

Presenting the Gospel in Honor-Shame Cultures



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Recognition of honor-shame dynamics common to the Bible and non-Western cultures can bring fresh insight to our interpretation of Scripture and to sharing the gospel in cross-cultural relationships.

Among various Missio Nexus resources on this topic, our Leader's Edge interview with Werner Mischke highlighted blind spots and opportunities associated with honor-shame cultures. Werner is the author of *The Global Gospel: Achieving Missional Impact in Our Multicultural World*.

What do you mean by a culture that is embedded in “honor and shame?” Just how do you define and describe these terms?

In Jerome Neyrey's book, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, he describes honor as the worth or value of persons, both in their eyes and in the eyes of their village, neighborhood or society. He says the critical item is the public nature of respect and reputation.

Brene Brown says this about shame: “The intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” It's the fear disconnection.

What ties these two definitions together is the social, relational or public aspect of the dynamics. Western philosopher René Descartes coined the phrase, *I think, therefore I am*. And one African theologian modified it to describe people in honor-shame cultures this way: *I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am*.

This idea shows that in an honor-shame culture, people are really immersed and completely embedded in their community, and their sense of individuality is far less than how we perceive ourselves in the West.



What's the difference between cultures that emphasize honor-shame and cultures more like ours that value guilt and innocence?

In guilt-innocence cultures I would say we are more law-oriented and individualistic. Kids grow up in the West with the phrase, *What do you want to be when you grow up?*

Many of us have been raised to value individual dreaming and pursuit with minimal regard for the opinion of the extended family or community. This is far less common in an honor-shame culture. They are so embedded in their extended family and community.

Now, to be sure, the West is not *completely* individualistic and guilt-oriented—neither is the Majority World is *completely* group-and-shame oriented. But without a doubt, in guilt-innocence cultures, we are a lot more individualistic, whereas people in honor-shame cultures are more collectivistic. Sometimes anthropologists call group-oriented cultures *dyadistic*—meaning the individual is embedded in the group.

Consequently, *laws* are not as important as *relationships* in honor-shame cultures. In the West, our society is ruled by laws. Honor shame-cultures *do* have laws, but there is a greater emphasis on relationships and how one is perceived in their community.

What are some of the blind spots that we in the West have toward cultures that have honor-shame as their pivotal cultural value?

When Westerners observe honor-shame values at work in other cultures, we normally see them as unethical. In other words, we only see the dark side of honor-shame. Now, to be clear, there is a dark side. We have become familiar with the honor killings that have taken place in some of our own cities in the West as people from south Asia and the Middle East have come to North America. And when someone from an honor-shame culture shames their family, sometimes violence and bloodshed is the result.

So if we are aware of honor and shame, it is almost always the dark and evil aspect that we notice. The Bible plainly describes the

source and the results of that evil. There is, however, a bright and glorious side to honor and shame throughout the Scriptures, which I examine extensively in my book.

As Christians we don't see the honor-shame dynamics in our own Bibles. We don't realize that there are twice as many occurrences in the Bible of the word *shame* and its derivatives than there are to the word *guilt* and its derivatives.

When we read the Bible we're not alert to the myriad honor-shame dynamics in Scripture because Westerners do not normally use that language—and more importantly, Western theology has a blind spot about honor and shame. We don't live with this awareness of honor and shame nearly to the degree that the authors of Scripture did.

Give us some biblical examples of honor and shame that you advocate permeates the Scriptures.

I'll mention just three of the ten honor-shame dynamics we describe in the book. The first dynamic is called *love of honor*. And that's simply the recognition that people in the Ancient Near East had as a primary motivation—the pursuit of honor and glory. Jerome Neyrey quotes Aristotle who says: "Honor is clearly the greatest of external goods. It is honor above all else that that great men claim and deserve."

The Roman Empire was saturated with values of honor and glory, so this is the social context and emotional environment in which the New Testament was written. So we see this love of honor, and correspondingly the fear of shame, to be something that goes from Genesis to Revelation.

A second honor-shame dynamic is *purity*. We see purity codes in the book of Leviticus, for example—who is included and who is excluded. As someone moves toward holiness, they gain honor. As someone moves toward being common or unclean or even an abomination, they move toward exclusion and shame.

If you want to see an example of how shame equates with uncleanness, look at Ezekiel 16. You'll see that God's unfaithful bride is described in crude shameful terms. Plus, the dynamic of purity is part of the atonement



THE GLOBAL GOSPEL: WESTERN CONTEXTUALIZATION AND THE BIBLE'S HONOR-SHAME DYNAMICS

WEBWORKSHOP • Werner Mischke • Executive Vice President and Director of Training Ministries, Mission ONE

How can the honor-shame dynamics common to the Bible and many Majority World societies be used to contextualize the gospel of Christ in order to make it more widely understood and accepted? The Global Gospel has more than 85 diagrams and charts; the presentations from each webinar will contain some of the key diagrams and charts that populate each section of the book.



in Leviticus and Hebrews. So purity is a key honor-shame dynamic in Scripture which beautifully relates to the gospel.

There is also the dynamic of what I call “honor-status reversal.” And by that, we mean someone’s family, community, or people whose status is being reversed from shame to honor or from honor down to shame.

Consider the great stories of the Bible: Adam and Eve, Abraham, Joseph, Moses and the Exodus, Job, David—all are examples of honor-status reversal. Whether in the books of Moses, the historical books, the prophetic books, many of the Gospel stories and parables, or in the epistles, we see this dynamic of honor-status reversal appearing again and again. The climactic example is the story of Jesus Christ. Look at Philippians 2:5–11. There it is—*honor-status reversal*! That’s why I call this honor-shame dynamic a *motif*—we see it repeatedly in the Scriptures.

What are examples of a gospel presentation in which guilt-innocence and honor-shame are the focal messages?

I think most of us are familiar with the gospel presentation called *The Four Spiritual Laws*, which was developed decades ago by Campus Crusade for Christ. God has used this presentation mightily. I’ve met numbers of people who have said, “Hey, that’s how I got saved.”

We don’t want to disesteem what God has done in using this great resource to introduce people to Christ. However, the very name of this gospel presentation—*The Four Spiritual Laws*—reflects a legal framework for the gospel. But it needs to be pointed out that we don’t have to articulate the gospel using laws. We can also articulate the gospel using stories. We don’t have to rely exclusively on propositional truth.

The Four Spiritual Laws is geared toward individuals. It talks about you as an individual and how you must make a faith commitment to Jesus Christ. Furthermore it talks about forgiveness of *sins*. In other words, all of us have behaved badly and we have committed sins for which we need forgiveness.

This may be distinguished from needing forgiveness—not just from our sinful *behavior*—but also from our sinful *being*. Behavior is more about guilt whereas our *being* is more about *shame*. It is not just our behavior—but also our *being*—which dishonors God. You can see this emphasis on *sin as the dishonoring of God* in Romans 1:23, 2:23 and 3:23.

So a Western gospel presentation like *The Four Spiritual Laws* focuses on a legal framework. And we certainly affirm that the gospel can be articulated using a legal framework that focuses on forgiveness for sin



MISSIONARY EFFECTIVENESS AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

WEBINAR • Fred Lewis, M.Div • Training Coordinator, WorldView

This webinar explores intercultural competence as a contributor to missionary effectiveness. It addresses misconceptions of missionary competence, a description of intercultural competence, differentiating it from cross-cultural competence and toleration of cultural differences, and factors that foster intercultural competence. Some recent studies on intercultural competence will be highlighted.



as guilt and based upon laws of Scripture, propositional truth.

In contrast, consider a gospel presentation called *The Father's Love Booklet* which we developed a couple of years ago. It's the prodigal son story in words and pictures. It shows how the prodigal son's descent into sin and shame alienated him from his father. Then his father—in his desire to have his son reconciled back to his family—went out and met this prodigal as he came back from his shameful exploits. The father covered his son's shame and restored his son's honor. He covered him with his favorite robe. He gave him a ring signifying his honored place in the family and his authority. He gave him sandals for his feet. With outrageous love, the father restored the honor of his prodigal son.

And then the booklet has a bridge to the gospel of Christ using verses from Scripture like, "He who believes shall not be put to shame" in Romans 10. We show how the work of Christ on the cross demonstrates that God is like a father willing to suffer shame for us that we may be reconciled.

In your book you say, "Shame is more likely to lead to hurtful behavior whereas guilt is more likely to lead to healing behavior. The pathology of shame for individuals can be terrible and impact generations, but when that pathology of shame impacts whole societies and

nations it becomes truly horrendous." What are some examples you've seen of how that is played out?

This is an important distinction between guilt and shame. Social science research shows that guilt is more likely to lead to healing behavior because people are motivated to apologize for what they have *done*. Consider the phrase, *I did that horrible thing*. For guilt-prone people the emphasis is on the words *did* and *thing*—the emphasis is on behavior.

However, with shame-prone people, the emphasis is not on the bad *thing* I *did*—but on the bad person *I am*. So the phrase reads with an emphasis on "I": "*I did that horrible thing.*" The research shows that whereas *guilt* is more likely to lead to *healing* behavior, *shame* is more likely to lead to *hurtful* behavior. And when this is played out on the broad stage of human history, we see horrendous things happen.

For example, in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Germany was deeply excluded and shamed by the international community. They had to pay back billions in reparations. It was impossible. Consequently, Germany was in a place of profound economic dysfunction and humiliation. My mother had been a teenager in Germany during World War Two. She told me that after the first World War, "We couldn't even buy a loaf of bread."

Hitler rose in power because he tapped into that German humiliation and shame. He



GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

MISSIO NEXUS PROFESSIONAL SERVICE GROUP • Eldon Porter • Global Engagement Consultant and Network Facilitator

Drawing on 25 years of life and mission experience in Africa and the Americas, Eldon seeks to facilitate effective engagement among global missions movements. He manages two websites aimed at networking and partnerships—LinkingGlobalVoices.com and Alliance4Gm.com—and he coaches Western mission leaders wrestling through the complexities of changing organizational structure, governance and policies as they seek to adapt to the realities of the global paradigm of missions.

also found a scapegoat—which of course was the Jews or other non-Aryan people. Hitler rebuilt their military and satisfied the longing of the nation to have their honor restored. The nationalist desire to overcome shame led to evil and violence on a monumental scale.

Another prominent example in the last century and continuing into current events has been the rise of Islamic terrorism, which I believe is large-scale honor competition. The Arab Muslim world has been shamed by the Western world in many different respects—at least that's how they perceive it—and so their honor must be vindicated.

I was reading about the Al Qaeda representative in Yemen who took responsibility for the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris. He plainly stated that this attack was

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a vindication to restore honor. He said they denounce the unbelievers who “insulted the chosen Prophets of Allah” and caused Muslims to “awake and roar out of rage.” The “heroes,” the killers in Paris, were then “assigned” to attack the Charlie Hebdo office in revenge.

“Congratulations to you, O Ummah of Islam, for this vengeance that has soothed our chests. Congratulations to you for these brave men who blew off the dust of disgrace and lit the torch of glory in the darkness of defeat and agony.”

We must understand that honor-shame dynamics are at the very root of what is happening in this clash between East and West—between religious fundamentalism, Islamic extremism, and our own Western culture—or we will not address it effectively. We've got to understand the root causes. We've got to realize that shame leads to hurtful, sinful behavior for individuals, families, societies, even nations. Christian leaders and missionaries must learn to teach and preach a gospel which speaks to honor-based violence.

You conclude that the gospel is already contextualized for honor-shame cultures. Would you explain that?

I agree with my friend Jackson Wu from China: “The gospel is already contextualized for honor-shame cultures.” This comes from our observations of honor-shame dynamics in the Scriptures that plainly overlap with verses concerning the gospel, salvation, Christ's atonement, the resurrection, and what it means to follow Jesus.

This is exciting because when we think about the unreached and unengaged peoples of the world, when we think about the multitudes who have yet to receive the blessing of Christ—so many of them are from honor-shame cultures.

We can build on the legal framework of the gospel by including the honor-shame dynamics that are woven into the Scriptures. We can connect with the thought forms and honor-shame motivations of the people who have yet to receive the blessing of the gospel. We can discover that for many in the Majority World, their honor-shame values overlap with the pivotal cultural value of honor and shame in Bible societies—and that this overlap can be used to powerfully communicate the gospel.

This gives us fresh hope as we continue our work in the world Christian community to bless all the peoples of the earth and make disciples of all nations.

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BETTER INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN ANY MINISTRY

WEBINAR • Fred Lewis and Mark Hedinger • Training Coordinator and Executive Director, Institute for International Christian Communication

Strong communication between people of different cultures ultimately facilitates fruitfulness in intercultural ministries of all kinds. With the help of scientific data from the secular business world and years of experience in missions, Lewis and Hedinger provide expert recommendations for intercultural communication.