

J. C. Ryle's Estimation of Whitefield's Ministry

by J.C. Ryle

George Whitefield was a powerful evangelist who preached a pure gospel, was a bold and direct preacher, and had a tremendous earnestness that made his preaching effective.

Scripture: Acts 17:11

Topics: "Noble Character", "Biblical Leadership"

Description

Greek Word Studies delves into the meaning of 'eugenes,' which signifies high or noble birth but is used figuratively to describe individuals with attitudes associated with well-bred persons. The term is also linked to 'eugenics,' the study of improving the human race through selective breeding. Various sources highlight 'eugenes' as having a high status socially, as well as possessing commendable and open-minded attitudes. The Berean Jews were commended for their noble character in contrast to others. The term is used in the New Testament to emphasize noble-mindedness and high birth.

Transcript

Estimate of good that Whitefield did - Testimonies to his direct Usefulness - Indirect good that he did - Peculiar character of his Preaching - Witnesses to his real power as a Preacher - Simplicity, Directness, Power of Description, Earnestness, Pathos, Action, Voice, and Fluency, his leading Excellences - Inner Life, Humility, Love to Christ, Laboriousness, Self-denial, Disinterestedness, Cheerfulness, Catholicity - Conclusion

George Whitefield, in my judgment, was so entirely chief and first among the English Reformers of the eighteenth century, that I make no apology for offering some further information about him. The real amount of good he did, the peculiar character of his preaching, the private character of the man, are all points that deserve consideration. They are points, I may add, about which there is a vast amount of misconception.

This misconception perhaps is unavoidable, and ought not to surprise us. The materials for forming a correct opinion about such a man as Whitefield are necessarily very scanty. He wrote no book for the million, of world-wide fame, like Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. He headed no crusade against an apostate Church, with a nation at his back, and princes on his side, like Martin Luther. He founded no religious denomination, which pinned its faith on his writings and carefully embalmed his best acts and words, like John Wesley. There are Lutherans and Wesleyans in the present day, but there are no Whitefieldites. No! The great evangelist of last century was a simple, guileless man, who lived for one thing only, and that

was to preach Christ. If he did that, he cared for nothing else. The records of such a man are large and full in heaven, I have no doubt. But they are few and scanty upon earth.

We must not forget, beside this, that the many in every age see nothing in a man like Whitefield but fanaticism and enthusiasm. They abhor everything like 'zeal' in religion. They dislike every one who turns the world upside down, and departs from old traditional ways, and will not let the devil alone. Such persons, no doubt, would tell us that the ministry of Whitefield only produced temporary excitement, that his preaching was common- place rant, and that his character had nothing about it to be specially admired. It may be feared that eighteen hundred years ago they would have said much the same of St. Paul.

The question, 'What good did Whitefield do?' is one which I answer without the least hesitation. I believe that the direct good which he did to immortal souls was enormous. I will go further,--I believe it is incalculable. Credible witnesses in England, Scotland, and America, have placed on record their conviction that he was the means of converting thousands of people. Many, wherever he preached, were not merely pleased, excited, and arrested, but positively turned from sin, and made thorough servants of God. 'Numbering the people', I do not forget, is at all times an objectionable practice. God alone can read hearts and discern the wheat from the tares. Many, no doubt, in days of religious excitement, are set down as converted who are not converted at all. But I wish my readers to understand that my high estimate of Whitefield's usefulness is based on a solid foundation. I ask them to mark well what Whitefield's contemporaries thought of the value of his labours.

Franklin, the well-known American Philosopher, was a cold- blooded, calculating man, a Quaker by profession, and not likely to form too high an estimate of any minister's work. Yet even he confessed that 'it was wonderful to see the change soon made by his preaching in the manners of the inhabitants of Philadelphia. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious.' Franklin himself, it may be remarked, was the leading printer of religious works at Philadelphia; and his readiness to print Whitefield's sermons and journals shows his judgment of the hold that he had on the American mind.

Maclaurin, Willison, and Macculloch, were Scotch ministers whose names are well known north of the Tweed, and the two former of whom deservedly rank high as theological writers. All these have repeatedly testified that Whitefield was made an instrument of doing immense good in Scotland. Willison in particular says, 'that God honoured him with surprising success among sinners of all ranks and persuasions'.

Old Henry Venn, of Huddersfield and Yelling, was a man of strong good sense, as well as of great grace. His opinion was, that 'if the greatness, extent, success, and disinterestedness of a man's labours can give him distinction among the children of Christ, then we are warranted to affirm that scarce any one has equalled Mr. Whitefield'. Again he says: 'He was abundantly successful in his vast labours. The seals of his ministry, from first to last, I am persuaded, were more than could be credited could the number be fixed. This is certain, his amazing popularity was only from his usefulness; for he no sooner opened his mouth as a preacher, than God commanded an extraordinary blessing upon his word.'

John Newton was a shrewd man, as well as an eminent minister of the gospel. His testimony is: 'That which finished Mr. Whitefield's character as a shining light, and is now his crown of rejoicing, was the singular success which the Lord was pleased to give him in winning souls. It seemed as if he never preached in vain. Perhaps there is hardly a place in all the extensive compass of his labours where some

may not yet be found who thankfully acknowledge him as their spiritual father.'

John Wesley did not agree with Whitefield on several theological points of no small importance. But when he preached his funeral sermon, he said: 'Have we read or heard of any person who called so many thousands, so many myriads of sinners to repentance? Above all, have we read or heard of any one who has been the blessed instrument of bringing so many sinners from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God?'

Valuable as these testimonies undoubtedly are, there is one point which they leave totally untouched. That point is the quantity of indirect good that Whitefield did. Great as the direct effects of his labours were, I believe firmly that the indirect effects were even greater. His ministry was made a blessing to thousands who never perhaps either saw or heard him.

He was among the first in the eighteenth century who revived attention to the old truths which produced the Protestant Reformation. His constant assertion of the doctrines taught by the Reformers, his repeated references to the Articles and Homilies, and the divinity of the best English theologians, obliged many to think, and roused them to examine their own principles. If the whole truth was known, I believe it would prove that the rise and progress of the Evangelical body in the Church of England received a mighty impulse from George Whitefield.

But this is not the only indirect good that Whitefield did in his day. He was among the first to show the right way to meet the attacks of infidels and skeptics on Christianity. He saw clearly that the most powerful weapon against such men is not cold, metaphysical reasoning and dry critical disquisition, but preaching the whole gospel--living the whole gospel--and spreading the whole gospel. It was not the writings of Leland, and the younger Sherlock, and Waterland, and Leslie, that rolled back the flood of infidelity one half so much as the preaching of Whitefield and his companions. They were the men who were the true champions of Christianity. Infidels are seldom shaken by a mere abstract reasoning. The surest argument against them are gospel truth and gospel life.

Above all, he was the very first Englishman who seems to have thoroughly understood what Dr. Chalmers aptly called the aggressive system. He was the first to see that Christ's ministers must do the work of fishermen. They must not wait for souls to come to them, but must go after souls, and 'compel them to come in'. He did not sit tamely by his fire side, like a cat on a rainy day, mourning over the wickedness of the land. He went forth to beard the devil in his high places. He attacked sin and wickedness face to face, and gave them no peace. He dived into holes and corners after sinners. He hunted out ignorance and vice wherever they could be found. In short, he set on foot a system of action which, up to his time, had been comparatively unknown in this country, but a system which, once commenced, has never ceased to be employed down to the present day. City missions, town missions, district visiting societies, open-air preachings, home missions, special services, theatre preachings, are all evidences that the value of the 'aggressive system' is now thoroughly recognized by all the Churches. We understand better how to go to work now than we did a hundred years ago. But let us never forget that the first man to commence operations of this kind was George Whitefield, and let us give him the credit he deserves.

The peculiar character of Whitefield's preaching is the subject which next demands some consideration. Men naturally wish to know what was the secret of his unparalleled success. The subject is one surrounded with considerable difficulty, and it is no easy matter to form a correct judgment about it. The common idea of many people, that he was a mere common-place ranting Methodist, remarkable for

nothing but great fluency, strong doctrine, and a loud voice, will not bear a moment's investigation. Dr. Johnson was foolish enough to say, that 'he vociferated and made an impression, but never drew as much attention as a mountebank does; and that he did not draw attention by doing better than others, but by doing what was strange'. But Johnson was anything but infallible when he began to talk about ministers and religion. Such a theory will not hold water. It is contradictory to undeniable facts.

It is a fact that no preacher in England has ever succeeded in arresting the attention of such crowds as Whitefield constantly addressed around London. No preacher has ever been so universally popular in every country that he visited, in England, Scotland and America. No preacher has ever retained his hold on his hearers so entirely as he did for thirty-four years. His popularity never waned. It was as great at the end of his day as it was at the beginning. Wherever he preached, men would leave their workshop and employments to gather round him, and hear like those who heard for eternity. This of itself is a great fact. To command the ear of 'the masses' for a quarter of a century, and to be preaching incessantly the whole time, is an evidence of no common power.

It is another fact that Whitefield's preaching produced a powerful effect on people in every rank of life. He won the admiration of high as well as low, of rich as well as poor, of learned as well as unlearned. If his preaching had been popular with none but the uneducated and the poor, we might have thought it possible that there was little in it but declamation and noise. But, so far from this being the case, he seems to have been acceptable to numbers of the nobility and gentry. The Marquis of Lothian, the Earl of Leven, the Earl of Buchan, Lord Rae, Lord Dartmouth, Lord James A. Gordon, might be named among his warmest admirers, beside Lady Huntingdon and a host of ladies.

It is a fact that eminent critics and literary men, like Lord Bolingbroke and Lord Chesterfield, were frequently his delighted hearers. Even the cold artificial Chesterfield was known to warm under Whitefield's eloquence. Bolingbroke said, 'He is the most extraordinary man in our times. He has the most commanding eloquence I ever heard in any person.' Franklin the philosopher spoke in no measured terms of his preaching powers. Hume the historian declared that it was worth going twenty miles to hear him.

Now, facts like these can never be explained away. They completely upset the theory that Whitefield's preaching was nothing but noise and rant. Bolingbroke, Chesterfield, Hume, and Franklin, were not men to be easily deceived. They were no mean judges of eloquence. They were probably among the best qualified critics of their day. Their unbought and unbiased opinions appear to me to supply unanswerable proof that there must have been something very extraordinary about Whitefield's preaching. But still, after all, the question remains to be answered, What was the secret of Whitefield's unrivalled popularity and effectiveness?

Let me now point out what appear to have been the distinctive characteristics of Whitefield's preaching.

For one thing, Whitefield preached a singularly pure gospel. Few men, perhaps, ever gave their hearers so much wheat and so little chaff. He did not get up to talk about his party, his cause, his interest or his office. He was perpetually telling you about your sins, your heart, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, the absolute need of repentance, faith, and holiness, in the way that the Bible presents these mighty subjects. 'Oh, the righteousness of Jesus Christ!' he would often say: 'I must be excused if I mention it in almost all my sermons.' Preaching of this kind is the preaching that God delights to honour. It must be pre-eminently a manifestation of truth.

For another thing, Whitefield's preaching was singularly lucid and simple. His hearers, whatever they might think of his doctrine, could never fail to understand what he meant. His style of speaking was easy, plain, and conversational. He seemed to abhor long and involved sentences. He always saw his mark, and went directly at it. He seldom troubled his hearers with abstruse argument and intricate reasoning. Simple Bible statements, apt illustrations, and pertinent anecdotes, were the more common weapons that he used. The consequence was that his hearers always understood him. He never shot above their heads. Here again is one grand element of a preacher's success. He must labour by all means to be understood. It was a wise saying of Archbishop Usher, 'To make easy things seem hard is every man's work; but to make hard things easy is the work of a great preacher'.

For another thing, Whitefield was a singularly bold and direct preacher. He never used that indefinite expression 'we', which seems so peculiar to English pulpit oratory, and which only leaves a hearer's mind in a state of misty confusion. He met men face to face, like one who had a message from God to them, 'I have come here to speak to you about your soul'. The result was that many of his hearers used often to think that his sermons were specially meant for themselves. He was not content, as many, with sticking on a meagre tail-piece of application at the end of a long discourse. On the contrary, a constant vein of application ran through all his sermons. 'This is for you, and this is for you.' His hearers were never let alone.

Another striking feature in Whitefield's preaching was his singular power of description. The Arabians have a proverb which says, 'He is the best orator who can turn men's ears into eyes'. Whitefield seems to have had a peculiar faculty of doing this. He dramatized his subject so thoroughly that it seemed to move and walk before your eyes. He used to draw such vivid pictures of the things he was handling, that his hearers could believe they actually saw and heard them. 'On one occasion', says one of his biographers, 'Lord Chesterfield was among his hearers. The great preacher, in describing the miserable condition of an unconverted sinner, illustrated the subject by describing a blind beggar. The night was dark, and the road dangerous. The poor mendicant was deserted by his dog near the edge of a precipice, and had nothing to aid him in groping his way but his staff. Whitefield so warmed with his subject, and enforced it with such graphic power, that the whole auditory was kept in breathless silence, as if it saw the movements of the poor old man; and at length, when the beggar was about to take the fatal step which would have hurled him down the precipice to certain destruction, Lord Chesterfield actually made a rush forward to save him, exclaiming aloud, "He is gone! he is gone!" The noble lord had been so entirely carried away by the preacher, that he forgot the whole was a picture.'

Another leading characteristic of Whitefield's preaching was his tremendous earnestness. One poor uneducated man said of him, that 'he preached like a lion'. He succeeded in showing people that he at least believed all he was saying, and that his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, were bent on making them believe it too. His sermons were not like the morning and evening gun at Portsmouth, a kind of formal discharge, fired off as a matter of course, that disturbs nobody. They were all life and fire. There was no getting away from them. Sleep was next to impossible. You must listen whether you liked it or not. There was a holy violence about him which firmly took your attention by storm. You were fairly carried off your legs by his energy before you had time to consider what you would do. This, we may be sure, was one secret of his success. We must convince men that we are in earnest ourselves, if we want to be believed. The difference between one preacher and another, is often not so much in the things said, as in the manner in which they are said.

It is recorded by one of his biographers that an American gentleman once went to hear him, for the first time, in consequence of the report he heard of his preaching powers. The day was rainy, the congregation comparatively thin, and the beginning of the sermon rather heavy. Our American friend began to say to himself, 'This man is no great wonder after all'. He looked round, and saw the congregation as little interested as himself. One old man, in front of the pulpit, had fallen asleep. But all at once Whitefield stopped short. His countenance changed. And then he suddenly broke forth in an altered tone: 'If I had come to speak to you in my own name, you might well rest your elbows on your knees, and your heads on your hands, and sleep; and once in a while look up, and say, What is this babbler talking of? But I have not come to you in my own name. No! I have come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts' (here he brought down his hand and foot with a force that made the building ring) 'and I must and will be heard'. The congregation started. The old man woke up at once. 'Ay, ay!' cried Whitefield, fixing his eyes on him, '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 God of Hosts, and I must, and will, have an audience.' The hearers were stripped of their apathy at once. Every word of the sermon after this was heard with deep attention, and the American gentleman never forgot it.

One more feature in Whitefield's preaching deserves special notice; and that is, the immense amount of pathos and feeling which it always contained. It was no uncommon thing with him to weep profusely in the pulpit. Cornelius Winter, who often accompanied him in his latter journeys, went so far as to say that he hardly ever knew him to get through a sermon without some tears. There seems to have been nothing of affectation in this. He felt intensely for the souls before him, and his feelings found an outlet in tears. Of all the ingredients of his success in preaching, none, I suspect, were so powerful as this. It awakened affections and touched secret springs in men, which no amount of reasonable and demonstration could have moved. It smoothed down the prejudices which many had conceived against him. They could not hate the man who wept so much over their souls. 'I came to hear you', said one to him, 'with my pocket full of stones, intending to break your head; but your sermon got the better of me, and broke my heart'. Once become satisfied that a man loves you, and you will listen gladly to anything he has to say.

I will now ask the reader to add to this analysis of Whitefield's preaching, that even by nature he possessed several of the rarest gifts which fit a man to be an orator. His action was perfect so perfect that even Garrick, the famous actor, gave it unqualified praise. His voice was as wonderful as his action--so powerful that he could make thirty thousand people hear him at once, and yet so musical and well toned that some said he could raise tears by his pronunciation of the word 'Mesopotamia'. His manner in the pulpit was so curiously graceful and fascinating that it was said that no one could hear him for five minutes without forgetting that he squinted. His fluency and command of appropriate language were of the highest order, prompting him always to use the right word and to put it in the right place. Add, I repeat, these gifts to the things already mentioned, and then consider whether there is not sufficient in our hands to account for his power and popularity as a preacher.

For my own part, I have no hesitation in saying that I believe no English preacher has ever possessed such a combination of excellent qualifications as Whitefield. Some, no doubt, have surpassed him in some of his gifts; others, perhaps, have equalled him in others. But for a well-balanced combination of some of the finest gifts that a preacher can possess, united with an unrivalled voice, manner, delivery, action, and command of words, Whitefield, I repeat my opinion, stands alone. No Englishman, I believe, dead or alive, has ever equalled him. And I suspect we shall always find that, just in proportion as preachers have approached that curious combination of rare gifts which Whitefield possessed, just in that very proportion

have they attained what Clarendon defines true eloquence to be "a strange power of making themselves believed".

The inner life and personal character of this great spiritual hero of the last century are a branch of my subject on which I shall not dwell at any length. In fact, there is no necessity for my doing so. He was a singularly transparent man. There was nothing about him requiring apology or explanation. His faults and good qualities were both clear and plain as noon-day. I shall therefore content myself with simply pointing out the prominent features of his character, so far as they can be gathered from his letters and the accounts of his contemporaries, and then bring my sketch of him to a conclusion.

He was a man of deep and unfeigned humility. No one can read the fourteen hundred letters of his, published by Dr. Gillies, without observing this. Again and again, in the very zenith of his popularity, we find him speaking of himself and his works in the lowliest terms. 'God be merciful to me a sinner', he writes on September 11, 1753, 'and give me, for his infinite mercy's sake, an humble, thankful, and resigned heart. Truly I am viler than the vilest, and stand amazed at his employing such a wretch as I am.' 'Let none of my friends', he writes on December 27, 1753, 'cry to such a sluggish, lukewarm, unprofitable worm, Spare thyself. Rather spur me on, I pray you, with an Awake, thou sleeper, and begin to do something for thy God.' Language like this, no doubt, seems foolishness and affectation to the world; but the well-instructed Bible reader will see in it the heart-felt experience of all the brightest saints. It is the language of men like Baxter, and Brainerd, and M'Cheyne. It is the same mind that was in the inspired Apostle Paul. Those that have most light and grace are always the humblest men.

He was a man of burning love to our Lord Jesus Christ. That name which is 'above every name' stands out incessantly in all his correspondence. Like fragrant ointment, it gives a savour to all his communications. He seems never weary of saying something about Jesus. 'My Master', as George Herbert said, is never long out of his mind. His love, his atonement, his precious blood, his righteousness, his readiness to receive sinners, his patience and tender dealing with saints, are themes which appear ever fresh before his eyes. In this respect, at least, there is a curious likeness between him and that glorious Scotch divine, Samuel Rutherford.

He was a man of unwearied diligence and laboriousness about his Master's business. It would be difficult, perhaps, to name any one in the annals of the Churches who worked so hard for Christ, and so thoroughly spent himself in his service. Henry Venn, in a funeral sermon for him, preached at Bath, bore the following testimony: 'What a sign and wonder was this man of God in the greatness of his labours! One cannot but stand amazed that his mortal frame could, for the space of near thirty years, without interruption, sustain the weight of them; for what so trying to the human frame in youth especially, as long-continued, frequent, and violent straining of the lungs? Who that knows their structure would think it possible that a person little above the age of manhood could speak in a single week, and that for years, in general forty hours, and in very many weeks sixty, and that to thousands; and after this labour, instead of taking any rest, could be offering up prayers and intercessions, with hymns and spiritual songs, as his manner was, in every house to which he was invited? The truth is, that in point of labour this extraordinary servant of God did as much in a few weeks as most of those who exert themselves are able to do in the space of a year.'

He was to the end a man of eminent self-denial. His style of living was most simple. He was remarkable to a proverb for moderation in eating and drinking. All through life he was an early riser. His usual hour for getting up was four o'clock, both in summer and winter; and equally punctual was he in retiring about ten at night. A man of prayerful habits, he frequently spent whole nights in reading and devotion. Cornelius

Winter, who often slept in the same room, says that he would sometimes rise during the night for this purpose. He cared little for money, except as a help to the cause of Christ, and refused it, when pressed upon him for his own use, once to the amount of 7,000. He amassed no fortune, and founded no wealthy family. The little money he left behind him at his death arose entirely from the legacies of friends. The Pope's coarse saying about Luther, 'This German beast does not love gold', might have been equally applied to Whitefield.

He was a man of remarkable disinterestedness, and singleness of eye. He seemed to live only for two objects--the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Of secondary and covert objects he knew nothing at all. He raised no party of followers who took his name. He established no denominational system, of which his own writings should be cardinal elements. A favourite expression of his is most characteristic of the man: 'Let the name of George Whitefield perish, so long as Christ is exalted.'

He was a man of a singularly happy and cheerful spirit. No one who saw him could ever doubt that he enjoyed his religion. Tried as he was in many ways throughout his ministry--slandered by some, despised by others, misrepresented by false brethren, opposed everywhere by the ignorant clergy of his time, worried by incessant controversy--his elasticity never failed him. He was eminently a rejoicing Christian, whose very demeanour recommended his Master's service. A venerable lady of New York, after his death, when speaking of the influences by which the Spirit won her heart to God, used these remarkable words, "Mr. Whitefield was so cheerful that it tempted me to become a Christian".

Last, but not least, he was a man of extraordinary charity, catholicity, and liberality in his religion. He knew nothing of that narrow-minded feeling which makes some men fancy that everything must be barren outside their own camps, and that their own party has got a complete monopoly of truth and heaven. He loved all who loved the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. He measured all by the measure which the angels use,--'Did they profess repentance towards God, faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, and holiness of conversation?' If they did, they were as his brethren. His soul was with such men, by whatever name they were called. Minor differences were wood, hay, and stubble to him. The marks of the Lord Jesus were the only marks he cared for.

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