



The Evangelistic Zeal of

George Whitefield

STEVEN J. LAWSON



A Long Line of Godly Men Profile

ENDORSEMENTS

“What I love about Steve Lawson’s books is that he writes as a preacher, with a keen eye and ear for details that show what a vital role great preaching has played in the advance of the gospel, the growth and strengthening of the church, and the collective testimony of the Evangelical movement. This volume on George Whitefield is another superb example of Dr. Lawson’s approach to history and biography. He highlights the key doctrinal nuances, character qualities, natural talents, and spiritual gifts that help explain why Whitefield was such a powerful preacher and such a monumental figure in church history. The book is written in an engaging, personal way that brings Whitefield to life. It’s hard to put a book like this down.”

—DR. JOHN MACARTHUR
Pastor, Grace Community Church
President, The Master’s College and Seminary
Sun Valley, Calif.

“Effective evangelism is humanly impossible. To take truth from the Bible, get it into your heart, cause it to burst into flames of love, and then carry its living coals into another heart—no man has the power to do this. It requires an anointing from heaven. God gave that anointing to George Whitefield and used him to ignite thousands of souls. Steven Lawson draws us close to feel the fire in this stirring and informative book. May many read it and cry up to heaven for the flame to descend again!”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE
President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Mich.

“When Whitefield came to town, everything stopped, everyone listened. And what did they hear? As Dr. Steven Lawson makes clear, they heard the gospel plainly, powerfully, and persuasively proclaimed. Read this book and you’ll learn the amazing story of George Whitefield—and then pray that God will use this book to raise up Whitefields in our day.”

—DR. STEPHEN J. NICHOLS
President, Reformation Bible College
Sanford, Fla.

“There is little doubt that George Whitefield is one of the most remarkable preachers in the history of Christianity: his preaching was central to the Great Awakening that refashioned British society on both sides of the Atlantic; it gripped the mind and imagination of so many in his era, and led to the conversion of thousands; and most importantly, it set forth plainly and faithfully the biblical gospel. To be reminded of all of this and much more by Dr. Lawson’s new study of Whitefield as a preacher is vital in our day, when far too many professing Christians disparage preaching and are questioning key facets of the gospel of Christ that Whitefield preached.”

—DR. MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN
Professor of church history and biblical spirituality
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Ky.

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George
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To Kent Stainback,
a devoted and faithful friend
whose passion for the gospel
reflects the evangelistic zeal
of George Whitefield and
whose spiritual influence
has helped launch
OnePassion Ministries

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Followers Worthy to be Followed

Down through the centuries, God has providentially raised up a long line of godly men, those whom He has mightily used at strategic moments in church history. These valiant soldiers of the cross have come from all walks of life—from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen’s shops. They have arisen from all points of this world—from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite these differences, these pivotal figures have had much in common.

Each man possessed not only an unwavering faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but more than that, each of these stalwarts of the faith held deep convictions in the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder-to-shoulder in championing these biblical teachings that magnify the sovereign

grace of God in salvation. They upheld the foundational truth that “salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9; Ps. 3:8).

Any survey of church history reveals that those who have embraced these Reformed truths have been granted extraordinary confidence in their God. Far from paralyzing these spiritual giants, the doctrines of grace kindled within their hearts a reverential awe for God that humbled their souls before His throne. The truths of sovereign grace emboldened these men to rise up and advance the cause of Christ on the earth. With an enlarged vision of His saving grace, they stepped forward boldly and accomplished the work of ten, even twenty men. They arose with wings like eagles and soared over their times. The doctrines of grace empowered them to serve God in their divinely appointed hour, leaving a godly influence upon future generations.

This Long Line of Godly Men Profile series highlights key figures in the agelong procession of sovereign-grace men. The purpose of this series is to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to impact their times and further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were courageous followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

This volume focuses upon the great English evangelist George Whitefield. In the eighteenth century, a day plagued by lifeless orthodoxy, Whitefield burst onto the scene with power and passion. In a day marked by great spiritual decline, Whitefield preached with a supernatural unction and intense boldness that became the primary catalyst in ushering in two

major revivals simultaneously, one in the British Isles and the other in the American colonies. As the Lord empowered him, Whitefield's clarion voice called men and women to the foot of the cross. Perhaps no gospel herald has ever been so effectively used in so many places over such an extended period of time. For these and countless more reasons, George Whitefield remains eminently worthy to be profiled in this series.

May the Lord greatly use this book to embolden a new generation of leaders so that they, like Whitefield, might leave an indelible mark on this world for God. Through this profile, may you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling. May you be filled with Scripture and, thereby, zealous in your evangelistic endeavors for the exaltation of Christ and the advance of His kingdom.

Soli Deo gloria

—Steven J. Lawson

Series editor

Lightning From a Cloudless Sky

*The gospel was to be recovered for nations and God had prepared Whitefield to preach it.*¹

—IAIN H. MURRAY

If I could be anyone in church history, I would be George Whitefield. I say this not because of his great oratorical skills or his worldwide fame, but primarily because of his consuming evangelistic zeal. Preeminently, Whitefield has instilled within me a passion for preaching.

Through Martin Luther, I have been motivated to strive for greater boldness for the truth. From John Calvin, I have gained a greater desire to preach the Scripture in a sequential, expositional manner. Through Jonathan Edwards, I have been challenged in terms of discipline in Christian living. From Charles Spurgeon, I have learned the necessity of an intense gospel focus in every sermon. But when it comes to George

Whitefield, I have been captivated by his unmatched zeal in proclaiming the gospel message to the ends of the earth.

In this book, it is my desire to unveil the heart of a man who burned to accomplish the work of God. My sincere hope is that George Whitefield's example will rekindle your passion for taking the name of Christ to the nations. I pray that this book will move a new generation of gospel preachers to advance into the fields of the world white for harvest. But before we examine the life and ministry of this extraordinary man, let me first establish the historical setting in which he lived.

The eighteenth century for the English-speaking world was a monumental period of spiritual awakening. Martyn Lloyd-Jones called this time "the greatest manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit since apostolic days."² This era proved to be an unprecedented season of evangelistic endeavor and spiritual renewal. Its effects spanned two continents and were especially dramatic given the spiritual lethargy that permeated the church and culture of that day. This season proved to be nothing less than a "second reformation."

Since the seventeenth century, gospel preaching had waxed cold throughout Europe, but especially in England. The state church was already in spiritual decline. Presbyterianism had weakened, and the General Baptists began a slippery descent from Arminianism to Unitarianism.

Several factors caused these days of drought. Many churches no longer required a regenerate church membership and were careless in whom they admitted to the Lord's table. Puritanism

suffered a devastating blow when Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity in 1662, which permanently divided the Church of England from all other Protestants, thereafter known as Dissenters.³ Under Charles II, this decree determined a more Catholic-like form of public prayers, the priesthood, the sacraments, and other rites in the Church of England. Puritan ministers were required to abandon their original ordinations and be reordained under this new form of the state church.

This brewing crisis came to a head on August 24, 1662, St. Bartholomew's Day, when two thousand Puritan ministers were ejected from their churches. In a single day, the greatest generation of gospel preachers was discharged from the pulpit and forbidden to preach. These Puritan ministers suffered even greater restrictions with the passing of the Conventicle Act in 1664. They were banned from preaching in the fields or conducting private worship services in the homes of parishioners. Further restriction came with the Five Mile Act in 1665, which barred ejected ministers from coming within five miles of their former churches or any city or town.

This persecution was lifted in 1689 by the Toleration Act under William and Mary, but by this time, most of the leading Puritan ministers had already died. Forbidden from being buried in English churchyards, many Puritan pastors were entombed in a separate Nonconformist cemetery in Bunhill Fields, outside of London. Included in this despised cemetery were such notables as John Bunyan, John Owen, Isaac Watts, and Thomas Goodwin. Considered outcasts and deemed unworthy, these

men of God were buried outside the city limits. Puritan influence had ebbed sharply.

At the same time, many highly esteemed Anglican pulpits taught a moralistic, legalistic corruption of justification by faith. This doctrinal decline left the English church with little appetite for the preaching of the Word. Any burden for the lost had waned. Like the Apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane, English ministers had left off watching and were lulled into a deep sleep. Biblical convictions were replaced with the prevailing secular philosophies. There was a virtual famine in the land for the hearing of God's Word.

It was into this spiritual void that God raised up the English evangelist George Whitefield. Like lightning from a cloudless sky, Whitefield stepped onto the world stage as the most prolific herald of the gospel since the days of the New Testament. God empowered Whitefield to become a blazing lamp set on a hill in the midst of Satan's empire of darkness.

This powerful figure of unusual gospel fervor stood at the headwaters of an Evangelical resurgence. His thundering voice was the catalyst for spiritual awakening, as his preaching took the British Isles by storm and electrified the American colonies. By his evangelistic zeal, he stoked the flames of revival until they spread to the hearts of countless men and women. It can be argued that by his preaching, the British Isles were saved from the equivalent of the French Revolution. And on the other side of the Atlantic, a nation would be birthed in the wake of his gospel proclamation.

Given the many ailments plaguing the church today, this present generation needs a strong dose of George Whitefield. As we look at modern Christianity, there is much for which to be thankful, especially in light of the Reformed resurgence of recent years. However, it has become a trend for many in this movement to retreat into a Calvinistic cloister, having little impact upon the world around them. Whitefield, through his intense engagement with the world and fervent proclamation of the gospel, has much to teach us concerning what desperately needs to be recovered.

We have too many mild-mannered apologists lecturing in pulpits today. The need of this hour is for red-hot *proclaimers* of God and His saving grace, not for mere philosophical explainers. It is all too easy to become ensnared in the web of social and political concerns that displaces our primary duty to preach Christ. What needs to be recovered in this hour is Whitefield's deep belief in the sovereign grace of God, coupled with a zealous desire to call the lost to repentance and faith in Christ. Whitefield saw that the greatest need of humanity is to have right standing before God. As Whitefield fulfilled his God-given call to passionately summon a lost and dying world to believe in the gospel, so must we do the same.



Before we proceed to consider George Whitefield, I must thank the publishing team at Reformation Trust for their

commitment to this Long Line of Godly Men Profile series. I remain grateful to Chris Larson, who has been instrumental in overseeing this series. I remain thankful for the ongoing influence of my former professor and current friend, Dr. R. C. Sproul.

I am indebted to Christ Fellowship Baptist Church of Mobile, Alabama, which I serve as senior pastor. I cannot imagine that any other pastor has ever received as much encouragement to serve Christ on such a far-reaching scale as I have. I am extremely grateful for the support of my fellow elders and congregation, who continuously encourage me in my extended ministry abroad.

I want to express my gratitude for my executive assistant, Kay Allen, who typed this document, and Dustin Benge and Keith Phillips, fellow pastors at Christ Fellowship, who helped prepare this manuscript.

I thank God for my family and for their support in my life and ministry. My wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, remain pillars of strength for me.

May the Lord use Whitefield's example, whether you are a layperson or a preacher, to embolden your own commitment to the cause of Christ and to the furtherance of His gospel. In these days, when there is a crying need for boldness both in the pulpit and the pew, may we see the restoration of Christ's church to her pristine purity through a new reformation.

—Steven J. Lawson
Mobile, Alabama
August 2013

A Force for the Gospel

*Other men seem to be only half-alive, but Whitefield was all life, fire, wing, force. My own model, if I may have such a thing in due subordination to my Lord, is George Whitefield. With unequal footsteps must I follow his glorious track.*¹

—CHARLES SPURGEON

Reaching from one side of the Atlantic to the other, the expansive ministry of George Whitefield (1714–1770) remains unmatched to this day. Relentless in drive and fervent in soul, this “Grand Itinerant” was the chosen instrument in the hands of our sovereign God for the ingathering of untold thousands into His kingdom. Reaching the British Isles from London to Edinburgh and the American colonies from Boston to Savannah, this anointed herald of the gospel was the

force behind the British Evangelical movement and the First Great Awakening.

There had been other open-air preachers before Whitefield. In the thirteenth century, the Waldensians circulated throughout central Europe propagating the gospel. During the fourteenth century, a band of brave preachers known as the Lollards were sent out by John Wycliffe (c. 1320–1384) to proclaim Christ in the villages and fields of England. Howell Harris (1714–1773), a contemporary of Whitefield, had preached in the open air of Wales. But *never* had there been anyone like Whitefield in terms of scope and power. In fact, not since the first-century missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul had such evangelistic preaching been taken so directly to the masses of the world.

In his thirty-four years of ministry, Whitefield preached some eighteen thousand sermons, often to multiplied thousands. If informal messages are included, such as in private homes, this number easily increases to thirty thousand sermons, perhaps more. Three sermons a day were common; four were not uncommon. Conservative estimates are that he spoke a thousand times every year for more than thirty years. In America alone, it is estimated that eighty percent of the colonists heard him preach. This means Whitefield was seen by far more American settlers than was George Washington. Whitefield's name was more widely recognized by colonial Americans than any living person's except for those of British royalty. It is believed that Whitefield preached to more than ten million people over the course of his ministry, a staggering number.

Making seven demanding trips to America, Whitefield crossed the Atlantic Ocean thirteen times for the express purpose of preaching the gospel. He spent almost three years of his life on a ship en route to preach. In all, about eight years of his life were spent in America. He made fifteen trips to Scotland, two to Ireland, and one each to Gibraltar, Bermuda, and the Netherlands. Of this unparalleled outreach, Whitefield could truly say, "The whole world is now my parish. Where-soever my Master calls me, I am ready to go and preach the everlasting gospel."² Since the time of the Apostles, the annals of church history record no other individual who possessed such gospel ambition and relentless determination.

Whitefield's contemporaries never encountered his like. The great English hymn writer William Cowper marveled that in Whitefield, "The apostolical times seem to have returned upon us."³ Another famed hymn writer, John Newton, stated, "As a preacher, if any man were to ask me who was second-best I had ever heard, I should be at some loss; but in regard to the first, Mr. Whitefield so far exceeds every other man of my time that I should be at no loss to say."⁴ Yet another renowned hymn writer, Augustus Toplady, praised him as "the prince of preachers, the apostle of the English Empire, and the most useful minister that has perhaps been produced since the days of the apostles."⁵

The greatest preachers of history have been the strongest admirers of Whitefield. J. C. Ryle, a noted preacher and author, asserted, "I believe no English preacher has ever possessed such a combination of excellent qualifications as Whitefield. . . .

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