**What’s Good about Shame!**

Logia 29/2 (2020): 65-67

Our use of the internet is reshaping how we think and act and live. This is so, most of all, for Facebook, which is relocating many people from real, face to face relationships into virtual, electronic communities. It plays on their need for the approval of others by its appeal to their likes, and feeds on their fear of rejection by unfriending. It provides them with public face in a virtual community and threatens them with the possible loss of face in it.

Social analysts quite rightly note that digital approval promotes a culture governed by shame and honor. This is most evident by the use of social media to name and shame people. The popularity of social media reflects and promotes a somewhat narcissistic obsession with identity and a new tribalism that is based on self-identification rather than ascribed identity. That focus on the search for approval and the threat of shame in a virtual community redefines righteousness as a matter of acceptance by like-minded people rather than acceptability according to commonly given moral, legal standards.

Social analysts also note that this seems to be bringing the Western world into line with most other traditional societies that are ruled by the interplay between honor and shame, even if they all do so in different ways. They claim that countries, like the USA and Australia which have in the past been largely driven by guilt, need to be reclassified and treated as shame cultures, with the breakdown of marriages, families and local communities and their replacement by a global electronic societies of like-minded people.

To what extent this is true I do not know, but I do know many people that I deal with exhibit an acute, somewhat inarticulate sense of shame that motivates how they think about themselves, the world and God, even though they lack the vocabulary for it and are not able to conceptualize what they experience. I am also convinced that we pastors need to address this issue directly in preaching and teaching, evangelism and pastoral care. That mentality has opened up a window of opportunity to engage with people who have been estranged from the church. For us to do this we need to understand how shame works, and why; we need to appreciate what the Bible teaches about shame, and how God uses it in His dealing with all people and His own people.

1. **The nature of shame**

While shame is much like guilt in some circumstances, it does differ significantly from it. I am guilty when I have done something wrong, something that damages my relationship with others and God. Guilt comes from doing evil deeds, from breaking God’s law. My guilty conscience tells me that the evil deed needs to be rectified before the breach in that relationship can be restored. The opposite of guilt is innocence. Guilty people seek to justify themselves by what they do and be justified by the verdict of others. Spiritually, they need to be justified by God’s gracious word of pardon.

By contrast with guilt that makes me feel bad about what I have done, shame makes me feel bad about myself as a person. When I am ashamed I recognize that I have failed as a person; I realize that I am a failure; I feel that I am bad; I am not the person I should be, or, even, that I would like to be. At its worst, shame cripples me; it makes me feel unacceptable and insignificant, useless and worthless. A hopeless soul!

The opposite of shame is honor. Shamed people need to be vindicated by the approval of others or of God. My sense of shame is connected with my sense of self, my standing with others, my public face and acceptability, my honor, the respect that I have or not have in my community. It makes me aware of social approval and disapproval. While the approval of my peers honors me, their disapproval shames me.

My own feeling that I am acceptable is damaged, diminished and destroyed by three main causes: my wrongdoing to others, their abuse of me, and my unacceptable status. First, I feel guilty and ashamed of myself when I have done something that I know is wrong, like the theft of money. Second, I feel ashamed of myself when something bad is done to me, such as when I have been sexually abused or been bullied. Third, I feel ashamed of myself when I suffer disrespect from what I am - my appearance or parentage, my race or ethnicity, my deficiencies and disabilities, my occupation or marital status, my religious adherence or political convictions, and so on.

That social sense of shame is matched by the shame that I rightly feel before God for my sin and the sins of others against me. But that proper sense of shame is distorted by the devil who uses God’s law to discredit and belittle me before God to undermine my assurance of salvation and confidence in God’s acceptance of me. That is why he is called the devil, the slanderer.

Yet, like guilt, shame is not in itself a bad thing. It is divinely given, God’s good gift to us by our creation in His image, something latent and inherent in our humanity. Positively speaking, it is closely associated with the personal modesty and humility that comes from the awareness of our worth with God. It shields us as persons and protects our honor. Shame reflects our standing with God. So shame and honor belong together; they correspond with each other like the two sides of the same coin. Shame shows our lack of honor in God’s eyes. As such it turns on us because of our disobedience to Him. Since we were meant to live in community with each other and Him, it discloses that we, like Adam and Eve, have fallen out with Him and are far from his glory; we become ashamed of ourselves and cover up before God and each other because we do not measure up to our status as people made in God’s image. Thus shame is the index of our standing with God. The worst thing that could ever happen to us is that we become completely shameless (Jer 8:8-12). Shamelessness desensitizes us; it depersonalizes us by distorting and destroying our sense of self in relation to others; it excommunicates us.

1. **The transition from shame to glory**

In Zephaniah 3:11 God has this to say to His people who had been shamed by their enemies:

**Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors.**

**And I will save the lame**

**and gather the outcast,**

**and I will change their shame into praise**

**and renown in all the earth.**

That time is the day when God comes to judge the whole earth. He promises that He would not shame his people for their rebellion against Him, but would save those who had been crippled by shame and banished from His presence by their shamefulness; by dwelling with them and rejoicing over them with gladness, he would turn their shame into praise, their reproach into renown (Zeph 3:11-20).

That prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus who gave up his high status as God’s royal Son to remove the shame of both Jews and Gentiles. By his human life on earth he shared their shame, so that they could share in his glory as God’s Son. That great reversal of status by which he unshames them at his own expense, is evident in his dealing with people from his baptism to his death. In his baptism he swaps places with them, taking on their status as unrighteous sinners and giving them his status as God’s righteous Son (Matt 3:13-17). In his ministry he only shuns and shames those who shame others in their quest for self-vindication. But he associates with sinners and refuses to shame them by exposing them; he covers their shame as appropriate to each person in each situation. There are many instances of this in the gospels. A good example is his treatment of the woman with a continuous menstrual discharge that kept on polluting her sexually as a woman, and excluded her as unclean person from contact with God, so that she would not desecrate his holiness (Mk 5:25-34; Lk 8:43-46). Jesus notices her, heals her by her secret contact with him, affirms her as a daughter of God, praises her for her faith in him, and sends her away with his blessing. But it occurs at his expense, for power goes out from him to free her from her shameful condition. By his shameful death by crucifixion, in which he is forsaken by his heavenly Father, he plumbs the full depth of human shame in order to undo its negative consequences and its toxic power. By his triumphal resurrection he puts the devil and his cronies to shame (Col 2:15). In 12:2 the author of Hebrews sums up that dimension of his ministry graphically by claiming that Jesus despised the shame and endured the cross for the joy that was set before him, the joy of delivering his human brothers from the fear of death and sharing his own status with them as holy sons and daughters of the heavenly King (cf. Heb 2:9-15).

As their exalted Lord Jesus takes his disciples with him in his journey from shame to glory (12:22-26). Through the proclamation of the gospel, God the Father honors them beyond measure; he calls them to participate in his eternal glory and share in the glory of his Son (1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 2:14; 1 Pet 5:10). Through baptism they share in his suffering and death, so that they too can live and reign with him (2 Tim 2:10-13; Rom 6:4-11); he removes their shameful self, like a change of old clothing, and clothes them with himself and a new honorable God-like self in him (Eph 4:21-24; Col 2:11-15; 3:5-14; Gal 3:27). In his holy supper Jesus honors them as his welcome guests. There he shows his approval and acceptance of them as his holy brothers and sisters; there he not only covers their shame but also removes its toxic power by giving them his blood to cleanse them from all their sin and all the sins of others against them (1 Jn 1:7-9). In all that he says and does he does not name and shame them. He deals with them discreetly, gently, and winsomely.

As children of God the Father, they have the same status as Jesus. They share in his sonship. They live in his reflected glory. Since they belong to Jesus and are sanctified by him, he is not ashamed to call them his brothers (Heb 2:11). What’s more, God the Father is proud of them and is not ashamed to be called their God (Heb 11:16). When He considers them he regards each of them as he regards Jesus. He says, “you are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11). His affirmation of them dispels their shame. They therefore have no reason to be ashamed of themselves.

God promises that everyone who believes in Jesus will not be put to shame, either now or at the last judgment (Rom 9:33: 10:11). He seeks to gain their confidence by forgiving their offenses and covering their shame. They therefore have nothing to fear from him; they have no need to avoid him or hide from him, like Adam and Eve in their naked state. As God’s dear children who abide in Jesus, they will have no reason to shrink from him in shame at his coming (1 Jn 2:28). All that Jesus asks of them is that they do not become ashamed of him and his words, for if they are ashamed of him and disown him now I their life on earth, he will be ashamed of them and disown them when he comes in glory with his holy angels (Mk 8:38). That is when their transition from shame to glory will be complete.

John W. Kleinig