Throughout history, there has been triumph and defeat. Men have walked the earth with purpose, and those have walked without it. Triumph cannot be obtained without purpose. The social reforms of 19th century Britain marked the triumphs of those men and women who walked with a destiny and whose tireless acts of reform never ceased until change was provoked. The Abolition of the Slave trade is the greatest wave of triumph the world has ever seen. The movement was pioneered by a man with purpose, who never gave up. William Wilberforce, along with the help of several others, helped the extermination of slavery and gave the world a reason to cheer.

Without a doubt, Wilberforce’s motives solely rested on his Evangelical faith. The movement was making its roar through England during the 18th Century and those with wealth and prestige rejected the idea of religious reform. William came from a long line of Church of England followers. He was not raised in an Evangelical household, and in fact his mother considered the movement “poison.” The cause of William’s conversion could prove indistinguishable without the careful examination of his early life. Through a string of events and formed relationships, William Wilberforce’s childhood provided the key to unlock his essential conversion to Christianity in 1785.

Since Wilberforce’s death, there has been an extensive scholarly survey of his life and accomplishments as Member of Parliament. The span of works covering Wilberforce can be traced from the earliest of biographies only a few short years following his death all the way to the year 2008. Throughout that span, several
biographies, articles and even a major motion picture have depicted his life through an historical lens.

Today William Wilberforce is celebrated as a hero of justice, and a warrior for God who fought with everything he had to abolish the world’s largest injustice. Sadly, that has not been entirely accepted throughout the academic world. Wilberforce’s motives, actions, consequences, and judgment have been presented in several different ways offering several different explanations. Overwhelmingly, through an exhausted examination of several biographies and few articles concerning the matter, the general consensus of Wilberforce equates to a man highly talented, accomplished and revered.

The first biography of William Wilberforce was written in 1838 by his two sons Robert and Samuel Wilberforce. The biography was entitled “Life of William Wilberforce,” and delivered in five volumes.¹ Some have argued that the biography left out or smudged certain information in order not to embarrass or weaken Wilberforce’s reputation as a political savior or saint and that the biography was thrown together in a rather expedient fashion.² The biography includes several letters of correspondences between important friends of Wilberforce including William Pitt and John Newton.³ Robert and Samuel set the bar for an examination of the life of William Wilberforce.

It wasn’t until another 85 years that another biography surfaced when Reginald Coupland released his 1923 biography entitled, “Wilberforce: A Narrative.” In the

² Pollock, xiv.
biography, Coupland discusses the necessity of his work due to the failing nature of the son’s portrayal of their father. According to Ian Bradley, Coupland’s main focus of the biography was to reveal the attack against slavery, not necessarily from an Evangelical perspective. The book primarily discusses the slave trade institution, not the motives behind Wilberforce.

In 1974, Robin Furneaux added his input concerning Wilberforce by refuting the Wilberforce Eric Williams portrayed in “Capitalism and the Slave Trade.” Furneaux’s, “William Wilberforce” begins to point to the major importance of William’s religious beliefs by stating, “Religion was to give his life its driving force.” Furneaux was able to use a relatively recent source under the title of, “The Private Papers of William Wilberforce,” in order to gain access to William’s deepest thoughts. The source was an extensive eight volume set of pre-unreleased letters to and from Wilberforce which Furneaux extensively used in his book.

Reverend John Pollack approaches the subject with an Evangelical background in his biography “William Wilberforce” released in 1977. As a minister, Pollack possessed a certain key into the mystery of Wilberforce’s Christian motives. Pollack set out to present more than just the abolition aspect of William’s career, but also his efforts to improve the conditions of the poor and his views concerning parliamentary reform.

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4 Pollock, xv
6 Furneaux, xiii
7 Furneaux, 1-455.
8 Pollock, xv-xvi.
Pollack clarifies that Wilberforce was a reformer, and not solely an abolitionist. A thirty year drought followed Pollack’s contribution perhaps due to the growing secular society.

Two biographies published both in 2007 offer varying differences in their presentation style, rather than the content. Eric Metaxas’ narrative of William Wilberforce’s life portrays the general consensus of most scholars by using a less formative style of writing\(^9\), while William Hague’s version creeps back to the formalized scholarly format.\(^10\) Both authors refrained from ruffling any feathers by not claiming a new school of thought on the history of Wilberforce.

According to Jonathon Aitken’s article, “The Force behind Wilberforce,” most historians of Wilberforce have left out or underestimated the most crucial aspect to his life.\(^11\) Aitkens concludes that the true motivation for the abolition of the slave trade came from William’s devout faith. Aitkens argues the relationship of Wilberforce and Newton has been downplayed throughout history as well. Through an examination of Wilberforce’s writings concerning Christianity, Aitkens rules out any other explanation of his motives. Aitkens does however, praise John Piper’s book, “Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce,” for demonstrating Wilberforce as a, “radically, God-centered Christian who was a politician.”\(^12\)

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\(^12\) Aitken, 61.
Overwhelmingly, history has proclaimed Wilberforce as the humanitarian champion, mainly attributed to the rarity of any scholarly work to the contrary. Ian Bradley gives a couple examples of works attempting to discredit Wilberforce’s “sainthood” in the article, “William Wilberforce ‘The Saint.’” Bradley pointed to Eric Williams’s Marxist piece, “Capitalism and Slavery,” that presented the abolition movement primarily as an economic cause rather than a humanitarian one.\textsuperscript{13} Williams argues that the slave trade was no longer profitable for Britain and thus needed to be shut down in a subtle manner. Bradley continues by examining Jack Gratus’ work, “The Great White Lie.” The piece accuses Wilberforce’s friends of exaggerating his virtues and improvements.\textsuperscript{14} Bradley closes by expressing the need to consider all sources and come to one’s own conclusions of history.\textsuperscript{15}

An extensive or even brief survey of the scholarly work covering the life of William Wilberforce indicates the conflicting ideas of the past. Although the information obtainable by all the authors remained relatively the same, they each individually had their own interpretation of the data. When reading any history, concerning any subject, scholars must question and consider the bias of the author.

Wilberforce’s childhood played a major, if not the vital role in his accomplishments in Parliament. Without the influences that shaped his early years, a much different Wilberforce and perhaps a much different history of Britain could exist. His childhood was marked with a blend of pleasure and pain, along with security and

\textsuperscript{14} Bradley, 42
\textsuperscript{15} Bradley, 43
confusion. The relationships sparked, and the unique experiences of his early years immensely affected him later down the road. The tragedies, accompanied with the privileges of William’s youth presented the opportunity of a young man from the port city of Hall to influence the end to one of the greatest injustices of history.

William came from a long line of successful men. A Wilberfoss family tradition contains that during the great conflicts of 1066, a member of the Wilberfoss clan was the spearmen who killed Harold Hardrada, who was the would-be king at the battle of Stamford Bridge. The name Wilberfoss dates back to the Saxon times and lasted until William’s Grandfather changed it to Wilberforce due to his discontent with the suffix foss, which translates to “servant.” The first William Wilberforce, the prime minister’s grandfather, was the mayor and leading merchant of Hull, which was the fourth largest port city of Britain behind London, Bristol and Liverpool. Located on the eastern coast of Britain, the city of Hull was a hot spot for trade and commerce during the 18th century. William Wilberforce Sr. capitalized on that trend and gained a substantial amount of wealth as a merchant. The elder emphasized the importance of family and business and in order to ensure the constant maintenance of both, he built the family home/office adjacent to the docks of Hull. The merchant unsuccessfully tried to pass the business to his eldest son William, who denied the offer and moved to London. Robert

16 Hague, 1  
17 Metaxas, 1  
18 Pollock, 3  
19 Furneaux, 2-3  
20 Hague, 3
Wilberforce, the second son of the successful mayor, accepted the offer and along with his wife Elizabeth, took over operations of the business.\(^{21}\)

On August 24th, 1759 Robert and Elizabeth gave birth to their third child, William Wilberforce. William was a small and fragile child. Later in his life, William questioned whether his parents would have been able to support him if they hadn’t have been as well off.\(^{22}\) As a child, he battled those negative physical perceptions with his, “…vigorous mind, an affectionate, considerate nature and a voice which struck all who heard it with its range and beauty.”\(^{23}\) From an early age, the reformer presented an aroma of greatness and destiny.

During the 18\(^{th}\) century, it was customary for well off parents to send their child off to boarding schools far from home, such as Eton, in order to gain a world-class education, but that was not the wish of Robert and Elizabeth.\(^{24}\) Due to the immense necessity for family involvement in the business, William spent the first eight years of his life immersed in the trade and gained insight into his families’ source of wealth.\(^{25}\) In the autumn of 1767 he attended Hull Grammar School, which was within walking distance of the Wilberforce’s home-business. Local grammar schools varied in quality and usually their effectiveness was determined by the ability of the school’s headmaster.\(^{26}\) Luckily, during that same year, Joseph Milner became the headmaster of the institution and quickly gained attention and admiration from a young Wilberforce. Milner, who

\(^{21}\) Metaxas, 2
\(^{22}\) Hague, 4
\(^{23}\) Furneaux, 4
\(^{24}\) Hague, 5
\(^{25}\) Hague, 4.
\(^{26}\) Hague, 5
was a graduate of Cambridge, proved to be an excellent choice for the job. He brought with him his younger brother Isaac to aide in his newly attained position. As one of William’s teachers, Isaac placed William on a desk and requested he read aloud as a model for the other students on numerous occasions. The relationship between Isaac and William will later prove to be of significant importance.

While excelling at school and learning the ins and outs of his future business, young William was a flourishing young lad until tragedy struck in the deepest of ways. In the spring of 1768, Robert Wilberforce passed away and left young William without a father. The enormity of the grief caused from his father’s death left his mother with a severe fever and incapable of raising children. As a result of his mother’s illness, William was sent to Wimbledon to live with his Aunt and Uncle during late fall of the same year. William’s transition to Wimbledon marked a tremendous shift in not only his surroundings, but his ideas of religion and faith.

Soon after his arrival at Wimbledon William fell in love with his Aunt Hannah and Uncle William. Located just outside of London, the new life seemed completely ok with Wilberforce. He enjoyed the quite lifestyle of Wimbledon compared to the loud and busy streets of Hull. William attended Putney Boarding School, which was a decent institution, but noticeably inferior to the teachings of Milner at the Hull Grammar

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27 Furneaux, 4
28 Metaxas, 5
29 Hague, 7
30 Pollock, 4
31 Metaxas, 6
32 Hague, 8
Although interested in studies, William became consumed with the current revolution concerning Christianity in England, a subject he previously knew very little about. The lackluster approach of the Church, doubled with his mother’s indifference to the church she attended, left William in the dark concerning Christianity.

During the 18th century, the Church of England had become a stagnant and complacent faith offering no real sacrifice or zeal. The Church was more of a social requirement for anyone acquiring to be a respectable citizen of England, not necessarily as a means of salvation. Bishops of the Church were said to have accumulated substantial amounts of individual wealth through corruption and manipulation and clergymen were often seen at popular pubs partaking in antithetical Christian behavior. According to William Hague, the church was in a state of, “virtual paganism.”

With the continual disregard of Biblical examples, the Church began to see members become opposed to the Church’s current operation. Two major opponents of the church, John Wesley and George Whitefield were quickly gaining followers during the mid 18th century. Wesley, while studying at Oxford, dedicated his life to a strict observation to the rules of the Bible. He preached the importance of daily discipline, charitable work, and self examination. George Whitefield, who also preached in America, was said to have some 50,000 Englanders at his rallies. His ability to invoke
emotion carried the Methodist movement throughout England and the Americas.\textsuperscript{39} The movement called for a closer walk with God and zealousness towards the faith.

William’s aunt and uncle were friends with both Wesley and Whitefield and shared their beliefs.\textsuperscript{40} William admired his guardians and naturally became interested in their new faith. He witnessed their sincerity in their everyday actions and noticed their overall joy in life. He attended meetings with Hannah and listened to evangelical orators. John Newton was one of the main preachers William had the pleasure to witness. John was an ex-slave ship captain who later devoted his life to the Lord. Newton’s sermons had a deep impact on the young Wilberforce, who later referred to Newton as resembling a parent.\textsuperscript{41} It was during this time that Wilberforce adopted Methodism as his faith, and became enthralled with his relationship with God.\textsuperscript{42}

Soon after William’s newly ascertained faith, another tragedy struck to the deepest bone of his body. After hearing the news of his conversion, his mother immediately traveled to Wimbledon during the summer of 1771 to bring him back to Hull.\textsuperscript{43} His mother was a member of the Church of England and considered the theology of Methodists to be poison.\textsuperscript{44} Her relationship with Hannah and William became weakened and William was left grieving for his beloved aunt and uncle. Upon returning back to Hull, William’s grandfather insisted no grandson of his would receive a sixpence if they followed Methodists. During the same time, Joseph Milner, the

\textsuperscript{39} Hague, 13.
\textsuperscript{40} Metaxas, 6.
\textsuperscript{41} Pollock, 5.
\textsuperscript{42} Hague, 14.
\textsuperscript{43} Metaxas, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{44} Hague, 14.
headmaster at Hull Grammar School converted to Methodism and immediately lost his decent reputation amongst the community. William was not allowed to attend the school and several other parents removed their children from the school in fear of Milner’s poisonous bias.\textsuperscript{45} Wilberforce compared the persecution of Methodists during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century to that of the Jews during Roman rule.\textsuperscript{46} Wilberforce witnessed this injustice first hand and began to see the affects of persecution.

Without the ability to attend his old grammar school, Wilberforce was sent to his grandfather’s old boarding school, Pocklington, which was located a few miles outside of York.\textsuperscript{47} During his years at Pocklington, William missed his aunt and uncle terribly and recounts those years as the darkest of days. He did, however develop an exquisite ability of expression. His writings were far beyond his years in both content and context and his peers tirelessly asked for demonstrations of his ability. While he was 15 one of his brilliant works read, “A real good Companion is not one who can sit over so many bottles, or play so many pools at quadrille; but one whom good sense, good-nature, and good education and improved understanding have all conspired to render truly agreeable.” William’s maturity became easily noticeable within his letters to his Uncle expressing his pain and how much he missed Wimbledon as well.\textsuperscript{48} It was as if he had lost yet another father and left to grieve alone.

Without the support of his aunt and uncle, and the ability to listen to the motivating John Newton, William began to slowly slip from the strict steadfastness of his

\textsuperscript{45} Metaxas, 12-13.
\textsuperscript{46} Metaxas, 11.
\textsuperscript{47} Christopher Hancock, “The Shrimp who Stopped Slavery,” Christian History 16 no.1 (1997): 13
\textsuperscript{48} Furneaux, 6-8.
recent faith. During his visits back to Hull on vacation from Pocklington, he began to socialize with his friends and experience drinking, cards and women.\textsuperscript{49} At first he could easily avoid the sinful pleasures but as the years went on his discipline began to decrease. With his grandfather’s passing in 1774 and the wealth he obtained soon after, William was left “susceptible to the temptations of plenty.”\textsuperscript{50} His faith had been formed, and although his diligence in action ceased, the seed of Christianity was planted and his past would help direct his future.

The Childhood of Wilberforce set the foundation for a life spent pursuing God’s call, which coincided with the abolition of the slave trade. His youth seemed as if it were constructed in order to nudge him a certain direction, or perhaps away from another. His short, weak, and inferior appearance almost demanded the need for extraordinary gifts in order to be respected. Without the death of his father, he would have remained a trade merchant engaging in the pleasures of a wealthy businessman. His mother’s lackluster approach to the Church of England never solidified his beliefs in Christianity, thus leaving him open minded on the subject. His trip back to Hull and attendance at Pocklington helped William develop strong social and communication skills which he would need as a motivator for reform in Parliament. William later commented that his removal from Wimbledon saved him from a life completely consumed by religiosity, which would have ripped him from the political world. Equipped by his childhood, William was prepared to undergo the greatest transition of his life just a few short years later: his complete conversion to Christianity. The story of William’s conversion cannot

\textsuperscript{49} Hague, 19.
\textsuperscript{50} Hancock, 13.
be told without the precedent of his past. The figures of his aunt and uncle, Isaac Milner, and John Newton which left such an impression on William’s early life later proved to be the perfect ingredients for his conversion in 1785.

The period between William’s days at Pocklington and his adulthood conversion was marked with success and leisure. After Pocklington William attended St. John’s College at Cambridge in 1776 and furthered his juggling of studies and social mingling. He became quite a talented card player and socialite, while still retaining good marks in class. William’s dormitory neighbor, Thomas Gisborne, who later became a famous minister in the Church of England, remembered Wilberforce’s room swarmed with guests eager to hear him speak from early in the morning to late and night. After his exit from Cambridge in 1780, Wilberforce decided to enter the world of politics. At the age of 21, William ran and was elected to the House of Commons for his hometown of Hull. He was one of the youngest members of Parliament and had a daunting task ahead of him. His first year in Parliament was a quiet one, but offered William a glimpse into the social structure of London. It would only be a few years from now that William would endure the turning point of his adult life.

In 1784, the wheels of Wilberforce’s monumental change began to turn. He was 25 years old and a Member of Parliament representing the County of York. While visiting Cambridge during the summer of 1784, he met up with his old usher from Hull

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51 Metaxas, 18
52 Metaxas, 18.
53 Furneaux, 12.
54 Metaxas, 25.
55 Metaxas, 26.
Grammar school Isaac Newton, who was now a Don at the University.\textsuperscript{57} Since his work at the Hull Grammar School, Milner was offered a position of Priest and college tutor at Queens in 1776.\textsuperscript{58} The two quickly became close and William requested Isaac's presence on a trip to the Riviera with his mother and sister. \textsuperscript{59} The two discussed Doddridge's "Rise and Progress of Religion," which Isaac revered as one of the best books ever written.\textsuperscript{60} The two discussed the book alone in their private carriage rides. William was beginning to consider the faith of Christianity. \textsuperscript{61}

After their return in 1784, William and Isaac continued their discussions of faith. In his diary, William commented on Isaac as, "He appeared in all respects like an ordinary man of the world, mixing like myself in all companies."\textsuperscript{62} The summer of 1785 offered another opportunity for the couple to deeply discuss faith during a trip to Switzerland. Milner became more serious in his approach to convert William and proposed to read the Greek Testament and examine its strict doctrines.\textsuperscript{63} The discussions from that trip caused William to write in his diary, "As soon as I reflected seriously upon these subjects, the deep guilt and black ingratitude of my past life forced itself upon me in the strongest colours, and I condemned myself for having wasted my precious time, and opportunities, and talents."\textsuperscript{64}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[58] Oxford National Dictionary of Biography, volume 57 s.v. Isaac Milner, 311.
\item[59] Coupland, 34.
\item[60] Metaxas, 47.
\item[61] Metaxas, 48.
\item[62] Wilberforce, 37
\item[63] Wilberforce, 39
\item[64] Wilberforce, 41
\end{footnotes}
William became overwhelmed with concern on how to handle his new version of faith. He was convinced that he needed to drop completely out of politics in order to fully serve God. Knowing the young preacher which had such an impact on young William's life, he approached John Newton with his dilemma. John Newton was known throughout the Christian world of being a pillar of wisdom for confused or weary followers. Records show that Newton at any given time could be replying to 50-60 letters at any given time. Needless to say, the bond William made in his childhood turned out to be the perfect man for the job. Newton’s response to would change William’s life forever. Newton encouraged Wilberforce to stay where he was, and wait for God to use him. William left the meeting with a sense of peace and purpose and captured the faith of his youth.

The success of the crucial conversion of Wilberforce relied heavily upon the foundation set in place during his childhood. Isaac Milner, whose familiarity with William helped in the ease of their friendship concerning the discussion of Christianity. The impression John Newton left on the young reformer gave him the know-how to approach Newton with such a confident vigor. Without his childhood, his faith wouldn’t exist, and without his faith, maybe slavery still would.

With his refreshed vigor for faith and Christianity, William Wilberforce set out towards one of the most stunning tasks of history: The Abolition of the slave trade. As an attempt to bring God into the public realm, Wilberforce raised the curtain of hate and

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66 Gertz, 38.
67 Metaxas, 59-60.
injustice. For 22 years he tirelessly fought for the end of such a great injustice. He was rewarded his goal the 25\textsuperscript{th} of March 1807 with the passing of “The Slave Trade Abolition Bill.”\textsuperscript{69} Three days before his death in 1833, Wilberforce received the news that Parliament had passed The Slavery Abolition Act, William Wilberforce could now peacefully rest. Metaxas, who brilliantly portrays history through his literacy genius, explains the magnitude of Wilberforce’s feat with, “Wilberforce presided over a social earthquake that rearranged the continents and whose magnitude we are only now beginning to fully appreciate.”\textsuperscript{70}


\textsuperscript{70} Metaxas, xvii.
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