

# Cultural Barriers to Confessing Sin in Asian American Churches



by TONY LIN

---

As biblical counseling spreads worldwide, some church cultures find they have values that are at odds with biblical principles. The Asian church, for example, is heavily influenced by a Confucian worldview that is problematic in the way it impacts relationships in the family and the church. As pastors and biblical counselors, we need to be aware of and engage with stress points like these in order to provide counsel that reflects gospel-centered ways of relating to one another.

As a pastor of a Chinese church, I know these issues firsthand. I found that there were some unique challenges in bringing biblical counseling into my church that were not addressed in my seminary classes. First of all, people did not seem to want to come in for counseling because there is a high degree of shame in telling others about your struggles, especially for Chinese men. Second, the confession of sin in marriages, families, and church life was conspicuously absent. I remember thinking about James 5:16, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.” I had never seen this practiced in any Chinese church I had been a part of.

There can be many reasons for this. Confession of sin is difficult for most people, but given the collective mindset of Confucian cultures,

*Tony Lin (ThM, DMin) is a pastor at First Chinese Baptist Church of Fountain Valley, California.*

it can be much more difficult.<sup>1</sup> This is due to the heavy emphasis on avoiding shame (and gaining honor) and the related values of maintaining harmony and respecting authority. At times, these can all be biblical concepts.<sup>2</sup> However, when we cling to them to the exclusion of other Scriptures, such as the exhortation to confess our sins, then they have become *too* important.

These cultural distinctives are not unique to Chinese churches. They are common in many Asian cultures. Therefore, counselors and pastors

The Asian church is heavily influenced by a Confucian worldview that is problematic in the way it impacts relationships in the family and the church.

from other backgrounds must understand how a Confucian worldview influences Asian Christians or they will not know how to address what is preventing them from living out their faith fully and freely.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Asian pastors and counselors have the double duty of seeing how they themselves have been influenced by Confucian culture and how that may lead them to inadvertently offer less than biblical counsel. This article seeks to be a helpful tool for these purposes.

To address this issue, I will identify and discuss the effects of the cultural barriers to confessing sin in Asian churches. I will then explore how to biblically reframe these barriers and provide practical suggestions for how Asian believers and those ministering to them can grow in sharing their sins and struggles. My hope is that having a more complete biblical

---

1. A few references that explain the influence of Confucian thought in Asian churches include Benjamin C. Shin and Sheryl Takagi Silzer, *Tapestry of Grace: Untangling the Cultural Complexities in Asian American Life and Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016) and Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

2. Maintaining harmony is exhorted in Romans 12:18, and submitting to authority is commanded in passages like Romans 13:1 and Ephesians 6:1. Even shame can be used in the context of church discipline to highlight our living in sin (e.g., 1 Cor 6:5 and Eph 5:12), but here it is used with a redemptive purpose.

3. For more on this topic, see Samuel J. Alex, Esther Liu, and Michael R. Emler, “Why Cultural Context Matters in Biblical Counseling,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 36:1 (2022): 7–39.

framework will enable individual conversations, small group sharing, and formal counseling to be more effective and meaningful in Asian churches.

### **Barriers to Confessing Sin in Asian Churches**

In James 5:13–20, we are exhorted to pray when suffering, praise when cheerful, and ask for prayer when sick. James goes on to call people to confess their sins to one another and confront our brethren when they are wandering from the truth. To obey these exhortations, we need to overcome our reticence toward openly sharing our lives with each other.

However, it is difficult to overemphasize how the shame-honor dynamic fuels this reticence. As an Asian person, this fear of shame is part of the air I breathe.

Confession of sin is difficult due to the heavy emphasis on avoiding shame.

When I have a sin to confess, I feel like a pitiful dog with my tail between my legs and a cone of shame on my head. When confronting sin with a coworker or authority figure, I feel sheer dread. It feels like it is my fault for disrupting community harmony and I am wrong for dishonoring those God has put above me.

While there is something to be said for overlooking sin (for love overlooks a multitude of sins [1 Peter 4:8]), we cannot overlook *all* sin. If we never talk about sin in church or family life, then we are ignoring James 5:13–20. By doing so, we will never develop a community that addresses what Jesus came to transform—the sin within each of us—and we are left to face our intractable suffering and sins alone.

Therefore, the question before us is why exactly is confessing and confronting sin so difficult in Chinese churches? I have identified four barriers (or values) that contribute to this problem:

1. the desire to avoid shame,
2. the importance of maintaining harmony,
3. the need to respect authority, and
4. the desire to think collectively.

These four barriers support and reinforce each other and create pressure for people to remain silent when perhaps they should not.

We will look at each of these one at a time. The first barrier to confessing and confronting sin is the desire to avoid shame.

To continue reading this article, visit [ccef.org/jbc](http://ccef.org/jbc) to purchase the individual journal issue or subscribe to the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*.

*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

[www.ccef.org](http://www.ccef.org)

Copyright © 2023 CCEF

All rights reserved.