



# themelios

*An International Journal for Students of  
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- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>EDITORIAL: When Revival Comes</b><br><i>D. A. Carson</i>   | 169 |
| <b>STRANGE TIMES: The Rolling Stones Will Stop</b><br><i>Daniel Strange</i>   | 173 |
| <b>Paul and Gender: A Review Article</b><br><i>Thomas R. Schreiner</i>  | 178 |
| <b>Songs of the Seer: The Purpose of Revelation's Hymns</b><br><i>Robert S. Smith</i>   | 193 |
| <b>Have Theologians No Sense of Shame? How the Bible<br/>Reconciles Objective and Subjective Shame</b><br><i>Jackson Wu</i>                       | 205 |
| <b>Apocalypse Now: The Neo-Bultmannian Universalism<br/>of David Congdon's The God Who Saves</b><br><i>Michael McClymond</i>                      | 220 |
| <b>The Kuyperian Impulse of the Benedict Option</b><br><i>James D. Clark</i>  | 235 |
| <b>The Rule of Faith and Biblical Interpretation in<br/>Evangelical Theological Interpretation of Scripture</b><br><i>Adriani Milli Rodrigues</i> | 257 |
| <b>Book Reviews</b>   | 271 |

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## DESCRIPTION

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## REVIEWS

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# Have Theologians No Sense of Shame? How the Bible Reconciles Objective and Subjective Shame

— Jackson Wu —

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**Abstract:** Everyone agrees shame is a pervasive problem; yet, in book and articles, we find writers often talk past one another. Missionaries and anthropologists speak of “honor-shame” cultures. Psychologists describe shame as an individual, emotional experience. Strangely, theologians typically say little about the topic. Christian scholars tend to treat guilt as “objective” and shame merely a “subjective.” This misunderstanding undermines our ability to develop a practical theology of honor and shame. Therefore, this article demonstrates how the Bible helps us have an integrated understanding of shame in its theological, psychological, and social dimensions.

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## *1. A Unified View of Shame*

Everyone agrees that shame is a pervasive human problem that causes havoc throughout society. Yet, in books about shame, writers often talk past one another. On the one hand, missionaries and anthropologists sometimes speak of “honor-shame” cultures. On the other hand, psychologists describe shame as an individual, emotional experience. Strangely, Christian theologians typically say very little about a destructive human experience. We have to ask, “Have theologians no sense of shame?”

Why do Christian scholars seemingly overlook such an important biblical and life theme? Within Western theology, why do people have a shameless preference for legal-metaphors? No doubt, there are many reasons for this.<sup>1</sup>

People have several hidden assumptions about “shame” that are based on partial truths. For instance, many in the church have the impression that shame is a “subjective” problem. It is concerned with

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jackson Wu, “Why Has the Church Lost ‘Face’?” *Mission Frontiers* (January–February 2015), [www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/why-has-the-church-lost-face](http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/why-has-the-church-lost-face).

psychology and culture, not theology, which is primarily about “objective” truth. As a result, honor-shame language seems ill-suited to describe ultimate realities, like God and salvation from sin.

In this essay, I will first correct this misunderstanding by clarifying the meaning of “shame.” I present a unified view of shame, one that includes a subjective *and* an objective dimension. The following definition of “shame” brings together the primary ways that people use the concept of shame. *Shame is the fear, pain, or state of being regarded unworthy of acceptance in social relationships.*

Shame is multi-faceted. It is a theological, psychological, and social concept. The Bible helps us reconcile the various understandings people have about this topic. In fact, the Bible uses honor and shame language both to describe the world’s most serious problem and its solution. Evangelicals want to have biblically faithful theologies and culturally meaningful ministries. To attain this goal, one needs a more robust view of shame.

## 2. What Is Shame?

### 2.1. Distinguishing Guilt and Shame

What is a basic difference between guilt and shame? Guilt focuses on a person’s actions or behavior. Thus, guilt is a person’s negative response to wrong actions. Compared to shame, guilt has a narrower focus.

Shame is more general and holistic. It focuses on a person’s worth. Whereas guilt says, “my actions were bad,” shame instead says, “I am bad.” When people do something that is regarded as wrong or bad, they can incur guilt, shame, or even both.

### 2.2. Guilt and Shame are Subjective and Objective

What often goes unnoticed is the fact that both shame and guilt each have an objective and subjective dimension. For instance, one can have objective guilt because (s)he commits an offense. Subjectively, a person might have guilt feelings.

Likewise, people can subjectively feel ashamed or a sense of worthlessness. Yet, it is possible to describe someone as *being* shameful or lacking honor. This sort of judgment is ascribed to individuals by other people or groups. This kind of shame is “objective” in the sense that it comes from some source *outside* the judged individual.

Accordingly, when ancient Romans crucified a person, they effectively shamed those whom they regarded as “criminals” or lacking social worth. Objective shame is inherently public by nature. It typically manifests in many ways, such as criticism, censure, mockery, exclusion, discrimination, torture, and execution.

### 2.3. Three Types of Shame

We can further classify shame into three specific subcategories. Shame is psychological, social, and sacred. Subjectively, shame is psychological or individualistic. Objectively, we can describe shame in two ways. First, it is cultural or social. Second, there is theological or “sacred” shame.

What is the major difference between psychological, social, and sacred shame? Each uses a different standard to assess whether someone is considered shameful (or conversely, worthy of honor). With psychological shame, an individual perceives himself or herself to lack value or significance. Social or

cultural shame measures one's worth in relation to social expectations. Finally, sacred (or theological) shame is ascribed to those who lack honor before God.

The following section will elaborate how these three types of shame differ and interconnect. I will use the Bible to illustrate how biblical authors use the concept of shame.

## 2.4. Individual or Psychological Shame

### 2.4.1. Overview

Psychological shame is closely linked to a range of negative emotions and behaviors, including fear, anxiety, anger, defensiveness, depression, and suicide. June Price Tangney further explains that shame is primarily concerned with “others’ evaluation” of oneself whereas guilt is more concerned with “one’s effect on others.”<sup>2</sup> Brené Brown rightly highlights a common aspect of subjective shame: “Shame is the fear of disconnection—the fear that we’re unlovable and don’t belong.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, shame makes people want to hide and causes them to feel isolated or invisible.

### 2.4.2. Shame Due to Personal Sin

Since psychological shame is a universal human phenomenon, we are not surprised to find examples of it throughout the Bible. Although Adam and Eve originally were naked yet without shame (Gen 2:25), their sin made them want to “hid[e] themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8). Jeremiah laments for Jerusalem, “How we are ruined! We are utterly shamed, because we have left the land, because they have cast down our dwellings” (Jer 9:16; cf. 3:25).

### 2.4.3. Shame Due to Others’ Sin

Elsewhere, people suffer psychological or individualized shame but not necessarily due to their own sin. For example, consider when King David sent his servants to console the Ammonite king, who mistakenly regarded them as spies.

So Hanun took David’s servants and shaved off half the beard of each and cut off their garments in the middle, at their hips, and sent them away. When it was told David, he sent to meet them, for the men were *greatly ashamed*. And the king said, “Remain at Jericho until your beards have grown and then return.” (2 Sam 10:4–5)

Later, Ezra’s shame results from imagining the king’s reaction were Ezra to ask for the king’s assistance in returning to Jerusalem.

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. For I was *ashamed* to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.” (Ezra 8:21–22)

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<sup>2</sup>June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: Guilford, 2002), 25.

<sup>3</sup>Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Random House, 2015), 109.

In each instance, the men feel a sense of shame that causes them either to hide or not to disclose their true desires and thoughts.

Multiple NT writers similarly use the concept of shame. Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:2 contrasts two ways of doing ministry—one that is “open” (φανερώσει), whereas the other is “hidden” (κρυπτά). He renounces the latter as shameful [αἰσχύνης]. He too connects shame with being “hidden” or “veiled” (4:3). Shame influence a character in Jesus’s parable. Luke 16:3 says, “the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and *I am ashamed to beg.*’”

#### 2.4.4. *Shame’s Influence on Discipleship*

The NT writers are ever mindful that shame influences their readers. Paul explains that he does not want to make his readers feel ashamed:

To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. *I do not write these things to make you ashamed*, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (1 Cor 4:11–15)

Given that Paul later writes, “I say this to your shame” (6:5; 15:34), he is aware that his use of shame can have contrasting effects on the Corinthians.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, both Peter and John want readers to be free from a subjective kind of shame. Despite the (objective) social shame that comes with suffering, Peter writes, “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, *let him not be ashamed*, but let him glorify God in that name” (1 Pet 4:16; cf. Rom 1:16). Similarly, John urges his flock to persevere in love by saying, “And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and *not shrink from him in shame* at his coming” (1 John 2:28).

## 2.5. Cultural or Social Shame

### 2.5.1. *Explanation*

The second type of shame is social or cultural shame. For instance, anthropologists and missiologists often write about so-called “honor-shame cultures,”<sup>5</sup> like those in East Asia and the Middle East. In fact, honor-shame cultures (and subcultures) exist throughout history and the world, including Western

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Te-Li Lau, “I write these things not to shame you.” *JETS* 60 (2017): 105–24. Lau suggests that Paul in 1 Cor 4:14 employs “a rhetoric of shame that a loving father might employ to instruct his children” (p. 107). An alternative explanation is possible. Paul might not use shame in 4:14 because he wants to motivate a certain positive response whereas 6:5; 15:34 rebuke negative behavior that stands in contrast to their identity as Christ followers.

<sup>5</sup>For example, Roland Müller, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2001); Jayson Georges and Mark Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

cultures.<sup>6</sup> Recently, major publications have given significant attention to the destructive use of shame, especially within social media.<sup>7</sup>

What do we learn from research on “honor-shame” cultures? Within any culture (or subculture), certain behaviors and characteristics are regarded as either shameful or honorable. That is, certain things are deemed worthy of either censure or praise. Many of these collective norms are rarely stated explicitly. These community standards form the moral basis for deciding right and wrong within a social group.

This type of “shame” is considered “objective” in the sense that it is more public than personal (i.e., psychological). Such “shame” reflects the assessment of someone other than the person being judged. In other words, an individual’s sense of self-worth is not the reason society views the person as being deficient or lacking worth. An individual has shame according to the measure of the surrounding group or culture.

### 2.5.2. Biblical Examples

The Bible has many examples of this objective, social shame. Nehemiah describes the condition of the exiles, “And they said to me, ‘The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in *great trouble and shame*. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire’” (Neh 1:3). Biblical writers can use shame-language to describe circumstances, as in Jeremiah 46:12, “The nations have heard of your *shame*, and the earth is full of your cry; for warrior has stumbled against warrior; they have both fallen together” (cf. Lam 5:1–16

Proverbs warns of the public shame that comes upon parents of an unruly child. For example, Proverbs 19:26 warns, “He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings *shame and reproach*” (cf. 10:5; 29:15). Also, Proverbs 25:10 warns against revealing another’s secret “lest he who hears you *bring shame upon you*, and your *ill repute* have no end.” These passages depict a type of shame that exists without respect to an individual’s psychological state.

The New Testament also speaks of shame that is imputed to a person by their community. When Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant with Jesus, he is concerned with the social shame that would be heaped on Mary. Matthew 1:19 states, “And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to *shame*, resolved to divorce her *quietly*.” He does not want to subject Mary to the merciless court of public opinion.

A most obvious example is found in Hebrews. The author claims that an inanimate object has “honor” or has a “dishonorable” use. Hebrews 3:3 states, “For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of *a house has more honor than the house itself*.”

Similarly, Paul explains, “Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, *some for dishonorable*. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself

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<sup>6</sup>Tamler Sommers, *Why Honor Matters*. (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: Norton, 2010); James Bowman, *Honor: A History* (New York: Encounter, 2006); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture Of Honor: The Psychology Of Violence In The South* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Sonya Lipsett-Rivera and Lyman L. Johnson, eds., *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Jon Ronson, *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed* (New York: Riverhead, 2015); Andy Crouch, “The Return of Shame,” *Christianity Today* 59.2 (March 2015): 32–40.

from what is *dishonorable*, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work” (2 Tim 2:20–21). The objects themselves neither claim honor nor feel dishonored. Instead, people give these ascriptions.

Honor-shame language routinely describes certain behaviors and actions (which of course do not have emotions). Thus, Paul can talk about “shameful gain” (Tit 1:11) and shameful speaking (cf. 1 Cor 14:35; Eph 5:12). In 2 Corinthians 6:8–9, Paul describes his suffering in a way that makes clear the nature of shame and honor, for he labors “through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known.” His social (dis)honor is made manifest in the way he is publicly treated (cf. Jesus’s treatment in Matt 22:5–6; Mark 12:4; Luke 18:32; 20:11). Thus, we understand why Jesus warns those who are “ashamed of me and my words” (Luke 9:26). Their problem is that they do not publicly ascribe worth to Jesus. In contrast, Moses “considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward” (Heb 11:26). Notice that “reproach” here describes Moses’ mistreatment in Egypt and is even objectified as wealth or reward.

## 2.6. Sacred or Theological Shame

### 2.6.1. Explanation

The Bible is foremost concerned with the third type of shame, which I call “sacred” or theological shame. Like social shame, this is an objective shame. That is, a person or thing is determined to be shameful according to some outside measure; in this case, God’s character. Ultimately, God is the measure of true honor/glorious (and conversely, whatever is dishonorable or shameful). Having shame before God may or may not be linked directly with psychological or social shame.

### 2.6.2. Old Testament Examples

A few examples from prophets illustrate the meaning of sacred/theological shame. These passages concern Israel’s sin and consequent exile. Hosea laments,

The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame.... When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring; their rulers dearly love shame. A wind has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices. (Hos 4:7, 18–19)

God’s judges his enemies by shaming them. Hence, Habakkuk vividly describes God’s wrath,

You will have your *fill of shame instead of glory*. Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision! The cup in the Lord’s right hand will come around to you, and *utter shame will come upon your glory!* The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them. (Hab 2:16–17)

Jeremiah speaks against his persecutors, “But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior; therefore, my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be *greatly shamed*, for they will not succeed. Their *eternal dishonor* will never be forgotten” (Jer 20:11).

Daniel does not talk about psychology when he contrasts God’s righteousness with Israel’s shame in Daniel 9:7–8. Daniel adds, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some



to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan 12:2). This eternal shame clearly transcends any particular cultural or social perspective of dishonor. Likewise, Ezekiel says those who rebel against the Lord will bear their “shame” (32:24, 25, 30; 44:13) and “disgrace” (16:52–54; cf. 36:15).

In salvation, God brings honor to his people and guards them against shame. In Zephaniah 3:18–20, the change from shame to honor is public and pervasive:

“I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will *no longer suffer reproach*. Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save *the lame and gather the outcast*, and I will *change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth*. At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for *I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth*, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes,” says the Lord.

We would be remiss to overlook the repetition and thus emphasis in Joel 2:26–27:

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And *my people shall never again be put to shame*. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God and there is none else. And *my people shall never again be put to shame*.

Other passages likewise speak of an objective state of honor and shame, which is determined by God (cf. Ps 25:2–3; 31:17; Jer 13:26–27; Ezek 7:18).

### 2.6.3. New Testament Examples

The New Testament paints a similar picture. Paul says that “enemies of the cross of Christ ... glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil 3:18–19). In Romans, Paul uses the concept of shame to describe justification, “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame’” (Rom 10:10–11; cf. 9:33). In this passage, the shame that is avoided is *as objective as the justification that is gained*. God gives “glory and honor” as a reward (Rom 2:7, 10; cf. Rom 8:30). As Jesus himself promises, “If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:26).

It would be a shame if we overlook sacred (dis)honor and think only in terms of sociology or psychology. Biblically speaking, “shame” cannot be reduced to a cultural or individual phenomenon.

### 2.6.4. Integrating Objective and Subjective Shame

Within a single passage, biblical writers sometimes use shame (and honor) language yet the meaning of their words might slightly differ. For example, Ezra first confesses his subjective shame and then speaks of Israel’s objective shame.

O my God, *I am ashamed* [בִּשְׁתִּי] and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and *to utter shame* [בְּשִׁת], as it is today. (Ezra 9:6–7)

A subjective sense of shame is the appropriate response to objective shame. For example, the prophet in Ezekiel 16:62–63 writes that the Lord will remember his covenant *so that* Israel would feel the *subjective* shame they ought to feel. As a result, he then says to Israel, “[you will] never open your mouth again because of your shame.” This shame is the objective shame they suffer as a result of their sin (cf. Ps 4:3; Ezek 39:26).

Shame is not an entirely bad phenomenon. In fact, morality requires one to have a sense of shame. The godless person is shameless.

### 3. Reconciling Shame

In this section, we see the theological significance of distinguishing subjective and objective shame. With a more holistic perspective of shame, we can explain the meaning of sin and its consequences. In addition, we will find a corresponding perspective of salvation. The Bible demonstrates how Jesus overcomes human shame and displays divine honor.

#### 3.1. When Shame is the Problem

Biblical writers use “honor and shame” to describe the human problem. Shame is the cause and consequence of sin. Simultaneously, shame is both sin’s root and its fruit. On this point, the distinction between objective and subjective shame is useful. When discussing the human problem, we should clarify the relationship between these two dimensions of shame.

In the Bible, people have at least 6 problems that concern honor-shame. Because of space limitations, I will only mention a few passages that illustrate these points from the Bible.

#### PROBLEM

1. People have shamed (dishonored) God.
2. People are shameful.
3. People feel shame.
4. People shame others.
5. People suffer shame from others.
6. God will put people to shame.

#### SHAME

- Objective  
Objective  
Subjective  
Objective  
Objective & Subjective  
Objective

##### 3.1.1. People Have Shamed God (Objectively)

First, humanity dishonors God; that is, we bring shame upon God’s name. Those who are supposed to reflect his glory and worth have instead regarded the Creator God as though he has little value.

In Romans 1:18–21, “unrighteousness” is described as “dishonoring” God. Verse 23 says people “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (cf. Ps 106:20; Jer 2:11). When people “did not honor him as God” (Rom 1:21), they effectively exchanged the basis of their *own* glory.

Chapter 2 explicitly describes sin in terms of “dishonor.” Romans 2:23–24 says, “You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.” The main verb in the sentence is “dishonor” (ἀτιμάζεις), whereas the phrase “by breaking the law” is simply a prepositional phrase (διὰ τῆς παραβάσεως τοῦ νόμου). Grammatically speaking, Paul indicates the main problem is *dishonor*; law-breaking is but one particular way that a person might dishonor God. Verse 24 supports v. 23 and confirms this emphasis: “For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’”

The following two passages illustrate the human problem using different perspectives. Malachi 1:6 poignantly identifies Israel's fault when the Lord says, "A son *honors* his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is *my honor*? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we *despised your name*?'” Second, 1 Corinthians 10:31 lays down a principle that should mark everything we do: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Thus, the human problem of sin could be summed up as *not* doing something to the glory of God.

### 3.1.2. *People are Shameful (Objectively)*

When people dishonor God, they incur objective shame. They are worthy to be reckoned shameful and disgraced. In other words, a person lacks the honor he or she should have before God (cf. Ps 8:5; Rom 3:23). Malachi 2:2–3 graphically depicts the consequence of not honoring the Lord:

If you will not listen, *if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name*, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. Behold, *I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it.*

Hosea 4:7 adds, "The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame." In other words, sinners are marked with shame objectively, not simply subjectively (i.e., within their own psychology).

### 3.1.3. *People Feel Shamed (Subjectively)*

Since humanity (objectively) dishonors God and so brings shame upon themselves, people feel varying degrees of shame (subjectively). This is a consequence of human sin. A world without sin is a world without shame.

Sin brings humiliation. Ezra represents the proper response of anyone who recognizes the horror of sin: "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens." Jeremiah foretells that Israel "shall be ashamed of their harvests because of the fierce anger of the Lord," which is inflicted due to sin (Jer 12:13).

### 3.1.4. *People Both Shame Others (Objectively) and Suffer Shame from Others (Subjectively)*

We will address the fourth and fifth problems together. They concern the same phenomenon within human relationships. However, they use two different perspectives—those who afflict and those who are afflicted. After all, the human problem is both passive and active. That is, people are sinners who bring harm to others. In addition, people suffer as a result of sin. God cares to solve both aspects of the human shame problem.

The most heinous sin in Scripture is the murder of Jesus. He describes in advance the suffering that awaited him saying, "he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him" (Luke 18:32–33).<sup>8</sup> Naturally, those who follow Christ share in his suffering because of the sin of their persecutors. Before arriving in Thessalonica, Paul

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Matt 22:6; 27:26–31; Mark 12:4; Luke 20:11; 23:11; Heb 12:2.

remarks, “we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi” (1 Thess 2:2). The writer of Hebrews depicts the experience of many early believers as “sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated” (Heb 10:33).

### 3.1.5. *God Will Put People to Shame (Objectively)*

Ultimately, God will put to shame those who are unwilling to honor him. Daniel 12:2 vividly describes their fate: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and *some to shame and everlasting contempt*” (cf. Jer 20:11). The psalms consistently praise God for the shame that will come upon God’s enemies.

Accordingly, the psalmist prays,

Fill their faces with shame, that they may seek your name, O Lord. Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever; let them perish in disgrace, that they may know that you alone, whose name is the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth (Ps 83:16–18).

Finally, the writer of Psalm 109:28–29 adds, “Let them curse, but you will bless! They arise and are put to shame, but your servant will be glad! May my accusers be clothed with dishonor; may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a cloak!”

## 3.2. Solving the Problem of Shame

For each aspect of humanity’s shame problem, the Bible offers a solution.<sup>9</sup> Objectively, God takes away our shame. By granting us honor, he eliminates the root of subjective shame. Next, I will succinctly state 6 aspects of salvation, understood from the perspective of honor and shame. I then will explain each facet by drawing from specific biblical texts.

### PROBLEM

1. God glorifies himself.
2. God gives us a heart to honor him.
3. God in Christ removes shame and restores honor.
4. We get a new identity and so belong to the Church.
5. Because of a new identity, we no longer feel ashamed.
6. We are able to honor God and others.

### SHAME

- Objective  
Objective  
Objective  
Objective  
Subjective  
Objective

### 3.2.1. *God Glorifies Himself (Objectively)*

What makes sin so deplorable is the fact that it is the dishonoring of God. Therefore, this is the fundamental problem that must be rectified in salvation. Throughout the Bible, God works to defend and restore his honor.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>One recent proposal that explore salvation from an honor-shame perspective includes Jackson Wu, *Saving God’s Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup>Others make similar arguments, like Glatt-Gilad, “Yahweh’s Honor at Stake,” 63–74; Jonathan Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World*. James Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); James Hamilton Jr., “The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment:

The Old Testament saints grasped this point well. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God reemphasizes the reason he will bring about salvation for his people. In a significant passage, which echoes the new covenant (cf. Jer 31:31–34), God begins by clarifying his purpose:

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. (Ezek 36:22–23; cf. 36:32; 20:44)

Furthermore, God says something similar concerning Israel's exodus from Egypt to Canaan. Despite Israel's sin, God declares, "I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations" (Ezek 20:14; cf. 20:9, 22).

Because God seeks to exalt his own glory, he faithfully saves his people, according to his promises. The petition in Jeremiah 14:21 is succinct: "Do not spurn us, for your name's sake; do not dishonor your glorious throne; remember and do not break your covenant with us" (cf. 14:7). The NT further confirms the point. Paul summarizes the reason why Christ came into the world, "For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Rom 15:8–9a).

### 3.2.2. *God Gives Us a Heart to Honor Him (Objectively)*

For what reason do God's people cast shame aside? The prophet Isaiah highlights the change in their hearts:

Therefore thus says the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob: "Jacob shall no more be ashamed, no more shall his face grow pale. For when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, *they will sanctify my name; they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.*" (Isa 29:22; cf. 8:13)

Peter thus exhorts, "in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy" (1 Pet 3:15).<sup>11</sup>

In John 5:44, Jesus distinguishes true and false faith via glory, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" The one who has faith in Christ has a new perspective of honor and shame. Peter and John share this perspective in Acts 5:41, "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name."

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The Centre of Biblical Theology?," *TynBul* 57 (2006): 57–84. Finally, nearly anything by John Piper highlights the point.

<sup>11</sup> In Greek, "sanctify the Lord Christ in your hearts" (κύριον δὲ τὸν Χριστὸν ἀγιάσατε ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν). To sanctify the Lord is to honor him as uniquely worthy of glory. Cf. Lev 10:3; other passages that similarly link holiness and honor; see Exod 29:43; Deut 26:19; Isa 4:2; 58:13; Ezek 28:22; John 17:7–18, 22–24; 1 Thess 4:4; 2 Tim 2:21; Heb 2:9–11.

When Christ inaugurates the New Covenant, God's people are given new hearts (cf. Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26; Heb 8:8; 10:16). From another angle, one might speak of God's granting people faith.<sup>12</sup> As a result, Paul says the believer seeks a different sort of glory, "His praise is not from man but from God" (Rom 2:29).<sup>13</sup> Because of Christ, they "boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:29, 31).

### 3.2.3. *God in Christ Removes Shame and Restores Honor (Objectively)*

Christ takes away objective shame and, in exchange, gives us honor. In terms of salvation, what do we mean by "objective" honor and shame? God's people are given glory and so gain a new identity. They no more suffer the shame of sin and death.

Those who follow Christ share in his glory. Jesus's prayer in John 17:22 is unambiguous, "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one." Hebrews 2:9–11 provides an excellent account of salvation via honor and shame:

But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, *crowned with glory and honor* because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in *bringing many sons to glory*, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who *sanctifies* and those who are *sanctified* all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers.

In the big picture of salvation, we ultimately seek glory (Rom 2:7, 10); yet, it is the sort that derives being conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29–30). Thus, we can understand Jesus's direct and succinct appeal to honor: "If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him" (John 12:26).

### 3.2.4. *We Get a New Identity and So Belong to the Church (Objectively)*

As we have seen, honor and shame are inherently communal concepts. One's social identity is influenced by a number of factors, including a group's many ways of assessing and ascribing honor and shame.

God's people also enjoy a unique type of honor not shared with outsiders. Those who follow Christ are reckoned to be God's children. Before God, Christians have a new identity. They now belong to a new community called the "church." Naturally, having this new collective identity has implications with respect to honor and shame.

Being a member of Christ's church entails a shift in worldview, loyalty, authority, and priorities. In many ways, what is honored within the church will be regarded as shameful to the world. Likewise, the world honors much of what God's people consider shameful. As a result, what happens when God changes our identity? Christ's followers are less concerned with the court of popular opinion; instead, they seek to do what is honorable in the eyes of God's people. Within this holy community, they ought not to be ashamed to "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col 3:17).

How do biblical writers depict Christian identity? They use a variety of images to indicate the church's privileged status. For example, Peter compounds honorific epithets:

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Rom 12:3; Eph 1:15; Phil 1:29; some appeal to Eph 2:8.

<sup>13</sup> Observe the echoes to the new covenant in Rom 2:27, 29 and, I suggest, in vv. 14–15.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet 2:4–5, 9–10)

As others also note, Peter's prolific use of OT language aims to convey the honor that God bestows on the church.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, Christ's followers lose worldly honor. Though citizens of God's kingdom, they are regarded as "sojourners and exiles" in the world (1 Pet 2:14–15). Many will be shamefully treated, even hated for Jesus's sake.<sup>15</sup>

### *3.2.5. Having a New Identity, We No Longer Feel Ashamed (Subjectively)*

The gospel does not merely change one's legal status; it transforms our social identity as well. Naturally, this has implications with respect to one's personal sense of shame. A person may endure varying types of "objective" shame yet not personally feel "subjective" shame. After all, why should Christ's people feel ashamed before those who dishonor the King of Glory? Peter's comments nicely illustrate the point:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (1 Pet 4:12–16)

When believers understand their identity in Christ, they will not be ashamed of the gospel because they know it is the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16).

Why can Paul persevere in ministry? He did not suffer from the subjective shame that comes from public ridicule and hardship; instead, he says, "it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil 1:20).

### *3.2.6. We Are Able to Honor God and Others (Objectively)*

In addition to the theological and psychological changes mentioned above, we can highlight a few practical ways God in Christ fills a person's life with objective honor. The Holy Spirit does more

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<sup>14</sup> John H. Elliott, "Disgraced yet Graced: The Gospel According to 1 Peter in the Key of Honor and Shame," *BTB* 24 (1994): 166–78; Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998); David deSilva, "Turning Shame into Honor: The Pastoral Strategy of 1 Peter," in *The Shame Factor: How Shame Shapes Society*, ed. Robert Jewett (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Matt 10:25; John 15:18–20; 17:14; Heb 10:33; 1 John 3:13.

than provide comfort for the soul. He enables us to honor God and others publicly, not privately or psychologically.

Shame has many destructive consequences. Renowned psychologist Elaine Aron rightly states, “Much of what we do everyday is to compare ourselves with others and to strive for respect, influence, and power. That is, we rank ourselves among others.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, she says, this sort of ranking results in unhealthy relationships and defense mechanisms, like minimizing, blaming, overachieving, inflating, and projecting.<sup>17</sup> What happens when God works to remove chronic shame and its vices? Put simply, people find more freedom to love others better.

A few examples from the Bible will illustrate the corrupting influence of shame (e.g., Cain killing Abel; those at Babel). Consider Simeon and Levi’s actions in Genesis 34. They “killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword and took Dinah out of Shechem’s house and went away. The sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister” (vv. 26–27). What’s more, the brothers’ actions pose a new threat to the family (v. 30).

How does Paul equip the church to be a light within a dark, social fragmented world? When he emphasizes and exhorts churches concerning church unity, he repeatedly returns to the theme of honor.

Positively, he seeks church unity by highlighting honor in relation to the church. In 1 Corinthians 12, he confronts competition and jealousy by undermining the idea that honor within the church is essentially individualistic. He argues that individuals are ascribed honor *as members of the group*.

On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor 12:22–27)

In other words, honor is ascribed to one part in as much as it belongs to and contributes to the whole. Distinction serves the purpose of unity.

Negatively, James 2:5–8 warns believers to avoid partiality due to social status. What does it look like when the church honors everyone in a way that glorifies God? Many ideas could be suggested. We will highlight one that is mentioned by multiple biblical writers. Like Jesus, his followers should be known for honoring those whom society routinely dishonors (cf. Luke 14:12–14). The distinction in honor-class often divides along economic lines. Thus, James warns,

Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. (Jas 2:5–8)

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<sup>16</sup> Elaine Aron, *The Undervalued Self* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2010), 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 40–70.



The inequality and partiality of the world might seep into the church through the subtlest of means. Even in the midst of doing ministry or in worship, churches sometimes reinforce a social hierarchy via their methods, traditions, choice of attire as well as how leaders schedule and run meetings.

#### *4. Summary*

This article addresses a frequently overlooked problem that impedes the church's theology and practice. Because shame is a universally experienced phenomenon, people across multiple academic disciplines have explored this topic. However, scholarly silos have long encumbered communication and thus our understanding of shame. While many people assume they understand the meaning of "shame," their assumptions diverge in significant ways.

We began by considering the nature of shame. Contrary to common opinion, shame has subjective and objective dimensions. Subjectively, shame is psychological or individual. Shame is objective in two different ways. First, shame is social or cultural. A particular community judges a person's value according to the norms of a social group. Second, sacred shame refers to a person's shame before God, who is the measure of honor throughout the entire world.

The Bible describes all three types of shame. They are both distinct and interconnected. Shame is both the fruit and the root of sin. Because shame is a basic human problem, we are not surprised that biblical writers also use honor-shame language to describe salvation. Accordingly, the second half of the essay identifies six ways the Bible uses honor and shame to depict humanity's problem and its solution.

The Bible provides an integrated framework for understanding shame (and honor). One hopes the above observations contribute to greater discussion and collaboration among theologians and practitioners across social spheres. This initial proposal should spur many people to rethink their assumptions about the meaning and significance of shame and honor. Our theological understanding is anemic without grasping the psychological and social import of honor-shame. Moreover, our reflections suggest potential ways the Bible can shape various ministries, such as counseling and mission. In short, honor and shame provide a framework for a theology and practice that is both biblically faithful and culturally meaningful.