FREEDOM STORIES

George Whitefield

April 1740

Hearts Afire: The Great Awakening

Historical Spotlight

By April of 1740, George Whitefield, a traveling evangelist drawing thousands of listeners in the open air, had stirred the hearts of the American colonists and watered a seed of freedom that would birth a nation. And one man in particular recognized it.

Benjamin Franklin stood in a crowd in Philadelphia and, true to form, began to measure a man he did not yet understand. As George Whitefield preached, Franklin began walking away from the sermon, counting his steps, calculating distance and estimating how many thousands could hear. By the time he stopped, he was convinced this man could reach an entire city at once. Franklin, ever the pragmatist, was not swept up in Whitefield's theology. But he was struck by something else, something harder to quantify. He recognized this single voice was gathering a scattered people. Whitefield was not just projecting sound across a field in a supernatural way, he was carrying a vision across a continent. The colonists were learning to think of themselves less as Virginians and Pennsylvanians, and more as a collected people of God, working together to build something remarkably new with a clear understanding of the sin nature of man. A social contract between God and each other. A way of living together that was unique in history.

Decades later, John Adams would write that the Revolution was not the war itself, but the change in the minds of the people before it. April 1740 belongs to that earlier story, when Whitefield's message did more than call for repentance. It challenged the way the colonists thought about authority and themselves.

At the center of the First Great Awakening, Whitefield emerged from England having been educated at Oxford, where he joined the "Holy Club" alongside John Wesley and Charles Wesley. But unlike many of his contemporaries, Whitefield carried the gospel out of the churches and into the fields. He became a phenomenon. Whitefield preached thousands of sermons across Britain and the American colonies, traveled seven times across the Atlantic, spoke to crowds that sometimes reached 30,000 people, without amplification, and helped found an orphanage in Savannah. His voice, it was said, could be heard a mile away. His delivery was dramatic, vivid, almost theatrical, but always centered on the new birth. He stepped outside the walls of the established church into the open air, where the distinctions and denominations that had long ordered society seemed, if only for an hour, to fall away. Farmers stood beside merchants, women beside magistrates, the obscure beside the prominent, all listening to the same message, all summoned to the same reckoning. "You must be born again," he insisted, and in that insistence was the quiet undoing of a world in which rank would often stand in for righteousness. His sermons were saturated with the themes of rebirth. (Read one of our favorite sermons by Whitefield HERE.)

George Whitefield Preaching in Bolton, June 1750
Thomas Walley, 1863

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The Voice That Awakened a Nation

Whitefield built upon the brain trust of the European reformers before him, crossed the Atlantic and ignited a fire of liberty in the hearts of Americans that still burns today. He died in 1770, 5 years before the battles of Lexington and Concord, but he passed on a covenantal vision of reality, one in which God deals not only with nations but with individuals, and where liberty is never separated from responsibility but entrusted to it. Authority still had its place, but it was no longer ultimate. It stood beneath a higher law, one standard to which both ruler and subject alike were accountable. Under that kind of preaching, these ideas were no longer distant or theoretical. They settled into the conscience. Men and women began to see themselves not as passive recipients of order, but as moral agents responsible before God, capable of judgment, accountable for belief. And once that conviction takes hold, it does not remain private for long. It begins to press outward, slowly but steadily, into every part of life.

The Revolution could not have taken place without this biblical shift in the hearts of the colonists. Here, in the Great Awakening, we can trace the early stirrings of a people who would later find the language of political liberty not as a novelty, but as a necessity. When John Adams would look back and say that the Revolution was already accomplished in the minds of the people before the war began, he was describing a transformation that voices like Whitefield's had helped to bring about. Even Franklin, who never fully embraced the theology he so energetically published, recognized that something larger than denominational dispute was underway.

The scattered collection of colonies was beginning, however faintly, to see itself as one, under God. Independence, when it finally came, was fueled by a people who had already been taught, decades before, that there are limits to human authority and societal obligations that transcend it. This individual responsibility towards one another was what made our Republic so unique. The people would have the power, but also, the people would be responsible for the outcomes.

Whitefield did not preach rebellion, and he did not outline a political program. He called men and women to stand rightly before God, and he helped form the kind of people who could not forever remain content to stand under Kings. The revolution he ignited was not fought with muskets or marked by declarations, but it moved with a deeper and steadier force. It reshaped conscience, awakened responsibility, and bound a disparate people together in shared conviction and vision.

Why it Matters Today

April of 1740 stands, not to mark a date of battle or decree, but to remember it as a moment in which a voice was ringing across the American colonies. A voice that carried farther than anyone present could have known, not only across the edges of a city, but into the inner life of a people who would learn to act together, as an **army of compassion**, building a city on a hill that would stand as an example to the whole world.

Portrait of George Whitefield
John Wollaston the Younger, c. 1742