

***Five Great Evangelists***, by John H. Armstrong, Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, IV20 1TW, UK, 1997. (38 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

## **Introduction.**

### **1. Mission Is Like Fire to Burning**

"A famous theologian once said, 'The Christian Church exists for mission as fire exists for burning.'" [p. 12]

### **2. Church Turning Inward Leads to Death**

"It is an observable fact that whenever the church loses her zeal for evangelism and mission she turns inward, seeking to protect her institutional interests. This always results in a slow, but ever increasing, decaying process that inevitably leads to death. There is an obvious reason for this. Christ has given His church a world-wide commission. If this commission is ignored, and if the zeal of God's people is blunted towards His purposes then why is it so surprising that the church experiences the fading of her focus and power?" [p. 12]

## ***George Whitefield 1714-1770***

### **3. Scholarship, a Christian Virtue**

"Scholarship was encouraged by these devote Oxford men, much as had been done in the Reformation era of the sixteenth century. The idea of separating piety from learning never seemed to occur to them. Each meeting included the reading of the New Testament in Greek, as well as readings from learned writers of the past. John Wesley, in one of the society's rules, regards scholarship as a Christian virtue, writing of 'the necessity of method and industry, in order to either learning or virtue'. How different from the multitude of theologically untrained evangelists we have in the 20th century, especially in North America. One is reminded of the counsel of the famous theologian James Denney who said evangelists should be theologians and our theologians should be evangelists!" [p. 23]

### **4. Trusted God for Daily Needs**

"He [George Whitefield] had formed the habit of living frugally, giving freely, and praying for personal help when the need became great. Like

George Mueller and Hudson Taylor in the next century, George Whitefield had to genuinely trust God for his *daily* need. He wrote, as many believers through the years have likewise written, 'I always observed, as my inward strength increased, so my outward sphere of action increased proportionately.' He always laboured to make sure that his inward man was strong and only then did he become concerned about outward needs. Every believer should follow this pattern." [p. 26]

## **5. Whitefield Criticized**

"As is always the case with men greatly used of God in awakening the church, Whitefield came under considerable criticism. He was called by some 'a spiritual pickpocket' because of the large offerings he gathered for the poor." [p. 30]

## **6. Never Deterred from His Mission**

"His [George Whitefield] return voyage was incredibly dangerous. The ship was nearly lost at sea and the journey would have kept most men from ever considering such travel again. Whitefield, however, was never to be deterred, as eleven subsequent journeys across the ocean would prove. He had a clear sense of what God wanted him to do and nothing would hinder his determination. He was to remain, for the rest of his life, a missionary-evangelist to North America. He was to carry out this mission across a vast and treacherous ocean. His heart increasingly ached for perishing sinners and the glory of God displayed in conversion." [p.31]

## **7. Going to London Compared to Lions' Den**

"George Whitefield wrote in his *Journal*, as he reflected upon what lay ahead of him:

'With a particular fear and trembling, I think of going to London, but He who preserved Daniel in the den of lions, and the Three Children in the fiery furnace, will, I hope, preserve me from the fiery trial of popularity, and the misguided zeal of those, who, without cause, are my enemies.'" [p. 32]

## **8. Revival Services Quiet in Nature**

"Contrary to modern 'revival' services that have swept the West in recent years, especially of the so-called 'signs and wonders' type, the throngs that came to hear Whitefield preach were almost always noteworthy for the *quiet*

*manner* in which they listened to his every word. These services often lasted for more than two hours. Often the depth of conviction was only noticeable outwardly by the tears that quietly covered hundreds of faces. The genuine fruit, Whitefield would have said, came in time. Only as lives were proven to be conforming to Christ's Gospel by the power of His Spirit would the evangelist speak about real saving faith in his hearers. He did not count his converts or boldly pronounce a number of new believers after he left an area. Public appeals, or any pressure to register physical response to the evangelist's message, were never used. Whitefield understood well that the preaching of the Word was the true work of the evangelist. He also understood that drawing the sinner effectually to the Saviour, regenerating the blind and the dead, granting the gift of faith, and turning a life about in true repentance, was all the work of the sovereign Spirit." [p. 36]

### **9. No Dichotomy between Social Ministry and Preaching**

"Whitefield visited America seven different times. Some visits were for months while others were for nearly four years. He preached in the major cities of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, as well as in numerous rural places as just cited. He went to Scotland fifteen times, traversed every county in the whole of England and Wales and in the years which followed 1740, always conducted weekly engagements in London on the Lord's Day, when he was in the area. When in London he would also administer the Lord's Supper to several hundred communicants at 6:30 AM, read prayers and preach in both the morning and afternoon. At 5:30 PM he would preach again and conclude his day with an address to a large society of widows, married people, young men and women, all sitting in separate parts of the building with each receiving a special exhortation to their particular position in life. Monday through Thursday mornings he would preach at 6 AM and lecture each of the same four nights, plus Saturday evening. During this time of residency he would speak at least thirteen times in the week. And all of this prodigious work was in addition to personal interviews and letter writing which took considerable time. Truly Whitefield was indefatigable in the work of Christ! This same quality of earnest and persevering labour marks every greatly useful evangelist in the history of the church. It just marked Whitefield in a more profound way." [p. 40]

10.

"During these early days in America, Whitefield's principal stated aim was to establish the orphanage in Savannah. This home, begun by the laying of the first brick in March, 1740, was to be called Bethesda, or 'House of Mercy'. Throughout the remainder of his life he would render consistent support for this venture, which 'the oldest charity in America'. The work of philanthropy was joined with the work of the Gospel in labours of Whitefield. There was no dichotomy between social ministry and preaching. Such was the case in both Britain and America during the Great Awakening. This same combination would also prove true in later revivals as well. Ethical and social fruit always attends the genuine work of the Spirit of God. Revivals build hospitals, promote literacy, nurse sick bodies, and fight social evils that beset society." [p. 40-41]

### **11. Had Tender Ppirit and Personal Warmth**

"Historians differ regarding the spread and the effect of the Great Awakening, but almost all agree that the tender spirit and personal warmth of George Whitfield was of great importance to the ultimate spread of his revival throughout the diverse colonies. Many have concluded, further, that the spread of this revival so united and impacted the colonies in social, political, and religious ways that these events significantly prepared the conditions for the American Revolution to succeed four decades later." [p. 43]

### **12. God Supplied through Specific Intercession**

"Whitefield's friend Seward was killed by an angry mob. At almost the same time a bill for 350 pounds was presented to him for the Orphan House. He was now 1000 pounds in debt and had nothing! What would he do? Many evangelists would have quit, believing God's blessing had been removed, but not Whitefield. His perseverance was exceptional. He prayed and renewed his determination to act with integrity, a characteristic quality so often missing in public figures today. He eventually paid the debt, finding God's supply through specific intercession. He was wiser for his trials and grew in wisdom. Soon his popularity began to recover as his actions reflected a noble meekness more like that of His Saviour than he had shown early in the controversy. He prayerfully worked at governing his speech towards the Wesley's and sought to repair the breach as much as possible. Sadly the Wesley's never turned back to the *old paths* theologically confessed by Puritans and Reformers. The division which resulted from these days has

remained to the dawn of the twenty-first century. The Arminianism of the Wesleys has become pervasive in the world evangelical scene. Only in recent years has a recovery of the faith of George Whitefield begun to spread throughout the church. Reconsideration of this life of George Whitefield has had a considerable influence in this providence." [p. 46-47]

### **13. Criticized Several Times**

"Whitefield was again criticized by the secular press for the large sums of money he had raised for the orphanage. At the same time religious leadership attacked him for the breadth of his fellowship and for his lack of proper ecclesiastical relationship to confessing church groups." [p. 51]

### **14. Grief Does Not Hinder Preaching**

"All joined in desiring that I [George Whitefield] would decline preaching till the child was buried; but remembered a saying of Good Mr. [Matthew] Henry, 'that weeping must not hinder sowing', and therefore preached twice the next day, and also the day following; on the evening of which, just as I was closing my sermon, the bell struck out for the funeral.

At first...it gave nature a little shake, but looking up I recovered strength, and then concluded with saying that this text on which I had been preaching, namely 'all things work together for good to them that love God' made me as willing to go out to my son's funeral, as to hear of his birth." [p. 53]

### **15. Stuck Closer to Clear Doctrines of the Bible**

"That Whitefield did learn profoundly from this great loss is beyond doubt. God seems to teach great evangelists, like all mature Christians, through pain. Earlier in his life, urged (by Jonathan Edwards no less) to not put so much emphasis upon impressions in his mind as the voice of God, Whitefield had not listened. Perhaps his greatest error in this regard came when he announced the intentions of God with regard to his son. Unlike so many who have made much worse announcements of 'God's will', in time Whitefield admits his error and never again do we find him engaging in this 'word from the Lord' business. He was to be the better for it, as now he would stick more closely to the clear doctrines of the Word of God." [p. 54]

## **16. Preaching Blessed Souls**

From Whitefield's letters: "It is surprising how the Lord causes prejudices to subside and makes my formerly most bitter enemies to be at peace with me.

My preaching is blessed to poor souls. Amazing love! Maryland is yielding converts to the blessed Jesus.

A large offering was offered to me ... If I would accept of it. But I have no thoughts of settling till I settle in glory." [p. 56]

## **17. Do More for God**

From Whitefield's letters: "O that I could do more for Him! O that I was a flame of pure and holy fire, & had a thousand lives to spend in my dear Redeemer's Service .... The sight of so many perishing souls affects me much, & makes me long to go if possible from pole to pole, to proclaim redeeming love." [p. 56]

## **18. Tender Affection for Orphans**

"In March of 1754 he sailed for America again, taking with him twenty-two destitute children for his Georgia orphanage. Arriving in South Carolina in May he went immediately to Georgia. The orphanage was still of immense concern. He always retained a tender affection for his orphans and for the witness of the Gospel to the poor and weak. There was no separation of evangelism and social action in Whitefield's ministry. This orphanage, begun in 1737, remained a passion of his for thirty-three years." [p. 59]

## **19. Not an Abolitionist**

When South Carolina friends helped him purchase a plantation it included, sadly, slaves. Though Whitefield spoke strongly against the abuses of this evil system, he was not an abolitionist. It is a fact that neither were many others. It is not fair to read our views into their time and thus expect Whitefield to conform to what we now know and understand. One can wish that he had taken a stand against the entire practice of slavery, but this blemish needs to be seen in its larger context of the sins of the eighteenth-century society." [p. 59]

## **20. Centered on God Day by Day**

"How did he [George Whitefield] remain so strong as he grew so much weaker in body? The only answer to this question can be found in his inner being. He clearly remained centered upon the love and mercy of God day by

day. He was often opposed, but always enabled to give this deep hurt to the Saviour with a sweet resignation born out of love and the knowledge of the Scriptures. One should recall that in his early years he had read the Word of God and the classic commentaries of Matthew Henry, while upon his knees before God. Early in his life he was drawing life-giving truth of the Word into his soul. He then learned, from his careful meditation upon the Word of God, not to oppose those who opposed him. God plainly showed him that private friendship with Christ builds the inward and outward person deeply so that demanding and strenuous outward service will never breakdown the real life, even if the body becomes weary and broken. This truth, so displayed in Whitefield, has been missed by multitudes of busy ministers in this feverishly shallow age." [p. 61]

### *21. Heaven Is the Believer's Only Resting Place*

On Whitefield's return to London in late 1767, he wrote "No nestling on this side of Jordan. Heaven is the believer's only resting place. There will not be disturbed." [p.63]

### **22. Preached Last in Exeter, NH**

"On September 29, 1770, he came to the town of Exeter, not far from Boston. He was really desirous of passing through, but the people urged him to remain and preach. A platform was prepared in a field. When an elderly gentleman saw him approaching the platform he said, 'Sir, you are more fit to go to bed than to preach.' Whitefield replied to him, 'True, sir.' Then, turning aside, he looked upwards and said: 'Lord Jesus, I am weary in Thy work, but not weary of it. If I have not finished my course, let me go and speak for thee once more in the fields, seal Thy truth, and come home and die.'" [p.64]

### **23. Died 1770 @ 7 AM**

"Whitefield went from the field to rest at the Presbyterian manse in Newburyport [Massachusetts]. Feeling very ill, he left the family at the dinner table for rest upstairs. Later in the evening a small crowd gathered outside the house, which stands to this day. People eagerly requested that he preach. He complied with their wish, and the account tells us that he held a candle in his hand, standing on the landing of the second level. He preached Christ until the candle expired. Then he retired to his room again and died on the Lord's Day of September 30, 1770, at approximately 7 AM.

The probable cause of death was the effect of a life-long battle with asthma. As several observed, like the candle in the socket, burning out during his final evangelistic effort, his life literally burned out in the service of Christ." [p. 65]

#### **24. Man's Depravity and Christ's Salvation**

"Whitefield's theme, throughout the whole of his days, was man's depravity and Christ's effectual salvation." [p. 65]

#### **25. Intellect first, Then Emotions and the Will**

"Contrary to false impressions about his preaching, cultivated by modern scholars, Dallimore has correctly noted that Whitefield's message '...was planned to reach the intellect first, and after lodging certain basic truths there, to arouse the emotions and move the will'. This view of evangelism needs desperately to be recaptured in own time. Modern crusades have prompted most to think of evangelism primarily in terms of creating an atmosphere, making a direct assault upon a person's heart and emotions, then calling for a decision of the will. It is interesting to note that none of the great evangelists [George Whitefield, John Wesley, Asahel Nettleton, Duncan Matheson, and Howell Harris] ever made such appeals." [p. 67]

#### **26. Philanthropy Burned in Whitefield**

"Sir James Stephen, writing in 1883 in *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, sums up well by writing:"

"If ever philanthropy burned in the human heart with pure and intense flame, embracing the whole family of man in the spirit of universal charity, it was in the heart of George Whitefield. 'He loved the world that hated him.' He had no preferences but in favour of the ignorant, the miserable and the poor. In their cause he shrank from no privation, declined neither insult nor hostility. To such wrongs he opposed the weapons of an all-enduring meekness and a love which would not be repulsed. The springs of his benevolence were inexhaustible and could not choose to flow." [p. 69]



## **John Wesley 1703-1791**

### **27. Education and Prison Reform Key to the Methodists**

"Methodism developed an impressive social philosophy that resulted in great good in the larger society of Britain and beyond. Methodist efforts included the improvement of popular education. Many local societies sponsored schools and Wesley himself operated a school for orphans at Kingswood. He also wrote numerous educational texts and revised standard ones for more general use. Ever since his Oxford days Wesley was exercised about the prison system in England. He had observed that the penalty for minor crimes was very severe, even life-long imprisonment, or death, at times. Wesley and the Methodists worked diligently for humane treatment of inmates and for societal reforms in the penal code itself. He steadfastly opposed slavery, saying it was 'the scandal of religion, of England and of human nature', and often preached and wrote against it. He also administrated medical dispensaries for the poor in several English cities and even wrote and published a handbook on home medicine, *The Primitive Physick*, an interesting, and at times quirky, book of remedies which went through many editions." [p. 106]

### **28. Preachers Well-read**

"Wesley wanted his men to be well read and careful preachers. He personally urged each minister to spend five hours out of every day in reading. He said once, 'Read, or get out of the ministry!' His men were urged to read very widely as well. Detailed instructions for preaching were written and taught." [p. 109]

### **29. Wesley Quite Humorous**

"The man who ruled Methodism for five decades was to most of those who knew him, simply 'Mr. Wesley'. He was a welcome guest in thousands of homes across England, Scotland, and Wales. He was also a convivial guest who, though opposed to outright levity, had an amazing sense of humour. His friends, especially in his more mature years, described him as a delightful companion. One said that wherever he went his presence 'made a festival among his friends'.

"Though his rules were quite strict, and could and did result sometimes in legalistic thought and practice, he was often good-natured with people and

far more tolerant than might be supposed. One example will suffice. Once when at a table with several Methodist preachers where the host's daughter had several rings on her hand, one of the ministers pointed this out to Wesley by saying, 'What do you think of this, sir, for a Methodist hand?' The older Wesley, who had a strong dislike for jewelry, smiled and said simply, 'The hand is very beautiful.' Such was the real man, John Wesley." [p. 110]

### **30. At Eighty Quite Spry**

"At eighty Luke Tyerman notes of John Wesley: Here we have a man, his age eighty, without indulgences, feeding for eight months in every year chiefly at the tables on the poor, sleeping on all sorts of beds in all sorts of rooms, without a wife, without a child, really without a home; and yet a man always cheerful, always happy, always hard at work, flying with all the sprightliness of youth throughout the three kingdoms, preaching twice each day, indoors and outdoors, in churches, chapels, cottages, and sheds." [p.119]

### **31. Still Preaching and Writing at 87 Years Old**

"At the beginning of 1790, now nearing eighty-seven years of age, Wesley wrote: 'I am now an old man, decayed from head to foot. My eyes are dim; my right hand shakes much; my mouth is hot and dry every morning. I have lingering fever almost every day. My motion is weak and slow. However, blessed be to God, I do not slack my labour. I can preach and write still.'" [p. 121]

## ***Howell Harris 1714-1773***

### **32. Poverty-stricken**

"By the spring of 1736, Harris, still a young convert of twenty-two years of age, was in tribulation. His health was broken down and he was out of work as a schoolmaster. His salary was only 4 pounds per year! He needed his brother to provide clothes for him. But things would get worse!" [p. 137]

### **33. Harris and Rowland in Conflict**

"When it was proposed that Daniel Rowland be the leader of Welsh Methodism, Harris agreed to step down and thought he would confine his labours more directly to England. Interestingly, as long as Rowland and Harris worked separately they remained good friends, but when they worked side by side they had serious conflict. This is a lesson that could be

learned by others who mistakenly enter into partnership with their dearest friends, only to see problems develop which they never expected." [p. 148]

### ***Asahel Nettleton 1783-1844***

#### **34. Converts of Nettleton Remained Faithful**

"Though Nettleton never pastored a church, wrote a book or led an actual evangelistic organization, he did see his preaching result in well over 30,000 conversions during a time when the entire American population was approximately nine million...John Thornbury suggests that if these numbers are translated to our time the number would be 600,000! ...These numbers are taken from those who continued in faithful church attendance and led consistently changed lives over the course of many years. Most of the pastors testified freely that the converts of the revivals led by Nettleton were still faithful, up to and beyond 90% of the total, ten, twenty, and thirty years later." [p. 173]

#### **35. Finney's Converts Did Not Remain Faithful**

"It is worth noting that in contrast to Nettleton, the famous Charles G. Finney, toward the end of his illustrious career, said that 'after reflecting on the many who had claimed conversion [under his ministry] but had since fallen away' he 'had mixed thoughts on the genuine results of his work'. Finney's personal appraisal is just not his alone. In a letter to Finney, written by one of his own associates the following tells of an all too common reality:

Let us look over the fields where you and I have laboured as ministers and what is now their normal state? What was their state within three months after we left them? I have visited and revisited many of these fields and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, contentious state into which the churches have fallen and fallen very soon after we first departed from among them.

Asa Mahan, Finney's closest friend, referred candidly to the 'sad subsequent lapse' of many converts and said, 'the people were left like dead coal which could not be re-ignited'. This is why scholars have referred to the areas where these revival men preached as 'burned out districts'. It was found

that many who had been 'decisioned' during these revivals were often virtually beyond help within weeks." [p. 174]

### **36. Nettleton's Preaching Was Also Powerful**

"Nettleton's preaching was also powerful in its effect. One evening several were seized with 'horror of mind' and had to be taken out of the meeting. (This was what he commonly did if there was any interruption of his preaching!) Speaking on the holiness of God, the certainty of hell, the need for repentance and the strictness of God's righteousness often prompted deep feelings among Nettleton's hearers. He referred to what had happened as paralleling the events of Pentecost, which would be a theme of his for many years to come. He stayed in Milton (Connecticut) for three to four months. A large harvest of new converts filled the church which was permanently brought out of the doldrums. Thornbury notes: 'His only material reward for this *campaign* was some clothing which the people presented him. Having *food and raiment* he was content.'" [p. 176]

### **37. Did Not Count Converts at End of Meetings**

"Nettleton wrote: 'We visit by appointment, and make a number of visits in a day at a given hour. We sometimes meet ten or fifteen, and sometimes thirty at once. We converse a little with each one, speak a word to all in general, pray, and pass on to another circle; and so we spend our time.

Not a hint had been given that one soul experienced religion, or had any reason to hope.'

This last statement is very important, especially in an age when we often count converts before the meeting is even over. Nettleton, typical of the pattern of this time, uniformly refused such an idea. He never told professors of faith that they had reason to have hope. He counseled that if the distinguishing marks of faith were present then they should apply the truth to themselves." [p. 182]

### **38. Finney Rejected Doctrinal Teachings as 'Contrary to Reason'**

"The ordination also included vows to affirm the Westminster Standards. Although Finney had not seriously studied the Westminster Confession he was not entirely ignorant of its contents. He had heard the teaching of man's total depravity, the imputation of Adam's sin, the need for divine

satisfaction in the atonement of Christ, and the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit regenerating sinners who were dead in their transgressions. From the very first he rejected these doctrinal teachings as 'contrary to reason' and especially the doctrine of *human inability*, insisting that it was completely unacceptable to hold people responsible for faith in Christ if each is somehow not capable of having faith through their own *human* ability.

So serious were Finney's theological departures from the orthodoxy of the time that it is a story in itself. Suffice it to say that he rejected the Protestant doctrine of a sinful human nature as well as the doctrine of the imputation of the believer's sin to Christ and of Christ's righteousness to the believer. In his struggle with the dominant Edwardsian theological content of the time he parted not only with the Calvinists but even from the more traditional Arminian theology of men such as John Wesley. Amazingly, Finney argued: 'I insisted that our reason was given us for the very purpose of enabling us to justify the ways of God; and that no such fiction of imputation could by any possibility be true.' The publication of Finney's writings in coming years demonstrated, beyond any reasonable doubt, that he considered not only the doctrine of original sin to be 'anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma', but he also believed that the new birth was not a divine gift of God." [p. 188]

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