

Shame: Secular and Biblical Perspectives

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Shame has been a major concern in recovery from addiction for decades, although psychologists and other clinicians and Christians have also recognized this malady. Shame is very much biblical leaven that corrupts the image of God in people. Some distinctions are in order.

It should be helpful to differentiate some related concepts. **Guilt** is the fact or state of having done wrong, illegal, immoral or committed an offence. However, *feeling* guilty is the **remorse** or self-reproach caused when someone owns up to being is responsible for a wrong or offence; one *feels* **regret**, painful sorrow or disappointment. Notice that remorse and regret can apply to both wrongdoing, and neglect to do what was right, good or loving. One familiar definition of sin, “missing the mark,” is an example of this. **Embarrassment** is related to *feeling* ashamed and even extreme humiliation, a throbbing loss of pride, self-respect, or dignity. Presumably “honor-killings” are an extreme aberration of this public mortification. In addition, these are all characterized as social and secondary emotions, not primary biological emotions like anger, fear, disgust and surprise. “Feeling” is emphasized because someone may admit guilt without feeling regret and remorse. Being exposed publicly might prompt at embarrassment but not necessary remorse.

In contemporary parlance, shame is equivalent to low self-esteem, poor self-image, and even self-contempt. A common distinction is, if guilt is “I made a mistake;” shame is “I am a mistake.” The person retains (often unconsciously) core beliefs that create and maintain a shame-based identity. Psychotherapy has confronted this for decades. Alfred Adler (2-7-1870 to 5-28-1937) recognized an inferiority complex, which occurs when people focus upon themselves and what they believe are their deficiencies, flaws, and imperfections. Adler is correct that in large part human self-esteem is based on competence, ability and achievement. To compensate, such people may develop a superiority complex and be adroit in work or artistic endeavors, but their private life may be in shambles due to shame. Shame-based people believe and feel insecure, inferior and inadequate, “less-than.” Relationships become problematic.

Adler is also accurate in defining people as social beings. We indeed can only thrive in healthy, nurturing, social relationships. In fact, the fundamental premise of this article is that *our identity is based on relationships: past, present and future*.

One sociologist who described this phenomenon was Charles Horton Cooley (1864-8-17 to 5-7-29). He described the “looking glass self” (which can be understood as “the mirror self”). Our self-esteem, self-concepts (core beliefs) and identities are a reflection of how *we believe* other people perceive us. While such beliefs may be inaccurate and false, our beliefs about how others perceive us truly shape our ideas about ourselves. There are three interrelated dynamics: people imagine, assume and believe how they must appear to others; people imagine, assume and believe how others judge our appearances; and people develop identity through those assumed judgments of others. This is like being in a hall of mirrors where who we see are reflections of how we see ourselves. And like a fun house distorted mirror, our warped images are once again our projections of ourselves. To sum, we human beings have a **social self**.

Volumes have been written on how family-of origin experiences shape identity. Often we have mixtures of nurturing, support, encouragement, and safety; conversely we have experienced criticisms, blaming and punitive consequences. It is a universal fact that given our social selves, our “looking glass” or “mirror selves” are largely shaped in our early years by parents or parent-figures. However, it is pertinent to mention even those kids with healthy childhoods can develop shame due to body types and physical defects, or poor school performance. Some of us lived in hellish nightmares in elementary, junior or high school. Hence, consumption of cannabis, alcohol and pills functioned to numb and self-medicate aching shame.

Thus far these ideas have been offered. Human identity results from relationships; shame has nuances; shame is grounded on social forces that can cause inferiority; and, we have a social self based on our perceptions of how we believe others see and think about us.

Next, we come to the power and role of core **beliefs** as shaping and determining shame-based or healthy-based identities. Finally, the dramatic comparison of the Bible, and relationship with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit shall follow.

Why is this emphasis of belief so essential in reinforcing shame or healthy identity?

Credo, ergo sum, “I believe, therefore, I am” is a variation of Descartes’ dictum that speaks to the force driving our humanness: our belief systems. We are believing creatures. Ordinary, to speak of a belief system implies one’s belief in and reverence to God or a

supernatural power or powers, so that a theological connotation is usually stated or understood. However, belief is also viewed as a psychological system defining ourselves as people.

Furthermore, sociologically belief manifests into worldview, such as those of an atheist, agnostic or theist. Everyone is a “believer.” Atheism is a belief system, in fact. “The fool has said” In the movie *God is not Dead*, Josh Wheaton as a Christian college freshman in a philosophy class, had an ongoing debate with atheist Professor Radisson about God. The climax was when Josh retorted to Professor Radisson to the effect “How can you hate something that does not exist?”

Belief has a range of meanings: concur to a proposition; acceptance of a fact, opinion or assertion as real or true without personal knowledge; reliance upon statements or testimony; assurance without experience or certainty; and confidence in someone or something. Remarkably, belief “in” or belief “that” may be founded on truth and reality, or falsehood and fantasy, or mixtures of both. Idolatry is an example of false belief.

We cherish, trust and give our heart to our core beliefs about ourselves, others, nature, and the universe, and God. In essence, what we believe is real, becomes our reality, and shapes our perception. Hence the axiom “Perception is reality.” Likewise, what we believe, we become. Moreover, beliefs are mental habits and ultimately rules for action, as William James articulated in *Varieties of Religions Experience*. Core beliefs are not merely mental agreements to logical propositions, but visceral tenets and “rules” we trust, have confidence in and depend upon. When we believe, we give our hearts to a statement, idea, person, place, thing, event, material or spiritual forces.

Furthermore, we have emotional and often passionate attachment to our cherished beliefs. What are more sacred than our beliefs? Any belief is as absolute as our stake in it. When we think about it, all of our beliefs are true—we “believe” our beliefs are truth. (A false belief is a falsehood at best, and at worst a delusion). Consequently, our belief system is “circular,” a cybernetic closed loop, in that our beliefs become self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating—a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, unless one allows truth to amend or replace belief. This can be painful, confusing, and even threatening.

Two examples should suffice.

Due to the progression of substance addiction (tobacco, alcohol, opiates etc.) the consumer forms a denial belief system and employs this and other defenses (repression,

rationalization, blaming etc.) to avoid the painful fact, “I am not an alcoholic.” His or her “looking glass self” is shrunken to using associates where the charade can continue uninterrupted. That becomes a core belief—delusionary as it is. Consequences and misery can shatter “Not I” into “I am addicted.” Then recovery is possible.

If a kid is raised by critical, blaming parents, and the angry parent’s favorite accusation is “You are a loser,” that, by sheer repetition, like a malevolent advertisement, becomes absorbed and believed as truth. It has the effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy. As long as that shame-based ascription is believed, guess who may end up “a loser?” (Transactional Analysis describes core beliefs due to (largely) parental programming, which TA dubs as “drivers” and “injunctions.” Injunctions are “don’t,” whether verbal and non-verbal).

In the secular arena, the therapeutic goal is to help the afflicted individuals understand the causes and dynamics of shame, and then cognitively and behaviorally launch a plan to alleviate it. Certainly, forming and maintaining healthy and nurturing relationships is essential (remember who we are that our identities are based on relationships). Trite as it sounds, a modus operandi is to help clients “feel better about themselves.”

Since our identities are based on past, present (and future) relationships, what about the “looking-glass” or “mirror” self, our social identities?

Utilizing Cooley’s model, how do people imagine, assume and believe how they must appear to God? How and what do they imagine, assume and believe the way God judges their appearances? How then do they then develop identities based on the judgments (not condemnation in the biblical sense) of God?

Simply, how does God see us? How does God *feel* about us? If what one imagines, assumes and believes about these indispensable questions is inaccurate and in error, how can he and she form a healthy relationship with God the Father? This is a most evocative question to ask: How does God *feel* about you? (From our perspective, a germane question is “How do we *feel* about Father God?”).

Now we come to the crux, the core and the ground of who we are in God.

A comment about shame in the Bible. There are some 134 derivations of shame in Scripture, four in the gospels (guilt has seventy-nine derivations). Shame has the connotation of embarrassment, humiliation, uncleanness, and dishonor. Disgrace is a synonym. However, this is habitually based on actions and behavior.

What is our identity in Christ? (Paul uses the expression “in Christ” well over twenty times). In order to help some afflicted, shame-based soul, our relationship with that person is the essential dynamic in showing God’s love and care for him and her. Remember some individuals have distorted and warped images and beliefs about God and the church. Consequently, we must be Christ’s image and likeness to “prove” God’s agape and also to refute the lies of *diábolos*, the accuser and slanderer.

A word about the evil one, the enemy named Satan. Satan’s power is in the lie. In John 8:44 it is written about Satan, “... he is a liar and the father of lies.” Satan was, is, and always will be defeated at the cross. He has no power unless we believe his lies. His power is in the deception and the originator of the “ulterior motive” so well expounded upon in Berne’s classic *Games People Play*. How about Games Satan Plays?! One of his greatest lies is that God doesn’t love or care about us, and that He will never forgive people for their sins. All lies. Shame is bondage and based on believing lies. Freedom is the result of believing God’s truth, as John 8:44 exhorts.

So who are we in God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit? And how would believing in and cultivating that relationship with YHWH transform shame? Since shame is based on such factors as abuse, abandonment, and neglect, fear is the primary emotion. The person must feel safe and secure that agape love is present—and Scripture offers numerous explanations and examples. Let us examine a few relevant verses.

Perhaps 2 Cor. 5:17 best articulates this: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” “Old things” are the past, the past people who caused and perpetuated shame and a feeling of being unloved and worse, feeling undeserving of love. Lies.

Many people have had close encounters of the worst kind: close calls with death. It is always intriguing and fertile ground to proclaim God’s love by asking about this. Usually he and she will cite past experiences such as car accidents, serious medical problems or even victimization by crime. Ask “Why are you still alive?” Then, “God loves you, always has, always will. He protected you and kept you alive.” Shame is “Nobody loved me for me.” Christ loves us like the parents every child should have had, to offer safety, security, acceptance and worth. We as helpers and gospel bearers are Christ’s arms and embrace.

Psalm 22:9-10 is worth quoting and giving to someone to read constantly: “But You are He who took me out of the womb; You made me trust while on my mother’s breasts. I was cast upon You from birth. From my mother’s womb You have been my God.” In addition, psalm 139:1-15 broadcasts God’s vigilance and protection for all.

Among countless Scripture of God’s perpetual, all-consuming love for us, consider Luther’s “gospel in miniature,” which really is a perfect summary of why everyone can trust God: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Shame-based people live with little to no hope—little wonder why many have suicidal ideation. Distrust is shame’s currency.

What is most thought-provoking is there is nothing in the Bible about enhancing self-esteem or feeling better about oneself! Quite the contrary: we are contending with, in Paul’s well-known words in Roman 7:17, “But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.” Jesus gave an incitement about not worrying about unclean foods but rather “what comes out of the heart is evil thoughts . . .” (Mt. 5:17). So much for self-esteem. Rather, how about God-esteem?

Yet we are loved warts and all. As always, we return to the heart of the gospel, the remedy for the lies founding and perpetuating shame. “In Christ” is the solution.

This concludes with the following poem, exemplifying this article.

The Secret

To the locked cellar door I sneaked with key.
Unlocking it, I cracked the door
And shined down to the bottom stair, to see
All that had been hidden before.

The warrior king stood sturdy and robust.
Barbie with ponytail looked new.
The flashlight beam remembered childhood trust,
With all the little toy playmates still true.

I stepped down to the cellar floor, in dread,
As sounds of blazing voices roared.
A murky thing stood by the bed,
Leaned over a child with flaming sword.

The child froze—pulled tight the sky blue sheet.

I'd seen it all, familiar sight,
As if it had been sculpted in concrete.
I fought my fright to turn, take flight.

Behind in some dark place a calm voice said
"Rise up my child. I am here."
Holding a tiny hand, upstairs I led,
To shut the door and deadbolt fear.

I offered a note that someone gave me:
"The thing is dead. Unlock the door."
I touched the child's brow, gave up the key.
Stepping outside I yelled "I'm free."

(Inspired by my clients and Don Paterson's The Lie)