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America's Awakener- The Greatest Christian Life

By Rick Joyner

George Whitefield 1714-1770

For a time, George Whitefield was one of the most widely recognized names in the world. He was certainly the best-known religious leader of his time and is credited with the spread of the First Great Awakening. This Awakening not only brought profound changes to Christianity, but to Western civilization as well. It is hard to imagine what the world would be like today without Whitefield's contribution.

Whitefield was born in 1714 in Gloucester, England. He later attended Oxford University where he met the Wesley brothers, John and Charles. The three joined "The Holy Club" at Oxford and began a friendship that would change the world. Together they founded the Methodist and Evangelical movements that not only changed the expression of Christianity, but also the trajectory of the British Empire and the North American colonies.

Whitefield traveled to the colonies and served as a parish priest in Savannah, Georgia, but he returned to England in 1738 to raise funds for an orphanage in Savannah. While in England, he preached to such large congregations that his friends persuaded him to preach to miners at an open-air meeting in Bristol. He drew massive crowds, some estimated to have been in the tens of thousands. This success caused many to try to persuade him to stay, but he wanted to return to Savannah. So, he asked John Wesley to take over the work in Bristol. This led to both men entering into the most fruitful periods of their lives.



It is noteworthy that Whitefield was a staunch adherent to Calvinism, being a firm believer in predestination and election. John and Charles held to the doctrines of Arminianism, considered the polar opposite of Calvinism. Even so, Whitefield and the Wesley brothers remained devoted friends and supporters of each other's work. When Whitefield was asked if he thought he would see John Wesley in heaven he replied, "No. I think that he will be so close to the throne, and I so far back, that it will be hard for me to see him there." Such was their generous attitude toward each other and other workers and movements with which they had differences. This noble spirit elevated the movement in the affections of the people and opened many to reach out beyond their own doctrinal or denominational boundaries.

Benjamin Franklin and Whitefield

Whitefield had become the most famous preacher in Britain when he began his tour of the American colonies in 1740. He quickly drew massive crowds like he had in Britain, and soon many considered him the most influential public figure in the colonies. Benjamin Franklin was skeptical of the reports he heard about Whitefield and the size of the crowds he was drawing. This provoked him to go to Whitefield's meeting in Philadelphia to see for himself.

As Franklin listened to Whitefield preach, he decided to walk away from the crowd to measure the distance from which he could hear him clearly. Then he estimated the square footage taken up by each person and the span of the semicircle crowd. By this he determined that Whitefield's powerful voice was heard and understood by over thirty thousand people at once.

After meeting Whitefield, Franklin became good friends with him. Franklin considered him to be a true intellectual and decided to print some of his tracts, as well as Whitefield's entire sermons in his newspaper. This fanned the flames of the Awakening even more.

Franklin was an ecumenist and approved of the way Whitefield drew people from across the denominational spectrum. After one of Whitefield's sermons, Franklin wrote about the "wonderful . . . change made in the manners of our inhabitants." "Manners" was the term used at the time for morals. He continued about this transformation: "from being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk thro' the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street."

Whitefield, the Moravians in Pennsylvania, and Jonathan Edwards in New England were the three major influences of the spiritual awakening in America. No doubt Whitefield's large gatherings were a chief influence, but it was the wide dissemination of his printed tracts and articles, such as Franklin distributed, that watered the seeds sown in his sermons. All of these factors profoundly impacted the colonies and helped set the spiritual DNA of the nation then forming.



In all, Whitefield visited America seven times and made thirteen ocean crossings. It was estimated that he preached eighteen thousand sermons, and over seventy were published and distributed. Whitefield preached a straightforward gospel message, the most powerful of all messages. He preached in a way that brought radical transformation in England and the colonies. He took the gospel out of the restrictive church buildings and into the places where the people lived their lives.

Whitefield's style was vibrant and alive with passion for God, not cold and formal as many were used to in the churches. It invoked a living relationship to God, not just adherence to a doctrine. For this reason, the people tended to respond personally and emotionally, often weeping, crying, and moaning for their sin, or rejoicing in the grace and mercy of God. The people did not just hear about God at Whitefield's meetings—they encountered Him. A personal experience with God became more esteemed in the Awakening than just knowledge about Him.

This was a radical departure from the typical religious experience of the time. Because of this, church became a means and not an end in itself. The colonists tended to be individualists anyway, but this fortified their love for freedom and the value of the individual. The Awakening is estimated to have impacted 50% of colonists, and this no doubt fueled their desire for true democracy as their government. It is likely that the American Revolution would not have happened without the Great Awakening.

An Advocate for Slavery

The colony of Georgia outlawed slavery in 1735, but in 1749, George Whitefield campaigned for it to be legalized. He believed that the southern colonies were too hot for white men to toil in their fields and that their lands could never be profitable without slave labor. In 1751, the trustees of the colony legalized slavery, probably because of Whitefield's influence. He then purchased slaves to work on his own plantation, as well as in his orphanages.

Whitefield was known for the kind treatment of his slaves and was critical of any who abused their own slaves. His slaves were devoted to him. That he viewed the use of slaves as acceptable yet the slave trade as wrong is an enigma. However, he viewed the slave trade as a means of delivering many from their heathen lands, leading them to Christ and salvation. This then provided their offspring with a chance to be nurtured in the fear and admonition of the Lord. He also advocated purchasing a good many so as to make their lives as comfortable as possible.

It has often been the practice of men to justify evils by including some good in them, but the good side of the Tree of Knowledge is just as deadly as the evil side. So this great preacher, possibly the most responsible for sowing the seeds of liberty in the colonies, also sowed the seeds of slavery. The man who brought salvation and light to the colonies also planted what would ultimately cost many lives and create unprecedented destruction in America's greatest crisis—the Civil War.



I remember as a very young child visiting my great grandparents whose estate still contained the former slave quarters on it. They were proud that their ancestors had owned slaves. My great grandparents had been born long after the Civil War, but they still talked about it. I remember their conversations at night while sitting on the porch, which often turned to how well “their slaves” had been treated. When something has to be justified so much, we need to understand that it is just evil.

We must also wonder how Martin Luther, who brought so much light to the world through the Reformation, could sow seeds of hatred and evil in his anti-Semitic writings. Because of these writings, he is credited by many as paving the way for the Jewish Holocaust. James 3:11 asked, “How can the same well bring forth both fresh and bitter water?” Ecclesiastes 3:16 answers this: **“Moreover I saw under the sun, in the place of justice, that wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, that wickedness was there” (WEB)**. At this time on the earth, we cannot expect pure justice or pure righteousness, but rather a mixture of justice with injustice and righteousness with unrighteousness. Even the greatest Bible heroes had terrible failures, except One. He is the One we should put our trust in, not man. In this age, even the best of them will have a mixture.

Through many trials and crises, America has made progress in confronting and overcoming some of our evils, but there is still progress to be made. The ultimate progress may not come until we learn that even if a tree has good fruit, if it is mixed with evil fruit, then the whole tree must be avoided. There is a Tree of Life, Christ Himself, in which there is no evil and no poisonous fruit.



This article is **Rick Joyner’s Word for the Week #43-2015** and can be accessed as originally published here:

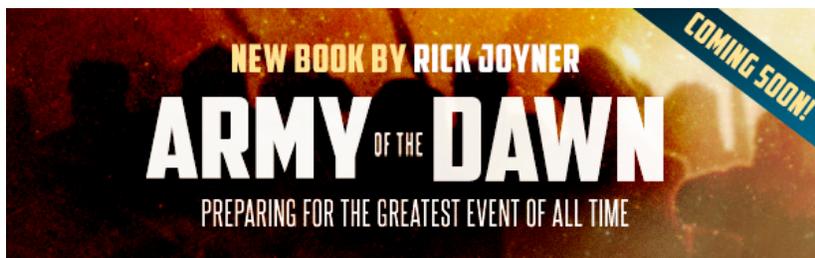
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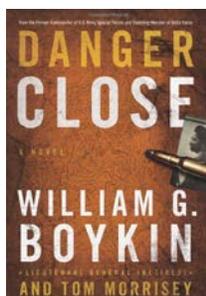
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