



Engaging Culture

A Biblical Case for Christian Influence into Government



STUDY 4

INSPIRING STORIES OF FAITH IN ACTION

We are all in need of role models in our Christian walk.

In this final session, we're going to look at two inspiring stories of people and groups who had incredible influence in the political arena of their day, impacting the world for generations to come. Through these stories, you will see the truths and principles of what we've presented in the previous three sessions being worked out in the real world, bringing reformation and change of momentous proportions.

As Christians, we have two broad responses when it comes to involvement with issues facing the world – we can 'escape' or we can 'engage'. The two examples we're going to look at now are great challenges to what's possible when we actively engage!

EXAMPLE 1:

JOHN WESLEY, WILLIAM WILBERFORCE, CLAPHAM SECT

Many of us may be aware, at least vaguely, of the Great Revivals in the 18th century. What we may not be familiar with is the remarkable societal reformation that resulted.

Throughout the history of the church, evangelism and social concern have been intimately linked. John Wesley, perhaps best known for his preaching and hymn-writing, inspired people through the Gospel he preached to take up social causes in the name of Christ.

In fact historians attribute to Wesley more than anything else, the reason Britain didn't go down the path of a bloody revolution like France.

Eric Metaxas, in his book *Amazing Grace* characterises the deep savagery of 18th century Britain in the following words: *"Entirely surprising to most of us, life in eighteenth-century Britain was particularly brutal, decadent, violent, and vulgar. Slavery was only the worst of a host of societal evils that included epidemic alcoholism, child prostitution, child labor, frequent public executions for petty crimes, public dissections and burnings of executed criminals, and unspeakable public cruelty to animals."*¹

¹ Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, (Monarch Books: UK, 2007), p. 69

And we think we've got problems today! Well we have got problems today, and many of them, but the story we're about to immerse ourselves in should inject us with hope and optimism for change.

Because in Britain, things did change.

History records that the Evangelical Revival *"did more to transfigure the moral character of the general populace, than any other movement British history can record"*, and refers to Wesley as *"the man who restored to a nation its soul"*.²

Three days before his death in 1791, John Wesley wrote to William Wilberforce to assure him that God had raised him up for his *"glorious enterprise"* and to urge him not to be weary of well-doing.

The next generation of Christian leaders after Wesley carried on his legacy, and to them credit for the abolition of slavery and the reformation of manners (morals), equally belongs.

In the media and in Parliament the Clapham Sect were mocked as the "Saints". They were wealthy aristocrats with some social blindspots of their own, but *"they were extremely generous in their philanthropy and their range of concerns was extraordinary. In addition to the slavery question, they involved themselves in penal and parliamentary reform, popular education (Sunday schools, tracts and the Christian Observer newspaper), Britain's obligation to her colonies (especially India), the spread of the Gospel (they were instrumental in the founding of both the Bible Society and the Church Missionary Society), and factory legislation. They also campaigned against dueling, gambling, drunkenness, immorality and cruel animal sports. Throughout they were directed and motivated by their strong evangelical faith."*³

Ernest Marshall Howse wrote of them:

*"This group of Clapham friends gradually became knit together in an astonishing intimacy and solidarity. They planned and labored like a committee that never was dissolved. At the Clapham mansions they congregated by common impulse in what they chose to call their "Cabinet Councils" wherein they discussed the wrongs and injustices which were a reproach to their country, and the battles which would need to be fought to establish righteousness. And thereafter, in Parliament and out, they moved as one body, delegating to each man the work he could do best, that the common principles might be maintained and their common purposes be realized."*⁴

Such a diverse group of people coming together reinforces the wide variety of gifts and talents needed to bring social change and reformation. While the Clapham Sect

² John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today 4th Edition*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006)

³ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today 4th Edition*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), p. 26

⁴ Ernest Marshall Howse, *Saints in Politics, The "Clapham Sect" and the growth of freedom* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953), p. 26

was a very key part of the movement for abolition, William Wilberforce was without doubt the central figure. And at times, if it hadn't been for the support and encouragement of his 'circle of friends', he may well have given up.

William Wilberforce, the son of a wealthy merchant, was born in England in 1759. At the age of twenty, having lost his father when he was a young boy, Wilberforce decided on a career in politics, and was elected at the age of just 21. He pursued his own political ambition with little thought for God or the Gospel. But now, at age 26, this promising, talent-laden member of Parliament had been persuaded to trust Christ after reading a famous devotional classic and the Greek New Testament, while touring Europe with an old schoolmaster.

What next? Should he leave politics? Should he resign from the House of Commons? Politics, after all, was, as many evangelicals then thought, a "worldly" pursuit. It was an endeavour fraught with moral compromise and the corrupting quest of power. Something, in short, in which no truly "spiritual" believer could take part. Perhaps he should enter the clergy or pursue full-time Christian service.

During this time, Wilberforce sought out the advice of an old Sunday School teacher, John Newton. He was one of the only people Wilberforce felt he could talk to about his struggle, and he wrote to Newton requesting a meeting, asking him to tell no-one about his visit.

In 1807, after a 20 year battle, the British Parliament passed a Bill to end the horrid British traffic in slaves. Then in 1833, just 3 days before his death, the House of Commons approved a bill for the abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies, which brought freedom to some 800,000 slaves.

The impact of Wilberforce was equally profound (as that of John Wesley) on the moral climate of Britain. One biographer states: *"It is a matter of history, that for two generations at least after Wilberforce, the British character was moulded by attitudes that were essentially his. Under his leadership, a Christian social conscience attacked prevalent social ills while at the same time seeking to better the lives of those affected by them."*

EXAMPLE 2:

ROSA PARKS, MARTIN LUTHER KING JNR AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Born on 4th February, 1913 in Tuskegee, Alabama, and unable to graduate with her class from High School because of the illness of her grandmother and later her death, Rosa Louise Parks was nationally recognized as the “mother of the modern day civil rights movement” in America.

Perhaps the most well-known story about Rosa Parks is when she was riding on a bus on December 1, 1955. Being tired of the way black people were treated, she refused to surrender her seat to a white male passenger, resulting in her arrest. She was tried and convicted for disorderly conduct and violating a local ordinance. This quite, courageous act changed the course of American history.

Following her trial in which she was found guilty, the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama began, and Martin Luther King Jnr, whom Rosa had met in August 1955, was asked to be the spokesperson, teaching non-violence to all participants. Thousands joined the “protest” to demand equal rights, taking the form of sit-ins, eat-ins, swim-ins, and similar causes. 381 days later, the local ordinance segregating African-Americans and whites on public buses was lifted.

Agitating for change within the boundaries of kingdom values, such as non-violence and peaceful protest, was vital to Dr King. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail he said *“the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek.”* In this letter he also espoused the concepts of ‘civil disobedience’ and ‘unjust law’.

In responding to the 8 church leaders to whom King was replying in this letter, he said:

“One may want to ask: “How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?” The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws...Now what is the difference between the two?...A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.”⁵

And of course King goes on to then explain how laws surrounding segregation are unjust and therefore don’t need to be obeyed. There is a lot to process and think about here, and we’re going to give you opportunity to do that in your discussion time shortly.

Martin Luther King Jnr is of course perhaps the most prominent figure of the civil rights movement. He drew inspiration from the example of the early Christians, saying they *“were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-*

⁵ Letter from Birmingham Jail, <http://abacus.bates.edu/admin/offices/dos/mlk/letter.html>

intoxicated to be 'astronomically intimidated.' They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests."

One of Dr King's biographers, Taylor Branch, laments the fact that he has been relegated to a leader for black people today. He says *"The overall lesson here is he's a leader, and the movement is leading all of America. And that's the real emotional resonance that you get even with Rosa Parks, where we have this paradox that we have an emotional connection, that we know they did something significant but because the tradition is not that it was significant for all of America but was somehow compartmentalized for black people, we falsify and simplify the myth."*⁶

His famous speech, 'I Have A Dream' continues to inspire many today.

As between 200,000 and 300,000 people marched on Washington in 1963, King delivered his visionary speech. More cameras were setup than had filmed the previous Presidential inauguration. After the march, King and other civil rights leaders met with President Kennedy at the White House.

The march had six official goals:

1. Meaningful civil rights laws
2. A massive federal works program
3. Full and fair employment
4. Decent housing
5. The right to vote
6. Adequate integrated education

The African-American Civil Rights Movement was about fundamental issues of freedom, respect, dignity, and economic and social equality. The power and influence of this movement resulted in the passing of legislation that forever changed America.

Three examples:

Civil Rights Act 1964 - banned discrimination based on "race, colour, religion, or national origin" in employment practices and public accommodations.

Voting Rights Act 1965 – restored and protected voting rights

Fair Housing Act of 1968 – banned discrimination in the sale or rental of housing.

African Americans re-entered politics in the South, and across the country young people were inspired to action.

King gave his life for this cause, for the dream. On 3rd April, 1968, he spoke, some would say prophetically, about his willingness to lay down his life for the cause. In his speech, 'I've been to the Mountaintop', he shared with conviction his reaction to the threats he'd begun to receive:

⁶ TIME Magazine, *TIME Talks with MLK Biographer Taylor Branch*,
<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1145215,00.html>

*"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."*⁷

The next night on the balcony of his hotel room where he was staying, Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, shot in the neck, and passed away.

As we wind up this 4-week study together, I trust we've been challenged, encouraged and inspired to 'engage' our culture, to get our hands dirty and to get involved in the issues and challenges facing our world. It's our prayer that God impresses on our hearts the things on His heart, that His heart for His world and the people He's created becomes our heart too. Perhaps one of the most poignant quotes of Dr King is this:

***"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."*⁸**

Included in this DVD pack, is a full-length documentary feature film on the life and legacy of William Wilberforce titled 'The Better Hour'. We really encourage you as a group to take some time, perhaps another week, to watch this 1 hour film. You will learn so much more about the joy, the suffering and the influence of the man who continues to inspire.

Also on our website www.acl.org.au/engagingculture, there is a recommended reading list, additional bonus material that might be helpful if you'd like to explore this subject further, and the transcripts of the four talks given on this DVD.

Thank you for taking this journey with us, and we invite you to 'engage' the culture, for God's glory and the good of our nation.

⁷ <http://www.thekingcenter.com/DrMLKingJr/>

⁸ http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/martin_luther_king_jr_4.html