**George Whitefield and the Great Awakening**

## I. George Whitefield (1713-1770)[1]

*Galli and Olsen: Whitefield is "Probably the most famous religious figure of the eighteenth century."*

**Early Life**

- George was born in the Bell Inn in Gloucester, England in 1714.
- His mother kept the Bell Inn in ship-shape and his father was a servant.
- However, at the age of 2, his father died, and his mother was left alone to raise the gregarious boy.

**Theater Kid**

- Whitefield grew up reading plays and had a flair for acting.[2] He would recite Shakespeare at length and had an unusual knack for grabbing people's attention and riveting them to himself.
- Though he later rescinded his approval of theater and plays, he and his ministry were nonetheless shaped by the dramaticism and vivid prose that he imbibed as a kid.
- On the whole Whitefield said that he was "addicted to lying, filthy talking, and foolish jesting."[3]

**Oxford**

- With the persistent encouragement of his mother he was admitted to Pembroke college at Oxford University. There, he put himself through his education by waiting on wealthier students.
- While he was at Oxford he joined a group led by the brothers John and Charles Wesley who called themselves "the Holy Club", others maligned them and their strict methods of holiness and called them "methodists".[4]
- Under their influence, George began to experience much turmoil of soul until he experienced a life-changing conversion in 1735. "In how own words, he cried out from his bed, "'I thirst! I thirst!' Soon after this, I found and felt in myself that I was delivered from the burden that so heavily oppressed me! The Spirit of Mourning was taken away from me, and I knew what it was truly to rejoice in God my Savior."[5]

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[1]Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, "George Whitefield," in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 63. All quotations not otherwise cited are from this source.

[2]John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *Church History Volume Two: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2013), 411.

[3]Woodbridge and James, 411.

[4]Woodbridge and James write in *Church History: Volume Two*, "Much impressed by William Law's *Christian Perfection*, John and others "methodically" sought to follow a life of Christian self-denial and devotion through fasting and good deeds, ministering to the poor and visiting prisoners, attending to the Eucharist, and engaging in regular prayer and Bible reading. Critics derisively called members of the Holy Club "Bible Moths" or "Methodists." Later, John defined "Methodist" as "one that lives according to the method laid down in the Bible."

[5]Woodbridge and James, 411.

**Priest, Preacher, and Missionary**

- After he was saved by our Lord, he quickly desired to be admitted to the Anglican priesthood. Into which he was ordained in the following year, 1736, at the age of 21.
- He felt greatly helped as he delivered his first sermon shortly thereafter. His exposure to public oratory as a child and in the Holy Club were a definite help but nothing compared to the assistance rendered to him by the Holy Spirit.
    - He made several men go mad… Mr. Benson hoped that their madness would last until Sunday.
- Thereafter, he "decided to become a missionary to the new George colony on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean."
- "When the voyage was delayed, Whitefield began preaching around London. He was surprised to discover that wherever he spoke, crowds materialized and hung on every word."
- He preached well-known biblical stories in the present tense to grip his audience.
- "Among the enthralled was David Garrick, then the most famous actor in Britain. "I would give a hundred guineas," he said, 'if I could say 'Oh' like Mr. Whitefield.'"
- MESOPOTAMIA. "[John] Wesley admired Whitefield's preaching ability, once claiming that Whitefield could say the word 'Mesopotamia' and people would weep."[6]
- Once in Savannah 1737 he worked on establishing an orphanage but quickly returned about three months later.

**Bristol** (1738)

- "When he returned to London, he found many churches closed to his unconventional methods. He then experimented with outdoor, extemporaneous preaching, where no document or wooden pulpit stood between him and his audience."
- Whitefield noted that there were none going to the coalminers in the rough and tumble town of Bristol, so he set out there to preach Christ to them. In February of 1739 "Whitefield attempted field preaching for the first time. His audience consisted of coal miners emerging from the coal pits…"[7]
- He wrote,
    - Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was a friend to publicans, and came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected was the sight of the white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully fell down their black cheeks as they came out of their coal pits.[8]'
- "Two months later, he was field preaching to large crowds in London."[9]

[6]Woodbridge and James, 412.
[7]Woodbridge and James, 412.
[8]Woodbridge and James, 412.
[9]Woodbridge and James, 412.

**The First Celebrity**

- "In 1739, Whitefield set out for a preaching tour of the American colonies. Whitefield selected Philadelphia—the most cosmopolitan city in the New World—as his first American stop. But even the largest churches could not hold the 8,000 who came to see him, so he took them outdoors."
    - Wherever he went, Whitefield drew record crowds. He was, according to Thomas Kidd, the first modern celebrity. Kidd compares his coming to America to that of the Beatles in the 1960s.
        - "So pervasive was Whitefield's impact in America that he can justly be styled America's first cultural hero. Indeed, before Whitefield, it is doubtful any name, other than royalty, was known equally from Boston to Charleston."
    - "Once Whitefield started speaking, however, the frenzied mobs were spellbound. 'Even in London,' Whitefield remarked, 'I never observed so profound a silence.'"
- "In the fall of 1740 Whitefield's field preaching tour through New England (45 days, 175 sermons) before large crowds became a major component of the 'First Great Awakening.'"[10]

**Testimony from:**

- Nathan Cole
- Elizabeth Hinson
- Benjamin Franklin

- "The spiritual revival he ignited, the Great Awakening, became one of the most formative events in American History. His last sermon on this tour was given at Boston Commons before 23,000 people, likely the largest gathering in American history to that point."

## II. The Great Awakening[11]

**What was the Great Awakening?**

**Definition.** Kidd defines the Great Awakening as "an enormous surge of Christian evangelism and spiritual fervor that saw its height in the early 1740s but continued to cascade through the colonies well into the era of the American Revolution."[12]

**Nuance.** Many Christian observers saw the Great Awakening as the result of a surprising outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who precipitated a new zeal for evangelism and drew tens of thousands to conversion and renewed dedication to Christ. Then and now, some have criticized the more emotional aspects of the awakenings and the revivalists' work. But there seems no question that, on balance, the Great Awakening was one of the more profound works of God in American history.

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[10]Woodbridge and James, 412.
[11]Thomas Kidd, *American History, Volume 1* (B&H Academic, 2019), 61-65.
[12]Kidd, 61.

**When was the Great Awakening?**

**1730s-1770s and beyond.** The Great Awakening began in the 1730s and persisted into the era of the American Revolution and beyond.

**Who was involved in the Great Awakening?**

**Re-vival.** Kidd writes that,

> The Great Awakening was a 're-vival' in the sense that many of the awakened came out of a church background. THose churchgoers had their faith reinvigorated, or they realized that they had never really experienced the transforming power of God in their lives. Some of the most impressive results came in the most highly churched areas of the colonies such as New England and the Scots-Irish villages of the Middle Colonies…

**Why was there a Great Awakening?**

**Spiritual decline.** Kidd continues,

> ...there was also a sense among many colonists in the 1720s and 1730s that the colonies had fallen into spiritual decline. This belief was pervasive in New England… many New England pastors lamented that the people had fallen away from their first love. They had gotten distracted by business and other concerns, and God had sent them repeated judgments such as the Salem witchcraft debacle and wars with the French and Native Americans.

**Half-way Covenant.** Many were not committing to the church in the Americas and the Puritan leadership had acquiesced to their lukewarm faith. The Great Awakening stirred the minds of many out of their malaise and toward greater commitment to Christ and his church.

**How?**

**Christ Proclaimed.** The Great Awakening was wrought through the faithful preaching of Christ Jesus. Specifically, the preaching of the law and the gospel in conjunction with the doctrine of justification by faith alone were central to the movement.

**What was the Preaching like?**

- Law and Gospel (Rom 7:7-12)
    - Dead in sin as revealed by the Law
    - Justified by faith alone as a gift in the gospel
    - This faith produces good works
- Letter from the Duchess of Buckingham to Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon (414)
- Gospel sweetness evident in Whitefield's letter to Howell Harris
- Do not make the gospel into a new law (Gal 2:15-16, 3:1-6)

## III. Whitefield Continued

**Theological Views and Oratory Technique**

- “Though mentored by the Wesleys, Whitefield set his own theological course: he was a convinced Calvinist. His main theme was the necessity of the ‘new birth,’ by which he meant a conversion experience. He never pleaded with people to convert, but only announced, and dramatized, his message.”
- “Jonathan Edwards’s wife, Sarah, remarked, ‘He makes less of the doctrines than our American preachers generally do and aims more at affecting the heart. He is a born orator. A prejudiced person, I know, might say that this is all theatrical artifice and display, but no so will anyone think who has seen and known him.”
- Not an abolitionist but nonetheless sought to preach to slaves the riches of Christ. “The response was so great that some historians date it as the genesis of African-American Christianity.”

**Other Ventures**

- “Everywhere Whitefield preached, he collected support for an orphanage he had founded in Georgia during his brief stay there in 1738, though the orphanage left him deep in debt for most of his life.”
- The greatest success that God was pleased to grant him happened in Scotland. There, he preached to a group of over 20,000 eager listeners about the riches of God’s grace for them in Christ.
    - “The following morning, more than 1,700 communicants streamed alongside long Communion tables set up in tents. Everywhere in the town, he recalled, “you might have heard persons praying to and praising God.”
- Whitefield made seven total trips across the Atlantic to the Americas to preach.
- “Indeed, much of the early controversy that surrounded Whitefield’s revivals disappeared (critics complained of the excess enthusiasm of both preacher and crowds), and former foes warmed to the mellowed Whitefield.
    - Serious pushback came in 1744 from the faculty of Harvard.
- “Before his tours of the colonies were complete, virtually every man, woman, and child had heard the ‘Grand Itinerant’ at least once. So pervasive was Whitefield’s impact in America that he can justly be styled America’s first cultural hero.”

**Personal Life**

- Married an older widow named Elizabeth James. “Whitefield was suspicious of marriage and feared a wife would become a rival to the pulpit… the union never seemed to flower into a deeply intimate, sharing relationship.”
- “In 1770, the 55-year-old continued his preaching tour in the colonies as if he were still a young itinerant, insisting, ‘I would rather wear out than rust out.’ He ignored the danger signs, in particular asthmatic ‘colds’ that brought ‘great difficulty’ in breathing. His last sermon took place in the fields, atop a large barrel. ‘He was speaking of the inefficiency of works to merit salvation,’ one listener recounted for the press, ‘and suddenly cried out in a tone of thunder, ‘Works! Works! A man gets to heaven by works! I would as soon think of climbing to the moon on a rose of sand.’” The following morning he died.”

**Legacy**

- John Wesley eulogized Whitefield by saying that George had “preached the gospel more widely and fruitfully than anyone since the apostles.”[13]
- J.I. Packer called him a “sanctified barnstormer. God have him actor’s gifts as his resource for communicating Christ… [Garrick said that] Whitefield could move a crowd to tears of joy just by his way of pronouncing ‘Mesopotamia.’”[14]
- On average, he spoke in public 50 hours each week.[15]
- “Let the name of Whitefield perish, if so be that Christ is glorified”.[16]
- “In his lifetime, he preached at least 18,000 times to perhaps 10 million hearers.”

Thomas Kidd summarizes Whitefield's legacy:

1. "Whitefield was the most influential Anglo-American evangelical leader of the eighteenth century."
2. "He also indelibly marked the character of evangelical Christianity."
3. He "was the first internationally famous itinerant preacher and the first modern transatlantic celebrity of any kind."
4. "Perhaps he was the greatest evangelical preacher that the world has ever seen."[17]

**MLJ on Whitefield:**
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhN2VgdJp_c

[13]J.I. Packer, “Great George”.
[14]J.I. Packer, “Great George”.
[15]J.I. Packer, “Great George”.
[16]J.I. Packer, “Great George”.
[17]Thomas Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* **(**Yale University Press, 2014), 260-263.