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The Strange Case of Dr. Franklin and Mr. Whitefield

It is difficult to imagine anyone today not liking Benjamin Franklin, the legend who in real life apparently embodied so many of our national ideals and fulfilled so much of the "American dream." Sage, scientist, patriot, and rags-to-riches businessman, he is unlike anyone else in our history. It is natural that most of those who have written about him should have been his unabashed admirers before they began their projects. True, they have been willing to concede some faults: his womanizing, for example, or his apparent attack of vanity while a diplomat in France. What they have admired even above his concrete achievements, however, has remained undimmed: his image as a man of tolerance, one likely to oil troubled waters, the kindly deist. Not even the multitalented Jefferson can attract such affection today.

For well over two centuries men have found it easy either to hate or to adore George Whitefield. He, too, has a set image. Those most likely to admire him (and become *his* biographers) have been those who, like him, favored revivalism and/or Calvinism. He has been roundly damned by those who oppose these traditions. Needless to say, a Franklinophile is more temperamentally inclined to be in the second group.

It is, therefore, rather startling to learn that two men so appar-

ently unlike were fast friends. Many of Franklin's biographers, in fact, have tried to explain this idea away, apparently believing that their man, as they have conceived of him, could not really have been a friend, much less a supporter, of such a person as Whitefield. One writer made much of Franklin's efforts at spreading his own religious ideas prior to the Great Awakening, and then guessed that "Franklin gave up all attempts to use the *Gazette* to foster his own religious notions" in the face of the overwhelming enthusiasm for more traditional beliefs during it.[1] Several have emphasized that he undoubtedly found the printing of Whitefield's books profitable, an understandable reason for his promoting the evangelist, and one suggested that he may have hoped that his open identification with so godly a man might help to purify his own somewhat tainted reputation.[2]

In the mid-1730s Franklin wrote and printed pamphlets and used his newspaper to defend Samuel Hemphill, a rationalist minister, against the more orthodox majority in the Presbyterian synod. It was a failing cause; the young clergyman was suspended from preaching.[3] Several authors have suggested that the printer championed Whitefield only as a means of continuing his feud with the Presbyterian establishment, which opposed the revivalists. Phillips Russell claimed that Franklin was "aloof" from the evangelist until "the Philadelphia pastors begin to refuse Whitefield their pulpits, forcing him to preach in the fields." Russell did concede that a friendship developed, but he assumed that this occurred later.[4] Similarly, Melvin Buxbaum argued that Franklin hated the Presbyterians and supported Whitefield because the latter aggravated the split in their synod. In contrast to Russell's view, however, Buxbaum believed that Franklin genuinely admired the evangelist at first, but "began to recoil from Whitefield and the Awakening" in the winter of 1740–1741.[5]

Whitefield has also been examined for a clue to this improbable

1 Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin, Philosopher and Man* (Philadelphia, 1965), 53.

2 Bernard Faÿ, *Franklin, the Apostle of Modern Times* (Boston, 1929), 195.

3 Melvin H. Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians* (University Park, Pa., 1975), 93–111.

4 Phillips Russell, *Benjamin Franklin: The First Civilized American* (New York, 1926), 147–148.

5 Buxbaum, *Franklin*, 145; also see Faÿ, *Franklin*, 190–191.

friendship. His contemporaries all seem to have agreed that it was the delivery rather than the texts of his sermons which was so affecting. Following this lead, some scholars have assumed that he really knew very little about the technicalities of theology at the time when Franklin first encountered him. He is said to have become a Calvinist only later, under the influence of the Tennent family (William, William Jr., Gilbert, Charles and John), also famous as revivalists at this time. The inference is that his supposed bigotry developed after he and the Philadelphian became friends. Buxbaum apparently had this theory in mind when he asserted that Franklin supported Whitefield at first, but later turned against him.[6] A more interesting, albeit farfetched, partial explanation for the relationship is the idea that Whitefield was attracted to Franklin by a subconscious admiration for his "sexual vigor and ease with ladies of all kinds," the minister having yet to have found a wife.[7] Bernard Faÿ suggested that Franklin supported the erection of a building for Whitefield to use for his meetings partly because the evangelist could not carry it away "as he could take their money, their enthusiasm, and spiritual peace."[8]

The attitudes of the Franklin scholars toward Whitefield as a man have varied, although few have had any sympathy for what he conceived to have been his mission. It was also Faÿ who made the flat statement that "The intelligent people in the city [Philadelphia] objected to . . . [the] delirious exhibitions" caused by the preaching of Whitefield and others. Although descriptions of Whitefield's preaching abound, Faÿ chose to substitute the description of another minister's pulpit manner—apparently the most unfavorable one he could find—and then suggested that it would also fit Whitefield.[9] Others, however, have taken the position that although he claimed to have been a Calvinist, Whitefield actually displayed few of the dreaded symptoms.[10] They imply that the evangelist was too

6 Buxbaum, *Franklin*, 4, 125–127. This position can also be argued from *The Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1936), X, 127.

7 Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God* (Durham, N. C., 1967), 106–107.

8 Faÿ, *Franklin*, 192.

9 *Ibid.*, 188–195.

10 Maurice W. Armstrong, "Religious Enthusiasm and Separatism in Colonial New England," *Harvard Theological Review*, XXXVIII (1945), 125.

good-hearted (and perhaps too simple-minded) to have been as doctrinaire as he thought he was. Therefore it would not have been so bad for Franklin to have been associated with him.

These are perhaps extreme examples, taken out of context. Some of the Franklin scholars are more realistic than others. Most concede that there was a friendship between the two men,[11] and all agree that Whitefield was an interesting person. A number have argued that Franklin could have been attracted by the moral improvement wrought by the evangelist, and by his attempts at social reforms, without having had any sympathy for Whitefield's theological views. Still, their readers are left with the feeling that the Whitefield-Franklin relationship is an embarrassment, and that any idea which could be used to soft-pedal it has been.

Among the most anxious to insure that the printer be remembered in a certain way was Franklin himself. His *Autobiography* is not so much his life's story as a moral guide for others, based on his experiences. In it he created a *persona* who was partly Franklin as he was and partly as he would like to have been. As its editor observed, "It is not notably accurate; Franklin frequently misremembered public and private details, and occasionally even distorted versions of important events in his life."[12]

Franklin did not shy away from mentioning Whitefield. In fact, as Buxbaum noted, the section of the *Autobiography* which deals with the Englishman is quite substantial, considering that the printer's long and fruitful life gave him many subjects about which to write. Nevertheless, Buxbaum believed that Franklin's account did not reflect Whitefield's real importance to him. He played down the Great Awakening and treated the preacher as "something of an amusing oddity."[13] Carl van Doren's suggestion that "When he [Whitefield] came to Philadelphia late in 1739 Franklin took a philosopher's and philanthropist's interest in him" is an accurate summation of the impression Franklin tried to leave in the *Autobiography*, although van Doren also added that the two men "were on the friendliest terms."[14]

[11] The idea that Franklin would use a close friend to hurt the friend's enterprise—religion—is illogical, but some have held both views. See Buxbaum, *Franklin*, 145.

[12] Leonard W. Labaree, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1964), 6.

[13] Buxbaum, *Franklin*, 138.

[14] Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 136–138.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from the *Autobiography*. Franklin actually described Whitefield in generally favorable terms, and he defended the minister against the charge that "he would apply these Collections [for his orphanage in Georgia] to his own private Emolument."[15] He took great care, however, to divorce himself from Whitefield's theology. Nowhere in the book did he suggest that he was ever tempted to swerve from those views which we usually associate with the word deism. Those authors who have viewed Whitefield as relatively benign have apparently come to their position by following Franklin's own lead. A study of Franklin's writings and of the correspondence between him and Whitefield shows that the relationship was much closer than he admitted in the *Autobiography* or than many others have indicated in their books about him.

Van Doren credited Whitefield with broadening Franklin's previously somewhat provincial outlook,[16] and William Sweet contended that, "The fact that Whitefield won the support of so many educated and sober-minded men in the Middle Colonies such as Benjamin Franklin, is evidence, however, of the fundamental soundness of the influence he exerted."[17] Since, as we shall see, the relationship was even closer than Sweet imagined, Whitefield's image should be re-examined to search for this "fundamental soundness." And likewise, Franklin may not have been theologically exactly as we have usually imagined.

A connection between Benjamin Franklin and George Whitefield was inevitable, even if there had been no sympathy between the two. Franklin was a newspaperman and Whitefield was news. The evangelist was famous from his performances in England even before he began preaching in America.[18] In the November 15, 1739, issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* Franklin reported: "On Thursday last, the Rev. Mr. Whitefield began to preach from the Court-House-Gallery in this City, about six at Night, to near 6000 People, before him in the Street, who stood in an awful Silence to hear him;

15 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 178.

16 Van Doren, *Franklin*, 138.

17 William Warren Sweet, *Religion in Colonial America* (New York, 1941), 277.

18 Whitefield first came to Georgia in 1738, but he stayed less than a year. His preaching tours were on the subsequent visits.

and this continued every Night, 'till Sunday."[19] Clearly, here was a phenomenon which could not be ignored. From 1739 onward the *Gazette* reported not only on Whitefield's activities in Philadelphia and the rest of Pennsylvania, but in all of the colonies.

Neither is there any reason to doubt that Whitefield's books were very profitable to printers like Franklin. Almost as soon as the evangelist first reached Philadelphia, Franklin announced his intention to publish two volumes containing twelve sermons each, and two volumes of Whitefield's journals. The following year we find a letter from Whitefield giving Franklin permission to "print my life."[20]

In all, Franklin is known to have published eighteen volumes of Whitefield's works between 1739 and 1756.[21] They were well advertised in the *Gazette*, and the printer's ledgers show that they sold well, especially in 1740 and 1741. In addition he did a thriving business in Bibles, testaments, hymnals, confessions of faith and prayer books.[22] An advertisement also shows that Franklin was selling "grav'd Pictures of Mr. Whitefield."[23] In January 1741 he began the publication of *The General Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, a publication which lasted six issues. Its contents included poems about Whitefield; letters to, from, and about the evangelist; and reviews of his books.[24]

Whitefield even interested the scientist in Franklin. There is no reason to doubt the account in the *Autobiography* of how he determined the number of people to whom Whitefield could preach at one time. He had read the seemingly incredible crowd estimates from England, and, besides, he had always doubted the stories he had read in "antient Histories of Generals Haranguing whole Armies." Stepping off the distance from the speaker at which his voice could still be clearly understood, Franklin took the distance

19 Leonard W. Labaree, ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1960), II, 242.

20 Whitefield to Franklin, Nov. 26, 1740, *ibid.*, II, 258. This is a reply to a letter from Franklin, no longer extant.

21 C. William Miller, *Benjamin Franklin's Philadelphia Printing* (Philadelphia, 1974), numbers 180, 214, 215, 215a, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 234, 269, 270, 460, and 654. In addition, four he may have published: B21, B26–B28.

22 *Franklin Papers*, II, 232, and III, 232.

23 *Ibid.*, II, 360–361.

24 *Ibid.*, II, 302, 317, 322–324.

as the radius of a semicircle, and allowing two square feet for an average listener, he determined that Whitefield might easily be heard by more than thirty thousand. Even at that, the radius was shorter than it would have been had not some competing street noises obscured the preacher's voice.[25]

Neither these facts, however, nor the other explanations offered by Franklin's latter-day admirers are sufficient to account for the relationship evident in the pages of the *Gazette* and especially in the widely ignored correspondence between the two men. Bernard Faÿ found ulterior motives for Franklin's conduct, but he did concede that the printer gave Whitefield "the support of his newspaper, of his printing shop, of his Junto, and his wisdom. In short, he became his temporal manager."[26] This is not an overstatement. Consider the following item from the June 12, 1740, issue of the *Gazette*:

> The Alteration in the Face of Religion here is altogether surprizing. Never did the People show so great a Willingness to attend Sermons, nor the Preachers greater Zeal and Diligence in performing the Duties of their Function. Religion is become the Subject of most Conversations. No Books are in Request but those of Piety and Devotion; and instead of idle Songs and Ballads, the People are every where entertaining themselves with Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs. All which, under God, is owing to the successful Labours of the Reverend Mr. Whitefield.[27]

Franklin not only reported Whitefield's triumphs in glowing terms, he also became personally involved in the evangelist's work. In the November 8, 1739, issue of the *Gazette* it was an article, not an advertisement, that gave the public an itemized list of goods donated by people in England to be sold in Philadelphia to raise money for Whitefield's pet charity, an orphanage in Georgia.[28] In the May 8, 1740, issue there was a report about the huge crowds Whitefield was drawing elsewhere in the colonies, and of the large offerings taken. Franklin carefully stressed that the money was for the orphan house, and he listed a Philadelphia address to which "Those who

25 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 179. Typically, this passage has been used to suggest that he did things other than listen to Whitefield's sermons when he attended.

26 Faÿ, *Franklin*, 190.

27 *Franklin Papers*, II, 287–288.

28 *Ibid.*, II, 241–242.

are disposed to send Provisions or Money for the Orphan House" might do so.[29]

A much quoted part of Franklin's *Autobiography* is the section in which he told about contributing to Whitefield's orphanage. He claimed to have been in sympathy with the idea of such an institution, but to have been so opposed to locating it in Georgia, a place "then destitute of Materials and Workmen" to which they would have to be sent "from Philadelphia at a great Expense," that he refused to contribute. Then one night, as Franklin told the story, he went to hear Whitefield preach, determined to add nothing to the collection.

> I had in my Pocket a Handful of Copper Money, three or four silver Dollars, and five Pistoles in Gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the Coppers. Another Stroke of his Oratory made me asham'd of that, and determin'd me to give the Silver; and he finish'd so admirably, that I empty'd my Pocket wholly into the Collector's Dish, Gold and all.[30]

The story was told to illustrate the power and persuasiveness of Whitefield's preaching, but it also seems to demonstrate that Franklin had little or no part in his enterprises. The articles from the *Gazette*, however, show that, at the least, he was promoting the orphanage. The November 27, 1740, issue also discloses that he was personally involved in a similar project, Whitefield's proposed school for Negroes:

> The Rev. Mr. Whitefield having taken up 5000 Acres of Land on the Forks of Delaware, in the Province of Pennsylvania, in order to erect a Negroe School there, and to settle a Town thereon with his Friends; all Persons who please to contribute to the said School, may pay their contributions to Mr. Benezet, Merchant in Philadelphia, Mr. Noble at New-York, Mr. Gilbert Tennent in New-Brunswick, New-Jersey, or to the Printer of this Paper.[31]

Franklin not only promoted Whitefield, he also defended him. An apparently constant charge against itinerant evangelists has always

29 *Ibid.*, II, 284. A similar appeal was in the November 13 issue. *Ibid.*, II, 289–291.
30 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 177.
31 *Franklin Papers*, II, 291.

been that they enrich themselves from the offerings that they collect. In the May 22, 1746, issue of the *Gazette* Franklin published a letter from Whitefield which included an audit of the money collected for and spent in support of the orphan house. He also printed two attached statements, the first sworn by Whitefield and a Savannah merchant named James Habersham before two bailiffs of that city, as to the accuracy of the audit. This statement declared: "The Reverend Mr. Whitefield . . . hath not converted or applied any Part thereof to his own private Use and Property, neither hath charged the said House with any of his travelling or any other private Use whatsoever." The second statement, signed and sealed by the trustees of the orphanage, testified that the bailiffs had studied the affair and concluded that Whitefield had taken a loss, not made a profit, from his connection with the institution.[32]

More interesting was Franklin's response to the direct attacks of Whitefield and others on those theological principles which he is generally assumed to have held. Whitefield repeatedly wrote and preached against deism and asserted that good works were not an end in themselves.[33] Specifically, he often spoke of the danger of an unconverted ministry,[34] although Gilbert Tennent was better known in this regard because of his celebrated sermon on the subject.[35] Whitefield's best known—and most controversial—work on this topic was a letter printed in Charleston, London, and by Franklin in Philadelphia. It concerned the views of the late Archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson, whom one of Whitefield's biographers described this way:

Though Dr Tillotson (1630–94) had been dead for nearly half a century, his memory was still highly honoured in both Britain and America. He had been a scholar, a popular preacher and a most benign gentleman, and

32 *Ibid.*, III, 71.

33 For example, George Whitefield, *The Rev. Mr. Whitefield's Answer to the Bishop of London's last Pastoral Letter* (New York, 1739: Readex Microprint, Evans #4457), 18–19; and George Whitefield, *A Continuation of the Reverend Mr. Whitefield's Journal* (Boston, 1741: Readex Microprint, Evans #4853), 14, 17.

34 Robert Philip, *The Life and Times of the Reverend George Whitefield* (New York, 1838), 154.

35 David S. Lovejoy, ed., *Religious Enthusiasm and the Great Awakening* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1969), 48–54.

had been particularly effective in presenting Christianity as a sedate ethic and the Christian life as merely cultured, inoffensive behaviour. His printed sermons, by reason of their easy and polished style, gave force to these views and rendered him the idol of the many persons, both within the Church of England and the other denominations too, who held to a belief in salvation by human works.[36]

Whitefield was moved to comment on Tillotson because Hugh Bryan, a wealthy planter from South Carolina, had told him that Tillotson's writings had for years kept him from understanding the gospel. The following passage is the one which raised the controversy: "Any spiritual man who reads them [Tillotson's works] may easily see that the Archbishop knew of no other than a bare historical faith; and as to the method of our acceptance before God, and our justification by faith alone (which is the doctrine of the Scripture and of the Church of England), he certainly was as ignorant thereof as Mahomet himself."[37] As a young man Franklin had admired Tillotson more than any other theologian. Nevertheless, he defended Whitefield's assertion and published the letter, a defense of the letter by Whitefield, and a number of letters by others supporting the evangelist's position.[38]

Franklin's bias in favor of Whitefield was so obvious that on at least two occasions he felt he had to deny it in print. One was in reaction to a story he printed about William Seward, a traveling companion of Whitefield's. Seward broke up a dance in Philadelphia on the grounds that music and dancing were "devilish diversions." Although these affairs had been regular events with a certain social set, they ceased. In the May 1, 1740, *Gazette* Franklin carried a letter from Seward in which he took credit for having helped the sinners see the error of their ways. The dancers were quick to reply, however. Actually, their season was over; the dance held on April 22 was the last that had been scheduled. Franklin said he was happy to print their answer to prove false "a groundless Report (injurious to that Gentleman) that Mr. Whitefield had engag'd all the Printers

36 Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield* (Edinburgh, 1970), I, 483.
37 *Ibid.*
38 Buxbaum, *Franklin*, 130.

not to print any Thing against him, but his Doctrine and Practice should be exposed."[39]

The second occasion was later in the same year. Ebenezer Kinnersley, a Baptist lay preacher in Philadelphia, delivered a sermon attacking the "Enthusiastick Ravings" of Whitefield's meetings. He suggested that since God, being a deity of order, could not have been responsible for such confusion, it must have come from another source. When he was denounced by his own church and forbidden to preach again, Kinnersley wrote a strongly worded letter to the *Gazette* attacking the regular minister of the congregation to which he belonged. Franklin printed the letter, and in an accompanying editorial he said it was his duty to publish both sides of any dispute, but especially this one since there was a rumor abroad that Philadelphia printers would not print anything in opposition to "the Preaching lately admir'd among us." He concluded with thankfulness that there was no official censor in America as there was in England, and saying that neither should any "petty Printer" decide what the public could or should not read.[40]

Some of the Franklin-Whitefield correspondence has been lost, but a sufficient number of the letters which passed between them and of those in which one mentioned the other still exist to bear testimony to the warmth of their friendship. From a 1747 letter we know that Franklin had written an appeal to assist in a subscription to raise money for Whitefield's personal needs. In this letter the evangelist thanked his friend for his kind words, although he made it clear that the affair had been too public for his taste. His debts were not great, and he wished no profit except for his orphan house. He also implied that it seemed to show a lack of trust in God to ask all the world for alms when a few friends, privately applied to, could likely have supplied his needs.[41]

One of the most simple and touching expressions of affection was in a letter Franklin wrote to his brother John: "I am glad to hear that Mr. Whitefield is safe arriv'd [in Boston], and recover'd his Health. He is a good man and I love him."[42] In a 1748 letter White-

39 *Franklin Papers*, II, 257–259.
40 *Ibid.*, II, 259–261.
41 Whitefield to Franklin, June 23, 1747, *ibid.*, III, 143–144.
42 Franklin to John Franklin, Aug. 6, 1747, *ibid.*, III, 169.

field asked to be remembered to Franklin's wife, in a way that suggested that he was a friend of the family.[43] Franklin sent Whitefield the greetings of his wife and family in a 1749 letter. The whole tone of this epistle makes it clear that it was written by and to a close friend.[44] We know from the *Autobiography* that the minister lodged in his home on at least one of his stays in Philadelphia, although Franklin was careful to say that he issued the invitation out of regard for the man, not his Master.[45]

From first to last Whitefield made a habit of consulting his American friend. The printer's displeasure at the location of the orphanage was apparently known to its benefactor because he had asked Franklin's opinion. The words "advis'd" and "Counsel" both appear in Franklin's recollection of the affair.[46] A few pages later Franklin wrote, "The last time I saw Mr. Whitefield was in London, when he consulted me about his Orphan House concern, and his Purpose of appropriating it to the Establishment of a College."[47]

The two men also consulted with each other about the establishment of the Philadelphia Academy, which later became the University of Pennsylvania. A large structure, commonly called "the New Building," had been built for the purpose of housing Whitefield's well-attended meetings, although it was open to other speakers as well. Whitefield began to use it even before the roof was constructed.[48] It was also intended to be a charitable nonsectarian school.[49]

Franklin had long had the idea of building a good school for the children of Philadelphia, and in 1749 it was finally begun. At first he and his friends wanted to build the school outside of town so that the morals of the students would not be corrupted by the city. But someone—quite possibly Franklin—suggested that the New Building, then ten years old, be used instead. Franklin was one of the trustees of the building and was well aware that by that time it was little used and in need of repair, and that the ground rent

43 Whitefield to Franklin, May 27, 1748, *ibid.*, III, 287–288.
44 Franklin to Whitefield, July 6, 1749, *ibid.*, III, 382–383.
45 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 178.
46 *Ibid.*, 177.
47 *Ibid.*, 179.
48 *Franklin Papers*, II, 270.
49 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 176n.

and other obligations were in arrears. He drew up a plan for remodeling the building so that part of it could be used for the school. But when he met with the other trustees, they decided to offer the whole structure. The trustees of the academy were to pay the debts, to agree to keep a large room available for preaching, and to establish a free school for poor children, which had originally been planned for the building anyway, but never actually begun.[50]

Franklin apparently wrote to Whitefield about the plan, enclosing his *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania.* Whitefield replied, warmly endorsing the concept. He had, in fact, planned to suggest that the new school be housed in the building when he first heard that such an institution was contemplated, although the trustees made the decision before he could write to them. His only concern was that the Christian religion be a central part of the curriculum, a point Franklin had evidently not stressed.[51]

Whitefield was interested in Franklin's other projects of this nature. In one letter the American thanked Whitefield for his "generous Benefaction" to the schools Franklin and others were promoting for the education of German children in Pennsylvania. In the same letter he mentioned an idea he is known to have had for some time, the founding of a colony in the West. Franklin seems to have believed that he was then (1756) in his declining years, and he saw the project as the cap to his career. He hoped that the two of them could be "jointly employ'd by the Crown to settle a Colony on the Ohio." He believed that they could do so efficiently, "without putting the Nation to much expense." It is worth noting that the printer suggested to Whitefield that one benefit of such a settlement might be that "pure Religion" would be spread among the Indians.[52]

From these facts it might be inferred that Franklin was attracted, however briefly, to orthodox Christianity. The correspondence, however, shows that this was not the case. In a number of letters Whitefield tried to convert his friend, and several were written for this purpose alone. As early as 1740 he wrote, "I do not despair of

[50] *Franklin Papers*, III, 435–436. David Freeman Hawke was apparently inexplicably ignorant of Franklin's connection with the New Building: *Franklin* (New York, 1976), 57, 86.

[51] Whitefield to Franklin, Feb. 26, 1750, *Franklin Papers*, III, 467–469.

[52] Franklin to Whitefield, July 2, 1756, *ibid.*, VI, 468–469.

your seeing the reasonableness of christianity. Apply to GOD; be willing to do the divine will, and you shall know it."[53]

On at least two occasions he related his appeal to Franklin's activities:

As you have made a pretty considerable progress in the mysteries of electricity, I would now humbly recommend to your diligent unprejudiced pursuit and study the mystery of the new-birth. It is a most important, interesting study, and when mastered, will richly answer and repay you for all your pains. One at whose bar we are shortly to appear, hath solemnly declared, that without it, "we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven."[54]

Franklin had written an epitaph in 1728 which later became well known:

The Body of
B Franklin
Printer;
Like the Cover of an old Book,
Its contents torn out
And Stript of its Lettering and Gilding
Lies here, Food for Worms,
But the Work shall not be wholly lost;
For it will, as he believ'd, appear once more
In a new & more perfect Edition
Corrected and amended
By the Author
He was born Jan. 6, 1706
Died 17 [55]

In one of his letters Whitefield used it as an opening: "I have seen your *Epitaph*. Believe in JESUS, and get a feeling possession of God in your heart, and you cannot possibly be disappointed of your expected second edition, finely corrected, and infinitely amended."[56] While in his *Autobiography* Franklin probably understated his friendship with Whitefield and his role in the latter's work, at least one statement is undoubtedly correct: "He us'd

53 Whitefield to Franklin, Nov. 26, 1740, *ibid.*, II, 269–270.
54 Same to same, Aug. 17, 1752, *ibid.*, IV, 343–344.
55 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 44.
56 Whitefield to Franklin, Jan. 17, 1755, *Franklin Papers*, V, 475–476.

indeed sometimes to pray for my Conversion, but never had the Satisfaction of believing that his Prayers were heard."[57]

On the other hand, the study of Franklin's religious ideas which his friendship with Whitefield prompts suggests that he did not always hold the standard ideas of the deists which the *Autobiography* indicates. A deist usually believes in an ordered, rational universe which a vague deity may have designed and set in motion, but which normally operates without supernatural interference. Therefore the deist may or may not have a strong religious theory, but he is unlikely to be "religious" in his daily life. He addresses himself not to his relationship with God, but to obtaining a satisfactory relationship with the world.

There is some evidence, however, that Franklin was quite religious. He does not seem to have believed in the Reformed theology he was taught as a child—the theories of sin, sacrifice, and salvation —but he may have believed in a God who was active in human affairs. When he was twenty-two or twenty-three Franklin created his own religion. His ideas, as expressed in a private notebook, were deistic for the most part, although he also accepted the old idea of "the great chain of being" and hinted at a belief in polytheism. What was not typically deistic was that the supreme being of his faith was apparently not remote. If Franklin followed the regimen he set up for himself, he prayed daily to this "Powerful Goodness." He also had a system of mathematically checking his conduct against thirteen set virtues. If this, too, were a part of this early "religion," it is worth noting that he gave up the practice in middle age.[58] In the *Autobiography* he very briefly referred to, but did not explain, his system of virtues, merely calling it "written Resolutions."[59]

For a time Franklin had a respectable connection with the Presbyterian Church, although his fitful attendance indicates that he may have done so for his family's sake, or to promote a good reputation.[60] His wife had attended Christ Church before they married. Afterwards he became a pewholder and contributed to its support. Their

57 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 178.
58 Aldridge, *Philosopher*, 47–50.
59 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 114.
60 Aldridge, *Philosopher*, 51.

children were baptized there, and their son was buried in the church cemetery.[61] His real interest, however, seems to have been aroused only at the time he defended a young minister who put more emphasis on good works than dogma.[62] Franklin certainly was not an orthodox Calvinist at this time, and probably not a Christian at all, but the explanation that he was interested in religion only to oppose religious bigotry seems inadequate.[63]

In June 1764 Franklin answered one of Whitefield's letters (now lost, but which apparently expressed concern for the state of the printer's soul), with an interesting account of his faith:

> Your frequently repeated Wishes and Prayers for my Eternal as well as my temporal Happiness are very obliging. I can only thank you for them, and offer you mine in return. I have my self no Doubts that I shall enjoy as much of both as is proper for me. That Being who gave me existence, and thro' almost threescore Years has been continually showering his Favours upon me, whose very Chastisements have been Blessings to me, can I doubt that he loves me? And if he loves me, can I doubt that he will go on to take care of me not only here but hereafter? This to some may seem Presumption; to me it appears the best grounded Hope; Hope of the Future; built on the Experience of the Past.[64]

Whitefield would not have been satisfied with this explanation. He believed that a man was either born again or lost. But the letter makes Franklin seem more like most modern Protestants than an eighteenth-century deist. Also of interest is a letter Franklin wrote to a friend in 1746: "I oppose my *Theist* to his *Atheist*, because I think they are diametrically opposite and not near of kin, as Mr. Whitefield seems to suppose where (in his Journal) he tells us, *Mr. B was a Deist, I had almost said an Atheist.* That is, *Chalk*, I had almost said *Charcoal.*"[65]

Some years later Franklin was involved in the production of another religious document, an unauthorized revision of the *Book of Common Prayer.* The project was principally the brainchild of Sir Francis Dashwood, Lord Le Despencer. His Lordship was a

61 *Franklin Papers*, II, 188n.
62 Aldridge, *Philosopher*, 51–52.
63 This is the general theme of Buxbaum, *Franklin.*
64 Franklin to Whitefield, June 19, 1764, *Franklin Papers*, XI, 231–232.
65 Franklin to [Thomas Hopkinson?], Oct. 16, 1746, *ibid.*, III, 88.

deist in theory and a rake in practice, having been associated with the notorious "Hellfire Club," whose membership also included John Wilkes. One author, however, has insisted that he had undergone moral reform by the time he decided to revise the prayer book. Although the work was called "Franklin's Prayer Book" in America, the Philadelphian was actually responsible for only the preface and the abridgements of the catechism and psalms. Lord Le Despencer had an edition published at his own expense in 1773.

The book is now exceedingly rare.[66] Consequently, reaction to it, not being based in most cases on a first-hand knowledge, has varied from regarding it as a joke, which proves Franklin's essential irreligiosity, to a serious effort at reformation. The former opinion is supported by the knowledge that Lord Le Despencer's pleasures were a notoriously wild mixture of "sex and heavy drinking with the external appearance of religion."[67] The latter opinion is buttressed by the fact that when the American Anglicans formed a separate denomination they studied the book and adopted some of its ideas.[68]

It would not be wise to draw too many conclusions from this episode, but the excerpts printed by Aldridge do not show the book to have been intentionally blasphemous. It in fact apparently consisted mainly of the old prayer book with those passages which relate to the distinctive doctrines of Christianity removed.[69] Betty Kemp in her life of Le Despencer has shown that this was only one of several attempts by latitudinarian Anglicans to either revise the liturgy and doctrinal standards of the Church, or to stop enforcing subscription to them. Although Le Despencer was in contact with a number of Unitarians, Kemp described his revisions as relatively conservative.[70] Franklin was probably also at least half-serious in the endeavor. Certainly he was not against public worship, the usual use for the prayer book. He urged his children to attend

66 Paul Leicester Ford, *Franklin Bibliography* (Brooklyn, 1899), 141. Copies are to be found at Yale, American Philosophical Society, and Sir Francis Dashwood House.

67 Aldridge, *Nature's God*, 166–174.

68 Ford, *Bibliography*, xxxvii.

69 For a discussion of Franklin's deletions, see Aldridge, *Nature's God*, 170–175.

70 Betty Kemp, *Sir Francis Dashwood* (New York, 1967), 137–157. The preface to the prayer book, with comments, is printed in an appendix, pp. 168–183.

services, and he always affiliated himself with a church when in a new city.

Franklin also revised the Lord's Prayer about this time and his version is obviously a serious reflection of his views:

1. Heavenly Father
2. May all revere thee
3. And become thy dutiful Children and faithful Subjects.
4. May thy Laws be obeyed on Earth as perfectly as they are in Heaven.
5. Provide for us this Day as thou hast hitherto daily done.
6. Forgive us our Trespasses and enable us likewise to forgive those that offend us.
7. Keep us out of Temptation, and deliver us from Evil.

Aldridge remarked that Franklin's "emendments [to the Prayer] actually had no real reference to Christian theology," but were rather "a petition to God completely abstracted from the milieu of Christianity . . . a deist's prayer. . . ."[71]

Franklin must have had too great a faith in man's goodness and God's mercy to have been an orthodox Christian, but he still accepted the idea of a personal and active God. Seeing him as less than a pure deist helps to explain why his objections to Whitefield's more traditional views were not stronger.

It is much easier to clear Whitefield of most of the charges commonly made against him than to understand his friend's beliefs. If his actions and beliefs were really those often reported, they would certainly have been repugnant to Franklin. Whitefield was a traditionalist, believing in a mankind rightly damned, and to be saved only as God chose to extend his mercy. This, however, was mere orthodoxy and not that for which he has usually been criticized.

Whitefield has often been described as a wild man of the pulpit, bellowing to the accompaniment of frantic gesticulations, appealing to the emotions on the most primitive level, and often rendering his hearers hysterical. For example, a standard American history textbook described him this way: "He made violent gestures, danced about the pulpit, roared and ranted, greatly to the delight of the common people who were tired of gentlemanly, unemotional sermons

[71] Aldridge, *Nature's God*, 175–179.

from college-bred ministers."[72] One error is immediately apparent: Whitefield, whom the authors contrasted with "college-bred ministers," was a graduate of Oxford.

This sort of description apparently originated with the same dry speakers to whom he was compared. To understand Whitefield and the reaction to him, one must know something about religion in the eighteenth century. As Norman Sykes noted, "The two Evangelical revivals, led respectively by John Wesley and George Whitefield ... had arisen definitely in reaction and protest against the dominant rationalistic and Latitudinarian tradition of the church."[73] The prevailing views of the leaders of the Church of England, of which Whitefield was a clergyman, were in fact not very different from the ideas Franklin apparently held. Religion was a matter of the reason, not the heart, and ethics rather than salvation were taught. Certainly Reformation Protestantism had been abandoned. The Bible was cited when convenient, but it was an embarrassment as often as not. Dr. Johnson referred to the pulpit of his day as "the old Bailey of theology, in which the Apostles are being tried once a week for the capital crime of forgery."[74]

The clergy objected to the message of the evangelicals as much as their methods and attacked both, but it is the exaggerated descriptions of the latter that are more likely to be noted today. There were, of course, some ranting preachers, and Whitefield himself was no monotone. But he was known for the expressiveness of his magnificent voice, not acrobatics. David Garrick, the greatest actor of the age, admired Whitefield's delivery. Paul Dudley, who was chief justice of Massachusetts and a fellow of the Royal Society, described the minister's manner of speaking as "very Serious, Earnest and affectionate."[75]

Franklin's description of Whitefield's delivery did not even hint at "enthusiastick ravings": "He had a loud and clear Voice, and articulated his Words and Sentences so perfectly that he might be

72 Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, and William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1969), I, 107–108.

73 Norman Sykes, *Church and State in England in the XVIIIth Century* (Hamden, Conn., 1962), 390.

74 Mark Pattison, "Tendencies of Religious Thought in England, 1688–1750," *Essays* (Oxford, 1899), II, 49, quoted in Armstrong, "Enthusiasm," 116.

75 Buxbaum, *Franklin*, 125, 125n (printed 236).

heard and understood at a great Distance, especially as his Auditories, however numerous, observ'd the most exact Silence." He described Whitefield's well-rehearsed sermons this way: "His delivery . . . was so improv'd by frequent Repetitions, that every Accent, every Emphasis, every Modulation of Voice, was so perfectly well turn'd and well plac'd, that without being interested in the Subject one could not help being pleas'd with the Discourse, a Pleasure of much the same kind with that receiv'd from an excellent Piece of Musick."[76] Although in his *Autobiography* Franklin tried to make everything about Whitefield (except his theology) appear attractive, it is unlikely that the printer would have wrongly described the public appearance of a man who was then still well remembered.

Whitefield was undoubtedly gratified to be able to see a noticeable reaction in his audiences, but he was not pleased with excesses. In some revival meetings, occasionally including his, some people in the crowd would be so moved that they would lose all control of themselves. He was not in favor of this convulsiveness, feeling that Satan sent it to discredit his revival.[77]

A point on which secondary sources have differed is Whitefield's reaction to those whose theology disagreed with his. Some have cited his remarks about other ministers as a sign of narrow Calvinism, while others have spoken of his "catholic spirit." There is an element of truth in both views. First, it is clear that he was not a contentious man. The following excerpt from a letter to another minister is only one of many such references:

> I wish Christians in general, and ministers of Christ in particular, were better acquainted. The cause of Christ thereby must be necessarily promoted. But bigotry and sectarian zeal have been the bane of our holy religion. Though we have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism, yet if we do not all worship God in one particular way, we behave to each other like Jews and Samaritans. Dear sir, I hope that neither of us have so learned Christ.[78]

Whitefield was willing to work with anyone who taught the basic

76 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 179–180.

77 Charles Maxton, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Chicago, 1920; reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass., 1958), 70.

78 Joseph Belcher, *George Whitefield: A Biography, with Special Reference to his Labors in America* (New York, 1857; microcard ed.: Lost Cause Press of Louisville, 1968, item 698), 99.

gospel. He conferred with Baptists, collected money in England for Lutherans in Georgia, and was friendly with the Moravians.[79] When attacked by a group of Presbyterians called "the Querists" (from the title of their publication), he "made every doctrinal concession to them that they could demand."[80] The New Building was open to all denominations, and the trustees were carefully chosen so that no two would be from any one denomination, although Franklin probably exaggerated when he said that "even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a Missionary to preach Mahometanism to us, he would find a Pulpit at his Services."[81]

In his sermons Whitefield emphasized fundamentals, not technicalities. Jonathan Edwards' wife said of him, "He makes less of the doctrines than out American preachers generally do, and aims more at affecting the heart."[82] To those familiar with the age, the ultimate proof of his lack of bigotry would be that on the voyage to America in 1739 he loaned his cabin to a Quaker, who used it to hold meetings.[83]

Those who have taken the opposite view had as evidence many of his writings. These can be explained, however. The earliest objectionable material comes from the first of his journals to have been printed. This was a personal document in which he gave his frank opinion on a number of subjects, including other ministers. He sent it to a small group of friends in England to show them what he had been doing. These, however, were intimates, well acquainted and in sympathy with his views. The journal was not an attack on other ministers for the simple reason that it was not intended to be published. Somehow it fell into the hands of a publisher named Cooper, who, despite Charles Wesley's efforts to prevent him from doing so, printed the journal, undoubtedly making a handsome profit. Anything by Whitefield sold well in those days. These injudicious remarks were soon being used by Whitefield's enemies as a weapon against him.[84]

A second group of writings also seem contentious. What is rarely stressed by those who quote them, however, is that they were de-

79 Maxton, *Awakening*, 45.
80 *Ibid.*, 69.
81 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 176.
82 Lovejoy, *Enthusiasm*, 33.
83 Maxton, *Awakening*, 45.
84 Dallimore, *Whitefield*, 168–170.

fenses, answers to attacks by others. Whitefield was the target of numerous publications, and he feared that not answering might indicate that he had no defense. His replies seem temperate when compared with many of the charges he was answering, but taken alone, they leave a different impression. He realized that he tended to be impulsive, and he regretted that "I have been too bitter in my zeal . . . and have published too soon and too explicitly what had been better kept in longer or told after my death."[85] Nevertheless, only a highly selective presentation of Whitefield's writing can be used to sustain the charge of sectarianism.

The Englishman did have definite views, however. When he wrote or spoke deploring the unconverted clergy, it was not an idle charge. He was out to save souls, and they were not. Interestingly, the charge was resented but not denied. What these ministers denied was the need for conversion, even among the clergy. They argued that a man's ability to minister to the spiritual or emotional needs of his flock were not affected by his private beliefs.[86]

While he did not dwell on theological trivia, Whitefield did not want what he considered error taught to those who would themselves become ministers. It was for this reason that he commented unfavorably on the rationalistic doctrines being expounded at Harvard and Yale. It should be emphasized, however, that although his were not the prevailing views, it was he who was technically orthodox so he can hardly be branded a radical. Replying to a publication by the president of Harvard, he was able to point out that he was "a Calvinist as to principle and preach no other Doctrines than those which your pious Ancestors . . . preached long before I was born."[87] Similarly, in answering charges made by the Bishop of London he was able to show that his doctrine under fire (no salvation by works) was explicitly endorsed by the Thirty-nine Articles.[88]

As we have already seen, some authors have argued that Whitefield's actions can be explained by the belief that his bigotry began when he became a Calvinist, well into his active ministry. This idea

85 *Ibid.*, 333–354.

86 Philip, *Whitefield*, 154.

87 George Whitefield, *A Letter to the Rev. the President . . . of Harvard College* (Boston, 1745; Readex Microprint ed., Evans #5712), 21.

88 George Whitefield, *Bishop*, 18–19.

is based on a preconceived notion that Calvinism and tolerance are mutually exclusive. It is supported by the assertion that the evangelist knew little theology at first. But Whitefield was trained in theology at Oxford, and had been ordained deacon and later minister before his American ministry began. He read Calvinistic attacks on Arminianism before he met the Tennents, who are presumed to have introduced him to Reformed theology.[89] His famous letter to John Wesley, reproving his friend with detailed logic and with scripture references, for denying the doctrine of predestination dates only from 1740.[90] Other writers speak of his "gradually stiffening Calvinism," but this, too, is a difficult assumption to support.

A charge frequently made against Whitefield in his own day was that of antinomianism. The "enthusiasm" with which the names of both the Methodists in Britain and the traveling revivalists in the colonies were connected included an implied accusation that individuals were encouraged to give themselves over to the spirit, without restraint or guidance from the trained clergy. In addition, Whitefield had unwisely mentioned in print that he sometimes had dreams of a religious nature. These statements caused concern even among those most sympathetic toward his work.[91] His defense on the matter of dreams was simple: he did not believe that his dreams were necessarily authoritative, and he did not govern his actions by them.[92] At any rate, the charge of antinomianism has apparently died out, since now it is Whitefield's Calvinism that is stressed.

There are still things not known about the relationship between Whitefield and Franklin. The possibility that the American did not hold exactly the same beliefs all his life makes his side of the story especially difficult. It does appear, however, that the stereotypes of one as the archetypal deist and the other as the ranting mesmerizer are both incorrect. Certainly, as Franklin himself said, their friendship was "sincere on both sides,"[93] and need not be explained by other factors.

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89 Maxton, *Awakening*, 44–45.

90 George Whitefield, *A Letter . . . to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley . . . Free Grace* (Lansinburgh, 1789; Readex Microprint ed., Evans #22278).

91 Dallimore, *Whitefield*, 342–344.

92 Whitefield, *Letter . . . Harvard*, 4.

93 Franklin, *Autobiography*, 178.