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Book Reviews

A Response to John Ellas and Flavil Yeakley

by David Wetzler

John Ellas and Flavil Yeakley wrote a review of *Natural Church Development* (NCD) that was published in the ASCG Journal–Spring 1999. I am amazed that these two distinguished scholars and authors would write such an irresponsible review and even more amazed that the ASCG has published it with no blush of embarrassment.

I have never encountered such an unfair misrepresentation of NCD as reflected in this review, and as the publisher of NCD, I cannot allow such a misrepresentation of NCD to go unchallenged.

At the very beginning of their review the writers reveal their bias by stating that “Schwarz *says* his church growth principles are supported by a massive research project” and “Schwarz *claims* that his research provides the first really accurate way of distinguishing between church growth myths and universally applicable principles” (italics mine). They then declare that his writings are “fatally flawed, pseudo-scientific, and that he did not follow scientific methods”(page 83). The most truthful statement in the first paragraph is that this review is the *opinion* of the authors. From this point on, the review is laced with false claims, misrepresentations, and a glaring lack of prudent research on the part of the reviewers.

To illustrate my point let me pose several questions:

1. *Did the reviewers go to the source for the research data?* The reviewers called our office (ChurchSmart Resources) and were unable to secure the statistical data for this project from us (page 84 – paragraph 2).

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It is true that we did not have the data to provide them. However, the data was available in a 120-page research report, written in German by Christoph Schalk. We did not have a copy on hand, and we have no reason to publish a German research paper for distribution in English speaking America. What publisher would? Since when is it the responsibility of the publisher to have all available data readily accessible in all languages before it is appropriate to put helpful information into print? That seems to reflect intercultural ignorance and an impossible standard that no publisher could meet. The reviewers should have contacted the Institute for NCD in Germany (their web-site is listed in the front of the book, NCD). They would have been able to secure this report in German, like many other individuals have in the USA and around the world. When someone wants data from a research project, the normal point of contact would be the organization that conducted the research—not the publishing house. To my knowledge, the reviewers made no attempt to do this by way of phone, fax, letter, or e-mail to Christian Schwarz or Christoph Schalk.

Note: In May of 1999, ChurchSmart Resources hosted Christian Schwarz in the USA to conduct seminars in six cities. Several ASCG members were in attendance at those seminars. *Christianity Today* sent an editor to one seminar and conducted an interview with Christian Schwarz following the seminar. My point is this; anyone who wanted to investigate NCD more deeply, or interact with Christian Schwarz about NCD has had many opportunities to do so. Also, Christoph Schalk conducted most of the research for NCD as the basis of his degree program in the Department for Organizational Psychology at the University of Wuerzburg, Germany. This project received the highest possible grade and accolades for academic excellence.

2. *Did the reviewers review the book Natural Church Development and what was written or speculate on what was not written?* The constant criticism in this review is not what Schwarz states in the book *Natural Church Development*, but what has been omitted. Since the reviewers acknowledge that NCD is written in a “popular level for non-technical readers” (bottom of page 83 & top of 84 in the ASCG Journal) it should be apparent that most of the technical data they want would not be included in this particular book. To then attack NCD for the

next eight pages of the review with the sole intent to create suspicion and discredit NCD on the basis of material that is not included seems very unprofessional. The reviewers say there should at least be a separate report of the scientific data—there is. They say Schwarz should tell the reader how to secure the information—he lists his web-site in the front of the book (which includes an e-mail option at the site), and further contact can be arranged through our office. They criticize Schwarz of creating a “straw man to attack” (middle of page 89). It seems to me the reviewers have employed the same strategy, by attacking what is not in print and then speculating that Schwarz is not following appropriate scientific methods. Once again, a phone call, fax, e-mail, or letter to Christian Schwarz or Christoph Schalk would have been a reasonable and appropriate step in the process the reviewers should have taken to inquire about their scientific concerns. Apparently the “omission” of such a contact is perfectly acceptable for the reviewers. Why confuse the issues by securing the facts? If they had secured the research report and read it, they would have discovered that: item analysis, measuring the internal consistency, factor analysis, checking reliability and construct validity is all addressed in the research report. This review was not a review of the book *Natural Church Development*, but a ten-page attack on a research report the writers did not secure and had not read.

Note: ChurchSmart Resources had three different translators unsuccessfully attempt to translate the research report because of the technical difficulty of the project. It requires a translator who understands academic German, is familiar with statistics, and fluent with the technical terms in both German and English. As of this writing, Christoph Schalk is working to translate the research report and it will be posted on our web-site (www.Churchsmart.com) when completed. It is possible the translation of the research report will be completed and available by the dates of the ASCG annual meeting in November 1999.

3. *Did the reviewers accurately interpret the data they received?* On page 90 the reviewers say, “the eight factors generated in the item analysis do not include local contextualization, national contextual, and national institutional factors.” The reality is that the NCD survey has been scientifically standardized in each country where it has been introduced. Also, one writer

(John) criticizes the results of the NCD survey conducted in his church because they scored a 54 in need-oriented evangelism (page 90). He concludes this score had to be inaccurate because there had been “little evangelism emphasis, training, or results in the past five years in the church” and therefore this score was not valid. He then compares this to some other church growth data at the top of page 91 and states, “this raises serious doubts about the efficacy of the NCD survey as a diagnostic tool.” I find it interesting that the reviewer never footnotes the source of his data that supposedly discredits NCD. In addition, he infers that the score of 54 in evangelism is unreliable and invalid. On what basis does he conclude this? The NCD survey is normed so that a score of 50 is the mean. Since 50 is average, a score of 54 indicates the church is slightly above average in the area of evangelism, but well short of the target score of 65 or higher. The reviewer then admits that the “congregation is growing and morale is high” (page 90). It seems apparent that the NCD survey result is verifying the reality of moderate health in the church while showing there was still room for improvement in the area of need-oriented evangelism. *The Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development*, which was sent to the church with the NCD survey results, explains how to accurately interpret the results of the survey. It should be noted that the *Implementation Guide* also includes some basic research information about reliability and validity—published in English!

Ellas and Yeakley have done a disservice to the body of Christ by attacking Christian Schwarz and *Natural Church Development*. What positive contribution did this review make for the Kingdom? It effectively disparages the work and reputation of an author and brother in Christ who risked all his earthly possessions to conduct this research to help the church. The reviewers expressed great concern for following appropriate process and methodology. They wrote with a sense of conviction, authority, and knowledge. However, they failed to secure the data that they mercilessly criticized, they inaccurately interpreted the data they did have, and they didn't even extend the common courtesy of contacting Schwarz or Schalk to discuss their concerns. In light of these glaring shortcomings, I must unapologetically protest this reckless and pseudo-academic review.

Writer

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