



The Shame Factor: Theological and Pastoral Reflections relating to Forgiveness

ROBERT H. ALBERS

Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

A negative response to the question posed by this issue of *Word & World* (“Is Forgiveness Enough?”) seems like a betrayal of the tradition. An affirmative response may be construed as reductionistic in relationship to the fulness of the gospel message.

In the *Small Catechism*, Luther speaks of the “benefits” that believers receive in the sacrament:

We are told [of the benefits] in the words “for you” and “for the forgiveness of sins.” By these words the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation.¹

¹In *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 352.

Luther includes three concepts under the benefits of the sacrament: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, giving the impression that these are separate gifts of grace. But then he hastens to add that life and salvation are subsumed under the category of the forgiveness of sin.

A pastoral issue arises when someone cannot hear this declaration of God’s forgiving love. How is the message appropriated for a person whose primary identity is “shame based”?

This essay will consider the “shame factor” as it relates to two primary issues: (1) disgrace shame as a barrier to hearing the gracious words of forgiveness, and (2) acceptance as the principal theological factor in addressing the phenomenon of disgrace shame.

I. DISGRACE SHAME: A BARRIER TO HEARING THE WORDS OF FORGIVENESS

The primary human problem addressed by the Lutheran theological tradition is that of sin experienced as guilt. Guilt is the verdict declared when the law of God is violated. Breach of the law results in alienation from God, others, nature, and self. The antidote to suffering the consequences of sin and guilt is to make confession and to hear the gracious words of forgiveness pronounced in the word and the sacraments.

Many in the faith community lament that, despite the ritual of confession and the declaration of grace and despite the promised gift of forgiveness afforded in the sacraments, their appropriation of that gift seems impossible. People with shame-based identities perceive themselves without value, unworthy of grace.

A person diagnosed as “shame based” is one whose self-perception and self-understanding are determined by the internalized message that she or he is of little worth or value.² This identity often develops very early in life. A shame-based identity can be attributed in some instances to growing up in a hostile environment or in the matrix of verbal and perhaps physical and/ or sexual abuse. It is a socialized condition whereby the person picks up messages from the environment that he is disgusting, deficient, deserted, dishonorable, defective, or defiled.³ The cumulative effect of these messages and perceptions makes the person see herself not only as one who makes mistakes (guilt) but as one who is a mistake (shame).

A possible theological or pastoral response to such people might be that they are full of pride, place themselves above God, and have thereby willfully precluded a hearing of the words of forgiveness. Such people are often dismissed as being recalcitrant or incorrigible. This reaction only exacerbates the situation; now in addition to the sense of unworthiness resulting from disgrace shame (i.e., shame as disgrace), the person is also shamed for not “believing” the words that could liberate her or him.

These internalized messages and perceptions make the individual feel so unlovable and unacceptable, that no persuasive effort can break through the

²Gershen Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring* (Cambridge, MA: Shenkmen, 1980) 37-39.

³Robert H. Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective* (New York: Haworth, 1995) 29-62.

barrier of self-denigration. The disgrace-shame spiral relentlessly screams the message, “You are not worth anything; you are of no value or consequence.” This is the debilitating and paralyzing work of disgrace shame.

In providing pastoral care for people who find themselves in this labyrinth of thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, one must acknowledge that the ears have been “stopped” when it comes to appropriating the words of forgiveness. The words themselves might be heard, but the internalized message is that they are not “for me.” No amount of persuasion, cajoling, or exhortation is sufficient to eradicate this deeply entrenched perception of the self. In my pastoral experience, these individuals are not incorrigible or recalcitrant, for their will is to believe, but their shame-based identity precludes them from appropriating the words of grace. The reality of disgrace shame stands as a significant barrier to the hearing and appropriation of the words of forgiveness. These people, like everyone else, need forgiveness, but before the words of grace can convey their liberating power, the people must first deal with the disgrace shame.

A pastoral situation may be illustrative. “Jim” was an unwanted child. From birth, the attitudes and actions of his parents conveyed that message in overt and covert ways. He was an intrusion, a problem, a pain, and a nuisance. In this environment, he soon developed a shame-based identity. In childhood and adolescence, he was not only blamed for the troubles at home, but was seen as a nuisance and problem at school and church. As a consequence of this social conditioning, Jim felt that he was a mistake. Shame became a barrier to his hearing the words of forgiveness. For Jim, pastoral care had to deal with his shame factor before speaking about forgiveness in a way that he could appropriate.

Conversation with pastoral colleagues and my own ministerial experience suggest that the number of people who are or perceive themselves to be in this situation is legion. Can such people ever hear God’s words of grace? Pastoral care for people with disgrace shame will have to

start not with forgiveness but with “acceptance.”

II. ACCEPTANCE AS THE PRINCIPAL THEOLOGICAL FACTOR IN DEALING WITH DISGRACE SHAME

Guilt and shame are often inextricably linked together to fashion a chain that keeps human beings shackled in bondage. Shame as disgrace can also manifest itself as a consequence of guilt;⁴ that combination constitutes a critical condition that requires even greater pastoral sensitivity and sensibility. Susan Miller has articulated the situation well.

Shame and guilt often co-occur, and they hold certain elements in common. Due to these shared features, shifts between the states occur rapidly and conceptual boundaries between the feeling-categories are difficult to maintain. Shame and guilt are most similar and most easily confused when moral shame is the type in question. Shame over ineffectiveness (as opposed to shame over immorality) generally is well distinguished from guilt. In fact, the clear differences between

⁴David Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling across Cultures* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 117.

shame and guilt when shame involves no moral issues may explain the common conviction that shame and guilt are different states even though they are sometimes hard to distinguish.⁵

Pastorally, it has been helpful to tease out the distinctive dynamics of each phenomenon. Separation of the two concepts has been an important breakthrough in ministering to people who suffer both guilt and shame. Philosophically, one might say that guilt is associated with phenomenology, whereas shame is connected with ontology.

My contention is that forgiveness constitutes the central core of the gospel of grace for those who suffer from guilt.

The attenuation of the guilt and the concomitant guilt feelings were accomplished by confession of the same to the party or parties offended, whether that was God or others. There was an appeal for forgiveness, an apology, and often appropriate restitution for the harm which was done. Once the established sequence was completed, the person or persons could experience forgiveness, freedom from the guilt, and reconciliation. The process resulted in the possibility of becoming reinstated in the covenant relationship with God and in the social network of the community. The Old Testament institution of sacrifice and the New Testament witness to the sacrifice of Christ have traditionally symbolized the manner in which the covenantal relationship has been reestablished.⁶

In the Lutheran tradition, the Sunday morning ritual of confession and absolution speaks powerfully to this dimension of human existence. We acknowledge our solidarity in the universal experience of sin: “We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.”⁷ The sins of commission and omission are blatantly

evident if we have not deceived ourselves! Whether in public or private confession, the purpose is to “come clean” with respect to our sinfulness. In response to the question of what sins we should confess, Luther unequivocally states,

Before God we should acknowledge that we are guilty of all manner of sins, even those of which we are not aware, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer. Before the confessor, however, we should confess only those sins of which we have knowledge and which trouble us.⁸

Guilt is ameliorated by God through Christ, and sin, with its consequences of bondage and brokenness, is forgiven, expiated, covered, removed, or atoned for; forgiveness and reconciliation are the result.

But where disgrace shame is the operating dynamic, these gracious words cannot be heard, and the declaration of forgiveness may even exacerbate the sense of shame because the person now is shamed for not believing the word of God!

This is the conundrum in which many people of faith find themselves. Whereas one might rightly argue theologically and intellectually that the grace of God covers all sorts and conditions of human experience, the reality in pastoral

⁵Susan Miller, *The Shame Experience* (Hillsdale: Analytic, 1985) 140.

⁶Albers, *Shame*, 21.

⁷*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, and Philadelphia: Board of Publication, 1978) 56.

⁸*Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, 350.

practice is that many people are separated from grace by their shame-based identities.

Acceptance is the antidote of grace for those who suffer from disgrace shame. Paul Tillich articulates this very well when he suggests that central to the New Being is acceptance of one’s acceptance by God.⁹ Radical and unconditional acceptance, despite one’s perceived unacceptability or unlovability, is the key issue. Communicating this truth and appropriating this theological reality in ministry, however, is quite another matter. Methodologically, the need for unconditional acceptance suggests that the starting point for some people may not be the traditional law-gospel dialectic, but rather gospel-law. While the law may effectively convict some, driving them to the forgiveness offered by God in Jesus Christ, it may condemn others to the pit of despair in their disgrace shame.

Theologically and pastorally it seems judicious to lift up a fuller dimension of the faith tradition. Our theological anthropology has been dominated by the classical emphasis upon sin and guilt. But the tradition also speaks eloquently regarding the infinite worth and value of all creation. In evaluating God’s creative efforts, including humankind, scripture states, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). Intrinsic human worth arises out of the creativity of the Creator. Sin and guilt notwithstanding, human beings are of infinite worth because they owe their origin to an Infinite God who assigns eternal value to all. Accepting the truth of this assertion is not easy if one’s theological conditioning is governed by the words of a former confessional service: “We poor sinners confess unto thee, that we are by nature sinful and unclean.”¹⁰

Acceptance is also predicated upon the conviction that the covenant that God establishes with God's people is a unilateral declaration of unqualified inclusion in the faith community. Whether the sign is circumcision or the watermark of baptism, a new identity is established; the person is incorporated into a community of acceptance and nurture. People who have developed a shame-based identity need to know that their identity is inextricably bound up and determined by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

The significance of the cross, which is so central to the Christian faith, takes on a slightly different character when appropriated for those suffering from disgrace shame. It represents a symbol of God's solidarity with humankind. In Christ the experience of disgrace shame is epitomized as he suffers the shaming experiences of the passion—mocking, derision, humiliation, scourging, spitting, and the ultimate ignominy and isolation of the crucifixion.

Thus the narrative of Jesus' own life, ministry, and death is a powerful witness to the incarnational reality of God's own subjection to and identification with disgrace shame in Christ. As the writer of Hebrews so eloquently states, Christ, in solidarity with humankind, experiences the powerfully debilitating and paralyzing dimensions of shame; thus, for shame-based people, it is important to

⁹Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963) 223-228.

¹⁰*Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, et al., 1958) 1.

look “to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, *despising the shame*, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2; emphasis added). This act of identification and solidarity becomes a touchstone of faith for the shame-based person who realizes that not only has God been subjected to the excruciating pain of shame, God has also taken up all shame into the cross, which is God's shame-bearing symbol for the world. In taking all shame into himself, Christ declares all free from the shame that binds them so that all might experience the glorious liberty of being daughters and sons of God.

God's acceptance is often experientially tied to human acceptance. Thus, the acceptance of the faith community is a key factor for those experiencing disgrace shame. A strange paradox develops for people in bondage to shame. They illustrate both the natural tendency to isolate themselves and to hide for fear the shame will be exposed and further humiliation will occur, and also the need for a community of acceptance in which each can name, claim, and embrace in safety her or his own issues of disgrace shame. It is only in the honest fellowship of sufferers that the candle of hope can be lit and new light and life can be born.

A debilitating effect of shame can be a narcissistic turning in upon oneself in an effort to hide and protect the self from the shaming tactics of the outside world. It is imperative that the shamed person learn to turn outward to others and to find meaning and purpose in community. This suggests that a truly accepting community can be the incarnational expression of God's love for all. The description of the people of God in Acts speaks powerfully about the healing capacities of a community that devotes itself “to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers” (2:42).

Once the reality of acceptance by God and others begins to take root, growth in grace occurs. Often it is only then that the person can personally appropriate the message of

forgiveness. What becomes readily apparent to many people at this juncture is that the cardinal doctrine of reformation theology, namely, that we are justified by God's grace through faith, takes on anew and liberating meaning. The enslaving power of a shame-based identity resulted in a whole host of self-justifying and defensive measures in order to ward off the impact of the disgrace shame.¹¹

One of the most pervasive and prominent defenses against disgrace shame within the faith community is perfectionism. Once acceptance is experienced and appropriated, people come to understand that their previous lifestyle was one of self-justification. They come to realize that their sin is wanting to be like God and failing to accept the limits of finitude. In the context of grace as acceptance they eventually develop both the insight and the freedom to acknowledge the nature of their sin.

Having established and experienced the truth of God's unconditional acceptance, they can then appropriate the powerful words of forgiveness for what they have come to understand as the true nature and reality of their sin. Whereas for the

¹¹Albers, *Shame*, 69-80.

person who suffers from guilt, the law-gospel dialectic works its power in convicting of sin and driving the person into the arms of God's mercy, for the person whose life is shaped by disgrace shame, the dialectic must be gospel-law. Once the gospel of God's acceptance in Jesus Christ is realized and experienced in the appropriation of creation, baptism, the cross, and the community of faith, then (and then only) comes the realization that one has been living under the law. Then and only then can the person understand that she has been engaged in a futile effort to justify herself. Then and only then is the person able to acknowledge that his primal sin is attempting to be like God. Then and only then can one understand that one's perfectionism and the inability to accept one's finitude is indicative of the human condition. Then and only then is the message of forgiveness heard and accepted for what it is, namely, God's liberation from every form of oppression and every bondage that precludes people from becoming what God intended them to be.

Disgrace shame appears to be endemic to the human condition; it will not be eradicated or eliminated from human experience. Its tentacles can strangle the human spirit; its power can crush the sense of worth and value given by God to every creature; and the fear engendered by its presence can lock a person in perpetual bondage. The hope of liberation from this convoluted life is lodged in the gospel message of God's unconditional acceptance.

In conclusion, we return to the focal question of this issue: "Is Forgiveness Enough?" At first blush, my answer might be no, if the question suggests that forgiveness is a simple matter unencumbered by the realities and exigencies that constitute human life. Pastorally speaking, too many people have the barrier of disgrace shame in their lives to even hear these gracious words. To exhort them to believe, to suggest that it is their pride that precludes their appropriation of these gracious words, only exacerbates the sense of shame and drives them into deeper despair. For many people, the gospel message of God's grace as acceptance must first be appropriated. This process often takes time, particularly for people like "Jim," noted earlier, whose principal identity has been shaped by social messages that have been internalized to produce a shame-based identity. Pastorally, one has to pray for all the gifts of the Spirit in order that God might

effect change, transforming this deeply ingrained and entrenched identity.

Ultimately, once the shame of disgrace has been addressed, then the answer to the question, “Is Forgiveness Enough?” might be yes, if by forgiveness one means the healing power of God’s grace that accepts, loves, and enfolds all human beings as they are. Perhaps, stating it in a more precise manner, it is “grace” alone which is enough. What is at the core of the gospel is God’s grace, understood as forgiveness for one’s guilt and acceptance for one’s shame. God’s liberating message of love enfolds and encompasses the entirety of the human condition.

ROBERT H. ALBERS, professor of pastoral theology, is the editor of the *Journal of Ministry in Addiction and Recovery* and the author of *Shame: A Faith Perspective* (Haworth, 1995).