

God's Plan or Mine?

BY PHILIP HUNT, A TALK FOR CHRISTIAN BUSINESSMEN'S BREAKFAST, JULY 2002

I was born at an early age, the 6th generation son of an English convict, Richard Hunt, who came to Australia on a government assisted passage in 1817. He was chosen for the journey by the best judges in England.

Richard Hunt, and his brother, William, were small-time crooks. They stole some bottles of wine and a few silver spoons from their employer. I say they were small-time crooks, but truth is they were not-very-bright-crooks. They decided to melt the silver spoons right there at their place of work. They were caught red-handed. And the evidence was red-hot too.

For this misadventure in social determinism, Richard and William Hunt found themselves on the way to Australia aboard a ship named the "Morley."

Once his jail term was over, Richard married another ex-con and they settled down to raise a family. But now, something very interesting happened.

Once Richard was out of jail he stopped being a criminal. Could it be that 19th century prison life reformed him? I seriously doubt that!

More likely, Richard was just like so many others of his class at that time. Society said they were criminals, and so they lived out society's expectations of them.

Transported to Australia, they found themselves in a new society in which once you'd done your time, you could have a fair go.

Within a year of his becoming an EX-con, Richard Hunt was an active member of the Wesleyan church. His children became founding members of the Methodist Church in Parramatta. Richard's grandson, John Charles Hunt, became the first mayor of Hornsby Shire and the local member of State parliament. The Hunts owned most of what now passes for the upper crust suburb of Dural. If only they had left it all to me, I'd be a rich man today.

I tell you this story, because it is part of my story. But also because it illustrates something of my theme for this morning. Richard's life changed. He started out as one thing. He ended up as another. If you had known Richard before 1817 you might have thought he was going to come to some sticky criminal end. If you had known Richard at the end of his life in 1852 you would have thought him the most upright citizen you could imagine.

Indeed, Richard did come to a sticky end, but not for any lapse of morals. He remarried later in life and had a second family. The whole family moved to Gundagai where Richard worked at his trade—he was a Saddler. In those days, Gundagai township was built down by the banks of the Murrumbidgee River. What Richard and the townspeople didn't know was that about every ten years the Murrumbidgee floods. The local aborigines could have told them so, if anyone had taken them seriously. In 1852 the river did flood. The whole town was swept away. Richard Hunt, wife, and five children all drowned. They were last spotted on the roof of their house. They were

singing hymns. The criminal man, transformed into the man who could lead his family in praise to God in the face of death.

Richard's story is my story. Much of what I learned in the beginning, I have had to un-learn on the way. Much of what I thought was true, has been proven to be untrue. Many things that I thought were fixed and absolute, I have later discovered to be changeable and variable.

I was born in Parramatta, New South Wales, about three blocks from where my forebear, Richard, once had a Saddlers business. My father, John Morris Hunt, was an engineer. But much of Dad and Mum's life as I experienced it was centred around the Granville Methodist Church. Dad was the Sunday School Superintendent. Mum was one of the organists. Like every child, I thought my experience was everyone's experience. Being a Christian was, for me, the most natural and normal thing in the world.

Of course, when I went to school I discovered that people's experience, of church and many other things, were a bit different to mine. Some other kids went to church, but different ones. And if there were any Jews or Muslims, they weren't at my school in the Fifties. Or, if they were, the teachers just made them line up with the Anglicans anyway.

But I was serious about my religion because my family was. And like all children, I accepted the way my family behaved as if it were absolute. That's the way the world is. Or was.

Then, Billy Graham came to town. I don't remember too much about his crusades except that they were at the Sydney Showgrounds and they were huge.

But I do remember that I followed the crowd one night down to the front to "give my life to Jesus." Was I following the herd instinct? Probably. Did I understand what I was doing? Well, I thought I did. Did I expect my life to be different after that? Yes, frankly I did. And was it? No. It was the same life. Same problems. Same struggles. Same. In fact, I wasn't yet a teenager, so life was bound to get worse.

But one thing was certain, I did want to do it. And I did say a prayer something like this one, "Jesus, I want you to be my guide for the rest of my life. I want to do whatever you want me to do." And, I think I meant it.

So what happened?

Well, I went to school. My Dad got promoted to be Queensland Manager and, when I was 15, we all moved to Brisbane. Both my parents were musical and I had learned the piano and organ. One of my mates had a ukelele, so I borrowed it and learned to play it and then spent one-pound to buy one of my own. And then Dad bought me a guitar for my birthday. Folk music was big in the Sixties, and more interesting than school work, so I formed a trio and did gigs all over South-East Queensland, pretending to be the Kingston Trio.

About this time I hit Year 12. And failed. Suddenly I no idea what I was going to do.

My immediate remedy was to suggest I go jackarooing. My parents saw that jackarooing was an occupation for which I was immensely NOT gifted. And they sent me back to repeat Year 12.

Slowly the idea formed in my head that I was to be a doctor. God knows why! No, actually, God knew something altogether different. I imagine he said "Philip! A doctor? You've got to be kidding."

Anyway, I had another great year at school. I debated. Won the public speaking competition. Took the role of the Captain in "HMS Pinafore". Crammed to do the entire secondary level music course in one year and passed. Took leadership roles in Methodist camps all over the State every school holidays.

But also, I played in the 6th Rugby Union side. There were only six sides. And only one other school, Nudgee College, had enough boys to field six sides, so we only played one game for the entire year. Nudgee College whipped us, 76 to nil.

And I also tried to pass Chemistry again. And again failed. At the end of the year, I couldn't get into Medicine, because I needed Chemistry. Now what?

Dad took me along to the National Bank and held my hand while I applied to be a bank Johnnie.

I enjoyed just over a year in the bank, but my real life was happening elsewhere. My trio was busy every weekend. I was compering at discos, and staging monthly youth rallies for Methodist young people.

Somewhere in the midst of this, the manager of one of the Brisbane radio stations got to know me and one day he said, "If you ever want to be in radio, let me know."

Did I want to be in radio? I guess I did.

I reckon about this time, I started to move from learning to un-learning. I remember my surprise at how really un-professional much of radio and television was in those days. Somehow the slickness of the finished product, and the enthusiasm of the voices and faces of media people had taught me something. I had learned that the media was about doing the best, about high production values, about art, about sincerity. But, as I worked in the media, I had to un-learn a lot of this. I found it full of people who led double lives. Their sincerity was entirely manufactured. What sounded like a good performance, or a good show, was the result of short-cuts, deceptions, and a lot of cut and paste.

In 1976 I got the first real inkling that maybe God had taken seriously that prayer I had prayed at the Billy Graham crusade. I had said I wanted him to guide me, that I wanted to do with my life what he wanted.

It happened like this.

I was reading the trade magazine, B&T weekly. And there was an ad, not for a radio job, but for a charity job. World Vision was advertising for a "Communicator." One thing impressed me about their ad, and a second thing just blew me away.

The thing that impressed me was that a charity had the unusual good sense to advertise in this magazine for a communicator. If they wanted an experienced media person, this was the ideal

place to advertise. And yet, I had never before seen a non-media organisation advertise here. Clearly, whatever this World Vision place was, they seemed to know their business.

But the thing that blew me away was that the ad was like a summary of my experience. Every one of the things they wanted, I had done. I took the ad home and showed it to Judy and we agreed I should apply.

Well, to cut a long story short, I got the job as one of two communications officers. And I thought that maybe this was all part of some divine plan. That maybe my childish prayer had been carefully considered by a power higher than I could imagine. That someone out there really did have a plan for me.

Those first six years with World Vision were really exciting. We introduced the 40 Hour Famine and turned it into a national success. We got onto television. We developed a direct marketing strategy. World Vision became a household name.

And then I got another surprise. For the first time in World Vision's short history, it was planning to close down a project office, because the country in which it existed had become rich enough not to need it. The country was Hong Kong. I began to argue that World Vision shouldn't pack up and leave Hong Kong. Instead, we should just change focus. Stop spending money, and start raising it.

With the help of a colleague more experienced in how big organisations work and make decisions I found myself with a reputation as an "expert" on the plan for Hong Kong. This had a consequence that was a shock to me.

When they agreed with my arguments, they wanted someone to go to Hong Kong to implement the plan. So they asked the "expert."

No-one got a greater surprise than I. I had never seen the possibility that my talents could be useful outside of Australia. We had to consider whether to uproot our young family and go and live in a foreign place. How do you decide? This hadn't been in my plan for my life. Was it possible that it was in God's plan?

It was then that an old friend gave me some sound advice. He said "A vocation is not something you say yes to: it is something you cannot say no to."

When put to the "No" test, it was clear that there was nothing that prevented us from saying "Yes" and so we embarked on our first adventure in living cross-culturally for four years in Hong Kong.

Now those four years are a whole speech in their own right. Living cross-culturally causes you to un-learn a million things you have taken for granted about your own culture. About how to think about time. About how to walk on the streets, to drive, to get on a bus. To whom you should give up your place on a crowded train. Who should speak first. Who last. When to raise the difficult topic. When to keep silent. And much more.

In 1988 the World Vision board asked me to lead World Vision Australia, I enjoyed eight great years leading the Australian organisation and playing my part on the international scene. In my

own small mind I felt I had gone as far as I could go. That I was at the end of the journey. That I would stay in this job for twenty years then retire.

But I was surprised once again. In 1996 the President of World Vision International was discussing with me a new position in his office. He wanted my opinion about the two leading candidates. The two candidates were at the time responsible for a region of World Vision projects. I asked the President how he would replace each of them if he moved them.

For the first candidate, he told me that he might split the region up. The second candidate was responsible for the Middle East & Eastern Europe region. I asked him who he would put in there and he said, "I thought I'd ask you."

I laughed in his face. I said, "Why would I want to do that? I've got a job."

He said, "Well, you've shown a lot of interest in the region, especially in the Middle East, and I think you would really fire it up."

Well, I was flattered, but not persuaded. I assured him that, in any case, Judy had already had her experience in cross-cultural living and she, who must be obeyed, had no intentions of living outside of Australia ever again thank you very much.

Well, you can live with someone for 30 years and still not know them.

When I reported on the President's conversation, Judy said very little. But two days later she asked me a question.

"If you took that job, where would we have to live?"

"In Vienna, Austria."

"That'd be a nice place to live, wouldn't it? I think I'm ready for another adventure."

And so, the only reason I could say "No" was removed and so I said "Yes."

And once again I was off on a journey not of my planning. It was just as if someone else had a plan in mind for me. It was just as if someone I had promised to follow, was keeping their part of the bargain.

We had decided that whatever happened we would return to Australia in time for our youngest boys' High School education. When the time came, there was no job for me in World Vision. I'd done all the interesting ones already in Australia, and I no longer wanted a job that took me overseas for weeks at a time. I had a teenage boy at home, and he deserved to have a Dad at home too.

So we took a leap of faith and returned to Australia without work and I embarked on the great adventure of becoming a management consultant. Is this part of God's plan? I am sure it is, but I am not sure for how long.

You see, I'm on a journey. I have been on a journey from the beginning. It's my journey, but it's not my journey. Sometimes I get to drive, but I can't always see the map. Yet, looking back at the

road I've travelled, I see a definite and logical route. A journey that has allowed me to use the gifts that God put in me in the beginning.

Why do I have this journey to talk about? Is it because I am a good Christian? I confess, I am not. Many others pray more than I. Many others are more spiritual. Many others are more devotional. Many others are less sinful. Frankly, I reckon this journey has got nothing to do with my faithfulness.

It has to do with Jesus and His faithfulness. As I look back I see so much evidence of a higher power that heard a child's prayer and took it seriously. God has been my guide. And he has given me whatever I needed to follow his lead.

He has been faithful—yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I'm really looking forward to the surprises to come.

I don't know what your situation is, and I don't want to judge where you're at. But maybe someone here today has felt something. Maybe someone here wants to pray a prayer like I did, a prayer that acknowledges God's leadership and invites him to take control of the journey.

It won't be because of anything I said. And it won't be because of anything you've done. It will be just because God really cares about you and me. He has a plan for each one of us, but he needs our willingness to let go of the controls. And, it's a very un-manly thing to let go control. Or so our society tells us. Personally, I think that's garbage. I reckon the real men are the ones who step out into the unknown and go where they did not expect to go to do what they didn't really expect to do. But then, I'm biased because I've experienced God's love and care.

If you feel you want to make a commitment to follow God, you might like to pray this prayer with me now.

Heavenly Father, I realise that I have been running my own life and have not always done what you know is best for me. Thank you for caring about me. I want to be the kind of person You want me to be. I want to be one who follows Jesus Christ as Lord and to experience life in all its fulness. Amen.