

1

SEEING NEW REALITIES

Gulzel trusted in Jesus as a university student. The message through which she accepted Christ was fairly standard: “Your transgressions separate you from God; therefore you deserve punishment. Jesus died for your sin. Believe in him, and your sins will be forgiven.” Her faith was genuine and real. Her sins were forgiven and she enjoyed new life in Christ. But as a Central Asian, Gulzel faced unique situations that forgiveness could not fully address.

One Sunday evening, Gulzel was returning to the city from her mom’s house in the village. The taxi she entered had a male driver and three male passengers. After a short while the men began inviting Gulzel to their homes for tea and propositioning her. As a young girl she felt uncomfortable and tried to downplay the situation. Halfway through the ride, the men stopped for a round of vodka shots along the road. Being intoxicated, the men became physically aggressive. At just that moment, Gulzel noticed her uncle in an oncoming car, heading in her direction.

But instead of jumping into the road and flagging her uncle down, Gulzel hid. She did not want her uncle to see her. Gulzel's primary concern in that moment was avoiding shame and maintaining family honor.

A few years later, Gulzel's brother died. Her family mourned the tragedy, especially since he played a unique role as the family's oldest son. A few weeks after his death, Gulzel began having regular dreams of her brother. While she was asleep, spirits in the likeness of her brother tormented her. When Gulzel mentioned the dark dreams to her family, she was told to eat dirt from the brother's gravesite to appease the spirits. Gulzel desired power over the spiritual realm to escape torment and find peace.

Though truly forgiven of her sins, Gulzel needed to experience God's salvation from shame and fear, as well as guilt. Gulzel, as with most Christians in the majority world, requires a three-dimensional gospel of God's forgiveness, honor, and power.

Three Types of Culture

"We have to reckon with three different types of reactions to transgressions of religiously sanctioned codes: fear, shame, and guilt," Eugene Nida¹

Christian missiologists identify three responses to sin in human cultures: guilt, shame, and fear. These three moral

emotions have become the foundation for three types of culture: (1) *guilt-innocence cultures* are individualistic societies (mostly Western), where people who break the laws are guilty and seek justice or forgiveness to rectify a wrong, (2) *shame-honor cultures* describes collectivistic cultures (common in the East), where people shamed for fulfilling group expectations seek to restore their honor before the community, and (3) *fear-power cultures* refers to animistic contexts (typically tribal or African), where people afraid of evil and harm pursue power over the spirit world through magical rituals.

These three types of culture are like group personalities defining how people view the world. Just as individual people have a *person-ality*, cultural groups share a *group-ality*. **Groupality** refers an “organized pattern of behavioral characteristics of a group.”² A person’s cultural orientation, or groupality, shapes their worldview, ethics, identity, and notion of salvation, even more than their individual personality does. For this reason, awareness of culture types helps us anticipate cultural clashes and communicate the gospel three-dimensionally to the world. The book of Ephesians is a good example of how God’s grace remedies guilt, shame, and fear.

The 3D Gospel in Ephesians

Paul wrote the book of Ephesians to explain “the

unsearchable riches of Christ" (3:8), which involves each of these three components of salvation (*italics added*).

Guilt-Innocence—"In him we have redemption through the blood, the *forgiveness of sins*" (1:7a). God "made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in *transgressions*" (2:5).

Shame-Honor—"In love he predestined us to be *adopted* as his *sons* through Jesus Christ" (1:5). "You are no longer *foreigners and aliens*, but *fellow citizens* with God's people and *members of God's household*" (2:19, cf. 2:12-13).

Fear-Power—"That *power* is like the working of his *mighty strength*, which he *exerted* in Christ when he *raised* him from the dead and seated him at this right hand in the heavenly realms, *far above all rule and authority, power and dominion*" (1:19-21). "Be *strong* in the Lord and in his *mighty power*. Put on the *full armor* of God so that you can *take your stand* against the *devil's schemes*" (6:10-11).

Three aspects of salvation also emerge from Paul's central prayer: "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the *hope* to which he has called you, the riches of his *glorious inheritance* in the saints, and his incomparably great *power* for us who believe" (1:18-19). The gospel always remains an indivisible whole, but examining the facets individually provides a more complete understanding of salvation. Reading Ephesians three-dimensionally helps Christians fully perceive "the riches of God's grace that he

lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding” (1:7-8).³

Seeing the Complete Diamond

The gospel is a many-sided diamond, and God wants people in all cultures to experience his complete salvation. But despite the multifaceted nature of Christian salvation, Western Christianity emphasizes one aspect of salvation (i.e., forgiveness of sins), thus neglecting other facets of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Imagine a diamond with only one side! For cross-cultural workers, a truncated gospel hinders spirituality, theology, relationships, and ministry. We unintentionally put God in a box, only allowing him to save in one arena.

Understandably, Western Christianity emphasizes the facet of biblical salvation most meaningful in its cultural context. Historically, two significant voices behind Western theology, Augustine of Hippo (b. 354) and Martin Luther (b. 1483), were both plagued with an internal sense of God’s wrath toward their transgressions. So their writings explore how God forgives and acquits guilty sinners. While theology from Western contexts addresses guilt and innocence, people in most Majority World cultures desire honor to cover shame and power to mitigate fear.

Despite the prominence of shame-honor and fear-power dynamics in global cultures, they remain conspicuous blind spots in most Christian theology. Gulzel’s understanding of

Christian salvation, adopted from Western Christianity, was only one-dimensional. Consequently, she defaulted to cultural practices to access honor and power, bypassing God's grace. What is the gospel for guilt, shame, and fear contexts? What does the entire diamond look like?

The cultures of the biblical world were primarily shame-based and fear-based. Consequently, honor and power are prominent features of the biblical story. The salvation story of the Bible presents a theology and missiology for all three types of cultures. The contemporary Church must likewise present the 3D gospel in various cultural contexts. To equip global Christians for increased fruitfulness in ministry, we examine each group orientation culturally, theologically, and missiologically.