

## GEORGE WHITEFIELD AND THE GREAT AWAKENING: A PENTECOSTAL PERSPECTIVE

David Jull

As a Pentecostal student of Church History, one of the important questions I wrestle with is how the Holy Spirit worked in the Historic Church – not *if* the Holy Spirit worked, but *how* did the Holy Spirit guide, enliven and reform the Church? This article is an examination of one man's theological journey which fit him for a pivotal role in one the renewal movements of the English speaking church - the British evangelical movement and the North American colonies' Great Awakening. While I am not trying to say that the Great Awakening was a Pentecostal revival, I would like to look at one moment in time through Pentecostal eyes to see how that theological perspective might shed light on the spiritual development of the forerunner of modern itinerant evangelists.

George Whitefield was an Anglican minister who re-popularized itinerant evangelistic sermons, even when preached outside the bounds of a church structure. Arguably he was John Wesley's forerunner (though also Wesley's student) - breaking ground and planting seeds that Wesley would harvest and gather into the Methodist Church. Yet Whitefield had a different theology than Wesley and, arguably a different theological understanding than many other Anglican ministers of his day. Was it always different? And if Whitefield changed, how and why?

While the theology found in Whitefield's published sermons is broadly consistent, it does demonstrate a noticeable change over time. That is, the sermons from Whitefield's two years of publishing and the sermons written prior to his American experience have at least three common themes with his later sermons: the need for conversion, the importance of sanctification, and the expectation of persecution. Conversion remains a necessary experience, enacted by God, and associated with an inward transformation. Sanctification is demonstrated by the holy actions that proceed from a convert's life. All

true converts, because their lives are governed by heavenly principles, will suffer persecution at the hands of those people who are committed to wickedness. While these themes are present in both Whitefield's early sermons and his Great Awakening sermons, they do show signs of development. Scholars such as Tyerman and Smith note that during Whitefield's 1738 English ministry, aspects of his theology change.<sup>1</sup> The early sermons printed prior to 1738 include "Nature and Necessity of Our New Birth in Christ Jesus, in Order to Salvation," "The Nature and Necessity of Society in General, and of Religious Societies in Particular," "The Almost Christian," "The Benefits of Early Piety," "The Great Duty of Family Religion," "The Nature and Necessity of Self-Denial," "Of Justification by Christ," "The Heinous Sin of Profane Cursing and Swearing," "Intercession Every Christian's Duty," "The Eternity of Hell-Torments," and "Ship Farewell."<sup>2</sup>

Selecting sermons generated by, or representative of, Whitefield's American ministry from 1738-1742 has been done by Whitefield himself. In his work, *Twelve Sermons on Various Important Subjects*, Whitefield claimed that the sermons included were representational of the sermons he preached during the Great Awakening.<sup>3</sup> These twelve sermons are "The Lord our Righteousness," "The Seed of the Woman and the Seed of the Serpent," "Persecution Every Christian's Lot," "Abraham's offering up his Son," "Saul's Conversion," "Christ the Believer's Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption," "The Holy Spirit Convincing the World of Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment," "The Conversion of Zaccheus," "The Power of Christ's Resurrection," "The Indwelling of the Spirit, The Common Privilege of

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<sup>1</sup> David A. Smith, "George Whitefield as Inter-Confessional Evangelist, 1714-1770" (Thesis D.Phil., University of Oxford, 1992), 28-31; the author has not had direct access to David Smith's thesis (the Oxford library system would not sell or loan a copy to an American and I was ignorant of the work when I was there) and depended on a series of notes taken from the work, provided by Dr. Lineham. Luke Tyerman, *The Life of Rev. George Whitefield, Vol. 1* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), 273-75.

<sup>2</sup> "Ship Farewell" is also known as "Thankfulness for Mercies Received, a Necessary Duty." These lists are derived from Tyerman *The Life of Rev. George Whitefield, Vol. 1*, 79, 95-101, 294-296.

<sup>3</sup> George Whitefield, *Twelve Sermons on Various Important Subjects*, 3rd ed. (London: W. Phorson, B. Ian and Son, 1792), 21.

All Believers,” and “The Eternity of Hell-Torments.”<sup>4</sup>

In the pre-1738 sermons, Whitefield defined conversion as the process whereby the individual experienced,

a thorough, real, inward change of nature, wrought in us by the powerful operations of the Holy Ghost, conveyed to, and nourished in, our hearts, by a constant use of all the means of grace, evidenced by a good life, and bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Whitefield's understanding of conversion reflects several sources, including Thomas á Kempis and John Wesley. Whitefield read á Kempis and thus Whitefield's lifelong assertion that the experience of conversion was necessary and perceptible could be attributed to this theologian.<sup>6</sup> However, Whitefield was also trained by Wesley, who was himself influenced by á Kempis.<sup>7</sup> According to Kenneth Collins in *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, “What á Kempis, the medieval monk, had taught Wesley, then, was that vital religion ever begins with the transformation of the heart, with the alteration of the tempers of the deepest recesses of our being.”<sup>8</sup> This message is clear in Whitefield's sermons, even if his source is not.

As the quotation defining conversion (“a thorough, real, inward change ... bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit”) indicated, Whitefield's early sermons linked the work of the Holy Spirit with active participation in “the means of grace.”<sup>9</sup> Whitefield insisted that penitent people must strive to be new creatures.<sup>10</sup> Further, in several

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<sup>4</sup> This sermon from 1738 was included in the twelve sermons Whitefield selected.

<sup>5</sup> “Early Piety” (1737), George Whitefield, *The Works of George Whitefield: Volume 5, Sermons* ([CD Rom] Meadow View, Shropshire, England: Quinta Press, 2000), 174 [abbreviated to WGW]; see also “On Regeneration” (1737), *WGW Vol. 6*, 264.

<sup>6</sup> ———, *The Works of George Whitefield: Journals* ([CD Rom] Meadow View, Shropshire, England: Quinta Press, 2000), 45.

<sup>7</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals*, (1740), 61.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 33.

<sup>9</sup> See above.

<sup>10</sup> “On Regeneration” (1737), *WGW Vol. 6*, 273.

sermons Whitefield identified “striving” as fasting, watching, and praying.<sup>11</sup> In addition to fasting, watching, and praying, Whitefield said that conversion required self-denial. The person seeking to be more than a nominal Christian must forgo his or her appetites for sensual amusements, innocent or otherwise, that detract from holy living.<sup>12</sup> These instructions imply that human efforts can influence God’s freedom in selecting whom he would bestow conversion upon. In “The Nature and Necessity of Self-Denial,” Whitefield did link the regenerative activity of the Holy Spirit to the prior human act of self-denial. He said, “Let us up and be doing; ... [I]et us but once thus show ourselves men, and then the Spirit of GOD will move on the face of our souls.”<sup>13</sup>

He admitted that this practice of self-denial may not require a person to actually give all their money to the poor, but it certainly required them to recognize that they were to be stewards of what wealth God gave them and they must be willing to give up material items for spiritual blessedness.<sup>14</sup> Whitefield asserted,

every degree of holiness you neglect ... is a jewel taken out of your crown, a degree of blessedness lost ... on the contrary, be daily endeavouring to give up yourselves more and more into him.<sup>15</sup>

In taking this position, Whitefield was both reiterating the circumstances of his own conversion and also reflecting the teachings of William Law and, again, John Wesley. As with á Kempis, Whitefield both read Law’s works and also received instruction in piety from John Wesley, whose spiritual formation was shaped by Law.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Religious Society” (1737), *WGW Vol. 5*, 128, “On Regeneration” (1737), *WGW Vol. 6*, 273.

<sup>12</sup> “Almost Christian” (1737), *WGW Vol. 6*, 191-192; “On Regeneration” (1737), *WGW Vol. 6*, 274.

<sup>13</sup> “Self-denial” (1737), *WGW Vol. 5*, 456.

<sup>14</sup> “Self-denial” (1737), *WGW Vol. 5*, 450.

<sup>15</sup> “Almost Christian” (1737), *WGW Vol. 6*, 197.

<sup>16</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals*, (1740), 50, 51, 69; see also Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, p 33; compare to William Law, “A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life,” in *William Law: A Serious Call to a Devout*

According to Collins, Law's works taught Wesley the importance of the moral law, suggested sanctification was the grounds of justification, identified the need for a whole hearted dedication to Christianity, and presented the need for "acts of renunciation and mortification" in the area of otherwise innocent amusements.<sup>17</sup> Whitefield himself wrote that Law's work, *The Absolute Unlawfulness of the Stage Entertainment*, convinced him that the theatre was an inappropriate form of entertainment.<sup>18</sup>

Whitefield balanced his endorsement of striving with the role of faith by asserting that fasting and praying, in either public venues or private venues, are only useful if they "make us inwardly better."<sup>19</sup> Whitefield taught that faithful belief in Christ and his crucifixion was the basis of any hope of forgiveness. He said,

And can any poor truly-convinced sinner, after this, despair of mercy? ... No, only believe in him, and then, though you have crucified him afresh, yet will he abundantly pardon you.<sup>20</sup>

There is a noticeable change in Whitefield's theology when the early sermons are compared with those found in *Twelve Sermons on Various Subjects*. The role of striving for conversion is reduced and the role of faith in Christ is increased. Whitefield's sermon, "The Holy Spirit Convincing the World of Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment," is a reasonably concise statement of Whitefield's position on conversion from among the twelve sermons he selected. His understanding of conversion as a path that God often, though not always, follows is similar to some reformed theologians of his era.<sup>21</sup> . The three stages he

*and Holy Life [&] the Spirit of Love*, ed. Paul G. Stanwood (London: SPCK, 1978), on complete devotion, 72, and on stewardship of wealth, 143.

<sup>17</sup> Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, 41.

<sup>18</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals*, (1740), 69.

<sup>19</sup> "On Regeneration" (1737), *WGW Vol. 6*, 270.

<sup>20</sup> "Justification" (1737), *WGW Vol. 6*, 234–235.

<sup>21</sup> See Jonathan Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls, in Northampton, and the Neighbouring Towns and Villages of Newhampshire [Sic], in New England," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1*, ed. Edward Hickman (London: Ball, Arnold and Co., 1840).

identifies are first a conviction of sin, second awareness that conversion is possible, and third an awareness that conversion has taken place. He stated that the steps in this sermon were only representational and that the Holy Spirit could choose to convert a person in some other order. Nevertheless, these were the steps Whitefield usually observed.<sup>22</sup>

Conversion, according to “The Holy Spirit Convincing,” had three stages. First, the Holy Spirit convinced and convicted a person of sin. This was a personal action – the Holy Spirit helped the person recognize and identify the presence and significance of some obvious sin.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, Whitefield referred to this personal attention as God calling a person by name. Thus, Adam and Paul were addressed by name as God made them aware of their sin.<sup>24</sup> After the person was aware of their most significant sin, the Holy Spirit identified other specific sins.<sup>25</sup> After the person was aware that he was responsible for a range of specific sins, the Holy Spirit made him aware that he had an unavoidable tendency to sin. Whitefield identified this with the doctrine of original sin. He insisted that the Anglican doctrine on sin, as articulated in the Thirty-Nine Articles, was an adequate and accurate assessment of the human condition.<sup>26</sup> In “The Pharisee and the Publican,” Whitefield identified the Publican as being a participant of original sin by calling him “half a devil and half a beast.”<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Franklin, when reflecting on Whitefield’s effect on the people of

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<sup>22</sup> “Holy Spirit Convincing” (1743), George Whitefield, *Sermons on Important Subjects ; with a Memoir of the Author, by Samuel Drew ; and a Dissertation on His Character, Preaching, &C. By Joseph Smith* (London: H. Fisher and P. Jackson 1829). [abbreviated WS], 459.

<sup>23</sup> “Holy Spirit Convincing” (1743), WS, 460.

<sup>24</sup> “Seed of the Woman” (1740) in George Whitefield, *Select Sermons of George Whitefield, with an Account of His Life by J.C. Ryle and a Summary of His Doctrine by R. Elliot* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 89-90; “Saul’s Conversion” (1740), WS, 472.

<sup>25</sup> “Holy Spirit Convincing” (1743), WS, 460.

<sup>26</sup> “Holy Spirit Convincing” (1743), WS, 461; compare Article nine, *Articles Agreed Upon by the Archbishops and Bishops of Both Provinces and the Whole Clergy in the Convocation Holden at London in the Year 1562 for the Avoiding of Diversities of Opinions and for the Establishing of Consent Touching True Religion*. [Webpage] (Lynda M. Howell, 1662 [cited May 26 2004]); available from [www.eskimo.com/~lhowell/bcp1662/download/rtf/bcp-1662-r.zip](http://www.eskimo.com/~lhowell/bcp1662/download/rtf/bcp-1662-r.zip).

<sup>27</sup> “The Pharisee And The Publican” (1739), WS, 397.

Philadelphia, commented that the phrase “half a devil and half a beast” was typical of Whitefield's sermons; it was also more readily received by the general public than Franklin had thought likely.<sup>28</sup>

Following the awareness of original sin, the Holy Spirit helped the person become aware of the sin of attempting to earn righteousness.<sup>29</sup> Whitefield taught that acts of charity and piety are good and necessary Christian actions. However, as a means to secure conversion, they were futile.<sup>30</sup> Such acts, prior to conversion, were either self-serving – intended to preserve the person's reputation – or a heretical attempt to earn righteousness.<sup>31</sup> Thus, fasting and tithing were good, but they did not give a person the right to think they had earned salvation.<sup>32</sup>

Once personal efforts to achieve righteousness were excluded, the Holy Spirit convinced the person that unbelief in itself was a sin. Whitefield did not intend the sin of unbelief to be connected with the act of not acknowledging the historicity of Christ's actions. He assumed his listeners acknowledged the eternal nature of the soul, the historical events of the incarnation, and the reality of future judgment.<sup>33</sup> Unbelief, rather, was the inability to depend on Christ for righteousness. This, according to Whitefield, was impossible to overcome alone.<sup>34</sup>

After this full acknowledgment of sin, the person often entered a period of despair, called “soul trouble” in which he recognized the complete gulf between mandated righteousness and their own state. Whitefield called this being “burdened with sin,” “wounded with sin,”<sup>35</sup> or “broken hearted.”<sup>36</sup> Whitefield warned ministers to refrain from offering comfort to a person in obvious agitation over impending

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<sup>28</sup> Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 175.

<sup>29</sup> “Holy Spirit Convincing” (1743), WS, 461, that we are conceived in sin, “Christ's Resurrection” (1739), WS, 582.

<sup>30</sup> “The Pharisee And The Publican” (1739), WS, 396; “Christ's Resurrection” (1739), WS, 582.

<sup>31</sup> “Holy Spirit Convincing” (1743), WS, 461.

<sup>32</sup> “The Pharisee And The Publican” (1739), WS, 396.

<sup>33</sup> “Hell-Torments” (1738), WS, 310.

<sup>34</sup> “Holy Spirit Convincing” (1743), WS, 463.

<sup>35</sup> “Hell-Torments” (1738), WS, 310.

<sup>36</sup> “Zacchaeus” (1739), WS, 410.

damnation until the person had fully acknowledged the depths of their sin.<sup>37</sup>

In the second stage of conversion, the Holy Spirit made people aware that they could obtain salvation.<sup>38</sup> They now knew that they needed Jesus' righteousness. While they were now aware that Christ's righteousness could make them happy, at the same time they recognized that they could not obtain it through any action on their part.<sup>39</sup>

In the third stage, the Holy Spirit applied the righteousness of Christ to them. They now knew that they were converted. Their knowledge and peace were "well grounded."<sup>40</sup> This righteousness was imputed to them through the free act of Christ. By this Whitefield meant both that Christ was free to give this righteousness to whom he chose and also that people could not induce Christ to give his righteousness to them.<sup>41</sup> Whitefield said the story of Christ directly addressing the tree-climbing Zaccheus demonstrated that Zaccheus was selected by a sovereign act of Christ.<sup>42</sup> The proper response to this knowledge of God's sovereignty was not fatalistic resignation (based on a belief that they are either reprobate or elect), but rather a diligent improvement of the work God was doing.<sup>43</sup> Whitefield urged people to follow the example of the Publican in the sermon, "The Publican and The Pharisee" – they should humble themselves and believe in Christ Jesus.<sup>44</sup> Christ completed the work of salvation on the cross, but it must be applied to the individual's heart to inwardly transform the person.<sup>45</sup> Since only God could do this work, it was appropriate for Whitefield to end the lesson with a prayer.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Whitefield, *Select Sermons*, 91.

<sup>38</sup> "Holy Spirit Convincing" (1743), WS, 465.

<sup>39</sup> "Holy Spirit Convincing" (1743), WS, 465.

<sup>40</sup> "Holy Spirit Convincing" (1743), WS, 465.

<sup>41</sup> "The Pharisee And The Publican" (1739), WS, 401.

<sup>42</sup> "Zacchaeus" (1739), WS, 404-405.

<sup>43</sup> "Holy Spirit Convincing" (1743), WS, 467-468.

<sup>44</sup> "The Pharisee And The Publican" (1739), WS, 400.

<sup>45</sup> "Christ's Resurrection" (1739), WS, 583.

<sup>46</sup> "Holy Spirit Convincing" (1743), WS, 468.

While both Whitefield's early and later positions concerning conversion assert that conversion is a transformation enacted by God, Whitefield's early sermons emphasize striving for holiness and thus working towards conversion. This element of human effort is muted, though not entirely removed (e.g. the call to improve God's work) in later sermons.

What accounts for the change in Whitefield's theology? First, it is unlikely that Whitefield made a radical change in his theology. Nowhere in his journals does he indicate that he regretted earlier sermons or theological positions. Further, one of his sermons from 1738, "Eternity of Hell-Torments," was included in his collection of twelve sermons. Thus, he had not rejected all of his previous theological convictions. What is under examination is a shift in emphasis rather than either a radical new insight or a conviction of heretical doctrine.

Some scholars have suggested that correspondence with the Erskine brothers influenced Whitefield's shift in theology.<sup>47</sup> David Smith, while recognizing the influence of the Erskine brothers' moderate Calvinism on Whitefield's theology, suggested that the shift in theology might be a consequence, in part, of Whitefield's reading of Matthew Henry's commentaries.<sup>48</sup> Yet this is negated to the degree that Justification by Faith is central to a Calvinist theology. In his Journals Whitefield comments that a member of the Oxford Holiness club came to him "lately [and] confessed he did not like me so well at Oxford, as the rest of his brethren, because I held justification by faith *only*."<sup>49</sup>

Smith suggests that Whitefield exaggerated his early Calvinistic understanding in the *Accounts*. However, this suggestion does not seem to account for the way this comment, made presumably near 1740 (the year Whitefield wrote the *Accounts*) by one of Whitefield's old acquaintances, implies that Whitefield was known for subscribing to justification by faith alone.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the suggestion that reading Matthew Henry's commentary taught Calvinism does not account for

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<sup>47</sup> William Reginald Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 314. Tyerman, *The Life of Rev. George Whitefield, Vol. 1*, 273-75.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, "George Whitefield as Inter-Confessional Evangelist, 1714-1770", 34-37.

<sup>49</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals*, (1740), 68.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, "George Whitefield as Inter-Confessional Evangelist, 1714-1770", 29.

Crump's observation that Whitefield's 1737 (pre-Calvinist) sermons were already based on Matthew Henry's work.<sup>51</sup>

Crump had a different suggestion as to why Whitefield's sermons demonstrate a shift in theology: the audience changed in 1739. Prior to 1739, most of Whitefield's published sermons were originally presented to religious societies or to churches that had an active religious society. Thus, Whitefield's validation of the practices of fasting, watching, and praying in "On Regeneration" was made to people who were using these spiritual disciplines to enhance their faith. Whitefield cautioned them that such religious exercises were only beneficial if they "make us inwardly better." That is, spiritual exercises are useful as spiritual exercises but not as hypocritical outward rites.<sup>52</sup> "The Benefits of Early Piety," with its call to young people to fervently seek God while they are young was delivered to the religious society that met at London's Bow Church.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Whitefield's comments about the usefulness of religious societies in "The Nature and Necessity of Religious Societies" are clearer when it is realized that, though the sermon was delivered on the Sunday after Whitefield's Deaconal ordination to the congregation at St. Mary de Crypt, in Gloucester, Whitefield had originally written it for "a small Christian society."<sup>54</sup>

Crump notes that in 1739 Whitefield began field-preaching.<sup>55</sup> Rather than addressing people who had some experience in religious disciplines such as fasting and dedicated periods of prayer, Whitefield was addressing people who seldom, if ever, attended church and had little or no acquaintance with the religious practices popular in religious societies. Their religious experience began with hearing Whitefield tell them God loved them and would provide the necessary faith to convert them. In this light, Whitefield's repeated assertions that good works – improvements in morality and increases in piety – do not form the basis of God's acceptance of the sinner are clearer: these people were starting their faith journey without the benefit of any religious training. To ask

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<sup>51</sup> Crump, "The Preaching of George Whitefield," 22.

<sup>52</sup> "On Regeneration" (1737), *WGW Vol. 6*, 270.

<sup>53</sup> "Early Piety" (1737), *WGW Vol. 5*, 172.

<sup>54</sup> James Patterson Gledstone, *The Life and Travels of George Whitefield, M.A.*, vol. 2004 ([CD Rom] Meadow View, Shropshire, England: Quinta Press, 2000), 40; compare Whitefield, *WGW: Journals*, (1744), 85.

<sup>55</sup> Crump, "The Preaching of George Whitefield," 22.

them to practice any form of spiritual discipline before encountering God through faith would effectively bar them from ever encountering God.<sup>56</sup>

There were other circumstances, not mentioned by Crump that might have contributed to Whitefield's change in approach to conversion. First, Whitefield stopped writing out specific sermons to be read before each specific audience. Rather, he began preaching *extempore*. In defending his practice to the faculty of Harvard, he stated that his *extempore* sermons were not random discourses, but rather carefully prepared sermons.<sup>57</sup> His introduction to *Twelve Sermons on Various Important Subjects* states that particulars of each delivery of the included sermons varied, but the main content remained consistent.<sup>58</sup> It is then reasonable to conclude that Whitefield's practice of *extempore* preaching entailed memorizing a sermon outline and doctrine while trusting God to provide illustrations that were appropriate to the specific occasion.<sup>59</sup> The act of memorizing Matthew Henry's outlines and doctrines might have caused him to consider Henry's Calvinistic theology more carefully. This suggestion is supported by Whitefield's observation, made shortly after he had begun preaching *extempore*, "I find I gain greater light and knowledge by preaching *extempore*, so that I fear I should quench the Spirit, did I not go on to speak as He gives me utterance."<sup>60</sup>

Second, Whitefield had the experience of seeing many people rapidly converted; they had not been struggling with conversion for months as he had during his time at Oxford. These examples of God's free and relatively instant grace may have convinced Whitefield that God's actions were more significant than the human action of fasting, watching and praying. He may have alluded to this insight in "Christians, Temple of the Living God" where he noted that he thought

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<sup>56</sup> see "The Potter" (1771), *WGW Vol. 5*, 228.

<sup>57</sup> George Whitefield, "A Letter to the Reverend the President, and Professors, Tutors, and Hebrew Instructors, of Harvard College in Cambridge; in Answer to a Testimony Published by Them against the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, and His Conduct," in *The Works of George Whitefield: Volume IV, Controversial Writings and Tracts* ([CD Rom] Meadow View, Shropshire, England: Quinta Press, 2000), 232.

<sup>58</sup> Whitefield, *Twelve Sermons*, 21.

<sup>59</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals* (1738), 154.

<sup>60</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals* (1739), 230.

willful sinners – those who have rejected their baptismal vows to seek God – could logically only expect divine retribution; in spite of this logic, he was aware of thousands of cases where God graciously intervened in the lives of willful sinners.<sup>61</sup>

Third, the opposition of Whitefield's fellow clergy to his innovations in ministry techniques may have caused Whitefield to study the Thirty-Nine Articles to see if he was preaching heresy. Article ten precludes the ability of free will actions to make a person acceptable to God. Article eleven teaches that the only acceptable source of justification is Jesus Christ. Article twelve states that good works are only possible if they proceed from faith and are only acceptable if they follow justification (which only comes through Christ). Article seventeen, dealing with predestination, claims that God has chosen some “to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation.”<sup>62</sup> Any careful examination of the Thirty-Nine Articles will reveal the Calvinist framework of this foundational document of the Anglican Church. While Whitefield did not mention such a doctrinal search in 1739, he did mention that, in January of 1739 he had engaged in three lengthy debates concerning his doctrinal position and his ministry choices.<sup>63</sup> Whitefield also mentioned meditating on the Thirty-Nine Articles a few years earlier as a spiritual exercise and part of his personal preparation for his ordination as a deacon. Possibly the time of persecution caused him to do so again.<sup>64</sup> Further, he had examined the Articles in such a manner that he was able to say that all those Anglican ministers who did not preach justification by faith alone were unfaithful to the Articles and were causing schisms within the church by forcing lay Christians who accepted the Articles to join the Dissenters.<sup>65</sup> By associating his opponents with Christ's opponents, it appears that he wanted his audiences (both his readers and his hearers) to mentally shift the center of religious authority away from wrong minded preachers and onto evangelical ministers. He did this when he called these opponents, “Letter learned masters of Israel,” “Letter learned scribes

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<sup>61</sup> “Temples Of The Living God” (1771), WS, 561.

<sup>62</sup> *Thirty-Nine Articles* (webpage).

<sup>63</sup> 17<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, and 29<sup>th</sup> of January, Whitefield, *WGW: Journals*, (1739), 224, 227, 228.

<sup>64</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals* (1740), 74.

<sup>65</sup> “Indwelling Of The Spirit” (1739), WS, 434-435.

and Pharisees,” and “A late, letter learned rabbi of our church.”<sup>66</sup> This is not a position Whitefield was likely to take unless he had examined both his doctrine and the doctrine of his opponents in light of the official doctrines of the Church of England.

While these suggestions are supported by Whitefield’s comments in his journals or his sermons, they are, to some degree, speculations. Did Whitefield claim to have had some spiritual experience that changed his theology or his approach to preaching? He did. On 14 January, 1739 Whitefield was ordained as Priest. He approached this ceremony expecting a spiritual experience, or at least that is implied by his prayer, “Oh, that I may be prepared for receiving the Holy Ghost tomorrow by the imposition of hands. Amen, Lord Jesus, Amen.”<sup>67</sup> After the ceremony of ordination, with the act of the laying on of the Bishop’s hands, Whitefield wrote, “I received grace in the Holy Sacrament.”<sup>68</sup>

Over the next three weeks, Whitefield noted instances that demonstrated the manner of the spiritual experience he had at ordination. He indicated that he preached with the power of the Holy Spirit ten times.<sup>69</sup> In addition to preaching with power, he claimed that God had altered his ministry style. On 28 January he said,

I offered Jesus Christ freely to sinners, and many, I believe, were truly pricked to the heart. Now, my friends, your prayers are heard, God has given me a double portion of His Spirit indeed.<sup>70</sup>

On 4 February he identified what manner the spiritual experience took. He said,

How has He filled and satisfied my soul! Now know I, that I did receive the Holy Ghost at imposition of hands, for I feel it as much as Elisha did when Elijah dropped his

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<sup>66</sup> “Christ’s Resurrection” (1739), WS, 583; “Christ The Only Preservative” (1740), WS, 567-568; “Persecution” (1741), WS, 604.

<sup>67</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals* (1739), 223.

<sup>68</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals* (1739), 223.

<sup>69</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals* (1739), 224-228. That Whitefield felt God had assisted his sermon was not unique to his post ordination ministry; see Whitefield, *WGW: Journals* (1739), 220, 221.

<sup>70</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals* (1739), 228.

mantle. Nay, others see it also, and my opposers, would they but speak, cannot but confess that God is with me of a truth.<sup>71</sup>

Following this testimony from the *Journals*, it appears that at Whitefield's ordination he had a spiritual experience. In the opinion of Whitefield and his friends, this experience changed his preaching ability and content. According to Edwards' insights into the nature of spiritual experiences, Whitefield's spiritual experience (which Edwards would have called a religious affection) would have given him the perception of greater confidence and effectiveness if he and the worshipping community had the expectation that that would happen.<sup>72</sup>

What does the ceremony of ordination to priesthood in the Anglican Church entail? Besides eliciting a promise to teach Scripture, adhere to the doctrines of the church, and care for whatever parish the priest is appointed to, the ceremony makes a rather bold claim. When the Bishop places his hands on the head of the person, he says,

**RECEIVE** the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments; In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Bishop follows this with

**MOST** merciful Father, we beseech thee to send upon these thy servants thy heavenly blessing; that they may be clothed with righteousness, and that thy Word spoken by their mouths may have such success, that it may never be spoken in vain. Grant also, that we may have grace to hear and receive what they shall deliver out of thy most holy Word, or agreeable to the same, as the means of our salvation; that in all our words and deeds we may seek thy glory, and the increase of thy kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Whitefield, *WGW: Journals*, (1739), 231.

<sup>72</sup> See Chapter Five, 5.2.4, 265, 268-272.

<sup>73</sup> *Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, According to the Order of the Church of*

While this might have been treated as a relatively empty ceremonial pronouncement by some priests, the double mention of divine assistance in ministry – first the Bishop promising that the priest would receive the Holy Spirit so that he could minister more effectively and second the Bishop requesting that the Father bless the priest so “thy Word, spoken by their mouths may have such success, that it never be spoken in vain” – describes a ceremony that expects a spiritual blessing to be imparted that would assist the minister to preach more effectively. A reasonable interpretation of Whitefield’s comments and the nature of the ceremony is that, in accordance with Edwards’ insight, the expressed expectations of the words of the ordaining Bishop, found in the ordination ceremony, shaped Whitefield’s expectations and thus his spiritual experience.

What then can we say? First and foremost, I think it is a good practice for Pentecostal scholars to look at the important moments of Church history from our own perspective (or reading through our own theological glasses) to see the work of the Holy Spirit in history.

Second, I think at least two of the theories I do not adopt have very relevant points. First, I think David Smith raises a very good point when he suggests Whitefield’s sermon theology was influenced by Matthew Henry and the other Reformed thinkers he was exposed to. Our understanding of who God is and how He works ought to be influenced (but not dominated) by the great minds of the Church. Also, Crump is correct to point out that Whitefield’s audience changed. Our presentation of the Gospel message ought to be influenced by the people who are gathered to hear us. Surely the point of preaching is taking the unchanging truths of the Gospel and presenting them in a manner that is understandable to the people we are addressing. Yet if either of these two men is correct, it highlights a danger – we cannot let the winds of circumstance or shifting “hot new doctrines” change our theology. Yet, as theologians we must listen to the voice of the people of God – both in the form of the historic voice of former theologians and also in the form of the contemporary body of Christ; listen to the voice, and let it motivate us to search the scriptures for a deeper understanding of God.

The theory I endorse – that Whitefield's theology changed as a direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit during his Ordination – embraces a great truth of the Pentecostal movement and has one great warning for us. The truth I refer to is that the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, or in this case, a significant empowering of the Holy Spirit, results in an equipping for a more powerful witness to Christ. Pentecostals have gotten caught up in looking for glossolalia (and I find no evidence of this in Whitefield's journals nor in the accounts of his ministry) or healing, or being slain in the spirit. All these are legitimate work of the Holy Spirit, but they are sideshows to what I believe are the two main works of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's life: firstly, transforming us into the image of God, and secondly, equipping us to share the Gospel.

The uncomfortable warning is in Edward's theory, used to understand Whitefield's experience. If Edwards is correct and the "secret expectations of the worshipping community" shape the experience of the infilling of the Holy Spirit, then Pentecostal ministers, as leaders of worshipping communities have the responsibility of leading the expectations of our congregations. We must provide a correct understanding so their expectations are in line with the outcomes that enhance the Kingdom of God; else our revivals will take on improper characteristics that will be a disgrace to the Kingdom of God.