



The Evangelistic Zeal of

George
Whitefield

STEVEN J. LAWSON



A Long Line of Godly Men Profile

ENDORSEMENTS

“What I love about Steve Lawson’s books is that he writes as a preacher, with a keen eye and ear for details that show what a vital role great preaching has played in the advance of the gospel, the growth and strengthening of the church, and the collective testimony of the Evangelical movement. This volume on George Whitefield is another superb example of Dr. Lawson’s approach to history and biography. He highlights the key doctrinal nuances, character qualities, natural talents, and spiritual gifts that help explain why Whitefield was such a powerful preacher and such a monumental figure in church history. The book is written in an engaging, personal way that brings Whitefield to life. It’s hard to put a book like this down.”

—DR. JOHN MACARTHUR
Pastor, Grace Community Church
President, The Master’s College and Seminary
Sun Valley, California

“Effective evangelism is humanly impossible. To take truth from the Bible, get it into your heart, cause it to burst into flames of love, and then carry its living coals into another heart—no man has the power to do this. It requires an anointing from heaven. God gave that anointing to George Whitefield and used him to ignite thousands of souls. Steven Lawson draws us close to feel the fire in this stirring and informative book. May many read it and cry up to heaven for the flame to descend again!”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE
President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Michigan

“When Whitefield came to town, everything stopped, everyone listened. And what did they hear? As Dr. Steven Lawson makes clear, they heard the gospel plainly, powerfully, and persuasively proclaimed. Read this book and you’ll learn the amazing story of George Whitefield—and then pray that God will use this book to raise up Whitefields in our day.”

—DR. STEPHEN J. NICHOLS
Research Professor of Christianity and Culture
Lancaster Bible College
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

“There is little doubt that George Whitefield is one of the most remarkable preachers in the history of Christianity: his preaching was central to the Great Awakening that refashioned British society on both sides of the Atlantic; it gripped the mind and imagination of so many in his era, and led to the conversion of thousands; and most importantly, it set forth plainly and faithfully the biblical gospel. To be reminded of all of this and much more by Dr. Lawson’s new study of Whitefield as a preacher is vital in our day, when far too many professing Christians disparage preaching and are questioning key facets of the gospel of Christ that Whitefield preached.”

—DR. MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN
Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Kentucky

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George Whitefield

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles

Series editor, Steven J. Lawson

The Expository Genius of John Calvin

by Steven J. Lawson

The Unwavering Resolve of Jonathan Edwards

by Steven J. Lawson

The Mighty Weakness of John Knox

by Douglas Bond

The Gospel Focus of Charles Spurgeon

by Steven J. Lawson

The Heroic Boldness of Martin Luther

by Steven J. Lawson

The Poetic Wonder of Isaac Watts

by Douglas Bond



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To Kent Stainback,
a devoted and faithful friend
whose passion for the gospel
reflects the evangelistic zeal
of George Whitefield and
whose spiritual influence
has helped launch
OnePassion Ministries

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Followers Worthy to be Followed

Down through the centuries, God has providentially raised up a long line of godly men, those whom He has mightily used at strategic moments in church history. These valiant soldiers of the cross have come from all walks of life—from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen’s shops. They have arisen from all points of this world—from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite these differences, these pivotal figures have had much in common.

Each man possessed not only an unwavering faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but more than that, each of these stalwarts of the faith held deep convictions in the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder-to-shoulder in championing these biblical teachings that magnify the sovereign

grace of God in salvation. They upheld the foundational truth that “salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9; Ps. 3:8).

Any survey of church history reveals that those who have embraced these Reformed truths have been granted extraordinary confidence in their God. Far from paralyzing these spiritual giants, the doctrines of grace kindled within their hearts a reverential awe for God that humbled their souls before His throne. The truths of sovereign grace emboldened these men to rise up and advance the cause of Christ on the earth. With an enlarged vision of His saving grace, they stepped forward boldly and accomplished the work of ten, even twenty men. They arose with wings like eagles and soared over their times. The doctrines of grace empowered them to serve God in their divinely appointed hour, leaving a godly influence upon future generations.

This Long Line of Godly Men Profile series highlights key figures in the agelong procession of sovereign-grace men. The purpose of this series is to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to impact their times and further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were courageous followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

This volume focuses upon the great English evangelist George Whitefield. In the eighteenth century, a day plagued by lifeless orthodoxy, Whitefield burst onto the scene with power and passion. In a day marked by great spiritual decline, Whitefield preached with a supernatural unction and intense boldness that became the primary catalyst in ushering in two

major revivals simultaneously, one in the British Isles and the other in the American colonies. As the Lord empowered him, Whitefield's clarion voice called men and women to the foot of the cross. Perhaps no gospel herald has ever been so effectively used in so many places over such an extended period of time. For these and countless more reasons, George Whitefield remains eminently worthy to be profiled in this series.

May the Lord greatly use this book to embolden a new generation of leaders so that they, like Whitefield, might leave an indelible mark on this world for God. Through this profile, may you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling. May you be filled with Scripture and, thereby, zealous in your evangelistic endeavors for the exaltation of Christ and the advance of His kingdom.

Soli Deo gloria

—Steven J. Lawson

Series editor

Lightning From a Cloudless Sky

The gospel was to be recovered for nations and God had prepared Whitefield to preach it.¹

—IAIN H. MURRAY

If I could be anyone in church history, I would be George Whitefield. I say this not because of his great oratorical skills or his worldwide fame, but primarily because of his consuming evangelistic zeal. Preeminently, Whitefield has instilled within me a passion for preaching.

Through Martin Luther, I have been motivated to strive for greater boldness for the truth. From John Calvin, I have gained a greater desire to preach the Scripture in a sequential, expositional manner. Through Jonathan Edwards, I have been challenged in terms of discipline in Christian living. From Charles Spurgeon, I have learned the necessity of an intense gospel focus in every sermon. But when it comes to George

Whitefield, I have been captivated by his unmatched zeal in proclaiming the gospel message to the ends of the earth.

In this book, it is my desire to unveil the heart of a man who burned to accomplish the work of God. My sincere hope is that George Whitefield's example will rekindle your passion for taking the name of Christ to the nations. I pray that this book will move a new generation of gospel preachers to advance into the fields of the world white for harvest. But before we examine the life and ministry of this extraordinary man, let me first establish the historical setting in which he lived.

The eighteenth century for the English-speaking world was a monumental period of spiritual awakening. Martyn Lloyd-Jones called this time "the greatest manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit since apostolic days."² This era proved to be an unprecedented season of evangelistic endeavor and spiritual renewal. Its effects spanned two continents and were especially dramatic given the spiritual lethargy that permeated the church and culture of that day. This season proved to be nothing less than a "second reformation."

Since the seventeenth century, gospel preaching had waxed cold throughout Europe, but especially in England. The state church was already in spiritual decline. Presbyterianism had weakened, and the General Baptists began a slippery descent from Arminianism to Unitarianism.

Several factors caused these days of drought. Many churches no longer required a regenerate church membership and were careless in whom they admitted to the Lord's table. Puritanism

suffered a devastating blow when Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity in 1662, which permanently divided the Church of England from all other Protestants, thereafter known as Dissenters.³ Under Charles II, this decree determined a more Catholic-like form of public prayers, the priesthood, the sacraments, and other rites in the Church of England. Puritan ministers were required to abandon their original ordinations and be reordained under this new form of the state church.

This brewing crisis came to a head on August 24, 1662, St. Bartholomew's Day, when two thousand Puritan ministers were ejected from their churches. In a single day, the greatest generation of gospel preachers was discharged from the pulpit and forbidden to preach. These Puritan ministers suffered even greater restrictions with the passing of the Conventicle Act in 1664. They were banned from preaching in the fields or conducting private worship services in the homes of parishioners. Further restriction came with the Five Mile Act in 1665, which barred ejected ministers from coming within five miles of their former churches or any city or town.

This persecution was lifted in 1689 by the Toleration Act under William and Mary, but by this time, most of the leading Puritan ministers had already died. Forbidden from being buried in English churchyards, many Puritan pastors were entombed in a separate Nonconformist cemetery in Bunhill Fields, outside of London. Included in this despised cemetery were such notables as John Bunyan, John Owen, Isaac Watts, and Thomas Goodwin. Considered outcasts and deemed unworthy, these

men of God were buried outside the city limits. Puritan influence had ebbed sharply.

At the same time, many highly esteemed Anglican pulpits taught a moralistic, legalistic corruption of justification by faith. This doctrinal decline left the English church with little appetite for the preaching of the Word. Any burden for the lost had waned. Like the Apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane, English ministers had left off watching and were lulled into a deep sleep. Biblical convictions were replaced with the prevailing secular philosophies. There was a virtual famine in the land for the hearing of God's Word.

It was into this spiritual void that God raised up the English evangelist George Whitefield. Like lightning from a cloudless sky, Whitefield stepped onto the world stage as the most prolific herald of the gospel since the days of the New Testament. God empowered Whitefield to become a blazing lamp set on a hill in the midst of Satan's empire of darkness.

This powerful figure of unusual gospel fervor stood at the headwaters of an Evangelical resurgence. His thundering voice was the catalyst for spiritual awakening, as his preaching took the British Isles by storm and electrified the American colonies. By his evangelistic zeal, he stoked the flames of revival until they spread to the hearts of countless men and women. It can be argued that by his preaching, the British Isles were saved from the equivalent of the French Revolution. And on the other side of the Atlantic, a nation would be birthed in the wake of his gospel proclamation.

Given the many ailments plaguing the church today, this present generation needs a strong dose of George Whitefield. As we look at modern Christianity, there is much for which to be thankful, especially in light of the Reformed resurgence of recent years. However, it has become a trend for many in this movement to retreat into a Calvinistic cloister, having little impact upon the world around them. Whitefield, through his intense engagement with the world and fervent proclamation of the gospel, has much to teach us concerning what desperately needs to be recovered.

We have too many mild-mannered apologists lecturing in pulpits today. The need of this hour is for red-hot *proclaimers* of God and His saving grace, not for mere philosophical explainers. It is all too easy to become ensnared in the web of social and political concerns that displaces our primary duty to preach Christ. What needs to be recovered in this hour is Whitefield's deep belief in the sovereign grace of God, coupled with a zealous desire to call the lost to repentance and faith in Christ. Whitefield saw that the greatest need of humanity is to have right standing before God. As Whitefield fulfilled his God-given call to passionately summon a lost and dying world to believe in the gospel, so must we do the same.



Before we proceed to consider George Whitefield, I must thank the publishing team at Reformation Trust for their

commitment to this Long Line of Godly Men Profile series. I remain grateful to Chris Larson, who has been instrumental in overseeing this series. I remain thankful for the ongoing influence of my former professor and current friend, Dr. R. C. Sproul.

I am indebted to Christ Fellowship Baptist Church of Mobile, Alabama, which I serve as senior pastor. I cannot imagine that any other pastor has ever received as much encouragement to serve Christ on such a far-reaching scale as I have. I am extremely grateful for the support of my fellow elders and congregation, who continuously encourage me in my extended ministry abroad.

I want to express my gratitude for my executive assistant, Kay Allen, who typed this document, and Dustin Benge and Keith Phillips, fellow pastors at Christ Fellowship, who helped prepare this manuscript.

I thank God for my family and for their support in my life and ministry. My wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, remain pillars of strength for me.

May the Lord use Whitefield's example, whether you are a layperson or a preacher, to embolden your own commitment to the cause of Christ and to the furtherance of His gospel. In these days, when there is a crying need for boldness both in the pulpit and the pew, may we see the restoration of Christ's church to her pristine purity through a new reformation.

—Steven J. Lawson
Mobile, Alabama
August 2013

A Force for the Gospel

*Other men seem to be only half-alive, but Whitefield was all life, fire, wing, force. My own model, if I may have such a thing in due subordination to my Lord, is George Whitefield. With unequal footsteps must I follow his glorious track.*¹

—CHARLES SPURGEON

Reaching from one side of the Atlantic to the other, the expansive ministry of George Whitefield (1714–1770) remains unmatched to this day. Relentless in drive and fervent in soul, this “Grand Itinerant” was the chosen instrument in the hands of our sovereign God for the ingathering of untold thousands into His kingdom. Reaching the British Isles from London to Edinburgh and the American colonies from Boston to Savannah, this anointed herald of the gospel was the

force behind the British Evangelical movement and the First Great Awakening.

There had been other open-air preachers before Whitefield. In the thirteenth century, the Waldensians circulated throughout central Europe propagating the gospel. During the fourteenth century, a band of brave preachers known as the Lollards were sent out by John Wycliffe (c. 1320–1384) to proclaim Christ in the villages and fields of England. Howell Harris (1714–1773), a contemporary of Whitefield, had preached in the open air of Wales. But *never* had there been anyone like Whitefield in terms of scope and power. In fact, not since the first-century missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul had such evangelistic preaching been taken so directly to the masses of the world.

In his thirty-four years of ministry, Whitefield preached some eighteen thousand sermons, often to multiplied thousands. If informal messages are included, such as in private homes, this number easily increases to thirty thousand sermons, perhaps more. Three sermons a day were common; four were not uncommon. Conservative estimates are that he spoke a thousand times every year for more than thirty years. In America alone, it is estimated that eighty percent of the colonists heard him preach. This means Whitefield was seen by far more American settlers than was George Washington. Whitefield's name was more widely recognized by colonial Americans than any living person's except for those of British royalty. It is believed that Whitefield preached to more than ten million people over the course of his ministry, a staggering number.

Making seven demanding trips to America, Whitefield crossed the Atlantic Ocean thirteen times for the express purpose of preaching the gospel. He spent almost three years of his life on a ship en route to preach. In all, about eight years of his life were spent in America. He made fifteen trips to Scotland, two to Ireland, and one each to Gibraltar, Bermuda, and the Netherlands. Of this unparalleled outreach, Whitefield could truly say, "The whole world is now my parish. Where-soever my Master calls me, I am ready to go and preach the everlasting gospel."² Since the time of the Apostles, the annals of church history record no other individual who possessed such gospel ambition and relentless determination.

Whitefield's contemporaries never encountered his like. The great English hymn writer William Cowper marveled that in Whitefield, "The apostolical times seem to have returned upon us."³ Another famed hymn writer, John Newton, stated, "As a preacher, if any man were to ask me who was second-best I had ever heard, I should be at some loss; but in regard to the first, Mr. Whitefield so far exceeds every other man of my time that I should be at no loss to say."⁴ Yet another renowned hymn writer, Augustus Toplady, praised him as "the prince of preachers, the apostle of the English Empire, and the most useful minister that has perhaps been produced since the days of the apostles."⁵

The greatest preachers of history have been the strongest admirers of Whitefield. J. C. Ryle, a noted preacher and author, asserted, "I believe no English preacher has ever possessed such a combination of excellent qualifications as Whitefield. . . .

Whitefield, I repeat my opinion, stands alone.”⁶ The undisputed Prince of Preachers, Charles Spurgeon, testified: “Often as I have read his life, I am conscious of distinct quickening whenever I turn to it. He *lived*. Other men seem to be only half-alive; but Whitefield was all life, fire, wing, force. My own model, if I may have such a thing in due subordination to my Lord, is George Whitefield; but with unequal footsteps must I follow his glorious track.”⁷ Spurgeon’s only mentor in preaching was Whitefield. On his personal copy of Whitefield’s sermons, he wrote, “C. H. Spurgeon, who admires Whitefield as Chief of Preachers.”⁸

The famed expositor Martyn Lloyd-Jones spoke in awe of this celebrated preacher: “George Whitefield is beyond any question the greatest English preacher of all time. . . . This man was simply a phenomenon.”⁹ Ian Paisley, founder of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, asserted, “Without a doubt, George Whitefield was the greatest preacher of his or any subsequent generation.”¹⁰

Those who are students of preaching place Whitefield at the head of their list. Historian Edwin C. Dargan said, “The history of preaching since the apostles does not contain a greater or worthier name than that of George Whitefield.”¹¹ Yale historian Harry Stout wrote that Whitefield was “America’s first cultural hero.” He added, “Before Whitefield, there was no unifying intercolonial person or event. . . . But by 1750 virtually every American loved and admired Whitefield and saw him as their champion.”¹²

As with Moses in Egypt, Paul in Rome, or Luther in

Wittenberg, God places His chosen servants in decisive eras of history when a voice is needed to advance the cause of His kingdom. In the powerful revivals of the eighteenth century, a season of spiritual renewal unlike any in church history, Whitefield was this voice, rousing the church from its spiritual slumber and fortifying her faith in the living God.

What was it that made Whitefield such an effective evangelist of the gospel of Jesus Christ? From the divine perspective, God sovereignly chose to use George Whitefield simply because it pleased Him. But humanly speaking, what God-given virtues qualified this tireless preacher to be so mightily used? Before we address these questions, let us first consider an overview of this extraordinary man.

Though he was arguably the greatest preacher of the Christian era, Whitefield ironically remains an enigma to most. A survey of his life and exploits becomes necessary because, as Lloyd-Jones once said, Whitefield is “the most neglected man in the whole of church history.”¹³ Lloyd-Jones further lamented, “Whitefield is an unknown man and the great story concerning him is something that people never seem to have heard.”¹⁴ For this reason, let us now hear the story of this unsung hero, the “Father of Evangelicalism.”

BIRTH AND NEW BIRTH

Born on December 16, 1714, in Gloucester, England, George Whitefield was the sixth and youngest son of Thomas and

Elizabeth Whitefield, the owners of the Bell Inn. His father died when he was only two years old. He was raised by his mother until she remarried when he was eight. Unfortunately, this remarriage was not a happy one, and eventually ended in divorce. In such unrest, George became involved in stealing, lying, fighting, and cursing. He had a knowledge of sin during these formative years, but had no knowledge of Christ.

The real interest of young Whitefield lay in the theatrical stage. A born actor and orator, George entertained the guests of the inn with his dramatics. He developed speaking abilities and powers of elocution that would be enhanced and used in his future ministry. Possessing a remarkable mind, sixteen-year-old George began reading the Greek New Testament and gained a proficiency in Latin. Throughout this time, though, his restless soul remained unconverted.

At age eighteen, Whitefield entered Pembroke College at Oxford University. To subsidize his education, he worked as a servitor, one who attended the needs of the wealthier students—cleaning their rooms, doing laundry, and preparing their meals. Amid the mounting demands of school and struggling with a guilty conscience, Whitefield ardently pursued a right standing before God. In a desperate spiritual struggle, he prayed three times a day and fasted, but found no peace for his troubled soul.

Near the end of Whitefield's first year at Oxford, Charles Wesley (1707–1788), the future hymn writer, introduced him to a small group of students known as the "Oxford Holy

Club.” Included in this group was Charles’ brother, John Wesley (1703–1791), and ten others who met to pursue religiously moral lives. Despite their rigid discipline in Bible reading, study, prayer, fasting, and service, not one of these young students was converted. So stringent was Whitefield in his self-righteous efforts to earn salvation that his severe discipline caused him to suffer a lifelong physical weakness.

Urgently searching for acceptance by God, Whitefield was given a book by Charles Wesley in the spring of 1735. It was a book on the new birth, called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, by Henry Scougal. He learned that the way of salvation was not by his own religious works but by divine regeneration. Under tremendous agony of conviction, he realized, “I must be born again or be damned!”¹⁵ At age twenty-one, Whitefield was regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and placed his faith in Christ. He confessed:

A man may go to church, say his prayers, receive the Sacrament, and yet . . . not be a Christian. . . . Lord, if I am not a Christian, if I am not a real one, for Jesus Christ’s sake, show me what Christianity is, that I may not be damned at last. I read a little further, and the cheat was discovered; O, says the author, they that know any thing of religion know it is a vital union with the Son of God, Christ formed in the heart; O what a ray of divine life did then break in upon my poor soul.¹⁶

An agonizing five-year search for acceptance by God was now realized. Being born again would be the repeated theme of his entire future ministry. He stated:

God was pleased at length to remove the heavy load, to enable me to lay hold on His dear Son by a living faith, and, by giving me the Spirit of adoption, to seal me, as I humbly hope, even to the day of everlasting redemption. But oh! With what joy—joy unspeakable—even joy that was full of, and big with glory, was my soul filled, when the weight of sin went off.¹⁷

Soundly converted, Whitefield was gripped with an all-consuming desire to know Christ more intimately. In humble submission, he began reading the Bible on his knees and devouring Matthew Henry's *Exposition of the Old and New Testament*. This saturation with biblical truth immediately grounded him in the Reformed faith, which would profoundly shape his preaching.

The Wesleys, still unconverted, departed for the mission field in the American colony of Georgia, leaving Whitefield the leader of the Holy Club. With flaming zeal in his soul, he evangelized his fellow students and placed new believers into small-group Bible studies. This strict discipline in Bible study led many to label the members of the Holy Club with the derisive term “Methodists.”

FROM PULPITS TO FIELDS

Upon graduating from Oxford in 1736, Whitefield returned to Gloucester, where he was ordained as a deacon in the Church of England. “I can call heaven and earth to witness,” Whitefield recalled, “that when the bishop laid his hand upon me, I gave myself up to be a martyr for Him who hung upon the cross for me.”¹⁸ But there was something unusual that God had in store for him.

Almost immediately, Whitefield sensed God’s call to preach, and one week later he delivered his first sermon in Saint Mary de Crypt Church, Gloucester, where he had been baptized. When he returned to Oxford for further studies, the compulsion to preach grew even stronger. For the next two months, Whitefield felt drawn to fill pulpits in London. It was instantly recognized that this young preacher possessed unusual homiletic gifts. The sanctuaries were filled to hear this young preaching phenomenon.

Unexpectedly, correspondence came from John and Charles Wesley in Georgia, urging Whitefield to help in their new missionary work. “Upon reading this, my heart leaped within me, and, as it were, echoed to the call,”¹⁹ he said. He was determined to sail to the American colonies and help in this new endeavor. Before leaving, Whitefield returned to Gloucester to say farewell to his family and took the opportunity to preach, again to swelling crowds that gathered under the great power of the Word.

Returning to London, Whitefield was ready to make his inaugural journey to the American colonies, but his ship was detained. Taking full advantage of the delay, Whitefield accepted invitations to preach in Gloucester, Bristol, Bath, and London. Wherever he went, news spread of this young pulpit prodigy. Church buildings were packed, hearts were stirred, and souls were converted. In a day known for dry, moralistic sermons that lacked any element of emotion, Whitefield came with fiery proclamations of the gospel that awakened people to their need for Christ. This unknown twenty-three-year-old evangelist was suddenly widely acclaimed. He wrote:

The tide of popularity now began to run high. In a short time, I could no longer walk on foot as usual, but was constrained to go in a coach, from place to place, to avoid the hosannas of the multitude. They grew quite extravagant in their applauses; and, had it not been for my compassionate High Priest, popularity would have destroyed me. I used to plead with Him to take me by the hand and lead me unhurt through this fiery furnace. He heard my request, and gave me to see the vanity of all commendations but His own. . . . I would be so overpowered with a sense of God's infinite Majesty that I would be constrained to throw myself on the ground, and offer my soul as a blank in His hands, to write on it what He pleased.²⁰

During Whitefield's first eighteen months of preaching, his initial labors were nothing short of astonishing. He burst onto the scene proclaiming the Word with greater fervency than had been heard before, and it stirred the souls of thousands in England out of their spiritual lethargy. Overflowing congregations were eager to hear him preach.

Finally, on December 28, 1737, the *Whittaker* was ready to depart for the American colony of Georgia. Though adverse weather further delayed its departure, Whitefield at last arrived in Savannah, Georgia, on May 7, 1738, only to discover that John Wesley had left the colony under indictment by a grand jury. The mission work was in complete shambles. As Whitefield surveyed the scene, he saw a great number of orphans and felt compelled to build an orphanage. Such an ambitious project would require substantial funds, however. In order to raise these necessary resources, Whitefield sailed back to England on August 28, arriving three months later on November 30.

Upon his return, Whitefield discovered the Wesleys had been converted and had assumed the leadership of this new, emerging movement known as Methodism. As Whitefield and the Wesleys preached, this dynamic trio emphasized the necessity of the new birth. They even insisted that many ministers in the Church of England were unconverted, causing no small stir. This daring assertion prompted many church leaders to resist their work. Vicious pamphlets were circulated in opposition to them and rumors spread, smearing Whitefield's name. Church doors were closed to him, forcing a bold new

strategy. He would bypass church buildings altogether and preach in the open air.

On February 17, 1739, Whitefield preached for the first time outdoors at Kingswood, in a field on the outskirts of Bristol. He stood on a little hill in the countryside and preached to a relatively small gathering of coal miners and their families, some two hundred in attendance. Whitefield declared the saving grace of Jesus Christ, and those in attendance were struck by the power of the gospel. He remarked on that event:

Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was a friend of publicans, and came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected was to see the white gutters made by their tears which plentifully fell down their black cheeks, as they came out of their coal pits. Hundreds and hundreds of them were soon brought under deep convictions, which, as the event proved, happily ended in a sound and thorough conversion. The change was visible to all, though numbers chose to impute it to anything, rather than the finger of God.²¹

This first success in open-air preaching proved to be the turning point not only for Whitefield's ministry but, in many ways, for evangelicalism in general. He preached wherever he could draw a crowd, whether in open fields, bustling

marketplaces, churchyard cemeteries, or aboard seafaring ships. Whitefield's own accounts of his initial London meetings are quite remarkable. His *Journals* is filled with entries that chronicle explosive crowds flocking to hear his gospel message. It is estimated that Whitefield preached to around 650,000 people per month during 1739, which equals around twenty-two thousand people per day.²² On Friday, June 1, 1739, he wrote:

Preached in the evening at a place called Mayfair, near Hyde Park Corner. The congregation, I believe, consisted of near eighty thousand people. It was, by far, the largest I ever preached to yet. In the time of my prayer, there was a little noise; but they kept a deep silence during my whole discourse. A high and very commodious scaffold was erected for me to stand upon; and though I was weak in myself, yet God strengthened me to speak so loud, that most could hear, and so powerfully, that most, I believe, could feel. All love, all glory be to God through Christ!²³

Armed with this new approach, Whitefield resolved, "Field-preaching is my plan; in this I am carried as on eagles' wings."²⁴ He further asserted: "It is good to go into the highways and hedges. Field-preaching, field-preaching forever!"²⁵ He was unfazed by opposition: "My preaching in the fields may displease some timorous, bigoted men, but I am thoroughly persuaded it pleases God, and why should I fear

anything else?"²⁶ So attached to preaching in the field was Whitefield that he once remarked, "Oh that I may die in the field!"²⁷ Within weeks, Whitefield was preaching multiple times per week to crowds numbering in the thousands.

On March 25, five weeks after his first open-air sermon, Whitefield stood before a crowd of twenty-three thousand to deliver his final sermon at Bristol. Reflecting on this momentous occasion, Whitefield remarked:

As . . . I had just begun to be an extempore preacher, it often occasioned many inward conflicts. Sometimes, when twenty thousand people were before me, I had not, in my own apprehension, a word to say either to God or them. But I never was totally deserted, and frequently . . . so assisted, that I knew by happy experience what our Lord meant by saying, "Out of His belly shall flow rivers of living water" [John 7:38]. The open firmament above me, the prospect of the adjacent fields, with the sight of thousands and thousands, some in coaches, some on horseback, and some in the trees, and at times all affected and drenched in tears together, to which sometimes was added the solemnity of the approaching evening, was almost too much for, and quite overcame me.²⁸

This initial success provoked much opposition. Feeling threatened, the bishop of Bristol accused Whitefield of

“pretending” to have received “extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost,” which the bishop called “a very horrid thing.”²⁹ Such resistance would not deter the young evangelist. With mounting confidence, he returned to London in order to preach in the open air. He preached in Moorfields, a public park, to thousands gathered for amusement. He preached at Kennington Common to a multitude of thirty thousand, where many were deeply convicted and turned to Christ. Believing God was with him in the open fields, Whitefield preached at Hampstead Heath and Bedford to swelling numbers. A staggering eighty thousand people gathered to hear him at Hyde Park. His outdoor preaching continued at Cirencester, Tewkesbury, Bristol, Basingstoke, Rodborough, Stroud, and Hampton Court.

During this one summer, it is estimated that in London and the surrounding counties Whitefield preached to as many as one million people. All London was abuzz with talk about the kingdom of God. Astonishingly, this success occurred while Whitefield was but a mere twenty-four years old. A century later, the Scottish pastor Robert Murray M’Cheyne exclaimed, “O for Whitefield’s week in London, when a thousand letters came!”³⁰ But at the very height of this ministry, Whitefield made a daring decision. Rather than ride this wave of popularity, he determined in August 1739 to board a ship and sail for America. This young evangelist was determined to enter the large cities of the colonies and bring this same evangelistic preaching and revivalist spirit to the New World.

CROSSING THE ATLANTIC

After a two-month voyage, Whitefield landed at Lewes, Delaware, ready to launch a new preaching campaign. This evangelistic tour through the colonies is considered by many the greatest preaching campaign ever undertaken. The influence of Whitefield in America, Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, was “simply overwhelming.”³¹ A visit by Whitefield, J. I. Packer said, was “a major event.”³² Wherever he went, commerce ceased, shops closed, farmers left their plows, and even judges delayed their hearings. This preaching circuit would set the American landscape ablaze with the truths of the gospel and the need for saving faith in Christ. In due time, a fledgling nation would arise out of the flames.

Whitefield first traveled to Philadelphia, the second-largest city in the colonies, where he preached inside Christ Church and then subsequently moved outdoors. Two days later he addressed upwards of six thousand people, roughly half of the thirteen thousand people who lived in Philadelphia. Whitefield then journeyed to New York City, where he preached to the largest crowds ever gathered in the colonies. He first spoke to eight thousand in a field, then on Sunday to fifteen thousand in the morning, and finally to twenty thousand in the afternoon. Never remaining stationary, he returned to the Philadelphia area, preaching again to swelling numbers in Elizabeth Town, New Brunswick, Maidenhead, and Neshaminy.

On November 24, Whitefield entered Philadelphia with mounting momentum, with multiple thousands attending his preaching. In the mornings, he stood before six thousand people, and in the evenings, eight thousand. The crowds grew to ten thousand, and by Sunday, twenty-five thousand gathered to hear him preach. His farewell address drew upwards of thirty thousand, more than twice the population of the city. Benjamin Franklin, a close friend of Whitefield, documented what he described as “enormous” numbers. Estimating the area covered by the crowd and allowing two square feet for each person, Franklin wrote, “I computed that he might well be heard by more than thirty thousand. This reconciled me to the newspaper accounts of his having preached to twenty-five thousand people in the fields.”³³ These vast numbers covered more than a dozen city blocks, and souls were impacted for eternity.

Franklin set out to make Whitefield famous in the colonies. He printed ten editions of Whitefield’s *Journals*, and secured the assistance of eleven printers in making them bestsellers. During 1739–1741, more than half the books published by Franklin were by or about Whitefield.³⁴

Departing from Philadelphia on November 29, Whitefield journeyed south to Savannah, Georgia, where he preached extensively and tended to his orphanage. In April 1740, he boarded a ship and sailed back north to Lewes; from there he traveled again to Philadelphia and the surrounding areas in order to preach. He rode to New Jersey and New York City,

then in May back to Philadelphia, where, on every occasion, he was met with growing success.

Energized by this visible effect, Whitefield boarded a ship again and sailed for Savannah, where he preached numerous times with unusual blessing through the summer. In September he sailed back north, this time to Newport, Rhode Island, where he met with great gospel success. Whitefield pushed north to Boston, preaching for more than a week before advancing up and down the New England coast, heralding Christ in every place. By the time he returned to Boston in October, "The very face of the town seemed to be strangely altered."³⁵ The power of God was visibly with him wherever he went.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the recognized leader of the first wave of the Great Awakening, invited Whitefield to Northampton, Massachusetts, where he preached four times in October 1740. This would be the only time that the leaders of this powerful movement would meet. On October 19, Whitefield recorded in his *Journals*, "Preached this morning, and good Mr. Edwards wept during the whole time of exercise. The people were equally affected."³⁶ Edwards reported that Whitefield's preaching brought "a great alteration in the town."³⁷ Whitefield and Edwards became the twin instruments God used so mightily during the American Great Awakening. As Perry Miller so aptly put it, "Jonathan Edwards had already put a match to the fuse, and Whitefield blew it into flame."³⁸

With no time to waste, in late October and early November Whitefield returned a third time to preach in New York City followed by a fifth time to Philadelphia. He next traveled by land to Savannah, a long and arduous trip of more than a month. There he labored for almost another month. During this excursion, Whitefield preached a total of 175 times within seventy-five days and traveled nearly six thousand miles.³⁹ He was divinely used as the instrument for rekindling the fires of revival that began several years earlier under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. Not since New Testament times had the world witnessed such explosive energy and extensive outreach in evangelistic preaching. On January 24, 1711, Whitefield boarded the *Minerva* and departed Savannah for a two-month voyage back to England.

OPPOSITION AND OPPORTUNITIES

Back on British soil, Whitefield was immediately confronted by an unexpected controversy. Having left England at the height of his popularity, he returned a year later to dwindling support. This decline was due to a crisis created by John Wesley over Whitefield's belief in the sovereignty of God in salvation. Before Whitefield's return, Wesley had distributed a tract titled *Free Grace*, a bitter condemnation of the doctrines of grace aimed directly at his old friend. Whitefield responded by defending the biblical teaching of God's election and predestination. However, the damage was done. The painful

separation of these spiritual leaders resulted in a division that affected countless people.

Whitefield remained undeterred. Facing mounting attacks in the press and hecklers at his open-air meetings, he persevered in preaching throughout England. He remained undaunted in the face of opposition: "I was honored with having a few stones, dirt, rotten eggs and pieces of dead cats thrown at me."⁴⁰ Once, a man tried to take Whitefield's life by attempting to stab him. On other occasions, drummers and trumpeters were hired to drown out his preaching. He was even physically assaulted and beaten: "I received many blows and wounds; one was particularly large, and near my temples. I thought of Stephen. . . . I was in great hopes that like him I should be dispatched, and go off in this bloody triumph to the immediate presence of my Master."⁴¹

Despite this escalating resistance, Whitefield regained a growing number of supporters. A large building was erected for him in London, Moorfields Tabernacle, in which he could preach whenever he was in the city. John Newton remarked that at five o'clock in the morning, the streets of the Haymarket area in London were as lit with torches carried by the large crowds going to hear Whitefield preach, as they were in the evening with multitudes going to the opera.⁴²

Amid his constant travels, Whitefield longed for the companionship of a wife, someone like Jonathan Edwards' Sarah. On November 14, 1741, he hastily married Elizabeth James, a widow he met in Wales whom he barely knew. They had probably spent less than a week together before their marriage. With

his new wife at his side, Whitefield preached throughout much of England to swelling numbers and with increased blessing. Next, he undertook a five-month preaching tour of Scotland, which was met with continued success. His sermons, he confessed, came with “much power” accompanied by “very great . . . weeping.”⁴³ The hand of God was upon him for good.

By early 1744, Whitefield was met with financial stress, which demanded his immediate attention. He instructed his wife to leave London with their newly born son, John, and to move into a cottage in Wales in order to reduce their expenses. Traveling in an unheated coach, mother and child stopped halfway in Gloucester, spending a few nights at his parents’ Bell Inn. En route, four-month-old John was overtaken by the cold and died. In strange providence, Whitefield’s son died in the very home in which George himself had been born, and as he confided, “laid in the church where I was baptized, first communicated, and first preached.”⁴⁴ As a hammer forges metal upon an anvil, so God used this painful affliction to further shape Whitefield into the image of the suffering Savior whom he was called to preach.

Further difficulty came when Whitefield survived a well-orchestrated assassination plot in which he was attacked while in bed at night. Recognizing God’s sovereign protection, he would later say, “We are immortal until our work on earth is done.”⁴⁵ God still had eternal work for His chosen servant to do, and Whitefield, even in the face of mounting opposition and personal tragedy, would not lose heart.

America again came into his sights, and in 1744, Whitefield embarked upon his third trip to the colonies, accompanied by his wife, her only trip to America. Like a colossal hurricane blowing onto the New England coast, Whitefield made landfall upon spiritually parched ground. This extended ministry would ignite yet another wave of revival. He arrived in critically poor health due to a sickness he had contracted onboard, but proceeded to launch a four-year preaching tour. In failing physical condition, Whitefield sailed to Bermuda in 1748 to recuperate. He preached in Bermuda for two months and quickly recovered, virtually preaching himself back to strength. Later that year, Whitefield returned to Britain in order to dispel reports that he had died in America.

For the next three years (1748–1751), this tireless servant labored throughout England. However, his heart became burdened due to the mounting debts of the Bethesda Orphan House in Georgia. During a time of great financial need, Whitefield providentially came into contact with a wealthy member of England's upper class, Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, who commissioned him to be her personal chaplain. Lady Huntingdon became a faithful supporter of Whitefield's gospel enterprises and lessened his financial strain. More importantly, this relationship afforded him the opportunity to preach to many British aristocrats at her multiple estates.

Realizing his need to give himself more fully to evangelistic work, Whitefield resigned as the organizational leader of the Calvinistic Methodist Society in 1749. His resignation gave

John Wesley full control of the emerging Evangelical movement and further eased the tension with the Wesley brothers. This allowed Whitefield to preach with greater regularity at his Moorfields Tabernacle in London. Focusing entirely upon his preaching, Whitefield traveled throughout the British Isles, first to Wales, then to Ireland, and finally to Scotland, taking the gospel to more-populated areas.

Whitefield set sail for the New World for the fourth time in October 1751. Undertaking another extensive preaching tour, he first arrived in Georgia to inspect the needs of the Bethesda Orphanage, only to discover its renewed financial shortages, a problem that would follow him for many years. After only six months in the colonies, he was forced to cut short his preaching in order to return to England and raise the much-needed money for his orphan house. Once back in England, Whitefield resumed his extensive preaching. He conducted another ministry tour through Wales and journeyed for a seventh time to Edinburgh. He returned to London for the opening of the newly rebuilt Moorfields Tabernacle, which could house four thousand people. In 1743, yet another tabernacle was built in Bristol to accommodate the large crowds that clamored to hear the great evangelist preach.

A TIRELESS ITINERANT

On a fifth tour of America in 1754, Whitefield again preached throughout the colonies amid rising popularity. This evangelistic

tour again stretched from the northern parts of New England to the southern reaches of Georgia. A visit from Whitefield remained a major event, drawing larger crowds than any other preacher. Near Philadelphia, the newly formed College of New Jersey, later named Princeton College, conferred upon him an honorary master of arts degree in recognition of his fundraising efforts on behalf of the school. He returned to Georgia but was stricken with illness because of his weakened state caused by the heavy demands upon him. After only a year in the colonies, Whitefield was forced to return to England in 1755 in order to recover physically.

Whitefield toiled in England for the next eight years due to the French and Indian War, which prevented his return to America. Under a grueling ministry load, he preached throughout the British Isles in places such as Bristol, Gloucester, Edinburgh, Dublin, Glasgow, and Cardiff. Yet with this sustained popularity came increased opposition, which further damaged his already deteriorating health. Nevertheless, with indefatigable resolve, he continued to preach. As revival in England continued, still another tabernacle was built in which Whitefield could preach, the Tottenham Court Road Chapel in central London. He subsequently opened an almshouse for widows in the same area.

In 1759, after more than twenty years, Whitefield was at last able to pay off the debt of the Bethesda Orphan House. Despite the removal of this heavy burden, the frail evangelist was weakening. John Wesley wrote, "Mr. Whitefield . . . seemed

to be an old, old man, being fairly worn out in his Master's service."⁴⁶ Whitefield's prolific ministry was exacting a high price. Whitefield journeyed to the Netherlands to regain his health. After his health stabilized and the war in America ended, he sailed back to the colonies for a sixth time.

Arriving in Virginia, Whitefield began a two-year preaching tour of the American coast from 1763 to 1765. He initially traveled north to New York, then further upward into New England. He next journeyed south to Georgia, where he preached to large, receptive crowds. He pushed north to Philadelphia, where he was met with further success for the gospel. From there, he departed for England for what would be his final ministry on British soil.

Back in England, Whitefield resumed his heavy preaching load. Based predominantly in London, his ministry knew no rest. He made his final preaching trip to Edinburgh. He faced less persecution wherever he went and was met with greater admiration. Yet he was not without trials. Sorrow came in 1768 when his wife, Elizabeth, unexpectedly died. Despite his grief, his belief in the sovereignty of God remained firm. He preached her funeral sermon from Romans 8:28, affirming that "all things work together for good." He pressed on in his preaching, visiting Trevecca and Wales in extended ministry labors. On September 16, 1769, Whitefield preached his final London sermon from John 10:27–28.

Soon afterward, he sailed for America in what would be his last trip across the Atlantic. This ocean crossing was

especially difficult and dangerous, further draining his already depleted strength. Whitefield arrived in Charleston, where he wholeheartedly preached to large crowds for ten consecutive days. He traveled south into Georgia, where he remained for the duration of the winter of 1769–1770. In late spring, he traveled north to launch another extensive evangelistic campaign in Philadelphia, New York, and New England. Under the demands of his constant travel and heavy preaching load, his frail body showed increased signs of deterioration.

Whitefield preached his last sermon in Exeter, New Hampshire, on September 29, 1770. It was a soul-searching exposition that would last two hours, and was titled “Examine Yourself,” from 2 Corinthians 13:5. As he stepped forward to preach, Whitefield uttered a silent prayer, “If I have not yet finished my course, let me go and speak for Thee once more in the fields, seal Thy truth, and come home, and die.”⁴⁷

Afterward, the drained evangelist rode south by horse to Newburyport, Massachusetts, where he was to preach the next day at the Old South Presbyterian Church. Upon arriving, he addressed a large gathering at the pastor’s parsonage on Saturday evening. Having suffered all of his life with severe cardiac asthma, he found it difficult during the night to breathe. On Sunday morning, September 30, 1770, at approximately six o’clock a.m., George Whitefield breathed his last and entered into the presence of Him whom he had so faithfully proclaimed. Biographer Sir Marcus Loane wrote, “At the age of

fifty-five, the Prince of English preachers was dead, a prince that hath no peer.”⁴⁸

As per his instruction, Whitefield was buried under the next pulpit in which he was to preach. Appropriately, his body was laid in a subterranean crypt under the pulpit of the Old South Presbyterian Church. Multiple funerals were held on both sides of the Atlantic to express sorrow and respect for this gifted servant. The service in Newburyport was attended by six thousand people. So many ships crowded into the harbor that it could contain no more vessels. In London, John Wesley preached Whitefield’s memorial service at one of Whitefield’s churches, Tottenham Court Road Chapel. There Wesley said:

Have we read or heard of any person since the Apostles, who testified the Gospel of the grace of God through so widely extended a place, through so large a part of the habitable earth? Have we read or heard of any person who called so many thousands, so many myriads, of sinners to repentance? Above all, have we read or heard of any who has been a blessed instrument in His hand of bringing so many sinners from “darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God”?⁴⁹

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Not quite fifty-six years old at his death, Whitefield had invested thirty-four extraordinary years in the work of

advancing the gospel. He had singlehandedly done the work of an entire army of gospel preachers. Even a fraction of Whitefield's evangelistic endeavors would exhaust the strongest of men. From a human perspective, never has one man exerted such far-reaching influence and been met with such enormous success for such an extended period of time as this commanding figure. A century after Whitefield's death, J. C. Ryle remarked:

No preacher in England has ever succeeded in arresting the attention of such crowds as Whitefield constantly addressed around London. No preacher has ever been so universally popular in every country that he visited, in England, Scotland, and America. No preacher has ever retained his hold on his hearers so entirely as he did for thirty-four years. His popularity never waned.⁵⁰

What uniquely marked this eminently gifted evangelist? In the following chapters, we will examine the evangelistic zeal of this tireless figure.

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