

The Sermons of George Whitefield, 2 vols, edited with an introduction by Lee Gatiss, Reformed Evangelical Anglican Library. Watford: Church Society, 2010. 504 and 462 pages.

Review by **Matthew Mason** in *Ecclesia Reformanda* 3.1 (April 2011)

Real Anglicans are Reformed Anglicans. That appears to be the premise of the series to which these volumes belong. From the Reformation on, the Church of England has been broader than this in practice. Nevertheless, confessionally, it is indeed a Reformed Church. The Articles and Prayer Book have a Reformed soteriology and doctrine of the sacraments. The Ordinal presents a Reformed view of the ordained ministry, albeit one that maintains episcopacy as a distinct order, over against the Continental Reformed churches. The Reformed Evangelical Anglican Library thus represents a kind of Anglican *ressourcement* project, seeking to recover the voices of significant Reformed Anglicans from history. These two volumes of sixty-one sermons by George Whitefield (1714-1770) are the first in the series.

Whitefield is an interesting choice. In *Evangelical Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*, J. C. Ryle emphasises that Whitefield, along with most of the leaders of the evangelical revival, was, in his words, a ‘Churchman’. However, in the twentieth century, the principal torchbearers for Whitefield’s legacy were non-Anglicans: Martyn Lloyd-Jones and Arnold Dallimore. The Church Society, and the series editor Lee Gatiss, deserve credit for reaffirming that Anglicans should also pay attention to the great evangelist.

Whitefield is known as an evangelist and an extraordinarily prolific preacher. During his 30 years of ministry, he is estimated to have given an average of 1,000 talks per year. In addition, there is the story of one of Whitefield’s young associates asking ‘Mr Whitefield, why do you always say, “You must be born again?”’ To which Whitefield is alleged to have replied, ‘Because, you must be born again.’ This might mislead us into assuming that he was simply a hack homiletician, mass-producing oratory for the credulous, or that he was a one-trick pony. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, as Whitefield’s Reformed theology would teach us, God is sovereign and can use any instrument to bring blessing, but the sovereign God uses means and, in preaching, the means he ordinarily uses are godliness, giftedness, prayerfulness, and preparation.

This was true in Whitefield’s case. As an itinerant evangelist, he was able to reuse and refine his messages, and the sermons in these volumes are generally carefully crafted and expository in style. Although the written word cannot capture Whitefield’s gifts as an orator, these transcripts demonstrate that the power of his preaching came from more than dramatic flair. Sermon after sermon reveals Whitefield as theologically astute, exegetically insightful, and pastorally wise, as well as evangelistically compelling. He quotes or interacts with a wide range of other interpreters of Scripture—church fathers, puritans, and contemporaries—as well as secular, particularly classical, texts. As a committed Churchman, he also often alludes to the formularies of the Church of England. However, these are no dry exegetical lectures; they are full of powerful, personal applications and appeals. Although the gospel is his central theme, he addresses many subjects, including ‘the education of children and family religion (Sermon 4), persecution (Sermons 55 and 56), how to listen to sermons (Sermon 28), drunkenness (Sermon 52), cursing and swearing (Sermon 18), prayer (Sermon 54), and even British military victories (Sermon 6).’ (‘Introduction’, 19)

The usefulness of these volumes is further enhanced by the introduction and editorial notes. Gatiss has published pieces on Reformed theology and history in the sixteenth century (Calvin), seventeenth century (Owen; the Great Ejection of 1662), and eighteenth century (Toplady), so he is well placed to understand Whitefield theologically, and locate him historically. In the introduction, he offers a sympathetic account of Whitefield as a Reformed divine, committed to the authority and sufficiency of the inerrant Scriptures, with a passion for evangelism, an entrepreneurial spirit, and most importantly, a prayerful confidence in the power of God's Word to do God's work. In the footnotes to the sermons, Gatiss has done sterling work tracking down obscure references. He also provides glosses for eighteenth century words that have fallen into desuetude, and fascinating comments on historical events and persons.

Gatiss says that these sermons have been made available once more because 'we need a heavy dose of [Whitefield's] theology, we need his inspiration, and we need his urgent international vision for evangelism, working with others of like mind whatever denomination they may be but without compromising the precious truths of the gospel.' (41) May they inspire a new generation of Real Anglicans, and, indeed, evangelical Christians of all stripes, to strive prayerfully to proclaim Whitefield's gospel afresh today.

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