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Articles

Honor and Shame in the Context of Culture and the Church in the United States

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Abstract: This paper is based on the presentation, "Honor and Shame in the Context of US Culture: The 'Sticks and Stones' Fallacy," given at the Multiethnic Symposium on April 26, 2019 at Concordia Seminary. This paper will examine two issues: (1) to what degree the categorization of certain cultures as "honor/shame cultures" and others as "guilt cultures" is valid with respect to the culture of the United States; (2) how the understanding of the honor/shame dynamic can be a helpful one for ministry in the US context today. The paper suggests that perhaps the most important dynamic in the investigation of this issue is not primarily one of honor/shame versus guilt but rather the dimension of collectivism versus individualism in the culture. After exploring this dynamic in the experience of honor/shame versus guilt, it will look at shame as a fundamental dimension of human experience after the fall, with deep and continuing relevance for understanding social life and human psychology in the US. It will also broaden our analysis to look at the dimensions of social class, status, and stigma as they shape the context of people's lives and affect the life and ministry of the church.

One of the half-truths that I imbibed as a very small child was contained in a rhyme we used to cite amongst our friends on the street or playground: "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me." It was a brave assertion that what others think or say about me is unimportant and can be ignored. It claimed that they are powerless to actually hurt me unless I allow them to. As a tactic for

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handling the social pressures of a child's life, it was a useful statement; but as a factual claim about the power of others' opinions of me to hurt or deeply affect me, it was just not true at all. What others think and say about us is very powerful as we go through life. In fact, some of the most painful experiences of human life are due precisely to what others think and say about us. For this reason, God gave us the Eighth Commandment to protect the good name and reputation of our neighbor. So as we consider the concept of honor and shame, we should not be deluded into thinking that this dynamic is significant and important only in certain kinds of cultures to which we give the label, namely, honor/shame cultures, in contrast to guilt/innocence cultures that we associate with America and the modern West.

As we consider the concept of honor and shame, we should not be deluded into thinking that this dynamic is significant and important only in certain kinds of cultures.

If you are in New Jersey and you want to get a nice view of the towers of Babel in the modern Babylon, New York City, an excellent place to do so is a small public park in the town of Weehawken. There, on a bluff over the Hudson River, you can gaze eastward across the river to midtown Manhattan, where you will see the Empire State building rising as a twentieth-century monument to modern American business. You will also see a sign telling you that, just below this bluff, Alexander Hamilton had the duel with Aaron Burr that brought about his untimely death. The practice of dueling, though common for about three centuries among the upper classes in English culture and across Europe, is now regarded as foolish and barbaric; but Hamilton's unfortunate death by dueling gives evidence that codes of honor and shame were very much a part of the early history of American culture and that the willingness to die for such a code ties the eighteenth-century American with the twentieth-century Japanese general's committing *hara-kiri* in response to disgrace on the battlefield. Honor and shame were very real in eighteenth-century America and continued to exert considerable power well into the nineteenth century and even to the present.

Considering what changed in American society and its social mores, and why, can give us an understanding of what it is that makes honor/shame a powerful dynamic in certain social contexts, as opposed to guilt and innocence. As American society made the transition from a more caste-like agrarian society to a more fluid and egalitarian commercial society, codes of honor and shame seem to have lost some of their power. Other influences bringing about this change can be traced to religion and to the democratic ideals and governance given birth by the American Revolution. People's perspective on themselves and their relationship to others underwent great changes. America became a kind of bellwether society, pioneering changes that would be taking place throughout the Western world as the nineteenth century unfolded.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the nineteenth-century French observer of American life, commented extensively on some of these changes in his 1835 work, *Democracy in America*.[1] In it he provided observation and analysis about the new ways that Americans interacted with one another. He described the development of individualism, as the hierarchical and corporate society of Europe gave way to the egalitarianism and individualism of the American Revolution. People were freed from some of the constraints of social hierarchies and encouraged to be self-reliant. This change, however, did not mean that social opinion ceased to be significant in the lives of these individuals, only that the nature of social influences was altered. With respect to the dimension of guilt and innocence versus honor and shame, Tocqueville argued that in American democracy, the constraints of conscience grew stronger and the influence of religion more powerful and necessary because the context of individual freedom made it necessary for internal controls of behavior to be strengthened. We can associate this change with the shift away from codes of honor and shame, as a means of social control, to guilt, as the individual judged his conduct according to a moral code inculcated as a matter of inner conviction.

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The changing context of the individual's relationship to society during this period has also been implicated as a powerful factor in the shift in religious institutions from more traditional hierarchical churches to voluntarist and egalitarian denominations, a shift that also contributed to changes in theology. Jonathan Edwards accommodated Calvinism to the more individualistic and voluntarist behavior of the eighteenth-century revivals. And the upsurge of the Arminian Methodists in the Second Great Awakening, with their doctrine of free will in conversion, should certainly be seen in the light of the increasingly democratic, individualistic, and egalitarian ethos of early nineteenth-century American life.

This transformation brings us to one key factor that must be taken into account as we compare societies where the dynamic of honor and shame play a greater role in comparison with those in which it seems to play a lesser role. It may be helpful here to think of societies as existing on a continuum with two poles. One pole is that of the honor and shame dynamic, and the other is that of the guilt and innocence dynamic. As a general rule, we can associate an emphasis on honor and shame with societies that are more collectivist in their orientation and those with less emphasis on honor and shame with societies that are more individualist. Societies that use honor and shame as a primary modus of social control are societies where the individual is tightly enmeshed in his or her social group, that is, his or her identity is bound to that of the group, and individual behavior and choices are more closely regulated by the group. Along with the tendency towards collectivism, these societies also tend to be more

hierarchical or less egalitarian in the way social relations between its members are regulated.

For example, if we compare a Hispanic society, say that of Mexico, with that of Anglo America, we see these three components linked together. Mexican society puts a higher emphasis on an individual's belonging in a family of extended kinship. Thus, individuals pay more attention to their social ties within the network of family and close friends than is typical in Anglo-American society. The freedom of individuals within the family network to make decisions without criticism or pressure from members of the group tends to be lesser than in Anglo America. Childrearing and patterns of authority within the family also differ accordingly. The authority and prerogative of parents over children is more highly emphasized and is assumed to have more importance throughout the life cycle. Likewise, the idea of honor and shame is more strongly emphasized in the behavior and values of the group, and to be *sin vergüenza* (without shame) is considered to be a very strong insult. One's behavior is considered to reflect strongly on one's family, and there is pressure to behave in accord with courtesy and proper respect.

Ruth Benedict's landmark study of Japanese culture shaped the terminology we use to discuss these matters. She described Japanese culture as a "shame culture" and American culture as a "guilt culture." Likewise, Japanese culture is much more collectivist and hierarchical than is the culture in the United States, and it governs the relationships of women to men, family members to each other, and employees to employers. Japanese society weaves a particularly tight web through the lives of its members with specific rules of conduct having to do with one's social position and relationship to others. Benedict put it this way: "The Japanese, more than any other sovereign nation, have been conditioned to a world where the smallest details of conduct are mapped and status is assigned."[2] The sense of honor and shame is a primary dimension of social control and is a reflection of the strongly collectivist orientation of the society.

Whereas many Americans take for granted the idea that the individual is the starting point for understanding society, in a collectivist society the group is much more powerful and individuals are apt to understand themselves primarily in terms of their relationship to the group. To some degree, when we say that a society regulates behavior through a mechanism of honor and shame as opposed to guilt and innocence, we are simply recognizing the power of the social group over the individual.

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Benedict linked the concept of a shame culture to the degree to which sanctions for good behavior were external as opposed to internal. In other words, we behave in a certain way due to social pressure and the shame that deviance from norms would bring upon us, as opposed to an internal sense of guilt created by violation of an internally held moral norm. She stated, "True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin."[3]

The idea that in "shame cultures" one behaves because of what people may think and that in guilt cultures one behaves because of an internal conviction of right and wrong has often been viewed ethnocentrically and pressed too far. It is more helpful to view this difference as a matter of collectivism versus individualism rather than one of amoral socialism versus asocial morality. Morality in a collectivist society is understood in social terms, while morality in an individualist society is understood with regard to individual responsibility to adhere to an objective standard.

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Kwame Bediako, the Ghanaian theologian, argues against the idea that a "shame culture" is somehow less biblical or moral in Christian terms than a "guilt culture." In his book, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, he writes, "Some suggest that ours is a 'shame culture' not a 'guilt culture,' on the grounds that public acceptance determines morality and consequently a 'sense of sin' is said to be absent. However, in our [African] tradition, the essence of sin is in its being an antisocial act. This makes sin basically injury to the interests of another person and damage to the collective life of the group."[4] Jayson Georges puts it this way: "Honor-shame cultures define right and wrong relationally and communally, not abstractly and legally."[5]

Millie Creighton, an anthropologist whose expertise is in Japanese culture, has criticized the notion that an emphasis on honor and shame versus guilt should be understood in terms of external versus internal sanctions. She points out that in terms of psychosocial development all of our understandings of both shame and guilt are shaped by our experience with others as social beings. Thus, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between shame and guilt on the basis of internal versus external sanctions. She argues that "the internal/external criterion cannot be used to distinguish guilt from shame, since at some point in the development process both are internalized."[6]

Donald Nathanson, American psychiatrist who has specialized in the study of shame, argues that shame is one of nine basic affects which are wired into our nervous system since infancy. Two of the basic affects are positive: interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy. One is neutral: surprise-startle. Six are negative: fear-terror, distress-

anguish, anger-rage, dissmell (human reaction to disagreeable smells), disgust (reaction to disagreeable tastes), and shame-humiliation. As learning takes place, the child is seen to attach new experiences, memories, etc., to these basic affect responses.

These fundamental affects are displayed by infants behaviorally, especially by facial expression. For example, the shame affect is characterized by the reaction of directing the gaze downward. Thus, Nathanson sees the feeling of shame as rooted in a basic neurological response that is wired in us. He understands this basic affect of shame as being a response to the interruption of the positive affects: interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy.

When these positive affects are not allowed to continue for some reason, the affect of shame kicks in. In the development of the child, this response becomes primarily a social experience. The child's interaction with parents and other caregivers shapes the child's experience of this affect and gives to it a set of memories and understandings that go along with it.

In sociology, Charles Cooley described the development of self-concept as deriving from social interaction. He coined the term, "the looking glass self," to describe how one becomes conscious of oneself through the eyes of others. We become aware of how we are perceived by others through their reactions to us, and in this way we become observers of ourselves. The "looking glass self" leads us to think of ourselves and evaluate ourselves on the basis of how others have reacted to us.

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In a sense, we see ourselves through the eyes of others. Our self-consciousness is basically a social consciousness; our inner dialogue is something that emerges on the basis of our interaction with others. Cooley understood this "looking glass self" to be shaped by the emotions of pride and shame and the reactions that are due to these emotions. The evaluations of others have their power in the development of our own self-consciousness.

In theological terms, we could think of it this way. We are social creatures created by God to need, and thrive by means of, bonds to others. Consequently, we have a strong desire for the approval of others and a fear of their disapproval or rejection.

Shame becomes a powerful factor in our inner development because it so effectively corrects or blocks impulses and inclinations that we might otherwise pursue. Thus, shame becomes one of the most important shapers of our inner self.

Silvan Tomkins, whose research identified these nine basic affects in infants, describes shame in the following way:

> If distress is the affect of suffering, shame is the affect of indignity, of transgression and of alienation. . . . While terror and distress hurt, they are wounds inflicted from outside which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego, but shame is felt as inner torment, a sickness of the soul. It does not matter whether the humiliated one has been shamed by derisive laughter or whether he mocks himself. In either event, he feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity and worth.[7]

If Tomkins and Nathanson are correct in their contention that much of our emotional and mental life is powerfully shaped by these basic affects, then, from a psychological and developmental perspective, guilt is a derivative of the more original experience of shame.

In Genesis 3, we see both shame and guilt alluded to. God asks Adam and Eve why they have broken His command. Adam and Eve's knowledge that they have violated an explicit command, as well as their response of shifting blame, addresses the dimension of guilt and innocence; but their attempt to hide and cover their nakedness points to the centrality of shame in the consequences of the fall.

Cain's subsequent reaction when Abel finds favor in God's eyes also points to the dimension of shame. His reaction to God's favor towards Abel, described as "his countenance fell," could be viewed as a description of the physical reaction of the shame affect. Dietrich Bonhoeffer identified shame as being more original than guilt or remorse, stating the following:

> Shame and remorse are generally mistaken for one another. Man feels remorse when he has been at fault; and he feels shame because he lacks something. Shame is more original than remorse. The peculiar fact that we lower our eyes when a stranger's eye meets our gaze is not a sign of remorse for a fault, but a sign of that shame which, when it knows that it is seen, is reminded of something it lacks, namely, the lost wholeness of life, its own nakedness.[8]

In recent years, exegetical scholars, using anthropological concepts of culture, have been demonstrating the importance of honor and shame in the cultures of the Bible and in the biblical texts themselves. Missions scholars have been arguing persuasively that we must take the dynamics of honor and shame into account as we proclaim the Gospel in the

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contexts of communal cultures with a strong honor and shame dynamic.

It seems true to say that the culture of the United States is a more individualistic culture with a stronger dynamic of guilt and innocence as opposed to honor and shame. Nevertheless, both shame and honor are fundamental components of human social life and should not be overlooked, even in the US context. Many observers are arguing that US culture is becoming increasingly shame oriented. Though the kinds of cohesive communities which create a context where honor and shame operate strongly to regulate behavior are increasingly rare in our individualistic and highly mobile culture, nevertheless, the human need to belong and to experience the affirmation of others cannot be erased.

In that regard, the existence of an individual in a more impersonal and less communal society may be particularly vulnerable to the experience of shame and isolation. In recent years, the development of social media has added a new dimension to the quest for affirmation and the power of shame in social life. Facebook has become a pervasive presence in the lives of many, especially the young. Kara Powell, of the Fuller Youth Institute, suggests: "On Facebook, others' perceptions of us are both public and relatively permanent. People tag you, people talk about you. And if no one comments, that can be just as much a source of shame."[9]

Modern secular thought and our theological tradition have both tended to view shame as more primitive and less connected with a truly moral existence than guilt. Some of those who study the role of shame in human life are suggesting that this is an oversight and a distortion of the role of shame and honor in human affairs. As Anthony Appiah has suggested, "We may think we have finished with honor, but honor isn't finished with us."[10]

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Because post-Enlightenment Western thought has become strongly individualistic in its understanding of the social world, there has been a tendency to underestimate the centrality of the interpersonal dimensions in human existence. This tendency has led to minimizing the role of honor and shame. Yet we cannot dispense with this dimension in our understanding of human life. It is too fundamental to our relationships with one another. Scripture, of course, commands us to honor our father and mother and those who exercise authority in our communities. We are also taught by the apostle Paul to outdo one another in showing honor to one another (Rom 12:10).

A strong argument can be made that honor and shame are pervasive in human life in all societies, not just collectivist ones. Erving Goffman, a prominent twentieth-century sociologist, devoted considerable attention in his writing to the individual's efforts to present the best face possible in the social world. He stated, "One assumes

that embarrassment is a normal part of social life, the individual becoming uneasy not because he is personally maladjusted but rather because he is not. . . . Embarrassment is not an irrational impulse breaking through social behavior, but part of this orderly behavior itself."[11] Every human interaction can thus be seen in some way to be governed by shame.

Those of us who are pastors could be asked to reflect on our earliest days of preaching and how we dealt with the social anxiety of standing in front of a crowd and delivering the Word. It might be piously flattering to say that we were anxious because of the awesome responsibility that had been placed upon us in being called to be the bearers of God's Word to His people (though certainly that may have increased the feeling of pressure and anxiety), but it would be very disingenuous if we were to deny that the primary source of our anxiety was that of the fear of shaming ourselves. We wanted to make a good impression and were fearful that we would not.

Every social encounter is fraught with this dimension of honor and shame and leads us all to experience some kind of tension in our interactions with others. Collectivist societies acknowledge the centrality of honor and shame in human life with their codes of conduct and their very conscious concern not to lose face. The power of the group over the individual is strong and is readily perceived.

Emile Durkheim, one of the pioneers in the field of sociology conceptualized what he called the "collective conscience," which he saw as a dimension of every society. The collective conscience was a description of how the core beliefs and values of a society imposed themselves on the members of the society and how the collective life of the society in a sense took on a life of its own. Society, as he said, was a reality *sui generis*, not to be reduced to being merely the agglomeration of the individuals of which it is composed.

In his first work on the Division of Labor, Durkheim suggested that, in the development of modern society, the collective conscience weakens in both strength and scope, allowing for greater diversity of thought and behavior.[12] In modern society, he argued, one of the core values in the collective conscience becomes that of tolerance, a necessary result of the increasing complexity and diversity of the society. In the modern West, an ethos of individualism gives great scope for individuals to make choices free of the constraints of the social group.

The marketplace becomes, increasingly, the primary mediator of human social life. Obedience to codes held internally substitutes for the constraints of a web of relationships. Sometimes this obedience is seen as the result of the influence of Christian faith and its call for us to stand individually before the judgment of God and His Law. However, one could also argue that the conception of the individual as autonomous derives more from other dimensions of modern social life than from the Christian faith.

As a number of biblical scholars have demonstrated, the Bible itself is written within the framework of collectivist cultures with their attendant moral framework of honor and shame. One could argue that the moral idea of an autonomous individual answerable to an abstract moral code owes more to the Enlightenment values epitomized by Immanuel Kant than to the Bible.

Thomas Scheff, an American sociologist who has focused his work on the social psychology of shame, argues that the emotion of shame has to do with the fear of social disconnection. He writes: "If . . . shame is a result of threat to the [social] bond, shame would be the most social of the basic emotions."[13] He argues however that our individualistic society tends to overlook and deny the importance of this social emotion. It exalts the idea of an autonomous self as normal and optimally healthy. Even though serious reflection on this concept demonstrates its falsity, it tends to be a background assumption of much of the thought of our society. We deny the significance of shame. In some ways, we are ashamed to admit the role of shame in our life and consciousness. Scheff writes:

> The emotion of shame, in the broad sense, is a constant reminder of the crucial significance of social bonds. Western societies, because they emphasize the self-reliant individual, mask bonds and shame by having few relational terms and by ignoring or disguising shame.[14]

If this is true, a culture like that of China, with seven or more distinct terms to describe guilt and shame, may in some ways be more in touch with the realities of our social existence than we in the modern West.[15]

To return to the idea with which this essay began, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," the very individualistic orientation that I developed by growing up in the US has been challenged in the course of my years living and working in Latino cultures with their stronger dimension of collectivism and a greater emphasis on honor and shame, both collective and individual. I still have a tendency to revel in the idea, "Why should I care what others think?" On the other hand, I have also come to value the social rituals and attention to the details of honoring and recognizing my relationships to others that I have learned in Latin American societies.

Guilt and shame are to a great extent overlapping in their significance, and it is clear that Scripture teaches that both are a consequence of the fall. In our efforts to follow the mission philosophy of St. Paul that we "should be all things to all men so that by all means we might save some," we do well to pay close attention to both dynamics.

Guilt and shame are to a great extent overlapping in their significance, and it is clear that Scripture teaches that both are a consequence of the fall.

One particular area of social life to which the church needs to pay closer attention is the dynamic of social class. Individualistic assumptions lead us to overlook the ways in which our social environment, including economic factors, powerfully shapes both our collective and inner lives.

However, we fail to address adequately the mission challenges we face when we do not look seriously at how even our inner lives are shaped by the economic dimension of life. The way we relate to one another in America, our individualism, is highly correlated with the dominance of the market in the organization of our social life. This factor also leads to the great significance of social class in shaping our lives. Though we do not have the same historic tradition of hereditary aristocracies that many societies do, our socioeconomic position exerts a strong influence in our lives.

When it comes to the dimension of social honor and dishonor, the competitive nature of economic life exerts a strong pressure on people's sense of themselves. People are highly conscious of their place in the social pecking order. Though our society makes claims to be a meritocracy, often times it is better at passing on privilege than it is in truly providing equal opportunity for all.

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I have noticed over the years how Richard Niebuhr's book, *Christ and Culture,* has received a great deal of attention in our circles. His description of Lutheranism and Luther as having a view of Christ and culture in paradox has flattered us and has given us a framework within which to think about our Lutheran legacy.

However, as a sociologist of religion, I have found more meat to chew on in his book entitled, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism.* As we seek to be faithful in proclaiming the Gospel in our day, when it is imperative that we break out of our demographic middle and upper middle class ghetto to share the treasures of the Gospel of grace with our diverse society, Niebuhr's reflection on the importance of social class and status on the life of the church can alert us to some of our weaknesses and help us see how we might take better advantage of the opportunities that we have to proclaim the Gospel to the lost and make disciples of all nations and conditions of people.

Niebuhr does two things that are very important for us to do. First, he takes seriously the fact that we must understand how the life of our communities is

powerfully shaped by economic and material factors. To deny this is to engage in a form of Docetism in our thinking about the Church as the Body of Christ in the world. Economic and material life would be irrelevant to our connection with one another and to our traditions and our practices if we were disembodied spirits floating in the air; but since we are flesh and blood human beings and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, we must recognize that socioeconomic factors have a huge impact on the life of the church, its forms, its practices, and even on some level its teachings.

Secondly, his sociologically realistic perspective takes very seriously how human beings are influenced by the dimension of honor and shame on the collective level in the way social class and status shape our religious responses, both individually and as groups. He uses a perspective in the sociology of religion developed by Ernst Troeltsch and by Max Weber which has been given the moniker, "sect-church" typology, and which has been prominent in the study of religious movements both within and outside of Christianity. Such movements cannot be understood without looking seriously at their connection with socioeconomic stratification and consequent understandings of prestige and social status existing in the society as a whole.

Niebuhr described how many working-class folk in Lutheran societies, particularly in Scandinavia, gravitated to different expressions of faith primarily due to factors related to social class and class culture. He wrote, "As the poor found their spiritual needs best supplied in the conventicle of dissent, official Lutheranism became an established church, predominantly an aristocratic and middle-class party of vested interest and privilege."[16]

Niebuhr's description of state church Lutheranism in Europe in the centuries following the Reformation is less flattering for Lutheranism than his discussion of the Christ-and-culture-in-paradox motif, but I believe it may be more important for us to reflect upon.

If there is any truth at all in this description, what can be learned from it? Can a critical reflection on our social reality today help us to be more in tune with people in differing segments of society and especially the less privileged? In what ways might our thinking and practices be shaped by or even warped by dimensions of our economic life, such as our social class position? These are self-critical questions that we might prefer to avoid; but, since we believe in the power of sin to deform our social life and relationships even within the church, faithfulness to God's Word and truth requires us to engage in this very self-criticism. In what ways do our perceptions of social status influence our religious profession and associations?

The current missiological discussion over the importance of taking into account the cultural dynamic of honor and shame is useful not only as we deal with so-called honor/shame cultures; it is also of great importance as we engage in reaching and understanding our own culture and society.

At times in the life of the church, we fall into a temptation of thinking that we can operate in a realm of pure theology, somehow isolated from the real social world in which we live. When it comes to honor and shame versus guilt and innocence, we assume that focusing on the problem of guilt and innocence is a more biblical and theological way to shape our message and practice.

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It is certainly true that the dimension of guilt and innocence is at the core of the Gospel message and the doctrine of justification by grace through faith by the blood of the cross; nevertheless, all dimensions of human life and culture should be taken into account as we reflect on the mission God has given us and how to address the human heart with its needs, both felt and unfelt. It is not either/or but rather both/and that should govern our approach to these matters across cultural contexts, both in the individualistic society of North America as well as in more collectivist cultures. It seems to me that this is also the approach of Scripture.

To conclude, I turn to 1 John 1, which clearly expresses both concerns, the issue of shame and guilt, as well as the justification of the individual before God and his/her incorporation into the people of God. "This is the message we have heard from Him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (vv. 5–7). These words bring together the issue of guilt and shame, forgiveness, and the restoration of fellowship. They are not two wholly separate concerns but rather two dimensions of our life with God and with one another transformed by the Gospel. May God guide us in these complex and important matters to faithful and authentic proclamation and life!

Endnotes

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