

The slave trade in the early 19th century presented a monumental ethical challenge and an apparently insurmountable obstacle to missionary outreaches in Africa. The abolition of the slave trade helped prepare the way for the 19th century to become the greatest century for missionary advance.

As we battle against great social evils such as abortion, pornography and persecution and work for Reformation, the overwhelming opposition and pressure can drive one to exhaustion and a temptation to give up the fight. William Wilberforce – the Reformer who led the campaign to abolish the slave trade and to set those in bondage free – was persistently slandered in the media, threatened, physically assaulted and even the target of attempted murder. Yet he persevered and, after a lifetime crusade, his steadfastness was rewarded with the liberation of all slaves in the British Empire.

At this critical stage in history Christians need to learn from one of the greatest Christian statesmen how, in the face of constant division and opposition, he succeeded in abolishing the slave trade.

The Scourge of Slavery

All nations and tribes engaged in slavery, particularly the Muslim nations. However, it was the Emperor Charles V (before whom Martin Luther made his historic *“My conscience is captive to the Word of God . . . Here I stand, I can do no other . . .”* speech) of the Holy Roman Empire who first authorized Europe’s involvement in the slave trade in 1519. Because of Pope Alexander VI’s Line of Demarcation Bull of 1493, which barred Spain from Africa, Spain issued Asientos (a monopoly) to other nations to supply slaves for her South American colonies. First Portugal had this lucrative franchise, then the Dutch, then the French. Finally, by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, the Asientos was transferred from France to Britain. Initially the contract was for 4 800 slaves a year. During the next century Britain transported up to 2 million slaves to the New World.

Britain’s involvement in slavery was first authorized in 1631 by King Charles I (who was later executed by Parliament). His son, Charles II, reintroduced it by Royal Charter in 1672.

The *Trade*, as it became known, involved a triangular voyage. Slave ships sailed from Bristol or Liverpool loaded with cloths, beads, muskets, iron bars and brandy. This merchandise was then traded in West Africa in exchange for slaves. Some African chiefs sold their own people, others engaged in wars and slave raids against neighbouring tribes to capture victims for the trade. Often professional Arab slave traders provided the victims.

The *Middle Passage* transported the slaves to the West Indies. Here the slaves were sold and the ships loaded with spices, rum, molasses and sugar. The third leg of the journey was the return to England (160 British ships were ultimately involved in slaving). The average Englishman on the street was kept in the dark as to what actually happened on the *middle passage*

, until – in 1785 – Thomas Clarkson’s landmark study

“Slavery and Commerce in the Human Species”

was first published – in Latin – at Cambridge and then translated into English and widely circulated.

In 1787 Wilberforce wore out the pages of his copy of Clarkson’s book on Slavery. According to Clarkson’s research, ten percent of the slaves would normally die during the *middle passage*. Strong men would fetch as much as £40 while the women and children were sold in cheap batches with the sick and weak men. The fit were often branded – using silver branding irons to minimise infection.

Slaving was one of the largest, and certainly the most profitable, sectors of the British economy. In England 18 000 people were employed simply in making the goods to trade for slaves. This trade constituted 4.4% of British exports.

On Sunday 28 October 1787, Wilberforce wrote in his diary: *“God Almighty has set before me two great objects, **the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Society.**”*

The Crisis of Conversion

William Wilberforce was born, in 1759, into a wealthy family and educated at Cambridge University. He was elected to Parliament, in 1780, at the age of 21 and served in the House of

Commons for the next forty-five years! William was short, frail, frequently sick and afflicted with poor eye sight. However, he more than made up for his weak body with his vigorous mind and boundless energy. He was a particularly gifted speaker and generous to friends and strangers alike. As a child he had been strongly influenced by the dedicated faith of his uncle and aunt.

William's father died when he was 9, so he was sent to live with William and Hanna Wilberforce, who were childless. William's uncle and aunt were friends of George Whitefield and William later described how deeply he had been impressed by Whitefield's preaching and visits to his uncle's home. He also met John Newton, the former slave ship captain who had been converted and later wrote "*Amazing Grace*." When William's mother realised that her son was becoming "*too religious*" she came and took him back, placed him in a boarding school, and encouraged a more worldly lifestyle.

As a Member of Parliament, Wilberforce opposed the British war against the American Colonies declaring that the Cabinet Ministers were acting more like lunatics than statesmen and denounced their "*cruel, bloody and impractical*" policies. Wilberforce made his name with his quick wit and devastating sarcasm.

In 1783, he travelled to France, and met King Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Lafayette and Benjamin Franklin. His good friend William Pitt was then elected Prime Minister – at age 24 the youngest Prime Minister in British history. Wilberforce then stood for Yorkshire, the largest county in England, and won by a landslide.

It was at this point, when he had won an unassailable position in both politics and society, that Wilberforce was confronted with the claims of the Gospel of Christ through a book "*The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*" by Philip Doddridge. His mind was convinced of the truth of the Gospel, but he recognised that intellectual assent was not enough.

A sharp conflict raged within him. "*I am no Christian*", he was forced to admit. He was overcome with anguish:

*"the deep guilt and dark
ingratitude of my past life forced itself on me in the strongest colours, and I condemned myself
for having wasted precious time and opportunities and talents."*

He was appalled by his
"shapeless idleness"

and

“a sense of my great sinfulness in having so long neglected the unspeakable mercies of my God and Saviour.”

Through all his heart searching, Bible study and prayer, he was transformed.

Since nearly all politicians drank, gambled and engaged in corrupt practices, William assumed that he would now have to give up his political career. In turmoil he went to see his boyhood hero, Rev. John Newton. Should he give up politics and become a preacher? Or should he seclude himself from society to live a life of quiet meditation and prayer? In response Newton admonished him that to leave his post in Parliament would be desertion from the duty to which God had called him: ***“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.”*** If he stayed in politics he would find opportunities to advance God’s Kingdom that other men could only dream of.

Wilberforce informed the Prime Minister that he could no longer vote the party line if it conflicted with Christian principles. The change in his behaviour and politics was dramatic. He resigned from five clubs in one day. He stopped going to plays and theatres (which had become particularly decadent at that time) and gave up gambling. With a new intellectual rigour, he set himself to redeem his idle years. He became less temperamental, more stable and more cheerful. He saw clearly that **if a man became a Christian it should influence everything he thinks and does.**

He began to search the Scriptures for the principles upon which his policies should be based. As he explained to one constituent: we are *“to give an account of (our) political conduct at the Judgement seat of Christ.”*

At his conversion there were only two other evangelical Members of Parliament. By the time of his death there were over 100 evangelical members in the House of Commons and the House of Lords!

A Call for Reformation

One of Wilberforce’s first actions as a Christian was to persuade the King, George III, to issue a Proclamation calling for spiritual Reformation throughout the land. On 1 June 1787, the King gazetted a ***“Proclamation for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue and for the Preventing of Vice, Profaneness and Immorality.”***

It declared: *“Whereas we cannot but observe with inexpressible concern, the rapid progress of impiety and licentiousness and that deluge of profaneness, immorality and every kind of vice . . .*

do hereby declare our Royal Purpose and resolution to discountenance and punish all manner of vice, profaneness and immorality . . .” Sheriffs and justices were to be “very vigilant and strict”

in prosecuting those

“guilty of excessive drinking, blasphemy, profane swearing and cursing, lewdness, or other immoral and dissolute practices.”

They were also ordered to close down brothels and destroy

“all loose and licentious prints, books and publications dispersing poison in the minds of the young and to punish the publishers and vendors thereof.”

Church attendance was also urged.

The Secretary of State was instructed to send six copies of the Proclamation to the High Sheriff of every county with the King’s Command that it be publicly read and acted upon. At the time few realised that the Member for Yorkshire was the author of the Proclamation.

Wilberforce then established a ***Proclamation Society*** to ensure that the Proclamation became a force rather than a farce. Local chapters of this society worked to bring about Reformation at every level of society. The time was ripe. Many thousands whose lives had been transformed by the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley got involved in this campaign to clean up and reshape the nation. Magistrates throughout the nation eagerly responded to the *Proclamation*

. The seriousness of the crime wave provoked a groundswell of popular support for Wilberforce’s campaign. As Wilberforce wrote:

“Surely the principles as well as the practice of Christianity are simple and lead . . . to action.”

Wilberforce also wrote a book which had an enormous impact on the upper classes of Britain: “*A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of this Country contrasted with* ***Real Christianity.***”

In six months it went through five editions and sold 7 500 copies. By 1826, 15 editions had been printed in England and 25 in America. It was also translated into French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and German. David Livingstone – the missionary who pioneered Christianity throughout the hinterland of Africa and successfully campaigned to eradicate the Islamic slave trade – testified that

Practical Christianity

was one of the most important and formative books he ever read.

Personal Generosity not State Taxes

In Parliament, Wilberforce generally voted against the expenditure of money. Although it was the government which needed to free the slaves – because it was the government that protected the slave traders, Wilberforce knew that the government could not do everything. In fact it should not exceed its jurisdiction. The Bible clearly limits the state's authority to the ministries of defence, law and order and justice (Romans 13:1-4; 1 Peter 2:13,14). For this reason Wilberforce did not support the expansion of government powers nor increased taxation. The state is the Minister of Justice. The Church is the Minister of Grace. So William did much to help the poor and needy – personally and through voluntary societies. In some years he gave more to charity than his entire income! Not surprisingly he ended his life bankrupt.

In 1802 the Proclamation Society was replaced by *The Society for the Suppression of Vice*. Amongst the many inspired to Reformation principles by this society were Lord Shaftesbury (who began his campaign to outlaw child labour in the factories the year Wilberforce died) and Princess Victoria (who was destined to be Britain's longest reigning Queen).

In 1803 Wilberforce also helped form the *British and Foreign Bible Society* – which was the first interdenominational society uniting Anglicans and Dissenters (Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and others). He also supported Hannah More's pioneering of the first Sunday Schools, helped launch the *Church Missionary Society* (in 1798) and started *The Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor* (1796). He sent missionaries to Tahiti and regularly supported William Carey's Baptist Mission in India. As one person described Wilberforce:
"Factories did not spring up more rapidly in Leeds and Manchester than schemes of Benevolence beneath his roof."

Wilberforce's home became a kind of national centre for benevolence and moral reform. At one time he was president, vice-president or a member of the committee for 69 societies! And he managed this while being married with four sons and two daughters.

Also remarkable is the fact that, unlike most men of Wilberforce's day and class, he spent quality time playing and praying with his children. As he declared: *"the spiritual interests of my children is my first priority."*

AI

I attended family prayers, which were held while kneeling, twice a day. These times of devotions were described as
“short and cheerful.”

Wilberforce urged his fellow MP's to curtail their activities on Sunday, if not to honour the Lord's Day, at least for the sake of their servants who had no choice but to work on the Sabbath if their masters decided to go hunting, yachting or partying. William himself set the example, he attended both services every Sunday and would only travel or discuss politics on the Lord's Day in the gravest emergency.

Professor Henry Perkins in his *Origins of Modern English Society* (1969) states that *“between 1780 and 1850 the English ceased to be one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, outspoken, riotous, cruel and bloodthirsty nations in the world and become one of the most inhibited, polite, orderly, tender-minded, prudish and hypocritical!”*

Evangelicalism was recognised as the most formative power behind the Victorian era and *“the rock upon which the character of the Nineteenth Century Englishman was founded.”*

The Crusade Against Slavery

However, it was the campaign to abolish slavery that dominated most of Wilberforce's life and demanded most of his time and energy.

Captain Sir Charles Middleton, while in the Navy, had boarded a French slave ship in the West Indies and was horrified by it. He wrote to Wilberforce requesting him to raise the matter in Parliament. Wilberforce replied that he felt unequal to the task, but *“could not possibly decline.”* In discussing it with his friend Pitt, the Prime Minister declared:
“Wilberforce, England needs a crusader to wake her up. This slave trade is horrible business . . . it will be a long, hard fight, but someone must take the lead. William you are that man!”
John Newton also encouraged him to launch the crusade against slavery.

The example of Christ inspired him:

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord . . . has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners.” Isaiah 61:1

Realising that he was going to war against an extremely profitable business with deeply entrenched financial interests and political support, Wilberforce prepared his campaign carefully. He gathered around himself a group of researchers and assistants dedicated to eradicating slavery. Granville Sharp (who in 1772 had initiated a law suit which successfully established the principle, based on the Common Law, that as soon as any slave set foot in Britain he became free); Thomas Clarkson (the author of *“Slavery and Commerce in Human Species”*); Zachary Macaulay (who himself had once been a slave plantation manager before his conversion) and others were tireless and innovative in strengthening the campaign.

A debilitating illness delayed William, but finally on 12 May 1789 he introduced a Bill for the abolition of the slave trade: *“I mean not to accuse anyone, but to take the shame upon myself, in common indeed with the whole Parliament of Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. **We are all guilty** – we ought all to plead guilty and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others . . .”* He spoke for 3½ hours, moving 12 resolutions against the Trade. Reports described it as one of the most gripping and moving speeches ever delivered in Parliament. Pitt declared that Wilberforce had *“the greatest natural eloquence of all the men I ever knew.”*

Most of the House was convinced of the righteousness of Wilberforce’s arguments, but they were fearful that abolition would result in an economic disaster. So the House accepted a delaying tactic proposed by the planters that the slavers be granted leave to produce evidence in reply. The matter was deferred until the next session. Tragically, the French Revolution erupted before the next session! The tide of public opinion hardened against abolition – in reaction to the anarchy and mass murder across the channel.

When the evidence on behalf of the Trade was concluded in April 1790, the slavers tried to get a snap decision before the evidence against slavery could be heard. Wilberforce needed to promptly mobilise his forces to win the right to continue. A General Election in June 1790 interrupted the process. The deteriorating situation in France and a bloody revolt by slaves in St. Dominique were exploited by the planters who attributed these revolutions to Wilberforce’s

abolitionist campaign! On 18 April 1791 the House debated Wilberforce's bill until 3:30 in the morning. The vote ended in defeat for the abolitionists by 163 to 88.

In the light of this reversal, Wilberforce began a regular strategy meeting for his co-workers and allies in a library in Clapham. The Clapham community recognised that this campaign could well require a lifetime to win. These meetings were often bathed in prayer and out of these strategy sessions came the idea of outflanking the corrupt puppets of the West Indian interests in Parliament – by creating a groundswell of popular support for the abolition of slavery.

Many thousands (ultimately millions) of pamphlets were printed and distributed. Clarkson produced a shocking drawing of how slaves were packed like sardines into slave ships for the *middle passage*.

This print was mass produced and widely circulated. Public meetings and rallies were organised country wide. A boycott of slave grown sugar was supported by over 300 000 people. 517 petitions for Abolition were delivered to Parliament and only 4 petitions against.

Against All Odds

In 1792, with slave revolts in Haiti and threatened revolts in British Jamaica (where slaves outnumbered colonists 16 to 1), and war with France looming, public reticence and panic swayed the debate. The best Wilberforce could achieve was a resolution to “*gradually*” abolish the slave trade by 1796. This was passed by 230 to 85 in the House of Commons. But the Bill became bogged down and sank beneath the surface in the House of Lords. The fact that King George III went insane at about this time and that Britain had just lost their American colonies didn't help matters either.

Wilberforce pledged to introduce a new bill to abolish the slave trade every year until it succeeded – and he did.

The last letter ever written by John Wesley was a fairly pessimistic message to Wilberforce: “*I see not how you can go through with your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils.*”

Indeed, Wilberforce was becoming one of the most hated men in England. On different occasions his life was physically threatened by West Indian sea captains.

National hero, Admiral Lord Nelson wrote from his flagship *Victory* to condemn *"the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies!"*

Admiral Lord Rodney declared that he had never known any slave to be ill-treated in the West Indies.

Lord Heathfield, the defender of Gibraltar, commented that a slave on the way to the Indies had twice as much cubic air space as a British soldier in a regulation tent!

Admiral Lord St. Vincent declared that *"the whole of society would go to pieces"* if Wilberforce's Abolition Bill went through!

The Duke of Clarence asserted in the House of Lords that *"the promoters of the Abolition were either frauds or hypocrites!"*

Every disturbance or revolt in the West Indies was blamed on Wilberforce.

Lady Malmesbury in 1791 insisted on Wilberforce being tried for murder and executed because of some murders committed by slaves!

Langford Hodge accused Wilberforce of having *"created a volcano!"*

Wilberforce was the target of scurrilous smear campaigns. While he was still a bachelor he was

accused of being a wife beater – and his wife was Black! Others accused him of being a republican and a revolutionary. “*All abolitionists are Jacobins*” (French Revolutionaries) declared Lord Abingdon. King George III declared that Wilberforce and his allies were “*hypocrites and not to be trusted!*”

” Other printed attacks on Wilberforce included:

“*totally ignorant of the subject of slavery!*”

;

“*the most consummate hypocrite*”

and of favouring

“*fat lazy Negro slaves*”

who were

“*laughing from morning till night*”

over his own countrymen! Whindham called him:

“*a wicked little fanatical imp!*”

How did Wilberforce manage to persevere in the face of such sustained hatred and character assassination? He established and sustained a life-time of daily discipline. He knew the value of the first few hours of the day for Bible study, prayer and mental preparation for the day. He sought to discipline his tongue, tastes and thoughts. He surrendered his reputation to God early on and commented after a slanderous article published in the *Courier* that such attacks were like the barking of dogs as one passes through a village. He preferred criticism to flattery and praised God that He had freed him from the fear of men’s opinions.

He did all that he could and then he left the result in God’s hands. His faith was resilient because it was not in himself, but in God alone.

Wilberforce believed that God was Sovereign and He guided and overruled in our lives down to the smallest details, that God could put His thoughts into our minds. William once asked a pastor if he believed in God’s specific guidance.

“Yes”, the Clergyman replied, “*on great occasions.*”

“*As unphilosophical as unScriptural*”, responded Wilberforce. “*Must not the smallest links be as necessary for maintaining the continuity as the greatest? . . . there is no great or little to God.*” He was adamant that God intervened and was Sovereign in both national and personal matters. Wilberforce was so crystal clear about his principles and so free of worry about himself, that he

was free to think of others.

Another reason for Wilberforce's astonishing resilience and persistence in his campaigns is that he never worked alone. He was supported by a community of dedicated and hard working activists.

Experiment in Africa

In order to accommodate freed slaves, the Clapham Community of William Wilberforce founded a settlement in Sierra Leone in 1787. They poured vast investments into this venture, through their Sierra Leone Company, as a form of restitution for England's role in the slave trade.

Initially the venture was plagued with disasters and a series of revolts, as well as a devastating raid by a French Naval squadron in 1794. But by the time Zachary Macaulay (the first governor) finally returned to England, in 1799, the capital, Freetown, was a thriving community of 1 200 people with 300 houses and three wharves to facilitate foreign trade.

Sierra Leone was an important project for the Abolitionists because it demonstrated that relations between England and West Africa could be healthy and involve legitimate commerce. It also showed that freed slaves could hold down responsible positions and that Africa had more products for trade than human flesh!

The day that the slave trade was abolished, in 1807, the company handed Sierra Leone over to the Crown.

Fighting for Justice

While fighting against slavery abroad, Wilberforce was also intensely involved in Reform at home. As early as 1786 he began introducing bills to reform the criminal law. He opposed flogging (whipping) in the army, sought to improve prison conditions, investigated working

conditions and dangers in the coal mines and was the first to campaign against the abuses of child labour in the cotton mills. He also pioneered popular education and campaigned against the game laws.

However, it was Britain's global responsibilities that preoccupied most of Wilberforce's energies. He organised intervention on behalf of the victims of the Napoleonic Wars, the Greeks who were then fighting for their freedom from the Ottoman Empire, the North American Indians, the Haitians and the Hottentots!

Love for our Neighbours

One of his most important campaigns was to work for a new sense of Christian responsibility in Britain's policies for India. The prevailing view was that Britain's relations with India were purely commercial.

The British East India Company handbook, of 1810, devoted 48 pages to the subject of mistresses, their upkeep, cosmetics and ornaments! The company felt no responsibility for education or ethics.

By an act of British Parliament, missionaries were forbidden to operate in India. The British missionary pioneer, William Carey, had been forced to seek sanctuary in the Danish enclave at Serampore in order to carry out his (illegal) missionary work in British-controlled India.

From 1793 Wilberforce began proposing resolutions to Parliament to authorise chaplains, missionaries and school teachers to serve in India. He brought to Parliament's attention Carey's research exposing the prevalent Hindu practices of widow burning, infanticide, human sacrifices and the horrors of the caste system. Yet the British government refused to intervene because these practices had religious sanction and they did not want to upset their commercial dealings with Hindu India.

Wilberforce declared that the exclusion of Christ's ambassadors from British India was "*next to the slave trade, the foulest blot on the moral character of our country.*"

Describing the terrible poverty, degradation, disdain for relieving human suffering and human rights abuses in India he exclaimed:

“

The remedy, sir, is Christianity

. . . Christianity assumes her true character . . . when she takes under her protection those poor degraded beings on whom philosophy looks down with disdain or perhaps with contemptuous condescension . . . Christianity delights to instruct the ignorant, to succour the needy, to comfort the sorrowful, to visit the forsaken.”

When challenged that he was “forcing his views” on the Indians, he responded: “*Compulsion and Christianity! Why the very terms are at variance – the ideas are incompatible . . .*

Christianity is the Law of Liberty!”

He was not asking Parliament to organise evangelism, but merely to permit it.

Since the East India Company had been given a monopoly by Parliament, it was up to Parliament to ensure that they practised religious freedom in India. In 1806, William wrote: “*. . . next to the slave trade, I have long thought our making no effort to introduce the blessings of religion and moral improvement among our subjects in the East, the greatest of our national crimes . . . we have too many . . . who seem to think our dominions safer under Brahma and Vishnu, than under that of the Almighty.*”

Wilberforce fought for a new Charter that would permit the activity of all missionaries, whether ordained or lay preacher, of the established Church of England or Dissenters. Wilberforce’s campaign was supported by 1,837 petitions – with half a million signatures!

Ultimately Wilberforce succeeded. In 1813, Parliament passed a new Charter for the East India Company guaranteeing liberty for the propagation of the Christian Faith. This was a watershed in British relations with India, marking “*the change from looting to paternalism.*”

As a result of the evangelical influence in British society and Parliament, Britain thereafter approached the native races of Africa and Asia with completely different goals from any other country: “*for administrative justice, kindness and moderation, not merely of increasing the security of the subjects and the prosperity of the country, but of advancing social happiness, of ameliorating the moral state of men and of extending a superior light.*”

And so in 1828, Lord Bentinck, as Governor General of India, outlawed thuggee (assassination for religious purposes), *suttee* (the burning alive of widows on their husband's funeral pyres) and female infanticide.

Faithful Perseverance Rewarded

In 1807, 20 years after he first began his crusade, and in the middle of Britain's war with France, Wilberforce and his team's labours were rewarded with victory. Finally, at 4 o'clock in the morning on 4 February, the Abolition Bill was passed in the House of Lords. On 22 February 1807 it passed the second reading in the House of Commons.

A new generation of statesmen, inspired by Wilberforce's tenacious example, rose up to speak in favour of the Bill. The motion to abolish the slave trade was carried by an overwhelming 283 votes to 16 against! The Parliamentarians leapt to their feet with great cheers and gave Wilberforce the greatest ovation ever seen in British history. William bent forward in his seat, his head in his hands, tears of gratitude streaming down his face that this long crusade of 20 years had been crowned with success by Almighty God.

The first clause declared that: *"all manner of dealing and trading in the purchase of slaves or their transport from Africa to the West Indies or any other territory is utterly abolished, prohibited and declared to be unlawful."* The second clause declared that any British ship employed in the Trade shall be confiscated and *"forfeit to the Crown."*

For the next 26 years, Wilberforce worked for the total emancipation of all slaves.

In 1809 the British government issued an Order-in-Council authorising British ships to search suspected slave ships, even foreign vessels, on the high seas.

In 1810 Parliament made slave trading a felony punishable by 14 years hard labour.

Wilberforce also solicited the support of foreign powers such as Tsar Alexander to help eradicate slavery.

He mobilised 800 petitions, with almost a million signatures, for Abolition and compelled the British representative at the Congress of Vienna in 1814 to insist on Abolition being included in the international treaty.

The obstructionism of some was swept aside when Napoleon returned from Elba and proclaimed the Abolition of the Slave Trade! No doubt this was a bid to win British favour. In that Napoleon failed, but when Louis XVIII was restored by British arms after Waterloo, he had no choice but to confirm Napoleon's gesture and bow to British pressure. A Declaration by the eight powers of Europe that they would abolish the Slave Trade "*as swiftly as possible*" was annexed to the final Treaty signed on 9 June 1815.

However, only the British Navy seriously attempted to enforce the Congress's decision. Squadrons of British warships patrolled the West coast of Africa to intercept slave ships and set captives free.

Now Wilberforce fought for the registration of all slaves in British overseas territories with the goal of their eventual emancipation.

Individual cases of abuses, such as the whipping of slaves, were widely publicised to mobilise public opinion against slavery. Slave owners shown to have mistreated their slaves were prosecuted.

Wilberforce founded the Anti-Slavery Society in 1823 and wrote a new book "*Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire on behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies.*"

In response, the slave owners mounted the most unprecedented campaign to wear him down. But Wilberforce was of tougher mettle and refused to be diverted from his path.

A Legacy of Liberty

In 1824 Britain passed a Bill ranking slave trading with piracy and punishable by death. In spite of all the opposition, the groundswell of anti-slavery opinion was mobilising and finally, in 1833, while Wilberforce lay dying, a runner was sent to his house to inform him that his lifetime campaign of 59 years was now fully successful. By an act of Parliament, all 700 000 slaves in British overseas territories were set free!

“Thank God that I have lived to witness the day in which England is willing to give twenty million sterling for the Abolishment of Slavery!” he exclaimed. Within 3 days he died, rejoicing.

The fulfilment of his labours was the end of his life. The body of William Wilberforce was buried in Westminster Abbey. There the memorial states:

“. . . He was among the foremost of those who fixed the character of their times . . . To warm benevolence . . . he added the abiding eloquence of a Christian life . . . a leader in every work of charity . . . his name will ever be specially identified with those exertions which, by the blessing of God, removed from England the guilt of the African slave trade, and prepared the way for the abolition of slavery in every colony of the Empire: . . . He relied, not in vain, on God; But in the process, he was called to endure great verbal abuse and great opposition: He outlived, however, all enmity: . . . through the merits of Jesus Christ, his only Redeemer and Saviour, (Whom, in his life and in his writings he had desired to glorify), he shall rise in the resurrection of the just.”

The book *“History of European Morals”* suggests that *“The unweary, unostentatious and glorious crusade of England against slavery may probably be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations.”*

Wilberforce was convinced that **Christianity must be allowed to pervade and penetrate every corner of a Christian’s existence.** He determined to put his faith into action in the political arena and he persevered for 59 years to outlaw one of the most inhumane – and profitable – practices of his time.

“ . . . where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” 2 Corinthians 3:17

Wilberforce and his friends were uniquely effective in altering the spirit of their age. John Venn commented on the Clapham community: *“Their lives spoke far more plainly and convincingly than any words. 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.”*

As William himself often declared: *“it is not in fact talents in which we are chiefly wanting, but in resolute integrity.”* The test for every question was : **“Is it morally right?”**

Wilberforce declared that the **central test of any country was whether it really believed in and practised true Christianity. As he declared, one of the supreme political benefits of Christianity is its direct hostility to selfishness!**

“Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” ☐☐ John 8:32

His biographer, John Pollock, observed: *“Wilberforce would disclaim the credit, but the essentials of his beliefs and of his conscience formed the foundation of the British character for the next two generations at least. He was proof that **a man may change his times, though he cannot do it alone.**”*

Wilberforce had become the national conscience and the effect of his actions on succeeding generations was extraordinary. He pioneered a new political integrity in an age of corruption and transformed the House of Commons from a self serving club to an Assembly concerned for the common good of people worldwide.

Wilberforce had also developed new ways of rousing public opinion (such as the pamphlet wars, petitions, graphic prints, local societies and voters guides) and using it to influence

Parliament.

He also ensured that British foreign policy would have its roots in the Biblical principle of love for one's neighbour. Most significant of all, Wilberforce transformed his fellow countrymen's attitudes towards Africa and India. He planted in the public conscience not merely a sensitivity against injustice, but a positive sense of obligation towards those people. He inspired an ideal of trusteeship that was to influence British conduct overseas for at least another century.

The abolition of slavery was one of the great turning points of history. If slavery had not been abolished before the great scramble for Africa began, then Africa would have been turned into a great slave farm so enormous that it would have corrupted and destroyed Europe itself – just as surely as world conquest under conditions of slavery destroyed the Roman Empire. Wilberforce's obedience to the Bible was graciously used by God to bring freedom and life to millions.

The abolition of the slave trade and slavery removed a monumental obstacle for missionary outreaches in Africa. So long as slaving continued it was very difficult for missionaries to even get into the interior of Africa, let alone gather a congregation amidst the understandable suspicion of foreigners and fear of being captured by slave-raiding tribes.

Thus William Wilberforce and his co-workers helped prepare the way for the 19th Century to become the greatest century for missionary advance.

May God raise up a new generation of Reformers in the tradition of Wilberforce for the 21st Century.

“ . . . proclaim liberty throughout the land . . . ” Leviticus 25:10