A BICENTENNIAL REMEMBRANCE OF
GEORGE WHITEFIELD

by Arnold A. Dallimore

The year 1970 marked the 200th anniversary of the death of George Whitefield. In celebration of the event memorial services were held in various lands and commemorative articles appeared in several publications.

Whitefield, however, is not easily commemorated. A hundred years ago John Charles Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool, declared, "There are few men whose characters have suffered so much from misrepresentation and ignorance as George Whitefield," and in the succeeding century this sorry practice has continued so frequently that Ryle's words may now be repeated, and this with emphasis.

Herein lies the difficulty of providing any adequate remembrance of the great evangelist of early Methodism. Truly, he would have wanted no attempt to correct mankind's faulty concept of him. He was willing to leave all such things till the time of his appearing before the judgment seat of Christ. But we wrong both Whitefield and ourselves if we continue in the pathway described by the good Bishop, and we have no choice but to come afresh to this life, to search out its facts and to acquire a fuller understanding of the man himself and of the nature and results of his work.

A NEW LOOK AT THE 18TH-CENTURY REVIVAL

Within the limitations of this article, of course, we can but sketch a few chief features of this more adequate picture of Whitefield, and in this attempt we do well, first of all, to take a fresh glance at the 18th-Century Revival itself.

In the common concept the great spiritual movement of two hundred years ago is very largely associated with John Wesley. He is commonly thought of as the preeminent figure in that work; the term "The Founder of Methodism" is applied to him, and the phrase "The Wesleyan Revival" is very frequently used as the title of the movement. In the bulk of the literature on the subject little is said about the part played in this work by Lady Huntingdon, John Cennick, Howell Harris or Daniel Rowland; Charles Wesley is given his place as "the poet of Methodism," while his well-deserved honor as an evangelist is but little made known; and George Whitefield is pictured as a man of extraordinary eloquence, but as a somewhat superficial figure and one whose part in the work was quite secondary to that of John Wesley.

This is both an incomplete and misleading view. Far from being limited to little more than the labors of John Wesley, marvellous though they were, the revival was a vast international movement that reached to several lands and affected much of the English-speaking
world of that day. It was mighty in the hands of God in Wales, and there today the names of Griffith Jones, Howell Harris, and Daniel Rowland are held in high remembrance as the men whom God raised up in this extraordinary work. Much of the spiritual life of Scotland was transformed in the revival. But, more important still to the people of the American continent, the revival fires were kindled throughout the length and breadth of the Thirteen Colonies in what was known as “The Great Awakening,” which resulted in blessings that ever since have been an integral part of the very life of the American nation.

In this wide international movement, George Whitefield was the supreme figure. Howell Harris’s labors were largely limited to a section of Southern Wales, and those of Jonathan Edwards to the town of Northampton and adjacent communities in New England. Admittedly, John Wesley ministered effectively in parts of Ireland, but apart from that his work as an evangelist was virtually limited to England. Whitefield alone carried the message, not only throughout England and much of Wales, but repeatedly to Scotland and also to Gibraltar, Bermuda, and Holland. Twice he conducted preaching missions in Ireland and seven times he visited America and over and over again preached the Gospel to vast multitudes from Maine in the north to Georgia in the south.

Accordingly, in our concept of the 18th-Century Revival, while we need to recognize the places occupied by Harris, Edwards, and John Wesley, we must also view the movement as a whole and recognize the preeminence that belonged to Whitefield. It is to Christendom’s loss that it has failed to understand the true nature and extent of the Revival, and it will be to its gain to see this mighty work in its international oneness and its lasting spiritual effects.

A FRESH APPRECIATION OF WHITEFIELD

Secondly, we take a further look at Whitefield and his ministry. It must be emphasized that the trumpet voice that first awakened England from its sleep of sin and religious lethargy was his. In 1737 in the midst of conditions so corrupt that several of England’s leading men, both secular and ecclesiastical, were declaring their hopelessness regarding the future of the nation, the people of London suddenly became conscious that a prophet of God had arisen in their midst. This was a clergyman of the Church of England, a recently ordained youth named Whitefield. He was twenty-two years of age, yet he was preaching every day in the week and thrice or more on Sundays, and his sermons were attracting such multitudes that they constantly overflowed the churches. News of his exploits was spreading throughout the land and such was the excitement that Charles Wesley declared “... the whole nation is in an uproar!” James Hervey exclaimed, “All London and the whole nation ring of the great things of God done by his ministry!” And this was some months before John Wesley’s Aldersgate Street experience and at a time when he and
Charles were as yet virtually unknown to the general public.

In 1739 Whitefield launched out into open-air preaching and therewith the excitement became still greater. Day by day his congregations amounted to many thousands, and these were not only the most numerous of his whole career but were very probably the largest assemblies ever reached by the unamplified human voice in the whole course of human history. As Whitefield performed this work hundreds of people, spiritually affected under his ministry, became attached to him and to his cause, insomuch that they constituted a great body of permanent followers, and to them the public gave the name “Methodists”. As is well known, Whitefield thrust John Wesley out into the open air work in Bristol and Charles Wesley in London, but their congregations were much smaller and they were but secondary figures in the movement. Accordingly, Whitefield was known throughout his life as Methodism’s founder and chief leader, and a score of statements to this effect from the literature of the times might be quoted. But these are well indicated by Skevington Wood in his assertion:

A scrutiny of the contemporary records will reveal that in the eighteenth century itself the name of Whitefield figures most prominently of all. . . . it is unquestionable that in the popular view Whitefield was regarded as the primate of the new movement and even as the founder of Methodism.1

Thus as we seek to pay tribute to Whitefield’s memory in recognition of the 200th anniversary of his death, we do well to correct our thinking regarding the nature of his work, and to repay something of that debt of recognition that Christendom in general and Methodism in particular owe him.

WHITEFIELD THE PREACHER

But any commemoration of Whitefield must recall him as a preacher above everything. He virtually lived to preach. From the beginning of his ministry in the churches of Bristol when he was twenty-two, he preached, with but a rare exception, every day and often twice and three times a day, and he preached thus until his dying day. The tremendous zeal which marked his work during his early twenties knew not the least abating as his life progressed, and was just as strong—perhaps stronger, although more matured—as his career drew on toward its close. A note book that he kept and which covers but part of his life records his preaching about 18,000 times, but the total figure is that suggested by Sir James Stephen who spoke of “Whitefield’s thirty to forty thousand sermons.” Stephen continues, “If the time spent in travelling from place to place and some brief intervals of repose and preparation be subtracted, his whole life may be said to have been consumed in the delivery of one continuous or scarcely interrupted sermon.”2 Similarly, Henry Venn,

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a carefully-spoken Church of England clergyman and long time friend of Whitefield, stated in a funeral sermon:

In the compass of a single week, and that for years, he spoke in general forty hours, and very many sixty, and that to thousands; and after his labours, instead of taking any rest, he was engaged in offering up prayers and intercessions with hymns and spiritual songs in every house to which he was invited.3

Mention has already been made of the unparalleled size of Whitefield’s congregations and of the amazing extent of his evangelistic travels—travels that included fourteen visits to Scotland, thirteen crossings of the Atlantic, besides journeyings throughout the great reaches of the American Colonies and to the majority of the counties of England and Wales.

But to this there must be added the wide range of the classes of people that composed Whitefield’s audiences. Though he could hold spell-bound the fastidious companies that gathered to hear him in Lady Huntingdon’s drawing room, and drew glowing tributes from such persons as Bolingbroke and Chesterfield, Handel and Hume, he also could preach in so simplified a fashion as to hold with equal attention the degraded colliers of Kingswood in England and the poor slaves of America. John Foster has left the statement:

... he had an energy and happy combination of the passions, so very extraordinary as to constitute a commanding species of sublimity of character. ... They had the effect of giving his ideas a distinct and matchlessly vivid enunciation; insomuch that ignorant and half-barbarous men often seemed, in a way which amazed even themselves, to understand Christian truths on their first delivery. Some of them may have heard, in unmeaning sounds, similar ideas expressed in the church service, but in Whitefield’s preaching they seemed to strike on their minds in fire and light.4

Bishop Ryle speaks of Whitefield as the greatest preacher England ever produced and Foster accords him a place as “one of the three or four most powerful and useful preachers since the apostolic age.”

WHITEFIELD, THE PHILANTHROPIST

Even when Whitefield, as a youth of nineteen, was among the Holy Club men in Oxford, the dream of founding an orphan house had become strong in his mind. Accordingly, when he was but twenty-four his dream became a reality with his founding of the large institution, Bethesda, for the homeless children of Georgia. With the death a few months later of his financial backer, William Seward (death that came by stoning in an open-air meeting in Wales), the whole burden of the maintenance of the orphan house fell on his own shoulders. It was a tremendous burden which loaded him with debt, hindered his ministry, affected his health and undoubtedly hastened his death, yet he bore it with uncomplaining patience throughout almost the whole of his ministerial career. Month by month and year by year he longed for the day when, as he said, “I shall owe no

3Ibid., pp. 384-5.
man anything but love," and only within two years of the close of his life did this longing come true.

Similarly, while he was but twenty-four, Whitefield began the construction of a great building at Nazareth in Pennsylvania which was to be a refuge for Negroes. Here the black man was to find kindness, was to be educated and to be brought under the sound of the Gospel. But because of the loss of Seward's financial assistance (not on account of theological bitterness with the Moravians, as has sometimes been assumed) Whitefield found he could not continue this large project, and he sold the uncompleted building to the Moravians.

Likewise, in a score of ways Whitefield lived to help others. He used his associations with the rich as a means of securing help for the poor. In the tremendous extent of his travels he was ever meeting with human need; the sick, the suffering, the lonely, the impoverished and the abandoned constantly drew his attention and his great heart was moved to come to their aid. He built schools from the very beginning of his ministry, labored to add an institution of higher learning to the orphan house in Georgia, and one of the chief features of his chapel on Tottenham Court Road in London was its adjacent row of alms houses. Well did Stephen say:

If ever philanthropy burned in the human heart with pure and intense flame, embracing the whole family of man in the spirit of universal charity, it was in the heart of George Whitefield. "He loved the world that hated him." He had no preferences but in favour of the ignorant, the miserable and the poor. In their cause he shrank from no privation, and declined neither insult nor hostility. To such wrongs he opposed the weapons of an all-enduring meekness and a love which would not be repulsed. The springs of his benevolence were inexhaustible and could not choose but flow.5

Strange it is indeed that the memory of such a man has been allowed to fall into neglect, that the facts of his life have been so little searched out, and that in one of the strangest inversions in all Christian history, "the love-fraught, self-denying and gentle-natured Whitefield," as Isaac Taylor described him, has sometimes been pictured as almost the very opposite. Strange it is also that his tomb, beneath the pulpit of the Presbyterian Church at Newburyport, Massachusetts, is seldom visited and is but little known to the Christians of America. Yet it has been depicted in verse by John Greenleaf Whittier and on this memorial occasion we do well to recall his lines:

Under the church in Federal Street,
Under the tread of its Sabbath feet,
Walled about by its basement stone,
Lie the marvellous prophet's bones.
No saintly honours to them are shown,
No sign nor miracle have they known;
But he who passes the ancient church
Stops in the shade of its belfry-porch,
And ponders the wonderful life of him

Who lies at rest in that charnel dim.
Long shall the traveller strain his eye
From the railroad car as it plunges by,
And the vanishing town behind him search
For the slender spire of the Whitefield Church;

And feel for one moment the ghosts of trade,
And fashion and folly and pleasure laid,
By the thought of that life of pure intent,
That voice of warning yet eloquent,
Of one on the errand of angels sent,
And if where he laboured the flood of sin
Like a tide from the harbour bar sets in,
And over a life of time and sense
The church spires lift their vain defence —
Still, as the gem of its civic crown,
Precious beyond the world's renown,
His memory hallow that ancient town.6