

Church History (51): George Whitefield

No man had a larger presence in eighteenth-century American Colonies and British Isles, than George Whitefield. "By common consent he was the greatest preacher of the 18th Century, and of his preaching gifts, J.C. Ryle wrote, 'No Englishman, I believe, dead or alive, has ever equaled him'" (Dallimore).¹

I. George Whitefield

1. *His conversion.* George Whitefield was born December 16, 1714, in Gloucester, England. He was the youngest son of Thomas Whitefield (1681-1716), the proprietor of the Bell Inn. He was raised by his mother, Elizabeth (1681-1751), when his father died at age two. "From the age of twelve to fifteen, he distinguished himself among the boys at the public school by his progress in Latin, and by his speeches and dramatic performances at public examinations. His mother still kept the inn; and as business decreased, he was forced to assist in the drudgery of the house" (Tracy).² "But his mother longed for something better for her son. Her persistence and the kindness of friends, enabled him in November 1732 to enter Pembroke College, Oxford University. It was here in the following summer that he first met John Wesley (1703-1791) and his younger brother Charles (1707-1788), who were regularly meeting with a group of men known to history as 'the Holy Club.' This was a company of ten or so men who were ardently trying to live religious lives in an extremely depraved age" (Haykin).³ The club was marked by a diligent yet external piety. They attended to numerous religious exercises, such as fasting, praying, attending public worship, and abstaining from what were deemed worldly pleasures. Yet for all of this, they remained unconverted. "I fasted twice a week. My apparel was mean. I thought it unbecoming a penitent to have his hair powdered. I wore woolen gloves, a patched gown, and dirty shoes; and though I was convinced that the kingdom of God did not consist in meat and drink, yet I resolutely persisted in these voluntary acts of self-denial, because I found in them great promotion of the spiritual life" (Whitefield).⁴ In 1735, Charles Wesley gave him a copy of *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* by Henry Scougal. Whitefield recalled these events in a sermon preached in 1769: "I must bear testimony to my old friend Mr. Charles Wesley, he put a book into my hands, called, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, whereby God showed me, that I must be born again, or be damned. 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" (Whitefield).⁵ Whitefield was ordained a priest in the Anglican Church June 20, 1736. "One week from that day, he preached his first sermon, in his native parish. Curiosity brought together a large audience; and though 'some mocked,' yet 'most for the present seemed struck'" (Tracy).⁶

His first sermon was preached in St. Mary-le-Crypt, Gloucester. It was said to have driven fifteen persons mad. Bishop Benson remarked, that he only hoped the madness might continue. He next accepted temporary duty at the Tower Chapel, London. While engaged there, he preached continually in many of the London churches. From the very beginning he attained a degree of popularity such as no preacher, probably, before or since, has ever reached. To say that the churches were crowded when he preached, would be saying little. They were literally crammed to suffocation. An eye-witness said, You might have walked on the people's heads.⁷

¹ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:1

² Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, 38

³ Michael Haykin, *The Revived Puritan: The Spirituality of George Whitefield*, 24

⁴ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:61

⁵ Michael Haykin, *The Revived Puritan: The Spirituality of George Whitefield*, 25-26

⁶ Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, 38

⁷ J.C. Ryle, *A Sketch of the Life and Labors of George Whitefield*, 21-22

2. *His orphanage.* In early 1736, the Wesley brothers returned from Georgia in an attempt to form an orphanage in the early colonies (they were yet unconverted). "Towards the end of December 1737, Mr. Whitefield embarked for Georgia. He arrived in Savannah on May 1738, after a voyage of about four months. He found much to discourage him. The colony was in an infant state, and seemed likely to remain so. Sickness and death were awfully prevalent, and multitudes of children were left without a home and without a friend" (Drew).⁸ Whitefield named the orphanage Bethesda. "I call it Bethesda, that is, The House of Mercy; for I hope many acts of mercy will be shown there."⁹ The orphanage was intended to be self-supporting with its own vegetables, meat, grain, honey, and cotton. "Whitefield also had certain ideals regarding the operating of the institution – ideals which were very important to him. Above everything else, Bethesda was to be a place of gospel influence, and he deemed it his duty to see that all parentless children, even those in foster homes, were rescued from their usually godliness surroundings and brought up in the wholesome atmosphere of the Orphan House" (Dallimore).¹⁰ Whitefield reported after six weeks of construction: "Nearly 20 acres of land are cleared, and almost ready for planting. Two houses are already raised, and one nearly finished. All the timber for the great house is sawn, and most of it brought to the place where it is to be built. Nearly 40 children are now under my care, and nearly a hundred mouths are daily supplied with food from our store. The expense is great, but our great and good God, I am persuaded, will enable me to defray it."¹¹ Yet, the care of the orphanage would burden Whitefield his entire life. The endeavor "weighed him down with debts, impaired his health and shortened his life" (Dallimore).¹² Whitefield at one point admitted: "I am almost tempted to wish I had never undertaken the Orphan House." Yet, for all its difficulties, he raised funds everywhere he went, and seemingly, the orphanage was debt free and in good financial standing at his death.

I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five Spanish coins in Gold. As he proceeded, I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determined me to give the Silver; and he finished so admirably, that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all...Some of Mr. Whitefield's enemies affected to suppose that he would apply these collections to his own private profit; but I, who was intimately acquainted with him (being employed in printing his Sermons and Journals, etc.) never had the least suspicion of his Integrity, but am to this day decidedly of opinion that he was in all his conduct a perfectly honest Man. And methinks my Testimony in his Favor ought to have the more weight, as we had no religious connection. He used indeed sometimes to pray for my conversion, but never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard. Ours was a mere civil friendship, sincere on both sides, and lasted to his death.¹³

3. *His marriage.* At first, Whitefield determined to remain single. He feared sharing his affections with anyone but Christ. But after his visit with Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, he saw the wisdom in marriage, and when he returned to England (1740), made a proposal to Elizabeth Delamotte. As this was presented more as a business deal (to take care of the orphanage and assist him in practical matters),

⁸ Samuel Drew, *Sermons of George Whitefield*, 1:11

⁹ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:446

¹⁰ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:61

¹¹ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:450

¹² Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:453

¹³ Benjamin Franklin, Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:442-443

it was rejected. A year later, Howell Harris introduced Whitefield to a Welsh widow, ten years his senior (with a teenage daughter), named Elizabeth James. They married on November 14, 1741. In a letter to Gilbert Tennent Whitefield said: "I married one who was a widow, of about 36 years of age, and has been a housekeeper for many years; neither rich in fortune nor beautiful as to her person, but, I believe, a true child of God, and would not, I think, attempt to hinder me in His work for the world."¹⁴ Whitefield preached the evening after his wedding and twice each day following for a week. He then set out on a preaching tour that took him to Bristol and Gloucester and then on to London. He returned one month later only to leave the next morning to Bristol and London again. While Elizabeth accompanied Whitefield on his next two preaching trips (to Scotland and America), she remained home on all remaining trips. They rented a little house in London furnished only with the necessities. She bore him only one son who died at four months. "Early in 1744, Whitefield found himself too poor to maintain even the simply lodgings in London and therefore he and Elizabeth agreed that she and the child should remove to her cottage in Wales" (Dallimore).¹⁵ The plan was for her to break the journey half-way, stopping in Gloucester at the Inn. "In the meantime, Whitefield continued his ministry. But as soon as his schedule of preaching would allow, he also made his way to Gloucester. Upon arriving, however, he heard startling news. He was told that the child had become sick, that a physician had been called, and that, despite the physician's best efforts, the child had died" (Dallimore).¹⁶

All joined in desiring that I would decline preaching till the child was buried; but I remembered a saying of good Mr. (Matthew) Henry, 'that weeping must not hinder sowing.' And therefore, I preached twice the next day, and also the day following; on the evening of which, just as I was closing my sermon, the bell struck out for the funeral. At first it gave nature a little shake, but looking up I recovered strength, and then concluded with saying, that this text on which I had been preaching, namely, 'all things work together for good to them that love God,' made me as willing to go out to my son's funeral, as to hear of his birth. Our parting with him was solemn. We kneeled down, prayed and shed many tears.¹⁷

4. *His preaching.* "It appears that, on arriving in London after his first visit to Georgia (1738), he found the countenances of many of the clergy no longer towards him as they were before. They had taken fright at some expressions in his published letters, and some reports of his conduct in America. They were scandalized at his preaching the doctrine of regeneration in the way that he did, as a thing which many of their parishioners needed. The pulpits of many churches were flatly refused to him" (Ryle).¹⁸ Having most churches closed to him, beginning in April of 1739, Whitefield turned to the outdoors. "Being forbidden to preach in the pulpit, he went outside, and preached in the churchyard. From that day, he regularly took up the practice of open-air preaching. Wherever there were large open fields around London; wherever there were large bands of idle, church-despising, Sabbath-breaking people gathered together—there went Whitefield and lifted up his voice" (Ryle).¹⁹ "My preaching in the fields may displease some timorous, bigoted men, but I am thoroughly persuaded it pleases God, and why should I fear anything else" (Whitefield).²⁰ "As to the substance of Whitefield's theological teaching, the simplest account I can give of it is, that it was purely evangelical. There were four main things that he never lost sight of in his sermons. These four were: man's complete ruin by sin, and

¹⁴ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:110

¹⁵ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:167

¹⁶ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:167-168

¹⁷ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:168

¹⁸ J.C. Ryle, *A Sketch of the Life and Labors of George Whitefield*, 23-24

¹⁹ J.C. Ryle, *A Sketch of the Life and Labors of George Whitefield*, 24-25

²⁰ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:269

consequent natural corruption of heart; man's complete redemption by Christ, and complete justification before God by faith in Christ; man's need of regeneration by the Spirit, and entire renewal of heart and life; and man's utter want of any title to be considered a living Christian, unless he is dead to sin and lives a holy life" (Ryle).²¹

I want to prepare you for a visit from the Rev. Mr. Whitefield, the famous preacher of England. He is truly a remarkable man, and during his visit has, I think, verified all that we have heard of him. He makes less of the doctrines of grace 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. O it is perfect music to listen to that alone. And he speaks so easily, without any apparent effort. It is truly wonderful to see what a spell this preacher often casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible. I have seen upward of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob. He impresses the ignorant, and not less the educated and refined. He is a very devout and godly man, and his only aim seems to be to reach and influence men the best way. He speaks from a heart all aglow with love, and pours out a torrent of eloquence which is almost irresistible.²²

(1) His preaching was relentless. Whitefield preached on average 40 hours a week. He preached 3-5 times a day, the first sermon beginning at 6am. His journal is filled with similar statements as this: "My discourse lasted nearly two hours, and the people were so melted down, and wept so loud, that they almost drowned my voice." It's estimated he preached over 18,000 sermons during his thirty years of ministry (a thousand a year). He preached in churches, fields, streets, houses, and ships. He preached standing on tree stumps, rocks, balconies, and grave stones. He preached across the British Isles and the entire American Colonies. "From Sunday morning to Saturday night—from the 1st of January to the 31st of December—excepting when laid aside by illness, he was almost relentlessly preaching. There was hardly a considerable town in England, Scotland, and Wales, that he did not visit. When churches were opened to him, he gladly preached in churches. When chapels only were offered, he cheerfully preached in chapels. When church and chapel alike were closed, he was ready and willing to preach in the open air. For thirty-four years he labored in this way, always proclaiming the same glorious gospel, and always, as far as a man's eye can judge, with immense effect" (Ryle).²³

(2) His preaching was fearless. Whitefield often preached against great opposition. "That any human frame could so long endure the labor he went through, does indeed seem wonderful. That his life was not shortened by violence, is no less wonderful. Once he was nearly stoned to death by a Popish mob in Dublin. Once he was nearly murdered in bed by an angry lieutenant of the navy at Plymouth. Once he narrowly escaped being stabbed by the sword of a rakish young gentleman in Moorfields; but he was immortal till his work was done" (Ryle).²⁴ "Early in 1742, Whitefield preached in a great gathering place known for its wickedness. Whitefield himself described the event: "A vast concourse was assembled together, and as soon as I got into the field pulpit, the countenance bespoke the enmity of their hearts against the preacher. Satan did not like thus to be attacked in his strong-holds, and I narrowly escaped with my life. The next day I renewed my attack on Moorefields. Several little boys and girls who were fond of sitting round me on the pulpit while I preached, and handing to me people's notes, though they were often pelted with eggs, dirt, etc. thrown at me, never once gave way; but on the

²¹ J.C. Ryle, *A Sketch of the Life and Labors of George Whitefield*, 33-34

²² Sarah Edwards (in letter to brother), *The Revived Puritan: The Spirituality of George Whitefield*, 35-36

²³ J.C. Ryle, *A Sketch of the Life and Labors of George Whitefield*, 26-27

²⁴ J.C. Ryle, *A Sketch of the Life and Labors of George Whitefield*, 28-29

contrary, every time I was struck, turned up their little weeping eyes, and seemed to wish they could receive the blows for me."²⁵

(3) His preaching was urgent. "One leading characteristic of Whitefield's preaching was his tremendous earnestness. One poor uneducated man said of him, that 'he preached like a lion.' He succeeded in showing people that he at least believed all he was saying, and that his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength were bent on making them believe it too" (Ryle).²⁶ Whitefield closed a sermon on the *Conversion of Zacchaeus* with an urgent appeal to sinners: "Make haste then, O sinners, make haste, and come by faith to Christ. Then, this day, even this hour, nay, this moment, if you believe, Jesus Christ shall come and make His eternal abode in your hearts. Which of you is made willing to receive the King of glory? Which of you obeys the call, as Zacchaeus did? Alas! Why do you stand still? How know you, whether Jesus Christ may ever call you again? Come then, poor, guilty sinners; come away, poor, lost, undone publicans; make haste, I say, and come away to Jesus Christ. The Lord condescends to invite Himself to come under the filthy roofs of the houses of our souls. Do not be afraid of entertaining Him; He will fill you with all peace and joy in believing."²⁷ Whitefield constantly stressed the need for the new birth. In a sermon on Eph.4:24, entitled, *Putting on the New Man, a Certain Mark of a Real Christian*, Whitefield said: "Unless you are new creatures, you are in a state of damnation. I tell thee, O man; I tell thee, O woman, whoever thou art, thou art a dead man, thou art a dead woman, nay a damned man, a damned woman, without a new heart. My brethren, thank God that He has brought you to a new year; and that you are out of hell; and, for Christ's sake, don't rest short of a new nature. But remember you must not only be reformed, but renewed; you cannot go to heaven without a new heart. Though you cannot of yourself change your heart, yet, blessed be God, He has promised it. Put Him therefore in mind of His promise, and beg that this promise may be fulfilled. For God's sake, don't harken to your wicked, carnal relations. They will tell you, that you are righteous overmuch—but remember that you are so, till you close with the righteousness of Christ."²⁸ In a sermon on the parable of the Ten Virgins (1739), Whitefield warned his hearers: "If the self-righteous hypocrite will not be saved, then where will the Sabbath-breakers, adulterers, fornicators, and suchlike of this generation appear? Where will thou, O man, appear, that takes pleasure in making a mock of sin? Where will thou, O man, appear, that makes it thy business to preach against the children of the Most High, who art always inventing methods in order to stop the progress of the gospel, who are raising evil reports against the disciples of Christ? You will surely see the judgment seat of Christ, though perhaps, sorely against your will, to be cast by Him into eternal fire, a place prepared for the devil and his angels. There is a burning Tophet, kindled by the fury of an avenging God. That devil longs to embrace you in his hellish arms, whenever the sentence is past, where you must forever bear the weight of sin. Oh, who can dwell with everlasting burnings? However you may think of hell, indeed, it is not a painted fire; He will let you feel the power of His almighty arm. If you will not lay hold on the scepter, He will break you with His iron rod."²⁹

Come ye publicans, come ye harlots, come to Jesus Christ. Oh, do not let me go without my errand; do not force me to say, 'Who has believed my report?' Indeed, I cannot bear the thoughts of it; I must lift up my voice, like a trumpet, begging you to lay down your arms, and return home, that your loving Father may dress you in His spotless robe. Must I weep over you, as our Savior did over Jerusalem? 'How often would I have gathered you together, as a hen gathers her chickens, but you would not.' I beseech you, by all that is good and dear to you, do not cast away your souls forever. Let some rail at my

²⁵ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:503

²⁶ J.C. Ryle, *A Sketch of the Life and Labors of George Whitefield*, 28-29

²⁷ George Whitefield, *Sermons*, 1:185

²⁸ George Whitefield, *Sermons*, 4:95-96

²⁹ George Whitefield, *Sermons*, 4:105

field preaching, I care not, so that I might but bring one of you to Christ, let men and devils do their worst. Many, I know, would rejoice to see me in prison; but I am willing, not only to go to prison, but to death for you, so that I may present you faultless at the day of judgment; that I might hear you say, 'We bless God for such a sermon.' Then I could bid all the world defiance.³⁰

5. *His death.* Whitefield left for America (7th trip), September 1769. He landed at Charleston, SC, "in better health than at the end of any voyage I have made for some years" (Whitefield).³¹ He intended to travel straight to Bethesda, "but longing as always at the close of an ocean journey to be busy again in the Gospel, he immediately began to preach" (Dallimore).³² When Savannah was reached, he was greatly encouraged at the condition of Bethesda. In a letter to Charles Wesley, he rejoiced: "My poor, feeble labors were owned in Charleston; and everything is more than promising in Georgia. The increase of this once so much despised colony is indescribable." From Georgia, Whitefield travelled to Philadelphia and on to New York. Invitations to preach were overwhelming. "O what a new scene of usefulness is opening in various parts of this new world! All fresh work where I have been. Invitations crowd upon me both from ministers and people, from many, many quarters" (Whitefield).³³ These extensive labors, however, were more than his worn-out frame could bear. In a letter to England, he confessed: "I was so ill on Friday that I could not preach, though thousands were waiting to hear. Well, the day of release will shortly come, but it does not seem yet; for by riding 60 miles, I am better, and hope to preach here tomorrow."³⁴ This was the last letter he wrote, as less than a week later his "release" would come. On Saturday 29, 1770, Whitefield realized he was very ill and sought to return to Georgia. He made it as far as Exeter (NH), where he unexpectedly preached to a large crowd. This was his final sermon. It lasted two hours. His text was *Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith*. "As he made his way toward the assembled congregation an elderly bystander observing him more uneasy than usual, said to him, 'Sir, you are more fit to go to bed than to preach.' To which Mr. Whitefield 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'" (Dallimore).³⁵

Following this tremendous effort Whitefield continued his journey and late that afternoon arrived at the home of the Rev. Jonathan Parsons, pastor of the Old South Presbyterian Church at Newburyport, Massachusetts. Parsons reported that while they were at supper, "I asked Mr Whitefield how he felt himself after this journey. He said, he was tired, therefore he supped early, and would go to bed. But by that time the street in front of the house had filled with people, and as he began to make his way up the stairs, several of them were at the door, begging him to preach. Unwilling, despite his weariness, to forego any opportunity to declare the Gospel, he responded to the request and stood on the landing, halfway up the stairs, candle in hand, preaching Christ. He was soon greatly alive to his subject and becoming heedless of time he continued to speak, till finally, the candle flickered, burned itself out and died away. That dying flame and that burned-out candle were representative that evening of the man himself and of his life."³⁶

³⁰ George Whitefield, *Sermons*, 4:107-108

³¹ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:489

³² Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:269

³³ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:490

³⁴ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:497-498

³⁵ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:503

³⁶ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:504