

H/S-1 to H/S-5: Levels of Awareness of Honor/Shame in Cross-Cultural Ministry

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Since 2009 I have been on a learning journey about the dynamic of honor/shame in Scripture and its significance for cross-cultural ministry. By God’s grace, I’ve had the opportunity to read and conduct research, to write articles and a book on the subject (Mischke, 2015), to introduce the subject of honor/shame through numerous seminars and workshops, to create resources,¹ and to teach collaboratively with two indigenous ministry partners.

My work has led me to discover five levels of awareness concerning H/S dynamics in cross-cultural ministry. Proposed below are these five levels: H/S-1 to H/S-5.

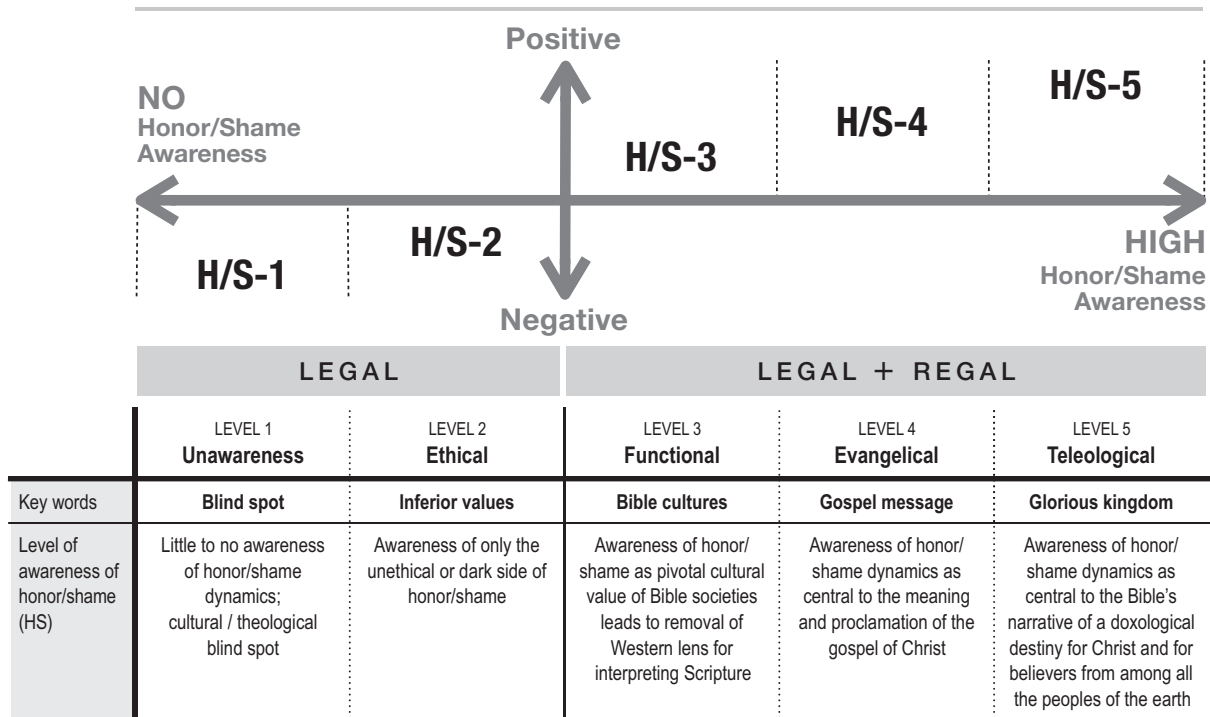


Figure 1: Five levels of awareness of honor/shame in cross-cultural ministry

H/S-1: UNAWARENESS

At level H/S-1, there is little to no awareness of honor/shame dynamics in Scripture or culture. The key words are: *blind spot*. This lack of awareness is considered negative because H/S is vital, not only for understanding a large number of cultures of the Majority World, but also for understanding the Bible, which has H/S as its “pivotal cultural value” (Neyrey, 1998, 15). This cultural and theological blind spot occurs for various reasons.

¹ See <http://wernermischke.org/resources>. See other H/S resources at <http://honorshame.com>.

First, consider Christian seminary education and the significance of systematic theology in training pastors, missionaries, and leaders. Timothy Tennent writes, “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” (2007, 92–93).

Tennent cites research showing that, in the Bible, the occurrence of the word *guilt* and its derivatives are half as frequent as the word *shame* and its derivatives.² Why is the atonement of Christ almost exclusively presented in the West as a cure for sin/guilt without any reference to sin/shame? It’s a blind spot.

There are other reasons for this blind spot. Much of the literature about honor/shame is relatively recent, therefore it has only marginally been incorporated into the academy or the mainstream literature for Christian discipleship. Plus, theological blind spots are common. All theology is smaller than the whole of biblical revelation. Lesslie Newbigin writes, “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” (1989, 144).

Commenting on the missionary enterprise of the church, David Bosch writes, “By the time the large-scale Western colonial expansion began, Western Christians were unconscious of the fact that their theology was culturally conditioned; they simply assumed that it was supracultural and universally valid” (1991, 448).

Could it be that today, Western Christian leaders—including many cross-cultural workers—are still “unconscious that their theology is culturally conditioned”?

Consider “The Four Spiritual Laws”³—a gospel message typical of Western presentations. The message is directed to *individuals*, not families or communities. The principles are *legal*, not *regal*; there is no mention of the gospel of the kingdom and its honorific meaning for believers. The cross provides forgiveness for sins and guilt; no mention of sin and shame. Moreover, the presentation is *abstract* (using diagrams)—rather than *concrete* in a narrative form. The majority of Western presentations of the gospel reflect this same set of values.

This blind-spot-problem about H/S is magnified when considering the fact that the majority of Christian leaders around the world have been taught by Westerners, Western-trained teachers, or use Western-published textbooks. Even if a Christian leader is serving in the Majority World

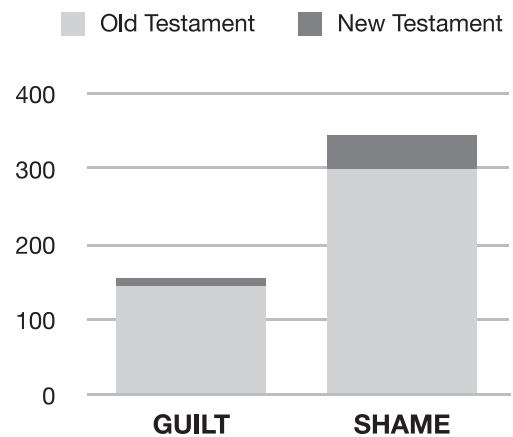


Figure 2: Words in the Bible derived from “guilt”—versus “shame”

² 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.

³ “The Four Spiritual Laws” has been renamed “How to Know God Personally.” <http://www.cru.org/how-to-know-god/would-you-like-to-know-god-personally/index.htm>. Accessed 10 February 2014. © Campus Crusade for Christ.

among people whose pivotal cultural value is H/S, they are still usually unaware of the extensive material in the Bible by which to articulate the gospel in H/S language.

No wonder—among many pastors, mission educators, theologians and cross-cultural workers trained from a Western theological perspective, the awareness of H/S dynamics is minimal. They have a blind spot at level H/S-1.

H/S-2: “ETHICAL” level of awareness

At level H/S-2, Christians are aware of honor/shame dynamics but only see the dark side. The key words are: *inferior values*. H/S is viewed negatively as an unethical value system; it is morally corrupt—to be recognized, yes, but replaced by superior (Western-Christian) values.

To be sure, there is a dark side to H/S cultures. One may think of “saving face” as a common, but negative, practice among some peoples. A believer at level H/S-2 may acknowledge the cultural feature of H/S, but thinks: *Why save face? Just look me in the eye and tell the truth!* Or if a suicide has occurred: *It was stupid to commit suicide to “save face” for their family.*⁴

Consider ‘honor killing.’ Honor-based violence is committed against a family member to restore family honor. It is mystifying to think that a family would, for example, conspire to murder a daughter because she has shamed the family by dating someone outside their religious background.⁵ Clearly, evil aspects of H/S cultures abound in our world.

Here’s a more ambiguous example: Suppose an indigenous Christian leader in an H/S culture in which achieved honor is routinely recognized accepts expressions of deference and honor given to him by those of lower status. Western Christians serving alongside the indigenous leader may perceive his behavior as egotistical—even sinful. The leader views his behavior as proper contextualization, congruent with the advance of the gospel in his culture. But the Westerners, while partially aware of H/S dynamics, see H/S as the values undergirding his unethical behavior. Thus, *the indigenous leader should repent*. While the indigenous leader ministers at positive levels of H/S-3 or H/S-4, the Westerners are at the negative level of H/S-2. They lack the cognitive categories, culturally or theologically, into which fit a positive view of H/S; they literally cannot imagine going beyond an ethically negative view of H/S.

Summary of H/S-1 and H/S-2

Levels H/S-1 and H/S-2 are negative. At H/S-1, there is no awareness of H/S, constituting a blind spot. At level H/S-2, H/S is recognized as a cultural feature, but is understood as the disease of a sinful culture to be replaced by a superior Christian value system (as interpreted by Western believers).

Concerning the atonement, believers at H/S-1 and H/S-2 view the cross through a legal lens. Christ’s sacrifice satisfies the wrath of a Holy God against guilty sinners who have violated God’s laws; the cross secures forgiveness for sin/guilt; the category of sin/shame is nonexistent. The understanding of salvation as the covering of shame and granting of honor by God—is foreign. There is little relevance in their cross-cultural ministry to the “gospel of the kingdom.”

⁴ For a deep exploration of how the Thai concept of face overlaps with gospel, see Christopher L. Flanders: *About Face: Rethinking Face for 21st Century Mission* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

⁵ See <http://theahafoundation.org> for more about honor-based violence.

The strategic issues relative to H/S-1 and H/S-2 are weighty. Missionaries sometimes fail to heed Romans 13:7—“Pay to all what is owed to them: ...respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed” (cf 1 Pet 2:17). When Christians ignore this, persons in places of honor can be offended—whether tribal chiefs, government officials, or even the monarchy of a nation. When this happens it sometimes casts a long shadow of animosity—even persecution—against the gospel, creating multi-generational resistance to the gospel in the respondent culture; that these offenses may be avoidable is sobering indeed. *The answer to such situations?* I propose learning the H/S dynamics of the Bible and how they overlap with the host culture; plus empathic listening and contextualized apology.

H/S-3: “FUNCTIONAL” level of awareness

Level H/S-3 begins the transition to a positive view of honor/shame—the *functional* level. The key words are *Bible societies* because at H/S-3, believers become aware of H/S as the pivotal cultural value of Bible cultures—gaining a vital lens for understanding the authors and original hearers of Scripture.

At H/S-3, believers *use* honor/shame; H/S has a *function*—a vital hermeneutic to interpret God’s Word. Christians using this hermeneutic see both the dark and bright sides of H/S.

They clearly see that the dark aspects of H/S result from the Fall, leading to a pathology of sin pervading all humanity. However, believers at H/S-3 also see the bright and glorious side to H/S. At the crux of this bright side is the glorious, *honorific*, kingdom-reign of God in which believers live (Mat 5:1–12), and the ascended kingship of Jesus Christ *in whom* believers live (Eph 2:6, Col 1:28, 1 Tim 6:15). Redemption is embraced in both *legal* and *regal* dimensions.

Moreover, believers at H/S-3 discover that by gaining awareness of H/S as the pivotal cultural value of Bible societies, they realize a two-fold blessing: One, their relationship with God’s Word comes alive with many new insights. Two, they see vivid overlaps between the values of Bible societies and those of many Majority World peoples; they gain *tools and skills* to relate more effectively as gospel messengers.

As believers progress in level H/S-3, they see the strategic function of H/S in hermeneutics, preaching, theology, missiology. They ask: Is the Western theological bias of *legal over regal* (ignoring H/S)—a remnant of colonialism?

H/S-4: “EVANGELICAL” level of awareness

Level H/S-4 builds on the positive understanding of honor/shame. The key words are: *gospel message*. At level H/S-4, believers gain awareness of H/S as central to the good news. H/S-4 is called the *evangelical* level—it is all about the gospel.

Concerning the dark side of H/S, believers understand sin as dishonoring God (Rom 1:21–22; 2:23–24, cf Rom 3:23). It may be just as serious to insult God’s regal Person as it is to violate the Judge’s legal code.

Concerning the bright side of H/S, believers embrace salvation in Christ as a drama of honor-status reversal—a reversal of shame to honor. Consider Ephesians 2, where one finds ‘salvation by grace through faith’ (v 8–10). Believers at level H/S-4 know this glorious redemptive truth sits at the intersection of two great honor-status reversals—*vertically* in relationship to God (v 1–7)—and *horizontally* in relationship to God’s people (v 11–22).

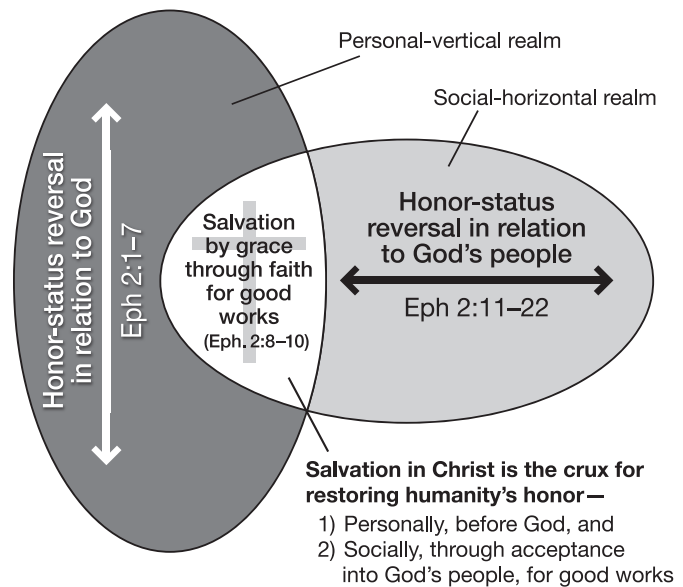


Figure 3: Honor-status reversal as the crux of salvation

Timothy Tennent writes: “The New Testament celebrates a salvific transformation that has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. Personal salvation in the New Testament is inextricably linked to becoming a part of the new humanity of Ephesians 2:15” (2010, 62).

Believers at level H/S-4 have experienced the gospel as the cure for both guilt *and* shame. Their shame has been covered and their honor restored through Christ. The Prodigal Son story (Luke 15:11–32) offers a powerful narrative⁶ by which Jesus teaches that God is like a father willing to suffer shame for us (Heb 1:3). “*Is there a way, today, to have the honor of joining God’s great family—and know for sure the honor of entering heaven’s great party?*” ... “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. The only way to the Father is through me’” (John 14:6 ERV).⁷ One facet of salvation is having one’s honor eternally relocated into the kingdom and Person of God’s beloved Son (Col 1:13).

At level H/S-4, the bright side of honor/shame is clear. H/S a powerful hermeneutic by which to contextualize the gospel of Christ,⁸ and is important for personal spiritual transformation.

Moreover, cross-cultural workers at level H/S-4 see the strategic value of H/S dynamics. The H/S hermeneutic offers scripturally-rooted thought forms by which the gospel may be contextualized for many unengaged and unreached peoples. H/S awareness contributes to the church’s task of discipling all nations. And the Western-based law-and-guilt-oriented gospel is relativized to be in balance with an honor/shame- and regal-based gospel of the kingdom.

H/S-5: “TELEOLOGICAL” level of awareness

The highest level of awareness of honor/shame is H/S-5. The key words are: *glorious kingdom*. At H/S-5 believers see H/S as central to the Bible’s narrative of an honorific destiny both for

⁶ See <http://thefatherslovebooklet.org>—a gospel presentation primarily as a narrative in H/S language.

⁷ “The Father’s Love Gospel Booklet,” p. 17–18.

⁸ See Werner Mischke, *THE GLOBAL GOSPEL: Achieving Missional Impact in Our Multicultural World*. Section 3 describes ten H/S dynamics and how they overlap with scriptural material about the atonement, thus forming a foundation for fresh presentations of the gospel.

Christ *and* for the peoples of the earth. H/S-5 is identified as the *teleological* level because of its focus on God's *ultimate purpose*.

Concerning the dark side of H/S, the Bible says that all evil forces will be conquered by King Jesus. The whole universe will one day be united in Christ (Eph 1:10). Christ's conquest will be so resounding, all enemies will be shamed, put under his feet (Ps 110:1; Mat 22:23–24; 1 Cor 15:25–27; Eph 1:21–22).

On the bright side of H/S, Christians see regal honor at the crux of God's ultimate purpose. The universe is less about what is right, more about who is exalted and loved as King. Eventually, the regal will trump anything merely legal. "The King of kings is not only the one from whom all laws are derived. He is the one unto whom the perfect law of love is finally directed."⁹

But there's more. With infinite grace, God actually shares his honor and glory with the redeemed (John 17:22). The saints of God shall actually *receive* and *possess* God's kingdom forever (Dan 7:18, 22, 27). The day is coming when every people will worship the regal Savior (Rev 5:9)—*while they themselves experience divine honor in the process!* Such is the overflowing love and honor of Almighty God *dwelling with* his people (Rev 21:30) ... the King *sitting with* conquering saints who have joined him on his throne (Rev 3:21) ... the Bridegroom *banqueting with* his bride (Rev 19:7–9) ... and Christ receiving the kings of the earth to bring the glory and honor of the nations into the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:24–26). The *missio Dei* culminates in glory *for* God and honor *from* God for every people! *Doxology as relational love and honor* (Hawthorne, 2013) —this is the destiny of all creation (Rom 11:36)!¹⁰

Strategically, H/S dynamics can serve mission thinking and practice. Empathic listening in the global body of Christ acquires an amplified importance as the so-called "honorable" collaborate with the so-called "less honorable" (1 Cor 12:21–24). Evangelism and church planting begin with a view toward the honor of every people restored, fully enjoyed by God; this is not only a reason to prioritize the unreached and unengaged—it's a beatific vision that can be an entry point for the gospel. And creative worship arts in ethnolinguistic harmony¹¹ glorify Christ while honoring every people. At H/S-5, a culture of Christ-centered honor permeates the church's mission of blessing the nations.

Conclusion

Many are unaware of the overlaps between the H/S dynamics in Scripture and the world's H/S cultures. Believers *can* gain higher levels of awareness of H/S, leading to more effective cross-cultural ministry.

This analysis of H/S awareness is a tool to stimulate dialog and understanding about both the negative and positive aspects of H/S—in Scripture and culture. May this resource be catalytic for the church's mission to disciple the nations for the glory of King Jesus and the honor of every people.

⁹ Steven Hawthorne; personal correspondence, 2014.

¹⁰ See Hawthorne's *Let All the Peoples Praise Him: Toward a Teleological Paradigm of the Missio Dei*, 354–359.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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