

The Ministry of Whitefield

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Whitefield

George Whitefield (1714-1770) was perhaps the greatest preacher of the period although not perhaps the best known and certainly not the best organizer. He was not an innovative theologian nor a keen systematizer of Christian truth. He was a preacher and that par excellence. Strongly Calvinistic, he spent a lifetime preaching on man's sinfulness and the adequacy of Christ. With great emotional power he simply overwhelmed audiences and moved persons who otherwise were thought unmoveable.

Whitefield descended from the "Holy Club" at Oxford ...that rigorous body that also produced the Wesleys and many others. His conversion came earlier than that of the Wesleys and when he came to this country to preach in Georgia (1737) he was already soundly aware of conversion and the grace teachings. In England he became the first of those who would preach to congregations in outdoor places...when the churches were closed to him...and he carried this policy in America as well. Many churches would not hear Whitefield for as a great denouncer of the current loss of pulpit piety, he alienated a great many of the clergy. Although ordained in the Church of England, he found many of those pulpits closed to him and thus he turned to the fields...first at Bristol, England, I believe. The new method of meeting the crowds shook the establishment...even Wesley opposed it at first...but it caught on and soon there were many field preachers...Wesley included. Whitefield's zeal in preaching led him to cross the Atlantic seven times (no mean feat in those days) to preach in America and his fame here was probably greater than it was in England.

In the States Whitefield was close to the Tennants of Neshaminy, PA., and other places. He enjoyed the friendship of Jonathon Edwards and a companiable affiliation with Ben Franklin! The latter was never convinced of Whitefield's message but appreciated his forthrightness, unselfishness and total dedication. Franklin actually sponsored some of Whitefield's work in Pennsylvania, most notably when all the Philadelphia churches were closed (winter) and Franklin was responsible for the erection of a large hall (tabernacle?) which later became the first major building of the University of Pennsylvania. In better weather and in the summer air, Whitefield preached in cemeteries and church yards. At Neshaminy he addressed as many as 3,000 persons on a Lord's day afternoon. His powerful voice could be heard distinctly at a range