

The SBJT Forum

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Prior to this role he served as Professor of Homiletics for twenty years at Western Seminary, where he also served as an Associate Dean and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program.

SBJT: Why is it important to remember George Whitefield as a preacher?

Robert Vogel: Agree with what he said or not, one could not ignore the preaching of George Whitefield. Benjamin Franklin, one of America's prominent Deists, was fascinated by Whitefield and his preaching, and though Franklin was never converted, he and Whitefield were fast friends. Crowds

thronged by the thousands to hear him in the fields or in the streets, filled with anticipation and enthusiasm, while knowing that he would confront their sin and warn them of the judgment of God. E. C. Dargan asserted that Whitefield's preaching, "for earnestness, eloquence, and immediate effect, was the admiration of his own age, and is one of the most sacred traditions of the Christian pulpit for all time" (Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, Vol. 2, 308). Accordingly, Whitefield is instructive to generations of preachers long after his time, and we would forget him at our peril. Here are three reasons why it is important to remember him.

First, Whitefield had a profound influence on evangelical Christianity in his day and beyond. Over the course of thirty-four years, Whitefield preached approximately 18,000 sermons. And through his preaching, he had a profound effect on both British and American Christianity as it developed in the 18th century, an era before modern media and travel made wide-ranging influence readily attainable. A newly-ordained Anglican, Whitefield began preaching outdoors to coal miners at Kingswood Common, near Bristol. He also preached in the evangelical awakening at Cambuslang, an extended outdoor meeting that continued for several months in 1743. Though Britain was his homeland, he made seven tours in the American colonies over a 30-year period, preaching from Georgia to Massachusetts. These seven tours,

ranging in length from several months to as many as four years, accounted for approximately one-third of Whitefield's ministry.

While the number of conversions directly and indirectly attributable to his preaching cannot be known, the immediate impact of his ministry was considerable; souls were converted and converts, particularly the young, were drawn into churches where they formed societies for continued growth in the faith.

Beyond the immediate, however, Whitefield helped set the course of American evangelicalism through his preaching. American evangelical identity is rooted deeply in the Great Awakening, in which Whitefield was a major shaping force. Through this influence, Whitefield has made a lasting mark on the American church.

As an evangelist, Whitefield sought to downplay denominational distinctions, and to promote the new birth among people of all religious backgrounds as they gathered to hear him preach. His strategy of field and street preaching was implemented because he was often denied access to the pulpits of the churches (due, in part, to his "enthusiasm"—his animated delivery stood in stark contrast with the staid forms of expression that were the norm in the pulpits of his day). Providentially, his open-air efforts reached diverse masses that he might not otherwise have touched.

Second, Whitefield was both an evangelist and a Calvinist. Some contend that the doctrines of Calvinism paralyze evangelism. Such was not the case with Whitefield, and it need not be the case in contemporary preaching.

Whitefield demonstrated that one holding Calvinist convictions could also preach the gospel with evangelistic intent, passion, and zeal. He believed that his hearers needed to be confronted forcefully with their own depravity, a condition remedied only by the saving grace of God extended to helpless sinners through the atoning work of Jesus Christ alone. Further, he believed that sinners must be warned of the awful judgment of God that awaits the unconverted. Frequent themes of his preaching addressed biblical realities of death, hell, and divine judgment. At the same time, he openly, passionately and consistently called sinners to repent, that they might find salvation from their sin, and avoid its attendant consequences.

Third, Whitefield modeled qualities of skillful pulpit proclamation. Consensus among historians is that Whitefield possessed rare oratorical abilities. Indeed, he has been called the "Demosthenes of the pulpit." Joseph Wakeley reported that the actor David Garrick said on one occasion, "I would give a hundred guineas if I could only say 'O!' like Mr. Whitefield;" and on another, Garrick claimed that Whitefield could "make his audiences weep

or tremble merely by varying his pronunciation of the word Mesopotamia” (in O. C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, 435). In his youth, Whitefield had developed an interest in the theater, and the capacities for delivery learned there would serve him well in his preaching. For example, knowing how to project his voice enabled him to be heard by audiences as large as 30,000 people, by Benjamin Franklin’s estimation.

Whitefield, however, did not see preaching as a theatric performance, but rather, he understood that skillful delivery enables one to engage an audience most effectively with the reality of the Gospel. While some moderns might believe that Whitefield’s flair for the dramatic made his preaching an act, his contemporaries agreed that his passion was the outflow of unqualified sincerity (O. C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, 436, notes that “effective acting ... is the ability to be convincing in the portrayal of emotions that are not the actor’s own, while effective preaching is the ability to convey one’s own deepest convictions with power”). Whitefield’s passion was driven by biblical conviction, and by the selfless concern that sinners would repent in the interest of their own eternal welfare. Though some might contend that he manipulated his audiences with his dramatic oratorical skills, stirring emotions such as fear, a better explanation of his ministry effectiveness is that his delivery was motivated by his confident passion for the Gospel, which he knew to be the power of God to save, and a message which had often been neglected in the pulpits of the churches.

The need is the same in all ages; while moderns seek satisfaction in forms of both religious and secular pursuits, true satisfaction of human need is found only in the Gospel of Christ and the new birth. And genuine, Gospel-driven passion in preaching is not manipulative.

Whitefield preached extemporaneously. This does not mean that his messages were not prepared. Rather, he preached without a written text or notes, which allowed him greater flexibility to adapt his message as warranted by the audience and the situation at hand. A departure from the pulpit norms of his day (i.e., read, lecture-like sermons), this then-novel approach gave a directness and a compelling quality to his messages—what Perry Miller has called a “rhetoric of sensation.” Extemporaneous preaching more readily accommodated the passions of the preacher, and established a connection between preacher and hearer. Whitefield urged the pastors of his day to preach without notes, and some of them began to attend to sentiment, emotion, and the affections as a result.

Because he preached extemporaneously, few of his sermons survive; and those that do exist, in print, probably do not do justice to the rhetorical

force they possessed as he preached them. Nonetheless, the literary artifacts reveal his ability to use figures of speech, turns of phrase, direct address, parallelism, rhetorical questions, exclamations, stories, pithy sayings, argumentation, and other literary and rhetorical features profitably. He used his powers of imagination and dramatic flair to make his narrative come to life. And although he was not the theologian that Jonathan Edwards was, he nonetheless respectably developed theological themes, particularly those directly related to the Gospel. Thus he was not merely one whose rhetorical devices veiled a lack of theological substance. His rhetorical abilities were used to engage his audiences and to press upon them the claims of the Gospel truth he proclaimed.

Whitefield's cultivation of delivery skills to express genuine heart-felt sentiments, his extemporaneous presentation, and his colorful idiom of expression are well worth emulation by contemporary preachers. Attention to these qualities can dispel boredom and enable engaging proclamation.

Some might contend that some of Whitefield's rhetorical *methods* could be effective in preaching today, but that his austere Calvinism, particularly his portrayal of the severity of God and judgment, would not be received as credible. Accordingly, they would say, preaching must be more "user friendly," adapted to contemporary thought preferences and devoted to the themes of religious humanism. But such accommodation simply will not do. The Gospel that Whitefield preached is the timeless, soul-satisfying truth of God, the message that helpless, hopeless sinners, dead in their sins, may find new birth and new life by the grace of God manifest in the redemptive work of Christ. And this Gospel is relevant for all people in all ages.

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He is also Professor of Preaching at The Master's Seminary, Teaching Fellow of Ligonier Ministries, and Professor in Residence of Truth Remains. Among his many publications, Dr. Lawson recently released, *The Evangelistic Zeal of George Whitefield* (Reformation Trust, 2014).

SBJT: You have just written a book on George Whitefield. What are some of the most important things the church in North America can learn from his life and ministry?

Steven J. Lawson: It was into the spiritual void of the eighteenth century that God raised up the English evangelist George Whitefield. Like lightning from a cloudless sky, Whitefield stepped onto

the world stage as the most prolific herald of the gospel since the days of the New Testament. God empowered Whitefield to become a blazing lamp set

on a hill in the midst of Satan's empire of darkness. This powerful figure of unusual gospel fervor stood at the headwaters of an Evangelical resurgence that is virtually unprecedented in church history. His thundering voice was the main catalyst for this spiritual awakening, as his preaching took the British Isles by storm and electrified the American colonies.

It is virtually impossible to read the life and ministry of George Whitefield without being impressed with his evangelistic zeal to proclaim the unsearchable riches of the grace of God through Christ. What do we learn from the life of George Whitefield, the great zealous evangelist of the eighteenth-century? We learn at least four important things: (1) Fervent spirituality; (2) Blazing zeal; (3) Firm conviction; (4) Blood earnestness. Let us focus on each of these areas.

First, Whitefield's passion in preaching was kindled by his own deepening love for God and his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In turn, this affection overflowed in his love for lost sinners. Biographer, Joseph Belcher, describes Whitefield as being "fired with love, from being in habitual contact with the cross" (*George Whitefield: A Biography, with Special Reference to His Labors in America* [New York: American Tract Society], 514). Such blazing love for God, kindled by personal communion with Jesus Christ, was the consistent theme that filled his soul and life. Belcher adds that this noted evangelist was consumed with "a heart burning with love and zeal for his Lord and Master" (*ibid.*, 351). This personal piety lies at the very center of Whitefield's effectiveness as a preacher. Perhaps he was more surprised than anyone that he was so mightily used by God and therein lies, in large part, the reason why he was used so mightily. He never lost sight of the reality that he was a lowly sinner saved by the matchless grace of His Master.

Second, this deep passion within Whitefield's soul revealed itself in the blazing zeal of his preaching. No one better describes Whitefield's pulpit presence and sermon delivery better than his gospel co-laborer, John Wesley. This former classmate noted that Whitefield spoke with "divine pathos"—that is, with God-aroused emotions -- and with "fervency of zeal, that was unequalled since the days of the apostles" (quoted by John Gillies, *Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield* [New Haven: Whitmore & Buckingham, and H. Mansfield, 1834], 244). Wesley claimed that the power of Whitefield's preaching "was not the force of education; no, nor the advice of his friends. It was no other than faith in a bleeding Lord" (*ibid.*, 247). Whitefield, he stated, spoke with "eloquence" and an "astonishing force of persuasion, which the most hardened sinners could not resist" (*ibid.*). It is recounted that Whitefield hardly ever preached with a flood of tears as he cried forth

for sinners to embrace Christ.

Third, Whitefield's passion arose from the depth of his biblical conviction. He was convinced God himself had taught him the biblical doctrines he embraced. Many preachers have weak convictions and therefore have little passion. However, George Whitefield was possessed with a full persuasion of the truth, which, in turn, fueled his passion. His heart was like a blazing furnace stoked by his belief in the gospel of grace. Such fervent convictions within Whitefield produced a power over his listener's hearts. Even unbelievers were drawn to the force of his firm belief in the truth. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: "I thought you do not believe in the gospel." Hume replied, "I don't, but he does" (cited in R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* [Wheaton: Crossway, 1991], xii). It was this overwhelming conviction in the truth of the Word of God that drew many like a magnet to listen to Whitefield's preaching.

Fourth, Whitefield preached with a deep sobriety and earnestness. Each time he mounted the pulpit, he was aware that eternal destinies were at stake. He knew the message he brought was of the utmost importance to his listeners. He preached the weighty message of a crucified Savior who secured eternal salvation for hell-bound sinners. Such preaching must be marked by gravity, not levity. The seriousness with which Whitefield approached his preaching was apparent to all. He proclaimed the gospel, Giles noted, with "a solemnity of manner" that conveyed "a sense of the importance of what he was about to say" (Gillies, *Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield*, 273-274). J. C. Ryle notes the "tremendous earnestness" in Whitefield's preaching ("George Whitefield and His Ministry," *Select Sermons of George Whitefield* [1958, reprint; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997], 36). Ian Paisley concurs, stating, "Whitefield was in deadly earnest. He preached as one who 'had measured eternity and taken the dimensions of a soul'" ("George Whitefield—Or From Pub to Pulpit: A Sermon Preached on the 250th Anniversary of Whitefield's Birth" [Belfast: Puritan Printing Co., 1964], 10-11). Such gravitas gripped his own soul and fueled his pulpit delivery.

Are we, like Jesus, like Paul, and like Whitefield, committed to seeing the conversion of our listeners? Do we long for their salvation in a way that our love, zeal, conviction, and earnestness can be heard, seen, and felt by them? Does our intense passion cause people to appreciate how serious the gospel call truly is?

In 1675, the Archbishop of Canterbury was speaking with a noted actor

named Butterson. The Archbishop said to Butterson, “Mr. Butterson, what is the reason you actors on stage can affect your congregations with speaking of things imaginary, as if they were real, while we in church speak of things real, which our congregations only receive as if they were imaginary?” Butterson responded, “The reason is very plain. We actors on stage speak of things imaginary, as if they were real and you in the pulpit speak of things real as if they were imaginary.” When told this account, Whitefield responded, “Therefore, I will bawl [shout loudly], I will not be a velvet-mouthed preacher” (Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 239-40).

We must have the burden of Whitefield, who told his listeners, “I shall return home with a heavy heart, unless some of you will arise and come to my Jesus” (George Whitefield, Sermon “Blind Bartimeus,” *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield*, vol. 5 [London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1772], 416). We need fewer dispassionate, exegetical lectures in the pulpit. Save those for the classroom. We need more strong proclamation as exemplified by Whitefield. We need fewer glib, light-hearted personalities in the pulpit. Instead, we need more intense passion in preaching as demonstrated by this gifted evangelist.

Ian Hugh Clary earned his PhD at the University of the Free State (Bloemfontein) where he wrote on Arnold Dallimore’s historiography.

He is also the co-editor (with G. Stephen Weaver, Jr.) of *The Pure Flame of Devotion: The History of Christian Spirituality, Essays in Honour of Michael A. G. Haykin* (Joshua Press, 2013). Ian and his wife Vicky have three children and are members of West Toronto Baptist Church, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

SBJT: Arnold Dallimore has written a very helpful and important two volume biography of George Whitefield. Discuss the circumstances around his writing this work.

Ian Hugh Clary: Arnold Dallimore (1911–1998) was born in London, Ontario, Canada, to English parents who had immigrated to Canada not long before his birth. His mother, Mabel, was from a middle-class background while his father, Arthur, was of working-class stock. They

struggled to make a life in Ontario, with Arthur regularly taking low-paying farm work. Dallimore was converted in his youth and soon attended Toronto Baptist Seminary, then under the leadership of the fundamentalist pastor, T. T. Shields (1873–1955). This was during the Depression and Dallimore had to sleep in a window sill in a boarding house, often going over to a nearby department store for “tomato soup”— a mixture of hot water

and ketchup! In 1935 he graduated with a bachelor's degree and pastored a series of churches in the Union of Regular Baptist Churches of Ontario and Quebec. After suffering through a serious bout of depression—precipitated by a bad church experience—he left ministry for a number of years. Upon his return he founded Cottam Baptist Church in Cottam, Ontario, Canada. Around this time the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches of Canada was founded (1953), which the Cottam church soon joined.

Due to the poverty that marked much of his life he struggled to provide for his growing family. Having heard about a nearby pastor who made money writing biographies of Christians like Brainerd and Finney, Dallimore decided to try his hand at writing. In seminary he had read about the great eighteenth-century revivalist George Whitefield (1714–1770). Believing that most biographies of the Grand Itinerant were inadequate, Dallimore thought he would try and improve on them and make a little money on the side. He had no formal training as an historian, and W. W. Fliescher, who had taught him church history at seminary, was admittedly weak. How did Dallimore accomplish the gargantuan task of writing a two-volume biography of Whitefield that many say is the most important biography written by an evangelical in the twentieth century?

Initially he wrote a three-hundred page draft in the 1950s that he felt did not really get at Whitefield the man. He had contacted a number of publishers to see if they would take it, but did not have the courage to send in his work. He eventually destroyed the manuscript and started again from scratch. Dallimore came into contact with Iain H. Murray of the Banner of Truth Trust in London, England, and Geoffrey Williams of the Evangelical Library. They both encouraged him to pursue Whitefield further, and he eventually flew over to the United Kingdom (UK) to do research. Murray brought Dallimore to Westminster Chapel and introduced him to Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981). During a two-hour meeting, Lloyd-Jones strongly encouraged Dallimore to complete and finish his work on Whitefield. With this encouragement, Murray and Dallimore drove to Wales, stopping in Gloucestershire to stay in the Bell Inn where Whitefield was born. Dallimore went on by himself to the National Library of Wales, where he found relevant resources to help his biography. He also consulted the British Library and other libraries in the United States. Upon his return to Canada he began the new work.

It took Dallimore twenty years to complete volume one of the biography. There was much heated discussion with his friends in England,

particularly as they sought to temper his negative conclusions about John Wesley (1703-1791). The senior advisor of the Banner of Truth, S. M. Houghton, also heavily edited the manuscript, much to Dallimore's chagrin. Around this time, and as a result of his reading of Whitefield's theology, he came to believe in the doctrines of grace. With his new-found theological convictions, he felt a sense of isolation from his Canadian Baptist peers. He also felt that they did not understand his writing endeavors. More and more he looked to the United Kingdom for friendship; Lloyd-Jones in particular became a source of support. By and large volume one was well-received. It was positively reviewed by professional historians like Geoffrey Nuttall and Allen Guelzo. The Dutch-American apologist and theologian, Cornelius Van Til, was apparently spotted mowing his lawn with a copy of Dallimore's work in hand!

With the completion of the first volume, Dallimore came to a critical point in his ministry. He had been the pastor in Cottam for nearly thirty years. The church was growing and in need of a new building. As a carpenter, Dallimore had helped design and build the first church, and now he was faced with the prospect of having to do so again. He knew that if he took up hammer and saw that he would not be able to complete the much-needed and anticipated second volume of his biography. As a number of students in the church had left for seminary, he did not have anyone to lighten his ministerial load. Sadly, he also experienced pressure from his congregants to give up writing. Knowing the importance of completing the biography, he opted to retire from pastoral ministry to pursue writing full-time. Letters between Dallimore and the Banner of Truth indicate that the next ten years were a real struggle for him financially, and his publisher proved to be a tremendous support. When he finally completed volume two, he had spent a combined total of thirty years working on Whitefield.

In an interview that I conducted with Mrs. May Dallimore, she explained to me that her husband always had a profound sense of calling. He felt it as a young man about to enter ministry; he felt it again when he returned after a hiatus to plant the church in Cottam. It was that deep sense of calling that undergirded his work on Whitefield. It is important to observe that had Dallimore not struggled financially, the Whitefield biography would not have been written. Thankfully he had the help of his publisher, which, coupled with his own detailed research, contributed to the writing of what David Lyle Jeffrey called, "The best modern study of Whitefield."

David Ceri Jones is Lecturer in History and Welsh History at Aberystwyth University in Aberystwyth, Wales. His PhD is from the University of Wales. Dr. Jones's research is currently focused on George Whitefield.

He has served as the co-organizer of the "George Whitefield at 300" conference held in June, 2014 at Pembroke College, Oxford. He is also preparing a critical edition of Whitefield's correspondence in conjunction with the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University. In addition he has written *The Fire Divine: Introducing Evangelicalism* (IVP, 2014) and the forthcoming, *Evangelicalism in Wales: 1945 to the Present* (University of Wales, 2016). Dr. Jones also serves as the joint series editor of the Ashgate Studies in Evangelicalism, and edits the *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*.

Whitefield was better known as an itinerant evangelist whose activities sparked religious revivals throughout the British Isles and the American colonies. For almost forty years, Whitefield was almost continually on the move, crossing the Atlantic on an unprecedented seven separate occasions. An expert networker he connected evangelicals throughout the Atlantic world often as far removed from one another socially and culturally, as well as in terms of geography. In the process he created the evangelical movement.

One of the main means he used to facilitate such interactions, and build such a movement, was letter writing. Letters have been called the "paste of history;" they bind together people, events and ideas, and through them we can often get the most revealing view into the past. While the letters and writings of some of Whitefield's contemporaries, including John Wesley, Charles Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, have been edited and subjected to sustained scholarly inquiry, Whitefield's correspondence has never been collected in its entirety, nor properly edited and interpreted.

The British funding body, the Leverhulme Trust has recently awarded me a generous grant to produce a new edition of Whitefield's trans-Atlantic correspondence. Numbering over 2,250 individual items, the collection naturally includes exchanges with all of the leading religious figures of the day, including both Wesley brothers, the dissenting divine Philip Doddridge, the Welsh revivalist Howel Harris, the Countess of Huntingdon, the Mora-

SBJT: What is the significance of your current project to produce a critical edition of George Whitefield's letters?

David Ceri Jones: 2014 marks the tercentenary of the birth of George Whitefield (1714-70), the leader of the British evangelical revival and the American Great Awakening who, for a time in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, preached to congregations numbering twenty and thirty thousand in London, Bristol, Philadelphia and Boston.

Despite achieving something approaching celebrity status throughout the British Atlantic world during his lifetime, Whitefield has remained a shadowy and poorly understood figure. A Church of England clergyman, White-

vian leader Count Zinzendorf, and the Americans Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin. However, what makes the correspondence of wider and compelling interest is the socially-extensive range of the collection. Humble converts, local lay Methodist preachers and leaders, women and native Americans all figure at different points.

Despite his best efforts, Whitefield was never able to escape the celebrity and fame of his youth. It has also cast an extremely long shadow over his posthumous reputation and later attempts to understand him. Over-zealous editors keen to celebrate Whitefield's achievements, preserve or enhance his reputation or popularise him through heavily abridged versions of some of what he wrote, have severely compromised the reliability of his extensive writings and manuscript papers, including his correspondence. Many of these bowdlerized editions of his writings are the ones most commonly consulted, and the ones that remain in print. At the heart of this project is, therefore, an attempt at historical retrieval. Through the transcription and editing of Whitefield's manuscript letters, this project will cut through the layers of later scholarship to reveal a more authentic Whitefield than has been seen hitherto.

The recovery of this important source will facilitate renewed investigation not only of Whitefield's life and the evangelical movement, but also relations between Britain and America in the colonial period, the growth of "democratic" and egalitarian thinking, and the evolution of attitudes towards race, class and gender. These will be addressed not only through the new edition of his correspondence, but also by means of a volume of critical essays, some of which were presented at the largest Whitefield conference to be held during this tercentenary year, at Whitefield's *alma mater*, Pembroke College, Oxford in June 2014.