William Wilberforce
The Inspiration for Wilberforce’s Opposition to the Slave Trade

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From the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, the English shipped millions of Africans across Atlantic, whom they eventually sold as slaves.¹ As the trade expanded, protests arose, but no activist’s voice spoke louder than that of the young Member of Parliament, William Wilberforce. At only twenty-one years old, Wilberforce found himself as the Member of Parliament (MP) for the small county of Hull.² His wit, humor, and speaking ability soon escalated him to the position of MP for the county of Yorkshire, “the most powerful constituency in all of England.”³ Wilberforce won every election in this position for the next forty-four years and won his battle for the abolition of the slave trade in 1807.⁴ However, political talent did not act as the sole factor leading to

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Wilberforce’s successes. Although Wilberforce had always possessed political talent, his relationship with William Pitt, conversion to evangelical Christianity, and involvement with the Clapham Sect combined to provide a passion to coincide with his talent, resulting in his campaign for the abolition of the slave trade.

Wilberforce’s relationship with William Pitt acted as one factor contributing to Wilberforce’s passion and high political aspirations. Just out of college and wealthy because of the family business, Wilberforce sought a career in politics.⁵ At the same time, William Pitt, son of the respected Lord Chatham, also pursued a position in Member of Parliament. In 1780, both Wilberforce and Pitt resolved to enter the election for the House of Commons.⁶ Approximately the same age and having similar goals, the two forged a friendship and political alliance that would last a lifetime. According to William Hague in his biography of Wilberforce, “…there was also a happily complementary nature to the advantages each of them possessed if they wished to become active in politics: Pitt had plentiful connections, widespread recognition and a famous name, but no money; Wilberforce had exactly the opposite.”⁷ With Pitt using his famous name and Wilberforce utilizing his fortune, both achieved their goal: Pitt sat as Member of Parliament for Cambridge

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⁵ Metaxas, 1.
⁷ Hague, 28.
University and Wilberforce represented the county of Hull in Parliament. In his early years as a Member of Parliament, Wilberforce had little impact on the political world. In his book *Amazing Grace*, Eric Metaxas states that his beginnings “were relatively slow and undistinguished.”

Instead of focusing on political status, Wilberforce concerned himself primarily with his social status, spending his nights gambling and socializing at one of the five gentlemen’s clubs of which he held membership. Wilberforce exhibited his superior social ambition at these clubs where his humor and fun-loving attitude soon gained him a wide range of friends.

Despite his hobbies, his circle of friends recognized Wilberforce as a man with strong morals. While others at the gentlemen’s clubs often drank heavily and solicited prostitutes, Wilberforce remained relatively controlled, joining in on some of the activities simply to provide humor and good company. William Pitt, on the other hand, applied his skills to his political status. While Wilberforce remained quiet in Parliament, Pitt rose to the top. Among the group of friends surrounding Pitt and Wilberforce, Pitt acted as the political leader. As time passed, Wilberforce’s relationship with Pitt and admiration of Pitt’s political skill grew. That admiration of Pitt slowly removed Wilberforce from the

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8 Metaxas, 37.
9 Ibid., 27.
10 Hague, 42.
11 Ibid., 43.
social scene and placed him at the forefront of national affairs. With Wilberforce using his social skills and Pitt using his political talent, the two excelled as a team. Pitt’s political respect led to his unexpected appointment as prime minister in 1783.\textsuperscript{12} After being appointed prime minister, Pitt called a general election. To gain support for Pitt’s election, Pitt asked Wilberforce to speak on behalf of him at a county meeting in Yorkshire.\textsuperscript{13} Wilberforce recognized the speech as an opportunity to advocate himself as a potential MP for the powerful county of Yorkshire as well.\textsuperscript{14} In the midst of a hailstorm, Wilberforce delivered such an eloquent oration that those who listened campaigned for him to represent them in Parliament. His speaking ability and relationship with Pitt led Wilberforce to become the Member for Yorkshire a few weeks later. The friendship and political alliance between Pitt and Wilberforce had already advanced the two in their political careers, but in years to come that relationship proved invaluable to Wilberforce’s campaign against slavery.

Four years after his entry into Parliament, Wilberforce experienced a conversion to evangelical Christianity - the primary factor that drove Wilberforce’s campaign against the slave trade.\textsuperscript{15} As a child, Wilberforce grew up in a wealthy religious family in the county of Hull,

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\textsuperscript{12} Metaxas, 35.
\textsuperscript{13} Hague, 61.
\textsuperscript{14} Metaxas, 36.
\textsuperscript{15} Short, 83.
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but that religion by no means affected the decisions or actions of any member of the family.  

However, each summer William visited his aunt and uncle in Wimbledon, where he experienced Methodism, the radical and evangelical religion of his relatives. 

During his stays in Wimbledon, Wilberforce heard the famous evangelical John Newton speak. Newton, who had previously experienced the slave trade, piqued Wilberforce’s interest in enthusiastic religion and contributed to Wilberforce adopting Methodism at the age of ten. 

William’s grandfather and parents, like many English citizens, opposed the strict Methodist beliefs held by William’s aunt and uncle, and consequently severed the relationship between William and his relatives in Wimbledon. Additionally, the family transferred William to a different school to ensure his separation from Methodism. 

As time passed, Wilberforce’s adherence to Methodism waned, and he returned to the mundane, but less structured religion of his parents. In his teenage years, Wilberforce developed a liking for gambling, music, the theatre, and card parties. 

In fact, his son Samuel later said in a biography of Wilberforce that at a young age he spent his evenings drinking tea in a brothel. 

Newton, who had taught Wilberforce in Wimbledon, said that “the

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16 Hague, 8.
17 Ibid., 9.
18 Ibid., 14.
19 Ibid., 16.
20 Ibid., 19.
strongest and most promising [religious conviction] I ever met were in the case of Mr. Wilberforce when he was a boy. But they now seem entirely worn off, not a trace left behind…”\textsuperscript{22} Years later and after his conversion, Wilberforce described this time in his life as “utter idleness and dissipation.”\textsuperscript{23} That “utter idleness and dissipation” continued into his college career at Cambridge University. Keith Windschuttle, in an article discussing Wilberforce’s fight for the emancipation of slaves, states that “he was an undistinguished student, never attending lectures and doing the minimum work to pass his exams.”\textsuperscript{24} Wilberforce’s frivolous character remained the same throughout his early years in Parliament. Rather than implementing his religion in his political involvements, Wilberforce set aside his religion to enjoy his nights socializing in clubs. The “Church of England” religion that Wilberforce possessed put him in a favorable light with the public, while still allowing him to enjoy his nights in clubs.\textsuperscript{25}

In 1784, Wilberforce’s notions about religion shifted dramatically. During the winter months, the Wilberforce family vacationed to the Italian and French Rivieras. Seeking company and conversation, William invited Isaac Milner, his previous tutor from Hull, 

\textsuperscript{22} Stephen Tomkins, \textit{The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain} (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010), 44.  
\textsuperscript{23} Windschuttle, 18.  
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 180.  
\textsuperscript{25} Hague, 18.
along for the journey. To stimulate conversation, Wilberforce brought with him *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* by Philip Doddridge. Milner, an evangelical, conversed with Wilberforce over the book, and prompted Wilberforce to seek out the Scriptures on his own. Metaxas asserts that because of this vacation, “surely something had occurred deep inside him, where it would remain hidden for a time: a seed had been pressed into the soil of his soil, and had been watered, and would soon burst and sprout green and grow beyond all possibility of concealing.” Later the same year, Milner and Wilberforce set out to Genoa, this time discussing the Greek New Testament. Those journeys with Milner shook Wilberforce’s religious foundations, and after his return to England, he gradually converted to an evangelical Christianity. He began to see the wayward nature of his previous beliefs and the consequences of his decisions. Later, Wilberforce would write in his book *A Practical View of Christianity*, “…we are accountable creatures, and to such only the writer is addressing himself, that we shall have to answer hereafter to the Almighty for all the means and occasion we have here enjoyed of improving ourselves, or of promoting the happiness of others.” This belief consumed Wilberforce and for the remainder of his life, he would tirelessly struggle to encourage the contentment of others.

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26 Metaxas, 42.
27 Ibid., 48.
28 Ibid., 50.
As an extreme guilt washed over him for not recognizing God’s love in his life, Wilberforce felt a need to leave his position in Parliament and “live now for God.”\(^{30}\) Wilberforce voiced his concerns in a letter to his best friend, William Pitt. Pitt, who had already inspired Wilberforce in terms of his political career, again influenced Wilberforce to keep his position in Parliament:

> For you confess that the character of religion if not a gloomy one, and that it is not that of an enthusiast. But why then this preparation of solitude, which can hardly avoid tincturing the mind either with melancholy or superstition? If a Christian may act in the several relations of life, must he seclude himself from them all to become so? Surely the principles as well as the practice of Christianity are simple, and lead not to mediation only but to action.\(^{31}\)

Similarly, Wilberforce’s childhood minister, John Newton, informed Wilberforce, “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.”\(^{32}\) Heeding the advice of his Pitt and Newton, Wilberforce remained in Parliament, not for his own gain, but for God’s. It became his duty to represent God in the House of Commons rather than himself or even the people of Yorkshire. With that responsibility, Wilberforce abandoned his social endeavors to discover God’s will for him in Parliament.

Although Wilberforce had always held the opinion that the slave trade was wrong, that belief did not manifest until after his conversion to

\(^{30}\) Metaxas, 54.


\(^{32}\) Tomkins, 48.
Wilberforce and the Slave Trade

evangelical Christianity in 1786. Pitt, who opposed slavery, also deeply influenced Wilberforce’s decision to campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. Pitt encouraged Wilberforce to bring the campaign to Parliament and advised him to “… not lose time, or the ground may be occupied by another.” At the time, most of the English citizens were oblivious to the harsh treatment of Africans on the slave ships. Even those who were aware of the injustices felt no need to intervene. After all, the Europeans considered themselves more civilized human beings than the Africans. Additionally, the slave trade allowed for many luxuries, such as tobacco and sugar, and greater revenue for the nation.

Supporting this, Christopher Brown writes in his book *Moral Capital*, “Slavery was often out of mind because it was out of sight. The British enjoyed the fruits of the slavery while incurring few of its social or cultural costs.” Even the church remained quiet on the issue of slavery and allowed its members to be involved in the slave trade. Thus, if Wilberforce agreed to challenge the slave trade, he, in turn, challenged the majority of England. Yet Wilberforce knew the horrors of the slave trade. Slave ship captains gave no compassion to the Africans on the ship, often fitting far more people on the ship than the ship could

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33 Ibid., 68.
34 Brown, 51.
35 Ibid., 53.
36 Ibid., 51.
reasonably hold. Of the 12-15 million Africans shipped to the Americas between 1492 and 1870, more than two million died on the trip. One slave ship captain threw 132 Africans overboard on the route from Africa to the Caribbean, knowing that the ship’s owner had insured and could profit from any lost cargo.\textsuperscript{38} When this and other similar stories reached Britain, evangelicals began to defend the slaves. Because of his new and radical Christian faith, Wilberforce recognized the iniquitous nature of the slave trade, and he began his fight for its abolition.

While Wilberforce remains as the name most commonly associated with the abolition of the slave trade, his successes and inspiration relied heavily upon a group of evangelical Christians known as the Clapham Sect. This group supported and encouraged Wilberforce’s religious beliefs, and utilized his unique position in Parliament to advance the campaign for abolition. Before their move to the city of Clapham, the Sect began at the Barham Court as a group of elite evangelical Christians including Isaac Milner and Wilberforce’s cousin Henry Thornton.\textsuperscript{39} The idea of the newer Clapham Sect originated with Thornton, a rich banker that lived in Clapham.\textsuperscript{40} Wilberforce and the group that formed around Thornton in Clapham shared moral and religious values and consequently fought together “in a seemingly

\textsuperscript{39} Metaxas, 186-187.
\textsuperscript{40} Tomkins, 185.
endless number of ventures, but at the center, always, was the fight for abolition and the slaves.”\(^{41}\) Henry Thornton expressed his objective for the Clapham Sect, saying, “On the whole I hope some good may come out of our Clapham system. Wilberforce is a candle that should not be hid under a bushel.”\(^{42}\) The Clapham Sect nurtured and matured Wilberforce’s new Christian faith through their extreme emphasis on religion, demonstrated by their determination to spend three hours every day in prayer.\(^{43}\) The compassion of the Clapham Sect, manifested through the many projects in which they were involved, also inspired Wilberforce. In addition to campaigning for the abolition of the slave trade, the Clapham Sect campaigned for the poor and uneducated in England, prisoners, and multiple missionary groups.\(^{44}\) Because of the example that the Clapham Sect set, Wilberforce cultivated his passion for the abolition of the slave trade. Wilberforce encompassed his own beliefs as well as the beliefs of the Clapham Sect by stating in his *Practical View of Christianity*, “…it is the true duty of every man to promote the happiness of his fellow creatures to the utmost of his power.”\(^{45}\) With that duty in mind, Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect prepared to confront the slave trade. The Sect planned to utilize Wilberforce as their spokesperson

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\(^{41}\) Metaxas, 190.
\(^{42}\) Tomkins, 113.
\(^{44}\) Scotland, 33-43.
\(^{45}\) Wilberforce, *Practical View of Christianity*, xxx.
in Parliament, voicing their concerns and advocating the abolition of the slave trade. For nine hours a day, members of the Clapham Sect sifted through information on the slave trade to support Wilberforce’s future debates in Parliament.\textsuperscript{46} The Sect also exposed that information in newspapers and other public media to gain the support of the general public.\textsuperscript{47} Additionally, Wilberforce and his allies toured mansions and palaces recruiting the English elite to join their cause.\textsuperscript{48} With the encouragement provided by the Clapham Sect, Wilberforce was poised to take the campaign to Parliament.

Due to his relationship with William Pitt, Wilberforce developed a passion for politics that coincided with his social and political talent. Because of his conversion to evangelical Christianity, Wilberforce brought a compassion for people to his political career. Lastly, Wilberforce’s involvement with the Clapham Sect matured his evangelical faith and helped him begin his campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. With these factors in place, Wilberforce prepared to speak in Parliament on February 2, 1788. However, Wilberforce became deathly ill in the weeks before his debate, and his doctor expected him to

\textsuperscript{46} Tomkins, 86.
\textsuperscript{48} Tomkins, 69.
live no more than two weeks.\textsuperscript{49} Wilberforce’s lifelong friend, Pitt, promised to take over the cause of the abolition of the slave trade if Wilberforce died.\textsuperscript{50} Despite the doctor’s predictions, Wilberforce regained his health and brought his motion to end the abolition of the slave trade to Parliament in May, 1789. In his speech, Wilberforce utilized the research prepared by the Clapham Sect, telling Parliament of the conditions on slave ships as well as the death rate of the Africans, which he estimated to be roughly fifty percent.\textsuperscript{51} Wilberforce also emphasized the damage done to African nations by imposing the slave trade upon them. According to Wilberforce, the English and the slave trade defeated any improvements made in African nations. Despite the appalling facts and Wilberforce’s ability to speak, the House of Commons postponed the vote for another year.\textsuperscript{52} Wilberforce and his evangelical colleagues in the Clapham Sect again set to work to find more convincing and convicting evidence of the slave trade. In 1791, Wilberforce spoke for a second time on the slave trade, and Parliament rejected the motion for abolition 163-88.\textsuperscript{53} Despite his failures, Wilberforce pushed forward, determined to stop the slave trade and the

\textsuperscript{49} Adam Hochschild, \textit{Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 139.
\textsuperscript{50} Tomkins, 71.
\textsuperscript{52} Tomkins, 74.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 90.
deaths resulting from it. Wilberforce worked incessantly to end the slave trade, speaking in parliament and publicizing his research, yet for the first twenty years, his work yielded no reward.\(^{54}\) (Aitken 60).

Finally, in 1807, Wilberforce tasted success. At forty-seven years old, Wilberforce brought his bill for the abolition of the slave trade to Parliament once more. One month later, Parliament voted in favor of abolition one hundred to thirty-four.\(^{55}\) After the first vote, Wilberforce wrote of his progress, “Never surely had I more cause for gratitude than now…”\(^{56}\) His work and his passion appeared to be finally reaching a fruitful end. A second vote passed the following week, and the bill passed conclusively on February 23, 1807. Wilberforce wept as he heard the success of the bill, and all of Parliament celebrated with him.\(^{57}\) This grand achievement in Parliament arose from three major experiences in his life. First, Wilberforce’s relationship with William Pitt gave Wilberforce a passion for his political career. His friendship with Pitt led to his high position in Parliament, as well as his decision to campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. The second and primary factor in Wilberforce’s campaign for the abolition of the slave trade lay in his conversion to evangelical Christianity. Although Wilberforce had always

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\(^{55}\) Metaxas, 206.  
\(^{57}\) Metaxas, 209-210.
believed in God, that belief did not influence Wilberforce’s actions in Parliament until his conversion to evangelical Christianity in 1784. Resulting from that conversion and the corresponding compassion, Wilberforce joined the Clapham Sect. This group developed his new faith and assisted him in his campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. Although Wilberforce’s natural personality abetted his social and political talent, these aforementioned factors provided him a passion that excelled his talent and led to his campaign for the abolition of the slave trade.