Stirling after dusk
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The literary work of G.R. Stirling was influential within the Australian Churches of Christ during the later twentieth century. Stirling’s writing was non-academic, yet conveyed tonalities consistent with significant academic theological works of its time. Correlating Stirling’s writing with selected academic sources, and by reference to Restoration movement ethos, this article opens an intertextual methodological dialogue to critically engage non-academic theological texts, affirming the importance of utilizing and transposing these as intelligent contextual expressions of Christian identity.

In Hegel’s phenomenological method, the work of philosophy in interpreting the phenomena of eventful life begins after dusk of that day (Philosophy of Right). While the moment of actuality has occurred and interpretation is already too late for the day now past, a work of transposing can occur toward engaging a new day. The previous cannot be relived; new possibilities can be lived out of resources transposed after dusk.

Amid communities of Christian identity, the literary work of G.R. Stirling had significant presence and influence in his day. His was not formal academic writing, yet addressed themes of theological significance, resonating with advanced expressions of academic thought contemporary to its time and pre-empting significant issues for contemporary Christian communities. Through a method of correlation between Stirling and selected theological writers, particularly Gerhard Ebeling, this article seeks to weave a dialogue between the thought and writing of Stirling, occurring within Christian communities of Restoration identity, and wider expressions of theological thought of his era. Methodologically then, this article is itself transposing the day of Stirling, after dusk, for a new day of engagement at another level of expression.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that advanced thinking and writing has and will continue to occur in the context of Christian communities seeking to engage theologically with issues of their time and context. Transposition is therefore demonstrative, advancing a possibility of conversation and exchange between academic and occasional contexts of vigorous, contingent theological thinking and its popular literary articulation.

This article will first, situate its focus within a Restoration perspective of writing, theological engagement and fluid movement among equals; second, demonstrate indicative tonal correlations between Stirling and academic interlocutors; third, suggest the necessity of continual transposition, after dusk, in order to extend the value of previous thought and literary engagement into new contexts of theological expression.

In 2011, the Churches of Christ national theological college in Australia (est. 1907) became Stirling Theological College, adopting the name of former vice principal, Gordon Stirling (1914–
2010). Remembered for expansive contributions to Churches of Christ in Australia and New Zealand, Stirling’s roles spanned the spheres of congregational ministry, regional ministries, and theological education. He is also remembered for his writing, including a collection of articles entitled Page 13. These were published in the Churches of Christ national subscription journal, the Australian Christian, between 1979 and 1987, while Stirling was also editor. The almost 200 single page articles—printed always on page 13—challenge readers to explore diverse issues of Christian identity, exhibiting significant theological engagement in their articulation of christological good news through the prism of Churches of Christ identity.

As theologically explorative articles in a popular non-academic journal, Page 13 reverberates with tonalities of its heritage. The substantial theological writings of the early Restoration movement characteristically occurred not in lengthy theological texts, but as ‘flying leaves’ in widely circulated journals. Alexander Campbell pioneered this work, inaugurating and editing the Christian Baptist and the Millennial Harbinger; Barton Stone worked similarly with the Christian Messenger. Some may have been embarrassed by this historical form of (non-academic) theological practice, yet journals offer a mode of theological engagement that is visible and available for communal participation, representing an integral expression of the priesthood of all believers. The possibilities for theological praxis offered by this genre’s particular limitations and scope (for example, the brevity and clarity required in short writings) offer pause for thought, as does the epistolery heritage of Christian thinking.

Nevertheless, this presents a challenge for critical theological method that seeks to locate such texts within an academic discourse. Because Page 13 was written for the church community, not for an academic audience, any scholarly-theological interlocutors engaged by Stirling remain largely unrecorded. How then, is Page 13 (or any theological writing of this genre) to be located and understood by reference to a wider range of theological endeavor? How are normative academic standards to be developed for understanding the theological veracity or caliber of such texts—not for apologetic or justificatory purposes, but in order to perceive the distinctive textures they offer, throwing these into relief by reference to a scholarly horizon? Such an exercise also raises the voice of such texts into discourse beyond their original scope.

**Intertextual theological correlation**

Theoretically, a text such as Page 13 might be juxtaposed with the texts of any other writer for a mutual illumination of dialectical relation to occur. Yet the relation might elicit uneven tendencies if the correlation of an academic text with a popular one apologetically seeks to bolster the merit of the latter as a point of validating authority. Likewise, to posit a value judgment on a non-academic text as influential ‘despite its non-academic status’ is too apologetic; how would this begin to be
measured? Both approaches suggest tacit embarrassment about the challenge of critically engaging non-scholarly texts. Such an exercise becomes static too, if the goal is simply taxonomic, configuring labels where a particular set of ideas neatly slot in to a wider set. Attempting to uncover invisible textual influences is too speculative a task.

Instead, what is sought here is a generative, dialogical movement where both sets of texts function to highlight the nuances of one another, drawing attention to particular themes, motifs and axiological threads that not only weave them together, but hold these texts in tension, recognizing too their historical situatedness. If a correlating text (or set of texts) used as a reference point is chosen arbitrarily, the methodological outcomes might merely be an enjoyable creative exercise in teasing out the implications of a serendipitous after-dusk meeting. There may too, be intelligent reasons for bringing together particular texts based on their apparent compatibility—a process which does not seek to undermine differentiation but precisely enables it. Both possibilities exist simultaneously in the following engagement with Page 13.

It is clear that Stirling’s Page 13 writing reflects a certain style of theological discourse concurrent with the era of his teaching at the College of the Bible (1969–1981) and his later editorship of the Australian Christian (1979–1988). In Western contexts, this era of theology energetically wrestled with the nature and place of Christian identity and narrative amid the exponential secularization (and tragedies) of the twentieth century. What could the articulation of Christian faith offer to the contemporary world, before rapidly solidifying assertions of scientific method, contemporary world events and increasing disillusionment with organized religion? What of Christian tradition could be honestly retained within a secularized context? If certain aspects of belief and practice that had previously defined Christian faith were being pared away, what was left? Theological lenses refocused during this era to engage New Testament kerygmatic impetus by emphasizing existence, vocative address, event and decision and Christian secularity, catalyzed by the work of Bonhoeffer, Bultmann and Barth.

The theological tone of Stirling’s Page 13 has particular resonances with the theology of Gerhard Ebeling (1912–2001), a German theologian contemporary to Stirling’s time and whose mentors included Bonhoeffer and Bultmann, who developed the ‘New Hermeneutic’ with Ernst Fuchs and whose work on Luther remains influential. In locating a significant meeting point between texts (and their authors), Ebeling here functions to help build a contextual hermeneutical framework for critically engaging Page 13’s theological layering; dialectically, Page 13 positions the reader to interpret Ebeling in particular ways. The texts of these authors are brought into symbiotic discourse by methodological correlation, utilizing brief comments and footnotes to weave a dialogue. The early Restoration movement ethos will continue to provide an important backdrop
reference point. So why the choice of Ebeling as an ‘apparently compatible’ (even serendipitous) dialogue partner for methodological correlation with Stirling’s work?

Ebeling’s theological project responded to its contemporary challenges by exploring the linguistic-theological tensions inherent in any articulation of gospel.9 For Ebeling, theological engagement is significant when it is expressed in the now of the word-event, which challenges, evokes and nourishes faith in the midst of life.10 Human life exists as response to God’s address; the word breaks into reality as a vocative, eruptive ‘event’ where I am encountered in the midst of life, in every now of my existence.11 This contemporary word of gospel (good news) occurs in proclamation, expounding a present reality in which the word of God shapes a hermeneutic for existence, as a bold summons to life in the world.12 Ebeling, in the tradition of Luther, maintains that gospel must come to expression in the midst of common life as eventful proclamation that moves the hearer, invoking decision and so, response; only then as news is it the birth site of faith, for faith comes by hearing.13

Methodologically, both Stirling and Ebeling demonstrate a primary concern with language, responding to underlying tensions rooted in the problematic dualism of a sacred/secular divide. Both engage in the after-dusk activity of philosophical reflection on what is occurring with the use of language amid Christian communities, including the presuppositions shaping language use and the social and cognitive theological effects in play. For both, this necessitates an investigation into the nature of Christian faith itself, as the source of what is communicated—of gospel as the vocative call to faith, and the implications of this being given in language—and at this point, theological and philosophical reflection are intertwined. The nature of gospel as good news and the nature of faith, both as ontological considerations, inform methodologically how Christian communities undertake and approach speaking their faith. Such considerations are central to the projects of both Stirling and Ebeling, albeit in differing contexts of writing.14

**Stirling’s language**

“Words! Words! Words! But what do they mean?”15 This question is it indicative of a passionate line of engagement central to Stirling’s theological endeavor on Page 13.16 According to Stirling, “Jesus Christ committed us to two things: to go and find people; to tell them good news.”17 How could ‘news’ of 2000 years ago, encased in the traditions and pages of church history, be new today?18 Such concerns are woven throughout the Page 13 collection, implicitly raising questions such as: Can gospel be new in every generation? Can gospel enter language anew? How does this occur?19 And if gospel comes to expression by the word, what is the role of creative language use—as old wineskins burst and are replaced with new—so that the newness of gospel and language
intersect? Might such newness suggest indigenized faith? Juxtaposed with traditional phrases such as \textit{Lord} and \textit{Savior}, Stirling describes Christ as “liberator and source of life”, “able to give us as much dynamic life as we are willing to receive.” He is the one “we look at” in order to learn “what God is like.” Salvation, in contrast to static constructions, is a living, active, continuous process as, by willing “openness,” we find that Jesus Christ “can liberate [us] from [our] hang-ups and fears and lostness.” “Qualitative eternal life” begins “now.”

If salvation is “liberation from ‘hang-ups’, limitations, meaninglessness, self-destructiveness, death, darkness, sins, inhibitions, and indeed everything that destroys life both here and here-after” then it is “God liberating us as whole persons here and now, and thus making it possible for us to be people whom even death will not be able to defeat.” Stirling consistently and intentionally deploys colloquial language in communicating theological concepts and describing Christian experience. Both Stirling’s performance of this, and his reflections on language and meaning, contest and attempt to overcome any perceived dualism (and therefore rupture) between the conceptual resources of faith and the experience of secular life. Stirling’s conceptual assertions are affirmed by a linguistic structure that contests any demarcation between Christian and secular language, so interlinking form and content; it is thus an illocutionary act, giving what it also promises. This colloquialism is not naïve jargon, precisely because it is an expression of thoughtful intentionality; it demonstrates intuitive theological wisdom that is written intelligently for a particular audience of readers.

When gospel meets people “in their own language,” it invites meaningful reception as existentially related to any place and time. This architecture is consistent with gospel narratives: gospel erupts boldly into unsuspecting scenes, beckoning to hearers by the reality of \textit{Emmanuel}, God’s exegesis in flesh and blood; Christ unveils the reign of God in the midst of common life through parables; at Pentecost, this \textit{good news} is delivered in mother tongues, as that which has been comprehended by some is given for meaningful reception to others.

Conversely, if gospel is expressed in language that is primarily non-existent in the sphere of a hearer’s everyday experience, gospel is communicated as also outside the sphere of the hearer’s everyday experience. For Stirling, if christological testimony does not ‘mean anything’, it does not mean anything; it has lost its character as \textit{good news}. “Jesus gave the good news in colloquial Aramaic. The early church translated it into colloquial Greek. The sixteenth century church translated it into impeccable educated upper class English” he writes, “and there it has stayed in our services, our hymns, our prayers and in our ways of talking about the faith. This is very good, except that it is not the language of our neighbours.”

For both Ebeling and Stirling, sharing faith—as testament to \textit{good news}—necessarily involves linguistic awareness and intentionality; the message remains meaningful only so long as it is
communicated meaningfully. This necessitates an ever new movement of translation, so renewed theological expression. Contesting an existence torn between separate spheres, both stress the role of language in eliminating this dualism, not only through their critical language analysis but by constructive proclamation. “Either,” writes Stirling, “we can print glossaries to hand to people on the way into church … or we can learn Australian and settle down to translating the gospel words, so familiar to us, into the vernacular.” Such translation occurs in meaningful expression of that which is continually received in faith; living the language of our neighbors is an integral part of this process, even as both the courage for proclamation and the possibility for its reception are fuelled by the blowing of a creative “Holy Gust”. Significantly therefore, faith is the freedom to explore, so to create and reinvest Christian identity with meaning and vigour; this process exists to be shared and understood, for communication is communion.

Stirling’s assertion that “the best way to learn to share the good news in contemporary language is first to share … what our faith means to us in non-religious language” is no arbitrary marketing assertion to corral people into the ‘Christian club’ by the use of catchy slogans or fashionable lingo. It is fundamental to the concept of gospel; that is, it has the capacity to speak meaningfully into the depths of all aspects of human experience. It can be expressed anew, meaningfully as news, because there is something vital to express. Page 13 throbs with the energy of conviction that gospel can be good news for everyone but must be communicated as such. For Stirling, gospel cannot remain truthfully good news if relegated to a religious ghetto to speak a language of its own; the language of faith is the language of the world, because the language of the world “is a confused and concealed dispute about faith.” The very locale for redemption—the intended recipient of good news—is the world! It would be an impotent faith that had not the power to address all of life; it would be a pocket of faith, rather than a foundation of faith. The gospel’s power, and so its noteworthiness in depth of meaning, is in its ability to transform life panoramically, breaking into human dialogue with a new word of light as comprehension dawns in reception. Page 13 depicts gospel as good news faithfully shared when it comes to expression as contemporary, given as a meaningful gift for personal reception; this is eventful in the ongoing dialectic of hearing and response.

Stirling’s hermeneutic assertions might be perceived as a threat to venerable Christian formulations and well-entrenched professions and practices of faith. Do these really need rethinking or renewal? Why challenge what appears well accepted or simply ‘right’? Yet even words which began as profoundly truthful in an originating context lose traction as they become worn with use, so becoming disconnected with reality and experience. They become clichés—“thought-
terminating sequences”—both expressing and perpetuating profound boredom with language.\textsuperscript{46} If language calcifies in its usage, this suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and scope of the Christian message as a response to the material needs, concerns and existence of humanity.\textsuperscript{47} As language loses traction through repetition, slipping from personally assimilated comprehension, it creates a separate realm of religious language which gradually fails to stimulate engagement; salience fades.\textsuperscript{48}

If faith is ever new in meaningful personal reception and expression, each generation must wrestle anew with its faithful articulation in the midst of life; removed from the originating context, without contemporary (so, personal) renewal, does a word maintain its veracity?\textsuperscript{49} For example, Stirling asserts that when Churches of Christ slogans (which originated to contest divisions associated with the use of creeds) are reiterated as separate from originating context and purpose—so thoughtlessly repeated as clichés—they simply become tribal markers which perpetuate the very culture they originally sought to disrupt.\textsuperscript{50} Faith is wrought as scenes of dissonance between the good news and life-in-the-world are brought to light; challenging pre-existing schemas invites the possibility of faith’s renewal. Page 13’s concerted resistance to linguistic stagnation is significant, for it holds faith that gospel can be received, so comprehended, as truly good news.

The impetus of Page 13, as it implies faith in the word of God to enter life anew as alive and active, “more than equal” to the challenges faced in every today, is a unique expression of Stirling’s theological undertaking.\textsuperscript{51} He models a boldness to undertake the ever new task of wrestling to express faith indigenously, inviting readers to accept and undertake this task themselves, in courageous trust of grace that gives space for exploration.\textsuperscript{52} This exploration, not only in recasting particular words or expressions of Christian narrative, but also in the undertaking of after-dusk reflection on language and so on the nature of faith itself, is an act of vulnerability in fully inhabiting a finite, contextual time and space.\textsuperscript{53} It does not speak any ultimate word, yet it offers grounding words in response to an initiating word, by reflection on human lives, language and community.\textsuperscript{54} Importantly, any concept of ‘salvation’ is not here about arbitrary ‘rightness’, but is a mode of being, inhabited in the very space of trusting, curious, intelligent discernment, in the relational space of language.\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{Nightfall}

This article demonstrates briefly a methodology by which non-academic theological texts might be brought into wider theological discourse, by reference to particular interlocutors who help to highlight themes and textures present in the original text. Such an intertextual method enters into the mesh of texts, weaving a way through by use of an immersive narrative that both draws together and holds apart, gaining a sense of place by mutual reference. It is clear that there are similar
themes animating aspects of the work of both Ebeling and Stirling, and that these are resourced by fundamental questions concerning the nature of faith and gospel. This locates the writing of Stirling in a particular area of theological engagement (whilst not confining his work there) yet affirms the historically situatedness of his writing, as an expression of Restoration identity in late twentieth century Australia. Many other angles could be used to explore Stirling’s texts (perhaps with other interlocutors); this article has focused on the topic of language as a correlating point of engagement.

The type of reflection undertaken by both Stirling and Ebeling comes late in their day—after dusk (to return to Hegel). Speaking occurs before the full implications of meaning are ascertained. Yet what occurs after dusk has its time tomorrow; critical reflection offers future possibilities by the very fact of its deliberate and thoughtful engagement. Transposing Stirling through Ebeling is both retrospective and eschatological; this article’s method has sought to demonstrate that faithful witness can be recast to speak in new contexts with a fidelity apposite to its previous articulation. Such methodological transposition is both consistent with and advances the Christian phenomenon of testimonial relay.

1 Founded in 1907 as the College of the Bible, the college became Churches of Christ Theological College in 1989 prior to its subsequent change to Stirling Theological College.


14 Because of the large volume of *Page 13* articles cited below, these will be referenced by volume number of the *Australian Christian*, edition, year and continuous page number only, with title of each omitted.

15 Found written on a notecard in an old notebook of G.R. Stirling’s; on display at Stirling Theological College, 2016.


17 *Page 13*: 82, no. 22 (1979): 549.


“The concept of ‘word’ is more than simply ‘linguistic tradition’ and involves our whole ‘encounter with reality’—see Ebeling, *Nature of Faith*, 1, 40; *Theological Theory of Language; Word and Faith*, 26–27, 41, 313, 333–353.


36 Stirling, *Page 13*: 82, no. 10 (1979) cf. Ebeling: “The message ... demands translation not only into other languages but also into other ages, other ways of thinking,” *Nature of Faith*, 40, 80.


39 Stirling, *Page 13*: 82, no. 22 (1979): 549; cf Alexander Campbell: “Unless words are understood, ideas or sentiments can neither be communicated nor received. Words that in themselves are quite intelligible may become difficult to understand in different connections and circumstances,” Campbell, ‘The Sermon on the Law (1816)’ in *An Alexander Campbell Reader*, 36–37 [originally,

40 For similar assertions in Ebeling, see Nature of Faith, 10, 16; Theological Theory of Language, 30, 39, 78–80, 104, 109, 116.


Stirling, *Page 13*: 82, no. 7 (1979): 157; cf. “What is most significant in theology does not occur when the theologian adopts an indifferent and neutral personal attitude to the word, but when he responds to it, so that his utterances display the unmistakable hand of their author.” Ebeling, *Luther*, 32. Also *Nature of Faith*, 9–12.

For similar tonalities, see Ebeling, *Theological Theory of Language*, 196; see also 196–198; *Nature of Faith*, 54.

