

## ARROW ARTICLES SEXUAL PRESSURES

### Barriers to Godly Living

As we think of barriers to godly living, and what is sometimes called the 'dark side' of leadership, areas such as money, sex and power readily come to mind. But do these issues affect women in the same way as they affect men?

When thinking about women and sexual pressures there seem to be two equal and opposite dangers: one is that the male is seen as the norm, and that if the subject of sexual pressures is addressed at all, it's assumed that women have the same experiences as men. The other is to assume that women are different and that male sexuality is quite different from female sexuality.

This paper sets out to address first, why these contradictory approaches can co-exist, and then to gather thinking and research on the subject and to set out some ways of thinking about sexual pressures for women. Given the almost complete lack of material on the subject, we hope it will be of use both to women, and to men who seek to understand how sexual pressures affect women.

While the 'dark side' refers to those things which can pull leaders away from God, and, if not dealt with, destroy their ministry, when it comes to sexual issues, women have often been on the receiving end of the dark side of other leaders. Thus this paper also focuses on sexual harassment, sexual exploitation by other leaders, domestic violence and sexual abuse, and points to some sources of help.

### Women, Sexuality and Christian Faith

What is known as the sexual 'double standard' has existed in different forms for much if not most of human history, and continues to exist today. This double standard is based on the idea that the 'sex drive' is some kind of biological force, which is stronger in men than in women. As a force which is to some extent beyond control, its expression, therefore, in men should be regarded differently from its expression in women. At its most extreme this view implies that men have sexual needs, but women don't.



How does this 'double standard' manifest itself? From first-century Greek and Roman society to Victorian Britain, the double standard allowed society to condone the behaviour of men seeking sexual satisfaction outside marriage, while maintaining a wife and marriage for the purpose of procreating and raising children (think Tess of the D'Urbervilles, for example).

Only ten or 20 years ago, boys' sexual expression was expected, and in some contexts encouraged, but girls' was not. While for young women there is now more equality, it is sometimes still assumed that men's sexual needs are different from women's; while married women may no longer hear Christian teaching on how to appear in suitable apparel at bedtime, sometimes the idea that a woman's role is to meet men's needs is not far under the surface.

Furthermore, these 'sexual scripts' of active/passive and dominance/submission may allow men power over women in sexual activity, both within marriage and outside it, justify brutal or violent behaviour by men as normal, and leave some women open to exploitation by other powerful males. This situation may be compounded in a church context where male dominance and female submission is taught as a biblical principle.

Since the time of so-called 'sexual liberation' in the 1960s and 70s, and the publication of books like *The Joy of Sex* (1972), our culture has adopted the idea that sexuality enables you to become a truly individual person, while the rise of awareness around homosexuality has pushed us towards becoming even more identified through our sexual behaviour; gay or straight, homosexual or heterosexual.

The 'permissive society' brought mixed blessings to both men and women: had women gained more control over their sexuality, more freedom to be themselves, or were they more sexually available, and open to exploitation in different ways? As the women's liberation movement brought greater equality between men and women, while many men genuinely changed, some sought to marry women who were like-minded equals, but in bed still maintained their assumptions of male supremacy and demanded submission.

Today, there is continued change towards more equal relationships between men and women, but some continuing barriers. In a consumer society, women's sexuality can be seen as another commodity to buy – witness the rise of human trafficking, sex tourism and internet pornography, or more controversially, the presence of shops such as Ann Summers in the high street. Domestic violence (the majority perpetrated by men) continues to be entrenched in most societies including our own, testimony to a continuing culture of male power and control which exists within the Church as well as outside it.

## BELIEVING DISTORTIONS

On the one hand women are bombarded by expectations and images from a media obsessed with sex, and on the other, some women have not been encouraged to recognise their sexual feelings – as suggested above, many women find sexuality confusing. In *Temptations Women Face*, Mary Ellen Ashcroft suggests that Christian women may believe one of several distortions about sex:

- **Sexuality is bad** The models of women presented to women in the Church have been somewhat limited: saint or whore. Lurking in the background of 'Christian' thinking is the virgin Mary (unattainable sinless mother), Mary Magdalen (wrongly thought to have been a prostitute), plus the legacy of Augustine's 'theology' of sex – that all sex is shameful.
- **Women don't 'lust'** The double standard which tells women that they have weak or non-existent sex-drives may hinder women from recognising their sexual feelings for what they are. The danger is that if a woman does not realise she can be capable of intense passion towards someone, then it is easier for her to slide into an inappropriate relationship.
- **Sex is a male need** Sex taught from a male perspective can assume that a woman is there to satisfy male needs – hence guidance for women on what to wear in bed. Christian women can experience several contradictory things: she may feel that her main role is to ensure that her husband gets what he needs – and sublimate her own desires. She may believe that being married to a Christian man will mean that everything will be wonderful – and if she feels dissatisfied she may feel guilty, be out of touch with her real feelings, and very vulnerable to sudden sexual temptation.
- **A happy marriage means fulfilling sexual intimacy** If women see themselves as existing for the sake of the other, they may blame themselves for any dissatisfaction they feel. They may also be tempted to find sexual satisfaction elsewhere.

So if these are distortions, where do we find the truth? Our starting point must be the Bible.

## Starting With the Bible

What does the Bible tell us about godly relationships between men and women? Before we look at how sin so easily distorts human sexuality, it's good to start with a brief look at how God intended things to be.

Genesis tells us that God made human beings in his image, 'male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27), and that God saw that 'it was not good for the man to be alone' (2:18). The foundation for godly relationships come from the mutuality within our Trinitarian God, patterned after the relationships between the first and second persons of the Trinity: interdependency and mutuality. The



biblical narrative also points to the goal of godly relationships, reflecting the character of God. The image of God is not reflected in men only or women only, but found in human community. The man Adam was incomplete until introduced to his counterpart, a woman.

Thus God's intention is a life-long 'one flesh' relationship between a man and a woman, a relationship of equals. For many Christians, this will be the context in which they enjoy a sexual relationship and grow in maturity to make a strong marriage and a sexually pleasurable one. The Song of Songs can be read as an allegory but is perhaps primarily an insight into intimate love between a man and a woman.

But marriage is not the only context in which people can grow in godly, loving relationships. Many people are single, out of choice or circumstances, and Jesus showed that it is possible to enjoy close relationships without the exclusive relationship of marriage.

Like every aspect of our humanity, though, our sexuality is marked by the consequences of our fallen state. Hence it is a source of both joy and sorrow, and at times we may find ourselves struggling both with our own feelings and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We may struggle with temptation, and when we sin, with guilt and with the consequences of past actions. With God there is always the possibility of forgiveness and healing, and the power to make a new start.

So how do we find godly relationships? Stanley Grenz puts it like this: 'godly relationships emerge as men and women offer their unique perspectives as gifts to each other, so that together they might become the community of persons God intends humans to be'.

But how does this work out in practice? The film *When Harry met Sally* asks the question, can men and women be friends, or only lovers? Can there be friendship without 'the sex thing getting in the way'? Christians may want to answer: yes men and women can be friends, but only when their relationships are not tainted by power, by fantasy, or by secrecy.

## Areas of Sexual Pressure

### THE SPECIAL DANGERS OF MINISTRY

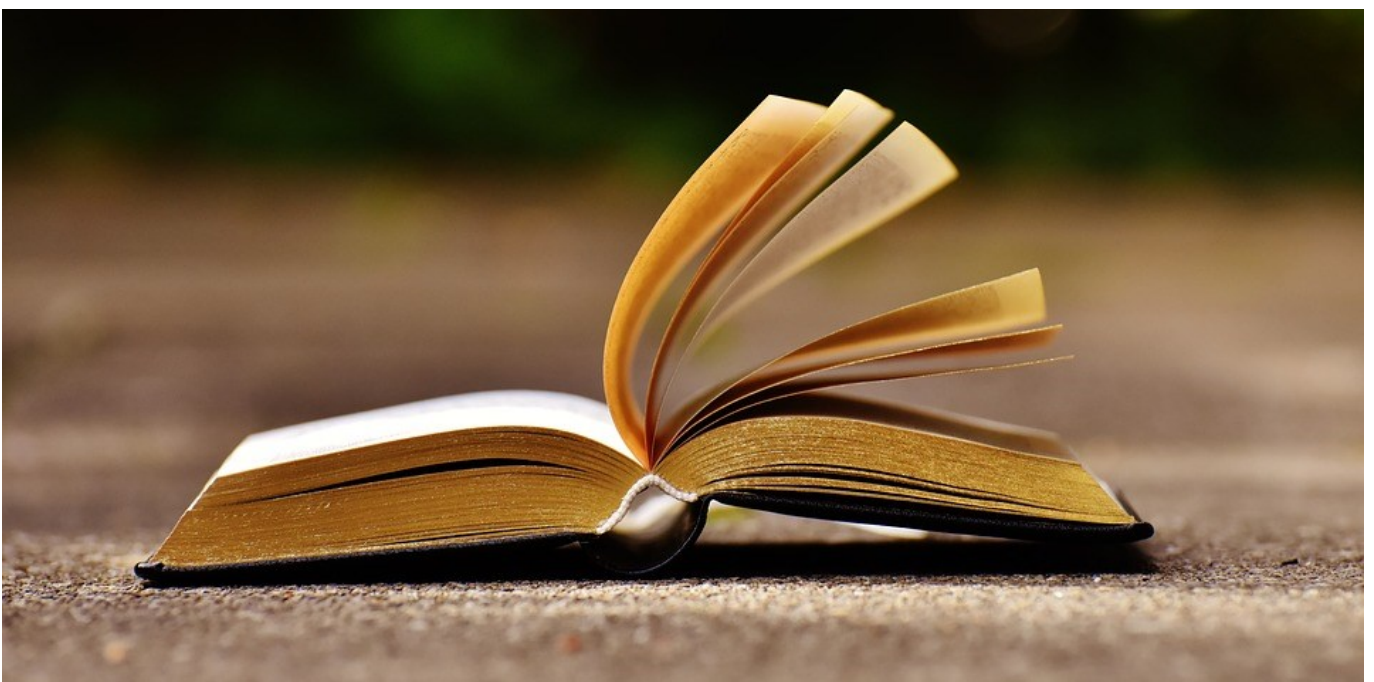
It is important to bear in mind the special circumstances of clergy and others in ministry. Those who are ministers find themselves interacting with others at a deep level. They are drawn into areas of intimacy with others – but may find that they in turn have no-one with whom to share their own deep thoughts and feelings.

In addition, some ministers find it hard to make good friendships – with those in their parish or work context, or outside it – and can be lonely, and vulnerable. Some react to being hurt by withdrawing, but that brings a variety of dangers, of being thought superhuman or subhuman. To depend solely on one's spouse as emotional support may be to put tremendous pressure on one person. And for those who are single, (more women than men in ministry) there are increased dangers of loneliness.

To be isolated or lonely may be to become dangerously vulnerable to the warmth of friendship (and more) with colleagues or those to whom one ministers.

### SINGLENESS

The Church does not always know what to do with single people, and some churches are more couple-oriented than society is, making it very difficult for single Christians.



Sexuality and singleness are rarely considered. It may be even more difficult for single leaders.

Some single people may have come to terms with the possibility of life-long singleness, others may long for marriage. There are more single women in the Church than there are single men, and for women the lack of single Christian men can make them feel their situation is increasingly hopeless as the biological clock is ticking away.

Single people need love and friendship as much as married people do. Within the Church there are huge pressures on single people to be celibate, but this may seem hard when so many people in our society seem to define themselves by their sexual behaviour. For those who find themselves single after being widowed or divorced, that lack of intimacy may feel extremely difficult.

### **HOMOSEXUALITY**

Same sex relationships are a difficult area, especially now that there are different 'Christian' viewpoints, even within the evangelical wing of the Church. But the traditional biblical view is that God's intention for his people is lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual union, and that sexual activity outside marriage is less than God's best.

Some women (and men) experience a same-sex attraction as a temporary phase during teenage years, others are attracted to other women as a reaction to abusive or dominating male relationships, while others again may find that what starts as a friendship with another woman develops into a sexual relationship.

Arguments continue as to whether a small percentage of the population are 'naturally' homosexual, and whether people who've had homosexual relationships can change, or whether lifelong celibacy is the only alternative, and Christians will probably continue to differ in their opinions. Those who struggle with their sexuality need to find the Church a place of grace rather than condemnation, and where support is given to single people and chaste loving friendships.

### **PORNOGRAPHY**

Women may be the implicit victims of pornography, or they may be consumers of porn. Pornography may involve stories and pictures in which people (usually women) are degraded and humiliated. Recent research links men's use of porn with their beliefs in traditional roles for women, and use of porn has been linked to dissatisfaction with committed relationships. While outwardly Christians do not condone the use of pornography, some church traditions promote the 'double standard' explored earlier: women are meant to be beautiful, and men more visual and more sexual.

Increasingly, as part of the trend of so-called sexual liberation, with pole-dancing promoted as a fun night out for the 'girls', and raunch culture encouraging women to be sexy, more women are viewing pornography too. For some women, porn seems to be about reclaiming power, turning the tables on men and putting them in positions of humiliation and submission. Yet for women, as for men, it is addictive, and detracts from real relationships.

By 'gendering' sexual sin, there is a danger that churches assume women are not affected by sexual addiction and pornography. Women can be as visual as men, and women as well as men struggle with pornography and lust.

Women – or men – who find themselves in the power of pornography need to find help: by admitting the problem, confessing it as sin, and addressing the underlying issues which have caused the addiction. As with all addictions, it is not easy to overcome the addiction to pornography, and it is not something which can be done by oneself. It is a struggle, and one which involves progress and setbacks. Every day may be a constant battle, but it is a start to recognise the temptation, and then one can make progress, through a combination of prayer, accountability, and building new patterns of thinking and behaving.

### **WOMEN AND TEMPTATION**

There are thus all kinds of ways in which women may struggle with sexual temptation. Some may be surprised when they identify within themselves strong passions or lust. For others, romance novels or soap operas can become fantasies which (as porn does) feed the hunger for intimacy and pleasure that they are not getting from actual relationships.

Some wrong relationships grow out of friendships or working relationships. We may be more aware of when male clergy end up in wrong relationships with women, but a female leader may have an inappropriate relationship with a male colleague.

How does one see the signs of danger? One writer suggests that friendship is moving out of safe bounds when there is secrecy, emotional intimacy and sexual chemistry. These three elements can combine in potent mix. If a relationship is open, it is probably a friendship. There may well be a degree of sexual chemistry with a friend of the opposite sex. But if one starts to want to meet alone, or to keep those meetings private, then it's time to acknowledge danger and to withdraw.

If friends and colleagues can acknowledge that there is sexual energy around, and that sparks are present, they may be able to acknowledge this to themselves at least, and possibly to others. Then they can set their own boundaries and keep accountable – to spouses and others.



There are guidelines for Anglican clergy in the form of the Guidelines for the professional conduct of the clergy, issued in 2003, but once an inappropriate relationship develops, rules are unlikely to stop it. It is more important to look at underlying issues.

It may take some time for a person to acknowledge and come to terms with sinful behaviour, since they may have rationalised or justified it in some way. Once a sin is acknowledged, it needs to be confessed. Confessing to another person as well as to God can give the opportunity for prayer together, for conversation (and perhaps referral for counselling) which can begin addressing the problem, and for future accountability. Confession of sin will enable a woman who has sinned to receive God's forgiveness and to have her sense of being accepted by God restored. She may also need help to be freed from any bondages created, to deal with the consequences of the sin, and then to move on.

### KEEPING SAFE AND FINDING GRACE

How do women keep safe, and find grace when they fail? Here are a number of principles:

- Acknowledge your vulnerability.
- Be accountable.
- Be alert to warning signs and avoid or remove the opportunity.
- Face deeper issues that make you vulnerable.
- Cherish the special relationships God has given you.
- When you fail, acknowledge it to yourself, and confess to God.
- Endeavour also to acknowledge your failure to others, through formal confession or informally in a secure place, in order to receive support as you work through the implications.

## 'More Sinned Against than Sinning'? Women, Harassment and Violence

The subject of sexual pressures from women's perspective needs also to acknowledge that women may have been on the receiving end of harassment, violence or other inappropriate sexual behaviour. As with any form of abuse, this may be part of a woman's past experience but never shared with others or resolved.

### SEX IN THE FORBIDDEN ZONE

In his seminal book published in 1989, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*, Peter Rutter suggested that the fulfilment of sexual fantasy in the 'forbidden zone' (any sexual contact that occurs within professional relationships of trust – including clergy) was always the product of an inequality of power. The dynamic was that the man held a key to the woman's future, and the woman was unable to say no to him. Rutter's research showed that the problem was huge, yet largely unacknowledged.

While there seems to have been little written on the subject more recently, the fact that many such relationships today involve less power makes the exploitation of women in this way less likely, but there are still male clergy who hold power and have the potential to abuse it.

In the past (and when Rutter was writing), it was mainly men in those professional positions. Now, leaders, whether men or women, need to be aware of the power they hold over others and how this influences the dynamics of relationships. Talking about power, sharing it, and using it humbly can help keep others safe from the abuse of power in a sexual way as well as in other ways.

Women ministers may be in danger of exploiting their power in a sexual way, or may have been victims of male church leaders in the past. In either case there will often be a variety of reasons why this has happened. For women who have been victims, the results may be devastating;



however, the potential for healing is enormous if they are able to talk about the experience.

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Domestic violence affects between one in four and one in three women at some time in their lives, and appears to be as prevalent in Christian as in non-Christian relationships – sometimes reinforced by so-called biblical views of ‘headship’ and submission in marriage. While men can be victims too, the majority of such violence is against women.

This is a huge area, and much has been written on the subject. Domestic violence, whether physical, sexual or emotional, usually involves power and control. Victims usually feel trapped and unable to escape, and their esteem often reaches rock-bottom. People who have been in abusive relationships may find it hard to achieve their potential because they are still living with feelings of regret, guilt and inadequacy.

### **SEXUAL ABUSE**

Sexual abuse can leave a terrible legacy, but a story which has been hidden can come to light in an atmosphere of safety and support, and the person may then be able to begin the journey of healing.

### **SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature, and it is estimated that around 50% of women in employment are or have been subject to harassment in some form. In 2007, staff of Gifted for Leadership, a US resource for Christian women leaders, commissioned a survey on sexual harassment. Out of 779 ‘active Christian women’, more than a quarter said that they had experienced sexually inappropriate behaviour, and one fourth of those who had experienced it said it happened in a church or ministry setting. In addition, many women who said they’d never been the victim of sexual harassment went on to report behaviour such as touching, suggestive jokes, or gender-based discrimination.

In the survey, 53% of those who reported being sexually harassed said they had no intention of reporting it – and the percentage is higher in the ministry setting. The Sex Discrimination Act (as amended in 2005) gives people the legal right not to be sexually harassed at work, and while the Church is exempt, it clearly is not morally exempt. The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 makes it a criminal offence to harass another person, and covers a wide range of actions.

Women who are ministers or working for Christian organisations may have experienced harassment in the past. If it has occurred within a church context they are unlikely to have complained, but may have suffered in

silence. The ongoing effects can be debilitating, and a safe, supportive group, or a mentoring relationship, might be the opportunity for telling the story and finding healing.

### **In Conclusion**

Consideration of sexual pressures for women is complex. Today, unrestrained sexual behaviour is increasingly seen as normal, while Christian women’s experience is coloured by centuries-old assumptions of male-female difference, and the religious association of women with defilement, shame and impurity. Women may experience the same temptations as men. They may also have been the objects of unwanted attention. However women may have experienced sexual pressures, God is always greater: swift to forgive, and the source of healing and hope.

### **Sexual Pressures – A Personal Story**

The article below is a highly personal account of the issue of sexual attraction and temptation.

#### **THE UNEXPECTED**

I would be described by my friends as stable, fulfilled and happily married. I suppose I am. But in the ordinariness of family, work and church life, a woman can feel very mundane and boring. The sense of life passing and days being so predictable was quite heavy on me at the time of the beginning of this story. I was ripe for something to happen.

The man in the story, I came to know quite legitimately in the ordinary course of my job. I work in the wider Church and our paths crossed quite frequently. We came across each other on the team at Spring Harvest, on committees and synods. We had so many groups of people ‘in common’ that there was never any lack of things to talk about and over a period of time I suppose it was only natural that these began to include much which was personal as well as that which were work.

I don’t remember that either of us ever remarked on the way in which the frequency of these chance meetings increased. We certainly never made an actual decision that we would make them happen. But we did. When two people run their own diaries, work outside any box and are surrounded by the trust of their colleagues, partners and congregations, there is no limit to the pattern of their lives. There is no limit either, it seems, to their ability for self-deception.

As the months went by and our interaction became ever more personal and intimate, the only thing which kept me safe was that we never made the decision to meet except on our way to other things. This meant that invariably we were in a car and both of an age where sex needs to be comfortable! But slowly this relationship had become sexual and invaded therefore any legitimate sexual situations. My relationship with my husband became



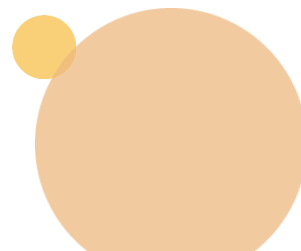
distant and my sexual relationship with him was dominated by thoughts of this man. Nor was that enough because before long he not only filled my mind in terms of when and how I would get to see him, but also in the almost perpetual state of sexual excitement I was in. It was only a question of time and place.

Then one day he phoned me at home when he thought everyone else would be out. But my plans had changed and I was working away from home. My son, unexpectedly home from university, answered the phone. Somehow this bridging of the gap between my real life and this 'woman's magazine existence' with this man jolted me awake. I was ashamed that my son had become even in this way, involved. I was embarrassed by his having to get a message through to me. I was shocked that this man was so sure of me that he was prepared to invade my home life. I met up with him that day and we had probably the first really honest conversation we had ever had. I brought the whole relationship to a painful end.

Then began the whole period of bereavement and rehabilitation. I had learnt to live in a particular way; my mind thought that way and my emotions were stimulated through that. Suddenly the whole system seemed to close down. I could not revert to what had been previously. I was unable to receive help because I would have died rather than tell anyone what had happened. There was nothing to tell, after all. We hadn't had an affair. Then as the numbness and grief died down a little, I realised that I was

more at risk than ever. Inevitably, soon another opportunity would open up for this kind of relationship and I would be more open to it than the first time and would start the relationship further down the road. I could of course confess all to my husband. But then the high level of trust which was what made our lives and my job possible, would be gone forever. For what? Why should my stupidity wreck his peace of mind? Hadn't I already cheated him enough?

So in the end, I went to see my immediate manager and then two colleagues. I saw each of them individually and told them only the basic facts of what had happened. I asked their forgiveness and said I wanted to be accountable to them. Suddenly the sense of being at risk, overcome by my own sexuality, 'damaged goods', disappeared and I started to pray again. I could face up to my own sexuality with its insatiable appetite, outrageous imagination and unreasonable power for self-deception. In time, I was able to look at myself - my gifts, skills and person-hood as a woman and say confidently 'I am worth more than that'.



Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

T'was grace that taught my heart to fear.  
And grace my fears relieved.  
How precious did that grace appear...  
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come;  
Tis grace that brought me safe thus far  
And grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years  
bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
than when we've first begun.

John Newton

## Resources

### BOOKS

While many people struggle with these issues, there seems to be a lack of accessible books. The following cover issues of temptation generally (the first two), and various aspects of sexual pressures.

- Mary Ellen Ashcroft, *Temptations Women Face*, InterVarsity Press, 1991
- Karen Lee-Thorp, *Peeking into a Box of Chocolates*, NavPress, 2005
- Peter Rutter, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*, Jeremy Tarcher Inc, 1989 and other editions (now out of print but an influential piece of research writing).
- S. Edwards, K. Matthews and H. Rogers, *Mixed Ministry*, Kregal, 2008
- Marie Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred? When sex invades the pastoral relationship*, Harper and Row, 1989
- Rosie Nixson (Ward) *Home is Where the Hurt is*, Grove Books, 1994 (now out of print but downloadable from CPAS website)

### WEBSITES

- [www.cbeinternational.org](http://www.cbeinternational.org) (resources include books, articles and recordings on sexuality, pornography, domestic violence, etc.)
- [www.thesurvivorstrust.org](http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org) (umbrella agency for specialist agencies working with women, men and children who are victims of sexual violence or abuse)
- [www.macsas.org.uk](http://www.macsas.org.uk) (minister and clergy sexual abuse survivors – site includes links to resources and other sexual abuse agencies)
- [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk) (info and resources on domestic violence)
- [www.rightsofwomen.org.uk](http://www.rightsofwomen.org.uk) (legal information on issues affecting women, including downloadable resource sheets)

### For Reflection/Discussion

- What assumptions do we have about men and women and their sexuality? How might these affect how we see women's sexual sin?
- How can single people enjoy their sexuality rather than seeing it as a burden?
- Is the celibate lifestyle more difficult today than in the past? How can we help single people to maintain their celibacy?
- Why do you think women may be confused by their sexuality and sexual feelings?
- What power dynamics are at work in relationships between women and their 'boss', their team members, those they serve?
- What 'rules', written or unwritten, do we currently operate by when it comes to sexual issues? What guidelines would best serve us and what boundaries do we want to make? How will we keep accountable to others so as to work safely?
- What safe places do we provide in our churches for women to speak about unwanted sexual experiences?





## Exploring the Hidden Feelings that Stop Us Being All that God Made Us to Be

Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame.  
Genesis 2:25 (NLT)

... (The woman) took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, **and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness**. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.

When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees.  
Then the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?'

He replied, 'I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.'  
Genesis 3:6-10 (NLT)

The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.  
Genesis 3:21

'THE ROOTS OF THE WORD  
SHAME ARE THOUGHT TO  
DERIVE FROM AN OLDER  
WORD MEANING  
"TO COVER".'  
WIKIPEDIA

Stories told in this article are true stories. They are either my own stories, or they have been altered to protect the identity of the person involved, and so may be an amalgamation of more than one story.

# Introduction

## SHAME

Those who study shame believe that we begin to experience shame before we can speak.

I have suffered from shame for 56 years, but could only name it as shame for the last 20 years.

The verses in the preface suggest that shame is one of the earliest feelings experienced in the Bible.

As I watch the faces of my pre-school grandchildren, I sometimes see what I think is shame cloud their faces.

Working one-to-one with many people I encounter shame in others regularly, I watch it rise up in them, until they are covered with shame. Then I watch them bury it with the protective techniques they have developed.

## MY OWN EXPERIENCE

These are my credentials (or lack of them!) for writing about shame.

Whilst I have done no systematic research into shame, I write as someone who has journeyed with my own shame – with God and with others. I am not an academic theologian but over the years I have begun to understand and name the shame that I and others experience in body, mind and spirit.

I have read about it; I have noticed it in the Bible; I have opened up my shame experiences to God and his word, and worked with him at learning to live well with shame.

I have a Spiritual Director who I trust to see the shame in my life.

Latterly, whilst doing a post-graduate Pastoral Counselling course, I had two years of therapy which largely focused on shame, and I engaged with others in 'group development', where my input was often around my shame.

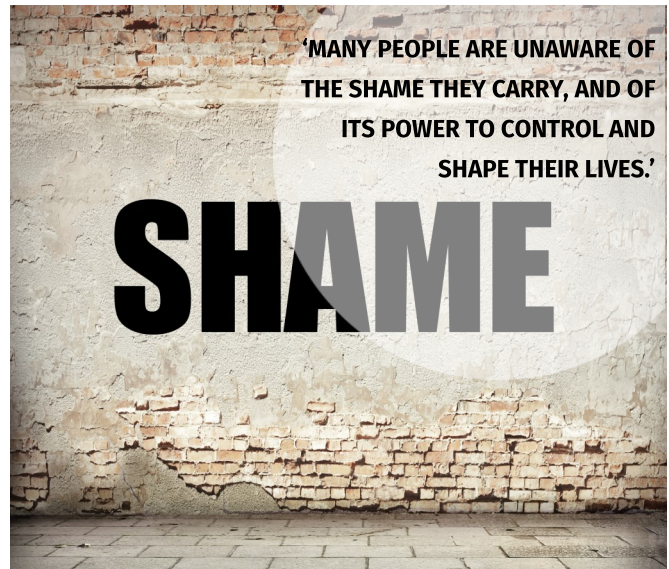
I have worked as a Spiritual Director for over 20 years and now also as a counsellor.

I do pastoral work on the CPAS Arrow Leadership Programme.

I lead individually guided retreats.

I am part of a large family.

And in all these contexts I observe the power of shame at work in peoples' lives.



As I do this work I find that many people are unaware of the shame they carry, and of its power to control and shape their lives, unaware of its ability to stop them being the people God planned for them to be.

It seems to me important that the Church learns a greater awareness and understanding of the effect and activity of shame, and how it works within the Church, particularly in those who lead the Church.

I believe that God can begin to heal shame and help us live well with the discomfort of shame; that he can set people free to come out of hiding.

This Arrow article is an introduction to what shame is and how it works, but also how God can begin to do the work of healing the shame within us.

As I've written it, discussed it and received feedback from others, there are perhaps now more questions arising in me than there were before I started.

- I've realised that what excites me is the possibility of helping Christian leaders discover and understand how shame is at work in their lives and ministries, particularly the links between shame and achievement, shame and success and shame and under-performing.
- I'd like to develop more thoughts about how we hide ourselves in God, once we become aware of shame.
- It would be interesting to look at repentance and sorrow, and how that is different to shame, but also how the former can bring healing to the latter.
- And what about fear, anxiety and worry, are they linked with shame?
- I'd love to explore how shame relates to personality using, for example, the Enneagram.

But for now these will have to wait. Here are my reflections on shame so far.

# Stories

## Her Story

The middle-aged couple stood on the narrow, dusty road, surrounded by cases and bags. The Greek men in the taverna opposite watched them idly.

The couple waited for some time in the hot sun, and then, after a brief conversation, the husband left, going back the way they'd come.

'You wait for taxi?' called one of the men to the woman. 'Yes' she answered.

Some minutes later the husband returned and then went over to speak to the men, explaining that their taxi hadn't arrived. One of the men made a phone call and promised that a taxi would come soon.

Again the middle aged couple waited, and sure enough, ten minutes, later the taxi came, and they climbed in.

Not a very dramatic story you might think, but as I am the woman, let me tell you the inside story.

We had come to the end of a few days on Rhodes, and were waiting for a taxi to take us to the airport. The owner of the house had told us that a taxi would come. The road was narrow with no pavement, and motor bikes and cars passed close to our luggage.

'We can't stand here on the road' I said to my husband, 'But that's where they said to wait' he replied.

Within me shame was growing. The negative voices of



those who are 'watching' me, 'observing' me were starting to speak.

'Why do they need so much luggage?

'Get out of our way!'

'Xeni – foreigners – go back home!'

'Look what she's wearing! – Greek women always dress smartly'

'So stupid – don't you know what you're doing!'

'Why are they just standing there?'

It was even worse when my husband abandoned me to go and phone the owner, leaving me to face the voices on my own.

And then the men spoke to me.

'Don't speak to me... don't notice me... I'll have to speak Greek... you'll think I'm pathetic'

Hot shame ran up and down my body like a river of fire, my chest tightened so that breathing became difficult.

So I don't breathe, don't move, don't look at anyone... I freeze... maybe then no one will see me.

## His Story

'He tries!'

Just two words, said behind my back, but deliberately within earshot – a throw away comment intended to humiliate. These words became indelibly printed on my memory, and would set me on a journey of striving and driven-ness. As a 15 year-old teenager I was walking past a small group of army cadets, painfully conscious of the three stripes on my shoulder that indicated my promotion above them. A teacher had seen something in me that made them think I could be a leader, much to my surprise, and I knew that the boys who were teasing me were really thinking 'Who on earth do you think you are?'


The words were said in a stage whisper, as a deliberately unfinished sentence. The implication being that I would indeed try, but that there was no way I was going to succeed.

My precarious ego lurched from its momentarily elevated state. It was, of course, true. I was bound to disappoint, and my newly given status would, yet again, make me unacceptable to the 'in-crowd'.

I would try, and like everything else I'd tried, I wouldn't be good enough at leading. I'd only recently been transferred from another school, where bullying had caused me to become isolated, lonely, and chronically depressed. My life seemed to be a story of not being wanted, even from early childhood, where, as the fourth (unplanned) child of

missionary parents whose missionary society only provided for up to three children, I had created all sorts of financial problems for them. And yet, in that moment, even as my neck turned a bright shade of red, and I walked away pretending I hadn't heard, a part of me resolved to prove them wrong.

I desperately wanted my parents to be proud of me, in some way. I also wanted so much to be ordinary, to be acceptable to the group of people who seemed to have such a strong sense of camaraderie. And as I started to throw myself into developing the gifts that I knew God had given me, my illusory sense of self, my ego, rose out of its battered, isolated hole, and became an unstoppable taskmaster that drove me to succeed, to strive to be enough.



'I PROVED THOSE BOYS WRONG. I TRIED AND I SUCCEEDED. WHAT I PERHAPS DIDN'T SEE WAS THAT IN MY ATTEMPT TO BECOME ACCEPTABLE, I HAD CREATED HABITS THAT WOULD BECOME VERY HARD TO BREAK IN ADULTHOOD.'

I spent hours practising to become the best guitarist in the school. Vomiting became a normative part of sprint training, to push the lactic envelope to its absolute limit in order to ensure that I became the fastest boy in the school. I made sure I was always in the right place at the right time in the eyes of his house master, so that I was made house captain.

I proved those boys wrong. I tried, and succeeded. What I perhaps didn't see was that in my attempt to become acceptable, I had created habits that would become very hard to break in adulthood – the striving for acceptability gave me an ability to read people and be winsome, but I was always haunted by those words, and doubted if I should really belong anywhere. My fear was that I was not really enough, in and of myself, and that it was only by magnifying my true self to create a larger ego, that I would truly be acceptable.

It took over 20 years to begin to understand that I was enough. The habits and patterns developed to avoid shame are hard to break, though, and remain drivers, if

unchecked. The Father's affirmation of Jesus at his baptism is a key Bible passage for me – beloved and pleasing before achieving.

Brene Brown talks about empathy as the antidote to shame, and I find this to be true. Those who know us, understand us and accept us are crucial in regaining perspective, and that's why authentic community is so powerful. Eckhart Tolle's book, *A New Earth* helped me to see how I had created an ego that was a false exaggeration of my self, the good and the bad bits, in my striving to avoid the shame of perceived unacceptability. Marshall Rosenberg's classic book *Nonviolent Communication* helped me to grow in self compassion, accepting myself as enough, and being compassionate when I fail to meet my sometimes ridiculous expectations!

### Your Story?

- I wonder if you suffer with shame. And if you do, what story would you tell here?
- What were your feelings then, and what are they now as you recall the events?
- If you aren't aware of incidents that shamed you, it may be worth asking yourself those questions as you read this paper, and in the days afterwards.
- Ask God about it too.

Because we can bury shame deep within us, and learn ways to keep it buried, we may be unaware of its presence and activity in us. Yontef (2003) calls these the 'automatic manoeuvres' by which we avoid the intolerable pain of shame.

### What Shame Is... and What It Isn't.

'Shame is experienced as a feeling of being fundamentally unacceptable, unworthy or defective, which leads to a desperate urge to hide or disappear.'

Joyce and Sills 2010

Some shame is healthy and necessary as it helps us to stay safe and live within our human boundaries.

When my children were young I encouraged them in the freedom of stripping off and playing naked in the Pennine rivers where we lived. But before they went to school they had to learn healthy shame, required by culture and stage of development. Healthy shame which would protect them physically, mentally and emotionally.

But much shame is unhealthy, interrupting us from living freely with God, with others and with ourselves. Shame can



also become toxic, making life a burden and stopping us from engaging in positive interaction with ourselves, others or God.

The consensus of expert opinion is that shame begins very early in life, before we can speak (Yontef 1996; Kaufman 1985; Joyce and Sills 2010). Gerhardt (2004) in her book about how babies' brains develop describes how an overdose of cortisol, caused by shame, will adversely affect the development of a baby's brain.

It doesn't take much to cause a shame reaction.

When my children were at primary school we had to cross a very busy road to get there. One day my daughter stopped in the road to pick up something she had dropped. I yelled very loudly at her to come. And we went on to school.

I know about it because years later she told me how badly it had affected her. Going straight into school after a shaming incident meant that we had no time to restore the relationship. She lived the whole day with the shameful feelings.

It's often the repetition of such small incidents that over the years result in unhealthy shame forming.

What is called 'toxic shame' is often rooted in childhood abuse and trauma where key attachments are disrupted or even non-existent.

## Naming Shame

Becoming aware of our own shame reaction can be difficult. As Joyce and Sills say (above) 'it leads to a desperate urge to hide or disappear', just like Adam and Eve did. Having lived with shame almost all our lives we become very skilled at hiding it – even from ourselves.

Let me suggest two ways to try to name it in yourself:

1. Notice your reactions:
  - After an uncomfortable experience ask yourself 'What happened in me – body, mind and emotions?'
  - Look for things like: shallow breathing, tightness in your chest/shoulders, constriction in your throat, shrinking (for example stooping to make yourself small), feeling frozen and unable to move, blushing, body heat, wanting to hide.
2. What name would you give your reaction?

Embarrassment, guilt and humiliation all carry similar feelings to shame, (Brown 2012 p.71), but let me suggest how they are different:

### EMBARRASSMENT

This is what we feel when we enter an unfamiliar situation or make a social faux pas. If we react normally to embarrassment, we will be able to laugh at it with others afterwards. But if we sink into shame we'll keep it hidden.

On holiday in France I found that none of the toilet doors had working locks. On most occasions I solved the problem by keeping my foot near the door. But on the train the door was too far away.

As I sat on the toilet, the door swung wide open, and a woman started to enter until she saw me sitting there!

Hot embarrassment flooded over me, closely followed by shame.

When I got back to my seat I realised that shame wanted me to keep quiet about the incident, not to tell David, my husband, about it – 'HIDE' shame told me, 'don't let anyone know.'



But this was really a funny social situation, shame was not an appropriate reaction, and in fact telling David about it alleviated the shame reaction.

The embarrassment I felt was an appropriate reaction, it is embarrassing if a stranger walks in when on the toilet. But reacting with shame is inappropriate, I am not a defective person who needs to be hidden away because of it.

## **GUILT**

True guilt is what we feel when we've done something wrong or bad.

The ability to feel guilt is a recognised developmental stage in children. For example Erikson (see Wheeler and McConville 2002) suggests guilt forms between ages three to six years, whilst shame precedes it ages one to three years. The ability to empathise and understand another's point of view is key to feeling guilt.

The appropriate reaction to true guilt is to say 'I'm sorry', and if necessary to make amends, however true guilt will often awaken shame.

False guilt is what we feel when we have transgressed against our own internal code of conduct, and feel we have done something wrong or bad. This can also awaken shame.

If we sink into shame, we'll either over-apologise and attack ourselves: 'I'm so, so sorry, I can't imagine how I could do that. I've never done anything like that before. I'm so stupid...'

Secondly we might attack the other person: 'Look what you've made me do! If you hadn't... I wouldn't have...'

Another possible reaction would be to freeze or withdraw.

It's interesting how hard I find it to think of an example of doing something wrong, owning up to it and saying 'I'm sorry!' Just the thought of it triggers an uncomfortable desire to cover things up and so prove to the world that I'm not a defective person.

## **HUMILIATION**

This happens when we are put down or belittled by someone else, it will be incident or comment that seems unjustified.

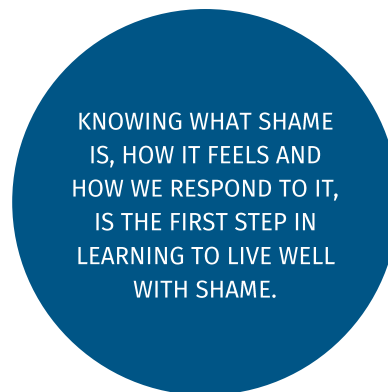
The appropriate reaction is either verbally or internally to stand up for ourselves. But if we sink into shame we'll agree with the humiliating remarks, often swallowing them whole without evaluating them.

As a young teenager a school friend told me I looked like a sheep, because of the way my fringe grew.

I took her humiliating remark as pejorative, shame kicked in and agreeing with her internally I told myself I was ugly and odd.

The appropriate reaction might have been: 'I love sheep, they're beautiful creatures, thanks for the compliment of noticing me.'

Knowing what shame is, how it feels and how we respond to it, is the first step in learning to live well with shame.



## **Male and Female Shame**

Men and women experience shame in the same way, but the triggers are different.

In Brown's research (2012) she discovered that shame is evoked for men when they show weakness. This can be the weakness of showing fear; being emotionally vulnerable; not succeeding sexually, financially, or in sporting prowess. They can be shamed by their perceived failure as a father or as a husband.

Gentleness in men can be another source of shame. Men are 'meant' to be aggressive. And this is compounded when women, who say they long for men to be more emotionally literate, in fact have an unwritten rule that their men stay strong.

A few years back I was very keen for my husband to 'grow' spiritually and emotionally. 'Why is it always me that seems to have the problems?' I raged as we had yet another discussion about my issues.

But beneath that was fear. Although I knew he did have his own issues, I was ambivalent – 'What if he became weak as he peeled back the protective covering that kept him "strong"?'

The triggers of shame for women are different, and have more to do with appearance. There's a certain way women 'should' look and not adhering to that can cause shame. Women experience shame if they show themselves up in any way, particularly if they go against society's norms for feminine behaviour. Shame about mothering is easily

activated, particularly as women feel they should be able to keep all the plates in their lives spinning perfectly.

It's important to understand the different stimuli which trigger shame for men and women.

I have more thinking to do in this area.

But one thing I notice as I work with both men and women, is that women often connect quickly with descriptions of shame and can see it at work in their life, whilst men understand exactly what I'm describing, but see it in other people rather than themselves.

I invited an equal number of women and men to comment on the draft of this booklet, several men responded quickly with constructive comments, whilst prising response from the women was far more difficult.

Maybe it was that emotional distance from the feelings that enabled them to respond more quickly... most of the men told me 'I don't suffer from shame, but I can read it for you', and I was left with the question 'Do they not suffer from shame, or are they not allowed to?'

My fear is that when men or women live with unacknowledged shame, it can be like an unexploded bomb lying in the cellar of our lives.

## Shame and the Bible

In a short article on shame we can only scrape the surface of current thinking about shame, and the same applies to shame in the Bible. The great thing about the Bible is that it doesn't try to hide shame or shameful situations.

There are many shame inducing incidents related in the Bible, and although we may not know exactly what those involved felt, it can be useful to imagine. Let me give a few examples:

- David danced before the Lord as the Ark was returned to Jerusalem, and Michal, his wife was shamed (2 Samuel 6).
- Peter, when he disowned Jesus (Mark 14), went away and wept.



- Elijah, after his contest with the prophets of Baal, fled into the wilderness. Perhaps an interesting example of shame being caused by success (1 Kings 19).
- The shame of childlessness (1 Samuel 1) where Hannah lets her shame be seen by Eli.
- Jesus in the courtyard and on the cross (Matthew 27). As Marie Therese, a sister of the Poor Clares said to me, 'In pictures we put a little cloth around him, but he was naked.' We don't know if Jesus felt shame or not, but whatever he felt it didn't stop him doing the will of the Father.
- In Matthew 27:3-10 Judas hangs himself after betraying Jesus. A terrible example of the destruction that shame can engender.

Then there's the woman who touched Jesus cloak. The shame of her condition made her want to come secretly for healing, but Jesus knew that becoming visible was vital for the healing of her shame (Mark 5: 25-34).

Conversely, as Collicutt McGrath (2009) points out, when the woman taken in adultery is dragged before him (John 8), and all eyes are on her, Jesus refuses to shame her further by looking at her, he bends down to write in the sand. But when her accusers have gone, then he looks at her, forgiving her and commissioning her to live a new life.

It's also interesting that both Paul and Peter use these verses from Isaiah in their letters (Romans 9:33; 10:11; 1 Peter 2: 6).

As it is written: 'See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, *and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame.*'

Whilst it would be overstressing the text to suggest this refers definitely to the type of shame we are describing in this booklet, it does encourage us to believe that a relationship with Jesus will make a difference to our inner emotional experience.

This relationship is described in Psalm 34, an intimate Psalm written by David to God, which includes the words:

Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

We began by looking at Genesis 2 and 3, where Adam and Eve's guilt at disobeying God turned into shame when they saw their nakedness. They tried to hide their nakedness by hiding themselves from God's sight. But in order to be covered by God they had to come out of hiding.

This image of being covered or clothed by God runs through the Bible. Take a look at: Galatians 3:27; Isaiah 61:10; Proverbs 18:10.

# Why Does Shame Matter?

The smartly dressed, older woman froze as the leader of the prayer meeting spoke:

'Let's finish our prayer by placing a hand on the shoulder of the person next to us as we pray silently for them.'

Sitting next to her was a middle-aged man who she knew by sight, but she didn't know him.

She couldn't *possibly* touch him.

Shame began to do its work and soon she began to find it hard to breathe, she hastily got up, muttering that she needed the toilet.

But when it was all over she felt ashamed that she hadn't been able to take part, and sad that she'd missed out.

Shame stops us in so many ways.

It can stop us doing what God wants us to do, stop us from obeying his call on our lives and it can stop us from telling others about God too.

Shame stops us from seeing other people – it stops us seeing their needs and can distort what we think of them.

Shame can stop us asking for help from God and from others, because to admit need can cause a shame reaction.

Shame often means we don't see ourselves as God sees us, and so we live with a warped view of who we are.

Shame affects our bodies, and we will often unconsciously dodge situations or people who might trigger that reaction. After all, who wants to suffer suffocation,



blushing, stammering, confusion and a racing heart if they can avoid it?

So shame stops us being free to experience life to its full.

Indeed, one unexpected effect of shame is highlighted by Brown (2012 p.118) who says that for those held prisoner by shame 'joy becomes something we approach with deep foreboding.' Because the experience of joy is often followed by shame.

I notice that I fear meeting up with family, because when we part, I invariably feel shame. The moment I leave the whole experience turns what had been a happy time, into a bitter, stomach churning sensation, as I relive the get-together.

Shame often means we are defensive, unable to be open to what life brings, which can lead to unhealthy relationships with family, friends and work colleagues. Often we will be unable to ask for, or receive criticism or feedback, and, as Proverbs 15:31-32 points out, we harm ourselves in the process:

If you listen to constructive criticism,  
you will be at home among the wise.  
If you reject discipline, you only harm yourself;  
but if you listen to correction, you grow in  
understanding.

Shame can be particularly powerful in those who have narcissistic personality traits, and can result in people working to disown parts of themselves, splitting off what they deem unacceptable in themselves. A dangerous and unhealthy way to live, both for themselves and those they come into contact with.

And so shame has the power to impede God's work in our lives, and our freedom to live the abundant life he offers us.

## Living Well With Shame

### OR HOW DOES PSALM 34:5 ACTUALLY WORK?

Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

Psalm 34:5

'There are no easy theological answers and no quick religious fixes to shame.' Pattison (2000 p.227)

The woman who touched the hem of Jesus' cloak received rapid physical healing. In some ways that was the easy bit. It may be that by calling her out from the crowd and into relationship with himself, Jesus was starting her off on the



more difficult work of healing her shame, because it is in healthy relationships that shame has a chance to heal.

Now that I have some awareness of shame and how it operates in me, I realise that its great gift is to teach me every day how helpless I am without God. Having no power to save myself from shame today, I am wholly dependent on my relationship with him to heal me, to protect me and to love me. Although I hate the feelings that shame engenders in me, I realise too how great a gift it has been in deepening my relationship with God.

So how might God help us learn to live well with shame?

I want to suggest several spiritual practices that I've used over the years. I'm not proficient at them, and some work better than others, but I offer them to you as a box of tools that you could try out for yourself.

### **Strengthen your Identity as a Loved Child of God**

Recently I gave a group a blank sticker, 'If you were to make a badge of what God thinks of you, I wonder what it would say?' I asked. A variety of shades of horror crossed their faces.

Later I asked God, 'What do you think of me?' and what leapt into my mind was, 'You are lovely'. I was startled to realise how hard that would be to write on my sticker, although my mind and my heart accepted the words, immediately I heard them my gut rejected them. Since then I've prayed with it, asked God questions, let him speak the words to me over and over again. I've made a badge and put it on and tried to keep it there despite the discomfort of shame that I feel.

'Self-talk' is widely encouraged in counselling, but this is self-talk with a difference, because it's done in relationship with God.

It can be useful to find verses that tell you that God loves you and values you. Absorb them and use them when shame strikes, learn to hear him speak the words to you.

The verse I use repeatedly is Isaiah 43:4:

You are precious and honoured in my sight, and... I love you.

But there are many others, find the verse or verses through which God speaks to you. Try Ephesians 1:4, Jeremiah 31: 3, John 3:16 or 1 John 3:1.

### **Remember the Incarnation**

Hebrews 4:15-16 tells us unequivocally that Jesus understands our weakness and our struggles, and wants us to bring them to him. Because of that, we can go to him

for the restoration of relationship that we need after shame has struck. We can hide ourselves in him (Psalm 61:3), and some of the suggestions below will help us learn to do that. And we can build a healthy attachment with God, in an adult relationship of mutual trust, respect and love, albeit we the adult child and he the adult father.

### **Reflect on Useful Questions**

Here are some of the questions I've picked up over the years which I ask myself when shame hits me:

- What am I guilty of? (Is this true guilt or the false guilt of shame?)
- Where is God in this? What is he doing?
- In the scales of eternity how much does this weigh?

Find questions that help you to stop and take a reality check in the middle of shame.

### **Awareness-Acceptance-Choice**

Becoming aware of shame and how it operates in us is important. Yontef (2003 p.353 *my italics*) writes:

'shame operates as an intense but *usually unaware force* that undermines confidence and identification with self, decreases self-esteem, inhibits social interaction and increases rigidity and defensiveness.'

Keeping a spiritual journal is one way of heightening awareness of our shame. We write, asking God to show us how shame is at work in us. Then, as we look back over the last 24 hours with God, he helps us see where shame has been operating, and again we write it down, perhaps as a letter addressed to God.

As we increase in our awareness of shame we learn to accept it. We will never get rid of shame, but with God's help, we can learn to tolerate it.

Once we are able to tolerate shame, we can begin to choose how to respond in various situations. Using a journal to describe our shame, to show it to God and to hear his response can support this process.

### **Spend Time with God**

There are many good reasons to spend time with God, but taking time to build a relationship with God is key to strengthening our ability to live well with shame. As I mentioned earlier, a healthy adult-to-adult relationship with God is a firm basis for working with shame. If our minds are filled by God, there is less room for shame to occupy.

There are a variety of ancient Christian practices which might help us keep our minds centred on God. At the end of this booklet I've suggested several books that will describe these practices more fully than I have space for.

## THE EXAMEN OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Used over time, the examen builds gratitude and awareness of God's activity in us. I use a simple form as I brush my teeth each night, and ask 'For what am I most grateful today?' and then 'For what am I least grateful?' Because gratitude is a valuable antidote to shame I have majored on the first question and I write down what I'm most grateful for each day. Over years of using this exercise I find I see God's goodness in my life far more often.

## PRACTISING GRATITUDE

This can be expanded in a variety of ways, such as the 'five -a-day' method: as we go to sleep, we recall five things we are grateful to God for that day and name them to him.

## CHRISTIAN MINDFULNESS

This helps us learn to keep our focus on God. Take a word such as 'Jesus', or a phrase such as 'Be still and know that I am God' and use it with your breath. Try to focus your attention on God as you use the words, and when your mind wanders, as it surely will, gently bring it back to looking at God.

The unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* describes a way of keeping our attention on God when other things try to grab our mind:

When thoughts are 'strongly pushing in between you and God, try to look, as it were, over their shoulders, seeking something else – which is God.'

## SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

Working with a Spiritual Director has helped me learn to tolerate shame. For me telling a person has been harder than telling God. As trust grows between me and a Spiritual Director, I am able to be increasingly honest about my struggle with shame. I am heard and accepted.

## I AM ENOUGH

Brown (2012 p.116) suggests that learning to say and believe 'I am enough' will become a shield against shame for us. A potential difficulty with that statement is that as we've never been able to believe it in the past, unless something fundamental changes, how can we believe it now?

Yet as those who belong to Christ, we know that we are only 'complete through our union with Christ' (Colossian 2: 10 NLT). And as we work at deepening that relationship with God, hiding ourselves in him, *then* we will learn to say, and even begin to believe, 'In Christ I am enough'.

## ENGAGING WITH OUR SHAME WITH GOD

This gives us the daily opportunity to deepen our trust and love relationship with him. I've often gone back to the

following poem by Dave Bookless. He seems to be describing the growing realisation of shame in his life. But, for him, there is hope, because his God is there in the cracks of his life.

## CRACKS

There are cracks in my world.

I noticed them one day and now they are everywhere  
Sinister hairline cracks that start and finish out of sight  
Cracks that grow and gape and laugh at my certainties.  
My world has been declared unsafe.

I have tried to paper them over  
Paint them out  
Move the furniture to hide them  
But they always return –  
cracks that hang like question-marks in my mind.

And now I begin to think  
why do the cracks appear?  
From where do they come?  
They have made my room unsafe  
BUT

They have thrown it open to new horizons  
Drawn back curtains  
Raised long-closed shutters.  
One day I looked and a crack had become a window.  
Step through it said, what have you to fear?  
Do you wish to stay in your crumbling room?

And then I remembered a childhood dream,  
Watching the egg of some exotic bird,  
Oval and perfect, spotted blue and cream  
(I wished to hold that egg and keep it on a shelf)  
BUT

As I watched it cracks appeared  
Tiny fissures spread like zigzag ripples.  
It broke in two and life struggled to its feet,  
Wet and weak and blinking at the world.  
Without those cracks that egg could hold  
no more than rotting stagnant death.

Without its cracks my world would be  
a room without a view.  
Cracks may be uncomfortable, disturbing gaps  
BUT

Could it be I need them?  
Do you believe in cracks?  
Because I keep looking for God in the room  
And find he is hiding in the cracks.

©Dave Bookless, 1990. 'Cracks', *God Doesn't do Waste* (Dave Bookless, IVP, 2010)

# For Further Exploration

## Discussion Questions

1. How do you experience shame?  
Brown (2012 p.44) has three useful questions that might help you answer this:
  - What do I do when I feel emotionally exposed?
  - How do I behave when I'm feeling very uncomfortable and uncertain?
  - How willing am I to take emotional risks?
2. What do you do when shame hits you?
3. How do you respond when you experience shame in others (if you do)?
4. Think of examples in the Bible where people may have been experiencing shame. Are there useful insights about how God helps us with shame?
5. Can you experience shame without 'the other' in mind? Is a shame reaction always caused by another person, even if they aren't present at the time?
6. How much does social media, and the hyper-connectivity it engenders, exacerbate shame? Could it benefit us if we were able to use it to bring our shame out of hiding in a way that brought healing?
7. To what extent does living in a celebrity culture with its opportunity for constant negative comparison increase shame?

## Suggested Reading to Accompany 'Living Well with Shame'

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## Becky Widdows

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