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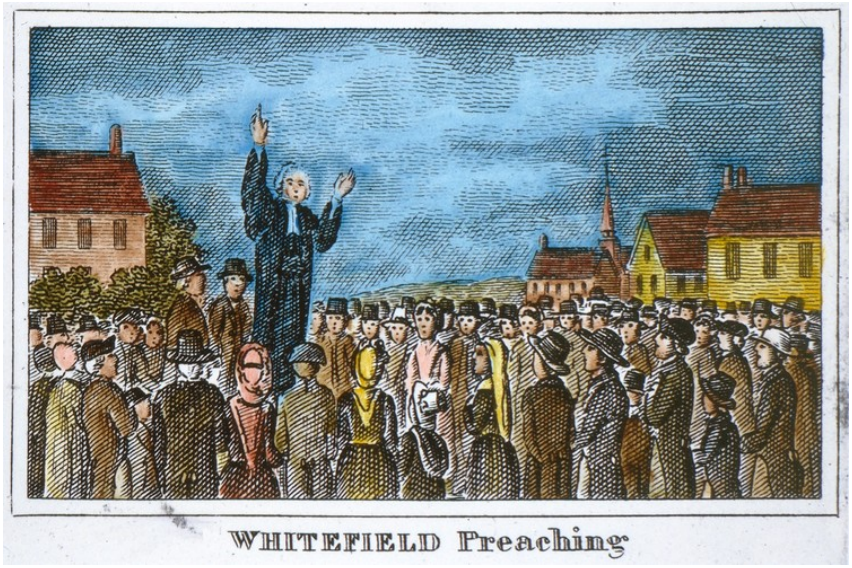
America's Spiritual Founding Father

The popular preacher helped define American evangelicalism as a broad, inclusive movement.



Harken An engraving, ca. 1740, of George Whitefield preaching in the Americas. *PHOTO: GRANGER, NYC / THE GRANGER COLLECTION*

By **BARTON SWAIM**

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The early 18th century was not a time of religious vibrancy and high church attendance. The upheavals of the previous century—collectively, if misleadingly, called "religious wars"—had seemed to discredit fervent belief. Yet at the height of his popularity in the 1740s, George Whitefield, the Anglican preacher and greatest evangelist of the First Great Awakening, was probably the most famous person in the English-speaking world, with the exception of the king himself. That a preacher should have generated international controversy and celebration—particularly a preacher who embraced a conservative Calvinism rather than some scandalous new heterodoxy—could not have been predicted in, say, the year of Whitefield's birth, 1714.

Although Whitefield died before the American Revolution, in 1770, Thomas S. Kidd contends that he was profoundly influential on the American nation's founding. An Anglican, he embraced baptists, presbyterians, Lutherans and even—with apprehensions—Moravians. He simply refused to countenance doctrinal divisions except in cases of (as he saw it) obvious heresy. George Whitefield did not invent American evangelicalism, but he made it, as we might say, a cohesive demographic.

GEORGE WHITEFIELD

By Thomas S. Kidd
Yale, 325 pages, $38

Whitefield was born in Gloucester, England; his father, a not very successful innkeeper, died when he was only 2. As an adolescent he was bright but aimless. His mother, hearing that capable but unconnected boys could attend Oxford as servitors—students who worked as servants to the college's fellows and attended at no charge—suggested he go. He did, and there made friends with John and Charles Wesley, the deeply serious progenitors of the Methodist movement. Like the Wesleys, Whitefield longed for assurance of his standing before God. He drove himself to physical and emotional exhaustion with dayslong sessions of fasting, Bible-reading and prayer, at last receiving certainty of his salvation in the late winter of 1735. After undergoing "many months' inexpressible trials by night and day under the spirit of bondage," he wrote, "God was pleased at length to remove the heavy load [and] to enable me to lay hold on his dear Son by a living faith." That experience led him to inquire into the subject of religious conversion itself—a topic generally avoided or ignored by Church of England clergymen of his day. Soon he felt called to preach, obtained his qualifications with further study and was ordained in Gloucester Cathedral in June 1736.

The young Whitefield's sermons had an electric effect, and he began preaching four and five times a week, at first in and around London, then further afield. Everywhere he preached, churches filled to capacity. At one service, in Bristol, a surprised Whitefield recalled, "people hung upon the rails of the organ-loft" and "climbed upon the [roof] of the church" in order to hear him. A wealthy Methodist businessman began placing ads in newspapers about Whitefield events, and a prominent London bookseller sold print likenesses of the man.

Whitefield was interested in conversion, not moral improvement. "Before ye can speak peace to your hearts," he says in one sermon, "ye must not only be sick of your original and actual sins; but ye must be sick of your righteousness, of all your duties and performances . . . if ye never felt that ye had no righteousness of your own; if ye never felt the deficiency of your own righteousness, ye can never come to Jesus Christ."

Soon it became clear that churches were insufficient venues. Whitefield began preaching outdoors. Crowds in the thousands gathered to hear him. Tearful responses to his calls for repentance and new birth became almost routine. In one moving scene, an outdoor preaching event in a coal-mining town near Bristol, Whitefield recalled the miners' faces with "white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully fell down their black cheeks."

In 1738, feeling the need to do something great for God, he followed John Wesley's counsel and left for Savannah, Ga., where John and his brother Charles had been ministering. There Whitefield founded an orphanage called Bethesda. The orphanage survived and at times flourished, but the greater consequence of Whitefield's first trip to America was that he began to think of himself as an itinerant evangelist. For the next three decades he preached everywhere he went, almost invariably to substantial crowds, sometimes to enormous crowds, on both sides of the Atlantic. Mr. Kidd reckons that Whitefield "saw and met more people in Britain, Ireland, and America than any other person of the era."

His foes were as fervent as his admirers. Anglican clergy often barred him from preaching in their churches, and scores of hostile pamphleteers scoured his published journals and sermons for evidence of heresy and "enthusiasm." Some accused him of profiting from the money he raised for the orphanage (Mr. Kidd finds no evidence for this). Once, as the preacher readied himself for bed in Plymouth, England, a thug made his way into Whitefield's room and thrashed him about the head. Death threats were common enough to be a nuisance. Hecklers did their utmost to disrupt events, but just occasionally they found themselves tearfully professing faith in Whitefield's God.

Mr. Kidd, a professor of history at Baylor and an evangelical Christian, balances his admiration for Whitefield with scholarly rigor—much as George Marsden, under whom Mr. Kidd studied at Notre Dame, has done in his marvelous biography of Jonathan Edwards, Whitefield's friend and supporter. Mr. Kidd's theologically sympathetic approach gives the book a depth that a more detached treatment might not: He misses none of the biblical allusions that peppered Whitefield's utterances, and he is an excellent guide through the tangled doctrinal controversies that dogged Whitefield's career—such as his disagreements with the Wesleys over monergism (the belief that God alone takes the initiative in human salvation) and perfectionism (the belief that a Christian could achieve perfection in this life).

Were the responses to Whitefield's preaching a product of his oratory? In part, perhaps. The Shakespearean actor David Garrick remarked that Whitefield could "make men

weep or tremble by his varied utterances of the word 'Mesopotamia.' " Yet the tremendous outpouring of emotion and sensitivity to divine wrath and love associated with the first Awakening continued undeterred—indeed intensified—in Whitefield's absence. Many less gifted preachers saw comparable responses in the 1740s. Mr. Kidd writes of a bricklayer in rural Virginia named Samuel Morris who drew vast crowds simply by reading Whitefield's sermons aloud.

In any case, the word "orator" doesn't readily apply to Whitefield. A great orator keeps his listeners' attention fixed on himself. What made Whitefield great was his ability to keep it fixed on Another.

—Mr. Swaim's "The Speechwriter: A Brief Education in Politics" will appear in July from Simon & Schuster.