George Whitefield, perhaps the most popular preacher of the Great Awakening, established himself as a man of many talents. He had seemingly boundless energy. His popularity with the people and his personal sense of mission brought him to America seven times. Between the summer of 1736 and September, 1770, he preached on at least 18,000 occasions. He published numerous pamphlets, directed several charity drives, assisted in establishing schools, and founded an orphanage. He had a tendency to provoke controversy. At various times he was called a saint, a devil, a knave, and a fool. Bishops wrote against him and ministers denied him the use of their pulpits. But the people flocked to hear him. The storm of controversy continued even after he was ordained to the priesthood in the Church of England.

The appraisal of Whitefield in England and in the Northern and Middle Colonies of America was little different from that accorded him in the Southern Colonies. He was sharply criticized for accepting invitations to preach in ballrooms. On at least one occasion, Robert Walpole accused him of encouraging crime in order to have a dramatic setting for “eleventh hour conversions.” Samuel Foote lampooned the cross-eyed preacher as “Dr. Squintum.” Richard Graves made him the butt of gentle, restrained satire. On the other hand, the poets William Cowper and John Greenleaf Whittier wrote of him with admiration and extolled his efforts. Even The Gentleman’s Magazine, which had never written favorably of evangelicals, published the following poem in November, 1737:

To the Rev. Mr. Whitefield, on His Design for Georgia

How great, how just thy zeal, adventurous youth
To spread in heathen climes the light of truth!
Go, loved of heaven, with every grace refined,
Inform, enrapture each dark Indian’s mind;
Grateful, as when to realms long hid from day,
The cheerful dawn foreshows the solar ray.
How great thy charity, whose large embrace
Intends the eternal weal of all thy race;

---

1 Whitefield’s visits to America were as follows: (1) 1736; (2) August, 1739 to March, 1741; (3) August, 1744 to June, 1746; (4) September, 1751 to March, 1752; (5) March, 1754 to May, 1755; (6) June, 1763 to July, 1765; (7) September, 1769 to September, 1770.
Prompts thee the rage of waves and winds to scorn,
To effect the work for which thy soul was born.
What multitudes, whom Pagan dreams deceive,
Shall, when they hear thy heavenly voice, believe!
On Georgia’s shore they Wesley shall attend,
To hail the wished arrival of his friend;
With joy the promised harvest he surveys,
And to his Lord for faithful laborers prays;
Though crowded temples here would plead thy stay,
Yet haste, blest prophet, on thy destined way.
Be gentle, winds, and breathe an easy breeze,
Be clear, ye skies, and smooth, ye flowing seas!
From heaven, ye guardian angels, swift descend,
Delighted his blest mission to attend;
Which shall from Satan’s power whole nations free,
While half the world to Jesus bow the knee.
Long as Savannah, peaceful stream, shall glide,
Your worth renowned shall be extended wide;
Children as yet unborn shall bless your lore,
Who thus to save them left your native shore;
The apostles thus, with ardent zeal inspired,
To gain all nations for their Lord desired.
They measured seas, a life laborious knew,
And numerous converts to their Master drew:
Whose hallelujahs, on the ethereal plains,
Rise scarce beneath the bright seraphic strains.”

While enjoying a widespread popular reception in Pennsylvania, Whitefield also managed to elicit favorable attention from Benjamin Franklin. Franklin was so impressed by the young preacher that he requested permission to publish two volumes of his sermons and two volumes of his Journals. In his newspaper, Franklin reported that, despite the strong opposition of the clergy, Whitefield was heard, on one occasion in Philadelphia, by approximately 30,000 persons of all sects and denominations. He concluded his article by commending the preacher for effecting such a “radical, wonderful change in the manners of the inhabitants.” Apparently, Franklin and Whitefield remained on friendly terms. In 1753, Whitefield wrote a

---

6 J. B. Wakeley (ed.), The Prince of Pulpit Orators: A Portraiture of Rev. George Whitefield (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1871), 112-113. The estimate of the size of the crowd was computed by Franklin in an elaborately described manner—he measured the area on which the crowd stood, determined the number of persons who could stand in each square yard, and then concluded the total number to have been 30,000 persons.
7 Tyerman, op. cit., I, 338-339.
letter expressing appreciation for the relief of paralysis which Franklin had induced by the application of electricity.\(^8\)

Following a fruitful ministry in Pennsylvania and the Jerseys, Whitefield traveled to Maryland. His first stop was in North East where, due to insufficient publicity, only 1,500 people turned out to hear him. The next day, at Joppa, his audience numbered only 40 persons.\(^9\) Luke Tyerman, Whitefield's exhaustive biographer, suggested that, whereas in Pennsylvania and the Jerseys the twenty-four-year-old preacher had been in the midst of a great revival, in Maryland he felt himself in a moral and religious desert.\(^10\) On a later visit to Maryland, however, Whitefield spent at least a month preaching to large congregations. The door was opened for preaching almost everywhere, and great crowds flocked to hear him.\(^11\) Consequently, he preached with "abundant success."\(^12\)

Apparently, Whitefield's popularity in the North continued throughout his ministry, for, in 1764, when he decided to make a journey to the southern colonies, "the Boston people sent a hue and cry after him, and brought him back." There were two reasons; they wanted to hear more of his preaching, and they were concerned for his health.\(^13\)

Throughout his ministry, however, Whitefield was more drawn to the South than to the North. When first invited to preach in Georgia, he wrote: "My heart leaped within me . . . and echoed to the call."\(^14\) During the next thirty years he never had serious cause to be disappointed in the results of his labors in that region. Throughout the South, he was accorded a popular reception. Often he was the invited, honored guest in the homes of the people. Frequently, he, rather than the resident clergyman, was asked to baptize the children of his hosts. On at least one occasion the populace stopped a New Year's dance to hear him preach.\(^15\)

There were discernible reasons for Whitefield's favorable reception in the South. His donations pleased the people. In preparation for his first visit to Georgia, Whitefield collected about 2,000 pounds for use among the colonists. He gave 50 pounds to the trustees of Georgia "towards building a church at Frederica." He purchased numerous books, pamphlets, and tracts, including "Flavel's Husbandry, Jenk's Devotion, Norris on Prudence."\(^\) Also he bought

---

\(^8\) Wakeley, op. cit., 118.
\(^10\) Ibid., 341.
\(^11\) Ibid., II, 164-165.
\(^13\) Tyerman, op. cit., II, 475-476. Whitefield's health had been poor, and the intense heat of the South, it was feared, would cause his death.
\(^15\) Tyerman, op. cit., I, 342-357.
\(^\) Ibid., 106-109.
300 pounds worth of clothing to distribute among the people of Savannah.\textsuperscript{17}

Moreover, Whitefield sympathized with the settlers, as is shown by his sharply worded criticism of the provision which denied rum and slaves to the settlers. He deplored the fact that lands were granted only to male emigrants, and he objected to the regulation which prevented female descendants from inheriting the estates of their ancestors. He argued that to impose such restrictions on the people was “little better than to tie their legs and bid them walk.” \textsuperscript{18} Thus, it is not surprising that, wherever Whitefield went, he was beloved. “Even the mongrel population of Savannah treated him with affectionate respect.” \textsuperscript{19}

It would appear that Whitefield’s greatest reception was in Georgia. William Stephens, who went to Georgia with a commission as secretary for the affairs of the trustees of the province, noted his personal anticipation of the evangelist’s arrival.\textsuperscript{20} By captivating the “many loose Livers, who heard him gladly, and seemed to give due Attention,” Whitefield was usually able to speak to great crowds of eager listeners.\textsuperscript{21} As a consequence, the place of worship was often far too small to contain the throngs who sought to hear him.\textsuperscript{22} So successfully did he stir up the colonists that his “Auditors increased daily.”\textsuperscript{23} Typically, he preached at five, ten, three, and seven o’clock on a single day, which meant a total preaching time of approximately forty hours per week.\textsuperscript{24} Preaching was his forte.

Whitefield’s popularity was not limited to any one group in society. One of the evangelist’s strongest supports in Georgia was the esteemed William Stephens who availed himself of every opportunity to hear him preach.\textsuperscript{25} Whitefield was invited by the Free-masons in Savannah “to read prayers and preach with power” at one of their dinner meetings.\textsuperscript{26} It seemed that his “Name . . . could not fail drawing all sorts of People to Church” as well as other meeting places.\textsuperscript{27} Whitefield himself expressed joy and satisfaction at the reception accorded him.\textsuperscript{28} He was so well liked in Savannah that when William Norris, who had been appointed rector of the church, arrived, he found his position nearly untenable. The people compared Norris with the evangelist and voiced their preference for

\textsuperscript{17} Belden, op. cit., 44-45. The list of articles purchased reflected considerable wisdom on his part.
\textsuperscript{18} Tyerman, op. cit., I, 140-142.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 139.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 199-200.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{23} Allen D. Candler (comp.), The Colonial Records of Georgia (Atlanta: The Franklin-Turner Company, 1905), IV, 148.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 150, 160, 174.
\textsuperscript{25} Stephens, op. cit., II, 251-252, 246, 262.
\textsuperscript{26} George Whitefield, A Continuation of the Reverend Mr. Whitefield’s Journal from His arrival at Savannah, to His Return to London (London: W. Strahan, 1739), II, 6. Hereinafter cited as Whitefield, Journals.
\textsuperscript{27} Stephens, op. cit., II, 246.
\textsuperscript{28} Whitefield, Journals, II, 12.
Whitefield's doctrine of salvation by faith alone. Ultimately Norris was compelled to resign.20

Just as his presence brought joy to the hearts of the people, Whitefield's departure was cause for sorrow. The first time he took leave of Savannah, the people came to see him off "with tears in their eyes." They brought him "wine, ale, cake, coffee, tea, and other things proper" for his passage. They were cheered when he assured them of his intention to return as soon as possible.30 No doubt they were also comforted by the thought of his reasons for returning to England at that time, namely, to receive ordination as a priest in the Church of England, to seek alterations in the government of Georgia which would eradicate abuses endured by the colonists, and to collect funds for the erection of an orphanage.31

The orphanage in Georgia was the object of much of Whitefield's thought and energy. He began planning for an orphanage when he noted that there were many children in the colony who might prove to be useful members of society if there were a proper place for their care and education.32 Apparently Whitefield's motivation was similar to that which initiated the schooling programs of New England. An orphanage was not an innovation, for the Saltzburghers had constructed such an institution at Ebenezer.33 Apparently the 24-year-old preacher detected some shortcomings in the Ebenezer orphanage, because he proposed to pattern his institution after the one built by August H. Francke in Germany.34 Upon receipt of his request, the Council in Georgia agreed to allow Whitefield to build, direct, and manage the proposed "Orphan House," provided he would acquaint the Council with the sums he collected and give an accounting of his expenditures. The Council added that if he would comply with its demands, it would conform to his every desire.36 Whitefield agreed to the terms laid down by the Council and was granted 450 acres of land, "in trust for the Orphan House, subject to a Quit Rent of 3 pounds per annum."36

Even so, the proposed orphanage was criticized. Some persons were openly skeptical of the feasibility and the value of the project. Patrick Tailfer wondered what support would be forthcoming for the orphanage after its completion; and he asked, "What Service can an Orphan-House be in a Desert and a forsaken Colony?"37

Not only did Whitefield build the orphanage and present the grievances of the people before the authorities, but in 1764 he also

21 Tyerman, op. cit., I, 140; Stephens, op. cit., II, 180-190.
22 Tyerman, op. cit., 140-142.
23 Ibid., 131-132.
24 Ibid., 137-138.
25 Ibid., 141.
26 Candler, op. cit., V, 89-90.
27 Ibid., 174.
28 Patrick Tailfer and others, A True and Historical Narrative of the Colony of Georgia in America (Charles-Town, South Carolina: Tho Authors, 1741), 113.
wrote a letter to the “Governor-in-Chief of His Majesty’s Province of Georgia,” pointing up the need and enumerating the advantages of establishing a college in the colony. Little wonder, therefore, that Tyerman concluded, “There cannot be a doubt that Georgia had had no benefactor superior to him.”

In contrast to the affection and esteem accorded Whitefield by virtually every segment of Georgia society, he was given a “cool Reception” by Alexander Garden, Commissary of South Carolina and Rector of St. Philip’s Church in Charleston. Garden charged Whitefield with “Enthusiasm and Pride, for speaking against the generality of the Clergy,” and with “breaking canons and Ordination Vow.” Then he warned Whitefield that if he preached in any public church in South Carolina he would suspend his ordination. Whitefield replied that he was ordained by the Bishop of London, and declared that the Commissary was not acting responsibly. In a sermon the next day, Garden likened Whitefield to “the Pharisee, who came to the temple, saying, ‘God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are.’ ” For reply Whitefield himself preached on the text, “Alexander the coppersmith hath done me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works.”

Garden continued his vitriolic attack on Whitefield for some time. On one occasion, he preached a “virulent, unorthodox and inconsistent” sermon against the Methodists in general and Whitefield in particular. Later he denied Whitefield the sacrament. Next, he cited the evangelist to appear before the court and formally charged him with breaking canon law. In a later sermon Garden drew a parallel between Whitefield and “all the Oliverians, Ranters, Quakers, French Prophets, till he came down to a family of the Dutarts, who lived ... in South Carolina, and were guilty of the most notorious incests and murders.”

Despite the opposition of the Commissary, the people of South Carolina received the youthful preacher cordially. As a matter of fact, they were so anxious to hear him that they went to “one of the Dissenting meetinghouses,” where he preached to a large crowd.

---

38 Tyerman, op. cit., II, 479.
39 Whitefield, Journals, VI, 10-11.
41 Tyerman, op. cit., I, 357-360.
42 Whitefield, Journals, VII, 6.
44 Ibid., 206-207.
45 Whitefield, Journals, VII, 8-9.
shut up their shops, forgot their secular business, and "laid aside their schemes for the world." And the oftener he preached the "keener edge he seemed to put upon their desires to hear him again." Consequently, the people of Charleston donated 70 pounds in a special offering to help build the orphanage at Bethesda. The people of South Carolina, like those in Georgia, were extremely reluctant to have Whitefield leave them.

Whitefield's popularity was reflected also in the newspapers. Colonial newspapers generally did very little reporting, and the South Carolina Gazette was no exception. Therefore, the extensive reporting of Whitefield's activities in South Carolina and elsewhere provides strong evidence that the people wanted to keep informed about his success. Frequently the reports contained editorial comments. For example, the announcement of Whitefield's expected return from Philadelphia included the observation that he had "already given new Life to Religion" there. A later article, in announcing Whitefield's arrival in Charleston, noted that he had been in America 77 days, preached 133 times, traveled over 800 miles, and that "Great and visible are the Fruits of his . . . Labours." The account seemed to suggest that people were more eager than ever to hear the evangelist. Another news item commented that Whitefield had recently preached to a crowd of more than 50,000 people in Bristol. Then there was a lengthy account of his tour through New England, and the notation that he preached at least twice a day to crowds numbering 5,000.

The newspaper evidence of the interest in Whitefield was not limited merely to the editor's reporting. The papers printed numerous articles and letters regarding the man. One such article, written by Rev. Joseph Smith, relayed the sentiments of acquaintances in Boston who had written that Whitefield deserved all the lofty praise accorded him by the southerners. An open letter from one Deborah Sherman implored the evangelist to return "to stop the Mouths of the wicked Oppressors," who said he was in league with the devil because he was a Dissenter. Another correspondent who had been most critical of Whitefield before his visit, likened him to a comet which, according to "Deep Philosophers," if it "should happen to brush

48 Belden, op. cit., 90.
49 Ibid.
50 Gillies, op. cit., 45.
51 South Carolina Gazette, March 15, 1740, 2.
52 Ibid., December 11, 1740, 2.
53 Ibid., July 7, 1739, 2.
54 Ibid., October 30, 1740, 2-3. Similar articles are to be found in the issues for December 29, 1739 (which had a handwritten notice on page one that Whitefield was to preach "at French in the morning"), March 8, 1740, August 23, 1740, January 1, 1741, November 11, 1745, January 5, 1740.
55 Ibid., January 15, 1741, supplement.
56 Ibid., March 18, 1745, 1.
57 Ibid., April 19, 1740, 1-2.
over any Part of the Earth or any other Planet, . . . would set all in a Flame." He said that Whitefield had the "same Effect" in calling men to repentance.68

George Whitefield was also the subject of a lengthy, but interesting newspaper debate. The series was touched off by a letter sent to the paper from one Rev. J—— S—— commending Whitefield. He observed that, although some persons accused him of deceiving the people, his preaching generally acquitted him of any despicable criticism.69 Apparently misunderstanding the intent of the original letter, an unidentified individual accused S—— of being prejudiced against Whitefield. He said the sole basis of such opposition was the fact that the subject of the editorial was a member of the established church.60 J—— S—— then requested permission to refute the "indecent" attack made upon his "Character" and his Letter."61

So well liked was Whitefield that the editor of the newspaper, bowing to public demand, frequently offered for sale copies of Whitefield's works. One sermon often requested was, _The Heinous Sin of Profane Cursing and Swearing_.62 His letters and journals were also in demand.63

Throughout the South Whitefield preached to thousands of persons during his travels. He was the "one preacher to whom people everywhere listened—the great unifying agency in the Awakening, the great molding force among the denominations.64 Whitefield was much "more readily" received in Virginia than any other preacher who went to that colony.65 When he preached in Williamsburg, there was a "numerous Congregation, and 'tis thought there wou'd have been many more, if timely Notice had been give."66 A letter from Rev. Patrick Henry to a friend indicated the popularity of the evangelist:

> If I had refus'd him access to the Church, he would have preach'd in the church yard, or very near it, and then the whole congregation would have gone over to him, this was what I plainly foresaw as did also my Friends; for tho the number of his followers there were but few, yet all the people to a man had a great desire to hear the famous Whitefield.67

---

68 Ibid., July 5, 1740, 1-2.
69 Ibid., January 5, 1740, 1-2. Although a handwritten note identified the author as Josiah Smith, the "father of the present Josiah Smith who is now 62 years of age," the more probable writer was Joseph Smith, the frequent defender of Whitefield. The writer identified himself as living in Charleston, which would further enhance the argument for Joseph Smith.
70 Ibid., January 13, 1740, 1-2.
71 Ibid., 2. The debate continued in the issues of Feb. 2, 8, 16, 23, March 8, 15, June 26, August 23, and Sept. 26, 1740.
72 Ibid., March 28, 1740, 2.
73 Ibid., August 23, 1740, November 13, 1740, January 1, 1741.
76 Virginia Gazette, December 21, 1739, 3.
77 Gewehr, op. cit., 61-62.
As in South Carolina, the *Virginia Gazette* gave considerable attention to the preacher from England. Editorially, he was praised as being "beyond controversy a Wonder of a Man" who "had a most easy way of delivering himself, and a great Command of Word." The newspaper also gave attention to his activities elsewhere, reporting that the "universal Attention" was such that, when he preached, "there was nothing to interrupt him." In speaking of the anticipated appointment of Whitefield to the position of Archbishop of Boston, the editor remarked that the move was a definite improvement. Another item of interest to the readers was the report that Whitefield and John Wesley had resolved their disputes.

Not everyone believed that Whitefield was a saint. An anonymous letter writer alleged that Whitefield's aims in his journeys were "not sincere, noble, and heavenly, as is pretended, but rather that carnal Self-Interest, and Applause" was his basic motivation. He was also described as a "mercenary self-seeking Man, all whose Pretence to Godliness, when discovered and laid open to the Bottom" was "mere Hypocrisy, in order to get Money and popular Applause: Another hot-headed, ambitious Phaeton." Thus the man who at one time was called the "angel of Moorfields" was referred to as a hypocrite who deserved to be "Thunderstruck with divine Vengeance.

Although Whitefield's preaching was most frequently cited as the reason for the popular response he elicited, doubtless his ethical positions were also contributing factors. On his first visit to Georgia he endeavored to alter the moral life of the town of Savannah. He became outraged that "several Persons in . . . town lived most scandalous Lives with their Whores, and went on impure in open Defiance of all Laws both divine and human." He made the circumstance the occasion of attending a session of the court in which he censured them severely for allowing such practices to continue unabated. In Georgia Whitefield did not recognize any inherent differences between Negroes and whites. The orphanage was segregated. According to the rules for the institution, Negro boys were to be baptized and taught to read, while Negro girls were "taught to work with the needle." Moreover, his practice, while a guest in homes throughout the South, was to visit among the Negroes of the house. As a consequence of these efforts, he became

---

66 *Virginia Gazette*, October 31, 1745, 1. A poem of praise was published in the January 8, 1740 issue.
75 Henry, op. cit., 58-59.
76 Tyerman, op. cit., II, 582-583. The population of the orphanage, in 1770, shows that there were 25 whites and 50 Negroes.
increasingly convinced 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." Even though he bought slaves for the purpose of making the Georgia plantation self-sufficient, Whitefield strongly opposed abusing slaves. In a letter to the inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, he censured them for their treatment of slaves, noting that their dogs were "caressed and fondled" at their tables, while their slaves had not an equal privilege. Some slaves, he noted, "upon the most trifling provocation" had been "cut with knives, and... had forks thrown into their flesh." Although he acknowledged that only Negroes could do field work in the hot climate of the South, the letter brought forth an unpopular clamor.

Whitefield's liberal position on liquor endeared him to some of the colonists. Although he was full of indignation at the "prodigality of the gay life of his time... he had no condemnation for the rapidly developing liquor trade, and was not himself an abstainer." In fact, on his first voyage to America, he took "two hogsheds of fine white wine." Moreover, as indicated above, he rebuked the Georgia Board of Trustees for denying rum to the settlers.

The popularity of Whitefield continued even after his death. Funeral sermons for him were preached throughout the South. In Georgia, "all the black cloth in the stores was bought up; the pulpits and desks of the church, the branches, the organ lofts, the pews of the governor and council, were covered with black." Many of his admirers sought to bring his remains from Massachusetts to Georgia and erect a monument to his memory. In a lengthy article extolling Whitefield's piety, zeal, ability, eloquence, devotion, and learning, the Virginia Gazette reported that a child born in Virginia on the day of Whitefield's death was named for him.

While George Whitefield was criticized in America, he was also popular over a period of thirty-two years as he made preaching tours up and down the eastern seaboard. In response to the esteem accorded him he said that the Americans were "the most hospitable people under heaven." He was more admired in the South than in the North. The din of popular acclaim directed toward him has long since subsided, but perhaps some of the effects of his powerful preaching are still felt in the land.

---

79 Whitefield, Works, IV, 37.41.
82 Mindo, op. cit., 64.
84 Hyory, op. cit., 15.
86 Virginia Gazette, January 17, 1771.
87 Ibid., Nov. 1770, 1. A similar article appeared in the issue of April 10, 1771.
88 Mindo, op. cit., 130.