A Biblical Theology of Honor and Shame

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In 1946 Ruth Benedict popularized, in the West, the concept of honor and shame societies in her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword"*.[1] Since the book's publication, the world has continued its march towards globalization. Westerners, especially Western missionaries, increasingly encounter the honor-based cultures of the 10/40 window. Western Christianity, which has long built its theology and gospel around a guilt-based worldview, must now learn to share its faith in terms of honor and shame. Fortunately, Scripture speaks much to the topic of honor and shame. Utilizing biblical theology, missionaries can re-shape their theology and gospel message in terms of honor and shame.

Honor and Shame a Worldview

Sociologists and missiologists alike divide the world's cultures into three distinct worldviews: shame-honor, guilt-innocence, and fear-power.[2] Dividing the world along these lines, most Western countries share a guilt-innocence worldview, most African and Latin/South American countries

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1 Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, (New York: Mariner Books, 2005).

2 Eguene Nida was the first individual to note these three divisions in a missiology book when he stated, "three different types of reaction to religiously sanctioned codes: fear, shame, and guilt." Eugene A. Nida, *Customs, Culture and Christianity*, (London: The Tyndale Press, 1954),150. Roland Muller further enunciated these three categories into the form of honor-shame, fear-power, and guilt-innocence. Roland Muller, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door*. (Birmingham, UK: Xlibris Corp., 2000).

share a fear-power worldview, and most Asian/Arabian countries share a honor-shame worldview.[3]

Each of these worldviews bases their ethical decisions on three separate criteria. Guilt cultures typically look to an internalized code of law.[4] Fear cultures, which are typically influenced by animism, see external sources of power as influencing the outcome of their lives. Honor-based societies look to the "approval and acceptance" of a group (e.g., family, clan, etc.).[5]

The Importance of the Group

Shame-based cultures typically exist in cultures with strong communities where the group and not the individual dominates the culture.[6] The group plays two important roles in an honor-based society. First, the group determines the ethical code. A Westerner would debate the ethics of a decision on merits of "right" or "wrong," whereas, an Arab would debate ethics based on the "honor" associated with an act.[7] Lying, to a Westerner, is

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[3] While all cultures demonstrate characteristics of all three worldviews, typically, one worldview dominates.

[4] Muller notes that the Roman Law functions as the underpinning for much of Western culture's ethical code, especially the concept of law being above the individual. *Honor and Shame,* 27-28. Eiko Ikegami notes that the group may consist as an ideal in the individual's mind rather than as an actual entity. "Shame and the Samurai: Institutions, Trustworthiness and Autonomy in the Elite Honor Culture," *Social Research* 70 no. 4 (Winter 2003):1365.

[5] Sandra Freeman, "Honour/Shame Dyanmics in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Mission Frontiers* 37 no. 1, (January/February 2015): 32-33.

[6] Muller, *Honor and Shame*, 50.

[7] Ibid, 52.

inherently wrong, but to an Arab, a lie may or may not be considered wrong if the honor of his clan is at stake.

Second, the group enforces the ethical code. In honor-based societies, the discovery of a shameful act can be as condemning as committing the act itself.[8] When one commits a shameful act, he not only shames himself, but also the group with which he is associated.[9] Discovery of a shameful act places the entire group into a position of shame. In order to restore its honor, the group must take action against the individual who has brought shame. In the context of missions, actions can range from pressure placed upon the individual not to convert all the way to the extreme act of honor killings.[10]

Saving Face

Individuals from guilt-based cultures often perceive shame as an initial "feeling" associated with guilt.[11] Shame, however, may be better described as the internal image of one's self as compared to an "ideal" set by the group.[12] Comparable, though in a more sophisticated way, to high-school peer pressure, shame represents a loss of "value" which has social

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[8] Ibid, 81.

[9] Nida, *Customs, Culture, and Christianity*, 97.

[10] Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting in Around the World.* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002),178. Brooklynn A.Welden describes several such honor killings committed by Arab families living in the West due to a child succumbing to Western influences. "Restoring Lost 'Honor': Retrieving Face and Identity, Removing Shame, and Controlling the Familial Cultural Environment Through 'Honor' Murder," *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 2 no. 1, 380-398.

[11] , Robert J. Priest, "Shame," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions,* edited by A. Scott Moreau, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 870.

[12] Ibid, 870.

implications.[13] Individuals in honor-based societies realize that shame affects not only their personal self-worth, but also bears directly upon their social standing within the group.

Bringing Honor

On the opposite end of shame lies honor. "Honor signifies respect for being the kind of person and doing the kinds of things the group values."[14] Within an honor-based society, honor and shame are seen as a zero sum game; to bring honor to one group necessitates the shaming of another group. Honor may be "achieved" or "ascribed."[15] One way that honor can be achieved is through a challenge-riposte, an open challenge (e.g., verbal banter, warfare, etc.) to another group. Protecting the females of one's house and male leadership (i.e., *machismo*) represents another way to achieve honor.[16] Other means of achieving honor include: wealth, education, and marriage. Positions of authority or leadership are ways in which honor may be ascribed by the group to the individual.

Honor and Shame in Scripture

Does honor and shame have a place in biblical theology? Much of Western Systematic Theology rests upon the foundation of the guilt-based

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13 David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kingship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity, 2000), 25.

14 Ibid, 25.

15 Ibid, 28.

16 Gary S. Gregg, *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 93-94.

theory of atonement. However, within the context of an honor-based society, guilt may or may not be felt when a law is breached. A missionary in this situation is forced to rephrase his theology in terms of honor and shame.

Eden's Effect

Beginning in Genesis 3, Scripture demonstrates the reality of the three major ethical worldviews.[17] As a result of Adam and Eve's sin, they experienced guilt, shame, and fear. After sinning, Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together to hide the shame of their nakedness. When confronted with God's presence (i.e., an external law) they hid in guilt. Finally, when confronted by God, Adam pointed to fear as motivating their flight from God (i.e., an external power). As Muller so eloquently states,

> "When man broke God's law, he was in a position of guilt. When man broke God's relationship, he was in a position of shame. When man broke God's trust, he was in a position of fear" (21).

Honor and Shame in the Old Testament

The Old Testament culture was based on honor and shame. The term most often used for honor in the Old Testament, כָּבוֹד carries the idea of "reputation," "importance," "glory," "splendor," and "distinction."[18] Honor could be achieved in the Old Testament through acts as diverse as childbirth (Gen. 3:20), skillful work (Dan. 2:6), and the accumulation of wealth (2 Chron. 32:27; Eccl. 6:2) and was associated with positions of authority (Num. 22:15).

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[17] Both Muller, in *Shame and Honor*, and Tennent, in *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, appeal to Genesis 3 as Scriptural proof for the three major ethical worldviews.

[18] Ludwig Koehler, , et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. (Leiden, New York: E.J. Brill, 1999), 457-458.

The Old Testament utilizes many words for shame, but חֶרְפָּה is the most prevalent term and carries the idea of "reviling," "taunt," and "disgrace."[19] Often associated with the face (2 Chron. 32:21; Ps. 83:16), shameful acts included idolatry (Isa. 44:9; Jer. 10:14; Jer. 50:2) and nakedness (Jer. 13:26; Nah. 3:5).

Two Old Testament Bible stories serve to illustrate the nature of shame in the Old Testament. When Saul failed to kill king Agag in 1 Samuel 15, Samuel confronts Saul for his sin. Samuel informs Saul that the kingdom would be ripped from his grasp. In response, Saul acknowledges his sin, but requests that Samuel feast with him before the elders (1 Sam. 15:30). Saul's response, when viewed from a shame-honor perspective, demonstrates that the group (e.g., the elders) determined honor and that increased shame would have resulted from Saul's public exposure. Saul requests Samuel's presence, which represented God's presence, at the feast as a means of re-establishing his honor before the elders.

The second book of Esther is replete with examples of honor and shame. The story begins with judgment being leveled against Queen Vashti for failure to honor her husband. Her refusal was considered an affront not only to the king but to the entire nation (Est. 1:16). Fearful that their *machismo* may be damaged (Est. 1:16-18), the king's advisors recommend that he dismiss the queen. Later in the book, we see a series of challenge-riposte develop between Haaman and Mordecai culminating with the king's declaration that Haaman dress Mordecai in the royal robes and lead him around the city (Est. 6:1-13). In this zero-sum game, Mordecai received honor at the expense of Haaman's shame.

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[19] Ibid, 356.

Honor and Shame in the New Testament

While many think of Romans and Paul's expose on guilt as the centerpiece of the New Testament, shame is mentioned more in the New Testament than guilt.[20] The New Testament word most often translated honor τιμή carries the idea of "price," "value," "manifestation of esteem," and "honor conferred through compensation."[21] The New Testament associates honor with positions of authority (Mal. 1:6; 1 Tim. 6:1) signified by something as simple as a position at the public table (Mk. 12:39). Paul describes the honor associated with different parts of the human body (1 Cor. 12). The New Testament recognizes that honor comes from the group (Rom. 12:7), but places the honor of God above that of the group (Jn. 8:49, 12:26).

Shame in the New Testament is related with actions (Eph. 5:12; Phil. 3:19), as well as their discovery (Col. 2:15; Matt. 1:19).[22] The greatest example in the New Testament of honor and shame is Christ. He "despised" the shame associated with his "criminal death" on the cross, choosing rather to associate with the honor his father bestowed (Heb. 12:2).

Honor and Shame Reversal

The Scripture presents a unique perspective on honor and shame not shared by honor-based societies. In honor-based societies, shame is to be

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[20] Guilt is mentioned 8 times, shame 30 times, and honor 77 times in the New Testament (ESV).

[21] Walter Bauer, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3 rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000):174-178.

[22] Joseph desired to divorce Mary privately because the revelation of her assumed shameful act would have led to greater shame.

avoided at all costs so that honor can be achieved. Scripture demonstrates that honor may sometimes be achieved by means of shame. Isaiah 53:3 describes Christ's position of shame at the cross, yet in a sudden turn of events, Isaiah 53:4 demonstrates that Christ's shame was not his own but that of the onlookers. Because Christ was willing to bear the shame he received "a portion with the great" (Isa 53:12). Because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the shame acquired by humanity through Adam can now be replaced with honor acquired by Christ (1 Cor. 15:22). At God's second coming, we will not need to shrink back in shame as Adam did because we are found righteous in Christ (1 Jn. 2:28).

Japanese Conversions

A Japanese proverb states, "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down." In Japan, conformity is honored and individuality is shamed. The group mentality is so deeply ingrained in Japanese society that even when living abroad Japanese will gather for cultural training on Saturdays. Japanese are expected to take part in cultural events often associated with Shinto practices. For example, the local children are required to carry around the cities' shrine on certain festival days. To defer from involvement brings shame on the individual and his family.

Both the group mentality and their honor worldview often prevent Japanese from responding to missionaries' presentation of the gospel. Missionaries seeking to work among Japanese soon learn that Japanese do not resist Christianity due to "specific theological objections" but rather "there are powerful social and cultural forces that serve as the primary

barrier to Christian conversion."[23] A missionary seeking to win a Japanese convert on the basis of sin and guilt soon learns that the Japanese word for sin is more closely associated to the Western concept of a criminal.

By utilizing a gospel approach centered on the themes of honor and shame, a missionary in Japan may not only overcome the barriers to the gospel but also speak to the worldview of the Japanese. Beginning with the shame created by Adam's choice in the garden, the missionary can demonstrate to the Japanese non-believer that only Christ has the power to move us from a position of shame to honor before God.

Once a Japanese believer comes to Christ, he will experience the pressure of society to continue to participate in idolatry. Such pressure leads believers in honor and shame societies to court the favor of their neighbors honor at the expense of their obedience to God. After all, God will forgive them, but their neighbors will not.[24] By pointing to Christ's judgment as the highest court of opinion, the missionary can begin to leverage the church and the Bible as means of establishing a new honor-shame mindset.[25] The New Testament church faced a similar situation. In the face of outside pressure, Paul reminds believers that "to be shamed by the shameless is ultimately no shame at all."[26]

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[23] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity,* 98.

[24] Freeman, "Honour/Shame Dyanmics in Sub-Saharan Africa," 33. I also had a Japanese missionary tell me one of his converts told him this very idea.

[25] deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kingship and Purity*, 56, 58.

[26] Ibid, 62-63.

Summary

While the West has long expressed its Christianity in terms of a guilt-based society, globalization requires that the church rethink its theology in terms of honor-shame societies. In moving toward a biblical theology of shame and honor, the missionary must not allow the individual nature of conversion to be overridden by the group mentality, nor must he allow personal culpability (e.g., guilt) to be devoid from the gospel. Perhaps as the modern missions movement looks back to the Old and New Testament with fresh eyes, it will be able to make new inroads into the difficult region known as the 10/40 window.

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