
Timelining Scripture Workshop

A Bible Engagement Tool designed to assist people to grasp the big picture of Scripture; the story of the King and His Kingdom, and their place in it!

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High School Students timelining in the Solomon Islands

Early memories

Cotton wool sheep with no legs and toilet roll shepherds, wonderfully animated story tellers, film strips with a “groovy” 1970’s Jesus, complete with flared robe and, underlining dozens of verses in my green, padded Living Bible with as many colors as I could find. These are some of my wonderful memories of engaging with Scripture in my childhood and teens. There were boring bits too, but in retrospect I can forgive those responsible!

The various “grownups” in my life really tried hard to help me climb into the bible from an early age, for which I’m very grateful... even for the pulpit thumping preachers... some of whom were also interesting! Together we explored a myriad of stories which, not until my very late teens did I begin to realize *were actually connected in some kind of progressive*

way, even despite the widespread practice of finding random ‘proof texts’ to justify all and sundry!

There may have been many reasons for this inability to understand. Most likely it was a combination of developmental stages and the way Scripture was being presented to me... *in a very fragmented and disconnected way!*

To some extent the idea of timelining Scripture is a response to all this because it attempts to help people to grasp a ‘big picture’ sense of Scripture, as well as theirs and their world’s place in it. It’s a tool that I stumbled over some years back (actually, I stole/borrowed a version of it from a colleague) and I played with it, progressively developing it into something that has become far more than just a ‘corrective’ tool that I wish I could give to some of my former Sunday school teachers. It is something that questions assumptions and draws on important principles as it addresses some of the underlying Bible engagement issues that confront us.

This is a tool which, along with several other ‘big picture’ tools, has become a foundational Bible engagement concept that I use with people, young and old, all over the world in my role with Scripture Union International. I find it gives them a simple framework that can be easily grasped and recalled, and which they can use to help make significantly more sense of the many stories that make up the wonderful, connected, progressive, life giving and full of hope story of the King and his Kingdom – past, present and future – in which they are participants!

Contemporary challenges

As I’ve used timelining as a Bible engagement tool, I’ve realized that it helps to address a number of challenging contemporary issues, such as:

- The pattern of a fundamentally fragmented and disconnected understanding of Scripture still remains a major issue for those within Christendom, in both the majority and minority world. This is not just within the laity, but among many clergy and Christian workers as well. (I have been surprised at how helpful it has been for many theologically trained people!)
- Biblical literacy and engagement is under pressure in the west, where traditional churches are shrinking. Confidence in the validity and plausibility of Scripture, and therefore engagement, also continues to be under pressure from conflicting and competing world views, secularism in particular.
- Conversely, rapid church growth in the majority world has led to an urgent need for foundational and accessible Bible engagement tools and frameworks that communities can build on. Similarly, the massive growth of indigenous mission endeavor in the majority world has focused the need for such tools (e.g. “Ubabalo e

Africa” a youth sports ministry model currently has a goal of training 75 000 life coaches, many of whom are illiterate/semi-literate.)

- Syncretism in both the majority and minority worlds is rife. The unconscious and conscious integrating of a Kingdom worldview with a fundamentally opposing one exists in every culture. Whether it’s a western enlightenment notion that it is ultimately possible to know all that there is to know... and therefore control all that there is to control, or a specific tribal belief that the spirit of a widow’s dead husband can only be released if she has (often forced) sex with his brother, Bible engagement tools are needed that can help people explore, critique and distinguish between Kingdom and other dominant world views that they may even be blinded from.
- Children and young people require roots. It’s no secret that kids are growing up with a capacity to be mobile unlike any previous generation. Comparatively, the desire and capacity for them to spread their wings is enormous in a global world. But they also have, need and usually want roots that anchor them to a sense of cultural belonging and meaning. In faith terms, the stronger the root system, the healthier the relationship between the connectedness of community (rootedness) and the volatility of spreading of wings (mobility), which is particularly important as their idealism faces the brutal realities of a broken world. Being able to recognize their personal stories within the context of God’s Kingdom community’s story can provide powerful strength and resilience.

How timelining works

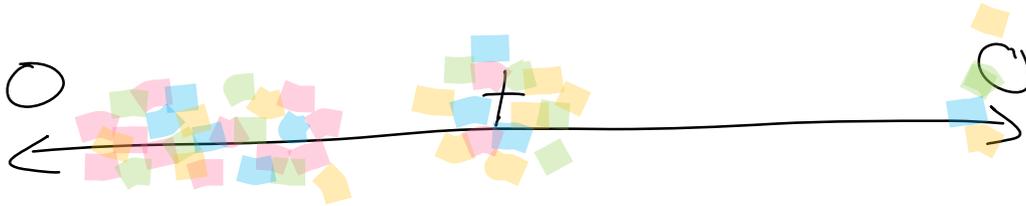
Step 1. The basic timeline I use is really quite simple. I draw a line with arrows at each end to represent time and space and then put several ‘markers’ along it. I begin with circles at both ends explaining that these represent Creation and New Creation and which act as book ends in history. In the centre I put a cross, which acts as a date marker. Increasingly, I’m including a tree up at the creation end to represent the fall of creation (and as an aid to explaining the concept of redemption and so on). This is the framework that I then build on in a myriad of ways depending on the situation and topic!



Depending on the situation, I may do this on a coffee table, a whiteboard, a beach (drawing with a stick in the sand) or a big sheet of paper. Several times I’ve even had people simply imagine it... and it seemed to work!



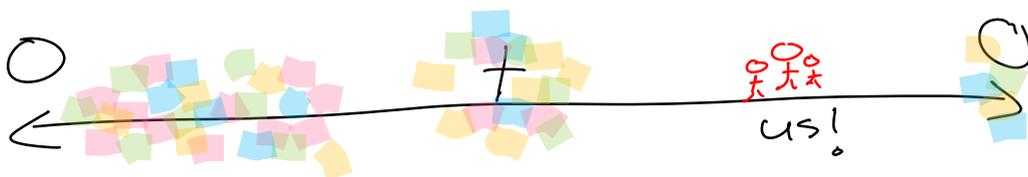
Step 2. The Big Story usually involves lots of ‘Post It Notes’, but torn squares of paper and tape will also do. I also try to use lots of color. I generally ask the group to write the name of a biblical character and/or a few words to describe a story and then to place it on the line at approximately where it fits. Some people may need help with placing it and I always make the point that this is not a test and not to worry if they don’t get it right!



I think it’s important to get people involved in building the story from their own knowledge base. It’s participative and interactive and draws on the collective knowledge of the group. It also reinforces the idea that we are all learners together. All of these are good educational principles to work with and the final product, the filled out framework, belongs to the group collectively and becomes the launch pad for engaging in the story in a myriad of ways.

Step 3. Finding ourselves in the Story Apart from helping people to understand the Bible as a big, connected and progressive story, the other key point that I like to make is that *we are actually part of the story!* Once all the ‘Post it notes’ are up, there is usually a ‘grouping’ through the OT and around the cross, with a gap for the inter-testamental period between the two. Then, there’s usually a large gap between the end of the NT and the New Creation circle at the end of the time line.

I ask what’s in the gap and it’s not usually too long before someone says ‘we are!’ This is often a paradigm shifting realization for people and I like to make a strong point of it. Again, I’ll hold a Bible and make the point that we are part of this story, we belong to it.



So, if step one is to establish a basic timeline, step two is helping people see the Scripture as a cohesive, progressive, big story. Step three then, is to help them see that they are part of

the big story of God! (Perhaps the other key point that I like to include at this step is about future hope and I point to the New Creation circle and talk about that.)

Big Issues



Often as I'm discussing 'Us', or our time in the big story of God, I get people to think about the 'Big Issues' that we face in our world. I move the discussion to the question of ***"what does it mean to be Kingdom people in the context of the big issues that we face in our world?"*** The big issues usually include things like: Corruption, Consumerism, HIV & AIDS, Tribalism and Ethnic Tension, Gender & Power, Poverty, Environment, Abuse, Self Esteem (individual and community), Religious Fundamentalism, Secularism, Family Expectations & Pressure, Family Dysfunction, Hopelessness and so on. I try to take the discussion further by asking questions like "what are the parallel stories from Scripture that could help us with these?" or I pick a story and ask people to

where they find themselves or their communities and their issues in it. Another question that works well here is "how does Scripture read us?" What specific stories from Scripture can read into these issues and the way we respond to them?

Pictured right: Youth leaders in the Middle East discussing ministry strategy

They are using timelining as a basis for exploring current "Big Issues" facing their young people as well as Biblical narratives that may speak into these.

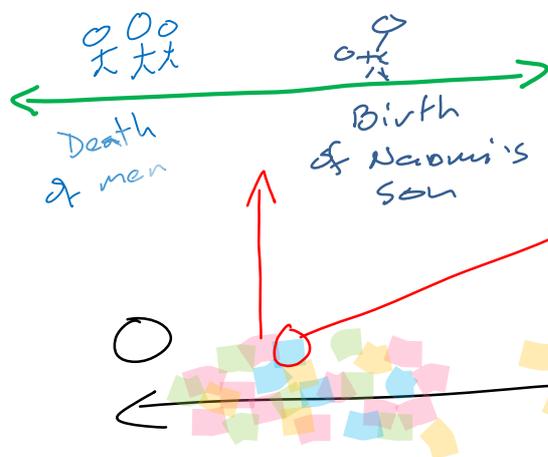
In this instance, timelining was also used to explore the idea of the plan of God through history as well as the many stories where strategy and planning are inherent.



Zooming in and Parallel lines

I often zoom in on various parts of the story and draw parallel lines to help people explore. It usually helps them to gain a stronger understanding of the various contexts surrounding a specific story or set of stories. It also works well when talking about 'our' place in the story and understanding our own contemporary histories and cultural issues. Three examples below include exploring Kingdom values in the story of Ruth, our (or our community's) story in the story of David and contemporary issues affecting the development of the Church.

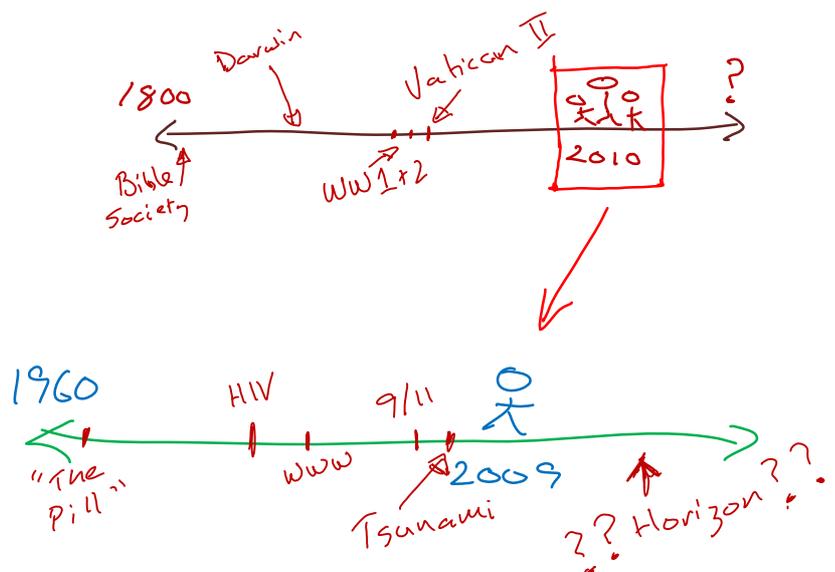
What Kingdom values can we find in the story of Ruth and her



Corruption in David's Story!!
Where do we find ourselves and our community in each of the characters in this story?

Emerging Church

- How is the contemporary Church re-shaping in the West?
- What is emerging?
- What are three significant issues that the growing church in the majority world will face in the next decade?
- What's on the horizon?



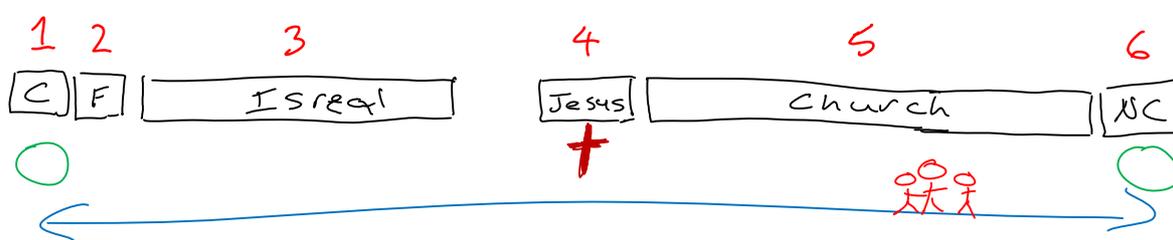
Zooming and paralleling are also great for helping people see the links between OT and NT. I find it particularly helpful for making the connection between Jesus' and other NT

character's regular references back to the OT. I also use it to help people explore the nature of God throughout the progressive story, such as tracking examples of God's concern for the marginalized or the environment and so on.

Other concepts and tools that I have used with timelining

1. Scripture in Six Acts

Author NT Wright introduced the concept of Scripture being understood as 'acts' in a drama, each acts having a number of key scenes (see chapter 5 of *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK 1992). This idea has since been developed by a number of people and I find the concept very useful to incorporate with timelining. The '6 acts' approach that I use includes the stories of Creation, the Fall, Israel, Jesus, the Church and the New Creation. It's also worth noting that when it comes to the story of the Church, we have a picture of the first 100 or so years of it in the NT letters!



We exist in act 5 and our challenge (notwithstanding the work of the Holy Spirit) is to work out, or improvise, the next scene in that act, in keeping with the story of the Kingdom of God so far, as well as focused on the liberating hope of the fully revealed Kingdom and renewed Creation that is yet to come.

2. Kingdom of God

Most of our engagement with the notion of the Kingdom of God comes from our experience of Jesus' and other NT comments about it, such as "The Kingdom is like..., the Kingdom is among you..." and so on (and still a bit confusing!). I have often used a mind map in



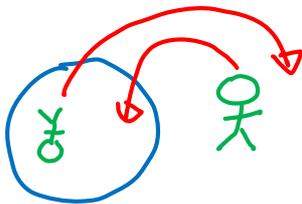
conjunction with timelining to help people explore the concept of the Kingdom and their place in it... both in terms of what it is and what it isn't. We can understand the idea of the Kingdom by understanding it in terms of:

- a. **Time** – the story of Scripture throughout history is *the story of the Kingdom of God*.
- b. **The King** of the Kingdom – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – His *character, values and nature*.

- c. **The people of the text (& Community)** – the stories of people who stood for the Kingdom, stood against the Kingdom, wrestled with *what it meant to be a people of the Kingdom* – whole communities at times and so on. Explore their stories!
- d. **Contemporary people** of the kingdom(i.e. the last 2000 years) – those whose stories are not specifically written about in the Scriptures, but who are nonetheless part of the story of the Kingdom of God and who have also wrestled with *what it means to be people of the Kingdom*.
- e. **What else?** Explore other ways to help people gain a sense of the depth and breadth of what Kingdom of God means.

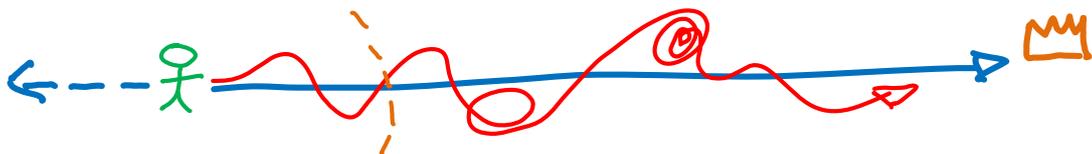
3. Bounded and directional understandings of conversion and discipleship

Another concept that many people have written about and which I find helpful alongside timelining relates to how we understand the nature of conversion and discipleship. In particular it provides a strong idea of faith, following Jesus and discipleship as journey, as distinct from status focused behavior. I find that the timeline, as a whole and by looking at specific people in the story, is a helpful image for people to understand the idea of the process of faith, which is so strong throughout Scripture.



Bounded Set Thinking:

- Is about getting people “in”.
- Discipleship is focused on compliance and reduced to keeping people in.
- Get it wrong or not comply and you could find yourself “out” (although this may be dependent on your theology... e.g. “once saved, always saved”... but you are likely to still be shunned in a compliance focused community.)



Directional Thinking:

- Is about people moving toward the King – the process of following (there may be a moment of conversion, or there may not.)
- Discipleship is focused on Kingdom direction, walking with a person, in community, maturing in Kingdom character and values.
- It’s never a straight line, but tends to wind its way along, sometimes going the wrong direction and sometimes getting stuck, reflecting the reality of our broken humanness and wrestle with faith!
- Get it wrong or get stuck and your faith community will help you get back up, point you toward the King and walk with you.

4. The art of good questions

There are many examples of ways to explore Biblical stories using good questions, along with creative approaches and good hermeneutical principles. While not professing to be an expert in this area, it seems to me that developing good questions is, in many ways, an art that can be developed and it usually improves with practice. Here are a few of the sorts of questions/exploration techniques that I often use in conjunction with the time line:

- What stories from Scripture can you think of that might help us with the issue of... (e.g. Gender and Power – the stories of Jesus interaction with women – what did he model? Similarly, Boas’ attitude and behavior towards Naomi and so on)?
- Who are the key characters in this story?
- Imagine what it might have been like to be... (e.g. the woman caught in adultery standing before the crowd – shame, exposed, terrified, used, worthless, powerless and so on)?
- Where do you find yourself in this person or story (e.g. the woman caught in adultery or as a person in the crowd, or as Jesus who stands in the gap for her and cares pastorally for her)?
- What tone of voice do you imagine is being used here?
- What values of the Kingdom stand out in this story and which one of these do you think speaks the loudest to our community?

Conclusion

Timelining is simply a tool. It has shown to be helpful in opening people’s eyes – particularly when long term fragmented and disconnected Bible engagement have been their norm. For those new to the Scriptures, it has provided a helpful framework for people to make sense of a story that covers such a huge span of time (all of it in fact)!

Its simplicity makes it such an effective tool. It’s an image that is easy to recall and make new connections with as new stories are explored. I even find that it comes in to my mind when I sing worship songs and hymns – helping me to make the connections!

Much of this paper has been devoted to explaining other Bible Engagement tools that I use in conjunction with and complementary to timelining. Perhaps this kind of adaptability is another aspect of its effectiveness. On this note, I hope that it is taken and adapted for all sorts of situations. I encourage you to “have a go” (as we say in Australia)! My only request is that you share what you have tried and learned! Details of how you can do this through the open access web site Max7: www.max7.org.

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This document was first made available as a report of a workshop held at the World Wide Scripture Engagement Consultation in Malaysia in October 2009. It is now available for download at: <http://www.scripture-engagement.org>

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