

RACISM, PERSECUTION, WILBERFORCE AND YOU



*Looking at racism through the lens of persecution:
Paul Robinson, CEO Release International*

*Release International CEO **Paul Robinson** looks at racism through the lens of persecution. And he calls for a new wave of bold reformers like Wilberforce, who gave his all to the long, hard struggle to abolish slavery - tolerated in its day by many Christians.*

I was opening a course for university students and kicked off with this provocative statement: 'We are all prejudiced.'

Then I waited in silence, a silence which dragged on for minutes before someone finally felt compelled to respond.

Break the silence

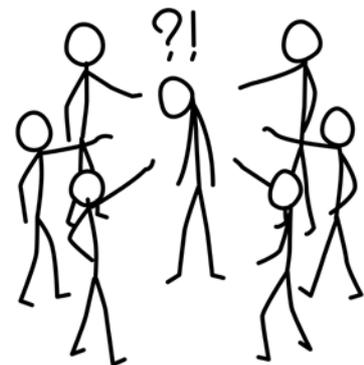
That long silence has to be broken.

Way back in the 18th century, William Wilberforce worked long and hard to break the silence over slavery.

With little thought for his reputation Wilberforce would stand up in Parliament, pull slave chains from beneath his seat, drape them around himself and speak out.

Yet even having seen those chains, even after hearing their clang and rattle, most chose to ignore the issue. Of the few to acknowledge the evils of the slave trade, most did nothing to prevent it.

So have we really moved on?



In a church service following the killing of George Floyd, one of our leaders cited Galatians, which declares we are 'one' in Christ. He said: 'If we're all "one", then an injustice against one is an injustice against all.'

'Push back'

Another added: 'It's not enough to say I'm not racist; I need to push back against racism. Our hearts must break for what is breaking God's heart.'

Racism begins with a fear of the outsider – a prejudice that starts in the heart and affects us all.

I am greatly encouraged, and optimistic, that an intense spotlight is being thrown on the issue of racism. And I long for a similar spotlight to illuminate another global issue which impacts more than 200 million Christians worldwide.

Prejudice + violence = persecution. Release International is dealing daily with a globally rising tide of persecution against Christians. For them it means harassment, discrimination, intimidation, violence, imprisonment, even murder – simply because they identify as belonging to Jesus Christ.

People like us

These are people like us. Pastor Raymond Koh, who was abducted and 'disappeared' in Malaysia. Twen Theodros, who was incarcerated in a shipping container in Eritrea and volunteered to be beaten in the place of her friend, Helen Berhane.

These are our family in Christ. We must do more than just watch. We must 'do something' and keep doing it!

Relentlessly, year after year, in the face of apathy, scorn and all the opposition the bloody slave trade could muster, Wilberforce repeatedly brought to Parliament his motion to do away with slavery.

Rejected time and again he never gave up. Even when his health failed Wilberforce clung to life and kept going until the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 was assured. Three days later, he died, his work complete.



Twen Theodros

Determined

Can we, as Christians empowered by the Holy Spirit, be as determined as Wilberforce about the key issues confronting our generation? Can we resolve to 'do something', not in our own strength, but in the strength God will give?

Social justice advocate Robert Hudnut wrote: 'Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act. To do nothing when a house is burning is to do something – it is to let the house burn. To say nothing when a country is burning is to say something. It is to let the country burn.'

When I raise awareness of persecution, some sincere Christians ask me, 'What can I do?' I point them to our ministry, and those like ours. I invite them to pray and offer financial assistance. But sometimes I say, 'Spend time in prayer. Ask God to show you what to do –

I know He will. And afterwards, by God's grace, make sure you become a doer of His word – and not a hearer only.'

Weight of oppression

I doubt racism will be defeated before Jesus returns, because sin remains active in the human heart. But we must all learn to overcome racism in our own hearts. We must recognise it when we find it, ask for forgiveness, and use our words and actions to push back racism wherever we find it.

The persecution of Christians will also continue until Jesus returns, but that does not excuse us from our obligation to watch and pray with our suffering brothers and sisters, to love and stand with the persecuted members of our own Christian family.

In his autobiography, *Tortured for Christ*, Richard Wurmbrand famously wrote: 'Our persecuted family, often alone and without help, are waging the greatest spiritual battle... equal to the heroism, courage and dedication of the early church. Will you hear their cry: "Remember us. Help us. Don't abandon us!"?'

It was the weight of an oppressor that stopped George Floyd from breathing. That weight takes many forms in this world: racism; trafficking; corruption; hunger; inequality; proxy wars; persecution – the list goes on.

'Never again'

Wilberforce concluded one speech in the House of Commons with these ringing words: 'Having heard all this you may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say you did not know.'

Well then, what about us? Having seen such oppression, we must recognise it for what it is, and refuse to look the other way, in the vain hope that matters will change without us. We must give in to neither privilege nor apathy, or the voice that whines 'do nothing.'

Instead, we must pray, find our voice and 'do something'. Real change can only come when we persist, like Wilberforce, to press on consistently, in the strength and grace of God; even to our dying breath!

George Floyd can no longer breathe. But we can. And the time has come to raise our voices. Now is the time to examine our hearts and push back against racism – including our own.

Now is the time to break the silence which often exists around the global persecution of Christians, to find words and ways that persistently help them, so we can say to them, again and again, 'I am remembering you! I will not abandon you!'



*'Never again say you did not know':
William Wilberforce*