

GLOBAL INSIGHTS

For Ministering and Leading in Honor-Shame Contexts

In April 2016, [visionSynergy](#) and [HonorShame.com](#) facilitated a global online conversation about ministering and leading in honor-shame contexts. This document summarizes the highlights of that learning event. (Clicking on @handles will link to the complete post at Synergy Commons.)

Understanding Honor-Shame Cultures

How is honor-shame expressed in cultures?

AFGHANISTAN: Honor is based on what people say about me and my 'group' (my reputation, but much more my family, or my group's reputation). Honor is like capital, the currency by which families survive. The men reflect honor through public virtues while females support this by being private and hidden. Because the pursuit of honor is so fundamental and basic in life, people frequently resort to dishonorable ways in order to gain and maintain their honor. This becomes false honor and frustrates interpersonal relationships and hinders effective leadership. @Arley

KENYA: Honor and shame is the operating system on which social life is lived in Kenya. Name and esteem at the family, tribal, and cultural level are important in Kenyan cultures. Much honor is expressed in marriage. Marrying below your status, premarital pregnancy, and adultery bring deep shame. Eating together also communicates a lot of honor. When an honorable person invites you to a family's party or special gathering to share a meal it is an honorable thing. Also, a wealthy person who uses his wealth to bless other people is an honorable man. @MartinMunyao

PHILIPPINES: Every word and gesture requires a response based on honor. If the response does not come, shame enters the scene. ... If one shows grace or charity in time of need, the recipient becomes indebted for the rest of life to repay the gift. A second aspect of honor, and saving face, is the unwillingness (and incapacity) of Filipinos to say, "No." They will avoid at any cost to say this word. @Chris

HAITI: In the United States most leadership decisions are made for you ahead of time. In Haiti everything is personal and negotiable and [the leaders] get blamed if [they] can't give a positive response. @SeanChristiansen

THAILAND: [Honor-shame] is so innate, so much a part of who they are (but so little talked about) that I have only learned about it via bumping into the invisible box, or shattering it like some little boy running through a glass door. It's nowhere, and yet it's everywhere. @Joy_P

CHINA: To receive honor and being honorable are not necessarily the same. Being known is power. If Westerners say "knowledge is power," then a Chinese person might say that people knowing you is power. Honor in the sense of known-ness more desired than anything Westerners might think of as "honor" in a chivalrous sense. @JacksonWu

ARGENTINA: Recent data show that on "average" Argentina is guilt-innocence oriented, but honor-shame is a close second. Perhaps that's why I'm confused. Argentina is not monolithic! Buenos Aires is home to 14 million people from different parts of Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay. There are also many from Spain and Italy. In our (very) small church in a lower middle class neighborhood we had people from all of those places! Each has its own cultural DNA, but each is also "Argentine." So, "average" Argentine data, while helpful, is essentially useless when it comes to dealing with an individual.

AFRICA: The issue at the core of the whole issue of honour/shame is, whose honour do we seek? African culture seeks the honour of elders to achieve honour and acceptance of oneself. It essentially places man in the position of God. Discipleship is about bringing the truth of what it means to honour God above all. @SandraFreeman

BALKANS: There's a paradox [in the Gospels]—Jesus our Lord is a master of securing his own honor, so to imitate him could mean arguing well and defeating those who slander God, yet Jesus tells his followers, honestly, to not get caught up in such battles. @NSharp

INDIA: An honor shame culture seems to be very much socially constructed, and everything (literally) is negotiable. The atmosphere of uncertainty so characteristic of an H/S culture (as in the Haitian example here) is dealt with by a delicately balanced network of kinship ties and social obligations. The winner is the one with the most people obligated to them, and who has the least obligations to others. The uncertainty created is managed by delicately balanced

inter-dependencies that people seem to navigate intuitively. It is truly an art. @Mark A Avery

Can a learning journey *together with nationals* about honor-shame in the Bible help us gain an understanding of the Bible that is closer to the original authors and hearers of Scripture—while also forging mutual understanding and deeper relationships with them? @WernerMischke

Resolving Conflict—Without Shaming

How to confront without harming relationships?

Conflict resolution in honor-shame cultures is inherently counter-cultural. The key aspects that challenge the culture, I think, include: take the initiative to address the issue, raising the issue *indirectly*, making direct confrontation private, and come up with a plan for restoring face. Also be sure to quickly admit your own faults or weaknesses. Be consistently and genuinely encouraging, such that people can no doubt your motives when conflict arises. By making it a practice to give face, you have the face to hasten resolution. @JacksonWu

In observing conflict resolution, I have noticed how people moralize forms of communication—they believe only their own cultural forms of communication (i.e. indirect vs. direct) are capable of communicating certain meaning. ... Here are three principles: First, don't assume motives. Second, value and utilize other forms of communication during conflict. Lastly, keep an eye on face. @JaysonGeorges

Unity in the body of Christ happens in proportion to the way the so-called strong and honorable demonstrate honor and respect toward the so-called weak and less honorable (1 Cor 12:21–25). @WernerMischke

One way we have tried to deal with [conflict] is recruiting via someone else. That third party then becomes the intermediary, or if you like the cultural broker, for when a conflict happens. @Karsten

From a Western perspective, I see conflict is most often over what is viewed as an 'action', whereas in HS culture it is more over an 'attitude'. ... As much as HS folk have to learn new ways to courageously speak 'no' while still being respectful, we as Westerners also have much to learn about new ways to speak 'disagreement' gracefully without 'disrespecting'. @SandraFreeman

Forms of gift giving that we would see as manipulative forms of corruption are genuinely seen as acts of thankfulness due to a person in a position of honor (such as a government worker, who thinks of his work in service of the monarchy). @Joy_P

So to evangelize is to be in conflict with the majority of the culture and to be part of [Ireland's] shameful past. Most attempts to broach serious religious discussion in a favorable fashion are met by shaming tactics ... It seems to me that the need to learn to deal with these shaming strategies as a bearer of the good news is crucial. @RoyAngle

A Gospel That Changes

What biblical truths lead to genuine moral change?

Our understanding of key biblical truths that effect change needs to be much broader than merely propositional statements. Intellectual concepts rarely effect change. However, experiencing transformational truth that is lived out in the context of a community has tremendous power to effect change. ... We must proclaim the gospel by living out the gospel in the context of a genuine community and then invite others into this community as well. @ColinEAndrews

Face is often disregarded and berated, when it's what the entire culture is built upon. Rather than saying that it's shameful to seek face or use it as social capital, (like has been done traditionally), how can we get people to start thinking through it as a resource that God has given, to be used to our benefit or to his. Using our face to gain greater face for him must be ok, just as using finances for the kingdom or our giftings would also be ok. @Joy_P

Jesus did not call the desire for honor “pride” nor did he dismantle the social hierarchy. Instead, he showed how to live in that context with Kingdom values driving you. He did it himself, ultimately on the cross and his exaltation after his humiliation becomes our own in Christ! @SeanChristensen

By regaining a sense of collective identity, the church is set free from the fear of shame. Christ’s followers belong to a community that shares a radically new sense of honor and shame. Therefore, they no longer esteem the praise of the world (cf. Rom 2:28–29). @JacksonWu

The new source of honor that we gain through relationship with Christ—giving us an *honor surplus*—is the foundation of our being able to live ethically superior lives. @WernerMischke

1 Peter 3:15 cuts through all [our self-honoring motives for ministry] by saying “in your hearts honour Christ the

Lord as holy.” As I give explanation of the hope within me, I am to do so bathed in the esteemed honour of Jesus that this frees me of other reference points that generate pride or fear. @RoyAngle

The concept of “faith” then is not so much cognitive belief in propositions about Jesus, but a transfer of allegiance to the new Jesus-community, more akin to faithfulness/loyalty. @JaysonGeorges

Salvation in most Kenyan communities is a transfer of identity and allegiance from one group to another. It’s a switch from an ordinary group membership (one’s tribal background and its practices) to an honorable community of believers. @MartinMunyao

Emphasizing sin as shame before God has been so helpful in our ministry, and it has brought conviction for sin that just doesn’t occur when guilt is spoken about. @SandraFreeman

To Be, Or Not To Be ... A Patron?

How should Christians engage the system of patronage?

In [honor-shame] cultures, participating in the patron-client system is not optional, but a sort of moral obligation. A stingy patron or an ungrateful client is a social offense and utmost disgrace. Missionaries from affluent countries are expected to function as patrons in developing contexts. @JaysonGeorges

Patronage is sometimes abused today in the world of missions because of attitudes of superiority or unhealthy dependency. Nevertheless I believe the honor-shame dynamic of patronage in the Bible can be understood very positively and can be a positive missiological dynamic in the world Christian movement. @WernerMischke

I find that the patron-client roles are one of the most difficult cultural issues for Westerner to judge correctly. So, it might be best to suspend judgment and start asking questions. @ColinEAndrews

[The Sermon on the Mount says,] Orient your life around me, Jesus, because I am the one who opens access to the Father. You have a patron in God himself. He will take care of your needs. He has your back. If you stop wasting your life scrounging to win, and instead radically give away in every situation, you will not be put to shame. Instead I will vindicate you and God will take care of everything. @N Sharp

The concept of covenant is the same as God as protecting Patron. ...The ‘client’ (e.g., Israel/church) is unfaithful, and can be punished. But God is faithful in his righteousness and full of forgiveness, by atonement through his beloved Son. @KeesH

I experienced three levels of patronage while in Ethiopia: street beggars, students seeking support, and teachers looking to study in the US. It was very difficult to say no, with the parable of the Good Samaritan always present in my mind. @PeteW



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To learn more, visit “[Introducing Honor-Shame Cultures](#)” or www.HonorShame.com

