Improvising a Renewed Story at AuburnLife

Utilising Biblical Narrative for Congregational Transformation

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The biblical narrative is a resource for congregational worship and transformation. N.T. Wright adopts a high view of Scripture as the narrative that the church finds itself in, and suggests the mission of the church is to “improvise” how to continue the storyline of the Bible in a new context. This chapter considers the case study of how AuburnLife Baptist Church has used this approach in Sunday worship to engage with the biblical story and how it engages with our story and mission. In a post-Christian society, it is important to explore a church’s story within a foundational Christian metanarrative, and its relationship to other competing (counter-)narratives of late/post modernity. The aim of the exercise, ultimately, is to improvise a renewed story — to utilise the biblical narrative for congregational transformation. It aims to help a congregation get in touch with the biblical narrative (and how they can continue that, using the Acts 29+ metaphor of improvising the ongoing story of the mission of God), in order to enhance the formational quality of Sunday worship and help the church improvise new ways of doing church and mission.

Who’s for a story?

Paying attention to the guiding narratives of a church can enhance worship and foster congregational transformation. Missional-culture architect J.R. Woodward teaches that a church can gain insights into where God is calling them by paying attention to their church’s narrative. His challenge is to ask: “As you consider the congregation you serve, is the narrative of the community shaping people to love Christ more, be more like him and deeply engage the world in order to see God’s
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Woodward suggests there are three groups of stories which shape a church. A church is shaped firstly by the Bible stories it focuses on. It is worth asking how these stories help the church love God, love their neighbours, and love their enemies. A church is also shaped by the historical stories and memories of the church that are rehearsed, and thirdly by stories of mission from current experience that are retold. Analysis of these three sets of stories can help identify what a church sees as important, and where a church might best focus its vision and mission.

In a previous chapter in the first New Wineskins volume, and inspired by Woodward's revitalisation frameworks, I explored the historical narrative of AuburnLife Baptist Church and some of our contemporary missional stories. As a congregational worship exercise, we used “appreciative inquiry” and a historical storyline to map our local church history. This revealed distinctive features of our church's history which are also shared values that inform our current mission and vision. The aim of the exercise was to imagine a renewed story. The key features of our vision draw on key assets of our history — especially being a “leadership farm” that grows a new generation of leaders, offering multicultural hospitality space, and being generous with our buildings.

This chapter discusses our experience with the other framing narrative that shapes our congregational life — the narrative of Scripture. At Auburn we followed up the congregational timelines exercise with a teaching and learning series on “This is My/Our Story”. We wanted to start exploring how our church's historical narrative fits in the context of the biblical story.

What's your biblical narrative? (Act V/Acts 29+)

Any church story begins not with the plant or start of the local congregation, but with the story of the Bible. The church's story is God's story to begin with. The first part of a church's narrative is to reconnect with the biblical narrative. This is not just about reading Scripture to master it, but letting Scripture read and master us. A good teacher, Woodward argues, helps people understand that the Bible is a voice to hear, not merely a book to read. Good teaching helps a church to be like a Berean. Luke reported that Bereans “were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul’s message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth” (Acts 17:11). Part of not just engaging Scripture but dwelling faithfully in its story is about asking what the truth of Scripture is for a particular local congregation.
N.T. Wright urges Christians to adopt a high view of Scripture as authoritative, but he suggests a different and more dynamic way of viewing its authority. It is not so much full of rules to obey or creeds to believe, nor even timeless truths to instruct, devotional snippets to inspire, or evangelistic summaries to quote, but more of a narrative that we find ourselves in. Wright does not belittle laws and truth, devotion and evangelism, but argues we approach Scripture best by dwelling faithfully in its story. He suggests a model for reading and responding to Scripture as like a five-act play:

Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play whose fifth act had been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves.7

The first four acts are authoritative. As we improvise the fifth act, we are guided by the plot and characterisation of the first four acts — Creation, Fall, Israel, and Jesus, and by understanding how the fifth act — the story of the church — will finish. The fifth act is begun in the New Testament as the first scene of the final act, but the church through history has been improvising and performing the following scenes. We do not make up the script entirely out of our own imaginations. Rather we let our imagination be formed by the story of what God has been doing in history, and of where Scripture tells us history is heading. The ways in which Jesus brought life and wholeness, and how Jesus sent the church to continue the story and mission of Jesus (John 20:21), are formative for how God invites us to continue the story.8

The Bible is the story of missio Dei or the mission of God, and as a story it has potential to capture people’s imagination. N.T. Wright suggests this is why God used so much narrative in Scripture: “Throw a rule book at people’s head, or offer them a list of doctrines, and they can duck or avoid it, or simply disagree and go away. Tell them a story, though, and you invite them to share a world-view or
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better still a ‘God-view’”. Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright encourages us to see the purpose of our lives wrapped up with the mission of God:

We want to be driven by a purpose that has been tailored just right for our own individual lives ... when we should be seeing the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation.¹⁰

Part of what really is good news about Christianity is that God has a purpose, a mission, and an ongoing story which God invites us to be part of and cooperate with. But it is an ongoing story that we co-create. God’s will and purposes for us are not a set script, although the story of Scripture points us in helpful directions from which we improvise.

Biography as theology, and as narrative ethics, was pioneered by James McClendon.¹¹ John Millbank contends the task for Christians today is not to “out-reason” opponents, but to “out-narrate” them — to tell a better story that draws them into a compelling vision of human flourishing.¹² Or in the words of Paul Fiddes:

The Christian strategy is not to imagine that we have a point of vantage above or beyond culture, from which to survey other stories. It is rather ... the persuasive power of our story that will judge other stories. And it is not just telling; we are to out-perform others by living by a better story.¹³

The story of Scripture is the clarion call for a local church to become all it can be as a partner with God in the missio Dei.

Missionary statesman Lesslie Newbigin urged leaders to let the tradition dwell in them, and dwell themselves fully in the tradition: “The Christian understanding of the world is not only a matter of ‘dwelling in’ a tradition of understanding; it is a matter of dwelling in a story of God’s activity, activity which is still continuing”.¹⁴ Scripture helps us understand God’s story. But congregational life also offers us clues about God’s story, and our congregations are a vehicle for communicating the uniqueness of the biblical story. In answer to the question of how the biblical story can challenge competing worldviews, Newbigin comments: “It can do so through the witness of a community which, in unbroken continuity with the biblical actors and witnesses, indwells the story the Bible tells”.¹⁵ More famously, in answer to how the gospel can be communicated, Newbigin declares: “The only
answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it”.

Martin Sutherland argues that a distinctly Baptist way of doing theology focuses on church as gathering and becoming, more than merely developing philosophical ideas that are more highly regarded in the prevailing scholastic model of theologising. For Baptists, church manifests primarily in local visible form, where Christ is dynamically present in the community. This is the “beating heart” of Baptist theology. Nevertheless, Sutherland asserts the importance of paying attention to the narratives of Scripture as well as the congregation:

The church experience is never just local, never just one story. Rather it is the dynamic interplay of two stories — the contemporary, local, “gathered” one, and the Christ story as revealed in Scripture. These stories are not equal partners. As the church gathers “in his name”, it is seeking to align its story with Christ’s story in all its scandalous particularity. Thus, in this dialectic, the Christ story is primary and normative.

Sutherland suggests the story of the church aligns with the story of Christ, not in direct correspondence or imitation, as if to answer “What would Jesus do?”, but more like the musical concept of “coherence”. Our theological task is to bring the story of the local church into harmony and consonance with Christ: “The story itself calls us forward and outwards rather than backwards or inwards.” But our beginning reference point is the storyline of Scripture.

The story of Scripture is something God invites us to continue to improvise. The early church’s story is told in Acts but finishes at Acts 28. It is the calling of the church since to continue the narrative and live out Acts 29+.

**AuburnLife — putting ourselves in the story**

AuburnLife has had a few worship experiments to help understand how the Bible fits together as a narrative, and where we fit in the story.

In 2012 we hosted a “Bible and art” series where different speakers shared a piece of art and talked about its significance. Each piece of art was then hung on the wall. The art was from different cultural backgrounds. The different pieces represented a different part of the biblical story — from creation through to Israel’s exile, to Jesus, the last Supper, and the early church. For example, an indigenous speaker, Safina Fergie, introduced creation for us with her indigenous
dot painting. Jenni Cronshaw invited us to engage with Jesus through his parable of the Sower, and invited us to reflect on what seeds God wanted to plant in each of us. Each Sunday offered a meaningful reflection on a different part of Scripture, but our Sunday Stuff co-ordinators that year, Julia Rhyder and Mark Payne, helped us also to see how the stories fitted together in the overall narrative of Scripture. Now each Sunday we are still surrounded by our biblical story, as a reminder of the story we inherit and of what we learned in that series.

When we came to 2014 we wanted to revisit our biblical story, in particular with reference to N.T. Wright’s concept of reading and applying the Bible as improvisation. Here are some questions we used as a church to imagine a renewed story through biblical narrative:

a. To what extent is the Act V or Acts 29+ metaphor of improvising the ongoing story of the mission of God helpful for reading the Bible?

b. In what ways can we read the Bible in order to help us deeply understand our story and help us improvise Acts 29+ today?

c. What parts or passages of Scripture are especially helpful or formative for us in our story as a church? What is your church’s biblical story that you are living, and why does it belong particularly to you as a group? (This question is a good “homework” or retreat exercise to invite people to consider and discern.21)

Discussing these questions was prompted by sixteen-year-old Tim Barnett’s comment on a sermon from a guest speaker one week:

That guy was good — he told interesting stories, though he didn’t mention the Bible at all, which was kind of weird. Still that’s better than when they just say obvious stuff about the Bible that anyone who just reads it could see. That’s so annoying when they just tell you what you already just read, as if you couldn’t read it for yourself. What’s the point of that?

This “fairly brutal honesty of youth” led Beth Barnett, one of our teachers and worship leaders, to ask on our church Facebook page: “how might this help us think through how we spend our time together in listening to stories (and whose stories) and how we help each other hear God’s Story in opening the Bible?” I wanted to open up the conversation, beyond Facebook, about how we can deeply engage Scripture and relate it to what God is doing and inviting us towards.
My story/ our story

When we discussed these questions one Sunday, connected to our congregational timeline exercise (11 May 2014), participants said that seeing the Bible as a basis for our improvisation was a novel but helpful framework. It also helped members make sense of reading some parts of the Bible that seem less relevant today — such as Levitical codes, or even offensive parts, such as calls for genocide. These parts of our narrative from Act II are not things to repeat as part of our script, but they are part of our background story for how we express faith today. Finally, Beth Barnett commented that N.T. Wright's language of giving “the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors” was daunting, but another writer reminded her that we have a helpful director and prompter in the Holy Spirit who guides our improvisation.22

An important footnote to this presentation was added by Alex Sangster who has a strong background in acting. Sangster shared the following “rules” for improvisation as an actor:

a. Say “Yes” (When someone suggests something begin with “Yes”.)

b. And say “Yes AND not Yes BUT. (It is too easy to undermine a good idea with too many “buts” ... but who would come?”)

c. Stay in the moment. (Don’t get distracted by what went wrong last time or what is supposed to happen next week. For an actor this is critical; for the church it means being attentive to God’s calling now.)

d. Make your partner look good. (We are a community and called to build each other up.)

These acting rules can quite easily be translated into a notion of “missional improvisation”. We read Scripture and do church together, at our best, when we affirm and build up one another, help each other to thrive, and do not dwell on past mistakes or future fantasies. We are planning on discussing this further, at Auburn, as we journey through the gospel of John. We will be asking, “How can we best support and bounce off one another in improvising this life of Jesus we are learning about?”

Improvisation is a fresh invitation to really engage and indwell our biblical story. Dave Male, related to his work in Fresh Expressions of Church, explains that pioneering leadership is not just about looking for new and novel ways of doing church and leaving tradition behind, but getting to the heart of our tradition. Like
those who can best improvise in music, sport, or art, we do well to understand first the foundations of musical forms (or movement or artistic expression), and then experiment in new and vivid directions. Male encourages us to rediscover the heart of our history, not to default to the status quo but on that foundation to imagine constructive change for a radical future. This is our hope for Auburn, as we reshape as a signpost of the kingdom for our context and times.  

We followed up our first exploration of the stories of the Bible and how they connect to our stories with Beth Barnett teaching on Genesis 1 and 2 (18 May 2014). From the perspective of biblical studies, the Bible is not one consecutive narrative, but numerous stories told together in various conversations and formats. These include two creation narratives, the law presented in different versions, four gospel story traditions, and three accounts of Saul’s conversion. Barnett suggested that since the Bible has numerous stories, it has room for our stories too. She invited the congregation to explore Genesis 1 and 2 using her “Twists and Turns” approach. This playful retelling offers an example of how the Bible tells two stories together and invites us to tell our story.

**All-Age Story**

The Bible has stories,  
Some big some small,  
Stories tangled together  
With a thread through them all  
They don’t all explain things  
In quite the same way  
So there’s room for some questions  
And there’s room for some play  
They’re good to hear twice  
On the very same day  
And then come back for more  
After going away.  
I’d tell you one now
But that will not do
If I tell you one story
I will have to tell two
Because right at the start as the Bible gets going
We straight away see that its strange way of knowing
Declares God too great to be simply defined
In one quick sketch leaving questions behind
But in more than two stories, each with details specific
Told in songs, tales and poems — the Bible’s prolific
You can’t just take one bit and think you know all
The whole truth about God is a mighty big call
The First Story begins with some calendar days
And God’s Voice speaks and makes things in wonderful ways
First the light, then the waters and seasons and land
Plants and animals sprout and then woman with man
So everything happens at the sound of God’s speech
And it happens in order, with a neat place for each
But look, turn the page to see Story Two
And spot all the differences — there’s quite a few
God’s sleeves are rolled up and he’s playing with mud
God makes first a garden and a man — flesh and blood
God makes animal friends for the man to name
But none of the animals are just quite the same
So God, with his own hands, still messy and muddy
Makes a woman, a sister, a life-long best buddy
What wonderful stories when taken in tandem
Show a God who can speak and whose ways are not random
And that God is with us in muck and in mess
And his purpose for us is to love, work and bless
God’s world works together in ways we can trust
But he asks us to help and take care of the dust
And the water and air and animals and plants
And God’s working with us, so it’s not left to chance.
Two stories together twisting round one another
Show us more about God and more of each other
Watch the twists of these stories as you follow along
And see this is God’s world, and it’s where we belong.

In postmodernity the “metanarrative” has come under suspicion, but people still look for framing stories to describe where they belong. Barnett’s approach, which AuburnLife is adopting, is one in which we can express unity and embrace through God’s story, but not by having to make everyone’s story sound the same. She suggests N.T. Wright’s model of a one-act play still embraces this idea, as one “play” often weaves together plot and subplots that end up being just as much “the plot”.

Another following Sunday (4 June 2014), when we discussed what biblical stories resonate with Auburn’s story, gave opportunity for people to open their Bibles and explore which parts were most significant for them and the church, and fostered a conversation about what people most appreciate about Auburn. In small discussion groups and then with the congregation, people offered these passages as resonating strongly with Auburn:

- The Apostle Paul’s story, who was persistent in ministry no matter what;
- Ruth who, like Israel, had her ups and downs, and who with Naomi had to leave her place, but who as a foreigner and alien came to a new place and belonged and was welcomed, like people who come to Auburn from all different sorts of backgrounds;
- The Psalms that speak of God offering a safe place and refuge in the wilderness (e.g., Psalms 46 and 91);
- Mary and Martha, who expressed warm welcome and hospitality, albeit in different ways (Luke 10:38–42);
• Noah’s ark, which offered a home to different people and even animals (Genesis 6–8);
• Gospel stories of Jesus and his followers eating with different people (e.g., Luke 5:27–32);
• The early church’s story in Acts sharing meals and Bible study (Acts 2:42), like AuburnHub’s student community;
• The Prodigal Son and the father’s non-judgmental welcome (Luke 15:11–32);
• The Mustard Tree and its creating hospitable space for the birds to nest (Matthew 13:31–32).

It was significant for the group to hear from one another that most people’s stories resonated strongly with a theme of welcome and hospitality. For example, our Sunday Stuff co-coordinator Julia Rhyder had previously introduced the vision of the Mustard Tree to us. We were asking about our hopes as a church. Where would we most love to branch out? What would the kingdom of God look like in answer to our prayer, “Bring heaven to Hawthorn. Let your dream for our neighbourhood happen”? The parable of the Mustard Tree suggested not to hope to grow from a small seed into a huge tree, but to grow into a space that can be a safe place of inclusion and a hub of hospitality for all the stranded to find a place of belonging. It is not about impressive size or fancy structure, but the hospitality it offers.25 Dreaming big when it comes to Mustard Tree hopes, therefore, is not to grow large, but to be generous with hospitality.

Jean Vanier’s words resonated with us about his vision for church hospitality:

In the midst of all the violence and corruption of the world God invites us today to create new places of belonging, places of sharing, of peace and of kindness, places were no-one needs to defend himself or herself; places where each one is loved and accepted with one’s own fragility, abilities and disabilities. This is my vision for our churches: that they become places of belonging, places of sharing.26

Hospitality, especially to others who are different from us including international students, is an important way of improvising the life of Jesus in our neighbourhood.

One person added a non-biblical image of Auburn as like a “Clayton’s church”; as the church you go to when you don’t want to go to church (echoing the
advertising slogan of the Clayton’s drink — the drink you’re having when you are not having a drink). We live in a post-Christian society where many people experience exclusion and loneliness. A dominant narrative is one of scarcity and self-sufficiency. Thus a community of generous inclusion is intrinsically a good news story to celebrate. It will be a worthwhile future exercise to invite AuburnLife to engage in deeper ways with the authority and example these Scripture stories offer for a countercultural witness of hospitality.

Open space questions

Discussing the narrative of Scripture and the narrative of our community also fed into a refreshed approach to Auburn’s “Sunday Stuff”; our “AuburnWay” of fostering spirituality and worship. Over the last two years the church had become accustomed to an “Open Space” time of discussion after a “sermon” or interactive teaching time. Some Sundays we replace a teaching input, a “sermon” time, with invited congregational sharing. For example, one Sunday the preacher could not come because of family illness, and so we invited everyone to “bring-a-favourite-book” and share why we love it and how it engages with faith. That morning’s discussion was profound and people are still talking about it (and comparing books). But we wanted to take all our gatherings, or “Sunday Stuff”, to another level of encouraging one another in faith and mission, as well as to engage Scripture more deeply.

One change we adopted was to begin almost all our services with a “Connect” question. To connect afresh with God, one another, and the AuburnLife space, we have an open-ended question or two as people gather. For example:

- What is happening in your life and what is God doing in your life and neighbourhood that we can celebrate with you?
- Where have we seen signs of God’s kingdom this week? Where have you longed to see signs of God’s kingdom this week?
- What have you been learning about Jesus, faith, and life this last week? What are you curious about Jesus and what else would you like to be learning about and growing in?
- What has stuck with you about Jesus from last Sunday, or from reading John through this week?

These connecting questions and the conversation that flows from them at the
beginning of our gatherings help us connect with the story of previous Sundays, the stories of people's lives, and the story of Scripture we want to improvise.

Moreover, after glimpsing the formative potential of Scripture's narrative, we decided to refocus our teaching times around reading and engaging the Bible. Woodward develops N.T. Wright's metaphor of reading Scripture as a five-act play that we improvise from and in, based on what God has done in the past and also where God is taking history in "making everything new" (Rev 21:5). He urges allowing what God has promised about the future to shape us:

> We can join God in writing a new future for the world by anticipating his future in the present. If God's future is the elimination of hunger and thirst, how are our economic practices at this moment anticipating the reality of abundance? If God's future is the elimination of weapons of war and having people live peacefully with each other, how should we treat our enemies at this moment? If God's future is renewed creation with clean air, fresh water and natural beauty, are we living sustainable lives in the present? Future-oriented living forces us to answer these questions in concrete ways.²⁷

We wanted to regularly read and engage with Scripture and its narrative to see how we could continue to improvise that story, and to teach people to read and apply Scripture this way. Thus for several gatherings we have read the Bible and then asked two standard open-ended discussion questions:

a. What questions or response do you have about this part of our/God's story?

b. In what ways does this story connect with your/our story today, and how do we improvise and continue to live it?

We did this before any focused teaching time, so that we gave God and the people of God the first opportunity to speak into the gathering. The second question echoes the encouragement of N.T. Wright to see our church story as Act V of the five-act play that continues the biblical narrative. In asking that question, we want to create continuity with the opening invitation question of what God is doing in people's lives.

The following parts of the gathering would then structure around the text and its narrative, and respond to people's questions and discussion. A priority for worship leaders or "curators" has been to help people utilise their five senses and their eight intelligences.²⁸ We want AuburnLife to be a place for all cultures, all ages, all abilities, all stages of faith. Some people come with more doubts than faith, but we
say that in a community of faith that is okay because we have faith and blessing to share.\textsuperscript{29} As we pray, bring our offerings, discuss the passage further, sing in worship, and send each other out, the continuity of the gathering is the story of how we are continuing God’s story.

\textbf{Improvising a new future}

It is important to understand the Bible and its narrative genre, rather than focusing on isolated verses. One of our leaders, Brad Jackel, who has a PhD in literature, has encouraged us to read the Bible as a literary text. When he preached recently he explained:

I don’t like thinking about Bible verses — there were no verse numbers originally — it is a pretty recent addition and like headings and red letters and all the other things we add to the Bible they change the way we read it. Among other things verse numbers encourage us to take things out of context and turn them into bumper stickers. I have just bought a Bible that doesn’t have any verse numbers printed.\textsuperscript{30}

The Bible is not so much a rulebook as a divine story about redemption. It is not an instruction manual for living life more comfortably, but a narrative that invites us to read ourselves into the ongoing story. It is “the story we find ourselves in”, to borrow from the name of Brian McLaren’s philosophical dialogue about the gospel.\textsuperscript{31} Moreover, as McLaren says elsewhere, it engages with the most pressing crises of the story of our contemporary world. The Bible offers us resources to challenge. “Everything must change”, since Jesus is better news than we had imagined and the Bible is potentially a more powerful story that models how God and people work together to transform society and avert self-destruction from the suicide machine of how the world is currently operating.\textsuperscript{32} The beauty of this biblical story is that it invites us into a purpose greater than we had imagined. It invites us to live this story, not as isolated individuals but in solidarity and community with our sisters and brothers in the church universally, and also locally expressed in our congregation. The story calls us beyond ourselves as a church, which may not be as safe and reassuring as it sounds. N.T. Wright comments that the story is not supposed to have reassuring limits, but expansive growth for us and the kingdom: