

George Whitefield

by J.C. Philpot

George Whitefield was a powerful evangelist who traveled extensively, preaching the gospel and winning souls to Christ, and his ministry was marked by a remarkable blessing of God.

Scripture: Psalm 126:5, Ezekiel 33:32, John 5:35, Acts 19:23, 1 Corinthians 12:4

Topics: "Revival Preaching", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

J.C. Philpot reflects on the life and ministry of George Whitefield, highlighting the opposition and admiration Whitefield faced, his unique gifts as a preacher, and the powerful impact of his sermons in a time of spiritual darkness. Whitefield, raised up by God in a period of torpor and death in the Church, brought a revival and called many to the necessity of the new birth. Despite his natural eloquence and popular appeal, Whitefield's preaching was accompanied by a divine power that convicted hearts and led to genuine conversions.

Transcript

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At this distance of time, we can scarcely frame to ourselves an idea of the general burst of execration that assailed Whitefield on the one hand from the dead formalists of that day and generation, and of the mighty revolution in the minds of hundreds and thousands on the other which led them to hail him as an ambassador of heaven. Let us present a slight sketch of this remarkable man.

God usually works by means, and brings about appointed ends by appointed instruments. These instruments are usually not only adapted to the work which they have to perform, but to the age and generation in which they live.

Luther was so adapted to Germany, Knox to Scotland, and Farel to Switzerland, that, humanly speaking, had the men been transferred to each other's soil, the work of reformation would have immediately stopped. So Whitefield was especially adapted to his day and generation. We speak sometimes of the low state of things in our day, as if all vital religion were perished out of the land. But whatever our day be, it is clear to all who know the history of that period that things then were much worse. Then there was scarcely any profession. People speak against our day as a 'day of profession'. It is true--but profession in many as

much implies possession in some, as forged coin proves the existence of genuine, or as shadow implies substance. In that day there was little or no profession, for the same reason that there is no shade in the Arabian desert--there are no trees. The influence of Puritanism had gradually worn out--the flood of corruption introduced by Charles II had gradually (the barrier of Puritanism being well-near in ruins) settled down over the lowlands of society as well as submerged its highlands. The pulpits resounded with moral essays. With the experience of the power, the very doctrine of godliness was lost in the Churches. Arminianism ruled far and wide; and as this has always been half-brother to Socinianism, a dark cloud was brooding over the land, akin to that which has buried Germany in neology and France in infidelity.

Thus the state of torpor and death everywhere prevalent before Whitefield was raised up is indeed indescribable. The very doctrine of the new birth was all but lost out of the land. It is hard to say whether Church or dissent was the worse; for though the latter might retain more of the form of sound words, yet it seems to have been nearly as destitute of the power.

In this state, of things, then, when all was torpor and death, God raised up Whitefield, and, in his providence and grace, sent him through the length and breadth of the land, proclaiming the necessity and nature of the new birth. To us who at this day read his sermons, there seems comparatively little in them to produce such powerful effects. When we read of the thousands who hung entranced upon his lips; of his arresting into silence the disorderly multitude of a London fair--of his receiving on one day a thousand notes from people under convictions of sin; and then quietly read the sermons which came abroad under his name, we look in vain for the "thoughts that breathe and words that burn" which produced such effects; and we seem led to the conclusion either that the published sermons are unfaithful, mutilated, imperfect transcripts of the actual discourses, or that a mighty power rested upon him which clothed with fire words and ideas which in other mouths would seem almost commonplace. But whichever solution we adopt, their effect is undoubted when delivered by him.

Besides the power from on high that rested upon him, there was a holy warmth and energy, a simplicity and godly sincerity, and a pouring out of his whole soul with fervor, that arrested the most unconcerned hearer. He spoke as one whose very heart and soul were in the work. He had, besides, great natural eloquence, a voice unrivaled for melody, variety, pathos, and strength, and every feature and gesture were lit up with energy and animation. The most fearless courage, the greatest patience, a character without a blot, the most undeniable disinterestedness, labors to us scarcely credible, a heart overflowing with tenderness and affection, and, above all, a soul favored beyond most with the in-shinings of God's favor and love--such is a feeble sketch of England's great apostle.

To say that Whitefield in all points was a perfect minister would be foolish. He was not always clear in doctrine; and his free addresses to sinners would seem to us now strongly impregnated with free-will. Doubtless there was also much in him due to natural advantages, which should always be carefully distinguished from grace. His natural eloquence arrested the attention of Hume, the infidel historian, who is said to have declared that his address to the angel Gabriel not to depart until he could bear to heaven the tidings of a sinner's conversion was the finest burst of oratory possible; of the skeptic, Benjamin Franklin, who tells an amusing story how he was compelled to empty his purse under a charity-sermon for the Orphan Institution, though predetermined to give only a small sum; of Lord Chesterfield, who used to hear him preach at the Countess of Huntingdon's. And if men of such name and note, men of great mental ability, were so charmed with Whitefield's eloquence, we may be sure that it must have been very extraordinary.

It is evident, therefore, that many followed and admired Whitefield as in days of old. As the rebellious children of Judah listened to the "lovely song" of the prophet Ezekiel; and as the Jews were willing for a season to rejoice in John the Baptist as a burning and a shining light, thus the multitude heard Whitefield. Hundreds admired his eloquence, wept under his pathos, and rejoiced in his light who never repented of their sins, nor believed on the Son of God. Still there can be no doubt that God largely honored Whitefield's ministry in the calling in of elect souls, and that it was the commencement of a revival in the Churches. Toplady, Newton, Berridge, Romaine, and other useful men in their day, may all be said to have sprung up under the light sown by Whitefield. There was a wide revival in the land; and where Whitefield planted, others watered--and God gave the increase.

We shall take this opportunity to describe a little of Whitefield's peculiar, almost unparalleled, gifts as a preacher--gifts so remarkable that we cannot doubt they were bestowed upon him for a peculiar purpose. His voice, which is affirmed to have been so clear and powerful as to be audible at the distance of a mile, appears, by general testimony, to have been in all other respects one of the most effective ever possessed by man, capable of taking every varied tone of emotion, and whether poured forth in thunder to rouse, or in softer music to melt, making its way to the heart with irresistible force and effect. Its tones, too, were singularly varied, and at the same time so truly natural, expressing every tender feeling of the heart with such touching pathos, that the dullest hearer was riveted as by an invincible charm as soon as he opened his lips.

His action, too, was singularly expressive and becoming, being easy, natural, and unaffected, yet eminently striking, though sometimes bordering almost on violence. His language also was peculiarly simple and full of fire, broken frequently into short sentences, abounding in figures and illustrations, interspersed with the warmest, tenderest appeals to the conscience, mingled often with his own uncontrollable sobs and tears, and divested of all that heavy lumber which weighs down preacher and hearer. Matter and manner were alike new, and burst upon a sleepy generation as a brilliant meteor, which in the midnight darkness draws to its path every eye.

Previous to his time sermons were for the most part longwinded, dull essays; and even when they were sound in doctrine, which was very rare, were, like the old Puritanical writings, more fitted for the closet than the pulpit, and divided and subdivided until "nineteenthly" weighed down eyes and ears into involuntary slumber. The holy fire which burned in Whitefield's soul burst its way through all these artificial coverings, and the glowing warmth which made his thoughts to breathe and his words to burn penetrated the hearts of his hearers.

A minister once asked Garrick, the celebrated actor, why people were so affected by a tragedy who fell asleep under a sermon? "The reason is," replied he, "that we speak falsehood as if it were truth, and you speak truth as if it were falsehood." Whitefield spoke truth as truth. The truth of God was in his heart, and a flame of love burnt there which lighted up his countenance with energy and his eyes with fire, poured itself forth in the most ardent and expressive words, quivered in every note of his melodious voice, and streamed forth in every wave of his hand. There is a peculiar charm in real eloquence, riveting the mind and swaying the feelings of the heart until it yields itself to the voice of the orator, as the strings of the harp to the fingers of the musician. The very sound of his voice can make the heart alternately burn with ardor and indignation, or melt it until the tears gush from the eyes.

All this is distinct from grace; and hundreds and thousands who melted at the accents of Whitefield's voice lived and died in their sins. Like the prophet of old, he was unto them "as a very lovely song of one that

has a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument; but they heard his words and did them not." (Ezek. 33:32.) Yet be it borne in mind, that these very natural gifts were bestowed on Whitefield for a particular purpose. It was these which gave him such congregations, and made his preaching admired by such men as David Hume, the philosopher, Lord Chesterfield, the courtier, and Franklin, the worldly politician, as much as by the poor colliers at Kingswood, when the white gutters, made by their tears, streaked their black cheeks. Whitefield was no actor cultivating his voice or studying his gestures--but these gifts were naturally in him, and he used them as inartificially as a person possessed of an exquisite ear and a beautiful voice pours forth melodious tones as the free utterance of the music within.

But besides these natural gifts, there was a peculiar power--the power of God, resting on his ministry. That a most signal blessing accompanied his labors is beyond the shadow of a doubt. John Newton, who had frequently heard him, in a funeral sermon preached at his death, from John 5:35, thus speaks of him from personal knowledge:

"The Lord gave him a manner of preaching which was peculiarly his own. He copied from none, and I never met any who could imitate him with success. They who attempted generally made themselves disagreeable. His familiar address, the power of his action, his marvelous talent in fixing the attention even of the most careless, I need not describe to those who have heard him; and to those who have not, the attempt would be vain. Other ministers could preach the gospel as clearly, and in general say the same things; but I believe no man living could say them in his way. Here I always thought him unequaled, and I hardly expect to see his equal while I live. But that which finished his character as a shining light, and is now his crown of rejoicing, was the singular success which the Lord was pleased to give him in winning souls. What numbers entered the kingdom of glory before him! and what numbers are now lamenting his loss, who were awakened by his ministry! It seemed as if he never preached in vain. Perhaps there is hardly a place, in all the extensive compass of his labors, where some may not yet be found who thankfully acknowledge him for their spiritual father. Nor was he an awakening preacher only; wherever he came, if he preached but a single discourse, he usually brought a season of refreshment and revival with him to those who had already received the truth. Great as his immediate and personal usefulness was, his occasional usefulness, if I may so call it, was, perhaps, much greater. Many have cause to be thankful for him who never saw or heard him. He introduced a way of close and lively application to the conscience, for which, I believe, many of the most admired and eminent preachers now living will not be ashamed or unwilling to acknowledge themselves his debtors."

On this point we shall have another opportunity to enlarge; but we cannot omit here his devotedness to the work of the ministry. Seven times did he cross the Atlantic, at that time a long and perilous voyage. From the very first, too, he had a most singular power of winning the affections of his hearers. His sincerity, warmth, deep and genuine feeling, and, above all, the blessing of God resting on the word, riveted to him the hearts of hundreds.

Making every allowance for his natural gifts, there must have been a peculiar power resting on his ministry, to produce these effects.

There can be little doubt that there was in Whitefield's day more life and power in the church of God than we now witness, or perhaps have any distinct idea of. Such coldness and deadness have fallen upon the churches that it seems hard to realize the zeal, warmth, and earnestness which then prevailed. The simplest, perhaps, and easiest way to do this will be for each of our gracious readers to recall the days of his spiritual youth, "when the candle of the Lord shined upon his head, and by his light he walked through

darkness; when the secret of God was upon his tabernacle; when he washed his steps with butter, and the rock poured him out rivers of oil." Let him recall his own earnestness in prayer at that memorable period, his tenderness of conscience, his zeal for the Lord, his deadness to the world, his love to God's people, his times of hearing when well near every sermon seemed blessed to his soul. The recollection of this never-to-be-forgotten season, the Spring of the soul, may serve to bring before his mind the days of Whitefield--that spring-tide of the church, when the flowers appeared on the earth, and the voice of the turtle was heard in the land; when the leaf of profession was green and the blossom of promise fragrant; before the fruit had become, as now, wizened from declining sap, and the foliage sear and yellow from the autumnal frosts.

One remarkable instance of the power of God attending Whitefield's ministry is recorded in his life--that after preaching, on one occasion, in Moorfields, he received, according to his own testimony, "at a moderate computation, a thousand notes from people under conviction." Making every deduction for natural excitement, giving the fullest allowance for temporary convictions, it affords an unparalleled example of power attending one sermon.

Where, at least in our day, is the minister whose labors are accompanied with such striking effects? We may have men clearer in doctrine, but where can we find that life and power, that ardent zeal, that burning eloquence, that devotedness to the work, those astonishing labors, that self-denying life, that singleness of eye to the glory of God, that unwearied perseverance, or that flame of holy love which seemed to consume the very lamp in which it shone with such surpassing brightness?

And for this life and power in the soul of a minister, what can be the substitute? Shall it be learning? That, in comparison, is but a flickering flame, a mere phosphorus light composed out of dead men's brains, too faint to illuminate, too cold to kindle. Shall it be sound views of doctrine? Amid the heaps of error which are spread on every side, and amid hundreds of erroneous men who lie in wait to deceive, sound views of truth are most valuable, no, indispensable. But there may be the soundest creed in the head with death in the heart and sin in the life! Sound views without divine life resemble a sound, well-tuned ring of bells, which charm the ear more than the jangling and the cracked, but are still mere tinkling metal.

Shall it be gifts?--a flow of words as unceasing as a babbling brook, a voice as musical as the evening nightingale, action as elegant as ever graced the stage, pathos as touching as ever bedewed female cheeks with tears, animation as vehement as ever stirred the audiences of Peter the Hermit, and eloquence as ardent as ever led men on to mount the breach or charge a battalion? Alas! what are they all, destitute of life? United with life--a combination very rare, though perhaps to a great extent existing in Whitefield--they are indeed to the sword what the back is to the edge, giving it weight and strength; but without life they are a lump of iron, which never pierces to the "dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow," or is "a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

To enumerate all the labors of this distinguished apostle would far exceed our pages. Wherever he went he was the same man, having but one object in view, and wholly devoted to it. This singleness of eye, oneness of purpose, and devotedness of heart won to him the admiration and esteem of many who gave little proof of a divine work in their souls.

To say that he was on all points sound, that there was no dross with his gold, no water mingled with his wine, would be indeed untrue. His ardor and zeal led him frequently to stretch the line beyond even his own views of divine truth. Thus his great theme was the Lord Jesus; but he preached him more as the

Savior of sinners generally than as the Head of the church, the Savior of elect sinners. The new birth was also with him a darling theme.

In considering the general character of Whitefield's preaching, we must bear in mind that a ministry suitable for one period of the church may by no means be adapted for another. The work of Whitefield was that of an evangelist. He was no pastor of a church, and had no settled congregation, and scarcely a fixed residence; but, burning with an unquenchable zeal, traveled from place to place, addressing multitudes who were living without hope and without God in the world. To reach their consciences was his aim and object. To set before them their perishing state as sinners, to proclaim in their ears free grace through the blood and righteousness of Christ as revealed in the gospel, to insist upon the necessity and unfold the nature of the new birth, whereby they became partakers of this salvation--these were the leading features of his preaching; and as he himself had a deep and daily experience of sin and salvation, in urging these points he poured out his very soul, and with a power and eloquence almost without example.

The best description that we know of the general drift of his preaching is the account which Tanner gives of the sermon that he preached at Plymouth, and which God owned and blessed to the quickening of his soul. When he had described, in the most touching manner, the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ, fixing his eyes suddenly on Tanner, he cried, "Sinner, you are the man who crucified the Son of God!" With such power did these words come to his soul, and his sins were so set in array before him, that Tanner, all but dropped down on the spot. This is but a specimen of his peculiar manner; but such preaching would not suit our day, as it did not suit the day which arose shortly after his death.

Whitefield threshed the corn, but he left wheat and chaff on the barn floor, a mingled heap. He could wield the flail as few men ever handled it, but he could not, or did not, touch the sieve. To do this, God raised up Huntington, who by his preaching and more by his writings, winnowed the corn which Whitefield had threshed. What Whitefield was to the flail, Huntington was to the sieve. Between them, therefore, there is no comparison to be instituted. The flail might say to the sieve, as it hangs on the nail, "What a poor thing are you! There is a sheaf for you; come, try and get the corn out of it." But by-and-bye the flail is hung on the nail, and then the sieve might retort, "Mr. Flail, what a poor thing are you! You can not sift your own corn. What good is all this heap here? I must come down to finish your slovenly work." Well might the laborer say to both, "Come, let us have no quarreling; you, Flail, can do your work, and no one better; and you, Sieve, can do your work, and no one better; but it is my hand which uses you both; and unless I take you down, you may hang on the nail until you, Flail, drop off by the dry rot, and you, Sieve, are eaten up by rust."

What Whitefield was, he was by the grace of God; what Huntington was, he was by the grace of God. Whitefield had not the deep experience, clear, doctrinal views, knowledge of and insight into Scripture, keen discernment, and able pen of Huntington; nor had Huntington the shining eloquence, burning zeal, and popular gifts of Whitefield; yet each were servants of God, and blessed in their day and generation. But they had their separate work. How different was Paul from Elijah! How unlike are the address of Stephen to the Jewish Council and the First Epistle of John! These differences spring, however, from the blessed Spirit, and are but diversities of his sovereign gifts--"Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but it is the same God which works all in all." So with Whitefield and Huntington. Huntington could not have preached to the Bristol colliers, nor Whitefield to the congregations of Providence. We are not insensible to Whitefield's defects, even errors; but we view him as a man raised up to do a special work.

We could not consistently close our review of his life and ministry without adverting to his faults. But it is an invidious task to point out defects. There are spots in the sun, flaws in a diamond, and specks in a mirror; but the sun is still the glorious orb of day, the diamond is still the most brilliant of jewels, and the mirror of the astronomer's telescope still penetrates the depths of ether and brings to light the wonders of the heavens. So is Whitefield still the prince of preachers, and his defects are lost in the brightness of his character as a Christian and as a minister!

The following is an extract from a letter of George Whitefield.

For many years, from one end of the large London fair to the other, booths of all kinds have been erected for performers, clowns, players, puppet shows, and such like. With a heart bleeding with compassion for so many thousands led captive by the devil at his will, on the day of the fair, at six o'clock in the morning, I ventured to lift up a standard among them in the name of Jesus.

Perhaps there were about ten thousand people in waiting, not for me--but for Satan's instruments to amuse them! When I mounted my field-pulpit, almost all flocked immediately around it. I preached on these words, 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so shall the Son of Man be lifted up!' They gazed, they listened, they wept; and I believe that many felt themselves stung with deep conviction for their sins. All was hushed and solemn.

Being thus encouraged, I ventured out again at noon. What a scene! The fields, the whole fields were ready for Beelzebub's harvest! All Satan's agents were in full motion--drummers, trumpeters, singers, masters of puppet shows, exhibitors of wild beasts, players, and so forth, all busy in entertaining their respective audiences. I suppose there could not be less than twenty or thirty thousand people. My pulpit was fixed on the opposite side, and immediately, to their great dismay, they found the number of their attendants sadly lessened.

Judging that like Paul, I would now be called as it were, to fight with beasts at Ephesus, I preached from these words--'Great is Diana of the Ephesians!' You may easily guess that there was some noise among the craftsmen, and that I was 'honored' with having a few stones, dirt, rotten eggs, and pieces of dead cats thrown at me, while engaged in calling them from their favorite, but lying vanities. My soul was indeed among lions--but the greatest part of my congregation, which was very large, seemed for awhile to be turned into lambs.

This encouraged me to give notice that I would preach again at six o'clock in the evening. I came, I saw--but what? Thousands and thousands more than before, if possible, still more deeply engaged in their unhappy diversions! One of Satan's choicest servants was performing, trumpeting on a large stage; but as soon as the people saw me in my pulpit, I think all to a man left him and ran to me. For a while I was enabled to lift up my voice like a trumpet, and many heard the joyful sound.

This Satan could not brook. The enemy's agents made a kind of roaring at some distance from our camp. At length they approached nearer, and one of the clowns (attended by others, who complained that they had lost much money on account of my preaching,) got up upon a man's shoulders, and advancing near the pulpit attempted to slash me with a long heavy whip several times--but always tumbled down with the violence of his motion.

Soon afterwards they got a marching band with drums, to pass through the congregation. I ordered that passage might be made for them. The ranks opened, while all marched through, and then closed again.

Finding these efforts to fail, a large group assembled together, and having got a large pole with their flag, advanced towards us with steady and formidable steps, until they came very near the skirts of our hearing, praying, and almost undaunted congregation. I prayed to the Captain of our salvation for present support and deliverance. He heard and answered; for just as they approached us with fearful looks--I know not why--they quarreled among themselves, threw down their flag, and went their way--leaving, however, many of their company behind, who before we were done, were brought over to join the besieged party. I think I continued in praying, preaching, and singing, (for the noise was too great at times to preach) for about three hours.

We then retired to the Tabernacle, with pockets full of more than a thousand notes from people brought under concern for their souls, and read them amid the praises and spiritual acclamations of thousands, who joined with the holy angels in rejoicing that, in such an unexpected, unlikely place and manner--so many sinners were snatched out of the very jaws of the devil!

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