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Honor and Shame and the Apostolic Life

April 30, 2011 by Ben Witherington



(What follows here is a small excerpt from my forthcoming full dress socio-rhetorical

Philippians commentary for Eerdmans, due out later this year. See what you think).

A Closer Look: Honor, Shame, and Apostolic Life

The honor and shame culture Paul lived in was far different from contemporary Western culture and its values. "Honor" and "shame" in this context do not primarily refer to feelings

of honor or shame, though feelings would be involved, but rather to being honored or disgraced in public. Paul's main concern is that the gospel not be disgraced and that God be honored, whether by Paul's life or his death. Being a mere public disgrace is of less concern to the apostle. In fact he would see such disgrace as an honor if it were suffered for Christ, so long as it did not involve the betrayal or renouncing of the gospel due to human weakness or the like.

What Paul saw as honorable or shameful was different from what the Greco-Roman pagan culture saw as honorable or shameful. There is overlap between the two, but also some categorical differences and contradictions between them. The category of overlap would include some of the things Paul lists as virtues in Phil. 4.8: "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right. . . ." Paul does not see the Christian worldview as inherently at odds with the worldview of the larger culture at every point. In these matters, Paul is not issuing a charge for entirely countercultural Christian beliefs and praxis. The culture's values could be affirmed when they comported with Christian values. But this required critical sifting of the culture with the sieve of Christian values and beliefs. Some things could be affirmed, and some things needed to be critiqued or rejected.

But Paul realizes as he writes that many of his converts are likely to see him in a very compromised position when it comes to the matter of honor. C. Osiek put it this way: "For a man to be arrested and detained in a shameful condition of loss of freedom was damaging not only to his sense of self but to his public reputation."66 But Paul the master rhetorician is able to show how he has turned a negative into a plus, even while suggesting from the very beginning of the letter, where he calls himself "a slave of Christ Jesus," that what the world considers true honor is not always so. He will demonstrate that he is still free, free in Christ, by his parrh3sia, his free speech, in this section.67

In the Roman world honor was bound up with public life and was largely an issue for males in a patriarchal culture. Men represented the public face of a family or kinship group, and their task was to represent in an honorable way their family or constituency. The main role of women was to protect the family from shame, in

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particular from sexual shame. Paul is certainly not talking about the latter in Philippians 1.

But he still affirms the categories of honor and shame, however busily he is redefining what they amount to for a Christian person and in particular for a Christian apostle, an ambassador for Christ. It is the honor of Christ and the honor of the gospel that Paul is an emissary of and that is at issue here. Likewise in the case of shame, it is letting Christ down, being a bad witness, failing to hold the faith or to be bold in witnessing to the end that is called shameful here. A pagan would not recognize loyalty unto death to a superstition as an honorable thing. Nor would betrayal or denial of one's former faith and commitments (if it was this Christian faith) under legal pressure be shameful. To the contrary, it would be sensible, as even a brief study of the correspondence between Pliny and Emperor Trajan in the early second century shows. Paul believes in the transvaluation of many of his culture's values, but he has not transvalued or rejected all the categories, such as honor and shame.

So how does Paul de-enculturate his converts from some of their dominant cultural values, while at the same time both affirming other traditional values and urging on them more distinctively new and Christian values? First, he accomplishes this by raising their standards and sights. He tells them that ultimately there is a greater commonwealth and a higher citizenship than that associated with Rome. The ultimate model for their behavior should not be Caesar, with his displays of military power, public games, and public performances (e.g., at poetry contests in Corinth), but Christ, as ch. 2 will make ever so clear. If they really want to be high-minded and do what is truly honorable and praiseworthy, they need to aspire to have the mind of Christ and follow his behavior pattern. And here is where the strikingly new value is affirmed: humility, taking on the heart and role of a servant. Real honor comes in self-sacrifice, not self-serving behavior, suggests Paul. "[I]t is within the area of 'lifestyle' that Paul wants to establish the distinctive characterizations of a specific Christian identity."⁶⁸ Thus to some extent Paul is remapping the zone of what counts as honorable and what counts as shameful.

Second, Paul is trying to get the Philippians to think eschatologically. Honor is indeed something that needs to be publicly acclaimed and recognized, but Paul suggests that the proper public forum for that is not the agora in Philippi but before the judgment seat of Christ. Public acclaim for works and ministry well done will come at the end when Christ returns and one's deeds will finally be scrutinized by an impartial and compassionate judge and either rewarded or punished (1 Corinthians 3). It is God in Christ who can bestow real honor on the Christian, not society, and Christ alone can take away lasting shame and humiliation from sin and failure. God alone is at the apex of Paul's value pyramid, Christ alone is the human paradigm that is immune to Paul's critique of human behavior, and the form of the world is passing away (1 Corinthians 7). Therefore, Paul hopes that the Philippians will have a sense of detachment from the world and attachment to Christ and his values. He is busily inculcating both these things in Philippians. As Chrysostom reminds us, however, "One must not suppose that he is demeaning this life. He is not saying that since there is nothing good for us here, we might as well do away with ourselves. Not at all. There can be profit even here, if we live not toward this life finally but toward that other" (Hom. Phil. 4.1.22).

Paul is not encouraging his converts to be so heavenly-minded that they become no earthly good. He is saying that the temporal should be seen in light of the eternal, the lesser good in light of the greater, the present in light of the future with Christ, the lesser citizenship in light of the greater citizenship. He models all this for his converts in the very way he faces both rivalry and the adversity of being in chains and in a judicial process. It can rightly be said that the narratio, with its correspondences with the exordium which precedes it, shows that Paul practices what he prays and preaches.⁶⁹ He also, in a status hungry and status conscious culture, addresses his converts as his equals—as his brothers and sisters in Christ and his partners in ministry. In this, too, he is providing a conscious paradigm for them that goes against the grain of the culture and against what would be considered normal, honorable behavior.

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6 Responses to "Honor and Shame and the Apostolic Life"

1 [Johnathan Pritchett](#)

on 30 Apr 2011 at 3:20 pm

Can't wait! This will be a good one.

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2 Johnathan Pritchett

on 30 Apr 2011 at 4:09 pm

Are we in for an in-depth treatment (finally) of Philippians 2:1-18 as a whole, and how it is all not only all related, but also interrelated as well, regarding verses 5:5-11 with the rest of it?

Too often in commentaries and books there is so much focused on the "theological issues" of the hymn itself, and not enough on why Paul chose it, beyond "here's the example of Jesus"...which 5-8 would alone suffice for that point. Is 9-11 also quoted simply for embellishment or to complete it (which is fine), or does 9-11 about Christ's exaltation and to whom everyone bows connects with God working in us etc. so that we shine like lights among a perverse and crooked generation?

I always feel like there is something I am not getting as to how it all interrelates to the passage as a whole and its intended effect on and meaning to the audience.

3 ben witherington

on 30 Apr 2011 at 8:52 pm

Oh yeah, you will get all that in spades, and more.

BW3

4 WoundedEgo

on 01 May 2011 at 2:27 pm

Socrates did a good job of creating a notion of a philosopher cum martyr. Ever the minority, philosophers still were an influential ethical voice in the culture. Jews as well sought honor of mind and practice over military heroism and political spotlight.

Governments have long used public honor to motivate troops.

5 Michael Flowers

on 02 May 2011 at 10:15 am

Ben, thank you for your consistent, "wide-spherical" treatment of theology and history. I resonate with your affinity with Chrysostom. I also resonate with your insightful comment which applies in today's world of "Christian" status and position: "He also, in a status hungry and status conscious culture, addresses his converts as his equals—as his brothers and sisters in Christ and his partners in ministry. In this, too, he is providing a conscious paradigm for them that goes against the grain of the culture and against what would be considered normal, honorable behavior."

Well said.

6 Life Plus

on 04 May 2011 at 9:18 pm

Very good suggestions, I just added this to my RSS feed. Im curious if you have any follow ups to this post?

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