

Review

Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials

Jayson Georges and Mark T. Baker
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In the early days of learning the Chinese language, my teacher introduced the word for sin, *zui*. As an evangelical Christian with experience relating to foreign missionaries, she felt it was necessary to explain that Chinese differ from Westerners in their understanding of the concept. *Zui* is more akin to a crime, something for which one is liable only in the event of being caught. For us Western missionaries, this would certainly pose a problem, for we had been taught to present a gospel that requires all individuals to recognize their guilt before a holy Creator. How could people who have no conscious realization of internal guilt possibly receive the gospel? Was some change required in their worldview before they could understand and receive the message of Christ's death and resurrection? Or, conversely, did this Western missionary need to gain a fresh understanding of the gospel so that he could communicate in a way that made sense to people from a collectivist culture? In their book, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, Georges and Baker attempt to help (evangelical) Christians who possess a Western, individualistic worldview better understand the collectivist mindset of the majority world, specifically those who live according to the moral code of honor-shame. The subtitle for this book – *Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* – describes the authors' methodological approach. Both with extensive experience in cross-cultural ministry among honor-shame cultures, as well as significant training and experience in theological education, their goal is to offer practical help to those from guilt-innocence cultures engage with people who see the world through the lens of shame-honor. The ultimate goal is to strengthen the church in its mission, particularly from the West to the rest. The authors underscore their discussions of biblical theology and cultural-anthropological insights with stories of individuals and groups, providing readers from guilt-innocence cultures with an easy grasp of the issues.

An introductory chapter, “A World of Shame,” introduces the dynamic of shame-honor cultures. The authors each share anecdotes from their times of ministry, Georges in Central Asia and Baker in a Latin American context. Through interaction with non-Westerners, they conclude that we live in a “world of shame,” even though “the human brain, and soul, was designed for honor” (Kindle Location 141). “Though designed to experience God’s true glory, our honor was exchanged for shame in the Garden of Eden. As a result, humans crave honor and grasp for it in warped and destructive ways, apart from God’s original design” (Kindle 148). Georges’ previously created the “Culture Test,” a survey that categorizes and compares cultures around the three rubrics of fear-power, guilt-innocence and honor-shame; his conclusion is that the majority of the world is collectivist and views the world through the lens of honor-shame. For the Western individualist, the primary problem is how to deal with guilt, but for most people in the world, it is one of shame. This is not a new finding by any means, and the authors trace the development of honor-shame studies, beginning with the studies of anthropologist Ruth Benedict in 1944. However, in order for the church to fulfill its mission, we must better understand the worldview of the majority world. “A person’s culture type significantly shapes his or her worldview, ethics and identity, even more than individual personality. And more significantly for Christian witness, cultural context influences how people experience sin (i.e., as guilt, shame or fear) and conceive of salvation (i.e., innocence, honor or power). The global influence of honor and shame requires Christian theology and mission to account for their reality” (Kindle 219-222).

The authors begin with their experiences in, as well as observations and studies of, collectivist human cultures, and then develop a biblical theology for ministry among such peoples. This immediately raises the question of text versus context, a common discussion in contemporary missiology. Do we begin with Scripture to determine the Creator’s expectations for human culture, such as Enoch Wan’s “Theo-Culture” approach? Or do we assume that all cultural expressions are valid in their own right, and consider how to apply Scripture in various contexts? In concluding this review, I will return to this question. For now, we may note that the authors offer a compelling case that biblical theology privileges the honor-shame worldview (though they seem somewhat unwilling to state that definitively), even affirming that the individualistic, guilt-innocence, is an acceptable worldview. However, in the opening chapter, they refer to both C.S. Lewis and David deSilva, both Western academics, to validate the significance of honor-shame. It is difficult to resist critiquing Western individualism at this point.

They note that “Western theology is itself *contextual*” (emphasis original, Kindle 257), and proceed to offer somewhat of a critique, noting that such theology is not wrong, but merely constructed within a particular worldview. Might the same be said of the collectivist, honor-shame worldview? The conclusion of chapter one may suggest otherwise: “Honor and shame are not merely cultural themes laced through the Bible, but are foundational elements to rightly understanding biblical salvation” (Kindle 358-359). It may be that a theological and anthropological study of honor-shame may serve as, not only a complement to Western theology, but as a corrective. However, could the reverse be said? Could a biblical theology of guilt-innocence from an individualistic worldview speak to the honor-shame construct?

The book progresses in three sections, the first two of which lay foundations for the authors’ goal of providing ministry perspectives and tools for the Western missionary. The first section on cultural anthropology explains the dynamics of shame-honor (collectivistic) cultures in contradistinction to guilt-innocence (individualistic) cultures. In the former, people are not accountable to some universal ideas of right and wrong, but rather “acceptable behavior is defined by ideals from the community” (Kindle 470). A chart compares behaviors between guilt-based and shame-based cultures. The former is individualistic and introspective, defined by rules and laws, focusing on conscience and a sense of guilt; the response is to confess and punish, and the desired outcome is forgiveness. The latter is communal and public, defined by community expectations; the response is to hide and to remove the shame, with the desired outcome of restoration to the community. “Shame cultures focus on who you are; guilt cultures emphasize what you do” (Kindle 528-529). There are seven manifestations of an honor-shame worldview: patronage, indirect communication, event orientation, purity, hospitality and social roles. In the third (and longest) section on practical ministry, the authors will return to these categories. Their helpful chart near the end of this first section shows how people from guilt-innocence cultures assess shame-honor cultures in the areas of money, communication, time, hygiene, food, and behavior; and, conversely, how collectivistic cultures view Western individualism.

Next, the authors demonstrate the significance of shame-honor in the Bible’s story, both in the Hebraic (Old Testament) narrative and in the life and ministry of Jesus. This fairly straightforward section begins with an overview of shame-honor through the Old Testament. “Biblical theology consistently addresses honor and shame because the cultures of the biblical world revolved around those values. The dynamics of honor and shame saturate the biblical texts

and shape the narrative of salvation history” (Kindle 1004-1005). Beginning with shame of Adam and Eve at the fall, the first manifestation of their problem, the chapter goes on to discuss a few high points of salvation and relationships in the Old Testament, including Abraham, the exodus, Ruth, King David’s relationship with Mephibosheth, and the exile. In all these cases (as well as others), the goal was to restore the honor of those who had been shamed. It would be impossible to develop a complete biblical theology in one chapter, and I will discuss this approach later in my review. However, the authors are to be commended for succinctly describing the theme of honor-shame in the Old Testament.

The second chapter of this section focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus, observing his teaching, encounters with individuals and his death and resurrection. The goal is to “understand the Messiah’s mission of honoring the shamed and thus to shape missiological practices in honor-shame contexts today” (Kindle 1461). Jesus’ teaching and personal encounters with others reveal his goal of reversing the prevalent understanding of honorable behavior and status, countering Pharisaic approaches to position and purity. In discussing his death and resurrection, the authors seek to broaden the traditional evangelical atonement theology to emphasize Jesus role as shame-bearer. They cite theologian Kevin Vanhoozer: “Like the five thousand, we have discovered that after our centuries-long banquet of atonement theology, there are still more fragments of the cross left over” (Kindle 1738).¹ In this case, the authors’ focus is squarely on the atonement as the means of restoring honor through an act of shame. “A key element in understanding the atonement is to recognize the centrality of shame to crucifixion itself” (Kindle 1746). The Apostle Paul’s subsequent letters explicate this particular understanding of Christ’s death on the cross.

Having laid those foundations, the final section offers practical advice on specific aspects of ministry to those in shame-honor cultures. This, the longest section, focuses on various aspects of Christian life and mission: spirituality, relationships, evangelism, conversion, ethics and community. Here, the discussion returns to some of the manifestations of honor-shame culture, previously mentioned in section one. The authors discuss the pros and cons of patronage, indirect communication, event orientation, purity, hospitality and social roles. Although

¹ Regarding various theories of atonement, Mark Baker’s *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (co-authored with Joel Green) has observed metaphorical descriptions of the atonement from New Testament writers. See Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in the New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

Westerners typically see these areas as cultural weaknesses and, indeed, are corrupted by human sin, but need not be understood as inherently evil. The Western missionary requires skill to navigate through such uncharted cultural territory. This third and final section, the goal of the book, offers much wisdom to those seeking to broaden their worldview and to engage others with humility and respect.

Having read this fine book on both theory and practice, I find myself left with the question of text versus context. As already mentioned, can we look to Scripture to define normative culture or should we employ Scripture to better understand culture? The authors have opted for the latter approach, articulating a biblical theology to fit a particular worldview. Along the way, they have constructed a reasonable biblical argument, and nowhere suggest that their honor-shame theology is universal. However, to begin with biblical theology rather than cultural anthropology would strengthen the critique against Western individualism. As one who has lived in a collectivist culture for several decades, it has become increasingly difficult to read Scripture from an individual point of view. Paul's word to the Ephesians, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Ephesians 2:10) is for the church collectively, rather than about my personal destiny in this world. His encouragement to the Philippians, "that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ," was directed to a group of people who needed to express Christ's love and servant's heart among one another, and not about my personal sanctification. A biblical theology that emphasizes relationships is obviously more consistent with Scripture itself. Perhaps a better starting point for this book would have been along the lines of Wan's Theo-Culture, and describing how the theme of honor-shame fits within the Creator's expectations.

Indeed, as a discipline, biblical theology has landed on troubled times. The goal of throwing off the dogma of systematics and Greek thought, and reading Scripture afresh through Hebrew eyes, has led to a dizzying variety of theologies. Moreover, the attempt to discover a biblical center has led to the discovery of many "centers" (salvation, covenant, promise, land, kingdom, etc.). It seems unlikely that the authors would see "shame-honor" as being at the "center," but their explication of the theme does serve to centralize it. Indeed, it should be noted that the theme of shame-honor is more consistent with overall Scripture than is guilt-innocence.²

² According to Timothy Tennent, the word "guilt" and related terms occurs 145 times in the Old Testament and 10 in the New Testament, whereas "shame" and its derivatives occurs nearly 300 times in the Old Testament and 45

However, Scripture must define and correct culture, rather than the other way around. Although we always read within that hermeneutical circle and within a hermeneutical community, we must never forget our own cultural assumptions, whether those be gained through upbringing or through association with people who share other worldviews. Granted, we read Scripture to understand and affirm our place in this world; in this case, to understand the roots of our dignity and sense of shame. However, more important than using Scripture to support a particular worldview, God's Word must be allowed to critique and correct all faulty culture building projects.

in the New Testament. See Timothy C. Tennent: *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 92-93.