

# Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 14

## “My Walk is a Public One”: William Wilberforce as Public Theologian

BRUCE RILEY ASHFORD

The Church's public theology combines reflection and praxis, employing thought and action in tandem. Public theology conforms to the biblical pattern of word-deed witness mandated from Genesis to Revelation. From time to time, a public theologian emerges who embodies the ideal combination of reflection and practice; William Wilberforce is one such exemplar. One of the most successful social reformers in world history, Wilberforce drew upon a deep well of theological reflection – reading Owen, Baxter, and Edwards regularly – to lead Britain in abolishing the slave trade and, eventually, the practice of slavery altogether. “William Wilberforce was someone who took the Bible seriously, and as a result of this belief, he literally changed the world.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, his social achievements are staggering, especially when viewed against the backdrop of his relatively short life and the immense opposition he faced.



### From Idle Aristocrat to Christian Politician

Yet, regarding Wilberforce's unwavering faith, it was not always so. As a teenager, he had little or no interest in the Christian faith, instead aspiring to become an aristocratic gentleman in British society. Enrolling at St John's College, Cambridge, he took advantage of his family's money and frittered away his time. “As much pains as were taken to make me idle as were ever taken to make anyone studious,” he later reflected. After graduating in the summer of 1780, Wilberforce campaigned – at age 21 – for election as a Member of Parliament (MP), defying the odds to win a seat in Parliament, where he remained an MP for another 45 years.

In 1784, after his election to Parliament, Wilberforce experienced a spiritual awakening. Through conversations with his friend Isaac Milner and immersion in Philip Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745), the young MP embraced the radical demands of the Christian

<sup>1</sup> Eric Metaxas, *7 Men and the Secret of Their Greatness* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 33.

faith, never looking back. Immediately, he began to view his parliamentary post as a divine vocation: “My walk I am sensible is a public one,” he wrote in his diary. “My business is in the world, and I must mix in the assemblies of men or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me.” He understood the implications of such a calling: “A man who acts from the principles I profess reflects that he is to give an account of his political conduct at the judgment seat of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> With a clear sense of divine calling thus in mind, Wilberforce set forth with steady resolve to honor the Lord Christ in the political sphere.

### From Intellectually Committed Christian to Fully Engaged Activist

In 1786, abolitionist friends approached Wilberforce, asking him to lead a parliamentary campaign for their cause. Initially, he hesitated, knowing that the economic security of Britain was deeply intertwined with the slave trade. Yet, soon, he came to see slavery as a great moral blight on his nation and embraced abolition as his mission. More than a decade into the struggle, Wilberforce declared this “the grand object of my parliamentary existence.... Before this great cause all others dwindle in my eyes.... If it please God to honor me so far, may I be the instrument of stopping such a course of wickedness and cruelty as never before disgraced a Christian country.”<sup>3</sup> What Wesley and others had declared from the pulpit, he proclaimed on the floor of Parliament.

For twenty long years, Wilberforce faced one obstacle after another. In addition to bouts of serious illness – including lung problems, curvature of the spine, and debilitating ulcerative colitis – he was the subject of widespread public criticism and vicious slander. Moreover, he was fiercely opposed by businessmen, ship owners, traditionalists and even the King. Admiral Horatio Nelson famously lambasted “the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies.” Yet so steadfast was Wilberforce that an opponent lamented, “it is necessary to watch him as he is blessed with a sufficient quantity of that Enthusiastic spirit, which so far from yielding that it grows more vigorous from

blows.”<sup>4</sup> Wilberforce’s indomitable spirit and relentless perseverance would soon reap dividends.

His great victory came in 1807 with the late-night passage of a bill to abolish the slave trade. Incredibly, it was a landslide victory, with 283 votes cast in favor of abolition and only sixteen in opposition. Wilberforce’s biographer, Pollock, describes the scene: “The House rose almost to a man and turned toward Wilberforce in a burst of Parliamentary cheers. Suddenly, above the roar of ‘Hear, hear,’ and quite out of order, three hurrahs echoed and echoed while he sat, head bowed, tears streaming down his face.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, even with this victory in hand, Wilberforce continued to work toward the deeper goal – abolition of slavery *in toto* – until Britain’s emancipation bill was passed on July 26, 1833, just three days before his death.

### William Wilberforce as Public Theologian

Wilberforce has been described in many ways: politician, political activist, political theologian and more. One description, however, fits him as well or better than any other, and that is a public theologian. Although he certainly was a politician and an activist, and even though some of what he wrote and said could be described as political theology, Wilberforce’s whole body of work far exceeds the sphere of politics. From his earliest years as a Christian, he sought to apply the Christian faith broadly across society’s architecture.

Two characteristics stand out regarding his public theology, informing his lifelong quest to abolish the slave trade.

The first, premised on his belief that politics is downhill from society, is his quest to foster a moral reformation in English society, while the second is his determination to critique and persuade, and the lifelong pursuit of excellence in that regard.

#### Fostering a Moral Reformation

Shortly after Wilberforce decided to run for office, he recorded a journal entry that would shape the rest of his life. “God Almighty has set before me two Great Objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation



2 Kevin Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 96.

3 John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London: Constable and Company, 1977), 143.

4 Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 105.

5 Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 211.

of Manners.”<sup>6</sup> The second great object, the reformation of manners, is often overlooked but holds the key to understanding his approach to social change. By “reformation of manners,” he means a moral reformation of the whole culture. For Wilberforce, politics is only one limited sphere of culture, and culture is shaped primarily by religion and morality. Thus, he worked to reform society at the religious and moral level so that a spiritual and moral awakening would radiate outward into all spheres of culture.

To understand his passion for reforming society at the religious and moral levels, we need not look any further than his books. The driving thrust of his first book, *A Practical View of Christianity*, is to show that Christianity is rooted in affection for Christ, which in turn is rooted in the biblical doctrines of depravity – that all aspects of human life are marred by sin – and substitutionary atonement – that Christ is God’s redemptive response to our depravity. These doctrines transform a Christian’s life and, at the social level, bequeath a determination to take the right courses of action morally. He wanted to “make goodness fashionable.”<sup>7</sup> His second book, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire on Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies*, published just before his death, employed Christian premises and forms of reasoning, urging British society to abolish slavery entirely rather than settling for the mere abolition of the slave trade. Moreover, historical records show that Wilberforce practiced what he preached – his days were marked by daily self-examination, extended prayer, times of solitude and faithful church attendance.

### Honing the Art of Critique and Persuasion

Furthermore, Wilberforce employed a powerful combination of *pointed critique* and *humble persuasion* to bring about the abolition of slavery. His critiques were disruptive to the aristocratic class who benefitted enormously from the slave trade, causing him to be the recipient of widespread public criticism and vicious slander. “What a lesson it is to a man not to set his heart on low popularity when after 40 years of disinterested public service, I am believed by the Bulk to be a Hypocritical Rascal. O, what a comfort it is to have to fly for refuge to a God of unchangeable truth and love.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, Wilberforce deployed his critiques in tandem with persuasion, using well-constructed arguments, magnificent rhetorical skills and personal humility to win the day: “He didn’t grandstand and fulminate at those

<sup>6</sup> William Wilberforce, “Journal, Sunday, October 28, 1787,” quoted in Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, vol. 1 (Andesite Press, 2017), 149.

<sup>7</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 276.

<sup>8</sup> Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 276.

who were wrong, even if the subject was the horror of the slave trade... [and this] graciousness in the midst of the battle against the slave trade did a lot to persuade those who were on the fence instead of putting them off and pushing them away.”<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion

God used William Wilberforce as a public theologian to bring tangible change to British society and the world at large. The world he left behind was dramatically different from the world it was when he entered politics some forty-nine years earlier. Not only had slavery and the slave trade been abolished but British society had been awakened to the necessity of social activism. His direct involvement launched at least four nonprofit organizations, and inspired countless coalitions and networks. Through his indirect influence, the entire Western world was reawakened to the biblical idea that fortunate people should use their privilege to help those less fortunate. For Wilberforce, therefore, his walk was a public one, as was his theology.

*Bruce Riley Ashford is Senior Research Fellow at the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology and CEO of [The Ashford Agency](#).*

<sup>9</sup> Metaxas, *7 Men*, 54.

