

The Christian Life in the Thought of George Whitefield¹

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The final decades of the seventeenth century witnessed a distinct decline in public manners and morals in England. Attestation of this fact is found in both public documents and private testimonies. Here is the witness of one author, the London Baptist theologian Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), writing in 1701:

Was ever sodomy so common in a Christian nation, or so notoriously and frequently committed, as by too palpable evidences it appears to be, in and about this city, notwithstanding the clear light of the gospel which shines therein, and the great pains taken to reform the abominable profaneness that abounds? Is it not a wonder the patience of God hath not consumed us in his wrath, before this time? Was ever swearing, blasphemy, whoring, drunkenness, gluttony, self-love, and covetousness, at such a height, as at this time here?²

Despite the presence of a number of gospel-centered ministries like that of Keach and various societies which had been created to bring about moral

reform, homosexuality, profanity, sexual immorality, drunkenness and gluttony were widespread. And the next three decades saw little improvement.

The moral tone of the nation was set in many ways by its monarchs and leading politicians. The first of the Hanoverian monarchs, George I (r. 1714–1727), was primarily interested in food, horses, and women. He divorced his wife when he was thirty-four and thereafter consorted with a series of mistresses.³ Sir Robert Walpole (1676–1745), prime minister from 1722 to 1742, lived in undisguised adultery with his mistress, Maria Skerrett (d. 1738), whom he married after his wife died.⁴ As J. H. Plumb has noted of aristocratic circles in the early eighteenth century, the women “hardly bothered with the pretence of virtue, and the possession of lovers and mistresses was regarded as a commonplace, a matter for gossip but not reproach.”⁵ Not surprisingly other segments of society simply followed suit. Pornographic literature, for instance, multiplied almost unchecked. Newspapers advertised such things as the services of gigolos and cures for venereal disease, and one could purchase guide-books to the numerous brothels in London.⁶ It was, as a recent writer has put it well, “an age when atheism was fashionable, sexual morals lax, and drinking and gambling at a pitch of profligacy that he never since been equaled.”⁷

Social conditions were equally bleak. While many of the rich indulged themselves and all of their whims, the lot of the ordinary man and woman was quite different. For a variety of economic causes, the towns of England mushroomed in the eighteenth century. The population of London, the capital, more than doubled. By the end of the century it contained over a million people and was the largest city in the western world.⁸ Many men and women came to these cities from rural poverty, hoping to find a decent living. But adequate housing could not keep up with the demand, and those who most needed the shelter lacked sufficient funds to purchase it.⁹ Consequently, houses were desperately overcrowded. In a large industrial center like Manchester, for example, ten people living in a room was common. Such rooms were often without furniture and lacked even beds. The occupants would sleep close together on wood shavings for warmth. Disease was rampant and unchecked: smallpox, typhus, typhoid, and dysentery made death a very familiar figure.¹⁰

From such a dismal situation many sought escape in drink. Beer had always been a central part of English life. But in the eighteenth century many turned to something far more potent: gin. By mid-century, the consumption of poorly distilled, and often virtually poisonous, gin was eleven million gallons a year. Some idea of the debilitation wrought by this plague may

be grasped in terms of a simple item of record. In one area of London, for instance, comprising two thousand houses or so, 506 were gin shops. One contemporary novelist, Henry Fielding, estimated that in London one hundred thousand people drank gin as their principal means of sustenance.¹¹ The sort of suffering that such consumption of gin brought in its wake is well illustrated by a news item from 1748 which reads as follows:

At a Christening at Beddington in Surrey the nurse was so intoxicated that after she had undressed the child, instead of laying it in the cradle she put it behind a large fire, which burnt it to death in a few minutes.¹²

The Hanoverian Church of England was basically helpless when it came to dealing with this dire situation. By and large the bishops of the Church of England were, in the words of English historian J. H. Plumb, “first and foremost politicians,” not men of the Spirit. “There is a worldliness,” Plumb continues, “about eighteenth-century [bishops] which no amount of apologetics can conceal.” They undertook their clerical duties “only as political duties allowed.”¹³ The worldliness of these bishops showed itself in other ways as well. Jonathan Trelawny (1650-1721), Bishop of Winchester, used to “excuse himself for his much swearing by saying he swore as a baronet, and not as a bishop”!¹⁴ Such bishops had neither the time nor the interest to promote church renewal. Of course, the decadence of church leadership was by no means absolute; but the net effect of worldly bishops was to squash effective reform.

Moreover, the attention of far too many of the clergy under these bishops was taken up with such avocations as philosophy, biology, agriculture, chemistry, literature, law, politics, fox-hunting, drinking—anything but pastoral ministry and spiritual nurture. There were, of course, a goodly number of Church of England ministers who did not have the resources to indulge themselves in such pursuits, since they barely eked out a living. But few of them—wealthy or poor—preached anything but dry, unaffectionate moralistic sermons. The *mentalité* of the first half of the eighteenth century gloried in reason, moderation and decorum. The preaching of the day dwelt largely upon themes of morality and decency and lacked “any element of holy excitement, of passionate pleading, of heroic challenge, of winged imagination.”¹⁵ Even among many of the churches of the Dissenters, the children of the Puritans, things were little better. One knowledgeable observer of these churches bemoaned the fact that “the distinguished doctrines of the gospel—Christ crucified, the only ground of hope for fallen man—salva-

tion through his atoning blood—the sanctification by his eternal Spirit, are old-fashioned things now seldom heard in our churches.”¹⁶ The Christian life was basically defined in terms of a moral life of good works. Spiritual ardor was regarded with horror as “enthusiasm” or fanaticism. The ideal of the era is well summed up by an inscription on a tombstone from the period: “pious without enthusiasm.”¹⁷

It was the eighteenth-century Revival’s message of the new birth and justification by faith alone that brought positive changes and hope. This message had numerous heralds in that remarkable era, but none as widely appreciated and known as George Whitefield (1714–1770).

The New Birth

Whitefield’s thoughts about the new birth are well seen in a letter to Louise Sophie von der Schulenburg (1692–1773), the Countess of Delitz. The Countess was the illegitimate daughter of George I by one of his mistresses, Melusina von der Schulenburg (1667–1743), the Countess of Kendal. The Countess of Delitz was also a friend of Selina Hastings (1707–1791), the Countess of Huntingdon, and she appears to have been converted through Whitefield’s ministry at either Selina’s London apartment or Chelsea residence. Writing to the Countess of Delitz from Plymouth in February of 1749, Whitefield rejoices in her conversion.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, I trust, hath imparted a saving knowledge of his eternal Son to your Ladyship’s heart. Your letter bespeaks the language of a soul which hath tasted that the Lord is gracious, and hath been initiated into the divine life. Welcome, thrice welcome, honoured Madam, into the world of new creatures! O what a scene of happiness lies before you! Your frames, my Lady, like the moon, will wax and wane; but the Lord Jesus, on whose righteousness you solely depend, will, notwithstanding, remain your faithful friend in heaven. Your Ladyship seems to have the right point in view, to get a constant abiding witness and indwelling of the blessed Spirit of God in your heart. This the Redeemer has purchased for you. Of this he has given your Ladyship a taste; this, I am persuaded, he will yet impart so plentifully to your heart, that out of it shall flow rivers of living waters. This Jesus spake of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive. As you have, therefore, honoured Madam, received the Lord Jesus, so walk in him even by faith. Lean on your beloved, and you shall go on comfortably through this howling wilderness, till you arrive at those blissful regions,

*Where pain, and sin, and sorrow cease,
And all is calm, and joy, and peace.*¹⁸

The new birth entails a “saving knowledge” of the Lord Jesus Christ that is far more than simple factual knowledge. It marries belief in him as the “eternal Son” of God to trust in him as one’s Redeemer from sin and its punishment. It means that one’s trust for acceptance by God is no longer focused on one’s own moral achievements but upon what God has done through Christ’s spotless life, propitiatory death and resurrection. As Whitefield wrote on another occasion to a different correspondent: “I hope you take particular care to beat down self-righteousness, and exalt the Lord Jesus alone in your hearts. I find, the only happiness is to lie down as a poor sinner at the feet of the once crucified, but now exalted Lamb of God, who died for our sins and rose again for our justification.”¹⁹

Moreover, the new birth is intimately bound up with the gift of the Spirit. Those who experience the new birth are “initiated into the divine life” as the Spirit comes to dwell in their hearts. This new birth ultimately comes from God. Only he can graciously enable a person to look to Christ alone for salvation. Finally, it is the new birth alone that sets a person on the road to heaven. In a sermon that he preached eleven months later on Ephesians 4:24, Whitefield put this final point more bluntly: “unless you are new creatures, you are in a state of damnation...I tell thee, O man; I tell thee, O woman, whoever thou art, thou art a dead man, thou art a dead woman, nay a damned man, a damned woman, without a new heart.”²⁰

Understandably Whitefield was critical of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, prevalent in many quarters of the Church of England and which he referred to more than once as “that Diana of the present age.”²¹ His earliest printed sermon, *The Nature and Necessity of our Regeneration or New Birth in Christ Jesus* (1737), was ardent and plain in its rejection of this doctrine. It is “beyond all contradiction,” he argued, “that comparatively but few of those that are ‘born of water,’ are ‘born of the Spirit’ likewise; to use another spiritual way of speaking, many are baptized with water, which were never baptized with the Holy Ghost.”²² Regeneration is not automatically dispensed when water baptism takes place. Rather, a person must experience “an inward change and purity of heart, and cohabitation of his [i.e., Christ’s] Holy Spirit.”²³ A genuine Christian is one “whose baptism is that of the heart, in the Spirit, and not merely in the water, whose praise is not of man but of God.”²⁴

It is noteworthy that Whitefield was not afraid of turning the substance of this criticism against the Baptist emphasis on believer's baptism. Writing in the summer of 1741 to a Baptist correspondent in Georgia, he urged him:

I hope you will not think all is done, because you have been baptized and received into full communion. I know too many that "make a Christ of their adult baptism," and rest in that, instead of the righteousness of the blessed Jesus. God forbid that you should so learn Christ. O my dear friend, seek after a settlement in our dear Lord, so that you may experience that life which is hid with Christ in God.²⁵

Justification by Faith Alone

Turning to the doctrine of justification, there is probably no better place to view Whitefield's thinking on this subject than his sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:30, *Christ, the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification and Redemption*.²⁶ It was written out early in 1741 while Whitefield was on board ship on his way home to England from Georgia. It appears, though, that he had preached it various times in the preceding months on what was his second visit to America. It was eventually published in Edinburgh in 1742, and subsequently came out in further editions in other cities in England and America.

After emphasizing that the blessing of justification is rooted in God's everlasting love, Whitefield deals with the first thing that is attributed to Christ, "wisdom." True wisdom, he argues, is not "indulging the lust of the flesh," a reference to the open immorality and godlessness of his day. Nor is it found in the acquisitive "adding house to house." Neither is it merely intellectual knowledge, for "learned men are not always wise."²⁷

What then is genuine wisdom? Well, first, Whitefield says and here he quotes an ancient Greek maxim, it is to "know thyself." What do the children of God need to know what about themselves? Well, that before their conversion they were darkness, and now, they are light in the Lord (see Ephesians 5:8). They know something of their lost estate. They see that that "all their righteousnesses are but as filthy rags; that there is no health in their souls; that they are poor and miserable, blind and naked." And knowing themselves they know their need of a Savior. This knowledge is basic and foundational to any biblical spirituality.

The type of self-knowledge that Whitefield is advocating also logically leads to the realization of the need for Christ as one's righteousness. Whitefield develops this thought in terms of Christ's active and passive

obedience. By the former Christ fulfills the entirety of the law's righteous demands. This righteousness is imputed to the believer so that he or she now legally possesses the righteousness of Christ. "Does sin condemn? Christ's righteousness delivers believers from the guilt of it." By the latter, Christ passively bears the punishment for their elect's sins—he takes legal responsibility for them, so that God the Father blots out the transgressions of believers, "the flaming sword of God's wrath... is now removed."²⁸ The spiritual importance of this truth Whitefield later laid out in a letter he wrote to a friend in 1746: "Blessed be his [i.e. Christ's] name if He lets you see more & more that in Him and in Him only you have Righteousness & strength. The more you are led to this foundation, the more solid will be your Superstructure of Gospel holiness."²⁹

And the means of receiving these precious benefits of Christ's death? Faith alone—believers, Whitefield affirms in his sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:30, are "enabled [by the Father] to lay hold on Christ by faith." Whitefield clearly indicates that faith itself does not save the sinner—only Christ saves. Faith unites the sinner to the Savior. Thus, faith, though a necessary means to salvation, is not itself the cause or ground of salvation. As Whitefield says, "Christ is *their* Saviour."³⁰ Little wonder then that Whitefield, employing the text of Romans 8, goes on to underline the fact that such genuine self-knowledge not only provides the foundation for a truly biblical spirituality but also gives that spirituality a tone of triumphant joy: "O believers!... rejoice in the Lord always."³¹ Whitefield knew that when the biblical truth of justification is grasped and appropriated, a deep sense of joy and freedom from the burden of sin floods the heart and one's relationship with God is firmly anchored.

Whitefield has a number of ways of describing this reliance on Christ. In one letter he talks of Christ as the believer's "asylum." Christ's "Wounds and precious Blood is a Sure Asylum & Place of Refuge in every Time of Trouble," he told a friend.³² In yet a third example, he speaks of Christ alone being able to fill the deepest caverns of the human heart: "Happy they who have fled to Jesus Christ for refuge: they have a peace that the world cannot give. O that the pleasure-taking, trifling flatterer knew what it was! He would no longer feel such an empty void, such a dreadful chasm in the heart which nothing but the presence of God can fill."³³

In another letter, he calls Christ "the believer's *hollow square*." This metaphor is drawn from the European battlefields of the eighteenth century, where armies would regularly form massed squares of infantry three or four rows deep for protection and consolidated strength. If a soldier

were wounded his comrades would place him in the centre of the square, where he would be a lot safer than if he were behind a skirmishing line.³⁴ “If we keep close” in the square that is Christ, Whitefield continues with the thought of the metaphor, “we are impregnable. Here only I find refuge. Garrisoned in this, I can bid defiance to men and devils.”³⁵ In another letter, he talks of Christ as the believer’s “asylum.” Christ’s “Wounds and precious Blood is a Sure Asylum & Place of Refuge in every Time of Trouble,” he told a friend.³⁶ In yet a third example, he speaks of Christ alone being able to fill the deepest caverns of the human heart: “Happy they who have fled to Jesus Christ for refuge: they have a peace that the world cannot give. O that the pleasure-taking, trifling flatterer knew what it was! He would no longer feel such an empty void, such a dreadful chasm in the heart which nothing but the presence of God can fill.”³⁷

The Priority of Gospel Holiness

The new birth and justification by faith alone were hallmarks of Whitefield’s spirituality, but so also was a concern for personal and social holiness.³⁸ While Whitefield never flagged in emphasizing that our acceptance with God can never be based on our sanctification, for the believer’s sanctification is always incomplete in this life in a practical sense. Sin, to some degree, still indwells him. “Our most holy thoughts,” Whitefield wrote to a correspondent in 1741, “are tinged with sin, and want the atonement of the Mediator.”³⁹ But although faith alone saves, saving faith is never alone. It always issues in good works.

In the sermon *Christ, the Believer’s Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification and Redemption* Whitefield thus explicitly rejects the error of those practical Antinomians who “talk of Christ without, but know nothing of a work of sanctification wrought within.” As Whitefield stresses, “it is not going back to a covenant of works, to look into our hearts, and seeing that they are changed and renewed, from thence form a comfortable and well-grounded assurance” of salvation. If “we are not holy in heart and life, if we are not sanctified and renewed by the Spirit in our minds, we are self-deceivers, we are only formal hypocrites: for we must not put asunder what God has joined together.”⁴⁰ In other words, believers cannot be in union with half a Christ. Or as he puts it pithily in the sermon *The Lord our Righteousness*: “if you are justified by the Blood, you are also sanctified by the Spirit of the Lord.”⁴¹

Whitefield was also unsparing in his criticism of doctrinal Antinomianism, which on one occasion he succinctly defined as believers looking for “all...Holiness without,” that is, outside of themselves.⁴² Its error, in White-

field's mind, was so overemphasizing freedom from the condemnation of the law that the passionate pursuit of godliness in everyday life was downplayed.⁴³ He could thus describe it as a "great Evil," "a rank weed" sown by Satan.⁴⁴ When doctrinal Antinomianism actually began to appear among Whitefield's English colleagues and supporters, in particular through the teaching of William Cudworth (c.1717–1763), Whitefield fervently prayed that Jesus might "crush [this] Cockatrice in its bud."⁴⁵

Following the lead of the New Testament Whitefield never implied that Christians must possess inherent holiness to be reckoned saints. However, he rightly assumed that those who have been made saints by faith alone will indeed lead holy lives. "Live near to Christ," he writes to an American correspondent, and "keep up a holy walk with God ... Hunger and thirst daily after the righteousness of Christ. Be content with no degree of sanctification."⁴⁶ Writing to the Countess of Huntingdon on the last day of 1755, he told her: "Every day and every hour must we be passing from death to life. Mortification and vivification make up the whole of the divine work in the new-born soul."⁴⁷ Or as he put it to a friend in Philadelphia:

I trust you will never rest till you are possessed of the whole mind which was in Christ Jesus. He is our pattern; and if we have true grace in our hearts, we shall be continually labouring to copy after our great exemplar. O the life of Jesus! How little of it is to be seen in those that call themselves his followers. Humility, meekness, love, peace, joy, goodness, faith, and the other blessed fruits of the Spirit, whither are they fled? I fear most take up with the shadow, instead of the substance. God forbid that I, or dear Mr. B—, should be of that unhappy number. Dear Sir, there is an unspeakable fulness, unsearchable riches in Christ. Out of him we are to receive grace for grace. Every grace that was in the Redeemer, is to be transcribed and copied into our hearts. This is Christianity; and without this, though we could dispute with the utmost clearness, and talk like angels, of the doctrines of grace, it would profit us nothing.⁴⁸

Whitefield wisely, and in New Testament fashion, sought to keep the medium between two extremes. On the one hand, he did not insist so much upon Christ's imputed righteousness as to exclude the vital importance of the believer having godliness to evidence that he or she belongs to Christ. But nor did he give such priority to the believer's inherent righteousness as to diminish his or her resting in the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

Whitefield's perspective on the issue of holiness, though it captures well New Testament thinking on the subject, brought considerable grief to the evangelist. For he found himself forced to defend it against two of his closest friends, namely, John (1703–1791) and Charles Wesley (1707–1788).⁴⁹ An honest evaluation of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival cannot belittle the central role played in it by John Wesley. One thinks, for instance, of his fearless and indefatigable preaching of Christ crucified for sinners year in and year out throughout the length and breadth of Great Britain after his conversion in 1738. Or there is the genius he displayed in preserving the fruit of the revival in small fellowship groups called “classes.” Again, one calls to mind his promotion of the matchless hymnody of his brother Charles, whom J. I. Packer has rightly named “the supreme poet of love in a revival context.”⁵⁰ Yet, for all the good that John Wesley did, he was a lightning-rod for controversy. His propagation of evangelical Arminianism, for example, did much to antagonize Whitefield and other key evangelical leaders.⁵¹

Equally serious an error was his commitment to the doctrine of Christian perfection. In the year before his death, he plainly indicated his conviction that God had raised up the Wesleyan Methodists primarily for the propagation of this doctrine.⁵² Yet, no other doctrine involved Wesley in more controversy than this one. It was a key factor in creating a rift between him and Whitefield, it alienated him from many of the younger leaders in the revival, and eventually it even caused a slight division between him and his brother Charles.⁵³

Convinced that Scripture taught this doctrine, though, John Wesley was determined to publish it to the world. Yet, unlike his clear presentation of the heart of the gospel, his teaching about perfection is somewhat murky and at times difficult to pin down. He always contended that he was not advocating “sinless perfection.”⁵⁴ Yet he could talk about the one who experienced this blessing as having “sin... separated from his soul” and having a “full deliverance from sin.”⁵⁵ Such perfection freed the person from evil thoughts and evil tempers. As he wrote to the Baptist authoress Ann Dutton (1692–1765), this blessing brings freedom from “all faintness, coldness, and unevenness of love, both towards God and our neighbour. And hence from wanderings of heart in duty, and from every motion and affection that is contrary to the law of love.” All this sounds very much like sinless perfection despite Wesley's protest, “we do not say that we have no sin *in us*, but that we do not *commit sin*.”⁵⁶

It is curious that Wesley himself never claimed to have experienced

Christian perfection, or what he sometimes called “the second blessing.”⁵⁷ But as he preached it, others did, which to his mind was further confirmation of the scriptural truth of the doctrine. George Whitefield mentions in a letter that he wrote a friend in 1741 that he had met one of Wesley’s followers who claimed he had not “sinned in thought, word, or deed” for three months. This man affirmed that was “not only free from the power, but the very in-being of sin” and asserted that it was “impossible for him to sin.” In the same letter Whitefield mentions another, a woman, who claimed she had been perfect for an entire year during which time she “did not commit any sin.” When he asked her if she had any pride, she brazenly answered, “No”!⁵⁸ As Gordon Wakefield wisely sums up Wesley’s teaching on Christian perfection: it was “confused, divisive, provoked scandals, errors, mania and the very evils of pride, malice and all uncharitableness it was intended to obliterate forever, and rested on an inadequate concept of sin.”⁵⁹

It was from Whitefield that significant opposition to this teaching first came. Despite his friendship with John and almost deferential respect for him, Whitefield was not afraid to challenge his erroneous thinking on Christian discipleship. Between 1740 and 1742 he wrote letters to Wesley and preached a number of sermons which opposed his views about Christian perfection with frankness, but also with evident love. Writing on March 26, 1740, from Savannah, Georgia, for instance, he told Wesley that to the best of his knowledge “no sin has dominion” over him, but he went on, “I feel the strugglings of indwelling sin day by day.”⁶⁰ Yet, despite his evident conflict with Wesley, he did not relish the prospect of disagreeing with him. Will not their disagreement, he said, “in the end destroy brotherly love, and insensibly take from us that cordial union and sweetness of soul, which I pray God may always subsist between us?”⁶¹ In September, 1740, Whitefield wrote to a Mr. Account of London: “Sinless perfection...is unattainable in this life. Shew me a man that could ever justly say, ‘I am perfect.’ It is enough if we can say so, when we bow down our heads and give up the ghost. Indwelling sin remains till death, even in the regenerate.”⁶² Scriptural support for this position was found by Whitefield in texts like 1 Kings 8:46 (“there is no man that liveth and sinneth not”) and James 3:2 (“In many things we all offend”), as well as examples drawn from the lives of King David and the Apostles Peter and Paul.⁶³ Two months later, Whitefield told Wesley: “I am yet persuaded you greatly err. You have set a mark you will never arrive at, till you come to glory.” The following month found Whitefield wintering at Bethesda in Georgia. From there he published an open letter against Wesley in which he once again dealt plainly with his brother in Christ. On the sub-

ject of perfection he confessed that since his conversion he has “not doubted a quarter of an hour of having a saving interest in Jesus Christ.” But, he also had to acknowledge “with grief and humble shame ... I have fallen into sin often.” Such a confession, though, was not unique to him: it was the “universal experience and acknowledgment ... among the godly in every age.”⁶⁴ Whitefield’s perspective rests squarely on the testimony of Scripture, an adequate theological analysis of indwelling sin, and the testimony of God’s people in the history of the church.

Coda

Wesley’s teaching carried enormous weight in the century after his death in 1791. It formed the heart and substance of the transatlantic holiness movement of the nineteenth century. And taking the nomenclature that John Fletcher (1729–1785), Wesley’s godly lieutenant, used for Christian perfection, namely his description of it as “the baptism of the Holy Spirit,” Wesleyan perfectionism prepared the soil for the emergence of Pentecostalism in the twentieth century. What would the later history of Evangelicalism have been like if Wesley had listened to Whitefield? We have no way of knowing, of course, for God’s sovereignty deemed otherwise. But it strikes this writer that his brother Charles eventually came to a much more balanced and clearer perspective on this matter than John, a perspective that was essentially the position of Whitefield. Writing to the great Yorkshire evangelist William Grimshaw (1708–1763) in March of 1760, the younger Wesley stated: “My perfection is to see my own imperfection; my comfort, to feel that I have the world, flesh, and devil to overthrow through the Spirit and merits of my dear Saviour; and my desire and hope is, to love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength, to the last gasp of my life. This is my perfection. I know no other, expecting to lay down my life and my sword together.”⁶⁵

¹ Earlier versions of portions of this article appeared as “Defenders of the faith: George Whitefield and the nature of Christian perfection”, *Evangelical Times* 32:10 (1998): 23; “Evangelical piety: grounded in justification by faith alone”, *Evangelical Times* 34:1 (2000): 14; “Christ, our wisdom and our righteousness”, *Evangelical Times* 34:2 (2000): 14; and “‘The Believer’s Hollow Square’: The new birth and justification by faith alone in the thought of George Whitefield”, *Sovereign Grace Journal* 2:1 (2000): 4–13. Used by permission.

² *Gospel Mysteries Unveiled* (1701 ed.; repr. London: L. I. Higham, 1817), III, 310.

³ J. H. Plumb, *The First Four Georges* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1956), 39–42.

⁴ J. H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole* (Clifton, New Jersey: Augustus M. Kelley, 1973), II, 114.

⁵ Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole*, II, 114.

⁶ Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1982), 279.

⁷ Selina Hastings, “A peeress with a passion for piety”, *Sunday Telegraph* (December 14, 1997).

- ⁸ J. H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1963), 144.
- ⁹ David Lyle Jeffrey, "Introduction," in *A Burning and a Shining Light. English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (ed., David Lyle Jeffrey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 9.
- ¹⁰ Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century*, 12.
- ¹¹ Jeffrey, "Introduction", 9.
- ¹² Cited Porter, *English Society*, 35.
- ¹³ *England in the Eighteenth Century*, 43.
- ¹⁴ Cited J. Wesley Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley. The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1938), 50.
- ¹⁵ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England* (1961 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids/Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1996), III, 73.
- ¹⁶ Cited A. Skevington Wood, "The Eighteenth Century Methodist Revival Reconsidered", *The Evangelical Quarterly* 53 (1981): 135.
- ¹⁷ J. I. Packer, "The Spirit with the Word: The Reformational Revivalism of George Whitefield" in *The Bible, the Reformation and the Church. Essays in Honour of James Atkinson* (ed., W. P. Stephens; *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 105; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 180-181; M. Dorothy George, *England in Transition. Life and Work in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1953), 65. For an excellent overview of the state of Christianity in England at this time, see Jeffrey, "Introduction", 2-10.
- ¹⁸ Letter to Louise Sophie von der Schulenburg, February 22, 1749 in *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771), II, 236-237. This collection of Whitefield's literary corpus is subsequently referred to as *Works*.
- ¹⁹ Letter to Serjeant B, July 25, 1741 (*Works*, I, 284).
- ²⁰ Cited L. Tyerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1877), II, 242.
- ²¹ See, for example, *Some Remarks on a Pamphlet, entitled, The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists compar'd* (London: W. Strahan, 1749), 30. The allusion is to the riot in Ephesus over the threat that Christianity posed to the worship of the goddess Artemis or Diana (Acts 19:21-40).
- ²² *Sermons on Important Subjects* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1833), 544. In this particular volume this sermon has the title *On Regeneration*. When it was first published, it had the title given in the text.
- ²³ *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 544.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 545.
- ²⁵ Letter CCCVIII to Mr. I— F—, July 24, 1741 (*Works*, I, 281).
- ²⁶ The full sermon can be found in *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 500-511.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 500-502.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 502.
- ²⁹ Letter to Jonathan Thompson, May 11, 1746 in John W. Christie, "Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, II", *Journal of The Presbyterian Historical Society*, 32 (1954): 161. See also his *Jacob's Ladder* (*Sermons on Important Subjects*, 772-773): "You need not be afraid of our destroying inward holiness, by preaching the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, that one is the foundation, the other, the superstructure; to talk of my having the righteousness of Christ imputed to my soul, without my having the holiness of Christ imparted to it, and bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit as an evidence of it, is only deceiving ourselves."
- ³⁰ *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 502. Italics added.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 502-503.
- ³² Letter to John Sims, November 30, 1745 in John W. Christie, "Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, I", *Journal of The Presbyterian Historical Society* 32 (1954): 73.
- ³³ Letter to Lady G— H—, December 15, 1757 (*Works*, III, 225).
- ³⁴ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 183-184.
- ³⁵ Letter to Colonel Gumley, February 8, 1750 (*Works*, II, 324-326).
- ³⁶ Letter to John Sims, November 30, 1745 in Christie, "Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, I", 73. See also his Letter to Mr. Strahan, June 16, 1746 in John W. Christie, "Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, III", *Journal of The Presbyterian Historical Society* 32 (1954): 257: Christ is "the Believer's Asylum. He is the Believer's all in all. I find Him to be so daily [sic]. Having nothing, in Him I possess all things."
- ³⁷ Letter MCXC to Lady G— H—, December 15, 1757 (*Works*, III, 225).
- ³⁸ Timothy L. Smith, "George Whitefield and Wesleyan Perfectionism", *The Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19:1 (1984): 74-75.
- ³⁹ Letter to Titus Knight, February 20, 1741 (*Works*, I, 251-252).
- ⁴⁰ *Christ, the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification and Redemption* (*Sermons on Important Subjects*, 505).
- ⁴¹ *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 193.
- ⁴² Letter to Herbert Jenkins, May 12, 1746 in Christie, "Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, II", 162-163.
- ⁴³ Letter to Gabriel Harris, May 2, 1746 in Christie, "Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, I", 87.

- ⁴⁴ Letter to Howel Harris, May 2, 1746 in Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, I”, 88; Letter to Mr. Kennedy, May 2, 1746 in Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, I”, 89; Letter to Herbert Jenkins, May 12, 1746 in Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, II”, 162-163.
- ⁴⁵ Letter to Elizabeth Longden, May 2, 1746 in Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, I”, 86. Elizabeth Longden was Whitefield’s mother, who, six years after the death of her first husband, married Capel Longden in 1722. It was not a happy marriage. See Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (1970 ed.; repr. Westchester, IL: Cornerstone Books, 1979), I, 52-55. On William Cudworth and his views, see Peter L. Lineham, “Cudworth, William” in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730-1860* (ed., Donald M. Lewis; Oxford/Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), I, 278-279.
- ⁴⁶ Letter CCLXII to Mrs. S—, February 17, 1741 (*Works*, I, 245).
- ⁴⁷ Letter MCXII to Lady Huntingdon, December 31, 1755 (*Works*, III, 153).
- ⁴⁸ Letter CCCXCV to Mr. B—, February 5, 1742 (*Works*, I, 366-367).
- ⁴⁹ For different perspectives on this controversy between Whitefield and the Wesleys, see Iain Murray, “Prefatory Note” to George Whitefield, *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley in Answer to His Sermon entitled “Free Grace”* (Iain Murray, “Introduction” to *George Whitefield’s Journals* [London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960], 564-568); Frank Baker, “Whitefield’s Break with the Wesleys”, *The Church Quarterly*, 3:2 (1970): 103-113; Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (1979 ed.; repr. Westchester, IL: Cornerstone Books, 1980), II, *passim*; Timothy L. Smith, “George Whitefield and Wesleyan Perfectionism”, *The Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19:1 (1984): 63-85; J. D. Walsh, “Wesley vs. Whitefield”, *Christian History* 38 (1993): 34-37.
- ⁵⁰ “Steps to the Renewal of the Christian People” in his *Serving the People of God* (*The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer*, vol. 2; Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998), 74.
- ⁵¹ On one occasion Howel Harris told Wesley: “You grieve God’s people by your opposition to electing love” (cited George E. Clarkson, *George Whitefield and Welsh Calvinistic Methodism* [Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996], 78).
- ⁵² Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, September 15, 1790 in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (ed., John Telford; 1931 ed.; repr. London: The Epworth Press, 1960), VIII, 238.
- ⁵³ W. E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection. An Examination and Restatement of John Wesley’s Doctrine of Christian Perfection* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1943), 25; John R. Tyson, *Charles Wesley on Sanctification. A Biographical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press of Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 227-301. Further examination of this aspect of Wesley’s thought may be found in Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (Stockholm: Nya Bokförlags Aktiebolaget, 1946).
- ⁵⁴ *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777) in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: John Mason, 1830), XI, 396.
- ⁵⁵ *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* in *Works*, XI, 402; Wesley, Letter to Sarah Rutter, December 5, 1789 (*Letters*, VIII, 190).
- ⁵⁶ Letter to Mrs. Ann Dutton (June 25, 1740?) in *The Works of John Wesley* (ed., Frank Baker; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 26:15. See also the remarks on Wesley’s inconsistency at this point by Jeffrey, “Introduction”, 32-33.
- ⁵⁷ John A. Newton, “Perfection and Spirituality in the Methodist Tradition”, *The Church Quarterly*, 3:2 (1970): 102.
- ⁵⁸ Letter to a Friend in London, April 25, 1741 in *Letters of George Whitefield For the period 1734-1742* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976). This book is a reprint of the first volume of the *Works* along with 34 additional letters.
- ⁵⁹ “John and Charles Wesley: A Tale of Two Brothers” in *The English Religious Tradition and the Genius of Anglicanism* (ed., Geoffrey Rowell; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 191.
- ⁶⁰ In 1753 he could similarly declare: “I can truly say, that for these many years last past, no sin hath had dominion over me” [Letter DCCCCLXXV to Mr. S—, May 27, 1753 (*Works*, III, 14)].
- ⁶¹ Letter CLXIX to the Rev. John Wesley, March 26, 1740 (*Works*, I, 155-156).
- ⁶² Letter CCXIX to Mr. Account, September 23, 1740 (*Works*, I, 209).
- ⁶³ Letter CCXXI to the Rev. John Wesley, September 25, 1740 (*Works*, I, 210-212).
- ⁶⁴ See Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, II, 563.
- ⁶⁵ Cited Tyson, *Charles Wesley on Sanctification*, 301.