

## **Movement Models: John Wesley and George Whitefield.**

John Wesley and George Whitefield were 18th century contemporaries in England sharing many traits in common. Both John Wesley and George Whitefield were effective, open-air revival preachers. George Whitefield preached his first open air sermon to about 200 people on February 17, 1739. When John Wesley heard about Whitefield's approach he "could scarce reconcile himself to Whitefield's strange way of preaching in the fields." (Heitzenrater:99) However on Sunday April 1, 1739 John Wesley preached a sermon based on Jesus's sermon on the mount and could not help notice how Jesus had set a precedent for preaching in the field. "The following afternoon, he himself 'submitted to be more vile' by preaching outdoors." (Heitzenrater:99)

Whitefield's powerful voice and captivating stories are legendary. Benjamin Franklin once confirmed that a sermon which Whitefield delivered from the court house steps could be heard clearly over a large area enough to hold a crowd of 30,000. (Franklin:2) Benjamin Franklin was a life long friend of Whitefield and wrote this about him:

He had a loud and clear Voice, and articulated his Words & Sentences so perfectly that he might be heard and understood at a great Distance, especially as his Auditories [listeners], however numerous, observ'd the most exact Silence. (Franklin)

Wesley and Whitefield both saw thousands converted to faith in Christ. Their preaching brought a powerful conviction from God which led to profound life change for those to whom they ministered. Those who listened to his preaching would fall down under the power of the Holy Spirit, quake and display other manifestations.

[Whitefield's preaching] soon made the Manners [behavior] of our Inhabitants; from being thoughtless or indifferent about Religion, it seem'd 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. (Benjamin Franklin:1791)

In addition to being revivalist preachers Wesley and Whitefield both preached many 'charity sermons' to take up offerings. Whitefield used these offerings to fund the Bethesda orphanage in Savannah Georgia while John Wesley's collections funded Kingswood College.

"Whitefield was a master at moving congregations; he could easily inspire almost any group to give generously to a special offering collected for a particular cause.

He had done so for Kingswood and now he was now doing it for the Orphan-house in Georgia. The Wesleys used this method of 'charity sermons' also (Heitzenrater:127)."

Both Whitefield and Wesley were exemplary in their handling of finances though both were at times accused otherwise. Benjamin Franklin and the magistrates of Savannah Georgia validated Whitefield's handling of finance (Whitefield memoirs, Franklin). Wesley was cleared by the testimony of others, including his organization's own internal finance structure which had multiple "stewards" who handled all the finance of the Methodist connection. (Heitzenrater:119,127)

Whitefield and Wesley's passion to see people know Christ prompted them to travel extensively keeping exhausting schedules. (Heitzenrater:158) Whitefield's obituary says he preached 18,000 sermons in 34 years, traversed the Atlantic ocean 13 times and traveled extensively throughout Great Britain and the Eastern United States. (Memoirs:220) Wesley traveled throughout Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England. Yearly he covered an average of 8,000 miles on horseback

maintaining a schedule of preaching two to four times a day for years.

## Differences Between John Wesley and George Whitefield

George Whitefield lacked the organizational gifts of John Wesley. Wesley organized his people into cells, but was committed to keeping the work of the Methodist connection within the structures of the Church of England. (Heitzenrater :94) George Whitefield, however expected new believers to join societies or existing churches by themselves with no organized follow-up. In 1748 while in England Whitefield wrote to John Wesley that he shared his aversion for creating “societies” or the small group structures that Methodism is known for.

My attachment to America will not permit me to abide very long in England, consequently I should but weave a Penelope’s web if I formed societies; and, if I should form them, I have not proper assistants to take care of them; I intend, therefore, to go about preaching the gospel to every creature. (Whitefield Memoirs:119)

A second difference is that Wesley preached an Arminian theology while Whitefield held to a clear Calvinistic teaching. In fact, despite years of friendship in 1741 the two more formally parted ways over their doctrinal differences. The dispute is recorded in *A letter from George Whitefield to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley*, which was a response to Mr. Wesley’s sermon “Free Grace” and Mr. Wesley’s rebuff of Whitefield’s views on predestination. Their parting of ways did not mean a total lack of mutual respect or animosity. In 1770 just prior to Whitefield’s death he wrote a letter to the Wesley brothers, John and Charles.

“I leave a mourning ring to my honored and dear friends and fellow laborers, the Rev. John and Charles Wesley, in token of my indissoluble union with them, in heart and Christian affection, notwithstanding our difference in judgment about some particular points of doctrine.” (March 22, 1770 location 5334 in Whitefield memoirs. Memoirs:295)

Another difference between the two men was their view of slavery. Whitefield felt slavery would benefit the building of America whereas John Wesley spoke out strongly against slavery throughout his lifetime. Wesley’s views are perhaps best recorded in his 1774 booklet “Thoughts on Slavery.” One of John Wesley’s final written messages was to encourage William Wilberforce in his efforts in the British parliament against slavery. In February 1791 John Wesley read the book *Gustavus Vasa* about a former Barbados slave, Olaudah Equiano. In response he wrote a note to encourage William Wilberforce in Parliament. “Go on in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.” (JWL 8:265). (Heitzenrater:307)

The most significant difference between these two revival preachers is probably the difference in their legacy. George Whitefield is remembered for his intense spiritual life and his loud voice, for telling captivating stories that filled his sermons, for open-air or “field preaching”, and for the large numbers of people impacted by his persuasive preaching. **All these however died when he did.** Whitefield did not mentor or apprentice revival preachers so there were not individuals who could carry on what he did. His lack of attention to what would survive him is also evident in the handling of the Bethesda orphanage in Savannah Georgia. Although he transferred the patronage to Lady Huntingdon in the UK she did not follow through, so that the institution fell on hard times and had to find its way apart from its benefactor. Whitefield set a high standard of what a revival preacher

can do which has inspired others who came after him. Some of his sermons exist however the context into which they were delivered has changed.

By contrast the Methodist denomination which sprung up around and after Wesley has over 12 million members at the time of this writing and a long history in the revival awakenings in American history.

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