

GEORGE WHITEFIELD AND JOHN WESLEY

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THESIS STATEMENT

Though vastly different personalities, George Whitefield and John Wesley left an incredible imprint on the faith of many thousands of people, both in Great Britain and America during the eighteenth century.

OUTLINE

- I. George Whitefield
 - A. Early life and education
 - B. Conversion
 - C. Early evangelism
 - D. Outdoor preaching
- II. John Wesley
 - A. Early gift for administration
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INTRODUCTION

As the eighteenth century began, England was a spiritual morass. There had been yet no William Wilberforce to free the slaves, no John Howard to reform the prisons. The first Sunday School was still decades away and there was no Bible Society or any foreign missions. Christianity was barely tolerated and then only in a bare intellectual capacity. As a result, society was filled with drinking, adultery, gambling, swearing, drunkenness, and brawling, as Ken Connolly notes.¹

The church was powerless, if it was even awake. Ministry was formal and filled with ritual. The state appointed bishops and controlled the forms of worship. These bishops were more politician than preacher.

GEORGE WHITEFIELD

It was into this spiritual darkness that George Whitefield was born in 1714. It seemed early on that the darkness was fighting horribly against him, preventing him from accomplishing anything. His parents tended to the Bell Inn in the city of Gloucester. As a result, celebrities were entertained, but also stopping here were robbers and other lowlifes. In addition, George's father died when George was two, leaving George's mother to tend to the inn and the family.

George's education suffered. It did not begin until he was twelve, and then it was interrupted at age 16 and 17. He did master Greek, but gave up his studies in Latin. He thought he would never go to college, but did enter Oxford as a "servant" to some upperclassmen.²

¹ Ken Connolly, *The Church in Transition*, Shreveport, Louisiana: Lin Wel, 1984, 237.

² *Ibid*, 238.

Whitfield had obstacles with his eyes and was early on sick and emaciated physically, often because of his emotional make up. Yet his determination helped him to overcome his obstacles one by one. One of the successes was his oratory, developed from his childhood. He always seemed to be the leading actor. He mastered enunciation, vocal projection, and gesturing, fascinating all who heard him. The leading actor of the day in England was David Garrick, who was amply impressed with Whitfield. His appeals often moved even the most hard-hearted.³

After reading a book by Henry Scougal, Whitefield realized he needed to be born again. He was now at peace with God.⁴ Yet more obstacles came again. This time it was clerical opposition. He had preached his first sermon in 1736. The people flocked to hear him. The clergy tried to undermine his success.⁵

During 1738 Whitefield served as a chaplain to British soldiers in Georgia. When he returned to England, the people were more eager than ever to hear him, and the clergy were more bitter in their opposition. Whitefield was denied permission to speak in all but a few pulpits, but that only made him even more popular. Arnold A. Dallimore describes the crowds thronging to hear Whitefield in London, “were not only the poor and middle classes but several of England’s nobility also.”⁶ He also quotes the biographer of one of them, Lady Huntingdon, “The preaching of Mr. Whitefield now excited an unusual degree of attention among persons of all ranks. . . he proclaimed the glad tidings of great joy to listening multitudes, who were powerfully affected by the fire which was displayed in the animated addresses of this man of God. Lord and Lady

³ Ibid., 239.

⁴ Ibid, 239-240.

⁵ Ibid, 240.

⁶ Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitfield*, Vol 1, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970, 131.

Huntingdon constantly attended wherever he preached and Lady Anne Frankland became one of the first fruits of his ministry among the nobility.”⁷ Lady Huntingdon invited her acquaintances to hear Whitefield. Among them was Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, and the wife of the Duke of Marlborough, ancestors of William Churchill.⁸

Soon he heard of Howell Harris in Wales. They shared a kinship in many ways. Harris had been forced to preach in the outdoors, often getting great crowds. Whitefield was impressed and challenged by Harris.⁹ He began to consider if he could do as Harris had done.

Whitefield left London in February 1739 to preach in the area of Bristol and to its miners. He sought permission from the proper authorities, but not only was he denied permission, he was accused of heresy and threatened with excommunication. He trembled at this threat, but cautiously ventured on. As he preached, the miners responded with tears to his message.¹⁰

After two hundred heard Whitefield at that first service, the following meetings were absolutely phenomenal. First it was two thousand, then four thousand, and then five thousand. Then he went to London and again was denied permission to preach. He went to the parks and “commons” to preach. Though the crowd was mostly of the lowest classes, the crowd now numbered 30,000, as respectful as being in a cathedral. Within a month he had preached to a crowd of 50, 000, then to 60,000. Eventually, near Hyde Park Corner, he preached to a crowd of 80,000.¹¹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Connolly, 240-241.

¹⁰ Ibid., 241.

¹¹ Ibid., 242.

Dallimore notes, in his words on the measure of Whitfield, that “Whitfield usually preached forty and often sixty hours a week.”¹² August Toplady estimated, from Whitfield’s journal, that Whitfield preached some eighteen thousand sermons.¹³ However, Sir James Stephen talks of Whitfield’s thirty of forty thousand sermons.¹⁴ If all his sermons, exhortings, and other discourses are counted, he likely preached about a thousand times a year for some thirty years.¹⁵

While Whitefield’s ministry was wildly successful when it came to his popularity and the size of his crowds, it was also a fruitful ministry among his listeners. The fruit that it bore was of a solid and abiding nature. It was not a simple burst of emotion and it did not end when he moved to another location. Dallimore attributes this to the “thoroughness he used in dealing with souls.”¹⁶

JOHN WESLEY

John Wesley was about ten years older than Whitfield, having been born in 1703. He would live to 1791, nearly all of the eighteenth century. According to Francis J. McConnell, Wesley was one of the great leaders of that century, surpassed by no more than about a dozen others. He goes on to say that most students of his life notice that he stands out for two qualities. One was his devotion to God, and the other was his talent for practical administration that bordered on genius.¹⁷ It was impossible for him to keep the two sides apart. In fact, they probably inspired

¹² Dallimore, Vol 2, 521.

¹³ Ibid, 522.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Dallimore, Vol 1, 136-137.

¹⁷ Francis J. McConnell, *John Wesley*, New York: The Abington Press, 1939, 9.

each other. His desire for perfection probably made him methodical, and his effort at practical living probably drove him to greater devotion to God.¹⁸

Most who have some familiarity with the life of Wesley probably remember the story of his rescue as a six-year-old boy from a badly burning second floor window. It clearly made a deep impression on his mind.

McConnell thinks that Oxford affected his way of thinking. His intellect was notable “for the movement toward decisions.” He did not like to leave anything open. “His mind did move by slow ripening to mature convictions through the years, but ripened usually under the pressure of events.”¹⁹ John drew up a timetable for each day, and became known for the fact that he was very “methodical”, even at that young age.²⁰

According to Arnold Lunn, Wesley inherited his executive gifts from his mother, his “methodical genius for making the best of poor material.” In addition, he inherited her iron will. He had none of his father’s sense of humor, but he had his mother’s sense of irony.²¹ Both John and his mother distrusted emotionalism and “fine talk”. John was grave and reserved.²²

In 1724, John began his study of “practical divinity”, suggested by his mother. By 1727 he had received his M. A. His father’s ill health caused him to interrupt his studies for a period. When he returned in 1729, Charles had already started the Holy Club. Soon, he too was one of the leaders. Stanley Ayling tells us that John was four or five years older than Charles, he was

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 30-31.

²⁰ Connolly, 244.

²¹ Arnold Lunn, *John Wesley*, London: Cassell and Company Limited, 1929, 31-32.

²² Ibid, p. 33.

the best scholar of the group by far, and had also the most forceful personality among the group.²³ Ayling adds, “Anxious to discover proper humility before God, he had little diffidence before men. His fingers felt instinctively for the reins of authority. . .”²⁴ The members of the Holy Club participated in various projects in the community.²⁵

In 1725, Wesley began to keep his famous diary. He wrote both journals and diaries. The journals were to be published, but the diaries were intended to be private. The diaries were for his eyes only. They were intended to be a check on his conduct. He intended for it to be a way to control his behavior. The first one began with a page of rules and regulations. Among them were admonitions to do as Christ would as well as general rules of employing time. One rule was to set aside one hour daily for devotion. Another was to avoid all manner of passion.²⁶

Lunn observes that, by nature, Wesley was lazy. He liked his bed, but he trained himself to rise at 4 o’clock every day, and seldom later than 5 o’clock. He occasionally notes in his diary of his “immoderate sleep” which leads us to conclude he allowed himself to sleep as late as 5:30 or 6 am. Wesley used his diary to check on his spiritual progress.²⁷

By 1733 the Holy Club had shrunk from twenty members to five because of discipline problems. John wrote his “*Christian’s Pattern*” after the mold of Thomas A. Kempis. George Whitefield joined two years later.

²³ Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley*, Cleveland: William Collins Publishers, Inc., 1979, 45.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁵ Connolly, 244-245.

²⁶ Lunn, 45-46.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

In 1735, James Edward Oglethorpe asked John to be the chaplain of the colony of Georgia. John saw this as an opportunity to learn the true sense of the Gospel by preaching to the heathen. By 1737, John considered himself a failure and terminated his mission, returning to England.²⁸ Later in the year he did publish his first hymnbook, including songs from Isaac Watts, his father, and his oldest brother. Charles' works were yet to come.²⁹

The Methodist Society had its first meeting on May 1, 1738 in London. The Aldersgate meeting took place later in May. Both Charles, and then John, came to an assurance of genuine conversion at that time.³⁰

The following February, Whitefield returned to open air preaching in Bristol. He invited the Wesleys to come and observe. John then became an open-air preacher himself.³¹ Wesley introduced several innovations to make the meetings more efficient. He also wrote his "*Rules for the Society of People Called Methodists*" in 1742.³² He continued to produce more guidelines to organize the meetings as Methodism started to greatly expand. As a result, some of the Anglican bishops began to attack the work of the Wesleys.³³

John wrote almost without ceasing. He spent a very great amount of time in traveling. His time in a coach was usually used to write more. Not only was there a large volume, but there

²⁸ Connelly, 245-246.

²⁹ Ibid., 246.

³⁰ Ibid., 246-247.

³¹ Ibid., 247.

³² Ibid., 248.

³³ Ibid.

was great care in all the writing, reading it over multiple times as he wrote. He left behind one hundred fifty-one sermons, all showing his definite personality and careful writing.³⁴

According to Ayling, “Wesley never ceased from reinforcing his spoken word by the written. By 1771, though he had another twenty busy years ahead of him, his collected works already numbered 32 volumes.”³⁵ In all, during his life he published about four hundred books and booklets.

Wesley’s writing was always rigorous, direct, and plain. He was not given to emotion or drama. One might even say his material is “dry”, but still somehow satisfying. They were “straight, bare, forceful”, yet with no pathos, humor, or illustration.³⁶ Lund described Wesley’s mind as “the mind of a scientist rather than that of a theologian. His method was empirical and experimental. He was always listing and re-arranging his collection of theological specimens.”³⁷ Lunn continues, “Wesley was always busy with his note-book. He collected ideas not only on spiritual problems, but also on problems of organizations.”³⁸

In 1744 both Wesleys joined several other preachers at a conference. This became the beginning of circuit riding tours for the preachers. The Methodist Societies were gathered into circuits.³⁹

³⁴ McConnell, 96-97.

³⁵ Ayling, 149.

³⁶ McConnell, 98.

³⁷ Lunn, 123.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Connolly, 248-249.

In the next few years Wesley made the first of his 42 trips to Ireland and 22 visits to Scotland. From 1750 to 1780 the work expanded in an amazing way. John preached often, usually at least two sermons each weekday and three on Sunday. He often exceeded even that. In addition, with his mind for administration, he was a master builder. He drew his crowds into societies which included preaching, but also fellowship and singing. Wesley also demonstrated an amazing aptitude for statesmanship when needed for these societies. He founded schools for the children of miners. He provided tracts and reading material to many people. Finally, Wesley was a social reformer. He fought virtually all of the evils of his age, such as smuggling, bribery, gambling, liquor, and the slave trade. He also meddled in health and sanitation.⁴⁰

According to McConnell, his societies were organized around the idea of the pastoral care of individuals. Wesley's goal was to develop the highest type of individual Christian character.⁴¹ As McConnell adds later, "In spite of the rage which Wesley had to face, it did not take forever for the ordinary people to see that here was a leader of men, of fine appearance, of evident knowledge and wisdom, who cared for them as if they were of inherent worth."⁴²

In 1751, Wesley married. His bride was a widow who had a cruel side and was unsympathetic to his calling. Ayling notes that, "By temperament, conviction, and long habit, he [Wesley] was a nomad. There was small prospect of his settling down at home,"⁴³ The marriage was a disaster,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 249-150.

⁴¹ McConnell, 109.

⁴² Ibid., 236.

⁴³ Ayling, 216.

and ended in separation. To the end of his days Wesley retained his deep mistrust of matrimony.⁴⁴

A Methodist chapel opened in New York in 1768. It soon was visited by Francis Asbury, who was often called the “John Wesley of America.”⁴⁵

When Sunday Schools had recently been started, Wesley used them to teach the parents and to care for the children. The older he got, the more he realized the importance of children.

According to McConnell, “Wesley was not an innovator by choice or by inclination. He never made any departure from the ordinary path except as he was virtually compelled to do so. The labor of seeking to save souls of men forced him to the emphasis that the all-essential was to get men to fearing God and to doing righteousness.”⁴⁶

The year 1784 was greatly important for two reasons. Now eighty-one, Wesley seriously thought to the future. In March he signed a deed that gave legal status to the Methodists and protected their future workings. In September he ordained Thomas Coke as the General Superintendent at Bristol. Coke was to go to America and ordain Francis Asbury as a Bishop. This was because Wesley could not achieve ordination for his men in the Church of England.⁴⁷

On March 24, 1784, Wesley met with William Wilberforce, who would go on to have a great influence on the abolition of the slave trade in England. At the end of his Life, Wesley wrote a letter to encourage Wilberforce in his efforts.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 298.

⁴⁵ Connelly, 250.

⁴⁶ McConnell, 173.

⁴⁷ Connelly, 251.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Wesley preached his last sermon on February 23, 1791. He was home by March 2 and in his own bed. On his way to bed he sang a verse of a hymn by Isaac Watts. That was his last known act.

As Connelly says, “It is estimated that John Wesley rode 5,000 miles every year on saddleback and preached 15 sermons every week. Therefore, in a lifetime of ministry he rode a quarter of a million miles on horseback and preached some 40,000 sermons.”⁴⁹

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Wesley’s ministry was the sheer length of it. He lived a very long life, almost the entire eighteenth century, and he was active until the very end of it. He was nothing if he was not determined and persistent. Throughout it all was his increasing hopefulness as time went on. As early as 1733 he wrote his mother “that he would not give up hope of any man short of ten years effort for him, and he held to this belief to the end.”⁵⁰

Lunn says, “John Wesley was the most consistent, and the most inconsistent of men.” He believes this paradox comes from his complete self-surrender to God. His only had one interest in life and that was to do the will of God. His “life was built on two and on only two fundamental beliefs, the existence of God and the verbal inspiration of the Bible”.⁵¹

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The personalities of these two men were quite different. Whitfield was the “actor” who could spellbound an audience of tens of thousands with his enunciation, projection, and gestures with the best of them. Wesley, however, was a man almost obsessed with “method” and consistency.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 252.

⁵⁰ McConnell, 321.

⁵¹ Lunn, 310.

He looked for the practical with little emotion. Whereas Wesley was grave and reserved, Whitefield was of cheerful vitality and unabashed emotionalism of the lower orders from which he sprang.⁵²

Whitefield was “the most lovable. He radiated warmth and joy, and wherever he went he moved others to greater zeal and activity. . . He had in abundant measure all the qualities of a great preacher. . . had a loving concern for the souls of men. As an orator there has scarcely ever been his equal. His voice was not only powerful but beautifully modulated and under perfect control. From all contemporary accounts one gathers that it had a most moving and melting quality that none could resist. . . “⁵³

Whitefield came from poverty and affliction, yet became a great speaker. Wesley came from the establishment, with his father a pastor. As a result, John became submissive before God, but was not inferior to any man. If anything, pride was his biggest snare.

McConnell notes that, “in all his long life Wesley never resorted to anything even resembling sensationalism. He had no tricks by which to catch the crowd. Yet the fact itself that he was persistent in preaching was advertisement of drawing power. Some went out of idle curiosity, some out of hostility, some out of more or less completely concealed admiration for the pluck of the preacher.”⁵⁴

By the age of twenty-two, with no advantages of birth or breeding, Whitefield “had established a reputation as the greatest and most popular preacher of his day.”⁵⁵ Unlike Wesley,

⁵² Ibid., p. 33.

⁵³ Dallimore, ix.

⁵⁴ McConnell, 87.

⁵⁵ Lunn, 128-129.

Whitefield was no scholar. He had little learning, and his mind had never been disciplined by exact study or research. Lunn tells, that he had read next to nothing. Samuel Johnson would not concede that Whitefield was a great orator. Rather, he said that Whitefield's popularity was because of his peculiar manner. Johnson said, "he would be followed by crowds were he to wear a nightcap in the pulpit, or were he to preach from a tree."⁵⁶ Whitefield could "make them laugh or weep at will."⁵⁷

Others describe his mastery of the crowds with descriptions such as that of Green, the historian, that the secret was "the intense reality of his preaching . . . in its earnestness of belief, its deep, tremulous sympathy with the sin and sorrow of mankind."⁵⁸ James Stephen, a rather harsh critic of Whitefield, nevertheless said, "if ever philanthropy burned in the human heart with a pure and intense flame, embracing the whole family of man in the spirit of universal charity, it was in the heart of George Whitefield. He loved the world that hated him."⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

Throughout much of the life of George Whitefield, he was as famous as any man in the English-speaking world. He was one of, if not the, foremost figure of the immense religious movement that held the attention of multitudes on both sides of the Atlantic. Though there were bitter critics, and many of them, he also won profound praise, and many of the notables in both Britain and America counted him as a dear friend. One such friend remarked that if one could

⁵⁶ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 132.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

make a list of the twenty most influential men, it would be highly likely that Whitefield's name would be one on it.⁶⁰

On the last evening of the life of George Whitefield, he started up the stairs to his bedroom. He was only fifty-five, but was tired and weak from his lifetime of evangelistic labors. For the previous several days he had been so weak he should not have left his bed. However, as he ascended the stairs, people pressing in at the door to hear the Gospel from his mouth one more time. He paused on the landing and began to preach, holding a candle in his hand. He preached once again with such zeal and passion, forgetting anything regarding time, that ultimately the candle burned to its end and died away. This was such a metaphor for the life of Whitefield, brilliant and bright, but burning out that night.⁶¹

Lunn says of Wesley, "Young men with Napoleonic ambitions, anxious to discover the secret of organizing and controlling vast undertakings, should study Henry Ford's Autobiography and Wesley's Journal."⁶² Later, he says, "Wesley must have failed, had he not possessed unlimited energy, a genius for administration, and the power to impose his will on the vast scattered organization."⁶³

These two men, contemporary and often in partnership, but very different in style and temperament, left a huge mark on the faith and the culture of the eighteenth century. It is hard to imagine either Britain or America without their influence of that time. They left much fruit behind and a legacy that will be seldom matched.

⁶⁰ Dallimore, 5.

⁶¹ Ibid., 37.

⁶² Lunn, 185.

⁶³ Ibid., 186.

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