

IMTN A conversation of trainers that leads to action

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Communicating the gospel in honor and shame cultures

Introduction

Ruth Wall PhD
Chair, IMTN

Welcome to the fifth IMTN Bulletin. This issue provides an excellent resource for all trainers as it focuses on an aspect of ministry training that is important yet often overlooked namely, how to equip people to share the good news with people whose worldview is dominated by honor and shame.

Jayson George has experienced living in an honor-shame context and has reflected deeply on his experiences and on how the good news of the Gospel addresses both shame and honor. Jayson has authored two useful books on this subject, *The 3D Gospel* and *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures* (see the end of his article.) Jayson has developed training resources primarily for use in the USA. However, it is not only people steeped in Western worldviews who need training and equipping to understand honor-shame values. Christians who have grown up in honor-shame contexts instinctively know how to interpret behaviors and beliefs in these cultures but may not have critically reflected on how the honor-shame cultural values influence disciples of Christ nor how to communicate the depths and riches of Scripture as it deals with issues of honor and shame. Therefore, although developed to meet a significant blind spot in Western thinking, Jayson's material is useful to us all, whether we were raised in honor-shame cultures or not. For the Bible clearly reveals that since the garden (Genesis 3) our shame disfigures and disables us from relating with our Creator and with one another in openness and trust, and how by God's grace alone, available to us through Christ's life, death and resurrection, our shame is taken away and we are bestowed with honor. When you start looking you find the themes of honor and shame in every book of the Bible!

Thank you Jayson for generously sharing your wisdom with the IMTN and guiding us to many useful resources. If you would like to discuss this topic further do get in touch with Jayson or with us in the IMTN.

Are there other topics you would like the Bulletin to cover? Let us know at <http://www.missionarytraining.org/mt/index.php/contact-imtn>

I am looking forward to joining several IMTN members in Panama City for the WEA-Mission Commission Global Mission Conference (3-7th October) and afterwards for a 24-hour consultation with mission trainers from around the world (7th – 8th). Please pray for these gatherings that God will help us as we meet, build relationships, listen and share. As well as using the Bulletin to support, resource and

connect the mission training network we are hoping to find new ways to enable dialogue and connection between us so please keep in touch in 2017.

Honor and Shame: An Indispensible Topic for Ministry Training

By Jayson Georges

Our family lived in Muslim Central Asia for nine years. In our pre-field preparation, we studied Islam rigorously hoping to enhance ministry fruitfulness. After one year in Central Asia we made a startling discovery—the people were hardly Muslims! Instead of Islam, the pivotal values of honor and shame guided everyday decisions and relationships. In short, culture trumps religion. Sadly, we learned nothing about honor-shame cultures in our pre-field ministry training. This is a startling miss, considering the prominence of honor and shame in global cultures and the Bible.

The cultural values of honor and shame stand behind most cultural practices that seem “senseless” to Westerners: face-saving, indirect communication, ostentatious feasts, honor violence, purity regulations, patron’s expectations, and balanced reciprocity. Without a basic interpretative framework, these aspects of honor-shame cultures cause enormous frustration and missed opportunities, let alone cultural mistakes and relational blunders. The typical Westerner interprets the world through the lens of their individualistic, guilt-innocence culture, but this worldview struggles to interpret honor-shame cultures. For this reason, honor-shame is an indispensable topic for ministry training.

Training in honor-shame is equally vital for Majority World Christians. Though honor-shame may be your primary culture, most Christians have theologically ignored this aspect of culture. Western theology and ministry methods have kept honor and shame hidden. But fortunately, Majority World Christians grasp the concept (and implications) of honor-shame much faster than Western Christians; honor and shame is the air they breathe.

To help you equip people ministering in honor-shame contexts, this bulletin offers seven experiential training exercises. We hope trainers will introduce honor and shame in their training, especially in the pre-field phase. These exercises are not a complete lesson plan, but they show practical ways to supplement and illustrate teaching on honor and shame. For a complete lesson, see the training video, [“Honor & Shame 201.”](#) For FAQs, visit <http://honorshame.com/faqs/>.

7 Practical Exercises for Teaching Honor & Shame

1. **Stories.** People who are perplexed are inclined to learn; so perplex learners. For pre-field trainees, I usually open with [personal stories](#) from Central Asia to illustrate the “bizarreness” of honor and shame to those outside the culture. When training people with field experience, I

solicit their honor-shame stories that seem strange to them. These concrete case studies create an appetite for learning by revealing a blind spot in their cultural worldview.

2. **Videos.** Who doesn't enjoy a good video? These 3–4 minute videos powerfully reveal key aspects of honor and shame for Christian ministry. (For more videos, [click here](#).)

- [“Do You Want Face?”](#) explains the gospel in terms of face.
- [“Back to God’s Village”](#) presents the entire biblical story of salvation.
- [“The Honor Code”](#) discusses ethics and moral change.
- [“He Bore Our Shame”](#) recounts Jesus’ honoring ministry.

3. **A Picture of Shame.** I give these instructions: “On a blank piece of paper, draw a picture of shame. When you hear the word ‘shame,’ what visual comes to mind?” After two minutes have participants explain their drawing to a partner. The word shame is familiar, but is hard to define since it is an abstract social construct. So, drawing a picture pulls people into the emotion of shame and asks them to consider its essence. (And voting on the worst drawing in the group could further illustrate the nature of shame!)

4. **The Culture Test.** Available for free at www.TheCultureTest.com, this 5-6 minute activity introduces the basic framework of [guilt/shame/fear cultures](#). The results allow people to see their own cultural preferences. You can also show [the global data](#) (or [this GMI infographic](#)) so people can see how they compare with other cultures.

5. **The Biblical Story.** First, introduce how [conceptual metaphors](#) relate to theology and contextualization. Then provide learners with [the list of relational/communal terms](#) (on screen or handout) and instruct, “Tell the biblical story (creation-fall-Israel-Jesus-salvation) using the words from the list of relational/communal terms. Do this in pairs; each person gets 4-5 minutes.” This is consistently people’s favorite learning activity, as it personally reveals the limitations of their Western theology. Be sure to debrief the experience as a group, as the exercise evokes many emotions. Ask, “What was happening in your mind and your heart as you were doing this exercise?” I conclude by showing [“Back to God’s Village”](#) as an example of the biblical story in honor-shame terms.

6. **Discussion Questions.** If group dynamics allow, discussing controversial questions can be a fun way to explore topics. Here are some examples. The answers to each of these is a “Well . . . sort of . . . kind of . . . yes, but . . . it depends!”

- [Does God slut-shame?](#)
- [Was Christ's death an honor-killing?](#)
- [Should Christians seek honor/glory?](#)
- When is shaming appropriate?

7. **Exegesis of Honor Codes.** [Every culture communicates honor and shame uniquely](#), so one must know the honor code of the context. This exercise works best when the entire group works in the same cultural context. Here are some questions to unpack the local *terroir* of honor and shame:

- What words mean “honor,” and what do those words mean? What words mean “shame,” and what do those words mean?
- Who gets honor? What are the sources and causes of honor in the context? Also, what (or who) is considered disgraceful?
- What are the symbols of honor? How does a person with honor display their status? What actions communicate honor to other people?

In my experience, learners have two main questions about honor and shame. One, “Is honor-shame *biblical*?” To address the first concern, let the Bible speak for itself; introduce biblical [verses](#), [proverbs](#), or [psalms](#) about honor and shame. Do not frame honor-shame as a replacement or corrective to Western theology (because it’s not), but as a compliment or supplement. Two, “How is honor-shame *practical*?” Christians in ministry are pragmatic, so discuss the implications of honor-shame for relationships, evangelism, and discipleship. Avoid being overly theoretical.

In the USA I joke that honor-shame is a “sexy” topic, because people find it so intriguing and interesting. Learning about honor and shame will be of great help to learners for this reason—it is a simple concept with tremendous explanatory power. The easy-to-understand idea unlocks many aspects of scripture, culture, and ministry.

4 Benefits of Learning Honor and Shame

Why introduce honor and shame in ministry training? Here are four benefits, or learning outcomes.

1. **Hermeneutics.** I once heard a Turkish unbeliever explain Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15). He read the opening verse about the son asking for his inheritance, closed the Bible, and declared, “That would never happen. Nobody could shame their father like that.” Honor and shame are essential for interpreting the Bible. People trained on the topic often say, “I now see honor and shame all over the Bible, as if I’m reading a new book!” The Bible was written in honor-shame cultures, so this is not surprising. The word “shame” appears twice as often as “guilt” in scripture, and many stories of God’s salvation center upon the restoration of status from shame to honor. Honor and shame also enrich our theology of key doctrines, such as [sin](#), [salvation](#), [atonement](#), and [hell](#).
2. **Relationships.** Learning the cultural script of honor and shame enables us to meaningfully communicate honor to people. Though several years of living in Central Asia, I learned how food, gifts, indirect communication, and patronage could be leveraged to build kingdom relationships. Perhaps more importantly, I finally realized all the ways I was inadvertently shaming friends, neighbors, and employees! When honor-shame is the default operating system for life, failing to play by the code causes relational friction.
3. **Spirituality.** Shame terrorizes all people, regardless of cultural background. The fear of disgrace is not limited to Arab or Asian cultures. Shame was a part of the fall in Genesis 3 and therefore

shame affects the entire human family. Addressing honor and shame in ministry training allows Christians to see how they personally struggle with shame. Shame and false honor are driving forces in our lives, even for Western Christians in ministry. Before proclaiming God's salvific honor to unbelievers, we must appropriate God's honor for ourselves.

4. **Ministry.** Honor and shame are inherent to the gospel and essential for the Christian mission. Jesus Christ dismantled shame and procured honor for the human family. The church now continues the mission of God to bless all nations with God's honor. This socio-theological reality impacts all facets of biblical mission. We spotlight three examples. Evangelism explains that all people stand ashamed before God, so all must abandon their pursuit of worldly honors and receive the honorable status of God's Son. Discipleship empowers Christians to resist cultural disgrace and live for the glory of God's name. Effective development increases people's social capital, not just material wealth.

Honor-shame is indispensable for reading the Bible, building relationships, growing spiritually, and ministering fruitfully. Without a basic understanding of it, our cultural blindness threatens to compromise the gospel and limit the power of God's salvation.

Jayson Georges (MDiv, Talbot) lived in Central Asia for nine years, doing CP and BAM. He is the founding editor of www.HonorShame.com, a blog of resources for global ministry. Jayson has authored [The 3D Gospel](#) and [Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures](#). To consult with Jayson about integrating honor and shame into ministry training, email jaysongeorges@gmail.com.