

The Acoustics of Abolition

*Recovering the Evangelical Anti-Slave Trade Discourse Through
Late-Eighteenth-Century Sermons, Hymns, and Prayers*

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Abstract

This thesis explores the late-eighteenth-century movement to end Britain's transatlantic slave trade through recovering one of the major discourses in favour of abolition, namely that of the evangelical Anglicans. This important intellectual milieu has often been ignored in academia and is discovered through examining the sermons, hymns, and prayers of three influential leaders in this movement: Member of Parliament William Wilberforce, pastor and hymn writer John Newton, and pastor and professor Charles Simeon. Their oral texts reveal that at the heart of their discourse lies the doctrine of Atonement.

On this foundation these abolitionists primarily built a vocabulary not of human rights, but of public duty. This duty was both to care for the destitute as individuals and to protect their nation as a whole because they believed that God was the defender of the enslaved and that he would bring providential judgement on those nations that ignored their plight. For the British evangelicals, abolishing the slave trade was not merely a means to avoid impending judgement, but also part of a broader project to prepare the way for Jesus's imminent return through advancing the work of reconciliation between humankind and God as they believed themselves to be confronting evil in all of its forms. By reconfiguring the evangelical abolitionist arguments within their religious framework and social contexts, this thesis helps overcome the dissonance that separates our world from theirs and makes accessible the eighteenth-century abolitionist discourse of a campaign that continues to resonate with human rights activists and scholars of social change in the twenty-first century.

Acknowledgements

“It’s a dangerous business . . . going out of your door,” Bilbo wisely cautions Frodo in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. “You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.”* The elderly hobbit was quite right. When I began this thesis, I had little idea of the adventure it would be or that it would require my travelling across the Atlantic to work through five archives in Oxford, Cambridge, and London. In the process I, like the unsuspecting hobbit, incurred a debt of gratitude to many without whose assistance my thesis would never have been completed.

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* J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings*, 2nd ed. (London: Unwin Hyman, 1966), 83.

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Writing a thesis about a subject that touches on the suffering of not just thousands but millions of others is disturbing in many ways. My comfortable, voluntary trip across the Atlantic Ocean to the archives was a stark contrast to the journey the enslaved Africans were forced upon across the very same ocean. This paper is written in their memory and dedicated to those in our present day whom the law neither recognizes as persons nor protects as humans.

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Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London
BOD	Bodleian Library, Oxford
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library, London
KCL	King's College Library, Cambridge
RID	Ridley Hall Library, Cambridge

Introduction

Over the course of one hundred years, Britons built up their industry and empire, in part, through buying and trading millions of men, women, and children stolen from Western Africa and selling them to slave owners in the Americas. Laws did not protect the abducted Africans, and no rights were granted to them as they were taken from their homes, crammed into ships, deprived of their most basic needs, and exploited beyond imagination: whipped, beaten, and many of them repeatedly raped during the ocean passage en route to the slave markets in the New World.

Occasionally individual voices condemned this commerce in human beings, but there was no concerted effort to abolish the British slave trade until the second half of the eighteenth century, when efforts culminated in the campaign led by William Wilberforce to make the slave trade illegal by an Act of Parliament. From 1787 until 1807, he together with many other Britons dedicated himself to bringing an end to this horrific practice. They faced opposition from some of the most powerful economic interests and politicians of their day, and yet year after year, with the odds against them, they sought to bring an end to this unmitigated evil—an evil which took place hundreds of miles away from Britain itself. Defeated in Parliament, mocked in the press, and undermined by their colleagues, some, though not all, remained steadfast until the British slave trade was finally abolished.

The process by which the world's most extensive slave trade was brought to an end in the early nineteenth century has captivated the hearts and minds of academics and activists for generations. Twenty-first-century initiatives to address continuing human rights violations often draw on the images, slogans, and narratives of this late-eighteenth-

century campaign. The William Wilberforce Award is given by Free the Slaves International to encourage champions against modern-day slavery; the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation is a graduate school at the University of Hull, which offers expertise on both historical and contemporary slavery. The interest is not purely academic: in the wake of the recent bicentennial commemoration of Parliament's passing of Wilberforce's 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, activists and politicians have increasingly turned to William Wilberforce and his colleagues for insights and quotations to motivate and inspire new generations to stand with the vulnerable and endure through repeated setbacks and failures. As they do, they face a central question: what was it that motivated Wilberforce and his contemporaries to sacrifice so much, struggle so long, and stand in the face of their society even when their cause looked hopeless? Was the driving force behind the antislavery movement primarily economic, as some have suggested, or was it based in the Enlightenment ideology of human goodness and human rights? Were their goals shaped by the rhetoric of religion and the missionary movement? Again, these questions are not purely academic: if we can find what drove these men and women, perhaps we can better understand what forces are able, and necessary, to drive change in our own day.

Many have searched for the answer, but in so much of this work, twenty-first-century ideas, such as the separation between the sacred and the secular, are projected onto the eighteenth-century mind, thereby inhibiting our ability to more accurately understand the campaign to abolish the slave trade as it was understood by those who gave meaning to the vocabulary still at the heart of today's popular discourse of human

rights. How then did contemporary Britons recall the protracted process to abolish the slave trade?

Keen interest in the telling of this story can be found from the time it was achieved until the present day. Just one year after the slave trade was abolished, the Reverend Thomas Clarkson embarked on an expansive two-volume history titled *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British Parliament*.¹ Clarkson, himself one of the most prominent champions of abolition, offered a riveting account of the movement which elevated the handful of individuals who coordinated the campaign to hero status—with a special emphasis on his own contribution. In an effort to counter the Clarkson-centric version, two of Wilberforce's sons wrote a five-volume biography/memoir, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, which maintained the heroic rendition of this cluster of activists but moved the focus from Clarkson to their father as the main figure of abolition.² These accounts see abolition as driven by the personal piety, compassion, strength, and determination of its chief proponents. While these two historical accounts provide insight into how the abolitionists and their families perceived their own anti-slave trade campaigns, these histories lack the distance and rigorous critique that historical scholarship demands. In this way, their work is more akin to primary sources than to secondary research.

When professional scholarly work was undertaken in the following generation, it further elevated the heroic stature of the abolitionists. The Victorian historian W.H.C. Lecky famously proclaimed that the campaign to end Britain's slave trade was “among

¹ Thomas Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols. (London: Taylor and Co., 1808).

² Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1838).

the three or four perfectly virtuous acts recorded in the history of nations.”³ The abolitionists served as symbols of human goodness and self-sacrifice.⁴ The climax of this scholarly sentiment came in the centenary of Wilberforce’s death. As the noted historian of early modern Britain, William G. Palmer, observes, “In 1933 when the centennial of Wilberforce’s death was celebrated in his hometown of Hull, it resembled the funeral of a great Norse warrior, complete with parades, wreath layings, memorial lectures, church services, trumpet fanfares, and the unfurling of nearly fifty flags from foreign countries.”⁵ Wilberforce, it seemed, not only served to inspire citizens to care for the vulnerable, but could also be appropriated by those seeking to advance an image of Britain’s prestige. The campaign to end the British slave trade stood as an example of Britain’s benevolent role in world affairs; and precisely at a time when empires were losing legitimacy, rather paradoxically it reinforced colonialism. Then as now, the history of the movement to end the British slave trade had implications far beyond the past. It was a dynamic component of contemporary discussion and debate on human rights, the role of the state, and the intersection between faith and politics.

This self-congratulatory abolitionist narrative was dramatically undermined in the 1930s by Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery*, which challenged the academic world with the argument that the abolition of the slave trade had nothing to do with religious zeal or humanitarian concern but was quite simply the direct result of economic forces and self-interest. Williams knew well the real-world implications of these scholarly

³ William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1869), 161.

⁴ Ernest Marshall Howse, *Saints in Politics: The “Clapham Sect” And the Growth of Freedom* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952).

⁵ William G. Palmer, “How Ideology Works: Historians and the Case of British Abolitionism,” *The Historical Journal*, 52, 4 (2009), 1040.

assertions, working not only as a professor but also as one of the main protagonists for Trinidad and Tobago's independence. In his Marxist interpretation of abolition, Williams claimed the slave trade had enjoyed the support of Parliament for as long as it was profitable, but by the turn of the nineteenth century the trade had lost its economic utility and was therefore discarded. The slave trade, according to his argument, helped make possible the early stages of industrialization, but with the emerging factory work and capitalist system, wage labour became the most profitable means of exploitation. He argued that it was this reason alone that motivated Parliament to abolish the slave trade.⁶ His argument is succinctly summarized by Barbara Lewis Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, who explain, "Britain's antislavery measures [were] economically-determined acts of national self-interest, cynically disguised as humanitarian triumphs."⁷ According to Williams's thesis, not only were the humanitarian appeals empty, they were also subversive because they were a facade by which further pillage and exploitation could continue. Williams not only challenged previous perceptions, he crushed them; and his thesis became the new orthodoxy of abolitionist scholarship for the next three decades. Though academics continued to write about various facets of the campaign, what could not be questioned was the view that the abolitionists' motivations were neither benevolent nor humanitarian.

One of the most influential books downplaying the role of humanitarian concern in abolition came in 1961 when Ford K. Brown crafted one of the most compelling accounts of the abolitionist campaign in his book *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of*

⁶ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Richmond, VA: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

⁷ Barbara Lewis Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 209.

Wilberforce.⁸ Brown countered Williams's theory that the campaign was driven entirely by economic factors, reintroducing religion as a major driving force of abolition. He insisted that evangelicalism—the branch of Christianity to which many abolitionists subscribed—cared only about souls being saved, and that evangelicals were indifferent to humanitarian concerns. Brown asserted, “Emancipation itself was not an end. It might lead to the wonderful accomplishment of introducing the Gospel . . . The opening of Africa and the East to the missionaries was the thing itself.”⁹ Brown believed that the cause of abolition served as a means for the evangelicals to gain influence by rallying people to something over which they could take leadership and thereby advance their mission. While this argument diverges from Williams's economic exclusivity, it conformed to his view that the abolitionists' words about the inhumane suffering of the enslaved were simply rhetoric used to further other aims.

Williams's thesis and its broad acceptance held until the early 1970s, when scholars began challenging the notion that these arguments could not be fully questioned. This effort was led by Roger Anstey, who by the force of his own scholarship and by providing, in the words of David Brion Davis, the “organizational impetus for international and comparative scholarship,” helped bolster respect for those who sought to challenge the views that had been assumed since Eric Williams.¹⁰ Anstey organized symposiums and conferences where scholars were encouraged to tackle questions on abolition from new perspectives.¹¹ As an historian, Anstey felt that the refusal to disagree

⁸ Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

⁹ Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, 383.

¹⁰ David Brion Davis, “An Appreciation of Roger,” *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey*, eds., Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (Kent: Dawson, 1980), 11.

¹¹ Davis, “An Appreciation,” 11.

with each other was undermining the credibility of all those involved in the study of abolition.

For Anstey, these discussions concerning the abolitionists' motives were far more than mere academic debates; the moral and theological underpinnings of his entire worldview were at stake. Unlike the majority of the scholars of abolition, Anstey shared the evangelical faith of the abolitionists. Instead of suggesting that this undermined the integrity of Anstey's work, the secularist Davis argues that Anstey's evangelicalism gave him insight into this subject in that he understood the implications of the abolitionists' convictions.¹² The abolitionists themselves, after all, connected their work to the specific doctrines of their faith. If the abolitionists' appeals to moral authority were merely a facade to cover nefarious objectives, then his own moral worldview might crumble. If their enthusiasm for ending the slave trade was merely a matter of economic calculations, then his own faith might also have been only about materialism and wealth. If the strength that sustained and animated abolitionists was merely a matter of economic determinism, then the power of the cross that he so firmly believed in was of little or no value. What was at stake in this question, as Anstey found, was nothing less than some of the most fundamental tenets not only of his Christian faith, but also of the central claims of the abolitionists. These claims are relevant not only to the person of faith, but also to those without faith. Just as Anstey's shared belief in God with his subjects inclined him toward accepting Wilberforce's claim that he had heard from God, so also the atheist's theological disagreement inclines him or her to disbelieve that Wilberforce heard from God. Were the atheist to accept the premise of the evangelical paradigm, his or her own worldview would crumble. Laymen do well to consider these questions, and scholars

¹² Davis, "An Appreciation," 11.

cannot ignore them. The human rights activist as well as the person of faith, the economist as well as the priest, has much to learn from examining the movement to abolish Britain's slave trade with the intensity that Anstey did.

Anstey's *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* supported the pre-Williams perception that abolition was inspired by evangelical theology and humanitarian concern.¹³ However, it was Seymour Drescher, in 1977, whose *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* dealt the most serious blow to the argument of scepticism.¹⁴ Combining economic and cultural history, Drescher carefully and meticulously explained how the Britons of the eighteenth century understood that ending the slave trade would prove to be disadvantageous to their economy. In fact, he shows that abolition was economic suicide (“econocide”) and that the abolitionists understood it to be so. He did not put forward an alternative reason as to why the slave trade was abolished, leaving that vital question to further research.

As part of the effort to answer the question created by Drescher's work, a number of scholars turned to examining the populist aspect of the campaign. J.R. Oldfield's *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* highlights the need to consider the antislavery motivation of the general public, not of the leaders only, and emphasizes the role of the London Committee of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in bringing antislavery to the forefront of the nation's conscience.¹⁵ He specifically argues against Anstey's thesis

¹³ Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* (London: Macmillan, 1975).

¹⁴ Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977).

¹⁵ J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807*, 2nd Edition (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

that evangelicalism was responsible for abolition and instead emphasizes the London Committee's work in mobilizing support. Particular attention is devoted to the symbols of antislavery, and in these he does not find an overtly religious dimension. Like Oldfield, Drescher also turned his attention toward the popular nature of the campaign, and in "Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade" he argues that abolition was not the plan of the elites but the achievement of the masses.¹⁶ This directly challenges Oldfield's emphasis on the role of the London Committee, but like Oldfield, he perpetuates the view that a religious dimension was not integral to the campaign.

The most influential book in the recent and voluminous scholarship in the field is Christopher Leslie Brown's *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*.¹⁷ The novelty of this monograph is that it recognizes the importance of the religious and moral argument while at the same time effacing the self-congratulatory perspective that was so common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Brown helpfully reminds academia that unlike Williams's portrayal of it, abolitionism was not inevitable and that the story could very possibly have gone another way. The main thrust of his argument is that Britons felt they needed to regain the moral capital their nation had lost through America's achievement of independence grounded on the ideals of liberty. Abolishing the slave trade would return Britannia to the moral high ground Britons assumed they occupied—at least in relation to other European powers.

¹⁶ Seymour Drescher, "Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade," *Past & Present* No. 143 (May 1994), 136–166.

¹⁷ Christopher Leslie Brown's *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006).

Brown's work on how abolitionism was used to restore moral credibility and international prestige to Britain, which then used it to justify imperial expansion, is illuminating, but his view on the place of American independence in fuelling abolitionism is overstated. Certainly American independence was a factor in British abolition, and abolition might not have occurred without it, but as one pauses to consider the abolitionist discourse of the time, one begins to distinguish a religious sentiment that penetrates deeper than a demand for moral credibility on the world stage. Indeed, a number of abolitionists believed Britain's very existence as a country depended on abolition. In examining the intellectual world the evangelicals operated in, one begins to see that the legacy of their vocabulary and the inspiration of their dedication to abolition had less to do with arguments in economic treatises or international politics and more to do with the evangelical sermons of their day, and yet at the same time one finds that there were in fact not one, but a variety of discourses at play in the abolitionist movement.

The central question of so many of the monographs mentioned above, and in fact the majority of scholars of British abolitionism, remains: what exactly was the driving force behind this movement? Perhaps this is the wrong question. Missing from virtually all of the scholarship on abolition is a consideration of the fact that while the very words with which the abolitionists formed their arguments are still in use today—*rights*, *duty*, and *humanity*—they were used within a profoundly different paradigm than that embraced by human rights activists or secular historians of the twenty-first century. Although those dedicated to abolishing the slave trade came from a broad ideological and theological spectrum, with many key champions among the Quakers, still others among the other nonconformists and Anglicans, and secularists such as Charles James Fox, those

leading the campaign within *Parliament* were primarily evangelical Anglicans. Therefore, in order to break through twenty-first-century ahistorical assumptions and begin to comprehend the discourse of the political abolitionist campaign as it was spoken and heard by contemporaries, it is necessary to recover the intellectual world of these late-eighteenth-century evangelical Anglicans by taking the time to reconstruct their theological milieu.

Scholars primarily examine the anti-slave trade campaign and the rise of evangelical enthusiasm as discrete historical movements. Although this interpretive framework elucidates the key features of the era, this separation veils the far-reaching potency of the early language of humanity and social responsibility and renders an understanding of the nature of eighteenth-century evangelical thought inaccessible—a setback considering that the abolitionist leaders were steeped in such thought. As Joel Quirk and David Richardson observe, for all that has been written on the movement to end the slave trade, there remains a “need to relate the anti-slavery movement to broader changes in British society.”¹⁸ This is certainly the case. Examining the shared theological dimensions among the evangelicals of the various campaigns sheds light on how these individuals gave meaning to the vocabulary of social responsibility which is still very much a part of twenty-first-century discussions on human rights.

This thesis will not answer the questions as to why abolition occurred when it did, nor will it assert that there was one single driving force behind the entire movement. The reality is likely more nuanced than these questions make room for. Instead, this thesis will help make possible the search for answers to these questions of causality by

¹⁸ Joel Quirk and David Richardson, “Religion, Urbanisation and Anti-Slavery Mobilisation in Britain, 1787–1833,” *European Journal of English Studies* (2010), vol. 14, issue 3, 264.

examining in detail one of the abolitionist discourses, specifically the religious convictions of the evangelical Anglicans.

“Religious history and intellectual history are two of the most dynamic fields of contemporary historical inquiry,” note Professors John Coffey and Alister Chapman. “Yet historians of ideas and historians of religion often plough separate furrows, paying little attention to each other’s work.”¹⁹ These two scholars edited a collection of essays building on the distinguished scholar Quentin Skinner’s effort to remind historians of the need to think historically, an approach he outlined in *Visions of Politics*:

If we are to write the history of ideas in a properly historical style, we need to situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts and frameworks of discourse as enable us to recognise what their authors were doing in writing them . . . My aspiration is not of course to perform the impossible task of getting inside the heads of long dead thinkers; it is simply to use the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to recover their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way.²⁰

Although Skinner’s work has been helpful in orienting young historians to their craft, his own work paid scant attention to the religious dimension of thought. As David Wooton, the noted historian of early modern political argument notes, “The problem with [Skinner’s] methodology is that it tends to lay insufficient stress on those issues, which authors and their audiences so took for granted that they felt they were scarcely in need of discussion . . . The most historically significant ideas, I would submit, are often those which are taken most generally for granted.”²¹ This is certainly the case with the public

¹⁹ Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory, eds., *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 1.

²⁰ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), vii.

²¹ David Wooton, “The Fear of God in Early Modern Political Theory,” *Historical Papers/Communications historiques*, vol. 18, no 1, 1983, 79

speeches and publications of the evangelicals in the anti–slave trade movement. In fact, this may be one reason why the evangelical discourse of abolition has been so difficult to elucidate. Rather than in newspapers and economic treatises (traditional sources for scholarship on abolition), it is in the sermons and hymns preached and sung each Sunday that the evangelical discourse is made most explicit. Accordingly, in seeking to recover the world in which this anti–slave trade discourse was created, one must turn to that which was expressed in sermons, songs, and prayers: their theology. This thesis is not arguing that evangelicalism was necessarily the movement’s dominant discourse. Instead, it recognizes that evangelicalism was one of the important discourses in the abolitionist movement and seeks to understand this discourse by examining the primary modes of its communication. Accordingly, by the final chapter of this work, one will not have achieved a complete grasp of the one anti–slave trade outlook because there isn’t one anti–slave trade outlook, but one will be able to hear more clearly what a key set of abolitionists were saying, including one of the chief spokespersons for abolition, William Wilberforce. This thesis on abolition, then, is both a study of religion and of ideas, at the same time a history of human rights and a history of theology.

The effort to make this particular abolitionist discourse accessible has unique challenges, because while historians primarily study written texts, the primary means by which evangelicals expressed and experienced their theology was through sermons, hymns, and prayers: all of these were encountered audibly rather than through the written word. Hymns were sung, while prayers and sermons were spoken. A historian’s written work is limited in its ability to convey the audible experience, and one must bear in mind the limitations inherent in this approach as one proceeds. As Leigh Eric Schmidt has

observed in *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*, “The voices of the past are especially lost to us. The world of unrecorded sounds is irreclaimable, so the disjunctions that separate our ears from what people heard in the past are doubly profound.”²² David Hempton, the noted historian of Methodism in Hanoverian Britain, builds on this observation and asserts, “Not only has hearing lost status against seeing in the modern proliferation of print culture, but also our post-enlightenment acoustical antennae are simply not adjusted to hearing the religious sounds of the past the way they were heard at the time.”²³ Yet, through examining sermons, hymns, and prayers, using the evangelical clergy and activists as our guides, historians may begin to recover and reconstruct the sounds through which the faith of the abolitionists was expressed and experienced, and therefore illuminate the key political speeches of the evangelical anti-slave trade Members of Parliament.

To make such a project manageable, this thesis will primarily examine the sermons and prayers of the evangelical Anglican priest and Cambridge academic Charles Simeon, together with the hymns of John Newton, one of the pioneers of evangelical hymnody, and the various works of William Wilberforce, perhaps the most famous evangelical Member of Parliament of his century. From their many decades of ministry and activism, these men, through sermons, hymns, prayers, and speeches, as well as by serving as mentors to many influential clergy and politicians, may not only be seen as ready examples of eighteenth-century evangelicals but also as shapers of the abolitionist movements in which they participated. This study will integrate intellectual history with

²² Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 15.

²³ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 56.

the history of religion and human rights, drawing on the insights of historians of British culture and religion such as Ian Bradley, Boyd Hilton, and Herbert Schlossberg as well as those who have focused on specific abolition campaigns, including John Coffey.²⁴ My work situates the development of the discourse of human rights within one of the historical contexts in which the discourse itself was created, namely late-eighteenth-century evangelical Anglicanism.

Simeon, Newton, and Wilberforce are prime examples of late-eighteenth-century evangelical Anglicans both because their thought was consistent with their fellow churchmen and because they were responsible for shaping much of the abolitionist movement in which they participated. For fifty-four years, Simeon served as the vicar of Holy Trinity Church, which lay, both geographically and intellectually, at the centre of Cambridge University. During these years he preached through every chapter of the Bible. The collection of his sermon notes is called *Horae Homileticae*, forms twenty-one volumes, and serves as one of the main sources of this thesis. Although his years in pastoral ministry formed the nexus of his work, he also served as a professor, dean, and vice-provost at King's College, Cambridge, where he was "central to changing attitudes" through "motiv[at]ing generations of undergraduates."²⁵ Beyond those whom he formally trained, he also mentored many young clergymen through holding discussion parties at his residence, as well as through corresponding with both clergy and laity throughout

²⁴ Ian Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (London: Cape, 1976); Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Herbert Schlossberg, *The Silent Revolution and the Making of Victorian England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000); John Coffey, "'Tremble, Britannia!': Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758–1807," *English Historical Review* (August 2012), vol. 127, no. 527, 844–881.

²⁵ Richard Brown, *Church and State in Modern Britain, 1700–1850* (London: Routledge, 1991), 103.

Great Britain.²⁶ The noted writer, politician, and scholar Lord Macaulay wrote in 1844, “As to Simeon, if you knew what his authority and interest were, and how they extended from Cambridge to the most remote corners of England, you would allow that his real sway in the Church was far greater than that of any primate.”²⁷

Simeon himself was mentored by John Newton, who, though best remembered for his hymn “Amazing Grace,” was “one of the leading evangelical ministers of the Church of England during the eighteenth-century.”²⁸ The recent interest in the campaign to abolish Britain’s slave trade has introduced a new generation to his key role in encouraging Wilberforce to remain in politics. However, Newton’s influence went far beyond that achievement. He was pastor to thousands of Londoners and mentor to many of the most influential evangelical pastors of his day, including John Venn, who in turn served as the parish minister in Clapham, the home parish of many of the key abolitionists and influential evangelicals, including Wilberforce.²⁹ Simeon’s discussion groups were modelled after Newton’s, which Simeon himself had attended.³⁰ Not only is Newton important to the campaign against the slave trade through his role as a mentor to Wilberforce and as a preacher to so many Britons, but his firsthand account as a former slave trader was distributed to every Member of Parliament by the Society for Effecting

²⁶ Arthur Pollard, and Michael Hennell, *Charles Simeon (1759–1836): Essays Written in Commemoration of His Bicentenary by Members of the Evangelical Fellowship for Theological Literature* (London: S.P.C.K., 1964), 141.

²⁷ George Otto Trevelyan, *Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1876), 4:68.

²⁸ D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), v.

²⁹ Donald E. Demaray, *The Innovation of John Newton (1725–1807): Synergism of Word and Music in Eighteenth Century Evangelism* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 166.

³⁰ Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (London: Continuum, 2007), 220.

the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the first few years of Wilberforce's becoming a member of that committee.³¹

Just as Simeon and Newton were viewed by their peers as among the most influential evangelical ministers of their day, "Contemporaries often saw Wilberforce as a spokesman for the Evangelical laity in the Church of England."³² Wilberforce was both the most famous abolitionist and among the most influential evangelicals. In *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865*, the historian of Hanoverian British history Boyd Hilton explains that in the late eighteenth century "there was no consensus, but rather a 'war of ideas' which left most thinking men . . . torn between 'incompatible opposites,'" but that "there does seem to have been a dominate mode of thought . . . and its core or 'hinge' was the Christian doctrine of the Atonement."³³ More than anything else, what makes Simeon, Newton, and Wilberforce insightful examples of late-eighteenth-century evangelicalism is that their lives and abolitionist activities were to be defined entirely by the Atonement. In this way, as one examines their views on the Atonement and its ramifications in their lives, one may access the late-eighteenth-century evangelical mind. Although only three individuals, they serve as excellent examples of the late-eighteenth-century evangelical Anglican discourse, and through them, I hope to open a door to greater understanding of that set of ideas and how it shaped the world of its day.

Because the majority of primary sources being examined in this thesis were originally communicated orally rather than textually, I will begin by considering how

³¹ British Library [Hereafter BL] ADD MS 21255, Proceedings of the Committee for Abolition of the Slave Trade. (1788).

³² Richard R. Follett, *Evangelicalism, Penal Theory and the Politics of Criminal Law Reform in England: 1808–1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 167.

³³ Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 3.

historians must approach working with these sources. Contemporaries placed great emphasis on the audible qualities of the spoken word. The intensity in the preacher's voice and the earnestness in the politician's speech were key to how their audiences evaluated the messages being heard. Therefore, this thesis devotes its first chapter to exploring the acoustics of the eighteenth-century evangelical and political auditory experience. From the physical architecture of churches and Parliament to popular guidelines on how to articulate sermons, hymns, and speeches, one may begin to piece together the religious sounds of this time period, and the arguments they expressed. Simeon is particularly useful in the effort to recover the lost sounds of the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century sermons because he was among the first to recognize the art of preaching as something that could be taught and thus offer detailed instruction as to how to craft and deliver sermons.³⁴ His advice, together with that of the hugely influential evangelical John Wesley on how to sing hymns, helps recreate the eighteenth-century auditory experience. What emerges in these sounds is the clear message that for evangelicals, every issue derived importance from the doctrine of Atonement.

At the centre of Georgian evangelical theology was the Atonement, which is the doctrine of Christ's reparation for all of humanity's sins through his own suffering and death. Chapter 2 of this thesis, therefore, considers the abolitionist discourse by examining what this doctrine meant to evangelical Anglicans and finds that while Hilton's observation that the Atonement was the central doctrine of evangelical Christianity is correct, the implications for the movement to end the slave trade are more holistic than Hilton is willing to concede. In direct contrast to the exaltation of human

³⁴ J.I. Packer, "Expository Preaching: Charles Simeon and Ourselves," *Churchmen* (1960) vol. 74, no. 2, 95.

beings common in eighteenth-century Enlightenment and Romantic literature, evangelicals were convinced that people were inherently wicked. Instead of resolving the problem of evil outside of time and space, they believed Christ had entered into the darkest realm of the human condition, borne the weight of all evil, and thereby atoned for the sins of all who believe in him. Christ's confronting evil in all of its forms served as the heart of the evangelical discourse and the cornerstone of their activism. In the cross they found the value of humanity and the "brotherhood of man." Through the cross they confronted and countered the biblical arguments in favour of slavery and found their inspiration for involvement in abolition.

Although the Atonement was the final word on the separation between humanity and God, the evangelicals also saw the process of confronting evil as intimately involving every individual among them. The third chapter in this thesis explores the evangelical emphasis on humankind's responsibility and role in answering Christ's call to confront evil in all of its manifestations. Without understanding this, it is difficult if not impossible to understand or even discuss what motivated these men and women to sacrifice and do so much for people so far removed from them. When one listens to their speeches, one distinguishes their use of the word "duty" as much more important than that of "rights." Accordingly, for the first time one begins to hear what Hanoverians heard when William Wilberforce, Henry Thornton, and James Stephen stood up in the House of Commons and argued in favour of the abolition of the slave trade.

This thesis will shed new light on what is only now being recognized as a fundamental part of the abolitionist discourse. Building on the recent work of Professor John Coffey, the fourth chapter will be among the first scholarly works to consider the

role of providentialism in the abolitionist movement. In doing so, it will illustrate the efficacy of treating sermons not just as a repository of insightful quotes to be cited, but as entire an argument with an internal structure that must be considered in order to understand what was being said. This work will confirm Christopher Leslie Brown's contention that late-eighteenth-century Britons cared about the well-being of their nation but will refute his argument that this had to do with the moral voice on the world stage. Rather, it had to do with Britain's moral standing before God and protection for the nation from judgement.

Completing this thesis is an analysis of the evangelical abolitionists' vision of the last days. Eighteenth-century convictions of Christ's imminent return and a final divine judgement, preceded by the expansion of Christian values throughout the globe, touched almost every part of contemporary thought, word, and deed. The brand of millennialism of these evangelicals must be understood if we are to hear what the evangelical Anglican abolitionists were actually articulating and upon what beliefs and convictions they were acting. By pausing to listen to the sermons, hymns, prayers, and speeches of these eighteenth-century evangelical Anglicans, we may begin to overcome the dissonance that separates our world from theirs and make clearly audible the eighteenth-century abolitionist discourse that still resonates with human rights activists and scholars of social change in the twenty first century.

In the doctrine of the Atonement, antislavery evangelicals found a message that undermined the religious pro-slave trade arguments of their day. In the cross they found a call to join Christ in his rescue mission. In the pending judgement of providentialism they found that it was not only the task of individuals but a collective obligation borne by

British society to end the slave trade. In Christ's pending return they found urgency to their cause. In evangelical theology they developed a discourse that inspired and shaped their anti-slave trade movement. It is possible to recover the lost sounds of the past. It is possible to hear, once again, the arguments of these men and women who were an integral part of abolishing Britain's transatlantic slave trade.

Chapter One: The Sound that Saves

“As early modern preachers liked to point out, vox audita perit, litera scripta manet—the spoken voice perishes and only the written word remains.”³⁵

Historians primarily make use of written documents, but the principal forms of communication of the late-eighteenth-century evangelical were oral, and this poses specific challenges for historians who study this period. The distinguished scholar of communications Randall P. Harrison observed that people often treat speech as text, analyzing it as being “neatly segmented into sentences, with capital letters at the beginning and periods at the end.” Actually, however, “written language only hints at some of the important features of speech. It suggests, but does not capture, intonations, stress, and pauses.”³⁶ In a similar vein, psychologist Albert Mehrabian conducted extensive research and found that “words themselves only account for about 7 percent of the impact [of a statement]. Meanwhile, the vocal cues produce 38 percent of the effect, and facial expressions contribute a whopping 55 percent.”³⁷ Of course the importance of nonverbal communication depends on what kind of information is being conveyed, but the point remains that in treating eighteenth-century audible communication as written text, one is only studying a small percentage of what was being communicated.

To completely correct this problem is nearly impossible, because as historian of sermons Arnold Hunt reminds us, “We have no sound recordings of early modern sermons, no archive films of preachers in their pulpits and no time-machines in which to

³⁵ Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audience, 1590–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

³⁶ Randall Harrison, *Beyond Words: An Introduction to Non-Verbal Communication* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 103–104.

³⁷ Harrison, 109.

travel back to the . . . seventeenth century and mingle unobtrusively with the crowd assembled to hear the sermon.”³⁸ Similarly, after emphasizing how important the nonverbal qualities of speech were to early modern Britons, in *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* the noted professor of early modern English theatre Bruce R. Smith notes that “our only access to the oral cultures of early modern England comes via written texts.”³⁹ Smith is right in acknowledging that this is a challenge for historians.

Recognizing the challenge this presents—admitting the fact that we are forming arguments with very little to go on—is a good start to addressing this historiographical challenge, but we need not leave it at that. Using the notes the preachers and orators of the day left behind that show how they presented sermons, hymns, and speeches sheds new light on how to read these texts. The reality is that when we take the time to consider it, much can be observed about the body language and even the tones of voice with which the treatises (sermons and speeches) used in the study of abolition were delivered. In seeking to recover the lost sounds of the past and awaken the historian’s understanding of the development of the discourse of human rights, we must pause to consider not only the content of the evangelicals’ message, but also the way in which it was conveyed and thus heard.

Every evangelical sermon revolved around explaining a specific scriptural text and began with a reading of that text. It is appropriate, therefore, to begin this analysis by considering how evangelicals heard Scripture.

Evangelicalism, in the words of Charles Simeon, upheld the view that “the whole Scriptures, both of the Old and New Testament, we may affirm, that God is the Author of

³⁸ Hunt, *The Art of Hearing*, 8.

³⁹ Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 25.

them, and that every part of them has been ‘given by inspiration from him.’”⁴⁰ In his own copy of the Bible, Wilberforce underlined the words, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”⁴¹ In his underlining of this passage, Wilberforce provides a glimpse of how he heard the Scriptures—that rather than simply a dry deposit of religious tenets, they were his personal source of spiritual nourishment for activism. Similarly, in an obituary for Charles Simeon, the editors of the *Christian Journal* wrote, “The Bible seemed to be not the text-book of his sermons merely, but the solace and joy of his heart.”⁴² Both in private and in public, the Scriptures were considered by the evangelicals to be God’s living Word to humanity. Therefore, when Charles Simeon quoted passages of Scripture from the pulpit, late-eighteenth-century evangelicals heard them as if God himself was speaking to them. In the words of a seventeenth-century preacher, Samuel Hieron, in the Scriptures “God himself stood by and spake these words unto thee.”⁴³ Truly, one cannot overstate the weight and importance Hanoverian British evangelicals placed on these scriptural texts.

⁴⁰ Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae, or Discourses, Principally in the Form of Skeletons: Now First Digested Into One Continued Series, and Forming a Commentary Upon Every Book of the Old and New Testament*, vol. 19 (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1832–1833), 72.

⁴¹ Bodleian Library [hereafter BOD], MSS Wilberforce f. 5, Copy of the *New Testament* printed for the Naval and Military Bible Society with a few notes in the hand of William Wilberforce (1818).

⁴² Ridley Hall [hereafter RID], MSS Charles Simeon and Charles Grant, Box 1, f. 34, Clippings from the *Christian Journal* (1836).

⁴³ Samuel Hieron as quoted in Hunt, *Art of Preaching*, 21.

Scriptural texts were of such importance that Simeon prescribed a hymn for his congregation to sing on “the excellency and sufficiency of the Scripture.”⁴⁴ The opening lines declare:

Father of Mercies, in thy Word
 What endless Glory shines!
 For ever be thy name ador'd
 For these celestial lines,

Here, may the wretched Sons of Want
 Exhaustless Riches find;
 Riches, above what Earth can grant,
 And lasting as the Mind.⁴⁵

This hymn demonstrates that the texts of Scripture on which evangelical sermons were based were viewed as something to be treasured far above any material possession.

Further along in the song, a stanza presents the Scriptures not as something visual to read, but rather as something audible to hear:

Here, the Redeemer's welcome Voice
 Spreads heavenly Peace around;
 And Life, and everlasting Joys
 Attend the blissful Sound.⁴⁶

The words were heard as God's own, not austere, and certainly timely and fully relevant.

For those who believed the words of these songs, God through the Scriptures was their teacher and was to be close to them, which is made clear in the final stanza of the same hymn:

Divine Instructor, gracious LORD,
 Be thou for ever near,
 Teach me to love thy sacred Word,
 And view my Saviour there.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Charles Simeon, ed, *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns From Various Authors Chiefly Designed for the use of Publick Worship* (Cambridge: Joseph Symonds, 1795), 82–83.

⁴⁵ Simeon, *A Collection*, 82–83.

⁴⁶ Simeon, *A Collection*, 83.

⁴⁷ Simeon, *A Collection*, 83.

Inasmuch as hymns conveyed biblical truths and sermons expounded on them, these too were taken with great seriousness. Those who took the time to listen heard God himself speaking into their everyday lives, and given the devotion of those who identified themselves as evangelical, few chose to ignore him.⁴⁸

It is also crucial to understand, in the attempt to recover the lost sounds of the past, that these hymns were heard and sung communally within parishes—which were not only basic units for religious and political organization, but the locus of urban and rural society in early modern and eighteenth-century England. This was a major societal change, brought in part by the Methodist revivals. Until the late eighteenth century, only Psalms from Scripture were sung in the Church of England, and it was the choirs at the front of the church who sang them.⁴⁹ John Newton and Charles Simeon were among the first in the Anglican Church to use hymns in their Sunday services and to have their congregations participate in the singing.⁵⁰ Just how novel this was is revealed by the fact that the hymnbook compiled by the evangelicals' favourite hymn writer, the dissenter Isaac Watts, includes an essay in which he defends and explains the validity of hymn singing. If the use of hymns needed an explanation even among dissenters, how much more so for the more traditional members of the Church of England!

Demonstrating how innovative hymns were especially for the established church, Simeon's hymnbook begins with a quotation from Queen Elizabeth I, which states:

For the comforting of such as delight in Music, it may be permitted, that in the beginning or in the end of Common Prayer, either at Morning or

⁴⁸ For more on the seriousness with which evangelicals took their faith, see Schlossberg, 28–46.

⁴⁹ Louis F Benson, *The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 22.

⁵⁰ Ian C. Bradley, *Abide With Me: The World of Victorian Hymns* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1997), 15.

Evening, there may be sung an Hymn, or such like Song, to the praise of Almighty God, in the best Melody and Music, that may be conveniently devised, having respect that the Sentence of the Hymn may be understood and perceived.⁵¹

That the hymnbook began with these words was not a mere formality, but an attempt to validate the hymnbook's legitimacy, which was necessary because congregational hymn singing as a central part of the service was such a new phenomenon. Being sung communally, hymns reinforced the fact that religious discourse was not regulated merely to one part of people's lives, but rather that it defined Englishmen and women and shaped their contribution to the public sphere.

Like Watts, Wilberforce's parish vicar, the Reverend John Venn, included an essay defending the use of hymns in church worship in the hymnbook he compiled. He insists that the biblical Psalms express the psalmist's "own Concerns, in Words exactly suited to his own Thoughts, agreeable to his own personal Character . . . This keeps all the Springs of pious Passion awake, when every line and Syllable so nearly affects himself; this naturally raises, in a devout Mind, a more lively and transporting Worship."⁵² His argument is that the Psalms were written more than two thousand years earlier and were their authors' personal and intimate worship of God, and though authoritative as Scripture, left room for new hymns that expressed a congregation's devotion. Hymns were thus designed to express the sentiments of the contemporary congregations. They certainly did of the clergy who compiled them and the episcopacy that endorsed them and are an avenue to access their thought.

⁵¹ Simeon, *A Collection*, i.

⁵² John Venn, *Select Portions of Psalms Extracted From Various Versions, And Adapted to Public Worship. With An Appendix, Continuing Hymns for the Principal Festivals of the Church of England* (London: W. Thorne, 1806), iii.

In *Liturgy in the Age of Reason*, historian Bryan D. Spinks notes that hymns are “theology put in verse.”⁵³ While scriptural texts and sermons may be hard to remember, parishioners memorized hymns much more easily. Thus, it is within the hymns that one can access part of the world of those who did not produce written texts.⁵⁴ Louis F. Benson writes that Newton’s hymns, which he compiled in *Olney Hymns*, “became a people’s manual of evangelical doctrine.”⁵⁵ In order to understand anti-slave trade evangelical England, one must consider hymns.

In order to access the nonverbal dimension of these hymns, we can look to the instructions of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, a branch of evangelical Anglicanism, who published advice for the new phenomenon of hymn singing. “See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can,” he wrote. “Let not a single degree of weakness or weariness hinder you . . . Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength.”⁵⁶ Some historians may view hymns as old-fashioned and archaic, but these hymns were a new innovation for the time. The songs were received as fresh and inspirational. Of all Wesley’s instructions, it is the final directive which was viewed as the most important:

Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually.⁵⁷

⁵³ Bryan D. Spinks, *Liturgy in the Age of Reason: Worship and Sacraments in England and Scotland, 16620–c.1800* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2008), 190.

⁵⁴ Bernard L. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts* (London: The Epworth Press, 1942), 81.

⁵⁵ Benson, *The English Hymn*, 338.

⁵⁶ John Wesley, “Directions for Congregational Singing,” *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley*, John Emory, ed. (New York: J. Emory, 1831), 609.

⁵⁷ Wesley, “Directions,” 609.

The words that came from the hymns were expressions of the evangelicals' commitment to their God. They were both expressions of theology and conversations with God; at the same time, they were communal and public. Hymns open a window into the priorities and understanding of the evangelical pastors who compiled them.

In Simeon's collection of hymns for his congregation, there are two hymns for singing just before the sermon is preached. Either could be chosen for the purpose. The first hymn begins with the lyrics:

Thy presence, gracious GOD, afford,
 Prepare us to receive thy Word:
 Now let thy Voice engage our Ear,
 And Faith be mix'd with what we hear:

Distracting Thoughts and Cares remove,
 And fix our Hearts and Hopes above;
 With Food divine may we be fed,
 And satisfied with living Bread⁵⁸

Here, we move from the significance of hymns in forming the discourse of early evangelicals to the significance of sermons. This hymn is designated to be sung before the *sermon* is preached, but the hymn clearly refers to the *Scriptures*, as it uses terms such as “thy Word,” “living Bread,” and “Food divine.” This is because inasmuch as the preacher expounded on Scripture, so his words carried the weight applied to Scripture. In fact, the Scripture read aloud from the front and the sermon preached to the congregation carried more weight than sermons or Scripture simply read. As Arnold Hunt has observed, the English “protestants were adamant that only the Word preached—not the Word read—could suffice for salvation . . . hearing a sermon was guaranteed to be more effectual than reading a sermon . . . better a bad sermon heard from the pulpit than a good

⁵⁸ Simeon, *A Collection*, 296.

sermon read on the page.”⁵⁹ It is this perspective which is heard in the most famous evangelical hymn, “Amazing Grace,” written by John Newton: “Amazing grace, how sweet the *sound*, that saved a wretch like me.”⁶⁰ For many of the abolitionists, lost souls and exploited slaves alike were saved not primarily by pamphlets and petitions that were read, but by preaching, hymns, and prayers that were spoken.

The second hymn prescribed by Simeon to be sung before the sermon is even more revealing than the first with regard to the evangelical emphasis on hearing rightly:

Lord, ever give us of that bread,
And grant us ears to hear;
Hearts to receive the heav’nly seed,
And bring forth fruit with fear.⁶¹

These lines are an allusion to Matthew’s gospel, where Christ speaks of response to God as being comparable to the reception of different types of soil to seed. The scene of a congregation singing their prayer to God to prepare their hearts and hearing for the sermon is truly quite striking. Without knowing the popularity of these songs among parishioners, it is difficult to know the earnestness with which they sang these lines, but the evidence is clear that the hymnbook’s compiler, Charles Simeon, placed great weight on the task to which these hymns allude to: that of preaching. In this, he was not alone. Although Scripture and hymns were key elements of the evangelical experience, sermons were by far the most significant aspect of the evangelical context.

The Reverend Daniel Wilson, a student of Simeon who went on to become the Bishop of Calcutta, recounted, “The labour [Simeon] bestowed on the preparation of his Sermons must by all means be noticed. Few cost him less than twelve hours of study—

⁵⁹ Hunt, *Art of Hearing*, 25–27.

⁶⁰ John Newton, *Olney Hymns: In Three Books* (London: Johnson, 1797), 170.

⁶¹ Simeon, *A Collection*, 297.

many twice that time: and some several days. He once told Wilson that he had recomposed the plan of one discourse nearly thirty times.”⁶² The sermons on which this thesis are based were carefully constructed and articulated. Simeon instructed his clergymen in training, “It is not an easy thing to preach. It is easy for a Minister to prate in a pulpit, and even to speak much good matter; but to preach is not easy—to carry his congregation on his shoulders as it were to heaven; to weep over them, pray for them, deliver the truth with a weeping, praying heart.”⁶³ One can find in his letters to other clergymen a great concern over doing this task well. Writing to John Newton he confesses, “Often my dear sir have I preached myself as much as Christ Jesus.”⁶⁴ This ongoing reflection as to whether he was drawing attention to Christ or to himself is found throughout his private papers, expressing a concern for preaching that went beyond personal career advancement and shedding light, too, on the motivations that drove abolition even when that movement personally cost its proponents. For the eighteenth-century English Anglicans (evangelicals included), preaching was considered the most important task of the clergy.⁶⁵

The sermon was truly the defining component of the evangelical church experience in the late eighteenth century. In fact, this emphasis on preaching changed the very architecture of the churches. Traditionally churches were built with side wings to the left and right of the sanctuary, but this worsened acoustics and thus made it more difficult

⁶² Daniel Wilson, “Recollections of the Rev. Charles Simeon by the Right Rev. Daniel Wilson, D.D., Lord Bishop of Calcutta,” in William Carus and Charles Pettit McIlvaine, eds., *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon with a Selection of his Writings and Correspondence* (New York: Robert Carter, 1847), 841–842.

⁶³ Abner William Brown, *Recollections of the Conversation Parties of the Rev. Charles Simeon* (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1863), 105–106

⁶⁴ Lambeth Palace Library [hereafter LPL], Bull Papers, MS 3096, f. 148, Letter from Charles Simeon to John Newton (April 1, 1784).

⁶⁵ Hunt, *Art of Hearing*, 19.

to hear the preacher.⁶⁶ This trend began to change in the mid-seventeenth-century, when the architect Christopher Wren was commissioned to rebuild the many church buildings that had been completely destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666. Wren took time to carefully examine the Anglican church experience and observed that there was an overwhelming need “that all who are present can both hear and see.”⁶⁷ Wren analyzed “how far the spoken voice may be heard from the pulpit [and] went on to work out the ideal dimension.”⁶⁸ There was now one single auditorium, and the extra pews would stand in the balcony within that one room to enable as many people as possible to hear. There was neither chancellery nor curtain. The auditory experience of the sermon, public reading, and hymns had replaced the sacraments as the focus of evangelical Anglicanism, demonstrated by the fact that the baptismal font was placed to the side in the back.⁶⁹ This design was dubbed the “auditory church,” and as the importance of sermons increased, the evangelical church experience “in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries concentrated on hearing and churches were built or reordered accordingly.”⁷⁰ The church building in which Newton’s sermons quoted in this thesis were preached was St. Mary Woolnoth, which was built by Wren’s protégé, Nicholas Hawksmoor, in this auditory style.⁷¹ Many parishioners heard the sermons and hymns used in this paper with great earnestness in church surroundings specifically designed to impact that experience by

⁶⁶ James E. White, “Prayer Book Architecture,” *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer*, Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 110.

⁶⁷ Christopher Wren as quoted in White, 110.

⁶⁸ White, 110.

⁶⁹ White, 110.

⁷⁰ White, 111.

⁷¹ Sophie Ploeg, “Staged Experiences: The Church Designs of Nicholas Hawksmoor,” *Dealing with the Visual: Art History, Aesthetics, and Visual Culture*, eds. Caroline Van Eck and Edward Winter. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 177.

maximizing their ability to hear, and though Simeon at first faced much opposition from his nonevangelical congregants at the prestigious parish in Cambridge, by the time the anti–slave trade movement was a few years underway, he had become one of Britain’s most popular evangelical preachers. Sermon quotations should be read bearing in mind the earnestness with which those in attendance would have heard them.

Architectural changes designed to amplify the acoustic experience were by no means limited to church buildings. The House of Commons underwent a number of architectural changes specifically to maximize on the auditory experience. The House of Commons met in St. Stephen’s Chapel in Westminster Palace, which as it was designed in the Gothic style—which typically does not have good acoustics—was renovated according to designs drafted by Henry Wren in order to increase the acoustics of the chamber. This included installing a false ceiling and oak panelling. Although the hall was considerably blander than the medieval chapel it was originally designed to be, the purpose of the renovation, similar to the purpose in the design of eighteenth-century church buildings, was to allow the maximum audible experience.

The relevance of these structural designs must not be overlooked, for it is in them that we may attune our understanding of the importance of the debates, lectures, and speeches held there. In contrast to present-day politics dominated by brief sound bites, late-eighteenth-century Britons placed enormous value on the oratory quality of speeches. The lines quoted in this thesis and in other academic works are often mere parts of thirty-minute sermons or even three-hour speeches, and they must be understood within the context of their broader arguments.

Evidence of the late-eighteenth-century anti-slave trade world's concern with how arguments were constructed and delivered is found in a grade school assignment that Wilberforce kept among his private papers his entire life. The assignment was to copy lines from Colley Cibber, Britain's poet laureate. The lines were about oratory: "The most dangerous Affectation of any perhaps is that of the Monotone or solemn sameness of Pronunciations which to my Ear is unsupportable . . . He that seeks not himself the Passion he would raise will talk to a sleeping Audience."⁷² It should be no surprise that Wilberforce was learning the art of oratory in grade school, as this was common in Hanoverian Britain. However, Wilberforce was certainly exceptional as one of his period's greatest orators: "I saw what seemed a mere shrimp mount upon the table," wrote James Boswell to Member of Parliament Henry Dundas, "but, as I listened, he grew, and grew, until the shrimp became a whale."⁷³ A local paper reported that Wilberforce "was listened to with the most eager attention . . . there was such an excellent choice of expressions, so rapidly pronounced, that we are unable to do it justice in any account we can give of it."⁷⁴ This observation recognizes the limitations the newspaper had to recreate the speech with text, but the evidence is clear that Wilberforce took to heart Cibber's instructions, copied out as a schoolboy: "the Voice of a Singer is not more strictly tied down to Time and Tune than that of a Speaker; the least Syllable too long and too lightly dwelt upon in a Period depreciates it to nothing."⁷⁵ Wilberforce kept his childhood notes on Cibber's advice throughout his parliamentary career. He paid

⁷² BOD, MSS Wilberforce, C. 4 f. 13, School Exercise on Oratory (c. 1771). For the source from which Wilberforce copied this out, see Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber* (London: 1750), 86.

⁷³ Schlossberg, 51.

⁷⁴ Samuel Wilberforce and Robert Wilberforce, *The Life*, vol. 1, 54.

⁷⁵ BOD, MSS Wilberforce, C. 4 f. 13, School Exercise on Oratory (c. 1771).

as much attention to the way he pronounced the words in the speeches as a singer would to how long to stress each syllable and how to convey the proper feeling through his words.

As previously noted, this presents quite a challenge for the historian trying to recover the discourse of eighteenth-century abolitionism, for the meaning and mood of much of what was said was revealed in the way it was said as much as in the words themselves. The reality of oral sources is that the notes of the text or the polished published version cannot convey the actual audible experience and thus the fullness of the message. The *Christian Journal* wrote of Charles Simeon, “so careful was his preparation for preaching that he sometimes read [the final draft of] his sermon five times over in private, and twice as nearly as possible with the tone, attitude, and manner he purposed employing in the pulpit.”⁷⁶ Simeon’s student, Abner William Brown, concurred: “The ‘Horae Homileticae’ can never make its readers acquainted with Simeon as a Preacher; and those who only know him from that valuable pulpit commentary upon texts—that vast accumulation of dry bony skeletons—may well be excused for deeming his sermons artificial and unreadable.”⁷⁷ The challenge of this thesis, therefore, is to use these oral texts with an understanding that they are at the same time revealing and limiting in what they convey.

Clues from Simeon’s instructions on how to preach sermons help make possible the task of recreating the audible experience. As “the ‘maker’ of so many moderate evangelicals,” his instructions on how a sermon should be constructed and delivered may be taken as the method by which evangelical pastors throughout Great Britain went about

⁷⁶ RID, MSS Charles Simeon and Charles Grant, Box 1, f. 34, Clippings from the *Christian Journal* (1836).

⁷⁷ Abner William Brown, *Recollections*, 9.

this task.⁷⁸ Close attention to how a sermon would be received was demanded by Simeon and his French contemporary Jean Claude whose notes on how to preach were translated into English and annotated by Simeon. Claude's advice, for example, includes such admonitions as, "The conclusion ought to be lively and animating, full of great and beautiful figures, aiming to move Christian affections—as the love of God—hope—zeal—repentance . . . and other such dispositions."⁷⁹ To this Simeon adds, "The fire of the preacher should blaze here; he should collect the ideas of his whole sermon into this part."⁸⁰ Yet, if anyone should think that the point of the sermon was to exalt one's own career, Simeon and Claude approvingly quoted the late-seventeenth-century Whig Bishop Gilbert Burnet, who insisted, "A sermon, the conclusion whereof makes the auditory look pleased, and sets them all talking with one another, was certainly either not rightly spoken, or not rightly heard."⁸¹ This they contrast with what is supposed to be spoken and heard: the Atonement.

We see in Simeon's writing, therefore, a sincere concern both for how sermons were spoken and how they were heard. Without getting lost in his 120 pages of advice on how to craft a sermon, we may go straight to the heart of his teaching on the method and content of the preacher's message. Like Bishop Burnet, he sees the Atonement as central. More important than the instructions on how to select a text, or how one should pronounce his words, was the principle that the most important element was keeping the Atonement as the centre of one's entire ministry, vocation, and life. It was this principle which the architecture was designed to allow all parishioners to hear preached. It was for

⁷⁸ Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 12.

⁷⁹ Jean Claude and Charles Simeon, *Claude's Essay on the Composition of a Sermon* (London: James Cornish, 1844), 118.

⁸⁰ Claude and Simeon, *Claude's Essay*, 118.

⁸¹ Claude and Simeon, *Claude's Essay*, 118.

this theology that Simeon gave himself to making lively, dynamic sermons. It is the Atonement and related doctrines which must be examined in order to recover the discourse utilized in Wilberforce's speeches in Parliament as he passionately—and successfully—argued for the abolition of the slave trade.

Chapter Two: Atonement Abolition

In a sermon on the meaning of evangelicalism delivered as a lecture to students and faculty at Cambridge University, Charles Simeon explained, “What really constitutes evangelical preaching” is that the subject “must be ‘Christ crucified’; that is, Christ must be set forth as the only foundation of a sinner’s hope . . .”⁸² Simeon then quoted 1 Corinthians 2:1–2, in which the apostle Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that he came to them without eloquent words or impressive grandeur, but knowing only “Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”⁸³

References to “Christ crucified” are references to the Atonement, and it was this doctrine that Simeon believed must form the sum total of every sermon. He restates this point again in this same Cambridge lecture, insisting, “The fact is indisputable that the apostle’s commission was to preach Christ crucified—to preach, I say, *that* chiefly, *that* constantly, *that* exclusively.”⁸⁴ For Simeon, it is first and foremost this “truth which ministers of the gospel are bound to teach and which their people be anxious to hear.”⁸⁵ In a similar vein, John Newton wrote that his primary goal as a minister was “to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified that I may declare his unsearchable riches to sinners . . . his life, passion, death, and resurrection.”⁸⁶ Whereas Simeon’s lecture was for public consumption, Newton’s words in this case were for private reflection, penned as

⁸² Charles Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge: University Addresses and Sermon Outlines* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1959), 109–110.

⁸³ Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge*, 109.

⁸⁴ Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge*, 110.

⁸⁵ Charles Simeon as quoted in Richard William Vaudry, *Anglicans and the Atlantic World: High Churchmen, Evangelicals, and the Quebec Connection* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2003), 136.

⁸⁶ John Newton as quoted in Aitken, *John Newton*, xv.

he wrestled with the decision of whether or not he should take up the vocation of a church minister. Both publicly and privately, these two men strove to ensure that the Atonement remained at the centre of their lives and ministries. As we seek to reconstruct the sounds of eighteenth-century evangelical anti-slave trade activism, therefore, our central focus must also be on the Atonement. It was this doctrine more than any other that shaped the evangelical mind and therefore their actions, and so it is this doctrine more than any other that is likely to lead us to the cornerstone of abolition.

The world into which Simeon, Newton, Wilberforce, and their evangelical Anglican contemporaries sought to bring light was a world in which they were daily confronted by the realities of human suffering, filth, distress, and trauma. Eighteenth-century London was anything but sterile. In *A Protestant Purgatory: Theological Origins of the Penitentiary Act, 1779*, the historian Laurie Throness takes his readers through the streets of eighteenth-century London and vividly describes the common scene of a cart bearing a condemned criminal winding its way to the scaffold: “A tumult of strong voices and loud laughter, scolding and quarreling, outcries and bawling answers, jests, oaths and imprecations accompanied the clanking of fetters. Drunken criminals rode in carts that burst through the prison gate with a mob of ‘thieves, pickpockets, whores, and rogues . . .’”⁸⁷ These images were seen by contemporaries such as William Hogarth and other social commentators as clear expressions of the depravity of humankind.⁸⁸ “Man is

⁸⁷ Laurie Throness, *A Protestant Purgatory: Theological Origins of the Penitentiary Act, 1779* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing), 1.

⁸⁸ On these themes see Matthew Craske, *William Hogarth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 41–57; Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Verso, 2003); Vic Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770–1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Simon Devereaux, “Recasting the Theatre of Execution: The Abolition of the Tyburn Ritual,” *Past & Present* 202, 1, (2009) 127–174. For a study on the perceptions of crime and punishment in the wider context of British

an apostate creature,” wrote Wilberforce, “degraded in his nature, and depraved in his faculties; indisposed to good, and disposed to evil; prone to vice . . . disinclined to virtue . . . he is tainted with sin, not slightly and superficially, but radically and to the very core.”⁸⁹ This is not the outlook of Christian humanism, nor that of the Enlightenment mind, but rather the theology of Britain’s leading abolitionist, and as such needs to be understood in order to understand this facet of the abolitionist discourse.

Along with other evangelicals, Wilberforce cast his theology in contrast to the secular philosophies of the day and took aim at Humanism, Romanticism, and Enlightenment thought—all of which, according to Wilberforce, saw humankind as naturally good. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the architect of eighteenth-century Romanticism and one of his century’s most influential philosophers, believed that “Nature creates man happy and good, but society depraves him and makes him miserable.”⁹⁰ This view was reflected in the paintings, statues, and other forms of art that focused on the human body and glorifying humankind. Historians of abolition must be careful not to read this view of humanity as the inspiration behind Wilberforce’s concern to see humans protected from exploitation. Challenging the competing philosophies of his day, in Wilberforce’s *Practical View* he points to what contemporaries considered to be the most “civilized” societies of all time (the Roman Republic and Ancient Greece) and finds in them overt oppression.⁹¹ These were the beacons of Enlightenment inspiration, and yet to him, they were found wanting. Wilberforce then considers the aboriginal communities of the New

society see Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 98–142.

⁸⁹ William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Middle and Higher Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity* (London: T. Caddell, 1797), 26–27.

⁹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques, Dialogues* (I: 934; 213).

⁹¹ Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, 25–26.

World, a favourite subject of the late-eighteenth-century Romantics, and in them he also found gross injustice and abuse.⁹² To him these were proof that human beings left to their own devices would degenerate into misery, exploitation, and oppression. What, then, inspired him to fight against that degeneration?

Simply put, for evangelicals, the Atonement was the answer to human depravity. The evangelical view was that humans were not beings to be in awe of, but rather slaves to be redeemed. In contrast to the harmony and benevolence that humankind was originally created to enjoy, Simeon emphatically insisted that his parishioners must “know then, that the heart by nature is universally wicked, unsearchably wicked, and incurably wicked.”⁹³ The first two attributes mean that every part of one’s heart is wicked and that this wickedness is beyond comprehension, but it is the third attribute which drives sinners to the cross. Of this incurable wickedness, Simeon explained, “No resolutions of ours, no exertions, can banish it from the soul.”⁹⁴ The evangelical view of the desperate unredeemed heart is distilled more clearly in a verse of a hymn by John Newton:

Alas! by nature how depriv’d
How prone to ev’ry ill!
Our lives to Satan how enslav’d
How obstinate our will!⁹⁵

Note the imagery of enslavement, and that the principle in these lines is the same as in Simeon’s words above: that in order to receive the gift of life through Christ’s Atonement, one must despair of freeing oneself. The individual’s inability to break out of the bonds of sin and bridge the chasm that separates that individual from God by any

⁹² Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, 25–26.

⁹³ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 9, *Jeremiah to Daniel*, 149.

⁹⁴ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 9, 151.

⁹⁵ Newton, *Olney Hymns*, 170. For the complete hymn see Appendix A of this thesis.

resolve or scheme of humankind is resolved by the Atonement. Newton's hymn continues:

Thus bought with blood, and born again,
Redeem'd and sav'd, by grace;
Rebels in God's own house obtain
A son and daughter's place.⁹⁶

As Simeon explained, although the heart is incurable, "We call not any case desperate in relation to the Gospel; because there is no sin from which the blood of Christ cannot cleanse us, nor any corruption, which the Spirit of Christ is not able to subdue."⁹⁷

According to the Christian Scriptures, Jesus is both fully human and fully God, is the only human completely without sin, and thus, is in a position where he is able to take the punishment of sin upon himself. At the heart of this theology is the concept that reconciliation to God is achieved solely on the merit of Christ, not at all by any good works or righteousness on the part of humankind. Christ's righteousness is counted as the righteousness of all humans provided that they place their faith in him. Indeed, this was the centrepiece of the evangelical hope: "God is now reconciled to every believing penitent: he embraces the returning prodigal in his arms, and frets him with the richest tokens of parental affection."⁹⁸ For Hanoverian Britons, the doctrine of Atonement was thus a doctrine of reconciliation between humans and God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The relevance of this to the cause of abolition becomes clearer when we see that the conversion experience was understood through the narrative of being set free from slavery. Preaching on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his evangelical conversion, Newton began his sermon by explaining that, "When Moses has related the deliverance of Israel

⁹⁶ Newton, *Olney Hymns*, 171.

⁹⁷ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 9, 149.

⁹⁸ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 357.

from Egypt, he adds, It is a night much to be observed, and they were accordingly directed to keep it in solemn remembrance. Much to be observed and remembered likewise is the time where it can be clearly known, of the Lord's appearance to deliver his people from Satan's bondage."⁹⁹ With these words, Newton called on his congregation to take time to regularly remember their own conversion experience in the same manner as the people of Israel were commanded by God to remember their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

The text of Newton's sermon came from 1 Timothy 1:16, where the apostle Paul writes, "Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." Paul states that as someone who had innocent people put to death, he served as an example to everyone that anyone can be saved. Newton compares himself to Paul and reminds his listeners of his own brutality. He had been a rebellious youth and a derelict adult, court-martialled for leaving the navy, and then became a slave trader with a reputation for being among the most vile. He became an evangelical, but only after a serious illness six years later did he finally abandon slave trading. Comparing himself to the apostle Paul, he declared, "I likewise sinned with a high hand and against great advantages and warnings yet I stand here this day to tell other sinners there is forgiveness with him."¹⁰⁰ Of God's ability to save anyone from their own devices, Newton reiterates this point and states, "I speak not from books but experience."¹⁰¹ Clearly evangelicalism was not synonymous with being against the slave trade, for not everyone against the

⁹⁹ LPL, MS 2940, f. 39, John Newton's Sermon Notebook.

¹⁰⁰ LPL, MS 2940, f. 39, John Newton's Sermon Notebook.

¹⁰¹ LPL, MS 2940, f. 39, John Newton's Sermon Notebook.

slave trade was evangelical, and as Newton proves being an evangelical does not automatically mean one will be against the slave trade.

Newton's sermon on his own life is a clear call to all who will hear him to enter into freedom: "I come in Christ's name, as though he did beseech you by me—*be ye reconciled to God*. You must either bend or break before him."¹⁰² This same sentiment can be clearly heard in a hymn Newton wrote for congregational singing:

Jesus rescues Satan's slaves,
His dear wounds still plead, "Forgive!"
Jesus to the utmost saves
Sinners, look to him and live.¹⁰³

As this hymn so strongly indicates with its designation of sinners as "Satan's slaves," reconciliation to God was to be understood in terms of freedom from bondage.

Given the fact that this most important element of evangelical belief was conveyed using the imagery of freedom from slavery, it is not surprising that the campaign against the transatlantic slave trade found great resonance with the British evangelicals. Not only does the imagery of freedom from slavery naturally carry with it abolitionist images, but every part of these evangelicals' lives were, at least in theory, to be defined by the fact that the Atonement was readily available to every individual regardless of what status he or she carried. As Simeon emphasized, "In the attainment of these exalted privileges, there is no distinction of persons whatsoever; none arising from nation, or rank, or sex."¹⁰⁴ In another sermon he quotes Isaiah 55, which begins, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come yet to the waters; and he that hath no money, come ye, buy,

¹⁰² LPL, MS 2940, f. 39, John Newton's Sermon Notebook.

¹⁰³ Newton, *Olney Hymns*, 124.

¹⁰⁴ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 17, 151.

and eat, yea, come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price.”¹⁰⁵ The belief is that the accessibility of God made possible through the Atonement “renders the Gospel suitable to fallen man.”¹⁰⁶ The doctrine of Atonement meant that all that was required to receive the gift of reconciliation to God was for one to place his or her trust in the atoning work of Christ.

This view is intimately conveyed in the prayer of conversion included in a book of prayers authored by Benjamin Jenks, the rector of Harley and chaplain to the Right Honourable Earl of Bradford, edited by Charles Simeon:

I acknowledge my transgression . . . My iniquities . . . are too heavy for me to bear . . . [H]ow mad have I been in cleaving unto things displeasing to my God, and destructive to my soul! . . . [W]hithersoever I look, I have no hope but in thine almighty power, thy super-abounding grace, and thine ever-enduring mercy . . . The most wretched case is not past thy cure. Though our sins be as scarlet, thou canst make them as white as snow . . . Yea, thou hast found a ransom . . . thy dear Son, who is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God through him . . . To the Lord Jesus therefore do I look, with the desire of my soul, to find healing through the precious blood of his cross . . . O Lord, pardon my sin, for it is great; too great for any but a God of infinite goodness and mercy to forgive . . . Do that work of thy grace thoroughly upon my heart, for which I may have cause to glorify thy name for evermore. Amen.¹⁰⁷

In this prayer, nowhere can one find the belief that a slave could not be saved, but just the opposite: salvation is available to anyone and to everyone. This prayer contradicts historian Boyd Hilton’s interpretation of abolitionist motivation, which argues that it was strictly “missionary rather than humanitarian . . . The fundamental problem with slavery was that its victims were not free to think, not free to choose Christ and reject Satan, and

¹⁰⁵ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 18, 456.

¹⁰⁶ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 18, 458.

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin Jenks and Charles Simeon, *Prayers and Offices of Devotion for Families, and for Particular Persons, Upon Most Occasions* (Derby: Henry Mozley and Sons, 1839), 127–131.

therefore not able to be saved.”¹⁰⁸ Atonement was closely connected to the abolitionist movement, but not completely in the way Hilton asserts. The problem with the slave trade was not primarily that it inhibited the work of Atonement, but rather that the Atonement had serious implications for the morality of the slave trade.

As one takes the time to thoroughly consider the doctrine of the Atonement, one finds that it is a doctrine of God confronting evil, reconciling all those who will believe in him to himself, and calling them to join him in sharing the truth of the gospel and caring for those in need of compassion. As we attune our ears to the verbalized beliefs and uttered convictions of late-eighteenth-century evangelicals, we find Hilton’s observation that the Atonement was central to their mode of thinking to be accurate indeed, but we also find, contrary to Hilton’s notion that evangelicals were indifferent to human suffering, that this doctrine compelled them to compassionately care both for people’s spiritual and physical needs.

In the Atonement, evangelicals found a new way to view those being sold as slaves, and in this, they discovered a powerful rebuttal to the pro-slavery arguments. The defenders of slavery and the slave trade had long framed their arguments in a biblical context. John M.G. Barclay accurately summarizes the pro-slavery argument as, “Slavery is a legitimate form of human relations, one expressly sanctioned by the laws of God, unquestioned by Jesus, and affirmed, even regulated, by the apostle Paul.”¹⁰⁹ A central part of this argument was found in Leviticus 25, which provided regulations to the people of Israel’s acquisition of slaves. Speaking of “the heathen,” it says they “shall be your

¹⁰⁸ Boyd Hilton, “Why Britain Outlawed Her Slave Trade,” *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*, ed. Derek R. Peterson (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 75–76.

¹⁰⁹ John G.M. Barclay, “‘Am I not a Man and a Brother?’ The Bible and the British Anti-Slavery Campaign,” *The Expository Times* (October 2007), vol 119, no. 1, 4.

possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen forever . . . but over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigor.” The Bible drew a clear distinction between enslaving the brethren and enslaving the heathen. Barclay insightfully explains how widespread was the view of seeing blacks as “the heathen.”¹¹⁰ The pro-slavery defence, therefore, was that as Britons were enslaving non-Christians, they were acting in line with the Scripture’s teaching.

So pervasive was the view of Africans as inferior, and so popular was it among Britons, that the abolitionist Granville Sharp felt the need to specifically argue against it, citing the views of David Hume, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, as an example of what he was challenging: “Mr. Hume argues . . . in regard to the superiority of white men over black. ‘I am apt to suspect,’ says he, ‘the negroes [. . .] to be naturally inferior to the whites.’”¹¹¹ Although the biblical regulations of Leviticus meant little to Hume, a religious sceptic, the distinction between the brethren and the foreigner that can be found in Leviticus was part of Hume’s discourse. It is for this reason that Sharp focused much of his *Just Limitations* on demonstrating how the Africans should be seen as brethren. He forcefully argued:

Under the Gospel dispensation, all mankind are to be esteemed our brethren. Christ commanded his disciples to go and teach . . . all nations so that men of all nations (who, indeed, were brethren before, by natural descent from one common father) are now, undoubtedly, capable of being doubly related to us, by a further tie of brotherhood . . . I mean the inestimable privilege of becoming sons, also, to one almighty Father, by adoption . . . and consequently of being our brethren, through Christ, by a spiritual, as well as a natural, relationship.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Barclay, “Am I not a Man and a Brother?,” 4.

¹¹¹ Granville Sharp, *The Just Limitation on Slavery in the Laws of God* (London, 1776), 28.

¹¹² Sharp, *Just Limitation*, 6.

Sharp built his argument on the fact that all human beings share common first parents to add weight to his argument for the universal brotherhood, but it is to the doctrine of Atonement that he turns for the main thrust of his argument. He spells the implications of this line of thought out clearly: “The same benevolence which was due from the Jew to his brethren of the house of Israel is indispensably due, under the Gospel, to our brethren of the universe, however opposite in religious or political opinions.”¹¹³ For Granville Sharp, the classification of the Africans as “heathens” crumbled in light of the many promises of God made possible through the Atonement:

The promises of God . . . are made to all mankind in general, without exception; so that a Negro, as well as any other man, is capable of becoming ‘an adopted son of God’ [Gal 4:5–6], ‘an heir of God through Christ’ [Gal 4:7], ‘a temple of the holy Ghost’ [1 Cor 3:16; 6:19–20], ‘an heir of salvation’, ‘a partaker of the divine nature’ [2 Pet 1:3–4], ‘a joint heir with Christ’ [Rom 8:7], and capable, also of being joined to that glorious company of saints who shall one day ‘come with him to judge the world’ [1 Cor 6:2–3].¹¹⁴

In the contest of late-eighteenth-century ideas, the universal brotherhood provided by the doctrine of the Atonement was a powerful weapon wielded by Sharp.

This view was not unique to Sharp but was shared by evangelicals in general and by abolitionists in particular. As popular as Sharp’s writing was, he was nowhere near as well known as the man at the heart of the evangelical Great Awakening, John Wesley. Wesley was one of the most influential evangelicals of his century on both sides of the Atlantic. His “Methodism” was central to the evangelical movement even within the

¹¹³ Sharp, *Just Limitation*, 40.

¹¹⁴ Sharp, *Just Limitation*, 19.

Anglican Church.¹¹⁵ He published an extensive pamphlet against the slave trade which concluded with this same sentiment on Atonement, expressed as a prayer to

the God of love who art loving to every man, and whose mercy is over all thy works, thou who art the father of the spirits of all flesh, and who art rich in mercy unto all, thou who had mingled of one blood all the nations upon earth . . . Are not those also the work of thine own hands, the purchase of They son's blood? [. . .] Thou savior of all, make them free, that they may be free indeed.¹¹⁶

One of the foremost scholars on slavery, David Brion Davis, notes the prominence of this argument and writes, “Early antislavery writers like James Ramsay and Granville Sharp repeatedly identified the theory of racial inferiority with Hume, Voltaire, and materialistic philosophy in general; they explicitly presented their attacks on slavery as a vindication of Christianity.”¹¹⁷ Similarly, John Coffey, an expert on early modern Protestant British culture, points to William Cowper’s famous poetry on this issue as an excellent example of this sentiment. It reads:

A Briton knows, or if he knows it not,
The Scripture plac'd within his reach, he ought,
That souls have no *discriminating* hue,
Alike important in their Maker's view.
That none are free from blemish since the fall
And love divine has paid one price for all.¹¹⁸

The fact that the Atonement, a doctrine understood by evangelical clergy and laity alike as having central importance, was a key pillar of the abolitionist argument gave them

¹¹⁵ For more on the theology and impact of John Wesley, see Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989); Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007); Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 2003).

¹¹⁶ John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (London: R. Hawes, 1774), 28.

¹¹⁷ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 131.

¹¹⁸ William Cowper, *The Works of William Cowper: His Life, Letters, and Poems* (London: W. Tegg, 1851), 530; quoted in part in John Coffey, “The Abolition of the Slave Trade: Christian Conscience and Political Action,” *Cambridge Papers* (June 2006), vol. 15, no. 2, 2.

greater resonance with their hearers, as pro-slavery biblical exegesis was based on passages of lesser importance, such as the permission to enslave the foreigner found in Leviticus chapter 25.

Those who mitigate the importance of evangelical thought in the abolitionist campaign could point to the evidence that the concept of universal brotherhood was part of the human rights argument in the broader late-eighteenth-century discourse. After all, the French Revolution's motto was famously "Life, liberty, and fraternity." But in fact, it seems that those in Britain who used the language of universal brotherhood themselves adopted the same language as the evangelical discourse.¹¹⁹

While the evangelical abolitionists are often remembered for their focus on human depravity, the doctrine of Atonement encouraged them to emphasize not human frailty, but rather divine love. Then as now, the standard Bible verse detailing the Atonement was John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." In a sermon preached from this text, Simeon explained just how incredibly pure this love is:

If man confer a benefit upon his fellow-creature, we are not surprised; because there is no man so elevated, but he may need the assistance of his inferiors; nor is there any man so depressed, but he may, at some period or other, have it in his power to requite a kindness. But God is totally independent of us . . . How wonderful, then was it, that he should . . . look on us; yea, that he should take such an interest in our affairs . . . Even in this first view of his love we are lost with wonder.¹²⁰

The implications of the nature of this view of God's love demonstrated through the Atonement—what such a view meant for the slave trade, human rights, and the abolitionists personally—must be considered.

¹¹⁹ *The Homiletic Review*, vol. 32 (Funk & Wagnalls, 1896), 300.

¹²⁰ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 254–255.

Chapter Three: Human Rights, Public Duty, and Practical Piety

Standing at his pulpit, Charles Simeon read to his congregation Christ's words from the Gospel of Matthew: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."¹²¹ Simeon began explaining this passage by reminding his listeners of the verse's context: "Our Lord had just foretold his own sufferings and death . . . in this view we may conceive our Lord as saying, 'Do I deny myself, and take up my cross, and even surrender up my life, from love to you? then do ye the same in obedience to me; if I do it willingly for your salvation, surely you cannot hesitate to do it for my glory.'"¹²² It was here at the cross, as evangelicals meditated on Christ's atoning work, that they took up the mandate to live in the world, sharing in Christ's own sufferings.

Even before this explanation of the text on the nature of evangelicalism, Simeon introduced the topic by mentioning how though God *could* do his work on earth without the agency of individuals, he chooses to principally call and qualify men and women to do his work. In Simeon's own words, "he chiefly uses the ministry of his servants, whom he has sent as ambassadors to a guilty world."¹²³ This introduction is called an *exordium*, and the voice for this first section of the sermon is to be, in Simeon's words, "cool and grave."¹²⁴ Simeon continues, "You must, in the beginning, speak gently . . . the agreeable should reign in this part."¹²⁵ The principle is that one begins a sermon by finding common ground, principles or illustrations that are not controversial, from which to begin the exegesis, and to build on it, waiting for the conclusion to press in with fiery zeal.

¹²¹ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 11, 456.

¹²² Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 11, 457.

¹²³ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 16, 33.

¹²⁴ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 21, 402.

¹²⁵ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 21, 403.

Absent from this introduction is the enthusiastic, passionate, fiery zeal meant to excite emotions and action in his hearers. In noting the cool, grave, and gentle manner with which these words would have been articulated, one can surmise that the principle that God uses people in a broken world was one of those ideas that were shared by his hearers.

With great earnestness in his voice, Simeon reached the conclusion of his sermon on the cross: “It is generally thought that the embracing of certain tenets, with a conformity to some rites connected with them, is sufficient to constitute us real Christians. But religion is a practical thing: it enters into every part of our conduct; and must regulate us in every possible situation . . . How vain are the excuses which men offer for their neglect of duty!”¹²⁶ Although for evangelicals salvation was by faith alone, the life of faith was, as Simeon told his congregation, marked by practical service, and this is the great emphasis of his sermon.

The activism of Wilberforce as a Member of Parliament, Hannah More as a popular novelist, Henry Thornton in banking, and their many evangelical friends in various other fashionable if sometimes stigmatized spheres of public life, was animated by this doctrine of Christ entering into the world in order to confront the darkness. Instead of acting outside of creation to remove the problem of evil, Christ chose to enter into it and bear the weight of sin, suffering, and all defilement. Simeon vividly depicts Jesus standing before God the Father saying, “On me be their curse, O my Father: let thy sword awake against me, who am the fellow: inflict their punishment on me, and let them go free; yea, be reconciled to them for my sake.”¹²⁷ Simeon subsequently declared, “We

¹²⁶ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 11, 460.

¹²⁷ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 357.

perceive that as sin had introduced all manner of temporal, spiritual, and eternal miseries into the world, it was for the removal of them that Jesus submitted to all the sufferings which were inflicted on him.”¹²⁸ It was this example—of the pure and holy Son of God, not content to remain in the heavenly realm with all its glory but instead choosing to enter into the world and take upon himself the defilement of humanity in order to confront evil, oppression, and injustice and bring life to all who would believe—which evangelicals were to follow. Those who subscribed to this belief followed Christ’s example not in order to earn their salvation, but rather out of deep gratitude for what God had done for them.¹²⁹ In this way, although salvation was seen as accomplished by the work of Christ, it did not render humans passive in a life of quiet contemplation but rather called them to lives of active service.

The active involvement of evangelicals in public affairs was in direct contrast to their immediate forbears in the faith. Considering the evangelicals of the early eighteenth century, the noted historian, the late David Spring, argued, “Not only were they ill-fitted to deal with the sophisticated world, but many of them also deliberately avoided it as a snare and a delusion.”¹³⁰ Whether or not to be involved in public affairs is a question the devout have faced throughout history. The evangelical Anglicans were no different. When as a young Member of Parliament William Wilberforce became an evangelical, he initially thought of leaving behind the world of politics and taking up a vocation in ministry. His friend, the future prime minister William Pitt (the Younger), urged Wilberforce to continue working as a Member of Parliament, insisting that “the principles

¹²⁸ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 356.

¹²⁹ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 358-359.

¹³⁰ David Spring, “The Clapham Sect: Some Social and Political Aspects,” *Victorian Studies* 5, (September 1961), 37.

as well as the practise of Christianity . . . lead not to meditation only but to action.”¹³¹

The popular evangelical author Hannah More concurred with Pitt and wrote that, “The mischief arises not from our living in the world, but from the world living in us; occupying our hearts, and monopolizing our affections. Action is the life of virtue, and the world is the theatre of action.”¹³² Likewise Simeon preached, “Know ye, brethren that your religion must be seen, not in the church, or in the closet only, but in the shop, the family, the fields.”¹³³ Evangelical Christianity was something to be lived out publicly.

Still unconvinced by the perspective of his friends, Wilberforce called on his childhood pastor, John Newton, who replied in a letter stressing the opportunity Wilberforce had to serve in the political arena. He pointed to examples of great men of faith in the Bible who held political positions:

My heart is with you, my dear sir. I see, though from a distance, the importance and difficulties of your situation. May the wisdom that influenced Joseph and Moses and Daniel rest upon you. Not only to guide and animate you in the line of political duty—but especially to keep you in the habit of dependence upon God, and communion with him, in the midst of all the changes and bustle around you.¹³⁴

Wilberforce clearly listened to the counsel of his friends, and he later declared, “My shame is not occasioned by my thinking that I am too studiously diligent in the business of life; on the contrary, I then feel that I am serving God best when from proper motives I am most actively engaged in it.”¹³⁵ Following Wilberforce’s conversion to

¹³¹ Letter from Pitt to Wilberforce, “December 2, 1785,” in Anna Maria Wilberforce, ed., *Private Papers of William Wilberforce* (New York: B Franklin, 1968), 13.

¹³² Hannah More as quoted in Spring, “The Clapham Sect,” 37.

¹³³ King’s College Archive [hereafter KCA], MS Charles Simeon f. 273, Manuscript Sermon (1818).

¹³⁴ BOD, MS Wilberforce C. 49, ff. 8-9, Letter from John Newton to William Wilberforce (May 18, 1786).

¹³⁵ William Wilberforce as quoted in Robert Isaac Wilberforce, Samuel Wilberforce, and Caspar Morris, *The Life of William Wilberforce* vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1841), 128.

evangelicalism, his chief question was how he could best serve God and his fellow men—which included his responsibility to suffer in degenerate places.

The political arena was seen as a morally dubious sphere, where decisions often involved compromises, often as confusing as they were complex, a moral quagmire for anyone seeking to accomplish anything of significance. Wilberforce was no exception. In the final debate on the slave trade in 1807, when it became clear that the bill for abolition was finally going to be achieved, some of Wilberforce's abolitionist colleagues in Parliament began calling for the total abolition of slavery itself. Wilberforce quickly stood up and stated that they "had for the present no object immediately before them, but that of putting stop directly to the carrying of men in British ships to be sold as slaves in the British islands, in the West Indies."¹³⁶ He continued, "We were not to say that because a man had two wounds we should refrain from curing one, because it was not in our power to heal both wounds immediately."¹³⁷ Perhaps even more unsettling is that the 1807 Act to Abolish the Slave Trade included a clause that made provision for the practice of apprenticeships in Sierra Leone, which as Tomkins noted was seen accurately by at least some contemporaries as yet another cruel form of slavery.¹³⁸ Wilberforce wrote to the governor of Sierra Leone in 1808 explaining that this was a necessary compromise in order to secure the passage of the act.¹³⁹ Wilberforce sought to bring change through entering into the midst of a confusing and difficult realm.

¹³⁶ "Debate on the Slave Trade" in William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary Debates from the year 1803 to the Present Time*, 36 vols (London: T. Curson Hansard, 1806–1820), 9 (1807), col 138. For discussion see William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), 335.

¹³⁷ "Debate on the Slave Trade," col 139.

¹³⁸ Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect: How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010), 202-205.

¹³⁹ Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect*, 205.

For evangelicals, the call to bring freedom by walking the narrow road lay before pastors, politicians, and in fact every Christian. This was a central component to abolition. Simeon addressed the duty of the politician by explaining, “Official influence is a valuable talent: but to use it aright is often very difficult . . . But power and responsibility are inseparable: and the magistrate who neglects his duty, must give an account of such neglect to God.”¹⁴⁰ He then went on to explain to his congregation that it was not only the magistrate to whom these words applied: “To succour the needy, and to relieve the oppressed, is a sacred duty, which no man can neglect, but at the peril of his soul: and to deceive ourselves with vain excuses is folly in the extreme.”¹⁴¹ Evangelical laity, from abolitionist leaders such as Wilberforce to the average volunteer signing petitions and hosting public lectures, considered the sacrifice of time or the possibility of being mocked as part of what it meant to live a cross-centred life.

The consequences of preaching the cross-centered life could certainly be a difficult path, as Simeon knew all too well. After graduating from King’s College, Cambridge University, in 1782, Simeon was assigned to Holy Trinity Church, a prestigious church at the heart of Cambridge. He refused to preach in the style of the fashionable preachers of his day, but rather took up his charge with an evangelical emphasis. The laity loathed his preaching and refused to attend his services. The pewholders locked their pew stalls so others could not sit in them.¹⁴² When Simeon brought chairs for the few who would come, the pewholders disposed of them. This escalated to the point that Simeon wrote to Lambeth Palace, the official residence of the

¹⁴⁰ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 5, 124.

¹⁴¹ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 5, 124.

¹⁴² RID, MS Charles Simeon, box 4, f. 121, Letter from Charles Simeon to Walter Scott (March 28, 1792).

Archbishop of Canterbury, asking for legal advice when his churchwardens tried locking him out of the church.¹⁴³

Although Lambeth Palace prevented the wardens from locking their preacher out of the church, this struggle continued for more than ten years, meaning that Simeon preached more than five hundred and twenty sermons to an almost empty sanctuary. During these years, Simeon wrote to John Newton, “Dear sir, I much need your prayers—beset as I am on every side.”¹⁴⁴ Despite the difficulty he faced, in response to Newton’s invitation to come preach in the prestigious parish in London, Simeon declined, writing that his “besetting sin and characteristic bane (vanity) say, ‘Go, go; you will preach before the Lord Mayor. You will stand in that Pulpit which is thronged with thousands.’”¹⁴⁵ But, he went on to explain, he desired to faithfully care for his congregation regardless of how difficult his situation was. The earnestness of Simeon’s sermons on picking up one’s cross and sharing in Christ’s sufferings can be heard more clearly when we realize that they were spoken in the midst of a very difficult situation to an audience that was at times sceptical or hostile and always few in number. Simeon’s preaching to an almost empty room is one of the nonverbal cues which provide a more accurate hearing of what he was saying. These words were spoken as he stood before an almost empty sanctuary, demonstrating that a willingness to walk a lonely and difficult path was not mere rhetoric but truly what he believed.

¹⁴³ RID, MS Charles Simeon, box 4, f. 121, Letter from Charles Simeon to Walter Scott (March 28, 1792).

¹⁴⁴ LPL, Bull Papers, MS 3096, f. 148, Letter from Charles Simeon to John Newton (April 1, 1784).

¹⁴⁵ LPL, Bull Papers, MS 3096, f. 148, Letter from Charles Simeon to John Newton (April 1, 1784).

After twelve years, many began taking his message to heart. His pewholders returned, and their numbers grew rapidly. This was in keeping with the broader trend in the Anglican church; as W.H.E. Lecky observed, “by the close of the [eighteenth] century the Evangelical party were incontestably the most numerous and most active part in the English church.”¹⁴⁶ It is difficult to verify the concrete numbers of evangelicals within the Anglican church, and thus hard to confirm Lecky’s observation, but certainly the influence of this movement, which in the mid–eighteenth century was attracting large numbers to church services in fields and other places outside the locus of refined and respectable English life, was considerable. By the close of the eighteenth century evangelical influence had grown significantly within the middle and upper classes, including within Parliament, the parishes, and the universities. By the turn of the century, for example, Wilberforce could count on the core support of thirty Members of Parliament who shared his theological and political views and who would follow his lead on a wide range of issues important to the evangelicals.¹⁴⁷ As Wilberforce influenced Members of Parliament toward evangelicalism, he also reached out to the middle and upper classes beyond the Palace of Westminster through writing a book, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted With Real Christianity*. Evangelicalism was a growing movement, and thus while by the turn of the century Wilberforce, Simeon, and Newton were all notable individuals with influence, at the outset of their careers they

¹⁴⁶ William Edward Hartpole Lecky as quoted in John Henry Overton, *The Evangelical Revival in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1886), 158.

¹⁴⁷ Chuck Stetson, *Creating the Better Hour: Lessons from William Wilberforce* (Macon: Stroud & Hall Publishers, 2007), 25.

were men who knew, at least to some extent, what the lonely and difficult path was like to walk.

Pastors in training turned to Simeon in large numbers for advice. To these scores of emerging pastors and leaders that he taught at Cambridge, Simeon was clear that the clergy's responsibility was not to pander to the appetites of their audience nor to impress congregants with their intellect, but simply to preach the Atonement even if it meant difficulty and isolation.¹⁴⁸ Likewise, when Wilberforce believed that his friend the Reverend William Jay was avoiding suffering by softening the message of his sermons, he wrote him a cautioning letter: "I have then . . . been told from various quarters, that your general strain of preaching has been of late not sufficiently Evangelical."¹⁴⁹ Jay took the rebuke to heart, thanked Wilberforce for his insight, and returned to the challenge of preaching on the difficult topics at the heart of evangelicalism. He confessed that his motivation for taming his preaching had been "to avoid the offence of the Cross."¹⁵⁰ In other words, Jay was neglecting his duty to preach "Christ crucified" in order to preach ideas that would prove more palatable to nonevangelicals.

The offense of the evangelical view of the Atonement was in the practical implications it contained for all Britons. Christ's death and resurrection were not doctrines merely to be believed and sung about and remembered in church, but rather truths that clergy and laity alike were called to sacrifice for and be defined by. This was precisely what so many nonevangelicals found so offensive. One of the most outspoken

¹⁴⁸ Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge*, 109.

¹⁴⁹ William Wilberforce "Letter to William Jay," in William Jay, *The Autobiography of the Rev. William Jay: With Reminiscences of Some Distinguished Contemporaries, Selections from his Correspondence, and Literary Remains* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1855), 299.

¹⁵⁰ Jay, *The Autobiography*, 300.

critics of evangelicalism was the Reverend George White, who posted this note organizing what was to become a physical assault on three evangelical preachers:

Notice is hereby given, that if any man be mindful . . . for the defence of the Church of England . . . let him repair to the drum-head at the Cross [a local ale house], where each man shall receive a pint of ale in advance, and other proper encouragements.¹⁵¹

What was it that so riled Reverend White and drove him to lead others in attacking these preachers? The answer is found in a sermon White preached in two nearby towns, which he published in conjunction with this assault. He contrasts his theology with the enthusiasm of the evangelicals: “True religion was never intended to . . . deprive us of the decent Conveniences and innocent Amusements of Life; rather let us look on the Great Deity as the compassionate Father of Mankind, who will make many Allowances for the general Frailties of Human Nature, and the particular Circumstances of each Transgression.”¹⁵² This same view was upheld by the distinguished bishop the Reverend Thomas Newton, who declared from the pulpit:

We are taught to pray daily, Thy kingdom come; but it is not enough to offer up our prayers, unless we likewise exert our . . . endeavours; for how can we be thought to pray in earnest, as long as we do nothing more? Not that I conceive we are obliged with the hazard of our lives and fortunes . . .¹⁵³

The context of Bishop Newton’s sermon is of great importance. He was preaching at the anniversary meeting of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. This international missionary organization actually owned slaves in the American colonies and later the United States of America. Earlier in his sermon, Bishop Newton

¹⁵¹ Michael Francis Snape, *The Church of England in Industrialising Society: The Lancashire Parish of Whalley in the Eighteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 33–34.

¹⁵² George White, *A Sermon Against Methodists* (London: James Stanley, 1748), 23.

¹⁵³ Thomas Newton, *On the Imperfect Reception of the Gospel; A Sermon Preached before the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts; At their anniversary Meeting* (London: Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, 1769), 18.

refers to how it would be ideal if no one anywhere was enslaved, but instead of calling on the Society to make the abolition of slavery a reality, or at least to consider not participating in the slave trade, he states that Christians are not called upon to take action that is so strenuous as to endanger their lives and/or livelihoods. Bishop Newton and Reverend White both understood the potency of evangelicalism and how its view of the duty of Christians was a serious threat to the sacred and secular status quo, the economic viability of Great Britain, and the comfort of those with vested interests in the slave trade.

This threatening concept of duty held a central role in the vocabulary of the leaders of abolition. Whereas activists in the twenty-first century might expect to find the terminology of rights at the forefront of the campaign against the slave trade, it was instead the discourse of duty which took centre stage.

In order to understand what contemporaries meant by these words, one would do well to turn to Dr. Samuel Johnson's eighteenth-century dictionary. His work served as the seminal source for defining terms by both the elites and the general public. As Olivia Smith observes, "No other writer concerned with language, such as Ben Jonson or Jonathan Swift, had such an extensive and tenacious appeal to the public."¹⁵⁴ Accordingly, Johnson's definitions of words and the order of importance with which he ranked their multiple meanings can be seen to exemplify the way his contemporaries thought. Historians seeking to find anything similar to a twenty-first-century conception of human rights in Johnson's dictionary must wade down to his fourth entry, which defines "rights" as "That which justly belongs to one."¹⁵⁵ As an example of use, Johnson draws upon "The Knight's Tale," by John Dryden, which was popular at that time: "The

¹⁵⁴ Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 13

¹⁵⁵ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 12th ed. (London: D. Buchanan, 1802), 722.

pris'ner freed himself by nature's laws, Born free, he fought for his *rights*.”¹⁵⁶ This sounds similar to the twenty-first-century definition of rights, “something to which one has a just claim,” as does the example Dr. Johnson gives from Clarendon given in the seventh entry: “Their only thoughts and hope was to defend their own *rights* and liberties, due to them by the law.”¹⁵⁷ The definition that preceded this example, however, was “Immunity, privilege.”¹⁵⁸ Seeing rights as privileges is quite different from the entitlements they are more commonly considered to be today.¹⁵⁹ What emerges both from the pages of Dr. Johnson's dictionary and the speeches within Parliament is that Hanoverian Britons perceived rights in terms of that to which one was entitled by virtue of humanity, yet still including the concept of privilege. The idea of inalienable human rights, then, is not here with any force. Though references to the rights of man, universal rights, human rights, and natural rights do appear scattered through the evangelical abolitionist speeches, the force of the abolitionist argument relied instead on the vocabulary of duty.

Duty and its related vocabulary were consistently used in abolitionist speeches, sermons, and writings. Wilberforce's most famous speech against the slave trade came on May 12, 1789, and as he introduced, for the first time, legislation to abolish the slave trade. He declared, “Had I deserted the great and important undertaking, I should have considered myself wanting in that necessary portion of duty which I owed to my

¹⁵⁶ Johnson, 722.

¹⁵⁷ Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2000), 1005; Johnson, 722.

¹⁵⁸ Johnson, 722.

¹⁵⁹ Defining rights as entitlements did not gain ascendancy in Britain until much later, though the concept began to gain momentum through the American Revolution, as outlined by Michael Zuckert, “Natural Rights in the American Revolution: The American Amalgam,” *Human Rights and Revolutions*, edited by Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, Greg Grandin, Lynn Hunt, and Marilyn B. Young (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 65–82.

constituents and to my country.”¹⁶⁰ In this speech, which lasted more than three hours, he insisted that Parliament had a responsibility to ignore the opinions of those with a vested interest in the trade because “it is our duty therefore to trust not the reasonings of interested men.”¹⁶¹ Wilberforce made it clear that he would not be dissuaded from demanding abolitionist legislation: “From every consideration I shall deal frankly with the House, by declaring, that no act of policy whatever will make me swerve from my duty and oblige me to abandon a measure which I think will be an honour to humanity.”¹⁶² In his opening remarks he also made clear that in bringing forward a bill to abolish the slave trade he was doing “nothing more than his duty.”¹⁶³

Insight into what he meant by “duty” is found in that last small phrase, for it is an allusion to a parable Jesus told to his disciples:

But which of you, having a servant ploughing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? . . . So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.¹⁶⁴

That this same sense of duty was adopted by others is seen in the fact that Johnson used the same parable to explain the word *duty* to his dictionary’s readers. His first entry is, “That to which a man is by any natural or legal obligation bound. When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded, you say we are unprofitable servants: we

¹⁶⁰ “Slave Trade,” *Morning Star* (London, England), May 13, 1789; Issue 78, 2.

¹⁶¹ BOD MSS Wilberforce B. 2, f. 13, Wilberforce’s Diary (May 12, 1789); “Debate on Mr. Wilberforce’s Resolutions respecting the Slave Trade” in William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England. From the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the year 1803*, 36 vols (London: T. Curson Hansard, 1806–1820), 28 (1789–91), col 45.

¹⁶² “Slave Trade,” *Morning Star* (London, England), May 13, 1789; Issue 78, 2.

¹⁶³ “Slave Trade,” *Morning Star* (London, England), May 13, 1789; Issue 78, 2.

¹⁶⁴ Luke 17:7–10, KJV.

have done that which was our duty to do.”¹⁶⁵ The essence of duty for Hanoverian Britons was intimately linked to this spiritual concept of duty to Christ and its biblical contexts.

One of the most often quoted passages of Scripture that reveals the evangelical concept of duty is Micah 6:8: “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” In a sermon on this verse titled “Justice and Mercy Recommended, Particularly with Reference to the Slave Trade,” preached at Cambridge University in 1788, the Reverend Peter Pickard defined *justice* as “an absolute and indispensable duty.”¹⁶⁶ Ending the slave trade was not to be seen as a heroic act, nor as something praiseworthy, but merely as something that should be expected of lawmakers who were expected to walk humbly with, and were accountable to, God.

Always careful to walk the fine line of calling Christians to do good works without preaching salvation by works, Simeon commented on this same passage of Scripture, cautioning against interpreting the call of duty as a means to salvation. He noted, “Can it be supposed that the prophet intended . . . to tell us that morality was *all* and Christ *nothing*?”¹⁶⁷ These evangelicals were passionate about the individual’s reconciliation to God being founded only on the merit of Christ’s perfect sacrifice of his life, and equally adamant that this could be received by faith alone. At the same time, Britons were passionate about how faith included action as they were awakened to biblical duty. If this duty to action was ignored, then one was probably not actually a believer, as Simeon explained: “If your faith be productive of good works, it is lively, and

¹⁶⁵ Johnson, 318.

¹⁶⁶ Peter Peckard *Justice and Mercy Recommended, Particularly with Reference to the Slave Trade* (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, 1788), 22.

¹⁶⁷ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 10, 326.

saving; if not, it is dead . . . delusive.”¹⁶⁸ The evangelicals took this sobering message to heart as they heard this Old Testament passage confirm and emphasize Christ’s call to follow him on the difficult road to the cross.

It is in pausing to hear the eighteenth-century concept of the duty to serve God even unto death that we may begin to make sense of Wilberforce’s willingness to take up the abolitionist cause at great personal cost and his readiness to sacrifice his political life as a consequence. By contrast, Ford K. Brown insists that abolition was a cause by which the evangelicals could galvanize the public to their side, and thus, by having greater influence, further their other objectives.¹⁶⁹ He quotes Charles Hole, a historian from the late nineteenth century, who wrote, “What was really wanted . . . was some grand and weighty public cause, appealing in the plainest and the most direct terms to the activities of every individual who heard the joyful sound, some vigorous undertaking to rouse self-denial, toil and sacrifice.”¹⁷⁰ However, for years—especially during the mid-1790s when revolutionary France was at war with Britain—support for abolitionism was politically and intellectually dangerous, even viewed as treasonous. It was not a politically expedient cause. Wilberforce, a man many thought could have been prime minister if he had only avoided the anti-slave trade cause, wrote a private letter to Dr. James Currie of Liverpool, explaining that he was prepared to suffer for the abolitionist cause:

In the case of every question of political expediency, there appears to me room for the consideration of times and seasons . . . but in the present instance . . . a man who fears God is not at liberty. To you I will say a strong thing, which the motive I have just suggested will both explain and justify. If I thought the immediate Abolition of the Slave Trade would

¹⁶⁸ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 10, 327.

¹⁶⁹ Ford K. Brown, 113–114.

¹⁷⁰ Charles Hole as quoted in Ford K. Brown, 114.

cause an insurrection in our islands, I should not for an instant remit my most strenuous endeavours. Be persuaded then, I shall still less ever make this grand cause the sport of caprice, or sacrifice it to motives of political convenience.¹⁷¹

This letter was penned in 1793, when Britain was at the height of its anti-revolutionary and anti-insurrectionary sentiment and when support for reform carried with it possible charges of sedition. At this time many reformers and abolitionists were withdrawing from public campaigns in order to avoid being tried and convicted of treason. Wilberforce demonstrated the veracity of his words and the strength of his convictions by continuing to publicly campaign for the abolition of the slave trade and introduce bills toward this end even during this dangerous season.

Ulterior motives have long been ascribed to the evangelicals for their involvement in opposing Britain's slave trade. Members of Parliament opposing abolition in the eighteenth century, as well as scholarly sceptics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, presume that religious men and women such as Wilberforce and Hannah More cared only about souls being saved and were therefore indifferent to human suffering. As quoted earlier from *Fathers of the Victorians*, Ford K. Brown asserts that "emancipation itself was not an end. It might lead to the wonderful accomplishment of introducing the Gospel . . . The opening of Africa and the East to the missionaries was the thing itself."¹⁷² Boyd Hilton concurs with this perspective and notes that "Wilberforce's impulse . . . was missionary rather than humanitarian . . . The fundamental problem with slavery was that its victims were not free to think, not free to choose Christ and reject Satan, and therefore

¹⁷¹ William Wilberforce as quoted in John Pollock, *William Wilberforce* (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1977), 123.

¹⁷² Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, 383.

not able to be saved.”¹⁷³ Hilton’s assumption is that the evangelicals believed slaves would only be free to become Christians if they were free from slavery, and so the evangelicals sought to abolish slavery. Brown’s argument renders the same conclusion: evangelicals were not interested in caring for people’s temporal suffering, but they used the effort to end slavery to further their mission to save souls. Hilton contrasts this supposed indifference to human suffering with the religiously subversive Member of Parliament, Charles James Fox, “whose speeches were marvellously humane and enlightened but not evangelical.”¹⁷⁴ But despite these assertions, if one truly comprehends the doctrines explained by Simeon and Newton, one finds that these evangelicals were compelled to empathize with the material needs of the vulnerable, not in spite of their religion, but rather because of it.

Acknowledging his theological perspective adds a new element to Wilberforce’s famous statement that “God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners.”¹⁷⁵ This statement is often cited to convey Wilberforce’s two primary goals for his work within Parliament; however, Wilberforce was doing much more here than simply identifying his twin objectives and his decision to pursue them. He was stating that these two objectives were mandates that *God* had given him the duty to fulfil. Three days after Wilberforce wrote these words in his journal, he received a letter from John Newton offering advice on how to proceed following Wilberforce’s decision to remain in politics—a decision he had

¹⁷³ Hilton, “Why Britain Outlawed Her Slave Trade,” *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*, ed. Derek R. Peterson (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 75–76.

¹⁷⁴ Hilton, “Why Britain Outlawed Her Slave Trade,” 77.

¹⁷⁵ William Wilberforce as quoted in James Walvin, “The Rise of British Popular Sentiment for Abolition, 1787–1832,” *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey*, eds. Christina Bolt and Seymour Drescher (Folkestone: W. Dawson: 1980), 149.

made when they were together four days previous.¹⁷⁶ Newton's advice answers the question of how might he do this work as a faithful servant of God. Wilberforce's campaign to suppress the slave trade—his leadership in abolition—was seen by himself, by Newton—by evangelicalism—as a God-given *duty*. There were certainly times when he felt like giving up—one can see frustrations in his journals—but in his theology he found something stronger than his own resolve to make a difference, and he was prepared to endure public and private hostility to remain faithful.

On a day of national penitence, Simeon spoke out against mere spiritual activity to the neglect of caring for the destitute, and he singled out the issue of the slave trade as the most blatant contemporary example: “When addressing you on a day of national humiliation, I may well advert to that great national sin of holding thousands of our fellow-creatures in bondage, and treating them as though they had neither the rights nor feelings of humanity . . .”¹⁷⁷ He went on to speak of the guilt shared by all of Britain because of the slave trade and the responsibility of every Christian to tend to the needs of all who were “poor and destitute.”¹⁷⁸ Noted historians, including Boyd Hilton and Ford K Brown, portray the evangelicals' concern for their fellow humans as exclusively having to do with the need for the salvation of souls, but here we see an appeal to the feelings of humanity. The Scripture Simeon shared that day was Isaiah 58, which reads in part, “Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let

¹⁷⁶ BOD, MS Wilberforce C. 49, f. 14, Letter from John Newton to William Wilberforce, (November 1, 1787).

¹⁷⁷ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 505.

¹⁷⁸ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 505.

the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?”¹⁷⁹ This passage, as Simeon went on to explain, speaks directly to those who concern themselves merely with spiritual matters and neglect to care for the physical well-being of the vulnerable. It was with these same words that Wilberforce began his pamphlet calling for the support of abolishing slavery itself: “To all the inhabitants of the British Empire, who value the favour of God . . . to all who have any respect for justice, or any feelings for humanity . . .”¹⁸⁰ In the following pages what emerges is a man who was “crying out from the heart in his indignation at the perpetuation of slavery and the slave trade.”¹⁸¹ This sentiment has also been observed by the historian Ian Bradley, who writes that Simeon, Newton, Wilberforce, and their evangelical contemporaries “were profoundly moved by human want and suffering.”¹⁸² The motivation to abolish the slave trade was found not in an abstract principle regarding free will, as Hilton assumes, but rather from a responsibility to compassionately care for suffering humans.¹⁸³

While the slave trade was the example that Simeon drew upon to illustrate injustice and responsibility to action in this case, other sermons were devoted to caring for the poor at home. “Let us stir up within our own breasts a tender concern for the welfare of our fellow-creatures,” he implored.¹⁸⁴ According to Simeon, not only were Christians to cultivate a sense of empathy for those who had material needs, but they must also use that empathy to animate their actions to do something about those practical

¹⁷⁹ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 502.

¹⁸⁰ William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire: In Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1823), 1.

¹⁸¹ Murray Andrew Pura, *Vital Christianity: The Life and Spirituality of William Wilberforce* (Toronto: Clements Pub., 2002), 132–133.

¹⁸² Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness*, 120.

¹⁸³ Hilton, “Why Britain,” 75–76.

¹⁸⁴ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 4, 457.

needs. Compassion must always include action. This was a principle Simeon deliberately emphasized from his pulpit:

Let not any then be contented with approving the things which they have heard, or with wishing well to the institution that has been recommended to their care: for St. James justly says, “If ye merely say to a brother or sister, Be ye warmed, be ye filled; and yet neglect to give them the things they need; what doth it profit?” Such compassion will neither profit them nor you.¹⁸⁵

For evangelicals, empathy must always be intimately linked to tangible service.

Fellow parliamentarians questioned the reality of this dedication to compassionate practical help toward their fellow Britons. “Oh, that our skins were black!” lamented Daniel O’Connell, the early-nineteenth-century champion of Ireland’s destitute.¹⁸⁶ Similarly, William Cobbett dismissed Wilberforce’s *An Appeal* by stating, “You pretend to want the Blacks to be as free as British labourers; but . . . [n]ever have you done one single act in favour of the labourers of this country.”¹⁸⁷ Wilberforce encountered these accusations frequently enough to write to his fellow abolitionist Thomas Clarkson complaining of “the imputation, which has been sometimes most falsely cast upon us, of having our minds so filled with African and West Indian grievances, that we are insensible to the suffering of our own countrymen.”¹⁸⁸ As one moves beyond the rhetoric of Wilberforce’s critics, however, examining both evangelical theology and social action, one finds that abolitionist evangelicals were in fact quite concerned about the suffering of their fellow citizens—and that they acted upon that concern.

¹⁸⁵ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 4, 457.

¹⁸⁶ Daniel O’Connell as quoted in Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, 113.

¹⁸⁷ William Cobbett, “To William Wilberforce: On the State of the Cotton Factory Labourers,” *Cobbett’s Weekly Register* 47 (Summer 1828), 527. For an excellent discussion of these accusations against Wilberforce, see Murray Andrew Pura, “For the Love of God and the Love of Humanity: The Motivation Behind William Wilberforce’s Fight for Abolition and Emancipation,” A paper presented at the Wilberforce Symposium, November 15–16, 2002.

¹⁸⁸ Pollock, *William Wilberforce*, 255.

Contrary to the claims that the evangelicals did nothing for the poor of England, they were often involved in caring for the local poor. For example, the evangelicals, including Wilberforce, supported Sir Robert Peel's Reforming Factory Acts, and the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor was founded at William Wilberforce's own house.¹⁸⁹ This society "first called for definite legislation to limit the hours worked by children in the cotton mills, to regulate the age and conditions of apprenticeship and to provide for regular inspection."¹⁹⁰ Wilberforce expressed deep frustration over how Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* dissuaded Members of Parliament from supporting measures to "interfere" in alleviating the effects of the grain shortage.¹⁹¹ As he wrote to Andrew Young, himself an agriculturalist, in 1800, "I am shocked at the languor which prevails on this important subject in sensible and feeling men."¹⁹² This sentiment and Wilberforce's reformist involvement fly in the face of the claims of his contemporaries and of scholarly sceptics as to Wilberforce's apparent hesitancy to act on behalf of the British poor.

While Wilberforce sought to provide the British destitute with a voice in Parliament, Simeon sought to care for the disadvantaged by not only contributing to a fund which subsidized bread for the poor, but by taking upon himself the task of riding out to the neighbouring villages every Monday to make sure the poor were able to buy bread at the reduced price.¹⁹³ These are just a few of the examples of how the

¹⁸⁹ Stetson, *Creating the Better Hour*, 23.

¹⁹⁰ Garth Lean, *God's Politician: William Wilberforce's Struggle* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), 153.

¹⁹¹ Pollock, *William Wilberforce*, 171.

¹⁹² Letter from Wilberforce to Andrew Young as quoted in Pollock, *William Wilberforce*, 171.

¹⁹³ Simeon as quoted in Carus and McIlvaine, *Memoirs of the Life*, 64–65.

evangelicals concerned themselves with caring for the temporal needs of their neighbours domestically.

Scholars paint the various late-eighteenth-century domestic initiatives, as well as the movement to end Britain's slave trade, as part of a general progression toward a secular perspective of human rights. As David Brion Davis notes, "We have uncritically tended to assume that anti-slavery can be understood as part of an irreversible process of secularization . . . we have assumed that Christianity was somehow diluted and secularized as religious men and women became preoccupied with social problems."¹⁹⁴ The secularized perspective views the words of Wilberforce and his fellow abolitionists as cloaking secular ideas in religious discourse. It seems more likely that the opposite is true: religiously inspired initiatives such as abolition were argued using arguments concerning economics and political viability. For example, although the majority of its members were deeply religious individuals, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (the committee Wilberforce was a part of which was responsible for coordinating much of abolitionist legislation and initiatives within Parliament) made a conscious effort to focus its attention within Parliament on the economic viability of abolishing the slave trade. This is seen in a report from one of its meetings from 1788:

The information and argument on this subject, contained in various publications, have fully evinced the injustice and inhumanity of the Slave Trade. The Committee have expended a considerable sum in printing and dispersing such tracts . . . they have more particularly directed their attention to the plea of political necessity, which is frequently urged to justify, or at least to palliate, this traffic.¹⁹⁵

This reference to political necessity refers to the argument that while the slave trade might be unjust, to abolish it would throw Britain into economic decline. As pro-slave

¹⁹⁴ Davis, 13.

¹⁹⁵ *World*, February 2, 1788, London edition.

trade Members of Parliament were increasingly willing to admit that the trade was immoral, they sought to establish their argument in favour of its continuing based on implications abolition would have on the economy. As this was the central argument of the pro-slave trade Members of Parliament, many abolitionist Members of Parliament, including Wilberforce, focused much of their attention on refuting it. Moreover, even in a nation like England with a powerful state religion, many were hesitant to use purely religious arguments to advance political causes. This proclivity owes something to the drawn-out religious and theological battles of the post-Reformation period which had lingered into the eighteenth century.¹⁹⁶ Paradoxically, when matters of faith and church were contested in Hanoverian society, they remained very public and political too.¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless, to ignore the evangelical dimension of abolitionist and other compassionate initiatives is to ignore one of the central motivators for a key constituency of abolitionists.

The taking up of the abolitionist cause, and even the fundamental ideas of that cause, were seen by contemporaries as manifestations of heightened religiosity. Lord Melbourne responded to the abolitionists' debate in the House of Lords by exclaiming, "Things have come to a pretty pass when one should permit one's religion to invade public life."¹⁹⁸ This Member of the House of Lords clearly saw the discourse against the slave trade as being a religious initiative. In Britain, abolitionists could be seen as having

¹⁹⁶ On this theme see Nicholas Tyacke, *England's Long Reformation, 1500–1800* (London: UCL Press, 1998); Jeremy Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation, and Reform, 1660–1828: Archbishops of Canterbury and Their Diocese* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁹⁷ On this theme see J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology, and Politics During the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); David Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland: From Glorious Revolution to the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁹⁸ Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2007), xix.

too much religion and the adherents of anti-slavery as being religious fanatics, as illustrated by Wilberforce's response to such criticism: "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."¹⁹⁹ In a similar vein to Lord Melbourne's indignation, the Earl of Abingdon rebuked Wilberforce furiously, insisting, "Humanity is a private feeling and not a public principle to act upon."²⁰⁰ What this earl found so offensive about Wilberforce's drive for abolition is that it was predicated on the belief that legislation should be founded on what had previously been seen as private sentiment. Abolitionism, for Wilberforce, Newton, and Simeon, was not a step toward secularism as much as it was a resurgence of religious beliefs shaping public policy.

For evangelicals, adopting the abolitionist cause was a return to the fundamentals of their faith. Pastors ceased seeing their work as a profession and began to view it more as a lifestyle; politicians stopped seeing their work as a vocation and viewed it more as a ministry. Simeon explained to future pastors that their role was to "always . . . maintain in [their congregations] an esteem and an eagerness for practical piety."²⁰¹ He cited James 1:27, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." Embodied in the words and deeds of Simeon and Wilberforce, evangelical religion emphasized practical service for the destitute. Whereas Bishop Thomas Newton and the Reverend George White absolved Britons of the need to go to extremes for their faith,

¹⁹⁹ William Wilberforce as quoted in Samuel and Robert Wilberforce, *The Life*, vol. 4, 290.

²⁰⁰ Melbourne as quoted in "Debate on Mr. Wilberforce's Resolutions" in William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England. From the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the year 1803*, (London: T. Curson Hansard, 1806–1820), 657.

²⁰¹ Charles Simeon and Jean Claude, "On the Composition of a Sermon," in Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 21, 295.

Simeon drew his sermon—the one this chapter began with—to a close by telling his parishioners very clearly, “Let this then be fully known; they, and they only, who, if put to the test, would be willing to die for Christ, are real Christians in the sight of God; and consequently, that they, and they only, will be saved in the day that he shall judge the quick and dead.”²⁰² The late-eighteenth-century evangelicals firmly believed that true Christians must be willing not only to suffer, but also to die as they took on the responsibility and challenge of entering into the midst of the darkness of this world to confront evil in all of its forms. For these evangelicals, the slave trade was one of those evils.

Evangelical theology may have not made its adherents more anti-slave trade than Bishop Thomas Newton—he shared their desire for a world of freedom—but it did give them the perspective that they had a duty to sacrifice everything for this freedom. Even if it threatened the economic well-being of individuals, corporations, or even Britain itself, the slave trade must still be abolished, and if it meant the loss of one’s career advancement, as it seemed to do for Wilberforce, abolition must still be brought forward—it was their God-given duty.

²⁰² Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 11, 460.

Chapter Four: Imminent Danger in the Discourse of Abolition

Although the Atonement was the doctrine at the centre of evangelical thought, the late-eighteenth-century evangelicals also found urgency in the thunderous teaching on God's impending judgement. This aspect of their discourse was almost completely neglected until John Coffey's recently published article "'Tremble, Britannia!' Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758–1807," which for the first time has raised it as a substantial topic for anti-slave trade historical inquiry.²⁰³ Coffey has compiled a powerful case that examines how widespread and extensive this element of evangelical thought was, offering overwhelming examples from abolitionist leaders and lesser-known contributors to the movement, all of whom contended that God was in control of the universe and may thus bless or judge nations through natural disasters or human affairs. This is called providentialism. Coffey's work is important as it restores to the forefront this doctrine as a central element of the abolitionist discourse. Most relevant to this thesis is the yet-unstudied aspect of abolitionist providentialism in "fast day" sermons.

Fast days were appointed by the decree of King George III and were common during the wars with France in the late eighteenth century. On fast days, the nation was to come together to pray, fast, and humble themselves before God, and seek his pardon for sins and blessing on their endeavours. On February 28, 1794, during the time when war with France caused almost any effort for reform of any kind to be seen as seditious and many abolitionists left the antislavery cause, John Newton preached a fiery sermon calling for the slave trade to be abolished. The sermon begins with the story of the people

²⁰³ John Coffey, "'Tremble, Britannia!': Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758–1807," *English Historical Review* (August 2012), Vol. 127, No. 527, 844–881.

of Nineveh from the famous biblical story of Jonah.²⁰⁴ The prophet had been sent by God to the capital of the world's greatest empire of the time, and he warned that God would soon destroy their city. Newton earnestly explained, "If they had reasoned on his prediction, they might have thought it very improbable, that a great city, the head of a great kingdom, and in a time of peace, could be in danger of an overthrow . . ." ²⁰⁵ The similarities between the inhabitants of Nineveh and Newton's London parishioners were striking, but just in case anyone missed the allusion, he spelled it out clearly: "Our wide spreading and flourishing commerce, has raised us to a pitch of opulence which excites the admiration and envy of other nations. Great Britain appears as but a small spot upon a globe or map; but our interests and influence extend, in every direction, to the uttermost parts of the earth!" ²⁰⁶ Several times throughout this sermon Newton raises this point. He is clearly grateful for the prosperity of Great Britain, but he wants to remind his listeners that Nineveh and other now-defunct empires throughout the ages shared these blessings. Such knowledge should lead Britons to trembling rather than arrogance: "Where are now the mighty empires, which were once thought as rooted and established as the everlasting mountains? They have disappeared like the mists upon the mountaintops. Nothing of them remains but their names." ²⁰⁷

The most terrifying and reoccurring example in the sermon, however, is not some ancient biblical empire, but contemporary France: "The rivers of human blood, and all the calamities and horrors which overspread a great part of the Continent, the distant report of which is sufficient to make our ears tingle, are all to be ascribed to this cause.

²⁰⁴ Newton, *The Imminent Danger, And the Only Sure Resource of This Nation: A Sermon* (London: Johnson, 1794).

²⁰⁵ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 3.

²⁰⁶ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 12.

²⁰⁷ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 16.

God is not acknowledged; yes, in some places, he has been formally disowned and renounced.”²⁰⁸ The horror of France’s turning its back on religion was shared by evangelicals. As Hebert Schlossberg observes, “William Wilberforce . . . joined with many others in fearing not only the violence of the French Revolution but more especially its source in atheism.”²⁰⁹ Newton’s sermon drove home the point that though Britain was experiencing global success and economic prosperity, their destruction could come at any moment if they continued in their exploitation of the victims of the slave trade, an exploitation Newton linked with a refusal to acknowledge and submit to God.

Although Newton clearly outlined the context for his listeners, late-eighteenth-century Britons would have already been quite familiar with these themes. In the lead-up to a fast day, newspapers would carry the proclamation of the king, which read:

. . . humble ourselves before Almighty God, and to send up our prayers and supplications to the Divine Majesty, for obtaining pardon of our sins, and for averting those heavy judgments which our manifold sins have most justly deserved; and imploring His blessing and assistance on our military, and for restoring and perpetuating peace, safety, and prosperity to himself and to his kingdoms.²¹⁰

Newton quoted the king’s proclamation for February 28, 1794, and these exact words appear in newspapers reporting on fast days dating back to the 1740s. This type of formal observation was not unfamiliar to late-eighteenth-century Anglicans, evangelicals included. The correlation between Britain and the countries of the Old Testament, as John Newton so clearly preached it, was a regular part of these sermons. One of many available examples from clergy preaching similar messages comes from the Reverend Henry Mead: “The charge of aggrieved sins, recorded in the Old Testament . . . is truly

²⁰⁸ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 6.

²⁰⁹ Schlossberg, 9.

²¹⁰ *The Oracle* (London: January 13, 1794), 1.

applicable to us.”²¹¹ Evangelical Britons shared Newton’s concern that they must take their national sins seriously.

After explaining that the first response of a devout Christian is to examine his or her own sins, Newton calls for the second response, which is to be concerned “for the sins of those among whom we dwell.”²¹² Regarding these, Newton speaks generally of the lusts and perversions of his nation, but then specifically names the slave trade. In fact, the slave trade is the only sin that he gives special mention to: “I would be inexcusable, considering the share I have formerly had in that unholy business, if, upon this occasion, I should omit to mention the African slave-trade.”²¹³ At first glance we might assume that he singles out this one sin because he carries the guilt of having been a slave trader himself. However, he continues, “There is a cry of blood against us; a cry accumulated by the addition of fresh victims, of thousands, of scores of thousands . . . from year to year!”²¹⁴ The guilt that Britain bears is not reduced to some time in the past, and it is greater than the guilt borne by France:

If you are justly shocked by what you hear of the cruelties practiced in France—you would, perhaps, be shocked much more, if you could fully conceive of the evils and miseries inseparable from this slave traffic, which I know, not from hearsay—but from my own experience and observation, are equal in atrocity, and, perhaps, superior in number, in the course of a single year, to any, or all the worst actions which have been known in France since the commencement of their revolution.²¹⁵

Newton’s reference to himself in speaking of the slave trade is not only an acknowledgement of his own guilt, but is provided as a means to validate his credibility

²¹¹ Mead Henry, *Fast-Day: A sermon, preached in Bethel Chapel, St. Pancras, March 9, 1796, being the day appointed for a National Fast. By the Rev. Henry Mead, Minister of the said Chapel, and Lecturer of St. John's, Wapping* (London: R. Hindmarsh, 1796), 7.

²¹² Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 10.

²¹³ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 14.

²¹⁴ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 15.

²¹⁵ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 14–15.

on the subject. His desire is to impress upon his audience that the slave trade is an abomination, and one of greater guilt than the many evils committed in France.

Echoes of this treatment of slavery can readily be found in one of Simeon's own fast day sermons, for another fast day and preached from another text. Simeon's sermon is not about the slave trade, but as he speaks on the issue of national sin, he cannot help but mention it: "When addressing you on a day of national humiliation, I may well advert to that great national sin of holding thousands of our fellow-creatures in bondage . . . Whilst this continues, God cannot but have a controversy with us; nor can we expect any thing at his hands but to be visited with his heaviest displeasure."²¹⁶

It is particularly remarkable that Simeon and Newton would speak about the slave trade in these fast day sermons because they were given during times of great tension during their wars with France, and to criticize the slave trade during these times, as has already been discussed, could lead one to be labelled seditious. This is even more readily seen when the context of both sermons is a call not only to confession, but to repentance. Simeon's sermon is based on Isaiah 58, a passage specifically criticizing those who merely fast and do not follow through with action. Newton's sermon, while on an entirely different passage, was also a call to action: "If the fast of this day is not confined to one day—but if, by his blessing, it may produce repentance not to be repented of, then I am warranted to tell you, from his word that there is yet hope . . . You that tremble . . . take courage."²¹⁷ "Repentance" in this way refers to a turning away from one's wickedness.²¹⁸ Simeon and Newton were not asking people to simply acknowledge their guilt, but to change their behaviour. In mentioning the slave trade, they were from their pulpits calling

²¹⁶ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 505.

²¹⁷ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 18–19.

²¹⁸ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 4, 224.

for abolition precisely when it was most dangerous to do so. By calling for repentance they were calling for meaningful reform. When the tide of popular opinion was its lowest points during the twenty-year campaign against the slave trade, it was evangelical preachers, together with Wilberforce, who endured as public voices of abolition, and they did so precisely in the evangelical discourse.

National fast days were certainly not the only instances when Newton preached on the slave trade and its connection to God's impending judgement. Although one such sermon is lost to us, Newton wrote to a friend regarding it, "When I was assured that Mr. Wilberforce would renew his motion in the House this session, I preached (as I did last year) about the slave trade."²¹⁹ His motivation to continue preaching on the subject is found in the fear that if abolition did not go through, he would "fear not only for the poor slaves—but for ourselves. For I think if men refuse to vindicate the oppressed—the Lord will take their cause into his own hands. And the consequences may be dreadful both abroad and at home . . . hurricanes, insurrections, etc. etc."²²⁰ This fear of impending punishment—this concern that the slave trade would destroy not only Africa, but Britain as well—is a key component that allowed the abolitionists to not only personally oppose the slave trade but to believe the nation had the obligation as a whole to bring about abolition.

In evangelical thought, while the slave trade was said to wreak havoc in Africa, it was also expected to bring destruction on Britain because it would invoke God's judgement on the nation. Wilberforce wrote in a letter to his constituents, "Though the mind be naturally led to the Africans as the greatest sufferers, yet, unless the Scripture be

²¹⁹ John Newton, *One Hundred and Twenty Nine Letters from the Rev. John Newton to the Rev. William Bull* (London: Hamilton, Adams, And Co., 1847), 262.

²²⁰ Newton, *One Hundred*, 263.

a forgery, it is not their cause only that I am pleading, but the cause of my Country.”²²¹

He does not wish to seem a wild prophet, but still he warns that natural calamities are judgements from God. “It is not that I expect any visible and supernatural effects of the Divine vengeance; that, not to listen with seriousness to the accounts which have been brought us of late years from the western hemisphere, as to a probable intimation of the Divine displeasure would be to resolve to shut our ears against the warning voice of Providence.”²²² Wilberforce goes on to carefully explain how this works:

Providence governs the world. But if we are not blind to the course of human events, as well as utterly deaf to the plain instructions of Revelation, we must believe that a continued course of wickedness, oppression and cruelty, obstinately maintained in spite of the fullest knowledge and the loudest warnings, must infallibly bring down upon us the heaviest judgments of the Almighty. We may ascribe our fall to weak councils, or unskilful generals; to a factious and overburthened people; to storms which waste our fleets, to diseases which thin our armies; to mutiny among our soldiers and sailors, which may even turn against us our own force; to the diminution of our revenues and the excessive increase of our debt: men may complain on one side of a venal ministry, on the other of a factious opposition; while amid mutual recriminations the nation is gradually verging to its fate. Providence will easily provide means for the accomplishment of its own purposes. It cannot be denied, that there are circumstances in the situation of this Country, which, reasoning from experience, we must call marks of a declining empire; but we have, as I firmly believe, the means within ourselves of arresting the progress of this decline. We have been eminently blessed; we have been long spared; let us not presume too far on the forbearance of the Almighty.²²³

Providentialism, then, was a means through which the abolitionists could appeal to self-interest even though, as the historian Seymour Drescher has conclusively shown, they understood that the abolition of the slave trade was financial suicide. The self-interest in question was the desire for their nation to escape punishment. Abolition for these

²²¹ Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade: Addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire* (London: 1807), 348.

²²² Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition*, 348.

²²³ Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition*, 350–351.

evangelicals was not primarily about restoring Britain's place in the world as Christopher Leslie Brown contends, but instead was about providentialism.²²⁴

Providentialism is about more than a fear of punishment: it was meant to portray a key element of the character of God. The impetus behind the judgement of the slave trade was understood to be that God was compassionate. Jeremiah 9:23–24 reads, “Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.” The desecration of the destitute is reprehensible to God. Newton's sermon on this text begins, “To know the Creator is the supreme excellence and chief good of man.”²²⁵ It is this knowledge of the Creator which evangelicals believe all human beings were made for, and it was precisely in becoming involved in the work of God in caring for the oppressed and showing them lovingkindness that the evangelicals of the late eighteenth century believed they could understand more of who God was. This was not a God who was obsessed with otherworldly spirituality, but who cared very deeply for the broken and the poor, so much so that he would bring judgement on nations that neglected them. Simeon in his fast day sermon, when mentioning slavery, speaks sternly of how God is “the avenger of the injured party.”²²⁶ This is from Psalm 140:12: “For, ‘I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the Poor.’” As Simeon worked his way preaching through every chapter and verse of the Bible, this

²²⁴ Christopher Leslie Brown, 449–450.

²²⁵ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 9, 93.

²²⁶ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 505.

theme of God's concern for the destitute and his commitment to them repeatedly emerged as a consistent subject.

The implications of believing that an almighty God was the defender of the destitute gives insight into Josiah Wedgwood's famous cameo of the kneeling African. This emblem, then and now the most widely recognized image of the campaign, was originally designed as the seal for the London Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade.²²⁷ The original featured a white background with an African slave on one knee. Above him is inscribed, "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" Wilberforce explained that he wanted to "make goodness fashionable."²²⁸ The cameo quickly became the most fashionable item on the market. Clarkson recounts, "Some had them inlaid in gold on the lid of their snuff-boxes. Of the ladies, several wore them in bracelets, and others had them fitted up in an ornamental manner as pins for their hair . . . the taste for wearing them became general."²²⁹ Oldfield explains, "The whole concept was brilliantly conceived, drawing on existing images of kneeling black figures."²³⁰ Adam Hochschild elaborates on just what this image was: "The African may have been 'a man and a brother,' but he was definitely a younger and grateful brother . . . the image of the pleading slave victim reflected a crusade whose leaders saw themselves as uplifting the downtrodden."²³¹ The weight of this statement is understood much more clearly when one considers that evangelicals repeatedly heard, in their sermons, their songs, and their Scriptures, that God was the lifter of the downtrodden—and the judge of the oppressors.

²²⁷ Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London: Rutledge, 1992), 37–40; for an image of this medallion see Appendix B of this thesis.

²²⁸ Clifford S. Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection* (Oxford: Monarch, 2004), 185.

²²⁹ Clarkson, 341.

²³⁰ Oldfield, *Popular Politics*, 156.

²³¹ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets And Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 133

For evangelical abolitionists, not only was Christ the judge of individual people, but he was also the judge of individual nations. Granville Sharp wrote:

Ye know the Scriptures, and therefore to you, my Lords, in particular I appeal! . . . ‘Stand up . . . for the land; make up the hedge,’ to save your country; perhaps it is not yet too late! Enter a solemn protest, my Lords, against those who “have oppressed the stranger wrongfully.” Warn, therefore, the nobles and Senators of these Kingdoms, that they incur not a double load of guilt; as the burthen, not only of the much injured African strangers, but also of our country’s ruin, must rest on the heads of those who withhold their testimony against the crying sin of tolerated slavery!²³²

The slave trade, it was often argued, undermined Africa. But here and in many other evangelical writings, the concern is not just for Africa, but also for Britain. Two elements of God’s providential judgement can be seen from the passage above. The first is that leaders would be judged for the destruction of fellow humans, but in this case the judgement would not come merely for the destruction of the Africans, but of Britons also. Second, culpability for the slave trade rested not merely on the slave traders, but on those who by their inaction allowed it to continue. Sharp went on to cite Psalm 140:12: “I KNOW that the Lord will maintain the cause of the Afflicted, and the RIGHT of the Poor.”²³³ These were the final words of his 340-page treatise and are meant as the final thrust of his argument. The evangelical principle of standing for the poor was based on the conviction that God cared about the poor. Evangelicals had a mandate to care about the poor because, as Scripture reminded them, it was their Christian duty to help the poor whom they knew from the Bible “would always be among them” (Deuteronomy 15:11, Matthew 26:11). Based on the Scriptures, they saw it as humane to care about and for the poor. Moreover, they believed that they would be judged if they did not.

²³² Granville Sharp, *The Law of Retribution; or, A Serious Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies, Founded on Unquestionable Examples of God’s Temporal Vengeance against Tyrants, Slave-Holders, and Oppressors* (London, 1776), 336–337, 339–340.

²³³ Sharp, *The Law of Retribution*, 340.

In his notes to a sermon about the day of judgement, Simeon puts in all capitals: “NOR IS IT FOR SINS OF COMMISSION MERELY THAT ANY WILL PERISH, BUT FOR SINS OF OMISSION.”²³⁴ In his notes, the references to the various names of God are often in capitals, but not until this point in this sermon is an entire phrase capitalized. This phrase is clearly to be emphasized by his voice. In another sermon titled, “On the Importance of Charitable Exertions,” Simeon makes this point even clearer: “Let it be known and peculiarly marked, that the *omission* of these duties is of itself sufficient to condemn us; and that the sentence of condemnation that is here denounced against the wicked, refers, not to any thing which they have done, but to what they have left undone.”²³⁵ The idea that indifference resulted in the damnable sin of omission makes knowledge or awareness more important. If awareness was raised, Britons would have the responsibility to act. In Wilberforce’s first and most famous speech on abolition, he concluded by insisting, “You may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say that you did not know.”²³⁶ This was one of his most quoted statements—and for good reason as it works well with projects built around the importance of raising awareness.

This view of awareness also makes sense of Wilberforce’s opening words of that same speech:

I mean not to accuse any one, but to take the shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty—we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others; and I therefore deprecate every kind of

²³⁴ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 11, 539.

²³⁵ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 11, 547.

²³⁶ William Wilberforce as quoted by Kay Marshall Strom, *Once Blind: The Life of John Newton* (Colorado Springs: Authentic Publishing, 2008), 223.

reflection against the various descriptions of people who are more immediately involved in this wretched business.²³⁷

While these words (as William Hague contends) served as a rhetorical tool employed by Wilberforce to keep from sounding as if he were pointing his criticism of the slave trade directly at any specific Members of Parliament, his words here are also consistent with the view repeatedly brought up by evangelical preachers that those who are indifferent to injustice are as guilty as if they partook in it.²³⁸

As Newton drew his fast day sermon of February 28, 1794, to a close, he brought it directly back to the Atonement. He transitions from the body of his sermon to the conclusion with the words, “There may be some people in this assembly, who are little concerned for their own sins, and are, of course, incapable of taking a proper part in the service of this day.”²³⁹ Those who had not sought forgiveness for their own sins were not in a position to plead for the forgiveness of their nation’s sins. But those who had sinned did have hope, because “he who loved you and died for your sins—is the Lord of glory!”²⁴⁰ These lines reinforce his original observation that “though we have much cause to mourn for our sins, and humbly to confess our deserved judgments, let us not despond. The Lord our God is a merciful God.”²⁴¹

The totality of Newton’s sermon was a call to take up abolition on behalf of the British Empire. Yet, it did so by driving his listeners back to the gospel, to the cross, to the Atonement. It emphasized the fact that the Atonement had made it possible for

²³⁷ “Debate on Mr. Wilberforce’s Resolutions” in William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England. From the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the year 1803* (London: T. Curson Hansard, 1806–1820), 28, col 42 (1789–91).

²³⁸ William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), 178.

²³⁹ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 23.

²⁴⁰ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 19.

²⁴¹ Newton, *The Imminent Danger*, 18.

humans to enter God's presence. Newton, like Simeon and many other evangelical preachers, reminded the Georgian British evangelical adherents that in the cross they found the value of humanity, and in the resurrection they found the call to care for the destitute.

Chapter Five: The Triumph of Abolition and the Coming of the King

An integral dimension of the late-eighteenth-century British evangelical proclivity toward abolition was the belief in the kingship of Jesus Christ and his imminent return. To understand this, it is necessary to examine the evangelical narrative of history.

Hanoverian British evangelicals believed that prior to the fall of man, humanity had existed in harmony with God, but all had rejected him and so cut themselves off from their king. Humans individually sought to assert themselves as masters of their own fate. In rejecting the authority and protection of God, they destroyed each other and themselves through perversion, exploitation, and greed:

There is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace have they not known: there is no fear of God before their eyes.²⁴²

Although humankind had rebelled against divine authority and rejected his laws, Jesus Christ was still the king of the universe. In God's mercy he delayed asserting his judgement, as he would have his subjects turn to him of their own accord. His desire was not for obedience by coercion, but rather for obedience by love. As has already been examined in the doctrine of Atonement, the good news which these evangelicals held to was that Christ put on the clothes of a commoner and walked among them, unrecognizable to most of his subjects; he confronted the very essence of evil, bearing on and in himself the punishment of humanity's sin, dying like a sinner and an outcast. After three days, God brought him back to life, and having defeated death, he achieved victory

²⁴² Romans 12:12–18, KJV.

for all who would submit to his reign. He returned to heaven and is holding off on the final judgement, providing the opportunity for further generations to turn to him. Many, if not most, of his subjects continue to reject him, but throughout the generations there have always been some who held to these truths, submitted to God's authority, and prepared for Christ's final return and the eternity beyond.

Although the evangelical anti-slave trade campaigners were moved to action in part by fear of divine retribution against their nation in the immediate future, they were even more concerned with matters of eternity. Evangelicals sang these words penned by Newton:

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil
A life of joy and peace.²⁴³

It is precisely this belief in eternity that has led academics to confusion as to the evangelical motivations for the anti-slave trade campaign. The view is that because the evangelicals were concerned about people's souls, they were not concerned about life in this world—but for the evangelicals, it was precisely the belief that life went on for eternity that invested life in this world with so much importance. The belief that each person is eternal means that how one treats another has everlasting ramifications.

The bridge between this life and eternity was the day of judgement. As evangelicals sang:

Day of judgment, day of wonders!
Hark! the trumpet's awful sound,
Louder than a thousand thunders,
Shakes the vast creation round!
How the summons wilt the sinner's heart confound!²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Newton, *Olney Hymns*, 43.

²⁴⁴ Newton, *Olney Hymns*, 214.

Their conviction was that Christ was coming again and would look for faithfulness on the earth. To illustrate this point, Charles Simeon read Christ's words from the Gospel of

Luke:

Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that, when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord, when he cometh, shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.²⁴⁵

Simeon explained what these ancient words meant for his congregation: "All of us are servants for one common Lord and Master. He is absent, and has commanded all of us to wait for his return: in certain expectation that he will come [and] in constant readiness to receive him."²⁴⁶ The evangelicals' view of themselves was as servants who desired to be found faithful in their duty, and their duty included loving their neighbour and caring for the vulnerable. Simeon warned, "[The] idea of a universal conflagration . . . is deemed a fable; and the destruction which will then come upon the whole ungodly world is disregarded, as the dream of a fanatical or superstitious mind . . . I beg you to attend to it, with the humility that becomes you."²⁴⁷ The coming of the king, the coming judgement and vindication, were not heard by these congregations as fairy tales or analogies, but were heard and literally believed with firm conviction as imminent.

A key element of the reality of the day of judgement, as they saw it, was that God would consider how each person had cared for the destitute. Christ, as judge, would summon the whole universe before his tribunal and separate the righteous from the wicked. Simeon explained, "That the whole of our principles and conduct will be taken

²⁴⁵ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 12, 482.

²⁴⁶ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 12, 482.

²⁴⁷ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 20, 340.

into consideration, there can be no doubt; but there is one point which will be inquired into, and will be regarded as a certain evidence of all the rest, namely, our activity in doing good to our fellow-creatures for Christ's sake."²⁴⁸ Simeon reiterates this point, insisting, "Love is the distinguishing feature of a true Christian. And where is this love to be directed? The poor and afflicted are the more peculiar objects of that love."²⁴⁹ The victims of the slave trade were the evangelical's most clear example of the afflicted.

The evangelical Reverend Henry Venn wrote to Simeon about the vital importance of addressing the needs of the destitute: "When we consider how many are needy and perish and want a morsel of Bread—what a terrible day of accounts, when it shall be proclaimed before the Lord . . . the naked thou hast not clothed, the hungry thou hast not fed."²⁵⁰ Venn is alluding to Matthew 25, where Jesus speaks of the day of judgement and describes how people will be judged for how they cared for the destitute just as if Jesus were the one who was destitute. In identifying so closely with the destitute, Jesus elevated compassion to a form of worship. Preaching from this passage, Simeon expounds, "There is one point which will be inquired into, and will be regarded as a certain evidence of all the rest, namely, our activity in doing good to our fellow-creatures for Christ's sake."²⁵¹ Here at the threshold of eternity, one's relationship with God would partly be understood in terms of how one had treated the destitute—and because for the late-eighteenth-century evangelicals the victims of the slave trade were the most obvious example of the destitute, these verses had direct relevance for the abolitionist cause and what it meant to be found faithful.

²⁴⁸ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 11, 544.

²⁴⁹ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 11, 544.

²⁵⁰ RID, MSS Charles Simeon and Charles Grant, Box 4, f. 124, Letter from Henry Venn to Charles Simeon (July 6, 1783).

²⁵¹ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 11, 544.

As evangelicals devoted themselves to faithfulness in these causes, they expected they would face great trials, suffering, and tribulation. Simeon crafted sermons around many passages emphasizing the difficulties Christians should expect to face. “All that will live a godly life will be persecuted,” he read from 2 Timothy 3:12, and from Acts 14:22, “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.” These words were spoken by the apostle Paul, a man to whom Simeon could relate in many ways. Paul had known popularity as a preacher but wrote this passage after being assaulted and almost killed. From this passage Simeon encourages Christians to “be not surprised at any thing that you suffer, nor be grieved at it.”²⁵² The evangelicals faced much opposition—Wilberforce in Parliament and the popular press; Simeon from his parishioners. They expected suffering. Their theology provided a framework for it, a mental landscape which made sense of persecution, thus preparing them and equipping them to endure, to contend, and to persist in their effort for victory.

The persistence of the abolitionist evangelicals in their work and convictions was neither accidental nor incidental, but something they took seriously. Among Simeon’s private papers is a letter from John Newton, which Simeon received shortly after being appointed as vicar of Holy Trinity. Newton was fifty-five and had already been serving as a vicar for quite some time, while Simeon was twenty-three years old and just about to start his lifelong ministry in Cambridge. Newton begins his fatherly letter by congratulating Simeon and expressing his great pleasure at hearing this news, but feels that he must warn Simeon, “You may take it for granted, Dear Sir, that our Grand Adversary is aware of all this, and you may expect that he will not be an indifferent spectator, but will do every thing that he is permitted to disturb and hinder you . . . He is

²⁵² Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 14, 433.

very Proteus, continually changing his ground, his approaches, his appearances, and the manner of his assaults, so as to adapt himself with the most advantage to every change in our circumstances.”²⁵³ He then assures Simeon that because he belongs to God and Christ is the “Captain of Salvation,” Simeon has “therefore no just reason to be afraid of the enemy,” but that he must rather fight with wisdom, being “aware of his devices.”²⁵⁴

At this point in the letter the evangelical theology about Christ and the call to walk with him is shown to have implications for personal endurance. Newton commends Simeon for his zeal, but warns him that the devil may seek to undermine his work not by dampening his zeal, but rather that he may “take occasion by the warmth of your desire to do good, to push you to extremes, to make you grasp at too much and to make you throw unnecessary difficulties in your own way, and thereby preclude your usefulness.”²⁵⁵

Historians have failed to consider the abolitionists’ thoughts on endurance. But the challenges of enduring, both the challenges external and internal, were understood by the abolitionist evangelicals precisely in the terms of resisting Satan and faithfully following Jesus their Saviour.

The antidote to the enemy’s plot to bring Simeon to burning out, writes Newton, is “a close attention to the whole Scripture.”²⁵⁶ This is because “detached texts or sentences may seem to countenance, what by no means will seem with the general tenor

²⁵³ RID, MSS Charles Simeon and Charles Grant, Box 4, f. 130, Letter from Newton to Simeon, (November 23, 1782).

²⁵⁴ RID, MSS Charles Simeon and Charles Grant, Box 4, f. 130, Letter from Newton to Simeon, (November 23, 1782).

²⁵⁵ RID, MSS Charles Simeon and Charles Grant, Box 4, f. 130, Letter from Newton to Simeon, (November 23, 1782).

²⁵⁶ RID, MSS Charles Simeon and Charles Grant, Box 4, f. 130, Letter from Newton to Simeon, (November 23, 1782).

of the whole.”²⁵⁷ Newton’s concern was that in times of exhaustion caused by dedication to the causes of evangelicalism, one might be more prone to moral failure, which one might be tempted to justify by taking a verse of Scripture out of context. His solution was to encourage Simeon to always remember to consider the entire Scripture.

Simeon clearly took these concerns to heart, as he went on to make Newton’s emphasis on the whole of Scripture the standard for himself and for the evangelicals he trained and tutored. This was true both in their style of preaching and in their approach to daily reading of the Scriptures personally, working their way from cover to cover. As we have previously read, a biographical article published by the *Christian Journal* shortly after Simeon’s death remarked, “The Bible seemed to be not the text-book of his sermons merely, but the solace and joy of his heart.”²⁵⁸ These words are true not only of Simeon but of Wilberforce as well, whose Bible is filled with notes to himself on what he was reading, cross-referencing passages and underlining verses throughout.²⁵⁹

Another concern Newton expresses is that Christians may abandon the cause of Christ because their zeal diminishes, a diminishment caused by falling in love with the temptations of the world. The solution to this is not simply to have firm resolve or to hide away from the world, but rather to cultivate “a sense of [one’s] own wretchedness,” wrote Newton. He continued, “Where the law of the Gospel [has] combined under the influence of the Holy Spirit, to give a just and deep impression of the character of God as a just

²⁵⁷ RID, MSS Charles Simeon and Charles Grant, Box 4, f. 130, Letter from Newton to Simeon, (November 23, 1782).

²⁵⁸ RID, MSS Charles Simeon and Charles Grant, Box 1, f. 34, Clippings from the *Christian Journal*.

²⁵⁹ MSS Wilberforce f. 5, Copy of the New Testament printed for the Naval and Military Bible Society with a few notes in the hand of William Wilberforce (1818).

God and a Saviour,” a person will endure until the end.²⁶⁰ Philosophers, psychologists, and theologians may choose to discuss whether dwelling on his own wretchedness as well as on the character of God truly provided Simeon with strength to endure, but what is certain is that the discourse of the whole movement to end the slave trade was brought forward and kept vibrant in part by an effort to hold fast to the whole of Scripture and keep the Atonement at the centre of the evangelicals’ thoughts and lives.

Wilberforce received similar letters from both John Newton and John Wesley at the outset of his work on slavery. This was the last letter Wesley wrote before his death, and it begins with the words, “Dear Sir, Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as *Athanasius contra mundum*, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature.”²⁶¹ Wesley saw the slave trade as a violation of Christianity. The reference to Athanasius is of crucial importance to understanding this well-known letter because Athanasius was not an activist or a public servant but a fourth-century man who defended the central doctrines of Christianity even though it meant being excommunicated from the Roman Empire for much of his life.²⁶² Wesley mentions Athanasius not merely as an example of a man who fought against the majority opinion, but as one who fought against the majority opinion regarding theology. He sees the difficulty of Wilberforce’s struggle against the slave trade as a battle for the integrity of Christianity. Both Wesley and

²⁶⁰ RID, MSS Charles Simeon and Charles Grant, Box 4, f. 130, Letter from Newton to Simeon, (November 23, 1782).

²⁶¹ Letter from John Wesley to William Wilberforce in John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, John Telford ed., vol. 8 (The Epworth Press, 1960), 265; for the complete letter see Appendix C of this thesis.

²⁶² Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Newton, as well as Wilberforce and the rest of their evangelical contemporaries, saw Wilberforce's work as a ministry not unlike Simeon's work as a clergyman.

Wesley continued his letter, "Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? . . . Go on, in the name of God, and in the power of His might."²⁶³ Wesley's advice to Wilberforce, like Newton's to Simeon, was clear: the path of following God is difficult, and there will be much opposition, but walking closely with God is the key to persevering until the abolition of the slave trade is achieved and to enduring onward till the coming of Christ. Although Wilberforce and his fellow abolitionists faced much opposition in the twenty years of parliamentary campaigns to end the slave trade, he and the evangelicals believed victory would eventually be theirs, and in their view their experience confirmed this faith.

After twenty years of striving, countless setbacks, and almost twenty legislative defeats, the bill to abolish the British slave trade made it to the floor of the House of Commons for the last time. On February 23, 1807, the day before the final vote took place, Thomas Babington, a longtime friend of Wilberforce, wrote to him expressing the anticipation thousands of Britons felt:

Though I cannot call on you to-day, and shall not be able to see you fight your battle in the House, you are and will be much in my mind . . . I shall station a servant at your house to bring intelligence of the event to-night. Do get somebody (Gisborne, if with you), when all is over, to give me on a scrap of paper—the event and numbers of the division.

The next day, the House of Commons voted for the bill 283 to 16, making clear the success of the end of the British slave trade, though not of the institution itself. The

²⁶³ Letter from John Wesley to William Wilberforce in John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, John Telford ed., vol. 8 (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 265.

abolition of slavery itself would take further campaigning and decades to achieve. But on that day in 1807, Sir Samuel Romilly, the solicitor-general, stood to his feet on the floor of the House of Commons and contrasted Wilberforce's achievement with that of the world's most powerful and notorious emperor, Napoleon:

He entreated the young members of parliament to let this day's event be a lesson to them, how much the rewards of virtue exceeded those of ambition; and then contrasted the feelings of the Emperor of the French in all his greatness with those of that honoured individual, who would this day lay his head upon his pillow and remember that the slave-trade was no more.²⁶⁴

The House of Commons resounded with cheering as all Members of Parliament rose to applaud this extraordinary achievement and the abolition of an unmitigated evil.

Wilberforce "sat bent in his seat, his head in his hands, and the tears streaming down his face."²⁶⁵ The prime minister, William Grenville, wrote to Wilberforce the next day:

I really feel quite overpowered with the thoughts of this success, and can readily conceive what your feelings must be, who may justly say to yourself, that to you and to your exertions alone this thing is to be attributed.²⁶⁶

This was but one of the hundreds of letters of congratulations that poured into Wilberforce's mailbox, but this letter from Grenville foreshadowed the direction abolitionist scholarship would take for the century that followed, in which Wilberforce would receive much of the credit for abolition. Notwithstanding, Wilberforce himself, as well as his fellow evangelicals, attributed the victory not to any one of them but to God. Wilberforce confided, "I really cannot account for the fervour, which happily has taken the place of that fastidious, well-bred lukewarmness which used to display itself in this

²⁶⁴ Robert and Samuel Wilberforce, 341.

²⁶⁵ Reginald Coupland, *Wilberforce: A Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 341.

²⁶⁶ Robert Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, eds., *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce* vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1846), 20.

subject, except by supposing it to be produced by that almighty power which can influence at will the judgment and affections of men.”²⁶⁷ If historians and twenty-first-century activists are to accurately hear the victory of the abolitionist campaign the way the abolitionists heard the results announced, they must recognize that for the evangelical Anglicans, the victory was seen as God’s achievement, the triumph of his commitment to care for the oppressed.

After eighteen years of campaigning, as the vote to abolish the British slave trade finally received royal assent, Wilberforce asked his cousin, MP Henry Thornton, “Well, Henry, what shall we abolish next?” To which Thornton responded, “The lottery, I think.”²⁶⁸ It might seem logical for Thornton to have replied, “The institution of slavery,” if this was the final objective of these evangelical companions. Or it would have made perfect sense for him to say something about promoting missionaries in Africa. But Thornton did not. This is because Wilberforce’s project was not merely about souls, nor about slavery, but about a far broader goal. Wilberforce and his evangelical colleagues helped establish the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), which is today the Royal Society for the Prevention of Animal Cruelty (RSPCA). They founded missions organizations and supported penal reform, they lobbied for increased access to education, and they funded numerous other causes.²⁶⁹ All of these movements were, in the minds of British evangelicals, connected to eternity. They operated within a conception of the kingdom of Christ and their view of his imminent return.

²⁶⁷ Samuel and Robert Wilberforce, *The Life*, vol. 3, 304.

²⁶⁸ Samuel and Robert Wilberforce, *The Life*, vol. 3, 298.

²⁶⁹ For an extended list of societies founded by the evangelical Anglicans around the turn of the century, see Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, 326-239.

For the evangelicals, abolition was seen as part of a broader process of advancing the kingship of Christ. The Christian message called “all persons to submit entirely and unreservedly to the dominion of Christ.”²⁷⁰ These evangelical Anglican abolitionists held an eschatology that the world would be brought into God’s dominion and that there would be a thousand golden years of truly Christian society before Christ would return.

As Simeon explained:

In due time his exaltation shall be complete—God having, in the resurrection of Christ, borne witness to him as his only-begotten Son, has engaged, in answer to his requests, to “give him the utmost ends of the earth for his possession.” And this he is gradually accomplishing: in every quarter of the globe is the Redeemer’s kingdom extending on the right hand and on the left: and though there is very much land still unsubdued before him, yet shall he “go on conquering and to conquer,” “till every enemy is put under his feet.”²⁷¹

Simeon, Newton, and Wilberforce were postmillennialists, which means they believed that they could and would bring moral improvement leading up to Christ’s return. As Simeon explained, they were to serve as heralds and harbingers of the Christ’s second coming. As pioneers,

We are to prepare his way. By us must his path be levelled, to facilitate his march: we must go before him, to “prepare his way, to make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Through the instrumentality of men “shall every valley be exalted, and every mountain and hill be made low; and the crooked be made straight, and the rough places plain; and the glory of the Lord be revealed, and all flesh see it together:” yes, “by a voice crying in the wilderness shall all this be done: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”²⁷²

For these men and women, the kingdom of God touched on every aspect of creation, and those who belonged to Christ were to advance it. When Wilberforce rose in the House of Commons, he did so to prepare the way for Christ. When almost everyone opposed him,

²⁷⁰ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 5, 7.

²⁷¹ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 5, 8.

²⁷² Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 10, 185.

he saw himself as a voice crying in the wilderness. The whole project of abolition was an effort to, in Simeon's words, "bring down, as it were, a heaven upon earth."²⁷³

The mandate for the anti-slave trade campaign, the missions, and the other varied campaigns of the late-eighteenth-century evangelicals to advance the kingdom of God is found in what they called "the Apostle's Commission."²⁷⁴ This was based on Matthew 28:18-20, which reads:

And Jesus came, and spake unto them, saying, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

How the various missionary and humanitarian efforts were seen as fulfilling this text can be understood through their understanding of a parable Jesus is recorded in the Scriptures as telling his disciples. In this story, known as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," a young man asks his father for his inheritance to be given to him immediately even though his father is still alive.²⁷⁵ The father generously grants the request, and the son leaves his father for foreign lands, where he squanders the money on prostitutes, gambling, and other unholy pursuits. From this reckless living, the son ends up in a desperate situation without money, friends, or any possessions, and so he takes up a job feeding pigs. Eventually, the son comes to his senses, realizing that even the servants in his father's house eat better than he, and he resolves to return to his father and ask to be made a servant. As he is walking back to his father, rehearsing his speech, the father sees him in the distance and enthusiastically runs toward him. The son begins to give the practised

²⁷³ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 10, 187.

²⁷⁴ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 11, 617.

²⁷⁵ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 191.

speech, but before he can finish it, the father gently interrupts him, embracing him as his son, and calls for servants to bring him robes of honour.

The parallels are obvious to the story of Atonement, but Simeon did not allow for any equivocation: “The Prodigal Son, in his return, is a pattern to us all.”²⁷⁶ All human beings are like the prodigal son rejecting God as their father, taking the treasures he gave them, even if that is simply their own bodies, and using them in ways that cause harm to themselves and to each other. The prodigal’s return to his father illustrates what it means for someone to become a true Christian. It is not enough that they simply believe that their father exists; it is that they come to him forsaking the ways of living against him. Evangelicals believed they were sent out to be like the Father, running out to bring home the prodigals, and bring life, truth, and freedom to the uttermost parts of the earth, which included missionary work, humanitarian work, and abolishing the slave trade.

²⁷⁶ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae* vol. 8, 191.

Conclusion

The discourse through which the evangelical Anglican abolitionists constructed and communicated their anti-slave trade arguments must be understood within the evangelical paradigm. The religious convictions that inspired and sustained concern for the enslaved were expressed and experienced publicly as part of shared religious beliefs made available to Hanoverian Britons, and their historians, through sermons and hymns. By studying these oral texts, it becomes evident that the discourse of universal brotherhood in abolition was based upon the doctrine of the Atonement. In emphasizing the need to share in the atoning work of Christ, these activists primarily used a vocabulary not of the rights of man, but of duty. This duty was to care both for the enslaved and for Britain's national interests, because they were convinced that God was a defender of the destitute and that he would bring providential judgement on nations who ignored the plight of the poor and oppressed. At the same time, abolishing the slave trade was not only a means for Britain to avoid impending judgement, but also part of a broader project to prepare the way for the return of Christ through advancing the work of reconciliation between humankind and God as his servants confronted evil in all of its forms.

The first chapter of this thesis revealed that much of what was communicated audibly in the eighteenth century depended not only on the words themselves, but also on the manner in which it was communicated. Through taking time to reconstruct the intellectual and experiential process by which late-eighteenth-century evangelical Anglicans presented and heard Scriptures, sermons, and hymns, we may begin to distinguish with more clarity the cacophony of competing ideas in Hanoverian Britain.

The passages of Scripture that called on their hearers to care for the enslaved, and sermons that expounded on what biblical exegesis meant for individuals personally, were *not* heard simply as one of the many perspectives available to draw upon, but as the very voice of God which necessarily took precedence over all others. The communal dimension of this audible experience—congregations singing aloud together—is an indication that the call to serve God was not something to be relegated to private life, but rather something to be lived out communally and experienced publicly. Evangelical theology was not a private sentiment to be believed, but a public principle to act upon. Furthermore, from the changes in architecture of churches, the shift from buildings built around religious rites to churches built to maximize the congregants’ ability to hear the sermon, it is evident that the evangelical church experience was not simply about participating in religious activities at church, but rather about receiving instruction on how live beyond the walls of the church in the parish and the nation.

As one looks into the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century evangelicals’ instructions on how to create a sermon, as exemplified in Charles Simeon’s writing, one finds that the key component for Hanoverian evangelical Anglicans to convey and to hear was the Atonement. The doctrine of Atonement was the focus of evangelical theology and the defining component of abolitionist thought. Drawing on both the public and private words of Charles Simeon, John Newton, and William Wilberforce, chapter two demonstrated that because this doctrine taught that restoration to God was open to everyone regardless of whether one was slave or free, everyone was to be considered potential family and thus protected from being enslaved. It eliminated the Enlightenment framing of “national characters” put forward by David Hume, which had provided a

rationale for enslavement through dividing the world into stages of national character. In the Atonement, evangelicals found a new way to view those being sold as slaves and a powerful rebuttal to the pro-slavery arguments. For Britons willing to recognize evangelical argument and the doctrine of Atonement, universal brotherhood was made possible through Christ's crucifixion and the propitiation of human sin it provided.

The work of bringing freedom through the cross was believed to be the responsibility of every Christian by walking, both metaphorically and literally, with Christ. Thus, the challenge of abolition was communicated through language replete with the imagery of entering into the midst of the darkness and depravity of the world in order to bring life and freedom. It is no accident that these evangelicals served in the often stigmatized places of the world: politics, banking, and letters (as in the plays and novels of Hannah More). The doctrine of the cross called them not only to sympathize with the victims of the slave trade, but also to suffer alongside them as evangelicals sought to end this lucrative industry, change laws, and win contemporary hearts and minds. This was one of the offenses of evangelicalism, and yet it was this which made it so potent for the anti-slave trade cause. This is why it is that the vocabulary of duty rather than that of rights held such a prominent role in the discourse to abolish the slave trade. Abolition was not merely an interest or something that inspired evangelicals to action, but was believed by Wilberforce and others to be a duty to God. This duty was not only to action, but also to empathy—a fact that refutes the claim that the evangelical abolitionists were indifferent to human suffering or that their work was about missions alone. Yes, their work was about saving souls, but it was also about addressing human suffering. They also clearly understood their duty as one to both the enslaved abroad and the destitute at

home. Evangelical enthusiasm for social reform and moral regeneration helps refute the claim of pro–slave trade MPs and some historians that they only cared about the enslaved black destitute overseas. All of this, what we would call humanitarian work, was to them evangelical work or Atonement work—but that includes rather than excludes concern for physical, or in their words, “temporal,” suffering. Thus, abolition was not a step toward secularization, but rather a revival of religious commitment.

The abolitionists found intense urgency in the thunderous teaching on God’s impending judgement. In the doctrine of providentialism, the abolitionists emphasized that the duty to care for the destitute lay not only before individuals, but also whole nations, and thus the lawmakers were particularly responsible for the ongoing injustice of the slave trade. In many of their arguments they taught that not only was the slave trade devastating Africa and the lives of the enslaved, but also had equally horrific consequences for Great Britain. Judgement lay in store not only for those who were actively involved in the slave trade, but also for those who allowed it to continue by their indifference. In speaking and preaching of this impending doom, the evangelical abolitionists did not conceive their God as an unforgiving deity whose appetite for wrath needed to be appeased, but rather as a committed defender of the destitute who would uphold the cause of the exploited even if it meant reluctantly bringing providential punishment on nations that wrought exploitation.

Finally, abolition and other late-eighteenth-century reformist campaigns to care for the destitute were considered by Wilberforce, Simeon, Newton, and many of their contemporaries as part of a broader effort to prepare for Christ’s return. As postmillennialists, William Wilberforce, Charles Simeon, and John Newton were

confident that their cause would be triumphant, and they were convinced that the setbacks and sufferings they faced both in Parliament and in public would be overcome. In their experience, they were right. They gave themselves to endure until they had achieved victory. The campaign required enormous endurance, and it should be primarily understood, as they understood it, in postmillennialist terms: as they prepared for Christ to return, as they demanded and drove forward reform in the many facets of society, they considered themselves to be participants with God in the work of entering into the midst of human suffering in order to restore prodigals to life and freedom in Christ.

Although this thesis has helped elucidate one of the central discourses in the movement to end Britain's transatlantic slave trade, it has not sought to resolve the question as to which influence (religion, economy, empire, etc.) was the most important driving force overall. The intersection of evangelical abolitionist thought and that of nonevangelical abolitionists certainly requires further study, as do questions of the prominence of evangelical abolitionists compared to nonevangelical abolitionists. This thesis has helped make such studies possible as it has examined the evangelical paradigm, which is, it has been argued, a key component to understanding its importance and the place of Atonement in the broader campaign to abolish the slave trade. It has made discussing these questions more possible as it has sought to retune our acoustical antennae to hear the religious sounds of the past the way they were heard at the time, as David Hempton argued needed to be done. Nevertheless, in doing so, this thesis has raised further questions that require more in-depth study, including why it is that evangelicals in the late eighteenth century found the Scriptures to be against the slave trade and imparting a duty to oppose it when their theological forbearers did not find the

same level of urgency or concern. Such a study will require a comparative analysis beyond the scope of my own research. At this stage, answers to these questions would merely be speculation. What is certain, however, is that for late-eighteenth-century evangelicals, the anti–slave trade movement must be understood as springing from their devotion to their God, who entered into the midst of the reality of human exploitation and died on the sinner’s cross in order to save humanity from slavery in all of its forms.

Just a few months after the Act to Abolish the British Slave Trade received royal assent in 1807, a dying John Newton looked back on his life and looked forward to eternity; unable to talk, he penned a short note which serves to succinctly summarize the evangelical abolitionist discourse. “My memory is nearly gone,” he wrote, “but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour.”²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ John Newton as quoted in Jay, *The Autobiography*, 316.

Appendix A

Hymn 29²⁷⁸

By John Newton

Alas! by nature how depraved,
How prone to every ill!
Our lives, to Satan, how enslaved,
How obstinate our will!

And can such sinners be restored,
Such rebels reconciled?
Can grace itself the means afford
To make a foe a child?

Yes, grace has found the wondrous means
Which shall effectual prove;
To cleanse us from our countless sins,
And teach our hearts to love.

Jesus for sinners undertakes,
And died that we may live;
His blood a full atonement makes,
And cries aloud, "Forgive."
Yet one thing more must grace provide,
To bring us home to God;
Or we shall slight the LORD, who died,
And trample on his blood.

The holy Spirit must reveal
The Savior's work and worth;
Then the hard heart begins to feel
A new and heavenly birth.

Thus bought with blood, and born again,
Redeemed, and saved, by grace
Rebels, in God's own house obtain
A son's and daughter's place

²⁷⁸ John Newton, *Olney Hymns: In Three Books* (London: Johnson, 1797), 170 – 171.

Appendix B

Josiah Wedgwood's medallion of slave on bended knee²⁷⁹

²⁷⁹ David Dabydeen, "The Black Figure in 18th-century Art," *BBC British History* <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/>> (accessed April 29, 2009).

Appendix C

Letter from John Wesley to William Wilberforce²⁸⁰

February 24, 1791

Dear Sir:

Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as *Athanasius contra mundum*, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it. Reading this morning a tract wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a “law” in our colonies that the *oath* of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this?

That he who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things, is the prayer of, dear sir,

Your affectionate servant,

John Wesley

²⁸⁰ Letter from John Wesley to William Wilberforce in John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, John Telford ed., vol. 8 (Epworth Press, 1960), 265.

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