

THE SERMONS OF GEORGE WHITEFIELD

Edited with an introduction by Lee Gatiss, (Watford: Church Society, 2010), Part 1, 504pp., Part 2, 464pp., £33.00 (2 vol. set).

ISBN Part 1: 978-0-85190-084-1 & Part 2: 978-0-85190-085-8

Review by **The Rev Professor Allan M Harman**, Melbourne. *Reformed Theological Review* (Volume 70, December 2011, No. 3).

This is a superbly produced set of Whitefield's sermons, and an extremely important one with which to commence the Reformed Evangelical Anglican Library (REAL). It is encouraging to see the Church Society attempting to reclaim the doctrinal deposit and pastoral piety of its Anglican heritage. We pray God's blessing on it and it aims to produce a series that contains 'a variety of theological, homiletical, and pastoral works from previous generations to both edify and inspire us as we seek to reform the church and reach the lost in our day' (p. 5).

The collected works of Whitefield, edited by Dr John Gillies of Glasgow and published in 1771-1772, consisted of seven volumes, comprising letters, tracts, biography and sermons. Lee Gatiss has taken volumes five and six of that edition and added four more sermons. Two of these (Sermons 58 and 59) were approved by Gilles for publication in 1772, but have not been printed since. Two further sermons (60 and 61) have been added. The editor notes that an abridged version of Sermon 61 appeared in the *Select Sermons of George Whitefield*. The full version makes it clear that Whitefield did not intend his thirteenth trip to America to mark his decision to die there, for he indicated that after achieving some plans there he was going 'to return to my dear London and English friends again'.

The editor concentrates on three issues in his introduction – 'Whitefield the Evangelical Preacher', 'Whitefield the Anglican Entrepreneur', and 'Whitefield the Reformed Divine'. These three sum up so much of Whitefield. He was the evangelical preacher who captivated thousands, the entrepreneur who pioneered new methods of reaching the lost, and the Reformed divine who was able to put into his sermons the doctrinal matter of the Church of England as expressed in the Articles, Homilies and the Prayer Book. The introduction would be a good way to introduce readers to Whitefield if they have never read much about him. It is concise but comprehensive.

But what of the sermons? The editor has noted where each sermon was preached, if that information is available, and where it was first published. He had also added appropriate footnotes that explain expressions or point to the source of a quotation that Whitefield used. In reading the sermons I am struck yet again by the simplicity of Whitefield's gospel preaching and the passion that comes through even the printed text. For example, he preached a sermon in London in 1742 to a Society of Young Women. Near the end of the sermon he said:

I know not how to conclude. Methinks I could speak to you till midnight, if it would bring you unto the Lord Jesus Christ and make you espoused to him. For indeed, that will be the espousal which will turn to the greatest advantage, as you will find by experience, if you will but make trial. And that you may do so, my prayers and my constant endeavour shall be used.

Before he left the 'Whitaker' at Savannah in Georgia, after crossing the Atlantic in 1738, he addressed his fellow passengers and crew. Preaching from Psalm 107:30-31 he spoke of the four months they had been on board, and of the things he had seen over which he wished a veil to be drawn. But then he went on to plead with his hearers:

O then, let me beseech you, give to God your hearts, your whole hearts. And suffer yourselves to be drawn by the cords of infinite love, to honour and obey him. Assure yourselves you can never serve a better master. For his service is perfect freedom, his yoke, when worn a while, is exceeding easy, his burden light and in keeping his commandments there is great reward; love, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost here and a crown of glory that fadeth not away, hereafter.

These are only two of many such passages in the sermons. There is great variety in the biblical texts he chose, and the contents of addresses. But through them all is the urgency of the gospel message. That is brought home in the final sermon (Part 2, Sermon 61) Whitefield preached in England before sailing for the last time to America, in which he pled with his hearers to be sure that they were among Christ's sheep.

These are volumes not just for Anglicans but for all of us who come from an evangelical and Reformed heritage. Reading them should inspire us with the message and the motivation of this great preacher. This was the preaching that by God's grace brought many into his kingdom. In welcoming these sermons, we look forward with anticipation to further volumes to come in the Reformed Evangelical Anglican Library.

ALLAN M. HARMAN