

Christians and Social Justice: Lessons from the Life of William Wilberforce

Christians are called to proclaim the gospel, but what about social justice? Throughout the Bible, God used people to have a transforming influence on the prevailing culture: Joseph, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel. Likewise, throughout Christian history there have been other striking examples. Many know William Wilberforce for his successful battle against the slave trade in the early 19th century but he was also a deeply committed evangelical Christian with a broad agenda for reforming society. Wilberforce believed that ‘peculiar doctrines’ (evangelical beliefs) led to ‘true affections’, ‘moral transformation’ and eventually ‘political reformation’. In other words, he was saying that Christian beliefs change hearts, which changes lives, which then transform society. This seminar reviews the life of Wilberforce to see what we can learn from his example in being both 'not of this world' but also deeply engaged in it, influencing the direction of culture under the Lordship of Christ.

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- I. Early Life and Influences
 - A. Family Life
 - B. The Evangelical Revival
 - C. Cambridge
 - D. Isaac Milner and Philip Doddridge
 - E. John Newton
 - F. Charles Clarkson
 - G. William Pitt and William Grenville

- II. Christian Development
 - A. A Practical View of Christianity
 - B. His two great objects
 - 1. The suppression of the slave trade
 - 2. The reformation of morals
 - C. His view on the Gospel and Social Justice
 - 1. Peculiar doctrines

2. True affections
3. Moral transformation
4. Political reformation

D. The Clapham Sect

E. The Sunday School Movement

F. The Church Mission Society

III. The Slave Trade

A. Early Efforts

B. The Slave Trade Act 1807

C. The Abolition of Slavery Act 1833

IV. Biblical basis

A. Biblical Social Reformers and Statesmen

1. Joseph, Nehemiah, Esther, Mordecai
2. Daniel and his Friends
3. Serving in Babylon ('in the world but not of it')
 - a. Moral Distinctiveness (Daniel 3:16-18)
 - b. Engagement (Jeremiah 29:4-14)

B. The Sovereignty of God

C. Good citizenship and Conscientious Objection

D. The God of Justice (Amos 5:15; Micah 6:8; Proverbs 24:11, 29:7, 31:8,9; Obadiah 1:11)

E. The Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:18,19)

F. Counting the Cost

V. Objections

A. Justice is the role of government

B. The church's real work is evangelism

C. Christians should not get involved in politics

D. We live in a pluralist society

E. Laws will not change people's hearts

F. You can't legislate morality

G. We should be doing social service not social justice

H. We will just antagonize people rather than commending the Gospel

I. We don't have a right to impose our morality

J. We shouldn't restrict people's freedoms

K. We should be known what we are for, not for what we are against

VI. The Challenge for Today

A. Today's Justice Issues

B. Prayer

C. A biblical balance

D. Carrying the Cross

Suggested Readings:

Eric Metaxas. Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to end Slavery. 2007. HarperOne.

John Piper. Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce. 2007. IVP.

Peter Saunders. The Christian Call to Social Justice. CMF.

William Wilberforce. A Practical View of Christianity. 1996. Hendrickson Christian Classics.