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The Biblical Basis of William Wilberforce's Fight for the Abolition of Slave Trade in the British Empire as Evidenced from His Writings and Speeches

Abstract: William Wilberforce was the foremost legislator who singlehandedly worked to rally the British government to abolish slavery in the British empire. He rallied through writings and speeches and this article attempts to find his spiritual conviction in his fight against slavery. Wilberforce was driven by his conviction that stemmed from his belief in the Bible as the word of God and he frequently justified his stand by the words from the Bible. We can find him using many verses of the Bible to direct his audience to rooting for the legislation to abolish slavery and he ultimately succeeded through his strong faith and utmost perseverance in valuing those who were termed as barbaric and enslaved because they were inferior.

In the history of the fight for the rights of slaves, the name William Wilberforce stands tall as a rock, a person who persistently stood up to fight in the British Parliament for decades and ultimately helped effect the abolition of slave trade in the British Empire by the Slavery Abolition Act 1833; soon after which he died, having accomplished his life's mission. William Wilberforce, who was an English politician having a political career in the British Parliament from 1780 to 1826, was the most prominent of the group known as the Abolitionists and was the most voiced supporter for the abolition of slave trade, writing

appeals to the people, to the British monarchy and giving speeches in Parliament to effect change in the people's view towards slave trade and the treatment of slaves in the colonies of the British Empire. His constant effort, single handedly continuing to campaign year after year ultimately bore fruit and inspired many other people to stand up for the rights of the marginalised and the oppressed groups and to give voice to the voiceless. William Wilberforce, was never an ordained church minister, but in all his writings and speeches we can see a strong theological background and his Christian faith runs as the bedrock of his convictions that guided his life's mission.

As we study the records of his life, William Wilberforce attended church faithfully and he had an in depth knowledge of the Bible as evidenced from his quoting it frequently in his communications. The strong Biblical basis of his fight for the abolition of slave trade was perhaps set up by his lifelong personal friendship with none other than John Newton, the slave trader turned ordained church minister, who is famous as the writer of the hymn, "Amazing Grace". John Newton, who was a former slave trader, had an intense conversion experience as he realised his sinfulness and turned to God for mercy and changed the entire course of his life, the substance of his life being summed up in the lyrics of "Amazing Grace". He knew William Wilberforce from his childhood days and had a personal relationship with him and his family throughout their lives. When being a Member of Parliament in London, William Wilberforce frequently visited the church where John Newton preached and listened to his fiery preachings many of which must have pleaded to the congregation to set right the wrongs of the British Empire in their handling of slaves. In the letters exchanged between William Wilberforce and John Newton, we see a close concern for each other's welfare and we can find how Wilberforce was under the mentorship of John Newton as his spiritual advisor and friend.

According to his own words, William Wilberforce also had an intense spiritual conversion

experience like that of John Newton. When formerly he had no heartfelt interest in either Christ, the Bible or the church, after his change of heart, he changed into a new person with new passions and desires and his political interests changed. Maybe William Wilberforce happily sang “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see!” - the famous hymn of his friend John Newton. Wilberforce's biographers say that after his spiritual conversion, he was no longer attracted to the high life of London's high class society, to the gambling and drinking and other obsessions. Though his friends said that he was still jovial and fun to be around, yet he was driven to love God and read his Bible and to get involved with the church. When he was disillusioned with the corruption in the British Parliament and was at the crossroads whether or not to leave politics, he was persuaded by John Newton himself to keep on being Member of Parliament, where God can use him best, in order to effect positive change in the policies of the British Empire. In reading his journals, we can find the tremendous faith and determination of his call to serve God in the Parliament by helping set righteous policies. In his journal in the summer of 1876, we can find this line written : “God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners”. Thus, being felt called to serve God in his capabilities as a politician, William Wilberforce took upon himself to start his campaign to urge the British lawmakers to help curb the inhumane treatment of the acquired slaves from their colonies and further on to ultimately abolish slave trade altogether, when the movement gained support and momentum.

William Wilberforce was a man who knew his Bible and so when he writes his 'A Letter on the Abolition of Slave Trade: Addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire'(1507), on the front page he puts these verses from the Bible:

There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision,

Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ
is all, and in all. Put on therefore bowels of mercies,
kindness. (Colossians 3: 11-12, Holy Bible, KJV)

God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell
on all the face of the earth. (Acts 17:26, Holy Bible, KJV)

William Wilberforce, by using these Bible verses, sets the tone of his entire open letter to the people of his constituency, as he establishes his argument based on the conviction of the Biblical view that contradicts the justification of slave trade in the British colonies. In the Bible verses taken from the letter to the Colossians, which the Apostle Paul had written to the inhabitants of the church at Colosse, then under the Roman Empire, he was addressing the differences between the Jewish Christian converts and the Gentile Christians, saying that in Christ, there are no race or class differences, but all are equal and all are one. Wilberforce, in using that verse, understands the core teaching of Paul which teaches mercy and kindness to one another, not viewing one another differently or holding oneself as superior and the other as inferior. By using that verse, he invites the people to view slaves not as inferiors but as someone whom Christ loves and so urges them to fight for their rights. He understood that the Bible does not allow for the inhuman treatment of what people would call as the “heathens”. Wilberforce gives numerous examples of the inhuman treatment of slaves that are brought from the colonies of the British, namely from Africa, and sold like cattle in order to work on the plantations under worse living conditions. There is no justification for treating fellow humans in the way slave trade was conducted, they are people made of “one blood”, as the apostle Paul writes in the book of Acts in the Bible. Just because they were born as “heathens”, do not make them inferior and the Britishers being born as Christians, do not have the divine authority and justification for slave trading and forcing them under subjugation. Wilberforce says,

Inasmuch therefore, as we are repeatedly and expressly told that Christ has done away all distinctions of nations, and made all mankind great family, all our fellow creatures are now our brethren ; and therefore the very principles and spirit of the Jewish law itself would forbid our keeping the Africans, anymore than our own fellow subjects, in a state of slavery.

(Wilberforce, William, 319)

The wonderful faith of William Wilberforce shines through these writings where he vehemently denounces the arguments of those supporting the slave trade, religiously saying that the Jews were allowed to keep slaves in the Bible. He gives Biblical reasons for the freedom Christ gives and how the Master instructs the kind treatment of others. Wilberforce is passionate in his attack against slavery and thus invites the people of his constituency to carefully examine his views and support him in his fight because of the call of their duty as true Christians. He invites the upliftment of the lives of the slaves as brothers and sisters in Christ, and not twist scripture in order to support slavery.

Wilberforce is so concerned for the moral and spiritual backsliding of the so called professing Christians that he writes a book, “A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians of the Higher and Middle Class, Contrasted with Real Christianity” where he showcases all the shallow Christianity that the urban Christians have fallen in and invites them to re-examine themselves in the light of the true teachings of the Bible. As always, Wilberforce has a strong Biblical basis and it can be seen in the way he begins. The book starts with these lines,

Search the Scriptures. (John 5 : 39, Holy Bible, KJV)

How charming is DIVINE PHILOSOPHY

Not harsh and crabbed, as dull fools suppose,

But musical as is Apollo's lute,

And a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets,
Where no crude surfeit reigns—MILTON

He invites people to look at the scriptures and to change the way they have been conducting their religion. He wants their religion to be more practical and not just mere rites, rituals and lip-service. He subtly hints at the failures of the so-called professing Christians to have a deep conviction to eradicate slavery and its abuses, and the practice of twisting and turning scripture to serve their own selfish purposes. Wilberforce invites the people to 'search the scriptures' and to acquire 'divine philosophy', as he lays down all the doctrinal positions of 'real Christianity', contrasting it with the shallow religion of the times. Wilberforce had very few supporters in his campaign against slavery and so it took many decades in order for the British Parliament to gain a majority to pass a strong law against slavery. Thus, William Wilberforce took a strong stand to write to reform the church and its views. He cuts through the empty religion that was prevailing in the then urban Christianity to shake them up to reform the gross wrongs that were being perpetrated by the British Empire in his book. Wilberforce had the strong belief that only a spiritual change in the nation could bring forth national good and he put his heart and soul to reforming people. His knowledge of the Bible, his wisdom and his understanding of the doctrinal issues in the scriptures can be clearly gauged when we study this book and the clear cut convictions he had was the fuel behind the Abolitionist movement.

In another of his open letters, named as “An Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire in Behalf of the Negro Slaves of the West Indies”, Wilberforce shows his strong Biblical basis as he begins with the verses,

Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his
chambers by wrong ; that useth his neighbour's service without
wages, and giveth him not for his work. (Jeremiah 22:13, Holy Bible, KJV)

Do justice, and love mercy. (Micah 6:8, Holy Bible, KJV)

These are pretty strong verses that continue with his strong attack against the gross wrongs in the slave trade by which the slave traders and plantation owners were reaping much profit. He calls down woe on the people of Britain if they keep sup[porting such a vile system. Wilberforce always supports his arguments with Biblical doctrine and here too he launches his open letter to invite people of the Empire to set right the wrongs that are done, things that are done contrary to what scripture demands. Wilberforce's strength lies in the strength of scripture being the instruction of God himself and he stands bold to call out the injustices even when having few people to stand by him. Of course, he had a close circle of supporters including former Prime Minister William Pitt to give him moral support, but his strength, as can be sensed from his journals, came from his prayer and Bible reading in communion with the Lord. In line with the Bible verses, Wilberforce begins his appeal in this manner,

To all the inhabitants of the British Empire, who value the favour of God, or are alive to the interests or honour of their country — to all who have any respect for justice, or any feelings of humanity, I would solemnly address myself. I call upon them, as they shall hereafter answer, in the great day of account, for the use they shall have made of any power or influence with which Providence may have entrusted them, to employ their best endeavours, by all lawful and constitutional means, to mitigate, and, as soon as it may be safely done, to terminate the Negro Slavery of the British Colonies ; a system of the grossest injustice, of the most heathenish irreligion and immorality, of the most unprecedented degradation, and unrelenting cruelty.

A very strong address, it shows how William Wilberforce had great strength of character stemming from his faith in God, and also shows how he believed in a God of justice who will render each man according to his deeds in 'the great day of account', referring to the

Judgement Day after the end of the world when every deed will be judged before the judgement seat of God. Wilberforce also fears that his nation's sins would be punished severely if people do not repent and turn from their wicked ways and set right this 'system of the grossest injustice'.

In his speeches, we find so much of intense conviction, pleading to men, keeping God as a witness and do what is right that we cannot but admire his passion for the issue he took up as his own fight. James Boswell, the famous commentarian witnessed Wilberforce speak with a powerful eloquence in the House of Commons and then commented saying, "I saw what seemed a mere shrimp mount upon the table; but as I listened, he grew, and grew, until the shrimp became a whale." In his famous abolition speech on May 12, 1789, Wilberforce says,

I take courage-I determine to forget all my other fears, and I march forward with a firmer step in the full assurance that my cause will bear me out, and that I shall be able to justify upon the clearest principles, every resolution in my hand, the avowed end of which is, the total abolition of the slave trade.

William Wilberforce drew upon the appeal to the core goodness of man and the reverence toward God to put forward his speeches in Parliament in order to effect change and enact the laws that will change the course of history, not only of the British Empire, but of the entire world. Such strength came from his viewing his fight for abolition as being the very duty entrusted by God to him, one that he must finish by all means possible. He drew from his deep reservoir of Biblical knowledge that lived in his heart and directed his steps. He worked as scripture compelled him to and he was doubly convinced as scripture convinces him as he read what it said. In no better lines can one convey his deepest principle and basis in his fight against slavery as in the lines that he writes in his "A Letter to His Excellency the Prince of Talleyrand Perigord",

Were I a bigoted Protestant, rather than a sincere Christian, I might rejoice to see the

votaries of the Roman Catholic faith thus sanctioning the violation of the plainest principles of the religion of Jesus. But no such unworthy sentiments as these find admission into my bosom; larger and nobler principles animate my heart, and actuate my conduct.

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21 November, 2016

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to my mentor, Dr Subarno Chatterjee, my classmates and my spiritual influences for inspiring me to write this article.