A Breakfast Surprise  Recently I had a serendipity breakfast in Phoenix with Werner Mischke who is with Mission ONE, a cross-cultural mission partnership ministry. His new book, The Global Gospel, examines the issue of honor and shame (H/S) in Scripture with implications for framing the Gospel message to honor-shame cultures.

Something is Missing  Several years ago while teaching in Lebanon, Werner became intrigued with how Western-trained missionaries were presenting the Gospel to honor-shame cultures. That prompted him to do a multi-year study of the Bible where he found that H/S themes occur twice as often as innocent and guilt (I/G) themes. This wasn’t surprising as the Bible is rooted in an honor-shame world. The parables of Jesus are entirely set in a Near Eastern village setting where issues of honor and shame permeate every aspect of daily life; e.g., the midnight visitor in Luke 11.

Werner next investigated Western Bible dictionaries for their treatment of H/S. All contained “guilt” in their respective indices, but few made even a passing reference to “shame.” Thus, while the Bible addresses H/S issues twice as often as I/G issues, it seemed that our Western theological paradigms barely address H/S! What to make of this dramatic imbalance?

A Judicial Gospel  Werner observed that Western Evangelicalism (WE) has gravitated toward a judicial approach to the Gospel. The “Four Spiritual Laws” evoke a courtroom scene where God is the Judge, Jesus is our Advocate, and we are declared innocent because we are cloaked with the Righteousness of Christ. If you live in an honor-shame culture, this judicial-only framework can be an impediment to receiving the Gospel of Jesus. As one Near Eastern woman put it, “I can’t approach God to forgive my sins because I have too much shame.” She had heard a Western Gospel that presents I/G, but seems to be silent regarding her deeply felt issues of H/S. As a result, much of the still-to-be-reached world receives a truncated Western Gospel that emphasizes guilt, but not the full Gospel of Jesus that addresses guilt and shame removal.
A Shameful Context  

This H/S omission on the part of Western Evangelicalism is both HUGE and profound. Jesus died on a shameful Roman cross to atone for our guilt AND also for our shame. During His earthly ministry He lifted people out of shame; e.g., the leper, the paralytic, tax collectors, prostitutes. In rescuing and restoring them, Jesus honored each one by bringing them into His new Kingdom of God community and invited them into His kinship group. Jesus was also born in culturally perceived shame (a notion we seem to have overlooked) and the “Good News” of His birth was first entrusted to shepherds, who the Rabbi’s decree, are in a shameful profession. The social dynamic of shame spans the birth, life and death of Jesus!

A Diagnosis  

So how did this H/S oversight by Western evangelicals happen? That is too complex a question for this modest paper. It suffices to say there is a mosaic of Western cultural and theological reasons. However, a few observations may provide a glimpse.

WE easily disconnects the *Gospel of Jesus* from the timeless Near-Eastern Jewish, first-century, village, agrarian context in which it is written. Having done that, it then projects its Hellenistic, urban, Modernity, industrial way of thinking onto the words in the biblical record. Furthermore, with its Hellenistic proclivity to dissect and separate things into pieces rather than keep them in an integrated whole, WE easily divides the *Gospel of Guilt* and *Shame* into a Gospel that primarily emphasizes Guilt removal. That leaves Shame undealt with on the far side of the Human Condition road. Thus, even though we are forgiven, unresolved issues of (often persistent) past shame still exist, e.g., sexual abuse, abortion.

Consider this unintended separation in the way that WE divided the seamless nature of “make disciples” into two separate notions – “Evangelism” and “Discipleship” (try to find these two words in Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance). First, WE uncoupled “Evangelism” from “Discipleship” prioritizing evangelism (the relatively easy task) over discipleship (the life-long, harder task). Then WE took the now-separated evangelistic message and emphasized only its innocence-guilt part (the easier task – our behavior) over the H/S part (the harder task – our sense of being and worth).

Putting Things Back Together  

Would giving H/S its rightful place in the presentation of the *Gospel* somehow dilute the importance of I/G? Actually, the opposite occurs – that reintegration completes the *Gospel of Jesus* and broadens its appeal to “all peoples” while infusing it with its always intended transformational power! The sooner we fuse the innocence-guilt and honor-shame motifs back together in the *Gospel of Jesus*, and likewise reintegrate “evangelism” and “discipleship” back into “make disciples,” the sooner revival may break out in our midst!

This reintegrating of I/G and H/S themes into the holistic *Gospel of Jesus* has immense pastoral implications. To begin with, we need to revisit our *Gospel* vocabulary and be sure to include the honor-shame words of *Scripture* when interacting with H/S cultures. Furthermore, we need to reflect the particular nuances of honor, shame and dignity resident within each culture; e.g. Chinese “face-saving” is not the same kind of shame issue that Middle Eastern Arab cultures live with. In addition, we need to recognize that our individualistic, inward Western notions of shame are very different from Eastern community-based, outward dynamics of shame.

Why Shame Matters  

Why does this whole issue of shame matter? Werner offered a penetrating insight when he observed that acknowledging our guilt often leads to helpful behaviors such as asking forgiveness, seeking reconciliation. In contrast, forty years of scholarly research as shown that unresolved shame often leads to hurtful behaviors. Dr. David Allen calls those hurtful behaviors “false programs for happiness,” e.g. obsessions and addictions. These destructive behaviors manifest because we have withheld
the other part of the Gospel message that can truly heal and transform, i.e., your shame as also been deal with at the Cross – 1 John 1:9. The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus is that you are forgiven and cleansed!

While shame is a very different dynamic in the West, unresolved shame still matters. In our PBT “Bible Alive” weekends, we describe something called “The Bermuda Triangle of the Soul”5 for understanding the ‘Human Condition” in our “The Five Story Lines of Scripture” contextual framework. In Dr. David Allen’s Bermuda Triangle model, the (often unresolved) shame-related issues of abandonment, humiliation and rejection are identified. At every seminar break, guess what most people want more information on – the “Bermuda Triangle of the Soul.” Why? Because the reality of unresolved shame issues (abandonment, humiliation and rejection) touches something deep in the souls of Westerners.

**Back to Prison with H/S** In God’s time frame, after having had breakfast with Werner, I taught the next two nights in prisons. Because of our H/S discussions, I decided to focus on three encounters with Jesus in Luke 5 – Simon and Jesus, the touching of the leper, and the calling of Levi. Middle Eastern cultural/religious shame issues are deeply woven into the fabric of these passages. Based on feedback from the “Brothers in Blue,” I can say that H/S certainly resonates with inmate audiences. They know what it means to live with the shame they have brought upon themselves and their families by the decisions they made. They also deeply identify with and connect with the honoring restoration that Jesus provides as part of His rescue and restoration mission.

**Middle Eastern Shame** There is an aspect of Middle Eastern shame that deepens our appreciation of the Gospel and the radical message of Jesus. A friend of mine recently pointed out to me that in the world of the Middle East, shame is a “zero-sum system.” That is, when someone rises to plus 2, someone else must be lowered to minus 2, resulting in a net gain that is always zero. Think of honor and shame as a teeter-totter. If one end is to rise, the other end must fall to the same degree. If someone’s honor is to be enhanced, then someone else’s honor must be degraded. For one person to win in the Middle Eastern shame system requires another to lose. The scholars term this dynamic the “Image of Limited Good.” This was the nugget I had never before fully appreciated when contextually restoring Gospel passages. And that nugget made my day!

**Jesus Use of Shame** Think of this teeter-totter shame system in terms of how Jesus provoked the religious leadership of His day. When He called them “a brood of vipers,” He was publically shaming the Jerusalem religious aristocracy. In a zero-sum shame system, the only way the aristocracy could restore their honor would be to bring shame upon Jesus; e.g., death on a shameful Roman Cross. For them to restore their honor, He must be taken down.

Think in terms of how Jesus redefined the purity/shame system of His day when He touched the leper in Luke 5. Heretofore, whenever a clean person touched an unclean person, the clean person became unclean and the unclean person remained unclean. With Jesus, when the Divine Clean One touches an unclean person, the unclean person becomes clean and the Divine Clean One stays (holy) clean.

In a similar manner, Jesus’ Kingdom of God approaches shame differently. He has already paid the price at Calvary to wipe away all the guilt AND shame that has ever been, is, and ever will be (Hebrews 1:3). It’s not a zero sum system. He took ALL our shame upon Himself, thus restoring honor to each of His adopted children, and still emerged victorious as the honored Holy One! It’s as if both sides of that zero-sum teeter-totter are now pointing up in a V – as in Victory over guilt and shame. That’s a dimension of the Gospel of Jesus that people in H/S cultures need to hear!

**Want More Insight** If you would like a better taste of this H/S issue, its various nuances and Gospel implications, read Werner’s book (globalgospelbook.org). Also consider checking out the JAN/FEB issue of
**Mission Frontiers** (online at [www.missionfrontiers.org](http://www.missionfrontiers.org)). There you will find missionaries describing the power of incorporating H/S *Gospel* themes along with I/G in honor-shame cultures. You will also get a feel for the paradigm shift going on in the mission world. It will also make you aware of the implications for dialoguing with people in your world whose paradigms have been conditioned by their respective honor-shame, face-saving cultures.

**Seeing More Clearly What’s Always Been There**  If you have ever stained wood, you know that staining brings out more of the wood’s intrinsic grain. The stain doesn’t alter the character or nature of the wood, but it does enhance our ability to discern and appreciate its grain. So it is with issues of honor and shame. It’s the rediscovery of something very old; something intrinsic to the Good News that has always been there. Stay tuned as PBT tries its best to apply contextual stain to biblical passages to more clearly draw out the grain of Truths (including honor-shame issues) that have always been there. Our purpose is to find and illuminate contextual nuggets of timeless Truth that lie just below the surface of our Western way of viewing things as we do our best to work in concert with the Spirit to “set the prisoners free.”

**Ponderings**

- Does understanding the zero-sum, teeter-totter shame system of the Middle East help you appreciate some of the seemingly intractable issues resident in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process?  When the Palestinians were shamed by having their land taken away (their perception), their only recourse in a zero-sum, shame system is to regain their honor by taking Israel down. This is another reason the open-ended, shame transference, win/win message of the *Gospel of Jesus* is the only hope for biblical *Shalom*.
- Does this honor-shame issue deepen your appreciation of Jesus as He interacts with a Samaritan woman in our John 4 series?  Here we have the King of Glory, the Holy One, taking the initiative to interact with a woman who has layers of uncleanness, shame, pain and rebuke from her five-divorce, infertile life and in so doing affords her dignity. She has accumulated so many layers of rejection, humiliation and abandonment that she is now willing to openly live with a man who is not her husband. This woman in Scripture has earned a PhD in shame. And yet the Father’s heart deeply beats for her to be restored and have her sin and shame transferred to His Son.
- This issue puts another question on the contextual horizon: How was honor-shame operating in the Roman Empire and how did that shape Paul’s writings?  That’s what I love about context – always more to dig into!
- Does this H/S omission from (most) Western theology frameworks suggest we Western evangelicals need to be (more) humble when it comes to thinking we have mastered God’s Word?  That we have all the answers?  That our Western (biased) way of viewing the *Gospel* is the best?

**Shalom**  Doug Greenwold  PBT Teaching Fellow  Reflection # 215  © Doug Greenwold 2015

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**Notes and Sources**  I am deeply appreciate to Werner Mischke for taking the time to review this Reflection with me. His observations were most helpful in guiding me to (try to) communicate the essence of a large and complex subject.

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Dr. David Allen, Handout from The Eleuthera Institute, Arlington, Virginia. Dr. Allen, a Christian psychotherapist and author of In Search of the Heart has developed what he calls the “Bermuda Triangle of the Soul.” His clinical experience suggests that the three sides of his Bermuda Triangle - abandonment, rejection, and humiliation - speak to the human condition of every person. The only question is to what degree. Contained within that prison triangle are the issues of guilt and shame in what Dr. Allen calls “The Hurt Trail.”

Ibid

I am indebted to Dr. Michael Crow of Church Resource Ministries (serving in East Asia) for this thought.