

Minister's Message – June 2012

William Wilberforce

I was surprised to read in a recent study of missions in India that William Wilberforce was instrumental in this missionary movement. He was not a missionary nor a church leader but a member of the British Parliament. He entered the Parliament at the age of 21 in 1780. He was converted and became an evangelical Christian four years later.

The secular world knows Wilberforce as a politician and philanthropist. He is most well-known for his efforts to stop the slave trade. The 'Act for the Abolition of Slavery' was finally passed in 1833, three days before he died. Wilberforce was also active in the 'Society for the Suppression of Vice', the 'Society for Better Observance of Sunday', the 'Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals', and in the promotion of better education for children. He was also a founding member of the 'Church Missionary Society'.

What about missions in India. The Parliament granted the East India Company the rights to operate the Indian trade. This Company refused to allow missionaries passage or places to stay in India. William Carey who went to India in 1792 is a case in point. Wilberforce pressed the Parliament to change the charter of this Company and after strong opposition from the Company succeeded in 1813 with his bill for the 'promotion of knowledge of religion and morals'. In 1833 the charter was again revised opening the way for missionaries to come from outside the Empire.

Was Wilberforce just a politician and philanthropist? Certainly not! He was a truly Christian politician. His own life was informed and directed by daily reading of the Bible and by prayer. He was encouraged to keep on in Parliament by John Newton and other Christian men. He faced much opposition from vested interests inside and outside of Parliament. But he pressed on. He did not cave in to the pressure. He did not compromise because he knew what was right and what was wrong in the eyes of God.

Wilberforce was concerned about the declining morals of society, but he did not see himself as a moral campaigner. He did not see the church's role as simply social welfare or humanitarian concerns. Wilberforce was committed to the truth. He was concerned about doctrine, about what people believed, because what they do, their morals, are based on what they believe. He wrote in his book 'A Practical View of Christianity':

'The fatal habit of considering Christian morals as distinct from doctrines gained strength'. And further; RESULT FROM THE MISTAKEN CONCEPTION ENTERTAINED OF FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIANITY. They consider not that Christianity is a scheme for 'justifying the ungodly' (Romans 4:5), by Christ's dying for them 'when yet sinners' (Romans 5:6-8), a scheme for making the fruits of holiness the effects, not the cause, of our being justified and reconciled'.

We pray for truly Christian politicians today. But we especially pray for the society from which our politicians come, and for the church. We pray that the church will teach the truth of God's word, namely *the gospel of Jesus Christ which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes* (Romans 1:16). Changed behaviour does not come from the outside. Wilberforce knew that it is changed hearts that lead to changed lives.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon