TOWARD A MERE CIVIL FRIENDSHIP: 
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND GEORGE WHITEFIELD

SAMUEL J. ROGAL

George Whitefield’s seven visits to the American colonies began on February 2, 1738, when he sailed from the Downs aboard the Whitaker for Georgia, and came to an end with his death, at age fifty-six, in the manse of Jonathan Parsons, Presbyterian minister of Newburyport, Massachusetts, on September 30, 1770. The effect of the Calvinist Methodist field preacher upon the religious revival in America during the middle decades of the eighteenth century has been well documented. Most notably, the discussions focus upon his contributions, through preaching before large crowds in the open air, to the so-called Great Awakening in New York and Pennsylvania, and to several but never totally successful attempts to arouse the staid but sparse populations in the southern colonies. Equipped with an especially strong voice, a commitment to his piety and to sharing it with his audience, and a gift for the dramatic, Whitefield immediately grasped and maintained the collective attention of those who stood in the yards, commons, and fields. He attracted the interest of all—even the non-believers.

Certainly one of the most notable among colonial Americans who belonged in that last category, Benjamin Franklin, held Whitefield in high and even warm regard. "He us’d indeed sometimes to pray for my Conversion," wrote Franklin in his memoirs, "but never had the Satisfaction of believing that his Prayers were heard. Ours was a mere civil Friendship, sincere on both Sides, and lasted to his Death." The question obviously arises as to the extent or depth of that friendship and, more importantly, the effect, if any, of one upon the other. In attempts to achieve a manageable discussion, the priorities seem to dictate a focus upon Franklin’s reactions to Whitefield, particularly since the latter engaged in the business of converting souls from one form of belief (or non-belief) to another. In that context, however, Franklin would not have been a very appealing or willing target.

As every person knows who has read completely Franklin’s incomplete Autobiography, the Philadelphia printer and philosopher had digested, at an early age, the notions of the moralist and religious skeptic Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, as well as large doses of the deist Anthony Collins, both of whom caused him to "become a real Doubter in many Points of our Religious Doctrine..." At the risk of oversimplification, Franklin, as a Deist, believed that God’s revelations derived not from Scriptural dogma, but could be found only in laws discovered by nature. Further, in a letter to the Rev. President Ezra Stiles of Yale College, written on March 9, 1790, some five weeks before his death, Franklin summarized his religious creed:

I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we render to him is doing good to his other Children. That the soul of Man is impartial, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever Sect I meet them.

More importantly, Franklin had no quarrel with those whose religious views proved more traditional and more rigid than his own; indeed, he represented the very essence of those principles of religious liberty to which he adhered in helping to compose the essential documents of the new United States of America. He concluded in his letter to Stiles,

I have ever let others enjoy their religious Sentiments, without reflecting on them for those that appeared to me unsupportable and even absurd. All Sects here [Philadelphia], and we have a great Variety, have experienced my good will in assisting them with Subscrip-

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4 Although Franklin (1706–1790) outlived Whitefield (1714–1770) by twenty years, the former was only eight years older than the latter.
tions for building their new Places of Worship; and, as I have never opposed any of their Doctrines, I hope to go out of the World in Peace with them all.

The Pennsylvania Gazette, which Franklin had acquired in early October 1729, houses, in its number for November 8, 1739, the initial reference to the thirty-three-year-old Philadelphia printer’s notice of Whitefield’s presence. The twenty-five-year-old Whitefield, who had only recently been appointed the nominal incumbent of Savannah, Georgia, succeeding John Wesley, had arrived at Lewistown, in Sussex County, Pennsylvania, on October 30, 1739, marking his second visit to America. The Gazette announced his arrival and a general itinerary that included, in addition to Philadelphia and New York, visits to Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, and then on to Georgia. That same number for November 8 carries an advertisement of the items donated by persons in England to be auctioned in Philadelphia for the benefit of an orphanage that Whitefield planned to build in Georgia. During the sixteen and one-half months of this visit, which ended with Whitefield’s departure from Charleston, South Carolina, on January 16, 1741, three distinct situations developed to initiate and then solidify what would amount to a thirty-year relationship between Whitefield and Franklin: (1) Whitefield’s specific scheme for an orphan house at Savannah, (2) Franklin’s scientific methods for measuring Whitefield’s popularity, and (3) Franklin as Whitefield’s printer.

During the six months of Whitefield’s first visit to America—or, more accurately from his point of view, the mission to Georgia—he conceived of a scheme to construct a combination orphan house and academy, and he cut short his activities, partly to journey back to England to raise money for its construction. When he returned to America in 1739, and after spending two months preaching in Pennsylvania and New York, Whitefield struck out for Georgia, where the trustees of that colony had granted to him five hundred acres of land nine miles from Savannah. In addition, he had realized 2,530 pounds from collections in England and America, which he applied toward the hiring of a temporary house and to the construction of a permanent facility. Thus arose the institution known as Bethesda, over which Whitefield would preside for the next thirty years of his life. He invested approximately 5,000 pounds of his own money into the project and, until his death, raised an additional 20,000 pounds for the maintenance of that institution.

Whitefield’s ideas about and plans for Bethesda proved far more constructive than the actual operations of the institution. For example, the influential

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*LeMay, Writings, 1180.
clergy who occupied faculty chairs at Harvard and Yale colleges had always been opposed to Whitefield because of what they perceived to be his extreme enthusiasm. No doubt, also, they harbored some jealously over his ability to convert persons whom they and their more sedate and conventional colleagues had really never been able to reach. Whitefield further aroused their ire, as well as that of the more liberal clergymen in the North, when, in March 1747, he purchased for 300 pounds a 640-acre (sixty of those cleared) plantation, complete with slaves, the profits from which he planned to apply to the management of the Georgia orphanage. Whitefield defended slavery on the usual grounds: the climate prevented the white inhabitants to subsist without the employment of slaves for the necessary outdoor arduous labors, while the lawfulness of maintaining slaves could be traced to Scriptures. Prior to the purchase of that property in winter 1746–1747, Bethesda, with a resident population of twenty-six, had been struggling under a debt in excess of 500 pounds. Then, in 1764, during his visit of 1763–1765, Whitefield further complicated matters when he conceived of a scheme to create a university as part of the Bethesda educational operation. By early 1770, such plans had gone forward and even appeared capable of fruition. However, Whitefield’s death abruptly ended the scheme. He had bequeathed Bethesda to his English patroness, Selina Shirley, Countess of Huntingdon, who, in turn dispatched an incompetent chaplain to oversee the place. The main building suffered destruction from fire in June 1773 and was never rebuilt. During the American Revolution, Lady Huntingdon’s chaplain dispersed the residents and, eventually, the remainder of the buildings were destroyed.  

Franklin demonstrated an awareness of Whitefield’s orphan house in Georgia almost from the outset of the scheme. In addition to the announcement in the November 8, 1739 extract of the Pennsylvania Gazette listing the items brought from England for auction toward the building of the orphan house, Whitefield informed Franklin (November 26, 1740) that he had collected an additional 700 pounds in goods and money for that purpose. Further, always sensitive to potential criticism in the northern American colonies that money collected for Bethesda went only into his own pocket, Whitefield forwarded to Franklin the audit reports from the orphanage, covering the period December 15, 1738 through April 16, 1746, asking that a summary be printed in The Pennsylvania Gazette. Franklin did so on May 22, 1746.

However, Franklin possessed more than a superficial knowledge of the financial condition of the Georgia orphanage. In Part Three of his Auto-
biography (begun August 1788), the Philadelphia philosopher recalled the broken shopkeepers and insolvent debtors sent from the prisons of England, as well as persecuted Protestant Dissenters, to labor in Georgia. Unable to cope with the climate, they perished in large numbers and left their orphaned children to fend for themselves. Those children caught Whitefield’s attention and prompted him to establish his orphanage outside Savannah. Franklin declared that, in principle, he approved of Whitefield’s scheme, “but as Georgia was then destitute of Materials and Workmen, and it was propos’d to send them from Philadelphia at a great Expense, I thought it would have been better to have built the House here and brought the Children to it. This I advise’d [in 1740], but he [Whitefield] was resolute in his first Project, and rejected my Counsel, and I therewith refus’d to contribute [money].” As late as summer 1769, when both Franklin and Whitefield were in London, the latter again called on his American friend about expanding the scope of Bethesda and establishing a college as part of the overall operation.

But returning to the year 1740. A short time following Whitefield’s rejection of that advice, Franklin attended one of the former’s sermons in Philadelphia, where he quickly determined that the Methodist field preacher had planned to bring the event to a close by asking for money for the Savannah orphanage. With equal quickness, he held firm to his resolve to contribute absolutely nothing.

I had in my Pocket a Handful of Copper Money, three or four silver Dollars, and five Pistoles in Gold. As he [Whitefield] proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the Coppers. Another Stroke of his Oratory made me ashamed of that, and determined me to give the Silver; and he finish’d so admirably, that I emptied my Pocket wholly into the Collector’s Dish, Gold and all.  

Whether the separation of Franklin from his loose change should be considered an example of the man of reason yielding to his emotions or attributed to Whitefield’s homiletic skill remains entirely speculative. What can be concluded about the experience, however, concerns Franklin’s clinical attraction to Whitefield and his need to understand how or why one person could affect so many. That inquisitiveness leads to the second issue that contributed to establishing the Franklin-Whitefield relationship.

Once again looking to the third part of the Autobiography, the reader notices that Franklin turned his attention, with a controlled tone of reverence, to the volume and clarity of Whitefield’s voice in the open air, combined with the apparent ability of large numbers of persons to hear him without difficulty. The temptation to provide concrete substance to the generalization about “large numbers” proved too great a temptation upon the philosopher-printer’s scientific and even deistic sense of curiosity. Therefore, he set out, one evening,
to discover just how large a crowd might actually be accommodated by Whitefield's vocal chords. In so doing, he also complemented data on extant maps with a topographical description of a portion of Philadelphia prior to the middle of the eighteenth century:

He preach'd . . . from the Top of the of the Court Court House Steps, which are in the Middle of Market Street, and on the West Side of Second Street which crosses it at right angles. Both streets were fill'd with his Hearers to a considerable Distance. Being among the hindmost in Market Street, I had the Curiosity to learn how far he could be heard, by retiring backwards [some five-hundred feet] down the Street towards the River, and I found his voice distinct till I came near Front-Street, when some Noise in that Street, obscur'd it. Imagining then a Semi-Circle, of which my Distance should be a Radius, and that it were fill'd with Auditors, to each of whom I allow'd two square feet, I computed that he [Whitefield] might well be heard by more than Thirty-Thousand. This reconcil'd me to the Newspaper Accounts of his having preach'd to 25,000 People in the Fields. . . .

Although Franklin's figures may be somewhat inaccurate, he nonetheless tends to support the conclusion that Whitefield drew exceedingly large crowds. Whether his outdoor audiences rose to such estimates as between 6000 and 8000 may be legitimately questioned, particularly at a time when the population of Philadelphia could not have stood at more than 10,000 persons.

Interestingly, in 1749, Franklin again approached the subject of estimating crowds, this time within the context of a closely related issue that, too, attracted his seemingly limitless curiosity: speeches by army generals to their troops in ancient times. "... supposing the men got together so close, that each took up no more ground than two foot in breadth, and one in depth, 45000 might stand in a space that was but 100 yards square, and 21780 on a single acre of ground. There are many voices that may be heard at 100 yards distance." Further, as a fitting conclusion to the issue, no less a counter of his congregations than John Wesley took up a variation on the exercise at 1:00 p.m., Sunday, August 10, 1766, at Dawgreen churchyard, near Leeds: "I judge the congregations, closely wedged together, to extend forty yards one way and about a hundred the other. Now suppose five to stand in a yard square, they would amount to twenty thousand people." Judging by Wesley's own slight stature—5'2" and 135 pounds—five citizens of 18th-century Yorkshire might possibly, if not somewhat uncomfortably, have "wedged" within a square yard. The point to be underscored, of course, relates directly to the absence of true and actual statistics about the number of persons assembled in

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14Autobiography, 179; Papers, 2:242, and map following p. 456.
Philadelphia or elsewhere to hear George Whitefield preach. Those students of history hopeful of determining, for example, the effect of outdoor preaching in the 18th century, as well as specifics to support the depth and breadth of its popularity (and the popularity of the preacher), must extend at least some degree of recognition in the direction of primitive estimates of scientifically primitive contemporaries.

The third aspect of the Whitefield-Franklin relationship undoubtedly yields larger dimensions of interest and importance than the other two combined, for it concerns matters financial and political, as well as bibliographical. To begin, between 1739 and March 1740, Franklin printed or reprinted at least eight separate volumes of Whitefield’s journals, those records concerning, principally, the Methodist preacher’s visits to and journeys through Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, Carolina, and Georgia colonies and settlements. In his Pennsylvania Gazette for November 15, 1739, Franklin advertised that Whitefield had deposited with the Philadelphia printer copies of his journals and sermons, with permission to print them. Franklin announced,

... I propose to publish them with all Expedition, if I find sufficient Encouragement. The Sermons will make two Volumes in twelves... and the Journals two more, which shall be delivered to Subscribers at 2s. each Volume bound. Those therefore who are inclined to encourage this Work, are desired to send in their Names to me, that I may take Measures accordingly.9

There exists little doubt that, immediately upon perceiving and then certainly supporting the popularity of Whitefield within the context of the revival of religion in the American colonies, Franklin also realized the potential for profit from the printing of the former’s works. The Gazette, in announcements of November 29, and December 6, 1739, called attention to crowds in Pennsylvania of, respectively, 5,000 at Germantown, 10,000 in Philadelphia, 7,000 at Chester, 5,000 at Willingstown, 2,500 at New Castle, 3,000 at Christian Bridge, and 8,000 at Whiteclay Creek.10 Again, even though the accuracy of those figures would prove difficult to determine, if only one percent of the total listeners subscribed to those journals and sermons at eight shillings for the lot, the effort would indeed prove financially worthwhile for all concerned.

The business relationship between Whitefield and Franklin did not limit itself to the publication of the former’s journals. On November 26, 1740, less than two months before the end of his second visit to America, Whitefield extended to Franklin his permission to publish the first installment of his autobiography and two volumes of his sermons.20 The sermons (in company

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18Papers, 2:242–244.
19Papers, 2:244.
20Papers, 2:269–270.
with the first two volumes of the journals) appeared under Franklin's imprint in May and August 1740, and the autobiography reached subscribers in that same year under the title *A Brief and General Account of the First Part of the Life of the Reverend Mr. Geo. Whitefield, from His Birth, to His Entering into Holy Orders. Written by Himself*. However, in that same letter of November 26, Whitefield indicated that he had undertaken several other projects, editions of three popular pieces, the profits from which, he must have thought, would be applied to expediting and completing the construction of the Savannah orphan house (begun in earnest in late February 1740), as well as his plan to erect a school for Negro children in the Delaware colony: an edition (with Whitefield's own preface) of Benjamin Jenks' *Prayers and Offices of Devotion for Families and for Particular Persons, upon Most Occasions* (London, 1697); Gilbert Tennent’s *A Solemn Warning to the Secure World; . . .; or, the Presumptuous Sinner Detected* (Boston, 1735), again with his own preface; and Cotton Mather’s *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (Boston, 1691). Franklin declined to print all three, principally, one would surmise, because he realized that other printing houses had provided sufficient supplies to meet the demands of potential subscribers.²¹ Perhaps equally important, Franklin's own attitudes toward religious doctrine and denominational organization could, on intellectual and social levels, accommodate the sound and the sense of Whitefield's polemics. Essentially, he held the Methodist field-preacher to be a committed Protestant, a loyal Briton, and an excellent orator. However, he perhaps might not as easily have adjusted his thinking to support, promote, or disseminate the often soul-threatening incantations of the likes of Mather, Jenks, or Tennent.

Philosophical and denominational considerations aside, Franklin's printing of the Whitefield volumes illustrates both the publication and distribution practices of the times. For instance, in the *Gazette* for May 22, 1740, Franklin announced that he would deliver to subscribers on “Monday next” one volume of Whitefield’s sermons and another of his journals. Further, “As many People, during the Printing of the Books, have sent in their Names, or subscribed, without paying the first Subscription Money; and as the whole Number of Names far exceeds the Number of Books printed; those Subscribers who have paid, or who bring the Money in their Hands, will have the Preference.”²² In other words, Franklin would exercise every care to avoid a loss in the venture, even though he viewed it as a fairly safe enterprise.


²²Papers, 2:286.
Additional announcements by him in the Gazette do not indicate that he had on hand extra copies for those subscribers who had not paid.

Several peripheral items in the Pennsylvania Gazette indicate that Franklin sensed an advantage in remaining attentive to Whitefield’s activities and to measuring his overall appeal throughout the American Colonies. Thus, in the February 5, 1741 number, he advertised the publication of the January number of his monthly General Magazine and Historical Chronicle for All the British Plantations in America, in which he had included among the eleven items in the poetry section, a piece titled, “On Hearing Mr. Whitefield.” In the March 1741 number of the General Magazine, he published a “Letter from Mr. Hugh Bryan, for Correcting which the Rev. Mr. Whitefield is now under Prosecution in Carolina,” while the April number of the same periodical housed a series of epistolary exchanges: “Letters to the Rev. Mr. Whitefield from the Rev. Mr. Garden, with one of Mr. Whitefield’s in Answer” (both letters and answers carried over into June) and “Remarks on Mr. Whitefield’s New-England Journal” (the essay, with a rejoinder, being continued in the May and June numbers). The Gazette for May 21, 1741 announced that Franklin had for sale a six-volume edition of Whitefield’s Works, while from that same periodical for May 20, 1742, readers learned that, among a number of items that Franklin had imported from London, he would sell “fine Mezzotinto and grav’d Pictures of Mr. Whitefield.” Indeed, had not scientific inquiry and practice, as well as philosophy, politics, and general learning, eclipsed Franklin’s interest in matters of pure business, one can only speculate about how diversified a corporate enterprise he might have built and how wealthy he might have become.

Whitefield, to the contrary, possessed neither Franklin’s imagination nor his business acumen. During the winter 1746–1747, the Methodist preacher found himself over 500 pounds in debt, principally the result of money needed to operate and maintain Bethesda Orphan House. At some point early in 1747, Franklin must have agreed tentatively to reprint additional volumes of Whitefield’s journals and/or sermons or, perhaps, print further installments of one, the other, or both. To determine if the volumes would attract sufficient interest among the widest possible audience, he published, most likely in May or early June 1747, a preamble, a document that has not yet been located. Whitefield objected openly but mildly, writing to Franklin on June 23, 1747 and explaining that he thought “a private subscription among my Friends here and elsewhere would raise as much as I want.” From those private subscribers, Whitefield believed that he “would raise . . . more than is sufficient to pay my debts.” That particular project never materialized, but four years later, Whitefield had another text for Franklin’s press. From Bermuda, on May 27,
1748, the Methodist field preacher sent Franklin A Letter from the Reverend Mr. Whitefield to a Reverend Divine in Boston: Giving a Short Account of his late Visit to Bermuda, dated May 17, 1748, that the writer hoped could be printed in The Pennsylvania Gazette and also "on a half a sheet of paper, to distribute among the Bermudas captains. . . ." Instead, Franklin and his new partner, the Edinburgh-born London printer David Hall (1714–1772), issued the piece in 1748 as a pamphlet.

For the next fifteen or sixteen years, the scraps of correspondence between, and relative to, Franklin and Whitefield range in substance from education through religious reformation to Whitefield's interest in becoming a chaplain in the colonial American army. If nothing else, those epistles demonstrate the mutual respect and interest each man had for the other. Not until July 2, 1756 does the issue of publication again emerge. On February 24 of that year, Whitefield had sent to Franklin the London edition of his pamphlet, A Short Address to Persons of all Denominations, Occasioned by the Alarm of an Intended Invasion, a reaction to the outbreak of the Seven Years' War and renewed hostilities between Britain and France. With his usual fire and zeal, Whitefield demanded steadfast loyalty to the British King and nation, even to the extent of the American colonists willingly shedding their own blood to resist the Popish French troops and their savage Indian allies. On May 4, 1756, a Provincial Fast had been proclaimed in reaction to those hostilities, to be celebrated on May 21. Seizing the opportunity created by a current event of some national trauma, the French having driven the British from the Great Lakes, Franklin announced, in The Pennsylvania Gazette for May 27, 1756, that he would reprint Whitefield's pamphlet and issue it on the 28th. As the printer informed Whitefield from New York on July 2, "I thought it very seasonable to be publish'd in Pensilvania, and accordingly reprinted it immediately."

The professional association between Whitefield and Franklin cannot really be separated from their relationship as human beings. "He is a good man," wrote Franklin to his brother John after hearing (on August 6, 1747) that Whitefield had arrived safely in Boston, "and I love him." How or why, one might ask, that amid the theological and denominational tensions of the 18th century, tensions that hung with equal heaviness over both England and colonial America, could a loudly professed Deist hold in high regard a fiery and zealous Calvinist Methodist? True, Franklin rarely spoke ill of any one, but while holding his temper and his tongue, he did not cast such words as "love" into meaningless waters. Hypocrisy was not a part of his intellectual or rhetorical equipment. Essentially, then, his sincere admiration for Whitefield developed, grew, and sustained itself for two principal reasons.

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26 Papers, 6:468-469.
27 Papers, 3:169.
First, as a Protestant ecumenist, a quality rising out of his theological rationalism, Franklin did not involve himself in denominational differences or the petty squabbles that too often emerged from them. He could, from the proper intellectual distance, observe the virtues of Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, Baptism, Moravianism, Congregationalism, or Methodism. As long as the likes of George Whitefield could command the attentions of persons of varying faiths and varying creeds, then the object common to them all—a belief in God—would prevail. On a purely humanitarian level, Whitefield’s thesis, wrapped in various projects such as schools and colonies and churches, transcended his sect. In England, attempts to reconcile the differences between the Wesleyan and Calvinist Methodists failed because John Wesley could not reconcile his Arminian philosophy of free will with the main Calvinist beliefs in election and predestination. In the American colonies, the more liberal-minded intellectuals such as Franklin rose above such conventional differences. They sensed the theological diversity present in colonial America, and believed that the evangelical activities of someone like Whitefield benefitted society far more than traditional theological dogma or extant religious organizations as efforts to achieve spiritual and national unification.

Second, Franklin embraced Whitefield as a learned person, not as an ignorant enthusiast who plied his rhetorical goods only upon the emotions of equally ignorant followers. Writing in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* on June 30, 1746, Franklin offered a precis upon Whitefield’s success at the mid-point of this third visit to America:

> His Sermons here this Summer have given general Satisfaction, and plainly proved the great ability of the Preacher. His rich Fancy, sound and ripening Judgment, and extensive Acquaintance with Men and Books of useful Literature, have been acknowledg’d by every unprejudiced Person. Purity of Language, Perspicuity of Method, a ready Elocution, and engaging Address, and an apt Gesture, peculiar to this accomplish’d Orator, consider’d with his unspotted Character in private Life, have added Force to the plain strong Arguments, and pathetick Expostulations, wherewith his Discourses abounded. And, it cannot be doubted, that many have been awaken’d to a Sense of Importance of Religion, and others have been built up in their most holy Christian Faith under his Ministry.²⁴

Such a portrait, drawn clearly, specifically, and concisely upon the canvas of objectivity and reason, may indeed provide the only reasons necessary for understanding Whitefield’s success in the American colonies and lead to an understanding of why the Countess of Huntingdon’s principal field preacher spent as much time in colonial America as he did. The Countess and her Methodist connexion could, and indeed did, provide Whitefield with the patronage essential to financing the activities of his trans-Atlantic evangelical mission. In America, such a person as Benjamin Franklin provided the equally essential means of recording and publicizing that mission and by standing as a respected barometer by which Whitefield could gauge the rise and progress of his work.

²⁴LeMay, *Writings*, 305.