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The Methodical George Whitefield: A ‘Most Excellent Systematic Divine’?

Jared C. Hood

George Whitefield does not have much of a reputation as a theologian. Toplady is almost alone in saying he was ‘a most excellent systematic divine.’ Dallimore says he ‘was much more a theologian than has commonly been recognized...’¹

That he believed the classic Reformed doctrines is well known. Was his theology ‘systematic,’ though? Did he see theology as being systematic, and to what extent did he, in his public ministry, present his beliefs as being part of a theological system?

To answer the question immediately, Whitefield believed that each part of theology belonged to a biblical and logical system, and he preached the system accordingly. This system was the Federalism of the 17th century covenant theologians. It was a cohesive historical narrative: the drama of God’s action for and in the world. The history has several parts to it, and stretches from eternity past to eternity future. How did Whitefield relate this systematic, Federalist story?

The prologue: the everlasting covenant

The story of salvation history has a pre-history to it, and so the Covenant of Redemption is the proper theological starting point. There is, at the back of salvation and all of human history, an eternal pact between two of the persons of the Triune God. The Father and Son formed an agreement in which the Father committed himself to giving his Son a people, and the Son agreed to die for those people. ‘God...hath let me see more into the Covenant of Redemption between the Father and the Son’²

Whitefield only rarely uses the terminology of ‘Covenant of Redemption.’ When he does, he shows that: (a) he dearly loves the doctrine; and (b) it is pastorally useful. In 1741, he counselled thus:

Dear Sir, get acquainted more and more with electing love; study the covenant of redemption, and see how GOD loved you with an everlasting love. This will cause you to glory only in the LORD, and to pass through the valley of the shadow of death, with a full assurance of faith; knowing that CHRIST hath engaged to lodge you safe in eternal glory.³

The doctrine is so momentous that knowledge of it is equivalent to knowledge of the love of God. It is a knowledge that enables believers to reach their highest goal of glorifying God, enables them to pass through life's deepest challenge, namely death, and enables them to attain to one of the most prized possessions of 18th century evangelicalism, namely full assurance of faith. This type of ardent commitment (to what some think of today as merely an artificial theological construct) is typical of the Puritans.

Incidentally, Whitefield's commitment to it shows that his thought is not essentially person- but God-centred (which gives some perspective to the description of the evangelist as a 'pedlar of divinity'). The story of salvation is fundamentally about God, for he is the author of it.

Whilst Whitefield does not use the term 'Covenant of Redemption' often, the concept is frequently present. He favours different terminology, namely, 'everlasting covenant,' frequently reserved for the closing blessings of his post-1742 correspondence. As with the term, 'Covenant of Redemption,' the 'eternal covenant' is a synonym for election (and the 'free distinguishing love of God').⁴ He likes to speak of Christ as 'the angel of the everlasting covenant,' adapting Malachi 3:1. This everlasting covenant is implemented within history, so that the first statement of the Gospel in Genesis 3 is the 'first opening of his everlasting covenant.'⁵

The doctrine of the everlasting covenant entered Whitefield's thinking explicitly in 1741, during which time he had been reading several Puritan authors. The rudimentary elements of the concept were not absent from his thought prior to 1741, though. Fully orb'd Federalism has its origins in 16th century Reformed theology, and Whitefield held fiercely to the Thirty-Nine Articles. The Articles do not speak of the Covenant of Redemption, but they do speak of election. Article 17 speaks of God's decree to deliver 'in Christ' and 'by Christ.'⁶ For Whitefield, this moves seamlessly into the Covenant of Redemption teaching.

There is a difference between Whitefield and the Puritans on this doctrine. Whitefield holds to just the fundamentals. He has reduced the dogma to its most basic form. He does not dispute the designation ‘covenant’ or define that word; he seems to simply assume it is the same as the doctrine of election, and he does not actually state that the Covenant of Grace differs from that of Redemption, although he is implicitly in agreement with Owen on this.

It is remarkable that he held to the doctrine at all, considering that he tried to minimize controversy so as to work across evangelical denominations. However, he would never draw back from that which he thought was proved from Scripture.

Thinking more broadly of Whitefield’s doctrine of election, what did he think of the lapsarian debate, and reprobation? Did God’s decree to save some and not others precede or follow the decree to permit the fall; and did God elect some to destruction, or ‘pass by’ the non-elect?

Again, it may seem surprising that Whitefield treats this subject at all, but it emerges that he is an infralapsarian, and that adamantly so. God decreed to create, to permit the fall, and then to elect some and reject others.⁷ He also holds to preterition, which is the typical infralapsarian understanding of reprobation. God passes over the non-elect, and they are condemned for their sin.

...I believe the doctrine of reprobation, in this view, that God intends to give saving grace, through Jesus Christ, only to a certain number, and that the rest of mankind, after the fall of Adam, being justly left of God to continue in sin, will at last suffer that eternal death, which is its proper wages.⁸

This discussion takes place in the December 24, 1740, letter to John Wesley, in which Whitefield is compelled to mount an argument for the fairness of reprobation. He writes, ‘For if God might justly impute Adam’s sin to all, and afterwards have passed by all, then he might justly pass by some.’⁹ He also sees that these matters affect one’s view of the atonement, and had already stated this in a preceding letter to Wesley: ‘I see no blasphemy in holding that doctrine, if rightly explained. If GOD might have passed by all, he may pass by some. Judge whether it is not a greater blasphemy to say, “CHRIST died for souls now in hell.”’¹⁰

Whitefield is definite in these views, but he does not want to address in any greater depth than this the complexity of the order of the decrees and the nature of reprobation. Is the decree to ‘permit’ humankind to sin substantially different to decreeing that humanity should sin? If God did not ordain humankind’s sin, then does he cease to be sovereign? Is he aware that Calvin arguably held views that accorded with the supralapsarian position that his successors would annunciate (e.g. Beza)? Such things are too abstract, as Whitefield would see it, for him to deal with. Rightly or wrongly, he wants a ‘Moderate Calvinism,’ and does not want to ‘choose to use expressions that need an apology’ (a seemingly well-intentioned aim, for is not being ‘moderate’ a self-evident virtue? This aim keeps Whitefield’s public ministry from complexity and obscurity, but it also artfully depreciates any theological position that is contrary to his own.).¹¹

Tension: the Covenant of Works

Whitefield believed there was a ‘Covenant of Works.’ His preaching of the Gospel story always commenced with this. He uses the exact term numerous times in his sermons. It is not possible to overstate the significance in Whitefield’s thought of this initial stage of the human race, or in this short article to amass all the references in his sermons in which he dramatically recounts the story (almost in every sermon in some way).

The content of the doctrine for him is entirely Reformed, but again, only simply presented. Adam and Eve were placed under a Covenant of Works. Adam stood in this covenant as the ‘head, the representative of all his seed,’¹² and, after the fall, Christ took this role to himself and fulfilled the covenant. The implications of some comments in Sermon I is that he sees this as a legal covenant, not a Covenant of Grace, in the sense that obedience rendered under this covenant would receive life as a reward. He uses language similar not to the Thirty-Nine Articles, but to that other great formulation of the Church of England, the Westminster Confession (ch. 7.1–2), writing the following:

And so infinite was the condescension of the high and lofty One who inhabiteth eternity, that although he might have insisted on the everlasting obedience of him and his posterity; yet he was pleased to oblige himself, by a covenant, or agreement, made with his own creatures, upon condition of an unsinning obedience, to give them immortality and eternal life.¹³

For Whitefield, the Covenant of Works is not an abstract idea. It is history. Two actual people, or better, one actual man, was placed under and broke that covenant. Furthermore, it is personal. In the constant, personal, dramatic, pathos-filled retelling of the story, he makes it clear more than any other that this story is every person's story. Adam's fault is every person's fault, both in terms of federal headship and familial repetition, and all people, according to Whitefield, are still under this Covenant of Works,¹⁴ so that the covenant failure is played out in every person's life. We are born under this Covenant, try to seek salvation through it, and are cursed by it.¹⁵ Adam's biography is every person's biography.

On the one hand, Whitefield's adherence to the doctrine is unexceptional. Inferentially from the above, he seems to hold to what is a minority view amongst Federalists, in which it is thought that the Covenant of Works continues outside Eden to genuinely offer life through obedience, so that each individual actually does repeat the covenantal breach of Adam (cf. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*). The Law is both a Covenant of Works for unbelievers, and a rule of life for believers.¹⁶ He never discusses the complexities of this, however, nor does he seek to locate himself amongst the diverse opinions of his forebears on this question.

On the other hand, he has taken the doctrine to new heights. With Whitefield, federalism lives like never before. He is adamant that not only must every person repent from their sin, but that every person must see him or herself as a sinner in a particular way. All people must envisage themselves in the Garden setting. The sinner must see her or himself not just as a sinner or law-breaker, but as an Adamic sinner (article four of the Thirty-Nine Articles weighs heavily upon Whitefield's mind). Shockingly, he comes close to saying that understanding and subjectivising the Federalist scheme is an essential part of what it is to be converted.

Resolution: the Covenant of Grace

Whitefield began to use the term, 'Covenant of Grace,' when he entered his phase of more fully defined Calvinism. This was around the time of his break with John Wesley, during his second visit to America.¹⁷ He speaks of the Covenant of Grace as the 'open revelation' of the 'secret covenant' (the Covenant of Redemption). Moreover, it is the Covenant of Works fulfilled for believers by

the second covenant head. ‘In this body he formed a complete obedience to the law of GOD; whereby he in our stead fulfilled the covenant of works...’¹⁸

Whitefield accepts the doctrine with the same impetus of the Reformed scholastics, that is, with the desire for a logical, unified system of theology. Hence, he counsels John Wesley on November 9, 1740, to ‘study the covenant of grace that you may be consistent with yourself.’¹⁹

Further to that, in the longer letter to Wesley of December 24, 1740, Whitefield expresses the opinion that adherence to the Covenant of Grace is the opposite of maintaining ‘carnal reasoning.’ This is a criticism of Wesley’s Arminian doctrine of universal atonement, entire perfection and dependence on the human will in salvation. Whitefield would rather emphasise divine sovereignty and grace in the bestowal of faith, justification and sanctification for the elect in Christ.

This Covenant of Grace was first revealed back in the Garden, which Whitefield speaks of as a river of promises flowing from God (but promises made only to believers, not unbelievers).²⁰ This is the ‘second covenant,’ made not with Adam and not dependent upon humankind’s works.²¹

Reformed Covenant Theology is the structuring device of Whitefield’s theology. When the references to the Covenants of Redemption, Works and Grace are added together, one realizes just how controlling that theology is. Still, he only occasionally explicitly uses the Covenant of Grace vocabulary. This is for Whitefield a theological decision. It might partly be the desire to minimize partisan spirit, although if this were the chief aim, Whitefield would also have softened his Calvinistic context. Rather, it is Whitefield’s way of doing theology. Overarching theological constructs are permissible, necessary, and not to be feared, but they ought not to be the dominant method of expression. There is mild biblicism here. *Sola Scriptura* washes over into the language used in theology. Thus, Whitefield would rather speak about Christ, grace and faith, than the ‘Covenant of Grace.’ When this is understood about Whitefield, his often-abused statement that he follows the Bible, not Calvin, will be better understood.

The Covenant of Grace is more often expressed in Whitefield by passionately retelling the Gospel story—the history of Christ. This can be told from the

Old Testament (Gen 3 in particular), but Whitefield typically repeats the Gospel *kerygma*: the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension (and return) of Jesus. This approach is in accord with the Thirty-Nine articles (articles 2–4), which are themselves drawn from the Nicene Creed and even more pointedly, from the Apostles' Creed, which relates the narrative with almost no theological extrapolation.

Thus, Whitefield repeatedly tells the Gospel story. Most sermons, in some way, will have the basic elements of the story, with a special focus on the suffering and death of Christ. This is not mere homiletics, or worse, theatrics. It is of theological significance. First, just as the Apostles' Creed in its early origins took this approach to counteract Gnosticism, so too may Whitefield be counteracting Deism and the spirit of the age. God *has* entered into history. God has not wound up the world like a clock, and left it to run its course.

Secondly, Whitefield understands that being a theologian is not only about content. Theologians must communicate. History-telling communicates in a different way to a series of theological propositions. Whitefield has both, as does Scripture. Arguably, it is the history-telling that speaks more readily to a wider audience, and it is the history-telling that best portrays God as the dynamic subject of history rather than an object of academic discussion. For Whitefield, history-telling works towards the end of all true theologizing, which is to bring people into doxology (or as he would have put it, 'experimental religion').

When Whitefield tells the story of the Covenant of Grace, he emphasises the incarnation and rejoices in the righteous life of Christ and in the blood of the covenant, but he lacks focus on the resurrection. When he does refer to it, the way he understands its significance is interesting. He sees it not so much as being about the basis of the believer's hope for bodily resurrection. Rather, he connects it with spiritual regeneration. Sermon LIII, entitled *The Power of Christ's Resurrection*, is typical: 'And as he rose again from the dead, so must we also rise to a divine life. None but those who have followed him in this regeneration, or new-birth, shall sit on thrones as approvers of his sentence, when he shall come in terrible majesty to judge the twelve tribes of Israel.'²² The emphasis is on the new-birth, not the new body. The sermon does make the point that Christ's resurrection assures the bodily resurrection of the believer, but this comes in the third point, and is dealt with quickly.

The ascension and session of Christ receive greater attention than the resurrection.²³ This is explicable, since Whitefield's central doctrine is union with Christ. The ascension of Christ explains where the 'believer's husband' is currently located.

The call: entering into the New Covenant

The above is the objective side of Whitefield's Covenant Theology—the *historia salutis*, as it might be put today. As an evangelist, he was also emphatic about the subjective side of the Covenant of Grace. The call to faith is the call to enter into the New Covenant.

Whereas, on the contrary, people should be taught, That the LORD JESUS was the second *Adam*, with whom the Father entered into covenant for fallen man; that they can now do nothing of or for themselves, and should therefore come to GOD beseeching him to give them faith by which they shall be enabled to lay hold on the righteousness of CHRIST; and that faith they will then show forth by their works out of love and gratitude to the ever blessed JESUS, their most glorious Redeemer, for what he has done for their souls.²⁴

The Covenant is made only with Christ as the second Adam, but it is made with him 'for fallen man.'²⁵ People must now 'lay hold on' the blessings of that Covenant, meaning they must exercise faith (and faith alone, as opposed to works, which is trusting in one's own righteousness).²⁶

Whitefield delighted to speak of this 'laying hold' with the imagery of a marriage covenant.²⁷ To the Fetter Lane Society of Young Women, Whitefield declared that 'the marriage covenant between CHRIST and your souls will dissolve all your sins.'²⁸ Elsewhere, he said, 'Jesus...entered into covenant with us, and we became his.'²⁹ The Father and Son have covenanted together, and then the Son enters into covenant with believers.

The story of covenant history continues into the present, then. Whitefield's Federalism propels him into untiring enthusiasm for Gospel preaching. Being an evangelist does not mean being a closet Arminian!

How did Whitefield reconcile the genuine, universal call to faith with his strong doctrine of election? How did he move from the Covenant of Redemption to the free offer of the Covenant of Grace? Clarkson laments the omission of a resolution, suggesting that Whitefield is part Calvinist, part Arminian.³⁰ Flynn decides that Whitefield was simply inconsistent.³¹ Fitzgerald has it as a disconnect between the head and the heart.³²

The real error here is the failure to understand Calvinism. Calvinism refuses to go further than Scripture, and so it affirms both election and the free offer. All that can be added is that the elect are saved by coming to faith through the outward call of the Gospel. '[W]hy should I not strive... since I know not but this striving may be the means God has intended to bless, in order to bring me into a state of grace.'³³ What more can be said? Whitefield refuses to waste any extra ink or breath on the matter.

The conclusion of covenant history

Eternal life in the next age is the conclusion of this world's history, and is the final act in the covenantal story. It is the 'Mediator of the new covenant' who 'shall come in his own glory' and gather in the elect. This final state must be eternal, for the Father and Son have made an 'eternal covenant.' Whitefield argues that there must also be eternal death, because of 'the nature of the Christian covenant.'³⁴

Conclusion

Whitefield, one of the fathers of evangelicalism, was a Federalist. The Covenant Theology of the Puritans was essential to his preaching. This needs to be given weight when the definition of the elusive term, 'evangelical,' is debated. There was a streak of biblicism with him, but he rejected 'mere Christianity' and, ultimately, even mere evangelicalism. His evangelicalism was about the covenants, and all that that entailed: election, total depravity, penal substitutionary and limited atonement, the imputed righteousness of Christ, and the perseverance of the saints in law obedience.

Some today criticize Whitefield for not being rigorously Reformed, and so for leading the ensuing centuries of evangelicalism down the path of biblicism, individualism and anti-intellectualism. However, this is unfair to Whitefield, who was a convinced Federalist, but who with good reason proclaimed only the

fundamentals of 17th century Covenant Theology. He was an evangelist, trying to reach the masses, not a college theologian, trying to engineer an intellectual movement. At an intellectual or theological level, he did not believe himself to be charting a new course, but self-consciously relied upon the Federalist Puritans. He would be disappointed if his offspring today did otherwise. He would be particularly bewildered if some were to pit his evangelistic harnessing of Federalism against Federalist theology itself.

What could be perceived as individualism in Whitefield's ministry he would rather have identified as the true power of Puritan theology at work. Federalism for Whitefield was no cold, rationalistic system, contrary to the caricature, but theology to be experienced. The Covenant of Grace was to be actualized in the individual's life.

Toplady said that Whitefield was 'a most excellent systematic divine.' As to being systematic, he was a staunch Federalist. As to being excellent, it depends upon what the standard is. Paul said, 'I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.' Whitefield was not given to abstract theologizing, and so tended to shy away from complexity, too, although there is more depth there than is sometimes appreciated. His manner of theologizing was consciously shaped by the exigencies of his evangelistic mission, so that it can be said that he was a theologian of a different ilk. He was a productive theologian—'a most excellent systematic divine' indeed.

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ENDNOTES

1. Augustus Toplady, *The Works of Augustus Toplady* (London: J Chidley, 1837), p. 494; Arnold A Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th Century Revival* 2 vols vol 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), p. 529.
2. George Whitefield, *Works*, 6 vols, Vol I (Shropshire: Quinta Press, 2000), Letter CCLXXI p. 287.
3. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol I, Letter CCLII, p. 269.

4. George Whitefield, *Works*, Vol IV, pp. 74, 79; George Whitefield, *Works*, Vol VI, Sermon XLIV p. 199.
5. George Whitefield, *Additional Sermons* (Shropshire: Quinta Press, 2000), Sermon LIX, p. 31.
6. Towards the end of his life, Whitefield wrote of the 17th article that it ‘deserves to be written in letters of gold’ (Whitefield, *Works*, Vol IV, ‘A Letter to the Reverend Dr Durrell’, p. 351, April 12 1768).
7. George Whitefield, *Continuation of the Reverend Mr Whitefield’s Journal* (London: R Hett, 1741), p. 635 (December 24 1740).
8. George Whitefield, *Journals* (Shropshire: Quinta Press, 2000), p. 635. He says he finds this truth in the 17th article of the Thirty Nine Articles.
9. Whitefield, *Journals*, p. 644.
10. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol I, Letter CCXXI, pp. 239–240, September 25 1740, to John Wesley.
11. George Whitefield, *Works*, Vol III, Letter MCCCC, p. 383, which comment is made against supralapsarianism—the only direct reference to supralapsarianism in his works. He believes that there is a correlation between supralapsarianism and a form of hyper-Calvinism in which the presently uncommitted but elect individual is still considered to be forgiven. From this, he rather offhandedly condemns supralapsarianism itself. Still, at least there is theological reasoning behind his rejection of supralapsarianism, rather than condemning it only because it does not meet his understanding of what is ‘moderate.’
12. Whitefield, *Additional Sermons*, Sermon LXXVI, p. 261. He held the doctrine from an early stage. In an early sermon on justification, he speaks of Adam as a ‘Publick Person, as the common Representative of all Mankind’ in the ‘first covenant.’ George Whitefield, *Sermons on Several Practical Subjects* (London: C Rivington...and J Hutton 1738), pp. 12, 15.
13. George Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon CIV, p. 233. Cf. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon CV, p. 255; Sermon CCIV, pp. 375–376.
14. Whitefield, *Additional Sermons*, Sermon LXXVII, p. 275; or what he less frequently calls the ‘old’ or ‘first’ covenant: *Works*, Vol VI, Sermon XXXIII, p. 34, and Sermon XLVI, p. 230 respectively.
15. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon XIV, p. 230.
16. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon XII, p. 196.
17. The term first appears in his letters on September 23 1740 (Whitefield, *Works*, Vol I, Letter CCXIX, p. 236; Letter CCXX, p. 237 and Letter CCXXI, p. 240); and then in Letter CCXXIX, p. 247, of November 9 1740.

18. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon I, pp. 23–24.
19. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol I, Letter CCXXIX, p. 248.
20. Whitefield, *Additional Sermons*, Sermon XXXIII, p. 31. ‘There is no promise in the Bible made to an unbeliever, but to a believer; all the promises of GOD are his, and no one knows, but the poor believer that experiences it, how glad it makes his heart.’
21. *A Letter to Some Church-Members of the Presbyterian Persuasion...*, Whitefield, *Works*, Vol IV, p. 58. This clarifies a comment made in Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon I, p. 23.
22. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol VI, Sermon LIII, p. 320. C.f. Whitefield, *Sermons on Several Practical Subjects*, p. 20.
23. W. A. Speck, *Stability and Strife: England 1714–1760* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 109, puts this down to the Moravian influence upon early Methodism.
24. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon I, p. 24.
25. Whitefield, at least twice, breaks down this distinction. Once, he writes, ‘I pray GOD to direct and bless you both, and to establish his covenant with you and your seed for ever.’ George Whitefield, *Works*, Vol II, Letter DCCCLXXI, p. 392. In the other case, he speaks of the covenant ‘made by God with men in Christ,’ Whitefield, *Works*, Vol VI, Sermon CCCVII, p. 93.
26. From his final sermon, he is famously said to have exclaimed, ‘Works! works! a man get to heaven by works! I would as soon think of climbing up to the moon on a rope of sand!’ J. B. Wakeley, *Anecdotes of George Whitefield* (Shropshire: Quinta Press, 2000), p. 29.
27. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon V, p. 77.
28. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon V, p. 88.
29. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon XII, p. 203, entitled, ‘Christ the Believer’s Husband.’
30. George E. Clarkson, *George Whitefield and Welsh Calvinistic Methodism* (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), pp. 26, 50.
31. John Stephens Flynn, *The Influence of Puritanism on the Political and Religious Thought of the English* (London: John Murray, 1920), pp. 180–181.
32. W. B. Fitzgerald, ‘George Whitefield’ in *A New History of Methodism*, eds. W. J. Townsend, H. B. Workman and George Eayrs, vol 1 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909) 2 vols, pp. 268–269.
33. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol IV, pp. 70–71.
34. Whitefield, *Works*, Vol IV, ‘A Letter to the Reverend Dr Durell’, p. 345; Whitefield, *Works*, Vol V, Sermon XXVI, p. 415.