

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE AND THE CLAPHAM GROUP

A Model of Prayer and Persuasion for Today

2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in England, an achievement in no small part due to the tireless efforts of the evangelical politician and social reformer, William Wilberforce, and the group of fervent "Clapham" believers who surrounded him. Look for the release of a feature film, "Amazing Grace: The Story of William Wilberforce," from Walden Media, starring Albert Finney and produced by Ken Wales, to commemorate the anniversary.

William Wilberforce's battle had spanned 20 years. The scene was extraordinary in the British House of Commons! The date was February 23, 1807. Supporters of the slave trade had their say, but now others were clamoring for the opportunity to speak for the motion for abolition. Finally, an eloquent speech was given in tribute to William Wilberforce himself, which brought the house to its feet. After years of discouragement, in which pleas for abolition were scorned or ignored, the motion passed by an overwhelming vote of 283 to 16.

As a new convert to Christianity in 1784, William Wilberforce, a member of the House of Commons since 1780 at the age of 21, seriously considered getting out of politics to better pursue spiritual growth. But ex-slave trader John Newton, then a pastor, convinced him that his most important spiritual duty was to stay where he was in the rough and tumble of the political world and there live out his witness for Christ. Wilberforce and his colleagues, particularly those known as the "Clapham group," set out to abolish slavery, a task that had to seem impossible at the time, since slavery played such a vital role in the functioning of the English economy. But they succeeded.

The families and individuals who surrounded Wilberforce were named for Clapham, a village south of London, where most moved in evangelical Anglican circles. Busy professionals, all of them, they still made time for Christian action and gave liberally and effectively to worthy causes. Together, they challenged the whole moral climate of their times and changed their world!

Their efforts ranged across a wide spectrum of issues including slavery, missions, prison reform, public immorality, and the needs of the poor. Their principles, approach and strategy are very informative and provide valuable guidelines for Christians and the Church in any era that seeks to make a major difference in the



A porcelain cameo by Josiah Wedgewood, the famous potter whose name is still known for fine china. A Slave asks, "Am I not a man and a brother?" Used by Claphamites as a visual aid in their efforts against slavery.

world. Here is a brief overview of how they went about their herculean task.

Set clear goals. Specific goals were set. No ambiguity here. Wilberforce's life goal was succinctly stated in an entry in his diary dated Sunday, October 28, 1787: "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners." (By manners Wilberforce was referring to the moral climate of his day.)

Know the Biblical and theological basis that motivates your cause. It is so important to get beyond personality issues, political party, and prejudicial preferences. If there is a Biblical teaching at stake, make sure the work has been done to ensure that your interpretation of the Bible is solid and the application is legitimate.

Have confidence in the cause and the truth. Can a small minority make a big difference? The Wilberforce group thought they could, even though the task seemed overwhelming at first. With the slave trade so essential to the economy then, who would have given them any chance of succeeding? But they were convinced of the rightness and righteousness of their cause and confident they could in time prevail.

Get the evidence. More than rhetoric is absolutely essential. It is not enough to ignite emotional support. Meticulous research was carried out to get the best data and irrefutable, substantiated facts to support their case.

Maintain the foundation of prayer. Wilberforce knew repeated times of defeat and discouragement. He sought refuge in God and was unapologetic in his acknowledgment of how he depended on the prayers of others. In his letter to John Newton of September 6, 1788, he poured out his heart: "... and in truth tis often matter of solid comfort to me, and of gratitude to the bountiful Giver of mercies, to reflect that the prayers of many of the well beloved of the Lord are offered up for me. My path is particularly steep and difficult and dangerous."

Don't give up when setbacks are encountered. When it seemed that they were decisively defeated, this group would not accept such reversals as final. They regrouped and came back to advance their cause again and again, no matter how many times they were defeated.

Rise above personal attacks. They did not let vicious attacks on their character and motives distract them but kept their efforts focused on the main issue. Inflammatory epithets may push hot buttons for fundraising and agitating followers but are not a good long-term strategy. They found the key was to keep attention focused on the issue and the facts and not be concerned to denigrate the persons who opposed them.

Understand the opponent's viewpoint. They were fully aware of (we might even say "sympathetic to") the concerns motivating their opponents and tried to deal with these in such a way that progress could be made. It is important to be able to state the rationale for the position for the opposition in such a way that the opponent would acknowledge that you have represented them accurately.

Accept incremental victories. When they couldn't get all that they wanted, they nevertheless pushed as far as they could, realizing that gradual change and progress was preferable to none. There were times when compromise was better than stalemate or defeat.

Cultivate a broad base of support. When they could not get the needed support of political leaders (who were afraid of the pressures from those whose economic interests were threatened), they took their case to the people and developed grassroots support.

Address the larger picture. While they dealt with a dominant issue, they were not isolated into a single-issue mentality but saw the main issue as part of the overall moral climate that also needed to be addressed. Realize how many of the burning issues of our day are rooted in wider and far-reaching issues of worldview and ideology.

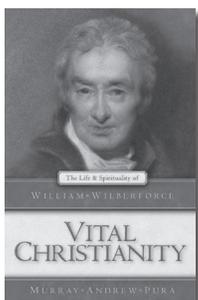
Maintain integrity. They worked through legitimate, established means to pursue their goals, not resorting to violence or dirty tactics, convinced that truth and right were on their side.

Commit the venture, progress, and results to the Lord. They were sustained by a conviction that they were simply obeying a mandate of the Gospel. They therefore committed their energies and passions to God, who would providentially guide the historical situation and bring about change when and how he saw fit.

In his own words. The following is a selection from Wilberforce's "Practical View of... Real Christianity:"

"I must confess. . . that my own solid hopes for the well-being of my country depend, not so much on her navies and armies, nor on the wisdom of her rulers, nor on the spirit of her people, as on the persuasion that she still contains many who love and obey the gospel of Christ."

The above article is edited and adapted from Glimpses #200 and #87; used with permission. Glimpses and Glimpses for Kids are full-color; 4-page bulletin inserts published by Christian History Institute; available in bulk quantities only. For more information, go to www.cbminstitute.org, or call 1-800-468-0458.



VITAL CHRISTIANITY Murray Andrew Pura

An excellent introduction! William Wilberforce (1759-1833) and the Clapham Group were truly inspiring followers of Christ. Their prayer life, energy, persistence in holding unpopular positions, compassionate concern and unashamedly evangelical faith are a shining example to all Christians today. Softcover, 160 pages. Order IFA Item #B663, retail \$9.99, IFA \$7.95 + \$3.00 shipping.