

THE PLACE OF GEORGE WHITFIELD IN THE GREAT AWAKENING

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by

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## THE PLACE OF GEORGE WHITFIELD IN THE GREAT AWAKENING

The Great Awakening of 1740 was by no means confined to that year though it was certainly the year when the greatest amount of revival activity was taking place in America. While many scholars limit the Great Awakening geographically to the American colonies, some scholars argue that the Great Awakening was a transatlantic experience.<sup>1</sup> Many local revivals preceded the Great Awakening, of which, the most famous is probably the revival at Northampton in 1734 under the ministry of Jonathan Edwards. Other evangelical revivals in the 1730's were led by Theodorus Jacobus Freylinghausen in New Jersey and Gilbert Tennent in Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup> Though George Whitefield may not have been the originator of the Great Awakening, he was certainly the catalyst for its expansion as Heimert and Miller suggest.<sup>3</sup>

### **The State of Religion Before the Great Awakening**

As England expanded its maritime trade, its people obtained worldly prosperity but lost their appetite for religion. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the religion

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<sup>1</sup>Susan O'Brien, "The Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network, 1735–1755," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 811–832. O'Brien argues in support of the transatlantic nature of the Great Awakening and references many works to support her argument.

<sup>2</sup>David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm and the Great Awakening* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 4.

<sup>3</sup>Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, with a foreword by Leonard W. Levy and Alfred Young (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), xxiv–xxv. The editors note that "the path of the revival closely followed [Whitefield's] tour of the colonies in 1739–1740" notwithstanding the contributions of a multitude of American clergymen.

of most people had been replaced “with an unsatisfying sobriety, a cold formality, and a dull, theological pedantry.”<sup>4</sup> The rise in rationalism and scientific inquiry led to a “rationalizing Arminianism that disturbed no man’s consciences and alarmed no man’s fears.”<sup>5</sup> This “rationalizing Arminianism” or Semi-Pelagianism deemphasized the emotional and experiential components of religion and affirmed the primacy of the will, the power of reason, and the liberty of conscience.<sup>6</sup> While there was no clear expression of Arminianism to be found in the colonies, some hints of it could be seen discerned from the subjects of some sermons as well as the subjects omitted from sermons.<sup>7</sup> Commissary Garden seemed to affirm Arminianism in a sermon against the regeneration teaching of revivalists who claimed that the person’s role is passive.<sup>8</sup>

Before beginning his preaching ministry in England, Whitefield was ordained in the Church of England. At the time of his ordination, the Church of England was filled with lukewarm Christians due in part to the accepted practice of infant baptism and the liberal approach to confirmation.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the practice of the Church of England,

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., v.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (Boston: Charles Tappan, 1845), 261.

<sup>6</sup>E. H. Plumptre. “Church Parties, Past, Present, and Future,” *The Contemporary Review* 7 (1868): 322.

<sup>7</sup>Heimert and Miller, ed., *The Great Awakening*, xx.

<sup>8</sup>Alexander Garden, “Two Sermons on Regeneration,” in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, eds. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 51.

<sup>9</sup>Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, 2. Tracy points out that bishops, though able to deny confirmation, almost always confirmed people since they could be prosecuted in the civil courts and be forced to give evidence of scandalism in the life of the person who had sought confirmation. He also notes that those seeking appointment to military office had to be confirmed; therefore, many officers would receive confirmation from the Church and then never participate in it from that point forward.

the New England Puritans before the mid-seventeenth century were intent on keeping the Church holy. In the Cambridge Platform of 1648, they agreed that Christians are those who “have not only attained the knowledge of the principles of religion . . . but also do together with the profession of their faith and repentance, walk in blameless obedience to the word.”<sup>10</sup> However, they also believed that those who had been baptized as infants but had not been confirmed as adults were “in a more hopeful way of attaining regenerating grace.”<sup>11</sup>

This practice led to the common problem of children being baptized who never followed through with confirmation when they matured. Since two classes of church membership had now formed, the Half-Way Covenant was introduced to allow for the official creation of a second class of members. According to Gaustad, the Half-Way Covenant allowed church members who were outwardly immoral to have their children baptized even when they themselves were not regenerate.<sup>12</sup> This practice ultimately led to a breakdown in church discipline since the standard for membership was so low; furthermore, it was sure to lead the masses to believe that their Church membership guaranteed their salvation.

According to Hurst, Rev. Solomon Stoddard of Northampton published a sermon defending the popular belief that “the Lord’s Supper was a means of

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<sup>10</sup>New England Synod of Elders and Messengers of the Churches, “The Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline, Gathered Out of the Word of God, and Agreed Upon by the Elders and Messengers of the Churches Assembled in Synod, 1648,” in *The Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline Adopted in 1648, and the Confession of faith Adopted in 1680* (Boston: Perkins & Whipple, 1850), 52.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>12</sup>Edwin S. Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 9.

regeneration.”<sup>13</sup> Tracy argues that this low view of salvation led to the popular misconception that the unconverted may “commence and carry on a series of works in preparatory to conversion” which ultimately led to an unconverted ministry.<sup>14</sup> When Whitefield came to New England, he encountered a church that was largely in decline in part due to the Half-Way Covenant from the Synod of 1662 and the low priority placed on regeneration for church membership which was gradually embraced by many churches.<sup>15</sup>

In the middle colonies, Whitefield encountered a situation much like that in Northampton due in large part to the ministry of the Tennents. In his journal, he acknowledged the character of the ministers in this part of the country and remarked that “the work of conversion has not been carried on with so much power in any part of America.”<sup>16</sup> Since the middle colonies had comparatively little Anglican influence, Whitefield had little resistance among the many dissenting groups since he “affirmed the legitimacy of their denomination.”<sup>17</sup>

In the southern colonies, Whitefield came in contact with a populace that was mostly nominal members of the Anglican Church with little or no desire for a deeper

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<sup>13</sup>John F. Hurst, *Short History of the Christian Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 481.

<sup>14</sup>Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, 7.

<sup>15</sup>Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England*, 11–12.

<sup>16</sup>George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 386.

<sup>17</sup>Jerome D. Mahaffey, *Preaching Politics: The Religious Rhetoric of George Whitefield and the Founding of a New Nation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 52.

religious experience.<sup>18</sup> Bonomi notes that local Anglican clergy suffered a bad reputation among the colonists due in a large part to “noisy disputes between certain ministers and a few powerful planters.”<sup>19</sup> Despite this popularly held low view of the Anglican clergy, Whitefield still found little opportunity for his ministry in the southern colonies due to the strong hold on the region by the Anglicans.<sup>20</sup>

### **Biographical Sketch**

George Whitefield was born on December 16, 1714 in Gloucester, England.<sup>21</sup> His mother ran an inn since his father passed away when Whitefield was only two years old.<sup>22</sup> As a child, Whitefield received some education and distinguished himself “by his speeches and dramatic performances.”<sup>23</sup> After spending some time working at the inn, Whitefield at the encouragement of his mother obtained a servitor’s position at Oxford when he was eighteen.<sup>24</sup>

At Oxford, Whitefield became acquainted with the Wesleys and the Methodists. At this time, he set out to find comfort for his soul by taking their self-denying practices to such an extreme that John Wesley advised him to start praying aloud, visiting the poor and imprisoned, keeping a diary, and renewing fellowship with

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<sup>18</sup>Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 42.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>20</sup>Hurst, *Short History*, 472.

<sup>21</sup>Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, 38.

<sup>22</sup>Whitefield, *George Whitefield’s Journals*, 37.

<sup>23</sup>Tracy, *Great Awakening*, 38.

<sup>24</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 40–44.

his friends again.<sup>25</sup> Even though he took Wesley's advice, he soon became desperately ill due to his other self-denying activities until at last sickness forced him to look for the help of the Lord.<sup>26</sup> Whitefield's salvation did not come from the works of the flesh that he had so faithfully practiced among the Methodists; rather, it resulted from his simple plea to the Lord, "I thirst."<sup>27</sup> After his ordination into the Anglican Church and a short ministry in England, he set sail for the first of seven times to America. Before he departed, he turned over the control of his ministries in England to John Wesley in 1739.<sup>28</sup> Whitefield finally rested from his exhausting preaching tours on September 30, 1770 when he died from his long bout with asthma.<sup>29</sup>

### **Transatlantic Ministry**

Whitefield's transatlantic ministry included Scotland, Wales, England, and the American colonies. During his many evangelistic crusades, many thousands were converted.<sup>30</sup> His sermons brought the message of the reformers back into focus among the Anglicans while also bringing unity among the Congregationalists, Scottish Presbyterians, American Methodists, Baptists, and various other dissenting churches. His

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 55–56.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 56–57.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>28</sup>Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1983), 1:389.

<sup>29</sup>Edwin N. Hardy, *George Whitefield: The Matchless Soul Winner* (New York: American Tract Society, 1938), 242.

<sup>30</sup>J. C. Ryle, "George Whitefield and His Ministry," in *Select Sermons of George Whitefield, M.A.: Formerly of Pembroke College, Oxford and Chaplain to the Rt. Hon. The Countess of Huntington*, ed. J. C. Ryle and R. Elliot (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 22.



non-denominational approach to ministry was influenced by his desire for “the partition-wall [to be] broken down and [that everyone] with one heart and one mind could glorify [their] common Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Franklin notes, “The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous.”<sup>32</sup>

Besides crossing religious barriers, Whitefield traversed socioeconomic barriers. When he was barred from preaching in the churches of England, he starting his practice of field preaching by addressing the Kingswood colliers on February 17, 1739.<sup>33</sup> The colliers were poor mine workers who had no local access to schools and churches and had a reputation for violence.<sup>34</sup> When Whitefield became a chaplain to a rich Methodist convert, Lady Huntington, he took the opportunity, through that relationship, to preach to gospel to the elite of the British society.<sup>35</sup>

Sarah Pierrepont Edwards in a letter to her brother on October 24, 1740 remarked that Whitefield’s audience included people from every segment of society.<sup>36</sup> Whitefield’s audience in America included not only European colonists from all socioeconomic classes but also African American slaves. He appealed to them directly in his

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<sup>31</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 347.

<sup>32</sup>Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: American Book, 1896), 119.

<sup>33</sup>Joseph B. Wakeley, *The Prince of Pulpit Orators: a Portraiture of Rev. George Whitefield, M.A.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Carolton & Lanahan, 1871), 93.

<sup>34</sup>Richard Hannula, *Trial and Triumph: Stories from Church History* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon, 1999), 195.

<sup>35</sup>Florence A. M. Rathborne, ed., *Letters from Lady Jane Coke to Her Friend, Mrs. Eyre at Derby, 1747–1758* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1899), 16–17.

<sup>36</sup>Luke Tyerman, *The Life of George Whitefield, B.A., of Pembroke College, Oxford* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876; reprint, Azle, TX: Needs of the Times, 1995), 1: 428.

sermon, “The Lord Our Righteousness,” and notes that Jesus died for them so that they may have salvation as well.<sup>37</sup> In his journals, he spoke of the importance of evangelizing the slaves, of their equality before God, and of their willingness to give to the Bethesda ministry.<sup>38</sup> Ironically, Whitefield also endorsed slavery and even owned some slaves himself.<sup>39</sup> His ministry to blacks encountered some resistance from slave owners in the South who feared that slaves who converted to Christianity may rise up in rebellion.<sup>40</sup> In a letter to the southern colonies, Whitefield openly rebuked slave owners who mistreat their slaves and deny them the opportunity to hear the gospel.<sup>41</sup>

### **Philanthropy**

During the closing remarks of most of his sermons, Whitefield would often take up a collection for some worthy cause. He frequently would ask for support for the Bethesda orphanage. He also took up collections for Harvard College, the College of New Jersey, and Moore’s Indian Charity School among other organizations.<sup>42</sup>

Whitefield’s transatlantic preaching tours and his relationship with wealthy

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<sup>37</sup>George Whitefield, “The Lord Our Righteousness,” in *Select Sermons of George Whitefield, M.A.: Formerly of Pembroke College, Oxford and Chaplain to the Rt. Hon. The Countess of Huntington*, ed. J. C. Ryle and R. Elliot (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 84.

<sup>38</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 420–422.

<sup>39</sup>Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 100–101.

<sup>40</sup>Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 119.

<sup>41</sup>George Whitefield, “A Letter to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South-Carolina,” in vol. 4 of *The Works of Reverend George Whitefield, M. A.* (London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly; and Messrs. Kincaid and Bell, at Edinburgh, 1771), 35–41.

<sup>42</sup>William W. Sweet, *Revivalism in America: Its Origin, Growth, and Decline* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 33–34.

philanthropists such as Lady Huntington made him a bridge between many charitable causes and the hearts of those willing to support the various causes.

### **Integrity**

Whitefield's character, in its developmental stage, can be seen in his earnest quest for God through extreme self-denial during his time at Oxford. In a sermon reflecting on his decision to receive holy orders in the Anglican Church, Whitefield spoke of the difficulty he faced in making so great a decision.<sup>43</sup> His hesitation shows that he had a very high view of ministry to which he was called. His integrity is also seen in his response to questions regarding his dealings with the donations taken up for Bethesda when he proved beyond all doubt the Godly character that he possessed by having an official audit performed.<sup>44</sup> Franklin himself testified that he “never had the least suspicion of his integrity;” in his opinion, Whitefield “was in all his conduct a perfectly *honest man*.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Itinerant Ministry**

The itinerant ministry of field preachers became a staple in the Great Awakening and the revivals that followed. Whitefield seems to be the first Methodist minister and the first ordained member of the Anglican Church to adopt the practice of

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<sup>43</sup>George Whitefield, “The Good Shepherd,” in *Eighteen sermons preached by the late Rev. George Whitefield, A.M.: Taken Verbatim in Short-hand and Transcribed by Joseph Gurney*, rev. A. Gifford (New York: John Tiebout, 1809), 311–312. In the words of Whitefield, “I never prayed against any corruption I had in my life, so much as I did against going into holy orders...I have prayed a thousand times till the sweat has dropped from my face like rain, that God of His infinite mercy, would not let me enter the Church before he called me to, and thrust me forth in his work.”

<sup>44</sup>Tyerman, *The Life of George Whitefield*, 2:154.

<sup>45</sup>Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 121–122.

preaching outside the walls of the church. His commitment to the itinerant ministry is evident in a reply to Ralph Erskine's invitation for him to join the Associate Presbytery of Scotland: "I come only as an occasional preacher, to preach the simple gospel, to all who are willing to hear me, of whatever denomination . . . My business seems to be to evangelize, —to be a Presbyterian at large."<sup>46</sup>

Whitefield's path to becoming a field preacher was likely influenced by his first trip to Georgia where he encountered many dissenting churches and his friendship with Howell Harris, an itinerant evangelist in Wales.<sup>47</sup> While among these dissenters, Smith notes that Whitefield preached in their churches and even in the outdoors.<sup>48</sup> When the pulpits of England were closed to him upon his return, he took the gospel to the marketplace. Stout notes that Whitefield would often locate himself in the markets and theaters, time his meeting to coincide with activities like the horse races, and hold the meetings at times that did not clash with regular church worship services.<sup>49</sup>

### **Publications**

While Whitefield enjoyed great popularity in regard to his oratory, his writings often led to controversy and condemnation from those that opposed him. While Franklin felt Whitefield's publications only injured his reputation, Gledstone argues that Whitefield was not concerned about his legacy; rather, he wished to provide a written

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<sup>46</sup>Tyerman, *The Life of George Whitefield*, 1:505.

<sup>47</sup>Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 67.

<sup>48</sup>Smith, "George Whitefield and the Wesleyan Witness," 14.

<sup>49</sup>Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 85.

version of his sermons to reach the masses and desired to address his critics.<sup>50</sup> His writing and printing from time to time gave great advantage to his enemies. According to Franklin, Whitefield's "[u]nguarded expressions and even erroneous opinions, delivered in preaching, might have been afterward explained or qualified by supposing others that might have accompanied them, or they might have denied; but *litera scripta manet*."<sup>51</sup> His publications, however, stirred the public's interest and imagination and caused the crowds that came to hear him to swell in numbers. Lambert states that these publications helped make participation in the revival "an intercolonial" experience where everyone could participate in Whitefield's ministry if only through the printed sermons, journals, letters, and newspaper articles.<sup>52</sup>

### **Extemporaneous Ministry**

Not only did Whitefield begin his itinerant ministry among the colliers, he also began his practice of extemporaneous preaching.<sup>53</sup> Whitefield had already begun the practice of extempore preaching sometime before he was ordained but after his first trip to America.<sup>54</sup> In his journal, Whitefield remarked the large-scale practice of reading sermons was a sign that "the old spirit of preaching" had been lost.<sup>55</sup> From his other

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<sup>50</sup>James P. Gledstone, *The Life and Travels of George Whitefield, M.A.* (London: Spottiswoode, 1871), 66–67.

<sup>51</sup>Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 123.

<sup>52</sup>Frank Lambert, "The Great Awakening as Artifact: George Whitefield and the Construction of Intercolonial Revival, 1739–1745," *Church History* 60 (1991): 224.

<sup>53</sup>Gledstone, *The Life and Travels of George Whitefield*, 77.

<sup>54</sup>John R. Andrews, *George Whitefield: A Light Rising in Obscurity* (London: Morgan and Chase, 1864), 42–43.

<sup>55</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 483.

remarks, one can discern that Whitefield believed extemporaneous preaching to be rooted historically in the practice of earlier Christians.<sup>56</sup> Holyoke (President of Harvard College), in his condemnation of Whitefield, criticized Whitefield's extemporaneous style by saying that his sermons were shallow, rash, and heretical.<sup>57</sup> Whitefield responded that his extempore preaching was supported by his belief in the Spirit of God and his constant study and meditation.<sup>58</sup>

### Sermon Style

Gaustad notes that many sermons were read from manuscript in the eighteenth century.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, Whitefield not only practiced extemporaneous preaching but he also encouraged others to follow his lead.<sup>60</sup> While not condemning those preachers who used notes, he did call the practice of preaching from notes “a symptom of the decay of religion.”<sup>61</sup> In a letter to her brother, Sarah Pierrepont Edwards described her impression of Whitefield:

He makes less of the doctrines 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-

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Edward Holyoke, “The Testimony of Harvard College Against George Whitefield,” in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, eds. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 350–1. Holyoke specifically accused Whitefield of antinomianism.

<sup>58</sup>George Whitefield, “A Letter to the Reverend the President, and Professors, Tutors, and Hebrew Instructor, of Harvard-College in Cambridge: In Answer to a Testimony Published by Them Against the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield and His Conduct,” in vol. 4 of *The Works of Reverend George Whitefield*, M. A. (London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly; and Messrs. Kincaid and Bell, at Edinburgh, 1771), 216.

<sup>59</sup>Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England*, 6.

<sup>60</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 470.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 483.

toned, yet clear and melodious, voice. It is perfect music. It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible.<sup>62</sup>

Benjamin Franklin marveled at the popular admiration for a man who called the people “*half beasts and half devils*.”<sup>63</sup> He also determined through scientific investigation that Whitefield’s voice could be heard “by more than thirty thousand.”<sup>64</sup> His unique style made use of his wonderful voice, his love for dramatic presentation, his passionate belief in the new birth, and his emotional delivery. Dallimore quotes David Garrick, a famous English actor in Whitefield’s day, as saying that he would “give a hundred guineas to be able to say ‘Oh!’ like Whitefield.”<sup>65</sup>

The focus of his sermons was on the new birth as opposed to the various forms of worship since he believed that the major denominations all had members who were not born-again.<sup>66</sup> His sermons also helped to cement the boundaries of all evangelical Protestantism among most Protestants who found unity in Whitefield’s teaching on the Bible as God’s word, the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation, and the collective call to evangelism.<sup>67</sup> While Whitefield was not the only preacher promoting Reformation theology, he certainly was the first to bring it to the masses. Franklin notes Whitefield’s effect on the masses: “From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion,

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<sup>62</sup>Tyerman, *The Life of George Whitefield*, 1:428.

<sup>63</sup>Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 119.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>65</sup>Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:530.

<sup>66</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 458.

<sup>67</sup>Timothy L. Smith, ed. “George Whitefield and the Wesleyan Witness,” in *Whitefield & Wesley on the New Birth* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1986), 13.

it seemed as if all the world were growing religious.”<sup>68</sup> Even Franklin himself was induced to give money to support the orphanage during one of Whitefield’s sermons even though he came to the gathering with full determination to give nothing.<sup>69</sup>

### **Theology**

Since Whitefield never wrote a systematic theology, he has been criticized by Ninde for his lack of theological knowledge.<sup>70</sup> Though he may not have been a systematic theologian, Dallimore points out that he discoursed at times in Latin and was known to read a Greek New Testament frequently as well as the works of many other scholars and theologians.<sup>71</sup> Like any modern day evangelist, Whitefield focused most of his energy on topics directly related to the salvation of souls. In just one sermon, Whitefield spoke on the new birth (regeneration), total depravity, original sin, repentance, justification, *sola fide*, and election.<sup>72</sup>

Whitefield taught that the Christian faith is an inward faith. This does not mean that the Christian faith is not expressed outwardly; rather, it means that the Christian faith

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<sup>68</sup>Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 119.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>70</sup>Edward S. Ninde, *George Whitefield: Prophet–Preacher* (New York: Abingdon, 1924), 185–186. Ninde states that “Whitefield was not a theologian,” but he does acknowledge that he believed passionately in the truths he proclaimed.

<sup>71</sup>Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 2:528. Dallimore provides a list of scholars mentioned in Whitefield’s writings including Plato, Augustine, Luther, Francke, Mather, Stoddard, and Edwards.

<sup>72</sup>George Whitefield. “The Method of Grace,” in *Select Sermons of George Whitefield, M.A.: Formerly of Pembroke College, Oxford and Chaplain to the Rt. Hon. The Countess of Huntington*, ed. J. C. Ryle and R. Elliot (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 49–54.



has its origin in the inner person.<sup>73</sup> Unlike the reformers, Whitefield and other revivalists emphasized the experiential component of conversion when a person is born-again.<sup>74</sup>

Whitefield stated his belief on total depravity when he says people “are in an unjustified state by nature and deserve to be damned ten thousand times over.”<sup>75</sup> To become a Christian, he preached that one had to feel the “weight of original sin” or “the sin of [one’s] nature.”<sup>76</sup> He believed that all people need to be set free by receiving the Holy Spirit since they are held by the guilt of Adam’s sin.<sup>77</sup> He would cause his listeners, most of whom were affiliated with church in some manner, to seriously consider their relationship to God.<sup>78</sup> Before they could be saved, he preached that they must acknowledge their original sin, their self-righteousness, and their unbelief.<sup>79</sup>

Whitefield offered no other path to salvation apart from repentance and faith. He called the righteous acts of sinful people “filthy rags, a menstruous cloth,” and he spoke against the idea that knowledge of the truth leads to salvation.<sup>80</sup> For the saved

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<sup>73</sup> George Whitefield, “The Nature and Necessity of Our Regeneration or New Birth in Christ Jesus,” in *Whitefield and Wesley on the New Birth*, ed. Timothy L. Smith (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1986), 66. Whitefield wrote, “But then tell them they must be regenerate, they must be born again, they must be renewed in the very spirit, that is, the inmost faculties of their minds, ere they can truly call Christ Lord, Lord, or have any share in the merits of His precious blood.”

<sup>74</sup> Heimert and Miller, *The Great Awakening*, xxviii.

<sup>75</sup> Whitefield, “The Method of Grace,” 53.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>77</sup> George Whitefield, “The Indwelling of the Spirit, the Common Privilege of All Believers,” in *Whitefield and Wesley on the New Birth*, ed. Timothy L. Smith (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1986), 101.

<sup>78</sup> Whitefield, “The Method of Grace,” 54. Whitefield argued that the people of his day “mistake a historical faith for a true faith.”

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 53–4. Whitefield stated, “Merely to believe there was such a person as Christ, merely to believe there is a book called the Bible, will do you no good.”

sinner who have repented and put their trust in Christ, Whitefield proclaimed that “they are actually justified, acquitted, and looked upon as righteous in the sight of God.”<sup>81</sup> In his Journal, Whitefield’s spoke of the time of his own salvation when he was justified “by *faith only*.”<sup>82</sup>

### **His Conflict with Wesley**

Upon his return to England in 1741, Whitefield, a dedicated Calvinist, encountered opposition from the Anglican clergy due in part to his condemnation of Archbishop Tillotson for his Arminian theology. Even John Wesley had adopted Arminianism and taught the previous followers of Whitefield in England to adhere to this theology. At this time, Whitefield remarked that his former audience was “so prejudiced by the dear Messrs. Wesleys dressing up of the doctrine of election in such horrible colors, that they will neither hear, see nor give [him] the least assistance.”<sup>83</sup> Whitefield, however, soon developed a large following in England despite his opponents. In the colonies, Whitefield found a ready reception for Calvinistic theology.<sup>84</sup>

Though both highly valued the Bible and shared very similar theological views, Whitefield’s belief in the doctrine of election caused a great chasm to form between him and John Wesley. Wesley’s sermon ‘Free Grace’ was a major cause for the

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<sup>81</sup>George Whitefield, “Christ the Believer’s Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption,” in *Select Sermons of George Whitefield, M.A.: Formerly of Pembroke College, Oxford and Chaplain to the Rt. Hon. The Countess of Huntington*, ed. J. C. Ryle and R. Elliot (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 63.

<sup>82</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 62.

<sup>83</sup>John Gillies, *Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield*, rev. ed. (Middletown, CT: Hunt & Noyes, 1838; reprint, New Ipswich, NH: Pietan, 1993), 67.

<sup>84</sup>Heimert and Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening*, xxvi.

separation since Wesley chose to speak outwardly against the doctrine of election.<sup>85</sup>

While he affirmed that salvation was not dependent on a person's will, Wesley did teach that salvation is dependent on the free grace, which he believed has been given to all, and those who are to be saved would simply respond affirmatively to God's free grace.<sup>86</sup>

Whitefield argued that those who deny election also exalt their own glory in the sight of God.<sup>87</sup> Even though Whitefield maintained a Calvinistic view of election, he confessed to John Wesley that he had never read any of Calvin's works and simply had arrived at his views through the study of Scripture.<sup>88</sup> In response to Wesley's sermon, "Free Grace," Whitefield penned a letter to him in which he said that Romans 8 was the proof text for the doctrine of election.<sup>89</sup> While Whitefield affirmed the doctrine of election, Downey notes that his invitation to lost souls who attended his sermons was "entirely democratic and unqualified" since he invited people to choose the Lord through repentance and faith.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>John Wesley, "Free Grace," *The Treasury of British Eloquence: Specimens of Brilliant Orations by the Most Eminent Statesmen, Divines, Etc. of Great Britain of the Last Four Centuries with Biographical and Critical Notices and Index*, comp. Robert Cochrane (London: William P. Nimmo, 1877), 128–129.

<sup>86</sup>Irwin W. Reist, "John Wesley and George Whitefield: A Study in the Integrity of Two Theologies of Grace," *Evangelical Quarterly* 47 (1975): 34–35.

<sup>87</sup>George Whitefield, "Christ the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption," 62.

<sup>88</sup>John Gillies, *Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield*, 59. Whitefield wrote to Wesley, "Alas, I never read any thing that Calvin wrote: my doctrines I had from Christ and his apostles; I was taught them by God..."

<sup>89</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 574.

<sup>90</sup>James Downey, *The Eighteenth Century Pulpit: A Study of the Sermons of Butler, Berkeley, Secker, Sterne, Whitefield, and Wesley* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 158.

### The Unconverted Ministry

In England, many unconverted persons entered the ministry largely for economic gain due to the practice of providing ‘livings’ to ministers seeking a parish. These ‘livings’ were granted by the king, some nobleman, or a university. Since obtaining a ‘living’ was an acceptable and obtainable means for many to improve their social status, many parents encouraged their children in this direction for all the wrong reasons.

In America, clergy were supported through tax revenues, especially in the southern colonies, or by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.<sup>91</sup> In the southern colonies, the Anglican Church was legalized, and therefore, ministerial appointments were made by the governor and the church council.<sup>92</sup> Cobb notes that the secular governor would often fill the vacant ministry positions with unsavory individuals who, once appointed, could not be removed unless they were found guilty of violating civil law.<sup>93</sup> In the middle and northern colonies, the clergy tended to be less scandalous since there was little governmental control and the large presence of many different religious groups.<sup>94</sup> Tracy, however, notes that many New Englanders believed “that the ministrations of unconverted men, if neither heretical in doctrine nor scandalous for

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<sup>91</sup>David Hein and Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr. *The Episcopalians* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), 22.

<sup>92</sup>Sanford H. Cobb, *The Rise of Religious Liberty in America: A History* (New York: MacMillan, 1902), 462.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

immorality, were valid, and their labors useful.”<sup>95</sup> According to Fish, the majority of the English clergy throughout the colonies were not even able to read; Fish also says that the Congregational ministers in America were largely unconverted.<sup>96</sup>

Like all other public figures, Whitefield had a measure of controversy surrounding his ministry. Some of the controversy was partly due to the publishing of some of his earliest journals without his knowledge and before they could be edited.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps the greatest controversy was his constant attacks in his early ministry on the unconverted ministry.<sup>98</sup> In his journal, Whitefield stated his belief that “the generality of preachers talk of an unknown and unfelt Christ. The reason why congregations have been so dead is, because they had dead men preaching to them.”<sup>99</sup> While this message had its application, Whitefield’s broad application caused many ministers, whether converted or not, to be offended to a degree since their integrity was now being brought into question by their parishioners.

Unfortunately, Whitefield’s attack on the unconverted ministry extended to condemnation of faculties at Yale and Harvard. In his journal, he stated that at Harvard there was an overall lack of discipline and “bad books are become fashionable among the tutors and students.”<sup>100</sup> Rutman notes that both of these schools continued to produce

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<sup>95</sup>Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, 66.

<sup>96</sup>Henry C. Fish, *Handbook of Revivals: For the Use of Winners of Souls* (Boston: James H. Earle, 1874), 92.

<sup>97</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 154.

<sup>98</sup>Whitefield, “The Method of Grace,” 49; Whitefield, “The Lord Our Righteousness,” 72.

<sup>99</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 470.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, 462.

students with fervency for revival, a fact which reflects greatly on the instruction of the faculty.<sup>101</sup> In Whitefield's short stay at Harvard, he certainly could not have made an adequate assessment of the spiritual character of the faculty and students. In his apologetic reply in 1745 to the accusations of Holyoke, Whitefield made it clear that he had "no intention of setting up a party for [himself], or to stir up people against their pastors."<sup>102</sup> As Whitefield grew older, his harsh words against the unconverted ministry became softer and less offensive since he took more care not to offend those ministers who were converted.

### **The Criticism**

Commissary Garden of South Carolina, according to Whitefield, denied him access to the Anglican churches in his area due to Whitefield's remarks against the clergy.<sup>103</sup> Since Whitefield continued his itinerant ministry and his public remarks on the unconverted ministry, Garden brought Whitefield to trial and suspended him from the ministry, a suspension which Whitefield would completely disregard.<sup>104</sup> In apparent agreement with Garden on the issue of labeling the existing clergy as unconverted, Edwards condemned the practice as "the worst disease that has attended this work."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup>Darrett B. Rutman, ed., *The Great Awakening: Event and Exegesis* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1970; reprint, Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger, 1977), 95.

<sup>102</sup>Tyerman, *The Life of George Whitefield*, 2:133-4.

<sup>103</sup>Whitefield, *Journals*, 400. Whitefield responded to Garden's threat to deny his access to the public pulpits of South Carolina by saying that he would "regard that as much as [he] would a Pope's bull."

<sup>104</sup>Arthur L. Cross, *The Anglican Episcopate and the American Colonies* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), 81-87.

<sup>105</sup>Jonathan Edwards, "Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England," in *The Works of President Edwards in Eight Volumes*, 1<sup>st</sup> American ed., ed. Samuel Austin (Worcester, MA: Isaac Sturtevant, Printer, 1808), 3:290.

Charles Chauncy, the leading opponent of the revivalists in New England, spoke against the emotional enthusiasm of revivals. He considered these emotional responses to be “workings of [one’s] own passions for divine communications.”<sup>106</sup> He added in his paper, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion*, that these heightened passions were to be expected when the listener’s understanding is allowed to remain stagnant.<sup>107</sup> Clearly, Chauncy’s argument is an accusation that the theology of revivalists and their messages was low on substance and high on the externals. Chauncy’s criticism of Whitefield in relation to hyper-emotionalism may not have been warranted. While events led by Whitefield certainly had those in attendance who evidenced signs of hyper-emotionalism, the preacher himself was soundly against such things.<sup>108</sup> Chauncy’s criticism of Whitefield’s over-zealous condemnation of the unconverted ministry was somewhat justified, but his criticism of Whitefield’s promotion of itinerant exhorters shows his bias toward the traditional establishment.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Charles Chauncy, “Enthusiasm Described and Caution’d Against,” in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, eds. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 231. Chauncy stated, “The cause of this enthusiasm is a bad temperament of the blood and spirits; ‘tis properly a disease, a sort of madness.”

<sup>107</sup>Charles Chauncy, “Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion,” in *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, eds. Alan Heimert and Perry Miller (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 298.

<sup>108</sup>Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of Rev. John Wesley, M. A., Founder of the Methodists*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. , (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1846), 1:258.

<sup>109</sup>Chauncy, “Enthusiasm Described and Caution’s Against,” 236–241. Chauncy criticized the attack on the unconverted ministry as uncharitable judgmentalism. While his criticism may have some validity especially given Whitefield’s later apology, he clearly was not willing to consider the conversion status of any minister as long as their outward behavior was acceptable. Furthermore, his remarks also showed his determination to support the traditional parish structure as opposed to the itinerant ministry.

## Conclusion

While the conservative establishment within the existing denominations within the colonies preferred to preserve the old order, Whitefield was an innovator who promoted among other things the personal experience of the believer. By elevating personal decision, Whitefield challenged the religious establishment. The American argument for personal liberty in their struggle for freedom is a good match for the evangelical mindset which promotes personal experience even at the cost of ignoring religious traditions.<sup>110</sup> Whitefield's willingness to step beyond the Church of England allowed him to promote, though perhaps not intentionally, the autonomy of American churches while weakening the hold that England had on the colonies through the Anglican Church in America.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Charles H. Maxson, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1920), 144.

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*, 150.



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