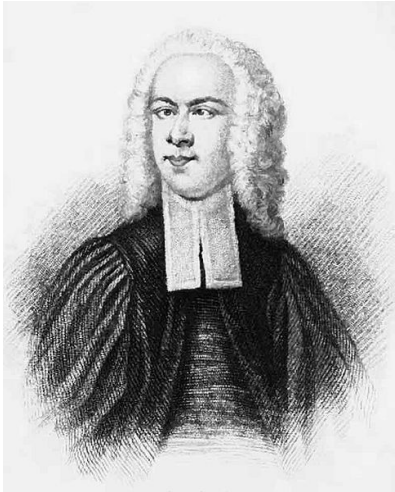


Recommended reading for more on George Whitefield: See Chapter 13 of [The Light and the Glory](#). See also the Works Cited at the bottom.





Pembroke's Old Chapel Quad

The young George Whitefield, at age 17, had entered the Pembroke College at Oxford in November, 1732 and soon became associated with a group called the “Holy Club” where he made acquaintances with John and Charles Wesley (Anglican Library). The relationship between John Wesley and George Whitefield created a profound influence on both of their lives, and perhaps as much on Wesley as on Whitefield, even though Wesley seems to be the better known of the two. Whitefield was drawn into the group of pious believers at Oxford and, “[u]nder John Wesley’s dour and often imperious leadership, the club put great emphasis on a disciplined spiritual life” (Marshall and Manuel 243). Marshall and Manuel go on to divulge the origin of the club’s later given name, explaining that “[d]ue to what their critics considered to be their methodical ways, they were dubbed Methodists” (243).

Whitefield wrote, in respect to his relations with Wesley and the Methodist students at Oxford, that the experience “taught me to die daily” (Ruttenburg, 433). Whitefield took up vigorous reading during his membership with the Holy Club and “[i]n his quest for a closer relationship with Christ, he was lead to an obscure, slim volume, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, by a

forgotten Scot named Henry Scougal” (Marshall and Manuel 243). This was a turning point in Whitefield’s life, in which Marshall and Manuel explain, “Whitefield was nonplused to discover that all of the good things which he had been doing to earn God’s favor were of no account. What he needed, he learned, was to have Christ formed within him; in short, he needed to be ‘born again’” (243).

With this strong conviction, Whitefield by his own efforts began a routine of “self-imposed asceticism... until at last his health began to give way” (243). Ruttenburg says, “In the throes of a prolonged agony of spirit, Whitefield wrote, he suddenly recalled that the crucified Christ had cried out, ‘I thirst! I thirst!’ immediately before his death and delivery from suffering,” and, “likewise threw himself down upon his bed in his Oxford garret exclaiming, ‘I thirst! I thirst!’” (437). In that moment of the cry of desperation for his dry soul he experienced true salvation by surrendering himself to God in resignation of a works-based faith which he had so diligently sought. A man named Charles Chauncy during Whitefield’s lifetime later criticized him for this testimony, which Whitefield had related in his published journals, saying that it “appeared to me very evidently to exhibit *a prophane Imitation of the Son of God in his last Sufferings*” (438).



Nonetheless, because of Whitefield’s profound conversion experience, preaching about the “new birth” and “new man” became central to his evangelistic message (430). Corroborating the effect of this idea, the Great Awakening (in which Whitefield played a major role) was called in the words of a man named H. Richard Niebuhr “our national conversion” (452). With this new evangelistic purpose in mind, Whitefield immediately after his experience in his room rushed out “to share the Good News that Jesus Christ had come for sinners,” and so “[t]hus began the ministry of the greatest evangelist of the eighteenth century” (Marshall and Manuel 244).

Whitefield’s newfound fervor was quickly noticed and he was soon ordained on “June 20,

1736, at the age of twenty-two" (244). He preached his first official sermon that following Sunday near his old stomping grounds at the Church of Saint Mary de Crypt (A short biography of George Whitefield). Somewhat comically, Whitefield later described the aftermath of that sermon, saying, "Some few mocked, but most for the present, seemed struck, and I have since heard that a complaint was made to the bishop, that I drove fifteen people mad, the first sermon" (ibid). Whitefield then began preaching abroad and "[b]etween the summer of 1736 and Christmas of 1737, his preaching proved very popular in London and surrounding areas" (Portraits). Not long after he made plans to travel to America.

Marshall and Manuel tell us, "His call, he felt, was to General Oglethorpe's new colony in America, where the Wesleys had already gone and were now urging him to join them" (244). Whitefield's preaching had already reached such a popular status that early word of his coming was published in America by a Philadelphia printer who has his eyes on news and developments coming out of England: Benjamin Franklin (Lambert 531). Frank Lambert, who details the relationship which developed between Whitefield and Franklin, speaking in retrospect of when Franklin had first heard of Whitefield, says:

Almost two years earlier Franklin had introduced Whitefield to his readers in an item culled from a London newspaper. William Seward, Whitefield's traveling companion and press agent, had paid for an announcement to be printed on the front page of the London Daily Advertiser of September 19, 1737, stating that "the Reverend Mr. Whitefield, a young Gentleman of distinguish'd Piety, very eminent in his Profession, and a considerable Fortune, will go voluntarily to preach the Gospel in Georgia." Two months later, Franklin reprinted the story in the Pennsylvania Gazette. (531)

Once in Georgia, Whitefield saw some of the deplorable conditions and his heart went out to the orphans there, so he resolved to raise money during his ministerial itinerancy in the colonies to fund the building of an Orphanage in Bethesda, Georgia (Aldridge 360). This initial endeavor became a tag-mark for his fund raising campaign in the years to come. After his rather short stay in Georgia Whitefield "returned to England after a few months, but only temporarily, to implore the trustees of the colony to provide land and approval for an orphanage, for he now regarded America as his home" (Marshall and Manuel 245). While in England "he found that the revival which his preaching had ignited in the Bristol-Gloucester area had continued unabated," and Whitefield, looking for a willing agent to continue the revival and fill in his shoes, met up with John Wesley again and "urged [him] to assume this role, and Wesley readily agreed" (245).

Whitefield, though, bided his time in England and continued to preach during his stay only

to soon “f[i]nd the pulpits of Bristol closed to him by jealous pastors, who deplored his ‘enthusiasm’” (245). Whitefield’s solution to this dilemma, which Marshall and Manuel call “God’s solution” (245), became the most famous trademark of his ministerial career: open-air preaching. He began to preach on the outskirts of the towns, first to the near savage and ill-treated coal miners, and then those who then flocked by the droves to hear this “radical” preacher (245-246). Marshall and Manuel tell us of the scene outside of Bristol only a week after he first began preaching to the miners: “The following Sunday, there were *ten* thousand, for by now there were far more townspeople than colliers. And on Sunday, March 25, 1739, the crowd was estimated by *Gentleman’s Magazine* at twenty-three thousand!” (246).



Whitefield continued to preach in England for the rest of the summer until he “sailed for Philadelphia on August 15” (246). Once he arrived in America he entered the mass colonial scene which would forever make an impression amidst the 13 colonies in the historical phenomenon called “the Great Awakening.” Numbers in the tens of thousands like had been seen in England began to be the normal attendance rate at his sermons in the open fields. It didn’t take long for people to notice the astounding power of his voice, how far it seemed to carry, and how persuasive his speech was. The most famous of George Whitefield’s observers, and even a demonstrated test subject and witness of his influential speech and powerful voice, was none other than Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin on one occasion decided to carry out an experimental calculation to determine how far Whitefield’s voice traveled because “he was amazed at the carrying power of his voice” (Marshall and Manuel 248). Marshall and Manuel tell us that “[r]etracing his steps backwards down Market Street until he could at last no longer hear him, the amazed Franklin computed that in an open space, Whitefield’s words could be heard by thirty thousand people” (248). Though Whitefield’s voice was testified to carry even farther than that on one astounding

occasion in which he preached in Ireland where “he is said to have preached to an audience variously estimated at from 30,000 to 100,000 people” (Lawson 182)!

Probably the greatest testimony of Whitefield’s powers of persuasive speech comes from Franklin’s own autobiography in a comical and at the same time jaw-dropping and heart-rending testimony of how Franklin’s resolve slowly weakened over an impassioned appeal by Whitefield to his audience to donate to the Georgia Orphanage:

I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me, I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably, that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all. (Brannan)

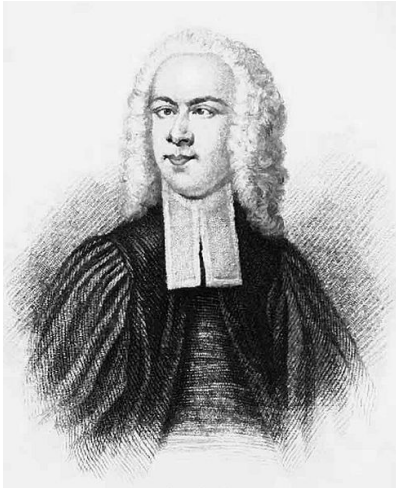
Frank Lambert aptly notes that “[h]istorians have viewed Franklin's account as evidence of Whitefield's oratorical powers” (529). The cherry on top of Whitefield’s strong conviction in his sermons and such “oratorical powers” was the sheer enthusiasm with which he gave his sermons, of which David Hume gives an ample testimony: “Skeptic David Hume, while racing off at 5:00 one morning to hear Whitefield preach, was asked if he believed what Whitefield had to say. ‘No,’ Hume replied excitedly, ‘but he sure does!’” (COLUMN).

Whitefield gathered skeptics and believers alike, and even made friends with people like Franklin who was a deist. Franklin’s deistic views kept him from fully accepting Whitefield’s beliefs, but first by virtue of partnership and then development into a more personal relationship and correspondence, the two became friends. Lambert in his research concerning Franklin and Whitefield says that his evaluation of their relationship began “with the printer's and preacher's first joint venture in the colonial print market: Franklin's 1740 subscription publication of Whitefield's sermons and journals” (530).

As a result of their partnership over the publication of Whitefield’s sermons Franklin’s business sky-rocketed and also “[t]he venture extended Whitefield's message of the New Birth far beyond the reach of his voice” (530) which was mutually beneficial for both of them. Over time they kept in contact and developed a closer friendship as Whitefield preached among the colonies. Franklin resisted Whitefield’s repeated attempts to convert him over the years and

only treated it as flattery. He wrote to Whitefield, “Your frequently repeated Wishes and Prayers for my Eternal as well as temporal Happiness are very obliging. I can only thank you for them, and offer you mine in return” (546).

However Lambert notices that “[b]y the 1760s, he saluted Whitefield as ‘Dear Friend,’” and that Franklin said in another letter that Whitefield “is a good Man and I love him” (546). Yet there is one more influence from Whitefield on Benjamin Franklin which is worthy of note. Nancy Ruttenburg



mentions that “[t]he growth of an itinerant ministry” in the colonies, due mostly to Whitefield, began “transmuting the evangelical impulse into a republican one in the decades before the Revolution,” (431) supporting part of her claim by the fact that “Franklin's biographer, Carl Van Doren, notes that Franklin ‘bec[ame] intercolonial’ (138) directly following Whitefield's first visit to Philadelphia in 1739” (453). In other words, Whitefield’s itinerancy of preaching abroad was the thread that wove the 13 colonies together in the first “nationalistic focus” that can be spoken of before the Revolution, which even affected Franklin, centered around revivalism and mass conversion (a.k.a. the Great Awakening).

Here we return in brief to Whitefield’s overall influence. In view of Whitefield’s impact on the Great Awakening Marshall and Manuel state, in their opinion, “Through the almost universal, almost simultaneous experience of the Great Awakening, we began to become aware of ourselves as a *nation*, a body of believers which had a national identity as people chosen by God for a specific purpose” (Marshall and Manuel 251). Marshall and Manuel also muse as they came upon “the closing pages of Whitefield’s story” (252), on his tremendous influence as a light-bearer of God, taking final note of the quickly nearing end of his ministry:

In 1770, his health now broken and his breathing tormented by asthma attacks, he drove himself as never before. He reached Boston on his last visit, on August 15, five months after British troops had fired on a mob of civilians, killing five, in what would come to be known as the Boston Massacre. Never had the crowds been larger, nor “the word

received with greater eagerness than now. All opposition seems, as it were, for a while to cease". (252)

Whitefield preached his last sermon "on the Exeter green" in New Hampshire, who, having a little difficulty speaking up at first because of his health, said, "I will wait for the gracious assistance of God. For He will, I am certain, assist me once more to speak in His name" (253).

He then after waiting a while became seemingly reinvigorated and preached for near two hours, of which a present minister named Jonathan Parsons wrote, "He had such a sense of the incomparable excellencies of Christ that he could never say enough of Him" (253). Early the next morning George Whitefield rose "to see dawn's early light" (253) and Marshall and Manuel tell us of his final farewell: "George Whitefield died, just as the first rays of the sun caught the waters of the bay below. The new day would soon break across the nation. His dream had come true: America was a nation now – one nation under God" (253).

Whitefield's ministry ranged from England, to Wales, to Ireland, to America (A short biography of George Whitefield). In the words of one observer "[t]he world had been his parish and Whitefield had been faithful to that parish" (Portraits). Among Whitefield's personal contributions he began the Orphanage in Georgia, gave John Wesley a kick start in his ministry with the revival in England, and befriended one of the greatest American minds in the person of Benjamin Franklin, along with making innumerable other acquaintances during the Great Awakening. It truly would be almost impossible to overestimate the influence that George Whitefield had on the world and the largeness of his heart to accomplish what he believed was his God-given mission to spread the Gospel to all men.

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