

George Whitefield

A. Background

1. Whitefield was born and reared in a tavern.
2. He managed to go to Oxford, where he was part of the “Holy Club” of the Wesleys and was labeled a “Methodist” despite his Calvinism.
3. Like the Wesleys, he tried to find peace through rigorous self-discipline; instead he made himself ill.
4. Eventually he was converted, saying that “the weight of sin went off, and an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God, and a full assurance of faith broke in upon my disconsolate soul!... My joys were like a spring tide, and overflowed the banks!” He became an evangelist.

B. Whitefield the Evangelist

1. George Whitefield was once asked, “Why do you preach so often on the text, ‘You must born again?’” (John 3:7). Whitefield replied, “Because you *must* be born again.”
2. He was the first evangelist in the modern sense of the term. He preached across England, made fourteen trips to Scotland, and seven to America. When churches were shut to him or proved too small, he preached in the open air.
3. Biblical Pattern of an Evangelist
 - a. The word *evangelist* derives from the Greek word for “gospel”; essentially it is one who proclaims the gospel. There are three biblical occurrences of the word.
 - 1) Acts 21:8 – Philip is called “the evangelist” and was known for preaching in Samaria (Acts 8).
 - 2) II Timothy 4:5 – Paul calls on Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist,” indicating that he should either be doing the same work as an evangelist (more probable) or that he was an evangelist himself.
 - 3) Ephesians 4:11 – “Evangelists” are listed as an office along with apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers. All Christians are to proclaim the gospel, but the Holy Spirit gives a special gift of preaching the gospel to some. This gift may fall to those we call “evangelists” or to other Christians, such as missionaries.

- b. Whitefield fits the biblical pattern of an evangelist in that he had definite gifts in presenting the gospel. He set the modern pattern by itinerant preaching, interdenominational meetings, and making evangelism his vocation. He believed, says J. C. Ryle, in an “aggressive” system in which preachers must be fisherman who must pursue the fish and not sit in their churches waiting for the fish to come to them.
4. He was said to have a powerful voice and profound delivery
 - a. “I love those that thunder out the Word,” Whitefield said. “The Christian World is in a dead sleep. Nothing but a loud voice can awaken them out of it.”
 - b. Actor David Garrick said Whitefield could bring tears by his pronunciation of the word “Mesopotamia.”
 - c. Characteristic phrases: “My brethren, I beseech you” (typifying his earnestness) and “I come to you in the name of the Lord” (typifying his authority).
 - d. Tears would make white trails on blackened coal miner’s cheeks when they heard him.
 - e. A British nobleman hearing Whitefield describe a blind man stumbling toward a cliff actually started to rush forward to stop him from falling.

C. Whitefield and the Great Awakening

1. His 1740 campaign through the colonies is sometimes called “The Great Awakening” by itself. He preached from the South to New England. Thousands heard and were converted.
2. James Tanis says Whitefield joined together the earlier work of Frelinghuysen, Tennent, and Edwards. “It was as though a crop, tended for twenty years, was coming to full corn.”
3. As historians have noted, Whitefield’s 1740 tour was the first *national* movement in American history; it contributed to the colonists’ thinking of themselves as *Americans*.

D. Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin

1. Franklin published Whitefield’s sermons, more out a desire for profit than piety. But he was a genuine friend of Whitefield. “He used, indeed, sometimes to pray for my conversion,” wrote Franklin, “but never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard.”
2. Franklin once experimented while listening to Whitefield speak and estimated that he could address a crowd of 20,000 and still be heard, despite having no amplification.

3. Franklin once came to a meeting of Whitefield's determined to give nothing to the offering. After hearing Whitefield speak, he emptied his pockets into the collection plate.
4. Near the end of Whitefield's life, Franklin wrote him a letter in which he wondered whether Providence even noticed the affairs of man, although Franklin called this an "uncomfortable thought." Whitefield wrote in the margin "Uncomfortable indeed! And unscriptural!" While Franklin had no consolation, Whitefield took comfort that the God who sees a sparrow fall would also care for him.