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By Hannah Elliott

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DALLAS (ABP)—Even though he lived in England two centuries ago, the life and work of [William Wilberforce](#) remain important examples for modern-day evangelicals, according to the lead historical consultant for a feature film chronicling the famous abolitionist's life.

Kevin Belmonte, a leading scholar on Wilberforce's life and work spoke in a chapel address and a symposium at Dallas Baptist University. The Wilberforce biopic, [Amazing Grace](#), debuted in American theaters Feb. 23.

Calling Wilberforce "one of the great souls of history," Belmonte urged listeners to capitalize on his example of devoting his life to doing right—even against great odds. As a member of Parliament, Wilberforce worked tirelessly for decades to abolish the slave trade in Great Britain.

And although slavery in the Western world has become illegal, there are still more than 27 million slaves in the world today, Belmonte said.

Producers of the film have worked to raise awareness about modern-day human trafficking.

“The film creates an opportunity for us today to confront something that is very sobering,” Belmonte said. “We live in a world where, sad to say, we really need to do what we can—as Wilberforce did.”

The author of *Travel with William Wilberforce: The Friend of Humanity* and *365 Days with Wilberforce: Daily Readings from the Writings of William Wilberforce*, Belmonte is the director of the Wilberforce Papers Project, an initiative at Gordon College in Wenham, Mass.

“Whenever you share the Wilberforce story, the ways in which the gospel transformed his life shine through,” Belmonte said. “In the year that followed what he called his ‘great change,’ Wilberforce came to realize how important it was to watch and to pray. He realized he was called to serve something larger than himself.”

Before that “great change,” Wilberforce had lived a rather hedonistic life. Born into a wealthy merchant’s family and elected to Parliament at the tender age of 21, he made wealthy and powerful friends in college—such as William Pitt, who would later become prime minister. Although an aunt tried to steer him toward Methodism, Wilberforce was initially a religious skeptic who playfully ridiculed evangelicals, Belmonte said.

Eventually, through the patient mentoring of Isaac Milner, a professor at Cambridge University, and John Newton, an evangelical Anglican clergyman, Wilberforce made a commitment to Christ. He qualified his earlier life as “the restlessness of a heart that had yet to find its peace in God.”

Newton, who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*, had been a slave trader until his conversion to Christianity during a storm at sea.

In 1785, Wilberforce resolved to commit his life to service of God and decided to leave the political scene. But Newton lobbied hard against the idea, writing that God had called the young man to politics for “such a time as this.”

“To me, that underlines in bright colors the role of a pastor in someone else’s life,” Belmonte said, noting that if Wilberforce had not returned to politics, the slave trade might have continued in the West for many more generations.

Soon after Newton’s urgings, Wilberforce “came to a profound sense that God would indeed use him in political life.” The rest, as they say, is history.

In 1787, Wilberforce joined a growing group of activists campaigning against the slave trade. In May 1789, he told the House of Commons the slave trade was morally reprehensible, unjust and unnatural.

By 1791, he introduced the first parliamentary bill to abolish the slave trade, but his colleagues defeated it easily. Subsequent bills in 1792, 1793, 1795, 1796 and 1797 were defeated as well. But, on March 25, 1807, the Slave Trade Act received royal assent.

During that time, Wilberforce wrote several books, including *Appeal to the Religion, Justice and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* and *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of This Country Contrasted With Real Christianity*.

In *Appeal to the Religion*, he claimed that total emancipation for slaves was a national duty before God. In *Real Christianity*, he presented Christian doctrine as a basis for stopping the moral decline of the nation.

“One moral imperative ... stood out to him above all others: the Golden Rule,” Belmonte said, adding that Wilberforce had a unique ability to “come

alongside [people who were] polar opposites and to work together with them.”

That talent extended beyond slavery, too. He was a founding member of the Church Mission Society and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He also established the African Institution to help slaves in the West Indies and developed a Sierra Leone project to take Christianity into western Africa.

Three days before he died in 1833, Wilberforce received news that the bill for the complete abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire—the earlier law had only banned the slave trade in England itself—had passed in its third reading in the Commons. One month later, the Slavery Abolition Act freed all slaves under British rule.

Studying the life of such a great success is “profoundly rewarding,” Belmonte said. And it motivates him to live in much the same way, he added.

“It is very inspiring and encouraging to look at the life of a William Wilberforce,” Belmonte said. “I always find it encouraging to know that Wilberforce didn’t know how his story would end. He just remained faithful.”

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