

**The
Great Evangelical Awakening
of the 18th Century**

John Dunn



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The Great Evangelical Awakening of the Eighteenth Century

John Dunn

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Contents

I INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 THE CONDITIONS OF THE TIMES IN THE 1700s	2
3 THE REVIVAL BEGINS.....	6
4 SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REVIVAL.....	11
5 THE MEN GOD USED.....	16
6 LESSONS FOR TODAY.....	20
7 CONCLUSION.....	26
Book List.....	27

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1***Introduction***

The great Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century was a mighty revival of biblical Christianity which swept through England, Scotland, Wales, parts of Ireland, Holland, Germany, France, and, over the Atlantic, through the New England colonies of North America. The nature and extent of the Revival was probably second only to the Reformation since the days of the Apostles and the Early Church.

The movement commenced in the late 1730s, early 'forties, and continued virtually unabated for nearly fifty years. It was an awakening which touched the lives of all classes of men, women and children, rich and poor, religious or otherwise. It changed the tide of English history and deeply influenced the religious and moral conditions of the day. Multitudes were turned from their godless and corrupt ways, and few historians would deny that the Awakening saved England from almost certain bloodshed and civil war.

The accounts of the revival are well documented, and there is a vast amount of material available today for reading on the subject. This outline is but a brief sketch, and touches on only a few of the features of the movement. Of necessity, only a handful of the great men that God used are mentioned, and for simplicity I have concentrated very much on just one as an example: George Whitefield.

The Conditions of the Times in the 1700s

It has been said that in the early 1700s the life of England was 'foul with moral corruption and crippled by moral decay'. Most Englishmen of the day considered that a life of unrestrained licentiousness could be indulged in with impunity, and with this frame of mind much of the nation threw off restraint and plunged itself headlong into godless living.

Bishop Ryle says: '...suffice to say that duelling, adultery, fornication, gambling, swearing, Sabbath-breaking and drunkenness were hardly regarded as vices at all. They were the fashionable practices of people in the highest ranks of society, and no one was thought the worse for indulging in them'.

Almost without exception, the churches of the Establishment were dead and formal. From many pulpits, a sermon could not be heard from one month's end to the next, and of the 10,000 clergy in the Church of England, only a tiny handful struggled to maintain the Truth. The chapels of the Dissenters were for the most part deserted, but where sermons were from time to time preached, these were little better than moral essays, devoid of anything to awaken souls, and deadening both to preacher and hearer alike. The majority of the people had 'no more concern for true religion than had their cattle'. As far as the great truths for which Hooper and Latimer had gone to the stake 200 years before, and Baxter and scores of Puritans had been jailed previous *century*—these seemed to have been entirely forgotten

The vast majority of the parochial clergy were sunk in worldliness

and, as Ryle says: '... neither knew nor cared anything about their profession. They neither did good themselves nor liked anyone else to do it for them. They hunted, they shot, they farmed, they swore, they drank, they gambled. They seemed determined to know anything except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.'

As for the Bishops, the majority of them were also men of the world. It was said that Archbishop Cornwallis gave so many balls and social parties at Lambeth Palace that the king actually wrote to him requesting he desist and that he conduct himself more in accord with his office!

It is no wonder that the land was deluged with infidelity and scepticism. Men and women had rejected entirely any belief in the Scriptures as such, and had therefore put out of their minds any serious thoughts of the God of the Bible, of holiness, of sin, of judgement or of the need for *personal* salvation. Man-exalting, God-debunking philosophies were rife, and few men had the courage or the ability to raise their voices in protest at the alarming spiritual and moral declension they saw about them. The whole nation was on the slide.

Archbishop Seeker said in one of his charges: 'In this we cannot be mistaken, that an open and professed disregard for religion is become...the distinguishing character of the age...Christianity is ridiculed and railed at with very little reserve...'

Coupled with this open disregard for Christianity, there was also a widespread abhorrence of anything that looked like 'religious enthusiasm'. It was believed that the wars of the seventeenth century had been stirred up by religious zealots, and it was taken for granted that anyone who preached or prayed with any degree of earnestness must of necessity be a danger to the peace of the nation. Everything relating to religion was therefore conducted in a 'quietly dispassionate' manner.

What of the general condition of the people? Back in 1689, the importation of liquor had been prohibited, and Englishmen had begun to brew their own--so much so that 'within a generation, every sixth house in London had become a gin shop, and the nation was in an uncontrollable orgy of gin-drinking'. 'These cursed liquors', asserted Bishop Benson, 'will, if continued to be drunk, destroy the race of the people themselves...gin has made the English people what they never were before... cruel and inhuman'.

As can be imagined, there was a considerable increase in the numbers of poor people in the land, and as a result of long rejection of moral standards as well as indulgence in gin drinking, larger and larger numbers became unable or unwilling to work. Lawlessness, violence and crime were rampant. In London, as part of the increase in punishment for crime, a permanent scaffold was erected at Kennington and another at Tyburn. A hanging became a gala event, and boisterous crowds gathered each time some poor wretch was to be strung from the gallows. Jail sentences were meted out with great freedom, but the conditions of the prisoners in their filthy cells was one of unspeakable wretchedness. Add to these deplorable conditions of the day, the inhuman treatment of the insane, widespread cruelty to children, the obscenity of the stage plays of the day, and the widespread corruption of the Press.

All this, it must be remembered, was before the Industrial Revolution. There were no great silk, cotton and linen industries, no iron and steel industry; no powered ships. no railways; no gas or electricity; no telegraph or telephone; no radio; no post; no sealed roads, no cars; no mechanical farming; no police force as we know it; and no educational system.

Politically there was agitation to restore the Stuarts to power. The Pretender had invaded from Scotland. England was at war with Spain, and Gibraltar had been besieged. The Indian Empire was only just established, and Captain Cook had barely begun his man, voyages; Australia was not yet on the map!

It would be hard to imagine a day and age less conducive to the spread of the Gospel, and a population less receptive to the hearing of it. But quite suddenly, England was startled by the voice of a young preacher. His name was George Whitefield, a Church of England clergyman, 22 years old. As he began to preach in the pulpits of London with uncommon power and ability, the churches could not hold the crowds that began flocking to hear him. Within a year he was joined by others in England such as John and Charles Wesley. In Wales, Daniel Rowlands and Howell Harris commenced an equally powerful ministry. Across the Atlantic, men such as Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd and the Tennents were raised up by God to speak His word with power.

Thus began a mighty onslaught by the Gospel which continued through until the latter pan of the century.

3

The Revival Begins

Whitefield entered Oxford University in 1732 to study for his degree, and it was while there that he first met John and Charles Wesley at what was called the Holy Club. This small band of men were dubbed ‘methodists’ because of their strict but ‘methodical’ self-disciplined way of life.

While at Oxford, Whitefield nearly died as the result of his strict self-denial after one lengthy period of fasting during the winter. Not until the Spring of 1735 did light burst in upon him and he knew for the first time that he belonged to Christ.

‘God was pleased to remove the heavy load and 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 to the day of everlasting redemption.’

This was the great turning point in his life, and Whitefield now began to entertain more serious thoughts of the ordained ministry. At the same time he dreaded the prospect and shrank from the awesome responsibility of speaking as the oracle of God. His strict discipline took on an entirely new complexion, and his hours of devotion were now spent on his knees studying the Scriptures (‘praying over every line and word’), comparing his English version with the Greek and consulting Matthew Henry’s great commentary (only then recently published, and which Whitefield purchased from Howell Harris).

Ryle says: *‘Once taught to understand the glorious liberty of Christ’s Gospel, Whitefield never again turned back to asceticism, legalism, mysticism or strange views of Christian perfection. The doctrines of grace, once firmly grasped, took deep root in his heart and became, as it were, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.’*

Immediately he began to teach others and to share the light of Scripture with those about him. In Gloucester, his home town, he formed a little Society with those who had come to know Christ through his early efforts. They met each evening of the week to read the Bible, sing Psalms and to pray. On each occasion he gave them an hour or two of instruction, and exhorted them from the Scriptures.

On Trinity Sunday 1736, Whitefield was ordained at Gloucester and straight away was pressed by his friends to begin preaching. ‘They want me to preach, but if I do, I shall tell them the truth, and I believe they will not like it...’ Some mocked at his first sermon, but most seemed thunderstruck. Complaint was made to the Bishop that he had driven 15 people mad! But Whitefield was launched, and the tide of English history was now about to change.

Within a month of commencing to preach in London, crowds began flocking to hear him. The ‘boy parson’ was undoubtedly a curiosity, but at the same time, few could deny his extraordinary gifts as a preacher and the unquestionable power with which God owned his words. People were stunned by the clarity and simplicity of his sermons, and by the earnestness with which he pressed upon them their hopeless state in Adam and their dire need for the new birth and a living hope through faith in Christ.

‘... from the very first he obtained a degree of popularity such as no preacher before or since has probably ever reached. Whether week-days or Sundays, wherever he preached the churches were crowded, and an immense sensation produced. The congregations were taken by surprise and carried by storm.’

Meantime, the Wesleys had gone to Georgia in North America as clergymen to the new colonies, and from there they had written to Whitefield, urging him to join them in the work. Their accounts fired his soul and he longed to ‘go abroad for God’. After continuing to preach in England for the remainder of 1737, he finally set sail for Georgia. This was to be the first of 13 such crossings of the Atlantic which he made during his lifetime. Some voyages took nearly three months, and several nearly ended in disaster and loss of life in ship-

wreck. (His vivid accounts of some of these make fascinating reading.) The day Whitefield set out from England, John Wesley arrived back. Both he and Charles were broken, disillusioned men. Things had not gone well in Georgia, and neither of them had found that peace of soul for which they both longed and worked and prayed. Not until May 1738 were the two of them soundly converted to Christ, both as the result of German Moravian teachers who were then in London. Like Whitefield, they both began preaching the necessity of the new birth and of faith in the atoning blood of Christ, and it soon became apparent that the same power which had accompanied Whitefield was also upon John and Charles. Nor were they alone.

In Wales, great stirrings were beginning. In 1735 Howell Harris had been powerfully awakened and soundly converted. A deep burden came over him. He says: 'Seeing both rich and poor going hand in hand to ruin, my soul was stirred within me. The ministers were the first that lay upon my heart. I saw that they were not in earnest and did not appear to have any sense of their own danger, or any experience of the love of Christ. Their deadness and indifference therefore made me speak... death and judgement were my principal subjects of conversation. The fire of God did so burn in my soul that I could not rest day or night...'

Elsewhere in Wales, God was preparing Daniel Rowlands, a curate ordained in 1733. Four years later a great change came over him, and he began 'preaching eternal perdition to a sinful world. Awful and extremely terrific was his message. His own spirit seemed to have been filled with great terror. He appeared as if he would kindle the fire of hell around the transgressors of God's law. He unfolded the indignation of heaven against sin with amazing earnestness, clearness and vigour. But there was no harshness in his voice; rather he spoke as one overflowing with compassion and under the deepest conviction of his own unworthiness.'

Whitefield stayed in Georgia a year, and then returned to England to obtain his priest's orders as well as to collect money for an Orphan House which had been set up in Savannah. His arrival back on English

soil occasioned great excitement. Rejoining his friends, he recommenced preaching, and his Journal records: 'Here seems to be a great pouring out of the Spirit'. Sadly, Whitefield was soon to discover that his position was not what it was previously.

'The bulk of the clergy were no longer favourable to him and regarded him with suspicion as an enthusiast and a fanatic. They were especially scandalised by his preaching the doctrine of regeneration or the new birth... as a thing which baptised persons greatly needed! The number of pulpits to which he had access rapidly diminished... [and his] field of usefulness within the Church of England narrowed rapidly on every side'.

In February 1739, when he was forbidden the use of the churches in Bristol, he took the momentous step of preaching to miners in the open air at Kingswood. He says:

'Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was a friend to publicans, and came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected was the sight of the white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully fell down their black cheeks as they came out of their coal pits. Hundreds of them were soon brought under deep conviction, which, as the events proved, happily ended in a sound and thorough conversion... sometimes when 20,000 people were before me, and I had not in my own apprehension a word to say either to God or to them. But I was never totally deserted... the sight of thousands, some in coaches, some on horseback and some in the trees, and at times all affected and in tears, was almost too much for, and quite overcame me...'

Back in London, and excluded from most churches, Whitefield determined to claim two open spaces of ground as sites where he would regularly preach. One was Moorefields, a pleasure ground of grass, paths and elm trees. The other was Kennington where the criminals were executed on the gallows. Amazing scenes followed during the years in which Whitefield preached at these two locations, but it was from this point onwards that the character of his ministry to the day of his death was almost entirely of one complexion. One year was just like another, and Ryle says: 'to attempt to follow him would only be to go over the

same ground... he was incessantly preaching Christ.'

There was hardly a considerable town in England, Scotland and Wales that Whitefield did not visit as an evangelist. On his second visit to America, the Great Awakening spread along the whole eastern seaboard from Boston to Savannah, and in association with great men like Edwards, the Tennents and others, Whitefield's preaching left an indelible mark on the new colonies.

In his tireless travels he visited Ireland twice and Scotland fourteen times. In 34 years he preached more than 18,000 times, regularly averaging 13 sermons a week and sometimes as many as 23.

There were many others whom God raised up in this era, who, like Whitefield, preached constantly throughout the length and breadth of the British Isles. Some of the better known ones were John Wesley, Howell Harris, Daniel Rowlands, John Newton and William Romaine. Never had the Gospel been sounded forth with such concerted effort, and never had so many heard and so many responded to the message of Scripture. The nation was never to be the same again.

4

Some Characteristics of the Revival

Whitefield's rejection by the vast majority of the Church of England clergy forced him into the open air, and there is no doubt that his habit of preaching in fields, market places, churchyards and at popular fairgrounds, was a remarkable characteristic of the revival. John Wesley soon followed his example, and of Howell Harris in Wales we read: 'At first he spoke only to people in their homes, but it was not long before vast crowds gathered to hear him and he commenced preaching in the open air. The Word was attended with such power that men cried out on the spot for pardon of their sins'.

Whitefield's own accounts of some of the London meetings are quite remarkable. Take, for example, these entries over one month in 1739:

- Sun. April 29 'Preached at Kennington Common, about two miles from London, where no less than 30,000 people were supposed to be present. The wind being for me, carried the voice to the extremest part of the audience. All stood attentive, and joined in the Psalm and the Lord's Prayer most regularly. I scarce ever preached more quietly in any Church. The Word came with power. The people were much affected... I hope a good inroad has been made into the Devil's kingdom today...'
- Wed. May 2 'Preached this evening again to above 10,000 at Kennington Common'.
- Sat. May 5 'Preached yesterday and today as usual at Kennington Common, to about 20,000 hearers who were much affected...'
- Sun. May 6 'Preached this morning at Moorefields to about 20,000 people who were quiet and attentive and much affected... at six, preached at Kennington. Such a sight I never saw before. I believe there were no less than 50,000 people...'
- Thur. May 10 'Preached at Kennington but it rained most part of the day. There were not above 10,000 people..'

- Sat. May 12 'I preached to about 20,000 at Kennington as usual.'
- Sun. May 13 'preached in the evening to some 60,000 people...'
- Fri. May 18 'At six I preached in a very large open place in Shadwell, being much pressed by many to go thither. I believe there were upwards of 20,000 people...'
- Sun. May 20 'Preached at Moorefields and Kennington Common... a visible alteration is made in the behaviour of the people, for though there were near 15,000 in the morning, and double the number in the afternoon, yet they were as quiet during my sermon, as though there had not been above fifty persons present...'
- Sun. May 27 'Preached this morning at Moorefields to about 20,000 and God manifested Himself still more and more. My discourse was near two hours long. My heart was full of love; and people were so melted down on every side, that the greatest scoffer must have owned that this was the Finger of God...'
- Fri. June 1 'Preached in the evening at a place called Mayfair near Hyde Park Corner. The congregation consisted, I believe, of near 80,000 people. It was by far the largest I ever preached to yet. In the time of my prayer, there was a little noise; but they kept a deep silence during my whole discourse. A high and very commodious scaffold was erected for me to stand upon; and though I was weak in myself, yet God strengthened me to speak so loud, that most could hear, and so powerfully that most, I believe, could *feel*... All love, all glory be to God through Christ'.

There is no human explanation for the power and the impact of Whitefield's preaching. As he recorded: '... the greatest scoffer must have owned that this was the finger of God'. The same was true of Harris. 'He declared the Word of God as a herald from another world; exposing the sins in which the town and country lay and were guilty of; every particle of his speech flashed and gleamed so vividly, as lightning on the consciences of the hearers, that they were terrified and feared that the day of judgement had overtaken them. So powerful were the effects accompanying his words that bold, hardy men, being seized with fainting fits through fear and terror, fell as corpses in the street'.

Of Daniel Rowlands we read: 'It was very common when he preached for scores to fall down by the power of the Word....pierced and

wounded by the love of God, and by a sight of the beauty and excellency of Jesus, and there to lie on the ground being overcome by the sight and enjoyment of God, so much so that they could not bear any more.'

Rowlands himself wrote to Whitefield: 'The Lord comes down among us in a manner that words can give no idea of. Though I have... openly discountenanced all crying out, yet such is the light, view and power God gives very many...that they cannot help crying praising and adoring Jesus, being quite swallowed up in God.'

Like Whitefield, Wesley was incessantly preaching, 'attacking sin and ignorance everywhere, preaching repentance towards God and faith towards Jesus Christ... awakening open sinners, leading on enquirers, building up saints, never wearied, never swerving from the path he had marked out, and never doubting of success...' As with Whitefield, he was ready to preach anywhere, or at any hour, early in the morning or late at night, in church, in chapel, or in a room, in the street, in field or on commons and greens. His messages too were always of sin, salvation, the need of Christ and the new birth and of faith following true repentance.

However, there was an important difference between Wesley and Whitefield. Wesley was a born organiser. He was an administrator, and took great pains to gather together the thousands of converts into Societies... Societies which became the foundation for a whole new denomination... the Methodists.

As we can well imagine, all this colossal activity occasioned great opposition. Wesley was often in danger of losing his life, and was assaulted by violent and semi-heathen mobs on a number of occasions. He was denounced by the bishops as an enthusiast, a fanatic, and a sower of discontent. He was often preached against by the parochial clergy and held up to scorn as 'a heretic, a mischief-maker and a meddling troubler of Israel'.

In Wales, Harris often met with violent hostility and was nearly killed on more than one occasion. In another incident, Rowlands narrowly escaped being blown up by gunpowder. At Moorefields and Kennington Common, Whitefield suffered rotten eggs, cats and dogs being thrown at him. At times his gown was so filled with clods of dirt that had been

hurled at him that he could hardly move. Near Bassingstoke, he was struck with a cudgel. In Gloucestershire, he was nearly thrown in to a lime pit, and in New England, an officer intended to shoot him dead. On another occasion in London, he was nearly run through with a sword, and at Hay, his constant and faithful companion William Seward was stoned to death by the angry mob.

The Press never ceased to caricature Whitefield in both words and cartoons. He was the constant brunt of scorn, and they never let up in their ridicule of his preaching, his methods and his doctrine.

Yet in spite of all this, Whitefield took the Gospel to the people of England as no single man had taken it before. Fashionable sinners in the glittering drawing rooms of the aristocracy heard him and trembled, while at the other end of the social scale, criminals, whose end would otherwise have been to hang on Tyburn or Kennington gallows, looked to Christ and lived.

The effect of such preaching was widespread. The impact of the message of Christ was so powerful under the influence of the Holy Spirit, that whole sections of society changed. In some towns and villages, virtually the entire population was converted. The standards of morality on a *national* scale changed and were immeasurably raised. The influence of Christian morality and ethics permeated all levels of society. Politicians were changed! New laws were enacted. People began to think with a new perspective, with a new set of values. Concern for the well-being of others, for the conditions and privileges of others, all began to come to the surface in the lives of people who, a few years before, could not have cared less. Open selfishness, greed, crime, immorality--all these and other vices diminished dramatically. Instead, Christ's Kingdom was earnestly and urgently desired, and the name of Christ was held in the highest esteem.

There are accounts of pubs and theatres closing their doors for want of patrons. Instead, people were pressing to know Christ, and to be sure that they had a saving faith in Him. William Cooper of Boston said that more souls came to him in one week in deep concern, than in the whole 24 years of his preceding ministry.

Of this great revival, Green says: '[it] changed in a few years the temper of English society. The Church was restored to life and activity,

and religion carried to the hearts of the people a fresh spirit of moral zeal, while it purified our literature and our manners. A new philanthropy reformed our prisons, infused clemency and wisdom into our penal laws, abolished the slave trade, and gave the first impulse to popular education.'

Much, much more could be said of the effects of the revival. It was the beginnings of the modern missionary movement; Sunday Schools started as a result; there was an upsurge in the printing of Christian literature; the first Bible Schools were established; there were a host of social, legal and political reforms as men's consciences became more attuned to the Word of God. There were changes to the penal system and the beginning of the modern medical and educational structures which we take so much for granted. And what of the great Industrial Revolution itself?--surely this too had its genesis in the Great Awakening.

The Men God Used

Spurgeon once said of Whitefield in reference to his journal: 'I am conscious of a distinct quickening whenever I turn to it. Other men seem to be only half alive; but Whitefield was all life, fire, wing, force'. And Ryle says of him: 'He was a singularly transparent man... there was nothing about him requiring apology or explanation... his faults and good qualities were both clear and plain as noonday.'

Whitefield was a very humble man. Read his journals and letters and one very soon gains the clear impression that he really didn't think he was very great at all. He lamented his failures, regretted his weaknesses, and constantly reprimanded himself for his lack of zeal in the work of the Lord. 'Let none of my friends cry to such a sluggish, lukewarm, unprofitable worm... Spare thyself [that is: don't work so hard, mate!] Rather spur me on, I pray you, with an Awake, thou sleeper, and begin to do something for thy God.'

Whitefield had a burning love for Christ and a passion for souls. The more he grew in his relationship with the Lord, the more he longed for others to know the same. 'Oh that I had a thousand tongues, they should all be employed in His service.'

The same could be said of Rowlands and Harris. On one occasion Rowlands was staying overnight with Harris, sharing a room. In the middle of the night, Rowlands was awakened by Harris sobbing over a dream he had just had. 'I had been preaching to ruined sinners on the brink of Hell, and I felt so deeply for them that I was pleading with them with all my might to return to God.' On another occasion, Rowlands was riding up the Vale of Aeon with Thomas Gray, and as

they came to a high spot they stopped to look down on the valley spread below them. Rowlands, realising the irreligious state of its inhabitants, 'began to weep, shedding many tears'.

It was said of George Whitefield, that it was not uncommon for him to weep profusely in the pulpit when preaching, and some said that they hardly knew him to get through a sermon without some tears. The great preacher felt so intensely for those to whom he was preaching that it often found an outlet in this way in tears--so much so, that his hearers found it hard to hate the man who wept so much over their souls. In one sermon he cried out: 'If you will not weep over your own sins, then I will'! One man said of him: 'I came to hear you with my pocket full of stones to break your head, but your sermon got the better of me and broke my heart.'

Bishop Ryle, in his magnificent essay on Whitefield, lists a number of characteristics of the great preacher:

1. He Preached a Singularly Pure Gospel.

'Few men ever gave their hearers so much wheat and so little chaff'. Whitefield had soaked himself in the Scriptures and knew vast sections of the Word of God by heart. But he also had a firm grasp of the great doctrines of Scripture, and in his thinking and theology was clearly in the line of the Puritans and the great Reformers. Whitefield's preaching was always a manifestation of the Truth, and his sermons of such a kind that God delights to honour.

2. His Preaching was Lucid and Simple.

It was said that no one could ever misunderstand what Whitefield was saying. Whether it was believed or not was another matter--at least his hearers were left in no doubt as to what he was saying to them.

3. His Preaching was Bold and Direct.

He met people head-on and addressed them as if he were talking to them individually. Many of his hearers thought that his sermons were intended specifically for them! He preached right to the conscience, and often he would say, 'I have come here to speak to you about your soul', or, 'This is for you'.

4. He had a Remarkable Power of Description.

The Arabians have a proverb: 'He is the best orator who can turn men's ears into eyes'. Whitefield seemed to have had this gift, and there is the famous story of Lord Chesterfield who was listening to White field on one occasion as he described the plight of an aged blind beggar. Deserted by his dog, the poor man stumbled towards a precipice. Whitefield portrayed the imminent disaster as the blind man groped forward. Just as he was about to take the fateful step that would plunge him to his death, Lord Chesterfield actually made a rush forward to save him, crying out, 'He's gone, he's gone!'

5. He Preached with Tremendous Earnestness.

One said of him: '...he preached like a lion'. All his energy was poured into his preaching so that none doubted but that he at least really believed that what he was saying was true! No one slept when he preached. There was a holy violence about him that took men by storm and he never let his hearers alone.

As I've read Whitefield, I have been struck especially by his extraordinary self-discipline. Never an idle moment. Never a hint of being tired of what he was doing. On the contrary, at the close of his life, he said, 'Lord, I'm weary in your work, but not of it.' Each day had its appointed periods for prayer, study, reading of the Scriptures, attending to personal affairs, writing letters, and to counselling. So many were the enquirers who pressed to see him from early morning to midnight that it became necessary for him to announce the hours during which he would be available. Nevertheless, it is astonishing how he managed to cope with as many as three sermons a day, dozens of letters a week, as well as literally hundreds of individuals seeking help. On top of all this he travelled many hours a week on horseback, going from one preaching engagement to another. Sometimes he slept only 3 or 4 hours a night, and yet he never seemed to be tired. In his Journal, he records such comments as: 'The more I do, the more I might do for God'; and. 'As my day is, so is my strength'.

Clearly Whitefield's energies were not wasted in unnecessary effort, nor on unworthy activities. God seemed to give all these men remarkable staying power, and I suspect that this was precisely *because* all their energies were devoted to His work in the proclamation of the Gospel. Under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit, they gave themselves wholly to the work of the Lord, and did not allow anything to divert their attention, nor dissipate their energy.

No doubt many other gifts were shared by these great men. All of them were eminent in self-denial. They were humble men and they were tireless in their labours. For the most part they seemed to have one all-consuming passion, a singleness of mind: this passion was to preach Christ wherever, whatever.

It almost goes without saying that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Over and over again Whitefield says in his Journal such things as: 'full of peace and love and joy in the Holy Spirit'; 'filled with joy unspeakable'; 'my soul was full of ineffable comfort and joy in the Holy Ghost'; 'my soul was filled with Divine love and joy in the Holy Ghost. Oh, what a mystery is the hidden life of a Christian!'; 'I continually walk in the comfort of the Holy Ghost'.

From this we may safely say that these men, above all else, were holy men. They lived godly lives. They lived close to their Lord. They communed with Him, walked with Him, lived in His Presence. And I suspect therein lay their power and their usefulness; for the clear testimony of the Great Awakening and of the men God used, was that their power lay not in their talents, nor in their oratory, but in their piety. They were charged with the power of God because what they spoke came out of a living experience and relationship with Him of holiness and obedience.

Can we say then, that the manifestation of God's presence and power during the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century was, in one sense, simply the outworking of the personal lives of godliness and holiness of the men-who preached? Did the revival in fact *begin* in the personal revival in their hearts? Indeed, can general revival ever be divorced from individual revival? This seems to be one of the lessons one can learn from the eighteenth century. Would therefore that we today might begin to live as these men lived, emulate their example, and commence to seek God personally in a new way!

6

Lessons for Today

What can we expect to learn from these events that took place 200 years ago? Is it valid to compare our times, our needs, our position today, with the eighteenth century? Surely there is no comparison between our way of life and that of Whitefield and Wesley? The answer must be both Yes and No.

Of course we live in a day and age of immeasurable advancement compared to England 200 years ago. But what of the moral and spiritual conditions of our nation? Is *that* really so different? Is there not a dearth of spiritual life in our day, which in many respects is just as deep, just as black, and just as all-pervading as that in their times? True, there *are* more people preaching the Gospel now, and there are probably more people 'in church' and more open Christianity than then--or is there?

Consider for a moment the fact that the population of London in Whitefield's day was about 500,000. That's less than one sixteenth of London's population today! On that basis, the ratio of so-called 'church-goers' is much the same as it was then; maybe even less. No doubt the *general* standard of religion and morality is higher today than it was then. Nor is there the same general ignorance. At least we can say that many more today have *heard* the Gospel. For all this we sincerely thank God.

So then, what in fact are the lessons that we can learn from what we have shared of the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century?

**1. WE MAY BE MORE SOPHISTICATED TODAY,
BUT THE DEPRAVITY OF MAN'S HEART IS STILL THE SAME**

I suspect that most people today would say that they believe in God or

think there is a Supreme Being of some sort, but few, by comparison, have a saving experience of Christ. A true knowledge of God throughout the generality of our population is at an abysmally low level. As a result, our standards are declining, not improving. The tide is going out, not coming in. We are going backwards, not forwards. We are getting poorer, not richer. Each day our media remind us of our depravity, our sin, and our corruption. We murder, we rape, we cheat, we lie, we steal, we embezzle, we defraud, we slander. Our politicians seem to spend more time at each other's throats than in the business of positive government; our judicial system is under threat through bribery and corruption; organised crime flourishes; drug trafficking goes on unchecked; pornography is big business. On a population basis, we spend more money on gambling than any nation on earth, and we also have more strikes than anyone else. Our divorce rate is now equal to the worst anywhere, and at least 55% of Australians are now saying that marriage is not necessary to raise children. Homosexuality is rapidly increasing, and a whole movement is establishing itself as a force to be reckoned with. If you add to all this the decline in formal church attendance, and a rapid increase in the occult--then we have a black picture indeed.

Whitefield was often asked, 'Why are you always preaching, "You must be born again"?' He would always answer, 'Because you *must be* born again!' Men and women today need new birth and spiritual regeneration just as urgently as people did in his day.

We are a guilty, selfish, angry, materialistic and idolatrous people. Our greed for money possesses us. We press for continual wage increases just so that we can indulge ourselves further. So the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and our unemployment ranks grow as the gap widens between those who have and those who can't get.

Unfortunately we have made one dreadful and fateful mistake in all this. We have left God right out of our reckoning, just as people had done in Whitefield's day. We have failed to see the indissoluble link between spiritual health and moral health. We have failed to see that our deepest needs are not social, economic or financial, but spiritual. We have forgotten the Scripture which says that *righteousness* exalts a nation. Thus we have a profound national *spiritual problem*. We are

spiritually asleep. Is it little wonder then, that our corruptions are surfacing? The depravity of the human heart and our blatant sinfulness is becoming more and more open.

Well, we deplore all this. We see what is happening in our society. But what can we do? One thing is certain, the Festival of Light will never turn the tide, helpful though such organisations may be. (There was an F.O.L. in Whitefield's day called 'The Society for the Reformation of Manners'.)

There is only one true answer, only one genuine, long-term solution: the proclamation of the Gospel. That Gospel which shows up man's sin for what it really is in the sight of a holy, wrathful God. That Gospel which goes to the very depths of man's sin and guilt and evil, and deals with it totally, once and for all. That Gospel which sets a man up to be the person that God created him to be. That's what was needed in the eighteenth century, and that's what is needed today.

2. THERE MAY BE MORE CHRISTIAN PROFESSION TODAY, BUT THE CHURCH NEEDS SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

As in Whitefield's day, the fire of cleansing needs to sweep through the Church. We Christians must be awakened to see our need for genuine repentance. We deeply need to be released from our own 'respectable sins' and our guilts, and to come into a new experience of the forgiveness and cleansing of the Cross. The great truths of justification and righteousness need to get hold of us, and we need to break into a new and living experience of their reality in our lives.

Our clergy need to be awakened out of their slumber of mediocrity. They need to see the seriousness of their charge, and so begin to speak {,ut with His authority and power.

Though we may deplore the vices that are rampant in our society, yet, to some extent at least, their flourishing existence is an indictment on the Church. If we in the Church had been living in the Truth and speaking it out, things would be different. We dare not be complacent about this. We have allowed the world's standards to invade our thinking, our worship, our doctrine. We have come to think with a secular mind, rather than the mind of the Spirit. We no longer believe the Bible to be

what it says it is: the Word of God. We no longer speak with authority, and the world no longer listens to what we say. After all, we *are* a minority group, and it's only our opinion over against theirs!--at least that's what we're told. When Whitefield started preaching, he was in a minority of one! But people soon came to tremble at his words, because he spoke as the oracle of God.

Add to what I have said, our gross laziness in spiritual matters, lack of discipline, and an awful ignorance of the very tenets of our Faith, and is it any wonder that we are powerless in the face of the mounting tide?

We need therefore a mighty internal reformation and renewal. We need a new holiness, a new godliness, a new Christlikeness—in our speech, in our thinking, in our conduct, in our relationships. *We need a genuine piety.* That's what was needed in the eighteenth century, and that's what is needed today.

3. THERE MAY BE MORE SERMONS TODAY, BUT WE NEED A RETURN TO BIBLICAL PREACHING

Whitefield, Wesley, and the great leaders of the eighteenth century Awakening, revived the art of proclamation. Their sermons were not moral essays or quiet talks. They were not pious homilies, or even great doctrinal lectures. Their sermons were marvellous examples of biblical preaching. They were declarations of Truth—and they were declarations not in word only, but in power and in demonstration of the Spirit God owned their preaching, and their hearers trembled.

We need a return today to such power in the pulpit. We need, not priestly parsons, but prophetic preachers. We need to go back to roots in our doctrine--back to Paul, to Augustine, to Luther and the Reformers, to the Puritans, and to good old Whitefield. They knew the Gospel was the power of God for salvation to all who believe. They preached sin and judgement and wrath. They preached repentance and faith, justification, Forgiveness and righteousness. And God broke into people's lives and effected radical transformations. People were born again! Lives were changed. Things were different as a result. People found they were new creations—the old had passed away, all was new.

Well,-how had it happened? What had done it? Preaching in the power of the Spirit--that's what did it--because that is God's way. Preaching is His appointed means of saving men and women, and we've lost sight of that today.

In Whitefield's day, men and women *pressed* to hear the Truth—precisely because it was the Truth--and they knew that it was no longer man's words or opinions, but the very word of the living God. That's what was needed in his day, and that's what is needed now.

4. THERE MAY BE PEOPLE IN CHURCH TODAY, BUT THE MASSES NEED TO HEAR THE GOSPEL

The love of Christ drove Whitefield and Wesley out to where the people were, and God gave them a holy boldness to go to the masses and confront them on their ground, in their territory.

The need has not changed. The overwhelming majority of our population is *outside* the Church, and there is no reason to expect that they will ever venture inside! The Gospel must be taken *to* them.

Well, we do not live in the eighteenth century, and God has given us all sorts of means which were not available to Whitefield and Wesley. They used whatever means they could to the best effect, to reach people, and so must we today.

As individual Christians we need to be representing Christ where we are, where we work, and where we live. We need to be living and speaking the Truth. We need to be prayerfully and wisely using the vast mediums of communication that God has given us in this age. Whitfield could have preached just *one* sermon *over* satellite television today and reached the same number of people as he did with all of his 18,000 individual sermons back then! Not so many years ago, cassette tapes were only just coming in: now it's video. It will not be long before most people will have players in their homes, and the potential for the spread of the Gospel is enormous.

By whatever means, the masses need to hear, and we must pray that God will thrust us out more and more to share the Good News. It was so in the eighteenth century, and the need is still the same today.

5. THERE MAY BE POCKETS OF GREAT BLESSING HERE AND THERE, BUT WE NEED A SOVEREIGN OUTPOURING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The most obvious thing about the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, was that God poured out His Holy Spirit on whole nations. Conviction of sin and an awakened interest in salvation was almost a universal matter. It was the subject of conversation throughout the land. That's often a singular characteristic of revival. We need to pray and long for such an outpouring in this country. And we need to determine that it begin in our lives with our own renewal.

Nothing less than a *national* effusion of Divine Grace can effect a national change in the tide. Nothing less can bring about a turning to God and to Christ from among all levels of our society. Only such a mighty movement of the Spirit will touch to the depths the hearts of those men and women who, at the present time, are hell-bent on destroying themselves and their country. What else can salvage our land from spiritual and moral ruin? It was true in the eighteenth century, and the need is the same today.

Conclusion

We desperately need the fire of God to fall upon our land, and we need God to raise up twentieth century White field-like prophets who will fearlessly thunder His truths throughout the length and breadth of the Commonwealth. Is it possible? Would God send revival now, as He did then? Could this country, which has never known revival, experience an outpouring of God's Spirit as has occurred many times elsewhere down through the history of the Church? Could there be a twentieth century Great Awakening in Australia? I have no doubt there could.

We would do well then, to read and pray over these accounts that have been handed down to us from these great periods of Church History. Not only would our hearts be stirred and warmed, but I believe we would have our level of expectation raised in the growing hope that God might do similar things in our day. May we begin to pray that 'in wrath He will remember mercy', that He will 'rend the heavens and come down', that He will bare His arm and act--and that what He did 200 years ago might be repeated in our land in our day.

'If My people who are called by My name humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sins and heal their land.' 2 Chronicles 7:14.

Book List

Historical Collections of Accounts of Revival. John Gillies. *George Whitefield.* Two volumes, Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield's Journals.*

Select Sermons of George Whitefield.

Christian Leaders of the 18th Century. Bishop J. C. Ryle *Early Life of Howell Harris.* Richard Bennett.

Lectures on Revival. W. B. Sprague.

Banner of Truth Magazine:

Vol. 2: 'The Great Awakening'

12: 'Reflections on Revival'

13: 'Thomas Charles of Bala'

21: 'Fire, the Want of the Times'

22: 'Gilbert Tennent'

23: 'John Tanner's Conversion'

37: 'Revival in History'

61: 'Trevecca College and the Countess of Huntingdon'

63: 'Lord Bolingbroke and Whitefield'

65: 'The Log Cabin'

68: 'John Wesley 1'

69: 'John Wesley 2'

70: 'John Wesley 3'

79: 'Whitefield and the Evangelical Awakening in Scotland'

79: 'George Whitefield--a Spur to Ministers'

87: 'Preaching and Revival'

88: 'Whitefield in the "Jerusalem of England"'