

REWRITING THE GOSPEL FOR ORAL CULTURES: WHY HONOR AND SHAME ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE GOSPEL STORY

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This essay demonstrates the intrinsic relationship between the gospel and an honor-shame worldview.¹ In short, the gospel is framed by honor and shame. This point is important not only for theology but also for missions, particularly in oral cultures. In the first section, I will show how biblical authors explain the gospel in ways that make sense to oral learners, who are often characterized by an honor-shame worldview.²

Drawing from this thesis, I will then highlight a few implications for both theological education and contextualization. The discussion raises a few questions. What previously has prevented people from seeing the gospel through the lens of honor and shame? What might this indicate about contextualization? I suggest the problem we face is systemic but solvable.

If an honor-shame worldview is inherent to the gospel, we have reason to rethink certain theological priorities. Accordingly, I will propose a “theological agenda,” listing a number of themes that are especially relevant for ministry within oral cultures. We will find that an honor-shame worldview enables us to read Scripture in an integrated fashion.

THE GOSPEL IS ALREADY CONTEXTUALIZED FOR HONOR-SHAME CULTURES

The biblical authors always frame their gospel presentations using *at least* one of three themes—creation, covenant, and kingdom.³ These motifs determine how other subthemes are used. Accordingly, this framework brings unity to the Bible’s overarching story. These three themes are interwoven closely together. Thus, we best understand their significance within the grand biblical narrative in contrast to a highly systematized theological framework.

I distinguish those themes that *frame* the gospel from those that *explain* the gospel. The latter have their significance within the context of the former. The three framework themes each carry distinctive connotations in the Bible. We should interpret explanatory motifs like law, grace, redemption, justification, adoption, etc. within the particular framework that shapes the

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¹ This is a chapter in the forthcoming book *Beyond Literate Western Contexts: Honor & Shame and the Assessment of Orality Preference*. Edited by Samuel Chiang. International Orality Network, 2015.

² For the purpose of this article, I will use the terms “honor-shame culture” and “oral cultures” interchangeably. Although no logically necessary relationship exists between the two, in practice they are closely linked. Because oral cultures are inherently more communal, they tend to be characterized by an emphasis on honor and shame. I personally am not aware of any oral cultures that would not be described in terms of honor-shame. It should be recognized that honor and shame, at some level, are a part of all human cultures.

³ I fully defend and explain the Bible’s use of these three themes in my forthcoming book to be published by William Carey Library. These three motifs consistently appear where gospel-language is explicitly used (i.e. the בשר, εσαγγελ- word-group).

Bible’s metanarrative. Thus, structuring a gospel presentation in a biblical way is more than simply mentioning a few key words, like “king” or “create.” Rather, these themes *control* the plot and tone of the story.

Monotheism in the Bible highlights the fact that one true God is the true king over the entire world. For example, throughout Isa 40–66, creation language functions to magnify God’s kingship. Isaiah 52:7 makes the explicit announcement, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘*Your God reigns*’” (cf. Isa 40:9).⁴ Similarly, Paul demonstrates how to apply the doctrine of creation in evangelism. In Athens, he uses monotheism to overcome cultural and philosophical divisions of his Greek audience (Acts 17:22–31).

Through a series of covenants, the Creator-king restores his kingdom in the world. In Acts 13:32–41, Paul directly proclaims “the good news [εὐαγγελιζόμεθα] that what God *promised* to the fathers, this he has *fulfilled* to us their children by raising Jesus . . . ,” after which he recalls the Davidic covenant, in which God would raise up a king from David’s line to forever rule over the nations (cf. 2 Sam 7:12–14; Ps 2). Covenant and kingdom similarly frame the gospel summaries found in Rom 1:2–4 and 2 Tim 2:8. Finally, Gal 3:8 unambiguously *equates* the gospel with the Abrahamic covenant; namely, “In you shall all the nations be blessed” (cf. Gen 12:3). In the context of Genesis, the Abrahamic covenant is clearly presented as the means by which God will rescue fallen humanity, who had been scattered into many nations. Not surprisingly, Paul then appeals to monotheism in Gal 3:20 to confirm that God’s promises included both Gentiles and Jews.

How does the Bible integrate creation, covenant, and kingdom within an overarching narrative? The creation-language of Gen 1 suggests that God makes the world to serve as a sanctuary, a temple where God dwells with his image bearers.⁵ The gospel announces Creator’s sovereignty, his right to rule all nations. In the ancient world, the word “gospel” inherently entails the idea of kingship and did not necessarily carry overt religious connotations.⁶ The various covenants in the Bible explain the means by which the Creator King will bring salvation to the world. These three motifs frame the biblical story in ways that carry certain connotations closely associated with honor-shame cultures.

HONOR AND SHAME EXPLAIN THE GOSPEL

Honor and shame are intrinsic to this three-pronged gospel framework. The table below shows the relationship between the gospel themes (discussed above) and characteristic features of honor-shame cultures. In what follows, I first give a brief overview of an honor-shame

⁴ All Bible citations come from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁵ Two helpful resources include Gregory K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Apollos, 2004); John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009).

⁶ For a thorough study of the term “gospel” in ancient contexts, see John Dickson, “Gospel as News: Ευαγγελ- from Aristophanes to the Apostle Paul,” *NTS* 51 (2005): 212–30; For a broader perspective on the “gospel” in the NT, see Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011).

worldview. Then, I will demonstrate how honor and shame explain the gospel in a way that faithfully draws together a diverse range of themes within biblical theology.

Biblical Themes		Honor-Shame Cultures	
Creation	Sanctuary	Holiness	Purity
Covenant	Salvation	Harmony	Promise
Kingdom	Sovereignty	Hierarchy	Power

Certain characteristics typify an honor-shame worldview. There is usually a more evident concern about issues related to purity, ritual, symbolism, tradition, and social boundaries. In addition, people from honor-shame cultures are more collectivistic than individualistic. Therefore, a moral person makes it a priority to maintain harmonious relationships. People are expected to demonstrate loyalty to those belonging to their “in-group,” such as a family or clan. In these societies, one’s relational network acts as a functional savior from trouble. Finally, honor-shame cultures tend to be hierarchal. Honor is ascribed based on social rank. Power and authority are critical for social harmony.

As a person gains influence and power, he also gets more “face” (and vice versa). “Face” essentially describes a person’s value according to standards of a particular social group. Social position is largely determined based on one’s face. In order to get face, one must conform to social expectations. Social transactions always require an exchange of face (much like a credit card). Allegiance to the group and its leaders are expressed in a variety of symbolic ways.

We will reframe the summary above in a way that prepares us to see the relationship between honor-shame and the gospel. In an honor-shame culture, people’s lives should be marked by purity and honor. However, society is full of broken relationships, shameful behaviors, and abuses of power. In an ideal world, social and government leaders would unite people, not contribute to the chaos. Humans would love one another as a family. Loyalty and reconciled relationships are key components to solving the world’s problems and bringing about social harmony.

Even in a few brief sentences, we can already recognize an outline of the biblical story; yet, this narrative is clearly told from an honor-shame perspective. In the following paragraphs, I will highlight in more detail some of the ways that honor and shame frame the gospel. I make a claim that some people may think counterintuitive: *the gospel is already contextualized for honor-shame cultures*. In the gospel, Christ “saves God’s face” when he honors God and removes human shame. These conclusions are confirmed via exegesis.⁷ We do not need to commit “eisegesis” by forcing honor-shame into the biblical story.⁸ The entire narrative presumes an honor-shame framework.

⁷ See Jackson Wu, *Saving God’s Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (Pasadena, Calif.: WCIUP, 2013), 193–292.

⁸ “Eisegesis” refers to people inserting or reading ideas *into* a text that are not a part of the original meaning. “Exegesis,” on the other hand, seeks to interpret or read *out of* the text what the passage inherently means.

The creation-theme addresses a number of issues important to those who live in honor-shame cultures. What do people regard as “sacred?” Many honor-shame societies set apart certain lands, structures, and people for a special purpose, such as worshipping ancestors, spirits, or idols. Yet, the gospel reorients our view of the world. God does not actually live in temples made with human hands (cf. Acts 17:24–25). The gospel foretells the day when God will instead dwell with his people forever. God’s people reject dualistic notions that regard physicality as “bad” and hope for a disembodied existence in “heaven.” In the Bible, “heaven” is described as God’s throne, his dwelling place (2 Chron 6:20; Isa 66:1). Thus, we long for heaven and earth to unite when God recreates the world to be free from the curse of death (Rev 21:1–3).

Because God made the entire world to be his sanctuary, people must reevaluate social boundaries that define purity and impurity. Rituals, sacrifices, and foods cannot purify a person from defilement (cf. Mark 7:15–20; Heb 7:8–10; 9:9–15; 10:1–4). A biblical theology of creation eliminates common social divisions that are based on the dichotomy between the sacred and secular. From among all countries and tribes, the holy God seeks to make “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pet 2:9). The LORD says, “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified” (Lev 10:3).

The covenant motif also has implications for honor-shame cultures. In the Abrahamic covenant, God promises to restore harmony to world by blessing all nations. The Mosaic covenant is one means by which God keeps this promise. He established a sacrificial system that foreshadows how he will reconcile the world to himself and to each other. God’s promise to David is for all “mankind” (2 Sam 7:19) since his offspring will forever reign over all nations (Ps 2:7–8). Ultimately, God fulfills all his promises through a “new covenant” (Jer 31:31–34), summarized by Ezek 36:25–27, which says,

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses [*sic*], and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

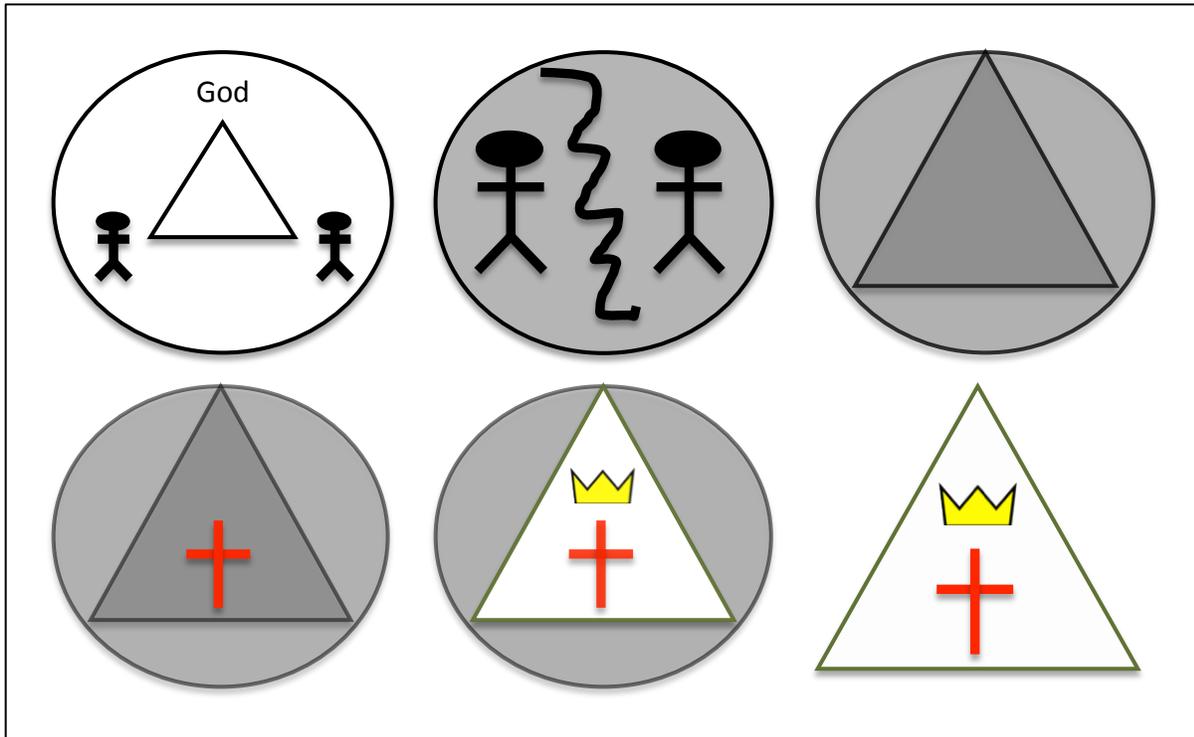
Accordingly, the gospel reveals God’s righteousness in that he keeps his promise to restore harmony to the world. Although others fail us, God is faithful. This universal order will not be maintained through a series of mere “laws.” Rather, God’s Spirit changes people’s hearts so that we will have a proper sense of shame. As a result, we want to glorify him.

Thus, the gospel demonstrates why relationships are truly significant. Whereas people commonly use relationships to exploit others for personal gain, the Creator God uses relationship for the benefit of those who were enemies. He is the true Father of the human family, consisting of all nations. In short, the gospel redefines social relationships. A person’s identity is ultimately determined by whether he or she gives allegiance to God and joins his family.

The gospel declares that God in Christ has reclaimed his kingdom. Biblically speaking, divine kingship in fact is one of the primary implications of monotheism (cf. Isa 40–66). He usurps every authority that brings about chaos and seeks honor for himself rather than the Creator. Christ is sovereign over every demon, disease, dominion, and even death.

His life, death, and resurrection relativize our cultural assumptions about the world. It is precisely because Christ did not conform to social expectations that he is holy and can purify us from corrupt desires and actions. It is because he loved outsiders and broke cultural traditions that Christ was able to reconcile the world. Christ lost face with social authorities and so was shamefully killed and cursed. Yet, it is for this reason that God raised him from the dead and so honors him, who is now seated on the heavenly throne as king of all kings.

The graph below illustrates the gospel metanarrative. First, God created the world (circle) to be the place where God would dwell in harmony with his people, much like a temple (foreshadowed by the triangle). Second, a break in relationship results in shame, disunity, impurity, exclusion, and disharmony. The shaded area depicts this state of affairs. Third, God established a series of covenants (represented by the triangular temple) through which he promises to bring righteousness to all nations and inaugurate his kingdom, which will endure forever. Fourth, Christ (represented by the cross) entered a defiled world in order to fulfill God's covenants. By dying on the cross as a sin offering, he became a curse in order to bless the nations. Fifth, Christ not only dies to cleanse his people, he resurrects. By defeating death, he reigns as God's son (symbolized by a crown). Accordingly, those who join God's family through faith in Christ also share his glory amid a rebellious world (i.e. the contrast of white and shaded areas). Sixth, the Creator King vindicates his honor by ridding the world of evil (i.e. no more shaded area). He reestablishes his glorious kingdom, having recreated the world to serve as a Temple in which he dwells with his people forever. (This is marked by the world's entirely having a triangle shape.)

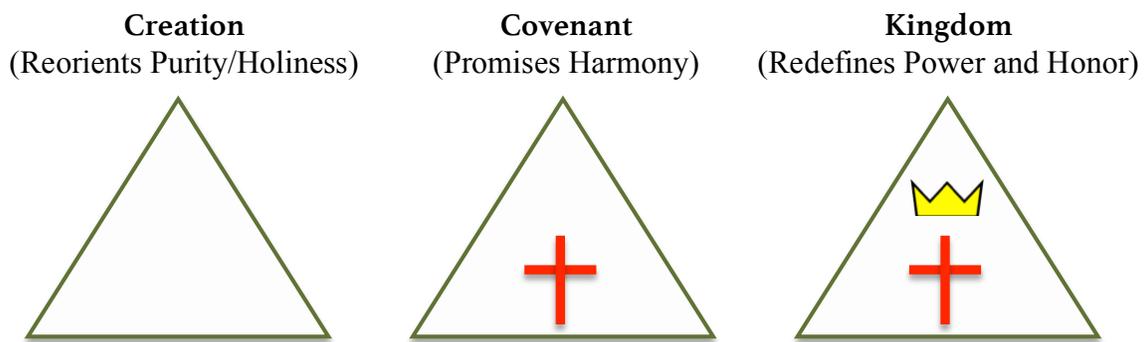


Honor and shame are inherently built into the gospel. The very framework of gospel demonstrates an honor-shame worldview. We conclude that the biblical authors used the themes of creation, covenant, and kingdom to present a message already contextualized for oral cultures.

Oral cultures have an innate capacity to grasp key biblical ideas in ways that are not instinctive for many people in western cultures.

For example, we can easily distort the meaning of “sin” by explaining it using merely one metaphor, i.e. breaking a rule or law. More fundamental, the Bible says we “sin” when we “dishonor” God (Rom 1:21–23; 2:23–24). We all “fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).⁹ Thus, the gospel redefines what is rightly regarded as honorable and shameful.

We preach “the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4). In Christ, we see the face of God. Christ became a sin offering in order to restore creation and build his people into a holy Temple in which he dwells (Rom 8:3–23). Christ died to demonstrate God’s righteousness “for all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor 1:20; cf. 5:14–6:2; Rom 3:25–26). In resurrection, he defeats death so that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:24–28).



Next, I highlight a few implications for contextualization and theological education. We have seen that honor and shame are inherent to the biblical narrative. Why have Christians for so long not seen how honor and shame shape the gospel story? I suggest that we have failed to emphasize these themes for the same reason many missionaries struggle to contextualize the gospel today. Simply stated, people tend to begin with systematic theology and neglect biblical theology.

CONTEXTUALIZATION PRECEDES SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

“I know everything about American culture because I’ve seen all the episodes of *Desperate Housewives*!” Those words came from a Chinese college student, who had never actually been to America. At the time, he was engaged in a debate with an *American* woman about what *her* home country was really like. On the one hand, the student is not entirely mistaken. The television show *Desperate Housewives* does depict what is true of certain aspects or people in the United States. However, his oversights are obvious. He did not know “everything” about America culture. He was completely oblivious to the fact that the show only gives one narrow perspective of America.

This conversation illustrates the challenge evangelicals face when contextualizing the gospel in oral cultures. We also can assume too much when studying and teaching the Bible. We

⁹ Conveniently, we can define sin in terms of honor and shame using the Rom 1:23, 2:23, 3:23, which I have elsewhere called “Roman 23 principle.” See my blog article at: <http://jacksonwu.org/2014/03/05/using-the-romans-23-principle-to-explain-sin>.

all interpret the Bible from limited perspectives. Over time, we can easily confuse our theology (which is developed from within a certain cultural perspective) with biblical truth itself (which transcends any one particular culture).

As people ask questions about various topics, systematic theologies inevitably emerge. One then begins to confuse doctrine with exegesis. Even if individual doctrines are correct, the way we organize them may not reflect the perspective or emphasis of a biblical author. Practically, *one's understanding of a story determines the way he or she tells that story*. Therefore, a stunted view of Scripture and gospel will affect everything from evangelism to theological education.

Evangelicals generally assume a particular understanding of the gospel that is shaped by western systematic theology.¹⁰ For instance, traditional gospel presentations prioritize the law-motif, focus on individual salvation, and mainly draw from select biblical texts such as Romans and Galatians. When missionaries start with systematic theology, they complicate or even compromise the gospel, *even if* they are teaching truth. People inevitably read Scripture in ways that prioritize particular themes and texts that reflect their assumptions and not necessarily those of the biblical authors. The problem is not that they confuse right and wrong but instead what is primary and secondary. Are we preaching the gospel in the likeness of our systematic theology?

Our view of the gospel shapes our approach to ministry. If we implicitly take our systematic theology as the implicit starting point for contextualization, we will veer towards pragmatism. Why? Since evangelicals assume a western formulation of the gospel, they typically explain contextualization simply in terms of communication or application.¹¹ Thus, missionaries use various “redemptive analogies,” “bridges” and stories to share the message in a way that is relevant to a local culture. The problem with this view of contextualization is that it starts in the wrong place. Contextualization fundamentally begins with exegesis and thus biblical theology.

Contextualizing the gospel in oral cultures begins with biblical theology, not simply theology that is biblical. Jim Hamilton describes biblical theology as “the interpretive perspective” the biblical authors use to present their message.¹² Biblical theology is concerned with the symbols, patterns, and emphases that unite “the overarching metanarrative that is the Bible’s big story.”¹³ We should first observe how the Bible frames the gospel message on its own terms.

What is the alternative? Lacking a framework inherent to the Bible, one inadvertently imposes a structure onto the narrative. Thus, many western missionaries will naturally select and organize stories in ways that tacitly reflect western culture. Even though they are using a “storying” methodology, their narrative becomes a “Trojan horse” for their systematic theology.¹⁴

¹⁰ Wu, *Saving God's Face*, 10–33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21–39.

¹² James M. Hamilton Jr., *What Is Biblical Theology?: A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2014), 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴ Of course, one's biblical theology is never perfectly free from the influence of systematic theology. That is not the point. Rather, the two disciplines have fundamentally different approaches. It is a process wherein one learns to distinguish them in practice and so prioritizes biblical theology.

A THEOLOGICAL AGENDA FOR ORAL LEARNERS

What are some implications for theological education? In what follows, I propose a theological agenda for honor-shame cultures. By this, I mean two things. First, what key theological themes need to be reconsidered in view of the fact that honor and shame are intrinsic to the gospel? This is primarily an exegetical-theological question. Second, what issues and motifs are especially important for us to integrate into our methods of evangelism and theological education? This is more of a practical question. Due to space, this section surveys only a limited sample of theological topics and debates. Readers are encouraged to identify other subjects potentially relevant for ministry in honor-shame cultures.

We need first to rethink our understanding of the gospel. In particular, fresh consideration should be given to see how biblical authors understand and integrate the three themes of creation, covenant, and kingdom. What connotations do we associate with each theme? Do these three themes frame the way we tell the biblical story? Are we applying them the way the biblical authors do? One must keep in mind that even if all of our doctrines and stories are true, it is possible that we may wrongly orient the way we tell the gospel story. In other words, it is possible to compromise the gospel by settling for truth.¹⁵ As an illustration, consider typical presentations that depict God as a judge. A king can act as a judge, but a judge is not necessarily a king. Might we compromise the *royal* message by settling for a merely legal motif?

In the previous section, we identified a major encumbrance to contextualization. Systematization should not precede contextualization. By identifying this problem, we can add one more item to our “theological agenda.” Thus, we conclude that biblical theology must be prioritized in theological education and in the process of contextualization. To do so will require careful planning and reflection. We will have to use methods conducive to helping people do orality-based exegesis.¹⁶

Also, missiologists need to explore further various implications of the covenant concept. It is especially relevant for honor-shame cultures due to its emphasis on identity, group unity, symbolic markers, and loyalty. Unfortunately, the covenant theme has not framed many of the evangelistic and training materials used by contemporary missionaries. Consider for example how the gospel in modern gospel tracts would make sense of Gal 3:8, where Paul says the *Abrahamic covenant is the gospel*. He does *not* say that it is merely *background* for the gospel. Inasmuch as we are not able to *equate* the two, we need to reevaluate our understanding of the gospel, indeed the grand biblical narrative.

Many people struggle to figure out how Israel’s history should shape missiological strategy and theological training. Some people may think that teaching a lot of OT theology to modern Gentiles is too much to ask. In fact, it may be exactly what is needed. Like many today who live in oral cultures, the ancient Mediterranean world (Israel included) was profoundly

¹⁵ Jackson Wu, “We Compromise the Gospel When We Settle for Truth: How ‘Right’ Interpretations Lead to ‘Wrong’ Contextualization,” *Global Missiology* 2, no. 10 (2013), n.p. Online: <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/issue/view/99>.

¹⁶ I offer a few initial suggestions in a blog series. Part One of the series is available online: <http://jacksonwu.org/2013/04/04/contextualization-among-oral-peoples-doing-theology-for-the-unreached/>.

shaped by a concern for honor and shame. Accordingly, it is important that we find ways to present the gospel as the completion of Israel's story.¹⁷

What might we learn from the Temple imagery? I suspect we have not sufficiently explored the significance of the sacrificial system in its OT context. At one level, sin offerings removed the threat of God's wrath, but how exactly do the sacrifices work? There are many indications that purification and holiness are linked to themes like honor and glory (cf. Exod 29:43; Lev 10:3; Isa 8:13; Rom 1:24; 2 Tim 2:21). Might it be that one way the sacrifices atoned for sin is that they served to vindicate God's honor (cf. 1 Sam 2:29; 1 Chron 16:29; Ps 96:8; Isa 43:23)? As I have argued elsewhere, Christ's death pays our honor debt to God.¹⁸ Biblical authors frequently regard sin as a "debt" (Mt 6:12, 14; 18:34–35; Luke 11:4; cf. Isa 52:3). In the Pentateuch, sin offerings and atonement are consistently presented in economic terms (i.e. restitution, compensatory payment). Noteworthy passages include Exod 30:11–16, Lev 5:11–16; Num 5:5–10; 31:48–51.

One might be tempted to dismiss these associations out of fear that people will mistakenly think they can "bribe" God. However, the fact that people might misunderstand or manipulate language does not deny the reality that God still uses this imagery to explain atonement via sacrificial offerings. Fear of misunderstanding must not dictate our theology and nullify God's revelation.

Although I cannot endorse everything that goes by the name "New Perspective on Paul,"¹⁹ that entire debate about Second-Temple Judaism and Paul's view of justification can benefit missiological practice. Thus, we better understand that the "law" in Romans and Galatians refers to the Mosaic Covenant. It cannot be reduced to an abstract "universal human law." Doing works of the Law marked someone not simply as a "moralist" but as a member of God's covenant community. From this perspective, ethnocentrism and cultural pride become paramount gospel issues (cf. Eph 2:11–3:6). Although it is true some people might try to "earn salvation" through good deeds, it is time we reconsider the problem that Paul addresses. Instead of focusing on "how" one gets saved, perhaps he is explaining "who" can be saved.²⁰ Might we at times talk about guilt when we should be talking more about shame?

Furthermore, we need to clarify the meaning of "faith" and the source of identity. In John 5:44, Jesus defines faith in terms of honor/glory when he asked his opponents, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" God's people do not find their identity according to group membership (e.g. ethnicity, tribe) and its symbols (e.g. Israel and the Law). Instead, the gospel calls us to give allegiance (i.e. loyalty, faith) to King Jesus.

¹⁷ See McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*.

¹⁸ This subject is ripe for new research. I have laid some initial groundwork, discussing atonement via honor and shame in Wu, *Saving God's Face*, 196–219.

¹⁹ The "New Perspective on Paul" debate is one the most important discussions among biblical theologians in the past 30 years. For an introduction to the topic, see Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2010); Mark Mattison, "A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul | The Paul Page," *A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul*, October 16, 2009, n.p. [cited 7 February 2014]. Online: <http://www.thepaulpage.com/a-summary-of-the-new-perspective-on-paul/>.

²⁰ The main problem may not be "achieved" honor/righteousness but rather "ascribed" honor/righteousness. See my blog article online: <http://jacksonwu.org/2013/10/15/china-justification-and-the-problem-of-ascribed-righteousness/>.

Honor-shame cultures also have an inherent capacity to grasp “union with Christ” language. Being “in Christ” means that we recognize Christ as the representative “head” of the group. Because we identify with Christ we share in his honor and shame, life and death. In addition, missiologists may also want to join a related debate: Does the phrase πίστewς Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ mean “faith in Christ” or “the faithfulness of Christ?”²¹ In cultures that stress loyalty and filial piety, this conversation may be especially relevant.

Ecclesiology is a critical issue for honor-shame societies. The gospel does not merely demand that an individual leave his or her family; it invites people to join the larger human family. Indeed, this was Jesus’ promise (Mark 10:29–30)! Conversion means changing one’s group identity. The gospel, framed as it is by honor and shame, necessitates a comprehensive ecclesiology. For typical oral learners, individual salvation apart from community does not sound like good news. A lot of missiological literature focuses on rapidity and quantity of churches. In some ways, honor-shame cultures will be less enamored by empirical measures of ministry success. A gospel that is truly “good news” will produce a united community whose character is transformed by a divine “sense of shame.” We need to ask, “How do churches identify themselves?” Do we implicitly teach that the Church is a “volunteer organization”?

How about soteriology in an honor-shame context? We have already discussed related subjects like justification, in which we join God’s people via identification with Christ. We also want to highlight a number of themes, such as the Holy Spirit, glorification, new creation, and rescue from shame. Honor-shame cultures tend to be pragmatic when it comes to religious faith. They want to know that salvation concerns the present as well as the next life. The Holy Spirit purifies our desires so that we can live holy, God-glorifying lives. The fruit of the Spirit mark out God’s people, not titles, or rituals. True repentance is a change in honor-shame standards. Therefore, we should not merely talk about “heaven” or “eternal life” in the abstract sense. Rather, Christians anticipate a new heaven and new earth when we will be physically resurrected. In short, we should emphasize that salvation is communal, cosmic, and concrete.

The Bible also explains salvation in terms of honor and shame. John gives explicit evidence for “glory imputation.” Jesus prays, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one” (John 17:22). God imputes to us the glory he gave to Christ. Salvation culminates in our glorification (Rom 8:30). Because Christ’s followers are heirs of God, they will be glorified with Christ “provided we suffer with him” (Rom 8:17). Though God’s people “lose face” in the present age, ultimately they “will not be put to shame” (Rom 10:11). In Christ, God saves their “face.”

Finally, the above reflections challenge us to consider our view of Scripture. In the Bible, the one true God reveals himself to all nations. Thus, the Bible’s theology is not restricted to the language, thought forms, and symbols of any one particular culture (e.g. western culture). Historically speaking, however, Christian theologians have overwhelmingly emphasized legal language to the neglect of honor-shame imagery.

Naturally, this background influences the work of modern day missionaries. For example, consider evangelism and theological education within oral cultures. Missiologists wisely

²¹ For an introduction to the debate, see Michael F. Bird and Preston M Sprinkle, eds., *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009).

highlight the importance of using stories to reach oral learners. Various articles consider issues like story selection and ordering. Yet, contextualization among oral learners requires more than storying. It is more than story selection. We first need to develop a biblical theology that makes sense of our web of stories. But are we actually doing this?

Certainly, many missiologists rightly stress the need to tell the “grand story” of the Bible; yet, what framework are people using to shape that overarching narrative? What implicit theology underlies our story selection? On what basis are we chosen one story thread and not another? For example, consider different ways people conceive of the gospel. One might see the gospel as the message about how one gets saved. Another person regards it as the proclamation that Jesus is king. A third person says the gospel is the fulfillment of Israel’s story. Each of these perspectives will lead people to frame their presentation with a different set of stories.

However, the biblical authors have already provided us with a distinct framework for presenting the gospel (as we have seen above). The three motifs determine how other themes interrelate. They also provide the interpretive context from which one discerns theological priority and emphasis. If we are not careful, our cultural and theological presuppositions will subtly shape the story we tell. We could invert major and minor themes. Perhaps, our presentation of the “grand narrative” may actually derive more from our systematic theology rather than from biblical theology.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY PRESENTS AN HONOR-SHAME GOSPEL

In conclusion, this essay has attempted to demonstrate that honor and shame are intrinsic to the gospel. These are not mere cultural labels tagged on to the “real” gospel. Rather, honor and shame are built into the framework of the gospel itself. This is because the biblical authors consistently frame their gospel presentations in terms of three themes—creation, covenant, and kingdom. Together, they give order to the grand biblical narrative. These motifs address a number of key concerns commonly found within honor-shame cultures.

There are practical implications for recognizing the contours of an honor-shame gospel. Thus, this article offered a “theological agenda” that identifies a number of theological themes relevant to oral learners. Some people may need to reconsider their understanding of contextualization in order to minister effectively and faithfully among oral learners. Christians from traditional, western backgrounds, for example, may want to reevaluate the way they tell the gospel story, the theological themes they emphasize, and their approach to contextualization.

What if we fail to take seriously the importance of an honor and shame worldview? Inevitably, we will rewrite the gospel for oral learners. And that makes no sense.

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