



A CORNERSTONE SERMON MANUSCRIPT

GEORGE WHITEFIELD'S TEXT

(JOHN 3:3)

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No. 1 in the series *Texts That Changed History: The Practical Ownership of Scripture*

Cornerstone Bible Church • Lilburn, Georgia

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Today we begin a new series in which we are going to be doing something different. We are going to be looking at passages of Scripture that have greatly impacted individuals, and through those individuals the lives of many others. We are going to be spending about equal time on the story of the people involved and on the meaning of the text itself. We start today with George Whitefield's text, which is John 3:3. We'll read it in context in a moment, but before we do that I should preface the series by telling you that the stories of these individuals are generally quite accessible in print and online. Most of these stories are not well-known, but they ought to be. We are going to be looking at people who shaped the history of their nations. In the case of George Whitefield, the great eighteenth-century evangelist, we are going to be looking at a man who shaped two nations: his home country of England, and what were then the British colonies in the New World. Frank Boreham, who wrote on Whitefield, said, "Whitefield was the first man who treated Great Britain and North America as if they belonged to him."¹ Whitefield had a special impact on Georgia, for he came here in the very early days after the colony was settled, and he started an orphans' home in

Savannah that is still functioning today. Not many people begin ministries that outlive them by two hundred and thirty years, but in many respects that orphanage, named Bethesda, is probably the smallest of Whitefield's achievements. So Whitefield's story is especially pertinent to all Georgians, and it basically started from his encounter with one verse of Scripture. So let us begin there in John 3...

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 3:1-8

1 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.
2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and wind, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

[Now if you are thinking that this isn't how you remember verse 5, let me point out that the word for "wind" and the word for "spirit" are precisely the same in New Testament Greek. The fact is that when Jesus used this word along with the word *water*, He knew that it would bring associations into Nicodemus's mind quite readily. The water was suggestive of cleansing, and the wind, as He explains in verse 8, is suggestive of the supernatural and invisible changes that are part of new birth.]

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." 8 The wind [here's that same word again] blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

GEORGE WHITEFIELD'S STRUGGLE

Before I say anything else, I want to commend to you for your personal reading the outstanding biography of George Whitefield in two volumes written by the late Canadian Baptist pastor Arnold Dallimore. We have it in our church library, and we have along with it a one-volume condensation of it by the same author. I think you will enjoy the two-volume work far more, because it includes hundreds of quotations from Whitefield's own letters and other writings that give you a flavor of the man. If you're looking for a gift for a person who enjoys reading, you could hardly do better than these volumes.

George Whitefield's text was John 3:3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus, *"Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Coming to grips with that verse turned Whitefield's life in a new direction. He is said to have preached on John 3:3 at least 300 times, and the chances are that the number was much larger than that because Whitefield preached the same sermon many, many times in his ministry. In fact, he became known publicly as the guy who believes that people have to be born again. He was just about the only preacher in England who did believe that at the time.

His youth

It is always interesting to learn how God brought a person and a text together, and so we begin with George Whitefield's youth. He was born and raised in Gloucester, England, as the son of an innkeeper, Thomas Whitefield, who died when George was only two.

Gloucester is up the River Severn a few miles from Bristol and is a center of the fishing industry in England, so George was frequently in the company of travelers and sailors in the inn and in the tavern that was part of it. In fact, at various times in his youth he served as bartender in the tavern. It was often a pretty rough crowd, and it didn't do his moral life any good. The bad habits he developed led him into many struggles of soul.

His soul-struggles

George's mother, who did most of his early training, gave him a decent moral underpinning, but he later reflected that he often strayed from her instruction. In an autobiographical account written while in his twenties, he wrote:

I was so brutish as to hate instruction and used purposely to shun all opportunities of receiving it...Lying, filthy talking, and foolish jesting I was much addicted to, even when very young... Stealing from my mother I thought no theft at all, and used to make no scruple of taking money out of her pocket before she was up...²

Of course, he could do these things, but he could not escape the condemnation of his conscience. That conscience was still defiled when he went off to Oxford University for his education. He did not find much help there, for both the faculty and the student body were given over to the pleasures of the flesh. The gospel of Christ was unknown at Oxford, and students who were interested at all were encouraged to commend themselves to God by keeping long lists of rules of moral behavior. No one knew much about forgiveness, and the notion of a new birth was utterly unfamiliar.

George was simply too poor to afford many of those pleasures that his classmates gave themselves over to, and he had little time to spend on them in any case. He had to earn his tuition by shining the shoes and washing the clothes of the other students, and he was despised by most of them for that

reason. But it was while at Oxford that he made a friend who was to play a key role in his life.

His friend

His friend was Charles Wesley, a man whose hymns we sing in this church with some regularity. But when Whitefield met Charles Wesley, Charles was struggling spiritually nearly as much as Whitefield was. Charles and his friends had started what they called “The Holy Club,” and they gave themselves over to resolutions to do better in life. They fasted and prayed at specified intervals and devoted themselves to religious exercises of various kinds, but they were all aware of the fact that they had no rest of soul for all of their efforts. They knew nothing of forgiveness of sins, and they knew nothing about loving God from the heart. Everything was rules and obligations and laws.

His book

But one day Charles took a step forward in his spiritual progress. He obtained a copy of a book by a man named Henry Scougal called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. (It’s still in print today.) He loaned it to Whitefield and recommended that he read it. It was while reading Scougal’s book that Whitefield for the first time came face to face with John 3:3 and the idea of the new birth. It led him to what can only be called...

His awakening

He at last came to realize that he was unable to save himself by his works, and he came to faith in the Lord Jesus. He later remembered the occasion when he wrote:

God was pleased to remove the heavy load, to enable me to lay hold of His dear Son by a living faith, and by giving me the Spirit of adoption...O! With what joy—joy unspeakable—even joy that was full of and big with glory, was my soul filled, when the weight of sin went off, and an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God, and a full assurance of faith, broke in upon my disconsolate soul!³

George’s relief of spirit was so great that he began to speak of his conversion to other people and to minister in the prison that was in the town of Oxford. He took his degree in 1736 at the age of 22 and was ordained as a minister in the Church of England that same year.

He was encouraged when his friend Charles Wesley and Charles’s older brother John were converted a few years later. John had served a stint as a missionary to Georgia, and he encouraged Whitefield to go as a missionary himself to the New World, where possibilities were enormous. In time, George Whitefield agreed to do just that, and he wanted to go with the purpose in mind of beginning an orphanage that could provide for children

who had lost their parents in the difficult circumstances of the young colony. As he prepared to go, however, he began a preaching ministry in England.

GEORGE WHITEFIELD'S MINISTRY

His preaching

His preaching ministry got off to a rocky start, however. After being invited to preach in several churches, George was soon labeled by his ministerial colleagues as a bearer of strange doctrine. He taught the necessity of the new birth, and that was viewed with suspicion in the churches. As he went from town to town, he was often refused the pulpit on the basis of his views. The Church of England was in a bad way, and so was the country. One historian described England's condition this way:

Only five or six members of parliament ever went to church... The plague, small pox, and countless diseases we call minor today had no cures... Clothing was expensive, so many of the cities' poor wore rags that were like their bedding, full of lice... The penalties for crimes seem barbaric today (hanging for petty thievery)... Young boys, and sometimes girls, were bound over to a master for seven years of training. They worked six days a week, every day from dawn to dusk and often beyond... If you were unlucky and starving, you might fall foul of the law and be packed off to the stench of Newgate Prison. From there, you might have the chance to go to the New World in a boat loaded with prisoners of all sorts ... [Drunkenness was rampant] and gin was fed to the babies... to keep them quiet, with blindness and often death as a result... The people's love of tormenting animals at bull-baitings was equaled only by their delight in a public execution. ⁴

His relations with the Church of England

Perhaps it is not too surprising that George's preaching was widely disapproved in the churches. It is likely that most of the parish priests in England were not themselves born again at this time, and they considered what he had to say to be novel and unauthorized. There were exceptions, but by and large Whitefield found more and more pulpits closed off to him. He was warned by village pastors not to speak of such things, and was escorted out of town in some places.

While he was being expelled from churches in England, however, he had been corresponding with a young Welsh preacher named Howell Harris. Harris had encountered similar experiences in Wales and had taken to preaching in the open air and bypassing the churches altogether. Large crowds gathered in Wales to hear him preach, and he wrote encouraging

Whitefield to follow his example and try it in England. Whitefield was reluctant at first, but since he was leaving for Georgia in a few months and few churches would have him, he began to try it. The results were astonishing, and today historians describe what happened as...

The Great Awakening: Britain

The Great Awakening began with the field preaching of Whitefield in Britain and Howell Harris in Wales. That God was doing something marvelous began to be apparent when George Whitefield made the decision to go into the fields and give the general public the opportunity to hear the gospel and the truth about the new birth. He went first to the west of England to a town called Kingswood. The area was dominated by coal mining, and Whitefield went to the miners or colliers of the area. These were people who, frankly, were not welcome in the churches of the area. Whitefield began to preach in the open air, using village greens, or public squares, or anywhere he could attract a crowd. The crowds were small at first because no one knew he was coming. When he announced that he would be in the same place the next day, however, large numbers began to show up: first dozens, then hundreds, and then thousands. They would stand there with black faces and black clothes after a long day in the mines and listen to Whitefield speak about the new birth. He said that the first indication that he had that people were getting it was when he saw the white channels on their cheeks as the tears began to wash off the coal dust.

The word spread quickly and Whitefield was soon speaking to crowds of two thousand and three thousand and five thousand. Everywhere he went enormous groups would turn out, and many conversions resulted. When this kind of thing happens, of course, people are always quick to try and give a human explanation for the extraordinary things God does through His servants. If there is one with Whitefield, I think it must have been his humility. He once received a letter that spitefully accused him of assorted wrongdoings in his ministry. Whitefield returned a brief, courteous reply that stands as an example to anyone who is judged and accused by others: "I thank you heartily for your letter. As for what you and my other enemies are saying against me, I know worse things about myself than you will ever say about me. With love in Christ, George Whitefield."

And the opposition was substantial. Critics followed him everywhere. His success in bringing the gospel to English towns and countryside provoked both envy from the clergy and hostility from many others.

One young group of detractors styled themselves the "Hell-Fire Club" and made it their business to ridicule Whitefield by holding their own "gospel meetings." On one occasion, a club member named Thorpe was giving his public imitation of Whitefield, complete with a gospel invitation as he had heard the great evangelist present it. In the middle of his oration Thorpe

stopped, pierced to the heart with what he had been saying, and was converted on the spot.⁵

At the height of his fame, Whitefield was about to leave for Georgia, so on his last tour he introduced John Wesley as the man who would replace him in these open air ministries. Soon he left for the colonies and he began using the money he had collected in England to build and supply the Orphan House in Savannah.

The Great Awakening: America

But of course he could not simply be a schoolmaster for any length of time. He began to preach and to write. He made a tour of the cities of the eastern seaboard and the crowds were even larger than in England. When he got to Philadelphia, Ben Franklin, who was not a Christian, was so taken with him that he became Whitefield's good friend and exclusive printer in the colonies. When Franklin heard Whitefield speak in the city, he walked around the perimeter of the crowd in an effort to estimate scientifically the size of the group. He concluded that Whitefield was preaching to 30,000 people that day. He added that at no time in his circuit had he encountered any difficulty in hearing what the evangelist was saying.

This was all transpiring at the same time Jonathan Edwards was sustaining a remarkable ministry in Massachusetts, and the work that the two men did is generally regarded as two parts of the same movement of God that American historians call the Great Awakening in America. The changes it brought were enormous, and among other things Whitefield had a hand in establishing three institutions of higher learning in the colonies. He collaborated with Jonathan Edwards in the establishment of what became Princeton University. With Ben Franklin, he was one of the founders of the University of Pennsylvania, and he also helped to start Dartmouth College.

Whitefield crossed the Atlantic thirteen times, trying to do what he could for the revivals both in England and in America, and preached an estimated 18,000 sermons in the years of his ministry. He died in Massachusetts, literally worn out from his labors, at the age of 55. It is likely that he was responsible for more conversions than any man between apostolic times and Billy Graham, and the great verse of his heart, and the theme of his preaching, was John 3:3.

GEORGE WHITEFIELD'S TEXT (JOHN 3:3)

Its word-plays

The meaning of this passage is affected in minor ways by the word-plays that it contains. I already mentioned one, the double meaning of the Greek word *pneuma*, a word that can mean both "wind" and "spirit." The Lord Jesus was using all the skills of a master teacher here to try and penetrate the obtuse Nicodemus. When He says, "Except one be born *again*," He uses a

word with two meanings. It can mean *again*, as it appears in most translations; and it can mean *from above*, which also suits the context very well. Both things, of course, are true. The new birth is a second birth, and it is a birth from above. That helps us establish...

Its fundamental message

The fundamental message of John 3:3 is that God is looking to effect in the human heart a change that is so radical that it is nothing less than the setting aside of one life and the beginning of a new one. That new life has to be implanted by God Himself, and part of making that change is faith in His Son.

Its fundamental rebuke

There is an implicit and fundamental rebuke in this passage, too. Jesus tells us that self-reformation cannot bring human beings into the kingdom of God. There must be a radical change in the whole relationship. We cannot see the kingdom of God by making promises to God to do better. For starters, we cannot do better. But there is a deeper problem. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, "We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved: we are... rebels who must lay down our arms."⁶ Self-reformation cannot accomplish the complete change in our relationship with God that God requires of us. The dawning of a new era has to take place. A new life must begin, and that new life must be implanted by God Himself.

Its effects

So how are we to tell if this new life is begun in us? There are many ways to tell, actually, but three effects of the new birth are quite easy to see. The first is...

Relief

This was the one that was most evident in George Whitefield. What he called "the heavy load" was taken off his back. He understood that God extends the permanent forgiveness of sins to the one who is willing to take it. Knowing that God has rolled all of what He held against you onto Christ brings a blessed joy and relief and a knowledge that we will not be called to account ever again for matters that Jesus Christ paid for. A second effect is what might be called a holy...

Thirst

We find ourselves facing a new direction. The thought of God doesn't make us cringe and look for an exit. It actually seems desirable to get to know Him better. We sense that He holds nothing against us, and longs to make us more like His Son. And thirdly, there is...

Growth

This one requires some time, of course. Paul likens it to the planting of a tree. God wants us to send down deep roots into the Scriptures and to reach

upward in prayer. We find ourselves looking back on the way we used to live and wanting no part of it. We approach God not because other people tell us to but because we want to. The new birth, as Jesus said, is the doorway through which every human being must go in order to enter His kingdom. If you have never gone through that door, you can change that today. Jesus said that no one who comes to Him is ever turned away. George Whitefield wasn't, and you won't be, either.

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NOTES

- ¹ Frank Boreham, *When Scripture Changes Lives* (Waynesboro, GA: OM LIT, 1994), 63.
- ² Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*. 2 vols. (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), I: 46-47.
- ³ *Ibid*, I: 77.
- ⁴ "Revival and Revolution," *Christian History* 2, 7-8.
- ⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996) 94-95.
- ⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 91.

Works about Whitefield[edit]. "Whitefield, George," in Dictionary of National Biography, London: Smith, Elder, & Co., (1885–1900) in 63 vols. "Whitefield, George," in The New International Encyclopedia, New York: Dodd, Mead and Co. (1905). "Whitefield, George," in The New Student's Reference Work, Chicago: F.E. Compton and Co. (1914). "George Whitefield, the Famous Preacher" in Littell's Living Age, 131 (1691). Works by this author published before January 1, 1925 are in the public domain worldwide because the author died at least 100 years ago. The George Whitefield: Sermons Community Note includes chapter-by-chapter summary and analysis, character list, theme list, historical context, author biography and quizzes written by community members like you. by George Whitefield. About George Whitefield: Sermons Poem Text George Whitefield: Sermons Summary Character List Glossary Themes Quotes Analysis Symbols, Allegory and Motifs Literary Elements Essay Questions. George Whitefield: Sermons Poem Text. Study Resources :: Text Commentaries :: George Whitefield. † Back to All Text Commentaries. George Whitefield. † Back to All Text Commentaries. Whitefield's zeal for God's glory" combined with an uncompromising commitment to preach the unchanging Gospel message" led to the great "Evangelical Awakenings" of England and North America in the 18th Century. For over thirty years, tens of thousands of people gathered to hear Whitefield's "open air" preaching all throughout England, Scotland, Wales, and North America. Whether it was in the fields or in a small chapel or in a large church, Whitefield found it worthwhile to preach the Gospel and to see lives converted for Christ.