

*Review: Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce
and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* by Eric Metaxas

As the credits began to roll before the house lights came up, a heavy silence rested over the audience—and then suddenly, as if on cue, almost everyone rose to their feet, applauding vigorously, with shouts of acclamation and approval reverberating throughout the room. Never had I experienced such a reaction to a movie. The catalyst? William Wilberforce, who after a 20-year crusade, had finally seen the British Parliament pass a bill abolishing the slave trade throughout the Empire—as portrayed in the film *Amazing Grace*.

Not only had the audience witnessed watershed political success after numerous defeats, they had also observed in Wilberforce greatness in leadership as well as humility; integrity of character as well as human frailty; inward faith as well as outward application of that faith to all of life.

It was February 2007. The film *Amazing Grace* had just been released, coinciding with the 200th anniversary of the date when the ban of the slave trade had been passed. Shortly thereafter, HarperSanFrancisco published the companion book, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* by Eric Metaxas, whose goal was to introduce Wilberforce to an ordinary audience who had perhaps never heard of him before.

Amazing Grace describes and analyzes the life of William Wilberforce (1759-1833), passionate abolitionist, social reformer, member of Parliament, brilliant orator, possessor of a “rare and bracing intellectual honesty,” and vibrant, deeply committed Christian. Metaxas presents Wilberforce with his privileged childhood, later as a friend to John Newton (former slaver and author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*), becoming a member of the House of Commons at age 24, and having a close political alliance with William Pitt, the youngest prime minister in England’s history. For 45 years, Wilberforce had an extraordinary career as an independent member of Parliament. While he lived a very rich and influential public life, he was also a devoted husband, father, and friend. A man of great energy—and sometimes little focus, he was easily distracted, with many “irons in the fire” at once. He lived life with passion, humor, and grace.

Since we live in an age when all things pertaining to one’s faith are to be kept private, encountering a man who believed that it is impossible to compartmentalize faith from one’s public life and social responsibility, readers may be offended, challenged, or encouraged by Wilberforce. Wilberforce made the decision after his conversion (the “Great Change,” he called it) not to retreat from the world in order to praise God, but instead to serve God by involving himself in politics. In fact, he believed that the powerful had an obligation to bring about social change. Thus, he devoted all of his life to two “Great Objects”: abolition of slave trade and the reformation of manners in England (which included alcoholism, child prostitution, child labor, public executions, and unspeakable cruelty to animals).

Metaxas has written a passionate tribute to a man who helped change the world as we know it. The author says, “If ever someone could restore our ability to again see simple goodness, it should be Wilberforce. If we cannot cheer someone who literally brought ‘freedom to the captives’ and

bequeathed to the world that infinitely transformative engine we call a social conscience, for whom may we ever cheer?" Sitting in a small Vermont movie theater in 2007, the audience recognized a man worthy of our applause.

Rarely do readers think of biography as a page-turning genre. But *Amazing Grace* reads like a novel. With lively prose, wit, humor, color, and energy, Eric Metaxas draws the reader into Wilberforce's circle, sitting in Parliament, hearing lively debates, visiting Clapham, walking the hedgerows, engaging in scintillating conversation, or living with "grateful joy and ebullient love for the Father."

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