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“Pedlar in Divinity”: George Whitefield and the Great Awakening, 1737–1745

Frank Lambert

When the Anglican evangelist George Whitefield arrived at Lewis Town, Pennsylvania, on October 30, 1739, he brought with him more than his zeal to declare the necessity of a spiritual new birth. His cargo in the hold of the Elizabeth contained boxes of evangelical books and pamphlets, including Benjamin Jenks’s Prayers and Offices of Devotion for Families, John Flavel’s Husbandry Spiritualized, Isaac Watts’s Divine Songs, William Law’s A Practical Treatise Upon Christian Perfection, John Norris’s A Treatise Concerning Christian Prudence, 200 copies of the Country-parson’s advice to his parishioners, and 150 volumes of the Book of Common Prayer. He also transported cartons of his own printed sermons, journals, letters, and prayers. These items represented just part of the apparatus he employed to generate religious enthusiasm in the intercolonial revivals known as the Great Awakening.¹

Whitefield’s shipload of consumer merchandise symbolizes his immersion in a thoroughly commercialized society, one that provided him with the means of constructing a new religious discourse—modern revivalism. Recent works have illuminated how Whitefield and other evangelicals shaped the Great Awakening. One imaginative volume has focused on Whitefield’s innovations in rhetoric and social communication that challenged local distinctions and authority relations. Case studies have explored the revivalist’s audiences, in particular those factors influencing the colonists’ attitudes toward the awakening—a complex interaction of age, gender, church membership, and social standing. And one landmark in early American historiography has indicated that commerce—long viewed as destructive of traditional values, including piety—served as a means of promoting community and religion. However, Whitefield’s appropriation of new commercial techniques to

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publicize the revivals has only been alluded to (often in passing) without systematic development. What was new about Whitefield was the skill as an entrepreneur, an impresario, that made him a full-fledged forerunner to evangelists like Charles Grandison Finney and Billy Graham.2

One recent writer asserted that "crowds materialized out of nowhere to hear [Whitefield] speak in the most stirring terms about the 'New Birth,'" adding an offhanded acknowledgement that "word" of Whitefield's successes "prepared" new regions to receive him. However, by applying means from the world of commerce to publicize his meetings, Whitefield generated large, enthusiastic crowds. Like the rest of us, the evangelist constructed his social reality with the elements at hand, and in the mid-eighteenth century, commercial language and techniques abounded, affording him a new way of organizing, promoting, and explaining his evangelical mission. Thus, the spreading market enabled him to conceive of organizing a revival spanning the Atlantic, making "the whole world his parish."3 Improvements in marketing organization and practices provided the means of relieving the suffering of "strangers at a distance," transforming mere awareness of distant needs into a moral imperative to deliver spiritual and material aid.4 In Whitefield's case, that meant preaching the gospel to the "uttermost parts of the earth," including the wilderness of Georgia. Drawing upon the experience of enterprising merchants selling their wares at great distances, Whitefield prepared remote auditors to receive the spoken word through advance publicity, especially that of newspaper advertising. And he employed a commercial vocabulary to convey the necessity of the New Birth to his listeners who themselves thought in categories of market exchange.

An argument that advance publicity and self-promotion alone explain the Grand Itinerant's attraction of unprecedented crowds is unfounded and reductionist. However, an examination of his promotional strategies does provide a new understanding not only of Whitefield's success but also of the diffusion of commercialism


throughout mid-eighteenth-century society. It indicates a need to view the Great Awakening in a larger context, as part of an evangelical stirring that occurred throughout the Atlantic world. And such a study points toward a reexamination of the relation between commerce and religion, challenging the interpretation that the two were antithetical, suggesting instead a creative tension whereby evangelists such as Whitefield, while preaching against a selfish preoccupation with the pursuit of wealth, employed the tools of trade to promote the gospel.

Contemporaries observed and commented on the extent and importance of Whitefield's advance publicity. Opponents and supporters alike remarked on the evangelist's use of print to promote his work. In early 1740, the antirevivalist, Timothy Cutler, an Anglican minister in Boston, complained in a letter to the bishop of London that Whitefield's "Journals, Sermons, and Pamphlets are reprinted and eagerly bought here," adding that "the enthusiastic Notions [were] very much kindled . . . and propagated by his Writings, dispersed everywhere." Six months after the evangelist's departure from New England in October 1740, Cutler lamented that the "ill effects of Mr. Whitefield's visit might to some measure have worn off could we have been preserved from his Writings, and those of his Converts and Followers now spread all over our Country." As a tribute to Whitefield's success in employing print to disseminate his message, Cutler requested a shipment of "orthodox" books to neutralize enthusiastic influence.¹

Thomas Prince, Jr., the prorevivalist editor of the Boston magazine Whitefield inspired, the Christian History, recounted the advance publicity that prepared New Englanders for the evangelist's trip in 1740. Prince recalled the succession of written works that arrived in Boston in the months preceding Whitefield's arrival. First Whitefield mailed copies of his journals and printed sermons to prominent ministers such as Benjamin Colman and Jonathan Edwards. Then Boston newspapers furnished New Englanders accounts of the preacher's successes in the middle and southern colonies—self-promoting reports written by Whitefield himself or his traveling companion William Seward, a London stockjobber, and transmitted through Benjamin Franklin's intercolonial newspaper network. Then supporters such as the Reverend Josiah Smith, heeding Whitefield's plea to "take up [their] pen[s]" on behalf of the revival, published glowing testimonials extolling Whitefield's evangelism and humanitarianism—works that recommended the itinerant to New Englanders. Thus when Whitefield began his services, Bostonians, indeed, "were prepared to embrace him."²

By 1739 Whitefield had discovered that "the meanest instruments," especially the press, promoted the gospel by "excit[ing] people's curiosity, and serv[ing] to raise their attention." He explained to Colman his motives for publishing accounts of the revivals, expressing his confidence that "our Lord's cause might be promoted

thereby.” Whitefield believed that his mission was so great that his publicity should exceed that of “the world.” Admonishing his business agent for mishandling the release of a promotional pamphlet, Whitefield wondered, “when will the children of light be as wise in their generation as the children of the world?” His opponents,
however, chafed under Whitefield’s control of the press. One antirevivalist com-
plained that Whitefield so dominated the newspapers in Philadelphia in 1740 that
“printers would not publish anything for [opponents of the revival] and that the
press [was] shut against them,” a charge Whitefield denied even as he supplied a
steady stream of self-serving articles to the publishers.7

In the first year of Whitefield’s public ministry, press coverage helped elevate him
and his revival to an unprecedented level of popular acceptance. While Whitefield
was not yet ordained as an Anglican minister and little known outside his hometown
of Gloucester, England, he became the best-known evangelist in the Atlantic world
in large part because of newspaper advertising, which interpreted his preaching as
a second Reformation. The evangelical bookseller, James Hutton, recorded White-
field’s emergence as the dominant figure in the early stirrings of the revival. In 1737
Whitefield came from Oxford to London “amongst other young awakened preach-
ers,” not yet distinguished from the zealous band of aspirants to the ministry. Mean-
while John Wesley, Whitefield’s mentor, who had traveled as a missionary to the
new colony of Georgia, had written requesting his assistance in Savannah. White-
field had accepted, forgoing “some advantageous proposals, which were designed
to hold him back in England.” Hutton reported that “notice of this was given in
the papers, with some prominence . . . which brought together great numbers.” A
wealthy businessman who promoted charity schools—Seward—had placed that ad-
vertisement in the London newspapers. Seward introduced Whitefield to the readers
as “a young gentleman of distinguished piety, very eminent in his profession, and
a considerable fortune [going] voluntarily to preach the gospel in Georgia.” Hutton
noted that because Seward presented Whitefield as undertaking “a cause . . .
without selfish interest, everybody ran after him.” Hutton further observed that
Seward “also had the result [of Whitefield’s performance] put in, viz. that much
money was collected at the preaching” for charity schools. For Hutton, it was the
“novelty of the thing”—the bold advertising of Whitefield and his success—that at-
tracted “many hundred people . . . curious to hear this Whitefield.” The bookseller
noted that the other young revivalists also “preached in a more than ordinarily ear-
nest way,” but Whitefield, benefiting from the prominent publicity, “was every-
where made known” and emerged as the leading evangelical preacher.8

Although the London clergy had long employed newspapers to publicize charity
sermons, under Seward’s guidance Whitefield transformed mere notices into adver-
tisements rivaling those promoting the latest consumer goods. Typical ecclesiastical
entries in the London Daily Advertiser announced sermons by presenting the bare
essentials: who was to preach, for what charity, in which church, and at what time.
And rarely did the ministers provide the press with a report of the services, such as
the number attending and the amount collected. By contrast, Seward “sold”

7 Pennsylvania Gazette, May 1, May 8, 1740; Gillies, ed., Works of Whitefield, I, 291, II, 180; Whitefield,
Journals, 407.
8 “James Hutton’s Account of ‘The Beginning of the Lord’s Work in England to 1746,’” Proceedings of the
Wesley Historical Society, 15 (1926), 183–84; London Daily Advertiser, Sept. 19, 1737.
Whitefield to the readers, complete with advertising "puffs," appealing details designed to pique interest. Seward's paid advertisements appeared on the front page in the form of news articles written by a third party. The format recounted recent successes and announced upcoming events. In describing Whitefield's performance at St. Swithin's church in September 1737, Seward reported that the evangelist preached an "excellent" charity sermon before a "crowded" congregation whose contributions were "remarkable." He noted that Whitefield's sermon on the "greatness of the charity of the poor widow's mites" inspired the auditors to contribute over five pounds including "no less than 800 halfpence." He concluded by announcing Whitefield's next sermon as a continuation of the evangelist's "truly pious" undertaking to promote the "good effects [charity schools] have on the lower ranks of the people." Seward employed similar language in promoting his own stockjobbing business. His advertisement of November 11, 1739, for instance, announced that he offered for sale shares "in a new method, much more advantageous to the purchaser than they can possibly be bought any other way." Whether publicizing sermons or securities, London's daily newspapers provided a powerful means of self-presentation, a lesson Whitefield learned and applied even after Seward's death in October 1740.9

Noting that following the press coverage "there was no end of the people flocking to hear the Word of God," Whitefield developed a sustained advertising campaign to promote his charity sermons in London prior to departing on his second American trip. Early in 1739, while collecting for an orphan house he had founded in Georgia, Seward placed two or three notices per week in the London Daily Advertiser, relying also on verbal communication at the services to publicize upcoming meetings. However, because of an embarrassing episode, Whitefield's "press agent" announced in the May 3 edition that "daily notice [would] be given in [the] paper." Although Whitefield had announced at a Sunday sermon when and where he would preach over the next few days, many people, including several "persons of distinction," awaited the evangelist at the wrong site. Thenceforward, daily newspaper advertising became a standard feature of Whitefield's publicity until his sailing for America almost three months later.10

Whitefield also benefited from the extensive advertising of his printed works, which both contributed to his growing popularity and resulted from his spreading fame. Booksellers recognized Whitefield as an author who had "made sermons, once a drug, a vendible commodity." Consequently, enterprising publishers vied with each other to exploit the lucrative demand for the evangelist's writings. In one issue of the Daily Advertiser, for instance, a printseller advertised a portrait of Whitefield, "neatly engrav'd from a drawing taken by an excellent painter," and on the same

9 For a typical sermon notice, see, for example, London Daily Advertiser, Sept. 24, 1737. Ibid., Sept. 28, 1737, Nov. 11, 1737 [italics added]; "A List of Deaths in the Year 1740," Gentleman's Magazine, 10 (Nov. 1740), 571. Whitefield had dispatched Seward to England to raise funds for a school for Negroes. Seward accompanied evangelist Howell Harris on a preaching tour through Wales, where a mob attacked them. Seward died in October 1740 from being hit in the eye by a stone.

page, a bookseller advertised two of the evangelist's sermons plus a collection of prayers "recommended by George Whitefield." In the summer of 1738, competition between publishers over which had the right to publish Whitefield's first journal resulted in a windfall of publicity. The rivals, Thomas Cooper and James Hutton, advertised their editions on the same pages of the Daily Advertiser for a full week. They also engaged in a front-page debate over whose edition offered the more faithful rendering of Whitefield's manuscript. While no evidence points to Seward's involvement, someone as zealous and shrewd as he must have placed a copy of Whitefield's diary in the hands of the non-Methodist Cooper. The itinerant had mailed the document to Hutton, at the time an ardent supporter. Whatever the case, the competing advertisements heightened interest in the journals, increasing their sales and thus promoting the revival.11

By the beginning of 1738, colonial newspapers reprinted Whitefield's advertisements, almost two years before his preaching tour that triggered the Great Awakening. Philadelphia's American Weekly Mercury included Seward's initial report of Whitefield's success at St. Swithin's, complete with the superlatives describing the evangelist's preaching and fund raising. The Williamsburg Virginia Gazette highlighted the revivalist's commitment to go to Georgia and his attraction of "so great a concourse of people." William Parks, the Williamsburg editor, may have selected the report about Whitefield because it stood out from the blander announcements of other Anglican clergymen. Or, he may have received the advertisement through Whitefield's expanding letter-writing network, a transatlantic chain of correspondence by which evangelicals circulated revival news, recommended devotional literature, and exchanged successful strategies. A year later, Whitefield provided Parks with material—sermons, pamphlets, newspaper reports, and journals—to reprint in his newspaper or to publish and sell through his bookstore. Whatever the case, press coverage on both sides of the Atlantic prepared men and women to receive the spoken word from this extraordinary evangelist.12

Upon arriving in America in October 1739, Whitefield continued to promote his revivals through vigorous newspaper coverage. Though Whitefield's associates, John Sym's and James Habersham, handled "press relations" while traveling with the itinerant, Seward proved the most aggressive and effective agent. In his own journal, published in 1740 in England and America, the zealous businessman recorded his role in newspaper reporting and press relations. Successive entries during 1740 reveal the nature and extent of his activities. "April 27. Wrote paragraph for the News, of our Brother's Preaching, etc., particularly the following to be published in New York. April 29. Wrote and examined sundry things for the Press; Particularly Mr. Whitefield's Letter. . . . May 2. Call'd at Mr. Franklin's the Printer."13

11 Josiah Smith, The Character, Preaching, etc., of the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, Impartially Represented and Supported, in a Sermon, Preach'd in Charlestown, South-Carolina, March 26th 1740 (Boston, 1740); London Daily Advertiser, Dec. 25, 1737. For the competing editions of Whitefield's journal, see ibid., Aug. 3–8, 1738.
While advance men and merchants performed the role of press agents, Whitefield himself exercised direct control over press coverage. After he dispatched Seward to England in April 1740 to raise money, the itinerant reported his own performances and successes, producing third-person accounts of his latest preaching tour in the middle colonies, complete with puffs. He opened a typical report with a statistical account of his activities, indicating he was on shore thirty-three days, traveled “hundreds” of miles, preached fifty-eight sermons, attracted crowds of up to twenty thousand, and collected “near 500 pounds sterling.” Then, assessing the power of the revival, he wrote, “Great and visible effects followed his preaching. There was never such a general awakening, and concern for the things of God known in America before.” He closed by announcing his intention to visit New England in the fall and return to Philadelphia afterwards. Thus, Whitefield advertised his revivals under the guise of a newspaper article—just the kind of “objective” third-party report Josiah Wedgwood instructed his associates to secure to promote pottery sales because he considered it the most powerful of advertisements.  

Although print runs remained small for mid-eighteenth-century newspapers, seldom numbering more than a few hundred, improvements in marketing and distribution meant that Whitefield could reach a wide audience. Parliament’s failure to renew the Licensing Act of 1694 prompted a proliferation of newspapers in London. The first daily was published in 1702, and by 1740 London boasted of “three dailies, five weeklies, seven thrice a week, and three thrice a week halfpenny posts, or fifty-three issues of various papers per week.” And the number of provincial and colonial newspapers mushroomed as well. But the number of subscribers does not indicate the readership of newspapers and books. Coffeehouses, which sprang up throughout England in the half century before Whitefield’s revivals, operated as circulating libraries where gentlemen gathered to read the latest newspapers and books. And entrepreneurial booksellers offered books for loan as well as for sale, enabling those who could not afford the purchase price to read the latest works. In Whitefield’s evangelical circles, religious societies and itinerant preachers served a similar function, widening the readership of evangelical papers and books. By the mid-1740s, after their well-publicized theological split, both Whitefield and John Wesley maintained “book rooms” that distributed their works through their separate “connexions.”

Most of the fourteen colonial newspaper publishers played important roles in promoting Whitefield’s revivals, advertising his writings, and soliciting contributions. As the major intercolonial event in 1740–1741, Whitefield’s revival enjoyed


extensive coverage. For example, 60 percent of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*’s issues of that period devoted space to Whitefield, often including reports of his successes and itineraries, reprints of his publications, and advertisements for his writings. And though Whitefield conducted most of his preaching tours in northern cities, the *Virginia Gazette* carried stories of the evangelist in a third of its issues. But, more than frequency, the space allotted Whitefield within single editions attested to the widespread interest he generated. For instance, during 1740, Andrew Bradford often devoted the entire front page of the *American Weekly Mercury* to the evangelist’s letters, journals, endorsements, and testimonials. In seventeen of fifty-two issues of the *South Carolina Gazette* published between the summers of 1740 and
1741, the lead story was a heated controversy pitting Whitefield and his supporters against his opponents. The disputes centered on whether Whitefield’s “enthusiasm” was acceptable behavior for an Anglican minister. Its persistence as a news item suggests revival controversy was good business for the newspaper.16

No one was a more aggressive Whitefield promoter than Franklin. Though differing in religious views, Franklin and Whitefield enjoyed a lasting and profitable relationship that satisfied both men—the publisher sold more newspapers and books, and the evangelist reached a wider audience. Franklin sent sermons, pamphlets, and journals through his intercolonial booksellers’ network, insuring fast and widespread dissemination. And Franklin’s newspaper coverage of the revival was so favorable and extensive he was forced to print a defense against charges of editorial bias in the Pennsylvania Gazette. But the printer’s support went beyond publishing. He helped Whitefield raise money through an effective subscription by which evangelicals covenanted to make installment payments to underwrite the revival. He also defended the preacher’s integrity when opponents accused Whitefield of misappropriating funds donated for the orphan house. However, Whitefield also helped Franklin. From 1739 to 1741, Franklin published 110 titles—as many as he printed during the previous seven years. Almost all the increase came from Whitefield. The itinerant’s works sold well. Franklin projected sales of two hundred for an expensive four-volume collection of two volumes each of sermons and journals, but actual sales exceeded the forecast by more than 25 percent. And according to Franklin’s ledgers, Whitefield’s works generated more revenue in some cities, for example, Charleston, South Carolina, and Newport, Rhode Island, than did his popular Poor Richard’s Almanac.17

Desiring a vehicle dedicated to the propagation of his revivals, in 1741 Whitefield assumed management of the London-based evangelical magazine, the Weekly History. His action inspired similar periodicals in Scotland and New England. In taking this initiative Whitefield responded to an expressed desire among evangelicals for a periodical dedicated to their cause. One subscriber noted that the “polite world have their Spectators, Tatler’s, Guardian’s, and Comedies,” adding that “the Children of God also [should have] their proper entertainment, their weekly amusement, their divine miscellany, and the historical account of the progress of their Lord’s kingdom.” Whitefield responded to such demands by supplying the editor, John Lewis, “fresh matter every week,” including sermons, journals, and letters. But by 1742 the evangelist had assumed editorial control and determined the magazine’s contents and format. And the paper became the official organ of the Whitefield Methodists, as the Calvinist branch of the movement became known. In the autumn of 1743, the paper assumed a new title, describing its purpose and scope: Christian History or General account of the Progress of the Gospel in England, Scotland, and

16 See, for example, American Weekly Mercury, Nov. 6, 13, 29, Dec. 6, 13, 20, 1739. For the controversy, see, for example, South Carolina Gazette, May 17, June 26, July 5, 12, 19, Aug. 1, 23, Sept. 13, 20, 26, Oct. 2, 16, 30, Nov. 6, 1740.

America as far as the Reverend Mr. Whitefield, his fellow-labourers and Assistants are Concerned.\textsuperscript{18} Whether Whitefield published his magazine or other printed matter such as sermons, he considered the reader as a consumer. He wrote for a mass audience that included the poor. In a letter to his fellow evangelist, William Hervey, Whitefield disclosed his plans to sell four sermons for just sixpence, noting that he wrote “for the poor, you for the polite and noble.” Thus while Hervey selected for one of his works “a very neat paper, with an elegant type,” Whitefield instructed his printer to reduce the paper costs for a sermon “designed for the poor . . . [because] the poor must have them cheap.” The evangelist also expressed his consciousness of the reader as he contemplated the length of his printed works. In explaining the brevity of one pamphlet, he noted, “I wrote short, because I know long compositions generally weary the reader.” His sensitivity to readers as consumers resulted in the wide diffusion of his works throughout the Atlantic world, attested to by booksellers, followers, and opponents alike.\textsuperscript{19}

Whitefield promoted his revivals through the widespread distribution of sermons and journals. The significance of the evangelist’s printed sermons is of particular interest because of Franklin’s well-known criticism of them. Focusing on the heated controversy the published discourses sparked, Franklin believed the itinerant’s sermons gave advantage to his enemies. The printer pointed out that they could not attack “unguarded expressions and erroneous opinions” delivered in oration. But his critics dissected his writings, leading Franklin to conclude, “I am of the opinion if he had never written anything, he would have left behind him a much more numerous and important sect.” However, Whitefield did not desire to create another denomination or church nor to swell the ranks of an existing denomination. Indeed, he incurred the wrath of the Scottish evangelist, Ebenezer Erskine, by refusing to join the Presbyterian church. Whitefield’s intention was to replace the “bad books” written by such rationalists as John Tillotson, archbishop of Canterbury, for example, with “good books” adhering to Calvinist tenets, thus strengthening Calvinist tendencies within the Anglican communion. Whitefield encouraged his followers to display the badges of their New Birth through material goods—the books they carried and the dress they wore. He exhorted them to “put on [their] cockades” that men and women would know them “to be Christ’s.” His own books could be displayed as just such cockades. And his written sermons advertised the kind of discourse auditors could expect at his services.\textsuperscript{20}

To thousands, the printed sermons also had important symbolic significance. They represented the principles of the revival—the primacy of the individual in salvation, renunciation of unconverted ministers, and emotional experience as the basis of religion. Opponents like Charles Chauncy and Timothy Cutler of Boston noted the symbolic nature of the sermons, crediting their ubiquitous presence with perpetuating religious “enthusiasm.”

Printed sermons in Whitefield’s revivals were analogous to consumer goods displayed by the followers of the radical English politician, John Wilkes. Pro-Wilkes potters sold mugs, punch bowls, and other ceramic articles adorned with the candidate’s political slogans. Mercers marketed such Wilkite clothing as coats with special buttons, cuffs, and handkerchiefs. Other merchandise symbolizing the radical cause included tobacco pipes, candlesticks, and tankards. All of these goods served as visible means by which supporters identified with and participated in a movement.

Whitefield disseminated his sermons in large numbers, with publishers eager to satisfy the demand during the revival’s peak years. From the first year of his ministry in 1737, the evangelist’s discourses sold well. Of his sermon on the necessity of a new birth, the evangelist noted, “This sermon sold well to persons of all denominations, and was dispersed very much both at home and abroad.” As he provided his bookseller, Hutton, a steady supply of homilies for publication he observed that they “were everywhere called for.” On his first landing in Philadelphia, Whitefield authorized Franklin’s rival, the publisher Bradford, to print two of his sermons when Bradford forecast sales of one thousand, a significant press run for any publication in the mid-eighteenth century. In the spring of 1740, the itinerant reported to a London supporter that “God is pleased to give a great blessing to my printed sermons. They are now in the hands of thousands in these parts.” And Cutler lamented to the bishop of London, “His Journals, Sermons, and Pamphlets are reprinted and eagerly bought here.”

Through his publications, Whitefield did more than publicize his revivals. For some people, his writings represented the primary means of receiving his message. While traveling through the southern colonies in 1739, the evangelist noted the difficulty of holding revivals among a sparse and scattered population. Though he conducted services, the absence of sizable towns and difficulty of travel limited the crowds. While in Virginia, the evangelist preached in Williamsburg, unaware of a small group of evangelicals just sixty miles away in Hanover County who were unable to come to hear him preach. The lay leader of the group, Samuel Morris, observed that Whitefield’s “fame was much spread abroad, as a very warm and alarming Preacher, which made such of us in Hanover as had been awakened, very eager to see and hear him.” Despite Morris’s eloquent statement of the efficacy of White-

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21 See, for example, Perry, ed., *Historical Collections*, II, 350.
field's promotional campaign, the group did not hear him. They procured, however, from a Scottish traveler a "book of his sermons preached in Glasgow and taken from his mouth in short Hand." Thus Whitefield's publications circulated through unexpected routes and with surprising consequences.

Through reading Whitefield's sermons, the Virginians spread the revival. Acting as a surrogate preacher, Morris began to read the sermons aloud at meetings attended by ten to twelve faithful souls. While the writings of reformers like Martin Luther had introduced the members to "the Way of Justification," the "Concern was not very extensive." But when Morris read Whitefield's works, "many were convinced to seek deliverance with the greatest solicitude." As the readings continued, the group grew too large to meet in homes and built its first meetinghouse. Unable to find a suitable pastor—that is, one who was evangelical and Calvinist—these dissenting evangelicals continued to rely on Whitefield's printed sermons. "When the report of these Sermons and the Effects occasioned by reading them was spread Abroad," Morris reported, he was invited to several places to read them, and "by this Means the concern was propagated." Through the aid of Whitefield's printed sermons, the group survived and evolved into the first Presbyterian church in Virginia.

By preceding the oral message with the printed word, Whitefield's journals were effective in raising expectations for the revivals. Upon reading Whitefield's journals, Benjamin Colman wrote, "I lov'd and honour'd [you] from the first sight I had of your Journal to Gibraltar." He continued, "when I read your Journals, my Heart tells me, if God were not with you of a Truth, neither could your bodily Strength hold out and less the Powers of your Mind." Thomas Prince, editor of Boston's evangelical magazine, the Christian History, recalled that in 1738 New Englanders began reading about the remarkable success of the evangelist in "his first two Journals." In the weeks before the first Boston preaching tour, lengthy journal extracts in the newspapers traced the revival's northward progress.

Whitefield disseminated his journals in various forms and through several media. The evangelist and his assistants circulated his latest journals through the letter-writing network. Often he mailed extracts from the version in process to give his supporters a current account of the revival. And on occasion the evangelist even read from his journals to religious societies. He also sent copies to newspapers where they

25 Ibid.
26 In mid-eighteenth-century Anglo-America orality had status only in ground prepared by print. If the Great Awakening had not occurred in a print culture, it would not have extended to the masses it reached. For the contrary argument that the revivalists participated in a popular, oral culture as opposed to an elite, print culture, see Harry S. Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," William and Mary Quarterly, 34 (Oct. 1977), 519–41; and Stout, New England Soul. See also Rhys Isaac, "Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776," William and Mary Quarterly, 33 (July 1976), 357–85. Isaac contrasts personal oral communication in a traditional face-to-face society with impersonal print media in a modern society, arguing that the latter made possible a level of withdrawal that promoted individualism.
27 Benjamin Colman, Three Letters to the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield (Philadelphia, 1739), 5; Christian History, Jan. 5, 12, 19, 1744/1745.
sometimes appeared in successive issues on the front page. Eager to print anything with Whitefield’s name on it, book publishers facilitated the dispersion of the journals. Though all sixteen printed versions emanated from Boston and Philadelphia presses, they radiated through an intercolonial bookseller network. Franklin published the seven journals in a two-volume set and distributed it to other printers and booksellers in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina. He also issued an eighth volume for a regional audience, covering only Whitefield’s travels in the environs of Philadelphia.28 Franklin’s colonywide network was a new scheme in America, just as Whitefield’s open-air preaching was novel. These two innovators naturally joined their intercolonial interests to serve each other.

Not only did Whitefield exploit a wide variety of printed forms, he also employed several merchandising techniques to promote his evangelical activities. One marketing strategy Whitefield favored was serial publication of his sermons and journals. Introduced by imaginative publishers earlier in the eighteenth century, “this method of weekly publication allure[ed] multitudes to peruse books, into which they would otherwise never have looked.” Through serialization, Whitefield increased demand two ways. First, the low price for each segment made it affordable for a larger group of people than could purchase the two-volume collection. Second, the serialized journals created a heightened sense of anticipation as readers followed the evangelist’s progress toward their own communities. From 1737 through 1741, the formative years of his transatlantic revivals when promotion was most needed, he wrote and published seven different volumes. At the end of the first, describing events from his departure to his arrival at Savannah, he wrote, “I . . . close this part of my Journal,” setting the stage for an ongoing account. He also serialized his spiritual autobiography. In 1740, during his second passage to America, he wrote for publication the first part of his life, A Short Account of God’s dealings with the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, designed to inform the reader of important events and influences up to those described in his first journal. At the close of the first of two volumes, he wrote, “I shall hereafter relate God’s further dealings with my soul, and how He led me into my present way of acting.” Advertisements for subsequent volumes of both the journals and the autobiography emphasized the “latest edition” or “most recent account.”29 About every six months, the itinerant sent new editions to his publishers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Whitefield increased publication sales through a variety of creative pricing schemes. Seeking widespread distribution in a mass market, Whitefield instructed his publisher to “print so as to sell cheap.” In the preface to his hymnal, he made explicit the connection between price and purchaser, “As the generality of those who receive the Gospel are commonly the poor of the flock, I have studied cheapness,

29 Whitefield, Journals, 70, 152; George Whitefield, A Short Account of God’s dealings with the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, late of Pembroke College, Oxford. From his infancy, to the time of his entering into Holy Orders (Glasgow, 1741).
as well as conciseness." However, raising money for the orphanage through a private subscription for a collection of sermons, the itinerant set a high price of four shillings. Recognizing that merchants such as Thomas Noble of New York bought hundreds of books and sermons for free distribution to those who could not afford them, Whitefield and his booksellers offered quantity discounts. The sermon on the new birth sold for "six pence; or two guineas per hundred for those who give them away," the latter terms representing a 16 percent discount. Through his London printer, Lewis, Whitefield offered a cash discount to encourage early payment on subscription sales. Through flexible pricing Whitefield expanded the market for his publications, facilitating widespread publicity.30

Whitefield best displayed his merchandising acumen in efforts to increase the Weekly History's sagging circulation and bolster its anemic revenue. After Whitefield returned to London in 1741, the magazine's management began to reflect his consumer-driven mentality. Late in 1742, editor Lewis announced, "we purpose to begin next in a more commodious manner as we are likely to be furnished with more materials," no doubt from the evangelist himself. The editor pledged "to let our readers have more reading for their money" by removing the large title, resulting in "much [more] room for useful reading." And for consumer convenience, the magazine would be made available in pocket size, perhaps an innovation Whitefield borrowed from Franklin, who produced a pocket-sized version of his almanac. And Lewis promised home delivery, dispensing the magazine at "people's houses, at the price of one penny."31 Through such imaginative merchandising, Whitefield and his associates reversed the fortunes of the publication, which survived well past the revival's decline.

Whitefield was an innovator in advertising. Merchants who viewed markets as restricted to a fixed number of customers did not advertise to create consumer demand. Instead, they merely provided information about the availability of their goods and the terms of sale. However, English capitalists in the eighteenth century expanded both domestic and foreign markets and advertised in order to exploit what they considered to be an elastic consumer demand. With a similar view, Whitefield sought to generate interest in his revivals through aggressive advertising. Opponents protested "the various methods taken up by Mr. Whitefield and his adherents, for trumpeting abroad his fame, and magnifying his person and performance."32

Whitefield recognized that negative as well as positive publicity could generate interest in his revivals. Especially during his first three American trips, the evangelist engaged in polemics to differentiate his message of the new birth from what he con-

31 Weekly History, Nov. 13, 1742.
sidered to be the “stirrings of dry bones,” rattling from unconverted ministers. In
a published letter to the students at Harvard and Yale, he charged both colleges
with allowing their “light [to] become darkness.” That incendiary tract attacking
cherished institutions sparked a heated exchange of supporting and opposing pub-
cations. Whitefield wrote of the debate, “A few mistaken, misinformed good old
men are publishing halfpenny testimonials against me.” However, Whitefield
agreed with Colman that such opponents had done him “a real service” by giving
the evangelist’s friends an opportunity “to publish testimonials in [his] favour.”
Whitefield recorded in his journal that opponents’ charges served in the end to
benefit him and the revival because they kept readers’ attention focused on him.33

On occasion, Whitefield and his associates manipulated the news to publicize
the revival. William Seward wrote an account of a dancing school’s closing in
Philadelphia and attributed its demise to Whitefield’s charge that its activities were
“inconsistent” with the gospel. Franklin inserted the unedited article in the May
1, 1740, Pennsylvania Gazette, sparking a dispute that dominated the paper’s front
page for the entire month. The school’s proprietor accused Franklin of biased
coverage and Seward of planting the story to “spread his master’s fame.”34 That astute
observation proved accurate as the story was reprinted from Boston to Charleston.

Testimonials and endorsements were key elements in Whitefield’s advertisement
program. They introduced and recommended him to a local community. For in-
stance, when he first arrived in Boston in 1740, he brought with him a strong tes-
timonial from Josiah Smith, a Harvard-educated minister in Charleston, South
Carolina. Smith, a friend of Colman, testified to the positive changes Whitefield’s
preaching had wrought in Charleston. He extolled the itinerant’s oratorical prowess
and pronounced his theology orthodox. Whitefield delivered the document to
Colman and another leading clergyman, Thomas Cooper. Both Colman and Cooper
wrote their own endorsements of the evangelist as a preface to Smith’s testimony
and published the whole as a pamphlet promoting the revival. Whitefield con-
tinued to benefit from the testimony by reprinting it in the Christian Weekly and
circulating it throughout the letter-writing network.35

Whitefield’s writings initiated a chain of events leading to unsolicited endorse-
ments. A New Yorker in 1739 “read two or three of Mr. Whitefield’s Sermons and
Part of his Journal, and from thence . . . obtain’d a settled opinion he was a good
man.” Inspired by what he read, the man attended one of the revival services. After
he heard Whitefield, he wrote a strong endorsement of the itinerant’s theology and
oratory. Philadelphia and Boston newspapers published the endorsement, further
extending the influence of a single testimonial.36

How Whitefield managed the revival’s funds illustrates a final important com-
mercial influence on his ministry. After announcing his intention to evangelize in

33 Gillies, ed., Works of Whitefield, I, 296, II, 76; Whitefield, Journals, 373.
34 Pennsylvania Gazette, May 1, May 8, 1740.
35 Christian History, Jan. 12, 19, 1744/1745.
America, the itinerant preached a series of charity sermons in England, collecting donations of more than a thousand pounds for the orphanage John and Charles Wesley had suggested for Georgia. At the prompting of a merchant, Whitefield bought consumer goods, which he transported on the *Elizabeth*, intending to sell them in America where demand for English merchandise ran high. Upon arriving in Philadelphia, he advertised his wares, conducted an auction, and made a profit sufficient to finance his preaching tour. On a subsequent fund-raising journey, Whitefield purchased a five-hundred-acre plantation in South Carolina with donations he collected in Charleston. Using slave labor, he hoped to generate a surplus to provide working capital for the orphanage. Thus Whitefield the entrepreneur significantly shaped the contours of the ministry of Whitefield the evangelist.37

Whitefield exploited the growing consumer demand to help finance the revivals. He found opportunities for profits at almost every level of the distribution chain. As a producer of raw materials for English textile manufactory and provisions for the West Indies market, the master of the Georgia orphanage generated 20 percent of the institution's revenues from such exports. His superintendent, James Habersham, who by the 1750s had become one of Savannah's wealthiest merchants, placed the orphanage schooner in the service of the expanding coastal trade to realize additional earnings from shipping fees. And at the Tabernacle, Whitefield's London headquarters, a bookkeeper managed the evangelist's book-selling business, preparing a weekly report of revenues from the sales of printed material throughout the Atlantic evangelical community.38

As a tireless fund raiser, Whitefield not only funded his evangelical and humanitarian interests, he amassed an estate in excess of £3,300—exclusive of his lands and buildings in England and America. Such a sum was significant in 1770 when an artisan's house and lot in Savannah cost £250 and a teacher at the Georgia orphanage house received an annual stipend of £50.39

Whitefield's extensive application of the new merchandising techniques set him apart from his evangelical predecessors and contemporaries. Although the revivalist exploited the power of newspaper publicity to "spread his fame" abroad, even his early colleagues in English pietism, John and Charles Wesley, rejected advertising as a means of promoting their religious enterprises, viewing it as a tasteless "sounding [of] a trumpet."40 What influenced Whitefield to employ innovations from the marketplace? How and from whom did the evangelist learn the commercial strategies he employed so successfully?

Whitefield's initial inspiration for appropriating commercial means to promote his revivals stemmed from his family's involvement in the market. His father was a wine merchant in Bristol before moving to Gloucester, where he purchased the Bell Inn, whose income placed the elder Whitefield's name near the top of the town's tax rolls. After his father died during George's childhood, the younger's mother married a man who traded in hardware, who immediately assumed ownership of the tavern. There, George worked as a "common drawer," under both his stepfather and, after the latter's death, his brother Richard, who gained title to the business. Before his departure to begin his studies at Oxford University, Whitefield ran the tavern in his brother's absence for almost a year. In addition to his direct experience in running a local business, Whitefield had at least a glimpse into overseas trade. He spent several months in Bristol with his older brother, James, who was a ship's captain trading in the American and West Indies markets. James sold English manufactured goods, Barbados rum, and muscovado, or raw sugar, at his store on the Charleston, South Carolina, wharf. Indeed, his advertisements appeared in the *South Carolina Gazette* before those of his evangelist brother. James gave financial support to the young minister, but his more important contribution may have been the knowledge he imparted regarding the world of commerce.41

Whitefield's childhood friends introduced him to the spreading world of book selling and newspaper publishing. Gabriel Harris, whose father owned Gloucester's most prominent book store, remained a faithful supporter throughout Whitefield's ministry. As a youngster, Whitefield spent considerable time in the Harris home and gained the approbation of the elder Harris, who provided both books and money toward George's studies at Pembroke College at Oxford. He helped promote the young minister by sending one of Whitefield's early sermon manuscripts to an older clergyman, who not only liked the discourse but also paid Whitefield a guinea for the document. Whitefield also associated with Robert Raikes, whose father founded the town's first newspaper, the *Gloucester Journal*. After assuming control of the paper following his father's death, Raikes attended Whitefield's first public sermon and wrote a favorable report in the next edition. At Whitefield's urging, Raikes published extracts from William Law's treatises on practical piety in six successive issues during 1737. Whitefield noted that "God was pleased to give [the reprints] His Blessing."42 Thus, Whitefield's early friendships introduced him to the print trade, which would later become the most important agent of his advertising and publicity.

Beyond the influence of family and friends in Gloucester, Whitefield was shaped by the spreading commercialized society itself—the world of Daniel Defoe and Bernard Mandeville—where "more [people] than ever was known in former years . . . engaged] in buying and selling." Because of rising incomes and easy credit, consumers on both sides of the Atlantic had the means to purchase the new consumer

41 Whitefield, *Journals*, 40, 61. For James Whitefield's advertisements, see, for example, *South Carolina Gazette*, Feb. 15, 1739.
goods coming on the market. As the cost of food declined throughout the 1730s and 1740s, the English enjoyed greater purchasing power. And, by the American Revolution, the colonists' per capita income matched that of the British. Further, American merchants made available "a large amount of credit extended for the purchase of all kinds of commodities and services for consumption purposes."43

By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, household producers throughout the English countryside turned out "small consumer goods on an unprecedented scale" to meet the demand of a very large and growing market. Defoe noted in 1722 that 120,000 people were employed in the woolen and silk manufactures of Norwich alone. Most worked out of their country homes, spinning yarn or operating looms. They sold their goods through merchants not only in London and the provinces but throughout the Atlantic world as well. One visitor to Maryland observed that "the quick importation of fashions from the mother country is really astonishing. I am almost inclined to believe that a new fashion is adopted earlier by the polished and affluent American than by many opulent persons in the great metropolis." Lorena Walsh's examination of probate inventories in the Chesapeake Bay area revealed that by the 1730s, "middling families got into the act [of consuming] and by the 1750's, even the poorer sorts were finding a wide variety of non-essentials increasingly desirable." Carole Shammas estimated that by 1774, "the average American spent over one quarter of his or her budget on imports from outside his or her colony of residence."44

Consumer demand spurred enterprising merchants to restructure the marketplace, creating institutions Whitefield found useful in promoting his religious enterprises. The scope and nature of advertising changed. Print capitalists published newspapers throughout provincial England and colonial America and made their readers aware of the latest London fashions. Generic descriptions of products, such as cloth, paper, and ceramics, characterized advertisements in the 1720s, but by the 1750s, New York advertisers publicized the availability of "purple gloves, rough gloves, chamois gloves, buff gloves, 'Maid's Black Silk' gloves, 'Maid's Lamb Gloves', and even 'Men's Dog Skin Gloves.'" Retailers introduced "bright, glass-fronted and bow-windowed" shops, "enabling English householders to obtain goods from the length and breadth of the country." And Scottish merchants extended the retail network to the sparsely populated Virginia countryside. In 1743 Francis Jerdone, a merchant in Hanover County, observed, "There are 25 stores within 18 miles round me . . . and 4 or 5 more expected next year from some of the [British] outports." Middlemen became more important links in the lengthening distribution chain, as their

warehouses and credit smoothed the flow of goods from manufacturers to final consumer. A new breed of wholesalers, traveling merchants, carried with them goods worth upwards of a thousand pounds sterling, supplied country shops with goods in bulk (called “whole pieces”), and gave “large credit” to shopkeepers. And as they had for centuries, itinerant hawkers and peddlers continued to sell their wares directly to consumers in London and beyond. Communications improvements enabled merchants to expand the flow of goods to the widening market. English businessmen raised funds through subscriptions to build the canals and turnpikes necessary to make exchanges easier and to mobilize effective demand.45

Consumer demand also prompted businessmen to develop new merchandising techniques that Whitefield applied to the propagation of religion. Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, many manufacturers were content to remain at home and “let the orders come to them.” But by 1780 William Hutton, observing business practices in Birmingham, could write, “The merchant stands at the head of the manufacturer . . . [and] travels the whole island to promote the sale; a practice which would have astounded our forefathers.” The brass manufacturer Matthew Boulton and the potter Josiah Wedgwood pioneered many of the aggressive sales strategies that characterized what Neil McKendrick has called the “birth of a consumer society.” Boulton seized such special occasions as royal birthdays to conduct spectacular London sales “to boost demand and to win the attention of the fashion spreaders.” Advertisements included familiar references to royal patronage to “milk the effects of social emulation.” But advertising alone was insufficient in warding off competitors who sought their share of the growing consumer demand. Wedgwood concluded that “various means must be unremittingly made use of to awake, and keep up the attention of the world to the fine things we are making.” He and other entrepreneurs employed a range of selling ploys that sound anachronistically modern, including market research, product differentiation, giveaways to promote sales, advanced credit, three-tier discount schemes, solicited puffs, and even “false attacks organized to provide the opportunity to publicize the counter-attack.”46

The new commercialism produced a language of goods that extended to human endeavors beyond the business world. John Brewer has claimed that Wilkes “ cribbed from the tradesman's copybook” to fund his campaign and capture votes.47 And


George Whitefield linked religion and commerce to organize and promote the transatlantic revivals. The young Anglican's message of the necessity of a spiritual new birth was not new. Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, Massachusetts, had sounded a similar theme in the regional awakening he led in 1735. Whitefield's innovation lay in the commercialization of his revivals. Although the eighteenth-century English world underwent significant demographic and economic change, churches clung to tradition. The norm was a settled ministry serving local parishioners who gathered at fixed times for worship. With a commercialized perspective strengthened by his familiar association with merchants, Whitefield developed a different vision—one informed by patterns of thought gleaned from the expanding market.48 Like the merchants who generated their own consumer demand by planting colonies and advertising their wares at home and abroad, Whitefield applied the latest marketing strategies to create and exploit a transatlantic audience for evangelicalism.

Whitefield heightened his familiarity with the world of commerce as he immersed himself in the Atlantic market to promote and fund his favorite charity, the Georgia orphan house (which he called Bethesda). Whitefield sharpened his entrepreneurial skills as he sought a commercial enterprise to make the orphanage self-sustaining. Throughout the 1740s, Whitefield's correspondence reflected his preoccupation with such mundane matters as profits from book sales, bills of exchange to settle transatlantic accounts, and the high cost of labor. Whitefield tried to keep track of funds being raised and disbursed on both sides of the Atlantic. While in Charleston in 1745, for instance, he requested his London agent, John Symes, to send "a short sketch of my accoumts that I may know how my affairs stand." To balance his books, the evangelist sought to increase his revenue and decrease his expenses. Whitefield wrote Boston supporters concerning his latest publications, expressing his expectation that "some profit will accrue to me from my sermons, etc." But to improve their profitability, Whitefield urged a trusted Bostonian to "make what bargain with [the printers] you think proper" to reduce printing costs. Whitefield also fretted over reducing expenditures, at one point proposing smuggling and illegally introducing slavery into Georgia as a way to lower Bethesda's labor costs. To a South Carolina planter, Whitefield expressed his opinion that although Georgia prohibited slavery, "no notice [was] taken of Negroes at all." Therefore, he suggested if the planter would "give [him] a Negroe, [he would] venture to keep him, and if he should be seized" the itinerant would buy him again. Like merchants of the day, Whitefield relied on credit to operate in overseas trade. He, for example, drew bills on William Seward's brother, Benjamin, a London merchant, to remit funds to Symes to satisfy British suppliers. Thus, Whitefield's own experience in the market

influenced his favorable attitude toward merchants and their role in propagating the gospel.49

Whitefield deepened his immersion in the commercial culture through consumption—purchases for himself as well as those for Bethesda. Unlike some of the radical revivalists, such as James Davenport of Long Island, who preached against spreading consumerism, Whitefield not only did not condemn consumption, he enjoyed material possessions.50 After securing the orphan house's financial position in the mid-1750s, the evangelist spent more freely on himself. Concluding that his "one-horse chaise [would] not do for [him]," Whitefield ordered a closed four-wheeled carriage with improved springs to make his trips over England's rough roads more comfortable. It cost "thirty or forty pounds," equivalent to the annual income of some of the lesser clergy. After taking delivery, the itinerant indicated he "like[d] the purchase exceedingly well." And he cherished a handsome watch adorned with a beautiful gold case, though he covered it with leather so the "delicacy [would] not offend." Whitefield also delighted in personal gifts his supporters gave him, including books, horses, and even a slave. One of his most treasured gifts was a slave whom his co-laborer William Hervey purchased for him at a cost of thirty pounds sterling. To remember the donor, Whitefield named the servant Weston, after Hervey's parish, Weston-Flavel. At times, Whitefield even demonstrated great anxiety over his personal goods. While in America in 1746, he wrote successive letters to his mother, brother-in-law, and finally his agent, Syms, requesting that his "padlocked chest . . . [and] portable furniture" be sent to Charleston. The letters expressed a growing sense of urgency by one attached to his possessions.51

Contrary to the interpretations of many contemporaries and historians alike, Whitefield viewed commerce and revivalism as compatible. Edwin S. Gaustad, agreeing with Perry Miller's thesis that there was a steady decline in the vitality of colonial Puritanism as third- and fourth-generation laymen and clergymen alike turned from the faith of their spiritual forefathers to the pursuit of profits and pleasure, argued that the "thriving West Indian trade . . . brought a measure of prosperity to the New England colonies" that led to such evils as pride and economic oppression. As a result of the expansion of the market, "God became less respected as man became more respectable." Writing on the Great Awakening in the major seaports, Gary Nash concluded that the awakening became "class specific," embraced by the laboring poor and shunned by the merchant elites of colonial cities. However, many merchants did support Whitefield and the early Methodists. Whitefield and John Wesley counted among their most ardent supporters in Bristol, for example, busi-

nessmen attracted not only by their proclamation of the Puritan ethic but also by their energy, dedication, and organization—qualities essential to mercantile success. And, Whitefield enjoyed no greater acceptance and support than that accorded him by the Brattle Street Church in Boston, a congregation dominated by merchants. Discovering a creative tension between profits and piety, Whitefield’s entrepreneurial evangelism accommodated Christians who pursued their callings in the marketplace.52

Not only did Whitefield view commerce and religion as compatible, he maintained that trade was an essential feature of the divine economy. He argued that God would have deemed creation incomplete if his human creatures lacked company. Therefore, the Almighty made it impossible that “communities be kept up, or commerce carried on, without society.” Indeed, “Providence seem[ed] wisely to have assigned a particular product to almost each particular Country, on Purpose, as it were to oblige us to be social.” Whitefield concluded that the mutual dependence of commerce and society demonstrated that “the one great end of [human] existence,” consisted in individuals’ being useful to each other in social life.53 Toward that end, he determined to share his “particular product”—his evangelical message—with the widest possible audience through the means at hand.

Whitefield’s acquaintance with the spreading market influenced his conception of evangelism. It provided him the language to define his “business” as that of propagating the gospel to a parish that encompassed the whole world. It also shaped his view that merchants were necessary to the spread of evangelical religion. Whitefield held that Christian merchants were called to their vocation, arguing that their success in profitable trade promoted soul winning by generating the funds necessary to conduct the transatlantic revivals. Whitefield expressed his regard for honorable exchange through the liberal sprinkling of commercial metaphors in his sermons and correspondence. In one self-conscious application of mercantile imagery, Whitefield thanked God for converting one supporter into a “Christian merchant, and teaching him the art of trafficking for the Lord.”54

As his ministry progressed in partnership with supporters from the world of commerce, Whitefield inserted commercial language more frequently into his discourses. Employing the vocabulary of trade and finance, the revivalist assured one merchant that the trader’s “all [was] insured, and [he would] receive [his] own with good usury at the great day.” He encouraged the businessman to “spend and be spent for Christ’s people,” declaring evangelism to be a “glorious employ.” Departing for his fifth visit to America in 1754, Whitefield exhorted his followers to be “laudably ambitious, and get as rich as [they could] towards God.” He declared the


“bank of heaven . . . a sure bank” on which he had “drawn thousands of bills . . . and never had one sent back protested.” Before embarking on his last American journey, Whitefield lamented losing “the sale of some gospel goods at Gravesend market-place” and urged his fellow laborers to “meet with thousands of moneyless customers” to “sell” the gospel. Then, referring to his own mission to the colonies, the evangelist voiced his desire for a fruitful “trading voyage [wherein he would] sail into harbour with a well full and choice cargo of heavenly wares.”

Whitefield’s use of commercial language sounded exactly like what ministers such as Cotton Mather and Benjamin Colman had preached a generation before the awakening. What was new about Whitefield was not his appropriation of the language of the market, but his adaptation of marketing techniques. Yet, Whitefield’s commercialization of religion need not suggest a secular orientation. Rather it indicates a zeal for propagating the gospel through the most powerful means available. Therefore, he intuitively and self-consciously appropriated merchandising strategies for igniting the transatlantic revivals.

Whitefield profited from a close association with businessmen. They followed the revivalist for a variety of reasons and provided him with valuable merchandising assistance. His major benefactor, Seward, an ardent supporter of charity schools as a means of elevating the “poorer sorts,” recognized Whitefield’s ability to solicit funds. James Hutton suggested that while Whitefield’s “chief object was at the time to convert souls;” Seward and others sought merely “to get money for their schools.” However, Seward demonstrated his commitment to the cause of broadcasting the need for the New Birth. Not only did he leave his lucrative business as a stockjobber to travel to America with Whitefield, he played a major role in financing and publicizing Whitefield’s revivals. In Philadelphia in 1739, he purchased a sloop and gave it to the evangelist, enabling the preacher and fellow travelers to itinerate between Savannah and Boston at their convenience. At Whitefield’s request, Seward bought five thousand acres on the forks of the Delaware River to establish a school for Negroes and a community for English evangelicals. He also gave monetary and spiritual encouragement to the religious societies that formed the nucleus of the itinerant’s informal organization in towns throughout Britain and America. As a respected member of the evangelical community, Seward extended the evangelist’s letter-writing network, corresponding with sympathetic business associates about Whitefield’s successes and needs. From Philadelphia, for example, he sent letters to “Savannah, Charleston, Frederica, Virginia, Cape Fear, New Brunswick, and New York,” enclosing both newspaper accounts and Whitefield’s latest publications.

Whitefield, shaped by the world of trade, also influenced lay followers in their business enterprises. James Lackington, a successful London bookseller, traced his initial encouragement in business to the early Methodist revivals of Whitefield and Wesley. While attending a revival meeting in the 1740s, Lackington underwent a

conversion experience, which “caused [him] to embrace every opportunity to learn to read.” His determination to read evangelical works led him to collect religious books, the foundation for the modest initial inventory of his first bookstore. Whitefield and Wesley encouraged evangelical entrepreneurs by inviting them to advertise their wares in evangelical magazines and by advancing them interest-free loans. Lackington “borrowed five pounds” from one of the Methodist society’s funds, adding that the advance “was of great service” in increasing his stock.57

In a more direct way, Whitefield helped Habershaw launch a successful commercial career, resulting in his becoming one of Savannah’s leading merchants. Habershaw accompanied Whitefield to Georgia on his first American trip and remained to lay the foundation for the orphan house. Just as Bethesda was “the means of first bringing [Whitefield] out” as an evangelist, it provided the enterprising Habershaw the means of beginning his trading business. As he engaged in the coastal and West Indies trade on behalf of the orphanage, he also traded on his own account. By 1744 Habershaw had left the orphan house and formed a partnership that participated in the transatlantic trade, exporting tobacco and rice and importing English manufactures. The link between commerce and evangelical religion stands in bold relief in the relationship between Whitefield and Habershaw. On the initial voyage to Georgia, Whitefield taught Habershaw the Bible and Latin so he would be effective in teaching the orphans. Then in the 1750s, Habershaw, by that time a savvy businessman, taught Whitefield how to solve Bethesda’s financial difficulties. Beset by funding problems exacerbated by the war with the Spanish, Whitefield turned to Habershaw to devise a plan to reduce the orphan house’s expenses and increase its revenues.58 As a result of his plan, the orphanage became self-sustaining.

Printers supported Whitefield in part because he was good business. As the revival spread in the colonies, Whitefield and American booksellers profited from the commercial appeal of the evangelist’s publications, fostered by his well-publicized successes—huge crowds, numerous conversions, and liberal contributions. Each year from 1739 through 1745, American publishers released more works by Whitefield than by any other writer. The total number of publications printed in the colonies increased by 85 percent from 1738 to 1741, with most of the increase attributable to the Grand Itinerant. In the peak revival year, 1740, Whitefield wrote or inspired thirty-nine titles, or 30 percent of all works published in America. For many printers, Whitefield’s writings constituted a significant proportion of their business. For instance, from 1739 to 1742, one of the largest publishers in the colonies, Daniel Henchman of Boston, spent more than 30 percent of his printing budget producing the evangelist’s books. Whitefield not only profited from the sale of his works, he also benefited from Henchman’s and Franklin’s generous contributions to Bethesda. However, the relationship between business and theology was a complicated one with both commerce and religion influencing decisions. Hutton, who had printed most of Whitefield’s early works, refused to produce further writings after 1741,

57 Memoirs of the Forty-Five First Years of the Life of James Lackington (London, 1794), 59, 129.
when he sided with Wesley’s rejection of Whitefield’s Calvinism. Although he had, according to Whitefield, “made hundreds” from the revivalist’s publications, Hutton forswore future profits, refusing to print religious matters “except what [he] believed and approved.”

Whitefield shared with the new merchants of the consumer revolution both similar strategies and a common view of the market as elastic. Improvements in communications and marketing enabled traders to escape the “cosseted constraints” of local markets and sell their goods to strangers at great distances. And the increased disposable income of urban consumers resulting from falling agricultural prices in the first half of the eighteenth century prompted merchants to consider means of selling consumer goods to the middling and even poorer people, not just the better sort. In a similar way, Whitefield discovered in the new merchandising techniques vehicles for conveying the necessity of a new birth to people far beyond the confines of a single local parish, or the entire Anglican church, or even the very boundaries of Britain itself. Although he subscribed to the Calvinist doctrine of election, Whitefield believed that God used the “meanest instruments” to awaken sinners to his grace. Thus, the evangelist felt compelled to employ every means—even those “the world” used to merchandise its baubles—to deliver the gospel to all people.

As Whitefield succeeded in generating unprecedented crowds, he raised the ire of those who opposed his violation of traditional ecclesiastical boundaries and clerical conduct. The eminent Boston rationalist, Charles Chauncy, protested the way Whitefield hawked religion like a traveling salesman peddling his wares, objecting especially to the itinerant’s giving “Public Notice” of his preaching activities. An anonymous writer to the Boston Weekly News-Letter proposed a remedy for the evangelist’s blatant commercial activities in the name of religion. The correspondent wrote that as there was “a very wholesome law in the province to discourage Pedlars in Trade,” the time had arrived “to enact something for the discouragement of Pedlars in Divinity also.” These outrages point to one of the greatest ironies of the Great Awakening: the Calvinist Whitefield embraced mass marketing. While Chauncy and other proto-Unitarians rejected Whitefield’s Calvinism as narrow and decidedly unenlightened, they also denounced his innovative, rational adaptations of the latest commercial means to propagate his message to vast audiences.


61 Charles Chauncy, A Letter From a Gentleman in Boston to Mr. George Wishart, concerning the state of religion in New England (Edinburgh, 1742); Boston Weekly News-Letter, April 22, 1742.