

George Whitefield and the Rise of American Evangelism

by Mark Sidwell¹

Christians sometimes think of “worldview” in terms of how Christianity applies to cultural issues in such areas as economics or the fine arts. But a true biblical worldview must be centered on understanding what Scripture both teaches and emphasizes. For example, however one views the “cultural mandate” that many Christians espouse, it is more important for the believer to fulfil the “gospel mandate” stressed in the NT. Part of this gospel mandate is evangelism. In that regard, this article is the first in a series on noted evangelists in American history—their work, methodology, and philosophy—a series that is intended to deepen understanding of the successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, of historic American evangelism.²

American evangelism originated in the British Isles. The first Protestant evangelization in North America was conducted by Puritans from England who attempted to spread the gospel among Indians in New England. Likewise, the pattern for American evangelism originated in Britain with the pioneer evangelist George Whitefield. This “Grand Itinerant” and “Great Awakener” not only preached up and down the eastern seaboard of the colonies with notable effect, but in doing so he also unwittingly set a precedent for other evangelists to follow. However they may have differed from Whitefield in methodology or theology, Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, and other American evangelists owe a debt to this English preacher, their forerunner in evangelism.³

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³ The starting point for studying George Whitefield is his own writings. Preeminent are his journals, the best edition of which is *George Whitefield's Journals* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960). His letters, numerous shorter writings, and sermons are gathered in *The Works Of The Reverend George Whitefield*, ed. John Gillies (London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly and Messrs. Kincaid and Bell, at Edinburgh, 1771–72); volume 1 of the *Works* has been reprinted as *Letters of George Whitefield for the Period 1734–1742* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), and this edition is particularly useful for the modern appendices (483–570) that provide annotations to the letters and the text of additional letters by Whitefield. Biographies of Whitefield divide into the devotional and the scholarly. The outstanding example of the first category is Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970, 1980); it is a model of what a dedicated author can accomplish in a devotional biography. Among the scholarly biographies, two useful if somewhat critical studies are Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), and Frank Lambert, *“Pedlar in Divinity”: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737–1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). However, uniting the qualities of the devotional and scholarly approaches is Thomas Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), likely the best modern biography.

Early Years

Whitefield was born in Gloucester, England, on December 16, 1714. He liked to say he was born in an inn, a tavern called the “Bell Inn” that his family operated. His father died before he was two, and his mother’s second marriage was unhappy, ending in divorce. Nevertheless, she nourished great hopes for George, sending him to school, when he was not forced by financial circumstances to work in the inn, “drawing wine for drunkards,” as he put it.⁴

The main source for Whitefield’s early years is an autobiographical account later published in his *Journals*. He recounted his days before conversion through his later understanding of human depravity, stressing the sinfulness or at least worthlessness of most of his pursuits. Whitefield loved acting and recitation and showed considerable skill at public speaking at school. Although he attended church and was even moved at times by passages of Scripture, he never developed sustained interest in spiritual matters. Still “I was always fond of being a clergyman,” he wrote, and “used frequently to imitate the ministers reading prayers, etc. Part of the money I used to steal from my parent I gave to the poor.”⁵ His first real interest in religion began in 1730 when he received communion for the first time at age sixteen.

His circumstances changed dramatically when his mother discovered that her son might be able to attend Oxford University. Since he was of lower social class than most Oxford students and limited financially, Whitefield went to the university in 1732 as a servitor, one who paid his way by serving the whims of wealthier students. At the university Whitefield made life-changing acquaintances. He was invited to become part of the “Holy Club,” an informal band of students led by John and Charles Wesley. Scoffers labelled them *Methodists* “because they lived by rule and method.”⁶ They were a serious and devout group who, at this point in their spiritual development, sought peace with God through rigorous self-discipline, regular periods of prayer and reading Scripture, and performing works of charity. Young Whitefield threw himself into these activities with as much zeal as any member of the Holy Club.

Whitefield practiced these “methods” so rigorously that both his schoolwork and his health suffered, but they did not bring the peace he sought. Relief finally came through a shattering crisis. After a seven-week period of conviction over his sin, Whitefield said he became unbearably thirsty and was reminded of Christ’s words “I thirst” when His “sufferings were near an end.” Whitefield wrote, “I cast myself down on the bed, crying out, ‘I thirst! I thirst!’ Soon after this, I found and felt in myself that I was delivered from the burden that had so heavily oppressed me. The spirit of mourning was taken from me, and I knew what it was truly to rejoice in God my Saviour.”⁷ George Whitefield had experienced the new birth, and it was to become his theme for the rest of his life.

⁴ *Journals*, 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46 note.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

Launching a Career

In 1736 Whitefield graduated from Oxford and was ordained a deacon in the Church of England, the entry level for clergy in the established church. By the time he graduated, John and Charles Wesley had gone to the colony of Georgia, where they hoped to minister to the settlers and become missionaries to the Indians. Whitefield also felt the attraction of Georgia and made plans to travel to the colony, although he encountered delays in sailing that stretched into several months.

Meanwhile, he began preaching in England with remarkable effect. As Whitefield put it, “I began to grow a little popular.”⁸ Preaching in his hometown of Gloucester and then mainly in London and Bristol, Whitefield soon saw huge crowds filling the churches in which he spoke. A major breakthrough in his ministry came in 1739, after his first visit to America. He met Howell Harris, a powerful preacher in Wales who had taken the controversial step of preaching outdoors. Harris’s reasons were practical. Lacking ordination, he was denied access to the churches, and furthermore he found he could address crowds larger than most churches could hold if he spoke outdoors. Because Whitefield faced opposition from more conservative clergy, and also drew large crowds, Harris encouraged him to follow suit.

In eighteenth-century Britain, preaching outdoors was at best controversial and disreputable. A proper ministry belonged inside a church building. Furthermore, if one did not have permission from a local Anglican clergyman or bishop, preaching outdoors violated church order. Whitefield hesitated, then committed himself. On February 17, 1739, at Kingswood, near Bristol, he spoke outdoors to some 200 Welsh coal miners. “Blessed be God that I have now broken the ice!” he wrote in his journal. “I believe I was never more acceptable to my Master than when I was standing to teach those hearers in the open fields.”⁹ In a short while, outdoor preaching became a mark of Whitefield’s ministry. Preaching near Bristol a little over a month later, Whitefield said, “I preached in the fields, which put me in mind of our Lord’s saying, ‘Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in.’”¹⁰ A week later he declared, “I always find I have most power when I speak in the open air.”¹¹

America and the Great Awakening

Whitefield finally sailed to America in the spring of 1738. He spent only four months in North America on this first visit, primarily in Georgia. “America is not so horrid a place as it is represented to be,” Whitefield wrote to a friend.¹² His work in Georgia was basically that of a parish minister to the settlement in Savannah. “I visit from house to house, catechise, read prayers twice and expound the two second lessons every day; read to a houseful of people three times a week; expound the two lessons at five in the morning, read prayers and preach twice, and expound the catechism to servants,

⁸ *Journals*, 81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹² George Whitefield to Mr. H., 10 June 1738, in *Works*, 1:44.

&c, at seven in the evening every Sunday.”¹³ He claimed to enjoy the challenge: “*America, infant Georgia, is an excellent soil for christianity [sic]; you cannot live there without taking up a daily cross.*”¹⁴

The Great Tour

As a result of his work in Savannah, Whitefield was burdened by the needs of orphans whose parents had died while trying to settle the New World. Whitefield therefore led a successful effort to establish an orphanage in Georgia, which he then oversaw. A major goal of his preaching tours, both in America and Britain, was to solicit funds for this work. During his second visit to North America in 1740, he launched a tour of the colonies to speak on behalf of the orphanage. That effort blossomed in an unexpected manner. Whitefield’s journey became known as “the Great Tour,” an amazing trek through British North America in which he preached to impressive throngs.

Dallimore breaks this tour into three periods: a spring tour to Philadelphia and New York (April 2–June 5); a summer tour to Charleston (July 2–25); and a fall tour to New England, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston (August 18–December 14).¹⁵ Toward the end of the first stage, Whitefield said that in thirty-three days he had “travelled some hundreds of miles, and preached fifty-eight times in the provinces of *New-Jersey, New-York, and Pensylvania [sic].*” Crowds swelled into the thousands. In Philadelphia the audience was estimated at 20,000.¹⁶ In the last stage, over the course of seventy-five days, he preached 175 times (not including small informal meetings) and traveled over 800 miles.¹⁷

Both Whitefield and some of his hearers left dramatic descriptions of these meetings. In Nottingham, Delaware, Whitefield said that “thousands cried out, so that they almost drowned my voice. . . . Some fainted; and when they had got a little strength, they would hear and faint again.”¹⁸ In Newport, Rhode Island, Whitefield went to a private house, but when the people discovered he was there they crowded in and surrounded the outside. Whitefield stood on the threshold and preached on the text, “Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”¹⁹ During a sermon at Basking Ridge in New Jersey, Whitefield reported, “A little boy, about eight years of age, wept as though his heart would break.” Someone placed the boy in the wagon from which Whitefield was preaching, “which so affected me,” he said, “that I broke from my discourse, and told the people that, since old professors were not concerned, God, out of an infant’s mouth, was perfecting praise; and the little boy should preach to them.” He said, “As I was going away, I asked the little boy what he cried for? He answered, his sins. I then asked what he wanted? He answered,

¹³ George Whitefield to Mr. H., 10 June 1738, in *Works*, 1:44.

¹⁴ George Whitefield to Mr. —, 16 November 1738, in *ibid.*, 1:45.

¹⁵ Dallimore, 1:465.

¹⁶ George Whitefield to Mr. G— L—, 22 May 1740, in *Works*, 1:179.

¹⁷ *Journals*, 499.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 425.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 455.

Christ.”²⁰ It is little wonder that in the midst of these events, Whitefield wrote in a letter, “All things go on well in *America*—nay, better than I dare ask, or could think.”²¹

Whitefield’s preaching created a stir in America’s largest cities. He observed that Boston, a major economic center and busy port of trade with a population of perhaps 17,000,²² “has the form of religion kept up, but has lost much of its power.” He allowed that Boston was “very remarkable for . . . the external observance of the Sabbath” but feared that many Bostonians rested in “a head-knowledge.”²³ Nevertheless, Whitefield preached there with great effect. A firsthand observer reported, “Though he preached every day, the houses were exceedingly crowded; but when he preached in the Common, a vaster number attended: and almost every evening the house where he lodged was thronged to hear his prayers and counsels.”²⁴

The size of the crowds astonished colonials. At three meetings in the New York City area, Whitefield estimated the audiences at 5,000, 7,000, and 8,000—numbers which, even if exaggerated, represented an unheard-of size for almost any kind of gathering at that time.²⁵ There were dangers in such numbers. On September 22 a crowd awaiting Whitefield in Boston’s New South Church panicked at the sound of a breaking board. People began pushing to get out for fear the overcrowded church was collapsing. Whitefield, who entered the meeting house during the panic, reported that “some threw themselves out of the windows, others threw themselves out of the gallery, and others trampled upon one another; so that five were actually killed, and others dangerously wounded.” He led the crowd out of the building into the common where he preached in the rain.²⁶

Whitefield’s visit to Philadelphia was among his most notable. Here Whitefield attracted the notice of printer Benjamin Franklin. The *Philadelphian* called the crowds that heard Whitefield “enormous,” and their response bemused Franklin by “how much they admir’d and respected him, notwithstanding his common Abuse of them, by assuring them they were naturally *half Beasts and half Devils*.”²⁷ Franklin said that Whitefield transformed the city. “It was wonderful to see the Change soon made in the Manners of our Inhabitants; from being thoughtless or indifferent about Religion, it seem’d as if all the World were growing Religious; so that one could not walk thro’ the Town in an Evening without Hearing Psalms sung in different Families of every Street.”²⁸

²⁰ *Journals*, 487.

²¹ George Whitefield to Madam C——, 27 April 1740, in *Works*, 1:166.

²² Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 85.

²³ *Journals*, 473.

²⁴ Mr. Prince, “Accounts of the Revival of Religion in Boston,” *Christian History*, 26 January 1745, 381.

²⁵ *Journals*, 415, 417. Dallimore, 1:295–96, discusses the estimates that Whitefield and his supporters gave of the number of his hearers and suggests that the estimates should probably be halved, which nonetheless makes for sizable crowds.

²⁶ *Journals*, 461. See also Dallimore 1:531.

²⁷ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 175.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 175–76.

Friendship with Franklin

The English evangelist and the Philadelphia printer formed a remarkable friendship.²⁹ Franklin's initial relations were purely commercial: Whitefield's writings sold well, so Franklin printed them.³⁰ But Franklin grew to admire Whitefield, saying that he "never had the least Suspicion of his Integrity, but am to this day decidedly of Opinion that he was in all his Conduct, a perfectly *honest Man*. And methinks my Testimony in his Favour ought to have the more Weight, as we had no religious Connection. He us'd indeed sometimes to pray for my Conversion, but never had the Satisfaction of believing that his Prayers were heard."³¹

Franklin preserved several anecdotes about Whitefield's effectiveness. Franklin, for example, disagreed with the plan for Whitefield's orphanage, believing it wiser to bring the orphans to Philadelphia than to haul building materials to Georgia.³² "I thereupon refus'd to contribute," he said. Shortly thereafter, he attended one of Whitefield's meetings, resolved not to give any money to the project. "I had in my Pocket a handful of Copper Money, three or four silver Dollars, and five Pistoles in Gold," Franklin recalled. "As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the Coppers. Another Stroke of his Oratory made me asham'd of that, and determin'd me to give the Silver; and he finish'd so admirably, that I empty'd my Pocket wholly into the Collector's Dish, Gold and all." An acquaintance of Franklin, Thomas Hopkinson, had come to the meeting likewise resolved to give nothing and had taken the precaution of bringing no money with him. The sermon so moved Hopkinson, however, that he tried to borrow money from a nearby Quaker friend who was, Franklin said, "perhaps the only Man in the Company" unaffected by Whitefield, and who said, "*At any other time, Friend Hopkinson, I would lend to thee freely; but not now; for thee seems to be out of thy right Senses.*"³³

Whitefield maintained ties to Franklin for the rest of his life, often urging conversion on him. After hearing of Franklin's experiments with electricity, Whitefield wrote to him, "As you have made a pretty considerable progress in the mysteries of electricity, I would now humbly recommend to your diligent unprejudiced pursuit and study the mystery of the new-birth. It is a most important, interesting study. . . . You will excuse this freedom. I must have *aliquid Christi* [something of Christ] in all my letters."³⁴

²⁹ David T. Morgan, "A Most Unlikely Friendship: Benjamin Franklin and George Whitefield," *Historian* 47 (1985): 208–18, provides a very good survey of the relationship of Whitefield and Franklin, reviewing all the correspondence and documents relating to the two men. For more detail, see Randy Petersen, *The Printer and the Preacher: Ben Franklin, George Whitefield, and the Surprising Friendship that Invented America* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015).

³⁰ The friendship that developed, however, did not keep Franklin from printing works hostile to Whitefield. See, e.g., George Gillespy, *Remarks Upon Mr. George Whitefield, Proving Him a Man Under Delusion* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1744); Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #5405.

³¹ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 178. Franklin once wrote to Whitefield, "Your frequently repeated Wishes and Prayers for my Eternal as well as temporal Happiness are very obliging." Benjamin Franklin to George Whitefield, 19 June 1764, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Leonard W. Labaree, et al., ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-), 11:231.

³² Dallimore, 1:453, gives reasons why Whitefield built the orphanage in Georgia despite the difficulties and the objections of supporters such as Franklin.

³³ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 177–78.

³⁴ George Whitefield to Benjamin Franklin, 17 August 1752, in *Works*, 2:440. Franklin's papers contain several other notable interchanges between the two men. Franklin once wrote to Whitefield during the French and Indian War

An Account from Connecticut

One of the most famous accounts of the Great Tour came from a Connecticut farmer, Nathan Cole. Having heard of Whitefield's progress through the Middle Colonies and New England, Cole eagerly received word that Whitefield was to preach in nearby Middletown. "I was in my field at work," he wrote. "I dropped my tool that I had in my hand and ran home to my wife, telling her to make ready quickly to go and hear Mr. Whitefield preach at Middletown, then ran to my pasture for my horse with all my might, fearing that I should be too late."

They dashed the twelve miles, riding double on horseback. When the horse became fatigued, Cole would get down to spell the horse and run until he was breathless, then remount. When they neared the road that went from Hartford to Middletown, Cole reported, "I saw before me a cloud of fog arising. I first thought it came from the great river, but as I came nearer the road I heard a noise of horses' feet coming down the road, and this cloud was a cloud of dust made by the horses' feet." A "steady stream of horses and their riders" jammed the road, the horses "all of a lather and foam with sweat, their breath rolling out of their nostrils every jump." The Coles edged into this stream of humanity and rushed along with it for three miles.

Cole said 3,000 to 4,000 people had assembled at the meeting house where Whitefield was to speak. As Cole and his wife arrived, he said, "I turned and looked towards the Great River and saw the ferry boats running swift backward and forward bringing over loads of people, and the oars rowed nimble and quick. Everything, men, horses, and boats seemed to be struggling for life. The land and banks over the river looked black with people and horses." When Whitefield stepped forward to speak, "he looked almost angelical; a young, slim, slender youth before some thousands of people with a bold undaunted countenance . . . as if he was clothed with authority from the Great God, and a sweet solemn solemnity sat upon his brow." After hearing the evangelist preach, Cole said, "By God's blessing, my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me."³⁵ After scenes such as these, it is little wonder that Whitefield wrote to the governor of Massachusetts later that year, "Surely our Lord intends to set *America* in a flame."³⁶

Criticism

Whitefield's success created its own dangers. His popularity in America caused Whitefield to "think it would be best for me to withdraw. But then I consider, that He, who delivered *Daniel* out of

speculating how they could found a colony on Ohio River that might "greatly facilitate the Introduction of pure Religion among the Heathen" by showing the Indians "a better Sample of Christians than they commonly see in our Indian traders." Benjamin Franklin to George Whitefield, 2 July 1756, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 6:468–69. In what was apparently their last exchange of correspondence, Franklin speculated that perhaps "our particular little affairs" are beneath the notice of the God who administers the universe. "It is, however," Franklin wrote, "an uncomfortable thought, and I leave it." Whitefield scribbled on the letter, "*Uncomfortable* indeed! and, blessed be God, *unscriptural*, for we are fully assured that 'the Lord reigneth,' and we are directed to cast *all* our own care on him, because he careth for us." Benjamin Franklin to George Whitefield, [Before 2 September 1769], *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 16:192.

³⁵ This version of Cole's account is quoted from *Journals*, 561–62, which modernizes the spelling and punctuation.

³⁶ George Whitefield to Jonathan Belcher, 9 November 1740, in *Works*, 1:220.

the den of lions, and the three children out of the fiery furnace, is able and willing to deliver me also out of the fiery furnace of popularity and applause,”³⁷ a disclaimer that reveals the potentially intoxicating nature of his acclaim.

Yet the acclaim was far from universal. Some within the Church of England opposed Whitefield as a rabble-rouser. In Charleston, South Carolina, the Anglican commissary denied Whitefield permission to take the Lord’s Supper at a Sunday service.³⁸ In Britain Whitefield was the target of physical violence. He recalled that at Exeter “a drunken man threw at me three great stones. One of them cut my head deeply, and was like to knock me off the table.”³⁹ Likewise, while field preaching at Balton, “a woman attempted twice to stab the person that was putting up a stand for me to preach on.”⁴⁰ Whitefield and his followers “were often pelted with eggs, dirt.”⁴¹ Although there were apparently few physical attacks on Whitefield in North America, he was attacked in a constant flow of critical pamphlets.⁴² Some criticisms were petty. “We think that the Practice of *singing Hymns* in the *publick roads . . . a Piece of Weakness and enthustastical Ostentation*,” complained the authors of one pamphlet.⁴³ Anglican clergy challenged his “disorderly” habit of preaching on weekdays, not just Sundays.⁴⁴

Other charges were more substantial. Opponents accused Whitefield of “enthusiasm,” not eagerness or excitement, but in the older sense of that word, that is, claiming to receive impressions, leadings, and even revelations from God. One critic alleged that Whitefield claimed “Extraordinary Communications from God,” special “assistances” of the Holy Spirit in preaching, and “Special Directions from God.”⁴⁵ Others criticized him for playing on the emotions of his hearers.⁴⁶

Still others attacked him for the violation of church order. They particularly criticized his practice of itinerancy, saying Whitefield’s itinerant preaching transgressed church parish boundaries. Furthermore, they argued that Whitefield had no scriptural authority for such a ministry, that ministers

³⁷ George Whitefield to “My dear Sister in Christ,” 10 November 1739, in *Works*, 1:69.

³⁸ George Whitefield to John Rowland?, 11 July 1740, in *ibid.*, 1:197. The commissary was the representative of the Bishop of London, who oversaw the Anglican church in the colonies.

³⁹ George Whitefield to Lady H——n, 4 September 1749, in *ibid.*, 2:278.

⁴⁰ George Whitefield to Lady H——n, 16 June 1750, in *ibid.*, 2:357.

⁴¹ George Whitefield to Mr. L——, 15 May 1742, in *ibid.*, 1:388.

⁴² One widely distributed polemic was *The Querists, Or, An Extract Of Sundry Passages Taken Out Of Mr. Whitefield’s Printed Sermons*, (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1740); Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #4587.

⁴³ The Sentiments and Resolution of an Association of Ministers . . . Concerning the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield (Boston: T. Fleet, 1745), 8; Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #5668.

⁴⁴ *Journals*, 452.

⁴⁵ “Observations Upon The Conduct and Behaviour of a Certain Sect, Usually Distinguished by the Name of Methodists,” in George Whitefield, *An Answer To The First And Second Part Of An Anonymous Pamphlet* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1744), 13–16; Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #5515.

⁴⁶ One defender answered the charges of both enthusiasm and emotionalism: “In Opposition to *Enthusiasm*, he preaches a close Adherence to the Scriptures, the Necessity of trying all Impressions by them, and of rejecting whatever is not agreeable to them, as Delusions.” As for manipulating emotions, he said Whitefield “*first* applies himself to the *Understandings* of his *Hearers*, & then to the *Affections*.” Untitled Notice in *Christian History*, 15 December 1744, 336.

were to settle with and attend to a single congregation.⁴⁷ Critics likewise disparaged Whitefield's attacks on ministers who questioned the revival, often to the point of implying they were unconverted. They regretted how Whitefield's ministry and the Great Awakening in general had introduced divisions and "separations" among the churches between pro- and anti-revival forces. Furthermore, because Whitefield constantly collected funds for his orphanage in Georgia, cynics questioned whether he was not simply lining his own pockets.

Some charges were mere innuendo, but others had some basis. Even a group of supporters who wanted Whitefield to return to Connecticut to preach expressed the hope to Whitefield that he would "not be free in personal Reflections to wound the Characters of others who have been generally well accepted among Christians for Piety" and that he would not take up offerings for the orphanage lest hearers think "you were pursuing a private, worldly Interest of your own."⁴⁸ Whitefield usually defended himself against charges of greed and gain. At other times he appeared to excuse some problems as in the mere nature of things: "But you know, in this mixed state of things, wild-fire will necessarily blend itself with the pure fire that comes from God's altar."⁴⁹

At other times Whitefield admitted he was wrong. When he spoke with four Boston ministers who feared more of the "separations" that resulted from his previous ministry there, Whitefield told them, "I was sorry if anything I wrote had been a means of promoting separations for I was of no separating principles, but came to New England to preach the Gospel of peace to all that were willing to hear . . . and promote charity and love among all."⁵⁰ Sometimes Whitefield blamed youthful inexperience. "Some unguarded expressions, in the heat of less experienced youth, I certainly did drop. I was much too precipitate in hearkening to, and publishing private informations, and thereby *Peter*-like cut too many ears off."⁵¹ On other occasions he admitted being "too rash and hasty in giving characters, both of places and persons. Being fond of scripture language, I have often used a style too apostolical, and at the same time I have been too bitter in my zeal." He recognized why some could have detected "enthusiasm" in his ministry in that he "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 likewise too much made inward impressions my rule of acting." The evangelist admitted ruefully, "By these things I have given some wrong touches to God's ark, and hurt the blessed cause I would defend, and also stirred up needless opposition."⁵²

⁴⁷ Opponents of Whitefield's itinerancy rejected his appeal to parallels with Paul and charged instead that his methods promoted discord and division. Nathaniel Stone, et al., *The Declaration of Ministers in Barnstable County, Relating to the Late Practice of Itinerant Preaching* (Boston: Rogers and Rowle, 1745); Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #5534.

⁴⁸ Invitations to the Reverend Mr. Whitefield, from the Eastern Consociation of the County of Fairfield (Boston: Kneeland and Green, 1745), 5; Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #5591.

⁴⁹ George Whitefield to Mr. —, 18 January 1745, in *Works*, 2:73.

⁵⁰ *Journals*, 529.

⁵¹ George Whitefield to Mrs. —, 19 February 1745, in *Works*, 2:76.

⁵² George Whitefield to the Rev. Mr. S—, 24 June 1748, in *ibid.*, 2:144.

A Dramatic Career

Whitefield's spectacular tour of the American colonies in 1740 may have been a highlight of his career, but it was only one milestone in a remarkable life. In 1741, closely following the triumph of the Great Tour, Whitefield entered a serious controversy with his friend John Wesley. They had shared much spiritually since their Oxford days, and Whitefield had helped introduce Wesley to the idea of outdoor preaching. Both men had seen tremendous results from their work. Wesley, however, was Arminian in theology, and Whitefield was strongly Calvinistic.⁵³ In 1739 Wesley preached the sermon "Free Grace" attacking the doctrine of predestination, publishing it shortly after Whitefield left for North America.⁵⁴ The following year Whitefield replied with an open letter from Georgia.⁵⁵ Although the conflict did not completely sever relations between them, the two men grew more distant, and their respective followers widened the division farther.

While in America, Whitefield had preached in the church of Jonathan Edwards at Northampton, Massachusetts, and had stayed in Edwards' home. The warm home life of Edwards' family impressed Whitefield and "caused me to renew those prayers, which, for some months, I have put up to God, that He would be pleased to send me a daughter of Abraham to be my wife."⁵⁶ Back in England, he married Elizabeth James, a widow from Abergavenny, South Wales, on November 14, 1741. Unfortunately, this marriage did not become the haven of spiritual warmth and fellowship he had observed in the Edwards' home. His constant absences created tension, and his wife could not keep up with her energetic, active husband. The Whitefields had one child, who died in infancy. His wife remained mostly in the shadows until her death in 1768.

Meanwhile, Whitefield's ministry continued to expand. He preached across England, made a total of fourteen trips to Scotland, where he saw marked revivals, and crossed the ocean to America five more times between 1744 and 1770. He also found a patron in Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, an evangelical noblewoman who committed her fortune to further gospel work. She appointed Whitefield and other evangelical preachers as her personal chaplains, which was her privilege as a member of the nobility, and thereby underwrote their evangelistic work. This system eventually led to the formation of the Huntingdon Connexion of Calvinistic Methodists as a Dissenting (non-Anglican) body.

Even success had its challenges. Whitefield once described a typical experience at Moorfields, a site in London for a kind of carnival of music, puppet shows, wild animals, and other entertainment. Arriving at six o'clock in the morning, he estimated that there were 10,000 people there, later swelling to perhaps 20,000 or 30,000. "Not for me," he said, "but for satan's instruments to amuse them." Whitefield began preaching on the text, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so shall the

⁵³ Iain Murray traces the division in part to the theological background of the two men. Wesley came from a tradition of high Anglicanism, in which Arminianism was strong. Whitefield, on the other hand, was a reader of Puritan theologians. See Murray's "Prefatory Note" in *Journals*, 564–65. See also Kenneth Lawson, "Who Founded Methodism? Wesley's Dependence on Whitefield," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 4, no. 3 (1995): 39–57.

⁵⁴ "Free Grace," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, *Sermons III*, 71–114, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 542–63.

⁵⁵ For the full text of the letter, see *Journals*, 569–88.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 476–77.

son of man be lifted up.” As crowds began to drift to him from the attractions, he switched texts to “Great is *Diana of the Ephesians*,” anticipating that the entertainers would try to break up his meeting. “I was honoured with having a few stones, dirt, rotten eggs, and pieces of dead cats thrown at me,” but the crowd reacted so well on the whole that he announced he would come back at six o’clock that evening. After his return his opponents made as much noise as they could to drown him out. They brought in “a recruiting sergeant” with a drum, for whom Whitefield simply told the crowd to make way, then began to speak again once the sergeant had passed through. One man unsuccessfully tried several times to strike Whitefield with a whip. “I think I continued in praying preaching and singing, (for the noise was too great at times to preach) about three hours,” he reported.⁵⁷

Although none of Whitefield’s later trips to North America matched the impact of the Great Tour of 1740, he still preached effectively in his last five excursions into the colonies. He viewed North America as a land of evangelistic opportunity. He referred to “hunting after poor lost sinners” in North Carolina, which he called “these ungospelized wilds.”⁵⁸ He reported that there were “thousands and thousands in *America* who as to spiritual things know not their right hand from their left; and who are ready to hear the gospel from my mouth.”⁵⁹

As he had in Britain, Whitefield continued to minister among the lower—even outcast—classes. In the British Isles, revivalists had preached to groups such as coal miners, who were scorned by the respectable. In America Whitefield and others continued this pattern, notably by preaching to slaves and free blacks.⁶⁰ From the beginning of his work in America, Whitefield was, as he put it, “touched with a Fellow-feeling of the Miseries of the poor Negroes.” He charged slave owners with treating their dogs better than their slaves and of keeping the slaves “ignorant of Christianity.”⁶¹ He asked if slave owners thought their children “are any way better by nature than the poor Negroes.”⁶² The Great Awakening sparked the first real surge in conversions among African Americans and helped give the black church in America a strong evangelical and revivalistic character. Phillis Wheatley, a former slave and America’s first notable African-American poet, memorialized Whitefield after his death, portraying the evangelist as saying,

“Take him, ye *Africans*, he longs for you,
Impartial Savior is his title due:

⁵⁷ George Whitefield to Mr. L——, 11 May 1742, in *Works*, 1:384-86. Eventually, Moorfields became a site of regular ministry as his supporters later built “Whitefield’s Tabernacle” there, one of several structures named after him, in which he preached regularly. The area was also a center of John Wesley’s ministry, being the site of the Foundry, Wesley’s original London chapel. After Whitefield’s death Wesley built what became known as Wesley’s Chapel, near the site of the Foundry about a block from the Whitefield Tabernacle.

⁵⁸ George Whitefield to the Reverend Mr. L——, 11 October 1747, in *ibid.*, 2:136.

⁵⁹ George Whitefield to Mr. H—— H——, 30 May 1747, in *ibid.*, 2:103.

⁶⁰ Dallimore, 1:495–509, gives a good overview of Whitefield’s work among African Americans.

⁶¹ George Whitefield, “Letter III: To the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South-Carolina,” in *Three Letters from the Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1740), 13; Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #4651.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 15. Likewise, he said elsewhere “that negro children, if early brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, would make as great proficiency as any white people’s children.” *Journals*, 379.

Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood,
You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God."⁶³

Yet Whitefield did not condemn slavery itself. In fact, because Georgia originally prohibited slavery, Whitefield actually supported efforts to introduce it in order to make the colony financially profitable. In a letter to a friend and supporter who opposed slavery, Whitefield defended his position by citing the OT examples of Abraham's slaves and of the Gibeonites who fell under Israel's yoke. Christians should seize the opportunity of slavery, he said, and "diligently improve the present opportunity for [the slaves'] instruction."⁶⁴ Some of his supporters disagreed and continued to agitate against slavery.⁶⁵

John Marrant, a free black of Charleston, attended a Whitefield meeting with plans to interrupt it by blowing a horn. As he put the horn to his lips, however, Marrant said that Whitefield "looking round, as I thought, directly upon me, and pointing with his finger, he uttered these words, 'Prepare to meet thy God O Israel.'" Marrant said he was "struck to the ground, and lay both speechless and senseless near half an hour." When he awoke, he could still hear Whitefield speaking, "every word . . . like a parcel of swords thrust in to me." After the service Whitefield came to him and said, "Jesus Christ has got thee at last." Marrant was converted a few days later. After his conversion he preached among the Cherokee and became a pastor and church planter in Nova Scotia and Boston.⁶⁶

Whitefield also preached to the upper classes, including the students at Harvard and Yale Colleges. After preaching to them messages critical in tone, Whitefield heard of a spiritual moving among them. He wrote to them, "What great things may we not now expect to see in *New England*, since it has pleased God to work so remarkably among the sons of the prophets?" Nonetheless, he warned them, "Learning without piety, will only make you more capable of promoting the kingdom of satan." He hoped that they studied "not to get a parish, nor to be polite preachers, but to be great saints."⁶⁷

Whitefield once exclaimed, "May I die preaching!"⁶⁸ Although he did not die in the pulpit, he did preach to the end of his life. In September 1770 Whitefield was in New England, during his seventh tour of North America. On September 29 he preached in Exeter, New Hampshire, at noon to a large crowd, then made his way to the home of the Presbyterian minister in Newburyport, Massachusetts. He planned to go to bed after supper and rest, but a large crowd gathered outside the house asking to

⁶³ Phillis Wheatley, "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield," in *Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin), 16.

⁶⁴ George Whitefield to Mr. B——, 22 March 1751, in *Works*, 2:404–5.

⁶⁵ A good example of the anti-slavery position among Whitefield's supporters was the Bryan family, to whom Whitefield addressed this letter. They vainly sought the elimination or at least amelioration of slavery in Georgia. For a discussion of their struggles, see Alan Gally, "Planters and Slaves in the Great Awakening," in *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord*, ed. John B. Boles (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 19–36.

⁶⁶ John Marrant, "A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant," in *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 78–79. See also Sidwell, *Free Indeed*, 15–23.

⁶⁷ George Whitefield to "the Students, &c. under convictions at the colleges of Cambridge and New-haven,—in New England and Connecticut," n.d. (c. 1741), in *Works*, 1:296.

⁶⁸ George Whitefield to Dr. S——, 9 June 1752, in *ibid.*, 2:432.

hear him. Whitefield therefore stood on the landing and preached to them until his candle burned down. That night he suffered a severe asthma attack and died on September 30. Only fifty-six years old, he was buried beneath the pulpit of the Presbyterian church in Newburyport.

Theology

George Whitefield preached doctrine but did so with such fervor and drama that his listeners, whatever else they may have said about him, never called his sermons dry. One may characterize Whitefield's theology as evangelical Calvinism. He combined the tradition of the Reformed branch of the Reformation typified by John Calvin with an emphasis on the new birth. In fact, he preached across denominational lines because he saw all the different denominations as representing the doctrines of the Protestant Reformation, at least as he understood them. His focus on evangelical conversion deeply shaped his theology, including his beliefs about evangelism, experimental religion, the office of an evangelist, and the importance of interdenominational cooperation in spreading the gospel.

Calvinism and "Methodism"

Whitefield's staunch Calvinism led to conflict with the Arminian John Wesley. Whitefield claimed never to have read Calvin and that his doctrine came "from Christ and his apostles; I was taught them of God."⁶⁹ Whitefield did, however, acknowledge his debt to "the *good old Puritans*," especially New England Puritans.⁷⁰ He considered Calvinistic teaching simply "the doctrines of the Reformation." Other systems of theology "leave freewill in man, and make him, in part at least, a Saviour to himself."⁷¹

For some, Whitefield's embrace of both Calvinism and evangelism made no sense. Wesley made the common charge against Whitefield's position that the doctrine of election cut the nerve of evangelism. The elect would be saved no matter what happened, and the reprobate would likewise be lost. Whitefield retorted, "O dear Sir, what kind of reasoning, or rather sophistry is this! Hath not God, who hath appointed salvation for a certain number, appointed also the preaching of the word, as a means to bring them to it? . . . And if so, how is preaching needless to them that are elected; when the gospel is designed by God himself, to be the power of God unto their eternal salvation? And since we know not who are elect, and who reprobate, we are to preach promiscuously to all."⁷² He told Wesley "*Honoured Sir*, let us offer salvation freely to all by the blood of Jesus; and whatever light God has communicated to us, let us freely communicate to others."⁷³

⁶⁹ George Whitefield to John Wesley, 25 August 1740, in *Works*, 1:205.

⁷⁰ George Whitefield to William Cooper, 26 February 1741, in *ibid.*, 1:255.

⁷¹ George Whitefield to Rev. Mr. P——, 10 November 1739, in *ibid.*, 1:89.

⁷² *Journals*, 575. He also wrote, "I believe Christ's redemption will be applied to all that shall believe. Who these are, we know not, and therefore we are to give a general offer and invitation; convinced of this, that every man's damnation is of himself, and every man's salvation all of God." George Whitefield to Mr. B——, 29 June 1750, in *ibid.*, 2:363.

⁷³ George Whitefield to John Wesley, 26 March 1740, in *ibid.*, 1:156.

In his commitment to Calvinism, Whitefield tried to maintain charity, although at times his moderation sounded a bit condescending: “Though I am a strenuous defender of the righteousness of Christ, and utterly detest *Arminian* principles, yet I know that God gave me the Holy Ghost, before I was clear in either as to head-knowledge: and therefore . . . I am the more moderate to people who are not clear, supposing I see the divine image stamped upon their hearts.”⁷⁴ To a fellow Calvinist, he said, “The doctrines of election, and of final perseverance, I hold as well as you.—But then, they are not to be contended for with heat and passion. Such a proceeding will only prejudice the cause you would defend.”⁷⁵ He reminded Wesley of the heated clash between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli during the Reformation, especially Luther’s antipathy towards Zwingli despite the fact that Zwingli “in all probability equally loved the Lord Jesus.” He cautioned, “Let this, dear Sir, be a caution to us, I hope it will to me.”⁷⁶

Despite the conflict between Whitefield and Wesley, both men were called “Methodists,” even if Whitefield and the Huntingdon Connexion were called “*Calvinistic* Methodists.” Both Whitefield and Wesley shared a “Methodistic” form of piety, a similar view of how the Christian life should be lived.⁷⁷ They agreed on the experience of a vital relationship with Christ, beginning with the new birth, as the central Christian experience, and in this they contrasted with the predominant view in the Church of England, where receiving the sacraments and learning the catechism were central. For Whitefield and Wesley, baptism, communion, and catechism were important but were subordinate to—and ultimately worthless without—the new birth. Methodists of all stripes also emphasized Spirit-anointed worship and preaching. One could not simply assume the Holy Spirit’s work whenever the Word was preached and the sacraments celebrated, but one must actively seek the Spirit’s special blessing on every activity through prayer.⁷⁸ Methodistic piety stressed the centrality of experienced conversion and rejected the assumption that those who had been baptized and brought up in the church were converted. Furthermore, Whitefield and Wesley also viewed holy living as a necessary result of conversion. Whitefield thus spoke of the need “to direct a careless unthinking world into a *holy Method* of dying unto themselves, and living unto God! This is the only Methodism I desire to know.”⁷⁹

Experimental Religion

As this Methodistic brand of piety indicates, Whitefield emphasized “experimental” (i.e., experienced) religion. When Whitefield read an epitaph the printer Benjamin Franklin had composed

⁷⁴ George Whitefield to John Willison, 7 July 1742, in *Works*, 1:406.

⁷⁵ George Whitefield to J—— L——, 26 August 1740, in *ibid.*, 1:206.

⁷⁶ George Whitefield to John Wesley, 26 March 1740, in *ibid.*, 1:156.

⁷⁷ For a discussion of these two strands from the Calvinistic perspective, see Michael A. Milton, “Why I Am a Calvinistic Methodist (and Why I Am Still a Presbyterian),” *Christian Observer*, August 1999, 22–24.

⁷⁸ It is interesting to note that after eating with some Quakers in 1739, a group known for their stress on leading of the “Inner Light,” Whitefield said he disagreed with their rejection of the sacraments and tithes, “But I think their notions about walking and being led by the Spirit are right and good.” *Journals*, 237.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 32. He also wrote, “Formerly, if a person was serious, or preached Christ, he was termed a *Puritan*, now he is a Methodist.” George Whitefield to Mr. —— H——, 18 December 1748, in *Works*, 2:213.

for himself in which Franklin expressed the hope that his body would someday “Appear once More In a New and More Elegant Edition Revised and Corrected By the Author,” he wrote to Franklin, “Believe on Jesus, and get a *feeling possession of God in your heart*, and you cannot possibly be disappointed of your expected second edition.”⁸⁰ So strong was this emphasis on feeling and experience that Whitefield sometimes had to clarify what he meant. He wrote to the Bishop of Gloucester over his alleged use of the phrase “*sensible operations of the Holy Ghost*.” “I know not that we use the word *sensible*,” Whitefield explained, “but, if we do, we do not mean that God’s Spirit manifests itself to our *senses*, but that it may be perceived by the soul, as really as any sensible impression made upon the body.”⁸¹

At the heart of this experience—the very commencement, in fact—was the doctrine of the new birth. In an often-repeated story (probably apocryphal), someone asked Whitefield why he preached so often on the text “Ye must be born again” (John 3:3). “Because,” Whitefield replied, “ye must be born again.” True or not, the incident accurately illustrates the burden of Whitefield’s message.⁸² One of his earliest published works was a sermon *On the Nature and Necessity of Our Regeneration or New Birth in Jesus Christ*. Whitefield saw this doctrine as a key truth that united all Christians. He mentioned, for example, meeting “an Anabaptist teacher” and concluded after speaking with him, “By what I could find out he was a spiritual man. . . . we both agreed in this, that unless a man be born again, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.”⁸³

Office of an Evangelist

In words echoing those of John Wesley, Whitefield once wrote, “The whole world is now my parish. Wheresoever my master calls me, I am ready to go and preach his everlasting gospel.”⁸⁴ This vision of the world as his “parish,” his assigned field of duty, led Whitefield to preach outdoors and to travel extensively. During his second trip to America, he resigned from his parish position in Savannah. “A parish and the Orphan House together are too much for me; besides, God seems to shew me it is my duty to evangelise, and not to fix in any particular place.”⁸⁵ The following year he wrote, “My business seems to be, to evangelize, to be a Presbyter at large.”⁸⁶

⁸⁰ George Whitefield to Benjamin Franklin, 17 January 1755, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 5:475–76 (emphasis added).

⁸¹ George Whitefield to the Bishop of Gloucester, 9 July 1739, in *Letters of George Whitefield for the Period 1734–1742*, 500.

⁸² The story is repeated without documentation, e.g., in F. W. Boreham, *A Casket of Cameos* (London: Epworth, 1924), 57. However, the same story is related of John Wesley, also without documentation, in Edward S. Ninde, *George Whitefield: Prophet and Preacher* (New York: Abingdon, 1924), 94.

⁸³ *Journals*, 115.

⁸⁴ George Whitefield to Risdan Darracott, 10 November 1739, in *Works*, 1:105. The Banner of Truth annotations to *Letters of George Whitefield for the Period 1734–1742*, 527–28, discuss the use of the “world is parish” phrase by Wesley and Whitefield. The earliest documented use of the phrase is by Wesley, who included it in a letter he incorporated into a journal entry for June 11, 1739: “I look upon *all the world as my parish*.” *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 19, *Journals and Diaries II (1738-43)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Hertzentrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 67.

⁸⁵ *Journals*, 488. The entry is dated November 6, 1740.

⁸⁶ George Whitefield to Ebenezer Erskine, 16 May 1741, in *Works*, 1:262.

Easily uttered, these words were nonetheless controversial. Sometimes Whitefield seemed to think the justification for his ministry self-evident. When one minister asked him by what authority he preached, charging that Whitefield's meetings were not properly authorized, the evangelist said he "afterwards went and shewed him my authority, by preaching on these words: 'Go ye to all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.'"⁸⁷ At other times, he could not shrug off the challenge so easily. His work for the Savannah orphans' home gave him some license for itinerancy, as well as least tacit approval from officials such as the Bishop of London.⁸⁸ Moreover, he developed a biblical rationale. When the faculty of Harvard challenged him about the legitimacy of itinerant preaching, Whitefield replied in a pamphlet. Using the words of their complaint, he wrote, "Indeed, *Gentlemen*, I do [admit being an evangelist] if by an Evangelist you mean what the Scripture I presume, means, *viz.* one who hath no particular Charge of his own, but goes about from Country to Country, or from Town to Town, in any Country, and stands ready to preach to any Congregation that shall call him to it."⁸⁹

Interdenominationalism

For Whitefield, the gospel transcended all churchly and denominational labels. Generally, he tried to be open to everyone who would work with him. Indeed, Whitefield said that he told Ralph Erskine "that if the Pope himself would lend me his pulpit, I would gladly proclaim the righteousness of Jesus Christ therein."⁹⁰

Nevertheless, Whitefield had been ordained a clergyman in the Church of England, with which he maintained an awkward relationship. He wrote in his journal, "I am, and profess myself, a member of the Church of England. I have received no prohibition from any of the Bishops; and having had no fault found by them with my life or doctrine."⁹¹ In fact, he saw himself as more loyal to the Church of England than the ministers who opposed him. "I keep close to her Articles and Homilies, which, if my opposers did, we should not have so many dissenters from her."⁹² He expressed concern over the departure of a fellow Anglican minister from the church, calling it "a needless separation." "For

⁸⁷ George Whitefield to Mr. S——, 6 November 1743, in *Works*, 2:43.

⁸⁸ See, e.g., *Journals*, 89–90, 259, 400. The approval of the Bishop of London was especially important in North America, which was under the bishop's jurisdiction.

⁸⁹ George Whitefield, *A Letter to the Rev. the President, and Professors, Tutors, and Hebrew Instructor of Harvard-College in Cambridge* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1745), 16; Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #5712. Whitefield was responding to Edward Wigglesworth, *A Letter to the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield: By Way of Reply to His Answer to the College Testimony Against Him and His Conduct* (Boston: T. Fleet, 1745), 47; Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #5715. Wigglesworth later responded by arguing that evangelists were a special office of the apostolic age whose duty was to supplement and support the work of the apostles. Wigglesworth actually granted Whitefield's argument for a special office of evangelist but limited it to being an extraordinary office of the first century. See Edward Wigglesworth, *Some Distinguishing Characters of the Extraordinary and Ordinary Ministers of the Church of Christ* (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1759); Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #7338.

⁹⁰ George Whitefield to Thomas Noble, 8 August 1741, in *Works*, 1:308.

⁹¹ *Journals*, 249.

⁹² *Journals*, 250.

my own part,” Whitefield said, “I can see no reason for my leaving the Church, however I am treated by the corrupt members and ministers of it.” He said he judged the Church of England “not from the practice of its members, but its primitive and public constitutions; and so long as I think the Articles of the Church of England are agreeable to Scripture, I am resolved to preach them up without either bigotry or party zeal. For I love all who love the Lord Jesus.”⁹³ When charged with criticizing fellow Anglican clergy, he protested, “Were I to convert Papists, my business would be to shew that they were misguided by their priests; and if I want to convince Church of England Protestants, I must prove that the generality of their teachers do not preach or live up to the truth as it is in Jesus.”⁹⁴

Some of Whitefield’s interdenominationalism was perhaps pragmatic. Because he found support among the Dissenting churches and because Anglicans often opposed him, Whitefield naturally cooperated with Dissenters. His trips to North America seem to have expanded his fellowship with non-Anglicans and his use of non-Anglican buildings because the Dissenters welcomed him more readily. Yet theological concerns moved him as well. In his view of the church, he acknowledged that all who had experienced the new birth were one in Christ. “As for my own part, (though I profess myself a minister of the church of *England*) I am of a *catholic spirit*; and if I see a man who loves the Lord Jesus in sincerity, I am not very solicitous to what outward communion he belongs.”⁹⁵ Commenting on the diversity of denominations among soldiers he met on board a ship, Whitefield said, “What a pity it is, Christ’s seamless coat should be rent in pieces on account of things in themselves purely indifferent!”⁹⁶ Unity in Christ trumped all labels. “I wish all names among the saints of God were swallowed up in that one of *Christian*.—I long for professors to leave off placing religion in saying, ‘I am a Churchman,’ ‘I am a Dissenter.’ My language to such is, ‘Are you of Christ? If so, I love you with all my heart.’”⁹⁷

Methodology and Philosophy

George Whitefield was a pioneer for modern evangelists in making evangelism his vocation. He also brought energy and urgency to evangelistic work. J. C. Ryle credited Whitefield with setting an “aggressive” pattern in evangelism: “He was the first to see that Christ’s ministers must do the work

⁹³ *Journals*, 256.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 345–46. To cite an example of such criticism, he said in 1740 in Philadelphia that he heard the Anglican commissary speak with “false doctrines and many fundamental errors,” which included “faith to be only an assent to the truths of the Gospel,” “the doctrine of an imputed righteousness had done much harm,” and “that we were to be justified by works at the last day.” *Ibid.*, 409–10. In 1740 he told two Dissenting clergy near Charleston, South Carolina, “I advised the people, since the Gospel was not preached in the church, to go and hear it in the meeting-houses.” *Ibid.*, 444.

⁹⁵ George Whitefield to Ralph Erskine, 16 January 1740, in *Works*, 1:140.

⁹⁶ *Journals*, 138. Likewise, in North America in 1739 he exclaimed, “Oh, that the partition-wall were broken down, and we all with one heart and one mind could glorify our common Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!” *Ibid.*, 347.

⁹⁷ George Whitefield to [none], 10 November 1739, in *Works*, 1:115. He also wrote, “Those who are not solidly established in the love of God, will fall too much in love with the outward form of their particular church, be it what it will. But as the love of God gets the ascendancy, the more they will be like him and his holy angels, and consequently rejoice when souls are brought to Jesus, whatever instruments may be made use of for the purpose.” George Whitefield to John Bray?, 27 May 1742, in *Works*, 1:392.

of fishermen. They must not wait for souls to come to them, but must go after souls, and ‘compel them to come in.’”⁹⁸ His approach was to address individuals en masse in special meetings, as opposed to the usual channels of regular church services or forming small groups, as Wesley did with Methodist class meetings.⁹⁹

Flexibility

As mentioned before, Whitefield pioneered in the British Isles the idea of preaching in the open air when churches were closed to him or when crowds were too large for church buildings to accommodate. In America he continued this pattern, and outdoor preaching became the norm rather than the exception. Although opposition necessitated this approach to some extent, Whitefield also saw advantages to his system. For one, it made his interdenominational approach easier to apply,¹⁰⁰ and he believed outdoor preaching was more popular in America than Britain. In fact, he said he found field preaching *more* popular in America than preaching in churches.¹⁰¹

At various times in his career, Whitefield preached from the top of a wall, from a table, in a tent, in a barn, and many times from a wagon.¹⁰² Even when preaching in church buildings, Whitefield often had to improvise. At Randwick near Gloucester, England, for example, the congregation was so large they had to take out the church window behind the pulpit so that people could hear Whitefield speak.¹⁰³ One tool that proved invaluable to him was a collapsible field pulpit, a portable stand which elevated him above the crowds enough to be seen and heard. He started using the field pulpit as early as 1742 in England and preached from it perhaps 2,000 sermons in the course of his career.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century* (1885; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), 48.

⁹⁹ Richard B. Steele, “John Wesley’s Synthesis of the Revival Practices of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Nicholas von Zinzendorf,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 30 (1995), 154–72, suggests different models of evangelism in the Great Awakening: Jonathan Edwards with a community-based approach; Whitefield with his stress on reaching individuals through his preaching ministry; Nicholas von Zinzendorf, who used a small group approach; and John Wesley, who blended all of these.

¹⁰⁰ “When I come to *New England* I shall endeavour to recommend an universal charity amongst all the true members of Christ’s mystical body. Perhaps therefore, the fields may be the most unexceptionable place to preach in.” George Whitefield to Benjamin Colman, 24 January 1740, in *Works*, 1:142.

¹⁰¹ “The inhabitants were very solicitous for me to preach in another place besides the church; for it is quite different here from what it is in England. There, the generality of people think a sermon cannot be preached well without; here, they do not like it so well if delivered within the church walls.” *Journals*, 343.

¹⁰² See *ibid.*, 297 (wall); George Whitefield to John Wesley, 3 April 1739, in *Letters of George Whitefield for the Period 1734–1742*, 495 (table); *Journals*, 364 (tent), 443 (barn), 353, 486 (wagon).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁰⁴ Library of Congress, “Religion and the Founding of the American Republic”; accessed 7 July 2022, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel02.html>. One of Whitefield’s portable field pulpits is on display today at the Old South Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

Delivery

“I love those that thunder out the word,” Whitefield once declared. “The christian [*sic*] world is in a deep sleep. Nothing but a loud voice can awaken them out of it.”¹⁰⁵ The power and purity of his voice enabled Whitefield to address huge throngs in the days before amplification. Benjamin Franklin said he “had a loud and clear Voice, and articulated his Words and Sentences so perfectly that he might be heard and understood at a great Distance.” Once while listening to Whitefield speak “from the Top of the Court House steps” in Philadelphia, Franklin felt “Curiosity to learn how far he could be heard.” Franklin began to walk away from the meeting until he reached a point where he could no longer discern the evangelist’s words. Then he calculated the area and concluded that 30,000 people crowded together could hear him at one time. “This reconcil’d me,” wrote Franklin, “to the Newspaper Accounts of his having preach’d to 25000 People in the Fields.”¹⁰⁶

Yet more than volume marked his preaching. The impressiveness of his manner and delivery led his admirers to extravagant praise, such as that of Josiah Smith, who said, “So methinks (if you will forgive the figure) Saint *Paul* would *look* and *speak* in a Pulpit.”¹⁰⁷ Benjamin Franklin wrote that Whitefield’s delivery “was so improv’d by the frequent Repetitions, that every Accent, every Emphasis, every Modulation of Voice, was so perfectly well turn’d and well plac’d, that without being interested in the Subject one could not help being pleas’d with the Discourse, a Pleasure of much the same kind with that receiv’d from an excellent Piece of Musick.”¹⁰⁸ A contemporary described his “clear and musical voice,” and said, “Every *Accent* of his Voice, every *Motion* of his body, *speaks*, and both are natural and unaffected. If his Delivery is the Product of Art, ’tis certainly the Perfection of it, for it is entirely concealed. He has a great Mastery of Words, but studies much *Plainness of Speech*.”¹⁰⁹

In fact, a modern biographer of Whitefield, historian Harry Stout, roused controversy when he called Whitefield a “divine dramatist.” Noting the evangelist’s early interest in acting and the stage, he suggested that Whitefield honed his artistry to make his sermons a dramatic performance. Stout did not imply that Whitefield was insincere, just that he played to an audience’s love of drama to hold their interest.¹¹⁰

Organization

One talent that George Whitefield did not possess, especially in contrast to John Wesley, was a talent for organization. Wesley gathered the converts from his ministry into class meetings (much like

¹⁰⁵ George Whitefield to “Rev. and Dear Sir,” 10 November 1739, in *Works*, 1:73.

¹⁰⁶ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 179.

¹⁰⁷ Josiah Smith, *The Character, Preaching, &c. of the Reverend Mr. Geo. Whitefield* (Boston: Rogers for Edwards and Foster, 1740), 12; Early American Imprints, First Series, microfiche #4601.

¹⁰⁸ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 180.

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin Colman and William Cooper, “Accounts of the Reverend Mr. Whitefield,” *Christian History*, 12 January 1745, 361–62.

¹¹⁰ On the controversy over Stout’s presentation of Whitefield, see the following: David White’s review of Stout’s *The Divine Dramatist* in *Banner of Truth*, March 1994, 29, and Stout’s reply to the review along with editor Iain Murray’s rejoinder, “Reviewers Reviewed,” *Banner of Truth*, March 1995, 7–11.

small groups in modern churches) and appointed leaders in a carefully structured body. By the time of Wesley's death, his branch of Methodism had ceased to be simply a popular movement but had become a denomination separate from the Church of England. Whitefield, on the other hand, worked with groups such as the Huntingdon Connexion of Calvinistic Methodists but left the task organizing to others. Furthermore, much of Whitefield's ministry was among diverse groups that funneled the converts into their own churches. His preaching tours followed a pattern he developed by habit and practice, but he never created well-oiled evangelistic teams like those of later evangelists such as Moody and Sunday.

Whitefield adapted to circumstances as the situation demanded. His work was often done on the fly, incorporated into other necessary duties. "I find much service might be done to religion on journeys, if we had but courage to show ourselves Christians in all places. Others sing songs in public houses, why should not we sing psalms? And when we give the servants money, why may we not with that give them a little book, and some good advice? I know by experience it is very beneficial."¹¹¹ Whitefield's dealings with inquirers were somewhat ad hoc. When he was preaching, people would pass him "bills," that is, notes, in which the person described his spiritual concern and asked for prayer or even an interview.¹¹² After preaching at the fair at Moorfields, Whitefield said he left "with my pockets full of notes from persons brought under concern."¹¹³ In Charleston, Whitefield said that as he was going to dine at a friend's house after a service, someone handed him a note that read, "Remember me in your prayers, for Christ's sake, Who died for me a sinner. I appeal to you for help in the way to salvation. Pray fail me not; I beseech you to pray for my soul; and the Lord bless you, and grant you may win many souls to God by your preaching."¹¹⁴ At other times inquirers approached Whitefield directly. After Whitefield preached in Neshaminy, New Jersey, in 1740, someone approached him and said, "You have brought me under deep convictions; what shall I do to be saved?" Whitefield said that he replied with "the Apostle's answer," "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."¹¹⁵

Printing and Publicizing

One area in which Whitefield did demonstrate organizational ability was in his shrewd use of publishing. In London he read *Christian History*, a pro-revival paper from New England, that illustrated how publishing could spread the word even across oceans.¹¹⁶ As early as 1739 in Philadelphia he wrote

¹¹¹ *Journals*, 208.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 316–17; see Dallimore, 1:379. On his second foray into Moorfields, Whitefield mentioned how several children sat around the pulpit and handed him notes that people passed forward even "though they were often pelted with eggs, dirt." George Whitefield to Mr. L——, 15 May 1742, in *Works*, 1:388.

¹¹³ George Whitefield to Mr. L——, 11 May 1742, in *ibid.*, 1:386.

¹¹⁴ *Journals*, 385.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹¹⁶ George Whitefield to the Countess of Huntingdon, 14 November 1748, in *Works*, 2:201. Susan O'Brien, "A Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network, 1735–1755," *American*

in his journal, “One of the printers has told me he has taken above two hundred subscriptions for printing my *Sermons* and *Journals*. Another printer told me he might have sold a thousand *Sermons*, if he had them.”¹¹⁷ Frank Lambert noted Whitefield’s use of new commercial techniques to publicize his revivals and viewed him as a forerunner of consumer culture.¹¹⁸ Whitefield’s goal was not personal publicity. Publishing extended his ministry far more than he could ever do in person,¹¹⁹ and advertising was simply a tool in the Lord’s work.

Whitefield also became aware of potential sources of trouble in publishing. At first, he contrasted North America with Britain: “I believe the work will go on better here than in *England*. We are more united in our principles, and do not print one against another.”¹²⁰ He soon found that America was no different. Benjamin Franklin noted that Whitefield’s “Writing and Printing from time to time gave great Advantage to his Enemies” because the works contained “Unguarded Expression and even erroneous Opinions.” Franklin commented, “I am of Opinion, if he had never written any thing he would have left behind him a much more numerous and important Sect. And his Reputation might in that case have been still growing.”¹²¹ Franklin notwithstanding, Whitefield’s publications along with newspaper accounts of his work spread his fame far more than he could have done otherwise.

Conclusion

There remains something inexplicable about the ministry of George Whitefield. Even when one admits his skillful publicizing or his matchless vocal skills and dramatic verve, there is a phenomenal aspect to his career. He lacked the organization of later evangelists, yet spoke to thousands on both sides of the Atlantic and saw countless conversions. It is little wonder that his supporters credited his success to the blessing of God, for the results seemed so remarkable. In setting the pattern for American evangelism, Whitefield also set a high standard, not just in numbers won but in the cultural impact he exercised on the future of religion in America.

Yet Whitefield did not intend to launch a revolution in religion. He simply wanted to proclaim the new birth that he himself had experienced. The dramatic results flowed from his straightforward desire

Historical Review 91 (1986): 811–32, discusses how transatlantic communication and interaction help explain the publicizing of the Great Awakening and promoted cross-fertilization of British and North American revivalism.

¹¹⁷ *Journals*, 360.

¹¹⁸ See Frank Lambert, *Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737–1770*. Compare idem, “‘Pedlar in Divinity’: George Whitefield and the Great Awakening, 1737–1745,” *Journal of American History* 77 (1990): 812–37, and idem, “The Great Awakening as Artifact: George Whitefield and the Construction of Intercolonial Revival, 1739–1745,” *Church History* 60 (1991): 223–46. One should note that Lambert is not claiming advertising as the explanation of Whitefield’s success but rather as the way in which he publicized his work.

¹¹⁹ He once told the Countess of Huntingdon, “I conversed with three or four, that have been awakened by the reading of some of my printed sermons.” George Whitefield to Countess of Huntingdon, 24 February 1749, in *Works*, 2:239.

¹²⁰ George Whitefield to William Seward, 19 May 1740, in *ibid.*, 1:170.

¹²¹ *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 180. For views both pro and con of Whitefield in the colonial American newspapers, see “The Great Awakening and George Whitefield, 1739–1743,” chapter 8 of David Copeland, *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers: Primary Documents of Events of the Period* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000), 94–108.

to be a “fisher for souls.” That was his work as an evangelist, as those around him recognized. Once as he was speaking with a woman who was seriously ill, she expressed her desire to go be with Christ. Whitefield then expressed that as his desire too, but she said to him, “No, you must stay longer, and bring home some more souls to Christ.”¹²² That is what Whitefield too saw as his burden.

¹²² *Journals*, 494.