

A Vision of Transformation: Insights from William Wilberforce

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Introduction

Here we are in 2008 and the visionary rhetoric is flying at us from all directions. Everywhere we turn words like “change”, “vision” and “transformation” are in the air. God-language is everywhere – even a former candidate, while endorsing a current front-runner, proclaimed, “We serve an awesome God!” Of course, it is an open question how Senator John Kerry conceptualizes his god! We have everyone arguing in multiple directions about healing and hope, character and competence and crisis management. Selective memories are operating at full capacity as legends are fabricated and re-fabricated to each audience.

We need a fresh vision of what it means to transform a culture. This vision must transcend ideological boxes, party politics and even narrow eschatologies. It must be rooted in truth and virtue while helping people live with their deepest differences. It must recapture our Founder’s spirit while moving us into the future.

Every decision we make consists of our assessments of the past and our aspirations for the future. How we distill history and define hope will stimulate present habits. If we are lost in nostalgia or utopia, we will never move forward. Conversely, if we fail to learn from history and articulate hope in a way that touches the heart, there will not be the willpower to change.

One example of transforming vision is found in the life of William Wilberforce, the great English antislavery leader of the late 18th and early 19th century.

His story as recently been popularized by the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in England and by the movie *Amazing Grace*. Without giving an exhaustive biography, a glimpse of his life can give us a window into the character and community needed to transform our own culture. There are critical lessons of leadership and vision that can propel us forward. Let me combine his story and ours and put forward what I call

A Manifesto of Transformation:

(Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation with his 95 Thesis – I offer just seven. Luther wanted to debate with scholars – I want all people to consider the opportunity before us.)

Thesis One: **Faith and Social Transformation are Inseparable.**

Wilberforce united his faith and his public works, discovering after a few years in Parliament that simply “advancing his own appearance” was not enough. (How I wish politicians today would have the same agitation of conscience!) His personal religious awakening dovetailed with the recognition that it was *just as holy and spiritual to engage in social transformation, as it was to join the clergy*. Wilberforce did want others to be converted and consecrated to a robust Christianity; however, he had the skill and wisdom to work with all who wanted the abolition of slavery and the transformation of morals, regardless of religious party.

Wilberforce was roundly criticized and even hated for being public with his convictions. Some in the House of Lords said that faith was to be “privately engaging but publicly irrelevant.” Wilberforce just kept working.

In our 21st century world, we must be unafraid to allow our deepest values to guide our social policy and political choices. *Pastors need to stop cowering at the specter of the IRS and realize that as long as they do not endorse a specific party or candidate, they can – and must – speak out as prophets on the moral and social ills of our day!*

Thesis Two: **We must have a Comprehensive Vision of Transformation.**

Wilberforce had a comprehensive perspective, not a single-issue agenda. He knew that slavery was the defining public issue, but he worked tirelessly for scores of other causes including child labor laws, education for the poor, the protection of animals, the improvement of public hygiene, programs for those in need and even alternatives to the gin that was killing the urban poor.

What does a transformed America look like?

- Does it have a more decentralized government, with local agencies delivering the goods and services far more efficiently than a distant bureaucracy?
- Does a transformed America protect the vulnerable, from conception to coronation?
- Does a transformed America welcome an immigrant to become a legal citizen, and build Ellis Island type Welcome Centers along a secure border?
- Does a transformed America continually rebuild her infrastructure with private/public partnerships?
- Does a transformed America renew her commitment to moral and spiritual values that ensure a stable and virtuous citizenry for future generations?
- Does a transformed America care for her poor right now and provide long-term solutions?

The list can go on...Wilberforce and his Clapham community would not rest until all facets of life were changed. Not everything involved legislation – often it was persuasion and volunteerism that won the day. He and his band were active in behalf of chimney sweeps, single moms, orphans and widows and others left behind by the Industrial Revolution. It is easy to say that we live in a global, information-driven age...how does that help a displaced factory worker?

Thesis Three: **Transformation takes Perseverance.** There will be enormous personal and social pressure. Wilberforce confronted many moments of intense emotional and physical stress and the sacrifices were many, but he and his team persevered. We will lose some battles – but if we really are principled and passionate, and if our heads, hearts and hands are integrated, we can prevail.

Thesis Four: **We must appeal to the First Principles that are deeply held by people of all faiths or none.** Freedom of conscience and speech, opportunity to flourish free from an over controlling government, help for the poor and vulnerable, defense of the defenseless, wise use of resources ensuring prosperity for posterity – all of these are facets of a world-view held by most thoughtful people. Wilberforce wanted all persons to believe as he did, but he managed to cobble coalitions that got the work done. How are

we building consensus among families who want a better world for their children?

Thesis Five: We are in a Battle for the Soul of our Civilization – and the good of the world. Wilberforce had to confront the class system, greed and racism of his day with blunt words and works. We will not succeed with platitudes – our hands have to take the plow and work. We cannot help families by rhetoric. We must literally embark on a generation-long mission of education, incentives, restructuring and sacrifice – or we will amuse ourselves to death and watch our nation fall into the hands of either a global, secular elite or a radical religion within our lifetime. We must empower the inner city neighborhoods and stop redlining. We must network with charities and churches, businesses and governmental agencies – always asking the moral and practical question, “Does this move us forward toward a freer, more just society?”

Thesis Six: While affirming a comprehensive vision of transformation, we must also decide what issues take priority and wisely choose our battles. Wilberforce wanted to eventually abolish slavery; however, he focused on the cruelties of the slave trade as a first step. He and the Clapham Group wanted to transform all manners, but they chose the most egregious first and then worked their way through the list. There are enough human resources to accomplish everything needed for abundance; however, it will take courage and discipline to get there. Our governor calls for sacrifice with our home heating usage while passing legislation costing millions to rewrite textbooks for a tiny politically charged minority. We cannot afford some basic services, but we multiply bureaucracy and jobs for the elite! *Let me be blunt – we must not abandon public education!*

Thesis Seven: Our Vision for Transformation must include generous, non-coercive help to all nations who long for the same freedoms we cherish. Wilberforce cared about missionary activity and social challenges in India. He knew that if the British Empire stood for justice, much of the world would take notice. I am not advocating more or less foreign aid. *I am advocating principles and practices that are universal and apply anywhere that people love freedom of conscience and personal and community opportunity.* I challenge moderate Muslims everywhere to demonstrate that Islam can treat people of other faiths or none with the same toleration that they are given in the West. At the same time, the perception of our nation and others who share this vision must be more than fast food and fast living!

This Vision for Transformation begins with concrete actions here in Silicon Valley and in California. It begins with loving our neighbors and neighborhoods enough to roll up our sleeves and do something every day to add value to others.

Regardless of your religious persuasion, every good action is a signpost of the future, a down payment for both eternity and the history yet to be made by our children.

Give to the VAC. Find the causes closest to your heart and persevere. If we each do something, much can change. If most of us do nothing, things will change – but only toward a nihilistic or totalitarian future too bleak to consider.

Let's take back our culture, persuading even our enemies of our integrity and cry for justice.