

# Editorial: The Life and Legacy of George Whitefield (1714-1770)

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This year marks the 300th anniversary of George Whitefield's birth. Whitefield is important for a number of reasons, all of which deserve our attention as evangelical Christians. As a man committed to the preaching of God's sovereign grace and the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, there is probably no better example of an individual who lived out his theological convictions. Believing that Scripture calls the church to take the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the world, Whitefield faithfully and tirelessly proclaimed Christ at home and abroad. During his lifetime, for example, he crossed the Atlantic Ocean thirteen times, as he wore himself out preaching Christ to all who would listen, and calling men, women, and boys and girls to repentance and faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. In addition, he sought to put the Gospel into practice by not only proclaiming Christ but helping those in need. For Whitefield, the preaching of the Gospel demanded action in word *and* deed, and his life, although certainly not perfect, was a shining example of biblical Christianity at work in real life.

Whitefield is also important in demonstrating that it is possible for evangelicals to work together, even evangelicals who differ sharply in

their theological convictions. As an Anglican with Calvinistic convictions, he was able to forge links with those outside of the Church of England and work with those within. His friendship with the Wesley's is well known, which nicely demonstrated that people with differing theological convictions can still work together in the common cause of the Gospel. Obviously, Whitefield's working with those who named Christ had its limits, as he sought to proclaim and defend orthodox Christianity. But within the pale of orthodoxy, Whitefield, without compromising his theological convictions, desired to see Christ's Church unified, and his life was a fine example of a person who worked to this end.

Probably one of the greatest encouragements we can receive in our day from the life and ministry of George Whitefield is the reminder of the power of the Gospel to transform individual lives and to impact the broader society. Whitefield's day, like our own, was dark on a number of fronts. Spiritually, the church was apathetic and weak. Culturally, immorality was rampant, and the social conditions of the day were awful. It was in such a day that our triune God, by his grace and for his glory, raised up people like Whitefield to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ. Through the preaching of the Gospel, God graciously brought revival both in the United Kingdom and in America, which set the stage for individual conversions and also societal transformation. Often people look back at this era and rightly acknowledge that if it was not for the changes which occurred in the Evangelical Revival in the United Kingdom and the Great Awakening in America, the history of these countries would be quite different.

As we look at our own day and age, we see a similar decay around us, as Whitefield and others witnessed in their day. What is the solution to our ills? What can bring about the change necessary to see the tide turned back? Whitefield reminds us that it is only by God's grace, and through the preaching of the Gospel and the transformation it brings, that the human heart can be changed and brought into right relationship with God and one another.

It is our privilege to devote this issue of *SBJT* to the life and legacy of George Whitefield. Our goal is not only to learn from his life—learn from him as a preacher, evangelist, missionary, Christian statesman, and theologian—but also to be reminded that it is only through the Gospel that true change comes. Working on other societal fronts is very important, and Christians are called to serve in all walks of life for God's glory. But we must never forget that God has called the church to faithful gos-

pel proclamation, and it is in the life of George Whitefield which we see this so beautifully demonstrated. It is my prayer that this issue will challenge us anew to Gospel faithfulness in our day, as we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.