

Who is the Greatest Preacher? The Life and Legacy of George Whitefield

Digby L. James

Digby L. James is Pastor of Quinta Independent Evangelical Church, Shropshire, United Kingdom, where he has served since 1990. Dr. James became interested in the life and ministry of George Whitefield in 1977 and began working on reprinting Whitefield's works. He published a CD-ROM of Whitefield's Works in 2000, and presently, he is editing a new, more complete edition of Whitefield's Journals. In addition, Dr. James spends time resetting old works and publishing them through Quinta Press at www.quintapress.com.

If asked who is or was the greatest preacher since the time of the apostles it is likely that most people would choose someone from the last hundred years, perhaps Billy Graham or Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Those with a greater sense of history might choose Charles Haddon Spurgeon, widely known as “the prince of preachers.” It is possible that some would choose George Whitefield (though such an exercise would be futile, as there are many preachers in different times and countries that most will never hear of—sound recording is a relatively recent invention in the history of the church, and it is only really possible to compare recorded preachers). If we go on the basis of reports or the power and effects of preaching, Whitefield would certainly have to be considered in a list of “greats” (though such an exercise would be futile, as there are many preachers in different times and countries that most will never hear of—sound recording is a relatively recent invention in the history of the church, and it is only really possible to compare recorded preachers).

Spurgeon said of Whitefield, “There is no end to the interest that at-

taches to such a man as George Whitefield. Often as I have read his life, I am conscious of a distinct quickening whenever I turn to it. *He lived*, other men seem only to be half alive; but Whitefield was all life, fire, wing, force. My own model, if I may have such a thing in due subordination to my Lord, is George Whitefield; but with unequal footsteps must I follow his glorious track.”¹

In a short article it impossible to cover everything about Whitefield’s life. This will be more “edited highlights.”²

Birth and Early Life³

George Whitefield was born on December 16, 1714⁴ in the city of Gloucester at the Bell Inn, Southgate Street⁵, near the central crossroads, the youngest of seven children of Thomas and Elizabeth Whitefield. He was baptized in the font of nearby St. Mary de Crypt. His parents owned and ran the Inn that he was born in. His father died when Whitefield was two years old. Eight years later Elizabeth remarried Capel Longdon, an ironmonger, but the marriage was not happy and he soon disappeared. Gloucester was a port on the River Severn and the first crossing point of the river to get into south Wales from London. It was a place where coaches traveling from London to south Wales would stop for the night. The Old Bell Inn continues to stand, but the main part of Whitefield’s Bell Inn is now a parade of shops. At the age of four Whitefield contracted measles and as a consequence was left with a severe squint, the left eye pointing inwards.

From the age of twelve he attended the Crypt Grammar School at St. Mary de Crypt. At school he developed a passion for acting and loved nothing more than reading and performing plays. At fifteen he decided he had learned enough and, as there was no hope of his following some of his ancestors in attending Oxford University, he persuaded his mother to allow him to start working at the inn, washing floors and serving customers. He especially enjoyed meeting the traveling players and discussing acting with them.

A while later a former school friend returned from Oxford and explained that by acting as a servitor he was able to study at Oxford and pay for his education. Elizabeth Whitefield decided this would be ideal for her son, so George returned to the Crypt School to brush up on his Classical education.

As a youth Whitefield was no more or less religious than other Englishmen of that day. He was a good Anglican, attending church regular-

ly, but knowing nothing of the teaching of the Bible. In his mid-teens he went to church with friends to mock, but before he went to Oxford he became more serious and began to take religion much more seriously. English religion had become very soft, drifting into Deism. The thing that many people feared was “enthusiasm” which they associated with the English Civil Wars and the execution of Charles I.

Oxford and the Holy Club

In the Fall of 1732 he went to Pembroke College, Oxford, his tuition being funded by acting as a servitor for other students. He did all the chores for those whose families could afford to pay for their tuition. Working in an inn had trained him perfectly for such tasks. This made him popular with the wealthier students.

He started attending church regularly, singing psalms and praying daily. He was an ideal person to join the Methodists (a pejorative name, along with Bible Moths and Bible Bigots) as they had a similar concern for religion. Their name for themselves was the Holy Club. It was after about a year that he met Charles Wesley. He was invited to breakfast in Charles’s room. Charles lent him some books, the most significant of which was Henry Scougal’s, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. Whitefield recounted:

In a short Time he let me have another Book, intituled, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*; and, tho’ I had fasted, watched and prayed, and received the Sacrament so long, yet I never knew what true Religion was, till God sent me that excellent Treatise by the Hands of my never to be forgotten Friend.

At my first reading it, I wondered what the Author meant by saying, “That some falsely placed Religion in going to Church, doing hurt to no one, being constant in the Duties of the Closet, and now and then reaching out their Hands to give Alms to their poor Neighbours,”—Alas! thought I, “If this be not Religion, what is?” God soon shewed me. For in reading a few Lines further that “true Religion was an Union” of the Soul with God, and Christ formed “within us;” a Ray of divine Light was instantaneously darted in upon my Soul, and from that Moment, but not till then, did I know that I must be a new Creature.

This completely undermined Whitefield’s beliefs. Everything he had been doing up to this point was without value. He resolved to do everything he could to become a new creature. He worked so hard at it that

he nearly killed himself. He began to live by the rigid rules of the Holy Club, accounting for every moment of the day. It did him no good. He felt a load of sin pressing upon him, and nothing took it away. He went to extremes, not eating, not speaking. At one point "It was now suggested to me, that Jesus Christ was amongst the wild Beasts when he was tempted" and that he should follow his example. He would go outside and pray, in the cold, even lying on the ground, for hours. His health began to deteriorate and one of his hands was turning black. His tutor began to worry about him and there were fears he would die. After seven weeks of sickness, he found he had a thirst which drinking did not allay. He remembered that when Christ was near an end of his sufferings he said "I thirst." He threw himself onto his bed and cried to God "I thirst! I thirst!" the first time he had looked outside of himself for help. His load lifted and he found himself full of joy. "The Spirit of Mourning was taken from me, and I knew what it was truly to rejoice in God my Saviour, and, for some Time, could not avoid singing Psalms wherever I was." He had become a new creature in Christ. In a sermon preached near the end of his life, he said "I know the place: it may be superstitious, perhaps, but whenever I go to Oxford, I cannot help running to that place where Jesus Christ first revealed himself to me, and gave me the new birth."⁶

For the sake of his health, he returned home to Gloucester to recuperate. While there he spoke to people of his new found faith. Some were converted and he gathered them together in a small society for mutual encouragement.

After nine months he had fully recovered and returned to Oxford to complete his studies. Though there was opposition to his new beliefs, and he was tested more rigorously, he passed and was awarded his degree.

He had vague thoughts of entering the ministry, but thought he was unsuited. Friends urged him that he should be ordained, but he resisted for some time. A visit with the Bishop of Gloucester finally persuaded him. This bishop said that normally he would not ordain anyone under the age of twenty-three, but he had been so impressed with Whitefield's character that he would ordain him whenever he asked. So it was that he was made a deacon of the Church of England in a ceremony at Gloucester Cathedral on Trinity Sunday, June 20, 1736. The following Sunday he preached his first sermon from the pulpit of St. Mary de Crypt on that most evangelistic of all subjects, *The Necessity and Benefit of Religious Society*. He recorded in a letter that complaints had been made to the bishop that he had sent fifteen people mad!⁷

He returned to Oxford but was soon asked by a friend to fill in for him as curate at the chapel of the Tower of London, Whitefield did not consid-

er he was ready to take on a full time ministry—he wanted to have a stock of a hundred sermons first—but was happy to help his friend. When he came to St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, near the Tower, people initially mocked him, saying “there's a boy parson”—but their opinions changed when they heard him preach.

In November, 1736 another friend prevailed upon him to fill in for him and Whitefield spent several weeks in the small village of Dummer. Here he met with and ministered to “normal” people, not Oxford academics or London sophisticates. While here he was offered a profitable curacy in London, but declined. Then he received letters from the Wesley brothers, now missionaries in the new colony of Georgia. He had received accounts of their activities before, and felt a yearning to join them, but this time the letter made a specific appeal to Whitefield to join them. He believed this to be the call of God and resolved he would be a missionary in the New World. He set his affairs in order and began saying his farewells to friends in Gloucester and Bristol.

He met with General Oglethorpe, the founder and first governor of Georgia, who said that Whitefield was to travel with him. But Oglethorpe was not ready to travel yet. So Whitefield had to fill his time, which he readily did, with preaching. Large numbers began attending his preaching and he was becoming very popular. It was both his manner of preaching (lively, not dull and dusty) and his “new” message (“You must be born again”) that attracted people. He filled in for another friend at Stonehouse, near Gloucester. Here, again, he ministered to ordinary people, and the eventual parting was tearful on all sides.

Returning to London he preached for many churches and for religious societies. Around the middle of 1737 a journalist published an account of his preaching, as a young man going to Georgia as a missionary. Whitefield was horrified and asked the journalist never to mention him again. He thought speaking of him detracted from Christ. But the journalist said that as long as these reports sold newspapers he would continue to publish. This was to have a great influence on the rest of Whitefield's ministry. Publishing accounts of his preaching, printed sermons, and advertising his preaching, would draw people along to hear the message of the New Birth, the theme that was to be his constant refrain for the rest of his life.

As the crowds grew in size, Whitefield began to discover opposition. He received criticism from some clergymen for stating in a published sermon on *Regeneration* that he wished “his brethren would entertain their auditories oftener with discourses upon the new-birth.” He was also criticized for

fraternizing with Dissenters, who had said to him “That if the doctrines of the new-birth, and justification by faith, were preached powerfully in the [Anglican] churches, there would be few Dissenters in England.”⁹

Eventually Oglethorpe was ready to depart at the end of December and they set sail aboard the *Whitaker*. Progress was slow and they met adverse winds as the ship turned into the Channel. The ship anchored off of Deal. Whitefield took lodgings in the town and preached while waiting for the winds to change direction. These adverse winds brought John Wesley back from his time in Savannah. When he heard that Whitefield was at Deal he sought to “discover God’s will” for Whitefield. He wrote two options on pieces of paper and drew one of them from a hat, which he sent to Whitefield. The message read “Let him return to London.” Whitefield ignored it and soon the winds changed and his voyage proper began. The ship sailed via Gibraltar before striking out across the Atlantic, arriving at Savannah at the start of May. During that time the ship’s crew and company of soldiers had changed their minds about the young clergyman. He had shown great love and concern for them, and preached the gospel to them, and some had been converted.

Arriving in Savannah he began his duties as the parish priest. He quickly found favor with the local population as he was not as rigid in his practice as John Wesley had been. When baptizing their babies he poured or sprinkled water on their heads rather than the full immersion that Wesley had sought to practice (in line with a strict understanding of the Book of Common Prayer).

One of the needs that Whitefield noticed was something that Charles Wesley had mentioned to him. The climate and disease had led many who came from England to die leaving their children as orphans. Others had come as a means of escaping debtors’ prisons, to work and repay their debts. On arrival in Georgia they had abandoned their families and headed north to other colonies where they were not known. Someone needed to care for the orphans and Whitefield decided that this would be what he would concentrate on. He resolved to return to England (which he had to do anyway to be ordained a priest), to get permission from the Georgia Trustees and to raise funds to build an orphan house. With the help of lobbying by powerful friends, the Trustees approved his plan and he was granted a portion of land south of Savannah, and on his return he proceeded to build and run the orphan house, which he named Bethesda.¹⁰

Journals

Whitefield had promised to send an account of his journey to Savannah to his friends and supporters. This he did, intending it for private circulation, but a printer, named Thomas Cooper, seeing the chance of a good profit, published the second half of this journal. Cooper's publication drove James Hutton, a friend of Whitefield's, to publish that journal in full. In his introduction he castigates Thomas Cooper and his "surreptitious edition," claiming that Whitefield had not intended to have it published, and saying that Cooper's edition contained errors. However, a comparison of the Cooper edition and the Hutton edition shows negligible differences in the text.¹¹

In the journals Whitefield, thinking he was writing only to friends, was more unguarded in what he said than was wise. He gave his enemies ammunition to use against him. A pamphlet was produced with quotes from the journal purporting to show that Whitefield was an enthusiast.¹² Whitefield later responded to this, and gave additional quotes from the journal where he had used unguarded language and apologised for them. Whitefield continued to publish journals of his activities as he saw that this was encouraging to believers. He published seven in all, the final one taking the narrative up to his arrival back in England on March 11, 1741. A manuscript journal was discovered at Princeton and published in the *Christian History* in 1938. Some of his biographers refer to later manuscript journals. Gillies, in his memoir of Whitefield, published Whitefield's journal for his time in Bermuda. Whitefield does not say why he ceased publication, but he may have considered that several revival newspapers, *The Christian's Amusement*, *The Weekly History*, *A Further Account*, and *The Christian History* (and *The Glasgow Weekly History*, the *Edinburgh Monthly History* and the *American The Christian History*) provided his readers with sufficient information about his work, as well as avoiding the controversy they caused. Whitefield edited them in 1756 and toned down some of his too exuberant language and claims.

Into the Open-Air

He returned to London in December, 1738 to be ordained as a Church of England priest and began preaching in various places. He found that some churches were now closed to him because of his teaching. Others, however, welcomed him, and the crowds that wanted to hear him often would not fit into the church buildings. He began to realize that there were often more outside than inside and perhaps he should be preaching outside to the majority. He mentioned this to friends who thought it was

a mad idea—it verged on “enthusiasm.” He set out for Bristol, expecting to preach at St. Mary Redcliffe on behalf of the orphan house. But he was told he needed permission from the Chancellor. The Chancellor was not happy with him and while not refusing permission indicated that he should not ask for it. “I am determined to put a stop to your activities” the Chancellor told him. Whitefield left without permission.

On the hearing of his intention of going to America to preach to the Indian “savages,” someone asked him why he did not go to preach to the “savages” of Kingswood, a mining area south-east of Bristol. There was no church and the people were rough. Whitefield, accompanied by William Seward¹³ and another friend went and stood on Hanham Mount in Kingswood and Whitefield preached from the Beatitudes as the miners came out of the pits. This was something new for Whitefield and for the miners. On the first day there was a small crowd of 200 people. He promised to return and when he did the crowd was said to number in the thousands. Whitefield wrote:

Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus that was a friend to publicans, and came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected, was to see the white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully fell down their black cheeks, as they came out of their coal pits. Hundreds and hundreds of them were soon brought under deep convictions, which (as the event proved) happily ended in a sound and thorough conversion. The change was visible to all, though numbers chose to impute it to anything, rather than the finger of God.¹⁴

News of these events came to the Chancellor who called for Whitefield to attend him again. He accused Whitefield of breaking Canon law, but Whitefield replied by asking why other Canon laws were not being upheld such as clergymen being prohibited from frequenting taverns and playing cards. Whitefield was accused of preaching false doctrine, but Whitefield replied that he would continue regardless. With the Chancellor threatening to excommunicate him, they parted.

Not long afterwards, Whitefield asked John Wesley to come and take over the work in Bristol. Wesley was amazed by what he saw:

Saturday March 31th 1739, In the evening I reached Bristol, and met Mr Whitefield there. I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday:

having been all my life (til very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in church.¹⁵

A week later he recorded, “I preached to about fifteen hundred on the top of Hanham Mount in Kingswood.”¹⁶

Wesley took over the work, but with his high Anglican, Arminian, background, he began preaching against predestination. Whitefield wrote from America pleading with him not to be contentious on this matter, but Wesley persisted, and added his doctrine of sinless perfection to the doctrinal differences between the two men. It resulted in a major breach between them. But over the years, Whitefield’s large heartedness led him to put aside differences and he would preach for Wesley’s societies. As Wesley remained in Britain for the rest of his life, he was able to build his work up. Whitefield’s transatlantic travels meant his work in Britain was more fragmented, and often declined in his absence.

Back in London Whitefield began to find places where he could preach in the open air. Moorfields in the city of London was a place where “the lower classes” would often meet for entertainments. Whitefield took the opportunity of a gathered crowd to preach the gospel to them. The stallholders were unhappy with the competition and used a variety of methods to silence him, but without effect. He also preached at Kennington Common in south London, near to a place where hangings took place, and at Blackheath in south-east London. The latter has a small mound from which Whitefield would preach, and it is still known as Whitefield’s Mount.

Marriage

Before his second visit to America, Whitefield had formed an emotional attachment to Elizabeth Delamotte, Whitefield had preached around the Blackheath area of what is now south east London, not far from the Delamotte family home at Blendon Hall. He appears to have struggled with conflicting thoughts. On the one hand he was determined that he would spend his life wholly for Jesus Christ. He was afraid that romantic attachments would dull his ardor for gospel preaching. On the other hand his heart was drawn to Elizabeth. After arriving in America for the second time, he wrote two letters in April, 1740, one to her parents and one to Elizabeth. The parental one¹⁷ asked permission to propose marriage to Elizabeth, and if this was acceptable, to pass the second letter to their daughter. The reason given to the parents was the fact that several of the women who had come from

England to assist in the work of the Orphan-House had died and he needed a help-meet to replace them. He was most unromantic: "I am free from that foolish passion, which the world calls love. I write, only because I believe it is the will of God, that I should alter my state." The second letter was to be given to Elizabeth¹⁸ only if the parents approved. There has probably never been a *less* romantic proposal letter in the history of the world. We do not know if Elizabeth ever read the letter. She did marry someone else, having expressed doubts over her salvation.

Whitefield still felt the need to marry, and did so in 1741. He traveled from Scotland to Wales to marry a widow, Elizabeth James (née Burrell) of Abergavenny, who had a daughter named Nancy.¹⁹ She and Howell Harris had formed a close attachment and probably should have married, but at that time Harris had the same doubts that Whitefield had. How could he marry a woman and not be deflected from his devotion to and work for Christ? So he resolved to "hand her over to brother Whit." Elizabeth raised some objections, but over a few days was persuaded and having traveled around looking for a sympathetic clergyman to marry them, they wed at Capel Martin, Caerphilly, on 14 November 1741. Rather than honeymoon, the newlyweds went off on a preaching tour.²⁰

In 1743 Elizabeth gave birth to their son in London. They named him John and Whitefield pronounced at his baptism at the Tabernacle in London that John would grow to be a great preacher of the gospel. He was to be disappointed. His son was weak and died at four months at the Bell in Gloucester.²¹ It is speculative to suggest that this was partly caused by Whitefield driving a carriage into a ditch while Elizabeth was pregnant.²² His intention for his infant son's funeral was to preach till he heard the tolling of the church bell. They were to have no further children, though Elizabeth wrote to a friend that she was remaining in London because she had in the previous sixteen months suffered four miscarriages. The constant itinerating took its toll on her and she remained in the chapel house in London while Whitefield "ranged" in Britain and America.

Elizabeth died on August 9, 1768.²³ Whitefield preached from Romans 8:20 at her funeral, and Elizabeth was buried in the vaults of Whitefield's Tottenham Court Road Chapel. It was where he planned to be buried if he died in Britain. At the end of the 19th century the Chapel was falling down and all those interred there, except Augustus Toplady, were moved to Chingford Mount cemetery in north London. The rebuilt Chapel was destroyed by the last V-2 rocket to land on central London in 1945.

Wales

Whitefield's first contact with the evangelicals in Wales was a letter written to Howell Harris in December, 1738.²⁴ Griffith Jones, Llanddowror, had been operating circulating schools and instructing people in the Scriptures. The work was carried on by Harris. He was converted in 1735 and began open air preaching as his bishop would not ordain him. As a "layman" he could not officially preach, so he referred to his preaching as "exhorting." Whitefield met Harris for the first time in Cardiff on March 7, 1739. Whitefield refused to shake hands with Harris until he gave a positive answer to the question "do you know your sins are forgiven."²⁵

Methodism in Wales developed with Harris, Daniel Rowlands, William Williams and others who held to Calvinistic principles. A joint association between English and Welsh Calvinistic Methodists was formed which first met at Watford, near Caerphilly, in 1743, and Whitefield was elected as the first moderator.²⁶

In 1768 six students were ejected from St. Edmunds College, Oxford, for being Methodists. Whitefield wrote a complaint against their treatment, but to no avail. This led the Countess of Huntingdon to open a training college for gospel ministers at Trevecca, a quarter of a mile north of Howell Harris's home. The lease on the Trevecca College property expired in 1792 and it relocated to Cheshunt in north London. It moved again in 1906 to Cambridge and was merged into Westminster College Cambridge in 1967.

Scotland, Cambuslang

Whitefield corresponded with several people in Scotland, including the Erskines. They had separated from the Church of Scotland and formed the Associate Presbytery. In a letter to Ebenezer Erskine, Whitefield explained why he could not solely join himself to the Associate Presbytery, and was concerned, as an "occasional preacher" to spread the gospel to everyone.²⁷ On his first visit to Scotland, arriving at Edinburgh on July 30, 1741, Whitefield called on the Erskines in Dunfermline, north of Edinburgh. He found that this was not to be a time of fellowship, but of correction. He must renounce Anglicanism and become a Presbyterian, adopting the Westminster Confession and the Solemn League and Covenant. In addition he must only preach for them. Why? "Because we are the Lord's people." Whitefield wisely replied that it was those *outside* the church who needed to hear the gospel, and that he was not so concerned about matters of church government.²⁸ This did not please the Asso-

ciate Presbytery at all. One of their number, Adam Gib, the following year preached a sermon and published an extended version denouncing Whitefield. It was entitled “A Warning against countenancing the Ministrations of Mr. George Whitefield, published in the New Church at Bristow, upon Sabbath, June 6, 1742.”

In July 1742, Whitefield visited the village of Cambuslang, south-east of Glasgow where he had met the Church of Scotland minister, William M’Culloch, the year before. It was here that unprecedented scenes occurred when Whitefield preached in the open air at a natural amphitheatre close to the church building. It was reckoned that 30,000 were present over several days. The revival had started before Whitefield arrived, but his preaching fanned the flames.²⁹

The Great Awakening

In America in 1740 Whitefield began a preaching tour northwards. With publicity and distribution of printed sermons and notices in the press the public was aware that he was coming and where he would be preaching. But unusual effects attended his services, whether within church buildings or in the open air. Many people who had come merely out of curiosity found themselves gripped by his preaching and many professed faith in Christ as a consequence. Everywhere he went this seemed to happen. Even ministers who had been preachers of the doctrines of grace professed themselves converted under his ministry.³⁰ Passing through Northampton, Massachusetts, Whitefield met and preached for Jonathan Edwards. Observing the relationship between Edwards and his wife made Whitefield desire a wife, and prompted the proposal mentioned earlier. Edwards was impressed with Whitefield’s passion, but was less keen on his demanding conversion experiences and an appeal to emotions.

This insistence on the New Birth led to a division between “New Lights,” those who supported Whitefield, and “Old Lights” who did not. One example of an “Old Light” is Jedidiah Andrews, writing to a friend in 1741:

A prevailing rule to try converts is that if you don’t know when you were without Christ and unconverted, etc., you have no interest in Christ, let your love and your practice be what they may; which rule is as unscriptural, so I am of the mind will cut off nine in ten, if not ninety-nine in a hundred, of the good people in the world that have a pious education.³¹

For Whitefield and his supporters, a Christian home, while a blessing, did not guarantee salvation, and *all* must be born again. Included among the “New Lights” were Gilbert Tennant and his family.

Voice

Whitefield would have had a Gloucester accent, very different from what is now considered “received pronunciation” (also known as “BBC English”). His early theatrical practice prepared him for projecting his voice. But even though he had a well trained voice it must have been one of immense power. Even allowing for some exaggeration in the size of the crowds gathering to hear him, Whitefield was able to speak and be heard while speaking for extended periods, often over an hour. His last sermon lasted two hours. When Benjamin Franklin heard the reports from England of Whitefield’s preaching, he at first refused to believe that it was possible for such crowds to hear the unaided human voice. When Whitefield arrived in Philadelphia, Franklin was among his auditors. As Whitefield preached from the balcony of the old courthouse, Franklin conducted an experiment. He walked away from Whitefield towards his print shop in Market Street until the noise of the traffic and general bustle drowned out Whitefield’s voice. He then estimated the area of a semi-circle with Whitefield at its center. Allowing two square feet per person he realized that the numbers quoted concerning Whitefield’s English congregations were possible.³²

Whitefield also had a *way* of speaking. It was said that Whitefield could make his congregation laugh or cry depending on how he pronounced the word “Mesopotamia.” David Garrick, the leading actor of the day, said he would pay a hundred guineas (£105, ~ \$170) if only he could say “Oh!” like Mr. Whitefield. These statements have led some to suggest that Whitefield’s success was solely down to well-honed acting skills. Secular academia finds no place for the supernatural work of God, so such an approach is not surprising. But those who believe in the power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit can see that, while God used all of Whitefield’s abilities, Whitefield had no ability to change the hearts of men and give them new life in Christ.

Slavery

Georgia was founded as a non-slave colony. It was also the most southerly and hottest. It proved difficult for white Europeans to cope with the summer heat and work the land. Observing the slave states to the north flourishing economically, Whitefield unfortunately argued that slavery should be permitted in Georgia also. His arguments were eventually accepted by the Georgia Trustees and slavery was legalized in 1751. This has been a stain on

Whitefield's name ever since. With that said, while arguing in favor of the *principle* of slavery he wrote to slave owners deploring the way they *practiced* slavery.³³ He did not regard slaves as being in any way inferior and he often preached to groups of slaves, and wrote a tract to slave owners about their treatment of their slaves.

In 1740 he purchased property in Philadelphia with a view to starting a school for the poor, including slaves, and a meeting place for his supporters. The project failed, but in 1749 Whitefield's friend Benjamin Franklin took over the premises and founded a college which, in time, became the University of Pennsylvania.³⁴

Selina, Countess of Huntingdon

Selina was converted under John Wesley's ministry, but later attached herself to Whitefield, and used her wealth and influence in support of his ministry. Socially, Great Britain was a very stratified society, and it was necessary for people to "know their place" and be deferential towards their "elders and betters" who had "better breeding." This is well-illustrated by the Duchess of Buckingham's reply to Selina, Countess of Huntingdon's invitation to come and hear Whitefield preach:

I thank your ladyship for the information concerning Methodist preachers; their doctrines are most repulsive, and strongly tinctured with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks, and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.³⁵

It was because of his social standing that Whitefield was often quite obsequious in writing to the Countess. It was to her that he left Bethesda to look after in his will.

Death

Whitefield crossed the Atlantic thirteen times. He was a workaholic. He often said "I had rather wear out, than rust out." By the time he was fifty-four he looked an old man.³⁶ Whitefield left England for the last time in September, 1769. He spent the previous weeks preaching farewell sermons in various places. Some of these were taken down in shorthand and published. Whitefield deplored this as he had no opportunity to correct

the text. His literary executor and first biographer, John Gillies, tried to buy up the whole print run and have them pulped, but without success. In the early 19th century these were added to the “official sermons” published by Gillies as part of Whitefield’s *Works* under the title *Sermons on Important Subjects*. Other sermons had been published during the course of his ministry, but these were not collected together till this century.

Itinerary of his Final Weeks

In the last weeks of his life, Whitefield, who had never been a well man, found his bodily weakness an increasing problem. His solution to any health problem was most usually to *travel* and then *preach*. Accordingly, he sailed from New York on July 31, 1770 to Newport, Rhode Island, arriving on the morning of August 3. He preached almost every day, except for a few days when he was too ill, roaming through north-east Massachusetts before arriving at Exeter, New Hampshire. Here he preached from a plank between two barrels on 2 Corinthians 13:5, “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith.” Some hearers reckoned his best ever sermon.

As he stood to preach someone said to him, “Sir, you are more fit to go to bed than to preach.” To which answered, “True, Sir:” but turning aside, he clasped his hands together, and, looking up, spoke, “Lord *Jesus*, I am weary in thy work, but not of thy work. If I have not yet finished my course, let me go and speak for thee once more in the fields, seal thy truth, and come home and die.”³⁷

He rode thirty miles to Newburyport, arriving at the parsonage of First Presbyterian Church. Exhausted, he went up to bed, but the press of people at the door still wished to hear him. So he preached from top of the staircase with candle in hand until the candle went out. He went to bed, but woke in the night struggling for breath. He believed it was asthma, but it was most likely heart failure. His friends tried everything to relieve his symptoms, but by six a.m. on September 30, 1770, nearly three months short of his fifty-sixth birthday, they realized that he had at last passed into the presence of the Savior he loved and had served.³⁸ The funeral was attended by thousands. His body was buried in the crypt under the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Newburyport, from which he had been due to preach the day he died. In recent years a plaque has been added with Whitefield’s chosen epitaph: “I am content to wait for the day of judgement for the clearing up of my character: and after I am dead I desire no other epitaph than this, “here lies G. W. what sort of a man he was the great day will discover.””³⁹

News Received in England

In the 18th century, news traveled only at the speed at which a traveler could go from one place to another. It took until November 5 for the news of Whitefield's death to reach London. There was great mourning wherever the news spread. A great number of people counted Whitefield as their spiritual father and they mourned his loss. The London funeral took place at Tottenham Court Road Chapel on November 18, 1770. The Chapel was draped with black material as a sign of mourning, and it was not taken down for six months afterwards. The sermon was preached by John Wesley, as requested by Whitefield. In his will he directed that mourning rings should be purchased for John and Charles Wesley. Though they still had serious differences of belief between them, Whitefield had been quite insistent before he died that Wesley was the man to preach the funeral sermon in England.

Aftermath

One of Whitefield's biographers, Robert Philip, relates a story⁴⁰ about Whitefield's left forearm having been removed from his grave and brought to England. It was eventually returned and reunited with the rest of the body. The small wooden box it was returned in can still be seen in the church building. However, one of his thumbs was also removed, and is in the archive of Drew University in Madison, New Jersey.⁴¹

While leading an army to fight the French, Benedict Arnold opened the grave and took Whitefield's clerical bands and cuffs, cut them up and gave each man a piece, in the apparent belief that this would help them in their fight. They lost!

Legacy

Whitefield is an encouragement to us to press on in the work of the gospel, trusting God alone for blessing. A man who used the means that God gave him. A man who was large hearted and catholic in spirit, concerned with what unites Christians rather than that which divides. He proved that a Calvinistic theology is no barrier to effective evangelism.

A man once said "The world has yet to see what God can do with a man fully consecrated to him. By God's help, I aim to be that man." The man who said those words cannot have heard of George Whitefield.

¹ *The Autobiography of C. H. Spurgeon* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1898) vol. 2, 66.

² Most biographies from evangelical authors have a tendency towards being hagiography. Inevitably some will think

- that is the case with this article. Whitefield was not perfect, was unwise in some of his words and actions. He was a sinful man, just like us. Some of the more negative details of his life can be found in Boyd Stanley Schlenker, "Whitefield, George (1714–1770)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, online at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/article.jsp?articleid=29281&back=> (accessed May 5, 2014). There is no room here to mention, except in passing, his innovative use of print media (see Frank Lambert, "Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals (Princeton University Press, 1994)), or the effects of his preaching in giving the American colonies a sense of unity prior to the Declaration of Independence (see Stephen Mansfield, *Forgotten Founding Father* [Nashville, TN: Highland Books, 2001] and Jerome Dean Mahaffey, *The Accidental Revolutionary* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011]).
- ³ Details of Whitefield's early life come from *A Short Account of God's Dealings with The Reverend Mr. George Whitefield*, A.B. (London: 1740). This and other Whitefield material is published on a CD-ROM *The Works of George Whitefield* (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2000).
- ⁴ This is the Old Style or Julian Calendar date. Great Britain and its colonies adopted the Gregorian Calendar in 1752. There was an eleven day difference between the two calendars. On the Gregorian calendar, Whitefield was born on December 27, 1714. cf. Whitefield's *Works*, vol. 3, 500. December 27 was Founder's Day at Bethesda when prizes were given out.
- ⁵ Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), erroneously gives the place of birth as Southgate Street, Bristol, 2. He gets the date of Whitefield's ordination wrong, 32. He gets the place of Whitefield's marriage wrong, 156. He states "Like America, Scotland emerged from the English Reformation," 134, even though the Scottish Reformation was separate from the English.
- ⁶ Sermon LXXII, *All Men's Place on Ecclesiastes 6:6*.
- ⁷ *Works*, vol. 1, Letter XVI.
- ⁸ John Gillies, *Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend George Whitefield*, MA (London: 1772), 26.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ¹⁰ A detailed history of Bethesda, up to the present day, can be found in Edward J. Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda: A History of George Whitefield's Home for Buys, 1740–2000* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001).
- ¹¹ The edition most commonly available is published by The Banner of Truth Trust. This edition is based on that of William Wale, 1905. A comparison of Wale's edition with the original publications shows that he made some omissions which cannot be explained as Whitefield's own 1756 edit. A version of the original, showing the text missing from the Wale edition, can be found at <http://www.quintapress.com/whitefieldjournals.html>.
- ¹² *The Trial of Mr. Whitefield's Spirit in some remarks upon his fourth Journal* (London: 1740).
- ¹³ William Seward became Whitefield's travelling companion, campaign manager, publicist and chief financial supporter. He had made money from stockbroking in the city of London and, having been converted, chose to support Whitefield in his work. He returned to England before Whitefield in 1740 and made various purchases for the orphan house. Sadly, when preaching in the open air at Hay-on-Wye, he was struck hard by a stone thrown at his head and died a few days later from his injuries. He was the first Methodist martyr. His death was a personal loss for Whitefield, but perhaps the greatest blow was that Seward died intestate and his wealth went to his family. The debts he had incurred on behalf of the Orphan House thus fell solely on Whitefield. For most of his life Whitefield was burdened with such debts, and made regular appeals for money at the end of his sermons. William Seward, *Journal of a Voyage from Savannah to Philadelphia, and from Philadelphia to England* (London: MDCCXL). Seward's third and final manuscript Journal, taking his account to a few days before his death, is located in Cheetham's Library, Manchester, England, and is viewable on the library's website (http://www.chethams.org.uk/digital_resources/chethams_library_seward.pdf accessed May 5, 2014). Whitefield, too, had stones hurled at him. The worst incident, in Dublin, resulted in a gashed head (*Works*, vol. 3, Letter MCLXX).
- ¹⁴ Gillies, *Memoirs*, 38.
- ¹⁵ Wesley's Journal for Saturday March 31, 1739.
- ¹⁶ Wesley's Journal for Sunday April 8, 1739.
- ¹⁷ *Works*, vol. 2, Letter CLXXII.
- ¹⁸ *Works*, vol. 2, Letter CLXXIII.
- ¹⁹ Gillies, *Memoirs*, 104. Dallimore questions that this was her maiden name. Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (London: Banner of Truth, 1980), vol. 2, 101.
- ²⁰ Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, vol. 2, 101–113.
- ²¹ *Works*, vol. 2, Letter DXLVII.
- ²² *Works*, vol. 2, Letter DXXXIV.
- ²³ *Works*, vol. 3, Letter MCCCXCI. Gillies, *Memoirs*, 254.
- ²⁴ *George Whitefield's Letters 1734 to 1742* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1976), 491.
- ²⁵ Edward Morgan, *The Life and Times of Howell Harris, Esq.* (Holywell: 1852), 43fn. Harris described this event in a letter to Wesley. Dallimore erroneously says Whitefield's question was referred to in Harris's diary (Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (London: Banner of Truth, 1970), vol. 1, 264), with a reference to the transcribed diary, but the words are not there (as can be seen at <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1050541/>

llgc-id:1051112/llgc-id:1051143/get650 accessed May 5, 2014).

²⁶ David Ceri Jones, Boyd Stanley Schlenther and Eryn Mant White, *The Elect Methodists* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 60–61.

²⁷ *Works*, vol. 1, Letter CCLXXX.

²⁸ Gillies, *Memoirs*, 74–77.

²⁹ See Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival* (London: Banner of Truth, 1971). M’Culloch collected testimonies of some of the converts. The manuscript is in the library of New College, Edinburgh. It was transcribed and a copy placed in the Evangelical Library. A retyped version can be found at www.quintapress.com/PDF_Books.html.

³⁰ E.g. Mr. Treat, “A Preacher of the Doctrines of Grace for some Years,” *Sixth Journal*, 20 (407 of BoT edition), “two Ministers with Tears in their Eyes, publicly confessed, that they had lain Hands on two young Men without so much as asking them, “whether they were born again of God, or not?” ... [Mr. Noble said] “I have been a Scholar, and have preached the Doctrines of Grace a long Time, but I believe I have never felt the Power of them in my own Soul.”” *Seventh Journal*, 53–54 (482 of BoT edition).

³¹ Quoted in Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940, reprinted Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003), 71.

³² More recently, Braxton Boren, a PhD student at New York University, has conducted a project in some of the English locations where Whitefield preached to estimate the volume of his voice. He is due to present a paper on his findings at the “Whitefield at 300” Conference at Pembroke College, Oxford, in June, 2014.

³³ ‘A letter to the inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South-Carolina’, *Works*, Volume 4.

³⁴ See <http://www.upenn.edu/about/heritage.php> accessed May 5, 2014.

³⁵ James Paterson Gledstone, *George Whitefield M.A., Field-Preacher*, 185.

³⁶ Wesley’s *Journal*, Monday, 28, 1765: “I breakfasted with Mr. Whitefield, who seemed to be an old, old man, being fairly worn out in his Master’s service, though he has hardly seen fifty years; and yet it pleases God that I, who am now in my sixty-third year, find no disorder, no weakness, no decay, no difference from what I was at five-and-twenty; only that I have fewer teeth and more grey hairs.”

³⁷ Gillies, *Memoirs*, 270.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 271–275.

³⁹ *Works*, vol. 2, Letter DCCLXIV.

⁴⁰ Robert Philip, *The Life and Times of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London: 1838), 551–552.

⁴¹ <https://uknow.drew.edu/confluence/display/DrewHistory/Whitefield's+thumb> accessed May 5, 2014; <http://archive.today/YSYJ4> accessed May 5, 2014.