

Amazing Grace (2006)

Rated PG. Our ratings: V-1; L- 1; S/N-2. Running time: 1 hour 51 min.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:27-28

William Wilberforce was less Amazing Grace than 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ feet tall, yet he towered over most of his fellow members of Parliament in the latter quarter of the 18th century (except, of course, for his good friend who became Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger [Benedict Cumberbatch]).

A gifted orator, he was elected to Parliament at the unheard age of 21 where he became a close friend and ally of William Pitt, son of the previous Prime Minister of the same name. Once converted to Christianity, he, joined with like-minded friends to reform "the manners of society." However, this did not mean just social niceties, but included the founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, reformation of the brutal penal code and prison system and of the way in which children were treated, and a host of other social concerns. But he was pre-eminently noted for spearheading the long campaign to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire. Sad to say that today he is little known in this country, something which I hope that the excellent film *Amazing Grace* will rectify. Directed by Michael Apted (best known for directing *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *Gorillas in the Mist*), this is a riveting story of a small man with a gigantic task, one far more revolutionary in its impact than the bloody revolution taking place across the English Channel during his time.

Even had he been healthy, William Wilberforce, called "Wilber" by his friends, would have been incredible, accomplishing so much, despite suffering from a debilitating form of colitis that struck him down from time to time. His doctor brought him some relief from his pain by prescribing the wonder drug of the time, laudanum, an opium derivative, but its side effects sometimes were as bad as his ailment. Steven Knight's screenplay touches on some of the highlights of this man's complex life, but obviously has to simplify matters a great deal by combining some characters and telescoping some of the events and time span. (See the book by Eric Metaxas, described briefly at the end of this review, to fill in the huge gaps in the movie story.)

The film opens in 1797 with the 34-year-old Wilberforce (Ioan Gruffudd) stopping his coach so that he can tell a man to stop beating his fallen horse. Wracked with pain and exhausted by all of his battles in Parliament, he arrives that night at the country estate of his cousins Henry and Marianne Thornton (Nicholas Farrell and Sylvestra Le Touzel), where they give him the tender loving (and firm) care he needs. They take him to Bath in the twin hopes that its famed waters will help cure him and that he and the woman they arrange for him to meet, Barbara Spooner (Romola Garai), will be attracted to each other. However, each of them walk out of the situation, not caring to be so manipulated, and it is only later that Barbara comes to Thornton Manor, where she induces Wilberforce to recount his life in regard to his seeking the abolition of slavery. Thus the film is a series of scenes between the present and flashbacks to the past.

We see something of Wilberforce's conversion from the bland rationalist philosophy of the Enlightenment, favored by his mother and most of the upper class of society, to the heart-felt faith of the evangelicals, so influenced by the preaching of George Whitfield and the Wesley brothers—though unless you know of this background, you might think that he was led to

God by the beauty of nature, rather than a long process of conversations with a close friend, study of the Scriptures inspired by reading a book by Philip Doddridge, and evangelical preaching, for we are shown little of the latter, and Wilberforce is in a garden when he expresses his reawakened faith. I write "reawakened" because, as Eric Metaxas's book relates, the young Wilberforce had been drawn to John Newton's evangelical faith during the brief period after his father died that he lived with his Aunt Hannah and Uncle William at Wimbledon, themselves close friends both of Newton and famed evangelist George Whitfield. Wilberforce's well to do parents were like most of those of the upper classes, or who aspired to be, despisers of orthodox Christianity as hopelessly primitive and outmoded. They spent their nights playing cards and gossiping, or dancing and going to the theater, so when his widowed mother saw in her boy's visits and his correspondence a change of attitude toward her frivolities, she smelled "methodism," and promptly swooped down upon Wimbledon to snatch away her boy, despite the pleas of William and Hannah. Safe back home, the fervent faith implanted in the boy grew weaker, until at last had almost vanished. Wilberforce grew up to join in all the gaiety and frivolity expected of a young man of his time.

Once he became a Christian again, he believed that he should give up politics because of all the maneuvering and compromises required to move any bill through Parliament. His good friend William Pitt, uncommitted to what he regarded as an outmoded religion, argued against such a rash move. Thus Wilberforce pays a visit to John Newton, his old mentor. Albert Finney makes a wonderfully captivating John Newton, except for the ridiculous, ragged monk's robe they dress him in when Wilberforce comes calling. The two talk of the old days and of his recent conversion, the older man suggesting that Parliament is exactly where he as a Christian should be. "You have work to do!" the old sea captain tells him.

Given the new spirit and impetus, Wilberforce throws himself into the abolitionist cause. Earlier we had seen his keen wit in being able to cut down any sneering opponent, no matter how high-born. A close-knit group of men and women reformers gather around him, most notably Thomas Clarkson (Rufus Sewell), James Stephen (Stephen Campbell Moore), and Olaudah Equiano (Youssou N'Dour). The latter had been slave in the West Indies, and when brought to England, was able to earn enough money to buy his freedom. He wrote a book about his slave experience that became a best seller, thus helping to raise public awareness of the brutal nature of the slave trade. He and others provide Wilberforce with an education in the misery of slavery, taking the Parliamentary member on a tour of the docks and a slave ship. What he saw was to haunt the dreams of Wilberforce for years, his conscience never giving him rest as long as the slave trade existed.

It was in 1787, seven years after entering Parliament and about three years after his quiet embrace of Christianity, that the small man took up the cause of the abolition of the slave trade. Although opposed to slavery itself, the abolitionists wisely thought that it would be easier to abolish the trade before tackling slavery itself. Slavery and the trade were so embedded in the life of the Empire that few, except the Quakers and John Wesley, had questioned it. Wilberforce soon found this out, with the angry members of Parliament offering a myriad of reasons why abolition would "destroy the Empire." The first vote on his bill was a disaster, with just a little over a dozen members voting in favor.

It would take twenty years of pleading, educating, demonstrating, and maneuvering before William Wilberforce would emerge victorious—in 1807, this year being the Bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade—and a year after the great man's death (in 1833) all the slaves of the Empire were declared to be free, almost 30 years before they

would be set free in the United States, and over fifty years in Brazil. At one point in the early 1790s Wilberforce actually had enough votes to pass his bill of abolition, but on the night of the vote (Parliament's business sessions often did not begin until early evening) many of his supporters were attending a comedy at the theater, and thereby the bill failed for lack of votes.

Ken Wales and Michael Apted's film is a fit tribute to William Wilberforce and the cause to which he was so dedicated, as well as to the circle of friends who inspired and supported him in his cause. It is encouraging to see that the producers are tying the film in with the abolition of modern slavery—see the brief review of the two books that the film studio has sent out to critics—thus making the film more than just an entertainment event. This is a film that churches should be taking their youth to see and discuss—and in those communities where the film has not been booked, church folk should be calling the theater managers urging them to book the film. This is one movie that really matters.

For Reflection/Discussion

1) Although it seems hard today to understand how slavery could be defended, what arguments can you recall that were raised in the film by its defenders? How was slavery virtually a part of every aspect of business and society then? You might go to such sources as Wikipedia to find out more about the trade, and especially the “triangle” involving transporting of Africans to the West Indies and America; the brutal process of harvesting and refining sugar and making it into rum; and the trading of the latter for goods manufactured in England—much of this involving the same ships.

2) What does Wilber reply when he visits John Newton and is asked about his conversion? How is Newton's description of conversion as a drip by drip process amidst a storm appropriate to his visitor's assertion that it was “not by

lightning" ? How might this be a reference to the account of the apostle Paul's conversion in Acts 9? What was your own coming to accept Christ like" A slow process that arose from your parents taking you to church since your infant baptism? Or were you not raised in the church, coming to Christ at an evangelistic meeting or the persistence of Christian friends?

3) Note that Newton did not give up the slave trade right away after his conversion: how does this indicate that conversion is a process, at least for some? With total conversion, how does what the apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians come into play? How must Newton (and all who are prejudiced) have regarded Africans when he transported them into slavery? When he gave his life fully over to Christ, how did the savior change his "human point of view" ? Has this happened in your life, perhaps changing the way you once regarded members of other races or unacceptable groups? (For a good film that shows that we all are in need of change is Crash. Another excellent film showing how a teacher emerges from stereotypical ways of viewing outsiders is the documentary Paper Clips, reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

4)From the first scene when he intervened in the whipping of a fallen horse to a later mention that he was a founder of the Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, we see that Wilberforce's compassion was not limited to human beings. How is this a natural out-flowing of agape love? Note that in the Torah there is a concern for the wellbeing of animals, the ox being included in the commandment to take a sabaath rest and to be allowed to eat the grain that fell to the floor during the threshing process (See Exodus 23:12 and Deuteronomy 25:4)

5) How did the tour of the docks and the slave ship affect Wilberforce? Have you had a similar response when you saw firsthand third world poverty or conditions of those living in our inner cities? (Something like this happened when a group from a church went with members of an African American church to a home in the projects, and the mother told the captivated

whites how she could not allow her children to play outside, even in front of their door, because of drive-by shootings and the ever present drug dealers.)

6) In what ways do we see the human side of Wilberforce? How does he rise above his bouts of sickness? At what points was he ready to give up his struggle? How does the film show the importance of community—of having those around to inspire, challenge, and sustain one's spirit? (The book is especially good at describing the lively group at Clapham, the residence of the reformer.)

7) How could the campaign that Wilberforce and his friends mount seem like the fore-runner of subsequent campaigns to change the mind and attitude of the public? We see in the film, for example, the famous drawing of a slave ship and the tiny figures of slaves crammed into every possible space; Wilberforce's box, designed to show audiences how small the slave's living space aboard a ship was. Tours of a slave ship; and more. Not shown was the famous medallion designed by Wedgwood, famed manufacturer of elegant china and pottery, showing a kneeling slave in chains asking, "Am I not a man and a brother?" How is this important in a battle against those who prefer the status quo?

8) The film humorously shows that reformers are not above political tricks, such as giving away free tickets to the races so that the opponents of Wilberforce's bill are absent when it unexpectedly is brought up for vote: might this be an example of the words of Jesus to his disciples to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves?

9) How did you feel when Wilberforce at last achieves his goal? Did he feel that his work was finished, or what? Check into the second of the following books to learn that the slave trade is still flourishing! For more about the reformer visit www.amazinggracemovie.com, and among the 30+ websites described in NOT FOR SALE, check out at least

www.NotforSaleFund.org.

AMAZING GRACE: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery by Eric Metaxas. (Harper San Francisco, 2007; 283 pages; \$21.95, hardback. A good book that will greatly enhance enjoyment of the film , it fills in the many gaps that the film leaves in the history of the times and of the development of Wilberforce's character. Wilberforce seemed to be involved in virtually every progressive movement in England. The book provides a fuller profile of his many devoted friends—indeed, the account of their frequent gatherings at his Chapham estate makes one wistful for such company. The account of the religious revival led by George Whitfield and the Wesley brothers will be of special interest, the author relating that the last known letter written by the dying John Wesley was to Wilberforce, encouraging him to fight on against the slave trade.

NOT FOR SALE: The Return of the Global Slave Trade—and How We Can Fight It by David Batstone. (Harper San Francisco, 2007; 306 pages; \$14.95, paper.

It might come as a shock to learn that there are today, in this bi-centennial year of the official ending of the slave trade in the British Empire, still at least 27 million slaves! The author, a professor of ethics at San Francisco University, documents all of his accounts of the slave trade in Asia, Africa, South America, Europe, and the United States (yes, here too!) with footnotes citing such sources as the U.S. Department of State. The stories of specific persons enslaved are counterbalanced by accounts of leaders who are fighting against the traffic, so this is a book of hope, with specific suggestions as to how the reader can be involved, describing over 30 websites for further information. This book should be circulating in every church of our denomination, and would make a great study resource for local women's associations (because most of the slaves are women and children).