

A close-up photograph of a person's feet, which are bare and resting on a cracked, yellowish-brown floor. The person is wearing heavy metal shackles on both ankles. A thick, braided rope is attached to the shackles, extending upwards. The lighting is warm and somewhat dim, creating a somber and oppressive atmosphere. The shackles are made of dark metal and are secured with a large metal ring and a thick rope.

THE CHRISTIAN
CALL TO
SOCIAL
JUSTICE

PETER SAUNDERS

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Published by Christian Medical Fellowship
6 Marshalsea Road, London SE1 1HL, UK www.cmf.org.uk

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ISBN: 9780906747766

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Design: S2 Design & Advertising Ltd

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The Wilberforce Academy is an annual UK conference which trains students and young professionals with a passion to serve Jesus Christ in a variety of vocations including law, politics, education, media, arts and business.

It prepares delegates for servant-hearted, Christ-centred leadership in public life, having been equipped with a robust biblical framework that guides their thinking, prayers and activity in addressing the issues facing our society. It also provides a platform for lasting friendships with peers and mentors that will be a source of support, encouragement and accountability for years to come.

The following talk was given by Dr Peter Saunders, Chief Executive of the Christian Medical Fellowship, at the final Wilberforce Academy banquet in Cambridge in September 2014.

want to talk to you about a young man who came to Cambridge at the age of 17 a few years ago and whose name you will recognise because this academy is named after him.

Yes, I'm talking about William Wilberforce. Wilberforce, of course, is best known for his work in abolishing the slave trade. If you watch the film *Amazing Grace* you might be forgiven for not really grasping the fact that Wilberforce was also a deeply committed evangelical Christian.

He was born in 1759 and died in 1833 at the age of 73. Wilberforce was married and did all this work with the support of his wife. He also had six children. I find that fascinating. Six children didn't stop Wilberforce making a massive impact and, in fact, if you read his biography you will see that God used his family, and especially his reckless play with his children, to keep Wilberforce sane through all of those days. He just loved spending time with his kids.

But to really understand Wilberforce we need to understand the times in which he lived, because he was born just as the evangelical revival was taking off in Britain and John Wesley and George Whitefield were preaching up and down the country. Whitefield was probably the greatest preacher the world has ever seen, crossing the Atlantic back and forth several times. He had the most incredible voice that you could hear ten blocks away.

One of the greatest actors at the time said he would give a small fortune just to be able to say 'Oh' like Mr Whitefield could. In America, Whitefield met and worked with the famous American Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards, who God used to help spark the 'Great Awakening' in New England. In 1792 William Carey went with the Baptist Mission Society to India, the first missionary to the developing world, catalysing the modern missions movement.

Shortly afterwards, in the early 1800s, came the incredible social reform that followed the abolition of the slave trade. This was also the period when King George III (mad King George) was losing America and Captain Cook was discovering countries like New Zealand and Australia. The French Revolution was also taking off and the Enlightenment was taking hold.

There was incredible disparity between the rich and the poor, great social unrest and huge social and spiritual need.

It was in the middle of this incredibly turbulent time in 1776 that a young man, just 17 years old, came to St Johns College in Cambridge. Wilberforce was an upper class reprobate who was into gambling and late night drinking. Shortly after arrival he made friends with another person of a very similar disposition called William Pitt. They became the best of friends and said, for a lark, 'Let's run for Parliament'. They did. They were elected in their early twenties and three years later William Pitt was the Prime Minister of the country. All of this happened before any spiritual awakening had taken place in Wilberforce.

It was actually almost as a joke or an afterthought that his friend Isaac Milner said 'Let's go over to the French Riviera. As reading material we'll take this book called *The Rise & Progress of Religion in the Soul* by Philip Doddridge.' Later Milner was to become a mathematician, an inventor, the President of Queens' College, Cambridge, and Lucasian Professor of Mathematics. He, along with Charles Simeon, would also be largely responsible for the evangelical revival at Cambridge. You may also recognise the name Doddridge as one of the most famous hymn writers of the evangelical revival.

Through reading his book Wilberforce was deeply moved and this led to his conversion. He had been in Parliament for five years by that time and his conversion led to a deep moral crisis because he began to think God couldn't possibly use a politician. He agonised about whether he should be doing something more 'spiritual' like going into pastoral ministry. And so he went for advice to the pastor of St Mary's in London – John Newton.

John Newton was of course the slave trader who wrote the most famous hymn ever written, *Amazing Grace*. He strongly advised Wilberforce not to leave Parliament. It was just a couple of years later that Wilberforce had two really critical meetings.

His first meeting was with a fellow student from his St John's days called Charles Clarkson who was deeply exercised about the slave trade. Clarkson

had just written an essay for his university degree on the slave trade that he was about to publish, and which became the basis of Wilberforce's conversion to this whole issue.

His second meeting was with William Pitt and William Grenville. It was at William Pitt's home in Kent that these three wealthy Williams – Pitt, Wilberforce and Grenville – had a world-changing conversation about slavery under an oak tree. Pitt was Prime Minister at the time and in his mid-twenties. Grenville would become the Prime Minister after Pitt. They were all concerned about the slave trade but neither Grenville nor Pitt was in a position to lead the charge against it. And so they said to Wilberforce, 'William you're an independent MP, unlike us, you've got to take on the issue of the abolition of slavery'.

So we see how important it is to receive wise advice at critical times. Through God's providence, Newton, Pitt and Grenville just happened to be there at the time when Wilberforce was thinking through all these matters.

Many only know Wilberforce for his battle against the slave trade. But in a diary entry he made in 1787, he said that God Almighty had set before him two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of morals or manners. He wasn't writing this as a moralist or someone who was purely concerned about ethics. In the book that he wrote around this time, *A Practical View of Christianity*, he laid out his whole philosophy.

You will have to forgive the archaic language to some extent, but he said in essence there were four really important things. The first was 'peculiar doctrines'. Peculiar doctrines led to 'true affections'. True affections led to 'moral transformation' and moral transformation led to 'political reformation'.

Let me translate that for you. Wilberforce was saying that Christian beliefs change hearts, which changes lives, which then transform society. The 'peculiar doctrines' included: a belief in human depravity, the fact that we are all sinners falling short of God's glory; divine judgment, the reality that death leads to judgment and one of two destinations for every human being; the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross, his death on our behalf; justification by faith; regeneration and the work of the Holy Spirit

leading to a transformed life of good deeds. You can't understand Wilberforce without understanding that everything he believed and did was built on this evangelical foundation. Everything that followed flowed from this.

If we look at Wilberforce's contribution over the years and the many things he was involved in apart from the slave trade, we learn that he was one of the founding members of the 'Clapham Sect'. The Clapham Sect was a group of Christian businessmen and politicians, other professionals, pastors and ministers, who lived near Clapham Common in London and who were all committed to these same four principles. They were engaged in transforming society across a whole series of levels. They were concerned about chimney sweeps, child labour, cruelty to animals, prison reform and the restriction of capital punishment. But a huge amount of Wilberforce's personal investment, in terms of relationships and money, went into the formation of the Sunday School movement. If you know your history you will know that the Sunday School attendances in Britain peaked in about 1860 when 70% of children in this country were involved. You can more or less trace the decline of British culture subsequently through falling Sunday School attendances: down to 50% by the turn of the 19th century and to about 3% by the year 2000.

We talk a lot about mission fields today. People will speak about the 10-40 window, between ten degrees and 40 degrees north of the equator, where most of the unreached people groups in the world live. But there is another critical mission field – the 4-14 window – children between the ages of four and 14 who have an amazing capacity to learn the Christian faith and who need to be taught because they will eventually be leading the church. Wilberforce recognised that. He was an incredibly generous benefactor who supported many church parishes, who paid off people's debts and who was also deeply committed to world mission. He was also one of the founders of the Church Mission Society (CMS), which was one of over half a dozen mission societies, many of which are still running today. These started in the last decade of the 18th century and in the early 1800s. Wilberforce was involved in all of these initiatives.

He gave his first speech on slavery in 1789. It was two years later that the first bill was tabled and he spoke for four hours in Parliament making twelve points at great length and with tremendous eloquence. He lost the vote by 163 to 88 but kept going over the next 18 years until finally, bill after bill, speech after speech, and more lobbying at all levels than we could possibly imagine, he gained his victory. In 1807, on 25 March, finally the Slave Trade Act went through by an incredible majority of 283 to 16. Just three days before his death in 1833, the Abolition of Slavery Act, which made slavery illegal throughout the whole of the British Empire, was passed. After this we saw similar changes in the United States in the mid-19th century.

Some years before, John Newton, who was in many ways a mentor to Wilberforce, said to him, 'The Lord has raised you up for the good of the church and for the good of society'. In the same way, the Lord has raised people of the next generation up at this critical time in history; in this generation with a whole group of new challenges which are no less daunting, for the good of the church and for the good of society. Whether you're involved in government, media or law, the professions, the performing arts, or whatever, today's Clapham Sect is our vision.

This is what the Wilberforce Academy is all about. Of course, there's nothing new about social concern. We know many of the great leaders throughout church history, from the Church Fathers of the first four centuries to people like John Newton, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Wesley and others. All had this vision. But of course a concern for social action goes right back to Scripture itself.

We don't have to look hard in the Old Testament to find striking examples of people who served in secular or polytheistic states at a very high level, men and women of God who had a phenomenal influence on the history of the civilisations they served. Joseph was number two in the Egyptian empire at the age of just 30. Nehemiah was cup bearer to the King of Persia, a senior government minister who went and re-built Jerusalem. Esther was married to the King of Persia. Mordecai, her cousin, served in his

cabinet and then of course in the most oppressive empire of all, Babylon, Daniel and his four friends rose to prominence because God put them there.

We must not be under any illusion. We're not trying to build heaven on earth. We look to Christ's return for the establishment of a new heaven and the new earth, but nonetheless we are called in the generation where we have been placed to be salt and light, to be 'not of the world' but to be deeply engaged in it and to be influencing the direction of the culture.

'Babylon' is a major theme throughout Scripture. The apostle Peter writes about it. John speaks about it in Revelation. Paul talks about it. We are living in Babylon today. We're living in a state that in many ways is hostile to Christian faith and values. But the question is, 'How do we live in Babylon?' Is Babylon simply an opportunity to withdraw into our escapist ghettos for caring and sharing and set up our own little safe communities? No. The way we are to live in Babylon is to be fully engaged in it.

You might remember when the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon, that the prophet Jeremiah spoke the word of God to them. He gave them these words from Jeremiah 29:

*This is what the Lord Almighty the God of Israel says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters. Find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase the number there, do not decrease also. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I've carried you in exile. Pray to the Lord for it because if it prospers you too will prosper. Yes this is what the Lord Almighty said.
(Jeremiah 29:4-9)*

He goes on:

For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart and I will bring you back from captivity.
(Jeremiah 29:11-14)

So you see, they were in exile in a hostile country, Babylon, but they were called to be fully engaged in that society, to settle down, to live in it, to serve it and to influence it. They are promised their return to Jerusalem and, of course, they did eventually go back.

In the same way, we are in Babylon today. We're aliens and exiles in just the same way and we're called to be engaged in this society. We look forward to the new Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth, but in the meantime we're to be engaged in the same way, build houses and settle down, plant gardens, eat what they produce, marry, have sons and daughters, and seek the peace and prosperity of the city in which we have been placed.

Why were the Jewish exiles asked to do this? What was behind all this?

They were instructed this way because it is God's world. Psalm 24 says that 'The earth is the Lord's and those who dwell on it'. It all belongs to God. Babylon belongs to God, because Jesus rules over all creation at the right hand of God.

God is absolutely sovereign over the rise and fall of nations. He puts kings in power and removes them. He raises up empires and he brings them down. It is God's world because God will judge, because every leader, everyone in authority in every nation, will one day bow before the knee of Jesus Christ and will give account for the way that they have lived their lives.

It's God's world and that's why the apostles call us to be subject to the governing authorities, to be good citizens, to be blameless, to live lives that are real salt and light, to fear God, to honour the king.

Of course that's not blind belief because we march to a different drum. We serve the Lord Jesus Christ and if the societies in which we've been placed attempt to force us to do things that we know are wrong or try to stop us from doing our duty to God, then we obey God first. Just as the Hebrew midwives refused to obey the King of Egypt in killing the children of Israel. Just as Rahab refused to bow to the King of Jericho in sheltering the asylum seekers from Israel. Just as Daniel and his friends refused to refrain from public prayer and refused to bow down to the idols of the age in which they had been placed. Just as the apostles, when they were commanded to stop preaching the gospel, said 'No we serve God and not men'.

We march to a different drum because God is a God of justice. It is absolutely key to his character.

It's God who said through Amos: 'Seek good not evil, hate evil, love God, seek justice in the courts' (Amos 5:15).

It's God who inspired Micah to say: 'Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8).

It's God who said through the writer of Proverbs, 'Speak up for those who have no voice, who cannot speak for themselves, speak and judge fairly. Defend the rights of the poor and needy' (Proverbs 31:8-9). And we know when the word 'poor' is used in the Scriptures it means anybody who is disempowered, marginalised, without advocacy.

Proverbs 29:7 says: 'The righteous care about justice for the poor but the wicked have no such concern'. You see, it's a mark of God's people to walk with concern for God's justice.

Proverbs 24:11 commands: 'Rescue those being carried away to death, those staggering towards slaughter'.

These are the challenges of life ethics today: unborn children losing their lives; people around the world being euthanised; the innocent being killed.

We have a responsibility, as the prophet Obadiah said to Edom: 'On the day you stood aloof when strangers carried off his wealth, you were like one of them' (Obadiah 1:11). They didn't actively oppress. They just didn't speak out in defence of those who needed it.

God is a God of justice. So we're called to be Christ's advocates to oppressed people; a voice for the voiceless, advocates for the weak.

Who are the powerless and the voiceless, those who have no voice, today?

Well, of course, it's the victims of human trafficking, the modern day slaves, asylum seekers, the poor, the marginalised, unborn children, those who are disabled, those who have dementia or mental illness, those who are sick, those who are discriminated against. We need to be their voice and their advocates because the prime function of government is to protect its people.

So we have to count the cost. It was costly for Wilberforce in terms of time and money and his health and the opposition that he faced. It was costly for Daniel and his friends. It involved great risk.

Likewise, we have to stand up against the opposition that would dampen our enthusiasm or stop us fulfilling this calling.

And yet, sadly, today a lot of that opposition will come from within the church. So we've got to be prepared to answer that discouragement from within the church, much of it very well meaning.

There are those who will say it's the rulers who are responsible for justice. But in a democracy like the one we live in, we're all rulers. We're all responsible at the ballot box. We all have an influence. We can all do something. We will all have to give account for the direction of our societies on the day of judgment as rulers.

There are those who will say the church's real work is evangelism. Well of course the church's work is evangelism – proclaiming the gospel – but the great commission according to the Lord Jesus himself was to 'go and make disciples, teaching them to observe everything I've commanded you'. Why? So that they might be fully mature, complete for every good work. Discipleship is bringing people to maturity in every area of their lives including in public life; the Lordship of Christ in everything: work, family and public life.

There are those who say we shouldn't get involved in politics. But we follow a God who sets up kings and queens and brings them down, who's

deeply concerned about justice, who asks us to pray for and be subject to the governing authorities.

There will be those who will say, 'Well it's a pluralist society. We're just one of many voices.' But Rome and Greece were both pluralist, polytheistic societies. Did God's people shrink back then?

There are those who will say, 'Well yes, laws are important, but laws don't change people's hearts'. Perhaps not, but just laws do restrain the heartless and they do protect vulnerable people.

There will be those who say, 'You can't legislate morality.' But every law legislates one morality or another. The question is: 'Which morality is it going to be?' Is it going to be an idolatrous morality or God's morality?

There will be those who say, 'We should be involved in social service, reaching out to people and meeting their needs.' Absolutely we should. Our churches should be running soup kitchens and doing debt counselling and street pastoring and mothers and toddlers groups and crisis pregnancy counselling. But we also have to address the structural injustices in society that lead to many of these things.

There are those who will say, 'But you'll just antagonise people.' Yes we will. Some people will be very antagonised. They'll be angry with us. They might not like what we are doing. But isn't that exactly what Jesus promised us will happen if we are living an obedient Christian life?

There will be those who say, 'We don't have a right to impose our morality.' But it's not our morality. It's the morality of the God of the universe and it's not about rights. We have a duty, brothers and sisters, to ensure to do what we can in a democratic society to make sure that the laws on the statute books of our country are just and fair, just as Wilberforce did.

There are those who will say, 'We shouldn't restrict people's freedoms.' But every law restricts freedom to some extent. That's why we have laws! We have laws because we believe that autonomy is not absolute; that it has to be restrained in order to protect people who are vulnerable or marginalised.

Then there will be those who say, 'We should be known for what we're

for, not just for what we're against.' But when I look at the Bible I see God telling us both to do some things and not to do other things. We need to be known *both* for what we're for and for what we're against. Morality cuts both ways.

So our prayer is that God will raise up a new generation of people following in Wilberforce's footsteps. People, like Wilberforce, who are passionate about the 'peculiar doctrines' of the Gospel. People, like Wilberforce, who are generous philanthropists, who live simply, who give generously to those in need.

People, like Wilberforce, who are passionate about world mission and getting people out to the margins to reach the lost.

People, like Wilberforce, who are passionate about injustice and get involved in addressing injustices of the city in which we've been placed.

People, like Wilberforce, who are passionate about the Lord Jesus Christ, who walk in his footsteps and who are prepared to carry the cross.

Carrying the cross involves serving the lost and needy, whatever the cost might be for us financially, emotionally or in terms of time and effort.

But carrying the cross in this generation also means being willing to stand up as a prophetic people to speak the truth that people might find uncomfortable but which needs to be heard, and to take the flak for that. We have to follow Christ in every area because we're involved in his great mission of building the Kingdom of God.

A lot of people today are saying, 'We must preach Jesus. It's all about Jesus.' And of course it is.

But when the apostle Paul talked about his work, he said a little bit more than that. He didn't talk just about preaching Jesus. He talked about preaching Jesus as Lord of the whole universe and ourselves as his servants walking in his footsteps.

So dear brothers and sisters, let's grasp that challenge and let's be faithful in God's strength in this generation in which he's placed us, as we look back and stand on the shoulders of humble giants like Wilberforce who have gone before. ■

Christians are called to proclaim the gospel, but what about social justice issues? William Wilberforce is best known for his work in abolishing the slave trade, but was also a deeply committed evangelical Christian with a broad agenda for reforming society.

Throughout the Bible, God used people to have a phenomenal influence on their culture – Joseph, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel and others.

Likewise today, Peter Saunders, CMF Chief Executive, encourages Christians to be 'not of the world' but to be deeply engaged in it, influencing the direction of culture; to preach Jesus as Lord of the whole universe and ourselves as his servants walking in his footsteps.

