

# The Unchaining Word



By Sue Hookway

Uncovering the Bible's awesome power –  
in the campaign to end slavery and in the continuing  
challenge to change our lives and world today



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**Front cover:** Farm workers, freed by the Special Group for the Repression of Forced Labour, queue for their first work permit, Brazil (Ricardo Funari/BrazilPhotos)

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# Welcome

Unchaining? No, it's not a typo. Ever since Moses heard the call to be God's freedom chaplain for a downtrodden people at the time of the Exodus, God's Word has been setting an agenda for freedom and dignity. An agenda that sometimes clashes head on with self-interest and with all forms of exploitation.

Two hundred years ago the Bible shook up the British Empire when a group of Christian abolitionists led the campaign to end the horrors and indignity of the slave trade. Even as swathes of the establishment and even sections of the Church tried to legitimise it. But Wilberforce and Sharpe, Clarkson and others had been impacted by God's agenda which – correctly read – loudly declares every person's dignity as people made in the image of God.

As we move towards the 200th anniversary of the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, we look again at how the Bible impacted these campaigners. In the light of the continuing existence of modern forms of slavery – in forms of bonded labour, sweatshops, sex trafficking and so on – we ask how the Bible should underpin our own campaigning today. And how should it transform us, so that we go on to transform the world around us – whether the challenges are slavery or any other issue?

As many of you support current initiatives like Stop the Traffik and Set All Free, we hope this will give you fuel for your thinking and responding. Let's hear God's agenda. Let's be changed by it. And let's get on with working it out in a needy world.

*Lindsay Shaw*

Bible Society Creative Resources Officer

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# Session 1: The challenge of slavery past

## Introduction

Imagine flocks of rare birds soaring over the Amazon forest, their bright colours passing overhead like flashes of rainbow lightning. The chatter of insects, bird song and rustling of foliage is all that can be heard. Suddenly, the forest's tranquil beauty is shattered by a loud crack, followed by another and then another. Several of the birds plummet into the thick mass of trees like thunderbolts, dead. Into the scene come children, running and whooping with excitement. Air-rifles are slung over their shoulders. The carnage has been a competition.

Fast forward to another year. Air rifles have been replaced with binoculars given by conservationists. Using these the children are seeing things they had not realised existed: details of plumage and even new birds they had never seen before. Their game has changed from one of destruction to one of discovery. They are starting to see their surroundings through new eyes.

Imagine now a different scene; a crowded, dirty street with broken down houses, lurid lights and flashing signs advertising the existence of brothels. Women of various ages and even very young girls stand, often cowering, in the doorways waiting for custom. Men sit drinking at shabby bars while small boys dart in and out of the streets looking for opportunities to rob unsuspecting passers by.

Into this red light district of Calcutta came Zana Briski with her camera. Living amongst these people for two years she gradually

became so familiar that no one really noticed her taking pictures, something quite forbidden for any casual visitor.

She wanted to help the many children born into these brothels to escape. She started by making an effort to see how they perceived their situation. She gave cameras to a small group of children and allowed them to take pictures as they wished and then followed their efforts up by giving the children photography lessons. Their creativity blossomed and before long exhibitions of their work were being held in international galleries. With the finance from these Zana was able to offer them the opportunity to receive an education which would enable them to be liberated from the environment into which they had been born. Thanks to the cameras, the children had become new people both in their own eyes and those of others.<sup>1</sup>

These two stories, told in recent BBC TV documentaries,<sup>2</sup> are not just examples of out-of-the-box thinking. They also mirror the way the Bible brought fresh thinking to the visionary campaigners against slavery.

For slavery abolitionists like Wilberforce, Clarkson, Equiano, and many others, the Bible acted in similar ways to the binoculars and the camera in these modern-day challenges. The Bible gave them a view of human slaves which

1 [www.kids-with-cameras.org](http://www.kids-with-cameras.org)

2 BBC 2, 11 February 2006 and *Storyville: Born into Brothels*, BBC 4, March 2006

was radically different to the dominant view of their day. It also gave slaves themselves a vision of their real worth in God's eyes and sustained them in their campaign for freedom:

The Bible is a saga of freedom. It tells the story of man's long struggle to throw off the shackles of bondage and enter into the freedom of the sons of God .... This ... is the character of the Bible – a book breathing the love of freedom and infusing its readers with the same love.<sup>3</sup>

*The Unchaining Word* explores some of the Bible teachings that enabled and inspired both abolitionists and slaves in the long struggle for freedom.

In looking at these, we also aim our binoculars and camera at our own world. Still one in which over 12 million people live and work in contemporary forms of slavery. A world where racism and the inequalities between the developed and developing worlds continue as part of the legacies of yesterday's colonialism. And a world in which many other challenges and opportunities small and large call for us to hear and heed the Bible afresh in our day.

*The Unchaining Word* will help us to look again at how the God of the Bible views his world. As we do, who knows how God will change us and challenge us to be change-makers in his world today?

## Slavery's defenders

Why was it that the anti-slavery campaign met with such strong resistance at the end of the

### The key to freedom

Many of these early abolitionists were prominent in the founding of the British and Foreign Bible Society. This involvement demonstrated the central role that the Bible played in their own lives and in the fight for the abolition of the slave trade. As one speaker said at the annual meeting following the emancipation of the slaves, "The Bible and slavery cannot co-exist. The Bible known and loved and lived must set the slave free."<sup>4</sup>

18th and early 19th centuries? To understand why it took some 20 years to outlaw the callous trading in human lives and another 26 to free slaves already employed in Britain's colonies we need to understand the benefits Britain and other nations gained from slavery.

In some form or another, slavery has been carried out for thousands of years. It was often the basis for establishing civilisations, both as a means of punishing and controlling the conquered peoples. It was also a way of furthering economic progress through cheap labour.

In Britain, slavery was linked to a sense of national identity. "Rule Britannia" wasn't sung for nothing. The British colonies and their mercantile trade were strong. England's greatest wealth came from sugar plantations that were founded on slave labour. This wealth helped to fund Britain's naval force, essential for maintaining the empire and its trade.

3 *These Remarkable Men; The Beginnings of A World Enterprise*, John A Patten, pages 136–137 (London, Lutterworth Press, 1945)

4 *Ibid.* page 24

### Slavery: a definition

The League of Nations' temporary Slavery Commission set up in 1924 defined slavery as "the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised".<sup>5</sup>

Allowing Britain's slaves in the Caribbean any measure of freedom was seen as too risky. The 1791 uprisings in St Domingue (now Haiti), led by former slave Toussaint L'Ouverture, confirmed this. Toussaint and his generals threw off the yoke of French slave rule. The British subsequently tried to invade to reinstate slavery and British rule. But they were defeated when in 1798 Toussaint became commander of the island and forced a British withdrawal.

Although belief in Britain as a land of liberty was strong, this did not extend to people from West Africa. West Africans in particular "were, in the eyes of most British people, beastly savages and a lesser order of human beings. Black African Slaves were generally considered fortunate to have been released from the darkness and depravity of life in Africa."<sup>6</sup>

### Holding the binoculars the wrong way round

Tragically, many Christians supported slavery and even used the Bible to support their

position. Like someone using the binoculars the wrong way round and getting a smaller picture instead of a larger one, they found justification from the Bible. They missed the Bible's big picture of all people made in the image of God. Self-interest and racism drove their use of Scriptures like those below:

#### 1. *Descendants of Ham*

Ham, Noah's youngest son, was denounced by his father Noah for telling his siblings that he had seen his father naked and drunk. His punishment was that his son Canaan would be a slave (Genesis 9.25, 27). Using Genesis 10.6–12, 15–29 and 32, Protestants went out of their way to prove that black Africans were descendants of Ham.



*Historical illustration of captured slaves on a slave ship*

#### 2. *Encouragement of slaves to be subservient*

Bible passages such as 1 Peter 2.18–19 and 1 Timothy 6.1–2 encouraged slaves to carry out their duties with respect for their masters, especially if those masters were Christians.

#### 3. *Predestination and nature*

Aristotle held that some people were predestined to a life of slavery and this was what they were most suitable for: "From the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for

<sup>5</sup> *1807–2007: Over 200 Years of Campaigning against Slavery*, Mike Kaye (London, Anti-Slavery International, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> *The Great Abolition Sham. The True Story of the End of the British Slave Trade*, Michael Jordan, page 48 (Stroud, Gloucestershire, Sutton Publishing, 2005)

rule ... Nature would like to distinguish between the bodies of freemen and slaves, making the one strong for servile labour, the other upright.”<sup>7</sup> England’s landed gentry found support for this in 1 Corinthians 7.22: “The affluent and the powerful viewed the Negro as a two-legged commodity with which to generate profit or loss, and with no more entitlement than a horse or dog ... Negroes were not human but constituted some lesser species closer to apes than *Homo sapiens*.”<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. *Slaves held by the early Christians*

Paul’s letter to Philemon was used to point out that Paul did not seek freedom for the runaway slave Onesimus but asked that he should be welcomed as a “brother in the Lord” (Philemon 16–20).

#### 5. *Punishment for the sin of Adam*

Slavery supporters quoted Early Church leader John Chrysostom who in the 6th century declared that “the unpleasantness of being a slave was part of God’s punishment of sin after the fall of Adam”.<sup>9</sup>

Generally, slaves were thought fortunate to have been released from the evils of Africa and to have the opportunity to be “Christianised” by their owners. This in itself was a justification for capturing them and removing them from the homelands.

To eradicate slavery, the abolitionists needed to bring about a sea change in public opinion. For many of them, a less prejudiced and less self-interested reading of the Bible was the key.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. page 5

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. page 58

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. page 48

### **Another view: freedom in the Bible**

The Bible portrays freedom as a vital feature in the life of the people of God and a central theme in both Old and New Testaments. The pivotal event in the Old Testament was God leading the Israelites from slavery in Egypt through the wilderness and into the Promised Land (Exodus 1–24; for a summary see Joshua 24). In the New Testament we read of Jesus Christ, through all that his life, death and resurrection accomplished, restoring us to a relationship with God. Through Jesus, if we turn to him in faith, we are freed from the consequences of the times when we let God down.

In John’s Gospel we read that Jesus said, “If you obey my teaching, you are really my disciples; you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8.31–32). There is a freedom that comes in following Christ that enables us to live life to the full. In that freedom we recognise God as a loving parent and relate to each other as sisters and brothers, valuing all people as created in the likeness of God.

The implications of this freedom are corporate as well as individual. Jesus himself was fierce in confronting the oppressive religious and political structures of his day (e.g. Luke 11.37–54). The values of God’s Kingdom, which Jesus ushered in, are also directly opposed to any practice or institution which lessens human freedom and dignity. The freedom Christ brings should spill over into communities, societies and nations until the day when the whole earth shares in this freedom and the Kingdom is established in all its fullness.

*Ian Maher*



## Unlocking the chains

- ◆ Why do you think professing Christians were prepared to accept these views of slavery?
- ◆ Are there any misunderstandings of the Bible we might hold for similar reasons (e.g. using Matthew 25.14–30 to give grounds for amassing wealth or for one business dominating and squeezing out a smaller one)?
- ◆ Split your group into twos or threes and assign one of the justifications of slavery to each sub-group. Ask them to suggest at least one Bible passage or story to counter that justification (e.g. for 3 see Ephesians 6.9; for 6 see John 9.2). Sub-groups then feed back to the main group.
- ◆ Read the panel “Another view: freedom in the Bible” on page 7. How helpful would it be to read the whole of the Bible as God’s freedom plan for his world? What differences could that make (a) to our faith (b) to our living (c) to our concern for others?
- ◆ In the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus (Luke 19.1–9), Zacchaeus makes reparation for the wrongs he has done to others. In February 2006 the General Synod of the Church of England made an apology for the slave trade. One descendant of the slaves on the Codrington plantation in Barbados, which belonged to the Church, asked whether an apology was enough: “Slavery is not something you can say sorry for and then be done with it” (see *The Times*, Saturday, 11 February, 2006). Miss Lisa Codrington goes on to ask whether this apology involves anything else by way of reparation, such as further work or education. What else might be appropriate for the Church to do?
- ◆ The City of Liverpool has issued an apology for its part in the slave trade. Bristol, which also benefited, has yet to make an apology and has said a national apology would be more appropriate. In May 2006 a BBC TV poll in the south-west found that 90 per cent of people were against an apology. Does this surprise you? Why or why not? What would be the benefits of an apology?

## Session 2: The Bible and the fight for freedom

Christianity must once again “out-think” the world if it is to conquer it ... Strong faith, invincible determination, deep wisdom – these characteristics of the Clapham Sect must be ours today.<sup>1</sup>

It’s always helpful to take inspiration from those before us who have taken on great challenges and won. And in campaigning for God’s values in our world today the anti-slavery campaigners of the late 18th and early 19th centuries have much to teach us. Most of all, there is no doubt that the Bible played a key role in equipping them to “out-think” the world and change it for good.

### Campaigner for righteousness: William Wilberforce

As one of the country’s most gifted MPs, and a thoroughly committed Christian, William Wilberforce was well-equipped to be the standard bearer of the anti-slavery campaign. Wilberforce was born in Hull in 1759 and in 1784 was elected as member for Yorkshire County, one of the most influential Parliamentary seats in the country. A close friend of William Pitt, soon to become Prime Minister, he always remained independent of him and was determined to be his own man.

“It is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation.”

Looking back later in life, he admitted, “Emulation and a desire for distinction were my governing motives; [I was] ardent after the applause of my fellow-creatures.”<sup>2</sup> But between October 1784 and Easter 1786 he went through his “great change”.

Wilberforce went on a continental tour with relatives and his former tutor, Isaac Milner.



William Wilberforce

Amid time spent sightseeing, gambling and partying, he came across a book by Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. Wilberforce and Milner read this together and Milner was able to give him a clear explanation of the intellectual heart of Christianity. This made a great impact on Wilberforce. As he spent more time examining the Bible he came to a “settled conviction in my mind, not only of the truth of Christianity but also of the Scriptural basis of the leading doctrines which I now hold.”<sup>3</sup>

1 *These Remarkable Men*, John Patten, page 152 (London, Lutterworth Press, 1945)

2 *Hero for Humanity. A Biography of William Wilberforce*, Kevin Belmonte, page 57 (Colorado Springs, Nav Publishing Group, 2002)

3 *Ibid.* page 82

When he returned home in 1785, Wilberforce discussed his future with both John Newton, the former slave and slave trader, and Prime Minister Pitt. They both urged him to stay in politics and put his new Christian faith into practice at the decision-making heart of the nation rather than go into the Church. John Newton wrote to him “that it is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation.”<sup>4</sup>

Wilberforce came to believe that “submission to Christ was a man’s most important political as well as religious decision.”<sup>5</sup> He now spent several hours a day studying Scripture, in meditation and in self-examination. If he didn’t do this, he said, “the most pressing claims will carry [my heart] not the strongest.”<sup>6</sup>

One of his complaints about the Christianity of his day was that far too many Christians knew scarcely anything of the Bible’s teachings and so had a faith based on the shallowest foundations. The letter to his sister (see panel) reflects the importance the Bible had in his life.

For Wilberforce the Bible had become the binoculars through which to view all his opinions and actions. “We should really make this book the criterion of our opinions and actions,” he said.<sup>7</sup>

What my heart most impels me now to say to you is “Search the Scriptures”, and with all that earnestness and constancy which that book claims, in which “are the words of eternal life”. Never read it without praying to God that he will open your eyes to understand it; for the power of comprehending it comes from him, and him only.”<sup>8</sup>

*Wilberforce writing to his sister*

What this gave him was a whole-life vision. Wilberforce had no time for circulating the Scriptures in Africa while still allowing Africans to be enslaved. He told the annual meeting of the Bible Society in 1819:

“The principles of that blessed book should prompt them to use their utmost endeavours, not merely for delivering our unhappy brethren in Africa from darkness and superstition of paganism, but also for delivering from that which ... must prevent almost the possibility of any communication to them of divine truth; – I mean the continuance of the detestable Slave Trade ... because it is chargeable with holding in bondage, in darkness, and in blood, one-third of the habitable globe; because it erects a barrier which shuts out light and truth and humanity and kindness.”<sup>9</sup>

## The biblical principles that gave Wilberforce his compass

So what were the biblical principles that guided him? Wilberforce summed up the two

4 *Wilberforce*, John Pollock, page 32 (Berkhamsted, Herts, Lion Publishing, 1977)

5 *Ibid.* page 66

6 *Hero for Humanity. A biography of William Wilberforce*, Kevin Belmonte, pages 8–9 (Colorado Springs, Nav Publishing Group, 2002)

7 *Ibid.* page 94

8 *Ibid.* pages 88–89

9 *These Remarkable Men*, John Patten, page 42 (London, Lutterworth Press, 1945)



## Unlocking the chains

- ◆ Get several people to do a quick survey of contacts in their street/workplace/network of friends, asking them what one rule or motto they might choose to guide their behaviour. Tell them it's anonymous and can be serious or light-hearted. Write the responses onto a flip chart. Discuss the suggestions. Which would strengthen a more compassionate society? Which would weaken one? Are any of these biblical?
- ◆ Read Matthew 7.12 (The Golden Rule). What experiences do you have of putting this into practice? When has it been hardest? When most rewarding? Where do you need to put it into practice this week? Who is there that you know who most embodies the Golden Rule?

great objectives of his life: “God Almighty has set before me *two great objects*, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners (values).”<sup>10</sup>

Wilberforce knew that if the values people lived by became God's values they would then recognise the evils of the slave trade. His thinking had four biblical corners.

### 1. *The Golden Rule and our common humanity* (Matthew 7.12; Genesis 1.26–27, Acts 10.34)

Let every one ... regulate his conduct ... by the golden rule of doing to others as in similar circumstances we would have them do to us; and the path of duty will be clear before him, and I will add, the decision of [a] legislature would scarcely any longer be doubtful.<sup>11</sup>

“God Almighty has set before me *two great objects*, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners (values).”

Wilberforce made this his guiding rule, and some of the first people to benefit were Parliamentary opponents he had previously treated with disdain. He repaired a very damaged relationship with Charles Fox who later became a driving force in pushing the bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade through Parliament.

Living at the time of the French Revolution, Wilberforce saw that treating others according to this rule would also be the best way to promote a harmonious society:

Following peace with all men and looking upon them as members of the same family, entitled to justice and brotherly kindness, he [the real Christian] would be respected and beloved by

<sup>10</sup> *Hero for Humanity. A Biography of William Wilberforce*, Kevin Belmonte, page 102 (Colorado Springs, Nav Publishing Group, 2002)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* page 176

others .... If such men filled any country ....  
Then all the world indeed would be active and  
harmonious in the human family.<sup>12</sup>

When answering some of the biblical arguments for supporting slavery, he saw the golden rule as the strongest argument of all.

The common humanity of every race was used to reply to appeals to predestination particularly from some in the Church of England as a justification of slavery. In 1792 the preacher Samuel Bradburn told fellow Methodists:

God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation. Who then has any right to go, or to authorise others to go across a vast ocean, to enslave a free and in relation to us, a harmless people. None but the sovereign ruler of the universe has power to grant such a right. There is nothing plainer than that Negroes have as good a right to invade Britain and make slaves of us as we have to invade Africa and make slaves of them.<sup>13</sup>

Wilberforce used this principle when explaining the incident of St Paul and the runaway slave



John Newton

Onesimus. In directing Philemon to treat Onesimus *as a brother*, he said Paul was claiming even more for him than the freedom the abolitionists were asking for African slaves.

This rule and its application is closely linked to the second corner of Wilberforce's thinking.

## 2. *Love of God and neighbour* (Luke 10.27)

Wilberforce could see that the benefits of the slave trade – easy wealth and increased commerce – would not be quickly surrendered by those infected by “the grand malady of nations ... Selfishness.”<sup>14</sup> There was only one cure:

It is of infinite value to establish in our minds a strong and habitual sense of the first and great commandment: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deuteronomy 6.5) ... If nominal Christians are defective in the love of God, what of their love toward their fellow men? ... How does benevolence stand the shock when it comes into encounter with ... our self-love, our self-interest, our love of care or pleasure, our ambitions, or our desire of worldly esteem?<sup>15</sup>

If self-interest led many people to excuse slavery (much as we might excuse shares in dodgy industries or buying sweatshop

12 *Real Christianity. Discerning True Faith from False Beliefs*, William Wilberforce, edited by James M Houston, page 151 (Colorado Springs, Victor 1982, 2005)

13 *The Great Abolition Sham. The True Story of the End of the British Slave Trade*, Michael Jordan, page 194 (Stroud, Gloucestershire, Sutton Publishing Limited, 2005)

14 *Real Christianity. Discerning True Faith from False Beliefs*, William Wilberforce, edited by James M Houston, page 152 (Colorado Springs, Victor, 1982, 2005)

15 *Ibid.* page 128

products), only seeing others through Jesus' eyes would change them. Wilberforce maintained that imperialism, military strength and mercantile trade as key principles were incompatible with the principle of love of God and one's neighbour.

### 3. *Doing all for the glory of God* (1 Corinthians 10.31)

Signing a petition or wearing a wrist band is one thing. Motivating others and battling for an issue over many years is another. The journey from the formation of the Committee

for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in May 1787 to the Parliamentary vote to end it in 1807 was fraught with setbacks. Wilberforce had to contend not only with those who would protect slavery at all costs, but with the political implications of a war with France (declared in 1793) and with his own ill-health. The agreed gradual abolition of the slave trade by January 1796 never materialised. When he introduced another bill for abolition by 1 March 1797, it was lost on the third vote by four votes. Four supporters missed the crucial vote: they had been at the opera.



## Unlocking the chains

Any attempt to bring about large-scale change will face resistance. On an international, local or even a personal level, we are likely to face setbacks.

- ◆ What activities has God called you to that will take real persistence to achieve?
- ◆ What biblical passages/verses or stories could sustain you or others in pressing on to your goals?
- ◆ Which of these passages would help most to strengthen your resolve (e.g. John 5.41, 44; Hebrews 13.20–21; Ephesians 3.20–21; Colossians 1.11; 2 Corinthians 12.9; Isaiah 40.28–31; 43.1–2; Psalm 18; Joshua 1.5–6)?
- ◆ Read the Book of Philemon together. Split into two groups. Ask one group to reflect on all the possible thoughts and emotions going through Philemon's mind as he reads Paul's request to accept Philemon as a brother rather than a slave. Ask the other group to do the same for Onesimus as he returns to Philemon, not knowing what his decision will be. Share or role-play your ideas.

Determined to follow his conscience, Wilberforce had painful disagreements even with his friends and received death threats from pro-slavery supporters. Between the years 1793 and 1803 he suffered abolition-related setbacks every year.

Through all of this, he stuck to his goal with the confidence that God would sustain him and a passion to seek God's glory above everything else. He wrote: "Always look to him for help. Your only safety consists in a deep and permanent sense of your own weakness, in a firm reliance on His strength."<sup>16</sup> He urged others to lose their hunger for human applause and "retain the vision in your conduct of seeking 'the honor [sic] which cometh from God.'" (John 5.44).<sup>17</sup>

When urging Wilberforce to stay in politics, John Newton wrote to him saying "You are not only a representative of Yorkshire, you have the far greater honour of being a representative for the Lord, in a place where many know Him not."<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. *Reformation of the heart* (Matthew 12.33–35)

The extent of Wilberforce's influence as a representative for God was shown not just in the eventual abolition of the slave trade, but also in the way in which he "made goodness fashionable".<sup>19</sup> He was very aware that any true

and lasting reform would only take place as individuals were themselves transformed in their hearts and their thinking. Reformation of views of slavery and of manners (how people lived out their everyday lives) would be spread from individual to individual. This reformation of the heart was another key biblical principle.

Wilberforce held that Christianity is "a religion of motives". Christian living can only flow from Christian faith and experience. As Jesus said, "A tree is known by the kind of fruit it bears ... how can you say good things when your heart is evil? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Matthew 12.34). He knew that any attempt at political reform was futile unless the hearts and minds of people were changed at the same time.

An anecdote related by his last surviving great-grandson in the 1970s shows the extent to which his influence had led to the reformation of manners. The great-grandson's father "had been walking with Wilberforce one day on a hill near Bath. While walking, they encountered a shocking scene: a carthorse being cruelly whipped by a carter while struggling to haul a heavy load of stone up the hill. Wilberforce pleaded with the carter to cease beating the animal. The carter turned round toward him, and began to curse him. Somehow, however, he recognised Wilberforce. 'Are you Mr. Wilberforce?' he asked, his anger giving way to shame, 'Then I shall never beat my horse again!'"<sup>20</sup>

16 Ibid. page 166

17 Ibid. page 166

18 *Hero for Humanity. A Biography of William Wilberforce*. Kevin Belmonte, page 137 (Colorado Springs, Nav Publishing Group, 2002)

19 Ibid. page 175

20 *Hero for Humanity. A Biography of William Wilberforce*. Kevin Belmonte, pages 269–270 (Colorado Springs, Nav Publishing Group, 2002)



## Unlocking the chains

- ◆ “In whatever class or order of society Christianity prevails, she sets herself to counteract the particular mode of selfishness to which that class is liable.”<sup>21</sup> In small groups, discuss ways in which selfishness in our society today might fuel human slavery, e.g. the demand for instant sexual gratification leading to sex trafficking? Economic demand leading to a need for cheap labour? Greed creating poverty in many countries that drives vulnerable people into the traps laid by human traffickers?
- ◆ Brainstorm ways in which our society today might be using people as commodities rather than respecting them as human beings.
- ◆ Share ways in which you might be able and willing to influence our society away from selfishness (e.g. in your shopping habits).
- ◆ In pairs, take each of the Bible principles which motivated Wilberforce. List ways in which that principle could challenge your present lifestyle.

### Two other abolitionists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries

While William Wilberforce spearheaded the abolition campaign in Parliament, many others were indispensable to its work and its success. Like Wilberforce, several of them were involved in forming the Bible Society and were strongly influenced by the “saga of freedom” found in Scripture.

Jesus gave this sharp focus in his first recorded sermon. He quotes Isaiah 61.1–2 and claims to be fulfilling the words as he speaks:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people (Luke 4.18–19).

Even so, people’s welcome for these words rapidly turned to hostility when Jesus pointed out the unsettling prospect of having a prophet in their midst. The following “prophets” of liberty 200 years ago faced similar resistance.

### Friend of slaves: Granville Sharp (1735–1813)

Although born in Durham, Granville Sharp began his working life in London as an apprentice to a linen-draper on Tower Hill. His early education was cut short but he made up for it by studying Greek and Hebrew.

<sup>21</sup> *Real Christianity. Discerning True Faith from False Beliefs*, William Wilberforce, edited by James M Houston, page 215 (Colorado Springs, Victor, 1982, 2005)

While working in a civil service post, he began studying the legal position of slaves in this country. Two incidents in particular brought him to the public eye.

The first was when an African slave, Jonathan Strong, was brought to England by a planter, David Lisle. Jonathan became ill and was rejected by his owner. Sharp got him into Bart's Hospital where he made a good recovery. With Sharp's help, he went into good employment. One day, his former owner met him and claimed Jonathan again as his slave. Sharp intervened, brought the case to the Lord Mayor of London, and Strong was set free.

The second was the case of James Somerset in 1772. Somerset was another African slave brought to England by his master, Charles Stewart. He escaped but was caught again and put on a ship to Jamaica to be sold as a slave. Somerset asked Sharp for help.

Having studied law for two years to see whether a man had to remain a slave on entering England, Sharp was convinced by this time that this was not the case and he instructed the lawyers representing Somerset. In the end, Lord Mansfield gave his verdict: "If the Negro Somerset was a man – and he should conclude him one till the court should adjudge otherwise – it was impossible he could be a slave in England."<sup>22</sup>



Granville Sharp

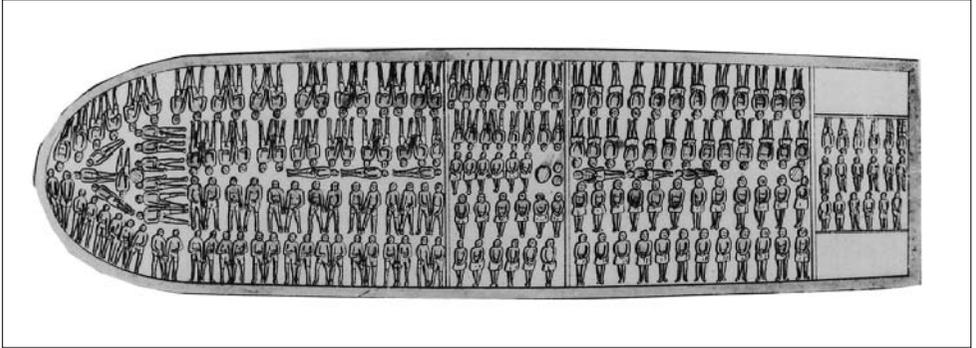
This historic observation helped to advance the cause of abolition and emancipation. Once someone had put a foot on English soil, they could not be a slave. It was also a clear rebuff to the view of slaves as property, establishing that they were people with equal rights to anyone else.

From this time on, Sharp was seen as a leader in the cause of liberty. He tried to stop the press-gangs who rounded up seamen for the Navy, where they endured conditions almost as harsh as the slaves. One of the most notorious cases he was involved in, along with Thomas Clarkson, was brought to his attention by Olaudah Equiano, a black crew member aboard the *Zong*.

In March 1783 he visited Sharp to tell him about a case of mass murder. In September 1781, the *Zong* had set sail from West Africa with 440 slaves aboard. The ship was hopelessly overcrowded. A number of slaves became sick and died, and drinking water became scarce. During the voyage, the ship's master, Luke Collingwood threw overboard 133 slaves, not all of whom were dead or ill. This was to minimise insurance losses for the owners who would have not received any compensation for slaves lost through natural causes but would for accidental loss.

Sharp brought a charge of mass murder before Lord Chief Justice Mansfield. Astonishingly, the same judge who had ruled that Somerset was a man, now argued that as many slaves as necessary could be thrown overboard. In his

22. *The Great Abolition Sham. The True Story of the End of the British Slave Trade*, Michael Jordan, page 66 (Stroud, Gloucestershire, Sutton Publishing Limited, 2005)



*Thomas Clarkson's diagram of the Brookes slave ship loaded with slaves*



## Unlocking the chains

The book of Amos is a hard-hitting expression of God's anger at those who abuse the poor for their own satisfaction. Rather than any meaningless religious ritual he asks that "justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry" (Amos 5.24).

- ◆ Share ways in which injustice triumphs in our society – perhaps even in your community – because Christians are not informed enough to challenge it as Sharp did.
- ◆ What can Christians to become truly aware of injustice and challenge it in an informed way?
- ◆ Read Luke 4.18–19 together, then allow three or four minutes to quietly mull it over and see what God is saying to you. Share your thoughts and questions.
- ◆ Invite members of your congregation who work with vulnerable people, e.g. asylum seekers, single mothers, drug users or unemployed people, to talk about the needs of those they work with. Can a support group in your church commit to pray for them on a regular basis?
- ◆ Is there anything your church, perhaps with others, can do to support vulnerable people in your area, and to stand with them in the situations they face?

view, it was a “case involving chattels or goods rather than human beings and that, for the purpose of insurance settlement, they constituted goods or property”.<sup>23</sup>

In 1787 the Quakers, along with Clarkson and Sharp, formed the Abolition Society with Wilberforce acting as political adviser and representative in Parliament. Sharp worked tirelessly on the committee and his knowledge on slavery was invaluable. He was also influential in the founding of the Bible Society and was unanimously chosen as its first chairman in 1804.

Sharp’s achievements on behalf of slaves are remarkable given his limited formal education. His passion for justice drove him to acquire the legal knowledge that made him a formidable opponent of the anti-abolitionists.

### **Champion on horseback: Thomas Clarkson of Wisbech, Cambridgeshire (1760–1846)**

The failure in the courts to bring the master of the slave ship *Zong* to book struck a nerve for many. The vice-chancellor of Cambridge University announced an essay competition to answer the question: “Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?”<sup>24</sup>



Thomas Clarkson

Its winner was Thomas Clarkson. His *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*, published in 1786, was an instant bestseller. Through researching it, Clarkson had become totally committed to devoting his considerable gifts to the anti-slavery cause.

Clarkson would let nothing stand in his way. It was largely his efforts that gave Wilberforce the evidence he needed to explode the popular myth that Africans transported to the West Indies had an enjoyable voyage and new life. Between 1787 and 1794 he interviewed an estimated 20,000 slaves and travelled ceaselessly to gather evidence. During two months in 1788 alone, he probably travelled over 1,600 miles. In France he linked with the abolitionist organisation *Les Amis des Noirs* and he even met the Emperor of Russia to seek his backing.<sup>25</sup>

He believed that the revolutionary ideas in France of liberty, fraternity and equality were at one with those of the abolitionists, even though his fellow abolitionists did not agree. In addition to passing information to Wilberforce, he published a good deal of information in his own right.

In the course of his research, Clarkson interviewed sailors in London, Bristol and Liverpool and collected shackles, thumbscrews

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. page 92

<sup>24</sup> *1807–2007: Over 200 years of campaigning against slavery*, Mike Kaye, page 7 (London, Anti-Slavery International, 2005)

<sup>25</sup> *The Great Abolition Sham. The True Story of the End of the British Slave Trade*, Michael Jordan, page 72 (Stroud, Gloucestershire, Sutton Publishing Limited, 2005)

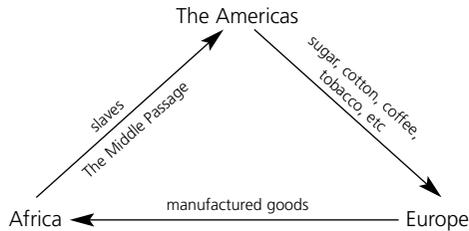
and a device for force-feeding as evidence. He combed through official records and found that an average of 20 per cent of each ship's crew died from disease or bad treatment before returning to England. For example, in 1786,

- ◆ 5,000 sailors were employed in the British slave trade
- ◆ 2,320 returned
- ◆ 1,130 died
- ◆ 80 were discharged in Africa or unaccounted for
- ◆ 1,470 were discharged or deserted in the West Indies.<sup>26</sup>

Only those who returned had to be paid. This gave a lie to the belief that the slave trade was good training for British sailors and shows the importance of Granville Sharp's efforts to prevent the press-gangs from recruiting them.

Clarkson amassed a mountain of soundly recorded evidence. It was as a result of his research that we have the picture from the Liverpool slave ship, the *Brookes*, showing 482 slaves chained to each other and to the floor. He brought to light the terrible abuses suffered by the slaves and the seamen.<sup>27</sup> He also met freed

### The Atlantic slave trade triangle



slaves in England and France, who urged him to press for the complete and immediate abolition of slavery – a strategy he personally favoured above the more gradualist approach of Wilberforce, so

horrified was he at the awfulness of the trade.

All this work took its toll on his health and Clarkson had to leave his campaigning for a while in the 1790s. He took it up again in 1804 and finally witnessed the success of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Bill in 1807. He then joined younger campaigners such as Thomas Fowell Buxton to work for the total abolition of slavery, eventually passed in 1833.

Clarkson and the Society for the Abolition of Slavery did not limit their work to Parliament but worked publicly to “alter the political culture and transform the calm acceptance of slavery”.<sup>28</sup> He believed that slavery could not exist alongside Christianity. It was contradictory to any idea of love to our neighbour, the dignity of all humans and of accountability to God. In addition to petitions and publications, the movement also organised a boycott of sugar from the West Indies.

He had an important “ability to construct alternative ways of reading culture”.<sup>29</sup> It was a view not only created through his research and contact with those involved in the slave trade, but also based on the Bible:

26 *1807–2007: Over 200 years of campaigning against slavery*, Mike Kaye, page 9 (London, Anti-Slavery International, 2005)

27 The Ramsden Sermon – *The Abolition of Slavery – from Clarkson to Today*, Revd Dr Carrie Pemberton, page 3 (preached before the University of Oxford at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, 19 October 2003)

28 *Ibid.* page 4

29 *Ibid.* page 5



## Unlocking the chains

- ◆ The strength of Clarkson's campaign was the sound evidence he produced. Find out about trafficked people today on the internet, in magazines, newspapers or through campaigning agencies. Why do they take such risks? With what results? What would you yourself do in similar circumstances to them?
- ◆ Are Christians too happy to reform hearts – and then hope the rest to follow? How would you like to change this?
- ◆ What political movements are you or your church supporting (i.e. equivalents to the sugar boycott organised by the Society for the Abolition of Slavery)? See the Stop the Traffik web site [www.stophetraffik.org](http://www.stophetraffik.org) for some ideas.
- ◆ Invite someone with knowledge of human trafficking, e.g. a chaplain at an immigration centre, to come and speak to your group of churches.
- ◆ Before your next session ask everyone in your group to read the Book of Ruth, a story of hospitality and welcome to an immigrant. Next time, ask people to share what lessons about God's welcome for the outsider they found.

For Clarkson the Scriptures from Genesis and Exodus in the Old Testament through to Philemon in the New informed his perspective of slaves as brothers and bearers of the image of God .... The edict not to oppress a stranger – “seeing as you were strangers in the land of Egypt” was also a part of his arsenal of theological and ethical arguments ranged against the trade and its allies.<sup>30</sup>

Clarkson was more than an idealist. He had sound commercial sense and used this in drawing up a business plan for freed African

slaves in the middle of slaving territory. The Sierra Leone Company would use trade in ivory, cotton, gums, spices and woods. It would also teach new skills of carpentry, whaling and viticulture and fulfil his dream of marrying “liberated labour and free trade”. In this way, “The stage was set for the establishment of the British Commonwealth in Africa – Sierra Leone became the first British Colony on the continent – established with European finance and delivery through African bodies.”<sup>31</sup>

30 Ibid. page 5

31 Ibid. page 6

## Session 3: The black fight against slavery

Black people themselves were active in the abolition movement. Their evidence and their resistance to slavery were pivotal in the struggle for freedom.

Slave rebellions had been going on in the Caribbean for two hundred years before 1807. Not that this was the only destination of slaves from Africa. Some 17 million were sold into slavery on the coast of the Indian Ocean, the Middle East and North Africa; 12 million were taken to the Americas; 5 million Africans were taken across the Sahara and East Africa and sold into slavery in other parts of the world. But it was the notorious Middle Passage that was the one England was most involved in and that was especially targeted by the abolitionists.

European traders would export manufactured goods to the west coast of Africa where they would be exchanged for slaves. The slaves would then be taken across the Atlantic (the Middle Passage), mainly to colonies in North America, South America and the West Indies. They were sold for large profits and the traders would buy raw materials such as sugar, cotton, coffee, metals and tobacco which were shipped back to Europe.

The uprisings of the slaves was a key factor in forcing European countries to make tentative steps towards emancipation. One of the most famous uprisings was the successful insurrection on St Dominique in 1791. The slaves took control of a large part of the country which up to then had produced 30 per cent of the world's sugar and over half its

coffee.<sup>1</sup> The French tried to re-take control of the island but after two years had to come to a peace agreement with the rebel army, led by Toussaint L'Overture. After war broke out with France in 1793, Britain sent thousands of troops to the West Indies to try to claim St Dominique for itself. The French too sent more troops to try to regain the colony in 1802, but although Toussaint himself was captured and died in prison, France lost 50,000 troops (more than at Waterloo) and was defeated. The Republic of Haiti was declared on 1 January 1804.

The implications and cost of these rebellions made many in Britain wonder whether the cost of maintaining the slave trade was worth it. But in addition to the rebellions, there were also some key figures in the black fight against slavery. We look at just two of them, a man and a woman.

### Former slave, champion of freedom: Olauda Equiano (c.1745–c.1797)

Generally, when the grown people in the neighborhood [sic] were gone far into the fields to labour, the children assembled together in some of the neighboring [sic] premises to play; and commonly some of us used to get up a tree to look out for any assailant, or kidnapper, that might come upon us ... One day, when all our people were gone out to their work as usual, and only I and my

<sup>1</sup> *1807–2007: Over 200 years of campaigning against slavery*, Mike Kaye, page 7 (London, Anti-Slavery International, 2005)

dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and women got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths and ran off with us into the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands, and continued to carry us as far as they could till night time came on.<sup>2</sup>

In these words Olaudah Equiano describes his kidnapping at the age of 11 from his home in what is now Nigeria. On the West African coast he was sold to slave traders and shipped through the notorious Middle Passage to Barbados and then to Virginia. Later he was bought by a British naval officer, Michael Pascal. Pascal introduced him to the naval way of life and he re-named him Gustavus Vassa.

He was brought to England and learnt to read and write at a London school. During the 1750s he saw action in the major battles of the Seven Year War and travelled to Canada and the Mediterranean. He was baptised and hoped for freedom as part of the reward given to sailors on the Navy's ships. But he was cheated of this as his master sold him to another sea-captain who took him to the Caribbean. Here he was sold again and witnessed the abominable ways in which his fellow slaves were treated. He held the position of "gauger" on the plantations (like a quality controller)



Olaudah Equiano

and managed to buy his freedom in 1766 for £40. He returned to England the same year and worked as a hairdresser.

It was Equiano who told Granville Sharp about the *Zong* disaster and it was this case which convinced him that the slavery laws had to be abolished. He dedicated his time to this cause along with another former slave Ottobah

Cugoano and abolitionists including Sharp, Wilberforce and Clarkson.

Equiano himself became a Christian around 1774 during a voyage to Spain. His spiritual journey started with exploring the Bible and led to his seeing "the bright beams of heavenly light" and being "born again" during this crossing.<sup>3</sup> In 1787 he was appointed Commissary for the Sierra Leone project to settle former black slaves in Africa.

That same year, Cugoano published his work about slavery *Thoughts on the evil and wicked Traffic of the Slavery and commerce of the Human Species*. Here he suggested that slavery itself should be ended speedily. In the Spring of 1789, Equiano published his autobiography, *The interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*.

Both books were highly influential in exposing the evils of slavery. Equiano used his story to

2 From *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, The African* by Olaudah Equiano, in *Voices of the Slave Trade* by Amy Lifson. *Humanities*, Mar/Apr 2002, Vol 23:2 (Washington DC, NEH)

3 From *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African* by Olaudah Equiano, quoted Brycchan Carey, [www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/biog.htm](http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/biog.htm), 2005



# Unlocking the chains

Equiano was not afraid to take his campaign to the highest levels of society, even ending his book with a letter to the Queen and writing to the Chair of the Privy Council. Yet as a former slave he would have every reason to feel inferior. In overcoming any prejudice that there could have been against him, he lived out the fact that "There is no difference between ... slaves and free men" (Galatians 3.28).

- ◆ Look at how God reassured biblical freedom fighters who suffered from feelings of inferiority, e.g. Moses in Exodus 3.1–4.17 or Gideon in Judges 6.7–40. In both cases they were thrown on God because they lacked strength in themselves.
- ◆ What truths, stories or passages in Scripture have given you strength when you might otherwise feel weak or inferior?
- ◆ How do you think workers with victims of human trafficking and sex trafficking can help them not only be freed literally but also freed from feelings of inferiority?

In an address to *The Power of One* conference, hosted by the Brixton-based Ruach Ministries,<sup>4</sup> Tony Blair praised the way that the Black Community today promote values such as respect for self and others. But often they themselves are not shown respect.

- ◆ Think of ways in which lack of respect is shown to black people. How could Christians make a change to these attitudes in society?

In India, some untouchables have been gaining new self-respect in Christ. Hearing the Bible in their own language, Telegu, has given them hope and peace.

- ◆ Make a list of people who could be called "untouchables" in our society?
- ◆ In pairs, share examples you know of attempts to meet these kind of people with the Word of God (e.g. the work of the Salvation Army, the Message Trust in Manchester etc.). How could you actively support these kind of initiatives?

<sup>4</sup> *Baptist Times* 7 July, 2006

lecture and lobby widely for the abolition of the slave trade. As the only written account of the transatlantic trade and slavery in Africa, it is impossible to over-estimate the impact it made on the abolition movement.

The risks that Equiano encountered in his bold campaigning were considerable, especially at a time of prejudice against black people and as a former slave himself. But he was unafraid of controversy and became well known in Britain as “the champion and advocate for procuring a suppression of the slave trade”.<sup>5</sup>

### **An ordinary woman: Harriet Tubman (c.1819/1820–1913)**

Although born after the passing of the Abolition Act in England, Harriet Tubman is worth looking at as an example of an African born into slavery who worked courageously to free fellow slaves as this continued in the USA. She was born in Maryland, the child of two African slaves. In 1844, she married a free black man, John Tubman, but five years later ran away, afraid that she might be sold with other slaves on the plantation. She travelled, following the North Star, to Pennsylvania and then to Philadelphia.

A year later, she returned to Maryland to rescue other members of her family and take them north. It was a rescue mission she kept repeating in order to free other slaves. She used a variety of strategies to avoid detection, such as changing direction, leaving on Saturdays so

that no notice of the runaways could appear in the papers until Monday, and even threatening any runaways with death if they deserted her in the escape. In 19 trips to rescue over 300 slaves she never lost one and was utterly oblivious to the dangers she was in: “She always expressed confidence that God would aid her efforts.”<sup>6</sup>

When she first settled in Philadelphia she met William Still, the “Stationmaster” on the “Underground Railroad” (similar to the underground movement that operated in Nazi-occupied France). Through Still and other members of the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, she learned about the UGRR (The Underground Railroad for Children). Through this she aided many more fugitives from slavery and spoke in support of the anti-slavery cause, even though there was a price on her head.

She has been described as

a woman of no pretensions ... Yet, in point of courage, shrewdness and disinterested exertions to rescue her fellow-men, by making personal visits to Maryland among the slaves, she was without her equal.<sup>47</sup>

She became known as “Moses” and it was said of her “Excepting John Brown – of sacred memory – I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people”.<sup>8</sup>

5 *1807–2007: Over 200 years of campaigning against slavery*, Mike Kaye, page 8 (London. Anti-Slavery International, 2005)

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 [www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1535.html)



## Unlocking the chains

Harriet was an ordinary woman who was not prepared to leave behind those in the situation from which she had escaped. She showed courage in freeing her own. The same could be said of Rosa Parks, an Alabama seamstress whose 1955 refusal to give her seat on a bus to a white man sparked one of the USA's most successful anti-segregation protests.

There are several biblical examples of ordinary women who have taken risks in obeying God within their ordinary situations in order to help those in need: Rahab (Joshua 2.1–15, 6.17–25), Namaan's wife's slave girl (2 Kings 5.1–27) and Esther (Esther) are just three examples.

- ◆ Share together times when you have felt/do feel enslaved. How did you/could you escape? How did/might the Bible help you?
- ◆ In small groups, explain the situations in which you live out your everyday lives. Discuss the kinds of "enslavement" that exist there (e.g. addiction of many kinds, family breakdown) and what you could do to help bring liberation to people like this.
- ◆ Romans 12.1–2. How can Christians have too narrow an idea of what constitutes worship? What kinds of practical service could be part of our "living sacrifice" to God? How much is this part of your worship? And how can this perspective change our service to others from duty to something better?

## Session 4: The challenge of slavery present

It would be wonderful to think that slavery ended at the stroke of a pen some 200 years ago. Sadly, that is far from the case. In 2005, the International Labour Organisation estimated that there were still 12.3 million people worldwide in forms of forced labour. In addition to this, there are continuing legacies of slavery seen, for example, in racism, lowered self-esteem and in economic disadvantage faced by many people of African origin and by nations affected by slavery and colonial control.

### Case study: the Morecambe Bay tragedy

On 24 March 2006 Lin Liang Ren was given a life sentence for the manslaughter of 23 cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay on 5 February 2004.

One of these was Guo bin Long from Fujian province, China. Caught in an ever-increasing debt spiral, Guo paid a “snakehead” (people smuggler) to get him out of China to earn money to pay off his debts and improve the situation for his wife and two children. He left home in February 2003 and was moved around the world, often treated no better than an animal. He had to make more large payments to the snakehead of almost £40,000, forcing his wife to borrow still more money.

In England, he ended up living in terrible conditions in Liverpool with 30 other illegal Chinese immigrants. He earned £5 a bag for cockle picking on the dangerous beaches of Morecambe Bay, but had to give over half of this to his gangmaster Lin Lan Ren, for board and

keep. The money he could send home was not enough to even pay off the interest on his debt.

On the evening of 5 February 2004, Guo was working in total darkness, other than the light from his head torch. The tide came in earlier than usual and it wasn't long before Guo and the other workers were trapped by the rapidly rising water. All he could do was frantically make calls to his family on his phone “Sinking water, sinking water. Many many sinking water.” That was the last anyone heard of him.

On the night of the tragedy, Lin Lian Ren threw away all incriminating paperwork and fled. As far as he was concerned, the workers were “social inferiors ... commodities to be used for his own enrichment”.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, back in China, families of the cockle pickers live in fear of reprisals from the gang masters. Likewise, the survivors themselves have begged to be allowed to stay in Britain for fear of what will happen to them if they return.

The case has brought to public awareness the shocking situations of some of the “hidden” workers on our own doorsteps. *The Times* commented:

The evil of gangmasters and “snakeheads” ... is their cynical readiness to enrich themselves from the deception and misery of their compatriots ... until now Western societies have been too

1 *Boss's lavish lifestyle as workers lived in squalor*, Russell Jenkins, *The Times*, page 7, Saturday 25 March 2006

### **Forced labour**

In 1930, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) defined forced labour as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily”.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, the ILO estimated that at least 12.3 million people are working against their will under the threat of punishment.<sup>3</sup> The following are all different forms of forced labour:

**Bonded labour.** A person has to offer their labour in return for a loan. They do not control their conditions of work, including pay, and the debt is often increased as interest is charged.

**“Unconditional” worst forms of child labour.** This can be the use of children for any

kind of labour, often illicit. It could be for prostitution, pornography, or armed conflict as in Northern Uganda.

**Trafficking in people.** This is unlike people smuggling, where migrants are illegally smuggled but are free from the smuggler’s control after they enter the country. Trafficked people have no say in the work they are forced to do to repay the traffickers or in where they live. More women are affected than men. Frequently they are trafficked for sexual exploitation.

**Descent-based slavery.** Where people are forced into labour because of their caste or ethnic group – a particular problem in South East Asia.

ready to turn a blind eye to the labour conditions of those used to fill unattractive jobs. And too often they have tolerated conditions among ethnic minorities that were outlawed more than a century ago in Victorian England. It is very indifference, however, that has made people-smuggling so profitable .... As the trial demonstrated ... it was humanity that drowned in Morecambe Bay.<sup>4</sup>

## **Christian action against slavery today**

As the Morecambe Bay tragedy shows, modern slavery is directly linked to world poverty.

Victims are lured into selling themselves or even their children by false promises of a better life in the destination country in order to pay off debts or simply obtain the means to live. So tackling modern slavery must go hand in hand with tackling world poverty. One of those who has led this fight in her own country is Cecilia Flores-Oebanda.

Cecilia won the 2005 Anti-Slavery Award for her campaigning on behalf of young girls trapped into domestic work in the Philippines. Poverty, landlessness and armed conflict have driven thousands of Philipinos into larger towns where they become vulnerable to exploitation as a cheap labour force and for the sex trade.

Cecilia worked as a child herself in order to survive and saw how very hard it was to escape from poverty. As a Christian teenager, she worked in a small chapel, teaching children

2 *1807–2007: Over 200 years of campaigning against slavery*, Mike Kaye, page 25 (Anti-Slavery International, 2005)

3 *Ibid.* page 27

4 *Death on the beach: The tragedy of the cockle pickers is not a foreign land*, Editorial, *The Times*, Saturday 25 March 2006

## Recent moves to combat modern slavery

**The UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC)**, and its optional Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (known as **The Palermo Protocol**) was adopted in November 2000.

**The Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005** provided a legislative basis for a new organised crime agency and new powers to help in tackling organised crime. The **Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA)** came into being on 1 April 2006.

**Operation Pentameter** is a unique initiative running in the first half of 2006 to tackle organised crime systematically. It includes police units and a raft of other agencies such as CHASTE (Churches Alert to Sex Trafficking across Europe).

from the local community. Later she organised small groups of local people to campaign for better pay and land rights.

This was dangerous work and, at 17, she joined rebels fighting against the government. Later, although both a wife and mother, she was imprisoned as a threat to the nation's security. While imprisoned, she developed the idea of what became the Visayana Forum.

Since 1992, the Visayana Forum has campaigned against the child labour in factories and pressured the government to pass a Child Labour Law and Anti-Trafficking legislation. It has set up community centres to offer education opportunities for both children and parents, and has set up an association for domestic workers.

Cecilia Flores-Oebanda, and many others like her, are working today to bring change in cultures that rarely welcome challenges of this



## Unlocking the chains

We all love a bargain! But is our demand for more and more at rock bottom prices simply fuelling the demand for child labour and sweat shops? How can we counteract this and challenge our consumerist culture?

- ◆ Read Psalm 72.1–3; Isaiah 1.17; 1 Timothy 5.18. In small groups, discuss the questions above. Should you be adjusting any of your own shopping habits, in order to use what God has given you fairly and wisely?
- ◆ Do you see any evidence of initiatives for Fair Trading increasing or decreasing? Are there any ways that you or your church can promote its growth and benefit the producers? How practically can fair trade be promoted in other areas of life (e.g. ethical holidays see [www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com))?



## Unlocking the chains

Newton urged Wilberforce “not to cut himself off from his present circles or to retire from public life” and wrote to him, “it is hoped and believed that the Lord has raised you up for the good of his church and the good of his nation”.<sup>5</sup>

- ◆ In what ways can Christians raise awareness of the existence of child forced labour and exploitation today and to work for their welfare?
- ◆ What practical implications might the parable of the three talents (Matthew 25.14–30) and the challenge of Wilberforce and abolitionists past and present have for you in using all the gifts you have in God’s service? Share ideas in small groups.

“Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering” (Romans 12.1, *The Message*).

kind. Dr Carrie Pemberton, a chaplain who founded the organisation CHASTE to combat sex trafficking, outlines what it takes to continue the reforms that both Cecilia and the 19th century abolitionists have achieved:

... human compassion, imagination, the construction of alternative worlds, the envisioning of others into this alternative landscape, resistance, abstinence, self-sacrifice, adventure, movement, tragedy, risk-taking inspired by hope for a better world ...<sup>6</sup>

From the abolitionists to Martin Luther King, Christians over the centuries have often been at

the forefront of re-imagining and changing the world in which they live. As people set free by Jesus’ death and resurrection and as God’s children empowered by his Spirit, his 21st century people should be no different.

### The unchaining word

Just as the Bible inspired the efforts of many involved in the struggle against slavery, it continues to spark a chain reaction of change and hope today. Isaiah 55.1–11 the prophet pictures a God who is longing to embrace and satisfy the thirsty through his words. Bible Societies often play a key role by being at the forefront of Bible translation, provision and promotion.

The effects can be seen in the act of translation itself. Providing the Bible in new languages is a way of helping minority people preserve their

5 John Pollock *Wilberforce*, 1997, page 38, Lion Publishing

6 The Ramsden Sermon – *The Abolition of Slavery – from Clarkson to Today*, Revd Dr Carrie Pemberton, page 9 (preached before the University of Oxford at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, 19 October 2003)

culture, boosting their esteem and demonstrating that God “speaks their language”.

In Bolivia, audio recordings of the Bible in Quechua have been a magnet for up to 90 per cent of villagers. While listening to stories of Jesus’ care for the outsider many who were used to being treated as backward by Spanish speakers have been overwhelmed.

In other situations, the Bible’s power for reconciliation starts even in the translation process. In Papua New Guinea Bible translation teams involved Huli language speakers from rival clans. Translation consultant Dr Stephen Pattemore says this has helped transform “warrior farmers” into “people who can now meet together in peace”.

A recent nine-month project increasing the literacy of over 2,000 adults in Central South Timor, Indonesia, is one of many Bible Society literacy projects that both empower people and give them opportunities to understand the Bible. A Bible Society HIV/Aids programme – widely used by Bible Societies and churches in East and West Africa – is helping communities proactively care for each other when victims before were stigmatised.

In India, *Faith Comes By Hearing* cassettes of the New Testament show Dalit (“untouchable”) people that Jesus moved among and touched the untouchables of his day. These downtrodden people are astonished and many have come to faith. Revd Parma of Bible Society of India’s Gujarat Auxilliary says, “A casteless person who



## Unlocking the chains

Read Psalm 19.7–11.

- ◆ List all the qualities that are given to the Bible in this passage. You could make an illustrated banner/poster of the Psalm.
- ◆ In small groups, can you think of ways of making the Bible current in our biblically illiterate society?
- ◆ Victor Premasager, a former Moderator of the Church of South India, has compared the situation of the Samaritans in Jesus’ day to that of the Dalits or untouchables in his nation. He says “Jesus appreciated the deep-seated hurt of the Samaritans and rebuked his disciples who were from the dominant Jewish culture”<sup>7</sup> (Luke 9.51–55 and cf John 4.9, 39–40). He writes: “The church often settles down within the dominant culture and does not take the stand which Jesus took against oppressive customs and discriminatory practices.” What challenges are there in this for us?

<sup>7</sup> Words for Today 2004, IBRA, page 100

comes to Christ sees himself in a new way. He straightens his back, gaining self-confidence, self-respect and zest for life.”

Case studies like these remind us that Jesus’ promise to reveal the truth and to set us truly free (John 8.32) has never been withdrawn. They inspire us, like Wilberforce, Equiano, Flores-Oebanda and Tubman, to use the Bible to give us God’s “binocular” vision to see the freedom and change he wants to bring.



*Literacy classes run through local tutors by the Indonesian Bible Society in Central South Timor*

As we do that, we can firstly receive that inner freedom ourselves. Then with God’s power we can be equipped to live in visionary, courageous ways that take the lid off modern slavery, challenge the status quo and show practical, sacrificial care for the healing and restoration of all who have been hurt by it.



## Unlocking the chains

“Wilberforce believed the best way to create a consensus amongst the nation that the slave trade was an evil needing to be fought was to strengthen the Christian framework of the nation. His work with the Bible Society was absolutely essential to strengthening this moral consensus.”<sup>8</sup>

- ◆ How can we strengthen the moral consensus in our own society? How should we approach strengthening a Christian voice when we live in a society with many faiths?
- ◆ What social and moral changes in our times should we/could we combat (a) as Christians (b) in partnership with people of other faiths or none?
- ◆ Our consumerist culture creates a climate of demand and immediate gratification. Human trafficking is just one way in which this demand is both met but also stimulated. How can Christians be instrumental in changing this culture? in reversing this “sexularisation” of society? Brainstorm ways of tackling today’s porn culture/industry (e.g. exclusion from ethical investment policies. Also see the work of Protest 4 – a collective of individuals seeking to find innovative ways of reducing demand such as distributing beer mats with the logo “The Truth isn’t Sexy”. See [www.protest4.com](http://www.protest4.com)).

*Continued overleaf*

8 Wilberforce biographer Kevin Belmonte interviewed March 2006

As Christians we have received freedom in Christ (e.g. Colossians 1.11–14; Romans 3.21–24, 5.18 (all people not just Israel); Galatians 5.1) Discuss:

- ◆ What does this freedom entail (e.g. from sin and its penalty, from captivity to the powers of darkness, freedom to be renewed in God's image by his Spirit)?
- ◆ How much do we value these freedoms?
- ◆ In what ways should our freedom challenge us to set others free?
- ◆ Find out about Bible Society's 8:32 Campaign. This highlights the continuing need to give people everywhere access to the Bible in forms they can use and understand, so they can know the freedom Jesus gives. Visit **[www.its832.org](http://www.its832.org)**

Some other initiatives you could get involved with:

- ◆ Stop the Traffik **[www.stopthetraffik.org](http://www.stopthetraffik.org)** – a one-year global campaign to raise awareness of people trafficking to the world and lead governments to action.
- ◆ Set all Free **[www.setallfree.net](http://www.setallfree.net)** – a Churches Together initiative to mark the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act apply its lessons to tackle the legacies of Transatlantic Slavery and modern-day slavery.
- ◆ Anti-slavery International **[www.antislaveryinternational.org](http://www.antislaveryinternational.org)** committed to eliminating all forms of slavery throughout the world.
- ◆ CHASTE (Churches alert to Sex Trafficking across Europe) **[www.chaste.org](http://www.chaste.org)**
- ◆ World Vision **[www.worldvision.org.uk](http://www.worldvision.org.uk)** Actively working for the child soldiers of Northern Uganda.

**Resources:**

*The Walk* – A new DVD dramatisation of the turning point in Wilberforce's life, starring Andrew Harrison, Bible Society, Autumn 2006.

*Amistad* – Director Steven Spielberg. Drama of refugees from a slave ship. Dreamworks, 1998.

*Amazing Grace* – Director Michael Apted. Feature film of Wilberforce's emancipation battle. Walden Media, late 2006.

## Some prayers to use

Give us, O Lord, churches  
that will be more courageous than cautious;  
that will not only “comfort the afflicted”  
but “afflict the comfortable”;  
that will not only love the world but will also judge the world;  
that will not only pursue peace but will also demand justice;  
that will not remain silent when people are calling for a voice;  
that will not pass by on the other side  
when wounded humanity is waiting to be healed;  
that will follow Christ even when the way points to a cross.  
To this end we offer ourselves in the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us.

**Amen**

(Christian Conference of Asia, from *Discovering Christ: Lent and Easter*, IBRA, 2002, with permission)

### Prayer from Jamaica

Keep your church free, that it may be the channel through which justice and peace, integrity and wholeness, harmony and goodwill may flow to the dispossessed and the desperate, that your kingdom may come in all its fulfilment of life and health and peace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

(From *Words for Today 2004*, IBRA, with permission)

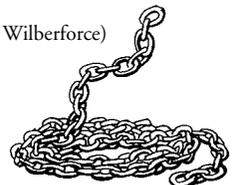
### The Wilberforce Prayer

Almighty God, may we live above the world,  
its low concerns and unsatisfying vanities,  
and may we be still endeavouring to please thee,  
to root out every remainder of our natural corruption,  
and to increase in every Christian grace.

May we indeed bear about us the likeness of our Heavenly Father,  
and be doing good in our generation to the will of God,  
until at length thou shalt receive us to thyself,  
and make us partakers of those pleasures which are at thy right hand for evermore.

**Amen**

(Private prayer of William Wilberforce)



# FOUR SMALL-GROUP SESSIONS

This eye-opening discussion resource gives rich background and discussion materials to help churches:

- learn from how the Bible enabled anti-slavery campaigners to end the Atlantic slave trade
- explore how the Bible can move us in working for justice and wholeness today

Two hundred years ago, the Bible drove a small group of Christian reformers to overturn a trade as important to Britain's economy as the IT industry today.

But it was a trade that turned 11 million Africans into slaves.

Now, 200 years on, from human trafficking to racism, the legacy of the slave trade has not gone away.

*The Unchaining Word* offers a thoughtful mix of:

- stories of people who challenged slavery 200 years ago
- the biblical perspectives that inspired them
- *Unlocking the chains* – creative, Bible-based discussion materials
- prayers and information on current campaigns

*The Unchaining Word* is a vital springboard for churches preparing for the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in March 2007.

It complements Bible Society's Bible Sunday materials *Chain Reaction* and the Set All Free and Stop the Traffik initiatives.

**Downloads of these materials are also available at [www.biblesunday.org](http://www.biblesunday.org)**

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