Isabel Rivers writes about Whitefield’s reception in England, beginning at his death in 1770 to the centenary celebrations of 1839. The majority of his followers were Dissenters, whereas his opponents increasingly came to include Anglican evangelicals, who regarded his influence as detrimental to the Church. In the concluding chapter, Andrew Atherstone makes clear that after Whitefield’s death many local communities on both sides of the Atlantic reclaimed their connection with him. In both regions, he was recast as a man for the contemporary age who could assume numerous roles: a Calvinist, an open-air preacher and revivalist, an evangelical ecumenist, or a loyal and committed Anglican.

This book is not only a good introduction to the life and thought of the great evangelist, but also a stimulus to further research. My criticism regards the comparatively minimal attention given to Whitefield’s theology and spirituality. Only two of the sixteen chapters are dedicated to these central issues in Whitefield’s life and thought, and then the focus is only on a specific period of his life, or on a specific work, his hymnbook. I am hopeful that future Whitefield-research will give a more prominent place to the study of his preaching, theology, and spirituality.

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In the ‘Classics of Western Spirituality’ series, Tom Schwanda has edited a volume with the title: The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality. The Age of Edwards, Newton and Whitefield. In choosing the theme of this volume, both editor and publisher make very clear that they understand Evangelical spirituality as a specific stream in the protestant movement – one that is closely related to Lutheran, Calvin’s and Wesley’s spirituality.

The Evangelical stream is rooted in Puritanism and Pietism, with some characteristics of the high church Anglican tradition, the Scottish-Irish Presbyterianism and the Welsh revival. It is characterized by its advocacy for leading an intense spiritual life; a religion of the heart which emphasizes the need for personal responsibility. While this stream is not uninterested in confessional truth, its central focus is on the experience of the power of the truth in the heart.
This focus also appears in each of the six sections that this book is divided into, the first of which is titled ‘New life in Christ.’ This section deals especially with writings around the theme of the new birth and starts with a poem by Isaac Watts: ‘When I survey the wondrous cross.’ This is followed by a fragment of Gilbert Tennent’s well known sermon on ‘The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry’, a sermon that stresses that the individual cannot be a good minister of the Word without being led by the Spirit, because we do not really know the reality of the soul and the eternal truths of the gospel from our own experience.

In the first section, poems by Samuel Davies, Augustus Toplady, John Newton, Anne Steel and Nicholas Ludwig Zinzendorf are also included. The choice of this last poet is particularly indicative of the broadness of the Evangelical stream in the protestant movement; Zinzendorf’s spirituality is certainly not that of Tennent. While Tennent can be called a ‘son of thunder’, Zinzendorf’s work is characterized by its absence of the holy law and strong focus on the Lamb of God.

A letter written by Mary Fletcher about the love for Jesus is also included in the first section, as is an extract of a sermon by Samson Occom about God’s repentance related to the creation of human beings. We can then read a letter by Henry Alline in which he describes the experience of the light of the gospel coming into his heart when he was at his greatest distance from experiencing God’s salvation. A striking detail that stands out in this first section is the letter written by the slave Richard Allen, who honors his white masters as good masters, whilst describing the sale of his mother and three siblings. We also get an insight into his journey to freedom and his subsequent role as a preacher. Another letter is that of Selina Hastings, of Huntingdon, in which we read about the compassion she feels for the millions of souls without Christ.

The second section covers the Holy Spirit and his indwelling. A sermon by Whitefield and Edwards’ appendix to Brainerd’s diary are representative of the power of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual life, a position for which the stream was accused of enthusiasm.

The third section is dedicated to the functioning and understanding of Holy Scripture in Evangelical Spirituality. The fourth looks at spiritual practices such as prayer, worship, the use of a diary, fasting, meditation, the Lord’s Supper, self-examination, friendship and the house-altar. It is impressive to read how McCulloch served the Lord’s Supper from early in the morning right through to the evening in the midst of the summer; (there were 24 tables, each with 120 attendants, with sermons by Whitefield in-between).

The next section deals with the love for God, covering subjects such as backsliding, the spiritual journey and the intimate communion with Jesus. The final section is dedicated to the love of one’s neighbor and looks at the active
Christian life in protest against slavery on the one hand and in mission work on the other hand.

The advantage of having a collection of texts in this series of ‘Classics of Western Spirituality’ is that the reader experiences a wide diversity of genres and messages around certain themes. However, it did occasionally seem that a certain text could also be matched to those in other sections, or that the link with the theme of the section was very thin or arbitrary. Another issue concerns the way spirituality is practiced. In this volume, spirituality exists outside the daily life of marriage, family, profession, politics, science and economics. I interpret this as an indication of the particular spirituality of this stream of Evangelical Christianity, or does it also betray something about the interest of the compiler or this volume? A comparable question could also be raised about the lack of a section about the church. These questions indicate that this volume raises interests, questions and ideas for further research, which confirms its value.

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