

“Shame On You!” Really?

Rachel Ramer



Shame can hijack the life of an unwed mother, outrank a church’s universal stance on the value of life, and contribute to the demise of children left unprotected to disease and malnutrition. All this happened at the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, Ireland between the years 1925 and 1961.

The remains of nearly 800 children, found in neglected, underground sewage chambers connected to the home for unwed mothers in Tuam, provide heartbreaking evidence of a religious heritage turned hazardous. This shelter, managed by the Bon Secours Sisters, was a place where children suffered in difficult conditions due to societal neglect. Many died of illness or from being underfed while waiting for adoption. This home was one of several throughout Ireland, monuments not for love and protection of life, but shrines of shame.

Distinguishing Shame from Guilt

Religion conflates guilt and shame. Guilt indicates

culpability, violations of moral behavior, and responsibility. Shame sends a different message—a social punishment, a rejection, a humiliation. A child may feel shame, for example, because of the deeds of a parent. At the height of Roman power, one noteworthy aspect of crucifixion was public shaming. Jesus experienced that shame, but that did not make him guilty.

Psychologist Mary Lamia states, “Shame is often confused with guilt—an emotion we might experience as a result of a wrongdoing about which we might feel remorseful and wish to make amends.” She adds, “Shame does not make a distinction between an action and the self.”

Psychologist Krystine Batcho adds, “For people who care about how others view them, shame can deter behavior that incurred such sanction. A form of punishment, shame is an aversive emotion that most people will try to avoid.”

Shame as a Religious Motivator

In a religious worldview, shame is often considered an effective way to bring about positive change in people. In *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Bradford A. Mullen states, “Shame is a godly motivator. A virtuous life shames the ungodly, providing a context for evangelism (Titus 2:8, 1 Peter 3:16).” Shame does have that effect, but we pay a price—girls with broken lives, babies with broken bodies, and even in some cases a preference for abortion over facing public shame.

According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III, ancient civilizations were “honor and shame cultures. At the top of the value hierarchy in an ancient culture was not the dyadic pair of ‘truth and falsity’ or ‘life and death,’ but rather ‘honor and shame.’ The chief end of life was to obtain honor and avoid shame.” This, however, was not the main concern of early Christians, who embraced the shame of following Jesus.



GREG ALBRECHT

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

QUESTION: Can you tell me how exactly “the church” is the “Bride of Christ”? What does this description teach us?

RESPONSE: Yes, the church is the bride of Christ—but the bride of Christ is not the only descriptive metaphor that the Bible uses to describe Christ-followers who compose, by the grace of God, the church.

We must also define the word “church” as we consider your question. The “church” (Greek *ecclesia*) is, according to the New Testament, an “assembly” – it is a plurality of entities, many individuals, a gathering, a group, a meeting or a crowd. When Jesus spoke of “the church” he said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). So, the assembly or gathering of the *ecclesia* can be small or large.

The word *ecclesia* is not reserved, as used in the Greek language, only for a specifically spiritual definition—an *ecclesia* can take place for any reason, as we see when *ecclesia* describes a riot in the city of Ephesus (see Acts 18). In ancient Greece cities actually had a place called an *agora* where an *ecclesia* (meeting or assembly) could take place.

The “church” as the **bride of Christ** is an assembly of people who are spiritually “in Christ” and in whom Christ himself lives. They are Christ-followers.

Now, the church is also spoken of in the Bible as the **body of Christ**—he is the head of the spiritual body, and those who trust, believe and follow are all a part of that body, as he calls and places his followers within his body. If we insist on only thinking of the church as the **bride of Christ**, then we must struggle with the fact that the church is also the **body of Christ**. Obviously, he would not literally marry his own body—so there are different descriptive metaphors being used to describe the church.

Another oft used metaphor of the church in the New Testament is of a building—Paul says that Christ-followers are “**the temple of the living God**” (1 Corinthians 6:16). Once again, if we are only thinking that the church is the **bride of Christ** then we must also realize that he will also marry not only **his own body** but he will construct a **building**.

Paul Minear in his book, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, catalogued 96 images of the church used in the New Testament, including a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9), the circumcision (Romans 2:25-29, Philippians 3:5-11 and Colossians 2:11-12), ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:18-21), citizens (Galatians 6:10 and Ephesians 2:10), exiles (Hebrews 11:13), an olive tree (Romans 11:13-23), a fig tree (Mark 11:12-14), a vineyard (Matthew 21:28-41) and the table of the Lord (1 Corinthians 10:21). There many other metaphors of the church used in the New Testament—light, salt, the new creation, a flock, a priesthood, the sanctified, the children of God and the friends of Jesus. □

What about Scripture passages where shame appears to be used as motivation? Could it be these are not cues to utilize shame; rather, they reflect a culture where shame was prevalent?

Jesus, the Shame Disruptor

Christians have adopted the use of shame yet this focus is contrary to the example of Christ. In the story of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus did not condemn the woman, but told her to change her

behavior. (John 8:1-11) He addressed her guilt, but he also disrupted her legacy of humiliation. The far-reaching potency of shame can be difficult to imagine—until, as in Tuam, actual graves are uncovered. Imagine the transformation if the young women and children had encountered a disruption to their humiliation. Imagine if Christians were known for love, not for encouraging shame. □

Rachel Ramer is the author of Religious Angst. This article is an excerpt adapted from her book.