

(Free pdf) George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father

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Thomas S. Kidd

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THOMAS S. KIDD

## GEORGE WHITEFIELD AMERICA'S SPIRITUAL FOUNDING FATHER



"The most authoritative yet readable book on the 18th century's greatest preacher."—Marvin Olasky, *World Magazine*

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**Thomas S. Kidd : George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father:

19 of 19 people found the following review helpful. Highly recommended!By ERIC COLEMAN SMITHI have come to value the historical writings of Thomas Kidd very highly over the past several years. I am a PhD student studying the Great Awakening era, and have found all of his works - The Great Awakening, God of Liberty, Patrick Henry, etc. - to be well-researched, skillfully-written, and genuinely enjoyable to read. George Whitefield is one of my

favorite figures of American and church history, so I was very eager to read Kidd's latest work. I was not disappointed. His thesis is clear and simple: "The argument of this biography is straightforward: George Whitefield was the key figure in the first generation of Anglo-American evangelical Christianity. Whitefield and legions of other evangelical pastors and laypeople helped establish a new interdenominational religious movement in the eighteenth century, one committed to the gospel of conversion, the new birth, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the preaching of revival across Europe and America (3)." In the brisk (only 263 pages) and compelling narrative that follows, I believe Kidd establishes Whitefield's primacy in the founding generation of evangelicalism. Kidd has written the new standard, academic study of this titanic figure. What I appreciate most about Kidd is his honesty about his presuppositions, laid out so well in the introduction: "Writing biographies, and writing religious biographies in particular, presents significant challenges. The temptation to write hagiography - the biography of a pristine saint - is ever present. In placing Whitefield within the new evangelical world, I am not offering an unsullied picture of a sanctified man, nor is my primary aim to edify readers spiritually. Yet historians today know that no one of us is fully objective - personal perspectives matter. So let me admit mine up front: I have a high regard for Whitefield. I identify personally with the religious movement he helped start. Yet I hope I have also been fair to his critics and transparent about his obvious failings as a man and minister (3-4)." I believe that Kidd accomplishes his goal. At no point does he, in the name of spiritual edification, compromise excellent scholarship -- he is thorough in his research and honest in his reporting. Yet he also does not, in the name of academic objectivity, deal condescendingly with the spiritual convictions of his subjects, nor does he sneer at the evangelical pastor-historians who are responsible for advancing Whitefield studies to the present time. He is a Christian man who has written a very good, very faithful biography, that anyone can respect and appreciate. It is Kidd's rare ability to do this that has made him my favorite historian writing for the academy today.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Hot and Cold on this one!

By bombshelterbob This has turned out to be the least liked of the Thomas Kidd works that I have read, I don't know if it's the repetitiveness of the story (Whitefield became very predictable, if not interesting in his life style) or Kidd's writing style at the time, but I ultimately got a little bored with the middle half of the book...that said, the book was very informative and provided me with a lot of new information and I did appreciate that. If you're casually interested in Whitefield, you may want to look around a little before you pony up the money (though it's not a pricey book). If you're really motivated to learn about him, this is a good book for knowledge...though be forewarned, it's emphasis is not on the revolutionary side of the man, this is overwhelmingly a history of his evangelical work.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. The Calvinistic Charismatic

By DantheMan George Whitefield was the central figure of the Great Awakening of the mid 1700s, and quite possibly the first English celebrity. It can be estimated that he preached over 18,000 sermons in his lifetime, commonly featuring audiences in the ten, twenty, and thirty plus thousands (remember this is before microphones, P.A. systems, and online marketing). There is no question that Whitefield is a hero of the faith and a founder of Western Evangelicalism. This was a necessary biography. Whitefield, pre-conversion, was a man of immense struggles almost Martin Luther like. There was even a season in his life at Oxford where Whitefield felt tormenting assaults from the devil, where he could be found writhing "on the floor day and night, praying and commanding the devil to leave his body, in the name of Jesus" (430). Whitefield fasted, mourned his sin, struggled, and made penance until God met him. Whitefield was "born again," proclaiming, "the Day Star arose in my heart" (451). This conversion experience would come to be the focal point of his preaching. Whitefield called the new birth: "one of the most fundamental doctrines of our holy religion, the very hinge by which the salvation of each of us turns" (1198). But do not think Whitefield preached salvation at the expense of a life of commitment as "he closely linked conversion with a life of holiness and benevolence" (1228). I was surprised to find out that Whitefield theologically was somewhat of a "Calvinistic Charismatic." By today's standards those two seem almost incompatible, but not to Whitefield. Kidd writes that Whitefield was "convinced that a recovery of robust Calvinist teaching was essential to a renewal of pure gospel preaching" (1718). This Calvinism caused a major rift between Whitefield and the Wesley brothers (and many others) that only grew with time. To Whitefield, Calvinism (primarily the doctrine of election) was fundamental because it made Christians forever secure in their standing before God. But Whitefield was perhaps more so accused of his "enthusiasm," almost akin to forms of the Charismatic movement. He would claim that the Holy Spirit made him do things. Kidd writes, "He was certain that the Holy Spirit had moved powerfully not just in the gospels or the book of Acts, but that he was 'the common privilege and portion of all believers in all ages'" (1279). The Holy Spirit was real and alive to Whitefield and he believed the same Spirit must be alive in every Christian. "He did not let the charge of enthusiasm dissuade him, for he believed that 'every Christian, in the proper sense of the word, must be an enthusiast that is inspired of God, or have God in Him'" (1605). Whitefield achieved much for the Kingdom of God. But I was surprised that though the Great Awakening was a powerful revival there was much opposition against Whitefield. By the Anglicans, Whitefield was far too ecumenical and accepting of other denominations. The Wesleys spurned him for his Calvinism and many others were wary of Whitefield's reliance on the Holy Spirit's "revelation." There was much in anti-revivalist, anti-Whitefield propaganda which shows that there will always be intense opposition to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ no matter the fruit. The itinerant had a grueling pace to his life: ever on the move (13 trips between England and the

colonies); preaching multiple times a day, often exhaustingly seven days a week. It could be said that Whitefield preached unhealthily too much ultimately preaching himself to his death in September of 1770 at the age of 55. Fifteen years earlier he only wished he could spend a day in "retirement and deep humiliation before that Jesus for whom I have done so little" (4838). Kidd's biography is good, scholarly, and enjoyable. He also gives an evangelical perspective necessary for a good recounting of this great life. My only concern is the price--\$19.99 for the Kindle edition is too much for any book no matter the quality. The biography also is a tad repetitive, but that is more due to Whitefield's life than Kidd's retelling of it. 4/5 stars

An engaging, balanced, and penetrating narrative biography of the charismatic eighteenth-century American evangelist. In the years prior to the American Revolution, George Whitefield was the most famous man in the colonies. Thomas Kidd's fascinating new biography explores the extraordinary career of the most influential figure in the first generation of Anglo-American evangelical Christianity, examining his sometimes troubling stands on the pressing issues of the day, both secular and spiritual, and his relationships with such famous contemporaries as Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, and John Wesley. Based on the author's comprehensive studies of Whitefield's original sermons, journals, and letters, this excellent history chronicles the phenomenal rise of the trailblazer of the Great Awakening. Whitefield's leadership role among the new evangelicals of the eighteenth century and his many religious disputes are meticulously covered, as are his major legacies and the permanent marks he left on evangelical Christian faith. It is arguably the most balanced biography to date of a controversial religious leader who, though relatively unknown three hundred years after his birth, was a true giant in his day and remains an important figure in America's history.

"Kidd, a professor of history at Baylor and an evangelical Christian, balances his admiration for Whitefield with scholarly rigor. . . . Kidd's theologically sympathetic approach gives the book a depth that a more detached treatment might not: He misses none of the biblical allusions that peppered Whitefield's utterances, and he is an excellent guide through the tangled doctrinal controversies that dogged Whitefield's career. . . . A great orator keeps his listeners' attention fixed on himself. What made Whitefield great was his ability to keep it fixed on Another." Barton Swaim, Wall Street Journal