

## A simple faith

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I have been reading Eusebius's *The Church History*, written in the early 300's AD. It provides a fascinating and challenging insight into the early church; the high regard for the Apostles and the turmoil of early persecution and heresy. As I have read about the grace of God which sustained believers through torture and barbaric forms of martyrdom, I have wondered how the Church today might compare. Not well, I suppose.

However, it occurred to me that the Church today faces different abuses at the hands of the same old enemy. The devil might have been more overt in earlier centuries and might be more discreet in these days (at least, in much of the Western world), but he is just as active and desperate. Today the Church is tempted away from faithfulness and simplicity through blinding obsession with wealth, through flagrant immorality and through an idolatrous confidence in our own great learning. We are encouraged to reject the simplicity of the God-breathed Scriptures and to work toward man-made solutions for a troubled world. Perhaps, therefore, the need for grace is greater today than it was in the early centuries! Is that possible? After all, didn't the Lord warn that even the Elect might be led astray in the Last Days? We are not defeated though, because, as Paul reminds us, where sin abounds grace increases all the more. We have good reason for confidence today as we seek a powerful outpouring of God's Spirit upon our generation.

In times of testing, it is not the cleverness of the Church that prevails. It is simple trust in Christ and the power of His Spirit. Recently our church leadership has sought to articulate the basics of our faith and to call each of us a renewed focus and unity. The National Board of Administration has established three *Priorities* for Wesleyan Methodist Churches across Australia.

The first *Priority* is to strengthen the preaching of an *Undivided Heart*. Take note though - this is not just another call to holiness. The doctrine of holiness includes two primary aspects: that of the cleansed heart and that of a lifestyle of love and obedience. This first priority is especially a call to the preaching and anticipation of a cleansed heart, with the confidence that a cleansed heart will lead to an increasingly Christ-honouring lifestyle. God offers to replace our corrupted morality with an inner motivation after His own heart. This inner motivation is empowered by a moment of complete surrender and purification and results in a lifetime of growth.

Both aspects of holiness are true; they are biblical and essential to a full Christian experience. The Bible calls us to complete surrender and promises the purifying touch of the Spirit (Romans 12:1-2, Ezekiel 36:26-27, Psalm 24:4, Ezekiel 11:19, James 4:8, Titus 2:14, etc). The Bible also calls us to a lifelong process of growth and self-discipline (James 1:22-25, 2 Corinthians 7:1, 2 Peter 1:5-9, 2 Timothy 1:7, Philippians 2:12, etc). The priority of an *Undivided Heart* is a call to trust God for cleansing; to preach it, to expect it and to give testimony to this experience.

The second *Priority* is to reach out to our communities across this nation. When we are deeply in love with God, a concern for the lost and hurting in our communities will follow naturally. If it doesn't then the sincerity of our love for God is in question. Love for our neighbours necessarily follows after love for God because God loves this lost world.

The national church priority of *Community Engagement* is specifically directed toward each local congregation. We are asking each local church to adopt a Statement of Community

Engagement at their 2010 Annual General Meeting which will summarise their ministry in their community. Congregations may have ministries of food, visitation, education, social groups or some other demonstration of care. While it is unlikely that any one congregation can meet all of the needs of its community, it is clear that God calls us each to have some form of ministry. For some of our congregations this Statement will simply be a summary of what is already in place, while for others it will require prayer and community research.

The third *Priority* is to rediscover the disciplines of *Prayer and Fasting*. Prayer is a primary means of communion with God and it is the most effective ministry that we can undertake for our communities. This priority is more than just a daily schedule of prayer; it is a call to include the discipline of fasting in our weekly program. Fasting is not the goal in itself, but it greatly enhances focus and expectation in prayer. Some of us already have a vibrant testimony of prayer and fasting, but for those who have not yet experienced this deeper experience, we invite you to enrich your spiritual experience and effectiveness through prayer and fasting.

There are numerous ways to fast. Some abstain from a particular type of food for a set time (rich food, meat, soft drinks/coffee/tea, etc.) while others abstain from all solid food for shorter or longer periods. John Wesley called his team to abstain from all solid food from Thursday evening after dinner until Friday mid-afternoon. We are encouraging each Wesleyan to take up Wesley's Fast as a starting point. There is some flexibility in this priority, but the challenge is always to find the method of fasting that suits you and to combine it with intentional periods of focused prayer. Identify prayer needs for yourself, your family, your congregation and your community and bring those needs to God in prayer. Pray for district and national church needs. Pray for God to bring spiritual awakening upon our generation. Watch and see how God works amongst us in 2010!

Early Christians had this world torn out of their fingers by brutal persecution. You and I don't have the same level of persecution, so sometimes we are tempted to cling to this world a little more than we should. As an act of the will, let's agree together to step away from the temptations of this world in 2010. Let's expect God to send us grace and purifying power and let's live for another world.