

# An Emerging OC Research Experiment about Summarizing the Gospel in Various Contexts

Stan Nussbaum, LIRC8 Presentation, v. 1.1 updated 19/4/18

## GOAL OF THE PRESENTATION

The presentation will describe the design of an upcoming experiment by the Global Research Team of One Challenge (OC) so that during discussion time, workshop participants will be able to:

- 1) give input about this experimental design that OC will use
- 2) share their thoughts about doing a somewhat parallel experiment in their own setting, adjusting the design as they prefer.

The desired impact of the paper and the discussion is more effective gospel communication in multiple and diverse contexts.

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## MAIN ASSUMPTION AND AGENDA

Many agencies and churches have broadened their understanding of mission from conversion to transformation. This is reflected in the Lausanne Movement's "Foundational statement" where one of the four parts of the Lausanne vision is "Kingdom impact in every sphere of society."<sup>1</sup> However, this broader understanding is not yet very widely reflected in the way most evangelicals summarize and present the gospel.

Our gospel summaries need to catch up with our understanding of mission. We need some *fresh summaries of the gospel* that will penetrate deeper, connect better, and lead more naturally to the transformation process that will affect "every sphere of society."

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

**Primary:** Find out whether the "Rescuer" stories are well received enough to deserve further local development and promotion as a foundation for Christian transformation at all levels.

**Secondary:** Find out what happens when OC's Global Research Team (GRT) attempts an experimental project. Develop GRT skills in this area in order to better serve many OC partners who are "experimenting" on their own all the time

## WHAT ARE THE "RESCUER" STORIES THAT ARE BEING TESTED?

These stories are seven overlapping versions of the biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation, each with the gospel woven into it in a different way. See one sample version at: <https://www.syncx.org/1-story-the-rescuer-3>.

All seven versions of the Rescuer story have the same general aim and approach as many other panoramic narrative explanations of the Bible and the gospel from a variety of sources such as:

- Firm Foundations, "Creation to Christ," <http://www.fbcva.org/filerequest/7850.pdf>
- God's Story Project, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGfyz97uEw>
- Rock International, "The King of Glory," <http://rockintl.org/index.php/rock-resources>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.lausanne.org/?sfid=27242&\\_sfm\\_wpcf-groupings=Foundational%20Statements](https://www.lausanne.org/?sfid=27242&_sfm_wpcf-groupings=Foundational%20Statements), seen on 16 April 2018

- Answers in Genesis, “The Seven C’s,” <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-history/seven-cs-of-history/>
- Spread Truth, <https://thestoryfilm.com/read>
- The American Vision, <https://americanvision.org/what-is-the-gospel/>
- The Gospel Project, <https://www.gospelproject.com/2015/03/30/a-5-minute-video-on-the-big-story-of-the-bible-for-kids/>

The stories in this list focus mostly on the question, “*How does Jesus take care of your sin problem?*” My belief is that when the gospel is presented with this focus, there is very little foundation or incentive for later transformation that goes deep into the person and widely across the society. It is like building the first floor of a building without leaving any steel rebar sticking up to attach the second floor later. It is almost as though no one intends that the second floor be built. Of course, it is still possible to add a second floor, but it is a lot harder than it needs to be.

The “Rescuer” stories try to leave some rebar sticking out of the gospel summary so that transformation can be built on easily later. They do this by focusing on the larger, more transformative question, “*How does Jesus draw you into his mission of bringing in a new era in the story of the world, an era in which he rules?*”<sup>2</sup>

This shift in focus makes our sin problem look more serious, not less. In these Rescuer stories, sin is to ignore or resist the new era that Christ died to bring in. Salvation is to embrace the new era whole-heartedly, walking through the door Christ opened for us. Salvation and transformation are intertwined. If we are not involved in the new era under Christ’s rule, our sin problem has not been dealt with yet.

#### WHY ARE THE “RESCUER” STORIES BEING TESTED?

The intention of experiment with these seven is not to come up with one “perfect” way to summarize the Bible and the gospel. On the contrary, it is to illustrate the richness of God’s message when viewed from different angles. These stories are intended as inspirations and templates for local writers and editors, who all have full permission to edit them freely and produce the “best,” most transformative version for their context as the Spirit leads them.

All seven of the test versions are recent writings by Stan Nussbaum as part of his development of [www.syncx.org](http://www.syncx.org). They are not used officially by any organization, and he has no plan to declare any version “finished” or “official”.

As local writers and editors create their own variations, they will produce exactly what Tom Steffen said we should be looking for as the next step in global efforts at evangelism and discipleship—“new observations in narrative theology”:

I’ve noticed that while Christian workers may be well-versed in systematic theology, fewer are familiar with biblical theology, and even fewer with narrative theology. Since the Bible is a Sacred Storybook, a Sacred Drama, with narrative as the predominant genre of choice by the Holy Spirit

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<sup>2</sup> Of the gospel summaries in the bulleted list above, the Gospel Project goes the furthest in the direction the Rescuer is trying to go. The others tend to go straight from the cross and resurrection to the return of Christ in glory, skipping lightly over the Holy Spirit, the Church, and its mission. In other words, they put little emphasis on three key biblical connections between the gospel and transformation in the present.

(approximately 55% of scripture), I fully expect new observations in narrative theology to impact the orality movement in the next decade.”<sup>3</sup>

The “new observations in narrative theology” will stand out most when local writers are distilling the whole Bible and the whole gospel into their own short metanarratives.<sup>4</sup> The versions of the Rescuer story give them templates for designing those metanarratives. Steffen uses the analogy of a clothesline to explain metanarrative.

To illustrate, if each [Bible story] lesson heard by an audience represented a piece of clothing, how would the listeners be expected to hold all the clothes without dropping them? We might suggest a linear or circular clothesline to remedy the situation. Metaphorically, this illustrates the need for a metanarrative of the Sacred Storybook.<sup>5</sup>

While doing this pilot experiment with the Rescuer stories, we are also gathering data on evaluative studies of the effectiveness of other metanarratives. That data will help us and/or others design follow-up research to evaluate the actual impact of experiments with the Rescuer stories in various contexts.<sup>6</sup>

#### CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION

We are only looking at how effective the focus group participants *think* the stories will be or could be if used in their contexts. We will therefore focus on this question:

Which of the two or three experimental versions of the “Rescuer” story discussed in the focus group do the participants believe will lay the best foundation for the transformation of their society, and why is that version the best?

NB: We are *not* attempting to tackle directly the question, “How effective are the ‘Rescuer’ stories as a form of gospel communication?” At a later stage, the actual effectiveness in the field could be measured, but that would be a different experiment than this narrower, introductory one.

#### RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCESS

**Technical type of research.** This experiment does *not* involve a control group or a random sample. Thus it falls into the category that is technically known as “*quasi-experimental research*.”<sup>7</sup> In spite of the derogatory label, this method is very common in the social sciences because so many parts of life and society have too many variables to construct experiments about all of them, using control groups in each case. Think of this experiment as a set of roughly parallel case studies.

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Steffen, “Orality Comes of Age: The Maturation of a Movement.”

[http://ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/31\\_3\\_PDFs/IJFM\\_31\\_3-Steffen.pdf](http://ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/31_3_PDFs/IJFM_31_3-Steffen.pdf) Seen on 31 March 2018

<sup>4</sup> Some who love systematic theology fear that narrative theology waters down the gospel. See <https://www.gotquestions.org/narrative-theology.html>, para. 4 and 5 explaining why this does not happen when narrative theology is done properly. For my part, I believe that narrative theology is more likely to beef up the gospel with biblical substance. It is some forms of systematic theology that have been watering down the message, producing converts who are not disciples and are not transforming anything.

<sup>5</sup> Steffen, “Orality Comes of Age,” see note 3.

<sup>6</sup> We are still looking for an evaluative research project on one or more of the other Bible panorama approaches to use as a model for an evaluative study of the Rescuer stories. There is much anecdotal evidence that those various approaches work better than older approaches to evangelism, but not much careful, objective research about them that we have found so far. Chuck Madinger, head of the research track in the International Orality Movement, indicates there is need for more of this type of study. (Personal communication of 9 April 2018).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/quasiexp.php>. Seen on 29 March 2018

**Self-selecting participants/locations.** OC's Global Research Team (GRT) will put out an invitation throughout the organization to leaders at regional, national, and team levels. GRT members will also make individual contacts to encourage participation, making sure we get at least 4-6 locations for the experiment and that they are somewhat spread out geographically and culturally. We will not attempt to get a precise regional balance.

**Focus group organizers** who respond to the invitation will receive a set of instructions (see Appendix 2) about preparing for their meeting, recruiting members, running the meeting, and reporting the results. Where feasible, OC will provide leadership for the focus group session by Skype to reduce the work load of the local organizer and to allow observation of more than one group by a single GRT member.

**Composition of each focus group.** Local organizers will each decide the composition of their own groups, and these may vary widely. Acceptable range of size is 4-12 participants, including the organizer. A group may be totally local, totally expat, or any ratio of the two that the organizer sees as most useful for his/her objectives in the experiment. Participants will be either OC members or local or expat leaders who are OC partners/friends. The ratio of OC members to OC partners is chosen by the group organizer and may depend on how people respond to the invitation.

## EVALUATION

Four things to measure about focus group participants:

1. How hard was it to get invitees to agree to come to the meeting?
2. How engaged were the participants during the meeting?
3. What do they say about it at the end?
4. What do they do about it afterward, individually or together?

The first two will be measured via a questionnaire to the group organizers (Appendix 4). The last two will be measured by one questionnaire to the participants at the end of the focus group (Appendix 5) and a follow-up questionnaire 2-3 weeks later (Appendix 6).

We also will note which versions of the Rescuer story are used by the most groups and in which contexts. That information will be inconclusive but may lead to further experiments of many kinds.

## VALUE AND USAGE OF FINDINGS

The main value of the experiment will be in what it sparks in each local context. What, if anything, will local groups do with the Rescuer stories once they know they exist?

The GRT will also make some general tentative observations. These will provide food for thought and further experimental action by people who believe their situation is similar to one or more of the situations tested.

## UPDATES ON THIS EXPERIMENT'S DESIGN AFTER MARCH 31<sup>ST</sup>

This experimental method is being actively discussed in various contexts during the month between submission of this draft and the presentation at LIRC8. Updates will be given orally.

## APPENDICES

1. Invitation to participate as a focus group organizer (still in preparation as of 19/4)
2. Instructions to organizers of focus groups
3. Invitation to participate in a local focus group (still in preparation as of 19/4)
4. Evaluation form A: Organizer's comments on group nature and participation
5. Evaluation form B: written survey of participants at end of focus group
6. Evaluation form C: follow-up survey of same participants 2-3 weeks later
7. Alternative option for focus groups – edit one Rescuer Story for local use

(Appendices 1 and 3 still in preparation)

## Appendix 2:

### Guidelines for organizers of focus groups

- Look over the seven Rescuer stories enough to get the idea of what they are and how they might work in your setting. If you do not see potential in any of them, do not proceed.
- Prayerfully decide which two or three versions of the Rescuer story to use in your focus group. If you use two, your group will spend 30 minutes on each. If you use three, it will spend 20 minutes. You may choose the versions yourself or get input from one or more others, but do not over-complicate the process
- Set an appropriate date and venue for your meeting
- Carefully select and recruit the group of people you believe will collaborate best in the meeting and produce the most fruit for Church and its mission where you are. Probably 6-8 participants, but use your own judgment
- Arrange with OC's Global Research Team to provide a moderator for your focus group session. The moderator will probably "attend" the session by Skype, if you believe the group can work well that way. If not, plan to moderate the focus group yourself, and arrange for an extra person to come to take notes to pass on to the GRT (that person is not one of the participants)
- Remind the participants as the day approaches. If possible, make last-minute replacements for any who have to withdraw
- Prepare printed copies of each version of the Rescuer story that you will discuss. These should be in the same language used during the focus group discussion
- Prepare for the short survey of participants at the end of the meeting by having either paper copies or a reliable way for all to do the survey on-line at the same time
- Convene the meeting. Moderate or hand over moderation to the OC designated person. The schedule is approximately as follows:
  - First 15 minutes - arrival, prayer, explain the focus group task
  - Next 60 minutes – reading and discussion of two or three versions of the Rescuer (Allow 5 minutes to read each version aloud before discussion.
  - Last 15 minutes – survey, invite closing comments from participants, prayer
- Engage in the discussion as a peer with all the other participants, or as close to that as appropriate. If you are moderating, guard the time so that the discussion is not too rushed during the second or third version you discuss, since rushing will distort your group's conclusions.
- Fill out the organizer's survey form, which is Appendix 4, Evaluation Form A (different than the participant's survey, Form B)
- Take any follow-up action the Lord prompts you to take

## Appendix 4:

### Evaluation form A: Organizer's comments on group nature and participation

1. What was the date of your focus group meeting?
2. What language(s) did the meeting take place in?
3. How many people besides you attended?
4. How many of those were expats?
5. How many were OC staff?
6. How many were women? \_\_\_\_\_ How many were men? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Which of these best describes the attendees at your meeting
  - a. A group that meets regularly for other purposes, such as a field team, an inter-church association, or a board
  - b. A combination of some who are in a regular meeting together plus others who were invited to join for this one occasion
  - c. A one-time meeting of a group that rarely if ever was together before
  - d. Other \_\_\_\_\_
8. On a scale of 5 with 5 being the hardest, how hard was it to get people to agree to come to the meeting? Circle your answer.  
Easiest 1    2    3    4    5    Hardest  
Optional: comment on any factor(s) that made this easy or difficult  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. How many versions of the Rescuer were discussed at your meeting?  
2    3    Other (how many?) \_\_\_\_\_
10. Who chose the 2 or 3 versions of the Rescuer story your group discussed:
  - a. You decided by yourself
  - b. You accepted the suggestion of one other person senior to you
  - c. You and one other person decided together
  - d. You and several others decided together
  - e. Other \_\_\_\_\_
11. Do you give OC's Global Research Team permission to contact you to discuss on Skype how you/others decided which versions to use? If no, leave this blank. If yes, give your Skype name if you know it. Otherwise give your e-mail.  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. On a scale of 5 with 5 being the liveliest, how lively was the discussion during your meeting?  
Very slow 1    2    3    4    5    Very lively  
Optional: comment on any factor(s) that affected this \_\_\_\_\_
13. What was the best thing about the group meeting? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Where could the meeting have gone better? What might you do differently if you could do it over? \_\_\_\_\_
15. Optional: Anything else you want to call to the attention of the Global Research Team? \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your service to the Lord, to your people, and to OC in this experiment. May the Lord reward you as you keep on discovering how wide, long, high, and deep Christ's love is.

# Appendix 5:

## Evaluation form B: Participants' reflections at the end of the focus group

- Rate each of the versions of "The Rescuer" that you discussed on a scale of 0 to 4, where 0 is worst (with the least power for transformation) and 4 is best (most transforming) for your context:

Circle your rating (skip those you did not discuss)					Number and title of story
Worst	OK		Best		
0	1	2	3	4	1. A Matter of Life or Death
0	1	2	3	4	2. Uprooted
0	1	2	3	4	3. The Freedom King
0	1	2	3	4	4. The Mother of All Power Struggles
0	1	2	3	4	5. Unforgivable
0	1	2	3	4	6. Having What it Takes
0	1	2	3	4	7. Best Vision Ever

- Using the same scale (4 means very transforming), how would you rate the method you usually use to summarize and present the gospel: (circle your rating)      Worst 0 1 2 3 4 Best
- If you could only use one of the versions you discussed to share the gospel with unbelievers in your area, which of the above would you use:
  - Story number \_\_\_\_
  - The method we already use
  - I would edit one before I used it (If so, which story number? \_\_\_\_\_)
  - A combination (Which 2 or 3 would you combine? \_\_\_\_\_)
  - Not sure how to decide
- How easy or hard is it for you to picture a situation where your church or agency would use at least one of the versions of the Rescuer story that you discussed today?
  - Very easy. I can think of several good situations right now.
  - Easy. People will like the stories.
  - Not sure.
  - Hard. It would take a lot of preparation and promotion.
  - Very hard. Unrealistic to think this will ever happen here.
- How likely is it that you would have agreed to participate in this meeting if you had understood at that time what you understand now about its purpose?
  - Very likely yes
  - Likely yes
  - Not sure
  - Unlikely
  - Very unlikely
- If the organizer told you there will be another meeting like this next week for the friends of today's participants, what would you tell your close friends to try to persuade them to come (leave blank if you would not advise them to come): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Suppose that one of today's participants says to you, "The Rescuer story is good but we need to edit it to make our own version. Then we should try it out and then improve it some more. Will you help me work on this?" How would you reply?
  - Yes, I will help
  - Maybe. Let's discuss it.
  - No, I'm not able to get involved
- How likely is it that in the next week or two you will share one or more of the stories with your family, friends, or some other individual or group to see what they think of it?
  - Very likely
  - Likely
  - Not sure
  - Unlikely
  - Very unlikely
- If you share as in question 8, how will you share (circle one or two that are most likely)
  - Conversation
  - e-mail/text
  - class/group meeting
  - print
  - other \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you give permission to be contacted by e-mail in 2-3 weeks for a follow-up survey with three questions? If so, write your e-mail here: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your service to the Lord, to your people, and to OC in this experiment. May the Lord reward you as you keep on discovering how wide, long, high, and deep Christ's love is.

# Appendix 6:

## Evaluation form C: Participants' reflection a few weeks after the meeting

1. As you look back on the focus group meeting of a few weeks ago, which of these is closest to your thoughts:
  - a. It was never very clear to me what was supposed to come out of it
  - b. It was interesting but probably won't have any lasting fruit
  - c. Somebody should follow up but I don't have time to get involved
  - d. I need to get involved in follow-up because this is so important to my own work of evangelism and/or discipleship
  - e. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Which of these is closest to describing your discussions about the meeting afterward (circle all that apply):
  - a. No discussions I can recall
  - b. Mentioned it to one or two people briefly
  - c. Talked to several people about the general idea
  - d. Replied to another participant who talked to me about following up
  - e. Discussed with colleagues how to use the "Rescuer" story in our ministry setting
  - a. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Which of these is closest to describing your follow-up actions since the meeting:
  - a. No actions
  - b. Thought about how we might do adapt or use the story but no action yet
  - c. Forwarded the version we discussed to one or more others I thought might use it
  - d. Tried it out myself with my family, a friend, or a group
  - e. Started editing it for my own use (if so, which version did you edit?  
\_\_\_\_\_)
  - f. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. Optional: Anything else you want to call to the attention of the Global Research Team?

Thank you for your service to the Lord, to your people, and to OC in this experiment. May the Lord reward you as you keep on discovering how wide, long, high, and deep Christ's love is.

## Appendix 7:

### Alternative option for focus groups – edit one Rescuer story for local use

OC has considered whether to give local organizers a choice between two options for their focus group—either the one described above (discussing two or three versions of the Rescuer story) or the following alternative, editing one Rescuer story for local use.

This alternative might be used if a local organizer wanted to skip the step of discussing various versions of the story. Then the focus group could get straight to work on producing one version that will actually be used in their context.

We are not sure how realistic that shortcut is. If we propose it as an option, we may confuse people while they are trying to decide whether to become local organizers or not.

Therefore we are not planning to suggest it to local organizers. However, we could change our minds if the participants at LIRC8 think we should after reading our current thoughts below. This is what we think would happen if we gave local organizers this extra option:

<b>Extra work required</b>	<b>Problems the extra work creates</b>
The focus group organizer would need to decide ahead of time which of the seven versions the group would edit.	Whoever made the choice would have to get a clear idea of all seven versions of the story to imagine how the story would be used in their context. If the organizer did that on his/her own, the choice might be criticized. If the organizer involved others in the decision, it might take a long time to get a consensus.
The focus group would have to be small, perhaps only 3 or 4. They must be chosen with care.	Groups of 6 or 8 are not efficient when they try to edit a document together. It would be harder to get wide ownership and adoption of the edited version if it was seen as only a project of a tiny group.
There will have to be more than one meeting, and probably more than two.	Participants have to be willing to make and keep a commitment to a process, not just one meeting. Ideas will be shared in the first meeting. Someone will take them away to prepare a draft, and the group will come back together to review the draft. This can easily get bogged down. If some people miss the second meeting, the whole project is at risk.

Are we wise not to propose this alternative to local organizers or are we exaggerating the problems this would cause? Is this worth discussing or should we just drop it?