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From Shame to Honor: A Theological Reading of Romans for Honor-Shame Contexts

JAYSON GEORGES

Honor and shame are pivotal cultural values for most non-Western Christians and yet are widely neglected in Christian theology. This article interprets Paul's epistle to the Romans, long interpreted according to Western individualistic concerns, according to the cultural notions of honor and shame to reformulate traditional theological categories. Theologizing from Romans in light of honor and shame reveals God as the honorable Creator and Covenanter, sin as shame and dishonor, salvation as honor and glory in Christ, and ethics as adopting God's code of honor. In closing, this article presents an analysis of ministry efforts to incorporate such an honor-shame theology, and suggestions for future directions.

Introduction

Every culture holds axiomatic values that, although not articulated, directly affect peoples' ideas and actions. Christian theology — the formulation of answers, drawn from divine revelation, to culturally rooted questions — must take into consideration these worldview assumptions to become a successful instrument of transformation and salvation. But since the theology of most Western missionaries is built upon a set of cultural foundations that significantly contrasts with the assumptions of their non-Western audience, that theology often “scratches where it doesn't itch” (Loewen 1966). From reflection on publications and personal experience as a church planter in Central Asia, I have recognized honor and shame as predominant cultural values that must be taken into consideration when articulating Christian truths.

Two recurring issues have helped me and my co-workers recognize the centrality of honor and shame. The first is the absence of unbelievers' sense of personal guilt or need for forgiveness of sins. Traditional evangelistic presentations have been affectively and cognitively unintelligible because of their unique cultural and religious assumptions (Hibbert 2008:343–44). Second, Christians are adversely impacted by cultural forces that are rooted in honor and shame, such as: rejection from family

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upon conversion, pressure upon girls to get married even to unbelievers, expectations upon men to establish a home, and the masking of shameful events from other believers.

One particular instance exposed to my co-workers and me the pervasiveness of honor and shame within the cultural setting where we work. On her way back to the city in a taxi, an unmarried Christian girl was harassed by her co-passengers and driver. While the girl was being abused alongside the road, her uncle passed by, but she hid herself instead of calling for help in order to not expose her shameful defilement to a relative. When she finally escaped, her mom told her to not recount the story to anyone out of fear that such shame would prevent any man from marrying her — the ultimate experience of shame. The avoidance of shame and acquisition of honor drastically impacts life in Central Asia, even more so than one's concern for physical safety and avoiding abuse. Honor and shame simply play too large of a role in many cultures to remain absent in theological formulations.

I first encountered the topic of honor and shame during a period of biblical studies, in which I was guided to appreciate ancient Near Eastern socio-cultural values, especially for their hermeneutical merit. Since the publication of *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Malina 1981), Bruce Malina, Jerome Neyrey, and others have applied anthropological models to New Testament documents and history, so successfully that social-science criticism is now a common hermeneutical approach. Although these biblical scholars have not made any inroads to spheres of theology, they have uncovered the pervasive significance of honor and shame in the socio-cultural worlds of the Bible, particularly by uncovering the social background of individual sayings and teachings.

After several months of living and working in Central Asia, I was disillusioned by how the culture I was experiencing was nothing like the idealistic representations of the biblical cultures I had been taught. The mechanisms of culture designed to limit shame and increase honor (e.g., threat of rejection, pressure for social conformity, fear of neighbors' opinion, covering of weakness, preoccupation with externals) seemed like social weapons of oppression. Yet, with time I learned valuable insights from missiological writings, especially those derived from Muslim and Arab contexts, which discuss the nature and ministry implications of honor and shame (Cate 1998:370; Musk 1995:67–88; Muller 2000; Thomas 1994). Although these writings helped me grasp the honor-shame elements of culture, I was frustrated that I could only conceive of shame as a socio-cultural problem between peoples and was unable to integrate cultural analysis with my theology. While I desired for my newfound awareness of honor and shame to somehow affect not just the means of communicating theology, but also the actual content of my theology, in point of fact I was long incapable of imaging how a theology could be centered on honor-shame values.

Then, works about specific theological issues from the angle of honor-shame (Jewett 1999; Muller 2000; Tennent 2007; Baker 2007) allowed me to see how shame was a theological-vertical problem between humans and God, to which honor from God was the answer. My search for a few biblical verses or stories addressing honor and shame birthed an awareness of the significant need for a reformulation of Christian theology in light of honor and shame. When starting this task, I quickly discovered that Romans (and many other biblical writings) already theologizes in a milieu of honor and

shame, but such theology has been long overlooked or reinterpreted by communities with other existential interests. To recover a Christian theology built upon the cultural assumptions of honor and shame, this article formulates a fresh theology of God, sin, salvation, and ethics for honor-shame contexts, based on the book of Romans.

The Issue of Honor and Shame

The concepts of honor and shame are difficult for Western Christians with individualistic values to comprehend. In order to understand the central values of honor and shame, and their function in theology, we need an anthropological model capable of interpreting the data. As with all models, the following is a conceptual map that deliberately reduces complex cultural interworkings into a meaningful pattern for analyzing cultures and the biblical text.

Honor is defined as the public acknowledgement of one's worth to the group; it is essentially a positive social rating that entitles a person to relate with other group members in socially prescribed ways (Malina 1991:26). Synonymous terms include prestige, value, respect, significance, worth, status, face, dignity, and reputation. Honor is a social construct, meaning it only exists when people themselves decide to grant it, and for this reason, it is most prevalent in group-oriented cultures. Since Aristotle, honor has been esteemed as the "greatest of all goods" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 4.3.9–12), upon which one's worth and identity greatly depend. The anthropological model we will be using identifies three sources and one main result of honor.

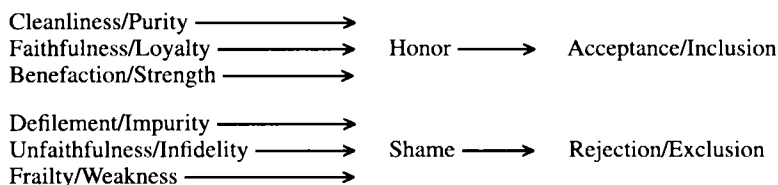
The first source of honor is purity and cleanliness. This "cleanliness" is not physical hygiene, but the cultural evaluation of peoples' appropriateness and acceptability. Purity is about the invisible social lines regarding "what is proper for a certain place at a certain time . . . with regard to society's view of an orderly and safe world" (DeSilva 2000:243). Public rituals and social boundaries (i.e., Jewish food laws in Mark 7) often reflect a concern for personal cleanliness. Pollution, defilement, and impurity, which are contracted through culturally inappropriate acts, deem one a dangerous threat to the group, to be shamed and rejected.

Another means to honor is faithfulness and loyalty to the group. Since individuals in honor-shame cultures are part of a large, complex social organism, there are mutual obligations and prescribed actions expected of each person by the group (Nesbitt 2003:6). By observing the identity markers and traditions of the group, members maintain the implicit group covenant, thus making them valuable (honorable) members for the preservation and continuance of the group. Maintaining the "covenant stipulations" (i.e., as Torah was for Israel) signifies group commitment and is rewarded with honor; those unfaithful to the group are shamed.

Finally, strength, not the mere possession of it but the use of it for the good of others, leads to honor. This is well illustrated in the ancient Greco-Roman world that revolved around the concepts of benefaction and patronage (DeSilva 2000:95–120). Wherever honor is a prized commodity, there are appropriate cultural mechanisms for upper-class citizens to exercise their power or display their wealth in exchange for honor and endearment from the lower classes. As liabilities to the group, the frail and weak reap only shame.

Purity, faithfulness, and benefaction lead to honor, and honor itself leads to group acceptance. The honorable are worthy of inclusion into the group; those shamed are

rejected and excluded, left to find meaning and provisions on their own. Honor and group participation are always linked together. This becomes significant in reading Romans since Paul's explanation of who, after the Christ event, receives the honor of membership in God's group is central to the latter's purpose and argument. Understanding the anthropological nature of honor, we approach the biblical text to construct an appropriate theology.



Romans for an Honor-Shame Context

To prepare the chauvinistic church in Rome for the upcoming mission to the Spanish barbarians (15:24; 1:15), Paul recounts a revolutionary ideology intended to eliminate imperialistic behavior. He hopes to eliminate such behavior by replacing all false claims to honor with God's honor, which is available by faith through grace in Christ (Jewett 2007:88). Although the book of Romans has been the assumed canon and starting point of individualistic, Western theology constructed around guilt and forgiveness, we will now explore the centrality of honor and shame in Paul's theological argument.

God: The Honorable Creator and Covenanter

The God spoken about in Romans is worthy of honor, glory, and praise (1:25; 15:8–12); he is the honorable Creator to be exalted (Rom. 11:36; 16:27). All the events of salvation-history magnify God's name and extol his honor. When formulating a theology proper for honor-shame contexts, two particular divine attributes merit particular emphasis — God's power and faithfulness. Because of these two defining characteristics, God is the ultimate honorable Being.

Firstly, God's honor is supported by his majestic power to enact his salvific and sovereign purposes within humanity. The power of God is clearly manifested in all creation (1:20) and in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (1:3). As the powerful Creator, God possesses even the power to re-create his fallen creation by fulfilling his promises to give life to the dead (Sarah, Jesus, and eventually all believers; cf. 4:21ff). God's power is also testified to when he is able to redeem all of creation from decay, work through the most evil of situations to achieve his purposes, and overcome any threat that may hinder the flow of his love toward us (Rom. 8). In Romans 9, the patriarchal events are recast as demonstrations of God's sovereign power to establish his right to incorporate Gentiles into the covenant as he so chooses. God's power that was used to form Israel as a people is now present in both Paul's powerful proclamation of the gospel to bring Gentiles into the fold (15:19) so that God's redemptive purposes are realized in the church (15:13). The gospel, the message of the enthroned Creator acting on behalf of his people, is the power of salvation (1:16; cf. Is. 52:7). Like a rich uncle or wealthy businessman is honored for his benefaction of helping others, so too

is God, but on a far greater scale, since the whole world benefits from his saving and blessing power. This image of God as a generous and powerful benefactor was a major cultural model for understanding deity in Greco-Roman and Jewish antiquity (Neyrey 2005). That image is also an appropriate model for Paul's theology in Romans, and thus for subsequent Christian theologies.

Secondly, God is honorable because of his faithfulness to fulfill his covenantal promises to Israel and the world; or, in one word, God is "righteous" (Dunn 1998:340). God's honor, as with anyone's in an honor-shame context, is reflected in his unwavering commitment to his own people, as affirmed throughout Romans 3. God is not a hypocrite reneging on his past obligations to Israel (as Romans 2 might suggest), but he is characterized by relational integrity.¹ Despite humanity's complete lack of loyalty (3:9–20), God has been persistently "righteous" — a term denoting God's covenantal faithfulness manifested in his saving activity (Hays 1980:111). The dense argument of 3:2–26 climaxes Paul's defense of God's faithfulness. God has been faithful to his salvific promises through the unexpected death of the Messiah — the definitive proof of God's relational integrity (3:25, 26). The work of Christ does not signify God's abandonment of or unfaithfulness to his covenant people (cf. 3:1; 9:6; 11:1), but demonstrates his truthfulness by fulfilling those long-standing promises given to the patriarchs and prophets (1:2; 3:21; 15:8; 16:26).

Jesus — the honored agent of God's benefaction — is central to God's honor. Romans 1:3–4, a theological foreshadow, establishes Jesus' honorable and exalted status as Son of God, Son of David, Messiah, and Lord, even despite his ignominious death. Jesus is worthy of such honor by virtue of his faithful obedience to death; the *pistis Christou* in Romans is not just the "faith in Jesus by which Jew and Gentile alike believe the gospel" but the "faithfulness of the Messiah to the purposes of God" (Wright 2005:47). Jesus' faithfulness facilitates the continuance of God's salvific plan (3:2–23). Or, in the words of 5:19, many will now become members of God's renewed family because of Jesus' obedience as a faithful son. Jesus was the first human obedient to honor God as the honorable Father. Therefore, by virtue of his present glory and exalted status at God's right hand (which he obtained via the resurrection, 1:4; 4:24; 6:4–9; 8:11, 34; 10:9), Jesus is the honorable agent of divine benefaction.

Sin: Shame and Dishonor

Despite previous theological attempts to define sin in accordance with Western cultural values as "missing the mark," Paul associates sin with the concepts of dishonor and shame. Humanity's problem is not its inevitable failure to live up to ethical ideals or its propensity for breaking the law; the problem is its fundamental unacceptability due to a lack of honor and its ensuing futile efforts to restore such honor via untruthful perversions of socio-cultural systems (Jewett 1997:268).

First and foremost, sin is the failure to honor God (1:18–32). Despite the Creator's marvelous benefaction, humans have been dishonoring and unthankful — the very essence of sin (1:20–23). The idolatrous redirection of praise away from the Creator to the creation (1:25), however respectable in the eyes of the dominant culture, is the ultimate act of dishonor before God. Humanity further diminishes God's value by not observing the basic purity maps, established at creation, that govern sexual relations (1:26–27). Such acts of sin are "dishonorable passions" (1:24) that erode humanity's

own honor and numb its ability to discern true honor and shame (1:27, 32). Ultimately, sin not only dishonors the Creator God, but also leaves the self mired in shame and defilement.

Not only have Gentiles dishonored God, but God's own people Israel have also dishonored God, despite their honorable calling. "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'" (Rom. 2:23–24). Ironically, Israel's "boasting" (i.e., their false claim to honor based on cultural status [2:17, 22; 3:27; 4:2], not pride in one's moral goodness) dishonored God because it fostered ethnocentrism that limited God's righteousness to their own cultural distinctives (e.g., circumcision and Sabbath). By promoting a covenant status for herself (2:17–22, cf. 10:3), Israel has made God out to be the god of the Jews and not the God of all people (cf. 3:29–30). Such ethnocentrism improperly limits the honor and praise which God has intended to reap from all nations, and denies God the role of sole grantor of honor to humans. Our only basis for claiming honor is the eschatological granting of divine honor — "let us boast in hope of the glory of God" (5:2b).

Moving into Romans 3, we see that sin is construed as shameful unfaithfulness to God (3:3–5). The basic point is that all humans, especially Israel, have failed to uphold their part of the bargain (3:9b). Since sin is conceived in relational and covenantal terms, not abstract or moral terms, Paul constantly characterizes humanity as "disobedient" before God (cf. 1:30; 5:19; 10:21; 11:30–32), bringing shame upon themselves and their Creator.

The climax of Roman's hamartiology is 3:23: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The assumption that sin is "any failure to conform to the moral law of God" (Grudem 1994:490) mistakes this phrase to mean that all individuals have morally failed to obtain God's required moral standard. But the Greek *hystereo*, meaning "lack," can refer both to a glory fallen short and a glory lost. Since humanity's futile efforts have "fallen short" of properly honoring God, they now "lack" their own glory and are in a position of deserving shame (Jewett 1999:1–12). Romans 3:23 references the Jewish theological tradition of Adam being deprived of the glory of God at the fall (Dunn 1998:93). The honorable name and prestigious reputation bestowed upon the primal pair by God is no longer present in humanity — "all have sinned and lack God's glory." The fruit of our dishonoring sin is shame before God (Rom. 6:21).

Central to Paul's understanding of the human predicament is the universality of shame — all nations without distinction (not merely all individuals without exception) lack a right status before God (3:9). Because Israel is under sin, she too is in the shameful position outside of the covenantal relationship through which God's honoring status is experienced, just like Gentile nations (10:2–3). This counters the dangerous sin of group arrogance and cultural imperialism prevalent among group-oriented peoples. Regardless of whatever artificial social lines are devised to exalt one group at the expense of another, all groups lack honor and have no right to claim superiority. This Pauline gospel overtly undermines his audience's current obsessions with false systems of honor that threaten to discredit Paul's mission to the Spaniards who already despise Roman imperialism. For this reason, Paul, biographically speaking as a pre-Messianic Jew striving for social prestige and divine honor, recounts in Romans

7 how his obsession for honor perverted the good Law into a false means of gaining precedent over others (cf. Phil. 3; Jewett 2007:435).

Humanity is further dishonored because of its inherent weakness. Since sin and death prey upon all humans (Rom. 5–7), humans lack the ability to be agents in God’s creation as intended, and thus have no purpose, worth, or honor. The vulnerability produces a terrifying sense of unworthiness.

First, Adam’s descendants are held under the vice grip of death itself (5:12, 14, 17, 21) — the ultimate experience of shame, powerlessness, defilement, and rejection. Regardless of how such dishonor and shame is masked during one’s lifetime, death will ultimately trump all such futile claims to cultural honor and make plain the dishonoring frailty of all. Sin is the second power ruling over feeble humans (5:21; 7:15–20). The power of sin is so decisive that humans are called “slaves of sin” (6:16–17) — mere puppets who jump at its commands. Weakened by the grip of sin, people became slaves of impurity (6:19) whose actions only produce shame, the ultimate expression being death itself (6:22). As one who frequents a workout gym in an honor-shame culture where muscular members claim honor by immaturely barking orders to the frail members, I have witnessed that honor is for the strong and powerful. Humans have no right to claim honor before God as creatures ruled by sin and death.

According to Romans, humanity’s (with no group as an exception) main problem is its shame and dishonor resulting from its idolatrous and ethnocentric unfaithfulness and from its weakness as slaves to sin and death. In essence, we are the very opposite of the Creator who is honorable due to his faithfulness and strength. And our perverse abuse of cultural systems to restore Adamic honor only further disqualifies us from our share in divine glory, and jeopardizes the Spanish mission.

Salvation: Honor and Glory in Christ

Although shame and disgrace cover all humans, God has bestowed honor through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the epistle to the Romans, salvation is not simply forgiveness of sins, the imputation of alien righteousness, or eternity in heaven, but honor and glory, the removal of shame, and group inclusion.

The first mention of salvation, after the introduction, in Romans is 2:6–10: “He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life . . . (there will be) glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.” Regardless of how one understands the means of salvation, the nature of salvation is “glory and honor.” This glory and honor is sought after by humans (2:7) and granted only by God, not other creatures (2:10, 29; cf. John 5:44). Because of this hope in “the glory of God,” Christians can rejoice in the present, despite shameful suffering (5:2–3). The original, honorable status granted by God at creation (Gen. 1:26–30; Ps. 8:4–6) is restored in the new creation.

The most dynamic explanation of salvation as honor comes in Romans 8:17b–18 — “We (will) be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Similar to a child who receives his father’s name and honor as a part of the family, our glory is derived from our unity with Christ, not from ourselves. Although Christians might live temporarily without honor, the honor revealed before the entire world in the eschaton

super-abounds the shame we currently endure — to such a degree that it is “not worth comparing” (Moxnes 1988:73).

The radical transference from shame to honor for those in Christ is further communicated through multiple rhetorical expressions: blessed, heirs, strength, life, sanctified, glorified, the Spirit, and adoption. For example, Romans 4:6–9 speaks of the honorable blessing granted through faith. According to recent socio-linguistic investigation, Paul is speaking of the blessed worth of being part of the acceptable group (cf. Gal. 3:7ff), not sentimental encouragement (Hanson 1996). Also, believers are considered rightful co-heirs with Christ of God’s promises (8:17); the inheritance being nothing short of the world itself (4:13). Inheritance symbolizes honor by affirming the boundaries of worthy descendants. The new resurrection power that victoriously reigns over sin and death with Christ (6:12; 5:17) is an additional source of honor. Even the theological terms “sanctification” and “glorification” describe our transition from shame to honor. Sanctification is the process of being made pure and cleansed from the defilement of sin (6:19; 15:16). Glorification is the future point at which the covenant members’ true honor as God’s children is revealed (8:30). Once orphans without a name or family-identity, we have been adopted into God’s family and granted an honorable status as children of God because of the gift of the Spirit (Rom. 8:14–17a). In honor-shame cultures, family determines one’s social status. For this reason, our adoption through the Spirit leads to a new, honorable status and a prestigious future of glory (Rom. 8:17b–21).

Along with the bestowal of honor, the removal of shame is another key element in the believer’s salvation. “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame” (Rom. 10:11). This citation of Isaiah 28:16, also cited earlier in Romans 9:33, is perhaps the greatest of all theological truths for those from honor-shame cultures. Regardless of why or how much one is covered by shame before God or community, God declares that Christ has objectively and completely removed that shame (Thomas 1994:287). Paul, for example, rightly lives free of shame before God and people. Because the gospel works powerfully for salvation in the lives of even Gentiles, he rejects the defilement or shame he once felt when associating with impure Gentiles or foolish barbarians (1:14–16) in favor of Christological honor; and neither does the stigma of the cross mar his status (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–31).

In addition to being the granting of honor and removal of shame, salvation in Romans is consistently presented as inclusion into the group of God’s honored people. As a matter of fact, “Who are God’s people?” undergirds and animates Romans more than “How can I be saved?” (Stendahl 1976:85–86). By welcoming and including people into his new community, God bestows an honorable status upon humans, which would have been otherwise inaccessible due to our shameful sin. Such honor derived from adoption into a prestigious family (in this case, God’s) is cherished by people of honor-shame cultures. Regardless of what false social mechanisms of shame and exclusion they fall victim to (even within the church), those in Christ are eternally honored and accepted as members in the people of God, with full rights, privileges, and status. This new group status expounded in Romans 3, 4, and 9–11 *is* salvation itself.

The language of “justification” and “righteousness” (Rom. 3:2–31) is one way of articulating entrance into God’s people. Paul’s formulation of “being set right by faith”

countered the mistaken Jewish notion that covenantal membership was maintained by adherence to the ethnic badges outlined in Torah (Wright 2005:112; Dunn 1998:334–389). So when expostulating who are the real people in and through whom God realizes his salvific purposes, justification is a shorthand way of declaring whom God now considers true covenant members with restored honor and glory (Jewett 1997:270).

The question of who the descendants of Abraham are is significant because of God's promises that Abraham's descendants would become an honored people (great nation, blessed, great name, divine protection, benefactor of blessing, cf. Gen. 12:1–3). Romans 4 exegetes Genesis 15:6 ("Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness") to redefine descent from Abraham — the father of all who believe (Hays 1985). Through Abraham-like faith in the Creator and not through being ethnic Israel (9:7ff.), we obtain the honorable heritage of Abraham, which is to become the people of God's promise and possessors of a great inheritance (DeSilva 2000:201).

The greatest explanation of God's redefined, new-covenant people is Romans 9–11. In 9:22, Paul explains that God's actions before Christ were pre-planned for the purpose of bringing the "riches of his honor" to the Gentiles, which is one's new identity as God's beloved people who were predestined "for glory" (Rom. 9:22–26). Also, believers in Christ are "grafted into the olive tree" planted long ago by God (11:17–24). As evidenced by the repeated and sustained arguments throughout Romans, God is working in history to create his own family of honored members from the entire world, and salvific inclusion into this shame-free community is through faith, not participation in ethnic Israel as demarcated by Torah.

This new, honorable status is mediated through grace — God's acceptance of the shamed — thus trivializing all false claims to honor, whether based on Jewish Torah observance, Roman imperial power, or Greek wisdom. Only in being honored by God through Christ's shameful death on behalf of the shameful can humans be integrated into God's community and bear eternal honor (Jewett 1999:12).

Christian Ethics: Honoring Others According to God's Code of Honor

Having received an honored status from God, the church is called to a new ethic in which honor plays a key role. "Behavior among Christians should reflect God's free granting of honour" (Moxnes 1988:75). The Spirit-led life is not conformity to an abstract legal standard, but the appropriate navigation of social relations in community. Christian ethics is rejecting cultural methods of group engineering, and extending honor according to God's righteous code of honor: "Pay honor to whom honor is owed" (13:7). For example, the church is to honor governmental authorities because God himself has vested them with authority. As recipients of divine honor, Christians reflect the honor that God himself graciously extends. Christians are to "outdo one another in showing honor" (12:10). Furthermore, the church is called to break the cultural cycles of exclusion by enduring shame and graciously extending honor even to those who do evil and persecute (12:14–21). This is possible because we no longer depend on culture for honor (2:29), but have already been credited infinite, divine honor.

Romans 14:1–15:13, the functional climax of the epistle, reformulates cultural honor systems to explicate the new terms by which Christians are to accept ("welcome," or "honor") others. Whereas Jewish Christians had used dietary regulations

to relegate Gentile Christians, Paul speaks of how all things are now clean and pure (14:14b; 14:20b); the logical conclusion being that God's welcoming (15:9–12) overcomes social barriers of shame and endues all with intrinsic honor. Romans 15:7 is a cornerstone of Christian ethics for honor-shame cultures — since the Christ has honorably accepted us, we are to welcome one another in the church for the sake of God's honor. The 21 admonitions to “greet” particular members in Rome in 16:3–16 reflect Paul's insistence that both sides of the Roman church honorably accept rather than shamefully exclude one another — the ultimate purpose of this Pauline letter designed to unify chauvinistic groups so they would not thwart the upcoming mission to the culturally-unique Spanish peoples with their sinful cultural imperialism. In summary, Paul's ethical teaching “disregards the rules of the game, breaks through the respected social boundaries and offers a new honor code for the Christian community” (Corrigan 1986:25).

Applications and Implications

Paul's epistle to Romans has provided an invaluable starting point for constructing an honor-shame based theology. Even so, the value of any theological formulation lies not in the clarity of its systematic presentation, but in its ability to transform the community of God. Therefore, worthwhile theology must be translated into culturally recognizable forms accessible to the peoples within honor-shame cultures.

Recognizing the strong need for freedom from shame and acquisition of honor among Central Asians, my co-workers and I have developed a narrative employing local images and metaphors to present an honor-shame based gospel. This 15-minute story, with a corresponding drawing, is set in a typical Central Asian village, God is portrayed as an honorable village elder (clean shoes, wrinkle-free suit, two-story yurt, great benefactor), humanity's problem is banishment from God's village to the other shameful side of the river (with the prostitutes, toilets, pigs, and rubbish bins), and salvation is returning to God's village on the bridge of Jesus' resurrection and being honored by God (new clothes, adoption documents, seats of honor, and honorable food). In discipling believers and training leaders, we have experimented with using this story as the core curriculum, but all the while methodically working through the narrative and corresponding biblical texts to provide a deeper theological understanding of each aspect (e.g., God, creation, fall, Israel) in light of honor and shame.

In our efforts to incorporate honor-shame themes and values into our mission work, several observable patterns have emerged.

1. *Gender plays a key role in one's understanding and response to the message.* Women tend to relish the removal of defilement and shame, whereas men prize the prestige and honor being offered. Although salvation in Christ is multi-faceted, each gender values one aspect over another. This corresponds to anthropological models that recognize that natural sexual divisions are replicated in cultural values (i.e., women privately cover shame and men publicly display honor [Malina 1991:42]).
2. *Socio-geographical origin also plays a key role in the receiver's level of interest.* People enculturated in rural settings are much more interested in the themes of honor and shame (particularly as it applies to their own social status) than urbanized people. Since honor and shame are social constructs designed for communal survival, and rural life is generally more group oriented, it naturally follows that honor and shame are larger cultural factors

in rural settings. For this reason, I suspect an honor-shame theology could also be relevant for Western Christians in small-town, agricultural contexts.

3. *Employing indigenous mediums to communicate the message has allowed for initial success.* The maxim that all truth is comprehended only through culturally bound vehicles of communication (Kraft 1991:109ff; Postman 1986) has proven true in our experience. Presenting these truths (a) person-to-person, (b) as a narrative, (c) through local images/metaphors, and (d) with a visual representation, has noticeably facilitated receptor interest and comprehension. I suspect that other cultures in which honor and shame are pivotal values also share these mediums of communication.
4. *Finally, Christians particularly have been quick to affirm the relevance and need for a theology centered on honor and shame.* The suitability of such a theological formulation for local audiences has been instantly recognized through explicit comments or people's eagerness for their own family to hear the message. One of the first times I discussed these ideas with a group of local Christians, one responded in tears, "I have been a believer for 10 years, why am I only hearing about this now? And my sister, I have shared Christ with her many times but she always says God will not accept her because of her great shame."

Even with the recent advancements of biblical historians and social scientists in analyzing the nature of honor and shame, the theological task remains relatively untouched. As theologies in the majority world develop, they must address the concerns of honor and shame in the following ways:

1. *Theological.* The Bible must be read with fresh eyes and a keen awareness of the pressing issues of honor-shame cultures. Individual biblical books, narratives (e.g., exodus, conquest), characters (e.g., Abraham, Elijah, Paul), and theological categories (e.g., Torah, atonement, final judgment) must be reformulated to address the questions and assumptions arising from honor-shame contexts. Most importantly, a fresh analysis of Jesus' life, from incarnation to exaltation, is needed to augment the prevailing Christology based on the penal substitution theory (Baker 2007).
2. *Ritual.* Then such a theology must be contextually articulated through stories, testimonies, sermons, songs, dramas, prayers, rituals, symbols, visuals, holidays, and doctrinal statements so that truth is connected with daily life (Zahniser 1997).
3. *Ethical.* The church must address unique issues arising from Christians' obedience to Christ in honor-shame contexts. How does one relate to cultural mechanisms of honor and shame? How does one "honor" God? What is the significance and meaning of Jesus' exhortations voluntarily to bear social shame (leaving land and family [Matt. 19:29], becoming a slave [Mk. 10:44], bearing one's cross [Lk. 14:27], and other socially-degrading exhortations)?

May the theological agenda of Romans set the pace for new contemporary formulations that address theology from and for the honor-shame contexts of Christians around the world.

Notes

1. The four semantically equivalent subjective genitive constructs in 3:3–7 (τὴν πίστιν τοῦ θεοῦ, ὁ θεὸς ἀληθής, θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην, ἡ ἀλήθεια τοῦ θεοῦ) all affirm God's persistent integrity to his covenant, even in spite of human disloyalty (Hays 1980:111).

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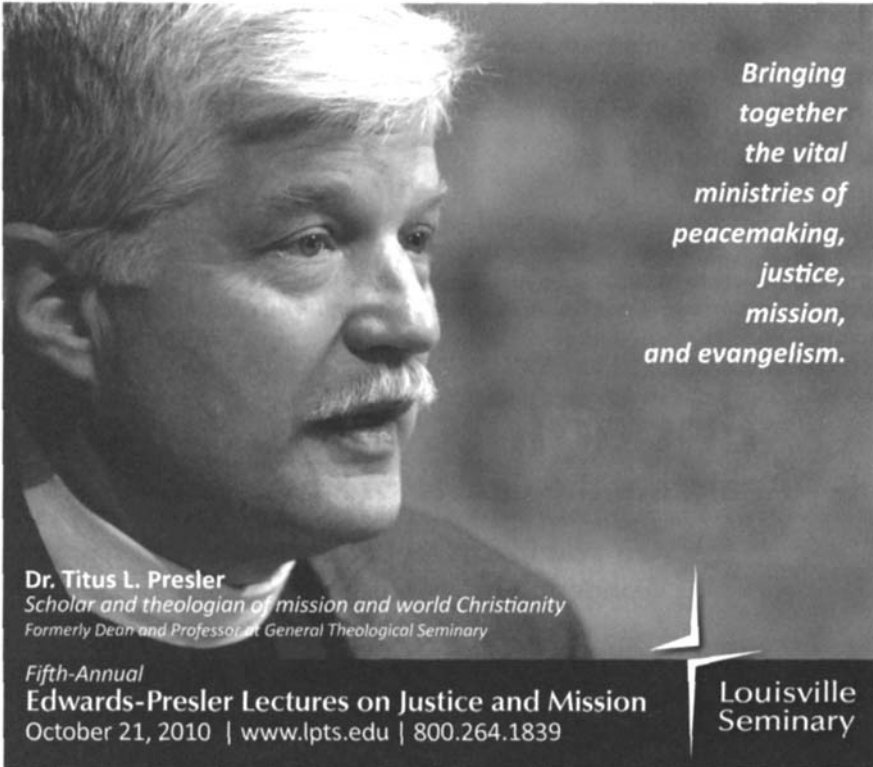
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