**The Power of Spiritual Revival**

*By Aaron Jura*

Contrary to previously popular Calvinist theology; revivalists highlighted a conversion process by which one could seek personal salvation. Inspired by dynamic sermons delivered by individuals touched by god, people once again began to join congregations in record numbers. Reverend Jonathan Edwards and others laid the framework for evangelical celebrities, such as George Whitfield, who would later shake the rationalists with his message and the changing levels of decorum in society. The battle between the “old light” rationalists and “new light” evangelicals is one that continues to influence modern Christian theological style and message today.

Traditionally, Calvinists believed that salvation was granted based upon the predetermined destiny given by God for each individual. The diffusion of colonial society through rapid and expansive growth of the colonies resulted in a wide array of local congregations spanning 1,500 through the mainland alone (Taylor, 2001, p. 342). While congregations expanded throughout the colonies and attendance at services sharply increased the rolls of those who had attained full membership declined. The hierarchy of salvation within the traditional church structure remains to be a point of contention with the common man who wished to directly connect with God’s grace and salvation (Taylor, 2001, p. 343). The push and pull impact of salvation fuels the evangelical movement that will occur throughout the colonies and England during the eighteenth century.

The rise of evangelicalism fueled by common people and dramatically delivered rhetoric by evangelical ministers would eventually lead to a Great Awakening in the colonies. While the fuel behind the popularity of evangelicalism came from the pursuit of a New Birth the fervor of the evangelical minister had a direct impact on the membership and attendance surges in congregations during the period. Inspiration for the evangelical minister’s oratory style came directly from early figures in the evangelical movement. John Tillotson’s argument that God would ask “nothing but what is easy to be understood, and as easy to be practiced by an honest and willing mind” reverberated throughout congregations as they debated the rationalists approaches, which favored an orderly approach to faith (Taylor, 2001, p. 345). The vivid descriptions of sin and salvation drove individuals to recommit themselves and their families to a new more direct spiritual relationship with God. Prior to the revival movement, membership in congregations throughout the colonies was diminishing. Men were strongly outnumbered by women and the evangelical preachers’ style allowed men to recommit without the more traditional roadblocks to full church membership.

Delivering the message of the evangelical movement, passionate sermons were given in local pockets throughout the colonies and not always in traditional church settings. Eventually spreading throughout the mainland region, popular English evangelical George Whitfield coordinated a trip from England, where he was wildly successful, to the colonies (Fea, 2015). Whitfield was famous across the Atlantic due to his evangelical style of preaching and celebrity strategies, which encouraged attendance at sermons. Whitfield, inspired by colonial evangelicals such as Jonathan Edwards, went directly to the common man and preached conversion to the masses (Taylor, 2001, p. 347). His success in England translated into success in the colonies when Whitfield coordinated a fourteen-month trip to the region (Taylor, 2001, p. 347). His popularity as a man of God, his celebrity image, and his powerful voice brought new theater to the already contentious issue of new and old light doctrine.

Gaining powerful allies, George Whitfield encouraged momentum for his loaded tour and speaking schedule throughout the colonial mainland. Benjamin Franklin’s relationship with Whitfield gave legitimacy to the advent of evangelical speech in the colonial region. Franklin’s autobiographical source indicates that the fuel of evangelicalism was already present prior to the visit by Whitfield in 1739. Franklin states that “… it seemed as if all the World were growing Religious; so that one could not walk thro’ the Town in an Evening without Hearing Psalms sung” (Franklin, 1986). The direct relationship with psalm singing and preaching in colonial congregational halls gave Whitfield a perfect opportunity to expand his reach with a campaign in the colonies. His powerful style of speech gained a foothold in Philadelphia and also gained a powerful ally in Franklin who assisted in publicizing the zealous Whitfield.

Whitfield’s message of salvation and Franklin’s notes provide a unique view into the conditions that allowed for the awakening to occur. Franklin describes crowds of 25,000 and the booming voice of Whitfield inspiring them toward seeking a New Birth (Franklin, 1986, p. 3). Whitfield’s style allowed him to be heard and comprehended by the common man, which was another element of his success in the larger colonial cities. His writings were designed to be understood by the common man and were written in a simplistic and economical tone (Fea, 2015) (Taylor, 2001, p. 348). While Franklin was a rationalist he was inspired by Whitfield’s message to the common man and the focus on morality that Whitfield promoted (Taylor, 2001, p. 348).

Whitfield knew that he could inspire the masses with his highly stylized approach to the narration of good deeds and salvation. Franklin too was taken by the rhetorical appeal of Whitfield. The changing culture of the time allowed for the message of Whitfield and other evangelicals to stick within the population, both among evangelically and rationally minded individuals alike. Franklin’s account of not wanting to donate to an orphanage project promoted by Whitfield was ultimately overcome by Whitfield’s unique and powerful oration style. According to Franklin, Whitfield “… finish’d so admirably, that I emptied my Pocket wholly into the Collector’s Dish, Gold and All.” (Franklin, 1986, p. 2) The power of evangelical speakers, like Whitfield, allowed for the ultimate change to the ways in which salvation could be sought.

The Old Light’s and New Light’s argued about the basis for salvation. New Light preachers embraced the principals of Tillotson, Edwards, and Whitfield. Religious revivals maintained legitimacy in the colonies due to the perceptions of the common man that the rationalists were not forward thinking. The fissures in colonial congregations and governments led to a debate between the new light evangelicals and the old light rationalists (Taylor, 2001, p. 352). While this debate raged on for long after Whitfield’s departure back to England the motivations for this debate can be attributed to the style and doctrine of evangelicals like Whitfield. The increasing church memberships also were a strong indicator of the success of evangelicals who were more inclusive in their approach than the traditional rationalist Calvinists in colonial North America. Franklin’s comments that the nature of society had changed proved to be correct and the influence of Whitfield and other evangelical leaders in the colonial age are relevant when examining modern forms of evangelical speech. Stylistically and substantively the modern landscape of evangelic speech still contains similar messages to those espoused by Whitfield during the period of the Great Awakening.

# Works Cited

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