

Discussion Notes on Christian Responsibility in Politics-Part 2



The Discussion Notes support the Discussion Guide. The Discussion Notes may also be used for a longer, more detailed lesson or sermon.

How Abolitionist William Wilberforce Inspires Christians to Register and Vote

Do you feel like you are swimming upstream in this current cultural and political climate? Do you ever think that it would be easier to just “go with the flow”?”

Paul declares in Romans 12:2, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will.”

And Jesus described the dangers of the easy path: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

Salmon and Christians: Both Swim Upstream

After their birth in freshwater streams, salmon eventually make their way into the saltwater ocean. When they are ready to reproduce, God created salmon to do something which seems virtually impossible. They swim upstream. Salmon start the upstream swim in peak condition, the culmination of years of development in the ocean. After all, they need strong swimming and leaping abilities to battle the rapids.¹

Amazingly, they follow a familiar scent that leads them back to the location of their birth, their home. According to Jade Blue’s article, “Why do salmon and other fish swim upstream?”, scientists state that the home odors, unique to each body of water, are embedded in the salmon’s brain. They want to lay and fertilize the egg in upstream waters because they are calmer, creating the perfect environment for embryo growth. Since it takes three to four months for salmon eggs to hatch, the more active downstream waters would increase the risk of the eggs being swept away.²

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The “river run” can be exhausting. Chinook and sockeye salmon from central Idaho travel 900 miles and climb nearly 7,000 feet before they are ready to spawn.³ Incredibly, salmon are not simply swimming against the current, but they are negotiating waterfalls and rapids by leaping and jumping. In fact, they have been recorded making vertical leaps as high as 12 feet!⁴ Not surprisingly, after their long journey, they die.

Like the salmon, Christians, who are not of this world, swim upstream in this sin-filled culture of lust, materialism, and selfishness. But we have a *higher* calling. To prepare us for the exhausting upstream swim, God empowers us with the Holy Spirit and sanctifies us. The swim is not easy. Satan, the world, and our own sin nature presents obstacles and temptations along our journey. But it is rewarding as we lead the next generation to Christ and move to our heavenly home.

1 John 2:15-17 says, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

William Wilberforce’s Conversion

One example of a Christian who swam upstream is William Wilberforce, who is credited with abolishing slavery in Britain. The orphaned son of a wealthy merchant, Wilberforce was raised by his uncle and aunt who were strong supporters of John Wesley who planted Gospel seeds in young William’s life. His Aunt Hannah was the sister of John Thornton, a Christian philanthropist and a supporter of the famed revivalist preacher, George Whitefield.⁵

Temporarily while at St. John’s College, Wilberforce joined the hedonistic lifestyle prevalent among the students which included gambling and late-night drinking. Upon graduation, he was determined to engage in a career of politics and was elected to Parliament in 1780.⁶ Years later, he looked back on his first few years as a politician with shame, saying, “The first years in Parliament I did nothing -- nothing to any purpose. My own distinction was my darling object.”⁷

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After reading the influential book entitled *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* by Philip Doddridge, a leading early 18th-century English theologian and author of some 400 hymns, Wilberforce was convicted of his sin, started to rise early to read the Bible, pray, and keep a private journal.⁸ At 25, received Jesus as his Savior in 1784.

Much like today, religious enthusiasm was generally regarded as a social transgression and was stigmatized in polite society.⁹ In God's sovereignty, Wilberforce met a famous abolitionist and preacher, Reverend John Newton, an Anglican clergyman, whom God had saved out of the slave trade as a Captain on a slave ship. While his first inclination was to leave politics, Newton, best known for composing the beloved hymn, "*Amazing Grace*," urged him to remain in Parliament. Newton convinced Wilberforce that God had placed him in a key position of influence to *champion* the Biblical values which had transformed his character and began informing his politics.

Indeed, his political views were shaped by his faith and his desire to promote Christianity and Christian ethics in private and public life.¹⁰ He said, "My walk is a public one. My business is in the world, and I must mix in the assemblies of men or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me."¹¹

Initially, he focused his attention on the exploitive working conditions in British factories where the workers labored for 16 hours a day for six days a week. Eventually, he focused on abolishing the slave trade in the British Empire.

The Odious British Slave Trade

The British became involved in the slave trade during the 16th century. By 1783, the triangular route that took British-made goods to Africa to buy slaves, transported the enslaved to the West Indies, and then brought slave-grown products such as sugar, tobacco, and cotton to Britain, represented almost 80 percent of Great Britain's foreign income!^{12 13} The monetary value of enslaved Africans on any given American auction-block during the mid-18th century ranged between \$800 and \$1,200, which in modern times would be equivalent to \$32,000–\$48,000 per person.¹⁴ British ships dominated the trade, supplying

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French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and British colonies, and in peak years carried 40,000 enslaved men, women and children across the Atlantic in horrific conditions.¹⁵

Slaves' treatment was horrific because the captured African men and women were considered less than human; they were "cargo", or "goods", and treated as such. For example, the *Zong*, a British slave ship, carried slaves on a voyage to the New World in 1781. Overcrowding combined with malnutrition and disease killed several crew members and around 60 slaves. Bad weather made the *Zong's* voyage slow and lack of drinking water became a concern. The crew decided to drown some slaves at sea to conserve water and allow the owners to collect insurance for "lost cargo". About 130 slaves were killed and a number chose to kill themselves in defiance, by jumping into the water willingly. The *Zong* incident became fuel for the abolitionist movement.¹⁶

The crew of the *Zong* are a Polaroid snapshot of wickedness as they shed innocent blood and made haste to run to evil. "Six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers" (Proverbs 6:16-19).

Of the estimated 11 million Africans transported into slavery, about 1.4 million died during the voyage.¹⁷ During the 18th century, when the slave trade transported about 6 million Africans, British slavers carried almost 2.5 million.

Wilberforce's Campaign to End the British Slave Trade

The British campaign to abolish the slave trade began in the 1780s with the establishment of the Quakers' anti-slavery committees and their presentation to Parliament of the first slave trade petition in 1783.¹⁸ The same year, Wilberforce met Rev. James Ramsay, a ship's surgeon became a clergyman on the island of St. Christopher (later St. Kitts) in the Leeward Islands, and a medical supervisor of the plantations there. What Ramsay witnessed of the conditions endured by the slaves, both at sea and on the plantations, horrified him.¹⁹ Wilberforce apparently did not follow up on his meeting with Ramsay.

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However, three years later, and *inspired* by his new faith, Wilberforce was growing interested in the abolition movement by a desire to put his Christian principles into action and to serve God in public life.²⁰ He and other evangelicals were horrified by what they perceived was a depraved and un-Christian trade, and the greed and avarice of the owners and traders.²¹ He said, "So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the trade's wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would: I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition."²²

Wilberforce sensed a call from God, writing in a journal entry in 1787 that "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners [moral values]"^{23 24} On May 22, 1787, the first meeting of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade took place, bringing like-minded British Quakers and Anglicans together in the same organization for the first time, pioneering techniques such as lobbying, writing pamphlets, holding public meetings, gaining press attention, organizing boycotts and even using a campaign logo: an image of a kneeling slave above the motto "Am I not a Man and a Brother?"²⁵

On May 12, 1789, Wilberforce made his first major speech on the abolition of the slave trade in the House of Commons, in which he reasoned that the trade was morally reprehensible and an issue of natural justice. He described in detail the appalling conditions in which slaves travelled from Africa in the "middle passage" to the West Indies and America.²⁶ In a 1791 speech, he ended, "You may choose to look the other way, but you can never say again that you did not know."²⁷

The pathway to abolition was blocked by vested interests, parliamentary filibustering, entrenched bigotry, international politics, slave unrest, personal sickness, and political fear. Other bills introduced by Wilberforce were defeated in 1791, 1792, 1793, 1797, 1798, 1799, 1804, and 1805.²⁸ He refused to give up, saying, "If to be feelingly alive to the sufferings of my fellow-creatures is to be a fanatic, I am one of the most incurable fanatics ever permitted to be at large." Shockingly, pro-slavery advocates claimed that enslaved Africans were lesser human beings who benefited from their bondage.²⁹

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Slavery Became a British Election Issue

Slavery became an election issue, bringing more abolitionist members of Parliament into the House of Commons, including former military men who had personally experienced the horrors of slavery and slave revolts.³⁰ Wilberforce was re-elected³¹ and spent the latter part of 1806 writing *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, which became a 400-page book summarizing the abolitionists' case.³²

Lord Grenville, the British Prime Minister, was determined to introduce an Abolition Slave Trade Bill in the House of Lords, rather than in the House of Commons, taking it through its greatest challenge first.³³ When a final vote was taken, the bill was passed in the House of Lords by a large margin. Sensing a breakthrough that had been long anticipated, Charles Grey moved for a second reading in the Commons on February 23, 1807. As tributes were made to Wilberforce, whose face *streamed* with tears, the bill was carried by 283 votes to 16.³⁴

Proverbs 21:15 promises that “When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.” The joyful tears that streamed down the face of the abolitionist were prompted by God’s justice that was going to be applied to the evildoers involved in the slave trade.

Twenty-six years later, long after he had resigned from Parliament, as Wilberforce received news that the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 - which abolished slavery in most of the British Empire -- was assured.³⁵ G.M. Trevelyan described the moment as "one of the turning events in the history of the world."³⁶

Despite the many obstacles and the 20-year-long effort, William Wilberforce was *not* deterred! He knew he had a Christian *responsibility* to speak up for the voiceless. At one point in his work he declared, “We have obtained, for these poor creatures, the recognition of their human nature, which, for a while was most shamefully denied ... Let us persevere and our triumph will be complete. Never, never will we desist till we have wiped away this scandal from the

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Christian name, released ourselves from the load of guilt, under which we at present labour, and extinguished every trace of this bloody traffic, of which our posterity, looking back to the history of these enlightened times, will scarce believe that it has been suffered to exist so long a disgrace and dishonour to this country.”³⁷

American Christians have a *Responsibility* to Register and Vote Biblically

Like William Wilberforce, we should live counter-cultural lives. While you may not feel called to run for elected office, you can make a significant difference by just *registering* and *voting* for candidates who champion Biblical values. It is your God-given *responsibility*!

Charles Finney, a prominent minister in the early 1800s, succinctly declared, “The time has come that Christians *must* vote for honest men and take consistent ground in politics or the Lord will curse them. ... God cannot sustain this free and blessed country which we love and pray for *unless* the Church will take right ground.”³⁸

“It is *vital* that Biblical voters develop an attitude of resolute steadfastness and unswervable duty,” wrote David Barton, the founder of Wall Builders. “The principle of retaking lost ground slowly, one election at a time, is neither appealing nor gratifying to our natural impatience, but it is a well-articulated Biblical principle. Therefore, arm yourself with the mentality of a marathon runner, not a sprinter.”³⁹ That was *certainly* true of Wilberforce.

Dr. Robert Jeffress, Pastor at First Baptist Church of Dallas whose Sunday School classes and small groups are studying the Jonathan Project lessons, said too many Christians have this false notion that “somehow the church is sacred and government is filthy and we shouldn't sully our spiritual clothes by getting involved in government.” He continued: “Let me remind you of something. God created three institutions: the family in Genesis 2, He created the government in Genesis 9, and the church in Acts 2. God created government *before* He created the church! He created it for a different function, but it is *still* a God-ordained

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function. And to say that Christians should have no influence on a God-ordained institution like government is *ludicrous!*"

David Barton insists that far too many God-fearing individuals have neglected their responsibilities as national voting stewards, and the impact of that neglect is now measurable. In the four elections from 1992-2002, Christian voter turnout declined by almost *40 percent*.⁴¹

The Influence of Christian Voters in the 2002, 2004, and 2006 Elections

Wall Builders looked at the voter data over several elections to show the *demonstrable* impact Christians can make.

In 2002, there was a two percent increase in Christian voter turnout above the 2000 numbers. Exit polling showed 41 percent of voters in that election identified abortion as an important issue affecting their vote: 23 percent said they voted a pro-life ticket, and 16 percent voted a pro-abortion ticket. The result was evident: of the 54 freshmen elected to the U.S. House in 2002, 36 were pro-life (67 percent) and of the 10 freshmen elected to the U.S. Senate, eight were pro-life.³¹

In 2004, Christian voter turnout *increased 93 percent* over the 2002 numbers, primarily because it was a presidential election year. In this cycle, 42 percent of voters identified abortion as an important issue: 25 percent voted pro-life and 13 percent pro-abortion. The 2004 elections sent 40 new freshmen to the U.S. House, of whom 25 were pro-life (63 percent) and nine new freshmen to the U.S. Senate, of whom seven were pro-life.³²

In those two elections when Christian voter turnout increased, a total of 94 freshmen were sent to the House, of whom 61 were pro-life (65 percent) and 19 freshmen were sent to the Senate, of whom 15 (79 percent) were pro-life. The result was the *prompt* enactment of three stand-alone federal pro-life laws: The Unborn Victims of Violence Act, the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban, and the Fetal Farming Ban.³³

Sadly, in 2006, the trend *reversed*: Christian voter turnout *fell* by 30 percent! Not surprisingly, exit polling on the percentage of voters who considered abortion an

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important issue also dropped. The result was of the 54 new freshmen sent to the U.S. House in the 2006 election, only 17 were pro-life (31 percent), and of the 10 freshmen elected to the U.S. Senate, only one was pro-life.⁴⁵ The *Baltimore Sun* described the results of that election as one producing the most *pro-abortion* Congress in the history of the Republic.³⁴ And, the reason that the 2006 Congress became so *aggressively* pro-homosexual, actually pushing through two stand-alone pro-homosexual bills, is because 92.5 percent of homosexual men and 91 percent of lesbian women voted – a percentage *much higher* than that of Biblical voters.⁴⁷

In light of the *disastrous* 2006 election results, the admonition of Daniel Webster in 1837 is quite convicting. The Congressman who became Secretary of State warned of the *tragic* consequence that could result from citizen neglect of our political system. He said, “I apprehend no danger to our country from a foreign foe ... Our destruction, should it come at all, will be from another quarter – from the *inattention* of the people to the concerns of their government – *from their carelessness and negligence*.”⁴⁸

To make matters worse, in the 2016 and 2018 elections, approximately 42% of self-described Evangelicals did *not* vote. Indeed, our greatest enemy is our own complacency.³⁷ Charles Finney, a great preacher, said, “The church must take the right ground in regard to politics. ... Christians must so their *duty to their country* as part of their *duty to God*. God will bless or curse a nation according to the course that Christians take in politics.”³⁸ Let that sink in.

What is Your Christian Responsibility in the Civic Arena?

1. **Pray for our elected officials.** I Timothy 2:1-3 says, “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Savior.”
2. **Register to vote.** Monday, October 5th is the *last day* to register to vote.

You are eligible to register to vote if:

- You are a United States citizen.

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- You are a resident of the county where you submit the application.
- You are at least 17 years and 10 months old, and you are 18 years of age on Election Day, Tuesday, November 3, 2020.
- You are not a convicted felon.

3. **Vote on the first Tuesday in November** for God-honoring candidates who will legislate God-honoring policies and appoint God-honoring judges.

Like the days of Jeremiah 29:4-7, we are called to “seek the welfare of the city” where God has called us.

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But *seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you* into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

“Seeking the welfare of the city” where God has called us includes *registering* to vote and *voting* for candidates who will champion Biblical values.

Franklin Graham said, “The year 2020 will mark a defining, watershed year in the long and storied history of our great nation. Will we continue to protect the freedoms of Christians to live and abide by their Biblical convictions?”⁵¹

Discussion Questions:

1. How do the challenges of the salmon swimming upstream compare to the challenges Christians face in today’s culture?
2. After William Wilberforce’s conversion, why did he decide to stay in Parliament as part of his heavenly calling?
3. As you review the list of the seven things that God hates in Proverbs 6:16-19, do you feel convicted about the need to vote for God-honoring candidates who will address the evils of our day?
4. On what Biblical basis did Wilberforce object to the slave trade?
5. What can we learn from Wilberforce’s unapologetic perseverance in his eight legislative attempts to abolish the slave trade?

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6. How did the election of additional members of Parliament help *ensure* the successful abolition of the slave trade?
7. Can parallels be drawn between the slave trade and abortion? How might they be similar? How might they differ?
8. What are some *primary* issues that should animate Christian voters today from The Ten Commandments?
9. With Proverbs 3:5-6 as your guide, how can you “acknowledge God” in casting your vote? (“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”)

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² Jade Blue, “Why do salmon and other fish swim upstream?”, April 24, 2017, Sciencing, accessed on March 15, 2020, <https://sciencing.com/do-other-fish-swim-upstream-8706847.html>

³ Jeffries, "Temporal changes in blood variables during final maturation and senescence in male sockeye salmon *Oncorhynchus nerka*: reduced osmoregulatory ability can predict mortality"

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⁶ Barkey, Paul, *On This Day: A Daily Guide to Spiritual Lessons from American History*, Ag Press, Manhattan, Kansas, p. 341.

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⁸ Pollock, John (1977), *Wilberforce*, New York: St. Martin's Press, p.37.

⁹ Brown, Christopher Leslie (2006), *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, pp. 380-382.

¹⁰ Brown, Christopher Leslie (2006), *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, p. 386.

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¹⁴ Soodalter, Ron, "Hell on the water" (*Civil War Times*, 2011), p. 1.

¹⁵ Hochschild, Adam (2005), *Bury the Chains, The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery*, London: Macmillan, pp.14-15.

¹⁶ “Middle Passage”, Wikipedia, accessed March 14, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_Passage

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- ¹⁹ Hague, William (2007), *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner*, London: Harper Press, p. 138-139.
- ²⁰ Brown, Christopher Leslie (2006), *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, pp. 26, 341, 458-459.
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- ²⁶ Hague, William (2007), *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner*, London: Harper Press, pp.178-183.
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- ³² Ibid, p. 351.
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- ³⁴ Pollock, John (1977), *Wilberforce*, New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 211.
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- ⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 42.
- ⁴¹ Ibid, p. 43.
- ⁴² Ibid, p. 43.
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- ⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 43.
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- ⁴⁷ Barton, David, *The Bible, Voters & the 2008 Election*, Wall Builders, Aledo, Texas, p. 44.
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