

THE POWER OF A GOOD IDEA

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As a college president, I have often argued that ideas have consequences. For good or for ill, ideas matter. People are unavoidably blessed or cursed by their guiding principles — by the import of their ideas. In many ways, we inevitably do practice what we preach. “[That] thing a man does practically believe . . . the thing a man does practically lay to heart, and know for certain . . . is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines all the rest.” (Thomas Carlyle).

I tend to wave a flag of danger and warn against bad ideas that cause bondage and dysfunction. Hedonism is an uncanny gift of deception and its destructive consequences of what M. Scott Peck called the “diabolical human mind.”

Today, however, I would like to focus on the power of a good idea. Rather than bemoan the bad ideas, let’s champion an idea that bore its fruit over two hundred years ago on the streets of London. Its promoter was a young British Parliamentarian named William Wilberforce and here was his idea: God is God and we are not.

Wilberforce believed that men were defined by God and not God by men. He challenged his culture for assuming it had the authority to define what was human and what was not.

In the face of slavery as well as the exploitation of women and children, Wilberforce boldly and clearly said no individual had the right to define, or redefine, “a man” or delimit his or her moral worth and responsibility.

Such things were God’s alone to judge.

For two decades, Wilberforce fought tirelessly in the British Parliament for his idea. He was beaten back time and again. He was ridiculed. He was accused of economic treason. He was insulted. He was ostracized. His political career suffered and was all but lost. His influence waned and his voice was muffled. But he held fast to his idea. He relentlessly pursued it, defended it, and promoted it. He believed in its power. He boldly declared that he would not be silenced. He confronted the “corruption . . . of human nature” endemic in the political system of his day and he called “vice and wickedness” by their true names. He refused to accept politically correct definitions of sin and contrasted the hubris of government with what he called the “humiliating language of true Christianity”, *i.e.* the call for personal repentance and moral responsibility.

Wilberforce believed passionately in his worldview. He was confident in the only solution to the corruption rampant in his land, but he did not advocate imposing his views with force. To the contrary, he believed in the power of persuasion and the example of personal integrity. He wrote that Christians should “boldly assert the cause of Christ in an age when so

many who bear the name of Christian are ashamed of Him.” Thus, he made it clear that his ideas would only prevail if they were grounded in — and proven by — the lives of those who espoused them.



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Wilberforce concluded (knowing that he could commend belief but not command it) by saying: “The national difficulties we face result from the decline of religion and morality among us. I must confess equally boldly that my own solid hopes for the well-being of my country depend, not so much on her navies and armies . . . as on the persuasion that she still contains many who love and obey the Gospel of Christ. I believe that their prayers may yet prevail.”

In the end, Wilberforce’s opponents were forced to concede the obvious: God defines a man and woman, and we do not. It was the victory of an idea, not one of political or military conquest (of “navies and armies”), but that of a good idea over a bad one. It was a victory of truth over lies; of freedom over slavery, of sanctification over sin.

Ideas do indeed matter, and in this case we see the power of an idea lived out in humility, balanced with integrity, and measured with grace can indeed change the world. In his example, Wilberforce leaves us with the hope that in the midst of a culture that arrogantly declares, “We are as God! We can redefine right and wrong, marriage and morality and even male and female,” the “prayers of many who love and obey the Gospel of Christ . . . may yet prevail.” 

*You may choose to
look the other way,
but you can never
say again that you
did not know.*

—William Wilberforce