

ON THE ERRANDS OF ANGELS SENT:
THE EVANGELISTIC PIETY OF GEORGE WHITEFIELD

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. Michael Haykin

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for 88910

by

Matthew D. Haste

1010 Morehead Road, Bowling Green, KY 42101

May 23, 2011

ON THE ERRANDS OF ANGELS SENT: THE EVANGELISTIC PIETY OF GEORGE WHITEFIELD

In his 19th-century poetic tribute entitled “The Preacher,” John Greenleaf Whittier called George Whitefield “a homeless pilgrim with dubious name / blown about by the winds of fame.”¹ This fame on both sides of the Atlantic provided Whitefield with a unique platform for preaching the Gospel in his day. He seemingly seized every opportunity, preaching over 18,000 sermons over the course of his life while traveling frequently between England, America, and Scotland. Whittier’s poem, while recognizing that Whitefield was not without his faults, summarizes his ministry well with these words: “Up and down the world he went / A John the Baptist crying, Repent!”² Beneath Whitefield’s fiery passion and inexhaustible energy for the Great Commission was an evangelistic piety built upon Calvinistic theology and evangelical convictions about the nature of God and man. This paper will examine Whitefield’s piety as it relates to his zeal for evangelism through the lens of his life and theology. The goal is to provide an evaluative summary of the spirituality of a man who lived, in Whittier’s words, as if he were “on the errands of angels sent.”³

The Life of George Whitefield

On December 16, 1714, the owners of the finest hotel in Gloucester welcomed their seventh child into the world. In his grammar school years, young George impressed his teachers

¹ John Greenleaf Whittier, “The Preacher,” [on-line]; accessed 18 April 2011; available from <http://www.readbookonline.net, 7798.htm>; Internet.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

with his oratory ability.⁴ Once, while reading a play to his sister, the young boy remarked somewhat presumptuously, if not prophetically: “God intends something for me which we know not of.”⁵ Whitefield’s words would prove true, but not before God wrought a miracle in him that he would spend the rest of his life striving to help others experience themselves.

Whitefield was converted while attending Oxford with John and Charles Wesley. The Wesley brothers modeled self-discipline and charitable living, but, unfortunately, as Arnold Dallimore has pointed out, they believed that this lifestyle “somehow ministered towards the salvation of their souls.”⁶ Whitefield quickly fell into both the zealous pursuit of Methodist asceticism and its erroneous theology. His non-stop effort to win the favor of God inevitably left him spiritually and physically exhausted with little joy in his life at all.⁷ Ironically, it was Charles Wesley who lent Whitefield the book that led to his conversion. It is worth quoting at length how Whitefield described this experience years later in a sermon:

“I must bear testimony to my old friend, Mr. Charles Wesley; he put a book into my hands, called, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, whereby God shewed [sic] me that I must be born again or be damned. I know the place; it may be superstitious, perhaps, but whenever I go to Oxford I cannot help running to that place where Jesus Christ first revealed Himself to me, and gave me the New Birth...[I] thus addressed the God of Heaven and earth: Lord, if I am not a Christian, if I am not a real one, God, for Jesus Christ's sake, show me what Christianity is, that I may not be damned at last. I read a little further, and the cheat was discovered; O, says the author, they that know any thing of religion, know it is a vital union with the Son of God, Christ formed in the heart; O what a ray of Divine life did then break in upon my poor soul...and from that moment God has been carrying on His blessed work in my soul.”⁸

⁴ Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, Vol. 1 (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 50.

⁵ George Whitefield, *A Short Account of God's Dealings with the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield* (London, 1740) in *George Whitefield's Journals* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷ Stuart Henry, *George Whitefield: Wayfaring Witness* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 22.

⁸ George Whitefield, “All Men’s Place,” in *Sermons on Important Subjects* (London: Henry Fisher, Son, & P. Jackson, 1828), 755.

This dramatic turn of events would shape Whitefield's theology and ministry for years to come. Soon after, he was ordained as a deacon in the Church of England and immediately began preaching locally, often to prisoners and to the sick.⁹ Whitefield zealously preached the miracle of the new birth whenever and wherever he could find an audience. Biographer Luke Tyerman refers to this season in 1737 as "the most important period of his life."¹⁰ At 22, Whitefield embarked on a year of itinerant preaching throughout the country that "literally startled the nation."¹¹ Soon thousands of people were gathering on a regular basis to hear the young "Gospel rover" admired for his "appearance, voice, elocution, and pulpit eloquence."¹² This season charted the course for the rest of Whitefield's life: he would travel, he would preach, and people would flock to hear him.

In 1738, compelled by God, Whitefield embarked on his first of seven journeys to America. Traveling throughout Georgia, he preached the same message of hope in the regenerating grace of God that won him such favor in England. As Stuart Henry has pointed out, "The man who came to Savannah on a May evening in 1738 was essentially the man as he continued for more than thirty years."¹³ He was a preacher who drew the attention of all he encountered. He was an evangelist who, whether in the pulpit before thousands or in the company of a newfound friend, was "always at the business of witnessing."¹⁴ He was a humanitarian who left Georgia only four months later with hopes of raising funds that would enable him to someday return and build an orphanage.¹⁵ The relationship of each of these roles

⁹ Henry, *Wayfaring Witness*, 25.

¹⁰ Tyerman, *The Life of George Whitefield*, Vol. 1 (Azle, Texas: The Need of the Times Publisher, 1995 Reprint, Originally published in 1876), 64.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹² *Ibid.*, 65.

¹³ Henry, *Wayfaring Witness*, 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

in regard to his personal piety will be considered below, but it is noteworthy that Whitefield's conversion launched him on a trailblazing path of passionate ministry that would continue in the same basic trajectory for the rest of his life.

He soon returned to England and was ordained as an Anglican priest despite encountering suspicions from his peers. Unsure of his motives and wary of anything that resembled enthusiasm, some clergy refused to grant him access to their pulpits.¹⁶ Whitefield, however, would not be deterred. On February 17, 1739, he took a final step toward what would become the hallmark of his ministry. Desiring to reach a group of coal-miners who lived on the fringe of society outside of Bristol, Whitefield "went upon a mount and spake [sic] to as many people as came" to hear him.¹⁷ Here is Whitefield's own description of the scene that followed as he repeated this method days later:

"Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was a friend of publicans, and came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected was to see the white gutters made by their tears which plentifully fell down their black cheeks, as they came out of their coal pits. Hundreds and hundreds of them were soon brought under deep convictions, which, as the event proved, happily ended in a sound and thorough conversion. The change was visible to all, though numbers chose to impute it to anything, rather than the finger of God."¹⁸

The importance of this revelation for Whitefield cannot be overstated. Though unsupported by the local clergy, he had discovered a pulpit that would always be his own. He had taken to the open air and he had seen remarkable success. Once Whitefield experienced the blessing of God on this effort, there was no turning back. He recorded his resolution in his private journal, "My preaching in the fields may displease some timorous, bigoted men, but I am

¹⁵ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶ Ibid., 46.

¹⁷ Whitefield, *Journals*, 216.

¹⁸ John Gillies, *Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield* (New Haven: Whitmore & Buckingham and H. Mansfield, 1834), 39.

thoroughly persuaded it pleases God, and why should I fear anything else!”¹⁹

Although he was seeing great success, Whitefield did not remain in Bristol long. Within the year, he returned to America, this time completing a preaching tour throughout New England on his way to Georgia to commence construction on the orphan house. His whirlwind tour of America provided a fresh spark to the smoldering fires of revival that had been spreading throughout the colonies. In the span of the next eight months, he would preach in the largest cities (Philadelphia, New York, Boston), the most prominent universities (Harvard and Yale), and in the pulpits of the most influential men in America (Jonathan Edwards, Gilbert Tennent, William Tennent). He would address thousands of people and see hundreds converted. His preaching success in America matched and even exceeded the success he had seen in England. .

He would spend the next thirty years consistently traveling between England, America, and Scotland. His preaching united a transatlantic revival that radically transformed the English-speaking world. Wherever he traveled, Whitefield remained devoted to his primary goal of preaching the Gospel to all that others might experience the new birth. On September 29, 1770, Whitefield preached his final sermon. He would die the following day at the young age of 56, his body utterly exhausted from years of spending its energy on the welfare of others. The zeal that Whitefield exhibited throughout his life was fueled by an evangelistic piety built on his own particular theological convictions. The following section will examine his theology as it relates to this piety and the message that he preached.

The Theology of George Whitefield

It is not a simple task to document the formal theology of George Whitefield. As J. C. Ryle has said, “The records of such a man are large and full in heaven, I have no doubt. But they are few and scanty upon earth.”²⁰ Indeed, despite his immense popularity and prolific ministry,

¹⁹ Whitefield, *Journals*, 227.

²⁰ J. C. Ryle, “George Whitefield and his Ministry” in *Select Sermons of George Whitefield* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 28.

Whitefield did not write a single theological treatise in his lifetime. Henry put it bluntly when he said, “Strictly speaking, Whitefield was not even a theologian, not so much because he did not produce a theology—as he did not—but because he did not address himself formally to the problems of speculative thought, nor attempt to systematize his dogma in any organized form.”²¹ To conclude from this point, however, that Whitefield was not a serious thinker would be erroneous.²² On the contrary, Haykin argues, “He was well grounded in the essentials of his theological perspective, as a close reading of both his letters and sermons reveals.”²³ This theological perspective was historic Calvinism, although Whitefield was uninterested in particular labels. He once wrote, “I embrace the Calvinistic scheme, not because Calvin, but Jesus Christ has taught it to me.”²⁴ Nonetheless, Dallimore argues, “He possessed a very real understanding of [the doctrines of grace], not as an abstract system of thought, but as the teachings of the Scriptures and as the basic principles of his daily Christian life.”²⁵ In a memorial sermon after his death, R. Elliot listed “the great doctrines which he taught and insisted on” as follows: “(1) Original sin, (2) The new birth, (3) Justification by faith in Christ, (4) The final perseverance of the saints, and (5) Eternal and unconditional election.”²⁶ This list provides a helpful outline for considering Whitefield’s unique theological emphases in his sermons and letters.

²¹ Henry, *Wayfaring Witness*, 96.

²² Stuart Henry argues that Whitefield’s life of faith was inconsistent with his stated theology. For example, “Whitefield knew his Bible. That, however, is not quite the same thing as saying that he understood it.” Henry, *Wayfaring Witness*, 98. Henry’s erroneous conclusions will be discussed in more detail below.

²³ Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Revived Puritan: The Spirituality of George Whitefield* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2000), 71.

²⁴ George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771), Vol. 1, 442.

²⁵ Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, 409.

²⁶ R. Elliot, “A Summary of Gospel Doctrine Taught by Mr. Whitefield; recorded in a funeral sermon on his death by R. Elliot, BA” in *Select Sermons*, 52.

Original Sin

Whitefield believed in the depravity of man. He urged his audiences to see their great rebellion against a holy God. In a sermon entitled “The Method of Grace,” Whitefield warned, “Before you can speak peace to your hearts, you must be made to see, made to feel, made to weep over, made to bewail, your actual transgressions against the law of God.”²⁷ According to Whitefield, these transgressions are many because man is “poor, miserable, blind, and naked by nature.”²⁸ He traced this condition back to the fall of Adam and the imputation of his guilt to all of humanity. Original sin, which he defined as “that original corruption each of us brings into the world with us which renders us liable to God’s wrath and damnation,” was a common theme in Whitefield’s sermons.²⁹ He stressed the point as a means of challenging his hearers to flee to Christ. He believed that “Jesus Christ calls none to him, but those who thirst after his righteousness, and feel themselves weary, and heavy laden with the burden of their sins.”³⁰ Thus, the doctrine of original sin was an important aspect of Whitefield’s theology both in terms of understanding his world and as a necessary precursor to one’s own conversion.

The New Birth

The doctrine of original sin was important to Whitefield because it established the necessity for individuals to experience the new birth. In a key sermon entitled “On Regeneration,” Whitefield declared unashamedly that all men “must be born again, renewed in the very spirit, in the inmost faculties of their minds, ere they can truly call Christ, ‘Lord, Lord.’”³¹ Whitefield knew from his own experience that external moralism was no cure for

²⁷ George Whitefield, “The Method of Grace,” in *Select Sermons*, 78.

²⁸ George Whitefield, “Marks of a True Conversion,” in *Sermons of George Whitefield* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 77.

²⁹ Whitefield, “The Method of Grace,” in *Select Sermons*, 80.

³⁰ George Whitefield, “The Indwelling of the Spirit, the Common Privilege of all Believers,” in *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 439.

man's depraved condition. Instead, he argued, "We must be so altered as to the qualities and tempers of our minds, that we must entirely forget what manner of persons we once were."³²

The result of being born again is "more than a bare outward profession" of faith but rather being "in [Christ], so as to be mystically united to him by a true and lively faith, and thereby to receive spiritual virtue from him, as the members of the natural body do from the head, or the branches from the vine."³³ This is what Whitefield experienced back at Oxford and it was what he longed for his hearers to know as well. This doctrine, however, is not just a matter of personal experience. In "On Regeneration," Whitefield lists four reasons why the new birth is necessary: (1) the Scriptures call for it, (2) the disparity between God's purity and our corruption demands it, (3) the experience of happiness God has prepared for us in heaven will require it, and (4) because "Christ's redemption will not be complete in us, unless we are new creatures."³⁴

Whitefield stressed that the new birth was a work of God alone and, personally, he never ceased to be amazed by the transformation it brought about in one's life. Characteristically, he once exclaimed, "Oh, what a privilege is this! To be changed from beasts into saints, and from a devilish, to be made partakers of a divine nature; to be translated from the kingdom of Satan, into the kingdom of God's dear Son!"³⁵

Justification by Faith in Christ

Regeneration opens the way for sinners to receive God's forgiveness through the divine verdict of justification. In a sermon on 1 Corinthians 6:11, Whitefield explained that being justified means that "You have your sins forgiven, and are looked upon by God as though

³¹ George Whitefield, "On Regeneration," in *Sermons*, 261.

³² *Ibid.*, 263.

³³ *Ibid.*, 262.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 264-266.

³⁵ George Whitefield, "Christ, the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption," in *Sermons*, 223.

you never had offended him at all.”³⁶ Whitefield understood this reality in forensic terms: “It is a law term, and alludes to a judge acquitting an accused criminal of the thing laid to his charge.”³⁷ This verdict is only possible to the one who unites himself to both the life and the death of Christ by faith. The sinless life of Jesus has fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law on the believer’s behalf: “Does the law condemn? By having Christ’s righteousness imputed to them, they are dead to the law, as a covenant of works; Christ has fulfilled it for them, and in their stead.”³⁸ Furthermore, “pardon for the sin of our lives” has been “abundantly done by the death of Jesus Christ.”³⁹ Thus, Whitefield would eagerly call sinners to embrace the life and death of Jesus as the sole grounds for their justification because he believed they would find “their Savior hanging on a tree, with arms outstretched ready to embrace them.”⁴⁰ The call to come to Jesus and be forgiven was at the center of Whitefield’s evangelism.

The Final Perseverance of the Saints

Once a sinner had turned to Jesus, Whitefield believed that there was no turning back. This life-long commitment was both a call to the Christian for perseverance and a promise from God that it would be so. In the final sermon that Whitefield ever preached in London, he comforted his hearers with a discourse on the faithful protection of the Good Shepherd over his flock. “He holds them in his hand, that is, he holds them by his power; none shall pluck them there. There is always something plucking at Christ’s sheep...but ‘None shall pluck them out of my hand,’ says Christ.”⁴¹ The departing Whitefield remarked, “My brethren, upon this text I can

³⁶ George Whitefield, “On Justification by Christ,” in *Sermons*, 233.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁸ Whitefield, “Christ, the Believer’s Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption,” in *Sermons*, 222.

³⁹ Whitefield, “On Justification by Christ,” in *Sermons*, 238.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁴¹ George Whitefield, “The Good Shepherd: A Farewell Sermon,” in *Sermons*, 334.

leave my cares, and all my friends, and all Christ's sheep, to the protection of Christ Jesus' never-failing love."⁴² In a sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:30, he exclaimed, "Was there no other text in the Book of God, this single one sufficiently proves the final perseverance of true believers; for never did God yet justify a man, whom he did not sanctify; nor sanctify one, whom he did not completely redeem and glorify."⁴³ The promise that God "always carried on and finished the work he began" ought to inspire Christians toward lives of holiness and endurance.⁴⁴ While many in Whitefield's day were satisfied with external moralism, he saw no room for such hypocrisy. Instead, he preached, "If we be not holy in heart and life, if we be not sanctified and renewed by the Spirit in our minds, we are self-deceivers."⁴⁵ Commenting on his focus on the necessity of obedience following conversion, James Gordon concludes, "Whitefield's Calvinism never for a moment tolerated the Antinomian heresy. Again and again he called Christians to a life of unsparing discipleship, ethical obedience, and determined perseverance."⁴⁶ True faith ought to work itself out in loving actions done in obedience to the Word of God. Such works are to be pursued because the "never-failing" love of Jesus ensures that all true believers will persevere. For Whitefield, this promise rests secure on the sovereign electing love of God the Father.

Eternal and Unconditional Election

Of the doctrine of election, Whitefield once wrote to a friend, "I am persuaded, till a man comes to believe and feel these important truths, he cannot come out of himself." However, once a man becomes "convicted of these, and assured of the application of them to his own heart,

⁴² Ibid., 334.

⁴³ Whitefield, "Christ, the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption," in *Sermons*, 225.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 225.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 225.

⁴⁶ James Gordon, *Evangelical Spirituality*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 59.

he then walks by faith, indeed, not in himself but in the Son of God, who died and gave himself for him.”⁴⁷ This conviction led Whitefield to insist on this doctrine throughout his preaching and, most famously, in public correspondence with John Wesley.

In 1739, Wesley published a sermon entitled “Free Grace” in which he argued against election. After great anguish over whether or not to respond, Whitefield finally decided to write an open letter to Wesley in order to “earnestly plead for the truths which are clearly revealed in the Word of God.”⁴⁸ In the letter, Whitefield addresses five primary arguments set forth by Wesley in his sermon: (1) that the doctrine of election makes preaching vain, (2) that this doctrine discourages the pursuit of holiness, (3) that it reduces Christian joy, (4) that it is unfair for men to suffer simply because they are not elected, and (5) that the doctrine of election makes revelation pointless.⁴⁹ For each argument, Whitefield lovingly but forcefully corrects Wesley’s poor logic and points him back to the Word of God. For example, in response to Wesley’s contention that the doctrine of election destroys holiness, Whitefield reminds him that the Apostle Paul does not seem to see it as a problem in Colossians 3:12 where he challenges “the elect of God” to “put on...kindness, humility, meekness.” Whitefield also uses his own experiences to establish his points with authority:

“As for my own part, this doctrine is my daily support: I should utterly sink under a dread of my impending trials, was I not firmly persuaded that God has chosen me in Christ from before the foundation of the world, and that now being effectually called, he will suffer none to pluck me out of his almighty hand.”⁵⁰

For Whitefield, the doctrine of election was incredibly practical. Thus, he argued, “Without the belief of the doctrine of election, and the immutability of the free love of God, I

⁴⁷ Whitefield, “Letter CVI to John Hutton, November 10, 1739,” in *Works*, Vol. 1, 101.

⁴⁸ George Whitefield, “A Letter to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley: in Answer to His Sermon, Entitled, *Free-Grace*.” in *Journals*, 569.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 575-584.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 578.

cannot see how it is possible that any should have a comfortable assurance of eternal salvation.”⁵¹ In his private journals, Whitefield went on to say that men who did not believe in this doctrine were being intellectually dishonest. He argued, “Whatever men’s reasoning may suggest, if the children of God fairly examine their own experiences – if they do God justice, they must acknowledge that they did not choose God, but that God chose them. And if He chose them at all, it must be from eternity, and that too without anything foreseen in them.”⁵²

In concordance with these clearly Calvinistic views about election, Whitefield saw no contradiction with proclaiming the Gospel to all. He once told Wesley in a separate letter, “Though I hold particular election, yet I offer Jesus freely to every individual soul.”⁵³ Some scholars have seen a contradiction here between Whitefield’s articulated theology and his actual practice. Stuart Henry argues that Whitefield’s various ways of appealing for sinners to be reconciled to God reveals that he actually believed “that man could help to save himself” and “that his salvation was not utterly dependent on the divine decree of election.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, “the actual pattern of his life” (as a field preacher who proclaimed the Gospel to thousands) exposes his faith in “man’s ability to co-operate with God in the salvation of his own soul.”⁵⁵ When reading Henry’s arguments, it is apparent that the discussion reveals more about the author’s own theology than the thinking of George Whitefield. Henry seems to equate Whitefield’s affirmation of the doctrine of election with the kind of Hyper-Calvinism that was prevalent in his day.⁵⁶ Interestingly, Wesley took the same approach in his sermon “Free Grace”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 580.

⁵² Whitefield, *Journals*, 491.

⁵³ Whitefield, “To the Rev. John Wesley,” in *The Revived Puritan*, 145.

⁵⁴ Henry, *Wayfaring Witness*, 124.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁶ In his dissertation on the interaction between Whitefield’s theology and methodology of evangelism, Timothy Ray McKnight concludes that while “the eighteenth-century debate between Calvinism and hyper-Calvinism chronologically surrounded the evangelistic ministry of George Whitefield...there is no

when he declared that preaching is “needless to them that are elected” and “useless to them that are not elected.”⁵⁷ Whitefield did not see the contradiction, as expressed in the following:

“O dear Sir, what kind of reasoning—or rather sophistry—is this! Hath not God, who hath appointed salvation for a certain number, appointed also the preaching of the Word as a means to bring them to it? Does anyone hold election in any other sense? And if so, how is preaching needless to them that are elected, when the gospel is designated by God himself to be the power of God unto their eternal salvation? And since we know not who are elect and who reprobate, we are to preach promiscuously to all. For the Word may be useful, even to the non-elect, in restraining them from much wickedness and sin. However, it is enough to excite to the utmost diligence in preaching and hearing, when we consider that by these means, some, even as many as the Lord hath ordained to eternal life, shall certainly be quickened and enabled to believe. And who that attends, especially with reverence and care, can tell but he may be found of that happy number?”⁵⁸

There is no contradiction between theology and practice here as Henry suggests.

Rather, Whitefield consistently weds his theology of eternal election with *the means* by which God has ordained to bring about faith in the lives of men. This unity of thought and action is not only logically consistent but it is also thoroughly biblical. Consider, for example, the connection between God’s sovereign grace and the call of the Gospel in 1 Peter 1: “According to his great mercy, [God] has *caused us* to be born again...*through* the living and abiding word of God.” (1:3, 23; emphasis mine) Verse 25 adds, “This word is the good news that was preached to you.” Because God causes men to be born again *through* the preaching of the Gospel, it only makes sense to, in Whitefield’s words, “preach promiscuously to all.” Gordon summarizes the issue well when he concludes that Whitefield “embodied an evangelistic Calvinism in which the theological principle of sovereign grace and the Evangelical imperative of gospel proclamation merged in a creative fusion.”⁵⁹

evidence that George Whitefield formally entered [the] discussion.” Timothy Ray McKnight, “George Whitefield’s Theology and Methodology of Evangelism,” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), 73.

⁵⁷ John Wesley, “Free Grace,” [on-line]; accessed 27 April, 2011; available from new.gbbm-umc.org/128.htm; Internet.

⁵⁸ Whitefield, “Letter to Rev. John Wesley,” in *Journals*, 575.

⁵⁹ Gordon, *Evangelical Spirituality*, 41.

In conclusion, it is apparent through the preceding study that Whitefield's theology was thoroughly Calvinistic. Similarly, Gordon concludes that the traditional Calvinistic formulation of the doctrines of grace "are the doctrines of the evangelist and their simple exposition satisfied Whitefield."⁶⁰ These doctrines not only satisfied the evangelist, they also compelled him toward his work. The following section will now examine the evangelistic piety of George Whitefield as it developed out of his particular theological system.

The Evangelistic Piety of George Whitefield

Gordon defines spirituality as "lived doctrine, the response of the human heart to divine initiative."⁶¹ Following Gordon's definition, this section will look at how Whitefield's particular doctrines fueled his personal piety. What was Whitefield's response to the divine initiative in his own life? How did the theological perspective described above shape his moral character and daily life?

Evangelistic Zeal

First, Whitefield was a man of considerable spiritual zeal. From the moment that he experienced the new birth at Oxford, he passionately pursued the work of seeing others converted. J. C. Ryle described him as "incessantly preaching Christ and going about the world entreating men to repent and come to Christ and be saved."⁶² According to John Piper, he possessed "the most single-minded, oratorically enthralling, thunder-voiced devotion to daily evangelistic preaching that history has ever known."⁶³ Whitefield believed that "a true faith in Jesus Christ will not suffer us to be idle—No, it is an active, lively, restless principle; it fills the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 64.

⁶¹ Ibid., 3. In this paper, the terms *spirituality* and *piety* will be used interchangeably.

⁶² Ryle, "George Whitefield and his Ministry," in *Select Sermons*, 21.

⁶³ John Piper, "I Will Not be a Velvet-Mouthed Preacher," [on-line]; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/biographies.html>; accessed April 15, 2011, Internet.

heart, so that is cannot be easy, till it is doing something for Jesus Christ.”⁶⁴ It is important to note that Whitefield’s understanding of “doing something for Jesus Christ” always involved proclaiming the Gospel. He once quipped, “God forbid I should travel with anybody a quarter of an hour without speaking of Christ to them.”⁶⁵

This passion led to self-sacrifice. To the end of his life, Whitefield preached frequently, traveled great distances, and spent his own health on helping others experience spiritual awakening. In a sermon commemorating his death, Henry Venn exclaimed, “The truth is, that in point of labour, this extraordinary servant of God did as much in a few weeks as most of those who exert themselves are able to do in the space of a year.”⁶⁶

Evangelistic Preaching

Others may possess the same zeal as Whitefield, but few have turned that passion into the kind of public force that he did. The second element of Whitefield’s piety that deserves attention is his commitment to preaching the Word of God evangelistically. Whitefield’s legacy is frequently narrowed to this one element of his life, and understandably so. As Harry Stout concluded, for Whitefield, “The preaching moment engulfed all, and it would continue to do so, for in fact there was nothing else he lived for...In the final scene, there was only Whitefield in his pulpit.”⁶⁷

Ironically, by his own account, Whitefield was initially reluctant to devote his life to preaching.⁶⁸ However, after months of wrestling with God, Whitefield was comforted by the

⁶⁴ George Whitefield, “Letter XLIV” , in *The Letters of George Whitefield 1734-1742* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 47.

⁶⁵ George Whitefield, “Jacob’s Ladder,” in John Gillies, *Memoirs of the Rev. George Whitefield* (New Haven: Whitmore & Buckingham, 1834), 535.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Ryle, “George Whitefield and his Ministry,” in *Select Sermons*, 41.

⁶⁷ Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitfield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 276.

words of the Good Shepherd, “My sheep hear my voice, and none shall pluck them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28) until finally he declared, “Lord, I will go; send me when you will.”⁶⁹ Here the doctrine of God’s sovereignty over the perseverance of His saints assures Whitefield that his own ministry could be successful. Once he made this discovery, the preacher never looked back. Several years later, he wrote to a friend, “I think mine is a glorious employ. I am not ashamed of my Master, though my Master may well be ashamed of me.”⁷⁰ Whitefield’s impact as a preacher is remarkable. Although less than 100 of his sermons exist in printed form today, he preached over 18,000 sermons during his ministry often to crowds numbering in the thousands.⁷¹

The impact of Whitefield’s preaching, however, is even more outstanding than its prolificacy. Ryle attributes this success to six key characteristics that set him apart from others: his Gospel-centrality, his simplicity, his boldness, his power of description, his earnestness, and the immensity of pathos that he expressed toward his hearers.⁷² Some modern biographers, such as Harry Stout, have questioned the authenticity of Whitefield’s histrionic preaching. According to Stout, Whitefield “applied the method and ethos of acting to preaching” in order to manipulate his audiences.⁷³ Stout argues that Whitefield preached in such a way because he held to “an implicit model of human psychology and homiletics that saw humankind less as rational and intellectual than as emotive and impassioned.”⁷⁴ This portrayal of Whitefield is as inaccurate as

⁶⁸ Near the end of his life, Whitefield recollected in a sermon, “God knows how deep a concern entering in the ministry and preaching was to me.” Whitefield, “The Good Shepherd: A Farewell Sermon,” in *Sermons*, 333.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 333-334.

⁷⁰ Whitefield, “Letter CCCCXCVI”, in *Letters*, 478.

⁷¹ Haykin, *The Revived Puritan*, 32.

⁷² Ryle, “George Whitefield and his Ministry,” in *Select Sermons*, 34-37.

⁷³ Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, xix.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, xix.

it is uncharitable. Whitefield would not have approved of such a bifurcation of the mind and the heart. His preaching aimed to engage the emotions *while* (not instead of) persuading the intellect. Whitefield knew that only “the Spirit of God works upon and convinces the soul” and that this work of the Spirit comes only through a true knowledge of Jesus Christ as Savior.⁷⁵ For Whitefield though, knowledge was never purely intellectual. Saving knowledge required one to know Jesus “so as to approve of him...so as to embrace him in all his offices.”⁷⁶ This “experimental knowledge” involved a heart-felt commitment to Jesus that enabled one “to feel the power” of the crucifixion.⁷⁷ This experience was the aim of Whitefield’s preaching and, as much as it served this end, he was willing to employ all manner of dramatic entreaty in order to help his hearers know Jesus. Thus, John Piper concludes, “When [Whitefield] warned of wrath, and pleaded for people to escape, and lifted up Christ, he wasn’t play-acting. He was calling down the kind of emotions and actions that correspond with such realities.”⁷⁸ This was the evangelistic character of Whitefield’s passionate preaching, employing his emotions, his words, his body, and his soul to labor toward the conversion of his hearers.

Evangelistic Relationships

While public preaching occupied the bulk of his time, Whitefield was evangelistic in his various personal relationships as well. From the beginning of his journey as a believer, Whitefield shared the Gospel with acquaintances and friends alike. Only a few weeks after he experienced conversion, the Lord used him to help an acquaintance understand the Gospel and believe.⁷⁹ In the years that followed, he would visit prisoners, engage sailors in late-night

⁷⁵ George Whitefield, “The Holy Spirit Convincing the World of Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment,” in *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 466.

⁷⁶ George Whitefield, “The Knowledge of Jesus Christ the Best Knowledge,” in *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 512.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 512.

⁷⁸ Piper, “I Will Not be a Velvet-Mouthed Preacher,” Internet.

conversations, and seize nearly every opportunity that came his way to proclaim the Gospel. In his journal he wrote, “I find much service might be done to religion on journeys, if we had but courage to show ourselves Christians in all places.”⁸⁰ Whitefield possessed this courage with both acquaintances and long-time friends.

One of the friends with whom he frequently corresponded was none other than Benjamin Franklin. Franklin described their relationship as “a mere civil friendship” that was “sincere on both sides.”⁸¹ By merely civil, Franklin meant that they did not share religious convictions; however, this did not stop Whitefield from entreating Franklin to consider his claims. In a letter referencing the publication of some of his sermons, Whitefield abruptly interrupted the talk of business to say, “I do not despair of your seeing the reasonableness of Christianity. Apply to God; be willing to do the divine will, and you shall know it.”⁸² In writing to his lesser-known peers, he was no less bold. To one friend Whitefield wrote, “My hearty desire and daily petition at the throne of grace is, that you may be saved.”⁸³

For Whitefield, every personal relationship had a kingdom purpose. From providential acquaintances to intentional friendships to the various congregants he served, Whitefield consistently sought to make evangelistic appeals to all whom he encountered.

Evangelistic Action

A fourth aspect of the evangelistic piety of George Whitefield was his commitment to evangelistic action. Although a man devoted to the spoken word, Whitefield’s preaching aimed at stirring others up toward faith-enabled good deeds. This insistence never appeared in

⁷⁹ Whitefield, *Journals*, 60.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁸¹ Benjamin Franklin, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, (Philadelphia: Desilver, Thomas, & Co: 1836), 77.

⁸² Whitefield, “Letter CCXXXVIII,” in *Letters*, 226.

⁸³ Whitefield, “Letter XXXIV,” in *Letters*, 37.

opposition to his doctrine of depravity or the need for conversion. As Haykin explains, “Following the lead of the New Testament, Whitefield never implies that Christians must possess inherent holiness to be reckoned saints. However, he rightly assumes that those who have been made saints by faith alone will lead holy lives.”⁸⁴

For himself, this call to holiness found its fullest expression in his beloved Bethesda, the orphan house in Savannah that he spent thirty years developing. Whitefield used his preaching tours as an opportunity to collect funds for the orphans and made numerous visits to Bethesda throughout his travels. For Whitefield though, the orphan house was more than mere humanitarianism. It was a means of doing evangelism. He would routinely exchange correspondence with residents of Bethesda, calling upon them to believe in their heavenly Father for salvation.

Evangelistic Perseverance

A final element of Whitefield’s evangelistic piety to consider was his willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ. The highs and lows of Whitefield’s ministry required great endurance. Throughout his life, Whitefield faced opposition ranging from printed attacks to physical assaults. Calling him the “friction that often ignited the tender,” biographer Stuart Henry aptly described Whitefield as a man who tended to elicit a strong response: “Encountering him, one could attack, flee, or surrender, but it was impossible to come into his presence and remain neutral about him, for his faith could not be ignored.”⁸⁵ In the printed press, Whitefield faced accusations of enthusiasm from the established clergy while secular writers mocked his popularity and message.⁸⁶ Others took the ridicule a step further and tried to injure him. One man attempted to stab him in the street. Another pelted him with stones during a sermon. More

⁸⁴ Haykin, *The Revived Puritan*, 51.

⁸⁵ Henry, *Wayfaring Witness*, 39.

⁸⁶ One particularly popular mocking was Samuel Foote’s play, *The Minor*, which included a satirical caricature of Whitefield named *Dr. Squintum*. Details of the play can be found in *Ibid.*, 159.

than once, he found himself in the midst of an angry mob.⁸⁷ In spite of it all, Whitefield kept a pious attitude toward the persecution. He told a friend, “If I am spoken evil of, for His sake, I rejoice in it. My Master was long since spoken evil of before me.”⁸⁸ Furthermore, these personal attacks provided an opportunity for the advancement of the Gospel. He concluded, “Methinks, I care not what I do or suffer, so that I may see my Lord’s kingdom come with power.”⁸⁹

Perseverance to this calling was often the subject of Whitefield’s prayer requests to his friends and colleagues. Many of his letters ended with an entreaty for intercession similar to this: “May [we] be stirred up to spend ourselves, and be spent, for the good of souls! Dear Sir, pray that such a mind may be given to [me].”⁹⁰ As with other aspects of his piety discussed above, Whitefield viewed his personal hardships as an occasion for perseverance for the sake of evangelism.

Conclusion

George Whitefield truly lived as if he were carrying out “the errands of angels.” His own conversion experience compelled him to devote his life toward imploring others to repent and believe. He toured the English-speaking world, taking the message of the Gospel to the churches and to the fields, wherever he could gather an audience. Theologically, he was a Calvinist who proclaimed the glory of God’s sovereign grace because he believed that depraved men have no other hope. This theology fueled an evangelistic piety that permeated his preaching, his personal relationships, and his own practice of the faith in such a way that he has left behind an example worthy for others to follow.

⁸⁷ Henry records various accounts in *Ibid.*, 82-83.

⁸⁸ Whitefield, “Letter 9,” in *Letters*, 493.

⁸⁹ Whitefield, “Letter LXIX,” in *Letters*, 66.

⁹⁰ Whitefield, “Letter CCXCVII,” in *Letters*, 274.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Works

Books

Edwards, Jonathan. *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. New York: Dunning & Spalding, 1832.

Gillies, John. *Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield*. New Haven: Whitmore & Buckingham and H. Mansfield, 1834.

Franklin, Benjamin. *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*. Auburn and Buffalo, NY: Miller, Orton, & Mulligan, 1854.

Whitefield, George. *A Short Account of God's Dealings with the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield*. London, 1740. In *George Whitefield's Journals*, 35-73. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960. 35-73.

_____. *George Whitefield's Journals*. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960.

_____. *George Whitefield's Letters*. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976.

_____. *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*. Edited by J. C. Ryle. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.

_____. *Sermons of George Whitefield*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009.

_____. *Sermons on Important Subjects*. London: Henry Fisher, Son, & P. Jackson, 1828.

_____. *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M A. Late of Pembroke College, Oxford, And Chaplain to the Rt. Hon. The Countess of Huntingdon. Containing All His Sermons and Tracts Which Have Been Already Published: With A Select Collection of Letters, Written to His Most Intimate Friends, and Persons of Distinction, in England, Scotland, Ireland, and America, from the Year 1734, to 1770, Including the Whole Period of His Ministry. Also, Some Other Pieces on Important Subjects, Never Before Printed; Prepared By Himself for the Press. To Which is Prefixed, An Account of His Life, Compiled From His Original Papers and Letters*. 6 vols. London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, in the Poultry; and Messrs. Kincaid and Bell, at Edinburgh, 1771-1772.

Articles

Elliot, R. "A Summary of Gospel Doctrine Taught by Mr. Whitefield; recorded in a funeral sermon on his death by R. Elliot, BA." In *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*. Edited by J. C. Ryle. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.

Whitefield, George. "A Letter to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley: in Answer to His Sermon, Entitled, *Free-Grace*." In *George Whitefield's Journals*, 563-588. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960.

Wesley, John. "Free Grace." [on-line]. Accessed 27 April, 2011. Available from new.gbbm-umc.org/128.htm; Internet.

Secondary Works

Books

Dallimore, Arnold A. *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*. 2 vols. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970-1980.

Haykin, Michael A. G. *The Revived Puritan: The Spirituality of George Whitefield*. Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2000.

Heimert, Alan, and Perry Miller, eds. *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1967.

Henry, Stuart C. *George Whitefield: Wayfaring Witness*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1957.

Lambert, Frank. *Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Noll, Mark A. *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*. Vol. 1. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

Stout, Harry. *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

Tyerman, Luke. *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield*. 2 vols. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876-1877; reprint, Azle, TX: Need of the Times Publishers, 1995.

Articles

Piper, John. "I Will Not be a Velvet-Mouthed Preacher." [on-line]. Accessed April 15, 2011. Available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/biographies.html>; Internet.

Ryle, J. C. "George Whitefield and his Ministry," In *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*. Edited by J. C. Ryle. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.

Whittier, John Greenleaf. "The Preacher." [on-line]. Accessed 18 April 2011. Available from <http://www.readbookonline.net, 7798.htm>; Internet.