

# *Theodidaktos*

Taught by God

Journal for EMC theology and education

Volume 6 Number 1 January 2011

Called?  
to lead.



**emc**

## Have You Been Called?

Standing outside the college dorm on a beautiful, sunny April day I wondered what God had in store for me.

It was the day after graduation from Bible College and the extent of my life-planning had come to a close. What's next? What did God want me to do now?

Then the phone rang back in the dorm. I answered it and was surprised that the caller wanted to talk to me. Our EMC conference pastor was offering me an opportunity to become a minister-in-training at Crestview Fellowship in Winnipeg.

There was no hesitation in my answer since this affirmed the personal calling I had received from God to enter the pastorate.

In the larger scope of my adventure in ministry this episode was only the middle of chapter one. What this story illustrates is, in my understanding, the process of being called to ministry.

*Step One:* God gives a nudge, an urging, a burning bush experience, or a collection of events that lead in a certain direction.

*Step Two:* the affirmation of the church body that this calling is correct.

*Step Three:* the opportunity to test your giftedness in the area of calling.



It is in the course of following Jesus personally that the individual is called to service. One cannot follow Jesus without the eventual revelation that one must serve the Lord with naturally endowed gifts and learned disciplines.

The natural inflow of Christ's life into our lives produces an outflow of like servanthood reflecting the life of Christ. This may or may not result in a salaried vocation but it is in any case the result of obedience.

A preacher must preach whether he is paid to or not. One who shows hospitality has a tremendous ministry to perform apart from remuneration.


In this sense calling goes beyond the one dimensional perspective that God only calls people to be pastors. He calls us to serve him in whatever capacity and giftedness he chooses.

We are all called to follow Jesus; we are all called to faith; we are all called to ministry.

To be called to the ministry of the pulpit is limited to those who are capable of elocution and handling the Word of God correctly. Perhaps there is a special calling to this ministry.

In my experience I felt that this was the case. It humbles me to think that I was chosen by God and the church to communicate God's counsel and Christ's pattern. That does not negate the calling another feels to pray and make prayer his or her main ministry. Perhaps there is a special calling to this ministry too, one that I have never received in particular.

God continually calls humankind to himself. How that sounds to each person is perhaps as unique as the person himself or herself. God is so imaginative in this respect.

Within that calling is the further call to call others to this marvelous experience: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been *called* according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also *called*; those he *called*, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (Romans 8:28-30). 

Darryl G. Klassen

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### **We are all called to follow Jesus; we are all called to faith; we are all called to ministry.**

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This is followed by further affirmation in the form of encouragement or a productive ministry where people are growing.

The question at large is: How do you know when you have been called? If we begin at the point of being called to ministry we err in our understanding of calling.

First, Christ calls all of us to follow him and learn from him what it means to be a human being, for he was in all respects the model of humanness. In becoming human we come to understand that the true human being strives to have a relationship with his or her Creator. Only through Christ's model do we begin to grasp the behavior and speech and worship of a human being created in the image of God.

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## Finding Spiritual Leaders for Our Church

### Dr. Harvey Plett

Dr. Harvey Plett (Prairie Rose), who holds a diploma from SBI and BA, MDiv, MA, and PhD degrees, is an ordained EMC minister and has served in many capacities within the EM Conference.



#### **Introduction**

Finding a leader for a church is always a challenging task for any congregation. It is, however, an unavoidable task because every church needs leadership.

Leadership in the human situation is a sociological necessity as well as a biblical prescriptive. The question that is not always easy to answer is how a church should do it.

Various church groups do it in various ways. Some mainline churches prepare and appoint leaders through giving them seminary

training and then either the church examines a candidate or the hierarchy appoints them.

Within the Anabaptist theological framework, as well as the Free Church tradition, a different pattern is followed. We stand within the Anabaptist theological framework and have eschewed leadership appointment by either hierarchy or on the basis of training alone.

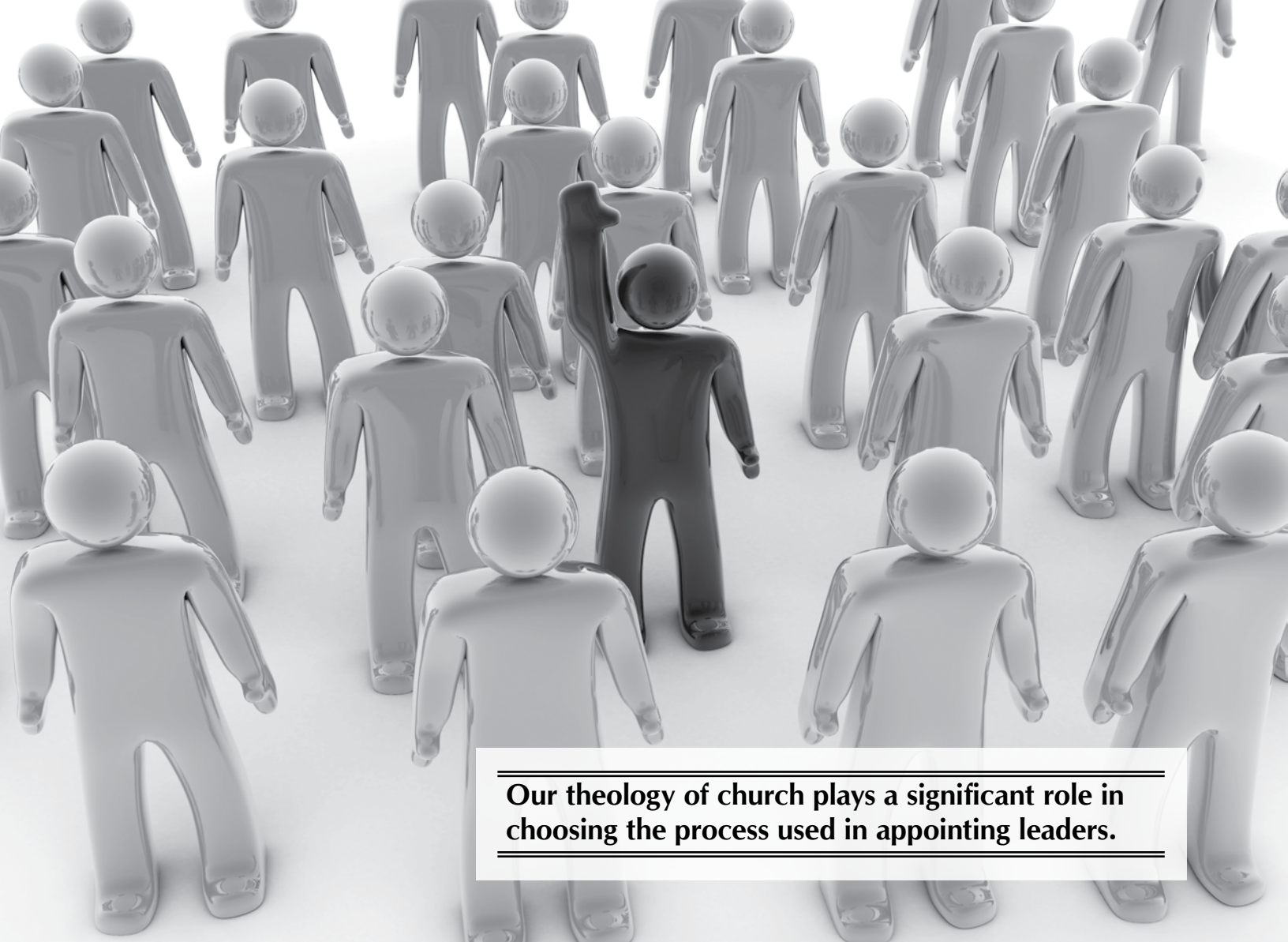
In the past we have appointed pastors/ministers and deacons by a process of electing individuals from our midst. This is still practiced by

many of our churches though many also have looked for pastors outside of their church.

Part of this shift has happened for two main reasons. First, training has become a more important issue as the educational level has risen in our churches, so churches look for lead pastors who have at least Bible college training.

A second factor that has contributed to this shift is remuneration for the lead pastor. This required the appointed person to





**Our theology of church plays a significant role in choosing the process used in appointing leaders.**

leave his work or business and take up the remunerated position as pastor. Also individuals who sensed God leading them into pastoral work took the training hoping that it would help them find a supported position in a church.

What do we find in Scripture in relation to this topic?

**I. A Brief Overview of Scripture on this Subject**

When we examine the New Testament we find several clear indications on how they appointed leaders.

- a. Appointed leaders as the need arose (Acts 6:16).
- b. Once a church was established

elders/bishops were appointed (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

- c. The elders and deacons were male members appointed from the membership of the local congregation.
- d. The New Testament churches had team leadership made of elders/bishops and deacons (Phil. 1:1).
- e. Leaders were chosen on the basis of character and giftedness (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).
- f. They were not to be novices and were to have a good report from those outside the church (1 Tim. 3:6; 1 Tim. 3:7).
- g. The task of the leaders was to teach, admonish, and guard

against false teaching and general oversight of the church (1 Tim. 3:1-13).

The above gives a brief overview of appointing leaders in a church as found in the New Testament. There is some other advice in Scripture re remuneration, honouring the leaders, not to quickly accept charges against a leader and how to discipline an elder.

As the church moved beyond the first and second century the hierarchical pattern emerged and was the dominant pattern at the time of the Reformation when the Anabaptists emerged.

The Anabaptists moved back to appointing leaders from their midst being very mindful of the spiritual character qualities and gifts as

qualifications for leaders taught in Scripture.

The following is an attempt to speak to the question on appointing leaders in our churches. The article restricts the discussion to appointing pastors, ministers and deacons in our churches. In some churches this group is known as the ministerial.

It should be noted that our theology of church plays a significant role in choosing the process used in appointing leaders. Some of the principles discussed also apply to appointing other church workers but this article does not speak to that question.

It should be noted that the New Testament speaks of bishops, elders and deacons. The New Testament evidence indicates that the words bishops and elders are used interchangeably and thus refer to the same office (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:1-2; Strauch, 178f).

Today this would equate to our terms of minister and/or pastor. In some of our churches who have a plural leadership team all ministers are called pastors while in others, only the leader of the leadership team is called pastor. Often in the latter situation the other ministers are called lay ministers.

## **II. Suggestions for Appointing Pastors/Ministers and Deacons**

**1. Preparation for appointing leaders.** The current leadership would lead the process. The process would involve decision of the congregation to appoint a leader. This would involve discussing what the responsibilities of the appointee would be, examining if the congregation had a person to fill that need, obtaining possible names from members as to who they think would be gifted for the need. To appoint a person would further involve discussion of a nomination and

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## **Shared leadership strengthens the teaching and preaching ministry for the church.**

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election process. Some churches may decide to appoint a spiritual leader via a consensus process.

**2. A church, in harmony with the Conference Constitution (C, III. Church Leaders, p.16f), the teaching of the Scriptures ( 1 Cor. 14:33-38; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; 3:1-13; Heb. 13:17; Patterson, 149-179), and the headship principle (Eph. 5:22-24), would look for male leaders that have the gifting and character qualifications for leadership as outlined in Scripture.**

This implies that we will look in our congregation as we approach a leadership need. It seems logical that, as at the time of the New Testament each church had the gifted individuals in their midst, so do we (Greg Ogden, 99). At times when the congregation is very small, the church may look for leadership help from sister congregations in the Conference or outside of the Conference. Here the Conference personnel would be very helpful.

**3. The leaders should be individuals that have a good reputation with those on the outside.**

**4. A plural leadership team would be a significant consideration** as a church looks for leadership to minister to the spiritual needs of the congregation. Plural leadership or team leadership refers to the pattern of having several ministers and deacons making up the spiritual leadership team in a church. Strauch outlines several benefits of a leadership team or also called shared leadership (Strauch, 36-38ff). He includes the following: balancing the weaknesses of a lone leader, lightening the workload, and

providing accountability.

In addition, shared leadership strengthens the teaching and preaching ministry for the church. No one leader is able to teach the church without leaving some blank spots. A shared leadership team brings a wider spectrum of perspectives on issues which in turn deepen the understanding for the congregation.

Shared leadership adds a better array of gifts to the leadership, making the leadership stronger as well as adding accountability. A further advantage of this form of leadership is longevity and continuity in leadership which brings stability to the church.

**5. A leadership team, as well as a church with only one leader, will have one leader/pastor who leads the team and the congregation.** To choose such a person would require a clear view of what the church would expect of him. It would also require that the individual accepts the team leadership principle and is committed and willing to work with a team.

A further implication is that it is the leadership team that makes leadership decisions which are presented to the congregation for approval or modification. It requires closing ranks with the team once a decision is made. In a team leadership situation the lead pastor would usually be elected from the team. This requires being willing to share the glory but it also involves sharing the blame.

**6. At times a church will not find the person they need in their midst** and so they will seek for a prospective leader in the sister churches of the Conference or in other churches standing within the Anabaptist theological tradition. A person from a non-Anabaptist background will need to clearly understand and accept the Anabaptist theological orientation of the church and Conference.

7. The person(s) being added to the leadership team, whether from within the church or outside, need(s) to be examined as to his beliefs before being added to the team. The local church should have a committee do a thorough theological examination of such a person.

The Conference has an Examination Committee in place and this Committee needs to also examine the theological orientation, character and giftedness of these people before they are added to the team. Pastors, ministers and deacons need to be thoroughly examined theologically, as well as character wise.

8. Academic qualifications are important in finding and appointing a minister to the ministerial role. Bible college graduation should be expected, though it should not be an absolute requirement. If it is a choice between giftedness and training, the scale would tend to fall in the direction of giftedness. Training can be and should be taken by one who is lacking in this area. This can be gotten in a number of ways, such as short courses, a day course, and on-line.

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### **Churches should be engaged in seeking out and training potential leaders from within their own group.**

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9. A lead pastor should have, if at all possible, some experience in being part of a leadership team before being appointed to the lead pastor position. Paul suggests it should not be a novice (1 Tim. 3:6).

10. Churches should be engaged in seeking out and training potential leaders from within their own group. The Conference's Minister in Training

program would be helpful in working with this. Young potential men should be approached to consider preparing for ministerial leadership. The existing Leadership team becomes a good mentoring group for the young trainee.

#### **Summary Observations**

Leadership in the church determines the direction of a church. In order for the church to reflect God's intention for the church, requires leadership steeped in the Word of God, sensitive to the Holy Spirit, and having a deep care for God's people.

It also requires leadership that is aware that as people of God, members of God's Kingdom, we march to a different drumbeat than the culture around us. As the leaders lead they are sensitive to the culture but they continually critique the culture in the light of God's Word.

As Peter says, we are aliens in this world (1 Peter 2:11), and Paul says we are ambassadors of Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). May the leaders of our churches be wise and brave to teach and stand for the truth of the Word of God! **✠**

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# A Journey, Not a One-Time Experience

Darnell Plett

My calling to ministry has been a journey, not a one-time experience.

Apparently, sometime in my childhood, I announced that I would be a minister. I don't recall this, but my mom has told me this.

As far as I'm concerned I had no desire to be a pastor. I don't recall ever seeing myself as being a pastor someday.

It came as a shock when someone called me and asked me to be a Sunday School teacher.

It came as another surprise later when someone called me to come to Prairie Grove Fellowship Chapel to start a youth group in

1988. In my mind it was God's call at the time, but my long-term interest was missions.

When I went to Steinbach Bible College (SBC) I entered the missions track. When Emily and I started dating we double-checked each other's interest in missions before we committed to our relationship.

Pastoral/church ministry was still not on my radar. I do recall a brief spell of fantasizing about pastoral ministry for the sake of prestige and glory, but that bubble quickly vaporized.

I was surprised in a third year class at SBC when we tried to discern our gifting with the help of our classmates and they pegged me as a pastor. I still did not see my future going in that direction.

After SBC, Emily and I went on a short-term missions training course with Northern Canada Evangelical Mission and explored some missions possibilities. Almost a year after SBC, Inner City Youth Alive (ICYA) called me in 1992 to come on board with them. I enjoyed two years of missions service with them.

As I studied at SBC and served within ICYA,

we continued to minister at Prairie Grove. Here we were participating in pastoral ministry and missions through our youth work and other church involvements. We had even moved into Lorette, Man., area to be more effective in our missions work and involvements there.

After my two years with ICYA we faced a crossroads: continuing with ICYA or with

Prairie Grove. We felt that we couldn't do justice to both and felt that we should live wherever we choose to continue. After prayer and deliberation we accepted a three-quarter-time youth pastor position with Prairie Grove in 1994.

Several years later, when our pastor passed away suddenly, Emily and I were called by the church to be their pastoral couple (1997). I vividly recall the agony of deciding how to respond to the call.

I was acutely aware of my inadequacy to fill my previous pastor's shoes. But I believed that God was calling me. His call came through the church and was confirmed in me as I considered it.  $\emptyset$



Darnell Plett is senior pastor at Prairie Grove Fellowship Chapel, near Lorette, Man.

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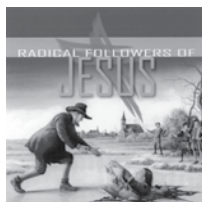
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**I was surprised in a third year class at SBC when we tried to discern our gifting with the help of our classmates and they pegged me as a pastor.**

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## Radical Followers of Jesus DVD



A DVD highlighting men and women who "display radical forgiveness, radical love and radical peace" has been produced by the Evangelical Anabaptist Fellowship of Canada.

The 54-minute DVD can be used in worship services, Sunday School, small groups, or family life.

DVDs can be obtained for \$11.20 (plus shipping) from the EMC office (204-326-6401 or rroman@emconf.ca) or from EAF, Box 323, Winkler, MB R6W 4A5, Ph. 204-325-8248, E-mail eafellowship@gmail.com.

# A Process Visible Only as One Looks Back

Ed Peters



Ed Peters has served as a youth pastor at Island Gospel Fellowship (Burns Lake, BC), and as senior pastor at Vanderhoof Christian Fellowship (BC), Mitchell Community Fellowship (Man.), and EFC Steinbach (Man.).

I have heard it said that before entering vocational ministry you had better be certain that God has called you. For many this call is clear and dramatic, changing forever the course of their life.

For me, however, few things seem so clearly defined. Instead, I experienced the call of God as a process that is only as visible as one looks back at life and sees the evidence of God's guiding hand.

In reflecting back on my life, I believe the first signs of God's call to pastoral ministry came shortly after committing my life to Christ as a teenager.

I found that I had an appetite to read God's Word and had discovered a copy of the *Living Letters* (the letters of the Apostle Paul in the Living Bible Paraphrase) at home. It became one of the first books I read from cover to cover.

Discovering that the Bible could be understandable and relevant was transformational. I imagined myself reading Paul letters to my home church without adding any comments—it would be an amazing sermon, I thought!

Could this be the beginning seed of a call from God? I had not thought of it in that way at the time, but God did allow me to stand before this same congregation and preach.

The call would be further developed through opportunities to lead youth Bible studies and even speak at some of the youth-led Sunday evening services as a teenager. A combination of opportunities mixed together with a generous amount of encouragement and patience on the part of my home church turned into key ingredients of God's call.

Bible college and seminary training was another important component of the formation of God's call. Ironically, pastoral ministry was not on my radar through most of my theological education.

Though unsure of the specifics, I was particularly drawn to cross-cultural ministry. It was while pursuing these studies, however, that the opportunity became available to minister part-time as a student pastor at a Baptist church.

After three semesters of seminary training and the birth of our first child, my wife and I discovered that "man does live by student loans alone." Consequently, we began discussing the

possibility of church ministry until we could save enough money to continue my education.

An opportunity soon opened up to return to my home church as a youth pastor. Three years later we were asked to consider serving as senior pastor of another church 80 miles down the road. It soon became evident that these opportunities were not merely an interlude until we reached the main goal—God was forming a passion and desire for pastoral ministry.

When thinking of God's call, my mind often turns to an incident recorded in John 6:67-68. After many admirers turned away Jesus asked his disciples, "Are you also going to leave?" Simon Peter replied, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life."

Sometimes, especially during times of frustration and discouragement, the lure of other vocations seem appealing. But I look back at how God has led to this point and I wonder, "Lord, to whom would I go?" **Θ**

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**Ironically, pastoral ministry was not on my radar through most of my theological education.**

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# Where Did That Come From?

Darren Plett

I am fairly certain that I did not “choose” pastoral ministry as my *career*. I have a strong sense that this is something I was specifically “called” to by God.

At the same time there is something within me that rebels at the notion that there is something “special” about my “pastoral” calling. You see, I want to simply be a “normal” Christian person.

Hasn't God called all Christians equally to serve Him in whatever vocation? I don't want my “pastoral call” to be elevated in any way over “calls” to other vocations.

And so I find myself in this quandary: Is pastoral ministry a career choice or a calling?

And if it is a calling,  
is it a different calling  
than the one given  
to all Christians to  
serve wholeheartedly,  
whatever you do, as unto  
the Lord (Col 3:23; Eph  
6:7)?

Did God choose me to be a pastor? In my heart I believe he did and the following story is why.

I remember first sensing this call toward full time ministry when I was in grade eight. My favourite teacher quit his teaching job; and he, his wife, and their four young children were planning to go to Rio Grande Bible Institute to learn Spanish and then move on to missionary service in Nicaragua.

I remember writing in his yearbook, as he invited all his students to do, that I believed I too would someday be involved in full-time ministry. Where did that come from?

I remember when I started high school and everything within me wanted rather to stay home and work on the family dairy farm. I loved the dairy farm; and at the time it was still semi-acceptable not to finish high school if you were

sure to be a farmer for the rest of your life.

I even remember explaining to another dairy farmer that I really didn't enjoy school and that I would much rather stay home and work on the farm. When he asked me, “So then, why don't you?” I simply replied, “Because that is not what God wants for me.” Where did that come from?

When I was finished with high school there were countless individuals who approached me and suggested that I go to Bible college and pursue ministry.

However, my love for dairy farming was very strong and by this time I had decided that I would be a good Christian and serve in the church, but I would pursue my love for farming.

I began my career as a dairy farmer and thrived in it, all the while remaining firm in my desire to serve God. I accepted ministry opportunities as they came to me, teaching Sunday School, doing devotionals at Union Gospel Mission or youth group, and even preaching in church on Sunday morning.

I took several evening courses at Steinbach Bible College and was even willing to take one whole winter out of farming to go to Bible college so that I would be better equipped to serve as a lay person in the church. I was very clear that this Bible college hiatus would only be a one-year event.

However, when I was encouraged to circle a major on my Bible college application form, I circled *pastoral*. Where did that come from?

After that year it was back into farming and then marriage. When I proposed to my future wife, I asked, “Will you marry me if I am farmer for the rest of my life?” To my delight she confidently replied, “Yes!”



Darren Plett is pastor of Pleasant Valley EMC.

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**By this time I had decided that I would be a good Christian and serve in the church, but I would pursue my love for farming.**

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At which time I added, "And would you still marry me if you knew that I would become a full-time pastor?" To which she somewhat more reservedly also replied, "Yes." Where did that rather unique proposal come from?

During this entire time I would consistently pray and tell God that I was willing to serve Him wherever He wanted me to serve even if that meant giving up farming. And, just as consistently, I would add, "But you will have to tell me *very* clearly."

That is exactly what began to happen about five years into my official farming career. For both my wife Pearl and me the sense that we needed to sell our share in the farm and go back to Bible college and pursue full-time ministry

became very clear.

Finally, just before our official decision God confirmed this call through several "coincidental" scripture passages at church and in our personal devotions. Where did those come from?

So we sold our share in the farm and went back to Bible college, preparing ourselves for some type of

full-time ministry upon graduation.

About half way through Bible college we were elected as a lay minister couple in our home church in Blumenort. Then as I graduated from Bible college we found out that we were expecting twins, our first children.

We decided that for the time being we would stay in Blumenort, start our family, and serve as lay-minister couple in the church. It did not take long and I was fully immersed in the construction world.

The doors of opportunity seemed to be swinging open wide, and again I loved it. I soon realized that once again I would need to begin praying, "God if you want us to make some type of move we will do it, but you will have to speak very loud and clear!"


Again we worked hard to remain totally open to God's call. Although I totally enjoyed the construction world, and especially all the people I was able to meet and at the same time serve as a lay minister, there was a sense deep down in my soul that there was a change just around the corner for us. Where did that come from?

When the Pleasant Valley church came and invited us to consider full-time pastoral ministry, another intense time of soul searching followed. I knew with all the calling that had happened in my life, I would never be able to feel satisfied as a retired man looking back on my life if I had never given pastoral ministry a fair shot.

So we consented and became the pastoral couple of the Pleasant Valley church. Although the past 12 years of ministry have not always been easy, I have enjoyed satisfaction and contentment in my soul that I never knew before. Where did that come from?

Yes, I believe I was called to be a pastor. This was not a career choice that I made.

And after rambling on to a very close friend about my "calling versus career" quandary, he simply said, "Darren, there is a mystical element in all of this. And when you try to quantify the mystical you will always run into problems." Thank you, Chuck Friesen, you are my true friend, a highly respected theologian, and the man God used to call us to Pleasant Valley.

Mystical, indeed! 

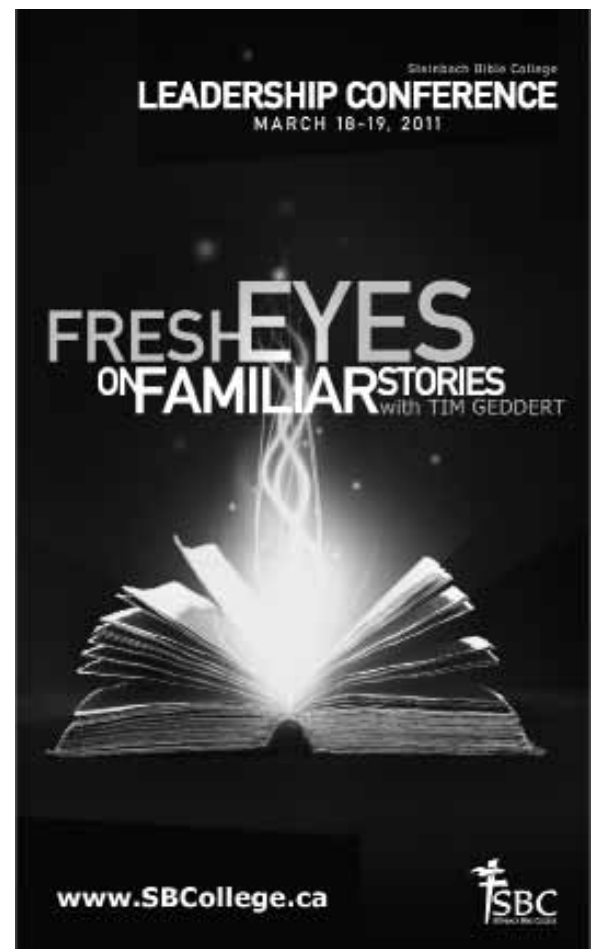
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**Although the past 12 years of ministry have not always been easy, I have enjoyed satisfaction and contentment in my soul that I never knew before.**

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# There Are Two Things I Am Sure of

Glenn Loewen

Sometimes I tell people, “There are two things I am sure of: that I married the right person, and that I’m called to be a pastor.”

Please don’t misunderstand. Both pastoring and marriage are hard work, impossible without God’s sustaining grace.

Why would God call a weak man like me into the pastorate? Why would God utilize such strange ways to ignite my soul, preparing and training me for the pastoral ministry?

My wife and I had been living in Portage La Prairie, Man., for about four and a half years when I received a phone call from Portage Evangelical Church to consider their vacant pastoral position.

I had been teaching junior high at Westpark School; and as a family we had been attending the Portage Alliance Church. What PEC did not know was that I had been praying about that position for quite awhile.

During my second year as a teacher, I entered into a deep dark night of the soul. The depression was terrifying and the despair ran deep. During this time, my soul panted after the living God. I grew very desperate for Him.

I began to read the old writers. My focus changed to seeking God, as much in life no longer held any appeal for me.

Although I had never really enjoyed teaching, I felt much too weak to quickly find a pastoral position and do what my soul craved. So I talked to God about it. I knew He would have to open the door, and this is exactly what He did.

I have had serious confirmations for this calling before and after that phone call from

PEC. I clearly remembered a powerful prophetic word back in 1994, while cycling through Montreal.

Our hostess, whom we had only just met, felt deeply moved by God to speak four prophecies over us. The last one was simply this: “Glenn, you are called to be a pastor.”

Did not she know I had just graduated with a teaching degree? Years later, I received another powerful prophetic word from a sister I had

never met before, saying almost the exact same thing.

From the opposite side, a bold sister from our small group seriously challenged me in a very candid e-mail. She expressed concern that because of my depression and its impact on those around me pastoring was something I should not even consider.

But when my wife and I contemplated these pleadings, we were “providentially” confronted with Jim Cymbala’s words from two of his books: “God intentionally uses the weak to get His work done. He wants His servants to rely on Him and His power, not their skills or degrees.”

Possibly the biggest confirmation was and is my dear wife Maribeth. God brought us together just over 20 years ago, and she’s been a rock of spiritual and emotional strength, an incredible support, counselor, exhorter, example, discerner, and lover of Jesus.

God continues to choose weak people to pastor, minister, and serve. *o*



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**Our hostess, whom we had only just met, felt deeply moved by God to speak four prophecies over us. The last one was simply this: “Glenn, you are called to be a pastor.”**

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# An Integrative Study of Shame

Terry M. Smith



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## I. Introduction

This paper will explore the matter of shame as an issue within both theology and psychology. It will consider what both disciplines have to say about shame, where they have gaps, and where they can learn from each other. The goal is to consider shame, and a response to it, from the integrated perspectives of theology and psychology in order to assist the Christian community, pastoral counselors, hurting individuals, and hurting families.

In 2007 I wrote a paper on the care of people in the aftermath of a suicide; this paper builds on that study of care. Further, between October 2008 and February 2009 I spoke three times on the issue of mental illness, suicide, and shame; this paper affords me an opportunity to explore elements within that presentation in greater depth.

In terms of a methodology toward integration, the paper will look at the issue of shame in the experience of Jesus. It will then look at the perspectives of shame within psychology and theology, consider how Jesus responded to shame, and then view how the Church might respond to shame.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is motivated, in part, by family experience. In my family

there have been four suicides in four generations. That mental illness and suicide carries a social stigma for both individuals and families is well known.<sup>2</sup> Joanne Klassen, director of Recovery of Hope counseling services (Eden Foundation), pictures this by imagining a couple taking their mentally ill son to a small-town emergency room amid the presence of their neighbours.<sup>3</sup> On a personal level, the history of suicides and mental illness within our history resulted (from my perspective) in generations of familial pain, silence, and shame.

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**Jesus was the eldest son,  
a responsible worker,  
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But people noticed his  
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## II. Shame Within the Experience of Jesus

Within a Christian worldview, the revelation of God become man in Christ (John 1:14) remains ultimate and authoritative. The integration of shame within theological and psychological disciplines, therefore, does well to start with Jesus of

Nazareth. As perfect God, he fits the definition of *theology* (the study of God); as perfect man he is the ultimate test subject for a study of the human *psyche*, which relates to psychology. In the light of Jesus and shame, let us back up a few years and consider a story.

He was the eldest son, a responsible worker, known in the community. But people noticed his behaviour had changed. His work routine was interrupted. He sometimes disappeared from the community and family didn't always know where he was. He had big ideas. Some people started to listen, while others got worried.<sup>4</sup> People in the community started talking negatively and that disturbed family members. Family members decided to get involved—to do something—partly because they cared, but also to deal with the shame they felt.<sup>5</sup> They intervened because the people said, "He is out of his mind!"

It says in Mark 3:20–21 (NIV), "Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'" The word *charge* is translated "custody" (NASB), "lay hold" (NKJV, Revised Challoner-Rheims), "restrain him" (Knox), "take charge" (Phillips, NEB, NIV), "seize him" (RSV). The passage also says his family described him as "out of his mind" (NIV, NEB, NKJV), "beside himself" (KJV, RSV), "mad" (Phillips, Knox, Revised Challoner-Rheims), or "lost his senses" (NASB).

1 This route was chosen, influenced partly by Robert H. Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective* (Binghamton, New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1995), prior to perusing Jill L. McNish, *Transforming Shame: A Pastoral Response* (Binghamton, New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2004), who has, in part, a somewhat similar structure.

2 Albers, 56.

3 Joanne Klassen, "Bipolar Disorder and the Church's response, Part I," *The Messenger* (May 14, 2008), 5.

4 This characterization of Jesus is unoriginal with me, whatever elements I might have added to it.

5 Ben Witherington, *What Have They Done With Jesus? Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History—Why We Can Trust the Bible* (USA: Harper One, 2006), 119–120.

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**In many families, there can be pain, secrets, and shame. Sometimes the bad events and memories even stop families from talking about positive memories and events.**

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Evidently, his mother, brothers, and sisters thought that something was mentally wrong with Jesus. He needed help and they were going to take him home. They did not understand him. As Joanne Klassen puts it, the story illustrates a family's response to an individual's onset of mental illness symptoms.<sup>6</sup>

It is unknown what Mary and Joseph told their other children about Jesus as he grew up. How could Mary describe her son in a way that others would really understand? What is out of the ordinary can be difficult to describe—whether it is the unique person of Jesus, merely (compared with Jesus) exceptional, or caused by an illness (which is not uncommon). Further, the circumstances of Jesus' birth, though theologically a miracle, were also the occasion for human scandal within the community.

Shame and honour have been described as "pivotal"<sup>7</sup> and a "preoccupation"<sup>8</sup> in Jewish culture in biblical times. From a standpoint of psychology, socialization about shame begins early<sup>9</sup>—and Mary and

Joseph would be no different. Mark McMinn and Clark Campbell refer to Mary's shame of being pregnant before marriage.<sup>10</sup>

Albers highlights that when Mary was found to be pregnant, Joseph did not want to shame her openly, but decided to divorce her privately,<sup>11</sup> which Ben Witherington calls an "unrealistic strategy."<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the quiet divorce, both Mary and Joseph and their families would continue to feel some shame within the community. Jill McNish said Jesus was born with the stain of illegitimacy.<sup>13</sup>

In the gospels, there is no mention of Jesus' early relationship with his siblings, and no indication that Mary and Joseph talked about his unique status within the family. In families it can be commonly difficult to talk about what is necessary. In many



families, there can be pain, secrets, and shame. Sometimes the bad events and memories even stop families from talking about positive memories and events. And, in this particular family dynamic, there was more shame to come.

People in Jesus' home community did not understand him either. In Mark 6:2–3 (NIV) we read, "When the Sabbath came, Jesus began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. 'Where did this man get these things?' they asked. 'What's this wisdom that has been given him that he even does miracles? Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him."

Rev. James Strachan, once the head of the chaplaincy department at Winnipeg's Health Sciences Centre, said in a sermon about the synagogue

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6 E-mail from Joanne Klassen to me in October 2008.

7 Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2000), 162; McNish, 7.

8 McNish, 10.

9 See Erik Erikson in Albers, 30–31.

10 Mark R. McMinn and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Response* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2007), 98.

11 Albers, 103.

12 Witherington, 109.

13 McNish, 8.

scene that the community thought Jesus was a hometown boy who had done well for himself, and they disagreed with everything that he said.<sup>14</sup>

It seems that it was actually comments from community members, many of them religious people, that motivated Mary and her children to do something: “*The people* said, ‘He is out of his mind!’” (italics added).<sup>15</sup>

The hometown people were offended at Jesus. “We know who Jesus is,” they might have said. “A man from this village, from an average family. We know his brothers and sisters; they live here with us.”<sup>16</sup> Community people made quick judgments and harsh statements—and their words disturbed family members who, of course, had to attend the synagogue and live in the community.<sup>17</sup>

Through individuals and groups opposed to him, Jesus faced attempts to shame him by negative statements about his character or his associations: he was a drunkard and a glutton, a friend of tax gatherers and sinners, possessed by a demon.<sup>18</sup> One could also include the trick questions that were designed to publicly show

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Jesus’ ignorance, expose him as holding unpopular views in Jewish society, or to reveal him as a political threat to Roman rule.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to his family’s discomfort in Mark 2, there is, according to Dr. Ben Witherington, other evidence of tension and distancing between Jesus and his siblings at the time of his itinerant ministry. Jesus was the eldest son who had left his responsibilities to provide for others.<sup>20</sup>

His brothers did not believe in what he was doing (John 7:3–5). Jesus does not go with the Jerusalem festival with his siblings (but goes anyway). There is tension in the Cana miracle of John 2.<sup>21</sup> McNish sees Mark 3:33–35—where Jesus identifies his family as those who obey God’s will—as a public exposure of “strained family relationships.”<sup>22</sup>

When Jesus kept on surprising people and confronting the religious and political leaders of his day, the

time came when they shamed him publicly and, they thought, decisively. He was arrested, mocked by Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers, shamed by being made to carry an instrument of torture,<sup>23</sup> and nailed to a cross. Jurgen Moltmann speaks of Jesus’ “shameful death.”<sup>24</sup> Execution in this manner was a clear, public act of rejection—a horrible humiliation. Joel Green and Mark Baker say:

Although we tend to emphasize the physical pain of death on the cross, in the Roman era crucifixion was dreaded first and foremost because of its shameful character. It was designed to be an instrument of contempt and public ridicule. The victim died naked, in bloody sweat, helpless to control body excretions. The cross ‘epitomizes human concepts of defilement and exclusion’ (216). By Roman law no citizen could be disgraced through this dishonorable means of execution.<sup>25</sup>

If the principle fear in shame is, as G. Piers and M. Singer suggest, abandonment,<sup>26</sup> then Jesus has entered into that abandonment experience in the cross: rejected by religious and political leaders, by a mocking crowd<sup>27</sup> (though not all members of the crowd mocked), by two people crucified nearby (though one changed and another fell silent), and by God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).<sup>28</sup>

Moltmann holds that Jesus “died with the signs and expressions of a profound abandonment by God.”<sup>29</sup> John Calvin and Jurgen Moltmann both hold that on the cross Jesus suffered the torment of hell—abandonment by God.<sup>30</sup>

Related to that, it is perhaps useful for us to consider, after Jesus died, who took down his body from the Cross and claimed it for burial. It was Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:58;

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14 The sermon, about 1984, was at the ordination of Elsa Baerg in Winnipeg, Man. I was present.

15 Witherington, 119, is unsure if “they” refers to public or family, but “the people” seems a stilted way to refer to family.

16 Again, this characterization is not original with me, but the source is unknown.

17 Witherington, page unknown.

18 Albers, 103–104; McNish, 7, 12.

19 McNish, 7, refers to Jesus verbally “jousting” with his opponents.

20 Witherington, 172.

21 Witherington, 172.

22 McNish, 11; Witherington, 120.

23 Albers, 104.

24 Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974), 132.

25 Green and Baker, 163.

26 Quoted in Narramore, 29n7.

27 Albers, 104; McNish, 171.

28 McNish, 171, does not see Jesus as forsaken and abandoned by God on the cross.

29 Moltmann, 147.

30 Donald K. McKim, *Calvin’s Institutes, Abridged Edition* (Louisville: John Knox Westminster, 1991), 2:16:10; Moltmann, 147–148. Cf. 159n75, where he quotes H. Gollwitzer, “The rift goes not only through Jesus but through God himself. God himself is abandoned by God and God casts him out.” McNish, 171, refers to Moltmann’s saying that Jesus’ worst experience was abandonment by God, “something that took place between Jesus and his God,” 149.



Mark 16:46; Luke 23:52; John 19:28), a member of the Sanhedrin.<sup>31</sup> Possibly this was because Joseph, as a member of the Sanhedrin, could approach Pilate, in a dangerous situation, to ask for the body of a man executed as a threat to Rome.<sup>32</sup>

There is, though, no indication that he made this request on behalf of Jesus' family. Further, no mention is made of family members besides Mary being present at Jesus' execution, nor were any family members involved in burial preparations.<sup>33</sup> Dr. Ben Witherington suggests that Jesus' family did not claim his body because they were ashamed of him:

I suspect the issue of shame is primary here. If Jesus was perceived to have shamed the family during his ministry, the fact that he died in the most shameful means possible in the ancient world would quite possibly have been the final straw severing the ties of Jesus from his siblings....<sup>34</sup>

Witherington notes that Jesus was not buried in the family cemetery—likely because it was located in Nazareth, not in Jerusalem—but in one provided by Joseph of Arimathea. Yet, again, the family was absent from such decisions.<sup>35</sup>

The shameful manner of Jesus' death had ramifications for the Christian Church ever since. The

Early Church, however, had to face and respond to its discomfort when people of Jewish and Roman backgrounds mocked their identifying with a crucified leader. Paul responded, "But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jewish and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23), where the true wisdom and power of God are revealed (1 Corinthians 1:24–25).

Further, the shame of the manner of Jesus' death is captured in the early Christian creed contained in Philippians 2:5–11—that Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross."<sup>36</sup>

### III. Shame as a Psychological and a Theological Reality

There are two types of shame: discretionary shame and disgrace shame.<sup>37</sup> Psychology provides positive roles of discretionary shame. Discretionary shame, such as blushing when embarrassed by a proposal interpreted as indecent, provides social protection for people.

McNish speaks of shame as a borderline phenomenon between union and separation.<sup>38</sup> She refers to Helen Lewis, who says shame helps protect against the loss of self-boundaries<sup>39</sup> and Alfred Adler,

who says shame both connects and separates in a positive way.<sup>40</sup>

Discretionary shame, then, helps us with defining proper boundaries, upon which both society and church can sometimes encroach.<sup>41</sup> Though having spiritual and moral implications, discretionary shame is not, however, the main focus on this study; that is disgrace shame, a response to an action by self or others.<sup>42</sup>

For Sandra D. Wilson, a counselor and speaker, we need to understand "the devastating lie of shame":

Shame is a soul-deep sense that *there is something uniquely wrong with me* that is not wrong with you or anyone else in the world. Because I am not perfect and problem-free, I feel hopeless, disgustingly different, and worth less than other people. I view myself as, literally, worthless. It isn't just that I *make* a mistake when I make a mistake, I *am* a mistake when I make a mistake. That is shame's message (*italics original*).<sup>43</sup>

Wilson holds that shame is learned "in our earliest, most influential educational institution. We call it *the family*" (*italics original*).<sup>44</sup> For her, a shame-based family raises children with a unique sense of flaws because of unrealistic parental expectations.<sup>45</sup> She talks of an "intergenerational cycle of shame."<sup>46</sup>

In Dr. Karl Menninger's *Whatever Became of Sin?* guilt is addressed, but the word, or matter of, *shame* is not easily located; he does write of people disassociating themselves from a group's dishonourable past and of other defense mechanisms, which, in my view, does relate to unnamed or unclaimed shame.<sup>47</sup> A sense of personal shame may be experienced, as Dr. Claudia Black says, by children who have been both raised by alcoholic parents and sexually abused.<sup>48</sup> The victim feels shame for what they are not responsible.

Albers, a professor of pastoral theology, says, "Disgrace shame... is fearful of exposure out of concern for the image of the self which others may develop should other people see

31 Witherington, 172–173.

32 No source has been found for this, but it is not original with me.

33 Witherington, 172–173, for some of this.

34 Witherington, 172.

35 Witherington, 173–174.

36 McNish, 172, for some of this.

37 Albers, 8–15.

38 McNish, 128.

39 McNish, 123.

40 McNish, 132–133.

41 Albers, 8–13. Spiritual abuse, though recognized, is not addressed in detail in this essay.

42 Albers, 13–15.

43 Sandra D. Wilson, *Shame-Free Parenting* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 1992), 14. McNish, 24, also refers to the difference between *making* a mistake and *being* a mistake (*italics original*).

44 Wilson, 14.

45 Wilson, 10.

46 Wilson, 16.

47 Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1973), 98.

48 Claudia Black, *Double Duty* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1990).

the 'real' me with all my disgusting ways, deficiencies, and defects."<sup>49</sup> Albers and Jill McNish, a parish priest, refer to Karen Horney who says that a gap between the projected and real sense of self results in shame.<sup>50</sup> McNish refers to Horney's view that pride systems and supports are symptoms and definitions of shame, but asks why there are pride systems in the first place.<sup>51</sup>

McNish surveys a number of viewpoints by leaders in psychology. Freud saw shame as exposure.<sup>52</sup> For Peer Hultberg, shame serves social adaptation and protects the self and individual integrity.<sup>53</sup> Psychoanalyst Alice Miller sees shame as a result of the way that we are raised within a culture, but McNish sees this begging the question of the origin of shame.<sup>54</sup> Heinz Kohut says shame reflects poor parenting, the mirroring of ideals and ambitions.<sup>55</sup>

As can be seen from the above, for McNish, the issue of the origin of shame is inadequately dealt with within secular circles. She sees a need for God and views shame as an ontological reality of our being apart from God.<sup>56</sup> For

McNish, shame is a "sense of essential flawedness, of something wrong at the core of one's being."<sup>57</sup> McNish quotes Diedrich Bonhoeffer as holding that shame is humankind's loss of unity with God and other people.<sup>58</sup>

Virginia Satir does not explicitly mention shame, or explicitly respond to it, in her book *Peoplemaking*. Within it, her *My Declaration of Self-Esteem* ends by saying, "I own me, and therefore I can engineer me. I am me and I am okay."<sup>59</sup> Nor does shame get mentioned in her *Conjoint Family Therapy*.<sup>60</sup> There is self-affirmation, and one suspects an implicit response to shame—a rejection of it through it not being mentioned. A deficit in her approach, however, is that there is no sense of

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relating to a higher being, nor how a concept of shame might relate to this. It would seem that if shame exists as a concept, the individual, or the group the individual is accountable to, constructs it.

On the other hand, psychologist Bruce Narramore, an evangelical Christian, distinguishes between "shame for the failure of living up to an inner expectation" and guilt for "self-inflicted punishment for the transgression of a fixed standard."

He, however, sees them as both stemming from conscience and, therefore, part of one process,<sup>61</sup> which, for him, seems weighted toward responding to guilt. For not distinguishing between shame and guilt, he quotes for support a psychoanalyst C. Brenner who says "for practical purposes such feelings of inferiority are the same as feelings of guilt" and Dr. Paul Tournier, who says, "All inferiority is experienced as guilt" (italics removed).<sup>62</sup>

It is Narramore's view that "one reason psychologists prefer to see self-esteem as a separate process from guilt is that they can thus remove problems of self-esteem from the moral realm."<sup>63</sup> While Narramore has a legitimate concern, the question is raised whether he adequately distinguishes between guilt and shame. I hold that he does not.

Albers says shame is the forgotten emotion.<sup>64</sup> McNish refers to Erik Erikson, who said shame was not studied enough by a society preoccupied with guilt.<sup>65</sup> Guilt is rational, Albers and McNish say, while shame is relational.<sup>66</sup> The focus on shame is what others will think of us, an ontological violation as a person.<sup>67</sup> Shame, then, reflects, in part, a socialization process.<sup>68</sup>

Albers says in the statement, "I did that!" the focus on guilt is on the last word; the focus on shame is on

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49 Albers, 14.

50 Albers, 36; McNish, 94.

51 McNish, 94–95.

52 McNish, 86.

53 McNish, 113.

54 McNish, 96–97.

55 McNish, 98.

56 McNish, 105–106, 125.

57 McNish, 128.

58 McNish, 131.

59 Virginia Satir, *Peoplemaking* (Palo Alto, California: Science and Behavior Books, 1972), 27–29. Satir's view of the family of the future, 298–299, reflects the values she holds—including the engineering.

60 *Conjoint Family Therapy*, rev. ed. (Palo Alto, California: Science and Behaviour Books, 1967).

61 S. Bruce Narramore, *No Condemnation: Rethinking Guilt Motivation in Preaching, Counseling and Parenting* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1984), 29.

62 Narramore, 30.

63 Narramore, 31.

64 Albers, 2.

65 McNish, 35.

66 Albers, 27; McNish, 53.

67 Albers, 22, 25.

68 Albers, 31–32.

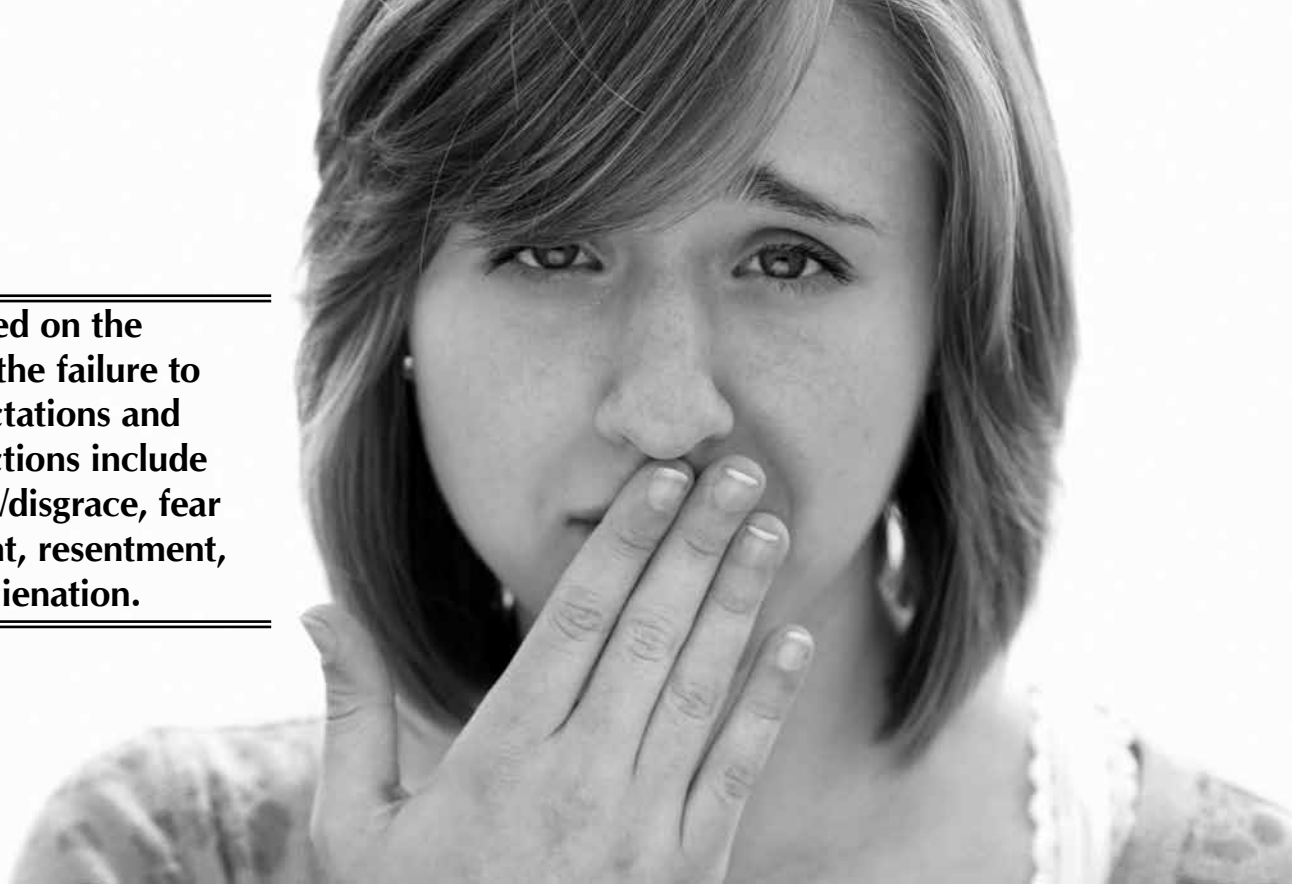
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**Shame is focused on the self. Its fault is the failure to meet self-expectations and its internal reactions include embarrassment/disgrace, fear of abandonment, resentment, self-isolation, alienation.**

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the first word.<sup>69</sup> The result, Sylvan Tompkins says, is that shame involves more of our person than does guilt.<sup>70</sup> For McNish, guilt and shame are often tangled together and exist in a state of fusion; she, however, sees guilt as being a “subset” of shame.<sup>71</sup>

Mark R. McMinn and Clark D. Campbell suggest that shame is self-oriented, while guilt is other-focused.<sup>72</sup> Their interpretation, however, seems to be weighted toward guilt, rather than shame. This is suggesting by their saying that “the grip of shame can be exchanged for the joy of *mercy*” (*italics added*).<sup>73</sup>

Mercy is needed when guilt is equated with shame, but for shame itself? They do, however, say that a depressed client might have “profound shame without cause.”<sup>74</sup> This suggests that they might accept more causes of shame than the presence of guilt. Clients, Scripture, and Christian theology would seem to be best served by distinguishing more carefully between shame and guilt, though—as McNish has suggested—it is a complex relationship.

Theologically, J. P. Thornton-Duesbury says that shame in biblical

language is both objective and subjective. Objective shame relates to realities and experiences such as *dishonour, confusion, mockery, defeat, destruction*.<sup>75</sup> This, evidently, includes the failure to achieve goals and desires. Subjectively, he says, it refers to the feeling of shame aroused within a person.<sup>76</sup> But the theology of shame involves more than this.

Joel Green and Mark Baker, seminary professors of theology, say that North American evangelical theology is heavily weighted toward a penal substitutionary view of the cross, which they find limiting.<sup>77</sup> They, instead, refer to the work of Dr. Norman Kraus, a former missionary to Japan, who sought to respond to that country’s shame-based culture, partly because a guilt-based orientation to the cross did not communicate effectively.<sup>78</sup>

Kraus says “the cultural expression of shame is much more evident in the Bible than most Western readers are aware.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, Green and Baker say the Cross can speak relevantly to a

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69 Albers, 101.

70 McNish, 26.

71 McNish, 27, 29.

72 McMinn and Campbell, 41.

73 McMinn and Campbell, 47.

74 McMinn and Campbell, 85.

75 J. P. Thornton-Duesbury, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, Alan Richardson, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 225.

76 Thornton-Duesbury, 225.

77 Green and Baker, 13, 23–33.

78 Green and Baker, 155.

79 Green and Baker, 157.



shame-based culture.<sup>80</sup> While within multicultural Canadian society there might seem to be cultures that are shame-based and others less so, it is important to remember, as McNish says, that all cultures are affected by shame, though what shames differs.<sup>81</sup>

Dr. Kraus said that it is important to distinguish between shame and guilt. Kraus says<sup>82</sup> shame is focused on the self. Its fault is the failure to meet self-expectations and its internal reactions include embarrassment/disgrace, fear of abandonment, resentment, self-isolation, alienation. The social reaction is to ridicule and exclude, disgrace and hold in contempt, disapprove and reproach.

By contrast, he says, guilt focuses on the act; its fault is an offense against legal expectations; its internal reactions are condemnation/remorse, self-accusation, fear of punishment,

anger, self-justification, hostility. The social reaction is to blame and hold responsible, accuse and condemn, punish and retaliate. The remedy is propitiation through restitution or penalty; justification banishes guilt.

Kraus's examination shows the negative effects of shame as distinct from guilt. It reiterates the view that shame is more relational, while guilt is more act-oriented. McNish says shame can sever one's relationships; isolate "from culture, with friends and lovers, and with God"; and even call into question one's existence.<sup>83</sup> Kraus gives an example of a suicide in Japan—a father died because newspapers published that his son committed a crime in Holland—where it was seen as an act of self-exclusion in response to shame.<sup>84</sup>

#### IV. The Response of Jesus to Shame

Dr. McNish observes that when Jewish leaders tried to shame Jesus through his associations with people, he refused to disassociate himself; he refused the shame.<sup>85</sup> McNish says that common defenses against shame are rage, power, righteousness, withdrawal, perfectionism, a transfer of blame, and envy—and that Jesus did not use them.<sup>86</sup> Rather, "Jesus turned shame on its head."<sup>87</sup>

When the Word became flesh (John 1:14), Jesus chose to enter our shame—both the shame that is undeserved by individuals and families because of the stigma of mental illness and the shame that is deserved by society when it mistreats mentally ill people and their families.

The Cross is God's "anguish" over "the moral tragic pain God endures in order to overcome the shamefulness of our evil," Kraus says.<sup>88</sup> Dr. Kraus says that on the cross God willingly experienced shame out of love for us and, because Jesus entered into our

shame, he provides a way to overcome shame.<sup>89</sup>

Yet in Jesus on the Cross, in the Crucified God (to borrow Moltmann's term), the New Testament asserts that God does enter our shame and pain. Irenaeus, a second-century church leader, said that Jesus, the Second Adam, went through

every stage of human life in order to restore them all to communion with God: "God recapitulating in himself the age-old shaping of the human creature, so that he might kill off sin, be rid of death, and give life to humanity; and because this is so, 'true are his works.'"<sup>90</sup>

Thomas Torrance, a systematic theologian, draws upon the first five centuries of church discussions—including by Irenaeus and Gregory of Nazanzus<sup>91</sup>—to say God become man in Christ in order to heal humanity in its totality: "for that



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**In Jesus on the Cross, in the Crucified God, the New Testament asserts that God does enter our shame and pain.**

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80 Green and Baker, 162, 162n1.

81 McNish, 14.

82 Green and Baker, 156, adapted almost verbatim from a chart, with adjusted punctuation.

83 McNish, 31, 142, quoting Donald Capps in part.

84 Green and Baker, 161.

85 McNish, 54.

86 McNish, 51, 54, 59–61.

87 McNish, 166.

88 Green and Baker, 163.

89 Green and Baker, 163–164.

90 Richard A. Norris, Jr., ed. and trans., *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980),

55. I am indebted to Dr. Chris Holmes for past instruction and for the highlighting of this quotation.

91 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, 1992), 38.

which He has not assumed He has not healed.<sup>92</sup> In context, this statement of Gregory's refers to Jesus being truly human—of a "rational mind" (meaning a human mind); but to be human includes to experience the range of human emotions, and he did this by the incarnation and crucifixion.

McNish quotes Diedrich Bonhoeffer: "God let himself get pushed out of the world on to the cross,"<sup>93</sup> but this allowing for rejection was to prepare for reunion. Peer Hultberg, a Jungian analyst, relates "eternal shame" and "overwhelming pain" while "conscious" (hell)<sup>94</sup>—though, for him, hell might not be a reality beyond one's experience here and now. Jesus entered our shame because only by entering into its very depth could He ultimately heal it, empty it, remove it.

Just as he tasted death for everyone (Hebrews 2:9), he tasted our shame.<sup>95</sup> The writer of Hebrews tells us, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, *scorning its shame*, and sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 12:2). As J. P. Thornton-Duesbery

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## The Son of God, our Creator, took on our humanity to deal with shame (Hebrews 12:2).

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says, Jesus "despised the ignomy of the Cross."<sup>96</sup> The word translated as "scorning" has also been translated as "made light of its shame" (Knox), "despising" (KJV, RSV, NASB, NKJV, Challoner-Rheims), "thought nothing of its shame" (Phillips), "making light of its disgrace" (NEB).

John Brown says it means Jesus did not let shame cause him to "shrink from the discharge of duty."<sup>97</sup> F. F. Bruce says "this disgrace Jesus disregarded, as something not worthy to be taken into account when it was a question of His obedience to the will of God."<sup>98</sup> The writer to the Hebrews says Christians are "to despise the fact that they were despised."<sup>99</sup> In a broader context, McNish says, "Jesus did not shrink from being shamed."<sup>100</sup> The cross is God's "shame-bearing symbol," says Albers.<sup>101</sup> McNish says Jesus' own struggle allowed their transformation in himself.<sup>102</sup>

Albers says, "A word of liberation

from the debilitating effects of disgrace shame is announced through the cross."<sup>103</sup> In fact, McNish says Jesus came to save us from shame, not sin.<sup>104</sup> In other words, Christians are given help through the Cross

to not let shame keep them from moving ahead. We are to move past shame into a better future.

That movement is possible because of the resurrection of Jesus—that this abandoned one, this shamed one (though Moltmann does not use the word) has been vindicated.<sup>105</sup> It reveals the honour given to Jesus and "underscores God's approval of Jesus' standards for what is honorable and shameful."<sup>106</sup> The resurrection of Jesus transforms shame.<sup>107</sup>

The Son of God, our Creator, took on our humanity to deal with shame (Hebrews 12:2), to recreate the human community (Romans 5), to forgive sins (Romans 3), and to heal the universe (Romans 8). Theologically, when Jesus rose from the dead, the entire created order—the *cosmos*<sup>108</sup> (John 3:16) began to change.

Further, McNish points out that the risen Jesus returns to his disciples in a body that continues to bear the identifying marks of his humiliating death.<sup>109</sup> They showed his continued identification with humans who struggle with shame. Jesus enters our shame, seeks, provides, and ultimately promises our healing.

### IV. The Response of the Church to Shame

For McNish, the Christian Church—despite being born in shame and having too much experience with it, has underdeveloped views of shame.<sup>110</sup> In the Church, Jesus forms a community that can move past silence and shame toward support. Dr. Witherington points out that we see a major change revealed in Acts 1:13–14. When the disciples went to the Upper Room where about 120 people were praying, among them

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92 Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970; rev. second English ed., 1987), 350.

93 McNish, 172.

94 McNish, 113.

95 This thought is not original with me.

96 Thornton-Duesbery, 225.

97 John Brown, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1862/1961), 613.

98 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 353.

99 Charles A. Trentham, "Hebrews," *Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1972), 12: 87.

100 McNish, 166.

101 Albers, 103.

102 McNish, 172.

103 Albers, 105.

104 McNish, 193. Paul, however, said that it was of "first importance, that "Christ died for our *sins*" (1 Cor. 15:3, italics added). McNish's bold statement does, though, suggest the Church needs more balance among statements of shame and guilt—though her statement offers another imbalance.

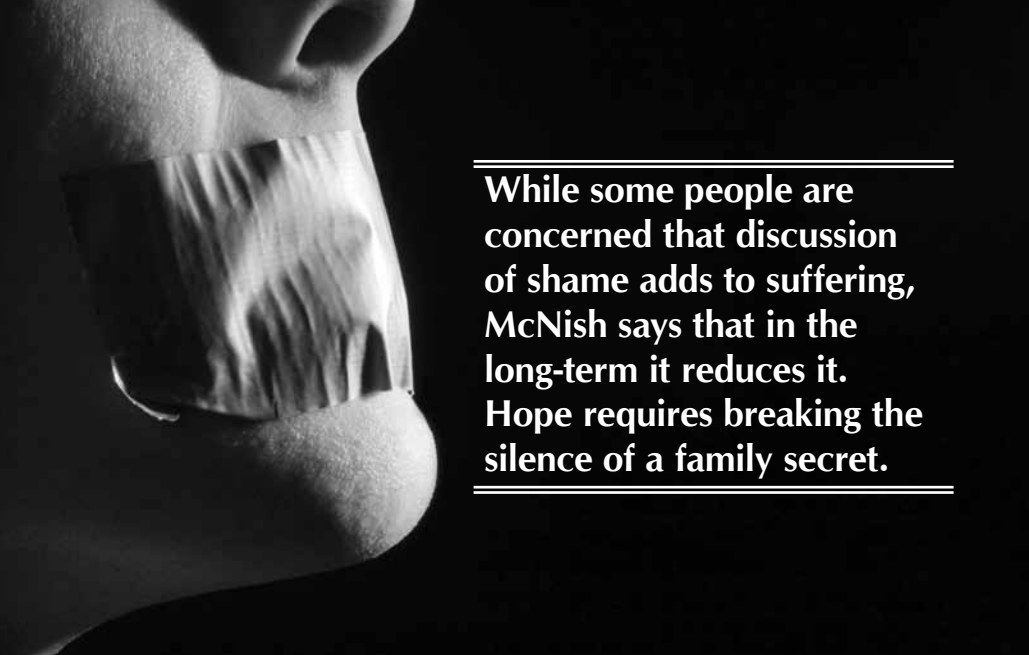
105 Moltmann, 175.

106 McNish, 166.

107 McNish, 166.

108 I am indebted to others for the awareness that *cosmos* in John 3:16 means more than Planet Earth.

109 McNish, 165.



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**While some people are concerned that discussion of shame adds to suffering, McNish says that in the long-term it reduces it. Hope requires breaking the silence of a family secret.**

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is there, for, as Thornton-Duesbery says, “Christian hope never puts a man to shame by failing or deceiving him....”<sup>115</sup>

Through the coming of Jesus and his resurrection, and from the changed and changing people in the Upper Room of Acts 1, we see God’s intention for us—for healing and for a community of healing.

It might be quite difficult for hurting and questioning family members to say that Jesus entered into the depths of our human experiences. It would mean that God in Christ enters our silence, doubts, questions, guilt, the shame of stigmas, the confusion, pain, sickness, brokenness in both life and death, the misunderstandings and hurts caused by family, church members, and wider society. But this is what the Early Church began to consider, discover, and take comfort in.

How can we assist people? There is a need for counselors to deal with their own shame-based issues,<sup>116</sup> for unconditional acceptance,<sup>117</sup> for recognition that hope brings people to therapy (Isaiah 42:3) and yet may add to their sense of shame (because they need help),<sup>118</sup> and the awareness that change for shame-based identities is a slow process.<sup>119</sup> While some people are concerned that discussion of shame adds to suffering, McNish says that in the long-term it reduces it.<sup>120</sup> Hope requires breaking the silence of a family secret.<sup>121</sup>

It is within a relationship that movement can be made to release some of the shame that binds people.<sup>122</sup> Institutions, counselors, pastors, churches, and members are to stand with hurting people and families and reject the wrongful shame society and church often places on people.

There is learning to be a support to others dealing with struggles, pain, limitations, and shame. This can happen with the recovery that is

were “Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers.” Mary and her other sons were praying.

What changed their minds to move beyond shame, to now identify with Jesus after his crucifixion? What happened between Jesus dying on the Cross and prayer in the Upper Room? As we know, and as Dr. Witherington reminds us, God raised Jesus from the dead<sup>111</sup> (Romans 1:4). Paul the Apostle tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:7 that “Jesus appeared to James.” And James and Jude, both the half-brothers of Jesus, each describe themselves in their letters as a “servant” of Jesus Christ (James 1:1; Jude 1).<sup>112</sup>

They were changed, Dr. Witherington reminds us, because of Jesus.<sup>113</sup> A family that struggled to talk and to understand, that

struggled with shame reinforced by wider society, began to change because Jesus was raised from the dead. But what happened within one family was also, according to the New Testament, also happening on a much larger scale.

Paul learns to boast in Christ the Crucified (1 Corinthians 1:31) and, through modeling, calls on the Church to do likewise. Other Christians have evidently realized that, shown by the hymn of Philippians 2:5–11, with its focus on humiliation and restored (and enhanced) honour.

For Barth L. Campbell, 1 Peter is partly written to reassure us of future “honor divinely bestowed on those who presently suffer shameful treatment by those outside the community.”<sup>114</sup> And Paul’s confidence

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110 McNish, 137–138, 188.

111 Witherington, 174–176.

112 Witherington, 218.

113 Witherington, 174–176.

114 Barth L. Campbell, *Honour, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter* (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1998), 62. I became aware of this writing by others in the past.

115 Thornton-Duesbery, 225.

116 Albers, 112–113.

117 Albers, 99, 112.

118 Albers, 123, 129.

119 Albers, 114.

120 McNish, 31.

121 Albers, 123.

122 McMinn and Campbell, 154.

happening, that partly happens, that does not happen.

In fact, because the Church is linked to Christ and is a community, it has unique resources to respond to shame. Theologian Douglas John Hall reminds us that within the mystery of sickness and healing there is much for the Church to do as God's people. He says, "The church is—we are!—a vital part of God's response to human suffering."<sup>123</sup> Alber says part of this is that we need to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2).<sup>124</sup>

Through Norman Kraus we are reminded that part of the remedy is identification and communication, that love can banish shame.<sup>125</sup> There is a need to give individuals and families the freedom to talk, to feel, to tell their stories with unhappy and happier moments. There is a need to break down the silence and shame, the isolation, and to support individuals and families.

For Albers, there is a need for the community to counter the tendency of shame-based people to isolate themselves.<sup>126</sup> He sees corporate worship with an outward focus as drawing a person away from themselves<sup>127</sup> and the Lord's Supper as a tangible reassurance of forgiveness and freedom beyond shame.<sup>128</sup>

McNish quotes Diedrich

Bonhoeffer as holding that "shame is only overcome in the fact of final shaming, namely the becoming manifest of knowledge before God."<sup>129</sup> Dr. McNish says, "Unless we are willing to enter into this process of naming and owning the shameful, shamed, and isolated parts of ourselves, we will not be able to achieve any sense of unity with God."<sup>130</sup>

We can agree with McNish that the journey is needed while, at the same time, recognizing it is an involved process.

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### **There is a need to give individuals and families the freedom to talk, to feel, to tell their stories with unhappy and happier moments.**

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In the Church's ministries, McNish says the Church has long erred by emphasizing that people are sinners who should be ashamed of themselves; rather, people should be told that God knows they are ashamed and he wants to be gracious to them.<sup>131</sup> Further, she says it is ironic that, given the centrality of the shamed Jesus on the Cross, that the Church has developed into an institution that focuses on shaming

people.<sup>132</sup>

In light of that, the Church does well to carefully examine its socialization process toward what she calls "toxic shame."<sup>133</sup> As part of this, the Church can also, in light of psychology, also look at its defense mechanisms related to shame.<sup>134</sup>

On the other side, there are also the positive roles of shame, which can be reviewed through psychology: the borderline between union and separation<sup>135</sup> that helps protect against the loss of self-boundaries<sup>136</sup> and connects and separates in a positive way.<sup>137</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The psychological depiction of shame relates to the image of a person as established by their inner self as reflected by those around and possibly excluding them.

If viewed apart from God in Christ, its frame of reference is individual or cultural, but has no ultimate handle.

Within North American evangelical circles there is a tendency to confuse shame and guilt, which ignores part of our complexity as human beings, part of the Christian message, and part of our response as a Christian community. If we are convinced God's strength can be revealed through weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), it can be revealed through the Church's sensitive response to shame.

It has been said that the Church is a community of recovering human beings. We are to grow in grace and understanding, to acknowledge, admit, learn from, and move past shame—and to stand patiently with those who are not able to move in step with our sometimes artificial psychological and theological timetables.  $\theta$

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123 Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 121.

124 Albers, 105–106.

125 Green and Baker, 163.

126 Albers, 106.

127 Albers, 107.

128 Albers, 106.

129 McNish, 121.

130 McNish, 167. One can see some similarity with some of David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2004), 63.

131 McNish, 185.

132 McNish, 188.

133 McNish, 185.

134 McNish, 114, 173, in part quoting Sandra Edelman.

135 McNish, 128.

136 McNish, 123.

137 McNish, 132–133.



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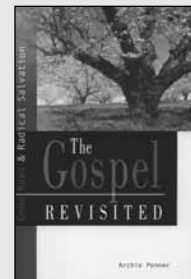
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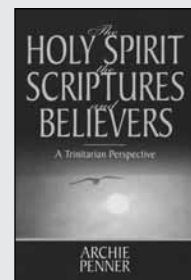
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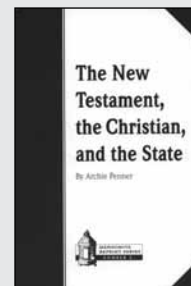
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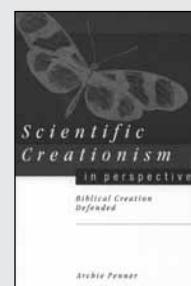
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# Book Reviews

***The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith***, Stuart Murray (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 172 pp., \$16.09, ISBN 9780836195170. Reviewed by David Thiessen, EMC conference pastor.

As if the title isn't provocative enough, when opening the book, you will find the first chapter is titled, *Uncovering Anabaptists!*

The book makes an effort to strip back historical and cultural accretions accumulated over the centuries, and take a look at what originally inspired a group of European believers back in the 1600's. Then it speaks to the question of why that original vision continues to attract people in today's complex and violent world.

Nakedness also speaks of vulnerability, humility, and openness. The book suggests ways in which this "stark" metaphor seems to fit. Murray then proceeds to describe the Anabaptists in the rest of the book by examining seven core convictions.

So who are the Anabaptists and what do they believe? A diverse group of people in the United Kingdom asked that question in the early 90s. They came from various churches and denominations.

They had stumbled into Anabaptism, and many of them expressed that this encounter was experienced as a homecoming. It was in Anabaptism that they discovered believers who shared their convictions about "discipleship, community, peace, and mission" (22).

In 1991, these folks from Ireland and Britain launched what is known as The Anabaptist Network. They were not looking for another denomination to join; they were exploring a shared understanding on faith and life that centred on following Jesus.

*The Naked Anabaptist* is a recent expression of the kind of resources

this network produces.

The second chapter is entitled *The Essence of Anabaptism*. It lays the groundwork for the rest of the book.

While the book develops the essence of Anabaptism by describing seven core convictions, it prefaces them with four disclaimers. I will mention two that seem particularly significant.

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**Jesus is the central reference point for faith and life. He is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord. Anabaptists are committed to following Jesus and worshipping Him.**

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The *first disclaimer* is that these convictions are not a creed, fixed statements of faith that imply that there is no need to listen to other understandings, or no need to continue to wrestle with Scripture.

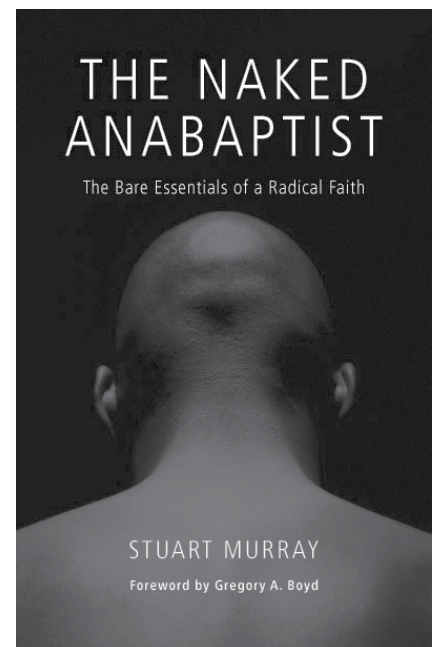
Credo's tend to be concerned primarily about beliefs, while Anabaptists are equally concerned about behaviour. So Anabaptists prefer to speak of confessions.

These confessional statements are not intended to be comprehensive; they are provisional. They are open for review to help Anabaptists learn and grow in their understanding of Scripture and of the implications of the Lordship of Christ.

The *other disclaimer* is that these

convictions are aspirations rather than achievements. Since Anabaptists describe discipleship as "following" Jesus, they are reluctant to claim that they have arrived. It is a journey that is incomplete.

Here is a brief summary of the *seven core convictions*:



1. Jesus is the central reference point for faith and life. He is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord. Anabaptists are committed to following Jesus and worshipping Him.
2. Jesus is the focal point of God's revelation.
3. Anabaptism is known for rejecting standard Christendom assumptions and pursuing other ways of thinking and behaving.
4. Christian faith is good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted.

Anabaptists are willing to suffer if it comes as a result of faithful discipleship to Christ.

5. There is a commitment to live in communities of discipleship and mission. The Bible is to be read and interpreted in community. This includes consultative leadership; roles based on gifts, not gender; baptism for believers; and the practise of hospitality and friendship.
6. Spirituality and economics are interconnected. This involves a commitment to simplicity, generosity, creation care, and working for justice.
7. Peace is at the heart of the gospel. This involves working hard at finding non-violent alternatives to a divided, violent and strife-ridden world.

The book ends with a chapter on *Anabaptism Today*, which uncovers some of the weaknesses and limitations of the Anabaptist tradition, as well as some affirmations.

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## **The book serves as an excellent introduction to Anabaptism for people who do not have that background, but would like to explore Anabaptist faith and life.**

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Here is a carefully articulated and readable book. How would this book be most useful?

This book does not so much advance Anabaptist scholarship, as it makes the results of that scholarship more accessible to the non-specialist.

It may be particularly useful to two groups of people. First, it serves as an excellent introduction to Anabaptism for people who do not have that background, but would like to explore Anabaptist faith and life.

Another group who could benefit from reading this spirited account from a non-Mennonite, are jaded and perhaps reluctant Mennonites, who are not very convinced or even aware of their own faith history. The book could facilitate that elusive “homecoming” for both groups.

This was the experience of Simon

Barrow of Exeter, England. He says, “The recovery of Anabaptist emphasis on discipleship, church as subversive and exemplary community, the biblical word oriented toward Jesus the living word, and peacemaking as integral to the gospel has given me fresh hope for a truly liberating, post-Christendom vision and practice of Christianity—something both committed and open” (30).

In a concluding statement the writer says that his interest is not in Anabaptism for its own sake, “... but in a tradition that helps us become more faithful followers of Jesus” (172).

In the appendix there is a list of resources on Anabaptism, a study guide for the seven core convictions, and notes on the introduction and the eight chapters of the book. **e**

***Transforming Conflict and Anger into Peace and Non-Violence: A Spiritual Direction***, Janet Malone (Ottawa, ON: Novalis, 2007), 232 pp., \$24.95, ISBN 978895076926. Reviewed by David Kruse, pastor, MacGregor EMC (Man.).

The title of this book gets right to the point: *Transforming Conflict and Anger into Peace and Nonviolence: A Spiritual Direction*.

What may need clarifying is the subtitle. *Spiritual Direction* here does not refer to the discipline of one person guiding another in a spiritual mentoring relationship. Rather, it refers to the method of transforming anger into peace: by spiritual principles, by the connection of the inner life with the divine.

Malone’s hypothesis is

that the various forms of violence associated with conflict can be let go of, and that the energies of anger can be transformed into personal growth.

Malone limits her project to the intra- and inter-personal

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**Malone’s hypothesis is that the various forms of violence associated with conflict can be let go of, and that the energies of anger can be transformed into personal growth.**

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aspects of anger, not the national or international aspects. She makes explicit her own position as “Christian” and her intention to be respectful of other faiths and spiritualities as she approaches the topic with a “spirituality of nonviolence.”

The author offers definitions of key terms, summarizes approaches to conflict and others’ theories, and draws on her workshop leadership experiences in this field.

Malone explores the

roots and patterns of conflict, and the physical, psychological and spiritual implications of various ways of handling anger. It is the sort of book that can be referred to in personal, pastoral, and congregational settings.

She begins with the invitation to a change of perspective: from narrow self-protection to a cosmic community of interdependence, from a scarcity of power to enough for all through sharing and respect. In addition, she argues we must change our language from using terms of “winning and losing” to using terms of mutuality and love for the other person.

Further, we must recognize our own “unfinishedness,” our own need for prayer. Malone doesn’t get to the “how to” of transforming anger energy into peace till near the end of the book, so the early chapters are for creating an understanding of the subject, which she does well, especially through the section on conflict, and in the discussion questions.

She concludes that “conflict and anger are normal, [and] necessary... for our own and others’ growth,” and that the process of change is life-long, but happens in daily steps. Wholeness can increase through various ways of letting go and being transformed.

This is a brief but useful comparison of various models of conflict transformation from which we can gain new perspective, attitude, and language for our own relationships, as well as in helping others in theirs (facilitating workshops and shaping public policy, for example).

If we can see conflict as the normal thing it is, that may remove some taboos in talking about it, and we can gain insight into how and why peace can be increased.

I believe the significance of this topic is immense for the well-being of all, because of the pervasiveness of the conflict/violence problem. It is widespread in societies and deep in each person.

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**If we can see conflict as the normal thing it is, that may remove some taboos in talking about it, and we can gain insight into how and why peace can be increased.**

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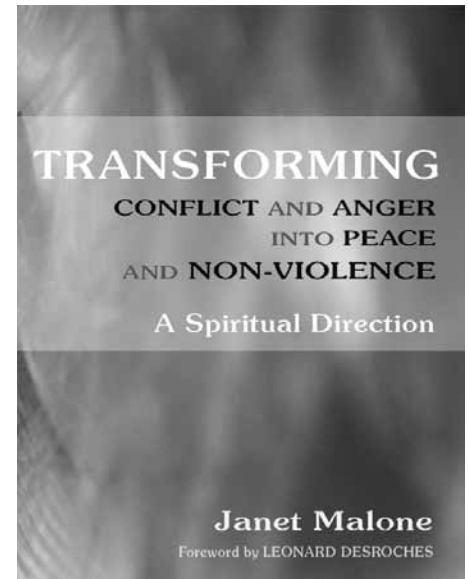
Malone addresses the roots of violence in the individual and how this plays out in getting along with others. Of personal importance, I was inspired by the inner conversion stories of the four people she chose (Dorothy Day, Mahatma Gandhi, Ety Hillesum, and Leonard Desroches), and by another look at the teachings of Jesus.

Her teaching challenged me about reconciling with people in my own life, and what some of the barriers are. What challenged me most were Malone’s observations on the roots of anger.

Malone’s tone and tack will resonate with many people’s basic decency and their desire to be in good relationship with others. Some will be inspired and motivated by the ecumenical, almost interfaith, even non-religious spirituality invoked.

Though I was drawn to Malone’s picture of a holistic, universe-affirming life of inner peace, the impact of this book on me was somewhat diminished by what I perceived about her interpretation of Jesus and the gospel.

Though Malone claims to approach the subject from a Christian perspective, her arguments didn’t strike me as particularly Christian. Perhaps I’ve been taught by evangelicalism and by an emphasis



on the Gospel of John to see Jesus as quite clearly divine as well as human.

My view of a divine and human Jesus is that he is destined to judge humanity and therefore his words have authority. Since Jesus is also a continuing presence through the Holy Spirit, we should have a sense that he is near.

This translates into accountability to Him—we must seek to obey absolutely and call others to do the same. However, in Malone’s work, Jesus is presented primarily as a prophet and teacher—never as divine.

In my interpretation of Malone’s view, Jesus is less the judge of the universe whose standards we must uphold, than a moral example whose words have inspired people from various religions to consider love for enemy.

Though most interpretations of “the gospel” include the issue of sin, and the need for divine forgiveness, that is not identified as a problem or recognized as a factor in any of Malone’s arguments. This seems to be a serious omission in a Christian understanding of the roots of conflict and anger.

Malone does write strongly, however, on the importance of interpersonal reconciliation.

In her account of creation, Malone tries to pull together scientific and



mystical elements, ending up with the Big Bang and God as a participator in the creative process.<sup>1</sup>


Similarly, while God is mentioned occasionally as a player in the process of transformation, there is nothing essential about God's role here, either. Perhaps the most telling statement of what I interpret to be God's too-diminished role is in her

final paragraph: "Who is God for you? Our many faiths, religions and spiritualities are our human attempts to communicate with the divine in our lives. Each of us must discover and nurture the ineffable mystery that connects us to all others in our cosmic community."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this is humility about the human search for truth beyond

ourselves, but it doesn't give the revelation of the Christian God in Jesus the exclusive glory it deserves.

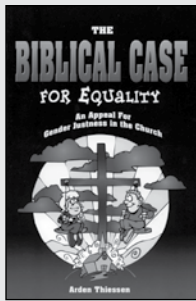
However, I was encouraged by the statement Leonard Desroches' (one of Malone's case studies) made about why he worked with nonviolent action: "My motivations are love of myself, of every sister and brother, and a burning hunger to help reveal God as expressed in Jesus' liberating truth, life-giving justice and indestructible love."<sup>3</sup>

May we be so motivated and active! 

1 p. 21, quoting Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Quantum Theology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), p. 184.  
 2 p. 197.  
 3 p. 60, quoting Leonard Desroches, *Allow the Water* (Toronto: Dunamis Publishers, 1996), p. 119-120.

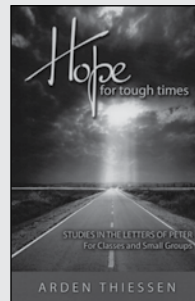
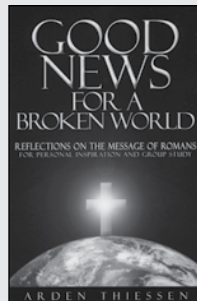
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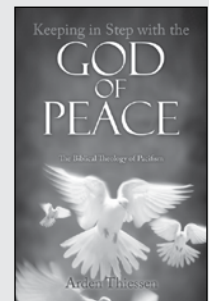
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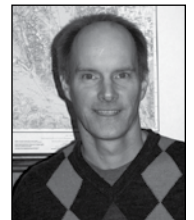


# Feature Sermon

## Nehemiah 8

# The Reading of the Book

**Brad Schneck**



Brad Schneck grew up in a Swiss Mennonite Church in Ohio. He is a diploma graduate of Moody Bible Institute and holds a BA from Briercrest Bible College and a certificate from Briercrest Seminary. He served with Avant Ministries in Alaska and Quebec. Brad is pastor of Vanderhoof Christian Fellowship (BC).

Imagine for a moment that you are about to move out of your house that you have been living in for many years. You have decided to downsize and make life simpler on you.

In order to do this you need to sort through lots and lots of stuff.

You start on the main floor, work your way to the basement and then remember that you also had some things stored in the attic.

You get your ladder and climb through the hatch to get to the attic. When you swing your foot up and

over into the attic you stand up hunched over and pull the string to the one light bulb that is hanging down.

As the bulb lights up the room you see all kinds of "treasures" from days gone by. You see an old boxed

Christmas tree that you gave up years ago after you went green. You see an old fur coat and leather bomber jacket that you gave up after you went vegan.

There are old boxes everywhere. One is marked *china*; one is marked *board games*; and one in the corner, that catches your eye, has written on it *books*. You go over to the box, (ducking your head so as to not hit a rafter) and you look inside.

There inside is a wide variety of books from many years ago when you went to school: books on English Literature, an old French textbook, an old psychology book. Then as you are rummaging through the box you pick up a book that looks familiar.

You blow the dust off it and realize that it is a Bible that your Grandmother and Grandfather gave to you when you graduated from high school. As you flip through the Bible you can't help but to wonder how your life would have been different if you had actually read your Bible...what problems you could have avoided... what kind of things you could have learned about God.

I have a question for you. Where would your life be without the Bible? I think if we answer that question in general terms we could say that we would know very little of God and his creation.

We would not know who we are. We would not know that we are sinners in need of a Saviour. We would not know that God in his mercy and love became a man in Christ Jesus to die on the cross for our sins.

Simply put, without the Bible we would be lost. We would not know



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**Without the Bible we would be lost. We would not know God in his fullness, the Father's authority, the Son's redemptive love, and the Spirit's indwelling in our heart.**

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God in his fullness, the Father's authority, the Son's redemptive love, and the Spirit's indwelling in our heart.

I think most of us would agree when we consider where we would be without the Bible and think on specific terms. We would simply say something like, "Without the Bible my life would be in shambles."

In Nehemiah chapter 8 and 9 God's people discovered that their lives were in shambles because they had ignored God's Word and lived contrary to His will. And it is because of this that they as a people were taken captive by foreign armies and taken into exile in foreign lands.

It is because of their ignoring God's Word that the temple of God was destroyed and that the city of

Jerusalem with its massive walls was razed. It was because of their ignoring God's Word that their lives became such a mess.

The Old Testament—some say that it has no relevance for our lives today. But I think the connection between the past and the present is already very clear.

If you put God's Word on the shelf and ignore it, your life will be in shambles. The walls will come down and your life will become a mess. Maybe not right away, but, like the Israelites of old, it will catch up with you sooner or later.

Today we will see what happens when God's Word finally catches up with the people of Israel and they put God's Word back into their lives. Let's read together our text for today: Nehemiah 8.

In the previous chapter we saw that the wall of Jerusalem was finished in just 52 days. It was acknowledged that this massive undertaking being completed so quickly was due to the help of God. Let's go ahead and read from chapter 8 of Nehemiah.

<sup>1</sup>All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out

the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

<sup>2</sup>So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. <sup>3</sup>He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

<sup>4</sup>Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

<sup>5</sup>Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. <sup>6</sup>Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

<sup>7</sup>The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. <sup>8</sup>They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

<sup>9</sup>Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

<sup>10</sup>Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

<sup>11</sup>The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."

<sup>12</sup>Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Let's pause here for a moment and consider these verses. We find ourselves in a place in Nehemiah's journal where he describes what happens in Jerusalem just a few days after the wall is complete.

It was the first day of the seventh month which was the beginning of the Jewish holiday the Feast of the Trumpets; a time of thanksgiving to

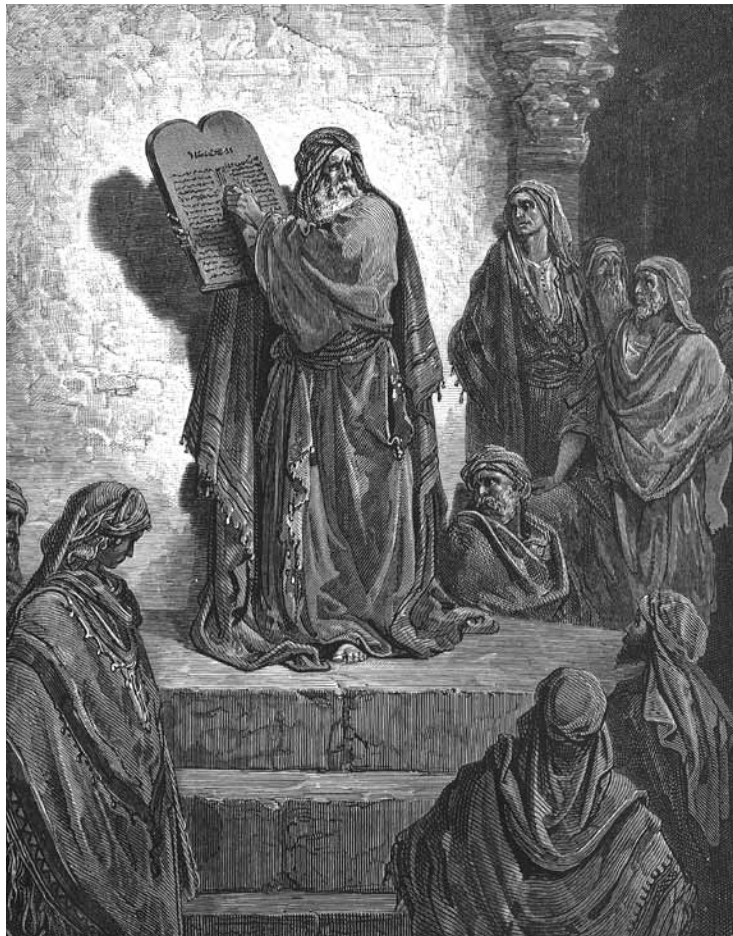
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### When Ezra opened the book the people responded in four physical ways.

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God. So it is the people, gathered to give thanks, who would ask Ezra the scribe to read to them from the Book of the Law of Moses.

I personally believe that the people have a rekindled interest in God's Word due to the fact that God had shown his power by helping them build the wall in such a short time. So it is with this spirit of thanksgiving that they desire to reconnect with God through his Word. They desire once again to hear from God.

So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the people to read. The reading we are told was done over roughly a six-hour period. It seems most likely that Ezra did not read all five books of the Pentateuch—that is, the first five books of the Bible—but most likely Deuteronomy.

In Deuteronomy we have the Ten Commandments plus a variety of other Laws that the Jews were to follow if they were to enjoy their covenant relationship with God.

But, in any case, whichever part of God's Word he read from, the people were enthusiastic to hear it read. Both men and women and anyone who was old enough to understand "listened attentively" to God's Word.

Ezra, along with his colleagues of unpronounceable names, went up on a wood platform built for the special occasion. When Ezra opened the book the people responded in four physical ways.

First, the people all stood up. Secondly, after Ezra praised the Lord the people raised their hands. Thirdly, they responded vocally, "Amen, Amen!" (which means "so be it").



And, fourthly, they bowed down and worshiped God with their faces to the ground.

Now I want you to know that this is descriptive and not necessarily prescriptive. But, with that said, I often wonder if we are not a bit stiff here.

I grew up like many of you in a Mennonite church where foot tapping during singing was considered radical (actually it wasn't that bad). But do you know what? God is not afraid when we move around a little.

It's okay to raise your hands in worship. It's okay to say, "Amen." You might give me a heart attack, but I'm sure someone would revive me. If you are comfortable and genuine, it's great to say "Amen" or raise your hands.

So the people were enthusiastic to hear the Word of God read to them once again. They were also attentive to God's Word. When the people gathered together they expected God to speak through his Word.

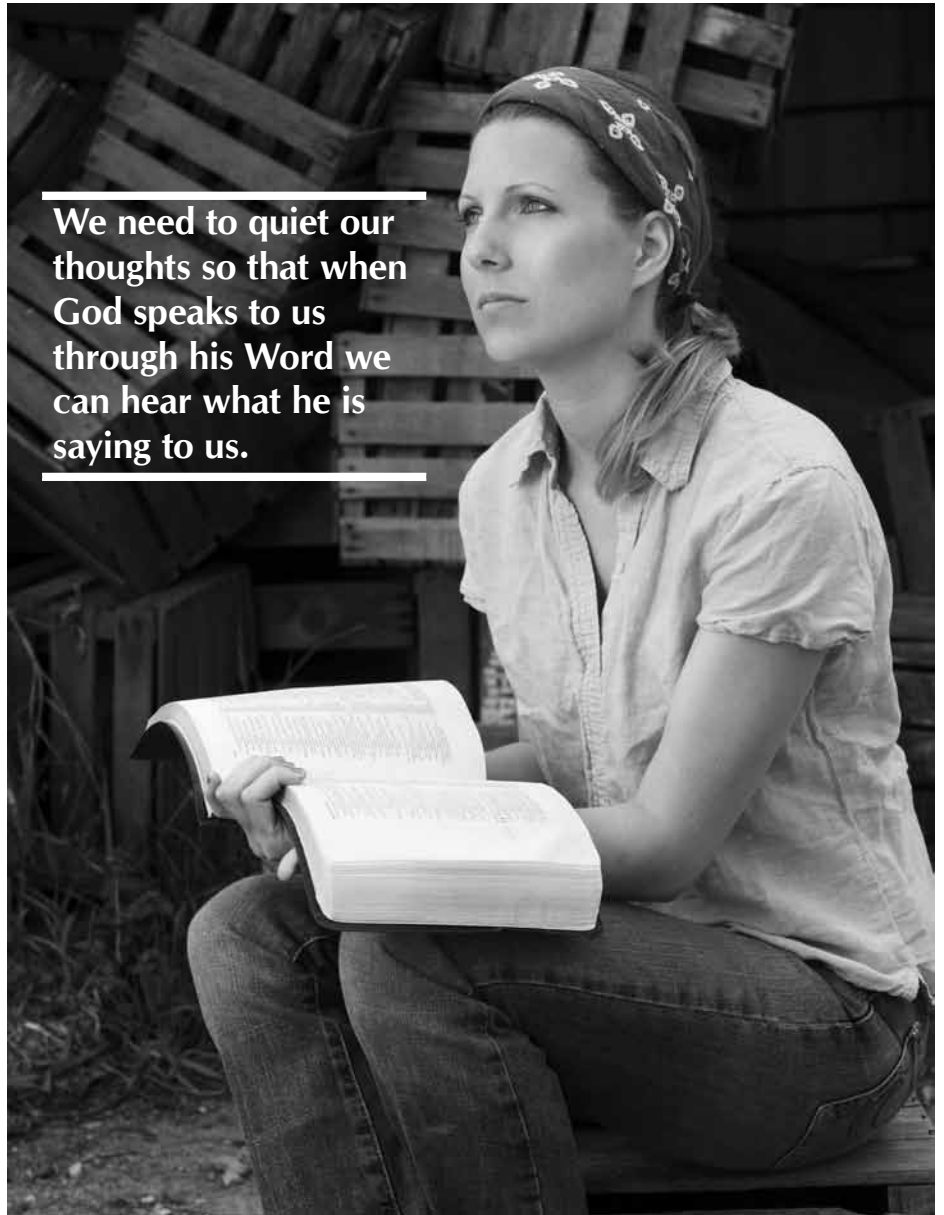
When you hear the Word of God read, do you do so attentively? Do you pay attention and focus upon what God is saying to you?

When you read your Bible at home, it's the same thing. We need to read the Bible attentively. We need to approach God's Word expecting to hear from him.

So often we approach God's Word in a way that is more unthinking. We put reading the Bible on our to-do list, like flossing and brushing your teeth.

We need to quiet our thoughts so that when God speaks to us through his Word we can hear what he is saying to us. We need it to move our heart, speak to our mind and guide our will.

The people that day also had a hunger for understanding God's Word, not just hearing it. They were teachable. In verses 7 and 8 we see that the Levites went out into the crowd (perhaps after Ezra was done reading) and they instructed the people.



**We need to quiet our thoughts so that when God speaks to us through his Word we can hear what he is saying to us.**

They read from God's Word and made it clear to them. They explained God's Word in such a way as to make it clear so that the people could understand what God was saying to them.

I think when the people began to realize what exactly God was saying to them they were cut to the heart. We see in verse 9 that *all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.*

Why did this cause them to weep? I believe that it was the conviction of sin. They were grieved that their ancestors did not follow God, and they were grieved over their own

personal sin. Perhaps they wept when they understood if only they had followed God's plan for them they wouldn't be in such a big mess.

Again it's the same today, isn't it? When you ignore God's Word, put it in the attic or keep it on the bookshelf, your life will eventually derail and there will be one big mess to clean up. If you think about it, how much more guilty are we than those who heard God's Word read that day?

Not everyone had access to the Word of God. Most of us have more than one copy of the Word of God. Yet we sin, not out of ignorance, but out of pure rebellion against God's





way. And we wonder how we get ourselves in such a mess.

If anyone should be weeping, it should be me. If anyone should be weeping, it should be you. You and I have free access to the Word of God, yet we rebel against God's plan and go our own way. It is we who should be weeping for our sins.

Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites saw the people weeping and could see their genuine sorrow for their sins. They did not want to leave the people in their sorrow without hope. They instructed the people to get the Kleenex out, dry their tears and celebrate.

In verse 10 *Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord.*

*Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*

Nehemiah's instructions were not to do penitence, but, rather, the opposite. They were to celebrate the feast with good food and sweet drinks, and to share it with those who did not have anything prepared.

Why were they to celebrate instead of weep? Because it was a special day to the Lord. Because "the joy of the LORD is your strength." They could rejoice in knowing that even though they had sinned against the LORD there was yet hope.

And that hope was in the LORD. It was the LORD who would give them strength to recover from their catastrophic living. It was the LORD who could return them to joyfully living in Him.

<sup>11</sup> The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."<sup>12</sup> Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

The people now had the picture. Now they understood why their life was in such a shambles. They now understood what it meant to live in covenant with God. And perhaps it was also explained to them that in just ten days, the Day of Atonement would arrive, a day in which the sins of the people could be covered by offering sacrifices to the Lord and by releasing the scapegoat who would symbolically carry the sins out into the desert.

I have a question for you. Are you still beating yourself up for a sin or



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**Why were they to celebrate instead of weep? Because it was a special day to the Lord. They could rejoice in knowing that even though they had sinned against the LORD there was yet hope.**

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sins that you have committed in the past? Do you feel as if you can never recover? Be still and do not grieve. Your Day of Atonement has come. It came 2,000 years ago when God became our scapegoat in Jesus Christ. Jesus became our sacrificial lamb and died for our sins.

The time for weeping is over. The time for living a new life in Jesus has begun. Confess your sins and get on with your joyful life in Jesus, for as Nehemiah said, *“Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”*

In verses 13 to 18 we see that the people continue to not only take in the Word of God, they begin to obey it by holding a special feast. Let’s read.

<sup>13</sup>On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered

around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. <sup>14</sup>They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month <sup>15</sup>and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths”—as it is written.

<sup>16</sup>So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. <sup>17</sup>The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

<sup>18</sup>Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

The people now had a chance to begin to once again follow the Word of God that had been read. They were told how they were to celebrate the feast of the booths in remembrance and thanksgiving of how God protected the people of Israel as they wandered through the desert.

Ezra the priest and scribe gave the people special instructions to spread the word through out the community that they were to collect branches from the native trees and make booths to live in during the festival.

This particular celebration called for the people to construct and live

in these little huts during this time of celebration. This served like a week-long skit reminding them of God’s faithfulness to his covenant people.

All of this was done in accordance with God’s Word. And you will notice that when they followed God’s instructions they experienced joy:

<sup>17</sup>The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

I want to close by asking once again the question that I asked at the beginning, “Where would your life be without the Bible?” Do you value the Bible that you have? Do you understand that it is God’s Word? Today I want to relate to you a story that comes from some of your Mennonite heritage.

While visiting with an older member of our church, my wife and I were told that when the Russians were advancing through the village of her grandparents, the Russians would collect Bibles to be burned. This particular Mennonite family, at great risk, hid their Bible in a very unique place. They actually hid it in a loaf of bread.

Why did they go to such lengths to protect a book? Because this family knew that it was not just a book; it was The Book, the Word of God. As we are closing, I want you to consider the following question. “What length would you go to save your Bible?” Or perhaps I need to ask, “Do you even know where your Bible is?” **Θ**

# The Final Word

**S**ome authority does tend to go with the office, person, and the ministry of the pastor who faithfully preaches and teaches God's Word. The ultimate authority, of course, rests in God and His Son Jesus Christ, and His Spirit. The Scriptures partake of this authority inasmuch as they reveal, as nothing else does, the will and ways of the sovereign God. The pastor who expounds this authoritative Word wields some authority too. This happens whether or not the pastor wishes it to happen.

The call and charge of the church tends to localize and convey a sense of responsibility and authority to be an example to believers. Years of proven faithfulness adds weight to anyone's words, and this is true of the pastor too. But the operational, functional authority to bind-and-to-loose, to decide, to give or to withhold fellowship, to set standards, and to speak prophetically to the principalities and powers—this authority belongs to the church and not to one or more of her servant-leaders. Power always corrupts human beings, and ultimate power corrupts totally, so save your pastor from this peril. Structure your life so that your pastor is and remains the servant of the congregation. Do give your pastor honest feedback and a periodic review in great seriousness.

You can expect that some neo-Anabaptists will come forward attacking ordination itself, arguing that the preaching-teaching of the Word be shared almost equally be laymen. They will amass many arguments why the congregation should not set apart, ordain, and support a preacher-teacher. You can salvage some wisdom from some of their arguments.

But you will notice that usually they are persons set apart and paid (as theologians, denominational executives, or whatever) so that they can give themselves to the Word, and to their study. You will wonder why they refuse a congregation's right to be served also by an "equipper with the Word." You will notice that they use their own education to turn around and attack the ideas of educated pastors serving congregations.

Even if opponents of an educated, ordained "preacher-teacher equipper with the Word" quote their New Testament to prove their points, remember that your congregation stands twenty centuries farther away from the Christ event, and trained exegetes to recover the meaning of the Christ are needed even more now than they were in New Testament times.

— Paul M. Miller,  
Leading the Family of God  
Herald Press, 1981

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