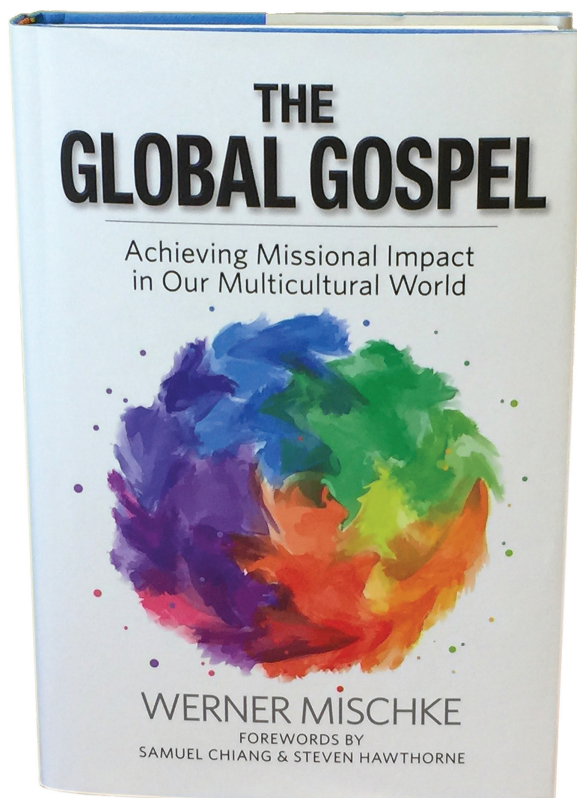


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Achieving Missional Impact in Our Multicultural World
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Chapter 1.3:
“Why Our Blind Spot about Honor and Shame?”



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Why Our Blind Spot about Honor and Shame?

WE WILL EXPLORE THREE REASONS WHY it is so easy to miss the pivotal cultural value of honor and shame in the Scriptures. Why this blind spot?

Theologically ignored. The first reason is that, compared to *innocence/guilt*, the matter of *honor/shame* has been largely ignored as a matter of theological inquiry.

New area of study. The second reason is related; it's a relatively new area of study. In the fields of anthropology, theology, and missiology, shame and honor have only recently been understood as significant for understanding peoples from the Majority World or for understanding and interpreting the Scriptures.

Blind spots are common. The third reason is that blind spots are common—they're a part of the human condition. Christians in every society and every culture, no matter how mature, have theological blind spots.¹

Let's explore these three reasons one by one.

Honor/shame is ignored by pastors and theologians

John Forrester writes as a pastor about this blind spot:

We Western pastors have a blind spot. In a word, that blind spot is shame. We don't learn about shame in seminary. We don't find it in our theological reading. We don't recognize it on the pages of Scripture. We don't see it in our people. Shame is just not part of our pastoral perspective.²

But why do so many pastors have this blind spot? Because *shame* has not been a subject of theological inquiry.

One way to ascertain the degree of theological importance of a particular word is by looking at theological dictionaries. I went to Phoenix Seminary here in Arizona and did a little research at the library. My question was simple: In the available theological dictionaries, is there an entry for *guilt* and also an entry for *shame*? Here's what I found. The dictionaries are listed in order of the year they were published.

1. A fourth reason for this blind spot (but not one explored in this book) is that *shame is taboo*. This reason is more subjective. To study honor and shame implies a personal willingness to explore shame in one's own life and one's own church community. All too often, chronic shame is unintentionally promulgated in the church. It can be uncomfortable for Christian leaders to address these things—causing resistance in studying the matter. See Stephen Pattison, "Shame and the Unwanted Self" in *The Shame Factor: How Shame Shapes Society*, eds. Robert Jewett, Wayne L. Alloway, and John G. Lacey (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), 9–10.

2. John A. Forrester, *Grace for Shame: The Forgotten Gospel* (Toronto: Pastor's Attic Press, 2010), 9.

Title / Editor / Publisher	Year Published	Entry for	
		Guilt	Shame
<i>The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology</i> , Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press).	1983	✓	
<i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i> , Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House).	1984	✓	
<i>Dictionary of Christian Theology</i> , Peter A. Angeles (San Francisco, CA: Harper).	1985	✓	
<i>Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible</i> , Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House).	1996	✓	✓
<i>New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, Exploring the Unity and Diversity of Scripture</i> , T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, Graeme Goldsworthy, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press).	2000	✓	
<i>The Theological Wordbook: The 200 Most Important Theological Terms and Their Relevance for Today</i> , Donald K. Campbell . . . [et al.]; Charles R. Swindoll, general ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing).	2000	✓	
<i>Global Dictionary of Theology</i> , William A. Dyrness, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press).	2008	Entry for "Guilt" under "Sin"	✓

Figure 1.04: Entries for “guilt” and “shame” in theological dictionaries

This survey shows that it was 1996 when *shame* appeared as an entry in Elwell’s redo of his 1984 version. Interestingly, neither of the dictionaries published in 2000 had an entry for shame. The massive *Global Dictionary of Theology* by Dyrness and Kärkkäinen has an extensive entry for *shame*. But (sadly) the vast majority of Western pastors would not likely use a theological dictionary with a global scope.

Perhaps a more profound reason for the blind spot about honor and shame has to do with the study of systematic theology. Most seminary students preparing for the pastorate study systematic theology. Take a look at whatever systematic theology book you may have: When one compares the amount of material concerning sin and *guilt* compared to sin and *shame*—one discovers that sin and *shame* is almost completely ignored.

Evangelical scholar Timothy Tennent has written about this blind spot in the Western church concerning honor and shame. I offer an extensive quote below:

Since Western systematic theology has been almost exclusively written by theologians from cultures framed primarily by the values of guilt and innocence, there has been a corresponding failure to fully appreciate the importance of the pivotal values of honor and shame in understanding Scripture and the doctrine of sin

Bruce Nicholls, the founder of the *Evangelical Review of Theology*, has acknowledged this problem, noting that Christian theologians have “rarely if ever stressed salvation as honoring God, exposure of sin as shame, and the need for acceptance as the restoration of honor.”³ In

3. Tennent cites Bruce Nicholls, “The Role of Shame and Guilt in a Theology of Cross-Cultural Mission,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 25, no. 3, (2001): 232.

fact, a survey of all of the leading textbooks used in teaching systematic theology across the major theological traditions reveals that although the indexes are filled with references to guilt, the word “shame” appears in the index of only one of these textbooks.⁴ This omission continues to persist despite the fact that 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.

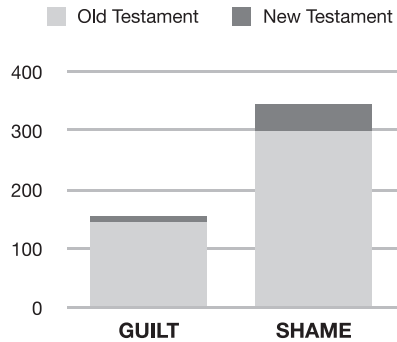


Figure 1.05: Words in the Bible derived from “guilt”—versus “shame”

This is clearly an area where systematic theology must be challenged to reflect more adequately the testimony of Scripture. I am confident that a more biblical understanding of human identity outside of Christ that is framed by guilt, fear, and shame will, in turn, stimulate a more profound and comprehensive appreciation for the work of Christ on the cross. This approach will also greatly help peoples in the Majority World to understand the significance and power of Christ’s work, which has heretofore been told primarily from only one perspective.⁵

Honor/shame is a relatively new field of exploration

The second reason for our blind spot has to do with the newness of this field of study. Our awareness of the fundamental differences between guilt-based and shame-based cultures is a recent phenomenon. According to Timothy Tennent, “Ruth Benedict was the first anthropologist to categorize Western cultures as guilt-based and Eastern cultures as a shame-based.”⁶ Benedict’s book was written in 1946. In addition:

- Bruce Malina is credited with being a pioneer in understanding the pivotal cultural value of honor and shame as it applies to the interpretation of Scripture. His book *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* was first published in 1993.

4. Tennent includes the following citation: “See L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941); Henry Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); Alan Gomes, ed., *Dogmatic Theology by William T. Shedd*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003); Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vols. 1–3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–1997); Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical and Evangelical*, 2 vols., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–1995); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). The only systematic theology I found with a reference to shame is a single line in volume 3 of Norman Giesler’s *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2002), which acknowledges that Adam’s sin ‘brought on him guilt, as well as the shame he expressed in view of it’ (Gen. 3:7).”

5. Tennent, 92–93.

6. *Ibid.*, 79.

- Jerome Neyrey's *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*⁷ is a book that I consider a classic in describing both the honor/shame dynamics of ancient Greco-Roman culture—and in explaining how the various features of an honor/shame social system are woven into the structure and fabric of Matthew's Gospel. The book was published in 1998.
- Roland Muller is a cross-cultural church planter who has served extensively in the Middle East. His *Honor & Shame: Unlocking the Door* is a good introduction concerning the vital role of honor and shame in Middle Eastern culture. Muller wrote another book, *The Messenger, The Message, The Community: Three Critical Issues for the Cross-Cultural Church Planter*, which incorporates the former book and provides a comparison of three worldviews: *guilt/innocence*, *honor/shame*, and *fear/power*. It is a useful handbook for missionaries. These two books were published in 2000 and 2013 respectively.⁸
- David A. deSilva has made major contributions in using social science scholarship to understand the New Testament. His books on the subject include *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, published in 2000.⁹
- Robert Jewett's massive commentary on the book of Romans, which includes extensive references to the pivotal cultural value of honor and shame, was published in 2007.¹⁰
- John A. Forrester's *Grace for Shame: The Forgotten Gospel* is both scholarly and useful, especially for pastors.¹¹ It was published in 2010.
- Robin Stockitt's *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame* was published in 2012.¹² He writes from a European pastor's perspective.
- Edward Welch's *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* is written from the perspective of the Christian counselor. It was published in 2012.¹³
- Timothy Tennent's, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (quoted above), was published in 2007. His chapter 4, "Anthropology: Human Identity in Shame-Based Cultures of the Far East" is a brilliant exploration of the theological issues of honor and shame, especially with regard to the atonement.

7. Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

8. Roland Muller, *Honor & Shame: Unlocking the Door* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2000); *The Messenger, The Message, The Community: Three Critical Issues for the Cross-Cultural Church Planter* (Saskatchewan, Canada: CanBooks, 2013).

9. David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 159.

10. Jewett writes in the introduction, "In the shameful cross, Christ overturned the honor system that dominated the Greco Roman and Jewish world, resulting in discrimination and exploitation of barbarians as well as in poisoning the relations between the congregations in Rome. The gospel offered grace to every group in equal measure, shattering the imperial premise of exceptionalism in virtue and honor." Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 1.

11. John A. Forrester, *Grace for Shame: The Forgotten Gospel* (Toronto: Pastor's Attic Press, 2010).

12. Robin Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

13. Edward Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012).

- Jackson Wu’s groundbreaking book, *Saving God’s Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (EMS Dissertation Series),¹⁴ integrates Reformed theology with the honor/shame dynamics of Scripture. It was published in 2012.
- Zeba Crook’s book, *Reconceptualizing Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* was published in 2004.¹⁵ The book is a definitive study on the honor/shame practice of patronage as it relates to the conversion and ministry of Apostle Paul.
- Brené Brown calls herself a “shame-and-vulnerability researcher.” Brown does not write as a Christian scholar, but as a mother, educator and social science researcher; nevertheless, I believe her work concerning shame resilience is broadly applicable to Christian ministry. Her last two books, published in 2010 and 2012, have popularized the study of shame as a serious field of study.¹⁶ Her two “TED Talks” have been viewed more than 13 million times.¹⁷

The point here is that the insights and research that these scholars offer is obviously very recent—only since the 1990s—in the overall history of the church.

Theological blind spots are common

The third reason for our blind spot about honor and shame is that blind spots are part of human nature. How can people with all their limitations—spiritually, intellectually and culturally—completely understand an infinite holy God? *Impossible*. I reference Jackson Wu to explain.

In Wu’s book, *Saving God’s Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame*, he offers a diagram to help describe the process of contextualization. In doing so, Wu also explains how blind spots occur.¹⁸ Let’s consider the various components of this diagram.

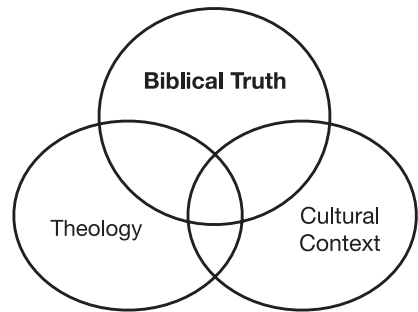


Figure 1.06: Jackson Wu’s Figure 1 concerning contextualization

The top oval represents *biblical truth*. The left oval represents *theology*. The right oval represents the *cultural context* in which followers of Christ endeavor to communicate the gospel.

14. Wu, *Saving God’s Face*.

15. Zeba A. Crook, *Reconceptualizing Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004).

16. Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012); *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010).

17. Brené Brown, *Ted Talks*, accessed 9 August 2013, http://www.ted.com/search?cat=ss_all&q=brene+brown.

18. Wu, *Saving God’s Face*, 52–53.

Notice this important aspect of the diagram: *Biblical truth* is larger and higher than *theology*; this is because no matter how refined one's theology may be, it can never be as comprehensive as the totality of biblical truth. Humans have limited knowledge, but God is omniscient; humanity is fallen and fallible, but God's Word is holy and infallible. It follows that every theology is smaller than the totality of biblical truth.

The esteemed missiologist Paul Hiebert addressed the distinction between the totality of biblical truth—*revelation*—and *theology*:

The former is God-given revelation; the latter is human understandings of that revelation and cannot be fully equated with it. Human knowledge is always partial and schematic, and it does not correspond one to one with reality. Our theology is our understanding of Scripture in our contexts; it may be true, but it is always partial and subject to our own perspectives. It seeks to answer the questions we raise.¹⁹

Now let's consider the numbered spaces in the diagram and what they represent.²⁰

- Area 1 is where matters of truth in one's *theology* overlap with *biblical truth*, but they are outside of, or inconsistent with, the *cultural context*; these biblical matters confront the culture.
- Area 2 is where the "culture has accepted biblical categories and values (perhaps unknowingly),"²¹ but are outside of one's *theology*. This is the area where blind spots occur, which is explained below.
- Area 3 is where values and beliefs are consistent with *biblical truth*, one's *theology* and the *cultural context*.
- Area 4 is where specific values in one's *theology* are accepted by the *cultural context*, but are outside of *biblical truth*.²²

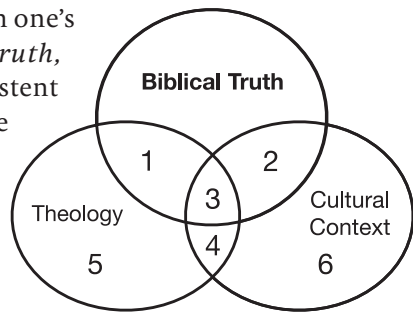


Figure 1.07: Jackson Wu's Figure 1 with numbered areas

19. Paul Hiebert, "The Gospel in Human Contexts: Changing Perceptions of Contextualization" in *MissionShift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, eds. Ed Stetzer and David Hesselgrave (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2010), 93.

20. The following bulleted items 1–6 have been slightly reworded from Jackson Wu. The concept is entirely his.
21. Wu, *Saving God's Face*, 53.

22. Two examples of Area 4 are offered here. The first example is the so-called "Prosperity Gospel," which overlaps with American consumerism but is inconsistent with the overall testimony of Scripture. A second example (and one that is much more extreme) comes from the work of liberal German theologians prior to and during World War II. So-called scholars from the "German Christian Movement" actually created theology to support the holocaust against the Jews. This group supported the philosophy and goals of Germany's Nazi government but was obviously completely unfaithful to God's revelation in Scripture. See Susannah Heschel's meticulously researched book, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

- Area 5 is where beliefs are part of one's *theology*, but are neither *biblical* nor overlap with the *cultural context*.
- Area 6 is where beliefs and values in the *cultural context* are neither *biblical* nor a part of one's *theology*.

Wu explains that proper contextualization of the gospel requires a dialog or conversation—as indicated by the diagram—between the overarching *biblical truth*, one's *theology*, and the *cultural context*. He calls this conversation a “dialogical model” of contextualization.²³ He writes that all theology is necessarily already contextualized. Wu quotes Lesslie Newbigin: “We must start with the basic fact that there is no such thing as a pure gospel if by that is meant something which is not embodied in a culture. ... Every interpretation of the gospel is embodied in some cultural form.”²⁴

Mark Noll makes the same point, “The contrast between the West and the non-West is never between culture-free Christianity and culturally embedded Christianity, but between varieties of culturally embedded Christianity.”²⁵

Area 2 is where blind spots occur. Wu writes:

In area 2, the culture has accepted biblical categories and values (perhaps unknowingly). General revelation makes this possible. Nevertheless, the temptation remains for missionaries to reject the culture and press hard the truths expressed in area 1, or in 5 (where one's theology is neither biblical nor intersects the local culture)... For example, personal bias may cause him or her to deny uncritically the legitimacy of the culture's insights.²⁶

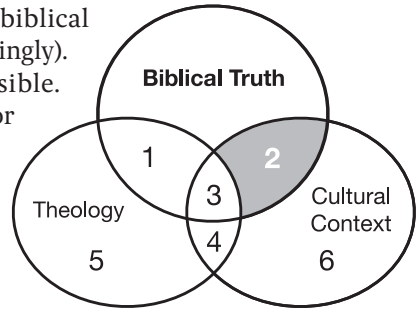


Figure 1.08: Jackson Wu's Figure 1; area 2 is where blind spots occur

The theological and cultural matter of honor and shame is, therefore, one example that fits into Area 2. We have demonstrated its biblical prominence. Honor/shame is likewise prominent in the majority of cultures of our world. An estimated 70 to 80 percent of the world's peoples are collectivistic rather than individualistic,²⁷ and therefore have honor and shame as a more dominant cultural

23. Wu, *Saving God's Face*, 52.

24. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 144.

25. Noll, Kindle edition locations 399–400.

26. Wu, *Saving God's Face*, 53.

27. “How prevalent are collectivistic societies? In today's world, Triandis (1989, 48) observes, 70 percent of the world's population remain collectivistic while 30 percent are individualistic. As a matter of fact, individualism seems totally strange, esoteric, incomprehensible, and even vicious to observers from collectivistic societies. Again, Triandis (1989, 50) notes that what is most important in the United States—individualism—is of least importance to the rest of the world.” Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, SJ, “Ancient Mediterranean Persons in Cultural Perspective: Portrait of Paul,” in *The Social World of the New Testament: Insights and Models*, eds. Malina and Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 258. They reference Henry C. Triandis, “Cross-Cultural Studies of Individualism and Collectivism” in *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation 1989: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Richard A. Diensbar and John J. Berman (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 41–133. Malina estimates that 80 percent of the world's peoples are collectivistic in “Anachronism, Ethnocentrism, and Shame: The Envy of the Chief Priests” in eds. Jewett, Alloway, and Lacey, 148.

value than do Western peoples. But honor/shame has been ignored by a majority of Western theologians. The systematic theologies disregard the matter of honor and shame altogether.

Wu adds: “From a Chinese perspective, Western theologians under-stress biblical ideas such as HS [honor/shame], group-identity, idolatry, and familial piety.”²⁸

Concerning African issues, Andrew Walls writes that Western theology is “too small” for African realities of life.

The truth is that Western models of theology are too small for Africa. Most of them reflect the worldview of the Enlightenment, and that is a small-scale worldview, one cut and shaved to fit a small-scale universe. ... They have nothing useful to say on issues involving such things as witchcraft or sorcery, since these do not exist in an Enlightenment universe. Nor can Western theology usefully discuss ancestors, since the West does not have the family structures that raise the questions.²⁹

But the fact that theological blind spots occur does not merely point to a deficit of theological knowledge. It ultimately points to the possibility of a fuller, maturing experience of Jesus Christ. Walls writes about the cross-cultural proliferation of the gospel as a means to a fuller knowledge of Christ:

Each [cultural expression of Christian faith] is to have, like Jew and Greek in the early church, its own converted lifestyle as the distinctive features of each culture are turned toward Christ. The representation of Christ by any one group can at best be only partial. At best it reflects the conversion of one small segment of reality, and it needs to be complemented and perhaps corrected by others. The fullness of humanity lies in Christ; the aggregate of converted lifestyles points toward his full stature.³⁰

So to unmask theological blind spots can be a most valuable exploration, for it can lead us to a fuller expression of the life of Jesus in our own lives, our own families, churches, and communities. Moreover, to unmask a theological blind spot can be critically important for making Christians more effective in cross-cultural ministry.³¹

In order to better grasp the reality of theological blind spots which are connected to cultural differences, we need to see a paradox: *God’s Word stands in authority above all cultures, but at the same time, God’s Word can embrace varying cultural ideas and styles, which on the surface seem contradictory.*

We will therefore move to the next chapter, where we will explore this paradox in something called the *canopy of biblical truth*. Let’s take a look.

28. Wu, *Saving God’s Face*, 54.

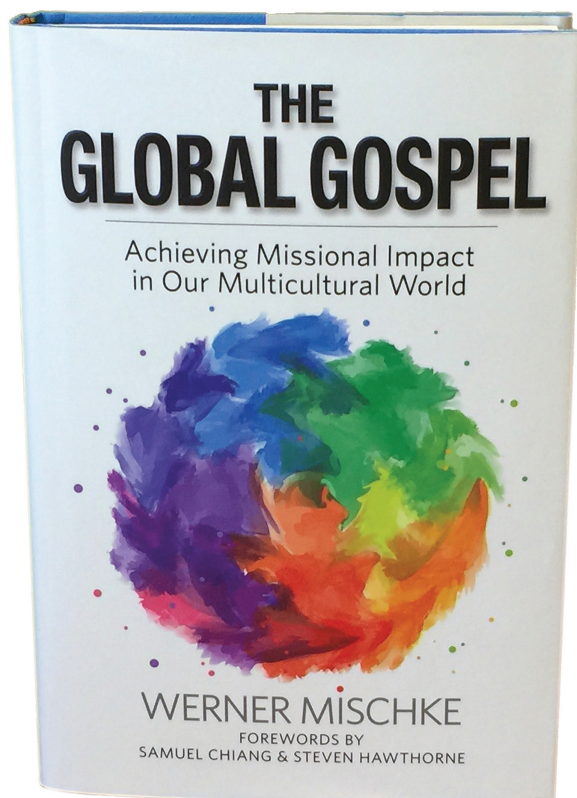
29. Walls, Kindle edition locations 1379–85.

30. Walls, Kindle edition locations 1342–45.

31. One of the most famous examples of an unmasked blind spot is represented by an article by missiologist Paul Hiebert. Craig Ott writes: “Hiebert’s landmark article ‘The Flaw of the Excluded Middle’ (1982) is an example of how the worldview of Western theologians led to a blind spot regarding the biblical teaching on unseen powers, a teaching desperately needed especially in animistic contexts.” *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, eds. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), Kindle edition locations 6595–97. The Hiebert article referenced is “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle” *Missiology* 10, no. 1 (January, 1982): 35–47. For more on Hiebert’s article and how it relates to the dynamics of honor and shame, see Section 3, Chapter 4 of this book. Hiebert’s article was originally published in *Missiology* 10, no. 1 (January, 1982): 35–47.

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