

Matthew Henry



The commentator

300 years ago this month, Matthew Henry began to write his commentary on the Bible

It was the advice of the Rev. Samuel Clarke and other friends which encouraged Matthew Henry to begin writing a commentary on the whole Bible.

The following entry in his journal announced the commencement of the work:

'November 12 1704. This night, after many thoughts of heart, and many prayers concerning it, I began my Notes on the Old Testament. It is not likely I shall live to finish it, or if I should, that it should be of public service, for I am not par negotio; yet in the strength of God, and I hope with a single eye to his glory, I set about it, that I may endeavour something and spend my time to some good purpose and let the Lord make what use he pleaseth of me. I go about it with fear and trembling, lest I exercise myself in things too high for me. The Lord help me to set about it with great humility.'

By September 1706, he finished his notes on the Pentateuch and every second year produced another volume. In April 1714 Henry recorded: 'Finished Acts, and with it the fifth volume. Blessed be God that has helped me and spared me. All praise be to God.'

Early life and education

Matthew Henry was a premature baby born in 1662, and was not, at first, expected to live. When he was five he nearly died of measles. Indeed, his brother, who was six, did die. At the age of ten Matthew heard his father preach on Psalm 51.17: 'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit', and it was then that he came to know Christ in a personal way.

If nonconformists had been allowed to go to university, there is no doubt that he would have gone. One of his strengths, for instance, was in languages. He was expert in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and French. At 18 he went for higher education to an academy in London, which was eventually persecuted out of existence. At 23 he went back to London to Gray's Inn to study law, but that convinced him that he was in the wrong place and that his call to the ministry had priority.

Liberty came with King William in 1688, at almost the same time as Matthew Henry began his ministry at a Presbyterian church in Chester. Before long, almost all non-Anglicans clustered to hear the young preacher, who was fiery, plain-speaking, practical, and with an enormous ability to light up the meaning of Scripture. Virtually all the Baptists,

Congregationalists and Presbyterians in Chester united into this one work. He built up the church to 350 members, but many more than that were in the congregation on the Lord's Day.

Simple services - Sunday services were simple in the extreme.

The first service began at 9.00 am with a psalm; Matthew Henry prayed for about 30 minutes and then preached from the Old Testament for one hour. In the afternoon they all gathered again. The psalm would be different and he would preach from the New Testament.

30-minute prayers and hour-long sermons seem like a recipe for trouble. But these prayers and sermons had cost long hours of detailed study. The people heard the whole Bible expounded excitingly, relevantly, more than once, and the church maintained itself for the 25 years he was in Chester.

His first wife died of smallpox when she was 25. And three of his children died in infancy.

When he buried one little daughter he wrote in his diary: 'There is now a pretty little garment laid up in the wardrobe of the grave to be worn against the resurrection'. The congregation sobbed. He may have wept in private. But he was in his pulpit on the Lord's Day following, as he said: 'Weeping must not hinder the Word of God'.

People of former centuries lived very close to death. Matthew Henry was never morbid, but privately he did prepare for his end. He wrote in his diary: '(I prepare) so that when (death) comes I may have nothing to do, but to die'.

Eventually Matthew Henry went to a church in Hackney, London. The first Sunday he followed the Chester pattern: Genesis chapter 1 in the morning service, Matthew chapter 1 in the later service. By then he was 50 and a diabetic.

Although he hated being out of his pulpit, he visited Chester when he was 52. He fell off his horse at Tarporley near Nantwich on the way home, and then died from a massive stroke.

He left behind 45 books and pamphlets which are mostly out of print. But his six-volume Commentary on the Bible, which he completed to the end of Acts, is his most well known achievement. 'Every page', he wrote, 'is a child of prayer'. It is almost impossible to beat for devotional and practical wisdom. For instance, if you look up Genesis 26.34 you will get 190 words of comment, including a three-part sermon outline.

Whitefield's ministry

George Whitefield, the great 18th-century evangelist, frequently carried Henry's Commentary on his evangelistic travels, and said that he had read it four times. That commentary undergirded Whitefield's ministry. Wherever he refers to the author he calls him 'the great Mr. Henry'. Spurgeon held the same view of the Commentary's value.

Matthew Henry's last words encapsulate the inspiration we can derive from his life. A friend had been noting down 'last words', and Matthew Henry called to him: 'You take notice of the sayings of dying men (well), this is mine: "A life spent in the service of God and in communion with him, is the most pleasant life that anyone can live in this present world".'

Don Stephens