

SHIFTING CULTURAL TRENDS AND THE IMPACT ON COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL

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Culture describes the way that people think and interpret the world around them. As a result, a particular cultural setting will have an influence on the way that people think about the message of the gospel. But as elements of cultures shift over time, responses to the gospel will also shift as well, which has missiological implications for Jewish evangelism, especially when continuing to rely only on methods that served well in the past.

Among the many models used to describe culture, two are especially relevant to this paper. One such model focuses on the way that people respond to transgressions within a particular community. In this approach, three dimensions are expressed using dichotomies of guilt/innocence, -shame/honor and fear/power.¹ The characteristics of cultures can be summarized in this manner:

- Cultures with a guilt/innocence orientation tend to be individualistic in nature, with people generally making decisions on their own. Transgressions lead to feelings of guilt, which can only be rectified through justice or forgiveness.
- Cultures with a shame/honor orientation tend to be group-oriented in nature, with people making decisions collectively. Because relationships are highly valued, transgressions lead to feelings of shame, which can only be rectified by having one's honor restored by the community.
- Cultures with a fear/power orientation tend to be animistic and tribal in nature. Transgressions lead to fear of harm by an offended spirit, which can only be rectified by gaining power over the spiritual realm in supernatural ways.

No individual culture can be described using any of the above orientations exclusively. As missiologist Jayson Georges points out, "Each cultural worldview is a unique blend of guilt, shame, and fear."² The same is true for individuals within a particular culture.³ But general trends are very evident for societies around the world.⁴ In the case of Israel as a country, guilt

¹ The tripartite division of cultures was introduced by anthropologist Ruth Benedict in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1946), and developed missiologically by Eugene Nida in *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 150.

² Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (Time Press, 2016). See also Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

³ An individual profile for the three types of culture can be determined by taking the Culture Test at <http://www.theculturetest.com/>

⁴ Jayson Georges, "Global Map of Culture Types," (2019, June 22), retrieved from https://public.tableau.com/profile/jayson.georges#!/vizhome/GlobalMapofCultureTypesFINAL_1/GlobalMapofCultureTypes?publish=yes

and shame are nearly equal in terms of the orientation of the people, with a modest inclusion of fear. This profile is in contrast to the predominate guilt orientation of Western societies.⁵ It has also been shown that Jews in North America tend to have a stronger shame orientation than the general population.⁶

The majority of people involved in Jewish evangelism would probably agree that there is nothing remarkable about these findings based on their own experiences in ministry. Barriers to acceptance of the gospel are often expressed in terms of a sense of obligation to family and the greater Jewish community, which indicates the significance of shame. Historically, perceived threats to the well-being and very survival of the Jewish people has been used as a defense mechanism against Christianity.⁷

But two questions must be asked at this point. First, is shame becoming more prevalent of an issue worldwide in a general sense and thus having an even stronger influence on Jewish thinking? And second, are the approaches being employed in Jewish evangelism adequately addressing the issue of shame in witnessing?

A Growing Cultural Emphasis on Shame

A second model used to describe cultures differentiates between those that are oral and those that are literate in nature. This distinction is not just a matter of emphasizing speaking or reading, but it influences the way that people think and the things that they value.

- Oral cultures emphasize the spoken word, thus communication tends to occur in group settings, with information discussed and decided upon with other people. Concrete relational thinking predominates, meaning an emphasis on what can be perceived through the senses, including the emotions that arise from what is perceived. Consequently, shame makes up a strong component of oral cultures.
- Literate cultures (also called “written” or “print cultures”) emphasize the written word, and information tends to be received and processed individually. Conceptual, abstract thinking predominates, focusing on the concepts and principles beneath the surface. Thus in literate cultures, a stronger weight is placed on personal guilt and innocence.

While many parts of the world are oral cultures, Western societies have generally been literate in orientation. But with the influence of technology, a shift is taking place today away from a true literate culture to a hybrid of oral and literate. The reason is the way that technology diminishes literacy, as evidenced by the recent demise of newspapers and magazines, the decline in the total number of the books read annually for the past decade,⁸ and the decrease in the

⁵ Ibid. The Israeli emphasis on shame is twice as great as the general population of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Central Europe and Australia.

⁶ See Andrew Barron and Bev Jamison, “A Profile of North American Messianic Jews,” *Mishkan* 73 (Jerusalem: Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies, 2015), 65. While not an assessment of guilt vs. shame per se, the authors showed in their discussion on pressures related to the decision-making experience that, “family rejection was the most often-cited item, with related items of community rejection, cultural pressures, and disloyalty.” They also showed that “conviction of sin ranked high.”

⁷ For a discussion on the origin of guilt and shame orientations within Judaism, see Alan Silver, *Jews, Myth and History: A Critical Exploration of Contemporary Jewish Belief*, (Leicester: Troubador Publishing Ltd, 2008), 160-161.

⁸ Pew Research Center, “Who hasn’t read a book in the past 12 months,” (March 22, 2018); https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/23/who-doesnt-read-books-in-america/ft_18-03-22_nonbookreaders_whohasnt/. The findings show a reduction in all formats, including electronic books.

percentage of American high school graduates who are prepared for college level English courses.⁹ In-depth arguments that previously have been made possible in writing, are now giving way to the quick, elementary emotion-oriented exchanges that characterize social media. This practice is comparable to the casual conversations that are common in oral societies where people meet briefly in public places.

But the trend is not merely a matter of format. It brings about changes to the way that people think, so that the full extent of oral culture attributes are being interjected into this hybrid state. Most notably, this includes a greater emphasis on collective decision-making, concrete relational thinking, and a shame/honor orientation. The results are evident today, with a great increase on shaming trends like the Me Too movement and victims of clergy sexual abuse, attempts to bring down public figures through social and mass media, and in some dysfunctional ways where body shaming and other forms of public humiliation are linked to vastly increased rates of suicide among teenagers and young adults.¹⁰ At the same time, the willingness to practice forgiveness and a path to social redemption is less evident, which is a core element of the guilt/innocence dimension.¹¹

Accordingly, we are witnessing a general culture shift in the direction of collective shame over personal guilt in all nations where social media plays a predominate role. This phenomenon is consistent with the trend among younger generations in which shame is becoming continually more dominant over time.¹² While this transformation may not flatten the characteristics of all cultures across the globe, the effect is becoming sufficiently noteworthy that it must be considered missiologically. It seems reasonable to conclude that in the case of Jewish people, the already significant emphasis on shame will be enhanced due to the influence of these broader cultural trends. For that reason, we would be wise to assess how well our witnessing approaches are addressing the issue of shame.

Guilt, Shame and Fear as Elements of the Complete Gospel Message

The need to address all three cultural dimensions is foreshadowed in the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Initially they were fully innocent (Gen 2:16-17), unashamed (2:25), and granted much power (1:26-28). But after sin was introduced into creation, they experienced guilt—their eyes were opened (3:7), shame—they covered themselves with fig leaves (3:7), and fear—they hid from God (3:8).

As descendants of Adam and Eve, all humanity shares in corruptions of all three dimensions. Correspondingly, God’s manner of redemption of humanity through the death of Jesus brings solutions to the problem of sin in all three dimensions. By virtue of His death, the gospel solves the problem of guilt due to sin because Jesus took our guilt upon Himself (Rom 5:8) and thus we are reckoned as innocent (Rom 5:9; 8:1). The gospel solves the problem of shame due to sin because Jesus was shamed on our behalf (Isa 53:2-3; Heb 12:2), thus removing our shame and restoring our honor before God (Rom 10:11; 1 Pet 1:7). And the gospel solves the problem of fear by defeating death and every power that exists (1 Cor 15:55-57; Eph 1:19-22)

⁹ Sarah Butrymowicz, “Most Colleges Enroll Many Students who aren’t Prepared for Higher Education,” *The Hechinger Report* (January 30, 2017).

¹⁰ Oren Miron, “Suicide Rates Among Adolescents and Young Adults in the United States, 2000-2017,” *JAMA*, 2019; 321(23):2362-2364.

¹¹ For an assessment of current trends regarding shaming and the de-emphasis on forgiveness, see Jon Ronson, *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015).

¹² “The Rise of Shame in America,” HonorShame (February 8, 2017), <http://honorshame.com/rise-shame-america/>, accessed August 2, 2019.

and granting believers His power (Acts 1:8; Eph 3:20).

In that light, we can see that the gospel—the culmination of God’s redemptive plan—addresses all three dimensions completely and flawlessly, meaning that it speaks to every culture that exists in our world. One way of expressing the complete gospel is shown in the following table:

	Guilt/Innocence	Shame/Honor	Fear/Power
The desire of God	God created humanity in a state of innocence, and He desires that we live holy and righteous lives that continue in an everlasting manner with Him.	God created humanity in a state of honor and He desires to have a relationship with us like a family.	God created humanity in a state of power in terms of dominion over His creation and without fear of harm.
The problem of humanity	All people are sinful and thus guilty by missing the mark of God’s standard of righteousness, thus preventing our ability to be in the presence of a holy God in the World to Come.	Because of our transgressions, all people dishonor God and bring shame upon themselves.	All people lack the power to solve their spiritual problem on their own, and thus we remain excluded from God eternally.
God’s solution through Jesus	Jesus came as God in the flesh and lived a perfect life, thus making Him a perfect sacrifice “once for all” by dying and taking on our punishment for sin.	Jesus took upon Himself our shame and, as our advocate, He has granted us the honor of being members of the family of God.	The death of Jesus was a victory over death and the power of sin, and He grants us power over the spiritual realm, while also taking away our fear from harm in an eternal sense.
The necessary response of people	All people must repent of their sins and seek forgiveness from God on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus in order to receive the gift of everlasting life.	All people must affirm their loyalty to God and accept His way redemption as the only way of acceptance in the community of the people of God.	All people must believe in Jesus in order to receive power as the children of God and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

In spite of the Bible’s completeness of the message, an imbalanced approach to communicating the gospel is a constant potential. Our tendency is to emphasize those aspects of the gospel that are most familiar to us and resonate with our own primary cultural dimension. For those raised in Western societies, especially in church settings and in formal seminary training,

that emphasis tends to be on guilt/innocence. But with approximately seventy-five percent of the world's population having a predominately shame/honor orientation,¹³ and with many Jewish people living in societies with an increasing emphasis on shame, it is imperative that we evaluate the content of our message regarding its completeness, and that we ensure that we are addressing the essential elements of shame/honor.

Practical Guidelines for Witnessing in a Shame/Honor Context

Use relevant biblical narratives and witnessing talking points

There are many passages in Scripture that can be used to show how God's redemptive plan for humanity, and the Jewish people in particular, speaks to the issue of shame.

- The Exodus and God's later acts of the restoration of Israel demonstrate God's willingness to remove shame and grant honor.

God is committed to removing shame and granting honor. The Exodus account reveals how God delivered the Jewish people from the shame of slavery in Egypt (Ex 3:7-8). Then God brought honor to the nation of Israel by choosing them "to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Deut 7:6) and giving them the privilege of receiving the Torah.

Subsequently, they dishonored God by forsaking His commandments and they became disloyal by embracing other gods, which resulted in national shame when they were sent back into bondage. But God restored their honor by bringing them back to their land again.¹⁴ Scripture holds the promise of a final restoration that removes the shame of dispersion and coincides with a great spiritual revival of the Jewish people (Joel 3:20-21, Amos 9:15).

- The prophet Hosea confirms that when we reject God's message in Scripture and act in a sinful manner, it brings both shame and guilt upon us (Hos 4:6-9).
- The fifth commandment calls upon people to "honor your father and your mother" (Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16), but the story of Eli in 1 Samuel 2 shows that it is wrong to honor family over God (cf. Mal 1:6-7).
- The story in 2 Samuel 12 regarding David's sin involving Bathsheba and Uriah teaches:
 1. While we receive forgiveness when we confess our sin, the effects of shame can linger in our relationships.
 2. Our shameful actions don't just impact other people, but they bring shame on God (cf. Ps 25:11). Here, the enemies of the Lord are given an excuse to speak evil against Him (v. 14), much in the same way that the Holocaust and acts of evil today lead some people to claim that God does not exist.
- The story of Paul reveals a restored life after an act that caused much shame. Acts 7-8 tells about his role in the stoning to death of Stephen for his belief in Jesus. Later, Jesus

¹³ Walter Simon, "Honor-Shame Cultural Theory: Antecedents and Origins," *Global Missiology*, Vol 1, No 16 (2018), 1.

¹⁴ For a detailed assessment of shame and honor as a factor in the captivity-restoration theme of the writings of the major Prophets, see Johanna Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible: The Prophetic Contribution*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

appeared to him and showed mercy on him. Paul's life was so changed that he went from hunting down believers in Jesus to spending every day of the rest of his life telling others about Him. To a great extent, his zeal arose from his understanding that God had restored him from the shame for what he had done (2 Cor 11:21).

- The Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 shows that, in spite of our shameful actions, our Heavenly Father waits for us to return to Him for restoration.
- Isaiah 45:17 foretells that Israel will be saved with an everlasting salvation that will remove our shame. 2 Peter 2:6 shows how Jesus, whose Hebrew name Yeshua means "salvation," removes our shame when we believe in Him.
- The book of Romans is exceptional in the way that it deals with shame in addition to guilt. Key verses include 1:16; 1:21-23; 2:9-10, 23-24; 3:23; 4:20-21; 5:2-5; 6:21; 8:18, 30; 9:33; 10:9-11; 10:11; 13:7; 14:6; 15:8-9.
- God places a high value on caring for those who are dishonored socially: "He raises the poor from the dust, He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with nobles, and inherit a seat of honor" (1 Sam 2:8). Jesus stood out in the way that He ministered to the outcasts of society—the poor, women, the ritually unclean (including the most dishonored person of all, a leper), an oppressor (a Roman centurion and his servant), and an ethnically ostracized person (a Samaritan). In so doing, it demonstrated His genuine love for people who faced shame in the community.

Focus on biblical terms that are associated with shame and honor

- Alienation (Eph 4:17-18; Col 1:21-22)
- Disgrace (Prov 14:34; Dan 12:2)
- Defilement vs. purity (Jer 2:7; Ezek 36:17; Mat 15:10-20; Phil 4:8; Tit 1:15; Jas 1:27)
- The worthiness of humanity (Ps 139:13-15; Jer 29:11; Lk 12:6-7; Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; Heb 2:6)
- The humiliation of Jesus on our behalf and His exultation (Isa 53:7-8; Acts 8:33; Phi 2:5-11)
- Honor (Jn 12:26; Rom 12:10; Phi 2:3; 1 Pet 2:17)
- Restoration (Ps 23:3; 113:7; Jer 30:17; Gal 6:1; 1 Pet 5:10)
- Jesus as our mediator and advocate (Jn 14:6; 1 Tim 2:5; Heb 8:6; 9:15; 1 Jn 2:1-2)
- The family of God (Jn 1:12; 1 Cor 12:26; Eph 2:19-22; 6:1-2)
- Community and citizenship (Acts 2:42-47; Eph 2:19; Phi 3:20; Heb 13:14; 1 Pet 2:10)
- Acceptance (1 Sam 16:7; Lk 15:1-7; Jn 6:37; Rom 2:11; 15:7; Jas 2:1-4)
- Adoption (Rom 8:14-18; Gal 4:4-5; Eph 1:5)
- Inheritance (Acts 20:32; Eph 1:11-14; 1 Pet 1:4)
- Inclusiveness/unity (Ps 133:1; Rom 12:16; Col 3:13-14; 1 Pet 3:8)
- Hospitality (Isa 58:7; Lk 14:12-14; Rom 12:13-20; 1 Pet 4:8-9)

Acknowledge the importance of loyalty within the Jewish community

According to Jewish tradition, it is customary to promote a sense of obligation to all of the Jewish people, not just those who are currently alive, but to those who have died. For example, during the Passover seder, Exodus 13:8 is quoted: "You shall tell your son on that day, saying, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.'" Those words have been repeated every year at Passover for over 3,000 years, establishing a connection down through the generations, and establishing a sense of obligation to the community, just as if

today's generation physically left the slavery of Egypt.

We see that reflected further in a rabbinical teaching that affirms that when the Israelites stood as a nation and were charged to accept the Mosaic covenant right “the souls [of future generations] were present, even though they had no bodies as yet.”¹⁵ So again, a sense of obligation exists that spans across the generations.

Distinguish between collective guilt and collective shame

The issue of collective guilt is a well-debated topic. It has been used by some people with anti-Semitic leanings to hold Jews guilty in every generation for the death of Messiah (using passages like Mat 27:25 erroneously—“His blood shall be on us and on our children”). Many German Christians have made efforts to acknowledge collective guilt over the Holocaust. Similar discussions are taking place in America over slavery.

But often these arguments confuse guilt with shame. Since guilt and innocence are paired as a personal matter, the Bible indicates in a number of passages that guilt is ascribed only to those who actually commit sins (Deut 24:16; Jer 31:30; Ezek 18:20; 2 Cor 5:10). Shame, on the other hand, is a collective matter, and it can be manifested relationally. Thus the sins of individuals can cause shame to come upon a community or an entire nation. Clearly a cloud of shame remains in Germany and America for events in the past that have lingering effects today. The same can be said about the shame that is associated with the Inquisition for Roman Catholics and the vitriol of the final writings of Martin Luther for Protestants.¹⁶ Catholics and Protestants may not even be aware that these regrettable incidents have brought on-going shame upon Christianity. But it has an inescapable impact on the receptivity of Jews to the Christian message.

As messengers of the gospel, we need to incorporate discernment and critical thinking regarding our interconnectedness with other Christians of the past and the present. As such, it calls for us to be willing to acknowledge the shame that we bear, if not the guilt that rests solely with those who persecuted Jews in the name of Christ.

Emphasize community and relationships

In cultures with a guilt/innocence orientation, outreach ministry tends to center around an evangelistic message that is directed toward individuals who then are then brought into the believing community. But in shame/honor cultures it is important for people to understand first who the group is that they are being invited to join, even participating in that setting before making a decision to respond spiritually to the individual matter of guilt.

Sharing meals with others is a key to building relationships. Inviting someone to eat together can be received as being an act that honors them. Our great example is Jesus who ate with those who were considered to be the shamed outcasts of society (Mat 9:10-11).

When presenting the gospel, we should be prepared to discuss pre-emptively the possibility of being alienated from family and friends. A candid discussion, combined with the assurance of inclusion in the community of other believers, will enhance the likelihood of people taking ownership of their decisions and being prepared to face what may come.

¹⁵ *Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim 3* on Deuteronomy 29:15. See also the Babylonian Talmud, *Shevuot 39a*.

¹⁶ Luther's final work, published in 1543, is entitled, *On the Jews and their Lies*. It was a polemic style of writing that employed hostile language toward Jewish people. Four centuries later the Nazis promoted this book by displaying it at their pre-war Nuremberg rallies and using it to validate the boycotts against Jews in 1933 and the Nuremberg Laws, which deprived Jews of civil rights in 1935.

Find ways to engage social issues

Jewish people are often actively involved in efforts related to social justice and advocacy. But when believers do not share that same concern, it can have the unintended effect of blocking our audience from considering the proclamation of the gospel. This is not a call for making social justice the central practice of our ministry. But we need to recognize that it holds a high value in a shame/honor culture, so it is important to demonstrate a shared concern, either in actual participation or in the content of our witness.

Use the biblical concept of the remnant to counter excuses related to shame

In shame-oriented cultures, acting in ways that are contrary to the will of the majority are typically the catalyst for the manifestation of shame. But Scripture is clear in showing that righteousness, from God's perspective, is never a matter of the majority. For example, in the days of Elijah, a very small percentage of Jewish people remained faithful to the Lord. They are called the remnant (1 Ki 19:18). Even more profoundly, only two men who left Egypt in the Exodus—Joshua and Caleb—were faithful to the Lord and were given the privilege of entering the Promised Land, while the vast majority of the people made excuses and perished in the wilderness. Paul refers to believers in Jesus as being the remnant in his day (Rom 11:4-5), and the same has been true in every generation since then. These examples show that Jews have historically shown the courage to believe the biblical message and to act upon it, in spite of what the majority might say.

Never be ashamed of the Gospel

Some Christians and Christian ministries will not witness to Jewish people out of shame for the historical persecution of Jews that has been perpetrated in the name of Christ. But in reality it becomes a shame of the gospel itself because there is a desire to excuse and suppress it. This unwillingness is exacerbated by the fear of being shamed for appearing to be judgmental and intolerant. So it becomes easy to remain silent and to settle for co-existence.

But the Apostle Paul based his personal dedication to witnessing on the truth that shame is removed from people when they believe in Jesus (Rom 10:11). Thus he could say with confidence:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16).

For Paul, it was not shameful to tell Jews and Gentiles alike about Jesus because he was doing the most honorable thing of all by communicating the only way for them to have their shame removed as well.

Conclusion

The Bible is fully able to speak to the increasingly high value on shame and honor among the people we meet. This is not to say that the issue of personal guilt is no longer relevant. With the weights of guilt and shame both trending high in the Jewish community, there is a need for balance in our evangelistic methods and writings. It begins with an assessment of the way that we do ministry. And that may be critical for those veterans of Jewish ministry who rely on a “tried and true” approach to communicating the Gospel that does not take into account changes in the thinking of their audience.

This present work is an exhortation to communicate the complete gospel to the Jewish people that God brings into our lives, and especially not to neglect the essential elements of shame and honor.