

PREFACE

As soon as I read the advertisement, something clicked into place. Donald L. Nathanson, MD, was telling me shame functions as the source for much of the hostility, violence, and trouble in our world. Rarely do I more than skim one of the many ads I receive for programs promising to assist me in ministry; this one I read carefully as memories of my three years in junior high school came to mind, followed by thoughts of the twelve and thirteen-year-old students I have taught in confirmation courses over the past thirty-three years. Often I had said to myself and occasionally to other adults that the cardinal rule for teaching them or dealing with them at all is, “Thou shalt not embarrass them, especially not in front of their peers.”

Not since seminary had I heard anyone say much about shame, and the only insight I could recall from those years was an observation that guilt is a bad feeling about something I have done or failed to do, whereas shame is an even worse feeling about myself: that there is something wrong with me as a person — something I feel an urgency to cover and keep hidden. Somewhere in my years of studying the first section of the biblical book of Genesis,¹ I had realized the first result of sin was shame. That is, in the story of humanity’s rebellion against God,² the man and woman expect a great awakening when they eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but what their eyes are opened to see is an embarrassing realization of their own nakedness. So, their first great act of independence from God is to hide in the bushes. The man and woman who had

¹Genesis, chapters 1-11.

²The temptation and fall in Genesis, chapter 3.

been without shame in their nakedness with each other now experience something new: shame about themselves, with its need to hide. I will say much more about this remarkable story of our human race in the body of this paper, but now I am merely recounting the extremely limited (but intriguing) ways in which the concept of shame had figured in my ministry before I encountered Donald Nathanson and the Silvan S. Tompkins Institute.

One other writer had stirred in my mind the importance of the biblical theme of shame. In his book, *The Crucified God*, the theologian Jurgen Moltmann insists upon Jesus' identification with people in the depths of the human condition: the depths, not only of sin and guilt, but of suffering, alienation, and shame. Actually, the passion narratives in the synoptic gospels³ depict more of Jesus' humiliation than of his physical pain, and the "Servant Songs" in the biblical book of Isaiah (which the church has always connected with Jesus' passion) likewise depict more of the Servant's humiliation than of his physical pain. The fact that crucifixion was designed to inflict prolonged and unbearable physical pain only emphasizes the importance of Jesus' humiliation, which receives even more attention in the telling of his passion. The New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, in his book, *The Death of the Messiah*, helps us understand the prominence of humiliation in crucifying rebels.⁴ Shame, it seems, was even more the objective than pain.

After viewing the video and reading the manual, I ordered Nathanson's book: *Shame and Pride*, subtitled, *Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self*. I had to hear the fuller story of shame's importance in the development of people and societies. I had to learn more because I sensed from

³Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

⁴Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, p.

the moment I glanced at the ad Dr. Nathanson was onto something big. I knew from my own life that he was right. Shame is a huge factor in human development.

Guilt never leaves the scene, but guilt is not the factor in life it once was, even though it remains the primary focus of Christianity's preaching of salvation. The theologian Douglas John Hall⁵ has argued that more young adults feel confusion caused by lack of purpose and direction or even motivation to seek purpose and direction than suffer from a perceived sense of guilt. Hall is not saying guilt is no longer a significant human problem; he is telling us, especially those of us who preach and teach in the church, that we have not been listening well enough to our own children. They are suffering less from the burden of guilt than from their uncertainty that life has real meaning at all. The big problem for them is not what they have done wrong, but their lack of assurance that anything is truly and deeply worth doing at all. "Why bother?" is a more painful question for them than, "How do I make up for my sins?" The latter question might arouse more annoyance in many young adults than real concern about themselves and the state of their souls. As I wrestle with *Shame and Pride* and seek to unfold the biblical and theological themes of shame, I wonder how big a role shame plays in the cynicism identified by Hall.

Why am I writing this paper? When I seek to clarify my purpose, I find it helpful to state the negatives: what are *not* my reasons for writing this paper. I am not trying to give biblical validation to Donald Nathanson's theory; he doesn't need such validation. Psychology is a valid discipline in its own right, and psychiatry a legitimate practice that needs no approval from me or my profession. Even more strongly, I must be clear that I am not attempting to validate the Bible or theology by

⁵Principally in his 3-volume work, *Theology in a North American Context*, to which we'll return in the body of the paper.

seeking agreement from psychology or medical science. Neither the Bible nor theology requires such validation, and attempts to validate the Bible with modern science are a sham. The two need not be in conflict, and neither needs the other's approval to exist and proceed with intelligent thought and investigation. The Bible is not a science book, and its truth is not scientific truth. At this point, I must restrain myself because I have written and taught much on the unnecessary conflict between science and biblical faith, but that wrongly perceived conflict is not the subject of this paper. It is enough here to state that I have no reason to attempt the false job of validating the Bible scientifically or the equally false job of validating psychology biblically.⁶

So, why am I writing this paper? My realization of shame's significance in the Bible has combined with my sense that Donald Nathanson is offering us⁷ something worthwhile and promising in the pursuit of healing and wholeness. To care anew each day, I have only to read our local newspaper's peeks into the frustration, hostility, and violence in the daily life of the tiny city in which I live. The destruction of self and others reported every day is appalling, and the newspaper only skims the surface. My wife reads with the quiet sadness of a teacher whose hopes are being blunted or even shattered as the paper tells of the arrests, indictments, and shootings of her former students.

If Donald Nathanson is right (and I know in my gut he is) that shame underlies much or most of our hostility and drives our self-destructive acts as well as our attacks upon others, then I need to know in my mind also, with all the intellect I can muster, *how he is right* and *what can be done* to

⁶ Anyone wishing to pursue this subject, in brief and not in depth, is invited to go to <http://home.earthlink.net/~rsind/sum02.htm>

⁷His video is specifically intended for pastors.

change the situation. He is psychological and medical in his approach to helping and healing. I am biblically theological in mine. We need to work together. It's that simple. People who care need to work together, and so we need to bring to the table all the intelligence, knowledge, and understanding we can gain from our own disciplines, experiences, and practices. Then, we need to listen and learn from each other. Why? The only alternative for me is to stop reading the newspaper, stop preaching, stop trying to teach, stop attempting community ministry, stop caring about education, and just go fishing.⁸ I enjoy fishing, but it's not enough to live for.

INTRODUCTION: RIGHT TO WRITE

Why write about shame? Why, especially, write about it as a study of the Bible? Surely it would be more useful to study the great biblical themes many feel are being neglected in our time, when truth seems always debatable. Many people seem frustrated that life has too many shades of gray, and they long for more black and white. What, they believe, once was true now seems sort of true but, also, sort of false. What once, they think, was clearly wrong is now open to interpretation. After all, shouldn't shame just be shame? Let those who should blush learn to do so and those who stand by the truth stand tall. Don't we have enough biblical themes already?

⁸ I do enjoy freshwater fishing, but to get the reference, see Matthew 4:18-22 and especially John 21:1-3, where Simon Peter, who is deep in shame over his denials of Jesus and left without hope by Jesus' crucifixion, announces he is going fishing. His discipleship appears to have failed, and so Simon decides to return to his old life, which proves utterly fruitless (he can't even catch fish) until he is lifted out of his shame and called anew to ministry and service.

Don't Talk about It

The symposium co-sponsored by the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychoanalytic Association had gone well, the first in either America or Europe to focus on the nature of this particular subject. Dr. Donald L. Nathanson, the psychiatrist who had presented his paper, recalls that, after the symposium, a friend took him aside to warn him. "That was really nice," his friend and colleague began. "But don't do anything more on shame. You wouldn't want to get a reputation for that." Nathanson reflects on the incident in the Introduction to his book, *Shame and Pride*, subtitled, *Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self*. His friend was being kind, thinking of his reputation and welfare within his profession. Nathanson concludes, "It was in that moment that I learned that the very *idea* of shame is embarrassing to most people."⁹

My wife Debbie listens to my sermon on Saturday, and I have always valued her reactions. She has a keen sense of what sounds right or wrong. In the early years of my ministry, she would tell me frequently that a particular section of the sermon didn't "sound like" me, and she was always right. I have referred to Dr. Nathanson's work in several sermons, but one Sunday I explored the subject at more length, devoting a section to shame. When I read Deb the sermon the day before I was to give it, she balked a little at one of those paragraphs. "You don't want to say too much about yourself," she warned me tentatively, as though she herself could not pinpoint what was wrong but knew something was. When I re-read my paragraph, not for its logic or phrasing, but for its feel, I knew she was right. What I was saying about shame required understatement. I had to allow the congregation a safe distance from the subject, or they would almost surely feel uneasy, as when someone tells something too personal in a social gathering. I realized, however, that the content of

⁹ Nathanson, Donald L., *Shame and Pride*, p. 15.

that paragraph offered no particularly personal information about me; the problem was not in the content but in the feel, and I could feel it myself as I read aloud: our embarrassment in hearing someone talk about shame. So, I put in some distance for comfort, taking a half-step back from the subject, and spared the congregation the feeling that their minister was saying something embarrassing. I was, after all, trying to make them think, not squirm.

The Human Condition: More than Just One Problem

In her satirical poem, “This Side of Calvin,”¹⁰ Phyllis McGinley portrays the popular minister who maintains his following by avoiding the one topic the poem clearly regards as crucial: sin. He speaks eloquently on many subjects but avoids that one which seems, from the poem’s point of view, the *sine qua non* of preaching – the one subject without which a sermon is not a sermon at all but merely a lecture. The second of the poem’s two stanzas reads:

And in the pulpit eloquently speaks
On divers matters with both wit and clarity.
Art, Education, God, the Early Greeks,
Psychiatry, Saint Paul, true Christian charity,
Vestry repairs that shortly must begin,
All things but Sin. He seldom mentions Sin.

¹⁰ McGinley, Phyllis, “This Side of Calvin,” from Laurence Perrine, *Sound and Sense, an Introduction to Poetry*, pp. 40,41.

Liberal Protestantism¹¹ has been faulted many times, not without some justification, for minimizing the problem of sin and underestimating the power of evil in our world. For just this failing, Liberalism crumbled under the crushing events of the first half of the Twentieth Century – two world wars and the Holocaust. How could an optimistic belief in human goodness and progress be squared with the realities of nightmarish human cruelty? So, in what I consider our theologically reactionary times here in America, sin has made a comeback as the premier problem in the human condition and, perhaps for many Protestant Christians, the only problem.

When sin is our only human problem, salvation must be defined as our liberation from the grip of sin and from its consequences. And what is the feeling-word attached to sin? It is guilt. If and when I sense my sin, I feel guilt. The preachers of salvation from guilt would hasten to remind me that guilt is a condition of my humanity and my personal self as well as a distressing emotion from which I might seek relief. I do not just feel guilty; I am guilty and inescapably so – that is, I cannot escape by myself through my own efforts. If I seek relief from my feelings of guilt without dealing with the reality of my guilt itself – my state of guiltiness – then I am merely taking pain relievers instead of treating the disease. My feelings of guilt are seen as symptoms of my real problem. For this reason, many preachers have labored to make people feel guilty. Their desire is

¹¹ “Liberal,” which in its root means free, has become a term so general as to mean specifically nothing. Often today it is used as a derogatory label to discredit the opinions of anyone who disagrees with or questions the opinions of someone labeled “conservative,” whatever that label means. Here, however, I am using the designation Liberal Protestantism for a particular theological movement proceeding from the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms comments, “It emphasized the use of reason, science, freedom, and experience while focusing on human goodness, progress, and the continuities between the divine and human.” (Page 160)

for people to feel the symptoms so they will recognize the illness and accept its cure. There are two problems with this approach in our time.

The everyday human problem, identified by the theologian Douglas John Hall, is that the distress people in our society, especially teenagers and younger adults, are feeling is not so much guilt as hopelessness.¹² Their agonized (but quite possibly unspoken) question is not, “What have I done wrong?” or even, “What have I failed to do right?” but, “Why bother doing anything that will require substantial effort and commitment?” So, by insisting sin is the one and only human problem requiring salvation and further insisting that guilt is both the state of sinful people and their rightful feeling before God, we are ignoring at least one major distress that cries out for salvation: hopelessness that, pushed to the limit, becomes despair.

The practical theological fault with our identifying sin as the one and only human problem requiring salvation is that we don't know what the word sin means. We Christian preachers tell people Jesus came, suffered, died, and was raised by God to free us from sin or, in the plural, to take away our sins. In our belief system, that statement is true, but few people have any workable idea of what it means. So, we continue to present Jesus to our society as the one and only solution to a problem people don't understand and may not honestly feel they even have. For this reason, we preachers become guilt pushers, trying to force people to feel guilty and become addicted to feeling guilty so they will seek the cure.

¹² Hall, Douglas John, *Theology in a North American Context*, vol. 1, *Thinking the Faith*, pp.

Ministers have tried to overcome this problem by defining sin in terms of the literal root-meaning of one of the Older Testament's¹³ words for sin: "missing the mark." That's not much help. The biblical concept of sin means much, much more than just missing the mark. It has to do with turning from the living God and making petty gods of our own egos; it has to do with rejecting God's love and mercy and, then, suffering the consequences; it has to do with disregarding and abusing the image of God in other people and in ourselves. The real concept of sin is gigantic. How do we expect people to accept a God who condemns us for doing what human beings cannot help doing: being a little off-target, missing the mark? That single root-word definition of sin misses the mark, and it invites people to reject God as the unfair judge who condemns huge numbers of hapless people simply for being human and, therefore, limited in their ability to be always on-target in life.

Taken seriously and studied thoroughly enough, sin would make a useful umbrella concept for the many distresses and evils that place human beings and humanity as a whole in need of salvation. But as the narrowly defined and easily recognized problem Phyllis McGinley's poem suggests it to be, sin as a one-word designation of our need for salvation is misleading. Excluded are some other major biblical themes describing the human condition: suffering, confusion/chaos, lostness, alienation, hopelessness/despair, and – shame. We compound the problem by linking sin

¹³ Old Testament is a Christian term for the collection of ancient writings Judaism groups into three sections – Torah, Prophets, and Writings (Often called by its acronym from the Hebrew names of the three as TANAKH). Testament is an antiquated word for "covenant," and so the Christian designation of these writings as the "Old Testament" has implied and often been meant to imply that the New Testament represents a covenant with God that replaces the older covenants between God and Israel. By using the term "Older Testament" (following Douglas John Hall, *op. cit.*), I am referring to that literature by a recognizable name but without prejudice.

to guilt in a way that limits our understanding of sin to the confines of guilt as a state of judicial guiltiness with the appropriate feeling of distress over one's misdeeds and failures.

It's almost as though we have been telling people they are not feeling the proper distress about themselves and their lives. They come to us feeling lost, confused, and devoid of hope. In effect, we tell them, "No, no, those are not the proper feelings for you to have; you should be feeling guilty about bad things you have done and good things you have failed to do." If people ask, "Why should I bother to care very much about anything?" we reply, "That's not a problem. Don't ask that question. Ask, instead, why you don't feel properly guilty about the bad things you have done." To no surprise, when we don't hear them, they don't hear us, either. If we were physicians so misdiagnosing a set of symptoms, we might be accused of malpractice.

My purpose in writing here is not to explore sin as an umbrella concept for all the human distresses rooted in our alienation from God, from each other, and from ourselves. Such an exploration might be useful, but it lies beyond the scope of this paper. I build our church's entire confirmation course around the three-fold need for reconciliation with God, each other, and ourselves, and I do so because Jesus (taking from the Older Testament) summed up life and all God wants human life to be in the two commands: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind (from Deuteronomy, chapter 6); and you shall love your neighbor as yourself (from Leviticus, chapter 19)." So, I also present sin in terms of the negatives to loving God, loving neighbor, and loving self. But I am writing here about the biblical concept of shame. So, for the present, my concern is to say that guilt is not the only human problem that distresses individuals and societies and so cries out for relief, treatment, healing, and replacement with positives that move us toward life and wholeness.

No Quick Fix

Too often, Christianity has presented salvation as a quick fix for all that is wrong with us, with the substance of “all that is wrong” usually defined as sin in its limited association with guilt over bad things we have done and good things we have left undone. While Liberal Protestantism did fail us by under-rating sin and underestimating evil in our world, it had the advantage of at least trying to make salvation mean real changes in us as people and in the way we actually live our lives and treat each other. Older views of salvation (atonement theories) had presented our salvation as a supernatural deal struck between either God and Satan (classical theory) or Jesus and God (substitutionary atonement).¹⁴ While each of these theories or explanations has value (and had greater value in its own time), both tend to leave us out of the equation as active participants. They pledge to solve ultimate problems (eternal salvation, heaven when we die) but fail to address present distresses with much more than “keep the faith” admonitions and “in the sweet by and by” promises.

Salvation is not a quick fix but an ongoing process, and the message of salvation rightfully speaks to the actual distresses of people in their real-life contexts and situations. Jesus did it that way. He healed the sick, comforted the troubled, found the lost, troubled the comfortable, showed the smug how silly they looked, elevated the downtrodden, inspired the hopeless, welcomed the despised, forgave the condemned, valued the worthless, and loved the self-hating. He always met people where they were in life, just as they were within themselves and in society.

Douglas John Hall has argued at length (three volumes) that theology is, always and of necessity, contextual: it must and can be done only within the real-life contexts of people and their

¹⁴ For a full discussion, see Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith*, pp.

societies. Even God’s eternal love is always known to us only within the contexts of our lives. That statement should seem obvious, but often it has not. No theologian writes eternal truth. Theology happens only in its time and place and is written in terms of the current understandings and concerns; so, better theology is done knowingly for its time and place without pretense to eternal verity. Following Hall’s lead, I have argued that salvation itself is always contextual – that it meets people where and as they are in life, in terms of their actual conditions of life. There is no other way God can meet us. We are not in eternity; we are in the here and now. We are not where we should be in life; we are where we are, for better and for worse. Our distresses are real, and any word of hope must speak to them with honesty and integrity.

What physician would tell a patient with a treatable disease (or any disease), “Go away and don’t worry about your illness because you’re going to die sooner or later, anyway”? It might be argued that all distress is related to ultimate distress, but it is also simply true that all the distresses we feel in life are present, overtaking us in our current time and place. I am not dismissing salvation’s ultimate meanings, but I am saying that if it is to reach people, salvation must enter the contexts of their actual and present lives. One theologian declared, “Temporal sense is nonsense,”¹⁵ meaning much the same as the apostle Paul who wrote to the Corinthians, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (I Cor. 15:19)¹⁶ Yes, that’s right; it is just as true, however, that hope which makes no temporal sense (here and now) never touches people at all; it neither hears our cries nor saves us.

¹⁵Brunner, H. Emil, *Our Faith*, in chapter seven, “Eternal Election.”

¹⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Talk about It

“Guilt,” Donald Nathanson writes, “is about action and laws” (theologians might insist action be elaborated to be sure to include sinful inaction, the failure to do what should have been done). Shame, however, “is about the quality of our person or self.” “Shame always speaks about our inner self rather than our actions.”¹⁷

Nathanson observes, “This most common of unpleasant experiences is also the least discussed.”¹⁸ I am writing because shame is a huge theme in the Bible and one that needs much more attention and development than it has received. The biblical theme of shame is complex and varied. At times, shame is made to sound like a good and much needed thing. More often, shame is the thing most dreaded, even more than death itself. Frequently in the Bible, shame is wished on one’s enemies, but its devastating effects upon the human community are also recognized. We will find it at the root of jealousy and violence and discover it driving seemingly endless and inescapable cycles of revenge. We will even hear of it as the source of potential humor, as an invitation to laugh at ourselves and our pretensions and so, maybe, to find relief and a measure of deliverance or even to rediscover a humbler nobility we have lost.

If it is true that shame lies at the heart of human misery, fueling our destructiveness and self-destructiveness alike, and if it is also true that shame is a major theme of the Bible in both the Jewish-Christian shared Older Testament and the Christian Newer Testament, then we need to talk about it. For me, this writing is a start.

¹⁷ Nathanson, p. 19.

¹⁸ Nathanson, p. 16.