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[Home](#) > How Would Jesus Tell It? Crafting Stories from an Honor-Shame Perspective

How Would Jesus Tell It? Crafting Stories from an Honor-Shame Perspective

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How might we craft stories from an honor-shame perspective in order to challenge cultural values that are contrary to the gospel?¹ Since honor and shame are important elements of all cultures, this question is relevant for every context. Below I offer a few initial suggestions that will hopefully contribute to a more comprehensive answer to the question.

The proposal below concerns shorter stories (e.g., parables), which may illustrate or defend an idea or action. I will not discuss how to craft broader stories that cover the entire biblical narrative, but instead discuss the kind of stories especially suited to address ethical questions and/or serve an evangelistic purpose. They challenge ethical norms and common perceptions of the world—that which the culture regards as honorable is presented as shameful (and vice versa).

What We Say Depends on How We Say It

If we want to tell a story to address our listeners' worldview, more is required than merely exchanging terminology and finding redemptive analogies or "bridges." Rather, our goal must be to create a narrative context that evokes emotional and intellectual responses similar to stories or situations common to the local culture. In other words, in order for gospel stories to subvert the prevailing cultural worldview, the listeners should not feel they enter a "foreign" world when hearing the story.

Certain types of stories (e.g., romantic tragedies) have distinctive features that frame or structure the narrative. Specific details may vary between individual plays like *Romeo and Juliet* and a movie such as *Titanic*. Similarly, *Star Wars* and *Glory* tell of the struggles within a wide-scale civil war. These stories have a similar framework that helps people make sense of the characters and key events. Likewise, comedic parodies depend entirely upon familiar narrative frameworks that listeners will understand. Without that firm structure, the audience will miss the intended humor of the parody.

Why were Jesus' parables so subversive? In part, it is due to the fact that he framed his stories so that his hearers heard the relevant allusions and context clues that gave significance to the details of the parable. For instance, the parable of the tenants (cf. Matt.

21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19) gets its subversive force from its use of Isaiah 5:ff. Additionally, Jesus uses word play to compound the effect. The Hebrew words for “son” and “stone” rhyme (McKnight 2012). Thus, Jesus’ opponents “perceived that he was speaking about them” (Matt. 21:45).

We see a similar dynamic in the epistles. Paul frames Romans 5:12–chapter 8 to depict the Christian story as a “new exodus” (Wright 2002). In chapter 5, we see “sin” in the role of an enslaving king (i.e., Pharaoh). After passing through water (cf. baptism/Red Sea), God’s people become “slaves of God” (6:22). In Romans 7, they encounter the Law (cf. Sinai). Finally, God’s people arrive at the “promised land” of the new creation in Romans 8.

Below are five key steps that focus our stories in a way that subvert the worldview of our hearers. Fittingly, the following five suggestions create the acronym F.O.C.U.S. There is much more that needs to be said than can be included here. I encourage you to expand upon the outline that follows.

1. Frame the Narrative with Honor and Shame

First, we identify a basic narrative framework. The framework one uses will provide an implicit worldview whereby readers interpret various details in the narrative. From the perspective of honor and shame, a few key themes consistently shape culturally meaningful stories (Wu 2013, 148–192). These include an emphasis on “face,” group identity, and authority (i.e., hierarchal relationships). The following are sample questions that can be used to spur reflection, guide conversation, and shape stories. They are organized according to theme.

Face

- How do people gain and lose face?
- Who has face in the community? Why?
- What is the most common basis for ascribed honor/shame (title, position, name, age, medical conditions, other)?
- What achievements are praised or criticized? • How do people respond to loss of face?

Group Identity

- What group do listeners identify with? Why?
- What does that group stand for and against?
- How does one join (or leave) the group?
- What are expressions and symbols of group identity?
- What are expectations of members?
- What does the group promise? Threaten?
- What distinguishes insiders from outsiders (criteria, characteristics, etc.)?

Authority

- Who do listeners regard as the key authorities?
- How is loyalty expressed?
- What promises come with allegiance?
- What have these authorities done or accomplished in the past?

One should note that the above questions not only address key aspects of an honor-shame perspective, but also correspond to the gospel’s three framework themes—creation, covenant, kingdom (Wu 2014). Accordingly, these questions equip us to

understand local cultures in a manner consistent with the gospel's inherent honor-shame perspective.

2. Outline Their View of the World

We should ask questions about people's worldview, not simply their "religion." Those in contexts emphasizing honor-shame tend to be rather pragmatic and concrete thinkers. Therefore, perhaps we should not primarily focus on their overt religious teachings and practices. In fact, many features of daily life will provide insights that implicitly shape their "religious" thinking. Keep in mind that many people groups do not divide their lives into secular and religious categories, as is commonly found in the West.

The following questions have two purposes. First, they cause us to reflect on the quality of answers to the questions above. Second, they compel us to consider how those answers interrelate.

- What major people and events shape their current way of seeing others, themselves, and the world?
- What do they see as their biggest two or three problems? Is there a relationship between them?
- What are the means of solving these problems?
- What things characterize an "ideal" world according to common cultural standards?

By these kinds of questions we better explore the broad perspective from which people see the world.

3. Consider Local Stories

By considering local stories, we again check the tentative conclusions we have reached thus far. By asking the following questions, we begin thinking about the above answers within the context of a story. Storytellers are required to think about the implicit connections and subtle messages that could or should be conveyed to listeners.

Local stories demonstrate what those in a culture regard as honorable and/or shameful. Here are a few questions one could ask about those stories:

- What virtues are most often highlighted?
- What is common about heroes and villains? Consider the way they solve or contribute to the problem and how they relate to others.
- How do people tell historical stories? How are these different from stories that are perceived as "non-historical" (e.g., fables, make believe children's stories, etc.)?
- What are the most common stories told to children? What are the stories that lie behind some of the cultures most common idioms?

Certainly, one could pose many other questions that show how honor and shame are embodied within diverse contexts.

4. Use the Language

In the process of reflecting on culture and crafting a story, a number of key words and concepts will emerge. What are potential synonyms, idioms, and alternative ways of

expressing these critical ideas? Pay careful attention to subtle differences in similar terms. Do some of them carry distance connotations that either help or hurt our efforts? What is the emotional import of the words we choose?

Because stories convey a particular worldview, our choice of words should do more than simply convey linguistically correct meanings. They should engage certain values and assumptions by stringing together ideas that spur appropriate responses (e.g., impressions, questions, emotions, desires, actions).

5. Subvert Their Stories

Jesus used honor and shame to “subvert” cultural stories for the sake of the gospel. The word “subvert” here does not carry negative overtones of “dominance” or “manipulation.” Rather, Jesus told stories in order to redeem, reconstruct, and reorient people’s view of the world. He proclaimed God’s kingdom and so challenged the values and priorities of the surrounding culture. Below are two approaches we find in scripture.

First, we can “move from good to bad.” Thus, one identifies the key movements and characteristics of local stories that convey honorable or praiseworthy traits and behaviors. The speaker replaces key characters and background setting without changing the essential framework that enables listeners to hear echoes of the original story.

In so doing, the newer characters and setting changes should naturally evoke “negative” responses. Listeners should see the characters as worthy of social censure. Actions or events in the story will be associated with one’s having no face or losing face. Finally, the narrator intentionally integrates word plays, idioms, themes, symbols, or other details that reinforce the traditional story’s framework and/or the intended negative response by listeners.

For example, Jesus’ parable of the tenants is framed around a vineyard that does not yield fruit for its owner. Ultimately, the owner (God) judges the tenants’ rampant injustice. These are stable elements drawn from the story in Isaiah 5. This framework allows the unstable parts of the story to have their subversive effect. Jesus casts the Jewish leaders in the role of the unrighteous tenants, who had rejected the owner’s son (a detail not included by Isaiah). In Mark 12:10-11, Jesus’ use of Psalm 118:22-23 further magnifies the tension.

Second, one might “move from bad to good.” Identify the key movements and characteristics of local stories used to convey shameful or disliked traits and behaviors. Replace key characters and background settings without changing the essential framework that enables listeners to hear echoes of the original story.

Ideally, the newer characters and setting changes should naturally evoke social praise. Actions and events should be associated with one’s having face or getting face. Intentionally integrate word plays, idioms, themes, symbols, or other details that reinforce the tradition story’s framework and/or the intended positive response by listeners. Two passages sufficiently illustrate the point. Luke 10:25-37 depicts the hated Samaritan as a loving rescuer. Despite negative views of women in first century Palestine, the Gospel writers honor the women as the first witnesses to Christ’s resurrection.

Conclusion

How do we craft subversive stories that address honor and shame in the worldview of our hearers? Why is this a critical question? The gospel transforms people's view of God, themselves, others, and the world. One must intentionally consider how hearers seek honor and avoid shame, why they identify with their group, and whom they regard as having authority.

Honor and shame characterize all human cultures. Naturally, they are also important for understanding and applying scripture. God's people seek his face. The gospel transforms a person's heart so that he or she seeks to honor Christ above all else. Thus, in order to contextualize gospel stories from an honor-shame perspective, more is required than the cursory use of themes, bridges, and analogies. Yet, do we have a "superficial" understanding of the biblical story?

Certainly, a number of issues have not been addressed. For instance, before crafting stories from the vantage point of another culture, the storytellers would be wise to give equal attention to their own background, particularly the way their cultural worldview shapes the stories they are accustomed to hearing and telling. By overlooking this step, we might easily subvert our own efforts. That is, one could unintentionally tell stories that convey biblical truth yet lack meaning in the local culture.

The above five-step outline gives F.O.C.U.S. to our process of crafting stories. When contextualizing stories for the sake of the gospel, we want to be biblically faithful and culturally meaningful. Otherwise, we may compromise the Story by settling for stories.

Endnote

1. This question is raised by Jayson Georges, who offers an excellent example of a subversive honor/shame story (2014a, 2014b).

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