



How Christ saves God's face ... and ours: A soteriology of honor and shame

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Abstract

Honor and shame are critical aspects of a biblical soteriology. In order to demonstrate the point, this article surveys three key doctrines—sin, atonement, and justification by faith. Shame is a subjective and objective reality. It is both the consequence and defining feature of sin. Within the context of a collectivistic covenant relationship, Christ pays the honor-debt owed by those who give their loyalty to him. In so doing, Christ not only glorifies his people; more importantly, he saves God's face.

Keywords

soteriology, honor, shame, atonement, justification, face, contextualization, salvation

Introduction

Chinese non-Christians frequently have the same reaction to a traditional gospel presentation: “What does that have to do with me?” This should not be surprising. The standard Chinese translation (和合本, CUV) translates “sin” as “crime.” Naturally, Chinese reply, “I’m not a criminal. I’ve never stolen anything nor killed anyone.” To many Westerners, this response seems perplexing. However, many cultures do not stress law-imagery as much as Westerners do. When making moral decisions, people rarely if ever appeal to a “universal law” or even to a god who will judge them. I doubt there was ever a morning that Chairman Mao woke up with Martin Luther’s stricken conscious and cried out, “How will a holy God ever accept me?” In cultures that do not emphasize legal metaphors, how can people make sense of salvation?

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This article demonstrates a way of understanding the doctrine of salvation from an honor–shame perspective. As will be shown, explaining salvation in this way is both biblically faithful and culturally meaningful.

These twin themes are found throughout the Bible. In fact, this essay suggests that honor and shame are fundamental to the biblical doctrines on sin, atonement, and justification. This essay gives a condensed overview of the theological and exegetical arguments I develop more fully elsewhere. For a more detailed discussion on key ideas, see especially Wu, 2013. I will expand on some points in order to provide more clarity and highlight a few relevant implications. Theologians routinely underestimate the importance of honor–shame when considering the doctrine of salvation. I suspect this is because they misunderstand what is meant by “honor and shame.” Therefore, we should begin by clarifying our terms.

What is “honor and shame”?

What do I mean by “honor and shame?” In broad terms, a person’s “honor” refers to his or her perceived public worth within a relational context. In America, millions seek honor by posting updates on social media, like *Facebook*. By contrast, “shame” is the ill repute that results when a person has some supposed deficiency or fails to meet the standards prescribed by his or her community. A more colloquial way of talking about honor and shame (in cultures like China) is to speak of giving or losing “face.” Generally speaking, an honor–shame worldview has three characteristic features.

First, people are concerned with reputation or “face.” Individuals are sensitive to the opinions of others. Every group makes judgments about the value or worth of other people relative to some group standard. These social assessments largely determine a person’s social status and public identity.

Second, an honor–shame worldview is more collectivistic than individualistic. In “collectivistic” contexts, one’s group largely shapes a personal sense of identity. In addition, the community’s needs are generally prioritized over an individual’s concerns. Even in sports subculture, we see this dynamic at work. People celebrate a victory by yelling, “We won the championship!!” We might say, “Excuse me, you said ‘we’? You were not on the field.”

Third, vertical, hierarchic relationships are often more influential than horizontal (i.e. peer) relationships. As a result, those who have an honor–shame perspective have a great respect for authority. We can remember these three features using alliteration: reputation, relationships, and role (which entails rank and responsibilities).

Cultures have manifold ways of conveying, assessing, and regulating honor and shame (Wu, 2013: 6). There are two ways to get (or lose) honor (or shame). First, it can be *achieved* (based on individual distinctions like getting good grades or winning a sports competition). Second, it can be *ascribed* (based on one’s social position, relationships, titles, etc.).¹ For example, if your last name was “Clinton” or “Obama” or “Hilton,” you would get a certain respect and attention from people regardless of my individual achievements.

Accordingly, one can better grasp the difference between guilt and honor–shame. Whereas guilt emphasizes *what* someone does wrong, honor and shame highlight *who* a person is. The latter is a broader category. Our identity is determined by both what we do and our relationship with others. For example, one is a daughter, C.E.O., or teacher in relationship to other people (e.g. parents, a company, or students).

Contrary to common perception, honor and shame have *both* subjective *and* objective dimensions. People are familiar with the subjective side of honor–shame. For example, *psychologically*, a person can feel “ashamed.” Or, one personally feels a sense of honor. However, there is another aspect of honor–shame. Objectively, we—as sinners—dishonor God and “shame” his name before a watching world. Likewise, our peers might (dis)honor us (regardless of our personal feelings). Within our community, we may have an *objective* high status . . . quite independent of our *subjective*, psychological state.²

All cultures are concerned with issues related to honor and shame. Certainly, people may not use those exact terms or express their concern in the same way; yet, they do care about things like their reputation, relationships, and their role in social groups. In actual fact, the difference between so-called “honor–shame cultures” and a “guilt-based culture” is merely one of emphasis. In short, honor and shame are *human* dynamics.

How might we understand honor–shame in relation to the law and morality? Biblically, we should not dichotomize law and honor–shame. The Mosaic Law was a *covenant*. It is not a set of ahistorical, abstract principles. Rather, it established a relationship with Israel through which God shares his glory with his people. Through the Law, God reveals His own honor. From a biblical perspective, *God is the ultimate measure for defining honor or glory*. In relationship to God, human sin is exposed as shame.

We are guilty of shame (sin)

We are now ready to discuss the meaning of “sin” in order to better understand salvation. Biblical writers frequently use honor–shame language to describe “sin,” such as in Romans. In Romans 1:18–31, Paul gives an extended description of unrighteousness; yet, he never once uses law language. Rather, he speaks of dishonor and shame. Verses 21–23 summarize the point:

For 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. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and *exchanged the glory of the immortal God* for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

In essence, sin treats God as though He were not infinitely valuable. In China, I tell people that “sin” is like publicly spitting in our father’s face. Then, in vv. 24–31, we see the consequence. Because people do not acknowledge God, they themselves become shameful.³

Paul introduces the Mosaic Law in chapter 2; yet, he still uses honor–shame language to describe sin. In Rom 2:23–24, he says, “You who boast in the law *dishonor* God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’” Even at a grammatical level, one observes that breaking the Law is one *means* to dishonoring God. In other words, the main verb, “dishonor” (ἀτιμάζεις), indicates the core problem. “Breaking the law” (διὰ τῆς παραβάσεως τοῦ νόμου) is a prepositional phrase, which shows one particular way or circumstance that God is dishonored. Verse 24 gives the ground clause (γὰρ . . .) for v. 23 and confirms that honor–shame is the central issue (not law) (Wu, 2013: 240).

Finally, recall Rom 3:23, perhaps the Bible’s most famous verse on sin: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” There is an easy way to remember these verses, which describe “sin” using honor–shame. Each passage uses v. 23 (i.e. Rom 1:23; 2:23; 3:23).

Unfortunately, some people get the order backwards. In *The Cross and Salvation*, Bruce Demarest summarizes a common idea about sin. According to penal substitution theory, sin “is primarily a violation of God’s law, *not his honor*” (Demarest, 2006: 158; Wu, 2013: 240). My interpretation suggests the exact opposite conclusion and rejects the dichotomy between God’s law and His honor. I affirm that sin *is most basically a violation against God’s honor*. Law points to merely one social sphere within an honor–shame world.

We can summarize all this by saying that sin is making God “lose face.” How so? When we sin, we do not glorify God because we essentially say that God is not faithful or worthy of praise (cf. Rom 4:20; 14:23). What does it mean to say that God “loses face”? We are not describing some aspect of God’s character that changes. Instead, we describe the ill repute or disregard that God endures among sinful nations. Compare passages like Isa 42:12, which says, “Let them *give glory to the LORD* and declare his praise in the coastlands.” Clearly, the writer does not imply God’s character is less glorious if people do not declare his praise. Similarly, if we give God “face” or if God “loses face,” we speak about the degree to which people recognize God’s honor.

In summary, shame is both the *fruit* and the *root* of sin. “Sin” cannot be limited to the single metaphor of law. Paul even says that before God introduced the Mosaic Law, “sin indeed was in the world before the law was given” (Rom 5:13). Genuine obedience seeks to *honor* God. Consider Paul’s words in 1 Cor 10:31: “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Therefore, not honoring God in any area of life is sin. This is more than conforming to a rule (Wu, 2013: 240). It is important that we grasp the essence of sin. After all, how we define a problem will largely shape the way we understand the solution.⁴

Christ saves God’s face (atonement)

What is salvation from an honor–shame perspective? Although people usually ask what Christ’s death accomplishes for us, I suggest we begin with another question: what does Christ’s atonement do *for God*?

First of all, the atonement is possible because of what Jesus does for God (Wu, 2013: 197–98). In God’s covenant with Abraham, God commits to bless all nations through Abraham’s offspring. Thus, God identifies with humanity, casting his lot with all nations. Because the human family dishonors God, people should be put to eternal shame. Were God to break His covenant and reject those whom He promised to save, God would deny himself, shamed for all eternity. In effect, He would cease to be God. Yet, because of the cross, God is able to keep his promises, which He guaranteed by oath, showing “the unchangeable character of his purpose” (Heb 6:17–18).⁵ Christ shows “God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (Rom 15:8–9).

God’s own honor is bound up in the cross. In that sense, Jesus saves God’s “face.” As I suggested, this is true in two ways. On the one hand, sin raises the need for God’s own vindication. This requires that He manifest his supreme worth in all the earth. God’s character is far more than a foil that exposes our sin. God’s honor is an end in itself. The cross saves God’s “face” from the shame of His people. On the other hand, the cross protects God from the shame of breaking his covenant promises.

These observations lead to a surprising and disturbing conclusion: *Jesus died for God*. The atonement is *necessary* but not merely for the sake of human salvation. I am claiming *more* than simply “God wants to glorify himself.” Rather, if Christ did not die, God would not be righteous (cf. Rom 3:25–26). In that case, God lacks honor. God is shameful. The atonement is a *God-centered* act. Christ’s death vindicates God’s righteousness whereby he is able to save his people. God’s glory is not an obstacle to his main goal, that is, saving sinners. Saving sinners is a *means* to his main goal. God seeks face; as a result, he seeks sinners. God’s concern for His honor ensures that He will not forsake His people (cf. Ps 79:9; Ezek 36:22ff.).

With respect to people, how does salvation work?

From birth, humans have a debt to God our Creator (Wu, 2103: 182–83). A “debt” or obligation is not necessarily something negative. As sons and daughters, made in the image of God, we are called to glorify God our Father and King (Kline, 2000: 44–66).⁶ In Romans 13, Paul says we should “pay . . . honor to whom honor is owed” and to “owe [ὀφείλετε] no one anything, except to love each other.” We must give God “face.” Honoring God as Father and King entails our obedience. I call this an “honor-debt.”

We also have a “sin-debt” because we fall short of God’s glory. The Bible characterizes sin as a debt that needs to be forgiven (Matt 6:12; 18:27–34; Luke 7:41–43; 16:5; Col 2:14). If one does not pay this debt, the offender suffers the shame of slavery, exile, and even death (Anderson, 2009).⁷ As a consequence, God in the Mosaic Law commands a “sin-offering” (ἁγιασμός), a restitution payment, and satisfies our debt-obligation due to sin.⁸ However, Hebrews 10:34 says the blood of animals ultimately cannot cleanse our impurity, which defames God’s honor.⁹

Therefore, Christ pays both our “honor-debt” and our “sin-debt.” This can be called “honor substitution.” Christ is the last Adam, the perfect “image of God,” representing

humanity. His obedience perfectly glorifies God.¹⁰ As the “firstborn son” and king of all, Christ pays the honor-debt the human family owes God (Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 John 3:5).¹¹ Likewise, he is able to pay our “sin-debt” on the cross, having become a sin offering (Rom 8:3; cf. 2 Cor 5:21). As a “compensatory payment,” Christ takes away the objective human shame before God, which we call “sin.”¹² His shameful death restores *God’s honor*. In this way, he averts God’s wrath and makes reconciliation (and justification) possible.¹³

Vindicating honor (justification): How do we describe “justification” from an honor–shame perspective?

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. Those who are “in Christ” by faith receive the Spirit, who enables them to glorify God the Father with their life.

Objectively, justification is possible because of “honor substitution” (discussed above). Christ gives his honor to his people. One could say his honor is reckoned or imputed to us. In John 17:22, Jesus intercedes for his followers: “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one.”¹⁴

In Romans, Paul uses honor–shame language to explain justification. In Rom 10:10–11, Paul writes, “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame’” (cf. 9:33). In Rom 5:2, 5 those who are justified can rejoice in “hope in the glory of God” and that “hope does not put us to shame.” In Rom 3:24–26, justification solves the glory problem of 3:23.

What is the nature of justifying faith? *The faith that justifies is the faith that glorifies*.¹⁵ Abraham typifies justifying faith: “No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (Rom 4:20–21). No wonder Rom 14:23 says that whatever does not come from faith is reckoned as “sin.”

Compare how Jesus talks about faith and righteousness. Observe in John 5:44 how Jesus defines “faith” in terms of glory-seeking: “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” In John 7:18, Jesus similarly describes a righteous person: “The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no *unrighteousness*.”¹⁶

Paul’s Jewish opponents misunderstood the nature of true glory and thus “works of the Law.” They “relied on” and “boasted in” the Law (Rom 2:17, 23). “Boasting,” in the biblical context, does not necessarily have a negative connotation (cf. Rom 5:2–3, 11). Boasting expresses one’s honor–shame perspective and thus sense of identity. In the eyes of many ancient Jews, keeping the Law was a way of getting *ascribed honor*.

How? They mistakenly *thought* God reserved the greatest honor for those who belonged to Israel.¹⁷ However, according to Rom. 3:27–30, Christ excludes ethnocentric

boasting since God is one (Rom 3:27–30; cf. 10:12; Gal 3:20; 1 Tim 2:5).¹⁸ When ancient Jews denied justification by faith, they ironically attempted to diminish God’s glory by reducing him to a tribal deity.

We see another perspective of works in Rom 2. Paul describes works as a means of getting *achieved honor and glory*. In Rom 2:5–7, “God’s righteous judgment” depends on whether people “in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality.” Otherwise, v. 8 says they do “unrighteous.” Romans 2:9–10 lists two possible results of one’s works: *either* “tribulation and distress” *or* “glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good.”

Observe that the person in v. 10 (who gains glory, honor and peace) is equivalent to the justified person in v. 13. This connection becomes significant when we then recall vv. 6–7. According to vv. 6–7, one is justified by seeking after glory and honor.¹⁹ The lone Greek verb in v. 7 is “seek” [ζητοῦσιν], not “well-doing” [ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ, or “good works”]. In other words, doing “works” is a type of glory-seeking. Our works reveal the type of glory we seek. Every one seeks to “get face” and not “lose face.” In short, our actions are ways that we attempt to gain both *ascribed* and *achieved honor*.

One seeks honor and glory *through* works. The key question is this: *From whom do we want “face,” honor, praise, and glory?* Paul speaks to this issue directly in Rom 2:29: “But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise [ἔπαινος] is not from man but from God.” In response, readers are naturally led to ask, “Whose ‘face’ do we seek?” The answer to that question determines our identity. Justified people pursue glory but it is not the kind that people typically desire.²⁰

I will offer a few summary remarks about justification. When Paul speaks of justification, Paul’s argument foremost concerns identity. Specifically, he rebuts exclusivism rooted in ethnicity or national identity. Justification is not limited to Jews. He foremost explains *who* can be justified. As a corollary, we can infer *how* people are justified.²¹ Traditional views of justification start with “how” and thus mistakenly reverse the order of Paul’s argument. For Paul, the “who” question leads to the “how” question.

By analogy, imagine a man says, “I can give birth to a baby.” He is making a claim about “who” can birth a child. In order to correct his misunderstanding, what could we do? Naturally, we would explain *how* a person becomes pregnant. In the same way, Paul answers the “how” question for the sake of clarifying “who” can be justified (i.e. both Jews and Gentiles).

When God justifies us by faith, not by the Jewish Law, he usurps the honor–shame standards of his social world. Thus, he redefines “insiders” and “outsiders.” God justifies those who seek God’s “face,” who glorify Him above all, regardless of ethnic-national identity. Because of their allegiance to Christ, they share in Christ’s honor. Furthermore, they are called to endure shame with him (i.e. suffering, rejection; cf. Rom 8:17ff.). Justification inherently concerns our collective identity. It is less about “me” and “God” and more about “us” and “God.” However, the “us” is redefined in relationship to Christ.²²

Transformation (a practical view of salvation)

Salvation is the work of transformation unto final glorification. God in Christ transforms both our identity and our practice. The Holy Spirit's mission is to glorify Jesus (John 16:14). He does this in part by sanctifying a community of nations, that is, the Church. We form a temple wherein God's Spirit dwells without regard for ethnicity. God adopts his people as children (Rom 8:14–19). In this sense, conversion has a definite collective aspect—our basic group identity is radically changed.

Whoever is willing to forsake natural “brothers or sisters or mother or father or children” (Mark 10:29; cf. Matt 25:40) is enabled to join Abraham's family of faith (cf. John 8:31–58; Gal 4:22–31). When we exchange relational loyalties, Jesus “is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb 2:11). Those who belong to Christ's family are honored.²³ As Jesus says in John 12:26, “If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.”

Additionally, God's Spirit transforms the Christian in *practice*. The Father gives the Holy Spirit to His children. The Spirit changes our hearts such that we seek God's “face” above all others (Rom 2:28–29; cf. John 12:26; Phil 3:3). Previously, we suffered as slaves under sin's imperialistic rule. According to Rom 6, we are now freed so that we “have become obedient from the heart” (Rom 6:17). As slaves to God, our lives are not marked by shameful patterns of living that ultimately lead to death (Rom 6:21–23).²⁴

Some evangelicals get nervous in talking about this practical dimension of salvation. However, when we do this, we obscure the glory of God revealed in salvation. After all, God in the new covenant promises more than forgiveness; he promises to give us new hearts, even causing us to obey (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26–27). In addition, we perpetuate the impression that Christian salvation is otherworldly. Of course, life after death is important. Yet, it concerns far more than the afterlife.

Salvation reshapes our daily lives and our view of the world. Knowing that God will make a new heaven and new earth should remind us that Christian soteriology emphatically concerns the concrete world and our manner of life here and now. In so doing, our lives will foretell the day when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Hab 2:14).

Finally, Christians seek “face” in a radically counter-cultural way. They are people who *seek glory through shame*.²⁵ In other words, Christ's followers should pursue greatness via humble service and even suffering (cf. Mark 10:41–45). Observe how Paul describes his approach to life and ministry in 2 Cor 4:10, where he says, “[We are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” This transformed moral perspective stems from the fact that Christ suffered the shame of death yet was glorified in resurrection. Jesus was “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb 2:9). Supernaturally, God's people will be willing to “suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17). A soteriology of honor and shame does not merely affect our perspective about death; it changes one's practice in life.

A contextualized message for the entire world

What is the significance of these observations? Honor and shame have a pervasive influence on the Bible and on the world's cultures. A number of implications become clear when we look at salvation from an honor–shame perspective. I will conclude by highlighting a select few applications.

First, our theology should reflect the strong emphasis on honor–shame in the Bible. By understanding honor–shame related issues, interpreters will better grasp the meaning and significance of various passages. This article has shown the importance of honor and shame particularly within the epistles, many of which have a reputation for stressing law imagery. Naturally, we can gain insights from countless narratives that are shaped by honor–shame dynamics.

Second, honor and shame are also very significant to the church's global mission. When Christians lay an unbalanced stress on “law” and the “individual,” it becomes very easy for non-Westerners to get the impression that the Bible is a Western book. If we are not careful, we run the risk of “Judaizing” the non-Western world (so to speak). That is, we may inadvertently make people first think like Westerners before they have the ability to become Christians.

Third, the gospel of honor–shame proclaims a radically new worldview and necessarily challenges common notions of worth, identity, and thus our loyalties. When a person gives allegiance to Christ, one loses “face” in the eyes of the world and even becomes an “outsider” in his or her own family. As a result, our message helps fuse the false dichotomy between “conversion” and “discipleship.”

Finally, we are equipped to better convey a contextualized view of salvation. Our contextualization should be biblically faithful and culturally meaningful (Wu, 2015). This is possible when we explain salvation from an honor–shame perspective. We need to broaden our perspective to see these two pervasive and powerful motifs in Scripture. In fact, I suggest Christians are *not justified when they marginalize honor and shame in relationship to salvation*. I do not at all deny the importance of “law” as a Scriptural metaphor; yet, we do not want to settle for what is merely true (i.e. the law) at the expense of a more robust view of salvation.

Let us not settle for innocence when Christ offers us glory.

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Notes

1. For elaboration, see deSilva, 2000: 23–42. A brief introduction to honor–shame within a biblical context is Moxnes, 1993. In Chinese culture, see Yau-fai Ho, 1976: 870. One of the most famous anthropological treatments is Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers, 2005.

2. As an aside, “guilt” also has two aspects—subjective and objective. On the one hand, we can *feel* guilty. On the other hand, we can *be* guilty in fact or in status (as when a criminal is convicted).
3. Cf. John 7:18, where Jesus clearly defines (un)righteousness in terms of glory: “The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory [δόξαν]; but the one who seeks the glory [δόξαν] of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no unrighteousness [ἀδικία].” For some unknown reason, the ESV says “falsehood” instead of “unrighteousness.”
4. Gary Anderson rightly says, “How we talk about sin . . . influences what we will do about it.” See his book *Sin: A History* (2009: 13).
5. To be sure, His own covenantal obligations are not externally “binding” to God since he by grace first committed himself to humankind. He freely initiates His covenant. The only thing that “limits” God is His own gracious freedom.
6. In addition, Richard Gaffin points out that Paul explicitly says that man “is the image and glory of God.” See Gaffin, 2010: 133–34.
7. Isa 50:1 is one example that illustrates the point.
8. The language of “sin offering” (חַטָּאת) carries definitive economic overtones. Cf. Ernst and Westermann, 1997; Keil and Delitzsch, 1996.
9. In the words of Mal 1:7, our sins “pollute” (נִטְמָא) God. To offend an infinitely glorious God deserves the ultimate retribution. This argument is seen in Jonathan Edwards (Edwards, 2000: 342). God vindicates the worth of his honor via retribution. This is deSilva’s point regarding Heb 10:26–31. See deSilva, 1994: 454–55. Also, see deSilva, 2000: 161, note 60. Also, see Deut 32:35–36; Job 40:10–11; Ps 149:5–19; Isa 59:9–19 (esp. vv. 18–19); 66:5–6; Jer 5:9, 29; 9:9; Ezek 38:16–18; Rom 9:22–23; Rev 15:1–8, 19:1–2. Also, compare Rom 12:19; 1 Thess 4:6. In Exod 34:5–7, God’s glory and name is found in his punishing iniquity (v. 7b).
10. Wright makes a similar point in discussing Jesus as the last Adam: Jesus’ “role was that of obedience, not merely *in place of* disobedience but in order to *undo* that disobedience.” Jesus’ “obedience unto death [is] the task by which the old Adamic humanity is redeemed” (Wright, 1993: 38). Jesus’ sinless life not only gives significance to his death; his death also gives his life its full value. His death completes the life that manifests God’s name by doing the work given to him (cf. John 17:4, 6). Accordingly, Paul also highlights Jesus’ “obedience unto death” so that “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9–11; cf. Rom 5:12–21). See Wright, 1993: 38–40, 91–92.
11. Contrary to some people’s concerns, Emile Nicole’s conclusion is undeniable when he says that several occurrences of כפר—group “indisputably link it to the notion of compensation.” See his argument at Nicole, 2004: 47. In addition, it is entirely appropriate to appeal to Christ’s life when speaking of his death and the cross. First of all, Christ’s perfect obedience includes his submitting to the cross. Second, his life is what qualified him to be a substitute such that his death has any value. Cf. Morris, 1965.
12. This sort of atonement was foretold by the prophet Ezekiel (16:62–63): God says, “I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord GOD.” “Shame” translates ἀτιμίας (LXX)/ קְלִיָּה (MT). “Atone” renders ἐξιλάσασθαι (LXX)/ כָּפַר.
13. God’s wrath and atonement are clearly linked in Num 16:46–47; Ps 78:38. Cf. Prov 16:14. Consider how a compensatory payment brings about atonement and appeases wrath in

- Exod 21:29–30; 30:11–16; Lev 5:6, 11–13, 16–17; Num 5:7–8; 16:44–50 (cf. Num 31:48–51). Conceptually, the connection is found in wisdom passages (Prov 6:34–35; 13:8; 21:14; Morris, 1965: 144–213). Although Morris emphasizes “propitiation” and atonement as the “the removal of wrath,” this misses *how* atonement is accomplished, that is, the sacrifice satisfies God’s demand for honor. According to Ezekiel, God’s wrath is poured out in order to vindicate God’s honor (Ezek 6:3–14; 30:17–26; 38:17, 23; 39:7, 13, 21).
14. Interesting, even D. A. Carson admits, “no text explicitly says” that “Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us.” Even though John 17:22 is a rather direct explication of “glory-imputation,” few have paid the idea much attention (Carson, 2004: 78). Also see Rom 8:30: “those whom he justified he also glorified.” According to Hebrews, Jesus is worthy of “glory and honor,” being without the shame of sin; therefore, he brings “many sons to glory” (Heb 2:9–10; cf. 4:15).
 15. Justifying faith is essentially a boasting in Christ. Piper observes in 2 Cor 1:24 and Phil 1:25, “joy and faith are almost interchangeable.” See Piper, 1987; Luther, 1972: 248. With respect to Paul, his righteousness stems from his being among those who “glory [καυχώμενοι] in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil 3:3; cf. Gal 6:12–14). One reason boasting is so important is because the Father honors those who honor the Son (John 5:22–24; 12:23–28). In fact, God’s whole scheme of salvation is “so that no one may boast,” in other things like wisdom, ethnicity, etc. (Eph 2:9; cf. 1 Cor 1:26–31).
 16. The ESV loosely translates ἀδικία as *falsehood*.
 17. Accordingly, Paul describes them as those who “rely on” and “boast in” the law (Rom 2:17, 23). Boasting expresses one’s honor–shame perspective and thus sense of identity. Though I have serious concerns about Yeo’s overall view of justification, he correctly points out that the Christian has “been set right by God from shame and curse so that now propriety, honor, and freedom characterizes the new and rightful relationship one has with God.” See Yeo, 2008: 207. In almost identical terms, cf. Yeo, 2004: 14. However, here he says the δικαι- root emphasizes God’s acting for a “group of people.”
 18. Jayson Georges posits, “[S]alvation in Romans is consistently presented as inclusion into the group of God’s honored people.” One glorifies God by boasting in the one true God, not social distinctives, by “no longer depend[ing] on culture for honor,” but instead gaining “a new honor code for the Christian community.” See Georges, 2010: 302. Philip Esler explicitly calls righteousness an “ascribed honor” that affects one’s group identity in Esler, 2004: 167, 186–88.
 19. The Greek for Rom 2:7: “τοῖς μὲν καθ’ ὑπομονὴν ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ ἀφθαρσίαν ζητοῦσιν ζῶνι αἰώνιον.”
 20. See also Wu (2013), where I show how the ascribed honor and achieved honor function within Philippians 3. In addition, I explain the relationship between faith and boasting. In short, we will praise or celebrate that to which we give our allegiance.
 21. Bird (2007: 153) echoes Seifrid saying, “[T]he status of the individual before God and the status of individuals within a group are not mutually exclusive categories.” He notes Seifrid, 1992: 63.
 22. The gospel reveals God’s righteousness by challenging and transforming social groupings and identity. Jewett, 1997: 262.
 23. Trevor Burke argues that adoption historically would have been seen as bestowing extraordinary honor upon the believer. Burke, 2006: 152–76. Packer calls adoption “the *primary and fundamental* blessing of the gospel.” See Packer, 1993: 206.
 24. Hafemann rightly argues that the Spirit’s power is decisive in salvation history. Previously, God’s people “transgressed the law because it lacked the power of the Spirit to put it into

practice . . . The problem was that the law was given apart from the transforming work of the Spirit to a hardened and resistant people.” See Schreiner, n.d. Prior to Jesus’ ascension, the Spirit was still needed for regeneration (cf. Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in John 3). Otherwise, I label “Christian” the salvation that follows Jesus’ departure. Kevin Vanhoozer’s thesis is succinct: “[T]he saving significance of Christ’s death consists in making possible God’s gift of the Holy Spirit.” See Vanhoozer, 2004: 398–99. He adds, “Jesus’ death saves because it enables a new *objective* situation, namely, the end of exile and the construction of a new kind of temple, indwelt by God’s Spirit. The cross saves, not by bequeathing an example, but by bequeathing to the church the same power that enabled Jesus to lay down his life for others: the Spirit of self-giving love” (2004: 400–401).

25. In Chinese, I make the point via the phrase “以辱为荣,” which I have explained further in Wu (2015: 127–46).

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