

The Power of Influence

By Rick Ezell

“I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none” (Ezekiel 22:30 NIV).

During the Eighteenth Century, many Quakers were wealthy, conservative slave owners. John Woolman, a Quaker, dedicated his adult life to eliminating the practice of slavery among his brethren. He spent more than twenty years visiting Quakers along the East Coast. He did not criticize, nor did he make them angry. He merely asked questions: “What does it mean to be a moral person? What does it mean to own a slave? What does it mean to will a slave over to one’s children?” Driven by his vision, he influenced a whole generation of people to give up slavery.

By 1770, a century before the Civil War, not one Quaker owned a slave.

Certain individuals, like John Woolman, have that kind of irresistible and flaming influence that brings out the best in others. Their influence is like a fire on a cold, lifeless piece of iron. While many attempts have been made to break the iron, all have failed. But the small, soft flame curls around the iron, embracing it, and never leaving the iron until it melts under the flame’s irresistible influence.

Influencing individuals know where they are going. They have a clear sense of direction. A reason for living. A clearly defined purpose for life. Victor Hugo, the French poet, wrote, “There is nothing like a dream to create the future.”

Influencing people refuse to quit. Nothing will discourage them. They possess remarkable staying power. They know that life cannot deny itself to the person who gives life his all. When faced with a mountain they keep on striving until they climb over, find a pass through, tunnel underneath or turn the mountain into a gold mine.

Influencing people will not allow their principles to be compromised. They are never victims of circumstances, but victors over circumstances. They are optimistic about tomorrow. They know that when one door is shut another door that is bigger and wider a little farther down the road will be opened.

Influencing individuals demonstrate a care and compassion for the people they are around. Love keeps the flame of influence burning brightly. Teilhard de Chardin said it this way: “The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire.”

John Woolman possessed each of these characteristics. Because of his efforts the Quakers were the first religious group in America to denounce and renounce slavery. In recounting this story, Robert Greenleaf points out:

One wonders what would have been the result if there had been fifty John Woolmans, or even five, traveling the length and breadth of the Colonies in the Eighteenth Century persuading people, one by one, with gentle nonjudgmental argument that a wrong should be righted by individual voluntary action. . . . A few John Woolmans, just a few, might have made the difference.

John Woolman was determined to change the minds of his fellow Quakers. His influence transformed his church and his state. He stood in the gap.

One person has the power to influence.

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