



## RESURGENCE

### Amazing Grace Redux: Not Much Different Than Sunday School

**Greg Wright**

Zachry Kincaid sent in the following about last week's review of *Amazing Grace*:

I liked your Wilberforce piece, particularly your points on the storytelling and your analysis of how the film story evolves. But what do you think of the fact that they got the ending historically wrong?

Over at the Matthew's House Project, Zach explains what he means.

Wilberforce died before he knew the results [of his efforts]. It was a month after his death before Parliament passed his Slavery Abolition Act. ... That's where the new film comes in and corrects that sad point of Wilberforce's life. With no note that stands contrary to the representation that clearly appeals to a Spielberg trained American public, Wilberforce is present and fully alive when the vote finally goes his way.

Zach raises a good point, and not just for historical reasons. It's as much an indictment of the Church as it is of Hollywood.

First, it's worth pointing out that I called *Amazing Grace* "beyond admirable" as a "history lesson." That was probably disingenuous of me, as I was trying to be complimentary and knew full well that an "admirable history lesson" is not the same thing as "good history"—any more than an "admirable Sunday School lesson" is the same thing as good theology.

Consider the watered-down versions of the stories of David and Goliath—or David and Bathsheba—that *VeggieTales* serves up and Christians swallow whole. Saturday morning fun, Sunday-morning values, right? Well, only if entertaining little white lies are part of your Sunday morning routine. And they are, for most of us.

Hebrews 11 tells us what real warts-and-all faith looks like:

Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.

Just like Wilberforce—that is, the real, historical Wilberforce.

So yes, Zach's got a point. If the story of Moses, for instance, was retold a la *Amazing Grace*, Moses would enter the Promised Land, and wouldn't disappear graveless up on the

mountain. If David got this cinematic treatment, he'd build the temple, not Solomon. Our Sunday School teaching isn't that bad, fortunately. But it's often times not a great deal better.

Without a doubt, *Amazing Grace* gets it wrong. But it's an inspiring movie, not a historical document—nor even a watered-down Sunday School lesson. And who is the Church to cast stones, particularly?

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**Update:** Further conversations between Zach, readers, and me reveal the source of the confusion. While technically the film does *not* portray passage of the Slavery Abolition Act, it's easy for viewers to get the impression that the film's climax was in fact the climax of the anti-slavery battle, when in fact it was not. The legislation featured in *Amazing Grace* was merely the first successful salvo in a battle that continued for many more years, culminating in the abolition of slavery shortly after Wilberforce's death. More than one of our readers helpfully pointed out the distinction.