



## **GEORGE WHITEFIELD, HERO OF THE FAITH 1714-1770**

*Excerpts from a talk given by William J. Larkin to the "Wednesdays at First" noon luncheons of First Presbyterian Church--ARP, Columbia, SC, November 3, 2004*

### **Introduction**

In thirty-two years of ministry, George Whitefield, itinerated throughout the British Isles, crossed the Atlantic 13 times, and preached an estimated 18,000 sermons (over 500 per year, or 10 per week). His audiences, often out-of-doors, could number as many as 25,000-30,000. Such was the work of God in and through George Whitefield that thousands upon thousands experienced the new birth of Christ's saving grace in response to his powerful preaching. He was a catalyst for spiritual awakening and revival which came to the British Isles and then swept through the American colonies in the 1730s and 40s. The direct effects of this awakening were felt for more than a hundred years. Many of the great evangelical evangelists of North America, including Charles G. Finney, D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham, can trace their lineage in methodology and spiritual effectiveness to the life and example of George Whitefield.

How can we begin to get the measure of a man of such prodigious efforts, whom God used so greatly? Since he was first and foremost a preacher of the Word, perhaps, it would be best to view him from the four angles any minister should be viewed: **his call to the ministry; his character; his competence; and his charismata—his gifting in ministry.**

### **George Whitefield's Call**

Born in 1714 in Gloucester, England, to the proprietor of "The Bell," (an inn), George experienced an unsettling childhood. He lost his father at age two, suffered economic reverses through an unscrupulous stepfather, whom his mother had to leave. He could only afford Oxford by entering it as a servitor, earning his tuition and room and board by employment as a servant to other students—"gentlemen commoners" who were the sons of aristocrats. At Oxford, he soon made the acquaintance of Charles and John Wesley and other students who had a desire to pursue God through spiritual disciplines and holy lives. They were known derisively as the "Holy Club" or "Bible Moths," or most generally, "the Method-ists." George's approach at first was one of "works-righteousness." But this changed dramatically when Charles Wesley shared with him a little book by a Scotsman, Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. Listen

to an account, in his own words, of the transformation Whitefield experienced:

*At my first reading it, I wondered what the author meant by saying that, "some falsely place 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 neighbors." "Alas!" thought I, "if this be not true religion, what is?" God soon showed me; for in reading a few lines further, that "true religion was 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 realization was instantaneous. Yet, it led to an almost year long process of soul distress—a wrestling with his sin, which included physical and emotional anguish. He describes the end thus:

*After having undergone innumerable buffetings of Satan, and many months inexpressible trials by night and day under the spirit of bondage, God was pleased at length to remove the heavy load, to enable me to lay hold of His dear Son by a living faith, and, by giving me the spirit of adoption, to seal me, as I humbly hope, even to the day of everlasting redemption. But oh! With what joy—joy unspeakable—even joy that was full of, and big with glory, was my soul filled, when the weight of sin went off, and an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God, and a full assurance of faith broke in upon my disconsolate soul! . . . At first my joys were like a spring tide, and, as it were, overflowed the banks. Go where I would, I could not avoid singing psalms aloud; afterwards it became more settled—and, blessed be to God, saving a few casual intervals, has abode and increased in my soul ever since. . .*

This secret of the “new birth”—the “life of God in the soul of man”—God’s work of sovereign grace received by faith, became the heart of George Whitefield’s preaching. Though he had gone up to Oxford to prepare for holy orders by his own efforts, the Lord had accosted him, turned him around and set him in a direction to become the catalyst of a Great Awakening—an awakening of his contemporaries to their sin, whether it be rebellion against God’s law or the rebellion of self-righteousness. And, then, to tearfully, yet joyfully, tell them of the Savior. Such a message must ever mark the work of God’s gospel officers.

### **George Whitefield's Character**

Two qualities most mark Whitefield's character—single minded dedication to the ministry (characterized by a gracious ministry to the whole person) and a desire to promote unity among all Christians. Isaac Taylor captured Whitefield's single mindedness this way: “It would not be easy to name an instance, surpassing that of Whitefield, of a thorough uniformity of conduct and intention, held to from the moment of a man’s coming before the world, to the very last hour of his life.” Sir James Stephen reflects, “If the time spent in traveling from place to place and some brief intervals of repose and preparation be subtracted, his whole life may be said to have been consumed in the delivery of one continuous or scarcely interrupted sermon.”

On the eve of his death, George Whitefield stood on the landing to the second floor of the

Presbyterian manse at Newburyport, Massachusetts, candle in hand, and preached to the crowd gathered at the door until the candle went out. Waking at 2 a.m. Sunday morning short of breath, he told his young assistant, Richard Smith, “A good pulpit sweat today may give me relief and I shall be better after preaching.” When Richard told him he wished he would not preach so often, Whitefield replied, “I had rather wear out, than rust out.” And so he did, departing this life later that morning at 7 a.m., September 20, 1770. In the first decades of the eighteenth century, when as Mark Noll describes it, “confident religious life, persuasive preaching of the gospel and effective Christian pastoring were in relatively short supply” in the British Isles and the American Colonies, Whitefield’s prodigious labors met an urgent need and provide a challenging example.

George Whitefield’s gracious spirit expressed itself most consistently in his efforts to establish and sustain an orphanage outside Savannah, Georgia. The Bethesda Home for Boys, founded in 1740, is still in operation today [[www.bethesdahomeforboys.org](http://www.bethesdahomeforboys.org)]. During his ministry, he raised the equivalent of six million dollars in support of the orphanage.

Whitefield neither allowed himself to be co-opted by any denominational cause nor did he create his own denomination (though there are still Wesleyans and Methodists, there are no “Whitefieldites”). And he practiced an evangelical ecumenicity by preaching not only in Anglican pulpits, but in Presbyterian and Baptist and Independent ones, sharing in the sacraments with them. When questioned closely by Boston clergy about this, Whitefield replied, “It is best to preach the new birth, and the power of godliness, and not to insist so much on the form: for people would never be brought to one mind as to that; nor did Jesus Christ ever intend it.” Such largeness of spirit within a common commitment to the great evangelical doctrines is Whitefield’s legacy to us.

### **George Whitefield’s Competence**

George Whitefield was a preacher extraordinaire. His sermonizing began with announcing and reading a text of Scripture, praying audibly and sometimes silently (often on his knees). Jonathan Edwards’ wife Sarah said of him,

*He makes less of doctrines than our American preachers generally do, and aims more at affecting the heart. He is a born orator. You have already heard of his deep-toned, yet clear and melodious voice. It is perfect music. It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible. I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob.*

George Whitefield transformed Protestant preaching from a merely cerebral explanation of closely reasoned Christian doctrine to, as Perry Miller puts it, a persuasive appeal to the heart which “arouses, excites, creates the faith.” He certainly did not leave the mind out of account, but appealed to the whole person to repent and believe the gospel. And today, those who preach warmly and zealously the doctrines of grace stand in Whitefield’s heirs.

### **His charismata—his gifting in ministry**

Whitefield exercised the spiritual gift of an evangelist. In the town, the country, or the city, in the west of England, Wales, Gloucester, Bristol, or London or in Scotland or the American colonies—crowds flocked to hear him preach. Conversions, changed lives, transformed communities were left in his wake. Whitefield was a publicist and used newspaper, published sermons, journals and advance men to prepare the way for his itinerant preaching. But only the hand of God can account for both the attraction of great crowds and the saving work in many hearts which accompanied his preaching.

Whether preaching to 23,000 in Boston Common (more than the population of Boston at the time) or participating in the great stirrings of God at Cambuslang, Scotland, or preaching to great crowds at the Moorfields in London, God's hand was continually on George Whitefield. His spiritual discipline of consistent early morning prayer (arising at three or four a.m.) certainly made him a prepared vessel. His single-minded devotion made him always available. But it is still God who chose to work mightily through him.

Who are the George Whitefields of today? They are individuals with a calling grounded in the new birth, about which they must tell others. They are individuals with a character of single-minded devotion to God, with a graciousness that ministers to the needs of the whole person and who reach out with largeness of spirit in evangelical ecumenicity. They are individuals with competence to persuasively appeal to the heart for soul transformation. They are individuals with charismata; gifting in ministry, spiritually prepared and constantly available for God to do his work through them.

Will you ask God to make you such a person?

### **For further reading:**

Dallimore, Arnold A. *George Whitefield: God's Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*. Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990; also available in its unabridged two volume edition—*George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth Century Revival*. London: Banner of Truth, 1970.

Heimert, Alan and Perry Miller, eds. *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*. Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967.

Whitefield, George. *George Whitefield's Journals*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960.

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