

ADVISING CHRISTIANS ON WHAT TO BE MORTIFIED ABOUT

Like its immediate predecessor, this thinksheet springs from two recent personal experiences: (1) 100s of teeth were gnashed against me when, speaking in our congregation's annual meeting (Jan/86) on behalf of a particular action for the poor, I said "Jesus will be ashamed of us if we don't...."; (2) the arrival, on my desk, of a review book primarily on the subject of how to deal with the shame that is the emotional response of the "self" to perceived "self-injury" from another. Underlying is the personal fact that throughout my life, shame has been "bigger," stronger, than guilt. That's the trunk, here are the branches:

1. Behavior incentives (ie, moral sanctions) are of two kinds: (1) ultimate, having for the hearer absolute force, independent of consequences; (2) consequential, adducing +/- effects of alternative courses of action. "What will the neighbors think?" is an instance of a sanction of consequence, viz, social fear of falling into shame vis-a-vis your neighbors. but "What will God/Jesus think?" is an instance of an absolute sanction when addressed to a God-lover (who therefore wants to please God)--combined with a consequence sanction if this God-lover is also a God-fearer (who therefore is concerned to avoid the anticipated consequences of doing anything displeasing to God)....The Bible knows nothing of God-lovers who are not also God-fearers: the former are Enlightenment/Bible hybrids, sentimentalists whom I understand and fear I tend to be too much like, for I have far more fear of making God weep than I have of God's making me weep. The older I get the more I'm a bhakti (love-oriented) Christian, though in heart more than in behavior!

2. Guilt is partial, out there, orbiting around some offence/offender: shame is total, in here, a condition of me-myself-and-I. Again, shame is split-level: (1) At the superficial upper level it's felt as threat to my social (human-humans) "ego," persona, person-in-human-community; at the profound level it's felt as threat to my very being (esse), my "self," instead of only to my well-being (bene esse). Sometimes the two shames are combined, facing a perceived threat to one's full-being (plene esse)--eg, a former doctoral-seminar student of mine who was buried alive by the North Koreans to wring information out of him: he'd decided death was preferable to betraying both God and his own buddies: the two shames combined to give him courage, which is often shame-driven. (How come he got to be a student of mine thereafter? It was a trick coffin, letting in a trickle of air, enough to let him gasp alive during the hours when four feet of soil were atop the coffin.)....It's a weakness of the shame book I reviewed for THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY (John Patton, IS FORGIVENESS POSSIBLE? Abingdon/85) that it fails to distinguish ego-shame and self-shame--prompting this thinksheet's title.

3. From my church-tramping days I remember many hymns I assume everyone knows and am continually surprised that people I know now don't know. So I often go to the hymnology section of my library to exhume the particular hymnal from the life-stratum in which I learned a particular hymn. Ever heard of "Ashamed of Jesus"? I was afraid not. Well, after looking through a stack of hymnbooks I found it in the old Methodist Hymnal (1935/6), published during my last year as a Methodist. It's #258. That hymnals hymns don't have names, so you go by the first words --which here are "Jesus and shall it ever be" and continues "a mortal man ashamed of Thee." Six stanzas; here's some more: "Ashamed of Jesus! just as soon/Let midnight be ashamed of noon....No; when I blush be this my shame/That I no more revere His Name....Ashamed of Jesus! yes, I may,/When I've no guilt to wash away;/No tear to wipe, no good to crave,/No fears to quell, no soul to save.//Till then, nor is my ^{over}

boasting vain,/Till then I boast a Saviour slain;/And O may this my glory be,/That Christ is not ashamed of me!" (Jos. Grigg, 18th c.) Peter became ashamed that, by betrayal, he'd shamed Jesus. Our hymnist seems to have had in mind M.8.38 (L.9.26): The Son of Man will be ashamed of anyone who is ashamed of Jesus....

4....which brings me to some comments immediately after having read all the Bible has to say about shame (which is a pile: shame is big with Jews and Christians)....OT, 18 Hebrew words. God knows our shame (Ps. 69.19), including our setting up of shameful idols (Jer.11.13), consuming our days with shame (Jer.20.18), which some will have to live with everlastingly (Dan.12.2). God complains (Ps.4.2), "How long will you turn my glory into shame?" The Wisdom writers see shame as an inevitable concomitant of pride (Prov.11.2), and note the "prudent" person's stratagems for covering personal shame (Prov.12.16). In Hosea (4.7), God threatens: "I will change their glory into shame." The Psalmist (110.31) prays "O LORD, put me not to shame," but prays that his enemies will be shamed (35.4; 40.14). Second Isaiah (54.4) promises freedom from shame. Zephaniah ends with a song of joy and the promise that the exiles' honor will be turned to shame (3.19). And Proverbs (14.35) threatens wrath against the shame-causer (14.35)....NT, 15 Greek words. In 64 passages, rendered in various versions/translations as "despise," "treat shamefully," "dishonor," "degrade," "humiliate," "bring (God) into contempt," "ordinary," "nothing to be admired," "least honorable," "contemptible," "disgrace," "no respect," "ashamed," "covered with confusion," "embarrassment," "put to shame," "make to blush," "disrespect," "make to look foolish," "humiliate," "coarse," "dirty," "squalid," "cause to be ashamed," "shamefulness," "shameful," "be ashamed of," "make ashamed," "feel in the wrong," and "be at a loss." Paradoxically, being humiliated (for Jesus' sake) can be an honor: Ac.5.41. God is shamed when Torah is touted but not lived: Ro.2.23. Respect God's community enough to see to it that the poor are not embarrassed: 1.Cor.11.22. In the Pastorals, clergy are to avoid shameful money-making (Tit.1.11); "Paul" praises a coworker for "never having been ashamed of my chains" (2 Tm.1.16) and exhorts "Do all you can to present yourself in front of God as one who has no cause to be ashamed" (2 Tm.2.15). In First Peter 2.6 (Is.23.16 LXX), we're promised shame-avoidance by trust in Jesus; and we're exhorted (4.16) not to be ashamed "if anyone of you should suffer for being a Christian." In the highly visual rhetoric of Jude (13), false teachers are "like wild sea waves capped with shame as if with foam." In 1 Cor. (1.14;6.5;15.34), Paul uses the shame sanction forthrightly. And in the Bible's last book (Rv.3.18), the "white robes" of Christian confession and baptism reach all the way back to the Bible's first-book's figleaves to "cover your shameful nakedness."

5. Shame-guilt, as a feeling complex, parallels physical pain: both are divine signals that something's amiss that should be attended to. If you have leprosy, rats may chew off your fingers while you sleep: no pain. If you are a (psycho)sociopath, you may live--at what high cost to yourself and others!--shamelessly, without intrapsychic pain. For the latter, therapy seeks to increase pain of soul just as for the former, therapy seeks to increase pain of body. Evangelistic meetings seek to increase soul-pain, "bringing to conviction" of personal sin: street demonstrations seek to increase pain, to "consciousness-raise," about (usu.) our nation's and other nations' sins. The two guilt-and-shame trips should be more friendly to each other instead of splitting along the crevasse of individual/social gospels.

6. Passive shame is an emotional response to something done you: active shame is (a) society's judgment against something you've done. Both are in a benediction response we use in our church: "Guard Thou...from shame/Who in this house have called upon Thy Name. Amen."