THE GREAT AWAKENING COMES TO GERMANTOWN

In 1739, in the midst of the era in the history of our nation called “The Great Awakening” preacher George Whitefield came to Germantown and spoke to an estimated 5,000 hearers. This young evangelical Anglican priest from England brought a compelling message few had heard before. Though his stay in Philadelphia was brief, a mere 5 days, the impact of his presence would be felt for quite some time.

To understand the impact and importance that this event had on the history of our community, let us first step back and learn a little more about the man, George Whitefield and his role in the Great Awakening.

GEORGE WHITEFIELD’S CAREER

George Whitefield has been called America’s “Spiritual Founding Father,” and he was probably the most famous religious figure of the 18th century. He preached at least 18,000 sermons to perhaps ten-million hearers during his thirty year career as an evangelist.

Whitefield was born December 16, 1714 in Gloucester, England. He was the fifth son (and seventh child) of Thomas Whitefield and Elizabeth Edwards who were tavern keepers. When Thomas died when George was two, the family became poor. Whitefield discovered at an early age that he had a passion and talent for acting in the theatre, a passion that he would put to good use with very theatrical re-enactments during his sermons. He was educated at Oxford University where his poverty required him to be a servitor (the lowest rank of students) for his free tuition. Dr. Benson, the bishop of Gloucester, befriended Whitefield and as a result Whitefield became a member of the “Holy Club.” There he met John and Charles Wesley, the future founders of the
Methodist movement. The events of an illness and reading Scougal’s book, “The Life of God in the Soul of Man,” on how to cry out to God for salvation, both greatly influenced his thinking and spiritual direction.

Following his conversion, Whitefield was passionate for preaching his new-found faith, grounded in Calvinist theology. Ordained by the Church of England as a deacon, in 1738, he traveled to Savannah, Georgia as a parish priest and established an orphanage in Georgia, which he helped to support the rest of his life.

In 1739, Whitefield embarked on the most important preaching tour of his career. Germantown was at that moment at the center of the renewal of the churches and at the very heart of the civilization of the New World. In Boston, Whitefield drew 25,000 to the Commons. Philadelphia was the metropolis of the Colonies, with a population of 11,500 in 1730. On November 27, 1739 Whitefield preached his Germantown sermon to 5,000 hearers at the beginning of a week of evangelism in Philadelphia. Historian Thomas S. Kidd inferred Whitefield’s affection for Germantown, noting “…not only because the people responded emotionally to his preaching, but also because the town had so many Protestant refugees of one sort of another…and yet to Whitefield they seemed remarkably cooperative and committed to true Christianity.”

*George Whitefield Preaching*, by John Collet (1725-1780), an English satirical artist.
The “American Weekly Mercury” newspaper for November 8, 1739 estimated that Whitefield’s audience at Germantown’s Market Square numbered over 5,000. Historian Stephanie Grauman Wolf thinks the estimate is an exaggeration. Whitefield spoke from the balcony of the home of James Delaplain (1660-1750), which is on the north side of the square. George Whitefield had squinting eyes due to childhood measles. He was cross-eyed, a condition that many believed showed his closeness to God. Though Whitefield was short, he possessed a magnificent and clear speaking voice with very fine diction and timing. He could be heard distinctly over a distance of five-hundred feet.

Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin (1705-1790, the printer, philosopher, and a future Founding Father of our new nation), became friends. Though they admired each other as fellow-intellectuals, they disagreed on theology – because Franklin was a deist and Whitefield was a Calvinist. Franklin was intrigued with Whitefield’s commitment to organizing Bethesda orphanage in Georgia. Franklin welcomed Whitefield to a guest room in his home and so impressed with the preacher’s voice and projection, Franklin employed people to scientifically test the magnitude of his volume.

During Whitefield’s brief stay in Philadelphia, he established prayer groups which were so popular that many of them lasted over a year. Whitefield preached to 10,000 in the farewell sermon to conclude his five day visit to Philadelphia. The 25 year old Whitefield, instantly famous, was escorted to his next preaching engagement in White Clay Creek, Delaware, by 150 men on horseback. Germantown was caught up with this Great Awakening at its beginning.

**WHY DID THE GREAT AWAKENING HAPPEN?**

What can explain why the Great Awakening happened - with its very prominent energy and emotionality? A starting place is the “Glorious Revolution of 1688” when the Church of England was established as England’s reigning church. It was “glorious” because it was a peaceful change for Catholics and Puritans to come together without conflict. The Anglican Church now ruled England and the country became complacent as everyone practiced the same religion. Worship in church became more habit than personal religious practice. It was ridiculed by many people who were without deeply-felt convictions of the heart and soul.
Then, suddenly, and unexpectedly, the Great Awakening caught fire in the hearts of the people. It happened first in the Connecticut River valley of Massachusetts as Johnathan Edwards, a Congregational minister, thought by many to be America’s outstanding intellectual, preached for an emotional response from his hearers in 1725. Following Edwards’ lead, George Whitefield began to preach in Britain’s American Colonies after 1738.

During this period, in New England, at least 50,000 new members were added to the churches, in a population of 250,000. Johnathan Edwards, preaching revival in Massachusetts was joined by Gilbert and William Tennant as well as George Whitefield in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Whitefield returned to Britain from 1741-1744 as the “Great Itinerant”, who had visited all of the colonies starting in 1738. Whitefield continued his philanthropy building a second orphanage in the colonies, located in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania. It is estimated that half of all the colonists heard about, read about, or read something written by Whitefield.

THE GREAT AWAKENINGS

The four Great Awakenings all began with powerful preaching that gave listeners a sense of personal guilt and impressed the need for salvation by Jesus. The Great Awakening gave participants a new interest in religion, a profound conviction of redemption, introspection and commitment to new standards of personal morality. The Awakenings was a first introduction of Christianity to enslaved Africans – and it challenged established religious authority.

According to Robert Fogel (the American economic historian, scientist and Nobel Prize winner), each awakening lasted about 100 years and consisted of three phases; each phase was about a generation long. Each revival was initiated by a religious revival followed by rising politicizing effect and reform. The Awakenings reshaped the Congregational church, and also the Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and German Reformed churches.

The First Great Awakening (1725-1780): Whitefield’s Germantown sermon in 1739 was close to the moment of renewal in the churches and the civilization of the the American Colonies. It began with Puritan Johnathan Edwards, in Connecticut in 1737, and George Whitefield’s first evangelistic tour in 1738 which captured the educated elite of New England. Edwards stressed the importance of immediate personal religion. Whitefield emphasized spiritual re-birth and he attracted large and passionate crowds. He declared that the whole world was his parish! The First Awakening played a key role in the development of democratic thought and belief in the free press throughout the Colonies.

The Second Great Awakening (1800-1820) moved beyond the educated elite to include the less wealthy and educated. The center of revivalism now was the so-called Burned-over district in western New York, which was named for its abundance of hellfire and damnation preaching at that time. There was a decrease in the Quakers, Anglicans, and Congregational churches. The Presbyterians and Baptists increased. The Second Great Awakening produced dozens of new denominations, and reform movements such as temperance (abstinence in the use of alcohol), abolition (ending slavery), women’s rights, and the restriction of tobacco use. The camp meeting and Methodist circuit writers were features of this period, and it was here that the Mormons and
Seventh Day Adventists got their start. Many new colleges were built at this time: Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth, and others. And anti-slavery sentiment divided denominations.

The **Third Great Awakening (1850-1910)** produced active missionary work abroad and at home, and the Social Gospel approach to social issues. The YMCA (founded in 1844) fostered the Revival of 1858, led by evangelist Dwight Moody, and spoke to the Civil War era needs.

The **Fourth Great Awakening (after 1890-1970s)** is a debated concept. Mainline denominations weakened during this time, but conservative denominations grew radically. Evangelists and organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ and Young Life Campaign, reach large audiences. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to the entire nation.

**WHITFIELD’S ADVOCACY OF SLAVERY**

Although many in the Great Awakening worked to abolish slavery, Whitefield was a pro-slavery proponent. In 1735, slavery had been outlawed in the young colony of Georgia. But in 1749, George Whitefield campaigned for legalization of slavery, claiming that the colony would never be economically prosperous unless farmers were able to use slave labor. The colony reauthorized slavery in 1751 for economic reasons and to attract more settlers and to raise the colony’s profits. Whitefield purchased African slaves for his orphanage. It was recorded that Whitefield treated his slaves well and they were devoted to him and he was critical of abuse of slaves by other owners. When Whitefield died, he bequeathed his slaves to the countess of Huntingdon, who supported the evangelical movement.

**RESULTS OF THE GREAT AWAKENINGS**

The Great Awakenings advanced an awareness of a national consciousness. The First Great Awakening emphasized personal freedom and repudiation of slavery. The chain of authority was formerly viewed as traveling from God to ruler to people, but now citizens viewed themselves as agents of God. During the American Revolution, people claimed for themselves the authority that used to be exclusively attributed to God. The Great Awakening helped people see that both political and religious power resided in the people’s hands rather than in the hands of the monarch or the Church of England. The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America reads, “… all men are created equal [and] are endowed by their creator with rights…” and our Constitution says, “We the people of the United States establish this Constitution for the people.”

**FINAL SERMON**

The day before his demise, Whitefield preached three sermons outside. The third sermon was to a great multitude for two hours in the vicinity of Newburyport, Massachusetts. He was tired and feeling sick. He
concluded with these words: “…My body fails, but my spirit expands. Now, willingly, I would live forever to preach Christ. But I die to be with him....” George Whitefield died September 29, 1770; the cause was said to be spasmodic asthma. He is buried in the crypt below the pulpit Old South Church in Newburyport. John Wesley preached the sermon for the occasion.

We thank Jaime Kehler, Allison Pokras, Louise Lisi, and our editor Sue Badeau for their important contributions to this article.

George Whitefield, statue, on the University of Pennsylvania campus, of the leading evangelist of the Great Awakening. The University began in a religious meeting house, built to accommodate the crowd’s attracted by the evangelist. Benjamin Franklin gave leadership to the building of the new school.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


