

George Whitefield and his Ministry

by

J. C. Ryle D.D.

Chapter 1: The Life of George Whitefield

Summary: Importance of historical inquiry— Gloucester—Whitefield's Birth-place and Parentage—Educated at Gloucester Grammar School—Enters Pembroke College, Oxford—Season of Spiritual Conflict—Books which were made useful to him—Ordained by Bishop Benson—First Sermon—Preaches in London—Curate of Dummer, Hants—Goes to America—Returns in a Year—Preaches in the open air—Is excluded from most London Pulpits—Extent of his Labours for thirty-one years—extensive travels—his weekly schedule when in London—Dies at Newbury Port, America, in 1770—Interesting circumstances of his death.

Who were the men that revived religion in England a hundred years ago? What were their names, that we may honour them? Where were they born? How were they educated? What are the leading facts in their lives? What was their special department of labour? I want to supply some answers to these questions in these short biographies.

I pity the man who takes no interest in such inquiries. The instruments that God employs to do his work in the world deserve a close inspection. The man who did not care to look at the rams' horns that blew down Jericho, the hammer and nail that slew Sisera, the lamps and trumpets of Gideon, the sling and stone of David, might fairly be set down as a cold and heartless person. I trust that all who read this volume would like to know something about the English evangelists of the eighteenth century.

The first and foremost whom I will name is the well-known George Whitefield. Though not the first in order, if we look at the date of his birth, I place him first in the order of merit, without any hesitation. Of all the spiritual heroes of a hundred years ago none saw so clearly as Whitefield what the times demanded, and none were so forward in the great work of spiritual aggression. I think I would be committing an act of injustice if I placed any name before Whitefield's.

Whitefield was born at Gloucester in the year 1714 (December 27th). It was this same county-town which was his birthplace also of William

Tyndale (1494-1536), one of the first and ablest translators of the English Bible. John Hooper (1495-1555) also, one of the greatest and best of our English reformers, was Bishop of Gloucester, and was burned at the stake for Christ's truth, within view of his own cathedral. In the next century Miles Smith (1554-1624), Bishop of Gloucester, was one of the first to protest the Romanizing proceedings of William Laud (1573-1645), who was then Dean of Gloucester.

Places like Gloucester have a rich inheritance of many prayers. The city where Hooper preached and prayed, and where the zealous Miles Smith protested, was the place where the greatest preacher of the gospel England has ever seen was born.

Like many other famous men, Whitefield was of humble origin and had no rich or noble connections to help him forward in the world. His mother kept the Bell Inn at Gloucester and appears not to have prospered in business. At any rate, she never seems to have been able to do anything for Whitefield's advancement in life. The inn itself is still standing and is thought to be the birthplace of our greatest English preacher.

Whitefield's early life, according to his own account, was anything but religious; though, like many boys, he had occasional times when conscience was pricked and of religious feeling. But habits and general tastes are the only true test of young people's characters. He confesses that he was "addicted to lying, filthy talking, and foolish jesting," and that he was a "Sabbath-breaker, a theatre-goer, a card-player, and a romance-reader." All this, he says, went on till he was fifteen years old.

Poor as he was, his residence at Gloucester procured him the advantage of a good education at the Free Grammar School of that city. Here he was a day-scholar until he was fifteen. Nothing is known of his progress there. He can hardly, however, have been idle, or else he would not have been ready to enter University afterwards at the age of eighteen. His letters, with frequent quotations, show that he was acquainted with Latin. The only known fact about his school days is this curious one, that even then he was known for his good elocution and memory and was selected to recite speeches before the Corporation of Gloucester at their annual visitation of the Grammar School.

At the age of fifteen Whitefield appears to have left school, and to have given up Latin and Greek for a season. His mother's difficult circumstances probably made it necessary for him to do something to assist her in business and to get his own living. He began, therefore, to help her in the daily work of the Bell Inn. "At length," he says, "I put on my blue apron, washed cups, cleaned rooms, and, in one word, became a professed common drawer for nigh a year and a half." [a "common drawer" was one who drew (poured) beer or wine in a tavern (pub)].

This state of things, however, did not last long. His mother's business at the Bell did not flourish, and she finally retired from it altogether. An old school-friend was interested in going to Oxford, and he went back to the Grammar School and renewed his studies. Other friends connected him to Pembroke College, Oxford, where the Grammar School of Gloucester held two exhibitions. Finally, after several providential circumstances, he entered Oxford as a servitor—a student of lower financial means who paid reduced fees—at Pembroke at the age of eighteen.

Whitefield's residence at Oxford was the great turning-point in his life. For two or three years before he went to the University his journal informs us of some religious convictions during that time. But from the time of his entering Pembroke College, Oxford, these convictions fast ripened into a decided Christianity. He diligently attended all means of grace within his reach. He spent his leisure time in visiting the city prison, reading to the prisoners, and trying to do good. He became acquainted with the famous John Wesley and his brother Charles, the hymn-writer. Over time a little band of like-minded young men gathered, and they were given the name "Methodists," because of their strict "method" of living.

At one time he seems to have greedily devoured such books as "Thomas a Kempis," among other and was in danger of becoming a semi-papist, an ascetic, or a mystic, and of placing the whole of religion in self-denial. He says in his Journal,

I always chose the worst sort of food. I fasted twice a week. My apparel was mean. I thought it unbecoming a penitent to have his hair powdered. I wore woollen gloves, a patched gown, and dirty shoes; and though I was convinced that the kingdom of God did not consist in meat and drink, yet I resolutely persisted in these voluntary acts of self-denial, because I found in them great promotion of the spiritual life.

Over time he was gradually delivered out of all this darkness, partly by the advice of one or two experienced Christians, and partly by reading the Puritan, Henry Scougal's "Life of God in the Heart of Man," or Henry Law's "Serious Call," or Richard Baxter's "Call to the Unconverted," or Joseph Alleine's "Alarm to Unconverted Sinners," and Matthew Henry's "Commentary." "Above all," he says,

My mind being now more opened and enlarged, I began to read the Holy Scriptures upon my knees, laying aside all other books, and praying over, if possible, every line and word. This proved meat indeed and drink indeed to my soul. I daily received fresh life, light, and power from above. I got more true knowledge from reading the book of God in one month

than I could ever have acquired from all the writings of men.

Whitefield had learned the glorious liberty of Christ's gospel, and never turned again to asceticism, legalism, mysticism or strange views of Christian perfection. The experience he had received by bitter conflict was most valuable to him. The doctrines of free grace, once thoroughly grasped, took deep root in his heart, and became, as it were, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. Of all the little band of Oxford methodists, none seem to have got hold so soon of clear views of Christ's gospel as he did, and none kept it so unwaveringly to the end.

At the early age of twenty-two Whitefield was admitted to holy orders by Bishop Benson of Gloucester, on Trinity Sunday, 1736. He had not sought ordination, but the bishop heard of his character from Lady Selwyn and others and sent for him, gave him five guineas to buy books, and offered to ordain him whenever he wished, though he was only twenty-two years old. This unexpected offer came to him when he was struggling about his own fitness for the ministry, and it brought him to the point of decision. *"I began to think,"* he says, *"that if I held out longer I should fight against God."*

Whitefield's first sermon was preached in the very town where he was born, at the church of St. Mary-le-Crypt, Gloucester. His own description of it is the best account that can be given:

Last Sunday, in the afternoon, I preached my first sermon in the church of St. Mary-le-Crypt, where I was baptized, and also first received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Curiosity, as you may easily guess, drew a large congregation together upon this occasion. The sight at first a little awed me. But I was comforted with a heartfelt sense of the divine presence and soon found the unspeakable advantage of having been accustomed to public speaking when a boy at school, and of exhorting the prisoners and poor people at their private houses while at the university. By these means I was kept from being daunted overmuch. As I proceeded, I perceived the fire kindled, till at last, though so young and amidst a crowd of those who knew me in my childish days, I trust I was enabled to speak with some degree of gospel authority. Some few mocked, but most seemed for the present struck; and I have since heard that a complaint was made to the bishop that I drove fifteen mad the first sermon! The worthy prelate wished that the madness might not be forgotten before next Sunday.

Almost immediately after his ordination, Whitefield went to Oxford and took his degree as Bachelor of Arts. He then commenced his regular ministerial life by undertaking temporary duty at the Tower Chapel, London, for two months, and preached in many London churches. From the very beginning Whitefield was popular, to the degree that perhaps

no preacher, before or since, has reached. Whether on weekdays or Sundays, wherever he preached, the churches were crowded, and an immense sensation was produced.

The plain truth is, that an eloquent, extempore preacher, preaching the pure gospel with most un-common gifts of voice and manner, was at that time a novelty in London. The congregations were taken by surprise.

From London he went for two months to Dummer, a little rural parish in Hampshire, near Basingstoke. This was a totally new sphere of action, and he seemed like a man buried alive among poor illiterate people. But he was soon reconciled to it and thought afterwards that he reaped much profit by conversing with the poor. From Dummer he accepted an invitation, which had been much pressed on him by the Wesleys, to visit the colony of Georgia in North America, and assist in the care of an Orphan House which had been set up near Savannah for the children of colonists.

After preaching for a few months in Gloucestershire, and especially at Bristol and Stonehouse, Whitefield sailed for America towards the end of 1737 and continued there about a year. He would be engaged with the orphanage at Savannah for the remainder of his life, although it would prove to be a cause of anxiety and responsibility.

Whitefield returned from Georgia at the latter part of the year 1738, partly to obtain priest's orders, which were conferred on him by his old friend Bishop Benson, and partly on business connected with the orphanage. Back in England, however, Whitefield discovered that his position was no longer what it was before he sailed for Georgia. The bulk of the clergy was no longer favourable to him and regarded him with suspicion as an enthusiast and a fanatic. They were especially scandalized by his preaching the doctrine of regeneration or the new birth, as a thing which many baptized persons greatly needed!

The number of pulpits to which he had access rapidly diminished. Church leaders, had ignored the drunkenness and impurity and were filled with intense indignation about what they called "breaches of order." Bishops, who could tolerate Arianism, and the heresies of Socinianism, and Deism, were filled with indignation at a man who declared the atonement of Christ and the work of the Holy Ghost and began to denounce him openly. In short, from this period of his life, Whitefield's field of usefulness within the Church of England narrowed rapidly on every side.

At this point Whitefield turned to the method of open-air preaching. Seeing that thousands everywhere did not attend a place of worship, spent their Sundays in idleness or sin, and were not to be reached by sermons within walls, he resolved, in the spirit of holy aggression, to go out after them *"into the highways and hedges,"* on his Master's principle, and *"compel them to come in."*

His first attempt to do this was among the coal miners at Kingswood near Bristol, in February 1739. After much prayer he went one day to Hannam Mount, and standing on a hill began to preach to about a hundred coal miners on the text of Matthew 5:1-3. The thing soon became known. The number of hearers rapidly increased, until the congregation amounted to many thousands. His own account of the behaviour of these neglected coal miners, who had never been in a church in their lives, is deeply moving: "Having," he writes to a friend,

No righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was a friend to publicans and came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected was the sight of the white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully fell down their black cheeks as they came out of their coal-pits. Hundreds of them were soon brought under deep conviction, 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. As the scene was quite new, 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 was never totally deserted, and frequently (for to deny it would be lying against God) was so assisted that I knew by happy experience what our Lord meant by saying, 'Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.' The open firmament above me, the prospect of the adjacent fields, with the sight of thousands, some in coaches, some on horseback, and some in the trees, and at times all affected and in tears, was almost too much for, and quite overcame me.

Two months after this Whitefield began the practice of open-air preaching in London, on April 27, 1739. He had gone to Islington, north London, to preach for the vicar, his friend Mr. Stonehouse. In the middle of the prayer, the churchwardens came to him and demanded his license for preaching in the diocese of London. Whitefield, of course, had not got this license any more than any clergyman not regularly officiating in the diocese has at this day. The upshot of the matter was, that being forbidden by the churchwardens to preach in the pulpit, he went outside after the communion service and preached in the churchyard. "And," says he,

God was pleased so to assist me in preaching, and so wonderfully to affect the hearers, that I believe we could have gone singing hymns to prison. Let not the adversaries say, I have thrust myself out of their synagogues. No; they have thrust me out.

From that day forward he became a constant field-preacher, whenever weather and the season of the year made it possible. Two days afterwards, on Sunday, April 29, he records.

I preached in Moorfields to an exceeding great multitude. Being weakened by my morning's preaching, I refreshed myself in the afternoon by a little sleep, and at five went and preached at Kennington Common, about two miles from London, when no less than thirty thousand people were supposed to be present.

After this, wherever there was large open spaces round London, wherever there were large bands of idle, godless, Sabbath-breaking people gathered, in Hackney Fields, Mary-le-bonne Fields, May Fair, Smithfield, Blackheath, Moorfields, and Kennington Common, Whitefield went and preached Christ.

Hundreds who never dreamed of going to a place of worship, listened to the gospel proclaimed in this way and received it. The cause of pure religion was advanced, and souls were plucked from the hand of Satan, like brands from the burning. But this method of preaching in the open air was too much for the Established Church of those days.

The clergy, with a few honourable exceptions, refused to recognise the strange preacher. In the true spirit of "the dog in the manger,"¹ they neither liked to go after the semi-heathen masses of population themselves, nor liked anyone else to do the work for them. The consequence was that Whitefield's ministry in the pulpits of the Church of England from this time was almost entirely stopped. He loved the Church in which he had been ordained, he loved in her Articles of Faith, and he used her Prayer book with pleasure. But the Church did not love him and so lost the use of his services.

The plain truth is that the Church of England of that day was not ready for a man like Whitefield. The Church was too much asleep to understand him and was vexed at a man who would not keep still and let the devil alone.

The facts of Whitefield's history from this period to the day of his death are almost entirely the same. One year was just like another, and to attempt to follow him would be only going repeatedly over the same ground. From 1739 to the year of his death, 1770, a period of thirty-one years, his life was one uniform employment. He was a man of one thing, and always about his Master's business. From Sunday mornings to Saturday nights, from the 1st of January to the 31st of December, excepting when laid aside by illness, he was almost incessantly preaching

¹ A referent to an old fable of the dog who lies in the hay and won't eat it himself but won't let the cows eat it either.

Christ, and going about the world entreating men to repent and come to Christ and be saved. There was hardly a considerable town in England, Scotland, or Wales, that he did not visit as an evangelist. When churches were opened to him, he gladly preached in churches; when only chapels could be obtained, he cheerfully preached in chapels. When churches and chapels alike were closed, or were too small to contain his hearers, he was ready and willing to preach in the open air. For thirty-one years he laboured in this way, always proclaiming the same glorious gospel, and always, as far as man's eye can judge, with immense effect.

In one single week, after preaching in Moorfields, he received one thousand letters from people under spiritual concern and admitted to the Lord's table three hundred and fifty persons. In the thirty-four years of his ministry, it is reckoned that he preached publicly eighteen thousand times.

His travelling was remarkable, when we consider the condition of the roads and the means of travel of his time. He was, like the apostle Paul, familiar with "perils in the wilderness and perils in the seas." He visited Scotland fourteen times and was nowhere more acceptable or useful than he was in that Bible-loving country. He crossed the Atlantic seven times, backward and forward in sail ships, and got the attention of thousands in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. He went over to Ireland twice, and on one occasion was almost murdered by an angry mob in Dublin. As to England and Wales, he travelled through every county in them, from the Isle of Wight to Berwick-on-Tweed, and from the Land's End to the North Foreland.

His regular ministerial work in London for the winter season, when weather hindered field-preaching was remarkable. His weekly engagements at the Tabernacle in Tottenham Court Road, which was built for him when the pulpits of the Established Church were closed, comprised the following work. Every Sunday morning, he administered the Lord's Supper to several hundred communicants at half-past six. After this he read prayers and preached both morning and afternoon. Then he preached again in the evening at half-past five, and concluded by addressing a large society of widows, married people, young men and spinsters, all sitting separately in the Tabernacle, with exhortations suitable to their respective stations.

On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings, he preached regularly at six. On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday evenings, he delivered lectures. This makes a total of thirteen sermons a week! And all this time he was carrying on a large correspondence with people in almost every part of the world.

That any human frame could so long endure the labours that Whitefield went through does indeed seem wonderful that his life was not cut short

by violence, to which he was frequently exposed, is no less wonderful. But he was immortal till his work was done. He died at last very suddenly at Newbury Port, in North America, on Sunday, September the 29th, 1770, at the comparatively early age of fifty-six. He was once married to a widow named James, of Abergavenny, who died before him. If we may judge from the little mention made of his wife in his letters, the marriage does not seem to have contributed much to his happiness. He left no children, but he left a name far better than that of sons and daughters. Never perhaps was there a man of whom it could be so truly said that he spent and was spent for Christ than George Whitefield.

The circumstances and particulars of Whitefield's death are deeply interesting. It was an end in striking harmony with the tenor of his life. As he had lived for more than thirty years, so he died, preaching to the very last. "Sudden death," he had often said,

Is sudden glory. Whether right or not, I cannot help wishing that I may go off in the same manner. To me it would be worse than death to live to be nursed, and to see friends weeping about me.

Whitefield was granted that wish. He was cut down in a single night by an attack of asthma, almost before his friends knew that he was ill.

On the morning of Saturday the 29th of September, the day before he died, Whitefield set out on horseback from Portsmouth in New Hampshire, to fulfil an engagement to preach at Newbury Port on Sunday. On the way, unfortunately, he was imposed on to preach at a place called Exeter, and though feeling very ill, he had not the heart to refuse. A friend remarked before he preached that he looked more uneasy than usual, and said to him, "Sir, you are more fit to go to bed than to preach." To this Whitefield replied: "True, sir;" and then turning aside, he clasped his hands together, and looking up, said:

Lord Jesus, I am weary in thy work, but not of thy work. If I have not yet finished my course, let me go and speak for thee once more in the fields, seal thy truth, and come home and die.

He then went and preached for nearly two hours to a very large crowd in the fields from the text 2 Corinthians 13:5. It was his last sermon, and a fitting conclusion to his whole career.

An eyewitness has given the following striking account of this closing scene of Whitefield's life.

He rose from his seat and stood erect. His appearance alone was a powerful sermon. The thinness of his visage, the paleness of his countenance, the evident struggling of the heavenly spark in a decayed body for utterance, were all deeply interesting; the

spirit was willing, but the flesh was dying. In this situation he remained several minutes, unable to speak. He then said: 'I will wait for the gracious assistance of God, for he will, I am certain, assist me once more to speak in his name.' He then delivered perhaps one of his best sermons. The latter part contained the following passage: 'I go; I go to a rest prepared: my sun has given light to many, but now it is about to set—no, to rise to the zenith of immortal glory. I have outlived many on earth, but they cannot outlive me in heaven. Many shall outlive me on earth and live when this body is no more, but there—oh, thought divine!—I shall be in a world where time, age, sickness, and sorrow are unknown. My body fails, but my spirit expands. How willingly would I live forever to preach Christ. But I die to be with him. How brief—comparatively brief—has been my life compared to the vast labours which I see before me yet to be accomplished. But if I leave now, while so few care about heavenly things, the God of peace will surely visit you.

After the sermon was over, Whitefield dined with a friend, and then rode on to Newbury Port, though greatly fatigued. On arriving there he ate early and retired to bed. Tradition says, that as he went up-stairs, with a lighted candle in his hand, he could not resist the inclination to turn round at the head of the stair and speak to the friends who were assembled to meet him. As he spoke the fire kindled within him, and before he could conclude, the candle which he held in his hand had burned down to the socket.

He retired to his bedroom, to come out no more alive. A violent fit of spasmodic asthma seized him soon after he got into bed, and before six o'clock the next morning the great preacher was dead. When his time came, he had nothing to do but to die. He was buried in a vault beneath the pulpit of the church where he had engaged to preach. His sepulchre is shown to this very day; and nothing makes the little town where he died so famous as the fact that it contains the bones of George Whitefield.

Chapter 2: The Preaching of George Whitefield

Summary: Estimate of good that Whitefield did—Testimonies to his direct usefulness—Indirect good that he did—Peculiar character of his preaching—Witnesses to his real power as a preacher—Analysis of his seventy-five published Sermons—Simplicity, directness, power of description, earnestness, pathos, action, voice, and fluency, his leading excellences—Inner life, humility, love to Christ, laboriousness, self-denial, disinterestedness, cheerfulness, catholicity—specimen of his preaching.

In my judgment, George Whitefield was chief and first among the English Reformers of the 18th century. The real amount of good he did, the peculiar character of his preaching, the private character of the man, are all points that deserve consideration. They are points, I may add, about which there is a vast amount of misconception.

This misconception perhaps is unavoidable, and ought not to surprise us. The materials available to use that might help us form a correct opinion about Whitefield are very scarce. He wrote no books. He headed no crusade against an apostate Church, with a nation at his back, and princes on his side, like Martin Luther. He founded no religious denomination, which pinned its faith on his writings and carefully embalmed his best acts and words, like John Wesley. There are Lutherans and Wesleyans in the present day, but there are no Whitefieldites.

No! The great evangelist of the 18th century was a simple, honest man, who lived for one thing only, and that was to preach Christ. If he did that, he cared for nothing else. The records of such a man are large and full in heaven, I have no doubt, but they are few on earth.

We must not forget, also, that many since the time of Whitefield, see nothing in a man like Whitefield but fanaticism and enthusiasm. They abhor everything like "zeal" in religion. They dislike everyone who turns the world upside down, and departs from old traditional ways, and will not let the devil alone. Such persons, no doubt, would tell us that the ministry of Whitefield only produced temporary excitement, that his preaching was common-place rant, and that his character had nothing about it to be specially admired. It may be feared that eighteen hundred years ago they would have said much the same of St. Paul.

The question, "What good did Whitefield do?" is one which I answer without the least hesitation. I *believe that the direct good, which he did to immortal souls*, was enormous. I will go further—I believe it is incalculable. Credible witnesses in England, Scotland, and America, have placed on record their conviction that he was the means of converting thousands of people. Many, wherever he preached, were not merely pleased, excited, and attracted to him and his message, but positively turned from sin, and made thorough servants of God. "Numbering the

people," I do not forget, is always objectionable. God alone can read hearts and discern the wheat from the tares. Many, no doubt, in days of religious excitement, are set down as converted who are not converted at all. But I wish my readers to understand that my high estimate of Whitefield's usefulness is based on a solid foundation. I ask them to mark well what Whitefield's contemporaries thought of the value of his labours.

Franklin, the well-known American philosopher, was a cold-blooded, calculating man, a Quaker by profession, and not likely to form too high an estimate of any minister's work. Yet even he confessed that,

It was wonderful to see the change soon made by his preaching in the manners of the inhabitants of Philadelphia. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious.

Franklin himself, it may be remarked, was the leading printer of religious works at Philadelphia; and his readiness to print Whitefield's sermons and journals shows his judgment of the hold that he had on the American mind.

Maclaurin, Willison, and MacCulloch, were Scotch ministers whose names are well known, and Maclaurin and Willison deservedly rank high as theological writers. All these have repeatedly testified that Whitefield was made an instrument of doing immense good in Scotland. Willison, says, "that God honoured him with surprising success among sinners of all ranks and persuasions."

Old Henry Venn, and evangelical Anglican, was a man of strong good sense, as well as of great grace. His opinion was, that,

If the greatness, extent, success, and disinterestedness of a man's labours can give him distinction among the children of Christ, then we are warranted to affirm that scarce anyone has equalled Mr. Whitefield.

Again, he says.

He was abundantly successful in his vast labours. The seals of his ministry, from first to last, I am persuaded, were more than could be credited could the number be fixed. This is certain, his amazing popularity was only from his usefulness; for he no sooner opened his mouth as a preacher, than God commanded an extraordinary blessing upon his word.

John Newton was a shrewd man, as well as an eminent minister of the gospel. His testimony is:

That which finished Mr. Whitefield's character as a shining light, and is now his crown of rejoicing, was the singular success which the Lord was pleased to give him in winning souls. It seemed as if he never preached in vain. Perhaps there is hardly a place in all the extensive compass of his labours where some may not yet be found who thankfully acknowledge him as their spiritual father.

John Wesley did not agree with Whitefield on several important theological points. But when he preached his funeral sermon, he said.

Have we read or heard of any person who called so many thousands, so many myriads of sinners to repentance. Above all, have we read or heard of anyone who has been the blessed instrument of bringing so many sinners from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God?

Valuable as these testimonies are, there is one point which they leave totally untouched. That point is the quantity of indirect good that Whitefield did. The direct effects of his labours were undoubtedly great, but I believe firmly that the indirect effects were even greater. His ministry was made a blessing to thousands who never perhaps either saw or heard him.

Whitefield was among the first in the eighteenth century to revive the old truths which produced the Protestant Reformation. His constant application of the doctrines taught by the Reformers, his repeated reference to the 39 Articles of Faith and Homilies, and the divinity of the best English theologians, obliged many to think, and roused them to examine their own principles. If the whole truth was known, I believe it would prove that the rise and progress of the Evangelical body in the Church of England received a mighty impulse from George Whitefield.

But this is not the only indirect good that Whitefield did in his day. He was among the first to show the right way to meet the attacks of infidels and sceptics on Christianity. He saw clearly that the most powerful weapon against such men is not cold reasoning and dry critical debate but preaching the whole gospel—living the whole gospel—and spreading the whole gospel. It was not the writings of Leland, and the younger Sherlock, and Waterland, and Leslie, that rolled back the flood of infidelity half so much as the preaching of Whitefield and his companions. They were the men who were the true champions of Christianity. Infidels are seldom shaken by mere abstract reasoning. The surest arguments against them are gospel truth and gospel life.

Above all, he was the very first Englishman who seems to have thoroughly understood what Dr. Chalmers aptly called the "aggressive system." He was the first to see that Christ's ministers must do the work

of fishermen. They must not wait for souls to come to them, but must go after souls, and "*compel them to come in.*" He did not sit peacefully by his fireside, like a cat on a rainy day, mourning over the wickedness of the land. He went forth to confront the devil in his high places. He attacked sin and wickedness face to face and gave them no peace. He dived into holes and corners after sinners. He hunted out ignorance and vice wherever they could be found. In short, he set on foot a system of action that, up to his time, had been comparatively unknown in this country, but a system which, once started, has never ceased to be employed down to the present day. City missions, town missions, district visiting societies, open-air preachings, home missions, special services, theatre preachings, are all evidence that the value of the "*aggressive system*" is now thoroughly recognized by all the Churches. We understand better how to go to work now than we did a hundred years ago. But let us never forget that the first man to commence operations of this kind was George Whitefield and let us give him the credit he deserves.

The peculiar character of Whitefield's preaching is the subject which next demands some consideration. Men naturally wish to know what the secret of his unparalleled success was. The subject is one surrounded with considerable difficulty, and it is no easy matter to form a correct judgment about it. The common idea of many people, that he was a mere common place ranting Methodist, remarkable for nothing but great fluency, strong doctrine, and a loud voice, will not bear a moment's investigation. Dr. Johnson was foolish enough to say, that "he vociferated and made an impression, but never drew as much attention as a mountebank does; and that he did not draw attention by doing better than others, but by doing what was strange." But Johnson was anything but infallible when he began to talk about ministers and religion. Such a theory will not hold water. It is contradictory to undeniable facts.

It is a fact that no preacher in England has ever succeeded in attracting the attention of such crowds as Whitefield constantly addressed around London. No preacher has ever been so universally popular in every country that he visited, in England, Scotland, and America. No preacher has ever retained his hold on his hearers so entirely as he did for thirty-four years. His popularity never waned. It was as great at the end of his day as it was at the beginning. Wherever he preached, men would leave their workshops and employments to gather round him and hear like those who heard for eternity. This of itself is a great fact to command the ear of "the masses" for a quarter of a century, and to be preaching incessantly the whole time, is evidence of no common power.

It is another fact that Whitefield's preaching produced a powerful effect on people in every rank of life. He won the admiration of high as well as low, of rich as well as poor, of learned as well as unlearned. If his preaching had been popular with only the uneducated and the poor, we

might have thought it possible that there was little in it but noise. But, so far from this being the case, he seems to have been acceptable to numbers of the nobility and gentry. The Marquis of Lothian, the Earl of Leven, the Earl of Buchan, Lord Rae, Lord Dartmouth, Lord James A. Gordon, might be named among his warmest admirers, beside Lady Huntingdon and a host of other ladies.

It is a fact that eminent critics and literary men, like Lord Bolingbroke and Lord Chesterfield, were frequently among his hearers. Even the cold artificial Chesterfield was known to warm under Whitefield's eloquence. Bolingbroke said, "*He is the most extraordinary man in our times. He has the most commanding eloquence I ever heard in any person.*" Hume the historian declared that it was worth going twenty miles to hear him.

Now, facts like these can never be explained away. They completely upset the theory that Whitefield's preaching was nothing but noise and rant. Bolingbroke, Chesterfield, Hume, and Franklin, were not men to be easily deceived. They were no mean judges of eloquence. They were probably among the best qualified critics of their day. Their unbought and unbiased opinions appear to me to supply unanswerable proof that there must have been something very extraordinary about Whitefield's preaching. But still, after all, the question remains to be answered, What was the secret of Whitefield's unrivalled popularity and effectiveness?

The man who turns to the seventy-five sermons published under Whitefield's name will probably be disappointed. He will not find a commanding intellect or grasp of mind. He will not find a deep philosophy, or very striking thoughts. It is only fair, however, to say, that by far the greater part of these sermons were taken down in shorthand by reporters and published without correction. These worthy men appear to have done their work very indifferently, and were evidently ignorant of stopping and paragraphing, of grammar and of gospel. The consequence is, that many passages in these seventy-five sermons are what Bishop Latimer would have called a "mingle-mangle," and what we should call in this day "a complete mess." No wonder that poor Whitefield says, in one of his last letters, dated September 26, 1769,

I wish you had advertised against the publication of my last sermon. It is not verbatim as I delivered it. In some places it makes me speak false concord, and even nonsense. In others the sense and connection are destroyed by injudicious, disjointed paragraphs, and the whole is entirely unfit for the public review.

I venture, however, to say boldly that, with all their faults, Whitefield's printed sermons will well repay a candid perusal. The reader must remember that they were not carefully prepared for the press, like others, but badly reported, paragraphed, and stopped, and we must read

with this continually before our mind. Moreover, the reader must remember that English composition for speaking to hearers, and English composition for private reading, are almost like two different languages, so that sermons which "preach" well, "read" badly. The reader must remember these two things, and judge accordingly, and I doubt if any reader would find much to admire in many of Whitefield's sermons. For my own part, I must plainly say that I think they are greatly underrated.

Let me now point out what appear to have been the distinctive characteristics of Whitefield's preaching.

First, Whitefield preached a singularly pure gospel. Few men, perhaps, ever gave their hearers so much wheat and so little chaff. He did not get up to talk about his party, his cause, his interest or his office. He was perpetually telling you about your sins, your heart, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, the absolute need of repentance, faith, and holiness, in the way that the Bible presents these mighty subjects. *"Oh, the righteousness of Jesus Christ!"* he would often say; *"I must be excused if I mention it in almost all my sermons."* Preaching of this kind is the preaching that God delights to honour. It must be pre-eminently a manifestation of truth.

Second, Whitefield's preaching was singularly lucid and simple. His hearers, whatever they might think of his doctrine, could never fail to understand what he meant. His style of speaking was easy, plain, and conversational. He seemed to dislike long and involved sentences. He always saw his mark and went directly at it. He seldom troubled his hearers with obscure argument and intricate reasoning. Simple Bible statements, apt illustrations, and pertinent anecdotes, were the more common weapons that he used. The consequence was that his hearers always understood him. He never shot above their heads. Here again is one grand element of a preacher's success. He must labour to be understood. It was a wise saying of Archbishop Usher, *"To make easy things seem hard is every man's work; but to make hard things easy is the work of a great preacher."*

Third, Whitefield was a singularly bold and direct preacher. He never used that indefinite expression *"we,"* which seems so peculiar to English pulpit oratory, and which only leaves a hearer's mind in a state of misty confusion. He met men face to face, like one who had a message from God to them, *"I have come here to speak to you about your soul."* The result was that many of his hearers often used to think that his sermons were specially meant for themselves. He was not content, as many, with sticking on a meagre tailpiece of application at the end of a long discourse. On the contrary, a constant vein of application ran through all his sermons. *"This is for you, and this is for you."* His hearers were never let alone.

Fourth, his singular power of description. The Arabians have a proverb

which says, *"He is the best orator who can turn men's ears into eyes."* Whitefield seems to have had a peculiar faculty of doing this. He dramatized his subject so thoroughly that it seemed to move and walk before your eyes. He used to draw such vivid pictures of the things he was handling, that his hearers could believe they saw and heard them. *"On one occasion,"* says one of his biographers,

"Lord Chesterfield was among his hearers. The great preacher, in describing the miserable condition of an unconverted sinner, illustrated the subject by describing a blind beggar. The night was dark, and the road dangerous. The poor mendicant was deserted by his dog near the edge of a precipice and had nothing to aid him in groping his way but his staff. Whitefield so warmed with his subject, and enforced it with such graphic power, that the whole auditory was kept in breathless silence, as if it saw the movements of the poor old man; and at length, when the beggar was about to take the fatal step which would have hurled him down the precipice to certain destruction, Lord Chesterfield actually made a rush forward to save him, exclaiming aloud, 'He is gone! he is gone!' The noble lord had been so entirely carried away by the preacher, that he forgot the whole was a picture."

Fifth, his tremendous earnestness. One poor uneducated man said of him, that *"he preached like a lion."* He succeeded in showing people that he at least believed all he was saying, and that his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, were bent on making them believe it too. His sermons were not like the morning and evening gun at Portsmouth, a kind of formal discharge, fired off as a matter of course, that disturbs nobody. They were all life and fire. There was no getting away from them. Sleep was next to impossible. You must listen whether you liked it or not.

There was a holy violence about him which firmly took your attention by storm. You were fairly carried off your legs by his energy before you had time to consider what you would do. This, we may be sure, was one secret of his success. We must convince men that we are in earnest ourselves if we want to be believed. The difference between one preacher and another, is often not so much in the things said, as in the manner in which they are said.

It is recorded by one of his biographers that an American gentleman once went to hear him, for the first time, after hearing a report of Whitefield's preaching powers. The day was rainy, the congregation comparatively thin, and the beginning of the sermon rather heavy. Our American friend began to say to himself; *"This man is no great wonder after all"* He looked round and saw the congregation as little interested as himself. One old man, in front of the pulpit, had fallen asleep. But all

at once Whitefield stopped short. His countenance changed. And then he suddenly broke forth in an altered tone.

If I had come to speak to you in my own name, you might well rest your elbows on your knees, and your heads on your hands, and sleep; and once in a while look up, and say, What is this babbler talking of? But I have not come to you in my own name. No! I have come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts.

There he brought down his hand and foot with a force that made the building ring, and said, "I must and will be heard." The congregation started. The old man woke up at once. "Ay, ay!" cried Whitefield, fixing his eyes on him,

I have waked you up, have I? I meant to do it. I am not come here to preach to stocks and stones: I have come to you in the name of the Lord God of Hosts, and I must, and will, have an audience.

The hearers were stripped of their apathy at once. Every word of the sermon after this was heard with deep attention, and the American gentleman never forgot it.

Sixth, the immense amount of pathos and feeling which it always contained. It was common for Whitefield to weep profusely in the pulpit. Cornelius Winter, who often accompanied him in his latter journeys, went so far as to say that he hardly ever knew him get through a sermon without some tears.

There seems to have been nothing artificial in this. He felt intensely for the souls before him, and his feelings found an outlet in tears. Of all the ingredients of his success in preaching, none, I suspect, were so powerful as this. It awakened affections and touched secret springs in men, which no amount of reasoning and demonstration could have moved. It smoothed down the prejudices which many had conceived against him. They could not hate the man who wept so much over their souls. "I came to hear you," said one to him, "with my pocket full of stones, intending to break your head; but your sermon got the better of me, and broke my heart."

I will now ask the reader to add to this analysis of Whitefield's preaching, that even by nature he possessed several of the rarest gifts which fit a man to be an orator. His action was perfect—so perfect that even Garrick, the famous actor, gave it unqualified praise. His voice was as wonderful as his action—so powerful that he could make thirty thousand people hear him at once, and yet so musical and well-toned that some said he could raise tears by his pronunciation of the word "Mesopotamia."

His manner in the pulpit was so curiously graceful and fascinating that it was said that no one could hear him for five minutes without forgetting that he squinted. His fluency and command of appropriate language were of the highest order, prompting him always to use the right word and to put it in the right place. Add, I repeat, these gifts to the things already mentioned, and then consider whether there is not sufficient in our hands to account for his power and popularity as a preacher.

For my own part, I have no hesitation in saying that I believe no English preacher has ever possessed such a combination of excellent qualifications as Whitefield. Some, no doubt, have surpassed him in some of his gifts. Others, perhaps, have equalled him in other gifts. But for a well-balanced combination of some of the finest gifts that a preacher can possess, together with an unrivalled voice, manner, delivery, action, and command of words, Whitefield, stands alone.

No Englishman, I believe, dead or alive, has ever equalled him. And I suspect we shall always find that, just in proportion as preachers have approached that curious combination of rare gifts which Whitefield possessed, just in that very proportion have they attained what Clarendon defines true eloquence to be—*"a strange power of making themselves believed."*

Let us dwell, for a moment on the inner life and personal character of this great spiritual hero of the 18th century. In fact, there is no necessity for doing so. He was a singularly transparent man. There was nothing about him requiring apology or explanation. His faults and good qualities were both clear and plain as noonday. I shall therefore content myself with simply pointing out the prominent features of his character, so far as they can be gathered from his letters and the accounts of his contemporaries and then bring my sketch of him to a conclusion.

First, he was a man of deep and sincere humility. No one can read the fourteen hundred letters of his, published by Dr. Gillies, without observing his humility. Again and again, in the very zenith of his popularity, we find him speaking of himself and his works in the lowliest terms. *"God be merciful to me a sinner,"* he writes on September 11, 1753,

*And give me, for his infinite mercy's sake, an humble,
thankful, and resigned heart Truly I am viler than the vilest,
and stand amazed at his employing such a wretch as I am.*

"Let none of my friends," he wrote on December 27, 1753, *"cry to such a sluggish, lukewarm, unprofitable worm, Spare thyself. Rather spur me on, I pray you, with an Awake, thou sleeper, and begin to do something for thy God."* Language like this, no doubt, seems foolishness and artificial to

the world, but the well-instructed Bible reader will see in it the heartfelt experience of all the brightest saints. It is the language of men like Baxter, and Brainerd, and M'Cheyne. It is the same mind that was in the inspired Apostle Paul. Those that have most light and grace are always the humblest men.

Second, He was a man of burning love to our Lord Jesus Christ. That name which is "*above every name*" stands out incessantly in all his correspondence. Like fragrant ointment, it gives a savour to all his communications. He seems never weary of saying something about Jesus. "*My Master,*" as George Herbert said, is never long out of his mind. His love, his atonement, his precious blood, his righteousness, his readiness to receive sinners, his patience and tender dealing with saints, are themes which appear always fresh before his eyes. In this respect, at least, there is a curious likeness between him and that glorious Scottish divine, Samuel Rutherford.

Third, he was a man of unwearied diligence and laboriousness about his Master's business. It would be difficult, perhaps, to name any one in the annals of the Churches who worked so hard for Christ, and so thoroughly spent himself in his service. Henry Venn, in a funeral sermon for him, preached at Bath, bore the following testimony.

"What a sign and wonder was this man of God in the greatness of his labours! One cannot but stand amazed that his mortal frame could, for the space of near thirty years, without interruption, sustain the weight of them; for what so trying to the human frame, in youth especially, as long-continued, frequent, and violent straining of the lungs? Who that knows their structure would think it possible that a person little above the age of manhood could speak in a single week, and that for years—in general forty hours, and in very many weeks sixty—and that to thousands; and after this labour, instead of taking any rest, could be offering up prayers and intercessions, with hymns and spiritual songs, as his manner was, in every house to which he was invited? The truth is, that in point of labour this extraordinary servant of God did as much in a few weeks as most of those who exert themselves are able to do in the space of a year."

Fourth, he was a man of eminent self-denial right to the end of his life. His style of living was most simple. He was remarkable to a proverb for moderation in eating and drinking. All through life he was an early riser. His usual hour for getting up was four o'clock, both in summer and winter, and equally punctual was he in retiring about ten at night.

A man of prayerful habits, he frequently spent whole nights in reading and devotion. Cornelius Winter, who often slept in the same room, says

that he would sometimes rise during the night for this purpose. He cared little for money, except as a help to the cause of Christ, and refused it, when pressed upon him for his own use, once to the amount of £7000. He amassed no fortune and founded no wealthy family. The little money he left behind him at his death arose entirely from the legacies of friends.

Fifth, he was a man of remarkable disinterestedness and singleness of eye. He seemed to live only for two objects—the glory of God and the salvation of souls. He knew nothing of secondary and hidden objects. He raised no party of followers who took his name. He established no denominational system, of which his own writings should be cardinal elements. A favourite expression of his is most characteristic of the man. *"Let the name of George Whitefield perish, so long as Christ is exalted."*

Sixth, he was a man of a singularly happy and cheerful spirit. No one who saw him could ever doubt that he enjoyed his religion. Tried as he was in many ways throughout his ministry—slandered by some, despised by others, misrepresented by false brethren, opposed everywhere by the ignorant clergy of his time, worried by incessant controversy—his flexibility never failed him. He was eminently a rejoicing Christian, whose very demeanour recommended his Master's service.

After his death, a respected lady of New York, spoke of the influences by which the Spirit won her heart to God. This is what she said. *"Mr. Whitefield was so cheerful that it tempted me to become a Christian."*

Seventh, he was a man of extraordinary charity, catholicity, and liberality in his religion. He knew nothing of that narrow-minded feeling which makes some men fancy that everything must be barren outside their own camps, and that their own party has got a complete monopoly of truth and heaven. He loved all who loved the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.

He measured all by the measure which the angels use. *"Did they profess repentance towards God, faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, and holiness of conversation?"* If they did, they were as his brethren. His soul was with such men, by whatever name they were called. Minor differences were wood, hay, and stubble to him. The marks of the Lord Jesus were the only marks he cared for.

This catholicity is the more remarkable when the spirit of the times he lived in is considered. Even the Erskines, in Scotland, wanted him to preach for no other denomination but their own—the Secession Church. He asked them, *"Why only for them?"* and they answer, *"they were the Lord's people."* This was more than Whitefield could stand. He asked *"if there were no other Lord's people but themselves?"* He told them, *"if all others were the devil's people, they certainly had more need to be*

preached to!" In the end he informed them that "if the Pope himself would lend him his pulpit, he would gladly proclaim the righteousness of Christ in it."

To this catholicity of spirit, he adhered all his days. If other Christians misrepresented him, he forgave them and if they refused to work with him, he still loved them. Nothing could be a weightier testimony against narrow-mindedness than his request, made shortly before his death, that, when he did die, John Wesley should be asked to preach his funeral sermon. Wesley and he had long ceased to agree about Calvinistic points. But Whitefield, to the very last, was determined to forget minor differences, and to regard Wesley as Calvin did Luther, *"only as a good servant of Jesus Christ."* On another occasion a censorious professor of religion asked him *"whether he thought they would see John Wesley in heaven?"* He answered *"No, sir, I fear not he will be so near the throne, and we shall be at such a distance, that we shall hardly get a sight of him."*

I am not saying that the subject of this chapter was a man without faults. Like all God's saints, he was an imperfect creature. He sometimes erred in judgment. He often drew rash conclusions about providence and mistook his own inclination for God's leadings. He was frequently hasty both with his tongue and his pen. He had no business to say that *"Archbishop Tillotson knew no more of the gospel than Mahomet."*

He was wrong to set down some people as the Lord's enemies, and others as the Lord's friends so precipitately and positively as he sometimes did. He was to blame for denouncing many of the clergy as *"letter-learned Pharisees,"* because they could not receive the doctrine of the new birth. But still, after all this has been said, there can be no doubt that in the main he was an eminently holy, self-denying, and consistent man. *"The faults of his character,"* says an American writer,

Were like spots on the sun—detected without much difficulty by any cool and careful observer who takes pains to look for them, but to all practical purposes lost in one general and genial effulgence.

Well indeed would it be for the Churches of our day, if God was to give them more ministers like the great evangelist of England a hundred years ago!

It only remains to say that those who wish to know more about Whitefield would do well to peruse the seven volumes of his letters and other publications, which Dr. Gillies edited in 1770. I am much mistaken if they are not agreeably surprised at their contents. To me it is matter of astonishment that, amidst the many reprints of the nineteenth century, no publisher has yet attempted a complete reprint of the works of

George Whitefield.

A short extract from the conclusion of a sermon preached by Whitefield on Kennington Common, London, may be interesting to some readers, and may serve to give them some faint idea of the great preacher's style. It was a sermon on the text, *"What think ye of Christ?"* (Matthew 22:42).

"O my brethren, my heart is enlarged towards you. I trust I feel something of that hidden but powerful presence of Christ, whilst I am preaching to you. Indeed, it is sweet—it is exceedingly comfortable. All the harm I wish you, who without cause are my enemies, is that you felt the like. Believe me, though it would be hell to my soul to return to a natural state again, yet I would willingly change states with you for a little while, that you might know what it is to have Christ dwelling in your hearts by faith. Do not turn your backs. Do not let the devil hurry you away. Be not afraid of convictions. Do not think worse of the doctrine because preached without the church walls. Our Lord, in the days of his flesh, preached on a mount, in a ship, and a field; and I am persuaded many have felt his gracious presence here. Indeed, we speak what we know. Do not therefore reject the kingdom of God against yourselves. Be so wise as to receive our witness.

"I cannot, I will not let you go. Stay a little and let us reason together. However lightly you may esteem your souls, I know our Lord has set an unspeakable value on them. He thought them worthy of his most precious blood. I beseech you, therefore, O sinners, be ye reconciled to God. I hope you do not fear being accepted in the Beloved. Behold, he calleth you. Behold, he prevents, and follows you with his mercy, and hath sent forth his servants into the highways and hedges to compel you to come in.

"Remember, then, that at such an hour of such a day, in such a year, in this place, you were all told what you ought to think concerning Jesus Christ. If you now perish, it will not be from lack of knowledge. I am free from the blood of you all. You cannot say I have been preaching damnation to you. You cannot say I have, like legal preachers, been requiring you to make bricks without straw. I have not bidden you to make yourselves saints and then come to God. I have offered you salvation on as cheap terms as you can desire. I have offered you Christ's whole wisdom, Christ's whole righteousness, Christ's whole sanctification and eternal redemption, if you will but believe on him. If you say you cannot believe, you say right; for faith, as well as every other blessing, is the gift of God. But then wait upon God, and who knows but he may have mercy on thee.

"Why do we not entertain more loving thoughts of Christ? Do

you think he will have mercy on others and not on you? Are you not sinners? Did not Jesus Christ come into the world to save sinners?

"If you say you are the chief of sinners, I answer that will be no hindrance to your salvation. Indeed, it will not, if you lay hold on Christ by faith. Read the Evangelists, and see how kindly he behaved to his disciples, who had fled from and denied him. 'Go, tell my brethren,' says he. He did not say, 'Go, tell those traitors,' but 'Go, tell my brethren and Peter.' It is as though he had said, 'Go, tell my brethren in general, and Peter in particular, that I am risen. Oh, comfort his poor drooping heart. Tell him I am reconciled to him. Bid him weep no more so bitterly. For though with oaths and curses he thrice denied me, yet I have died for his sins; I have risen again for his justification: I freely forgive him all.'" Thus, slow to anger and of great kindness, was our all-merciful High Priest. And do you think he has changed his nature and forgets poor sinners, now he is exalted to the right hand of God? No; he is the same yesterday, today, and forever; and sitteth there only to make intercession for us.

"Come, then, ye harlots; come, ye publicans; come, ye most abandoned sinners, come and believe on Jesus Christ. Though the whole world despise you and cast you out, yet he will not disdain to take you up. Oh amazing, oh infinitely condescending love! even you he will not be ashamed to call his brethren. How will you escape if you neglect such a glorious offer of salvation? What would the damned spirits now in the prison of hell give if Christ was so freely offered to them. And why are we not lifting up our eyes in torments? Does anyone out of this great multitude dare say he does not deserve damnation? Why are we left, and others taken away by death? What is this but an instance of God's free grace, and a sign of his good-will toward us? Let God's goodness lead us to repentance. Oh, let there be joy in heaven over some of you repenting!"