

The Rev. George Whitefield

"The Grand Itinerant"

"The Marvel of the Age"

It is not an easy task to reveal and analyze the life and works of George Whitefield. He was the major celebrity in the British Empire. He was known as well in the English-speaking world as the monarch. His life has been measured and parsed as much as any mortal, and sifting through his accomplishments is akin to thumbing through a copy of Guinness' World Records: he preached 18,000 times; 10 million people heard at least one of his sermons; 80% of the American colonists heard him; he preached 40-50 hours per week, more than he slept; his largest audience was 30,000 in Philadelphia, and a similar number greeted his return to England in 1742; he crossed the Atlantic, a nine-week voyage, 13 times. He traveled to Scotland 14 times, to Wales 12 times, to Ireland 8 times, and Bermuda 4 times. He was one of the first to travel from Charleston to Boston by land, as he wished to preach along the way on all his trips. And he was cross-eyed!

George Whitefield was an extraordinary religious showman who brought a new message of rebirth and hope for salvation to the common masses of the British Empire. His charisma was a part of his simple message of love and redemption. Through his extraordinary deep voice, precise elocution and amazing vocal projection, he cast a spell on his audiences and brought them to an emotional rebirth which caused his audiences to fall to the ground, writhe in fits, moan for hours, and cry out in strange tongues. When it was known that Whitefield was coming to preach, shops closed, commerce paused, highways jammed, plows were deserted in the fields, and regular life stopped for a few days. Rowdy and aggressive crowds elbowed, shoved and trampled the fallen to press in near the great man, who regularly addressed them for well over two hours from the top of a barrel out in the open. But once Whitefield began, the large audience would unexpectedly fall quiet until his rhetoric and delivery elicited the cries, sobs, shrieks and swoons of the listeners.

But there were also those who detested him and felt his criticism of his fellow clergy of the Church of England was unwarranted. Roman Catholics, particularly in Ireland, found him to be a great threat to their society. Whitefield frequently had rotten fruit and dead cats slung at him and his entourage. He was urinated on from trees above. Brutal mobs sometimes attacked him and his followers, maiming them and stripping the women naked. He was once stoned nearly to death.

And yet this phenomenon was no quick fad or flash-in-the-pan. Whitefield's emotional message of salvation and love changed Christianity in colonial America, as the common man took control of his religious beliefs as a personal right. Sermons became emotional and singing and praising became regular features. Revivals were held as a method of recommitting to one's personal rebirth. This was the Great Awakening, a watershed in America's religious history, and Whitefield was the primary driver of the movement. Methodist and Baptist churches rapidly spread Whitefield's message, and new evangelical sects followed his tenets. Whitefield also preached to slaves who emulated much of his style in the pulpit. He is even considered as the

genesis of African American Christianity, and much of his pulpit style remains popular in African-American churches. Here the sermons always have a message based on scripture, and the message is reinforced repeatedly with much personal testimony by the tenor of delivery will then rise, the message punctuated by louder delivery and physical exertion which will climax in a crescendo of exhaustion and participation by the congregation in praises, clapping and aisle dancing.

And yet this giant of America's Christianity made it very clear to all of his many followers that his purpose and focus was to raise funding for his beloved orphanage in Savannah, his house of mercy or "Bethesda." George Whitefield's humble beginnings gave him the credentials to build a simple and personal faith for the common man. He was born in 1714 in Gloucester, the seventh and last the keeper of the Bell Inn and Tavern on Southgate Street. His father died when he was young, and young George tended bar while attending grammar school. He fell in with a local theater group where he honed the skills that would serve him so well. After dropping out of school and becoming more street-wise, George fell under the spell of an Oxford student who was attending under the servitor program, something he thought young Whitefield could easily do. George quickly finished grammar school and was enrolled in Pembroke College, Oxford, as a servitor.

A servitor was a charity student\worker in the dormitories in lieu of tuition. The work was to clean the chamber pots and assist the paying students with their wardrobe and personal needs. Whitefield never complained about this arrangement. He was attracted to "Holy Club" meetings, and there he met brothers John and Charles Wesley. This cadre of students practiced aestheticism through fasting and prayer and came to believe that a true Christian must have a rebirth in the form of a personal and emotional experience which would fill them with joy and grace. The only problem was that the clerics of the Church of England were dour and reserved, very intellectual in their beliefs. The Holy Club referred to the senior clergy as "Old Lights" and themselves as "New Lights." They called monotone sermons "dry bones."

Whitefield had his experience and conversion in 1735 and upon receiving his degree he was ordained a deacon by the Bishop of Gloucester. Most young clerics were assigned a parish at this stage, but Whitefield had a desire for missionary work. The Holy Club group was fascinated by the native Americans and postulated that they were the perfect innocent vessels for their emotional Christianity. The Wesley brothers were so taken by the idea that they signed on with the Georgia Trustees as vicars in Savannah and Frederica. They thought they could run a school for Indians during weekdays while preaching on Sunday.

What the Wesley's found in Savannah was quite different. The town of shacks was populated by the street-poor of London who were anything but an industrious group. The local Yamacraw Creeks were outcasts who were dependent on Carolina settlers for handouts. They were very resistant to Christian conversion. A Moravian group had sponsored an Indian School at Irene mound and gave up in frustration after two years. When Whitefield later visited Tomochichi, the head man, he asked the chief where he intended to go when he died. "To heaven" was the answer. Whitefield's reaction was "Alas, how can a drunk enter there?"

Unexpected fame delayed Whitefield's departure for Georgia. He had preached in a few London pulpits, but when he was asked to preach to several hundred Kingswood coal miners in the open, these tough laborers became putty in his hands and fell into emotional fits. Soon Whitefield's exuberant preaching style caused him to be banned from almost all pulpits, but he took to outdoor preaching which was drawing large numbers. He had his sermons printed and they were widely distributed. When he finally left for Georgia, the Wesleys were on the way home and were happy to see the last of Georgia. Whitefield, however, booked passage on the Whitaker, a ship delivering rough soldiers to Georgia. They cursed, played cards, and read bad books. By the time they reached Georgia, Whitefield had converted them all, and the cards and bad books were replaced with his religious tracts.

Whitefield found Savannah promising. Rather than taking on Indian conversion he was struck by the number of orphans in bondage. Many settlers had died of the tropical fevers, leaving children who were bonded as servants and labor to other settlers. Whitefield was immediately drawn to their plight, and a visit to the orphanage at the Lutheran settlement at Ebenezer clarified his vision. These children needed instruction and guidance which he could provide by building an orphanage. This mission became a fixation which would dominate his life for the next 32 years. Bethesda became the reason he preached, the centerpiece of his religious calling.

Whitefield never sat still for long, and soon he was visiting the dozen small villages established in Georgia. North of Georgia was the Beaufort District of South Carolina, and its prominent families were among the facilitators for the Georgia Colony. Nathaniel Barnwell was Beaufort's most important leader, an Indian fighter who helped clear the area of the hostile Yemassee. Brothers Jonathan and Hugh Bryan were slave-owning rice planters from the upper county, in the watershed of the Tulifinny and Combahee Rivers. Barnwell was the senior warden of St. Helena's Church (C of E), and the Bryans supported the Stoney Creek Independent Presbyterian Church (dissenters). These three men and their ministers and a Baptist minister came to Savannah to call on the famous preacher and size him up. They met with him for two days in his home, and all had a profound religious conversion. While Whitefield prayed, Barnwell "dropped down as though shot with a gun." They all confessed their sins to Whitefield, and Barnwell "lay on a bed, groaning in bitterness of soul, under a sense of guilt."

Jonathan Bryan moved his property to Georgia after slavery was approved in 1749, Whitefield had regularly preached to the Bryan slaves and he pushed slave owners to accept their chattel as humans needing divine light. This simple directive would create the first erosion of slavery. In Georgia the Bryan slaves continued to practice a Whitefield form of Christianity, and by the late 18th century they created the African Baptist Church under former slave Andrew Bryan. Hugh Bryan also preached to his slaves, irritating his neighbors who complained that the Bryan slaves were lazy and rarely worked, too busy praying. Hugh Bryan had been kidnapped as a child by the Huspa king of the Yemassee and held hostage for a few years. His religious conversion only compounded his problems, for he came to believe that God had given him powers, but when he took a crowd to Whale Branch Creek and ordered it to part its waters, nothing happened but the loss of his status in the Beaufort District.

Whitefield started his orphanage in a rented house in Savannah with about twenty children: some true orphans, some the children of Carolina followers, some the children of German immigrants. He obtained his wards in many ways. On a trip to Philadelphia he railed against Robert Bolton's dancing school, but after shutting down the Bolton family's income, he offered to educate their children at Bethesda.

A Bolton daughter eventually married Whitefield's assistant, James Habersham, who handled the day-to-day operations of Bethesda for many years. Soon a new Bethesda building would be erected, the largest in the colony, and Whitefield would purchase a ship he named *The Georgia*, the largest in the colony. Whitefield and Bethesda were becoming Georgia's largest economic driver, but Whitefield's wanderlust would put him on the road again, this time back to England for ordination so he could fill the pulpit of Christ Church in Savannah.

On the trip he penned a journal of his time in Georgia, and it went to the printer as soon as he arrived and was a best seller. Unfortunately, he castigated the "Old Light" clergy in print, which kept all pulpits closed to him. At Bristol he introduced John Wesley to outdoor preaching, but there were doctrinal differences wedging them apart. Whitefield embraced predestination which the Wesley's did not support, and Whitefield rejected the Wesley's doctrine of atonement. As the Wesley's built the movement which became Methodism, Whitefield chose to continue crowd preaching and collecting funds for Bethesda. Had he chosen to fight the Wesley's for control of the movement, he would surely have prevailed and Methodism today may have been a very different religion.

There are many interesting accounts of Whitefield's preaching and how his visit would impact a community, Whitefield and his attendants were masters of contemporary media. They placed advance ads in local newspapers, some rode ahead with broadsides to post and great numbers were converted to Christ; I felt the Spirit of God drawing me by conviction. Then one morning there came a messenger and said Mr. Whitefield was to preach this afternoon. He had pamphlets to distribute. Everyone knew he was coming. This account from New England was published in 1897:

"Now it pleased God to send Mr. Whitefield into this land; and hearing of his preaching at Philadelphia, like one of the Old apostles, and thousands flocking to hear him preach, and ("Now it pleased God morning. I was in my field at Work. I dropt my tool that I had in my hand and ran to my pasture for my horse with all my might fearing that I should be too late to hear him, I brought my horse home and soon mounted and took my wife up and went as fast as I thought the horse could bear, and when my horse began to be out of breath, I would get down and put my wife on the Saddle and bid her ride as fast as she could and not Stop or Slack for me except I bad[el] her, and so I would run until I was much out of breath, and then mount my horse again, and we [went] along as if we were fleeing for our lives, all the while fearing we should be too late, for we had twelve miles to ride double in little more than an hour.

And when we came within about half a mile of the road; I heard a noise something like a loud rumbling thunder and presently found it was the noise of horses coming down the road. A cloud

of dust arose some Rods into the air over the tops of the hills and trees. I heard no man speak a word but everyone pressing forward in great haste. 3 or 4,000 people assembled together. I turned and looked towards the great river and saw the ferry boats bringing over loads of people; the land and banks over the river looked black with people and horses all along the 12 miles. I saw no man at work in his field, but all seemed to be gone.

When I saw Mr. Whitefield come upon the Scaffold he looked almost angelical, a young, slim slender youth before some thousands of people with a bold undaunted countenance, and he looked as if he was Cloaked with authority from the Great God. And my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound; by God's blessing my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me."

Benjamin Franklin, a deist sceptic, attended a Whitefield sermon and recorded the following account:

"I happened soon after to attend one of his Sermons, in the Course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a Collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my Pocket a Handful of Copper Money, three or four silver Dollars, and five Pistoles in Gold. As he proceeded I began to soften and concluded to give the Coppers. Another Stroke of his Oratory made me ashamed of that, and determin'd me to give the Silver; and he finished so admirably, that I emptied my Pocket wholly into the Collector's Dish, Gold and all.

At this Sermon there was also one of our Club who being of my Sentiments respecting opinions concern in the Building in Georgia, and suspecting a Collection might be intended, had by Precaution emptied his Pockets before he came from home; towards the Conclusion of the Discourse, this man, however, he felt a strong Desire to give, and apply'd to a Neighbor who stood near him to borrow some Money for the Purpose, The Application was unfortunately to perhaps the only Man in the Company who had the firmness not to be affected by the Preacher. His Answer was, At any other time, Friend Hopkinson, I would lend to thee freely; but not now; for thee seems to be out of thy right Senses."

Franklin became a close friend to Whitefield and would host him in his home when the famous cleric visited Philadelphia. Franklin printed and published many of Whitefield's works for him, and he also was the sponsor of building a large hall for public preaching in inclement weather, something Whitefield wanted.

David Garrick, the most famous actor in Britain at that time, was enthralled by Whitefield. This great tragedian was known for his elocution and projection, but he bowed to Whitefield as a greater master of those skills. Garrick reported that the crowds moaned and cried when Whitefield said "Mesopotamia." Garrick stated, "I would give a hundred guineas if I could say 'Oh' like Mr. Whitefield." When Whitefield was acting out a Biblical passage about a storm at sea in his vivid and convincing style, a sailor in the audience actually cried out, "To the lifeboats! To the lifeboats!"

Whitefield never wrote his sermons in advance. They were always extemporaneous and varied according to his mood and mindset. He emphasized a simple message of redemption and

salvation but presented it with showmanship and emotionalism. He cried, he danced, he screamed, he shouted, he gyrated. He frequently portrayed the lives of Biblical characters as a one-man show. A typical portrayal is seen here:

'Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven?' "Any Episcopalians?"

("Father Abraham," Whitefield danced around the stage as he spoke, jabbing at the air with his finger,

"Any Independents or Seceders. New Sides or Old Sides, any Methodists?"

"NO! NO! No!" Quoted the crows in unison.

Who have you there, then, Father Abraham? We don't know those names here! All who are here are believers in Christ, men who have overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of his testimony God help me, God help us all to forget having names and to become Christians in deed and in truth!"

Another example is here:

"Once, when preaching on eternity, he suddenly stopped his message, looked around, and exclaimed, "Hark! Methinks I hear [the saints] chanting their everlasting hallelujahs and spending an eternal day in echoing forth triumphant songs of joy. And do you not long, my brethren, to join this heavenly choir?"

Whitefield recorded an account of his visit to a revival in Cambuslang, Scotland. His evening service attracted thousands and lasted until 2:00 in the morning.

"There were scenes of uncontrollable distress, like a field of battle," Whitefield said. "All night in the fields, might be heard the voice of prayer and praise. It far outdid all that I ever saw in America."

The next day he preached to 20,000 people in services stretching into the night. The following morning, 1700 communicants streamed alongside long Communion tables set up in tents.

But was all of Whitefield's showmanship sincere Christian expression? The answer comes from Sarah Edwards, the wife of Rev. Jonathan Edwards (known for "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.") Whitefield had visited with them and they became close friends. Mrs. Edwards gave this assessment:

"He makes less of the doctrines than our American preachers generally do and aims more at affecting the heart, He is a born orator. A prejudiced person, I know, might say that this is all theatrical artifice and display, but not so will anyone think" who has seen and known him."

But his strenuous schedule was physically costing him: he frequently vomited after preaching, and it was bloody. His fame was greatest in his early years, and the revival fever in America was quieted by the French and Indian War. Whitefield's crowds shrank, and donations for Bethesda dwindled. He entered into a loveless marriage with an older woman who preceded him in death. Problems at Bethesda mounted. One of his last acts was to will Bethesda to Selena Hastings,

Countess Huntingdon, one of his biggest financial supporters. Certainly she had the finances to bring his passion to fruition!

Whitefield's last sermon was in 1770, atop a barrel before 23,000 in the Boston Commons. That was more people than the population of the Boston area. He was ill but insisted on continuing. He was taken to bed but continued to quietly preach on the inefficiency of works to merit salvation. His last words were "Works! Works! A man gets to Heaven by works? I would as soon think of climbing to the moon on a rope of sand."

He was buried in the crypt under the pulpit of Old South Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts. For many years his followers filed into that undercroft to view into the crypt where his bust sat upon his sepulcher. It was later sealed off to discourage the number of visitors.

The African American slave poet, Phillis Wheatley, attended several of his sermons. After his death she wrote a 47-line elegy which was printed as a low-cost broadside, the profit going to a charity. Later John Greenleaf Whittier penned of him,

"That life of pure intent, that voice of warning yet eloquent, of one on the errands of angels sent."

George Whitefield changed Christianity in America. He made it happier, simpler, and more emotional. He was most sincere about the need for salvation through rebirth, or "Born Again" in modern talk. His style and message lives on in Methodist, Baptist, Missionary Baptist, Presbyterian, and a host more of American faiths such as Primitive Baptists, Nazarenes, Adventists and snake-handlers.

He enlivened the pulpit. He wrote hymns and even altered lyrics to one of Charles Wesley's works, making it, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" by printing it thus in his own songbooks. His name, in both spellings (with and without the first "e"), is memorialized at several Methodist chapels in England as well as Methodist churches in America. In Georgia the old road to Bethesda is named for him. A county in Georgia was named for him, as well as the chapel at Bethesda. For years — the Burn on the Bethesda grounds was cited as the place where he preached to his wards.

But in spite of this amazing legacy and the social and religious revolutions he sparked, his focus and concern was always his beloved Bethesda.