

Maranatha Baptist Bible College

Influential Man During the Great Awakening

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By

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George Whitefield made a profound impact on American history. He was very instrumental during the Great Awakening. Most people knew him because he was an amazing preacher and saw the need to preach about the salvation of their souls. Not only did he care about their souls for eternity, but he cared about their souls while they were still on earth. This was shown when Whitefield started and helped maintain an orphanage. There were two main things that caused Whitefield to make a great impact on America as it is seen today. Whitefield made an impact because he was an amazing preacher, and he started an orphanage.

George Whitefield was an amazing preacher. He preached dramatically, heartily, and excitedly. Watching Whitefield preach was like watching a one-man play. He used imagination and drama.¹ He acted out the stories in the Bible just as they were written. The Scriptures were beautifully displayed when he preached, and the people were drawn into a story from the Bible by his performance. His excitement was shown, and it was contagious. Other people were excited about what Whitefield was preaching because he was excited. Not only was his preaching informative and convicting, it was stunning. Benjamin Franklin commented on Whitefield's preaching by saying that listening to him speak was "a pleasure of much the same kind with that receiv'd from an excellent piece of musick."² People enjoyed watching him preach like they enjoyed watching a play.

¹ Harry Stout, *Divine Dramatist* (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans Pub., 1991), 93.

² No author, "Benjamin Franklin on George Whitefield"; available from <http://www.pioneernet.net/rbrannan/whitefield/bfongw.htm>; Internet; accessed 12 May 2009.

Many people watched him, and they were all amazed. Huge crowds were “spellbound.”³ He preached in ways that people had never seen before. After hearing Whitefield preach, New York Presbyterian Minister Ebenezer Pemberton stated, “I never saw the like.”⁴ He set an example to others because he was an amazing preacher. Other preachers could watch him and learn how they could keep the attention of their congregations.

Itinerant evangelism was new to New England. In New England’s short past they had never seen anything that was comparable to it. Sometimes pastors would preach at different churches. They would switch congregations for a Sunday, but they never traveled around a huge area, such as Whitefield did in New England and the southern colonies, preaching in different churches almost every time he spoke. Also, preachers never preached outside. They always preached inside of their churches. C. C. Geon states in his book *Revivalism and Separatism in New England* that “It was a radical innovation, and set an example destined to be followed by numbers of preachers equally zealous for the salvation of souls if not equally effective in awakening pious concern.”⁵ Whitefield was a great precedent-setting leader. There would be many others that would follow him. His itinerant preaching helped shape the future of evangelistic preaching. He also helped shape the American people’s mindset to be in favor of itinerant preaching.

The British and Anglicans were against Whitefield’s preaching, and he used this in his favor. Whitefield stated “Little do my enemies think what service they do to me. If

³ Stout, 93.

⁴ Ibid., 95

⁵ C. C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England* (Forge Village: Yale University, 1962), 9.

they did, one would think out of spite, they would even desist opposing me.”⁶

Persecution only helped Whitefield’s popularity, and he used it to his advantage to help him gain popularity when preaching to others.

Whitefield preached to millions of people in his lifetime. Many people were able to hear that Christ died on the cross, and if they believed on him, they could be saved.

“Whitefield preached more than 18,000 sermons in his lifetime, an average of 500 a year, or ten a week. Many of them were given over and over again.”⁷ He preached many times a week, and often to thousands of people each time he preached. Whitefield preached throughout the American colonies. He began in larger cities, hoping that the revivalism would spread to smaller, rural areas.

Whitefield started his preaching in England, but then he came from England to preach to Americans. First he preached in Philadelphia. His first time in America he spent a week in Philadelphia, and then he went to New York. When he returned to Philadelphia he made a lasting friendship with Benjamin Franklin.⁸ Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette* gives an account of his work around Philadelphia:

On Thursday last the Rev. Mr. Whitefield, left this city, and was accompanied to Chester by about one hundred and fifty horse, and preached there to about seven thousand people. On Friday he preached twice at Willings-Town to about five thousand; on Saturday at New Castle to about two thousand five hundred; and the same evening at Christiana-Bridge to about three thousand; on Sunday at

⁶ Stout, 103.

⁷ Anglican Library, “George Whitefield”; available from <http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/whitefield/index.htm>; Internet; accessed 12 May 2009.

⁸ Mack Caldwell, *George Whitefield Preacher to Millions* (Anderson: Warner Press, 1929), 73.

Whiteclay-Creek he preached twice, resting about half an hour between the sermons to about eight thousand of whom about three thousand it is computed came on horseback. It rained most of the time and yet they stood in the open air.⁹ From Franklin's account of half of a week of Whitefield's life, one can tell that Whitefield was constantly preaching to many people with little time to rest.

Not only did many people listen to him, many followed him. One of Whitefield's biographers said that one thousand people followed him to Chester, which was twelve miles, and most of these people walked.¹⁰ Whitefield was popular with many people, and they wanted to support him. When he was in the south, in some instances, the population of the people that gathered exceeded the population of the town. He was a very popular evangelist, because no one in America had ever seen anyone preach in such a dramatic way before. Also, they had never seen an itinerant preacher before. He was a great speaker and definitely kept people's attention. He was a man with purpose, and he was eager to reach many people with the gospel.

George Whitefield also made an impact on the colonies by starting an orphanage. His original idea was given to him by Charles Wesley. He agreed to start an orphanage in Georgia. The orphanage was ten miles from Savannah, and it covered 500 acres.

When he went to Georgia and saw the orphans for himself, he wrote,

Upon seeing this, I thought I could not better shew my regard to God and my country, than by getting a house and land for these children, where they might

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

learn to labour, read, and write, and, at the same time, be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.¹¹

Whitefield cared about the children's hearts, but he also cared about their physical needs. He felt a burden for young children who had no parents. Whitefield was significant in the history of the United States because he made a difference in children's lives in this country.

He not only wanted to see others reached for Christ; he also wanted to make a major impact on souls that had no parents in Georgia. He called the orphanage Bethesda because he hoped it would be a house of mercy to many souls.¹² The orphanage was to be made as self-supporting as possible. The children would learn to work so that they would be prepared to earn a living when they were ready to leave the orphanage. There was a plantation where the children could learn to work so they would be prepared to be on their own one day.

Although Whitefield tried to make the orphanage as self-supporting as possible, he also impacted America because he encouraged people to give to the orphan house. This made an impact on Americans because it caused them to give to a good cause. "The orphan house compelled Whitefield to travel and inspired him to preach."¹³ One can tell that since the orphan house compelled Whitefield to travel, Whitefield was very passionate about the children who lived in the orphan house. He wanted their lives to be changed, but most of all he wanted their lives to glorify God.

¹¹ Rev. L. Tyerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield Volume I* (Azle: Need of the Times Publishers, 1995), 347.

¹² *Ibid.*, 249.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Many people gave what they had to the orphanage. People not only gave money, but many gave food, clothes, livestock, bricks, and much more.¹⁴ Even though the orphanage tried to be as self-supporting as possible, every small gift helped. He was a good example to others in showing them that when one has the means and the ability, one needs to help others as much as possible.

During the time of the Great Awakening, Whitefield helped make history by preaching and making a difference in revival services. George Godwin states in his book *The Great Revivalists*, that Whitefield was “perhaps the most powerful influence in the days of the Great Awakening throughout the New England States and beyond their borders.”¹⁵ George Whitefield helped shape the United States during the days of the Great Awakening, and he had a profound impact on America’s history during the country’s early years.

George Whitefield was an amazing man because he was a brilliant preacher and he started an orphanage. He helped shape America into what it is today by being a good example during part of America’s history. He can be looked to as an example because he cared about people’s lives and their eternal destiny. George Whitefield helped in making America what it is today.

¹⁴Ibid., 249.

¹⁵ George Godwin, *The Great Revivalists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 30.

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The Great Awakening. As previously stated, Edwards believed in a personal religious experience. From 1734-1735, Edwards preached a number of sermons about justification of faith. During this same period, traveling preachers had begun a series of evangelist meetings calling on individuals to turn away from sin throughout the New England colonies. This form of evangelism focused on personal salvation and a correct relationship with God. This era has been called the Great Awakening. The evangelists produced huge emotions. But the foolish children of men do miserably delude themselves in their own schemes, and in their confidence in their own strength and wisdom; they trust to nothing but a shadow." However, as Edward says, there is hope for all men.