

Lloyd-Jones Preaching Regeneration

We have seen how Keller preaches regeneration. Let's remind ourselves of how D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached it.¹

Lloyd-Jones was under no illusions. He knew that what he was about to preach would not be liked by unbelievers, and he said so. He did not try to make it palatable:

There is nothing... I sometimes think, that so demonstrates the depth of sin in the human heart as this objection to the doctrine of the rebirth or being born again. Read the New Testament Scriptures, and you will find that men objected to it in those days. When our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ spoke about it, he was always persecuted. People disliked him for mentioning it... They disliked it then, and it has always been the same ever since... The natural man, the unregenerate human heart, objected to this great and wondrous biblical doctrine of rebirth and regeneration. And it is equally true today... If a preacher stands before the natural man and says: 'You must be born again – you must have a new life from God', they ask: 'What is this strange doctrine?'

Why is this doctrine so unpopular?

Lloyd-Jones:

There is in the human heart by nature a rooted objection to the doctrine of the rebirth. What is the cause of it? It is not at all difficult to discover the answer to that question. When I am confronted by this doctrine, I deduce from it that I am in such a thoroughly bad state and condition that nothing less than being born again can put me right. And by nature I do not like that suggestion. The natural man is prepared to admit he is not one hundred per cent a saint; but if you tell him that he is absolutely rotten, and that not only is he not

¹ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Out of the Depths – Restoring Fellowship with God*.

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one hundred per cent a saint, but that unless he is born again he is hopeless, he will take umbrage and ask: 'What are you suggesting?' He will feel that you are insulting him... You remember how our Lord put it to Nicodemus, who went to him one night. Nicodemus said: 'Master, I have watched you, and observed your miracles, and have listened to you, and it is evident to me that you are a teacher come from God, for no man could do these miracles except God be with him'. Then our Lord interrupted him and said: 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God' (John 3:3). You remember the conversation that followed. Clearly Nicodemus' thought was something like this: 'I have been watching and listening to you, and I have come to the conclusion that you have something which I lack. I am a master in Israel, I have a good deal, but I am quite clear that you have more than I have. What have I to do in order to become like you?' Our Lord said to him: 'It is not a question of adding to what you have got; you must be born again, you have to go right back to the foundation; not addition, but regeneration'. But we do not like that, we do not by nature like a doctrine that tells us we are hopeless, that we are so sinful or rotten that we cannot be improved but must be literally created anew.

Let me underline the important point Lloyd-Jones was making. Nicodemus, coming to Christ, had his agenda. But Christ cut him off – midstream. Christ was not going to deal with what Nicodemus wanted. He had to be confronted with eternal verities; above all, he had to be born again. More, Nicodemus not only needed to know that he needed to be born again; he himself had to be born again! Unless he was regenerated, his case was utterly hopeless.

Precisely the same – precisely the same – applies today. Whatever unbelievers have in mind, whatever their agenda, whatever their motives, the preacher has to press upon them the blunt fact that they need to be born again. And they must be told why: they are flesh, and flesh will never see or enter the kingdom. Furthermore, being 'flesh' means that they are utterly ruined, dead in sins, helpless and hopeless: in Lloyd-Jones' terms 'absolutely rotten'. Again, as Lloyd-Jones put it, the natural man 'cannot be improved, but must be literally

created anew'. How different is this to Keller's 'loves reordered'!

Lloyd-Jones proceeded to explore the reasons behind the natural man's hatred of the doctrine of regeneration:

Or let me put it in another way. These are the obvious explanations of the opposition to the doctrine, but the real cause of the trouble is to be found at a deeper level. Why should I object when I am told in the gospel that I am so rotten that I must be born again? Why should I object when I am told that all my efforts and endeavours will not be adequate? Surely this is the answer: it is my failure to realise that I am face to face with God.

I must break in at this point. Lloyd-Jones was putting his finger on the very issue I have been trying to argue throughout this book. This is the crux of my disagreement with Keller. Keller takes the unbeliever's agenda – his obsession with himself, his self-interest, his self-esteem – and tinkers with it. Christ took Nicodemus' agenda and shattered it. The unbeliever is obsessed with his greatest idol – self. What he has to do is to start thinking about how God sees him: 'It is my failure to realise that I am face to face with God' Quite!

Lloyd-Jones went on:

We are so accustomed to looking at ourselves and to comparing ourselves with one another. We are all in competition with one another. Look at the professions, look at men in business; they are all vying with one another. Men say that you can only get on in this world by applying yourself – that is the whole idea of life which we have by nature; and we can satisfy one another and human standards up to a point. But in this matter which we are considering we are not concerned with man; we are face to face with God... If we realise for a moment that we are concerned with God and not with man, we very soon realise how lost we are and how helpless.

Spot on! This is the nub of the question in hand.

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Lloyd-Jones had more to say on the reasons behind the natural man's hatred of the doctrine of regeneration:

The other explanation, of course, is our failure to realise the truth about ourselves... 'Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me' [Ps. 51:5]... The man who sees he is shapen in iniquity and that in sin did his mother conceive him, when told that he is rotten and that he must be born again, says: 'I entirely agree. I know that my heart is in this rotten condition'. There, then, are the reasons and explanations of this objection to the doctrine. But it is also true to say that it is a humiliating doctrine.

And so on.

On the key question of regeneration leading to conversion, as I have tried to argue in these pages, there is a huge difference between Keller's approach and that of preachers recorded in Scripture, as well as the preaching of Lloyd-Jones. And I agree with the latter when he declares:

I say it is one of the major tragedies of this twentieth [and now twenty-first] century that a loose conception as to what constitutes Christianity, and what makes a man a Christian, has crept in.²

Regeneration must come near the top of the list of doctrines – if not holding first place – about which this must be said today.

² D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Out of the Depths – Restoring Fellowship with God*.