

Worldview and the Gospel

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There is beauty and power in the ability to express eternal truths in a way that is familiar and common. However, what is familiar to one person may be foreign to another; and what is common to some may be completely strange to others.

As messengers of the Gospel, we must know well the message we carry. Whether we present the Gospel from a pulpit or a park bench, we must know the Scriptures well.

There is, however, another important aspect to sharing the Gospel with others—the ability to understand their worldview. Although an argument can be made that there are as many worldviews as there are people in the world, it would be impossible to study seven billion-plus viewpoints!

Let's define worldview before continuing. Simply put, it is a person's basic assumptions about reality. Sociologist Robert Redfield said, "*Worldview is the way a people characteristically look outward upon the universe . . . it is the way we see ourselves in relation to all else.*"

Worldview is at the base of all culture. Using the iceberg analogy, culture is what is visible above the water line, while worldview is what lies beneath the water line—hidden and unseen. Worldview serves as the foundational basis of culture, while personality is something every individual on earth possesses.

We can use the same concept for groups. Groups can possess a "group-ality," while every person in the group has their own personality. There are generally three cultural dichotomies used to explain in part the global cultural differences of the peoples of the world. These are guilt/innocence, shame/honor, and fear/power. They help explain a cultural orientation toward sin, and they describe the cultural ideal for wholeness. Around the world, sin can be viewed through a lens of guilt, shame, or fear. Conversely, people perceive wholeness through a lens of innocence, honor, or power.

Guilt, shame, and fear each make an appearance in Genesis 3, and this has been called the "Eden Effect." Sin has the potential to produce guilt, shame, and fear in us. We see all three of these consequences actively working in the fall of Adam.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God—the essence of sin from a Biblical perspective—three things occurred. First, they realized they were naked (Genesis 3:7)—the experience of shame. Second, they hid themselves from God (v. 8)—the experience of fear. Third, their disobedience was exposed (v. 17)—the experience of guilt. These three aspects of the fall or brokenness of humankind are evident in every culture, and have one original cause—rebellion against God.

These concepts help us understand sin better, but they also help us understand culture better. Although every culture is influenced by all three aspects, usually only one is the dominant cultural orientation.

For example, guilt/innocence is the dominant cultural orientation in the Western world. In a context where brokenness and dysfunction are defined in terms of guilt, restoration to a state of innocence is the highest value—a condition that often cannot be met.

In the U.S., for example, when we talk about the power of the Gospel, it is often in judicious terms that are framed by guilt and innocence. It should be noted that in the last 10 years, American culture is shifting more toward an honor/shame framework, particularly within Gen Z.

Asian and Middle Eastern cultures chiefly possess an honor/shame orientation. Failing the expectations of their community and bringing shame is the ultimate catastrophe. In these cultures, the needs of the group trump the needs of the individual. Restoration to acceptance and a position of honor within the group is the overriding need.

Effectively expressing the Gospel in a shame/honor culture must emphasize different aspects of the Gospel than what is expressed in a guilt/innocence culture. For people working within an honor/shame framework, the salvation narrative should be presented in the context of a relationship with the Creator, emphasizing the dishonor and shame that comes to us when we are in a broken relationship with Him. We are shamed because the Creator represents the purest form of honor. However, honor can be once again restored to us because Jesus bore our shame on the cross.

The fear/power dichotomy is found primarily in Africa. Animistic or folk-religion cultures see the world primarily as a power struggle. The spirit world is very real and much effort is spent either appeasing powers that may harm, or appealing to powers that may address the individual's needs by giving control over harmful spirits. This belief system creates a system of appeasement.

A narrative of salvation for people whose worldview has been framed by fear and power must emphasize how individuals can become free of fear and obtain power in Jesus. The good news for folks who see the world through a lens of fear and power is that Jesus died and arose to overcome the ruler of this world (the devil), proving Himself to be the most powerful God, highest above all. When we are aligned with Jesus, we no longer have to give in to fear because everything on this earth must submit to Jesus. Jesus' death and resurrection gave Him power over death, Satan, and sin. When we turn from earthly powers to the one true God, we are transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, and we have authority over our fears.

So more can be said about presenting the salvation story to various peoples. It is not enough to just know the story. We must know the men and women with whom we share this story. We must understand their context. Framing the salvation narrative in a context that is more relatable to the recipient makes it more accessible, understandable, and real.

I recognize that reducing worldview/culture to three categories is quite simplistic in an increasingly diverse and complex world. However, these categories serve as a tool to help better understand those who see the world through a different lens and to offer a method of how to better communicate the Gospel.

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