

For instance, the issue of shame is permeating more than ever into a Western context. This shame and dishonor occurs through multiple contributing factors.

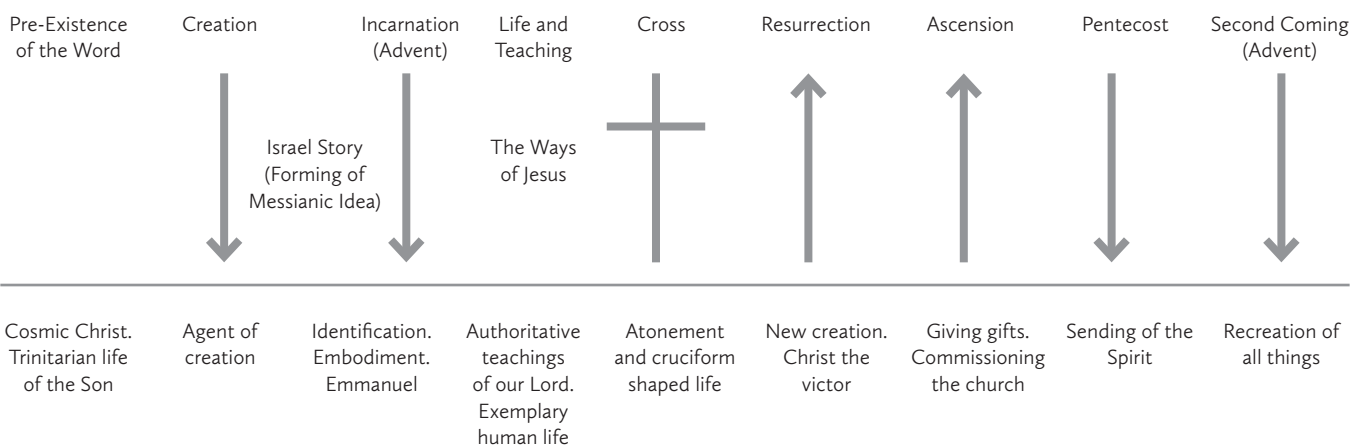
Consider the fact that America is an extremely competitive culture: from childhood playgrounds, to sport, to stock markets, gambling, business deals, and the pursuit of fame, everything is built upon the idea of winning. To be sure, this has created a high-achieving culture where people strive to be better than the next person. However, the problem with a competitive culture is that by celebrating the achievement of the celebrity-winner, the culture produces a whole lot of people who are considered “losers” by comparison. And it is here that people are shamed, because with losing comes the shame of not winning.

Another very significant example comes from the idealized celebrity-beauty: by idealizing what it means to be “beautiful,” and in giving that beauty disproportionate worth, we create by implication a standard of ugliness by which everyone else is measured—let’s face it, we are all “ugly” (read *unacceptable*) by comparison. This beauty myth contributes to a culture of honor and shame.

Rather than judging the drivenness and competitiveness evident throughout American culture, we would do well to consider that it might simply be symptomatic of the real human need to feel significant, to stand out, to be recognized. The forgiveness of sins (addressing objective guilt for having violated a standard) simply does not address the experience of shame. It’s not meant to. God’s love, grace, and acceptance do. The gospel here must rather proclaim that there is nothing anyone can do to increase how much God eternally loves each and every individual, regardless of strength or beauty, winning or losing. No one needs to prove themselves before *this* God. It is *this* God who also restores personal dignity by giving believers a new status and identity. The Scriptures constantly tell us that God opposes the proud (another major register of honor/shame) and raises up the downcast. He eternally “sees” us (foresight and election), and in choosing us he honors each one of us with a new identity as a fully legitimate member of his family. God has dealt with the roots of all shame and dishonor. God is the waiting Father who runs to the returning son, who embraces the one who has squandered everything and so dishonored the family name. This speaks volumes in an honor/shame culture in which fathers must always retain face and respect ... They do not run to greet people, let alone toward sons who have shamed the family.⁴¹

In terms of the register of power/powerlessness, in the West we have recently experienced mass social movements that are birthed from a sense of powerlessness. Take for instance Black Lives Matter. Those involved in this movement are communicating real experiences of real people who feel utterly powerless to change their destiny. This powerlessness was birthed out of the wrongful appropriation of their ancestors as slaves in what was later to become the United States of America. Because this is an issue of power, a more effective way to connect the gospel with those who have been affected by these issues is often through the gospel of liberation from slavery and oppression. This is why the Exodus narrative resonates in most civil rights movements. God is a Redeemer; he sets the captive free; he creates a community based on justice, equity, and the dignity of all concerned. He defeats and humiliates the powers and principalities that oppress and demean them. Once again, God’s forgiveness of personal sins, although necessary in the healing of the human soul, will not address the problems raised by the forceful misuse of power. The #MeToo movement is likewise motivated by power/powerlessness motifs (as well as shame/dishonor) in its opposition to sexual harassment and assault of women.

And in terms of universal human guilt and culpability, God in his



APPENDIX 2

BLINDED BY DISOBEDIENCE

Visitors to the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) at Langley, Virginia, are confronted with the following slogan: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32 KJV). Besides this being a rather blasphemous appropriation of the words of our Lord, this application nonetheless reflects the generally held view that any old truth, no matter what it is about, where it came from, or how one arrived at it, can set the subjective knower free. But this is *not* what Jesus is saying here. This type of thinking always circumvents the essentially biblical idea that religious truth almost always requires repentance and change. Anything that involves theological truth—truths about God—requires something far more demanding and personal from the would-be knower.¹ The covenantal condition that Jesus attached to this promise in John 8 changes the frame entirely. Jesus actually says “*If* you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. *Then* you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32, italics ours). The freedom Jesus promised here is conditional on discipleship.

Similarly, Jesus says in John 7:17 that one must be predisposed to obey God if one is to discern truth (“Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own”). And in the parable of the wise and foolish builders, Jesus warns that “everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Matthew 7:26). James explicitly admonishes, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like” (James 1:22–24).

In other words, true knowledge of God can only be gained through a relationship with God and obedience to him. Or, as Calvin says, “All knowledge is born in obedience [...] God cannot be truly served unless we