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## Guilt and Shame

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*Effective interaction means giving of yourself—trying to see the world of others and respect their life ways. It means not forcing your ways on them. Yet, at the same time, it means being true to yourself and your ways. To be really effective, interaction must be a two-way street or, of course, it is not interaction at all. That is, all interacting individuals should be doing so from a basis of awareness, understanding, and knowledge.*

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MOST NORTH AMERICANS ARE FAMILIAR WITH GUILT. Often we associate it with our conscience telling us we have done something wrong. Many cultures think more in terms of shame. While the lines between guilt and shame are not easily or strictly drawn, it might be helpful to make some distinctions to sensitize us and help us adjust our behaviors. Because we can inadvertently injure a relationship, this chapter will alert us to a danger many overlook.

### GUILT AND SHAME CULTURES

In my attempt to clarify and simplify, I run a danger of becoming simplistic and losing accuracy. Guilt and shame are two of the more difficult concepts to explain without getting mired in unnecessary detail. Many experts, though not all, find it helpful to think of societies as either guilt based or shame based. I am going to share their insights, blend them with my own and hopefully help us use this important information for

building and sustaining strong relationships with people who are different from us.

John Condon and Fathi Yousef state that in shame cultures “pressures to conform to the norms of the society are explicit and exerted from without, while in guilt cultures, there is an internalized sense of ‘wrong’ so that one who feels guilty punishes himself.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, David Augsburger says:

In a culture shaped predominantly by shame controls, the expectations, sanctions, and restraints of the significant others in a person's world become the agents of behavior control. The shame incorporates the basic anxiety and shapes the guilt through the promises of acceptance or threats of rejection. . . .

In a culture controlled predominantly by guilt, controls are expected to be internal, within the conscience. The guilt is focused on the violation of specific prescribed behavior and the anxiety and shame tend to be repressed or denied and the energies redirected.<sup>2</sup>

Augsburger quotes Pitamber in supplying an example: “In a shame-culture, approval of ‘parents’ is more important than the actual performance of a deed.”<sup>3</sup> There is a curious side to this:

Shame is not aroused in a person if he [she] feels that his [her] acts have been approved by those considered significant. When a person performs any act in the interest of the community, he [she] is not concerned about the wrongness or rightness of the acts, but only with the approval of the self. . . . If a shame-prone person commits violence which is considered valid (in the community of significant people) then such a person has no reason to feel shame.<sup>4</sup>

By way of summary, it is important to note that shame and guilt are complex concepts. It appears that some societies are more dominated by shame where external forces such as people and circumstances exert more influence on one's thinking, believing and behaving. Other cultures are more dominated by guilt where internal

forces exert a more dominant influence on one's thinking, believing and behaving. Both shame and guilt are present in every society, according to the experts, but it is a matter of knowing which tends to be emphasized.

### **GUILT**

Generally speaking, Western—individualistic—societies are more guilt based while Two-Thirds World—collectivistic—societies tend to be more shame based. In a guilt-based society, people feel guilty for what they have done. An act, perhaps a lie or a violation of some rule, triggers the conscience that a wrong has been committed. In this society, people are careful to separate the bad act from the person. So the person might be punished for the bad act, but there is assurance that the person is not bad.

A guilt-based society responds to the external laws of the land, rules of the institution, morals of the church and code of the home. It is hoped that these become internalized in the person. It is further hoped that when the individual is tempted to break a rule or actually does, that it will trigger the conscience, causing a sense of guilt and prompt the individual to stop. Just as one is driven to avoid certain behaviors by an internal mechanism, like the conscience, so one is also driven to achieve, not so much to please others, but to fulfill an inner drive to accomplish a goal. Certainly, one wants to honor one's family and country, but these are usually not the strongest driving forces.

### **SHAME**

In shame-based societies, the critical factor is not to bring shame upon oneself, upon one's family, one's tribe or even one's country. One strives to succeed, driven by the desire to uphold family, school, company or national honor. Living up to the expectations of one's significant others tends to be the dominant value even to the point where morality, ethics and right/wrong are defined by one's dominant

group, or in-group. One feels shame when disappointing important others or not living up to expectations of family, supervisor or company. Thus, motivation comes more from the people who surround you at different points in life and in different situations. Failure is defined in terms of one's inability to meet the standards or expectations of important others.

For example, Asian students may go to special classes on Saturdays for several years in order to gain entrance into the most desired university. If successful, the entire family is honored (that is, not shamed). If not, the entire family is dishonored. In extreme cases students have been known to commit suicide to restore family honor.

In an attempt to control littering in Malaysia, a fine of \$400 (U.S.) would be levied to any offender caught. In addition, the culprit would be forced to sweep the streets in a T-shirt with the words "I am a litterbug" printed on it. The government minister, Ting Chew Peh, said he "hoped public shaming would deter others."<sup>5</sup>

### **GUILT, SHAME AND THE BIBLE**

Does the Bible speak to shame and guilt? Actually, the occurrences of shame are considerably more than those of guilt. However, the Western church has emphasized the guilt more because it fits most comfortably into our cultural values. The apostle Paul uses guilt (Romans 3:19) when speaking to the Romans, a Western guilt-based society, but switches to shame (Romans 9:33; 10:11) when he addresses the Jewish Christians in Rome. The writer of the book of Hebrews uses shame, not guilt, as the forceful thought that hopefully would keep the believers committed to following Christ (Hebrews 2:11; 11:16; 12:2).

### **SHAME, FACE AND HONOR**

*Shame, face and honor* are powerful words in much of the Two-Thirds World, though not talked about much in North America. We can make some serious mistakes if we do not understand these concepts and their

significant role in many societies. Though the three words differ slightly in meaning, I will treat them as essentially the same. Thus, maintaining one's honor in Japan and much of Latin America is not very different from "saving face" in Thailand and much of Africa or "not causing another to feel shame" in the Philippines.

The Thai word for losing face means, literally, "to tear someone's face off so they appear ugly before their friends and community." The word among the Shona in Zimbabwe means, literally, "to stomp your feet on my name" or "to wipe your feet on my name." In many societies (the Middle East, for example) the dirtiest part of the person is the bottom of the shoe. Thus, the act of wiping your shoes on someone's name is a grievous offense and humiliation. It is a direct attack on them and their character. In the Middle East, taking one's shoe off and waving the sole at someone is the worst insult. For this reason, in most Arab countries, one does not sit in such a way as to expose the bottom of one's shoe/sandal to another person. It shows serious disrespect.

Western concepts that carry similar impact include disgrace, severe public humiliation or intense embarrassment. There are two important differences, however. In the Two-Thirds World, nothing worse could happen to you. To cause someone else shame strains, if not breaks, the relationship. Not so in the Western mind. The difference is partially explained by the fact that many of the Two-Thirds World people think holistically—they do not differentiate between criticism of an idea and criticism of a person. To criticize my thought is to criticize me and that causes me shame or loss of face. The Westerner will often put the criticism of an idea in one category and separate that from the category of self or criticism of self. Thus, criticism of an idea is not taken personally or not taken as personally.

The other difference is that in the Two-Thirds World if you cause someone else shame, you also shame the entire family or school or office or nation depending upon the status of the person and their net-

work of relationships. This is not as true for the Western mind. Again, one sees the influence of holistic thinking. What happens to one happens to all or, at least, affects all. This is not foreign to Scripture. (See 1 Corinthians 12, especially verse 26.) What may be worse is causing shame without even knowing it. The reason? Westerners are not sensitive to these issues because they are not a part of the fabric of the other culture. So we must learn about them and, hopefully, avoid the mistakes.

### CAUSES OF SHAME

In my book *Cross-Cultural Conflict* I write:

Shame, loss of face and dishonor may occur in a variety of ways. One may dishonor oneself by not living up to certain goals. For example, the Japanese student who was denied entry into the preferred university; the businessperson who does not get the contract; the leader who makes a serious mistake. Or, one might be shamed by the actions of a family member. In Arab society, especially Muslim, to become a Christian is to shame the family and the Islamic religion. The shamed family tries to restore honor and face by excommunicating the Christian convert and treating the person as though she/he were dead or never existed. If the family wishes to restore itself from extreme shame, it may physically punish the departed member, sometimes threatening or even taking the person's life.<sup>6</sup>

What follows are some ways in which we may unintentionally cause people to lose face or feel shame. I then provide an alternative response that is less likely to cause shame.

**Blame.** Stating or implying the other person is to blame for something. Rather, hold your tongue and be known for your wise silence. Westerners tend to separate the person from the act—we have categories for each—but most cultures believe that blame from someone is an attack on their person. For example, a Westerner might say, “Don’t take this personally but . . .” People from the Two-Thirds World usually can

take it only one way: personally. They think holistically and do not separate themselves from their acts or words.

**Shortcomings.** Pointing out a shortcoming, especially if anyone else is present. Rather, don't point out shortcomings or failures at all. If you must, do it in private with statements about how much you value the relationship and want to preserve it.

**Error.** Suggesting they have made an error whether it be in thinking, speaking, logic, grammar, behavior and so on. Rather, let these things go. We do not need to correct everything; we are building relationships not giving a test.

**Requests.** Asking of them something that would be difficult, costly or impossible to do. Rather, make indirect requests —“It would be nice if . . .” or “Someday I would like to . . .” or “I have heard that . . .” They can respond to such requests if they can, but not cause you to lose face if they disappoint you.

**Comparisons.** Comparing how things are done in your country versus this country, especially if you think your country is better. Rather, don't compare. If people ask you to compare, praise their country for its strengths (and there will be many if you look) and be modest about the strengths of your own country. Criticism of one's own country is generally not well received so go easy on that.

**Refusals.** Saying no to a request they make of you. Rather, say, “I would like to help you out, but right now I do not think I can. If things change, I will let you know.”

Remember, you are a guest in their culture.

## COMMUNICATING CHRIST

As you go about your activities with the hope that some will become followers of Christ, you are, by implication, suggesting that their traditional beliefs are not as good, but defective or even misleading. This causes them to feel loss of face, dishonor and shame. You have pointed out something that is wrong with their life, and they have a response that is

very natural in their culture. The extended family may then get involved because if one member is thinking about changing to become a follower of Christ, they would all feel the shame and loss of face. Any place of honor they had in the community would be gone and everyone would see them as failures.<sup>7</sup> Thus, they rally to protect their “family face” and “family honor” by trying to persuade the person not to leave the family religious tradition to become a follower of Christ.

The convicting work of the Holy Spirit often overcomes the family pressures, but not always. However, sometimes we present the gospel in a way that is offensive to the listeners in their cultural context. Because of their sensitivity to shame, loss of face and dishonor, they may hear our cultural insensitivity and not the message. So how can we communicate the love of Christ so that they hear with open ears and not feel the negative impact?

First, share your testimony including the sin that separated you from God. In this way, you put yourself in position of shame by not being pleasing to God. Second, rather than saying to the others that they too are sinners, try using collective language: God says we are all sinners—our sin has caused God shame—everyone stands in need of a Savior. Third, explain that just as Adam and Eve caused God to feel shame when they sinned, so all of us have caused God shame by not obeying his commands and refusing the gift of his son, Jesus. Fourth, the ultimate shame is in putting one’s trust in the wrong place. God promises that if we put our trust in Jesus, we “will never be put to shame” (Romans 10:11; note verses 9, 10; see also Romans 9:30-33 and 1 Peter 2:6). Fifth, God has wonderfully taken care of our shame. Jesus bore our shame on the cross (Hebrews 12:2) so that he may call us brothers, family (Hebrews 2:11).

Remember that we want to share Jesus in a way that will be heard by their mind and heart, not in a way that seems foreign, even confusing. Following are some other cultural differences that may confuse us unless we get some advance insight.



### LEARNING MORE FROM EUNICE

I would like to return to the story of Eunice (pp. 58-65), because there is more to the story. Eunice spoke some English, but her heart, mind and actions reflected Zulu values. Let's analyze this story further from the perspective of shame. Notice that I implied that Eunice had done something wrong, which caused her to feel shame. I did not intend to, but Eunice understood it like most people of the world would. In her discomfort she still answered calmly. To save face, or avoid shame, she insisted that the "dish fell from her hand and is dead." It was her way of saying clearly that it was an accident—a statement of truth from her cultural perspective.

Eunice came from an animistic culture. In animism, outside forces control nearly everything, so one does not take personal responsibility for something that lies outside of one's control or so the belief goes. Thus, the use of the passive and stative voices simply acknowledges that other forces are active, including evil spirits and good spirits.

One last point: notice my expectation. Since Eunice spoke English, I expected her to respond in keeping with my cultural heritage. When she didn't, I placed blame rather than seeking understanding. In my confusion I made some negative judgments; I blamed Eunice for my confusion. Beneath the negative judgments (see lower track on the cultural adjustment map, p. 72), "I was wishing Eunice would be more Western, more like me, so I would not be forced outside of my comfort zone. If I could change her, I could avoid the awkwardness of changing myself."<sup>8</sup> In other words, I wanted to retain my squareness. While hoping to make her more square, I was resisting becoming more round, like Eunice.

I revisited this incident to demonstrate that a number of factors are often at work in explaining a particular situation. It is not important that you try to analyze everything from all angles. It is important that you are aware of how easy it is to cause someone to lose face, feel shame or be dishonored and that you avoid such activity.

### DIFFERENCES AND HUMAN NATURE

Differences are not the problem when working cross-culturally. The way these differences are expressed is the problem. For example, everyone values and uses time. However, the confusion arises when some cultures demonstrate their use of time differently. Everyone wants and deserves respect (status), but some cultures display it differently. If you show me respect in a way I am not accustomed to or not expecting, I will consider you disrespectful. The misunderstanding comes not from the value itself but in how it is demonstrated in day-to-day living. Thus, we must try to separate the value from its expression. Our ability to do this will help us respond in culturally appropriate ways rather than simply react out of our cultural frame of reference.

It is important, therefore, to realize that as human beings we often desire the same thing, but fail to realize it. We focus on the way a value is lived rather than on the value itself. Seeing the value unites us in our humanity. Seeing only the difference in expression moves us toward divisiveness.

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### F O R   R E F L E C T I O N

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Respond to each point on the following guilt/shame continuum.

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<b>Guilt</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Shame</b>
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1. Put an X indicating where you fall on the guilt versus shame continuum.
2. Put a P indicating where you think your parents are.
3. Put a C for whether your church is more guilt or shame oriented.
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?

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D I S C U S S I O N   Q U E S T I O N S

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1. Do you respond more out of an internalized guilt feeling or more out of how other people are going to see you and think about you?
2. As you think of your present relationships, do you have difficulties with people who are different from you on this matter? How difficult will it be for you to adjust?
3. Does the guilt-shame difference raise any questions for you?
4. How were your concepts of guilt and shame shaped by your family and upbringing?