



# George Whitefield

1714 – 1770

He was the illegitimate son of an English barmaid, yet he evangelized many among the social elite of England. He was afflicted with a squint so severe that no one knew exactly where (or at whom) he was looking, yet he drew vast outdoor crowds who never took their eyes off him. Benjamin Franklin, who heard him preach many times in Pennsylvania, declared that he had a “voice like an organ.”

George Whitefield was born in Gloucester, England; his remains are buried in Newburyport, Massachusetts. He voyaged to the New World seven times (a one-way trip took two months) and was equally at home on both sides of the Atlantic.

Having languished in spiritual emptiness and disquiet for several years, Whitefield’s “birth” was aided by the spiritual midwifery of a godly bishop who directed him to John 7:37: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me [i.e. Jesus].” Whitefield exclaimed aloud, “I thirst!”—and recalled that when Jesus uttered these words his struggle was almost over. He realized too that for the first time in his life he had implicitly renounced any claim upon God’s favour and explicitly acknowledged his helplessness. Immediately he was granted assurance of his new nature in Christ and his new standing before God.

The young Anglican preacher was transparent to the message that had altered him. The day the twenty-two year old was ordained his sermon won over the hungry even as it antagonized the hardened. On this occasion his opponents complained that his preaching had driven

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fifteen people mad. "I hope their madness lasts until next Sunday," replied the bishop who had sponsored him.

In 1738 he stumbled into a development that was to characterize the Evangelical Awakening. Standing in the pulpit of the crowded-out church in Bermondsey, he was haunted by the fact that a thousand-plus stood outside, and haunted doubly because of the reason they were there: they gave off an odour that no one could deny and few could endure. He told his friend John Wesley of his plan to begin "field-preaching." Wesley thought the scheme insane (until he had to admit its effectiveness). It was also illegal since the Conventicle Act permitted outdoor preaching only at public hangings!

Before long, however, a scheduled execution brought it about. Whitefield's heart had been broken by the coalminers at Kingswood, Bristol—men as violent as they were vulgar. Once the date for the hanging had been set the miners began anticipating the celebrations surrounding the entertainment. When the murderer "cheated" them of their amusement by committing suicide, the miners dug up the corpse and partied around it.

They and their families were 100 percent illiterate, sunk in a degradation that defies description. Whitefield walked among them, in full clerical attire, and began speaking to them from Matthew 5: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Two hundred of them gathered around the homely man as he spoke to them of "Jesus, who was a friend of publicans and sinners." Thoroughly despised and contemptuously shunned, these people found in Whitefield someone who loved them and therefore did not fear them. Grimy with caked-on dirt and coated in coal dust as they were, Whitefield wrote of them in his diary that as he preached he saw "the white gutters made by their tears down their black cheeks."

Immediately church authorities arranged for all Anglican pulpits to be closed to him. He was undaunted. The next Sunday ten thousand people joined themselves to the Kingswood miners. Opposition intensified. When Whitefield attempted to visit prisoners in Newgate jail, the Corporation of Bristol suddenly "remembered" to appoint a prison chaplain! Nonetheless, disadvantaged people returned his love for them. After hearing Whitefield preach time after time poverty-stricken miners collected money to build a school for their children: the impoverished were not to be exploited by the socially privileged!

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Yet more than the high-born opposed Whitefield. At Moorfields one lout climbed a tree overlooking the preacher and urinated at him. Ever the master at turning opposition into gospel-advantage, Whitefield rhetorically asked the crowd, "Am I wrong when I say that man is half devil and half beast?"—and then commended anew that gospel whereby anyone at all may become a child of God.

In the New World Whitefield preached from Georgia to New England, always raising money for the orphanage he had established in Savannah. New York, Boston, Philadelphia, the Carolinas, Harvard University: all were beneficiaries of his ministry as he was anything but "the generality of preachers who talk of an unknown and unfelt Christ."

Before he died the "threefold cord not quickly broken" (Whitefield, plus John and Charles Wesley) was reknit. He and the Wesleys had agonized and grown apart over Whitefield's adherence to the doctrine of predestination. When they were joyfully reconciled he wrote in his diary, "Prejudices, jealousies and suspicion make the soul miserable."

John Wesley preached at the memorial service which was held for Whitefield in England. "He had nothing gloomy in his nature," said John, "being singularly cheerful, as well as charitable and tenderhearted." It was true. When a Quaker had chided Whitefield for wearing full Anglican vestments Whitefield had replied good-naturedly, "Friend, you allow me my vestments and I shall allow you your peculiar hat."

When their disagreement had been sharpest concerning predestination Wesley was asked if he expected to behold Whitefield on the final Day. "I fear not," John had replied, "for George will be so much nearer the throne of grace." It was in the memorial sermon that John spoke most succinctly of his friend: "Can anything but love beget love?"

