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# The Gospel for the Whole Person: Attending to Sin and Grace Throughout the Human Experience

By Charles Ridley



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Preaching is the means by which the Holy Spirit speaks to God's people through the preacher who stands in the stead of Jesus, the Lord of the Church. Through a sermon that is faithful to God's revealed will and written Word, the Spirit convicts the world concerning sin and proclaims the gospel of forgiveness, life, and

salvation which is found in Christ alone. The basic task placed before us in preaching is not only to be faithful to scripture, but also to make a coherent and compelling presentation of the gospel. Most of those reading this will be familiar with the basic Law/Gospel dynamic of preaching and the move we typically make in applying it: you have broken the law and are therefore guilty, but Jesus took your place in bearing the punishment for your transgression, so you are forgiven and declared innocent before God. But is this the only faithful, coherent, and compelling way to apply law and gospel in preaching? Or is there more going on in the lives of hearers that could be addressed by the gospel? Is this account as coherent and compelling as it could be to those who experience more than just feelings of guilt and innocence in their lives? What does the gospel have to say to our other experiences, such as fear and shame?

Drawing on the work of Eugene Nida, Jayson Georges identifies three different types of cultures in our world, categorized based on how each type handles “transgressions of religiously sanctioned codes.”<sup>1</sup> The types are named according to their responses to sin and the solution to those responses. Our familiar, individualistic, Western culture-type responds to breaking the law with guilt, as noted above. This guilt is primarily experienced internally or as a status before an institution, not so much a relational status with the community. The punishment that coincides with such guilt is imposed individually. The solution to this guilt is presented in judicial terms, using words like “pardon,” “substitution,” and “justification”—terms that identify a restoration (or declaration) of innocence. So, the basic gospel narrative depicted above clearly aligns well with this cultural “framework.” But the other two types of culture do not think and speak primarily in these terms. Many



*“Shame” by Joe Gatling CC BY 2.0.*

cultures in the world are more collectivistic than our individualistic Western culture; their morals are primarily determined communally, and they respond to transgressions against those moral standards primarily with shame rather than guilt. This shame is more about identity than action (who I am rather than what I do); it separates an individual from their community, and it is solved by honor that comes through reconciliation and restoration of the broken relationship. Then there are still other types of cultures which tend to focus more on the spiritual world and experience life more in terms of battle with those spiritual forces. This type of culture primarily experiences fear in the face of the unknown, especially of forces that would harm them for living in “disharmony with the spiritual”<sup>2</sup> and seeks power to contend with the unseen forces of the world. These three types of culture are conveniently referred to as guilt-innocence, shame-honor, and fear-power.

But it is critical to recognize that each of these cultural frameworks expresses an aspect of the total human experience. As such, there are components of each paradigm in every specific human culture. That is, every culture on earth manifests its own blend of these three paradigms.<sup>3</sup> We should not treat any culture or any person as a pure expression of only one of these paradigms. Instead, these categories serve to help us see, understand, and respond to different aspects of the total human experience in a faithful and effective way. It may be helpful to think of these cultural types as different melodic lines that come together to form a harmony. The gospel can “sing” according to any one of the types, but when they are all combined over the course of a preacher’s career, his hearers get the full experience of the glorious gospel of Christ. The importance for all preachers of the gospel to recognize and engage with these different cultural frameworks thus becomes clear. By addressing these different paradigms, preachers are expressing a fuller picture of reality, from the human experience of sin and their attempts to deal with it on their own to the gospel of God’s grace in Christ to provide the real solution to sin and its consequences. Preachers thereby provide a more coherent and compelling account of the gospel to all people, addressing their actions and their identity.

Note that these are not purely sociological concepts but reflect biblical ideas. As Georges notes, “Adam and Eve’s original sin introduced guilt, shame, and fear to the world. But God restores innocence, honor, and power to those who trust Him through the atoning life and death of Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Major themes in scripture, which we regularly use in preaching, express this diversity. Readers will undoubtedly be most familiar with the judicial language of scripture, especially prevalent in the Pauline epistles, which often expresses the guilt-innocence paradigm. But consider the prevalent themes of feast and ritual purity which are woven throughout the Old and New Testaments. These themes express hospitality, inclusion, and acceptability, experiences that are more closely aligned with the shame-honor paradigm than with guilt-innocence. One’s purity and acceptability may be linked with their guilt or innocence regarding keeping of the law, but one’s purity or defilement impacts more than just oneself. It is a communal status. It may accompany guilt, but it does not have to, and it stands as its own status. Likewise, the fear-power paradigm can be seen in themes such as warfare and captivity. Israel battles its enemies and ends up in bondage. While their defeat may be a result of their guilt from not keeping God’s law, they nonetheless experience these aspects of life which are not themselves an expression of innocence or guilt, since being in a

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battle or in captivity is not always directly related to the judicial process of determining one's guilty status. One may be attacked or imprisoned despite being innocent of having broken any laws. Furthermore, as we see with Israel, forgiveness addresses their guilt, but it does not directly set them free from captivity. Israel needs the power of God to rescue them from bondage. These different cultural frameworks simply focus on individual facets of the whole gospel of Christ. The gospel can, then, be preached faithfully in terms of shame and honor or fear and power, in addition to guilt and innocence.

We are familiar with guilt-innocence culture and often speak exclusively in the language of that framework because that is how we have been taught to read scripture and how to preach. But, aligning with the language of scripture, our language still often wanders into expressing our sin problems in terms that would more appropriately be categorized under other frameworks. These expressions are not coherently and compellingly addressed through a proclamation of innocence, but ought to be addressed with their proper solution. One familiar example, though unlikely to have been taught to most readers in terms of these paradigms, is the explanation to the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer: "we ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us [from] [...] *great shame* and vice, and that [...] we may finally *prevail and gain the victory*."<sup>5</sup> Here, Luther himself expresses the gospel in terms of shame-honor and fear-power. Luther did not have to do some special study to determine categories of cultural thinking. He simply expressed the range of human experience and how God addresses the various results of sin. Thus, gospel proclamation limited to the guilt-innocence paradigm may leave people feeling that God has not addressed all their needs and they may wander into idolatry seeking solutions to the problems caused by their sin which are not experienced as guilt, but rather as shame or fear.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, some recognize that Americans experience more elements of the shame-honor paradigm than is typically realized or acknowledged.<sup>7</sup> Georges' work is again helpful here. The source of these cultural frameworks is seen in how each type of culture meets the basic needs of its members. In a chart comparing how the three frameworks meet "human needs," a task which reflects how "cultures embody their subsurface values," Georges shows us that in an honor-shame culture sickness is considered to be best treated by "a traditional natural remedy" rather than "a doctor's prescription," a person's misdeeds affect their "public reputation" rather than their "internal conscience," people desire "status and face" over equality and fairness, and people tend to feel "inferior" after misdeeds rather than "remorseful."<sup>8</sup> Consider the push for "organic" foods and "natural" remedies, the ubiquity of social media, and a general sense that we have to do enough to be enough. All of these express aspects of a culture that deals in honor and shame. For instance, a mom of two toddlers may choose to buy "organic" produce because the other moms in the neighborhood do this (communal expectation), and she would experience some degree of shame if she did not follow suit—she would be made to feel inadequate as a mother. She is not guilty before an institution but shamed by a community. Likewise, an ill-advised post on social media may seek to obtain "face" or status with a community (i.e., "friends" or "followers"), but can just as easily attract degrading shame in the form of mockery and cyber-bullying. This is not inherently a legal issue, but a communal issue related to reputation and identity. Of course, there can be aspects of guilt and innocence in the manifestations of these phenomena, such

as legal ramifications of cyber-bullying and any physical harm that may result, or the mother trying to avoid feelings of guilt for transgressing God's command to care for creation. But these aspects of guilt can coexist with the aspects of shame.

I hope the importance of attending to cultural frameworks other than guilt-innocence is now evident. But let me be clear that I am not suggesting we abandon the guilt-innocence framework. I am arguing for a fuller, more robust presentation of the gospel, not a mere chasing after the winds of change. I am arguing that we express the full harmony of the gospel in our preaching. Guilt-innocence is expressed in scripture and must be proclaimed when it is encountered in the text and, at the same time, shame-honor and fear-power are also expressed in scripture and must be proclaimed when *they* are encountered in the text. Our hearers experience sin and its results in a variety of ways, not just as guilt. So, through awareness of these different paradigms of sin and grace and intentional engagement with them in our preaching, we are better able to proclaim the full gospel to all people to address their whole lives. To try to make one framework fit into another—to attempt to turn shame or fear into guilt—not only does a disservice to the text, but also does disservice to (dare I say dishonors?) our hearers. It not only does not address the problems they are experiencing, but it heaps another burden on top of the one already being experienced. In other words, if we ignore these biblical and cultural distinctions and try to preach the gospel as pardon for transgression when the text conveys honor to resolve shame, our proclamation will not be as strongly coherent and persuasive that it would be if we were to recognize and proclaim the gospel through the lens of honor. The point is that we are called to proclaim God's truth in its fullness, and as we do so faithfully, we anticipate that God's Word will reach more people in a more complete way.

Seeing the need to expand our range of proclamation to be faithful to scripture and to connect with people who experience sin as shame and fear as well as guilt, how do we address these different frameworks in our preaching? What does this look like? An easy first step might be to simply read Georges' book, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures*, as a primer to enhance awareness of the subject. It is short and straightforward, yet full of helpful information that might easily be overlooked otherwise. Other books on the subject are available and provide more depth that could help us in evaluating our own reading of scripture and our application of it to preaching.<sup>9</sup>

As we become more familiar with these frameworks and their expressions in scripture and in the lives of those around us (including ourselves), we can begin to intentionally incorporate the relevant language in our sermons. Sin and grace can be expressed not only in terms of guilt and innocence, but also in terms of alienation and restoration, of bondage and power. But this is not a case of simply translating one framework into another. It is not as if guilt-innocence is the "right" framework and we are merely accommodating other frameworks up to a certain point. No, this is a recognition of the variety of human experiences of sin and grace. For instance, addiction is a consequence of our sinful condition, but on its face, addiction to tobacco does not make one guilty of breaking some law,<sup>10</sup> but rather binds the one addicted and requires power, not pardon, to overcome it. Similarly, feeling like an outsider among one's classmates or coworkers is not a matter of guilt, but of shame, which is not rectified by an acquittal, but with reconciliation

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and inclusion. Our Lord is superabundant in his mercy and grace and has addressed every problem our sin causes. He pardons our guilt, restores our dignity, reconciles us to the Father, and he gives us power to withstand the assaults of the devil along with authority to forgive and retain sins. Once we are aware of these different paradigms and start to see them in scripture, I think it will become clear that addressing these facets of the gospel is not an optional “upgrade” to our preaching and teaching, but it is necessary to be faithful to the biblical witness.

Such expansion of our preaching could manifest itself in the following ways. Our understanding and expression of the shame-honor dominant culture of ancient Israel and the surrounding nations is enhanced, and our hearers may be able to better relate to and appreciate the accounts of this in scripture. Themes such as uncleanness and adoption become more coherent and compelling within a paradigm that is communal rather than individualistic, since they are relational in nature. Preaching can highlight the dignity that is conveyed through the act of adoption, which not only proclaims gospel to those who struggle with their identity and worth but can also elevate the importance of human adoption that expresses God’s love to those who have experienced the shame of losing their family. Our adoption into God’s family does not address any guilt we may have but brings honor to resolve our shame. Our preaching ought to reflect this. Vocation also becomes critical since social roles are central to the dynamics of honor and shame. The fourth commandment is the prime example, emphasizing the need to honor those in authority. Attending to the dynamics of honor and shame can help expand preaching on this aspect of the Christian life, beyond outward obedience. For instance, a preacher may be able to admonish adults to care

for their aging parents in a more compelling way by expressing it in terms of shame-honor rather than in terms of avoiding guilt of breaking a law. It is easy to write a check, send aging parents into a nursing home, and consider one’s duty done. But does this bring honor to parents, or shame? Christ has not just paid our debt for sin and left us as free individuals but has incorporated us into his body.



*Exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, woodcut for “Die Bibel in Bildern,” 1860. Public domain.*

Likewise, bringing in a greater expression and understanding of the fear-power framework can help inculcate a deeper sense of the reality of spiritual warfare in the life of

Christians. Consider the use of the word “Lord.” This fits within the fear-power paradigm, yet we tend to throw it around as nothing more than an honorary title. Christ provides pardon as mediator, but as Lord, he brings protection and authority. The working of Satan in this world is no mere analogy or allegory but is taken seriously in the fear-power paradigm and preaching that intentionally attends to this reality drives us back to the one who can rescue us, to Christ who has already triumphed over him. Proclaiming Christ as Lord portrays his power and assuages fear more so than guilt. The full harmony of the gospel can be heard as we intentionally incorporate the other melodies it plays.

I want to emphasize that this is no simple task. The gospel cannot be picked apart, nor are there different “gospels.” The different aspects get intertwined, as I have already noted. However, I advocate a greater understanding and application of these different paradigms simply because I recognize the value of pursuing the expansion of our preaching to intentionally address these different expressions of sin and grace. Having tried this a couple of times, my humble perspective is that this is no easy task. Falling back into familiar ways is easy and it takes time and effort to reorient our thoughts and speech. Misaligning the aspect of gospel proclamation with the aspect of law in our sermons is easy to do. But who said preaching was supposed to be easy? If nothing else, in addition to being faithful to the texts we are preaching, applying ourselves as preachers to this “3D Gospel” might exemplify and embody for our hearers the fullness of Christ’s saving work for us.

## Endnotes

1 Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures*, (Timē Press, 2016), 10.

2 Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 26.

3 Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 16.

4 Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 49.

5 Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 358. Emphasis mine.

6 Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 9-10. Georges tells the story of a Central Asian woman who came to faith through the proclamation of the gospel in guilt-innocence terms, but subsequently faced problems in life that reflected the other two paradigms. The contention is that the guilt-innocence paradigm could not coherently and compellingly address these problems for the woman, and she was pushed by others into unjust and idolatrous actions to deal with those problems. One might argue that she is nonetheless accountable for her actions and therefore guilty, but this misses the point that the woman has not been taught to call upon the Lord (Rom. 10:14) in situations in which she is not deemed guilty. It is from the mishandling of the experiences of shame and fear, resulting from a lack of teaching, that she becomes guilty.

7 Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 22, 118-20. Cf. Georges, *3D Gospel*, 15. While working for a different purpose, Ryan P. Brown also works off the premise that America has deep roots in the shame-honor paradigm, *Honor Bound: How a Cultural Ideal Has Shaped the American Psyche*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8 Georges, *The 3D Gospel*, 30-1.

9 See E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2012); Juliet November, *Honor/Shame Cultures: A Beginner's Guide to Cross-Cultural Missions* (self-pub., 2017); Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016).

10 One might argue that such an addiction breaks the fifth commandment because of its direct harm to self and indirect harm to neighbor, but this would have to be a labored argument and misses the point that the addiction is a form of bondage out of which one is not freed by a declaration of innocence, but by deliverance from the captivity and power over the oppressive force.