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The Theology and Methods of George Whitefield

Seth N. Polk

George Whitefield ranks among the most influential evangelists and preachers of all time, and he left a significant mark on his generation and those that followed. "If a list could be made from the experience of all nations and ages, of the twenty men that have produced the greatest effects, by means of their single personal influence, it is highly probable that the name of Whitefield must there hold a place" (Dallimore, 1995, Vol.1, p.5). Born in Gloucester, England, the son of a saloon and hotel operator, the English evangelist lived from 1714-1770.

In his youth he was "addicted to lying, filthy talking, and foolish jesting, and was a Sabbath-breaker, theater goer, card player, and romance reader" (Ryle, "George Whitefield His Ministry", n.d., para. 7). At the age of eighteen he entered Oxford University and became involved in the Holy Club, a small group of young men that included John and Charles Wesley and several other pious students" (Stout, 1991, p.19). While involved in the rigorous discipline and methods the Holy Club advocated, Whitefield realized "like Luther and the Puritans before him...that the more he threw himself into acts of piety and deprivation, the further from God he felt" (Stout, 1991, p.26). In 1735, he gave up trying to earn his salvation by pleasing God with his works, and trusted in Christ alone by faith for salvation. "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 doctrines of free grace...took deep root in his heart and became, as it were, bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh" (Dallimore, 1995, Vol.1,

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p.5).

Ordained by the Anglican Church in June of 1736, Whitefield first began to preach in jails. This was a humble beginning for a man who during his lifetime would preach extensively in Scotland, Wales, and visit America seven times. While Jonathan Edwards was stirring things up in New England, and John Wesley was doing the same in England, Whitefield was working both sides of the Atlantic. Whitefield would play a crucial role in the First Great Awakening, working closely with Jonathan Edwards. Though they approached things differently, they were able to come together around the common cause of revival.

While there are many fascinating details in the life and ministry of Whitefield, this treatment will focus on two specific aspects, his theology and methods. Whitefield's theology formed the foundation and framework that influenced the methods of his ministry, and an effort will be made to outline how one impacted the other. The view will be a historical one, not arguing for or against the merits of his theology and methods, but instead outlining what Whitefield believed and practiced. Many believe his theology was biblical, Pauline, Augustinian and that of the Reformers. His methods on the other hand, were revolutionary at the time, and set the tone and pattern for those who would follow him in evangelicalism.

The Theology of George Whitefield

The Theologian

In the area of theology he "did not address himself formally to the problems of speculative thought, nor attempt to systemize his dogma in any organized form" (Henry, 1957, p.96). His "theological erudition was relatively small. His forte was...with a full heart, to warn the wicked of their sin and danger and to lead and love them to the all-sufficient Savior. His throne was the pulpit, not the professor's chair" (Tyerman, 1876, Vol.1, p.275), and he was first and foremost, an evangelist. Though he never wrote a systematic theology, he was quite certain about his beliefs. Whitefield's sermons and writings reflect a very clear theology, and a steadiness in thought from start to finish in his ministry.

View on the Bible and Other Essentials of the Faith

For Whitefield, all thinking about important matters began

with the Bible. Soon after conversion he wrote, "I got more knowledge from reading the Book of God in one month than I could ever acquire from the writings of men. It was intense reading and I was engaged in much secret prayer" (Hardy, 1938, p.47). In his study he developed a unique practice: "that of praying over every line and word of both the English and the Greek until the passage, in its essential message, had veritably become part of his own soul" (Dallimore, 1995, Vol.1, p. 83). The Bible was not a textbook to be mastered, but words from the living God to be internalized and lived out. The Bible served as his final and unquestioned authority (Henry, 1957, p.97) and he believed "every part of the Bible was equally inspired and equally valuable" (Henry, 1957, p.115).

Whitefield held steadfastly to the fundamentals of the faith: "inerrancy of the Scripture, the Deity of Christ, His virgin birth, atoning death, literal resurrection, ascension and coming again" (Lambert, 1994, p.533). Speaking with clarity and "a mighty sense of God, eternity, and of the immortality and preciousness of the souls of his hearers, his doctrine was plainly that of the reformers" (Hardy, 1938, p.188).

View on Calvinism

Whitefield is often referred to as a Calvinist. Is that a fair label to place on the great evangelist? The answer is a qualified yes. In the midst of conflict over his beliefs he said, "I never read anything John Calvin wrote, and he added with a self assurance of being individually called by God, my doctrines I had from Christ and His apostles. I was taught them of God" (Henry, 1957, p.96). He also said, "But what is Calvin, or what is Luther? Let us look above the names and the parties; let Jesus be our all in all...I care not who is uppermost. I know my place...even to be the servant of all. I want not to have a people called after my name" (Stout, 1991, 203). Clearly he was not a student of Calvin, nor did he form his basic theological framework from Calvin's teachings. Having never read Calvin that could not be the case. His desire was not to elevate another man, and certainly not to elevate himself, saying "let the name of Whitefield perish, but Christ be glorified" (Dallimore, 1995, Vol.2, p.518). In the strictest sense, Whitefield objected to being referred to as a Calvinist. If however, one means Whitefield was a Calvinist in the sense that he adhered to most of the same doctrines that John Calvin did, then he indeed was a Calvinist.

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“The so called Five Points of Calvinism were formulated by Dutch Reformed theologians at the Synod of Dort (1618-19) in response to Arminianism. The five points teach that: 1) Humankind is spiritually incapacitated by sin (Total depravity); 2) God chooses unconditionally those who will be saved (Unconditional Election); 3) The saving work of Christ is limited to those elected ones (Limited Atonement); 4) God’s grace cannot be turned aside (Irresistible Grace) ; 5) Those whom God elects will be saved forever (Perseverance of the Saints)” (Norwood, “George Whitefield: His Life, Times, and Influences”, n.d., para.7). Whitefield affirmed and consistently taught all five points, though not as a theological system. These points provide a helpful framework to examine the core of his theological beliefs.

Total Depravity

From “the time of his conversion in 1735, Whitefield had been profoundly conscious of man’s entire depravity, his need of the new birth, and the fact that God can save and God alone” (Murray, “Whitefield and Wesley”, n.d., para.1). Recognizing the deep need of man and his inability to solve the sin problem on his own, Whitefield saw the evidence of human depravity everywhere he went (Henry, 1957, p.97). Whitefield insisted “that the tree of the heart is by original sin exceedingly corrupted and must be made good by regeneration, that so the fruits proceeding from it may be good likewise, that when the heart is renewed, it ought and will be careful to maintain good works” (Hardy, 1938, p.166). The nature of man was not simply damaged by the Fall, but destroyed by sin and incapable of repair or of obtaining salvation on its own.

Unconditional Election

In Whitefield’s thinking, the depravity of man demanded a solution that only God could provide. The solution God provides is unconditional election whereby God chooses men out of the grips of sin and death unto salvation based not on their merits, but on His good pleasure. “Man must be saved, he could do nothing to save himself and could no more effect his own salvation than he could turn the world upside down or measure the moon for a suit of clothes. The hopeless inability of man to save himself demanded that he be elected for salvation” (Henry, 1957, p.102). Whitefield believed salvation to be a work of God from

start to finish.

His beliefs were strengthened by the “reading of Scriptures, the Reformers and the Puritans, and gradually he grasped the great related chain of truths revealed in the New Testament- the Father’s electing love, Christ’s substitutionary death on behalf of those the Father had given Him, and the Spirit’s infallible work in bringing to salvation those for whom it was appointed” (Murray, “Whitefield and Wesley”, n.d., para. 1). He believed he could not preach the gospel of Christ without speaking of election (Henry, 1957, p.96). Whitefield believed the Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies all the elect people of God.

Whitefield believed the doctrine of election to be, above all, a doctrine that humbles men, writing “either God must choose us, or we must choose God, either God must be the first mover, or man must be the first mover...a doctrine hated by carnal people because it cuts at the very root of human pride, cuts the sinews of free will all to pieces” (Henry, 1957, p.104). Plainly put, from “first to last Whitefield was a Calvinist who believed that God chose him for salvation and not the reverse” (Stout, 1991, p. XXIII).

Limited Atonement

Whitefield did not preach or write in terms of a limited or particular atonement, but there was a definite connection in his thinking between the doctrine of election and limited atonement. In keeping with his Calvinistic views, he clearly believed in a substitutionary atonement and the idea of the imputed righteousness of Christ to the believer. In one of the more trying times in his ministry, Whitefield split with his mentor John Wesley over Wesley’s teaching of universal redemption. Wesley believed Christ died for all men, not just the elect, and preached harshly against Whitefield on this matter (Lambert, 1994, p.15).

Whitefield published an open letter to John Wesley condemning his denial of predestination in favor of universal redemption, saying of Wesley, “Mr. John Wesley, had been prevailed upon to preach and teach and print in favor of perfection and universal redemption and against election, a doctrine which, I then thought, and do now believe, was taught me of God and therefore I could not possibly recede from it” (Philip, 1837, p.189). They later repaired their friendship, but continued to disagree on the issue. Whitefield faithfully preached Christ and

Him crucified for the sins of God's people, and believed Jesus and Jesus alone justifies sinners. This view of the atonement had clear implications for the 'New Birth', which became the centerpiece of his preaching, and remained such for the duration of his life.

Irresistible Grace

Whitefield believed "man hath a free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven, till God worketh in him to will and to do" (Henry, 1957, p. 102). In a sermon on Ephesians 2, "he likened the sinner to dead Lazarus who Jesus called forth from the grave. It is a blunt, unvarnished message:

Come, ye dead, Christless, unconverted sinner, come and see the place where they laid the body of the deceased Lazarus; behold him laid out, bound hand and foot with graveclothes, locked up and stinking in a dark cave, with a great stone placed on top of it. View him again and again; go nearer to him; be not afraid; smell him, Ah! How he stinketh. Stop there now, pause a while; and whilst thou are gazing upon the corpse of Lazarus, give me leave to tell thee with great plainness, but greater love, that this dead, bound, entombed, stinking carcass, is but a faint representation of thy poor soul in its natural state; ... thy spirit which thou bearest about with thee, sepulchered in flesh and blood, is literally dead to God, and as truly dead in trespasses and sins, as the body of Lazarus was in the cave. Was he bound hand and foot with graveclothes? So are thou bound hand and foot with thy corruptions; and a stone was laid on the sepulcher, so there is a stone of unbelief upon thy stupid heart. Perhaps thou has lain in this estate, not only four days, but many years, stinking in God's nostrils. And what is still more effecting, thou are as unable to raise thyself out of this loathsome, dead state, to a life of righteousness and true holiness, as ever Lazarus was to raise himself from the cave which he lay so long. Thou mayest try the power of thy boasted free will, and the force and energy of moral persuasion and rational arguments, but all thy efforts, exerted with ever so much vigor, will prove fruitless and abortive, till that same Jesus, who said, 'take away the stone' and cried 'Lazarus,

come forth, also quicken you. This is grace, graciously offered, and grace graciously applied" (Brown, "Whitefield on Effectual Calling", n.d., para.1).

Whitefield viewed effectual calling and irresistible grace as what led to the New Birth wrought by God in the life of the helpless sinner. His first published sermon, *The Nature and Necessity of Our Regeneration or New Birth in Christ Jesus*- London, 1737, "contains the all consuming theme of the New Birth that was featured in one way or another in virtually every sermon he preached" (Stout, 1991, p.38). The New Birth was a supernatural regeneration accomplished by the Holy Spirit of God and an individual conversion experience was central to his message. Whitefield "asserted that only God's actions were efficacious in redemption, effecting salvation through nothing less than a union of the soul with God, resulting in the one thing needful, the new birth...human merit played no role whatever" (Lambert, 1994, p.15). This 'New Birth' language was used by evangelicals to distinguish themselves from others who had not undergone a spiritual conversion.

Perseverance of the Saints

Whitefield said, "I am fully convinced of the doctrine of...final perseverance" (Philip, 1837, p.225). Perseverance of the saints was the natural outworking of what God accomplished in the sinner through the New Birth. It was not overtly a common theme of Whitefield's, but a logical conclusion of his belief system. "His piety was molded by a conversion experience that...was unmerited and of divine initiative" (Stout, 1991, p. XXIII). The evidence of perseverance was a life well lived, a fruitful life. However, he refused to count converts, stating "only the judgment morning will reveal who the converts really are" (Dalimore, Vol. 2, 1995, p.137).

The Methods of George Whitefield

This system of theology had been taught arguably since the time of Jesus, and it presented nothing particularly new. What is very interesting and unique are the methods that Whitefield employed. Within the context of his methods, there are several categories that merit particular attention. They include preaching, extensive travel, marketing, and a non-sectarian approach.

Preaching

Whitefield preached Calvinistic tenets throughout his ministry, but his was an “evangelical Calvinism, one that emphasized the universal need for preaching” (Lambert, 1994, p.227). Preaching was viewed as God’s primary means to save souls. Whitefield had one theme as he constantly pleaded with sinners to come to Jesus: He preached, “I offer you salvation this day; the door of mercy is not yet shut, there does yet remain a sacrifice for sin, for all that will accept of the Lord Jesus Christ. He will embrace you in the arms of His love. O turn to Him, turn in a sense of your own unworthiness; tell him how polluted you are, how vile, and be not faithless, but believing” (Reisinger, “What Should We Think..?”, n.d. para.1). A passionate heart for the souls of men who needed Jesus saturated his preaching efforts.

A variety of natural giftings made him a standout preacher from the start. His voice “excelled both in melody and compass, and its fine modulations were happily accompanied by the grave of action which he possessed in an eminent degree and which is said to be the chief requisite of an orator” (Belcher, n.d., p.51). It is said that his voice was so powerful, that up to 30,000 people could hear him at one time without any amplification (Ravenhill, “Portrait of a Revival Preacher”, n.d., para.18). Well suited to speak to the large crowds who came to hear him with his powerful, booming voice, God had “endowed him with a singular union of qualities, which most eminently fitted him for the work of an evangelist” (Belcher, n.d., p.48). Whitefield said, “I love those that thunder out the Word! The Christian world is in a deep sleep. Nothing but a loud voice can waken them out of it” (Dalimore, Vol.2, 1995, p.18)!

An early background in theater proved most helpful in his pulpit ministry, and he was described as a “born actor whose intrinsic need and special gift for dramatic self expression never disappeared, even as the focus shifted from stage to pulpit. “The methods and ethos of acting were applied to preaching with revolutionary results” (Stout, 1991, XIX). Some of the methods of the prophets were used, “ a smite with the hand, a stamp with the foot, lifting up his voice like a trumpet, and beseeching with tears” (Philip, 1837, p.525).

An extemporaneous style in his preaching made him very popular with the crowds. Records indicate “he very carefully prepared his sermons and wrote them out” (Hardy, 1938, 119),

then learned the material by heart and delivered the sermons note free. "With no notes and no pulpit, he could move freely, encumbered only by the gown that remained his last visible tie to the established church" (Stout, 1991, p.75). The pulpit he used was absent of any rest for a Bible, singing book or notes. Not only did he preach extemporaneously, he would preach some favorite sermons as many as 30 times, adapting them as he went to the situation and circumstances (Stout, 1991, p.79). This style of preaching connected with people as he utilized a plain, conversational style that was easy to understand. "His preaching was warm, earnest, pointed, and addressed at the heart rather than the head" (Tyerman, Vol.2, 1876, p.629) and the Holy Spirit used the evangelist in a mighty way.

Seeing "thousands everywhere would attend no place of worship and they spent their entire 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 principles and compel them to come in" (Ryle, "George Whitefield and His Ministry", n.d., para.15). Outdoor preaching became a pioneering method. This did not win many friends as the established clergy were motivated by sheer jealousy to oppose him, because of his tremendous success in the open fields around the cities. Whitefield forged ahead, believing the method to be blessed by God, as attested to by the crowds that continually came to hear him.

Extensive Travel

In a day when travel was treacherous and took painstakingly long amounts of time, the mobility of Whitefield is nothing short of amazing. Having little concern for his own health, well-being or comfort, he traveled extensively. Over the course of his ministry he would visit Scotland fourteen times, Ireland two times, and cross the Atlantic thirteen times. In thirty-four years, he is said to have preached publicly over eighteen thousand times, and addressed an estimated ten million people in person (Ryle, "George Whitefield and His Ministry", n.d., para.1).

The need for mobility led to a willingness to brave the dangers of the Atlantic, on crafts that would not gain approval for river travel today. When in America, he braved the snow and cold winter of New England and "pushed through the matted forests to reach the Indians. From tribe to tribe he went and from wigwam to wigwam. To get to their encampments he shot the

angry rapids in a frail bark canoe (Ravenhill, "Portrait of a Revival Preacher", n.d., para. 20) passionately seeking to take the message of the gospel to those who needed it most.

Whitefield traveled south all the way to Savannah, Georgia and founded Bethesda in 1740, America's oldest charity (Belden, 1930, p.89). It was an orphanage that Whitefield constantly raised funds for, often going without himself to see that the orphanage had their needs met. All of this travel was undoubtedly made possible by the hand of God as He enabled the evangelist to maintain a pace that could have been the death of much harder men.

Marketing

Presenting himself "as both backward looking, fearing the market's erosion of Christian values, and forward thinking, adapting commercial strategies for his own ends" (Lambert, 1994, p. 8), he was a pioneer in the commercialization of religion. A "self promoter with sure business instincts" (Stout, 1991, p. XXIII), he was in a sense a postmodern figure in his ability to utilize the media available to him for his evangelism efforts.

Whitefield "learned to exploit the emerging world of print journalism to promote his tours...he cared little whether he elicited adoring praise or vicious criticism; both served his purpose well" (Stout, 1991, p. XXII). A master at utilizing the press to build anticipation of a preaching event and to draw in the crowds, "he developed a reliable system of contacts through which he circulated information about his revival successes, solicited funds for his missionary work, and instructed ministers on the practice of revivalism" (Lambert, 1994, p.9). These methods influenced evangelists to follow, from Charles G. Finney, to Billy Graham.

The famous Ben Franklin viewed Whitefield as good business as well as good news. Franklin printed his journals and also was a good friend of Whitefield, though he was never converted under his ministry (Lambert, 1994, p.110). All of these methods were radical at the time, but Whitefield had a single purpose, to gain a hearing for the gospel. This desire to gain a hearing for the gospel led to a willingness to utilize whatever methods were at his disposal.

Non-Sectarian Approach

"Perhaps no man was ever more free from sectarianism than

George Whitefield. The vast majority of his sermons were delivered in connection with other bodies of Christians. This non-sectarian approach is reflected in one of his sermons; 'Father Abraham, who have you in Heaven? No Episcopalians? No Presbyterians? No Baptists? No Methodists, Seceders, or Independents? No, why, who have you there? Father Abraham said, we don't know those names here. All who are here are Christians, believers in Christ, men who have overcome by the blood of the Lamb" (Belcher, n.d., p.206). Though staunch in his beliefs, and faithful to the Anglican Church, even when they turned their back on him, Whitefield refused to be pulled into sectarian battles.

Recognizing that God had entrusted him with a special ministry, the itinerant evangelist knew he could not afford to be pulled into battles that pitted one group against another. Firmly holding to his beliefs and preaching a simple message about Jesus, in America..."Whitefield connected the local awakenings, fashioning them into an intercolonial movement-crafting a national event...lifting the revivals out of narrow denominational restraints" (Lambert, 1994, p.95).

Solely concerned with his passion to reach people in the name of Jesus, he stayed true to the course and God used the broad appeal in a tremendous way. This proved to be the correct approach, as time and again, various groups tried to persuade Whitefield to align himself with them, only to be told no by the great evangelist.

Conclusions

Several characteristics of the theology and methods of George Whitefield stand out. First, he was a man that remained true to his theology over the course of a long ministry. A sincere personal piety supported what he preached. It was his piety and sincere devotion to the Lord that shone through to the massive crowds he preached to. Iain Murray wrote, "half a dozen men like Whitefield would at any time move a nation, stir its churches, and reform its morals. Whitefield's power was not in talents, nor even his oratory, but in his piety" (*George Whitefield Journals*, 1998, p.19). They believed, that he believed, what he was preaching.

Second, he was a man that was passionate about the gospel, who never wavered from his zealous commitment to deliver the gospel message to sinners, and trust God for the results. As he

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lifted up the Lord Jesus Christ and passionately preached the cross, God used him to reach multitudes.

Third, Whitefield was a trailblazer. While he stayed close to his core principles, he was not afraid to think and operate “outside of the box”. The methods he used were very radical for his day and set the pace for itinerant evangelists that would follow in years and even centuries to come.

Fourth, he diligently labored to maintain as broad of an approach as he could in order to reach as many people as possible. Instead of being mired in denominational struggles, he spent his time in the field laboring for Christ. This too proved to be fruitful as he appealed to people in all social classes as well as across denominational lines.

Fifth, the Lord used Whitefield significantly in the area of revival. Wherever he went to preach, it seemed as though God moved in a special way. The anointing of the Holy Spirit was evident as He called sinners to come to Jesus and he was used uniquely on both sides of the Atlantic to spark and to sustain revival.

George Whitefield was a remarkable man and the church would be well served to take a more in-depth look at his life and ministry. Charles H. Spurgeon said, “often I have read his life, I am conscious of distinct quickening whenever I turn to it. He lived. Other men seemed only to half-live, but Whitefield was all fire, wind, and force. My own model, if I may have such a thing in due subordination to my Lord, is George Whitefield; but with unequal footsteps must I follow in his glorious track” (Brown, “The Essential George Whitefield”, n.d., para.1). What a wonderful testimony to a truly remarkable man.

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