

Dear Friends,

Last quarter, I wrote briefly about the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The anniversary was quite well covered on television and I was interested to watch various historical programmes. This is an important part of our Methodist heritage: it was while listening to someone read from Martin Luther's Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans that John Wesley felt his heart 'strangely warmed'. Luther wrote extensively about the doctrine of justification by faith. John Wesley wrote:

*If any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed fundamental, they are doubtless these two, – the doctrine of justification, and that of the new birth: The former relating to that great work which God does for us, in forgiving our sins; the latter, to the great work which God does in us, in renewing our fallen nature.*

Wesley considered it vital that everyone understood these two fundamental doctrines – justification by faith and the new birth. He felt that plenty had been written about both doctrines, but that there was need to give a full and clear account of the new birth, and this he did in one of his sermons ('The New Birth', *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Sermon 39) under three headings:

- (1) First, Why must we be born again?
- (2) How must we be born again?
- (3) Wherefore must we be born again?

(1) In the beginning, men and women created in the image of God were perfect. Only by a wilful act of disobedience, rebellion against God, did death enter the world. The most dreadful dimension of death was dying to God, being 'alienated from the life of God'. A new spiritual life has to begin in every human heart – or as Wesley rendered it, 'every one that is born of a woman must be born of the Spirit of God' (see John 3:7).

(2) In his conversation with Nicodemus, the Lord Jesus did not describe precisely how the new birth happens, or how the Holy Spirit works in the soul. Nicodemus realised that someone could not be born again literally, but could be reborn spiritually – that is, born from above, born of God, born of the Spirit. The new birth is 'that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life; when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness'. 'It is that change whereby the earthly, sensual, devilish mind is turned into the "mind which was in Christ Jesus."'

(3) The reason we must be born again becomes clearer. The new life that follows the new birth is not simply a life of religious observances and practices, but the beginning of growing into the life of holiness, which is impossible without the new birth. Today, 'holiness' can have a rather negative feel, but what it really means is to live a Christ-like life. 'The new birth is absolutely necessary in order to eternal salvation.'

In his early life, Wesley had been very wary of 'instantaneous conversions'. However, by the time he reached the famous Wednesday night meeting in Aldersgate Street, he had come to understand that instantaneous conversions were normal in the New Testament. His inclusion of the time in his conversion narrative, 'at about a quarter before nine', is a significant detail often missed:

*A child is born of a woman in a moment, or at least in a very short time: Afterward he gradually grows, till he attains the stature of a man. In like manner, a child is born of God in a short time, if not in a moment.*

Wesley realised that then, as now, there would be plenty of excuses to sidestep the need to be born again. Some will say they do not do anyone else any harm. Others will say, they lead a devout and religious life. However, Wesley insisted on the importance of coming before God in humble prayer:

*Let me be born again! ... Only give me this, to be born of the Spirit, to be received among the children of God! Let me be born, 'not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever;' and then let me daily 'grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!'*

It is a humble prayer in which we can all share. At home or in our annual Covenant Services, we can ask God to give us the new life in Christ, or to renew the gift within us.

God bless

*John Haley*