

George Whitefield (1714-1770)



What Did Whitefield Do? How Remarkable Was He?

Whitefield preached over 18,000 sermons and 12,000 talks and exhortations in 34 years, in the American colonies, England, and Scotland. It is estimated his sermons reached the ears of 10 MILLION people.

80% of all American colonists heard him preach face-to-face at least one time. He was more recognizable to colonists than George Washington. He traveled to the colonies seven times, crossing the Atlantic 13 times, and spending over two years of his life on a ship.

Whitefield

George Whitefield who fueled and fanned it into a bonfire. Whitefield was the thread woven into the tapestry of the Great Awakening, on both sides of the Atlantic.

His farewell address in Boston drew 23,000 people when Boston's population was less than 20,000. In New York City he preached to 20,000 people, 30,000 in Philadelphia. As we stated last week, Jonathan Edwards started the fire of The Great Awakening, but it was

In Scotland, near Glasgow, he preached to an estimated 100,000 people. There were an estimated 10,000 people who came to Christ in response to that sermon that day.

Charles Spurgeon - "My example in the ministry is George Whitefield. There is no end to the interest which attaches to such a man as George Whitefield. Often as I have read of his life I am conscious of a distinct quickening whenever I turn to it. He lived. Other men seemed to be only half alive, but Whitefield was all life, fire, wind, force. My own model, if I have such a thing in due subordination to my own Master, is George Whitefield. With unequaled footsteps must I follow his glorious track."

J.C. Ryle - "No Englishman dead or alive has ever equaled him. No preacher has ever been so universally popular in every country he has visited."

Martyn Lloyd Jones - "George Whitefield is beyond any question the greatest English preacher of all time. His influence is beyond calculation. There is no man who has labored with greater zeal in God's Kingdom. Other men merely existed, George Whitefield lived."

John Newton (author of Amazing Grace) - "As a preacher, if anyone were to ask me who were second best I had ever heard, I should be at some loss. There is only one man who is the greatest preacher I ever heard in my life, his name is George Whitefield."

Who was George Whitefield?

Born in Gloucester, England in 1714, his father died when George was two years old. He helped his mother continue to run the family business; an inn and tavern. This job, along with his developing interest in theatre, prepared him for his future...

Whitefield literally worked his way through Oxford University as a "servitor", being granted free tuition in exchange for serving other students - cleaning, tutoring, and assisting with their work.

While a student at Oxford, Whitefield would join a group of four other men in a Bible study that came to be known as The Holy Club. Charles Wesley and John Wesley were also in this group. None of them were yet converted to Christ. They were all under the delusion of a self-works righteousness, trying to please God enough to forgive their sins.

One day Charles Wesley handed Whitefield a book titled *The Life of God in the Soul of a Man*, by a Scottish preacher named Henry Scougal. The book was about the new birth and his five-year stretch of searching for acceptance from God was finally satisfied as he knew forgiveness.

The print quality on the handouts is very poor, but I assure you, you aren't missing much. George Whitefield was of middle stature, a slender body, a fair complexion, and a comely appearance. Most drawings and representations of him show him to be cross-eyed, which he was.

He never attended seminary. He woke every morning to read and study his English Bible, Greek Bible, and Matthew Henry's commentary. In 1736 he was ordained as a deacon and began preaching. In 1738 he received a letter from the Wesley brothers from Georgia.

Where did he preach? How did he preach? Why was he so effective?

Whitefield was most known for preaching to large crowds in open fields outside of towns and large cities. He visited Ireland twice, Scotland 14 times, America 7, and even Bermuda. His method of preaching was passionate, animated, and he would even act out the parts of Old and New Testament characters in his sermons. His hearers were enthralled by this new style that broke from the dispassionate, monotone sermons which simply read notes from the pulpit. J.C. Ryle said when Whitefield preached "He roared like a lion".

His wit was quick and piercing, his imagination was lively, and he had a most ready memory and spoke almost entirely without notes. He had a clear and musical voice and a wonderful command of it. Amid his use of hand gestures, body movement, and animation it remained natural and not distracting.

When in London he would preach every morning Monday through Thursday at 6am and the town of London would be so full of people walking in the dark to hear him preach that it looked instead like people going home from work in the evening it was so crowded.

Wherever Whitefield preached it was a major event, simply overwhelming the town or city. Commerce would come to a halt, business shut down, farmers left their plows in the field, and judges would delay hearings. He set the American landscape ablaze with his preaching.

In his first session preaching in Philadelphia, which was a city at the time of about 13,000 people, he preaches to 6,000 people. He first tried to preach in a church but it was in danger of collapsing the structure, so they moved outside.

When he traveled through New Jersey and arrives in New York City it would be the largest gathering of people in the history of the colonies. He first preached to 8,000 people in a field, then on Sunday morning he preached to 15,000 people, then finally to 20,000 people in the afternoon.

Whitefield traveled and preached all throughout New England including to North Hampton to Johnathan Edwards's church where he preached four times. Edwards would go on to write that the entire town was affected by the preaching of George Whitefield.

He had a singular devotion to Christ. He understood the deeper he went in his relationship with Christ, the higher he could stand to preach the gospel of Christ. "Converse less with man and more with God".

His style of preaching was abundantly clear, lucid, and simple. He never shot over the heads of his listeners. "I always took dead aim for the heart".

He preached with an evangelistic emphasis. He said, "I believe I was never more acceptable to my Master than when I was standing to teach to those hearers in those open fields." Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "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. They must go after souls and compel them to come into. He did not sit tamely by his fireside like a cat on a rainy day, mourning over the wickedness of the land. He dived into holes and corners after sinners, he hunted out people and their sin that he might present Christ to them."

As you visualize the imagery in that quote, of George Whitefield diving into holes after sinners like a hungry cat, listen to this story:

When Whitefield preached at Kingswood which was a coal-mining town in England and as he set up and preached the word spread and the miners began coming out of the mines in the ground like ants out of the earth to come into the crowd and hear him preach. Their faces were pitch black from the soot of the coal and they stood out in the crowd. As he preached 'You must be born again' and he preached the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ he noticed there were white lines forming on their faces and he realized tears were washing the soot from their faces as the conviction of the Holy Spirit was poured out onto these rough crude cussing men.

Whitefield said, "I preach as a dying man to dying men."

He would say, the way he got ready to preach on Sunday was to preach every day of the week. Whitefield used no alter calls, no calling for raising a hand if a decision was made.

His command of oratory was so remarkable, many who rejected his message still traveled to hear him. In one account, a man who was a notorious atheist was among the crowd walking along a dusty road to go see Whitefield preach. When someone asked him, "I didn't think you believed in the gospel" he replied, "I don't, but he certainly does."

Included in this group was Benjamin Franklin who would develop a strong lasting friendship. Franklin used a scientific method to determine how far Whitefield's voice could project against how many people could be in a given area, then reconciled himself that reports of his preaching to 20,000 in Philadelphia were actually conservative.

Also, Franklin himself raised funds to build what would be the largest building in Philadelphia, called the Preaching House, to hold the massive crowds that would gather to hear Whitefield. In 1750, this massive cathedral would become the first building in the founding of the University of Pennsylvania.

Benjamin Franklin saw in Whitefield a potential gold mine. Franklin became his publisher and printed ten editions of Whitefield's journals. From 1739-1741 more than half of the books that Benjamin Franklin published and sold were either by Whitefield or were about Whitefield.

When he leaves Philadelphia, his last sermon has 30,000 people gather to hear him. When he leaves Philadelphia a thousand men follow him on horseback to wherever he goes to preach next. They just wanted to hear him preach one more time.

To summarize and put simply, Whitefield possessed a supernatural empowering from the Holy Spirit. His preaching was the embodiment of 1 Thess 1:5, that his preaching came in demonstration of power in the Holy Spirit in full conviction.

“There is a tremendous difference between uttering truths and preaching. You may have a correct and orthodox message, but it does not follow that you are preaching.” Lloyd-Jones. Whitefield was the embodiment of Spirit-filled preaching.

What did George Whitefield preach?

The dominant sermon subject he would preach was the nature and necessity of the new birth of a man’s soul through a personal encounter with Christ Jesus. “Mr. Whitefield, why do you keep telling us every time we must be born again?” “Because, dear woman, because you must be born again.”

He preached an uncompromising gospel. The bloody cross of atonement was central to his message. He preached grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone - regularly employing the five solas of the Reformation.

Whitefield was Calvinistic in his preaching, yet in a letter to John Wesley he said, “I never read anything John Calvin wrote, my doctrines I had from Jesus Christ and His apostles. I was taught them of God.” He also said, “We are all born Armenians, and we are born again Calvinists.” For Whitefield, predestination was the greatest reason for humility and he reveled in it.

Lloyd-Jones said, “Let us, I hope once and forever, put an end to the lie that says that Calvinism and an interest in evangelism are incompatible.”

He saw God as God and he saw God in everything - in nature, in history, in salvation, in judgement, in damnation, in governing all things. He understood that from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. He understood that God works all things after the council of His will. He understands that God is causing all things to work together for His good. And he understood that those whom He foreknew He predestined and those whom He predestined He called and those whom He called He justified and those whom He justified He glorified. Whitefield was full of the sovereign grace of God.

He understood the teaching of scripture was to unveil the supreme majesty of God himself.

Whitefield said, “The doctrines of our election fill my soul with holy fire. Nothing but the doctrines of the Reformation can do this. Christ is all in all. Man is nothing. He has a free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven till God works in him to will and to do to His good pleasure.”

Here is an excerpt from one of the 78 sermons we have record of from Whitefield. The context here is the calling of Zacheus, the tax collector “publican”, by Jesus. Listen to his appeal, his theology, his style of preaching:

I do affirm that we are saved by grace, and that we are justified by faith alone: but I do also affirm, that faith must be evidenced by good works, where there is an opportunity of performing them.

What therefore has been said of Zaccheus, may serve as a rule, whereby all may judge whether they have faith or not. You say you have faith; but how do you prove it? Did you ever hear the Lord Jesus call you by name? Were you ever made to obey the call? Did you ever, like Zaccheus, receive Jesus Christ joyfully into your hearts? Are you influenced by the faith you say you have, to stand up and confess the Lord Jesus before men? Were you ever made willing to own, and humble yourselves for, your past offenses? Does your faith work by love, so that you conscientiously lay up, according as God has prospered you, for the support of the poor? Do you give alms of all things that you possess? And have you made due restitution to those you have wronged? If so, happy are ye; salvation is come to your souls, you are sons, you are daughters of, you shall shortly be everlastingly blessed with, faithful Abraham. But, if you are not thus minded, do not deceive your own souls. Though you may talk of justification by faith, like angels, it will do you no good; it will only increase your damnation. You hold the truth, but it is in unrighteousness: your faith being without works, is dead: you have the devil, not Abraham, for your father. Unless you get a faith of the heart, a faith working by love, with devils and damned spirits shall you dwell for evermore.

Make haste then, O sinners, make haste, and come by faith to Christ. Then, this day, even this hour, nay, this moment, if you believe, Jesus Christ shall come and make his eternal abode in your hearts. Which of you is made willing to receive the King of glory? Which of you obeys his call, as Zaccheus did? Alas! why do you stand still? How know you, whether Jesus Christ may ever call you again? Come then, poor, guilty sinners; come away, poor, lost, undone publicans: make haste, I say, and come away to Jesus Christ. The Lord condescends to invite himself to come under the filthy roofs of the houses of your souls. Do not be afraid of entertaining him; he will fill you with all peace and joy in believing. Do not be ashamed to run before the multitude, and to have all manner of evil spoke against you falsely for his sake: one sight of Christ will make amends for all. Zaccheus was laughed at; and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution. But what of that? Zaccheus is now crowned in glory; as you also shall shortly be, if you believe on, and are reproached for Christ's sake. Do not, therefore, put me off with frivolous excuses: there's no excuse can be given for your not coming to Christ. You are lost, undone, without him; and if he is not glorified in your salvation, he will be glorified in your destruction; if he does not come and make his abode in your hearts, you must take up an eternal abode with the devil and his angels. O that the Lord would be pleased to pass by some of you at this time! O that he may call you by his Spirit, and make you a willing people in this day of his power! For I know my calling will not do, unless he, by his efficacious grace, compel you to come in. O that you once felt what it is to receive Jesus Christ into your hearts! You would soon, like Zaccheus, give him everything. You do not love Christ, because you do not know him; you do not come to him, because you do not feel your want of him: you are whole, and not broken hearted; you are not sick, at least not sensible of your sickness; and, therefore, no wonder you do not apply to Jesus Christ, that great, that almighty physician. You do not feel yourselves lost, and therefore do not seek to be found in Christ. O that God would wound you with the sword of his Spirit, and cause his arrows of conviction to stick deep in your hearts! O that he would dart a ray of divine light into your souls! For if you do not feel yourselves lost without Christ, you are of all men most miserable: your souls are dead; you are not only an image of hell, but in some degree hell itself: you carry hell about with you, and you know it not. O that I could see some of

you sensible of this, and hear you cry out, "Lord, break this hard heart; Lord, deliver me from the body of this death; draw me, Lord, make me willing to come after thee; I am lost; Lord, save me, or I perish!"

Challenges Whitefield Faced

When he arrived in Georgia in 1738 Whitefield was moved to compassion for the tremendous number of orphans he saw. He established an orphanage in Savannah Georgia and funded this growing ministry personally, to the great stress of his finances. It nearly broke him multiple times and was a continual burden, like a millstone around his neck. For twenty years this Orphanage will be in essence the personal financial responsibility of George Whitefield. It finally took a wealthy aristocrat in England named Lady Hunnington who would help him pay off this debt of the orphanage.

In 1744 he was so financially poor that he told his wife Elizabeth to take their newborn son John and leave London where the cost of living was high and travel to Wales to live in a tiny cottage. Elizabeth and John got into this coach in the dead of winter. As they passed through Gloucester on their way to Wales, they stopped at the only Inn they could find and while there learned her son died from the cold. The Inn was the same Inn owned by his family and where he grew up. Whitefield hurried to be with his family and a

He was eventually opposed by John and Charles Wesley in theology due to his adherence to sovereign grace. Upon return from one of his many trips to the Americas, Whitefield returned to England to great controversy. John Wesley had written a tract called Free Grace, which was a frontal assault of Whitefield's preaching on sovereign election. While he has been gone, Wesley has deepened his own influence because he was present in Whitefield's absence and he has distributed this tract far and wide. Wesley went so far as to tell the people that Whitefield is preaching the Devil's doctrine. Whitefield was put in the awkward position of defending himself against his friend and brother in Christ. It was Whitefield who continually offering an olive branch to repair the relationship. Whitefield removed himself from the Methodist movement and turned it over to Wesley to take away any sense of competition between them. Also, he requested Wesley to preach at his own funeral, which Wesley did do. Whitefield was asked in the midst of this turmoil, do you think you will see Wesley in heaven. He responded "No, I don't think I will see Wesley in heaven. Because he will be so close to the throne of grace and I will be so far away in the back corner of heaven that I will not even be able to see Wesley."

When he preached at carnival gatherings, merchants and others persecuted him physically.

He had a callous disregard for his own personal well-being and health. J.C. Ryle said, "Never perhaps was there a man of whom it could be so truly said he spent and was spent for Christ."

Even marriage took a distant second and was one of his few weaknesses as a Christian example.

Whitefield died in Newburyport Massachusetts. He said on one occasion, "May I die preaching. I hope yet to die in the pulpit or soon yet as I come out of it." His last sermon was 2 Corinthians verse 5 'examine yourselves whether you remain in the faith'. His remains are under the pulpit in that church where he was to preach the next morning.

