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Dynamics of Shame in Genesis 3 and 4: Missiological Implications for Today

Introduction

The dynamics of shame and honor as they relate to each other is well documented by cultural anthropologists and ethnologists around the world. Southern Asia has been a region that has received a lot of attention in this area because of the strong influence that the maintenance of honor plays in Indian society. This has been documented in numerous studies and monographs and need not be repeated here (for a few examples, see Mandelbaum 1988; Pauwels 2010; Singh 1956). There is no doubt, however, that the dynamics of shame and honor are vital to a good understanding in order to grasp much of what happens in South Asian society.

Having lived in India for some time and being married to an Indian national I have had the fortune of learning firsthand the dynamics of shame and honor in Southern Asian culture. I have even found myself incorporating some of the cultural aspects of the shame and honor paradigm into my own life. This has occurred mainly unnoticed by me unless pointed out by someone outside the culture. As a result of personal experience I have gained new insights into how a worldview can be influenced by a person's understanding of shame and honor within the given society.

Examples

To give some brief examples of how this works I will cite a few experiences. I have seen families who have had inner family disputes over certain seemingly minor issues, but because it is considered shameful to apologize in their cultural setting, the dispute creates a rift in the family that may not be bridged for decades and sometimes is never healed depending on the attitude of the family members involved. On the other hand I have seen Indians go to great length to make me and others feel comfortable in very modest settings in order to maintain a sense of honor.

One of the most important things I have learned is that one of the primary goals of Indians is to maintain the honor of the family at all costs. This is true of the Hindu just as much as any other group of people in Indian.

Shame and honor in and of themselves are not good or bad. Even so the societies where shame and honor are foundational to life still need to be critiqued by the biblical worldview. This leads us to the biblical understanding of shame and honor, the primary focus of this article. This will not be a comprehensive study on shame and honor in the Bible but rather a glimpse of one way the subject is presented in the Bible. In order to do this, two narratives will be reviewed and contrasted to show two different responses to shame and the attempts at the maintenance of honor. These examples are presented with the hope that the shame and honor dynamic will be seen as being addressed in the Bible and that if properly understood can aid in a more appropriate presentation of the gospel to Hindus in South Asia.

Biblical Understanding of Shame and Honor

The best place to start a study on shame and honor in the Bible is right at the beginning of the narrative on the creation of humanity. The story of Adam and Eve's fall as compared and contrasted with the sin of Cain can help develop a better understanding of the biblical approach to shame and honor. There are many subsequent stories and verses in the Bible that deal with the issue but these two narratives provide an ideal starting point for the discussion which this article hopes to foster.

Biblical studies, like the social sciences, have recognized the importance of shame and honor as it relates to culture. Much work has been done to highlight texts and themes related to this issue and have been published both in article and book form (for example see Georges 2010; Hoefer 2005; Olyan 1996; Simkins 1994; Stansell 1994). This is not the place to review the vast amount of literature dealing with the biblical view of shame and honor, but it should be noted that the concept is very much accepted as being one the dynamics found in Scripture. What has not been done is to take the biblical understanding of shame and honor and apply it missiologically in cultures which manifest shame and honor dynamics. This is especially true of the Old Testament view which is rarely used in missiological thinking, whereas the New Testament understanding has at least been utilized somewhat (see, e.g., Bailey 2000).

Genesis 3

Genesis 3 records the fall of Adam and Eve from being perfect to becoming imperfect. This well-known narrative has been interpreted and

applied in countless ways. Yet, there is one aspect of the story that has often been either overlooked or not emphasized as much as the text demands. The shame and honor dynamic as found especially in the nakedness Adam and Eve experience after eating from the forbidden tree deserves deeper study.

Nakedness Equals Shame

Genesis 3:7 narrates what happens to both Adam and Eve after they ate from the forbidden tree. They, for the first time, are *ashamed* of their nakedness. Up until that point they had been naked but not ashamed (Gen 2:25). But sin brings with it a new type of feeling or emotion—one of horrific shame. It is unbearable and in order to regain a sense of the honorable feeling they previously held they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. This is humanities first attempt to cover personal shame through their own methods (Gangel and Bramer 2002:43; Hamilton 1990:191; Stratton 1995:154-155).

As the narrative continues God walks in the Garden in the evening but does not find Adam and Eve. So he calls out to them and eventually after attempting to hide in the bushes, the two ashamed beings come out and face God. God begins the conversation by asking questions. He asks where they had been and Adam immediately speaks up that they were afraid. However, based on Adam's answer to the next question, shame seems to be the real reason why they were hiding. When God asks why they were afraid Adam's response invokes a sense of shame more than fear, he replies that they hid because they were naked (Kidner 1967:69). It is important to remember that at this point they actually were not naked, so Adam's response is a bit odd. Physically they were not naked for they were covered with fig leaves, but the shame that sin produced in them did not disappear when they covered their nakedness; in fact the thought of facing God increased their sense of shame (Atkinson 1990:87; Fretheim, Brueggemann, and Kaiser 1994:362; Reno 2010:92). "Their efforts to hide their shame are as puny as their effort to hide from God since their man-made coverings are ineffective" (Mathews 1996:239). Notice also the need to explain away the shame by blaming others. Adam blames his wife, Eve blames the serpent, and ultimately they both are blaming God who created them. Shame often leads to an attempt to regain honor even if that means belittling or falsely accusing others (Collins 2006:174).

A Covering for Their Shame

I will bypass the rest of the conversation between God and Adam and Eve and move instead to Genesis 3:21, which is an extremely important verse connected to the shame of nakedness and which is also vital for un-

derstanding the shame and honor dynamic in this narrative. The text says that God “made” these garments implying that an animal was sacrificed (Gangel and Bramer 2002:46). This would appear to be the first recorded sacrifice. At first glance though this does not look like the sacrifices that will be performed later in the Old Testament. It seems to be more of a practical sacrifice not a symbolical one (Wenham 1987:84). This however would seem to be an oversimplification. If God simply wanted to cover Adam and Eve there was plenty of materials that could have been used other than animal skins. This was a symbolic sacrifice, and just like sacrifices performed at the sanctuary it served as an example of what the death of Jesus would accomplish for the sinner (Hamilton 1990:207; Mathews 1996:255).

The major difference is that the primary symbolism is not so much focused on the forgiveness of sins as it is on the covering of shame. This then places sin and shame on an equal basis. Jesus’ sacrificial death was meant to cover the shame of Adam and Eve and the countless other shamed human beings that have lived throughout the centuries (Stevens 1978:33). Adam and Eve had tried to regain their own honor through their own methods (fig leaves) but this had failed because only God could truly cover human shame (Phillips 1980:59). The sacrifice recorded in Genesis 3:21 is an indication of God’s desire to help people who live in fear of never overcoming their shame; it also moved Adam and Eve towards a truer sense of honor which is only found in what God does. Adam and Eve accepted this covering and probably passed on this story to their children as an example of what God had done for them.

Genesis 4

In contrast with Adam and Eve’s eventual acceptance of God’s covering for their shame, in Genesis 4 there is the story of Cain and Abel. This narrative follows immediately after the above narrative and is tied to it in many different ways (Wenham 1987:99). One area that has been neglected in scholarship is the dynamic of shame both in connection with the previous narrative and its importance in the present narrative.

The two brothers bring their offerings before the Lord, but as is well known only Abel’s is accepted while Cain’s is rejected. Genesis 4:5 describes Cain’s reaction when his offering is not accepted. It says that “his countenance fell” (NKJV). In other words his face was downcast in anger and shame (Gowan 1988:68). It seems clear that there was a dynamic of shame at work in Cain’s emotions. The fact that his brother’s sacrifice was accepted and his was not produced more than just anger—it was shameful and was almost impossible for Cain to bear.

Looking back on the fall of Adam and Eve we find that it was an act of

disobedience that brought on their shame, and we can assume it was the same with Cain. And in a similar fashion God attempted to intervene on behalf of Cain. Phillips asserts that “Cain and Abel had doubtless been told of fig leaves replaced by garments of skins” (Phillips 1980:65). With this in mind it can help in understanding the conversation between God and Cain at this juncture.

The Shame of Cain

God had asked Adam why he was afraid and now in Gen 4:6 God asks Cain why he is angry (Mathews 1996:269). But just like the conversation with Adam eventually moved to the nakedness/shame issue it also moves to the issue of Cain’s fallen countenance/shame. God asks, “Why has your countenance fallen?” (4:6). Shame again appears to be at the very core of the issue. God then proceeds to prod Cain to make the correct decision. His next words are, “If you do well will not your countenance be lifted up?” (Gen 4:7 NASB). Other versions say “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” (NKJV). Mathews states it this way, “When Cain practices what is right, there will be an uplifted face, meaning a good conscience before God without shame (Mathews 1996:270; see also Fretheim, Brueggemann, and Kaiser 1994:373). This was an attempt by God to “provoke a change of heart” in Cain (Gowan 1988:68; Wenham 1987:104).

While we are not told exactly what decision God wanted Cain to make it probably would be fairly safe to deduce that Cain should have made a more appropriate sacrifice which also makes sense when compared with the previous narratives when the covering of skins was the only way to cover the shame of Adam and Eve.

Cain’s Unfortunate Choice

Cain unfortunately chose to attempt to regain his honor through his own method and allowed his anger to dictate what that method was. Cain is guilty of the first murder that was committed in his attempt to regain his honor—an act that is still practiced in some cultures today, including parts of South Asia. This however, did not lead to honor but rather to greater shame (Hamilton 1990:230). Cain could not fully regain his honor on his own and as a result became shamed for life. Cain not only experienced shame, but his method of attempting to restore honor through an “honor killing” was passed on to subsequent generations as demonstrated by Lamech in Genesis 4:23-24. Cain’s story also had a very different ending than Adam and Eve’s because he attempted to “cover” his own shame.

These two narratives give two different reactions to shame. The first one demonstrates that humanity cannot “cover” their own shame, but the

good news is that God is willing to make a sacrifice to do it for them. In fact Christ's sacrifice covers the shame of all humanity. The second reaction as demonstrated by Cain is an extreme example of what happens when humans try to cover their own shame through their own devices. The ending is not good, and simply leads to even greater shame and eventual alienation from family and friends.

Implications for Today

In cultures where a dynamic of shame and honor is highly important it can be a challenge to present the gospel. Unfortunately not much has been done connecting the biblical understanding of shame and honor and its practical application in shame and honor cultures. Presenting the stories of Adam and Eve contrasted with that of Cain and Abel, highlighting the shame and honor element in the narratives can help people who live in cultures where the dynamics of shame and honor dictate their every decision to better understand the Gospel.

Many South Asians, including Hindus, are constantly concerned with matters of shame and honor. For them a gospel presentation that highlights Jesus' death as a sacrifice for our sins because we are guilty of sin is often not understood and is in fact also offensive to them (Hoefer 2005). But a gospel that presents the sacrifice of Jesus as a covering for the shame of humanity, a shame that no human can completely cover, is much more understandable and is good news that cannot be found in any other sacred text.

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