



ROOTS

Seven short biographies remembering
who we are and where we came
from as evangelicals

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Introduction

Evangelical history is very important at this present time.

It is important because the Bible believing churches are under increasing and subtle pressures from society to compromise on our beliefs and standards. If we are cut loose from our history, we will be in danger of concocting our own brand of Bible-lite Christianity which has very little or nothing to do with ‘the faith once for all delivered to the saints’, Jude v3. Being reminded of the brave men and women of the past who took their stand for Christ and worked hard for the kingdom amid the troubles of their own days might help us not to be so easily seduced by the spirit of our age. Our friends from history will guide us and inspire us to keep on track and not leave the narrow path, Matthew 7.13, 14.

Christian history is being forgotten.

- *First*, we live at a time when digital technology has brought such a revolution in the way we live that it is tempting to think we know everything and the people of the past knew nothing. Techno-gadgets can induce us to believe that history isn't worth bothering with.
- *Second*, a whole new morality of so-called political correctness is making a play to take over and to dominate society. It has a vested interest in rewriting the past. It wants to eradicate all traditional thinking – like Christian teaching – so that its ideas can predominate unopposed. It desires Christians to forget the past and so become compliant.
- *Third*, modern people being so time poor, most church leaders, understandably, concentrate on teaching their congregations the Bible. That indeed should be the priority. But there is no space left in the church calendar to introduce people to Christian history which shows what Biblical truth has done down the ages.

The forgetting of our history leaves the church impoverished, sick and vulnerable. Trees detached from their roots die.

These 7 chapters might provide material for pastors to give their people some clues to the past which may encourage them in the present and prove vital for the good of the church in the future.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3.10-17

You may be aware of excellent work of The Wycliffe Bible Translators – a missionary organization which aims to translate the Bible into all the world’s languages.

Why did they choose that name for themselves? It is the name of an Englishman, John Wycliffe who lived during the 14th century *circa* 1330-1384. It indicates that this man was very special to the history of evangelical Christianity. Working 150 years before Luther, he is often called ‘The Morning Star of the Reformation’.

He was born into the family of ‘the lord of the manor’ near the little village of Wyclif, in the vicinity of Richmond, North Yorkshire. He was a very bright boy, from a wealthy family. His life falls fairly neatly into three phases.

Oxford University

He went to study in Oxford as a teenager and by 1360 (around 30 years old) he was already the Master of Balliol College. On gaining his MA, he was ordained and, as was the way of those days, he became the absentee rector of Lutterworth near Leicester (something I’m sure he would later be ashamed of). Living away from Lutterworth enabled him to pursue his academic career at Oxford while being financially supported by the parish.

He became the star man at Oxford – in philosophy and theology. And as he pursued his studies – including reading the Bible in Latin – he began to develop radical ideas on ‘lordship’ (we would say government) which he explained in his book *Civil Dominion*. In particular he argued that only godly people can exercise good government in the church and therefore ungodly church leaders have no legitimate authority (perhaps the seeds of democracy are here?). The Roman Catholic Church (this is way before any Church of England or Non-conformists like us) ruled Europe and the Pope claimed authority even over kings and many of their clergy were notoriously corrupt. The monasteries and nunneries were immensely wealthy. Wycliffe said that their dishonesty gave the secular rulers – the kings and nobles – the right to confiscate Church property.

Working for the Crown

The king Edward III (who reigned from 1327 to 1377) heard about Wycliffe and in the early 1370s Wycliffe entered the service of the Crown. So began the second phase of his life. The Catholic Church owned about a third of the land in England and also claimed it should pay no tax to the king. Wycliffe's arguments were used against the church. They should pay taxes to help finance war with France. His arguments could also be used against the Pope himself who claimed the right to tax the English clergy.

In 1374 he was part of a delegation to Bruges (Belgium) to negotiate with the Pope's ambassadors. His powerful arguments meant he became hated by the Catholic hierarchy. Pope Gregory XI unsurprisingly condemned Wycliffe's doctrines, and the English Catholic bishops tried to have him put on trial at St. Paul's in London and burnt as a heretic. It was only the intervention of John of Gaunt (third son of King Edward III) that saved him. However, Wycliffe's career was soon to change. In 1377 Edward III died and Richard II came to the throne. In 1378 a rival Pope set himself up against Gregory. The Catholics had more pressing things to worry about than John Wycliffe or England. Wycliffe was no longer needed by the government to make arguments with Rome. Wycliffe was dropped. But he was to leave the court for more important work.

Lutterworth

So, in 1378, the final phase of his life began which turned out (like Moses) to be the most influential. He retired to Oxford and Lutterworth, took up his old posts and began preaching and translating the Bible into English. He published *The Truth of Holy Scripture* in which he argued that the Bible is the norm, the only rule of Christians, by which the Church, tradition, councils and even the Pope must be tested. He said that Scripture contains all that is necessary for salvation. He translated Jerome's Latin Bible into English for all Christians to read for themselves.

This was way before the invention of printing, photocopiers, word processors – so every volume had to be written out by hand. Many people helped.¹ He also sent out 'Poor Preachers' (despised and known as 'Lollards' = mutterers) to distribute and preach the Bible. These men had an immense impact. They did not have the friends in high places that Wycliffe enjoyed and many of them were martyred.

¹ There are still 235 manuscripts of the revised edition of his Bible (revised after his death) extant today. It indicates the immense number which must have circulated in England in the 14th and 15th centuries.

In 1379 his book *The Power of the Pope*, he challenged the papacy and said it was a human institution not found in Scripture. He then went on to publish a book denying transubstantiation. In 1381 the Peasants revolt broke out. John Ball, the ringleader, was alleged to be a follower of Wycliffe. But Wycliffe disowned the revolt. He knew that nations are not changed for the better by violence but by the word of God. He died on New Year's Eve 1384 following a stroke. But the work of the Lollards went on and this helped to prepare the way for the English Reformation just over 100 years later. Oxford students from Bohemia took Wycliffe's books to Europe. These influenced another man, John Hus, who was burnt at the stake in 1415, also a forerunner of the Reformation.

So hated was Wycliffe by the Roman Catholic Church that 44 years after his death they had his bones dug up (I think from the churchyard in Lutterworth) and burnt. The ashes were thrown into the River Swift. One later historian wrote 'They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into the Swift, a neighbouring brook running hard by. Thus, the brook conveyed his ashes into the Avon, the Avon into the Severn, the Severn into the narrow seas and they into the main ocean. And so, the ashes of Wycliffe are symbolic of his doctrine, which is now spread throughout the world.'

Lessons

1. Don't take your English Bible for granted. People died that we might have it.
2. John Wycliffe and his Lollards served Christ in every way during the worst of times – risking their lives. When times are bad, let us be brave too. Though we may not see much success in our day, be encouraged, we may like Wycliffe, be laying gospel foundations for great work in future.

Scripture: Romans 1.14-17

Martin Luther is the most important German Christian who ever lived. Born in 1483 to a mining family, he was brought up in Medieval Roman Catholicism. His intellectual ability soon showed and he had graduated from the University of Erfurt by the time he was 18.

His father wanted him to be a lawyer and he began the studies. But then a great convulsion took place in his life. On his way back to studies, at the age of 21, on July 2nd 1505 he was caught in a tremendous thunderstorm. He was struck to the earth, and he realized the closeness of death and of eternity. Deeply shaken he decided to join a monastic order to seek to save his own soul. And if anyone could have got right with God through the pursuit of religion and good living, it would have been Martin Luther. He was thoroughly sincere and conscientious, forever examining himself for sins, going to confession, doing penances. He would have himself whipped, engage in hours of prayer and deprive himself of sleep, in order, as he thought to merit the mercy of God. He was ordained a priest at age 23. But he found no peace, no salvation.

Conversion

His spiritual malaise was so great that his spiritual mentor directed him to study the Bible. At age 28 he became Professor Martin Luther, at Wittenberg University (about 60 miles SW of Berlin) though he was still in the spiritual wilderness. However, it was through his study of Scripture that the great change occurred in his life. In 1513 (aged about 30) he began to lecture on the Psalms, and there was confronted with the enormity of the sufferings of Christ in Psalm 22. 'Why such suffering?' he wondered.

Then in 1515-1517 he began to study and lecture on Romans and Galatians. It was here the glory of the Biblical gospel suddenly dawned on him. He had always thought of the righteousness of God as that which condemns the sinner – because we sin and fail to match up. But here he found that the New Testament teaches that the righteousness of God is that which, through Christ bearing our sins on the cross and living perfectly on our behalf, God *gives* the sinner freely by grace, through faith so that we are counted right with him. Luther later wrote: 'When I realized this, I felt myself absolutely born again; the gates of paradise had been flung upon and I had entered!' But this rediscovery of the gospel was soon to lead Luther into enormous controversy.

Conflict

On 1st November 1517 indulgences were to be sold in Wittenberg to finance the building of St Peter's in Rome. These played on people's fears and the superstition of purgatory. Purgatory is meant to be the place of torment Christians must go through to get rid of our sins ready for heaven. This is nowhere found in Scripture. But the Catholic Church taught that by giving money you could buy your dead relatives release from purgatory. The friar Tetzel who was selling the indulgences is said to have used a sales pitch that went, *'As soon as the coin in the collection box rings, a soul from purgatory to heaven springs.'*

Outraged by this, the night before the indulgences were to be sold, Luther nailed his 95 theses attacking indulgences on the basis of the gospel, to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg as a protest. Within a fortnight (because of the recent invention of the printing press) Luther's theses were all over Germany and within a month all over Europe.

Council

After 4 years of interviews and threats from the Catholic Church, Luther was ordered to appear before the Emperor Charles V at a Council (or Diet) at the town of Worms. This finally occurred in the Spring of 1521. Luther was 37 and he was about to change history.

After days of dispute, arguments and threats, Luther was told to recant and repent of the 'error' he had been teaching. But eventually he replied, 'Unless I am convinced from Scripture, I cannot and will not recant...Here I stand, I can do no other.' He felt alone. But Bishop Tunstall, the English representative at the Council, later reported back to Henry VIII that there were 100,000 Germans ready to lay down their lives for Luther. And so had begun the Protestant Reformation – perhaps the most massive spiritual awakening since the days of the apostles. It was possible that Luther would have been burnt as a heretic, but friends spirited him away and hid him in the Wartburg castle for 10 months, where he grew a beard, changed his name to 'Squire George' for a while and spent time translating the Bible into German.

The Pope excommunicated him, but the gospel spread with tens of thousands of people being converted and brought a whole new freedom which shattered the superstitious ways of Medieval Europe. It heralded the dawn of the modern world. In 1525 Luther married an ex-nun, Katie von Bora, and his newly converted parents attended the wedding. The Luthers had 6 children. Luther was not an easy man. His character was both explosive and extremely

tender. He suffered terrible health, with bladder problems and kidney stones which caused him enormous pain. He sadly had an anti-Semitic streak – a leftover from his days in Catholicism. Yet he spent 3 hours a day in prayer and gave his time to writing and preaching, a vast ocean of theology and deep thought. The Reformation unfortunately brought wars and sparked a peasants' revolt which Luther vehemently opposed. He lived through tumultuous times and died at the age of 62 in 1546. He had struck an enormous blow for the cause of Christ.

Lesson

From one less than perfect man what God can accomplish? Luther's story excites and inspires our faith!

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3.15-17

John Calvin was a Frenchman, born in 1509 at Noyon, NE of Paris, into a strongly Roman Catholic family. He went to the University of Paris where he studied for the priesthood and then as a lawyer.

Turned by God

At some time in 1529/30 he was converted. He did not like to talk about himself so we know very little about it, but he does mention it once in the Preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*. *'God drew me from obscure and lowly beginnings and conferred on me the most honourable office of herald and minister of the gospel. My father intended me for theology from my early childhood. But when he reflected that the career of the law proved everywhere lucrative, he changed his mind. I was called away from the study of philosophy to learning law...I tried my best to work hard, yet God at last turned my course... What happened first was that by an unexpected conversion he tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years – for I was so strongly devoted to the superstitions of the Papacy that nothing less could draw me from such depths of mire. And so, this mere taste of true godliness set me on fire with such a desire for progress... Before a year had slipped by anybody who longed for a purer doctrine kept on coming to learn from me, still a beginner, a raw recruit'*

His unexpected conversion indicates Calvin was not seeking God, but God had pursued him.

Trained by Scripture

Calvin was part of a second phase of the Reformation. Biblical faith had been choked by the superstitious Catholicism of Medieval Europe, but Luther had rediscovered the gospel (justification by faith alone in Christ alone). Calvin's contribution was to consolidate and, in a sense, to rebuild an understanding of the church.

Protestants were persecuted, but soon Calvin had written the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It is a kind of systematic overview of Biblical teaching, (all the great Reformation truths are there – Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, glory to God alone) but it is also full of intense devotion. In a day when Bible concordances did not exist, he soon showed he had the Bible at his fingertips. He had an immense mind and he was also an

original thinker. But though he was a mental giant, he was physically weak. To blunt the pain of migraine he ate only one meal a day. He had kidney stones and ulcerated haemorrhoids; all this with chronic asthma.

Tackled by Farel

Travelling to avoid persecution and to study, he stopped one night in Geneva, in Switzerland, and was met by Guillaume Farel and coerced into helping lead the newly Reformed church there. This was in 1536. Geneva had just gained independence from the prince-bishop of the duchy of Savoy. This had been accomplished with the military help of the city of Berne. But this was all to cause factions in the city – some for Berne, some for the old ways etc. And because of the difficulties, Calvin's time there ended after 2 years.

In 1538 we find him as pastor in Strasbourg. There he introduced congregational singing. In 1540 aged 31 he married Idelette, the widow of a Christian man who died of plague. She lived just another 9 years. Their only son died in infancy. But Calvin brought up her 2 children by the previous marriage as his own.

Teaching in Geneva

In 1541 he accepted the invitation to return to Geneva. Before, there had been a lot of animosity against him – guns fired outside his house, people demanding communion with drawn swords and his opponents giving his name to their pet dogs! He would rather have gone elsewhere he tells us. But he felt constrained by God to stay and so begun 23 years of astonishingly influential ministry.

He would preach twice on Sundays and once on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. All his preaching was straight exposition going through Bible books making the meaning plain.

Geneva was a city of 10,000 people with some 6,000 refugees. Eventually Protestant refugees in Geneva paid a man, Denis Raguénier, who had developed a kind of shorthand to write up Calvin's sermons. We now have some 4,000 of them (342 on Isaiah!). He preached without notes, directly from the Hebrew and Greek, and this was facilitated by the fact that he was usually simultaneously writing commentaries on the Biblical books from which he was preaching.

Among the refugees in Geneva was John Knox, the great man whose prayers caused Mary Queen of Scots to tremble and who brought the Reformation to Scotland. Knox called Geneva 'the most perfect school of Christ since the times of the apostles.' There many pastors and missionaries were trained. Missionaries

were sent all over Europe but especially into France. By the time of Calvin's death in 1564 there were some 2,150 Reformed Congregations in France with about three million members. Nearly all the pastors had studied in Geneva.

Twisted by history

Despite caricatures, Calvin was not a dictator. He never held political office. Of course, he was not a man without faults. He made one terrible mistake in agreeing to the execution of a heretic (Servetus). This tragedy flowed partially from Calvin's own view which connected church and state. (Baptists would see such a connection as unbiblical). But generally, under his influence Geneva was transformed. Care of the poor and elderly was organized. The city had one of the first sanitary systems in the world. Education for the young began. All this was done through Calvin's suggestion not his wielding political power.

Aged 54 when he died, he requested that he be buried in an unmarked grave. To this day I don't think we know where he is buried. His enemies accused him of being 'drunk with God'! But his own motto was 'I give Christ all. I keep back nothing for myself.'

Lesson

Really Calvin's life stands as an enormous memorial to the transforming power of the Bible and the preached word of God. This is a great encouragement to those who feel constrained by God to pursue the Christian ministry and be a preacher.

Scripture: 1 Peter 4.7-14

If the Politically Correct have their way they will abolish free speech for views opposed to them and insist their 'Equality' legislation be driven and pressed through society.

That will make things very difficult for Bible Christians. There will be no toleration of people of conscience who think differently. But taking the long view, we need to realize we have been here before. It was just such a situation in this country back in the 17th century which gave rise to the emergence of Non-conformist churches. Many Anglican ministers were ejected from their livings and many people suffered because the government was determined that it would dictate how people should worship. They expected everyone to conform with their ideas.

So, it is good to be reminded briefly of the life of one such sufferer – John Bunyan. His book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, written in prison, is a classic now available in over 200 languages. And already we see a lesson – that out of great trouble for the church can come great blessing.

His poor background

He was born in 1628 the eldest son of his father's second marriage at a place called Elstow, a little village a mile south of the town of Bedford. Poverty was the mark, said Bunyan, of their home. His education was very poor too. His parents were not Christians and young John learned a full range of swear words from his father, a tinker, who mended pots and pans for a living and that is the trade Bunyan learned. He was a poor, sinful nobody. But God loves to take up and use the nobodies of this world.

When John was 16, his mother died and his father remarried within three months. The Civil War (1641-51) between Parliament and the Royalists, partly over the matter of religious toleration, was under way and he left home to join Cromwell's Parliamentary Army. He was posted to Newport Pagnell. We know little of his soldiering, although he does refer to a soldier with whom he swapped duties who was sent to a siege and was shot in the head and killed. Bunyan's regiment was demobilized in July 1647.

His conversion and imprisonment

He returned to Elstow, took up being a tinker and was married at the age of 19 to a woman whose name we don't know. 'We did not have dish or spoon', Bunyan later wrote. However, the woman's father was a godly man and gave her two Christian books, which she brought to the marriage. One was *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* by Arthur Dent and the other was *The Practice of Piety* by Lewis Bayly. These influenced Bunyan. He gave up swearing and started going to church.

Their first child Mary was born blind and Bunyan went through tremendous spiritual struggles for 3 or 4 years. He found help from an old and tattered copy of Martin Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*, Luther himself having agonies of soul before he found salvation. Bunyan was never able to date his conversion but a turning point came one day when, as he walked through Bedford, he overheard 3 or 4 women talking about being 'born again' and the way God had changed their hearts. Another great help to him was a sermon he heard on the love of God for sinners. At the age of 25 he became the nineteenth member of the Bedford Christian Meeting (for those who were unhappy with the ways of the Church of England). His gift for preaching soon became clear. He used every opportunity to preach, 'In woods, in barns, on village greens or in town chapels' and his fame began to spread.

In 1657 his wife died. He remarried in 1659, but soon after saw the beginning of his more or less 12 years in prison for his beliefs. Following the death of Cromwell, in 1660 the Monarchy was restored (Charles II) and that saw the re-introduction of the laws against Nonconformity. His blind daughter, Mary, would come to the prison, bring him soup and together they would make lace which was sold to support the family. He was released in 1666 but within 6 weeks he was arrested again for preaching without a licence. But it was during these years in prison that he both studied and wrote his books. Thanks to Charles II's covert intention of favouring Roman Catholics in England and so working towards religious liberty, Bunyan was among the Nonconformists pardoned in 1672 and he became pastor of the Bedford church.

Parting lessons

First, his preaching: He was rearrested in 1676. The great Theologian John Owen pleaded for his release. Charles II asked him why he went to listen to such an uneducated tinker. Owen replied, 'I would relinquish all my learning for the tinker's ability to touch people's hearts.' *The Pilgrim's Progress* was published in 1678 with Owen's help and it has certainly touched hearts ever since. Lack of

education is no hindrance to usefulness to God. Spiritual work is about the heart.

Second, Bunyan was extremely keen for evangelical unity: He wanted all true Christians at the Communion Table. And it was striving for unity that killed him. In 1688 he was due to preach in London, but took a diversion riding to Reading to try to reconcile a father and son who had fallen out. He got caught in a rainstorm. He insisted on preaching even though he felt unwell. He caught pneumonia and died 59 years old, never living to see the Revolution of 1688, which made William of Orange king and brought the Act of Toleration. Bunyan would teach us that, although we may differ over secondary issues, evangelicals must stick together – especially during troubled times.

Scripture: John 3.1-8

Our country was rescued from decadence and social disintegration by the great evangelical revival of the 18th century.

The engravings of William Hogarth depicting things such as the gin craze and the 'Rake's Progress' are witness to the degraded nature of the nation. Bishop J C Ryle declares that foremost among those who were used by God in the revival was George Whitefield. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones calls him 'the greatest preacher England has ever produced.'

Conversion

Whitefield was born in a pub, the Bell Inn, Gloucester, the youngest of seven children in 1714. He was awarded a degree at Oxford but spent most of his time there in a desperate and genuine search for God. And it was in 1735, at the age of 20 (having been greatly helped by reading a book entitled *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, by Henry Scougal) that he cast himself upon the mercy of God in Christ and received the free grace and forgiveness of God. 'I know the place,' wrote Whitefield later, 'some of you might think it superstitious, but when I go to Oxford I go running to that place where Jesus Christ first gave me new birth.'

Ministry

The next year, he was ordained into the Church of England, and he preached his first sermon in his local parish church in Gloucester. Some people complained that with 'his first sermon he had driven 15 people mad'. We would say that a dead church saw 15 people truly converted that day!

That was the start of such an astonishing preaching ministry that if it were not so clearly documented by historians, we might find it difficult to believe. His message was one of human sinfulness and Christ's effective salvation through the cross. It was the old message of Christ, the apostles, and the Reformers.

Why did so many people listen to him? Once he was asked that. He replied, 'You have seen how it is that people love to watch a fire. I am on fire (for God).' In his 34 years of public ministry, he travelled more than 100,000 miles, preached more than 18,000 sermons, crossed the Atlantic 13 times, and often preached to congregations of 20 to 30,000 people. And he could always be clearly heard,

without the help of modern-day microphones. While preaching in America, the great philosopher and politician, Benjamin Franklin heard him preach and said Whitefield's voice could be distinctly heard a mile away!

Whitefield never invited people to come to the front and thought it was wrong to try to count converts, but his influence was absolutely immense. He often preached over 40 hours in a week at different places, and even while sick and on holiday in Holland was caught preaching to people. On Saturday 29th September 1770, he was staying with Rev Jonathan Parsons of the Presbyterian church in Newbury Port Massachusetts. He was exhausted and ready for bed, but a crowd began to assemble, and he could not let them go without commending Christ to them. He stood on the stairs with a candle in his hand preaching to them. He preached until the candle burned out, climbed the stairs, collapsed into bed where he died. He was 55 years old. He is buried there in the USA.

Incidents

To understand why he is called the greatest preacher England has ever produced we have to be aware of the kind of incidents which marked his life and ministry.

Because churches were closed to him, in February 1739 Whitefield began to preach in the open air. He first did this for the rough, tough and utterly degraded miners of the Kingswood area of Bristol. The first time he preached 200 gathered, next time 500, next 3,000, next 5,000 and the one after that 20,000 people were there. The people were greatly affected. He himself found it very moving as he saw the miners begin to weep (tough men remember!) as God convicted them of their sin, and white streaks appeared on their cheeks as the tears trickled down through the coal dust on their blackened faces.

He would preach outside also in the great parks around London. For example, he preached on Hampstead Heath during a storm, with thunder and lightning and rain, and no one moved, such was the sense of God speaking to them. And a profound silence of the people was often characteristic. It was said, 'People listened as if they were listening for eternity.'

Once around 12,000 people had gathered in London to watch a public hanging. Whitefield happened to ride by and realize that here was an opportunity to preach. He found a place to stand, began to preach, and soon the 12,000 who had come to watch the hanging were listening to him, and someone said, 'You could have walked on the heads of the people, they stood so close together.'

Friends in London built him a huge wooden building, Whitefield's tabernacle, I think in Tottenham Court Road, which could hold 5,000 people – it became known as Whitefield's soul trap. In Scotland, the Erskine brothers had broken away from the state church to try to form purer, separationist churches. They invited Whitefield to Scotland but only wanted him to preach in their churches. He said he couldn't do that. The gospel was for all and he stood for evangelical unity. At Cambuslang near Glasgow, there was a wonderful revival. Whitefield preached for a Communion season there. He preached at 2pm, 4pm, 6pm and 9pm and the last service did not finish until midnight. But the people stayed in the fields most of the night simply singing the praises of God and hoping Whitefield would come once more to preach.

Whitefield was a very happy Christian. J. C. Ryle writing of Whitefield recalls this story: 'A venerable lady of New York, after his death, when speaking of the influences by which the Spirit won her heart to God, used these remarkable words, "Mr. Whitefield was so cheerful that it tempted me to become a Christian"'.

Main lesson

If his message was no different, what was his secret? The secret lies in God's power. He was a man who served God totally, not partially. He had an enormous heartfelt affection for Jesus Christ, and a similar heartfelt affection for the lost. He loved God and the people and the people knew he loved them! Asked why he preached so frequently on the text 'you must be born again' from John 3.7, he answered 'because you MUST be born again!

Scripture: Galatians 6.10

It is December 1785. A young man who had recently become an MP walked around Charles Square in London debating with himself whether or not to knock on a certain door.

The young man had been away travelling on the continent, and with a companion had been studying the New Testament as part of his holiday. He had been so challenged and inspired by what he found there about Jesus Christ that he was on the brink of becoming a Christian. But something held him back. What would his friends say? And how could he reconcile faith in Christ with his political life?

Finally, he knocked on the door. It was the house of the great preacher John Newton who had once been a slave trader but had become a Christian and wrote the famous hymn *Amazing Grace*. The two men had a lengthy conversation in which Newton explained to him how, like such great Biblical characters as Joseph and Daniel, it is possible to serve God in the political arena. 'When I came away,' the young man wrote, 'I found my mind in a calm, tranquil state, more humbled, and looking more devoutly up to God.' William Wilberforce had crossed his Rubicon, chosen his path in life and became a Christian.

Not long ago was the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade. And, of course, instrumental in that great step forward was William Wilberforce. What can we learn from his life?

Early Days

He was born in Hull in 1759. But at the age of 8 his father died, and he was sent, by his well-to-do mother to live with an aunt and uncle. But these people had become Christians. During the 18th century – a time of true revival, when God's Spirit worked in power across our country. They had become Christians under the ministry of George Whitefield and were friendly with the John Newton. Newton soon became a hero in the eyes of the young Wilberforce.

But William's mother, finding out about this Christian, influence took him away. She did not want her boy getting into religion – spoiling his life! She did everything possible to 'wash the religion out of him.' He was sent to boarding

school and then on to Cambridge University where he joined rich young men in all their worldly ways. At Cambridge he was popular and became a close friend of the young William Pitt. Both decided on a career in politics.

Political Life

At the age of just 21 Wilberforce became MP for Hull and entered Parliament. Four years later, the young William Pitt his friend, became Prime Minister. Being a friend of the Prime Minister, Wilberforce was fated to become a man of great consequence.

But, as we have said, it was in 1785 that he made his great decision to become a Christian – to have personal faith in Jesus Christ and live by his Word, the Bible. John Newton urged him to stay in politics, and convinced Wilberforce to take up the cause of the slaves. Black Africans would be caught, loaded by the hundreds into slave ships and sold to the plantation owners of America and the West Indies. This was started by the Spanish in the 17th century.

To enslave people is a wicked sin. And the conditions of transport by ship across the Atlantic were terrible. As many as 400 slaves were chained below decks. It is estimated that about 25-40 million people had this happen to them and many died in the appalling conditions of the sea crossing – between 7 and 9%. That means overall something like 2 to 3 million black people died in this way. It is comparable with the Nazi holocaust. Wilberforce collected information about the slave trade and was so horrified by the death rates of slaves on board ship that he took up the cause.

The battle against slavery

He expected a quick victory – but it was not to be. Many people in Britain made much money from slaves and the plantations in America and the West Indies in which they worked and were convinced that slavery was necessary for the economic well-being of Britain. They hated and threatened Wilberforce.

On May 11th 1789 he made a great speech in the Commons but his bill was defeated. Then came the French Revolution later that summer. All Europe was in turmoil. The issue of slavery was forgotten. In 1792 came War with France.

But Wilberforce did not give up. He was an optimistic and charming man and gathered around him a remarkable team of helpers. Early in 1806 Pitt died. A change in government and in the fortunes of war offered a new opportunity and

James Stephen, a brilliant lawyer, saw an opportunity of combining the anti-slave trade bill with a bill that would help the war. On 23rd February 1807 after 20 years work, the Commons voted by 267 votes to abolish the slave trade. It was a great victory. Now Wilberforce hoped that if the trade stopped then slavery itself would stop too. It didn't. It took another 26 years for that to happen. But with hard work it did happen just before Wilberforce died in August 1833. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Lessons?

People are sinful. Things like the slave trade prove it. You and I are sinners too. We all need God's forgiveness.

Christianity is about Jesus Christ who stands for all that is good. Wilberforce is just one example of what it is to be a Christian. We are not born Christians. We have to be born again. Just like Wilberforce, we must make that personal decision and commit ourselves to Christ and his church and his cause.

Scripture: 1 John 1.1-10

Francis Ridley Havergal was a Victorian woman, famous for writing great and stirring hymns. Through these hymns she has continued to inspire 1000s of Christians over the last couple of centuries.

Her hymns include *Who is on the Lord's side? Like a river glorious, I am trusting Thee Lord Jesus* and perhaps her best known *Take my life and let it be*.

Golden curls

She was the daughter of William and Jane Havergal. William was an evangelical CofE clergyman and vicar of Astley in Worcestershire. She was the youngest of 6 children and with her bubbly personality and golden curls, her father's favourite.

He was talented musically and actually turned down a position in music at Oxford University in order to remain a preacher of the gospel. And you get the kind of man he was, giving his girl the second name Ridley. It was a name both he and she loved. It was, of course, the name of Bishop Nicholas Ridley who was martyred for the gospel – burnt at the stake at Oxford in 1555 for his faith in Christ along with Bishop Hugh Latimer by the Catholic monarch, Queen Mary I. Latimer's last words as they faced the flames together were these: 'Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England, as I trust shall never go out.' The fact that both she and her father loved that name tells you a lot about their Christianity. They were gospel people.

Languages

Her father, unusually for many Victorians, believed that girls should be educated just as well as boys and Francis was very bright. She went to Campden House School run by a formidable evangelical headmistress who stressed the importance of personal commitment to Christ. It was during the last term before Mrs. Teed's retirement that Francis felt the urgency of conversion and was led to Christ at the age of 14, having long resisted.

At 18 when she left school, she was fluent in three European languages and studied Hebrew and Greek in her spare time. But all this went along with very fragile health. Before she was 20, she had memorized the 4 Gospels and in her

20s added all Paul's epistles.

Letters

Victorian Christians were often into writing poetry and so was Francis. Her poetry began to appear in newspapers. These attracted lots of letters as people realized the depth of spiritual experience and Bible truth expressed there. They would write asking for counsel and spiritual advice. So, she became something of a kind of Christian 'agony aunt.' For example, in 1870 she received 600 letters which she took time to answer personally.

Things weren't all smooth for her. Her family was troubled. Her mother died. Later she fell out with her new step-mother. She remained single though she received a number of proposals of marriage. She taught Sunday School. She spoke at many meetings encouraging overseas mission. Her great concern was for holiness and evangelism.

The story behind the writing of *Take my Life* gives the flavour of the woman. She explained herself how she came to write it. She had been away on a visit to a family of ten people. Before the visit she had specifically prayed she would be a blessing to all ten of her hosts. On February 4th 1874 she wrote in her diary: 'The last night of my visit. After I had retired the governess came to me and asked me to go to the two daughters. They were crying. Then and there both of them trusted (Christ) and rejoiced. It was nearly midnight. I was too happy to sleep and spent the night in praise and renewed my own consecration. And these little couplets started to form in my mind *Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to Thee...*' And they chimed in with my heart, one after the other, until they finished with '*Ever, only, all for Thee.*'

The words of the hymn are as follows:

*Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow with ceaseless praise.*

*Take my hands and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love;
Take my feet, and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee*

*Take my voice and let me sing
Always, only, for my King;
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee.*

*Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold;
Take my intellect, and use
Every power as Thou shalt choose.*

*Take my will and make it Thine;
It shall be no longer mine;
Take my heart, it is Thine own;
It shall be Thy royal throne.*

*Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store;
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee.*

Lessons

Francis Ridley Havergal's dedication to Christ was unending, single-hearted and total. Does she have any challenges for us today?

She was an evangelist. Are we? She teaches us that those who pray for opportunities are frequently given them.

She was concerned for holiness. She was the enemy of half-hearted Christian commitment, one foot in the church and one foot in the world.

Her favourite verse was the verse through which she was converted. It says, 'But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son cleanses us from all sin', 1 John 1.7.