

The Gospel from an Honor-Shame Perspective: An Evaluation and a Proposal

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INTRODUCTION

There are at least three primary types of reactions to sin across human cultures: guilt, shame, and fear.¹ These reactions are loosely associated with geographical regions. According to Jayson Georges,

(1) *guilt-innocence cultures are individualistic societies (mostly Western), where people who break the laws are guilty and seek justice or forgiveness to rectify a wrong*, (2) *shame-honor cultures describes [sic] collectivistic cultures (common in the East), where people are shamed for fulfilling group expectations seek to restore their honor before the community*, and (3) *fear-power cultures refers [sic] to animistic contexts (typically tribal), where people afraid of evil and harm pursue power over the spirit world through magical rituals*.²

In this article, we will focus on one of these cultures – namely, honor-shame cultures – and examine how the gospel can be effectively contextualized within them. Although the Bible is saturated with the theme of honor-shame, it was around the year 2000 that Western cross-cultural workers began to recognize its significance.³ This is largely because Western theology was shaped by figures such as Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther, both of whom were deeply burdened by a sense of guilt and sought ways to obtain pardon.⁴ In recent years, however, an increasing number of scholars have come to recognize the vital importance of the theme of honor-shame as portrayed in Scripture, as well as its relevance for the proclamation of the gospel in these cultures.

THE GOSPEL FROM AN HONOR-SHAME PERSPECTIVE

As noted above, those living outside the West are often concerned with, and burdened by, shame or fear and seek liberation from them. A key question, then, is, "In cultures that do not emphasize legal metaphors, how can people make sense of salvation?"⁵ In this

1. Eugene A. Nida, *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1975), 150.

2. Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (Timē Press, 2017), 10-11.

3. Tom Steffen, "A Clothesline Theology for the World: How a Value-Driven Grand Narrative of Scripture Can Frame the Gospel," in *Honor, Shame, and the Gospel: Reframing Our Message and Ministry*, ed. Christopher Flanders and Werner Mischke (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2020), 45.

4. Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 13.

5. Jackson Wu, "How Christ Saves God's Face . . . and Ours: A Soteriology of Honor and Shame," *Missiology: An International Review* 44, no. 4 (2016): 375, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Brad-Vaughn-4/publication/347038937_How_Christ_Saves_God's_Face_and_Ours_A_Soteriology_of_Honor_and_Shame/links/5fd7a50592851c13fe8915d0/How-Christ-Saves-Gods-face-and-Ours-A-soteriology-of-Honor-and-Shame.pdf.

section, we will briefly summarize how the gospel can be made more understandable to those living in honor-shame cultures. From an honor-shame perspective, sin is fundamentally a failure to honor God.⁶ In other words, "sin treats God as though He were not infinitely valuable."⁷ Rather than honoring God, humans engage in "the construction of false status via religion or social codes," such as idolatry or the pursuit of distorted honor.⁸ Furthermore, failing to honor God has two consequences: (1) God "loses face," as he does not receive the honor that he deserves from humans, and (2) humans themselves end up in a shameful position, as they fail to fulfill their duty to glorify God as their Father.⁹ Jesus, on the other hand, perfectly obeyed God and thus glorified him. His complete submission eventually led him to public humiliation on the cross, where he bore the ultimate shame.¹⁰ According to Jackson Wu, the cross of Christ accomplishes two purposes. First, recall that God committed himself to bless all peoples on earth through Abraham's offspring (Gen. 12:1-3). If he had failed to keep his covenant, he would have shamed himself and lost face. Thus, "the cross protects God from the shame of breaking his covenant promises."¹¹ Second, Christ's shameful death "takes away the objective human shame before God" and "restores God's honor."¹² Furthermore, "when God justifies us in Christ, he declares us to be one of his people. We belong to his kingdom-family. This new identity restores honor and removes shame."¹³ Wu calls this "honor substitution," whereby the honor of Christ – the last Adam, who perfectly obeyed God – is reckoned to us.¹⁴ Finally, from an

face_and_Ours_A_soteriology_of_Honor_and_Shame/links/5fd7a50592851c13fe8915d0/How-Christ-Saves-Gods-face-and-Ours-A-soteriology-of-Honor-and-Shame.pdf.

6. Referring to Romans 2:23-24, Wu observes that "breaking the Law is one means to dishonoring God." See Wu, "How Christ Saves God's Face . . . and Ours," 378.

7. Wu, "How Christ Saves God's Face . . . and Ours," 377.

8. Jason Borges, "'Dignified': An Exegetical Soteriology of Divine Honour," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66, no. 1 (February 2013): 77, <https://honorshame.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Dignified-Soteriology-of-Divne-Honor-SJT.pdf>.

9. Wu, "How Christ Saves God's Face . . . and Ours," 377-378.

10. Esther Park, "Reading the Bible with Asian Eyes," *Asian Missions Advance* 88 (Summer 2025): 20, https://www.asiamissions.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/AMA88_EstherPark.pdf.

11. Wu, "How Christ Saves God's Face . . . and Ours," 379.

12. Wu, "How Christ Saves God's Face . . . and Ours," 380.

13. Wu, "How Christ Saves God's Face . . . and Ours," 380. Georges observes that, in responding to the gospel, "women tend to relish the removal of defilement and shame, whereas men prize the prestige and honor being offered." See Jayson Georges, "From Shame to Honor: A Theological Reading of Romans for Honor-Shame Contexts," *Missiology: An International Review* 38, no. 3 (July 2010): 304, <https://honorshame.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/From-Shame-to-Honor-Missiology.pdf>.

14. Wu, "How Christ Saves God's Face . . . and Ours," 379.

honor-shame perspective, faith is more than mere belief in certain propositional truths. Rather, “faith is fundamentally about loyalty. To believe in Christ is to give one’s ultimate allegiance to him. In this sense, we understand faith in far more practical terms that direct our present life.”¹⁵

ANALYSIS

In this section, we will examine the gospel from an honor-shame perspective within the broader framework of contextualization. First, Stephen Bevans observes that one can undertake the contextualization of theology either from a creation-centered or a redemption-centered perspective:

*If one were to opt for a more creation-centered approach, one would approach the context more positively. In a creation-centered approach, human experience, current events, and culture would be areas of God’s activity and therefore sources of theology. If, on the other hand, one believes in a world that is first and foremost in need of redemption by the Word of God from outside the world, context would be seen more negatively. The Word of God might have to be adapted to differing and changing circumstances, but those circumstances could never be interpreted as Word of God. While context may be taken with utmost seriousness, it will be seen as what God’s Word needs always to challenge.*¹⁶

The gospel from an honor-shame perspective presupposes that honor-shame cultures manifest themselves in the worship of idols and in the pursuit of distorted honor, and that these aspects need to be challenged and redeemed. Thus, it is an instance of redemption-centered theology. Second, in *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr discusses five responses that Christians can adopt with respect to culture. Of these, the gospel from an honor-shame perspective typifies *Christ the transformer of culture*, for “Christ is seen as the converter of man in his culture and society.”¹⁷ Lastly, according to Rahman Yakubu, a successful contextual theology should satisfy three criteria: relevancy, identity, and dialogue. The questions posed by these criteria are as follows:

Relevancy: Is this theology **meaningful, understandable, and liberating** within its specific cultural and social situation? Does it “speak to the heart” of the people?

Identity: Is this contextual theology **recognizably and authentically Christian**? Does it maintain continuity with the core of the Christian faith?

Dialogue: Was this theology developed through a

380.

15. Jackson Wu, “Does the ‘Plan of Salvation’ Make Disciples? Why Honor and Shame Are Essential for Christian Ministry,” *Asian Missions Advance* 50 (January 2016): 14, https://www.asiamissions.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/AMA-50_screen.pdf.

16. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and exp. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 22.

17. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1951), 43.

genuine, critical, and mutual conversation between the biblical tradition and the local culture?¹⁸

The gospel from an honor-shame perspective meets the criterion of relevancy, in that paying attention to shame and liberation from it is certainly meaningful and understandable to those living in such cultures. How about identity? As noted above, the theme of honor-shame has not been the focus of much of Western theology. However, Anselm of Canterbury developed a theory of atonement called the satisfaction theory, which reflected “the eleventh-century feudal values of personal honor and reparation of dishonor.”¹⁹ Moreover, the gospel from an honor-shame perspective is supported by a rich array of biblical references (see below). Thus, though it may not be readily recognizably Christian, it is authentically so. Finally, the gospel from an honor-shame perspective also meets the criterion of dialogue. Focusing on honor-shame cultures has contributed to the rediscovery of the significance of honor-shame in the Bible. At the same time, Scripture exposes, challenges, and seeks to redeem the worship of idols and the pursuit of distorted honor. Thus, we can conclude that the gospel from an honor-shame perspective is a viable form of contextual theology.

EVALUATION AND PROPOSAL

We will now evaluate the gospel from an honor-shame perspective. First, Scripture contains ample references to the theme of honor-shame. For comparison, note that “the term guilt and its various derivatives occur 145 times in the Old Testament and 10 times in the New Testament, whereas the term shame and its derivatives occur nearly 300 times in the Old Testament and 45 times in the New Testament.”²⁰ As human beings created in the image of God, we are to “ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name” (Ps. 96:8). However, “although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). Jason Borges observes that “Paul’s climactic hamartiological statement in Romans 3:23 – ‘for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God’ – recounts how humanity has ‘fallen short’ of properly honouring God and so now ‘falls short’ of the dignified existence God intended.”²¹ Consequently, humans end up living in shame: “O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water” (Jer. 17:13). Christ

18. Rahman Yakubu, “Hermeneutical Process in Contextualization,” IC645: Contextualization (class lecture, Tyndale Theological Seminary, Badhoevedorp, the Netherlands, September 24, 2025).

19. Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 51.

20. Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 92.

21. Borges, “Dignified,” 77.

came to earth to set us free from the predicament we brought upon ourselves. He lived a perfectly obedient life before God. Scripture declares that “for as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). According to N. T. Wright, “His role was that of obedience, not merely in place of disobedience but in order to undo that disobedience.”²² Jesus “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). Yet he “endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2), so that “everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame” (Rom. 10:11).²³ Jesus is now “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death” (Heb. 2:9).²⁴ He sanctifies those who believe in him; thus, “he is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb. 2:11). Now we exclaim, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1). Eschatologically, God assures us that “on that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me. The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (Zeph. 3:11, 17). Note that God’s rejoicing over us suggests his full acceptance of us.

As Wu says, “In honor-shame cultures, one’s relationships and reputation are among the chief concerns in a person’s life. People go to great lengths not to ‘lose face.’”²⁵ Supported by ample references to honor-shame from Scripture, the gospel from an honor-shame perspective will certainly speak to those living in such cultures regarding the removal of shame and the invitation to be part of God’s honorable family. One of the weaknesses of this contextual theology, however, concerns the crucifixion of Christ. As noted above, Scripture declares that “everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame” (Rom. 10:11). The immediate context makes it clear that belief in Jesus entails confessing that Jesus is Lord and believing that God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9). The resurrection of Christ presupposes his crucifixion. But why did he have to die? Recall that, according to Wu, the cross of Christ accomplishes two purposes: (1) protecting God from the shame of breaking his covenant and (2) taking away our shame before God and restoring his honor. However, it is not clear why the crucifixion was necessary for God

22. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 1991), 38.

23. Georges observes that “this citation of Isaiah 28:16, also cited earlier in Romans 9:33, is perhaps the greatest of all theological truths for those from honor-shame cultures.” See Georges, “From Shame to Honor,” 302.

24. Note in passing that the resurrected Christ was most likely clothed (otherwise the Gospel writers would have mentioned it). This provides a subtle implication that Jesus’ honor was restored after the resurrection. According to Tennent, “Another important feature of shame and honor, which can be traced back to the account of the fall in Genesis, is the association of nakedness with shame and the corresponding association of clothing with honor.” See Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 85.

25. Wu, “Does the ‘Plan of Salvation’ Make Disciples?,” 14.

to fulfill his covenant promises. As for the second purpose, since Wu does not elaborate on how the crucifixion takes away our shame before God and restores his honor, we have no clear understanding of its indispensability, either. For this, we can turn to Timothy Tennent’s insight:

*In a normal honor and shame context, if a person of greater honor is shamed by someone of a significantly lower status, the offended party has the right to unleash public punishment on those who have offended their honor. . . . This response often involved shedding the blood of the offender. The punishment must take place publicly, or at least become widely known by the larger group. Only then can the honor of the one who was offended be restored.*²⁶

Following this, we can say that the crucifixion of Christ, which involved the shedding of his blood, served as a public act of punishment by the offended God (cf. Ezek. 39:21). Although it was we humans who failed to honor God and thus brought shame upon him, Jesus went to the cross to bear the punishment on our behalf. In that sense, it is reminiscent of penal substitutionary atonement.²⁷

This explanation probably made sense to the original, first-century audience, who lived in the honor-shame culture. However, does it speak to the hearts of those who live in such a culture in the twenty-first century? In Japan, at least, the offended party does not usually administer public punishment to those who have insulted their honor by shedding their blood (it may indeed happen among the yakuza, but it is a criminal act). Is there another way to make sense of the fact that our shame is removed via the crucifixion of Christ? I propose that Jesus’ hanging on the cross signifies his solidarity with us in our shame. Jesus bore the ultimate shame on the cross. As Scripture says, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isa. 53:3). Gorges and Baker observe:

The Gospel writers recognize and highlight the shame factor of Jesus’ death by listing the many affronts dishonoring Jesus in the crucifixion process: spitting on him, striking him in the face and head, stripping him, ridiculing him, insulting him and derisively mocking him. Then worst of all, they hung Jesus’ mangled, naked body near the city gates on the busy Passover weekend for all to behold. Jesus even suffered the humiliation of his closest friends’ abandoning him. Set within Roman conventions, Jesus’ crucifixion is a tale of shame and humiliation, the ultimate form of

26. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 94.

27. Note in passing that “for Anselm Christ’s death is not an act of punishment. Above all there is no indication at all that in the death of Jesus God is exercising on Jesus the punishment that sinners deserve, or that God is punishing Jesus in place of punishing sinners.” See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 236.

labeling a person as an outcast.²⁸

When we come to realize that we have failed to meet not only the expectations of others but also those of the glorious God, we feel the burden of shame. In such times, how comforting it is to know that Jesus understands what it is like to be burdened by shame! As a high priest, he can sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15). He himself went through the utmost shame so that we would feel that our own shame is nothing by comparison. I know of a former youth pastor who shaved his head because one of the teens in his youth group was going through chemotherapy and losing hair. His act of love vividly showed the teen that he was not alone in his shame. In a much more amazing and dramatic way, Jesus lets us know that we are not alone in our shame by experiencing the abject shame himself.²⁹

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have investigated how the gospel can be contextualized in honor-shame cultures. Those living in such cultures can readily relate to the gospel from an honor-shame perspective (criterion of relevancy). It also has a rich array of biblical references (criterion of identity). Focusing on honor-shame cultures has contributed to the rediscovery of the significance of honor-shame in the Bible. At the same time, Scripture exposes, challenges, and seeks to redeem the worship of idols and the pursuit of distorted honor (criterion of dialogue). Thus, the gospel from an honor-shame perspective is a viable contextual theology. One drawback is the question of how to make sense of the crucifixion of Christ. I have proposed that his crucifixion demonstrates solidarity with us in our shame. It is comforting to know that Jesus can sympathize with our shame because he himself went through excruciating shame for our sake. I thus suggest the following points to focus on when sharing the gospel with those living in honor-shame cultures:

If we are honest, we all experience shame and are burdened by it.

We try to hide our shame or cover it up through achievements (i.e., distorted honor).

But, deep down, we still feel the sting of shame.

God loves us deeply and does not want us to live in shame.

Therefore, he came to earth in the person of Jesus and endured utter shame on the cross on our behalf, showing us that we are not alone in our shame. He fully sympathizes with our shame.

Jesus was raised from the dead, thereby defeating

²⁸ Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 108.

²⁹ On top of Jesus' solidarity with us in our shame, Tennent correctly observes that "at the very hour of Jesus' public shame on the cross, he was actually in the process of shaming his enemies, disarming the powers and authorities and making 'a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross' (Col. 2:15)." See Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 88.

shame. He is now exalted in glory and honor.

Through faith in Jesus, our identity is transformed. We are no longer people marked by shame, but sons and daughters of God.

This is not meant to be exhaustive, nor does it cover the entirety of the gospel. Furthermore, as Tom Steffen points out, most cultures have at least two preferred value systems among the four (i.e., guilt-innocence, fear-power, shame-honor, and pollution-purity).³⁰ That is, even in so-called honor-shame cultures, there is typically another value system that is meaningful to those living in such cultures. In sharing the gospel, then, it is important to make use of at least two contextual theologies that speak to the recipients' hearts (e.g., the gospel from an honor-shame perspective and that from an innocence-guilt perspective), so that they can understand that God graciously desires to offer both honor and forgiveness to them.³¹

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³⁰ Steffen adds a fourth value system. See Steffen, "A Clothesline Theology for the World," 45-46.

³¹ Steffen observes that "the texts of Bible authors flow smoothly from one value system to another. Overlap is common." See Steffen, "A Clothesline Theology for the World," 47.

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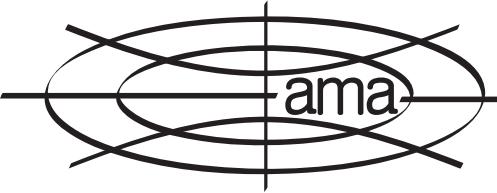
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HISTORY

In 1971, Dr. David J. Cho made several trips to various Asian countries, discussing the possibility of calling an All-Asia Missions Consultation. This proposal was warmly received and the Consultation was held in Seoul, South Korea in August, 1973. As a result of the Consultation, the Asia Missions Association was formed in August 1975. It consisted of 14 Asian nations: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Brunei, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The Asia Missions Association has hosted a Triennial All Asian Missionary Conference in different countries in Asia since its All-Asia Mission Consultation in Seoul. Each conference ended with resolutions and action plans that have contributed to the unification of Asian Churches and Mission Agencies for the advancement of the Gospel. The year 2023 marked the 50th anniversary of the AMA and 14th AMA Triennial Convention was held in Jakarta, Indonesia. The next convention will be held in Seoul, Korea, in 2023.

CONVENTIONS

- All-Asia Missions Consultation in Seoul, Korea, 1973
- The 1st Convention in Seoul, Korea: Inauguration of Asia Missions Association, 1975
- The 2nd Convention in Singapore, 1978 – "Strengthen and Lengthen" (*Isaiah 54:2*)
- The 3rd Convention in Seoul, Korea, 1982 – "Isaiah 62:10"
- The 4th Convention in Pasadena, USA, 1986 – "Peace Council of World Christians"
- The 5th Convention in Utsunomiya, Japan, 1991 – "World Christian for World Mission"
- The 6th Convention in Kobe, Japan, 1997 – "Mission to the World for Glory to God and Peace on Earth"
- The 7th Convention in Jakarta, Indonesia, 2000 – "Missionary Vision for the Third Millennium"
- The 8th Convention in Moscow, Russia, 2003 – "New Global Partnership for World Mission"
- The 9th Convention in Ephesus, Turkey, 2006 – "Mission, The Apostolic Way"
- The 10th Convention in Jakarta, Indonesia, 2010 – "Asian Churches in Global Mission"
- The 11th Convention in Inchon, Korea, 2013 – "Discipleship in the 21st Century Mission" (Luke 9:23)
- The 12th Convention in Manila, Philippines, 2016 – "Globalization and Mission"
- The 13th Convention in Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2019 – "Migration and Mission"
- The 14th Convention in Jakarta, Indonesia, 2023 – "Missions in the Post Pandemic Era: Challenges and Opportunities in the New Normal World"