



Understanding Five Basic Culture Scales  
Through the Cultural Lens of Honor and Shame—  
with Application to Cross-Cultural Relationships and Partnerships

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# Honor & Shame in Cross-Cultural Relationships

## Understanding Five Basic Culture Scales Through the Cultural Lens of Honor and Shame— with Application to Cross-Cultural Relationships and Partnerships

by Werner Mischke

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## **INTRODUCTION: A little background on how this developed, and an introduction to basic concepts of honor and shame**

In the early part of 2009, I began reading through all of the epistles of Paul, and underlining words, phrases and verses that were clearly connected to honor and/or shame. Words like ... *honor* ... *glory* ... *name* ... *ashamed* ... *exalted* ... *rivalry* ... *boasting* ... these words and the stories which relate to them—all relate to the ‘honor and shame’ cultural values of the Bible’s authors,<sup>1</sup> and clearly Paul was moved by the values of honor and shame, as well. I had read through Philippians several times with this theme in mind. This practice was extremely helpful in helping me see the commonness of the theme in Paul’s writings.

I traveled to the Middle East in May of 2009 to visit our Mission ONE ministry partner (it was my third trip there in two years). During this trip, I shared in a Bible study with a group of mostly first-generation believers from a Muslim background who were part of vibrant, mission-motivated church family. Our study was in the book of Philippians. It was a nourishing time in the Word of God together.

Here’s how we did this:

Prior to my trip, we agreed to a one-day study. Our ministry partner had asked me to lead a Bible-teaching event or seminar during my visit. I suggested that we do a study in Philippians and to do so studying it through the lens of honor and shame. He agreed. I also suggested to him that he communicate this to the church family—and that they begin reading through Philippians on their own, which some did.

I asked the pastor to provide background teaching on the book of Philippians. The pastor accomplished this by asking one of the church members to do this. It was empowering to the church member (who was relatively young in the faith)—and this provided the background teaching that helped everyone have a proper context for the book; it dealt with the history, geography and significance of the city of Philippi.

I began the study by teaching through Philippians chapter 1—through the honor and shame lens—going verse by verse. This showed to everyone the surprising—sometimes *implicit* and sometimes *explicit*—honor and shame theme in Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi. It may be observed that a major issue in chapter one is *Paul’s imprisonment* and the degree to which the shame of being in prison affected both his sense of identity as an apostle of Jesus Christ—and his relationship with his friends at Philippi.

We broke into small groups for chapters 2, 3, and 4. We had each small group take about 30 to 45 minutes to consider the way that honor and shame is woven into Paul’s writings. Each group

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to question the inerrancy of the Bible in its original manuscripts, or the fact that all Scripture is “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). I simply contend that all of the cultures of Bible held the pursuit of honor and the avoidance of shame as pivotal values, and that this is reflected in Scripture.

wrote their results in Arabic on a big sheet of paper using markers. Then, a member of each group presented their results to the whole group, along with further discussion.

The results of this time of learning and studying together was profound for some of the individuals present.

One woman had left the Muslim sect in which she was raised and endured considerable shame as a result; the study helped her as a believer to experience Christ's acceptance and overcome shame. She told me a few days later that she was set free to live with a new boldness.

A man in his mid-20s told me that this study was particularly significant to him because he himself had been imprisoned for his faith for more than two months some nine years prior. It was freeing to him to see that Paul also struggled with the shame of being in prison (Phil. 1:20).

We observed that Philippians 2:5–11 addresses the intense Muslim objection to Christ's public humiliation/crucifixion; Muslims contend, 'God would NEVER allow his son to be so totally humiliated and shamed—this is inconceivable!' Paul answers this challenge by a magnificent cosmic *riposte*, countering with a revelation from God of the *achieved honor* of Christ...

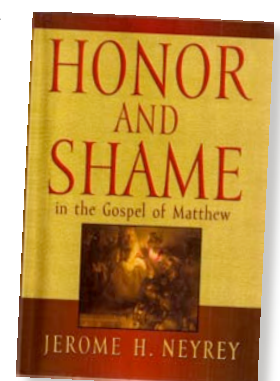
Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. —*Philippians 2:9–11*

This experience in the Middle East for me was an outstanding time of learning together—building a deeper bond—for a healthy cross-cultural partnership. I am so grateful for the oneness we have in Christ with friends around the world. To God be the glory.

When I returned home, I went to the Internet to search for books on honor and shame. One book I found is Jerome Neyrey's *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*.<sup>2</sup> I love this book for the way it explains the honor and shame cultural values of the Ancient (and contemporary) Middle East, and how these cultural values are generally expressed in Scripture, and specifically in Matthew's gospel. I cannot recommend this book highly enough for students of the Word of God. It explains so clearly and authoritatively the honor and shame values and makes understanding Bible cultures more accessible for followers of Christ. Neyrey cites a wide range of ancient Greek and Roman texts—along with Scripture and an understanding of Matthew in its original Greek—to make an extremely strong case.



**Arab men in a small group studying the book of Philippians through the lens of 'honor and shame.' There is something very special about learning together that builds a cross-cultural relationship.**



<sup>2</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey: *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1998).

### Primary features of honor and shame from Jerome Neyrey: *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*

Feature	Quote
Definition	Honor: "the worth or value of persons both in their eyes and in the eyes of their village, neighborhood, or society." ... "The critical item is the public nature of respect and reputation." (Neyrey, p. 15)
General comment	"It would not be an understatement to say that 'honor' as reputation and 'good name' was endemic to the ancient world; hence, we hear [scholars] and anthropologists calling it a <b>'pivotal value'</b> of the Mediterranean world, both ancient and modern." (Neyrey, p. 5)
	CONCERNING PAUL: "Whether we turn to Paul's letters and examine his self-presentation, his conflict with rival teachers and preachers, his praise of certain behavior or blame of other, or his articulation of the status and role of Jesus—all of this needs to be assessed in light of the pivotal value of his world, namely, honor and shame." (Neyrey, p. 34)
Quote from Aristotle	"Now the greatest external good we should assume to be the thing which we offer as a tribute to the gods and which is most coveted by men of high station, and is the prize awarded for the noblest deeds; and such a thing is honour, <b>for honour is clearly the greatest of external goods ... it is honour above all else that great men claim and deserve.</b> " (Neyrey, p. 5)
Sources of honor	"Worth and value are either <b>ascribed</b> to individuals by others, or they are <b>achieved</b> by them." (Neyrey, p. 15)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>"Ascribed honor</b> refers to the granting of respect and given to a person from members of the basic institutions of antiquity, namely: family/kinship or state/politics." (Neyrey, p. 15)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>"Achieved honor:</b> Competition, aggression, and envy: ... 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." (Neyrey, p. 16)</li> </ul>
Love of honor	<p>"Athenians excel all others not so much in singing or in stature or in strength, <b>as in love of honour.</b>" –<i>Xenophon</i></p> <p>"For the glory that the Romans burned to possess, be it known, is <b>the favourable judgment of men who think well of other men.</b>" –<i>Augustine</i></p> <p>"The ancients name <b>love of honor and praise as their premier value.</b>" (Neyrey, p. 17)</p>
Image of limited good	<p>"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."</p> <p><b>If you gain, I lose ... a "zero-sum game."</b> (Neyrey, p. 18)</p>
Challenge and riposte	<p>"Riposte" is a term used in the sport of fencing, meaning—"a quick return thrust following a parry." Socially it means, "a quick clever reply to an insult or criticism." There are <b>four steps</b> to this protocol or social code of challenge and riposte—or "push-and-shove."</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. claim of worth or value</li> <li>2. challenge to that claim or refusal to acknowledge the claim</li> <li>3. riposte or defense of the claim</li> <li>4. public verdict of success awarded to either claimant or challenger</li> </ol> <p>(Neyrey, p. 20)</p>
	<p>CONCERNING JESUS: "This peer game of push-and-shove can be played in any of the typical forums of social life: marketplace, gymnasium, synagogue, banquet with one's male companions, and the like. From our reading of the Gospels, it seems to have occurred whenever Jesus stepped into the public space. The very pervasiveness of this challenge-riposte game indicates that Jesus was both claiming prestige and worth (as God's agent) and achieving a splendid reputation as prophet, teacher, and healer. The fact that he was so regularly challenged ... indicates that he was a very honorable person who was worthy of allegiance and loyalty. It is to his credit that he was both envied (Matt. 27:18) and challenged." (Neyrey, p. 20)</p>
Blood and name	<p>"...the most important institution in antiquity was the family, which conveyed to its members their personal identity and social standing."</p> <p>"...all the members of the family share in its reputation: all rejoice in its honor and all share in its shame. Honor, then, is symbolized by family blood." (Neyrey, p. 21)</p>

This book by Jerome Neyrey has had a profound influence on my reading of the Scriptures and my understanding the cultures in which they were written. Moreover, it has shed much needed light on social and cultural dimensions of cross-cultural ministry where honor and shame are pivotal values.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Understanding both the *ascribed* and *achieved* honor of Jesus Christ can help us better navigate cross-cultural relationships and partnerships.**

As stated in the chart above, there are two kinds of honor—*ascribed* honor and *achieved* honor. It is important for Westerners to understand the difference. It will help them navigate social situations in all honor and shame societies, particularly those in the Muslim world and Asia. The result should be healthier relationships, deeper friendships, more effective cross-cultural partnerships, and ultimately ... more people following Christ to the glory of God.

*Ascribed* honor is the value given to a person in public based on one's family, bloodline, and heritage. On the other hand, *achieved* honor is the value or worth given to a person based on what one has accomplished—usually through some form of competition or challenge; rivalry or warfare can also be part of this.

This contrast is easy for Westerners to understand—we both acknowledge the *ascribed* honor of powerful political families and celebrate the accomplishments of great athletes, an expression of *achieved* honor. However, what Westerners do not normally recognize is the intensity to which the pursuit of honor and the avoidance of shame influences the behavior of people in Eastern societies. Honor and shame is a core value for family, vocation, politics, religion—in short, for everything that matters in life.

One way to explain the difference between *ascribed* honor and *achieved* honor is to let the Bible give us examples. Consider the following verses about the honorable, indeed, glorious, identity of Jesus Christ.

I'll begin with two verses about the *ascribed* honor of Jesus Christ. First ...

"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

—Matthew 1:1 ESV

Note that the entire first chapter of Matthew is given to establish the honor of Christ's identity by establishing the Jewish family line through which Jesus came. This was extremely important to the Jewish people, and it makes perfect sense that it appears in Matthew's gospel, since this gospel more than any other was written to the Jewish audience.

Secondly ...

“and behold, a voice from heaven said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” –Matthew 3:17 ESV

Following the baptism of Jesus, God the Father declares the honor of his Son by publicly stating his divine love and pleasure toward him.

Now let's turn to a classic passage about the *achieved* honor of Jesus Christ:

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. –*Philippians 2:9–11* ESV

Note the the word, “Therefore.” This word is a conjunction, linking the super-exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ with what he achieved on the cross. His honor was, in this sense, earned or achieved, because of the humiliation he suffered and the work he accomplished (“It is finished!”) through his Passion and crucifixion.

Below is a passage describing both the ascribed honor and achieved honor of Jesus Christ—Hebrews 1:1–5, 8–9 (ESV) ...

<sup>1</sup> Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,

<sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, [*ascribed honor*] through whom also he created the world.

<sup>3</sup> He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature [*ascribed honor*], and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high [*achieved honor*],

<sup>4</sup> having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs [*ascribed honor*].

<sup>5</sup> For to which of the angels did God ever say,

You are my Son,  
today I have begotten you? [*ascribed honor*]

Or again,

I will be to him a father,  
and he shall be to me a son? [*ascribed honor*]

<sup>8</sup> But of the Son he says,

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,  
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.

<sup>9</sup> You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;

therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. [*achieved honor*]

In fact, when you read the first two chapters of Hebrews, one can see it is permeated by the Eastern value of honor and shame. The author is making an irrefutable case for the exalted honor of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

A Western Christian may observe this in a detached, logical way—while the Eastern Christian may perceive this with far more relevance and impact. For the Western Christian, it would be like looking at a map called the Bible and seeing on that map a river called The Honor & Glory of the Son of God. The Western believer says, “Ah, yes, there it is, that is a very big river, indeed.”

Christians from an Eastern culture—where the value of honor and shame dominates life—would be more likely to receive this passage of Scripture with deep emotional and life-impacting significance. Because of the significance for them of honor and shame, it is unlike seeing the name of the river on a map; it is more like swimming in that river of truth, being influenced by the strong current of the river, terrified by its depth while enjoying its life-essential vitality. The Eastern believer cannot compartmentalize this as a facet of truth to be acknowledged, but swims in this *honor and shame* reality every hour of every day of his life.

Can you begin to see how this understanding about honor and shame could significantly impact the work of facilitating healthy cross-cultural ministry partnerships between Eastern and Western Christians?

- Consider the importance of ministry focused on family, fatherhood, and bloodline as opposed to ministry centered on individuals. Ministry to the family and children is important in Western churches; *how much more important* is this in Eastern cultures?
- What if you are invited to visit the parents of your ministry partner? What is the best way to handle that? What does that mean for your partnership?
- What does the strong avoidance of shame imply concerning the directness or indirectness of your communication styles? The honor-and-shame practice of ‘saving face’ plays a huge role here.
- How does honor and shame impact a ministry partner’s willingness to assume risk or to live with caution?
- Competition, envy, and rivalry are on the dark side of the honor and shame value system. Is this showing up anywhere in the dynamics of your cross-cultural partnership? How do you respond?

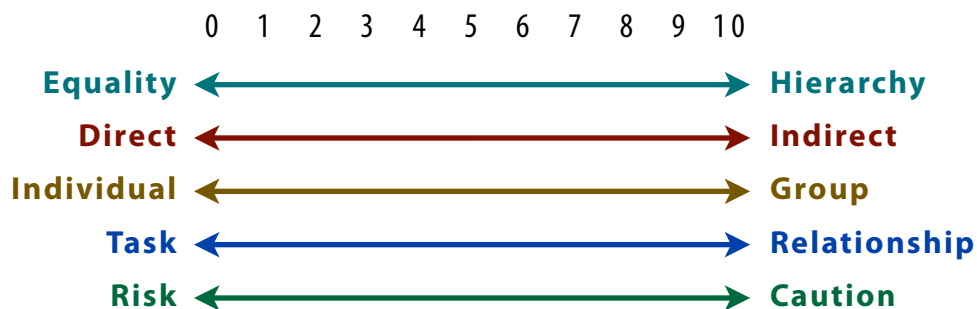
Let’s serve our partnerships with biblically-informed cultural intelligence, for the honor of the Lord Jesus, and to the glory of God. Understanding honor and shame, and correspondingly, embracing God’s passion for his glory among the nations, can help us do just that.



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## Understanding five basic culture scales through the cultural lens of honor & shame— with application to cross-cultural partnerships

According to Brooks Peterson,<sup>3</sup> there are five basic culture scales: 1) Equality/Hierarchy, 2) Direct/Indirect, 3) Individual/Group, 4) Task/Relationship, and 5) Risk/Caution. These may be diagrammed as follows:



What I intend to do in this article is to outline these five culture scales one at a time, and further, to enhance our understanding of each of them by viewing them through the lens of honor and shame—using primarily biblical illustrations.

# 1

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### CULTURE SCALE #1: EQUALITY/HIERARCHY.



According to Peterson<sup>4</sup> ...

***A style based on EQUALITY means people prefer to:***

- be self-directed,
- have flexibility in the roles they play in a company or on a team,
- have the freedom to challenge the opinion of those in power,

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<sup>3</sup> Brooks Peterson: *Cultural Intelligence: A Guide to Working with People from Other Cultures* (Boston: Intercultural Press, 2004)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

- make exceptions, be flexible, and maybe bend the rules, and
- treat men and women in basically the same way.

**A style based on HIERARCHY means people prefer to:**

- take direction from those above,
- have strong limitations about appropriate behavior for certain roles,
- respect and not challenge the opinions of those who are in power because of their status and their position,
- enforce regulations and guidelines, and
- expect men and women to behave differently and to be treated differently.

**Equality:** Where employees are granted the power to take initiative even if they don't have a position or title after their name.

**Hierarchy:** Where the manager is expected to take control and make the decisions.

You may note that while Peterson's descriptions are framed in business language, they are highly applicable to the work of cross-cultural ministry partnerships. This outline simply describes the way our values of equality or hierarchy invariably influence the different ways we relate to and work with others.

**An example from Scripture: David spares Saul's life / 1 Samuel 24**

The Scripture passage of 1 Samuel chapter 24 is part of a series of events in which Saul tries, directly and indirectly, to get rid of David. Understanding the cultural value of honor and shame brings much clarity to these events. Let's do a little review:

David gains great honor and public acclaim by defeating Goliath the giant Philistine (1 Samuel 17). David's courage is in the context of defending the honor of God and the honor of God's people.

And David said to the men who stood by him, What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?

—1 Samuel 17:26 ESV

David's victory resulted in a huge accrual for him of achieved honor. In chapter 18, Saul becomes jealous of David. Notice how the achieved honor of David was publicly recognized by the women who danced and sang in celebration of David. Note also that Saul recognized that David's achieved honor also seemed to be elevated by the women to a form of ascribed honor.

As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women

sang to one another as they celebrated, 'Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.' And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom? And Saul eyed David from that day on.  
—1 Samuel 18:6–9 ESV

It is easy for us to recognize Saul's jealousy. But when you add to this the understanding that in an honor and shame culture, honor is a *zero-sum game*, the power of this value to influence behavior is raised to another order of magnitude.

What does this mean, that honor is a *zero-sum game*? Simply this: It 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."<sup>5</sup> In other words, *If you gain, I lose ... And if I gain, you lose*. It is the belief that we cannot both increase in honor at the same time, because it is 'a limited good,' there's only so much land ... there's only so much wealth ... there's only so much honor.

From an honor and shame perspective, King Saul saw that his *ascribed* honor as king was threatened by the *achieved* honor of David. Saul's very personhood, his total identity was threatened by David, and this caused him to rage with jealousy and seek David's demise. Saul's honor was at stake, and I believe he may have considered it the equivalent of a mortal threat. Naturally, Saul became obsessed with finding a way to kill David.

After a series of attempts by Saul to kill David (1 Samuel 18–23), chapter 24 finds David and his men in the innermost part of a cave, and when they go toward the entrance, they discover to their surprise that their mortal enemy King Saul is there sleeping. Some of David's men say here's your chance to kill your enemy, but David says no ...

And the men of David said to him, Here is the day of which the LORD said to you, Behold, I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it shall seem good to you. Then David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's robe.  
—1 Samuel 24:4 ESV

Because of David's loyalty to the position of the king who had been anointed by God—along with his obedience to the Spirit of God—David could have killed Saul, but didn't. He was committed to respecting the ascribed honor of Saul.

He said to his men, The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD's anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the LORD's anointed. So David persuaded his men with these words and did not permit them to attack Saul. And Saul rose up and left the cave and went on his way. —1 Samuel 24:6–7

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<sup>5</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey: *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1998) p. 11.

David was displaying his commitment to God. Using the terminology of the culture scale of Equality/Hierarchy, this story also illustrates David's commitment to hierarchy as opposed to equality. To quote Peterson near the beginning of this post, David is an example of "taking direction from those above, having strong limitations about appropriate behavior for certain roles, and respecting and not challenging the opinions of those who are in power because of their status and their position."

### **What are some lessons for building cross-cultural relationships and partnerships?**

What are some applications to cross-cultural partnership? Understanding that most of the peoples of the non-Western world hold to the values of hierarchy as opposed to equality, it is likely that Western and non-Western partners will confront situations where this collision of values will cause confusion and sometimes conflict. Here are some examples:

- A Westerner may be visiting the cross-cultural partnership and discover that he or she is treated with respect and honor that is unusual for Western culture. This may make him or her feel uncomfortable, and one may want to refuse the honor given. But be careful: it can be disrespectful of their culture not to receive the honor they want to give you. *Principle: A Westerner should graciously receive the honor he or she is offered.*
- A Westerner may want to display the attitude of being a servant-leader by doing things to serve others in an egalitarian manner—like washing the dishes after a meal with your host family in their home. You may have a sincere heart in doing this but this can violate the hierarchical values of the home and society where you are serving. *Principle: Don't be a showoff.*
- A Westerner may want to become friends or exchange email addresses with a member of the church family which is led by a non-Western Christian pastor/leader. This may be viewed as inappropriate by the non-Western leader because it displays an independent attitude which is not in keeping with the hierarchical values of their culture. It could cause conflict or suspicion between the Western Christian leader and the majority-world Christian leader. *Principle: Keep the primary relationship between leaders.*

## CULTURE SCALE #2: DIRECT/INDIRECT

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**Direct** ← → **Indirect**

I'll begin this section with a story of indirect communication in an honor and shame culture ...

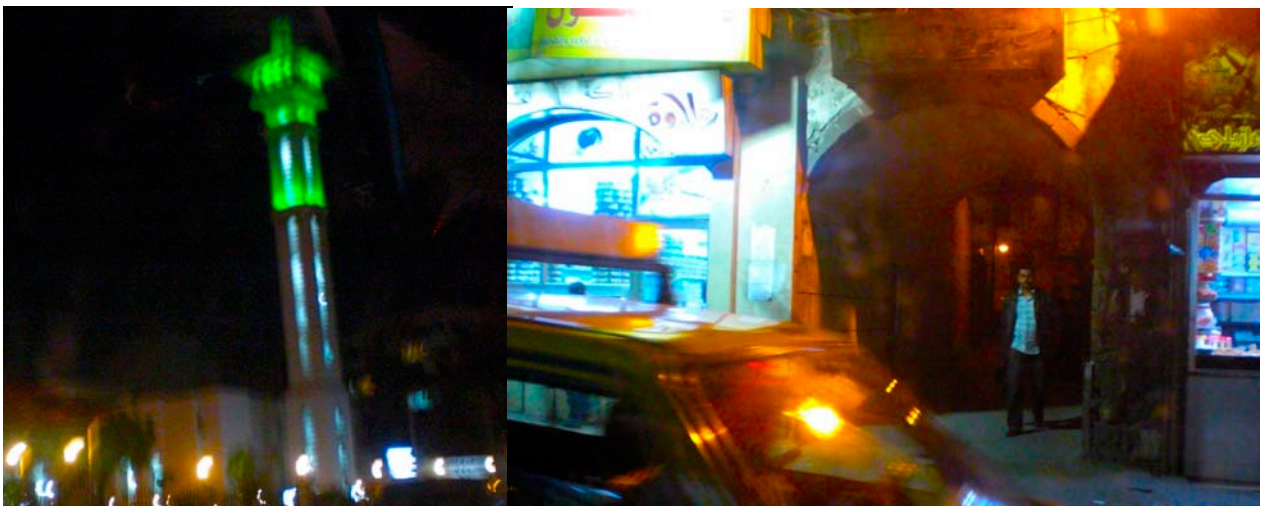
We were driving in a large Arab city in the Middle East in May 2009. My dear friends (and Mission ONE ministry partners) Fahim and Karima (not their real names), were in the front. I was in the back seat. It was about 7:30 at night and we were looking for a certain neighborhood where we could find the proper evening accommodations for me. In order to get directions, we stopped at a parking lot in front of a shop where some young Arab men were standing around and talking. Fahim asked them for directions; one of the young men answered and told us how to get to the neighborhood we were looking for. We drove away, proceeding according to his directions.

We soon discovered that these directions were misleading. As we continued driving around, not able to find the place we were looking for, I suggested from the back seat that maybe it was an example of the "honor and shame" culture at work. We ended up going in circles, and a few minutes later, Fahim said, "Yes, I think you are right about this honor and shame in our culture." We ended up in the same neighborhood in front of the same Arab guys; Fahim, himself an Arab, yelled at them in mild disgust.

Eventually, we found our destination through trial and error.

What happened to us? Here's my explanation using the cultural lens of honor and shame.

Generally speaking, non-Westerners, including Arab men, are committed to avoiding shame. While shame avoidance is a strong motivation in all cultures including the West, this need to avoid shame is of another order of magnitude in Eastern cultures; one might even say it as strong as the need to breathe. Maintaining one's honor is simply *vital* in the truest sense of the word.



***These pictures were taken the evening in May 2009 in a Middle Eastern city of the story described below.***

Indirect communication is part of avoiding shame; it protects the honor—both of the one speaking and of the one hearing. This is true for oneself and for one's family, group of friends, or clan. Honor is established and maintained in public, face-to-face.

One of the characteristics of honor/shame cultures is the social 'game' of challenge and riposte. It may also be referred to as the honor game, or push-and-shove. This honor game is ubiquitous in Eastern cultures; that is, it's *everywhere, all the time, for everybody*—but especially for males. It is simply taken for granted as a normal, essential part of social interaction. And it is crucial for Westerners in an Eastern culture to understand that in public social situations, this 'honor game' is being played constantly.

From the perspective of the Arab guys who were hanging around, our car drove up to them; they were asked a question which posed a challenge. Would they have the ability to provide the information needed in order for the people in the car to get to where they wanted to go? Would they know the answer? Would they satisfy the need of the people in the car who were lost? Would they be able to help? Would they pass the test?

This "test," however small to the Western mind, nevertheless constituted a genuine challenge to their honor. The young Arab man who answered us felt obligated to respond in such a way that everyone's honor would be protected, and no one would be shamed—especially he and his friends.

In order to preserve their group honor and individual honor (which are inextricably linked), the Arab man invented an answer and gave us information which at best was incomplete, and at worst, completely contrived and wrong. However, while the answer was not accurate, it was given confidently; thus their honor, individually and collectively, was preserved. What's more, in the moment when the Arab guys answered the question, the honor of those in the car—my friends and me—was also preserved. How so? Because we did not have to experience the disappointment/shame of being told, *No, we do not know and we cannot help you.*

### **Direct versus Indirect communication styles**

This story represents a social dynamic called "saving face," because honor is established and maintained in public, face-to-face. In Eastern cultures, saving face is as common as breathing—an example of *indirect*, as opposed to *direct*, communication.

According to Peterson,<sup>6</sup> the culture scale of Direct versus Indirect has the following features:

This second culture scale relates to the way people communicate and interact with one another in face-to-face verbal and nonverbal communication and in written communication.

***A direct style means people prefer to***

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<sup>6</sup> Peterson, p. 40.

- be more direct in speaking and be less concerned about how something is said,
- openly confront issues or difficulties,
- communicate concerns straightforwardly,
- engage in conflict when necessary,
- express views or opinions in a frank manner, and
- say things clearly, not leaving much open to interpretation.

***An indirect style means people prefer to***

- focus not just on what is said but on how it is said,
- discreetly avoid difficult or contentious issues,
- express concerns tactfully,
- avoid conflict if at all possible,
- express views or opinions diplomatically, and
- count on the listener to interpret meaning.

Using Peterson's words to add understanding to my story above, we could say that the Arab men who gave incorrect directions were "discreetly avoiding difficult or contentious issues" ... "avoiding conflict if at all possible" ... "expressing views or opinions diplomatically" ... and perhaps, "counting on the listener to interpret meaning."

**An example from Scripture**

Most, if not all, of the interactions recorded in the Gospels between Jesus and the Pharisees were conducted in public. These interactions, when seen through the cultural lens of honor and shame, follow the rules of the 'honor game,' also known as challenge and riposte. (As already stated, the word 'riposte' comes from the sport of fencing; it means "a quick return thrust following a parry." Socially speaking, a riposte is "a quick clever reply to an insult or criticism.") According to Jerome Neyrey's brilliant book, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, there are four steps to this protocol or social code of "push and shove."<sup>7</sup>

1. claim of worth or value,
2. challenge to that claim or refusal to acknowledge the claim,
3. riposte or defense of the claim, and
4. public verdict of success awarded to either claimant or challenger.

In the following example, you'll see ... Jesus' claim of worth or value ... the challenge by the Pharisees to Jesus' honor ... the riposte by Jesus in defense of his claim ... and the public verdict. You will also observe that the riposte by Jesus consisted of both direct and indirect communication, in addition to a miracle.

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<sup>7</sup> Neyrey, p. 20.



<sup>8</sup> For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.  
<sup>9</sup> He went on from there and entered their synagogue.  
<sup>10</sup> And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?—so that they might accuse him.  
<sup>11</sup> He said to them, Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?  
<sup>12</sup> Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.  
<sup>13</sup> Then he said to the man, Stretch out your hand. And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other.  
<sup>14</sup> But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.  
<sup>15</sup> Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all <sup>16</sup> and ordered them not to make him known ...



**Christ Healing the Withered Hand, by James Tissot, showing the public nature of Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees (Public Domain)**

<sup>23</sup> And all the people were amazed, and said, Can this be the Son of David? –Matt. 12:8–16, 23

**1. Claim of worth or value:** Matthew 12:8 is a claim by Jesus concerning his worth and value. Verses 1–7 of this chapter describes the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning the disciples plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath. Verse 8 is the verdict—“For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

**2. Challenge to that claim or refusal to acknowledge the claim:** Verse 10 displays the challenge by the Pharisees to Jesus' claim. “And they asked him, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?—so that they might accuse him.”

**3. Riposte or defense of the claim: Jesus' riposte, or defense, is in three parts.**

First, Jesus uses indirect communication. “He said to them, Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! ... ” (v11–12). Jesus paints a picture of a sheep in desperate need rescued by its shepherd—a picture that goes beyond reason to connect heart-to-heart. Jesus answers their challenge indirectly.

Second, Jesus adds a declarative direct response. Jesus says straightforwardly, “So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (v12).

Third, Jesus adds to his words an action—he performs a miracle: “Then he said to the man, Stretch out your hand. And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other” (v13).



This three-part riposte to the Pharisees' challenge was so powerful that "the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him" (v14). Why were they so enraged? Because their honor and standing in the public sphere took a huge hit, while at the same time, the honor and renown of Jesus was skyrocketing. This led to ...

**4. Public verdict of success awarded to either claimant or challenger.** "And many followed him, and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known ... And all the people were amazed, and said, Can this be the Son of David?" (v15, 23). The public verdict of increased honor for Jesus is represented by the words, "And many followed him" and "all the people were amazed."

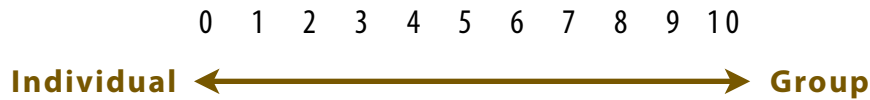
Most Westerners, including Christians, are more comfortable with direct communication. Americans hold people in high esteem who can quickly "get to the bottom line" ... who do not "beat around the bush." Business executives respect employees who are "brutally honest." Americans often believe it takes too long to tell a whole story to make a point. *Just make the point!*, we contend.

In contrast, non-Western peoples are often more comfortable with indirect than direct communication. Indirect communication includes the practice of storytelling and the use of poetic forms of speech. Indirect communication also means a hesitancy to give bad news. From an honor and shame perspective, this makes perfect sense. The beauty of indirect communication allows individuals to *save face* when giving bad news. Indirect communication saves the *face* of the one bearing the bad news as well as the *face* of the person receiving the news.

### **What are some lessons for building cross-cultural relationships and partnerships?**

- **Slow down and be extra generous with your time.** If you expect to work through an issue of your partnership in 20 minutes, triple it and plan for an hour. Expect indirect communication, and it will take you at least two or three times longer to thoroughly discuss an issue.
- **Learn to be a good storyteller.** Storytellers are highly respected in non-Western cultures. If you are a good storyteller, you will use a form of communication that is indirect, and gain favor with your cross-cultural partners and with the individuals and families in their community. Telling a story from your own life can be especially powerful.
- **Be gentle when communicating directly.** Of course, direct communication is still needed for effective cross-cultural partnerships. But you can communicate in an overbearing manner, or in a gentle, effective manner. Choose the latter by the grace of God.
- **Use written documents appropriately.** A written document or partnership agreement is usually a form of direct communication. This can be a helpful tool to review the logistics of the partnership, along with expectations and goals. At the same time, do not use the document as a "hammer" to enforce behavior; instead, use it as a guide that serves your vision to bless the peoples served by the partnership for the glory of God.

## 3

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**CULTURE SCALE #3: INDIVIDUAL/GROUP**

*"If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." –African proverb*

In this section, we are looking at the culture scale known as Individual/Group. It refers to the degree to which people identify themselves as independent individuals versus interdependent members of a group. According to Peterson:<sup>8</sup>

***An individual style means people prefer to***

- take individual initiative,
- use personal guidelines in personal situations,
- focus on themselves,
- judge people based on individuals traits,
- make decisions individually,
- put individuals before team,
- be nonconformists when necessary, and
- move in and out of groups as needed or desired.

***A group style means people prefer to***

- act cooperatively and establish group goals,
- standardize guidelines,
- make loyalty to friends a high priority,
- determine their identity through group affiliation,
- make decisions as a group,
- put team or group ahead before the individual,
- conform to social norms, and
- keep group membership for life.

**An example from Scripture**

Moses (the individual) pleads with God to enter the Promised Land, but is forbidden because of his identification with the rebelliousness of God's people (his group).

The story begins in the book of Numbers. God's people are at Meribah in the Wilderness. They desperately need water. Frustrated and angry because of the incessant grumbling of the people he was leading, and desperate for God's provision, Moses hears from God:

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<sup>8</sup> Peterson, p. 46.

"Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle." –*Numbers 20:8 ESV*

But Moses does not simply speak to the rock in obedience to God. He also struck the rock.

And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. –*Numbers 20:11 ESV*

Moses' disobedience carried a heavy consequence.

And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." –*Numbers 20:12 ESV*

Instead of obediently speaking to the rock in order to get water, Moses was guilty of striking the rock (twice!) with his staff. Water came out from the rock, but Moses had failed to obey God. The English Study Bible states, "As the prime mediators of God's laws to Israel, Moses and Aaron had to be exemplary in their obedience. Their failure to follow the divine instruction exactly led to their forfeiting their right to enter Canaan."

Now let's go forward several years in the story to the book of Deuteronomy. This point in the story is just prior to Moses' death and the people of God being led into the Promised Land by Joshua. Moses describes an encounter with God that is connected to the happenings in Numbers chapter 20. The passage below is Deuteronomy 3:23–29 (ESV):

<sup>23</sup> "And I pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying,

<sup>24</sup> O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yours?

<sup>25</sup> Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.

<sup>26</sup> But the LORD was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the LORD said to me, Enough from you; do not speak to me of this matter again.

<sup>27</sup> Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and look at it with your eyes, for you shall not go over this Jordan.

<sup>28</sup> But charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he shall go over at the head of this people, and he shall put them in possession of the land that you shall see.

<sup>29</sup> So we remained in the valley opposite Beth-peor.

When I read this passage, I am struck with God's immediate rejection of Moses' request. Of course, God was re-affirming what he had told Moses in the first place. But considering the overall

faithfulness of Moses to God, and the tremendous burden Moses bore in leading God's people for forty years through the Wilderness—it seems God was harsh.

However, let's look at Moses' words more closely. Moses said, "But the LORD was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me ..." (v26). This indicates that God's anger at Moses was not simply the result of Moses' disobedience in Numbers 20; God's punishment toward Moses the individual was also a result of the stubbornness of the group of people he was called to lead. You can observe this dynamic at work—that group responsibility is just as significant as—and at times more significant than—individual responsibility.

### **How honor and shame is connected to individual versus group**

Moses' honor before a holy God was compromised—both by his individual disobedience to God —AND by the stubborn sinfulness of the group he was leading. This profound sense of identification of the individual with the group—and its link to honor and shame—is widespread in the Scriptures. Here are just a few examples:

The covenant blessing of God to Abraham and his descendants was not to individuals, but to groups: "... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3 ESV). The word "families" in the Hebrew is the word, "mishpahoth ... This is used for smaller groupings, like those referred to by the English words clan, family or sometimes also lineage."<sup>9</sup> If God's blessing is one and the same with honor bestowed from God (as I will demonstrate at the end of this paper), then God's blessing being given to *clans* of people marks an important source of honor for the members of that clan—or the lack thereof if God's blessing is absent.

The prophet Isaiah acknowledged ... "And I said: Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; ... " (Isaiah 6:5 ESV). Isaiah was likely the most righteous man in the land but saw his own uncleanness—his shame!—profoundly connected to the uncleanness of God's people.

Consider also Apostle Paul's teaching about the body of Christ:

"As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. 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 unpresentable 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." –2 Corinthians 12:20–24

Notice the emphasis on giving greater *honor* to those who seem *honorless*, because in Christ, all are ascribed honor by virtue of their being in Christ, members of God's family, unashamed before

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Orville Boyd Jenkins: "Nation" & "People" in Hebrew and Greek, <http://strategyleader.org/peopledefinitions/nationpeopleshebgreek.html>. Accessed 28 April 2010.

holy Almighty God. In this way it appears that *community* trumps *individuality* in the body of Christ—and that God wants our desire for individual honor to be in balance with—if not in submission to—the unity, honor and strength of the community.

### **What are some lessons for building cross-cultural relationships and partnerships?**

It is vital for Christians from Western nations to understand that most of the peoples of the non-Western world hold the value of the group in *much* higher esteem than the value of individuality. Therefore it is likely that Western and non-Western partners will confront situations where this collision of values will cause confusion and sometimes conflict. Here are two examples.

1. Because of the high value of individuality in the West combined with an expectation to get things done fast, Western Christians may expect non-Western leaders to make decisions quickly—and without need for much input from their community. But decisions in non-Western communities are made much more slowly—there's a need for consultation with more people; this takes time.

*Suggestion:* Western Christians leaders should expect decisions will be made much more slowly by Christian leaders in the majority world. They will need to suspend judgment, and exercise patience in these cross-cultural relationships.

2. When taking a team cross-culturally for a mission trip, there is an amplified need for your team work in unity. If on your team there is an individual who is loud, displays high individuality in the way they dress or act, or challenges the consensus of the group, your non-Western partners may view that individual and the group leader with suspicion.

*Suggestion:* Invest extra time to prepare your team to respect leadership and one another, and to serve in a spirit of humility and Christian unity.

*Suggestion:* Be willing to exclude 'prima donnas' from your mission team—people who are "regarded as egotistical, unreasonable and irritable, with a rather high opinion of themselves not shared by others." (Note: Even though this attitude is clearly un-Christian, *how many* Western Christians show up in non-Western lands with precisely this attitude?)

## 4

## CULTURE SCALE #4: TASK/RELATIONSHIP



In this section, we consider the culture scale Task/Relationship, which refers to the degree to which people focus *first*—on getting work accomplished (Task)—versus building *trust* between people (Relationship). According to Peterson:<sup>10</sup>

***A task style means people prefer to***

- define people based on what they do,
- move straight to business—relationships come later,
- keep most relationships with coworkers impersonal,
- sacrifice leisure time and time with family in favor of work,
- get to know co-workers and colleagues quickly but usually superficially,
- use largely impersonal selection criteria in hiring (such as resumés or test scores), and
- allow work to overlap with personal time.

***A relationship style means people prefer to***

- define people based on who they are,
- establish comfortable relationships and a sense of mutual trust before getting down to business,
- have personal relationships with co-workers,
- sacrifice work in favor of leisure time and time with family,
- get to know co-workers and colleagues slowly and in depth,
- use largely personal selection criteria (such as family connections) when hiring, and
- not allow work to impinge on personal life.

**An example from Scripture: Jesus praises Mary for sitting at Jesus' feet**

A classic text for comparing a task-oriented person to a relationship-oriented person is the story of Martha and Mary in Luke's gospel. Martha is doing the expected work of a woman in her culture; Mary, however, is sitting at the feet of Jesus and learning from him.

<sup>38</sup> Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house.

<sup>39</sup> And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.

<sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said,

<sup>10</sup> Peterson, p. 52.

Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.

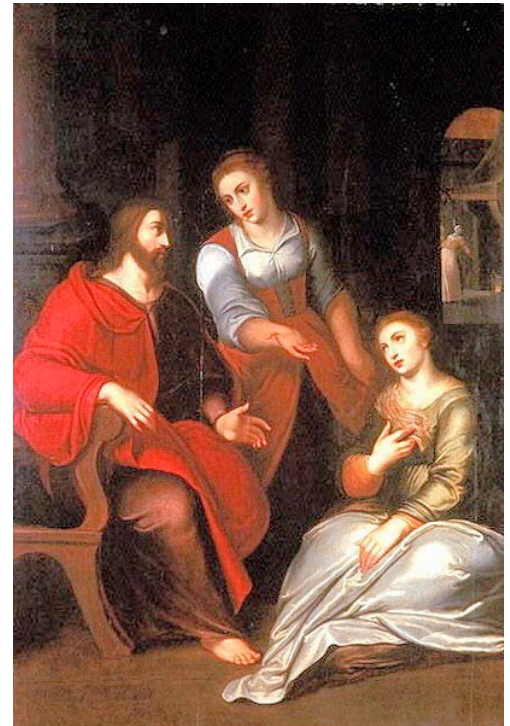
<sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things,

<sup>42</sup> but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.

—*Luke 10:38–42 (ESV)*

There are several things we can observe from this passage using the lens of honor and shame. Jesus Christ was honored by Mary; Martha was not. Several things are plain:

- **Mary sat at the Lord's feet.** Her humility is evidenced by her posture. She physically expressed her recognition of the honor of Jesus. In the economy of honor and shame, feet have a particular meaning. Feet are among the least honorable parts of the human body—in contrast, for example, to the right hand. This honor/shame contrast may be observed in Psalm 110:1—“The LORD says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” The meaning in Mary's action of sitting at Christ's feet was profound and plain in their honor-shame culture—and surely was clear to Martha.
- **Mary was listening.** Mary gave honor to Jesus by doing nothing except listening in humility to the Savior. The sacredness of her attention fittingly corresponded to the sacredness of the One in the room.
- **“Martha was distracted with much serving.”** Martha was serving, getting stuff done. In defense of Martha, one could say that it was Mary who was the one distracted; it was Mary who should have been serving and getting work done. But Jesus praised Mary, and critiqued Martha.
- **Martha was preoccupied with herself.** Note what she said: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” Could it be that Martha's service was a smokescreen for her preoccupation with herself? No wonder Jesus said, “Mary has chosen the good portion.”
- **In the end, Mary was the one willing to give honor to Christ by her humility, and as a result, was praised by Jesus.** This overturns one of the classic features of the honor and shame culture, namely, that honor and shame is a “limited good” ... or “zero-sum game.” What does this mean, that honor is a zero-sum game? As already stated: It is the belief that “everything in the social, economic, natural universe, everything desired in life: land,



*Jesus visits Martha and Mary, by Otto van Veen, 1597 (public domain)*

wealth, respect and status, power and influence exist in finite quantity and are in short supply.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, *If you gain, I lose ... And if I gain, you lose*. It is the belief that we cannot both increase in honor at the same time, because it is ‘a limited good,’ there’s only so much land ... there’s only so much wealth ... there’s only so much honor.

- Here in the story of Mary and Martha, it is Mary who willingly ‘loses’ self-honor by giving honor to Jesus—and yet, in the end, instead of losing, she gains a compliment from Jesus; Mary gains honor from the Lord.

Using Peterson’s words, above, might we say that Mary was someone who prefers to “define people by who they are,” while Martha was someone who prefers to “define people by what they do?” Can we say that rather than trying to impress Jesus by her service, Mary gave immense honor to Jesus by sitting at his feet, listening and learning attentively, affectionately?

### **What are some lessons for building cross-cultural relationships and partnerships?**

Understanding that most of the peoples of the non-Western world hold to the values of relationship as opposed to task, it is likely that Western and majority-world partners will confront situations where this collision of values will cause confusion and sometimes conflict. Here are some suggestions for task-oriented Christian leaders in order to avoid these conflicts:

- Westerners are familiar with the relational style of networking. In networking, people often consider first what they can gain from the other person. For some, this is their primary relational style. Ultimately, this is a task-oriented, rather than a person-oriented relational style. At its worst, networking tends to “objectify” people into categories of what they can do, rather than to simply honor who they are. Could it be that American Christians, in particular, may use this superficial relational style as their default way of communicating with others? Unfortunately, partnership with national missionaries can have this dehumanizing edge, because sometimes Westerners think of the cost-effectiveness factor above all else. Networking has its place in the Christian community. But when spending time with your cross-cultural partners, leave your networking style behind.
- Be intentional to focus on the person who is your ministry partner—his or her life, family, story, struggles. Share your story, too. Focus on honoring the one you are with in the present moment by listening with your heart. Ask open-ended questions and learn. Listen ... Listen ... Listen!
- Give honor; avoid flattery. Flattery is giving pseudo-honor in order to get something. Can you imagine sitting at the feet of your cross-cultural partner—perhaps not physically—but

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<sup>11</sup> Neyrey, p. 11.



spiritually? Are you willing to wash the feet of your cross-cultural ministry partner? There is simply no substitute for the spirit of Christlike servanthood.

- When visiting your cross-cultural partner, plan for informal time together. If you are on a seven-day mission, consider spending one day together, leader-to-leader, family-to-family. Just talking and praying and laughing as friends. This must be intentional. Consider ... just being together as friends ... accomplishing nothing ... simply honoring one another's personhood in Christ. The honor you will give to your cross-cultural partner will be immensely appreciated. The trust you build will pay huge dividends later on.

Obviously, there are tasks to accomplish. Jesus Christ has commissioned us with the magnificent, enormous task of discipling the nations. But let us remember, Jesus taught us that this "task" is first and foremost a relational journey: "... And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20 ESV).

## 5 CULTURE SCALE #5: RISK/CAUTION



In this section, we are looking at Risk/Caution, which refers to the degree to which people embrace change, risk, and the future—versus stability, caution, and the past.

According to Peterson:<sup>12</sup>

### ***A risk style refers means people prefer to***

- make decisions quickly with little information,
- focus on present and future,
- be less cautious—in a "ready, fire, aim" way,
- change quickly without fear of risks,
- try new and innovative ways of doing things,
- use new methods for solving problems,
- have fewer rules, regulations, guidelines, and directions, and
- be comfortable changing plans at the last minute.

### ***A caution style means people prefer to***

- collect considerable information before making a decision,
- focus on the past,

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, p. 52.

- be more cautious—in a “ready, aim, aim, fire” way,
- change slowly and avoid risks,
- want more rules, regulations, guidelines, and directions
- refer to past precedents of what works and what doesn’t,
- stick to proven methods for solving problems, and
- not change plans at the last minute.

### An example from Scripture: God calls Abraham

The calling of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 represents God’s command for a radical departure in the life of one man living in the ancient Near East. This “radical departure” is not simply a departure from one land to another. It is also a departure from one way of thinking to another: From caution to risk ... from past to future ... from family-based honor to God-given honor. Knowing that the ancient Near East was thoroughly rooted in the culture of honor and shame, it is helpful to understand these verses from that perspective. Here is my two-part thesis:

1. God called Abraham to leave his family in the land of Ur and all of the familiar, traditional, family-based honor that went with that—to a life of honor that is of a much greater magnitude: honor bestowed by God himself.
2. While God’s call constituted the risks of a radical departure in geography, faith and worldview, it nevertheless retained as a central motivation for both God and Abraham—*the pursuit of honor and glory*.

Here are the verses:

<sup>1</sup> Now the LORD said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

<sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

–Genesis 12:1–3 (ESV)



**God Calls Abraham, State 2 by Wencelas Hollar, 1607-1677 (public domain)**

When God told Abram to leave his country, his kindred and his father’s house, God was telling him to leave his core identity—to abandon his very source of honor, or manhood—in exchange for another. All of the wealth and honor of a man in the ancient Near East consisted of land and family—*land*, because their wealth would be based largely on the number of livestock they would have (camels, sheep, goats, etc.)—and *family*, because it

was through family—that is, blood relations, father to son—that wealth and honor was passed from one generation to another. The command by God to leave all this comprised for Abram an unthinkable risk. In his book, *The Gifts of the Jews*, Thomas Cahill has a chapter about this called “The Journey in the the Dark: The Unaccountable Innovation.” In regard to Genesis 12:4, “So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...,” Cahill writes:

So, “wayyelekh Avram” (“Avram went”)—two of the boldest words in all literature. They signal a complete departure from everything that has gone before in the long evolution of culture and sensibility. Out of Sumer, civilized repository of the predictable, comes a man who does not know where he is going but goes forth into the unknown wilderness under the prompting of his god. ... Out of mortal imagination comes a dream of something new, something better, something yet to happen, something—in the future.”<sup>13</sup>

### Seven bestowals of honor

The point is this: What Abram (or Avram) did in response to God’s call was for him a tremendous risk, and constituted a huge counter-cultural act of boldness because it violated the traditional way that men accrued and preserved their honor. Despite this great risk, consider these seven honor-laden rewards that Abram would receive by believing God’s promise and acting in obedience:

1. **“to the land that I will show you”**—God was promising Abram that, although he was to leave the honor of his father’s land, Abram would gain the honor of another land. This was made plain in later revelations from God that this “promised land” was to be the land of Canaan (Gen. 15:18–21, Gen. 17:8).
2. **“I will make of you a great nation”**—this was God’s promise that, although Abram had no son, had no heir, and therefore had none of the highly-prized honor that comes by having a son to carry on his name—Abram would nevertheless, according to God’s promise, be the father of a great nation. Further promises from God revealed that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven (Gen. 15:5). God also said, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you” (Gen. 17:6). God’s promise to honor Abraham in this way is of inestimable value.
3. **“I will bless you”**—this is God’s bestowal of divine favor on the man Abram. In the economy of honor and shame, to be blessed by God Almighty (Gen. 17:1) constituted an enormous accrual of ascribed honor.

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Cahill: *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 63.

4. **"I will make your name great"**—this was God's promise that Abraham would gain a public reputation of great honor. Abraham would become a man of renown and glory in the "public square."
5. **"so that you will be a blessing"**—this is God's promise that Abram would become a benefactor. A man can only be a benefactor of blessing if he himself is a man of means; he must first himself be a person of wealth and honor if he is to be a means of blessing to others. God's promise that Abram would "be a blessing" is another promise of honor.
6. **"I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you I will curse"**—this is God's promise to pay close attention to the social, public dimension of Abraham's relations. As blessing is to honor, so also is cursing to dishonor; this is a vivid acknowledgment by God of the public nature of honor and shame. God is guaranteeing that God will not allow Abraham to be shamed by his enemies. Again, this is an extremely valuable bestowal of honor from God to Abram.
7. **"in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"**—this is God's way of explaining the extent of the honor which is to accrue to Abram's account. God promises that Abram's honor will not be limited to his own family, local community or region. God promises that Abram will ultimately have the weighty influence that extends to all the families of the earth—a global significance, global renown.

Again, from the cultural perspective of honor and shame, God is asking Abram to abandon the traditional source of honor (in that culture, a truly unthinkable act; this was a huge risk) in exchange for the honor that God himself is able to give.

Remember the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22—in which Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son? This represents the climax of a lifestyle of risk which Abram lives out by faith in covenantal relationship with God—and which, in the end, is commensurate with the immense honor, inexpressible in value, granted him by God.

Could it be that Abraham would not have taken such enormous risks had it not been for the utterly astounding set of promises made by God that Abraham would gain immeasurable honor from both God Himself and from the nations?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jerome Neyrey's *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster, 1998) deals extensively with the honor-shame dynamics of the ancient Middle East. One of the many ways it was expressed is in what is known as the patron-client relationship. Neyrey explains how Matthew's gospel emphasizes this cultural value when great ascribed honor is accorded to Jesus by his Father. Neyrey explains this in detail on pages 146–148 in the section: "Praise from the Divine Patron." It is in the light of this cultural value of the honored patron—that God's promise to Abraham that "you shall be a blessing"—is seen as an example of this highly prized honor. Essentially, God is a Patron to Abraham, and promises him that he (Abraham) will *also* become an extension of God's divine blessing, or patronage, to the nations.

**What are some lessons for building cross-cultural relationships and partnerships?**

With regard to risk and caution, it has been my observation that godly Christian leaders in the majority world may sometimes be more comfortable with risk than their Western counterparts. Even though they may come from risk-averse societies, their faith in God, their walk with Christ, their knowledge of God's promises may lead them to take big risks; this propensity for risk-taking may be greater than the Western Christian partner.

- *Suggestion:* Try to assess your partnership in the light of biblical values more so than on the basis of cultural preferences. Pray together about risk-laden opportunities in the power of the Holy Spirit so that you can have unity of mind and heart. And don't assume that higher risk makes it more biblical or spiritual. Practical wisdom is still necessary in all situations.

The pursuit of honor and the avoidance of shame was core to the cultures of the ancient Near East. They are still core values in most majority-world cultures, especially in the Near East and Far East. I would venture to say that all Muslim peoples and all Eastern peoples have honor and shame as vital, core values.

- *Suggestion:* Do not underestimate the significance of honor and shame as motivation in the decisions made by your cross-cultural partners. When faced with a situation that puzzles you, look at it again through the lens of honor and shame, and see if it makes more sense.

Remember that Abraham, even in his abandonment of his familial and traditional sources of honor, nevertheless was moved to obedience in part because God's promises were heavy-laden blessings for immense gain in his "honor account."

- *Suggestion:* Because Westerners generally live by a different set of values—*right and wrong*, not *honor and shame*—they may have the tendency to judge people with the honor and shame value system as being less than virtuous, or at worst, unbiblical. This would be a big mistake. Instead, practice "suspending judgment" and patiently, quietly listen and learn.

The honor and shame value system is not inherently good or evil. God freely, sovereignly blessed Abraham with *ascribed* honor, and God rewarded Abraham with *achieved* honor because of Abraham's obedience and faith. I believe the whole Bible is written with the default cultural value of 'honor and shame.' One may observe that because of man's fallen nature, the honor and shame value system can be very sinful and destructive. On the other hand, one could make the argument that *the most biblical and wholesome of cultural values* is the pursuit of honor and the avoidance of shame—when lived out through God's grace and truth in Jesus Christ.

- *Suggestion:* When spending time with peoples of the majority world, listen and learn. Observe how the granting of honor, the pursuit of honor, is core to their way of life—and to their way of glorifying God. You may be surprised at how this may positively influence your own walk with the Lord.

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**END NOTE:**

**“Top-line, bottom-line” or “Glorious honor from top to bottom”?**

The Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 12:1–3 is sometimes seen through the lens known as “top-line, bottom-line.” Proponents of this “top-line, bottom-line” view say that God gives to us his blessings (top-line), therefore we have an obligation, a responsibility, a duty—to share those blessings with the nations (bottom-line). *We are blessed to be a blessing*, as the popular missions song goes.

While the Abrahamic covenant may be seen in this light (for, indeed, we *do* have an awesome responsibility!) I wonder whether this may be primarily a Western cultural reading of the passage. Could it be that the seven-fold bestowal of honor to Abraham suggests that there is no “top-line, bottom line” separation in the way that *Abraham* would have received and understood the promise? Could it be that *every* aspect of the covenant, including the responsibility to bless others—was an expression of great honor bestowed by God upon Abraham, and therefore an enormous, glorious delight?

I contend that from top to bottom, from beginning to end of the passage of Genesis 12:1–3, for Abraham to be included in God’s global purpose was an astounding honor. God’s promise that Abram would “be a blessing” is another facet of the magnificent diamond of honor by which Abraham would himself (through his descendants) become a most-honored benefactor to the nations. This is an extension of the divine patronage that originates in Almighty God himself, the ultimate Patron—for whose glory the universe was made.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:29 ESV). We are Abraham’s offspring as followers of Christ! It follows that, in the spirit of God’s promise to Abraham, we as Great Commission Christians should embrace the *sacrificial responsibility*—as well as the *eternal magnificent honor*—of declaring his glory to the nations.

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