

UNDERSTANDING SIN, RECOGNISING SHAME

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IN HER BOOK, *SPEAKING IN PARABLES*, SALLIE TESELLE SUGGESTS THAT 'THE PURPOSE OF THEOLOGY IS TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR THE GOSPEL TO BE HEARD IN OUR TIME'.¹ This is both a fair and challenging observation, not least because it should raise within us a series of questions that flow naturally from TeSelle's comment. What is our time? How do our cultural peers understand themselves, and what influence does that have on the theological task of making the gospel heard? What barriers are there to a meaningful and sufficient translation of the Christian story for our contemporary settings? Such questions are pertinent to every dimension of the gospel and for every time and place. However, I would like to suggest that they are particularly applicable when dealing with the issue of sin. For contained within this briefest of theological terms is a panoply of ideas, driven not only by the biblical narrative and the Christian community, but by our culture as a whole.

MISS-UNDERSTANDING SIN

If we listen attentively to the stories being told by those outside the Church, and by those within it, what we will hear, time and again, is the idea that sin is an offence against a divinely instituted law, or more simply, we are bad people because we *do* bad things. I know for myself that coming to faith through an evangelistic event required that I say a 'sinner's prayer', something I was helped to achieve by being offered a list of 'sins' that it was assumed there was a fair chance I had committed. The problem was, I did not recognise the 'sinner' being painted by this narrative. The story I was carrying around was this: I felt disconnected from God (and from other people for that matter). I knew my relationships, both human and divine, weren't all that they could and should be. I wanted to know God and feel that he cared about me. I was not a bad person, but somehow I did not feel good enough for God.

Of course, transgressing is a biblical understanding of what sin is – though a highly simplified version. Mark Biddle, an old Testament theologian, notes that the "sin as crime" metaphor ... addresses certain aspects of the problem of human existence. Yet although dominant in the Western popular mind, it does not fully reflect the biblical witness, nor provide a sufficient basis for the Church's ministry in addressing human wrongdoing and its consequences, nor take account of the insights of contemporary theological movements, philosophies and social sciences that do not confirm its validity as a thorough description of the problem of being human.²

The fact is, both Testaments view sin as a much more complex phenomenon than the 'sin as crime' model allows for. Indeed, honest observation might conclude that most people we know (Christian or not) are not utterly depraved, evil, rebellious, hubristic individuals. They are probably a bit lost, life-questioning, soul-searching, generally good, but not quite feeling good enough, unsatisfied, 'there's something missing', kinds of people.

The reason such observations are important is because both the Hebrew (*bt'*) and Greek (*hamart*) root of the word we translate simply as sin does not denote wilful rebellion or wrongful transgression. Rather, as the title of Biddle's book declares, it is missing the mark. That is, human beings are more often than not like archers. We unintentionally miss the target of authentic humanness that God has set. Or, to employ a slightly different (though not unconnected) concept, we *fall short* of the glory of God (Rom 3.23).

The simple yet vital point being made is that, like the cross that ultimately deals with it, sin cannot and should not be described from one vantage point, or by employing a single metaphor. What is more, the emphasis we have so often placed has tended to quantify something that is first and foremost about the *quality* of our relationships with each other, the world we live in, and the God who created it. Sin has rather unhelpfully been reduced solely to the *presence* of wrongful actions when in reality it would have far greater meaning to describe it as an *absence* of mutual, intimate, undistorted relating. And it is this understanding that opens the way for us to see shame as part of the biblical narrative of sin.

SEEING SHAME

Shame, is not an easy concept to pin down. It is a complex and at times contradictory phenomenon. And yet, as James Fowler once said, 'Now that I have eyes for it, I see [shame] everywhere.'³

Though it has been described in many ways, shame can be read as, 'an inner torment, a sickness of the soul ... It is the most poignant experience of the self by the self ... a wound from the inside, dividing us both from ourselves and from one another.'⁴ Equally it is an 'internalised pollution', a staining, defiling *dis-ease* rendering the sufferer worthless in his or her own sight.⁵

Despite its pervasiveness, shame is seldom recognised, named or discussed within the Christian community,

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especially in relation to sin. Partly this is due to the fact that those who suffer from shame, while acutely aware of it, and desperately searching for a way to vanquish themselves of it, find it almost impossible to speak its name. The fear of exposure silences the victim, so their true stories are seldom heard. Along with this fear, however, is the fact that it is too easily absorbed into guilt-language. Shame is perceived merely as a rightful and necessary emotional response to the guilt we live under as disobedient children of God.

Shame is, in so many ways, an assessment of the self. While social setting and cultural expectations can cause, and even perpetuate it, in reality 'there is no need for an audience or the presence of others for people to feel shame'.⁶ The shamed person effectively ignores the 'Other', keeping interrelating and intimacy to a minimum to restrict the possibility of being exposed for who he or she truly is. This fear of exposure conspires to paralyse the person in relation to the 'Other'. Therefore, the shamed person is either blinded to the possibility of (or the need for) reparative action, or simply avoids it.

What the chronically shamed person craves above all else is a self-consistency; a coherence within the self; that is, a wholeness of being. This is all too often absent, however, for within the shamed person is a fissure dividing the story of the self. There is a disparity, an inconsistency, set up between the ideal-self (the person we aspire to be) and the real-self (the actuality of our lives).

Without this self-consistency, a desire exists to 'deadend' the real self – to isolate, cover, suppress, and even banish it, rather than have it exposed: 'shame is a state of linguistic and social exclusion and alienation ... one is trapped in the self without words and without other people: "Shame sets one apart" and destroys the interpersonal bridge and social bonds between people. This may be felt as a kind of "radical abandonment" as the person turns inward, loses social bonds and a sense of the other, and so, being a social animal, loses a real sense of self. The functioning social self is lost in shame. It is a lonely, alienating experience.'⁷

While most manage to 'live' in this state, in extreme cases of shame, some find the whole experience utterly unbearable. Shame must be put to death. But, as we have already observed, the self and shame are indivisible; therefore the death of shame has to mean the death of self. Therefore, for the chronically shamed, the step from relational suicide to its physical counterpart can be very short indeed.

ATONING FOR SHAME: SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Unquestionably, Christian theology has a well-developed notion of guilt and the rites and rituals deemed necessary to deal with it. Such tradition has served the Church and its constituents well. However, in a society where guilt is a marginal concern,⁸ a fresh engagement with the Gospel narratives is required. We need to re-hear them in the light of shame, and so understand their relevance to this issue.⁹

The fact is, any individual or institution that claims to care for the well-being of people, but ignores the existence of shame, is apathetic towards its victims, or discounts its importance in the postmodern narrative, will ultimately be discredited. There is, therefore, a clear and obvious challenge facing the Church: 'We must ... acknowledge shame and thereby redeem it.'¹⁰ However, this is not a straightforward concern. 'Shame is not easy to live with, to transcend, or to heal. There are no easy solutions or infallible techniques that can be applied. The condition of shame is a hard one to ameliorate because alienated people are, by definition, fundamentally cut off from the individuals and communities who might help them.'¹¹

Even without such isolation, this question still remains: How can a community help the chronically shamed person if the only narratives of healing and atonement they have to offer are ones based upon a reduction of sin and guilt to moral misdemeanour?

We require a fuller, more meaningful, more biblical account of the plight of humankind that speaks appropriately and often about the atonement as a restoration and reconciliation between relational beings, both human and divine, who too often live with an *absence* of mutual, intimate, undistorted relating. Therefore, if we are to develop narratives of atonement from the stories that surround the life and death of Jesus, then it is imperative that we keep at the forefront of our theological creativity the reality that, for the chronically shamed, relationships and ideals are more important and persuasive than law and punitive threat.

This is precisely why we need to listen to the stories being told around us, to understand what it means to be a person living in a post-industrialized, post-Christian world. But we also have to listen with a critical ear to the stories we tell as the Christian community, and ask ourselves if these truly make sense within our current context. This is not to ask '*Do they make sense to us?*' but '*Do they have meaning for those who know not the atoning life and death of Jesus of Nazareth?*' Let

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NOTES

1. S TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables* (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 1. Subsequent editions of this book appear under the name Sallie McFague.
2. M Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin and It's Consequences in Biblical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. viii.
3. J Fowler, *Faithful Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 91. Cited by S Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1.
4. G Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring* (Rochester: Shenkman Books, 1985), pp. ix-x.
5. Pattison, *Shame*, p. 76.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
8. See the research by John Finney published in *Emerging Evangelism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004): '61 per cent [of Christians surveyed] had no sense of guilt' (p. 49).
9. Space does not allow for an extended discussion on how the biblical narrative, particularly the Passion Story, can be re-read through the lens of shame. Suggestions for this, and how the employment of Eucharistic rites and rituals can aid the healing of shame, can be found in my book, *Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society: Engaging with an Emerging Culture* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).
10. G Kaufman and I. Raphael, *Coming Out of Shame* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 110.
11. Pattison, *Shame*, p. 156.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
13. C Goldberg, *Understanding Shame* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1991), p. 257. Cited by Pattison, *Shame*, p. 169.
14. DJ Hall, *The Cross in Our Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 132.

► us be clear, however, that 'making sense' is not a call to ditch biblical, theological and doctrinal understandings of the gospel. It is the challenge to think creatively, laterally, tangentially, even abstractly, within the confines placed upon us, and to (re)tell our story with fresh and contemporary insight.

According to Stephen Pattison, 'Shame, is best situated within the metaphorical ecology that pertains to defilement, pollution and stain.'¹² This, he argues, is in stark contrast with the metaphorical ecology surrounding guilt, which has more to do with 'offence, debt and punishment'. Naturally, such things as offence or debt require equal and opposite responses, and so it is appropriate to use language of punishment and reparation. Shame, however, is far better described as a phenomenon that excludes, that pollutes the individual and community. It is therefore more appropriate to speak of cleansing and acceptance in order to be reconciled with the 'Other', as well as with one's own self. While guilty people need forgiveness, shamed people need a sense that they can live as whole, coherent beings – they need to live a story that makes sense so that they themselves make sense. But is this perhaps just another way of articulating what it means to be forgiven? What is certain is that exclusion and pollution more than adequately reflect the way sin is described in the Scriptures, while cleansing and acceptance are indeed the fruit of atonement.

Given that shame is experienced as if it is a pollutant, bringing a self-imposed isolation and exclusion, healing from shame therefore requires opportunity for cleansing, for inclusion and social reincorporation and relational restoration. It may well be fruitful, therefore, to consider how we may incorporate cleansing rites and ritual, rather than verbal acts of confession and repentance, into our corporate expression of the story of Jesus. We may even have to consider making room for the shamed to respond as they wish – so that, at least initially, they can do so without fear of being exposed.

Finally, I wish to consider the idea of the process of atonement. For though we might speak of the cross as a once and for all sacrifice, this does not mean that all people will be able to hear the gospel once, respond to it with repentance, and feel that their lives have been significantly altered by this brief encounter. For some, it is a long, painful journey to accept the story of atonement so that it significantly changes their lives.

For the chronically shamed, it is perhaps better to imagine the atonement as a process rather than a crisis

event. 'There are no sure, certain, or quick ways of healing shame . . . "At best it is a creative and compassionate art."¹³ For while the more rational and objective nature of guilt can be dealt with in a moment of confession and absolution, the more personal and relational dynamics of shame, mean that the task of reconciling the person to self and to the 'Other' is more akin to a long and arduous journey. There is no easy solution to shame. But then, simplicity is not a luxury we are afforded when dealing with the complexities of people as relational beings. Indeed, is it not the biblical witness that the reconciliation of God to humankind, and humankind to ourselves, is a long and arduous process?

If we are to deal meaningfully and sufficiently with the issue of shame as one of the most dominant themes in the story 'What it means to be human', then a critical reassessment of how we communicate the Christian story is needed. Of course, 'there will never be a time when the themes [of sin and guilt and the models of atonement needed to deal with such human tragedies] are wholly irrelevant, because the anxieties they address are perennial.'¹⁴ That Jesus' death deals with sin as our disobedience and guilt is self-evident. That Jesus' death also deals with shame often goes unnoticed in our understanding and communication of the gospel. Therefore, if the Church is to speak meaningfully and sufficiently, it needs to draw out fresh emphases from its theological and liturgical traditions, which allow the chronically shamed person to hear a story of hope and healing, to become shame-less and so be at-one with themselves and their God. ■