

LEADER'S GUIDE  
FOR THE VIDEO

# William Wilberforce

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for Gateway Films and Vision Video

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## 1. About This Guide

This material is supplied for the teacher or leader who is using the video William Wilberforce for a class or small group as well as for those using this program for personal enrichment.

Here you will find further background, questions to discuss, and further resources.

This is a remarkable story and unmistakably relevant for those of us living in the closing years of the 20th century. As we face problems that seem hopelessly entrenched in “the system.” Beyond our wisdom to solve, and protected by powerful interest who will not easily let go, we find in Wilberforce an example who gives us hope that things can change, that age old evils seemingly in control can be defeated, and that there is hope even when the opponents seem to hold all of the trump cards.

## 2. How To Use This Video

If you are using this program for a group meeting of any kind (church service, small group, Sunday School, etc.), we urge that it is important to prepare your group for the experience. This video program is not intended primarily as an entertainment piece even though the story itself is captivating and full of human interest details. Its more basic purposes are to generate thinking about what has happened in the world, what Christians have done about it, what happened we can learn from people like Wilberforce to be better enabled to affect our world today.

Wilberforce dealt with a clear and odious problem--slavery. But slavery was just one expression of the ages –old syndrome of “man’s inhumanity to man.” In our day, in our own land, as well as on the international scene, there is no shortage of ready examples of exploitation, injustice, and powerful interest cruelly taking advantage of the weak. Our purpose is not to get into contemporary issues, or to suggest what you or your group should be most concerned about, but to share this wonderful case study of how an individual with his colleagues were indeed able to make a foundational difference.

So we suggest that you plan sufficient lead time to schedule this video. Prepare your group for it. Let them know a little bit about Wilberforce ahead of time. You might also want to quote from Wilberforce’s speech to Parliament beginning on page 6, or make a copy of that speech available for participants to read in advance of the video showing. You might also tie the showing into reflection on specific concerns that you have as part of your church and community.

## 3. Introducing The Program

Before you show the video, be sure to take time to give your viewers a little background to help set the program in context. We suggest that you point out that slavery in the 18th century was taken for granted as a part of life and thought to be a necessary underpinning of the economy in England.

Also stress how we often feel overwhelmed with social problems today.

And rightly so! But the flight against slavery was probably as formidable as any of overwhelming social ills facing today.

The Wilberforce presentation has been used effectively before groups of varying sizes by Mr. J. Terence Blair of Richmond, Virginia. At the beginning of the program he shares some basic facts with his viewers, and with his permission we give them below for you to use.

1. Britain, with a population of 8 million (in 1900) and no standing army, faced throughout the 18th century the combined power of France and Spain with 39 million people, large standing armies and absolute monarchs, who could raise taxes and wage war without popular consent. The one factor which saved her from invasion and conquest was control of the English Channel by the British navy. Sea power was the key to national security, and trade the key to British wealth. The 400 ships and thousands of sailors involved in the slave trade were thought essential to both.

2. Investment in the slave trade offered 100% profit on a nine-month's voyage. Everybody with money was in it from bishops to shopkeepers.

3. Political power was unbreakable in the hands of combines of great landowning families. The house of Lords, which had equal power with the Commons, was simply the heads of the great families in conclave. Members of the Commons, were elected, two from each county and two lay in the "rotten boroughs." Though here had been enormous shifts in population, there had been no re-districting since the 16th century. Many boroughs were left with a handful of electors, all of whom were tenants of some big landowner, but they still elected two members of Parliament.

Typical was Old Sarum. During the civil wars it had been a fortified city on a hill. When the wars stopped everybody moved to a better site by the river. Twelve farmers remained on the hill, all tenants of Sir Edmond Lowther. At election time Sir Edmond threw a great feast for the twelve families with lots of beef and beer. Before everyone got to drunk, he introduced his two candidates, who were duly elected to Parliament, after which everyone got on with the party!

This system could only be changed by majority vote of both Houses of Parliament; which meant it was protected against anything less than a violent upheaval on the scale of the French Revolution—or a massive arousal of conscience was what Wilberforce meant when he undertook "to reform the manners of England."

Wilberforce gives a great example of Christian commitment in the public arena. He can inspire any of us who seek to change public policy. But he also shows us how God uses people where they are. When he got serious about Christianity, his first impulse was to get out of politics, presumably to devote himself to some "purer" area of God's work, perhaps the ministry. Thank God for John Newton who talked him out of that. Your lay people may feel that if they were good Christians, they'd quit their jobs at the steel mills or advertising offices or department stores and become missionaries or something. But God shows us though

Wilberforce and a host of other historical Christians that God calls us to minister within the professions He has given us.

One further note. If needed with your group you may find it advisable to explain the British political structure and the meaning of such terms as Parliament, Member of Parliament, House of Lords, etc.

#### 4. For Discussion

We hope you will provide time to discuss the video after the showing.

Here are some questions that you might find useful. One through seven have suggested answers given in italics.

1. What key characteristics describe Wilberforce? *Sociable, excellent public skills (singing, speaking), persistence, cooperator, compassionate, committed.*
2. What was the key to understanding his life? *His Christian commitment and faith.*
3. What evils from Wilberforce's time persists now? *Using others for economic gain, greed, the powerful exploiting the weak, gambling, chemical dependency (cheap gin).*
4. What were some factors that made slave-trade possible? *Complicity of Africans, investors willing to make profit, good people content to do nothing, church in lethargic condition.*
5. What partial measures were set forth to pacify but not abolish? *Outlaw slaves on British soil, gradual elimination of slavery.*
6. What major stumbling blocks did Wilberforce face that could easily have distracted him? *Friendship with Pitt, poor health, politically out-manuevered, reluctance of witnesses to give information, having to take a stand even if it hurt his career, loyalty to party, reputation, discouragement.*
7. What factors aided in triumph? *Good research and information, mutual support of like-minded, sense of calling and destiny; communication done imaginatively, taking democratic government process seriously.*
8. How do you account for the fact slavery was not a burning moral issue until some concerned people began to lobby against it?
9. What are the issues in our world and society today that will be seen as moral outrage and that Christians should have been more prepared to combat?
10. What do we learn from the decades-long struggle that was needed to win the cause? Are we too easily discouraged when we do not get a "quick fix"? Can basic structural change ever take place quickly and easily?

11. What does Wilberforce show us about the necessity for concerted persistent action and perseverance in spite of continual defeats and setbacks?
12. One of the major reasons for defending slavery was that it was such a boost to the economy. In what ways today is evil institutionalized? Many benefited, even those who did not crack the whips. In what ways do we find that we are willing to accept social evils, and not be outraged by their presence, comforted by the fact that we are not direct perpetrators?
13. Slavery was clearly a social issue and much more than just a matter of the morality of the slave owners and those directly involved in the trade. Wilberforce and his colleagues saw it their duty to apply their Christian principles and take action in the public arena if they were to be faithful to their Lord and to the Gospel. Do you agree with this perception? If so, why; if not, why not?
14. Even though slavery has been long abolished, are there ways that those of us in Western societies have continued to benefit from the exploitation of the slaves?
15. In February of 1992, when Pope John Paul visited Africa, he stopped at Goree Island off Senegal, a 19th century trading station for slaves. Here he begged forgiveness for Christians who had been involved in the slave trade. Is it necessary and appropriate for us to repent on behalf of our forbearers? Do you have any sense of repentance in regard to slavery?
16. A diary entry from March, 1788 gives an insight into the spiritual stress Wilberforce experienced in the political battles. You might want to write it on the blackboard or give out in written form. You may find it worthy of discussion and meditation. Here is his prayer: "Lord, thou knowest that no strength, wisdom or contrivance of human power can signify, or relieve me. It is in thy power alone to deliver me. I fly to thee for succor and support, O Lord; let it come speedily; give me full proof of thy Almighty power; I am in great troubles, insurmountable by me; but to thee slight and inconsiderable; look upon me, oh Lord with compassion and mercy, and restore me to rest, quietness, and comfort, in the world, or in another by removing me hence into a state of peace and happiness. Amen."

## 5. Making a Difference

By the end of Wilberforce's life there was a discernible increase in the level of Christian commitment in Britain. Researcher and biographer John Pollock notes: "Religion certainly was spreading. Wilberforce was 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."

If you and your congregation are involved in a difficult effort to change public policy or some community condition, take heart from Wilberforce's experience that shows us how committed believers can take on the most difficult social evils and effect change in a culture.

The video illustrates that there were several specific elements in his commitment that worked for ultimate success (and Wilberforce would be quick to add "by the grace of God").

- He set clear-cut and specific goals.
- He conducted meticulous research and had the best data and irrefutable, substantiated facts to support his case.
- He knew he could not sustain the battle alone, so he linked up with a support community to pray, work, and struggle together.
- When it seemed that they were decisively defeated, this group would not accept such setbacks as final.
- They did not let vicious attacks on their character and motives distract them but kept their efforts focused on the main issue.
- 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.
- When they couldn’t get all that they wanted, they nevertheless pushed as far as they could, realizing that gradual change and progress were preferable to none. There were times when it was better to compromise than get locked in a stalemate or defeat.
- 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.
- 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.
- They worked through legitimate, established means to pursue their goals, not resorting to violence or dirty tactics, convinced that truth and right were on the other side.
- They were sustained by a conviction that they were simply obeying a mandate of the Gospel, and, therefore they committed their energies and passions to a God who would providentially guide the historical situation.

## 6. Additional Resources

For a basic readable popular biography of Wilberforce we suggest John Pollock’s *Wilberforce*, Lion Publishing Co. 1986. Price is under \$10. Fortunately a recent book has come out that gives an almost exhaustive listing of Wilberforce resources. If you want to find books about Wilberforce, his own publications, his letters, cartoon caricatures in the press of his day, or almost anything else you may want to find, the place to begin is *William Wilberforce—A Bibliography*, published by Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road, Westport, Connecticut 06881. Orders may be placed toll-free at 1-800-225-5800. Price \$49.95.

## 7. Horrors Of The British Slave Trade

Below is the text from a speech made by Wilberforce in the House of Commons in 1789. The leader will find it helpful to read this for his/her own interest before showing the video. It will give you a fuller appreciation for the program. You will also find this to be a resource that you will want to commend for interested viewers to read.

In opening, concerning the nature of the slave-trade, I need only observe that it is found by experience to be just such as every man who uses his reason

would infallibly conclude it to be. For my own part, so clearly am I convinced of the mischiefs inseparable from it, that I should hardly want any further evidence than my own mind would furnish, by the most simple deductions. Facts, however, are now laid before the House. A report has been made by his majesty's privy council, which, I trust every gentleman has read, and which ascertains the slave-trade to be just such in practice as we know, from theory, it must be. What should we suppose must naturally be the consequence of our carrying on a slave-trade with Africa? With a country vast in its extent, not utterly barbarous, but civilized in a very small degree? Does anyone suppose a slave-trade would help their civilization? Is it not plain that she must suffer from it? That civilization must be checked; that her barbarous manners must be made more barbarous; and that the happiness of her millions of inhabitants must be prejudiced with her intercourse with Britain? Does not everyone see that a slave-trade carried on around her coasts must carry violence and desolation to her very center? That in a continent just emerging from barbarism, if a trade in men is established, if her men are all converted into goods, and become commodities that can be bartered, it follows they must be subject to ravage just as goods are; and this, too, at a period of civilization when there is no protecting legislature to defend this their only source of property, in the same manner as the rights of property are maintained by the legislature of every civilized country. We see, then in the nature of things, how easily the practices of Africa are to be accounted for. Her kings are never compelled to war, that we can hear of, by public principles, by national glory, still less by the love of their people. In Europe it is the extension of commerce, the maintenance of national honor, or some great public object, that is ever motive to war with every other monarch; but in Africa it is the personal avarice and sensuality of their kings; these two voices of avarice and sensuality, the most powerful and predominant in natures thus corrupt, we tempt, we stimulate in all these African princes, and we depend upon these vices for the very maintenance of the slave-trade. Does the king of Barbessin want brandy? He has only to send his troops, in the night-time, to burn and desolate a village; the captives will serve as commodities, that may be bartered with the British trader. What a striking view of the wretched state of Africa does the tragedy of Calabar furnish! Two towns, formerly hostile, had settled their differences, and by an intermarriage among their chiefs, had each pledged themselves to peace; but the trade in slaves was prejudiced by such pacifications, and it became, therefore, the policy, was soon put in practice, and the scene of carnage which followed was such that it is better, perhaps, to refer gentlemen to the privy-council's report than to agitate their minds by dwelling on it.

The slave trade, in its very nature, is the source of such kind of tragedies; nor has there been a single person, almost, before the privy council, who does not add something by his testimony to the mass of evidence upon this point.

Some, indeed, of these gentlemen, and particularly the delegates from Liverpool, have endeavored to reason down this plain principle: some have palliated it, but there is not one, I believe, who does not more or less admit it. Some, nay most, I believe, have admitted to slave-trade to be the chief cause of wars in Africa.

Having now disposed of the first part of this subject, I must speak of the transit of the slaves in the West Indies. This, I confess, in my opinion, is the most wretched part of the whole subject, So much misery condensed in so little room is more than the human imagination had ever before conceived. I will not accuse the Liverpool merchants; I will allow them, nay, I will believe them to be men of humanity; and I will therefore believe, if it were not for the multitude of these wretched objects, if it were not for the enormous magnitude and extent of evil which distracts their attention from individual cases, and makes them think generally, and therefore less feelingly, on the subject, they never would have persisted in the trade. I verily believe, therefore, if the wretchedness of any one of the many hundred Negroes stowed in each ship could be brought before their view, and remain within the sight of the African merchant, that is no one among them whose heart would bear it. Let anyone imagine to himself six or seven hundred of these wretches chained two and two, surrounded with every object that is nauseous and disgusting, diseased, and struggling under every kind of wretchedness! How can we bear to think of such a scene as this? One would think it had been determined to heap on them all the varieties of bodily pain, for the purpose of blunting the feelings of mind;...when the surgeons tell you the slaves are stowed so close that there is not room to tread among them, and when you have it in evidence from Sir George Younge, that even in a ship which wanted two hundred of her complement the stench was intolerable.... What shall we say when we are told that their songs are songs of lamentation upon their departure, which, while they sing, are always in tears, insomuch that one captain (more humane, as I should conceive him, therefore, than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings? In order, however, not to trust too much to any sort of description, I will call the attention of the House to one species of evidence, which is absolutely infallible. Death, at least, is a sure ground of evidence, and the proportion of deaths will not only confirm, but, if possible, will even aggravate our suspicion of their misery in the transit. It will be found upon an average in all ships of which evidence has been given at the privy council, that, exclusive of those who perish before they sail, not less than twelve and one half per cent perish in the passage. Besides these, the Jamaica report tells you that not less than four and one half per cent die on shore before the day of sale, which is only a week or two from the time of landing. One third more die in the seasoning, and this in a country exactly like their own, where they are healthy and happy, as some of the evidences would pretend. The diseases, however,

which they contract on shipboard, the astringent washes used to hide their wounds, and the mischievous tricks employed to make them up for sale, are, as the Jamaica report says—a most precious and valuable report, which I shall often have to advert to—one principal cause of this morality. Upon the whole, however, here is a mortality of about fifty per cent, and this among Negroes who are not bought unless quite healthy at first, and unless (as the phrase is with cattle) they are sound in the wind and limb. How, then, can the House refuse its belief to the multiplied testimonies, before the privy council, of the savage treatment of the Negroes in the middle passage? Nay, indeed, what need is there of any evidence? The number of deaths speaks for itself, and makes all such inquiry superfluous. As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave-trade, I confess to you, sir, so enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear, that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished, let the policy be what it might. Let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition.

When we consider the vastness of the continent of Africa; when we reflect how all other countries have for some centuries past been advancing in happiness and civilization; when we think how in this same period all improvement in Africa has been defected by her intercourse with Britain; when we reflect that it is we ourselves that have degraded them to that wretched brutishness and barbarity which we now plead as the justification of our guilt; how the slave-trade has enslaved their minds, blackened their character, and sunk them so low in the scale of animal beings that some think the apes are of a higher class, and fancy the orangutan has given them the go-by. What a mortification must we feel at having so long neglected to think of our guilt, or attempt any reparation! It seems, indeed, as if we had determined to forbear from all interference until the measure of our folly and wickedness was so full and complete, until the impolicy which eventually belongs to vice was become so plain and glaring that not an individual in the country should refuse to join in the abolition; it seems as if we had waited until the person most interested should be tried out with the folly and nefariousness of the trade, and should unite in petitioning against it.

Let us then make such amends as we can for the mischiefs we have done to the unhappy continent: let us recollect what Europe itself was no longer ago than three or four centuries. What if I should be able to show this House that in a civilized part of Europe, in the time of our Henry VII., there were people who actually sold their own children? What if I should tell them that England itself was that country? What if I should point out to them that the very place where this inhuman traffic was carried on was the city of Bristol? Ireland at that time used to drive a considerable trade in slaves with these neighboring barbarians; but a great plague having infested the country, the Irish were struck with a

panic, suspected (I am sure very properly) that the plague was a punishment sent from heaven for the sin of the slave-trade, and therefore abolished it. All I ask, therefore, of the people of Bristol is, that they would become civilized now as Irishmen were four hundred years ago. Let us put and end at once to this inhuman traffic—let us stop this effusion of human blood. The true way to withdraw from the these wretched Africans those temptations to fraud, violence, cruelty, and injustice with the slave-trade furnishes. Whenever the sun shines, let us go round the world with him, diffusing our beneficence; but let us not traffic, only that we may set kings against their subjects, subjects against their kings, sowing discord in every village, fear and terror in every family, setting millions of our fellow creatures a-hunting each other for slaves, creating fairs and markets for human flesh through one whole continent of the world, and, under the name of policy. Concealing from ourselves all the baseness and iniquity of such a traffic. Why may we not hope, ere long, to see Hanstowns established on the coast of Africa, as they were on the Baltic? It is said the Africans are idle, but they are not too idle, at least, to catch one another.... It is the slave-trade that causes their idleness and every other mischief, We are told by one witness, "They sell one another as they can;" and while they can get brandy by catching one another, no wonder they are too idle for any regular work....

They are brought, as we are told, from three or four thousand miles off, and exchanged like cattle from one hand to another, until they reach the coast. We see, then, that it is the existence of the slave-trade that is the spring of all this internal traffic, and that the remedy cannot be applied without abolition. Again, as to the middle passage, the evil is radical there also; the merchant's profit depends upon the number that can be crowded together, and upon the shortness of their allowance. Astringents, escharotics, and all the other arts of making them up for sale, are of the very essence of the trade; these arts will be concealed both from the purchaser and the legislature; they are necessary to the owner's profit, and they will be practiced. Again, chains and arbitrary treatment must be used in transporting them; our seamen must be taught to play the tyrant, and that deprivation of manners among them (which some very judicious persons have treated of as the very worst part of the business) cannot be hindered, while the trade itself continues....

I trust therefore, I have shown that upon every ground the total abolition ought to take place. I have urged many things which are not my own leading motives for proposing it, since I have wished to show every description of gentleman, and particularly the West India planters, who deserve every attention, that the abolition is politic upon their own principles also. Policy, however, sir is not my principle, and I am not ashamed to say it. There is a principle above everything that is political; and when I reflect upon the command which says: "Thou shalt do no murder," believing the authority to be Divine, how can I dare to set up any reasoning of my own against it? And, sir, when we think of eterni-

ty, and of the future consequences of all human conduct, what is there in this life that should make any man contradict the dictates of his conscience, the principles of justice, the laws of religion, and of God? Sir, the nature of all the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us; we can no longer plead ignorance, we cannot evade it, it is now an object placed before us, we cannot pass it; we may spurn it, we may kick it, out of our way, but we cannot can not turn aside so as to avoid seeing it; for it is brought now so directly before our eyes that his House must decide, and must justify to all the world, and to their own consciences, the rectitude of the grounds and principles of their decision. A society has been established for the abolition of this trade, in which Dissenters, Quakers, churchmen—in which the most conscientious of all persuasions have all united, and made a common cause in this great question. Let not Parliament be the only body that is insensible to the principles of national justice. Let us make reparation to Africa, so far as we can, by establishing a trade upon true commercial principles, and we shall soon find the rectitude of our conduct rewarded by the benefits of a regular and growing commerce.