

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Winter 2010 No. 115

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GEORGE WHITEFIELD – Lessons for Today (Part 2) – THE IMPACT OF HIS PREACHING

By David Meager

'Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Acts 2 v37

The previous *Cross†Way* article on George Whitefield examined the message of his preaching. We saw that he preached the doctrines of grace, which emphasised God's holiness, man's sinfulness, the necessity of the new birth, and heaven and hell. This article will attempt to outline the impact of his message. Arnold Dallimore's biography (which quotes extensively from *George Whitefield's Journals*) contains many accounts of the impact of Whitefield's preaching and reveals the mighty work of God's Spirit in bringing about conviction of sin and true conversion.

Henry Venn, writing to Lady Huntingdon, on the occasion of Whitefield preaching on a tombstone in the churchyard of Cheltenham Parish Church, states:

'...There was a visible appearance of much soul-concern among the crowd that filled every part of the burial ground. Many were overcome with fainting, others sobbed deeply; some wept silently; and a solemn concern appeared on the countenance of almost the whole assembly... Oh, with what eloquence, what energy, what melting tenderness, did Mr Whitefield beseech sinners to be reconciled to God, to come to Him for life everlasting, and to rest their weary souls on Christ the Saviour! When the sermon was ended the people seemed chained to the ground. Mr Madan, Mr Talbot and myself found ample employment in trying to comfort those who seemed broken down under a sense of guilt. We separated in different directions among the crowd, and each was quickly surrounded by an attentive audience, still eager to hear all the words of this life.'
(J. C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*, Charles Nolan edition p252-253)

Whitefield describes the effects of his preaching to several thousand miners at Kingswood, Bristol:

'Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was a friend of publicans, and came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected was to see the white gutters made by their tears which plentifully fell down their black cheeks, as they came out of their coal pits. Hundreds and hundreds of them were soon brought under deep convictions, 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.' Dallimore, Vol 1 p263

Whitefield often described in his *Journal* the impact his preaching had on large crowds:

'The word was sharper than a two-edged sword. The bitter cries and groans were enough to pierce the hardest heart. Some of the people were as pale as death; others were wringing their hands; others lying on the ground; others sinking into the arms of friends; and most lifting up their eyes to Heaven and crying to God for mercy... They seemed like persons awakened by the last trump, and coming out of their graves for judgement.' Vol 1 p487.

'An extraordinary power of the Spirit... accompanied the word preached. There was a great mourning in the congregation... Many cried out, and these not only women; but some strong and stout hearted men.' Vol 2 p122

'...I have reason to believe that upwards of five hundred souls have been awakened, brought under

deep convictions of sin, and a feeling sense of their lost condition. Most of these have also, I trust, been savingly brought home to God.’ Vol 2 p127.

Under God, Whitefield’s preaching had a similar impact wherever he went. According to Thomas Prince of Boston, North America:

“His preaching was as searching and rousing as ever I heard. He seemed . . . to aim directly at the hearers’ hearts and consciences, to lay open their ruinous delusions, shew them their numerous, secret, hypocritical shifts in religion, and drive them out of every deceitful refuge...

From the terrible and deep convictions he had passed through in his own soul, he seemed to have such a lively view of the Divine majesty, the spirituality, purity, extensiveness, and strictness of His law, with His glorious holiness, and displeasure at sin, His justice, truth and power, in punishing the damned; ... The arrows of conviction, by his ministry, seemed so deeply to pierce the hearts, even of some of the most stubborn sinners, as to make them fall down at the feet of Christ, and yield a lowly submission to him.” Vol 1 p535.

Critics then (and today) tried to account for what happened by saying it was due to Whitefield’s skills as an orator, mass hysteria or group manipulation etc, however there are also many individual conversion testimonies from the time, and the ultimate evidence was seen in the long term change in people’s lives and society. For example, Dallimore describes the testimony of a man who later became a Methodist preacher:

‘While Whitefield was preaching one day his voice was heard a considerable distance away by a godless twenty-six-year-old shipwright, Henry Tanner. Thereupon Tanner and six companions filled their pockets with stones ‘and set off to knock the preacher down.’

But the stones remained unused. Whitefield was preaching from the text, ‘Thou bringest certain strange things to our ears, we would know, therefore, what these mean’ and Tanner found himself arrested by the message. The next evening he went to hear Whitefield again and returned home bitterly wounded of heart and crying to God for mercy. The following evening, as he listened again, in a rich experience of grace he received that mercy and went home rejoicing.’ Vol 2 p175.

Dallimore concludes at the end of Volume 2 that it was the true Gospel that brought about the great change in people’s lives and society:

‘It was not the so-called ‘Social Gospel’ but the gospel of redeeming grace – the only Gospel – that wrought the great change... The Gospel is the need of this present hour. Not the partial Gospel which characterizes so much of to-day’s evangelicalism, but the whole Gospel that declares the majesty and holiness of God, the utter helplessness of man, the necessity of repentance, and a salvation that is manifested, not in a mere profession, but in the miracle of a new life.’ Vol 2 p536.

Lessons and Questions for today

The signs of the Spirit’s work which the Methodists looked for in conversion were a deep conviction of sin against a holy God, repentance and faith in Jesus, joy in believing and changed lives which ultimately impacted Society. Although the situation we face today is vastly different to the 18th Century (people then seemed to be converted quickly compared to today, where it seems people often gradually come to a knowledge of the truth through the influence of friends or attending church), do we look for such marks as evidence of conversion today?

Sadly it seems that many evangelical churches look for evidence of conversion elsewhere. One popular evangelistic course teaches little about God’s character and man’s sinfulness and then calls upon the Spirit to fill participants; ecstatic feelings, speaking in tongues or bodily sensations are judged as evidence of the Spirit’s work. Unsurprisingly, when reading the participants testimonies

there is often no mention of conviction and sorrow for sin against a Holy God and love and gratitude to Christ.

Looking for evidence of the work of the Spirit in this way, or in seeking miraculous signs would not have been Whitefield's method:

'...what need is there of miracles, such as healing sick bodies and restoring sight to blind eyes, when we see greater miracles done every day by the power of God's Word? Do not the spiritually blind now see? Are not the spiritually dead now raised and the leprous souls now cleansed, and have not the poor the Gospel preached unto them? And if we have the thing already which such miracles were only intended to introduce, why should we tempt God in requiring further signs?' Vol 1, p348

Many churches or ecumenical groups seek to introduce people into an experience of God's love or presence, or encourage people to find God in their own way on their own 'spiritual journey,' without explaining the need for repentance and faith. Often the message is more akin to 'New Age' rather than 'New Testament'.

Often churches encourage people to make a decision for Christ or to 'go forward' at an evangelistic meeting, or to recite a prayer at the end of an evangelistic talk. Once I was in a meeting where the youth-worker at the end of his evangelistic talk encouraged the group of teenagers to recite a prayer after him, and then congratulated those who said the prayer, that they were now Christians. According to Dallimore this would not have been Whitefield's method:

'It must be explained that Whitefield made no appeal for people to make a public profession of salvation at his services. His practice (which had also been that of the Puritans) was one of making powerful application of the Gospel as he preached and of therewith leaving the Word to become operative in the heart by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He looked for the Spirit's work in arousing the sinner to a deep, and even overwhelming, sense of his need...he taught that the illumination of the mind and the implanting of faith in the heart are entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. He urged the seeker to go directly to the Lord, entreating that this saving work might be done within him. He directed the needy soul to the Gospel promises and told him to plead them before God, and, on the basis of them, to seek the assurance that this Divine work was accomplished within his heart...numerous persons came...to Whitefield, and many others wrote to him, telling him, often with abounding joy and deep assurance, that this work had indeed been accomplished within them.'
Vol 1 p137

The next article will look at Whitefield's policy toward the Church of England.

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