

HEROES + HERETICS

John Martin & Silas Anderson look at the architects of the 18th century transatlantic 'Great Awakening'

HEROES 18: George Whitefield & John Wesley

George Whitefield:
'I will not be a
velvet-mouthed
preacher'

George Whitefield (1714-80) was cross-eyed. Some saw it as a mark of divine favour. Whitefield, undoubtedly the greatest preacher of the 18th century 'Great Awakening', used his squint to enthral huge crowds. He also used his voice, which was so full of expression that people wept just hearing him speak of 'Mesopotamia.'¹ He preached an estimated 18,000 times and his listeners totalled 10,000,000; he would preach for an hour, often four times a day. He could be heard by crowds numbering as many as 30,000. As well as being instrumental in the American 'Great Awakening', historians today agree he was influential in the people of the disparate 'New World' colonies coming to see themselves as Americans.²

Gloucester-born Whitefield was probably the first ever transatlantic celebrity. Benjamin Franklin, US Founding Father, was a friend of Whitefield's. Despite disagreeing with much of what he said, he could not help but marvel at Whitefield's ability to deliver a message so eloquently to such large groups of people. 'Every accent, every emphasis, every modulation of voice' he wrote, 'was so perfectly well-turned, and well-placed, that without



being interested in the subject, one could not help being pleased with the discourse: a pleasure of much the same kind with that received from an excellent piece of music.'³ Franklin once conducted an experiment: he could distinctly hear what Whitefield was saying from a distance of 500 feet from the preacher's podium in Market Street Philadelphia.

preaching style

It may come as no surprise, then, that Whitefield came under much criticism for being

unhelpfully emotive in his preaching. A listener from Scotland observed that he spoke with 'such vehemence upon his bodily frame' that those listening 'felt a momentary apprehension even for his life'.⁴ In reality Whitefield simply spoke as if what he was saying was entirely real to him. He preached as though what he was preaching about was entirely true to him. Being theatrically-minded, this meant that Whitefield's sermons overflowed with exuberance and energy, not because he was acting and trying to convince people of something that wasn't true, but because what he was saying was so real that he could not help but let it burst out of him. Whitefield himself had the following to say in response to critics of his method of preaching:



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“Pray, inform me Mr Butterson, what is the reason you actors on stage can affect your congregations with speaking of things imaginary, as if they were real, while we in church speak of things real, which our congregations only receive as if they were imaginary?”

“Why my Lord,” says Butterson, “the reason is very plain. We actors on stage speak of things imaginary as if they were real and you in the pulpit speak of things real as if they were imaginary.”

“Therefore,” added Whitefield, “I will bawl, I will not be a velvet-mouthed preacher.”⁵

What he was saying was real to him and he wanted to convince those listening of its reality too. No prevaricating, no stifling of truth, no beating around the bush. Whitefield spoke reality, whether his audience wanted to hear it or not.

background

Whitefield was the son of a not very affluent innkeeper. His brilliant mind secured entrance to Oxford. Lacking any parental means of support he became a ‘servitor’, paying his way by carrying out menial tasks for more affluent contemporaries. A bout of sickness and reading a book titled *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* saw Whitefield crying out to God for salvation and his new-found faith soon propelled him into preaching.

In 1738 he went to Savannah, Georgia, as a parish minister but quickly noticed the dire needs of orphans; he thought they would be his life’s work. He raised funds for building of the Bethesda orphanage in 1740. Back in the old country, with Church of England pulpits closed to him, Whitefield took to preaching in parks and fields, a hitherto unknown stratagem. It put him in touch with a sizeable segment of the population who were beyond the reach of the Established Church. While he never lost sight of the needs of orphans he arranged for others to take on this work.

Silas Anderson considers Whitefield’s relevance today for students

Eccliesiastes teaches us that ‘there is a time to speak and a time to be silent’.⁶ Whitefield did a lot of speaking, and perhaps it can be said in truth that there were times when he should have been silent. Jonathan Edwards, for example, had particular concerns for his ‘deeply unqualified appeals to emotion, his openly judging those he considered unconverted, and his demand for instant conversions’.⁷ Whitefield was first and foremost a sinner saved. Medical and nursing students can learn much from the hearty outspokenness of Whitefield; we are far too often silent when we should be speaking truth.

Are you so convinced of the truth of the gospel that you want to do nothing more than tell people about it? Do your convictions of the truth claims of the gospel affect every area of your life, including how you go about living for Jesus as a medical student? Or are you tempted to be a ‘velvet-mouthed preacher’, dampening the truths of the gospel to accommodate the views of those around you?

I know I am far more often guilty of being silent than I am of saying too much.

Whitefield & Wesley

At Whitefield’s urging, another diminutive man with a massive voice would also preach in the open air. John Wesley (1703-1791) and his brother Charles (1707-1799) were members of the Oxford Holy Club. The term ‘Methodist’ originated as a nickname for these ultra-serious young men. It was Charles, its founder, who was instrumental in Whitefield’s conversion. The Holy Club practised a regime of demanding austerity. They met daily for three hours to pray, recite psalms and read the Greek New Testament. Their rhythm of life included praying for a few minutes during every waking hour. They fasted two days a week and visited prisons. Whitefield, who became the leader for a time, would walk penitently in the winter cold and suffered frost bite.

John Wesley: 'a brand plucked out of the fire'

Today, Wesley's faith story tends to be better known than Whitefield's. Behind the story of her sons stands the great Susannah Wesley, home-educator and spiritual giant, married to the Reverend Samuel Wesley. She bore 19 children, of which only nine survived beyond infancy. Born into a non-conformist family, she and Samuel embraced High Anglicanism as young adults, and Oxford-educated Samuel was rector of Epworth, Lincolnshire, from 1696.

One incident, a rectory fire in 1709, would embed itself forever in John's memory. The five-year-old was stranded in an upper bedroom but lifted to safety just before the roof collapsed. He would use a phrase from Zechariah 3:2 (KJV) 'a brand plucked out of the fire' to trace the hand of God in his life.

In 1735 John and Charles set sail for Savannah, Georgia. On the voyage the brothers met a group of Moravian settlers. The Atlantic is notorious for storms and a storm blew and snapped the mast of the ship. The English passengers panicked while the Moravians calmly prayed and sang hymns. Wesley saw that these people possessed something he lacked.

USA

The power of lively singing was a lesson learnt and the Wesley brothers left one important legacy, the publication of *Psalms and Hymns*, the first Anglican hymnbook published in the Americas. Hymns and hymnbooks would be pillars of their ministries. Charles would write over 6,000 and his hymns are used worldwide, not just by Methodists.



John's Georgia sojourn ended in fiasco. His High Church style failed to endear him to the colonists. He fell in love with a Miss Sophia Hopkey, who jilted him. When he tried to ban her from Holy Communion her family took legal action and he fled the colony.

Aldersgate

Then on 24 May 1738 a depressed John Wesley recorded in his diary the decisive moment in his journey of faith:

'In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one

*was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.'*⁸

Methodists still celebrate Aldersgate Day. For Wesley it was the springboard to a new life. A formerly High-and-Dry Anglican now testified the doctrine of personal salvation by faith and the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. It was in high contrast to prevailing Deist theology in the Anglican Church which perceived a 'clockwork universe' – God may have set the world in motion but did not intervene in it. Wesley's great insight was that God could be known in experience.

separation

Wesley linked up with George Whitefield, his friend from Oxford. Still a High Churchman by instinct, Wesley was at first reluctant to follow Whitefield's example of open air preaching. What was decisive in

this momentous step was that both men were banned from many pulpits. Wesley was in touch with the pulse of newly emerging middle classes and their aspirations. Wesley saw a lethargic Established Church, failing to respond to emerging industrialisation, seemingly unaware of the spiritual needs of people in the new urban centres. Many clergy were corrupt and absent. Wesley would have insisted he was a life-long Anglican. The Methodist Church actually emerged in America. In England Wesley founded the 'Methodist Society' which he always saw as a movement for renewal in the Established Church. It was not until after his death that UK Methodists became a church.

His first venture in open air preaching was to miners in Kingswood near Bristol in April 1739. In the years that followed members of the Wesley and Whitfield connexions would suffer persecution from clergy, judges and mobs. While both leaders were episcopally ordained, most preachers they trained were not. Whitefield became better known in America than England, conducting a highly fruitful partnership with Jonathan Edwards.

Perhaps the best image of Wesley has him seated on a horse reading as he rides. He would not waste a single moment. He famously said 'the world is my parish' and he constantly crisscrossed England and Ireland. Wesley was a brilliant organiser. Soon there was a network of chapels. The smallest Methodist units were 'classes' meeting regularly to learn, share fellowship and exhort one another to good works. For larger projects Wesley founded 'Companies of One Hundred' and even today many Methodist organisations operate on this basis.

It should inspire us to know that Wesley and Whitefield were never in full agreement doctrinally. Whitefield was a Calvinist, Wesley an Arminian. Their views triggered bitter debates, but eventually they were reconciled. They complemented each other in ministry. Whitefield would win converts; Wesley would disciple them.

Wesley opposed slavery and wrote a letter of encouragement to the young William Wilberforce. Whitefield is criticised for a more ambivalent

extract from Charles Wesley's 'And Can It Be'

*And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray –
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.*

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine;
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th' eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.*

Charles Wesley, 1707-1788

attitude. In fairness, his insistence that slaves should hear the gospel was ground-breaking and subversive in the context of the America of his day.

Here are two greats who were very different. As historian JD Walsh has said, 'What is most striking is the providential complementarity of the two men's gifts. More than any evangelist before him, Whitefield was given the ability to scatter the seed of God's Word across the world. To Wesley, pre-eminently, was granted the ability to garner the grain and preserve it'.⁹ ■

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