

CHAPTER 1



GOD'S GRAND ITINERANT

1740

In 1740, there was no urgency in Edwards to defend what he described in his letter from 1743 as “a blessed outpouring of the Spirit of God.”¹³ In the first full year of the revival, all Edwards could do was rejoice and pray and hope that where he pastored in Northampton, they would all see a greater measure of the Spirit’s work among them. And Edwards’s anticipation was not unfounded.

It had been only since the mid-1730s that he witnessed, with all of Northampton and its neighboring towns in Hampshire County, a season of unusual spiritual power. Occurring toward the end of 1734 and lasting till June 1735, “the Spirit of God . . . extraordinarily set in,” wrote Edwards in his published account of the event, “and wonderfully [worked] amongst us.”¹⁴ But as this revival season ebbed

¹³ *Edwards’ Works*, vol. 16, 111.

¹⁴ *Edward’s Works*, vol. 4, 149. Edwards had no intention of actually publishing a detailed account of this revival. Due to the extraordinary nature of what had occurred, a minister in Boston named Benjamin Coleman (1673–1747) inquired from Edwards a report of what took place in Northampton. Replying in brief on May 30, 1735, Coleman sent Edwards’s letter to fellow ministers John Guyse (1680–1761) and Issac Watts (1674–1748), with whom he kept in frequent

away in Northampton, spiritual decline broke in, and by the beginning of 1740 Edwards bewailed “a lamentable decay of religious affections, and the engagedness of people’s spirit in religion.”¹⁵ This despite the fact that prayer societies and social religion had continued since the previous awakening. So as 1740 dawned, an ardent desire in Edwards pled with God more earnestly to return again in those more visible measures of spiritual power as He’d done in the past.

THE CATALYST TO THE GREAT AWAKENING

Yet the past experience of revival was not the only thing moving Edwards with such a building anticipation. The other factor flaming his fervency toward this work of God was in the person of a young Anglican minister named George Whitefield (1714–1770). When Whitefield arrived in America in late fall 1739, it was his second visit to the British-American colonies. Since his first visit, an evangelical revival had already landed in England through the conversion

contact. When Watts delivered this narrative to his own congregation at the Mark Lane Congregational Chapel in London, the feedback was a prompt request to not only publish Edwards’s letter but to have it expanded with greater details. It appeared first in December 1736 as an eighteen-page appendix to a book of sermons by William Williams (1665–1741). But then in the fall of 1737, it was published as a single title, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, and the Neighboring Towns and Villages of New Hampshire, in New England*. Watts and Guyse wrote a protracted preface to the book. In its first two years in print, it went through three editions and twenty printings. It has been described as “the most significant book to precede the great evangelical awakening on both sides of the Atlantic” concerning this subject of revival (Murray, *Edwards: A New Biography*, 122).

¹⁵ *Edwards’ Works*, vol. 16, 116.

and preaching of men who were heralding to their nation, “You must be born again!” But at the center of this revival in England was George Whitefield—a West Country man in his early twenties whom God chose to raise up and preach the gospel with singular, evident power.¹⁶ Thus, when word reached Colonial America via the local papers and

¹⁶ When you assess the life of George Whitefield, the one word that naturally surfaces is *exceptional*. His irrepressible zeal for Christ, his glowing catholicity for the body of Christ, his ever-humble and teachable spirit, and his fearless, incessant determination to preach Christ to as many people as he could humanly reach distinguished him among his contemporaries as “the wonder of the age” and by later church historians as “the greatest evangelist since the apostle Paul.” Such accolades are not meant to paint a picture of Whitefield that would leave an impression of him as sinless during his earthly sojourn. Far from it! But it is to stress that when you consider honestly the facts of both his Christian life and gospel ministry, his devotion to Christ and the way in which God spent him out in service to Christ were exceptional. When he passed away in September 1770 (only three months shy of his fifty-sixth birthday), his labors for Christ had covered thirty-four years—wherein he preached some eighteen thousand sermons averaging sixty hours a week, reaching combined audiences of over ten million people. His ministry took him all over his native country of England, fifteen times to Scotland, twice to Ireland, once to Holland, crossing the Atlantic thirteen times with seven trips to America, one to Gibraltar and Bermuda, with attempts to reach Canada and the West Indies. No single gospel minister in the eighteenth century had achieved the magnitude of such a breathtaking span of evangelistic enterprises. (If you’ve never read a biography on Whitefield, I humbly recommend my own work on this subject, entitled *Thundering the Word: The Awakening Ministry of George Whitefield*, published by Free Grace Press in 2020. It is a well-rounded introduction to Whitefield’s life and ministry. To read what is perhaps the best exhaustive biography on Whitefield, there is Arnold Dallimore’s two-volume work published by Banner of Truth Trust).

personal correspondence from Whitefield of his return, the expectation of his arrival was electric.¹⁷

But one thing must be clarified as to Whitefield's return to Colonial America: *His aim and ambition was not to bring revival.* What Whitefield designed in all his aspiration as he headed for America was twofold: first, the orphan house he planned to build in Savannah, Georgia; and second, but most important, to be the brightest burning candle for Christ by way of gospel proclamation.¹⁸ As he expressed by letter to a fellow minister just before landing in America,

¹⁷ Regarding the general anticipation for Whitefield's appearance in New England alone, Thomas Kidd wrote, "New Englanders had begun hearing reports of Whitefield's ministry as early as the spring of 1739, when the *Boston News-Letter* included a story on his preaching to the Kingswood colliers. By mid-1739, news about Whitefield had become a staple of the Boston papers, and in November 20, 1739, the *New England Weekly Journal* reported on the itinerant's arrival in America. . . . The newspapers in New England monitored Whitefield's movements throughout 1740" (Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014], 120). Lisa Smith, in her book *The First Great Awakening in Colonial American Newspapers*, noted how the first two years of the Awakening focused heavily on Whitefield throughout the colonies. To most Americans in this initial season of the revival, Smith reports how Whitefield *represented* the Awakening. In a further observation from her research, she wrote, "What is noteworthy about Whitefield's entrance into the American newspaper scene is its explosiveness. Approximately seventy-five newspaper items related to Whitefield appeared in the colonial papers during the first two months of Whitefield's visit, almost the same number that had appeared during the preceding ten months. [Benjamin] Franklin printed nine items in the first two months after Whitefield's arrival—four letters and five news reports" (*The First Great Awakening in Colonial American Newspapers*, [Lexington Books, 2012] 17–18).

¹⁸ Kurt M. Smith, *Thundering the Word: The Awakening Ministry of George Whitefield* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2020), 67.

"Never was the harvest greater, never were the laborers fewer. If we do not now lift up our voices like trumpets, the very stones would cry out against us. I could almost say, 'the glory is departed from Israel; the ark of the Lord is fallen into enemies hands.' Oh let us endeavor, dear Sir, let us endeavor to bring it back, by preaching and living the truth as it is in Jesus. The light that has been given us, is not to be put under a bushel, but on a candlestick."¹⁹ And to another minister on this same voyage he summed up with all simplicity his mission to the British-American colonies, "The whole world is my parish. Wheresoever my master calls me, I am ready to go and preach his everlasting gospel."²⁰

But what Whitefield could not anticipate was the extent to which God would call him to preach the "everlasting gospel" and the way in which his labors would impact all thirteen colonies in a spirit of true awakening power. Indeed, when one considers all seven visits Whitefield made to Colonial America in his lifetime, this second sojourn from November 1739 to January 1741 would harvest more souls to Christ than any other time he labored in this country. Yet the reason for such enormity of gains for Christ was not credited to Whitefield's greatness but God's grace poured out in a most uncommon manner. Nevertheless, by God's own prerogative, it would be George Whitefield emerging in the first full year of the Great Awakening as the catalyst for this extraordinary work.²¹

¹⁹ George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Letters: 1734–1742* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1976), 94.

²⁰ *George Whitefield's Letters: 1734–1742*, 105.

²¹ Whitefield's endeavors to preach the gospel during this period in Colonial America were not reckless or purely impulsive. He was