

Biblical Reflections on Shame and Honor in Asia

With the rise of the church in the Majority World comes a rise in interest in issues drawn from those cultural contexts. One of the issues in the last few years has been that of honor and shame. While this is not a new issue to Asians, it is one of the most difficult aspects of Asian cultures for Westerners to grasp. It may have been issues like this that poet Rudyard Kipling, who was born in British India, had in mind when he wrote his famous line “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.” Difficult or not, it is part of the core of most, if not all, Asian cultures.

It is also, as my colleague Marlene Yap pointed out to me some time ago, a core value in the background of the Mediterranean cultures in the New Testament era. I then discovered that the Old Testament cultures also had honor and shame as a core value, opening up new vistas of biblical understanding to me. I am not alone in this discovery.

Fortunately, authors like Jackson Wu, *Saving God’s Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation Through Honor and Shame*, Jayson George and Mark Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* and Werner Minschke, *The Global Gospel: Achieving Missional Impact in Our Multicultural World* and others have begun to address this issue that bridges the gap between East and West as well as demonstrating the shame and honor values in the biblical background cultures.

This edition is our small contribution to the discussion. All papers here reflect viewpoints that are deeply biblical and thoroughly Asian. Two of our authors are from the Philippines, one from India, and one from Korea. Three of the papers here were originated from a class taught by Dr. Darin Land at the Asia Graduate School of Theology—Philippines, which is a consortium of several seminaries of which APTS is a part.

In the lead article, Amanda Shao-Tan discusses shame and honor among people of disabilities among her own ethnic group, the Chinese-Filipino community in the Philippines. For Shao-Tan, this is personal as she has battled a congenital disability all her life and used to feel ashamed of her body. After sharing part of her story, she takes us on a study of the book of Hebrews and tells us about how “Hebrews presents

an empathetic and empowering Jesus who is worthy of emulation in his responses to shame.” Amanda has learned well from Jesus and borne her disability with dignity and grace. I have seen her at various functions over the last several years and I have never heard her complain and she always has a kind word and a warm smile. She is one of my many heroes.

In the article that follows Marlene Yap, who is also a Chinese-Filipino, explores the cross and the resurrection through the prism of honor and shame. Rooting the events of the day in the Graeco-Roman culture of the times, she notes that Mediterranean cultures practiced a number of “status degradation rituals,” which included crucifixion. She then goes into detail about how shameful death on a cross was and how Christ willingly endured the shame, which God turned into honor (Phil. 2:6-11). In accepting Christ, we too, must accept the shame that comes from our sin. But in Christ, however, we are now honored, sitting with him in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6-7). Yap demonstrates that not only did Christ die for our sins, he also died for our shame and his death also put to rest the stigma that comes with shame and elevated us to positions of honor in Christ.

Im Seok (David) Kang then follows with an article whose theme is similar to Yap’s. Kang, however, also roots his theme deep in his Korean culture by exploring the meaning of the of the *hyeonchung* ceremony to honor the dead—specifically those who have died in service to others. He then proceeds to connect this to Jesus’ call to “do this in remembrance of me.” (I Cor. 11:23). In doing so, he explains how Jesus redefined his culture’s understanding of shame and honor in light of the values of the Kingdom of God. Finally, he introduces the Korean concept of honor, *bakgolnanmang*, and explains how Koreans could understand Jesus’ concept of honor within their own culture.

In Kang’s second article, he explores the concept of friendship in the book of Job, a concept which, he believes, is central to the book. While shame and honor are not specifically mentioned in the paper, the concepts are implied because he focuses on the idea of loyalty within friendship. This loyalty is an integral part of shame and honor. Job’s friends repeatedly failed the friendship test and shamed Job with their comments. In the final analysis, however, God intervenes and, after confronting Job with his ignorance and hearing his plea for forgiveness, restores Job’s honor in Job 42:7-17. God also restored Job’s friendships with those who had dishonored him.

Finally, Balu Savarikannu, from India, contributes an excellent paper on shame and honor through a threefold reading of Lamentations 1. First, it explores some characteristics of the Mediterranean culture as well as honor-shame references in the Old Testament in general. Second, it gives a close reading of Lamentations 1 through the perspective of

honor-shame. Third, it offers some contextual reflections of the study. This study is significant because there is no complete study on the book of Lamentations through an honor-shame perspective. A close reading of the book of Lamentations reveals cultural norms of honor as well as expressions of honor that counter those common in that culture.

Those of us from the West have much to learn about interpreting Scripture from our Asian colleagues. If my understanding of Kipling is correct, he was at least partly wrong. In Christ, the one who shamed and then honored above all, East and West can meet and understand one another.

As always, your comments and suggestions are welcome. You may contact me through the APTS website, www.pts.edu or through my personal email address, dave.johnson@agmd.org.

Respectfully,

Dave Johnson, DMiss
Managing Editor