

Guilt, Shame and Power Worldviews and the Gospel

Sharing the gospel is always challenging, but sharing cross-culturally adds a new dimension. While the gospel message is the same, the connection point, or the “aha! moment” can be different. Does this mean that we change the gospel message? No, but there are pre-existing worldviews that need to be understood so that the fullness of the gospel can be felt. This understanding helps us to see the world from our friends’ points of views so that we can better show the love of Christ.

God created a world that was perfect. In it, he placed his creation and he was in constant loving relationship with those he had made. In eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve changed the way things were. Their actions had consequences for both Adam and Eve, and for God. Adam and Eve began their lives innocent, unashamed and fearless in their relationship with God. The moment they ate the fruit the world turned upside down: from being innocent, they became guilty of breaking God’s command; from being unashamed, they became ashamed of their nakedness and tried to hide it; from being fear-less, they became fear-full, hiding from God when he came into the garden. For God, he saw his beloved creation fall into chaos. Guilt brought punishment. Shame brought rejection. Fear was joined by condemnation brought about by the judgment God pronounced. Yet, through all this, God did not withdraw his love from his creation.

These three consequences align with three worldviews: *guilt-innocence*, *shame-honour*, and *fear-power*. Everyone is affected by all of these, but there is generally one that more strongly influences a culture. This in turn affects how the gospel is relevant to people’s hearts. In understanding these differences, we are better poised to communicate the gospel message.

Guilt-Innocence

The guilt-innocence worldview focuses on law and punishment, which is a view shared by those in most of the western world. Children are taught to follow the rules and schoolyard scuffles often centre on who “started it.” In university, those who plagiarize or cheat risk expulsion. We are shocked when we hear of dishonesty by those in power, often demanding they step down from office. Rules regulate what is proper and improper, what is acceptable and unacceptable.

These cultures tend to be more individualistic in nature. Energy is focused on fulfilling your destiny and reaching your potential. Central pillars of society are respecting personal choice

and freedom, and being able to do what you wish “as long as it isn’t hurting anyone.” Individual rights and freedoms are highly valued, and people are expected to make their own choices. In this society, changing religions is seen as a personal freedom. Even though families and friends may resist or ridicule the change, ultimately most people will see this as an individual’s choice and therefore acceptable.

Communicating the gospel: Christ pays the price of sin

This worldview can be summed up in the words “to do right.” The focus on rightness/wrongness corresponds with an emphasis on punishment. When someone breaks a law or hurts us, we demand payment to make things right. This focus on payment is the connection to the gospel. When Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately became aware of their guilt and that the punishment was death. This is the penalty for sin. Christ’s death and resurrection is the payment for sin, allowing us to regain relationship with God and have eternal life. Forgiveness of sin and restoration of relationship are based upon accepting the payment made. God’s love had never been taken away from his creation, but their ability to experience that love was broken. In Christ, God took away the punishment that separated him from his creation once and for all.

In our interactions, we need to show people that we are not judging them for who they are or what they have done. While they are under God’s judgment, God has provided a way to take away their guilt and make them right with God in every way and we need to clearly show this. Christ’s death on the cross was a final payment for every sin ever done and for all who come to him, the bill has been paid in full, the one that was innocent took on our guilt to make us innocent. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, it has become possible for us to experience the fullness of his love. We need to show our friends this same love and point them to the one who makes it possible.

Shame-Honour

People from non-Western areas, such as Asia, South America and the Middle East are more likely to come from a shame-honour background. These cultures are collective in nature with the focus being on group and not individual identity. The group’s concerns, honour and needs outweigh those of the individual. Society is organized along tribal or familial lines, and life is about connection and group contribution. Individual achievements and accomplishments contribute to group honour. Just as successes add to honour, a trespass or failure similarly reflects upon the group. Actions are calculated to maximize honour and minimize shame.

Right and wrong are defined in terms of bringing or taking away honour. As long as the results bring honour, the moral issues are secondary. Success can be measured in wealth, power, or education. For example, a student who fails brings shame. Cheating leads to a positive result (good grades) and as long as they are not caught, the action has brought honour and is acceptable. However, if the student is caught, the same action brings shame. In order to preserve lost honour, the family may choose to hide the wrongful act and its consequence. In more serious cases, the offending member may be cast out of the family and regarded as dead, or in more extreme cases, killed to wipe away the shame.

In a community-minded culture, people are more likely to think and act the same as their family (and by extension their culture at large). Shared beliefs and “being the same,” not being an individual and independent, is the goal of life. If individualistic cultures are about standing out and how to be innovative, communal cultures are more about keeping the harmony and blending in.

Communicating the gospel: Christ restores lost honour

If the summary for guilt-innocence is “to do right,” the summary here would be “to be right.” Adam and Eve brought shame by eating the fruit, losing the honour that they once had. Their new knowledge led them to cover their nakedness. Before, they didn’t know shame, but their actions ushered it in. Not only this, but when faced with God, they threw the blame at others to divert the blame from themselves. Galatians 4:4-5 says “when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.” Christ’s death bestows on us the honour lost in the Garden of Eden. Jesus ministry often focused upon restoring the honour of those whom society shunned and saw as shameful. Zacchaeus was hated for being a cheating tax collector, but Jesus reached into his life and transformed him. Again, when the religious leaders dragged a woman caught in adultery, instead of condemning her, Jesus tells her to sin no more. Those who came to Jesus for help were outcast because of disease or being otherwise undesirable. Instead of rejecting them, Christ restores them and their position not only by healing but often by physical touch itself. He literally reaches out in love to touch their lives.

People were rejected by God because of the shame of their sin. As Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, God created animal coverings for them to hide their shame. God’s love for his people was evident in history as he showed his love many times by providing a covering for their sin. None of those coverings were enough but were all a substitute and a foreshadowing of the final covering: Jesus Christ. In sending Jesus to earth to pay for the penalty of sin, God removed the problem of shame and restored to himself a people that were free from shame and restored with honour. (Gal. 3:27) Inviting people to accept Jesus is inviting them to join the family of God and accept all that he offers. Therefore, the quality of our relationship is important. We want to be a family that they would want to join. It is important to remember that your friend’s decision for or against accepting Jesus is not about you or because of you. We want to develop trust because at the core of this decision is relationship: relationship with you, and ultimately with God. Our friends need to know that we genuinely care about them and that we love them – something conveyed by more than words.

When international students consider changing their beliefs, there can be pressure from family for beliefs to remain unchanged. Others may be told that they can change their religion as long as they do not become too serious. It is a big deal to make a decision outside the family, especially if opposed. It is not a decision made lightly and we need to be respectful of these familial ties. It is easy for us to be frustrated with indecision or not understand why our friends so highly value their family’s opinion. Yet, it is a real concern and we need to help our friends in this step by being understanding and willing to listen.

Fear-Power

Most normally associated with Africa, this worldview is also seen in parts of South America and Asia, where the cultures are more animistic. Animistic cultures view the world as both physical and spiritual, with the spiritual having power over the physical world. Offering sacrifices to spirits buys protection and prosperity. Charms, curses and spirit worship are parts of everyday life as people seek to find the powers that can best protect them. Spirits can be angered for unknown reasons and so people continually work to remain in their good graces. There is often a lot of superstition that regulates how people can remain on the good side of the spirits. Think about life in these cultures as a battle of spiritual powers - are my spirits stronger or are yours?

While unfamiliar to most of us in the west, this is alive and well in other areas of the world. To help our western minds gain a better understanding of this perspective, think of the superhero genre of movies with battles between the forces of good and evil. Ultimately, it comes down to who is stronger and has better powers.

Communicating the Gospel: Christ is more powerful

If the other two perspectives are about some form of rightness, the fear-power worldview is about might (strength). The proof of God's power is seen all over scripture, from Joshua's battle where the sun stood still, to Elijah's dramatic sacrifice of soaked, heaven-ignited cattle, to Jesus calming a raging storm, and the countless demons who cowered before him. Time and again, God has proven his power over nature, spirits and all created things. The emphasis here is that God has the power to protect like no other. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. For people from this culture, it is important to help them understand that in the battle of spiritual powers, God wins hands down. He is able to protect, he is able to bring blessing, and he is stronger than the rest.

When Adam and Eve ate the fruit in the garden, they put themselves under the power of Satan. They became susceptible to the powers of death, sickness, injury and evil. Ever since, people have been in a battle to combat these things through channeling the powers of spirits. Becoming a Christian in this culture means changing allegiances from powers that had always protected you and/or your family. It means taking that faith in the spirits and lining up with a new, stronger power. Inherent in this is great risk. While we may not recognize that spirits have power, they do and Paul is clear on this in Ephesians 6. There is a real risk people are taking – that they will be losing the benefits the spirits have previously given. For example, some Buddhists buy fortunes or charms that are supposed to ward off evil and bring prosperity. For this person to become a Christian, they will have to leave those things behind and choose to trust in God to provide and not the charms.

Christ's death on the cross showed once and for all his power over all things. Because of God's love, the power of sin over us was broken and fear was wiped away. The Bible tells us that perfect love drives out all fear (1 John 4:18) and that is the spirit in which we need to move forward. God's power is rooted in a nature that is good and loving. He is not a tyrant and will not misuse his power. He can be trusted to use his power for our good and in a good way.

Where to go from here?

A few questions remain: why does God pay the price? Is it merely to satisfy his justice? Why does God wipe away our shame? Is it merely to prove his mercy? Why does God show his power? Is it merely a show of might? The answer to all these: no.

God's actions are proof of his love. His love for his creation is why he sent Jesus and is why he answers the call of those who call to him. It is why he reveals himself to people in a way they understand. As we communicate the gospel to people of various cultural backgrounds, we need to keep in mind that we need to be loving others first. Understanding how the gospel connects with someone's heart is simply a way of loving them better. All of our words and actions should first and foremost show God's love.

While each culture has one main worldview, it is important for us to understand how all these perspectives influence everyone. At times, we struggle with guilt, shame or fear and we need to know that whatever it looks like, Christ is the answer to all these problems. The gospel message never changes, but the way Christ answers the heart issue can vary from culture to culture and even situation to situation.

It is important for us to remember in building relationship and sharing the gospel that it is God who works in the hearts, minds and lives of people. While we need to be faithful to share the message of the gospel, we can rest assured that we are not alone and God is working. Successful evangelism is sharing the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God. Changing beliefs means changing the foundation for life. Where family and group concerns lay claim to our hearts, there are more considerations. As we wait on God and patiently journey with others in love, there is no telling what impact we will have as God uses us.

Sources:

This is only a brief survey of the three worldviews. For more information, you can read the following:

Muller, Roland. *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door*. Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation, 2001.
Naylor, Mark. "Fear, Shame and Guilt." *Cross Cultural Impact for the 21st Century*. 1 August 2010. Web. 17 August 2014.