

Tribal Honor Culture

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Jesus teaches us to do what is right in spite of our loyalties to family or the culture of our people. We have a new family in Christ and are citizens of a new kingdom in heaven. If someone insults us, our family, our people, or even our God, Jesus teaches us to "turn the other cheek" instead of avenging ourselves, Romans 12:17-21. So, it is a question of integrity and doing what is right and not a question of honor, shame or embarrassment. As the Scripture says, "Do not follow the majority to do evil." When our side behaves badly, we will not betray our principles by defending the indefensible: integrity trumps tribal honor.

The Arab-Israeli conflict provides an illustration of what it looks like when Jesus' teachings are ignored. The passions of the Muslim world against Israel cannot be understood without recognizing the emotions of the tribal honor culture. (Let me quickly add that this type of culture is not unique to Muslims. It is found among all cultures to some degree, even our own.) When a member of the tribe is insulted or attacked, the other members must rally around and avenge the tribe. It is a question of honor to the tribe. It does not matter that the tribal member was behaving badly. The rules of the tribe must not be violated lest the family be dishonored. So if a young lady dishonors her house, the other members are obligated to cleanse that guilt by blood, that is, by killing her. As in the case of the Pharisees, not all sins stir up such passions. (Mainly it was the traditions concerning the Sabbath, ceremonial washings, and tithing.) Jesus said, they neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy.

What is more important to you: justice and mercy or loyalty to a family member? Can you stand for the Truth even when it is spoken by someone outside our family, church or tribe, a stranger? Can you accept the dishonor to your own group by admitting it when a beloved member is wrong even when he is being criticized by an outsider? Tribal loyalties have made some brethren disposed to cover up both fraud and adultery in a flawed brother. All it took was a skillful stirring up of hatred toward the outsider who tried to call the attention of brethren to these sins.

If it seems incompressible that the Muslims should rejoice when innocent women and children are intentionally slaughtered by a suicide bomber, remember it is just tribal honor that moves them. The innocent who suffer are just collateral damage. tp