



+ FEATURE

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WHY HAS NOBODY TOLD ME THIS BEFORE?

THE GOSPEL THE WORLD IS WAITING FOR

As our team in Central Asia was preparing to host a training for national church-planting partners, I took advantage of the opportunity to dialogue with the six national believers on our team about honor and shame. We examined the biblical story through the lens of honor and shame for over an hour, and they were animated and encouraged to see how the Bible speaks so directly into their honor-shame culture.¹

Aisha has served in campus ministry and church planting, and the gospel she learned from Western ministry organizations emphasizes forgiveness of sins without reference to the problem of shame. She quickly recognized the implications of this new paradigm, and her eyes watered up as she begged to know, “Why has nobody told me this before? I have shared with my sister many times that God forgives her sins. But she just says her shame is too great for God, and I have had nothing to say to her. Why am I just learning this now?”

Aisha’s question highlights a glaring missiological problem. If most of the world (especially most unreached people

groups) live and think in terms of honor and shame, and honor-shame themes are inherent in the Bible, then why is honor and shame so absent in our missiology and theology? Why do we fail to present people in shame-based cultures with the honor-restoring salvation available in Jesus? These questions have huge missiological significance for the completion of the Great Commission.

HONOR-SHAME DYNAMICS AMONG UPGS

Roland Muller notes that “much of the 10/40 window is made up of shame-based cultures.”² And anthropologists and missionaries increasingly observe that collectivistic and group-oriented cultures, most notably in Arab and Asian contexts, construct their worldview and society upon the pivotal values of honor and shame. This is in contrast with individualistic Western societies that emphasize personal guilt, legal innocence, and retributive justice.

Most people in collectivistic societies structure their life to avoid shame and maintain honor. This influences where they sit at a meal, how they introduce themselves, who they

marry, where they work, and how they receive the message of Jesus. All of these behaviors are influenced by concern for maintaining a positive reputation and harmonious relationships in the community.

OUR TUNNEL VISION

Does the gospel address shame? Does Jesus Christ grant honor to those who believe in him? Absolutely! The Bible is saturated with honor and shame dynamics. Majority World peoples in shame-based cultures may intuitively understand facets of the Bible better than seminary-trained Westerners.

While studying the Bible together I asked my friend Kairbek, a Central Asian believer, “What kind of person was Adam?” anticipating a philosophical or ontological answer. Kairbek replied, “A person of great honor!” Being from an honor-shame culture, Kairbek implicitly understood the great honor God gave Adam at creation—blessing, land, a multitude of descendants, food, the divine image, naming privileges, and a wife. For these reasons, Adam and Eve “felt no shame,” even though they were naked (Gen 2:25). Kairbek opened my eyes to see new aspects of God’s plan in scripture.

Beginning from Genesis 1, honor and shame run through

the entire story of the Bible. “The term guilt and its various derivatives occur 145 times in the Old Testament and 10 times in the New Testament, whereas the term shame and its derivatives occur nearly 300 times in the Old Testament and 45 times in the New Testament.”³ Yet leading theology books continue to emphasize guilt and courtroom motifs over shame and community motifs. In fact, I have encountered indices in theology books with multiple references to “Shakespeare”, but no references for “shame.”

THE BIBLE IS COVERED IN SHAME (AND HONOR!)

Western theology is “shameless,” yet the Bible is saturated with references to shame and honor:

- “Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more” (Isa 54:4).
- “My salvation and my honor depend on God” (Ps 62:7).
- “Whoever believes in him [Jesus] will not be put to shame, [with] honor to those who believe” (1 Pet 2:6-7).

THE BIBLE’S STORY FOR HONOR-SHAME CONTEXTS

(adapted from *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* by Jayson Georges)

CREATION

God has existed for all eternity in full glory and honor. He is an honorable King, a Father who provides for the entire family. He is pure, faithful, and glorious—the essence and source of all true honor.

To magnify his glory, God created the world and spoke life into being. God created Adam and Eve, crowning them with glory and honor. As God’s esteemed co-regents, they received authority to rule over creation in God’s

name. They walked naked, but were not ashamed.

SIN

But Adam and Eve were disloyal to God. They forfeited divine honor to pursue a self-earned honor. Their disloyalty to God created shame, so they hid and covered themselves. Moreover, their sin dishonored God, and God lost face. Because Adam and Eve brought shame upon everyone, God banished them from His presence.

As Adam and Eve’s descendants, the human family inherited their shame. And having lost everything—our spiritual face, family, name, and status—we became engaged in a perpetual effort to construct a counterfeit honor for ourselves. The tower of Babel is a powerful illustration of our continuing drive to exalt ourselves and make a name for ourselves apart from God.

ISRAEL

God then initiated a plan to restore His honor and remove shame from humanity. He covenanted to honor

Abram with a great name, as well as land, blessing, and many children. As a great nation, Abraham’s family would become God’s instrument to bless—or honor—all nations.

When Abraham’s descendants suffered in slavery in Egypt, God delivered them from their shameful bondage, and Israel became God’s most prized nation—the apple of his eye and the treasure of his heart. God made a special covenant to honor Israel if she would honor him with loyalty and obedience to his law.

God intended this covenant to produce honor, but Israel’s disloyalty in turning to other gods brought God dishonor among the nations, and even more shame to Israel. As an unfaithful spouse, Israel caused God to lose face. And instead of bringing God’s blessing and honor to all nations, Israel further dishonored God by becoming ethnocentric—treating Gentiles as inferior and unworthy of God’s family.

Like Adam, Israel was chosen for honor but ended up in shameful exile. Yet assurances and instances of divine

New Testament professor David deSilva tells us, “The culture of the first-century world was built on the foundational social values of honor and dishonor.”⁴ So it is natural that biblical writers proclaimed the gospel in the language of honor and shame. The centrality of honor and shame emerges even more fully as we consider the biblical motifs of glory, name, adoption/family, and purity/defilement. And the stories of Genesis, Esther, many Psalms, Daniel, Luke, 2 Corinthians, 1 Peter, Revelation, and even Romans center around God’s status-restoring salvation.

WHERE DOES THE ROMAN ROAD LEAD US?

Western theology leads us to read Paul’s epistle to the Romans as a legal letter explaining heavenly acquittal of our individual transgressions. But Romans rarely uses courtroom terms like guilt (0x), forgiveness (1x), or innocence (1x). Rather it places much greater emphasis on shame (6x), honor (15x), and glory (20x). In Romans, Paul addresses the corrosive ethnic divisions between Roman Christians (Jew-Gentile and Roman-barbarian) by replacing their false claims to honor with their new basis for true honor in God, equally available to all who trust in God’s honored Messiah.⁵ In other words, Romans confronts “group righteousness” (claims to superiority over other

groups), not just “works righteousness” (pride in one’s moral goodness). In this context, Paul reveals sin as the shameful manipulation of cultural systems that dishonors God (1:23-24, 2:23-24, 3:23). The trajectory of “The Romans Road” leads to a salvation of divine honor, eternal glory, and membership into God’s family (2:7, ch 4; 8:18, 10:10-11).⁶

SEEING THE FOREST IN THE TREES

Biblical authors communicate their from-shame-to-honor theology through various literary genres:

- propositions—“No one who believes in him will be put to shame” (Rom 10:11),
- metaphors of status reversal—“You are no longer strangers and aliens” (Eph 2:19),
- narratives of honorification—Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Daniel, Jesus’ healings, etc., and
- covenants of promised honor—Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), David (2 Sam 7:7-14).

The biblical view of honor and shame runs even deeper than these passages suggest. Understanding honor and shame does far more for our message and ministry than help us better interpret Jesus’ parables or repackaging our evangelistic

exaltation (e.g., Ruth, David, Daniel, and Esther) foreshadowed a greater intervention by God to rescue the human family from shame and restore its honor.

JESUS

Although Jesus was eternally glorious and honored in heaven, he became flesh to deliver us from our shame by embracing and destroying it. Jesus’ healings and acceptance of marginalized people restored their dignity and honor. He was so full of divine honor that those who touched him were cleansed and accepted. His teaching proclaimed the true, eternal code of honor. And by loving and accepting all people regardless of their reputation or ethnicity, Jesus undercut society’s false honor code and offered divine honor to humanity.

Jesus’ life fully honored God, but his ministry threatened the earthly honor of established leaders. So they shamed Him—publicly and gruesomely. Jesus was arrested, stripped, mocked, whipped, spat upon, and nailed to die

on a cross. Thus he broke the power of shame by embracing and overcoming it rather than retaliating. The cross restored God’s honor and removed our shame. Face was restored.

God then honored Jesus’ obedience by raising him from the dead and exalting him to the highest place of honor—seated at God’s right hand with a name that is above every other name. By fully honoring God and mankind, Jesus has reversed the shame that Adam and Israel had brought on God and humanity.

SALVATION

Today, apart from Jesus, our own defiled and disloyal hearts add to the shame we inherit from our forefathers. Apart from God, mankind continues seeking to manufacture a false honor—often through shaming others or boasting in the superiority of our family or group. This pursuit of false honor dishonors God and leads to disgraceful conduct—abuse, anger, gossip, boasting, racism, violence, war, etc.

Yet Jesus provides a better option.

When we give our allegiance to Jesus, God removes our old status as unclean and shameful orphans and adopts us as his own pure and honorable children. We who find our honor solely in following Jesus are freed from the games of social manipulation, status construction, and face management. And we who embrace the shame of the cross with Christ are assured by His Spirit of eternal resurrection glory.

Membership in God’s family is not based on ethnicity, reputation, or religious purity, but on our familial allegiance to the crucified Messiah. And becoming part of God’s family empowers us to welcome and accept others. As followers of Christ we are able to honor others and glorify God since we possess God’s eternal honor and empowering Spirit. Upon Jesus’ return, unbelievers will be stripped of all worldly honors and banished to everlasting shame, while we who believe will receive crowns of eternal honor as God’s glory fills all creation.




presentations. Ultimately, the Bible's teaching about honor and shame reveals the very heartbeat of God to remove shame and restore honor for the human family. God intends humanity to become his family, bearing his honor. This stands at the center of his salvific purposes for the nations. We must not miss the forest—God's mission to gain honor for himself by honoring those who embrace his kingdom—for the trees—biblical texts about honor. From Adam (Gen 1:27) and Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) through to Jesus (Phil 2:4-9) and his Church (1 Pet 2:6-10), the historical and eschatological purpose of God's salvation is to honor his people (Rev 21:17-22). Throughout salvation history *Missio Dei* is the restoration of human "face" and status. Saving people from shame to honor establishes God's reputation as the only true source of honor and glory. Ultimately the story of the Bible is about God's honor and "face," not just ours.

In application of this understanding, our team in Central Asia practices a missiology of "honorification" to connect Central Asians longing for honor with God's offer of honor. Through our relationships, evangelism, discipleship, and business platform, we aim to join in God's mission of blessing all people with Christ's eternal honor.

A MISSIONAL HARMONY

The scriptures were written in a socio-cultural milieu of honor and shame, so we don't need to "contextualize the gospel" in terms of honor and shame! That has already been done. We must simply overcome the Western assumption that the legal framework of the gospel is the only biblical framework of salvation.

If the nations long for honor and God's plan is for the nations to seek and find their honor only in Him, then Christian mission involves playing the role of matchmaker. The Good News of Christ's salvation, as outlined in the Bible, already speaks to unreached people groups and their deep longing for honor. It is a perfect match, just waiting to be made! 

- ¹ See a five-minute video on this theme, and other related videos, at HonorShame.com/videos.
- ² Roland Muller, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door* (Xlibris, 2001), p. 20.
- ³ Timothy Tennent, "Anthropology: Human Identity in Shame-Based Cultures of the Far East," in *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 92.
- ⁴ David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 23.
- ⁵ Krister Stendahl, "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976); Robert Jewett, "Honor and Shame in the Argument of Romans," in *Putting Body & Soul Together: Essays in Honor of Robin Scroggs*, eds. Virginia Wiles, Alexandra R. Brown, and Graydon F. Snyder (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
- ⁶ Jayson Georges, "From Shame to Honor: A Theological Reading of Romans for Honor-Shame Contexts," *Missiology* 38, no. 3 (2010): 295-307; Jackson Wu, *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame*, EMS Dissertation Series (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2013).