The Role of Formal Theological Education in Missiological Strategies in Honor/Shame Contexts

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Abstract

Missionaries oscillate between overemphasizing theological education and shying away from it. One factor that may play an essential role in determining the importance of theological education in missiological strategies is that of context. This article argues that missionaries working in honor/shame cultures need to consider the possible role of formal theological education in preparing a church elder/overseer (πρεσβύτερος, ἐπίσκοπος) to be able to teach. The article first examines the biblical qualification "able to teach," arguing for a cultural component to it. The discussion then introduces honor, shame, and honor/shame cultures. Finally, it provides specific ways formal education might help build cultural rapport for Christian elders/overseers to teach in these contexts.

Key Words: elder/overseer, formal education, honor, honor/shame cultures, theological education

Introduction

Many majority world cultures emphasize honor and shame. Jayson George's *Culture Test* suggests that "approximately 80 percent of the global population (i.e., Asians, Arabs, Africans, and even Latin Americans) runs on the honor-shame operating system" (Georges & Baker, 2016, p. 19).[1] If true, missionaries must continue considering how these cultural concepts might influence their strategies.

With the growth of the global church, leadership development is an essential component of missions. The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention considers it one of six core missionary tasks (*Foundations*, 2018, pp. 94–98). While missionaries rarely debate the need for leaders, they do dispute the role of formal theological education in leadership development. Missiological strategies oscillate between overemphasizing theological education and shying away from it completely.

When planning strategies, missionaries can fall into the trap of searching for a universal key for leadership development. However, each culture comes with its own particularities that missionaries must consider. Context can play an essential role in determining the importance of theological education in leadership development.

This article argues that missionaries working in honor/shame cultures need to consider the possible role of formal theological education in preparing a church elder/overseer—the English translations used here for πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος—to be able to teach.[2] The article first examines the biblical qualification "able to teach," arguing for a cultural component to this skill. The discussion then introduces shame, honor, and honor/shame cultures. Finally, it points out specific ways formal educational credentials might assist in building the needed cultural rapport for Christian elders/overseers to teach in these contexts.

Considering Biblical Qualifications

Leadership development in missions strategies requires identifying qualifications and skills of leaders. This section first explores the qualification "able to teach" found in Paul's list of elder/overseer qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:2. Then it examines the corresponding text in Titus 1:9, where Paul encourages elders/overseers to "hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine."[3] It then questions the contextual nature of the skill of teaching, arguing that while "able to teach" primarily specifies knowledge of and commitment to God's Word, it also includes a contextual recognition that a person is a teacher. Because this article specifically focuses on 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 2, it therefore limits the discussion to leadership development to πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος.

1 Timothy 3: Able to Teach

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul focuses on character, with the nod to one action or skill: "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2). Dave Harvey states, "This is the only nonnegotiable *skill or talent* listed in the eldership requirements [emphasis added]" (Harvey, 2012, pp. 116). By setting this one skill in the middle of a list of distinctly Christian character traits, Paul implies that a leader couples the ability to teach with integrity and uprightness. As all too many examples have shown, a leader who can teach but does not have good character can shipwreck a church.

The question arises, though: what makes someone able to teach? While Benjamin Merkle acknowledges that "there is some debate as to what qualifies as an aptitude for teaching" (Merkle, 2014, p. 181), many scholars and commentaries gloss over the idea. For example, W. Hulitt Gloer describes this attribute as "*an apt teacher*…able to teach effectively" (Gloer, 2010, p. 150). The International Mission Board's *Foundations* document states, "the pastor/elder/overseer must be able to teach the content of the Bible and sound biblical doctrine well" (*Foundations*, 2018, p. 96). These and other examples seem to assume that the various recipients of I Timothy innately know what makes someone able to teach.

Titus 1: Holding Fast to the Trustworthy Word

The corresponding list in Titus 1 provides a fuller explanation. In Titus 1:9, Paul expounds on the idea of being "able to teach," stating that an elder/overseer should "hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine" (Knight III, 1992, p. 294; Towner, 2006, p. 252). The main emphasis shifts from "able to teach" in 1 Timothy to "hold firm" in Titus.

Titus 1:9 has many implications for defining "able to teach." First and foremost, one who is able to teach must hold fast to the trustworthy Word. A teacher is not simply someone with the appropriate skill to teach; he intimately knows the Bible and conveys its message to those he leads. Second, this passage stresses that leaders have learned from others. William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker state, "No one, moreover, will be *able to teach* … unless he himself is *taught*." (Hendriksen & Kistemaker, 2002, p. 124). While God can raise up leaders with just a Bible and the Holy Spirit, he often works through the faithful training of other disciple-makers. Finally, elders/overseers must commit to this Word above all else (Mounce, 2000, p. 392). This wholehearted devotion to the Word cultivates the character qualifications in Titus and 1 Timothy, allowing elders/overseers to stand against the winds of cultural comfort and false teachings.

Potential elders/overseers must be able to teach. This section has demonstrated that this ability primarily encompasses knowledge and commitment to God's Word such that an elder/overseer can instruct and rebuke. In addition, solid character, as described in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, must accompany this skill.

Teaching in a Contextually Understandable Way

The commitment to and knowledge of God's Word described above is the baseline of one's teaching ability. Without this baseline, no matter how successful or charismatic a leader may be in a context, that person is not meeting the biblical requirements of an elder/overseer. However, as missionaries work to develop leaders across cultural boundaries, they must ask if there is also a cultural aspect to one's ability to teach.

While many commentators gloss over "able to teach," some scholars expound on the phrase. Philip Towner states, "Within the sphere of Christian instruction …, the sense is of practical authoritative teaching that *compels believers* to implement the faith in all aspects of life [emphasis added]" (Towner, 2006, p. 692). William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker explain the meaning of both the Titus and Timothy sections, stating, "to the end that every overseer may be by means of his sound teaching *to incline will and heart to the joyful service of God*, and *to expose the errors* of those who rebel [emphasis added]" (Hendriksen & Kistemaker, 1996, p. 349). Both verbs—compel and incline—require disseminating information in a way that is understood and persuades the church to action.

Contextualization encourages the communication of the gospel and the Christian faith in a culturally appropriate way. Tim Keller defines contextualization as "giving people *the Bible's answers*, which they may not all want to hear, *to questions about life* that people in their particular time and place are asking, *in language and forms* they can comprehend, and *through appeals and arguments* with force they can feel, even if they reject them" (Keller, 2012, p. 89). Keller's definition may offer a window into teachers' cultural *je ne sais quoi* ("indefinable attributes"). Someone who is able to teach must be biblically qualified—giving the people the Bible's answers—but they must also have the ability to teach in "languages and forms" the people can understand, through "appeals and arguments with force they can feel." Christian elders/overseers must strive to communicate truth in a culturally impactful manner.

Missionaries need to recognize this cultural element to the ability to teach. Each role in society has cultural assumptions that accompany them. In other words, the role of a capable, equipped teacher has specific traits or qualifications that are often unvoiced but carry cultural weight. What makes someone a gifted teacher in one culture may not make them one in another.

In conclusion, these biblical qualifications and cultural assumptions help build a fuller picture of a Christian elder/overseer in a specific culture. As mentioned before, the biblical qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 form the baseline requirements for elders/overseers. If Christians possess the cultural savvy to be teachers but do not meet these biblical qualifications, they are not fit to serve in this role. These cultural elements, however, can build upon this scriptural baseline, augmenting the force people feel in response to the teacher's words. The Bible, however, does not require these cultural qualifications. Therefore, a person who lacks them is fit to be an elder/overseer but should work to develop the skills needed for people in that society to recognize him as an apt teacher. Together, the biblical and cultural qualifications amplify the elder's/overseer's ability to teach in a specific context.

This section has examined the elder/overseer qualification, "able to teach" in 1 Timothy 3:2, and the corresponding requirement in Titus 1:9 to "hold firm to the trustworthy word." It argued that the main impetus of this qualification is knowledge of and commitment to God's Word. However, it also contested that contextual elements might influence one's ability to teach. While churches should not mandate these cultural elements because they are not biblical requirements, they should recognize and cultivate them in potential elders/overseers.

Theological Education in Honor/Shame Cultures

As shown above, people may innately identify teachers according to specific values, skills, or traits. Missionaries must investigate these cultural assumptions when working in predominantly honor/shame cultures. Marvin Mayers argues, "*Every group has natural leaders*—those who lead it in keeping with the group expectations" (Mayers, 1987, p. 132). The same idea can apply to those who teach.

This section focuses on theological education in honor/shame cultures, asking whether educational credentials help people in these cultures recognize a person as able to teach. To do so, it introduces honor, shame, and honor/shame cultures. Then, it explores some possible implications of formal theological education in honor/shame cultures by delving into education's relationship with honor and collectivism.

Introduction to Honor/Shame Cultures

The motifs of shame and honor have garnered attention in missiology in the last few decades. Some missiologists and anthropologists describe cultures through the markers of guilt/innocence, honor/shame, or sometimes fear/power (See Benedict, 1946; Georges, 2017; Georges & Baker, 2016; Nida, 1954 for examples). Yet, the ideas of shame and honor—and honor/shame cultures—are often clouded, difficult to describe, and sometimes contested. Veli Kärkkäinen admits concerns with some of the early honor/shame scholarship but also argues that people in some cultures do tend to exhibit these distinguishing characteristics (Kärkkäinen, 2020, p. xiv). This section briefly explains shame and honor and then describes honor/shame cultures.

Shame and Honor

Shame and honor are complex concepts. Christopher Flanders and Werner Mischke define shame as "the feeling or condition of being unworthy or defective. … This can occur in public or relational contexts (e.g., embarrassment, social stigma, or scorn); it may also be the private experience of the individual without any audience (simply feeling ashamed or harboring a sense of inadequacy)" (Flanders & Mischke, 2020, p. xx). Honor, conversely, is the "positive recognition of or by a group or individual based upon some type of excellence or norm" (Flanders & Mischke, 2020, p. xx). Scholars often juxtapose shame with guilt and fear (Georges & Baker, 2016, 2016; Nida, 1954).

E. Randolph Richards and Richard James argue that concepts like honor and shame are cultural tools that serve as "a means for enforcing and reinforcing a value" (Richards & James, 2020, p. 129). This distinction paints a slightly different picture than other popular understandings. Instead of honor and shame being the deep values or paradigms of the culture, Richards and James contend that collectivistic cultures have deep values, and honor and shame serve as tools, buckets, or lenses to maintain them (Richards & James, 2020, pp. 129–131).

Honor and Shame Cultures

While people from all cultures experience guilt, shame, and fear, many cultures emphasize one trait more than the others. Georges and Baker state, "'Honor-shame cultures' refers to *collectivistic* societies where the community tends to shame and exclude people who fail to meet group expectations, and reward loyal members with honor" (Georges & Baker, 2016, p. 18). In these cultures, people accentuate honor/shame more than guilt/innocence or fear/power. Just because people in a culture emphasize honor and shame does not mean that they exclude guilt/innocence or fear/power (Georges, 2017, p. 15; Muller, 2000, p. 55; Nicholls, 2001, pp. 233–234; Tennent, 2007, p. 79; You, 1997, p. 57). Also, cultures express these honor/shame dynamics differently, resulting in a symphony of honor/shame cultures. Therefore, while these cultures may share similarities, the honor/shame dynamic is a tool for understanding, not assumption or prejudice.

Formal Education in Honor/Shame Cultures

Because there is no one-size-fits-all description of honor/shame cultures, assessing the role of formal education in these cultures is challenging. This section, therefore, does not intend to prove the necessity of formal education for all honor/shame cultures but instead raises the anthropological question of what qualifications or traits teachers need for others in that culture to recognize them as people who are able to teach. It introduces concepts related to formal theological education that missionaries should consider, particularly questioning education's relationship to both honor and collectivism.

Formal Education and Honor

In honor/shame cultures, missionaries must question the relationship between formal education and honor. First, they need to ask whether educational credentials carry an assumed cultural weight or currency. Jonathan Pennington explains: "In honor-shame societies, honor is like a currency that gives people status and power (much as money does in modern Western societies). Honor is granted according to what the society values" (Pennington, 2022). Therefore, missionaries in honor/shame cultures must discover what bestows honor.

In most cultures, people recognize two types of honor: ascribed honor and achieved honor. Ascribed honor comes with birth or a name and is somehow related to one's family or community. Conversely, achieved honor comes through individual success (Neyrey, 1998, pp. 15–16). Cultures prioritize these two types of honors differently. Some cultures see them as complementary, while others view them as competitive. Honor/shame cultures often highlight ascribed honor but can also have a place for achieved honor.

Formal theological education may provide one pathway to achieved honor. Roland Muller claims that in some shame-based Islamic cultures, "education bestows honor" (Muller, 2000, p. 91). Richards and James start their chapter on honor with the story of an Arabic man who worked for a Ph.D. so "he would be honored by the community with a title that could not be lost" (Richards & James, 2020, p. 133). For people in these cultures, educational credentials can provide a culturally understood weight to the teacher's authority.

Herein lies an important consideration, though. Not all honor/shame cultures value the same things. People from one honor/shame culture might bestow honor for education, while people from another might emphasize other things, such as age or socioeconomic status. Therefore,

missionaries cannot assume a silver bullet approach to the role of theological education, even among cultures identified as honor/shame cultures.

Second, missionaries should also consider what might take away honor or bring a teacher shame. Joseph Henrich states, "People experience shame when they, their relatives, or even their friends fail to live up to the standards imposed on them by their communities" (Henrich, 2020, p. 22). In other words, if people in these cultures expect teachers to have formal education, missionaries, by downplaying its importance, could set up future leaders for painful, shameful experiences when they fail to meet society's expectations.

Formal Education and Collectivism

This section assumes that many honor/shame cultures share collectivist tendencies and therefore explores the possible relationship between formal education and collectivism. Richards and James explain the use of shame in collective cultures, stating,

> Collectivist cultures think collectively. It is not that the community is alarmed that I (as an individual) have moved too far. Their thinking is more alarm that I have pulled *all of us* off center. … My community will use shame to make me aware that I have drifted. The goal—and this is critical to understand—is to *pull* me back toward the center, for everyone's benefit. We have rescued me *and us* (Richards & James, 2020, p. 184).

This description raises a critical consideration for a teacher's ability to teach. Theological education from a respected entity might provide a person with an affirmation that he will keep the collective group centered and will not push the group into shameful territory. In other words, formal theological education may provide a sense of trust or security, and as Craig Ott states, "If you trust the person, you trust the information" (Ott, 2021, p. 146).

Again, the diversity of cultures with honor/shame tendencies provides an important caveat. While people in some honor/shame cultures might put collective trust in credentials, others might disregard or downplay such credentials in favor of relational networks or perceived authority. Again, missionaries need to learn about and understand the role of formal education—and by extension, theological education—in collective honor/shame cultures.

Finally, in collectivist cultures, education might bring collectively achieved honor. James Plueddemann acknowledges that students performing well in school can bring honor to their parents (Plueddemann, 2018, p. 66). He argues the educational aim of collective cultures is "success for the sake of making family proud, avoiding shame, and bringing status and honor *to the community* [emphasis added]" (Plueddemann, 2018, p. 77, Table 8.1). As national Christians pursue formal education, they may simultaneously bring honor to their entire family, tribe, or people. Could the opposite also be true? Is it possible that missionaries unintentionally shame communities when Western workers with formal academic credentials dismiss or downplay national Christians' desire for education?

This section examined formal education's relationship to both honor and collectivism in honor/shame cultures, presenting potential ways education may add cultural weight to teachers in these cultures. These two possibilities represent examples of many other categories to consider for formal education's importance in a person's ability to teach in these cultures. Therefore, missionaries need to work with cultural insiders to understand the role of formal education in their particular culture before deciding whether to emphasize it in leadership development strategies.

Some Problems to Avoid

As with any missions strategy, potential pitfalls threaten from all sides. For example, people who wish to build their own kingdoms may recognize the cultural currency of academic credentials and use them to gain status or demand dominance over others. To avoid this pitfall, leaders must realize that Christ calls them to use their honor for the good of the church, not themselves.

Second, churches can assume formal education implies that potential leaders have the character qualifications mentioned in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 (Merkle, 2008, p. 122). However, as mentioned earlier, a person who does not have the necessary character traits is not qualified for leadership in the church, regardless of their cultural ability to teach. Formal theological education may help develop these character traits, but it in no way guarantees them.

Conclusion

While discussing eastern views on the atonement, Timothy Tennent states, "Since Western systematic theology has been almost exclusively written by theologians from cultures framed primarily by the values of guilt and innocence, there has been a corresponding failure to fully appreciate the importance of the pivotal values of honor and shame in understanding Scripture and the doctrine of sin" (Tennent, 2007, p. 91). When considering the question of formal theological education in mission strategies, one must ask if missiologists, at times, err similarly. Missionaries can bring their own preconceived notions about the role of education and the value of theological education in general.

This article has argued that missionaries working in honor/shame cultures need to consider the possible role of formal theological education in preparing an elder/overseer to be able to teach. First, it examined "able to teach" in 1 Timothy 3 and the corresponding "hold fast to the Word of the truth" in Titus 1. Though acknowledging a biblical baseline to the skill, it also argued that "able to teach" has a contextual aspect. Next, it examined those contextual aspects, introducing the concepts of shame, honor, and honor/shame cultures contending that education might provide honor or collective trust to a teacher. Though his article focused on the development of πρεσβύτερος and ἐπίσκοπος, the principles could also be applied to other leadership roles.

What, then, is the role of formal theological education in leadership development in honor/shame cultures? First, formal theological education is not a biblical requirement for leadership. The lists in Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 do not explicitly state, "Men must have an MDIV" to be an elder/overseer. Basic biblical qualifications focus mainly on character and the ability to teach.

Culture, however, may make the role of formal theological education in leadership development more complicated than first assumed. While the Bible does not stipulate academic credentials as a requirement for elders/overseers, the context might encourage formal theological education as a helpful aid. In an honor/shame culture, formal theological education may play an important and sometimes overlooked role in leadership development. If so, while formal theological education should never be required, it should never be wholly discouraged, either.

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[1] Georges and Baker concede that *The Culture Test* "was developed primarily as a missions training tool, not a social research instrument so results are more suggestive than scientific" (Georges & Baker, 2016, p. 263, n. 19).

[2] Missionaries come from all over the world. "Missionary" in this article mostly refers to a cultural outsider who enters an honor/shame culture, but this use of the word is not meant to neglect or diminish missionaries who come from honor/shame cultures.

[3] This article uses ESV unless otherwise noted.