

George Whitefield at 300

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This year marks the tercentenary of the birth of the great British evangelist, George Whitefield; old GW would turn 300 this year in December. Men like Whitefield need to be studied, the times in which Whitefield lived need to be studied, the revivals and awakenings under Whitefield's mighty preaching need to be studied and Whitefield's theology and the great doctrines he preached need to be studied as well, friends. George Whitefield knew full well the wicked windings of the human heart and depravity of mankind. He referred to a lost sinner as a man who was half-devil and half-beast and Whitefield preached up man's duty of repentance and the necessity of a work of regeneration upon the heart through the new birth. Whitefield's often cry was, "You must be born-again."

This afternoon, as we celebrate the tercentenary of his birth this year, I'd like to introduce you to Whitefield. I will read some excerpts from my two volume definitive biography on Whitefield published by Revival Literature. I'm going to start with part of the Preface written by Richard Owen Roberts.

"A man's view of God has an incredible impact upon his own life and the lives of all his life touches. It is particularly grievous that a man in ministry whose view of God is altogether too small will eventually find that the eternal truth of his life parallel his conception of God. Thankfully in the kind providence of the Almighty, he occasionally loans the world a man who really knows his God. Wondrously, not only the multitudes of his day are gloriously helped but hundreds of years later, the magnitude of the works of God through that man are still felt and loved. George Whitefield was one of those men whose concept of God matched both Scripture and reality. Rarely in the history of the world has the impact of a single man been so profoundly powerful, deeply felt and enduring as that of the Prince of Preachers and fiery evangelist, George Whitefield."

Next, friends, I'd like to read a portion from the Foreword of the book by J. I. Packer who wrote,

"George Whitefield of Gloucester, England, intercontinental gospel preacher with a voice like organ music and a life-long west country accent, was a phenomenon. He was an unusual human being whom God

equipped and used in a quite unique way. He was a very godly man from the time when as a student in Oxford, he met the Wesleys. His passion was to grasp and be grasped by the God they served, the God of the Bible, the God and Father of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

“Following his conversion, he left Oxford and ministered in and around his hometown. He came to the bishop's notice and received ordination at 21, two years younger than the statutory minimum age. Overnight, he became a popular preacher, always highlighting the new birth. Throughout his ministry, he lived by rule: maintaining a steady devotional life each day, reading and re-reading the marvelous Puritan exposition of the Bible by Matthew Henry, usually on his knees and interceding at length for the advance of God's kingdom.

“His penitent humility before God was life-long and deep and was the taproot of the compassionate, confident and confidential boldness that never ceased to amaze his hearers. He was a disciplined man: abstinence in food and drink, taking no more sleep than he needed and he could manage on less sleep than most. Always meticulous in his personal affairs, a single-minded and eager, well-focused and joyful, genial and practical, he lived every day full-stretched for his Lord. Premature aging and the onset of asthma or angina or perhaps both, did not slow him down. The odd response that he commanded whenever he preached was as much admiration for his transparent spiritual zeal as for the stupendous force of his preaching as such.

“He was a very gifted man. To his natural energetic alertness and charm were added and sanctified all the powers that mark great actors. What were these? First, the power to command and hold attention. Movement or action as the classical theorists of rhetoric called it is central here and Whitefield was never still in the pulpit. Second, a big, in Whitefield's case, a huge voice capable of expressing the whole range of human emotions and attitudes. Whitefield could thunder, lament, caress and encourage with overwhelming heart-searching, heart-breaking power. Third, total identification with what he was projecting, not in Whitefield's case a character on stage, but the holiness and mercy of God and the transformation of life that Christ brings when through faith and repentance we learn to live in, through, to and for him. Fourth, the ability to make every utterance an easy flow, a vivid and arresting speech. All great actors and all great preachers can do this. Fifth, power so to impact each individual in the crowd that he or she feels personally addressed, arrested and drawn into what is going on. In Whitefield's case, persuasion from God through his messenger. Thus gifted as a dramatic communicator, Whitefield had an evangelistic and assuring ministry in the pulpit of unprecedented power and fruitfulness.”

I now want to read us, friends, my Introduction to my two volumes on Whitefield.

“The last definitive biography on George Whitefield was first published in 1970, volume 1, in 1980, volume 2, written by Arnold Dallimore and published by the Banner of Truth Trust. It was Dallimore's hope that his work would bring renewed interest since history had so neglected him. This was accomplished but in the last 35 years Whitefield has again fallen into neglect and misinformation about him has been published that detracts from the facts of history and diminishes his role in the revival of the 18th century. Hopefully, this book will correct those errors and re-establish Whitefield's prominence in the role of church history.

“As comprehensive as Dallimore's work was, he left out large amounts of Whitefield material and since Dallimore's death, much new Whitefieldian material has come to light. Some of the new material is exciting: discovery of 109 letters which Dallimore never saw, written during 1737-1739 comprised of correspondence of Whitefield and early Methodists. These letters now published by the National Library of Wales are a goldmine of rich Whitefield material. These letters add much to the existing works of Whitefield and contain such gems as: John Wesley would sit at Whitefield's feet while the latter preached. Also, errors in the editing of the journal by Reverend William Wale are updated and corrected. It's the goal of this new biography on Whitefield not to replace or lessen Dallimore's fine contribution but to tell the untold part of Whitefield's massive life and to bring him back to the rightful place he deserves in history.

“Few men have had the international fame and impact on the kingdom of God that George Whitefield had. Sadly, he's almost forgotten in history or viewed as an oddity. There are likely reasons for this. Whitefield left no denomination behind him unlike John Wesley, to promote and safeguard his life and writings. Whitefield himself declared his desire to be forgotten, 'Let the name of George Whitefield perish,' was his often comment. He also stated that Wesley had penned his sheep and he had not. Another reason Whitefield has been so terribly neglected and even replaced, John Wesley was not the prominent figure of the Revival in England, Whitefield was, is that this has been divinely determined. God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not ours.

“God has seen pleased to allow the primary figures in Revival history to fall by the wayside and allow secondary figures to rise to the place of prominence in man's eyes. This was the case with George Whitefield, the primary figure of the Revival of religion in Britain and John Wesley, the secondary figure in the Revival. As was the case in the second Great Awakening with Asahel Nettleton, the primary figure of the Revival and Charles Finney, the secondary figure of the Revival. Many will ask, 'Who

was Asahel Nettleton?' His biographer, Bennet Tyler, said of Nettleton that he was the means of awakening no less than 30,000 souls, yet few know of him today and the same can be said of George Whitefield. John Wesley has been heralded in history as leader and champion of the Revival in Britain but Whitefield is seldom mentioned and if so, it is in a diminished role. Even Charles Wesley's role in the Revival has been sadly overlooked in the shadow of his brother. However, had someone stated during the Revival of the 18th century that John Wesley was the leader of it and not George Whitefield, that person would have been ridiculed and out of touch with the facts of that great movement of God. Oddly, God seems to smile on the servants who can say with Charles Wesley, 'Keep me little and unknown, prized and loved by God alone.'

“One of the reasons for writing this book was a hope to have all of the existing material on Whitefield reprinted and readily accessible to the public. We are grateful to the effort of Quinta Press for making much with fealty and material available to us again. However, there still remains much material on Whitefield that is out of print. Another reason for this book is revival. We are still in great need of a pouring out of the plentiful effusions of divine grace. We in America, Great Britain and Canada desperately need a national movement of God where the manifest presence of God re-establishes a place of prominence and pre-eminence in his church. We have grieved him away from our sanctuaries with weak theology and meager methodologies and we are bankrupt without him. A heaven-sent revival would awaken a slumbering church, revitalize religion and usher in thousands of lost sinners into the kingdom. How desperately we need a George Whitefield today.

“My own study on revival has taken decades and it is critically important that we study revival and the servants God used in revival. It is also my prayer that someone will read these pages and the embers of their heart will begin to burn brighter in expectation of what God can do with the one fully yielded and concentrated to him. God used Whitefield and Wesley because they were holy men. When writing a biography, it is easy to fall into the trap of hagiography; unless one is careful, it is easy to lionize a man like Whitefield who was so incredibly gifted and used of God. I want to state that Whitefield was no super-human or unearthly saint, he was human. All the great men I've known have had faults. Whitefield's faults were plentiful, he was a man like my friend, Dr. Curt Daniels, so aptly told me “whose weaknesses stood in the shadows of his strengths.” Because of his great ability in oratory, he could draw 20,000 people to a field to hear him preach and because of this, he was prone to pride. He was also given to impressions. Jonathan Edwards admonished GW for this and this is perhaps the reason they did not stay close friends. When his son was born, he announced to his London congregation that God had told him his son would grow to be a great preacher. Whitefield's son died four months later

and he sorrowfully had to publicly apologize for his unguarded remarks. Other faults were as obvious: he was a perfectionist and extremely fastidious. If his meal was late or a piece of furniture out of place, he could become vividly upset. Whitefield was also a slave owner and he believed in slavery. This is ironic since he did so much to help the black populace of the Colonies by building a school in Pennsylvania and reaching out to them with the gospel message. One cannot excuse Whitefield's stance on slavery by stating he was merely a product of his time, he was wrong and this was perhaps the biggest mark upon his character. I point these things out now in the Introduction of his life because as the narrative of it progresses, it's easy to think of him as faultless which he was not.

“There have been few preachers in the history of the church who have possessed such holy fire. His apostolic preaching startled those who heard him. When George Whitefield preached, he was like Mount Sinai, he was altogether on a smoke. Other than pope or king, few men were as famous as George Whitefield in his day. It's astounding that in the century we live in now, he's almost forgotten. On a recent trip to Gloucester, his place of birth, none of the locals we talked to about him had even heard of him yet in his day, he was more well-known than his good friend, Ben Franklin.

“Regarding the amount of time and labor that went into this lengthy biography on Whitefield, it is my prayer that the time used to create it will be valued alongside the brevity of life and the light of eternity. May the reading of George Whitefield stir your heart to do greater things for God and may these volumes put a fire in some young person's belly to go all-out for God and may the life of George Whitefield awaken some slumbering minister who is burned out and fatigued and who lost his flame years ago. It is my prayer that God will rekindle the embers on the altar of your heart and stir you up to do greater things for him who has done such great things for us. In doing the research on Whitefield, my good friend, Ian Murray, informed me that I would be the recipient of a great blessing as I performed this task. This has been so true. May you as well receive a blessing from reading it. All glory to his holy name.”

That was the Introduction, friends, and like I said, men like Whitefield need to be studied particularly in our day of sad spiritual declension and a watered-down gospel. Let us preach the old doctrines that Whitefield preached and preach them with the authority that Whitefield possessed from on high. And as we remember him, as we commemorate the tercentenary of his birth this year, let us focus not so much on Whitefield but the God he served.