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WHITEFIELD AND THE REVIVAL

By David Streater

The name of George Whitefield, compared to that of John Wesley, is little known today, apart from a minority who would seek prayerfully to follow in his footsteps in life and ministry. The lack of knowledge concerning him might well lead one to suppose that he was merely the incumbent of some obscure rural parish.

The facts of the case are very different. George Whitefield (1714-1770) was, during his life-time, one of the most famous men in the English speaking world. He was the foremost figure of the immense religious movement that spanned the North Atlantic during the eighteenth century.

The cause of his contemporary fame was two-fold. Whitefield was one of the greatest preachers that the world has seen but his life also evidenced a Christ-like spirit which was ready to forgive all manner of injuries, insults and slights that were piled on him by certain ministers of the Church, as well as the unbelieving world.

No assessment can be honestly made without taking into account the appalling state, both spiritually and morally, of England during the eighteenth century. Spiritually, the Church of England, with all its parish potential, was afflicted with Deism and Arianism. The non-conformists, with their new found liberties were in no better position, save for a few pastors. In a word, the Church of England was asleep in the dark and the non-conformists asleep in the light.

The result of this was rampant unbelief, leading to Bishop Butler's well known statement that

‘ . . . Christianity is no longer a subject of inquiry; but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious . . . and nothing remained but to set it up as a principle subject of mirth and ridicule.’

Where unbelief reigned, immorality, vice, crime and corruption soon followed in its train. Marriage was lightly regarded and the Church was powerless to effect any change.

But change came, and it was brought, not by Acts of Parliament or Convocation, but by a tiny group of English clergy, ‘ . . . whose heart the Lord touched about the same time.’ The methods used were the simple tested and tried ones used by the apostle of prayer and proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The first and foremost name of this little band was George Whitefield.

Whitefield was born at the Bell Inn, Gloucester. Although his parents were inn-keepers, it appears that the family had fallen on hard times for many of Whitefield's ancestors were university men, and it was not surprising that he should go up to Oxford. This was the turning point of his life. He became acquainted with the Holy Club through Charles Wesley. It was at this time that Whitefield underwent a deep and profound conversion experience which led him to turn away from the practices of the Holy Club to put his whole trust in the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Both John and Charles Wesley were to follow him.

From the time of his being made deacon, he began to experience a real power in the pulpit, but this was not without much prayer and study. Wherever he preached large crowds followed him. He was offered various appointments but refused them all to cross the Atlantic to Georgia in 1737.

The following year he returned to receive full orders from Bishop Benson. To his surprise and dismay, he found many churches shut and pulpits closed to him. This may well have been partly caused by some injudicious behaviour of the Wesleys. But his doctrines of justification by grace through faith alone and the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration also caused offence to many.

The closing of the Churches led Whitefield to adopt the tactic of open-air preaching, thereby reaching literally thousands who not only did not, but would not, attend a place of worship. It was at Kingswood, near Bristol, that the first attempt began, and it was to the rough and ready colliers that Whitefield preached on a Sunday in February 1739.

By the following week a large number were professing conversion and demonstrating the truth of that profession by changed lives. As Whitefield said, 'Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was friend to publicans and came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.'

From Bristol, Whitefield moved to London, to Moorfields and to Kennington Common where thousands attended his ministry, not only from the down-and-outs but also those who regarded themselves as part of high society. The result of this field-preaching was that George Whitefield, a faithful minister of the gospel, who loved the Articles and liturgy, was, to all intents and purposes, now excluded from the pale of the Church's ministry

But the Church of England's loss was the wider Church's gain. Fourteen times Whitefield crossed the Atlantic to America. There, he came into contact with the Tennant Brothers and also Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, Massachusetts. Whitefield's fellowship was not only with those ministers of the Church of England who would receive him, but with ministers of the Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, Baptists and Congregationalists in a truly evangelical ecumenism.

There is no time nor space to consider the unfortunate quarrel between Whitefield and the Wesleys over the doctrine of election. Suffice it to say that the division caused a serious fragmentation in the Revival which has not entirely healed to this day.

What does Whitefield's life and ministry teach us today? First, that the ministry of the Word of God is no light matter but a very special calling which is entirely of free grace. It requires deep devotion and discipline in prayer, study and preparation to stand before the people to declare the whole counsel of God.

Secondly, the difficulty that we face with an apathetic and sinful people does not mean that the message has to be changed, although it has to be made relevant. Whitefield's approach was the same doctrine as the Puritans and before them the Reformers, but as the Puritans had to adapt to their new situation, so did Whitefield, and so do we.

Finally, the fact is that our God does not change. The gospel is still the power of God unto salvation for all who will believe. The Church has been lost in heresy and error before but God is able to do much more than we can either ask or think. We need to throw off the present discouragements and to pray earnestly for the presence and power of the Lord in our preaching and living. It may be that the Lord will grant us a season of refreshing and raise up godly ministers of the stamp of George Whitefield.

David Streater (at the time of publication) was Director of Church Society.