

# George Whitefield: A Commemorative Address

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**Given by Geoffrey Nuttall  
on Sunday 1 November 1970**

*It is appropriate to remember the 225th anniversary of George Whitefield's death in 1995 by this sermon preached by Dr Nuttall at the Whitefield Memorial Church, particularly as the emphasis in the sermon is upon the Lord Jesus Christ which is the way that Whitefield himself would have required it.*

Ezekiel 34:26      'I will cause the shower to come down in his season; there shall be showers of blessing.'

Mark 1:17          'Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.'

Your ministers have asked me to speak to you tonight about George Whitefield, and to do so as part of our worship. This church owes its existence to Whitefield, by whom the original building was opened on 7 November 1756. He was never its minister, in our Congregational sense of a called and settled pastor; but he had a special relationship to it and to the Moorfields Tabernacle, which were the two places where he preached most often and the two largest buildings open to evangelical preachers of all the different Protestant denominations. When one of these preachers, the Welshman Howel Davies, died—in 1770, just a few months before Whitefield's own death on 30 September—the poet and hymnwriter, William Williams, wrote in an elegy for him:

Tot'nam Court-Road shall hear his voice no more,  
Where crouds on crouds as waves came to adore.<sup>1</sup>

Here, as elsewhere, indoors or out, evangelical preachers then drew immense crowds; and none more so than Whitefield himself, after whom the building here at one time became known as Whitefield's Tabernacle. The name *Tabernacle* was chosen at first to indicate a temporary structure but also (like the name *Chapel*, which was adopted by the followers of John Wesley and lasted longer) suggested that the building was neither a parish church nor a Dissenting meeting-house, but auxiliary to both and ready to welcome Dissenters and Churchmen alike. To us today *Tabernacle* sounds peculiar; but it was a good scriptural word for a building erected for worship: it signified the place where God dwelt, and where his worshippers might meet him face to face. It thus expressed a conviction dear to these evangelical preachers, Whitefield among them, that worship meant, above all, coming into God's presence and meeting him. The presence of God among his worshippers, making them holy, might make the building itself precious; but there was no need, indeed there could be no place, for superficial and outward adornment. The Tabernacle was a huge edifice of no architectural merit; it had plain red brick walls, small windows and doors like entrances to a barn; even the seating accommodation was rude and consisted mainly of benches rather than pews.<sup>2</sup> When Mr Salmon planned this present building, he was anxious that—within limits—its noticeably simple character should be preserved. It thus provides association of a visible kind with Whitefield, whose memory is preserved in the name you now use, the Whitefield Memorial Church.

Whitefield was a figure of considerable importance, and his place is secure, in the religious history of this country. The bicentenary of his death has been noticed in other churches, and in the religious press as well; but there is a special appropriateness in our remembering him here. As a result of his preaching, or of the preaching of men whom he converted, a number of congregations came into being, and were sometimes grouped in a *connexion* (as the word then was) such as the Rodborough Connexion in Gloucestershire;<sup>3</sup> but most of these congregations in time became Congregational churches, as this one has done; neither Whitefield nor his followers founded a separate denomination, as the followers of Wesley did. The Moorfields Tabernacle is now gone; in 1868 it was rebuilt and renamed the New Tabernacle and in 1908 it removed to Alexandra Park, where, like this building, it bears the name Whitefield Memorial Church; and, so far as I know, you two and the Whitefield Tabernacle at Kingswood, Bristol, alone preserve his name. It is therefore good that we here should remember him and thank God for him and for all the blessing and life that have flowed from his preaching and his faithfulness during the two hundred years since his death.

And this is what I want to do; and why I began the address with a couple of texts. During their Yearly Meeting (which corresponds to our own May Meetings) the Quakers have this excellent custom: one of the Clerks to the Meeting reads aloud what they call a 'Testimony to the Grace of God in the life' of one or more recently deceased Friends. This is my purpose tonight: to bear testimony to the Grace of God in the life of George Whitefield, and with you to thank God for him, that we may all offer our lives anew to be better servants of God ourselves. You keep a small bust of Whitefield on the windowsill there, close to the preacher. I do not think Whitefield would smile on me if I were simply to talk about *him* and praise *him*. If we are to commemorate him in the only way he might have approved, we must talk of *Jesus* and praise *God* for his inexhaustible life-giving grace. 'I will cause the shower to come down in his season; there shall be showers of blessing;' 'Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.' Those are the two texts which after much consideration seem to me to be the right ones for commemorating George Whitefield: God's promise, to those who are his, of 'showers of blessing'; Jesus' call, 'Come ye after me'. The word *come* is in both: and the showers of blessing coming to us from God, with our coming to Christ and then going after him, following him, give us the meeting with God which, I have said already, is deep in Whitefield's experience and in his preaching. 'Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men:' Whitefield heard these words of Jesus to the first disciples as if uttered in his own ear, addressed directly to himself; and, wherever he went, he went fishing for men, catching and winning souls, bringing them not to himself but to Jesus. He did not organize any new denomination; but 'Come!' he cried again and again: 'Come! Come!'

I suppose many of you here will be familiar with the outlines of Whitefield's life. For the benefit of any who may not be, I will run over them. He was born on 16 December 1714 at Gloucester, where his father, and after his father's death in Whitefield's infancy his mother, and then his stepfather, were successively proprietor of the Bell Inn. He was the youngest in the family, with five elder brothers and one sister. After schooling in Gloucester he went up to Oxford in 1732, to Pembroke College, from which he graduated as BA four years later. While in Oxford he came under the influence of a group of serious young men led by the Wesleys (nicknamed the Holy Club); and by this means, with the help of a book written in the previous century which Charles Wesley put into his hands, he was brought to the knowledge of God, and after prolonged inward struggle found what he calls 'an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God, and a full assurance of faith . . . My joys', he writes, 'were like a spring tide, and overflowed the banks!'.<sup>4</sup> From then onwards 'showers of blessing' were his

constant experience, and he never looked back. He did not have the difficulties experienced later by many of his own converts in finding a bishop willing to ordain him. The Bishop of Gloucester was sympathetic, and ordained him first deacon in 1736, and three years later to the full orders of a priest in the Church of England. By this time he had already become noted and popular for his remarkable power as a preacher. 'I now preached generally nine times a week', he writes; and here in London, 'on Sunday mornings, long before day, you might see streets filled with people going to church, with their lanthorns in their hands, and hear them conversing about the things of God'.<sup>5</sup>

He had also already been to America for missionary work in Georgia, then a young colony, where his friends the Wesleys had preceded him. Those years either side of 1740 were a wonderful time of expansion and hope for these young Christians. The Wesleys, Whitefield, Cennick and other Moravian brethren, Howel Harris and other Welsh evangelists, were all active, and all active together, consciously and deliberately sharing in a single movement of revival in religion that, besides affecting Scotland, which Whitefield visited with great effect, was at work across the Atlantic as well. This was the setting of Whitefield's ordination and mission, whether at home or abroad, especially in these first years, during the 1740s. 'From New-England', he writes in 1742 to the Baptist minister in Leominster, 'fresh and surprising glad tidings are sent . . . In Scotland, the fruits of my poor labours are abiding and apparent. In Wales I hear the word of the Lord runs and is glorified, as also in many places in England. In London, our Saviour is doing great things daily . . . We scarce know what it is to have a meeting without tears'.<sup>6</sup> London was the centre, where the Moorfields Tabernacle was erected in April 1741; but the circumference was in America, and for Whitefield much more so than for Wesley: Whitefield as well as Wesley claimed the world as his parish,<sup>7</sup> and, while Wesley crossed the Irish Sea forty-two times, he never went back to America, whereas Whitefield crossed the Atlantic no less than thirteen times. And, wherever he went, it was the same, whether in London, in Glasgow, or in Philadelphia. 'I can't pass over in silence', a Philadelphia merchant wrote in 1740 to a friend in London,

'the surprising change and alteration I see in the people of this place since that shining light the Reverend Mr Whitefield has been amongst them . . . He appears to me to be a very sincere person, zealous for his Master's cause, and justly admired for his elegant though plain language and easy to be understood, and for the serious vein of piety that runs through all his exhortations, crowded after by multitudes . . . He is endeavouring to reclaim a wicked, vicious, and sinful age, and that with great authority and courage, and I must own to you that I never heard of or saw his fellow'.<sup>8</sup>

In Philadelphia (as in London) Benjamin Franklin wrote, 'it seem'd as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk thro' the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street'.<sup>9</sup>

That is, more or less, what everyone said of Whitefield and of the effect he had; and there is not much more that can be said; for, while extraordinarily broad in its outreach, Whitefield's life is extraordinarily narrow in its consistency, persistence and devotion; and it was not a long life. On 14 November 1741 he married a widow, a Welshwoman named Elizabeth James; she died two years before him (she was buried here in Tottenham Court Road); and their only child, a son named John, lived only four months. Whitefield's remarkable preaching had the unusual quality of appealing to, or at least intriguing, the nobility and court, as well as the illiterate, poor and downtrodden. Lord Bolingbroke and Lord Chesterfield were among those who came to hear him. There is a story of Chesterfield, when Whitefield was describing a blind beggar tottering at the edge of a precipice, bounding from

his seat with the cry ‘Good God! he’s gone!’; and in America Benjamin Franklin, though he had come in an unsympathetic frame of mind, was so moved by Whitefield’s appeal for financial help for the orphanage established by him in Georgia, that in the end he emptied his pockets into the collection, gold and all.<sup>10</sup> In August 1748 Whitefield became a chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon; and for a time there were political currents flowing round the Prince of Wales as the centre of the Tory opposition party (to which Bolingbroke and Chesterfield both belonged), current which some hoped might lift Whitefield to the bench of bishops.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to speculate how things might have developed if this had come to pass; but I do not think Whitefield himself gave much thought to it. The grand alliance of Evangelicals had broken up by this time—first the Wesleys and Whitefield had found it impossible to work together owing to differences of doctrine, and at the second conference of others than the Wesleys, Whitefield was chosen Moderator; but then Cennick and the Moravians had broken away, and in 1750 the Welsh evangelists suffered grievous division between two rival leaders—but through it all Whitefield himself seems to have been little affected. This was partly because all through his life he refused to be diverted by the business of organising (with the disagreements which so easily accompany this), diverted from his own particular calling and charge, which he believed to be that of general itinerant preaching, awakening, evangelizing, converting of any and all who might listen. Whitefield’s simplicity of temperament as well as of purpose also enabled him to keep on affectionate terms with fellow-workers who were themselves too ready to quarrel. His entry in his diary after meeting Howel Harris—‘My heart was knit closely to him. I wanted to catch some of his fire . . . A divine and strong sympathy seemed to be between us’<sup>12</sup>—suggests the affectionateness and generosity of spirit which attached many besides Harris to him, and kept them attached. He never fell out, as so many others did, with Lady Huntingdon, whose chapels he was opening, and also her college at Trevecca, during the last twelve months that he spent in England. Though he had been seriously ill, he was determined to return to America, to make final arrangements for his beloved orphanage (which he bequeathed to Lady Huntingdon); and at Newburyport, Massachusetts, he died, probably of angina, on 30 September 1770. He was only 55. Even his death was characteristic and dramatic. He had been preaching, and was now exhausted and on the way to bed; but on the way up he stood on the stairs with the candle in his hand; and there he remained, still exhorting the people, till the candle burnt out; by next morning he was dead. Among the many funeral sermons, a notable one was preached here, in Tottenham Court Road, by his old friend, John Wesley, who spoke to the congregation of ‘our dear friend’, ‘your beloved Brother, Friend, and Pastor; yea, and Father too; for how many are here whom he hath begotten in the Lord?’ Wesley referred to ‘the uninterrupted shower of blessings whereith God was pleased to succeed’ Whitefield’s ‘labours’, and to ‘the Integrity, which was inseparable from his whole character’; and for ‘of all others . . . the distinguishing part of his character’ he pointed to ‘an heart susceptible of the most generous and the most tender Friendship’.<sup>13</sup>

The church historian, John Stoughton, who is not given to fanciful or exaggerated language, says that

‘Whitefield bears away the palm from all rivals in pulpit oratory. Perhaps no man of any age in the world’s history was exactly like him . . . By his own voice, so far as human instrumentality was concerned (he) converted thousands on thousands from the error of their ways. No one man before him had ever come into immediate contact with so many minds; no one voice had ever run in so many ears; no one ministry had touched so many hearts. The *depth* of the impression produced is as wonderful as its *extent*. People were not merely interested, persuaded, convinced, . . . they were quickened with a new kind of life . . . Say that it was mere

excitement; still the fact remains, that no such excitement by preaching had ever in this country been produced before'.<sup>14</sup>

I should like to add my own confirmation of this remarkable tribute by saying that I find, when working on the development of the Evangelical Revival in this country, that the evangelical leaders in the next generation often owed their conversion to Whitefield. Torial Joss, the sea-captain who assisted Whitefield and was left by him in charge of the work here, was naturally one of these; but so was Cornelius Winter, a man like Whitefield for his large heart, who is commemorated by the Winter Memorial Church at Painswick, where he combined his pastorate with an academy for training ministers. So was Rowland Hill, of the Surrey Chapel and of the Tabernacle at Wotton-under-Edge (who in turn, may I say in parenthesis, converted one of my own ministerial great-grandfathers). Another was Robert Robinson, the minister and virtual founder of the Baptist church in Cambridge, with whose hymn, 'Mighty God, while angels bless thee' we opened our service tonight. So that it is true to say that, though no denomination bears his name, churches all over the country owe their existence, as this one does, to Whitefield's preaching. And how many unknown people—as unknown then as now—owed it to him that they were brought into captivity to Christ! No one who listened to him could doubt that he was in earnest. Did you notice the sentence I quoted earlier from him, 'We scarce know what it is to have a meeting without tears'? If you did, you probably thought it quaint; but he meant it literally. Of a meeting in Bristol in 1739 he says, 'Floods of tears flowed plentifully, and my heart was so melted, that I prayed for them with strong cryings – and many tears.' Two years earlier, at a sacrament service at Christmas time here in London, he says, 'The tears of the communicants mingled with the cup'.<sup>15</sup> In 1844 an old man of eighty-one named John Knight recorded how he had heard Whitefield preach in 1769 on his last visit to his native parts in Gloucestershire.

'I was about 6 years of age', he writes, 'my father held me up in his arms, and though so young I well remember to have seen the tears run down the cheek of that Servant of God while preaching the love of his Master to dying sinners'.<sup>16</sup>

Whitefield was totally engaged. 'I have heard,' Knight writes, 'that it was worth going 10 miles to hear him give out that Doxology, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow"'.<sup>16</sup>

If Whitefield was pre-eminently a preacher, the natural question is: what was his preaching like, and what made it so remarkable? After allowing for the imponderables of time and circumstance and the inimitables of personality, I think one must say that its secret lay in an unalterable and indefatigable simplicity and singleness of purpose. Whitefield found Jesus everywhere: he found him everywhere in the Bible, in the Old Testament no less than the New, through an allegorical mode of interpretation which gave scope for the vivid use of imagination; he found him everywhere, no less, in his own everyday experience; and his one consuming desire was to bring others to Jesus. 'If thine eye be single', Jesus once said, 'thy whole body shall be full of light'. Whitefield's singleness of purpose, the *integrity* which Wesley picked out as his distinguishing characteristic, expressed itself, when he preached, in a *simplicity* of language and illustration which first struck home to, and then united, all who listened to him; nor did he hesitate to speak from his own experience, in a way some might find embarrassing or egotistical, had it not been that his interest, so evidently, was not in himself but in Jesus, to whom he called others to come, as he had come; and when Whitefield said 'Come!', people came.

Most sermons, if printed for reading, are revised, and any original immediacy they may have had is taken away. Fortunately we possess the last sermon Whitefield preached here at Tottenham Court Road, on Sunday 27 August 1769, together with one preached in the Moorfields Tabernacle the following Wednesday, before he left Ramsgate for America, both of them in a state *not* revised by him, for he never returned. They were published<sup>17</sup> in November 1770, after his death, by an anonymous admirer, who says, ‘The florid style was never affected by Mr Whitefield—but their peculiar manner will sufficiently bespeak the Author, will stamp them his own, and leave no room to doubt their authenticity’.

The sermon preached here was from the passage about Jacob’s dream of ‘a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven’ (Gen 28:12-15); the sermon at Moorfields was from the text ‘My sheep hear my voice . . . and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand’ (John 10:27-28). Both were consciously farewell sermons, in which Whitefield looked back over his thirty years in the ministry.

His text at Moorfields had carried him all the way through.

‘I have got to part from you with good news in my mouth’, he said. ‘*I give them eternal life*. Oh that these words may come with as much warmth to your hearts, as they did to mine near five-and-thirty years ago! I am sure I never prayed so much against my infirmities, as against going into holy orders so soon . . . I remember once at Gloucester (I know the room, and I cannot help looking up at the window, whenever I am there and go by. I know the bed-side, I know the floor on which I have prostrated for weeks together); . . . and I remember once I was crying, *I cannot go! I am a novice!* . . . At last these words came into my mind, *My sheep hear my voice, &c. and none shall pluck them out of my hand*. Then I said, Lord I will go, send me when thou wilt.’ ‘I call heaven to witness’, he says later, ‘and earth to witness, and God to witness, and his holy angels to witness, that tho’ I had preferment enough offered me, tho’ I was offered two parishes before I was two-and-twenty, tho’ the late bishop of Gloucester was my friend, and used always to invite me to his table before the sacrament, God knows I cared for no other preferment than to suffer for the Lamb of God. In this spirit I came out, in this spirit I came up to this metropolis. I was thinking Jacob went over the brook with a staff, but I could not say I had so much as a staff. I had no friend, no servant, not a single person to introduce me . . . I might have settled in London, I was offered hundreds then, yet I gave it all up to turn pilgrim for God, to go over into a foreign clime, out of a love for immortal souls and I go, I hope, with that single intention now. When I came from America last, I thought I had no other river to cross but the river Jordan, . . . I thought of nothing but retiring into some little corner, that I might pray though I could not preach. But God has been pleased to renew my strength, God has been pleased in some measure to bring back my spirits, and as I find my spirits return, I find my heart willing to be a pilgrim preacher for the blessed God . . . This is the thirteenth time of my crossing the water, and I find it a little difficult at this time of life. But I am willing to go. I am as clear as light in my call . . . and my prayers for you shall be, *Lord! let nothing pluck them out of thy hands* . . . And if I am drowned, if I can, while I am drowning, I will say, *Lord! take care of my dear London friends*’.

Though ‘a pilgrim preacher’, as he calls himself, and never the pastor here, Whitefield was far, you see, from being devoid of pastoral feeling.

The sermon is not all like this; this is the autobiographical part; earlier we find this:

‘Christ does not say, Are you an Independent, or Baptist, or Presbyterian? or are you a Church of England-man? nor did he ask, Are you a Methodist? All these things are of our own silly invention. But the whole world the Lord divides into two classes of people, sheep and goats.

The Lord give us to see this morning to which class we belong! . . . You know sheep generally love to be together, they don't love to be alone, and you will seldom see a sheep by itself. . . And they are but little creatures, and Christ's people may well be compared to them in this: . . . O, think some, if we had but great people on our side, King, lords and commons! what then? alas! alas! do you think the church of God would go on a bit better? . . . No! no! religion never prospers when it has too much sunshine. Christ's people are a little people . . . Sheep are likewise some of the most quiet, harmless creatures on earth . . . Come learn of me says Christ, for I am meek and lowly of heart . . . And I believe of all creatures', he goes on, 'sheep are the most apt to wander; . . . Turn a horse out and he will go back again, and a dog will find his way home; but when a poor sheep wanders, he knows not his way, baaing here, bleating there, as much as to say, dear stranger show me my home again. Thus Christ's sheep are apt to wander, without the great shepherd keeps them at home. They leap over this hedge, and that ditch, and often return home shorn: but at the same time sheep are the most useful creatures. They manure the land which feeds them—they clothe our bodies with their wool, and there is not a single part of the sheep but what is useful. Oh, my brethren! God grant you and I may in this respect answer the character of sheep'.

'Take care, take care', he ends this sermon, 'if you never was among Christ's sheep, may you be brought into the number now. Come, come, see what it is to have eternal life! *Haste! haste! haste* away to the great, the glorious shepherd! He calls you, he holds up his crook; and if you never heard his voice before, God grant this may be the happy time, that I may have the same comfort now I had the last time of my leaving you, to be the means of converting one soul to God! O may it prove a farewell sermon indeed to some, to make them bid a farewell to the world and the devil! *Come! come! come! come!* said the Lord Jesus. *Nothing shall pluck you out of my hand.* With this I leave you, ye dear sheep! God keep you from wandering! I don't care where you go, so as you are kept under the care of the great Shepherd and Bishop of souls. May the Lord Jesus bless his preaching to you'.

In the other sermon, the one preached here, Whitefield takes the congenial story of Jacob's vision and develops it in much the same manner and to much the same end. Here too we have autobiography.

'I have never gone yet', he says, 'but God has been pleased to bless my ministry. I intend to travel all along the Continent—I am going in no public capacity—I am going trusting on God to bear my charges. I call heaven and earth to witness, that I have never had the love of the world, nor ever felt it one quarter of an hour in my heart . . . *I will bring thee to this land again,* said God to Jacob: - whether that may be so or no with me, I know not; but I have a better land to go to: and if I am to die in the ship - I am as clear as the sun, that I am called by the will of God'.

Earlier, he draws out the story of Jacob in this way.

'He went on foot; and it should seem (by those who know the geography of the place) that the first day of his journey, he walked no less than forty English miles.—No wonder, therefore, that by the time the sun was going to set, poor Jacob found himself weary . . . He saw the sun going down, and he was a stranger in a strange land.—You who were born, and live in England, can have little idea of this; but those who travel in the American woods, often go hundreds of miles, covered with lofty trees, like the tall cedars of Lebanon. This was the case of Jacob; there was no inn; he got to a certain place . . . *and lay down in that place to sleep,* ver.11. Hard lodging indeed!—It was a hard pillow!—and yet, I don't hear him say, "It is too hard for my head";—I don't hear him say, "I wish I had not set out" or "I wish I had got home to my father and mother again". No: I believe the good man never slept sweeter in his life; and certainly, we never sleep sweeter than when God is with *us* in our dreams. He was in a very dangerous situation, and might have been killed by his brother, or he might have been

destroyed by the wild beasts. When we are travelling in the woods, we are obliged to light a fire, and that keeps off the beasts from us.—And have often got up in the night, and said to them that were with me (and God forbid that I should ever travel with any one even a quarter of an hour without speaking something of Jesus) —This fire, said I, is like the fire of God’s love—for it keeps off the Devil and our own lusts from hurting our souls—. . . Perhaps some people may say—Pray what is there here so very extraordinary or particular? Jacob was very tired—fell to sleep—and, among other things, dreamt of a ladder! No:—no:—*this dream* was from God. And how kind was it of God, to meet him on the night of the first day’s journey—to encourage him in his lonesome way! . . . this ladder’, Whitefield continues, ‘is a type of the Lord Jesus Christ: . . . A ladder, you know, is that by which we climb to one thing or other.—Thus God, in condescension to our capacities, lets down this ladder, to show us that Jesus Christ is the way to heaven.—“*I am the way, the truth and the life.* . . . If we would climb to heaven it must be by Jesus Christ. No one ever chalked out our way to heaven but him; Jesus alone is the true and living way’.

And so, after explaining how the top of the ladder reached to heaven, though the bottom reached to earth, how it had steps, how God stood above it, not sat, but stood, and not only stood but spoke to Jacob, after explaining all this in the grand evangelical manner, Whitefield draws to his invariable conclusion in this fashion.

‘Let me ask every one of you—Whether you have ever set your foot upon this blessed ladder, the Lord Jesus Christ? Did you ever believe on the Lord Jesus? Come to him as a lost sinner? . . . Perhaps, when I ask, some of you may say—away with your ladder—I can go to heaven without it—I have been baptized—That ladder will break under you.—What! trust to a ladder of water?—I have done no harm. What’s a ladder made of negative goodness good for? That will surely fail you! I think, says one, to get to heaven by my praying and fasting.—My friend! all these things are good in their place, but don’t think to climb to heaven by them. Christ is the way, the truth and the life . . .

‘Young people! Put your feet on this ladder . . . Climb! Climb! Climb up the blessed ladder! —It delights me to see so many climbing to heaven. Come! Come young women! Set your foot on this ladder—Come! you middle aged people! It is high time for you to begin to climb to heaven. And ye old! Ye grey-headed sinner! that have one foot in the grave, God give you strength—to climb up to heaven. Some of you have climbed—at least are climbing:—I give you joy; God be praised for letting down such a ladder! But for Jesus Christ’s sake! Climb—oh climb a little faster! Take care that the world does not take hold of your heels! You may think what you will, but the *luke-warmness* of God’s people is more provoking to him than all the sins of the nation. If there be any one coming down the ladder again, may the Lord Jesus stop you! Oh, say you, I am giddy—I shall fall—Here – I will give you a rope.—Just as the sailors put down a rope to climb by—so God lets down his promises for our assistance. Climb, then, till you have got to the top of the ladder, there God stands to receive you . . . Remember my *last* words! COME!—COME to Christ, to Jacob’s God! And God give you faith to climb up Jacob’s ladder!’

That is how Whitefield preached—always with what he called ‘the true market-language’, vivid images and the appeal to come to Christ. In his sermons, as in his journals and in his letters, he is never afraid of the conversational style, the loose, the half-slang phrase that gives vivid immediacy: ‘broken the ice’, ‘taken to task’, ‘all was hush’ are three that I have noticed out of many. ‘He has a great mastery of words’, a writer in the *New England Journal* for 1743 says,

‘but studies *much plainness of speech*’. ‘He has a most ready memory’, the same writer recorded, ‘and, I think, speaks entirely without notes. He has a clear and musical voice and a

wonderful control of it. He uses much gesture, but with great propriety. Every *accent* of his voice, and every *motion* of his body, speaks and both are natural and unaffected'.<sup>18</sup>

Another American, the wife of Jonathan Edwards, wrote to her brother in 1740:

'It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible. I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob . . . It is reported that while the miners of England listened to him, the tears made white furrows down their smutty cheeks'.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, here is the testimony of an unlettered farmer, who was one of the great multitude whose lives Whitefield permanently changed. It is a passage entirely innocent punctuation.

'when i see mr whitefield come up . . . he looked almost angelical a young slim tender youth before thousands of people and with a bold undaunted countenance & my hearing how god was with him everywhere as he came along it solemnized my mind and put me in a trembling fear before he began to preach for he looked as if he was Clothed with authority from ye great god and a sweet solemnity sat upon his brow and my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound & by gods blessing my old foundation was broken up & i see my righteousness would not save me.'<sup>20</sup>

So we commemorate George Whitefield, who, because he forgot himself for Jesus' sake, in his lifetime drew multitudes to Jesus and since his death has been largely forgotten; as I suppose he would have wished; yet it is not wrong to commemorate him, especially here; so long as we let him point us, as he pointed those who listened to him, beyond and away from himself to the *God* whose *showers of blessing* came down wherever he went: so long as we let him say to us, as he said to those to whom he preached, *Come to Christ* the true and living way to heaven, to Christ the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls; so long as we hear, beyond Whitefield's call, the call of Jesus himself, *Come ye after me*, and I will make you to become fishers of men; hear it, and answer; hear it and *come*.

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Endnotes:

- 1) *Gweithiau Williams Pant-y-celyn* ed N Cynhafal Jones (Treffynnon 1887) i p 648
- 2) Cf John Stoughton *History of Religion in England* (1881 edn) vi pp 244-5
- 3) Cf G F Nuttall 'Rowland Hill and the Rodborough Connexion', Congregational Historical Society *Transactions* for 1971
- 4) Cf Arnold Dallimore *George Whitefield* vol I (London Banner of Truth Trust 1970) p 77
- 5) Cf Dallimore *George Whitefield* vol I p 114
- 6) *George Whitefield Works* ed John Gillies 1771-2 vol I p 381
- 7) Cf Dallimore *George Whitefield* vol I p 400

- 8) Cf F B Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture* (New York 1960) pp 98-9
- 9) Cf Dallimore *George Whitefield* vol I p 439
- 10) Cf *Dictionary of National Biography* sv George Whitefield
- 11) Cf G F Nuttall *Howell Harris 1714-1773* (Cardiff 1965) p 21
- 12) *George Whitefield's Journals* (London Banner of Truth Trust 1960) pp 229-30
- 13) John Wesley *Sermon on the Death of . . . George Whitefield* (1770) pp 3, 13, 20, 18-19
- 14) Stoughton vi pp 124-5
- 15) *George Whitefield's Journals*, pp 242 and 92
- 16) Cf Congregational Historical Society *Transactions* x pp 279 and 277
- 17) Cf George Whitefield *Two Farewell Sermons* (1770) (copy preserved in library of New College, London)
- 18) Cf Dallimore *George Whitefield* vol I p 435
- 19) Cf Dallimore *George Whitefield* vol I p 539
- 20) Cf Dallimore *George Whitefield* vol I p 541