

The Big Story: A Gospel Presentation

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Adapted from his book and booklet,
True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In (IVP, 2008)
& *Based on a True Story* (IVP, 2008)



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A new Gospel presentation is needed. Our most popular Gospel summaries may have been effective in the past, but these days they often communicate only a small part of Jesus' central message. And unfortunately, it's often a message that feels increasingly irrelevant and arbitrary in today's culture.

So, *the Big Story* diagram hopes to be, as Einstein put it, "simple as possible, but not simpler." It's a visual way to present a more holistic picture of our faith's central message, and hopefully may inform the way we Christians think about the Gospel itself as well.

This diagram addresses three movements to present Jesus' compelling message more fully and relevantly. The items on the left aren't wrong, but they need to be balanced with the values on the right.

- Decision ↔ Transformation
- Individual ↔ Communal
- After-life ↔ Mission-life

This article is designed to be a teaching tool to present this diagram. Words presented in a normal font are things you might say. Instructions on how to draw the diagram are in *italics*. One-sentence summary statements are in **bold**. But please don't feel like you have to memorize a script. Feel free to tailor or change this presentation according to your needs while remaining biblical. You don't even have to use the diagram, but at least it can be a memory aid to remember and communicate the transformational, communal and missional aims of the Gospel.

A few more things: First, the Bible verses are for your reference only; you don't *need* to use them. Second, please add your own personal touch; your stories and metaphors will help. Third, keep in mind three levels — *systemic, relational* and *personal* — throughout the presentation.

In the end, diagrams don't save people — the Spirit does. And this diagram can't replace a community that credibly lives out the teachings of Jesus. But I hope this diagram not only helps us share a faithful message, but also allows us to feel better about the good news we share. Because it's not meant just to be good news for us, but also good news for the world.

Introduction: the ache

Would you like to hear the core message Jesus came to teach, or the basic message of the Bible?

What's our world like? What do you see on the news?

- *Draw the world (outer circle) and the people within in, slightly apart.*

Then we agree that the world is messed up?

- *Draw a squiggly line over the outer circle to represent a world in damage and shock.*

The world is messed up; that's obvious. But what's more interesting is the human response: how do you feel about this kind of world?

No normal person thinks that suffering, violence and oppression are good things. No one throws a party for the bloodbath in Darfur, when a child is infected with AIDS, or when the Towers fell in New York.

So what does this mean? **Most people ache for a better world.** But our universal ache speaks of something more. Just like hunger points to food and thirst points to water, so our universal ache for a better world means that such a world either once existed or will one day exist.



Part 1: Designed for good

In the Christian worldview, God created a good, wonderful world. In the beginning, everything was right with each other.

- Draw a new circle in the top left corner representing the world. Draw people, who are not necessarily Adam and Eve, close together to represent intimacy and community.

On a bigger level, creation was designed to take care of us and we were designed to take care of creation. We were made to be interdependent on each other.¹

On a relational level, people were designed to take care of each other. They were made to be in true community, with the freedom to love and be loved, to serve and be served, to be themselves without shame in front of each other.²

Lastly, on a personal level, we were each designed to be in a relationship with the God, one full of love and intimacy. God hung out with us, and we liked being with him. We were meant to love and serve each other as well.³

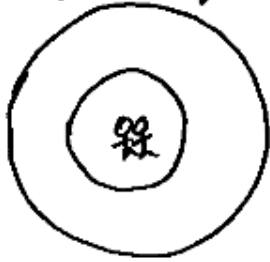
- Draw the inner circle to represent God's presence with us.

The world and all that's in it was designed for good.

- Write the words "Designed for good" at the top.

But what happened to this good world? How did we get to where we are today?

Designed for good



¹ Genesis 1:29-30, 2:15

² Genesis 2:25

³ Genesis 3:9

Part 2: Damaged by evil

When God was in charge, we had a wonderful world. But we wanted to be in charge so that all of it — creation and everyone in it — could be used for our own benefit instead of its intended design and purpose to serve each other. It became all about us.

- *Draw the arrows that point inward to the people that represent self-centeredness.*

On the bigger level, we damaged creation. We fill the air with pollutants so we can have a comfortable lifestyle. And it fights back in hurricanes and tsunamis. But there are also other larger issues, such as racism, sexism, slavery, injustice and oppression that damages us and our world.⁴

On a relational level, we damage each other and others hurt us — whether we mean to or not.⁵ When we live for only ourselves, then it's easy to take and gain without regard for other people.

- *Draw a squiggly line right down the middle, splitting the people from each other.*

And on a personal level, we damage our soul and its relationship with God. We are afraid of God now, and in our fear, we try to ignore him and live for ourselves. But we are only hurting ourselves, and we will never be the kinds of people that we want and dream to be.⁶

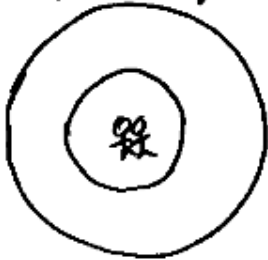
- *Draw an inner circle, and then a squiggly line around the inner circle to represent damage to our relationship with God.*

We — and the world — are damaged by evil. We're all damaged, and are consistently contributing to the mess.

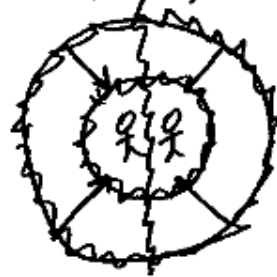
- *Write the words "Damaged by evil" in the top right.*

Where have you seen damage in your own life or the lives around you?

Designed for good



Damaged by evil



⁴ Genesis 3:14-19; Ezekiel 16:49; Amos 5:4-15; Ephesians 6:12

⁵ Genesis 3:12-13; Romans 1:18-32

⁶ Genesis 3:10; Romans 1:18-32

Part 3: Restored for better

But God loved the world too much to leave it this way.

- Draw the world (outer circle) again with the squiggly lines. Draw an arrow coming down from above into the world's mess, and a cross in the center of the circle.

God came to the planet as Jesus 2,000 years ago and started a new thing: a resistance movement against evil, though not with military revolt or communal escapism. Instead, he taught us a better way to live, and wants to give us the power to overcome evil in us and around us.

Jesus took on all of the damage and died on the cross, letting it die with him.⁷ But he also came back to life, proving that evil doesn't have the final say. And in the mystery of faith, we too die with Jesus to truly live in and with him.⁸ In so doing, everything, including us, is all restored for better.

On a bigger level, he restored creation so that all of it could be used in their good ways. All of the world's systems — corporations, governments, schools, etc. — have the new potential to usher in God's values of love, peace and justice. Oppression and injustice can cease.⁹

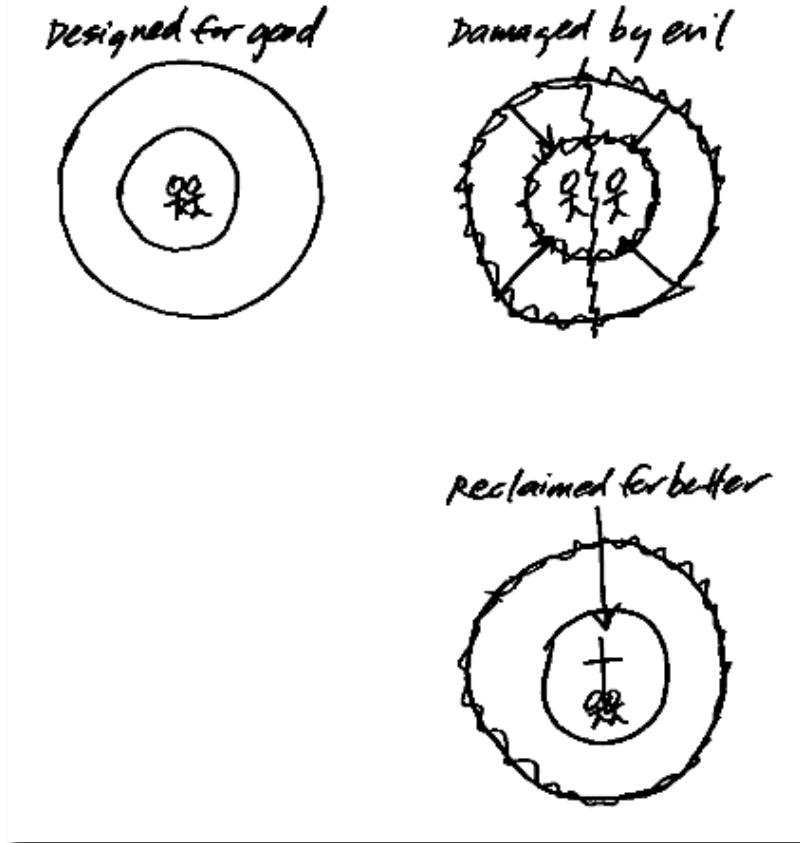
He also restored our relationships, so that we can love and forgive each other.¹⁰ Damaged relationships can be healed.

- Draw people at the foot of the cross, learning to be like Jesus.

Lastly, God restored our relationships with himself. People don't have to live self-centered lives or be afraid of God anymore.¹¹ He forgives the ways we contribute to the damage in the world. Now we can truly live with God, in a relationship full of love and intimacy.

- Draw an inner-circle representing God's presence, and write "Restored for better" at the top of this circle.

The good news: the revolution has begun, and we're all invited. **Jesus came to restore the world and everything in it for better.**



⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:21

⁸ Philippians 1:21; Luke 9:23

⁹ Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 1:15-20

¹⁰ Matthew 6:12, 18:21-35

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:11-21; Colossians 3:1-17

Part 4: Sent together to heal

Jesus wants us to join this resistance movement against evil, to go out and heal the world.

- Draw the outer circle again, again with the squiggly lines — because the fullness of the Kingdom of God has not yet arrived. Draw the cross in the center again.

On a personal level, we're called to submit to Jesus' leadership and become more like him. We need to become the kind of good we want to see in the world. So we admit our contribution to the damage, receive forgiveness, and trust Jesus, letting him take charge of our lives instead.¹²

- Draw the inner circle representing God's presence.

As we're becoming more like Jesus, we're also called to heal relationships, our own and others. We ask for forgiveness, and forgive others. Then we're freed to love each other.¹³

- Draw the four pairs of people near the inner circle.

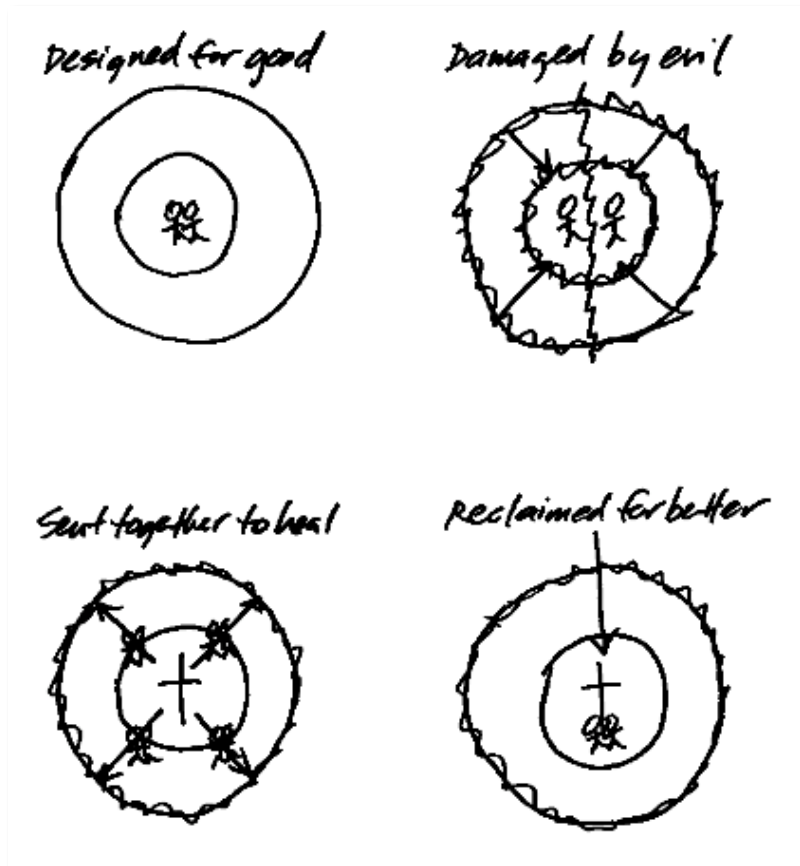
Lastly, on a bigger level, we're called to heal systems. We're called to protect the environment, to fight injustice and oppression.¹⁴ It's overwhelming, but we're called to do it together.

- Draw the arrows leading outward, which represent God's Spirit.

Many Christians around us have gotten stuck in the third circle, not helping to heal the planet. But Jesus wanted his followers to be in this fourth circle, by being sent together to heal.

- Write "Sent together to heal" at the top of this circle.

We don't go alone, but with the power of God's Spirit and the community of God's people with us. *He'll be with us.*¹⁵ **With these resources, Jesus is asking us to be sent together to heal the planet.**



¹² Romans 6:23; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 3:1-17; 1 John 1:9

¹³ Matthew 6:12, 18:21-35; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

¹⁴ Genesis 2:15; Exodus 23:1-13; Leviticus 19:9-15, 23:22, 25:1-54; Deuteronomy 15:1-18; Ezekiel 16:49; etc.

¹⁵ Isaiah 41:10; Matthew 28:20; etc.

Response

We can't go straight to the last circle. **We need to become the kind of good we want to see in the world.** In everything we do, we bring all that we are to it — our motivations, our instincts, our actions. We are all damaged too, and we need healing before we can really heal around us. Jesus does that the best. By trusting him, and giving him leadership over our lives, we can become the kind of good we want to see around us.

- Draw 2 parallel lines that block the path between the 2nd and 4th circle. Then draw 3 arrows: the 1st is unable to reach to other side. The other 2 show a path to the 4th circle only through Jesus.

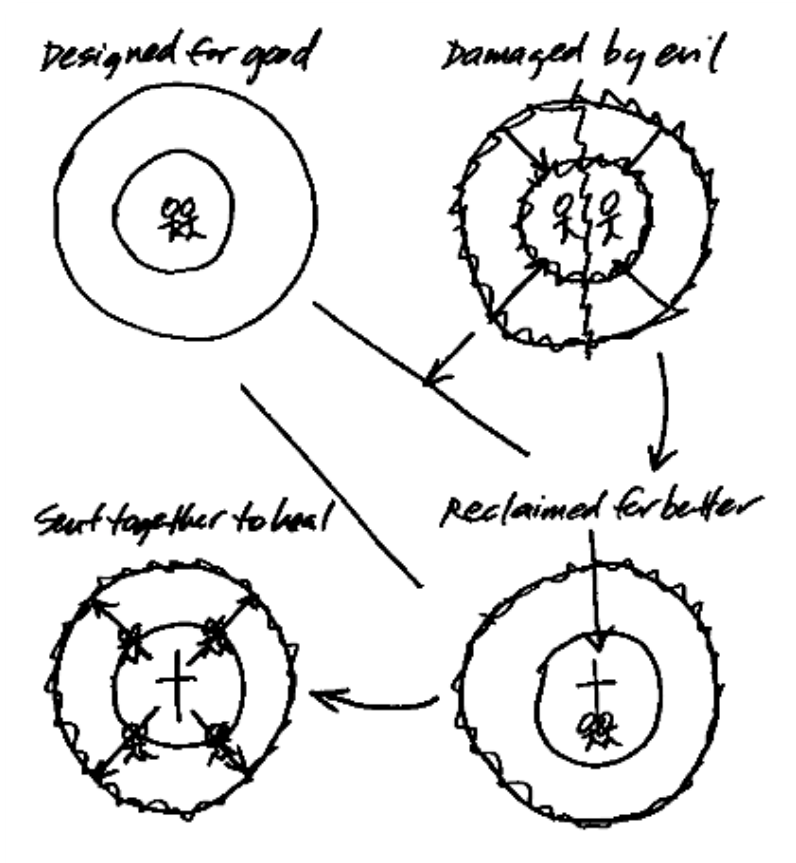
So, which one of these circles do you relate to? In the first, everything's fine. In the second, you're overwhelmed by the problems. In the third, you've made some commitment to Jesus but are holding back. Fourth, you're in the movement of God with his people. Where are you?

- (If first circle): but we already said that the world needs help. What's your role in helping to heal the world?
- (If second circle): tell me about it. Jesus is offering you a way to overcome it. Would you like to know how?
- (If third circle): that's a great start. But it's clear that Jesus is asking you for more. What's keeping you from joining his movement to heal the world?
- (If fourth circle): What you're doing is in line with the values of the Kingdom of God, but you could be doing so much more with God's presence and with his people. You could be a part of something that will last. Would you like to be a part of it?

Would you like to let Jesus be the leader of your life and join his movement to heal the planet? Will you trust him with your life?

(If making a decision toward Jesus): Great! Jesus also wants to give you resources for this mission. Have you ever asked to receive the Holy Spirit? Can I pray that you receive the Holy Spirit?

Would you like to learn more about Jesus in a Bible study with some friends? When's a good time? Can I pray for you?



Frequently Asked Questions

1. *Didn't Jesus die for our sins? Is the other stuff really a part of the Gospel?*

Jesus died for our sins. Absolutely. But does that mean he *only* died for the *penalty* of our sins? If he died for only the penalty, then we don't have to change. But he also died for our *sin* itself, then the power of sin is also truly dead in us. We are saved and delivered from our sin, and thus *can* change. We can finally become the people of God we were meant to be.

Also, looking at Colossians 1:20, it's clear that Jesus didn't just come to save individuals, but "to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." That includes not only us, but also our relationships and the systems around us — *all things*. This diagram is just an attempt of putting the Gospel back in its original context.

2. *Is this really the Gospel? If this is Biblical, why haven't people taught this in our churches?*

Nothing in the diagram is new. If it's new, it's probably heretical. But all of this old truth is often locked behind the Bible's many pages or in theological tomes, and so seems inaccessible to the normal Christian. So the teaching has been around, but we need something simpler so that Jesus' central message can be recaptured more broadly.

3. *So then, what actually happens with Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection*

Many biblical metaphors of atonement exist. One of the earliest is the *ransom* view by Origen. Satan held humankind hostage, but God tricked Satan into accepting Jesus as a ransom. Satan accepted, thus freeing mankind, but lost again because death couldn't hold Jesus. In the *moral influence* theory, 11th century scholar Pierre Abélard argued that Jesus is the great example of service and sacrifice in devotion to God, which culminates in the Cross. His example changes us to be selfless. In the *Christus Victor* theory, Jesus takes on all of the evil and damage of the planet onto himself and it all dies with him. But it doesn't hold him back. Instead he comes back to life, he brings new life into all of these old structures and people. He faces and overcomes death, and we are free

from sin, death and the Devil. The *penal substitution* theory we know arose in the 11th century by Anselm, but was codified in the 13th century by Thomas Aquinas and then applied to individuals by John Calvin in the 16th century. They all help explain the Big Story.

In it all, our invitation is to participate in his death and resurrection each day — to carry our cross daily — in a communal and world context. In this way, we die in Christ and live in Christ each day.

4. *What if someone just wants to jump to the fourth circle, and ignore the third? Why do we need Jesus to heal the planet?*

Ultimately, we need to become the kind of good that we want to see in the world.

Besides, it's the stuff that will last. Think about every beneficial major social revolution out there in the past two thousand years: public education, health care, human rights, children's rights, women's suffrage, civil rights, literacy education, rights for the disabled — even fair-trade coffee — and more were all started by Christians. The only major movement I could think of that didn't seem to have Christian beginnings are non-violent resistance movements, which could mark their beginnings with Gandhi. But he admits that he learned it from the Gospels of Jesus! The followers of Jesus have a good track record of leaving behind the kind of good that lasts.

To be fair, there were the Inquisitions, Crusades, and Western Imperialism. Yes, these were atrocities, and Jesus' name was smeared. But think of major irreligious movements of our time. Communism alone claimed 100 million lives, far more than the Inquisitions or the Crusades combined. I'm just trying to balance things out.

5. *Can you recommend some books that will go deeper into the themes of this diagram?*

A good, basic primer is Allen Wakabayashi's *Kingdom Come. The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard can help you go deeper. For atonement metaphors, Scot McKnight's *A Community Called Atonement* is helpful. And to learn more about Jesus in his cultural context, go with N. T. Wright's *The Challenge of Jesus*. And his *Simply Christian* is one of the best books explaining the faith to a postmodern world.