

**JAMES CHOUNG HAS
FOUND A WAY TO TELL
THE OLD, OLD STORY TO
A NEW GENERATION.**



INTERVIEW BY ANDY CROUCH

From Four Laws to Four Circles

*It may not be a coincidence that when James Choung, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, set out to help college students explain the gospel to their friends, he turned to the most beloved tool in an engineer's arsenal: the diagram. Choung, who now serves as the divisional director for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in San Diego, has spent his life in ministry on and around college campuses, where Christians today are met with a paradoxical and perplexing combination of suspicion and openness. The Christian Vision Project's big question in 2008 is, **Is our gospel too small?** Choung is working to persuade skeptical students—and their Christian friends—that the answer is “No.”*

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an you summarize the “Big Story” that your four-circles diagram is designed to tell?

I call the diagram “the Big Story” because it sums up the plot points of the larger story in which we live and breathe. The most essential parts are the phrases: *designed for good, damaged by evil, restored for better, and sent together to heal*. They follow the biblical narrative: creation, fall, redemption, and mission.

As I’m drawing the four circles, I’ll tell a story like this: the world, our relationships, and each of us were designed for good, but all of it was damaged by evil because of our self-centeredness and inclination to seek our own good above others’. But God loved the world too much to leave it that way, so he came as Jesus. He took everything evil with him to death on the cross, and through his resurrection, all of it was restored for better. In the end of time, all will be fully restored, but until then, the followers of Jesus are sent together to heal people, relationships, and the systems of the world.

The diagrams you use in your book, *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In*, join a long line of evangelistic tools. What motivated you to create a new one?

I used many of those tools when I became serious about my faith in college, and found that I was the only practicing Christian in my fraternity. When someone was either curious or drunk enough, I wanted to have something ready to share. Some times, the conversation would go nowhere. But other times, one of these diagrams

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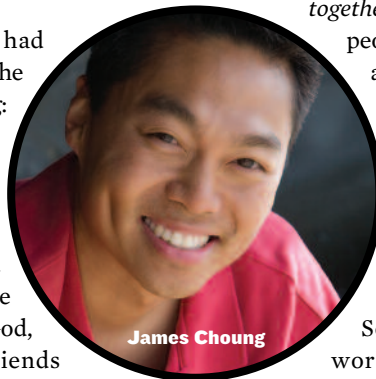
would actually help someone make a decision to follow Jesus for the first time. And we'd both be surprised!

These tools obviously aren't magic wands that will automatically cause someone to pledge allegiance to Jesus. But they are aids that offer a clear explanation in a memorable format. And when we're nervous, having something to hold on to will help us be clear in what we present. Even if we don't use the tools themselves, they give us helpful reminders to know what's essential in a presentation and what's not.

I think of them as modern-day iconography. Icons and stained glass windows helped preliterate Christians understand biblical stories and themes. Evangelism diagrams have the same function today: they help us understand the core message of the faith.

Your version, though, has a different emphasis from some previous diagrams.

Well, what was missing from the diagrams I had learned was anything substantial about one of the most important themes in Jesus' own preaching: the kingdom of God. I was reading a lot about the kingdom of God, in the Bible and in recent scholarship, but when it came to sharing the core message of the faith, I'd always fall back on an evangelistic diagram that didn't include it. And it dawned on me: Even though there are tons of books out there about the kingdom of God, very few will be able to share it with their friends unless they are given some tool or aid—some icon—that will help them remember the key points. So even though I'm not a fan of canned presentations, I felt that creating a diagram was essential to help us understand a bigger picture of the gospel that Jesus taught.



Are you also reacting to a change in the religious landscape, especially among college students?

I've been in college ministry for 13 years now—16 years if you count my student days. And college students today seem really different from when I was in college.

In the early 1990s, most of us were marked by a high level of distrust. So campus ministry meant building trust. It was not easy. I had to beg people to hang out with me even to start a mentoring relationship. And evangelistic approaches back then focused on authenticity and community. The overriding spiritual question of the day was: What is real?

But the so-called "Millennials" (Generation Y) on campuses today seem much more trusting. Freshmen come in looking for mentors. And they're a civic generation. They're ready to volunteer, because they really think they can change the world. They're far more optimistic. And our evangelistic approaches that have worked are far more civic as well, such as dealing with the AIDS pandemic or sex trafficking. Our best approaches mix a global concern with spirituality, and many people come out for it.

The overriding spiritual question today is: What is good? What will really help the planet be a better place? And our faith better have an answer for it to be relevant today.

At the same time, the environment on campus can shift quite

quickly. Just in the last five years, my sense is that campus culture has turned against Christians. People seem more negative about Christians than at any time I can remember since the scandals of many Christian television personalities in the 1980s. We are perceived by many as intolerant, overpolitical, and homophobic. We have to work hard to overcome that.

Wheaton College evangelism professor Rick Richardson has observed that the best evangelistic strategies challenge contemporary idolatries—for example, Campus Crusade's Four Spiritual Laws challenged the idol of the autonomous self. What idolatries does the Big Story take aim at most directly?

The heart of the real challenge is in the parallel lines that prevent going straight from Circle 2 (*damaged by evil*) to Circle 4 (*sent together to heal*). In our field-tests we found that many people want to jump right to the mission of healing and restoring the world. They say, "We want to be about healing the world, but why does it have to be with Jesus?"

But our diagram says, "No, you can't do this without Jesus. We need Jesus to help us become the kind of good we want to see in the world. Only he can fully help us put to death our self-centered ways so that we can truly live. So if you really want to be a part of healing the world in a way that lasts, you have to go through Jesus." You have to go through Circle 3. It's at this point that we may bring up Christian history that many have forgotten, that Christians have been at the forefront of lasting social change, such as the abolitionist movement and women's suffrage and the civil rights movement.

But it's here that people will walk away from us and say, "I like everything you've said, but I still don't see why Jesus needs to be a part of it." The postmodern idolatry is that all spiritual ways of life lead to the same place. Any local truth is a valid truth. In the postmodern mind, they're all paths to being good and doing good.

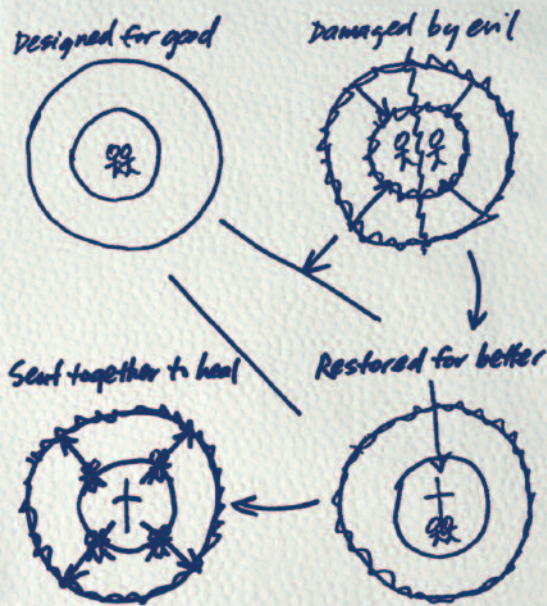
But we are asking people to "repent"—literally, to "change their mind" or to have a new way of thinking, to see that they need to let their selfish lives die with Jesus—so they can have a new life of loving him and their neighbor. That's a huge call to faith for this generation.

How does sin—a central part of the biblical vocabulary—enter into your presentation of the gospel in the Big Story?

Evangelicals have traditionally assumed that we have to start every gospel message by helping people see they're sinners. If we don't, then we can't move on to salvation or how Jesus gives them assurance that they will be in heaven when they die.

It's not that this message isn't true, but the approach is jarring. We haven't created any common experience or authority so that our message will have any weight. We just come out and say it's the truth. And in a postmodern setting, that sounds arrogant. How do we know it's the truth? Have we ever been to heaven?

So at the beginning of the Big Story, we instead talk about our common perception: The world is not the way it's supposed to be.



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We all agree with that. And we all agree that it makes us sick to our stomach when we think about it. No one thinks that our world is great as it is. We hunger for a better world. And up to this point, there is no disagreement. We all experience this.

It's from this point that we can move on and say that our hunger actually must be evidence that a better world did exist, or will someday. Because our hunger points to food, and our thirst points to water—shouldn't our hunger for a better world point to something? And then we can share that the world was "designed for good."

But we still come back to the concept of sin in the context of a broken world. Each person contributes to the mess. We all do. And when we present sin in the context of the results we see in the world (instead of, to a postmodern, an arbitrary set of rules that one tribe happens to live by), then our sinfulness is much easier to accept. It's still sin: our failure to love our neighbors is ultimately our failure to love God. And then sin seems much deeper and more real. And our need for a Savior becomes stronger, not weaker.

Jesus' invitations into the kingdom seem to be summed up in a

couple of words: "Follow me." Jesus didn't always require people to see the depths of their sin before they started a journey with him. They just needed to be willing to change.

How do you hope this tool will change the way Christians themselves think of evangelism?

I hope we will move from decision-oriented presentations to ones that have more to say about transformation. As we were developing the Big Story, we wanted a diagram that wouldn't just be binary—in or out—but would represent the journey that all of us are on.

We also wanted to move from an exclusive focus on the afterlife to the mission-life. Immediately after Jesus' invitation, "Follow me," he added, "I will make you fishers of men." From the outset, he gave his disciples a mission. Without the mission in our gospel presentations, we do people a grave disservice. We imply that they can be Christians without being on a God-given mission to love others in his name. And that's just not true. In Jesus' summation, we are all called to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In Micah's version, we are called to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We need to allow the reign of God to continue to grow in us and around us.

That's not to say that life after death isn't important. But it's not the whole story. It's the final chapter, but there are still many chapters to be lived out.

Tools are pragmatic things, so here is a pragmatic question: Has this tool worked?

We have been field-testing it for several years, and the answer is yes, it has. We have had people come to follow Jesus through this. One of my favorite stories comes from another student, who had met a self-proclaimed atheist. After sharing the diagram, the atheist said, "I knew God would be like that." And they met together to study the Scriptures after that. A skeptic became a seeker.

In partnership with InterVarsity, World Vision, and La Jolla Presbyterian Church, we were able to put up massive tents on our eight San Diego campuses to raise awareness about the AIDS pandemic and how spirituality fits into the picture. We presented the Big Story at the end. If we had come with a more traditional approach, it would've felt like a bait and switch, but instead, the Big Story felt very much in line with the global concerns we were exploring.

Equally important, this tool has a message that Christians are proud to share. We see Christians who don't fit the stereotype of an evangelist and haven't really shown any previous interest in sharing this story, share this message immediately with their friends and even strangers after being trained in this. For them it finally feels like good news, so they share it.

Ultimately, I don't think I'm saying anything new here. If it were new, I'd be a heretic. This diagram has come out of my love for Scripture and the desire to share the whole story that I've found in it. It's the same old gospel truth, the one we embraced when we first started walking with Jesus. None of us fully grasped the whole truth when we started our spiritual journeys, and if we're honest, we still don't. But each day, we see something more fully and more clearly. And we'll find that it's the same gospel that's been in these pages of Scripture for a long, long time. 