



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

The “Peculiar Doctrines” of William Wilberforce

TIM PAULEY

BIOGRAPHY

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Many lawmakers serving in the West Virginia legislature want to make a difference regarding many important issues. It can easily become discouraging to work for change only to find it slow going and difficult due to opposition and the inertia of the political process. Since our study of Philemon dealt with the issue of slavery in New Testament times, we may find it helpful to consider the life and work of William Wilberforce, a British legislator who fought to end the slave trade during the late 1700's. You might be familiar with him through the 2006 movie, “Amazing Grace”. Wilberforce fought a 20 year legislative battle to outlaw the slave trade in Great Britain. During that time he faced tremendous opposition and challenges both in his political and personal life; yet Wilberforce persevered until he saw the slave trade abolished in 1807. How did Wilberforce persevere for so long in the face of great challenges and opposition? Why was he such a dedicated advocate for the cause of abolishing slavery? It was because of what he called the “peculiar doctrines” of the Christian faith to which he firmly held. In our study this week we will briefly consider William Wilberforce's life and work, and see how the “peculiar doctrines” to which he held sustained him in the challenges he faced.¹

A PRIVILEGED YOUNG MAN GETS INTO POLITICS

William Wilberforce was born into a wealthy family in 1759. Just before his 9th birthday his father died and his mother sent him to live with his aunt and uncle who were evangelical Christians. While there he was exposed to preachers such as Whitefield, Wesley, and Newton. His mother was concerned about these influences and sent him to a boarding school. After this, Wilberforce largely lost interest in biblical religion and fell into the typical social life of a wealthy young man of his day

Almost on a lark, he and a friend William Pitt ran for seats in the House of Commons. Wilberforce was wealthy and was a gifted speaker. He spent £8,000 and won the seat. This began a 54 year career in politics.

A PRIVILEGED YOUNG POLITICIAN TURNS TO CHRIST

For several years Wilberforce lived the life of a wealthy, upper-class, socializing politician with all the late nights and partying which that entailed. Throughout the year the British parliament would take two long recesses and wealthy members would often use this time to “travel the continent” spending time in places such as the French Riviera. On one such trip Wilberforce invited an old grammar school mate Isaac Milner to join them. Milner was a devout believer, yet demonstrated none of the stereotypes Wilberforce held regarding evangelical Christians. They spent hours on the trip talking about theology and the Christian faith. At the end of the trip, Wilberforce confessed to having reached an “intellectual assent” to the truths of Christianity. He shoved all this to the back of his mind and continued on with his political and social life. The next year he again traveled with Milner and they talked about the Bible for hours. His intellectual assent became a profound conviction regarding the truth of the gospel.

One of the first great indications of the conversion that had taken place in his life was his attitude towards his wealth. Almost immediately he began using his wealth to help the less fortunate. He was soon giving away at least ¼ of his income. He also came to see his political position as a means to help the poor and oppressed.

He seriously considered dropping out of politics. He decided to visit the well known evangelical pastor, John Newton, (also known for the hymn “Amazing Grace”) to seek advice. Newton advised him to stay in politics, later writing "It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation." Wilberforce indeed stayed in politics, but his priorities and his lifestyle were drastically changed by his faith in Christ.

Instead of traveling and socializing during the recesses, Wilberforce began to study as much as nine or ten hours a day. The Bible became his best loved book and he memorized a great deal of it. Though he never had any formal theological training, he became quite a lay theologian as is demonstrated in his book, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes.*

BIBLE STUDIES

LOBBYIST / STAFF STUDY: **TUESDAYS, 12:00 NOON**, TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

LEGISLATOR / ELECTED OFFICIAL STUDIES: **THURSDAYS 8:00 A.M. & NOON** TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

West Virginia

The “Peculiar Doctrines” of William Wilberforce

When we speak of Wilberforce’s “peculiar doctrines” we must remember the wider use of the word. “Peculiar” often refers to something that is strange or odd. But it is also used to describe something that is distinctive in nature, or to something characteristic of or belonging exclusively to some person, group, or thing. In his writings Wilberforce often spoke of the “peculiar doctrines” of Christianity as the basis of his own fight against slavery and of the very foundation for true morality in the British Empire. These “particular doctrines” which set Christianity apart from all other religions and from secular society were the corruption of human nature, the atonement of the Savior, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. ²

Wilberforce expounded how each and every member of society is a sinner by nature and by action. He wrote of how we can only be made right with God through faith Christ and His suffering and death on the cross. He explained how society could be changed, even a great ill such as slavery, only when hearts and minds were changed through the new life that is found in Christ. These were the teachings that set Christianity apart from what he called the “nominal religion” and moralism of his day.

A DEDICATED CHRISTIAN POLITICIAN FACES GREAT CHALLENGES

William Wilberforce took on the issue of the slave trade as the driving focus of his political career. He wrote, “God Almighty has placed before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners [morals].” In 1787 he notified the House of Commons that he would move for the abolition of the slave trade. It would be 20 years before he would see this put into law. During this fight he faced many political and personal challenges.

He fought for 20 years seeing his proposal defeated through the politically machinations common to the day. Opponents accused him of caring more for the foreign slaves than for the common laborers in England.

He faced challenges in his personal life as well. His wife was depressed and pessimistic and worried herself into chronic poor health. His oldest son, William, went to college and fell away from

the Christian faith. When he learned his son was living a profligate lifestyle, he had to cut him off. He lost his daughter, Barbara to tuberculosis at the age of 32. Wilberforce faced many serious health problems himself.

It is amazing that despite all these challenges he remained faithful to the Lord and faithful to the task of fighting for the abolition of the slave trade. Early in the morning on February 24, 1807, the House of Commons voted to abolish the slave trade in Great Britain. The Ayes, 283, the Noes, 16. It is recorded that the members of the House stood and turned toward Wilberforce and burst out in a round of parliamentary cheers. Reportedly, Wilberforce turned to his best friend and colleague and quipped, “Well, what shall we abolish next?” It was Wilberforce’s steadfast faith the “peculiar doctrines” of Christianity that sustained him. In the face of all these challenges, many wrote of the joy in his Christian life that he constantly exhibited.

CONCLUSION

The account of Wilberforce demonstrates how important it is for believers to share the good news of the gospel with colleagues and coworkers in the capitol. God can use you to be an Isaac Milner in someone’s life!

Wilberforce made it clear that a genuine change in morals in society only comes about when people’s hearts are changed through the good news of the gospel. This is vital for us to keep in mind as we seek change in the capitol, in our families, in our communities, and in our state. Have you put your faith in those “peculiar doctrines” of Christian faith?

I hope this brief study might whet your appetite to dig deeper into the life of William Wilberforce and of other great Christians of the past. You can find the references to the resources used in this study in the endnotes below if you would like to read more.

¹ Material for this study largely adapted from *Peculiar Doctrines, Public Morals, and the Political Welfare*, a biographical message by Pastor John Piper. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/biographies/by-title>

² Wilberforce, William. *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Middle and Higher Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity*. (Kindle Locations 7-9). Kindle Edition.