

⊗ New Creation Teaching Ministry

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# George Whitefield

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Man of Grace

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By  
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## GEORGE WHITEFIELD—MAN OF GRACE

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The great Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century was a widespread revival of biblical Christianity which swept through England, Scotland, Wales, parts of Ireland, Holland, Germany, France, and—on the other side of 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 '40s, 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 reading material available today on the subject. This outline is but a brief sketch, touching only a few of the features of the movement and concentrating on just one of its great preachers: George Whitefield.

### 2. CONDITIONS IN THE 1700S

It has been said that in the early 1700s the life of England was 'foul with moral corruption and crippled by spiritual decay'.<sup>1</sup> Bishop Ryle says of that period: 'duelling, adultery, fornication, gambling, swearing, Sabbath-breaking and drunkenness were hardly regarded as vices at all. They were fashionable practices of people in the highest ranks of society, and no one was thought the worse for indulging in them.'<sup>2</sup>

Almost without exception, the churches of the Establishment were dead and formal. From many pulpits a sermon would 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 miserable moral essays'<sup>3</sup> devoid of anything to awaken souls. They were deadening to both preacher and hearer alike. The majority of the people had 'no more concern for true religion than had their cattle'.<sup>4</sup> As far as the great truths for which Hopper and Latimer had gone to the stake 200 years before, and Baxter and scores of Puritans had been jailed the previous century, these seemed to have been entirely forgotten.<sup>5</sup>

The vast majority of the parochial clergy were sunk in worldliness, and, as Ryle says:

They 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.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dallimore, Arnold A., *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1970, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ryle, J. C., *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Pennsylvania, 1978, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 2, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

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 conduct himself more in accord with his office!<sup>1</sup>

It's no wonder that 'infidelity and scepticism' were the order of the day.<sup>2</sup> Men and women had rejected entirely any belief in the Scriptures as such, and had therefore suppressed any serious thoughts of the God of the Bible, of holiness, of sin, of judgment, or of the need for *personal* salvation. The whole nation was on the slide. Ryle says that 'the spirit of slumber was over the land. In a religious and moral point of view, England was asleep.'<sup>3</sup>

Coupled with this open disregard for Christianity, there was also a widespread abhorrence of anything that looked like 'religious enthusiasm'.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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'.<sup>6</sup> There was also a considerable increase in the number 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'.<sup>7</sup> 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'<sup>8</sup>, and boisterous crowds gathered each time some poor wretch was to be strung from the gallows. 'Jail sentences were metered out with great freedom'<sup>9</sup>, but the conditions of the prisoners in their filthy cells was one of indescribable 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, and widespread corruption of the Press'.<sup>10</sup>

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.

It would be hard to imagine a day and age *less conducive to the spread of the Gospel*, nor 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 Brainard and the Tennents were raised up by God to speak His word with power.

So began a mighty onslaught by the Gospel which continued through until the latter part of the century.

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1 Ibid., p. 17.

2 Ibid., p. 15.

3 Ibid., p. 19.

4 Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 23.

5 Ibid., p. 23.

6 Ibid., p. 25.

7 Ibid., p. 26.

8 Ibid., p. 26.

9 Ibid., p. 26.

10 Ibid., p. 27.

11 Ibid., p. 31.

### 3. WHITEFIELD AND THE BEGINNING OF THE REVIVAL

George 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 and ‘methodical’ self-disciplined way of life. This discipline was specifically to do with their spiritual pilgrimage as they searched for salvation. Whitefield said of this group:

Never did persons strive more earnestly to enter in at the strait gate. They kept their bodies under, even to an extreme. They were dead to the world, and willing to be accounted as the dung and offscouring of all things, so that they might win Christ . . . I now began, like them, to live by rule . . . I left no means unused which I thought would lead me nearer to Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

While at Oxford Whitefield almost died as a result of his strict self-denial after one lengthy period of fasting during the winter. He had been reading, amongst other books, Henry Scougal’s *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* and discovered that he needed to be born again—or *be damned!*<sup>2</sup>

I learned that a man may go to church, say prayers, receive the sacraments, and yet not be a Christian. Shall I burn this book? Shall I throw it away? Or shall I search it? I did search it . . . ‘Lord, if I am not a Christian, or if not a real one, for Jesus Christ’s sake show me what Christianity is, that I may not be damned at last!’ . . . God soon showed me . . . a ray of divine light was instantaneously darted into my soul, and from that moment, and not till then, did I know *I must become a new creature.*<sup>3</sup>

Whitefield’s search for the truth now intensified as he sought with all his heart to find peace and assurance. All else became secondary to the this one all-consuming necessity. He became so physically weak that he could not even crawl up the stairs, and it was not until the spring of 1735 that 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. O! with what joy—joy unspeakable—even joy that was full of, and big with glory, was my soul filled when the weight of sin went off, and an abiding sense of the love of God broke in upon my disconsolate soul! Surely it was a day to be had in everlasting remembrance. My joys were like a springtide and overflowed the banks.<sup>4</sup>

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. ‘Oh, it is a dreadful office! . . . I began to think that if I held out any longer, I should fight against God.’<sup>5</sup>

His strict discipline took on an entirely new complexion, and his hours of devotion were now spent on his knees reading and praying over every line of his Bible—a habit he maintained over most of his life. He studied his English version with the Greek, and consulted 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 to asceticism, legalism, mysticism or strange views of Christian perfection.’<sup>6</sup> ‘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.’<sup>7</sup>

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. (This was in fact the first Methodist Society in the permanent

<sup>1</sup> Dallimore, Arnold A., *George Whitefield, God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, Crossway Books, Illinois, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 16–17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> Ryle, J. C., *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

sense of the word.<sup>1</sup>) 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, exhorting them from the Scriptures.

On Trinity Sunday 1736 Whitefield was ordained at Gloucester and was immediately 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 . . .’<sup>2</sup> Some mocked at his first sermon, but most seemed thunderstruck. Complaint was made to the Bishop that he had driven fifteen people mad!<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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’.<sup>5</sup> After continuing to preach in England for the remainder of 1737, he finally set sail for Georgia. This was to be the first of thirteen such crossings of the Atlantic during his lifetime. Some voyages took nearly three months, and several almost ended in disaster and loss of life in shipwreck. (His vivid accounts of these voyages make fascinating reading.)

The day Whitefield set out from England, John Wesley arrived back, their ships meeting in Deal Harbour.<sup>6</sup> Things had not gone well in Georgia, and John Wesley immediately wrote to George urging him to give up his mission.<sup>7</sup> He did this as a result of casting a lot to determine if God wanted Whitefield to stay or go. The lot bid Whitefield ‘return to London’.<sup>8</sup> Thankfully, Whitefield ignored the so-called Divine guidance from Wesley and set sail for Georgia as planned!

John and Charles Wesley were broken, disillusioned men as neither of them had found that peace of soul for which they both longed and worked and prayed. John Wesley himself admitted that his motive in going to Georgia was in ‘the hope of saving my own soul’.<sup>9</sup> 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 wrote:

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 judgment were my principle subjects of conversation. The fire of God did so burn in my soul that I could not rest day or night without doing something for my God and Saviour.<sup>10</sup>

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1 Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 83.

2 Ibid., p. 96.

3 Ryle, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 14.

4 Ibid., p. 14.

5 *George Whitefield’s Journal*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Pennsylvania, 1960, p. 77.

6 Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 145.

7 *George Whitefield’s Journal*, p. 119.

8 Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 150.

9 Ibid., p. 145.

10 *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 2, p. 15.

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 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 transgressor 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’.<sup>1</sup>

Whitefield stayed in Georgia for a year and then returned to England to obtain his priest’s orders, as well as collect money for an Orphan House which he had set up in Savannah. His arrival back on English soil occasioned great excitement. Rejoicing with his friends, he recommenced preaching, and his Journal records: ‘Here seems to be a great pouring out of the Spirit, and many who were awakened by my preaching a year ago, are now grown strong men in Christ . . .’<sup>2</sup> However, Whitefield soon discovered that his position was not what it had been 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! . . . [and his] field of usefulness within the Church of England narrowed rapidly on every side.<sup>3</sup>

He also faced bitter opposition from the Wesley’s, as I will mention later.

In February 1739, when he was forbidden the use of 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 them being affected was the sight of the white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully ran 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, 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 trees, and at times all affected and in tears, was almost too much for, and quite overcame me . . .<sup>4</sup>

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 Moorfields, 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,’ says Ryle, ‘and to attempt to follow him would only be to go over the same ground . . . he was incessantly preaching Christ.’<sup>5</sup>

There was hardly a considerable town in England, Scotland or 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 thirteen sermons a week and sometimes as many as twenty-three.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Ryle, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

#### 4. 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, marketplaces, churchyards, and at popular fairgrounds, was a remarkable characteristic of the revival. John Wesley soon followed his example, and of Howell Harris 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.<sup>1</sup>

Whitefield's own accounts of some of the London meetings are quite remarkable. Take, for example, these entries over just one month in 1739 when he was 24 years of age:<sup>2</sup>

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. I hope a good in-road has been made into the Devil's kingdom today . . .

Wed May 2

Preached this evening 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 Moorfields 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 Moorfields 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 that number] **30,000** in the afternoon, yet they were as quiet as during my sermon as though there had not been above fifty persons present . . .

Sun May 27

Preached this morning at Moorfields 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 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.

(Add to these the figures he records for the intervening days, and the total is around **650,000** people for the month, or an *average* of about **22,000** per day.)

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<sup>1</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 2, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *George Whitefield's Journal*, pp. 260–277.

In spite of the distorted comments by some biographers, there is no *human explanation* for the power and the impact of Whitefield's preaching. As he recorded, 'the greatest scoffers must have owned that this was the finger of God'.<sup>1</sup>

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 judgment 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 the sight of the beauty and excellence 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 out, praising and adoring Jesus, being quite swallowed up in God.<sup>4</sup>

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 inquirers, building up saints, never wearied, never swerving from the path he had marked out, and never doubting of success . . .'<sup>5</sup> 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 in 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.

Whitefield's preaching was met with constant opposition and not a little danger. I will say something more about that in a moment. The secular 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 other 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.<sup>6</sup>

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. 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 high esteem'.<sup>7</sup>

There are accounts of pubs and theatres closing their doors for want of patrons. Instead, people were pressing to know Christ, and to be certain 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 twenty-four years of his preceding ministry.<sup>8</sup>

Of this great revival, historian John Green said:

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>2</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 2, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 88, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Vol. 87, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 535.

[it] changed in a few years the whole 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 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 beginnings 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.

## 5. WHITEFIELD THE PREACHER

In addition to his famous Journal and many letters and sermons, there are numerous biographies of George Whitefield. These present a fairly uniform picture of the great preacher, and allow us to see right inside the character of this godly man. However, one new biography presents a very different impression from all the others. Harry Stout is Professor of American Religious History at Yale University. He has recently released a book on Whitefield called *The Divine Dramatist*, in which he insists that we have to find some 'explanation' as to why Whitefield was so successful as the 'evangelical marvel of the age'.<sup>2</sup>

Stout proposes that the answer lies primarily in the fact that Whitefield desperately wanted to be an actor. He wanted to have an outlet for the oratory gifts which he believed God had given him. Following his 'religious conversion' he could no longer entertain thoughts of going into the secular theatre, and so chose to be a preacher in order to have the pulpit as his stage. His ambition was so strong that he stopped at nothing in order to draw in the largest crowds possible. Even his Journal, Stout says, was a marketing tool which he cleverly devised so that he could publicise himself as widely as possible. He says Whitefield 'lived his life almost exclusively for public performance'.<sup>3</sup> He says:

few great people achieve fame without aspiring to it, and Whitefield was no exception . . . he strove to achieve the actor's command performance on centre stage. From his youth, Whitefield wanted to be a star, and the particular egotistical, self-promotion he displayed in his career was very much in the manner of the great actor.<sup>4</sup>

Stout says that Whitefield very soon 'discovered the value of newspapers and, for the first time, applied the psychology of public relations to his preaching. He learned that he was a dramatic preacher without peer'<sup>5</sup>, and this gave him 'a great sense of power'<sup>6</sup> which he used and manipulated to his own ends. Stout says Whitefield 'wanted power and respect *so badly*'.<sup>7</sup>

He claims that Whitefield had an 'anti-intellectual faith'<sup>8</sup> and 'showed no interest in theology. Instead of doctrine, he explored the *feelings* of the new birth. Whitefield was not content to talk about the New Birth; he had to *sell it* with all the dramatic artifice of a huckster.'<sup>9</sup> Stout claims that 'self-promotion came naturally to Whitefield. He did not hesitate to exploit by word of mouth and print'.<sup>10</sup> 'He openly gloated' and he says, 'Whitefield learned to

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1 J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People*, pp. 736-737.

2 Stout, Harry S., *The Divine Dramatist*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991, p. xv.

3 Ibid., p. xv.

4 Ibid., p. xxi.

5 Ibid., p. 32.

6 Ibid., p. 32.

7 Ibid., p. 33.

8 Ibid., p. 20.

9 Ibid., p. 40.

10 Ibid., p. 44.

make *himself* news.’<sup>1</sup> He learned to ‘stage preaching events in ways that vaulted him to the forefront of public attention. He grasped intuitively the potential for fame . . .’<sup>2</sup>

Stout goes on to frequently describe Whitefield with such words and phrases as: ‘technique; clever manipulation; undefined ambition<sup>3</sup>; concealed delight’.<sup>4</sup> He talks about Whitefield’s ‘preaching performances’<sup>5</sup>; his ‘steep climb of self-promotion; his boundless self-confidence’<sup>6</sup> and that ‘he was at the centre’.<sup>7</sup> Stout says Whitefield was ‘determined to win people to Christ—and to *himself*.’<sup>8</sup>

During his first visit to Georgia, he says that Whitefield came to the realization that ‘this small, struggling colony, while beloved, was much too small a canvas on which to paint his life’s work’<sup>9</sup> and so he ‘crystalised his plans’<sup>10</sup> during his voyage back to London where he could return to ‘the staging of his outdoor performances’.<sup>11</sup> Once in London, Stout says he ‘worked closely with publishers and printers publicizing his two favourite subjects: the New Birth *and himself*.’<sup>12</sup>

I have made mention of this biography because it is receiving widespread acclaim as a dazzling, daring interpretation of a Whitefield we have never seen before. It is my conviction that it is a gross misrepresentation of the truth, and a caricature of the real Whitefield. There are many aspects of the life of the great evangelist which Stout either completely ignores, or else is unable to incorporate into his preconceived notion of who Whitefield was and what he was about.

Charles Spurgeon once said of Whitefield’s 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 . . .’<sup>13</sup> And Ryle said 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.’<sup>14</sup> This is the Whitefield most of us have come to appreciate as we’ve read his Journals, his sermons, and various biographies.

I believe Whitefield was a truly 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. At one low point in his life he felt that he should relinquish his ministry. ‘A sense of unworthiness and unfitness so weighs me down that I have often thought it would be best for me to retire.’<sup>15</sup> 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, un-profitable 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.”’<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to Stout’s claim that Whitefield lived for the adulation of the crowds and craved popularity, Whitefield wrote in his Journal when he was just 22:

The tide of popularity now began to run very high . . . had it not been for my compassionate High Priest, popularity would have destroyed me. I used to plead with Him to take me by the hand and lead me unhurt through the fiery furnace. He heard my request, and gave me to see the vanity of all commendations but His own.<sup>17</sup>

1 Ibid., p. 45.

2 Ibid., p. 46.

3 Ibid., p. 47.

4 Ibid., p. 36.

5 Ibid., p. 45.

6 Ibid., p. 48.

7 Ibid., p. 53.

8 Ibid., p. 55.

9 Ibid., p. 61.

10 Ibid., p. 63.

11 Ibid., p. 79.

12 Ibid., p. 102.

13 Spurgeon, C. H. , *The Early Years*, p. 348.

14 Ryle, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 28.

15 Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 68.

16 Ryle, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 28.

17 Ibid., p. 89.

On another occasion he wrote: ‘O Heavenly Father, for Thy dear Son’s sake, *keep me from climbing*. Let me hate preferment.’<sup>1</sup>

What drove Whitefield was his burning love for Christ and passion for souls. The more he grew in his relationship with the Lord, the more he longed for others to know the same reality. ‘O that I had a thousand tongues, they should all be employed in His service.’<sup>2</sup>

Bishop Ryle, in his magnificent essay on Whitefield, lists a number of characteristics of the great evangelist, saying that he believed no other preacher had ever possessed such a *combination* of excellent qualifications as Whitefield.<sup>3</sup>

### **1. He preached a singularly pure Gospel.**

‘Few men ever gave their readers so much wheat and so little chaff.’<sup>4</sup> 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 his thinking and theology was clearly in the line of the Puritans and the great Reformers. He made no apology for his Calvinism, and his sermons are full of solid doctrine and robust theology. He spoke constantly of the righteousness of Christ, of justification by faith, and of the fundamental necessity of the new birth. Ryle says:

He did not get up to talk about his party, his cause, his interests or his office. He was perpetually telling you about your sins, your heart, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, the absolute necessity of repentance, faith and holiness, in the way the Bible presents these mighty subjects.<sup>5</sup>

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. He seemed to hate long and involved sentences. ‘He seldom troubled his hearers with abstruse arguments and intricate reasoning. Simple Bible statements, apt illustrations, and pertinent anecdotes were the more common weapons that he used. The result was that his hearers always understood him. He never shot above their heads.’<sup>6</sup> There was a simplicity and clarity about his preaching that few of his contemporaries could match.

### **3. His preaching was bold and direct.**

He met people head-on and addressed them as if he were talking to them individually with a message directly from God. Many of his hearers thought that his sermons were intended specifically for them! He preached right to the conscience, and would often say: ‘I have come here to speak to you about your soul,’ or, ‘This is for you and this is for you.’<sup>7</sup> His hearers were never let alone. It was this direct approach that often left his hearers stunned, and they carried away with them the profound sense that God had spoken directly and personally to them.

There is the story of a man who came to one of the great outdoor meetings just in order to witness the spectacle of the crowds. He was determined not to actually listen to Whitefield and so had a finger in each ear. But the Lord sent along a bee to sit on the man’s nose. In the instant that he swatted the bee, he heard Whitefield thunder the words: ‘He that has ears to hear,

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<sup>1</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> *George Whitefield’s Journal*, p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> Ryle, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

let him hear!’ The man’s attention was arrested on the spot. He listened intently to the remainder of the message and went home converted to Christ.

#### 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.’<sup>1</sup> Whitefield seemed to have had that gift, so much so that he was able to dramatise his subject so powerfully that his hearers felt they were witnessing the real thing. There is the famous story of Lord Chesterfield who was listening to Whitefield 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!’ The noble lord had been so carried away by the power of Whitefield’s description that he had forgotten the whole event was but a word picture!<sup>2</sup>

There is ample evidence that Whitefield’s dramatic abilities were unique. He was able to so powerfully portray his Biblical characters, that his congregations felt they were actually witnessing the real thing.

#### 5. He preached with tremendous earnestness.

One said of him: ‘he preached like a lion’.<sup>3</sup> 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! He used all his abilities to make others believe it too. 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.

There is the account of an American who went to hear Whitefield out of curiosity. The beginning of the sermon was rather heavy and an old man at the front had dozed off. Suddenly Whitefield stopped. His countenance changed.

If I had come to speak to you in my own name, you might well rest your elbows on your knees, and your head on your hands, and sleep: and once in a while look up and say: ‘What is this babblers talking of?’ But I have not come to you in my own name. No! I have come to you in the name of the Lord God of Hosts [here he brought down his hand and foot with such force that it shook the building] and I must and will be heard. The congregation started. The old man woke up at once. ‘Ay, ay!’ cried Whitefield, fixing his eye on him, ‘I have woken you up, have I? I meant to do it. I am not come here to preach to stocks and stones: I have come to you in the name of the Lord God of Hosts, and I must and will have an audience.’ The hearers were stripped of their apathy at once. Every word of the sermon after this was heard with deep attention, and the American gentleman never forgot it.<sup>4</sup>

Another writer said that ‘Whitefield was like a powder-blast in the quarry, and would by one explosive sermon shake a district’.<sup>5</sup>

#### 6. His preaching was filled with immense pathos and feeling.

It was said of 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. Stout caricatures this as Whitefield’s contrived ‘homiletical trademark’.<sup>6</sup> More to the point was the fact that the great preacher felt so intensely for those to whom he was speaking that he found an outlet in this way, in tears.

Whitefield’s tears awakened affections and touched secret springs in men which no amount of reasoning and demonstration could have moved. It smoothed down the prejudices which many had conceived against him—so much so, that his hearers found it hard to hate the man who

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 79, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, p. 41.

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 pockets full of stones to break your head, but your sermon got the better of me and broke my heart.’ When men and women discovered how much Whitefield loved them, they gladly listened to what he had to say.

### **7. He spoke with an extraordinary clarity, power and grace.**

His voice was so powerful that a crowd of 30,000 could hear him with ease. And not only so, but his voice was said to be so musical and well-toned that even the pronunciation of simple words could bring tears to his hearers. Every movement of his body communicated the truth as he spoke. His manner in the pulpit was said to be ‘so curiously graceful and fascinating that no one could hear him for more than five minutes without forgetting that he squinted’.<sup>1</sup>

### **8. He was a man of singularly happy and cheerful spirit.**

Ryle says:

No one who saw him could doubt that he enjoyed his religion. Tried as he was in many ways throughout his ministry—slandered by some, despised by others, misrepresented by false brethren, opposed everywhere by the ignorant clergy of his time, worried by incessant controversy—his elasticity never failed him. He was eminently a rejoicing Christian, whose very demeanour recommended his Master’s service. One lady in New York spoke of the influence of the Spirit which had won her heart to the Lord: ‘Mr Whitefield was so cheerful that it tempted me to become a Christian.’<sup>2</sup>

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As I’ve read Whitefield, I have been struck especially by his extraordinary self-discipline. He wrote when he was 23: ‘Began to live by rule more and more than ever, for nothing I find is to be done without it.’<sup>3</sup> There was 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 weary *of* it.’<sup>4</sup> Each day had its appointed periods for prayer, study, reading of the Scriptures, attending to personal affairs, writing letters, and to counselling. Whitefield wrote: ‘There was no end of the persons coming to me under soul concern.’<sup>5</sup> In fact, 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, with anything up to a thousand 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 three or four hours a night and yet never seemed to be tired. In his Journal he records such comments as: ‘The more I do, the more I might do for God’<sup>6</sup>, and ‘As my day is, so is my strength.’<sup>7</sup>

Bishop Ryle says he was ‘eminent in self-denial’<sup>8</sup>, a man who was tireless in his labours. For the most part he seemed to have one all-consuming passion, a singleness of mind: this passion was to preach Christ wherever, whatever. While in Georgia, Whitefield prayed: ‘God give me a deep humility, a well-guided zeal, a burning love and a single eye, and then let men or devils do their worst.’<sup>9</sup>

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1 Ryle, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 27.

2 Ibid., p. 29.

3 *George Whitefield’s Journal*, p. 110.

4 *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 79, p. 5.

5 Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 138.

6 Ibid., p. 87.

7 Ibid., p. 105.

8 Ryle, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 29.

9 Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 140.

It almost goes without saying that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Over and again Whitefield says in his Journal such things as: ‘Came home full of peace and love and joy in the Holy Ghost’<sup>1</sup>; ‘filled with joy unspeakable’<sup>2</sup>; ‘my soul was full of ineffable comfort and joy in the Holy Ghost’<sup>3</sup>; ‘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.’<sup>4</sup>

Above all else, Whitefield was a godly man. He lived close to his Lord. He communed with Him and lived in His presence. And I suspect therein lay his power and his usefulness; for the clear testimony of the Great Awakening and of this extraordinary man was that, as Tyerman says, ‘*his power lay not in his talents, nor in his oratory gifts, but in his piety.*’<sup>5</sup> He was charged with the power of God because what he spoke came out of a living experience and relationship with the Living God.

## 6. WHITEFIELD: OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAN

There are several other aspects of George Whitefield’s character and ministry which we need to consider before completing this brief outline.

### 1. Whitefield and Doctrinal Convictions.

From the earliest days Whitefield had been introduced to the writings of the Reformers and the Puritans. ‘I embrace the Calvinistic scheme, not because of Calvin, but Jesus Christ has taught it to me.’<sup>6</sup> There is no question that he generally taught and insisted on the key elements of what people call Calvinism: Original sin, the new birth, justification by faith in Christ, the final perseverance of the saints, and eternal and unconditional election.<sup>7</sup> He came to love these great ‘doctrines of grace’, as he preferred to call them, and there was hardly ever a sermon in which some aspect of these cardinal truths were not mentioned. He wrote:

You know how strongly I assert all the doctrines of grace, as held forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the doctrinal articles of the Church of England. These I trust I shall adhere to as long as I live because I verily believe they are the truths of God, and have felt the power of them in my own heart . . . these are the doctrines which, when attended with a divine energy, and preached with power, always have, and always will . . . make their way through the world, however weak the instrument that delivers them may be.<sup>8</sup>

However, there was nothing hard or cold or academic about Whitefield’s doctrine. It was all life and fire and passion! His sermons, his expositions and his letters all breathe warmth and conviction and rich Biblical content. He wrote to a friend: ‘As the Lord has been pleased to reveal his dear Son in us, O let us stir up the gift of God and with boldness preach him to others.’<sup>9</sup> Though he held firmly to the truth of God’s sovereignty and his electing grace, nevertheless he also knew that he was called to preach that Gospel of grace with all his might. ‘I love those that thunder out the Word. The Christian world is in a deep sleep! Nothing but a loud voice can awaken them out of it . . . Oh for a revival of true and undefiled religion in all sects whatsoever! God make me an instrument in promoting it!’<sup>10</sup> To a friend he wrote:

The doctrines of our election and free justification in Christ Jesus . . . fill my soul with a holy fire and afford me great confidence in God my Saviour. I hope we shall catch fire from each other [he said to another] and that there shall be a holy emulation amongst us who shall most debase man and exalt the Lord Jesus. Nothing but the

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<sup>1</sup> *George Whitefield’s Journal*, p. 205.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>4</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 21, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> Ryle, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 79, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

doctrines of the Reformation can do this . . . I know that Christ is all in all. Man is nothing: he hath a free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven, till God worketh in him to will and do of His good pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

It was these very doctrines that fired Whitefield in his evangelistic preaching. Writing to Howell Harris he said:

Put them in mind of the freeness and eternity of God's electing love, and be instant with them to lay hold of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ by faith. Talk to them, oh talk to them till midnight, of the riches of His all-sufficient grace. Tell them, oh tell them, what He has done for their souls, and how earnestly He is now interceding for them in heaven . . . Press on them to believe immediately! Intersperse prayers with your exhortations, and thereby call down fire from heaven, even the fire of the Holy Ghost . . . Speak every time, my dear brother, as if it were your last. Weep out, if possible, every argument, and as it were, compel them to cry, 'behold how he loveth us!'<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Whitefield and Extemporaneous Preaching.

It was the normal custom for preachers in Whitefield's day to read their sermons word for word from a prepared manuscript. They lived in a 'social milieu where sermons were carefully composed and were read and judged as literacy exercises'.<sup>3</sup> This was Whitefield's method as he began his ministry<sup>4</sup>, and it is why we have such detailed records of the contents of many of his early sermons.

Early in his ministry Whitefield had commenced to pray extempore, a rather radical move for a Church of England minister, and a habit which sparked much of the criticism from his fellow clergyman. They viewed it as a serious departure from the right and proper use of the Prayer Book. He very soon added extemporaneous preaching to his ministry, without which he could never have carried on his extensive outdoor engagements.<sup>5</sup> This does not mean he ceased to prepare his messages. On the contrary, he probably spent more time in preparation than if his sermons had been written down word for word beforehand. With extemporaneous preaching he found a new freedom, and his dramatic and oratory skills now came to the fore with enormous life and energy.

Whitefield's extemporaneous preaching style was soon taken up by other preachers involved in the Great Awakening. For example, Whitefield's friend, John Berridge, the Rector of Everton, found himself one day in the situation of having to preach to a large congregation without having had the time to write out his manuscript. It was his first bona fide extemporaneous sermon. Though very unsure of himself, 'God wonderfully and most agreeably disappointed his fears, by affording him such extraordinary assistance as enabled him to rise superior to all his embarrassment and to command the most solemn attention from his numerous audience'.<sup>6</sup> From that point onwards he never again used a manuscript, and his biographer says that during that first year of his new ministry 'he was visited by a thousand persons under serious impressions'.<sup>7</sup> From time to time Berridge was assigned a curate as his assistant, but he would always first ask if the man used notes. If he did, then Berridge didn't want him!

## 3. Whitefield and controversy.

It would be impossible for a man of Whitefield's extraordinary talents and very public ministry not to stir up controversy and opposition, especially from his fellow clergymen. His habit of preaching in the open air, to say nothing of the unprecedented crowds that assembled to hear him, must have been incredibly intimidating to the local Parish clergy, the vast majority of whom were probably not converted. Stout claims that Whitefield deliberately cultivated

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1 Ibid , pp. 69–70.

2 Ibid., pp. 70–71.

3 Pibworth, *The Gospel Pedlar*, p. 36.

4 Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 119.

5 Ibid., p. 140.

6 Pibworth, *The Gospel Pedlar*, p. 36.

7 Ibid., p. 42.

controversy in order to gain for himself increased public popularity. He says: ‘Confrontation, as Whitefield knew, aroused curiosity, and his own Anglican Church was his favourite target.’<sup>1</sup> Stout talks about Whitefield ‘stepping up his clergy-baiting with inflammatory accusations against the established ministers’.<sup>2</sup>

The fact is the clergy were often the ones who were vitriolic in their denunciation of Whitefield and his doctrines, and he had little choice but to respond, warning his people against the anti-evangelical clergy.

With fearless eloquence Whitefield preached that the sins of the Church were more offensive to God than the sins of the nation; that in most pulpits the Gospel of Christ was buried out of sight; that sinners were flattered and encouraged to live in nominal Christianity; and that Bishops wilfully ordained unconverted men . . . In one sermon he said: ‘God knows my heart, I do not speak out of resentment. I heartily wish the Church of England was the joy of the whole earth; but I cannot see her sinking into papistical ignorance, and refined Deism, and not open my mouth against those who, by their sensual, lukewarm lives, and unscriptural, superficial doctrines thus cause her to err . . . I speak the truth in Christ, I lie not; the generality of the clergy are fallen from our Articles, and do not speak agreeable to them, or to the form of sound words delivered in the Scriptures; woe be unto such blind leaders of the blind! how can you escape the damnation of hell? . . .’ It is impossible to depict the storm which Whitefield produced by such words as these; it led to a flood of abuse which remained with him to his dying day.<sup>3</sup>

Usually Whitefield chose to ignore attacks made on himself, but it became increasingly difficult for him to remain silent when those attacks involved clear denials of Scriptural truth. He took seriously the injunction, ‘Earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints’, but his mistake lay in the *manner* in which he responded to these attacks. There were many occasions when Whitefield was clearly unwise in some of his public remarks, and these caused great mischief. There were entries in his Journals (written when he was in his early twenties) which he clearly regretted in later years. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he became wiser as he grew older. He eventually acknowledged his errors in a confession recorded in his Journal:

I have been too rash and hasty in giving characters, both of places and names . . . I have been too bitter in my zeal. Wild-fire has been mixed with it, and I find that I frequently wrote and spoke in my own spirit, when I thought I was writing and speaking by the assistance of the Spirit of God . . . I have published too soon and too explicitly, what had been better kept in longer and told after my death. By these things I have hurt the blessed cause I would defend . . .<sup>4</sup>

During his 1740 summer tour of the Charleston area of the New Colonies, Whitefield was bitterly attacked by the Rev. Alexander Garden, the Commissary of the Church of England at Charleston.<sup>5</sup> Garden wrote ‘Six Letters’ in which he made a series of very serious charges against Whitefield’s conduct and character. He accused Whitefield of ‘wilful and malicious, arrogant and wicked slander’. Whitefield made no reply to Garden’s Letters, however many notable clergy friends did undertake to reply in his defence, though Whitefield neither asked them to do so, nor countenanced their actions. All this only served to incite Garden all the more and he laid plans to further humiliate Whitefield by taking the unprecedented step of summoning him before an ecclesiastical court and forcing him to stand trial. Whitefield appeared before Garden and his men, but asserted that he would answer nothing until the Court had proved that it had the authority to examine him. His powerful arguments won him a begrudging adjournment and he immediately went out and ‘held two great meetings that filled the rest of the day’.

Garden pursued Whitefield for over a year, constantly interrupting his ministry. Finally (though Whitefield was not even in America at the time) Garden had him legally defrocked and thus technically outcast from the ministry of his own church. What was Whitefield’s attitude? He wrote in his Journal at the time: ‘I did not feel the least resentment against him. No; I pitied him, I prayed for him; and wished from my soul that the Lord would convert him as He

<sup>1</sup> Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 88, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 333.

<sup>5</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 84–86.

once did the persecutor Saul.’ It was with great difficulty that Whitefield managed to prevent his friends from taking vindictive action against Garden on his behalf.

As far as his ‘illegal’ ministry was concerned, Whitefield continued as usual, but the whole affair had left its mark on him. From that point onwards he rarely preached in the Church of England and increasingly had ministry with the Presbyterians, Independents, and the Baptists. And it was from that point onwards that he dropped his habit of regularly attending Sunday morning services in a Church of England.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. Whitefield and the Wesleys.

Unlike some of his contemporaries (e.g. Augustus Toplady), Whitefield hated doctrinal disputes and avoided them like the plague whenever he could. However, his close friendship with John and Charles Wesley suffered a fatal blow while Whitefield was in America and this came to a head on his return. It was what Dallimore calls (in his abridged biography), ‘Whitefield’s Darkest Hour’.<sup>2</sup> There had already been some doctrinal differences between he and the Wesley brothers, but in Whitefield’s absence, John Wesley had preached a sermon against the doctrine of election, knowing full well that it would hit at the very heart of Whitefield’s Calvinistic doctrinal belief.

Though Whitefield had urged John Wesley not to preach such an inflammatory sermon, he not only did so, but also had it published. The sermon had the effect of turning multitudes away from Whitefield, and the large crowds which had assembled regularly to hear him in London before he went to America, were now generally absent. ‘He saw many of his former hearers rush by with their fingers in their ears, and several of them after informed him that this had been Wesley’s instruction to them to prevent them from hearing heretical doctrine.’<sup>3</sup>

Whitefield wrote:

Many, very many of my spiritual children, who, at my last departure from England would have plucked out their own eyes to have given them to me, are so prejudiced by the dear Messrs Wesley’s dressing up the doctrine of election in such horrible colours, that they will neither hear, see, nor give me the least assistance: yes, some of them send threatening letters that God will speedily destroy me.<sup>4</sup>

In a further inexplicable move, Wesley seized the New Room at Bristol and the School House at Kingswood as his own; ‘buildings for which Whitefield and Seward had raised virtually all the money’.<sup>5</sup> Though Whitefield wrote to Wesley concerning these matters he received only a ‘long harsh letter’ in reply.<sup>6</sup> As Whitefield’s popularity gradually increased, Wesley publicly accused Whitefield of ‘refusing to offer him the hand of fellowship, and that Whitefield asserted he would preach everywhere against him’.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of these events, Whitefield refused to hold any grudge against John and Charles and spoke of them as: ‘my dear, dear old friends, Messrs John and Charles Wesley, whom I still love as my own soul’.<sup>8</sup> It was more than a year and half before Whitefield finally decided to write a reply to Wesley’s sermon, ‘Against Predestination’. Even then, Whitefield refused to say anything directly critical of Wesley himself. (It is worth noting that Wesley’s decision to preach against predestination came only after he had cast lots to determine whether or not such an action was indeed of God.)<sup>9</sup>

Some of Whitefield’s friends were indignant that he had been so forgiving to Wesley and had not claimed a share in the New Room and the Kingswood School. But Whitefield replied:

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1 Ibid., p. 86.  
2 Ibid., p. 97.  
3 Ibid., p. 98.  
4 Ibid., p. 98.  
5 Ibid., p. 100.  
6 Ibid., p. 100.  
7 Ibid., p. 100.  
8 Ibid., p. 98.  
9 Ibid., p. 100.

My heart does not reproach me for my kindness and friendship to those that differ from me . . . I cannot renounce those precious truths that I have felt the power of and which were taught me not of man, but of God. At the same time, I would love all that love the Lord Jesus, though they differ with me in some points . . . I have not given way to the Moravian Brethren, or to Mr Wesley, or to any whom I thought in error, no, not for an hour. But I think it best not to dispute when there is no probability of convincing.<sup>1</sup>

When asked by an opponent of Wesley's if Whitefield thought he would see Wesley in heaven, Whitefield replied: 'I do not think we shall . . . You and I will be so far off the throne of Christ, and Wesley will be so near, that he will be lost in the brightness of his Saviour, and I hardly think you and I will be able to see him.'<sup>2</sup> Although Charles Wesley moderated his doctrinal stand in later life, John remained implacably and fiercely opposed to Whitefield to the end of his days.

## 5. Whitefield and Methodism.

As we have already noted, it was Whitefield who first gathered small groups of people into 'Methodist' Societies in order to teach them the Scriptures and build them up in faith and fellowship. This habit grew rapidly, especially as folk were converted and found they had no evangelical Church of England to attend where they would receive spiritual nourishment. A huge wooden shed, known as the Tabernacle, was erected at the edge of Moorfields, and this became the centre of Whitefield's ministry in London. Not far away, a former canon factory, the Foundery, had become the headquarters of Wesley's work.

Whitefield's Calvinism and Wesley's Arminianism inevitably brought a polarisation amongst the people, and there was a growing spirit of rivalry between the two groups of followers. When Whitefield arrived back from America in 1748 after one of his trips, he found that this rivalry had reached alarming proportions. He had already come to the conclusion that much of his future work would be in the New Colonies and not in England, and he now had to decide what to do. His friends and followers were pressing him to stay in England and to establish himself as their leader of Calvinistic Methodism. But 'Whitefield was determined not to enter a scene of conflict again'.<sup>3</sup> He deplored the spirit of competition and rivalry between the two parties, and 'he resolved to overcome it'.<sup>4</sup> His intention was to attempt to unite Arminian and Calvinistic Methodism into one body. He put his proposal to Howell Harris, who replied: 'It will never do because neither of the sides can submit to the other head—Mr Wesley or Mr Whitefield.'<sup>5</sup>

After conferring with the Wesleys, Whitefield saw that 'there was little possibility of uniting the two branches of Methodism'.<sup>6</sup> By now there were deep hostilities among the people and Whitefield came to the conclusion that John Wesley's gift as an administrator would not permit him to be satisfied with anyone else as leader but himself. Whitefield therefore made the amazing, self-sacrificing decision to relinquish his leadership of the Calvinistic Methodist Societies. Rather than see division, rivalry and bitterness continue amongst God's people, he would retreat.

His decision deeply distressed his congregation at the Tabernacle. Though he was content to preach there whenever he was in England, no one else could be found to lead the work there because the congregation refused to accept anyone as pastor but Whitefield himself. Naturally there was strong objections to Whitefield's decision. Many voiced their opinion that he would now lose his fame and that his name would be forgotten to future generations.<sup>7</sup> His reply was:

Let the name of Whitefield perish, but Christ be glorified. Let my name die everywhere, let even my friends forget me, if by that means the cause of the blessed Jesus may be promoted. What is Calvin, or what is Luther? Let us

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 68, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God's Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

look above the names and parties; let Jesus be our all in all—So that He is preached . . . I care not who is uppermost. I know my place . . . even to be a servant of all.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of Whitefield's decision, although the Societies he had founded continued, the Calvinistic Methodist Association eventually died away and the revival was saved from further discord and strife. Dallimore notes that because of Whitefield's action, 'John Wesley, not George Whitefield, is known today as the leader and founder of Methodism'.<sup>2</sup>

## 6. Whitefield and Persecution.

As we can well imagine, all this colossal activity of the outdoor preaching of the Gospel occasioned great opposition from the general public. As one writer has said: 'Men cannot stand being searched by preaching such as Whitefield's.'<sup>3</sup> Dallimore notes that all the leaders of early Methodism met physical opposition with unflinching courage. 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 meddling troubler of Israel'.

On one occasion, Dallimore records:

a butcher, hearing John Cennick speak of the 'blood of Christ', shouted, 'If you want blood, I'll give you plenty.' He ran into his shop and returned with a pailful. He attempted to throw it over Cennick, but was thwarted by a bystander and in the struggle received most of the contents on himself.<sup>4</sup>

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 Moorfields and Kennington Common, Whitefield suffered rotten eggs, cats and dogs being thrown at him. At times the folds of his preaching gown were so filled with clods of dirt that had been hurled at him that he could hardly move. Near Basingstoke he was struck with a cudgel. In Gloucestershire he was nearly thrown into 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.<sup>5</sup>

There is record of the rioters violently interrupting a meeting and attacking the minister, a friend of Whitefield's, assaulting him with punches and kicks. They attacked the women in the congregation, stripping some of them naked. Others were hauled outside and dragged through the sewer. The riot continued for several hours, and, although no one was killed, the congregation was in great danger and in fear of their lives.<sup>6</sup>

Whitefield decided it was time to take the rioters to court. He called a meeting of his preachers so that they could discuss the matter and bring the whole dire situation to the Lord in prayer. The outcome of the court case was a complete victory for Whitefield and his friends. He had the right to prefer damages against the rioters, but having shown them that they were subject to the law of the English courts, 'chose to forgive them and let the matter drop'.<sup>7</sup> From that day onwards, though the violence did not cease, the mobs were less and less in evidence at the meetings.

Whitefield also suffered constant abuse from the playwrights of the London theatres. The Drury Lane Theatre staged plays in which Whitefield was often held up to obscene ridicule.<sup>8</sup> Commenting on these, Tyerman states: 'How educated and respectable people could listen to such

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>3</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 21, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God's Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 21, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God's Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

ribald and blasphemous outpourings is difficult to imagine. The whole thing is so steeped in lewdness, that it would be criminal to even reproduce the plot.’<sup>1</sup>

‘Several obscene ballads were written about imaginary incidents in Whitefield’s life, and numerous lewd tales were circulated about him. It became impossible for him to step onto the street without hearing children singing the ballads and older ones taunting him with the false reports.’<sup>2</sup> There is little doubt that Whitefield suffered inwardly from their iniquitous treatment and blatant lies, but he continued his preaching ‘to the fullest of his strength’.<sup>3</sup>

## 7. Whitefield and the Aristocracy.

As I mentioned earlier, Whitefield had an extraordinary impact with the Gospel, not only on the general population of his day, but also upon the Aristocracy of England. This was largely due to the efforts of the Countess of Huntington. ‘Lord and Lady Huntington had attended Whitefield’s ministry since the beginning.’ But Lord Huntington died shortly after. The Countess became ‘a true student of the Scriptures and a woman of believing prayer’. It was not long before she appointed Whitefield as one of her chaplains.<sup>4</sup> She then began inviting her high society friends to her home to hear Whitefield preach. In spite of the strain on Whitefield, this became a twice weekly appointment. Dallimore says: ‘Her drawing room constantly overflowed with these richly bejewelled, highly perfumed, and elegantly dressed members of the nobility.’<sup>5</sup> ‘Seldom in England’s history did a gospel preacher stand before so distinguished, fastidious, and critical an audience.’<sup>6</sup>

Whitefield did not particularly relish these occasions and probably felt like a fish out of water. ‘I go with fear and trembling, knowing how difficult it is to speak to the great so as to win them to Jesus Christ. But divine grace is sufficient for me.’<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless his sermons had a profound effect on many of the nobility. For example, the Earl of Bath, ‘one of the most powerful Parliamentary figures of the century, after hearing Whitefield for the first time, came to him greatly moved and arranged that he visit him’.<sup>8</sup> He afterwards became a regular member of the ‘congregation’ at Lady Huntingtons.

Lady Chesterfield, wife of the famous Earl of Chesterfield, ‘experienced a changed heart and a transformed life’<sup>9</sup> as a result of Whitefield’s preaching. The King remarked to her, ‘I hear you have attended on [Mr Whitefield] this year and a half?’ ‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘I have, and I like him very much.’<sup>10</sup> However, not all in Whitefield’s audiences liked what he said. The proud Duchess of Buckingham wrote: ‘It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your Ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.’<sup>11</sup>

Whitefield was not content just to preach to these people, he also carried on a considerable correspondence with a number of them. Through his letters he was responsible for deeply influencing many of them with the truth of Christ.

## 8. Whitefield and money.

Whitefield had the constant responsibility for the Orphan House he had founded in America and he relied entirely for its upkeep on the gifts he collected at his many huge outdoor

<sup>1</sup> Dallimore, Arnold A., *George Whitefield*, Vol. 2, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980, p. 407.

<sup>2</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 132.

meetings. Stout has a lot to say about Whitefield's collections, and rightly notes that the sums he collected were phenomenal for that day and age. He even hints that Whitefield was something of a prototype tele-evangelist.<sup>1</sup> In this regard he seems to suggest that a good deal of the cash went into Whitefield's pocket!

In reality, Whitefield seems to have had no personal interest in money, even when offered huge sums for his own use<sup>2</sup>, or as an incentive to be the permanent pastor of a church.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless he went to painstaking lengths to account for every penny that was given to him for the Orphan House. His own wealth was meagre indeed, so much so that when he married, he and his wife had to live in rented lodgings in London. But he was so poor that he could not maintain this arrangement, and decided that his wife, Elizabeth, and son, John, had best move to her cottage in Wales. They set off by coach in midwinter, staying over for a few days in Gloucester. There their four month old son died. Since they had no furniture, Whitefield was able to borrow some from friends in Gloucester. Dallimore notes that Whitefield reported 'with a measure of joy that he had obtained a second-hand set of curtains . . . Yet this was the man whom many charged with becoming rich through funds given for the Orphan House'.<sup>4</sup>

Biographer Tyerman records that:

in one of his journeys, Whitefield was told of a widow with a large family, whose landlord had seized her furniture . . . Whitefield's purse was never large, but his sympathy was great, and he immediately gave the five guineas the helpless woman needed. The friend who was travelling with him hinted that the sum was more than he could reasonably afford: to which the reply was, 'When God brings a case of distress before us, it is that we may relieve it.'<sup>5</sup>

## 9. Whitefield and illness.

Whitefield had never been strong as a youth, and his whole adult life was plagued with constant illness and severe physical weakness. He was a chronic asthmatic, and there are many accounts in his Journal of these times of illness.

I rose full of love and joy, but afterwards, on a sudden was deserted and then taken very ill in body. I struggled just like one in his last agonies, and longed to stretch myself into God. After having vomited several times I was obliged to go to bed. Oh, how did I long to be dissolved and be with Jesus Christ! How do I wish for the wings of an eagle, that I might flee away to Heaven! But that happy hour is not yet come. There are many promises to be fulfilled in me, many souls to be called, many sufferings to be endured, before I go hence.

My sickness still continuing after service, I went to bed again full of peace, but weak in body, oppressed much in my head, and quite shut up till near five at night, at which time, by the advice of my brother Seward, I took courage, and though it rained hard, rode with my dear friends to Basingstoke, where above five hundred were waiting to hear me expound; but my indisposition continuing, brother Kinchin expounded in my stead. After this, my spirit revived, my body was strengthened, and God gave me utterance, so that I spoke freely to near twenty people who came to converse with me, and to hear the Word of God.

The summer of 1747 was especially hot, and in June Whitefield collapsed with high fevers and a recurrent convulsions. 'Many, including himself, thought he would soon die.' The prospect did not terrify him. On the contrary, he relished the thought, 'I hope yet to die in the pulpit, or soon after I come out of it. Dying is exceedingly pleasant to me; for though my body is so weak, the Lord causes me to rejoice exceedingly.'<sup>6</sup> In 1761, when Whitefield was exhausted from his years of preaching and on the verge of physical breakdown, he had the Rev. John Berridge fill in for him at his many engagements. 'Mr Berridge is here and preaches with power. Blessed be God that some can speak though I am laid aside.'<sup>7</sup>

Preaching obviously took a great toll on Whitefield's health, and it is remarkable that he was able to accomplish what he did, and continue speaking publicly for so many years. Many of

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<sup>1</sup> Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, p. xxiii.

<sup>2</sup> Ryle, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God's Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 115.

<sup>5</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 2, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, p. 199.

<sup>7</sup> Pibworth, *The Gospel Pedlar*, p. 88.

his close friends often used to urge him to preach less. His reply: ‘I intend going on until I drop.’<sup>1</sup> He often used to say: ‘Sudden death is sudden glory’<sup>2</sup>, and at the end of his life he said: ‘I would rather wear out than rust out.’<sup>3</sup>

He died from a sudden asthma attack in 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts. He was almost 56.

## 7. LESSONS FOR TODAY

What can we expect to learn from these events which took place over 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’s? The answer must be both ‘Yes’ and ‘No’.

There is no question that we live in an age of immeasurable advancement compared to England in the 1700s. 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 just as deep, just as black, and just as all-pervading as that in Whitefield’s time? No doubt there *are* more people preaching the Gospel now, and there are probably more people ‘in church’, and more open Christianity than then. But is the *general* standard of religion and morality higher today than it was then? Is there not a similar general ignorance?

So, then, what are the lessons that we can learn from what we have shared of the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century and of the life of George Whitefield?

### 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 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. Our media reminds 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 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 virtually 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. Homosexuality is rapidly increasing, and a whole movement is establishing itself as a force to be reckoned with. Add to 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 the new birth and spiritual regeneration just as urgently as they did in his day.

We are a guilty, selfish, angry, materialistic and idolatrous people. As a nation we have made the fateful mistake of leaving God right out of our reckoning, just as people had done in Whitefield’s day. 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 that our corruptions are surfacing? The depravity of the human heart and our blatant sinfulness is becoming more and more overt.

We deplore all this. We see what is happening in our society. But what can we do? There is only one true answer; only one genuine, long-term solution: the powerful proclamation of the Gospel. That Gospel which shows up man’s sin for what it really is in the sight of a holy,

<sup>1</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield. God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 195.

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 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 our churches. We Christians must be awakened to see our need for genuine godly living. We deeply need to be released from our own 'respectable sins' and guilts, and to come into a new experience of the forgiveness 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. Pastors need to be awakened out of their slumber of mediocrity. They need to see the seriousness of their charge, and so begin to speak out with Christ's authority and power. Our pastors have become far too respectable. As a Church we need to recognise our gross laziness in spiritual matters, our lack of discipline, and our awful ignorance of the very tenets of our Faith. Is it any wonder that we are powerless in the face of the mounting tide?

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 were 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 and our doctrine. We have fallen into the trap of thinking with a secular mind, rather than with the mind of the Spirit. We no longer seem to 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. We see ourselves as a minority group in society and seem to be intimidated by that. 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.

We need therefore a mighty internal reformation and renewal. We need a new holiness, a new godliness, a new Christ-likeness—in our speech, in our thinking, in our conduct, and 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 preachers today, but we need a new holiness in our Pastors.**

Can we say that the manifestation of God's presence and power during the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century was, in one sense, 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 we can learn from the eighteenth century. As Pastors we need to live more and more as these men lived, emulating their example, and seeking God personally with a new passion and earnestness! 'Whitefield in the pulpit was but a refection of Whitefield in the study. The hours on his knees with the Bible, the Greek New Testament and some rich Puritan volume spread out before him, were his preparation for this pressing and powerful ministry'.<sup>1</sup>

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

We may not have Whitefield's gifts, but *we must have his holiness.* We may not be able to preach with the great oratory skill that he did, but our devotion to the Lord and our proclamation of His truth must be no less zealous. Our life, as well as our words, must be an example to others of the truth of the Gospel. Whitefield poured an enormous amount of time and energy into teaching and instructing small groups of men whom he had won to the Lord. He shared his life with them so that they saw the reality of his holiness and godly ways. One of his

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<sup>1</sup> Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 1, p. 128.

favourite maxims was: ‘Every student’s name is *legion* . . . catching him is catching thousands; helping him, helping many.’<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. There may be more sermons today, but we need to return to powerful Biblical preaching.

Whitefield, 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 strong, biblical preaching. They were declarations of the 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. ‘These times need as much energy and fire as ever those times did; there needs as much passion and earnestness for the conversion of men now as then; there needs as much exertion that we may be good ministers of Christ, and clear our souls from the blood of men as in those olden times.’<sup>2</sup> We need men with granite in their preaching! We need boldness in our preaching! We need to go back to the roots of our doctrine—back to Paul, to Augustine, to Luther and the Reformers, back to the Puritans, and back to good old Whitefield. They knew that the Gospel was the power of God for salvation to all who believe. They preached sin and judgment, repentance and faith, justification and righteousness. They didn’t care about the consequences, and God broke into people’s lives and effected radical transformations. People were born again! Lives were changed.

How had it happened? What had done it? *Preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit*. But this is not just preaching good Biblically-correct sermons that inform the mind. Whitefield always preached to the conscience. He said in one of his sermons:

Whatever you may pretend, if you speak the truth, you must confess that conscience breaks in upon you in your more sober intervals whether you will or not, and even constrains you to believe that hell is no painted fire. And why then will you not come to Christ? He alone can procure you everlasting redemption. Haste away to Him, poor beguiled sinners. You lack wisdom; ask it of Christ. Who knows but that He may give it you? . . . You are afraid to die; let this drive you to Christ: He has the keys of death and hell; in Him is plenteous redemption; He alone can open the door which leads to everlasting life . . . why, why will you die? Why will you not come to Him that you may have life?<sup>3</sup>

We have lost the art of preaching to the heart. Whitefield’s hearers didn’t tremble just because their intellect was stimulated. They quaked because their consciences were aroused from slumber and their wills jolted into action! Whitefield believed that you must speak *from* the heart if you wish to speak *to* the heart, and that there must be unmistakable faith and conviction within the pulpit if there is to be faith and conviction among the congregation.<sup>4</sup> In Whitefield’s day, men and women *pressed* to hear the truth—precisely because it was the truth—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.

#### 5. There may be people in our churches, but the masses need to hear the Gospel.

The love of Christ drove Whitefield and his contemporaries out to where the people were, and God gave them a holy boldness to go to the masses and confront them on their own ground, on their turf, in their territory. Whitefield was ‘the first to see that Christ’s ministers must do the work of fishermen. They must not wait for souls to come to them, but must go after souls, and ‘compel them to come in.’<sup>5</sup> 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. We don’t live in the eighteenth century, and God has given us

<sup>1</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 79, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 70–71, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> *Banner of Truth Magazine*, Vol. 87, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Ryle, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*, p. 23.

all sorts of means of communication which were not available to Whitefield and his men. They used whatever means they could to the best effect to reach people, and so too must we.

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. The potential is enormous. Whitefield 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! 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 Whitefield's day, and the need is still the same today.

#### **6. 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, 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.

### **8. CONCLUSION**

Is it right to be seeking for revival such as occurred in Whitefield's day? Who would deny that we desperately need the fire of God to fall upon our land, and that we need God to raise up twentieth century Whitefield-like prophets who will fearlessly thunder His truths throughout the length and breadth of the Commonwealth. Is it possible? Would God send such revival now, as He did then? Could this country, which has never known *national* 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. But if it comes it will be a revival of His Word. It is not that we seek revival just for the sake of revival for there is no distinction in the Scriptures between the Word and Revival. They are the one.

We have a responsibility to be living in His truth, and to be proclaiming it faithfully whatever, wherever. What God will do He will do. Where revival is needed we should be praying for it and seeking His face for that sovereign outpouring of His Spirit. Of course we should earnestly desire that His work be going ahead with great effectiveness, but we also should know that He has His times and seasons for such effusions of His grace.

We would do well 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, our love and devotion and obedience to our Lord quickened, but I believe we would also have our level of expectation raised in the growing desire 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', and He will bare His arm and act—and that what He did 200 years ago might be repeated in our land, in our day, for His great name's sake.