

What comes to mind when you see the image to the right? Are particular memories stirred? Are fears about the future awakened? Does anything happen at all?



I've told you before (probably several times) that seldom does an issue of *Christianity Today* fail to contain something that sets me to thinking about life and faith in a new way, and the current issue continues that trend.

In the article, "The Return of Shame," Andy Crouch contends that "We feel less guilty than ever before—and more ashamed than ever before."<sup>1</sup> I must confess that "shame" isn't something I generally think about very much. The heritage of the Protestant Reformation, soon 500 years old, is much more "guilt" than "shame."

And even when I do think about shame, I tend to do so in the intrapsychic terms of Western psychology. One such definition goes like this: "Shame is an inner sense of being completely diminished or insufficient as a person. It is the self judging the self. A moment of shame may be humiliation so painful or an indignity so profound, that one feels one has been robbed of her or his dignity, or exposed as basically inadequate, bad, or worthy of rejection. A pervasive sense of shame is the ongoing premise that one is fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, or not fully valid as a human being."<sup>2</sup> Feeling better yet?

I was interested to discover that guilt and shame occur in the Scripture in roughly equal measure.<sup>3</sup> I was also interested to note that Scripture's use of "shame" appears to be different from the definition above. Here are just a few examples:

#### **1 Samuel 20:30**

<sup>30</sup> *Saul's anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own **shame** and to the **shame** of the mother who bore you?"*

#### **Psalms 25:2**

<sup>2</sup> *I trust in you; do not let me be put to **shame**, nor let my enemies triumph over me.*

#### **Psalms 69:6**

<sup>6</sup> *Lord, the LORD Almighty, may those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me; God of Israel, may those who seek you not be put to **shame** because of me.*

#### **Psalms 71:1**

<sup>1</sup> *In you, LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to **shame**.*

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Crouch, "The Return of Shame," *Christianity Today*, March 2015, 32-41. Most of the ideas in this column come from or were inspired by this article.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Behavioral Health, Baptist Hospital East, Louisville, Kentucky, "What Is Shame?"

<sup>3</sup> "Guilt" and its cognates occur 194 times, while "shame" and its cognates occur 186 times.

## Daniel 12:2

<sup>2</sup> *Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to **shame** and everlasting contempt.*

## Mark 8:38

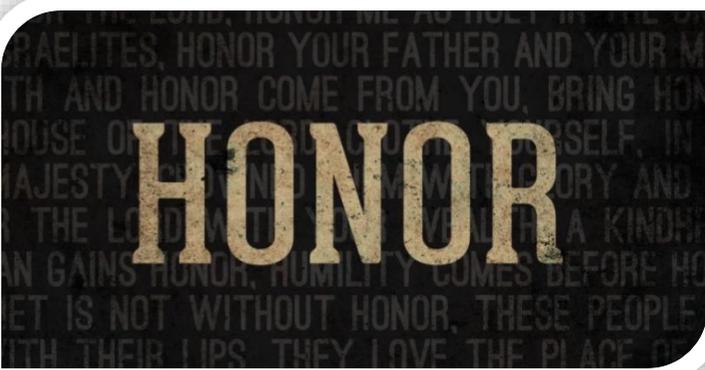
<sup>38</sup> *If anyone is **ashamed** of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be **ashamed** of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."*

## 2 Timothy 2:15

<sup>15</sup> *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be **ashamed** and who correctly handles the word of truth.*

The general trajectory of "shame" in Scripture is much more communal and interpersonal than the intrapsychic definition I've given above. In the Scriptural sense, "shame" is the opposite of "honor," and both have to do with "saving face," which is the currency of interpersonal and communal life in most non-Western parts of the world . . . which is most of the world.

The Bible itself was born out of cultures that were unmistakably honor-shame cultures. When God first called Abram to found what would become the nation of Israel in Genesis 12, God did not promise to make him morally good, although we might argue that such transformation did, in fact, occur. What God promised was to "make his name great," which is a far more central concern in an honor-shame culture.



When the Bible speaks about God's "glory," this is all about public worth, about the One who is worthy of greatest honor and praise, who is due the highest recognition and adoration. These are honor-shame concepts.

In his essay, Crouch notes that "Bestowing and maintaining honor requires the kind of binding community that Western mobility and personal freedom are practically designed

to dissolve. So instead of evolving into a traditional honor-shame culture, large parts of our culture are starting to look something like a postmodern *fame*-shame culture. Like honor, fame is a public estimation of worth, a powerful currency of status. But fame is bestowed by a broad audience, with only the loosest of bonds to those they acclaim."

"Because fame-oriented culture lacks the traditional structures of community and honor, those in it dread being excluded or shamed. In a traditional culture, when someone experiences shame, a web of people will try to restore lost 'face.' Indeed, many honor-shame cultures strive to prevent the loss of face in the first place. Conflict that would be tolerated in a guilt-innocence culture is suppressed or redirected in order to prevent ruptured relationships—one reason that many honor-shame cultures prize politeness and indirectness in situations in which disagreement could erupt."

It's quite interesting to re-experience the Bible from an honor-shame perspective rather than from a guilt-innocence perspective. Shame in the interpersonal sense has to do with

exclusion from community and from honor, and Jesus was known for seeking out and sharing the company of those who were so excluded: tax collectors, lepers, beggars, “sinners” . . . and women!

Crouch points out that Westerners have a hard time grasping how devastating and shaming it would have been for Paul’s churches to learn that their apostle was in prison. But Paul turns all this on its head, pointing out that “*what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel*” (Philippians 1:12). Later in that same letter, Paul enumerates the large list of “honor” qualifications he acquired before he met Jesus, declaring that all of these things are essentially shameful when compared to the glory of knowing Jesus and being found in Him (Philippians 3:7-9).



The cross itself was far from just an instrument of execution. The whole crucifixion sequence was carefully and specifically designed to maximize the victims’ shame and humiliation. Yet the Bible tells us that “*for the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*” (Hebrews 12:2).

My friends, what joy could possibly have become available to Jesus through the cross that was not available to Him without it? What might He, the One by whom, through whom, and for whom all things exist, gain on the far side of the cross that made it worth its cost? What joy could be sufficient counterweight to such agony? I submit to you that there was just one thing that could do it. **The joy that took Jesus to the cross was the thought of the possibility of spending eternity with you.** “*The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed*” (Isaiah 53:5b).

It is, in fact, because God has so honored us that we honor God in return. It is because we know ourselves to be held in such an unimaginable Love that we love God in response. It is because we know that nothing in all creation can separate us from that Love that we who follow Jesus continue to reach out to those no one else will touch.

“The remedy for shame,” Crouch notes, “is not becoming famous. It is not even being affirmed. It is being incorporated into a community with new, different, and better standards for honor. It’s a community where weakness is not excluded but valued; where honor-seeking and ‘boasting’ of all kinds are repudiated; where servants are raised up to sit at the table with those they once served; where even the ultimate dishonor of the cross is transformed into glory, the ultimate participation in honor.”

As we make our way toward Holy Week once more, let’s affirm with Paul that “*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile*” (Romans 1:16). And let’s watch for opportunities to share the Good News!

Dave

# God in Guilt vs. Shame Cultures

by Jayson Georges

	<b>GUILT CULTURE</b>	<b>SHAME CULTURE</b>
<b>God's Attributes</b>	<i>Lawgiver &amp; Judge</i> (sinless and just)	<i>Father &amp; Patron</i> (glorious and faithful)
<b>God's Holiness</b>	He alone is morally pure.	He alone is worthy of honor.
<b>God's Power</b>	Forgives transgressors	Honors the lowly and humbles the proud
<b>God's Righteousness</b>	Procures justice	Maintains covenant faithfulness
<b>Jesus Christ</b>	Highlights priestly office: His death satisfies divine justice, making our forgiveness possible	Highlights sonship: His shameful death covers our shame; His faithfulness to the Father restores our honor with God