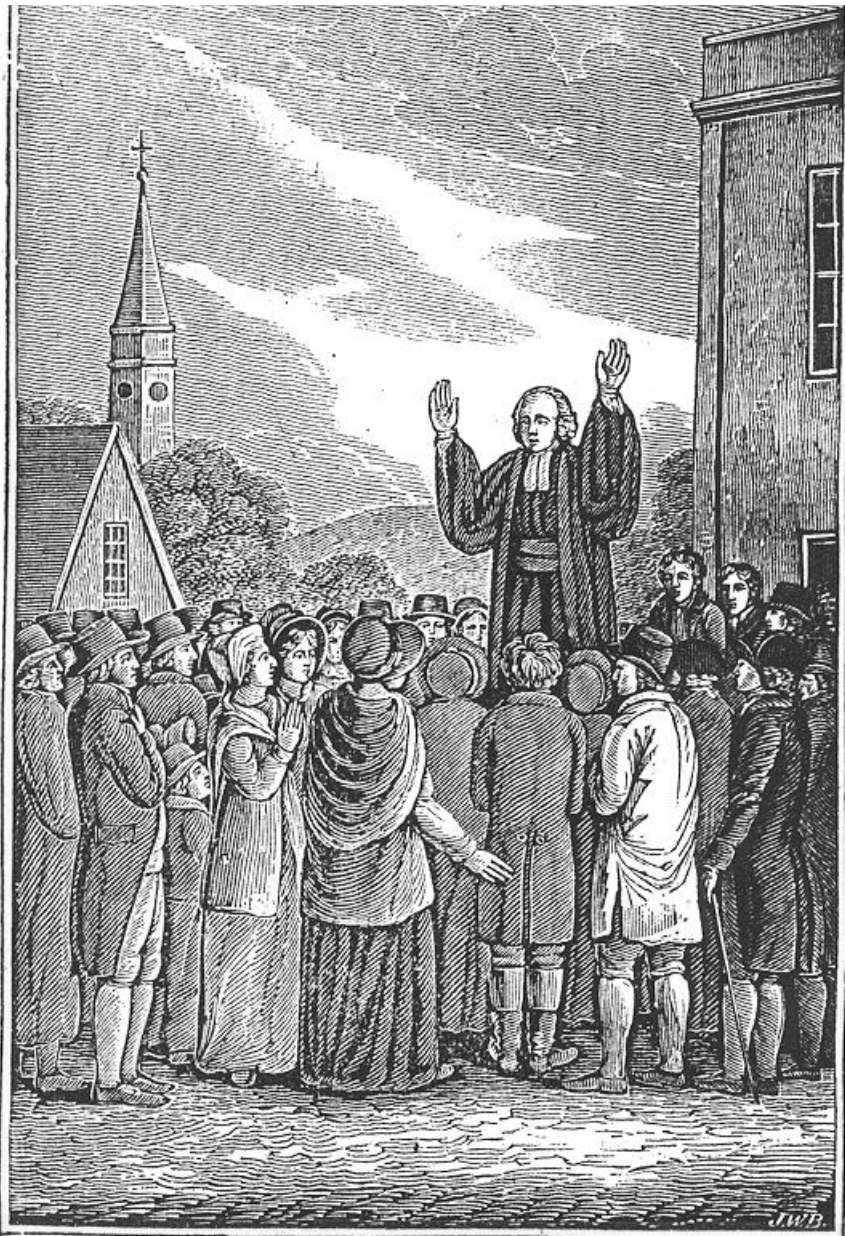


Michael A. G. Haykin

**“The revived Puritan:
The spirituality of George Whitefield (1714-1770)”**



The revived Puritan: The spirituality of George Whitefield (1714-1770)

In 1835 Francis Alexander Cox (1783-1853) and James Hoby (1788-1871), two prominent English Baptists who were visiting fellow Baptists in the United States, made a side trip to Newburyport, Massachusetts, to view the tomb of George Whitefield. The “grand itinerant” had died on September 30, 1770, at the home of Jonathan Parsons (1705-1776), pastor of the town’s First Presbyterian Church, also known as Old South. He had been interred two days later in a vault below what is now the centre aisle of this church, where, along with the coffins of Parsons and another pastor of the church, Joseph Prince (d.1791), his remains were on display all through the nineteenth century. In fact, it was not until 1932 that the coffin in which Whitefield’s remains lay was covered over with a slate slab.¹

Cox and Hoby later recalled descending with some difficulty into the subterranean vault where Whitefield was buried. As they did so, they remembered that “deep expectant emotions thrilled our bosoms.” They sat on the two other coffins in the vault and watched as the upper half of the lid of Whitefield’s coffin was opened on its hinges “to reveal the skeleton secrets of the narrow prison-house.” They “contemplated and handled the skull,” while they “thought of his devoted life, his blessed death, his high and happy destiny” and “whispered [their] adorations of the grace that formed him both for earth and heaven.”² What makes this scene even more *outré* is that the skeletal remains that Cox and Hoby viewed were not intact. The main bone of Whitefield’s right arm had been stolen some years earlier by another Englishman. It was not until either the late 1830s or even the 1840s that the thief’s conscience brought him to the point of sending the bone back across the Atlantic in a small wooden box!³

¹ G. Norris Foster, compiled, *First Presbyterian Church (Old South), Newburyport, Massachusetts. Historical Notes and Dates* (n.p., n.d.), 1.

² *The Baptists in America; A Narrative of the Deputation from the Baptist Union in England to The United States and Canada* (London: T. Ward and Co., 1836), 421-422. For other similar accounts, see L. Tyerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1877), 2:602-603, 607.

³ Foster, *First Presbyterian Church (Old South)*, 1, 8. Tyerman gives the date for the bone’s return as 1837 (*George Whitefield*, 2:606). Robert Philip, Whitefield’s nineteenth-century biographer, knew the thief and urged him to return it. The thief sought to show Philip the bone in 1835, but the latter refused

These accounts are a potent reminder of the fact that of all the great preachers raised up in the transatlantic Evangelical Revival none gripped the public mind and imagination more than George Whitefield. During his lifetime, the Congregationalist Joseph Williams (1692-1755), a merchant from Kidderminster with a keen interest in spiritual renewal, rightly termed him the “Father” of those seeking to advance the revival.⁴ Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751), who “professed himself a deist,” was forced to exclaim, after hearing Whitefield preach: “the most extraordinary man of our times, the most commanding eloquence, unquenchable zeal, unquestionable piety.”⁵ On the other side of the Atlantic Benjamin Colman (1673-1747) and William Cooper (1694-1743) viewed Whitefield as “the wonder of the age” and were convinced that “no man more employs the pens, and fills up the conversation of people, than he does at this day.”⁶ Shortly after the evangelist’s death Augustus Montague Toplady (1740-1778), author of the famous hymn “Rock of Ages, cleft for me,” remembered him as “the apostle of the English empire.”⁷ And looking back from the following century, John Foster (1770-1843), the Baptist essayist, was sure that with “the doubtful exception of Wickliffe, no man probably ever excited in this island [i.e. the British Isles] so profound, and extended, and prolonged a sensation in the public mind, by personal addresses to the understanding and conscience, on the subject of religion.”⁸

to gaze upon it. See Philip’s *The Life and Times of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London: George Virtue, 1838), 550-551.

⁴ “Charles Wesley in 1739 by Joseph Williams of Kidderminster”, introd. Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 42, No.6 (December 1980), 182.

⁵ Cited Willard Connely, *The True Chesterfield: Manners—Women—Education* (London: Cassell and Co. Ltd., 1939), 179.

⁶ “To the Reader”, the Preface to Joseph Smith, *The Character, Preaching, etc. of the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield. Impartially Represented and Supported* in George Whitefield, *Fifteen Sermons Preached on Various Important Subjects* (London, 1792), 5-6.

⁷ “A Concise Character of the Late Rev. Mr. Whitefield”, *The Works of Augustus Toplady, B.A.* (London: J. Chidley, 1837), 494.

⁸ “George Whitefield: A Critical Essay” in *George Whitefield’s Journals (1737-1741)* (1905 ed.; repr. Gainesville, Florida: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1969), 15.

**“A ray of divine life”:
The pathway to conversion⁹**

George Whitefield was the youngest son of Thomas Whitefield (1681-1716), the proprietor of the Bell Inn, at the time the finest hotel in Gloucester. George's father died when he was but two and so he was raised by his mother Elizabeth (c.1681-1751). His school record was unremarkable, save for a noticeable talent for acting. For a while during his teen years, when his older brother Richard took over the running of the inn, he worked as one of the servants. But his mother longed for something better for her son. Her persistence and the kindness of friends enabled him in November 1732 to enter Pembroke College, Oxford University. It was here in the following summer that he first met John Wesley (1703-1791) and his younger brother Charles (1707-1788), who were regularly meeting with a group of men known to history as “the Holy Club.” This was a company of ten or so men who were ardently trying to live religious lives in an extremely dissolute age.

Whitefield, like-minded and longing for spiritual companionship ever since coming up to Oxford, joined them. He engaged in numerous religious exercises such as fasting, praying regularly, attending public worship, and seeking to abstain from what were deemed worldly pleasures. Systematic reading of Puritan and Pietist devotional literature also occupied much of Whitefield's time.¹⁰ Despite the evident zeal he brought to these religious activities he had no sense of peace with God or that God was satisfied with what he was doing. He was, though he did not know it at the time, treading a pathway similar to the one that Martin Luther (1483-1546) had taken over

⁹ The best biographical study of Whitefield is Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (1970 and 1979 eds.; repr. Westchester, Illinois: Cornerstone Books, 1979 and 1980), 2 vols. Dallimore has also written a one-volume account of Whitefield's life: *George Whitefield: Evangelist of the 18th-Century Revival* (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1990). For a shorter study of Whitefield, see John H. Armstrong, “George Whitefield 1714-1770” in his *Five Great Evangelists* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1997), 15-70. For two studies that are more critical and controversial in nature, see Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1991) and Frank Lambert, “Pedlar in Divinity”. *George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). For an insightful critique of Stout, see Eric Carlsson, “Book Reviews: Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*”, *Trinity Journal*, NS, 14, No. 2 (Fall 1993), 238-247.

¹⁰ On the role that reading played in his conversion and his subsequent growth as a Christian, see Lambert, “Pedlar in Divinity”, 17-21. It is interesting that it was Christian literature, not the spoken word, that played the vital role in the conversion of Whitefield, although he is best remembered as a preacher (*ibid.*, 18). On Whitefield's later reading, see the helpful article by John Lewis Gilmore, “Preparation: the Power of Whitefield's Ministry”, *Christianity Today*, 24, No.5 (March 7, 1980), 22-24

two hundred years earlier. And just as Luther's conversion was the spark that lit the fires of the Reformation, so Whitefield's conversion would be central to kindling the blaze of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival.

Conversion came in the spring of 1735 after Charles Wesley had given him a copy of *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (1677) by Henry Scougal (1650-1678), a former Professor of Divinity at Aberdeen.¹¹ This book was a frontal challenge to Whitefield's ardent endeavour to create a righteous life that would merit God's favour. Here is the way Whitefield recalled it many years later in a sermon that he preached in 1769:

I must bear testimony to my old friend Mr. Charles Wesley, he put a book into my hands, called, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, whereby God shewed me, that I must be born again, or be damned. I know the place: it may be superstitious, perhaps, but 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. As a good writer [i.e. Scougal] says, a man may go to church, say his prayers, receive the Sacrament, and yet, my brethren, not be a Christian. How did my heart rise, how did my heart shudder, like a poor man that is afraid to look into his account-books, lest he should find himself a bankrupt: yet shall I burn that book, shall I throw it down, shall I put it by, or shall I search into it? I did [search it], and, holding the book in my hand, thus addressed the God of heaven and earth: Lord, if I am not a Christian, if I am not a real one, for Jesus Christ's sake, shew me what Christianity is, that I may not be damned at last. I read a little further, and the cheat was discovered; O, says the author, they that know any thing of religion know it is a vital union with the Son of God, Christ formed in the heart; O what a ray of divine life did then break in upon my poor soul...¹²

Awakened by this book to his need for the new birth, Whitefield passionately struggled to find salvation along the pathway of extreme asceticism but to no avail. Finally, when he had come to an end of his resources as a human being, God enabled him, in his words, "to lay hold on His dear Son by a living faith, and, by giving me the Spirit of adoption, to seal me, as I humbly hope, even to the day of everlasting redemption." And, he went on, "oh! with what joy—joy unspeakable—even joy that was full of, and big with glory, was my soul filled..."¹³

"The open bracing air":

¹¹ For a modern edition of this work, see Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1996).

¹² "All Men's Place" in his *Sermons on Important Subjects* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1833), 755.

¹³ *Journals* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 58.

The life of a preacher

Always the avid reader, it was Whitefield's prayerful perusal of the Puritan biblical commentaries of William Burkitt (1650-1703) and Matthew Henry (1662-1714) a few months after his conversion that led to his becoming convinced of "free grace and the necessity of being justified in His [i.e. God's] sight by *faith only*."¹⁴ Following his ordination as deacon in the Church of England the following year these Reformation doctrines came to occupy a central place in his preaching arsenal.¹⁵ There is, for instance, a recently published account of Whitefield's preaching drawn up by an unknown French contemporary. Dated August 1739, this observer states that Whitefield preaches "continually about inner regeneration, the new birth in Jesus Christ, the movement of the Spirit, justification by faith through grace [*justification par la foy de grace*], the life of the Spirit."¹⁶

The following year Joseph Smith, a Congregationalist minister from Charleston, South Carolina, defended Whitefield against various attacks in *The Character, Preaching, etc. of the Rev. George Whitefield*.¹⁷ In the section dealing with the doctrinal content of Whitefield's sermons, Smith lists four "primitive, protestant, puritanic" doctrines that Whitefield regularly heralded in his preaching in America—original sin, "justification by faith alone," the new birth, and "inward feelings of the Spirit."¹⁸ Smith recalled the way in which Whitefield

earnestly contended for our justification as the free gift of God, by faith alone in the blood of Christ, an article of faith delivered to the saints of old...telling us plainly, and with the clearest distinction, that a man was justified these three ways; meritoriously by Christ, instrumentally by faith alone, declaratively by good works.¹⁹

Whitefield's preaching on the new birth, though, was not at all well received by the Anglican clergy in England and churches began to be barred to him. By and large the bishops in the Hanoverian Church of England were, in the words of English historian J.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁵ Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:124-128.

¹⁶ Jeremy Black, "The Origins of Methodism: an unpublished early French account", *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 6 (1987), 116.

¹⁷ For this tract, originally a sermon, see *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 791-799. For its historical context, see Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:511-514.

¹⁸ *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 792-795.

H. Plumb, “first and foremost politicians,” not men of the Spirit. “There is a worldliness,” Plumb continues, “about eighteenth-century [bishops] which no amount of apologetics can conceal.” They undertook their clerical duties “only as political duties allowed.”²⁰ The worldliness of these bishops showed in other ways as well. Jonathan Trelawny (1650-1721), Bishop of Winchester, used to “excuse himself for his much swearing by saying he swore as a baronet, and not as a bishop”!²¹ Such bishops had neither the time nor the interest to promote church renewal. Of course, the decadence of church leadership was by no means absolute; but the net effect of worldly bishops was to squash effective reform.

Moreover, the attention of far too many of the clergy under these bishops was taken up with such avocations as philosophy, biology, agriculture, chemistry, literature, law, politics, fox-hunting, drinking—anything but pastoral ministry and spiritual nurture. There were, of course, a goodly number of Church of England ministers who did not have the resources to indulge themselves in such pursuits, since they barely eked out a living. But few of them—wealthy or poor—preached anything but dry, unaffecting moralistic sermons. The *mentalité* of the first half of the eighteenth century gloried in reason, moderation and decorum. The preaching of the day dwelt largely upon themes of morality and decency and lacked “any element of holy excitement, of passionate pleading, of heroic challenge, of winged imagination.”²² Even among many of the churches of the Dissenters, the children of the Puritans, things were little better. One knowledgeable observer of these churches bemoaned the fact that “the distinguished doctrines of the gospel—Christ crucified, the only ground of hope for fallen man—salvation through his atoning blood—the sanctification by his eternal Spirit, are old-fashioned things now seldom heard in our churches.”²³ The Christian life was basically defined in terms of a moral life of good works. Spiritual ardour was regarded with

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 793.

²⁰ *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1963), 43.

²¹ Cited J. Wesley Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley. The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1938), 50.

²² Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England* (1961 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1996), III, 73.

²³ Cited A. Skevington Wood, “The Eighteenth Century Methodist Revival Reconsidered”, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 53 (1981), 135.

horror as “enthusiasm” or fanaticism. The ideal of the era is well summed up by an inscription on a tombstone from the period: “pious without enthusiasm.”²⁴

Whitefield, however, was not to be deterred. On Saturday, February 17, 1739, he made the decision to take to the open air and preach to a group of colliers in Kingswood, a coal-mining district on the outskirts of Bristol. These men with their families lived in squalor and utter degradation, squandering their lives in drink and violence. With no church nearby, they were quite ignorant of Christianity and its leading tenets. It was a key turning-point in not only his life but also in the history of Evangelicalism.²⁵ The concern that has gripped Evangelicals in the last two hundred years to bring the gospel message directly to ordinary people has some of its most significant roots here in Whitefield’s venturing out to preach in the open air.

From this point on Whitefield would relish and delight in his calling as an open-air preacher. He would preach in fields and foundries, in ships, cemeteries, and pubs, atop horses and even coffins, from stone walls and balconies, staircases and windmills.²⁶ For instance, referring to this calling in a letter dated December 14, 1768, he wrote, “I love the open bracing air.” And the following year he could state: “It is good to go into the high-ways and hedges. Field-preaching, field-preaching for ever!”²⁷

²⁴ J. I. Packer, “The Spirit with the Word: The Reformational Revivalism of George Whitefield” in W. P. Stephens, ed., *The Bible, the Reformation and the Church. Essays in Honour of James Atkinson (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 105; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 180-181; M. Dorothy George, England in Transition. Life and Work in the Eighteenth Century (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1953), 65. For two excellent overviews of the state of Christianity in England at this time, see Wood, “Eighteenth Century Methodist Revival Reconsidered”, 132-136; David Lyle Jeffrey, “Introduction” to his ed., *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1987), 2-10.*

²⁵ For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Whitefield’s innovative role in this regard was forgotten. The publication of Dallimore’s two-volume *George Whitefield* has certainly gone far in redressing this amnesia. Yet, even today, good historians can forget this fact and see John Wesley as the real innovator. See, e.g., Mark Noll, *Turning Points. Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 221-244. Noll mentions Whitefield as an innovator (*ibid.*, 223, 238-239), but it was Wesley’s decision to preach in the fields two months after Whitefield that Noll regards as the critical turning-point in the history of Evangelicalism. Gordon Wakefield, though, in his essay “John and Charles Wesley: A Tale of Two Brothers” has it right when he says that it was Whitefield “and not the Wesleys who may be said to have begun the Evangelical Revival in 1737” [Geoffrey Rowell, ed., *The English Religious Tradition and the Genius of Anglicanism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 172].

²⁶ In light of his own itinerant ministry, it is interesting to read the following remarks on Jesus’ ministry. Christ, he wrote in 1756, “taught all that were willing to hear, on a mount, in a ship, or by the sea-side” [Letter MCXVII to the Bishop of B—, February 2, 1756 (*The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771), 3:157)].

²⁷ *Works*, 3:379, 387.

It should be noted that Whitefield never confined his witnessing about Christ to preaching occasions. He took every opportunity to share his faith. “God forbid,” he once remarked, “I should travel with anybody a quarter of an hour without speaking of Christ to them.”²⁸ On another occasion, during his sixth preaching tour of America, he happened to stay with a wealthy, though worldly, family in Southold on Long Island. The family discovered after the evangelist had left their home that he had written with a diamond on one of the windowpanes in the bedroom where he had slept, “One thing is needful!”²⁹

At that first open-air service in February of 1739 there were 200. Within six weeks or so, Whitefield was preaching numerous times a week to crowds sometimes numbering in the thousands!³⁰ Whitefield’s description of his ministry at this time is a classic one. To visualize the scene at the Kingswood collieries, we need to picture the green countryside, the piles of coal, the squalid huts, and the deep semi-circle of unwashed faces as we read his words:

Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was a 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. The change was visible to all, though numbers chose to impute it to anything, rather than the finger of God.³¹

Here is another description from this same period of time, when others besides the miners of Bristol were flocking to hear Whitefield preach:

As...I had just begun to be an extempore preacher, it often occasioned many inward conflicts. Sometimes, when twenty thousand people were before me, I had not, in my own apprehension, a word to say either to God or them. But I never was totally deserted, and frequently ... so assisted, that I knew by happy experience what our Lord meant by saying, “Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). The open firmament above me, the prospect of the

²⁸ *Jacob’s Ladder (Sermons on Important Subjects, 774).*

²⁹ Iain Murray, “Introduction” to *George Whitefield’s Journals* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 13.

³⁰ George Whitefield, Letter to Daniel Abbot, February 24, 1739 [Graham C. G. Thomas, “George Whitefield and Friends: The Correspondence of Some Early Methodists”, *The National Library of Wales Journal*, 27 (1991), 83].

³¹ Cited Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:263-264.

adjacent fields, with the sight of thousands and thousands, some in coaches, some on horseback, and some in the trees, and at times all affected and drenched in tears together, to which sometimes was added the solemnity of the approaching evening, was almost too much for, and quite overcame me.³²

Revival had come to England! And to that revival, and its confluent streams in Wales, Scotland, and British North America no man contributed more than Whitefield. Over the 34 years between his conversion and death in 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts, it is calculated that he preached around 18,000 sermons.³³ Actually, if one includes all of the talks that he gave, he probably spoke about a thousand times a year during his ministry.³⁴ Moreover, many of his sermons were delivered to massive congregations that numbered 10,000 or so, some to audiences possibly as large as 20,000.³⁵

In addition to his preaching throughout the length and breadth of England, he regularly itinerated throughout Wales, visited Ireland twice, and journeyed fourteen times to Scotland. He crossed the Atlantic thirteen times, stopping once in Bermuda for eleven weeks, and preached in virtually every major town on the Atlantic seaboard.³⁶ What is so remarkable about all of this is Whitefield lived at a time when travel to a town but twenty miles away was a significant undertaking.

In journeying to Scotland and to America he was going to what many perceived as the fringes of transatlantic British society and culture. And yet some of God's richest blessings on his ministry was in these very regions. For example, Harry Stout, commenting on Whitefield's impact on America, writes:

So pervasive was Whitefield's impact in America that he can justly be styled America's first cultural hero. Before Whitefield, there was no unifying intercolonial person or event. Indeed, before Whitefield, it is doubtful any name other than royalty was known equally from Boston to Charleston. But by 1750 virtually every American loved and admired Whitefield and saw him as their champion.³⁷

³² Cited *ibid.*, 1:268.

³³ Augustus Montague Toplady, "Anecdotes, Incidents and Historic Passages" in *Works*, 495; John Gillies, *Memoirs*, 284.

³⁴ Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:522.

³⁵ For the numbers, see Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:263, 267, 295-296; 2:522-523.

³⁶ He was in America during 1738, 1739-1741, 1744-1748, 1751-1752, 1754-1755, 1763-1765, and 1769-1770.

³⁷ "Heavenly Comet", *Christian History* 38 (1993), 13-14.

Whitefield's ministry—insisting, as it did, on the vital necessity of conversion and the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart—was not without its critics, many of whom castigated him for what they regarded as fanaticism. In an interview with John Wesley on August 18, 1739, for example, Joseph Butler (1692-1752), the Bishop of Bristol, accused both Wesley and Whitefield of “pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost,” which he found “a horrid thing—a very horrid thing.”³⁸ Of course, if Whitefield had been present, he would have rightly disputed the accuracy of Butler's accusation.³⁹ John Callender (1706-1748), a Baptist pastor in Newport, Rhode Island, denounced Whitefield as “a second George Fox,” obviously convinced, and wrongly so, that Whitefield, like the founder of the Quakers, publicly promoted the restoration of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

It should be admitted that in his early ministry Whitefield did make some unguarded statements and adopted certain attitudes that helped fuel this opposition. On his second preaching tour of America, for instance, Whitefield appears to have maintained that assurance belonged to the essence of saving faith and that a mature Christian could discern the marks of conversion in another individual. As Jonathan Dickinson (1688-1747), the first president of the College of New Jersey (later known as Princeton University) and a friend to the revival, remarked about Whitefield's views at this time: “I cannot stand surety for all his Sentiments in Religion, particularly his making Assurance to be essentially necessary to a justifying Faith; And his openly declaring for a Spirit of discerning in experienced Christians, whereby they can know who are true converts, and who are close Hypocrites.”⁴¹ To his credit, Whitefield would later admit his injudiciousness and that he had been far “too rash and hasty” in his speech and published writings. “Wild-fire has been mixed with it,” he wrote in 1748, “and I find

³⁸ *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (1911 ed.; repr. London: The Epworth Press, 1960), 2:256-257, n.1.

³⁹ See Michael A. G. Haykin, *Revivals and Signs and Wonders: Some Evangelical Perspectives from the Eighteenth Century* (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Canadian Christian Publications, 1994), 17-29.

⁴⁰ C. C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800. Strict Congregationalists and Separate Baptists in the Great Awakening* (1962 ed.; repr. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 240.

⁴¹ Letter to Thomas Foxcroft, May 24, 1740 [Thomas Foxcroft Correspondence, Firestone Library, Princeton University, cited Milton J. Coalter, Jr., “The Life of Gilbert Tennent: A Case Study of Continental Pietism's Influence on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies” (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1982), 151].

that I frequently wrote and spoke in my own spirit, when I thought I was writing and speaking by the assistance of the Spirit of God.”⁴²

Despite these faults—basically overcome by his early thirties—multitudes of Whitefield’s hearers found his preaching “moving, earnest, winning, melting” and rooted in a doctrinal framework which was “plainly that of the Reformers.”⁴³ Sarah Edwards (1710-1758), the wife of the New England divine, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), was one such hearer. She heard Whitefield preach in her home church in Northampton, Massachusetts, a number of times between Friday, October 17 and Wednesday, October 22, 1741, when Whitefield left for New Haven and New York. Three days after Whitefield had left Northampton, Sarah, “an astute judge of pulpit manner,”⁴⁴ wrote to her brother, James Pierpoint, who lived in New Haven, to give him first-hand information about Whitefield.

I want to prepare you for a visit from the Rev. Mr. Whitefield, the famous preacher of England. He has been sojourning with us a week or more, and, after visiting a few of the neighbouring towns, is going to New Haven, and from thence to New York. He is truly a remarkable man, and during his visit has, I think, verified all that we have heard of him. He makes less of the doctrines [of grace] than our American preachers generally do, and aims more at affecting the heart. He is a born orator. You have already heard of his deep-toned, yet clear and melodious voice. O it is perfect music to listen to that alone! And he speaks so easily, without any apparent effort. You remember that David Hume⁴⁵ thought it worth going twenty miles to hear him speak; and Garrick⁴⁶ said, ‘He could move men to tears or make them tremble by his simple intonations in pronouncing the word Mesopotamia.’ Well, this last was a mere speech of the play-actor; but it is truly wonderful to see what a spell this preacher often casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible. I have seen upward of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob. He impresses the ignorant, and not less the educated and refined. It is reported, you know, that as the miners of England listened to him the tears made white furrows down their smutty cheeks, and so here our mechanics shut up their shops, and the day-labourers throw down their tools to go and hear him preach, and few go away unaffected. A prejudiced person, I know, might say that this is all theatrical artifice and display; but not so will any one think who has seen and known him. He is a very devout and godly man, and his only aim

⁴² Letter DCXL to the Rev. Mr. S—, June 24, 1748 (*Works*, 2:144).

⁴³ These are the words of Thomas Prince (1687-1758), a New England pastor and historian [cited John Gillies, *Historical Collections of the Accounts of Revival* (1845 ed.; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), 350, 351].

⁴⁴ Stout, “Heavenly Comet”, 13.

⁴⁵ David Hume (1711-1776), a Scottish philosopher, was a vehement critic of Christianity.

⁴⁶ David Garrick (1717-1779) was widely regarded as the greatest British actor of the day.

seems to be to reach and influence men the best way. He speaks from a heart all aglow with love, and pours out a torrent of eloquence which is almost irresistible. Many, very many persons in Northampton date the beginning of new thoughts, new desires, new purposes, and a new life, from the day on which they heard him preach of Christ and this salvation.⁴⁷

J. I. Packer has drawn attention to at least three reasons mentioned in this letter for Whitefield's success as a preacher.⁴⁸ First, the Anglican evangelist addressed his hearers simply as fellow human beings, so that distinctions of rich and poor, educated and uneducated, ceased to matter. Whitefield spoke in such a way that he was readily understood and appreciated by the poor and uneducated as well as by the wealthy and learned.

Then, he put spiritual issues to his hearers as one who transparently loved them and longed for them to be delivered out of the bondage of sin. "He speaks from a heart all aglow with love," Sarah recalled. And many who came to mock the preacher and laugh at his doctrine went away sobered and ultimately converted as they heard of the love of God in Christ for sinners and felt that love through the medium of Whitefield's impassioned preaching. As we shall see, Whitefield was thoroughly convinced of what have been called the doctrines of grace, the distinguishing tenets of Calvinism. Yet, this never prevented him from giving "sweet invitations to close with Christ," which he considered to be "the very life of preaching."⁴⁹ Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), the African-American poet, well captured Whitefield's passion in preaching, when, in her elegy on the evangelist, she wrote the following:

That Saviour, which his soul did first receive,
The greatest gift that ev'n a God can give,
He freely offer'd to the num'rous throng,
That on his lips with list'ning pleasure hung.

"Take him, ye wretched, for your only good,
Take him ye starving sinners, for your food;
Ye thirsty, come to this life-giving stream,
Ye preachers, take him for your joyful theme;
Take him, my dear Americans, he said,
Be your complaints on his kind bosom laid:
Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you;

⁴⁷ Repr. *The Banner of Truth*, 79 (April 1970), 25-26.

⁴⁸ "George Whitefield: Man Alive. A Review Article", *Crux*, 16, No.4 (December 1980), 26.

⁴⁹ Letter DCCXIX to Dr. D—, December 21, 1748 (*Works*, 2:216).

Impartial Saviour is his title due:
Wash'd in the fountain of redeeming blood,
You shall be sons, and kings, and priests to God.”⁵⁰

Finally, Whitefield spoke as one who sought to awaken and grip the heart. In Sarah's words, he “aims...at affecting the heart.” Unlike many of his Anglican contemporaries who addressed only the mind and whose preaching lacked zeal, Whitefield spoke to the whole man with passion and without mincing any words.

A fourth reason, not mentioned by Packer in these reflections on Sarah's fascinating letter, was Whitefield's godliness. Robert Philip was surely right when he wrote in his mid-nineteenth century biography of the evangelist that “the grand secret of Whitefield's power was...his devotional spirit.”⁵¹ To a consideration of that “devotional spirit” and piety we now turn.

**“The believer's hollow square”:
The new birth and justification by faith alone**

Summing up the characteristics of transatlantic British society in the opening decades of the eighteenth century, Oxford historian John Walsh lists the following: a noticeable decay of ministerial authority, the growth of rationalism and a massive intellectual assault on supernatural Christianity, the spread of material wealth and “luxury,” the frivolity of the young and an indifference on their part to spiritual matters, and a sense of spiritual powerlessness among both pious Anglicans and Dissenters.⁵² Attestation of this description is found in both public documents and private testimonies. Here is the witness of one author, the London Baptist theologian Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), writing in 1701:

Was ever sodomy so common in a christian nation, or so notoriously and frequently committed, as by too palpable evidences it appears to be, in and about this city, notwithstanding the clear light of the gospel which shines therein, and the great pains taken to reform the abominable profaneness that abounds? Is it not a wonder the patience of God hath not consumed us in his

⁵⁰ *On the Death of the Rev. George Whitefield. 1770* in *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Julian D. Mason, Jr. (Rev. ed.; Chapel Hill/London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 56.

⁵¹ *Life and Times of the Reverend George Whitefield*, 565.

⁵² “‘Methodism’ and the origins of English-Speaking Evangelicalism” in Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 20-21.

wrath, before this time? Was ever swearing, blasphemy, whoring, drunkenness, gluttony, self-love, and covetousness, at such a height, as at this time here?⁵³

Despite the presence of a number of gospel-centred ministries like that of Keach and various societies which had been created to bring about moral reform,⁵⁴ homosexuality, profanity, sexual immorality, drunkenness and gluttony were widespread. And the next three decades saw little improvement.

The moral tone of the nation was set in many ways by its monarchs and leading politicians. George I (r.1714-1727) was primarily interested in food, horses, and women. He divorced his wife when he was thirty-four and thereafter consorted with a series of mistresses.⁵⁵ Sir Robert Walpole (1676-1745), prime minister from 1722 to 1742, lived in undisguised adultery with his mistress, Maria Skerrett (d.1738), whom he married after his wife died.⁵⁶ As J. H. Plumb has noted of aristocratic circles in the early eighteenth century, the women “hardly bothered with the pretence of virtue, and the possession of lovers and mistresses was regarded as a commonplace, a matter for gossip but not reproach.”⁵⁷ Not surprisingly other segments of society simply followed suit. Pornographic literature, for instance, multiplied almost unchecked. Newspapers advertised such things as the services of gigolos and cures for venereal disease, and one could purchase guide-books to the numerous brothels in London.⁵⁸ It was, as a recent writer has put it well, “an age when atheism was fashionable, sexual morals lax, and drinking and gambling at a pitch of profligacy that he never since been equalled.”⁵⁹

The Hanoverian Church of England, due to its moralism and worldliness described above, was basically helpless when it came to dealing with this dire situation.

⁵³ *Gospel Mysteries Unveiled* (1701 ed.; repr. London: L. I. Higham, 1817), 3:310.

⁵⁴ On these societies, see especially A. G. Craig, “The Movement for Reformation of Manners” (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1980); Craig Rose, “Providence, Protestant Union and Godly Reformation in the 1690s”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th. Series, 3 (1993), 151-169 and the literature cited in *ibid.*, 151, n. 1.

⁵⁵ J. H. Plumb, *The First Four Georges* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1956), 39-42.

⁵⁶ J. H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole* (Clifton, New Jersey: Augustus M. Kelley, 1973), 2:114.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:114.

⁵⁸ Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1982), 279.

⁵⁹ Selina Hastings, “A peeress with a passion for piety”, *Sunday Telegraph* (December 14, 1997).

“Morality of itself,” as Whitefield once observed, “will never carry us to heaven.”⁶⁰ Rather, it was the Revival’s message of the new birth and justification by faith alone, trumpeted forth by Whitefield throughout his life, that brought positive changes and hope.

Whitefield’s thoughts about the new birth are well seen in a letter to Louise Sophie von der Schulenburg (1692-1773), the Countess of Delitz. The Countess was the illegitimate daughter of George I by one of his mistresses, Melusina von der Schulenburg (1667-1743), the Countess of Kendal. The Countess of Delitz was also a friend of Selina Hastings (1707-1791), the Countess of Huntingdon, and she appears to have been converted through Whitefield’s ministry at either Selina’s London apartment or Chelsea residence. Writing to the Countess of Delitz from Plymouth in February of 1749, Whitefield rejoices in her conversion.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, I trust, hath imparted a saving knowledge of his eternal Son to your Ladyship’s heart. Your letter bespeaks the language of a soul which hath tasted that the Lord is gracious, and hath been initiated into the divine life. Welcome, thrice welcome, honoured Madam, into the world of new creatures! O what a scene of happiness lies before you! Your frames, my Lady, like the moon, will wax and wane; but the Lord Jesus, on whose righteousness you solely depend, will, notwithstanding, remain your faithful friend in heaven. Your Ladyship seems to have the right point in view, to get a constant abiding witness and indwelling of the blessed Spirit of God in your heart. This the Redeemer has purchased for you. Of this he has given your Ladyship a taste; this, I am persuaded, he will yet impart so plentifully to your heart, that out of it shall flow rivers of living waters. This Jesus spake of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive. As you have, therefore, honoured Madam, received the Lord Jesus, so walk in him even by faith. Lean on your beloved, and you shall go on comfortably through this howling wilderness, till you arrive at those blissful regions,

*Where pain, and sin, and sorrow cease,
And all is calm, and joy, and peace.*⁶¹

⁶⁰ Letter CIX to Mr. Thomas Periam, November 10, 1739 (*Works*, 1:104). See also Whitefield’s remark regarding a Mrs. Palmer, who was converted under his ministry in New England: “I should think myself well rewarded had our Lord made me instrumental of turning only Dear Mrs. Palmer from a life of polite civility to real & undissembled godliness” [Letter to Isaac Royal, May 21, 1746 in John W. Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, II”, *Journal of The Presbyterian Historical Society*, 32 (1954), 169]. This second installment of a three-part article will henceforth be cited as Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters II.”

⁶¹ See below,

The new birth entails a “saving knowledge” of the Lord Jesus Christ that is far more than simple factual knowledge. It marries belief in him as the “eternal Son” of God to trust in him as one’s Redeemer from sin and its punishment. It means that one’s trust for acceptance by God is no longer focused on one’s own moral achievements but upon what God has done through Christ’s spotless life, propitiatory death and resurrection. As Whitefield wrote on another occasion to a different correspondent: “I hope you take particular care to beat down self-righteousness, and exalt the Lord Jesus alone in your hearts. I find, the only happiness is to lie down as a poor sinner at the feet of the once crucified, but now exalted Lamb of God, who died for our sins and rose again for our justification.”⁶²

Moreover, the new birth is intimately bound up with the gift of the Spirit. Those who experience the new birth are “initiated into the divine life” as the Spirit comes to dwell in their hearts. This new birth ultimately comes from God. Only he can graciously enable a person to look to Christ alone for salvation.⁶³ Finally, it is the new birth alone that sets a person on the road to heaven. In a sermon that he preached eleven months later on Ephesians 4:24, Whitefield put this final point more bluntly: “unless you are new creatures, you are in a state of damnation...I tell thee, O man; I tell thee, O woman, whoever thou art, thou art a dead man, thou art a dead woman, nay a damned man, a damned woman, without a new heart.”⁶⁴

Understandably Whitefield was critical of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, prevalent in many quarters of the Church of England and which he referred to more than once as “that Diana of the present age.”⁶⁵ His earliest printed sermon, *The Nature and Necessity of our Regeneration or New Birth in Christ Jesus* (1737), was ardent and plain in its rejection of this doctrine. It is “beyond all contradiction,” he argued, “that comparatively but few of those that are ‘born of water,’ are ‘born of the Spirit’ likewise; to use another spiritual way of speaking, many are baptized with

⁶² Letter CCCXI to Serjeant B—, July 25, 1741 (*Works*, 1:284).

⁶³ See also George Whitefield, Letter MCCCLX, July 21, 1767 (*Works*, 3:349-350).

⁶⁴ Cited Tyerman, *Life*, 2:242.

⁶⁵ *Some Remarks on a Pamphlet, entitled, The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists compar'd* (London: W. Strahan, 1749), 30. The allusion is to the riot in Ephesus over the threat that Christianity posed to the worship of the goddess Artemis or Diana (Acts 19:21-40).

water, which were never baptized with the Holy Ghost.”⁶⁶ Regeneration is not automatically dispensed when water baptism takes place. Rather, a person must experience “an inward change and purity of heart, and cohabitation of his [i.e. Christ’s] Holy Spirit.”⁶⁷ A genuine Christian is one “whose baptism is that of the heart, in the Spirit, and not merely in the water, whose praise is not of man but of God.”⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that Whitefield was not afraid of turning the substance of this criticism against the Baptist emphasis on believer’s baptism. Writing in the summer of 1741 to a Baptist correspondent in Georgia, he urged him:

I hope you will not think all is done, because you have been baptized and received into full communion. I know too many that “make a Christ of their adult baptism,” and rest in that, instead of the righteousness of the blessed Jesus. God forbid that you should so learn Christ. O my dear friend, seek after a settlement in our dear Lord, so that you may experience that life which is hid with Christ in God.⁶⁹

Whitefield has a number of ways of describing this reliance on Christ. In one letter, he talks of Christ as the believer’s “asylum.” Christ’s “Wounds and precious Blood is a Sure Asylum & Place of Refuge in every Time of Trouble,” he told a friend.⁷⁰ In another letter, he speaks of Christ alone being able to fill the deepest caverns of the human heart: “Happy they who have fled to Jesus Christ for refuge: they have a peace that the world cannot give. O that the pleasure-taking, trifling flatterer knew what it was! He would no longer feel such an empty void, such a dreadful chasm in the heart which nothing but the presence of God can fill.”⁷¹

In yet a third example he calls Christ “the believer’s *hollow square*.” This metaphor is drawn from the European battlefields of the eighteenth century, where armies would

⁶⁶ *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 544. For a recent edition of the 1737 version of this sermon, see Timothy L. Smith, *Whitefield & Wesley on the New Birth* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press of Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 65-78. See also Smith’s commentary on this sermon, *ibid.*, 63-65.

⁶⁷ *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 544.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 545.

⁶⁹ Letter CCCVIII to Mr. I— F—, July 24, 1741 (*Works*, 1:281).

⁷⁰ Letter to John Sims, November 30, 1745 [John W. Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, I”, *Journal of The Presbyterian Historical Society*, 32 (1954), 73]. See also his Letter to Mr. Straham, June 16, 1746 [John W. Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield, 1745-46, III”, *Journal of The Presbyterian Historical Society*, 32 (1954), 257]: Christ is “the Believer’s Asylum. He is the Believer’s all in all. I find Him to be so dayly [*sic*]. Having nothing, in Him I possess all things.” The first installment of this article is henceforth cited as Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters I” and the third installment as Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters III.”

⁷¹ Letter MCXC to Lady G— H—, December 15, 1757 (*Works*, 3:225).

regularly form massed squares of infantry three or four rows deep for protection and consolidated strength. If a soldier were wounded his comrades would place him in the centre of the square, where he would be a lot safer than if he were behind a skirmishing line.⁷² “If we keep close” in the square that is Christ, Whitefield continues with the thought of the metaphor, “we are impregnable. Here only I find refuge. Garrisoned in this, I can bid defiance to men and devils.”⁷³

“An insatiable thirst for travelling”: Taking the Word over land and sea

In the early years of the revival Whitefield’s itinerant, open-air preaching was often paraded as evidence of his “enthusiasm,” or fanaticism. Part of Whitefield’s response to this criticism was to go back to the example of the Apostle Paul as found in the Book of Acts. “Was he not filled,” he asked his opponents, “with a holy restless Impatience and insatiable Thirst of travelling, and undertaking dangerous Voyages for the Conversion of Infidels...?”⁷⁴ Here Whitefield lays before us the spiritual passion that spurred his own incessant travelling over land and sea: the longing to see sinners embrace Christ as Lord and Saviour and find their deepest spiritual thirst and hunger satisfied in Christ alone.

Criticism of the wide-ranging nature of his ministry also came from such ardent Evangelicals as Ebenezer Erskine (1680-1754) and his younger brother Ralph (1685-1752), founders of the Secession Church in Scotland.⁷⁵ This body of churches had seceded from the national church in the 1730s over the issue of whether or not the people of a congregation had the right to refuse a minister chosen for them by the Presbytery or heritors (i.e. landowners who possessed hereditary rights to property within a parish). The Erskines had invited Whitefield to preach solely in their churches. But Whitefield refused to be pinned down to a few locales and insisted on

⁷² John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 183-184.

⁷³ [May 27, 1755 #36](#).

⁷⁴ *Some Remarks on a Pamphlet, entitled, The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists compar’d*, 26.

⁷⁵ On the Erskines, see Alan P. F. Sell, “The Message of the Erskines for Today”, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 60 (1988), 299-316; Joel Beeke, “The Ministry of the Erskines” (Two papers presented at the 21st Annual Banner of Truth Ministers’ Conference, Grantham, Pennsylvania, May 26-27, 1999). For another perspective on Whitefield’s relationship with the Erskines, see also Kenneth B. E. Roxburgh, *Thomas Gillespie and the Origins of the Relief Church in 18th Century Scotland* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), 31-39.

preaching wherever he was given a pulpit in Scotland.⁷⁶ He told the Erskines that he was “more and more determined to go out into the highways and hedges; and that if the Pope himself would lend me his pulpit, I would gladly proclaim the righteousness of Jesus Christ therein.”⁷⁷

That Whitefield failed to understand the concern of the Erskines for the reformation of the church is evident in the sad disagreement between them. Yet, his reply well reveals his passion for the salvation of the lost wherever they might be. As he told the Scottish Lord Rae a few days after this discussion with the Erskines, the “full desire” of his soul was to “see the kingdom of God come with power.” He was, he went on, “determined to seek after and know nothing else. For besides this, all other things are but dung and dross.”⁷⁸ Still in Scotland two months later, the same spiritual desire still deeply gripped him. “I want a thousand tongues to set off the Redeemer’s praise,” he told the Earl of Leven and Melville.⁷⁹

Five years later, while the surrounding scenery is different—he is on his third preaching tour of America—this passion burned as bright as ever. “Oh that I was a flame of pure & holy fire, & had [a] thousand lives to Spend in the dear Redeemers service,” he told Joshua Gee (1698-1748), for the “sight of so many perishing Souls every day affects me much, & makes me long to go if possible from Pole to Pole, to proclaim redeeming love.”⁸⁰ “Had I a thousand souls and bodies,” he noted on another occasion, “they should be all itinerants for Jesus Christ.”⁸¹ Six years earlier he told a correspondent that because “Jesus hath of late remarkably appeared for me,”

I ought to lay myself out more and more in going about endeavouring to do good to precious and immortal souls. At present this is my settled resolution. The Redeemer seems to approve of it; for the fields in the Southern parts are white ready unto harvest, and many seem to have the hearing ear. All next October, God willing, I have devoted to poor North Carolina. It is pleasant hunting in the woods after the lost sheep for whom the Redeemer hath shed his precious blood. May the Lord of the harvest spirit up more to go forth in his strength, to compel poor sinners to come in!⁸²

⁷⁶ Letter 33 to John Willison, August 17, 1742 (*Letters*, 514-515).

⁷⁷ Letter CCCXXXIX to Thomas Noble, August 8, 1741 (*Works*, 1:308).

⁷⁸ Letter CCCXLIII, August 11, 1741 (*Works*, 1:311).

⁷⁹ Letter CCCLVI, October 2, 1741 (*Works*, 1:323).

⁸⁰ Letter to Revd. Mr. Gee, June 21, 1746 (Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters III”, 261).

⁸¹ Letter [DCCCCLXXXV] to Mr. G—, July 21, 1753 (*Works*, 3:24).

⁸² Letter DLXXXVIII to Mr. B—, May 8, 1747 (*Works*, 2:96-97).

Nothing gave Whitefield greater joy than to report to his friends that God was blessing his preaching. “The word runs and is glorified,” a line from Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 3:1), and Jesus’ statement to his disciples that the fields were “white already to harvest” (John 4:35) were frequent refrains in his correspondence. Writing from Pennsylvania in May of 1746, Whitefield informed a correspondent in Gloucestershire, England, that Christ “gives me full employ on this side the water, & causes his word to run & be glorified. ...Everywhere the fields are white ready unto harvest. I am just now going to tell lost sinners that there is yet room for them in the side of Jesus.”⁸³ Upon hearing of the marriage of one of his nephews in 1756, Whitefield observed, “Alas, what a changing world do we live in! Blessed be God for an unchangeable Christ! Amidst all, this is my comfort, his word runs and is glorified.”⁸⁴ Christ “vouchsafes daily (O amazing love) to own my feeble labours,” he told a friend in 1757. Then he added: “The word runs and is glorified.”⁸⁵ Or writing to a fellow minister in Scotland only a couple of years before his death: “In London the word runs and is glorified, and in Edinburgh, I trust, the prospect is promising. The fields are white ready unto harvest.”⁸⁶

It was important, though, for Whitefield that it was God and Jesus Christ, the ones about whom the Word chiefly spoke, that were glorified and not he himself, the preacher of the Word. A Christ-centredness permeates his correspondence. “What unsearchable riches are there in Jesus [Christ],” he told Jonathan Thompson in the summer of 1746. “What treasures of light & love are hid in Him! May this find you gazing at & admiring them, & by a living faith drawing them down into your soul.”⁸⁷ Writing around the same time to John Redman (1722-1808), an American who was studying at Guy’s Hospital in London and who later became a renowned physician in Philadelphia, he expresses a similar desire. He hoped that his letter found Redman

admiring the love & beauty of the Great and everblessed Physician of souls. Blessed be God that I hear you have His interest yet at heart. Look up to Him, my Dear Man, & you shall be kept unspotted from the world. London is a

⁸³ Letter to Mr. Adams, May 15, 1746 (Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters II”, 163).

⁸⁴ Letter MCXLII to Mrs. C—, June 21, 1756 (*Works*, 3:185).

⁸⁵ Letter MCLXIV to the Reverend Mr. B—, March 10, 1757 (*Works*, 3:202).

⁸⁶ Letter MCCCCLXXXIX to the Reverend Mr. T—, July 4, 1768 (*Works*, 3:371).

⁸⁷ Letter to Jonathan Thompson, May 11, 1746 (Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters II”, 161).

dangerous place. But Jesus is able to deliver you, & make you more than Conqueror over all temptations. May He carry you as a Witness of the power of his resurrection by Land & by sea, & after death give you a Eternal & exceeding weight of glory!⁸⁸

The following year he was moved to exclaim in a letter he wrote while in New York:

Christ is a good Master: he is worthy of all our time, and of everything that we possess. Is not one heart too little for him? And yet he requires no more. Amazing love! I am lost when I think of it. I can only say, Lord, I adore and worship!⁸⁹

His ideal in this regard is found in some lines he wrote to William Pepperell (1696-1759), the commander of the New England militia that captured the fortress of Louisbourg in 1745: “Glory be to our God for what He had done for you & by you, & above all, for enabling you like a pure Crystall [*sic*] to transmitt [*sic*] all the honour He has been pleased to pour upon you, back again to the source from whence it first sprang.”⁹⁰

In his correspondence, though, he frequently admitted to wrestling with pride and indwelling sin. “It is difficult,” he observed early on in his ministry, “to go through the fiery trial of popularity and applause untainted.”⁹¹ This observation came from bitter experience. “I am a proud, imperious, sinful worm,” he wrote to Gabriel Harris in 1737.⁹² Four years later, we find the same self-evaluation: “I am a poor unworthy sinner, and yet, (O sovereign grace!) the Lord works by me day by day.”⁹³ In 1755 he cried out in one letter,

O this self-love, this self-will! It is the devil of devils. Lord Jesus, may thy blessed Spirit purge it out of all our hearts! But O how must the divine Paraclete sit as a refiner’s fire upon the heart, in order to bring this about! Few choose such fiery purgations, and therefore so few make the progress that might justly be expected of them in the divine life. Make me, O God, willing to

⁸⁸ Letter to John Redman, May 28, 1746 (Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters II”, 174-175).

⁸⁹ Letter DCX to Mr. A–, August 27, 1747 (*Works*, 2:117).

⁹⁰ Letter to William Pepperell, May 28, 1746 (Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters II”, 172). As he wrote three years later: “Like a pure chrysal [*sic*], I would transmit all the glory he is pleased to pour upon me, and never claim as my own, what is his sole property” [Letter DCCXXXVI to Lady G–, February 22, 1749 (*Works*, 2:234)].

⁹¹ Letter LXI, August 7, 1739 (*Works*, 1:60).

⁹² Letter XXIX, December 23, 1737 (*Works*, 1:32).

⁹³ Letter CCLXXVIII to Mr. S–, May 5, 1741 (*Works*, 1:261).

be made, willing to be, to do, or suffer what thou pleasest, and then—what then?—this foolish fluttering heart will sweetly be moulded into the divine image.⁹⁴

In the year this text was written Protestant Britain was on the brink of war with Catholic France—a war that would last until 1763 and would become known as the Seven Years’ War—and there was widespread fear of Roman Catholic domination if this war should be lost. Whitefield’s main concerns, however, were elsewhere. He could pray for a British victory,⁹⁵ but he was convinced that the believer’s chief danger and fiercest warfare was with indwelling sin. “O that this time of outward danger,” he wrote towards the end of autumn, 1755, “may be sanctified to the exciting of greater zeal against our inward spiritual enemies! For after all, the man of sin in our own hearts, is the greatest foe the real Christian hath to fear.”⁹⁶

Despite the intensity of this inner struggle, however, Whitefield could sincerely declare: “Let my name be forgotten, let me be trodden under the feet of all men, if Jesus may thereby be glorified.”⁹⁷ Nor did this sense of his own sinfulness keep Whitefield silent. In fact, it had the opposite effect. As he told a friend in 1742:

It is good to see ourselves poor, and exceeding vile; but if that sight and feeling prevent our looking up to, and exerting ourselves for our dear Saviour, it becomes criminal, and robs the soul of much comfort. I can speak this by dear-bought experience. How often have I been kept from speaking and acting for God, by a sight of my own unworthiness; but now I see that the more unworthy I am, the more fit to work for Jesus, because he will get much glory in working by such mean instruments; and the more he has for given me, the more I ought to love and serve him. Fired with a sense of his unspeakable loving-kindness, I dare to go out and tell poor sinners that a lamb was slain for them; and that he will have mercy on sinners as such, of whom indeed I am chief.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Letter MCII to Lady Huntingdon, September 24, 1755 (*Works*, 3:144).

⁹⁵ Witness a letter he wrote while in Lisbon in the spring of 1754. He thanked God “for the great wonder of the reformation” and “also for that glorious deliverance wrought out for us a few years past.” The latter is a reference to the defeat of Charles Edward Stuart (1720-1788), also known as the Young Pretender or Bonnie Prince Charlie, at the Battle of Culloden (1746). The prince had attempted to overthrow the Protestant George II and restore the Roman Catholic dynasty of the Stuarts to the throne of England [Letter MXXXVI to Mr.—, April 3, 1754 (*Works*, 3:79)].

⁹⁶ Letter MCVIII to the Honourable A— O—, November 8, 1755 (*Works*, 3:149).

⁹⁷ Letter DCXCVIII to the Reverend Mr. E—, October 12, 1748 (*Works*, 2:193). See also Letter CCCCLXI to Edmund Jones, October 6, 1742 (*Works*, 1:446): “I care not if the name of George Whitefield be banished out of the world, so that Jesus be exalted in it. Glory be to his great name...” For further examples, see Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:518-519.

⁹⁸ See below, ... Dec 24, 1742.

Finally, it should be noted that Whitefield's deep devotion to the person of Jesus Christ stood in vivid contrast to the view of God promoted, consciously or unconsciously, by the moralistic preaching in many quarters of the Anglican church of his day. Although the latter liked to dwell on the universal benevolence of God, his lack of involvement with men and women in the hurly-burly of history made him seem distant and very impersonal.

Laying "the soul lower at the foot of Jesus": A Calvinistic spirituality

It is not infrequently asserted that Whitefield did not have a truly lucid understanding of Calvinism as a body of divinity.⁹⁹ As we have seen, he was an evangelist extraordinaire, an itinerant preacher of the Word first and foremost. He certainly never had the time to write out his own systematic treatise on Calvinism. Yet, he was well grounded in the essentials of this theological perspective, as a close reading of both his letters and his sermons reveals. As John Lewis Gilmore has noted of both his sermons and letters, Whitefield was well able to "give a restatement of the classic doctrines of the Reformation in the simplest, most salient language, indicating a digestion of the great doctrines, thoroughly integrated into his thought processes."¹⁰⁰

Very early on in his ministry he identified himself as an heir of the theology of the Reformers and the Puritans. Theirs was a theology that revelled in what Iain Murray has called "the great related chain of truths revealed in the New Testament—the Father's electing love, Christ's substitutionary death on behalf of those whom the Father had given him, and the Spirit's infallible work in bringing to salvation those for whom it was appointed."¹⁰¹ Writing, for instance, from Philadelphia in 1739 during his first American tour, Whitefield declared:

Oh the excellency of the doctrine of election, and of the saints final perseverance, to those who are truly sealed by the Spirit of promise! I am

⁹⁹ Gilbert Thomas, *William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1935), 180; Stuart C. Henry, *George Whitefield: Wayfaring Witness* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 95-114.

¹⁰⁰ "Preparation: the Power of Whitefield's Ministry", 23. For a similar judgement, see Packer, "the Spirit and the Word", 188-189.

¹⁰¹ "Prefatory Note", 564.

persuaded, till a man comes to believe and feel these important truths, he cannot come out of himself; but when convicted of these, and assured of the application of them to his own heart, he then walks by faith indeed, not in himself, but in the Son of God, who died and gave himself for him. Love, not fear, constrains him to obedience.¹⁰²

The same day he wrote to another correspondent that “election, free grace, free justification without any regard to works foreseen” are “the truths of God” that “agree with the written word, and the experiences of the all the saints in all ages.”¹⁰³ During his ministry he freely admitted that his theological convictions were “Calvinistical principles,”¹⁰⁴ argued that “the great Doctrines of the Reformation” were what those involved in the Evangelical Revival chiefly sought to propagate,¹⁰⁵ hoped that he would adhere to “the doctrines of grace” as found in the Anglican *Thirty-nine Articles* and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* all of his life,¹⁰⁶ openly defended those whom he called “the good old Puritans and free-grace Dissenters,”¹⁰⁷ and was convinced that “useful puritanical books” were vital reading for theological students.¹⁰⁸ Whitefield was convinced that if it had not been for the Puritans and those whom he calls “their successors, the free-grace Dissenters,” England would have become utterly destitute of vital Christianity and so “void of any spiritual aid in spiritual distresses.”¹⁰⁹

Illustrative of his love of Puritan literature is the following passage, a recommendation of the works of the Puritan evangelist John Bunyan (1628-1688), written towards the end of his life.

Ministers never write or preach so well as under the cross: the Spirit of Christ and of glory then rests upon them. It was this, no doubt, that made the Puritans of the last century such burning and shining lights. When cast out by the black Bartholomew act and driven from their respective charges to preach in barns and fields, in the highways and hedges, they in an especial manner

¹⁰² Letter CVI to John Hutton, November 10, 1739 (*Works*, 1:101).

¹⁰³ Letter CXIII to the Rev. Mr. S—, November 10, 1739 (*Works*, 1:108).

¹⁰⁴ Letter CCCCLVI to Mr. F—, September 22, 1742 (*Works*, 1:439).

¹⁰⁵ *Some Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 43-44.

¹⁰⁶ Letter 33 to John Willison, August 17, 1742 (*Letters*, 515).

¹⁰⁷ Letter MMCCLXXX to Mr. S—, March 13, 1763 (*Works*, 3:288). For the same description of the Puritans, also see *The Seed of the Woman, and the Seed of the Serpent (Sermons on Important Subjects, 44)*; *Spiritual Baptism (Sermons on Important Subjects, 730)*; *Observations on Some Fatal Mistakes* (3rd ed.; London, 1763), 21.

¹⁰⁸ Letter MCCCIV to Mr. S— S—, March 10, 1764 (*Works*, 3:307).

¹⁰⁹ *Observations on Some Fatal Mistakes*, 21-22.

wrote and preached as men having authority. Though dead, by their writings, they yet speak; a peculiar unction attends them to this very hour; and for these thirty years past I have remarked, that the more true and vital religion hath revived, either at home or abroad, the more the good old Puritanical writings, or authors of a like stamp, who lived and died in the communion of the Church of England, have been called for.¹¹⁰

The final sentence in this text is particularly noteworthy, for it draws an explicit link between the Puritans and the Evangelical Revival of Whitefield's own day.¹¹¹ Moreover, this recommendation is rooted, as Whitefield notes, in thirty years of appreciative reading of the works of the Puritans.

Like his Puritan predecessors Whitefield valued the written word.¹¹² And despite the busyness of his life, he found time to read and digest not only Bunyan's writings, but also such Puritan works as *Human Nature in Its Four-fold State* by Thomas Boston (1677-1732),¹¹³ Thomas Goodwin's commentary on various passages from Paul's letter to the Ephesians,¹¹⁴ *The Christian in Complete Armour* by William Gurnall (1617-1679),¹¹⁵ the annotations on the Scriptures by Samuel Clarke (1626-1701),¹¹⁶ and some of the works of John Owen (1616-1683).¹¹⁷ He also read and warmly recommended other Puritan divines, men like John Flavel (c.1630-1691),¹¹⁸ John Howe (1630-1706),¹¹⁹ Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729),¹²⁰ Thomas Halyburton (1674-1712),¹²¹ and was familiar with the life of Philip Henry (1631-1696).¹²²

¹¹⁰ "Recommendatory Preface" in *The Works of that eminent servant of Christ, John Bunyan* (Philadelphia: John Ball, 1850), 1:v. This passage can also be found in Tyerman, *George Whitefield*, 2:508.

¹¹¹ Lambert, "Pedlar in Divinity", 145.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 142-146.

¹¹³ Letter DCCXI to the Rev. Mr. L.—, November 19, 1748 (*Works*, 2:206); Letter CXXXVIII to Ralph Erskine (*Works*, 1:128-129). Whitefield told Erskine that Boston's book had "under God been of much service to my soul." For another reference to Boston, see *The Seed of the Woman, and the Seed of the Serpent* (*Sermons on Important Subjects*, 42), where he calls Boston "an excellent Scots divine."

¹¹⁴ "Recommendatory Preface" (*Works of...John Bunyan*, 1:v). For another reference to Goodwin, see *Marks of a True Conversion* (*Sermons on Important Subjects*, 274).

¹¹⁵ Letter DCCLXXXIX to Mr. L.—, December 3, 1749 (*Works*, 2:295).

¹¹⁶ Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:481.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 493; *Walking with God* (*Sermons on Important Subjects*, 48); *Observations on Some Fatal Mistakes*, 21.

¹¹⁸ Letter to John Wesley, August 9, 1740 (in Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:564); Letter DCCXI to the Rev. Mr. L.—, November 19, 1748 (*Works*, 2:206). Also see Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:144; *Marks of a True Conversion* (*Sermons on Important Subjects*, 274).

¹¹⁹ *Observations on Some Fatal Mistakes*, 21.

¹²⁰ *The Lord our Righteousness* (*Sermons on Important Subjects*, 193); *The Good Shepherd—A Farewell Sermon* (*Sermons on Important Subjects*, 782).

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

A regular companion from the very beginning of his ministry to its end was Matthew Henry's *Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, a work that "draws on a century of Puritan theology, Bible study and homiletics."¹²³ Henry, he said, was his "favourite commentator."¹²⁴ David Crump, in a fine study of eleven of Whitefield's sermons, notes the way in which Puritanism, "not only in its theology but also in its method of evangelism," shaped Whitefield's preaching. And he suggests that a reading of evangelistic literature by Puritan preachers like Joseph Alleine (1634-1668) and Richard Baxter (1615-1691) "will quickly show the influences which had molded Whitefield's evangelistic method."¹²⁵ Martyn Lloyd-Jones thus puts it well when he succinctly states that Whitefield "lived in the Puritans and their writings."¹²⁶

There is little doubt that, in part, Whitefield learned his Calvinism from his reading of the Puritans.¹²⁷ But his Calvinism also came to him through a close reading of the Word of God. As he once declared publicly, Calvinism is "Scriptural truth."¹²⁸ Thus, he was confident that his friend James Hervey (1714-1758) could read Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians and find there plainly written the doctrines of justification by faith alone and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the ungodly.¹²⁹

Morover, the doctrines of grace ran true to his Christian experience.¹³⁰ Whitefield knew from his own experience and that of countless others he counselled that unless God sovereignly intervenes in a person's life, that person will never willingly leave the

¹²² Letter MCXIX to the Bishop of B—, February 16, 1756 (*Works*, 3:163).

¹²³ Packer, "The Spirit with the Word", 174. On Whitefield's use of Henry, see David Crump, "The Preaching of George Whitefield and His Use of Matthew Henry's *Commentary*", *Crux*, 25, No.3 (September 1989), 19-28. Crump demonstrates that while "Henry's *Commentary* played a significant role in shaping Whitefield's understanding of the passages upon which he preached," the evangelist was "no slavish plagiarizer of Henry." His use of the Puritan *Commentary* was "as he deemed it helpful throughout his preaching career" (*ibid.*, 23). From this study Crump generalizes: "Henry's indepth, practical, Calvinistic and biblical exposition served as the educational backdrop for almost every one of Whitefield's sermons" (*ibid.*, 24).

¹²⁴ *The Temptation of Christ (Sermons on Important Subjects)*, 220

¹²⁵ "Preaching of George Whitefield", 24. For Whitefield's appreciation of Baxter's pastoral labours, see Letter DXLIV to Mr. J— S—, December 31, 1743 (*Works*, 2:47-48).

¹²⁶ "John Calvin and George Whitefield" in *Able Ministers of the New Testament* ([London]: The Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, 1964), 95. Clarkson fails to develop Whitefield's indebtedness to the Puritans in his discussion of the evangelist's Calvinism, *George Whitefield and Welsh Calvinistic Methodism*, 21-32.

¹²⁷ Murray, "Prefatory Note", 564; Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:404-405; Packer, "The Spirit with the Word", 178-179.

¹²⁸ *The Beloved of God (Sermons on Important Subjects)*, 680). See also Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:406.

¹²⁹ Letter C, November 10, 1739 (*Works*, 1:95).

¹³⁰ Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 1:405-406.

thralldom of sin and its tawdry pleasures for the heart-ravishing joys of knowing God in Christ. Man has “a free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven, till God worketh in him to will and to do after his good pleasure.”¹³¹ Then it is only the sovereign work of God through the Spirit of Christ that can give the believer spiritual victory over indwelling sin and the attacks of the devil. As he said in an early letter:

The doctrines of our election, and free justification in Christ Jesus, are daily more and more pressed upon my heart. They fill my soul with a holy fire, and afford me great confidence in God my Saviour. Surely I am safe, because put into his almighty arms. Though I may fall, yet I shall not utterly be cast away. The Spirit of the Lord Jesus will hold, and uphold me.¹³²

Biblical truth brings “new Love” to Christ and “lays the soul lower at the foot of Jesus.”¹³³ The truth of Calvinist doctrine was found in the fact that it did this very thing the best. Writing from Philadelphia on his first visit to the city in 1739, Whitefield observed that it was “the doctrines of the Reformation” that did the most to “debase man and exalt the Lord Jesus. ...All others leave freewill in man, and make him, in part at least, a Saviour to himself.”¹³⁴ When the Connecticut carpenter Nathan Cole (1711-1783) heard Whitefield preach on what was for Cole an unforgettable day—October 23, 1740—he came under deep conviction of his sinfulness as he heard Whitefield outline the spiritual implications of some aspects of Calvinistic truth. “My old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me,” Cole later wrote. “I was convinced,” he continued, “of the doctrine of Election: and went right to quarrelling with God about it; because that all I could do would not save me; and he had decreed from Eternity who should be saved and who not.”¹³⁵ After two years of spiritual turmoil Cole experienced the new birth and could cry out Whitefield-like: “I thought I could die a thousand deaths for Christ, I thought I could have been trodden under foot of man, be mocked or any thing for Christ—Glory be to God.”¹³⁶

¹³¹ Letter XCIV to the Rev. Mr. P—, November 10, 1739 (*Works*, 1:90).

¹³² Letter LXXXII, November 10, 1739 (*Works*, 1:79).

¹³³ Letter to Samuel Church, May 11, 1746 (Christie, “Newly Discovered Letters II”, 160).

¹³⁴ Letter XCIV to the Rev. Mr. P—, November 10, 1739 (*Works*, I, 89).

¹³⁵ “The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole” [in Richard L. Bushman, ed., *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745* (1970 ed.; repr. Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1989), 68].

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* (Bushman, ed., *Great Awakening*, 71).

Little wonder then that we find Whitefield's correspondence filled with such doxological exclamations as "O free grace! Sovereign, electing, distinguishing love!"¹³⁷ Reformed theology was utterly central not only to Whitefield's personal experience and his preaching, but also to his understanding of revival and biblical spirituality.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Letter DCXV to Mrs. S—, September 6, 1747 (*Works*, II, 120).

¹³⁸ *Pace* Harry S. Stout, "George Whitefield in Three Countries" in Noll, Bebbington and Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism*, 68-69.

Conclusion

This paper, lengthy as it is, has not touched upon certain aspects of Whitefield's piety—his high estimation of the Lord's Supper, for instance.¹³⁹ Hopefully enough has been provided, though, to verify J. I. Packer's observation that to drink deeply from the well of Whitefield's spirituality is "one of life's richest blessings."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ See, for example, his *Journals*, 541.

¹⁴⁰ "Great George", *Christianity Today*, 30, No. 13 (September 19, 1986), 12.