

A Destiny Together

Justice for First Peoples

Fasting and the Church: Biblical and Theological Foundations

In July 2012, the members of the 13th Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia listened to the report from the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) and to stories about life in the Northern Territory since the so-called 'Intervention'. Those of us who were privileged to hear those testimonies, experienced the visceral reality of being truly the body of Christ:

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26).

One of the unplanned reactions to hearing the first-hand accounts of the suffering and struggle for justice of Aboriginal members and leaders within the Uniting Church was a call to prayer and fasting.

The resolution adopted by the Assembly is a recognition that now is the time for God’s mission of reconciliation between First and Second Peoples in Australia to move to the centre of our concerns as a whole church. At a critical turning point like this, the appropriate thing to do -- the Biblical thing to do -- is to prepare ourselves to respond to God’s call through prayer and fasting.

Through fasting, we are turning to God in our pain to plead for justice – justice that is a foretaste of “that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation” (*Basis of Union* paragraph 3) in the lives of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and in the nation as a whole.

In the Biblical witness, fasting is not primarily a formality, a religious routine. In fact that kind of fasting is frequently criticised (e.g. Isaiah 58). More often, fasting arises in the extremities of life: in times of fear, grief, repentance, pleading with God for rescue (e.g. Judges 20:26, 1 Chronicles 10:12, Nehemiah 1:4, 1 Samuel 7:6, 2 Samuel 12:16); or at critical turning points as a practice that equips people to respond to God’s call.

The families who returned with Ezra from exile began their journey with a fast (Ezra 8:21). After his epiphany in the Jordan, Jesus goes further into the wilderness fasting – seeking clarity about his identity and mission as the Son of God anointed by the Spirit (Matthew 4:2). The church in Antioch set Paul and Barnabas apart for God’s mission to the Gentiles with a fast, and Paul and Barnabas set apart elders in the churches God founded through their preaching in the same way (Acts 13:3, 14:23).

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Fasting with prayer is a means of grace, namely through this practice we seek for God to be with us and to assist us in our lives in order that God's purposes go forward.

In both the Reformed and Methodist traditions from which the Uniting Church comes, fasting was recognised. John Calvin taught about it in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4.12.14-21). John Knox included a written account on fasting in the first service book of the Reformed Church in Scotland. John Wesley included instructions on fasting in his *Forty Four Sermons* (XXII) and he led by example. Wesley observed a weekly fast for most of his life. His practice was to fast from Thursday evening, after the evening meal to mid-afternoon on Friday, spending much of this time focussing on prayer. He expected his preachers to participate, and he wanted all the leaders and members of the Methodist movement to practice the discipline too.

While fasting may be unfamiliar to many in the Uniting Church, there are a growing number of people who are discovering and learning about the practice, especially from our Pacific Islander, African and Asian members, many of whom bring with them strong fasting traditions. It is becoming important to many UAICC communities too. Uniting Prayer and Fasting is a prayer movement that began in 2009. It encourages fasting every Friday, and a week of prayer and fasting before every Assembly Standing Committee meeting. Uniting Prayer and Fasting also hosted 40 days of prayer and fasting before the 13th Assembly, in 2012 – the Assembly that decided to call the whole church to a week of prayer and fasting for justice for First Peoples.

Fasting with prayer has as its aim to sharpen our focus on God in a disciplined way. Any other reason is unsatisfactory. Fasting may well have physical benefits, assist our praying and lead to insights about ourselves, but these are secondary. John Wesley declared, "First, let it (fasting) be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven."¹ Fasting is a reminder that we do not live by bread alone, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). Jesus calls us to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). Fasting with prayer is a means of grace. Through this practice we seek for God to be with us and to assist us in our lives in order that God's purposes go forward.

In this focused time of prayer and fasting for justice for Australia's First Peoples, we are being called to put aside other concerns—in particular our physical needs and our self-thoughts—and focus on God and God's will. We are being invited to give concentrated attention in prayer to God's desire for justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. As we fast and pray we can more fully align ourselves with God's will and collectively seek to move towards this justice. This is not a matter of trying to move a reluctant God, but rather placing ourselves in a disciplined way in line with God's purposes. The goal is that God's will for justice, reconciliation and wholeness for Indigenous Australians be realised in this country.

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¹ Sermon 27, Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse 7. Available: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/>

