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FEBRUARY 23, 2026

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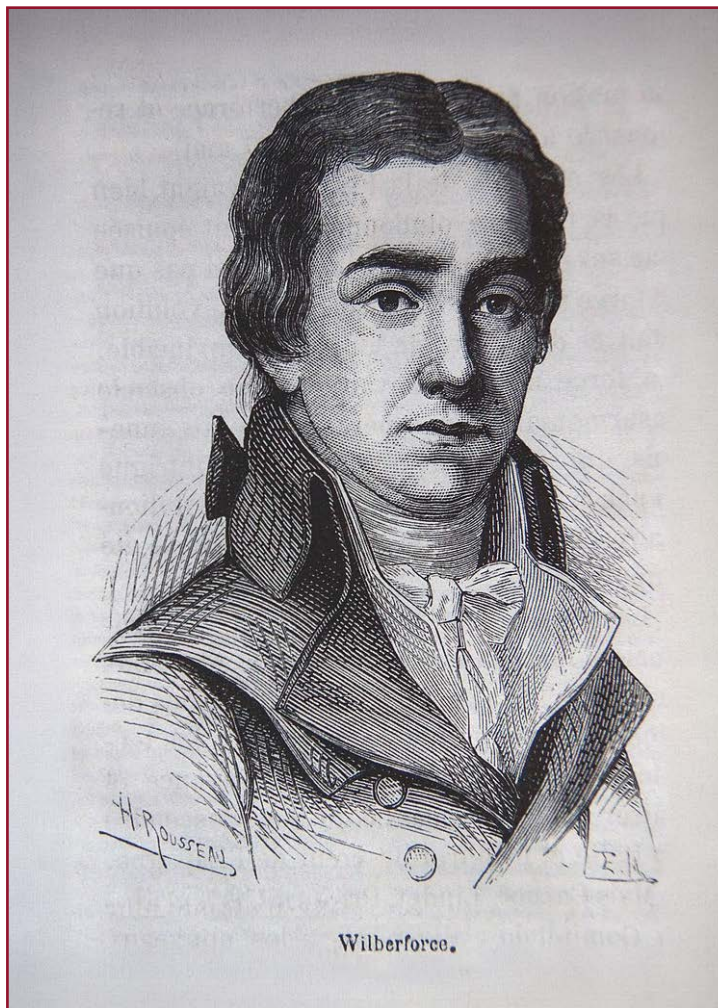
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FOCUSED ON THE WORD

● ○ PART 1 OF 2

# Wilberforce: Insights on Successfully Persevering in Office



**B**ritish lawmaker William Wilberforce, who worked indefatigably for nearly 40 years to abolish slavery in Great Britain, is often cited by Christian political activists as their exemplar for political activism. On July 26, 1833, after Wilberforce had left office and only three days before he died, Great Britain's House of Commons passed the Slavery

*Continued next page*

- WHITE HOUSE CABINET  
AMBASSADORS  
AND GOVERNORS**
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  - Mike Dunleavy* **AK**
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*The views expressed in each Bible Study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of any individual Bible Study sponsor.*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDIES**

**White House Cabinet and Governors:** Wednesdays 7am (EST), light breakfast served  
**Senate Members:** Tuesdays 8am, rotating offices, hot breakfast served  
**House Members:** Thursdays 8am, Natural Resources, Longworth 1334, hot breakfast served



MINISTRY UPDATE

## Why Written Bible Studies?



Scripture says *faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ* (Romans 10:17). Making disciples of Jesus Christ requires steady, consistent, and in-depth study of the pure Word of God.

People in ministry who are not committed to regularly teaching God’s Word year round are missing the mark. How can you say you are making disciples among the political people group of America if you have five or six, a dozen, or two dozen Bible studies with them every year—if any at all?

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## Wilberforce: Insights on Successfully Persevering in Office (Part 1)

Abolition Act and ended the practice of African slave trading throughout its empire. While Wilberforce is a wonderful model, it is evident that Christian political activists completely miss the point regarding what we can learn from the example of Wilberforce, especially when it comes to the role of the Church in politics. In truth, William Wilberforce would be a forgotten figure in history had it not been for a pastor like John Newton. Newton remained singularly focused on his calling, which was making disciples of Jesus Christ by teaching the Word of God. He was perhaps just as responsible for ending the slave trade in Britain as Wilberforce, yet he never engaged directly in politics.

A motion picture titled “Amazing Grace,” highlights the life of William Wilberforce, and you should definitely see it. This movie’s title is derived from the famous Christian hymn of the same name which was written by Newton. A self-described “wretched man,” Newton had been a slave trader who was dramatically saved by the powerful message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. After his conversion he became a pastor and had a profound personal impact on Wilberforce—not a political impact, but a spiritual one.

Newton and other ministers within the Church were responsible for helping Wilberforce develop convictions born from Scripture. Their discipleship efforts led Wilberforce to become a man driven by theology and doctrine. The Church made Wilberforce who he was through the ministry of the Word.

After he became a Christian, he decided to spend legislative recesses studying the Bible. It was common for him to spend 10 hours per day studying and memorizing Scripture. This righteous conviction rooted in biblical doctrine is what sustained and directed Wilberforce during his decades-long battle against slavery.

Wilberforce’s vital work occurred in the late 1700s. Today, as Christian lawmakers, you continue legislative battles for good laws that will underpin and buttress our nation. To aid you in your crucial work, we will examine in two parts, “Wilberforce: Insights on Successfully Persevering in Office.”

Read on, friend.



## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the darkest chapters in American history is nineteenth-century African slavery. During America's Civil War (1861–1865), Bible scholars on both sides of the slavery issue were firing theological volleys back and forth at one another in an attempt either (1) to decry the enslavement of one human being by another or (2) to justify slavery by aligning it with slavery in the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Commenting on this theological warfare, one historian writes, “Abolitionists argued vehemently that, based on the Bible, the spirit of Christianity forbids the enslavement of one race by another. Slavery’s defenders in the South argued just as vehemently that the Bible itself did not condemn slavery but took it for granted.”<sup>2</sup>

While it is not the purpose of this study to reconstruct and analyze the theological arguments surrounding this human atrocity, be assured that nineteenth-century African slavery in America was in no way biblically justified.<sup>3</sup> Nor was it justified in Great Britain. Let’s examine the primary figure behind the abolition of African slavery in Great Britain 200 years ago, the politician William Wilberforce.<sup>4</sup> And importantly,

### How did Wilberforce persevere in his decadal quest that changed the course of a nation?

Contemporary Christian activists<sup>5</sup> often cite this man as the par excellence example of Christian political activism.<sup>6</sup> His ultimately successful 20-year fight in British Parliament to end slavery is looked upon as a jewel in the crown of moralistic campaigning. While it can-

not be denied that Wilberforce fought a persevering, meritorious fight, prevailing against the odds, and helping to eradicate a vile cancer from his part of the world, what sustained him as he fought the good fight for so long? Was he motivated by the simple desire to take back the culture? Or was there something deeper that put the fire in his bones to fight for righteousness? As the following pages will show, it was the Word of God that dwelt richly in Wilberforce. He had a vibrant and growing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that steered his political career, informed his convictions and gave him the motivation to persevere against incredible odds.<sup>7</sup> The following survey of Wilberforce’s life will bear this out.

In Wilberforce’s own words,

The diligent perusal of the Holy Scriptures would discover to us our past ignorance. We should cease to be deceived by superficial appearances, and to confound the Gospel of Christ with the systems of philosophers; we should become impressed with that weighty truth, so much forgotten, and never to be too strongly insisted on, that Christianity calls on us, as we value our immortal souls, not merely in general, to be religious and moral, but specially to believe the doctrines, and imbibe the principles, and practice the precepts of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

In yet another way to answer what motivated him, he was involved in Bible study with other believers in Parliament, one that was led by a skilled Bible teacher named Newton. How sad that so many believers in office in America today do not get this! How unfortunate it

VERSE OF THE WEEK



## Colossians 3:16

*Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you.*



It was the Word of God that dwelt richly in Wilberforce; he had a vibrant and growing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that steered his political career, informed his convictions, and gave him the motivation to persevere against incredible odds.



*Continued from page 2*

The question in the political arena is how best do you unleash the Word of God? The answer to that question must be informed by the lifestyle of public servants: the higher they go in their career paths, the more complicated their daily schedules become—and the more difficult it is for them to maintain consistency in attending a weekly Bible study where Ministry Leaders teach them (in person) the Word of God.



For 30 years Capitol Ministries has been committed to perfecting written Bible studies for public servants—Bible studies that have both depth and personalized application to these busy, influential people. We publish 52 Bible studies per year that aver-

*Continued on page 6*

is to see believers leave office this year in discouragement! Regrettably, many of them were never connected to a Bible study while on the Hill.

### II. WHO WAS WILLIAM WILBERFORCE?<sup>9</sup>

William Wilberforce was born in 1759 in Hull, England. He was a contemporary of some of England's (and history's) greatest preachers, including John Newton, John Wesley, and George Whitefield.<sup>10</sup> God used unusual circumstances in the life of young Wilberforce to bring him into the company of Evangelicals and one of these great men of God—John Newton.<sup>11</sup> Writes Wilberforce biographer John Pollock:

When William was turning nine, his father died at the age of forty. Abel Smith became head of the business; the firm changed its name to Wilberforce and Smith, and William's life changed too. Not merely because he would be independent and quite rich when he came of age, but because he was sent, a year after his father's death, to live with his childless uncle and aunt, William and Hannah Wilberforce, at their Wimbledon villa in the Surrey countryside and their London house in St. James's Place. They put him to boarding school at Putney.<sup>12</sup>

As it turns out,

These relatives were despised evangelicals, friends of the preacher George Whitefield, a leader in the first Great Awakening, and John Newton, best known today as the author of

“Amazing Grace.” Newton, an old seadog, ex-naval deserter, ex-lecher, and ex-slave-trader who had been converted slowly in and after a storm at sea, fascinated the boy with his yarns. And Newton showed little William “how sweet the name of Jesus sounds” until his mother, horrified that he was turning “Methodist,” took him away.<sup>13</sup>

An article by Steven Gertz on Wilberforce's relationship with Newton states, “As a boy of eight years [or nine!], he [Wilberforce] sat at the feet of the fascinating sea-captain [Newton], drinking in his colorful stories, jokes, songs—and perhaps most importantly, lessons of faith.”<sup>14</sup> Later in life,

William remembered a younger Evangelical, John Newton, the parson of Olney in Buckinghamshire who often preached in London and was soon to be famous as a hymn-writer. A boy could hardly fail to be impressed by this jolly, affectionate ex-sea captain and slaver, who as a youth had been flogged in the Royal Navy for desertion and later suffered as the virtual slave of a white man's native mistress in West Africa. Wilberforce listened enthralled to his sermons and his stories, even “reverencing him as a parent when I was a child.”<sup>15</sup>

Seeds of faith may have been planted in young Wilberforce's life, yet the real fruit of true salvation was still years away. Wilberforce, Piper notes, “had admired George Whitefield, John Wesley, and John Newton as a child. But soon he left all the influence of the evangelicals behind.”<sup>16</sup> As noted previously,



Wilberforce's "mother was more high church and was concerned her son was 'turning Methodist.' So she took him out of the boarding school where they had sent him and put him in another."<sup>17</sup> "In the holidays the Wilberforce family began to scrub William's soul clear of Wimbledon and Clapham a slow process: he [William] wrote manfully to his uncle [whom he was pulled away from] of endurance under persecution [from his family], and of increasing 'in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus whom he sent, whom to know is life eternal.'"<sup>18</sup> In Wilberforce's life, the intervening time between his childhood exposure to Newton and his later conversion via Isaac Milner's ministry was one of spiritual deadness. Says one writer about Wilberforce's college years, he "lost any interest in biblical religion and loved circulating among the social elite."<sup>19</sup> So far had he drifted, "Newton said sadly that nothing seemed left of his [Wilberforce's] faith except a more moral outlook than was usual among men of fashion."<sup>20</sup> Being moral apart from regeneration was no more salvific back then than it is now—or ever will be!

### III. COMING TO FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST

In the spiritual vacuum of his heart, Wilberforce made room for the popular religion of his day.

In London, he [Wilberforce] had a sitting at the Essex Street chapel founded by Theophilus Lindsey, the "father" of modern Unitarianism, one of the few clergy of the Church of England who had shown courage and principle enough to resign their livings on abandoning, like so many, a be-

lief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Lindsey still preached the Christian ethic and read the Church services, and his chapel attracted several eminent men: Wilberforce rated him London's only fervent preacher, since the Evangelical or "methodistical" preachers he had enjoyed with the uncle and aunt were now outside his pale.<sup>21</sup>

But Wilberforce would eventually be saved from this anti-biblical notion of Jesus Christ.

Wilberforce's subsequent accounts of his long-drawn-out Conversion or perhaps Rededication to the Christ of his boyhood faith—are somewhat contradictory but he gives a prime share to his reading Doddridge's book with Milner. They possibly looked up relevant passages in the Bible, for Wilberforce says he adopted his religious principles from the "perusal of the Holy Scriptures and ... the instruction I derived from a friend of very extraordinary natural and acquired powers."<sup>22</sup>

Wilberforce had come to salvation in Jesus Christ at age twenty-five,<sup>23</sup> a few years before a life-changing meeting with Newton. According to one biographical sketch of Wilberforce's life, after he won his election to Parliament in 1784, he "agreed to take a tour of the continent. ... When he happened to run into his old schoolmaster from Hull, Isaac Milner, Wilberforce impulsively invited him to join the traveling party. That invitation was to change Wilberforce's life."<sup>24</sup>

### George Washington



**"I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it [slavery]."**

— George Washington, first president of the United States, commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, member of the Continental Congress, president of the Constitutional Convention, "Father of His Country," judge.

George Washington to Robert Morris, April 12, 1786; Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-04-02-0019>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Confederation Series, vol. 4, 2 April 1786–31 January 1787, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995, 15–17.]



*Continued from page 4*

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By the time Milner deposited him on 22 February 1785 at Number 10 Downing Street, Wilberforce had reached intellectual assent to the Biblical view of man, God and Christ. He thrust it to the back of his mind and resumed his social and political life.<sup>25</sup>

In the summer of that year, “slowly intellectual assent became profound conviction.”<sup>26</sup> But, still not a Christian by his own summation, it was not until “the third week of October 1785 the ‘great change,’ as he afterwards termed it, had driven Wilberforce to rise early each morning to pray.”<sup>27</sup> The story goes that Milner spoke of his Christian faith to Wilberforce, and that the latter “initially treated the subject flippantly, but eventually agreed to read the scriptures daily.”<sup>28</sup>

#### IV. WILBERFORCE'S CRISIS OF FAITH

Faced with tremendous difficulty, “feeling weary and confused”<sup>29</sup> over how to reconcile his political career with his new life in Christ, Wilberforce “turned to his boyhood hero, John Newton, now sixty years old and Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth in the City.”<sup>30</sup> Says Gertz of Wilberforce's 1785 meeting with Newton: “Now, in a moment of spiritual crisis, wondering whether his reborn faith in God required him to leave politics, Wilberforce knew who could help him most. ... He mustered his courage and strode to the front door to call on his old friend.”<sup>31</sup> It is noteworthy that when it came to his political career, Wilberforce sought counsel from none other than a minister of the Word of God. Newton advised Wilberforce to stay in office and pursue Christ as well.

#### What We Can Learn From Newton and Wilberforce Pertaining to the Differing Roles of Church and State

Newton and Wilberforce serve to magnificently model a clear, biblically correct understanding of the relationship between the institution of the state and the institution of the Church. The latter is to disciple the former versus trying to do the state's job! God appointed Wilberforce to lead in His institution of the state while God appointed Newton to lead in His institution of the Church. The latter is called to make disciples; the former is called to moralize the unregenerate. As mentioned in the preamble, it is ineffective for leaders in the Church to assume the work of God's leaders in the state—especially while turning a deaf ear to their call of making disciples of the state's leaders.

#### V. THE LIFE OF A SAVED POLITICIAN

**Once saved and sure that he should stay in politics, Wilberforce “worked hard to strengthen not only mental but spiritual stamina.”<sup>32</sup> In the process, “the Bible became his best loved book and he learned stretches by heart.”<sup>33</sup>**

He did this “so that he could meditate at night, or should his eyes trouble him,



or when needing guidance in his place in the Commons or at committees.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, he *let the Word of Christ richly dwell* in him (Colossians 3:16). Perhaps most telling of the primacy he put on his salvation over his entire life is the following statement by Pollack:

For Wilberforce wanted to subject not merely his appetites but his politics to Christ: “A man who acts from the principle I profess,” he told a constituent three years after the conversion, “reflects that he is to give an account of his political conduct at the Judgment seat of Christ.”<sup>35</sup>

Wilberforce’s reliance and accountability to biblical precepts underlie the tremendous things he did as a legislator—namely, fighting a 20-year battle to abolish the African slave trade. It is unfortunate his successful campaign against slavery is often trumpeted without proper and necessary emphasis on his love for the Word. Like a faithful pastor-teacher is continually mindful of James 3:1, *Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment*, it seems that Wilberforce had similar sentiments about answering to the Lord Jesus Christ one day for his political endeavors as *a minister of God ... for good* (Romans 13:4).

It was also only a few years after his conversion that Wilberforce’s heart slowly became set on abolishing the slave trade. Much could be said from a historical perspective about the providential workings of God through specific people and circumstances that brought the issue to a rolling boil in Wilberforce’s heart, but be assured that God raised up

the right person, at the right time, for the right task.

Next week, “Wilberforce: Insights on Successfully Persevering in Office,” Part 2, will examine the importance of evangelism and discipleship in Wilberforce’s life and how those influences resulted in his successful career-long political battle to change the world.

1. For more on this topic see: H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents*, Vol. 2, 1820–1960 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 167–212.
2. George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), 74.
3. As the preamble to this study concludes, that which germinated the overturn of slavery in America was not political activism, Abraham Lincoln, or the Civil War. It was the winning out of correct Bible interpretation, and that correct theology influenced the state. By way of application, this influence is why Bible study among public servants is so vitally important—because politics and policy, wars and actions, stem from the beliefs people hold close in their hearts. Actions are reflective while beliefs are causal.
4. To get a sense of the political courage necessary to lead this charge, consider the following: “Britain two hundred years ago was the world’s leading slave-trading nation; uprooting the vile practice threatened the annual trade of hundreds of ships, thousands of sailors, and hundreds of millions of pounds sterling.” (John Pollock, “A Man Who Changed His Times,” in *Character Counts: Leadership Qualities in Washington, Wilberforce, Lincoln, and Solzbenitsyn*, ed. by Os Guinness [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1999], 81.)
5. It is generally accepted that the goal of the Christian political activist movement in America is to increase societal morality. The method employed by this movement to reach this goal is political in nature, i.e. the passage and enforcement of laws that promote morality.
6. One of many examples is the Wilberforce Forum, which is a subsidiary of Prison Fellowship. The Annual Wilberforce Forum Award “recognizes an individual who has made a difference in the face of formidable societal problems and injustices.” <https://colsoncenter.org/ww-award>
7. Dear Reader, this same God-given wisdom is available to every Christian legislator today who believes in Jesus Christ and submits him- or herself to the Word of God.
8. William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, ed. Kevin Charles Belmonte, with an introduction by Charles Colson (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), 5–6.
9. Respected author and Bible teacher John Piper wisely suggests, “To understand and appreciate the life and labor of William Wilberforce, one of the wisest things to do is to read his own book, *A Practical*

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*View of Christianity*, first, and then read biographies’ (John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002), 117). Let the reader also read Piper’s book, *The Roots of Endurance* for a cogent synthesis on the vibrant faith in Christ that fueled Wilberforce’s political efforts. The politician who is willing to study the life of William Wilberforce through his writings and those writings about him will be richer for the experience.

10. Though Wilberforce was personally encouraged by both Wesley and Newton, he “almost certainly ... never heard Whitefield, who in the early autumn of 1769, at about the time of William’s coming south, left for his sixth and last visit to America, where he died.” (John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), 5.)
11. Contrast with Charles Colson, “Introduction,” in *Wilberforce, A Practical View of Christianity*, xxii. Colson writes, “By the time Wilberforce knew of him, Newton was a clergyman in the Church of England, renowned for his outspokenness on spiritual matters.”
12. John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), 4.
13. John Pollock, “A Man Who Changed His Times.”
14. Steven Gertz, “Pastor to the Nation: Newton responded to thousands of requests for spiritual counsel with letters advising the lowly and the great,” in *Christian History & Biography*, Issue 81, Winter 2004, 37.
15. Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 5.
16. Piper, 123.
17. Ibid.
18. Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 6.
19. Piper, 123.
20. Pollock, “A Man Who Changed His Times.”
21. Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 33. Pollack further states of Wilberforce’s spiritual instruction at that time: “In no sense was he an atheist. Lindsey’s disciples at Essex Street worshipped the Deity, a benevolent Prov-

idence in some way also the judge of man’s actions, but they rejected Christ’s divinity, the Christian view of the Atonement, and the authority of Scripture.” (Pollack, *Wilberforce*, 33–4). Wilberforce may have been no atheist, yet he was not a Bible-believing Christian!

22. Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 35.
23. J. Douglas Holladay, “A Life of Significance,” in *Character Counts: Leadership Qualities in Washington, Wilberforce, Lincoln, and Solzhenitsyn*, ed. by Os Guinness (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1999).
24. Charles Colson, “Introduction,” xxi. Pollack writes of the situation: “Wilberforce was looking for a traveling companion. He ‘had no one else in mind when the family went to Scarborough, Yorkshire’s fashionable watering place, for the summer season. Here he fell in with the huge Isaac Milner, his former usher at Hull Grammar School who now was a tutor of Queen’s College, Cambridge. On impulse, apparently, Wilberforce invited Milner, all expenses paid.’ (Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 32.) Notes Pollack of Wilberforce’s and Milner’s initial acquaintance, “Isaac [Milner] would one day influence William Wilberforce profoundly, but their paths crossed only briefly at Hull Grammar School.” (Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 4.)
25. Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 35.
26. Ibid., 36.
27. Ibid., 37.
28. Colson, “Introduction,” xxi.
29. Ibid.
30. Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 38.
31. Gertz, 37.
32. Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 44.
33. Ibid., 44.
34. Ibid., 146.
35. Ibid, 46.

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Bangui CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC • San Jose COSTA RICA • Yamoussoukro COTE D’IVOIRE • Kinshasa DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO  
Quito ECUADOR • Malabo EQUATORIAL GUINEA • Mbabane ESWATINI • Addis Ababa ETHIOPIA • Brussels EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT  
Helsinki FINLAND • Suva FIJI • Libreville GABON • Strasbourg GERMANY • Accra GHANA • Conakry GUINEA • Port-au-Prince HAITI  
Tegucigalpa HONDURAS • New Delhi INDIA • Rome ITALY • Nairobi KENYA • Riga LATVIA • Monrovia LIBERIA • Vilnius LITHUANIA  
Antananarivo MADAGASCAR • Lilongwe MALAWI • Mexico City MEXICO • Chisinau MOLDOVA • Maputo MOZAMBIQUE • Nauru • Kathmandu NEPAL  
Wellington NEW ZEALAND • Abuja NIGERIA • Skopje NORTH MACEDONIA • Oslo NORWAY • Ngerulmud PALAU • Port Moresby PAPUA NEW GUINEA  
Warsaw POLAND • Brazzaville REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO • Bucharest ROMANIA • Apia SAMOA • Edinburg SCOTLAND • Belgrade SERBIA • Freetown  
SIERRA LEONE • Bratislava SLOVAKIA • Honiara SOLOMON ISLANDS • Pretoria SOUTH AFRICA • Seoul SOUTH KOREA  
Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte SRI LANKA • Bern SWITZERLAND • Papeete TAHITI • Dodoma TANZANIA • Nuku’alofa TONGA • Kyiv UKRAINE  
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