

HONOURING GEORGE WHITEFIELD: FUNERAL EULOGIES AND ELEGIES IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA¹

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How did the Christian world react to Whitefield's sudden death in 1770? This article examines memorial sermons and poetic laments from both sides of the Atlantic, to show how his gospel priorities were portrayed by his friends and successors.

In December 1769 George Whitefield arrived in Georgia for what was to be the last of his seven visits to the American colonies. After some months at his Bethesda orphanage near Savannah, he set off in April 1770 on his final preaching tour through Philadelphia, New York and New England. During August and September he made his way through Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, preaching almost every day in towns along the east coast such as Newport, Providence, Boston, Salem, Ipswich and Portsmouth. His last sermon was to a large crowd at Exeter, before riding south again to Newburyport on the Merrimack River, where he stayed with Jonathan Parsons, the local Presbyterian minister, and his family. At six o'clock the next morning, Sunday 30 September 1770, Whitefield suddenly collapsed and died, aged 55. His health had been failing for a number of years. His demise was attributed at the time to an attack of asthma, though it is now recognised probably to have been angina.² A poet conjured up the scene:

How quick the Change! How speedy was his Flight
From these dark Realms, to yonder Realms of Light!
No sore disease sat ling'ring on his Flesh;
His rev'rend Vigour to the last shone fresh.
But aha, alas! A strange surprising Fit
Summon'd him hence, and bid his Soul submit.
He had not Time to bid a last Farewell,
But fell asleep in Christ, and all was well.

¹ This paper was delivered as the Evangelical Library annual lecture for 2014, the tercentenary of George Whitefield's birth, and was first published in *In Writing: The Magazine of the Evangelical Library* 126 (2015): 4–15.

² Boyd Stanley Schlenker, "George Whitefield (1714–1770)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online at www.oxforddnb.com.

He joyfully obey'd the Voice of Death,
And with extatick [*sic*] Joy resign'd his Breath.³

The very day of Whitefield's death, Pastor Parsons told his congregation at Newburyport:

He is gone while our souls were flushed with expectation! Snatched away suddenly, without any time allowed us to wean ourselves from him! O severe, affecting stroke! ... Where is the man that can describe divine things, with such a heavenly flame! Who, O who, shall arise in England, or America, with an equal genius, the like spirit and equal address, to encourage religion, pure and undefiled, and to stem the torrent of opposition to the gospel!⁴

Two days later, 2 October, Whitefield's body was placed in a new tomb in Newburyport church. Jedediah Jewett (one of the six pall bearers) addressed the gathered crowd, lamenting the "irreparable loss":

What hopes and projections for advancing the interests of Christ's kingdom among men are come to an end! How is the mighty fallen, and the weapons of the spiritual warfare perished! ... What a gap is opened for judgments to come in upon us, now this righteous man, and powerful pleader is removed! ... How much zeal for God, and gospel doctrine, compassion for the perishing souls of sinners, and true holiness, is taken from amongst us, by this stroke of God's hand.⁵

This paper examines the memorial sermons and elegies published at Whitefield's death on both sides of the Atlantic. In America there were sermons in Newburyport, Boston, Salem, Philadelphia, Charleston and Savannah. News of Whitefield's death reached London on 5 November 1770, where again there were sermons in his honour across the country. One preacher mourned: "What! Whitefield dead!—a greater loss, when all things considered, could not perhaps befall the church of God in the

³ *A Funeral Elegy on the Rev. and Renowned George Whitefield* (Boston, 1770); opening line, "Why throbs my panting Heart!"

⁴ Jonathan Parsons, *To Live is Christ, to Die is Gain: A Funeral Sermon on the Death of the Rev. Mr George Whitefield* (London, 1771), 25.

⁵ Jedediah Jewett, "An Exhortation at the Grave," appendix to Parsons, *To Live is Christ*, 28, 30–31.

death of a single person ... He is gone! he is gone!”⁶ As the preachers swung into action, so did the poets. Numerous elegies were published, the longest being the rhyming couplets by Titus Knight of Halifax (502 lines) and Charles Wesley (536 lines), trumped only by the blank verse of John Fellows, a Baptist from Bromsgrove in Worcestershire (792 lines). The sermons were solid, but the memorial poems were of variable quality. Richard de Courcy, for example, introduced his own less than scintillating composition with the excuse that although he had never drunk from the sacred springs of Mount Helicon (the fount of poetic inspiration), at least he had drunk from the waters of life!⁷

Ebenezer Pemberton, preaching in Boston, accurately prophesied that “Posterity will view Mr Whitefield, in many respects, as one of the most extraordinary Characters of the present Age.”⁸ The funeral sermons were particularly significant, David Ceri Jones has recently argued, in establishing the major themes which have absorbed Whitefield’s biographers from the eighteenth century to the present.⁹ Nevertheless these eulogies and elegies remain a generally neglected source in Whitefield studies. His first biographer, John Gillies, summarised them at length, though with no analysis.¹⁰ Subsequent historians have been more interested in narrating Whitefield’s remarkable life than in his posthumous reputation. Robert Philip, for example, in 1837 summed up the funeral sermons in a brief paragraph, lumping them all together as “too similar to be distinguished.” He wrote:

Their *similarity* is, however, their most instructive and interesting characteristic. It both proves and illustrates the fact, that Whitefield’s character and career left the *same* impression upon ministers of different churches, and men of dissimilar talents and temperament. Wesley

⁶ David Edwards, *A Minister Dead; Yet Speaking: Being the Substance of Two Discourses Preached November 11, 1770, Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. Geo. Whitefield* (London, 1770), 13.

⁷ Richard de Courcy, *Some Elegiac Lines, Composed on the Death of that Faithful and Painful Servant of the Lord Jesus, the Rev. Mr George Whitefield* (London, 1771), iii.

⁸ Ebenezer Pemberton, *Heaven the Residence of the Saints: A Sermon Occasioned by the Sudden, and Much Lamented Death of the Reverend George Whitefield* (Boston, 1770), 20.

⁹ David Ceri Jones, “‘So Much Idolized by Some and Railed at by Others’: Towards Understanding George Whitefield,” *Wesley and Methodist Studies* 5 (2013): 11–13.

¹⁰ John Gillies, *Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend George Whitefield* (London, 1772), 292–346.

and Toplady might have written their sermons at the same desk, and compared notes before preaching them. Romaine might have exchanged pulpits with Dr Pemberton of Boston, and Venn and Newton with Brewer of Stepney, or Dr Gibbons. They all bear the same testimony, and breathe the same spirit, at the grave of Whitefield.¹¹

The memorial sermons are certainly the same genre, but closer attention reveals the variety of concerns they addressed. The dominant themes, as Jones notes, are Whitefield's fruitful preaching, godly character and evangelical ecumenism. These were set within a wider context of lamentation and evangelistic exhortation. Each of these themes will be sampled here, with extended quotation to give a flavour of the memorialist rhetoric.

Lamentation

As expected from funeral tributes in every age, they were shot through with the note of deep lamentation. In Massachusetts, Benjamin Church (later famous as a participant in the Boston Tea Party and a British spy against the American revolutionaries) began his accolade to Whitefield with these words:

But come heav'n's radiant Offspring! Hither throng,
Behold your Prophet, your Elijah fled;
Let deep distress now palsy ev'ry tongue,
Whitefield the *Gabriel* of mankind—is dead.

Where are his dulcet periods? Where the grace?
The soft persuasive magic of his voice?
That heav'nly harp which rung immortal lays,
And limn'd religion to the sinners choice.

Where is the vollied thunder of his zeal?
The solemn pathos of the wrestler's prayer?
That held fierce conflict with the pow'rs of hell,
And thinn'd the dreary regions of despair.

¹¹ Robert Philip, *The Life and Times of the Reverend George Whitefield* (London: George Virtue, 1838), 542.

The ice of Death has quench'd the seraph's flame;
 Mute is the tongue, that charm'd the world before:
 The Grave's strong fetters bind his precious frame,
 He speaks, he pleads, he prays, he weeps—no more.¹²

This angelic imagery of Whitefield the seraph, or the new Gabriel, was picked up by others. Josiah Smith (Presbyterian minister of Charleston, South Carolina) described Whitefield as one with “the face of an angel.”

We shall hear his silver tongue no more. The natural decencies of his gesture; his flowing oratory; his striking rhetoric; his doctrines of grace ... He is gone ... Let me go, and die with him. Weep not therefore for him, but weep with tears of blood for yourselves, and for your children—weep for England, weep for Scotland, weep for Ireland, weep for Bermuda, weep for New England, and almost all the continent, but especially weep for Georgia.¹³

At Philadelphia, the memorial service at the Second Presbyterian Church opened with Isaac Watts' hymn *Hark! From the tombs a doleful sound*, and ended with a rendition by young people from the congregation of *Ah! Lovely appearance of death, No sight upon earth is so fair*. The minister, James Sproat, imagined the rejoicing in heaven on Whitefield's entrance: “My brethren, may we not suppose that Heaven's high arches resounded, with loud hallelujahs, and anthems of praise to God and the Lamb, upon Whitefield's arrival in those pure regions of eternal felicity!” But he acknowledged that the church on earth was “bereaved of one of its greatest champions,” and therefore it was right to lament:

Let England, Scotland, and Ireland mourn! Let all the American colonies join the lamentation. Let this city be clad in mourning, and this congregation, which, under God, owes its origin to this beloved Servant of Christ—let it be clad in sable, and take its place in the first class of unfeigning mourners! Who that has any regard for the prosperity of

¹² Benjamin Church, *An Elegy to the Memory of that Pious and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend Mr George Whitefield* (Boston, 1770), 3–4.

¹³ Josiah Smith, *Success a Great Proof of St Paul's Fidelity: Sacred to the Memory of the Reverend George Whitefield* (Charleston, 1770), 12.

poor Zion, can refrain from tears, when we repeat the doleful sound,
Whitefield is dead?¹⁴

At Christ Church, Savannah, the Episcopalian minister Edward Ellington said that Whitefield “died like a Hero in the Field of Battle,” with converted sinners as the trophies of his victory.¹⁵ Others remarked that those redeemed souls were now the sparkling jewels in his crown in paradise.¹⁶ Back in England, Charles Wesley consoled himself with the thought that although separated from his old friend by the waves of the Atlantic Ocean, and unable to share the same grave plot as they had once planned, they would nevertheless be reunited in glory:

Yet at the trumpet’s call, my dust shall rise,
With his fly up to Jesus in the skies,
And live with him the life that never dies.¹⁷

Another former colleague, Richard Elliot, lamented Whitefield’s death as “one of the greatest strokes to God’s visible church, that hath been inflicted on it for many years.”¹⁸

Whitefield’s Godly Character and Fruitful Preaching

As Whitefield’s memorialists surveyed his life and ministry, some focused upon his godly character. A prime example was Charles Wesley’s elegy, which proclaimed of Whitefield:

In his unspotted life with joy we see
The fervors of primeval piety:

¹⁴ James Sproat, *A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of the Reverend George Whitefield* (Philadelphia, 1771), 21–22.

¹⁵ Edward Ellington, *The Reproach of Christ the Christian’s Treasure: A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. George Whitefield* (London, 1771), 25–26.

¹⁶ Sproat, *Discourse*, 21; J.J. Zubly, *The Wise Shining as the Brightness of the Firmament, and They That Turn Many Unto Righteousness as Stars Forever: A Funeral Sermon, Preached at Savannah in Georgia, November 11, 1770, on the Much Lamented Death of the Rev. George Whitefield* (Savannah, 1770), 18.

¹⁷ Charles Wesley, *An Elegy on the Late Reverend George Whitefield* (Bristol, 1771), 27.

¹⁸ Richard Elliot, *Grace and Truth, or a Summary of the Gospel Doctrine, Considered in a Funeral Discourse Preached on the Death of the Rev. Mr George Whitefield* (London, 1770), 17.

A pattern to the flock by Jesus bought,
A living witness of the truths he taught...¹⁹

Whitefield was portrayed as a man of prayer, wise counsel, and personal integrity: “No prophet smooth to men of high estate, No servile flatterer of the rich or great.”²⁰ Another paean emphasised his sacrificial pastoral care, especially for the marginalised:

Forget him not though he lays under Ground,
But let his Fame on every Tongue resound:
And let the sweet Remembrance of the Just,
Long flourish, though confin'd to sleep in Dust.
For he was both our Father and our Friend,
The lame Man's Staff, the Leader of the Blind;
The Poor's Relief, the Widow's Help and Guide,
The Orphan's Father and the Sick Man's Pride.²¹

Whitefield's Bethesda orphanage was a permanent visible reminder of his philanthropic endeavour, and eulogists were at pains to defend his memory from the rumours of financial impropriety with orphanage funds which dogged his final years.²² They acknowledged that Whitefield had character flaws and faults, but were reluctant to name any. By supporters in America, in the years of political unrest leading to the War of Independence, Whitefield could even be remoulded into the shape of a “patriot,” who though loyal to the king was “greatly concerned for the liberties of America,” a friend to religious and civil freedom, and an enemy to tyranny and “episcopal oppression.”²³

For most memorialists, however, it was not Whitefield's philanthropy and civic duty but his evangelistic preaching that took centre stage. Titus Knight described his famous open-air ministry:

Fearless of man, he lifts his voice on high,
His rostrum earth, his sounding-board the sky;
While multitudes in vast abundance throng,

¹⁹ Wesley, *Elegy*, 19.

²⁰ Wesley, *Elegy*, 22.

²¹ *Funeral Elegy*.

²² Pemberton, *Heaven the Residence*, 27.

²³ Nathaniel Whitaker, *A Funeral Sermon, on the Death of the Reverend George Whitefield* (Salem, 1770), 33–34.

And hang delighted on the preacher's tongue,
 Allur'd by sweeter than orphean strains,
 They run with eager haste, to fields, and plains...
 What part of England hath not heard his fame?
 Where did he not proclaim Immanuel's name?²⁴

The only funeral sermon personally commissioned by Whitefield was that by John Wesley, delivered twice on Sunday 18 November 1770 at Whitefield's two Tabernacles in London, at Tottenham Court Road and Moorfields. Wesley asked:

Have we read or heard of any person since the apostles, who testified the gospel of the grace of God, through so widely extended a space, through so large a part of the habitable world? Have we read or heard of any person, who called so many thousands, so many myriads of sinners to repentance?²⁵

Several other preachers asserted that a preacher like Whitefield had not been seen since the apostolic age.²⁶ Elliot called him "a second Paul."²⁷ Sproat likened him to Barnabas, who was "a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith," at a time when "a great many people were added to the Lord" (Acts 11:24). Ellington compared Whitefield instead to Moses who "esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt" (Hebrews 11:26). Some looked not only to the pages of Scripture but to the Reformation—one called him "a second Luther."²⁸

Others turned to the annals of Greco-Roman history for Whitefield prototypes. Nathaniel Whitaker of Salem, for example, said his abilities to arouse the affections equalled those of Demosthenes and Cicero.²⁹ One poet mused:

Of Eloquence, he bore a Master's Fame
 Of Oratory, Rhetoric the same.

²⁴ Titus Knight, *An Elegy on the Death of the Late Revd Mr George Whitefield* (Halifax, 1771), 7, 9.

²⁵ John Wesley, *A Sermon on the Death of the Rev. Mr George Whitefield* (London, 1770), 22.

²⁶ Sproat, *Discourse*, 19; Elliot, *Grace and Truth*, 22; Henry Venn, *A Token of Respect to the Memory of the Rev. George Whitefield, being the Substance of a Sermon* (London, 1770), 12.

²⁷ Elliot, *Grace and Truth*, 23.

²⁸ Edwards, *A Minister Dead; Yet Speaking*, 23.

²⁹ Whitaker, *Funeral Sermon*, 30.

Of other Learning, Wit and Worth possess'd,
 Whitefield shone forth conspicuous o'er the rest....
 His Words came forth with such impetuous Force,
 As stopp'd rebellious Sinners in their Course....
 None ever since the apostolic Days,
 Like Whitefield, shone with such illustrious Blaze!³⁰

Sproat asserted that Whitefield was

fired with a flaming zeal for his Lord and master; filled with bowels of tender compassion to immortal souls; and favoured with more than Ciceronian eloquence ... As a speaker, he was furnished with such admirable talents, with such an easy method of address, and was such a perfect master of the art of persuasion, that he triumphed over the passions of the most crowded [*sic*] auditories, with all the charms of sacred eloquence.³¹

Likewise Elliot exclaimed: “how forceable his eloquence! how engaging his address! how burning his zeal for the glory of God, and the salvation of sinners! ... he would cry aloud and spare not, lifting up his voice like a trumpet.”³² Nevertheless, in an echo of recent debates over the significance, or otherwise, of Whitefield’s technique as an orator and “divine dramatist,”³³ some memorialists were at pains to remind their congregations that his fruitful ministry was the work of the Holy Spirit, not the preacher’s method. Josiah Smith observed:

how many hearts have his sermons pierced! What multitudes throng after him, in his journeying, and how many of them, have been ready to pluck out their eyes, and give them to him, after they have felt the power of his ministry, upon their hearts. I will allow, there may be something very attractive in his gesture, his voice, and happy elocution. But it is plain to me, this is not all—such impressions usually vanish, as soon as the engine is down, that produced them. But we know there are instances, who have given the most lasting proof of a real change and conversion, under his

³⁰ *Funeral Elegy*.

³¹ Sproat *Discourse*, 17–18.

³² Elliot, *Grace and Truth*, 21–22.

³³ Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

ministry! Yea, “Hell seems,” as one has observed in print, “to tremble before him whenever he marches, and a new face of religion to appear!”³⁴

In similar vein, John Fellows pointed out that God did not need any Demosthenes to convert souls, because that was the work of his sovereign Spirit.³⁵

Whitefield’s Evangelical Ecumenism

The Whitefield memorial sermons were preached by ministers from a wide variety of backgrounds—Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists and Baptists—both Calvinists and Arminians. This theological breadth demonstrated the diversity of Whitefield’s transatlantic evangelical networks and it was unsurprising, therefore, that many memorialists focused upon his non-partisan credentials. Titus Knight wrote:

He was a stranger to that narrow mind,
That seems to think salvation is confin’d
To sect, or party; and as he approv’d
All that lov’d Christ, he was by all belov’d.³⁶

Charles Wesley picked up the same theme:

Though long by following multitudes admir’d,
No party for himself he e’er desir’d,
His one desire to make the Saviour known,
To magnify the name of Christ alone.³⁷

He emphasised Whitefield’s ecumenical spirit and broad catholicity:

How have we heard his generous zeal exclaim,
And load with just reproach the bigot’s name!
The men by sameness of opinion tied,
Who their own party love, and none beside;
Or like the Romish sect infallible,

³⁴ Smith, *Success a Great Proof*, 10–11.

³⁵ John Fellows, *The Bromsgrove Elegy, in Blank Verse, on the Death of the Reverend George Whitefield* (London, 1771), 2.

³⁶ Knight, *Elegy*, 14.

³⁷ Wesley, *Elegy*, 21.

Secure themselves, and send the rest to hell!
 Impartial, as unfeign'd, his love o'erflow'd
 To all, but chiefly to the house of God;
 To those who thought his sentiments amiss—
 O that their hearts were half as right as his,
 Within no narrow party-banks confin'd,
 But open, and enlarg'd to all mankind!³⁸

Anglican clergyman, Henry Venn, preaching at the Countess of Huntingdon's chapel at Bath in November 1770, described Whitefield as "truly cordial and catholic in his love."³⁹ Meanwhile in Savannah, Georgia, the Presbyterian minister, Johannes Joachim Zubly, praised Whitefield's "free and catholic [*sic*] spirit; his familiar acquaintance with religious persons of all denominations," and his refusal to be bound by the "narrow limits of sect or party."⁴⁰ Zubly's Episcopalian neighbour, Edward Ellington, likewise applauded Whitefield's desire "to countenance the Image of Christ wherever he saw it" and to build unity between all "real and sincere Christians."⁴¹

John Wesley's memorial sermon neatly sidestepped the significant theological arguments which had divided him from Whitefield. Perhaps he wisely decided that preaching at Whitefield's request in Whitefield's honour in Whitefield's own Tabernacles was not the most auspicious occasion to reopen old wounds. He simply summed up Whitefield's fundamental doctrine in two phrases, "new birth" and "justification by faith," maintaining that on other less essential questions Christians might "agree to disagree." Instead Wesley chose to focus upon Whitefield's gift for friendship as his distinguishing characteristic, especially his "catholic love": "Who is a man of a catholic spirit?" he asked. "One who loves as friends, as brethren in the Lord, as joint partakers of the present kingdom of heaven, and fellow-heirs of his eternal kingdom, all of whatever opinion, mode of worship, or congregation, who believe in the Lord Jesus."⁴² Whitefield frequently and passionately lamented the lack of love within the church, Wesley asserted:

³⁸ Wesley, *Elegy*, 24–25.

³⁹ Venn, *Token of Respect*, 18.

⁴⁰ Zubly, *Wise Shining*, 23.

⁴¹ Ellington, *Reproach of Christ*, 19–20.

⁴² Wesley, *Sermon*, 23, 27.

“O yes,” says one, “I have all this love for those I believe to be children of God. But I will never believe, he is a child of God, who belongs to that vile congregation! Can he, do you think, be a child of God, who holds such detestable opinions? Or he that joins in such senseless and superstitious, if not idolatrous worship?” So we justify ourselves in one sin, by adding a second to it! We excuse the want of love in ourselves, by laying the blame on others. To colour our own devilish temper, we pronounce our brethren children of the devil. O beware of this! And if you are already taken in the snare, escape out of it as soon as possible. Go and learn that truly catholic love, which is not rash or hasty in judging.... Was not this the spirit of our dear friend? And why should it not be ours? O thou God of love, how long shall thy people be a byword among the heathen? How long shall they laugh us to scorn, and say, “See how these Christians love one another?”⁴³

As David Ceri Jones has observed, this repeated emphasis on Whitefield the “evangelical ecumenist” meant that his Calvinism was “quietly airbrushed out of the picture.”⁴⁴ There were some notable exceptions to this general trend, however. John Langford (a Baptist pastor in Southwark) emphasised that Whitefield lived and died a five-point Calvinist.⁴⁵ At greater length, William Mason gave his entire memorial tribute over to an exposition of Whitefield’s Calvinist doctrine, quoting liberally from Whitefield’s own sermons.⁴⁶ Most polemical was the memorial sermon by Richard Elliot, who was willing to agree that Whitefield was

no partisan in religion, his spirit was not narrow and contracted, but he cordially embraced all the true followers of Christ, of every opinion, name, and nation; however in circumstantial, modes, and external forms of worship they might differ from him: yet he was zealous, steady and unshaken in the great and fundamental truths of the Gospel.⁴⁷

⁴³ Wesley, *Sermon*, 28–29.

⁴⁴ Jones, “So Much Idolized,” 11.

⁴⁵ John Langford, *The Exalted State of the Faithful Ministers of Christ, After Death, Described and Considered: A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. Mr Geo. Whitefield* (London, 1770), 33.

⁴⁶ William Mason, *The Best Improvement of the Much Lamented Death of that Eminent and Faithful Minister of the Gospel, the Revd Mr George Whitefield* (London, 1770).

⁴⁷ Elliot, *Grace and Truth*, 24.

The five central doctrines particularly insisted upon by Whitefield, according to Elliot's exposition, were original sin, new birth, justification by faith in Christ, the final perseverance of the saints, and eternal unconditional election. Whitefield kept clear, said Elliot, of the "equally dangerous extremes" of Antinomianism and Arminianism.⁴⁸ He quoted liberally from Whitefield's 1740 *Letter to Wesley* in defence of predestination, and averred:

I fear some, who call themselves Mr Whitefield's friends and followers, are strangers both to him and his doctrine; many perhaps might follow him from carnal motives, but unless they hold his principles, they cannot with propriety be called his followers, for the sake of those truths which he held and taught.⁴⁹

Elliot warned that the most dangerous errors in the history of the church "have arisen not from avowed enemies without, but from professed friends within." The Arminians were dressed "in the garb of professed friendship, holiness and love ... Beware then, that through credulity and weakness you do not receive their erroneous opinions." In a rousing peroration he exhorted his congregation not to "quietly suffer ourselves to be robbed of the saving doctrines of grace, but obstinately fight and perseveringly contend for them ... Let us be followers of the dear Mr Whitefield as he was of Christ, not turning to the right hand or to the left."⁵⁰

Richard Elliot's sermon, with its sharp Calvinist polemics, drove against the overwhelming tide of memorialist sentiment which focused instead upon Whitefield's catholicity. It was prescient of the theological clash between the followers of Whitefield and Wesley, concerning the place of good works in justification, which burst forth in the 1770s, especially between Augustus Toplady and John Fletcher. When the Banner of Truth Trust republished a selection of Whitefield's sermons in the 1950s, the only memorial discourse they reprinted was Elliot's, though his was atypical and the editors were spoiled for choice with more ecumenical alternatives.⁵¹ This was indication that Reformed Christians in the mid-twentieth century felt it more necessary to emphasise Whitefield's Calvinism than his immediate contemporaries had done in 1770.

⁴⁸ Elliot, *Grace and Truth*, 25.

⁴⁹ Elliot, *Grace and Truth*, 35.

⁵⁰ Elliot, *Grace and Truth*, 40–41, 46.

⁵¹ *Select Sermons of George Whitefield* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1959).

Evangelistic Exhortation

Several memorial preachers ended with a rousing evangelistic summons, as expected from eighteenth-century evangelical sermons, even at funerals. Jewett, for example, as Whitefield's body was laid in the tomb at Newburyport, proclaimed that dying souls were "a sight incomparably more sad and awful than the dead body of a saint.... Where is our faith as Christians if we don't believe them to be in imminent danger of eternal death?"⁵² Jonathan Parsons warned that the people of New England were themselves morally responsible, in some sense, for Whitefield's death, and therefore were in need of God's mercy:

Let us consider whether our sins have not a hand in the removal of this and other ministers of Jesus Christ? The repeated deaths, not only of people from among us, but of some shining lights in the church, are usually for a punishment of the sins of the living. Wherein conscience points to the guilt, let us apply to the blood of Christ for pardon and cleansing.⁵³

On the other side of the Atlantic, the sins of London were said to be responsible for Whitefield's early death, the judgment of God on the unrepentant metropolis.⁵⁴ For Ebenezer Pemberton in Boston, it was the sudden and unexpected manner of Whitefield's demise which should make the living take heed:

His sudden Death, calls aloud upon All, to prepare for that great Event, which must decide our Destiny forever. From the silent Grave, he seems to address us in the awakening Language of our Lord to his own Disciples, *Watch ye therefore, for ye know not when the Master of the House cometh* ... The solemn Calls, the faithful Reproof, the compassionate Invitations, you have heard from this deceased Servant of Christ, will aggravate your Condemnation, if you die in Impenitence, or Infidelity. Be persuaded [*sic*] then, to trifle no longer with your Immortal Welfare. Be awakened, by the Word and Providence of God, without Delay, to prostrate yourselves at the Feet of our Almighty Saviour; and accept of the offers of reconciling Grace.⁵⁵

⁵² Jewett, "Exhortation," 34–35.

⁵³ Parsons, *To Live is Christ*, 26.

⁵⁴ Edwards, *A Minister Dead; Yet Speaking*, 19–20.

⁵⁵ Pemberton, *Heaven the Residence*, 30–31.

In Charleston, Josiah Smith likewise meditated upon the coming Judgment. Whitefield had preached throughout South Carolina and Smith previously warned his congregation that the evangelist would return again on the Last Day:

I say, all these Things stand now recorded in the Book of God's Remembrance; and when that Book is open'd, even the admired Whitefield will appear as a Witness against us, if we do not frame our Lives agreeable to his Doctrines, and that Form of sound Words which he has taught us. And you that now delight to hear him, will tremble to see his Face in the Judgment. Better, ten thousand Times better were it, that such a Boanerges had never been raised up in the Church. Better were it, this Angel of the Church had never brought the everlasting Gospel to us; if we do not obey it.... tho' his loud Calls may not awaken us now, they will make us tremble in the Judgment.⁵⁶

In his 1770 memorial sermon, Smith picked up this dramatic image again: "Did I say, you should see his face no more—I must retract it—you shall see his face again, when he shall come, with his mighty Redeemer, and ten thousand of his saints, to execute judgment upon all."⁵⁷ Likewise David Edwards declared:

A book of remembrance is kept before the Lord, and the word shall judge you in the last day. If it does not convert you, it will condemn you. Dear Mr Whitefield's feet will climb up your pulpits no more; his voice will address you no more; those eyes which wept over you many times will see you no more till the judgement is set, and the books are opened ...⁵⁸

Zubly also ended his sermon with an evangelistic appeal: "will you run the risk of launching into eternity, before you have turned from the error of your ways, and escaped the danger of everlasting destruction?" He wanted the congregation to go home not admiring the departed Whitefield but saying to themselves, "in his funeral sermon I was pricked to the heart, in that very sermon I grew wise to think of my own soul, in that very sermon I was effectually turned from sin unto righteousness." The

⁵⁶ "The Rain Imbided, an Emblem of Grace," in Josiah Smith, *Sermons on Several Important Subjects* (Boston, 1757), 65–66.

⁵⁷ Smith, *Success a Great Proof*, 12.

⁵⁸ Edwards, *A Minister Dead; Yet Speaking*, 20–21.

saints in glory were not interested in funeral plaudits, Zubly observed, but they did rejoice at “news of a soul brought home unto God.”⁵⁹

A Future Without Whitefield

Some of the memorialists, as they looked to the future of evangelical religion without Whitefield’s ministry, believed the prospects were bleak. Who was there to fill his shoes? Charles Wesley ended his elegy with the lines:

O had he dropt his mantle in his flight!
 O might his spirit on all the prophets ’light!
 But vain the hope of miracles to come;
 There’s no Elisha in Elijah’s room.⁶⁰

The Elijah/Elisha motif was a particular favourite, picked up by Jonathan Parsons, John Wesley, Titus Knight and John Fellows, amongst others.⁶¹ Nathaniel Whitaker exclaimed: “Our Elijah is ascended, to be here no more ... What a breach is here! wide as the sea! Europe and America feels the stroke, and mingle their flowing tears in one common stream.”⁶² Several preachers were hopeful, however, that Whitefield’s place would soon be filled. David Edwards asserted that “though the most gifted and most useful ministers die, yet the church shall not die. Religion shall not die with them. Jesus still lives.”⁶³ Josiah Smith was confident that God “can raise up another Whitefield.”⁶⁴ Parsons took comfort from the fact that Jesus Christ “can make up the great and widely extended breach, and favour his church with ministers as eminent for religion, and as zealous for the redeemer’s cause, as his departed servant ever was, or ever could be.”⁶⁵ Likewise Ellington prayed for a multitude of gospel preachers to follow in Whitefield’s footsteps:

But what a Loss has our World sustained! A Star of the first Magnitude is set, a great Man is fallen in our Israel ... Adoreable Emanuel, make thou

⁵⁹ Zubly, *Wise Shining*, 31, 34.

⁶⁰ Wesley, *Elegy*, 27.

⁶¹ Parsons, *To Live is Christ*, 25; Wesley, *Sermon*, 30; Knight, *Elegy*, 18; Fellows, *Bromsgrove Elegy*, 1.

⁶² Whitaker, *Funeral Sermon*, 36–37.

⁶³ Edwards, *A Minister Dead; Yet Speaking*, 8.

⁶⁴ Smith, *Success a Great Proof*, 14.

⁶⁵ Parsons, *To Live is Christ*, 26.

up the Loss of him to thy Church and People! Let a double Portion of thy Spirit be poured out upon the remaining Ministers—let that holy Fire which burnt so bright in thy departed Servant, warm each of their Hearts! And, O thou Lord of the Harvest, send forth more such true and faithful Labourers into thy Harvest.⁶⁶

But for Jedediah Jewett, the death of Whitefield was an important reminder to keep the great evangelist's ministry in proper perspective. It was, he said,

egregious folly to put our trust in the greatest of men, princes, or the best of Christ's ministers, whose breath is in their nostrils, and may easily and suddenly pass away.... Possibly some have entertained in their minds too high an esteem of God's precious servant, and attributed that power and honour unto him that is due only to him that worketh all in all. Now God has removed him, and shewn them, that how much soever of God he had about him, yet he was but a man ... God teaches us, how little need he has of the services of his most active and fervent ministers. Our dear departed friend and brother was a vessel of honour, eminently fitted for the master's use, but he is broken in pieces.... Behold, as the clay is in the hand of the potter, so are we in the hand of the Lord our God.⁶⁷

Quoting from Philip Doddridge, Jewett reminded Whitefield's mourners to look only to God, and submit to his sovereignty: "But herein our great Lord displays his royalty. He can form the most promising instruments of service; and can lay them aside, and carry on his cause without them."⁶⁸ Here was a fitting conclusion of which Whitefield himself would have approved. George Whitefield was a godly minister and a remarkably fruitful evangelist, apparently snuffed out in his prime, but the unstoppable sovereign purposes of God would continue to move forward without him.

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⁶⁶ Ellington, *Reproach of Christ*, 27.

⁶⁷ Jewett, "Exhortation," 32–33.

⁶⁸ Jewett, "Exhortation," 33, quoting "Christ's Mysterious Conduct to be Unfolded Hereafter: A Funeral Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Reverend Mr James Shepherd" (1746), in *Sermons and Religious Tracts of the Late Reverend Philip Doddridge*, 3 vols. (London, 1761), 3:81.