

**THE RHETORIC OF GEORGE WHITEFIELD**

**CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES**

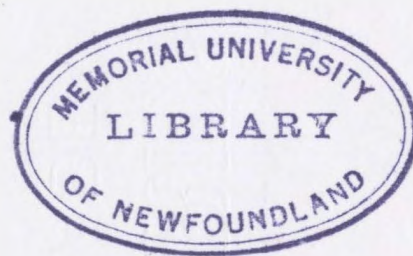
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THE RHETORIC OF GEORGE WHITEFIELD

by

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the requirements for the degree of Master of  
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### ABSTRACT

George Whitefield is still an anomaly in literary as well as religious circles. Many have stated, quite categorically, that he has no place in literature. Even those who regard him as a figure of considerable importance in English church history and the development of preaching, experience difficulty in determining his place as a writer.

The reason for this is twofold: First, many now regard the sermon as a religious exercise and nothing more. They have forgotten the prominence it once enjoyed in the social, intellectual, literary, as well as religious life of our forbears. Second, some, while recognizing the sermon as a legitimate literary form, find Whitefield's extant sermons devoid of grace or merit. It must be confessed that these sermons now appear rather lifeless, pedestrian, and needlessly repetitive. Someone has said, 'the bows of eloquence are buried with the archers'. Whitefield is proof of the truth of that statement. In reading his sermons we are conscious that something has been lost between the pulpit and the press. That something is the preacher's oratorical prowess which for thirty-five years made him the undisputed regent of the rostrum in England, Scotland, and America.

In an age of great prose writers, the age of Swift, Sterne, Addison, Richardson and Fielding, Whitefield is a peripheral figure. His claim to a place in literature must rest upon his

gifts as a rhetorician and his contribution to English oratorical prose and not as a conscious prose stylist nor even as a theologian. As an orator, he was a consummate artist. His fluent delivery enlivened even the most threadbare homilies and doctrines. The aridity of theology was transfigured by his rhetoric.

There were few in church or state who remained indifferent to the itinerant evangelist; the dynamic and imposing personality that he was forced men to make a decision about him. Among the secular literati, he was variously regarded. Some, like Dr. Johnson, Richard Graves, and Tobias Smollett summarily dismissed him as a clerical oddity. Others, like Samuel Foote, Alexander Pope, and Hogarth parodied him. Still others, like David Garrick, Lord Bolingbroke, and Benjamin Franklin praised him as the greatest orator of the age.

This thesis has been examined and approved by:



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PREFACE

'The History of Evangelical Revival', Canon Smyth has remarked, 'is essentially a history of personalities rather than opinions'. The truth of this statement can scarcely be refuted. Such men as John Wesley, Charles H. Spurgeon, Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday and, more recently, Billy Graham can be said to have achieved their remarkable success as preachers more through personal charisma than through any theological innovations. Objectively examined, their sermons reveal little homiletic originality; there is only that which has been said many times by countless other revivalists. The difference is to be found in the personalities of the men who preached and, what is closely allied to this, their presentation of the message.

Among the more illustrious of the evangelists who, through the power of their personalities and preaching, have left an indelible impression upon their respective epochs is the eighteenth century evangelist George Whitefield. Like the age which gave him birth, Whitefield was something of an anomaly. Even from the distance of two centuries, it is difficult to arrive at an objective assessment of either the man or his ministry. That in his own day he generated controversy about himself and his evangelical endeavours is evident from even a perfunctory perusal of eighteenth century writings. Those who came into personal contact with him, and the number was great, regarded him variously

as saint or demon; as God's divinely appointed apostle whose task it was to waken men from the slumber of eighteenth century religion, or as an incessant and belligerent offence to the spirit of true and benign Christianity; as a truly inspired man of God, or as a grandiose imposter who revelled in his personal fame and grew rich on his 'humanitarian' enterprises. Many loved him, many hated him; few ignored him. The man he was, like the message he preached, forced people to make a decision.

It is difficult, I believe, to exaggerate the impact or estimate the ramifications of Whitefield's preaching upon the people among whom he lived and laboured. His influence reached into every part of the British Isles and across the sea to America. Thousands flocked to hear him wherever he went and the impression he left was ineffaceable. He preached from pulpits, balconies, windows, mountebank stands, staircases, coffins of executed criminals, street corners, in church yards and in open fields. He preached to multitudes and the scant few; to all sorts and conditions of men, irrespective of their station in life or their spiritual condition. And always there was an urgency about what he had to say, an urgency that arrested men's attention and often effected in them a 'conversion'. Indefatigable in his labours for his Lord and uncompromising in his convictions, he preached some eighteen thousand sermons during his thirty-five year ministry, or an average of ten per week. Possessed of a powerful voice, a robust body (notwithstanding his frequent protestations to the

contrary), a ready wit, and an astute if not profound mind, Whitefield combined with all this the indefinable and indispensable quality of character which placed him among the greatest orators of the eighteenth century.

To those unfamiliar with Whitefield's career and achievements all of this may appear exuberant panegyric. Unlike John and Charles Wesley, whose names have been carefully preserved and enhanced by the movement for whose inception they rightfully claim credit, Whitefield has not had, nor did he desire to have, a specific sect or following to venerate either his name or his achievements. Perhaps his vigorous disagreement with John Wesley over the doctrine of 'election' and his strong Calvinistic leanings have kept Methodists from granting Whitefield his rightful praise as the primary advocate of Methodism in eighteenth century Britain and America. If John Wesley can be said to be the organizing mind behind the Methodist movement and his brother Charles the poet who captured its spirit in hymn and song, then George Whitefield can be called its chief salesman. Especially among the poorer people was his salesmanship effective, though his success was by no means limited to the lower stratum of society.

It is the purpose of this study to examine Whitefield's oratory in an effort to explain what it was about his preaching and personality that made him such an imposing and dynamic figure. I shall attempt to point out his place in the homiletic, theological, and rhetorical traditions. I purpose, also, through an



examination of his sermon rhetoric, to show his contribution to English oratorical prose. That contribution was highly individualistic, for Whitefield's style of writing and preaching, like his religious belief and practice, was a variation from the eighteenth century norm. Like the Romantics, of whom in many ways he was a precursor, Whitefield was in rebellion against the spirit as well as many of the conventions of the 'age of reason'. Ratiocination and scholarship he eyed suspiciously and placed all store by a religion that could be felt.

Part of the problem involved in appreciating the contribution of a man like George Whitefield lies in understanding the place of importance in social, intellectual, literary, as well as religious life once occupied by the sermon. In this age of mass media, highly specialized entertainment, and professional men of letters, the sermon has been deprived of many of its former functions. Its purpose is now a specifically religious one. For our ancestors it was much more. Among other things, it was regarded as literature and reflected perhaps better than any other form changing literary tastes and prose styles. The influences of preaching upon the general development of medieval literature have been ably traced by G.R. Owst in his Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (1933). An excellent study of the place of the seventeenth century sermon in the literary life of the time has been made by W. Frazer Mitchell, English Pulpit Oratory From Andrewes to Tillotson (1932). More recently the social and

political function of the sermon has been studied by Millar MacLure, The Paul's Cross Sermons (1958). I hope to show Whitefield's place in, and contribution to, this extremely interesting branch of literature in a still later period.

Special thanks are extended to Dr. A. Macdonald and Dr. G.M. Story for their advice and guidance. I am indebted also to Dr. E.R. Seary, Head of the Department of English, for his suggestions and encouragement, and to Miss Jean Carmichael and other members of the staff of The Memorial University Library for much valuable assistance.

CHAPTER I

A BACKGROUND BIOGRAPHY

## CHAPTER I

Apart from the fact that he was born in Gloucester, 'that venerable country town ... connected with more than one name which ought to be dear to every lover of Protestant truth',<sup>1</sup> there was little about Whitefield's early life to portend his meteoric career as a preacher. The fact, however, that he was born in December (1714), and in an inn (the Bell Inn, kept by his parents) seemed, at least to George, to be charged with something more than ordinary significance. '... the circumstance of my being born in an inn, has been often of service to me, in exciting my endeavours to make good my mother's expectations, and to follow the example of my dear Saviour, who was born in a manger belonging to an inn.'<sup>2</sup> In his Journal he records the 'early stirrings of corruption in my heart',<sup>3</sup> which later seemed sufficient evidence of the fact that he, like all mankind, was 'conceived and born in sin.'<sup>4</sup>

The doctrine of original sin in Adam, imputed upon the heads of all his posterity and finding free and obvious manifestation in the 'natural man', was the basis of Whitefield's theology. In this light, his account of what most psychologists would call a normal childhood is interesting.

I can truly say, I was froward from my mother's womb. I was so brutish as to hate instruction, and used purposely to shun all opportunities of receiving it. I soon gave pregnant proofs of an impudent temper. Lying, filthy talking, and foolish jesting, I was much addicted to, even when very young. Stealing from my mother I



thought no theft at all, and used to make no scruple of taking money out of her pockets before she was up. I have frequently betrayed my trust, and have more than once spent money I took in the house, in buying fruits, tarts, etc., to satisfy my sensual appetite. Numbers of Sabbaths have I broken, and generally used to behave myself very irreverently in God's sanctuary. Much money have I spent in plays, and in the common entertainments of the age. Cards, and reading romances, were my heart's delight.

Often have I joined with others in playing roguish tricks, but was generally, if not always, happily detected. For this I have often since, and do now, bless and praise God.<sup>5</sup>

If he had very early in his life a deep conviction of his fallen nature, he was also very early aware of 'movings of the blessed Spirit upon [his] heart',<sup>6</sup> which assured him of God's love for him; an awareness he had to the end of his life. At this time also, George, as have many children before and since, felt his youthful imagination strangely excited by thoughts of becoming a preacher.

I was always fond of being a clergyman, used frequently to imitate the minister's reading prayers, etc. Part of the money I used to steal from my parent I gave to the poor, and some books I privately took from others (for which I have since restored fourfold) I remember were books of devotion.<sup>7</sup>

His mother's remarriage when George was ten (his father having died eight years before) proved financially embarrassing for all concerned. Yet she took care that her youngest son finished his elementary education. His precocious talent as a public speaker was already apparent.

When I was about twelve, I was placed at a school called St. Mary de Crypt, in Gloucester, the last grammar school I ever went to. Having a good elocution and memory, I was remarked for making speeches before the Corporation at their annual visitation...

During the time of my being at school, I was very

fond of reading plays, and have kept from school for days together to prepare myself for acting them. My Master seeing how mine and my school-fellows' vein ran, composed something of this kind for us himself, and caused me to dress in girls clothes (which I had often done), to act a part before the Corporation. The remembrance of this hath often filled me with confusion of face, and I hope will do so, even to the end of my life.<sup>8</sup>

'The remembrance' of these activities might have embarrassed the George Whitefield of later years; but even he would have admitted that the experience and training thus gained were invaluable to him as a public orator.

When, at fifteen, all doors to a university education seemed unalterably closed, George defected from school to help his mother in what was by now an impoverished public-house. '... I put on my blue apron and my snuffers, washed mops, cleaned rooms, and, in a word, became a professed and common drawer for nigh a year and a-half'.<sup>9</sup> But George Whitefield was not destined to remain a 'common drawer'. Hearing from a former school-fellow how he had, through acting as a servitor of Pembroke College, defrayed all his expenses that year at Oxford, young George, encouraged by his mother, decided he would like to exchange his blue apron for an Oxford gown. To prepare for his entrance examinations at university, he returned to his old school to resume study in the classics. But his second stay at Mary de Crypt school is noteworthy for more than the fact that he was able to make sufficient academic progress to qualify for admission to Oxford. While there, he became increasingly conscious of his own 'vile and sinful nature'. Here began his search for forgiveness, and the release from his

overwhelming sense of guilt.

At eighteen, Whitefield entered Pembroke College, Oxford, where his quest for peace of mind continued. At this time, there was at Oxford a group of young men who, because of the rigorous religious disciplines they practised, were called 'Methodists'. Included in this group were John Wesley, the acknowledged leader and a Fellow of Lincoln College, his younger brother Charles, and James Hervey. Whitefield had already subjected himself to many of the ascetic disciplines this group was practising collectively; and he admired the Methodists from a distance. It was almost inevitable that he should eventually become one of the group. Once he had joined, his efforts to find spiritual release were intensified not because of the wishes of the group but by a sense of guilt that was more acute than ever. His wilful neglect of his personal appearance and health proved a matter of concern to College authorities. Yet, for all his masochistic privations and fastings, spiritual emancipation was not achieved. His body weakened by these rigorous, self-imposed exercises and his spirit emaciated by unresolved conflicts, he finally succumbed to an illness which lasted seven weeks. The climax of this 'season in the wilderness' was the dramatic deliverance from guilt which came towards the end.

About the end of the seven weeks, and after I had been groaning under an unspeakable pressure both of body and mind for above a twelvemonth, God was pleased to set me free in the following manner: One day, perceiving an uncommon draught, and a disagreeable clamminess in my mouth, and using things to allay my thirst, but in vain,

it was suggested to me, that when Jesus cried out: 'I thirst', his sufferings were near an end. Upon which I cast myself down on the bed, crying out: 'I thirst, I thirst.' Soon after this, I found and felt in myself that I was delivered from the burden that had so heavily oppressed me! The spirit of mourning was taken from me, and I knew what it was truly to rejoice in God my Saviour, and for some time could not avoid singing psalms wherever I was; but my joy gradually became more settled, and, blessed by God, has abode and increased in my soul (saving a few casual intermissions) ever since.<sup>10</sup>

This was Whitefield's Damascus Road; his place of conversion. This was the event whose recollection could vivify for himself and his audiences the conversion experience. From that day Whitefield never doubted the reality or efficacy of such an experience. That he should later find his life's work in the ministry, and as an itinerant evangelist who preached for a dramatic spiritual conversion, was sealed that day at Oxford.

But Whitefield was not yet ready to offer himself to the ministry. Returning to Gloucester, he continued to make diligent use of the means of grace, to visit the prisons and to ruminate about religion with anyone who wished to engage him. It is difficult to say what exactly Oxford had meant to Whitefield other than being the place of his conversion. It has been suggested that perhaps the influence of Oxford upon the young proselyte had not been so very great. 'Whatever manner he had, it was certainly not the Oxford manner. He had the cheerful vitality and the unabashed emotionalism of the lower orders from which he sprang. Oxford neither made nor marred him.'<sup>11</sup>

Though the events of the past few years had appeared to point



him towards entering holy orders, yet it was not without trepidation that he finally went to see the Bishop of Gloucester.

... the bishop told me he had heard of my character, liked my behaviour at church, and inquiring my age, "notwithstanding," says he, "I have declared I would not ordain any one under three-and-twenty, yet I shall think it my duty to ordain you whenever you come for holy orders." He then made me a present of five guineas, to buy me a book.<sup>12</sup>

On Sunday, June 20, 1736, at the age of twenty-one, George Whitefield, overawed by the august solemnity of Gloucester Cathedral and the gravity of the cause to which he was dedicating his life, was ordained a minister of the Church of England.

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 smelted down, and I offered up my whole spirit, soul and body, to the service of God's sanctuary!<sup>13</sup>

The following Sunday, he made his pulpit debut. His first sermon was a portent of what was to come. His own account deserves to be cited in full.

Last Sunday, in the afternoon, I preached my first sermon in the church of St. Mary de Crypt where I was baptized, and also first received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Curiosity, as you may easily guess, drew a large congregation together upon the occasion. The sight at first a little awed me; but I was comforted with a heartfelt sense of the divine presence, and soon found the unspeakable advantage of having been accustomed to public speaking when a boy at school, and of exhorting and teaching the prisoners and poor people at their private houses whilst at university. By these means, I was kept from being daunted over much. As I proceeded, I perceived the fire kindled, till at last, though so young, and amidst a crowd of those who knew me in my infant, childish days, I trust I was enabled to speak with some degree of gospel authority. Some few mocked, but most for the present seemed struck; and I have since heard, that a complaint had been made to the bishop, that I drove fifteen mad the

first sermon. The worthy prelate, as I am informed, wished that the madness might not be forgotten before next Sunday.<sup>14</sup>

Thus began his extraordinary career as a preacher; thus it continued with unabated vigour and unstinting zeal to the end of his life. No occasion was ever so solemn or gay, holy or unholy, significant or insignificant, as not to be improved by an exposition of scripture. He never lost his ability to disturb men (if not to drive them mad!); and the fire he perceived kindled that Sunday afternoon in June, 1736, scarcely waned for thirty-five years.

Almost immediately after ordination he returned to Oxford and took his B.A. From there he went to London to officiate at the chapel of the Tower of London. His first service in London, at Bishopsgate Church, created almost as great a stir as had his first at Gloucester. His youthful appearance caused many of his congregation to entertain doubts about his ability to preach; but he very soon dispelled their apprehensions. 'They were thunderstruck and delighted',<sup>15</sup> he wrote. As a consequence, other London churches opened their pulpits to him, and with each sermon his popularity increased.

To say Whitefield was indifferent to personal fame and accolades, as some have done, would be as untrue as it is unnecessary. To say, however, that he placed more store by acquiescing in the dictates of conscience than by the acquisition of popular acclaim as a preacher is easily verifiable. Nowhere is this truth more in evidence than in an incident which happened early in his

ministry. Though in the midst of new-found acclaim at London, he accepted an invitation from John Wesley, then in America, to assist him there in his missionary labours. It should be remembered, too, that he remained adamant in that decision even when John Wesley himself tried, just prior to Whitefield's departure for America, to dissuade him from going. On February 2, 1738, Whitefield left England for Savannah, Georgia, on board the Whitaker. In the year that had elapsed from the time of his decision to go to America until he was actually able to go, he was occupied doing the thing he enjoyed most, preaching. In Bristol, Bath, and London alike, he spoke extemporaneously and with astonishing results. In a year and a half he had achieved an incredibly widespread reputation as a preacher. At twenty-three and not yet admitted to priest's orders, he had created a sensation in religious circles in England for which it is difficult to find a parallel.

Neither the scope nor the purpose of this study will permit a consideration of Whitefield's labours in America; but his remarkable success there should be noted. At Savannah, he founded an orphanage. He called it Bethesda and for its building and subsequent maintenance he assumed almost complete responsibility. He made a total of seven crossings to America before dying there on September 30, 1770. America was his first love; and although his efforts there were criticized by some, as they were in Britain, yet the effect of his work was, in Augustus Toplady's words, an 'astonishingly extensive usefulness.'<sup>16</sup> He preached in nearly

every major city and town in New England and always the response was dynamic: some cheered, some jeered; few, if any, were apathetic. His vigorous, youthful appearance, his revolutionary and explosive style of preaching, his tolerance of, and respect for, people of other religious faiths and cultural backgrounds were all very compatible with the spirit of America.

Many saw him as the apotheosis of the spirit and ideal of the new world; but this alone will not explain his success as an evangelist there. There was something more universal and profound about Whitefield's appeal. His sermons were as well received in Great Britain as in the Colonies. Scotland could never hear enough of him; and his appeals on behalf of his overseas orphan home were so charged with pathos as to make spendthrift the most frugal Scottish heart. He visited Scotland fourteen times and preached almost without exception to crowded and responsive congregations.

On December 8, 1738, Whitefield arrived back in London after his first visit to America. Two things had led him to return: first, he wished now to be admitted to priest's orders in the Church of England, and, second, he hoped through preaching to raise enough money to permit construction of his new orphanage in America. Though he was civilly, even warmly, received by the Bishop of London and the Archbishop of Canterbury, yet he was soon to discover that many of the clergy were not favourably disposed towards him. Two days after his arrival, five London churches refused him the use of their pulpits. The publication of his



Journal during his absence seems to have caused this change of attitude. The Journal, which was published by some well-meaning friends without the author's consent or revision, betrayed a jarring tumidity in places. Later on Whitefield revised it before having it reprinted.

Notwithstanding attitudes of hostility towards the young evangelist-missionary by many of his fellow clergy, he was ordained a priest on January 14, 1739. Resentment and recrimination, however, continued to increase and an ever diminishing number of pulpits was available to him. Nor can Whitefield be absolved altogether of blame for this. On occasions he spoke quite temperariously about particular members of the cloth. Of the clergy at Bristol, for example, he once said that he could produce two cobblers who knew 'more of true Christianity than all the clergy of the city'.<sup>17</sup> The situation soon reached an impasse. Unable to find a church in which to expound, and unable to extinguish the burning desire in his heart to preach, he resolved to go 'into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in'. His first excursion 'into the hedges' was accidental. He had gone to Kingswood, near Bristol, to minister to the colliers there, and had found this group of impoverished workers without a place of worship. On Saturday afternoon, February 17, he preached to some two hundred at Rose Green. His own account of the effect of his sermon upon his congregation is poignant.

Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was a friend to publicans,

and came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. 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.<sup>18</sup>

As he himself said, 'the ice [was] now broken'.<sup>19</sup> Field-preaching had been inaugurated. Later, John Wesley would follow the practice; but Whitefield had been an innovator. Set against the background of nature rather than a narrow church chancel, 'with a table for [his] pulpit, and the heavens for [his] sounding-board',<sup>20</sup> Whitefield found an expansive new freedom and a rich new source of metaphor and analogy. His incredibly powerful voice made it possible for him to make himself heard, sometimes in the face of raucous competition, by the thousands who flocked to hear him. After his experience at Kingswood, he was convinced that the idea of field-preaching had been suggested to him by God, and he continued its practice to the end of his life.

Two months after his first open-air service, Whitefield introduced outdoor preaching to London. Again the initial occasion came more by accident than design. On Friday, April 27, at the invitation of the minister, the Reverend Stonehouse, he travelled to Islington to preach. While the service was in progress, but before the sermon had begun, the church-warden demanded to see Whitefield's licence to preach in that church. When it could not be produced, he was forbidden to speak. After the service inside had been concluded, Whitefield preached in the church-yard, where a licence was not required.

Let not the adversaries say, I have thrust myself out of their synagogues. No; they have thrust me out. And since the self-righteous men of this generation count themselves unworthy, I go out into the highways and hedges, and compel harlots, publicans, and sinners, to come in, that my Master's house may be filled.<sup>21</sup>

From the church-yard at Islington to the Moorfields, Kennington Common, Blackheath, Mary-le-bonne Fields, and other places, his field-preaching spread. Not that Whitefield ever lost respect for the Church of England or refused the services of its pulpits when they were available to him. On the contrary; but here, through outdoor preaching, he realized that he could make contact with many who would have never entered a church to hear him or anyone else. It is difficult to exaggerate his success as a field-preacher. Some entries in his journal for April and May, 1739, typify a response that continued throughout his ministry.

Sunday, April 29. - Preached in the morning at Moorfields to an exceeding great multitude. Being weakened by my morning's preaching, in the afternoon I refreshed myself by a little sleep; and at five, went and preached at Kennington Common, about two miles from London, where no less than thirty thousand people were supposed to be present.

Tuesday, May 1. - Preached after public service in Islington church-yard, to a greater congregation than ever... Now I know more and more that the Lord calls me into the fields; for no house or street is able to contain half the people that come to hear the word.

Wednesday, May 2. - Preached this evening again to above ten thousand, at Kennington Common.

Sunday, May 6. - Preached this morning in Moorfields to about twenty thousand people, who were very quiet and attentive, and much affected. Went to public worship morning and evening; and at six preached at Kennington.

But such a sight never were my eyes blessed with before. I believe there were no less than fifty thousand people, near fourscore coaches, besides great numbers of horses; and what is most remarkable, there was such an awful silence amongst them, and the word of God came with such power, that all, I believe, were pleasingly surprised. God gave me great enlargement of heart. I continued my discourse for an hour and a-half; and when I returned home, I was filled with such love, peace, and joy, that I cannot express it.<sup>22</sup>

To say that from this time on there was a certain sameness about the life of George Whitefield is not to say, or even imply, that the sameness was in any way akin to monotony. Quite the opposite; the last thirty-two years of his ministry were as eventful as the first three. Though his fame as a preacher spread and the effects of his preaching became more celebrated, yet his evangelical efforts were not without appreciable opposition. Some, like the Bishop of London, Alexander Garden in America, and his former friends, the Erskines, in Scotland, vehemently opposed him on personal as well as theological grounds. Others, like John Wesley, admired his character but took issue with his Calvinistic leanings in theology. Among the secular literati, Whitefield was either summarily dismissed as a clerical oddity, as by Dr. Johnson, unmercifully parodied, as by Samuel Foote, or celebrated as the greatest orator of the age, as by David Garrick and Benjamin Franklin.

There were also setbacks of other kinds. Not infrequently, financial debt, incurred mostly by his insistence upon supporting Bethesda, proved embarrassing for him. It should be noted, however, that the amount of money raised for this cause is remarkable

in view of the poverty of a vast majority in his congregations. His marriage, too, was a disillusioning experience, if the scant reference he makes to his wife in his writings or the pathetically little time he spent with her are indicative. The death of his only son, at four months, February 1744, also proved saddening for the evangelist. On occasions he was physically attacked while he preached, and, in one instance, while he slept at Plymouth.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, through it all, action and reaction, acclaim and recrimination, success and failure, ran one persistent thread. For Whitefield, successful living depended not so much upon circumstance as upon temperament. Thus the sameness already alluded to was not so much in the way he was treated by circumstance as in his response to its treatment. His one insatiable desire was to 'preach Christ crucified', and this he did whether men praised him or blamed him. Whether the message was blandly received or rudely rejected, the revivalist preached with intrepid zeal.

For Whitefield, as for most men, life was not lived entirely on the heights of success or in the ravine of failure: much of it was lived on the plateau of routine. This point is especially well illustrated by Dr. J.C. Ryle in his account of Whitefield's ministerial duties in London during the winter season.

His regular ministerial work in London for the winter season, when field-preaching was necessarily suspended, was something prodigious. His weekly engagements at the Tabernacle in Tottenham Court Road, which was built

for him when the pulpits of the Established Church were closed, comprised the following work:- Every Sunday morning he administered the Lord's Supper to several hundred communicants at half-past six. After this he read prayers, and preached both morning and afternoon. Then he preached again in the evening at half-past five, and concluded by addressing a large society of widows, married people, young men and spinsters, all sitting separately in the area of the Tabernacle, with exhortations suitable to their respective stations. On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings, he preached regularly at six. On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings, he delivered lectures. This, it will be observed, made thirteen sermons a week! And all this time he was carrying on a large correspondence with people in almost every part of the world.<sup>24</sup>

It is not surprising that such exacting and exhausting efforts should bring about a premature death for Whitefield. On September 30, 1770, at Newbury Port, near Boston, the evangelist died. His death came less than twenty-four hours after he had kept his last field-preaching appointment. His passing occasioned eulogies from both sides of the Atlantic. Among those who paid tribute by funeral sermons were Venn - the author of The Whole Duty of Man, Augustus Toplady and John Wesley. Perhaps Toplady gave most eloquent expression to those thoughts which clamoured for expression in the hearts of thousands.

If absolute command over the passions of immense auditories be the mark of a consummate orator, he was the greatest of the age. If the strongest good sense, the most generous expansion of heart, the most artless but captivating affability, the most liberal exemption from bigotry, the purest and most transpicuous integrity, the brightest cheerfulness, and the promptest wit, enter into the composition of social excellence, he was one of the best companions in the world.

If to be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the works of the Lord; if a union of the most brilliant with the most solid ministerial gifts, ballasted by a

deep and humbling experience of grace, and crowned with the most extended success in the conversion of sinners, the edification of saints, be signatures of a commission from heaven, George Whitefield cannot but stand highest on the modern list of Christian Ministers.

England has had the honour of producing the greatest men, in almost every walk of useful knowledge. At the head of these are Archbishop Bradwardin, the prince of divines; Milton, the prince of poets; Newton, the prince of philosophers; Whitefield, the prince of preachers.<sup>25</sup>

With Whitefield's death, the evangelical arm of the Christian Church was considerably weakened. For thirty-five years he had been the prince of the pulpit, the greatest preacher and orator of the century. His rhetoric had become both the symbol and priority of his office. Wherein the magnetism and captivation of his oratory resided will be considered in subsequent chapters.

## NOTES

- 1  
Select Sermons of George Whitefield, p. 11.
- 2  
Sketches of Life & Labours of The Rev. G. Whitefield, p. 9.
- 3  
ibid., p. 9.
- 4  
ibid., p. 9.
- 5  
ibid., p. 10.
- 6  
ibid., p. 11.
- 7  
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- 8  
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- 9  
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- 10  
ibid., pp. 34-35.
- 11  
Quoted by R.A. Knox, Enthusiasm, p. 490.
- 12  
Sketches, p. 44.
- 13  
ibid., p. 47.
- 14  
ibid., pp. 52-53.
- 15  
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- 16  
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- 17  
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- 18  
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- 19  
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- 20  
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- 21  
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- 23  
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- 24  
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- 25  
Sketches, pp. 255-56.

CHAPTER II

WHITEFIELD'S THEOLOGY

## CHAPTER II

Like many other outstanding preachers, George Whitefield was not a theologian. The more practical and pressing demands of preaching always laid greater claim upon his energies and attention than the systematic study of the 'queen of sciences'.

Strictly speaking, Whitefield was not even a theologian, not so much because he did not produce a theology - as he did not - but because he did not address himself formally to the problems of speculative thought, nor attempt to systematize his dogma in any organized form.<sup>1</sup>

He appears to have spent little time in study during his ministry, which is understandable when the stringent preaching schedule he subjected himself to is remembered. For the most part he appears to have held erudition suspect. He eyed with mistrust those 'letter-learned' clergy who were, it seemed to him, more concerned with becoming scholars than saints. His theological concepts and beliefs were relatively few and remarkable for their ingenuous nature. At times, in his preaching, he was theologically inconsistent, being influenced more by the exigencies of the moment than any hard and fast theological schemmata.

Since he did not attempt to set down or devise any formal theology, we can do no more than examine his sermons to discover what he actually believed. Because of the lamentably little time he could give to preparation, there is an inevitable sameness about his sermons. Almost any single sermon embodies most of his fundamental beliefs about religion. The basis of his

belief and the theme of his preaching is essentially that employed by evangelists in every age. In his natural state man is estranged from God; Jesus Christ, God's Son, by his sacrificial atonement, has made reconciliation between man and God possible; repudiation of sin and open identification with Christ effect salvation for man. As previously pointed out, there was nothing even slightly novel about this theology. Its special appeal to eighteenth century audiences lay in the dynamic personality of the man who vocalized it and in the peculiar emphasis and stress he gave to it.

Both in his own time and since, Whitefield has been regarded as a Calvinist. Yet, though he believed himself to have embraced wholeheartedly the doctrine of 'election', he once remarked to John Wesley that he had read nothing of Calvin and that his source of belief in this matter was not Geneva but Christ and his apostles.<sup>2</sup> Thus, as Stuart Clark Henry has shown,<sup>3</sup> strictly speaking, Whitefield cannot be considered a Calvinist since he neither shared Calvin's propensity for a highly systematic presentation of thought, nor was he aware, except in a very superficial way, of the primary tenets of Calvin's theology.

But, whatever its origin, there should be no underestimating the emphasis Whitefield placed upon the doctrine of election in his preaching. When Adam committed the sin of disobedience against God, he fell, and all succeeding generations of humanity with him. Being our 'federal head', his sin became, ipso facto,

ours by imputation. Original sin was 'that original corruption each of us brings into the world with us, which renders us liable to God's wrath and damnation'.<sup>4</sup> This fact was so in evidence to Whitefield as not to need substantiation. The hostility of the animals of nature to man, the disobedience of little children, and the moral dereliction of society were incontrovertible arguments to prove original sin.

God, however, being merciful as well as just, though he might have damned all Adam's posterity to hell, chose to save some. These he chose indiscriminately and without their having done anything to deserve so great a preferment. In their hearts would the Kingdom of God be established, and their souls would be preserved beyond death for heaven. For the evangelist, it was imperative to recognize that man could do nothing to save himself; that no amount of pleading or expending of energy in service to others could avail. All was dependent upon God. '... and remember, you have not chosen Christ, but Christ has chosen you'.<sup>5</sup>

There seems, however, to have been some inconsistency between what Whitefield professed in this matter and what his preaching at times would lead us to believe he felt. Stuart Clark Henry explains it as the difference between his theology and his faith.

Whitefield's professed theological creed was not identical with the vigorous faith by which he lived. To say this is not to charge him with duplicity. It is only to observe that Whitefield was a man and like many men believed what he wanted to believe and did what the exigencies of the moment required, thereby betraying a difference between his fiducia and assensus.<sup>6</sup>

On the matter of Predestination versus Arminianism, he had once crossed swords with John Wesley. Wesley had stated rather emphatically, in a sermon on free grace, his opposition to the doctrine of 'election, preterition, predestination, or reprobation'.<sup>7</sup> He unequivocally repudiated the idea that 'by virtue of an eternal, unchangeable, irresistible decree of God, one part of mankind are infallibly saved, and the rest infallibly damned'.<sup>8</sup> To Whitefield, on the other hand, the belief that man should play any active role in salvation was anathema and inconsonant with his understanding of scripture. He demonstrated his abhorrence of Wesley's stand in a vituperative pamphlet.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, if Whitefield was opposed to free grace in principle, it was not always apparent from his practice. His sermons almost invariably concluded with a protracted invitation to those under the condemnation of sin to come to Christ. The invitation, moreover, was entirely democratic and unqualified. Furthermore, it acknowledged the fact that there was something left for man to do; he was not completely passive in the process of salvation. A specimen of such an invitation can be taken from almost any sermon.

If you are willing to accept of him, behold, the Lord Jesus Christ is willing to accept of you. Though you are poor, the Lord Jesus Christ will take care of you; the Lord Jesus Christ will make you heirs of God; you shall be joint heirs with Jesus Christ; you shall have crowns on your heads, and sit on God's right hand in the kingdom of God. This is the gospel - this is glad tidings to you who are poor.<sup>10</sup>

Though, in theory, he considered Arminianism to be 'the back

way to popery', the tenor of his preaching would seem to indicate the ghost of Arminius to have been closer to him as he preached than the ghost of Calvin.

The basis of all belief and source of all true wisdom was, for Whitefield, the Bible. It was God's definitive and unalterable statement to man; divinely inspired and eternally relevant. From beginning to end it was charged with errefragable truths and every part was of equal significance and importance. All could admit of literal interpretation. Having himself read the Bible thoroughly and having memorized (though not always understood) large portions of it, he considered it an indispensable means of grace to all believers.

If we once get above our Bibles, and cease making the written word of God our sole rule both as to faith and practice, we shall soon lie open to all manner of delusion, and be in great danger of making shipwreck of faith and a good conscience.<sup>11</sup>

In the Bible he found answers to his own questions and doubts, and with it he attempted to answer the questions and doubts of others. He felt it always sufficient substantiation of any contention or proof of any point to be able to say 'the Bible says so'. In this respect his attitude to the Bible is forcibly shown in a sermon entitled 'The Indwelling of the Spirit', where, while inveighing against a hypothetical cynic, he says:

If thou canst prove, thou unbeliever, that the book which we call the Bible does not contain the lively oracles of God - if thou canst show that holy men of old did not write this book, as they were inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost - then we will give up the doctrine of original sin: but, unless thou canst do this, we must insist upon it,

that we are all conceived and born in sin; if for no other, yet for this one reason, because that God, who cannot lie, has told us so.<sup>12</sup>

Having such implicit faith in the infallibility of the Bible it is little wonder that he committed so much of it to memory and punctuated his sermons with references to and quotations from it. On occasions, too, he was not above using the Bible for the practice of sortilege; a practice common among early Methodists.

The extent to which he accepted and practised a literal interpretation of the Bible is best illustrated in a sermon entitled 'The Seed of Woman and the Seed of the Serpent'.<sup>13</sup> Here he attempted an explication and application of the Genesis story of the Fall. It is apparent that he regarded Adam and Eve as historical characters and the Fall as an historical event with a step by step time sequence.

How soon man fell after he was created, is not told us; and therefore, to fix any time, is to be wise above what is written. And, I think, they who suppose that man fell the same day in which he was made, have no sufficient ground for their opinion. The many things which are crowded together in the former chapter, such as the formation of Adam's wife, his giving names to the beasts, and his being put into the garden which God had planted, I think require a longer space of time than a day to be transacted in. However, all agree in this "man stood not long." How long or how short a while, I will not take upon me to determine.<sup>14</sup>

His vivid and infinitesimally detailed description of the story of Creation and the Fall is understood only when we remember the vital position it occupied in his concept of the purpose of Christianity. Here, in Adam's disobedience and the subsequent expulsion from Eden, was the emanation of all sin and death. Here



was the awful origin of all illness and chaos; all poverty and shame. Because of Adam's disobedience, our plight was a most unenviable one.

Our whole head is sick, our whole heart is faint; from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot, we are full of wounds, bruises and putrefying sores. In our flesh there dwelleth no good thing.<sup>15</sup>

But the more repugnant the moral morass into which the first Adam plunged the human race, the more dramatic and astonishing the extrication effected by the second Adam - Christ. For, if the Bible told how in Adam all died; so it also declared how in Christ all were made alive. Because of the unimpeachable nature of His justice, God, having forewarned Adam of the consequences of eating the forbidden fruit, was forced to pronounce the death sentence when His divine directive was disregarded. Having fallen from grace, man could henceforth do nothing of himself to appease God. But there was another side to God: a side of love, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. In the fullness of time, God was pleased to demonstrate this side of His nature. In Christ's offering Himself as mollification for man's sin, Whitefield saw God satisfying both His justice and His mercy. Herein, also, is the basis of Whitefield's belief about and understanding of the Trinity.

The field-preacher, it would appear, accepted without reservation the doctrine of the Trinity. Only rarely does he attempt to elucidate explicitly the respective duties of each member of the Godhead, but that he accepts such a threefold division of

divine labour is implicit in almost every sermon. It is noteworthy, too, in this connection, that virtually all his sermons concluded with an ascription of praise to 'God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit'. Essentially, God the Father was, in Whitefield's faith, the God of the Old Testament; a God of exacting justice and inescapable retribution. He was the God of Adam's expulsion from the 'garden of delights'; the God who consumed a sinful Sodom; the God who transformed Lot's wife into a pillar of salt. God the Father, as He is characterized in Whitefield's preaching, is one of whom we stand in reverential awe, and even fear, but one whom we can scarcely love. In juxtaposition to a forbidding God the Father is an endearing God the Son. With Christ, God the Son, the preacher was on intimate terms. Was it not Christ who had redeemed him and had 'made peace betwixt God and offending man'.<sup>16</sup> The poignantly vivid picture Whitefield painted for his audiences most frequently and effectively, was that of a 'bleeding, panting, dying'<sup>17</sup> Christ groaning out his life as an excruciating propitiation for the sins of the world.

If God the Father created, and God the Son redeemed, it remained for God the Holy Ghost to sanctify.

By the Holy Ghost, is to be understood the third person in the ever blessed Trinity, consubstantial and coeternal with the Father and the Son, proceeding from, yet equal to them both; for, to use the words of our Church in this day's office, that we believe in the glory of the Father, the same we believe of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, without any difference or inequality.<sup>18</sup>

Though he acknowledged the necessity of the purifying influence of the Holy Ghost upon the lives of the elect, yet the third Person of the Trinity, like the first, was somewhat less real to Whitefield than God the Son.

As in much evangelical preaching before and since, the concepts of heaven and hell loom large in Whitefield. They were God's ultimate sanctions, positive and negative, and their reality was never doubted by the revivalist. Without them life and death had no discernible purpose. Without them Christ's death and resurrection were but a vain delusion. In the very nature of things it seemed imperative that there should be a place where the righteous were rewarded and the ungodly punished; where God's efficacious sense of justice was appeased. Again the Bible was the basis of belief and the source of detail. But the Bible had a great deal more to say about hell than heaven; consequently, so did Whitefield.

Only rarely does he seek to argue the reality of the Resurrection; he appears rather to have taken it for granted. When he did speak of it, he left no doubt in the minds of his listeners as to how he conceived it would be. In a sermon entitled 'Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification and Redemption', he states that Christ 'ascended into heaven with the body which he had here on earth',<sup>19</sup> and that, clothed in that same flesh, He will return for the final and irrevocable judgement. Likewise, we too, notwithstanding the ostensible decomposition of the body after death, will be resurrected in the flesh and designated for heaven or hell.

'... so all that are in Christ, the second Adam, who represented believers as their federal head, shall certainly be made alive, or rise again with their bodies at the last day'.<sup>20</sup>

Just as Dante's pen stopped short of a description of the beatific vision, so the otherwise intrepid tongue of George Whitefield was often silenced by the contemplation of heaven.

... eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the hearts of the most holy men living to conceive, how great it is. Were I to entertain you whole ages with an account of it, when you come to heaven, you must say, with the queen of Sheeba, "Not half, no, not one thousandth part was told us".<sup>21</sup>

But if heaven were veiled by a curtain of resplendency, hell had nothing to obstruct the evangelist's view of it. On occasions he spoke of hell as a spiritual estrangement from God rather than a place with physical attributes and dimensions. 'What is hell', he once asked, 'but to be absent from Christ?'<sup>22</sup> More generally, though, he described hell in unambiguous, anthropomorphic detail.

Can you live, think you, in everlasting burnings? Is your flesh brass and your bones iron? What if they be? hell-fire, that fire prepared for the devil and his angels, will heat them through and through.<sup>23</sup>

Indulging such graphic descriptions of hell, it is little wonder that he sent many away from his services distraught with fear. For this, the evangelist made no apology; 'Is it not better to have some soul-trouble here, than to be sent to hell by Jesus Christ hereafter?'<sup>24</sup> This was one of Whitefield's homiletic devices, and the gravity of his mission among men justified, at least to his own satisfaction, the continual use he made of it.

For Whitefield, man's choice between the cross of the redeemed and the unredeemed had to be made in this life; death closed the door on opportunity. Thus, like many other successful evangelists, he exploited both the fact of the inevitability and man's instinctive fear of death. A brief portion of the conclusion to a sermon called 'The Kingdom of God', preached in the High Church-Yard, Glasgow, on one of his early visits to Scotland is typical.

But, O, how many are here in this church-yard, who will be laid in some grave ere long, who are strangers to this work of God upon their souls! ... God almighty knows whether some of you may not drop down dead before you go out of the church-yard;... Let me draw out my soul and heart to you, my dear friends, my dear guilty friends, poor bleeding souls, who must shortly take your last farewell, and fly into endless eternity... Now when the Sabbath is over, and the evening is drawing near, methinks the very sight is awful (I could weep over you, as our Lord did over Jerusalem), to think in how short a time every soul of you must die - some of you to go to heaven, and others to go to the devil for evermore.<sup>25</sup>

The theological legitimacy or desirability of such preaching aside, its effectiveness in Whitefield's case is indisputable.

Whitefield saw it as incumbent upon every minister of the gospel to employ every homiletic technique at his disposal to save men from hell. He had neither patience for nor understanding of those preachers who expostulated only upon morality and moral issues.

Besides, my dear friends, it is not the business of the ministers of the gospel merely to entertain people with harangues of dry morality, and leave out Jesus Christ. It is not our business to entertain our people, as Cicero, Seneca and other heathen moralists did; but we are to preach Christ, not ourselves.<sup>26</sup>

Moral virtue and good works would, he felt, inevitably issue in a life that was in right relationship with God. It was entirely necessary to realize, however, that these things were not means to but manifestations of salvation. Upon this point there was an emphatic insistence in much of his preaching. He once exclaimed during a sermon: 'Every minister should be a Boanerges, a son of thunder, as well as a Barnabas, a son of consolation'.<sup>27</sup> Whitefield's vociferation left little doubt as to which spiritual ancestor he favoured.

Much of his thundering was directed towards the clergy of his day, whom he considered 'blind, unregenerate, carnal, lukewarm and unskilful guides'.<sup>28</sup> Many, he believed, had no saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and consequently could do little towards leading their people into an intimate relationship with Him. He was convinced that a majority of them knew Christ only 'through books' and scholarly pursuits, and had not, as he had, a 'conversion' experience to which they could refer. Perhaps there is something not unlike envy and resentment in this attitude of Whitefield. Not being a scholar himself, he viewed intellectual and academic enterprises as being something less than profitable. He regarded 'plays, spectators, Pope's Homers [sic], and such like' as 'trifling books'.<sup>29</sup> Many of his clerical contemporaries, he felt, expended a great deal more time in reading such 'trifling books' than in meditating upon the Book of books - the Bible. Then, too, of course, the clergy in England had refused him their

pulpits and for that he could scarcely commend them. However, Whitefield opposed and repudiated many of them for more than personal reasons. There can be little disputation upon the fact that for a preponderance of eighteenth century clergy in England, the ministry was a far less engaging and sacred task, and preaching a far more lethargic and uninspiring exercise than they were for George Whitefield.<sup>30</sup>

If his preaching betrayed a somewhat intolerant attitude towards his fellow members of the cloth, it also revealed a more amiable quality of which he was possessed: a catholic and forbearing disposition towards people of other faiths. While he saw church union as not only impossible but perhaps undesirable since 'that is a privilege reserved for heaven',<sup>31</sup> yet Christian unity was most desirable and possible. In this respect, too, ministers had been remiss, the evangelist felt, in not dwelling enough on the essentials of religion which Christians, generally, held in common.

It is high time, therefore, for ministers to stand in the gap, to preach up a catholic spirit, to preach out bigotry, to preach out prejudice; for we will never be all of one mind, as long as we are in the world, about externals in religion; that is a privilege reserved to heaven, to a future state. But while we have different degrees of light, it is absolutely necessary that we should bear with all who cannot in all things follow us.<sup>32</sup>

For this reason Whitefield refused to be confined to any single sect or denomination. On one occasion he boasted that his feelings on this matter were so strong that 'if the pope himself would lend [him] his pulpit, [he] would gladly proclaim the righteousness

of Christ therein'.<sup>33</sup> For his catholicity he often suffered,<sup>34</sup> but his ministry, seen wholly, was greatly benefited by his spirit of forbearance about 'the externals of religion'. No passage in the whole of his preaching is more truly demonstrative of this spirit than the following:

"My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me." It is remarkable, there are but two sorts of people mentioned in scripture: it does not say the Baptist and Independents, nor the Methodists and Presbyterians; no, Jesus Christ divides the whole world into but two classes, sheep and goats: the Lord give us to see this morning to which classes we belong.<sup>35</sup>

Though his theology was decidedly pedestrian, his expression verbose, and his argument often inconsistent, yet there was an importunity about Whitefield's message which captivated his audiences. Perhaps the secret of that captivation is in large measure to be found in the extent to which he obviously believed the message himself. He believed in preaching; he believed that every man should be given the opportunity to accept or reject Christ. Through preaching, he would proffer that opportunity to as many as he possibly could. Often, during a sermon, he would proclaim his faith in the value of preaching.

My dear friends, I would preach with all my heart till midnight, to do you good, till I could preach no more. O that this body might hold out to speak more for my dear Redeemer! Had I a thousand lives, had I a thousand tongues, they should be employed in inviting sinners to come to Jesus Christ!<sup>36</sup>

Such were the demands the gospel made upon the man; such was the ardour and enthusiasm he brought to his calling. The gospel was for him exactly what it signified to Tyndale centuries before:



'good, mery, glad and ioyful tydinge, that maketh a mannes hert glad, and maketh hym synge, daunce and leepe for ioye'.<sup>37</sup> He not only possessed this good news but in a very real sense was possessed by it. Nor was it an empty sentiment that he expressed when he wished for a thousand tongues to preach. To preach was not only a privilege but a grave responsibility, and, like St. Paul, he understood the consequences of hiding his talent: 'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel'. His grammar at times might jar the sensibilities of some of his listeners; his sermons might lack the profundity of thought to challenge the more theologically sophisticated; but the 'high seriousness' of the content of his oratory, combined with the virtuosity of his delivery, always assured him an audience.

## NOTES

- 1  
S.C. Henry, George Whitefield Wayfaring Witness, p. 96.
- 2  
Letter CCXIV, Whitefield's Works, I, 205.
- 3  
S.C. Henry, Wayfaring Witness, p. 95.
- 4  
D. MacFarlan, Revivals of the 18th Century, p. 21.
- 5  
Select Sermons, p. 71.
- 6  
Wayfaring Witness, p. 115.
- 7  
J. Wesley, Works, VII, 375-76.
- 8  
ibid., pp. 375-76.
- 9  
Works, IV, 53.
- 10  
Revivals of 18th Century, p. 10.
- 11  
Select Sermons, p. 102.
- 12  
Sketches, p. 287.
- 13  
Select Sermons, p. 85.
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- 15  
Revivals of 18th Century, p. 14.
- 16  
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- 17  
Sketches, p. 292.
- 18  
ibid.,
- 19  
Select Sermons, p. 67.
- 20  
ibid., p. 68.
- 21  
ibid., p. 69.
- 22  
Revivals of 18th Century, p. 32.
- 23  
Select Sermons, p. 82.
- 24  
Revivals of 18th Century, p. 32.
- 25  
ibid., p. 47.
- 26  
ibid., p. 5.
- 27  
Select Sermons, pp. 91-92.
- 28  
Revivals of 18th Century, p. 18.
- 29  
Sketches, p. 36.
- 30  
For an excellent account of the state of religion and clergy  
in 18th century England see Elliott-Binns, The Early Evangelicals.
- 31  
Revivals of 18th Century, p. 36.
- 32  
ibid., p. 36.
- 33  
Sketches, p. 81.

34

ibid., p. 81.

35

Select Sermons, p. 112.

36

Revivals of 18th Century, p. 48.

37

Baker's Dictionary of Theology, p. 254.

CHAPTER III

WHITEFIELD AND THE TRADITION OF PULPIT ORATORY

## CHAPTER III

The preacher, like any other artist, inherits a tradition which perhaps no less than his individual talent determines the quality of his work. To separate what is traditional from what is the peculiar quality of his own genius in any artist often leads one far afield. This is perhaps especially true of the art of the preacher, exercised as it is within the framework and traditions of an ancient Church. Hence it is that to understand the reasons for, as well as the nature of, the success of a man like George Whitefield, it is necessary to consider the relationship in which he stands to his professional contemporaries and forbears. Whether sensible of it or not, Whitefield was the inheritor of a preaching tradition: rhetorical, homiletic, as well as theological; a tradition with as many facets as the preacher himself. Against much of that tradition he rebelled, but even in rebelling he was being influenced by it. I propose, in this chapter, to suggest the extent of that influence while fixing Whitefield's place in the history and tradition of pulpit oratory. To do so, it will be necessary to trace briefly the historical evolution of the sermon.

Having its inception, as it did, in a culture and epoch when Greek civilization and learning exercised marked influence, it is not surprising that Christianity should have reflected many customs and conventions that were essentially Greek in origin. It

is still less surprising that early Christian preaching should betray so many features of classical rhetoric. It was in the second century A.D., with the Sophistic orators and philosophers, that classical rhetoric achieved its florescence. With artists like Lucian, Philostratus, and Eunapius plying their highly specialized and often lucrative trade around the Mediterranean, it was unavoidable that Christian orators, consciously or unconsciously, would emulate the Sophistic manner and method of public speaking.

For a speaker with such a formidable task of persuasion as the early Christian preacher, eloquence was imperative and the criteria of eloquence had long since been adumbrated by Greek rhetoricians. Once adopted by Christian orators, these principles of public speaking became a part of the preaching tradition. In Augustine's sketch of the duty of a preacher, Ciceronian and Hellenistic principles are described:

It is the duty, then, of the interpreter and teacher of Holy Scripture, the defender of the true faith, and the opponent of error, both to teach what is right and to refute what is wrong, and in the performance of this task to conciliate the hostile, to rouse the careless, and to tell the ignorant both what is occurring at present and what is probable in the future... If the hearers need teaching, the matter treated of must be fully made known by means of a narrative. On the other hand, to clear up points that are doubtful requires reasoning and the exhibition of proofs. If, however, the hearers require to be roused rather than instructed, in order that they may be diligent to do what they already know, and to bring their feelings into harmony with the truths they admit, greater rigour of speech is needed. Here entreaties and reproaches, exhortations and upbraidings, and all the other means of rousing the emotions are necessary.<sup>1</sup>

As will be shown later, the last two sentences of this passage

suggest the approach to preaching adopted by Whitefield and the eighteenth century evangelicals generally. The need, as they saw it, was for men to be 'roused rather than instructed'.

Such an unambiguous statement as this by Augustine, W. Frazer Mitchell has pointed out, justifies Dr. Oswald Dyke's contention that 'from Augustine to Melancton homiletics were treated almost exclusively as a branch of classical rhetoric'.<sup>2</sup> But if preaching began and for a long time continued as a branch of classical rhetoric, it was from its inception a distinct branch. Three factors combined to give it this clear identity. The first was the esoteric nature of its content. The second was the particular result Christian orators attempted to achieve: a permanent conversion of the hearer rather than the momentary persuasion of the Sophists. The third, and most relevant to this study, was the malleability of form in both sermon construction and presentation.

In very general terms, sermons can be divided into three groups: the written and read sermon, the sermon preached from notes, and the extemporaneous sermon. Early Christian preaching was largely a simple, straightforward, extempore address with a direct appeal to the audience. It was this kind of preaching which to the Puritans of the seventeenth and reformers of the eighteenth centuries was the 'pure' and 'ideal' mode. Anything more elaborate or calculated was frowned upon as the work of man's reason rather than God's inspiration. With the growth of Monasticism, and, later, Scholasticism, the formal written oration assumed



a greater role. But while the monks and scholastics entertained their highly learned auditories with patristic and erudite homilies, the friars more than kept alive the extempore mode of preaching as they moved about among the poor and illiterate.

During the Reformation the written and read sermon gained a new and unique importance. The clergy of the Roman Catholic Church who wished to remain loyal found their manuscripts a defence against any charges of heresy preferred against them. For Protestants, the written sermon was favoured since a corpus of doctrine for posterity was vital to the preservation of the principles and beliefs of the movement. And what better material than the vituperative litany of the proto-reformers themselves?

The seventeenth century in England has generally been regarded as par excellence an age of sermons. The sermon, in every age, has revealed exemplars of thought; men of intelligence and taste reflecting upon man's eternal problems. But no age has produced men more capable of profound reflection upon, or expression of, these problems than the seventeenth century. Preachers of the spiritual and intellectual stature of Jeremy Taylor, Lancelot Andrewes, John Donne, Archbishop Tillotson and Robert South gave to the sermon a new dignity and purpose. While for each the sermon was structurally different, yet all manifested the same reverential regard for it, and were conscious of a sobering responsibility in preaching the Word. The influence, both direct and indirect, they exercised upon succeeding generations of preachers, and especially those of the eighteenth century, is considerable.

It is difficult for us who live in an age when the sermon has a very specialized religious purpose and character to envisage the prominence it enjoyed in the intellectual and social, as well as the religious, life of seventeenth century England.

For the century in question the sermon, besides its strictly religious function, took in large measure the place of the journalistic press at the present day, and enjoyed the enormous influence, reinforced by a tremendous sanctity of authority, of a modern broadcasting company. For one person who witnessed a play or ten who happened to read it, thousands may, without exaggeration, be said to have attended sermons, or afterwards studied them from shorthand notes or in printed copies.<sup>3</sup>

In an excellent recent study, The Paul's Cross Sermons 1534-1642, Millar MacLure vindicates this statement, reminding us that 'The Paul's Cross Pulpit was nothing less than the popular voice of the Church of England during the most turbulent and creative period in her history'.<sup>4</sup> The functions the sermon was called upon to fulfil were multifarious.

The public sermon, like the editorial page of a great city newspaper (this one, said Carlyle, The Times, "edited by Heaven"), was at once an arrangement of commonplaces varied in their application to the events of the day, a forum for the great and would-be great to express their views, and a collection of remembrances. There was enough art in it to satisfy the dilettante, enough sameness to please the sober citizen who did (and does) not like to be startled by new ideas, enough passion for the zealot, enough theology for the Puritan (and Catholic) intellectuals.<sup>5</sup>

But apart from its other influences and functions, the sermon maintained a very conscious alliance with the rhetorical tradition from which it had risen and whose contribution it was now in a position to reciprocate. Contemporary education, with its emphasis upon 'theme' composition, contributed to the process of

making the sermon a highly polished rhetorical exercise. Preachers, aware that Sunday morning's sermon would be copied by students, and criticized by masters and scholars alike during the ensuing week, were likely to be meticulous and deliberative in their preparations. Thus, for the most part, the seventeenth century sermon, though of variegated prose styles, was a highly conscious literary form.

For Andrewes, Donne, and the 'metaphysical' preachers, the sermon was quite obviously an exercise in scholarship. Andrewes' sermons are almost invariably mosaics of Greek and Latin quotations, minute linguistic analysis of texts, plays upon words, and gnomic wisdom from the church fathers. Donne was more concerned with the poetry in words than with their etymology. He drew freely upon the church fathers and enlivened his sermons with effective, though sometimes recondite verbal conceits. Whether writing in prose or verse, Donne is always a poet, and his 'wit' and imagery are at times as lively in his sermons as in his poetry. Coleridge called Jeremy Taylor, the 'Spenser of prose.' Taylor's contribution to the age of great sermons and sermonizers is a beautifully modulated prose style; exuberant and powerful. His is the antithesis of the 'market-place' language which the eighteenth century evangelicals were to idealize.

With Robert South and the Restoration preachers generally, a decided change in sermon construction and presentation is evident. Preaching became less erudite, more lively, and, not infrequently, humorous. Reading from manuscripts gave way to extemporization;

the formal, statuesque delivery was replaced by a more gesticulatory manner of expression. It is noteworthy that it was to their Restoration forbears that many of the dissenting clergy of the eighteenth century were to go for their model of pulpit oratory.

It is also noteworthy, and quite remarkable, that in an age in which extempore sermonizing was considered the norm, the greatest preacher, Tillotson, should read his sermons. Though perhaps it is not so astonishing when we consider his genius, his perspicacious mind, his magnanimous spirit and his meticulous prose. His preaching style became the model for the clergy of the Established Church and the theological seminaries for most of the eighteenth century. Nor was it only his mellifluous prose that aspiring clerical neophytes sought to imitate, but his theology also.

Just as philosophy during most of the eighteenth century was dominated by Locke, so orthodox theology was equally dominated by the seventeenth century divine, Archbishop Tillotson. Three characteristics of his teaching seem to stand out: (a) in all matters of religion there must be an appeal to reason; (b) claims to spiritual intuition are to be distrusted; (c) man's knowledge of truth must always be imperfect.<sup>6</sup>

Such teachings, however, were inconsonant with the convictions held by most eighteenth century evangelicals and they reacted violently against both Tillotson's theology and his oratorical method.

Whitefield's remonstrances were decidedly acrid. On one occasion he is reported to have said that the venerable Archbishop 'knew no more of Christianity than Mohamet.'<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is possible to explain much of Whitefield's theology and rhetorical manner, and

possibly the whole Methodist movement, as a part conscious - part unconscious reaction against Tillotson and the Established Church.

Thus far, I have attempted a sketch of the homiletic and rhetorical traditions as Whitefield inherited them. At this point it is necessary to recognize that any attempt to place Whitefield in such a tradition is likely at best to be unsatisfactory. All great preachers by virtue of their individual talents and personalities stand apart from their age. Some by means of scholarship and study deliberately pattern their preaching on those great divines of the past with whom they feel an affinity, while leaving room for the interjection of their own individual contribution. Others, and Whitefield is one of these, though indebted to and influenced by the past, do not wittingly imitate it, but preach almost instinctively and according to the exigencies of the moment.

To discover a precedent for Whitefield's manner and method of preaching we must go back by way of the Restoration preachers, through Hugh Latimer, to the friars. The duties and methods of the friars, as G.R. Owst has outlined them, reveal a striking similarity to Whitefield's.<sup>8</sup> Like the friar's, Whitefield's mission was essentially an evangelical one; like the friar, he drew his audiences primarily from the common and poorer people. Just as the friar often regarded the more learned monk with a jaundiced eye and was in return looked upon with scorn, so were Whitefield's relations with many of the clergy of the Church of England. Like his medieval forbear, he extemporized and interlarded his

sermons with vernacular expressions that were pungent enough for most of the audience even if they outraged the sensibilities of the grammarians.

Though for a majority of the clergy, during and for some time after the Reformation, the friar's style of preaching fell into desuetude, there was one colourful figure who almost single-handedly carried on the tradition. He was Hugh Latimer (1490-1555). Whitefield's temperamental affinities with him are striking. Latimer was an awakener of men; he spoke directly to them and in tones and terms that often shocked the more refined. Yet, despite his garrulous overtures, his pulpit solecisms, and his vituperative rhetoric, he identified himself with his congregations, was listened to intently and loved by them. To some extent, with South and the Restoration preachers Latimer's vigorous and colourful style of preaching was to find a recrudescence. Though it should be noted that the evangelical emphasis, so easily discernible in Latimer, is conspicuously absent from South and his contemporaries. Not until Methodism would that emphasis reappear.

The influence of the Restoration preachers upon Whitefield and the eighteenth century evangelicals originated as much from what they had formally to say about preaching as from how they actually preached. Further evidence that the seventeenth century was pre-eminently an age of sermons and sermonizing is to be gathered from the multiplicity of treatises on pulpit oratory that were published. Of these perhaps none enjoyed more popular influence among eighteenth century dissenters than an English preach-

ing-manual, Art of Prophecyng, by William Perkins. In this work Perkins, one of the most popular and prolific theologians of his day, purports to give 'The Order and Summe of the sacred and onely Method of Preaching'. He decries humane learning; and with Calvinistic earnestness insists upon the priority of scripture in all preaching. He admonishes all intending preachers -

1. To reade the Text distinctly out of the Canonickall Scriptures.
2. To give the sense and understanding of it being read, by the Scripture it selfe.
3. To collect a few and profitable points of doctrine out of the naturall sense.
4. To apply (if he have the gift) the doctrines rightly collected, to the life and manners of men in a simple and plaine speech.<sup>9</sup>

Between the years 1597 and 1616 no fewer than ten editions of Perkins collected works, in which this treatise appeared, were published in English, besides Latin and Dutch translations. It seems unlikely that Whitefield should not have been familiar with this work, so enormously popular was its author and so nearly does his preaching conform to the principles set forth by Perkins.

But while Whitefield, Wesley, and their fellows paid obeisance to the more fundamental and puritanical theologians of the previous age, there were those who carried on the Tillotson tradition of rhetoric and theology. Among them was a group of preachers commonly referred to as the 'moderate divines'. This sobriquet they earned because of their rational and 'non-enthusiastic' approach to religion. Most distinguished of this group was the Scottish divine, Hugh Blair. A member of a select literary circle which flourished at Edinburgh throughout the century, Blair was in later

life appointed Professor of Rhetoric at Edinburgh. His sermons, carefully constructed and formally delivered, are excellent examples of the unimpassioned and somewhat affected style of the 'moderate divines'.

Though not usually numbered among the 'moderate divines', four contemporary ministers with other claims to fame could well be included, if by moderate is meant orthodox. The four are Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, Joseph Butler and George Crabbe. Though their prose styles vary greatly, from Swift's crisp, economical and vigorous expression to the elaborate, ponderous and involved style of Butler, the tenor of their preaching is very much the same. Nearly all their sermons might be considered moral essays; there was little evangelical fervour in either their content or presentation.

Such were the clergy Whitefield considered 'lukewarm, unregenerate and blind'; and it was as much against their unimpassioned style of preaching as their theology that he rebelled. From Calvinism Whitefield learned that it was necessary to deal more bluntly and discourteously with his hearers than his more moderate counterparts in the Established Church did. He fumed and flamed, feeling it necessary to insult his listeners in order to convict them of their spiritual plight. Nor did his breaches of pulpit etiquette dissuade his audiences from feeling an intense affection for the evangelist.

Franklin mused upon the strange respect felt by the people for a man who, to their faces, called them "half beasts



and half devils". "It was wonderful," he adds, "to see the change soon made in the manner of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street."<sup>10</sup>

Whitefield had come to warn men not to praise them. His primary task, as he saw it, was to arouse, and the 'entreaties and reproaches, exhortations and upbraidings' of which Augustine had spoken were his most effective rhetorical tools.

As one might expect, there are few references to or quotations from the church fathers in Whitefield's sermons. Indeed, there is little by way of scholarly embellishment of any kind. Yet, odd though ostensibly it is, he employed practically the same five-fold division in his discourses as had been suggested by Keckermann and practised by Donne a century earlier. He usually began a sermon by announcing the text and giving his audience the germane scriptural background: praecognitio textus. Whereas the metaphysical poet-preacher had then proceeded to a partitio et propositio of his theme and followed that by an explicatio verborum to elucidate further the scriptural passage and possibly attempt some ingenious hermeneutic, Whitefield inverted the order. With Whitefield, the textual exegesis almost invariably preceded the adumbration of his theme and intention. For both, the major portion of the sermon was taken up with amplification and application, though, needless to say, methods employed were strikingly dissimilar. Whereas Donne embellished his sermons with erudite,

and often abstruse, allusions, quotations and analogies, Whitefield's language was arrestingly simple and direct. He aimed at conviction and persuasion of his hearers, and in the only way he knew how: by means of an unadorned and confessional mode of preaching. The last sermon Whitefield gave in London, on Wednesday, August 30, 1769, before his final departure to America affords such an example.

I thought this morning, when I came here, riding from the other end of the town, it was to me like coming to be executed publicly; and when the carriage turned just at the end of the walk, and I saw you running here, O, thinks I, it is like a person now coming just to the place where he is to be executed. When I went up to put on my gown, I thought it was just like dressing myself to be made a public spectacle to shed my blood for Christ. I take all heaven and earth to witness, and God and the holy angels to witness, that though I had preferment enough offered me, that though the bishop took me in his arms, and offered me two parishes before I was two-and-twenty, and always took me to his table; though I had preferment enough offered me when I was ordained, thou, O God, knowest, that when the bishop put his hand upon my head, I looked for no other preferment than publicly to suffer for the Lamb of God: in this spirit I came out, in this spirit I came up to this metropolis.<sup>11</sup>

In the age of Defoe, Addison, Steele, Swift, and Fielding, the 'age of prose', as Professor Sutherland has called it,<sup>12</sup> Whitefield is a peripheral figure. His claim to a place in literature must rest upon his gifts as an orator, not as a conscious prose stylist. If, as has been suggested, good prose, like Swift's, is that which 'allows the writer's meaning to come through with the least possible loss of significance and nuance, as a landscape is seen through a clear window',<sup>13</sup> then Whitefield's cannot be called good. In reading him we are always conscious,

some would say too conscious, of the author. But Whitefield did not apologize for the intrusion of his own personality or experiences. His was a candid and confessional style of preaching, and however deficient his language might be in literary graces, it was an excellent vehicle for his intentions.

There must be a deep conviction before you can be brought out of your self-righteousness; it is the last idol taken out of our heart. The pride of our heart will not let us submit to the righteousness of Jesus Christ. But if you never felt that you had no righteousness of your own, if you never felt the deficiency of your own righteousness, you cannot come to Jesus Christ. There are a great many now who may say, Well, we believe all this; but there is a great difference betwixt talking and feeling. Did you ever feel the want of a dear Redeemer? Did you ever feel the want of Jesus Christ, upon the account of the deficiency of your own righteousness? And can you now say from your heart, Lord, thou mayst justly damn me for the best duties that I ever did perform? If you are not thus brought out of self, you may speak peace to yourselves, but yet there is no peace.<sup>14</sup>

As this passage illustrates, there is a nervous, energetic quality about his prose. Short, staccato statements and questions, meant to effect a crescendo of emotion, give the impression of a waterfall rather than a smooth, flowing river. And this is exactly the impression he meant to give; he wished to startle, even frighten, men, not entertain them. As Arthur Pollard has pointed out, for Wesley as for Whitefield, there is a skilful building up to a climax by means of an adept, if unconscious, alternation between question, exclamation, statement and appeal.<sup>15</sup>

It must be acknowledged, however, that while Whitefield's sermons made for excellent listening they are now rather disappointing reading. They lack variety and grace. The repetition which

was so effective on the lips of the speaker becomes tedious when read. As a prose stylist, Whitefield suffers in comparison with Swift, Sterne and Crabbe. In comparison with Taylor, Andrewes, and Tillotson, he appears impoverished. But his objectives were different from those of his orthodox contemporaries and forbears, and his success in achieving these objectives was no less.

A comparison of his manner of preaching and that of John Wesley is instructive. As is true of Whitefield, it is difficult to find an objective assessment of John Wesley's preaching. Contemporary accounts were invariably coloured by the predisposition of the observer for or against the preacher. Two diametrically opposed descriptions of Wesley's technique prove this point. The first is by Horace Walpole, a sceptical, even hostile, contemporary; the second is by John Nelson, a devotee.<sup>16</sup>

Wesley is a lean, elderly man, fresh-coloured, his hair smoothly combed, but with a 'souppcon' of curl at the ends. Wondrous clean, but as evidently an actor as Garrick. He spoke his sermon, but so fast, and with so little accent, that I am sure he has often uttered it, for it was like a lesson. There were parts of eloquence on it; but towards the end he exalted his voice, and acted very ugly enthusiasm.

As soon as he got upon his stand, he stroked back his hair, and turned his face towards me where I stood, and I thought fixed his eyes upon me. His countenance struck such an awful dread upon me, before I heard him speak, that it made my heart beat like the pendulum of a clock; and when he did speak, I thought his whole discourse was aimed at me.

Wesley, like Whitefield, and virtually all early Methodist ministers, was an extempore preacher. It would appear, however, that the 'founder of Methodism' relied appreciably more upon the

art of preparation and less upon propitious inspiration than his fellow evangelist. His texts are surprisingly few and, like Whitefield, he believed a good sermon got better with each additional preaching.

Wesley's printed sermons have much more to recommend them than those of Whitefield. The language is simple and direct, the logic is sound; no theological inconsistencies jar the reader. He is unquestionably a more perspicacious thinker and scholar. His love of disputation and debate is shown by his frequent arguments with an imaginary objector during his sermons. Whitefield, no less effectively, occasionally attempted the same rhetorical trick though his appeal to reason was considerably weaker. To quote an appropriate passage of scripture was, for Whitefield, always a sufficient rebuttal to any objection the sceptic might put forward. Indeed, further refutation seemed to him not only redundant, but affrontery to the infallible Word of God. Wesley fought logic with logic and syllogism with syllogism.

This is not to say that Wesley's only appeal, or even major appeal, was to the ratiocinative faculties of his audience. The physical paroxysms which accompanied many of his revivals are more than ample evidence of the fact.<sup>17</sup> Whitefield rarely left an audience in such a state of emotional chaos. A.D. Belden explains it thus:

Whitefield's more dramatic and warmer emotional style in preaching expressed a degree of the audience's emotion for them, and so served as a safety-valve, whereas Wesley's colder type of utterance, his more statuesque delivery, left his hearers pent up emotionally, and liable to sudden convulsive and even physical outbreaks.<sup>18</sup>

Though less a self-conscious artist than Wesley and less capable of analysing the nature of the forces he set in motion, Whitefield was unquestionably a greater orator. Nor was Wesley reluctant to admit as much. In a funeral sermon for Whitefield, the originator of Methodism quoted from the Boston Gazette a passage that expressed his own feelings:

In his public labours, Mr. Whitefield has for many years astonished the world with his eloquence and devotion. With what divine pathos did he persuade the impertinent sinner to embrace the practice of piety and virtue! Filled with the spirit of grace, he spoke from the heart; and, with a fervency of zeal perhaps unequalled since the days of the apostles, adorned the truths he delivered with the most graceful charms of rhetoric and oratory. From the pulpit he was unrivalled in the command of an over-crowded auditory. Nor was he less agreeable and instructive in his private conversation: happy in a remarkable ease of address, willing to communicate, studious to edify.<sup>19</sup>

It is that same eloquence and unrivalled command he held over an audience which gives Whitefield the right to stand besides John Wesley, and which assures him a place of prominence in the tradition of pulpit oratory.

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CHAPTER IV

VOX ET PRAETEREA NIHIL

## CHAPTER IV

We come now to a more detailed examination of Whitefield's rhetoric. In attempting to do so it is essential to take into account the limitations imposed upon such a study by the printed sermon. Apart from the fact that the eloquence or animation, emphasis or expression which may have accompanied the oral delivery are missing, there is also the problem of faulty reporting. Many of Whitefield's sermons were transcribed in shorthand notes, some by well-meaning but not very accurate followers, and others by antagonists who wished to devalue his ministry, and then published without the preacher's revision or consent. In a letter to Mr. R--- K--n, dated September 26, 1769, Whitefield complains about this practice.

I wish you had advertised against the publisher of my last sermon. It is not verbatim as I delivered it. In some places, he makes me to speak false concord, and even nonsense. In others, the sense and connection are destroyed, by the injudicious disjointed paragraphs; and the whole is entirely unfit for the public review. But we must suffer by the false zeal of professing friends, as well as by the inveterate malice of public avowed enemies.<sup>1</sup>

Aware of these limitations, then, I shall attempt, through an examination of what I believe are discriminating reports about, and passages from, Whitefield's preaching to reconstruct something of the preacher's rhetorical method and manner.

Williston Walker does not hesitate to say of Whitefield that 'No Anglo-Saxon of the eighteenth century showed such pulpit

power'.<sup>2</sup> Yet, only a minor part of that power was generated by Whitefield's personal appearance. Even an admiring biographer like J.R. Andrews has difficulty in extolling his physical attributes.

The personal appearance of Whitefield was prepossessing, and his address and manners those of an educated gentleman. He was rather above middle size, well proportioned, and of slender figure until near forty years of age, when he became inclined to corpulency; this, however, was more owing to disease than to any other cause, for it was remarkable that he never took more exercise, and that too of a more violent kind, than during the latter period of his life. There was, however, one drawback to his personal appearance - a rather serious one - he had contracted a slight squint in one of his eyes, brought on, it is said, in the first instance, through the carelessness of his nurse when in his fourth year, whilst suffering from an attack of the measles: with this exception, his features were good, and his countenance open and manly.<sup>3</sup>

There can be little doubt that Whitefield owed much more of his pulpit success to his extraordinary voice than to his physical attractiveness. It was immensely powerful, permitting its owner to make himself heard at great distances and by vast numbers of people. Had we only the word of his enthusiastic followers that he preached to congregations of twenty and more thousands in the open air, we would perhaps be inclined to accept the statement sceptically. But there can scarcely be any charges of exaggeration brought against this detached statement of Benjamin Franklin, made in Philadelphia on Whitefield's first visit to that city.

I had the curiosity... to learn how far he could be heard, by retiring backward down the street towards the river, and I found his voice distinct till I came near Front Street, when some noise in that street obscured it. Imagining then a semicircle, of which my distance should be the radius, and that it was filled with auditors, to each

of whom I allowed two square feet, I computed that he might well be heard by more than thirty thousand. This reconciled me to the newspaper accounts of his having preached to 25,000 people in the fields, and to the history of generals haranguing whole armies, of which I had sometimes doubted.<sup>4</sup>

But the field-preacher's voice had another quality almost as remarkable as its power. Loudness is usually associated with an inflexible and monotonous dissonance. Not so, it would appear, in Whitefield's case. His voice had an orphic tone and was capable of giving convincing expression to almost every human emotion. Garrick marvelled at its malleability and declared that Whitefield could melt an audience from exultant joy to tears by varying his pronunciation of the word 'Mesopotamia'. The celebrated actor also said that he would willingly part with a hundred guineas if he could pronounce 'O' with the same pathos and dynamic effect as Whitefield.<sup>5</sup> Whether playing the part of Boanerges or a Barnabas; whether convicting or consoling; the preacher's voice was equal to the occasion.

George Whitefield enjoyed many gifts of a great actor. In addition to a protean face and voice, he had a penchant for the histrionic. And, as Stuart Clark Henry has suggested, in a more profound sense, Whitefield's unique appeal to men may be understood in terms of the theatre.

The greatness of any enduring drama rests finally on a scene of identification, a point at which the piece upon the boards achieves reality in the life of the man in the pit, because he looks on it and says this could happen to me, this has happened to me. When the genius of a great actor informs such a scene, the one who watches recognizes universality and instinctively responds. The place at

which Whitefield's dramatic ability touched the lives of his audiences was that of the human predicament. He spoke to man's eternal question: What shall I do to be saved? The individual in the pit heard the strange man on the boards speaking of a restlessness that any man knew and of a certainty that every man sought. The situation to which Whitefield addressed himself was ruthlessly democratic: it embraced the colliers at Kingswood, the fan painters at Bath, sailors at sea, and slaves in Georgia. Whitefield was insured an audience because he played to man's dilemma, not because he acted. Only the setting changed. The drama was always the same.<sup>6</sup>

One of his most effective and frequently exploited dramatic devices was his ability to weep. He seems to have employed this histrionic measure most often while dramatizing some incident in scripture. In the midst of a straightforward narrative account of some Biblical happening, the preacher would suddenly strike a pose, assume the dramatic present in his description, and evoke pathos with his tears and tremulous voice. Of Christ in Gethsemane:

See, see, O my soul, how he sweats! But what is that which I see! Blood - drops of blood - great drops of blood falling to the ground. Alas! was ever sorrow like unto this sorrow? Hark! what is that I hear? Oh, dolorous complaint! 'Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.' Hark! he speaks again. Amazing! the Creator complains to the creature: 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; tarry ye here, and watch with me.' And now he retires once more. But see how his agony increases - Look! how he prays, and that, too, yet more earnestly: 'Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.'<sup>7</sup>

Of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac:

... but methinks I see tears trickle down the Patriarch Abraham's cheeks; and out of the abundance of the heart, he cries, Adieu, adieu, my son; the Lord gave thee to me, and the Lord calls thee away; blessed be the name of the Lord: Adieu... But sing, O heavens! and rejoice, O earth! Man's extremity is God's opportunity: for

behold, just as the knife, in all probability, was near his throat,... "the angel of the Lord... called unto him".<sup>8</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine the reaction of Whitefield's hearers to such empathetic description and pantomime. If in reading them now such passages betray an irksome tumidity it is because the naturalness and grace with which the preacher spoke are absent. Nor was it only the poor and unlettered who felt their 'hearts strangely warmed' by such spontaneous and affecting outbursts. Even the 'disinterested' philosopher David Hume could not help but warm to Whitefield's eloquence. Of one particular sermon Hume said, 'it was accompanied with such animated yet natural action, that it surpassed anything I ever saw or heard in any other preacher.'<sup>9</sup> The philosopher then went on to illustrate:

"The attendant angel," exclaimed Whitefield in the midst of his sermon, after a deep, solemn pause - "the attendant angel is just about to leave the threshold of this sanctuary, and ascend to heaven. And shall he ascend, and not bear with him the news of one sinner, among all this multitude, reclaimed from the error of his ways?" Then stamping with his foot, and throwing his eyes and hands to heaven, he exclaimed, with a loud piercing voice, "Stop, Gabriel, stop, ere you enter the sacred portals, and yet carry with you the news of one sinner converted to God."<sup>10</sup>

One amusing anecdote of the effect of Whitefield's oratory is told in connection with the fashionable and sophisticated Lord Chesterfield. As a guest of Lady Huntingdon at her chapel, he was listening with rapt attention as Whitefield spoke of man's doleful plight in his natural state of sin. The preacher compared man to a blind mendicant who, in the blackest night and on a bleak and barren hillside, suddenly loses his dog. Helplessly,

he staggers near the precipice of a cliff. So coruscating was Whitefield's description and so enthralling his animation that just as the beggar was about to topple into the abyss below, Chesterfield, with complete abandon of propriety, threw himself forward into the aisle and exclaimed - "Good God! he is gone!"<sup>11</sup>

Another anecdote which demonstrates Whitefield's powers of persuasion is related by Benjamin Franklin's biographer - James Parton.

On the return of the orator from Georgia, with the project of founding an orphan house in that new colony, he consulted his friend Franklin on the subject. Franklin approved the scheme, but strongly advised that the asylum should be placed in Philadelphia, and the orphans brought to it, since Georgia was then destitute of workmen and supplies. His advice being rejected, he determined not to subscribe. "I happened soon after," says Franklin, "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 pistoles in gold; as he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the copper. 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!"<sup>12</sup>

This account helps to explain how, in an age appreciably less opulent than our own, Whitefield managed to raise in the United Kingdom alone some fourteen thousand pounds for his colonial projects.

As earlier suggested, the task of the evangelist is twofold: he must first of all convict, then he must persuade. He knows that before his listeners will accept the cure, they must be made conscious of the malady. The word 'conviction' held, for Whitefield, very definite connotations. Conviction was that over-

powering sense of guilt a man felt after his spiritual infirmity had been adequately described to him. Whitefield's descriptions were always arresting, even if, upon occasions, they shocked the more genteel members of his audience. Some felt he abused his pulpit priorities. The Duchess of Buckingham, having, from behind a curtain in Lady Huntingdon's chapel, heard Whitefield preach, said that it was

strangely tinctured with impertinence and disrespect towards [his] superiors. It is monstrous to be told you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. Such sentiments were at variance with high rank and good breeding.<sup>13</sup>

That some should be offended by his 'monstrous' approach was to Whitefield further manifestation of spiritual pride, a fact which only made his scathing descriptions the more necessary. Somehow pride had to be eradicated and humility planted in the hearts of the people. Expostulations such as these were not likely to be ignored:

You are just hanging over hell. What peace can you have when God is your enemy, when the wrath of God is abiding upon your poor soul? Awake, then, you that are sleeping in a false peace; awake, ye carnal professors, ye hypocrites that go to church, receive the sacrament, read your Bibles, and never felt the power of God upon your hearts; you that are formal professors, you that are baptized heathens; awake, awake, and do not rest on a false bottom.<sup>14</sup>

Ye poor miserable creatures, what a damnable condition are your souls in! Ye poor blind souls, ye poor whole-hearted creatures, you think you lack nothing, but, alas! you know not that you are poor, miserable, blind, and naked.<sup>15</sup>

One of his favourite analogies was to compare man's moral and spiritual plight to the physical plight of a leper. The detail was



often revoltingly clinical. To justify his painting such a repugnant picture of human nature, he employed a similar figure of speech.

If you have a wound in your bodies, and are in earnest about a cure, you bid the surgeon probe it to the very bottom; and shall not the Physician of your souls be allowed the same freedom? And what have I been doing but searching your natural wounds, that I might convince you of your danger, and put you upon applying to Jesus Christ for a remedy? Indeed, I have dealt with you as gently as I could; and now that I have wounded, I come to heal you.<sup>16</sup>

Nor was Whitefield above addressing himself directly to specific groups of people or, at times, to particular individuals, to give greater impact to his message of conviction. In a sermon entitled "The Lord Our Righteousness",<sup>17</sup> he speaks in turn to 'young men,' 'young maidens,' 'busy merchants,' 'cumbered Marthas,' 'hoary heads,' and 'poor negroes,' - to each group according to its salient religious needs. His remonstrances with individual members of the congregation proved effectively embarrassing for those thus addressed. On one occasion, while preaching in a small American town, one of Whitefield's congregation, an elderly gentleman, fell asleep. Suddenly, taking note of the man, the preacher brought down his hand upon the pulpit and his foot upon the floor with such force that the sound reverberated through the building. Then fixing his eyes upon the startled old fellow, he said: 'Ay, ay,... I have waked you up, have I? I meant to do it. I am not come here to preach to stocks and stones; I have come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts, and I must, and

I will have an audience'.<sup>18</sup>

Whitefield's treatment of the celebrated comedian Shuter, when the latter attended service at the 'soul-trap' on Tottenham Court Road, was equally humiliating. Shuter was at the peak of his popularity, and especially renowned for his portrayal of Ramble. In the midst of a protracted plea to sinners to accept salvation, Whitefield paused, directed his gaze at Shuter and exclaimed: 'And thou, poor Ramble, who has long rambled from Him, come thou also. O, end thy ramblings by coming to Jesus'. Mortified, the actor hurried to the preacher afterwards and said, 'I thought I should have fainted - how could you serve me so?'<sup>19</sup> But for Whitefield, any departure from pulpit propriety on his part, or any subsequent discomfiture on the part of particular members of his audience could be justified by an appeal to the end which all was designed to achieve.

Conviction was not this end; conversion was. And the task of persuading his hearers to accept the cure he proffered was no less formidable than that of making them conscious of the gravity of their malady. For Whitefield, this task of persuasion brought into play the most devastating weapons in his rhetorical arsenal. In effect, he appears to have attempted, and not without significant success, to overpower his congregations.

One very effective device was a rapid series of laconic questions which allowed listeners no time to formulate answers. Such a series might occur, and usually did, several times during a

sermon but most emphatically and effectively towards the end.

With questions such as these, Whitefield came close to casting an hypnotic spell over his audience:

You boast of wisdom... What will your wisdom avail you, if it does not make you wise unto salvation? Can you, with all your wisdom, propose a more consistent scheme to build your hopes of salvation on, than what has been now laid before you? Can you, with all the strength of natural reason, find out a better way of acceptance with God, than by the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ? Is it right to think your own works can in any measure deserve or procure it? If not, why will you not believe in Him? Why will you not submit to his righteousness? Can you deny that you are fallen creatures? Do not you find that you are full of disorders, and that these disorders make you unhappy? Do not you find that you cannot change your own hearts? Have you not resolved many and many a time, and have not your corruptions yet dominion over you? Are you not bondslaves to your lusts, and led captive by the Devil at his will? Why then will you not come to Christ for sanctification!<sup>20</sup>

It is not uncommon in a single sermon of Whitefield's to count sixty or more questions, most of which are clustered together in series of six to ten, and sometimes more.

Another of his favourite rhetorical tools, and one employed by great preachers in every age from St. Paul to the present day, was the repetition of certain key words and phrases. Sometimes it was a verb, sometimes a noun, but always it was a word that answered some need of which the preacher had made his hearers aware. For example, having remonstrated with his listeners for their moral blindness, he then assures them that it is possible for them to see. In a single paragraph he repeats the word 'see' seventeen times before concluding thus:

If you can mix faith with the promise, and look up to Jesus

Christ, you shall see. What shall you see? You shall see wonders; you shall see Christ, and you shall be so ravished with his beauty, that you shall be scarcely able to contain yourself. You shall see fulness and righteousness in the Son of God - something in Christ that will satisfy all your wants; you shall see your interest in him; you shall see that you shall be with him for evermore; you shall see him here by faith, and see him as he is in heaven; you shall see wondrous things. May God recover the sight of all you poor blind sinners.<sup>21</sup>

At times, almost like a faith-healer attempting a cure for some psychosomatic disorder, Whitefield would repeat the word 'heal' with a crescendo of emphasis and emotion. On other occasions, he would attempt an onomatopoeic effect by a quiet, insistent repetition of such a word as 'peace'.

It follows, "peace". "The Kingdom of God is righteousness, and peace." By peace I do not understand that false peace, or rather carnal security, into which so many are fallen. There are thousands who speak peace to themselves, when there is no peace. Thousands have got a peace of the devil's making; the strong man armed has got possession of their hearts, and therefore their goods are all in peace. But the peace here spoken of is a peace that follows after a great deal of soul trouble; it is like that calm which the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to the wind, "Peace, be still; and immediately there was a great calm;" it is like that peace which Christ spoke to his disciples, when he came and said, "Peace be unto you" - "My peace I leave with you." It is a peace of God's making, it is a peace of God's giving, it is a peace that the world cannot give, it is a peace that can be felt, it is a peace that passeth human understanding - it is a peace that results from a sense of having God's righteousness brought home to the soul.<sup>22</sup>

In such a way the 'strange man on the boards' spoke to the deepest longing of the human soul: the longing for peace. Who could refuse an invitation which promised so much?

Though not devoid of anecdotes, Whitefield's sermons have a dearth of such illustrative material. Unlike the modern evangelist, his repertoire of stories seems to have been somewhat

restricted. When he did indulge in an anecdote it was invariably brief and usually, though not always, pungent. When it was necessary to illustrate, there seemed no better source book than the Bible itself. He chose his illustrative materials from the Old and New Testament alike, believing all to be divinely inspired and eternally germane to the human situation. Even his own speech was influenced by the rhetorical form of the Bible.

Having said all of this, we must acknowledge that Whitefield's oratory has not been explained; it has merely been described. Ultimately, we must concur with Stuart Clark Henry:

The difference was not in his technique. The difference was in the spokesman. And here, seemingly, is the real secret of Whitefield's attraction: the intensely confessional character of his preaching - the intensely confessional character of the man who preached.<sup>23</sup>

## NOTES

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- 2  
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- 3  
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p. 408.
- 4  
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- 20  
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CHAPTER V

QUOT HOMINES, TOT SENTENTIAE



## CHAPTER V

Any age would have found it difficult to arrive at unanimity of opinion about such an anomalous figure as George Whitefield or such an anomalous movement as Methodism. For the eighteenth century it was especially hard. The battle between orthodoxy and Deism which had split religious and philosophical thinking for the second half of the seventeenth century had been exhausting for both sides. While the former may not without justification have claimed victory, there was little of which to boast. Indeed, perhaps in some respects the victory had been a pyrrhic one. Butler, Locke, and Tillotson had done much to refute the primary claims of 'natural religion' and venerate 'revealed religion'. But their efforts to place Christianity on an essentially rational basis had reduced it to a barren intellectual sterility. Tillotson insisted upon an appeal to reason and a mistrust of all spiritual intuition in religious matters. Acquiescing in the theology of the seventeenth century divine, the Established Church of the eighteenth century came to mistrust any emotion in religion. Among clergy and laity alike there was a widespread acceptance of the rational approach to religion, and few questions about the Establishment were being asked.

A lack of questioning of religion may indicate either a wholehearted acceptance of and dedication to it, or apathy towards it. For the orthodoxy of eighteenth century England, the latter would

appear more nearly true. And it is apathy, not hostility, which has always been the most effective enemy of the Christian Church. For the Church of England of the early eighteenth century there was little overt hostility or even opposition. Even the sceptics among the upper classes had no desire to overthrow religious conventions since such practices and beliefs obviously had a very useful social function. Religion provided splendid reinforcement for morality and did much to restrain the vulgar.

Preaching reflected this attitude. For the moderate divines, the sermon was a treatise on moral philosophy. Any divergence from, or reaction against, this form of religious observance was labelled with the pejorative term 'enthusiasm'. In an 'age of reason' enthusiasm was virtually synonymous with madness; and when manifested in religion was to be condemned outright. Numerous pamphlets were published warning people against the dangers of this insidious spiritual disease. As early as 1680, the Nonjuror, Bishop Hickes, had published his seventy-eight page sermon on The Spirit of Enthusiasm Exorcised. The same sermon was republished in 1709 and touched off a series of publications on the subject. As late as 1823, Isaac Taylor could find an enthusiastic audience for his treatise on The Natural History of Enthusiasm; such was the intensity of the interest created in the subject by clergy and laity alike during the eighteenth century. To many of the clerical and secular literati of the day, Whitefield was the apotheosis and Methodism the seed plot of this 'vulgar' enthusiasm.

To understand more fully the nature of such a charge it is necessary to find an acceptable definition of enthusiasm. To the extent to which it is possible to construct a semantic fence around such a term, David Hume best shows what the word meant to the latter half of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries.

Hence arise raptures, transports, and surprising flights of fancy; and, confidence and presumption still increasing, these raptures, being altogether unaccountable, and seeming quite beyond the reach of our ordinary faculties, are attributed to the immediate inspiration of that Divine Being who is the object of devotion. In a little time, the inspired person comes to regard himself as a distinguished favourite of the Divinity; and when this phrensy once takes place, which is the summit of enthusiasm, every whimsey is consecrated: human reason, and even morality, are rejected as fallacious guides; and the fanatic madman delivers himself over, blindly and without reserve, to the supposed illapses of the Spirit, and to inspiration from above.- Hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance, are therefore the true sources of Enthusiasm.<sup>1</sup>

While acknowledging that certain psychological and sociological benefits might accrue from such an abandon to religious fervour, Hume was nonetheless forced to decry enthusiasm because it tended to vitiate human reason. Yet, Hume appears not to have attempted to depreciate Whitefield or accuse him of the 'pride, presumption' and 'ignorance' associated with enthusiasm. Perhaps it was the respect in which the philosopher held the orator which prevented him from holding up Whitefield to particular criticism.

There were others among the secular literati who saw Whitefield as the personification of enthusiasm and who were unrestrained in criticism by any respect for the preacher's oratorical vir-

tuosity. Dr. Johnson, himself a Pembroke man (though slightly before Whitefield's residence there) was unimpressed by either the character or talent of his fellow alumnus. Though Boswell felt that Whitefield's 'eloquence was powerful, his views pious and charitable, his assiduity almost incredible',<sup>2</sup> Johnson thought he merely 'vociferated and made an impression'.<sup>3</sup>

His popularity, Sir, (said he), is chiefly owing to the peculiarity of his manner. He would be followed by crowds were he to wear a night-cap in the pulpit, or were he to preach from a tree.<sup>4</sup>

Johnson considered Whitefield much inferior to Wesley, who, Johnson said, thought only of religion and could speak well on almost any subject. Whitefield, he contended, meant well, 'but had a mixture of politics and ostentation'.<sup>5</sup>

Whitefield never drew as much attention as a mountebank does; he did not draw attention by doing better than others, but by doing what was strange. Were Astley to preach a sermon standing upon his head on a horse's back, he would collect a multitude to hear him; but no wise man would say he made a better sermon for that. I never treated Whitefield's ministry with contempt; I believe he did good. He had devoted himself to the lower classes of mankind, and among them he was of use. But when familiarity and noise claim the praise due to knowledge, art and elegance, we must beat down such pretensions.<sup>6</sup>

Johnson found a considerable number of sympathizers both within and without the church who were willing to join forces with him to 'beat down' Whitefield's 'pretensions'. Attacks upon Whitefield from the learned laity took various forms. Pope chose the medium and form in which he worked best to give expression to his anger. In scathing, satiric verse, he denounces Whitefield and all religious enthusiasts.

So swells each wind-pipe; Ass intones to Ass;  
 Harmonic twang! of leather, horn, and brass;  
 Such as from lab'ring lungs th'Enthusiast blows,  
 High sound, attemper'd to the vocal nose;  
 Or such as bellow from the deep Divine;  
 There, Webster! peal'd thy voice, and Whitefield! thine.<sup>7</sup>

Fielding's criticism was embodied in a more modern literary genre, the novel. It is perhaps dangerous to attribute the sentiments expressed by a character in a novel to the novelist himself. When, however, the same sentiments are expressed by other characters in other novels by the same author, one feels justified in drawing conclusions about the writer's predisposition to the subject in question. That Fielding was ill disposed towards Whitefield is apparent from the way the evangelist is spoken of in Joseph Andrews (1742) and Tom Jones (1749). In the former there is a discussion between the two parsons and the bookseller into which Whitefield's name is introduced. Mr. Adam's denunciation of him is explicit enough.

"Sir," answered Adams, "if Mr. Whitefield had carried his doctrine no farther than you mention, I should have remained, as I once was, his well-wisher. I am, myself, as great an enemy to the luxury and splendour of the clergy as he can be... But when he began to call nonsense and enthusiasm to his aid, and set up the detestable doctrine of faith against good works, I was his friend no longer; for surely that doctrine was coined in hell; and one would think none but the devil himself could have the confidence to preach it. For can anything be more derogatory to the honour of God than for men to imagine that the all-wise Being will hereafter say to the good and virtuous, 'Notwithstanding the purity of thy life, notwithstanding that constant rule of virtue and goodness in which you walked upon earth, still, as thou didst not believe everything in the true orthodox manner, thy want of faith shall condemn thee'? Or, on the other side, can any doctrine have a more pernicious influence on society, than a persuasion that it will be a good plea for the villain at the last day - 'Lord,

it is true I never obeyed one of thy commandments, yet punish me not, for I believe them all?'<sup>8</sup>

Nor does Fielding miss an opportunity, when Tom Jones visits Whitefield's home town, Gloucester, and stays at 'The Bell', to reiterate his disapproval of the evangelist, though a little less acridly here. The inn, at the time of Tom's visit, was kept by the preacher's brother and his wife, with whom, incidentally, George had been unable to get along. Of the proprietors and their house, the narrator speaks well, saying of Mr. Whitefield that he:

... is absolutely untainted with the pernicious principles of Methodism, or of any other heretical sect. He is indeed a very honest plain man, and, in my opinion, not likely to create any disturbance either in church or state.<sup>9</sup>

The 'pernicious principles' of which Fielding speaks are those embodied in the character of Thwackum. Thwackum is obviously meant to exhibit a doctrinal affinity with Whitefield and, for the most part, represents the antithesis of the simple goodness for which Tom, the foundling, stands.

Another English novelist who had little regard for Whitefield was Tobias Smollett. Smollett had railed against Methodism and summarily dismissed Whitefield as of little importance in his history of England. The same attitude towards the evangelist is expressed, this time much more interestingly, in his novel Humphrey Clinker (1771). In Clinker, the jejune, ingenuous footman who, inebriated by the Holy Spirit, tries his hand at preaching, we see Methodism in its most inane light. Perhaps it is only the warm contagion of the character of Clinker which saves this satire on Methodism and Whitefield - with whom Humphrey is meant to be

associated in the reader's mind - from being too caustic.

A third novelist, Richard Graves, attempted a somewhat more sympathetic caricature of Whitefield in The Spiritual Quixote (1772). This 'comic romance', subtitled The Summer's Ramble of Mr. Geoffrey Wildgoose, relates the adventures of a Methodist proselyte who gives himself over to a summer of preaching. Graves leaves little doubt about the identity in real life of Wildgoose's model.

But it must be remembered likewise, that Mr. Wildgoose, notwithstanding the present uncouth appearance of his short hair, had something naturally agreeable in his countenance, and also a very musical tone of voice; and though in the vehemence of his harangues, he had a wildness in his looks, proceeding from the enthusiastic zeal which possessed his imagination, yet that very circumstance gave a more pathetic force to his eloquence; and he himself appearing so much in earnest and affected with the subject, it had a proportionable effect upon his audience.<sup>10</sup>

His manner of preaching, too, is patterned after Whitefield's and his sermons embellished with direct quotations from Whitefield's sermons and journal. Wildgoose may be naive, but he is by no means a despicable or dissimulatory character. Indeed, the reader can scarcely keep from liking him, so amiable is his disposition and so innocently earnest are his intentions.

In The Spiritual Quixote, also, Whitefield is introduced in person as Wildgoose's inspiration and adviser. In this capacity, Whitefield is much less attractive than his fictional counterpart.

As Wildgoose was thus expostulating with his friend, they arrived at Mr. Whitefield's lodgings; and, upon inquiring for him, they were shown up one pair of stairs by the maid of the house, who, tapping at the door, the two pilgrims

were immediately admitted to Mr. Whitefield's presence.

Mr. Whitefield was sitting in an elbow-chair, in a handsome dining-room, dressed in a purple night-gown and velvet cap; and, instead of a Bible or prayer-book, as Wildgoose expected, he had a good bason of chocolate, and a plate of muffins well-buttered, before him.<sup>11</sup>

The tumescence of which the evangelist was so frequently accused by his enemies is accentuated in the series of questions Whitefield immediately asks Wildgoose.

Well, brother Wildgoose, says Mr. Whitefield, when and where were you converted? when did you first begin to feel the motions of God's Spirit? in what year, what month, what day, and in what manner, did you receive the secret call of the Spirit, to undertake the work of the ministry? What work of grace has God wrought upon your soul? and what symptoms have you felt of the new birth?<sup>12</sup>

Like many another of his contemporaries, Graves seems to have been unsure whether to condemn or condone the 'chief spokesman' for Methodism. And, in fact, he attempts to do both: Whitefield as Whitefield smacks of pomposity and overbearing pride; Whitefield as Wildgoose is possessed of enough humility and sincerity to endear him to us.

It was unquestionably through the medium of drama that the most virulent attack was made upon the character and ministry of George Whitefield. This fact to many seemed poetic justice since more than a few of the revivalist's harangues against social evils were directed towards 'playhouses'. It is ironical that the man who possessed so many natural acting gifts should have become the stage's most vituperative opponent. Psychologists would again find significance in the fact that the boy who acted with such passion at St. Mary de Crypt school should in later life condemn



outright all such forms of entertainment. But Whitefield's hostility to the theatre was reciprocated with a vengeance. The Minor (1760), a comic farce by Samuel Foote, was a venomous attack on Methodism and on Whitefield in particular. The latter is caricatured in an unscrupulous preacher, Mr. Squintum, a name Whitefield had been given by those who jested about his squinted eye. The evangelist's character is mercilessly aspersed; his theology taken to its most ludicrous extreme.

In Mrs. Cole, a former prostitute forced by age and ill health into retirement, and a recent convert to Methodism, Foote brings his acrimony to its libellous best. In conversation with a client, Mrs. Cole twits him for his negligence:

And never once called upon old Cole. No, no, I am worn out, thrown by and forgotten, like a tattered garment, as Mr. Squintum says. Oh, he is a dear man! But for him I had been a lost sheep; never known the comforts of the new birth; no.- There's your old friend, Kitty Carrot, at home still. What, shall we see you this evening? I have kept the green room for you ever since I heard you were in town.<sup>13</sup>

Foote, who has been called the English Aristophanes, is working in his best medium here; the language is pointed, caustic and a perfect vehicle for his purposes. The satiric farce precipitated a number of impassioned defences from Whitefield's followers, but the damage had nonetheless been done; doubt had been cast upon the validity of a religious experience and a personality that seemed able to accommodate a Mrs. Cole. Men might laugh at Mrs. Cole and Mr. Squintum, but at the same time they found themselves questioning the very things Foote intended they should:

the integrity of Methodism and the sanity of the 'enthusiastic' theology of a Whitefield.

If there were those among the intelligensia who were ready to condemn the field-preacher, there were also those who stood ready to defend him. What to some appeared 'vulgar enthusiasm' in the preacher, seemed to others a spontaneous expression of concern for the souls of his audience. What to his critics were affected gesticulation and blasphemy, to his admirers were 'natural animation' and the priorities of a man who lived in close communion with God.

Nor was it just his doting converts who were thus favourably disposed to Whitefield. Among those who respected the evangelist without being much affected by the message he preached, none was more generous in his praise or loyal in his support than the American philosopher-inventor - Benjamin Franklin. It was not just the preacher's rhetorical brilliance that Franklin admired; he respected Whitefield the man too, and had implicit faith in his honesty and integrity. When others, and some of them in holy orders, questioned Whitefield's probity in connection with his Bethesda project, Franklin stated his absolute faith in the evangelist's character.

Some of Mr. Whitefield's enemies affected to suppose that he would apply those collections [i.e. those taken for his orphanage at Savannah, Georgia] to his own private emolument; but I, who was intimately acquainted with him, never had the least suspicion of his integrity, but am to this day decidedly of opinion that he was in all his conduct a perfectly honest man; and methinks my testimony in his favour ought to have more weight, as we had no religious connection.<sup>14</sup>

A man not given to exaggeration, Franklin had seen the change Whitefield had effected in the colonies and for that he praised his missionary labours.

It was perhaps in verse that Whitefield received his finest tributes. And of these tributes, none more effectively combined noble sentiment with poetic grace than William Cowper's Hope. Cowper's name for Whitefield is Leuconomus; his comparison is to Saint Paul.

He loved the world that hated him: the tear  
That dropp'd upon his Bible was sincere:  
Assail'd by scandal and the tongue of strife,  
His only answer was a blameless life;  
And he that forged, and he that threw the dart,  
Had each a brother's int'rest in his heart.  
Paul's love of Christ, and steadiness unbribed,  
Were copied close in him, and well transcribed.  
He follow'd Paul; his zeal a kindred flame,  
His apostolic charity the same.  
Like him, cross'd cheerfully tempestuous seas,  
Forsaking country, kindred, friends, and ease:  
Like him, he labour'd, and like him content  
To bear it, suffer'd shame where'er he went.  
Blush columny! and write upon his tomb,  
If honest Eulogy can spare thee room,  
Thy deep repentance of thy thousand lies,  
Which, aim'd at him, have pierced th'offended skies,  
And say, Blot out my sin, confess'd, deplored,  
Against thine image, in thy saint, O Lord!<sup>15</sup>

Cowper who knew little of Leuconomus' peace of mind and certainty, felt a profound respect for the man whose 'apostolic charity' was comparable to Saint Paul's.

William Blake must have felt a certain spiritual affinity with Whitefield. Like the preacher, Blake's professional unorthodoxy had made him something of a rebel and earned him many derogatory epithets of which 'mad', 'enthusiast', 'fanatic' were not

the most pejorative. Like Whitefield, he had rebelled against the Established Church; though for somewhat different reasons. Finally, both the evangelist and the poet felt themselves to be cast in a very special prophetic role with divine appointment and favour. Though worlds apart theologically, Blake held Whitefield in high esteem and with unaffected candour could write -

No faith in all the earth: the Book of God is trodden underfoot.  
He sent his two servants, Whitefield and Wesley: were they prophets,  
Or were they Idiots or Madmen? Show us Miracles!  
Can you have greater Miracles than these? Men who devote  
Their life's whole comfort to entire scorn and injury and death?<sup>16</sup>

Not everyone was gifted like Cowper and Blake to express approval of Whitefield so beautifully and articulately in poetry. Some found more practical means; Lady Huntingdon, for example. It is difficult to exaggerate the part she played in the Revival movement of the eighteenth century. Knox credits her with having been the real leader of the Evangelical group.

It would be a capital mistake to suppose that Wesley, whatever his contribution may have been to the genius of eighteenth-century Evangelicalism, was the leader of the Evangelical group... Nor was Whitefield the leader of the movement; it was not his métier to be the leader of any movement. There is one single figure which, without dominating the whole picture, interprets and unifies the whole picture. And it is the figure of a woman.<sup>17</sup>

In almost every sphere of that movement Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, made her influence felt; but especially in the orb of Whitefield's activities was it pronounced. From her, Whitefield received financial and moral support. Through her, he was pro-

vided with an opportunity to preach to and meet many of the social elite of the day. To her, he paid a deference that at times bordered on servility. To her chapels at Brighton, Bath, and Chelsea she invited many of her own circle to hear Whitefield and others of her chaplains preach. Among his contemporaries the field-preacher had no more generous patron or ardent supporter than Lady Huntingdon. Few would doubt that her favours towards him gave added impetus to his ministry.

Among those who visited Lady Huntingdon's chapels to hear Whitefield was the celebrated statesman, Lord Bolingbroke. In a letter to Lady Huntingdon after hearing Whitefield preach, he wrote:

He [Whitefield] is the most extraordinary man in our times. He has the most commanding eloquence I ever heard in any person; his abilities are very considerable; his zeal unquenchable; and his piety and excellence genuine - unquestionable. The bishops and inferior orders of the clergy are very angry with him, and endeavour to represent him as a hypocrite, an enthusiast; but this is not astonishing - there is so little real goodness or honesty amongst them. Your Ladyship will be somewhat amused at hearing that the king has represented to his Grace of Canterbury, that Mr. Whitefield should be advanced to the bench, as the only means of putting an end to his preaching.<sup>18</sup>

Were it necessary, it would not be difficult to uncloset further evidence to show the diversity of opinion about Whitefield among his lettered contemporaries. One fruitful source would be the magazine and periodical publications of that day on both sides of the Atlantic. In publications such as The London Magazine, The Gentleman's Magazine, Universal Magazine, Pennsylvania Gazette, Virginia Gazette, and Boston Gazette, Whitefield is var-

iously condemned and condoned, vilified and vindicated, extolled and execrated, and not infrequently in the same edition.<sup>19</sup>

The Christian community of his day could come no closer to agreement about Whitefield than the secular community could. For the most part, the clergy of the Church of England were antagonistic towards him. A few were perhaps jealous of his success, but most had less personal reasons for opposing him. Some took issue with his theology and homiletics; some were outraged by his seeming lack of respect for church tradition and his fellow clergy. There can be little doubt that Whitefield's temerity in condemning Archbishop Tillotson, a loved and respected figure among the Established clergy, confirmed many in their detestation of him.

Between Whitefield and the clergy of the Church of England a verbal war was protracted for virtually the whole of the revivalist's ministry, with accusations, defences, charges and counter-charges. Though frequently upbraided with having forsaken his mother church, Whitefield, to the end, protested his unstinting fealty to her. In a letter 'To the Bishop of B---', dated February 16, 1756, he is at pains to answer charges of disloyalty.

Your lordship therefore judgeth exceeding right when you say, 'I presume you do not mean to declare any dissent from the Church of England.' Far be it from me; no, my lord, unless thrust out, I shall never leave her; and even then (as I hope whenever it happen it will be an unjust extrusion) I shall still continue to adhere to her doctrines, and pray for the much wished-for restoration of her discipline, even to my dying day.<sup>20</sup>

Notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary, there were many who considered Whitefield a flagrant heretic. There were those,

like Bishop Lavington, who considered Whitefield, Wesley, and the whole Methodist movement a very real jeopardy to the Church of England. Lavington crystallized his fears in this matter in a work entitled The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists, Compared (1749-51). Others, like Bishop Warburton, regarded Whitefield and Methodism as a danger of another kind. In his Doctrine of Grace (1762), Warburton depicts the evangelical movement as a recrudescence of the old Puritan fanaticism. The list of publications for and against Methodism, and Whitefield in particular, is surprisingly long. For the year 1739 alone, Tyerman gives a list of forty-nine published pamphlets.<sup>21</sup>

For every new attacker of the field-preacher, there seemed to be a new defender. So, unrelentingly, for thirty-five years the controversy was sustained, and few were in authority in church or state who remained indifferent to it all. On September 30, 1770, the one who had been the central figure in that controversy expired in Newbury Port. Even then the Christian and secular communities were no closer to unanimity of opinion about him than they were in 1739 when he inaugurated his field-preaching ministry. What exactly it was Whitefield had left behind few were absolutely sure: some said manna, some said flotsam. On this, however, all were agreed, he would not soon be forgotten.

## NOTES

- 1  
Essays, 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm', p. 76.
- 2  
Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. G.B. Hill, i, p. 75.
- 3  
ibid., v, p. 36.
- 4  
ibid., ii, 79.
- 5  
ibid., v, 35.
- 6  
ibid., iii, 409.
- 7  
Poetical Works, ed. A.W. Ward, II, 253-58.
- 8  
Joseph Andrews, Bk. I, Ch. xvii.
- 9  
Tom Jones, Bk. VIII, Ch. viii.
- 10  
Spiritual Quixote, Bk. III, Ch. iii.
- 11  
ibid., Bk. VII, Ch. i.
- 12  
ibid., Bk. VII, Ch. i.
- 13  
The Minor, Act i.
- 14  
Sketches, p. 259.
- 15  
Poetical Works, 'Thomas Nelson,' 1848, p. 83.
- 16  
Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, p. 402.



17

Enthusiasm, pp. 483-84.

18

Sketches, p. 271.

19

One excellent example is The Gentleman's Magazine, IX, 1739.

20

Sketches, p. 150.

21

Whitefield, Vol. i, p. 283.

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