

George Whitefield

1714 – 1770

Born	Gloucester, England (son of an innkeeper)
Education	Pembroke College, Oxford; ordained as Anglican minister
Occupation	Itinerant evangelist, Church of England minister
Key Sermon	Marks of a True Conversion (c. 1750)
Legacy	Most widely heard preacher in colonial America; key figure of the First Great Awakening

“You must be born again — not reformed, not improved. Born again.”

— George Whitefield (paraphrase of his consistent message)

The Man

George Whitefield was the most widely heard preacher in colonial American history — and arguably in the history of the English-speaking world. Born in Gloucester, England, the son of an innkeeper, he was converted as a young man at Oxford and ordained as an Anglican minister. From that point forward, he had one message and he preached it everywhere.

He crossed the Atlantic thirteen times and traveled more than 20,000 miles across the American colonies, preaching to crowds that sometimes numbered 20,000 to 30,000 people at a time — without amplification, without infrastructure, without stopping. Historians estimate that 80 percent of the colonial population heard him preach at least once.

Benjamin Franklin, a skeptic about religion, attended his Philadelphia meetings and was so astonished by the crowd that he did the geometry himself — walked backward from Whitefield until he could no longer hear him, then calculated the radius — and confirmed the numbers. Franklin never converted, but he became a close friend and Whitefield's American publisher.

The Sermon

Marks of a True Conversion tackles the oldest problem in religion: the gap between outward performance and inward reality. Whitefield catalogues every way a person can fool themselves — denomination membership, baptism records, moral reputation, church attendance, performing duties. None of these, he argues, is conversion.

A man can have Christ in his head without Christ in his heart. The test is not what you do — it is who you are becoming. Real Christianity is not about making bad people good. It is about making dead people alive.

His image for the converted man is striking: become like a little child. Not innocent — Whitefield was clear that children are not born innocent. But humble, teachable, guileless, and dependent. A truly converted man no longer trusts his own strength. He knows he is being led. He does not pretend to have it all figured out. He is still learning and admits it.

The Legacy

Whitefield preached to slaves and slaveholders, to the educated and the illiterate, to city crowds and frontier settlements. His message crossed denominational, class, and racial lines in ways almost no one else managed in his era. He died in 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts, still preaching the night before his death — so exhausted that friends begged him to stop.

He kept going. He was 55.

His voice shaped a generation, and that generation shaped a nation. The religious unity he helped create across the colonies was one of the preconditions for political unity. You cannot understand the American founding without understanding the Great Awakening. And you cannot understand the Awakening without understanding George Whitefield.

Why This Matters for Bible X

Day 3 is the cure. Edwards showed what sin is. Whitefield shows what a changed man actually looks like — and how to tell the difference between performing religion and living it.

Many young men at camp have grown up in the church. They know the language. They can perform Christianity. Whitefield's question is the one that cuts through all of that: Is there something real happening on the inside?