

MOVIE REVIEW

Amazing Grace

The Movie, the Music, the Movement | BY AUDREY DECOURSEY

Do you know who wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace," and why? I do. I recently saw the sneak preview of the movie *Amazing Grace*, about the activist life of William Wilberforce. He was the man the British abolition movement coalesced around at the turn of the nineteenth century, the movement that

eventually (through two decades of work) got the slave trade banned in the British Empire. I heartily recommend the movie, which lived up even to its producer's hype. It comes out February 23, 2007, and you should go see it.

February 17–18 is Amazing Grace Weekend, so if you're in a church, Adventist or otherwise, you should lobby to get the folks singing the song that day. Ideally, you could also tie the song into its origins as a voice of protest against slavery, and use it as a protest against modern-day slavery—twenty-seven million people are enslaved today.

One of the most remarkable strengths of the movie is that, like *Iron-Jawed Angels* (about U.S. women's suffragists), it glamorizes political activism without obscuring the realities of the struggle's difficulties. There is pain; there is hopelessness; there is self-doubt; there is loneliness; there is mistrust among members of the community.

There are people who say "Go slower"; "It's bad for the economy"; "People are too fearful for change"; "You'll be called a traitor"; and most damaging of all, "Yes, I agree with you, but I don't think yours is quite the right way to act, so I will work against you and support the status quo out of my own unoriginality."

The story also makes a great case for overcoming the typical division between political and spiritual life. It shows convincingly that the best way to live as a Christian is to struggle to end injustice—that political activism is no less Christian than is a life of solitude.

The parallels between the movie's time in



The movie Web site (see box at left) is chock full of facts about "Amazing Grace," the song: 972 arrangements exist; it was included in soldiers' hymnals during the Civil War; the song appears in eleven hundred albums.

For more information:**Movie Web site:**

www.amazinggracemovie.com

Movie's modern-day abolition campaign**Web site:**

www.theamazingchange.com

Official book of the movie, about modern-day global slavery:

Not for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade—and How We Can Fight It (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), by David Batstone

Film clips about the book and campaign:

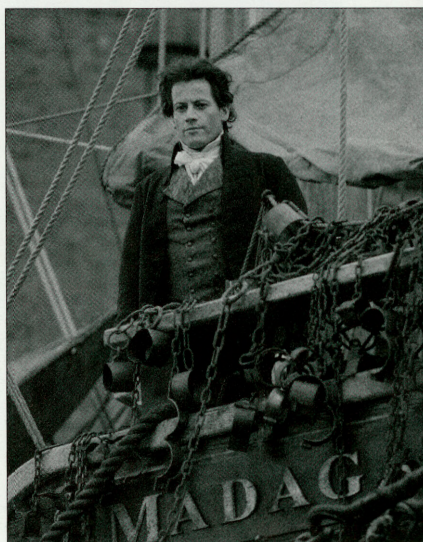
www.youtube.com/profile?user=NotforSalecampaign

Internet trivia:

A Google search for "Amazing Grace, sheet music" yielded more than 1,040,000 results, offering sheet music, music downloads, books, and more. Just for comparison, a similar search for "Elvis, sheet music" yielded 1,150,000 results.



Ioan Gruffudd stars as William Wilberforce, a pioneer abolitionist—but not the author of the song, which became an anthem for the antislavery movement. It was composed by John Newton, a former slave and one of Wilberforce's friends.



history and our own are incredible. I don't know how hard the filmmakers had to work to draw out those matches, but it's pretty blatant. There's a world power defending its empire abroad in a war against insurgents (these ones are in America); the people are kept in too much a state of fear to be amenable to social change; economic hardship is cited as a justifiable excuse for inaction against injustice; understanding the evils of chattel slavery leads activists to realize the evils of the entire economic system that creates rich and poor; anyone who speaks out against the national leader is labeled unpatriotic and seditious; people are always hatin' on the French....

The movie is also packed with tight one-liners. I may have to watch it again with a pen and notebook in hand to jot them all down.

Of course, it's a shame that the movie focuses so

much on white people's work to end slavery, and that there is all of one African character. Presenting the good activism of white abolitionists is the goal of the movie, and it meets its goal. But I am consistently disappointed in us white people that we seem to need to have our hands held through antiracist work, and that we can't just hear the stories of racist oppression and figure out how to act.

The makeup in the movie is amazing; the actors really do look twenty years older than their younger selves. And, yes, the movie has a love story, and, yes, it has busty cleavage and tight pants, if you need that sort of thing in your movie-going ventures.

Oh, and about the song? It was composed at the end of the eighteenth century by John Newton, a former slave ship worker, who wrote it as a sort of confession about the sins he had committed against fellow creatures of God. Newton was one of Wilberforce's friends and role models, and the song became an anthem for the movement. Watch the movie and you'll know even more. ■

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Questions

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that all participants are expected to affirm. I think it's rather impressive.

- We will be open and respectful toward each person we encounter.
- We will be positive examples of Christ's love for all people. Whenever possible, our witness will be for the power of that love rather than against the evil that we deplore.
- Our actions will be grounded in our shared worship, prayer, study of the Bible, and reliance on our historic confessions. These are the fundamental building blocks of our faith.
- We will use no violence, verbal or physical, toward any person, especially those with whom we disagree or officers of the law who feel compelled to arrest us as we carry out nonviolent, peaceful protest.
- We will not destroy or damage any property.
- When engaging in nonviolent acts of "divine obedience" that may be seen as breaking the law, we will accept the consequences of our actions.
- We will not carry anything that could be construed as a weapon.
- We will not bring or use alcohol or drugs (except for medical purposes). ■

Note: The pledge is posted at <www.christianpeacewitness.org>