

George Whitefield - Revival Preacher

by Stan K. Evers

Struggling to achieve salvation through his own efforts, the Gloucester-born student, George Whitefield, at the age of twenty, read 'The Life of God in the Soul of Man', written by a 17th century Puritan divine, Henry Scougal. Near death for seven weeks because of his constant fasting, Whitefield learnt from this book that it is Christ's dying and not our doing that gives the sinner acceptance with God. Whitefield wrote in his Journal, 'God was pleased to remove the heavy load, to enable me to lay hold of his dear Son by a living faith. With what joy - joy unspeakable - was my soul filled!' This great event took place in the spring of 1735 - three years before John and Charles Wesley trusted Christ alone for salvation.

Fifteen 'mad people'

Ordained on June 20th 1736; a week later, Whitefield preached his first sermon at St. Mary de Crypt, Gloucester. 'Fifteen people were driven mad' complained some of his hearers to the Bishop who responded with the wish that the madness would not wear off before next Sunday. These first fifteen conversions paved the way for a ministry spanning thirty-five years throughout Great Britain and in thirteen American colonies. Historians estimate that Whitefield preached 18,000 sermons before he died.

Miners in tears

After a visit to America in 1738, Whitefield returned to England to find closed Anglican pulpits because of his powerful Spirit-anointed preaching. J. C. Ryle, the first Bishop of Liverpool wrote, 'The Church was too much asleep to understand him, and was vexed at a man who would not keep still and let the devil alone'. The pulpit ban became a blessing in disguise when Whitefield took to open-air preaching. The evangelist described his first open-air preaching in his Journal: 'I hastened to Kingswood [Bristol]. There were about 10,000 people to hear me. The trees and hedges were full. All was hush when I began; the sun shone bright and God enabled me to preach for an hour with great power, and so loudly that all, I was told, could hear me. The fire is kindled in this country and I know all the devils in hell shall not be able to quench it'. Miners, just up from the mines, listened and the tears flowed making white gutters down their coal-black faces. Whitefield's preaching gave birth to the 18th century Evangelical Revival.

The preacher

Eyewitnesses speak of Whitefield's eloquence, envied even by actors such as David Garrick who said 'I would give a £100 to say "Oh" like George Whitefield'. Pennsylvania's Benjamin Franklin, a publisher and a Quaker with little spiritual interest in the evangelist's message gave a glowing

report of his preaching. 'The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous. I observed the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers, and how much they admired and respected him, notwithstanding his common abuse of them' - he called his hearers sinners! The changed lives of Whitefield's hearers impressed Franklin even more than the preacher's oratory. An American farmer who heard Whitefield preach wrote, 'He looked almost angelical, a young slim tender youth. He looked as if he was clothed with authority from the great God. A sweet solemnity sat upon his brow. My hearing him preach gave me a heart wound. ... I saw that my righteousness would not save me'. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones called Whitefield 'the greatest preacher that England has ever produced'.

The Message

George Whitefield skilfully adapted his message to his hearers - the noisy crowds on London's Kennington Common and at Moorfields and the aristocrats in the home of Selina, the Countess of Huntingdon. He believed that the unchanging gospel is 'the power of God' for all sorts of sinners (Rom. 1:16).

What was Whitefield's message? The doctrines known as Calvinism: the depravity of sinners and the freeness of God's grace; he rejoiced in the substitutionary atonement of Christ for God's elect; he proclaimed that all those for whom Christ died will persevere to the end of their lives and will then be glorified in heaven. Where did he learn these truths? 'My doctrines I had from Jesus Christ and His apostles; I was taught them of God', he wrote, and added two years later, 'I embrace the Calvinistic scheme, not because Calvin, but Jesus Christ, has taught it to me'. Whitefield, the convinced Calvinist, preached the gospel earnestly and persuasively urging and commanding sinners to go to Jesus Christ for salvation. A mark of revival is heartfelt gospel preaching whether the preacher is a Calvinist, such as George Whitefield, or an Arminian, such as John Wesley - both men preached that salvation is through Christ alone.

'I die to be with him'

Whitefield died, during an asthmatic attack, in America on Sunday morning September 30th 1769, having reached the age of 55, and was buried at Newbury Port, New England. Shortly before dying he said, 'Lord Jesus, I am weary in the work, but not of it. If I have not yet finished my course, let me go and speak for You once more in the fields and come home to die'. God answered this prayer and he preached for two hours. While preaching this last sermon he cried out, 'Works! Works! A man get to heaven by works! I would as soon as think of climbing to the moon on a rope of sand! How willingly would I live forever to preach Christ, but I die to be with him'.

The Secret of Whitefield's Success

1. Natural eloquence - a gift from God - used by the power of God's Holy Spirit.
2. Fellowship with God. Whitefield gives us a glimpse in his Journal of his walk with God. 'Early in the morning, at noonday, evening and midnight, nay, all day long, did the blessed Jesus

visit and refresh my soul. At other times I would be overpowered with a sense of God's Infinite Majesty'.

3. Godliness. 'Above all he was a great saint, and Wesley and others bore tribute to this during his life and his death. This was the ultimate secret of his preaching power' (Lloyd-Jones).
4. Concern for the lost and the conviction that sinners are in danger of an everlasting hell.
5. Wholehearted commitment to God. 'If ever a man burnt himself out in the service of God, it was Whitefield. He was tireless and relentless in his efforts to win souls. Throughout his life he enjoyed the presence of God in his preaching. Even on his last day in this world he preached, though he was very ill. He was a man whose sole desire was to preach Christ crucified' (Nigel Clifford, Christian Preachers, Bryntirion Press).

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Recommended reading

- Biography of George Whitefield (2 volumes), Arnold Dallimore
- The Journal of George Whitefield
- The Letters of George Whitefield
- Select sermons of George Whitefield

All published by the Banner of Truth.

Quinta Press have the most comprehensive Works of George Whitefield in a CD with an index. Not only are the six Works of Whitefield on the CD but also a number of biographies.

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