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THE AIR YOU BREATHE: CONGREGATIONAL ATMOSPHERE

It was a cold, winter day as I cleaned several inches of Michigan snow from my car in the hotel parking lot. The day before, my colleague and I had led a workshop at St. James.

“It was a great crowd, yesterday,” I thought, as I started the car and waited for precious heat to warm my cold hands. The workshop went well, and considering the weather, the crowd was decent. St. James is a good church. The pastor is a hard-working leader. Many of the people are involved. However, quite a few are frustrated. The church has been plateaued and slightly declining for a few years.

A couple of years ago, we had consulted St. James. We diagnosed several issues. They wrote action plans and are beginning to make progress. Yet...there was something else about the church. It had so much going for it, but it seemed like there was some penetrating cloud of.... “Hard to put your finger on it,” I thought.

Welcome heat was finally pouring out the dashboard vents. I picked up my colleague at the front door of the hotel, and we were officially launched to our next mission. We were on our way to Emmanuel. The snow-packed, icy roads would extend our thirty-minute journey to almost an hour. Planning extra time, with the weather in mind, we would make it on time, about ten minutes

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MULTIPLYING MINISTRY

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before the 11:00am service. We were there to attend church, and then join the Church Council for lunch and an exploratory meeting. They were exploring a *Diagnostic Consultation*.

While these two churches are from the same denominational background, the contrast was striking. As we pulled into one of the empty spaces reserved for visitors, it wasn't a change in weather. We were about to experience a *difference in atmosphere*. It started as we entered the front doors and walked into the lobby. "What is that contrast?" I thought, "Is it just me?" No, my colleague felt it too. What is it?

What followed reinforced this contrast—a change in the air, a feeling—something hard to quantify. After a short trip to the men's room, a few words with the pastor, and some casual greetings with ushers, the service began. The feeling continued. "Why does this feel so different?"

The meeting with the pastor and leaders over lunch was like most groups inquiring about a consultation for their church. There were no unusual questions or concerns that we hadn't heard. Yet, beyond the content, beyond what is tangible and measurable, the contrast between this church and St. James the day before was like night and day. You can't see it or measure it. Yet, everyone can feel it. It's the air you breathe.

CONGREGATIONAL ATMOSPHERE

When the barometric pressure changes, some people report that their joints ache. That seems strange, because you can't see barometric pressure. You can't feel it—except when it results in joint pain. Yet, you can measure barometric pressure. It is an important part of what we call climate.

Climate issues are huge. The climate certainly affected our trip over to Emmanuel that cold winter Sunday morning. Perhaps one of the most neglected issues for churches is attention to *spiritual climate*. In this case, it wasn't the snow outside the church, but the climate inside: the atmosphere.

Every congregation has a climate. By contrast, St. James has some toxic issues in the air. Much of it has to do with the operational approach of the pastors, staff, and church leaders. Much of it is driven by inherited governance approaches that are not biblical, but treated as sacred. Governance is the focus on "how we make decisions." The approach can, at one extreme, pollute the air. The other extreme, the biblical approach, can feel like a breath of fresh air. However, what is the barometer? How do you measure something easy to feel, but difficult to grasp?

THE SPIRITUAL BAROMETER

TEN ELEMENTS OF HOLY AIR

1. Continually communicate Jesus' distinguishing trademark of His disciples: love for one another (John 13:15).
2. Leaders model love, respect, and dignity for fellow believers, recognizing that atmosphere is caught more than taught.
3. Tough love is exercised reverently and decisively with those who pollute the atmosphere (Matthew 18:15-17).
4. Discipline is exercised in the biblical manner of a one-on-one, face-to-face, private and confidential approach.
5. The objective of discipline is always to restore the person to spiritual health and practice.
6. Leaders operate from a position of low control, exercising their role of spiritual benevolent influencers, leveraging the power of relationships.
7. High accountability is a culture focused on personal integrity and responsibility.
8. Ministry thrives in an atmosphere of freedom to risk, fail, and learn.
9. People of faith demonstrate a willingness to trust God to do the impossible (Matthew 19:26).
10. Leaders set a low bar on leadership and a high bar on discipleship. There is freedom to grow in ministry, matched by the discipline of one-on-one relational discipleship.

The barometer for congregational climate is a two dimensional intersection between *control* and *accountability*. If you read the New Testament teachings of Jesus, and the apostles' letters through this lens, it can be revealing.

Using *control* and *accountability* as a matrix, there are four operational choices for the environment of your church.

1. *Low control/low accountability*. This is a form of anarchy. Some countries in the Middle East, and parts of Africa, are examples of this environment. Early on in the Pentecostal movement, some churches reflected this climate. Reducing control is a biblical concept. However, without high accountability, it has led, in many cases, to unhealthy churches, frequent aberrations, and even the disintegration of Christian movements.
2. *High control/low accountability*. This is a form of dictatorship. Zimbabwe, under the rule of Robert Mugabe, would be a national example of this. In church life, surprisingly, many churches operate with this climate. While it is not the biblical model of the New Testament Church, there seems to be a propensity for humankind to over organize, over control the church.

Some churches are ruled by a dominant pastor. This is occasionally found in non-denominational churches, especially those still under the leadership of the founding pastor. Another example of high control is the benevolent dictator. This is common in emerging Christian movements in Africa, where new Christians come from a background of tribal culture. These pastors operate as tribal chiefs of their churches. In discussions with one another about the size of their churches, it is common for these pastors to ask, "How many people do you rule?"

Surprisingly, most western churches have fallen into this high control/low accountability climate—to their detriment. Instead of the dictator, however, the climate has mutated to control by committee. Sometimes it is called a Church Council, the Church Board, the Elders ("Ruling Elders" in many Presbyterian circles), and, in some cases, the staff ("the staff-led church"). The influence of 20th Century corporate business has enhanced this concept.

This high-control climate has many characteristics. To launch a new initiative—the challenge of change!—requires a vote by those in control. There are motions and seconds and Robert's Rules of Order are followed, without question—as if they are somehow biblically ordained.

In congregational forms of church government, the whole church votes on almost every decision. Since the larger group generally votes the status quo, innovation of anything—from outreach methods, to new forms of music, to new carpet—faces a maze of hierarchy that guts the movement dynamic of Christianity.

While high control requires a "two-thirds majority" to do about anything, an opposite irony exists: low accountability. Gossip is just one example of this low accountability atmosphere. Gossip is rampant in many churches. With major disregard for Jesus' teaching about discipline (Matthew 18:15-17), and Paul's injunction to "speak the truth in love," (Ephesians 4:15—a sign of spiritual maturity), emails fly as Christians fan the flames of dissent and division. Sadly, the atmosphere of high control/low accountability is common in churches today.

3. *High control/high accountability*. This is the climate of countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, which, at least until recently, has had the profile of a theocracy—an Islamic cleric pulls the strings of a puppet president.

Few churches operate this way. The Roman Catholic Church has reflected seasons when the papal high control was balanced by high accountability. In recent centuries, the high accountability has waned, as evidenced by the child abuse scandals reported among priests. The emergence of Pope Francis shows signs of a mellowing of the high control climate of Rome.

4. *Low control/high accountability.* This is the biblical model reflected in the New Testament. Christ is the head of the church, not a pastor or a council. The *modus operandi* for decision making is to seek God's will, not a majority vote. The Christian movement, in this climate, is liberated from control, to the extent that it can, literally, grow out of (human) control. This is a dynamic of every revival. The explosive, exponential expansion of Christianity is under the control of the Holy Spirit alone. Ultimately, this is a faith issue. It is trusting God to be in charge.

While it sounds radical, most operational church councils and boards, while they mean well, are unintended road blocks to the organic and spontaneous growth of the church. Likewise, the way most denominations operate, the high control characteristics actually hinder the very purpose for which they exist. Deep down, many pastors and church leaders with hearts for reaching the lost, intuitively know high-pressure climate. They have encountered roadblocks of human-invented systems that frustrate the expansion of God's Kingdom.

NEW TESTAMENT CLIMATE

In the New Testament, the apostles demonstrated a different profile than the Scribes and the Pharisees. They caught the new paradigm of low control from the Master, Jesus. The religious leaders were high control/high accountability dictators of the religious right. They practiced a form of dead orthodoxy. For most of them, Jesus was an enigma, a heretic of liberality. Jesus called this climate "grace."

The apostles demonstrated this climate. They didn't seek elections. There were no votes. They didn't "lord it over the people," like the religious leaders. They influenced, by grace. Their leverage was not a two-thirds majority. Their primary mechanism was relationships. They

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modeled relational influence. They caught this from Jesus, who became flesh—a relational incarnation. This is the climate of revival. It liberates the Christian movement for exponential potential. High control stifles the impact of faith—risk faith that pleases God (Hebrews 11:6). Low control allows God to breathe life into on-fire Christians.

LOW-CONTROL BALANCE: HIGH ACCOUNTABILITY

Low control is at great risk without high accountability. Jesus taught this. He modeled it. Relationally, He said to offenders, “you are forgiven.” This is low control. Then He added, “Go and sin no more.” This is high accountability. The apostles perpetuated this atmosphere. Read their letters in the New Testament through this lens. They spoke to the churches in a climate of relationship, but admonished them to high accountability. It is so obvious, one must wonder how the church today could drift so far into toxic atmosphere, a climate that roadblocks Kingdom purposes.

Liberate the climate of your church to a biblical atmosphere, and you will release the power of God’s Spirit to multiply your impact for Kingdom growth. It is the spontaneous expansion of Christianity. It is the air you breathe!

CLIMATE CONTROL

So, does this climate change to low control and high accountability allow your church to operate perfectly? Of course not! Not as long as we are imperfect people. Witness the drift reflected in the letters to the church at Corinth, Ephesus, and Galatia. Yet, notice the loving, grace-filled, relational low-control correction and the persistent challenge to high accountability. This isn’t about *what* but the *how* of biblical environment. It is an operative climate that follows Scripture and trusts the Lord of the church to control the Body. It is a breath of fresh, divine air. Atmosphere impacts everything.

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