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HONOR & SHAME

Connecting Personhood to Group Values

The culture of the first-century world was built on the foundational social values of honor and dishonor. 🖋️ Seneca, a first-century Roman statesman and philosopher, wrote: “The one firm conviction from which we move to the proof of other points is this: that which is honorable is held dear for no other reason than because it is honorable” (*Ben.* 4.16.2). Seneca claims that his peers regard honor as desirable in and of

itself, and dishonor as undesirable in and of itself. Moreover, he understands that the concept of “honor” is fundamental and foundational to his contemporaries’ thinking. That is, he expects them to choose one course of action over another, or to approve one kind of person over another, and, in short, to organize their system of values, all on the basis of what is “honorable.” From the wealth of literature left to us from the Greek and Roman periods, including the New Testament, it appears that Seneca’s analysis of the people of his time was correct.¹

¹ For a close investigation of honor language at work in several major Greek, Latin and Jewish authors, see David A. deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SBLDS 152 (Atlanta:

In his book on ethics Aristotle lists two motives that people might have for choosing

Scholars Press, 1995), chaps. 2 and 3; for discussion of honor in the world of Homeric and Classical Greece, see Arthur W. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) and the correction and refinement of his study in Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). The persistence of these values in Mediterranean culture is demonstrated by Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. John G. Peristiany (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), pp. 21-77. An excellent overview of the work done in applying these insights to New Testament study between 1981 and 1993 can be found in Halvor Moxnes, "Honor and Shame: A Reader's Guide," *BTB*

some course of action: honor and pleasure (*Nic. Eth.* 3.1.11 [1110b11-12]). Honor, however, is viewed as the first and foremost consideration. Isocrates, an Athenian orator who was Aristotle's senior, advised his young pupil that, while honor with pleasure was a great good, pleasure without honor was the worst evil (*Ad Dem.* 17). Those who put pleasure ahead of honor were considered to be more animal-like than human, ruled by their passions and desires. He also placed the value of honor above one's personal safety (*Ad Dem.* 43), an evaluation that would persist through the centuries. In the first century B.C. a teacher of public speakers held up honor and security as the two primary considerations when trying to win an audience over to

23 (1993): 167-76.

support the course of action the speaker promoted. He recognized, however, that one could never admit a course to be safe but dishonorable and still expect to win (*Rhetorica ad Herennium* 3.5.8–9). Quintilian, a teacher of rhetoric from the late first century A.D., holds up the “honorable” as the fundamental factor in persuading people to adopt or avoid a course of action (*Institutes* 3.8.1); from Aristotle to Quintilian, successful orators were the ones who could demonstrate that the course of action they advocated led to the greatest honor.

Honor and dishonor played a dominant part in moral instruction as well. In his collection of advice *To Demonicus* [*Ad Dem.*], Isocrates repeatedly uses the phrases “it is disgraceful” and “it is noble” (rather than “it is right” or “wrong,” “prof-

itable” or “unprofitable”) as sanctions for behavior. Aversion to disgrace and defense of honor is to guide his student’s conduct in friendships, in enmity, in private life and in public office. One can observe a similar phenomenon in the book of Proverbs (or in other Jewish wisdom literature, like the Wisdom of Ben Sira): the promise of honor and threat of disgrace are prominent goals to pursue a certain kind of life and to avoid many alternatives.² Thus the students of the Jewish sages are led to value giving alms and pursuing

² See also Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.6.26 on the general power of shame for social control: “There are many things which they either do or do not do owing to the feeling of shame which these men [i.e., the public whose opinion matters to the doers] inspire.”

justice in one's dealings with other people, since these lead to honor (Prov 21:21), while they are led to fear adultery, oppression of the poor and disrespect toward parents as the road to disgrace (Prov 6:32-33; 19:26, respectively).

Honor is a dynamic and relational concept. On the one hand, an individual can think of himself or herself as honorable based on his or her conviction that he or she has embodied those actions and qualities that the group values as "honorable," as the marks of a valuable person. This aspect of honor is really "self-respect." On the other hand, honor is also the esteem in which a person is held by the group he or she regards as significant others—it is the recognition by the person's group that he or she is a valuable member of that group. In this regard, it is

having the respect of others. It was a problematic experience when one's self-respect was not matched by corresponding respect from others, but strategies could be developed to cope with discrepancy here. While the powerful and the masses, the philosophers and the Jews, the pagans and the Christians all regarded honor and dishonor as their primary axis of value, each group would fill out the picture of what constituted honorable behavior or character in terms of its own distinctive set of beliefs and values, and would evaluate people both inside and outside that group accordingly.

The meaning of shame is somewhat more complicated. If honor signifies respect for being the kind of person and doing the kinds of things the group values, shame signifies,

in the first instance, being seen as less than valuable because one has behaved in ways that run contrary to the values of the group. The person who puts personal safety above the city's well-being, fleeing from battle, loses the respect of society. His worth is impugned; he "loses face"; he is disgraced and viewed as a disgrace. In a second sense, however, shame can signify a positive character trait, namely a sensitivity to the opinion of the group such that one avoids those actions that bring disgrace. Out of shame of this kind, a woman refuses an adulterous invitation; a soldier refuses to flee from battle.

Those living or reared in Asiatic, Latin American, Mediterranean or Islamic countries have considerable advantage in their reading of the

New Testament in this regard, since many of those cultures place a prominent emphasis on honor and shame. Readers living in the United States or Western Europe may recognize immediately that we live at some distance from the honor culture of the first-century Greco-Roman world (including the Semitic peoples in the East). In our culture the bottom line for decision-making is not always (indeed, perhaps rarely) identifying the honorable thing to do. In the corporate world, for example, the "profitable" frequently acts as the central value. Considerations of right and wrong are also prominent, but these are based on internalized values or norms rather than values enforced by overt approval or disapproval by the larger society. Typically we do not talk about honor and shame much (the one place

where I've recently observed honor as an openly discussed, coordinating value was at a service honoring a newly inducted Eagle Scout), but we do wrestle with "worth," with "self-esteem," with the push and pull of "what other people will think." The vocabulary has greatly receded, but the dynamics are very much still present. We want to know that we are valuable, worthwhile people, and we want to give the impression of being such.³

³ It has been popular in recent literature to characterize the ancient Mediterranean world as an "honor culture" or a "shame culture" in contrast to a "guilt culture," a label often attached to the modern world. (America has also been described as a "rights" culture.) Such lines cannot, however, be drawn in a hard and fast way. The ancient world knew both the

Our move toward individualism (and the accompanying reluctance to communicate openly with others, especially those beyond our circle of acquaintances, friends and kin) has contributed greatly to tempering the dynamics of honor and shame in our culture. We are less likely to openly challenge others or to openly censure them where they transgress values we consider to be central to our group or to the society. Nevertheless, there are aspects of our experience and our culture that do come

experience of shame and feelings of guilt as deterrents to behavior (see Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* [Berkeley: University of California, 1966]), just as the modern person can wrestle both with guilt and shame (see Robert Karen, "Shame," *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1992, pp. 40-70).

deSilva, D. A. (2000). *Honor, patronage, kinship & purity: unlocking New Testament culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

closer to the cultural environment of the first-century world and perhaps can help us get in touch with the social dynamics of that world.

We are aware, for example, of the effects of peer pressure, particularly on adolescents. Those who do not conform are ostracized, insulted and often the targets of physical violence (or at least the threat of violence). All of this is unofficial from the standpoint of the authority figures in the schools, but it is nevertheless a potent force in the lives of the students. Moreover, belonging in one group—conforming to its culture and finding affirmation there—often means conflict with another group. The intellectuals (“geeks”) are a close-knit bunch, affirming one another in their group culture, but their worth as persons comes under the attack of the

more physical crowd (“jocks”), and vice versa. There is also the artsy crowd, the social crowd, the rebel crowd, the drug crowd and so forth. Within each group, peer pressure enforces conformity and castigates difference. Those too deeply touched by the jeers of others may change their whole images to secure approval rather than ridicule. Additionally, those readers who have been exposed to the cultures of gangs, whether in urban or suburban environments, have encountered a culture in which “respect” is a primary value (a greater value than even human life) and “disrespecting” is a challenge that cannot go unanswered.

This is not to suggest that the world in which the early church developed was like an immense high school locker room, nor that Mediterranean

culture was developmentally more primitive than modern culture (something that might be inferred from the adolescent model of peer pressure above). Far from it. That world was every bit as culturally and socially sophisticated as ours and, in some ways, far clearer and more articulate about the values that defined and guided each group. However, we do need to become sensitive to the social dynamics—to the power—of honor and shame in the lives of the first Christians and their contemporaries if we are to hear the texts of the New Testament with their full force. Placing a mental bookmark in our own memories of experiencing (and contributing to) peer pressure can begin to open up those parts of us that are still sensitive to honor and shame to the challenge and the gifts of the Christian Scrip-

tures.

The Vocabulary of Honor

Before we look at the New Testament, we need to learn the language of honor and dishonor in the first-century Greco-Roman world (which includes the Jewish subculture, one of many native cultures that had been absorbed into first the Greek then the Roman empire).⁴ Words like *glory*, *repu-*

⁴ For a fine survey of honor language in 1 Peter, see John H. Elliott, “Disgraced yet Graced: The Gospel According to 1 Peter in the Key of Honor and Shame,” *BTB* 24 (1994): 166–78. Elliott’s rigorous analysis of this letter, particularly his inventory of places where honor and shame language enters into the letter, provides a helpful model for readers to apply to other texts. His work is, in turn, deeply informed by Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, “Honor and

tation (*doxa*), honor (*timē*) and praise (*epainos*), together with verb and adjectival forms, are frequent. Their antonyms, dishonor (*aischunē*), reproach (*oneidos*), scorn (*kataphronēsis*), slander (*blasphēmia*), together with the adjectives and verbs derived from these roots, are also prominent. Such word searches provide a starting place for us to “hook into” the texts as first-century Christians would have, but they are starting places only. Many concepts and terms would also resonate directly with considerations of honor and dishonor for them, but to hear this we have to learn more about these

Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 25–66.

resonances.

First, honor can be ascribed to a person on account of accidents of birth or grants bestowed by people of higher status and power. A person’s parentage and lineage became, in many ways, a starting point for honor: “A person’s honor comes from his father,” wrote Ben Sira ([Sir 3:11](#)), a fact confirmed by the practice of the eulogy, which began celebrating the deceased person’s honor by recalling the honor of his or her ancestors and immediate parents. Thus a person of the “house of David” begins with a higher honor in the Jewish culture than a member of the “house of Herschel,” and thus insults (or assaults on a person’s honor) often involve one’s descent (“You spawn of snakes” [[Mt 3:7](#), my translation]; “You are of your father, the devil” [[Jn 8:44](#), my transla-

tion]). A person's race could also become a factor in the esteem or lack of esteem with which he or she was held. In Judea, *Samaritan* was a term of reproach; in Egypt, native Egyptians were regarded as less honorable than the Greeks who comprised the ruling class. Honor can also be ascribed later in life, whether through adoption into a more honorable family (as Octavian, later the Emperor Augustus, had been adopted by Julius Caesar as a son: Octavian's honor rating rose considerably by that grant), through grants of special citizenship status or through grants of office. All of these are, again, prominent in the New Testament, as Christians are said to be adopted by God, made citizens of heaven and given the honorable office of priesthood (see, for example, [Gal 4:4-7](#); [Phil 3:20](#); [1 Pet 2:9](#)).

Second, honor can be achieved as well as ascribed. In the first instance, this occurs as one persists in being "virtuous" in one's dealings, building up a reputation—a name—for being honorable and embodying virtues prized by the group. Thus the soldier who displays above-ordinary courage is singled out for special honors, the generous benefactor is proclaimed at public festivities and commemorated in inscriptions, the loyal client or friend comes to be known as such and is welcomed by other patrons into the household on that basis, and the Torah-observant Jew is seen to be pious and held in high regard by fellow Jews. Again, the importance of such achieved honor is reflected in the incorporation into the funeral oration of accounts of the virtues of the deceased and the ways in which these virtues

were enacted throughout life. In the second instance, honor can be won and lost in what has been called the social game of challenge and riposte.⁵ It is this “game,” still observable in the modern Mediterranean, that has caused cultural anthropologists to label the culture as “agonistic,” from the Greek word for “contest” (*agōn*).

The challenge-riposte is essentially an attempt to gain honor at someone else’s expense by publicly posing a challenge that cannot be answered. When a challenge has been posed, the challenged must make some sort of response (and no response is also considered a response). It falls to the bystanders to decide whether or not the challenged

⁵ Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” p. 27; Malina and Neyrey, “Honor and Shame,” p. 30.

person successfully defended his (and, indeed, usually “his”) own honor. The Gospels are full of these exchanges,⁶ mainly posed by Pharisees, Sadducees or other religious officials at Jesus, whom they regarded as an upstart threatening to steal their place in the esteem of the people. Consider, for example, [Luke 13:10-17](#):

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.... When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his

⁶ See Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), pp. 44-52, for a fuller discussion of this phenomenon and its appearance throughout Matthew’s Gospel.

hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Jesus’ violation of the prohibition of work on the sabbath day suggests to the synagogue

leader that Jesus claims to be “above the law” (specifically, Torah) on account of his power to heal. The synagogue leader does not cast doubt on Jesus’ abilities in this regard; he assumes it. He does, however, challenge Jesus’ right to perform a work, even a good work, on the sabbath. Even though his words are directed at the crowd, it is nevertheless a challenge directed at Jesus. Jesus offers a piercing response (riposte), pointing out that the synagogue leaders themselves will care for their animals on the sabbath, how much more ought he, then, care for “a daughter of Abraham” (notice the use of genealogy here to highlight the woman’s value). The result, according to Luke, is that Jesus wins this exchange. His rivals lose face on account of their unsuccessful challenge (they are “put to

shame”), while Jesus’ honor in the crowd’s eyes increases (they rejoice at his works).

A second and more complicated example appears in [Mark 7:1–16](#). Jesus’ disciples eat their food without performing a ritual purification of their hands (the Pharisees were not concerned with hygiene but with purity laws), so the Pharisees challenge Jesus’ honor—what kind of teacher can he be if his disciples transgress the revered “tradition of the elders” (that was attaining a status equal to the written Torah)? Jesus responds, this time with a counterchallenge. He challenges the Pharisees’ honor as followers of Torah, citing an instance where their tradition stands in contradiction to the written Torah (indeed, one of the Ten Commandments), allowing him even to apply a devastating quotation from

Isaiah in his riposte. The reader is reminded of the public nature of this exchange as Jesus addresses his last comment to the crowd ([Mk 7:16](#)). Presumably, Jesus has successfully warded off the challenge and even caused his opponents to lose face with the counterchallenge. In telling these stories, moreover, the Gospel writers make the Christian readers into the public that witnesses the exchanges and gives its own verdict on who won and who lost. Their own positive estimation of Jesus (as an honorable person and as a reliable teacher of the way to please God) is confirmed as they read these challenge-riposte stories actively and appraisingly.

Such exchanges basically characterize Jesus’ relationship with the religious leaders and groups with which he is, in essence, in competition.⁷

Even those scribes who appear to ask a polite and “innocent” question are seen actu-

⁷ In Luke’s Gospel alone, see 4:1-13; 5:29-39; 6:1-5, 6-11; 7:1-10 (not hostile); 7:18-23 (not hostile); 7:39-50 (notice that the challenge does not even have to be articulated!); 10:25-28; 11:14-20; 11:37-54; 13:10-17; 14:1-6 (Jesus initiates here); 15:1-32 (the three parables are an extensive riposte here to the Pharisees’ challenge; the series end with the surly older brother refusing to welcome his brother and join the party, a parting counterchallenge aimed at the Pharisees and the scribes); 16:14-18; 19:39-40, 45-48 (Jesus initiates, and the riposte comes at the end of the week!); 20:1-19 (the parable is part of Jesus’ counterchallenge/riposte); 20:20-26, 27-40. In Luke 20:41-47, Jesus closes that last series of exchanges with renewed challenges of his own, which go unanswered until

ally to be posing challenges, trying to trip up Jesus, to cause him, at first, to lose face (and, with it, his following) and, later, to step into a chargeable offense. An individual’s honor can also be on the line, as it were, when the individual receives a gift from a social equal—since failure to reciprocate will result in diminished honor, this is also a challenge-riposte situation, although it is not a hostile one. Hence Isocrates advises his student to “consider it equally disgraceful to be outdone by your enemies in doing injury and to be surpassed by your friends in doing kindness” (*Ad Dem.* 26), that is, to take pains to win when presented either with negative or positive challenges, so that his honor will remain undiminished.

the crucifixion.

In addition to recognizing how a text or speaker weaves in references to topics of ascribed honor or achieved honor, we need also to become aware of how honor and dishonor are symbolized in the physical person, as well as in the “name” or reputation of a person. The way a body is treated is often a representation of honor or dishonor: thus the head of a king is crowned or anointed, but the face of a prisoner is slapped and beaten (e.g., Mk 15:16–20; Lk 22:63–65). Binding, mutilating and eventually killing are also part of the assault on (indeed, the erasure of) the deviant criminal’s honor. The relative placement of bodies is also a representation of honor. Thus a king is often seated on a level higher than others, and subjects bow deeply to the ground before a ruler to acknowledge symboli-

cally the difference in honor and the reverence due the sovereign. Enemies once subjected are thrown at the feet of the victor, as a representation of the new order and relationships established (see 1 Cor 15:24–28; Heb 1:13). Seating order at feasts or in synagogues is an important signal of the relative status of the guests or worshipers. Jesus’ censure of those who vie for the “best seats” is a critique of the honor-seeking customs of his day (Mt 23:6–7; Mk 10:35–37; Lk 14:7–11). Applying Psalm 110:1 to Jesus—“The LORD says to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand’”—fixes Jesus in the position of highest honor in the Jewish and Christian cosmos (Mk 12:35–36; Heb 1:13; 12:2). Clothing also is regularly used as a symbol of one’s honor or status. Thus Esther can exchange her “robes of honor”

for “mourning garments” (Add Esth 14:1-2; 15:1), and King Artaxerxes’ honor is so magnificently displayed in visible signs (seating, garments, tokens of wealth like gold and jewels) that Esther faints upon seeing him (Add Esth 15:6, 11-14).⁸

⁸ See Matthew 11:7-8, where Jesus begins to extol John for having greater honor and worth than anyone, including “those who wear soft robes” in their “royal palaces.” John’s clothing, while reminiscent of Elijah, also defined his status as someone who stood “outside” the social hierarchy of civilization (see also Heb 11:37-38). When the soldiers mock Jesus, part of their sport includes “dressing him up” as the king that, in their eyes, he falsely claimed to be (Mk 15:16-20); their mock coronation is their way of challenging (and negating) his claim to this honor.

In addition to paying close attention to the way bodies are treated, attired and arranged with regard to other bodies, we need to consider the way a person’s name is treated. The name is another place where a person’s honor is symbolized and toward which honor or dishonor can be directed. Praising or “sanctifying” God’s name or making God’s name “known” are expressions for giving God honor or spreading God’s honor (Tob 3:11; 8:5; 11:14; 14:8-9; Mt 6:9; Jn 17:6, 26; Rom 9:17; 15:9). When God’s name is “spoken ill of”⁹ because God’s people disobey God’s commands or live immorally (Rom 2:24; 1 Tim 6:1), God’s people are participating in the dishonoring of God; God’s name is also “spoken ill

⁹ *Blaspheme* means, essentially, to hurt the reputation of someone.

of” by his enemies (Rev 13:6; 16:9), resulting in God’s vindication of his honor through the punishment of those enemies. Doing something or asking for something “in the name” of Jesus invokes Jesus’ honor: good works or service becomes a vehicle for increasing Jesus’ fame, and answered prayers will result in the celebration and spread of Jesus’ honor (i.e., through testimony). The Christians also each have a name, that is, a reputation: Jesus prepares them for the ruin of their “good name” among their neighbors on account of their commitment to Jesus but assures them that the loss of their “good name” here wins them eternal honor before God (Lk 6:22).¹⁰

¹⁰ There are many instances, of course, where the New Testament

Finally, we should mention the ways in which gender roles impinge on conceptions of honorable behavior. In the ancient world, as in many traditional cultures today, women authors merely mention that someone’s name is so-and-so. In these places a name is just a name. Where a name represents a person, or the estimation of a person in the eyes of others, it is a cipher for the honor and worth of that person. The symbolizing of honor in name is ancient, as attested by the very frequent (and almost exclusive) use of *name* in this manner in the Psalms. The psalmists give God honor as they “bless his name,” pray that the “name” of Israel or the “name” of the individual petitioner not “perish forever” (that is, pray that God will preserve the honor and the honorable memory of Israel or the individual), and ask God to obliterate the “name” of their enemies.

and men have different arenas for the preservation and acquisition of honor, and different standards for honorable activity. Men occupy the public spaces, while women are generally directed toward the private spaces of home and hearth. When they leave the home, they are careful to avoid conversation with other men. The places they go are frequented mainly by women (the village well, the market for food) and so become something of an extension of “private” space. In the fifth century B.C., Thucydides wrote that the most honorable woman is the one least talked about by men (*Hist.* 2.45.2). Six hundred years later Plutarch will say much the same thing: a woman should be seen when she is with her husband, but stay hidden at home when he is away (“Advice on Marriage” 9). Both her body

and her words should not be “public property” but instead guarded from strangers. She should speak to her husband and through her husband (“Advice on Marriage” 31–32). In second-century B.C. Jerusalem, Ben Sira is expressing the same delineation of a woman’s sphere and honor (*Sir* 26:13–18).¹¹

¹¹ There are some notable exceptions to this general rule. Judith, the heroine of the apocryphal book bearing her name, wins honor by lulling the general of the enemy troops besieging Israel into a drunken stupor in the expectation of sexual gratification and then beheading him as he slept on his bed. The author of 4 Maccabees depicts a mother urging her seven sons on to accept martyrdom for the sake of God and fidelity to God’s Torah, praising her for being more “courageous” (the Greek word is more like “manly,” being

The reason for this relegation of women to private or nonmale areas is rooted in the based on the word for a male person) than men. Plutarch dedicates a lengthy essay, “On the Bravery of Women,” to stories in which women’s courage (“manliness”) exceeded that of the men around them and is held up as exemplary to men and women alike. Women are therefore certainly not excluded from seeking to embody courage, generosity or justice. Indeed, they are encouraged to be virtuous in these ways as well. Nevertheless, even the courageous heroines mentioned above know that their honor is inseparably linked to the virtue of sexual exclusivity and that damage there will undermine any achievement of honor in another arena. Judith therefore quickly points out that, although she used her charms on General Holofernes, he never actually had her (Jdt 13:6). The

ancient conception of a woman’s place in the world. She is not seen as an independent entity or agent but as embedded in the identity and honor of some male (her father, if she is unmarried, her husband after she marries). If she fails to protect her honor, for example by engaging in extramarital intercourse or by displaying “looseness” by providing males outside her family with her company or her words, she actually brings shame upon her husband or father. A daughter or a wife was regarded as a mother of the seven martyrs also acts to preserve her body from the defiling touch of the soldiers by throwing herself into a fire (4 Macc 17:1), and the author of 4 Maccabees closes his book with a speech by the mother in which she testifies to her chastity throughout life (4 Macc 18:6–9).

point of vulnerability in the man's rearguard against disgrace. It is for this reason that Ben Sira considers the birth of a daughter a liability (Sir 42:9-14) and offers such strong words about the potential loss incurred through women (Sir 26:10-12).

Despite the progressiveness of the New Testament authors with regard to attacking the distinction between Jew and Gentile that was central to Jewish identity, and despite Paul's conviction that even the distinctions between male and female, slave and free, are valueless in Christ (Gal 3:28), we do find a good deal of space given over to promoting (or simply reflecting) the larger society's view of female honor within the pages of the New Testament. Thus 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, where Paul attempts to convince the Corinthian Chris-

tians that women must pray with their heads covered, also reflects the view that female honor is embedded in male honor in naming the husband as the "head" of the wife, who is incorporated conceptually into his "body." Two passages from the pastoral epistles (1 Tim 5:8-12; Tit 2:4-5) attempt to reinforce within Christian culture the values of sexual exclusivity (even for the widow after a first husband has died) and the delineation of the appropriate female sphere as the home. Two passages are repeatedly in the forefront of debate because they appear strongly to forbid female speech in public worship, which has obvious bearing on the issue of ordaining women:

Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also

says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Cor 14:34-35; see also 1 Tim 2:11-12)

These passages continue to be the topic of endless debate, but relevant for our concern here is the fact that they reflect the same conviction articulated by Plutarch, namely that a woman's words are for her husband's ears, not for the public ear.¹²

¹² There is a notable discrepancy between the conception of the congregation as public, as non-kin or outsiders before whom women are to be silent and withdrawn, and the conception of the church as family—related by the blood of Jesus, as it were—throughout the greater part of the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul's chief concern appears to be the impression that will be made on

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The focus of ancient people on honor and dishonor or shame

the visitor to the congregation—the one “outsider.” I would consider it likely that the passages limiting women's public voice and presence are introduced as part of the early church leaders' attempts to show outsiders that the Christian movement is not subversive but inculcates the same “family values” (with regard to women, children and slaves in the household) as the dominant, non-Christian culture. The reason for this is first to diminish the slander against the Christian group (namely that it “turned the world upside down” and was a source of instability and trouble for “good” people), and second, to make the group more attractive to the people around it. Making a concession to ancient cultural values normative for the church in every age seems to me to be erroneous, par-

means that they were particularly oriented toward the approval and disapproval of others. This orientation meant that individuals were likely to strive to embody the qualities and to perform the behaviors that the group held to be honorable and to avoid those acts that brought reproach and caused a person's estimation in the eyes of others to drop. As a group discovered and defined those qualities that it needed its members to display in order for the group to survive, the desire to be honored would

particularly since it is done at the expense of so many passages that speak of the gifting of all believers—including the gift of prophecy being poured out on “sons and daughters,” both slave and free men and women ([Acts 2:17–18](#))—for the building up of the church.

ensure that the members would all do their part to promote the health and survival of the group.

For this reason courage, for example, was held in extremely high regard. In the classical period the safety of a whole city depended on the willingness of its (male) citizens to embrace the dangers of armed conflict, to risk life and limb (quite literally). Both the fallen soldier and the living veteran were therefore honored by the group, while the deserter became a reproach. The desire to be honored and to avoid being disgraced kept most citizen soldiers in the thick of the battle, preferring death with honor to safety with disgrace. Because most public works and civic improvements depended on the initiative of wealthy citizens, generosity (benefaction) was also highly and visibly

honored. The desire for honor made the wealthy willing to part with vast sums of money for the good of the city. The list could go on endlessly: the virtues and behaviors that preserved the order and stability of a culture, and made for its growth and improvement, were rewarded with honor. Those who did their part in both the private and public spheres were affirmed as valuable persons of worth. Those who violated those values, whether through adultery (attacking the stability of the family), through cowardice (undermining the security and the honor of the group), through failing to honor the gods or the rulers (risking the loss of their favors), through ingratitude (being unjust toward the generous and threatening to diminish their willingness to be generous)

were held up to contempt. The group would exercise measures designed to shame the transgressor (whether through insult, reproach, physical abuse, confiscation of property—at worst, execution) so that the transgressor would be pressured into returning to the conduct the group approved (if correction were possible) and so that other group members would have their aversion to committing such transgressions themselves strongly reinforced. Honoring and shaming became the dominant means of enforcing all those values that were not actually legislated and of reinforcing those values that were covered by written laws. ✎

When a particular group lives in relative isolation from other groups—that is, when all the people one is likely to meet in a given lifetime share the

same values and bestow honor and dishonor accordingly—the process of keeping group members committed to the group values is relatively simple and consistent. Retaining the commitment of the next generation is also not a great challenge. They are nurtured in an environment in which there is little, if any, disagreement concerning what behaviors are honorable and what behaviors are disgraceful. They see the social sanctions of praise and shaming applied consistently, and they absorb the group values without question.

This, however, is not the situation of the first-century Mediterranean world,¹³ particu-

¹³ Nor is it the situation of much of the modern world, in which the complexity of maintaining a particular group culture is made all the more challenging by strong

larly in its cities where there is a wide representation of the various cultures available in that world concentrated in a small space. In taking just a cross section of the situation at the time of Jesus or Paul, we find first a dominant culture, that of Hellenism, with its distinctively Greek set of values. This is the dominant culture because all those in power share it, from the emperor in Rome to the local elites in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, even to Herod Agrippa in Palestine. It is also the majority culture, since Hellenism had by this time been penetrating local cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean from Macedonia through Egypt (including Palestine for three centuries). There were, however, many emphases on multiculturalism and pluralism.

deSilva, D. A. (2000). *Honor, patronage, kinship & purity: unlocking New Testament culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

other groups living within this world, trying to preserve their distinctive values while adapting to the necessities of living in a world empire. Prominent among these minority cultures is the Jewish culture. Formerly a dominant culture in its own right, the Judean people had become a subcultural group within empires dominated by other people for six centuries.¹⁴ In Palestine and especially among communities of Jews living in the Diaspora, negotiat-

¹⁴ The century of “independence” under the Hasmonean house (the family of Judas Maccabaeus: see 1 Macc for the establishment of the dynasty) could be considered an exception, save for the fact that by that point already more Jews were living outside of Palestine than within. They were thus still, by and large, living as an ethnic subculture within a larger empire.

ing commitment to Jewish values and making a life in the midst of a Gentile world were challenging tasks. There were also voluntary groups promoting their own set of values and their own distinctive culture. Among this category one would find the Greco-Roman philosophical schools like Stoicism, Epicureanism and Cynicism as well as the early Christian movement.

What made this multicultural environment challenging is the fact that each group defined honorable and dishonorable conduct according to its own distinctive set of values and beliefs. Sometimes these values would overlap (and the strategy of both Jewish and Christian apologists was often to stress the areas of overlap and commonality). Frequently, however, the values would clash. The same behavior that

one group would hold up and reward as honorable, another group could censure and insult as disgraceful, and vice versa. It was difficult to remain committed to the law of Moses when doing so brought ridicule and barred one from being affirmed as honorable by the majority or dominant culture. It was difficult to keep the ideals of Stoicism foremost in one's mind when the majority of people paid little heed to those ideals, scoffed at philosophy and acclaimed those who were rich in external goods (like wealth or crowds of followers or positions of power) rather than in virtue. This made for keen social tension and pressure on the individual member of a particular group.

In order to make this scenario clearer, let us consider the specific example of the plight of Jews in the ancient world

and the ways in which they might negotiate this tension. Within the Jewish culture, observance of God's law, the Torah, was a primary mark of the honorable man or woman. Ben Sira, for example, reaffirms this as the group's core value—the fundamental and foundational source of a person's worth:

What race is worthy of honor?
The human race. What race is worthy of honor? Those who fear the Lord. What race is unworthy of honor? The human race. What race is unworthy of honor? Those who transgress the commandments. Among brothers their leader is worthy of honor, and those who fear the Lord are worthy of honor in his eyes. The rich, and the eminent, and the poor—their glory is the fear of the Lord. It is not right to despise an intelligent poor man, nor is it proper to honor a sinful man. The nobleman, and

the judge, and the ruler will be honored, but none of them is greater than the man who fears the Lord (Sir 10:19–24).

For Ben Sira, keeping God's covenant is the essential ingredient to establishing a person as honorable, while transgression of Torah leaves even the powerful and mighty without true honor.

Even while Ben Sira teaches this saying to his students, however, those students will experience the ridicule and censure of non-Jews precisely because they keep Torah. The law of Moses forbids any kind of dealings with idolatrous worship, and so the honorable Jew never frequents a Gentile temple. The rest of the world, however, regards the paying of proper respect to the gods (namely, the deities depicted by the idols loathed by Jews) as an essential characteristic of the

honorable person—the pious and just person who gives the gods their due. Jews are, in the eyes of the majority, as good as atheists and every bit as dishonorable. Circumcision, the mark revered among Jews as a sign of being included in the covenant of Abraham and the covenant of Moses, was viewed as a barbaric mutilation of the human body by the Greek culture. Moreover, strict observance of Torah means keeping watch over what one eats and, as it came to be applied, with whom one eats. Between the prohibition of idols (which would be present and honored even at a private dinner party given by a Greek or Roman) and the dietary and purity laws of Torah, Jews were severely restricted in their interactions with non-Jews. The majority culture, however, placed a high value on civic unity and on

participation in the life of the city in all its aspects (e.g., religious festivals, business guilds and the like), with the result that Jews appeared to them to keep strictly to themselves and to harbor barbaric suspicions of (or even hatred of) other races. This became another source of ridicule and insult directed against Jews, whose very way of life (the Torah) came to be despised as a body of xenophobic and retrogressive laws.¹⁵

The Jew is thus faced with a disturbing contradiction. If he lives by Torah, he will be honored and affirmed as a valuable member of the community by

¹⁵ Prominent examples of ancient anti-Jewish sentiments can be found in Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 2.121, 258; Tacitus *Hist.* 5.1-5; Juvenal *Sat.* 14.100-104; and Diodorus of Sicily *Bib. Hist.* 34.1-4; 40.3.4.

his Jewish peers, but he will also be regarded with contempt and even find his honor openly assaulted by the majority of the Greco-Roman population. In such a situation it cannot be taken for granted that a Jew will remain such. If he desires the approval and affirmation of the members of the Greco-Roman culture (and the opportunities for advancement, influence and wealth that networking in that direction can bring), he may well abandon his strict allegiance to Jewish values. This was the course chosen by many Jews during the Hellenistic period.¹⁶

¹⁶ See, for example, the eagerness even of priestly families in Jerusalem itself to remove the mark of circumcision, to throw off the Mosaic restrictions on their dealings with a Gentile world, and to achieve status as a Greek city in

Most Jews, however, chose to remain faithful to their ancestral law and customs, and to preserve their culture and its values. To do so, they had to develop strategies for keeping themselves and their fellow

the eyes of the Greek elite in Antioch (1 Macc 1:11-15; 2 Macc 4:7-15; especially noteworthy is 2 Macc 4:15, “disdaining the honors prized by their ancestors and putting the highest value upon Greek forms of prestige”). There are several stories of individuals who apostatized from their Jewish roots and became highly honored and influential in the “larger” arena of politics, for example, Tiberius Julius Alexander, the nephew of the devout Old Testament scholar Philo of Alexandria. Tiberius Alexander, having left behind Torah observance, went on to become prefect of Alexandria and, in A.D. 46-48, governor of the province of Judea.

Jews sensitive to Jewish definitions of the honorable and, at the same time, insulated from non-Jewish verdicts concerning honor and dishonor.

These strategies would be common to many minority cultures attempting to secure the allegiance of their members and to defuse the pressures those members might feel from people outside the group. They can be found at work in Jewish writings, in the writings of Gentile philosophers promoting their way of life, as well as in the early Christian texts called the New Testament.¹⁷ First, group

¹⁷ A detailed analysis of these techniques at work in Plato, Seneca, Epictetus (three Greco-Roman philosophers), Jeshua Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon, and 4 Maccabees (three Jewish works produced between 200 B.C. and A.D.

members need to be very clear about who constitutes their “court of reputation,” that body of significant others whose “opinion” about what is honorable and shameful, and whose evaluation of the individual, really matters. Their eyes need to be directed toward one another, toward their leaders, and, very frequently, toward beings beyond the visible sphere (for example, God or the honored members of the group who have moved to another realm after death) as they look for approval¹⁸—and thus

70) can be found in chapter three of my *Despising Shame*.

¹⁸ The eyes are not always directed “outside” the individual. Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher, is often concerned with empowering moral autonomy—that is, stressing the importance of “self-respect” as the philosopher exam-

ined his or her own life, finds that he or she is indeed walking in the ideals of the philosophy and extending affirmation to himself or herself on the basis of living up to those internalized norms. directed away from those people who do not share the group’s values and whose negative estimation of the group threatens to erode individual commitment. Connecting the opinion or approval of this potentially small body of visible “significant others” to the opinion and approval of a larger or more powerful body of significant others (God, the heavenly hosts, the saints throughout the ages, the church of God in every place) also helps to offset the “minority” status of its values. Adherents to a minority group (such as the church or synagogue) must believe that, even though

ines his or her own life, finds that he or she is indeed walking in the ideals of the philosophy and extending affirmation to himself or herself on the basis of living up to those internalized norms.

the majority of people around them have a different and contrary set of values, the majority is really the deviant body since it doesn't live in line with the cosmic order. The group will then award honor to its members that adhere to the way of life promoted by that group, and use shame and censure to try to bring the wayward members back into line with group values. Members will be encouraged to interact more with, and invest themselves more in, other members of the group. The importance of these relationships must outweigh any advantages that might be perceived in exchanging this network of support and affirmation for the "friendship of the world."

A second critical strategy is, more or less, the mirror image of the first. Group members need to understand (and to

articulate for one another) why the approval or disapproval of outsiders does not matter to the members of the group and why it is no reflection of the group members' true honor and worth. This often takes the form of stressing the ignorance of outsiders who, because they do not know what the group members know about God and God's values, do not have all the facts necessary to make an informed evaluation about anyone's honor or lack thereof. It also involves reminding group members of the shameful conduct of outsiders whose persistence in sin against God and refusal to do what is right in God's eyes marks them as dishonorable people whose opinion can carry no weight (if the despicable despise you, what does that matter?).

When group members do experience insult, scorn and

hostility at the hands of the members of the majority culture, they need to have ways of interpreting this experience positively from within the worldview of the group. For example, perseverance in the face of the shaming tactics of the larger society can become a “noble contest” (akin to an athletic competition) in which giving in is the greatest disgrace and remaining firm is an honorable victory. Rather than being felt as a demeaning, degrading experience, society’s assaults on the group can become an opportunity to show courage or to demonstrate a person’s loyalty to God or to have his or her moral faculty exercised and strengthened. In this way, group members will be insulated against the strong pull the experience of disgrace will have on them and will be protected from being pulled

into the values of the majority culture (which is one of the aims of the shaming techniques).

Finally, the group will use considerations of honor and shame to reinforce for its members what behaviors and goals they ought to pursue, and to dissuade them from any activities or attitudes that will hinder the group’s survival (or the solidarity of its members). In the literary remains of these groups (e.g., the works of Seneca, Ben Sira or Paul), we find the guiding voices of minority cultures motivating their audiences to pursue or leave off particular courses of action based on the affirmation or demonstration that such a course would result either in honor or disgrace. If the course of action promoted by the group leader does not seem to lead to honor as the broader

culture defines it, that leader will frequently offer some defense or explanation for his claim that the course leads to honor where honor lasts forever or “really counts.” In these texts we also find models for behavior being set forward. Some figures are held up as praiseworthy, with the expectation that hearers will be led to emulate that figure in the hope of being recognized themselves as praiseworthy; alternatively, some figures (whether living or past) will be singled out as disgraceful and censurable so that the hearers will be averted from imitating the kind of life he or she embodied.¹⁹

¹⁹ Analysis of these strategies takes us into the study of classical rhetoric. The handbooks on rhetoric written between the fourth century B.C. (Aristotle) and first century A.D. (Quintilian) give

Honor and dishonor, then, are not only about the individ-

modern readers a great tool for understanding how an ancient argument was constructed and how it would affect its hearers—how it would appeal to their minds and their emotions as it sought to lead them to take a certain course of action. These handbooks were written to teach orators how to persuade their hearers to do what the orator wanted them to do. This is helpful because the New Testament texts are in fact all seeking to persuade the hearers to do something: Gospels seek to shape community life and individual behavior, just as epistles and visionary works like Revelation try to move the hearers toward or away from certain actions (or to reinforce certain values). While few New Testament authors are likely candidates for formal rhetorical train-

ual's sense of worth but also about the coordination and promotion of a group's defining and central values, about the strategies for the preservation of a group's culture in the midst of a complex web of

ing, all of them would have had the benefit of the informal training of hearing orators at work, of learning inductively the art of persuasion. Looking at how persuasion happened, and specifically at how orators would appeal to honor in the course of their attempts at persuasion, throws much light on how the New Testament texts would have been heard by, and would have made an impact on, their first-century hearers. For a starting point, please see David A. deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), pp. 14–26.

competing cultures, and about the ways in which honor or dishonor are attained, displayed and enacted. As we keep the dynamics of this rather complex model in mind, however, we can begin to approach the New Testament writings with a much greater sensitivity to how these texts speak to honor-sensitive hearers, develop a distinctively Christian definition of what gives a person worth and value (i.e., makes one honorable), and sustain commitment and obedience to Jesus and his teachings in a largely unresponsive world.

Two

HONOR &

SHAME IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

T*he early Christians proclaimed a message and stood for values that differed from, and indeed contradicted, core values within the dominant Greco-Roman culture as well as the Jewish subculture within which the church arose. Their non-Christian neighbors, therefore, subjected the early Christians to censure and other shaming techniques, designed to bring these deviant people back in line with the values and behaviors held dear by the surrounding culture (whether Jewish or Greco-Roman). The authors of the New Testament devote much of their attention, therefore, to insulating their congregations*

from the effects of these shaming techniques, calling the hearers to pursue lasting honor before that court of God whose verdict is eternal. These authors continue to use the language of honor and shame to articulate the value system of the Christian group, and to build up the church into a court of reputation that will reinforce commitment to those values through honoring those who distinguish themselves in acts of love, service and faithful witness and through censuring those who fail to embody those values.

Twenty-first century churches can learn much that is useful from the New Testament authors with regard to forming vital communities of disciples undaunted in their pursuit of complete obedience to Jesus by the world around them. The study of honor and

shame language in the New Testament feeds directly into the building up of the church now, even as it did in the first century.

Assaults on the Honor of the Early Christians

Jesus gave his followers every indication that attachment to him would make them fall in the estimation of their neighbors:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. (Lk 6:22)

A disciple is not above the teacher... If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! (Mt 10:24-25)

Similarly, John the evangelist recalls that even some prominent and high-placed Jewish leaders believed in Jesus but

kept silent about their convictions because “they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God” (Jn 12:43). And, indeed, being known as a “Christ-follower” did prove to be a source for dishonor and the manifestations of one’s neighbors’ lack of esteem (insult, abuse, assault).

Rarely in the first century were Christians killed (i.e., lynched). Far more rarely were they executed on official orders (Nero’s brief persecution appears to be the only imperial act against Christians in the first century),¹ but very fre-

¹ It is highly contested whether Domitian actually instigated or supported the persecution of Christians. See the penetrating critique of the commonly held view that Domitian was a “second Nero” to the church in Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation:*

quently they experienced the rest of the spectrum of society's strategies for "correcting" those who had deviated from honorable paths. In Jerusalem and Judea, particularly in the years immediately following the resurrection, the Christian movement was identified as a deviant group and suppressed. Its leaders were cajoled, threatened, whipped (their honor publicly assaulted) and even killed ([Acts 4:1-3; 5:17-18, 40-41; 7:54-8:3; 12:1-4; 1 Thess 2:14](#)). Throughout Asia Minor and Greece, Gentile Christians experienced the social pressure of their non-Christian neighbors:

Apocalypse and Empire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 96-132, 171-85; and Adela Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 84-110.

You endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. ([Heb 10:32-34](#))

Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evil-doers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.... Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.... Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be

glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. (1 Pet 2:12; 3:16; 4:12-16)

The references to society's attempts to pressure the Christian "deviants" back into conformity with Greco-Roman or traditional Jewish values could be multiplied indefinitely.² It is

² There are many examples in the New Testament of communities of Christians enduring their neighbors' coercive measures (see Phil 1:27-30; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:13-14; 3:1-4; 2 Thess 1:4-5; Rev 2:9-10, 13). Paul mentions his own endurance of these measures in nearly every

noteworthy that maligning, reproach, beatings, imprisonments and financial ruin are mentioned frequently and explicitly, but lynching or execution only rarely: their neighbors were trying to reclaim these wayward members of their society.

Why should such social pressure be brought to bear on this group?³ To the outsider, this Jesus movement appeared to undermine the sacred and cen-

letter attributed to him.

³ For a more detailed explanation of anti-Christian sentiment and its sources, as well as an analysis of how this sentiment came to expression in one noteworthy manifestation of social pressure (Heb 10:32-34), see my *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SBLDS 152 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 146-64.

deSilva, D. A. (2000). *Honor, patronage, kinship & purity: unlocking New Testament culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

tral values of the society, pulling formerly good and reliable people into a subversive cult. First, the leader figure of the movement was executed in a manner suggestive of sedition: crucifixion was commonly associated with the punishment of political revolutionaries. Greeks and Romans might view Jesus, then, as a rebel who sought to overturn the peace. Jews regarded him as a “deceiver” (a false teacher), a “sorcerer” (his miraculous deeds went unquestioned; the source of the power, however, was a matter of debate)⁴ and a “blas-

⁴ These are labels associated with Jesus in the few rabbinic references to him (see [b. Sanh. 43a; 107b](#)). These labels have important connections with the materials preserved in the Gospels (see especially [Mt 9:34; 10:25; 12:24–28](#) on the charge of sorcery and [Mt](#)

phemer” (the charge that comes out in his trial before the Sanhedrin). Those who elected to follow such a subversive and disgraced man were immediately suspect in the eyes of both audiences.

With regard to Greco-Roman values, the message about this Christ was incompatible with the deeply rooted religious ideology of the Gentile world, as well as the more recent message propagated in Roman

[27:63–64; Lk 23:2, 5, 14](#) on the charge of deceiving the people), suggesting that they preserve accurately the “outsider’s” view of Jesus. On labeling and social control, see Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, “Conflict in Luke-Acts: Labelling and Deviance Theory,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 97–124.

imperial ideology. Hints of the other side of the argument appear in statements made by New Testament authors. Central to the conflict is the fundamental religious shift made by converts to the Christian movement: “You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9). Christians shared the Jewish conviction that there was in fact only one God and that all the gods of the Gentiles were empty nothing. To the pagan, however, these gods were the guardians of the stability of the world order, the generous patrons who provided all that was needed for sustaining life, as well as the granters of individual petitions. The presence of idols throughout and the incorporation of some act of reverence toward the gods into every public festival, every assembly (whether for the

business of the city or the meeting of a trade guild), and every private dinner party was a constant reminder to the individual of the care and protection of the gods—as well as the necessity of giving the gods their due and maintaining their favor. Piety was indispensable to an individual’s good reputation,⁵ especially since reverence toward the gods was interwoven so deeply into the domestic, social, civic and political aspects of Greco-Roman life. Plutarch regarded piety toward the gods (and the

⁵ Isocrates advises his student: “Revere the gods, both by performing sacrifices and keeping your vows. Honor the gods at all times, but all the more at public festivals. This will give you the reputation for being pious and law-abiding” (*Ad Dem.* 13, my translation).

belief in their rule) as the bedrock of government: “It would be easier to build a city without the ground it stands on than to **establish or sustain a government without religion**” (“Reply to Colotes” 31).⁶ The rejection of the gods by the Christians made them “atheists” and colored them as a subversive element in the society, a potential cancer in the body politic.

Strict avoidance of participation in idolatrous worship meant that the Christians would need to remove themselves from much of the public life of their city.⁷ As Ramsey

⁶ Plutarch *Moralia* 1125E, my translation. See the whole paragraph in *Mor.* 1125D-E.

⁷ The early Christians struggled to justify participation in idolatry so that they would not have to sever so many important connections

MacMullen correctly observes: “There existed...no form of social life...that was entirely secular. Small wonder, then, that Jews and Christians, holding themselves aloof from anything the gods touched, suffered under the reputation of misanthropy.”⁸ *First Peter* 4:3-4 captures something of the response from the pagan

with their networks of friends and patrons, their involvement in government and their good name. See, for example, the evidence for this attempt in the negative responses of Paul and John (1 *Cor* 8:1-13; 10:14-22; *Rev* 2:14-15, 20).

⁸ Ramsey MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 40. Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.44) attributes Nero’s ability to get away with scapegoating the Christians to the general unpopularity of the Christians for their “hatred of the human race.”

side: “You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme.” Of course, the author is painting Gentile conduct in the most negative of colors here, so as to reinforce the Christians’ distaste for their own former lives and thus their aversion to returning to that life. Nevertheless, he still captures the essence of one important source of the unpopularity of Christians: their defection from the solidarity they formerly showed with their pagan neighbors at public worship, at public festivals, at social gatherings. Such a violation of that solidarity, and the feelings of rejection and even

indignation it would arouse, is more than enough to motivate unofficial persecution. Seeing their neighbors and former friends defect from that way of life might, additionally, even threaten their own assurance that their own behavior and convictions about the world were ultimately “correct”—a questioning that can result in conversion, of course, but more frequently in hostility. By shaming the defectors they reaffirm the absolute veracity of their own way of life: if they succeed in winning back the “**deviant**,” their own security is also reconfirmed.⁹

⁹ Pliny, governor of Bithynia and Pontus (Roman provinces located in the north and west of what is now Turkey) in A.D. 110–111, expresses a deep satisfaction when his prosecution of those charged with being Christians causes a

To the rejection of their gods and rejection of their lifestyle, the Christians added rejection of their neighbors' very world order. The central conviction of this movement was a revolutionary premise: Jesus would return, put an end to the reign of the current world rulers and establish his own kingdom in their stead.¹⁰ The gospel of revival of traditional Greek and Roman religion in his province (see Pliny *Ep.* 10.96).

¹⁰ Thus to "turned to God from idols," Paul adds "and to wait for his Son from heaven" (1 *Thess* 1:10). The centrality of the return of Christ to take history into his own hands is, of course, everywhere attested in the New Testament (*Mt* 24:5-31 and parallels; *Acts* 3:19-21; *Rom* 13:11-14; 1 *Cor* 15:24-28; *Phil* 3:20; 1 *Thess* 2:12; 2 *Thess* 1:6-10; *Heb* 1:13; 9:28; 10:37-38; 12:26-29; 1 *Pet* 1:5; 4:5, 7; 2 *Pet* 3:7-13; *Rev* 11:15-19; chaps. 19-21).

Jesus was a warning about God ripping into the fabric of society, calling day-to-day life to an abrupt halt and judging all according to the standards of this minority group. It spoke of "wars and rumors of wars," of the self-destruction of the glorious empire, and of cosmic conflagration before a new order was established. The Christians' neighbors, however, placed their hope in the perpetual rule and enforced peace of Rome and her power; for them, the stability necessary to sustain their often precarious existence came from the emperor's careful rule and the protection afforded by legions of soldiers, able to rebuff any assault from without. The inhabitants of the Mediterranean knew all about the ravages of "wars and rumors of wars" and wanted no part of it: the "Roman

peace” was their golden age. Thus apocalypse and empire, “kingdom of God” and “Eternal Rome,” were incompatible ideals, and the group that proclaimed the end of the Roman peace made itself the enemy of the common good.

So much for Gentile anti-Christian sentiments. The non-Christian Jewish population also had strong reasons for attempting to dissolve through erosion of commitment the sect that had grown up in its midst. First, it had grave reservations about Jesus’ way of keeping Torah and his assaults on central Jewish symbols like the sabbath and the temple.¹¹

¹¹ Disagreements about the temple’s importance and the fulfilling of the Torah appear to have been the precipitating factors in the mob lynching of Stephen ([Acts 6:13-14](#)).

When Jews became Christ-followers, their Jewish families might feel the social pressure to cut them off, so as to say to their neighbors, “We do not approve of what they do. Do not attach their shame to us.”¹²

¹² Jerome H. Neyrey writes that those who lost property and possessions, who fell into poverty because of their attachment to Jesus, who were estranged from their families and basic support base “would not be the objects of compassion or sympathy. They got what they deserved, because they did not suffer ‘misfortune’. They experience shame from family and kin for their rebellion against family tradition” (Neyrey, “Loss of Wealth, Loss of Family and Loss of Honour: The Cultural Context of the Original Makarisms in Q,” in Philip F. Esler, *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Its Context* [London: Routledge, 1995], p. 156).

Jesus clearly anticipated that many of his followers might face bearing this cost (Mt 10:34-37; 19:29). Second, the non-Christian Jews took exception to the way in which Jewish Christians lowered the boundaries between themselves and the Gentiles. Thus Paul discerns the primary aim of Jewish persecution to be “hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved” (1 Thess 2:16).

Separation from the Gentiles was a core value of Jewish culture from the beginning. When Jews desired to “become like the Gentiles” again, assimilating to Gentile culture and breaking down the boundaries, disaster overtook the people of Israel. This truism of history was deeply reinforced for the Jews by the events of 175-164 B.C., in which the Jewish leadership sought to make Jerusalem

a fully Greek city and stamp out the customs (like circumcision, monolatry and dietary regulations) that separated Jews from the larger world in which they wanted to become players. When resistance grew, the Hellenistic overlord Antiochus IV took measures to enforce this policy, and a brutal period of oppression ensued: “Those whose ways of living they admired and wished to imitate completely became their enemies and punished them” (2 Macc 4:16). Only after many Jews suffered heroic martyrdom (rather than transgress Torah) and many others fought successfully alongside Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers was peace and Torah observance restored.

Those who wrote about this period used it to teach the lesson that neglect of Torah and the marks of the covenant

for the sake of making it easier to relate to Gentiles only leads to national disaster.¹³ When Paul, therefore, proclaims that circumcision is meaningless in God's sight, urges Jewish Christians to eat freely with Gentile Christians rather than to keep kosher (or force the Gentiles to keep kosher so that they can have table fellowship), and declares that the dividing wall of hostility has been broken (Eph 2:14), he is striking at the heart of what it means to be

¹³ See the full accounts, with their interpretation, in 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees; for an analysis of the latter text and its reinforcement of the basic Deuteronomic conviction that transgression of Torah leads to disaster, see David A. deSilva, *4 Maccabees, Guides to the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 134–41.

Jewish. To prevent this new outbreak of Torah neglect, non-Christian Jews act speedily to shower the leaders and their followers with disapproval and disgrace in the hope of cauterizing the open wound on the body of Israel. Because of this persecution, some Jewish Christians attempt to Judaize the Gentiles in their midst (Gal 5:11; 6:12) and put their non-Christian Jewish neighbors, friends and relations at rest.

For these and other reasons the Christians' neighbors sought to dissuade them by any means available from continuing in this deviant way of life and to return to being "decent" people who supported the values and stability of Greco-Roman society.¹⁴ We find, there-

¹⁴ Thus, John H. Elliott rightly says: "The nature and weapons of the attack on the Christians is a classic

deSilva, D. A. (2000). *Honor, patronage, kinship & purity: unlocking New Testament culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

fore, the New Testament authors responding in varying degrees to two critical issues arising from this situation. First, since the values of the new community are, at many points, radically different from the values of the dominant culture (or Jewish ethnic sub-culture) in which the converts were first reared, the leaders of the group must be attentive to the persistence in the new community of those old definitions and models of what is honorable and how honor is

example of public shaming designed to demean and discredit the believers in the court of public opinion with the ultimate aim of forcing their conformity to prevailing norms and values (“Disgraced yet Graced: The Gospel According to 1 Peter in the Key of Honor and Shame,” *BTB* 24 [1994]: 170).

attained, maintained and displayed. Thus, a fair portion of these texts is dedicated to reinforcing the group’s definition of what makes a person honorable as opposed to what other cultures promote as honorable behavior. Second, the New Testament authors address the potentially erosive effects of the dominant culture’s negative evaluation of the group members (expressed at the light end of the continuum by reproach, moving through abuse, disenfranchisement and the occasional lynching at the heavy end), while at the same time attempting to strengthen the “alternative court of reputation” so that members will continue to pursue honor in terms of the group’s values.¹⁵

¹⁵ The following discussion will proceed thematically; readers interested in detailed analysis of

The Case of Jesus

The very story at the center of the church's faith already

honor discourse at work in a specific New Testament text should consult David A. deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), which contains exegetical essays on Matthew, John, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Hebrews, and Revelation. Elliott's article "Disgraced yet Graced" focuses on 1 Peter. Excellent discussions on Romans can be found in Halvor Moxnes, "Honor, Shame, and the Outside World in Paul's Letter to the Romans," in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 207-18, and Halvor Moxnes, "Honour and Righteousness in Romans," *JSNT* 32 (1988): 61-77. Jerome H. Neyrey's commentary, *2 Peter, Jude*, AB 37C (New York:

forces a decision concerning the reliability of the world's estimation of honor and shame. Jesus suffered crucifixion, known as an intentionally degrading death, fixing the criminal's honor at the lowest end of the spectrum and serving as an effective deterrent to the observers, reminding them of the shameful end that awaits

Doubleday, 1993), affords excellent insights into all the cultural backgrounds of those short texts. By far the most innovative and accessible study of honor and shame in Paul is Robert Jewett, *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998). Jewett interacts not only with Pauline texts and critical scholarship, but he uses the popular medium of film as a way of connecting Paul's message about honor with the concerns of twentieth-century Western culture.

deSilva, D. A. (2000). *Honor, patronage, kinship & purity: unlocking New Testament culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

those who similarly deviate from the dominant culture's values.¹⁶ Paul no doubt understated the case when he referred to the proclamation of this cross as the wisdom of God as a "stumbling block" to Jews and "folly" to Gentiles. No member of the Jewish community or the Greco-Roman society would have come to faith or joined the Christian movement without first accepting that God's perspective on what kind of behavior merits honor differs exceedingly from the per-

¹⁶ Martin Hengel provides a detailed description of the humiliation attached to this form of execution in his book, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); see also Jerome H. Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross," *Semeia* 68 (1996): 113-37.

spective of human beings, since the message about Jesus is that both the Jewish and Gentile leaders of Jerusalem evaluated Jesus, his convictions and his deeds as meriting a shameful death, but God overturned their evaluation of Jesus by raising him from the dead and seating him at God's own right hand as Lord.

The evangelists had also, in many respects, provided resources to buttress the community against the outsiders' view of their leader. They present Jesus as an honorable figure whose opponents were in fact acting dishonorably in seeking his demise. Many of the features of the encomium, the funeral speech in praise of the deceased, are addressed by the Gospels:¹⁷

¹⁷ *Encomia* focused on the origins, nurture and advantages-by-birth

those who were accustomed to hearing encomia would also understand how the Gospels were constructing encomia in

of the individual, the virtues manifested by the subject in his or her deeds, and the kind of death the subject died. The chief sources for information on encomia are the rhetorical handbooks (*The Rhetorica ad Herennium*

3.6.10–3.8.15 contains a strikingly complete outline; see also the discussion of Theon of Alexandria’s advice on giving funeral speeches in Henri I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* [New York: Mentor, 1964], pp. 272–73); fuller discussions of the Gospels as encomiastic biography can be found in my *Hope of Glory*, chaps. 2 and 3; a fine, comprehensive survey of Matthew from this standpoint can be found in Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

praise of the dead-yet-living leader of the Christian group. The birth stories in Matthew and Luke present Jesus as the descendent of the most noble stock in Israel (Mt 1:1–16; Lk 1:27, 32, 69) and at the same time reach to Jesus’ divine parentage (Mt 1:18–20; Lk 1:35; Jn 1:1–18). These same infancy narratives affirm that he was set apart by God for a special and noble destiny, namely the deliverance of his people and of the world (Mt 1:21; Lk 1:32–33; 2:10–11; Jn 4:42). Angelic messages and astronomical omens (i.e., the star) enhance this impression. The Gospels are filled with accounts of Jesus’ “deeds of virtue,” chiefly his acts of healing and exorcism, which are acts of beneficence and result in the increase of his fame.¹⁸ It is those who

¹⁸ On Jesus’ healings and on his

oppose Jesus who are shown at every turn to be dishonorable: they refuse to give God his due (Mt 21:33-44); instead of continuing to act openly against Jesus, like honest people, they retreat to acting secretly in their efforts to dispose of him (Mt 26:3-5, 14-16, 59-61); ultimately, their motives are attributed to “envy,” a mark of dishonorable people (Mt 27:18).¹⁹

death as acts of benefaction, see chapter four.

¹⁹ See the discussion of the emotions of envy and emulation in Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.10-11: Aristotle regards “emulation” (somewhat, but not exactly, akin to jealousy) as an emotion of the virtuous, since when these people observe others in possession of good things, they fit themselves to acquire the same (the result being, they better themselves), while “envy” is an

While the outside world might regard his crucifixion as a shameful death that signaled his opponents’ defeat of their rival, the evangelists present Jesus’ death in such a way that reader will clearly understand it as a noble death. Those who died to bring benefit to others or to save others from danger (such as soldiers on the battlefield, who die to preserve the people back home) were understood to have died honorably: they laid down their lives voluntarily to benefit their friends or fellow citizens, displaying their virtue in death more clearly than most display in life. The materials preserved by the evangelists explicitly address these topics. First, they emphasize the voluntariness of

emotion of the dishonorable, since they wish to deprive the virtuous of the fruits of their virtue.

Jesus' death: "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:18). Jesus' foreknowledge of his death,²⁰ even of the very hour of his betrayal and arrest,²¹ the prayer in Gethsemane (Mt 26:39, 42; Mk 14:36), and Jesus' power in the midst of arrest (Mt 26:52-53; Jn 18:3-11) all emphasize that Jesus laid down his life for others voluntarily. It was a gift, not a defeat. Second,

²⁰ This is seen most prominently in the passion predictions (Mk 8:31; 9:30-31; 10:32-34 and parallels in Mt and Lk; Jn 3:14-15). The journey to Jerusalem is presented explicitly as a voluntary procession to the cross.

²¹ See Matthew 26:18, 21, 31-32, 45; in John, this is his knowledge of "the hour" (Jn 2:4; 7:6-8; 12:23; 13:1, 11, 18-30). In this last passage, Jesus even takes the lead in sending his betrayer out to do the job.

the Gospels emphasize that Jesus accepted death specifically with a view to benefiting others: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Jesus dies in order to bring about forgiveness of sins, a fact celebrated not only in the Gospel story but in the central ritual of the Christian group, namely the Eucharist (Mt 26:27-28; 1 Cor 11:23-26; see also Jn 1:29; Heb 10:1-10). Jesus' death "on behalf of [his] sheep" brings them eternal life (Jn 3:14-17; 10:10-11, my translation). The death of Jesus was in every respect, then, an honorable death, despite the vehicle by which it was effected. The failure on the part of the world to understand this fact speaks of their ignorance, not Jesus' degradation.

The New Testament defense, as it were, of Jesus' honor

affects the early Christians in several important ways. God's affirmation of being "well pleased" with Jesus (God's only two direct communications in the Synoptic Gospels; see [Mt 3:17; 17:5](#)), an affirmation that is finalized in God's raising of Jesus from the dead (overturning human estimations of Jesus: [Acts 2:32, 36; 3:14-15](#)), assures those who hear him and follow his way that they are the people who truly please God, whose honor God will likewise vindicate on the last day. In the paradigm of the maligned group leader who, rejected by society, becomes God's right-hand regent, the Christians come to terms with their own relationship to society's approval. At the close of the parable of the wicked tenants, Jesus cites [Psalm 118:22-23](#) as a scriptural warrant for this paradigm: "Have you not read

this scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?'" ([Mk 12:10-11](#)). What human beings reject as worthless and dishonored by a marvel of divine intervention appears at the top of the honor scale.

Jesus' case becomes then the demonstration of the ignorance and upside-down mentality of the society, as well as the guarantee of the reversal and vindication that God will grant to all Jesus' followers. As such, it becomes a precedent that will be applied to the Christian group members as well. Particularly interesting is the application of [Psalm 118:22-23](#) first to Jesus and then seamlessly to the situation of believers in [1 Peter 2:4-8](#):

Come to him, a living stone,
though rejected by mortals yet

chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." Honor, then, is for you who believe;²² but for those who do not

believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

The author has described Jesus in [1 Peter 2:4](#) as a "stone...rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight," a description combining echoes of [Psalm 118:22-23](#) with

²² I have replaced the "To you then who believe, he is precious" with "Honor, then, is for you who believe." Translators of this passage from the KJV on have been reading the adjective "precious" (*entimon*) from vv. 4 and 6 into v. 7, where, however, the author has shifted to the related noun "honor" (*timē*). Since two adjectives exist (*entimos*, *timios*) for "precious," and the author of 1 Peter has chosen to use neither of these in favor of employing the noun, I must conclude that we

have here a fossilized translation error passed down through the generations of translators. First Peter has, instead, moved the discussion forward in v. 7 from the "preciousness" of Jesus to the "honor" that belongs to believers, and to the dishonor that will befall the unbelievers. This reading also preserves the parallelism between [2:7a](#) and [2:7b](#): "to you...who believe...for those who do not believe..."

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[Isaiah 28:16](#). This second passage, which is then explicitly quoted in [1 Peter 2:6](#), ends by promising that “whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” The addressees of 1 Peter, currently being intentionally shamed by their neighbors (see above), are thus told that their trust in Jesus will result in their future vindication. Verse 7 makes this conclusion even more explicit: “Honor, then, is for you who believe,” just as honor came to the One who had been “rejected by mortals.”

The author of Hebrews also appeals to the example of Jesus as a warrant for his audience to set aside their concern for society’s negative evaluation of and response to them: just as Jesus “despised shame” (that is, understood the folly of society’s attempts to shame him and divert him from his goal)

and thus arrived at his seat at the right hand of God ([Heb 12:2](#)), so the Christians are not to “grow weary” as they struggle against the pressures they face ([Heb 12:3-4](#)).²³ The fact that, after voluntarily humbling himself in obedience to God, Jesus was exalted to the place of greatest honor by God ([Phil 2:5-11](#)) becomes a warrant for believers also to humble themselves in the assurance that God will look after their honor and manifest it in the future ([Phil 2:1-4](#)). Here Paul appeals to Jesus’ example

²³ [Hebrews 11](#) presents several examples of those heroes of faith who similarly embraced temporary disgrace in the world’s eyes in order to remain faithful to God and receive the honors God had appointed for them. For a detailed analysis of this theme in Hebrews, see my *Despising Shame*, chap. 4.

specifically to curtail competition and rivalry over status within the Christian movement, showing that the precedent of Jesus was as useful for regulating relationships within the group as for strengthening the group against erosion from without.

Convening the Court of Reputation

Like the leaders of other minority cultures in the first century, New Testament authors were also careful continually to point the members of the Christian group away from the opinion that non-Christians might form of them toward the opinion of those who would reflect the values of the group and reinforce the individual's commitment to establish his or her honor and self-respect in terms of those group values. It is this latter group that must

constitute the "court of reputation," the sole body of significant others whose approval or disapproval should be important to the individual.

Most prominent within this court of reputation is God, whose central place is assured because of God's power to enforce his estimation of who deserves honor and who merits censure. Jesus brings this powerfully to expression in the well-known saying: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" ([Mt 10:28](#)). In executing the deviant, the society bestows the fullest measure of disgrace and disapproval, but Jesus considers society's "worst" as trivial compared to the punishment coming to those who merit God's verdict of "deviant" and "dishonorable." God's power to place the

final stamp of approval or censure is brought into sharp focus by the conviction that God has appointed a day (see [Acts 17:31](#))—the Day of Judgment—when he will hold the whole world accountable to his standards. On that day, God will award grants of honor to those who have lived to please him and heap disgrace upon those who have lived contrary to his values. The belief in a Day of Judgment is foundational to the elevation of God’s estimation of the individual as the opinion of first importance: “We make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” ([2 Cor 5:9-10](#)). At that time God will also bring all secret things to light and thus make a reliable

assessment of nobility and lack of nobility, or worth, possible ([1 Cor 4:3-5](#)).

Commendation on that day is the only commendation that ultimately matters, so that Christians are throughout the New Testament urged to live so as to “be found blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones” ([1 Thess 3:13](#), my translation),²⁴ and so

²⁴ Note how Paul in this verse draws a picture of those who will witness the evaluation of the believer: God, Jesus and “all his holy ones.” Whether these holy ones are construed as angelic beings, as is made explicit in Jesus’ vision of this scene in [Matthew 16:27](#) (angels were also called “holy ones” in early Jewish apocalypses like 1 Enoch), or as the human believers who had died or even who are gathered together from

as to hear the words “well done, good and faithful servant” pronounced by the mouth of the Master (Mt 25:14–30). Indeed, the more focused the individual believer is made to be on receiving that commendation on the day of visitation, and the more concerned he or she is made to be about not falling into the group at the “left hand” of the Judge (Mt 25:31–46)—the group that is rebuked as “wicked and lazy,” “worthless” or “evildoers” (Mt 25:26, 30; 7:23)—the more firmly committed he or she will be to remaining loyal to the group and to embodying the behaviors and virtues it promotes so as to be “pleasing in his

every place on that day (see Mk 13:26–27), the arena is filled with observers, making the possibility for honor—and for disgrace—on that day great indeed.

sight” (Heb 13:20–21). In this way they will be enabled to “have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming” (1 Jn 2:28).

In order to sharpen this focus on God’s approval or disapproval, and thus to keep the believers’ ambitions focused on securing their honor through pleasing God rather than by surrendering to society, New Testament authors frequently remind the churches that God’s grants of honor or dishonor are of far greater significance than human affirmation or censure. Thus Paul carries out his ministry strictly with a view to pleasing God, not people—whether they are his potential converts or his Jewish-Christian colleagues with a stricter sense of Torah’s application in the new community (Gal 1:10; 1 Thess 2:4–6). Similarly, believers are

instructed to live for God's approval rather than human approval. They are to seek the circumcision of the heart that God values rather than circumcise their flesh so as to gain the approval of conservative Jewish Christians (Rom 2:29). They are to seek God's approval by their pious actions (whether prayer, fasting or almsgiving) rather than engage these actions for the sake of human approval (Mt 6:1-18).²⁵

²⁵ The reason for this is not just purity of motive, although this is important. It is also crucial that the Christian not continue to seek the approval of his or her non-Christian neighbors on the basis of religious activity, since this would draw him or her back into the piety of the pre-Christian existence for the sake of pleasing the neighbor and recovering a good reputation.

These authors repeatedly underscore the contrasting, indeed often contradictory, courses of action commended by God and one's society: "What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God" (Lk 16:15). Awareness of this difference continues to insulate believers against society's attempts to shame them, since the Christians know they pursue a more lasting and significant grant of honor. In John's Gospel, concern for the estimation of other people cripples discipleship: "How can you believe when you accept glory [honor, *doxa*] from one another and do not seek the glory [honor, *doxa*] that comes from the one who alone is God?" (Jn 5:44). Those among the Jewish leaders who "loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God" keep their belief in Jesus hid-

den from their colleagues so as not to lose face in the Jewish community (Jn 12:42-43). Such concern for reputation among humans, however, poses the greatest threat to one's reputation before God: "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven" (Mt 10:32-33). Those who keep their eyes on honor at the last day will thus be emboldened to witness boldly to their association with Jesus and with the way of life he taught, so that they, in turn, will receive his testimony before the "court of reputation" whose verdict is eternal.

By focusing on God's approval, the Christian's desire will be to "live up to (walk in a manner worthy of) the gospel"

or "the Lord" (see Eph 4:1; Phil 1:27; Col 1:10; 2 Thess 1:11-12) rather than living up to the expectations and standards of the cultures they left behind. The opinion of those who award honor and censure by standards alien to the Christian culture is bracketed as being of no real concern. Occasionally one finds in the New Testament that even some inside the new community still evaluate worth based on the world's values. When sisters or brothers judge "from a human point of view," their opinion of the worth of their fellow believer must be disregarded as well.

How can God's affirmation (or disapproval) be experienced by the believer? Certainly we should not overlook the possibility of the direct experience of this through prayer and through the practice of the presence of God. God's direct

affirmation of Jesus, the Son “with whom I am well pleased,” in [Matthew 3:17](#) and [17:5](#), for example, encourages the possibility that the testimony of the believer’s conscience can provide important reassurance of God’s affirmation in the midst of the experience of unbelievers’ censure ([Rom 8:16–17](#); [1 Jn 3:21–22](#)).

Another important channel of access to God’s estimation is Scripture, which James insightfully likens to a mirror ([Jas 1:22–25](#)). As the Scripture is read, the individual believer sees his or her conduct and commitments reflected in what the oracles of God declare to be pleasing in God’s sight, or perhaps sees his or her behavior and attachments reflected in what God censures in the record of divine revelation. Thus “gazing intently, looking into the perfect law of God” as

if into a mirror shows the person a reflection of God’s approval or disapproval of the individual’s conduct. The person who acts in accordance with what he or she sees in the word of God “will be blessed in what he or she does,” that is, enjoy God’s approval and favor ([Jas 1:22–25](#), my translation).

Perhaps the most prominent vehicle envisioned by the authors of the New Testament for the individual believer’s awareness of when he or she stands in honor before God or merits divine censure is the community of faith. Paul models how the community of faith can reflect God’s evaluation of the believer in the thanksgiving sections that begin most of his letters (see, for example, [Rom 1:8](#); [1 Cor 1:4–9](#); [Col 1:3–8](#); [1 Thess 1:2–10](#); [2:13–16](#)). By thanking God for certain qualities exhibited by these congrega-

tions, or for certain activities that they have been engaging, he affirms that those qualities and activities are indeed pleasing in God's sight—indeed, a blossoming of virtue that is the very work of God's Spirit in their midst. Hearing their leaders' commendations and rebukes, couched as these are in terms of what is honorable or censurable in God's eyes, also brings the believers before the divine "court of reputation," as it were, identifying for them where they have a strong claim to honor and where their honor is threatened. For this reason it is important that the early churches esteem their leaders (see [1 Thess 5:13](#)), particularly local leaders, not only because their service merits the honor of the group but because they have a primary responsibility for keeping the group members mindful of

God's standards, calling back the wayward.

One's fellow believers will be the most visible and, in many senses, the most available reflection of God's estimation of the individual, and so the New Testament authors are deeply concerned with building up a strong community of faith that will reinforce individual commitment to the group.²⁶ John, for example, effectively reduces Jesus' commandments to one, name-

²⁶ On the role of a community committed to the same worldview and ethos in sustaining the commitment of each individual member of the community to "see" the world the same way and internalize the same values, see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of a Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), chaps. 1 and 2.

ly, that the Christians “love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12; 13:34; see also Paul’s emphasis on this mutual love in 1 Thess 3:12; 4:9–10). The bonds between believers should be so strong—the affective ties so firm—that an individual believer would be willing to lay down his life for the sake of a sister or brother in the faith (Jn 15:12–13; 1 Jn 3:16). Such a lofty principle calls for directions for practical application, and John provides this:

How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (1 Jn 3:17–18)

The Christian group is called to share, to serve, to support one another as Jesus gave himself for them—unselfishly and

without reservation. Writing to addressees who had known the full range of society’s deviancy-control techniques (short of mob lynching or legal execution; Heb 12:4), the author of Hebrews captures even more completely the essence of the kind of community that enables its members to withstand social pressure:

Let mutual love [“fraternal love,” *philadelphia*] continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. (Heb 13:1–3)

The author invokes the ethos of kinship, specifically the love characteristic of siblings, which represented the pinnacle of friendship and the most

enduring and intimate of relationships.²⁷ Adopting a kinship ethic meant mutual sharing of resources as any had need, as well as a firm commitment to one another. They were to be family, a call that was all the more essential given the networks of relationships that a believer could potentially lose in the ancient world. This kinship was to extend beyond the local group to the provision of hospitality to traveling sisters and brothers. Hospitality in the early church served to create strong bonds between local churches, facilitating communication and mission work between churches and allow-

²⁷ Aristotle includes his discussion of fraternal love within his discussion of friendship (*Nic. Eth.* 8.12.1–8 [1161b11–1162a34]); see also Plutarch “On Fraternal Affection” (*Mor.* 478–490).

ing an itinerant leadership to keep linking local cells together. The love of sisters and brothers of Christ is most needed where the censure of society is most keenly felt. The author therefore urges the hearers to reach out to those most acutely targeted by the society for deviancy-control techniques, letting them know that the family they joined will not desert them, and letting each other know at the same time that their bond is stronger than society’s hostility.

This kind of intense in-group reinforcement and mutual commitment makes the verdict of the group, not the verdict of society, the one of ultimate importance for the individual caught in-between. The strong affection and support within the group makes these relationships primary for each member—he or she would

be more willing to sacrifice relationships with outsiders than lose face before the people the member really cares about, and whose commitment to each other is “to the death.” Once the community of faith becomes the primary reference group for the individual believer, then mutual exhortation can have its full effect. Members can reinforce for one another and stimulate one another on to what constitutes honor in God’s sight and in the sight of the group, dissuading one another from what would bring shame (see [1 Thess 5:11, 14](#); [Heb 3:12-13](#); [10:24-25](#)).

The local congregation, moreover, is part of a matrix of such cells empire-wide, and New Testament authors will frequently call the local church’s attention to this fact. Frequently this happens simply through greetings being

passed on from one church or group of churches to another ([Rom 16:16](#); [1 Cor 16:19](#)), or the mere mention of the activities happening in other churches (such as the endurance of hostility; [1 Thess 2:14-16](#)) or in conjunction with other churches (such as the collection effort, which unites the churches of Macedonia and Achaia in a group relief effort; [2 Cor 8:18-24](#)). Such mention keeps the local cell aware that it is part of a much larger movement and not an insignificant group. Authors may also call attention to this global network to remind a local congregation that its dedication to Christ and the group has won it fame abroad in these other cells ([1 Thess 1:6-10](#); [2 Thess 1:3-4](#)), so that the believers are compensated for the loss of esteem they suffer in their neighbors’ eyes by the fame they win in

the eyes of Christians empire-wide. Paul will even call a local congregation to take up a certain course of action out of concern for its honor in the eyes of the other congregations of believers (2 Cor 8:24; 9:1-5), and also to conform to the norms followed by the larger Christian culture (1 Cor 7:17; 11:16; 14:33).

Christians can remain committed to “walking as Jesus walked,” to bearing witness to the author of their salvation, and to standing by the community of those called out by God as they set their hearts fully on being approved by God and seeking honor before God, Christ and the holy angels on that day when all shall be judged by God. Because the unbelievers will use the power of shaming to impose their values on the believers, and to call them back to a way of life

that supports and perpetuates the values of the non-Christian culture, it is imperative that the believers’ sense of worth be detached from the opinion of unbelievers. Rather, their engagements with one another, their mutual esteem and support, and their awareness of the many who affirm them in their Christian commitment (God, the angelic hosts, the church throughout the world, the people of faith throughout the ages)²⁸ will strengthen

²⁸ John uses these topics to great advantage in Revelation. By describing at length in chapters 4 and 5 the celestial liturgy and the ranks of myriads of angelic beings who worship the one God and the Lamb, and by extending those circles to include all creatures in heaven and on earth and under the earth, he makes the idolatrous members of the majority culture

them for the journey.

Invalidating the Opinion of Outsiders

As the Christians are looking away to God's approval, New Testament authors also explain why the approval or disapproval of outsiders should not matter to the members of the group, or why it is no reflection

look very much like the minority, cosmically speaking (for example, when they finally appear in [Rev 9:20-21](#) as those who will not abandon their deviant way of life), who are powerless in the face of the God and the Lamb they affront ([Rev 6:15-17](#)). The Christians are thus emboldened to see themselves as the "normal" ones and the idolaters as the "deviants," and thus remain true to their convictions despite the hostility they encounter and losses they face. For a more detailed discussion, see deSilva, *Hope of Glory*, pp. 184-90.

of the group members' true honor and worth. Usually this takes the form of stressing the ignorance of outsiders or their shamelessness.

Those who do not have faith do not have all the facts necessary to make an informed evaluation concerning what is honorable and what is censurable. The non-Christians are therefore frequently said to be "in darkness" and even "of the darkness" ([Jn 8:12](#); [12:46](#); [Eph 4:17-20](#); [1 Thess 5:3-8](#)) as opposed to being enlightened ([2 Cor 4:1-6](#); [Heb 6:4](#); [10:32](#)) or "children of light" ([1 Thess 5:5](#)). This contrast stresses the fact that outsiders lack essential information—for example, the fact that God's judgment is soon coming ([1 Thess 5:1-3](#)) or God's standards of what is honorable conduct ([1 Thess 4:1-5](#)). The fact remains, however, that God's judgment is impending: when

it arrives, those who now in ignorance oppose the Christian movement will be made aware of their error and their shame while the “children of light” enter into their honorable destiny. Christians make their choices and evaluations with the full benefit of this knowledge and so are in a better place to understand what is praiseworthy and to pursue and achieve it. This topic appears in the Gospels as well. As Jesus censures the Pharisees as “blind guides,” for example, the disciples of Jesus can apply the critique to the disciples of the Pharisees and their descendants, the rabbis (Mt 23:16-17, 19, 24). Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees’ “ignorance” of what God requires of those who would keep God’s covenant assures the Christian readers that their way of keeping Torah—the way taught by

Jesus, in whose resurrection by God one sees God’s affirmation of his instruction—is in fact the way that pleases God, despite the assertions of their rivals to the contrary.

The ignorance of outsiders comes to expression in several other ways as well. New Testament authors may specifically target their inability to form reliable estimations of people. Both John and Paul, for example, contrast those who “judge by appearances” with God, who judges by the heart (Jn 7:24; 2 Cor 5:12). God had already spoken a definitive word in 1 Samuel 16:7 on this point that the heart, and not the outer person, provides the true criterion of assessment. The opinion of outsiders is thus based on flawed premises and is not a reliable guide for the believers to follow if they hope to be found truly honorable when

God comes to judge. Their ignorance, moreover, is attributed both to delusion but also to purpose. Because they “refused to love the truth and so be saved” and “took pleasure in unrighteousness,” God intensifies the delusion that holds them in darkness, with the result that God will ascribe dishonor to them on the Day of Judgment (2 Thess 2:10–12). The society’s resistance to the Christian group is thus transformed completely from an experience of shaming that might weaken the believer’s resolve, into a demonstration of the society’s alienation from the truth and God’s verdict of condemnation on the outsiders.²⁹

²⁹ The author of Hebrews also affirms that the world’s rejection of the virtuous, faithful people of God is not a reflection on the believers’ honor but rather shows

The negative evaluation outsiders form of and enforce on Christians is offset not only by considering the ignorance of these unbelievers, such that they are unable to form a reliable evaluation of worth, but also their dishonorable conduct, indeed, their utter shamelessness in the light of God’s revelation of God’s standards.³⁰

the unbelievers’ dishonor. Concerning those most pushed out to the margins and most pressured by a hostile world he says, “The world was not worthy of them” (Heb 11:38, my translation).

³⁰ Paul captures both reasons to disregard the unbelievers’ estimation of one’s conduct in Ephesians 4:17–20: “Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and

To be shamed by the shameless is ultimately no shame at all.³¹ In fact, contemplating the vice hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” An honorable person will not be concerned about the opinion that people of this sort may form of him or her since it will not be based on the criteria that truly distinguish between the noble and the base.

³¹ The believers are also assured that the hostility of these unbelievers—the hostility with which they hope to pressure the Christians back into conformity with the dominant culture’s way of life—is itself displeasing to God and incurs God’s wrath (1 [Thess 2:14–16](#)). Knowing this will also help the believers endure rather than surrender to those measures that not only assail the Christians but bring down God’s anger on the

of their detractors almost transforms their experience of rejection into a sign of the believers’ honor. Contrary to the dominant-cultural view of participation in idolatrous forms of worship as an honorable mark of piety, Paul declares idolatry to be the true source of dishonor ([Rom 1:18–32](#)). On account of its commitment to idolatry, the non-Christian Gentiles have become a debased, shameless crowd, handed over to the domination of the passions and every kind of vice. What is perhaps most poignant about this passage is that the pinnacle of their degradation is not merely their participation in such conduct: “They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them outsiders.

but even applaud others who practice them” (Rom 1:32). The unbelievers form again an unreliable court of reputation, commending what is actually wicked and shameful (see Phil 3:18–19). Their very sense of honor and value is upside down, as their lives testify. Therefore, the Christian experiencing their pressure to “join them in the same excesses of dissipation” (1 Pet 4:4) should not be moved away from his or her honorable course of action.

Johannine literature also contributes to the Christians’ impression that the censure (or honor, for that matter) that the outside world might offer the believers ought to be disregarded on account of the judges’ own lack of honor. In Revelation, for example, those who cling to idolatrous worship are also presented as those who engage in all manner of wicked

conduct and who have made a pact with the forces of chaos, Satan, the enemy of God (Rev 9:20–21; 12:1–13:8). They are committed to vice and to impiety, despite having been given many opportunities to repent (and no matter what God does in the future, they will still manifest this dishonorable character). In John’s Gospel those who remain apart from the Christian group do so because of their commitment to wickedness:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God. (Jn 3:19–21)

All who stand outside the community of disciples show by that very fact that they prefer vice to virtue. They prefer dishonorable conduct to the light of God that first reveals the nature of that conduct but then empowers one to set it aside. All such statements in Scripture serve to insulate the community against the pressure of society's attempts to "rehabilitate" them. Christians will see the course of "rehabilitation" as the course back to darkness, back to vice, back to a disgraceful status in God's sight that would merit God's punishment at the Day of Judgment.

Two other strategies assist believers in setting aside the opinion of nonbelievers. First, the New Testament authors commend as honorable many who "despised shame" in order to remain steadfast in their

quest for the honors God had prepared for them. The most prominent of these, of course, is Jesus, who endured the low point of society's ascription of disgrace en route to the high honor God had appointed for him (see [Phil 2:5-11](#); [Heb 12:2](#)), but he is joined by many others from among the people of faith throughout the ages. Notable among these is Abraham, presented in [Hebrews 11:8-16](#) as willing to leave behind an honorable existence in a homeland for the low-status life of a resident alien and foreigner for the sake of attaining citizenship in the "better" and "heavenly" homeland that God prepared. Moses, too, understood that solidarity with despised and abused slaves was of greater worth than remaining as heir to the crown of Egypt, since the latter afforded only "fleeting pleasures" while the

former brought one eternal “reward” (Heb 11:24–26). Jesus, Abraham and Moses made the correct choices because they weighed honor and advantage through the eyes of faith—in the eyes of unbelievers, all three during their lifetimes would have been considered to have made foolish choices, incurring the loss of honor. Disregarding the opinion of outsiders (the world) is thus presented as a necessary step to achieving honor where it counts eternally.

Finally, the same visions of reversal and divine judgment that focus the believer on God’s estimation as the evaluation of greatest importance also assist in insulating the believer from society’s negative sanctions. The believers may endure the scorn and censure of their neighbors, knowing that the day is coming when the majori-

ty culture that scorns the group will be put to shame and the group will come into its own honor. On the Day of Judgment not only will God affirm the honor and virtue of those who have responded to him with trust and obedience, but he will also censure the disobedient and enforce the status degradation (e.g., through punishment) of those who now have the upper hand on the believers (see 2 Thess 1:6–10; 1 Pet 4:5).

When Dishonor is No Dishonor

In addition to preventing the experience of insult, scorn and shame from having its intended effect on the Christians by pointing out the ignorance and shamelessness of the outsiders (that is to say, by explaining that the people censuring the believers are themselves inca-

pable of rendering reliable judgments about the noble and the shameful), New Testament authors also seek to help the believers make sense of those experiences in ways that will not cause them to question their commitment to the group. They even go so far as to turn the very experiences of society's deviancy-control techniques into marks of honor within the group. The frequency with which these texts address the topic of shame from outside the group reveals the importance of insulating members from the strong pull the experience of disgrace will have on them. The predictability or normalcy of the experiences, the commendation of perseverance as a means of demonstrating loyalty and courage, the interpretation of the hardships as God's training of the believers or as a noble

contest or battle in which the Christians have the possibility of an honorable victory over their antagonists simply by persevering are topics intended by New Testament authors to inform and protect the group from being pulled back into the values of the majority culture.

The leaders of the Christian movement, beginning with Jesus himself (see [Mt 10:17-18, 24-25; 24:9-10](#)), prepared their followers for society's censure and rejection ahead of time. By stressing that it was to be expected, and indeed that it was predictable, these leaders hoped that it would not be disconfirming when it actually occurred. That is to say, it should not catch the Christians off guard; it should not surprise them and cause them to question their new commitments. Given what happened to

Jesus, it is only natural that the world should act the same way toward his followers (Jn 15:18-21), but also given the honor that Jesus now enjoys after enduring the hostility of sinners (Heb 12:3), it is also endurable! Jesus' predictions of society's attempts to shame them into silence and surrender are specifically intended by him to arm them ahead of time to encounter it and persevere (Jn 16:1-4). Paul followed the same procedure in Thessalonica: "We sent Timothy...to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know" (1 Thess 3:2-4).

The experience of shaming was meant by outsiders to make the Christians feel abnormal and make them wish to retreat back into the safety of conformity. Paul, however, turns the experience of being shamed into something "normal" for the existence of believers in the world. The believers in Thessalonica find replicated in their own experience the well-established pattern of rejection known by Paul (1 Thess 2:2; 3:7; see also Phil 1:30) and by their sister churches in Judea (1 Thess 2:14).

Suffering for Jesus' sake is even transformed into a badge of honor before God. This strategy represents perhaps the strongest tool the minority group has for reversing the effects of society's attempts to reign the "deviants" back into line with dominant cultural values. The response of the

twelve apostles to the Sanhedrin's marking them with the whip as deviants requiring correction becomes paradigmatic: "They rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name" ([Acts 5:41](#)). The author of 1 Peter, writing to Christians throughout Asia Minor, seeks to inculcate a similar response among them to their experiences of their neighbors' insult and abuse:

Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear

this name. ([1 Pet 4:13-16](#); see also [3:14](#))

The pattern of Jesus is invoked as the first means of understanding the "blessedness" of suffering the world's hostility. Sharing the lot of Jesus for the sake of association with his name now will mean sharing in his lot in glory as well. Indeed, the believers should see society's negative response to them as a sign of the "spirit of glory"—the honor of being part of God's own family and sharing with his Son—resting on them. Pronouncing such a person "blessed" (*makarios*) essentially means pronouncing him or her "honorable,"³² or perhaps in

³² See the rich discussion of the meaning of *blessed* by Kenneth C. Hanson, "How Honorable! How Shameful! A Cultural Analysis of Matthew's Makarisms and

some contexts, “favored.” *Happy* is too weak a synonym for this term, which is used more to affirm a person as occupying a noble or divinely favored status.³³

A further rationale for the surprising estimation of those disgraced by the society as “blessed” appears in Jesus’ beatitudes:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the

Reproaches,” *Semeia* 68 (1996): 81-111.

³³ [Revelation 20:6](#) and [22:14](#) also pronounce “blessed” or “honorable” those who have suffered the world’s shaming most intensely (execution in [Rev 20:6](#); those who “washed their robes” are those who endure the “great ordeal,” which is not God’s plagues but the beast’s campaign against godliness [[Rev 7:13-14](#)]).

Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. ([Lk 6:22-23](#))³⁴

The appeal to the historical precedent of the prophets of Israel, many of whom suffered severe degradation at the hands of the rulers of Israel and Judah,³⁵ provides proof

³⁴ See also the parallel saying at [Matthew 5:11-12](#). [Luke 6:26](#) goes on to turn praise and honor on the lips of the outside world into a sign of dishonor within the community of disciples by the same logic, namely, that the ignorant world spoke well of the false prophets.

³⁵ Although the deaths of the prophets are not mentioned in the books bearing their names, legends arose in Israel depicting the brutal martyrdoms of these men (see *The Lives of the Prophets* [J.H. Charlesworth, ed., [OTP](#),

that those people who were most honorable could also be most openly disgraced by their neighbors. The fact that Jews had for centuries revered the names of Jeremiah and Isaiah overturns any shame that their kings might have tried to impose upon them. The followers of Jesus can have the same confidence when they encounter impositions of dishonor from outside.

Paul states this same rationale in terms of a more general principle: “Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse,

2:379-400]; the tales are collected and abridged in David A. deSilva and Victor H. Matthews, *Untold Stories of the Bible* [Lincolnwood, Ill.: Publications International, 1998], pp. 102-14).

deceiving others and being deceived” (2 Tim 3:12-13). Godliness—and those who pursue virtue—is simply persecuted by a dishonorable world. Because of this, the Christians should feel confirmed that they have chosen the honorable path when their unbelieving neighbors assail them and tear them down.

The early church leaders also used the metaphor of the athletic contest to turn endurance of hardships into an opportunity to manifest the virtues of courage and endurance,³⁶

³⁶ This image was commonly employed by Jewish authors, whose audiences often found themselves also the brunt of society’s shaming (see 4 Macc 6:9-10; 16:16; 17:11-16; Philo “Every Good Person is Free” 26-27), as well as by Greco-Roman philosophical writers, for whom the great contests

recasting society's hostility as the antagonist over which the believer can win an honorable victory—and the crown of the victor—simply by persevering in his or her Christian commitments:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that

were not the Olympiads but wrestling with insults, with hardship and with the passions and weaknesses of the flesh that seek to subvert the person's reason and commitment to virtue (see Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 8.15–16; Epictetus *Diss.* 1.18.21; 1.24.1–2; 3.22.56). For further reading on this topic, see Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1967); Noah Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); deSilva, *4 Maccabees*, chap. 4.

clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race (“contest,” *agōn*) that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. In your struggle against [*antagōnizomenoi*] sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ([Heb 12:1–4](#); see also [Heb 10:32](#))

The metaphor works because athletes needed the qualities of perseverance and endurance, particularly in the face of pain but also in the face of the jeering of the crowd. Giving up in the face of such jeering or because the body hurt would mean defeat and dishonor, but the athlete who persisted

despite the opposition of people, antagonists and personal weakness would be honored.

In this passage the author calls the Christians' attention to the spectators whose approval they are to court as they engage in the contest. It is the people of faith throughout the ages, with Jesus conspicuously at the center, who now watch how the Christians run the same gauntlet of society's antagonism. They compete not merely against their unbelieving neighbors but ultimately against the power of sin itself (making surrender all the more disgraceful and impossible to contemplate). The metaphor is a powerful resource indeed, as it turns the experience of being victimized by a hostile society into an opportunity for victory, empowering the victim to choose to follow his or her own convictions rather than suc-

cumb to coercion.

The author of Hebrews also ennobles the experience of reproach, ridicule and even physical violence at the hands of unbelievers as being God's training of his children for citizenship in the kingdom ([Heb 12:5-11](#)). This is explicitly not punitive discipline (not "chastisement" for sins committed by the believers)³⁷ but character-shaping exercise, building up their commitment to God and the strength of their trust and loyalty, sharpening their investment in the unshakable

³⁷ The interpretation of this passage as educative or formative discipline, rather than punitive discipline, has been definitively established by Croy, *Endurance in Suffering* (who also traces and ably explains the development of a "punitive" misreading of the passage).

kingdom they are about to receive. As parental discipline, it becomes a proof of their being God's legitimate sons and daughters rather than illegitimate children for whom a parent does not take such care and forethought.³⁸ In addition

³⁸ It is essential to recognize that the author of Hebrews is discussing in [Hebrews 12:5-11](#) the very same kind and source of suffering he has been considering since [10:32-34](#) (the community's earlier experience of society's shaming techniques on account of their commitment to Jesus), the models of Abraham, Moses and the martyrs in chapter [11](#), and the example of Jesus (and the believers' own contest with society's pressures) in [12:1-4](#). That is to say, [Hebrews 12:5-11](#) does not address all kinds of suffering, like disease or domestic abuse—only those hardships imposed on one by unbelievers (or false Christians)

to courage and endurance, then, perseverance becomes an opportunity to demonstrate reverent submission to God (after Jesus' own example, [Heb 5:8-9](#)).

Endurance of the world's deviancy-control measures is also an opportunity to demonstrate one's fidelity to and trust in God ([1 Pet 1:6-7](#)) or one's sincerity and integrity. Paul uses his own experience of sufferings in the latter manner, offering his endurance of shame—both verbal and physical degradation ([2 Cor 6:4-10](#); [11:23-25](#))—as proof that he does not use the gospel as a means of enjoying temporary gains or

because one has stepped out in faith and allegiance to Jesus. To apply the principle of God's parental training too broadly risks theological disaster and the conjuring up of an abusive God.

pleasures (like the Sophists, who peddle philosophies for a living), but for the highest of ideals. Modeling the confidence of one who has remained loyal to Jesus despite earthly adversity and disgrace, Paul believes that God will surely vindicate those who remained faithful: “No one who believes in him will be put to shame” ([Rom 10:11](#); cf. [2 Tim 1:8, 12](#)). Endurance now means incomparable honor eternally ([2 Cor 4:17–18](#)).³⁹

³⁹ Assurance of God’s vindication of the honor of the martyred and marginalized Christians is also a prominent topic in Revelation. See [Revelation 11:3–13](#), in which God overturns the disgrace heaped on his witnesses (the ultimate disgrace in the ancient world, by the way—to be left unburied after death). The cry of the martyrs for vindication in [Revelation 6:9–11](#) is

The Christian Riposte to the Outsider’s Challenge

The honorable person subjected to insult or to some other challenge to honor is culturally conditioned to retaliate, to offer a riposte (see discussion in [chapter one](#)) that will counter the challenge and preserve honor in the public eye intact. Christians confronted with such attacks on their honor as verbal challenges, reproachful speech and even physical affronts would be sorely tempted to respond in kind, playing out the challenge-riposte game before the onlookers. Beginning with Jesus, however, Christian leaders sought to cultivate a specifically Christian riposte—the believer is

explicitly answered in [11:18](#), and their disgrace turned to highest honors as co-regents with Christ in [20:4–6](#).

allowed to respond to the challenges made against his or her honor, but directed to do so in such a way as reflects to the outside world the virtues and values of the Christian group.

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Mt 5:38-41; see also Mt 5:44; Lk 6:28, 35)

Followers of Jesus overcome challenges to honor not through using the same currency of insult or violence that the outside world throws at them, but rather they meet hostility with generosity, violence with courageous refusal to use violence, curse with blessing from God’s inexhaustible resources

of goodness and kindness.

Paul expands on the teaching of Jesus by urging the Christian to “take thought for what is noble in the sight of all” (Rom 12:17) rather than repaying “evil for evil.” One finds in Paul and 1 Peter a deep concern to demonstrate to outsiders that being Christian is in fact honorable. On the one hand, Christians are never allowed to choose their course of action out of desire or need for the affirmation of the outside world. They are to remain focused on God’s approval and on the actions that lead them, regardless of the world’s response. On the other hand, however, there is the explicit hope articulated in the New Testament that by pursuing the course that God approves, the nobility of the Christian community will be made apparent to those outside the

church, who still have some ability to recognize virtue even if they pursue vicious paths in the name of virtue (like idolatry). Some concern for the group's reputation is also in keeping with the conversionist emphasis of the Christian movement, since the "multitude" only go by hearsay rather than investigating the facts.⁴⁰

The Christian posture in regard to how it elects to respond to its attackers is very similar to the course promoted by Plutarch in his treatise "How to Profit by One's Enemies" (*Mor.* 86B-92F):⁴¹ "How

⁴⁰ See Isocrates *Ad Dem.* 17; Luke gives the impression that the Christian group had a poor reputation empire-wide: "With regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against" (*Acts* 28:22).

⁴¹ Elliott helpfully calls attention to

shall I defend myself against my enemy?' 'By proving yourself good and honourable' ("How to Profit" 4, *Mor.* 88B). It will distress the enemy more than being insulted, Plutarch writes, to see you bear yourself with self-control, justice and kindness toward those with whom you come in contact. The insulted person must use the insult as an occasion to examine his life and rid himself of any semblance of that vice ("How to Profit" 6, *Mor.* 89D-E). In the same way, the author of 1 Peter urges Christians throughout Asia Minor, "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your hon-

this comparative text in his discussion of the response to outsiders promoted in 1 Peter ("Disgraced yet Graced," p. 171).

orable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (1 Pet 2:12). “Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Pet 3:16). By means of honorable conduct, the author hopes to overturn the reproach that society attaches to the name of “Christian”: “For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish” (1 Pet 2:15). At the very least, he adjures the believers to do nothing that might actually add to or justify the bad reputation of the group: “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker” (4:15).⁴²

⁴² Second Peter 2:2 expresses an awareness that bad conduct by people calling themselves Christians only confirms the majority

Advice given to wives and slaves (1 Pet 3:1–7; 2:18–25; see also Tit 2:9–10), young men (Tit 2:6–8) and women (Tit 2:4–5), and to the group as a whole, can be seen as serving the goal of offering proof through noble conduct that the group is truly honorable (whether or not the outsiders ever actually come to admit this: at the last judgment they will be forced to do so).

At many other points one can find New Testament authors showing concern for living with integrity (see 2 Cor 1:12; 4:2; 6:3–4; 1 Tim 3:7), showing the congruence of the message of Jesus with the virtues implanted, as it were, in the hearts of Gentile and Jew alike (Rom 2:14–16). Thus Paul is careful to administer the collec-

culture in its opinion of the group and is highly detrimental to the cause of Christ.

tion for the sisters and brothers in Judea with regard for “what is noble not only in God’s sight but in the sight of human beings” (2 Cor 8:21, my translation). Another notable arena in which the Christians are called to demonstrate their virtue is through beneficence not only within the community of faith (essential though this is to the maintenance of the group’s commitment and solidarity) but also toward all (Mt 5:43-48; 1 Thess 3:12; 5:15). Benefaction is unmistakably recognizable in the ancient world as honorable in and of itself, reflecting also God’s own character. If the outsiders do not respond nobly with gratitude but rather keep maligning the believers, that will be just another confirmation of the outsiders’ debased character. The Christian group thus keeps walking the fine line between remaining inde-

pendent of society’s response (approval or censure), while also striving to enhance the honor of the group through embodying the highest ideals, overcoming evil by doing good (Rom 12:21).

The Christian’s Honor

The early church leaders frequently reminded the believers that joining the Christian group did not merely bring them dishonor in the eyes of the world that refused the gospel. The believers have also gained incomparable honor because of their attachment to the group. The author of 1 Peter, sensitive to the fact that he writes to people whose self-respect has come under serious fire from without, dedicates the first two chapters of his epistle largely to affirming the honor that is theirs in Christ. The language of elevation to

priesthood provides him with an important vehicle for conveying the honor that believers now enjoy as those fitted to approach God with confidence in holiness:

Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. (1 Pet 2:5, 9-10; see also Rev 1:5-6; 5:9)

The emphasis in these verses on God's selection of each of the believers to become part of God's own people also speaks to the honored and favored status conferred on the Christian.

Most impressively, becoming

a disciple of Jesus brings with it adoption into God's family and a share in Christ's honor (Jn 1:12-13; Rom 8:14-17; Heb 2:10; 3:1-6, 14; 1 Pet 1:23). In this regard, God ascribes the honor of God's own household to the believer.⁴³ The exaltation of Jesus to the place of highest honor in the cosmos (Eph 1:20-22) is thus an honor in which all faithful believers now share (Eph 2:6). This honor, though possessed by the Christian, is yet fully to be enjoyed and yet to be manifested to the world. It remains their inheri-

⁴³ See Jewett, *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies*, p. 12: "To be 'set right' in the context of the 'righteousness of God' (3:21), and with reference to humans who have fallen short of the 'glory of God,' is to have such glory and honor *restored*. This is not an achievement but a gift of grace."

tance (1 Pet 1:4). Their full investment with, and indeed their full discovery of the magnitude of, the honor that God has conferred on them through adoption into his family will occur at the future appearing of Jesus. When the glorified Christ's own honor is revealed to the world, then the honor of his followers will be revealed as well (Col 3:4; 2 Thess 1:10-12; 2:14). The Christians look forward to receiving an unshakable kingdom (Heb 12:28), an enduring city (Heb 13:13-14) in which the believers will be invested with their full honor as God's children, where that honor will be manifested and not assaulted.

More immediately, the believers gain the esteem and respect of their sisters and brothers as Christ takes shape within them and as their actions show his love. Commu-

nities of faith are met with international fame across the web of churches empire-wide as they reach out in support of fellow-believers, endure bravely the opposition of unbelievers, or shine as examples of trust and firmness in their commitment to Jesus (see Rom 1:8; 1 Thess 1:7-9; 2 Thess 1:4).

Pressures to conform to the values of the Greco-Roman culture or Jewish subculture, and temptations to assess worth and honor in light of those alien values, do not come only from outside the Christian community. After all, every member of the church during the first generation of its existence in a given locale was first socialized into one or the other of those cultures. One finds, therefore, early Christian leaders combating the tendency to import what are now to be considered alien standards and

values into the Christian group. The challenge here is to prevent the members' "primary socialization" from overriding or short-circuiting their full secondary socialization into the Christian worldview and ethos. The Christians needed to reinforce clearly and distinctly for one another the group's values as the path to honor. There was no room for acculturation of those values to the definitions of honorable behavior they "left behind" at their conversion.

Jesus, James, Paul and most New Testament voices take the time to clarify the true basis for honor and to correct intrusions of dominant-cultural (or Jewish ethnic subcultural) ways of attaining or asserting honor. The prevalence of these discussions suggests that one's primary, non-Christian socialization is surprisingly persis-

tent, and Christian leaders need to show special vigilance in this regard. Jesus, for example, confronts head-on the manner in which the majority culture thinks of greatness in terms of power over others and precedence before others, a conception that manifests itself in the disciples' conversations at least twice on the road to Jerusalem (Mk 9:34-35; 10:35-45 and parallels). True honor consists rather in serving the sisters and brothers after the model of Jesus, the servant leader who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mk 10:45). The disciples, and the later readers of the Gospels as well, are jolted into realizing the vast difference between what counts as honorable or great in the world and what makes one great or honorable in God's sight: "The one who is least among you all is the one

who is great” (Lk 9:48, my translation).

James and Paul both combat the tendency to honor the rich above the poor, thus replicating within the community the majority culture’s conviction that a person’s honor or worth is proportionate to his wealth (see 1 Cor 11:20-22; Jas 1:9-10; 2:1-9). Ethnicity can no longer be a cause for claiming honor above others (Rom 1-3; 11:19-20),⁴⁴ whether the Christian Jew would consider himself privileged beyond and

more honorable than the Christian Gentile, or the Christian Greek would cling to the dominant culture’s perception of the Greek as more honorable than the barbarian. In a world that valued visible signs of divine possession and proximity to God’s power, God’s gifts and endowments of the believers are not permitted to become a ground for competition for honor among believers (1 Cor 4:7). Similarly, spiritual knowledge does not create an enlightened elite within the church, where building up one another in love (rather than becoming puffed up) is the way to act honorably and be recognized as honorable (1 Cor 8:1-2).

An especially critical issue for Paul in the Corinthian correspondence is detaching the believers there from their tendency to evaluate a person’s worth by appearances, that is

⁴⁴ So, rightly, Jewett, *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies*, p. 10: “Removal of ‘boasting’ undercuts the superiority claims of every system of gaining honor through performance or inherited status”; also, p. 13: “No one gains this honorable, righteous status by outperforming others or by privilege of birth or wealth.”

to say, by charisma, observable strengths and polished performances (2 Cor 5:12).⁴⁵ The case of Jesus proves, Paul argues, the unreliability of these criteria in determining honor (whether evaluating one's own honor, the honor of a fellow believer or the honor of various leaders and teachers), since the "world in its wisdom," that is, acting and selecting according to its criteria of worth, failed to recognize God's wisdom (1 Cor 1:18–31). Only God's work in the believer, transforming the mortal into the image of Christ, bringing the life of Christ to life in the frail human (and, in the face of death, even the strongest and most gifted human is frail), gives a person any claim to honor. Valuing oneself or others on the basis

of the "outer person," that is, the endowments of our mortal person or our performance, is folly, since no strength of the outer person can avail in the face of death. Paul's decision not to try to hide his weaknesses or work to make his appearance "perfect" and semi-divine as a means of gaining respect and authority (which was the goal of most public speakers) reflects his firm conviction that such a way of valuing and trying to convey value was fundamentally opposed to God's values (again, revealed most clearly in the extreme case, the case of Jesus). Thus the only "boast," or "claim to honor," that Paul will allow is boasting "in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17) and "in one's weaknesses" (2 Cor 11:30; 12:5–10). Only where the character and person of Jesus becomes visible in the individual (which Paul found

⁴⁵ For a fuller discussion, see deSilva, *Hope of Glory*, chap. 5.

most where his human strengths ran out) does one find cause for self-respect, and the group needs to reinforce this as the central criterion for bestowing honor.

Another essential and pervasive aspect of this re-education of the Christians concerns the replacement of the basic competitive model of establishing one's honor with a cooperative model. The believers, as children of God, become what sociologists would call a fictive kinship group, that is, a collection of people who are not genealogically related but who nevertheless consider one another as family, attempting to relate at that higher level of intimacy, belonging and mutual commitment. As sisters and brothers, believers share honor within one household, working together toward the advancement of the honor of all mem-

bers of this family rather than competing with one another for honor as if between unrelated individuals. Thus Jesus criticizes the scribes and the Pharisees for loving to be honored in ways that set them above and apart from their fellow Israelites, forbidding his own disciples to create or pursue such distinctions: "They love the head table at banquets and the first seats at the synagogue and greetings in the market place and to be called 'Rabbi' by people. But do not you be called 'Rabbi,' for One is your teacher and you are all sisters and brothers" (Mt 23:6-8, my translation). Honor is not truly gained by competing against one's own kin. Similarly, Paul urges his friends in Philippi to lay aside all rivalries over recognition in the church, choosing instead "in humility [to] regard others as better

than yourselves” (Phil 2:3). Instead of clinging to claims of certain recognition, the Christians are simply to relinquish those claims (seedbeds of factionalism that they are) and offer recognition and honor to the other members of the body.

Believers are summoned to honor one another and to affirm one another’s value in God’s sight and in the sight of the group (see Rom 12:10; Phil 1:17; 2:3-4; 1 Pet 5:5-6; 3 Jn 9-11). There is certainly no room for dishonoring or shaming fellow Christians for any reason other than their departure from the norms of the faith. The poor Christian is not to be treated shabbily and made to feel ashamed because he or she is poor (1 Cor 11:21-22; Jas 2:6-7); believers are not to disdain one another on the basis of indifferent matters of custom (Rom 14:3, 10)⁴⁶ or on the basis of

promoting some spiritual gifts as more distinguished and distinguishing than others (1 Cor

⁴⁶ Jewett helpfully comments on Romans 14-15 as an attempt to remove the tendency to disparage fellow believers over matters that were indifferent to God: “In place of the ordinary Greco-Roman assumption that the strong should dominate the weak while holding them in contempt, Paul argues that ‘we the powerful are obligated to bear the weaknesses of the powerless and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please the neighbor for the good, toward upbuilding. For also Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproach you fell upon me”’ (Rom 15:1-3)” (*Saint Paul Returns to the Movies*, p. 15). This Psalm text may be read now as referring not to the reproaches of those who reproach God, but of those who reproach the neighbor—identifying with

12). Such would only push the shamed believers away from the group and back to the bosom of society to no good purpose. Shaming must be reserved only for the enforcing of vital group norms of honorable conduct (see 1 Cor 6:5; 15:34; 2 Thess 3:6, 14-15; 1 Tim 5:20, and discussion below).

Instead the interactions within the group must reflect the honor of each person in God's eyes and according to God's standards. This means taking special care to bestow honor on the "less presentable" ones:

Those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more

the weak sister or brother, the strong believer willingly takes on the reproach falling on that weak one.

respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Cor 12:23-26)

Within this single paragraph, three related concerns are brought together. First, Paul uses the metaphor of the body as a means of helping the Christians in Corinth understand the importance and suitability of intentionally affirming the honor of those who have honor in God's sight but, by society's criteria (the criteria of the Christian's primary socialization, learned in the pre-Christian period of one's life) would be of no account. Second, the relationship

between this kind of attitude toward one another and the maintenance of unity and concord within the church is made explicit. Third, Paul articulates a kinship ethos as far as both loss and honor are concerned. The advancement of the honor of one member of the family means advancement for all members of the family, such that it becomes only right to rejoice at one another's being honored and even to promote one another's honor (rather than promote one's own at the expense of others). The Christian community that nurtures this kind of ethos will see tremendous growth and be equipped to do acts of ministry worthy of God.

Honor and Shame Within the New Community

Once the distinctively Christian criteria for what consti-

tutes honorable and dishonorable behavior have been established, and group members' focus has been taken wholly off the verdict of the unbelieving world and fixed on God's approval and the intimations of that approval reflected in one's fellow Christians and in the leaders of the group, then honor and shame can be used within the group to reinforce commitment to live out the group's values. Leaders can harness the hearers' natural desire for honor to promote the courses of action or attitudes necessary for sustaining the Christian movement as the path to honor before the court of reputation that matters and to dissuade them from any attitudes, behaviors and commitments that might prove detrimental to group solidarity or contrary to group values, labeling it as the path to dishonor

before that body of significant others. Where the majority of this minority culture can agree, it can encourage individual members to embody shared values by bestowing honor on those who manifest them, and it can even use shaming techniques (although notably not the same techniques to which the outside world has subjected them!) to correct members who stray beyond the shared norms.

The promise of being honored in God's house reinforces the value of not yielding to the lusts of the body (2 Tim 2:20-22), of serving Jesus (Jn 12:26), of taking up the posture of servant to the Christian community (Mk 10:41-45), and of extending hospitality and material support to the sisters and brothers in need (2 Cor 8:1-7, 24; Philem 7; 3 Jn 5-8), to name but a few examples. "Dying in the Lord" is held up by

John as an absolute good, an absolute claim to being deemed honorable: "'Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them'" (Rev 14:13). John is redefining the criteria for a "good death," with loyalty to the Lamb and the group's core values (in his situation, monolatry and disentangling oneself from the sinful prosperity of the imperial system would be prominent) at the center. The makarism carries weight whether this death is violent or natural. The important point is that the hearers will associate perseverance "in the Lord," whatever that may entail, with a noble death, a good death.

The threat of disgrace before God sustains commitment to forgive one another (Mt 18:23-35); to tend the hungry,

sick, destitute and imprisoned (Mt 25:31-46); and to remain loyal to the Lord who saved them rather than bring dishonor to his name through defecation (Heb 6:4-8). Looking again to Revelation, John graphically depicts the public (indeed, cosmic) humiliation that awaits those who yield to the pressures to participate in idolatrous ritual and especially emperor cult—being physically degraded through punishment in the sight of an honorable audience, the holy angels and the Lamb (Rev 14:9-11). Those who yield are labeled “cowardly” and “faithless” (Rev 21:8) and are excluded from the honor and favors prepared by God for his people. As particular acts or general attitudes are linked in the believers’ consciousness with honor or disgrace as the consequences, their own ambitions and aver-

sions are being reprogrammed in terms of the distinctive ethos of the Christian culture.

Leaders will thus frequently remind the hearers of honorable and shameful behavior through words such as those above. Members will then reflect this information back to one another in their conversations and even in their nonverbal communication. Honor and shame do not work in the Christian culture only at the level of the internalization of values, however. Across the New Testament the early shepherds were themselves “activating” the church as a “court of reputation” as they held up certain believers to be honored, shamed others and encouraged the churches themselves to create a dynamic social environment in which honoring and shaming actively supported the group’s values and rein-

forced individual commitment to embody those values. Leaders like Paul or the author of Hebrews openly praise (honor) believers who embody the group's values and whose energies or commitment have advanced the group's well-being (whether locally and translocally). For example, the Christians in Thessalonica are commended for their loyal work and loving labors in the Lord, and particularly for their steadfastness in the face of opposition, by means of which, they find out here, they have become a model for emulation throughout the regions of Macedonia and Achaia ([1 Thess 1:3, 7](#)). The author of the letter "to the Hebrews" indirectly praises the hearers for their past stance of courage and solidarity in the face of society's shaming strategies ([Heb 10:32-35](#)), an honorable course

in which they now need to persevere. The seven oracles to the seven churches in [Revelation 2](#) and [3](#) show a masterful and quite explicit combination of praise and censure, as Jesus affirms those who have manifested steadfastness, loyalty and love toward him and one another and censures those who have made far too much room for the dominant culture's values and prized pursuits. This praise and censure, being heard by the churches throughout the province, is very public and thus even more powerful an affirmation and deterrent as each local church's fame throughout the circle of churches is augmented or diminished as the Judge makes his appraisal known.

These same oracles display another important strategy being used throughout the New Testament: they inten-

tionally direct the hearers and channel their ambitions for honor toward the honors bestowed by God or by the group for having embodied the group's values (see also [1 Thess 3:12-13](#); [2 Thess 1:11-12](#); [2:14](#)). Whether their current behavior has merited praise, censure or a mixture of the two, each church is invited to pursue a specific course of action that Jesus will affirm, and each is invited more broadly to aspire to "conquer" and thus receive the honors and awards promised to "everyone who conquers" ([Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26-28](#); [3:5, 12, 21](#)). This summons to conquer spurs the hearers on to orient themselves toward the society as if in a battle (in the context of Satan's war against God and its last desperate campaign in the power of Rome and the cult of the emperors; see [Rev 12-13](#)),

and to embody endurance and courage as they resist the enemy's pressures to surrender.

Fear of shame before one's fellow Christians in the local assembly or concern about loss of honor in the eyes of the translocal Christian group now becomes a powerful motivation for investment of oneself in the activities and processes that sustain the minority culture. Paul, for example, uses this fear of being dishonored with a view to securing maximum participation in the relief efforts for the sisters and brothers in Judea:

Openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you...to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting

about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. (2 Cor 8:24-9:4)

The Corinthians have already won a reputation for generosity among the churches (a desirable honor, to be sure) thanks to Paul's boasting about them, but this reputation is now on the line: the Corinthians must put their money where Paul's mouth is, as it were, if they are to confirm their honor in the sight of their Macedonian sisters and brothers. If they fail to support this relief effort generously, their reputation among the churches will suffer loss.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Romans 15:25-27 suggests that Paul's stratagem met with success.

Not just the leaders of the movement but the members themselves are called to exercise social control within the group. On the positive side the believers are called on to honor those who distinguish themselves in service to the church (1 Cor 16:15-18; Phil 2:29-30; 1 Tim 3:13; 3 Jn 12), the effect of which is to encourage even broader investment in these kinds of group-building and sustaining activities. Even Jesus, however, also prescribes the use of censure and public rebuke (shaming) within the Christian community for the brother or sister who persists in living contrary to the way of life taught by him (Mt 18:15-18). Notably, this process begins in private, for the first concern of kin is to protect rather than damage the honor and standing of their sisters and brothers. If a private meeting, and then a