

The Challenge of Wilberforce

Aim:

Although “The Challenge of Wilberforce” does not directly address the issues of trade and debt, it has proved very popular in challenging people to continue in their campaign work. It has a local resonance for Credo because the great anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce was from Hull, but for everyone his story is an inspiration because his struggle spanned across many years, but eventually changed the world.

Performers:

1 voice

5 actors

Props etc:

Slave poster and advertisement

(e.g.

http://c.fastcompany.net/multisite_files/codesign/imagecache/inline-large/post-inline/inline-slave-trade-infographic-7368885460-550b83c0a8-o.jpg and

http://new.rejesus.co.uk/images/area_uploads/wilberforce/story_2.jpg)

Notes:

This piece works best when the debate feels authentic in its pace and passion. Don't worry if every word of the argument isn't absolutely clear. The debaters should be voicing agreement/grievances throughout the last section. The more of a shock the first interruption can be, the better.

The voice at the end should be adapted to suit the context of the piece.

The Challenge of Wilberforce

Voice: Because we know of his final success, it is difficult at times to remember the struggles that William Wilberforce must have gone through during his campaign. Here we see a man wracked with anxiety at the proposal and responsibility before him, a young man, used to the decadent life during his days as a student and statesman, whose newfound faith spurs him into action.

William Wilberforce is sitting at a desk, writing in his diary.

Wilberforce: 5th June, 1786:

As soon as I begin to reflect seriously upon my growing faith, the deep guilt and black ingratitude of my past life forces itself upon me in the strongest colours and I condemn myself for having wasted precious time and opportunities and talents.

I begin to realise more and more that my heart and mind should be full of faith, not simply theology and doctrine, nor even the most elegant of sermons. I must allow the gospel to embrace every aspect of my life and actions.

God Almighty has set before me two great objectives, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners in our country. Indeed, I respect those who already work and speak to this motion. I recognise the great importance of the subject, and yet, I must admit, feel inadequate for the task ahead.

12th May 1789

Today I rose to address the house of Commons, for the first time, on the slave trade. I felt unprepared and inadequate, due to illness. Indeed, I feared that I might even be unable to complete my speech.

My fears were unfounded. Incredibly, the house listened for three and a half hours, as I explained all things in detail.

I trust that I have shown that it is good policy for the trade to be abolished. However, I must stress, and I am not ashamed to say, there is principle above everything that is political, and when I reflect on the command that says "thou shalt not murder", believing the authority to be divine, how can I dare to set out any reasoning of my own against it, and when we think of eternity and of the future consequences of all human conduct, what is there in this life that could make any man contradict the dictates of his conscience, and principles of justice, and the laws of religion, and of God.

Voice : William Wilberforce brought the first motion for the Abolition of Slavery to Parliament in 1789. It was defeated. He made the same proposal every year, to be defeated, for the next twenty years.

Reaction to the Motion

William Wilberforce now stands to address the room. He is at the end of a passionate speech.

Wilberforce) And so I conclude, honoured gentlemen, yet again, that as the leaders of a civilised nation, we must lead the way to justice and humanity, and that the Abolition of Slavery is the only conclusion that we can come to in the sight of God. Scenes such as this and advertisements which

hold a human being as of no greater worth than as commodities to be traded, must be abolished for the sake of honour and respectability.

1) My dear Mr Wilberforce, must we yet again be bombarded with your "honour" and your "respectability"? The majority of these slaves were prisoners of war, who would otherwise have been killed. They owe us their lives, and it is widely acknowledged that our slaves in the West Indies lead better lives than if left in Africa. Indeed, have you not heard that our trade in slaves is known as a respectable trade?

W) (*holding up picture of slave trade*) Is the transportation of our fellow man as cattle respectable? Is it respectable to shackle and beat as dogs, our fellow man?

2) Again, why must we keep hearing of our "fellow" man as though these people are our equals? As a man of religion, you are conveniently forgetting that the Bible tells us that as a race, we are superior, and have been ever since God cursed the children of Ham and made them black.

1) In which case, as I say, we are improving their lot. If we give up the trade other nations will take it on, and then their lives could easily be worsened - we are giving them opportunities

W) Where can there be opportunities without choice?

3) My dear Wilberforce, you know I stand as a brother in faith, but please remember, though liberty is a sweet thing to such as are born free, yet to those who never knew the sweets of it, slavery may not be so irksome.

4) We could debate the rights and wrongs of the matter as infinitum, but the simple fact is that the Plantations are the backbone of our prosperity, without slaves we simply could not operate.

2) These people know no other - we should stop judging them with the same standards.

3) All people are valuable in God's sight, indeed I hope that many will turn to Him and thus gain eternal salvation, and then their present condition will be merely a temporal inconvenience.

4) The point is that the Abolition of slavery will mean the total abandonment of the West Indies, and the loss of the entire British shipbuilding industry, with nearly 20,000 jobs affected

1) Mr Wilberforce, do you really want to change things merely for the sake of change? The absolute necessity for the slave trade must, since there is no other, be its excuse.

4) Do you really want to improve their condition, those who have no understanding of our view of harsh treatment, and damage that of your own countrymen?

2) If the slave trade is abolished we would yield national prestige and naval power to other nations, is that what you want Mr Wilberforce?

W) Is this what you want, gentlemen, to stand before God on the Day of Reckoning and attempt to justify this (*holds poster*) and this (*holds advert.*) and your decision against your fellow men today, is that what you want?

Voice: William Wilberforce finally saw his motion for the Abolition of the Slave Trade carried in Parliament on February 23rd 1807, by a staggering 283 votes to a mere 16. His fight for justice had taken over 20 years, and it was to be a further 26 years before those who were already slaves gained their rightful freedom.

Alternative ending

Voice: William Wilberforce brought the first motion for the Abolition of Slavery to Parliament in 1789. It was defeated. He made the same proposal every year, to be defeated for the next twenty years.