

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Autumn 2009 No. 114

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George Whitefield – Lessons for Today (Part 1) - THE MESSAGE

By David Meager

'There is no end to the interest which attaches to such a man as George Whitefield. Often as I have read his life, I am conscious of distinct quickening whenever I turn to it...My own model, if I may have such a thing in due subordination to my Lord, is George Whitefield; but with unequal footsteps must I follow in his glorious track.' (C. H. Spurgeon) Vol 2 p534.

'God give me a deep humility, a well-guided zeal, a burning love and a single eye, and then let men or devils do their worst!' George Whitefield. Vol 1 p140.

Recently I and several other Christians I know¹ have been encouraged by reading about the life and ministry of George Whitefield, in particular Arnold Dallimore's two volume biography and J. C. Ryle's shorter account.² Although Dallimore's volumes were published more than 30 years ago and contain the biography of an 18th Century evangelist, it seemed apparent to me that there are a number of lessons that we as conservative evangelicals in the Church of England, and evangelicals in general, can learn from Whitefield.

This first article will consider the message Whitefield preached, subsequent articles will consider the results of his preaching, his attitude to the Church of England, and finally his Christian character.

Brief account of his life

George Whitefield was born in Gloucester in 1714 and educated at Pembroke College, Oxford, where he became a member of the Holy Club with the Wesley brothers. Following ordination to the Church of England for more than 30 years he worked as an itinerant evangelist preaching to large crowds (often 20,000+), and often faced opposition from the clergy. He preached in many towns in England, Wales and Scotland, and travelled to North America seven times to preach. It is estimated that he preached 18,000 sermons, many of which were in the open air to vast crowds from all classes of society.³ Under his ministry (and the other Methodists) there was wide-spread Christian revival. He died in 1770 at Newburyport, Massachusetts.

His preaching

'...I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.' (Acts 20 v27).

'I love those that thunder out the word! The Christian world is in a deep sleep. Nothing but a loud voice can waken them out of it!' Whitefield, 1739. Vol 1 p18.

At the heart of Whitefield's preaching lay the doctrine of the new birth. Since his conversion he had gradually come to the conclusion that Calvinism (or *the doctrines of grace* as he called it) was the core message of the Bible, and it was this message that people needed to hear. He seems to have been able to preach in such a way as to enable his hearers to visualise in some measure, God's Holy character and Holy Law, man's utter sinfulness, the reality of the final judgement and the eternal nature of heaven and hell.⁴ Both volumes contain many quotes of his preaching and the following are a few examples.

The new birth

Whitefield's most widely circulated sermon was entitled *The Nature and Necessity of Our New Birth in Christ Jesus*. It gives four arguments as to 'why we must be born again', one of which is as

follows:

'Now God is described in the Holy Scripture (and I speak to those who profess to know the Scripture) as a Spirit; as a Being of such infinite sanctity as to be of purer eyes than to behold iniquity; as to be so transcendently holy that it is said the very Heavens are not clean in His sight, and the angels themselves he chargeth with folly.

On the other hand, man is described (and every regenerate person will find it true by his own experience) as a creature altogether conceived and born in sin; as having no good thing dwelling in him; as being carnal, sold under sin; nay, as having a mind which is enmity with God. And since there is such an infinite disparity, can anyone conceive how such a filthy, corrupted, polluted wretch can dwell with an infinitely pure and holy God, before he is changed and rendered, in some measure, like Him. Can He that is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, dwell with it? Can He in whose sight the heavens are not clean, delight to dwell with uncleanness itself? No! We might as well suppose light to have communion with darkness, or Christ to have concord with Belial.' Vol 1 p124

The preaching of the new birth lay at the heart of the revival, and Dallimore could therefore conclude:

'The chief characteristic of this preaching is its Biblical content. Throughout these sermons there runs one great Scriptural truth... "The doctrine of the New Birth and Justification by Faith." He stood, not as declaring his own message, but that of God as set forth in His Word, "Ye must be born again".' Vol 1 p127

'There can be no doubt that the man on the street in Bristol, Gloucester and London, had he been asked in 1739, "What do Whitefield and the Methodists believe?", would have answered "They claim everybody must be born again".' Vol 1 p345

Judgement, Heaven and Hell

Integral to Whitefield's preaching of the *new birth* was an emphasis on the final judgement and heaven and hell. The below quotes are extracts from two of Whitefield's sermons and reveal how he presented these Biblical truths to his hearers in very vivid and powerful ways:

'...And where will you be, my hearers, when your lives have passed away like that dark cloud?...In a few days we shall all meet at the judgement-seat of Christ. We shall form a part of that vast assembly which will gather before his throne. Every eye will behold the Judge. With a voice whose call you must abide and answer, He will enquire, whether on earth you strove to enter in at the strait gate...' Vol 1 p542

Oh sinner! I beseech you to repent, let not the wrath of God be awakened! Let not the fires of eternity be kindled against you!' Vol 2 p122

'Thirdly, think often of the pains of hell. Consider whether it is not better to cut off a right hand or foot and pluck out a right eye, if they cause us to sin, rather than to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched. Think how many thousands there are now reserved in chains of darkness, unto the judgement of the great day, for not complying with the precept in the text . . . Think you, they now imagine Jesus Christ to be a hard master; or, rather think you not they would give ten thousand times ten thousand worlds, could they but return to life again and take Christ's easy yoke upon them? And can we dwell with the everlasting burnings more than they? If we cannot bear this precept, how can we bear the irrevocable sentence, 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels'?' Vol 1, p123

Lessons and Questions for today

Although Whitefield lived in very different times to us and had wonderful opportunities to preach to vast numbers of people (which we don't seem to have anymore in this country) do we share Whitefield's compassion for the lost and weep over those around us who are without Christ and

without hope in the world? When we do have opportunities to share the gospel with those whom God has placed in our midst - family, friends, work colleagues or neighbours etc we should sensitively explain to them the perilous situation that they are in and their need of Christ.

We should also make sure that we take people to a church where they will hear the true gospel, and if we invite them to evangelistic courses we should make sure the course contains the whole gospel with a Biblical description of God's character, man's sin, and hell. Although conversion experiences vary amongst Christians (especially those from Christian homes) do we remember that people are born sinners and need to be born again?

If we have opportunities to preach or lead Bible studies we need to teach God's holiness and our sinfulness in clear terms, as well as teaching the eternal reality of hell, rather than describing it in weaker terms or saying that God will put an end to the suffering either by purgatory or annihilation.

Do we try and make a stand against the vices of the culture around us (as Whitefield and the Methodists did) whether rampant greed and materialism, the sexually immoral, violent, or crude content of some popular entertainment, the obsession with sport and recreation, or seeking to find true identity in career rather than in Christ? Do we try and tactfully point out to those around us the futility of living for this world? This may sound very negative and uncomfortable but it was the message George Whitefield (and the other Methodist's) preached and God blessed their labours with a mighty outpouring of the Spirit, and it was they who saw true revival. It was a message which divided people and led to opposition from within and without the Church but it was a message which brought many to a saving faith.

The next article will look at the results of Whitefield's preaching.

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Endnotes:

- 1) The reviews on Amazon USA make inspiring reading.
- 2) *George Whitefield – The life and times of the great evangelist of the 18th Century revival.* Arnold Dallimore, Banner of Truth. Volume 1 was published in 1970, volume 2 in 1980. For a briefer account of Whitefield's life see the chapter in J. C. Ryle's *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century* (Banner of Truth). For a biography by a contemporary writer see: '*George Whitefield*' by John Pollock, Christian Focus, 2009. It should also be noted that Dallimore's biography contains many quotes from *George Whitefield's Journals* which is also published by Banner of Truth.
- 3) There are many paintings from the period of Whitefield preaching, my favourite one is of him preaching in Bolton and is displayed in Bolton Museum, and can be viewed at:
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=2324531368775654099#>
- 4) For a better understanding of the message he preached see '*The Sermons of George Whitefield*' published by Church Society, 2010:
www.churchsociety.org/publications/real/REAL01-1-Whitefield1.asp
or '*Select Sermons of George Whitefield.*' Banner of Truth, 1958.