

GEORGE WHITEFIELD

The name of George Whitefield, the prince of open-air preachers, will ever rank high among those of great soul-winners. Perhaps no preacher was ever gifted with a more powerful voice for open air work, or ever preached to larger out-door congregations than did Whitefield. It is estimated that he preached to a hundred thousand persons at Cambuslang, in Scotland, and that ten thousand persons professed conversion to Christ as the result of his sermon. Although frail in body and having weak lungs, God seemed to endow him with supernatural strength for open air work at a time when church doors were closed against him. Benjamin Franklin claimed to have tested the voice of Whitefield to find out how far he could hear him distinctly, and he heard him clearly for over a mile.

Whitefield's grandfather was a clergyman in the Church of England, but his father was a wine merchant and inn-keeper. George was born in 1714. He was the youngest of a family of seven — six sons and a daughter. His father died when he was an infant, and his mother — like the mother of Mr. Moody — was left to struggle through poverty with a large family. When four years old George had the measles, which through neglect, left one of his lively dark blue eyes with a slight squint. This, however, did not mar the charm of his countenance. His early life was stained with lying, cheating, evil speaking, small thefts, and other juvenile sins. In this he much resembled the celebrated Saint Augustine. He would sometimes run into the dissenting meeting-house during services and shout the name of the worthy minister — "Old Cole! old Cole! old Cole!" and then he was off in a hurry. A member of the same chapel once asked him what he intended to be. "A minister" said he, "but I would take care never to tell stories in the pulpit like the old Cole" he added. The worthy old minister afterwards rejoiced to hear Whitefield relate anecdotes and incidents with a vividness and power far exceeding his own capabilities.

Whitefield was a wild, unrestrained lad. His mother tried to keep him from taking part in the business, but he sometimes sold drinks over the counter and kept the money. "It would be endless" says he, "to recount the sins and offences of my younger days." He had many good thoughts and compunctions of conscience. Thus, he did not use all the money he stole from his mother, but gave some of it to the poor. Among the books that he stole from others were devotional books as well as books of romance — he afterwards restored them fourfold. He was very high tempered, and once when some persons, who took pleasure in exasperating him, had greatly provoked him, he went to his room and on his knees, with tears in his eyes, prayed over the 119th Psalm. He was familiar with the Bible, and although he ridiculed sacred things, he was fond of the thought of some day being a clergyman, and he frequently imitated the clergyman's manner of reading prayers, or intoning them in the manner so common at that time.

In the Church of St. Mary de Crypt, Gloucester, Whitefield was christened as a baby, made fun as a boy of ten, and preached his first sermon as a deacon at the age of twenty-one. When he was ten years of age his mother married again, but this does not seem to have improved their condition, financially at least. At the common school of St. Mary de Crypt, young Whitefield's memory and elocutionary powers won him great distinction in the amateur theatricals of which he was very fond. At fifteen years of age he gave up the common school and commenced helping his mother in the housework at Bell Inn. In the evenings he often read his Bible and even composed several sermons. Finally his brother took charge of the inn, and George could not agree with the sister-in-law, and so left and went to another brother's in

Bristol. Here he first felt the power of God's Spirit working upon his heart. He felt a great longing for the things of God. After two months he returned home and these convictions and longings left him. His mother gave him the best she could—a bed on the floor. No business seemed to open up for him, and one day he said to his sister, "Sister, God intends something for me that we know not of." His mother also seems to have had presentiments of his coming greatness.

After remaining idle for some time he found that there was opportunity for him to work his way, as a servitor, through Oxford University. He went to school again to prepare for Oxford, and was led off into atheism by sinful companions. This did not last long, and he finally made up his mind to prepare to take communion on his seventeenth birthday. A dream about God, and a powerful impression that he was to preach the gospel seem to have greatly sobered him. A brother also gave him a straight talk about his rapid changes from saint to sinner and from sinner to saint. In 1732, when eighteen years of age, he went to Oxford. At Oxford, to his great delight and after long desiring it, he was taken into the band of "Methodists," which then numbered fifteen. A book entitled "The Life of God in the Soul of Man" loaned to him by Charles Wesley, opened Whitefield's eyes to see that outward works and outward forms and ceremonies would not save the soul. When he read that "true religion is an union of the soul with God, or Christ formed within us," a ray of light instantaneously darted in upon his soul, and from that moment, but not till then, did he know that he must be a new creature. He was "born of God" long before the Wesleys, his devout companions, were brought out into the clear light of the new birth. He wrote his acquaintances concerning his conversion, and they charitably supposed him to be insane. He shared great persecution with others of the "Holy Club," or "Methodists." The contempt and shame he suffered at Oxford helped to prepare him for the still greater persecutions of his later life.

Owing to the fact that the Wesleys did not yet understand regeneration, or the new birth, Whitefield got his eyes off Christ, and began once more to look to external works for salvation. He went through many sore trials and temptations, and spent whole days and nights in fasting and prayer for "deliverance" from the proud, hellish thoughts that used to crowd into his soul. "He says," I never ceased wrestling with God till He blessed me with victory over them." Before obtaining victory through faith, he sought it by means of severe fasting, eating coarse food, dressing poorly, and by practising other severe austerities and penances. He prayed one night out under a tree in the coldest weather, and he lived for some time on sage tea, without sugar, and coarse bread. Finally his austerities so weakened his body that he could scarcely creep upstairs. The Wesleys could help him but little, but after seven weeks of self-centered seeking his eyes were once more directed to Christ as his Saviour, and peace and joy returned to his soul. He says, "But oh! with what joy, joy unspeakable, even joy that was full of, and big with, glory, was my soul filled, when the weight of sin went off; and an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God, and a full assurance of faith broke in upon my disconsolate soul! Ever afterwards he seems to have had clearer views concerning salvation through faith, and he was soon the means of leading several of his companions into the experience of the new birth, both at Gloucester and Oxford.

He now began joyfully to read the Word of God, to visit the sick, and to perform other services for the Master. Soon his friends urged him to be ordained. His great humility led him to decline, but being patient and flexible in all matters regarding himself, though firm as a rock in matters of conviction, he was persuaded to go through the ceremony of ordination. As he had previously dreamed, the bishop sent for him and received him kindly, and made him a present of some gold, and informed him that though he had previously made up his mind not to ordain any one under three-and-twenty years, still he was willing to ordain him whenever he desired it. It was at the moment of his ordination that Whitefield seems to have made a complete consecration of himself to God and to have received the anointing of the Spirit and power which made him so mighty a worker in God's harvest field. It was on June 20, 1736, at the age of twenty one, that he was ordained by the good Bishop of Gloucester, Dr. Benson. In

"Account of God's Dealings," Section IV., Whitefield thus describes what he experienced at that time: "About three days before the time appointed for my ordination the Bishop came to town. The next day I sent his lordship an abstract of my private examination on these two questions, 'Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take upon you this office and administration?' And, 'Are you called according to the will of the Lord Jesus Christ and the laws of this realm?' The next morning I waited on the bishop. He received me with much love, telling me, he was glad I was come; that he was satisfied with the preparation I had made, and with the allowance given me by Sir John Phillips. 'I had myself,' said he, 'made provision for you of two little parishes, but since you choose to be at Oxford, I am very well pleased. I doubt not but you will do much good.' "Upon this I took my leave, abashed with God's goodness to such a wretch, but withal exceedingly rejoiced, that in every circumstance he made my way into the ministry so very plain before my face I

"This, I think, was on Friday. The day following I continued in abstinence and prayer. In the evening I retired to a hill near the town, and prayed fervently for about two hours, in behalf of myself and those that were to be ordained with me. "On Sunday morning I rose early, and prayed over St. Paul's epistle to Timothy, and more particularly over that precept, 'Let no man despise thy youth.' When I went up to the altar, I could think of nothing but Samuel's standing a little child before the Lord with a linen ephod. When the bishop laid his hands upon my head, my heart was melted down, and I offered my whole spirit, soul, and body, to the service of God's sanctuary! I read the gospel, at the bishop's command, with power, and afterwards sealed the good confession I had made before many witnesses, by partaking of the holy sacrament of our Lord's most blessed body and blood "

That God really touched the lips of Whitefield with the divine fire of His Holy Spirit at the time of his ordination seems proved by the fact that he began to preach with great unction and power on the next Sunday after his ordination. His first sermon was delivered to an immense audience in his old home church at Gloucester. Complaint was afterwards made to the bishop that fifteen people were driven mad by this sermon. The good bishop replied that he hoped that madness would not be forgotten before the next Sunday.

After his ordination Whitefield returned to Oxford, with great joy, to complete his course at the University. While there he was invited to occupy a friend's pulpit for two months in an obscure part of London. He accepted the invitation, and although his youth provoked sneers at first, great crowds flocked to hear him. At Oxford his rooms were often filled with praying students. He left the university full of fervor, zeal, and the constraining power of the Holy Spirit. After preaching a few sermons in England, with great unction and power, he sailed for the United States. His few sermons in Bristol, just before he left England, stirred the whole city. On his second visit, while waiting for his vessel to sail for America, crowds of people flocked out to meet him on his way to the city. Although he was only twenty-two years of age, Bristol was completely under his spell. Quakers and Non-conformists generally left their chapels to hear him preach. His "new birth" preached with power from on high seemed to attract all conditions of men. Every nook and corner of the church was crowded, and half the people had to be turned away. Many wept bitterly when he left the city, as did the people of Gloucester when he left that city. In London, while waiting for his vessel, he was compelled to preach, and the large churches would not hold his audiences. Thousands went away for want of room. On Sunday the streets were crowded with people going to meeting long before the break of day. The stewards could hardly carry the donations made for the orphanage he hoped to start in America, so heavy and so many were the large English pennies of that day, which formed the bulk of the collections. Soon the clergy became jealous, and bitter opposition set in against Whitefield, and churches were closed against him.

About Christmas, 1737, he set sail for America, as weeping crowds bade him farewell. He left the charity schools of England £1,000 (\$5,000) richer for his brief labors there. All on board the vessel were greatly blessed by his ministrations during the voyage. When Whitefield reached his destination in Georgia he had but little opportunity to preach to large crowds, as two hundred people were a large congregation in the frontier settlements. But he won his way to the hearts of the people and scores were brought to Christ. He returned to England in 1738, and began to work in co-operation with the Wesleys, who had been led out into the light concerning regeneration, or the "new birth," during his absence in America. God was greatly blessing them, but their preaching was too plain to suit lukewarm, worldly, and fashionable churches, and the doors of these churches were rapidly closing against them. Whitefield preached in one church where a thousand people were unable to get inside, and this suggested to him the idea of outdoor preaching, but even his Methodist brethren at that time regarded this as a "mad idea." Soon after this the people were so deeply moved by his preaching that they began to say aloud "Amen " to many things that he said. This seems to have been a new thing in those days.

Excluded from many of the state churches, Whitefield began his open-air preaching at Kingswood, Bristol, in 1739. There the rough coal miners gathered to hear him, and his audiences doubled and trebled until he found himself preaching to 20,000 people. Tears streamed down the cheeks of the coal-begrimed men, and hundreds and hundreds were convicted of sin and brought to Christ. White-field had now left off using printed prayers and written sermons, and prayed and preached extempore as he felt led by the Spirit of God. Wherever he went, the people flocked to hear him in such great crowds that the churches would no longer have contained them, had they been open to him. When farewelling from Bristol, the crowd was so great at one of the Methodist Societies that he had to leave by mounting a ladder and climbing over the tiling of an adjoining house. Wesley continued the great work begun by Whitefield in Bristol.

When evicted from a Church of England in London, while preaching, Whitefield continued his sermon in the church yard. He then began his open-air meetings at Moorfields, one of the largest, vilest, and most notorious pleasure resorts in London. Great was the astonishment of the London rowdies to see the tall, graceful young clergyman, with mild blue eyes, and clad in gown and cassock, standing on the wall addressing them on the second coming of Christ. The same day he addressed a more refined audience of 20,000 people on Kennington Common. After this he continued to preach to great audiences of from 20,000 to 40,000 in both of these places. It is said that he received more than a thousand written requests for prayer at one of his meetings at Moorfields. The singing of the vast audiences could be heard for a distance of two miles. When the people at Kennington Common heard that he was to leave for America, their weeping was so loud as to almost drown his voice. A similar scene was enacted at Moorfields. At Hackney Marsh he preached at a horse race to about 10,000 people, and the horses got but little attention.

On his second and subsequent trips to America, White-field met with very great success. He preached to large audiences, and won many souls to Christ. It was claimed that every student in Harvard University professed conversion to Christ during his meetings there. Benjamin Franklin was deeply impressed with his preaching, and the celebrated Jonathan Edwards wept while listening to his sermons.

On his return to England he preached to great audiences in the tabernacle built for him at Moorfields, and also to vast audiences in many other parts of Britain. Perhaps his greatest meeting was at Cambuslang, near Glasgow, Scotland, where he is said to have preached to an audience variously estimated at from 30,000 to 100,000 people. Many were bathed in tears for an hour and a half while he was preaching, and it is claimed that ten thousand persons professed conversion to Christ under his sermon. All Britain seemed in a holy fervor over his preaching. The Vicar of Bideford warned the people

against Whitefield's preaching one Sunday evening, but next morning he preached to an audience of 10,000. Even the nobility gladly sat at his feet, and thousands of people would often stand in the rain listening to him.

The frailty of Whitefield's body was so great that the marvelous range of his voice seemed almost supernatural. The clearness and range of his voice has probably never been equaled by that of any other open-air preacher. The vividness with which Whitefield preached seemed to be almost supernatural. One time he was preaching to sailors, and he described a vessel wrecked in a storm at sea. He portrayed her as on her beam and just ready to sink, and then he cried aloud, "What next?" The picture was so real that the sailors sprang to their feet and cried out, "The long boat ! Take the longboat ! " At another time he pictured a blind man walking towards the edge of a precipice without knowing where he was going, until finally he was right on the edge of the precipice. The portrayal was so vivid and real that when he reached this point in his sermon, Lord Chesterfield, who was present, sprang to his feet and cried aloud, "My God ! he is gone !" Famous actors like Garrick, Foote, and Shuter loved to hear Whitefield preach. Garrick was so deeply impressed with the oratorical powers of Whitefield that he declared he believed Whitefield could make people weep by the mere enunciation of the word Mesopotamia.

Whitefield was not a theologian by nature, and found but little time for reading books. Most of the books he did find time to read were of the old-school Calvinistic type so prevalent at that time, and his mind became confirmed in the Calvinistic views of theology. This led to a controversy between him and the Wesleys, as the latter rejected the fatalistic teachings of old-school Calvinism. Their friendship for each other continued, but Whitefield did not work in such full accord and harmony with the Wesleys as before the controversy. But both the Wesleys and Whitefield were mightily used of God, each preaching the gospel with the degree of light given to him. Whitefield probably did not have so logical a mind as John Wesley. He was sometimes accused of rambling in his sermons, and of not keeping to his subject. His reply to this was, "If men will continue to ramble like lost sheep, then I will continue to ramble after them."

Like Wesley, Whitefield was a strenuous worker. When in his prime he seldom preached less than fifteen times a week. It is estimated that he preached at least eighteen thousand sermons, or an average of ten times a week for thirty-four years. He often preached as many as four or five times in one day.

After intensely longing to be with the Master for over a score of years, he died in 1770, during his seventh visit to America, having preached up to and on the day preceding his death.