

No Longer a Sinner Saved by Grace

BY DR. JOHN ANDERSEN

Surprisingly, the most common problem that I encounter with Christian clients is guilt and shame. Such guilt and shame can take an extreme psychopathological form of a pervasive rigid sense of condemnation leading to a fear of hell. Clinically it is a spiritual psychopathology characterized by delusional thinking that accompanies a diagnosis of major depression with psychotic features. This rigid delusional conclusion of inevitable condemnation is remarkably hard to shift in therapy. Yet the gospel is about forgiveness, acceptance and grace. How can shame and guilt co-exist with the gospel?

This article explores the issue of shame and guilt in Christians. Its thesis is that what gives rise to shame and guilt is the absence of a key central feature of Paul's theology. This key feature is that conversion to faith in Christ amounts to a profound change in a person's identity. Gentile believers are no longer aliens and strangers, but members of God's household. We are no longer godless, but adopted children of God. We are no longer sinners, but saints. Our holiness should be an accomplished fact, not an ongoing process of sanctification to a future outcome.

As we shall see, Paul's ethics is based upon this profound identity transformation. His ethical exhortations can be summed up in this way: Act consistently with who you really are now in Christ! Be authentic! Be consistent! In Paul's view, this is what Godliness is all about. The implication is that for a Christian, to sin is inconsistent with who we are - and living righteously is simply being who we are. Paul's view of holiness is the reverse of the tradition that most of us have grown up in.

CHRISTIANITY: A SHAME-BOUND RELIGION

In many protestant traditions, the Christian believer is characterized as a sinner saved by grace and covered by Christ's righteousness. It sounds pious, but is potentially toxic from a mental health perspective. What is missing from this theology is the recognition that Christian conversion involves a profound change in identity from "sinner" to "saint". In its absence, a believer remains a sinner in all a sinner's depravity, whose relationship with God is made right by the magic black box called "grace".

The Protestant doctrine of original sin provides a dogmatic legitimization

for a pervasive sense of shame. The shamefulness of original sin as a depraved nature is reflected in Calvin's definition of original sin.

"Original sin, therefore appears to be an hereditary pravity [sic] and corruption of our nature, diffused through all the parts of the soul, rendering us obnoxious to the Divine wrath, and producing in us those works which the Scripture calls the 'works of the flesh.'" (Calvin, 1559, II.1.8)

The effect of original sin was an evil inclination of the will, a propensity toward evil. Individual sins spring out of our inherited corrupt nature. Sins are also the outward expression of the evil desires of the heart. So, as John Wesley (1856, p.252) expressed it, "outward wickedness proceeds from inward wickedness."

This understanding of original sin as a pervasive corruption of our nature gives rise to a profound sense of shame. This sense of shame can be expressed in pious language. For example, Calvin (1559, II.1.1) wrote in his Institutes, "we should contemplate our miserable condition since the fall of Adam, the sense of which tends to destroy all boasting and confidence, to overwhelm us with shame, and to fill us with real humility." Pervasive shame is reflected in a negative attribution bias that ascribes all good works and virtues to God's grace, while attributing vices to the flesh. It is also reflected in Calvin's conception of sanctification as mortification of the flesh that amounts to the abolition of the self in the ultimate shame-based action of disappearing altogether (1559, II.3.1-5).

When a child cometh out of his mother's womb, what bringeth he with him? What worthiness [hath he]? Surely he is a poor carcass full of filth and uncleanness. Now then if God mark us out at the time when there is nothing in us worthy to be accepted of him, or which deserveth any love or liking; ... it is by reason of his own mercy;" (Calvin, 1547/1995, 119).

This tendency in popular Protestant Christianity towards shame-bound religion lies behind the pervasive sense of shame and guilt that affects Christians. When it interacts with and reinforces other forms of mental illness such as complex developmental trauma, it can evolve into a spiritual pathology.

What has given rise to this shame-based feature of popular Protestant Christianity is the absence of identity transformation as an emphasized feature of the gospel.

IDENTITY IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Identity is an overlooked feature in biblical theology for the reason that it is not a biblical concept. There is no word in Hebrew, Greek, or Latin that carries the same meaning as the word 'identity'. The closest word to identity in these languages is 'soul'. The Hebrew word *nepeš* meant 'soul' or 'life'. *Nepeš* often referred to the whole person as a living being in the Old Testament (Bergmann, 1997). The New Testament Gospels used the Greek word *ψυχή* (soul) in a number of ways. In some passages it denoted the life of the person. In others, it was the seat of a person's emotions. Elsewhere it referred to the whole person. There are also references to the *ψυχή* of a person surviving death to be either consigned to Gehenna or raised to a new eternal life with God. The New Testament usage of *ψυχή* lacked the precision that came to characterize Western thought, though the identification of *ψυχή* with life is consistent with the meaning of *nepeš* in the Old Testament (Bertram et al, 1985). The Latin conception for soul, *anima*, was understood to be a special substance that was endowed with reason and acted in and through the body (Johnson, 1998). According to Aristotle, (*On The Soul*, II.1), possession of a soul distinguished living beings from inanimate objects. So, we see that the classical notion of soul was concerned with identifying the human as a living being.

In contrast, the modern concept of identity is more concerned with distinguishing the person as an individual from others. The concept of identity is unique to Western culture because it presupposes the Cartesian conception of the person as a *res cogitans*, "a thinking thing", a self-conscious rational self (Descartes, 1641/1986). As we entered the 20th century, identity became a central concept in social psychology. The self became recognized as the locus of unity for an individual's social action and personal self-awareness. Identity has four features:

1. It is fluid and dynamic. It is actively maintained and continually being confirmed or being modified. It is not static or based on "substance" or a distinct hypostasis (Holstein&

Gubrium, 2000).

2. It is based upon identifications from significant others. We derive our identity from the identifications other people make regarding who they regard ourselves to be. Our identity is maintained by ongoing identifications from others that confirm our identity.
3. We derive our sense of identity with reference to our significant relationships - our family, clan, friendships, and the ethnic group to which we belong. Identity came to define our place in the social world. A significant change in these relationships inevitably leads to a modification of our identity (Mead, 1934).
4. It is actively maintained through self-enactment - identity is our personal existence as persons is through active dynamic being. We are continually enacting our existence. Our identity is inevitably reflected in our social behavior. The way we present ourselves in social life in the performance of social roles is the means by which we confirm our identity by expressing it in action. Furthermore, our self-presentation has a reflexive effect on our self-image. We tend to present ourselves in a way that is consistent our sense of identity, and we tend to modify our self-image in accordance with our social behavior (Goffman, 1969).

Our self-enactment interacts with identifications by others in an internal – external dialectic of identification. This dialectic involves an ongoing interaction between our own sense of identity and the identifications made by others that inform us of who they regard us to be from their perspectives. Where these identifications match our own sense of identity, they confirm our identity. When the identifications other people make call into question our sense of identity, we can either disregard their statements or we modify our sense of identity in the light of their identifications (Jenkins, 2004).

IDENTITY LANGUAGE IN PAUL'S LETTERS

The following sections discuss the identity language in Paul's letters with reference to the identifications from significant others, significant changes in relationships, and how the new Christian

identity is to be maintained through self-enactment - which is the central concern of Paul's ethical exhortations in his letters. When we interpret Paul's letters with reference to this conception of identity, a number of features immediately stand out. A prominent element in Paul's anthropology is the transformation of the believer's identity with respect to his or her status and relationship with God. Christian identity involves both continuation and discontinuity. There is discontinuity in that the new relationship with God, renewal from the indwelling Spirit, and being "in Christ" amounts to a profound transformation of identity. Alongside this transformation of the believer's identity is a continuation of identity with respect to personal history, personality, enculturation, and ethnic identity. This transformation of identity does not constitute a total break from the past. The relation between old and new is more complex than that. Rather, the new Christian identity superimposes itself upon the enduring identity that a person retains with respect to culture and personal history.

IDENTIFICATIONS BY OTHERS IN PAUL'S LETTERS

Paul's perspective on identity draws our attention to the importance of the identifications by others. Paul repeatedly made identifications that ascribed positive characteristics of his readers. Paul made some very striking and positive statements regarding how he regarded his readers to be.

- "I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another." Rom. 15:14
- In the opening passage in 1 Corinthians he described them as having been sanctified in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 1:2), enriched in all speech and knowledge (1 Cor. 1:5), not lacking in any gift (1 Cor. 1:7), and enjoying fellowship with Christ (1 Cor. 1:9).
- In 2 Corinthians 8:7-8 Paul described the Corinthian church as abounding in everything in faith, utterance, knowledge, earnestness, and love.
- In Colossians he described them as being disciplined and stable (Col 2:5), and complete in Christ (Col 2:10).

- He described the Philippians as beloved, his joy and crown (Phil 4:1).
- He described the Thessalonians as being beloved by God, steadfast, faithful, loving, enduring persecution, his glory and joy.

Paul repeatedly affirmed his readers in very positive terms and these affirmations amounted to positive identifications with respect to their new identity in Christ.

A significant source of a person's identity is the way he or she is identified by others. What Paul affirmed about the identity of the Christian is reflected in the ways he addressed his readers in his letters and his letters are full of identification language that conveys how he regarded the Christians to whom he was writing. A number of significant terms of identification occur throughout Paul's letters.

- Saint: One significant term is ἅγιος – translated 'saint'; ἅγιος being a Greek adjective meaning 'holy'. In the New Testament and the Septuagint, its primary reference was to the holiness of God. The word ἅγιος has a cultic meaning in the sense of sacred or set apart for cultic use or dedicated to the deity. The Old Testament tradition added a moral dimension to holiness in that God's holiness had a moral thrust to it and was unique to Judaism. The identification of a person as ἅγιος was an affirmation that one was set apart to serve the deity, and enjoyed a derived sacred status.
- Characteristics: The act of calling someone something is an act of social identification that ascribes that status or characteristic to the person being addressed. This is what Paul was doing when he repeatedly identified his readers as holy ones. He addressed them as ἅγιοι 39 times in his letters. He opened most of his letters by addressing his readers as ἅγιοι (Rom. 1:7, 1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1, Eph. 1:1, Col. 1:2, Phil. 1:1). Paul regarded the church as a ναὸς ἅγιος, a "holy temple" (1 Cor. 3:17; Eph. 2:21), and members of that temple as οἱ ἅγιοι, literally "the holy ones". Paul's choice of ἅγιος as his preferred form of address was a deliberate affirmation that identified the believer as an already holy person. Being ἅγιοι meant they were chosen, set apart, under God's

protection and favour.

- An accomplished fact: This is closely related to the assertion that we have a holiness and a righteousness that is a personal characteristic, rather than an alien righteousness ascribed to us by grace. The notion of sanctification is a process towards a future righteousness or purity from sin that will only be accomplished when we are resurrected into glory is foreign to Paul's theology. For Paul, holiness is an accomplished fact. By virtue of being saints (ἅγιοι), we already have been sanctified (ἡγιασθητε, and already possess holiness (ἁγιασμός). For Paul, being washed (referring to baptism), being sanctified (becoming saints) and being justified (made righteous) all go together. They are accomplished facts (1 Cor. 6:11).

That is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:11)

CHANGES IN SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIPS

A Christian's most significant change in relationships that has a dramatic transformative impact upon a person's identity is the new reconciled relationship with God. A key component of identity is a person's significant family relationships. Paul utilized metaphorical family language to describe the new relational status with God that believers had been introduced into. He called the believers he wrote to children of God (Rom. 8:16, 21, 9:8, Eph. 5:1, Phil 2:15), and adopted sons (8:15, 23, 9:4, Gal 4:5, Eph. 1:5). He affirmed that they were members of God's household as opposed to being aliens and strangers (Eph. 2:19). These familial titles implied a dramatic change in social status.

Sons of God: A prominent family metaphor in Paul's letters is that of adoption as sons (υιοθεσία). In Ephesians 1:5 he wrote that they have been predestined to adoption as sons. In Romans 8:15 Paul wrote that we have received a Spirit of adoption as sons, and when we address God as "Father" we are taking a relational position of adopted sons. He furthermore taught that the privilege of adoption of sons belongs by right to Israel (Rom. 9:4), but because Israel has rejected its Messiah,

this privilege has been extended to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:11). In Galatians 4:5-6 Paul wrote that Jesus came to redeem those who were under the law that we might receive adoption as sons. Adoption as sons both affirms a new family status while at the same time acknowledging that they were not sons by birth.

Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. (Rom. 8:17)

Inheritance of God: Adoption as sons is closely related to inheritance in Paul's letters. In Galatians 4:7 Paul wrote, "if a son, then an heir through God". His reference to our receiving adoption as sons in Galatians 4:5 was with reference to entering into ownership of the family estate, or coming into one's majority. In making this close connection between adoption as sons and having a right to inherit, Paul was referring to contemporary Greco-Roman laws of inheritance with respect to adoption.

Adoption by God: Adoption was not a Jewish custom but a Hellenistic one. Adoption was a legal strategy to address the problem that arose when a family had no male heir to inherit the estate. The estate holder could designate an heir through adoption, which designated him both as heir and incorporated him into the family so the family line continued. Adoption was also a Roman custom. Likewise, it was primarily concerned with inheritance of the family estate. Unlike Greek law, under Roman law women could also be adopted as heirs. Adoption also involved legally severing all ties with one's natural family, and becoming in effect a full member of the family one was adopted into with all the rights and family obligations that entails (Walters, 2003).

Change of Relationship with Others: The change in relationship with God that adoption brings also leads to changes in relationships with others. Our relationships with others are now primarily in terms of brethren versus unbelievers. This metaphor of adoption as sons is closely related to another common form of address Paul uses. He repeatedly addressed his readers as brethren, his brethren, brethren of each other, and brethren of Christ. The word ἀδελφός occurs 132 times in Paul's letters in reference to fellow believers. Paul is referring to a brotherhood between believers.

Kinship: The term 'brethren' implies kinship ties. This is all the more striking

in that he was predominantly addressing Gentile churches. Behind this term is a dramatic theological assertion that all believers, Jew and Gentile alike, are now family, household members, all now part of a new family of God in, through and under Christ. Family membership is a key reference point for a person's identity. Describing people as having been adopted into a new family is a profound change in identity that brings with it a new social status, new kinship ties and obligations.

IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION IN PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Identity transformation involved a dramatic change in identity. A departure from the old and becoming new:

Change of Identity: Paul's letters repeatedly contained statements where he challenged the old identities of his readers and invited them to regard themselves in dramatically new ways:

- In Galatians Paul states they were formerly slaves but are now sons and heirs of God (Gal. 4: 6-7).
- In Romans 5: 8-10, Paul stated that they were formerly sinners and enemies of God, but now are reconciled and justified and made righteous.
- Paul wrote in Ephesians 2: 1-22 that they were formerly alienated and hostile and engaged in evil deeds, but now are reconciled with a view to being holy and blameless and beyond reproach.
- They had formerly been in the domain of darkness, but have now been transferred into the kingdom of God's Son (Col 1: 13).
- In Romans 6 he described them as formerly being slaves to sin, but now free from and dead to sin.
- Paul makes a similar contrast that they were formerly dead in sins but now made alive with Christ (Eph. 2: 1-5; Col. 2: 12-13). Likewise, they were formerly subject to the law, but having died to the realm of the law, are released from its demands (Rom 7: 1-6).
- In Romans 8 Paul wrote that they formerly had been according to the flesh, but now exist according to the Spirit.

Transformation by the Spirit: This new state of being according to the Spirit involved a transformation of mindset (Rom. 8: 6-7), and the inner presence of God's indwelling spirit (Rom 8: 9-11). In 1 Corinthians 1: 26-30 he made the contrast that they were formerly of no status, regarded as foolish, weak, not mighty nor noble, but now in Christ they have received wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption, possessing a spiritual wisdom that the world did not understand. He also observed that formerly some of them had been thieves, idolaters, drunkards, adulterers, swindlers, but now they have been made clean, sanctified and justified, so that they were no longer the kind of people they formerly had been (1 Cor. 6: 9-11). They were now spiritual as opposed to natural, and the natural human does not comprehend who they now are (1 Cor. 2: 6-15). In 2 Corinthians he used a number of exchange comparisons where Christ became sin on their behalf that they might become the righteousness of God (5:21), and Christ became poor that they might become rich (8: 9). These changes amounted to such a transformation of the person that Paul described the believer as God's workmanship (Eph 2: 10) and a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17). All these contrasting identifications challenged his readers to modify their sense of identity accordingly.

New Creation: Paul's insistence that the Christian is a new creation directly contradicts the notion that the believer still possesses a corrupt sinful nature. Paul's insistence that a believer is a saint directly contradicts the pious notion that we are sinners saved by grace. Indeed, not once does Paul refer to a believer as a sinner. Rather, a believer is a saint.

These Pauline descriptions of the new Christian identity that changes our idea of self, our relationships with significant others and our spiritual transformation is very different from the shame and guilt that pervades much of popular Christianity.

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

The dramatic transformation of identity described by Paul as old man and new man, dying and being made alive, does not extend to an abolition of all aspects of our prior identity. This radical death and resurrection analogy implies a complete comprehensive discontinuity

of identity. As we shall see, however, there is ample evidence in Paul's letters to a continuity of identity with respect to social status and relationships alongside of the new identity the believer now has in relation to God in Christ. Paul continued to identify himself as an Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin and a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; Phil. 3:5). He remained a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:25-29). There was a continuity in social economic status and profession. Paul remained a tent-maker, and he continued in this trade to support his itinerant ministry (Acts 18:3). He encouraged Christians to remain in the social status they occupied when they came to believe – each person was to remain in the condition in which he or she was called, whether married, slave or free, circumcised or uncircumcised. This continuity of identity, however, did not exclude pursuing opportunities for improvement. Slaves could still aspire to freedom (1 Cor. 7:17-24).

How the new related to the old was not in terms of abolition and replacement, but rather in terms of salience and priority. Paul's assertion that there is no distinction in Christ and that the Christian is a "new man" and a new creation, can be taken as amounting to an abolition of the old man and the old identity. Paul in Galatians 3:28 where he wrote there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, but they are all united in Christ. In Colossians 3:11 Paul also wrote that the image in which the new man has been created contains no ethnic distinctions between Greek and Jew and barbarians, circumcised and uncircumcised, or social distinctions between slaves and freemen, but Christ is all in all. These distinctions no longer are salient for Christian identity in view of the preeminent salience of our union in Christ. In other words, there is a continuity of identity, with reference to our ethnic and social status, but a dramatic change in their salience for our new identity.

PAUL'S ETHICS: ETHICAL SELF-ENACTMENT

A common misconception in Christian spirituality is that pursuing righteousness and resisting sin requires an ongoing struggle against my fallen nature, my natural inclinations. It amounts to an ethic of self-inconsistency. To the contrary, Paul champions an ethic of self-consistency. Authentic spirituality provides the

foundation for Paul's ethics. Paul's ethical arguments repeated amount to engaging in sin is totally inconsistent with who you now are. It is inconsistent with your identity. Paul believed that the believer was no longer controlled by the sinful nature but governed by the Spirit (Rom 8:9). Paul exclaimed, "We died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?... Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies" (Rom 6:2, 12).

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Rom. 12:2)

Paul's ethics reflects a fundamental choice between being conformed to this world or being transformed by the renewal of one's mind (Rom 12:2). Being transformed by the renewal of one's mind plays itself out in the ethical actions specified in Romans 12:9-21. He based his exhortation to flee sexual immorality because they are a temple of the Lord and bought with a price and belong to God (1 Cor. 6:16-20). In his letter to the Colossians Paul based his exhortations not to get caught up in religiosity on the basis of their identity of being dead to sin and alive in Christ (Col. 2: 6-13). He based his exhortations to have nothing to do with immorality, greed, malice, anger, deceit on the basis of their identity transformation from who they used to be, and their new live in Christ (Col. 3:1-14). Paul's ethical exhortations in Ephesians chapters 4 and 5 were based upon the identity transformation of putting off the old man and putting on the new man created in God's likeness (Eph. 4:22-24). Paul's ethic can be summed up in this statement to the Ephesians, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." (Eph. 4:1).

In his rejection of living according to law, which was an externally referenced ethic, Paul had to come up with an internally referenced ethic. Hence, he consistently referred his ethical exhortations back to their identity, whom they have now become, and their new relationship status with God, who is the source of their new life. For Paul, ethical behaviour was a matter of self-enactment. We maintain and confirm our Christian identity through behaviour that is authentically consistent with that identity. Our behaviour does not establish our identity. This is why Paul consistently rejected any notion of salvation by works. But our behaviour maintains and confirms our identity through our self-presentation

in everyday life; it is a matter of self-enactment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Paul's identity language has two profound implications for Christian spirituality:

- The first implication is that Christian spirituality affirms the value and worth of the person. Paul's theology amounts to a powerful affirmation of authentic personhood. Paul's identity language affirms that we are chosen. We are accepted. We are loved. We belong. We are holy. We are good and righteous people.
- The second significant implication is that being righteous and godly is simply being consistent with who one is. A psychological feature of a believer is that we have a genuine desire to please God, be godly, do the right thing. Pursuing righteousness is a matter of desire. It is ego-syntonic. It is consistent with being oneself. It is a matter of self-enactment that affirms my identity as a Christian in relationship with Jesus.

Both these affirmations of Christian identity leave no room for deep seated shame. As far as Paul would be

concerned, having a shame-bound identity is simply inconsistent with being a Christian. Becoming a Christian amounts to a profound transformation of the person that penetrates to the depths of his or her being. This transformation, described in terms of a new life and a new creation, is the secret of the Christian life. It is also what stands between the liberating message of the Gospel, and the perversion of shame-bound legalistic religion that is buttressed by a distorted view of an angry judgmental God. On a practical level, it means that Paul's theology of identity as expressed in his letters provides a valuable resource for the Christian counsellor, with the additional benefit that it carries with it all the weight of the authority of the Scriptures.

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