

Relief from Shame

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Over the last three years I have written a book for Concordia about the Biblical teaching on shame for Concordia Publishing House called “From Shame to Glory: God’s Surprising Remedy for Injustice and Failure” (2026). In it I distinguish shame from guilt. Since they are similar in effect and overlap in experience, they are all too often regarded as one and the same thing. But that is not so at all. While we feel guilty because we have done something wrong, or think that we have, we, usually, are ashamed because we have been wronged and abused in some way. While guilt makes us feel that we have done something bad, shame makes us feel bad about ourselves personally because of who or what we are. We therefore feel worthless and useless, unlovely and unlovable. While guilt damages our relationship with others, shame damages our sense of self, our identity. And that is why it causes such great and, often, lasting hurt

My interest in this topic has been stimulated by my pastoral care of people who had been severely abused, first those who were victims of sexual abuse and then the victims of other kinds of abuse. As I listened to them, I discovered that, like the guilt from sin, shame from abuse had given them a bad conscience. They felt unworthy and out of place in God’s presence. No matter how much they tried, they could not pray. They stayed away from church and felt that they should not receive Holy Communion. Above all else, they felt unclean before God and condemned by him. But they did not really know why. They thought that they must have done something wrong, because they felt so bad about themselves. They wondered whether they felt unworthy because they had done something really bad, some unforgivable sin, or whether God disapproved of them because they could not really forgive those who had abused them and forget what they had done. In my pastoral care of them I therefore learned to name shame as the main reason for their distress. I also learned to distinguish the shame that they felt as a result of their abuse from the guilt that they felt for other reasons, such as their desire for revenge.

As I was writing this book on shame, something changed in the casual conversation of some people with me. In the past when people asked me politely what I was doing in my retirement and discovered that I was spending much of my time writing on a religious topic, they seldom showed any interest in pursuing the matter any further. But not now! The mere mention of shame often triggers a sudden jolt of interest and curiosity that stimulates further discussion. It is as if that word touched something largely ignored and yet significant for them. So much so that the conversation suddenly became personal and emotional, even, at times, confessional and spiritual. It was as if the usual social taboo on the discussion of personal issues and religious questions had been lifted. Something important had been named. Something new was about to be discovered.

A recent encounter is a good example of this. When we offered hospitality to a homeless man last year, he wanted to know what I did for a living. After I had told him that I was a

retired pastor, he asked how I filled in my time. I told him that I was writing a book on shame. At that his eyes lit up, before he sighed and said that, if he were a writer, he would write a book about his life as a story of shame, which, of course, he could not do. But, as time has passed, he told us his complex story of shame and its devastating impact on him.

In these encounters I have noticed two things that have surprised me, because they were so unexpected. On the one hand, the initial superficial social interest in the topic changed to a sense of personal engagement as soon as I distinguished shame from guilt. The insight from that distinction seemed to open the door for understanding their experience of shame. This happened, most of all, when I touched on shame from various kinds of injustice and personal failure. On the other hand, interest in the topic was not just restricted a particular class of people, such as churchgoers, or sexually abused women. It extended across the board from young to old, from Christians to atheists, from well-educated to people with little education, and included people of both sexes, all ethnicities, all social classes, and all occupations.

Even though the reasons for their personal interest in shame differed from person to person, case to case, and context to context, everybody seemed to stand on common ground with a similar sense to shame. They differed from each other in the cause of their shame and its intensity, which ranged from harmful to toxic, from disabling to crippling. Even so, despite all similarities, it was hard to generalize about their actual experience of shame, apart from its social orientation and its connection with the identity of each person. I discovered that, because it is so personal, shame is so hard to pin down. Our sense of shame has to do with who we are, our unique identity despite our common humanity. We are all prone to shame in a different way, because each of us has been created as unique persons in God's image.

As I was writing this book, I was uncertain how to tackle the issue of shame respectfully and sensitively, in its full personal complexity, without sounding as if I were an expert on it, when my knowledge and awareness of it has come largely from my own experience as a person and a pastor. I therefore ran the first chapter of the book past people that I know well, to get feedback from them. In most cases the response from them has been that my reflections have, as I had hoped, opened up the topic for them. It named something significant that had been previously unnamed and explained, something that they had not really noticed, let alone understood. It triggered a chain of reflection on shame and their own experience of it.

Let me mention just one example of this which happened when I shared the first chapter of this book with a young fellow pastor. After reading it, he said, the topic of shame kept cropping up for him. In a few days it came up in three different situations. First, he brought it up rather tentatively in a Bible study on 2 Timothy 1:1-14 where Paul tells young pastor Timothy that, like Paul in prison in Rome, he had no reason to be ashamed of Jesus or suffering for the gospel. Prompted by what he had read, this pastor spoke about how he was often ashamed to admit that he was a Christian and asked why Timothy would be

ashamed of his connection with Jesus and Paul. That led to an animated discussion of their own experience of shame from their rejection by their friends and families for their convictions and commitment to God's word. In this they found that it was helpful to distinguish wrongful, misplaced shame from appropriate shame from doing something wrong or failing to fulfill their duties.

The next day the pastor visited a conscientious young man who was plagued with a bad conscience from his repeated failure to keep God's law. He was able to help the young man by distinguishing his guilt, with the need for confession and absolution, from his failure to meet the impossible expectations that he had set for himself. He then turned his attention away from himself and his self-esteem to Jesus to ask him to take away his shame as well as his guilt.

Then, soon after that, he met with a troubled woman who left her abusive husband. Hiding behind a pious front, he had abused her emotionally for twenty years. Even though she had, with God's help, forgiven him, she still felt guilty, because she still felt as deeply hurt as ever by his abuse and could not forget how badly he had wounded her. The pastor suggested that her 'guilt' could, in fact, be the shame that he had put on her by belittling and abusing her. That remark hit home for her and brought her to tears of relief. By naming her shame and distinguishing it from guilt, he was able to get her to join with him in prayer that Jesus would take away her shame and set her free from the deep, toxic hurt of her abuse by her husband.

These three cases dealt with three different, common experiences of shame and its impact on the conscience. In each case the pastor named the shame by distinguishing it from guilt. In each case a discussion on shame resulted in increased self-understanding and spiritual growth.

Like him, I, in this book, want to help its readers to name the shame that they have experienced but may not yet have understood, or only partly understood, or even misunderstood by their confusion of it with guilt, and encourage them to seek relief from the burden of it and its impact on them by relying on Jesus to set them free from it. His promise is that whoever believes in him will not be put to shame (Rom 9:33; 10:11; 1 Pet 2:6).