

George Whitfield – Evangelist to Britain and America

C.H. Spurgeon once wrote concerning George Whitfield, “Often as I have read his life, I am conscious of distinct quickening whenever I turn to it. He lived. Other men seemed to be only half-alive; but Whitfield was all life, fire, wing, force. My own model, if I may have such a thing in due subordination to my Lord, is George Whitfield; but with unequal footsteps must I follow in his glorious track.”

His Early Years:

- 1) George Whitfield was born on December 16, 1714 to Thomas and Elizabeth Whitfield in Gloucester, England. He was the youngest of seven children and was born in the Bell Inn where his father was a wine merchant and an innkeeper. When George was two, his father died, leaving his mother to provide for the family. At the age of fifteen, George persuaded his mother to allow him to quit school and work at the inn because, at that time, he could not see what good an education would do for him. While working at the inn, George stayed up late and studied the Scriptures. One day a student from Oxford who had worked his way through college, visited the inn and encouraged George to pursue a university education. He thus returned to grammar school with the intent of preparing himself to enter Oxford University.
- 2) In November of 1732, at the age of seventeen, George entered Pembroke College at Oxford, and while there he was introduced to the “Holy Club” (a group dedicated to the pursuit of holiness) by Charles Wesley. This little group was derided at Oxford and its members were ridiculed for their disciplined lives. As a result, the members of this club were referred to as “Methodists”. At this time, both the Wesley brothers as well as Whitfield were still unconverted. The conversion of Charles and John would take place about three years following Whitfield’s conversion. The Lord used a book that Charles loaned Whitfield entitled “The Life of God in the Soul of Man” to bring about a “deep and thorough conviction of sin” in the heart of George. He later spoke of those days when the troubles of his soul were overpowering, so much so that they, at times, hindered him from pursuing his studies and almost broke down his bodily and mental health. Night and day the “spirit of bondage” lay upon him and the “buffetings of Satan” seemed innumerable. But finally in the spring of 1735, when Whitfield was 20 years old, he said that “the days of my mourning ended.” In his journal, Whitfield wrote, “God was pleased to remove the heavy load, to enable me to lay hold of his dear Son by a living faith, and by giving me the Spirit of adoption to seal me even to the day of everlasting redemption. With what joy - joy unspeakable - was my soul filled.” He said many years later, “Whenever I go to Oxford, I cannot help running to that place where Jesus Christ first revealed himself to me, and gave me the new birth.”
- 3) Whitfield graduated from Oxford University and on June 20, 1736 he was ordained for the ministry by the Bishop of Gloucester. On the Sunday following his ordination, he preached his first sermon in the church that he had grown up in as a boy. Following this sermon he said, “Some few mocked, but most for the present seemed struck, and I have since heard that a complaint has been made to the Bishop that I drove fifteen mad.” The Bishop replied that his hope was that “the madness might not be forgotten before next Sunday”. Thus began the public ministry of George Whitfield which would last for 35 years and would reach to all parts of the British Isles and the 13 American Colonies.

His Evangelistic Ministry:

- 1) From the very beginning, the common people flocked to hear Whitfield preach. Within a year from his ordination, it was said of Whitfield that “his voice startled England like a trumpet blast.” When he preached it was said that “his words were like a burning fire, like a hammer smashing a rock into pieces.” J.C. Ryle, in his book entitled “Christian Leaders in the 18th Century”, quoted a writer in the North British Review as saying, “All force and impetus, Whitfield was the powder blast in the quarry, and by one explosive sermon would shake a district and detach materials for other men’s long work.” This was Whitfield’s style of preaching and it was a style that drew multitudes of people to hear him. It was not long before the church buildings that he preached in were not able to hold all who came, thus the meetings began to be held outdoors. Eventually crowds numbering over twenty thousand people gathered in the open air services at Moorfields and Kennington Common to hear him preach. Whitfield carried around with him a small moveable pulpit to give him additional elevation when it was needed, and possessing a voice that was both “strong and melodious”, he preached the law and the gospel with great success.

2) When Whitfield returned to England following his first visit to America, he found that the awakening in London had been furthered by the conversion and subsequent ministry of the Wesleys. Immediately they began to work together. Under Whitfield's preaching the revival spread to Bristol in the winter of 1739 and in the spring of that same year, John Wesley was given the oversight of the work. But before three months had elapsed, it became evident to Whitfield that there were some theological differences between them. Whitfield's theology from the beginning was distinctly Calvinistic whereas Wesley was more Arminian in his doctrinal position and this matter eventually led to a parting of ways. Though, on a personal level, they remained "brothers in Christ", with regard to their respective ministries, they felt it better to work separately.

3) Whitfield's preaching took place for the most part in the open air. In addition to this method being frequently mentioned in the New Testament, there were two chief reasons why he chose this forum. In the first place, as was already mentioned, there was no building at that time large enough to hold the vast crowds of people that flocked to hear Whitfield preach. Secondly, most of the clergy in the Church of England opposed what they called "the new enthusiasm" and thus prohibited Whitfield from preaching in their churches. They further held to the position that no spiritual good could come to any man outside the walls of a church building. It seemed however, that the more opposition Whitfield faced from the Church of England and others opposed to his ministry, the more souls were brought to a saving knowledge of the Lord.

4) London and Bristol were Whitfield's chief places of ministry in England. An example of the effect of Whitfield's preaching upon those who heard him was recorded in his journal concerning the miners at Kingswood, near Bristol: "At four I hastened to Kingswood. There were about 10,000 people to hear me. The trees and hedges were full. All was hush when I began; the sun shone bright and God enabled me to preach for an hour with great power, and so loudly that all, I was told, could hear me. The fire is kindled in the country and, I know, all the devils in hell shall not be able to quench it." Another biographer described the effect of his preaching on these miners when he wrote, "Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they (the miners) were glad to hear of a Jesus who was the friend of publicans, and came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected was to see the white gutters made by their tears which plentifully fell down their black cheeks as they came out of their coal pits. Hundreds and hundreds of them were soon brought under deep convictions, which, as the event proved, happily ended in a sound and thorough conversion."

5) Whitfield also became involved in the work of a Scottish revival centered near Glasgow in 1742. His preaching appealed powerfully to his Scottish hearers, most of whom appreciated his Calvinistic theology. He did encounter certain difficulties here as congregations which had previously separated themselves from the Church of Scotland, wanted his ministry to be confined to their churches only and objected to him preaching in parish churches or in the open air. Regardless of their opposition, the Lord blessed his ministry in Scotland.

6) In Wales, Whitfield worked with several Welsh ministers whom God was already using in the work of revival there. Revival did not originate in Wales with the preaching of Whitfield but he was happy to cooperate with those who were actively involved in the preaching of the gospel there. It was also in Wales that Whitfield met his wife to be, Elizabeth James. They were married on November 14, 1741.

7) Whitfield visited the American Colonies on thirteen occasions and became known as the "Apostle of the British Empire.". The first visit was to the newly established colony of Georgia in 1736. It was in Georgia that he established an orphanage and during his preaching engagements he took up collections in order to maintain that orphanage. He visited and preached in the New England and Middle Colonies as well with much success. One American farmer, who was working in his field, when word came that Whitfield was going to preach at noon in a town twelve miles away, threw down his tools, mounted his horse with his wife and they arrived just in time at the meeting place where a large crowd was assembled. He wrote, "He (the preacher) looked almost angelical, a young, slim, slender youth. He looked as if he was clothed with authority from the great God. A sweet solemnity sat upon his brow. My hearing him preach gave me a heart wound, and by God's blessing my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me." Such was the experience of thousands of men and women in the American Colonies.

8) Though the Lord had especially gifted Whitfield with many natural gifts, the greatest of these being a strong voice and eloquence in his speech, Whitfield was always conscious of the fact that it was necessary for the working of the Spirit of God to accompany his preaching if men were to be saved. Thus his gifts were clothed in the grace of humility. Whitfield genuinely loved all the true children of God regardless of their denominational association. His resolve to preach the gospel to every creature affected how he related to all the children of men.

9) In all, Whitfield preached over 18,000 sermons in his lifetime, an average of 500 per year or 10 every week. He spent roughly 24 years ministering in Great Britain and another 9 years in America.

His Final Hours:

- 1) **Whitfield died at the age of 55 and was buried beneath the pulpit of the Old South First Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts, as he had requested.**
- 2) **On September 29, 1770 as he journeyed from Portsmouth, New Hampshire to Newburyport, Massachusetts, knowing that his life was drawing to a close, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, I am weary in the work, but not of it. If I have not yet finished my course, let me go and speak for thee once more in the fields, seal the truth and come home and die.” His request was granted.**
- 3) **He preached for two hours on the subject of faith and works. In it he cried out, “Works! Works! A man to get to heaven by works! I would as soon think of climbing to the moon on a rope of sand! How willingly would I live forever to preach Christ, but I die to be with him.”**
- 4) **After preaching, he arrived at the parsonage of the First Presbyterian Church and ate supper with his friend, Jonathan Parsons. On his way to bed, a number of friends who had gathered at the parsonage, begged him for just a short message. He paused on the stairway holding a candle and spoke to the people until the candle went out. At 2:00 AM that night, struggling to breathe he told his traveling companion Richard Smith, “My asthma is returning; I must have two or three days rest.” His final words were, “I am dying.” He passed into the presence of the Lord at 6:00 AM, September 30, 1770.**
- 5) **Whitfield had expressed repeatedly before he died that his wish was that John Wesley preach his funeral sermon. At the conclusion of his sermon, Wesley said, “O God, with thee no word is impossible! Thou does whatsoever please thee! O that thou would cause the mantle of thy prophet, whom thou hast taken up now to fall upon us that remain! Where is the Lord God of Elijah? Let his spirit rest upon these thy servants! Show thou art the God that answers by fire! Let the fire of thy love fall on every heart! And because we love thee, let us love one another with a love stronger than death! Take away from us all anger and wrath and bitterness; all clamor and evil speaking! Let thy Spirit so rest upon us, that from this hour we may be kind to each other, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven us.”**
- 6) **The funeral service concluded with a hymn that was written by Charles Wesley for this occasion entitled “An Hymn on the Death of the Rev. Mr. Whitfield” which begins, “Servant of God, well done! Thy glorious warfare’s past; the battle’s fought, the race is won, and thou art crown’d at last; of all thy hearts desire triumphantly possess’d, lodged by the ministerial choir, in thy Redeemer’s breast.”**