

## AMAZING GRACE?

William Wilberforce, John Newton and George Whitefield

Evangelicals perk up when they hear the name William Wilberforce. The movie, “Amazing Grace,” now in theaters across America, makes born-again Christians proud! The Hollywood film, directed by Michael Apted, chronicles the life of William Wilberforce, the 18th-century English evangelical parliamentary figure, played by Welsh actor Ioan Gruffudd.

*“God Almighty has set before me two great objects—the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.”* By manners, Wilberforce was referring to gambling, drunkenness and sexual vices. It is impressive to note that Wilberforce was also a founding member of the Church Mission Society, and a branch of CMS called the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Wilberforce is best known for the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. His friend and contemporary, John Newton (1725-1807), was the slave shipmaster ultimately transformed into an Anglican clergyman who is credited, along with William Cowper, for perhaps the best-known hymn in the world today, “Amazing Grace.”

2007 is the 200-year anniversary of what Wilberforce accomplished when the abolition of the slave trade was given royal assent in 1807. It was only 174 years ago that the British Parliament finally passed the Slavery Abolition Act. America’s Civil War history has links to this profound attitude change about slavery.

Lest we think slavery was an apparent transgression visible to all in Wilberforce’s day, we should remember that Wilberforce’s Aunt Hannah, who had profound influence on his spiritual interest, was a steadfast supporter of George Whitefield, the great revivalist who visited America and started preaching in Georgia in 1738. Whitefield established Bethesda Orphanage, which still exists in Georgia today. Although Georgia originally prohibited slavery, in 1749 there was a movement to introduce slavery, which Whitefield supported. Whitefield owned slaves and they worked at the orphanage. The truth is that rank-and-file Christians and their leaders at that time accepted slavery as normal.

**What is our blind spot in the year of our Lord, 2007?** Have we exposed all the degradation of mankind? I contend that evangelicals, in their desire to anticipate the second coming of Christ, have neglected the legitimate human rights of the Arab people in Palestine.

Evangelical leaders could learn from Jewish Rabbi Arik Ascherman of Rabbis for Human Rights, who works for the human rights of Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs and Palestinians. Where is his counterpart among evangelicals in the world today?

This week I got this news from the Arab world:

*“Imagine praying in a gigantic tent in a desert location not far from the Mediterranean with 8000 vibrant believers from throughout the Middle East. What a joy and privilege it was to join them! The Middle East Prayer Summit followed soon after with prayer leaders from 11 nations who shared the wonders our God is working to bring many thousands of Arab nationals to Christ through dramatic healings, visions and dreams in which they see Jesus beckoning them to follow Him. They testified that prayer for their friends is a key factor in such encounters. Let’s continue to pray for this tumultuous region that many, many more will come to Christ and that the prayer movement will be greatly strengthened and cover the whole Middle East!”*

As we publish this issue of the EMEU Bulletin, we who pray for the peace of Jerusalem support the stated commitment by the American administration to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine as a way forward in addressing the conflicts in the greater Middle East. We should pray for those who are working for peace.

We pray for the legitimate rights of all people in the lands of the Bible, and we support the fundamental conclusions of the Iraq Study Group Report, particularly in regard to the importance of the United States addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict as quoted below:

“The United States cannot achieve its goals in the Middle East unless it deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict and regional instability. There must be a renewed and sustained commitment by the United States to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace on all fronts: Lebanon, Syria, and President Bush’s June 2002 commitment to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. This commitment must include direct talks with, by, and between Israel, Lebanon, Palestinians (those who accept Israel’s right to exist), and Syria.”

Leonard Rodgers, Director, EMEU