

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE: TEACHING AGAINST SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND CORRUPTION

Good morning brothers and sisters. I am honoured to be part of this year's Consultation, and humbled to give a brief address on the subject before us today. My attempt this morning is not a comprehensive overview on the subject but a motivation to pursue doing good in the world in from the perspective of grace.

I will present a short history of William Wilberforce and then give an application of how the inward work of grace influences the way we think and act towards God's creation. Before I say anything about Wilberforce, let me first pour this bucket of cold water on you: 'This is not an heroic painting of Wilberforce, but the manifestation of God's grace in an earthen vessel'. Keep that in mind.

Background

For many years the country of Great Britain grew and prospered economically. The wealthy and powerful through the use of their military and local African kings came to establish a new trade, which served to sustain this economic prosperity. This was the trading of African men and women as

slaves, some captured by the military, some by the rival kings, others just sold off by the powerful fellow Africans – against their will. For many years this was taken as a normal exercise by the wealthy who benefitted and the government that needed the revenues. However, there were also countless people who opposed slavery. But there was nothing formal or organized to put pressure on this dehumanizing exercise, until May 1787 that a small society was started in London by Thomas Clarkson to pressure Parliament to dismantle this evil institution.

The society started off as a pressure group for the end of the transatlantic slave trade but their ulterior motive was that with the cut of slaves, plantation owners would then resort to free paid labor. So they called themselves the 'Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade'. When slave trade was abolished they changed their name to their actual reason for being which is the 'Anti-Slavery Society'.

The first group to openly oppose the slave trade was a religious group called the Society of Friends. They were known as **Quakers**. Quakers believe that all people should be treated with respect and are against violence.

Amongst these Quakers was a young man named **William Wilberforce**.

- We need role-models of people who are transformed by God's grace and living it out practically.
- We are not here to paint an image of a hero, but of human being in God's service towards humanity (1759-1833)

- This is an example of the power of a gracious God acting in the life of a man who once lived only for himself to live for God and others.

His Life

- born in Hull in 'God's Own County'
- son of Robert, a wealthy merchant
- educated at Hull Grammar School, Pocklington School and St John's College Cambridge
- At 18, he inherited vast wealth from his family and lived for himself - gambling and drinking and being lazy.
- Even though virtually lazy and dragging himself through life, he passed his exams, continued with his life, unmoved by anything but himself, even as an MP. Besides his political office his time was about gambling, drinking, singing and entertaining the ladies.
- Like all aristocrats of his day he lived in dissolution e.g. His friend Pitt drank three bottles of Port per day, unfortunately he later died of alcoholism.
- With all the wealth, learning and association, he was destined for a life of ease...

His Conversion

In 1784 at the age of 25, he went on a grand tour with his family and tool Rev. Isaac Milner with. It was during this tour he experienced conversion, which was

evidenced by renouncing his previous ways of life and replaced them with godly living. His conversion became a point of ridicule especially from those of the High Church, who even thought these evangelicals to be dangerous and foolish.

After few years of doing absolutely nothing to contribute to the political debate, William was moved to rethink his position and task in parliament. It is upon encouragement from a number of his friends of the low church that William saw a clearer vision – to make abolition of the slave trade his life mission. He coined his new vision as:

“God almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the reformation of manners.”

Wilberforce with a number of his friends campaigned rigorously against the slave trade and eventually in 1791, he tabled 15 anti-slave trade Bills. He argued:

“I must speak of the transit of the slaves in the West Indies. This I confess, in my own 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”

Which was devastatingly defeated by 163 to 88 votes. A blow in the face after all these efforts, from those who claimed to be Christians.

Many attempts happened since then, found in records of history...fast forward to 1806 wrote a 400 page Letter on the Abolition of Slave Trade, the following years slave trade was abolished by the Abolition of Slave Trade Act 283 to 16 votes. He battled ulcerative colitis and the rumours of plantation owners whose businesses were affected by his work. He was loved by many but also hated by many, that the king William IV said, ***“The promoters of abolition are either fanatics or hypocrites and in one of these class I rank Mr Wilberforce”***

In 1833, Wilberforce went to be with the Lord, three days after slavery was abolished.

What Can We Learn From William Wilberforce For the African Context Today:

We need to move away from an image of an Africa which is the epicenter of human suffering, to that of a continent inhabited by humans made in the image of God. A continent whose histories has been tainted by sins of greed, power, oppression, exploitation etc. A continent that is in need of the message of eternal hope grater than handouts of economically progressive and richer countries.

1. The need to understand the nature of God’s grace in a fallen world

- Social injustice and corruption is because of sin, men and women who have not experienced God’s grace will not have a clear vision for the world as long as they remain their of reference.

2. Hearts that are touched by grace become concerned for the oppressed

There is danger in divorcing doctrine from our deeds, and Wilberforce warned against this when he wrote “Christianity calls on us, not merely in general to be religious and moral, but especially to believe the doctrines, and imbibe the principles, and practice the precepts of Christ.” Good works is the fruit of what we believe or evidence of inward experience of grace.

We are to be concerned with social justice and participate in acts that will bring relief because God is glorified in our doing so. We are to sacrifice our resources and energies because we understand what it means to have been on the receiving end of God’s grace.

3. The revival of the soul will lead to a renewed sense of justice

We love our privacy in the 21st century, well, true revival in the soul leads to outward and open response to issues of poverty, corruption, abortion, human trafficking etc.

We are accustomed to the syndrome of doing enough, well, a mind that has been revived as we see in Wilberforce. Instead of thinking about doing enough we should ask “If God requires more of me, will I respond in faith?” (Armstrong).

4. We don't seek to change the world for the sake of the world

Getting engage in the world is for the sake of God’s glory. Social injustice and corruption in its various manifestations are evidence of human spiritual brokenness and spiritual blindness which does not recognize God. We need to have a clear vision of God and his glory such that our acts of resisting evil would lead people to God. Ours is not a task of social redemption but if it

were, the United Nations would have achieved that long ago. Instead ours is to glorify God as we engage in his world. In his diary on June 21 he writes: “To endeavour from this moment to amend my plan for time. I hope to live more than heretofore to God’s glory and my fellow-creatures’ good.”

Conclusion

It is those who live in view of eternity who live with the urgency to address the needs of the world. Believers who understand the coming kingdom of God, live to bring a glimpse of that glory in their time, beginning with the proclamation of the Gospel accompanied by good works. Wilberforce is a human example of what it means to be transformed by grace to become heavenly minded and of earthly good.

Sources:

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