

*Imagination and Improvisations of God's Story is a must in a postmodern world ...*  
— Winn Griffin

# Luke-Acts Improv:

Biblical Narratives That Get You Into The Act

**Jamie Greene**

Foreword by: Bill Woodward

# Praises for Luke-Acts Improv

In *Luke-Acts Improv: Biblical Narratives that Get You into the Act*, Jamie Greene takes his reader back to the good news of the Bible. This well researched and approachable book will help every day Christians live out the whole story of God in their communities. It is a must read and an incredible resource for all who want to equip this generation of Christian to love the world around them.

—**Dr. Ron Ruthruff**, Author

*The Least of These: Lessons Learned from Kids on The Street*, 2010,  
Adjunct Professor, Bakke Graduate University, Seattle, WA



I finished your book and only wish it was longer. Anyone who is thinking about how the church, in too many situations, has become irrelevant and voiceless in our current culture should read your thoughtful analysis. The fact that you go beyond analysis in what is happening into a biblical based strategy of what can and must occur makes it significant. The idea of moving from an organization that simply proposes a certain worldview and beliefs towards a conduit of the life and power of God rings true and excites my spirit. I hope many read it and take up the challenge to really be the followers of Jesus like I was. Great job!!! It is a book I can't wait to put into the hands of those who long for Jesus to be raised up in our world.

I found especially helpful the explanation of how the church's embrace of reason for the proof of truth and the postmodern distrust of reason has led people to exclude the church as dangerous and suspicious. Also the linking of church history with biblical truth as lights to help guide us out of the intellectual swamp we find ourselves in. I think it would be an excellent resource for church leaders (I liked the discussion about clergy vs. laity ) to discuss. I believe that church leaders who ignore your insights and conclusions will continue

to alienate, not attract thinking people to the kingdom of God. Put me in for an order of ten copies!

—**Tosh Hayashi**, MSW, MDiv  
Therapist, Samaritan Center of Puget Sound  
Seattle, WA



Jamie Greene addresses the difficult issue of how the church is going to get from *here* to *there* in a culture that no longer regards our message and our methods as relevant. Leaders who know they need to transition the church into a community that expresses the gospel transformationally in a postmodern world will want to read this book. He challenges us to recover a way of doing and being in our communities of faith that authentically spills out into the world around us.

—**Dr. Morris Dirks**,  
Alliance Northwest; and Director of Soul Formation  
(C&MA)  
Portland, OR



This is a thought-provoking, compelling book! It is cutting-edge, biblically rooted, and thoroughly missional. It speaks directly to the hunger of Christians who are grappling with how to navigate through the present day realities of a post-Christian, postmodern culture in which there is great suspicion and even hostility toward the gospel.

Here, Jamie gently but convincingly invites us to overcome this indifference by engaging in six “incarnational practices.” He rightfully contends that by living in “the way of Jesus” people can “read the gospel” through how we relate and live in our particular context. These incarnational practices are not new. They have been practiced by followers of Jesus through the ages.

This book helps us recapture these, first by engaging our imaginations by reframing our experience of the biblical narratives of Luke and Acts. It then takes us on a journey through the historical

church, highlighting two essential spiritual practices that serve to enliven our spirits, such as the spiritual reading of Scripture (*Lectio divina*), and the art of spiritual discernment, that is, listening to the voice of Jesus through prayer. Four other incarnational practices such as compassion for the marginalized, table fellowship, authentic Christian community, and the priesthood of all believers are explored in-depth to help the church effectively overcome cultural suspicion. All six are illustrated with contemporary examples.

The church has been given a gift in this book! Both the structure and content of the curriculum make it a tremendous resource to help us learn to live in the way of Jesus. I commend this book to anyone seeking to live faithfully into the biblical mandate to share in the missional vocation of Jesus, that is, to announce the coming of the kingdom of God that is “already here but not yet!”

—**Rev. Dianna Kunce**, MDiv, M.S.W. (Presbyterian)  
Co-Executive Director, Renewal Ministries Northwest,  
Mukilteo, WA



I have been privileged to observe and admire Jamie from close-up for many years and know that most of the ideas and methods he shares here have been personally tested and validated by this godly man of great integrity. If you love Jesus and desire to share his love in meaningful, practical ways with those who need him or don't love him, then this is a must-have book for you. Whether you are a new or old Christian, Jamie's book gives you the background and ideas for living your life as an incarnational Christian in a way that will change lives and bring real blessing to God's kingdom here on earth.

—**Walt Huyser**  
Senior Vice President, Bank of America (Retired)  
Seattle, WA



*Luke-Acts Improv* is an essential book for all those who are trying to live out the gospel meaningfully in a post-Christian, urban culture.

Drawing from relevant historical sources, theological traditions, literary examples, and biblical models, this book offers a broad and perceptive analysis of contemporary urban culture and shows pragmatic ways evangelical Christians can respond to some of its most challenging problems. The premise of the book is that we can bring palpable hope even to places where there may be intransigent resistance to the gospel.

—**Haein Park**

Assistant Professor of English, Biola University  
La Mirada, CA



Jamie Greene lived this book long before he wrote it. So what is contained in these pages is not simply “good ideas” about living the Christian life but rather “lived out practices” for a holistic life in Christ.

This book is written for any sincere Christian interested in extending the gospel in ways that are consistent with Scripture, in accordance with orthodox history, and relevant for today’s world. Rather than strictly condensing the Christian witness to “proclaiming the good news,” Jamie reminds us that the good news was always intended to be lived out. Throughout these pages, Jamie provides ample support and encouragement for each one of us to expand and affirm how to live meaningfully and joyfully with God and our neighbor.

Over and over again, Jamie invites his reader to be informed by Scripture, encouraged by history, and creatively challenged by our culture so that we too will Live the Improv in such a way that we and our community know Christ more! Enjoy the adventure!

—**Andrea Zikakis**

Associate Pastor, Calvary Chapel (2002 — 2009)  
(Assemblies of God)  
Seattle, WA



This book is a great discussion of the strategic connection between living compassionately in the narrative of the gospel and sharing it with skeptical postmoderns. Jamie reacquaints us with how authentic gospel living and compassionate engagement are necessities in reaching postmoderns.

—**Dr. Andre Snodgrass**  
Lead Pastor, North Seattle Alliance Church  
(C&MA)  
Seattle, WA



Jamie Greene is one of the people who “gets it” when it comes to the new realities of ministering a whole gospel to the whole person. He has worked hard to add solid research and observation to his native intuition for missional leadership. In this book, he is laying at our feet hours of hard work and data gathering plus many deep insights.

—**Dr. Randy Rowland**  
Lead Pastor, Sanctuary  
(Christian Reformed, CRC)  
Seattle, WA



Kingdom people who embrace the heartbeat of God to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” will certainly value this book! The author has done a masterful job of communicating, illustrating, and proposing his passion for reaching people in culturally pluralistic contexts with the gospel of Christ. I highly recommend it!

—**Sharon Davis**, Therapist, Discovery Counseling  
(C&MA)  
May Valley, WA



For the last twenty-five years I've lived, walked, and breathed incarnational ministry in partnership with a community of people. It has been our mission to pursue intimacy with the Trinity living out God's love in relationship with each other and the community of homeless and street involved youth we serve.

*Luke-Acts Improv* defines the vital nature of this living out of the gospel in a manner that provides strong rationale and invitation for all Christians to join in the life of incarnational ministry and story. With profound clarity, Jamie Greene paints a picture that illuminates the value of accepting God's invitation to live in his epic adventure, "an adventure story rooted in the Story of Scripture that is experiential, participatory, full of imagery, and that offers connectivity."

Jamie lights the pathway creating an antidote for the paralysis of the evangelical church in North America, writing in a way that removes roadblocks of fear of liberalism for evangelicals while at the same time wooing them to the solution of living incarnationally and telling story.

—**Rita Nussli**, MSW (Free Methodist)  
Soul Formation, Olympia, WA  
Executive Director New Horizons Ministries, (1986 — 2010)  
Seattle, WA



Today's culture is less interested in truth on ice; i.e., doctrinal assertions, than in truth alive. God intends life to be lived as an exciting drama, in lives filled with joy and reality, and what the world is waiting to see. Jamie Greene's life embodies that of which he writes, a life of "Gospel Improv," a congruence so greatly needed today.

—**Bud Bylsma**, Founder, Northwest Leadership Foundation  
(Retired)  
Portland, OR



We find ourselves now living in “show me” times. If the church of Jesus Christ is to find a way forward in this rapidly changing environment, we must embrace this reality. It is imperative that we immerse ourselves in what Jesus taught and did, what history conveys to us regarding the story of the church down through the centuries attempting to live out the message, so that we too can step forward in courage to bring the life transforming grace, mercy, and love of Jesus Christ into *all* the contexts to which we are called and privileged to enter. Jamie Greene has provided the church today with a solid foundation from which we can move out with this kind of courage through his work *Luke-Acts Improv: Biblical Narratives That Get You into the Act.* This is a true gift to every local congregation seeking to live out incarnational practices grounded in the life and ministry of our Lord and the story and witness of the church; as we are led and empowered by the Holy Spirit.”

—**Rev. Denise Easter**, MSW, MDiv  
Co Executive Director, Renewal Ministries Northwest,  
(Presbyterian)  
Mukilteo, WA



Imagination and improvisations of God’s Story is a must in a postmodern world; without their use we may be doomed to repeat the mistakes of our ancestors. In *Luke-Acts Improv*, Jamie Greene takes the time-honored, spiritual disciplines of our ancestors and runs them through the lens of Luke and Acts to offer a fresh way of participating in the story of God. You will want to imbibe in his conclusions because they can “get you into the Act.”

—**Dr. Winn Griffin**  
President of Seeing the Bible Live Ministries, Woodinville, WA  
Adjunct Professor Bakke Graduate University, Seattle, WA  
participates with Vineyard Community Church, Shoreline, WA







# Luke-Acts Improv:

*Biblical Narratives That Get You Into The Act*

**Jamie Greene**

Foreword by: Bill Woodward

**HARMON  
PRESS**

Luke-Acts Improv: Biblical Narratives That Get You into the Act

Copyright © 2010 by Jamie Greene  
All Rights Reserved. Worldwide.

**HARMON**  
**PRESS**

Published by  
Harmon Press  
Woodinville, WA 98077  
<http://www.harmonpress.com>

ISBN-10: 0-9799076-2-4  
ISBN-13: 978-0-9799076-2-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2010941313

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *The New International Version of the Bible*, © 1975, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

All rights reserved solely by the author. The author guarantees all contents are original and do not infringe upon the legal rights of any other person or work. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means mechanical or electronic, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from author except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review. The views expressed in this book do not necessarily represent those of Harmon Press or one of its Imprints.

Cover design by: Harmon Press

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	i
Foreword by Bill Woodward.....	v
Introduction .....	1
Prologue .....	9
Chapter 1: Setting the Stage Biblically.....	37
Chapter 2: Imaginative Engagement with Scripture .....	59
Chapter 3: Experiencing Prayer Primarily As Relationship .....	81
Chapter 4: Compassion for the Marginalized .....	105
Chapter 5: Table Fellowship with Sinners and Tax Collectors ....	129
Chapter 6: Communities as Signs of Kingdom Witness .....	147
Chapter 7: Gospel of Kingdom. The Call of <i>Whole</i> Community	171
Epilogue .....	197
Afterword by Phil Laube.....	199
Appendix 1: Three Conversation Partners .....	201
Bibliography .....	211



## Luke-Acts: Improv Acknowledgements

**A**s I think about everyone who has helped me along in this project, let me first begin with my family.

To my “single missionary gal,” Lynn Ann, who has become the most wonderful life and ministry partner that your husband could ever hope for, my acknowledgments begin with you. Your kindness, compassion, humor, counsel, insight, *editorial skills*, and ministry to family, friends, strangers, neighbors, and coworkers in everyday life are so *amazing*. I am so privileged to share each day with you. Thank you for your support and encouragement.

To Lynn’s sister, Gail Burke, for the generous sharing of a cabin on the lake in which to write.

To my sons, Sean and Nate, who bring so much joy and life, especially in their choice of wonderful spouses, Nicole and Rachel, and in their love of sports. Thank you for supporting the family move from suburban single family living with a backyard and a dog to urban townhouse living with a courtyard and an alley during your teen years.

To Mom and Dad, who brought me into this world and raised me in a wonderful family of five sisters and brothers, Mimi, Jonny Joyce, Bob, Tom, and Jon. Thank you for the love, the childhood memories, the education, and the great start you gave me in this journey of life. Mom, I continue to enjoy our twice weekly phone conversations at ninety-one years of age, and I still often think of Dad and know he would be so proud of this accomplishment.

To my friend Everett Renner, who is like a brother. For the journey of a thousand miles walking around Green Lake each week in the 1990s when you listened, affirmed, and stoked into flames the passion and energy to write this book — thank you!

## Luke-Acts Improv: Acknowledgements

Second, my learning community, from North Seattle Alliance church (NSA).

To my breakfast club members who read many of my book reviews, proposal, and provided *real world* feedback early in this process: Ron Murphy, Walt Huysen, Kyle Hogan, Mike Jackson, Phil Laube, Roger Penner, Ken Kerkhoff, Del Clark, Forrest Franklin, Larry Broweleit, Alan Pritchard, Cheryl Laube, Pat Giurgevich, Becky Jackson, Alannah and John DePlace, and Lynn Greene. Thank you!

To Bill Woodward, professor, teacher, fellow board member, and friend who came alongside me in so many unexpected, supportive and reinforcing ways over the past several years, thank you!

To Phil Laube, my monthly breakfast and occasional pinochle partner, who read every single word written and provided feedback and encouragement every step of the way — thank you! My step was always lighter after our meetings.

To Haein Park, a new friend with a PhD in American Literature, who agreed to serve as an informal second reader so I could gain a cross disciplinary perspective with her feedback.

Third, my learning network in the greater Christian community.

To those who provided support, encouragement, insight, feedback during this process and are truly caring and insightful friends and colleagues: Ron & Sharon Davis, Andy Snodgrass, Jay & Lucy Johnson, Dave & Elaine Hogan, Morris Dirks, Jon Sharpe, Dianna Kunce, Denise Easter, Andrea Zikakis, Charis Weathers, Dennis Heida, Tosh Hayashi, Troy and Tonya Wagner, Randy Rowland, Phil Bence and Rose Madrid-Swetman. Thank you all!

To Dave Heckman, husband of Jill, who on the verge of completing his PhD work in Economics at the University of Washington, read my proposal and provided very helpful written feedback and suggestions like he was one of my professors. Thank you!

To Ron Ruthruff, my first professor at Bakke Graduate University, whose class I only intended to audit. Halfway through his course I decided to do all the reading and papers only to discover that an application to the DMin program was needed to gain credit! Now several years later, Ron graciously agreed to be the second reader of my book project. Thank you!

## Luke-Acts Improv: Acknowledgements

Fourth, my Urban Mission Alliance (UMA) network too numerous to name.

To all those pastors, churches, and individuals who shared in the challenge of UMA's vision of incarnational, missional community as a foundation for church planting in the in-city neighborhoods of Seattle from 1991 to 2003. Thank you!

To Bud Bylsma, who came alongside us in developing the initial vision for UMA, introduced us to Ray Bakke, and gave encouragement and wise counsel. Thank you!

Fifth, my mentor in this book project.

To Winn Griffin, whose Research Bridge class and recently published book, *God's EPIC Adventure*, provided the language, model, and framework to validate the kind of book project wanted: one that will be useful for the next ten to fifteen years of ministry, thank you! Your willingness to be available for breakfast so many times during the course of this project was invaluable. Your encouragement, insightful comments, sharing of resources, and personal interest have been so appreciated — Thank you for modeling what it means to be a mentor!

In addition to my present mentor, I would like to mention three more:

At Alliance Theological Seminary, some of my formation came from Dr. Karl W. Westmeier, Assistant Professor of Missiology, and former C&MA missionary to Colombia. He opened my eyes to the big picture storyline in the Scriptures. I'll never forget the day sitting in his class when I felt like I was on the road to Emmaus. Thank you!

Second, the late George Reitz, Urban Director for the Metropolitan District of the C&MA, who came alongside me as a valued consultant, passionate cheer leader, listening confidante, and beloved friend. Thank you!

Third, the late Dr. Ray Anderson, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, who in my first class in academic theology at the Seattle extension program, underscored that his goal in teaching was to develop in his students "theological instincts." Thirty years later, when recently reading two of his books: *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (2005), and *The Shape of Practical Theology* (2001), he applied



## **Luke-Acts Improv: Acknowledgements**

a lifetime of his “theological instincts” to the burning practical issues of the day. His example helped provide the reinforcement for me to attempt the same through this book project in my context of ministry. Thank you!

Jamie Greene  
Seattle, WA  
August 1, 2010



## Luke-Acts: Improv Foreword by Bill Woodward

**A**s the service ended, the minister mentioned that a guest had requested special prayer. Whoever could stay on to pray was asked to do so.

My wife and I stayed.

Once the sanctuary emptied, Pastor Dick gently introduced the visitor. Turning to look, we reacted with eye-widening surprise. For we all recognized the face we had so frequently seen on television. It was 1973 in Washington D.C., and sitting in our midst was Watergate burglar James McCord.

And so we prayed — for a brother who had strayed but now wished restoration.

It was no surprise that this occurred at Fourth Presbyterian Church in an “inside-the-beltway” Maryland suburb. The long-time senior minister, Dr. Richard Halverson, sought passionately to flood the inner circles of government with the love of Christ. He would later embody all that he had long preached by serving as Chaplain of the United States Senate, spending his “retirement years” on Capitol Hill, quietly ministering to Senators and their families. Dick Halverson was my mentor in how to be the church.

He once told a story of a midweek flight when he got the inevitable question from a seatmate.

“And what do *you* do?”

“I’m a minister.”

“Oh.” Pause. “Where is your church?”

“Let’s see . . . right now? They’re in the offices of Congress, at Foggy Bottom, at Georgetown University, in several law firms . . .”

“No, I mean where is the church *located*? You know, where everybody meets on Sundays.”

## Luke-Acts Improv: Foreword

“You mean, where is our church *building*,” Dick would reply with a characteristic twinkle in his eye. “My congregation worships in Bethesda, but between Sundays my church is at work all around the District.” What we today would call an “incarnational and missional” perspective gripped Dick Halverson. He came to the nation’s capital with a vision: that his parishioners welcome everyone into their gatherings, but more importantly live their faith when they had *left* the church building.

He thus understood and modeled what Jamie Greene lays out for us in *Luke-Acts Improv*: church is what happens in the streets as well as the sanctuary, in witness no less than in worship, with those unlike us even more than those like us.

Neither building nor organization, the church is who we are as the body of Christ in the world, and what we do to *be* Christ *for* the world. In the twenty-first century, that world is defined by what goes on in cities — cities like Washington D.C., in the halls of power, and Seattle, in the temples of secular postmodernism. So Jamie rightly focuses on Christian witness in the city.

He understands that we Christians *can* win a hearing in the noisy cauldron of today’s urban culture. But we must think of our mission in a new way. We who would follow Jesus, he points out, are invited to step into a grand drama. It’s a narrative of grace and glory, and we get key roles within it. We thus join with the apostles, who were taught by Jesus and then unleashed at Pentecost. So Jamie focuses on the narratives of Luke’s Gospel and its sequel, Acts. He explains that much of this play-of-the-ages is already written and acted, but much remains incomplete. And as it continues its run, the performances — *our* performances, suggests Jamie — are more improvised than scripted.

A Luke-Acts improv, in other words!

This is a gripping and galvanizing insight. The God of grace is the director, and we get roles in God’s play? We even get to shape a lot of how we act out those roles? And our improv both builds toward God’s grand climax *and* recruits more into the company on stage? Wow!<sup>1</sup>

Yet this is as it has always been. The biblical narrative climaxes with

## Luke-Acts Improv: Foreword

Jesus coming in human form to redeem and reign, and *invites us to join in*. Jesus came in fulfillment of God's grand design, or mission, and summoned, empowered, and sent his church *into* mission. As Archbishop Rowan Williams has said, it's not the church of God that has a mission, it's the God of Mission that has a church! That's Luke-Acts. That's us.

And yet, doing new things for new times is nothing new!

The vision spelled out in this book is at one and the same time both highly innovative and very familiar. For at *each* strategic moment in the story of Christianity in America, a new era has called forth new ways to "do church." When culture undergoes tectonic shifts, God's Spirit is right there, empowering Christians to adapt — to acculturate, we might say, borrowing a missiological term — in order to confront the culture with a gospel that communicates afresh. Visionaries rise to lead God's people into out-of-the-box ways to reclaim and fulfill the Lord's mission. Put differently, in the metaphor Jesus used (Matthew 9), new wine (the ferment of the Spirit's empowering work) requires new wineskins (the adaptations in the church's structures and strategies).

That's what connects Richard Halverson and Jamie Greene. Each shows how to respond to an altered cultural context. For Christians of the early 1970s, in a world blasted by the culture shifts of the 1960s and the social shocks of the 1970s, prophets like Dick rose up in response.

Their new strategies, in turn, are built on a great heritage of innovation and impact. Back in the post-World War II decade, Americans had to cope with a daunting combination of suburban affluence and Cold War anxiety, while memories of depression and war evoked a jarring mix of fears and hopes. In this uneasy era, dynamic new evangelistic movements exploded on the American scene (think Billy Graham and Campus Crusade's Bill Bright), while brilliant new voices like Carl Henry and Harold Ockenga called erstwhile "fundamentalists" to a "new evangelical" engagement with society and culture.

A generation before, spiritual entrepreneurs had embraced the new mass medium of radio, which, along with other instruments of a new mass consumer culture, posed new challenges to Christians.

## Luke-Acts Improv: Foreword

Go back another century, and then another, to the Second and First Great Awakenings, each igniting in the midst of wrenching social and political upheaval, for the same kind of creative responses to new environments.

The most helpful examples of historical precedents may be found, however, in the 1880s. In the aftermath of bloody civil war, rapid industrialization and the accompanying flood of people, many of them poor immigrants, into squalid cities raised fears of monopolistic corporations and social chaos. Into this new culture came the dynamic preacher Dwight Moody. Moody built a network of what today would be called parachurch groups that deliberately bypassed conventional denominational ministries in favor of nimble, outreach-oriented organizations that explicitly opened the church doors to the underclasses and foreign-born. Churches housed a variety of social service programs within their walls. Worship services embraced new forms and uses of music, especially highly personalized songs set to new tunes in the popular styles of the day. A different style of less formal sermon, emphasizing stories, was pioneered by some younger pastors like Charles Sheldon, who recast his story-sermons into best-selling novels. Do any of these innovations seem oddly parallel to today?

One who fit into that Moody-initiated pattern had quit his Presbyterian parish in New York City so he could combine outreach to the city's unchurched, a training institute for lay folk, a variety of social ministries to meet physical along with spiritual needs, and a missionary-sending organization focused on unreached peoples. His name: A. B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the movement to which Jamie and I belong.

In many ways this book is Jamie's tribute to, and recovery of, Simpson's legacy.

But it also reconnects with the past in another way. Each age had its key books, charting the new departures for participant and skeptic alike.<sup>2</sup> In that grand tradition, Jamie Greene's challenging call now joins an outpouring of recent works, many of which he conveniently summarizes and synthesizes.

In other words, our own time is but the latest chapter of a grace-filled drama that began "in the beginning" in Genesis. God's gracious

## Luke-Acts Improv: Foreword

acts in creation and redemption, through the incarnate Son, point to purposeful human performance to fulfill God's design. What a story!<sup>3</sup>

Jamie doesn't just explain that this is so, however. He points out what we should do about it in today's culture, inspiring us to incarnate the works of the faith, getting "into the act" (not just *The Acts*). That's why I believe Jamie's book is so strategic for our time.

More significant still, my friend Jamie has lived it. He has practiced what he preaches. Like Dick Halverson a generation ago, he has himself engaged in the arena. I have known Jamie from the time he left the pastorate to do "bi-vocational ministry," earning his way in the world of commerce, like Paul, in order to connect with both the leaders of business and the marginalized of the city. More recently, I have watched as he relocated into a diverse and rather bohemian neighborhood of Seattle, orchestrated an intentional urban ministry, chaplained a church-based health clinic, organized urban-immersion and human-service experiences for suburban church-goers, and modeled incarnational ministries in his welcoming relationships with neighbors high and low. Finally, he has come full circle, from theory to practice and back to theory, earning a practitioner doctorate. This book, then, is the product of real-life experience, wide study, and deep reflection.

So let me offer a sneak preview as you retrace my own learning from both the thinking and the doing of Jamie Greene, the latest prophetic voice in the grand history of the church's innovative biblical responses to changing times. Let Jamie first introduce you to an array of penetrating authors who have wrestled with our emerging postmodern, pluralistic, globalized world (thereby sparing you from a ton of essential reading!). Be sure to pick up the emphasis on story, learned ("imagined") and lived ("incarnated"), and on community, cultivating relationships in and out of the faith. Find Jamie's grounding in biblical truth, then join him, side by side with his effervescent wife Lynn, out in the city, modeling community, practicing hospitality, and mingling on the street, in short proclaiming the gospel, occasionally with words.

Jamie Greene, through both study and action, knows whereof he speaks. But don't read what follows if you're not open to following

## Luke-Acts Improv: Foreword

him into the messy, multi-cultural, postmodern (and, yes, sinful) metropolis. For Jamie is merely following Jesus in this grand improv of living the kingdom in the heart of the city.

—Dr. Bill Woodward, Professor of History  
Seattle Pacific University  
Seattle, WA

### Endnotes

1. Jamie derives his arresting metaphor from the theater arts. But we could readily switch it to music, as Jeremy Begbie and others have suggested, where jazz — *musical* improvisation — provides a picture of the ever-creative, individualized, multi-voiced, yet ultimately structured and communal art of making music on the spot. See Begbie, “Through Music: Sound Mix,” in *Beholding the Glory*, ed. Begbie (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 152-153; see also Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003).
2. One might begin with Jonathan Edwards, *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1979 [orig 1736]) and Charles Finney’s *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (2nd ed; NY: Leavitt, Lord & Co, 1836). The late 1800s gave us Charles Sheldon’s *In His Steps* (NY: Chicago Advance, 1897), still in print; the Topeka pastor’s stark and simple challenge echoes to this day: “What would Jesus do?” The newly engaged evangelicalism of the 1940s and 1950s took its cue from Carl F. H. Henry’s *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1947). The new directions of the 1970s were profoundly influenced by Howard Snyder’s *The Problem of Wineskins: Church Renewal in a Technological Age* (Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 1975) and Ray Stedman’s *Body Life* (Glendale CA: Regal Books, 1972) as well as Halverson’s *How I Changed My Thinking About the Church* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1972); still essential reading are Halverson’s earlier *Between Sundays* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1965), and Snyder’s sequels, *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church and Kingdom* (Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 1983), and *Radical Renewal: The Problem of Wineskins Today* (Houston TX: Touch Publications, 1996).
3. For my own perspective on Scripture as story, see Woodward, *The People of Promise and the People of Hope: A Response to the American Dream* (Weter Award Lecture), distributed by Seattle Pacific University, 2005, accessible at <http://www.spu.edu/depts/uc/response/summer2k5/faculty/WeterLecture2005.pdf>.



## Luke-Acts: Improv Introduction

Enter the word *Improv* in your search engine or look it up in [UrbanDictionary.com](http://UrbanDictionary.com) and the first lines or definitions that pop up will inevitably have something to do with comedy. So what does Luke-Acts have to do with comedy? Not a thing unless it's the joy on God's face as he watches the implications of Christ's great act of redemption worked out in the lives of his people!

Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham in the Church of England, named by *Christianity Today* magazine as one of the top five theologians in the world, "describes the biblical story as being like a five act play, of which a large part of the fifth act is missing."<sup>1</sup> He says that it is up to us, the actors and actresses in the biblical story "to *improvise* a suitable second scene in Act 5, preparing for the conclusion God has revealed toward which our play must move."<sup>2</sup>

The entire sweep of God's story not only in Scripture but also in church history offers wonderful resources to form twenty-first century actors and actresses with the eyes, ears, minds and hearts of Jesus. This book offers Luke-Acts as a starting point for discovering the incredible formative power of Biblical narratives that prepare us for the often unexpected, spontaneous opportunities to share the good news of Christ in everyday life in the home, at work, and in the neighborhood. In a nutshell — Gospel Improv!

By coining the term, Gospel Improv, I am not suggesting a different gospel. It is not a new gospel. It is the same gospel that both Peter and Paul preach, recorded in the book of Acts using different scripts improvised on the spur of the moment to differing audiences and contexts. Luke preserves their scripts as examples: Peter's impromptu sermon on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14-40) and Paul's impromptu sermon on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:22-31).



## Luke-Acts Improv: Introduction

In the 1980s, teaching church growth principles and equipping the laity with propositional forms of the gospel were popular in Protestant evangelical churches. As a church planting pastor of a small church in Corvallis, Oregon, I was trained in these systematic presentations and trained others in them. Yet something seemed amiss. Often, I encountered resistance, suspicion, and barriers to these systematic explanations of the gospel. These came across more as a canned sale's pitch and struck me as highly impersonal, often creating barriers to further relationship building.

After about a year into the church planting effort, I went bi-vocational to better support my family. My weekly rhythm changed to three days as a pastor and three days as an advertising sales person for a small weekly newspaper. Over the next two years, I became acquainted with a vast cross section of business merchants in town. While building relationships, many of them discovered I was also a pastor. The result: curiosity about my faith and opportunities for gospel conversations that emerged naturally and organically in building personal relationship.

It reinforced my instincts that living out the gospel provided a credible basis for natural entrées to share about one's faith in Christ. I was later to learn that theologians called this approach to sharing one's faith, "incarnational ministry." This approach is rooted in God's primary way of reaching out to us through his Son, Jesus, which is known as the Incarnation: John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and lived for awhile among us." Or as Eugene Peterson says in the Message paraphrase, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."

After moving back to Seattle in 1987, I decided to adopt a bivocational approach to pastoral ministry. I reentered the market place in sales. My exploration of ministry options led to meeting Bud Bylsma, a friend of Ray Bakke's. He encouraged our Christian & Missionary Alliance (C&MA)<sup>3</sup> denomination to consider an incarnational approach to church planting in the city, so I became involved with what became known as Urban Mission Alliance (UMA)<sup>4</sup>: first, as founding Board member, and eventually as Director in 1996. In 1999, I moved my family from a suburban home with a fence and backyard into an urban townhouse condominium with a courtyard

## Luke-Acts Improv: Introduction

and an alley in one of the most gospel *suspicious* neighborhoods in the United States, Capitol Hill in Seattle.

According to the local chamber of commerce visitor information, “Capitol Hill is a neighborhood of funky apartments and grand mansions . . . offering edgy style and Bohemian flair. Pedestrian-friendly, with peek-a-boo views of water and mountains, the Hill is the historic home to Seattle’s gay community and wholeheartedly embraces its diversity. The Hill’s vibrancy is a direct result of a youthful student population and a thriving arts and nightlife scene . . . the most urban, dense part of the city.”<sup>5</sup>

A significant part of my motivation for the move was to encounter up close and personal the problem related to the confident announcement of the gospel as propositional truth in such culturally pluralistic, postmodern contexts. As the Director of UMA: I would often speak in suburban churches to raise funds and to encourage a few to relocate and join our urban work. As UMA developed, many who had moved into the Capitol Hill neighborhood to be a part of UMA also came to recognize that using a propositional truth model for sharing the gospel was not an effective working model in this neighborhood. Propositional forms of gospel witness tended to generate responses of suspicion and indifference.

So then, what was the way forward? At the time, my theological instincts suggested that the antidote to overcoming the suspicion of words, language, and reason was through a ministry of presence. We would do volunteer service with the poor; hang out in coffee shops, the courtyard, and in the alley. We sought to build community through table fellowship and other fun events with our neighbors, incarnational ministry.

However, I learned that some people who supported UMA were worried about the emphasis on incarnational ministry. They wondered if that emphasis would lead to the social gospel<sup>6</sup> and theological liberalism. Yet, as I involved groups of young adults in weekend urban plunge events to taste incarnational ministry, I saw its transformative possibilities. I began to wonder if the urban plunge events helped them step into the drama of the biblical story through identifying with stories of Jesus and the early church in Luke-Acts. Was I witnessing firsthand the incredible formative power of biblical

## Luke-Acts Improv: Introduction

narrative for helping God's people get into the act of sharing their faith spontaneously?

Fast forward several years later after the official close of UMA, my wife and I still find ourselves significantly involved in incarnational ministry. During this same time frame, we reconnected with our home church some six miles away. As we settled back in, we discovered that others too were experiencing some of the same responses we experienced when announcing the gospel as propositional truth — suspicion and indifference.

I began to wonder! Would the lessons learned in our ministry with UMA have application not only to our home church on the edge between an urban and suburban context but also to other churches who find themselves in similar situations? Since there might be some who are suspicious that incarnational ministry and biblical narrative will lead to theological liberalism, it would be essential to teach and show such an approach to ministry is thoroughly rooted and grounded in Scripture.

Since many in congregations around the world have been trained in propositional forms of the gospel, a new way is needed to help others to see, understand, and be transformed for gospel improv and proclamation, which is really the recovery of a very old way, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:27). A recovery of Christian formation in the Protestant tradition for missional/incarnational engagement in the way of Jesus! Hence, the underlying motivation for the book you are now reading.

So with that in mind, here is the general format. First, we will begin each chapter with an overview of where we are going, i.e., what's coming to a page near you. Next, we will cover information that hopefully will help you see with new understanding. To assist the reader who may encounter new or unfamiliar words and/or words with associations or connotations different than intended by the writer, here is a brief glossary of key words. These brief explanations are simply intended to help provide the reader with a framework as to what the writer means when using these terms. They are not final or complete definitions.

**Gospel.** The gospel is the good news that God in Jesus Christ

## Luke-Acts Improv: Introduction

has fulfilled his promises to Israel, and that a way of salvation has been opened to all<sup>7</sup> (Romans 1:16-17).

### **Propositional Truth (Propositional Forms of the Gospel).**

Propositional truth in the case of Scripture is the reduction of a story to succinct summaries, systematic restatements, or presentations of biblical truths or facts from the Bible without context. This simplified set of statements are generally intended for easier understanding and persuasion toward belief. The rise of propositional thinking in the Enlightenment led to systematic theology that served as the basis for propositional forms of the gospel in the nineteenth and twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Campus Crusade's Four Spiritual Laws is an example of a succinct summary of the gospel story of Jesus Christ and the work he has accomplished in his death and resurrection, reduced to a simplified set of four statements to more easily explain the way of salvation and to persuade toward belief.

**Incarnational Ministry.** "A natural, compelling, transferable approach to sharing the life of Jesus . . . focused on authentic living and building relationships with redemptive intent as the primary method of ministry. This approach is rooted in God's primary way of reaching out to us through his Son, Jesus, which is known as the Incarnation (John 1:14), "The Word became flesh and lived for awhile among us."<sup>9</sup>

**Missional.** Being missional is at its essence the idea of being a missionary. In his book, *Planting Missional Churches*, Ed Stetzer states, "Missional means adopting the posture of a missionary, learning and adapting to the culture around you while remaining biblically sound. Think of it this way: missional means being a missionary without ever leaving your zip code."<sup>10</sup>

**Evangelical.** A brief explanation of the term evangelical is in order since contemporary culture tends toward a redefinition around Fundamentalism, ultra-conservative and often political agendas. "Historically, evangelicals derive their name from

## Luke-Acts Improv: Introduction

the Greek New Testament word for the *gospel* or *good news* (*euangelion*) of Jesus Christ. They are committed to the central tenets of apostolic faith as emphasized by the reformers who gave birth to the Protestant Reformation and believed these core truths had been neglected by the medieval church. In this sense, evangelicals are “good news” people who desire to proclaim the teachings of Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament gospel account.”<sup>11</sup>

We will conclude each chapter with a review of what has been covered with the purpose of helping you as a reader begin the process of reflecting on what lens changes are needed to more fully learn how to participate in Luke-Acts Improv, in tune with the previous acts and scenes of God’s drama in Jesus Christ.

The Prologue will discuss the problem of how the rise of postmodern influence in certain cultural contexts challenges the ability of Protestant evangelicals to be heard when proclaiming the gospel as propositional truth. We will also introduce the proposed antidote to overcome postmodernity’s suspicion of words, language, and reason — Incarnation!

Chapter 1 will show that the biblical and theological basis for addressing the problem of Protestant evangelical witness in postmodern contexts can be seen in the incredible formative power of biblical narrative found in incarnational practice.

Chapters 2 to 7 is the heart of the book, showing the incredible shaping power of narrative organized around six incarnational practices of Jesus and the early church in Luke-Acts, which can be used as a curriculum for gospel improv. The structure of each of these chapters is similar in that each chapter has a major section on Scripture, church history, and contemporary application.

A short epilogue concludes the book.

### Endnotes

1. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 26.
2. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding*

## Luke-Acts Improv: Introduction

- Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).
3. The Christian & Missionary Alliance (C&MA) is a Protestant evangelical denomination with a strong deeper life and missionary emphasis, especially in overseas contexts outside the United States. See [www.cmalliance.org](http://www.cmalliance.org).
  4. Urban Mission Alliance of Greater Seattle (UMA) was a 501c3 nonprofit organization supported primarily by Puget Sound area C&MA churches from 1994 to 2003 with a focus on reaching “overlooked people” in the city with the gospel of Christ.
  5. Capitol Hill Walking Map 2010, produced by the Capitol Hill Times for the Capitol Hill Chamber of Commerce.
  6. J. D. Douglas, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 911-912. **Social Gospel:** While no clear definition can be given to the term, nor can its first use be dated, its more common use can be traced to the response to a number of beliefs held by different groups in the nineteenth century. First, some Christians virtually advocated a position which minimized the importance of all things material — a “pie in the sky” attitude so lampooned by their critics. Second, and more widespread, was a fear that participation in works of social improvement would lead to evangelistic activities being swamped in social work. To avoid the danger, the form of social work adopted was narrowed to include care for the individual but to exclude concerns with forms of institutional change, especially of a political nature. Some reacted by stressing the need for institutional and environmental changes apart from changes in the individual which could easily lead to a denial of the need for change in the individual. The move from orthodoxy was encouraged still further by a third influence. An optimistic doctrine of man and of his improvement in society was increased by the biological studies of the nineteenth century and the economic progress of the time, so it became easy to adopt a position that man was to be perfected through change in society which was contrary to the orthodox Christian view that only through a prior reformation of the individual will society be improved through the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of individuals (edited paraphrase).
  7. J.D. Douglas, *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974, 484.
  8. For a more complete discussion of how the rise of propositional thinking in the Enlightenment led to systematic theology, which served as the basis for propositional forms of the gospel in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, see Winn Griffin, *God’s EPIC Adventure: Changing Our Culture by the Story We Live and Tell* (Woodinville, WA: Harmon Press, 2007), 17-23.
  9. Bob Havenor, “The Rest of Our Lives: My Incarnational Journey,” *Alliance Life*, April 15 2010 .18. This article is about one couple’s story illustrating incarnational ministry.
  10. James Rudd, “Missional Living,” *Alliance Life*, June 1 2010. James Rudd is the pastor of True Vine Church Community of the C&MA in Philadelphia, PA.

## Luke-Acts Improv: Introduction

Rudd quotes from Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (B&H Academic: Nashville, TN, 2006), 19.

11. Morris Dirks, "Recovering Spiritual Direction in the Protestant Tradition," (Dissertation, George Fox University, 2005), 5.



## Luke-Acts: Improv Prologue

### Learning Objectives

When you finish reading this section, you should be able to:

- ✓ Understand why Seattle is considered one of the clearest examples in the United States of a culturally pluralistic post-Christendom context, the leading edge of a profound cultural shift in ways of communicating and understanding.
- ✓ Recognize how this profound cultural shift in ways of communication and understanding affects Protestant evangelicals' proclamation of the gospel, and why many pastors and lay people trained in sharing propositional forms of the gospel encounter hostility, indifference, and suspicion.
- ✓ Appreciate why more incarnational forms of living out the gospel rooted in intentional, missional community and the biblical story is an antidote for overcoming postmodernity's hostility, indifference, and suspicion of words, language, and reason.
- ✓ Visualize the concept of *Narrative as Proclamation* as a prism through which you can see yourself as living primarily in the biblical story rather than the American story.

### Preview

Our initial focus in this lesson is to overview four main areas that are fundamental to grasp an understanding of how to engage in the teacher/student interaction envisioned with the use of this book.

First, we will look at why Seattle is considered one of the clearest examples in the United States of a culturally pluralistic post-Christendom context and, second, how this profound cultural shift, in ways of communication and understanding, affects those who have



## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

been trained in sharing propositional forms of the gospel. Third, we will talk about how incarnational forms of living out the gospel rooted in intentional, missional community and the biblical story are an antidote for overcoming postmodernity's hostility, indifference, and suspicion. Finally, we will preview the concept of *Narrative as Proclamation* as a prism through which you can view your life in the drama of Scripture.

### **I Don't Think We're In Kansas Anymore, Toto**

Some of the most dramatic stories of the early church's expansion across cultural and social barriers were documented and recorded by one of the Apostle Paul's traveling companions, Luke, the beloved physician. For many Protestant evangelicals that identify with the mega church phenomenon across suburban North America, the propositional forms of the gospel they've been trained to share have resulted in many stories of growth and expansion. On the surface, it seems the activity of the Holy Spirit recorded in Luke-Acts is alive and well today in North America.

Yet, toward the end of the twentieth century, in Western Europe and certain parts of North America, undercurrents reflecting shifts of historic proportions began to emerge. These were especially prevalent in Canada and the East and West coasts of the United States, especially San Francisco, Vancouver BC, and Seattle. Shifts of historic proportions began to emerge politically, economically, socially, culturally, and philosophically, significantly affecting Protestant evangelicalism's approach to evangelism, church planting, and mission.

In the 1980s, Lesslie Newbigin was one of the first to recognize something was different. After thirty-five years as a career missionary to India, he found his native England had become a foreign mission field.

At the age of 65, he came home to England and found it foreign. Ministry in England, he discovered, "is much harder than anything I met in India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel which is harder to face than opposition ... England is a pagan society and development of a truly missionary encounter

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the church.”<sup>1</sup>

Also in the 1980s Eddie Gibbs, professor at Fuller Seminary, shared that, “Seattle, Washington is the clearest example of a post-Christian city in the United States.”<sup>2</sup> This opinion heard by Dan Samuelson, Founder of Urban Mission Alliance of Greater Seattle (UMA),<sup>3</sup> in a class offered by Fuller Seminary was one of the formative influences upon the development of UMA when the urban ministry began in 1994. Gibbs had worked many years with the Billy Graham organization traveling to major cities through the United States, conducting demographic analyses six to eight months in advance of crusades.

I, among many others, can certainly testify to the validity of both Newbiggin’s and Gibb’s observations through my intimate involvement with UMA’s ministry efforts. In 1999, I relocated my family into the most suspicious place in Seattle to Protestant evangelical’s proclamation of the gospel, Capitol Hill, where postmodern influence is greatest and Christian presence is weakest.

UMA started in the Capitol Hill neighborhood to develop a missionary encounter with a gentler, milder strain of this tough form of paganism similar to what Newbiggin faced in England. The ministry adopted an overseas missionary paradigm and developed urban-suburban partnerships with constituent churches to support those who would relocate into Seattle’s in-city neighborhoods like an overseas missionary. During its ten-year existence, the heart of UMA’s missionary encounter in the city was the development of a pilot intentional, missional community that lived within proximity of one another to establish a credible, authentic presence for developing incarnational forms of living out the gospel.

This incarnational community then partnered with many volunteers from supporting suburban constituent churches who “drove into the neighborhood” to help through urban plunge programs. Part of UMA’s mission was to help these volunteers whose churches had trained them to present a propositional form of the gospel (*i.e.*, *Campus Crusade for Christ’s Four Spiritual Laws booklet*) or to offer invitations “to church” to hear the professional “full-time” pastor proclaim a propositional

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

form of the gospel, recognize how their efforts to engage in overtly Christian conversation in such contexts can easily lead to *building walls* rather than *bridges*.

Many began to identify with the challenge of how easily the confident announcement of the gospel as propositional truth in such contexts appears arrogant, impersonal, and is less compelling. Their disorienting experiences of sharing propositional forms of the gospel along with similar stories of others the writer has heard who have moved here from California, the Midwest, and the South help document the fact that Seattle and the Pacific Northwest are on the leading edge of these profound changes, described as the “None Zone,”<sup>4</sup> the most unchurched part of the United States.

Like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, they began to feel as if they had been spun around in a cultural tornado that has left them so disoriented that about all they can do is echo her puzzlement: “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto!”<sup>5</sup> The term *postmodernism* is often used to denote the new state in which we find ourselves.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Postmodernism: A Profound Cultural Shift**

According to Dennis Okholm, formerly professor of theology at Wheaton College,

If nothing else, postmodernism refers to the fact that we are no longer in the Kansas of modernity anymore. That means we must first understand something of “modernity” if we are going to get a handle on postmodernity.”<sup>7</sup>

So let’s start with Modernism, which emerges out of eighteenth century Western Europe and the Enlightenment. Simply put, modernism ushered in an era where confidence in reason as a means of knowing absolute truth replaced confidence in particular religious traditions and communities to know absolute truth. (i.e., various forms of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism). Confessional religious belief was relegated to the private world as a matter of opinion or tradition, not fact. The modernist agenda of confidence in reason held sway in the West until recently. A new paradigm has been brewing called postmodernism.

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

No longer is truth “out there” waiting to be discovered. All knowledge is system dependent and culturally bound. There is no neutral, timeless, self-evident foundational truth available to anyone or that gives us absolute certainty about anything. The Augustinian dictum “All truth is God’s truth” has come to mean “Everybody’s truth is God’s truth.” It all depends how one looks at it.<sup>8</sup>

Reason was not only demoted from its role as the unbiased discoverer of objective truth, it is not what it was cracked up to be.

The postmodern critique of modernism argues that in light of certain historical and philosophical developments in the twentieth century,<sup>9</sup> reason as a means to apprehend truth began to crack. And so did Protestant Evangelicals confident announcement of the truth based on reasonable evidence that demands a verdict. It was viewed as a philosophical system built upon the Modernist, Enlightenment worldview and was met with suspicion.

Perhaps the greatest challenge encountered by UMA’s ministry in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle was suspicion, indifference, and resistance to anything overtly Christian. For those who had been trained in propositional forms of proclaiming the gospel, it was quite disorienting to encounter the postmodern condition up close and personal. There were also varying degrees of agreement and commitment to developing incarnational forms of living out the gospel to engage others with pluralistic worldviews. Much angst was evident in the challenge related to how much to be “in the world, but not of the world,” how much to witness in deed and/or word.

George Weigel, in a lecture at Seattle Pacific University on February 27, 2007, entitled “Europe and Its Discontents,” helped me in hindsight to better understand the sources of this kinder, gentler Western European malaise affecting places like Seattle. Weigel described the drama of postmodernity’s atheistic humanism being played out in Western Europe over the past century as it liberates itself from the God of the Bible, creating a post-Christendom environment. As a result, Western Europe today is facing a “crisis of culture, a crisis of civilization morale, and a crisis of confidence in the future,

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

reflected first and foremost in the low number of children per capita of population.”<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, a similar observation can be made about the in-city neighborhoods of Seattle.

Seattle ranks second behind San Francisco as to the lowest number of children per capita of population in the United States.<sup>11</sup> This is in stark contrast to the high number of children in Seattle’s suburbs where Protestant evangelical mega churches thrive, on the east side and north end of Lake Washington, the Bible belt of the Pacific Northwest.<sup>12</sup>

Second, these post-Christendom environments found in Western Europe, Canada, and the East and West coasts of the United States seem much more hospitable to the predominance of liberal, Democratic Party political views, in contrast to the suburbs surrounding Seattle where more conservative views dominate. In a political analysis of the 2004 U.S. Presidential election by one of Seattle’s alternative newspapers, the headline on the front page read, “George W. Bush only got fifty-one percent of the national vote ... John Kerry got eighty percent of the vote in Seattle.”<sup>13</sup> The article encouraged distressed liberals not to flee to Canada or secede from the union, but:

to focus on our issues, our urban issues, and promote our shared urban values. We can create a new identity politics, one that transcends class, race, sexual orientation, and religion, one that unites people living in cities with each other and with other urbanites in other cities. The Republicans have the federal government — for now. But we’ve got Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego, New York City (Bloomberg is a Republican in name only), and every college town in the country.<sup>14</sup>

Eleven years ago, I intentionally relocated my family into a predominately politically liberal<sup>15</sup> and post-Christendom context: the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle, to help develop incarnational forms of living out the gospel. While encountering these profound cultural shifts in ways of communication and understanding has been disorienting, the crucial question always before us has been “how are we going to witness to the God of Abraham and Jesus without that

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

witness collapsing into the vortex of postmodernism?”<sup>16</sup>

For churches located somewhere between the invisible line from suburban to urban, to increasingly post-Christendom contexts, they begin to realize that they are not in Kansas anymore. “And unlike Dorothy, no matter how hard we wish nor how many times we tap our red shoes, there is no “home” to which we can go back,”<sup>17</sup> which raises the question, what is the antidote, the kingdom way forward?

### **Churches and Pastors Hungry for an Antidote**

Imagine for a moment a church of Protestant evangelical heritage and faith on the edge between North American suburban and urban centers like North Seattle that increasingly encounters cultural, pluralistic contexts in which verbally sharing the words of the gospel is deemed inappropriate, insensitive, and politically incorrect behavior. Imagine also their pastoral leadership, who are increasingly challenged to help congregants biblically bridge and engage such cultural contexts with both a demonstration and proclamation of the gospel. Many pastors are seeking resources to help them bridge the gap between the biblical and postmodern world, especially in translating from what is often perceived as the abstract world of theology to the concrete realities of everyday life in family, business, neighborhood, and civic life.

Their story might go something like this: hope springs anew with the arrival of a new pastor with strong pulpit skills. There are over 400 people present for his first Sunday, which is about half of the church’s attendance twenty years ago. The church is excited about the prospects of growth after years of decline. The new pastor’s training has been influenced by the success of mega churches, whose model is Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church, Bill Hybel’s Willow Creek Community Church, and other growth-driven ministries. Such mega churches tend to promote evangelistic strategies that are pulpit and program driven, based on men and women inviting their co-workers and neighbors to Sunday morning church to hear a verbal proclamation of the gospel.

Now fast forward several years: the new pastor’s strategy doesn’t seem to be working. While the arrival of a new pastor brought an initial growth, the church has since plateaued and lost people.

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

Congregants are frustrated and do not understand why invitations to Sunday morning church are met with suspicion and indifference by neighbors and co-workers. Their attempts to share the words of the gospel in the *propositional* formats they've been trained in do not seem to be connecting with their neighbors and co-workers. Instead of building bridges, they seem to be building walls with others in their attempts to share the gospel.

One example of a church I am familiar with that finds itself in this situation is in North Seattle. While the church's demographic profile is still largely the same as was true forty years ago, primarily white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, the neighborhood has changed significantly. The nearby elementary school, a magnet public school for children with English as a second language, is a microcosm and magnification of the changes that urbanization, globalization, and secularization has brought, reflecting increased ethnic and religious diversity, acceptance of gay and lesbian lifestyles, and "time challenged" families scattered over the city.

While the church has commendably chosen to engage the neighborhood by providing a tutoring program and by helping to start a medical and dental clinic to serve low income families, it faces an aging congregation with more than half the members being baby boom age or older. Most commute into "Sunday morning church" from suburban neighborhoods north of Seattle: Shoreline, Lake Forest, Edmonds, Kenmore, Lynnwood, Bothell, and Mill Creek.

In light of these emerging realities, how shall Protestant evangelical churches like this one rooted in the changing cultural soil of a post-Christendom Seattle continue to grow and build capacity to proclaim the gospel? Shall churches that are located "on the edge between suburban and urban" turn to the successful attractional/invitational models of the suburban megachurch variety found on the eastside and north end of Lake Washington, in the suburban "Bible Belt" of the Pacific Northwest? Or, will examples and resources emerge from ministry initiatives in the urban context of what Newbigin calls for: *the development of a truly missionary encounter with this tough form*<sup>18</sup> of resistance to the gospel.

For a large number of churches of Protestant evangelical heritage and faith in the city (with some notable exceptions), it's been a

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

story of gradual decline and challenge, and they are hungry for an antidote!

### ***Overcoming Postmodernity's Suspicion, Hostility, and Indifference***

Much has been written in the past two decades related to encountering these profound and disorienting cultural shifts in ways of communication and understanding. Protestant evangelicals, who have been trained in propositional forms of the gospel, are presented with a quandary: postmodernity's suspicion of words, language, and reason. So what is the antidote to this problematic situation?

### ***Newbigin on a Pluralistic Society***

Lesslie Newbigin proposes that the antidote is “a congregation of men and women who believe the gospel and live it”<sup>19</sup> as the key to making the gospel credible so that “people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on the cross.”<sup>20</sup> However, his proposal is dependent upon a new kind of pastoral leadership where churches would, “deploy ministers in the areas where the Christian presence is weakest, whose primary business is not to look after the needs of the church members but to lead the whole congregation as God’s embassy to the whole community.”<sup>21</sup>

### ***Hauerwas and Willimon on Resident Aliens***

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon echo Newbigin’s proposal. They suggest that “the biggest problem facing Christian theology is not translation but enactment.”<sup>22</sup> The key to the gospel’s credibility is a church community that embodies our language about God and our life with God in visible ways that need no explanation.<sup>23</sup>

The challenge facing today’s Christians is not the necessity to translate Christian convictions into a modern idiom, but rather to form a community, a colony of resident aliens which is so shaped by our convictions that no one even has to ask what we mean by confessing belief in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>24</sup>



## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

### Bosch on Transforming Mission

David Bosch proposed a broadened definition of mission as the antidote that will provide the credibility needed for the gospel, at a time when “the Christian missionary enterprise is, slowly but irrevocably, moving away from the shadow of the Enlightenment.”<sup>25</sup> Writing on the heels of the church growth movement at the end of the 1980s, he suggested such a broadened definition of mission would lead “mission out of the straight jacket of defining it only in terms of proclamation or church planting.”<sup>26</sup>

Mission is a multifaceted ministry, in respect to witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting, contextualization, and much more. Our mission has to be multi dimensional to be credible and faithful to its origins and character ... we might appeal to images, metaphors, events and pictures rather than to logic or analysis.<sup>27</sup>

### Guder on Missional Church

Darrel Guder and company seek to apply Bosch’s broad definition of mission to the North American cultural contexts by proposing new forms of mission-shaped churches, and a new kind of *missional* leadership and ecclesiology to develop such *missional* churches. They describe the evangelical and missional understandings of church that must find expression in North American culturally pluralistic contexts.

We explore the basic definition of the church as the people of God who are called and sent to re-present the reign of God ... we build on this basic theology ... by understanding ... the church as an apostle to the world ... we consider what it means to be a city on a hill, to take up Christ’s cross and to continue his ministry.<sup>28</sup>

### Hirsh on Forgotten Ways

Alan Hirsch also expands on the idea of the church as an apostle

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

to the world to remind us that at the heart of the gospel's credibility is a rediscovery of the Holy Spirit's power to fill and empower his people. His solution "goes to the very roots of what it means to be Jesus' people,"<sup>29</sup> a rediscovery of the hidden power that could unleash remarkable energies. He names it Apostolic Genius<sup>30</sup> and describes "the constituent elements of mDNA that make it blaze up."<sup>31</sup>

### **Grenz and Franke on Foundationalism**

Stanley Grenz and John Franke claim that evangelicals have tended to limit the scope of theological reflection to just biblical exposition, which has allowed them "to sidestep the thorny issues surrounding the roles of tradition and culture in theology."<sup>32</sup> They propose a new theological method that rescues theology from its destructive accommodation to modernity.

We seek to develop a methodological proposal that provides a framework for shaping Christian theology in such a way as to rescue the discipline from its destructive accommodation to modernity while fostering the vitality and relevance of Christian theology for the church in its various social and cultural incarnations.<sup>33</sup>

In the second half of their book, they propose that the constructive task of theology is an ongoing conversation among three conversation partners: Scripture, Tradition, and Culture.

### **Keller on the Uniqueness of the Biblical Storyline**

Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, proposes not only an engagement with skeptics but also holds out the uniqueness of the biblical storyline with its twofold vision of life. His proposal, first of all, urges both believers and skeptics to engage to the point where each side learns to represent the other's argument in its strongest and most positive form, thus providing a safe and fair environment for disagreement, achieving civility in a pluralistic society, which is no small thing.

I commend two processes to my readers. I urge skeptics to wrestle with the unexamined "blind faith" on which skepticism is based,

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

and see how hard it is to justify those beliefs to those who do not share them.” I urge believers to wrestle with their personal and culture’s objections to the faith. “At the end of each process, even if you remain the skeptic or believer you have been, you will hold your own position with both greater clarity and greater humility. Then there will be an understanding, sympathy, and respect for the other side that did not exist before<sup>34</sup>

Second, he holds out the uniqueness of the whole biblical storyline with its two lens vision of life. First, while the gospel is definitely about getting one’s individual sins forgiven so one can go to heaven, that’s only half the picture. The gospel is also about preparing to be part of Jesus’ second coming when he will come to renew and restore all of creation.

In short, the Christian life means not only building up the Christian community through encouraging people to faith in Christ, but building up the human community through deeds and justice and service.<sup>35</sup>

From his viewpoint in Manhattan, Keller is seeing such a vision of Christian life growing among the increasingly multiethnic younger professionals and the working class immigrants, in a category-defying variety of strong religious beliefs that are the vanguard of some major new religious, social, and political arrangements that could make the older form of culture wars obsolete.

This new, fast spreading multiethnic orthodox Christianity in the cities is much more concerned about the poor and social justice than Republicans have been, and at the same time much more concerned about upholding classic Christian moral and sexual ethics than Democrats have been.<sup>36</sup>

### T.M. Moore on Restoring Reason

Echoing Keller’s proposal for engagement with the skeptic, T. M. Moore, dean of the Centurion’s Program for the Wilberforce Forum with Chuck Colson, calls for a Christian consensus on cultural engagement that helps Christians “*learn to think Christianly*.”<sup>37</sup> At

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

the heart of their proposal is the call to “work diligently to restore reason in a postmodern era that has rejected reason.”<sup>38</sup>

### Zacharias on Living the Faith We Defend

Ravi Zacharias, a well-known evangelist and credible defender of the faith, recently published a new book that is intended to help those who are not trained in the discipline of apologetics “to feel comfortable talking about the gospel without feeling the burden of needing a high level of philosophical training.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, he also underscored the importance of living out the gospel.

I have little doubt that the single greatest obstacle to the impact of the gospel has not been its ability to provide answers, but the failure on our part to live it out .... The Irish evangelist Gypsy Smith once said, “There are five Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the Christian, and some people will never read the first four.”<sup>40</sup>

Then, Zacharias sums up his point with an astonishing statement:

*Apologetics* is seen before it is heard ... For [many], answers to their questions were not enough; they depended upon the visible transformation of the one offering them.<sup>41</sup>

### Stassen and Gushee on Kingdom Ethics In The Way of Jesus

Glen Stassen and David Gushee propose recovering the teachings and practices of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, to set the agenda for Christian ethics. They see themselves along with several others as part of a larger trend.

Now we are pleased to think we are part of a trend to recover the way of Jesus for Christian discipleship. Recently, and from three different traditions, Dallas Willard has published the *Divine Conspiracy*, William Spohn has published *Go and Do Likewise*, and Allen Verhey has published *Remembering Jesus*. It is with great enthusiasm that we welcome these three elegantly written books, each of which takes the way of Jesus seriously. We

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

are part of the same cause, and we hope all four books foretell a movement and will work together like a team of four horses pulling in the same direction.<sup>42</sup>

They described the essence of their proposal as *incarnational discipleship*, which is a “new life style of service, servanthood, and humility.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Staub on Need for New Kind of Christian**

Dick Staub, writing in the Seattle context from the perspective of a former nationally syndicated daily radio show host for fifteen years, focused on understanding evangelical faith and culture, says we are living in an intellectually and aesthetically impoverished age of Christianity-Lite. While he says it can be argued that today, evangelicalism is the fastest growing and most influential Christian movement in America,<sup>44</sup> sadly, with some exceptions; he concludes that evangelicals have largely given way to a pop Christianity that mirrors the superficiality of popular culture.

We’ve arrived at a crossroads in faith and culture. The Christian community has degenerated into an intellectually and artistically anemic subculture, and the general population is consuming an unsatisfying blend of mindless, soulless, spiritually delusional entertainment .... Today, religious and irreligious alike face the lose-lose proposition of both a superficial culture and a superficial faith.<sup>45</sup>

He calls for a new kind of Christian who follows in the way of Jesus in the mold of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien who were serious about the centrality of a faith in their lives, savvy about faith and culture, and skilled in relating the two.

Their calling was to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who came into the world as a loving, transforming presence. They transformed culture by fulfilling roles as creators of culture, as communicators in culture, and, at times, as countercultural influencers who operated like aliens in a foreign land.<sup>46</sup>

The three metaphors Staub employs to communicate the calling

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

of what he calls a culturally savvy Christian includes: creating culture like *artists*, communicating in culture like *ambassadors*, and influencing culture by an alternative, *countercultural*<sup>47</sup> way of life like Jesus.

### **Gibbs/Bolger On Cross-Cultural Nature of Mission Needed in Postmodern Contexts**

Gibbs and Bolger, both professors at Fuller Theological Seminary, argue that most churches agree that cultural understanding has always been essential to good mission practice. Most churches in the United States, however, seriously underestimate the need for cross-cultural training of its members. Convinced that we understand Western culture, many churches give culture short shrift, not recognizing the major cultural shifts and transformations underway.

What are these cultural changes that have contributed to the marginalization of the church? First, we are in the midst of a shift from modernity to postmodernity .... Second, we are embroiled in a shift from Westernization to Globalization. Third, we are engaged in a communication revolution, as we shift from a print culture to an electronic-based culture. Fourth, we are in the midst of a dramatic shift in our economic mode of production, as we transition from national and industrial-based economies to economies that are international, information based, and consumer driven. Fifth, we are on the verge of significant breakthroughs in understanding the human at a biological level. Sixth, we are seeing a convergence of science and religion that has not been seen in centuries.<sup>48</sup>

While there has been a great deal of debate in recent decades over the relationship between the gospel and culture, the relationship between church and culture, especially in Protestant evangelical suburban contexts, has not been given much attention. For churches who find themselves in an increasingly culturally pluralistic, post-Christian, postmodern context, cultural study like overseas missionaries have done for hundreds of years is essential. Gibbs and Bolger resonate with Newbigin's analysis — mission encounter is needed in Western culture today.

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

There is now a growing realization that churches in the West face a missional challenge, one that is increasingly cross-cultural in nature.... Ultimately, Christians who want to serve within Western culture must be trained as missionaries. They must understand both the incarnational demands of the gospel and the surrounding context.<sup>49</sup>

### **Fitch on Reclaiming the Mission of the Church**

David Fitch, pastor of a C&MA church in the Chicago area and adjunct professor of ministry, theology, and ethics at Northern Seminary, argues that evangelical churches have either outsourced many of the practices that constitute being the church or compromised them to the point that they are no longer recognizable as being a function of the church. He calls it “The Great Giveaway.”

I contend, for instance, that we give away certain functions of the church when we adopt models for doing these functions from American business ... we give away certain functions of the church by farming them out to parachurch organizations ... we outsource spiritual formation to psychotherapy when we send our parishioners to therapist offices in their times of greatest emotional need.”<sup>50</sup>

His book is a proposal for a renewal of evangelical ecclesiology. He discloses how to help the church become the church by recovering the practices rooted in the Scriptures and history of the church. One example is the practice of evangelism. Rather than traditional evangelical methods centered on training individuals to present the truth of the gospel, a new generation has arrived who engage truth differently than previous generations. Postmodern people want to see how truth is lived and practiced in everyday life not just talked about intellectually as information. Such an approach requires the church, not the individual, to move back to the center of the practice of evangelism.

They might suspect truth known only in words or propositions, but they respect a truth that can be seen and experienced in life. These postmodern people demand a living truth they can

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

participate in.... Indeed, these postmoderns challenge us to live the truth we tell as a body of believers. They seek a living display of truth and in so doing force us to move the church back to the center of the work of evangelism.<sup>51</sup>

### **Common Ground of All Proposed Antidotes**

So what's the common ground in this review of various perspectives as to the antidote to overcome postmodernity's suspicion of language, words, and reason. From proposals calling for:

- ✓ A deployment of pastors to places of least Christian presence (Newbigin)
- ✓ An odd church of resident aliens (Hauerhaus)
- ✓ A broader definition of mission (Bosch)
- ✓ A mission-shaped church (Guder)
- ✓ A church that recovers the source of its power (Hirsch)
- ✓ A new theological method (Grenz and Franke)
- ✓ A church that engages with skeptics and holds out the uniqueness of the biblical storyline and vision for life (Keller)
- ✓ A renewed effort to restore reason in a postmodern era that has rejected reason (T. M. Moore)
- ✓ Living the faith we defend (Zacharias)
- ✓ A church that revives teachings and practices in the way of Jesus as central to the way of discipleship (Stassen and Gushee)
- ✓ Developing a new kind of culturally savvy Christian (Staub/Seattle)
- ✓ Training Christians who want to serve in Western culture as cross-cultural missionaries (Gibbs/Bolger)
- ✓ Or, helping the church to become the church by recovering the practices rooted in the Scriptures and history of the church (Fitch/C&MA).

### **Tickle: They Are All Incarnational**

In a recent work entitled, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*,<sup>52</sup> author Phyllis Tickle suggests an answer. Her



## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

book seeks to provide a reference point in the larger, sweeping scheme of history to help churches and faith communities make sense out of the times in which twenty-first century Christians find themselves. She quotes an observation from Anglican bishop, Mark Dyer, as a basis for her thesis “that about every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale ... we are living in and through one of those five-hundred-year sales.”<sup>53</sup> History can reveal patterns and confluences that can “help us identify the patterns and flow of our own times and occupy them more faithfully.”<sup>54</sup>

In trying to make sense of a *mélange* of things currently going on within Christianity in North America, she suggests that the one shining characteristic they all have in common is they are incarnational.

All, however ... are incarnational. Not only is Jesus of Nazareth incarnate God, but Christian worship must be incarnate as well. It must involve the body in all its senses and take place among people, all of who are embraced equally as children of God.<sup>55</sup>

### Dudley: On the End of Words Being Persuasive

In the Seattle area context, Dr. Scott Dudley, pastor of First Presbyterian church in Bellevue, has best articulated what my theological instincts suggested as an antidote to overcoming postmodernity’s suspicion. In a lecture, at the C. S. Lewis Institute on Seattle Pacific University’s campus entitled, “The End of Words Being Persuasive in Our Culture,”<sup>56</sup> he suggested that the huge shifts going on in our culture in light of the collapse of the Enlightenment worldview are creating extra ordinary opportunities for the church’s witness.

He called for a renewed embrace of a foundational doctrine of Christian faith: the *incarnation*. In short: getting our hands dirty in the mess and mix of life to serve others, incarnating God’s truth in daily life, embracing emotion, and telling stories. Less orthodoxy and more orthopraxis<sup>57</sup> are needed to proclaim the gospel. Even as a pastor of a large suburban congregation, he is calling for the church to rediscover and to re-embrace incarnational forms of living out the gospel as an antidote to postmodernity’s indifference, hostility, and suspicion of words, language, and reason.

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

### **Needed: Incarnational Forms of Living Out The Gospel In Secular Contexts**

In feedback gained from business and professional men and women, examples of living out the gospel in secular contexts are needed. Many voiced how challenging it is to bridge from the abstract ideas in academic books to the concrete realities of everyday business, civic, and family life in culturally pluralistic contexts like found in Seattle.

While the many published books surveyed in this section no doubt contain many stories that illustrate needed philosophical and theological concepts, the preferred context of application tends to be large metropolitan, inner-city urban contexts as found in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles or in suburban contexts where Protestant evangelical megachurches thrive.

The other translation challenge is that many of the published authors in this literature survey have devoted their livelihoods to full-time teaching in academic settings, shepherding larger churches, or in leading faith-based organizations. While much can be gained from them, there is also a hunger to hear from those who earn their livelihood in secular contexts (which is ninety-five percent of the church).

Also needed are examples of incarnational forms of living out the gospel from those who have experienced marginalization in some measure by large Protestant institutions because of singleness, divorce and remarriage, political views, multicultural and/or gender issues such as women who are gifted in leadership. They also have much to offer.

### **Halter & Smay on Incarnational Ministry: Rooted In Story and Community**

Hugh Halter and Matt Smay in their recent work, *The Tangible Kingdom*,<sup>58</sup> suggest that this desire to hear from those who live and work in secular contexts can be described as searching for ways to make God's kingdom more tangible. Many are looking for practical new ways to reorient their lives around God's mission, learning "how to use their influence, resources, and networks to launch new incarnational 'Christ going into the world' forms of ministry."<sup>59</sup> Yet, they warn that going it alone doesn't work. Incarnational forms of living out the gospel hinge on being rooted in two things: community and story.

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

Being missional has at its essence the idea of being a missionary, a sent one, called by God, going and proclaiming a story, the gospel, baptizing, making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28, The Great Commission). According to Halter and Smay,

*Missional* has an inseparable twin. It's called *incarnational*. The root meaning of incarnation means "any person or thing serving as the type or embodiment of a quality or concept." Specifically, it means to "embody in the flesh." John 1:14 gives us the picture: "And the Word (Jesus) became flesh and made his dwelling among us."<sup>60</sup>

While God could have stayed in heaven, and dispatched his son to set up a website and download spiritual information about the biblical story to every billboard in the world, he didn't. Rather, he chose to take on flesh, and live among us for awhile to embody and proclaim the gospel story.

Yet, Jesus did not do incarnational ministry alone! He lived in community, eternally as part of the Triune God with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and in his earthly ministry with the twelve disciples along with several others (including many women who helped provide financial support out of their limited means). Likewise, in the incarnational model of ministry, "everything hinges on having a people or community to invite people to belong to. Community is the center of the entire missional incarnational approach."<sup>61</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Incarnation Rooted In Story and Community Is the Antidote**

The Incarnation rooted in the biblical story and community is the antidote to help counteract the effects of the problematic situation of postmodernism, so the gospel can be first seen, felt, and experienced so it can be heard. Needed in today's increasingly post-Christendom contexts is a more *holistic* approach to gospel improv and proclamation:

- ✓ An approach that is anchored in the recovery of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, the life, and ministry of Jesus ("The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" John 1:14)
- ✓ One that reflects the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (John

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

16, 17), centered on “relationships in community” rather than on the individual; and

- ✓ One that expresses the transformative nature of God’s grace to form a people rooted in the biblical story (I Peter 2:9, 10).

Mark Lau Branson, Homer L. Goddard Associate Professor of the Ministry of the Laity at Fuller Seminary, describes the goal of such formation:

Interpretative leadership provides the resources, the inspiration, the perceptions that form a people who own the biblical and historical narratives, re-narrate their own personal and corporate stories, and become aware of the numerous forces that shape their contexts.<sup>62</sup>

### **Perceived Risk of Proposed Antidote: Theological Liberalism**

For Protestant evangelicals trained in *propositional* forms of the gospel, there is another suspicion to overcome in emphasizing that *incarnational* forms of living out the gospel might be more effective in reaching postmoderns. It is the risk and fear that an emphasis on the incarnation (the life of Jesus) as opposed to the death and resurrection of Jesus will result in an emphasis on “practice” as opposed to “belief,” a repeat of the Social Gospel/Fundamentalist controversy of one hundred years ago, which is viewed as leading down the path of theological liberalism.

Many of these belief issues will surface and be dealt with in greater detail in chapters throughout this book. Several are summarized here for easy reference. While the views expressed here are my own, I do write from the perspective of being an ordained minister in the Christian & Missionary Alliance, a Protestant denomination that takes seriously the Bible and the biblical mandate of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20), the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40), and the New Commandment (John 13:34).

### **Practices: A Response to the Gift of God’s Grace, Not Works-Righteousness**

To help overcome Protestant evangelical fears of engaging culturally

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

pluralistic contexts, I am arguing that incarnational forms of living out the gospel must demonstrate that they are rooted in Scripture as a response to the gift of God's grace, not a works-righteousness means to earn God's grace. Dallas Willard responds to those who confuse the relationship between grace and works: "May I just give you this word? Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action."<sup>63</sup>

### ***Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life***

A second issue that surfaces in culturally pluralistic contexts relates to the heart of the gospel, which are Jesus' words that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and that nobody comes to the Father except through him (paraphrase of John 14). Postmodernity rejects historic Christian (Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox) claims to absolute truth, and argues that all truth is relative. For Protestant Evangelicals, rejecting the belief of absolute truth has enormous implications affecting the doctrine of the inspiration and interpretation of Scripture and leads down the road to theological liberalism.

### ***The Church's Primary Mission: Evangelism or Social Action?***

A third issue that arises when encountering postmodern contexts relates to the Fundamentalist versus Social Gospel controversy of the early twentieth century as to the church's primary mission. Is the church's primary mission: evangelism (belief) or social action (practice)? Postmodernity's suspicion of words, language, and reason affects the ability for the gospel to be heard if the proclamation of the gospel is narrowed to just verbal presentation of words based on the historical evidence that demands a verdict.

In such contexts, a more compelling witness is needed: the Word embodied in the life of God's people. Living as salt and light and learning to be "in the world but not of the world" become critically important to proclaiming the gospel. Wrestling with such tensions between word and deed also affects one's doctrine of eschatology: Is the church's *verbal* proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the earth the sign that Jesus will return to usher in God's coming kingdom (pre-millennialism)? Or, is the church's embodiment of the gospel on

## **Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue**

earth the key to ushering in God's kingdom (post-millennialism)?

### **Salvation in Christ through His Death & Resurrection**

A fourth issue that often surfaces relates to the doctrine of salvation, the necessity of the new birth, the preaching of the work of Jesus on the cross, his shed blood appropriated personally by faith, affecting one's eternal destiny in heaven or hell. Since a postmodern mindset has exchanged an appreciation for the past and the future for an attitude of only living in the now,<sup>64</sup> such a proclamation is met with skepticism and indifference. Postmoderns want to make a difference in this life, on this earth — they are not focused on the hereafter.

### **Controversial Social and Cultural Roles and Issues**

Finally, a fifth issue that always surfaces relates to sexuality and the challenge of dealing with gender and sexual orientation issues in light of Scripture. A postmodern mindset is hypersensitive to perceived discrimination of any kind when it comes to women in leadership roles, marriage, divorce and remarriage, and gay, lesbian, and transgendered issues.

### **Narrative as Proclamation: A Prism for Finding Your Place in Biblical Story**

Finally, foundational to my thesis is the discussion of “narrative as proclamation,” as a prism for finding our place in the biblical story. To North American evangelicals whose mindset has been influenced by Platonic dualism in Western culture, narratives of the Gospels as story do not resonate as well as the Apostle Paul's writings.<sup>65</sup>

One of the earliest Christian examples of narrative as proclamation is Luke-Acts.

The Gospel of Luke, often mined for information about the life of Jesus, is also one of the earlier Christian examples of narrative theology. Unlike some writers of New Testament books, Luke has engaged in the theological task by shaping a narrative representation of the coming and mission of Jesus. In doing so, he goes to great lengths to ground the work of Jesus in the continuing story of God's redemptive plan, especially witnessed in the Scriptures, and he also emphasizes the ongoing character

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

of that story, so that Luke's audience is challenged to discern the purpose of God so that they may embrace it and order their lives around it.<sup>66</sup>

While exploration of select narratives in Luke-Acts may help explain why the Western mindset prefers propositional truth, systematic theology, and the writings of the apostle Paul, my hope is that our eyes might be open to new possibilities for seeing, interpreting, and applying the Scripture text *without* affecting a high view of the inspiration of Scripture. Is it possible a different approach to hermeneutics may help evangelicals more holistically proclaim the gospel in culturally pluralistic contexts?

As Fuller Seminary Professor Mark Lau Branson says about his experience as a local church pastor wrestling with these issues, a different approach to hermeneutics may be needed.

The question was transformed from 'What does it mean?' to 'What kind of people do we need to be for this to make sense?' This is a different approach to hermeneutics, one that recognizes that not only do we interpret Scripture; it interprets us.<sup>67</sup>

A more thorough discussion developing the biblical and hermeneutical foundation and interpretive framework will be needed and is the subject of Chapter 1, as the concept of "narrative as proclamation" holds much promise as a prism for finding our place in the biblical story.

### Endnotes

1. Tim Stafford, "God's Missionary to Us, Part 1," <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1996/december9/6te24a.html> (accessed February 5, 2009).
2. This comment by Professor Eddie Gibbs about Seattle was related to me by Dan Samuelson, Founder of Urban Mission Alliance (UMA), in a class offered by Fuller Seminary in the mid 1980s. Gibbs had worked over twenty years with the Billy Graham organization traveling to major cities through the United States, conducting demographic analyses six to eight months in advance of crusades.
3. UMA was an urban ministry initiative of the Pacific Northwest District of the Christian & Missionary Alliance denomination (C&MA) in partnership with Puget Sound area C&MA churches from 1994 to 2003

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

4. Floyd J. McKay, "The Evangelical Northwest," *Seattle Times*, May 31, 2006, B7.
5. Wikipedia, "List of Misquotations," Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_misquotations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_misquotations) (accessed May 12, 2010). The actual quote is: "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."
6. Dennis L. Okholm, "I Don't Think We're In Kansas Anymore, Toto! Postmodernism in Our Everyday Lives," *Theology Matters* Vol 5 No 4, (1999): 1.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 2.
9. Ibid., Read Dennis Okholm's entire article for a great summary of the historical and philosophical developments that lead to postmodernism.
10. George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics without God* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005).
11. Tim Burgess, "Sidewalks Without Children," *Seattle Times*, October 3, 2006, B7.
12. McKay, "The Evangelical Northwest," *Seattle Times*, May 31, 2006, B7.
13. The Stranger, "The Urban Archipelago: It's the Cities, Stupid," *The Stranger*, November 11, 2004, Front Page.
14. Ibid., 11-17.
15. Some politically liberal evangelical Christians may have angst over use of the term liberal. The intent is to simply observe that the rise of postmodern influence in culturally pluralistic contexts seems correlated with political liberalism also being dominant in such contexts. For those familiar with statistical theory, this use of the word liberal appears to be a relationship of correlation not causation, an interesting relationship that merits further conversation, which is beyond the scope of this book. There is also no intent in this discussion to say that liberal equals post-Christian.
16. Okholm, "I Don't Think We're In Kansas Anymore," 6.
17. Ibid.
18. Stafford, "God's Missionary to Us, Part 1."
19. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 227.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 236-237.
22. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 171.
23. Griffin suggests that the ministry of God in the OT and Jesus in the NT was both words and works. They go together, they are the same thing. It is not one or the other. So, it may be that a church community that embodies language (words) and life (works) in visible ways *is* an explanation of the gospel? Unless noted as a reference to his book, *God's EPIC Adventure*, the comments suggested by Griffin in this book, were from personal conversations during the writing



## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

of this book.

24. Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, 171.
25. David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 332.
26. Ibid., 512.
27. Ibid.
28. Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 15.
29. Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 17.
30. Ibid., 18. Using language and concepts from biological systems, Hirsch defines *Apostolic Genius* as the ‘built-in life force and guiding mechanism of God’s people. He further defines *missional DNA* or *mDNA*, for short, as the living components or elements that make up Apostolic Genius.
31. Ibid., 24.
32. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 15.
33. Ibid.
34. Timothy J. Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008), xviii.
35. Ibid., 225.
36. Ibid., xx.
37. T. M. Moore, *Culture Matters: A Call for Consensus on Christian Cultural Engagement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 117.
38. Ibid.
39. Ravi K. Zacharias, *Beyond Opinion: Living the Faith That We Defend* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), xix.
40. Ibid., 303-304.
41. Ibid., 304.
42. Glen Harold Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 12.
43. Ibid., 21.
44. Christine Wicker, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008 ). I heard a counter perspective to Staub’s argument that evangelical Christianity is the fastest growing and most influential Christian movement in America at an *Off the Map* Conference in Seattle, WA, November, 2008. Christine Wicker, a religion reporter (formerly of the *Dallas Morning News* and author of *Lily Dale*) offers what “Publishers Weekly” calls “a tendentious, confused book about the alleged demise of conservative evangelicalism” in her book.

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

45. Dick Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian: A Manifesto for Deepening Faith and Enriching Popular Culture in an Age of Christianity-Lite* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), xi-xii.
46. Ibid., ix.
47. Eric H. F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993). Ron Ruthruff says that Law's book is a must read for developing leadership for countercultural and cross-cultural leadership.
48. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 18.
49. Ibid., 16, 26.
50. David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming The Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 13-14.
51. Ibid., 49.
52. Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).
53. Ibid., 16.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 135.
56. Scott Dudley, "The End of Words Being Persuasive In Our Culture," (Presentation: Seattle, WA, November 18, 2003).
57. George Fox, an evangelical seminary, in Newberg, Oregon, in a brochure seen at an *Off The Map* Conference, in Seattle, WA 2007, provides a helpful definition of orthopraxy in the broader definition and framework of spiritual formation. "Spiritual Formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit and grounded in Scripture and a faith community. The process of becoming Christ-like involves three interwoven processes: 1) Orthodoxy: Right thinking about Christ and the Christian faith; 2) Orthopraxy: Right action/piety and devotional living; 3) Orthopathy: Right feeling toward God, self, and others."
58. Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community*, Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008).
59. Ibid., xxi.
60. Ibid., 38.
61. Ibid., 98.
62. Mark Lau Branson, "Forming God's People," Alban Institute, [www.allelon.org/articles/print.cfm?id+390](http://www.allelon.org/articles/print.cfm?id+390) (accessed March 4, 2007).
63. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 61.
64. Randall Smith, "Let Be Finale of Seem," *Mars Hill Review* 12, Fall 1998 (1998).

## Luke-Acts Improv: Prologue

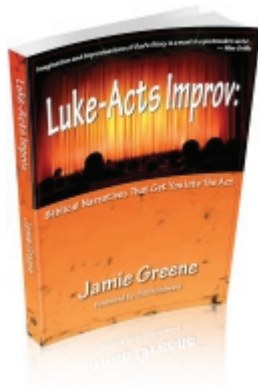
This is an excellent description of the postmodern condition.

65. Griffin, *God's EPIC Adventure*, 222-228 and Appendix 11, 346-353. The Apostle Paul's writings have been reduced to propositional truth by some within Protestant evangelicalism, which they are not. For an excellent introduction to the Apostle Paul, the challenges of interpreting his writings related to reading a Hebrew book with a Greek mind.
66. Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, New Testament theology (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995), i.
67. Branson, "Forming God's People," Alban Institute, [www.allelon.org/articles/print.cfm?id+390](http://www.allelon.org/articles/print.cfm?id+390) (accessed March 4, 2007).



For More Information on  
Luke Acts Improv Ministries

[www.lukeactsimprov.com/](http://www.lukeactsimprov.com/)

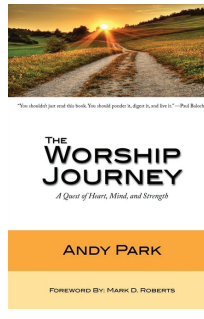
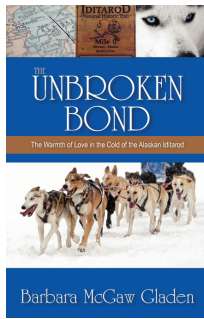
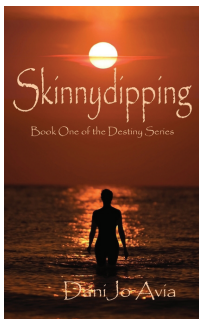
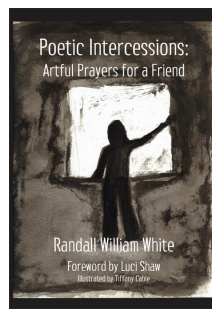
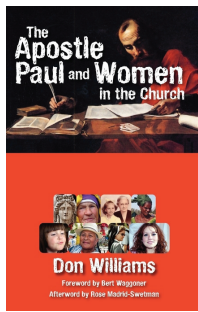
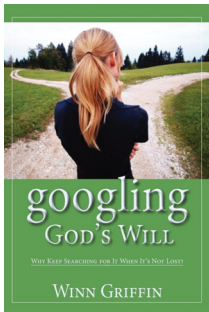
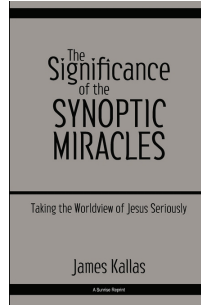
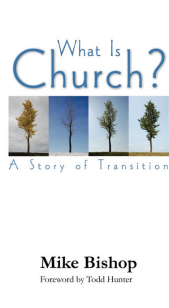
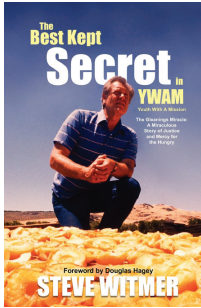


To Purchase Luke-Acts Improv  
Click on either link below

[www.harmonpress.com](http://www.harmonpress.com)

[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

# Other Books from Harmon Press



Look for them at:

[www.harmonpress.com/bookstore](http://www.harmonpress.com/bookstore)

[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

