

# History of the Reformation

## George Whitefield

- Background
  - Evangelicalism
    - One part Pietistic spirituality
    - One part Presbyterian doctrinal precision
    - One part Puritan introspection
  - Jonathan Edwards
    - “What does it mean to be a Christian?”
    - “What is the evidence that my faith is genuine?”
  - John/Charles Wesley
    - “What do I need to do to be holy?”
    - The “drive for holiness” in both public and private life is the central purpose of redemption, not just the simple assurance of salvation
- England in 18<sup>th</sup> Century
  - Catholic/Protestant wars were over
    - Act of Settlement 1701 – monarchs of England/Scotland could not be Catholic nor married to a Catholic
  - Enlightenment
    - Reason is the primary source of authority
      - Liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government, separation of church and state, philosophy
    - Scientific revolution
      - Sir Isaac Newton
    - Philosophy
      - John Locke, Emmanuel Kant, David Hume
  - Two directions
    - Secular Humanism – France – French Revolution
    - Great Awakening – England, America – American Revolution
- George Whitefield Life
  - Born Dec 1714 in Gloucester, England (25 mi W of Wales)
    - Thomas Whitefield and Elizabeth Edwards – poor inn keepers
    - Measles at a young age caused permanent eye malformity
    - Appeared to be cross-eyed
      - Later in life – “Dr. Squintum”
  - Early life
    - Always had a passion for the theatre
    - Age 12 – enrolled in St. Mary’s de Crypt
    - Mother’s desire for him to attend Oxford
      - Found out that “poor” could attend Oxford classes tuition free if they became a “servitor” to the more affluent students
    - At St Mary’s de Crypt, he became very concerned about his soul



- George Whitefield Life
  - Strove to become very devout
    - Attend services twice a day, spend a lot of time reading his Bible, reform his behavior, spend lots of time reading his Greek New Testament
  - At Oxford, his servitor status made him 2<sup>nd</sup> class
  - Devotional life distanced him from many of his peers
    - He became almost ascetic in his lifestyle
    - 1733 – Charles Wesley invited him to breakfast
      - In opposition to all the rules
    - 1734/35 – almost died from his religious fervor
      - A friend nursed him back to health
  - At an end to himself, God showed him His grace and George Whitefield was born again
    - “God showed me that I must be born again” and, “a ray of Divine Light ... instantly darted upon my soul, and from that moment, but not till then, did I know that I must be a new creature.”
  - Not long after, fully understood God’s Sovereignty
    - Fully embraced a Calvinist understanding
    - Contra to his friends the Wesleys
    - “love, not fear constrains a person to obedience”
    - God’s sovereignty became a central theme in his evangelism
  - He became an even more avid studier of God’s Word
    - Reading and praying over the English text, the Greek text, and Matthew Henry’s commentary
  - June 1737 – ordained a deacon in the Church of England
    - His 1<sup>st</sup> sermon in Gloucester – some complained that he drove some mad.
    - The Bishop – wished the madness might not be forgotten before the next Sunday.
  - At age 22, returned to Oxford to lead the Holy Club for the next year
    - John & Charles Wesley had gone to Savannah – sent for Whitefield to join them
    - Went to Gloucester to say farewell, prevailed to preach
      - Congregation was very large
    - 4 weeks in Bristol (35 mi SE of Gloucester)
      - Found out that he would accompany General Oglethorpe to Georgia
      - Preached every day and twice on Sunday
  - Jan 1738 – departed
    - Wesley arrived back disheartened, was in the same harbor
    - Would not meet with Whitefield
  - On trip to America (stop by Gibraltar)
    - As chaplain to the soldiers, Whitefield initially met with resistance
    - By the end of the trip, the soldiers/sailors were in tears at his departure
  - Savannah
    - Became keenly aware of great social need
    - Determines to found an orphanage
  - 1739 – return to England to raise funds for the orphanage
    - Pulpits closed to him
    - At Kingswood, near Bristol, he found another distressed group, the Welsh miners
    - Hearts reached with the Gospel, with tear-streaked faces
    - Began “Open Air” preaching to thousands with his powerful voice
    - Rich and poor alike stood in the field to hear his preaching

- George Whitefield Life
  - 1739 – Whitefield and Wesley’s relationship soured
    - Because of Calvinistic vs Arminian theology
    - Wesley published *Freedom of Grace*
    - Whitefield had established the Calvinist Methodist Church in Wales
      - Eventually became the Presbyterian Church of Wales
      - From whence came Dr. Martin Loyd-Jones
    - Eventually, Whitefield turned all Methodist churches which he’d established to the Wesleys
  - 1740 – Whitefield returned to Georgia
    - Established the Bethesda Orphanage
      - Oldest surviving charity in the US (now Bethesda Academy)
      - Calvinist work ethic – part of education is to learn a practical skill
      - Eph 4:28 “labor with your hands. . .to give something to those in need”
    - Went back and forth between Savannah and New England
      - Philadelphia, New York, Charleston
      - Preached for Jonathan Edwards in Massachusetts
    - Wherever he went, there were requests for him to preach
      - The crowds were always extremely large
- Preaching of George Whitefield
  - Preaching was central, but always focused on exhortation
    - Benjamin Franklin – “Whitefield’s integrity, disinterestedness, and indefatigable zeal in presecuting every good work, I have never seen equaled, I shall never see excelled” (Autobiography)
  - 1740 – 1770 – a “blur” of preaching
    - Central preacher of the Great Awakening
    - Not only in America, but England, Wales, Scotland
    - Estimates of a thousand sermons per year (avg of 3 per day)
      - Major addresses, not just brief talks
    - “Who would think it possible that a person. . .should speak in the compass of a single week (and that for years) in general 40 hours and in very many, 60, and that to thousands and then after this labor, instead of taking any rest, should be offering up prayers and intercessions with hymns and spiritual songs, as his manner was, in every house to which he was invited.” (Henry Venn, vicar of Huddersfield)
  - Benjamin Franklin –
    - while listening to George Whitefield in the Philadelphia Court house, walked away from him in the direction of his shop in Market street, stopping when he could no longer clearly discern his voice. He estimated his distance to Whitefield, used that (138 ft) as a radius of a semi-circle, calculated the area, allowed 2 ft<sup>2</sup> per person, he computed that George Whitefield could be heard (unamplified) by 30,000 people.
  - Charles Spurgeon
    - “Often as I have read his life, I am conscious of distinct quickening whenever I turn to it. *He lived*. Other men seemed to be only half-alive; but Whitefield was all life, fire, wing, force. 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.”

- His Travels – In a day of rudimentary travel by horse, carriage or ship
  - Length & breadth of England & Wales countless times
  - Scotland – 14X
  - America – 7X
    - Every major town on the East coast from Charleston to New Hampshire
  - Ireland – 2X
  - Everywhere he stopped, he preached
    - Usually to extremely large crowds, sometimes 20 – 30 thousand
    - He exhausted himself in the preaching of salvation in Jesus Christ

- His Death

- Sep 29, 1770, on a trip to New England
  - Preached “atop a large barrel” at Exeter, NH
  - Spent the night in the parsonage of Old South Presbyterian Church, Newburyport, Massachusetts
  - Though exhausted from his travel, preached atop the stairway going to his bedroom “until the candle burned out”
  - Woke at 2 AM complaining that his asthma prevented his breathing
  - Died 5 AM the next morning
- The last thing he did in life was to preach the Gospel
- He was buried “under the pulpit” of that church



- Content of His Preaching

- Not “untheological”, but emphasis on being born again
- Place of drama, emotional appeal
- The full biblical Gospel message to ordinary people
  - The majesty and holiness of God
  - The devastating nature of sin
  - The reality of future judgment including the reality of hell
  - The sole remedy of a crucified Christ
  - The utter necessity of repentance and the new birth
  - Salvation that is manifested in a new life, not a mere profession

- Manner of His Preaching

- Whitefield was interested in people’s souls
  - His method was dramatic, almost theatrical, yet sincere and heart-felt
  - “He makes less of the doctrines than our American preachers generally do and aims more at affecting the heart. He is a born orator” Sarah Edwards
  - “It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simple truths of the Bible. I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob”
- His appeal was to their emotions from his emotion
  - The movement of the Holy Spirit is often felt in the emotion rather than in the intellectual understanding
  - His sermons often found him “emotional” for his lost hearers

- “You blame me for weeping, but how can I help it when you will not weep for yourselves, though your immortal souls are on the verge of destruction, and for aught you know, you are hearing your last sermon, and may never more have an opportunity to have Christ offered to you.”
  - Important – Both are involved
  - Whitefield would always follow up in places he’d been before that people who’d had an emotional conversion were continuing in the faith

- Opposition and Persecution

- Whitefield was opposed almost relentlessly
    - Church of England ministers opposed his “preaching outside the Church”
  - Often physically attacked
    - “The enemy continued to persecute him... striking him with sticks and staves, until overcome with exhaustion he fell to the ground... They still abused him, though prostrate...”
    - Once, allowing a man in his room to hear his problem, the man beat him with a gold-tipped cane



- Opposed in writings
    - Pamphlets and books were written
    - Political cartoons were published
  - Rivalries, divisions, and criticisms
    - Arminian vs Calvinist
    - “Old Lights” vs “New Lights”
      - Anti-revivalists vs revivalists
    - Church of England vs Separatists



- An American Phenomenon

- American Influence “Accidental Revolutionary”
    - (Jerome Mahaffey – 2011)
  - While English, Whitefield became increasingly drawn to the Americas
    - Wesley – always loyal to the crown
    - Whitefield – institutional attachments and personal identification were more to the colonies
  - He became a unifying colonial force
    - 80% of colonials heard him at least once
    - By 1750 – virtually every American from Boston to Charleston loved him and saw him as their champion
  - Though dying prior to the American Revolution
    - You might argue that a unified American people was possible because of George Whitefield

- Controversy

- Slavery
    - Once advocated that the colony of Georgia should legalize slavery
    - Letter to the editor

- Whitefield advocated his position However, angered plantation owners by advocating
    - 1) slaves should have the Gospel preached to them
    - 2) Slaves should be credibly educated
  - “His letter represents the 1<sup>st</sup> journalistic statement concerning slavery” (Harry Stout)
  - Whitefield did not even realize that his letter would be the seed of the Abolition movement
  - In one famous sermon
    - “And to you Negroes here, Jesus Christ died for them. . .For in Jesus Christ there is neither male nor female, bond or free. . . Jesus Christ will wash you in His blood”
- Influence
  - Whitefield did not spend his time organizing churches
    - Wesley, with genius for organization, took the seed planted by Whitefield and made in into the Methodist Church
    - Whitefield’s influence was on revivalistic evangelism
      - Charles G. Finney
      - Dwight L. Moody
      - Billy Sunday
      - Billy Graham
  - His leadership was by integrity, affection, and example
    - “inflexible in matters of moral rectitude
    - Heartfelt concern, unfailing encouragement, and personal example