

Not Ashamed

2 Timothy 1:7-12, Romans 1:16

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Why does Paul say in his letter to the Romans, “I am not *ashamed* of the gospel”? Why does he tell Timothy “Don’t be *ashamed* to tell others about Jesus?” We might expect him to say “Don’t be *afraid*” because of what people might do to you. Or he might say “Don’t be *embarrassed*” since a few verses earlier he told Timothy that God didn’t give us a spirit of timidity. But the issue here is not being afraid to speak to strangers or embarrassed to bring up religion. The issue is being ashamed of Jesus—the same way Jesus put it in Mark 8:31, “whoever is ashamed of me and my words.” What it is that is shameful about Jesus?

Do you remember what shame feels like? It’s not the same as guilt, which involves knowing that you have violated a rule you believe in yourself. Shame is imposed on you from outside. There is a facial expression that is characteristic of shame that can be reproduced in laboratory experiments: a downcast look and averting the eyes, sometimes with a peculiar smile that is flat in the middle. It even shows up on babies. Babies have a learned response when they hear Mommy coming into the room; they look up with eager expectation. But if Mommy ignores them—and this is something they’ve tested in laboratories—the expression on the baby’s face tells you that what she is feeling is not just disappointment or anger: it’s shame. It’s the feeling “I am unworthy.”

Some have made a distinction between embarrassment and shame this way: It’s more than a difference of degree. Embarrassment is a violation of your own persona, the image you want to project of yourself. You think you are coordinated, but you fall down. You think you are smart, but you say something stupid. You are embarrassed. Shame, on the other hand, comes from a failure to meet external, objective social standards. It is not the guilt you feel inside from doing something bad; it is the rejection you feel by the social group because you have done something that violated its mores. Sometimes you have violated a rule you were not even aware of, and you are made to feel that you are less than everyone else. Shame is humiliation imposed on you by someone else. When you are ashamed, it is because someone is shaming you.

Our culture is guilt-based rather than shame-based, for the most part. When you do something bad, you are expected to feel guilty about it. We lock up bad people to protect society from them. But Paul and Jesus’ culture—and in most Middle Eastern and Asian cultures today—are shame-based. When you did something bad, the society at large shunned you, like the Amish, or like *The Scarlet Letter*. You are put in prison or in the stocks to shame you. They crucified you to shame you. It is worse to lose face than to lose your life, which is why in those cultures people turn to suicide when they are shamed.

When we think of being ashamed of Jesus or ashamed of Christianity, our first thoughts are probably of embarrassment. We just don’t want to appear too religious or conventional or backwards in violation of the persona we have created. But sometimes it really does rise to the level of shame. We don’t want to be ashamed; we don’t want to be shamed by our immediate culture, the culture of Block Island or our group of friends. I can think of three reasons people are ashamed of Christianity these days.

1. Christianity is not cool. You’d think that by the time I reached 60 I wouldn’t care about being cool. It sounds so adolescent. And, honestly, a lot of the time I don’t give a rat’s

whatever about what people think of me. I tell my children, who are often embarrassed by me, that I am way past being embarrassed, I've done so many humiliating things in my life. And in general, people say that the 50's and 60's are often the happiest times in life because you've become comfortable with yourself and less concerned with everyone's criticisms of you—and it's before your body really starts to fall apart.

But I find in myself that I still care what some people think about me. Yeah, there are people I consider idiots and I don't really care. But there are people I like, or people I want to be like, and it distresses me that they think I might be a person of interest to them if I weren't so darn religious. There are people who would never invite me to their cocktail parties not because I write letters to the paper but because they are afraid I might bring up the subject of Jesus or some moral issue. Maybe they wouldn't invite you, either.

I wouldn't bother with my hair they way I do, I wouldn't buy new clothes, I wouldn't post half of what I do on Facebook, if didn't care what people think of me. I want them to think I'm cool. When I take the 8th graders to New York, I want them to think I'm cool because I know about cool things and can show them around, and I get their pop culture references. I tell myself that this is so I can share the gospel with them someday, but I also just want to be cool. I want to be liked—as hard as that might be for some people to believe.

I have a hard time denying Jesus like Peter—at least in a tiny town like this—because I have a big sign hanging around my neck that says “One of Those.” But do you ever feel ashamed to tell people that you are connected to Jesus? Or that you believe in Christianity? Or that you are part of Harbor Church? Is it too uncool? I don't think the solution is trying to make the church cool so that people will come, because the problem—with them and with us—is deeper than that. And that's only one of the issues we face.

2. Christianity is not intellectually respectable. Sometimes when people are ashamed of the gospel today it's because they have the impression that all the smart people are atheists and the Christians are lazy thinkers. Actually, this is lazy thinking in itself and shows that you haven't read very widely. Sure, there are some books by those called “the new atheists” who are campaigning against God, but the vast majority of people still believe in God. A majority of science professors in America still believe in God. There are theologians and Christian philosophers who are as brilliant as anyone out there. Some of us are stuck with a stereotype that comes from the “monkey trial” when fundamentalists were made to look foolish, and Lord knows fundamentalists still succeed in looking foolish. But the fact that there are idiot Christians does not mean that Christianity is for dummies.

In my own self-defined literary world, this is hardly ever an issue, because in this country at least many of the very best poets and novelists and essayists are Christians. Many others are persons with some kind of religious faith. If you are ashamed of Christianity because it's intellectually unsophisticated, you need to come to Bible study or let me suggest some books to read. It might be true that *you* are unsophisticated, which is OK, but it's not true that Christianity as an intellectual system is something anyone needs to be ashamed of.

3. Christianity is considered bigoted. If I hear one more story of a young adult who has left the church forever because the church is identified with the right-wing Republican political agenda, I'm just gonna cry me a river. The truth is that *I* am ashamed of the church as a whole sometimes, but I'm not ashamed of Jesus. I am ashamed to be associated with Baptists in particular who can be sexist, homophobic, racist, climate-change-denying, science-denying, art-hating fun-damn-mentalists. I am ashamed that some Christians have allowed their churches to be hijacked by the politics of fear. But I know that Jesus is ashamed of them, too, and I am not

ashamed of Jesus. Jesus and his Spirit and his kingdom are the greatest forces in the world for peace and justice, the greatest forces for the advancement of women and equality of ethnic groups and the progress of all truth including science and the growth of all beauty in human creativity.

So we may be ashamed because Christianity seems to the world to be uncool and anti-intellectual and anti-equality. But when I turn back to Paul and Timothy it seems to me that they are facing different issues when they talk about being ashamed of the gospel. When Timothy became a minister of one of the early churches, he knew he was joining a fringe group, a radical group that would not get much respect. He had no desire to seem cool, and I doubt, given that Paul was his mentor, that he cared much about the opinions of philosophers. But shame was a real issue for Timothy; otherwise Paul wouldn't have brought it up early in this letter. Why would Timothy have been ashamed of Jesus or Paul in his culture?

1. Paul was in jail. In most cultures, being in jail is shameful. It means that you are in opposition to the majority culture, at least, and that you have done something everyone agrees is bad. Paul says to Timothy, "Don't be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord (Jesus) or of me his prisoner." A few verses later, he says that many of his friends in the province of Asia *were* ashamed of him and turned away from him. He praises one friend named Onesiphorus who "was not ashamed of my chains."

Most likely Timothy was raised a good boy by his mother and grandmother, who were faithful Jews. He probably had a Boy Scout's heart. He was on the timid side. He was basically conventional, like most church people. And yet Jesus was calling him to a life that was radically opposed to the values of his culture. His culture might well try to shame him for standing against its values—including the worship of many gods, the focus on money and sex, and bowing down before Caesar. The straight-arrow part of himself might feel ashamed to be a follower of a man who was jailed and executed on a cross. Nothing in the first century was as shameful as a cross. That was the whole point of crucifixion. It wasn't quick like hanging or the guillotine. The point was to hang you out naked in public for days while you dried out and gasped for air. The point was to shame you. Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus "endured the cross, disregarding the shame." It wasn't the pain that was the toughest part; it was the shame. So Timothy would have been tempted to be ashamed of a cause that ran afoul of the law and resulted in prison and crucifixion.

2. Christians were poor. Paul says that there were not many rich among them, and Jesus' message had a special appeal to the poor. No doubt they had a few wealthy members in whose houses they could meet, but many of them were slaves or widows or the working poor. Many Jews of that day worked from a theology that said that wealth was a sign of God's blessing (since God is omnipotent and decides who gets rich), so being poor is a sign that God had not blessed you for some reason that must be just in God's eyes. This is not so different from an ideology reflected in some politicians and talk radio people today: if you are poor, it must be your fault; if you are rich, it must be your own doing, so good for you. When you know that other people think that way, it's easy to be ashamed of yourself for being poor.

I am paid a salary that is right at the average for American workers, so I can't consider myself poor. But when I go to a Princeton reunion I feel poor, because some of my classmates are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, and investment bankers, and former senators, and physicians who own hospitals. Some of them are respectful of me, but you can tell that some of them think I have wasted my life by not using my education to provide for my family. I know the reasons I made my choices in response to God's call, but I can still feel ashamed for being poor—even though I'm not. How much more might genuinely poor people feel ashamed when

they encounter rich people who think that riches are a reward for hard work and virtue? The “prosperity gospel” that some churches preach today is in fact an anti-gospel; if the gospel is not good news for the poor, it’s not Jesus’ gospel.

Paul tells Timothy not to be ashamed of himself for being poor. “Remember the Lord Jesus who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor.” In his first letter to Timothy, he warned him that “Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.” Staying free of that is nothing to be ashamed of.

3. Paul suffered. Timothy might have felt ashamed of Paul and his gospel not only because he was in jail and poor, but because he suffered so much in general. He had health problems. He had shipwrecks. He had legal problems. He lost a lot of friends. Is this a life to be proud of? If my mentor has so many difficulties, what’s going to happen to me? Again, you have the context of a theology which says that if God loves you everything is going to turn out right, so if things go wrong there must be something wrong between you and God. Most likely you’ve been a bad boy and deserve what you are getting. Paul and Jesus stand completely opposed to that.

The root problem, of course, is that Jesus suffered. The center of our understanding of God is that God became human and suffered at the hands of humans on a cross, and through that suffering we were forgiven. Jesus’ call to us as disciples is to take up the cross—to take up his shame, to take up his suffering, in order to reconcile others to God. Paul says, “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel.” The choice is between being ashamed of the suffering of Jesus and Paul on the one hand, and joining them in suffering on the other. If we want to present Christ to people, if we want to be his body, his representation in this world, we must share his suffering. It is our suffering through which Christ is presented to the world.

If I am to follow Jesus, then, I must not be ashamed of violating the mores of my culture and finding myself rejected. I must not be ashamed of being poor because I have chosen to reject materialism. I must not be ashamed of my suffering, because my suffering reveals the love of God to others. There is only one reason Jesus says that he will be ashamed of us, and that is if we are ashamed of him. Let us each say with Paul, “I am not ashamed.”