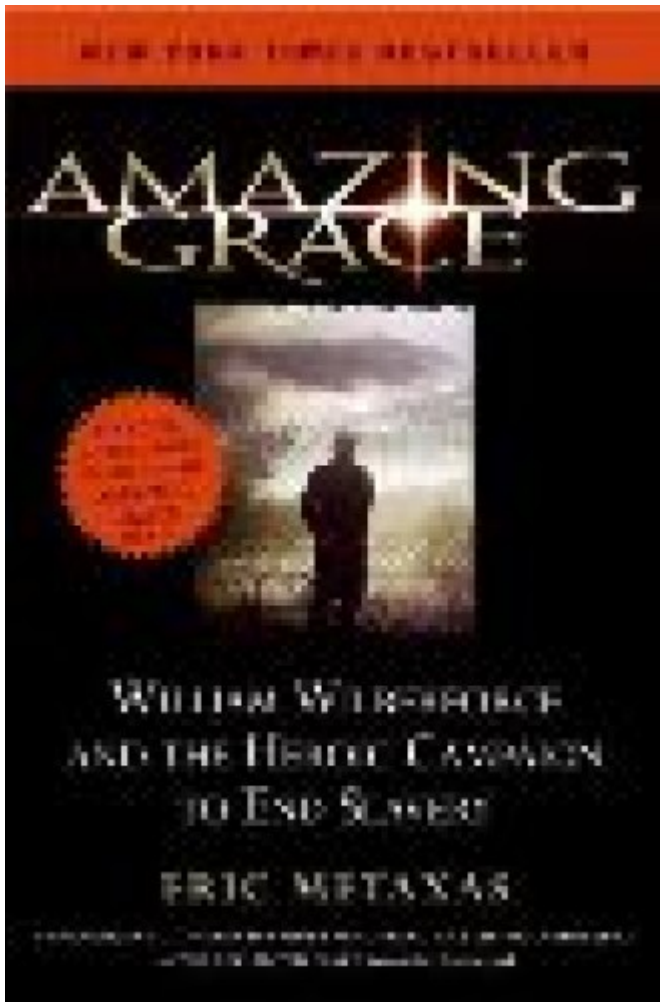


Amazing Grace

reviewed by [Jonathan R. Baer](#) in the [November 13, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery

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In the present confusion over religion and public life—and the accompanying opportunism—the life and career of William Wilberforce provides a needed tonic. Best remembered as the liberator of African slaves in the British West Indies, Wilberforce had a remarkable career as a member of Parliament during which he helped form and lead numerous organizations dedicated to improving the lot of poor and oppressed people in Britain and beyond. He based both his personal and his public life on his deep Christian commitment, which filled him with the motivation and perseverance to advance social justice in the face of enormous obstacles.

In his sparkling biography of Wilberforce, intended as a companion to the film also titled *Amazing Grace* (both were produced in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade), Eric Metaxas unveils the Christian heart of the man and the politician. His Wilberforce is more clearly a Christian statesman and moral leader than the celluloid version.

Wilberforce was an unlikely hero. He grew up the son of a merchant in the port city of Hull, comfortably well-off but not aristocratic in an age when noble blood guaranteed access to the corridors of power. Physically unprepossessing, Wilberforce barely cleared five feet tall and approached 100 pounds only after a copious feast. He had a sickly constitution from childhood onward, and he suffered both from severe myopia that eventually left him nearly blind and from gastrointestinal difficulties (likely ulcerative colitis), for which he took opium for decades. Hardly the raw material from which legends are forged. But by all accounts, Wilberforce was blessed with a winning temperament, an extraordinary speaking and singing voice, and a vigorous (if somewhat disorganized) mind.

Like most prosperous people in that age, Wilberforce's parents went through the motions of Anglicanism, well assured that its ossified dogma would not interfere with their social practices. Because of family unrest, young William went to live with an uncle and aunt in London for two years, and during this formative time he observed and embraced the living faith of their Methodist circle, which included John Newton, the former slave ship captain and author of the hymn "Amazing Grace."

Back in Hull with a family eager to dispose of his newfound "enthusiasm" and amid fashionable soirees with the right sort of people—those who knew not to take religion too seriously—Wilberforce found his Christian resolve weakening. This trajectory continued at Cambridge and into the beginning of his career in the House

of Commons, to which he had won a seat from Yorkshire at the ripe age of 21, thanks to his powerful oratory and savvy campaigning.

The turning point of Wilberforce's life came a few years later in an experience of conversion he called "the great change." Metaxas details the influence that Isaac Milner, the physically gigantic and mentally brilliant Cambridge mathematician and chemist, had on Wilberforce during a mutual holiday in France. Riding cross-country in a stagecoach that Metaxas imagines must have been comically tilted, they reasoned together on sacred matters, and Milner gradually won over Wilberforce to his evangelical convictions.

In short order Wilberforce's life and career were likewise tilted as he sought ways to stabilize his identity and mission on his new Christian foundation. Imbued with a capacity for profound empathy now enlivened by the love of Christ, Wilberforce identified two "great objects" that would provide direction for the remainder of his life: the abolition of British slavery and a "reformation of manners" in British society—that is, moral reform aimed at improving the lives of poor and suffering people.

Wilberforce and his evangelical allies in the famous Clapham group worked doggedly over the next 20 years against entrenched, sometimes vicious enemies to eliminate the scourge of slavery. Wisely recognizing that abolition would be viable only in stages, they first targeted the slave trade, in part by communicating its barbarities to a populace largely kept ignorant by the nautical miles separating Britain and its plantation colonies. With a host of strategies that Metaxas suggests were pioneering innovations in democratic politics, Wilberforce led his troops in aiming above and beyond party interests to reach the people in the streets.

Despite numerous disappointing defeats in Parliament, in time Wilberforce and company turned the sensibilities of the nation against the slave trade by widely distributing studies, treatises, poetry, speeches, artwork, songs and petitions. Their indefatigable application of the gospel humanized Africans to the British public and called the nation and its leaders to account, leading to the momentous 1807 ban on the slave trade. Other, smaller victories and much labor led to Parliament's passage of the bill for full abolition in 1833, only three days before Wilberforce died.

Wilberforce's second great object involved a massive effort at national moral uplift. Repulsed by the complacent, "exquisitely selfish" ways of the rich and powerful,

Wilberforce and the Clapham group worked for decades to ease the crushing burden of poverty and the moral degradation that so often held it in place. Again using democratic methods and political skill to broaden the base for reform and enlist key allies, Wilberforce helped establish schools for poor children, reform prisons, limit capital punishment, outlaw bull-baiting, reform child labor practices, assist orphans and widows, counteract widespread prostitution and much more.

As in his abolitionist efforts, Wilberforce faced naysayers who insisted that his Christian principles had no place in politics. “Things have come to a pretty pass,” howled anti-abolitionist Lord Melbourne, “when one should permit one’s religion to invade public life.” Yet Wilberforce knew the cruel suffering of the gin-soaked masses and the brutality of their daily lives. Metaxas informs us, for instance, that in late-18th-century London, fully 25 percent of unmarried women were prostitutes, with an average age of 16, and brothels specializing in girls under 14 were favorites among enlightened gentlemen.

Abetting this wretchedness with their cash and their insouciance, the privileged served as exemplars of turpitude and moral indifference. Wilberforce rejected the assertions of self-serving libertines who would cordon off Christianity into a safely impotent private sphere, and he attacked Britain’s debauchery with all the ingenuity and force he could muster. He was a moving force in an astounding array of social reform organizations; at one time, Metaxas indicates, Wilberforce was active in no fewer than 69 such groups.

Metaxas argues that more than anyone else Wilberforce is the parent of our modern conception of social conscience. By applying the teachings of Christ to his context, by seeing the face of Jesus in that of the broken African slave and the despairing London prostitute, Wilberforce helped change the world for the better. Convictions about social justice and responsibility that buttress the work of countless churches, religious organizations and nonprofit agencies find their roots in Wilberforce and the moral revolution he led. While Metaxas may overreach somewhat—many others also contributed to the genesis of our humanitarian impulses—it is indisputable that Wilberforce was a player of grand proportions on the world-historical stage, even if the spotlight of historical memory has too often bypassed him.

Through Metaxas’s diligent research and superb craftsmanship, we come to know not only Wilberforce the politician and public figure but also the inner man; we see the sensitive contours of his psyche and soul. This deeply moving and compelling

work of art, a biography of the first order, is one of those rare literary treats filled with crackling prose and witty vitality, inducing in the reader frequent smiles and reflective pauses. Mercifully lacking in academic and ideological cant, *Amazing Grace* is also accessible to a wide audience. On the other hand, the book lacks footnotes, an index or even a bibliography that might help orient those interested in learning more about Wilberforce.

The engaging, eloquent, spiritually profound Wilberforce has found in Metaxas a biographer more than equal to the task of bringing him back to life.