

From The Editor

A Company of Whitefields

by Art Azurdia



There was a knock on the door of my study early last December. Upon my invitation, a familiar face peeked inside. It was the wife of one of my seminary colleagues. After extending her typically warm greeting she said: “Christmas is just around the corner, and I’d like to get my husband something he would really enjoy reading. Any suggestions?” Knowing that my brilliant brother’s proclivity for nightstand reading includes such tomes as *Justification And Variegated Nomism* and *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I immediately suggested a biography (with pictures, no less!). I told his wife of a book that, some fifteen years ago, proved to be a means of great influence in my life: the two-volume edition of *George Whitefield* by Arnold Dallimore.

Well, it turned out to be a *Merry* Christmas. She purchased the book for her husband . . . he subsequently devoured it. To my delight he said to me: “It is the best biography I’ve ever read”—echoing my own sentiments. Recently, we were engaged in a discussion regarding theology and ministry. As our conversation drew to a close, I attempted to summarize my convictions in a way I knew he would uniquely appreciate: “*I want to be a man like Whitefield.*” My colleague grinned and replied immediately: “*I have the very same aspiration.*”

But it made me wonder: “What does this aspiration say about us—my friend and me? Is this certifiable proof of our pastoral irrelevance?” Moreover, it makes me wonder: “Is this shocking *to you?*” You say, “Not when it comes from such ministry-Neanderthals as you two guys!” Okay . . . so we’re not Doug Pagitt and Rob Bell. Consider, however, a more substantial endorsement from a far more compelling ministry-Neanderthal:

There is no end to the interest which attaches to such a man as George Whitefield. Often as I have read his life, I am conscious of distinct quickening whenever I turn to it. *He lived.* 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; but with unequal footsteps must I follow his glorious track (C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol 2, p 66).

But, again, you may ask: “*Why George Whitefield?* Why would any contemporary minister look to this 18th century man as a model worthy of emulation?” A number of relevant reasons could be cited, but among the most obvious are the following:

- 1) Whitefield possessed an exceedingly high view of God and His glory;
- 2) Whitefield was filled with a robust love for human beings—often expressed in great acts of social benevolence;
- 3) Whitefield’s preaching was uniquely empowered by the Spirit of God; and,
- 4) Whitefield was relentlessly committed to the proclamation of the gospel.

In fact, to be more precise, it is this *final* quality that defines Whitefield most ultimately—in that it was his radical preoccupation with the gospel that supplied the theological foundation and evangelical motivation for the other defining features of his ministry. He never allowed the gospel to be relegated to the periphery—that is, to regard it as indispensable to the inception of the Christian life, only then to *assume* it with regard to the ongoing perseverance of people. The gospel, for Whitefield, was central to everything he preached and the basis for every ministry he undertook.

So . . . should we aspire to be contemporary expressions of Whitefield? *Absolutely. Positively.* I am unashamedly greedy for such pastors. But why? Is it because the well-being of the American evangelical church lies in a return to an earlier epoch in church history? A renaissance, perhaps, of the Puritan experiment? Is it because there are no present-day models of ministry worthy of our consideration? The answer to both of these questions is an unequivocal “no.” Rather, we should aspire to be like Whitefield because of what we learn from reading Whitefield: *that there can be no hope for genuine reformation or revival until we bring our ministries under the magnificent tyranny of the gospel.* To pose the same idea in the form of a question: How can we ever authentically anticipate the fresh outpouring of the Christocentric Spirit—so indispensable to renewal—until our agendas for ministry correspond to His . . . an agenda inexorably aimed at glorifying Jesus Christ?

This is no small matter, my friends. At the risk of oversimplification, everything can be distilled down to this simple test: Will we be *Christian* in our pastoral preoccupations?

“Every day in the temple complex, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming *the good news that the Messiah is Jesus*” (Acts 5:42)

“So those who were scattered went on their way *proclaiming the message of the good news*” (Acts 8:4)

“Philip went down to a city in Samaria and *preached the Messiah* to them” (Acts 8:5)

“So Philip proceeded to tell him *the good news about Jesus*” (Acts 8:35)

“Immediately he began *proclaiming Jesus* in the synagogues: ‘He is the Son of God’” (Acts 9:20)

“But there were some of them, Cypriot and Cyrenian men, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Hellenists, proclaiming *the good news about the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 11:20)

“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to *preach the gospel*” (1 Co 1:17)

“. . . we preach *Christ crucified*” (1 Co 1:23)

For those of you who know me, it is no surprise that I now passionately commend to you this issue of ***The Spurgeon Fellowship Journal***—“The Centrality Of The Gospel.” I do so for the simple reason that I long for a reformation that can only be the consequence of a decided return to the gospel.

My dear brothers, I write it here, now, and without ambiguity: I am praying for *you* to become a company of Whitefields. I am asking God to make *us* a company of Whitefields. Can you imagine the benefit to our congregations—and to the entire world—were the Lord of the Church to transform us into a company of Whitefields?

Listen to the words of a man who knows . . . another Whitefield:

“Of all I would wish to say this is the sum; my brethren, preach CHRIST, always and evermore. He is the whole gospel. His person, offices, and work must be our one great, all-comprehending

theme. The world needs still to be told of its Saviour, and of the way to reach him . . . If with the zeal of the Methodists we can preach the doctrine of the Puritans a great future is before us . . . the fuel of Whitefield will cause a burning which shall set the forests of error on fire, and warm the very soul of this cold earth. We are not called to proclaim philosophy and metaphysics, but the simple gospel. Man's fall, his need of a new birth, forgiveness through atonement, and salvation as the result of faith, these are our battle-axe and weapons of war. We have enough to do to learn and teach these great truths, and accursed be that learning which shall divert us from our mission . . . More and more am I jealous lest any views upon prophecy, church government, politics, or even systematic theology, should withdraw one of us from glorifying in the cross of Christ. Salvation is a theme for which I would fain enlist every holy tongue . . . O that Christ crucified were the universal burden of men of God" (C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students*, p 79).