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GEORGE WHITEFIELD – Lessons for Today (Part 4) – CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

By David Meager

“Mr Whitefield *was so cheerful* that it tempted me to become a Christian.” J. C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century* p47.

The previous Cross†Way articles on George Whitefield sought to examine the message¹ and impact of his preaching, and also his attitude to the Church of England. This final article will focus on his godly character and example, which Christians should learn from and aspire to. When reading about Whitefield it is apparent that he enjoyed and cultivated a close walk with God, and his Spirit-filled, passionate devotion to Christ overflowed in every area of his life.

Humility

Although Whitefield had some notable faults² he was a very humble man who thought very little of himself and his ministry and seemed to live almost exclusively to the glory to God. According to Dallimore:

‘More than once he accused himself of pride: “*I am blind, I am full of self-pride and self-love*”, he admitted. He prayed, “*Oh, that these inner conflicts may purify my polluted, proud and treacherous heart!*...Looking upon his great fame as a danger and a stumbling-block, he portrayed himself in such a way as to make the people see that their idol was but a poor, weak sinner. He sought to turn away their attention from himself, saying, for example, to a certain correspondent, “*You have my person too much in admiration. If you look to the instrument less and to God more, it will be better*”. Vol 1 p402.

‘Moreover, rather than, like most men, glorifying in his accomplishments, he regarded his labours as virtually worthless’. Vol 2 p518

Attitude to Popularity

Whitefield was hugely popular in most places that he visited, but instead of enjoying or indulging his fame he viewed it as a severe trial. Speaking of his early ministry in London he reported:

“*The tide of popularity began to run very high. In a short time I could no longer walk on foot as usual, but was constrained to go in a coach from place to place, to avoid the hosannas of the multitude. They grew quite extravagant in their applauses, and had it not been for my compassionate High Priest, popularity would have destroyed me. I used to plead with Him to take me by the hand and lead me unhurt through this fiery furnace. He heard my request and gave me to see the vanity of all commendations but His own.*” Vol 1 p133

“*O heavenly Father, for Thy dear Son’s sake, keep me from climbing. Let me love a low contemptible life, and never think to compound matters between the happiness of this world and the next.*” Vol 1 p133

In a letter to Gabriel Harris following the popularity he had received in Bristol he wrote:

“*O pray, dear Mr Harris, that God would always keep me humble and fully convinced that I am nothing without Him, and that all the good which is done upon earth, God doeth it himself...Sanctify it, Holy Father, to Thine own glory and Thy people’s good.*”

At times Whitefield even sought to avoid the attention, for example once when leaving Bristol he

wrote:

“About three (in the) morning, having thrown myself on the bed for an hour or two, I set out for Gloucester, because I had heard that a great company [of people] intended to see me out of town.”
Vol 1 p133

Attitude to opposition

Since the beginning of his ministry he seemed to be plagued by opposition and trials from many different quarters. However, it seems he nearly always responded in loving and forgiving ways, whether the opposition was from within the church (such as the Wesley brothers who opposed his Calvinism, or the many unconverted clergy and bishops) or from the mocking and harassment of wider society. The following quotes are a few examples of this:

“I did not feel the least resentment against him. No; I pitied, I prayed for him; and wished from my soul that the Lord would convert him.” Vol 1 p519

“Preached six times this week, and should have preached a seventh time, but one minister would not permit me, which caused me to pray for him most earnestly. Blessed be God, I can say, ‘I love mine enemies.’”

“Went this morning and received the Sacrament at the hands of the minister who wrote against me. Blessed by God, I do not feel the least remonstrance against, but a love for him; ...Oh that I could do him any good.” Vol 1 p226

Whitefield’s response to personal criticism should also challenge us:

‘When Bishops Lavington and Warburton published criticisms of the excesses of his early ministry, he wrote a reply in which he plainly admitted such errors and thanked his accusers for giving him occasion to confess them publicly. And we have seen several instances in which he likewise thanked friends for rebuking him for his mistakes. To one such he wrote: *“You need make no apology for your plain dealing. I love those best who deal most sincerely with me. Whatever errors I have been, or shall be guilty of...I hope the Lord will shew me grace to amend.”* Vol 2 p518

Other people’s opinions of him

Many of his contemporaries (including non-Christians) held him in high esteem, and often their correspondence bears witness to his godly character:

“Mr Whitefield goes about his Master’s work with diligence and application; and with such cheerfulness as would make one in love with a life of religion, which has so many inward springs of the best comforts, and is not that gloomy, melancholy thing, which prejudice and imagination make it. He is proof against reproach and invective. When he is reviled he revileth not again, but prays heartily for all his enemies, and that such as oppose the truth may be converted to it. He professes himself to lay down his life for Christ, and to spend and be spent in the service of souls. Such a man has all imaginable claim to our highest love and honour.” Joseph Smith, Charleston, 1740.
Vol 1 p510.

‘I see the man to be all of a piece; his life and conversation to be a transcript of his sermons. It is truly a rare thing...to see one so eminent for humility in the midst of applause; for meekness and patience, under reproaches and injuries; for love to enemies; for desire to glorify Christ, and save souls; acquiescing in the will of God in all cases, never fretting...but still praising and giving thanks in everything.’ John Willison of Dundee. Vol 2 p98

Philanthropy

Whitefield throughout his life sought to alleviate the physical and spiritual needs of the disadvantaged in society. This included physical and spiritual provision for orphans in Georgia (see

the chapter *A House of Mercy in the Woods of Georgia* - Volume 1). Although regrettably he approved of slavery (as most Christians of that time did) he did seek to ease the suffering of slaves on North American plantations, and also sought to bring the gospel to them (see the chapter *Whitefield and the American Negro* – Volume 1, and his letter to the slave owners). However when providing for people's physical needs *he always sought their spiritual welfare too*. He also witnessed to condemned criminals in prison or at the place of execution.

Lessons and Questions for today

The way in which Whitefield dealt lovingly with those who opposed him in the Church of England is a lesson for those of us who face opposition today. When we have to engage with those who teach error or who are indifferent to it, or to fellow evangelicals who we may disagree with on some points, do we respond in love and pray for those we disagree with? Often I think we are more likely to respond in opposite ways. Are people attracted to us because our doctrine has led to spiritual growth and holiness? We would do well to heed Whitefield's advice:

“Let us study to be holy, even as he [Christ] is holy, and walk even as he also walked. Let these be your daily questions, “Am I more like Christ? Am I more meek and patient? Does my practice correspond with my knowledge, and am I a light to enlighten and inflame all that are around me?”
Vol 2 p67

If God blesses us in our work, whether in the ministry, secular employment or in other spheres of influence, do we view ourselves with humility, and remember that it is God's opinion of us that matters? In our culture obsessed with celebrity and fame, Whitefield's attitude to popularity and 'success' is a welcome corrective if we are tempted to take pride in ourselves.

Whitefield also suffered at the hands of wider society. The intellectual elite often ridiculed him (witness Hogarth's paintings or his caricature in London plays), he was also frequently the victim of verbal and physical abuse from the crowds (he was almost murdered on two occasions). However, he endured patiently the suffering in a Christ-like manner. If we stand boldly for biblical truth we should expect to suffer too from wider society, whether in the media for being homophobic, misogynist or fundamentalist, or in our day-to-day lives as we seek to be salt and light in a hostile world.

Whitefield's concern for people's physical needs should also challenge us. If we are accused of lacking concern and action in this area then Whitefield's example should spur us on to help meet the physical needs of fellow Christians - for example providing aid for persecuted Christians in Muslim countries, or contributing to those in our local church who may be struggling financially. If we have such opportunities do we seek their spiritual welfare as well?

In conclusion, reading about Whitefield's life and ministry has been very inspiring and in some ways it would be tempting to leave the focus on him, however his ministry should lead us to give God the glory as we see the power of His gospel at work, and in Whitefield's own words: *“Let the name of George Whitefield perish, so long as Christ is exalted.”*

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Endnotes:

- 1) Church Society has recently (June 2010) published 61 of Whitefield's sermons in two volumes (edited and introduced by Lee Gatiss). For further information see the Church Society website.
- 2) Arnold Dallimore lists six main faults on pages 519-521 of Volume 2 of his biography. According to

Dallimore, three of these faults were mainly confined to the early days of his ministry: egotism, haste in judgment of other ministers and impulsiveness in decision-making. The latter three faults lasted throughout his ministry: failure to be sufficiently discriminating in some of his dealings with the public, undue measure of adulation when corresponding to those in higher ranks of society, and condoning of slavery.