

## William Wilberforce (1759-1833)

*He never worked alone.*

God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade, and the reformation of manners." 1787

- Wilberforce had a genius for: Friendship, Eloquence, Faith
- "the greatest natural eloquence in England" William Pitt
- A 'winged being in airy flight' -- seraphic
- "Every face lit up with pleasure at his entry"
- Southey, the poet: "There is such a constant hilarity in every look and motion, such a sweetness in all his tones, such a benignity in all his thoughts, words, and actions that ... you can feel nothing but love and admiration for a creature of so happy and blessed a nature."

1784 trip abroad with Isaac Milner. Discussed Christianity for over a year.

1785: famous visit to Newton. Thenceforth allied himself with the "keenest and so most spoken against, spiritual forces of his times. That commitment largely freed him from the fear of men's opinions. " Garth Lean, *God's Politician*

1787: King reissued a Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue and for the Preventing of Vice, Profaneness and Immorality

1807 Slave trade abolished in British Empire: "*the bill was "one of the three or four perfectly virtuous acts recorded in the history of nations."*

1833 Slavery itself abolished in British Empire. *Three days later William Wilberforce died.*

Wilberforce believed God could give a man detailed guidance, that He could put a thought into a man's mind in exactly the same way as He did to the prophets or to Paul, Ananias and a score of others in Acts "Must not the smallest links be as necessary for maintaining the continuity as the greatest?"

Wilberforce's inward conflict between piety and gaiety of heart. Hannah More:  
His happy ways were an 'honest bait' by which acquaintances who were dead and buried in luxury and indulgence might be awakened." (119 John Pollock, Wilberforce)

The chief source of Wilberforce's views was the bible: "if you read the Scriptures with earnest prayer .. and a sincere desire for discovering the truth and obeying it when known I cannot doubt of your attaining it."

### Wilberforce's PROCESS OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION:

- "The genuine Christianity, strives not to prove himself guiltless but humbles himself in the dust and acknowledges that he is not worthy of the least of all God's mercies.
- He takes a survey of his past life and of the state of his temper and affection; these he compares with the law of God and contrasts with the bounty and longsuffering, etc. of

his Creator and is ready to despair, when he reads the gracious invitation: Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest, and he reads, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, etc.

- This revives his hopes, but heightens his shame and self-aborrence. His language is “Oh that I might therefore show myself in some sort worthy of this infinite love, infinite condescension and unutterable love.”
- He goes out from his prayers in this spirit, and if he falls he turns yet again to the Cross, and ‘the sight of his expiring Redeemer assures him of the pardon of his iniquities.’
- As the penitent sinner gets to know his own heart better, ‘how selfish, how ungrateful, how disobedient to Christian’s commands, a frame of mind is produced wherein ‘the utmost self-abasement’ (is) mixed with firm reliance on the mercies of God through Christ, and a hatred of sin and a desire to be released from its powers as well as from Its punishment.
- Look to Jesus. Devote yourself body and soul to His service, I pray to God through Christ to enable you to do this more sincerely, more willingly, unreservedly...”

Letter to cousin Mary Bird 1789

Wilberforce:

Studied! Spent two months every summer reading, up to 9 hours per day

Arose very early for meditation every day

Fasted

Took Sacrament regularly

Learned stretches of Scripture by heart so that he could meditate at night, or should his eyes trouble him, or when needing guidance in his place in the Commons or at committees.”

On Sundays, he went to church twice

Would not travel or discuss politics on Sabbath. Sabbaths were devoted to the enjoyment of family.

Spent a part of Sunday in self examination

Went w/o sleep one night a week to write letters, do research, reports & pray

After dinner, he would consider how he could do good to his absent friends, praying for them individually.

1797. Wilberforce’s book became a runaway best seller: *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity.*:

“Christianity must be allowed to pervade and penetrate every corner of a Christian’s existence.”

“Every purpose in life must be tested by the pattern of the life of Christ.”

**His book:** How Christianity could guide the politics, habits and attitudes of a nation from the highest to the lowest.

It “astonished an age used to furious religious arguments, when not so long ago the Calvinist author of ‘Rock of Ages’ had poured verbal vitriol over John Wesley.”

Wilberforce: “The time is fast approaching when Christianity will be almost as openly disavowed in the language as in fact it is already supposed to have disappeared from the conduct of men: when infidelity will be held to be the necessary appendage of a man of fashion, and to believe will be deemed the indication of a feeble mind and a contracted understanding.”

One end of the spectrum: *general* Christians w/ *general* penitence in *general*, *general* desires of universal holiness, but who neglect that vigilant care with which they should labor to extirpate every *particular corruption*, by:

- Studying its root,
- Its ramifications
- Its Secret movements
- How it gains strength
- The most effectual methods of resisting it with persevering zeal for the improvement of every Christian grace.

These Christians “confess themselves, in *general* terms,” to be ‘miserable sinners’; this is a tenet of their creed and they feel even proud in proclaiming it. ... a false guise of contrition, a secret self-complacency .....they are in danger of deceiving themselves!... And if the world observes that they have the same eagerness in the pursuit of wealth or ambition, the same vain taste for ostentation and display, the same ungoverned moods and dispositions which are found in the generality of mankind, it will treat with contempt their pretences to superior sanctity and indifference to worldly things, and merely be hardened in its prejudices against the only means which God has provided for our escaping the wrath to come and obtaining eternal happiness.”

Let him then who would be indeed a Christian

- Watch over his ways and over his heart w/ unceasing circumspection (self evaluation)
- Endeavor to learn both from men and books, particularly from the lives of eminent Christians what methods have been actually found most effectual for the conquest of every particular vice and for improvement in every branch of holiness. (Study)
- Studying his own character and observing the most secret workings of his own mind and of our common nature, the knowledge which he will acquire of the human heart in general, and especially of his own, ... will enable him to avoid or to guard against the occasions of evil.”
- It must be the business of their whole lives to grow in grace!

How did William Wilberforce’s experience and finish life’s journey?

He was considered to possess the most beautiful voice, wit and joy in England

Throughout his life, he wore an uncomfortable cage structure to hold his spine straight.

He walked with a sort of shuffle, putting one side of his body first.

His eyesight was dreadful.

He suffered throughout his life from colitis.

He was in constant pain.

He took opium for the pain, and suffered from its awful side effects. He stayed on as small a dose as he could manage.

He gave away more than one quarter of his annual income each year

He eventually gave away and/or lost his great fortune.

He supported a profligate son throughout every venture he attempted.

He ended up living with his children.

He lost his favorite daughter two years before his own death.

His wife was a notoriously unpleasant woman to whom he was devoted

His household was famous for its lack of discipline and order because Wilberforce helped everyone who asked, including his staff of servants.

Three of his sons became ministers, and two eventually joined the Oxford Movement.

As he aged, he would stand on the first pew, leaning on the pulpit with a binocular aimed several inches from his son's face in order to hear and see. Everyone in church watched Wilberforce, not the preacher.

Wilberforce would arrive at breakfast with a different flower in every buttonhole of his coat, but with his hair unbrushed and unkempt.

The children of the Clapham sect remembered that he was the only person of the group who would be interrupted in meetings to throw things, chase them and play outside at the drop of a hat.

Wilberforce struggled with discipline of living, vowing to drink only 9 glasses of wine at dinner, and to restrict his food. However, his mother and friends noticed that his temper, and genius for sarcasm were rarely if ever witnessed after his conversion to Christ. His mother who loathed "dissenters" said, after spending a weekend with him (after conversion), "if he be mad, perhaps we will be bit by it."

### The Clapham Sect ( Clapham was a Village 4 miles south of Westminster)

Men and women of:

- Enormous energy
- Iron determination
- Deep faith

Rev. John Venn son of one of the pioneers of evangelicalism, great preacher and wise Counselor, parson at Clapham

Hannah More Poet, pamphleteer and playwright (the bishop in skirts). Published penny tracts for lower classes to read, put Christian truths in story form.

Charles Simeon Cambridge pastor

Zachary Macaulay Had been a slave overseer and estate manager,  
Governor of Sierra Leone

Charles Grant Former dissolute (owed L20,000 gambling debts) who was converted after the death of his two young sons in India, Chairman of the East India Company

John Shore, Lord Teighmouth, retired Governor-General of India

James Stephen Lawyer w/ fierce hatred of slavery

Henry Thornton banker and M.P. with his brother Eliot, known as "The Saints"

Many chieftains from Sierra Leone were living at the community.

It is a travesty which represents the men of Clapham as being made stern and gloomy by an austere religion.

Those who knew them best emphasize an unusual happiness as the striking feature of their family life."

.... We saw their patience, cheerfulness, generosity, wisdom and activity daily before us, and we knew and felt that all this was only the natural expression of hearts given to the service of God."

On the Clapham Sect: Among them, St Paul's recipe for teamwork ('each humbling considering the other the better man') came near to achievement. They learnt from each other, respected each other, while feeling free to help each other overcome their various defects of character or temperament....They talked straight to each other."

Clapham strategies (Ford Brown, Fathers of the Victorians)

- Parliamentary change in laws
- Creation of societies, voluntary in nature
- Literature
  - Wilberforce's book
  - Hannah More's penny tracts
  - Distribution and availability of Scripture to everyone "ceaseless proselytizing in the ranks of the great – "of those who count"
- Capture of the Established Church: helping men enter Holy Orders, getting Evangelical clergymen into lectureships, livings and church offices.
- Immense religious and moral propaganda
- Creation of subsidiary causes of a popular nature
- Relentless use of Evangelical money
- Did not allow themselves to be confused w/ Methodists, Calvinists, radicals or liberals. Conservatives.
- Recognized that idealistic procedure (such as Wesley's) was a waste of time
- Instead used "ways and means of this world"

Descendants (either spiritual or actual) of the Evangelicals included:

The Brontes  
George Eliot  
Elizabeth Barrett  
Virginia Woolf  
Queen Victoria

Battersea Rise          Thornton's Queen Anne house, 34 bedrooms. Broomfield Lodge and Glenelg, built adjacent

These men and women were each very different and possessed an astonishing range of capacities:  
Encyclopedic knowledge  
Capacity for research  
Sparkling wit and enjoyment of life  
Family life was rich and valued  
Intimate knowledge of India and West Indies  
Legal ability  
Oratorical genius  
Parliamentary skill

"Clapham was often a place for relaxation and delightful time-wasting"  
Wilberforce was "as restless and volatile as a child himself"  
Each had been through an "experience of re-birth"  
Tried to embody Paul's admonition: "each humbly considering the other the better man"  
Lived in community  
Emphasis on the Sabbath  
Friendly times of self criticism

Every decision to be made on basis of what God desired for the whole fellowship

These decisions not to be made alone

Their lives were filled with dialogue with each other.

Accomplishments:

Abolition of the Slave Trade in Britain 1807

Abolition of Slavery throughout the Empire 1833

Formed the Church Missionary Society and 150 other organizations

Sent missionaries to India

Intervened on behalf of the Greeks fighting for freedom, also the North

American Indians, the Haitians, and the Hottentots

Opposed flogging in the Army

Took first steps toward humanizing prisons and penal code

Pioneered public education

### **London during Wilberforce's life:**

Annual intake of 5-10- million gallons of gin

70,000 prostitutes in London

women and children killed publicly for minor misdemeanors

Drunkenness & gluttony the norm among gentry and political leaders

### **English aristocracy: do what you like & take the consequences”:**

Some examples:

Lord Francis Dashwood (who with Benjamin Franklin, revised the Book of Common Prayer for American use), presided over a “Hell Fire Club” where, in underground caves and grottoes beneath his palace at West Wyckham, satanic orgies were held by torchlight. Participants dressed at medieval monk debauched young girls, dressed as nuns.” (A Burning and A Shining Light, David Lyle Jeffrey).

Fredrick Cornwallis, archbishop of Canterbury (1768-1783). Noted for orgiastic “routs and feastings”. “Madness” was the charge most often levied against any sort of serious and outspoken Christianity.” (Jeffrey).

MANNERS: From Lord Chesterfield's Letters to His Son, 1773

- A man must fight a duel when insulted
- Men (and women) must pay their gambling debts
- A woman should provide her husband with an heir of his own blood. After that she could do anything.
- Liaisons were to be handled discreetly, not flaunted

Trevelyan: “Society was one vast casino”

### **Lower classes:**

Body snatchers would kidnap and kill hapless individuals to provide bodies for medical research.

1750: consumption of gin (poorly distilled and virtually poisonous) = 11 million gallons

- Women carried 170 lbs. of coal up steep ladders
- 1780 a typical colliery employed 173 children under 7
- **children worked 13-16 hours per day**

Obscene pictorials prominently displayed everywhere in London society