

Chapter 2.10: **Honor-status reversal as a motif of the Bible**

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**NOTE:** *This excerpt is not the final edited typeset book version,  
but from the final manuscript.*

# THE GLOBAL GOSPEL

Achieving Missional Impact  
in our Multicultural World



WERNER MISCHKE

FOREWORD BY  
SAMUEL CHIANG & STEVEN HAWTHORNE

# Your journey through this book—in four sections

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	Intro	A longing for honor, a shadow of shame
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*Length of bar corresponds to length of chapter*

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***This is your excerpt***

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*How the gospel can be articulated using any of the honor/shame dynamics*

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## SECTION 2, CHAPTER 10



## HONOR-STATUS REVERSAL AS A MOTIF OF THE BIBLE

In music, “a motif is a short musical idea, a salient recurring figure, musical fragment or succession of notes that has some special importance in or is characteristic of a composition.”<sup>272</sup> Any musician, music teacher or composer is familiar with the *motif*. It’s what makes any composition “hang together.”

A motif in literature “is any recurring element that has symbolic significance in a story. Through its repetition, a motif can help produce other narrative (or literary) aspects such as theme or mood. ... A narrative motif can be created through the use of imagery, structural components, language, and other narrative elements.”<sup>273</sup>

This book argues that “honor-status reversal” is a major motif in the Word of God—*God’s Story*.

### DEFINITION

Honor-status reversal is when a person, family or people have whatever degree of esteem, respect, privilege, power or authority before a community—turned the other way around. One’s honor status can be high or low or in-between, ranging from the lowest honor status of a leper or a slave—to the immensely powerful high honor status of a mighty king. Everyone in honor/shame cultures knows their level of honor relative to everyone else in their community.

There are two types of honor-status reversal.

- 1) **End result is honor:** Honor-to-shame-to-honor, or simply, shame-to-honor.
- 2) **End result is shame:** Shame-to-honor-to-shame, or simply, honor-to-shame.

These variations may be expressed graphically as shown below:

<sup>272</sup> Definition from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motif\\_\(music\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motif_(music)). Accessed 23 May 2013.

<sup>273</sup> Definition from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motif\\_\(narrative\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motif_(narrative)). Accessed 20 May 2013.

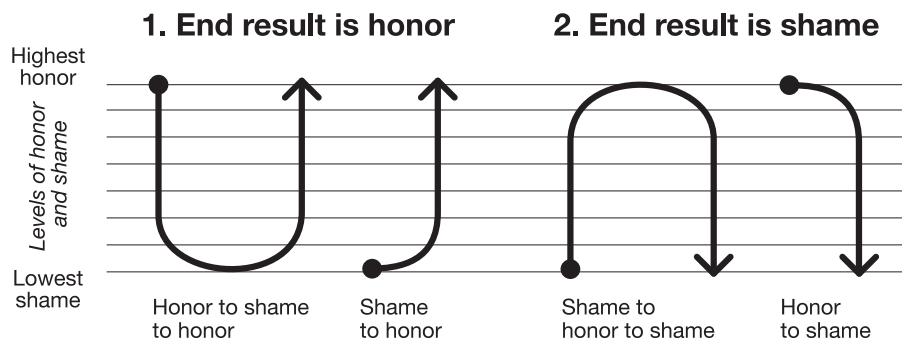


Figure 2.30: Types of honor-status reversal

A classic example in Scripture of honor-status reversal is found in the Apostle Paul's description of our Lord Jesus Christ in Philippians 2:

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:5–11).

### The Humiliation and Exaltation of Christ

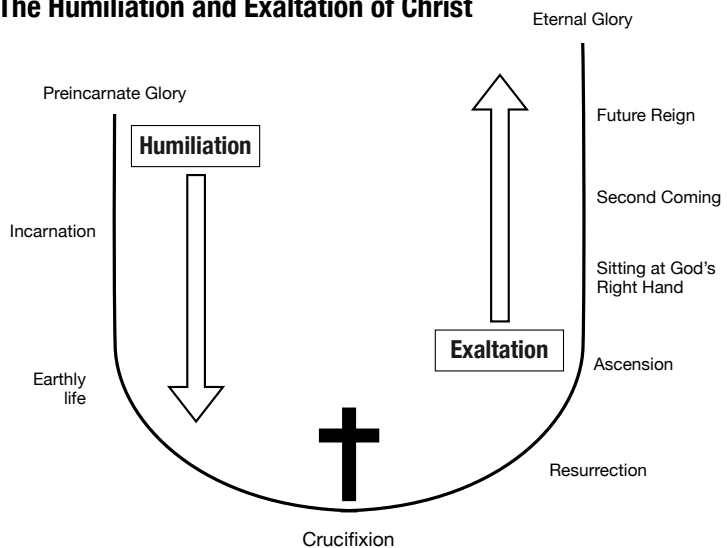


Figure 2.31: Humiliation and exaltation of Christ as honor-status reversal

Jesus Christ was with the Father in the honor and glory of heaven in eternity past. His honor status was infinitely high. Christ was in His "pre-incarnate glory."

But Jesus willingly allowed for his honor status to be reversed. He "emptied himself" ... descending through the Incarnation ... born fully human to the virgin Mary ... "taking the form of a servant."

He humbled himself further by dying, "even death on a cross"—the most shameful and ignominious destiny a man could endure.<sup>274</sup> Christ's entire Passion experience was his *humiliation*. However, as Timothy Tennent points out,

<sup>274</sup> For an overview of the honor/shame dynamics in the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus, see Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 89–91. Tennent cites Jerome Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross: Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative," *Semeia* 68, (1994): 113–37. Neyrey's full article is available at: <http://www3.nd.edu/~jneyrey1/shame.html>. Accessed 18 December 2013.

“... even though Jesus accepted this shame, it did not involve an *actual* loss of honor. Jesus stands up and exhibits control of the situation giving directions to the Roman soldiers (John 18:8), acknowledging that this arrest took place to fulfill Scripture (Matt 26:54, 56), healing the man’s ear (Luke 22:51), and even causing the soldiers to draw back and fall to the ground while Jesus remained standing (John 18:5).”<sup>275</sup>

Moreover, Jesus’ crucifixion-as-destiny on earth was not the end of the story. The pre-incarnate glory and honor he once had in heaven, then willingly laid aside, was to be regained and then magnified as he rose from the dead and sat down at the right hand of the Father. *The honor and glory of Christ was vindicated!* Again, this is an example of honor-status reversal—also known as Christ’s exaltation.

The significance of these verses cannot be overstated. As Christians, we believe that the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the crux of human history. That it constitutes the most dramatic account of honor-status reversal has wonderful implications for cross-cultural Christian ministry, which we will explore later in this book.

When you read and study the Bible with an awareness of honor/shame dynamics, you’ll be surprised by how frequently you will find that honor-status reversal is *hidden in plain sight*. In fact, the dynamic is so prevalent, I contend that honor-status reversal is a powerful motif in the entire panorama of Scripture. It becomes a powerful key for understanding so many aspects of God’s Story, Christ’s mission, the meaning of the kingdom of God, and the journey of discipleship for believers.

Here’s another example of honor-status reversal from the words of Jesus:

“Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great” (Luke 9:48).

Karl Reich explains honor-status reversal this way:

The very words “least” and “greatest” would automatically call up the thought of the Greco-Roman honor-shame system which was ultimately concerned with greatness. Malina and Rohr argue that this verse cuts at the very heart of the honor-shame system. They write, “A squabble over honor status would be typical within any ancient Mediterranean grouping ... Jesus’ reversal of the expected order challenges the usual assumptions about what is honorable in a very fundamental way.”<sup>276</sup>



Figure 2.32: Honor-status reversal is a major motif in Scripture—the axis of honor/shame dynamics in God’s Story

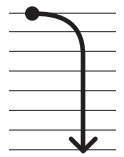
<sup>275</sup> Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 89.

<sup>276</sup> Karl Reich: *Figuring Jesus: The Power of Rhetorical Figures of Speech in the Gospel of Luke* (Koninklijke Brill NV, The Netherlands, 2011), 156.

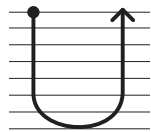
Referring to this verse, “And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (Luke 13:30), Reich continues:

... The pithy comment stays with the audience because of its compact and forceful nature and its enigmatic message. The transformation of polar opposites into their antithesis is unthinkable. The saying of the Lukan Jesus undermines the honor-shame system by proclaiming a reversal of roles.”

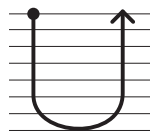
We have observed the dynamic of honor-status reversal in Paul’s description of Christ’s incarnation in his letter to the Philippians. We have seen it briefly in one passage in Luke’s Gospel. But it must be noted that honor-status reversal is present throughout Scripture. (Otherwise, of course, it cannot be considered a *motif*.) Consider:



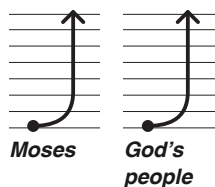
**Adam and Eve** were “sent out from the Garden of Eden” (Gen 3:24); they left the glory and honor of perfect fellowship with God and were shamed by their rebellion (Gen 3:10–11) to live apart from the honorable presence of God. The honor of their fellowship with God was reversed to a condition of being a permanent outsider—with shame, guilt, and fear.



**Abraham:** The story of Abraham is a story of a wealthy man who is called by God to essentially abandon his identity, to leave the very source of his honor—his father, his kinship, his homeland: “...Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). But consider the immense honor he is promised by God: “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2–3). Christopher Wright says of God’s promise in the call of Abraham: “The word of God that spoke into darkness now speaks into barrenness with good news of *astounding reversal*, holding before our imaginations vistas of a future that is (almost) beyond belief. God’s mission of world redemption begins.” (Emphasis mine).<sup>277</sup> It is an honor-status reversal foundational to the entire narrative and revelation of Scripture—including the global mission of God.



**Joseph.** The story of Joseph takes up a large portion of Scripture (Genesis 37–50), fully fourteen chapters. Joseph was the favorite, most honored son of Jacob. But his brothers threw him down into a pit to be sold into slavery—a deep shame—from which he eventually rose to become the prime minister of Egypt. It’s a classic story of honor-status reversal.

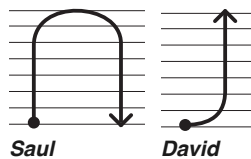


**Moses and The Exodus:** The story of Moses in Exodus is also an account of honor-status reversal. A baby born into the oppressed minority society of the Hebrews is found by Pharaoh’s daughter—and then raised as a prince in the royal palace. Eventually, in a dramatic God-empowered salvation event of epic proportions, Moses led the oppressed Hebrews in the Exodus out of the shame of slavery in Egypt toward the honor of the Promised Land (Ex 6:6–8).

The reversal of shame to honor for all God’s people is also depicted in Leviticus: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect” (Lev 26:13). After many generations of oppression, God rescued them. He made them to “walk erect”—their dignity recovered, their honor restored.

<sup>277</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 200.





Saul

David

**Saul and David:** The story of Saul is one of low status to kingly honor—back to low status and shame (1 Sam 9:21; 10:22; 15:17). On the other hand, God took David, a lowly shepherd boy who had faith in the living God, and raised him to become a mighty king whose honor in the eyes of the people permanently exceeded that of the prior king (1 Sam 18:7). The contrast between Saul and David in their honor-status-trajectory is

summarized in 1 Samuel: “There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker” (2 Sam 3:1). God honored David even to promising an eternal kingdom to his son (2 Sam 7:11–13), and many saw Jesus as this son.<sup>278</sup>



Mephibosheth

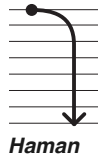
A dramatic story of honor-status reversal is recorded in 2 Samuel 9. King David inquired to find if there was “anyone left of the house of Saul” in order to “show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake” (2 Sam 9:1). One shameful survivor was found—Mephibosheth—“he is crippled in his feet” (2 Sam 9:3). With great kindness, David instructed that all of Saul’s family land be returned to Mephibosheth, and that Mephibosheth would eat at the king’s table (2 Sam 9:7). *What a reversal*—from the shame of disability and obscurity—to eating every day with the king!



Esther



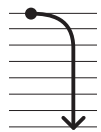
Mordecai



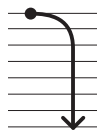
Haman

**Esther:** The story of Esther is another classic. A beautiful woman (Esther) from the minority culture of the Jews ends up rising in honor as she was chosen to be the wife, the very queen, of the king of Persia. When a plot to kill the Jews was hatched by the evil Haman, Esther’s uncle Mordecai asked Esther to courageously intervene with the king on behalf of her people, the Jews. The ESV

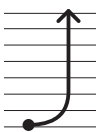
Study Bible says, “The reader is clearly meant to laugh at the way [Haman’s] vanity traps him into having to publicly honor the very man he intended to kill (6:6–11), and his death on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai (7:8–10) is a classic case of a villain falling into his own pit.”<sup>279</sup> We see here, again, various examples of honor-status reversal!



Judah &amp; Jerusalem



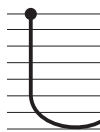
Arrogant peoples &amp; nations



Every valley



Mountain and hill



The suffering Servant



Israel's future glory

**Isaiah:** The book of Isaiah is saturated with the dynamic of honor-status reversal. I will mention just a few examples. Judah and Jerusalem will be judged, disgraced and shamed for their rebellion against God (1:1–

8:22). The nations surrounding Judah and Israel will be likewise judged and shamed because of their arrogance; a variety of oracles are spoken against them (various passages in chapters 10–23, 34). In chapter 23, the whole earth undergoes an honor-status reversal, being judged by God for rebellion.

Perhaps the most elegant and poetic example of honor-status reversal is in chapter 40: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (40:4–5).

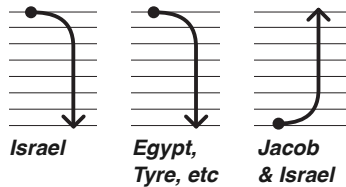
Chapters 52–54 describe the honor-status reversal of the suffering servant. Chapter 52 has status reversals ending in both shame and honor. Chapter 53 deals exclusively with the shame

<sup>278</sup> Ten times in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is referred to as the Son of David, indicating the high honor accorded to David by God in Jewish tradition.

<sup>279</sup> *ESV Study Bible* (Kindle Locations 59670–59671). Good News Publishers/Crossway Books. Kindle Edition.

of the Servant who is “wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities” (53:5), “because he poured out his soul to death” (53:12). Chapter 54 deals exclusively with the upward status reversal of God’s servant and the surprising, joy-filled honor to come: “Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married,’ says the LORD” (54:1).

Finally, chapters 60–66 describe various ways that (following God’s judgment in 63:1–19), Israel and even all the nations (66:18–20) will experience a dramatic honor-status reversal through worshiping the one true and living God. This honor in God for all of his people will finally end in *shalom* in “the new heavens and new earth” (66:10–17, 22).<sup>280</sup>

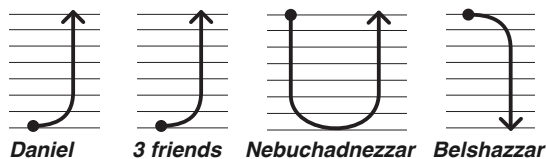


**Ezekiel:** The book of Ezekiel has numerous examples of honor-status reversal. For example, Israel was *brought low* by God for her idolatries and immorality in chapters 5–6, and 20–24. This dynamic of bringing Israel *down into shame* is seen in these verses:

“Moreover, I will make you a desolation and an object of reproach among the nations all around you and in the sight of all who pass by. You shall be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and a horror, to

the nations all around you, when I execute judgments on you in anger and fury, and with furious rebukes—I am the Lord; I have spoken...” (Eze 5:14–15). God used the nations to judge Israel, but God also *brought down* those same prideful nations—Ammon, Moab, Edom, Phylistia, Tyre, Egypt (chapters 25–32)—for their arrogance against God.

The comprehensive theme of honor-status reversal—bringing down the proud while elevating the humble—may be seen in chapter 17. “And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it.” (17:24). The restoration of Israel’s honor from a place of degradation and shame is wonderfully represented in chapters 36–37, especially in the passage about the “dry bones” which are *raised up* from graves to become “an exceedingly great army” (37:1–14). God promised that he will “restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel” so that “they shall forget their shame...” (39:25–26).



**Daniel:** The book of Daniel has a high concentration of stories which contain the dynamic of honor-status reversal. Repeatedly, Daniel and his friends were challenged in their faith, kept their commitment to trust in God, descended into a severe trial, only to rise in vindication and honor. In

chapter one they were vindicated and promoted for their refusal to compromise their cultural identity as people of the Most High God. In chapter two, Daniel publicly praised God as the one who “reveals deep and hidden things” (v 22). Subsequently, Daniel revealed not just *what* King Nebuchadnezzar dreamt, but also its profound meaning (v 31–45); as a result Daniel was highly honored and promoted to the position of “ruler over the whole province of Babylon” (v 48).

In chapter three Daniel’s three friends refused to worship the huge golden image set up by the King, were thrown into the fiery furnace made seven times hotter—and they survived without their hair being singed. God was literally with them in the fiery trial as “the fourth [who] is like the

<sup>280</sup> Limited space does not permit us to include examples of all Old Testament prophets. But honor-status reversal is a widespread dynamic in all of the OT prophetic books. Examples include Jer 33:1–13; Lam 5:1–22; Hos 10:1–6; 14:4–7; Joel 2:18–29; Amos 2:1–16; 9:11–15; Oba 1–21; Jon 2:1–9; Mic 7:8–17; Nah 2:1–12; Hab 2:6–20; Zeph 2:5–15; 3:14–20; Hag 2:20–22; Zech 3:1–6; 8:1–11:3; Mal 3:11–4:3.

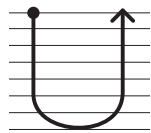


son of the gods” (v 25). Again God’s people were vindicated and experienced a rise in their honor status (v 29–30).

Chapter four reveals the honor-status reversal of King Nebuchadnezzar himself. Because of the king’s sin (v 27) and pride (v 28–30), God sovereignly removed him from his throne.

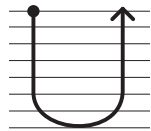
Nebuchadnezzar was humiliated as he apparently lost his mind and became like an ox eating grass, ugly and unkempt, isolated in shame (v 33). Then, Nebuchadnezzar said, “my reason returned to me” (v 34), and he gave eloquent praise to the Most High (v 34–35). It is a dramatic example of honor-status reversal for Nebuchadnezzar: “and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me” (v 36).

In chapter five, King Belshazzar threw a party using the vessels from the temple in Jerusalem—and in so doing, dramatically dishonored God (v 1–4, 23). A mysterious hand appeared and wrote a message on the banquet wall, causing intense fear and dread (v 5–6). Daniel was called in to interpret the message from God (10–28): *It is the doom and imminent fall of Belshazzar*. The prideful king was killed that same night by the invading army of Darius the Mede (v 30). It is another classic example of honor-status reversal under the sovereign rule of the Most High God.



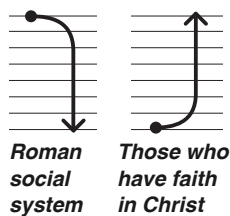
**The Beatitudes** (Matthew 5:3–11) begin with “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In every verse in this most beautiful series, Jesus is teaching that in his kingdom, there is a new way of living, a new way of gaining and measuring the honor of a man or woman. This new way of living is not a

dismissal of the need for honor—nor a total rejection of the honor/shame values which permeated Greco-Roman culture. It is, rather, a proclamation that a new honor, a higher and permanent honor is now available to all as they live in God’s kingdom in loving submission to the most honorable King of Kings.



**The parable of the Prodigal Son** (Luke 15:11–32) is considered the best short story ever told.<sup>281</sup> The younger of two sons has turned away from his family and his father. Entering a downward spiral of shame, he ends up in the most degrading condition conceivable—in a famine, feeding swine, wishing to eat what the pigs eat.

He comes to his senses, and decides to return home to his father. Rather than being rejected and scorned, the father greets him with kisses and weeping. He gives the lost son his prized robe. He provides sandals for his feet and gives him a ring for his finger, signifying the honor and authority of the family. Then the father calls for a huge village celebration to welcome home the lost son. Is there a more powerful example of honor-status reversal in Scripture?<sup>282</sup>



**Romans:** Robert Jewett explains that Roman emperors were worshiped as gods by the people of the Roman Empire. For example, concerning Caesar Augustus, “The imperial cult celebrated ‘the gospel’ of the allegedly divine power of the emperor, viewing him, in the words of an official document from the province of Asia, as

“a savior... who put an end to war and will restore order everywhere: Caesar, by his appearance has realized the hopes of our ancestors; not only has he surpassed earlier benefactors of humanity, but he leaves no

<sup>281</sup> See John MacArthur: *The Prodigal Son: An Astonishing Study of the Parable Jesus Told to Unveil God’s Grace for You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 3.

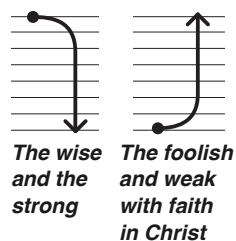
<sup>282</sup> See “The Father’s Love Gospel Booklet” at <http://thefatherslovebooklet.org>

hope to those of the future that they might surpass him. The god's birthday was for the world the beginning of the gospel that he brought."<sup>283</sup>

Moreover, Nero was lauded as "the saviour and benefactor of the universe."<sup>284</sup> In his commentary on Romans 1:16,<sup>285</sup> Jewett asserts:

"The contrast with Roman civic [religion] brings more clearly into focus the implications of Paul's thesis and its correlation with the rest of the *exordium*<sup>286</sup> as well as the subsequent argument of his letter, because this gospel shatters the unrighteous precedence given to the strong over the weak, the free and well-educated over slaves and the ill-educated, the Greeks and Romans over the barbarians. If what the world considers dishonorable has power [Jewett is referring to the gospel of the cross], it will prevail and achieve a new form of honor to those who have not earned it, an honor consistent with divine righteousness. All who place their faith in this gospel will be set right, that is, be placed in the right relation to the most significant arena in which honor is dispensed: divine judgment. Thus the triumph of divine righteousness through the gospel of Christ crucified and resurrected is achieved by transforming the system in which shame and honor are dispensed. *The thesis of Romans therefore effectively turns the social value system of the Roman empire upside down.*"<sup>287</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

Therefore, we assert that Paul's letter to the Romans is a theological treatise shaped in part by the social and cultural situation of the church in Rome—and incorporating at its core the dynamic of honor-status reversal.



**1 Corinthians:** "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor 1:27–29). Richard Bauckham asserts that "social status is the issue in much of Paul's debates with the dominant faction in the Corinthian church." The wise are "the powerful elite, or those who aspire to join them.

The strong are those whose wealth and social position give them power and influence in society, while the people Paul calls weak are the powerless, the ordinary people with no say and no muscle in this social world."<sup>288</sup> Into this intensely status-conscious faith community, Paul proclaimed the foolishness of "Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23).

**Revelation:** In God's Revelation to John of the cosmic struggle between God's glorious kingdom and the devil's empire of evil, God's final judgment on evil is revealed.

<sup>283</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 138. Jewett's citation is "Letter of the Proconsul of Asia, Paulus Fabius Maximus, honoring Augustus in *I. Priene*, 105.35ff cited by Ceslas Spicq *TLNT* 3 (1994) 353. ..."

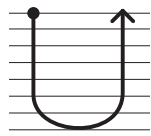
<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>285</sup> "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16). Jewett likens Paul's "power of the gospel" with the "word of the cross" in 1 Cor 1:18—"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." In essence, Paul is saying in Rom 1:16 that he is "not ashamed" of the gospel—the preaching of the *shameful folly of the cross*.

<sup>286</sup> *Exordium* means "introduction of a discourse or treatise."

<sup>287</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 139.

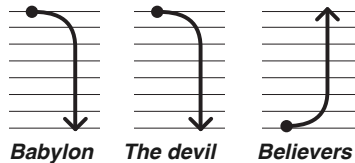
<sup>288</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 50.



Foundational to God's victory is the resounding conquest of the Lamb who was slain, and who has through resurrection become the fearless, triumphant Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev 5:6–7). The honor-status reversal of Jesus Christ—from crucified Lamb to conquering Lion—could not be more clear.

Also contained in Revelation is the honor-status reversal of mighty Babylon.

“And he called out with a mighty voice, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast’ (Rev 18:2).



Numerous other examples of honor-status reversal also appear in Revelation. In chapter three, the saints at Laodicea are admonished by the Lord, “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen...” (v. 18), and then a few verses later, in an almost

unthinkable expression of elevated honor, the Lord Jesus says, “the one who conquers I will grant to sit with me on my throne as I also conquered and sit with my Father on his throne (v. 21). In addition, the saints who were martyred are honorably clothed in white (6:11) ... the once glorious, evil serpent, the devil, is finally vanquished (20:1–10) ... even the once-inglorious unredeemed peoples of the earth—represented by their kings—bring their glory into the new city (21:22–26). This is but a sampling of the examples in Revelation of honor-status reversal.<sup>289</sup>

### HONOR-STATUS REVERSAL IN LESS WELL-KNOWN PASSAGES, TOO

I’ve mentioned some of the big stories of the Bible as examples of honor-status reversal: *Abraham ... Joseph ... Moses ... David ... Esther ... Daniel ... the drama of Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection ... the cosmic drama in Revelation.*

But honor-status reversal shows up in smaller ways, too. A look at the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel shows this is true. The chart below contains various examples of honor-status reversal:

Basic story / idea	Luke	Beginning status	Honor/shame dynamic	↑ or ↓
Zechariah and Elizabeth—old and childless—become pregnant with John the Baptist	1:5–24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advanced in age and childless; barren (1:7)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pregnant with son who “will be great before the Lord” (1:15)</li> <li>“to take away my reproach among the people” (1:25)</li> </ul>	↑
Mary visited by angel and is given the honorific news that she will bear a son who will be an eternal king	1:26–38	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teenage girl, virtuous but common</li> <li>Not shameful, but no honor status</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visited by angel and told she is the “favored one” (1:28)</li> <li>Will give birth to a son, Jesus, “called Son of the Most High,” descendant of David</li> <li>Her son will be a king who will reign forever in an eternal kingdom</li> </ul>	↑
Elizabeth elevates the honor status of Mary	1:39–45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teenage girl, virtuous but common</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (1:42)</li> <li>“blessed is she who believed” (1:45)</li> <li>An amazing pronouncement by Elizabeth (an old woman) about Mary (a young woman) relative to Mary’s status compared to all other women</li> </ul>	↑

<sup>289</sup> See Appendix 5, “Honor/shame dynamics in the book of Revelation;” this is an extensive chart listing the occurrences of honor/shame dynamics—including honor-status reversal—in the book of Revelation.

Basic story / idea	Luke	Beginning status	Honor/shame dynamic	↑ or ↓
Mary's Song of Praise, The Magnificat	1:46–56	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• humble</li> <li>• hungry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “he who is mighty has done great things for me” (1: 49)</li> <li>• “mercy for those who fear him” (1:50)</li> <li>• “exalted those of humble estate” (1:52)</li> <li>• “filled the hungry with good things” (1:53)</li> </ul>	↑
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• proud</li> <li>• mighty</li> <li>• rich</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “scattered the proud”</li> <li>• “brought down the mighty from their thrones”</li> <li>• “the rich he has sent away empty” (1:51–53)</li> </ul>	↓
Birth of John the Baptist, Elizabeth's shame covered and her honor gained	1:57–66	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zechariah and Elizabeth barren</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “she bore a son” ... “her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.” (1:57–58)</li> <li>• Elizabeth gained respect and honor in her community</li> </ul>	↑
Zechariah's prophesy of the honor-status reversal of the house of David (Israel)	1:67–80	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• needing salvation</li> <li>• hated by enemies</li> <li>• in darkness</li> <li>• shadow of death</li> <li>• constant conflict / oppression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “the Lord” ... “has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (1:68–69)</li> <li>• “the we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (1:71)</li> <li>• “the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (1:78–79)</li> </ul>	↑

Figure 2.33: Honor-status reversal in Luke 1

And that's just the first chapter in Luke's Gospel! And so it continues—the motif of honor-status reversal shows up in every chapter of Luke.

In fact, in the very next chapter, there is a scene where the parents of Jesus have brought the child Jesus into the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22–38). The man Simeon is there, “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.” There is deep emotion which permeates this passage of Scripture. Simeon was *longing* for the restoration of Israel's honor among the nations, “waiting for the consolation to Israel” (v. 25). He picks Jesus up in his arms and says:

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:29–32).

Then something curious happens:

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel*, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:33–35). (Emphasis mine.)

Simeon was under the anointing of the Holy Spirit (2:25). He hints at the royal identity of Jesus the Messiah: “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall [↓] and rising [↑] of many in Israel.”

Simeon summarized the ministry of Jesus as a ministry of *honor-status reversal*! The shamed will be elevated in honor, and the honorable will be brought low and shamed.

Could it be that with respect to the pivotal cultural value of honor and shame, *honor-status reversal* is the very essence of the gospel?

Richard Bauckham does not use the word *motif*; nor does he use the phrase *honor-status reversal*; but he does use the phrase “consistent divine strategy” in referring to Paul's

proclamation of how God works to bring down the high-minded and arrogant—while he elevates the low and humble. Alluding to the opening chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Bauckham writes:

In this passage and its context Paul does something rather remarkable. In the first place, by echoing the Old Testament, he identifies a *consistent divine strategy*, a characteristic way in which God works, to which the origins of the church at Corinth conform. That God chose the first Corinthian converts is the God who chose the least significant of all the people (Israel) for his own (Deuteronomy 7:7). This is Hannah's God, who exalts the lonely and humbles the exalted (1 Samuel 2:3–8), just as he is also Mary's God, who feels the hungry and dismisses the rich (Luke 1:51–53). This is the God who chose the youngest of Jesse's sons, David, the one no one had even thought to summon (1 Sam 16:6–13). This is the God who habitually overturns status, not in order to make the non-élite a new élite, but in order to abolish status, to establish his kingdom in which no one can claim privilege over others and all gladly surrender privilege for the good of others.<sup>290</sup>

This leads us to consider more thoroughly what honor-status reversal means for Christians.

### HONOR-STATUS REVERSAL FOR BELIEVERS

Consider again the diagram at right which illustrates the honor-status reversal of Jesus Christ based on Philippians 2:9–11. Observe this truth again—that after Christ's public humiliation through the crucifixion, he was rewarded and vindicated by supreme, magnificent, comprehensive, highly exalted honor.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9–11).

#### The Humiliation and Exaltation of Christ

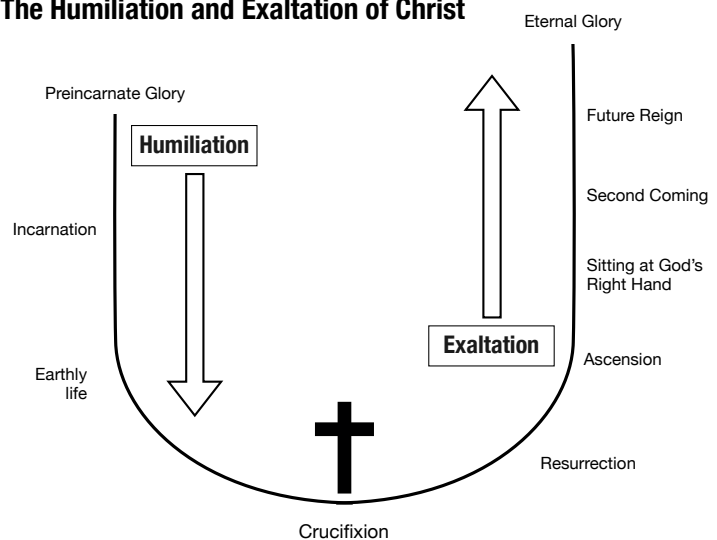


Figure 2.32: Humiliation and exaltation of Christ as honor-status reversal

So honor-status reversal is clearly represented here in the drama and Person of Christ. Can we also apply this dynamic of honor-status reversal to those who believe Jesus Christ is their Savior? The verses below indicate, that, *yes, honor-status reversal applies to believers*.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Rom 6:3–5).

<sup>290</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 51.



Normally, we do not associate the truth of being “baptized into Christ Jesus” and “baptized into his death” as identification with his humiliating shame. It’s ugly and assaults our sense of pride. We like to think that Jesus died for our sins in our place, but being “baptized into his death” is harsh and difficult to embrace.

### **Positional and experiential?**

This draws us into the paradox between the believer’s *positional* and *experiential* identity in Christ. For some, trusting in Christ as Savior and Lord may include in this life a literal downward status reversal relative to their family or community which involves shame, rejection, or even martyrdom. Thus, being “baptized into his death” is both positional and experiential.

For many others, however, no such shame and rejection is required by their community, so being “baptized into his death” represents more of a *positional* truth, and less an *experiential* truth. The baptism of children comes to mind. I was baptized as a ten-year-old boy. Except for a general sense of dying to self-will, this verse was for me much more of a *positional*, rather than an *experiential*, reality.

The paradox between the positional and experiential also relates to the truth of being “united with him in a resurrection like his” (6:5). In order for believers to be included in the honor and exaltation of Christ’s resurrection—must we first identify with Christ in the shame of his death? We can answer that for all genuine Christians, this is *positionally* true. This is why the ordinance of *baptism* is given by God for all Christians—symbolizing both a downward death to sin and an upward rise into new life in Christ.

**But a caution is in order.** We sometimes all too easily ignore the demands of the gospel when, on the one hand, we claim the *positional* truth of our victorious, honored identity in the exalted Christ—but on the other hand, refuse the *experience* of obediently relinquishing our status or our rights in the service of our King.

Consider the life of Apostle Paul, for whom there was a genuine merger between *positional* and *experiential* truth. Paul actually *lived* the dynamic of Christ’s honor-status reversal. As Michael T. Gorman says, “For Paul, to be in Christ is to be a living exegesis of this narrative of Christ, a new performance of the original drama of exaltation following humiliation, of humiliation as the voluntary renunciation of rights and selfish gain in order to serve and obey.”<sup>291</sup>

The Bible says that our *positional* identification with Christ should lead to an *experiential* reality. For example, to be “united with him in his resurrection” is not solely for our eternal life after we die. Otherwise, Paul’s emphasis that “we too might walk in newness of life” would not make sense, as this represents living life on earth prior to physical death. “Walking in newness of life” refers to a new lifestyle which both contains and reflects the glory and honor of Jesus Christ. This may lead believers to ask, *is honor-status reversal for us now or for us the future?* It appears there is a dynamic tension at work. It is similar to the mysterious *already-but-not-yet* nature of the kingdom of God.<sup>292</sup> Therefore, the answer is *Yes!*

**More in Romans 6 and 8.** There are other passages in Romans which illustrate honor-status reversal for believers in Christ. For example, Romans 6:6–14 elaborates on the honor-status reversal that believers experience in Christ:

<sup>291</sup> Michael T. Gorman: *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 87. As quoted in Dean Flemming: *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (p. 176). Kindle Edition.

<sup>292</sup> See Graham Cray, “The Theology of the Kingdom,” in Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, Eds., *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999), 26–44.



We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Rom 6:6–14).

When Paul writes about being set free from slavery to sin (Rom 6:6–7), and “consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11), we must capture the dynamic of shame associated with slavery to sin. Slaves were low status people (property, actually) in the Roman Empire.<sup>293</sup> Correspondingly, we must see the dynamic of honor associated with our identifying with the resurrection life of Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:34–38 expresses the dynamic of believers being on the low, shameful end of the spectrum, “being killed ... regarded as sheep for the slaughter,” whereas on the high, honorable end of the spectrum, being “more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Think of the believers at Rome, where the church was an oft-shamed minority group, breathing the air of the honor of the Roman Empire and its “glorious” conquerors. How much it must have stirred their hearts to hear that, in Christ, they were “more than conquerors!” What a glorious honor-status reversal for the church at Rome—of course, a *positional* truth.

Believers are called to identify with our Lord to such an extent that our relationship with him begins with the willingness to relinquish social status and personal rights (a downward honor-status reversal). At the same time, our being in Christ ultimately leads to a magnificent, upward rise in our honor status in eternity. Of course, all of these realities are solely *in Christ*.

## A steady theme of Paul: honor-status reversal through Christ

Below are other passages which show the upward honor-status reversal of believers. You will note that these verses show that believers’ honor is embedded totally in Christ. And you will observe again the *already-but-not-yet* tension between positional and experiential realities.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. *But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are*, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor 1:26–29).

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. *What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body...* (1 Cor 15:42–44).

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. *Therefore, if*

<sup>293</sup> “Slaves were considered property under Roman law and had no legal personhood. Unlike Roman citizens, they could be subjected to corporal punishment, sexual exploitation (prostitutes were often slaves), torture, and summary execution.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery\\_in\\_ancient\\_Rome](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_ancient_Rome). Accessed 20 June 2013.

*anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ... Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us (2 Cor 5:16–20).*

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20).

to redeem those who were under the law, *so that we might receive adoption as sons.* And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” *So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God (Gal 4:5–7).*

## A CLOSER LOOK AT HONOR-STATUS REVERSAL IN EPHESIANS 2

Ephesians 2:1–7 gives us a dramatic picture of honor-status reversal from being “dead in trespasses and sins” to having been “raised...up with him and seated...with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” *From death—to seated with Christ in exalted honor.* Astounding!

Let’s take a closer look at the profound dynamics of honor-status reversal in Ephesians 2 in the charts below:

Honor-status reversal—Humanity in relation to God (Ephesians 2:1–7)	
VERTICAL DIMENSION (COSMIC)	
Our original shameful status in relation to God	Our honor-status reversal by grace through faith in Jesus Christ
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Spiritually dead:</b> “dead in...trespasses and sins” (2:1)</li> <li>• <b>Unwittingly following the world’s spirit and devil:</b> “following the course of this world” / “following the prince of the power of the air” (2:2)</li> <li>• <b>Victimized by evil spirit:</b> “the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (2:2)</li> <li>• <b>DNA of an evil, shameful father:</b> “sons of disobedience” (2:2)</li> <li>• <b>Enslaved to self:</b> “lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (2:3)</li> <li>• <b>Destined for God’s eternal punishment:</b> “children of wrath” (2:3)</li> <li>• <b>Unexceptional:</b> “like the rest of mankind” (2:3)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Loving intervention, undeserved, from the powerful, divine Benefactor directed toward us:</b> “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us” (2:4)</li> <li>• <b>Gave us new life us by enjoining us to the Messiah-King:</b> “made us alive together with Christ” (2:5)</li> <li>• <b>Permanently raised our honor status in Christ’s resurrection:</b> “and raised us up with him” (2:6)</li> <li>• <b>Providing us rest and authority in relational co-regency with Christ the King:</b> “seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (2:6)</li> <li>• <b>All to display God’s riches to magnify his honor for all eternity:</b> “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” (2:6)</li> </ul>

Figure 2.34: The vertical dimension of honor-status reversal—humanity in relation to God

Honor-status reversal—Gentiles in relation to God’s People (Ephesians 2:11–22)	
HORIZONTAL DIMENSION (SOCIAL / CULTURAL)	
Ephesians 2:11–12 Our original shameful status in relation to God’s people	Ephesians 2:13–22 Our honor-status reversal by grace through faith in Jesus Christ
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Unclean, defiled and without hope of being made clean:</b> “Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision” (2:11)</li> <li>• <b>No access to the honor and benefaction of the Messiah King:</b> “separated from Christ” (2:12)</li> <li>• <b>As aliens in relation to God’s great people Israel:</b> “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel” (2:12)</li> <li>• <b>Unaware of any relational destiny in God:</b> “strangers to the covenants of promise” (2:12)</li> <li>• <b>Living in despair without God’s presence:</b> “having no hope and without God in the world” (2:12)</li> <li>• <b>Disconnected from the most honorable relationship:</b> “far off” ... “strangers and aliens” (2:12)</li> <li>• <b>On the other side of “the dividing wall of hostility”</b> (2:12)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>From far away in shame to very near through the honor of Christ’s blood:</b> “you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:13)</li> <li>• <b>Messiah King himself is our new source of honor—dispelling our compulsion for honor competition and hostility:</b> “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (2:14)</li> <li>• <b>For a completely new kind of kinship group made in peace:</b> “by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” (2:15)</li> <li>• <b>The shame of Christ’s body on the cross absorbed humanity’s compulsion for honor competition and hostility—to create a new body among humanity—a community of peace:</b> “and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” (2:16)</li> <li>• <b>Both Jew and Gentile (no superiority for being Jewish) were equally in need of the preaching of this grace and peace:</b> “And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.” (2:17)</li> <li>• <b>The high honor of access to Holy God is now available to all peoples—further dispelling honor competition:</b> “For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” (2:18)</li> <li>• <b>Shameful state as <i>strange aliens</i> replaced by multi-dimensional honor of <i>citizens, saints, family members</i>:</b> “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (2:19)</li> <li>• <b>Entering into the honor of God’s ancient story, the crux of which is the Messiah King and Son of God:</b> “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (2:20)</li> <li>• <b>Brothers and sisters in Christ become the new “sacred space”—wherever they are:</b> “in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.” (2:21)</li> <li>• <b>In Christ your new community is the dwelling for the most honorable, holy presence of God.</b> “In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (2:22)</li> </ul>

Figure 2.33: The horizontal dimension of honor-status reversal—humanity in relation to God’s people

The first seven verses in Ephesians 2 speak to all believers—Jew and Gentile—of humanity’s relationship with God—from spiritually dead to—“made alive with Christ” ... “raised with Christ” ... “seated with him.” This is the *vertical dimension*. It refers to our personal, positional, eternity-future in relationship to God.

The last twelve verses of Ephesians 2 speak to Gentile believers and their relationship to God’s chosen people. Paul describes it as a profound transformation—a reversal of shame to honor. From separated, alienated, strangers, having no hope—the “uncircumcision”! (v. 11)<sup>294</sup>—to citizens, saints, full-fledged family members who together are a dwelling for the presence of God. This is the *horizontal dimension*, the right-now, life-on-earth-with-my-neighbor dimension.

<sup>294</sup> The intensely shameful status of the “uncircumcised”—in relation to God’s people Israel—is depicted by the prophet Habakkuk: “Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink—you pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness! You will have your fill of shame instead of glory. Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision! The cup in the LORD’s right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory! (Hab 2:15–16).

## AT THE CRUX OF TWO DIMENSIONS OF HONOR-STATUS REVERSAL—THERE IT IS— “SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH”

What is located between these two dramatic expressions of honor-status reversal—between verses 1–7 and 11–22? The often-quoted verses about *salvation by grace through faith*:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph 2:8–9).

This “salvation verse” sits at the intersection of vertical and horizontal dimensions of honor-status reversal. The vertical dimension refers to a person’s relationship with God. The horizontal dimension refers to the Gentiles’ relationship with God’s people. The epic drama inherent in these dimensions of honor-status reversal—along with the liberation that this brought spiritually, emotionally and socially<sup>295</sup>—is the context for “salvation by grace through faith.”

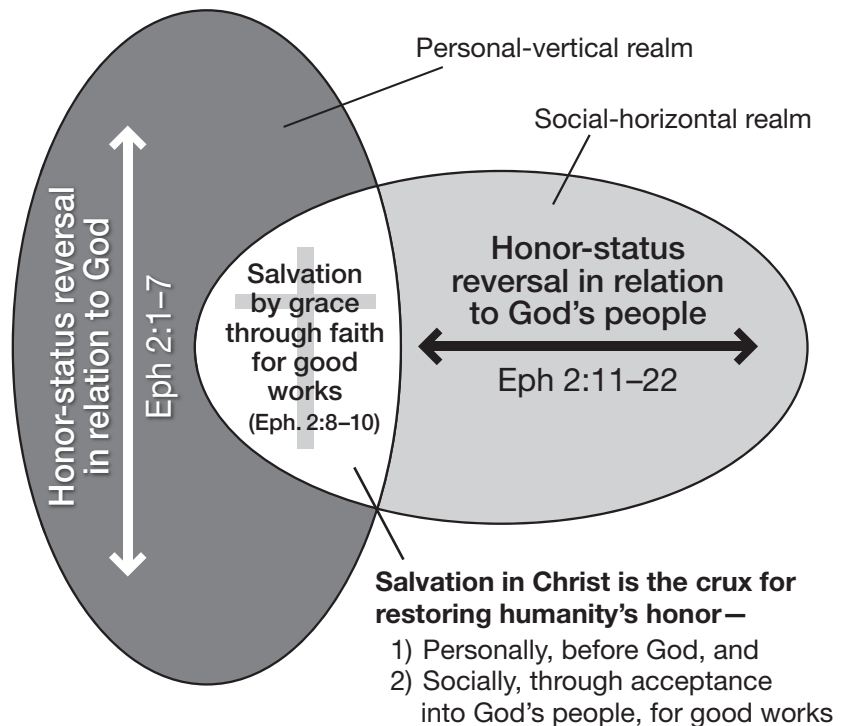


Figure 2.36: Salvation is the crux of two dimensions of honor-status reversal in Ephesians 2

Timothy Tennent writes: “The New Testament celebrates a salvific transformation that has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. Personal salvation in the New Testament is inextricably linked to becoming a part of the new humanity of Ephesians 2:15.”<sup>296</sup> As salvation is *vertical* because sin is *personal*, so also is salvation *horizontal* because sin is *corporate*. According to Hiebert: “There is both personal and corporate sin and personal and corporate dimensions to God’s redemption.”<sup>297</sup>

<sup>295</sup> I believe that when Paul wrote in verse 4, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,” he intended that his readers—and those listening to the letter being read—experience a kind of deep sense of relief to the anxiety about humanity’s predicament created by verses 1 through 3. When Paul wrote in verse 19, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,” he intended that his readers—and those listening to the letter being read—experience deep relief to the never-ending shame anxiety about levels of honor status, inclusion or exclusion, acceptance or rejection—which they experienced in their honor/shame society.

<sup>296</sup> Timothy C. Tennent: *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 62.

<sup>297</sup> Paul Hiebert, “The Gospel in Human Contexts: Changing Perceptions of Contextualization” in Stetzer, Ed; Hesselgrave, David, *MissionShift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium* (p. 99). B&H Publishing, 2010. Kindle Edition.

The verses, Ephesians 2:8–9, are well known by lay persons in evangelical churches. Not as well known is the verse which immediately follows:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph 2:10).

Why is Ephesians 2:10 referenced less frequently than Ephesians 2:8–9? Would seeing it in the light of honor and shame help us see how the original recipients would have understood it? Let's unpack the meaning of Ephesians 2: 8–10 this way.<sup>298</sup>

Honor/shame dynamics of Ephesians 2:8–10	
Ephesians 2:8, 9, 10	Comment
For by grace you have been saved through faith. (2:8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• God is a most-high Benefactor-Savior; he has saved us by grace as we have placed our full trust in him; our honor is embedded in an altogether different King: his name is Jesus Christ.</li> </ul>
And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (2:9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We claim no self-honor in this; it is not our own doing.</li> <li>• Our self effort has no impact on whether God accepts us; no one can boast (or make a claim to honor) that they deserve what God has given them.</li> </ul>
For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (2:10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our new lives are created in Christ Jesus, and thus we bear the honor of our King in doing his good works.</li> <li>• Being in Christ, we have the immense honor of being in God's story to do the good works which our King "prepared beforehand" — what a privilege!</li> </ul>

Figure 2.37: Honor/shame dynamics in Ephesians 2:8–10

Remember, because the original recipients of the letter lived in an honor/shame culture, the doing of good works would have been understood as a natural outcome of a great salvation provided by a great Benefactor-King! To return honor to the Great Benefactor by doing his good works would *not* have been seen as incongruous to salvation by grace, but a natural, completely appropriate response. The absence of the expectation to do good works would have been considered deviant from the norm, an anomaly.

## PAUL'S OWN STORY OF HONOR-STATUS REVERSAL IN ACTS 22

Paul recounts the story of his own salvation in Acts 22:6–16 as he defends himself in front of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. What he shares is a story of dramatic honor-status reversal.

<sup>298</sup> The royal nature of Christ as King—emphasized much in this chart—is not *directly* seen in Ephesians 2. I derive this emphasis *indirectly* from three things: 1) The word *Christ* means "Messiah," and Messiah in the Old Testament has many royal, kinglike qualities. For example, Psalm 110:1–7 is a prophecy of Christ; verse 1 is quoted multiple times in the New Testament. It is a vivid expression of Christ as conquering king who saves his people and rules in victory over all his enemies. 2) The passage immediately preceding Ephesians 2 is 1:19–23; it is descriptive of a ruling, reigning king, especially the phrase in verse 20 (referring to Ps 110:1)—"and seated him at his right hand." 3) When Paul was about to leave Ephesus for the last time, he said to the believers, "And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again" (Acts 20:25). Paul summarized his communication of the revelation of God in Christ as "proclaiming the kingdom." In the last verse of the book of Acts, Luke writes a similar summary statement about the ministry of Paul while he was under house arrest in Rome, that Paul was "...proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ..." Moreover, Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians from Rome. Therefore, is it too much to say that his entire letter to the Ephesians is an expression of "proclaiming the kingdom"—a kingdom ruled by Jesus Christ the King? To the original readers and hearers of this letter—living as they did under the reign of Caesar—the royal reign of Christ as King was understood.



He begins by describing his original high honor status. “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel<sup>299</sup> according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day” (Acts 22:3). What a pedigree! Not only that, he also persecuted the early Christians (Acts 22:4–5) as an attempt to protect the honor of God and Jewish religious standards.

Paul’s descent into a shameful state is represented by the following:

- On his way to Damascus, a “great light from heaven” knocked him down! Paul “fell to the ground” (falling is often an indication of loss of honor).
- Paul was challenged by the highest authority in the universe, our Lord Jesus Christ — “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” (Acts 22:7)
- Paul was blinded by the “great light;” he became abnormally vulnerable so that he had to be “led by the hand” like a child (Acts 22:11).

Paul’s rise in honor is represented by the following:

- “And the Lord said to me...” (Acts 22:10). *God spoke to Paul!* This was an honor claim of an unusually high degree. This would qualify Paul to have roughly equal honor status with Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, or Elijah.
- Contrasted with “fell to the ground” (Acts 22:7), the Lord told him to “*Rise*, and go into Damascus” (Acts 22:10). “Rise” indicates an elevation of honor status.<sup>300</sup>  

“And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him.” (Acts 22:13).
- Paul emphasized that a *most honorable man, Ananias* (Acts 22:12) was used by God to speak to Paul so that he could regain the normal honor of eyesight after having been blinded. Consider the honor-laden meaning in Paul’s account of what Ananias said: “And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name’” (Acts 22:14–16).
- There are massive honor connotations here: “*The God of our fathers*” represents the very honor of their ancestral tradition ... “*appointed you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth, for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard*” ... This confirms that Paul’s honor and authority is to be equated with the great Old Testament prophets. Impressive, indeed!
- “*Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name*”—here the act of baptism is a sign of being cleansed from sin for the honor of entering the presence of God; moreover, he was baptized into the name (honor) of the Lord. This summed up Paul’s honor-status reversal. No wonder Ananias told Paul to “*Rise....*”

<sup>299</sup> “Gamaliel holds a reputation in the Mishnah for being one of the greatest teachers in all the annals of Judaism.” See “Gamaliel,” <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamaliel>>. Referenced 17 June 2013.

<sup>300</sup> Keep in mind that Luke is the author of Acts. And it was Luke who recorded in Luke 2:34 that Jesus was “... appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel...” (Luke 2:34), meaning Jesus would have a ministry of honor-status reversal. Paul fits into both categories—*falling* and *rising*.



Unquestionably, Paul is making every effort to impress his adversaries, hoping to convince them of the credibility of his story and to authenticate that God had chosen him for a calling, a mission of highest honor.<sup>301</sup> Paul's life was one of dramatic honor-status reversal, mirroring in a significant manner the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

### FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE COMMUNAL

Following his personal confession in Philippians 3, Paul changes his “voice” from the first person-singular to the first-person-plural—addressing his faith-family—the body of Christ:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will *transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body*, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Phil 3:20–21). (Emphasis mine.)

The motif of honor-status reversal applied to believers continues in Paul's letter to the Colossians:

He has delivered us *from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son*, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:13–14). (Emphasis mine.)

And you, who once were *alienated and hostile in mind*, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you *holy and blameless and above reproach before him* (Col 1:21–22). (Emphasis mine.)

From the shame of being “alienated and hostile” to the honor of “holy and blameless and above reproach before him” ... *honor-status reversal!*

Moreover, he speaks of believers as...

having been *buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God*, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, *God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses*, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. *He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him* (Col 2:12–15). (Emphasis mine.)

**Healing for shame.** The honor-status reversal which Christ himself experienced was not just for his own glorification, but also for the community of believers who follow him as Lord. Honor-status reversal is also for believers—for all who have found life in Jesus Christ! John Forrester writes: “In brief, the ministry of Jesus is this: he sets aside his own honor and glory to identify with human dishonor and shame at its deepest level; but in his own recovery and return to glory, he breaks a path out of shame for all humanity. Each human being is now invited to identify with Christ and to participate vicariously in the depth of his descent and the height of his ascent.”<sup>302</sup>

**Freedom to serve.** “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21); Jesus Christ relinquished his honor in order to serve humanity—an example to believers to live by the same pattern. *How challenging! How honoring!* Jesus sends us to serve in the same pattern that God sent him. Apostle Paul followed Christ's example. He wrote in his first letter to the church at

<sup>301</sup> Paul's attempt to sway his adversaries failed. Acts 22:22–23:15 records the reactions of outrage, violence, chaos, and attempted murder—all in response to the honor claims of Paul.

<sup>302</sup> Forrester, *Grace for Shame*, 131.

Corinth, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant [slave] to all, that I might win more of them” (1 Cor 9:19). Dean Flemming explains:

By cloaking himself with the metaphor of slavery, Paul sets his own mission in diametric contrast to the “strong” Corinthians’ concern over personal liberty and status. In light of chapter 9 as a whole and the values of Roman culture, Paul’s “self-enslavement” could not help but include a social dimension. He has modeled slavish behavior by voluntarily climbing down the ladder of status for the sake of others.<sup>303</sup>

Flemming also says of Paul: “more importantly, his course of downward social mobility becomes an illustration of the gospel itself, an identification with his crucified Lord. The message is embodied by the messenger.”<sup>304</sup>

One wonders how many Christians are willing to ignore the importance of “personal liberty and status” and “voluntarily climb down the ladder of success”—in order to embody the message of the gospel for their global neighbors and the unengaged or unreached peoples. I find this a sobering challenge. Undoubtedly, more believers would live in this pattern of honor-status reversal if, like Paul, we also grasped more fully the sublime honor of knowing Jesus Christ! One is compelled to ask: *How much does our own status-seeking culture hinder our walk with God or service in his kingdom?*

**Celebration and suffering.** Soong-Chan Rah compares the *theology of celebration* focused on the resurrection with the *theology of suffering* focused on the cross. He says that middle-class Christians in America and other wealthy societies tend to identify with the celebration of life located in the resurrection, whereas believers in oppressive minority circumstances will tend to identify with the suffering of Christ on the cross.

The theology of celebration, which emerges out of the context of affluence and abundance, focuses on the proper management and stewardship of the abundant resources that God has provided. Because there is abundance, the world is viewed as generally good and accommodating to those who are living under the theology of celebration. Life is already healthy, complete and whole. God, therefore, takes on the role of a nurturer and caregiver and takes on more feminine attributes. In the theology of celebration, maintaining and preserving the status quo becomes a central priority. The theology of celebration is a theology of the resurrection.

The theology of suffering, on the other hand, emerges out of the context of scarcity and oppression and therefore focuses on the need for salvation and survival. Because of the reality of oppression, the world is generally considered to be evil and hostile to those who are living under the theology of suffering. Life is precarious, needing a deliverer. God, therefore, takes on the image of a warrior and conqueror and assumes more masculine attributes. In the theology of suffering, fighting injustice becomes the central priority. The theology of suffering is a theology of the cross.<sup>305</sup>

When we look at the dynamic of honor-status reversal, we see both suffering and celebration. If we are to take the words of Jesus seriously—“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending

<sup>303</sup> Dean Flemming. *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (p. 195). Kindle Edition.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Rah, Soong-Chan (2009-08-20). *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Kindle Locations 2565-2574). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

you” (John 20:21)—then the whole church is called to identify with both the shame of Christ’s suffering and the honor of Christ’s resurrection.

**Jesus shares his glory.** In what is known as the High Priestly Prayer of Christ in John 17, Jesus prayed to the Father:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. *The glory that you have given me I have given to them*, that they may be one even as we are one (John 17:20-22). (Emphasis mine.)

Why is it so challenging to our Christian sensibilities, that Jesus prayed to the Father, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them”? Normally we think that glory belongs exclusively to God. But this is not supported by the overall testimony of Scripture.<sup>306</sup>

I contend that when we as believers *in community* embrace our honor-status reversal *in Christ*—both in his descent of sacrificial service and his ascent unto glory—something miraculous happens by the grace of God and Holy Spirit: We gladly, freely serve others in humility without regard to our own honor status—because we have no honor deficit; we have apprehended that Jesus has shared with us his divine honor from out of his eternal “riches in glory” (Phil 4:19).

## OH, THE LOVE OF GOD!

With all this emphasis on honor for Christ—and honor for those who follow him—we dare not forget the vital importance of God’s love. “God *so loved* the world that he gave...!” If the dynamics of honor and shame comprise the wheel—and honor-status reversal is the axle—then let us consider the love of God as the engine which propels and makes motion possible. Imagine a car without an engine—utterly useless! And to take the word picture one step further, we can imagine God’s passion for his glory as the *fuel* which powers the engine and *propels it forward*.

Why should sinful and shameful humans be able to experience the glories of honor-status reversal? Why should they be able to experience forgiveness of sins, their shame covered, and their honor restored before God? It ultimately points us to the tapestry of God’s abounding love for the world (John 3:16) and God’s passion for his glory (John 12:28).

What does this mean for *people* and *peoples* struggling with shame?

- *What does it mean...* for Christ’s gospel being extended to the billions of lost people and thousands of people groups whose pivotal cultural value is honor and shame? What about those peoples who are unreached and unengaged?
- *What does it mean...* for people who are victims of abuse—whose shame is from no fault of their own?

<sup>306</sup> Some may counter that God does not share his glory with anyone, citing verses from Isaiah: “I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols” (Is 42:8), and, “For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another (Is 48:11). However, these verses are in the context of the idolatry of his people, the worship of false gods. Obviously, God will never relinquish his glory to mere idols. But God’s Word plainly teaches that God shares some of his infinite honor and glory with those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ. See Isa 55:5, John 5:44, 12:43, Rom 2:7, 8:21, 1 Cor 2:7, Eph 2:6, Col 1:27, Jude 1:8, Rev 3:21). In Christ, God’s people are glorious. (For more on this, see the Section 2, Chapter 1 on the love of honor.)

- *What does it mean...* for members of minority groups and minority peoples—who suffer humiliation every day of their lives?
- *What does it mean...* for people whose overwhelming concern is their pursuit of social status, acceptance, and climbing the ladder of success?
- *What does it mean...* for the ordinary person who lives with a constant low grade depression because they somehow feel unworthy?

It means there is an answer to the perplexing problem of shame for individuals and peoples. Are we up to the task of actually communicating and living out this *global gospel*?

It is clear that knowing and experiencing the honor of Christ is biblical. We head now into the next section of the book to explore various ways that this global gospel of Christ can be understood and communicated in the light of the various dynamics of honor and shame.