George Whitefield: The Man
and His Mission

By Walter B. T. Douglas

George Whitefield was a figure of considerable importance and his place is secured in the religious history of England and America. As a result of his preaching, or the preaching of men whom he converted, a number of congregations came into being.¹

Whitefield was born on December 16, 1714, at Gloucester, England, where his father, and after his father's death in Whitefield's infancy his mother, and then his step-father were successively proprietors of the Bell Inn. He was the youngest in the family of five elder brothers and one sister. After schooling in Gloucester he went up to Oxford in 1732, to Pembroke College, from which he graduated as B.A. four years later.

While in Oxford he came under the influence of a group of serious young men led by the Wesleys (nicknamed the Holy Club); and by this means, with the help of a book written in the previous century which Charles Wesley put into his hands, he was brought to the knowledge of God, and after prolonged inward struggle found what he calls "an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God, and a full assurance of faith..." "My joys," he writes, "were like a spring tide and overflowed the banks."²

From then onwards "showers of blessings" were his constant experience, and he never looked back. He did not have the difficulties experienced later by many of his own converts in finding a bishop willing to ordain him. The Bishop of Gloucester was sympathetic, and ordained him first deacon in 1736, and three years later to the full order of a priest in the Church of England. By this time he had already become noted and popular for his remarkable power as a preacher. "I now preached generally nine times a week," he writes; and in London, "on Sunday mornings, long before day, you might see streets filled with people going to church, with their lanthorns in their hands, and hear the conversing about the things of God."³ He had also already been to America for missionary work

¹. Whitefield helped to bring into existence in America a hundred and fifty congregational churches.
in Georgia, then a young colony, where his friends the Wesleys had preceded him. Those years either side of 1740 were a wonderful time of expansion and hope for these young Christians. The Wesleys, Whitefield, Cernick and other Moravian brethren, Howel Harris and other Welsh evangelists, were all active, and all active together, consciously and deliberately sharing in a single movement of revival in religion that, besides affecting Scotland, which Whitefield visited with great effect, was at work here in America as well.

This was the setting of Whitefield’s ordination and mission, whether at home or abroad, especially in these first years, during the 1740’s. “From New England,” he writes in 1742 to the Baptist minister in Leominster, “fresh and surprising glad tidings are sent....In Scotland, the fruits of my poor labours are abiding and apparent. In Wales I hear the word of the Lord runs and is glorified, as also in many places in England. In London, our Saviour is doing great things daily....We scarce know what it is to have a meeting without tears.”

London was the center, where the Morefield Tabernacle was erected in April, 1741, but the circumference was in America, and for Whitefield much more so than for Wesley. Whitefield as well as Wesley claimed the world as his parish, and, while Wesley crossed the Irish Sea forty-two times, he never came back to America, whereas Whitefield crossed the Atlantic no less than thirteen times. And, wherever he went, it was the same, whether in London, Glasgow, or in Philadelphia.

“I can’t pass over in silence,” a Philadelphia merchant wrote in 1740 to a friend in London, “the surprising change and alteration I

4. Ibid., i. p. 114.
5. Cf Arnold Dallimore, op. cit., p. 400. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that this world-wide perspective and universal spirit contributed significantly to the emergence of the concept of World Evangelism as evidenced by the various Missionary Societies. Through the active interest of Matthew Willis, one of Whitefield’s successors at the Tabernacle and Totenham Court Chapel, the London Missionary society was born, and chose as its stated purpose, “to send neither Episcopacy, Presbyterianism, nor Independency to the heathen, but simply the Gospel of Christ.”
see in the people of this place since that shining light the Reverend Mr. Whitefield has been amongst them....He appears to me to be a very sincere person, zealous for his Master’s cause, and justly admired for his elegant though plain language and easy to be understood, and for the serious vein of piety that runs through all his exhortations, crowded after by multitudes....He is endeavoring to reclaim a wicked, viscious, and sinful age, and that with great authority and courage, and I must own to you that I never heard of or saw his fellow."

In Philadelphia (as in London) Benjamin Franklin wrote, “it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk thro’ the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.”

That is, more or less, what everyone said of Whitefield and of the effect he had; and there is not much more that can be said; for while extraordinarily broad in its outreach, Whitefield’s life is extraordinarily narrow in its consistency, persistence and devotion; and it was not a long life. On November 14, 1741, he married a widow, a Welsh woman named Elizabeth James; she died two years before him, and their only child, a son named John, lived only four months.

Whitefield’s remarkable preaching had the unusual quality of appealing to, or at least intriguing, the nobility and court, as well as the illiterate, poor and downtrodden. Lord Bolingbroke and Lord Chesterfield were among those who came to hear him. There is a story of Chesterfield, when Whitefield was describing a blind beggar tottering at the edge of precipice, bounding from his seat with the cry, “Good God! he’s gone!” In America Benjamin Franklin, though he had come in an unsympathetic frame of mind, was so moved by Whitefield’s appeal for financial help for the orphanage established by him in Georgia, that in the end he emptied his pockets into the collection, gold and all.

In August, 1748, Whitefield became a chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon; and for a time there were political currents flowing round the Prince of Wales as the center of the Tory opposition party (to which Bolingbroke and Chesterfield both belonged), currents

which some hoped might lift Whitefield to the bench of bishops.\textsuperscript{10}

It is interesting to speculate how things might have developed if this had come to pass; but it is scarcely arguable that Whitefield himself gave much thought to it.

The grand alliance of Evangelicals had broken up by this time — first the Wesleys and Whitefield had found it impossible to work together owing to differences of doctrine, and at the second conference of others than the Wesleys, Whitefield was chosen moderator; but then Cernick and the Moravians had broken away, and in 1750 the Welsh evangelists suffered grievous division between two rival leaders — but through it all Whitefield himself seems to have been little affected. This was partly because all through his life he refused to be diverted by the business of organizing, from his own particular call and charge, which he believed to be that of general itinerant preaching, awakening, evangelizing, converting of any and all who might listen.\textsuperscript{11} Whitefield's catholicity of spirit and simplicity of temperament as well as of purpose also enabled him to keep on affectionate terms with fellow-workers who were themselves all too ready to quarrel. His entry in his diary after meeting Howel Harris — "My heart was knit closely to him. I wanted to catch some of his fire....A divine and strong sympathy seemed to be between us"\textsuperscript{12} — suggests the affectionate generosity of spirit which attached many besides Harris to him and kept them attached. He never fell out, as so many others did, with Lady Huntingdon, whose chapels he was opening, and also her college at Trevecca, during the last twelve months that he spent in England. Though he had been seriously ill, he was determined to return to America to make final arrangement for his beloved orphanage; and at Newburyport, Massachusetts, he died, probably of angina, on September 30, 1770. He was only 55. Even his death was characteristic and dramatic. He had been preaching and was


\textsuperscript{11} Whitefield fought shy of all denominationalism. He saw it as divisive and leading to dissension. In a sermon preached from the balcony of the Court House in Philadelphia, he declared: "Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians? No! Any Presbyterians? No! Have you any Independents or Seceders? No! Have you any Methodists? No! No! No! No! All who are here are Christians — believers in Christ — ...Oh! is this the case? Then God help me, God help us all, to forget party names, and to become Christians in deed and in truth." Cf Belden, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 240.

exhausted and on the way to bed, but on the way up he stood on the stairs with the candle in his hand and remained there exhorting the people until the candle burnt out; by next morning he was dead.

Among the many funeral sermons a notable one was preached by his old friend, John Wesley, who spoke to the congregation of “our dear friend,” “your beloved Brother, Friend and Pastor; yea and Father too; for how many are here whom he hath begotten in the Lord?” Wesley referred to “the uninterrupted shower of blessings wherewith God was pleased to succeed” Whitefield’s “labours”, and to “the integrity, which was inseparable from his whole character;” and for “of all others...the distinguishing part of his character” he pointed to “an heart susceptible of the most generous and the most tender Friendship.”

The church historian, John Stoughton, who is not given to fanciful or exaggerated language, says that

Whitefield bears away the palm from all rival in pulpit oratory. Perhaps no man of any age in the world’s history was exactly like him. By his own voice, so far as human instrumentality was concerned [he] converted thousands on thousands from the error of their ways. No one man before him had ever come into immediate contact with so many minds; no one voice had ever rung in so many ears; no one ministry had touched so many hearts. The depth of the impression produced is as wonderful as its extent. People were not merely interested, persuaded, convinced, ... they were quickened with a new kind of life .... Say that it was mere excitement, still the fact remains, that no such excitement by preaching had ever in this country been produced before.

A similar estimate is placed on Whitefield by the careful historian John Richard Green.

Whitefield, a servitor of Pembroke, was, above all, the preacher of the Revival...Whitefield's preaching was such as England had never heard before, theatrical, extravagant, often commonplace, but hushing all criticism by its intense reality, its earnestness of belief, its deep, tremulous sympathy with the sin and sorrow of mankind. It was no common enthusiast who could wring gold out of the closefisted Franklin, and admiration from the fastidious Walpole or look down from the top of a green knoll at Kingswood on twenty thousand colliers, grimy from the Bristol coalpits, and see, as he preached, the tears “making white channels down their blackened cheeks...?” In power as a preacher he [John Wesley] stood next to Whitefield.

G. F. Nuttall, the eminent British church historian of non-conformity, observed when he worked on the development of the Evangelical Revival in England that the evangelical leaders in the next generation following Whitefield often owed their conversion to Whitefield.\textsuperscript{16}

So it is true to say that, though no denomination bears his name, churches all over England and many in America owe their existence to Whitefield's preaching. And how many unknown people — as unknown then as now — owed it to him that they were brought into captivity to Christ! No one who listened to him could doubt that he was in earnest. Of a meeting in Bristol in 1739 he says, "Floods of tears flowed plentifully and my heart was so melted, that I prayed for them with strong cryings — and many tears." Two years earlier, at a sacrament service at Christmas time in London, he says, "The tears of the communicants mingled with the cup."\textsuperscript{17} In 1844 an old man of eighty-one named John Knight recorded how he had heard Whitefield preach in 1769 on his last visit to his native parts in Gloucestershire. "I was about 6 years of age," writes Knight, "my father held me up in his arms, and though so young I well remember to have seen the tears run down the cheeks of that Servant of God while preaching the love of his Master to dying sinners."\textsuperscript{18}

Whitefield was totally engaged. "I have heard," Knight records, "that it was worth going 10 miles to hear him give out the Doxology, "Praise God from whom all blessing flow."\textsuperscript{19}

If Whitefield was pre-eminently a preacher, the natural questions is: What was his preaching like, and what made it so remarkable? After allowing for the imponderables of time and circumstance and the inestimables of personality, I think one must say that its secret lay in an unalterable and indefatigable simplicity and singleness of purpose. Nothing is more impressive in Whitefield than his consummate zeal for the saving of men. He was as ready to spend and be spent for the individual and for the few as for the vast congregation. The stupendous achievements in his preaching is due

\textsuperscript{16} There were at least twenty ministers at one time in the Boston area alone who claimed Whitefield as their awakener.
19. \textit{Loc. cit}. 

to this fact. Whitefield found Christ everywhere: he found him everywhere in the Bible, in the Old Testament no less than the New, through an allegorical mode of interpretation which gave scope for the vivid use of imagination; he found him everywhere, no less, in his own everyday experience, and his one consuming desire was to bring others to Him. Whitefield’s singleness of purpose, the integrity which Wesley picked out as his distinguishing characteristic, expressed itself when he preached in a simplicity of language and illustration which first struck home and then united all who listened to him. Nor did he hesitate to speak from his own experience, in a way some might find embarrassing or egotistical had it not been that his interest so evidently was not in himself but in God, to whom he called others to come, as he had come, and when Whitefield said “Come!”, people came.

In 1720 the wife of Jonathan Edwards wrote to her brother: “It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible. I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob...It is reported that while the miners of England listened to him, the tears made white furrows down their smutty cheeks.”

Here is an eye-witness account of how Whitefield’s preaching affected the lives of all classes of people. This account is told by an unlettered farmer. It is a passage entirely innocent of punctuation.

When i see mr. whitefield come up...he looked almost angelical a young slim tender youth before thousands of people and with a bold undaunted count­enance and my hearing how god was with him everywhere as he came along it solemnized my mind and put me in a trembling for before he began to preach for he looked as if he was clothed with authority from ye great god and a sweet solemnity sat upon his brow and my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound and by gods blessing myoId foundation was broken up and i see my righteousness would not save me.

Fortunately we possess the last two sermons Whitefield preached at Tottenham Court Road, London, on Sunday, August 27, 1769, and at Moorfield Tabernacle the following Wednesday, before he left Ramsgate for America for the last time. Both sermons were published in November 1770 by an anonymous admirer, who says,

21. Ibid., p. 541.
"The florid style was never affected by Mr. Whitefield — but their peculiar manner will sufficiently bespeak the Author, will stamp them his own, and leave no room to doubt their authenticity."

These last sermons give some insights regarding Whitefield's theological reflection on the "call" to the ministry. In them, too, he speaks with deep emotion about his near departure to America:

I have got to part from you with good news in my mouth; I give them eternal life. O that these words may come with as much warmth to your hearts, as they did to mine near five-and thirty years ago! I am sure I never prayed so much against my infirmities, as against going into holy orders so soon...I remember once at Gloucester I know the room, and I cannot help looking up at the window, whenever I am there and go by. I know the bedside, I know the floor on which I have prostrated for weeks together; and I remember once I was crying, I cannot go! I am a novice!...At least these words came into my mind, My sheep hear my voice,...and none shall pluck them out of my hand. Then I said, 'Lord I will go, send me when thou wilt.' I call heaven to witness and earth to witness, and God to witness, and his holy angels to witness, that tho' I had preferment enough offered me, tho' I was offered two parishes before I was two-and-twenty, tho' the late bishop of Gloucester was my friend, and used always to invite me to his table before the sacrament, God knows I cared for no other preferment than to suffer for the Lamb of God. In this spirit I came out, in this spirit I came up to this metropolis...I had no friend, no servant not a single person to introduce me....I might have settled in London, I was offered hundreds, then, yet I gave it all up to turn pilgrim for God, to go over into a foreign clime, out of a love for immortal souls and I go, I hope, with that single intention now. When I came from America last, I thought I had no other river to cross but the river Jordan....I thought of nothing but retiring into some little corner, that I might pray though I could not preach. But God has been pleased to renew my strength, God has been pleased in some measure to bring back my spirit, and as I find my spirits return, I find my heart willing to be a pilgrim preacher for the blessed God....This is the thirteenth time of my crossing the water, and I find it a little difficult at this time of life. But God has been pleased to renew my strength, God has been pleased in some measure to bring back my spirit, and as I find my spirits return, I find my heart willing to be a pilgrim preacher for the blessed God....This is the thirteenth time of my crossing the water, and I find it a little difficult at this time of life. But I am willing to go. I am as clear as light in my call....And my prayers for you shall be, Lord! let nothing pluck them out of thy hands....And if I am drowned, if I can, while I am drowning, I will say, Lord! take care of my dear London friends.

We have quoted this lengthy statement only to emphasize Whitefield's attachment to his mission and his people. It would be well-nigh impossible to estimate and validate the personal consequences of such a ministry and its impact on the evangelical movement in England and America. We can only think with wondering amazement what it must have meant for men and women in the eighteenth century who came under the ministry of George Whitefield, what it must have meant for them to begin to live new lives by the grace of God.