

GEORGE WHITEFIELD



HIS LIFE AND TIMES

J. C. RYLE
(1816 – 1900)

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GEORGE WHITEFIELD: HIS LIFE AND TIMES

1. The Religious and Moral Condition of 18th Century England

a. Importance of the history of the 18th century

THE subject I propose to handle in this volume is partly historical and partly biographical. If any reader expects from the title a fictitious tale or something partly drawn from my imagination, I fear he will be disappointed. Such writing is not in my province, and I have no leisure for it if it was. Facts, naked facts, and the stern realities of life absorb all the time that I can spare for the press.

I trust, however, that with most readers the subject I have chosen is one that needs no apology. The man who feels no interest in the history and biography of his own country is surely a poor patriot and a worse philosopher.

“Patriot” he cannot be called. True patriotism will make an Englishman care for everything that concerns England. A true patriot will like to know something about everyone who has left his mark on English character, from the Venerable Bede¹ down to Hugh Stowell,² from Alfred the Great³ down to Pounds,⁴ the originator of Ragged Schools.

“Philosopher” he certainly is not. What is philosophy but history teaching by examples? To know the steps by which England has reached her present position is essential to a right understanding both of our na-

¹ **Venerable Bede** (c. 672-735) – English monk at the monasteries of St. Peter and St. Paul in the Kingdom of Northumbria, England; author of *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

² **Hugh Stowell** (1799-1865) – Church of England clergyman with a reputation for his vigorous preaching.

³ **Alfred the Great** (c. 848-899) – King of the West Saxons in England.

⁴ **John Pounds** (1766-1839) – teacher and altruist born in Portsmouth; responsible for creation of the concept of Ragged Schools, where homeless and poor children would be taught basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills.

tional privileges and our national dangers. To know the men whom God raised up to do His work in days gone by will guide us in looking about for standard-bearers⁵ in our own days and days to come.

I venture to think that there is no period of English history which is so thoroughly instructive to a Christian as the middle of last century. It is the period of which we are feeling the influence at this very day. It is the period with which our grandfathers and great-grandfathers were immediately connected. It is a period, not least, from which we may draw most useful lessons for our own times.

Let me begin by trying to describe the actual condition of England a hundred years ago.⁶ A few simple facts will suffice to make this plain.

b. Political and financial position of England

The reader will remember that I am not going to speak of our *political* condition. I might easily tell him that, in the days of Sir Robert Walpole,⁷ the Duke of Newcastle,⁸ and the elder Pitt,⁹ the position of England was very different from what it is now. Great statesmen and orators there were among us, no doubt. But our standing among the nations of the earth was comparatively poor, weak, and low. Our voice among the nations of the earth carried far less weight than it has since obtained. The foundation of our Indian Empire had hardly been laid. Our Australian possessions were a part of the world only just discovered, but not colonized. At home there was a strong party in the country which still longed for the restoration of the Stuarts. In 1745 the Pretender¹⁰ and a Highland army marched from Scotland to invade England and got as far as Derby. Corruption, jobbing¹¹, and mismanagement in high places were the rule; and purity the exception. Civil and religious disabilities still abounded. The Test and Corporation Acts¹² were still unrepealed. To be a Dissenter¹³

⁵ **standard-bearers** – role models.

⁶ A hundred years before Ryle's writing would have been the mid-1700s.

⁷ **Sir Robert Walpole** (1676-1745) – British statesman and Whig politician; generally regarded as the *de facto* first Prime Minister of Great Britain.

⁸ **Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle** (1693-1768) – British Whig statesman and prime minister.

⁹ **William Pitt** (1708-1778) – first Earl of Chatham; British Whig statesman and prime minister.

¹⁰ **Charles Edward Stuart** (1720-1788) – elder son of James Francis Edward Stuart; grandson of James II and VII, and the Stuart claimant to the thrones of England, Scotland, and Ireland from 1766 as Charles III; also known as “the Young Pretender,” or “Bonnie Prince Charlie.”

¹¹ **jobbing** – using a public service or trust for private gain.

¹² **Test and Corporation Acts** – series of English penal laws which served as a religious test for public office and limited rights of Roman Catholics and Nonconformists.

was to be regarded as only one degree better than being seditious and a rebel. Rotten boroughs flourished. Bribery among all classes was open, unblushing, and profuse. Such was England politically a hundred years ago.

The reader will remember, furthermore, that I am not going to speak of our condition in a *financial* and economical point of view. Our vast cotton, silk, and linen manufactures had hardly begun to exist. Our enormous mineral treasures of coal and iron were scarcely touched. We had no steamboats, no locomotive engines, no railways, no gas, no electric telegraph, no penny post, no scientific farming, no macadamized roads,¹⁴ no free trade, no sanitary arrangements, and no police deserving the name. Let any Englishman imagine, if he can, his country without any of the things that I have just mentioned, and he will have some faint idea of the economical and financial condition of England a hundred years ago.

But I leave these things to the political economists and historians of this world. Interesting as they are, no doubt, they form no part of the subject that I want to dwell upon. I wish to treat that subject as a minister of Christ's gospel. It is the religious and moral condition of England a hundred years ago to which I shall confine my attention. Here is the point to which I wish to direct the reader's eye.

c. Low state of religion in churches and chapels

The state of this country in a religious and moral point of view in the middle of last century was so painfully unsatisfactory that it is difficult to convey any adequate idea of it. English people of the present day who have never been led to inquire into the subject can have no conception of the darkness that prevailed. From the year 1700 till about the era of the French Revolution [began 1789], England seemed barren of all that is really good. How such a state of things can have arisen in a land of free Bibles and professing Protestantism is almost past comprehension. Christianity seemed to lie as one dead, insomuch that you might have said, "She is dead." Morality, however much exalted in pulpits, was thoroughly trampled underfoot in the streets. There was darkness in high places and darkness in low places—darkness in the court, the camp, the Parliament, and the bar—darkness in country and darkness in town—

¹³ **Dissenter** – member of a non-established church; a Nonconformist; one who attended a church not affiliated with the Church of England.

¹⁴ **macadamized roads** – roads consisting of multiple layers of crushed stone; invented by John McAdam of Scotland in the 18th century.

darkness among rich and darkness among poor—a gross, thick, religious and moral darkness—a darkness that might be felt.

Does anyone ask what the churches were doing a hundred years ago? The answer is soon given. The Church of England existed in those days, with her admirable articles, her time-honored liturgy, her parochial system, her Sunday services, and her ten thousand clergy. The Nonconformist body existed, with its hardly won¹⁵ liberty and its free pulpit. But one account unhappily may be given of both parties. They existed, but they could hardly be said to have lived. They did nothing; they were sound asleep. The curse of the Uniformity Act¹⁶ seemed to rest on the Church of England. The blight of ease and freedom from persecution seemed to rest upon the Dissenters. Natural theology without a single distinctive doctrine of Christianity, cold morality, or barren orthodoxy formed the staple teaching both in church and chapel. Sermons everywhere were little better than miserable moral essays, utterly devoid of anything likely to awaken, convert, or save souls. Both parties seemed at last agreed on one point, and that was to let the devil alone and to do nothing for hearts and souls. And as for the weighty truths for which Hooper¹⁷ and Latimer¹⁸ had gone to the stake, and Baxter¹⁹ and scores of Puritans had gone to jail, they seemed clean forgotten and laid on the shelf.

When such was the state of things in churches and chapels, it can surprise no one to learn that the land was deluged with infidelity and skepticism. The prince of this world made good use of his opportunity. His agents were active and zealous in promulgating every kind of strange and blasphemous opinion. Collins²⁰ and Tindal²¹ denounced Christianity as priestcraft. Whiston²² pronounced the miracles of the Bible to be grand impositions. Woolston²³ declared them to be allegories. Arianism

¹⁵ **hardly won** – obtained with difficulty; hard-won.

¹⁶ **Uniformity Act** – an Act of the Parliament of England in 1662 which prescribed the form of public prayers, administration of sacraments, and other church rites, according to the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.

¹⁷ **John Hooper** (1495-1555) – Anglican bishop and Protestant reformer; burned at stake by Queen Mary I for heresy.

¹⁸ **Hugh Latimer** (1487-1555) – Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, and Bishop of Worcester during the Reformation, and later chaplain to Edward VI; burned at the stake under Queen Mary I.

¹⁹ **Richard Baxter** (1615-1691) – English Puritan church leader and theologian.

²⁰ **Anthony Collins** (1676-1729) – English philosopher and early proponent of Deism.

²¹ **Matthew Tindal** (1657-1733) – eminent English deist author; highly influential in the early Enlightenment.

²² **William Whiston** (1667-1752) – Anglican priest and mathematician who sought to harmonize religion and science.

²³ **Thomas Woolston** (1668-1733) – Anglican theologian.

and Socinianism²⁴ were openly taught by Clark²⁵ and Priestly²⁶ and became fashionable among the intellectual part of the community. Of the utter incapacity of the pulpit to stem the progress of all this flood of evil, one single fact will give us some idea. The celebrated lawyer, Blackstone,²⁷ had the curiosity, early in the reign of George III, to go from church to church and hear every clergyman of note in London. He says that he did not hear a single discourse which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero, and that it would have been impossible for him to discover, from what he heard, whether the preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mahomet,²⁸ or of Christ!

d. Testimonies of this condition

Evidence about this painful subject is, unhappily, only too abundant. My difficulty is not so much to discover witnesses, as to select them. This was the period at which Archbishop Secker²⁹ said, in one of his charges, “In this we cannot be mistaken, that an open and professed disregard of religion is become, through a variety of unhappy causes, the distinguishing character of the age. Such are the dissoluteness and contempt of principle in the higher part of the world, and the profligacy, intemperance, and fearlessness of committing crimes in the lower part, as must, if the torrent of impiety stop not, become absolutely fatal. Christianity is ridiculed and railed at with very little reserve, and the teachers of it without any at all.” This was the period when Bishop Butler,³⁰ in his preface to *The Analogy of Religion*, used the following remarkable words: “It has come to be taken for granted that Christianity is no longer a subject of inquiry; but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly, it is treated as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all persons of discernment, and nothing remained but to set it up

²⁴ **Arianism** – system of theological thought founded by Arius, a bishop of Alexandria (A.D. 250/56-336), who taught that the Son of God was created by God the Father, and that before that time the Son did not exist. He taught that, though the Son is a heavenly being who existed before the rest of creation and who is far greater than all the rest of creation, he is still not equal to the Father in all His attributes. He was divine, but not God. Jehovah’s Witnesses are modern day Arians.

Socinianism – 16th and 17th century movement of Faustus and Lelio Socinus, who professed belief in the God of Scripture, but denied original sin, the substitutionary aspect of Christ’s atonement, the deity of Christ, and consequently the Trinity.

²⁵ possibly **Samuel Clarke** (1675-1729) – English Arian philosopher and Anglican cleric.

²⁶ **Joseph Priestly** (1733-1804) – Unitarian English minister, teacher, author, philosopher, and scientist.

²⁷ **William Blackstone** (1723-1780) – English jurist, judge, and Tory politician of the 18th century; author of *Commentaries on the Laws of England*.

²⁸ **Mahomet** – an older name for Mohammed, founder of Islam.

²⁹ **Thomas Secker** (1693-1768) – Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury.

³⁰ **Joseph Butler** (1692-1752) – Anglican bishop, theologian, and moralist.

as a principal subject for mirth and ridicule.” Nor were such complaints as these confined to Churchmen.³¹ Dr. Watts³² declares that in his day “there was a general decay of vital religion in the hearts and lives of men, and that it was a general matter of mournful observation among all who lay the cause of God to heart.” Dr. Guyse,³³ another most respectable Nonconformist, says, “The religion of nature makes up the darling topic of our age; and the religion of Jesus is valued only for the sake of that, and only so far as it carries on the light of nature, and is a bare improvement of that kind of light. All that is distinctively Christian or that is peculiar to Christ—everything concerning Him that has not its apparent foundation in natural light, or that goes beyond its principles, is waived and banished and despised.” Testimony like this might easily be multiplied tenfold. But I spare the reader. Enough probably has been adduced to prove that when I speak of the moral and religious condition of England at the beginning of the eighteenth century as painfully unsatisfactory, I do not use the language of exaggeration.

e. Defects of bishops and clergy

What were the bishops of those days? Some of them were undoubtedly men of powerful intellect and learning and of unblameable lives. But the best of them, like Secker, and Butler, and Gibson, and Lowth, and Horn, seemed unable to do more than deplore the existence of evils which they saw but knew not how to remedy. Others, like Lavington and Warburton, fulminated fierce charges against enthusiasm and fanaticism, and appeared afraid of England becoming too religious! The majority of the bishops, to say the truth, were mere men of the world. They were unfit for their position. The prevailing tone of the episcopal³⁴ body may be estimated by the fact, that Archbishop Cornwallis gave balls and routs³⁵ at Lambeth Palace until the king himself interfered by letter and requested him to desist.³⁶ Let me also add, that when the occupants of the episcopal

³¹ **Churchmen** – members of the Church of England; Anglicans.

³² **Isaac Watts** (1674-1748) – English Congregational minister, hymn-writer, theologian, and logician.

³³ **John Guyse** (1680-1761) – English Independent minister.

³⁴ **episcopal** – pertaining to the bishops.

³⁵ **routs** – large social gatherings for entertainment.

³⁶ The king’s letter on this occasion is so curious, that I give it in its entirety, as I find it in that interesting though ill-arranged book, *The Life and Times of Lady Huntingdon*. The letter was evidently written in consequence of an interview which Lady Huntingdon had with the king. A critical reader will remember that the king was probably more familiar with the German than the English language.

“My good Lord Prelate, I could not delay giving you the notification of the grief and concern with which my breast was affected at receiving authentic information that routs have made their way into your palace. At the same time, I must signify to you my sentiments

bench were troubled by the rapid spread of Whitefield's influence, it was gravely suggested in high quarters that the best way to stop his influence was to make him a bishop.

What were the parochial clergy of those days? The vast majority of them were sunk in worldliness, and neither knew nor cared anything about their profession. They neither did good themselves, nor liked anyone else to do it for them. They hunted, they shot, they farmed, they swore, they drank, they gambled. They seemed determined to know everything except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. When they assembled, it was generally to toast "Church and King," and to build one another up in earthly-mindedness, prejudice, ignorance, and formality. When they retired to their own homes, it was to do as little and preach as seldom as possible. And when they did preach, their sermons were so unspeakably and indescribably bad, that it is comforting to reflect they were generally preached to empty benches.

f. Poverty of printed theology

What sort of theological literature was a hundred years ago bequeathed to us? The poorest and weakest in the English language. This is the age to which we owe such divinity as that of *The Whole Duty of Man*³⁷ and the sermons of Tillotson³⁸ and Blair.³⁹ Inquire at any old bookseller's shop, and you will find there is no theology so unsaleable as the sermons published about the middle and latter part of last century.

g. Education

What sort of education had the lower orders a hundred years ago? In the greater part of parishes, and especially in rural districts, they had no education at all. Nearly all our rural schools have been built since 1800. So extreme was the ignorance that a Methodist preacher in Somerset-

on this subject, which hold these levities and vain dissipations as utterly inexpedient, if not unlawful, to pass in a residence for many centuries devoted to divine studies, religious retirement, and the extensive exercise of charity and benevolence; I add, in a place where so many of your predecessors have led their lives in such sanctity as has thrown luster on the pure religion they professed and adorned. From the dissatisfaction with which you must perceive I behold these improprieties, not to speak in harsher terms, and on still more pious principles, I trust you will suppress them immediately, so that I may not have occasion to show any further marks of my displeasure or to interpose in a different manner. May God take your grace into His almighty protection. I remain, my Lord Primate, your gracious friend, G. R."

³⁷ *The Whole Duty of Man* – English anonymous high church devotional work.

³⁸ **John Tillotson** (1630-1694) – Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury from 1691 to 1694; held to Arminian views and focused more on morality than theology in his preaching.

³⁹ **Hugh Blair** (1718-1800) – Scottish minister of religion and author; rejected Calvinistic doctrine.

shire was charged before the magistrates with swearing because in preaching he quoted the text, “He that believeth not shall be damned” (Mar 16:16)! While, not to be behind Somersetshire, Yorkshire furnished a constable who brought Charles Wesley before the magistrates as a favorer of the Pretender, because in public prayer he asked the Lord to “bring back His banished ones!” To cap all, the vice-chancellor of Oxford actually expelled six students from the University because “they held Methodistic tenets, and took on them to pray, read, and expound Scripture in private houses.” To swear extempore, it was remarked by some, brought an Oxford student into no trouble; but to pray extempore was an offence not to be borne!

h. Morals

What were the morals of a hundred years ago? It may suffice to say that dueling, adultery, fornication, gambling, swearing, Sabbath-breaking, and drunkenness were hardly regarded as vices at all. They were the fashionable practices of people in the highest ranks of society, and no one was thought the worse of for indulging in them. The best evidence of this point is to be found in Hogarth’s⁴⁰ pictures.

i. Popular literature

What was the popular literature of a hundred years ago? I pass over the fact that Bolingbroke,⁴¹ and Gibbon,⁴² and Hume⁴³ the historian were all deeply dyed with skepticism. I speak of the light reading which was most in vogue. Turn to the pages of Fielding, Smollett, Swift, and Sterne,⁴⁴ and you have the answer. The cleverness of these writers is undeniable; but the indecency of many of their writings is so glaring and gross that few people nowadays would like to allow their works to be seen on their drawing-room table.

My picture, I fear, is a very dark and gloomy one. I wish it were in my power to throw a little more light into it. But facts are stubborn things, and especially facts about literature. The best literature of a hundred

⁴⁰ **William Hogarth** (1697-1764) – English painter, engraver, pictorial satirist, social critic, editorial cartoonist, and writer.

⁴¹ **Henry St. John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke** (1678-1751) – English politician, government official, and political philosopher.

⁴² **Edward Gibbon** (1737-1794) – English historian, writer, and member of Parliament.

⁴³ **David Hume** (1711-1776) – Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, historian, economist, librarian, and essayist.

⁴⁴ **Henry Fielding** (1707-1754) – English novelist, irony writer, and dramatist.

Tobias Smollett (1721-1771) – Scottish poet and author.

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) – Anglo-Irish satirist, author, essayist, and Anglican cleric.

Laurence Sterne (1713-1768) – Anglo-Irish novelist and Anglican cleric.

years ago is to be found in the moral writings of Addison, Johnson, and Steele.⁴⁵ But the effects of such literature on the general public, it may be feared, was infinitesimally small. In fact, I believe that Johnson and the essayists had no more influence on the religion and morality of the masses than the broom of the renowned Mrs. Partington⁴⁶ had on the waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

To sum up all and bring this part of my subject to a conclusion, I ask my readers to remember that the good works with which everyone is now familiar did not exist one hundred years ago. Wilberforce⁴⁷ had not yet attacked the slave trade. Howard⁴⁸ had not yet reformed prisons. Raikes⁴⁹ had not established Sunday schools. We had no Bible Societies, no ragged schools, no city missions, no pastoral aid societies, no missions to the heathen. The spirit of slumber was over the land. In a religious and moral point of view, England was sound asleep.

j. The “good old times” a mere myth

I cannot help remarking, as I draw this chapter to a conclusion, that we ought to be more thankful for the times in which we live. I fear we are far too apt to look at the evils we see around us and to forget how much worse things were a hundred years ago. I have no faith, for my part, and I boldly avow it, in those “good old times” of which some delight to speak. I regard them as a mere fable and a myth. I believe that our own times are the best times that England has ever seen. I do not say this boastfully. I know we have many things to deplore; but I do say that we might be worse. I do say that we were much worse a hundred years ago. The general standard of religion and morality is undoubtedly far higher. At all events, in 1868, we are awake. We see and feel evils to which, a hundred years ago, men were insensible. We struggle to be free from these evils; we desire to amend. This is a vast improvement. With all our many faults, we are not sound asleep. On every side there is stir, activity, movement, progress, and not stagnation. Bad as we are, we confess our badness. Weak as we are, we acknowledge our failings. Feeble as our efforts are, we

⁴⁵ **Joseph Addison** (1672-1719) – English essayist, poet, playwright, and politician.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) – English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, and moralist.

Richard Steele (1672-1729) – Anglo-Irish writer, playwright, and politician.

⁴⁶ **Mrs. Partington** – fictional character who is said to have attempted to turn back a high tide with her broom, invented by Benjamin Shillaber (1814-1890), editor of the *Boston Daily Post*.

⁴⁷ **William Wilberforce** (1759-1833) – British politician, philanthropist, and leader of the movement to abolish the slave trade.

⁴⁸ **John Howard** (1726-1790) – philanthropist and early English prison reformer.

⁴⁹ **Robert Raikes** (1736-1811) – English philanthropist and Anglican layman; noted for promotion of Sunday schools.

strive to amend. Little as we do for Christ, we do try to do something. Let us thank God for this! Things might be worse. Comparing our own days with the middle of last century, we have reason to thank God and take courage. England is in a better state than it was a hundred years ago.

2. The Agency by Which Christianity Was Revived in England

a. A great change

That a great change for the better has come over England in the last hundred years is a fact which I suppose no well-informed person would ever attempt to deny. You might as well attempt to deny that there was a Protestant Reformation in the days of Luther, a Long Parliament in the time of Cromwell, or a French republic at the end of the last century. There has been a vast change for the better. Both in religion and morality, the country has gone through a complete revolution. People neither think, nor talk, nor act as they did in 1750. It is a great fact, which the children of this world cannot deny, however they may attempt to explain it. They might as well try to persuade us that high-water and low-water at London Bridge are one and the same thing.

But by what agency was this great change effected? To whom are we indebted for the immense improvement in religion and morality which undoubtedly has come over the land? Who, in a word, were the instruments that God employed in bringing about the great English Reformation of the eighteenth century?

This is the one point that I wish to examine generally in the present chapter. The names and biographies of the principal agents I shall reserve for future chapters.¹

The government of the country can lay no claim to the credit of the change. Morality cannot be called into being by penal enactments and statutes. People were never yet made religious by acts of Parliament. At any rate, the Parliaments and administrations of last century did as little for religion and morality as any that ever existed in England.

¹ This booklet only covers one of these men, George Whitefield. For the others including John Wesley, William Grimshaw, William Romaine, Daniel Rowlands, and John Berridge, see *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century* by J. C. Ryle; available from Banner of Truth Trust, www.banneroftruth.org.

Nor yet did the change come from the Church of England as a body. The leaders of that venerable communion were utterly unequal to the times. Left to herself, the Church of England would probably have died of dignity and sunk at her anchors.

Nor yet did the change come from the Dissenters. Content with their hardly-won triumphs, that worthy body of men seemed to rest upon their oars. In the plenary² enjoyment of their rights of conscience, they forgot the great vital principles of their forefathers and their own duties and responsibilities.

Who, then, were the reformers of the last century? To whom are we indebted, under God, for the change which took place?

b. A few isolated and humble individuals

The men who wrought deliverance for us a hundred years ago were a few individuals, most of them clergymen of the Established Church, whose hearts God touched about the same time in various parts of the country. They were not wealthy or highly connected. They had neither money to buy adherents nor family influence to command attention and respect. They were not put forward by any church, party, society, or institution. They were simply men whom God stirred up and brought out to do His work, without previous concert, scheme, or plan. They did His work in the old apostolic way, by becoming the evangelists of their day. They taught one set of truths. They taught them in the same way, with fire, reality, earnestness, as men fully convinced of what they taught. They taught them in the same spirit, always loving, compassionate, and, like Paul, even weeping, but always bold, unflinching, and not fearing the face of man. And they taught them on the same plan, always acting on the aggressive; not waiting for sinners to come to them, but going after, and seeking sinners; not sitting idle till sinners offered to repent, but assaulting the high places of ungodliness like men storming a breach, and giving sinners no rest so long as they stuck to their sins.

The movement of these gallant evangelists shook England from one end to another. At first, people in high places affected³ to despise them. The men of letters sneered at them as fanatics; the wits cut jokes and invented smart names for them; the Church shut her doors on them; the Dissenters turned the cold shoulder on them; the ignorant mob persecuted them. But the movement of these few evangelists went on and made itself felt in every part of the land. Many were aroused and awak-

² **plenary** – full; complete.

³ **affected** – aimed.

ened to think about religion; many were shamed out of their sins; many were restrained and frightened at their own ungodliness; many were gathered together and induced to profess a decided hearty religion; many were converted; many who affected to dislike the movement were secretly provoked to emulation. The little sapling became a strong tree; the little rill became a deep, broad stream; the little spark became a steady, burning flame. A candle was lighted, of which we are now enjoying the benefit. The feeling of all classes in the land about religion and morality gradually assumed a totally different complexion. And all this, under God, was effected by a few unpatronized, unpaid adventurers. When God takes a work in hand, nothing can stop it. When God is for us, none can be against us.

c. Their preaching

The instrumentality by which the spiritual reformers of the last century carried on their operations was of the simplest description. It was neither more nor less than the old apostolic weapon of *preaching*. The sword which St. Paul wielded with such mighty effect, when he assaulted the strongholds of heathenism eighteen hundred years ago, was the same sword by which they won their victories. To say, as some have done, that they neglected education and schools, is totally incorrect. Wherever they gathered congregations, they cared for the children. To say, as others have done, that they neglected the sacraments, is simply false. Those who make that assertion only expose their entire ignorance of the religious history of England a hundred years ago. It would be easy to name men among the leading reformers of the last century whose communicants might be reckoned by hundreds, and who honored the Lord's Supper more than forty-nine out of fifty clergymen in their day. But, beyond doubt, preaching was their favorite weapon. They wisely went back to first principles and took up apostolic plans. They held, with St. Paul, that a minister's first work is "to preach the gospel" (1Co 1:17).

Manner of their preaching

They preached everywhere. If the pulpit of a parish church was open to them, they gladly availed themselves of it. If it could not be obtained, they were equally ready to preach in a barn. No place came amiss to them. In the field or by the roadside, on the village-green or in a market-place, in lanes or in alleys, in cellars or in garrets,⁴ on a tub or on a table, on a bench or on a horseblock, wherever hearers could be gathered, the spiritual reformers of the last century were ready to speak to them about

⁴ garrets – attics.

their souls. They were instant⁵ in season and out of season in doing the fisherman's work (2Ti 4:2), and compassed sea and land in carrying forward their Father's business. Now, all this was a new thing. Can we wonder that it produced a great effect?

They preached simply. They rightly concluded that the very first qualification to be aimed at in a sermon is to be understood. They saw clearly that thousands of able and well-composed sermons are utterly useless because they are above the heads of the hearers. They strove to come down to the level of the people and to speak what the poor could understand. To attain this, they were not ashamed to crucify their style and to sacrifice their reputation for learning. To attain this, they used illustrations and anecdotes in abundance, and, like their divine Master, borrowed lessons from every object in nature. They carried out the maxim of Augustine: "A wooden key is not so beautiful as a golden one; but if it can open the door when the golden one cannot, it is far more useful." They revived the style of sermons in which Luther and Latimer used to be so eminently successful. In short, they saw the truth of what the great German reformer meant when he said, "No one can be a good preacher to the people who is not willing to preach in a manner that seems childish and vulgar to some." Now, all this again was quite new a hundred years ago.

They preached fervently and directly. They cast aside that dull, cold, heavy, lifeless mode of delivery, which had long made sermons a very proverb for dullness. They proclaimed the words of faith with faith, and the story of life with life. They spoke with fiery zeal, like men who were thoroughly persuaded that what they said was true, and that it was of the utmost importance to your eternal interest to hear it. They spoke like men who had got a message from God to you, and must deliver it, and must have your attention while they delivered it. They threw heart and soul and feeling into their sermons, and sent their hearers home convinced, at any rate, that the preacher was sincere and wished them well. They believed that you must speak from the heart if you wish to speak to the heart, and that there must be unmistakable faith and conviction within the pulpit if there is to be faith and conviction among the pews. All this, I repeat, was a thing that had become almost obsolete a hundred years ago. Can we wonder that it took people by storm and produced an immense effect?

⁵ instant – ready; prepared.

Substance of their preaching

But what was the substance and subject-matter of the preaching which produced such wonderful effect a hundred years ago? I will not insult my readers' common sense by only saying that it was "simple, earnest, fervent, real, genial, brave, life-like," and so forth. I would have it understood that it was eminently doctrinal, positive, dogmatical,⁶ and distinct. The strongholds of the last century's sins would never have been cast down by mere earnestness and negative teaching. The trumpets which blew down the walls of Jericho were trumpets which gave no uncertain sound. The English evangelists of last century were not men of an uncertain creed. But what was it that they proclaimed? A little information on this point may not be without use.

For one thing, then, the spiritual reformers of the last century taught constantly *the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture*. The Bible, whole and unmutilated, was their sole rule of faith and practice. They accepted all its statements without question or dispute. They knew nothing of any part of Scripture being uninspired. They never allowed that man has any "verifying faculty" within him, by which Scripture statements may be weighed, rejected, or received. They never flinched from asserting that there can be no error in the Word of God; and that when we cannot understand or reconcile some part of its contents, the fault is in the interpreter and not in the text. In all their preaching, they were eminently men of one Book. To that Book they were content to pin their faith, and by it to stand or fall. This was one grand characteristic of their preaching. They honored, they loved, they revered the Bible.

Furthermore, the reformers of the last century taught constantly the *total corruption of human nature*. They knew nothing of the modern notion that Christ is in every man, and that all possess something good within, which they have only to stir up and use in order to be saved. They never flattered men and women in this fashion. They told them plainly that they were dead and must be made alive again; that they were guilty, lost, helpless, and hopeless, and in imminent danger of eternal ruin. Strange and paradoxical as it may seem to some, their first step towards making men good was to show them that they were utterly bad; and their primary argument in persuading men to do something for their souls was to convince them that they could do nothing at all.

Furthermore, the reformers of the last century taught constantly that *Christ's death upon the cross was the only satisfaction for man's sin*; and that, when Christ died, He died as our substitute, "the just for the unjust"

⁶ **dogmatical** – manifesting doctrinal certainty.

(1Pe 3:18). This, in fact, was the cardinal point in almost all their sermons. They never taught the modern doctrine that Christ's death was only a great example of self-sacrifice. They saw in it something far higher, greater, deeper than this. They saw in it the payment of man's mighty debt to God. They loved Christ's person; they rejoiced in Christ's promises; they urged men to walk after Christ's example. But the one subject, above all others, concerning Christ, which they delighted to dwell on, was the atoning blood which Christ shed for us on the cross.

Furthermore, the reformers of the last century taught constantly the great doctrine of *justification by faith*. They told men that faith was the one thing needful in order to obtain an interest in Christ's work for their souls; that before we believe, we are dead, and have no interest in Christ; and that the moment we do believe, we live, and have a plenary title to all Christ's benefits. Justification by virtue of church membership—justification without believing or trusting—were notions to which they gave no countenance. Everything if you will believe, and the moment you believe; nothing if you do not believe—was the very marrow of their preaching.

Furthermore, the reformers of the last century taught constantly the *universal necessity of heart conversion and a new creation by the Holy Spirit*. They proclaimed everywhere to the crowds whom they addressed, "Ye must be born again" (Joh 3:7). Sonship to God by baptism, sonship to God while we do the will of the devil—such sonship they never admitted. The regeneration which they preached was no dormant, torpid, motionless thing. It was something that could be seen, discerned, and known by its effects.

Furthermore, the reformers of the last century taught constantly the *inseparable connection between true faith and personal holiness*. They never allowed for a moment that any church membership or religious profession was the least proof of a man being a true Christian if he lived an ungodly life. A true Christian, they maintained, must always be known by his fruits; and these fruits must be plainly manifest and unmistakable in all the relations of life. "No fruits, no grace," was the unvarying tenor of their preaching.

Finally, the reformers of the last century taught constantly, as doctrines both equally true, *God's eternal hatred against sin, and God's love towards sinners*. They knew nothing of a "love lower than hell," and a heaven where holy and unholy are all at length to find admission. Both about heaven and hell they used the utmost plainness of speech. They never shrunk from declaring, in plainest terms, the certainty of God's judgment and of wrath to come, if men persisted in impenitence and un-

belief; and yet they never ceased to magnify the riches of God's kindness and compassion, and to entreat all sinners to repent and turn to God before it was too late.

Such were the main truths which the English evangelists of last century were constantly preaching. These were the principal doctrines which they were always proclaiming, whether in town or in country, whether in church or in the open air, whether among rich or among poor. These were the doctrines by which they turned England upside down, made ploughmen and colliers⁷ weep till their dirty faces were seamed with tears, arrested the attention of peers and philosophers, stormed the strongholds of Satan, plucked thousands like brands from the burning, and altered the character of the age. Call them simple and elementary doctrines if you will. Say, if you please, that you see nothing grand, striking, new, peculiar about this list of truths. But the fact is undeniable that God blessed these truths to the reformation of England a hundred years ago. What God has blessed it ill becomes man to despise.

3. George Whitefield and His Ministry

a. A brief account of his life

Who were the men that revived religion in England a hundred years ago? What were their names, that we may do them honor? Where were they born? How were they educated? What are the leading facts in their lives? What was their special department of labor? To these questions I wish to supply some answers in the present and future chapters.

I pity the man who takes no interest in such inquiries. The instruments that God employs to do his work in the world deserve a close inspection. The man who did not care to look at the rams' horns that blew down Jericho, the hammer and nail that slew Sisera, the lamps and trumpets of Gideon, the sling and stone of David, might fairly be set down as a cold and heartless person. I trust that all who read this volume will like to know something about the English evangelists of the eighteenth century.

The first and foremost whom I will name is the well-known George Whitefield. Though not the first in order, if we look at the date of his birth, I place him first in the order of merit, without any hesitation. Of all

⁷ **colliers** – workers in coal mines.

the spiritual heroes of a hundred years ago, none saw so soon as Whitefield what the times demanded, and none were so forward in the great work of spiritual aggression. I should think I committed an act of injustice if I placed any name before his.

His birthplace and parentage

Whitefield was born at Gloucester in the year 1714. That venerable county town, which was his birthplace, is connected with more than one name which ought to be dear to every lover of Protestant truth. Tyndale, one of the first and ablest translators of the English Bible, was a Gloucestershire man. Hooper, one of the greatest and best of our English reformers, was Bishop of Gloucester, and was burned at the stake for Christ's truth within view of his own cathedral in Queen Mary's reign. In the next century, Miles Smith, Bishop of Gloucester, was one of the first to protest against the Romanizing proceedings of Laud, who was then Dean of Gloucester. In fact, he carried his Protestant feeling so far that, when Laud moved the communion table in the cathedral to the east end and placed it for the first time "altar-wise" in 1616, Bishop Smith was so much offended that he refused to enter the walls of the cathedral from that day till his death. Places like Gloucester, we need not doubt, have a rich entailed inheritance of many prayers. The city where Hooper preached and prayed, and where the zealous Miles Smith protested, was the place where the greatest preacher of the gospel England has ever seen was born.

Like many other famous men, Whitefield was of humble origin and had no rich or noble connections to help him forward in the world. His mother kept the Bell Inn at Gloucester and appears not to have prospered in business. At any rate, she never seems to have been able to do anything for Whitefield's advancement in life. The inn itself is still standing and is reputed to be the birthplace, not only of our greatest English preacher, but also of a well-known English prelate, Henry Philpot, Bishop of Exeter.

Whitefield's early life, according to his own account, was anything but religious, though, like many boys, he had occasional prickings of conscience and spasmodic fits of devout feeling. But habits and general tastes are the only true test of young people's characters. He confesses that he was "addicted to lying, filthy talking, and foolish jesting," and that he was a "Sabbath-breaker, a theater-goer, a card-player, and a romance-reader." All this, he says, went on till he was fifteen years old.

Education

Poor as he was, his residence at Gloucester procured him the advantage of a good education at the Free Grammar School of that city. Here he was a day-scholar until he was fifteen. Nothing is known of his progress there. He can hardly, however, have been quite idle, or else he would not have been ready to enter a university afterwards at the age of eighteen. His letters, moreover, show an acquaintance with Latin, in the shape of frequent quotations, which is seldom acquired, if not picked up at school. The only known fact about his schooldays is this curious one, that even then he was remarkable for his good elocution⁸ and memory and was selected to recite speeches before the Corporation of Gloucester at their annual visitation of the Grammar School.

At the age of fifteen, Whitefield appears to have left school and to have given up Latin and Greek for a season. In all probability, his mother's straitened⁹ circumstances made it absolutely necessary for him to do something to assist her in business and to get his own living. He began, therefore, to help her in the daily work of the Bell Inn. "At length," he says, "I put on my blue apron, washed cups, cleaned rooms, and, in one word, became a professed common drawer¹⁰ for nigh a year and a half."

This state of things, however, did not last long. His mother's business at the Bell did not flourish, and she finally retired from it altogether. An old schoolfellow revived in his mind the idea of going to Oxford, and he went back to the Grammar School and renewed his studies. Friends were raised up who made interest for him at Pembroke College, Oxford, where the Grammar School of Gloucester held two exhibitions. And at length, after several providential circumstances had smoothed the way, he entered Oxford as a servitor at Pembroke at the age of eighteen.¹¹

A turning point

Whitefield's residence at Oxford was the great turning-point in his life. For two or three years before he went to the University, his journal tells us that he had not been without religious convictions. But from the time of his entering Pembroke College, these convictions fast ripened into decided Christianity. He diligently attended all means of grace with-

⁸ **elocution** – pronunciation; speech.

⁹ **straitened** – pressed with poverty.

¹⁰ **drawer** – liquor server at a tavern.

¹¹ Happening to be at Oxford in June 1865, I went to Pembroke College and asked whether anyone knew the rooms which Whitefield occupied when he was at Oxford. The porter informed me that nothing whatever was known about them. The rooms which the famous Dr. Johnson occupied at Pembroke are still pointed out. Johnson left Oxford just before Whitefield went up.

in his reach. He spent his leisure time in visiting the city prison, reading to the prisoners, and trying to do good. He became acquainted with the famous John Wesley and his brother Charles and a little band of like-minded young men, including the well-known author of *Theron and Aspasio*, James Hervey. These were the devoted party to whom the name “Methodists” was first applied, on account of their strict “method” of living. At one time, he seems to have greedily devoured such books as [*The Imitation of Christ* by] Thomas à Kempis,¹² and Castaniza’s¹³ *Spiritual Combat*, and to have been in danger of becoming a semi-papist, an ascetic, or a mystic, and of placing the whole of religion in self-denial. He says in his journal, “I always chose the worst sort of food. I fasted twice a week. My apparel was mean.¹⁴ I thought it unbecoming a penitent to have his hair powdered. I wore woolen gloves, a patched gown, and dirty shoes; and though I was convinced that the kingdom of God did not consist in meat and drink, yet I resolutely persisted in these voluntary acts of self-denial, because I found in them great promotion of the spiritual life.” Out of all this darkness he was gradually delivered, partly by the advice of one or two experienced Christians, and partly by reading such books as Scougal’s¹⁵ *Life of God in the Soul of Man*, Law’s¹⁶ *Serious Call*, Baxter’s¹⁷ *Call to the Unconverted*, Alleine’s¹⁸ *Alarm to Unconverted Sinners*, and Matthew Henry’s¹⁹ *Commentary*. “Above all,” he says, “my mind being now more opened and enlarged, I began to read the Holy Scriptures upon my knees, laying aside all other books, and praying over, if possible, every line and word. This proved meat indeed and drink indeed to my soul. I daily received fresh life, light, and power from above. I got more true knowledge from reading the Book of God in one month than I could ever have acquired from all the writings of men.” Once taught to understand the glorious liberty of Christ’s gospel, Whitefield never turned again to asceticism, legalism, mysticism, or strange views of Christian perfection. The experience received by bitter conflict was most valuable

¹² **Thomas à Kempis** (c. 1380-1471) – German-Dutch canon regular of the late medieval period; author of *The Imitation of Christ*, which emphasized an ascetic life and devotion to the Eucharist.

¹³ **Juan de Castaniza** (d. 1598) – Spanish biographer and theologian, of the order of the Benedictines. It is disputed whether Castaniza or Lorenzo Scupoli (c. 1530-1610) was the author of *The Spiritual Combat*.

¹⁴ **mean** – showing poverty or humility.

¹⁵ **Henry Scougal** (1650-1678) – Scottish theologian, minister, and author.

¹⁶ **William Law** (1686-1761) – Church of England priest and author of *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

¹⁷ **Richard Baxter** (1615-1691) – English Puritan church leader and theologian.

¹⁸ **Joseph Alleine** (1634-1668) – English Nonconformist pastor and author.

¹⁹ **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) – British Nonconformist minister and author.

to him. The doctrines of free grace, once thoroughly grasped, took deep root in his heart, and became, as it were, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. Of all the little band of Oxford methodists, none seem to have got hold so soon of clear views of Christ's gospel as he did, and none kept it so unwaveringly to the end.

Early ministry

At the early age of twenty-two, Whitefield was admitted to holy orders by Bishop Benson of Gloucester, on Trinity Sunday, 1736. His ordination was not of his own seeking. The bishop heard of his character from Lady Selwyn and others, sent for him, gave him five guineas to buy books, and offered to ordain him, though only twenty-two years old, whenever he wished. This unexpected offer came to him when he was full of scruples about his own fitness for the ministry. It cut the knot and brought him to the point of decision. "I began to think," he says, "that if I held out longer, I should fight against God."

Whitefield's first sermon was preached in the very town where he was born, at the church of St. Mary-le-Crypt, Gloucester. His own description of it is the best account that can be given: "Last Sunday, in the afternoon, I preached my first sermon in the church of St. Mary-le-Crypt, where I was baptized, and also first received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Curiosity, as you may easily guess, drew a large congregation together upon this occasion. The sight at first a little awed me. But I was comforted with a heartfelt sense of the divine presence, and soon found the unspeakable advantage of having been accustomed to public speaking when a boy at school, and of exhorting the prisoners and poor people at their private houses while at the university. By these means, I was kept from being daunted overmuch. As I proceeded, I perceived the fire kindled, till at last, though so young and amidst a crowd of those who knew me in my childish days, I trust I was enabled to speak with some degree of gospel authority. Some few mocked, but most seemed for the present struck; and I have since heard that a complaint was made to the bishop that I drove fifteen mad the first sermon! The worthy prelate wished that the madness might not be forgotten before next Sunday."

Almost immediately after his ordination, Whitefield went to Oxford and took his degree as Bachelor of Arts. He then commenced his regular ministerial life by undertaking temporary duty at the Tower Chapel, London, for two months. While engaged there, he preached continually in many London churches, and among others, in the parish churches of Islington, Bishops-gate, St. Dunstan's, St. Margaret's, Westminster, and Bow, Cheapside. From the very first, he obtained a degree of popularity such as no preacher, before or since, has probably ever reached. Whether

on weekdays or Sundays, wherever he preached, the churches were crowded, and an immense sensation was produced. The plain truth is that a really eloquent, extempore preacher, preaching the pure gospel with most uncommon gifts of voice and manner, was at that time an entire novelty in London. The congregations were taken by surprise and carried by storm.

From London, he removed²⁰ for two months to Dummer, a little rural parish in Hampshire, near Basingstoke. This was a totally new sphere of action, and he seemed like a man buried alive among poor, illiterate people. But he was soon reconciled to it and thought afterwards that he reaped much profit by conversing with the poor. From Dummer, he accepted an invitation, which had been much pressed on him by the Wesleys, to visit the colony of Georgia in North America and assist in the care of an orphan house which had been set up near Savannah for the children of colonists. After preaching for a few months in Gloucestershire, and especially at Bristol and Stonehouse, he sailed for America in the latter part of 1737 and continued there about a year. The affairs of this orphan house, it may be remarked, occupied much of his attention from this period of his life till he died. Though well-meant, it seems to have been a design of very questionable wisdom, and certainly entailed on Whitefield a world of anxiety and responsibility to the end of his days.

Whitefield returned from Georgia at the latter part of the year 1738, partly to obtain priest's orders, which were conferred on him by his old friend Bishop Benson, and partly on business connected with the Orphan House. He soon, however, discovered that his position was no longer what it was before he sailed for Georgia. The bulk of the clergy were no longer favorable to him and regarded him with suspicion as an enthusiast and a fanatic. They were especially scandalized by his preaching the doctrine of regeneration or the new birth, as a thing which many baptized persons greatly needed! The number of pulpits to which he had access rapidly diminished. Churchwardens, who had no eyes for drunkenness and impurity, were filled with intense indignation about what they called "breaches of order." Bishops who could tolerate Arianism, Socinianism, and Deism²¹ were filled with indignation at a man who declared fully the atonement of Christ and the work of the Holy Ghost, and began to denounce him openly. In short, from this period of his life, Whitefield's field of usefulness within the Church of England narrowed rapidly on every side.

²⁰ **removed** – moved his residence.

²¹ **Deism** – belief in the existence of one God while admitting only natural religion and rejecting the divine origin of Scripture.

Open air preaching

The step which at this juncture gave a turn to the whole current of Whitefield's ministry was his adoption of the system of open-air preaching. Seeing that thousands everywhere would attend no place of worship, spent their Sundays in idleness or sin, and were not to be reached by sermons within walls, he resolved, in the spirit of holy aggression, to go out after them "into the highways and hedges," on his Master's principle, and "compel them to come in" (Luk 14:23). His first attempt to do this was among the colliers at Kingswood near Bristol, in February 1739. After much prayer, he one day went to Hannam Mount, and standing upon a hill began to preach to about a hundred colliers upon Matthew 5:1-3. The thing soon became known. The number of hearers rapidly increased till the congregation amounted to many thousands. His own account of the behavior of these neglected colliers, who had never been in a church in their lives, is deeply affecting. "Having," he writes to a friend, "no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus Who was a friend to publicans, and 'came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' (Luk 5:32). The first discovery of their being affected was the sight of the white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully fell down their black cheeks as they came out of their coalpits. Hundreds of them were soon brought under deep conviction, 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. As the scene was quite new, it often occasioned many inward conflicts. Sometimes, when twenty thousand people were before me, I had not in my own apprehension a word to say either to God or them. But I was never totally deserted and frequently (for to deny it would be lying against God) was so assisted that I knew by happy experience what our Lord meant by saying, 'Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water' (Joh 7:38). The open firmament above me, the prospect of the adjacent fields, with the sight of thousands, some in coaches, some on horseback, and some in the trees, and at times all affected and in tears, was almost too much for and quite overcame me."

Two months after this, Whitefield began the practice of open-air preaching in London, on April 27, 1739. The circumstances under which this happened were curious. He had gone to Islington to preach for the vicar, his friend Mr. Stonehouse. In the midst of the prayer, the churchwardens came to him and demanded his license for preaching in the diocese of London. Whitefield, of course, had not got this license any more than any clergyman not regularly officiating in the diocese has at this day. The upshot of the matter was that, being forbidden by the church-

wardens to preach in the pulpit, he went outside after the communion-service and preached in the churchyard. "And," says he, "God was pleased so to assist me in preaching and so wonderfully to affect the hearers that I believe we could have gone singing hymns to prison. Let not the adversaries say I have thrust myself out of their synagogues. No, they have thrust me out."

From that day forward he became a constant field-preacher, whenever weather and the season of the year made it possible. Two days afterwards, on Sunday, April 29, he records, "I preached in Moorfields to an exceeding great multitude. Being weakened by my morning's preaching, I refreshed myself in the afternoon by a little sleep, and at five went and preached at Kennington Common, about two miles from London, when no less than thirty thousand people were supposed to be present." Henceforth, wherever there were large open spaces round London, wherever there were large bands of idle, godless, Sabbath-breaking people gathered together, in Hackney Fields, Mary-le-bonne Fields, May Fair, Smithfield, Blackheath, Moorfields, and Kennington Common, there went Whitefield and lifted up his voice for Christ.²² The gospel so proclaimed was listened to and greedily received by hundreds who never dreamed of going to a place of worship. The cause of pure religion was advanced, and souls were plucked from the hand of Satan, like brands from the burning. But it was going much too fast for the Church of those days. The clergy, with a few honorable exceptions, refused entirely to countenance this strange preacher. In the true spirit of the dog in the manger, they neither liked to go after the semi-heathen masses of population themselves, nor liked anyone else to do the work for them. The consequence was that the ministrations of Whitefield in the pulpits of the Church of England from this time almost entirely ceased. He loved the Church in which he had been ordained. He gloried in her Articles; he used her prayer book with pleasure. But the Church did not love him, and so lost the use of his services. The plain truth is that the Church of England of that day was not ready for a man like Whitefield. The Church was too much asleep to understand him and was vexed at a man who would not keep still and let the devil alone.

Faithful labors

The facts of Whitefield's history from this period to the day of his death are almost entirely of one complexion. One year was just like an-

²² The reader will remember that all this happened a hundred years ago, when London was comparatively a small place. Most of the open places where Whitefield preached are now covered with buildings. Kennington Oval and Blackheath alone remain open at this day.

other; and to attempt to follow him would be only going repeatedly over the same ground. From 1739 to the year of his death, 1770, a period of thirty-one years, his life was one uniform employment. He was eminently a man of one thing, and always about his Master's business. From Sunday mornings to Saturday nights, from the 1st of January to the 31st of December, excepting when laid aside by illness, he was almost incessantly preaching Christ and going about the world entreating men to repent and come to Christ and be saved. There was hardly a considerable town in England, Scotland, or Wales that he did not visit as an evangelist. When churches were opened to him, he gladly preached in churches. When only chapels could be obtained, he cheerfully preached in chapels. When churches and chapels alike were closed, or were too small to contain his hearers, he was ready and willing to preach in the open air. For thirty-one years, he labored in this way, always proclaiming the same glorious gospel, and always, as far as man's eye can judge, with immense effect. In one single Whitsuntide²³ week, after preaching in Moorfields, he received one thousand letters from people under spiritual concern and admitted to the Lord's table three hundred and fifty persons. In the thirty-four years of his ministry, it is reckoned that he preached publicly eighteen thousand times.

His journeyings were prodigious, when the roads and conveyances of his time are considered. He was familiar with "perils in the wilderness" and "perils in the sea" (2Co 11:26), if ever man was in modern times. He visited Scotland fourteen times and was nowhere more acceptable or useful than he was in that Bible-loving country. He crossed the Atlantic seven times, backward and forward, in miserable, slow sailing ships, and arrested the attention of thousands in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. He went over to Ireland twice, and on one occasion was almost murdered by an ignorant Popish mob in Dublin. As to England and Wales, he traversed every county in them, from the Isle of Wight to Berwick-on-Tweed, and from the Land's End to the North Foreland.

His regular ministerial work in London for the winter season, when field-preaching was necessarily suspended, was something prodigious. His weekly engagements at the Tabernacle in Tottenham Court Road, which was built for him when the pulpits of the Established Church were closed, comprised the following work. Every Sunday morning, he administered the Lord's Supper to several hundred communicants at half-past six. After this he read prayers and preached both morning and afternoon.

²³ **Whitsuntide** – the week following Whitsunday, which is the seventh Sunday after Easter, and commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ's disciples.

Then he preached again in the evening at half-past five and concluded by addressing a large society of widows, married people, young men, and spinsters, all sitting separately in the area of the Tabernacle, with exhortations suitable to their respective stations. On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings, he preached regularly at six. On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday evenings, he delivered lectures. This, it will be observed, made thirteen sermons a week! And all this time he was carrying on a large correspondence with people in almost every part of the world.

That any human frame could so long endure the labors that Whitefield went through does indeed seem wonderful. That his life was not cut short by violence, to which he was frequently exposed, is no less wonderful. But he was immortal till his work was done. He died at last very suddenly at Newbury Port, in North America, on Sunday, September the 29th, 1770, at the comparatively early age of fifty-six. He was once married to a widow named James, of Abergavenny, who died before him. If we may judge from the little mention made of his wife in his letters, the marriage does not seem to have contributed much to his happiness. He left no children, but he left a name far better than that of sons and daughters. Never perhaps was there a man of whom it could be so truly said that he spent and was spent for Christ than George Whitefield.

His death

The circumstances and particulars of this great evangelist's end are so deeply interesting that I shall make no excuse for dwelling on them. It was an end in striking harmony with the tenor of his life. As he had lived for more than thirty years, so he died, preaching to the very last. He literally almost died in harness. "Sudden death," he had often said, "is sudden glory. Whether right or not, I cannot help wishing that I may go off in the same manner. To me it would be worse than death to live to be nursed, and to see friends weeping about me." He had the desire of his heart granted. He was cut down in a single night by a spasmodic fit of asthma, almost before his friends knew that he was ill.

On the morning of Saturday, the 29th of September, the day before he died, Whitefield set out on horseback from Portsmouth in New Hampshire, in order to fulfil an engagement to preach at Newbury Port on Sunday. On the way, unfortunately, he was earnestly importuned to preach at a place called Exeter, and though feeling very ill, he had not the heart to refuse. A friend remarked before he preached that he looked more uneasy than usual, and said to him, "Sir, you are more fit to go to bed than to preach." To this Whitefield replied, "True, sir," and then turning aside, he clasped his hands together, and looking up, said, "Lord

Jesus, I am weary in Thy work, but not of Thy work. If I have not yet finished my course, let me go and speak for Thee once more in the fields, seal Thy truth, and come home and die.” He then went and preached to a very great multitude in the fields from the text, 2 Corinthians 13:5, for the space of nearly two hours. It was his last sermon and a fitting conclusion to his whole career.

An eyewitness has given the following striking account of this closing scene of Whitefield’s life: “He rose from his seat and stood erect. His appearance alone was a powerful sermon. The thinness of his visage, the paleness of his countenance, the evident struggling of the heavenly spark in a decayed body for utterance, were all deeply interesting. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was dying. In this situation he remained several minutes, unable to speak. He then said: ‘I will wait for the gracious assistance of God, for He will, I am certain, assist me once more to speak in his name.’ He then delivered perhaps one of his best sermons. The latter part contained the following passage: ‘I go. I go to a rest prepared: my sun has given light to many, but now it is about to set—no, to rise to the zenith of immortal glory. I have outlived many on earth, but they cannot outlive me in heaven. Many shall outlive me on earth and live when this body is no more, but there—oh, thought divine!—I shall be in a world where time, age, sickness, and sorrow are unknown. My body fails, but my spirit expands. How willingly would I live forever to preach Christ. But I die to be with Him. How brief—comparatively brief—has been my life compared to the vast labors which I see before me yet to be accomplished. But if I leave now, while so few care about heavenly things, the God of peace will surely visit you.’”

After the sermon was over, Whitefield dined with a friend and then rode on to Newbury Port, though greatly fatigued. On arriving there, he supped early and retired to bed. Tradition says that as he went upstairs, with a lighted candle in his hand, he could not resist the inclination to turn round at the head of the stair and speak to the friends who were assembled to meet him. As he spoke, the fire kindled within him, and before he could conclude, the candle which he held in his hand had actually burned down to the socket. He retired to his bedroom, to come out no more alive. A violent fit of spasmodic asthma seized him soon after he got into bed, and before six o’clock the next morning, the great preacher was dead. If ever man was ready for his change, Whitefield was that man. When his time came, he had nothing to do but to die. Where he died, there he was buried, in a vault beneath the pulpit of the church where he had engaged to preach. His sepulcher is shown to this very day; and noth-

ing makes the little town where he died so famous as the fact that it contains the bones of George Whitefield.

Such are the leading facts in the life of the prince of English evangelists of a hundred years ago. His personal character, the real extent of his usefulness, and some account of his style of preaching are subjects which I must reserve for another chapter.²⁴

b. The nature of his ministry

His influence

George Whitefield, in my judgment, was so entirely chief and first among the English reformers of the last century that I make no apology for offering some further information about him. The real amount of good he did, the peculiar character of his preaching, the private character of the man, are all points that deserve consideration. They are points, I may add, about which there is a vast amount of misconception.

This misconception perhaps is unavoidable and ought not to surprise us. The materials for forming a correct opinion about such a man as Whitefield are necessarily very scanty. He wrote no book for the million, of world-wide fame, like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. He headed no crusade against an apostate church, with a nation at his back and princes on his side, like Martin Luther. He founded no religious denomination, which pinned its faith on his writings and carefully embalmed his best acts and words, like John Wesley. There are Lutherans and Wesleyans in the present day, but there are no Whitefieldites. No! The great evangelist of last century was a simple, guileless man, who lived for one thing only, and that was to preach Christ. If he did that, he cared for nothing else. The records of such a man are large and full in heaven, I have no doubt. But they are few and scanty upon earth.

We must not forget, beside this, that the many in every age see nothing in a man like Whitefield but fanaticism and enthusiasm. They abhor everything like "zeal" in religion. They dislike everyone who turns the world upside down, and departs from old traditional ways, and will not let the devil alone. Such persons, no doubt, would tell us that the ministry of Whitefield only produced temporary excitement, that his preaching was commonplace rant, and that his character had nothing about it to be specially admired. It may be feared that eighteen hundred years ago they would have said much the same of St. Paul.

²⁴ The referenced chapter of Ryle's book is reproduced in this booklet in the following section as "b. The nature of his ministry."

The question, “What good did Whitefield do?” is one which I answer without the least hesitation. I believe that the direct good which he did to immortal souls was enormous. I will go further. I believe it is incalculable. Credible witnesses in England, Scotland, and America have placed on record their conviction that he was the means of converting thousands of people. Many, wherever he preached, were not merely pleased, excited, and arrested, but positively turned from sin, and made thorough servants of God. Numbering the people, I do not forget, is at all times an objectionable practice. God alone can read hearts and discern the wheat from the tares. Many, no doubt, in days of religious excitement, are set down as converted who are not converted at all. But I wish my readers to understand that my high estimate of Whitefield’s usefulness is based on a solid foundation. I ask them to mark well what Whitefield’s contemporaries thought of the value of his labors.

Testimonies from his contemporaries

Franklin,²⁵ the well-known American philosopher, was a cold-blooded, calculating man, a Quaker by profession, and not likely to form too high an estimate of any minister’s work. Yet even he confessed that “it was wonderful to see the change soon made by his preaching in the manners of the inhabitants of Philadelphia. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious.”

Franklin himself, it may be remarked, was the leading printer of religious works at Philadelphia; and his readiness to print Whitefield’s sermons and journals shows his judgment of the hold that he had on the American mind.

Maclaurin,²⁶ Willison,²⁷ and MacCulloch²⁸ were Scotch ministers whose names are well known north of the Tweed, and the two former of whom deservedly rank high as theological writers. All these have repeatedly testified that Whitefield was made an instrument of doing immense good in Scotland. Willison in particular says, “That God honored him with surprising success among sinners of all ranks and persuasions.”

Old Henry Venn, of Huddersfield and Yelling, was a man of strong good sense as well as of great grace. His opinion was that, “if the greatness, extent, success, and disinterestedness of a man’s labors can give

²⁵ **Benjamin Franklin** (1706-1790) – American scientist, inventor, statesman, diplomat, printer, publisher, and political philosopher.

²⁶ **John Maclaurin** (1693-1754) – Church of Scotland minister.

²⁷ **John Willison** (1680-1750) – evangelical minister of the Church of Scotland and Christian writer.

²⁸ **William McCulloch** (1691-1771) – Scottish parish minister and leader in Cambuslang Revival.

him distinction among the children of Christ, then we are warranted to affirm that scarce anyone has equaled Mr. Whitefield.” Again, he says, “He was abundantly successful in his vast labors. The seals of his ministry, from first to last, I am persuaded, were more than could be credited, could the number be fixed. This is certain: his amazing popularity was only from his usefulness; for he no sooner opened his mouth as a preacher, than God commanded an extraordinary blessing upon his word.”

John Newton was a shrewd man as well as an eminent minister of the gospel. His testimony is: “That which finished Mr. Whitefield’s character as a shining light, and is now his crown of rejoicing, was the singular success which the Lord was pleased to give him in winning souls. It seemed as if he never preached in vain. Perhaps there is hardly a place in all the extensive compass of his labors where some may not yet be found who thankfully acknowledge him as their spiritual father.”

John Wesley did not agree with Whitefield on several theological points of no small importance. But when he preached his funeral sermon, he said, “Have we read or heard of any person who called so many thousands, so many myriads of sinners to repentance? Above all, have we read or heard of anyone who has been the blessed instrument of bringing so many sinners from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God?”

Indirect influence

Valuable as these testimonies undoubtedly are, there is one point which they leave totally untouched. That point is the quantity of indirect good that Whitefield did. Great as the direct effects of his labors were, I believe firmly that the indirect effects were even greater. His ministry was made a blessing to thousands who never perhaps either saw or heard him.

He was among the first in the eighteenth century who revived attention to the old truths which produced the Protestant Reformation. His constant assertion of the doctrines taught by the Reformers, his repeated reference to the Articles and Homilies, and the divinity²⁹ of the best English theologians, obliged many to think and roused them to examine their own principles. If the whole truth was known, I believe it would prove that the rise and progress of the Evangelical body in the Church of England received a mighty impulse from George Whitefield.

But this is not the only indirect good that Whitefield did in his day. He was among the first to show the right way to meet the attacks of infi-

²⁹ divinity – theology.

dels and sceptics on Christianity. He saw clearly that the most powerful weapon against such men is not cold, metaphysical reasoning and dry critical disquisition, but preaching the whole gospel, living the whole gospel, and spreading the whole gospel. It was not the writings of Leland,³⁰ and the younger Sherlock,³¹ and Waterland,³² and Leslie³³ that rolled back the flood of infidelity one half so much as the preaching of Whitefield and his companions. They were the men who were the true champions of Christianity. Infidels are seldom shaken by mere abstract reasoning. The surest arguments against them are gospel truth and gospel life.

Above all, he was the very first Englishman who seems to have thoroughly understood what Dr. Chalmers³⁴ aptly called the aggressive system. He was the first to see that Christ's ministers must do the work of fishermen. They must not wait for souls to come to them, but must go after souls, and "compel them to come in" (Luk 14:23). He did not sit tamely by his fireside, like a cat in a rainy day, mourning over the wickedness of the land. He went forth to beard the devil in his high places. He attacked sin and wickedness face to face and gave them no peace. He dived into holes and corners after sinners. He hunted out ignorance and vice wherever they could be found. In short, he set on foot a system of action which, up to his time, had been comparatively unknown in this country, but a system which, once commenced, has never ceased to be employed down to the present day. City missions, town missions, district visiting societies, open-air preachings, home missions, special services, theater preachings, are all evidences that the value of the "aggressive system" is now thoroughly recognized by all the churches. We understand better how to go to work now than we did a hundred years ago. But let us never forget that the first man to commence operations of this kind was George Whitefield, and let us give him the credit he deserves.

His preaching

The peculiar character of Whitefield's preaching is the subject which next demands some consideration. Men naturally wish to know what was the secret of his unparalleled success. The subject is one surrounded with considerable difficulty, and it is no easy matter to form a correct judg-

³⁰ **John Leland** (1691-1766) – English nonconformist pastor and author.

³¹ **Thomas Sherlock** (1678-1761) – bishop of London, eldest son of Dr. William Sherlock.

³² **Daniel Waterland** (1683-1740) – English theologian who opposed latitudinarianism and argued for the Trinity.

³³ **Charles Leslie** (1650-1722) – former Church of Ireland priest who became a leading Jacobite propagandist after the 1688 Glorious Revolution.

³⁴ **Thomas Chalmers** (1780-1847) – Scottish minister, professor of theology, political economist, and leader of both the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland.

ment about it. The common idea of many people, that he was a mere commonplace ranting Methodist, remarkable for nothing but great fluency, strong doctrine, and a loud voice, will not bear a moment's investigation. Dr. Johnson³⁵ was foolish enough to say that "he vociferated and made an impression, but never drew as much attention as a mountebank³⁶ does; and that he did not draw attention by doing better than others, but by doing what was strange." But Johnson was anything but infallible when he began to talk about ministers and religion. Such a theory will not hold water. It is contradictory to undeniable facts.

It is a fact that no preacher in England has ever succeeded in arresting the attention of such crowds as Whitefield constantly addressed around London. No preacher has ever been so universally popular in every country that he visited, in England, Scotland, and America. No preacher has ever retained his hold on his hearers so entirely as he did for thirty-four years. His popularity never waned. It was as great at the end of his day as it was at the beginning. Wherever he preached, men would leave their workshops and employments to gather round him and hear like those who heard for eternity. This, of itself, is a great fact. To command the ear of "the masses" for a quarter of a century, and to be preaching incessantly the whole time, is an evidence of no common power.

A powerful effect

It is another fact that Whitefield's preaching produced a powerful effect on people in every rank of life. He won the admiration of high as well as low, of rich as well as poor, of learned as well as unlearned. If his preaching had been popular with none but the uneducated and the poor, we might have thought it possible that there was little in it but declamation and noise. But, so far from this being the case, he seems to have been acceptable to numbers of the nobility and gentry. The Marquis of Lothian, the Earl of Leven, the Earl of Buchan, Lord Rae, Lord Dartmouth, Lord James A. Gordon, might be named among his warmest admirers, beside Lady Huntingdon³⁷ and a host of ladies.

³⁵ **Samuel Johnson** (1709-1784) – English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, and editor.

³⁶ **mountebank** – one who mounts a bench in the market or other public place, boasts of his skill in curing diseases, vends medicines which he pretends are infallible remedies, and thus deludes the ignorant multitude.

³⁷ **Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon** (1707-1791) – English religious leader who played a prominent part in the religious revival of the 18th century and the Methodist movement in England and Wales; helped finance and guide early Methodism.

It is a fact that eminent critics and literary men, like Lord Bolingbroke and Lord Chesterfield,³⁸ were frequently his delighted hearers. Even the cold, artificial Chesterfield was known to warm under Whitefield's eloquence. Bolingbroke said, "He is the most extraordinary man in our times. He has the most commanding eloquence I ever heard in any person." Franklin the philosopher spoke in no measured terms of his preaching powers. Hume the historian declared that it was worth going twenty miles to hear him.

Now, facts like these can never be explained away. They completely upset the theory that Whitefield's preaching was nothing but noise and rant. Bolingbroke, Chesterfield, Hume, and Franklin were not men to be easily deceived. They were no mean judges of eloquence. They were probably among the best qualified critics of their day. Their unbought and unbiased opinions appear to me to supply unanswerable proof that there must have been something very extraordinary about Whitefield's preaching. But still, after all, the question remains to be answered: What was the secret of Whitefield's unrivalled popularity and effectiveness? And I frankly admit that, with the scanty materials we possess for forming our judgment, the question is a very hard one to answer.

His published sermons

The man who turns to the seventy-five sermons published under Whitefield's name will probably be much disappointed. He will see in them no commanding intellect or grasp of mind. He will find in them no deep philosophy and no very striking thoughts. It is only fair, however, to say, that by far the greater part of these sermons were taken down in shorthand by reporters and published without correction. These worthy men appear to have done their work very indifferently and were evidently ignorant alike of stopping³⁹ and paragraphing, of grammar and of gospel. The consequence is that many passages in these seventy-five sermons are what Bishop Latimer would have called a "mingle-mangle," and what we should call in this day "a complete mess." No wonder that poor Whitefield says, in one of his last letters, dated September 26, 1769, "I wish you had advertised against the publication of my last sermon. It is not verbatim as I delivered it. In some places, it makes me speak false concord, and even nonsense. In others, the sense and connection are destroyed by injudicious, disjointed paragraphs, and the whole is entirely unfit for the public review."

³⁸ **Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield** (1694-1773) – British statesman, diplomat, man of letters, and acclaimed wit of his time.

³⁹ **stopping** – punctuation.

I venture, however, to say boldly that, with all their faults, Whitefield's printed sermons will well repay a candid perusal.⁴⁰ The reader must recollect that they were not carefully prepared for the press, like the sermons of Melville⁴¹ or Bradley,⁴² but wretchedly reported, paragraphed, and stopped, and he must read with this continually before his mind. Moreover, he must remember that English composition for speaking to hearers and English composition for private reading are almost like two different languages, so that sermons which "preach" well "read" badly. Let him, I say, remember these two things and judge accordingly, and I am much mistaken if he does not find much to admire in many of Whitefield's sermons. For my own part, I must plainly say that I think they are greatly underrated.

Let me now point out what appear to have been the distinctive characteristics of Whitefield's preaching.

A pure gospel

For one thing, Whitefield preached a singularly pure gospel. Few men, perhaps, ever gave their hearers so much wheat and so little chaff. He did not get up to talk about his party, his cause, his interest, or his office. He was perpetually telling you about your sins, your heart, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, the absolute need of repentance, faith, and holiness, in the way that the Bible presents these mighty subjects. "Oh, the righteousness of Jesus Christ!" he would often say. "I must be excused if I mention it in almost all my sermons." Preaching of this kind is the preaching that God delights to honor. It must be preeminently a manifestation of truth.

Lucid and simple

For another thing, Whitefield's preaching was singularly lucid and simple. His hearers, whatever they might think of his doctrine, could never fail to understand what he meant. His style of speaking was easy, plain, and conversational. He seemed to abhor long and involved sentences. He always saw his mark and went directly at it. He seldom troubled his hearers with abstruse argument and intricate reasoning. Simple Bible statements, apt illustrations, and pertinent anecdotes were the more common weapons that he used. The consequence was that his

⁴⁰ See the following sermons by George Whitefield: *The Conversion of Zaccheus*; *Christ: The Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption*; *The Holy Spirit Convincing the World of Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment*; *The Lord Our Righteousness*; *The Method of Grace*; and *Saul's Conversion*; all available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

⁴¹ possibly **Henry Melvill** (1798-1871) – British priest in the Church of England and principal of the East India Company College from 1844 to 1858.

⁴² possibly **Charles Bradley** (1789-1871) – English Anglican priest who was eminent as a preacher and writer of sermons published between 1818 and 1853.

hearers always understood him. He never shot above their heads. Here again is one grand element of a preacher's success. He must labor by all means to be understood. It was a wise saying of Archbishop Ussher,⁴³ "To make easy things seem hard is every man's work; but to make hard things easy is the work of a great preacher."

Bold and direct

For another thing, Whitefield was a singularly bold and direct preacher. He never used that indefinite expression "we," which seems so peculiar to English pulpit oratory, and which only leaves a hearer's mind in a state of misty confusion. He met men face to face, like one who had a message from God to them: "I have come here to speak to you about your soul." The result was that many of his hearers used often to think that his sermons were specially meant for themselves. He was not content, as many, with sticking on a meager tailpiece of application at the end of a long discourse. On the contrary, a constant vein of application ran through all his sermons. "This is for you, and this is for you." His hearers were never let alone.

Power of description

Another striking feature in Whitefield's preaching was his singular power of description. The Arabians have a proverb which says, "He is the best orator who can turn men's ears into eyes." Whitefield seems to have had a peculiar faculty of doing this. He dramatized his subject so thoroughly that it seemed to move and walk before your eyes. He used to draw such vivid pictures of the things he was handling that his hearers could believe they actually saw and heard them. "On one occasion," says one of his biographers, "Lord Chesterfield was among his hearers. The great preacher, in describing the miserable condition of an unconverted sinner, illustrated the subject by describing a blind beggar. The night was dark, and the road dangerous. The poor mendicant⁴⁴ was deserted by his dog near the edge of a precipice and had nothing to aid him in groping his way but his staff. Whitefield so warmed with his subject and enforced it with such graphic power that the whole auditory was kept in breathless silence, as if it saw the movements of the poor old man; and at length, when the beggar was about to take the fatal step which would have hurled him down the precipice to certain destruction, Lord Chesterfield actually made a rush forward to save him, exclaiming aloud, 'He is gone!'

⁴³ **James Ussher** (1581-1656) – Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland between 1625 and 1656.

⁴⁴ **mendicant** – beggar.

He is gone!’ The noble lord had been so entirely carried away by the preacher that he forgot the whole was a picture.”

Earnestness

Another leading characteristic of Whitefield’s preaching was his tremendous earnestness. One poor, uneducated man said of him that “he preached like a lion.” He succeeded in showing people that he at least believed all he was saying, and that his heart and soul and mind and strength were bent on making them believe it too. His sermons were not like the morning and evening gun at Portsmouth, a kind of formal discharge, fired off as a matter of course, that disturbs nobody. They were all life and fire. There was no getting away from them. Sleep was next to impossible. You must listen whether you liked it or not. There was a holy violence about him which firmly took your attention by storm. You were fairly carried off your legs by his energy before you had time to consider what you would do. This, we may be sure, was one secret of his success. We must convince men that we are in earnest ourselves, if we want to be believed. The difference between one preacher and another is often not so much in the things said, as in the manner in which they are said.

It is recorded by one of his biographers that an American gentleman once went to hear him for the first time, in consequence of the report he heard of his preaching powers. The day was rainy, the congregation comparatively thin, and the beginning of the sermon rather heavy. Our American friend began to say to himself, “This man is no great wonder after all.” He looked round and saw the congregation as little interested as himself. One old man in front of the pulpit had fallen asleep. But all at once, Whitefield stopped short. His countenance changed. And then he suddenly broke forth in an altered tone: “If I had come to speak to you in my own name, you might well rest your elbows on your knees, and your heads on your hands, and sleep; and once in a while look up, and say, ‘What is this babbler talking of?’ But I have not come to you in my own name. No! I have come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts” (here he brought down his hand and foot with a force that made the building ring), “and I must and will be heard.” The congregation started. The old man woke up at once. “Ay, ay!” cried Whitefield, fixing his eyes on him, “I have waked you up, have I? I meant to do it. I am 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 have an audience.” The hearers were stripped of their apathy at once. Every word of the sermon after this was heard with deep attention, and the American gentleman never forgot it.

Pathos

One more feature in Whitefield's preaching deserves special notice; and that is the immense amount of pathos and feeling which it always contained. It was no uncommon thing with him to weep profusely in the pulpit. Cornelius Winter,⁴⁵ who often accompanied him in his latter journeys, went so far as to say that he hardly ever knew him get through a sermon without some tears. There seems to have been nothing of affectation in this. He felt intensely for the souls before him, and his feelings found an outlet in tears. Of all the ingredients of his success in preaching, none, I suspect, were so powerful as this. It awakened affections and touched secret springs in men, which no amount of reasoning and demonstration could have moved. It smoothed down the prejudices which many had conceived against him. They could not hate the man who wept so much over their souls. "I came to hear you," said one to him, "with my pocket full of stones, intending to break your head; but your sermon got the better of me, and broke my heart." Once become satisfied that a man loves you, and you will listen gladly to anything he has to say.

Oratorical skill

I will now ask the reader to add to this analysis of Whitefield's preaching, that even by nature he possessed several of the rarest gifts which fit a man to be an orator. His action was perfect—so perfect that even Garrick,⁴⁶ the famous actor, gave it unqualified praise. His voice was as wonderful as his action—so powerful that he could make thirty thousand people hear him at once, and yet so musical and well-toned that some said he could raise tears by his pronunciation of the word "Mesopotamia." His manner in the pulpit was so curiously graceful and fascinating that it was said that no one could hear him for five minutes without forgetting that he squinted. His fluency and command of appropriate language were of the highest order, prompting him always to use the right word and to put it in the right place. Add, I repeat, these gifts to the things already mentioned, and then consider whether there is not sufficient in our hands to account for his power and popularity as a preacher.

For my own part, I have no hesitation in saying that I believe no English preacher has ever possessed such a combination of excellent qualifications as Whitefield. Some, no doubt, have surpassed him in some of his gifts; others, perhaps, have equaled him in others. But for a well-balanced

⁴⁵ **Cornelius Winter** (1742-1808) – American Methodist preacher; understudy and assistant to George Whitefield.

⁴⁶ **David Garrick** (1717-1779) – English actor, playwright, theater manager, and producer.

combination of some of the finest gifts that a preacher can possess, united with an unrivalled voice, manner, delivery, action, and command of words, Whitefield, I repeat my opinion, stands alone. No Englishman, I believe, dead or alive, has ever equaled him. And I suspect we shall always find that, just in proportion as preachers have approached that curious combination of rare gifts which Whitefield possessed, just in that very proportion have they attained what Clarendon defines true eloquence to be—"a strange power of making themselves believed."

His Character

The inner life and personal character of this great spiritual hero of the last century are a branch of my subject on which I shall not dwell at any length. In fact, there is no necessity for my doing so. He was a singularly transparent man. There was nothing about him requiring apology or explanation. His faults and good qualities were both clear and plain as noonday. I shall therefore content myself with simply pointing out the prominent features of his character, so far as they can be gathered from his letters and the accounts of his contemporaries, and then bring my sketch of him to a conclusion.

Humility

He was a man of deep and unfeigned humility. No one can read the fourteen hundred letters of his, published by Dr. Gillies, without observing this. Again and again, in the very zenith of his popularity, we find him speaking of himself and his works in the lowliest terms. "God be merciful to me a sinner," he writes on September 11, 1753, "and give me, for His infinite mercy's sake, a humble, thankful, and resigned heart. Truly I am viler than the vilest, and stand amazed at His employing such a wretch as I am." "Let none of my friends," he writes on December 27, 1753, "cry to such a sluggish, lukewarm, unprofitable worm, 'Spare thyself.' Rather spur me on, I pray you, with an 'Awake, thou sleeper, and begin to do something for thy God.'" Language like this, no doubt, seems foolishness and affectation to the world; but the well-instructed Bible reader will see in it the heartfelt experience of all the brightest saints. It is the language of men like Baxter, and Brainerd, and McCheyne. It is the same mind that was in the inspired Apostle Paul. Those that have most light and grace are always the humblest men.

Love for Christ

He was a man of burning love to our Lord Jesus Christ. That name which is "above every name" (Phi 2:9) stands out incessantly in all his correspondence. Like fragrant ointment, it gives a savor to all his communications. He seems never weary of saying something about Jesus.

“My Master,” as George Herbert⁴⁷ said, is never long out of his mind. His love, His atonement, His precious blood, His righteousness, His readiness to receive sinners, His patience and tender dealing with saints, are themes which appear ever fresh before his eyes. In this respect, at least, there is a curious likeness between him and that glorious Scotch divine, Samuel Rutherford.⁴⁸

Diligence

He was a man of unwearied diligence and laboriousness about his Master’s business. It would be difficult, perhaps, to name anyone in the annals of the churches who worked so hard for Christ and so thoroughly spent himself in His service. Henry Venn, in a funeral sermon for him, preached at Bath, bore the following testimony: “What a sign and wonder was this man of God in the greatness of his labors! One cannot but stand amazed that his mortal frame could, for the space of near thirty years, without interruption, sustain the weight of them; for what so trying to the human frame, in youth especially, as long-continued, frequent, and violent straining of the lungs? Who that knows their structure would think it possible that a person little above the age of manhood could speak in a single week, and that for years—in general forty hours, and in very many weeks sixty—and that to thousands; and after this labor, instead of taking any rest, could be offering up prayers and intercessions, with hymns and spiritual songs, as his manner was, in every house to which he was invited? The truth is that in point of labor 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.”

Self-denial

He was to the end a man of eminent self-denial. His style of living was most simple. He was remarkable to a proverb for moderation in eating and drinking. All through life he was an early riser. His usual hour for getting up was four o’clock, both in summer and winter; and equally punctual was he in retiring about ten at night. A man of prayerful habits, he frequently spent whole nights in reading and devotion. Cornelius Winter, who often slept in the same room, says that he would sometimes rise during the night for this purpose. He cared little for money, except as a help to the cause of Christ, and refused it, when pressed upon him for his own use, once to the amount of £7000. He amassed no fortune and founded no wealthy family. The little money he left behind him at his death arose entirely from the legacies of friends. The Pope’s coarse saying

⁴⁷ **George Herbert** (1593-1633) – English poet, orator, and priest of the Church of England.

⁴⁸ **Samuel Rutherford** (c. 1600-1661) – Scottish Presbyterian pastor and theologian.

about Luther, “This German beast does not love gold,” might have been equally applied to Whitefield.

A focused man

He was a man of remarkable disinterestedness and singleness of eye. He seemed to live only for two objects—the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Of secondary and covert⁴⁹ objects, he knew nothing at all. He raised no party of followers who took his name. He established no denominational system, of which his own writings should be cardinal elements. A favorite expression of his is most characteristic of the man: “Let the name of George Whitefield perish, so long as Christ is exalted.”

Cheerful

He was a man of a singularly happy and cheerful spirit. No one who saw him could ever doubt that he enjoyed his religion. Tried as he was in many ways throughout his ministry—slandered by some, despised by others, misrepresented by false brethren, opposed everywhere by the ignorant clergy of his time, worried by incessant controversy—his elasticity never failed him. He was eminently a rejoicing Christian, whose very demeanor recommended his Master’s service. A venerable lady of New York, after his death, when speaking of the influences by which the Spirit won her heart to God, used these remarkable words: “Mr. Whitefield was so cheerful that it tempted me to become a Christian.”

Charity and liberality

Last, but not least, he was a man of extraordinary charity, catholicity, and liberality in his religion. He knew nothing of that narrow-minded feeling which makes some men fancy that everything must be barren outside their own camps, and that their own party has got a complete monopoly of truth and heaven. He loved all who loved the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. He measured all by the measure which the angels use. Did they profess repentance towards God, faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, and holiness of conversation? If they did, they were as his brethren. His soul was with such men, by whatever name they were called. Minor differences were wood, hay, and stubble to him. The marks of the Lord Jesus were the only marks he cared for. This catholicity is the more remarkable when the spirit of the times he lived in is considered. Even the Erskines⁵⁰ in Scotland wanted him to preach for no other denomination but their own—viz.,⁵¹ the Secession Church. He asked them, “Why

⁴⁹ **covert** – secret; disguised.

⁵⁰ **Ralph Erskine** (1685-1752) and **Ebenezer Erskine** (1680-1754) – brothers and Church of Scotland ministers who left the established church to form the Secession Church.

⁵¹ **viz.** – from Latin *videlicet*: that is to say; namely.

only for them?”—and received the notable answer that “they were the Lord’s people.” This was more than Whitefield could stand. He asked “if there were no other Lord’s people but themselves.” He told them, “If all others were the devil’s people, they certainly had more need to be preached to,” and he wound up by informing them that “if the Pope himself would lend him his pulpit, he would gladly proclaim the righteousness of Christ in it.” To this catholicity of spirit, he adhered all his days. If other Christians misrepresented him, he forgave them; and if they refused to work with him, he still loved them. Nothing could be a more weighty testimony against narrow-mindedness than his request, made shortly before his death, that, when he did die, John Wesley should be asked to preach his funeral sermon. Wesley and he had long ceased to agree about Calvinistic points;⁵² but Whitefield, to the very last, was determined to forget minor differences, and to regard Wesley as Calvin did Luther, “only as a good servant of Jesus Christ.” On another occasion, a censorious professor of religion asked him “whether he thought they would see John Wesley in heaven?” “No, sir,” was the striking answer; “I fear not. He will be so near the throne, and we shall be at such a distance that we shall hardly get a sight of him.”

Not without fault

Far be it from me to say that the subject of this chapter was a man without faults. Like all God’s saints, he was an imperfect creature. He sometimes erred in judgment. He often drew rash conclusions about providence and mistook his own inclination for God’s leadings. He was frequently hasty both with his tongue and his pen. He had no business to say that “Archbishop Tillotson knew no more of the gospel than Mahomet.” He was wrong to set down some people as the Lord’s enemies and others as the Lord’s friends so precipitately and positively as he sometimes did. He was to blame for denouncing many of the clergy as “letter-learned Pharisees,” because they could not receive the doctrine of the new birth. But still, after all this has been said, there can be no doubt that in the main he was an eminently holy, self-denying, and consistent man. “The faults of his character,” says an American writer, “were like spots on the sun—detected without much difficulty by any cool and careful observer who takes pains to look for them, but to all practical purposes lost in one general and genial effulgence.” Well indeed would it be for the churches of our day if God was to give them more ministers like the great evangelist of England a hundred years ago!

⁵² See *Whitefield’s Letter to Wesley on Election*; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

It only remains to say that those who wish to know more about Whitefield would do well to peruse the seven volumes of his letters and other publications, which Dr. Gillies edited in 1770. I am much mistaken if they are not agreeably surprised at their contents. To me it is matter of astonishment that, amidst the many reprints of the nineteenth century, no publisher has yet attempted a complete reprint of the works of George Whitefield.

An example from his preaching

A short extract from the conclusion of a sermon preached by Whitefield on Kennington Common may be interesting to some readers and may serve to give them some faint idea of the great preacher's style. It was a sermon on the text, "What think ye of Christ?" (Mat 22:42).

"O my brethren, my heart is enlarged towards you. I trust I feel something of that hidden but powerful presence of Christ, whilst I am preaching to you. Indeed it is sweet—it is exceedingly comfortable. All the harm I wish you who without cause are my enemies is that you felt the like. Believe me, though it would be hell to my soul to return to a natural state again, yet I would willingly change states with you for a little while, that you might know what it is to have Christ dwelling in your hearts by faith. Do not turn your backs. Do not let the devil hurry you away. Be not afraid of convictions. Do not think worse of the doctrine because preached without the church walls. Our Lord, in the days of His flesh, preached on a mount, in a ship, and a field; and I am persuaded many have felt His gracious presence here. Indeed, we speak what we know. Do not therefore reject the kingdom of God against yourselves. Be so wise as to receive our witness.

"I cannot, I will not let you go. Stay a little, and let us reason together. However lightly you may esteem your souls, I know our Lord has set an unspeakable value on them. He thought them worthy of His most precious blood. I beseech you, therefore, O sinners, be ye reconciled to God. I hope you do not fear being accepted in the Beloved. Behold, He calleth you. Behold, He prevents⁵³ and follows you with His mercy, and hath sent forth His servants into the highways and hedges to compel you to come in.

"Remember, then, that at such an hour of such a day, in such a year, in this place, you were all told what you ought to think concerning Jesus Christ. If you now perish, it will not be from lack of knowledge. I am free from the blood of you all. You cannot say I have been preaching damnation to you. You cannot say I have, like legal preachers, been requiring

⁵³ prevents – goes before.

you to make bricks without straw. I have not bidden you to make yourselves saints and then come to God. I have offered you salvation on as cheap terms as you can desire. I have offered you Christ's whole wisdom, Christ's whole righteousness, Christ's whole sanctification, and eternal redemption, if you will but believe on Him. If you say you cannot believe, you say right; for faith, as well as every other blessing, is the gift of God. But then wait upon God, and who knows but He may have mercy on thee.

"Why do we not entertain more loving thoughts of Christ? Do you think He will have mercy on others and not on you? Are you not sinners? Did not Jesus Christ come into the world to save sinners?

"If you say you are the chief of sinners, I answer that will be no hindrance to your salvation. Indeed, it will not, if you lay hold on Christ by faith. Read the Evangelists, and see how kindly He behaved to His disciples, who had fled from and denied Him. 'Go, tell my brethren,' says He (Mat 28:10). He did not say, 'Go, tell those traitors,' but, 'Go, tell my brethren and Peter' (see Mar 16:7). It is as though He had said, 'Go, tell my brethren in general, and Peter in particular, that I am risen. Oh, comfort his poor drooping heart. Tell him I am reconciled to him. Bid him weep no more so bitterly. For though with oaths and curses he thrice denied Me, yet I have died for his sins. I have risen again for his justification. I freely forgive him all.' Thus slow to anger and of great kindness was our all-merciful High Priest. And do you think He has changed His nature and forgets poor sinners, now [that] He is exalted to the right hand of God? No, He is "the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Heb 13:8), and sitteth there only to make intercession for us.

"Come, then, ye harlots; come, ye publicans; come, ye most abandoned sinners. Come and believe on Jesus Christ. Though the whole world despise you and cast you out, yet He will not disdain to take you up. Oh, amazing, oh, infinitely condescending love! Even you He will not be ashamed to call His brethren. How will you escape if you neglect such a glorious offer of salvation? What would the damned spirits now in the prison of hell give if Christ was so freely offered to them? And why are we not lifting up our eyes in torments? Does anyone out of this great multitude dare say he does not deserve damnation? Why are we left, and others taken away by death? What is this but an instance of God's free grace, and a sign of His goodwill toward us? Let God's goodness lead us to repentance. Oh, let there be joy in heaven over some of you repenting!"

