

Book Review

True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In

James Choung

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In a world where relativism and religious pluralism can overwhelm the average Christian, intimidating them into shrinking back from the call to share the gospel, James Choung raises a new challenge, inviting Christians and churches to change their approach to witnessing. He calls them to embrace the whole story of the gospel and sets out to open the eyes of believers who know the Christian message well yet feel it is somehow lacking in its relevance for the world.

Choung begins his expansion of the gospel message by introducing his reader to the main characters of his illustrative story: Caleb, Anna, and Shalandra. The short and oddly-named chapters, the youthful style of writing, and the choice of college students as main characters all suggests that Choung has targeted a younger demographic. He also tries to be true to his narrative scenarios without “Christianizing” every detail of the characters. For example, Anna often swears and uses language that may make some Christians uncomfortable, but the language helps lend authenticity to how her character would probably think and talk. The use of narrative in order to bring his point to life is a style that may be risky, as the Christian literature marketplace is well-stocked with trite stories about an individual’s battle to win over their lost friends through tired

evangelistic tactics and corny bumper-sticker phrases. Although Choung faces a challenge in overcoming the skeptical “heard-it-all” Christian who may be turned off by his literary approach, it is a challenge that he appears to delight in and one he meets head on. It does not take long before the reader realizes that Choung’s approach to his Christian protagonist, Caleb, is unique. Right away the reader is introduced to the fears, doubts, and reservations Caleb holds about his Christian faith and his struggle to explain the seemingly glaring flaws in his faith to others, let alone himself.

Through Caleb’s theological quandaries, Choung sheds light on the doubt that many Christians experience and yet are too ashamed to express. Choung notes that asking questions of one’s faith is indeed a positive thing and makes the analogy that questions are like a wrecking ball; they remove the old frame so a new one can be built on top of what already is a trustworthy foundation in Christ.¹ This analogy will certainly ring true for anyone who has had a crisis of faith (or who has undertaken a theology degree) and experienced that same

¹ James Choung, *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 61.

sort of spiritual “destruction and rebuilding” process.

While Choung’s presentation of the complete gospel message is laid out in a way meant to be easily shared with others, it seems that his greater accomplishment may be explaining the Christian faith in a way that sheds light into the dark corners of doubt for those already Christian. Through his story, Choung breaks down the gospel message into four pieces relating to creation, the fall, redemption through the cross, and the result of that redemption from sin. Although most Christians are well aware what they are saved *from*, he asks the crucial question of what Christians are really saved *for*—what is the relevance of salvation for the societal structures of the world?

This emphasis of finding the relevance of Christianity for society at large is one that certainly strikes a chord with the younger social justice-driven generation of today. Choung’s book seems to purposely cater to some of the concerns of that particular demographic. This intention becomes even more apparent as he notes how his college-age characters are involved in poverty relief in a majority world country and fighting AIDS for those in Africa. Choung appears eager to join the ongoing theological debate over the value of adding a social face to the gospel. He unashamedly proclaims that living the Christian life as God intended demands the restoration and healing of the surrounding world through physical as well as spiritual renewal.

According to Choung, this physical and spiritual renewal is accomplished as humanity submits to Christ and becomes more like Him; this new relationship, between Christ and the believer, brings with it an empowerment to change and heal the world around them. Choung’s book

challenges readers to leave the mindset that Christianity is a religion that is all about “you” and instead should be about what you can do for others and your surrounding community. His message is a perfect wake-up call for a younger generation tired of consumerism and the selfish American way of living. He shifts the spiritual focus from the individual to the community and the church’s exclusive emphasis on afterlife to the importance of missional life here on earth. Choung demonstrates that a kingdom-focused life is one that exudes love for God and for one’s neighbor and that this love in action causes a change in the world and people around us.

In addition to showing the importance of a community-minded and kingdom-focused gospel, Choung also makes the crucial point that a relevant gospel message must move away from emphasis on a one-time decision to seeing salvation as transformation. This viewpoint is one that clearly needs to be incorporated into the mindset of the modern church; it would impact how believers disciple individuals and the way people measure successful churches or outreaches. It could also change how denominations conduct short-term missions trips. Rather than primarily focusing on how many people made “decisions” for the Lord, they could develop a plan for discipleship subsequent to the mission team.

Throughout the book, Choung challenges the status quo of traditional evangelism, digging deeper to get to the full truth of the Christian message and expanding narrow worldviews. His quest to create an easily understood evangelistic strategy is a noble one, but the greatest strength of his book is in his arguments for the relevance of Christian faith in today’s society. His question of what Christians are saved *for* is an important one that every believer should

ask. His communally-focused mindset resonates with today's socially conscious younger generation. Choung demonstrates that for people willing to take part in Christ's Kingdom mindset, the restorative

and healing nature of that kingdom is truly a faith worth believing in and indeed "good news" for the world today.