

Where Are the George Whitefields of This Generation?

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 17,000, he preached to an estimated crowd of 20,000 on the Boston Common. The Awakening he ignited became the first national event the scattered American colonists experienced as a single people, leading Thomas S. Kidd of Baylor University to say, "Whitefield was the central figure in the process by which the disparate colonists became Americans" (Hyatt, "George Whitefield," 58).

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 1738 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, "George Whitefield," 100). With a heart totally given to God and

possessing 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, shop keepers 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, "1726: The Year that Defined America," 78-79).

Benjamin Franklin and Philadelphia Are Transformed

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,

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 (Hyatt, "1726: The Year that Defined America," 79).

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" (Hyatt, "George Whitefield," 45).

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.

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