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11-16-2021

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Recommended Citation

Schwanda, Tom, "George Whitefield's Teaching on Redeeming Wealth for the Glory of God" (2021). *2021 Evangelical Theological Society*. 10.

<https://pillars.taylor.edu/sr-ets-2021/10>

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“George Whitefield’s Teaching on Redeeming Wealth for the Glory of God”

ETS November 16, 2021

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George Whitefield was often criticized for his itinerant ministry. Rather than following the normal Anglican practice of serving a single congregation in a specific location he traveled to America seven times preaching up and down the length of the colonies. He also made repeated journeys into Scotland and Wales as well as encircling Britain throughout his life. On one occasion he responded to these attacks by declaring: “When I was absent from my parishioners, I was not loitering or living at ease, but preaching Christ Jesus, and begging for them and theirs; and when I returned, it was not to fleece my flock, and then go and spend it upon my lusts, or lay it up for a fortune for myself and my relations. No; freely as I had received, freely I gave. I choose a voluntary poverty. The love of God and the good of souls is my only aim.”¹

Whitefield wrote these words in 1744 to confirm his integrity in every aspect of his ministry.

Eighteenth-Century Context

Before I can examine Whitefield’s teaching on wealth and poverty we must first consider his context. Whitefield was born in Gloucester, England in 1714 and died in 1770 in Newburyport, MA. During his life England took the needs of the poor seriously. Parliament had established a

¹ Luke Tyerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield*, 2 vols (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1876), 2:98. John Gillies cites the same quotation word for word until he deleted “I choose a voluntary poverty.” George Whitefield, *The Works of the Rev. George Whitefield M. A.*, ed. John Gillies, 6 vols (London: pub, 1771–1772), 4:121. In a curious reference Whitefield spoke of “many dear disciples of the Lord” who went with Whitefield to visit Conrad Mattheus, who was an “aged hermit, who had lived a solitary life nearly forty years. He was heir to a great estate, but choose voluntary poverty.” Whitefield spoke with deep appreciation of his visit with Mattheus. George Whitefield, *Journals of George Whitefield* (Edinburg: Banner of Truth, 1960), 358.

number of Poor Laws that taxed the wealthy to support those less fortunate. The eighteenth century witnessed a growing expansion of those who were considered poor. One scholar estimates the number of people supported by the Poor Laws rose from 4 % in 1700 to about 14% in 1799.² Those considered poor included widows, the sick, orphans, and those unable to support their children. Given the expanding number of those who qualified for public relief it isn't surprising that the general attitude towards the poor became more hardened during Whitefield's time.³ Attempting to provide relief without encouraging idleness was a major challenge. Parliament enacted more than twenty-seven legislations from 1531 to 1782. One example was the Workhouse Test Act of 1723 which refused to support any person who would not work.⁴ The effectiveness of these attempts varied greatly depending upon location; those in the south and east were considerably more effective than regions to the north and west.⁵ This context reveals the ever-present need for charity which Whitefield and other early evangelicals addressed.

Demonstration of Whitefield's Voluntary Poverty

From the beginning of his ministry Whitefield was attacked for his practice of taking collections following his charity sermons. As the name implies these sermons were preached to raise funds to support various schools for underprivileged children or relief agencies. During his first year

² George E. Hendricks and M. Elton Hendricks, "Mr. Wesley, Since You Wanted to Help the Poor, Why Did You Ignore the English Poor Law of Your Day?" *Asbury Journal* 70, no. 2 (2015): 58.

³ Tim Macquiban, "What have the Sermons of John Wesley Ever Done for Us? The Wesley Legacy in Issues of Wealth and Poverty: Reflections on Wesley's Sermon, "The Use of Money" *Holiness, the Journal of the Wesley House Cambridge* 2, no. 3 (2016): 422.

⁴ Hendricks and Hendricks, "Mr. Wesley, Since You Wanted to Help the Poor," 61.

⁵ Alannah Tomkins and Steven King, "Introduction" in Stephen (sic) King and Alannah Tomkins, eds. *The Poor in England 1700–1850: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 10–11. This volume provides a valuable summary of the various trends and historiography of British welfare history. King and Tomkins, *The Poor in England*, 1–25

of ordained ministry it was not uncommon for Whitefield to preach two or three charity sermons during the week plus another two or three on Sunday.⁶ In 1737 when Whitefield was just twenty-two years old he made this entry in his journal: “as my popularity increased, opposition increased also... Some called me a spiritual pick-pocket, and others thought I made use of a kind of charm to get the people’s money.”⁷ At this stage Whitefield was collecting funds for sanctioned organizations in which he had no personal involvement. However, once he established his orphan house in Georgia in 1740 the attacks increased. This orphanage was unique since it was not supported by an organization placing the sole responsibility for fund raising on Whitefield. In response to the mounting criticism Whitefield published reports that confirmed the collections were used exclusively for the operation of the orphanage. Over time he provided more detailed audits to confirm that none of the money was misspent.⁸ His extensive financial report in 1746 appeared to silence many of his critics. In 1765 an accountant after a careful review of the records asserted that Whitefield had not taken any money from the Bethesda collections for salary, traveling expenses, or any other needs that would have been legitimate for his ministry.⁹ Whitefield’s good friend, Benjamin Franklin also vouched for Whitefield’s integrity and financial honesty.¹⁰

Reviewing Whitefield’s life confirms the accuracy of his claim of voluntary poverty. First, he never received a salary.¹¹ He sought simplicity and even after he developed friendship with

⁶ Whitefield to Mr. H— (14 November 1737) in George Whitefield, *George Whitefield’s Letters for the Period 1734–1742* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 30–1.

⁷ Whitefield, *Journals*, 89.

⁸ Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America’s Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 239 and Arnold A. Dallimore, *The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th Century Revival*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970), 2:213–4.

⁹ Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 3:487–8, 491.

¹⁰ Kidd, *Whitefield*, 112. For more on this see William & Mary, “Extorting” thesis

¹¹ Tyerman, *Whitefield*, 1:84.

many wealthy people he eschewed excessive consumption. A stronger proof of Whitefield's poverty was that he frequently found himself in debt.¹² This began as early as his student days at Oxford when he took a loan to purchase some of his books.¹³ Also indicative of his family's income he attended Oxford University as a servitor. This scholarship identified Whitefield's humble background and required him to serve the wealthier students.

During the early years of ministry William Seward accompanied Whitefield on his travels. Seward had been successful in investments and publicity and became Whitefield's promoter and public relations person. Seward also generously supported Whitefield in his ministry including the Georgian orphan house. Sadly Seward died from a mob attack in Wales in 1740 at the age of thirty-eight. Whitefield had depended upon Seward to fund his ministry and his sudden death without a will plunged Whitefield deeper into debt.¹⁴

In 1745 Whitefield wrote to William Strahan, one of his printers, and declared that he was troubled by the debt he owed Strahan. Whitefield confessed that this debt was the "greatest cross" he had to bear and his desire was to "owe no man any thing but love."¹⁵ Whitefield frequently referred to his debts as his "embarrassments" and was conscious that being in debt reflected adversely on Jesus. For that reason, Whitefield was committed to paying off his obligations "lest religion should suffer if I die in debt."¹⁶

¹² Kidd, *Whitefield*, 75.

¹³ Whitefield, *Journals*, 78.

¹⁴ Kidd, *Whitefield*, 49, 140.

¹⁵ Whitefield to Mr. William Strahan (27 November 1745) in John W. Christie, ed. "Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield 1745–1746, Part I" *Journal of Presbyterian History* 32, no. 2 (June 1954): 72.

¹⁶ Whitefield to Revrd. Mr. Shurtliff (4 June 1746) in John W. Christie, ed. "Newly Discovered Letters of George Whitefield 1745–1746, Part III" *Journal of Presbyterian History* 32, no. 4 (1954): 243. For other references to his debts being his embarrassment see: Whitefield to Mr. j[ohn] C[ennick] (8 June 1741) in Whitefield, *Letters*, 272; Whitefield to Mr. H— (1 June 1747) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 2:105; Whitefield to Mr. J[ohn] W[esley] (9

Indicative of Whitefield's meager finances he borrowed furniture from a friend in Gloucester after he was married and had a child in early 1743. This was due to the high rent in London which motivated them to move to Elizabeth, his wife's, hometown in Wales. Whitefield expressed his gratitude writing "thank you a thousand times for your great generosity in lending me some furniture having little of my own."¹⁷ When travel on horseback became difficult due to his frail health Whitefield borrowed a carriage from a friend. Neither did Whitefield accumulate any great wealth during his lifetime. If he had not received a number of sizable contributions shortly before his death he would have been like his friend John Wesley and "died almost penniless."¹⁸ Poverty was not an indication that God has rejected the person. DVD, 5:286. Consistent with earlier Puritan teaching. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints*.¹⁹

Whitefield's Teaching and Demonstration of Charity

Whitefield's sermon on "The Great Duty of Charity Recommended" provided a focused treatment on this topic. It is important to grasp that in Whitefield's day spiritual disciplines were called duties or the means of grace. He clearly articulated it was not enough to feel sorry for a person but that a person's charity needed to be demonstrated in tangible ways. He was quick to qualify that acts of charity were to be in accordance with a person's abilities. In other words, one should not be so generous as to become impoverished themselves. Whitefield's only reason for this clarification is that it followed the apostle Paul's teaching. If true love is present then charity

September 1747) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 2:127; Whitefield to Rev. Mr. M— (5 May 1749) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 2:252; etc. During one particularly discouraging time Whitefield came close to regretting the establishment of Bethesda due to the burden of its debt. DVD, 1:220. See reading notes for volume one of Letters for a series of letters expressing his anxiety over the debt of Bethesda.

¹⁷ Whitefield to Mr. H— (18 January 1744) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 2:50.

¹⁸ Tyerman, *Whitefield*, 2:608.

¹⁹ Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Academic/Zondervan, 1986), ref?

will always be a fruit of it.²⁰ Further, Whitefield taught that no one could live an isolated life independent of others. On the day of Judgment a person's wealth does not provide any advantage over those who were poor. He warned of the danger of lavishing one's resources on "sensual devilish pleasures" when there were distressed people around them. He became more forceful in his condemnation towards those who spent money on horse races, cock fighting, plays and parties. Whitefield's concern is that if the wealthy squander their money on wasteful and immoral activities they will be unable to support those who are in need. This is a basic principle of the body of Christ. This argument follows that humanity was created to help each other and not further grind the less fortunate into greater poverty.²¹

Whitefield specifically addressed the responsibilities of three different groups of people. The first category were the wealthy. He reminded them that Jesus and other NT writers reiterated the expectation to help the poor. Whitefield used James 5:1–5 to illustrate this obligation. Next he spoke to the clergy and cautioned them against the practice of seeking out the best paid parishes to serve. He further warned them not to give the wealthy members of the church preferential treatment but to visit the poor as well as the rich. To illustrate that charity is the responsibility of everyone Whitefield specifically addressed the poor as the third group. While they might be unable to assist their fellow poor financially they had the ability to comfort those who were sick or distressed. He returned to his beginning principle that charity needs to be cultivated according to the abilities of each person.²²

²⁰ Gillies, "Charity Recommended", 6:227, 228, 238.

²¹ Gillies, "Charity Recommended," 6:229, 230.

²² Gillies, "Charity Recommended," 6:230, 231, 232, 233.

The sermon continued by examining the superior value of the soul over the body. Time does not permit a consideration of Whitefield's treatment of this but he also preached a sermon entitled "Soul Prosperity" and frequently spiritualized the nature of true wealth and the benefit of poverty in keeping with Jesus' first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3, NIV).²³ Whitefield also stressed the importance of motivation. When charity sought the applause of others it had lost its value. Rather it must always proceed from the love of God. Whitefield concluded with a strong challenge to inspire genuine charity from all of his listeners. He proclaimed whether high or low or rich or poor that charity was something that needed to be practiced.²⁴

Whitefield's prayer for a person in want offers another illuminating window into his teaching on the subject. The prayer is filled with biblical examples of God's provisions for those who were in need including water gushing from a rock to satisfy the thirsty Israelites on their journey to the Promise Land, compassion on Hagar when she fled from Sarah, and the ravens who delivered food for Elijah. He also reminded his listeners that a person who sought God's kingdom first would have all of their needs met. Whitefield stressed the need for patience as the person waited for God's provision and used the imagery from the wedding of Cana that God changed their water into wine suggesting both abundance and delight. Whitefield recognized that some people would need to wait until heaven to experience God's abundance and therefore he elevated the concerns for the soul over that of the body. Whitefield cultivated a personal awareness of God's providence and encouraged the same for those who were poor. He even extolled the virtue of

²³ Gillies, "Charity Recommended," 6:235 and George Whitefield, "Soul Prosperity" in *Eighteen Sermons Preached by the Late Rev. George Whitefield, A. M.*, ed. Joseph Gurney and revised by Andrew Gifford (London: Joseph Gurney, 1771), 54–77. Whitefield frequently wrote to correspondents wishing them spiritual prosperity.

²⁴ Gillies, "Charity Recommended," 6:235, 236, 237.

poverty that it could humble the proud heart and assist them in discovering what was most valuable in life. At the same time he prayed that those who were in need would not be tempted to steal but to rely solely upon God.²⁵

Significantly Whitefield not only preached about the importance of charity to the poor but also demonstrated it throughout his life. While a student at Oxford Whitefield followed the habit of devoting one hour a day to acts of charity. He first displayed this after his ordination when he read prayers from the BCP to poor prisoners.²⁶ As previously mentioned Whitefield became a popular preacher of charity sermons which were the originator of the “go fund me pages.” Some of his better-known efforts included the establishment of the University of PA which began as a charity school in 1740. While Ben Franklin has often been credited as the founder Whitefield played a key role and was one of the original trustees. Its original structure was built as a school for poor children and a location for Whitefield and others to preach. Whitefield played a vital role in fund raising for the development of the “Log College.” This was the first institution designed to prepare ministers in the Presbyterian Church in the colonies and evolved into Princeton University. Whitefield also preached frequently for Eleazer Wheelock’s charity school for native Americans to prepare them as “missionaries, interpreters, or schoolmasters, among the Indian tribes.”²⁷ This school became Dartmouth which tragically lost its original purpose and became a school for elite young men.

²⁵ Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 4:467–8.

²⁶ Whitefield, *Journals*, 48, 69.

²⁷ Tyerman, *Whitefield*, 2:473.

While Whitefield frequently visited and preached to prisoners on both sides of the Atlantic he demonstrated his compassion in a more personal manner when he visited a NYC jail. After he completed his sermon he was informed of the needs of some of the prisoners and “generously gave” out of his own money “enough to purchase ten cords of wood for the poorest prisoners, and promised to make a collection for their relief.”²⁸ The firewood would warm the prisoners from the cold winter temperatures and the remaining money was donated to reduce their debts. This clearly demonstrated Jesus’ command to visit the prisoners and provide for those in need (Matt. 25).

Other Examples: According to the MA thesis William & Mary, 108. During Whitefield’s sixth visit to America he collected for the poor in all of the major cities he visited. North, Early Meth Philanthropy good development of Whitefield and his involvement in the charity schools. During Whitefield’s first visit to Boston he created great conflict by his hasty judgment on the lack of vibrant spirituality at Harvard. On subsequent visits he repented of his hasty condemnation that not only created reconciliation but Whitefield’s generous fund raising to restore the Harvard library after a fire had destroyed it in 1765. Also for Yale. Generosity to take a collection for German Protestants in need, Dallimore, GW, 2:406. To assist Boston after their 1760 fire, Dallimore, GW, 2:428. the collections for Germans and others who were financially strapped due to Roman Catholic persecution. Also Samson Occom. See Kidd, GW, 235, 243, 244. Letter #1618 (Gillies, Works, 3:158) Whitefield took a collection at the London Tabernacle for the persecuted French Protestants.

Whitefield’s Teaching on the Dangers and Responsibilities of Wealth

Whitefield in a 1754 letter confessed, “People, money, power, are not my objects.”²⁹

Clearly Whitefield was not against wealth since he depended upon numerous generous benefactors to support his ministry. Rather his concern was to develop a proper stewardship of finances. To that end he warned of three dangers. First, was the temptation of deception. Just as he wrote a prayer for a person in want he also wrote one for someone rich. Whitefield recognized the lie of the world and reminded those who were wealthy not to assume that their riches were the result of their own effort but rather a gift from God. He understood that success

²⁸ Cited in Stuart C. Henry, *George Whitfield: Wayfaring Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1957), 171, cf. Eric McCoy North, *Early Methodist Philanthropy* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern), 1914), 54 for Whitefield’s broader prison ministry.

²⁹ Whitefield to Mr. W— (19 January 1754) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 3:61.

could blind a person and that the more one accumulated the greater the temptation to place their confidence in money instead of God.³⁰ At the start of his ministry, Whitefield wrote to a young man. He realized that he would be counseled by different individuals and Whitefield was anxious to remind him of the gospel message of Jesus Christ. While others wished him wealth, pomp, and grandeur Whitefield prayed that he would triumph “over the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life.” Whitefield declared that money could never bring him happiness and that only God could satisfy his heart. He asserted that wealth was fleeting and could never provide salvation and eternal benefits.³¹ A related deception was believing that if a person only gained a little more money that they would be satisfied. Whitefield countered that distorted perception when he asserted as a person’s wealth increases so does their desires for more.³² The implication was that financial contentment was a difficult goal to attain. [Hymnbook illustration of the emptiness of glittering wealth]

The second danger was distraction. Whitefield clearly understood this temptation and confessed his own need to a friend in a 1748 letter: “I fear prosperity more than affliction; and though there is but little danger perhaps of my being exalted in this world, yet the language of my soul is, ‘In all time of wealth, good Lord deliver me.’”³³ Whitefield often repeated this refrain from the Church of England liturgy. Further, his positive recognition of affliction followed not only the teaching of Scripture but the Puritans. Whitefield warned others how a preoccupation with money could distract a person’s focus from God. One’s daily human needs of life can easily

³⁰ Whitefield, “A Prayer for a Rich Man” in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 4:470–1.

³¹ Whitefield to Dear Sir (27 February 1738) in Whitefield, *Letters*, 39.

³² Whitefield to My Dear Friend (10 November 1739), in Whitefield, *Letters*, 68. The editor believes the recipient was Gabriel Harris, who lived in Gloucester, Whitefield’s birthplace. Whitefield, *Letters*, 524, note for letter 71.

³³ Whitefield to Mr. S— W— (19 September 1748) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 2:177. The quotation is from the general supplication that follows the morning prayers used on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays in the Anglican liturgy. Cf. Whitefield to Mr. J— W— (1 September 1748) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 2:170.

create a preoccupation with the immediate and ignore the long-term eternal and spiritual necessities of life. In a 1737 letter he warned a friend that “Prosperity hath been a snare to you.” This person’s occupation [Gabriel Harris, a prominent bookseller in Gloucester] enabled him to accumulate sufficient wealth that was problematic for a faithful Christian.³⁴ In another letter Whitefield reminded a person how Satan could tempt others “with his golden bait” and once again prayed “In all times of our wealth, good Lord deliver us.”³⁵

Whitefield who was a keen observer of people and sensitive to the subtleness of temptations preached this same warning in his sermons. He proclaimed that “prosperity lulls the soul” and has a strong tendency to spoil Christians.³⁶ This would be especially true for those consumed by gathering as much wealth as possible. It was difficult to quantify how much money created these potentially dangerous temptations since one person’s wealth might be inadequate for the wants of another. This served as a reminder of the flexible nature for both the terms of poverty and wealth. More to the point of Whitefield’s concern was that worldly people tended to recognize prosperity only in terms of money and miss the greater reality of soul prosperity that lasts for eternity.³⁷ Whitefield stated that anyone who had turned to Jesus Christ as their savior would be more concerned about their eternal soul than their temporal wealth.³⁸

The third danger of wealth was destruction and was clearly articulated in a letter to the manager of Whitefield’s Georgian orphanage. Whitefield called financial prosperity “worldly

³⁴ Whitefield to My Dear Friend (10 November 1739) in Whitefield, *Letters*, 68.

³⁵ Whitefield to Mr. C— (12 July 1748) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 2:150.

³⁶ George Whitefield, “The Burning Bush” *Eighteen Sermons*, 268.

³⁷ Whitefield, “Jacob’s Ladder” in Gurney, *Eighteen Sermons*, 414.

³⁸ Whitefield, “Soul Prosperity,” 61.

mindfulness” and reminded his friend that it had destroyed many fools. Whitefield’s concern was to warn his friends to avoid “this dangerous rock” that can destroy a believer’s life.³⁹ Three years later in 1756 Whitefield expressed his desire to convince a person to join him to work at Bethesda, his orphan house. Serving at Bethesda was difficult and required resilient persons who had the fortitude to persevere in a demanding ministry. Again Whitefield named the danger of financial prosperity that could destroy a person’s willingness to suffer and sacrifice for the cause of Christ.⁴⁰ Underlying Whitefield’s concern was that once prosperity became the default position a person’s life was in grave danger.

Whitefield argued in one of his sermons that the reason why a person might only be an almost Christian and not an altogether Christian was that they were consumed by a “reigning love of money.” He illustrated this with the rich man in Matthew 19:16–30 who questioned Jesus what good deed was missing for him to inherit eternal life. When he learned the necessity of selling his portfolio and giving the money to the poor he departed sadly. Whitefield concluded that many people were unable to “renounce the self-enjoyment of riches.”⁴¹ Elsewhere Whitefield reinforced the necessity of this when he reminded a friend of Agur’s prayer from Proverbs 30:8, “Give me not riches, lest I be full and deny thee, and say, ‘who is the Lord.’” Again he affixed the petition from the Anglican liturgy, “In all times of our wealth, good Lord deliver us.”⁴²

In writing to a widow Whitefield counseled her that one way to withstand the challenge of prosperity was to make Jesus her husband. See Whitefield, *DVD, Add Letters*, 61. Unless the women had some degree of wealth the loss of her husband who was likely the primary source of income could create anxiety for her provision. Whitefield’s prayer for a rich person warning let my prosperity not destroy me.⁴³ Any value of use of **Contentment**. The contentment was directed to the poor and their meager resources. This is consistent with Paul’s teaching.

³⁹ Whitefield to Mr. J— B— (1 February 1753) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 3:4. [Could add prayer for a rich man to not allow money to destroy him.]

⁴⁰ Whitefield to Mr. G— (10 June 1756) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 3:183.

⁴¹ Whitefield, “The Almost Christian” in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 6:180. Similarly in his “Soul Prosperity” sermon Whitefield warned his listeners “only take care it [money] does not get into” you and control you. Whitefield, “Soul Prosperity,” 71.

⁴² Whitefield to My dear friend (10 November 1739) in Whitefield, *Letters*, 68.

⁴³ Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 4:470–1.

As we turn our focus to the proper use of wealth Whitefield again demonstrated the integration between his personal practice and the message he taught others. His relationship with Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon introduced him to the rich and famous of Britain. He used these contacts to expand his ability to collect money for the poor and worthy organizations. Long before he met Lady Huntingdon he had already established this principle. In a revealing account from his *Journal* in 1737 when he was just twenty-two he recorded an important discovery of God's providence. Whitefield recounted his visit with a friend to an older minister who introduced Whitefield to some wealthy ladies who "delighted in doing good." Whitefield asserted a principle that he would continue throughout his life "It being my common practice to improve my acquaintance with the rich for the benefit of the poor." Whitefield suggested two ministers and a lay person who could benefit from the wealth of these women. Much to Whitefield's delight they provided for his friends. When Whitefield reported this to the older minister he commented that if Whitefield had not told the women about these three individuals that Whitefield himself could have received the money. But Whitefield clarified his personal desires and rejoiced that he "had nothing and the poor all." When Whitefield returned to London the next day he received a letter that contained a £10 note. This reinforced what he had already discovered that if he provided for the needs of the poor that God would supply all of his needs as well. He concluded with the affirmation that he had many similar experiences in which God had provided both for his physical and spiritual welfare.⁴⁴ With this same strong dependence on God's gracious and wise providence, Whitefield was confident that God would supply all his needs for his itinerant preaching ministry and his ambitious project of building the Bethesda orphanage. In a letter to a fellow minister he declared "Though poor, yet desiring at least to

⁴⁴ Whitefield, *Journals*, 86.

make many rich, I would have for my motto still. Some way or another, my God will supply all my wants.”⁴⁵ Notice how the themes of spiritual wealth merge with God’s provision of financial support. Significantly this letter was written in 1754 when Whitefield had experienced twenty-two years of God’s faithful providence in supplying all of his needs.

What Whitefield learned personally he taught to others. Those who were wealthy had a responsibility to help those in distress. In his sermon on “Soul Prosperity” he proclaimed the necessity of guarding the soul and recognized its eternal value. Instead he counseled that if a person’s wealth increased their zeal for good works it must also increase assisting those in need. He continued if a person’s soul prospered they should discover the joy that it is “more blessed to give than to receive.” Whitefield challenged his listeners that each morning as they awoke they should ask themselves “what can I do for God today? What can I do for the poor?”⁴⁶ In another sermon Whitefield reiterated his teaching that a person’s wealth was not to be used for self-gratification but to help the poor.⁴⁷

During one December Whitefield preached a sermon on the birth of Christ and affirmed that it was an appropriate season to be generous to those in need. More instructive was Whitefield’s principle on moderation. He corrected the distorted perception of some of his critics who claimed that he was an ascetic and prohibited any enjoyment of eating or drinking. Rather Whitefield’s concern was the self-centered excesses that ignored the needs of others. He challenged the rich to “use the good things of this life with moderation” and if they did they

⁴⁵ Whitefield to Mr. B— (19 January 1754) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 3:61.

⁴⁶ Whitefield, “Soul Prosperity,” 71, 72.

⁴⁷ Whitefield, “Charity Recommended,” 229.

would celebrate Christmas in a worthy manner.⁴⁸ In his prayer for a rich person Whitefield followed Jesus' teaching from Matthew 25:31–46 and named the sick, those in prison, the stranger, the naked, the hungry but expanded it to include the blind, the lame, orphans, and widows. Whitefield expected those with wealth to be grateful and generous stewards to those the less fortunate.⁴⁹

Conclusion

For Whitefield discipleship included a person's finances. If you were poor he expected you to learn contentment. Though Whitefield never accused those in need of laziness or blamed them for their poverty he did counsel them not to seek money through dishonest means. And to the wealthy he warned them not to let money control their lives. The glittering nature of riches could easily deceive a person and lead them away from God. Rather they were to become wise stewards of the wealth that God had blessed them with and use it to alleviate the plight of the poor and support worthy ministries of God. Whitefield's "Charity Recommended" sermon provides a helpful conclusion as well as a challenge for each of us today: "You cannot be true Christians without having charity to your fellow creatures, be they friends or enemies, if in distress. And, therefore, exert yourselves in this duty, as is commanded by the blessed Jesus: and if you have true charity, you shall live and reign with him for ever."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ George Whitefield, "The Observation of the Birth of Christ, The Duty of All Christians; or the True Way of Keeping Christmas" in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 5:258.

⁴⁹ Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 4:470–1.

⁵⁰ Whitefield, "Charity Recommended," 230–40.

Appendix

Alternative closing quote: Whitefield's letter to a ship's captain captured the essence of the proper use of wealth when he wrote: "My prayer for you is, that you may have power to get wealth, and grace to improve it for the Redeemer's glory, and his people's good. Then you will be rich for both worlds, and God, even your own God, will give you and yours his blessing."⁵¹

Due to his celebrity status on both sides of the pond Whitefield was the subject of numerous funeral sermons. The Rev. Joseph Smith of Charleston, SC praised Whitefield for his charity and compassion to the poor.⁵²

Wesley is known for his sermon entitled "The Use of Money" and his famous saying, "Gain all you can, Save all you can, and Give all you can."⁵³

Wesley is also famously known for his desire that "if he left more than ten pounds at his death, any one could call him a thief and a robber." (Heitzenrater 1984:1:217 (page 5 of Wesley and Poor Law article). In fact when Wesley died in 1791 he had enough money left to pay his six pallbearers. (same article, *ibid*). According to Heitzenrater his personal property was "rather substantial" and went primarily to the Methodist connection.

How do widows fit into Whitefield's understanding of wealth and poverty. They do connect with charity in the sense of creating the twelve widow' homes that surround the London Tabernacle.

Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, esp. 60ff for a helpful Puritan summary of wealth and poverty.

I could perhaps use this as a case study to encourage other wealthy people. Whitefield wrote of Mr. Bryan, who was a wealthy SC planter who provided for the financial needs for Bethesda. He was converted at Bethesda and was grateful and apparently this would have inspired his generosity to those in need. DVD, 3:457.

In "The Great Duty of Family Religion" (DVD, 5:70) Whitefield proclaimed that God has provided the time and abilities to work for themselves that they should not neglect giving to the poor. The broader context is Judas scolding Mary for anointing Jesus with the costly perfume. He further stated that God gives people power to get wealth and that the best way to prosper in the world is to "secure his favour". I have oscillated if this is related to the prosperity gospel. I still think not given the context and the challenge to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness.

⁵¹ Whitefield to Captain G— (20 December 1752) in Gillies, *Works of Whitefield*, 2:463.

⁵² Joseph Smith, "The Character, Preaching, etc. of the Rev. George Whitefield" in *The Works of George Whitefield, Additional Sermons* (Meadow View: Quinta Press, 2000), 319–20.

⁵³ Tim Macquiban, "What have the Sermons of John Wesley Ever Done for Us? The Wesley Legacy in Issues of Wealth and Poverty: Reflections on Wesley's Sermon, "The Use of Money" *Holiness, the Journal of the Wesley House Cambridge* 2, no. 3 (2016): 420–2.