



the issue of

SHAME

IN REACHING people for CHRIST

WHEN GUILT-free Isn't enough

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The Issue of Shame
in Reaching People for Christ:
When Guilt-Free Isn't Enough

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“Heaven’s Gates and Hell’s Flames,” a play by Reality Outreach

Ministries in Canada, portrays Jesus’ death and resurrection and presents several vignettes of people from all walks of life dying and approaching heaven’s gates. Some experience the joy of meeting Jesus. Others scream in terror as Satan drags them into hell.

The message is simple, clear, and scary—a modern version of Jonathan Edward’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” that brings home the reality of heaven and hell in dramatic form.

People are flocking to the hellfire-and-brimstone play by the droves, especially youth. Churches from California to Florida report record attendance and record response. Heaven and hell, rather than being passed off as irrelevant myths of some past era, are again occupying center stage. The production has touched a nerve.

Jesus wouldn’t be surprised at the current generation’s response to “Heaven’s Gates and Hell’s Flames.” He knew the heart of man. He knew what it meant to offer the Good News to people who, for all their swagger and “coolness,” knew they deserved destruction.

When Jesus presented the Gospel to humanity, His message always remained the same: Jesus, the Son of God, offers salvation from sin and its many-faceted consequences through His life, death, and resurrection. Salvation introduces humanity to an intimate, loving relationship with God the Father through the power and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, Christ’s encounters with individuals in the New Testament show how much attention He paid to the perspective of His hearers, how He took into account the personal realities of the people to whom He related.

To the rejected woman who had been bleeding for years Jesus offered tenderness and acceptance. To the self-righteous Pharisee He gave a stern rebuke. When Jesus spoke to Pilate and the rich young ruler, He spoke to them as power brokers. The demon-possessed man received a message that focused on the spiritual powers holding him captive. Nicodemus was approached as a sadly unfulfilled religious man. Jesus spoke on the frequency each person was best able to hear.

Careful study of Christ’s interactions can prove immensely useful as we seek to put the Gospel in words and actions that men and women in our day can

understand. The truth remains the same. But the aspects of the truth that are highlighted, that make immediately-embraceable sense to the hearer, change from culture to culture and from generation to generation.

This article will focus on the emotional filters that surround the reality of sin. In particular, it will address the difference between guilt and shame and how this “emotional reasoning” process affects one’s response to the Gospel.

Emotional reasoning operates from the gut; it can fly in the face of sound logic or even established principles. Even the most logical person sometimes relies on emotional reasoning. On the basis of this “reasoning,” a man can insist on the sanctity of marriage and yet have the occasional affair to boost his self-esteem. Likewise, a woman can enjoy the admiration of many friends and still consume a barrel of sweet rolls to placate feelings of inadequacy or emptiness. Emotional reasoning allows us to believe, deep down, things about ourselves and about others that are much different than what we *say* we believe.

REVISITING SIN

When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they broke God’s commandment. Strong emotions came into play after that traitorous act. Those emotions live on in each of us, influencing the way we view ourselves, each other, and God.

This scene in the garden speaks to the deepest realities of our beings. Adam and Eve fear exposure before God and hide from Him. Anger also lurks in the picture. When God confronts Adam with his failure, he angrily dismisses the charge. He blames Eve. She’s the problem. “The woman you gave me...” Adam says, as if God had matched him with the wrong woman.

Though anger and fear are powerful feelings, the primary emotions accompanying the fall of man are guilt and shame. They remain the most far-reaching emotions a human being ever experiences. Guilt and shame are so potent that we simply cannot deal with them without the miraculous grace and mercy of God.

Let’s look more closely at the nature of shame and guilt in this account of man and God in the garden.

Shame. The Bible says that as soon as Adam and Eve ate, their eyes were opened and they knew they were naked. In the deepest aspect of their being, their sexual identities, they knew shame. Their response: find a way to hide. So desperate was their need that they tried to come up with their own solution. Fig leaves sewn together provided some paltry, but vaguely comforting covering.

Shame continues to operate in the human psyche just as we see in this passage. Deep fear of being known and the subsequent need to find some sort of façade are the fundamental marks of a shame-based person. He directs his energy toward preventing exposure of his real self to others. In the very core of his being he knows he is fatally flawed, just as Adam and Eve knew they could never be as they once were—innocent, carefree children of a Father who walked and talked with them in the cool of the garden.

Guilt. Adam and Eve had broken the law of God. The one fruit withheld from them became the fruit they must have. Eve was deceived into thinking this fruit was necessary for her life. In reality, the thing she believed would bring her more life, brought death. Adam, undecieved, chose to disobey God rather than displease the beautiful and sexually powerful creature before him. Their guilt brought the end of the life they had known. They had to leave the garden.

Guilt always follows a similar trail. There is an awareness of a law, a standard that originates from outside or from within the person. The breaking of that law brings punishment. Guilt is what we feel when we sense that we have fallen short of the standard. We feel it because we are indeed guilty before a holy God.

Guilt and shame often hide deep in the human psyche and shape the core of our being. Anger, fear, a sense of powerlessness, loneliness—any of these may be much easier to identify. They appear readily in our responses. But sometimes the more observable emotions are merely symptoms of the real problem.

The Gospel speaks directly to our deepest needs; it profoundly addresses our guilt and our shame. These emotions can actually become the vehicle by which we learn to appreciate the meaning of God's love.

A SHIFT TOWARD SHAME

America has long operated as a guilt-based culture. As such, Christians have done evangelism from a guilt-based point of view. Our mass evangelistic

crusades and successful use of “four spiritual laws” emphasize being forgiven for our sin. Resolving guilt is the core issue, so the life and death and resurrection of Christ are proclaimed as the answer to our problem. The Bible clearly teaches this concept. It’s a message that has spoken directly to the hearts of Americans, especially in previous generations.

The tide of sin is shifting. We may well find that focusing on the issue of guilt meets more blank stares and furrowed eyebrows than we are prepared for. We are fast approaching a time when shame is the emotional framework from which most of our listeners will ponder the message of Christ. American culture is becoming shame-based.

This shift in emotional reasoning digs its roots into the steadily increasing refusal to acknowledge absolute truth. Since the modernist-fundamentalist debate of the 1920s, the concept that truth exists and can be known has been gradually undermined. We are now at a point where in the vast majority of academic or media settings, you can offer any theory you prefer—as long as you don’t present it as truth. To claim there is any sense of ultimate truth that transcends culture and individual whim is nearly taboo.

The sexual revolution of the ‘60s contributed to the decline of the acknowledgment of absolute truth. All the lines in human sexual behavior became blurred. The notions of “right” and “wrong” exchanged places. Now even the categories are up for grabs. A whole generation has been raised by parents who systematically dismantled the system in their own youth—and along with it, any clear parameters or true standards for behavior and belief.

Without the foundation of right and wrong, with its carefully circumscribed paths, guilt loses its edge. It lacks a context for meaning. This does not mean that a person is not guilty; it means only that he has no internal standard for assessing his guiltiness. An adequate sense of moral and spiritual laws is necessary for genuine awareness of guilt.

Enter shame. It surrounds America’s youth. Ugly is beautiful, grunge is in, and any body part is fair ground for piercing (or cutting), as if bearing self-inflicted pain is somehow noble—maybe even deserved. This youth culture actually wears its shame.

Attempting to deter crime, our courts have begun meting out the punishment of public shaming. Some adolescent criminals have been tagged as “super-criminals” because of their total lack of remorse for wrongdoing. Observe the halls of nearly any public high school and witness the lack of respect for

authority. Cast adrift in a tide of relativism, our youth have lost their moorings. Many are lost at sea.

Becoming a shame-based culture is by no means an American phenomenon. Russia, Japan, India, Jamaica, China and many other countries are shame-based cultures. Cultures that have known significant oppression from within and without experience the emasculation of their strength and dignity. The interpersonal and spiritual dynamics of such cultures come to closely resemble those that we recognize as the “inner city.” Lacking purpose and hope, individuals wander through a maze of destructive choices in an effort to restore some sense of self-respect—if only for a moment.

To understand how this shift from guilt to shame affects the way we communicate the Gospel, we need to take a closer look at shame itself.

THE NATURE OF SHAME

Shame is an emotional state in which a person feels fundamentally flawed—flawed at the core. Guilt says, “I’ve done something wrong.” Shame says, “I am bad. I am worthless. I deserve to be punished. I do not deserve to be loved. The problem is not what I’ve done. The problem is *who I am*.”

Something about the experience of shame attacks one’s sense of identity, especially in the eyes of another. A shamed person thinks, “It’s not just that I am flawed. My deepest fear is that I will be exposed as a worthless person. Someone might ‘see’ me.” Shame also is intimately connected to embarrassment; it threatens to reveal its prey as contemptible and unlovable. That’s why Nietzsche labeled man as “the animal with the red cheeks.”

The experience of shame is universal. We all feel shame in varying degrees and in certain situations. And we avoid it like the plague. We might be amazed to discover how much of our own behavior stems from the need to avoid shame, cover shame, deny shame. Shame is deep and primal and as old as the fig leaves of Adam and Eve.

Lest we be tempted to think of shame as the invention of popular psychology, let’s consider what the Bible teaches about shame.

The First Experience of Shame. Genesis 3 describes the first occurrence of shame. If Adam and Eve had only felt guilt when they sinned, they might have

washed their hands and mouths for what they had done. Instead, they tried to cover their sexual identity. This is an experience of shame. They needed to cover who they were, their true identity, because they were fatally flawed.

A Graphic Metaphor of Shame. In Ezekiel 16:1-63, Jerusalem is cast in successive stages as a discarded infant, a loved young girl, a beautiful bride, a detestable prostitute, and an atoned-for sister. The key to this progression revolves around the dynamics of shame.

This metaphor paints an incredible picture of God's love. Jerusalem is likened to a baby, cast off at birth, still covered in its afterbirth and unworthy of anyone's care. "No eye looked with pity on you," the text says. The baby is left abandoned in a field. Then God passes by. He sees the baby still "squirming in [its] blood" and says, "Live!" And the baby lives.

The baby grows up to be a young girl and then a beautiful bride, treated as royalty. Eventually, though, that bride becomes a prostitute who actually pays others to make love to her. The charge against her is that she did not remember the days of her youth, when she was naked and bare and kicking in her own blood (v. 22). She'd forgotten that Someone had passed by her and said, "Live!"

This Old Testament picture of God's love is set in the context of shame. The abandoned baby left by the side of the road is a fitting analogy. Nothing about the baby—no intrinsic quality—deserves to be loved. This reflects the experience of shame. The miracle is that God offers His love to us when what we deserve is anything but love.

A Woman "Adorned" in Shame. In Mark 7:24-30, Jesus interacts with a Gentile woman who comes to Him and asks that He cast a demon out of her daughter. By her birth and her heritage, this woman knows she should expect nothing from Yahweh. Nothing about herself commends her to Jesus ... yet she asks. The text says she keeps on asking Jesus to heal her daughter.

Notice the way Jesus responds. "Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," He says. Jesus likens her to a dog! In other words, Jesus speaks directly to her sense of shame. She replies immediately, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs." Jesus, in turn, heals her daughter.

The story illustrates how Jesus dealt with an individual whose primary experience was that of shame. He did not soft-pedal where she was. He addressed her shame and brought it out into the open. He knew she felt she

could only hope to experience the crumbs of life, while others got the choice morsels. He authenticated her sense of shame—and touched her life with His mercy.

The Experience of Shame as Inverted Pride. Shame often masquerades as false pride. To keep others from discovering our inadequacy, we inflate ourselves with displays of position or status or wealth. Pride serves as camouflage. We think that by being more than what we are, we can keep from being seen as less.

The rich young ruler and Pontius Pilate demonstrate pride that is really masked shame. The rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-22) had eliminated his problem of guilt by fulfilling all the commandments. Yet he needed something more. Jesus turns the tables by saying, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor ... Then come, follow me.” Jesus strips his pride and requires the man to face his inward poverty.

Pilate is treated similarly by Jesus in John 19:8-12. Pilate boasts, “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus replies, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” He forces Pilate to view his own powerlessness—a state of shame.

Finally, two classic passages in the New Testament reveal the interplay and overlap of the two primary emotions surrounding sin. Romans 3:10-12 affirms both guilt and shame. “There is no one righteous [guilt and shame], not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God [guilt]. All have turned away [guilt]; they have together become worthless [shame]; there is no one who does good [guilt], not even one.”

Whether we suffer from a sense of guilt or a sense of shame, we stand in need of a Savior. Guilt and shame often co-exist in a person. The Gospel speaks to each.

Ephesians 2 declares that we were dead in our sins. The text goes on to explain our position before God as Gentiles. “Remember that at that time you were separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). As Gentiles, we are flawed from our origin, which is the experience of shame.

THE SOURCE OF SHAME

Shame originates in sin. It is the emotional by-product of sin and the reality of life in a fallen world.

Painful life experiences, especially those that occur during childhood, often translate into a reservoir of shame that people carry into adulthood. This reservoir is easily re-ignited by later threats of loss or failure. Some of those experiences include sexual abuse, the divorce of one's parents, physical abuse, the death of a parent, emotional abandonment by parents through workaholism. The emotional fallout of such experiences is a deep sense of abandonment and powerlessness.

How does emotional fallout grow into a reservoir of shame and worthlessness? To understand this, we have to think as children think. Children have a view of the universe that puts them close to the center. When good things happen, it's because they've been good. When bad things happen, it's because they've been bad. They *are* bad. And their feelings often lead to damaging conclusions:

"Mom and Dad are divorcing because there's something wrong with me."

"Daddy left because I'm not a lovable enough boy for him to stay."

"My uncle wouldn't abuse me if I were somehow different" (more powerful, more lovable, more worthy).

"What happened to me was repulsive ... I am repulsive."

As incidents of divorce, neglect, and abuse remain high, we can expect to be ministering to more and more adolescents and adults whose primary emotional experience is shame.

MINISTERING TO SHAME-BASED PEOPLE

The concept of shame is a paradox. We all feel it. But no one wants to acknowledge his shame, even when he's drowning in it! Shame's nature is to hide. Not any time soon will we find a "shame seminar" featuring the smorgasbord of related topics for people in polite company to discuss. That,

however, does not make the potency of shame, or the implications of ministering in a shame-based culture, any less real.

From a scriptural point of view, embracing shame can lead to the deepest imaginable experience of God's love. To acknowledge our inherent sense of shame is to experience our true state before a righteous God, a God who sees us in our essence—and loves us.

All of this brings us to a fundamental point. It is very difficult to minister in a shame-based culture without understanding your own sense of shame. How do you get in touch with your own shame? Consider the following questions:

- Think of the last time you refrained from telling the whole truth. What were you trying to avoid?
- When do you feel the need to make something a little bigger than it actually is? What are you needing to prove?
- When have you been in the middle of an awkward or heated discussion and looked around desperately for a way to exit the conversation? What did you need to get away from?
- Think of the last time you felt exposed with a friend or family member, perhaps by tears that brimmed over, or anger that got out of control, or a “half-truth” you got caught in? What was that sense of exposure about?

These are just small examples of the experience of shame. We are accustomed to thinking in terms of our guilt before God, but our shame is no less real. There is no degree of guilt the Gospel cannot forgive. There is no depth of shame the love of God cannot touch and transform. With this confidence, exploring the emotional depths of shame becomes a rich facet of experiencing God—and inviting others into that experience. God uses the emotions of guilt and shame to draw us to Himself. In fact, shame and guilt are blessings without which we might never be drawn to Him.

With this in mind, let's consider some of the implications of ministering to others in a shame-based culture.

Validate Shame. Though hardly anyone ever openly talks about shame, they still live and breathe in that emotional reality. The first aspect of ministering

to people in a shame-based culture is to do what Jesus did: call a spade a spade. We must validate a person's sense of shame even if we never use the word!

Rather than trying to convince someone he is worthy of love, deserving of favor, the language of shame takes a different course. Surprising as it sounds, validating a person's shame means to agree with his or her deepest sense of reality. Instead of shaking your head and saying, "no way," you agree with your listener. "I understand how you don't feel you deserve any better life than you are experiencing..." In a shame-based culture, the message of judgment makes sense.

This may sound ludicrous at first. Remember we are coming from a guilt-based paradigm. As modern westerners, we resist the notion that we don't deserve love. In truth, we don't deserve God's love. We are uncomfortable with this position. From our theological slant, we insist that because God made us in His image we have inherent value. It's emotionally reasonable that God should love us. After all, He sent Jesus to die for our sin. He ought to love us as human beings created in His image.

The plain scriptural truth is that God has no moral obligation whatsoever to extend us His favor. When Satan rebelled against God, he got what he deserved. And so should we. We are not entitled to anything other than punishment. God could just as easily have eliminated His creation and started over with another batch of clay!

The Bible validates our inherent sense of shame, our "undeservedness." From that place of raw honesty God offers us mercy and favor that we cannot lay claim to on any other basis than the blood of Jesus. Mercy alone embraces us in our shame and moves us beyond it to a life marked by newness and restoration. The person who deeply feels his shame is able to receive the unfathomable riches of undeserved love offered to him.

Call Them to Their Deeper Identity in Christ. In C.S. Lewis' book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the wicked witch possesses a deep magic from before the dawn of time. When Aslan, who is a type of Christ, comes on the scene he embodies even "deeper magic from before the dawn of time."

That is how the Bible presents the truth of who we are in relation to shame and grace. We do stand condemned in our guilt and shame. But God gives us an identity that is deeper still as His very own sons and daughters, His children.

The book of Ephesians perhaps best illustrates this progression. Paul validates the Ephesians as people who are dead in their sins. They deserve death, not love. Paul appeals to their identity in Christ who delivers them from their deserved end. He prays that they will be established in Christ's love, which surpasses knowledge. Then he calls them to specific lifestyle and relational changes that reflect their identity as children of God.

Become a Living Extension of the Love of God. Kindness goes a long way in reaching a shame-based person. Romans 2:4 says it is God's kindness in the face of our condition that leads us to repentance. To someone who knows he deserves rejection, abandonment, and destruction, kindness seems like a miracle.

Simply showing kindness to someone who is shame-based makes an impact more significant than we know. The kindness itself becomes an illustration of how the grace and mercy of God can transform a life.

Also important to a shame-based person is our commitment to him or her over time. Shame-based people have an intense fear of abandonment. God's promise to never leave us and never forsake us speaks deeply. And in a relational context, our commitment to a person through the ups and downs is a living demonstration of the love of God.

CONTINUING TO PUSH OUT THE BOUNDARIES

Little work has been done to equip lay people to minister to shame-based people. We need to develop quality shame-based evangelism and discipleship materials to help bring the Gospel to the next generation. This brief discussion is a simply a small step toward that direction. But much is at stake. The next generation may well reject a Good News that speaks to guilt-based people. Does not Jesus want us to communicate the Gospel in a way they can relate to as shame-based people?

FURTHER PASSAGES TO CONSIDER

Genesis 3

Ezekiel 16

Matthew 18:21-35

Mark 7:24-30

Luke 7:36-50

Luke 15:11-31

Romans 1-3

Romans 5:1-11

Ephesians 2

Adam and Eve's decision to disobey God in the Garden of Eden brought spiritual and physical death upon the human race. It also left behind one of the most far-reaching emotional fallouts human beings experience: shame. Shame is becoming the predominant filter through which many people interpret every experience and relationship ... even their relationship with God. How can Christians communicate the Gospel in a way that penetrates shame and touches wounded hearts?

About the Authors

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