

## Interpretation has divided centuries of bible-believers.

*\*Published in The Australian Wesleyan, Issue 3, 2008*

In September and October I had the joy of attending all four of our district conferences in Australia. These annual gatherings are a source of rich fellowship and encouragement, as well as times of district business. This year the district conferences included two ordinations and the granting of two district licenses. Congratulations to our two new ordained ministers: **Rev. Rachel Tonga** (Southern District) and **Rev. Tevita Hakohako** (South Queensland District). We also commissioned two Special Workers: **Laurie Hogg** and **Taina Vea** (both of the Southern District). Congratulations to these ones who have shown themselves faithful in study and ministry and have now received appropriate district recognition.

One matter for concern and prayer at the district conferences was the lack of growth demonstrated in the statistical reports. Over the past ten years we have declined in average Sunday attendance by close to 200 people nationally. I ask you to join me in prayer that we might rediscover the power of God in our churches. In this edition of the *Australian Wesleyan* the theme is “worship”, which is very timely. We need a touch from the Lord that we might be moved to worship, pray and reach out to the lost.

This leads me to the theme that I have been pursuing over the past couple of editions of the *Australian Wesleyan*: rediscovering the keys to revival. I wrote first about the need for prayer – and this is something that God keeps stirring me about. I trust that He is also convicting you of the need to be consistent and specific in prayer. In the last edition I wrote on the topic of the inerrancy of the Scriptures. As Wesleyan Methodists we are confident that God inspired the original flawless documents and He has ensured that the Scriptures have reached us today – via the work of copyists and translators – without any significant loss or alteration. What an amazing demonstration of God’s power and care for His people. Prayer and preaching the Word are two essentials for spiritual awakening. No revival will come without prayer or where the Scriptures are dishonoured.

However, in the last edition we only briefly touched upon the issue of interpretation of the Scriptures. The interpretation of the Scriptures has divided centuries of bible-believers. John Wesley had good cause to know how doctrinal differences can divide the Church. He was ostracised from ministry in the Anglican Church for decades because of his bible beliefs. Consequently, he was very careful and systematic in interpreting the Bible. In 1964, a scholar named Albert C. Outler coined a phrase which we regularly use to explain Wesley’s method of interpretation. Outler called it “Wesley’s Quadrilateral”. That is to say, while Wesley’s primary source of theological understanding came through his study of the Bible, he confirmed the validity of his conclusions in three ways: by weighing them against the traditional teachings of the Church, by the use of logic and reason and by considering the experience of believers exposed to his teachings. These four; Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience, became known as Wesley’s Quadrilateral. However, that is not to say that all four were of equal authority to Wesley. Scripture was always authoritative. Tradition, reason and experience merely shed light upon the Scriptures. They helped Wesley to evaluate his interpretation of the text, and they aid us similarly today. When we arrive at a conclusion that appears irreconcilable to these three tests, we are encouraged to look more deeply into the text and into parallel biblical statements.

Nonetheless, as we have stated before, well-meaning, clear-minded faithful believers can read the same Scriptures and arrive at different interpretations. This in itself should not surprise us!

The Bible is the wisdom of God, and since none of us could claim to have equalled God's immense wisdom, we often see His truths only dimly. Sometimes we see one part of a larger truth, and find ourselves stating the truth differently to other believers. Sometimes we simply miss the point of the biblical lesson, or worse, we approach the Bible with our own conclusions and simply search for a text to serve our own purposes. Surely though, we should approach these Scriptures and theological debates with a spirit of humility. We are all learners under the authority of the infallible Word of God. One thing is constant though, we do not question the wisdom of the Scriptures themselves – only our own ability to comprehend God's wisdom.

One classic example of differing interpretations lies in the Calvinist / Arminian debate. The different conclusions of these two schools of theology are significant and greatly impact our approach to evangelism and holiness. As Wesleyans, we assert that Christ died for all mankind, and by His Spirit He invites all to respond to his mercy. As a member of the Wesleyan Methodist Church you are expected to accept and defend this truth and a number of similar fundamental doctrines, without disrespecting the views of other believers.

However, some issues are considered less essential, and therefore Wesleyans are free to adopt their own interpretation. One example is the timing of the Second Coming of Christ. Many of us hold strong views on this topic, but as a church we require only that you accept that Christ is returning soon in person, and that He will overthrow evil and sin upon His return.

Another issue in which we have freedom is in the timing and method of the Creation. This topic surfaces regularly when inerrancy of the Scriptures is discussed because it is at the forefront in the battle for authority between the Bible and the sciences. Science makes many claims relating to the origins of the universe and of life on earth. These claims are used by some as proof that the Bible is not trustworthy, while good science which supports the Biblical record is often disregarded by those who have an agenda of denying God.

Many Wesleyans hold to a view of a six-day creation and a young earth, while others support theistic evolution and an old-earth theory. Inasmuch as these theories are based upon the authority of the Scriptures, taking into account secondary information from tradition, reason (including science) and experience, they are both firmly Wesleyan. However, if at any time we elevate the authority of the sciences over that of the Bible, claiming that a Bible text cannot be true because of what science has proven, we have forsaken our roots as Wesleyans. Scientific theory is shifting sand. It is not suitable as a foundation for a theological house. The Scriptures however, are bedrock that does not change. Wesleyans are not afraid of using sand, mixing it with the cement of tradition, reason and experience to strengthen the house of faith – but we do not build our faith upon it.

Issues of interpretation like this can still divide us today, especially if we assume the infallibility of our own conclusions. Rather, let us be a people who know our core doctrines, but who encourage free and careful study in those matters which are not essential. “Let us hold firmly to the faith which we profess” (Hebrew 4:14); a people of conviction, but also of grace, ready to be used of God in reviving a dying world.