

Chicagoland Evangelism Research Project (CERP): Comparison of “The Big Story” and “Roman Road with Bridge”

David M. Gustafson and Samuel C. Kang*

Chicagoland Evangelism Research Project (CERP) is conducted by faculty and students of Trinity College and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School at Deerfield, Illinois. CERP combines evangelism education and experience with evangelism research.

CERP 2015-17 analyzed two short-view gospel presentations (10–15 minutes) comparing perceptions, clarity, and effectiveness of each by surveying non-Christian participants. CERP 2015-17 analyzed: 1) Choung’s “The Big Story” (TBS), and 2) the Roman Road with Bridge (RRB). Student-evangelists were trained by demonstration, quizzes, and role playing to share both gospel presentations. Students then asked non-Christian friends, neighbors, or co-workers to participate in the research project that “assesses two presentations of the Bible’s basic message.”¹ Student-evangelists were directed to alternate the order of the presentations.

After a student presented *both* gospel presentations to *each* participant, the non-Christian participant completed the CERP Survey, providing demographic information as well as responses to questions about the two gospel presentations. The results of CERP 2015–17, which were based upon a convenience sample of seventy-five (75) completed surveys and student analyses, are presented in this report. The report identifies perceptions of these two short-view gospel presentations and correlations between age (generations), geographical area, education, ethnicity, etc.

Often, evangelism education proceeds with methods that are taught in classes on evangelism without critical analysis of feedback from non-Christians. The goal of CERP is to receive information from non-Christian participants in order to evaluate effectiveness, clarity, and receptivity of two gospel presentations among groups of people.

Short-view presentations of the gospel such as Bill Bright’s “Four Spiritual Laws,” James Choung’s “The Big Story,” the Roman Road, Randy Raysbrook’s “One Verse Evangelism,” and Tony Payne’s “Two Ways to Live” give a snap-shot of the gospel or some aspect of it. Most short-view gospel presentations provide simple and transferable methods to share the gospel with

* David M. Gustafson is associate professor of evangelism and missional ministry at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Samuel C. Kang is a PhD candidate in Intercultural Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois.

others.² These methods normally utilize diagrams or illustrations along with main points or a brief narrative of the gospel story.

In contrast to long-views of evangelism that take longer timeframes for reading, discussing, and reflecting on one of the four Gospels over multiple meetings, for example, a short-view of evangelism normally presents the gospel in ten to fifteen minutes.³ Short-view approaches generally highlight four or five themes of the gospel, and use diagrams and illustrations to clarify theological themes and concepts.

CERP is conducted with the understanding that there is no substitute for serious theological and contextual inquiry regarding gospel proclamation and practice. Gospel clarity depends on communicating not merely the core theological foundation of the gospel but doing so in a manner that people in a cultural context can understand. Since evangelism happens within specific contexts, contextualization of the gospel should be both biblically informed and culturally appropriate.⁴

This report begins with a brief historical foundation of short-view gospel presentations, provides an overview of the CERP Survey, presents the CERP 2015-17 results that compared the “Roman Road and Bridge” and Choung’s “The Big Story,” acknowledges limitations to the data, and offers considerations for future research.

Brief History of Short-view Gospel Presentations

Within the Scriptures there are examples of short-view gospel presentations. While one may consider each of the four Gospels to be a long-view approach to gospel proclamation, there are a number of examples in the New Testament of short-view gospel explanations. Two passages to be noted, among others, are: Acts 10:34–43 and 1 Cor. 15:1–6. These passages contain condensed versions of the Gospels. They communicate briefly the work of God in Jesus Christ in reconciling humans to himself. Summaries of the gospel from passages such as these have provided the substance of the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds.⁵ Moreover, throughout church history, Christians have developed ways to communicate the gospel or some aspect of it, by using diagrams, illustrations, and tracts that accompany short-view gospel presentations.



Figure 1: *Ichthus*, an early symbol of Jesus as Christ, Son of God, Savior.

The *ichthus* from the Greek ἰχθύς, meaning “fish,” was adopted as a symbol by early Christians (see Figure 1). It was a sacred symbol in the catacombs, becoming popular by the late second century and spreading widely in the third and fourth centuries.⁶ The letters of the Greek word ἰχθύς (IXΘΥΣ or IXΘΥC) form an acrostic in which the initial letters mean “Jesus Messiah (Christ), God’s Son, Savior.”⁷

Jesus said to his disciples: “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people” (Matt. 4:19 NIV). Moreover, he told the kingdom parable of drawing in the fishing net, keeping the good fish and throwing away the bad, speaking in reference to judgment at the end of the age (Matt. 13:47–9). The church father Tertullian (160–220) said: “The heavenly *Ichthus*, then, was Jesus Christ, and we are the smaller fishes, born in the waters of baptism, caught in the net of salvation, and thus made members of the heavenly kingdom.”⁸ Clearly, the symbol of the *ichthus* became a means to identify with Jesus Christ and to explain his identity to others as “Jesus Messiah (Christ), God’s Son, Savior” during a period of church history when converts to the faith increased in number exponentially.⁹



Figure 2: *Biblia Pauperum* of Jesus' crucifixion, with Old Testament types of Isaac's offering and serpent lifted up on pole.

Another example of a short-view gospel presentation is the “Paupers’ Bible,” from the Latin *Biblia pauperum* (see Figure 2).¹⁰ This was a tradition that began most likely with Ansgar, the apostle to the North (801–65).¹¹ The biblical illustrations told a story with only a brief text or no text at all. *Biblia pauperum* were commonly made in block-book form, mainly in the Netherlands and Germany where both text and images were done entirely in a single woodcut for each page.

Each group of images in *Biblia pauperum* is dedicated to one event from the Gospels which is accompanied by two slightly smaller pictures of Old Testament events which prefigure the central one. For example, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is associated with Abraham’s call to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22) and Moses lifting up the serpent on a pole in the wilderness (Num. 21:4–9). The images of these events were used as teaching aids, especially for the illiterate, which was the case of most people at the time.¹² In these images, the gospel is framed within God’s redemptive story and historically had an evangelistic impact upon those who saw and heard the stories.¹³

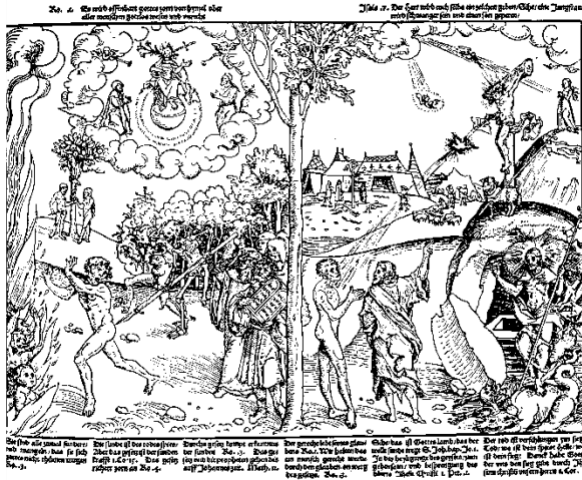


Figure 3: “Law and Gospel” by Lucas Cranach the Elder,

After Martin Luther (1483–1546) translated the Bible into German, his version of the Scriptures was mass produced using Gutenberg’s movable-type printing press, a technological advancement over block-type books. Luther included in his Bible a number of woodcut illustrations by Lucas Cranach the Elder (ca. 1472–1553). One famous illustration is titled “The Law and the Gospel,” originally painted by Cranach in 1529. This illustration explains Luther’s ideas in visual form, particularly his teaching that salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁴

In this illustration (see Figure 3) two nude, identical male figures appear on different sides of a tree that is barren and dying on the “Law” side on the left, and green and living on the “Gospel” side on the right. On the “Law” side, Adam and Eve are eating the forbidden fruit with the serpent wrapped around the tree. Death and the devil pursue the male figure who is condemned by the Law because of law-breaking. On the “Gospel” side, one of the four Evangelists is pointing to Jesus Christ on the cross who crushes the serpent’s head. Moreover, Jesus has risen from the grave and ascending to heaven. This illustration with an explanation is a short-view presentation of the gospel. While the Law condemns and brings death, the Gospel promises forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ who triumphs over death and the devil. In this illustration and its explanation, the gospel is framed within God’s redemptive story.

The distribution of gospel tracts began in earnest by the London-based Religious Tract Society founded in 1799. This publisher of Christian literature was dedicated to evangelism of men, women, and children, particularly among the poor and immigrants. One convert was Hudson Taylor (1832–1905), the missionary to China and founder of the China Inland Mission who made use of gospel tracts in cross-cultural missions. In the United States, the New England Religious

Tract Society was organized in 1814, and in 1823 its name was changed to the American Tract Society. This society distributed thousands of tracts in various languages to newly arriving immigrants at Castle Garden and Ellis Island in New York City.¹⁵ An example of a tract from 1814 is titled “The Warning Voice” which 1) sounds a warning to the reader who is living in sin, 2) while remaining a stranger of God and Christ, 3) making the great God one’s enemy, 4) and in a little while death and judgment will come, while 5) the Gospel of Jesus Christ points out a way to escape.¹⁶

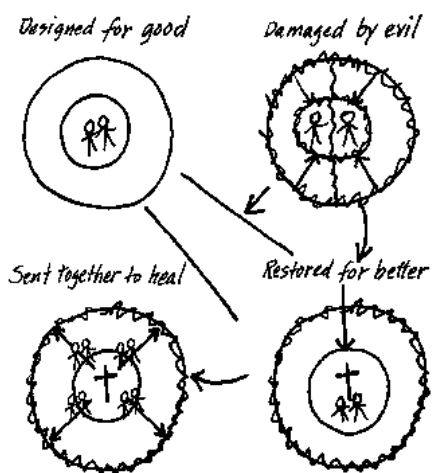


Figure 4: “The Big Story” by James Choung

Gospel tract distribution continued into the twentieth century. One of the most widely distributed tracts is “The Four Spiritual Laws” written by Bill Bright, first published in 1965. This short-view gospel presentation as well as Billy Graham’s “Steps to Peace with God,” The Roman Road, and Dawson Trotman’s “Bridge of Life” have defined evangelism and the gospel for many Christians around the world until today. While short-view approaches to evangelism present the gospel or some aspect of it, all do not have the same effects, especially given particular human contexts.

Overview of the CERP Survey

The CERP Survey 2015–17 compared two short-view gospel presentations, Choung’s “The Big Story” (see Figure 4) and the Roman Road with Bridge Illustration (see Figure 5). “The Big Story” is a gospel presentation designed by James Choung to lead nonbelievers to make a decision for Jesus Christ and join his mission to heal the world.¹⁷ Built on the premise that “most people ache for a better world,” this tool presents the gospel using the following four points shown visually:

World 1: The world and all that is in it was designed for good; World 2: The world and all humans were damaged by evil; World 3: Jesus came to restore the world and everything in it to what God intended; and World 4: Jesus invites us to join him and his community to heal the world.¹⁸

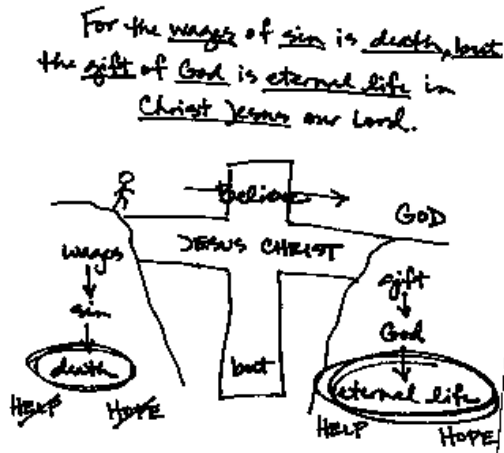


Figure 5: Romans 6:23 from "One-verse Evangelism" by Randy D. Raysbrook.

The Roman Road with Bridge Illustration combines the traditional Roman Road explanation of the plan of salvation from Romans 1:16, 3:23, 5:8, 6:23, and 10:9–10 and Randy D. Raysbrook’s adaption of the Bridge Illustration for Romans 6:23. This method uses these select verses which are read from a Bible, asking the non-believing listener to paraphrase each verses in his or her own words. It is a simple method of introducing salvation, explaining why one needs salvation, how God provided salvation, and how one receives salvation. Raysbrook’s illustration is sketched on a piece of paper or napkin to provide a visual explanation of Romans 6:23.¹⁹

The following CERP Survey (2015–17) was designed by David M. Gustafson and Robert J. Priest.

CERP SURVEY

This survey measures participant response to two brief descriptions of the Bible's core message (the gospel) in order to understand people's understandings of Christian faith, and how this message is communicated most clearly. Thank you for your participation.

Participant Demographic Information

1. Birth year: 1927-1945
 1946-1964
 1965-1983
 1984-2002
 2003-
2. Residence (select one):
 Urban Metropolis (over 1,000,000)
 Urban City (over 100,000)
 Suburban, near metropolis (over 10,000)
 City (over 10,000)
 Town (over 1,000)
 Rural (under 1,000)
3. Ethnicity origin:
 White
 Hispanic or Latino
 Black or African American
 Native American or American Indian
 Asian / Pacific Islander
 Other
4. Highest degree or level of school completed:
 Eighth grade, or some high school
 High school graduate or GED
 Trade/technical/vocational training/ Associate degree
 Bachelor's degree
 Above bachelor's degree
5. Religious preference or worldview:
 None (no religious faith, agnostic, atheist)
 Protestant Christian
 Roman Catholic
 Orthodox Christian, such as Greek or Russian
 Mormon
 Muslim
 Jewish
 Buddhist
 Something else (please specify) _____

Participant Response

This survey measures participant response to: 1) GOD’S BIG STORY IN FOUR CIRCLES, and 2) ROMAN ROAD AND BRIDGE.

6. As you heard each description, which was most clear to understand?

- GOD’S BIG STORY IN FOUR CIRCLES
- ROMAN ROAD AND BRIDGE

7. Which description of the Bible’s core message (the gospel) most addressed a “looming question” you had in your mind?

- GOD’S BIG STORY IN FOUR CIRCLES
- ROMAN ROAD AND BRIDGE

8. Which description raised more questions for you about the Christian faith?

- GOD’S BIG STORY IN FOUR CIRCLES
- ROMAN ROAD AND BRIDGE

9. Which description did you find yourself most identifying with personally? In other words, in which description did you at some point most see yourself, possibly along with other human beings?

- GOD’S BIG STORY IN FOUR CIRCLES
- ROMAN ROAD AND BRIDGE

10. If you were asked to summarize the Bible’s core message (the gospel) using one of these two descriptions, which would you choose?

- GOD’S BIG STORY IN FOUR CIRCLES
- ROMAN ROAD AND BRIDGE

11. Which description of the Bible’s core message most challenged your previous ideas or assumptions about the Christian faith?

- GOD’S BIG STORY IN FOUR CIRCLES
- ROMAN ROAD AND BRIDGE

Thank you for your participation!

Return survey to David M. Gustafson PhD, Intercultural Studies, Trinity International University, 2065 Half Day Road, Deerfield, Illinois 60015

CERP Survey and Results

Methodology:

The Chicagoland Evangelism Research Project (CERP) used a mixed mode of inquiry combining a quantitative survey with semi-structured interviews to understand and analyze clarity, perception, and effectiveness. The reason for using a mixed mode of inquiry to collect data was due to two reasons. First, a short survey could obtain information in a timely manner whereas the participants would not be burdened by an excessive use of time. Second, the optional discussion on why they answered the survey questions a certain way could create an avenue to acquire data that would further explain the quantitative results.

The unit of analysis in this study was consistently kept to professing non-Christians or individuals that professed to having no religious affiliation. Professing non-Christians included individuals who may have had some form of Protestant Christian or Roman Catholic encounter but considered themselves non-Christian. The variables of the study were operationalized by demographic data and participant's open responses. Student-evangelists were either verbally asked for responses to the survey or had participants fill them out in their presence. Follow-up questions to the survey were asked but not all participants were willing to discuss the reasons why one gospel presentation was preferred over the other.²⁰

Data Results:

This study is based on a convenience sample of seventy-five surveys. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the participants were between the ages of 16 and 34 years while the difference in ethnicities consisted of 53% White, 22% Asian / Pacific Islander, and all others as below 1%.²¹ The areas of primary residence were somewhat equally divided between suburban, near a metropolis, or urban city. Half of the participants were currently in or had completed a bachelor's degree program while 36% of individuals were high school graduates or had a GED. Forty percent (40%) of participants claimed to have no religious faith, agnostic, atheist or were "something else."

Many millennials were drawn towards the perception of inclusiveness and clarity of Choung's "The Big Story" (TBS). The illustration of the four circles and the narrative format of God's Big Story kept many participants engaged. In addition to this, many found that TBS was more engaging and applicable to their current situation and environment because of its illustration and ideas that were open to personal interpretation. Another reason why many millennials were drawn towards

TBS was because of its inclusivity of all people and the possibility of “healing the world” language. Individuals favored a message of cooperation that included all people; they preferred collective rather than simply personal responsibility. Several expressed criticism of TBS stating that it assumed the “world was actually bad” and its troubles needed a savior like “Santa Claus.” Others observed that reality was oversimplified to give an unrealistic impression, portraying a “mythical story that nobody can confirm.” Though the TBS presentation was popular in its perception of humanity’s current situation and solution, the clarity and effectiveness after the presentation was often misguided by the participant’s own decision on how they chose to understand the gospel.

The Roman’s Road with Bridge (RRB) illustration focused on an individual’s state of hopelessness but through a decision in Christ, hope is restored. The personal dimension of this short presentation appealed to some but to others it was “disturbing, awkward, puzzling and overly religious.” Participants with prior encounters with “holy books” did engage with the scripture presentation. They viewed the RRB as “straightforward/ closer to reality” and a more “comfortable way of thinking about spiritual things.” Individuals with no prior encounter with the Scriptures observed that it was “overcomplicated and difficult to understand.” The “religious jargon” did not appeal to many while several questioned the idea of sin. Several participants stated that RRB seemed to assume that everyone suffers from the same sin and guilt but participants voiced objections to this “offensive and inaccurate” notion. The presence of the Scriptures from the book of Romans caused several participants to react negatively due to its difficulty, and sense of personal condemnation. It appeared as a foreign medium that was used to “jump to a personal decision too soon.” The use of the Scriptures seemed to alienate many participants, distancing themselves from identifying as one in need of God.

Limitations.

There were three main limitations identified in this study. First, the shortness of the survey and following discussion questions limited the amount of data and exploratory information. This limitation in “rich data” restricted the researchers to analyze clarity, perception and effectiveness in a linear manner. Although open-ended questions were asked afterwards, because it was not directly incorporated into the survey, participants either did not respond or chose not to respond.²²

A second limitation to this study may be the convenience sampling of individuals. Student-evangelists had the freedom to present the two short view presentations with anyone. Our

demographic data reveals that over half of the participants were ethnically white, while less than one percent of the participants were Hispanic/Latino or Black/African American. Responses to the survey may have been different if guidelines had emphasized asking participants that represented different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Finally, the study understands that there are student-evangelist biases in the presentation of the gospel message. Since each student was not reading from a script but presenting from a personal understanding of each illustration, the contextualization of the message would affect clarity, perception, and effectiveness. In addition to this, the personal enthusiasm for one presentation over the other could affect the outcome.

Considerations for Future Research

In light of CERP 2015–17, the next round of research will include rotating one of the short-view presentations of the gospel from Roman Road with Bridge Illustration to David M. Gustafson’s “God’s Human Drama.”²³ Thus, beginning in the fall of 2017, CERP will compare Choung’s “The Big Story” and Gustafson’s “God’s Human Drama.”

Moreover, upon recommendations from scholars who attended the research track of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education, at Wheaton College, on June 17, 2017, the next round of CERP will limit the number of gospel presentations to *one* for *each* non-Christian participant, rather than two. This requires parallel surveys for Choung’s “The Big Story” and Gustafson’s “God’s Human Drama.” Parallel CERP Surveys will utilize the Likert scale to measure participant responses rather than comparative questions as utilized in the CERP Survey 2015–17. In addition, related questions will be added to gain reasons for participant responses. (See the survey at the end of the article.)

The research protocol will require that each student-evangelist present “The Big Story” to a non-Christian participant and present “God’s Human Drama” to another non-Christian participant. Respectively, completed CERP Surveys will be gathered and responses collated for each gospel presentation, and then the two methods will be compared.

CERP SURVEY
Gustafson's God's Human Drama

This survey measures participant response to a brief description of the Bible's core message (the gospel) in order to understand people's understandings of Christian faith, and how this message is communicated clearly. Thank you for your participation.

Participant Demographic Information

1. Birth year: 1927-1945
 1946-1964
 1965-1983
 1984-2002
 2003-
2. Residence (select one):
 Urban Metropolis (over 1,000,000)
 Urban City (over 100,000)
 Suburban, near metropolis (over 10,000)
 City (over 10,000)
 Town (over 1,000)
 Rural (under 1,000)
3. Ethnicity origin:
 White
 Hispanic or Latino
 Black or African American
 Native American or American Indian
 Asian / Pacific Islander
 Other
4. Highest degree or level of school completed:
 Eighth grade, or some high school
 High school graduate or GED
 Trade/technical/vocational training/ Associate degree
 Bachelor's degree
 Above bachelor's degree
5. Religious preference or worldview:
 None (no religious faith, agnostic, atheist)
 Protestant Christian
 Roman Catholic
 Orthodox Christian, such as Greek or Russian
 Mormon
 Muslim
 Jewish
 Buddhist
 Something else (please specify) _____

¹ Students are instructed to ask: “Would you be willing to give your opinion on two brief explanations of the Bible’s basic message as part of a research project that seeks to determine which is clearer to listeners?”

² Some have described such methods as “cookie cutter models.” Mark R. Teasdale, *Evangelism for Non-Evangelists: Sharing the Gospel Authentically* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 11.

³ An inductive study of the Gospel of Mark for sixteen weeks and the Alpha Course for ten weeks are examples of long-view approaches to evangelism.

⁴ Gary Tyra, *A Missional Orthodoxy: Theology and Ministry in a Post-Christian Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 73.

⁵ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 63-70.

⁶ Iota (I) is the first letter of Iēsous (Ἰησοῦς), Greek for “Jesus.” The second letter chi (X) is the first letter of Christos (Χριστός), meaning “anointed” or “messiah.” Theta (Θ) is the first letter of Theou (Θεοῦ), meaning “of God,” the genitive case of Theos (Θεός) meaning “God.” Upsilon (Y) is the first letter of Yios (Υἱός), meaning “Son.” Sigma (Σ) is the first letter of Sōtēr (Σωτήρ), meaning “Savior.” The symbol of the ichthus or fish meant “Jesus Messiah, God’s Son, Savior.” Rasmus, T. (2011). “Revisiting the Ichthys: A Suggestion Concerning the Origins of Christological Fish Symbolism,” in *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices*, Christian H. Bull, Liv Ingeborg Lied, John D. Turner, editors (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 327–348.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁸ Tertullian, trans. by C. Dodgson, Vol. 1, *Apologetic and Practical Treatises* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1842), 355-6. Cf. Jeff Kinley, *Uncovering the Mysteries of God* (2011), 130.

⁹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: HarperOne, 1997).

¹⁰ Henrik Cornell, *Biblia Pauperum* (Uppsala: Henrik Cornell, 1925).

¹¹ Henry Noel Humphreys, *A History of the Art of Printing, from Its Invention to Its Wide-spread Development in the Middle of the Sixteenth Century* (London: B. Quaritch, 1868), 38.

¹² Ankete Heesen, “Within the Tradition of the Biblical Image,” *The World in a Box. The Story of an Eighteenth-Century Picture Encyclopedia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 65.

¹³ William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37.

¹⁴ Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Fortress Press, 1986), 89, 118.

¹⁵ “The Gospel in 30 Tongues,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 1907.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1907/02/24/archives/the-gospel-in-30-tongues-american-tract-society-disseminated-much.html> (accessed April 6, 2018).

¹⁶ “The Warning Voice,” *Tracts Published by the New England Tract Society*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (Andover: Flagg and Gould, 1814), 1. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hxjntg;view=1up;seq=9> (accessed Dec. 24, 2017).

¹⁷ Andy Crouch, “From Four Laws to Four Circles,” *Christianity Today*, June 27, 2008.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/july/11.31.html> (accessed Dec. 26, 2017).

¹⁸ James Choung, *True Story* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Randy D. Raysbrook, “One-Verse Evangelism,” 2000. See: <https://www.navigators.org/resource/one-verse-evangelism/> (accessed Dec. 26, 2017).

²⁰ Follow-up questions were: Q 7. If you don’t mind sharing... what is the looming question and how was it answered in some way? Q 8. Why? What aspect of it raised more questions? Q 9. Why? Q 10. Could you summarize it for me briefly? Q.11 What were some of these previous ideas or assumptions?

²¹ In addition to the co-author Samuel C. Kang, Hyo Seok Lim assisted in the data analysis.

²² See endnote 20.

²³ For “God’s Human Drama,” see: <http://davidmgustafson.blogspot.com/2017/10/gods-human-drama.html> (accessed Dec. 26, 2017).