Movies often help the eye see what the imagination conjures up. Director Michael Apted's account of the heroic life of William Wilberforce in the movie *Amazing Grace* is a case in point. Chronicling Wilberforce's two-decade fight to abolish the British slave trade, the film is well-acted, visually stunning, and morally weighty. Ioan Gruffudd plays a convincing and youthful Wilberforce caught in the tension of his desire to serve the God who recently found him and his passion to see the slave trade in England halted. Should he devote himself wholly to God or should he continue to invest himself in Archimedean task of parliamentary reform? His answer comes through the counsel of a friend who affirms: "you can be both a Christian and an activist."

John Newton, Wilberforce's boyhood pastor, mentor, and the author of the hymn *Amazing Grace* is played brilliantly by Albert Finney who reminds us in his portrayal that Newton was not a genteel Anglican minister, but was, in his own words, a converted "rude, profane, slave-trading sailor" whose conscience was wracked by the horrific images of the human beings he himself maltreated.

Among Wilberforce's other associates were Thomas Clarkson, Hannah More, Edward Eliot, Granville Sharp, Henry Thornton, and clergyman John Venn. Together they composed what was known as the Clapham Sect or, better, the Clapham Circle, named for the area of London where they lived at the time. Ending with the victory to abolish the slave trade in Great Britain in 1807, the movie leaves out much of the proverbial rest of the story.
Not only was this little group of men and women responsible, under God, for abolishing the slave trade in England, they helped to reform child labor laws, established the Founding Hospital, built a hostel for former prostitutes complete with job training, promoted the vaccination of children, established a missionary society, a society for bettering the condition of the poor, and on and on. They were holistic in their efforts to protect their fellow humans from the assaults of an avaricious culture.

What does any of this have to do with bioethics? A lot. First, the presenting issue was the same as in our current bioethics debates: human dignity. Slavery treated human beings, members of our species, as commodities to be bought and sold in the marketplace. Wilberforce and company repudiated the instrumentalism of the slave trade, maintaining that human beings ought not be treated like chattel. Similarly, the violation of human subjects in research—whether in Weimar Germany or Tuskegee, Alabama—is an affront to the dignity of those whose lives are harmed. And the abuse of members of our own species for research that results in their destruction—as in embryonic stem cell research—treats human beings instrumentally, as means to someone else’s ends. The dignity of the human family demands that we protect the dignity of each of its members.

Second, economics and power of place fuelled the slave trade. For two decades members of parliament argued that Britain’s fortunes rested on the economic gains made possible through the slave trade. Today, the rhetoric is similar. Big biotech lobbies lawmakers in state after state to pass legislation that provide government funding for embryo-destructive research and embryo cloning. "If we don’t," they maintain, "we will lose market share." "If we don’t," they lament, "the United States will lose it’s place at the leading edge of R&D." Never mind that the path to this development leads inexorably to the willful commodification and destruction of human embryos, those most vulnerable members of our species.

Finally, the slave trade did not come to an end overnight. In fact, despite chronic illness, Wilberforce labored tirelessly for twenty years to abolish trade in human slaves in Britain in 1807 and another fifteen years to abolish slavery in the British colonies—a victory he won just three days before his death in 1833. The lesson is that the protection of human dignity against economic, technological, and political interests requires persevering vigilance. We must see this as a vocation, not an occasional skirmish.

See the movie, and read the companion volume by Eric Metaxas, Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery (Harper SanFrancisco). You’ll find new energy for bioethics and its role in protecting human dignity. Then, build your own Clapham community. Invest yourselves for a lifetime. Nothing less than the future of our species hangs in the balance. Surely that is worth our best efforts.