

## Leadership Series – Part I

# Jefferson and Wilberforce: Leaders Who Shaped Their Times

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In the annals of history, there are singular individuals who by superior and often unique personal qualities are able to energize many others to shape or transform their times. Often their influence seems to come from the exercise of power – military, economic, or political. Sometimes their impact comes from unique insights and galvanizing ideas that capture the imagination of large numbers of people. For people of faith, there is the added dimension of God’s activity in the world, shaping events and lives for his purposes, and raising up leaders of all stripes to positions of influence, particularly in times of crisis.

### *A Search for Heroes*

We live in an era that many describe as unprecedented in history. Various commentators refer to it as chaotic, a time of continuous, unpredictable change – permanent white-water. Rapidly spreading technology; bewildering and deadly religious and ethnic passions; moral and cultural decline – especially in the West; a global economic, political, and media influence; and the widespread availability of stunningly lethal weapons that can be employed by a single person. This is the stuff of our everyday lives and daily headlines. In such times people often greet the day with a sigh and search for wise and good leaders who can navigate the treacherous shoals. Often there is a deep need and even a craving for past examples – heroes – who have exercised transformational moral leadership and who have changed their times to give us hope and to encourage our hearts in these difficult days.

In recent years, Americans have begun to rediscover the time of our nation’s founding, closely studying the lives of a small group of Revolution leaders. Authors have relentlessly mined history in a number of biographies, searching for clues to the character and wisdom that brought the world’s first freely elected democracy into being in a time of great testing. But, perhaps we have been a bit myopic and limited in this search for leaders and heroes.

If we turn to examine England during the same time period, we would find the entire moral culture of a nation being transformed over the course of some 40

years – largely by the determined leadership of another small group, most of them scarcely known. They were men and women of Christian faith who gave up their lives and ambitions for a great moral cause. This remarkable story is perhaps best embodied in one man, called to the vocation of politics: William Wilberforce. His career spanned the administrations of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and John Quincy Adams. But his impact in transforming English morals, practices, and culture arguably gave rise to the greatest era in English history and accomplished what America could not without its bloodiest war ever – the peaceful abolition of slavery in the entire British Empire.

If we then juxtapose the founding era in America, we find one man in particular, who gave eloquent voice to the freedom of man that would roll down through the ensuing centuries as his legacy: Thomas Jefferson.

Both men, Wilberforce and Jefferson, challenged perhaps the most perplexing cultural and moral issue of their time – the existence of slavery in a free and advanced society. How each approached this challenge and how they influenced others to engage their culture is one of the more interesting and compelling lessons of leadership to be found.

### *Parallel Paths*

To begin, what is particularly intriguing in comparing these two great men is the remarkably similar nature of their early paths in life, in their public commitments, and in their choice of career. Only later in life would their actions begin to diverge – starkly.

They entered the world in the same era – Thomas Jefferson born on April 13, 1743; William Wilberforce on August 24, 1759. Each came from famous bloodlines and a privileged, achieving background: Wilberforce’s father and grandfather were wealthy merchants and his grandfather a revered politician; Jefferson’s father was an important plantation owner and a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses; his mother was a Randolph, the first family of Virginia with a line to British aristocracy.

They subsequently lost their fathers at an early age,

Jefferson at 14 and Wilberforce at the age of 10. They went on to receive an excellent education for their time, one that opened doors to important careers. Wilberforce would attend Cambridge while Jefferson attended William and Mary. Most significantly for our initial focus, each man was to come under the early influence of significant male role models who would not only mentor them but also provide them with an example and a worldview that shaped their entire lives.

In their choice of vocations, while in their early twenties, both young men embarked on a political career. And then, early on as young legislators, they made it a matter of priority to sponsor bills to eradicate slavery. And, not surprisingly, they received a common reaction from their older peers—legislative failure and personal vilification. But, the lessons each drew from those early setbacks would be quite different. In observing the roads each man subsequently chose, we come to the heart of what we will attempt to discover—why do common beliefs and common commitments not always translate into common actions in leaders? Or, in today's vernacular, what causes some to walk the talk and others not.

For while Jefferson continued to ever more sporadically speak and write against slavery for the rest of his life—most importantly in his memorable phrasing in the Declaration of Independence—he never did embody his early words with consequent actions. He died in 1826 with slavery more firmly ensconced in the culture, not only in the south, but also in the growing western lands of America as he failed to even lend a hand to a growing abolition movement. Forty years later, that failure would come home with a vengeance.

By contrast, Wilberforce would for 40 years keep a clear-eyed focus on abolishing the slave trade and then slavery itself in all of England's colonies. Before his death in 1833, word came to him that his lifelong objective had become a legal reality. In the course of his pursuit of this objective, he was to see the beginning of a cultural and moral transformation in England that made it fashionable to do good, ushering in the Victorian era for decades to come.

### *Their Times*

To be fair, for both men the difficulty of their abolition task was enormous and it daunted many others who shared their views. Not unlike our time today, each country faced threats to their national survival. They came of age in a time of revolution in both Europe and America. There was not only the common threat of military conquest but also economic failure if the slave-driven engines of the largely agrarian economies were to run down and imperil national security.

England was confronted by the threat of France,

and the example of the French and American revolutions loomed as frightening possibility at home. As an island nation that relied so heavily on trade, England's wealth was dependent on its colonies and their use of slaves to produce trading goods. Abolishing slavery would be tantamount to surrendering to their enemies and a crippling of their economy opening the door potentially to chaos.

America, throughout most of Jefferson's lifetime, would contend for freedom from what they saw as the overt and then latent tyranny of England as well as military threats from France and Spain. In addition, the passions of regional contention between the states of the industrial north and the agrarian south were fueled by a plantation economy which required more slaves as the landholdings expanded farther south and then west when the soil was depleted. This issue, alone—slave or free—as the nation grew, threatened the very capacity of a United States to hold together.

### *The Role of Mentors*

We begin by focusing on one important explanatory factor for why Wilberforce and Jefferson took different roads: the critical role their early mentors played—particularly in shaping their character and their contrasting worldviews. A significant relationship with older, wiser people is one of the key lessons of experience that shape a leader.<sup>1</sup> In particular, it is these relationships that do more to shape character than anything else.<sup>2</sup> In one of the best analyses of what shapes a leader, the authors of *The Ascent of a Leader* use the metaphor of two ladders. One is the short capability ladder where individuals identify their gifts, develop their capabilities, acquire a position or title, and ultimately reach their potential. But what is ignored in this typical pattern of developing a leader is the very reason people follow others—character leading to trust in difficult times. The longer character ladder is a development process that doesn't ignore capability but which focuses greatly on important shaping relationships such as good mentors provide. It is here that individuals learn to trust God and others with their lives, make choices to be vulnerable and open about their entire lives, align their actions with time tested truths, often paying a price for choices made, and reaching not simply a position of power, but one they have been called to by their Creator and co-laborer. This examination of their mentors is a good illustration of how the development of character and capability were different for Jefferson and Wilberforce. It is at least a beginning explanation for where and why their paths ultimately diverged.

James Houston has rightly observed that the whole subject of mentoring today has taken a turn toward

intense interest as we look for exemplars in an age of alienation.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, talk of mentors is rare in the pages of history; it was more a matter of fact. Houston ascribes it, in part, to a hunger for soul friendship in today's culture. Another more prosaic reason might be the changing demographics that find the aging population becoming much larger proportionately as younger persons acquire the leadership roles earlier than they would normally expect. The hunger for mentors we see today may be even more shaped by the whole range of issues surrounding missing parents—divorce, busyness, self-preoccupation, and absent parents (particularly fathers).

#### *Jefferson's Early Mentors*

Both Wilberforce and Jefferson would say that they were fortunate protégées and indeed, they were deeply impacted by their early mentors.

It was at William and Mary at the age of 17, that Jefferson encountered the three men who would be his most important mentors. The first, William Smalls, was a philosopher and mathematician from Scotland (and the only non-clergy person on the faculty) and one of the earliest Enlightenment scholars in America. There was also Governor Fauquier, a prominent government leader in Williamsburg, who held strong views on the role of government and the need to curtail state sponsored religion—an issue Jefferson later took up with some success. And, finally, there was attorney George Wythe who would shape Jefferson not only as his law tutor but also later as a business partner and lifelong friend. Wythe would later become a prominent Virginia leader as a signer of the Declaration of Independence and as a framer and signatory to the Constitution.

The four men formed somewhat of a European style salon during Jefferson's university years, brought together by Smalls, with the teenage Jefferson the clear beneficiary of such heady company arranged by Smalls. Here the great issues of the day were discussed and debated as Jefferson learned to think widely about the world he was entering.

Jefferson would say later in his autobiography that of the three mentors, William Smalls, his professor in mathematics and later philosophy, "probably fixed the destinies of my life."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps Smalls' greatest impact was on Jefferson's lifelong passion for science and the supremacy of rational thought over supernatural revelation.

Smalls' form of philosophy, formerly called skepticism, and later rationalism, would be fully embraced by the young Jefferson as a means of understanding the world and later the role and limits of politics. That philosophy marked the emergence of the Enlightenment in Europe and in America. Jefferson's years as

ambassador in France where the Enlightenment originated only reinforced his early discovery of the exciting new way of understanding the shaping of history and the destiny of man at William and Mary. It was also a rejection of the longstanding biblical view of the sovereign guidance of God in the affairs of men.

In one sense, this begins to explain how Jefferson could write so tellingly about slavery as a violation of rights (and not moral law). This was a central idea from the Enlightenment: a rejection of revealed truth about morality as a basis for decisions. He would also come to place his trust in the moral progress of man as the eventual answer to slavery—another central Enlightenment tenet. We will examine these impacts in greater detail later, but it is clear that the roots of those views in an older Jefferson can be traced back to Smalls and to the Williamsburg salon. It did fix Jefferson's "destinies" in ways he may not have understood. Throughout his life, Jefferson was more a man of great ideas with a faith in the ultimate perfectibility of man and society.

#### *Wilberforce's Mentors*

Wilberforce was only 10 when his father died and his mother was also ill at the time, so for two years he lived with his uncle and aunt, recent evangelical converts to Methodism under Whitefield. There he met two of their friends who both became important male role models and mentors.

The first man, John Thornton, his aunt's half brother, was also a convert under Whitefield's preaching and one of the wealthiest men in England who lived simply and used his wealth to do his "Church work." He took the unusual step of giving William a large sum of money and instructing him to use it to alleviate the needs of the poor. Here was a lesson that could be seen later in Wilberforce's life as he took up dozens of causes for the poor in England.

The other mentor, John Newton, was the colorful ship's captain, preacher, and converted slave trader—whom we know as the author of "Amazing Grace." Childless, he came to consider young William as a son. Under the influence of Thornton and Newton and that of his uncle and aunt, William became a practicing evangelical and a Methodist, alarming his mother who finally recalled him home. Though his early faith would fade as Wilberforce encountered the culture at his mother's insistence, he would later recommit his life to this faith spawned under his mentors' influence.

For Wilberforce, the most influential of his two mentors was clearly John Newton. In those early days at his aunt and uncle's, Newton and the boy he came to call his "son" became close. Newton would come to the house to preach "parlor sermons," often an exposition

on *Pilgrim's Progress*, which remained vivid in Wilberforce's memory. Later as Wilberforce came to place his entire faith in Christ after a time of wandering in the cultural enticements of his day, he came to repent of his man-about-town ways as a young, bachelor parliamentarian.

Newton had not lost track of Wilberforce over the ensuing years but followed his career, even using him to illustrate how a life could go off track. "The most promising views of this sort (Christian conviction) I ever met with were in the case of Mr. Wilberforce when he was a boy but now they seem entirely worn off, not a trace left behind, except a deportment comparatively decent and moral in a young man of a large fortune."<sup>5</sup>

It was on the heels of his recommitment to his earlier Christian faith that he secretly sought out Newton for advice. To openly associate with such a religious enthusiast as Newton would potentially doom Wilberforce's political career, yet the two met. This was to be a life changing conversation, because Wilberforce had concluded that now as a professing Christian, he could not remain in the sordid world of politics but must instead enter the ministry. He sought confirmation from Newton only to be told that his calling was to remain where he was. The government needed godly leaders during difficult times. Newton made it clear that his calling to politics was not a lesser choice.

This understanding of vocation would become the centerpiece for Wilberforce's work for the next 40 years and soon led him directly to his clearer understanding of his call. In 1787 he saw his specific mission was laid down in "two great objects" that came from God—to abolish slavery in all of Britain's colonies and to reform the manners and morals of England. Against horrendous odds, that breathtaking vision remained his focus for the rest of his life.

Newton's early influence led to the conversion of young William; his later influence was certainly twofold. First, in helping Wilberforce to see that his vocation, his calling by God, was politics, not the church. This ran counter to the common view that the highest expression of religious commitment was to be in the profession of clergy. Second, Newton helped Wilberforce to understand the horrors of the capture and transporting of slaves where almost half would die in what was called "the middle passage." It not only galvanized William's conscience, it provided him with the beginnings of his exhaustive documentation of the realities of slavery that proved so effective in the debates that led up to the slave trade being ended in 1807. Without Newton's influence as a mentor, it is doubtful that Wilberforce would have become the man in later life that became known as "the Washington of humanity." It was in the shaping of Wilberforce's

character that Newton made the greatest impact.

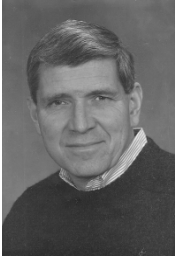
### Conclusion

Two older men, Smalls and Newton, were at the forefront of those who shaped the thinking and ultimately the destinies, not only of Jefferson and Wilberforce, but arguably of America and England as well. Their place is perhaps little appreciated but clearly they were a part of God's design for the lives of Jefferson and Wilberforce as both began their rise to power. Their role is at least one piece to the puzzle of why the leadership of Jefferson and Wilberforce in transforming their cultures was one of divergence from their early commitments. Jefferson became a man of science, philosophy, and rational thought, trusting in the forces of enlightened minds. Wilberforce became a man with a calling and a commitment to act on that call, empowered by a God who acted in history.

However, a fuller explanation remains as we next examine the role of their colleagues, followers and supporters in shaping their commitments and then as we take a fuller look at how their worldviews shaped not only their choices but their legacies in shaping the culture of their times.

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- 1 Morgan McCall, Jr., Michael Lombardo, Ann Morrison, *The Lessons of Experience*, (New York: Lexington books, 1988), p. 68.
  - 2 Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, Ken McElrath, *The Ascent of the Leader: How Ordinary Relationships Develop Extraordinary Character and Influence*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999); Howard and William Hendricks, *As Iron Sharpens Iron: Building Character in a Mentoring Relationship*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995)
  - 3 James M. Houston, *The Mentored Life*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 16.
  - 4 Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, (New York: Random House, 1944), p. 4
  - 5 Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 95



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