

How Justification by Faith Impels Justice: The Biographical Testimony of William Wilberforce

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by David Schrock

At 4:00am on February 24, 1807, the British Parliament voted to end the British slave trade. With a count of 267 to 16, the House of Commons voted with loud cheers for the abolition of this abominable institution.

Though it would take another 26 years for slavery to be ended in Britain and its colonies, this decision by the House of Commons, which followed the majority decision of the House of Lords, proved that in the span of 50 years what was unthinkable—namely, the end of the slavery—could be put to an end through a radical change in public and political opinion.

This change raises the question: What led to that remarkable act of liberation? What changed the hearts of the British governors? Was it a war? No, not unless you count the war of words in parliament. Was it a pragmatic argument based upon economics. No, [it actually cost Britain a fortune to end slavery](#). What was it then?

The answer can be given in three words—a man, a mission, and an unusual motivation.

Abolition: The Man, The Mission, and His Motivation

The man was [William Wilberforce](#). Born in 1759, Wilberforce entered parliament in 1780 and came to Christ in 1785. Within two years of his conversion, Wilberforce had taken up the fight against slavery. Counseled to stay in politics by none other than John Newton, the slave-trader turn pastor and author of Amazing Grace, Wilberforce became the tireless champion for abolition in England.

He first introduced a bill for abolition in 1787, and for the next 20 years he endured intense scorn and opposition as he led parliament to overturn the slave trade—an event that happened in 1807. Then for the next 26 years, he continued that fight, until three days before his death, in 1833, the British parliament voted to end slavery entirely.

For this man, his mission was to abolish the slave trade. And by God's grace, he succeeded. His counter-cultural mission brought sweeping changes to England and the world. His life and his mission can be explored in John Piper's [biographical sermon](#) and Eric Metaxas's [biography](#).

Yet, beyond learning the history and mission of this man, we need to know something about what drove him. Where did he find the strength to endure such opposition? The answer lies in Wilberforce's evangelical faith and his understanding of justification by faith.

Justification by Faith: The Source of Justice

Wilberforce's peculiar motivation to end slavery—to borrow Piper's turn of phrase—is chronicled in his own book, [A Practical View of Christianity](#). Here Wilberforce outlines how his understanding of the gospel impelled him to pursue the impossible task of confronting and abolishing the evils of the slave trade. As Piper has noted in his [biography of Wilberforce](#),

From the beginning of his Christian life in 1785 until he died in 1833 Wilberforce lived off the "great doctrines of the gospel," especially the doctrine of justification by faith alone based on the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. This is where he fed his joy. And the joy of the Lord became his strength (Nehemiah 8:10). And in this strength he pressed on in the cause of abolishing the slave trade until he had the victory.

Truly, it was not justice that Wilberforce sought disconnected from the gospel message of justification. Rather, it was his belief in the gospel which produced good works as a fruit of justification that empowered him. On this point he wrote against his fellow Englishmen who turned the gospel on its [head](#):

They consider not that Christianity is a scheme "for justifying the ungodly" by Christ's dying for them "when yet sinners"—a scheme "for reconciling us to God"—when enemies; and for making the fruits of holiness the effects, not the cause, of our being justified and reconciled.

Wilberforce's orthodox faith led to his zeal for good works. And this is the truth we must recover today—namely, that justification by grace through faith is the greatest motivation for endless good works. Justification before God is not, as some might believe, a "get out jail free token" whereby Christians are given pass into heaven. Rather, such a heavenly gift, that comes freely from the throne of God, produces all manner of good works in this age, as well as the next.

Indeed, just as William Wilberforce [discovered](#) that the joy that empowers bold and risky service for God comes from the salvation of God, so we must learn that seeking justice is not something additive or alternative to the gospel. Neither is justice-seeking the way we earn the favor of God. Instead, when we rightly understand that God justifies those who trust in Christ, it produces in man a new nature that loves his fellow man and seeks to do them good. And when that new nature is instructed by biblical truth and empowered by the Spirit, it will labor and sacrifice to right wrongs and bless others in every place that man or woman may go.

In Wilberforce's case, God gave him the place to pursue the lifelong fight of abolition. But importantly, this life of action arose from Wilberforce's understanding of the gospel.

Justification by Faith is the Place Where Justice Begins

To be sure, much good has been done with illicit motives. Pride and fear—instead of faith working itself out in love—have often motivated people. Yet such moral attempts will only result in self-righteous arrogance (when they succeed) or cynical discouragement (when they fail). In the former, the pursuit of justice is corrupted by the pride of those who accomplish it. In the latter, no lasting good work is produced at all. Contrary to both of these failures, however, Wilberforce reminds of God's wisdom and power and justice.

When God justifies a man, he frees him to do good works for others. This includes acts of charity, mercy, and justice. Because he is not trying to work for himself, he is no longer working from fear of punishment, not from the pride of self-justification. Freed from both, he

can lay his life down for others, just like Christ. This is how justification by faith impels good works and why all enduring works of justice must depend upon and flow from the gospel.

For this reason, as we continue to consider justice in our world, we must remember how God does justice and that justification by faith is at the center of that work. At the same time, we must see how he creates new creatures in Christ—the only righteous seeker of justice—who in turn do justice as their joy in the gospel impels them to love and serve their neighbors. Indeed, such a vision for justice is smaller and slower and more location specific than what is offered and demanded by Twitter. But in God’s wisdom, this is the way justification leads to justice, such that when it is done, all the glory is given to him and not the men and women who are impelled by pride and fear.

May God create an army of justice-seekers, who like William Wilberforce turn back the darkness of this fallen world. But may God do it in such a way that the gospel of Jesus Christ, and his justification by faith, is the unmistakable cause of that change and the source of strength for those disciples.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds

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