
Achieved Status and Ascribed Status

Life requires a series of adaptations.

GUDYKUNST AND KIM

THIS CHAPTER CONTINUES TO EXPLAIN some of the differences that confuse or frustrate those who transition cultures. In the United States we think of status¹ as something anyone can achieve through diligence and hard work. In many parts of the world, one's status has nothing to do with hard work but with birth order, parentage and even gender. For example, in recent years, and especially with the Afghanistan war, the world has seen how differently women are treated in various parts of the world. For many women in other cultures, status is ascribed at birth, and it will not change outside of some intervention that disrupts the status quo. The caste system is another example. While officially outlawed in India, it maintains a functional grip on the masses. People of low caste (status) find themselves locked into that position while those of high caste protect their high status. How are we to understand this, and how is the Christian to respond to it?

North Americans support equality, having anchored the concept in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. One sees it in employment ads—"an equal opportunity employer"—a more diverse workforce, the growth of sensitivity training seminars and a multitude of efforts to treat people more equally. This appreciation of equality also means that people can move from rags to riches. Anyone can be president of a corporation or a company or, presumably, of the nation. A person of low status can achieve lofty goals and great accomplishments. For example, Jimmy

Carter was a peanut farmer before eventually becoming governor of Georgia and then president of the United States. He did not become the leader of the country because he was part of a monarchy or bloodline—ascribed status—but because he worked hard to get to the top—achieved status.

One U.S. employer was sending company shirts to all his Mexican employees in Mexico. Word came back that the plant manager in Mexico would not accept a shirt that matched the ones received by the other employees. A person of higher status deserved something distinctive, befitting his status. The U.S. employer, wanting to accommodate but still maintain some sense of equality, sent the plant manager a different kind of shirt but one costing the same as the others. A creative solution.

GREETINGS

The American teenager greets the grandparent with a simple “Hi, how ya doin’?” In much of Asia, the teenager will bow deeply when greeting an elder and will not speak until spoken to first. The older the person the more deeply the younger person will bow to show proper respect for the person of age. The teenager uses a special set of terms that convey honor and respect to the elder person. One uses different language for greeting a senior person than for greeting one’s peers. The same holds true in conversation. The person’s ascribed status, in this case younger person and older person, dictates language and behaviors.

BUSINESS CARDS

In status-ascribed cultures, people are treated differently depending upon their status. Status is determined by age, by rank in a company, by education, family of origin, title (doctor, surgeon, professor), possibly wealth and, as noted above, even by the caste one is born into, as in India. One’s respect comes not so much from what you have done but who you are. Thus, business cards may be exchanged early in the meet-

ing of two businesspeople so that those from the status-ascribed culture know how to treat those they are meeting. Western businesspeople often miss the point of exchanging business cards. To receive a business card from another requires a careful read to determine the status of the person followed by signs of respect fitting to the status of the other person. Then the card should be placed in front of you not only to remind you of the status of the other person but as a sign of respect. To glance at another's business card and casually put it in a pocket or wallet would send the wrong signals.

STATUS AND PROTOCOL

People who are considered middle management would not receive the degree of honor that a president or senior vice president might receive. Thus, before doing business with someone in a formal way, one should know the appropriate symbols of respect to be shown for people at various status levels.

U.S. companies often err on this point in their global business interactions. The U.S. company may send lower level, more functional staff to one of their customers or joint-venture partners in another country. They are sent because they are best equipped to discuss the product, technology or financials. But the level of the people sent from the United States is often lower in status than the level of the group sent by the overseas customer or joint-venture partner. The overseas person feels devalued because it is rude and inconsiderate of the other party to require someone to do business with someone of lower status. Thus, negotiations often begin on a sour note usually without the Westerners realizing what has happened. One can argue against status or thinking in status terms, but the fact remains that is the way it is and it is unlikely to change anytime soon.

A similar situation occurred recently when U.S. Christian groups were sending late highschoolers and collegians into Eastern Europe to do training for adults and, in some cases, university professors. For peo-

ple of lower status to be sent to train people of higher status is an affront to their dignity. It did not work out well until changes were made. For this reason, when I did my conferences with several university faculties in Russia, Ukraine and other former Soviet Union countries, I always took Christians who were full professors from major North American universities.

An interesting note on these conferences came in the use of titles. I was never called Dr. Elmer but always Professor Elmer. I found this curious because in the United States, the title “doctor” is considered the highest honor. However, in Eastern Europe, to be called “professor” is the highest honor. Thus, by being paid the highest honor, I was on equal footing with (or of higher status than) others at the conference. This gave my colleagues and me credibility as we spoke.

Christians need to keep the status issue in mind as they conduct their affairs regardless of their vocation. To ignore it is to discredit yourself and jeopardize your purpose in being there. At the same time, one must think about not showing partiality, a matter we will take up later.

In education, the student or recent graduate would be treated very differently than the doctorate holder who teaches at a major university. I have taught at the university level most of my life. One student whose parents came to the United States from South Korea had been my student and teacher’s assistant for much of his undergraduate and graduate programs. While I see Daniel (who I discussed in the last chapter) as a friend, he has never been able to address me by my first name even though he is now thirty-four years old and well into his doctoral program. I once asked him why, in spite of my repeated efforts, he could not relate to me on a first name basis. His answer was crisp: “Because in my culture to call someone of your status by their first name would be very disrespectful and I could never do that.” That helped me understand. Forcing him to change would be asking him to betray his culture.

Shortly after New Year’s day, about four years ago, Daniel walked into my office. I was going to hug him (not appropriate in some cultures)

after not seeing him for over a year, but he said, “Wait.” He then proceeded to drop to his knees and bow deeply before me. I was stunned and a little chagrined, not knowing what to make of this display. Daniel immediately explained that around this time every year, younger Koreans would bow to those they most deeply respected. While it was usually reserved for parents, it was appropriate to do it to others. I was deeply honored.

Knowing that often when honor is given, there are ways that honor should be returned. Not knowing the custom, but wanting to respect the tradition, I said to Daniel, “Thank you for that wonderful expression of honor given to me. Is there something I should do in return that would respect this cultural tradition?” In a rather unusual display of frankness, Daniel said, “Yes, you should give me money.” Both his bluntness and statement caught me off guard, and I began to laugh and he quickly joined me. Then Daniel explained that it was usually the parents or an uncle who would send a cash gift with the child as he was departing the home to return to job or school. Daniel paid me the same honor as he did his parents because he saw me somewhat as his parent away from home as well as his professor—both positions of high status.

EMBARRASSING QUESTIONS

If you do not have a high position and your status is unknown, you might get questions that relate to your family, your father’s vocation or even something about the financial status of your family. In this way, a status-conscious person gets some idea of how to treat you. Most Westerners feel embarrassed at such questions and offended that people are treated differently according to status rather than treating everyone with equal respect. After all, everyone is a human being, worthy of dignity and possessing value. Handling such situations calls for wisdom so one neither violates the scriptural teaching that all people have equal value in the eyes of God nor violates culture in unnecessary ways.

CASE STUDY

A few years ago I was the featured speaker at a Christian conference in a status-conscious country. After my first address, an interpreter ushered me to the door so I could greet the people as they left the room. As the people paraded by, the interpreter quietly gave me the pedigree of everyone he knew. These tidbits of information clued me on how deeply to bow, how many times and the kinds of honorific terms to use. "President of a big company," whispered the interpreter, "student," "professor at prominent university," "wealthy businessman," "pastor," "respected grandfather" and so the labeling went. When the interpreter said nothing, I took that to mean that the person was of low status and would not need the same degree of respect as others of higher status.

This posed a moral dilemma for me. How could I knowingly treat people so differently on this matter of respect when I was taught to respect everyone equally? Some people would take a strong stance and proclaim that they treat all people alike, so they do not need any information about status. Thus, the president and the pupil would be given the same honor. Some Bible texts suggest that this would be the right way to view people and to treat them.² Yet other texts seem to call for greater honor to some, such as parents (Exodus 20:12; repeated numerous times throughout Scripture), the aged (Leviticus 19:32: "Rise in the aged, show respect for the elderly") and the humble (Proverbs 22:4), while others are not to receive honor (the fool of Proverbs 26:1). I was also keenly aware of my guest status in their culture. If I trampled their values, I would be disrespectful. Furthermore, I would be seen as an arrogant American trying to tell the world how to conduct their lives. I found myself between a rock and a hard place: trying to uphold biblical values while not being seen as arrogant and paternalistic. So what was I to do?

Here is what I did, though I cannot say it is the right response for everyone. Having traveled and observed Asian cultures, I had some

sense of how to give different degrees of honor. But my preference and conviction was to treat them with equal respect. In fact, if I err in giving honor, I err on giving more to those who receive little from their society. Jesus' treatment of the poor and marginalized seemed to support this.

Even though I bowed more deeply to some than others, I tried to give each the respect and honor each deserved as human beings (1 Peter 2:17). Thus, those of high status got what they were expecting, and those of lower status got more than what they were expecting (perhaps Paul's idea in 1 Corinthians 12:23 and Romans 12:10). My attempt was to treat everyone with respect but in ways that did not crudely tear at the fabric of the culture.

My approach was modeled after that of Don Douglas, who told me a similar story many years ago. While living overseas he was invited to a large social event. Being a foreigner, he was given the status of a dignitary. The high-status people milled around the center of the room with their drinks and finger food while those of low status squatted at the perimeter of the room. None of the dignitaries would even acknowledge any of the squatters. Don's discomfort with this pushed him to ponder how he might build trust with the low-status people while not breaking trust with the high-status people. He refused to ignore the squatters as though they were invisible or unworthy. Yet to give them undue attention would certainly alienate him from those who invited him and whose relationship he wished to maintain. Several times during the evening he would slip away from the crowd to greet one or two of the squatters that he knew. After acknowledging them, which they appreciated immensely, he would slip back into the crowd. Later he would repeat this excursion into the squatter world. The plan was not complicated, but it did take intentional thought and in so doing, he managed to honor his values and theirs. He also maintained trust with both groups.

LOSS OF STATUS

In one of my overseas stints, I was the president of a Bible school. Work-

ing late on a Friday, I noticed the grass had not been cut. The church used our buildings on Sunday, and I was feeling a bit ashamed to have them come to a ragged-looking place. Everyone else had gone home, so I got out the lawn mower and cut the grass myself in my shirt and tie. The school was located on the border between a largely Indian community and another that was mostly mulatto or colored (mixed race). Being late in the afternoon, hundreds of people saw me laboring away. I must confess, I felt rather positive about the fact that I was modeling out humility before all these observing people. Surely my esteem would go up as this example of someone who did not consider himself above the menial.

The following Monday morning the students came to me confessing that they had forgotten their job and wondering how the grass got cut. I proudly announced that I did it, hoping that they too, would see my humility. Noticing the glances of consternation they exchanged among themselves, I asked if anything was wrong. One of the senior students politely and gingerly announced that I had lost status before the entire community. "How can that be?" I fired back. "They saw you cutting the grass and believed that you had lost all authority in the school. You were not able to get any students to do it or any of your faculty or even your secretary." Furthermore, the school also lost credibility (remember collectivism?), because who can respect a place where everything is in chaos? After the shock wore off, I resolved to restore my status in the community and that of the school. For the next several months, I stood outside looking regal and authoritative while the students did their work.

In a different incident, a man was carrying a propane tank from the store to his house. The fact that he did not get his servant, spouse or older child to do it communicated to those around he had lost his authority in the house and could get no one else to do even the small things. From that point on the local merchants negotiated with the wife, who obviously had the status and power in the house. The husband had lost status.

MAKING A STATEMENT

I have tried to honor women in cultures where they possess little or no status, often being treated as low status servants of the males. By asking them about their children, extending courtesies, praising them for the wonderful meal they have prepared, thanking them for the gracious hospitality and warmth of their home, I hope to say to all watching, "They are people made in the image of God and worthy of respect and honor as much as anyone else." Does the message always get through? I am not sure, but that is not entirely my concern. My concern is to make some kind of statement that disturbs the status quo but without coming across as the ugly American who thinks his way is superior to every other way.

Keep in mind that if you insist on imposing your cultural values and even your biblical values on the rest of the world in way that others perceive as crude or harsh, you will not get a hearing for the gospel. As I noted earlier, the message of the cross is offensive, but that does not give us the right to be offensive! Respect among people is an important value to me. Furthermore, I believe it to be a biblical value based on the fact that God has endowed every human being with dignity, loves everyone, does not show partiality and exhorts us not to do so either. Attempting to live out that truth may mean expressing it differently depending on the culture we are in. One size (one way) may not fit all.

I do not believe I have the right to wantonly ignore the values that have been practiced for hundreds if not thousands of years—that would be rude, disrespectful and constitute a lose-lose situation. Rather, find a way, if possible, where you can uphold the cultural values while bringing your own biblical values to bear on the situation in a sensitive way—a win-win situation. Keep in mind that if you associate with the poor and oppressed, you are making a public statement that you, a high-status person, are identifying with low-status people. I wonder, is this what Jesus was doing when he identified himself with sinful humanity? with the outcasts? with women?

FOR REFLECTION

Respond to each point in the following ascribed status/achieved status continuum.

| Achieved status | | | | | Ascribed status | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|-----------------|---|---|---|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 1. Put an X indicating where you fall on the status achieved versus status ascribed continuum. | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Put a P indicating where you think your parents are. | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Put a C for whether your church is more status achieved or status ascribed in its orientation. | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Use any further symbols that are meaningful to you: S for spouse; F for friends, B for boss. | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Use NC (new culture) to indicate where you think the people of the new culture will be on the continuum. How much distance is there between X (you) and NC? | | | | | | | | | |

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did you agree with the author on how he handled the moral dilemmas? Would you do anything differently?
2. Do you think of achieved status and ascribed status in terms of right/wrong? What difficulties could this cause you in your new culture if this is practiced?
3. Read James 2:1-13. How does this influence your thinking about status?

4. Read Matthew 20:25-28 (note context) and Matthew 23:1-12. What insights from these passages help us think about our own conduct in relationships?
5. If you differ with the new culture on status, how should you deal with it so that you stay true to Scripture and still show proper respect to the people? How do you determine your rights to try to change things in a new culture? Or, do we have any right to try to change things? Does Jesus' life provide any guidelines?