

Giving Honor: A Key to Fruitful Cross-Cultural Partnerships

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We begin with two assumptions: First, challenges concerning honor competition and rivalry affect cross-cultural teams, networks, or partnerships throughout the world Christian movement. Second, solutions (though not easy) are found in Christ.

Problem: (1) Honor competition—rivalry—was a major cultural feature of the New Testament world and a problem in the New Testament church. (2) Honor competition and rivalry occurring in mission teams and cross-cultural collaborations hinder biblical unity and fruitful ministry.

Solution: (1) Jesus and Paul teach that serving and “giving honor” undermine the problem of rivalry. (2) Unity in the body of Christ happens when the so-called honorable “give honor” to the so-called less honorable. (3) The practice of empathic listening is an appropriate way of giving honor in any culture. Giving honor by listening builds trust and unity for fruitful ministry—a vital practice in the collaborative, intercultural, global mission of God.

The Problem of Rivalry in the New Testament World and Church

New Testament scholar James M. G. Barclay describes the social context of Apostle Paul:

Paul lived in a face-to-face society where self-advertisement, rivalry, and public competition were a perpetual cause of tension in every day life. As recent research has emphasized, almost all social relations in Paul’s cultural context were both ordered and threatened by the competition for honor. . . . The pursuit or defense of honor was, many ancient commentators claimed, the chief motivating force for action: “by nature we yearn and hunger for honor, and once we have glimpsed, as it were, some part of its radiance, there is nothing we are not prepared to bear and suffer in order to secure it” (Cicero, *Tusc.* 2.24.58). . . . Honor was derived from comparison, from placing oneself (or being placed by others) higher on some hierarchical scale, in which one person’s superiority means that another is comparatively demeaned. This made honor ever the subject of contest.¹

Rivalry and public competition were a perpetual cause of tension in every day life. We observe rivalry in Mark’s Gospel when the disciples argued about who was the greatest (9:34); or when James and John boastfully petitioned Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (10:34), for which the other ten disciples were

“indignant” (10:41).

We also see rivalry in the early church. Paul writes, “Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry. . . .” (Phil 1:15). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul proscribes “enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions” (5:22). He is addressing the values of the Roman Empire—it was expected of men to publicly engage in rivalry, competition, and to ‘never back down.’

Jerome Neyrey writes: “Some scholars of the ancient world describe it as an ‘agonistic society,’ by which they point to its intensely competitive nature and the common envy shown successful persons.”² And Robert Jewett, in his commentary on Romans, writes “. . . it is ordinarily overlooked that Rome is the boasting champion of the ancient world . . .”³

Relatedly, consider the word “boast” in the New Testament. According to Strong’s Concordance, the Greek word forms for boast (*kauchaomai*, *kauchéma*, *kauchesis*) occur sixty times in the New Testament; fifty-six are in Paul’s epistles—a surprisingly high number. Why is this?

The boast is related to the honor-shame dynamic scholars call “challenge and riposte,” which has four-parts: (1) the claim to honor (or boast); (2) the challenge to the claim; (3) the riposte, or defense of the claim to honor; and (4) public recognition of who wins and loses.⁴ Boasting was ingrained in Roman manhood,⁵ so the frequent use of the word boast in the New Testament signals for

the reader a social world characterized by rivalry, competition, conflict.

Bringing Honor Status Issues to the Surface

I do not mean to suggest that today’s Christian networks and partnerships around the world have the same degree of boasting, rivalry, or honor competition that plagued the New Testament church. I do mean to convey that there is value in bringing to the surface the issues of honor status and rivalry both in the New Testament church and in contemporary cross-cultural ministry—along with solutions offered by Jesus and Paul.

What might rivalry look like in networks or cross-cultural partnerships today? Table 3.1 lists ten aspects of identity—plus examples of how variations in honor status related to those aspects may typically contribute to tension or rivalry.

Is the purpose of this article to unleash thin-skinned resentment in otherwise healthy relationships? Obviously not. It’s to bring to light possible assumptions about honor status on the part of the default strong and honorable which may inhibit partnership health. We want to stimulate introspection and dialog toward more fruitful partnerships.

Who is in control? Which training model, which theology, is assumed? How is our agenda determined?

We want to avoid choosing leaders based

Table 3.1 Aspects of Identity and Variations in Honor Status

Aspects of Identity	General Variations	Typical Source of Tension/Rivalry
Age	Young, middle age, old	The older person has greater authority than the younger (or the reverse)
Gender	Male or female	The male automatically assumes leadership
Marital Status	Married, single, divorced	The married person always leads
Race	Arab, East Asian, South Asian, Anglo-European, African, Latino, native/indigenous, etc.	By default, the Anglo-European leads the intercultural collaboration
Tribe	Minority tribe vs. majority tribe	The majority tribe representative is automatically the leader
Caste	Untouchables, lower, middle, upper	The untouchables or lower caste have little voice; the higher caste are dominant
Family/Kinship	Orphan, “low” family, well-known family, nobility	The orphan is the follower—while the one from the well-known family or nobility: automatically the leader
Economic Status	Poor, middle class, upper class, wealthy	The recipient of funds automatically submits to the provider of funds
National Identity	Western vs. Eastern & “Global South” or American vs. any other	The American or other Westerner is the leader by default
Formal Education	Little, undergraduate, advanced degrees	The one with an advanced degree assumes leadership over those with lesser education

on assumed cultural values rather than biblical servanthood and competence. We want the voices of cross-cultural partners amplified, not marginalized. We want issues of equality (2 Corinthians 8:14) given a fair hearing.

Jesus: Undermining Rivalry Through Serving

Jesus taught an upside-down honor code: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35), and “whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43). High honor—being great in God’s kingdom—is based on servanthood: the more you serve the more you are honored by God.

Great honor is now accessible to everyone—regardless of gender, age, marital status, race or tribe or caste, family blood, economic status, nationality, or education. Jesus is *democratizing honor*—making accessible to everyone the availability of honor in the kingdom of God. By knowing Christ the King and gaining honor through serving (not competing), the problem of honor competition and rivalry—can be undermined.

Paul: Undermining Rivalry Through “Giving Honor”

Let’s consider a selection of scriptures from Paul as he describes the antithesis of rivalry—what a unified body of Christ looks like. The first passage is in 1 Corinthians: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’

nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body ...” (1 Corinthians 12:21–25). Take note of the phrase: giving greater honor to the part that lacked it.

The second scripture is Romans 12:10. “Outdo one another in showing honor.” Here Paul says go ahead, engage in competition, but it is of an entirely different kind. The only kind of rivalry permissible in the body of Christ is this: Outdo one another in showing honor. Don’t compete for honor gained; compete for honor given. Paul is prescribing behaviors that undermine the default culture of rivalry and honor competition in order to unify believers. Here’s the principle: Unity in the body of Christ happens in proportion to the way the so-called strong and honorable give greater honor and respect to the so-called weak and less honorable.

Paul’s Theology for Global Mission

In Romans, Paul’s appeal for unity in the church has profound missiological significance. Theology professor Jackson Wu writes, “mission drives the theological agenda of

Romans.” Wu’s article on Romans (highly recommended!) demonstrates exegetically “that Paul wrote Romans in order to motivate the Roman church to support his mission to the ‘barbarians’ in Spain. ... The letter’s elaborate theology exists so that Paul might preach the gospel where Christ had not been known (Romans 15:20).”⁶ Paul wants Jewish and Gentile factions of the church in Rome to overcome rivalry and unite in fellowship—which Paul sees as essential to gain their support for his mission to unreached “barbarians” in Spain⁷ (Romans 1:14, 15:24–28).

One more scripture: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). This verse speaks of a world-changing honor-status ideal: In Christ, all persons and peoples are equal in value and honor status.⁸ This union with Christ creates for believers an “honor-surplus”—from which the so-called strong and honorable are able to give greater honor to the so-called weak and less honorable.

Supernatural unity in the body of Christ happens as we intentionally give honor to those who seem to have less honor. One early Christian document instructs such alertness about honor status in its guidelines for bishops: “The Didascalia ... prescribed that a bishop ought never to interrupt his service to greet a person of high degree who had just entered the church, lest he—the bishop—be seen to be a respecter of persons;

but, on seeing a poor man or woman enter the assembly, that same bishop should do everything in his power to make room for the new arrival, even if he himself should have to sit upon the floor to do so.”⁹

How Christlike and counter-cultural—to relinquish honor so someone of lesser standing can be elevated! Can we see this practice of relinquishing-honor-for-the-purpose-of-unity as vital for the health of our own partnerships and networks, and for bringing the gospel to all the peoples of the earth?

Exceptions to Equality of Honor Status

There are exceptions to the New Testament ideal of egalitarian honor status. Paul says that good church elders, preachers and teachers are worthy of “double honor” (1 Timothy 5:17). And elevated honor is implied for believers who suffer (1 Peter 2:7, 3:14, 4:16, 5:9, cf. Revelation 2:10).

Moreover, it is wise to give appropriate honor in the culture at large. Paul wrote, “Pay to all what is owed to them: . . . respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed (Romans 13:7). Similarly, Peter wrote, “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17).

Give honor to whom honor is owed—honor everyone—honor the emperor. Is there a particular honor-shame dynamic which helps the New Testament reader understand these commands in their social context? Yes: patronage and reciprocity.¹⁰ “The emperor was the patron, the benefactor, of his every subject. The subjects, in turn, paid him back for his benefactions with their loyalty; Thus, the empire was a single enormous spider’s web of reciprocal favors.”¹¹ Obviously, giving honor to the emperor through civic-minded reciprocity is not the same as worshiping the emperor as a god, considered idolatry by the church. So, this rule: Giving honor? Usually

appropriate. Idolatry? Forbidden.

Balancing Equality and Hierarchy

This presents believers with a balancing act. Inside the church, all persons are equal in ascribed honor in relationship to Christ. Believers live by Jesus’ upside-down code of serving and giving honor; this may challenge the status quo while witnessing to the egalitarian love of God. Plus, effective leaders, preachers, and teachers are worthy of “double honor.” Outside the church, believers give honor to whom honor is due. Believers live in harmony with local norms, upholding the status quo of hierarchical honor codes—so long as it doesn’t veer into idolatry.

Giving Honor Through Empathic Listening

What might “giving honor” look like in Christian ministry? It varies, of course, depending on the kind or ministry you’re a part of. Local customs, events, and language may also shape how you give honor to a person, family, or community. But there’s also a universal manner of giving honor, appropriate in most any relational situation. It’s listening. Table 3.2 identifies five levels of listening culminating in empathic listening.

Empathic listening is also called hearing with your heart. It’s not easy. It requires uncommon self-awareness and discipline. It is difficult to not merely listen casually, but to listen actively and uncritically—to interpret what I hear and to reflect what’s being said with the right corresponding emotion. To listen deeply when I’d rather speak is relinquishing honor to another. It requires much of me—spiritually and emotionally—to reflect what my friend both thinks and feels before offering an opinion. It requires much, but listening shows respect, gives honor, and builds trust.

Listening Empathically with an Honor-Shame Filter

Finally, consider three honor-shame dynamics in light of empathic listening. Might we gain some additional perspective to defuse rivalry and conflict?

1. Love of honor. The honor-shame dynamic love of honor is common worldwide, and amplified in honor-shame cultures. Augustine wrote, “For the glory that the Romans burned to possess, be it known, is the favorable judgment of men who think well of other men.”¹² How might our awareness of the love of honor be useful in resolving conflict?
Reflect: Has a person, family, or community been insulted? Can honor be restored?
2. Two sources of honor—*ascribed* and *achieved*. *Ascribed* honor is about one’s being—derived from family, kinship, tribe, place of birth, or title, regardless of individual merit. *Achieved* honor is about one’s behavior. *Ascribed* honor is gained by loyalty and doing good, by competition in the arenas of sport, politics, warfare, the arts, education, or simply the daily ‘social game of push-and-shove.’¹³
Reflect: Is a standard of *ascribed* honor based on age, family, title, etc. in conflict with a merit-based standard of *achieved* honor?
3. Image of limited good. This is “the belief that everything in the social, economic, natural universe . . . everything desired in life: land, wealth, respect and status, power and influence . . . exist in finite quantity and are in short supply. If you gain, I lose . . . it’s a ‘zero-sum game.’”¹⁴
Reflect: Has someone gained honor—at the undue expense of another?

Table 3.2 Levels of Listening


1. I only appear to be listening	2. I listen in order to be heard	3. I listen for information	4. I listen to understand	5. I listen empathically
I’m thinking about something else. My mind and heart are elsewhere; and usually the person I’m talking to knows it.	I’m thinking about what I will say next. I want to make a good impression by what I say. I may gain something valuable as a result.	I need the knowledge to be effective in my work, family, relationships, ministry.	I repeat using many of the same words I have heard—so that the person knows I understand him or her. I want to reflect what the person is thinking.	I interpret what I have heard using my own words, and I try to use the appropriate emotion. I want to reflect what the person both thinks and feels.

Summary

Rivalry in the body of Christ is undermined through servanthood and when the so-called honorable “give honor” to the so-called less honorable. Giving honor—so others of lesser standing are elevated—can be done by empathic listening in our cross-cultural partnerships. Could it be, that in our increasingly collaborative global Christian family, this is vital to our mission?

For Discussion

How might you assess the issue of rivalry in your agency, network, or partnership?

What would be the benefits of developing a ministry culture of outdoing one another in showing honor and empathic listening? 

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Endnotes

1. James M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 433–4.
2. Jerome Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 15.
3. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 295–6.
4. Werner Mischke, *The Global Gospel: Achieving Missional Impact in Our Multicultural World* (Scottsdale: Mission ONE, 2015), 104–11.
5. See Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 214–5. He discusses the cultural norm of honor competition by males in public—and that Jesus calls his disciples to “vacate the playing field.”
6. Jackson Wu, “Paul Writes To The Greek First And Also To The Jew”, *Journal of Evangelical Theology Society: JETS* 56, no. 4 (2013) 765–79. http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/56/56-4/JETS_56-4_765-79_Wu.pdf.
7. Jewett’s massive *Romans: A Commentary* argues the same theology-for-mission.
8. Ephesians 2:12–19 articulates the same principle of egalitarian honor status in the family of God.
9. David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009), 170.
10. See David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 95–156.
11. J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, Kindle edition locations 170–73.
12. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 17.
13. Mischke, *The Global Gospel*, 94.
14. Mischke, *The Global Gospel*, 98.