

## William Wilberforce and the Clapham Circle

- John Newton was a former slave trader who came to Christ and became a pastor. He was the Wilberforce family pastor when William Wilberforce was a child.
- William Wilberforce was born into a wealthy aristocratic family, was well educated. He was only 1.5M tall and described as “scrawny”, and he was frequently ill. He is most remembered for his fight against the slave trade.
- Isaac Milner was an Anglican clergyman and was a mathematician and scientist at Cambridge University.

William Wilberforce grew up in the church but never knew Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He enjoyed politics and got elected into the British Parliament at the age of 21, the youngest age allowed.

He enjoyed the battles in politics and was known as a great speaker and having a quit wit. A few years into his political career his sister became ill and he decided to take her on a trip to the French Riviera where he hoped the better climate would help her recover. His mother and a female cousin of his wife also traveled with him.

During this time period, England was a very secular and immoral society. The aristocrats of British society had little regard and no respect for religious people. The Anglican church was deeply entwined in the government and was more political in nature than spiritual.

Not wanting to be bored during this trip, Wilberforce decided to invite an Irish friend to accompany him, but when the friend declined, Wilberforce asked Isaac Milner, the brother of Joseph Milner (his former schoolmaster) to join him.

Milner, an Anglican clergyman, was known as a brilliant Cambridge scientist and mathematician. Unaware of Milner's evangelical convictions, Wilberforce was surprised to find that someone whom he could respect intellectually could also embrace a Christian worldview. Together they read and reviewed the Greek New Testament and Philip Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*.

Wilberforce made a second trip and once again asked Milner to accompany him. By the end of the second European trip, Wilberforce was convicted of his sin. He acknowledged "a sense of my great sinfulness in having so long neglected the unspeakable mercies of my God and Savior."

But now Wilberforce had a problem. Knowing how his aristocrat friends felt about people of faith, Wilberforce quietly came to the door of John Newton who was popularly associated with the faith Wilberforce had embraced but his aristocratic friends despised.

Fear and shame tormented Wilberforce until John Newton encouraged him by telling him to stay in politics. "The Lord has raised you up for the good of His church, and for the good of the nation".

Wilberforce's faith in Christ changed him from being a careless, wealthy young politician, to a pillar of strength in the Christian community and an amazing agent of social change in England.

Wilberforce came to Christ in 1785, six years into his political career, and for the next two years God was at work in his life as he grew in his faith. In 1787, Wilberforce wrote: "God gave me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade, and the reformation of manners", (The reforming of the nation's moral culture).

He knew that he was limited in his talents and recruited several other believers with influential positions in society which became known as the Clapham Circle,(their integrity group) a group of believers committed to serving the Lord. Together they started over 69 different initiatives with which to glorify God and begin transforming the nation.

In addition to his abolition work, he was consistently involved in church work that included the Church Missionary Society and the sending of missionaries to India and Africa, the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Proclamation Society Against Vice and Immorality, the School Society, the Sunday School Society, the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, the Vice Society, and others.

What struck me the most is that these people were not thoughtless about their giving of their finances, time, and talents to the Lord's service. It was designed

and run with full intention of glorifying God and making a positive difference for not only their nation but the world in the abolition of slavery in the British Empire.

It took twenty years of Wilberforce's tireless efforts, along with the help of the Clapham Circle before England's Parliament finally voted, in 1807, to abolish the slave trade. During those twenty years, they proposed legislation that was voted down 19 times. This is an amazing example of perseverance!

It took still another 26 years to emancipate the existing slaves and abolish slavery entirely. During this long struggle Wilberforce faced intense opposition from politicians and businessmen, assassination attempts, and long bouts of frail health. Yet his steadfast resolve to end this societal evil eventually won out and in July 1833, just three days before his death, the House of Commons passed a law emancipating all slaves in the British Empire.

Wilberforce's faith in Jesus Christ changed him from a careless, wealthy young politician to a tireless, compassionate public servant. He developed and used his gifts of leadership and persuasion to champion countless efforts to better society. He was a moral leader who voted against his party when principle required it.

His partnership with his Christian brothers and sisters in the Clapham Circle serves as a model for Christians working together to bring about meaningful reform in society. He persisted for decades in the tasks God had called him to, despite illness, physical threats, and enormous opposition.

An end note regarding John Newton, the former slave trader turned pastor, another soul radically changed by his faith. I read a biography on his life many years ago and the slave trade was a brutal and evil business. Because of his overwhelming experience of being forgiven, even after such awful personal sin, he wrote the famous hymn, Amazing Grace

I hope you are as inspired as I am in the radical giving of their lives of William Wilberforce and his Clapham Circle brothers and sisters. One secular account of Wilberforce's life states that "some say that his faith to which he converted played a part in his work to abolish slavery". I laughed when I read that as it was clear that after his conversion, the Holy Spirit clearly grabbed his heart and transformed it and his mindset. I thought this would be a small encouragement to you all.

## MODULE | Ministry and Work [Pages 15 – 21]

**Theme: Work is not separate from ministry—**

**it is a primary context for discipleship, redemptive influence, and spiritual capital.**

**Every believer is called to glorify God through their vocation.**

Grounding Scripture:

Colossians 3:23–24 | *“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord...”*

Genesis 2:15 | *“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden... to work it and keep it.”*

Ephesians 4:28 | *“...let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands...”*

1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 | *“...work with your hands... so that you may walk properly before outsiders...”*

Puzzle Piece:

Insight: Many believers compartmentalize faith and work—seeing ministry as church-based and work as secular. But, scripture reveals work as a divine assignment, a place to reflect God’s image and resist corruption.

This piece is vocational: how do we reclaim work as worship and witness?

Challenge: When believers disconnect their faith from their profession, spiritual capital is lost.

Corruption thrives when Christians remain silent or passive in the workplace.

Bridge Thought | connection

- The idea of a bridge from sacred to secular is false.
- Whole-life discipleship equips believers to live redemptively in every domain—including business, education, government, and trades.
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### Toolbox | Practical Tools

*Vocational Discipleship Framework:* Teach believers to see their work as ministry.

*Integrity Group Integration:* Form workplace-based groups for support, accountability, and witness.

*Spiritual Capital Tracker:* Help believers identify how their work builds or erodes trust, justice, and dignity.

### Reflection Prompts

1. How does your work reflect God’s character—productivity, responsibility, creativity?
2. Where have you felt tension between your faith and your profession?
3. What would it look like to treat your *JOB* as a mission field?

### Action Steps

- Equip believers to live visibly and courageously in their workplace.
- Form Integrity groups within sectors—business, education, healthcare, government.
- Teach churches to affirm and commission believers for ministry in the marketplace.