

*George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father*, by Thomas S. Kidd, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

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This year seems to be a season for new biographies of prominent eighteenth century British and American figures: Eric Metaxas on William Wilberforce; Lynn Chaney on James Madison; and Karen Prior on Hannah More. Thomas Kidd has added to this collection a new biography of George Whitefield, whom he terms “America’s Spiritual Founding Father.” Kidd, a member of the history faculty at Baylor University, has authored numerous volumes related to the period of America’s founding.

In his introduction, Kidd surveys prior biographies on Whitefield, and admits he has a high regard for his subject. He uses Christian terminology throughout the volume, but helpfully explains language that may not be familiar to a general reader.

Kidd artfully weaves Whitefield’s story between England and North America. The twelve chapters trace Whitefield’s life from infancy in Gloucester, England, through his student years at Oxford, to his remarkable trans-Atlantic preaching career, concluding with an assessment of his influence since his time. Whitefield crossed the Atlantic several times, maintaining correspondence with his allies in preaching the gospel. He traversed denominational lines and resisted efforts to force him to choose sides on internal church matters which were not central to the gospel.

A regular theme in these chapters looms in the tension and reconciliation between Whitefield and the Wesley brothers, John and Charles. Through their influence at Oxford, Whitefield had moved from a nominal churchman to an active leader in the Methodist society. Whitefield, like the Wesleys, was ordained as an Anglican minister. However, his theology was Calvinist, which caused a mid-career breach between him and the Wesley’s, and, for that matter, the rest of the Established Church. Unlike the Wesleys, he preached a salvation that was available to all, but effective only for the elect.

The Wesleys adopted the position that it was possible for Christians to become perfect—without sin. Both Scripture and experience taught Whitefield otherwise. For his part, Whitefield tried not to make this issue a matter of public friction between himself and his mentors. The Wesleys, however, were not so kind. John particularly felt betrayed by his mentee’s intransigence on this point. As they all aged and mellowed with time, they reconciled.

Whitefield was a pioneer in two areas: cross-denominational cooperation and the use of the new media of his day—inexpensive newspapers and magazines. Early on, Whitefield would preach wherever he was invited. He would preach alongside non-conforming dissenters and established churchmen alike. His focus was the gospel, and he strove to bring harmony around the gospel among the groups where he preached. He took the lessons on publicity he learned as an actor and applied them to publicizing meetings. He and Benjamin Franklin began a lifelong friendship that started as a business venture. Franklin agreed to print and distribute Whitefield’s sermons. Whitefield had similar agreements with publishers in England.

The parallels to the preaching career of Billy Graham, the renowned twentieth century evangelist, are remarkable. Whitefield and Graham worked cross-denominationally, were savvy on the use of current media, and kept the gospel message central to their work. Kidd does not explore this comparison, but it suggests itself for future research.

Kidd also explores how Whitefield’s celebrity impacted his ministry. Following the old adage that all publicity is good publicity, he took with aplomb the hysterics of opposing ministers, and theater people. If people were made curious about him when they read attacks on his character or

his facial expression (he had a lazy eye), he was content not to answer the attacks as long as his critics heard the gospel. Also, he was very careful with money. He sought out charities to support. His most ambitious project was an orphanage near Savannah, Georgia. Bethesda, a private academy for boys in Savannah, Georgia, traces its roots back to Whitefield's orphanage.

Kidd avoids hagiography, and he deals directly with Whitefield's shortcomings. As a young evangelist, he had a hot temper when dealing with critics, which time ameliorated. He married in his middle years, but his demanding preaching schedule caused him to neglect his wife. The two had only one son, who died young. Elizabeth Whitefield served him more as a scheduling manager than as a wife. He also rationalized the use of slaves to work the farm that supported the orphanage he founded in Georgia. Whitefield died before slavery became a pressing issue among active Christians in England.

The only fault in Kidd's volume is that, as narrator, he does not allow the evangelist to speak for himself. Perhaps an editorial decision was made to avoid much direct quotation and to refer to printed volumes of Whitefield's work in the endnotes. The endnotes and index are well prepared and will assist the reader in further study. Overall Kidd's biography of Whitefield is an accessible work of scholarship and a good read.