

Sharing the Gospel in an Honour and Shame Society II

by Abu Dawood

In *Seedbed XX No. 1*, G.K. did a great job of introducing the honour and shame aspects of Arab culture and shared several passages of the Bible in order to highlight our Western tendency to overlook these concepts. I too remember studying R. Muller's book, *Honour and Shame: Unlocking the Door*¹ and thinking, 'Is Muller correct in this analysis of the Bible?' Even this reaction exemplifies how Greek and Western critical thought affects me, evaluating the concept of shame and honour on the basis of whether it is right or wrong, correct or incorrect. I began to realize how little I understood honour, shame and the related gospel message.

Honour and Shame by D. McIlroy² does well in explaining the community aspects of honour and shame. Specifically, honour and shame always occur in the context of relationship and never operate on isolated individuals. For example, consider the employees of a company. If the manager takes one employee aside and doubles his salary but also stipulates that he not tell any of his fellow employees, then the social relations among employees will remain the same, albeit one employee will have a big secret! However, if the manager informs the employee that he is being promoted to assistant manager, but with the same salary, the other employees will immediately begin to treat him differently. The employee will have been honoured by the manager's public promotion. Thus, honour is the public esteeming of a person, or in a general relational setting, the esteeming of a person, family, clan or tribe among a greater community. Honour also has the effect of strengthening or reinforcing a relational bond. In the second company example, the employee's promotion to assistant manager built up his relationship to the manager. This also readily explains the number of *empty* comments given by our Arab friends, such as, 'My, how well you speak Arabic!' which is far from the exact truth. Our friends are trying to build relationship with us and honour us even though the exact details of their honouring comments might be exaggerated.

Conversely, shame, though not a precise antonym of honour, also occurs in the context of relationship. Specifically, shame is placed upon a person/family/clan by others, usually for the purpose of community discipline, with the result of disparagement and possible distancing of the relationship. Shame is linked with uncleanness or any other actions frowned upon by the greater community. In other words, shame is the instrument used to keep individuals in line with community values. Shame is the pressure that causes American teenagers to strive towards a certain clothing style set by their friends. Arabs feel similar family and societal pressure even when making what the West would consider individual decisions. For example, a fellow university instructor once caught an intelligent Arab student cheating on an exam. When confronted, the student claimed that the incident wasn't his fault but the instructor's! The student went on to explain that he knew the course material, but his cousin did not and had asked for his help during the exam. As

a family member, it would be a great shame to refuse his cousin and so he blamed the instructor for seating them too close together while taking the exam.

As far as the gospel message is concerned, honour and shame speak to the community aspects of faith. In his book, Muller highlights how the fall of man resulted in guilt, fear and *shame* before God and led to the expulsion of man from Eden. In the garden, Adam could hear God walking³ and experienced a close relationship to God. God honoured Adam not only by this special relationship, but also charged him to name the animals and take dominion over the earth. It is strange that in Islam God honours Adam by commanding the angels to worship him, but the ultimate honour of a close relationship to God is absent.

In order to help explain the good news of Jesus' work on earth, some have begun utilizing cultural norms of the Arabian Bedu. For example, in the days before prisons an individual responsible for a great shame was sent out of the tribe to fend for himself in the desert. The tribe provided safety and security from enemies and so in order to survive, the expelled member would sell himself into slavery to another tribe. Similarly, Adam and his offspring are slaves to the world outside and expelled from the intimate presence of God. This relational concept of shame lends insight to David writing, 'In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame'⁴ and to Jesus stating, 'For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'⁵

Most of my Arab friends maintained that there was no way of return for a person once he was expelled from the tribe. However, a few stated that restoration was possible, if someone of good standing in the tribe came out to the expelled member and arranged a method of return. Thus, Jesus, the Word of God, is presented as coming out from God to the world in order to restore the believer's membership in the Kingdom of Heaven. Of course, Jesus' death on the cross also purchased the believer's justification, but the tendency of Western believers is to focus on an individual's salvation from condemnation while minimizing the gospel message of a restored relationship with God. Consider Jesus' commissioning of Paul in Acts 26:18, 'I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a *place among those* who are sanctified by faith in me.' In this verse, Jesus describes salvation as a change in understanding (*open their eyes*), allegiance (*power of Satan to God*), judgment (*receive forgiveness of sins*) and community (*a place among the righteous*).

In the West, *The Four Spiritual Laws* and other tracts⁶ succinctly present the guilt and innocence aspects of the gospel. G. R. Francis presented in his paper, 'The Gospel for a Sin/Shame-Based Society', a similar concise gospel presentation highlighting shame and honour concepts for the Taiwanese people.⁷ Considering this presentation, Arab society

and Islam, I propose the following synopsis of the gospel from a shame and honour perspective:

1. God created Adam and his offspring to be in God's Kingdom. Specifically, all of mankind was created to be in God's intimate presence, reflecting his glorious, upright image. In other words, every human, family, clan and society was created to live for God. This not only glorifies God but is also the absolute ultimate good for every human, family, clan and society.

2. All of the sons of Adam – every human, family, clan and society – stand ashamed before God and barred from the presence of God.

3. As a result, the sons of Adam live as slaves in the world, outside God's Kingdom.

4. Jesus, the Word of God, came out from God into the world in order to secure a way back into God's Kingdom for the sons of Adam.

5. Restored members of God's Kingdom have a place among the righteous in the presence of God.

As with any succinct gospel presentation, this summary has gaps and weaknesses. Follow-on discussions need to address ideas such as: *What does it mean to live as a slave in the world and just how did Jesus secure a way back to God's Kingdom?*

Furthermore, there are numerous teachings of Jesus related to shame and honour such as greatness through servant leadership and that it is better to sit in a lowly place and be asked to sit in a place of honour than to sit in a place of honour and be asked to move down for another more honourable than yourself.⁸ These Kingdom principles are often at odds with the norms of Arab and Western society but are important for discipleship and sanctification of believers.

Muller's book helped me understand that the gospel is more than the good news of justification and imputed righteousness before God. These concepts of guilt and innocence strongly resonate within Western nations, but there are biblical elements of the gospel which speak to the Arab societies' deeper concern with shame and honour. In fact, some suggest that it will take every tribe, tongue and nation of mankind to fully understand the gospel – the saving, relationship-restoring work of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Footnotes

1. R. Muller, *Honour and Shame: Unlocking the Door*, 2000. This book can be downloaded from www.rmuller.com.

2. D. McIlroy, *Honour and Shame*, Cambridge Papers, VI4, N2, June 2005.

3. Genesis 3:8 (ESV).

4. Psalm 31:1 (ESV).

5. Mark 8:38 (ESV).

6. J. Piper, *Quest for Joy*, Bethlehem Baptist Church, <http://www.hopeingod.org> .
7. G.R. Francis, 'The Gospel for a Sin/Shame-Based Society', *Taiwan Mission Quarterly*, October 1992.
8. Luke 14:9,10 (ESV).

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