

George Whitefield

Arguably the greatest revival apart from the Reformation itself began in the late 1730's and extended for almost 50 years. It was dubbed '*The Great Evangelical Awakening*'. It was a sudden, sovereign and unexpected move of the Holy Spirit that swept through England, Scotland, Wales, parts of Continental Europe, and the New England colonies in America. This Awakening touched millions of lives of men and women of all classes. It literally changed the course of history and shook the moral fabric of society. One of the most influential preachers of these days was *George Whitefield*.

The condition of the churches prior to the Awakening was one of apostasy. In England churches were dead and formal. Few adhered to sound doctrine or taught from Scripture. Immorality was rife even amongst pastors and many had sunk into entangling themselves with the affairs of the world, (2Tim.2:4). Just two hundred years before, the English martyrs, in their desire to bring the Bible to the common people and for their stance against Popish traditions, had been put to their deaths by the Roman Catholic religion. Just one hundred years before, Puritans had been jailed. Yet these events had almost been forgotten (in much the same way as today the Reformers and the Reformation have almost been forgotten and even suffer denigration).

Against that background arose this young 22 year old Church of England clergyman who began to startle England, preaching in the pulpits of London with amazing zeal and power. The next year John and Charles Wesley burst on the scene followed by Daniel Rowlands and Jonathan Edwards across the Atlantic in America. God in His mercy brought an Awakening that would, as in the book of Acts, turn churches, villages and even nations '*upside down*', (Acts 17:6).

In 1732 Whitefield entered Oxford University to study for his degree and met Methodists John and Charles Wesley at what was called '*The Holy Club*'. The Wesleys were searching for salvation and Whitefield later said that when he joined them he '*began to live by the rule*'. (1) Whitefield almost died as a result of a lengthy fast but after reading a book by Henry Scougal he realised he needed to '*be born again or be damned*'. His search for truth was intense and he became so physically weak he could hardly walk up stairs. But in the spring of 1735 God drew him and burst revelation upon his soul and Whitefield knew he was Born Again. '*God was pleased to remove the heavy load...giving me the spirit of adoption to seal me to the day of everlasting redemption...the weight of sin fell off...my joys were like a springtide and overflowed the banks.*' (2)

Whitefield at first fought the call to the 'ministry' until he felt he was fighting against God. His hours on his knees in devotion and reading the Bible increased. He studied Greek and delved into commentaries. He never again turned to legalism or strange views of Christian perfection as he had with the Wesleys and the 'Holy Club'. '*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*'. (3) He formed a society in his home town, Gloucester. They met each evening of the week to sing Psalms, read the Bible, pray, and listen to George teach for an hour or two.

In 1736 Whitefield was ordained in Gloucester. Some mocked at his first sermon but many were overawed and he was accused of driving 15 people 'mad'. (4) Crowds began to flock to hear him and congregations were taken by storm. He was clear, simple, earnest and people were visibly stunned

during his preaching. He constantly pressed upon listeners their state of depravity, their total inability in Adam and the necessity for a new birth.

Meanwhile the Wesleys had gone to Georgia, Nth America and asked Whitefield to come. In 1738 he set sail to join them. But on the day he was to set out from England a despondent Wesley arrived back and urged Whitefield to give up his mission. (5) Wesley did this by 'casting a lot' to determine if God wanted Whitefield to stay or go. The lot drew Whitefield to remain home. (6) Whitefield ignored this advice and continued. In all he crossed the Atlantic 13 times. Some trips almost saw him in disaster and shipwreck.

The Wesleys were broken men and John admitted his reason for going to Georgia was to save his soul. (7) It was not until May 1738 that the Wesleys were converted through German Moravian teachers who were teaching in London at the time. The Wesleys then began to display power similar to Whitefield in preaching. At the same time Daniel Rowlands was preaching on 'eternal perdition and sin'. Other men too were beginning to rise up.

When Whitefield returned to England the clergy attacked him relentlessly. They disliked that Whitefield would preach to 'baptised people' who he said 'needed regeneration'. (8) Whitefield avoided controversy wherever possible but occasionally was drawn into debate. He later admitted he had been too hasty at times and had replied with some 'wild fire' mixed with zeal. This rejection by the Church of England forced Whitefield into the open air. John Wesley followed. The Church of England attempted a court against Whitefield but it failed. Eventually they had him 'defrocked'.

Whitefield also faced bitter opposition from John Wesley. Wesley, in Whitefield's absence, had preached a sermon against the doctrine of election knowing full well it would hit the heart of Whitefield's ministry. Many were turned away from Whitefield's ministry and subsequently he received many threatening letters. To the shock of Whitefield's followers Wesley seized buildings which Whitefield had raised the money for and had commonly preached in. Whitefield claimed he wrote to Wesley concerning this but received only a '*long harsh letter*' in reply. (9) Despite such opposition Whitefield's popularity steadily increased. Wesley publicly accused Whitefield of '*refusing to offer the hand of fellowship...*' (10) However, Whitefield refused to hold any grudge and commented lovingly and positively of both Wesleys and that he loved them '*as his own soul*'. (11)

Whitefield's theology like almost all of the great Reformers and evangelists was that of the church Fathers and the Puritans. He was what some today call a 'Calvinist' (although this term is currently being grossly misrepresented as, and confused with, 'hypercalvinism'). Whitefield wrote: '*I cannot renounce those precious truths that I have felt the power of and which were taught me not of man, but of God...*' (12) He taught predestination, the eternal unconditional election of God, the perseverance of the saints, and that no man comes to Christ except the Father draws him. His sermons were full of the 'doctrines of grace'. Whitefield stated: '*I embrace the Calvinistic scheme, not because of Calvin, but Jesus Christ has taught it to me.*' (13) He strongly held to the Westminster Confession of Faith and said of the 'doctrines of grace': '*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.' (14)

Unlike some of the Calvinism today there was nothing dead or lifeless about Whitefield's preaching. He spoke with fire and passion. He wrote to a friend: '*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...nothing but the 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 to do His good pleasure.*' (15) To Howell Harris he wrote: '*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 till midnight, of the rivers of His all sufficient grace...oh tell them...press on them to believe immediately!...compel them...*' (16)

To avoid the conflict with the Wesleys and others, he spent most of his time in America. While in Georgia he 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.*' (17) The Methodists were split into those who followed Wesley and those who attended to the 'doctrines of grace'. Whitefield at one time tried to combine the two factions but eventually stepped away from the leadership of the Methodist movement, saying '*let the name of Whitefield perish*'. (18) Thus John Wesley is known today as the leader of the Methodist movement. Charles Wesley later moderated his doctrine considerably and John Wesley is reputed to have denied his teaching of Christian perfection at his death.

In 1739 Whitefield preached to the miners at Kingswood in Bristol. Tears streamed down the miners faces as Whitefield called them to repentance from sin. Hundreds were converted. He then visited America again and the Great Awakening spread along the whole eastern seaboard. He continued to travel and in 34 years he preached more than 18,000 times, sometimes averaging 13 sermons per week and at times up to 23. He regularly preached to an average of 20,000 people and sometimes up to 60,000. Some months he reached 650,000 people at the rate of 22,000 per day. On June 1st 1739 when he was just 24 years of age he preached to 80,000 in a park. Whitefield, like Spurgeon, spoke with audible power - 30,000 people could hear him.

Whitefield '*attacked sin...preaching repentance towards God and faith towards Jesus Christ...*' (19) His messages were nearly always on sin, the need for salvation, the new birth, faith and repentance.

When Whitefield preached he was stoned, assaulted and abused. Eventually he took some rioters to court and they were found guilty but Whitefield had them let off. The violence then somewhat diminished.

The secular press made fun of Whitefield in editorials and cartoons. But the standards of morality in all levels of society itself were changed on a national scale by such preaching. Even Politicians were changed. The crime rates reduced dramatically. Pubs and theatres closed. The modern missionary movement as well as Sunday schools were founded. Bible schools re-opened and the 'clergy' in general rose up from a dead formalism.

Whitefield remained a humble man. His diaries show his sense of unworthiness. He would write '*keep me from climbing...let me hate preferment*' (20) He was led by a passion for souls and a love for Christ. He preached a pure Gospel and had soaked himself in Scripture of which he knew whole sections off by heart. Few of his contemporaries could

match his simplicity and lucidity in preaching. His listeners were left in no doubt where they stood with almighty God.

Whitefield was bold and preached to the conscience. He would often say '*I have come here to speak to you about your soul*' or '*this is for you and this is for you*' (21) There is the story of one man who had a finger in each ear, determined not to listen. A bee sat on his nose and he took a finger out of one ear to swat the insect, and at that instant he heard Whitefield thunder '*He that has ears to hear, let him hear!*' The man listened from that moment on and was converted.

He had a remarkable power to describe and illustrate. At times he almost acted out some of his illustrations and was known to often weep. At one time he was describing a poor blind beggar deserted by his dog and at the edge of a cliff. Whitefield graphically described the beggar leaning forward. A Lord Chesterfield rushed forward to '*save the beggar*' crying '*he's gone, he's gone!*' Many people actually thought they were witnessing the dramatic roles Whitefield described. Few could sleep when he preached, for Whitefield would wake them up with one of his thunderous phrases. If C.H. Spurgeon was the '*Prince of Preachers*' perhaps Whitefield was the '*Lion of Preachers*'. One writer said Whitefield was '*like a powder-blast in the quarry, and would by one explosive sermon shake a district*'. (22) Charles Spurgeon said Whitefield was '*all life, fire, wing and force*'. (23)

Whitefield's diaries show he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He often wrote '*Came home full of peace and love and joy in the Holy Ghost*'. (24) He was a happy and cheerful man. He enjoyed the Lord's ministry but was very self disciplined. Each day he had set times for study, prayer counselling, reading letters, etc.

Whitefield put much of his gifts and offerings into orphanages. He was known to account for money painstakingly and scrupulously.

He was often ill, suffered from asthma and exhausted himself from continuous preaching. Yet he relished the thought of death.

In 1770 he died suddenly from an asthma attack at age 56.

Today the church is in perilous times like those before the Great Awakening. Apostasy, immorality and lawlessness abound. New doctrines and church growth movements have weakened any emphasis on sound doctrine, the preaching of sin and the new birth. Many now even attack the Reformation and the 'doctrines of grace'. 'Easy believism' methods fill the church with tares...The church needs Reformation! We need to return to sound and bold expositional preaching.

Terry Arnold

Source: '*George Whitefield - Man of Grace*' by John Dunn, 1992 (1) '*George Whitefield, God's Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the 18th Century*' by Arnold Dallimore, P.16 (2) Ibid P.18 (3) '*Select Sermons of George Whitefield*' by J.C. Ryle, P.13 (4) Ibid, P.14 (5) George Whitefield's Journal, P.119 (6) *Banner of Truth* magazine, Vol.2, P.15 (7) '*George Whitefield*' by Dallimore, Vol.1, P.50 (8) '*Select Sermons of George Whitefield*' by J.C.Ryle, P.15 (9) '*George Whitefield, God's Anointed Servant...*' by Dallimore, P.100 (10) Ibid P.100 (11) Ibid P.100 (12) Ibid P.101 (13) Ibid P.69 (14) *Banner of Truth* magazine, Vol.79, P.13 (15) '*George Whitefield, God's Anointed Servant...*' by Dallimore, P.69-70 (16) Ibid P.70-71 (17) '*George Whitefield*' by Dallimore, Vol.1, P.140 (18) '*George Whitefield, God's Anointed Servant...*' by Dallimore, P.154 (19) '*Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*' by J.C.Ryle, P.78 (20) '*George Whitefield*' by Dallimore, Vol.1, P.133 (21) '*Select Sermons of George Whitefield*' by J.C.Ryle, P.27 (22) *Banner of Truth* magazine, Vol.79, P.22 (23) '*Spurgeon, C.H. The Early Years*', P.348 (24) George Whitefield's Journal, P.205