

## **“THE DUNGEON FLAMED WITH LIGHT”: THE EVANGELICAL REVIVALS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Charles Wesley

The year 2007 saw the celebration of a number of anniversaries associated with that remarkable work of God in the eighteenth century, what historians call the Eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival or the Great Awakening:

- The three hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charles Wesley (1707-1781), who was born prematurely on December 10, 1707 and who was been well described by J.I. Packer as “the supreme poet of love to Jesus in a revival context.”<sup>1</sup>
- The two hundredth anniversary of the death of John Newton (1725-1807), who was, in the words of G.R. Balleine, “the great spiritual director of souls through the post.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Steps to the Renewal of the Christian People” in Peter Williamson and Kevin Perrotta, eds., *Summons to Faith and Renewal. Christian Renewal in a Post-Christian World* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1982), 113.

<sup>2</sup> Cited D. Bruce Hindmarsh, “Newton, John” in H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40:728.

- Then, this year has also witnessed various celebratory events associated with the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, in which, while there were many involved, the evangelical politician William Wilberforce (1759-1833) played the key role in the lobby for abolitionism.
- Finally, this year is the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of a remarkable woman, Selina Hastings (1707-1791), known by some who were critical of the eighteenth-century awakenings as the “Queen of the Methodists.”<sup>3</sup> That title alone should alert us to the remarkable role that she played in those awakenings. Her life and her influence touched virtually all of the leading figures of the revival in England, including George Whitefield, the Wesley brothers, Philip Doddridge, and John Berridge, as well as the Welsh leaders Howel Harris, Daniel Rowland, and William Williams.

What I would like to do over the next four weeks is reflect on each of these figures—but today, give an overview of the Great Awakening.

### **Puritan concerns**

In 1678 a Puritan preacher by the name of John Howe preached a series of sermons based on Ezekiel 39:29 in which he dealt with the subject of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In one of these sermons he told his audience:

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<sup>3</sup> Faith Cook, “Selina, Countess of Huntingdon”, *The Evangelical Times*, (October 2001), 19. For the framework of what follows I am indebted to this article.

When the Spirit shall be poured forth plentifully I believe you will hear much other kind of sermons, or they will, who shall live to such a time, than you are wont to do now-a-days ... It is plain, too sadly plain, there is a great retraction of the Spirit of God even from us; we not know how to speak living sense [i.e. felt reality] unto souls, how to get within you; our words die in our mouths, or drop and die between you and us. We even faint, when we speak; long experienced unsuccessfulness makes us despond; we speak not as persons that hope to prevail ... When such an effusion of the Spirit shall be as is here signified ... [ministers] shall know how to speak to better purpose, with more compassion and sense, with more seriousness, with more authority and allurements, than we now find we can.<sup>4</sup>

Now, if Howe felt that ministers in the 1670s lacked divine power in their preaching and saw this as a sign that the Spirit of God was no longer blessing the Puritan pulpit as he once had done, by the time that Howe died in 1705 the situation was even bleaker.

The final decades of the seventeenth century had witnessed a definite decline of piety and morals in transatlantic British society. Attestation of this fact is found in both public documents and private testimonies. Here, for example, is the witness of the London Baptist author, Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), writing in 1701 about the situation in the English capital:

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<sup>4</sup> *The Prosperous State of the Christian Interest Before the End of Time, By a Plentiful Effusion of the Holy Spirit: Sermon IV* [The Works of the Rev. John Howe, M. A. (New York: John P. Haven, 1838), I, 575]. For the explanation of “living sense” as “felt reality,” I am indebted to J. I. Packer, *God In Our Midst. Seeking and Receiving Ongoing Revival* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1987), 33.

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?<sup>5</sup>

Despite the presence of gospel-centred ministries and various societies which were created in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries bring about moral reform, homosexuality, profanity, sexual immorality, drunkenness and gluttony became increasingly widespread in Great Britain. In New England this same period saw a decline in the public influence of the clergy, the prevalence of sin, even among church members, and a dearth of conversions. And the next three decades saw little improvement.

### **The dungeon**

The moral tone of the nation was set in many ways by its monarchs and leading politicians. George I, who reigned from 1714 to 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.<sup>6</sup> Sir Robert Walpole, prime minister from 1722 to 1742, lived in undisguised adultery with his mistress, Molly Skerrett, whom he married after his wife died.<sup>7</sup> As English historian J. H. Plumb has noted of aristocratic circles in the early

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<sup>5</sup> *Gospel Mysteries Unveiled* (1701 ed.; repr. London: L. I. Higham, 1817), III, 310.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Plumb, *The First Four Georges* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1956), 39-42.

<sup>7</sup> J. H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole* (Clifton, New Jersey: Augustus M. Kelley, 1973), II, 114.

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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, houses were desperately overcrowded. In a large industrial centre 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.

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<sup>8</sup> Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole*, II, 114.

<sup>9</sup> Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1982), 279.

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1963), 144.

<sup>11</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey, “Introduction” to his ed., *A Burning and a Shining Light. English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 9.

Disease was rampant and unchecked: smallpox, typhus, typhoid, and dysentery made death a very familiar figure.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

### **The failure of the Church: conformist and non-conformist**

When we turn to the religious situation of early eighteenth-century England we find churches basically unable to cope with the increasingly dire moral

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<sup>12</sup> Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey, "Introduction", 9.

<sup>14</sup> Cited Porter, *English Society*, 35.

and social situation. The dominant religious grouping was the Church of England, which was the established church of the land. But it was largely helpless when it came to dealing with social and moral problems. First of all, the Church of England was primarily a rural-based denomination. Despite the large-scale population shift towards industrial, urban centres, the Church of England stayed in the country. Moreover, in the words of Plumb, many of the leading figures in the Church, its bishops, were “first and foremost politicians, and politicians are rarely men of the spirit. There is a worldliness...about eighteenth-century [bishops] which no amount of apologetics can conceal. The[ir] clerical duties...were done only as political duties allowed.”<sup>15</sup>

The worldliness of these bishops showed in other ways as well. Jonathan Trelawny, Bishop of Winchester, used to “excuse himself for his much swearing by saying he swore as a baronet, and not as a bishop”!<sup>16</sup> Such bishops had neither the time nor the interest to promote church reform. Of course, the decadence of church leadership was by no means absolute; but the net effect of worldly bishops was to squash effective reform.

The clergy under these bishops also failed to see the seriousness of the situation. Far too many of those who were well-to-do devoted themselves to anything but their ministries: philosophy, biology, agriculture, chemistry,

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<sup>15</sup> *England in the Eighteenth Century*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Cited J. Wesley Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley. The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1938), 50.

literature, law, politics, fox-hunting, drinking—all claimed the attention of these ministers. Many of the ministers, though, barely eked out a living. Few of them—wealthy or poor—preached anything but dry, unaffecting sermons. In a diary kept by a shopkeeper named Thomas Turner from East Krathly, Sussex, such preaching was insightfully criticized as an

idle lazy way of preaching, which many of our clergy are got into, seeming rather to make self-interest the motive for the exercising their profession than the eternal happiness and salvation of men's souls. To which if we add the intolerable degree of pride and covetousness predominant in too many of our clergy, we need not wonder at our degeneracy from the strict piety with which our forefathers worshipped God in the first ages of Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

Part of the reason for this spiritual ineffectiveness of the ministers of the Church of England is the fact that in the year 1662 around two thousand ministers of the Church of England, the most spiritually-minded group of the established Church at the time, had been expelled from her ranks for refusing to conform completely to the rites and practices of the Church of England. These men, known to history as the Puritans, had sought unsuccessfully for close to a hundred years to bring reform and renewal to the Church of England. Eventually they were forced out to join three fledgling denominations: the English Presbyterians (about 1,700 ex-Anglican ministers) the Congregationalists (about 180), and the Particular Baptists (7 or 8—there were many already outside of the Anglican Church),

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Turner, *Diary*, entry for January 20, 1758 [in *The Diary of Thomas Turner, 1754-1765.*, ed. David Vaisey (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 131].



also known as the Calvinistic Baptists. These three groups became known as the “Dissenters” or “Nonconformists.” Little wonder then that the Church of England found herself at a distinct spiritual disadvantage when it came to leading the nation in moral and spiritual reform in the early eighteenth century.

Of the three Dissenting denominations, it was especially the Congregationalists and the Calvinistic Baptists who stayed true to Christian orthodoxy as the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth century. But, for a variety reasons these Dissenters—especially the Calvinistic Baptists—were largely stagnant and not reaching out to the unsaved with the gospel.

The spiritual situation in which early eighteenth-century Dissenters thus found themselves is well described by two Congregationalist ministers in 1737, Isaac Watts, the father of the English hymn, and John Guyse. “There has been a great and just complaint for many years,” they wrote, “that the work of conversion goes on very slowly, that the Spirit of God in his saving influences is much withdrawn from the ministrations of his word, and there are few that receive the report of the gospel, with any eminent success upon their hearts.”

Increasingly, therefore, orthodox ministers on both sides of the Atlantic prayed for and preached about what they saw as the only remedy to this

situation: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In the words of Daniel Neal, an American Congregationalist pastor and historian of that era: “The Blessing of God, and the Influence of the Holy Spirit, are absolutely necessary to the Reformation of the Wicked World.” Neal went on to urge believers to pray fervently for an outpouring of the Spirit of God.<sup>18</sup> Isaac Watts and John Guyse, the English Dissenters who arranged for the publication of the first edition of Edwards’ *Faithful Narrative*, may be considered typical in this regard. “May a plentiful effusion of the blessed Spirit,” they prayed in their preface to this work, “descend on the British isles, and all their American plantations, to renew the face of religion there. ...Return, O Lord, and visit thy churches, and revive thine own work in the midst of us.”<sup>19</sup>

### **“Flamed with light”: Revival and the Celtic frontier**

Now, it is an amazing fact that when the revival for which this prayer longs actually came to Great Britain it did not originate among the fellow Dissenters of Watts and Guyse. Though biblical orthodoxy had by and large been kept alive by these heirs of Puritanism, it was from within that body which had actually persecuted the Puritans, namely, the Church of England that revival broke forth.

The first flames of full-fledged revival in the British Isles were visible in Wales. In 1735 the two men who were to be the leaders of the revival in

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<sup>18</sup> Crawford, *Seasons of Grace*, 40-41.

<sup>19</sup> Isaac Watts and John Guyse, “Preface” to Jonathan Edwards, *A Narrative of a Surprising Work of God* [in *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 2-3].

Wales, Howel Harris and Daniel Rowland (1711-1790), were converted. By 1750 their preaching and spirituality, and that of others like Howel Davies (d.1770) and William Williams, Pantycelyn (1717-1791), had brought about the creation of 433 religious societies. Known to history as the Calvinistic Methodists, these societies would set the tone and character of the Welsh people for the next two centuries.<sup>20</sup> All of these early Calvinistic Methodist leaders were convinced of the vital importance of having the Holy Spirit's power and anointing on their various ministries. As Harris once asked: "What is the Bible but a dead letter to us till we do experience the work of the Holy Spirit in us, not one or other separately, but both together?"<sup>21</sup>

Another Celtic land deeply impacted by the revival was Scotland. Local awakenings were sporadically occurring during the 1720s and 1730s. Typical of these revivals was one that took place in 1739 at Nigg, Easter Ross, near Cromarty, where forty were converted during this one year.<sup>22</sup> A far more extensive work began at Cambuslang in the Lowlands a few years later in 1742 under the preaching of William McCulloch (1691-1771), the minister of Cambuslang, at that time a rural parish a few miles to the southeast of Glasgow. McCulloch was far from being an accomplished speaker. In the jargon then current, he was a yill- or ale-minister, a term that was used of ministers whose preaching was so dry that when their turn

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<sup>20</sup> Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters. From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 397.

<sup>21</sup> Cited R. Tudur Jones, "The Evangelical Revival in Wales: A Study in Spirituality" in James P. Mackey, ed., *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 249.

came to preach at the large outdoor communion gatherings then held once a year by the Scottish churches, many of the audience would leave to quench their thirst from nearby ale barrels provided for refreshment.<sup>23</sup> Yet it was under McCulloch's preaching in mid-February, 1742 that, according to the English Nonconformist Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), around one hundred and thirty people, most of whom had sat under McCulloch's preaching for a number of years, "were awakened on a sudden to attend to it, as if it had been a new revelation brought down from heaven, and attested by as astonishing miracles as ever were wrought by Peter or Paul."<sup>24</sup>

In July of the same year, George Whitefield arrived at Cambuslang, where he was soon preaching to huge, receptive audiences. In August, for instance, some 30,000 attended an outdoor communion service, where Whitefield preached a number of sermons over the course of a three-day weekend. Alexander Webster, a minister from Edinburgh, wrote of some of the happenings of that weekend:<sup>25</sup>

During the time of divine worship, solemn, profound reverence overspread every countenance. They hear as for eternity ... Thousands are melted into tears. Many cry out in the bitterness of their soul. Some

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<sup>22</sup> A. Skevington Wood, *The Inextinguishable Blaze: Spiritual Renewal and Advance in the Eighteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), 117-118; R. E. Davies, *I Will Pour Out My Spirit: A History and Theology of Revivals and Evangelical Awakenings* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Monarch Publications, 1992), 87.

<sup>23</sup> Michael J. Crawford, *Seasons of Grace. Colonial New England's Revival Tradition in Its British Context* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 160.

<sup>24</sup> *Some Remarkable Passages in the Life of the Honourable Col. James Gardiner* §22 [*The Works of The Rev. P. Doddridge, D. D.* (Leeds: 1803), IV, 88].

<sup>25</sup> Cited Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield. The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (Westchester, Illinois: Cornerstone Books, 1980), 2:128. For further details and discussion of this revival, see especially Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival. The Scottish Evangelical Revival of the Eighteenth Century* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971); Crawford, *Seasons of Grace, passim*.

... from the stoutest man to the tenderest child, shake and tremble and a few fall down as dead. Nor does this happen only when men of warm address alarm them with the terrors of the law, but when the most deliberate preacher speaks of redeeming love.

A number of the Scottish ministers involved in the leadership of this revival—men such as William McCulloch, John McLaurin (1693-1724), of the Ramshorn Church in northwest Glasgow, James Robe (1688-1753) of Kilsyth, and John Erskine (1721-1803), of Kirkintilloch—would become close correspondents of Jonathan Edwards.

### **George Whitefield**

Linking these various revivals was the ministry of George Whitefield. Converted in the same year saw as Harris and Rowland, 1735, Whitefield, more than any other figure, was the one evangelist regarded by the eighteenth century as the leader in the Evangelical Revival.<sup>26</sup>

He was the youngest son of the proprietor of an inn in Gloucester. At school he had been unremarkable. He left school early, and when his older brother took over running the inn, he became one of his brother's servants. But his mother longed for something better for her son. Her persistence and the kindness of friends enabled him in December 1732 to enter Oxford University. It was here that he first met John and Charles Wesley, later co-leaders in the revival, and it was in here that he was subsequently converted

in the spring of 1735. The following year he was ordained a deacon in the Church of England and preached his first sermon.

Within months of this sermon he was in great demand as a preacher as he spoke powerfully and with authority on justification by faith, the new birth and repentance. Such preaching, though, was not well received by the majority of the Anglican clergy and churches began to be barred to him. Whitefield, however, was not to be deterred. On February 17, 1739, he took to the open air and preached to a group of coal miners on the outskirts of Bristol, who lived in dire poverty without any church nearby. There were around two hundred at that service. Within weeks, Whitefield was preaching thirty or so times a week to crowds of 10,000 or more!

Whitefield's description of his ministry to these coal miners is a classic one. Visualize the scene—the green countryside, the piles of coal, the squalid huts, and the deep semi-circle of unwashed faces—as we read his words:

Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was a friend of 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

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<sup>26</sup> Thus, the Congregationalist Joseph Williams could describe Whitefield as “the Father” of the Methodists [“Charles Wesley in 1739 by Joseph Williams of Kidderminster”, introd. Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 42 (1979-1980), 182]

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.<sup>27</sup>

Here is another description from the same period of time, when many others had come to hear Whitefield preach besides the miners of Bristol:

As ... I had just begun to be an extempore preacher, it often occasioned many inward conflicts. Sometimes, when twenty thousand people were before me, I had not, in my own apprehension, a word to say either to God or them. But I never was totally deserted, and frequently ... so assisted, that I knew by happy experience what our Lord meant by saying, "Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" [John 7:38]. The open firmament above me, the prospect of the adjacent fields, with the sight of thousands and thousands, some in coaches, some on horseback, and some in the trees, and at times all affected and drenched in tears together, to which sometimes was added the solemnity of the approaching evening, was almost too much for, and quite overcame me.<sup>28</sup>

Revival had come to England! And to that revival no man contributed more than Whitefield. Over the 34 years between his conversion and his death in 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts, it is calculated that he preached around 18,000 sermons. Actually, if one includes all of the talks that he gave, he probably spoke about a thousand times a year during his ministry. Moreover, many of his sermons were delivered to congregations of 10,000 or so, some to as large a gathering as 20,000.

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<sup>27</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (1970 ed.; repr. Westchester, Illinois: Cornerstone Books, 1979), I, 263-4.

## Revival in New England

In the middle of the winter of 1740, Jonathan Edwards sat down at his desk to write a letter of invitation to George Whitefield to come and preach for his congregation in Northampton that summer. He had heard, he told Whitefield, that the English evangelist was “one who has the blessing of heaven” attending him wherever he went and he hoped that “such a blessing” might descend on Northampton, enter his house and even fill his own soul. “It has been with refreshment of soul,” Edwards continued, “that I have heard of one raised up in the Church of England to revive the mysterious, spiritual, despised and exploded<sup>29</sup> doctrines of the gospel, and full of a Spirit of zeal for the promotion of real, vital piety, whose labours have been attended with such success. Blessed be God that hath done it! Who is with you, and helps you, and makes the weapons of your warfare mighty.”<sup>30</sup>

Whitefield had been in America three and a half months at this point, and when Edwards wrote to him he was wintering in Georgia. He arrived in New England not in the summer as Edwards had hoped, but in mid-September.<sup>31</sup> His coming long anticipated by many of the New England ministers, he quickly threw himself into a breathtaking round of itinerant preaching. In Boston and its neighbourhood, where he preached for twenty-six days, the response to his ministry was overwhelming. His farewell sermon on the city

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<sup>28</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, I, 268.

<sup>29</sup> I.e. held in contempt or rejected.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Abelove, “Jonathan Edwards’s Letter of Invitation to George Whitefield”, *The William and Mary Quarterly*

<sup>31</sup> For somewhat contrasting accounts of his New England preaching tour, see Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, I, 527-544 and Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 113-132.



common on October 12, for instance, drew more than twenty thousand listeners, the largest crowd ever assembled in America to that point in history.

After Whitefield left Boston for Northampton, churches in the Boston area continued to be thronged. That winter William Cooper, the assistant pastor of Brattle Street Church, declared that “more came to him in one week in deep concern about their souls, than had come in the whole twenty-four years of his preceding ministry.”<sup>32</sup> In November of 1741, when he wrote the “Preface” for Edwards’ *Distinguishing Marks*, Cooper testified that the entire face of Boston had been changed. Taverns and dance-halls were much less frequented than before. The Christian faith was more a topic of regular and daily conversation in peoples’ homes than Cooper had ever known. “The doctrines of grace” were “espoused and relished”; private religious meetings “greatly multiplied; opportunities for public worship well attended with “attentive and serious” auditors. “There is indeed,” Cooper emphasized, “an extraordinary appetite after ‘the sincere milk of the word’.”<sup>33</sup>

Whitefield spent six days with Edwards, from Friday, October 17 to the following Wednesday, October 22. As he preached from the Northampton pulpit on the Sunday morning, Whitefield noted in his diary that “Edwards wept during the whole time of exercise” and that the congregation were “equally affected.” During the afternoon service, he recorded, “the power

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<sup>32</sup> Cited C. C. Goen, *The Great Awakening* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1972), 50.

increased yet more.” In all Whitefield spoke on five occasions in the town, and, Edwards later wrote in 1743, “the congregation was extraordinarily melted by every sermon,” with “almost the whole assembly being in tears” during the preaching.<sup>34</sup> Whitefield’s affective preaching had rekindled the fires of revival in the Massachusetts town as the following months would show.

Not only in Northampton and Boston, though, did the fires of revival burn white-hot after the preaching tour of Whitefield, who left New England that November. Revival swept this heartland of Puritan theology for the next two years, yielding a harvest of between 30,000 to 40,000 new church members.<sup>35</sup>

### **Some reasons for the revival**

Why did this revival come? What were the reasons for it? Well, first of all, as we have seen, there was a growing hunger among English Christians for the outpouring of God’s Spirit in revival as their attempts to bring about moral reform had met with little success.<sup>36</sup>

Then, there was the nature of the preaching at the outset of the revival and all the way through it. It was centred on the great truths that God had singularly blessed at the time of the Reformation:

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<sup>33</sup> *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, 82.

<sup>34</sup> George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, *The State of Religion at Northampton in the County of Hampshire, About a Hundred Miles Westward of Boston* (in Goen, *Great Awakening*, 544-545). The item by Edwards was actually a letter to Thomas Prince, which the latter printed in his *The Christian History*.

<sup>35</sup> Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards — A New Biography* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 175-176.

- The fallenness and sinfulness of men and women
- The vital need therefore for them to experience the new birth and be made right with God by faith in Christ—the crucified and risen Lord
- And the exaltation of Christ alone as the way to God.

Another reason for the rapidity and depth with which the revival spread throughout the English-speaking world on both sides of the Atlantic may be found in the conversion of a man called Robert Robinson under the preaching of George Whitefield. Whitefield, like other revival preachers of that era, put spiritual issues to his hearers as one who transparently loved them and longed for them to be saved. Many who came to mock the preacher and laugh at his doctrine went away sobered and ultimately converted as they heard of the love of God in Christ and felt that love in Whitefield's impassioned preaching. Robinson is a good example in this regard.

As a teenager Robinson went to hear Whitefield preach on Sunday, 24 May, 1752. His motivation in going to hear the irrepressible evangelist was an odd one to say the least. Earlier that day he and some friends had decided to have

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<sup>36</sup> Michael J. Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Revival Tradition in Its British Context* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 19-80.

some fun by visiting an aged woman who claimed to be a fortune-teller. After they had gotten her thoroughly drunk on what was probably cheap gin, they proceeded to have her tell their fortunes. When it came to Robinson, the woman predicted that he would live to see his children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren growing up around him.

Now, what had started as something of a lark was taken quite seriously by Robinson. Later that day, when he was alone, he mused that if he was to live to such an age, he would probably end up being a burden to these young people. What could he do? Well, he thought, one way for the elderly to make themselves liked by the young is to have a good stock of stories to draw upon to entertain them. He thus determined there and then to fill his mind with knowledge and “everything that is rare and wonderful,” which, when he was old, would stand him in good stead. As his first acquisition, he decided to experience one of Whitefield’s sermons.<sup>37</sup> He went to hear him, though, as he later told the famous preacher, with feelings of pity for “the folly of the preacher” and “the infatuation of the hearers,” and of abhorrence for Whitefield’s doctrine.”<sup>38</sup>

Whitefield was preaching that evening at the Tabernacle, his meeting-house in Moorfields, London. His text was Matthew 3:7, John the Baptist’s stern

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Fuller, “Anecdote”, *The Evangelical Magazine*, 2 (1794), 72-73. Fuller had received this account of Robinson’s conversion from Robinson himself. The story was written under the name of “Gaius,” the pen-name that Fuller regularly used.

<sup>38</sup> Letter to George Whitefield, 10 May 1758 [William Robinson, ed., *Select Works of the Rev. Robert Robinson, of Cambridge* (London: J. Heaton & Son, 1861), 166-167].

rebuke of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” When, according to Robinson,

Mr. Whitefield described the Sadducean character; this did not touch me, I thought myself as good a Christian as any man in England. From this he went to that of the Pharisees. He described their exterior decency, but observed that the poison of the viper rankled in their hearts. This rather shook me. At length, in the course of his sermon, he abruptly broke off; paused for a few moments; then burst into a flood of tears; lifted up his hands and eyes, and exclaimed, ‘O my hearers! *the wrath’s to come, the wrath’s to come!*’ These words sunk into my heart, like lead in the waters. I wept, and when the sermon was ended, retired alone. For days and weeks I could think of little else. Those awful words would follow me, wherever I went, ‘*The wrath’s to come, the wrath’s to come!*’<sup>39</sup>

For over three years he was haunted by these words and Whitefield’s sermon. He regularly attended the preaching at the Tabernacle, and found himself “cut down for sin” and “groaning for deliverance.” Eventually on Tuesday, 10 December 1755, “after having tasted the pains of rebirth,” Robinson “found full and free forgiveness through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.”<sup>40</sup>

Then, the preaching of men like Whitefield was designed to awaken and grip the heart. Unlike many of their Anglican contemporaries who fed only the mind and were lacking in zeal, Whitefield and revival preachers like him

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<sup>39</sup> Fuller, “Anecdote”, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to George Whitefield, 10 May 1758 (Robinson, ed., *Select Works*, 167); William Robinson, “Memoir [of Robert Robinson]” in his ed., *Select Works*, xv-xvi, footnote.

spoke to the whole man with passion and without mincing any words.<sup>41</sup> A fine example of the way in which he sought to impact the heart is found in the following words from his sermon *The Method of Grace*:

What shall I say to you that have got no peace with God? — and these are, perhaps the most of this congregation; it makes me weep to think of it. Most of you, if you examine your hearts, must confess that God never yet spoke peace to you; you are children of the devil, if Christ is not in you, if God has not spoken peace to your heart. Poor soul! what a cursed condition are you in. ...What peace can you have when God is your enemy, when the wrath of God is abiding upon your poor soul? Awake, then, you that are sleeping in a false peace; awake, ye carnal professors, ye hypocrites that go to church, receive the sacrament, read your Bibles, and never felt the power of God upon your hearts; you that are formal professors, you that are baptized heathens; awake, awake ... Would you have peace with God? Away, then, to God through Jesus Christ, who has purchased peace; the Lord Jesus has shed his heart's blood for this. He died for this; he rose again for this; he ascended into the highest heaven, and is not interceding at the right hand of God. ... And how will you do if you be not at peace with God—if the Lord Jesus Christ has not spoken peace to your heart? If God speak not peace to you here, you will be damned forever. ...I beseech you, as a poor, worthless ambassador of Jesus Christ, that you would be reconciled to God. My business this morning, the first day of the week, is to tell you that Christ is willing to be reconciled to you. Will any of you be reconciled to Jesus Christ? Then, he will forgive you all your sins, he will blot out all your transgressions.<sup>42</sup>

One final text, however, points us to *the* fundamental reason for Whitefield's success and for the revival in general: his life and ministry had

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<sup>41</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: Evangelist of the 18th-Century Revival* (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1990), 221-222.

<sup>42</sup> *The Method of Grace* (Repr. Lisborne, New Zealand: Westminster Standard Publications, n.d.), 26-28, *passim*.

upon it the anointing of the Holy Spirit, as did other preachers in the revival of his day. This reason is found in a letter that the Welsh evangelist Howel Harris wrote to George Whitefield in 1743, as he gave his friend what can be regarded as a classic description of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival.

The outpouring of the Blessed Spirit is now so plentiful and common, that I think it was our deliberate observation that not one sent by Him opens his mouth without some remarkable showers. He comes either as a Spirit of wisdom to enlighten the soul, to teach and build up, and set out the works of light and darkness, or else a Spirit of tenderness and love, sweetly melting the souls like the dew, and watering the graces; or as the Spirit of hot burning zeal, setting their hearts in a flame, so that their eyes sparkle with fire, love, and joy; or also such a Spirit of uncommon power that the heavens seem to be rent, and hell to tremble.<sup>43</sup>

The revival was ultimately a sovereign work of God the Holy Spirit, one that could not be manufactured or conjured up, let alone controlled. The Spirit anointed and blessed the labours of various preachers and it was he who enabled them to see such a great work of God, whereby God completely reshaped many facets and sectors of British society on both sides of the Atlantic.

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<sup>43</sup> Cited Eifion Evans, *Daniel Rowland and the Great Evangelical Awakening in Wales* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 243.

