

From a sermon of George Whitefield (1714-1760)

"I suppose I may take it for granted, that all of you, among whom I am now about to preach the kingdom of God, are fully convinced, that it is appointed for all men once to die, and that ye all really believe that after death comes the judgment, and that the consequences of that judgment will be, that ye must be doomed to dwell in the blackness of darkness, or ascend to dwell with the blessed God, forever and ever.

I may take it for granted also, that whatever your practice in common life may be, there is not one, though ever so profligate and abandoned, but hopes to go to that place, which the scriptures call Heaven, when he dies. And, I think, if I know anything of mine own heart, my heart's desire, as well as my prayer to God, for you all, is, that I may see you sitting down in the kingdom of our heavenly Father.

But then, though we all hope to go to heaven when we die, yet, if we may judge by people's lives, and our Lord says, "that by their fruits we may know them," I am afraid it will be found, that thousands, and ten thousands, who hope to go to this blessed place after death, are not now in the way to it while they live.

Though we call ourselves Christians, and would consider it as an affront put upon us, for anyone to doubt whether we were Christians or not; yet there are a great many, who bear the name of Christ, that yet do not so much as know what real Christianity is."

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George Whitefield was an Anglican Protestant minister who helped spread the Great Awakening in Britain and, especially, in the British North American colonies. Though he was slender in build, he stormed in the pulpit as if he were a giant. Within a year it was said that "his voice startled England like a trumpet blast." At a time when London had a population of less than 700,000, he could hold spellbound 20,000 people at a time at Moorfields and Kennington Common. For thirty-four years his preaching resounded throughout England and America. In his preaching ministry he crossed the Atlantic thirteen times and became known as the "apostle of the British empire."

He was a firm Calvinist in his theology yet unrivaled as an aggressive evangelist. Though a clergyman of the Church of England, he cooperated with and had a profound impact on people and churches of many traditions, including Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists. Whitefield, along with the Wesleys, inspired the movement that became known as the Methodists. Whitefield preached more than 18,000 sermons in his lifetime, an average of 500 a year or ten a week. Many of them were given over and over again. Fewer than 90 have survived in any form.

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I am firmly convinced that the same is true in our country, South Africa. While 1Cor 9:26-27 is true in my life, and that in fear and trembling, I am thoroughly convinced, all the more as I grow older, that thousands warm the pews of church buildings Sunday after Sunday, while being strangers to the experiential realities of saving grace.

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