



CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

GREAT PREACHERS



GEORGE WHITEFIELD

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Footprints into Africa

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1. HIS BACKGROUND

His grandfather had made a lot of money as a Bristol merchant. He had spoken on equal terms with squires of ancient lineage, and was the son, grandson, nephew and brother of clergymen.

Oxford was in the Whitefield blood. But the Whitefields had come down in the world. Thomas, George's father, had become an apprentice wine-merchant and had bought the Bell Inn. He married Elizabeth Edwards (from sound trading stock), bred a large family and died at 35, when George was 2 years old. His mother remarried an ironmonger and lived in misery. They lived with social inferiority imposed by the keeping of the inn. George longed to be a gentleman like his grandfather. He saw the best way back to gentility in becoming a clergyman, although his first love was for the stage (which was taboo at the time). A tremendous advantage for him was his beautiful and strong voice, which drew everyone's attention.

2. HIS SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE

2.1. Gloucester

Early in his life, in a church in Bristol, he was overcome by a desperate longing to be holy. But although sometimes he repressed his natural gaiety and sense of fun and felt very devout, he was very erratic. He would not be able to suppress his passions, and then would once again be overcome by shame and remorse, and became pious again. One evening he had an extraordinary sensation, "a very strong impression was made upon my heart that I should preach" (he could just see the faces of the congregation as they hung on his words, while his golden voice reached forth to the farthest corners of a church). He told his mother, who was unimpressed.

Shortly before going to Oxford, Gabriel Harris, a friend and neighbor who kept the best bookshop in Gloucester gave George William Law's "A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life". This book had a tremendous effect on him. Law wrote, "He therefore is the devout man who lives no longer to his own will, or the way of the spirit of the world, but to the sole will of God; who considers God in everything, who makes all parts of his common life, parts of piety, by doing everything in the name of God, and under such rules as are comfortable to his glory". George began praying, singing psalms three times daily, visiting the poor, fasting on Fridays, receiving the Sacrament once a month (instead of four times a year), going to services at Gloucester Cathedral on weekdays, etc. His mother, brother and Gabriel Harris didn't know what to make of all this – they didn't think this eccentric behaviour would last long but it did, even after he went to Oxford.

2.2. Oxford

Through his mother's help from an influential friend, he obtained a servitorship when he came up to Pembroke College from Gloucester. He was a poor student who earned his keep as a

servitor. He refused to go roistering around the inns and brothels with fellow servitors and eventually they left him and called him a “singular odd fellow”.

Charles Wesley was junior tutor of Christ Church in the University of Oxford at the time and in October 1773 he met Whitefield. His first impressions of Whitefield were, “A modest, pensive youth who mused alone – a neat, pale young man of 19, with a marked squint in one of his dark eyes and a twinkle in both – at first sight I saw, I loved and clasped him to my heart (Wesley was 26 years old and a Master of Arts student).

George had longed to join the little knot of pious friends around Charles and John Wesley – the “Holy Club” – but was too shy. But after his meeting with Charles, he was invited to come to the next meeting. He was overjoyed. The members of this “Club” had no other desire than to save their souls by being good and doing good. He wanted their help in the arduous climb to heaven. He had now officially “turned Methodist”. George found Charles Wesley a kind friend and guide.

But life proved to be a wearisome struggle for him. He read Henry Scougal’s “The Life of God in the Soul of Man” and was shocked to find Scougal lamenting at the fact that few who wanted to be religious actually understood what religion means. – “Some placing it in the understanding, in orthodox notions and opinions. Others place it in the outward man, in a constant course of external duties and a model of performances; if they live peaceably with their neighbours, keep a temperate diet, observe the returns of worship, frequenting the church of their closet, and sometimes extend their hands to the relief of the poor, they think they have sufficiently acquitted themselves”. George was confused – all his ideas were overturned! “Alas! If this be not true religion, what is it?... If I am not a Christian, for Jesus Christ’s sake show me what Christianity is, that may not be damned at last” He read on that true religion is “Christ formed within us” and realized then that “I must be born again a new creature! Christ must be formed within me! I must leave no means unused which will lead me nearer to Jesus Christ”. With this, he wrote letters to everyone he knew, friends and family, urging them to be born again. He wrote, “All our corrupt passions must be subdued, and a complex habit of virtues such as meekness, lowliness, faith, hope and love of God and man be implanted in their room before we can have the least title to enter into the Kingdom of God... we must renounce ourselves and take up our cross daily... Unless we have the spirit of Christ we are none of his”.

Then he set out to attain this new birth – he resolved to be more humble, he gave up tasty food, denied himself laughter – he looked for happiness only in the meetings of the Holy Club and in the Church, yet he felt no nearer new birth. He spent hours outside in the rain and cold praying, and eventually felt he was required to sacrifice his religious friends too “for Christ’s sake”. His fellow Club-members became worried at George’s excesses, and eventually managed to convince him that fellowship was God-ordained and necessary, helping men obtain salvation.

He witnessed two notorious sinners in jail being “born again” and forgiven in a second, and he just couldn’t understand this. In 1735 he nearly died as a result of himself and cried out with utter helplessness to God. He threw himself (at long last!) blindfold and without reserve,

without struggle or claim, into God's almighty hands. He experienced "Joy – joy unspeakable – joy that's full of, big with glory". His excessive fasting and exposure, and while ill, he read Joseph Hall's "Contemplations on the New Testament". He gradually became aware that "Man's puny efforts to redeem himself, whether by praying in a storm in Christ Church Walk or schooling his passions or dispensing charity, were incapable of doing what Jesus Christ had already done". He became aware of an incredible "thirst" within

3. HIS RETURN FROM OXFORD

3.1 Gloucester

After his three years at Oxford, he went back home. He had decided not to be a parson, but wanted to "deny himself honour in the world's sight, and to spend his years unordained, spreading the good news". He was rebuffed by his family on his return, but immediately taken in by bookseller Gabriel Harris. On the very first night there, he explained to Harris that it was not the reward of a long struggle, but the unmerited gift of a gracious God which led to the new birth. The life of self-discipline and devotion was the consequence and proof of new birth, never its cause. WHAT a revelation for him!!

He shared the gospel wherever he went, realizing more and more that a hunger of the spirit lay in rectories, tradesmen's homes and among the poor. He reached the conclusion that dissenters and plain lay people like himself knew more about the new birth, God's free grace and the necessity of being justified by faith only, than John Wesley. John and Charles Wesley had sailed in 1735 to the newly-founded colony of Georgia as chaplains, intent on saving their souls by doing good. Whitefield wrote a letter to John Wesley, explaining the new birth.

3.2. Ordination

The Bishop of Gloucester, Dr. Martin Benson, heard of Whitefield's activities and offered to ordain him whenever he came for holy orders – despite the fact that he was only 21, two years younger than the official age for ordination. Eight months later (June 20, 1736) he was ordained. Yet, although the bishop offered him two small Gloucester parishes, he did not feel ready for a public ministry.

3.3. Bishopsgate

Thomas Broughton, a Holy Club friend, asked Whitefield to relieve him for two months as officiating curate of the chapel at the Tower of London. He was very excited about this, even though the congregation giggled at this "absurdly young, unknown "Boy" Parson with dark blue eyes and a squint" when he arrived. Yet by the end of the first sermon (which he based on

1 Corinthians 6:11 "But ye are justified"), the congregation sat utterly quiet and almost spellbound. After that, the Tower Chapel in Bishopsgate was crammed with outsiders each Sunday. He spent his weekday mornings poring over his books, especially the Bible and the great dissenting divines like Matthew Henry.

Letters from the Wesleys in Georgia did not sound too happy, but their accounts fired Whitefield's imagination – he saw himself preaching to Red Indians and heathen savages. Yet he put this thought behind him and returned to Oxford. While temporarily helping in a little village in Hampshire (Dummer), the “still small voice” came to him again about Georgia. It was at this time that John Wesley (his spiritual father in Christ) wrote, pleading for a man to help with the needs of the orphans and immigrants. George Whitefield decided to go!

There was a long wait before the ship was to sail – many delays – and in that time, Whitefield preached in a number of churches, starting off in Gloucester his home parish of St. Mary's-de-Crypt. The church was thronged each time – Whitefield said, “Congregations were very large, and the power of God attended the word, and some I have reason to believe were truly converted”.

3.4. Bristol

He then went to Bristol to say goodbye to his brother Andrew. While at a mid-week lecture, he was recognized and asked to preach. By the following Sunday evening George Whitefield was famous in the town (February, 1737).

“The whole city seems to be alarmed. Churches are as full on weekdays as they used to be on Sundays, and on Sundays so full that many, very many, are obliged to go away because they cannot come in. Oh pray... that God would always keep me humble, and fully convinced that I am nothing without him, and that all good which is done upon earth God doth it himself...”

The mayor of Bristol sent for him and offered him a rich living “in the gift of the Corporation”, but Whitefield declined – he felt called to the Red Indians in America. The Mayor replied that if Whitefield wanted “Indians” there were plenty in Bristol – the coalminers working stark naked deep in the Kingswood collieries; their hearts were as grimy as their bodies, their minds as ignorant and their habits as savage as any he would find in Georgia. Whitefield's heart went out immediately to these miners, and was later to come back to them.

While spending a further two months at Stonehouse as rector before he left for America, Joe Husbands attached himself to Whitefield as his servant. Then back in Bristol again, he became so popular that when he was about to leave for London “plans were afoot to escort him out of the city like a monarch or conquering hero, with the young men on horseback and the old and the women in coaches. George threw himself on his bed for a brief sleep, bidding Joe wake him at three. They slipped away together by moonlight”. He was only 22 years old.

3.5. Betty Delamotte

In October 1737 George first met Betty through Charles Wesley and liked her immediately. But he told himself that he was “too busy to fall in love, especially a girl above his station. He tried to put away all thought of her”.

3.6. London and Opposition

Back here in London, his fame had preceded him – morning, noon and night he was caught up in the unexpected revival. He became terrified of pride. He was asked to issue a printed version of his Bristol sermon on the “New Birth” which he did. In the preface to this sermon he accused fellow ministers of not preaching salvation out of fear of displeasing “some particular persons”. Clergy reacted very negatively to this – they called him “an upstart youth”, a “spiritual pickpocket”, etc. Yet although the clergy began to oppose him, the laity praised him the more extravagantly. “The grace of God was sweeping across London, working out His purpose of grace on a scale beyond any that George Whitefield could have imagined..... He wondered if he should abandon America in order to fan the flames of this revival... and if he stayed here he could see more of Betty.... yet his call remained in America.”

God must have another plan for London, although “the whole nation is in an uproar”. He took another and daring step forward – he began to preach extempore, which was absolutely unheard of in the Church of England. He found the formal prayers too confined. He needed to talk to God face to face, as with a friend. He prayed often for John and Charles Wesley, that they might find the true meaning of trusting Christ and then would spread through all the earth the honours of His name.

4. AMERICA

When the time came to sail for America (January 3, 1738 even the very winds seemed determined to keep Whitefield in England until a successor had arrived. During the three weeks of waiting aboard the “Whitaker” because of wrong winds, Whitefield took the opportunity to go ashore and preach at Deal. While the ships here were waiting to be blown out to the English Channel, another convoy of ships was “blown in”, carrying a depressed and discouraged Wesley – much to Whitefield’s disappointment, they did not see each other before Whitefield sailed.

4.1. His Journey

On embarking on the Thames, he immediately assumed the duties of chaplain. The officers grudgingly allowed him to read prayers and give sermons to the common soldiers on board, but eventually the captain ordered that he should take prayers and expound to the soldiers and the officers twice daily. It was here that he began preaching extempore - his words became fresh, informal and alive, until even the captain was converted.

4.2. Georgia

George was almost afraid of his own influence and at his daring dreams for this mighty continent of the future. He wanted the entire British North America, from Maine to the Spanish Florida frontier, to catch fire for God. He prayed, “What a stripling I am for so great a work! God

give me a deep humility, a well-guided zeal, a burning love and a single eye, and then let men or devils do their worst!"

Charles Delamotte, Betty's brother, greeted him on his arrival at the Savannah Wharf on May 7 1738. James Habersham, who had travelled with Whitefield from England, had come to replace Delamotte as schoolmaster.



Immediately the colonists took George Whitefield to their hearts – they had hated Wesley, but could not help loving George. It was at about this time (24 May, 1738) that far away in London, in Aldersgate Street, John Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" and he was converted.

Less than four months after arrival (August, 1738) he returned to England to get his priests orders and collect money for a much-needed orphanage – to add to this, an insistent and strong inward call told him he was needed in England. But before leaving, he "set the cat among the pigeons" by advocating slavery "if one treats the slaves well". At his farewell sermon the congregation was "so crowded that a great many stood without the doors and under the windows to hear him". Whitefield felt greatly humbled. Captain Gladman, a shipwrecked sea captain, sailed home with him and was saved on the trip. Although they were nearly shipwrecked themselves off the coast of Ireland, Whitefield had the strongest inward assurance that "a more effectual door than ever will be opened in England for the preaching of the everlasting Gospel. O Satan, thou mayest toss me up and down, but Jesus Christ is praying for me". It was soon after this that he heard the quotation by Baxter, "I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men". This became a very strong motivating force for Whitefield while he was battling health-wise in the future.

4.3. Back to London

George was excited on his return when he found that the revival he had sparked a year earlier, had spread mightily, the human agents of this wind of God being Charles and John Wesley. But because of some negative reaction against the Wesleys, certain pulpits were now being refused to him – another reason was their reaction to his book "A Journal of a Voyage to Georgia" (printed by James Hutton).

In January 1739 he was ordained as priest in Oxford by his old patron, Bishop of Gloucester. Charles and Betty were also there and a "delightful evening at Blendon Hall with music, prayers and talk" was enjoyed by all. Although George was now very excited and in love, he kept resisting his feelings firmly, saying, "The joys of a human love could be nothing to the thrill of being an instrument to break down the dams of apathy and irreligion, of seeing the waters of grace flooding into the parched ground of England and America".

4.4. Opposition

It wasn't long before enemies of Whitefield (the clergy) published a pamphlet decrying him as a "peddler of strange doctrines, a menace to the good order of the Church". He and the Wesleys were accused of breaking the law by having meetings in private homes and praying extempore. After long debates with these people, Whitefield came to the conclusion, "They believed only in an outward Christ; we believe that He must be inwardly formed in our hearts also". More and more pulpits were closed to evangelical clergy. How then, if all churches closed, should the Gospel be preached? The answer came to Whitefield while preaching one Sunday – a crowd of nearly 1000 stood outside, unable to get in. "As he preached, a conviction formed in him that he ought to go into the churchyard afterwards, climb on a tombstone and give the sermon all over again to these ragged wretches "but he did not dare offend convention by doing so:) When he suggested preaching out of doors to the Wesleys, they were horrified – it would be indecent, indecorous and illegal, they said.

The fire around Whitefield was further fueled by an incident at St. Margaret's (near the Palace of Westminster). Due to a misunderstanding, Rev. Majendie was barred from entering the minister's pulpit, although he thought he was to preach there. Whitefield arrived late and unaware of the conflict, preached the sermon (because he's also been asked to preach). Afterwards it was reported in the newspaper that "Mr. Whitefield had deliberately plotted to oust the proper preacher at St. Margaret's and had locked him in the minister's pew with his own hands". George made no attempt to correct the false report, merely remarking that opposition "brings me nearer to my Master".

The pulpits in Bristol also became closed to him – he was in fact advised to leave the city – but he resorted to preaching at Newgate, the Bristol prison. Here, once again, his thoughts turned to the coal-miners. "Their bodies might be foul, but their souls were immortal ". And they could only be reached in the open air. Yet to preach in the open air, John Wesley said, was a 'mad notion'. Yet it wasn't long before he decided. Him and his friends went out at the hour when many coal-miners left the pits, and walked towards a rise of ground. He pitched his voice about a hundred yards, to a group of colliers moving towards him. He called out, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall see the kingdom of heaven". The crowd grew, till about 200 were clustered around Hannam Mount. And as he spoke he noticed pale streaks forming on grimy faces until he saw "white gutters made by their tears down their black cheeks".



He was immediately summonsed to appear before the Chancellor of the Diocese. He was accused of preaching false doctrine, of preaching without a licence and he was threatened with suspension and even excommunication. But Whitefield answered. "I cannot but speak the things that I know and am resolved to proceed as usual". Although he was hated by the clergy in Bristol, the laity loved him. A little more than 24 hours later, at the request of the coal-miners,

Whitefield went back to Kingswood and preached to nearly 2000 people. After this, he no longer hesitated about open air preaching, anywhere! The next Sunday 10 000 Bristol folk flocked to Kingswood to join the colliers and a few weeks later 23 000 converged on Hannam Mount – incredible!! He once commented, “I believe I was never more acceptable to my Master than when I was standing to reach those hearers in the open fields”.



4.5. Howell Harris and Countess of Huntingdon

Before returning to Georgia, he joined Howell Harris in Wales, who had also been preaching there in the open air because no bishop would ordain a declared “Enthusiast”. William Seward, a wealthy Londoner who had been converted through Charles Wesley, was to return to America with him and proposed to buy and equip a schooner in Philadelphia on the way to Georgia, to be Whitefield’s own ship for the service of the Gospel. Whitefield would be able to employ Captain Gladman as its Master.

At the same time Lady Selina Huntingdon frequently attended Fetter Lane chapel and was converted. She took several of her titled friends to hear Whitefield with great effect.



4.6. Moorfields and Kennington Common

On arriving back in London with Howell Harris and Seward, Whitefield was again refused the pulpit and he saw it as God’s way of driving him to preach in the open air here in London too. He began by climbing on to a tombstone in the Islington churchyard after a service, and eventually held an open-air meeting in lower Moorfields, an open space north of the city used for fairs, games, and a gathering point for peddlars, quacks etc. Clergy were shocked at Mr. Whitefield’s intended company. His friends were worried for different reasons. They knew the London rabble better than he did. Every thief, murderer and agitator would join the crowd; one false word, one false step might start a riot... But on Sunday April 29, 1739, he preached. The table on which he was to have preached was broken by the crushed throng of people – they were responding to posters advertising the meeting! – so he stood on a wall and preached. “He looked about at the multitude of faces which peered expectantly towards him, closely packed...”

A well-known divine, Dr. Trapp, saw what was happening and began a smear campaign against Whitefield. He warned his people against Whitefield, yet this did not deter Whitefield – another meeting was organized for Kennington Common on the same afternoon. That week, all of London was stirred – men, women and children from the gutters and gin shops, who never would have ventured before into churches, now flocked to Moorfields and Kennington. (Charles Wesley commented that the Devil had gained nothing from excluding George Whitefield from the Churches). Whitefield himself came to the conclusion, “Now I know more and more that the

Lord calls me into the fields, for no house or street is able to contain half the people who come to hear the Word”.

With revival flourishing in England and Scotland, he knew he must return to America. He had collected a lot of money for the orphanage in Georgia. But before he left, he approached John Wesley to take over from him in Bristol which he agreed to do.

5. AMERICA

His own “family” of sixteen souls accompanied him. These included William Seward, Captain Gladman, a surgeon for the orphan house, three London waifs, Joseph Periam who had signed on for the orphan house and four women, one of whom Periam later married.

During this journey he wrestled much inwardly – he replied too much of the criticism which was leveled against him. Another cause for concern was that he and John Wesley were no longer eye to eye. Wesley had preached against predestination (he said it conflicted with free grace). This led Whitefield to study afresh the great doctrines as he sailed from America (at the very time when anti-Methodist pamphleteers were painting him as “empty-headed and ill-read” he was wrestling with the Truth).

5.1. Philadelphia

William Tennent had years before stirred men’s hearts to repentance and faith through his preaching, and was there to see Whitfield on his arrival. He saw young Whitefield as “the prophet he had awaited, one who should stir the embers of fires he himself had lit long ago in his prime” – while George saw in Tennent the aged standard-bearer who had been through the battle and had more to teach, if George could find the time to listen. A mutual affection sprang up immediately between them.

A wealthy layman, Thomas Noble, had begged him to come to New York. It was here that a prominent New Yorker made the following observations: He studied this 24 year old preacher (with considerable mental reservations!) – he was of middle height, slender, fair and good-looking – he was too far off for the squint! ‘He is of sprightly, cheerful temper and acts and moves with great agility’. Impressed with George’s quick wit and imagination of his stories, rather surprised that both wit and imagination remained under control; he had expected someone fanatical! ... This New Yorker, who had never heard an extempore sermon in his life, was amazed at Whitefield’s memory. No notes, yet the discourse flowed logically and reasonably and with a delightful simplicity: no long words. Scriptures quoted copiously and explained with marvelous faculty; ‘he strikes out of them such lights, and unveils those excellencies which surprise his hearers’. And that voice! “He has a clear and musical voice and a wonderful command of it. He uses much gesture but with great propriety. Every accent of his voice, and every motion of his body speaks; and both are natural and unaffected!”

Whitefield thus became “all things to all men”, ecclesiastically, that he might by all means save some. Back in Philadelphia Benjamin Franklin (then in early 30’s) began printing an edition of Whitefield’s journals and sermons. He testified too, to the “amazing range and clarity of his voice”. One night during November 1739, while Whitefield preached from the Court house steps, Franklin slowly worked his way backwards down through the streets, and computed that in an open space George could certainly reach 30 000 people. (George tried to convert Benjamin Franklin, but with a twinkle in his eye, Franklin rebuffed him. Yet they became fast friends).

In November, 1739, they left Philadelphia – Captain Gladman sailing the newly bought sloop “Savannah” down the coast, while Whitefield and Seward travelled overland. Whitefield’s “grand design” was to unite the American colonies in a wave of dedication to God, and to see conditions throughout the South. He preached wherever he went, sometimes “despite the rain they stood in thousands for the service”.

5.2. Amongst the Slaves

While travelling through Maryland, he was appalled, not at the fact of these blacks being slaves, but at the ceaseless remorseless pressure applied by the overseer’s whips. He insisted that he should be allowed to visit the Negroes as he travelled further southward through Virginia and North Carolina, and was “sensibly touched with a fellow-feeling for the miseries of the poor Negroes”. He formed in his mind the project of an Open Letter to the slave-owners. He also resolved to set up a school for Negroes in Pennsylvania and to do all he could for blacks.



5.3. Georgia

After this long and arduous journey he returned exhausted in nerves, body and mind – another dilemma for him and the time was whether to propose to Betty or not. He concentrated now on the orphanage he wanted to establish, Seward proposing to finance it in full. Five hundred acres was bought 10 miles north of Savannah, and he decided to call it “Bethesda” (“House of Mercy”). Between his travels and preaching engagements, he supervised the construction and organized the orphans in their temporary hired house.

At this stage he wrote many private letters including his “Open Letter to Slave Owners”, and a pamphlet criticising “Tillotson’s Sermons” (Archbishop John Tillotson of Canterbury). Tillotson’s teaching was that moral goodness, prayers and ethical behavior provided sufficient passport to heaven. Whitefield commented that “Archbishop Tillotson knew more of Christ than did Mohamet”. The Bishop’s Commissary, Rev. Alexander Garden threatened to suspend him

because of this and also if he preached in any church in the province. Whitefield realized that "Garden's attitude could swing the Episcopal clergy against the revival and himself; and if the Established Church rejected him he could never unite the colonies for Christ..." Although the Charlestonians wanted to hear Whitefield, the Trustees slowly tried to edge him out of the control of Bethesda.

5.4. Proposal

He was still struggling all the time within himself with regard to Betty. He knew his own passionate nature, the cravings of his body. He had sacrificed the desires of the flesh for the call of the Gospel, but could not trust himself that once married he could tear himself from her body, and the delight of her presence and the mutual relaxation of mind, whenever he heard the inward call that he should be on the road again. He dared not believe that a wife "in the Lord" might encourage fervency of spirit. Yet he longed to be married, and married to Betty. Also he had always thought of Bethesda as a family and orphans as his own children – they needed a mother, and he needed a wife. Although he was terrified that she would cool his love for Christ, he eventually took the step and wrote to her parents and her, but as it happened, their letters crossed in the post, and it was a while before he knew that another man had already entered her life.

5.5. Revival

Back in Philadelphia in April 1740 he was astounded by the response of the people. Men and women from all walks of life were awakened by his preaching – lawyers, foul-mouthed sea captains and Negroes. Whitefield and Seward now bought 5 000 acres on which to build a school for Negroes which he proposed to call "Nazareth". But because of his remarks about Tillotson, the pulpits were starting to shut against Whitefield, and it wasn't all that easy to collect money. So he decided to preach in the open on Society Hill – thousands upon thousands came.

Preaching three times a day, despite lack of sleep and travel weariness, and wrestling with problems ahead of him, he rode out of Philadelphia to New York exhausted. On his return to Philadelphia a "new and strange element" arose in the human mind and spirit due to the revival, and people were now led by the Spirit to pray, amidst weeping and confessing, for long periods (sometimes hours) at a time. "Whitefield preached on May 14 to 12 000 people who had gathered in a clearing near Nottingham Delaware – thousands cried out, so that they almost drowned his voice. He did not doubt this time that the Spirit of God was present in fire and love and force. Men and women dropped as dead, then revived, then fainted again, as George preached on, swept up into contemplation of Christ's 'all constraining, free and everlasting love' until, as he reached a last appeal to come to the Cross and receive the grace of God, George himself fell in a swoon..."

5.6. Boston

On arriving in Boston he was received like a royal prince, although one minister remarked to him "I m sorry to see you here". George replied, "So is the devil". Boston was then the most populous and outwardly religious city n North America, and Whitefield seized the opportunity to "unfreeze" the formality of their religion. They responded with a warmth that astonished him – the people pressed themselves into the meeting houses without an inch to spare (which led to tragedy in one church when 5 people died of injuries). His preaching at Harvard University resulted in students being "full of God".

From October 1740 began the Great Awakening, among the people and the ministers. He once said, "The reason why congregations have been so dead, is because they have dead men preaching to them". One year later he was able to say, "Our lectures flourished, our Sabbaths are joyous, our churches increase, our ministers have new life and spirit in their work". It was at this point that Whitefield and the famous Jonathan Edwards met.

It was now that he decided to return to England – he was needed there – there were rising persecutions among the Methodists and grievous divisions and acrimonious disputes among them. John Wesley had also openly entered into controversy with Whitefield (the whole world knew they were at loggerheads). News had also reached him that his friend Seward had died "of wounds received in action" – he was stoned and killed by an angry mob while preaching with Howell Harris in Wales, and was therefore the first Methodist martyr.

6. BACK IN ENGLAND AGAIN

Betty had by this stage refused his proposal of marriage, so before he even sailed from Charlestown for England on January 24, 1741, he had renounced and given up his "Rachel".

The central issue of his conflict with John Wesley kept recurring. Wesley said that " a man who holds that God foreknows and predestines those whom he calls to be 'confirmed to the image of His Son', must believe also that the preaching of Christ's Gospel is superfluous and useless because the issue has been settled already, from all eternity, for every individual". But George proclaimed that grace and the new birth was open to every single one of a vast audience, however vile, hard, ignorant or self-righteous, if he or she would come humbly in repentance to the Cross of Christ. He said to Wesley, "Since we know not who are elect, and who are reprobate, we are to preach promiscuously to all". He prayed that this conflict would be resolved when he returned.

He arrived back only to find that his congregation on Kennington Common had dwindled from 20 000 to 200-300. This was because of Wesley's propaganda against his doctrine of election, and also because of embittered clergy who did not accept his "injurious and too severe"

expressions against Tillotson. He faced the other problem of heavy liabilities which were now his after Seward's death – there was no money to pay for the land bought for "Nazareth", so it was sold as well as debts incurred by the Orphan House at Bethesda.

6.1. Spiritual Error

He was also thoroughly alarmed at the direction of the Methodist movement, and became more and more determined to rescue his "spiritual children" from error. Preaching at Moorfields, he publicly separated himself from John and Charles Wesley and their teachings, and so, after much discussion, they parted. It was all the sadder, because (as Wesley said 30 years later), "Whitefield had a heart susceptible to the most generous and the most tender friendship. I have frequently thought that this, of all others, was the distinguishing part of his character. How few have we known of so kind a temper, of such large and flowing affections. Was it not principally by this that the hearts of others were drawn and knit to him? Can anything but love beget love? This shone in his very countenance, and continually breathed in his words whether in public or private. Was it not this which, quick as lightning, flew from heart to heart, which gave that lift to his sermons, his conversations, his letters?" Yet on April 4, 1741 the early leaders of this revival split asunder, marking the end of the glorious morning of the revival.

6.2. Scotland

So George had to begin all over again. He traveled and preached everywhere. He was invited to Scotland by the Erskine brothers who tried to persuade him to break with the bishop-bound Church of England. Being true evangelists, Whitefield had not accepted this attitude; in addition, they felt that they alone were the Lord's people, which shocked Whitefield and made him more and more determined to go out into the highways and hedges. "If the Pope himself would lend me his pulpit, I would gladly proclaim the righteousness of Jesus Christ therein!" The Secession Church of the Erskines became his inveterate enemy. A grievous dispute arose and Whitefield was run down in the following way "Mr. Whitefield is no minister of Jesus Christ; his call and coming to Scotland are scandalous; his practice is disorderly, and fertile of disorder; his whole doctrine is, and success must be, diabolical. People ought to avoid him, from duty to God, to the Church, to themselves, to posterity, and to him".

Fortunately for God, the Church, themselves and posterity, the people did not avoid him. Free to preach wherever he was welcome, George Whitefield rekindled in the next three months the fervor of the Scots. His private grief, however, remained his breach with the Wesleys. He wrote to them, "May God remove all obstacles that now prevent our union".

6.3. His Marriage

On November 14, 1741 he married Elizabeth James, a childless widow in her mid-thirties. She was ten years older than George, and was efficient, brisk, open hearted and understanding. She

was a great help to him and although it was not a love match in the beginning, love grew between them as the years went by.

6.4. Easter Pentecost

Eventually in February 1742 there was a form of reconciliation with the Wesleys. "John Wesley was not prepared to unite with Whitefield in equal. Total alliance for their common aim: they would love one another but work separately unless Whitefield acknowledged the leadership of Wesley"... and Whitefield disagreed too profoundly with some of Wesley's teaching to accept that leadership.

(Together they could have done so much more. They complemented each other. Wesley possessed a brilliant administrative mind whereas Whitefield felt impatient with organizing... Wesley was the better theologian. Both were devoted pastors, but Whitefield was by far the greater preacher. John Newton once said that Whitefield was incomparably the greatest preacher he had ever heard. Newton said that Whitefield had a manner of preaching which was peculiarly his own. He copied from none, and his familiar address, the power of his action, his marvelous talent in fixing the attention of the most careless... Other ministers could, perhaps, preach the Gospel as clearly, and in general say the same things. But no man living, said Newton, could say to them in his way).

George Whitefield prayed that Easter 1742 would become a Pentecost at Moorfields and Kennington Common. At this time of the year the poor gave themselves over to fun – every clown, conjuror, freak, trickster, pickpocket and gin seller converged on these places. Although afraid to start with, he preached from his portable pulpit about the "Serpent in the Wilderness", and when he had finished, he knew by the stillness (except for weeping) that here grew a field white to harvest. Three times a day he preached, with tremendous effect – hundreds upon hundreds were converted. Whitefield was only 27 years old.

During the next quarter century or more Whitefield ranged up and down Great Britain, Ireland and the Thirteen Colonies on his endless quest for souls. He crossed the Atlantic 13 times altogether...

6.5. Revival in Scotland

In 1742 here was a tremendous revival in Scotland. Whitefield helped men like William McCulloch and Rev. James Robe. He addressed great crowds while undertaking a strenuous itinerary in the Forth and Clyde Valleys. Sometimes "all night in the fields could be heard the voice of prayer... the astonishing physical manifestations of spiritual conviction and spiritual joy were amazing". Crowds varied from 30 000 – 50 000. Week after week he travelled around Scotland, fanning the flames. Witnessing a "Great Awakening" as in New England.

6.6. The Birth of a Son

Elizabeth became pregnant after they returned from Scotland and in 1743 a son, John, was born. He left wife and son to go preaching, but returned to London at the end of November only to find that little John had died suddenly of a stroke or seizure at the age of 4 months. Although heartbroken, Whitefield quoted Matthew Henry by saying, “Weeping must not hinder sowing”, being fully assured that “all things work together for good to them that love God”.

7. ANOTHER TRIP TO AMERICA

7.1. Ill Health

George took Elizabeth to America for the first time in 1744 on the “Wilmington”. With constant pain in his side (probably a symptom of angina pectoris), as well as terrible storms, calms and contrary winds along the way, this was probably one of the worst crossings he’d ever experienced. His health worsened, until Elizabeth thought she’d lose him. When they arrived at York Harbour he collapsed and they thought he was dying – but the crisis passed. Almost immediately Samuel Moody came to him and welcomed him to America and asked him to preach – and when the doctor arrived the next day to tend to this “dying man” or attend his funeral, they found him in the pulpit!

Because he never stopped pushing himself to meet all his commitments and itinerary, he had relapse after relapse and became dangerously ill with angina pectoris. In Portsmouth he dragged himself out of bed and staggered into the church thinking this would be his last sermon before dying. After the service he dropped into almost a coma, but managed to come through this too.

Much was published against Whitefield, especially over his remarks about “dead and unconverted clergy”. He was accused of “cutting too many ears off” and he apologized for all the things he’d said in the past. “I am sorry”, he said, “if anything I wrote has a means of separations, for I am of no ‘separating’ principles. I came to England to preach the Gospel of peace to all that are willing to hear, on my way to Georgia – and to promote charity and love among all”. Yet, despite all the controversy, the Harvard Awakening continued, bringing many strong evangelicals into the ministry.

7.2. Bethesda

A year after they arrived from England (1745), Elizabeth and he eventually arrived at Bethesda and found it flourishing. Whitefield had formed a new plan for the Negroes (after Seward’s death and the sale of “Nazareth”) – he suggested that slave labour be brought to Bethesda. “He wanted to display to all the world how blacks should be loved, taught, cared for and made industrious. At the same time he believed that Bethesda would never expand, not the colony flourish, on white labour”. A controversy arose over this between him and Salzburger Protestants and the Moravians, but eventually he got his way and in 1750 Bethesda had been

turned into a slave-run plantation. "His slaves were the best treated, the happiest in the entire South; he even brought out a young man to look after their spiritual and temporal interests. The Negroes loved George Whitefield".

8. ENGLAND – 1748

On this visit to England he spent much time preaching to the nobility, encouraged by the Countess of Huntingdon. He was very highly honoured by these invitations and many came to know Jesus as their Saviour – he urged these aristocratic converts to flee the world, to abjure the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life, which many of them did.

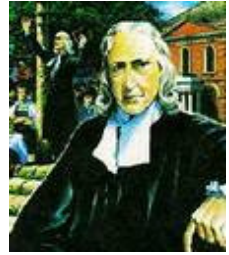
By this stage Whitefield had learned to expect rioting and disruption wherever he went, and even escaped a deliberate attempt at cold-blooded murder. The news that he's nearly murdered in his bed attached a much larger audience to his field of preaching when he returned 10 days later. And, indeed, one of the finest evangelists in the West, Harry Tanner, was the fruit of it.

Whitefield constantly refused to found an organization that smacked of a sect. He believed he could do more by "ranging up and down, preaching repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus to those multitudes who would neither come to church or meeting, but who are led by curiosity to follow us into the fields". Whitefield encouraged local societies for prayer and praise without wishing to weaken the church loyalty of members.

In 1749 at the age of 34 he publicly deplored in print "my public mistakes", especially his Tillotson pamphlet and the extravagance of the published Journals. "Alas, alas, in how many things I have been too rash and hasty in giving characters. Both of places and persons... I have hurt the cause I would defend, and also stirred up needless opposition".

Young evangelicals could not find bishops willing to ordain "enthusiasts". And Episcopal mistrust of George Whitefield denied many good pastors and evangelists the opportunity of serving a flock. The dilemma was resolved by the Countess of Huntingdon - a peer or peeress of the realm had the legal right to build private chapels and to appoint chaplains. She started by licencing Whitefield's Tabernacle at Moorfields when he rebuilt it as a permanent place of worship, and another chapel which he erected later in the spreading west end of London, in Tottenham Court Road. She opened many other chapels wherever she resided during parts of the year, especially at Clifton Hot Wells near Bristol and Tunbridge Wells and Bath. These chapels became glorious "soul-traps", as Lady Huntingdon brought her fellow aristocrats to hear her favourite preachers. The roll of her licenced preachers continued to grow. In the last years of Whitefield's life she founded, with his counsel and that of Howell Harris, a seminary for future chaplains, at Trevecca in Wales. What a wonderful work she did for the Lord!

8.1. Reconciliation with Wesley



On Friday, January 19, 1750, John Wesley and George Whitefield met again and administered the sacrament together to some 1 200 people in Wesley's chapel, Wesley reading the prayers and Whitefield preaching – until then the two evangelists had gone their separate ways. Wesley was gracious enough to remark, "How wise is God in giving different talents to different preachers". He had mellowed a lot and was fast becoming the mild, cheerful, sympathetic pastor-evangelist, instead of the disciplinarian.

Thereafter Wesley never encouraged Criticism of Whitefield. "Do you think we shall see Mr. Whitefield in heaven?" asked one small-minded disciple. "No", replied Wesley, and the man looked pleased that he had aimed his flattery well. "No sir", said Wesley. "I fear not. Mr. Whitefield will be so near the Throne, and we at such a distance, we shall hardly get a sight of him".

In 1753 a message reached Whitefield that Wesley lay dying of galloping consumption in London. Whitefield was one of the first to be at his friend's side to pray with him and commit him to the Lord – only for Wesley to recover and eventually outlive Whitefield by 20 years.

Through sickness and health George labored, refusing to stop. "It is better to wear out than to rust out", he'd say. His influence on the American colonies which in another 20 years would become the U.S.A. is incalculable. He never lost his vision of one nation under God which no ocean could divide – he strengthened the moral fibre of the nation that was to be. He helped mould the American dream by his untiring call that whether for a man or a people, "the heart can never be at unity with itself until it is wholly centred on God".

Long after, many stories would be remembered by men and women about Whitefield. Once in New Jersey, the congregation sat as sleepy as under their own minister. Whitefield noticed an old man settling down for his accustomed sermon-time nap. George began cheerfully and the deep voice rippled across the pews – and the people dozed. Suddenly he paused. His expression changed, and changed again, until a thundercloud sat on his brow. "If", he said in measured, deliberate words, "I had come to speak to you in my own name you might rest your elbows upon your knees and your heads on your hands and go - to - sleep!" (The old man in front dozed on!) "Once in a while", George continued, ominously quietly, "you would look up and mutter, 'What does this babbler say?' But – I have come to you in the name of the Lord God of Hosts and" – BANG, he clapped his hands and stamped his foot, and the old man looked up – "I must and I will be heard!"

He looked at the old man. "Aye, Aye, I have woken you up, have I? I meant to do it! I have not come here to preach to stocks and stones. I have come to you in the name of the Lord God of Hosts and I must and will be heard!"

Whitefield and his friends brought innumerable ministers of different denominations into a new understanding of the ministry and of each other: He was the first man to cut right across denominational barriers. He said that he merely was an “outside worker” in the house of the Lord; others worked at the inside, which they might design and decorate however they liked.

9. America – 1769

Whenever George returned to America after some years in retain, his friends grieved to see how he had aged. He suffered much from asthma, from angina and an unrecognized condition which gave him a florid, rather puffy face. Sometimes his infirmities made him a little irritable. He became quite corpulent because of this disease. His enemies said he had grown fat on good living but in fact he ate sparingly, his favourite dish being the cow-heel which was a poor man’s treat. Wesley once noted in 1764, “Mr. Whitefield seemed an old, old man, being fairly worn out in his Master’s service, though he has hardly seen fifty years...”

He never stayed content with his achievement either of personal character or in evangelism. “Grace! Grace!” he wrote to Robert Keen in London, a few days after landing in America for the last time. “Next Wednesday I am fifty five years old. God be merciful to me a sinner, a sinner, a sinner! As such, continue to pray, my dear steady friend for – less than least of all, George Whitefield”.

“Amazing grace” kept him young in soul. He did not care that he aged in body. He had expected to die long ago; every month was a miracle of the unexpected for his worn-out physique. He once said “... Oh, may I never cease itinerating till I sit down in the kingdom of heaven. Oh, for a pilgrim’s heart with my pilgrim’s life”.

After 4 years in England he arrived back in December 1769 and in January 1770 everyone, including the governor of Georgia, James Wright, converged on Bethesda to honour its founder, George Whitefield. Elizabeth had died in England in August 1768.

Six years previously Whitefield had petitioned the government of Georgia for an additional 2000 acres and a grant to buy slaves to clear it, which would support a college and a seminary. His dream was of America as a continent of “educated saints”. The buildings were now complete and the governor was invited to share his pleasure, to join the Sunday worship and see where students lived. He recalled and praised God’s unfailing provision and prayed that Bethesda should be always on a “broad bottom” – “All denominations have freely given. All denominations, all the continent, God being my helper, shall receive benefit from it”. (Little did he know that within 3 years of his death Bethesda would be struck by lightning and mostly burn down.)

9.1. His death

In Philadelphia in May 1770 he was still preaching and drawing the crowds. "Corpulent and white-haired he might be, squint-eyed as ever, but the people flocked from their farms and smithies and counting houses and gathered in their hundreds and often thousands to hear him. His voice had not lost its timbre; no other man in North America could so make them aware of God's purity and love and the state of their own hearts."

His aide, Richard Smith, was a little worried at his master's asthma and suffocating spasms. In the pulpit, however, George seemed to become another man his spirit soaring. Though he often returned from the pulpit very feeble after public preaching, yet his engaging sweetness of conversation changed the suspicions of many into passionate love and friendship. "His popularity exceeded all that I ever knew", said a New England pastor.

On Saturday, 29 September 1770, on his way back to Boston, he spent the night in Exeter, where he begged to preach on the Sunday. When the time came one of them looked at him and said, "Sir, you are more fit to go to bed than to preach". "True, sir", replied George. He clasped his hands, looked up to heaven and said: "Lord Jesus, I am weary in Thy work but not of it. If I have not finished my course, let me go and speak for Thee once more in the fields and seal Thy Truth, and come home and die!"

The following day he preached. The first hour passed. It seemed as though Whitefield looked right into heaven, viewing the beauty of the Lord Jesus; as if "he felt the pleasures of heaven in his raptured soul, which made his countenance shine like the unclouded sun".

Nearly two hours had passed when Whitefield cried, "I go! I go to rest prepared. My sun has arisen and by the aid of heaven has given light to many. It is now about to set – No! It is about to rise to the zenith of immortal glory!" "I have outlived many on earth but they cannot outlive me in heaven. O thought divine! I shall soon be in a world where time, age, pain and sorrow are unknown. My body fails, by spirit expands. How willingly would I live for ever to preach Christ! But I die to be with him!"

That same night at about 2 a.m. he woke up struggling for breath during an attack of asthma, and died (probably of angina pectoris), after commending his friends to God.