

What We Can Learn About Revival From America's Spiritual Founding Father

He became the most recognizable and talked-about figure in Colonial America. From Georgia to Maine, thousands filled churches and gathered in open fields to hear him preach. Loved by the masses, he was detested by many of the clergy who refused him their pulpits. Undaunted, he preached in the open fields to massive crowds of all sects and denominations.

At a time when the population of Boston was estimated at 20,000, he preached to an estimated crowd of 25,000 on the Boston Common. Great revival seemed to erupt everywhere he went. Denominational walls were broken down, and for the first time, the scattered American colonists began to see themselves as a single people with one divine destiny. Through his incessant labors and his love for America, George Whitefield (1713-1770) helped prepare the way for the formation of the United States of America.

Communities Are Entirely Transformed

A native of England, Whitefield departed his home country at the age of 24 in August of 1739 with a burden for the American colonists and a prayer that they would not live as 13 scattered colonies, but as "one nation under God" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 100). With a heart totally given to God and a rare oratorical gift, he was providentially prepared and positioned for such a moment in history. As he traveled up and down the eastern seaboard, shopkeepers closed their doors, farmers left their plows and workers threw down their tools to hurry to the place where he was to preach.

Nathan Cole gave a vivid description of the stir it caused throughout the region when Whitefield preached in Middletown,

Connecticut. Cole was working in his field 12 miles away near Kensington when someone told him that Whitefield would be preaching in Middletown at 10 o'clock that same morning.

Cole immediately dropped his tools, ran to the house and told wife to get ready to go and hear Whitefield preach. He then saddled their horse. They both mounted and hurried on their way to Middletown. Concerned that the horse might tire carrying two riders that distance, Cole would ride for a while and then dismount and run alongside.

As they approached the main road from Hartford to Middletown, they saw an amazing sight. A cloud of dust rose above the hills and trees, and they heard a sound like a low, rumbling thunder. As they drew closer, they realized that the dust and sound were caused by a massive company of horses and riders that filled the road, all on their way to hear Whitefield preach. No one made a sound, and there was something surreal about the scene as every rider seemed somber and intent on their purpose. "It made me tremble to see the sight," said Cole.

Cole and his wife finally reached Middletown covered with dust. There they encountered another amazing sight. He said:

When we got to the Middletown old meeting house there was a great multitude, which was said to be three or four thousand people assembled together. I turned and looked towards the great river and saw the ferry boats running swift bringing over loads of people. The land and banks over the river looked black with people and horses all along the 12 miles. I saw no man at work in his field, but all seemed to be gone. When I saw Mr. Whitefield come upon the scaffold, he looked almost angelical; a young, slim, slender youth before some thousands of people with a bold undaunted countenance. And my hearing how God was with him everywhere he came along, it solemnized my mind and put me into a trembling fear before he began to preach, for he looked as if he was clothed with

authority from the Great God, and a sweet, solemn solemnity sat upon his brow. And my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound. By God's blessings, my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, 101).

Benjamin Franklin and Philadelphia Are Impacted

Whitefield preached in Philadelphia and saw incredible results. Benjamin Franklin's testimony of the impact of his preaching on the city is particularly significant since he did not profess to be a Christian at the time. In his autobiography, Franklin tells of the incredible transformation that came over the city when Whitefield came there on his first of seven visits to America. He wrote:

In 1739 there arrived among us from Ireland the Reverend Mr. Whitefield, who made himself remarkable there as an itinerant preacher. He was at first permitted to preach in some of our churches, but the clergy, taking a dislike to him, soon refused him their pulpits, and he was obliged to preach in the fields. The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was a matter of speculation to me, who was one of the number, to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.

Whitefield and Franklin became close friends and business partners, with Franklin taking on the task of printing and distributing Whitefield's sermons and journals. They kept up a lively correspondence until Whitefield's death some 31 years later, and Whitefield stayed in Franklin's home on at least one subsequent visit to Philadelphia. In a letter to his

brother James, a printer in Boston, Franklin said, "Whitefield is a good man, and I love him."

Franklin admits that he was skeptical of reports of Whitefield preaching being heard by crowds of 25,000 and more. While listening to Whitefield preach from the top of the Philadelphia courthouse steps to a huge throng, Franklin, having an inquiring and scientific mind, retired backward to see how far Whitefield's voice would reach. He then did some calculations and decided that Whitefield's voice, which he described as "loud and clear," could be heard by crowds of 30,000 and more.

The Awakening Touches All Sects and Denominations

Although ordained with the Church of England, Whitefield did not have a denominational bone in his body. In England, he had been instrumental in spearheading the great Methodist Revival along with the Wesley brothers. He freely fellowshiped with all true believers, including Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers and any who honored God and confessed Jesus Christ as the true Lord of the church.

In one of his sermons, as he was preaching in the open air to a great multitude representing various sects and denominations, Whitefield pretended to converse with Father Abraham, whom he pictured as looking over the banister of heaven at the gathered multitude.

Whitefield cried out, "Father Abraham, are there any Anglicans in heaven?"

The answer came back, "No, there are no Anglicans in heaven."

"Father Abraham, are there any Methodists in heaven?"

"No, there are no Methodists in heaven."

"Are there any Presbyterians in heaven?"

"No, there are no Presbyterians here either."

"What about Baptists or Quakers?"

"No, there are none of those here either."

"Father Abraham," cried Whitefield, "What kind of people are in heaven?"

The answer came back, "There are only Christians in heaven, only those who are washed in the blood of the Lamb."

Whitefield then cried out, "Oh, is that the case? Then God help me, God help us all, to forget having names and to become Christians in deed and in truth!"

Although accounts of his meetings often describe the multitudes as standing and listening in rapt silence, accounts also reveal intense emotional responses at times, as things eternal were made real to their hearts and minds. On one occasion after preaching to a huge throng gathered outdoors, Whitefield surveyed the crowd and noted the amazing response. He wrote in his Journal: "Look where I would, most were drowned in tears. Some were struck pale as death, others wringing their hands, others lying on the ground, others sinking into the arms of their friends and most lifting up their eyes to heaven and crying out to God."

Cultural Change

The Great Awakening literally changed the moral climate of colonial America. Entire communities were transformed. Profanity, lewdness and drunkenness almost completely disappeared, especially in some areas. Reports in New England alone show 30,000 to 40,000 converts and 150 new churches. No one had a greater role in this transformation than George Whitefield.

There were many local and regional revivals at the time, but, by his incessant travels, Whitefield made the Great Awakening

one national event. It was the first time the scattered colonists of various, national, denominational and theological persuasions had participated together in a single event. Denominational walls were broken down, and for the first time, the colonists began to see themselves as a single people with one divine destiny, "One Nation Under God," as Whitfield had prayed.

The preaching of Whitefield also helped democratize the inhabitants of the colonies by showing no preference based on race, wealth or social status. For Whitefield, everyone was on the same level—guilty sinners before God—with only one solution for the sin problem—faith in Jesus Christ. He did not spare anyone because of their social status.

When, for example, a black woman was roundly criticized because she interrupted a white preacher with shouts of praise to God, Whitefield came to her defense and expressed his firm belief that at that moment, "The Lord Jesus took a great possession of her soul." He went on to say, "I doubt not, when the poor Negroes are to be called, God will highly favor them, to wipe off their reproach, and show that He is no respecter of persons."

The preaching of Whitefield helped create a national identity and prepared the way for nationhood. This is why Harvard professor William Perry said, "The Declaration of Independence of 1776 was a direct result of the evangelical preaching of the evangelists of the Great Awakening."

Historian Benjamin Hart points out that when Whitefield visited America for the final time in 1770, even the Episcopal (Anglican) churches, which had initially rejected him, opened their doors to him. He goes on to say, "The true Spirit of Christ had dissolved sectarian differences. America considered itself to be a nation of Christians, pure and simple, as Whitefield noted with satisfaction. 'Pulpits, hearts and

affections,' he said, were opened to him and any preacher of whatever denomination who had a true Christian message to share."

Whitefield Burns Out for God

Whitefield loved America and made seven visits to this land. During his seventh and final visit in 1770, Whitefield was continuing his incessant travels even though he had been experiencing weakness, pain in his chest and had been coughing up blood. On September 29, he preached to large crowds in an open field near Newburyport, Massachusetts. With night falling, he retired to the home of a friend, Reverend Jonathan Parsons, to spend the night. Hundreds, however, followed him to the home wanting to hear more of God's love and power.

Although night had fallen and he was weak in body, Whitefield emerged from the house with a candle and announced to the multitude that he would preach and pray until the candle burned out. There were many tears and cries to God as he continued to pour out His heart to the people and to God. Finally, the candle burned down and went out. Whitefield bid the people a final farewell, returned to the house and went to bed.

His sleep, however, was restless, and he awakened in the middle of the night with an asthma attack. He then went back to sleep but awakened later with a tight chest and difficulty breathing. He finally stopped breathing altogether, and despite a doctor's attempts to revive him, he expired at 6 a.m. on Sept. 30, 1770.

Offers to bury him came from New Hampshire and from Boston's Old South Church. Parsons, however, quickly arranged for Whitefield's interment in the vault of the Newburyport Presbyterian Church, where his remains still lie today.

Daniel Rogers, who had been converted under Whitefield's ministry 30 years before and had remained a loyal friend,

prayed at the funeral. He said that he owed his conversion “to the labors of that dear man of God, whose precious remains now lay before them.” Rogers then began weeping and crying, “O my father, my father!” The congregation melted into tears.

Condolences poured in from throughout the colonies and from Great Britain. Franklin was in London at the time of Whitefield’s death. When he received word of his friend’s passing, he wrote, “I knew him intimately upwards of 30 years; his integrity, disinterestedness and indefatigable zeal in prosecuting every good work, I have never seen equaled, I shall never see exceeded.”

Benjamin Franklin, the skeptical printer of Philadelphia, and America would never be the same as a result of the “indefatigable zeal” of George Whitefield in preaching the gospel to colonial America. This is why Thomas S. Kidd, Professor of History at Baylor University, has called Whitefield “America’s Spiritual Founding Father.”

Where are the George Whitefields of this generation who will proclaim God’s truth without fear of man? May they stand up now! {eoa}

*This article was derived from **Dr. Eddie Hyatt’s** latest book, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, available from Amazon and his website in both Kindle and paperback. His website is .*