

## SUPERINTENDENT MINISTER'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

The requirements of the new General Data Protection Regulation mean that this circuit plan might not be as widely circulated as it has been previously. There is little we can do about that but it does give the opportunity to know more accurately who is reading this letter and we must try to use that to our advantage. As the readership is now mainly ministers, local preachers and local church leaders, we can consider some important issues in greater depth.

In line with the Reformation understanding of the Holy Scriptures, the Methodist Church states in its foundation documents, the Deed of Union, that 'the Divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures is the supreme rule of faith and practice'. This is very much in the spirit of John Wesley. When people accused him of being a 'Bible-bigot', he adopted the term and used it with pride saying that he followed the Bible in all things, both great and small. For Wesley the Bible was the 'Word of God' and he was committed to the 'plain, literal meaning of any text, taken with the context'. This was the content of the preaching of a man who said: 'I must declare just what I find in the Book'.

John Wesley was committed to the Protestant idea that 'Scripture interprets scripture; one part fixing the sense of another,' but as a loyal and educated Anglican he was also familiar with the theological method of the Anglican divines, including Richard Hooker (c. 1554-1600), whose statue stands in the Cathedral Close at Exeter. Hooker used tradition and reason in Biblical interpretation to which John Wesley added 'experience'. This emphasis on Scripture, tradition, reason and experience is sometimes called the 'Wesleyan' or 'Epworth quadrilateral'.

The geometric metaphor, 'quadrilateral' – probably coined by Dr Albert Outler, who later regretted the term – can be misleading. It implies that Wesley gave all four points (Scripture, tradition, reason and experience) the same measure of authority, whereas he was committed to the Reformation principle of sola scriptura, where Scripture is the final authority in matters of faith and practice. The tests of tradition, reason and experience were applied to the interpretation of Scripture.

Therefore, the authentic Wesleyan and Methodist method is to interpret the Scriptures using the tests of tradition, reason and experience. To Wesley, 'tradition' meant 'Christian antiquity': the precedents of early Christianity, and particularly the writings of the ante-Nicene Fathers. With regard to reason, Wesley believed that all true religion would be reasonable in essence because it was reflective of the image of God. Wesley supplemented tradition and reason with the dimension of personal experience, by which he meant 'Christian' or 'evangelical experience', because he was ever concerned that formal religion should not be allowed to usurp vibrant faith. The theory of religion was never enough. It needed to be a living experience. This was what Wesley meant by 'experimental religion'. As far as Wesley was concerned, Scripture's message is reasonable; it is best interpreted by the early church; its teachings are clarified by the principles of the Reformation (which for Wesley also meant the Articles of Religion of the Church of England, though he ruthlessly edited these); and its principles are experienced in the lives of believers.

If we are to be faithful to the Methodist tradition, we need to work much harder at Scriptural interpretation than those who, to indulge their own eisegesis (making Scripture mean what you want it to mean), say careless, throwaway things such as 'that's just the Old Testament' or 'that's just Paul' or 'that's just your interpretation'. The Methodist understanding (and we are by no means unique in this) is that the Bible, rightly interpreted, offers us the truth, supremely revealed in Christ – incarnate, crucified, risen, returning.

God bless,

*John Haley*