

**Amazing Grace A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor
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The plot is well-known. British politician, William Wilberforce works tirelessly, in partnership with the Clapham Sect, for over 30 years in an attempt to outlaw slavery in the British Empire. The ending is predictable and the music suitably triumphant.

But I still cried. *Amazing Grace* (directed by Michael Apted) got under my skin and into my tear ducts. Perhaps it was the sheer joy of hearing decent theology, as the butler enquires “You found God, sir?” and Wilberforce replies, “I think He found me.” Perhaps it was appreciating the sheer, dogged, persistence required to bring about a better society. Possibly it was seeing the history of a grace that has fused amazing faith, with real life issues of slavery, in real life people like William Wilberforce.

I applaud the acting skills of Albert Finney as a guilt ravaged John Newton, and Micheal Gambon as a cool and cunning Lord Charles Fox. Ioan Gruffudd as William Wilberforce, and Romola Garai as Barbara Wilberforce, turn in solid, although never spectacular, performances.

The repeated use of scenes of Parliamentary Debate in the British House of Commons was a masterstroke. It not only lent the narrative coherence, but served to raise tension and expose the complexities involved in bringing about political change. We realise that amazing grace is offered through a relentless mix of determination, publicity stunts and the odd bit of skilful subterfuge.

Critically, the opening scene needed to work harder at demanding audience attention. The cinematic technique of cutting between early Wilberforce and later Wilberforce was at times unclear, and a little forced. Further, the film, in choosing to focus on slavery almost entirely through the whites of Wilberforce’s colonial eyes, leaves itself open to the charge of paternalism.

Nevertheless, *Amazing Grace* remains compulsory Christian viewing. It is, and always has been, tempting for Christians to view belief as separate from acts of justice. The life and legacy of Wilberforce is a poignant reminder that such a separation is nonsense, for all of life, including politics can be Christian ministry. As Wilberforce finds God and considers giving up politics for a clerical collar, his Clapham friends speak:

“Mr Wilberforce, we understand you’re having problems choosing whether to do the work of God or the work of a political activist? We humbly suggest that you can do both.”

At Opawa Baptist, we have taken a gamble and block booked an entire movie cinema for a Sunday evening. I hope that our church community will be inspired by the life of William Wilberforce, his persistence in face of setback and disappointment, his generosity as he fed beggars at his kitchen table and his willingness to marry his faith to his work

Amazing Grace was released on the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade by British Parliament. As Wilberforce exclaims: “No matter how loud you shout, you will not drown out the voice of the people!” And so may a new generation of Wilberforce’s find their voice on behalf of all 21st-century enslaved peoples.

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