

ASIAN CHURCHES:
EXAMINING THE LOVE QUOTIENT

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It is alleged that Karl Barth once answered a request to recall his most profound theological discovery by saying, "Jesus loves me, and this I know." Few would argue against the claim that the Bible is essentially the story of God's love. God not only loves: God is love. A number of word pictures in the scriptures illustrate this truth: God cares for his people like a farmer caring for sheep (Isa 5:1-7); he is a caring father who protects his children (Ps 103:13); he is a husband who continues to love his wife in spite of her brazen unfaithfulness (Hos 3:1). While Israel's loyalty to her covenant with God was often fickle, his love towards her could rightly be described as "eternal" (Jer 31:3).

Most Christians would also endorse the New Testament declaration that God's love was perfectly expressed in Jesus of Nazareth. The love of the Son was co-equal and co-existent with the love of the Father. Furthermore, the resurrected Christ summoned his supporters to follow His example of radical love. He told them to live by and in love, and then graciously empowered them with his Spirit to do so. Love was to be the distinguishing mark of every Christian community, even surpassing the importance of signs and wonders as evidence of God's presence and grace among his people.

Modern Christians still explore the wide implications of these timeless mandates and seek to implement them. Love has to be the heartbeat of our relationship with the three persons of the Godhead, and the catalyst that holds our churches together.

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In any congregation, love is the principle which protects unity and encourages growth. It binds believers together in a common purpose as they progress in their knowledge of Christ. The Christian body is built up, its work smoothly co-coordinated, as its members deepen their love for one another (1 Cor 8:1; Eph 4:16).¹

1. Agape: An Allusive Factor

One of the problems that our churches face is the difficulty of measuring their love quotient. Just how strong is the love between our members? How healthy is our church's love to its community? Does our congregation love in the New Testament sense or it is just exceptionally friendly? In short, how can we determine to what extent our churches are *loving*?

For many churches agape has been a mysterious, subjective, indefinable element in both the individual and corporate arenas. Often leaders interpret data such as numerical growth, encouraging weekend retreats, lack of church fights over finance, or trouble-free board meetings as evidence that agape love is strongly present. In reality, there has been no reliable way to take an objective measurement of the love quotient in our churches. Many church leaders have probably looked longingly at the prophet Amos' plumb line!

2. The German Dilemma

Before proceeding with the issue of the love quotient in Asian churches, we need to provide the backdrop to our later discussion. It relates to the Institute of Church Growth in Germany. By the late 1980s, its leaders had become frustrated over the lack of numerical growth among European churches. A number of these churches had adopted the best church growth philosophies and methodologies that were flowing out of the West, but did not experience comparable growth rates. This was disappointing and frustrating to the Institute as it had encouraged churches to follow the overseas models as closely as possible.

This dissatisfaction drove the leaders of the Institute of Church Growth back into their Bibles. What had gone wrong with the harvest in

¹ David H. Field, "Love," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, eds. David J. Atkinson and David H. Field (Leicester, England: IFV, 1995), pp. 9-15 (11).

Europe, home of the Reformation? Why could models of ministry and evangelism work in some cultures and not in others? What was God trying to tell Europeans about the growth of their churches?

The Institute reached two conclusions. First, there is a profound and fundamental difference between church growth models and church growth principles. God opened the researcher's eyes to the realization that principles are universals, but models are bound by culture and context. What the Institute needed was a method of identifying universally valid church growth principles which were not dependent on specific, local, or cultural elements.

The second conclusion related to the popular practice of churches setting numerical growth goals as a fundamental strategy for their growth. While the Institute recognized the motivating power of setting concrete goals, it became convinced that the thrust of the New Testament was to develop qualitative congregational health rather than focus on quantitative growth. Increased numbers in the Early Church seemed to be a natural by-product of congregational health.

3. The Research Project

These convictions propelled the Institute leaders to propose a scientifically reliable research project. The design team used approved methods from social science and insisted on rigorous standards for objectivity, reliability, and validity. To accumulate a sufficiently large database to make scientific assertions, the Institute conducted a survey of 1000 different churches in 32 countries from all six continents. The scope of churches included large and small, growing and declining, charismatic, Pentecostal, persecuted and state-subsidized, non-charismatic, prominent models and entirely unknown churches. The aim of the research? To answer the question, "What church growth principles are true, regardless of culture and theological persuasions."²

² Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (Emmelsbull, Germany: C & P Publishing, 1996), p. 19.

4. The Research Results

The results showed that there is a qualitative difference between growing and declining churches in eight areas of church life. (The following characteristics are not ranked in any order).

- ? Empowering leadership: leaders of growing churches allow members room to develop their ministries.
- ? Gift-oriented ministry: members in healthy churches are helped to identify their gifts and use them in appropriate ministries.
- ? Passionate spirituality: people in growing churches are enthusiastic about their faith and practice it with commitment and joy.
- ? Functional structures: growing churches are not constricted by outdated organizational structures. Nor do their leaders pursue the latest church fashions or trends.
- ? Inspiring worship services: church services are refreshing experiences. The congregation is aware, challenged and inspired by the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- ? Holistic small groups: they focus on the needs of people. They are places where members can bring up issues that are of immediate personal concern.
- ? Need-oriented evangelism: growing churches focus their evangelistic efforts on the needs of the non-churched. They do not assume that every member has the gift of evangelism.
- ? Loving relationships: healthy churches are known for their love and laughter. Practical Christian love among members generates a magnetic power that is far more effective than programs. A loving church is a caring, joyful, transparent company of God's people.

We should not be surprised at the presence of "loving relationships" as one of the fundamental characteristics of healthy church life. Growing churches possess on average a much higher "love quotient" than declining or plateaued churches. We shall return to this subject shortly.

The German Institute research also showed that there is no one single factor that leads to numerical growth in churches. Growth is interplay between all eight elements. Claims that the key to church growth is a singular activity such as "cell groups," "seeker services," or the building of a "prayer mountain," are simply not true. Such an exclusive focus accentuates one element at the expense of others. The director of the Institute, Christian A. Schwarz, puts it this way.³

³ Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, p. 39.

There is no one key to church growth. *The* key is found in the harmonious interplay of all eight elements. We should be wary of advice to follow someone's pet emphasis that excludes the other quality characteristics.

5. The Church Health Paradigm

In light of all the above conclusions, the German Institute of Church Growth was phased out and replaced by the Institute of Natural Church Development. The name of the organization communicates its theological paradigm. The Institute believes that we should not attempt to grow churches through institutional or technocratic means, but rather seek to release the biotic potential that God has put into every church. In other words, a local church already possesses divine growth automatisms within itself because it is a living body, not an organization.

This means that the role of church leadership is to identify those things in our churches that act as obstacles and hindrances to the release of God's growth automatisms. When we remove these blockages, we discover that church growth occurs "all by itself." After all, the nature of a church is to grow. When we concentrate on issues of qualitative church health, numerical growth will come naturally. This is precisely the point of many of Jesus' parables about the kingdom when he used analogies from nature such as soil, seeds, trees, fruit, farmers, sowing, and harvesting.

6. The Diagnostic Tools

We are most fortunate that the Institute of Natural Church Development (NCD) has continued to refine the church survey materials and make them available to the rest of the world. Indeed, NCD materials are now accessible in about 50 countries. More than 7000 churches from a broad range of denominations have completed at least one survey. The Institute provides a standardization factor in the computer program for each major geographical region to allow for contextual issues.⁴

⁴ The Institute of Natural Church Development has recently appointed two national representatives in Asia: Philip Sung (Assemblies of God, Malacca, Malaysia) and Loh Hung Chey (Singapore). Both are Assemblies of God ministers.

The values of each of the eight quality characteristics are normed to a median of 50. That is, the “average church” in a particular country has a quality index (score) of 50 for each of the eight quality characteristics.

At last, church leaders around the world have access to a reliable diagnostic tool to measure their health. Agape love no longer need be a nebulous, subjective dynamic in the life of a church. It can be objectively measured.

7. Asian Churches and Loving Relationships

Over the past two years, the writer has conducted 27 NCD surveys for English-speaking churches in Malaysia and Singapore. The denominations represented are: 10 Assemblies of God; 5 Independent Pentecostal; 2 Salvation Army; and 10 Charismatic mainline churches.

The average score for the eight quality characteristics for all the churches was 49. This is consistent with the intention of the NCD standardization to create a norm of 50 for an average church anywhere in the world. The 27 churches surveyed are therefore comparable in health with other churches worldwide. This is the positive aspect of the Asian surveys.

Of greater concern to us, however, is the finding that 17 of the 27 churches surveyed recorded their lowest scores in the quality characteristic of ‘Loving Relationships.’ The average score for “Loving Relationships” was 33. This is considerably less than the overall average score of 49.

Of particular interest to us are the main issues explored by the questions in the NCD surveys. These subjects are: 1) the degree to which people feel affirmed and encouraged; 2) the practice of intentional conflict resolution; 3) the development of authentic community; and 4) the process of assimilating new comers.

Assuming that the churches surveyed by the writer are typical of English-speaking churches in Asia, it appears that above issues are matters of concern for a number of churches in the region.

7.1 The Role of Affirmation and Encouragement

A basic function of leadership is the ministry of encouragement. In John 14:1, Jesus noticed the disciples’ obvious disappointment that he was leaving. He told them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” There are many people in our churches with “heart trouble.” Disappointments,

personal failures, family tensions, and financial worries can cause even the most committed Christian to become discouraged.

The writer observes that a number of Asian pastors assume that their people regularly experience personal encouragement through attending church related activities. That is, the pastors interpret people's attendance at meetings as evidence that they feel encouraged and affirmed. In a number of cases this is a false assumption. People often confide in private that are struggling with discouragement and only support the church program to avoid being confronted by the leaders or losing face with their friends.

George Barna makes this observation about a congregation's need for encouragement.

The congregation not only needs a leader who provides direction and builds skills, but also recognizes what the people are doing and acknowledges and celebrates their growth. In much the same way that a father's words of encouragement and congratulations can transform the attitude and commitment of a child, favorable feedback from the pastor can make all the difference in the ministry commitment of the laity. And the more personal and heartfelt the words of encouragement, the greater their impact.⁵

7.2 The Practice of Intentional Conflict Resolution

Conflict in churches is inevitable because each member has his or her own expectations, experiences, preferences, and personal values. Sometimes differences are prickly and cause interpersonal stress between people. Euodia and Syntyche are early examples of Christians in tension (Phil 4:2).

There can also be collective stressors operative within the church. Causes can be factors such as a perceived mismanagement of finances, the forced resignation of a staff member, organization ambiguities, poor or inadequate facilities, or the pastor dominating most aspects of congregational life.

The traditional view of conflict in most churches is that it is unnecessary and harmful. Leaders act quickly to smooth over problems and expedite a return to unity. In recent years, however, social scientists have shown us that conflict is inherently neither functional nor dysfunctional. Conflict has the potential for improving or impairing an organization, depending on how it is managed.

⁵ George Barna, *Turnaround Church* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1993).

According to Stoner and Wankel, there are three factors that determine whether the net result of a given dispute will be a functional conflict or a dysfunctional conflict.

- (1) The level of conflict. Moderate levels of conflict have far greater potential for desirable outcomes than high levels. People are more likely to interact in constructive, problem-solving ways. As the level of conflict rises, however, so does the temptation to use unhealthy levels of authority.
- (2) The organization structure and culture. Conflict may draw attention to problem areas in an organization that could lead to more positive and effective achievement of the goals. However, if the leaders resist change, tensions will continue to mount.
- (3) The conflict resolution methods. The most common approaches are dominance or suppression, compromise, and integrative problem solving.⁶

Any church that has a low score for “Loving Relationships” ought to pay serious consideration to its practices of conflict resolution. In many cases such a study will reveal elements of unintentional dominance and suppression. Leaders repress conflict, rather than settle it, by forcing it under-ground. This creates a win-lose situation in which the losers, forced to give way to the leadership, remain disappointed and hostile. These people exert a marked influence in lowering the “loving relationships” quotient.

7.3 The Development of Authentic Community

One of the striking elements of the emerging church described in the book of Acts is its sense of community. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship” (Acts 2:42). To be a believer was to be a believer in fellowship, to be a member of the church (ἐκκλησία).

It is significant that the word *κοινωνία* does not occur elsewhere in Acts, but is used by Paul of his collection for the poor saints (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4). This lends support to the understanding that fellowship in the early church carried a charitable motivation. Calvin claimed that *κοινωνία* meant “mutual association, alms, and other duties of brotherly fellowship.”⁷ In other words, the experience of believers sharing the blessing of life in Christ led to the sharing of themselves.

⁶ James A. F. Stoner and Charles Wankel, *Management*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986), pp. 387-90.

⁷ C. K. Barrett. *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark,

Robert E. Logan serves as a church planting and church health consultant for church leaders in over 20 countries and claims that the most pertinent issue for building authentic Christian community is inclusiveness. This dynamic, the sense that every person in the church family feels embraced by the fellowship, does not come automatically or as a result of inspired preaching or dynamic worship. Leaders need to be proactive in developing systems to help people find relevance, acceptance, and security. According to Logan, there are four indicators of inclusiveness.

- (1) Visitors are followed up.
- (2) Seekers and believers are integrated together.
- (3) Relationships remain open and avoid the formation of cliques.
- (4) People are sponsored into relationships.⁸

Contemporary leaders ought to be particularly attentive to the emphasis in the book of Acts on addressing the needs of poor people and widows. With the disintegration of many traditions in Asia and of a reduction of the role of extended families, it can be assumed that a number of people in the lower socioeconomic sector are looking for a place to belong, for connectivity. To what extent are these people represented and embraced by the fellowship of the average English-speaking Asian church?

7.4 The Process of Assimilating New Comers

Church leaders are often tempted to think that the manner of assimilating newcomers into the church is a routine process. People who come to know Christ through the church's ministry or are drawn into the church fellowship feel as though they are a vital and needed part of the church. Unfortunately, the attrition rates of many church rolls show that this is not a common pattern.

A holistic approach to church health requires that we are very intentional about the way newcomers are settled in, or bonded, to a local church. When the local church fails in the assimilation process, and the new Christian stops attending church regularly (or is out of the church completely), his or her spiritual growth and development is seriously undermined. In those cases where new Christians look for another location, the local church itself suffers the loss.

1994), p. 163.

⁸ Robert E. Logan, *CompuCoach Guidelines* (www.coachnet.org/compucoach/ccguides1, August 13, 2001).

Elmer L. Towns describes how churches can make a false assumption about the dynamics of assimilation.

It is often assumed that new Christians and new members are bonded to the church when they formally join. In practice, nothing could be further from the truth. If such an assumption is made, the back door will always swing wide open. The key to the bonding process is *not* church membership, but church ownership. Newcomers are bonded to the church only when they begin to think of the church in terms of “my church,” and that only happens when they begin to feel as though they are a vital part of the church as a whole or some group or organization within the church.⁹

An effective process of assimilation is essential to closing the back door of the church. Nothing is more frustrating for the church members than spending time and effort to bring their friends and family members to church and watching them lose interest through lack of an effective and loving assimilation process. But that is exactly what happens when the task of assimilation is taken for granted.

8. Loving Relationships: The Uniqueness of the Church

We are indebted to the fourth Gospel for many of our Lord’s most powerful statements on the subject of love. The newness of Jesus’ teaching was he required that his disciples love one another *as he loved them!* “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34).

In a striking commentary on the words of Jesus, Tertullian (fl. c 200 A.D.) wrote:

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. “See,” they say, “how they love one another,” for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; “see how they are ready even to die for one another,” for they themselves will rather put to death.¹⁰

May churches in all parts of Asia, and indeed the world, rise to the challenge of bringing vitality and renewal to their love quotients. This is

⁹ Elmer L. Towns, *Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995).

¹⁰ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (London: Banner of Truth, 1954), p. 254.

the need of the hour. In a world where personal relationships are often sacrificed by self-interests and consumer mentalities, let the Church demonstrate in Word and deed how God's love is incarnational.