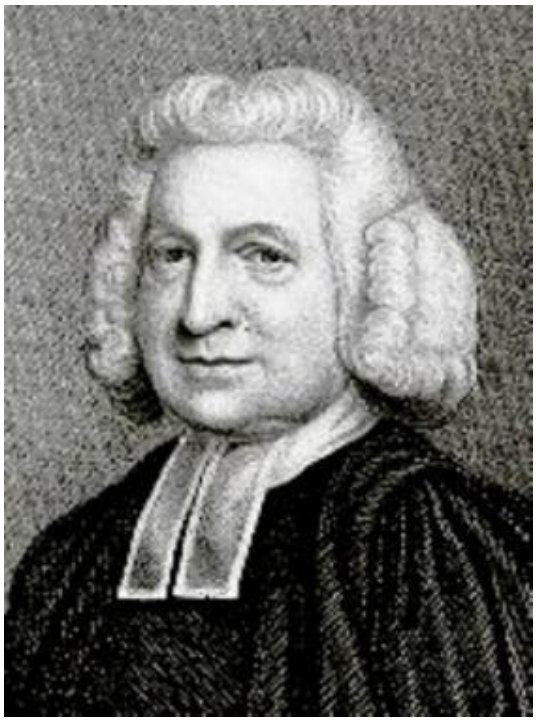

George Whitefield

George Whitefield & His Ministry by J.C. Ryle

Whitefield's Birth-place and Parentage – Educated at Gloucester Grammar School – Enters Pembroke College, Oxford – Season of Spiritual Conflict – Books which were made useful to him – Ordained by Bishop Benson – First Sermon – Preaches in London – Curate of Dummer, Hants – Goes to America – Returns in a Year – Preaches in the open air – Is excluded from most London Pulpits – Extent of his Labours for thirty-one years – Dies at Newbury Port, America, in 1770 – Interesting circumstances of his Death.

Who were the men that revived religion in England a hundred years ago? What were their names, that we may do them honour? Where were they born? How were they educated? What are the leading facts in their lives? What was their special department of labour? 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 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.

Whitefield was born at Gloucester in the year 1714. That venerable county-town, which was his birth-place, is connected with more than one name which ought to be dear to every lover of Protestant truth. Tyndal, 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 birth-place, 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.

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 elocution 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 straitened 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 drawer 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 school-fellow 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.

FOOTNOTE: Happening to be at Oxford in June 1865, I went to Pembroke College, and asked whether any one 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.

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 within 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 Thomas Kempis, and Castanuza's 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. I thought it unbecoming a penitent to have his hair powdered. I wore woollen 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's Life of God in the Soul of Man, Law's Serious Call, Baxter's Call to the Unconverted, Alleine's Alarm to Unconverted Sinners, and Matthew Henry's 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 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.

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 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, Bishopsgate, 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 week-days 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 removed 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 in 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 favourable 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. Church wardens, 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 Deism, 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.

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.' 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 behaviour 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. 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 coal-pits. 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.' 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 licence for preaching in the diocese of London. Whitefield, of course, had not got this licence 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 churchwardens to preach in the pulpit, he went outside after the communion-service, and preached in the churchyard. 'And,' says he, 'God was pleased 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 29th, 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 that 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.

FOOTNOTE: The reader will remember that all this happened 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.

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 honourable 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 any one 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.

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 another; 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 laboured 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 Whitsuntide 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 seas', 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 country 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. 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 labours 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 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, his 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.

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, September 28th, 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 eye-witness 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 for ever to preach Christ. But I die to be with him. How brief–comparatively brief has been my life compared to the vast labours 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 up-stairs, with a lighted candle in his hand, he could not resist the inclination to turn around 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 has 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 die. Where he died there he was buried, in a vault beneath the pulpit of the church where he had engaged to preach; His sepulchre is shown to this very day; and nothing 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.

Further reading- we recommend the Arnold Dallimore Biography.