

# Lessons from the Gruen Transfer for Mission in the Modern World?

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## 1. In the bunker?

In January 1945, with the armies of the Reich in retreat on both fronts, Adolf Hitler retreated into the bunker that had been constructed near the Reich Chancellery. By April, the Russians had encircled Berlin, and the end was close. The British historian Alan Bullock writes:

*To try to make too much sense out of what Hitler said or ordered in those final days would be wholly to misread both the extraordinary circumstances and his state of mind. Those who saw him at this time and who were not so infected by the atmosphere of the bunker as to share his mood regarded him as closer than ever to that shadowy line which divides the world of the sane from that of the insane. (Hitler, p. 788)*

On 29<sup>th</sup> April, he finally married his constant companion, Eva Braun. After a brief celebration, he sat down to dictate his will and his political testament. As Bullock describes this document:

*Facing death and the destruction of the regime he had created, this man who had exacted the sacrifice of millions of lives rather than admit defeat was still recognizably the old Hitler. From first to last there is not a word of regret, no a suggestion of remorse.... Word for word, Hitler's final address to the German nation could be taken from almost any of his early speeches of the 1920s or from the pages of Mein Kampf. Twenty-odd years had changed and taught him nothing. (p. 793)*

Raging against those of his advisors who had the temerity to suggest that he should step down, and commanding non-existent armies, Hitler put a bullet in his own brain in an act that he saw not as cowardice but as the brave end of a noble hero.

Have we in the Anglican Church of Australia retreated to our own bunker, in the grip of our own delusions, still speaking as if nothing at all has changed in a generation? Let me at once admit that the rhetorical gesture of a comparison to Hitler is close to cheating. We all know how that works: they invented Godwin's Law to point out that introducing Hitler into an argument is usually the end of the argument as a genuine argument.

Nevertheless, Hitler has his uses, particularly when it comes to his folly. It would still be a mistake to mount a land invasion of Russia, for example. And likewise: his 'bunker mentality' might just describe deleterious aspects of our own corporate behaviour, and help us to see how we need to be different in order to fulfil our purpose.

Certainly, the bunker mentality is in evidence among us in two respects. The first is the way in which we still attempt to communicate through the media as if nothing has changed since the era when sermons were published without comment in the major newspapers of our nation. We have a cultural habit of establishment – we simply expect to be given a respectful hearing, and are shocked and dismayed when we aren't.

The second is really what happens when we realise that we aren't getting the kind of cultural and political purchase that we used to have: we now assume that we need to use whatever remaining cultural and political capital we have to shore up our defences. That is not to say that this is a wrong thing to do, but that it is in some respects an admission of defeat, and a determination that we need to survive, rather than to thrive.

This is the problematic context into which a discussion of our contemporary mission has to step. We desperately want to declare Jesus Christ to all Australians, but unless we address the 'bunker mentality', we will be communicating to no-one. Now, don't worry: I understand what's at stake here. It is thinkable that Australian churches may lose their tax exemptions. It is thinkable that we will be grouped with those who incite religious hatred. It is thinkable that teaching what Christians have taught for two millennia about marriage, because it is what the Bible plainly

teaches, will in coming days be held to be an outrageous and immoral blasphemy. This is already what some leading politicians in our nation say they think.

But describing these changes, and fighting against them in the public square, is not the same as effectively communicating Christ in this space. My task this evening is to venture some thoughts on precisely this tension for Australian Christians in 2016 and beyond: how can we testify to Jesus Christ authentically and powerfully, and yet still stand for the truth?

Let me make it a bit more personal. As I was writing this talk on Monday, I received an email from a person I do not know, named Jan Howard, which contained only one word: *bigot*. I have no idea what in particular prompted this missive, but there it is. And with it, a challenge that I know a Christian will instinctively feel: how can I hope to hold out the word of life when I am despised, not as the scum of the earth but as the oppressive voice of an outdated and deeply harmful moral system?

## **2. Questions on the other side: Tim Dick**

But this picture needs to be nuanced a little, because there are signs of a wistful looking back from the secularists of our age. Now that we are almost free from the shackles of religious dogma and moribund ecclesiastical institutions, at least according to Fairfax journalists, there is still a sense that something has been lost. The triumphalism is, I might add, ironic when it comes from that quarter, since I venture to claim that the days of the newspaper journalist are likely to be a lot fewer than the days of the churches.

Nevertheless, Fairfax columnist Tim Dick noted in one of his columns recently that the loss of the moral authority of the churches in Australia is not entirely to be celebrated. In fact, the churches have, he thinks, made and continue to make a contribution to debate that emanates from outside the usual political system, and speak without fear or favour to unpopular causes. Dick writes:

*When the churches are so weak, when Christians are no longer a majority, who will speak to our collective conscience on*

*unpopular causes? Will it be enough to rely on single-issue groups, on GetUp, on charities, on political parties, on clicking on someone's petition?*

*You don't have to agree with all their positions to appreciate the force of moral arguments coming from outside political parties and lobby groups. Yet even facing such a crisis, the churches almost rush to make spectacularly dumb strategic decisions, hastening the demise of their influence. The marriage question is a case in point.*

Dick concludes:

*...the decline of Christianity leaves us with bigger problems that what to do with empty churches...It leaves a gap in the public discourse, and that should worry all of us, including the faithless."*

I was surprised to read these words from a self-consciously hip pundit, and there is a bit of a catch. Of course, Dick applauds the churches for speaking out when they agree with him – on refugees, for example - and scolds them for being unpopular on marriage. Our decline is our fault, for not agreeing with popular causes. It is a strangely inconsistent position, but one I've encountered elsewhere from Guardian columnist David Marr, who seemed genuinely baffled that the churches, so terrible and out of touch when it comes to marriage redefinition, were among the very few groups who would stand alongside him on refugees. I would like to say to Dick and Marr, of course, that perhaps there is an underlying coherence in the moral vision of the churches that gives them both positions; and that maybe there's more to Christianity than meets the media eye.

But for those of us inside the church, busy reverse-parking our wagons into a circular formation, Dick's observation are a hint that the opportunity for communication with, and even leadership of, secular Australia is not yet lost. Despite the decades-long drubbing we've taken at the hands of journalists and politicians and other culture-makers, often deservedly, and despite our often amateurish and defensive responses to these attacks, there is still a spiritual opportunity for preachers of the gospel in 21<sup>st</sup> century

Australia. It may however, take ABC TV's *Gruen*, formerly known as *The Gruen Transfer*, to show us how.

### **3. Being Wise as Serpents, with Gruen**

Since beginning in 2008, *Gruen*, hosted by comedian Wil Anderson and with regular admen Russell Howcroft and Todd Sampson as panellists, has consistently been one of the most entertaining and insightful programmes on Australian TV, in my view in any case. The brilliant and yet scary thing about *Gruen* is that it is devoted to the study of mammon-worship; and because of that, it provides a detailed anatomy of the Australian soul. Because the business of advertising is to sell products, it needs to deal with the harsh reality of what we are really like. It has to find out where our hearts are. There's no time for politically correct waffle, here. Advertisers don't care what should be the case; they have to deal with what actually *is* the case.

What we get from *Gruen*, then, is a kind of serpent-wisdom (to borrow from Jesus's saying 'be wise as serpents, and innocent as doves' from Matthew 10:16). It's the shrewdness of the dishonest manager in the parable from Luke 16, where Jesus notes that *the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light*. *Gruen* is about how advertisers shrewdly communicate with people, rather than how to say things that are acceptable to the cultural and political elites.

So: here are four things that *Gruen* says again and again about communicating a message in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia. First, we are creatures that dream. Secondly, we can't resist a story. Thirdly, that we are afraid. And fourthly: authenticity matters to us.

#### *Creatures that dream*

The advertising industry recognises that, even though we like to think of ourselves as primarily rational creatures who make our choices through careful deductive analysis of all the possibilities, we are nothing of the kind. We are creatures of the heart, not the head. We are dreamers, who are set in motion by a vision of what we yearn for. When Qantas had been through a couple of years

of bad press, *Gruen* showed how the response from their marketing team was not to issue public statements denying the mistakes, or correcting the record. Rather, Qantas sells a dream, as it always has, with the 'Feels Like Home' campaign. Consider how counterintuitive this is: surely an airline shouldn't make us want to stay at home? Don't they want us to long for foreign shores? But longing for home is a very powerful longing within us – an almost childlike feeling of reassurance and comfort and nostalgia. Qantas' campaign tells us that we can enjoy the security of home, even as we enjoy the delights of travel. Qantas feels like 'us'.

Of course, we need not look very far to discover that this insight about anthropology is a commonplace in Christian theology. In his new book *You Are What You Love*, US theologian James KA Smith, channelling Augustine of Hippo writes:

*To be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as "flourishing".* (p. 11)

We are creatures whose habit is to long for some better world beyond but not unlike this one. We are internally constituted to long for the kingdom to come. What advertisers can see is that we are easily convinced to substitute this-worldly kingdoms for the kingdom of heaven.

*Can't resist a story*

In fact, we think of ourselves in narrative terms: as characters, inhabiting plots. Narratives have their own logic, because they draw us into a created world of cause and effect, in which things make sense because they relate to the playing out of characters over time. Stories are entrancing and addictive, and you don't have to do much to tell a story or imply one. We can easily recall the Tooheys 'How do ya feel?' campaign, because of the drama of the underdog that it narrated. I can still see the batting minnow Mike Whitney tapping his bat while the 6 foot 8 inch West Indian fast bowler Joel Garner thundered in to bowl the final delivery of the innings, with three runs to get, in an ad from about 1985. The

jingle places us in the story: how do you feel – as the vulnerable, nervous, modestly talented batsman? And then it takes us through a scintillating array of emotions, from the tension of facing Joel to the climactic release of victory.

The power of stories for communicating is not just a TED-talk tip. It is a primary and basic truth about the way human beings are trained to think about themselves and the world. Neuroscientists, as they seem to do these days without any invitation, have stuck their nodes on people's heads, and [observed the brain lighting up in recognition](#) and pleasure when stories are told. But I think we can give a theological account of why human beings are created this way. It has to do with the character of God, who reveals himself to human beings in time and over time. He is the *promising* God, who reveals what he is like and what he will do through his words and actions – as a character in a plot, in other words. He is no abstract principle, but the one who invites human creatures into union with him, not as a mystical principle, but as the experience of being part of his story. To do mission well, then, the church does not have to invent new stories; it already has a story to tell.

### *We are afraid*

The flipside of desire as a motivation in human nature is fear. If I do want X, I also don't want Y: and perhaps my distaste for Y is a stronger motivator. Our fears are multiple: we fear disease, we fear the loss of loved ones, we fear financial ruin, we fear being seen as uncool or overweight or out of touch, we fear missing out. And into this space, advertisers rush. *If sex sells, then so does fear*, as advertising teacher Todd van Slyke says.

There was actually a debate about this *Gruen*, when the subject of anti-bacterial cleansers was raised. The science shows that these are of no or little benefit. Yet advertisers have successfully sold these products to householders by making them afraid that they are basically living in nightclubs for bacteria. Is this ethical? Dee Madigan suggested that it wasn't, but Todd Sampson said:

*Tapping into a fear that exists in society, amplifying that, advertising it, and putting a product to it that solves that, that's not unethical, that's advertising.<sup>1</sup>*

It worth noting how Sampson gives the advertising industry a free pass on ethics, and doesn't consider whether ads actually create fears that aren't already there; and whether it is right to manipulate this emotion to a commercial ends.

However, there is a theologically acute observation embedded here. We *are* afraid, and we seek security. Preachers of the gospel don't need to make people fearful: they already are. For finite creatures living in the realm of Adam, fear is a reality. What preachers need to do is to be successful at unmasking our attempts to find security in things are not in themselves secure. The gospel of Jesus Christ is offered as response to fears which does not need to magnify them nor does it deny them, but acknowledges them as real. 1 John's antidote to fear is not insurance, or an anti-bacterial soap, but 'perfect love'.

### *Authenticity matters*

It is interesting how often the word 'authenticity' crops up in marketing discussions. The irony is obvious, and comes with a dilemma: how can we make people think our brand is more authentic, by using an inherently fake instrument like marketing? (Sampson quote).

Advertising has itself made people more suspicious that they are being conned. People like to feel that they are making a smart and informed choice, and that the relationship that they establish with a brand is with people who are genuine about them as a person.

In a fascinating discussion about the *Jesus – All About Life* campaign, the *Gruen* panel noted that the campaign focussed on Jesus rather than on church, because of research that had highlighted that while church is not popular in Australia, Jesus still

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:301337/carahinteractions.pdf>



is. But this means that there's a disconnect between brand Jesus and his outlets. As Todd Sampson said:

*...most people would say the retail shops are letting the brand down.*

How? Well, in some of the ways that Tim Dick mentions, perhaps. The sense of entitlement and moral superiority with which people hear us is not matched on the ground by communities of genuine care. At least, that's the perception. And it's no good whinging about media distortion. Would a company with a product to sell get away with that? We should not underestimate the impact of the child abuse scandals, either. Would you entrust your children to the care of an organisation which was notorious for taking a forgiving attitude to the child abusers in its midst?

#### **4. How to talk Gruen**

How can we adapt these lessons to our situation? Are they any help in getting us to emerge from our bunker? I suspect they might be, because they will help us to imagine better what it is like *not* to be Christian, or a member of a church, in 21<sup>st</sup> Australia. In particular, we need to engage in this sort of thinking and activity in order to provide the gospel context for our stands on moral and political issues.

So, first:

*Address human beings as creatures made to dream; ask what they long for. Tell them about the great dream.*

There's two sides to this process. One is to ask: *what are people's longings, and how are they seeking to meet them?* Qantas uses the comfort of nationalism. The entire cult of consumerism itself is designed to make us long for an unattainable world of freedom and pleasure.

What we have lost the ability to do, perhaps, from our side, is to speak in an appealing and persuasive way about the kingdom of heaven. Meditation on heaven was a staple of both Puritan and medieval spirituality. It seems to me that this is why the work of CS Lewis still has so much appeal: he understood what it means to

long for a better home, and was able, because of this to suggest ways in which we might critique our culture's glib satisfaction with what turn out to be fleeting pleasures that very often cause us damage.

*Tell the strange old story, and show how it's a better story.*

The gospel story is not a philosophy or a piece of wisdom. It's a narrative that, if we believe it, sweeps us up. But it is a strange story. We should not forget its strangeness, for that is its great advantage. It isn't a story about how we are better than the rest. If it is the church's story, it is only that as a judgement on the church for its failure to be what it is called to be. It remains, always, the story of the risen and crucified Jesus Christ, who has been declared with power to be the Son of God. In this story, weakness is strength, and gentleness is power. In this tale, the hero dies for his enemies to make them his friends. It's the story of how justice is affirmed, but also of how sinners are shown mercy. It is embarrassingly miraculous, but sweatily realistic.

Now: in both dreaming and in telling stories, James KA Smith reminds us that, at its best, Christian corporate worship can provide us with a different dream and a better story. As he writes:

*...Christian worship should tell a story that makes us want to set sail for the immense sea that is the Triune God, birthing in us a longing for a 'better country – a heavenly one' that is kingdom come. (p. 93)*

Like a number of non-Anglicans, he has latterly discovered the majesty and genius of the Book of Common Prayer. One of the tragedies of contemporary Anglican evangelicalism is that it has traded this extraordinary birthright for a mess of pottage – services that provide no counter to the dreams and stories of the *Gruen* planet.

*Be less afraid. Know people's fears.*

Knowing what people fear, and that people fear, is a window into their souls. Pastoral work should teach us a good deal about this. I think from personal experience I can see that people fear loss of

identity almost more than they fear loss of life; they fear grief more than suffering; and the randomness of events that can determine the course of our lives is truly terrifying.

This is where we need not only to believe but to practise the sovereignty of God – which means being people who are not afraid. The sovereignty of God is not simply an abstract and distant and remote quality. It is learnt through the strange story of Jesus Christ, and enacted by us as we respond to him in prayer. Remember the Lord, sings Australia's most influential theologian, Colin Buchanan, for he is in control...how? He watches his children, he cares. And how do we know that God loves us? He sent his son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Paul will remind the Romans that they have not received a Spirit of slavery to be subject again to fear, but a Spirit of Sonship, by adoption.

*Shape communities of authenticity.*

Our outlets are, in marketing terms, letting the brand down. Only last week a piece appeared on the ABC Religion & Ethics website castigating Sydney Anglicans for any number of the usual crimes, not least of which was the crime of being communities in which it was hard to be a broken person. If we are meant to be representing the Lord who died for sin, if we hold the atoning blood of Jesus Christ as not just important but central, then: why is it not evident in our communities? Why is this not a reality that permeates our life? The message here is: we don't need to be hipper, cooler, funkier, or younger. We need to be more authentically what we really *are*. Is the truth we proclaim embodied – including the truth that we are not perfect, but forgiven?

### **5. What can I do? Getting out of the bunker**

But I want to take this a little further for us here this evening, and invite you in particular to be quite deliberate in leading us out of the bunker and in to the light of day. To implement the strategies that I have named will take some serious creative, intellectual, and organisational firepower. It will take some courageous

leadership. The good news is that the resources are already to hand in the Scriptures, and in our heritage.

So, here's some direct challenges for us this evening.

*We need to end the stupid war about so-called 'straight evangelism' and apologetics.*

It is not uncommon in recent years to read pieces in the Christian media decrying the emphasis on apologetics and emphasising instead simple 'preaching the gospel'. There is an internal political undercurrent here about the influence of Tim Keller, and those who support him, and so on. Of course, evangelism is a spiritual process. But the Spirit makes use of our ability to communicate well. It's a false dichotomy, in my view: what I've talked about tonight is simply to do with learning to do evangelism well, or to do with making the gospel plausible because it is embodied in congregational life. Could there at least be a mature conversation about this?

*We need to calibrate theological education to the complex task of mission in the context we are in.*

We are ministering in a vastly different culture to the one of even twenty years ago. To minister the gospel effectively in it takes an advance set of listening skills. Insofar as you have an influence over theological education, will you make it your business to see that students can exegete not simply the text of Scripture but the world around them? This is not a suggestion that theological education be dumbed down: far from it. Neither is it an attempt to do to theology what liberal theology has always done, shoehorning it into contemporary categories that ultimately distort it. On the contrary: this is doing only what orthodox Christian theologians from Irenaeus to Vanhoozer have done.

*We need to avoid political alignment to one side of politics or other.*

It's enormously difficult at the moment not to feel that two sides of politics have it in for conservative Christians. This is largely because of the issue *de jour*: marriage redefinition. In the election just past,

[the current moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Australia](#)

name this issue as *the* single issue for Christians. It was hard not to read his piece as a commendation of the Coalition against the alternatives.

With respect, it seems to me that we must avoid this kind of alignment at all costs. There is a grave danger in this: that we will lose our truly prophetic edge and simply become a wing of the Liberal Party. Marriage is an important issue for our nation; but if and when redefinition comes to pass, our task will still be the same: to witness to Jesus Christ as Lord. The sky will not fall in. That will only happen when the Lord returns.

*We need to stop talking internally, and start talking externally.*

What we don't need is another website hosting articles that focus on internal Christian discussions about whatever. There is a place for this; but we've become good at the internal discourse and lost our ability to communicate in the external world. It takes practice and discipline to do it, and space to fail and try again. It was fascinating to watch different reactions on social media to [Ian Powell's confrontation with Bill Shorten](#) at the opening of parliament church service. Christians, including me, were cheering him on – and it felt good that one of our own had given Shorten some much-deserved stick. Non-Christians had completely the opposite reaction. That difference showed to me that there's quite a disconnect, and that we tend to be blind to it. If we can't see that difference, we may find that we will not even notice when the armies have captured our Berlin.