

**“WILLIAM WILBERFORCE:
A MAN WHO CHANGED HIS TIMES”
BY JOHN POLLOCK**

Background on the Selection

This reading is a short biography of the English reformer William Wilberforce (1759–1833) with a foreword by Doug Holladay that draws lessons from Wilberforce’s life and his principles for today’s leaders.

Group Discussion Questions

1 Doug Holladay says that “the big question that gnaws at us is: ‘How can our lives truly make a difference?’” What sort of difference do you want to make with your life? Do you have a sense of your purpose? What grounded Wilberforce’s sense of calling? What grounds yours? Why do you think Wilberforce argued that effective social reform needs a spiritual base, and that otherwise reforms will fail or do more harm than good?

2 Consider Wilberforce’s mission statement on “two great objects.” Which of the two do you think was the bigger and harder? Why? Do you think that such an explicit purpose is necessary? Is it helpful? Would it make you more likely to miss something or make you able to choose your battles, or both?

3 What do you make of the range of causes Wilberforce was involved in? What sorts of things do you consider in need of change in your home, work, church, neighborhood, industry, society, nation?

4 Do you have a group of friends with whom to tackle critical issues? If so, how strategic are you? If not, what steps can you take to gather such a group?

5 How would you assess the similarities and differences between your time and culture and that of Wilberforce and his friends? Where are you being called to stand against your culture?

6 How do you think you would have withstood the public hatred Wilberforce endured during his career? What resources did he draw on? What resources are available to you?

7 Do you think people today have the stamina to persevere in such a mission for nearly fifty years? How do you think you might develop such persistence?

8 Read Holladay's discussion about public persuasion and consider Wilberforce's tactics. Did they match in character with his goals? Whom did Wilberforce target in moral reform and why? How did he go about it? What can we learn from these strategies for transforming society today?

9 Consider the points on fanaticism as compared with Wilberforce's joyful humanity. What do you do to maintain a broad perspective and fully enjoy life? What compromises are you willing to make? Where do you draw lines?

10 Do you think Wilberforce could have died satisfied if abolition had not happened in his lifetime? Why or why not? Compare the end of Wilberforce's life to the retirement mentality of today.

11 In what arenas are you contributing to the good of people in your spheres of influence? Do you need to contract your sphere of influence so that you can be more thorough, or expand it so that you can reach out? Do your daily actions and attitudes demonstrate an integrity and consistency with your stated goals? How would you like your life and accomplishments to be summed up?

Further Reading

- *Entrepreneurs of Life: Faith and the Venture of Purposeful Living*, The Trinity Forum (NavPress 2001)
- "Abraham Lincoln: The Spiritual Growth of a Public Man," by Elton Trueblood, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1993.
- "One Word of Truth: A Portrait of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn," by David Aikman, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1997.
- "Poor Man's Ear: An Introduction to Lord Shaftesbury, the Great Reformer," by John Pollock, *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1999.