

## Jesus' Use of Social Power in Honour–Shame Conflicts: A Model for Male–Female Interactions

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### Abstract

*Because social power is interpersonal, it is exercised in physical space. Edward Hall distinguishes between public, social, personal, and intimate space by the distance that individuals maintain from each other in that space. Soja describes the concept of space as either a geophysical reality, a mental-symbolic reality, or a social reality. Power is a physically perceived, socially-negotiated construct based on mental perceptions of authority and value in a group. Jesus regularly exercised his power in social settings to challenge traditional group norms. One of the norms challenged was the objectification of women in male honour-shame conflicts. In this paper I will define social power as a complex and multifaceted construct exercised in "space." I will demonstrate Jesus' use of power to restore a woman to a position of honour in Luke 7: 36-50. Then I will suggest ways that Jesus models for us the redemptive use of power between males and females in social space.*

Space is never static. It is relational.<sup>1</sup> The identity of objects or persons is "constituted through interactions" in social space.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, interactions in social space define who is seen and heard and valued, and who is not, who has power and who does not. Power is not brought into social space as an abstract concept. Power is constructed and communicated in social space through interactions. Edward Soja, distinguished professor of geography and urban planning at UCLA, wrote in his 1996 book *ThirdSpace*, "We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology."<sup>3</sup> This was as true in first-century Palestine as it is today. And the largest political

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1 J. L. Berquist, *Critical Spatiality. Imagining Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social and Historical Constructs in Honour of James W. Flanagan*, ed D. M. Gunn and P. M. McNutt (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 26.

2 Doreen Massy, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1994), 261.

3 Edward W. Soja, *ThirdSpace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 6.

and ideological divide, globally in our world and also among Evangelicals, is between men and women.

For instance women contribute 62% of all hours worked and yet they receive 10% of the global income. In advanced countries women working outside the home earn 40-70% of men's earnings.<sup>4</sup> Women own less than 1% of the world's property. According to the Development Institute for Women, 70% of the world's absolute poor are women. As reported by Shari Kelly, "Poverty still wears a woman's face."<sup>5</sup> 75% of the world's illiterates are women. Access to medical care, food, and education is limited for poor women worldwide.

Because of prejudice or ignorance, the majority of women are excluded from the decision-making that impacts their lives, giving them a sense of worthlessness. The cultural stigma against women, often based in religious views of their lesser value, leads even to the gendercide of women either through violence, abortion, or female infanticide. In India alone the estimate is that five million baby girls are aborted every year.<sup>6</sup>

As concluded by Viannello and Caramazza in *Gender, Space, and Power*, "everywhere, always, women have been excluded from positions of power in public life. Of course, not every kind of action aims at gaining power, but clearly every sphere of life ('without exception' Weber insists) is deeply influenced by power structures whatever form they may take, these are inextricably interwoven with power in public life. This in its turn is structured along several dimensions, but the most pervasive, total and radical is by gender."<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how Jesus' interaction in a social setting, during an honour–shame conflict, subverted traditional views of women's identity and social place. The geography of Jesus' use of power to bestow honour and thus social power to a woman becomes a model for our interactions as Christian men and women. Since Jesus is our Lord, his interactions in social settings in regards to women's power and identity should be mimicked by us at every opportunity. It is commonly known among sociologists and development agencies that if you want to improve a country's quality of life and economic stability, educate the women and give them a voice. My thesis is the same for the church. If you want to improve the quality of life and health of a church, of a community, of a country, educate the women and give them a voice. I will support this with several premises.

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4 M. Vianello and E. Caramazza, *Gender, Space, and Power* (London: Free Association Books, 2005), 26-27.

5 Shari M. Kelly, "The Worldwide Suffering of Women," *Mutuality* (Winter, 2002): 5.

6 Kelly, "Worldwide Suffering of Women," 8.

7 Vianello and Caramazza, *Gender, Space, and Power*, 19.

**1. Power is essential for life.**

Many Christians have a love–hate relationship with the word “power.” Christians love having God’s power, but shun as suspect the human use of power, believing that Jesus called us to be servants, not power brokers. The tendency then is to associate all power that is good with God’s sovereign will and all power that is bad with human endeavour. However, power is less like a tool wielded to make something happen and more like the water we drink to stay alive. Personal power for self-definition and self-determination is essential to our health and well-being. Rollo May in his classic *Power and Innocence* wrote, “Power and the sense of significance...are intertwined.”<sup>8</sup> Power is a basic element of human composition embedded in our DNA. Personal power leads to the freedom to exercise power in social settings. May described power as simply the “ability to cause or prevent change.”<sup>9</sup>

The exercise of power is essential for freedom. The difference between God’s power and human power is one of scale, not necessarily of quality. God designed us in God’s image. Therefore, in the same way that the exercise of power defines the scope and nature of God, our exercise of power defines our scope and nature. In healthy settings an individual has the power to make changes in his or her life either internally or externally and to contribute to the well-being of his or her community. This essential ability to choose is not the purview of an office or a specific role, but the nature of being human.

Though power is a neutral construct given by God to steward the earth, how it is used is not. The ability to cause or prevent change can either benefit others or simply benefit oneself or one’s social group.

**2. Power is physically perceived.**

Because power is interpersonal, it is exercised in physical space and is physically perceived. Since the kinds of interactions in physical space vary, power dynamics will vary. One researcher, Edward Hall, took a special interest in the difference in space distances that animals and humans maintain in various settings and cultures. In *The Hidden Dimension*, Hall described different types of space by noting the preferred distances that individuals maintained from each other in a given space.<sup>10</sup> These distances defined the type of interactions people desired, and thus whether or

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8 Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 35.

9 May, *Power and Innocence*, 99.

10 The study of how humans use space is referred to as “proxemics,” a term coined by Hall meaning “hidden dimension” (Edward Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, New York: Random House, 1969/1990). In 1968, Forston and Larson described proxemics as “the distance that man consciously or unconsciously maintains between himself and another person while relating physically to others with whom he is interacting.” Robert Forston and Charles Larson, “The Dynamics of Space: An Experimental Study in Proxemic Behavior Among Latin Americans and North Americans,” *The Journal of Communication* 18, (June 1968): 109-116. The study of proxemics has evolved into more sophisticated designations. See Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss, *Theories of Human Communication* (Boston, MA: Thomson Wadsworth

not a social power dynamic would occur. He, and those researchers who followed him, looked at these distances in various cultures from Western, to European cultures, to Asian and Middle Eastern contexts. Hall found that there are four types of space: public, social, personal, and intimate space.

How these spaces are perceived and the distances that mark their boundaries differ from culture to culture. For instance, in Western culture persons in public space are most comfortable maintaining 3.6 – 7.6 metres of distance between each other.<sup>11</sup> Westerners like to maintain a “bubble” of space between themselves and others. However, in Middle Eastern cultures space is not determined by proximities to other human bodies. Public space is public and open to anyone. If someone were to prefer where you are standing, they would simply move into your space hoping you would get the hint and move over. For them the invasion of space is not connected to the body, but to the ego.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, pushing on someone’s ego is far more aggressive than invading his or her personal space. In social space persons have a common interest in being together, such as meetings, classrooms, and fellowship experiences. Persons are focused on the same purpose, and they manage their participation in that space according to the group dynamics.

Power is exercised differently in different spaces. Power is physically perceived according to the geographic dynamics of human interactions in various settings. Power exercised in personal or intimate space is not as dynamic for influencing social change, because these spaces are individual and private.<sup>13</sup> However, power exercised in social space is particularly dynamic. Most of the gospels describe Jesus in social space. His teaching, preaching, and healing ministry happened in socially gathered space. Hospitality events, such as meals, were key playgrounds for power dynamics between Jesus and others present. Social space is the boundary between personal and public space. In social space people are relationally oriented, as participants, or as observers and interpreters. During Jesus’ time, power interactions in public and social settings mostly happened between males. The observers would decide who had authority and value and therefore, who would have the power to influence them, who would have honour.

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Communication, 2005), 107–108; Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

11 For Westerners public space occurs when persons are going about personal business with no desire to engage others, such as sitting on the beach, going to the store, driving on the freeway, studying in a library. Even if it were crowded, a Westerner still would prefer more distance, and people would usually not interact with each other. In personal space 0.76 - 1.2 metres is the normal preferred distance, the distance found between two friends. The more dominant the person, the more personal space he or she will have when relating to another. Intimate space is 15 - 46 cm which is reserved for the closest of relationships such as husband and wife, parent and child, and friends of the heart

12 Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, 154-164.

13 The focus of this article is what happens in social space. In public spaces, such as sidewalks, libraries, stores, we maintain anonymity. Not as much is gained by taking up more room on a sidewalk, as there might be in a social setting where pecking orders are being established.

**3. Power is a socially-negotiated construct based on mental perceptions of authority and value as seen in social space.**

Power that a culture bequeaths to individuals is based on the values a cohesive social group applies to framing life and relationships. This includes various roles given for influence, kinds of expertise which are valued, the character traits which elevate status, and the particular cultural values each social group has. First-century Palestine was both a purity culture and an agonistic culture. A purity culture defines itself by what is sacred and strictly avoids what is profane. God called the Jewish people to be a kingdom of priests who begin every prayer remembering that the Lord God is one and is holy. Therefore, they were careful to distinguish between those things which aligned them with God's holiness and those things which were corrupt and would alienate them from God.

A major cultural value was honour and shame. Honour was given to those who adhered to the holiness code and shame followed any divergence. Honour and shame clarified who was inside and who was outside the social group. Those inside the group had the power to influence. Those outside did not.

Malina proposed that power, gender status, and religion cross to define the value of honour.<sup>14</sup> He describes honour as "a claim to worth along with the social acknowledgment of that worth."<sup>15</sup> Ascribed honour is socially defined. Acquired honour happens when an individual excels in a challenge and response, a social game to confirm, enhance, or lessen social status. Honour and shame were socially bestowed in public and social encounters, usually between males. The conflict between males in public for honour gave status and power to the one who prevailed in the conflict. The more honour one had, the more social power one had. The more shame one had the more isolation and exclusion one would experience. Since Jesus came to subvert traditional views on holiness, the gospels are full of conflict events between Jesus and religious leaders, full of power struggles that occurred in the interactions in public and social space. These conflicts would be perceived and understood, not simply through the words exchanged, but through the manner in which the persons physically interacted. During those events, the crowd would decide who had honour.

**4. Premise: Power in social space is limited.**

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Malina, *The New Testament World*, 31.

If the use of power is exercised in social space, then the stewardship of that power in relationships becomes critical. First-century Palestine viewed itself as a limited-goods culture.<sup>16</sup> Land, produce, livestock, and fish were all limited. There was only so much to go around. Therefore, people depended on social ties to keep things balanced. Patrons, kinship groups, and neighbours ensured that justice occurred and that everyone received care, no matter how impoverished. In a limited-goods culture, the person with more had a responsibility to share with those who had less. Those with less maintained loyal, supporting relationships with the patron or kin who looked out for them.

During the first-century, however, the economic system had broken down. Most of the rich landowners moved to the cities and increased their coffers at the expense of the land tenants. The patron-client relationships had also broken down. The more space the wealthy took up, the less the poor had. Jesus challenged the deterioration of the economic social system as impacting on all areas of life.

Seeing the exercise of power through a limited-goods lens encourages a fresh understanding of its use in social space. If power is limited, then how it is stewarded in social space illustrates whether one is using it for personal gain or social benefit. Since power is exercised in social settings where persons are observing and attending to the exchanges between persons, the observers have a vivid picture of how power is being used. In a limited-goods culture, honour too was limited. Therefore, if honour came into dispute, someone would go away with less and someone with more, or the status quo would be affirmed. However, Jesus used these social events to redistribute power and to challenge traditional views of value and honour. An example is found in Luke 7:36-52.

### **5. Jesus' Use of Power in Social Space**

In Luke 7: 36-52, Jesus is invited to the house of Simon the Pharisee for a meal. It is possible that Simon was a member of a local *haburah*, a religious group that gathered to study and discuss the Torah. Jesus was preaching in the area and his reputation as a teacher, probably led to the invitation by Simon. The doors to such events were left open so that the uninvited could come in as they desired.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the invited guests who would recline at the banquet table, they would sit

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<sup>16</sup> D. E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day*. Vol. 8 Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> A detailed discussion about the scholarship surrounding the banquet being open to others is found in Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 3-6 and in *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 239-244. Bailey sites scholarship from Henry Baker Tristram, a nineteenth century traveler in the Middle East (Henry Baker Tristram, *Eastern Customs in the Bible Lands* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1894), 36-38, and evidence from Book of Minor Tractates of the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Derek 'Erez Zuta 59a (1) no. 4 which admonish the pious Jew not to shut the doors of his house when he eats or drinks. Though the Tractates were finalised in the fifth century, the admonition is attributed to R. Eliezer Ha-Kappar from the second century (courtesy of Dr. Bailey's scholarship).

or stand around the room. The servants, Jesus' followers, and an assortment of the curious and devoted were probably standing around the edges of the banquet room. Some scholars debate whether it was possible for the event to be open since the Pharisees are exact about following purity codes. However, the Pharisees knew that Jesus had sinners as followers and that he ate with tax collectors, yet still they invited him to a banquet. Also, only open doors could explain how a sinner woman was present at a banquet and how she was there long enough to observe Simon's treatment of Jesus.

The sinner woman came expecting to anoint Jesus as a sign of gratitude after the traditional social amenities were extended. The text says she brought the alabaster jar of perfume with her. She had probably heard him speak about God's love for sinners and wanted to show her gratitude. Besides her gender and sinner status in the city, nothing is known about her. Her lack of specific identity in that social space meant she had no power to influence. She was noticed, but not valued.

Simon, the Pharisee, is named and he had every type of social power. As a Pharisee he was considered an expert in holiness; he adhered to every aspect and interpretation of the Jewish purity laws and codes. His public adherence to the observances and laws of the Torah marked him as having honour and thus social status. As a male he had role power over the women, children, and slaves in the household. Simon took up a great deal of social space.

Jesus, like Simon, also had power in that social setting. He was watched by all. He was known for his expertise with the scriptures and with his ability to confront his antagonists with logic, parables, and returned questions. He was known for his righteousness. Persons flocked to hear his teachings and be touched by his healing powers. As a teacher he had authority over his disciples and as a prophet and sage he had role authority with the crowds. Wherever Jesus traveled, he used his power to catalyze a re-formation of thinking about hospitality, outsiders, interpretation of the law, economic systems, and the practice of the religious system.

It is not spelled out whether Simon set up the event to unveil Jesus as an imposter or to interact with Jesus as a curiosity. Whatever the purpose, Simon obviously omitted the traditional hospitalities extended to a guest, possibly because the implications of the various types of hospitality gestures would have made a statement to the observers about the status relationship between himself and Jesus. And, Simon apparently was reticent to say. Nevertheless, by withholding the hospitality rituals, he had challenged Jesus' honour in public. His statement to himself about whether Jesus was a prophet or not, is grammatically structured to give the answer: He was not.

The ordinary rituals for welcome between individuals became the interactivity in social space where the question of who had the power to influence came up for social reconstruction. Jesus reclined without the ritual cleansing. The sinner woman, who observed the omissions and who had come prepared to add the anointing of her perfume at the end of the hospitality rituals, moved to make up for Simon's neglect. The woman, not having water or towel, used her tears and hair to extend hospitality to Jesus. Standing behind Jesus, she risked more shame by uncovering her hair, and by touching the feet of a holy man. Jesus dignified her by allowing her to serve him. His lack of response signaled an acceptance of her gesture of love and gratitude.

Simon then had an opportunity to challenge Jesus' honour in public, though probably not as he expected. Simon's inward thoughts about Jesus' status might suggest his shifting view on how to proceed with the meal because of the embarrassing event occurring in his own house. Simon had decided that Jesus was not a prophet, and he had challenged Jesus in public. Rather than interacting with the woman, Jesus turned to Simon and told a parable, asked a question, and then turned to the woman, comparing the quality of her hospitality to Simon's. Jesus used her actions to shame Simon's lack of action. Jesus' use of her public actions also suggested that she became the righteous one, rather than Simon, as she was the one bestowing the hospitality. Simon, the righteous Pharisee, became the sinner, who acted to preserve his own status at the expense of Jesus and the woman. Simon lost status. Jesus exercised his power and lost nothing. The audacity of the sinner woman's loving act illustrates the capacity of even the powerless to influence change in a social setting, if someone in power acknowledges the act.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

The moral use of power is directly related to the stewardship of one's power in social space. A social setting does not afford limitless amounts of power to everyone present. One or a few persons will "take up space" in order to have influence in a group. Jesus and Simon the Pharisee were taking up space in that group. They were exercising their right to influence through their interactions. However, the purpose of "taking up space" is not to enhance or secure one's personal influence, but to enhance the influence and well-being of those who need redemption or restoration, whether individual or cultural.

Jesus had a large amount of social power, but he used it in social settings to invite others into his personal space. Acknowledging the hemorrhaging woman who touched him, touching the leper, calling Bartimaeus over to him, demonstrate the ways Jesus invited the powerless, the outsider, and the desperate into the sacred personal space around him. By his doing so, the individual would be given status and would have access to what Jesus could offer. In an honour–shame



culture, Jesus with honour cleansed the persons with shame by bringing them into his personal, and it could be argued intimate, space. In a social setting where others observed this act, the observers would accept the honour bestowed, if they accepted Jesus' status. Physical proximity with Jesus had the power to heal and restore these persons to the community in a redeemed role.

In most cultures, including our Christian culture, religious leaders — pastors and academics — have power which is exercised and bestowed in social and public space. The temptation is to use it to maintain current religious and social systems which ensure status and authority. Jesus' use of power drew into visibility, into the eyesight of the crowd, the stewardship of honour to the marginalized.

The geography of power to create a spirit of hospitality, where others are invited in, rather than a spirit of personal elitism, where others are excluded, is modeled by Jesus. The concern is always for invitation to God's feast, rather than to personal security and exclusion. As stated in the introduction, the most pronounced place of inequity in power dynamics is between men and women. These power dynamics have moral implications for gender relations, especially in the church and home. Males are usually given more power than females. For instance, many Evangelical churches value more male expertise and role power particularly for major decision-making concerns. Women's expertise is not as valued. Men can serve as pastors or elders and women often cannot. Women in clergy or support roles are usually paid less than their male counterparts, and they are less likely to serve as senior pastors or denominational leaders. Men's voices carry more weight because of their character than women's. Women are considered too emotional or illogical to be trusted, and some believe that theologically women have less resistance to evil. Generally, some Christian cultures give more status to males than females. Therefore, males are usually given more power to change and influence than females in social settings.

However, Jesus used his considerable power to empower and subvert the status quo, not to maintain it. Preserving status and power is contrary to Jesus' use of power to restore. He used social space to subvert unequal power relations and injustices because of his great love. Persons who have the most social power will have a greater capacity to influence in social space. And the more dominant the person, the more social space that person uses. If the exercise of power in limited social space can be for good or for bad, then for the sake of the church's health and future, learning to use power well is critical. The value of persons having a large amount of social power is the ability to bring the powerless into their space. Therefore, power is not to be shunned or hidden. Acquiring power is an important act of spiritual stewardship. In fact, a person

cannot be a servant leader without the power and personal capacity to influence. Servant leadership comes not through the divestment of power, but through bringing the marginalized and shunned into one's power circle for redemptive purposes.

Jesus did not give up his authority. He gave up his right to exercise his authority for self-serving purposes. Men in the church who have personal power can use social space to bring women into leadership conversations, not as a token presence but as real contributors to the decision-making and influencing processes of the church. Women have a perspective and strength essential to the well-being of the community. Disregarding this puts the community and males and females at risk for failure.

Power is a physically perceived, socially-negotiated construct based on experienced perceptions of authority and value in a group. Women usually do not have the same social power in Evangelical circles as men do. Women do not have the same social power in the world as men do. If the message of Jesus Christ is “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and to let the oppressed go free,” then we have a responsibility to restore dignity and power to women. Jesus is our model.

To summarize:

1. Jesus allowed a woman into his personal space as a gesture of his acceptance of her humanity, dignity and equal value to that of a prominent male.
2. Jesus reconstructed the identity and status of a woman in social space by naming her service and contribution.
3. Acting as if power in social space is limitless rather than limited creates an isolating consumer construct rather than a construct of hospitality. Therefore, the tendency is to conclude that a person's power or lack of power is his or her own doing and not the responsibility of the group to address. By adopting the model of Jesus those with large amounts of social power have a primary responsibility to steward it for the benefit of the oppressed. If we as Evangelicals took seriously the plight of women in the world, not paternalistically but as a response of love, we could also make as profound a difference as did Jesus Christ.