newton might have been expected to encourage the young Mr. Wilberforce to follow his newfound religious vocation for ordination. Instead, combining spiritual counsel with political wisdom, Newton strongly advised Wilberforce not to withdraw from the House of Commons, not to desert his friends in government, but to stay in Parliament in order to serve God as a Christian statesman.

**I**T IS CLEAR FROM WILBERFORCE'S LETTERS and diaries that this momentous conversation was a turning point in his life. He took Newton's advice and remained an MP. Soon he became a regular attender at Newton's church. Newton became a regular guest at Wilberforce's house on Wimbledon Common. They talked endlessly about Wilberforce's opportunities for Christ-centered service to Parliament and to the nation. Newton reminisced, with much remorse, about his former life as a slave ship captain. These two subjects featured heavily on October 28, 1787, a Sun-

day the two men spent in each other's company. For at the end of that day Wilberforce wrote in his diary: "God Almighty has placed before me two great objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners" (morals).

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Newton and Wilberforce were close friends, correspondents, and prayer partners. Their letters are strong evidence for the belief that the real wellsprings of Wilberforce's momentous achievement were not to be found in votes counted, speeches delivered, or bills passed, but in a far deeper level of spiritual commitment. One of Wilberforce's best (and shortest!) biographers who has captured the strength of his subject's spirituality is John Piper in his *Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce* (Crossway Books, 2007). "He was not a political pragmatist," writes Piper. "He was a radically God-centered Christian who was a politician. And his true affections for God based on the peculiar doctrines of Christianity were the roots of his endurance in the cause of justice."

The amazing grace in Wilberforce's life was God's spiritual transformation of him. This altered his behavior, for in his pre-conversion days he was a libertine, a gambler, and a lightweight political dilettante. He was changed into a deeply serious legislator with tenacious determination and high moral purpose. So for all Wilberforce's abolitionist achievements, momentous though they were, there was an even more important spiritual dimension behind him. Wilberforce's secret was that he made a lifelong journey from self-centeredness, achievement centeredness, and political centeredness to God centeredness. On the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade we should also celebrate this spiritual transformation of William Wilberforce as the key to his historic accomplishments as a parliamentary reformer. ❧

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