

Awakening a Nation Under God: George Whitefield, 7/2/17

Opening- Read excerpt from *If You Can Keep It*, p.79-80, 82-83

On this Independence Day I'd like to do something a little different. I'd like to take us back before the birth of our Nation, to introduce us to the Spiritual Founding Father of America. If not for God's sovereign use of George Whitefield, a man we may know very little about compared to founding Fathers like Jefferson, Madison and John Adams, we may not have America. But it's Whitefield's electrifying preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ among the colonies that unified them with one heart and mind. God was sovereignly behind the birth of our Nation using the human weather pattern, Whitefield

Who is George Whitefield? [Picture]

Born in 1714 into humble circumstances in the Bell Inn, Gloucester, England the youngest of 7 children. His father passed away when he was 2. Although Whitefield was bright and showed much promise, in these days in England the poor class would not be able to afford to go to university. However, there were a select few of the poorer class who could go as a servitor. This was a term given to young men who served the other students, polishing their shoes and being a butler and maid to them, which was considered humiliating work but Whitefield jumped at the opportunity, was selected and off he went to Oxford.

Already at the age of 15 Whitefield was uniquely curious about spiritual things. He began to read the Bible on his own and sought to live a life of highest moral conduct. He was a loner in school not only because of his position as servitor but because he didn't join his classmates in the wild debauchery...which didn't look much different in early 18th century England than it did in 2017 America.

Pick up his story when he arrived at University of Oxford by working as a butler to the other students. But as the providence of God would have it, right there at Oxford, at the very same moment Whitefield joined a movement of zealous teenagers called the **Holy Club [Picture]**. Little did the world know at that time but from this group of a handful of teenagers would come the Great Awakening that began in England, then moved to the New World and across Europe. It is estimated that the Great Awakening resulted in more conversions, missionaries sent out, preachers ordained and churches planted than any other movement in history...and it started in a college dorm room at Oxford. Don't ever under-estimate what God can do with young people on fire for him!

Members of the Holy Club included John and Charles Wesley- Founder of the Methodist church and famous hymn writer, John Gambold, bishop of the Moravian Church, John Clayton, the distinguished Anglican minister, and thers who became evangelists, writers, missionaries, political leaders and pastors...not the least of which was George Whitefield. To get our heads around how unique this really was it

would be like Steve Jobs (Apple), Bill Gates (Microsoft), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) and Jeff Bezos (Amazon) being in a tech club together as teenagers.

~~Holy Club—These were the Jesus Freaks of their day. And they were made fun of by the other students for the way they lived their lives with rigorous spiritual discipline, fasting, Bible reading, serving the poor... the name that they used to make fun of them was “Methodists” because of their methodical spiritual practices. Of course they came to consider this an honor...~~

But for all Whitefield’s religious and spiritual zeal and effort, George Whitefield was missing the very heart of Christianity, a relationship with God through Jesus Christ’s work on the cross for us. He thought that through greater self-restriction and more effort he could somehow prove worthy of God, as if he was building a ladder to God, one rung at a time through his works. Until one day he was reading the Bible to a woman he was ministering to in jail and read John 3:16. The woman lept up and exclaimed “I believe” over and over again. “I am saved!” She was changed before George’s eyes! This flustered and confounded George, who wasn’t read to believe it was that simple. He doubled down his religious, self-denying efforts, so much so that he made himself sick in bed. But while in bed he was reading about the thief on the cross and read as if for the first time Jesus’ response, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” At that moment he realized God was the one who built a ladder down to him through Jesus’ work of dying for our sins on the Cross. He was born again and it was as if scales fell from his eyes, just as it did the woman in jail.

Let me stop and say friends, the same simplicity and beauty of the grace of salvation is available to us today just as it was to George Whitefield. Simply trust Jesus.

Metaxas- *What followed from this moment in a bed in Oxford's Pembroke College can hardly be calculated. It was as if in the dead works doldrums the slightest finger of a divine breeze blew that day, which over the course of the next weeks and months and years would become a sanctified tornado.*

It would reconfigure things in England and then leap across the Atlantic to light down in the New World and there so dramatically alter the landscape of the thirteen colonies that we really should not think of anything that has happened since without first thinking of that tornado.

He preached his first sermon at 21 at **St. Mary’s de Crypt [Picture]**. While at first some openly mocked him for his youth and boyish appearance as he began to open his mouth to preach the crowd was silenced and enraptured. All in attendance agree that they had never heard his equal and many people cried out in repentance giving their lives to Christ, which was unheard of during these days in the Enlightenment rationalism.

While at first the churches opened their doors to the young Whitefield, soon they began to shut them when they realized that his message was of repentance, grace

and belief in Jesus alone, experiencing the new birth at conversion. And that going to church would not save them, only Jesus. At this time in England the church had become largely an extension of the state, secular, gospeless...

Which is why Whitefield famously said, "*Congregations are lifeless because dead men preach to them.*"

No longer welcomed in the pulpit wasn't going to stop Whitefield who had a unrelenting fire to preach the Gospel. He once said, "*God forbid that I should travel with anybody a quarter of an hour without speaking of Christ to them.*" And so we took to the open air of the countryside. He took the gospel to places no preachers were willing to go: the poor, the drunkards, menial labor, the slaves. Where none of the people who would hear would be welcomed in the church. And the people that would not darken the door of a church building if they could.

His first outdoor sermon was at the age of 24 to the coalminers of Kingswood in Bristol, England. Reflecting on this experience he wrote "*the first discovery of their being affected was to see the white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully fell down their black cheeks, as they came out of their coal pits.*" Many thousands came to Christ that day. That the poor and uneducated have value is something we today take for granted, but when this young man announced to the unwashed faces that there was someone who cared about them, who loved them, that they were equal with the duchess and duke in the eyes of God...this was like streams of water to thirsty souls. From this moment Whitefield never looked back, daily preaching in the fields, prisons, and city streets and all over England where thousands would gather and be converted.

While England was experiencing the great awakening through Whitefield and the Wesleys, Whitefield's greatest ministry was among the 13 colonies in the New World. Here he preached at an unrelenting, breakneck speed. Within just one year in America he traveled 5,000 miles on horseback, preaching 350 times. He would draw crowds of up to 25,000. By the end of that year 25% of the New World heard him preach! And by the end of his ministry in 1770 in America over 80% of the country heard him preach at least once, and virtually everyone read his sermons, which were published regularly by his friend Benjamin Franklin. John Piper says, "*Before Whitefield, there was no unifying inter-colonial person or event. Indeed, before Whitefield, it is doubtful any name other than royalty was known equally from Boston to Charleston. But by 1750 virtually every American loved and admired Whitefield and saw him as their champion.*"

Why did Whitefield have such an impact on the Spiritual life of America?

-*God gave him supernatural stamina.* From his first outdoor sermon until his death 30 years later in 1770 in Massachusetts, his life was one of almost daily preaching. Theologian J.I. Packer says that sober estimates are that he spoke about 1,000 times every year for 30 years. That included at least 18,000 sermons and 12,000 talks and exhortations. He literally preached more than he slept for thirty years... take that in

for a moment. Never done before this and has never been repeated since, no one has come close!

-God gave him a supernatural speaking gift- Whitefield was a born orator. The world-famous actor David Garrick, a contemporary of Whitefield once said *"I would give a hundred guineas, if I could say 'Oh' like Mr. Whitefield."* But his voice was also so powerful and at a frequency that he could be heard clearly by nearly 30,000 people with no amplification, as confirmed in Philadelphia by an experiment by Ben Franklin. He had a powerful gift of winsome persuasion that God used to make even the hardest heart like flesh. Sometimes at the end of a message he would take up a collection for an orphanage in Georgia that he built and supported.

Ben Franklin, while never becoming a Christian himself, was a close friend of Whitefield and writes of this gift of speaking.

"I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistols in gold."

As he proceeded I began to soft, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably, that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all."

-God gave him Supernatural Results

Read the account of Nathan Cole the farmer- p.105

This is but one of countless stories, at least 50k came to Christ, many more thousands recommitted in their faith and 300 churches started.

-God gave him a supernatural Message

I say supernatural because he was constantly preaching from a supernatural book, the Bible. These were not political messages. These were not like the Enlightenment rationalism of the pulpits of his day. It was direct exposition and application of the Word of God!

1) **That we must be born again through faith in Jesus.** Everywhere he went he preached the gospel clearly, calling people to faith and repentance. The message was salvation by faith not works. His last sermon before he died the next day he cried out in a tone of thunder, *'Works! works! A man gets to heaven by works! I would as soon think of climbing to the moon on a rope of sand.'* So many responded in genuine repentance and faith in Jesus that by the birth of our nation their common faith became their central animating force of their lives.

2) **That we were equal before God and valued by Him regardless of class, ethnicity, or country of origin.** These individual, disparate colonies began to be unified together under this new identity of equality. This is what it began to mean to be American. This value of equality before God was so prevalent it began to shape the contours of the constitution.

3) Whitefield preached that each person could have a **direct relationship with God and that we could know him and discern his truth by His Spirit** for ourselves was incredibly empowering and freeing. They could decide if those in authority (The Monarchy, the Church) was in line with God's principles or acting in a tyrannical way. This gave birth to the distinctly American spirit of freedom. Freedom to self-govern and to chose their future.

4) That the **new birth leads to a new life**. In other words- living a virtuous life. And in the Great Awakening this was not a flash in the pan. It led to lasting impact on the colonies. In 1831, forty years after the Constitution and 60 years since Whitefield's last sermon, the French political thinking **Alexis deTocqueville** (TAWK- VEEL) came to visit and learn in America. He was curious why the self-government experiment of America was working after many decades when in France there was revolt and seemingly constant transition. He wrote Democracy in America after his visit.... Apt summation of his classic- quoted by Eisenhower, Reagan and Clinton have used it to illustrate what they too saw as the secret at the heart of American success: ***Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.***

Now America certainly had its share of flaws, dysfunction and blind spots, the most glaring of course was slavery and it would take several more decades until the equality that they claimed to believe would begin to bear its fruit in abolition. But a call to virtue and holiness, lives changed by Christ's life living through us was present in America. And Tocqueville noted that it came from the churches! The Great Awakening through the ministry of George Whitefield was still bearing its fruit 60 years later.

And so in summary, when we consider the ministry of George Whitefield in America in the 18th Century, we begin to get just a glimpse into why he is considered the Spiritual Founding Father. For these gospel-birthed values of freedom, equality and virtue to be so widely embraced and embodied by the American people within such a brief window in our history, and birth the founding of our country on these Biblical principles is unprecedented and should bring us to a sense of awe. But not simply in awe of a man, George Whitefield, or a movement... but of our God, the sovereign one who providentially and supernaturally caused His Spirit to move mightily in likely the greatest spiritual revival in history

Application

1) All this points to the truth that God is sovereignly working all things together for his ultimate redemptive purposes in history, just as he did with leading Israel out of slavery in Egypt, just as he was faithful to bring them back to the land under Ezra and Nehemiah, just as he was faithful to bring the Messiah, his plans are right on time... so we can trust Him. Let God be God in the future of our country.

2) I agree with Tocqueville... The proclamation of the unadulterated Word of God, the preaching and sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is the genius, it's the secret sauce of what Makes America Great.

