George Whitefield

Leonard Ravenhill:

Peep with me through the window of history and see the eighteenth century cluttered with genius.

That pompous dandy we see over there is Beau Nash, famed as the master of ceremonies of the fashion courts in Bath. (Later John Wesley will puncture his pride.)

The interesting character now approaching is none other than the literary celebrity, Dr. Samuel Johnson. John Wesley once declined a late meal with Johnson because it would deter him from rising early for prayer the next morning. (Note that, preacher!) Dr. Samuel Johnson's companion with the sharp pen is Boswell.

In an unpretentious place not far away is a man weaving paints into what will become a famous picture, The Blue Boy. Well done, Gainsborough!

In another area, with sweat on brow, soul, and mind, Howard is laboring to effect prison reforms.

Over in the House, William Wilberforce, with a scorpion-like tongue, is lashing the lawmakers on the evils of slavery.

Philip Sheridan, the Irish playwright and politician, is elated over his School for Scandal. For some time Sheridan owned Drury Lane Theatre. I wonder if he had David Garrick, the prince of actors in that day, play a part in it.

Hear those heavenly strains? Here is another Englishman (naturalized). His name? Handel. With tear-filled eyes and arms upraised to heaven, this genius is singing some of the strains of his Messiah and interspersing it with some hallelujahs. (Is that why he was reported drunk when he wrote the blessed oratorio?)

Just before we leave the wonderland of England at this period and jump over the channel for a peep at the evil genius Voltaire, let us peep through a small window. Here is the wry face of Hogarth, painting one of his political satires which made him immortal.

Over now to France. Voltaire sits high and mighty on his throne of skepticism. Disclaiming that he is an atheist, this brilliant deist poured contempt and satire on the Christian doctrines. If he was the father of the French Revolution, he was probably goaded to it by the persecuting and bitter Jesuits lording their priestly benefits.

But Voltaire seems to have been a man of compassion too. He was honest in evaluation. Sangster of Westminster said, "Voltaire, when challenged to produce a character as perfect as that of Christ, at once mentioned Fletcher of Madely."

So there we end up with surveying the eighteenth century with its crop of intellectuals and men of achievement. All the afore-mentioned characters have a place in the sun. Each had an art.

But what Johnson and Boswell were in literature, what Reynolds and Gainsborough were in art, what Sheridan and Garrick were in the theater, John Wesley and George Whitefield were in the church of the living God - only they were so in a superlative sense.

Here is one of those blessed paradoxes that the Lord works. Just as years back the Beechers ruled the fashion of New England, so in old England the Wesleys were a family of culture and set the pattern. Yet this Oxford don, John Wesley, is the man the Lord uses to the miners outside Bristol, England. And the squint-eyed boy born in the tavern at Gloucester is the David selected to pass the Saul and Jonathan in order to evangelize the state rooms of England with their silk-clad patrons.

Fire begets fire. In my opinion, John Wesley caught something of his fiery zeal from George Whitefield. In this day some claim the revival, often called the Wesleyan Revival, was not Wesley's at all. At least, they say, he did not begin it. (To prove or disprove that, we can wait until the great day of judgment.)

In field preaching, the blazing Whitefield certainly preceded Wesley. Wesley picked up the revival torch that Whitefield dropped when he went to America.

Whitefield arrived in America after a battering on the stormy Atlantic in a boat that the Maritime Commission

would not now license for a river trip. Again Whitefield dropped a coal of his zeal. This time it was into the heart of Gilbert Tennant, who, we are led to believe, could out-preach his tutor. (That seems impossible.) Yet greater crowds than Whitefield's tramped the snows to hear Tennant after Whitefield left New England.

Forget for a moment the other experiments Benjamin Franklin made. Right now we see him standing where Whitefield's pulpit is. Walking backward from there to where he could not hear too distinctly, he marked a spot. Later he measured the distance to arrive at the conclusion that 30,000 people had heard the anointed Whitefield at one meeting, and heard him comfortably without any amplification.

But Whitefield's audiences were not always large. On one trip across the Atlantic while he was still but twenty-five years of age - tall, graceful, and well-proportioned - he addressed a group of just thirty people. His pulpit was the swaying deck of a ship whose sails were tattered and whose gear was out of gear! His blanket was a buffalo hide, and though he had slept in the most protected part of the vessel, he had been drenched through twice in one night. It had taken the vessel three months to sight the Irish coast.

On the Atlantic or on either side of it, whether preaching to a few on a ship's hatchway or galvanizing the vast audience of the field into rapt attention, Whitefield's message was the same: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

The lamp that lit the path that led to the kingdom for Whitefield was a book. At Oxford, Charles Wesley had seen Whitefield and passed on to him Henry Scougal's The Life of God in the Soul of Man.

In America, Whitefield pushed through the matted forests to reach the Indians. From tribe to tribe he went and from wigwam to wigwam. To get to the encampments of the Delawares, he shot the angry rapids in a frail bark canoe. He ferreted out the backwoodsmen. Men must hear the message; they must have the life of God in their souls.

From the squalor of Indian camps this seraph-like preacher moved with ease of disposition to the stately historic homes of England. Whence all those carriages? What drew those poets, peers and princes, philosophers and wits together? Proud of their blue blood and pedigree, those aristocrats came - some of them three times a week - to hear the scorching words "Ye must be born again."

From a lordly chamber heavy with the pungent aroma of costly perfumes, Whitefield would race off to a street meeting. Catch his joy as he says, "There I was honored with having stones, dirt, rotten eggs, and pieces of dead cats thrown at me."

Coming from Gloucester as he did, Whitefield knew that for being too outspoken on the things of Christ during Queen Mary's reign, Bishop Hooper of Gloucester was burned within sight of his own cathedral. Whitefield cared not about consequences for obedience. Tyndale was a Gloucester man too, and think what his faith cost him!

Whitefield was of the Baxter-Brainerd-McCheyne mold; he wore the harness of discipline with ease. He drove stakes deep into his own mind. His "thou shalt not's" were for himself, and he never forced others to wear his sackcloth.

The Pope's flattering (?) words about Luther, "This German beast does not love gold," might have been said of Whitefield too.

What was the secret of Whitefield's success? I think three things: He preached a pure gospel; he preached a powerful gospel; he preached a passionate gospel.

Cornelius Winter, who often travelled, ate, and slept in the same room with Whitefield said, "He seldom if ever got through a sermon without tears." On the other hand, a lady of position in New York said, "Mr. Whitefield was so cheerful that it tempted me to become a Christian."

Literary men of his times frequented his meetings. Lord Chesterfield, icy as he was, warmed under his preaching. Lord Bolingbroke, not a generous critic, said, "He is the most extraordinary man of our times. He has the most commanding eloquence I ever heard in any person."

David Hume, Scottish skeptic in philosophy, and deist though he was, is said to have raced off at five in the morning to hear Whitefield preach. Asked if he believed what the preacher preached, he replied, "No, but he

does!"

Franklin of America, a cold-blooded, calculating philosopher, said of the revivalist Whitefield, "It was wonderful to see the change made by his preaching in the manners of the inhabitants of Philadelphia. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if the whole world were growing religious."

John Newton, a giant of a preacher as well as poet, said of Whitefield, "It seemed as if he never preached in vain."

John Wesley comments about him: "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 anyone who has been God's blessed instrument to bring so many sinners from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God as Whitefield?"

Old Henry Venn of Huddersfield and Yelling stated, "Scarce anyone has equalled Mr. Whitefield."

George Whitefield walked with the great-with the Marquis of Lothian, the Earl of Leven, Lord Dartmouth, Lady Huntingdon. But better still, he walked and talked with God. He heard what God said, saw as God saw, and loved as God loved. An Arabian proverb says, "He is the best orator who can turn men's ears into eyes." This amazing soul did just that.

God of Whitefield, give us today men like Whitefield who can stand as giants in the pulpit, men with burdened hearts, burning lips, and brimming eyes.

And, Lord, please do it soon!
