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**Divine Forgiveness and Freedom from the  
Shame of Past Mistakes:  
A Communitarian Perspective**

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**Introduction**

Reflecting on the Protestant Reformation 500 years on, beyond a shadow of doubt, the main predicament addressed by this theological tradition from its inception was the problem of sin experienced as guilt. In other words, the Reformation sought to answer the question, “How can a sinner stand justified before a Holy God and have the assurance that he is so forgiven?”

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Dealing with the vertical relationship between God and man, the Reformation was deeply engaged in dealing with guilt as a forensic category. One can argue that this emphasis came to some extent at the expense of specifically addressing the profundity of the existential angst of shame that many believers feel despite their mental assent to or understanding of the fact that their sins are forgiven. The Reformation also dealt less with grace as a unique, qualitative experience of life in the *communio sanctorum*, the *communion of the saints* in the sacred fellowship of all living believers in Christ.

In this article, I wish to briefly lay out the gravity of shame that many believers feel and how such shame makes it impossible to truly experience the grace of divine forgiveness. Secondly, I will present theological arguments in favour of discrediting such feelings in the hearts of believers which will include looking at forgiveness itself as healing and cleansing. Finally, I argue that while divine forgiveness occurs on an individual basis between oneself and God, it was in fact meant to be mediated experientially through the community of the church as the presence of God in the world here and now and what we must do as a church to make that real.

### A. The Gravity of Shame

*Oxford Dictionary* defines shame as “a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behaviour.”<sup>2</sup> Bernard Golden refers to shame as, “negatively judging ourselves when we believe we’ve failed to live up to either our own standards or the standards of other people.” He distinguishes between healthy and toxic shame referring to healthy shame as guilt: “Guilt can be healthy in moving us toward positive thinking and behavior. It is specific in its focus.” Golden quotes Brené Brown:

Shame, however, when toxic, is a paralyzing global assessment of oneself as a person. When severe, it can form the lens through which all self-evaluation is viewed. As such, some words used to express the emotion of shame include feeling insecure, worthless, stupid, foolish, silly, inadequate or simply less than.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/shame>.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Golden, “Overcoming the Paralysis of Toxic Shame: An essential step for Cultivating Healthy Anger,” *Psychology Today* (April 27, 2017): [www.PsychologyToday.com/us/blog/overcoming-destructive-anger/201704/overcoming-the-paralysis-toxic-shame](http://www.PsychologyToday.com/us/blog/overcoming-destructive-anger/201704/overcoming-the-paralysis-toxic-shame). Golden references Michael Lewis’ *Shame* [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

Extreme forms of shame can be associated with depression and even suicide.<sup>4</sup> For example, in Eastern, honour/shame based cultures, suicide was known to be a common antidote to shame. It was more honourable to die than to live in a community where one had been disgraced. Gershen Kaufman, one of the foremost affect theorists about shame and how deeply feelings of shame can cut into the core of our basic schemas of the self, made this observation:

Shame itself is an entrance to the self. It is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, of inferiority, and of alienation. No other affect is closer to the experienced self. None is more central for a source of identity. Shame is felt as an inner torment, as a sickness of the soul. It is the most poignant experience of the self by the self ... a wound felt from the inside, dividing us both from ourselves and from one another.

Shame is the affect which is the source of many complex and disturbing inner states: depression, alienation, self-doubt, isolating loneliness, paranoid and schizoid phenomena, compulsive disorders, splitting of the self, perfectionism, a deep sense of inferiority, inadequacy or failure, the so-called borderline conditions and disorders of narcissism. These are the phenomena which are rooted in shame.... Each is rooted in significant interpersonal failure....

The binding effect of shame involves the whole self. Sustained eye contact with others becomes intolerable ... speech is silenced. Exposure itself eradicates the words, thereby causing shame to be almost incommunicable to others.... The excruciating observation of the self which results, his torment of self-consciousness, becomes so acute as to create a binding, almost paralyzing effect upon the self.<sup>5</sup>

Returning to shame in the spiritual context, believers suffering with extreme shame over past sins may withdraw from the church community with debilitating feelings and negative self-talk. Common beliefs tend to disbelieve what God's word says about us; they deny that we are forgiven, holy, loved. Other common beliefs deny the

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*and Guilt in Neurosis* (International Universities Press, 1995) and Brené Brown's *Shame—The Exposed Self* (Free Press; [www.TED.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame](http://www.TED.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame)). See Golden's article here: [www.Psychologytoday.com/us/blog/overcoming-destructive-anger/201704/overcoming-the-paralysis-toxic-shame](http://www.Psychologytoday.com/us/blog/overcoming-destructive-anger/201704/overcoming-the-paralysis-toxic-shame). Cf., Helen Block Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1971.)

<sup>4</sup> Brené Brown "Self-Conscious Emotions and Depression: Rumination Explains Why Shame But Not Guilt is Maladaptive," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 32, no. 12 (Dec. 2006): 1608–1619.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Wheeler, "Self and Shame: A Gestalt Approach," *Gestalt Review* 1, no. 3 (1997): 224.

reality of forgiveness altogether—forgiveness is not real—worse, it is a lie.

Oftentimes, we project onto God the way we feel about ourselves, creating a dysfunctional God image which leads to perceiving God as judgmental, verbally abusive and unloving. When this occurs, hearing the message of the gospel and forgiveness of sins may not result in feelings of hope and joy at all.

### **B. God as Most Real Being and Divine Forgiveness**

In tackling the feeling of shame within believers over past sins, it is important to have a clear understanding of who is the God that forgives us. The true depth and beauty of God’s forgiveness and of the God who forgives is seen exclusively in the New Testament.

Who is this God who forgives?

In Acts 17, in seeking to evangelize the Greeks, the Apostle Paul made consensual reference to the philosophy of the Greek poets that the true God was the One, “in whom we live and move and have our being,” said Saint Paul to the Athenians in Acts 17:28. The expression was advocated by the poet Epimenides of Cnossos who “flourished” in the sixth century BC.<sup>6</sup> J. A. Crabtree said of Acts 17:28:

The most real being (*ens realissimus* or, more typically, *ens realissimum*) is one of several titles that medieval philosophers and theologians used to denote God. The fact that God exists on a higher level of reality than we do—that is, he is more real than we are.<sup>7</sup>

Not only is God the Father through Christ the ground of all being, but all things were created by Him, are sustained in Him, and were made for Him. As Colossians 1:15–17 tells us, Jesus *is*,

the image of the invisible God, the first-born [*prototokos*] of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” In other words, everything in creation was made by and for God and in the end, everything will serve His ultimate purpose.

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<sup>6</sup> Note from the *Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), 231.

<sup>7</sup> J. A. Crabtree, *The Most Real Being—A Biblical and Philosophical Defense of Divine Determinism* (Gutenberg College Press, 2004).

These ideas play no small role in our understanding of God's redemptive acts towards us.

Geurt Hendrik Van Kooten made it clear that God, Christ, and the cosmos are closely intertwined in Pauline thought. The scriptures refer to our redemption as God gifting us with a new identity in Christ that belongs to the age to come (God's re-created order of the cosmos). God saves us in His capacity as the most real being, as the author and telos of human history. Consequently, there could never be anything more real and enduringly true in the entire cosmos than what God is doing for creation in Christ. Resultantly, while the shame that seizes our hearts may tell us that we are worthless, foul, and disgraced, there can be no truer reality of ourselves than who we are in Christ and no more authentic and enduring reality in the world than that which is in Christ our Lord. This is why when Paul wrote about the grace we receive from God, he has on occasions done so from a cosmological perspective (see Colossians and Ephesians in particular).<sup>8</sup>

In spite of what our shame may tell us, the truth of the matter is that the forgiven transgressor is in the truest sense possible a pure, beautiful, and cherished person in space and time because of *Who* it is that saves us.

### **C. The Depth and Beauty of Forgiveness**

It is commonplace for many believers to understand divine forgiveness much like a judicial document declaring that our sin debt has been cancelled. However, the Scriptures speak of our forgiveness as a cleansing phenomenon that is part of the divine act of new creation. Seyoon Kim said in his preliminary considerations on Paul's theology of new creation in 2 Corinthians 5, "At this point Paul may have in mind the Rabbinic idea which compares forgiveness and atonement for sin on the New Year's Day or on the Day of Atonement with a new creation."<sup>9</sup> Sometimes forgiveness in general without any

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<sup>8</sup> Geurt Hendrik Van Kooten, *Cosmic Christology in Paul & the Pauline School: Colossians & Ephesians in the Context of Graeco-Roman Cosmology, with a New Synopsis of the Greek Texts, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 171.

<sup>9</sup> Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Wipf & Stock Pub, 2007), 17. Cf. Str.-Bill. ii, 421; iii, 519; Moore i, 334; Ekik Sjöberg, "Wiedergeburt und [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

connection with the New Year's Day or the Day of Atonement is compared with a new creation.<sup>10</sup>

Divine Forgiveness not only cleanses us but also affirms our beauty, dignity, and God given majesty (Zech. 3:1–5; Eph. 1:6, 2:5–6).

Finally, divine forgiveness is not only a judicial pardon but an act that draws us into a deep perichoretic union with the God-self.<sup>11</sup> British Theologian T. F. Torrance often reminds us that it is mistaken to separate the gift of salvation from the gift giver. In his *Theology in Reconstruction*, Torrance said,

Grace is to be understood as the impartation not just of something from God but of God Himself. In Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit God freely gives to us in such a way that the Gift and the Giver are one and the same in the wholeness and indivisibility of His grace.<sup>12</sup>

It follows that believers cannot be anything but holy as forgiven children of God. For God cleanses us by making us participate in the righteousness of His Son (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). The cleansing work of God is therefore too unfathomable to be disregarded in the wallow of our shame. In the present moment, what we truly are in Christ is unseen; furthermore, what is unseen here and now is more real and enduring than what can in fact be seen (2 Cor. 4:18; 1 John 3:1–3).

Who is it that God forgives?

Now, one may think that they are simply too sinful for the glorious redemptive of God to be applicable to them. But the message of scripture is quite the opposite. The salvation of God is for the “least of these.” Two biblical lessons suffice.

The first is the gracious message to be found in the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (Mat. 1:1–17). It tells about much

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Neuschöpfung im palastinischen Judentum (Rebirth and new creation in Palestinian Judaism),” *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology* 4, no. 1 (1950): 45ff.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Lev.R. 30.3 (to Lev. 23.40); Midr. Ps. 18.6 (str.-Bill. iii. p. 519). See Sjoberg, 58 and 67.

<sup>11</sup> “Perichoresis” refers to the relationship between the three persons of the triune God in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, particularly that one God has three distinct persons that commune.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 246.

more than who Jesus' ancestors were, who were an abridged tribute to God's grace throughout redemptive history. Matthew wants us to see that Jesus, the king of Israel, is like no other king on earth. Genealogies served as cultural indicators of authenticity, nobility, and honour. And perhaps it is exactly for that reason that the genealogy of the King of grace includes persons you least expect to be included in a genealogy: women and sinful outcasts.

John MacArthur says of this,

The first outcast was Tamar, the Canaanite daughter-in-law of Judah. She gained notoriety in Genesis 38 by resorting to deception, prostitution, and incest when she couldn't get a child any other way. Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and tricked Judah into having sexual relations with her. From that illicit union were born twin sons, Perez and Zerah, and thus Tamar and her son Perez joined Judah in the Messianic line. Despite prostitution and incest, God's grace fell on all three of those undeserving persons, including a desperate and deceptive Gentile harlot.

The second outcast was also a woman and a Gentile, but she made prostitution her livelihood. Rahab was no paragon of virtue, but she put her faith in the God of Israel and demonstrated it by protecting the two men Joshua sent to spy out her city. God spared her life and the lives of her family when Jericho was besieged and destroyed (Josh. 2:1–21; 6:22–25), and, brought her into the Messianic line. She became the wife of Salmon and the mother of the godly Boaz—David's great-grandfather.

Ruth, the wife of Boaz, was the third outcast. Though she was a Moabitess and former pagan, having no right to marry an Israelite, God's grace brought Ruth into the family of Israel, and through Boaz, into the royal line. She became the grandmother of Israel's great King David.

The fourth outcast was Bathsheba. She entered the Messianic line through adultery with David. The son of their sinful union died in infancy, but the next son born to them was Solomon (2 Sam. 11:1–27; 12:14, 24), successor to David's throne and continuer of the Messianic line. Once again, by God's grace Bathsheba became the wife of David, the mother of Solomon, and an ancestor of the Messiah.<sup>13</sup>

What does their inclusion tell us? It shows that God truly demonstrates His pedigree as a savior by his ability to redeem the *least of these*. The people whom God chose to be part of the Messiah's lineage reveal that the grace of God provides hope for every sinner.

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<sup>13</sup> See MacArthur, "Genealogy of Grace: Matthew 1:1–17," [www.gty.org/library/articles/A287/the-genealogy-of-grace](http://www.gty.org/library/articles/A287/the-genealogy-of-grace).

The second lesson comes from the story of the Israelite prophet Jonah and the salvation of the city of Ninevah. Oftentimes we focus on the disobedience of Jonah without trying to understand the painful emotional and existential realities the prophet was enduring. What immediately comes to mind are the many socially debilitating ethnic conflicts that have ravaged many countries in our modern time and the difficult process of reconciliation, healing, and transitional justice. Jonah's ill feelings toward warning the city of Ninevah can be easily understood once we understand the intensity of the conflict between Israel and Ninevah. Nineveh was an ancient Assyrian city of Upper Mesopotamia. Nineveh had long been an enemy of Judah and Israel. In 722 BC, the Assyrians defeated the northern kingdom of Israel, destroying its capital, Samaria. In 701 BC, the Assyrians nearly conquered Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. In the book of Nahum, we see God judging Ninevah harshly and are given clues regarding the kind of experiences the people of Israel had with the Ninevites. Of the Ninevites, Nahum 3:1 says, "Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!" Nineveh was a city of violence, known for its brutal treatment of those it conquered. The Assyrians were notorious for amputating hands and feet, gouging eyes, and skinning and impaling their captives. The final verse of Nahum's book emphasizes the violence of the Assyrians in the form of a rhetorical question: "Who has not felt your endless cruelty?" (Nahum 3:19). One could only imagine the kind of angst that Jonah felt about giving such a people an opportunity to be preserved when his memory was haunted by the suffering of his own people at their hands.

But the lesson we learn from this is clear. Israel was the chosen people of God. Consequently, what God was willing to do by showing mercy to the Ninevites was like the parent of a family that had suffered death and unspeakable atrocities; yet they sent their one surviving son to give the perpetrators an opportunity to live in spite of their crimes.

God forgives any who come to him no matter the sin. Shame has no power at the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16). In the end we can conclude that God's grace is even for us, the worst of sinners.



#### **D. The Will of God for the Church: Enacting the Forgiveness of God in Community**

In the midst of fierce theological rivalry with the Roman Catholic Church, the pioneers of the Reformation placed emphasis on the salvation of the individual. However, it is my contention that while the Reformers were essentially correct in their views on *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and the assurance of salvation, the relationship between the *communio sanctorum* and these cardinal doctrines was relatively left underdeveloped. One work that has gone a long way to address that lacuna is James M. Howard's *Paul, the Community, and Progressive Sanctification: An Exploration into Community Based Transformation within Pauline Theology*. Therein, Howard briefly outlines one of the definitions of "imago dei" developed by the Reformation movement which will be key to developing a main point of this article. Howard gives three basic views on the understanding of the term "imago dei" and says of the third view:

Third, the "dynamic view" understands the image of God in eschatological terms. This view also has its roots in the Reformation. Rather than seeing the divine image as the restoration of something that was lost, it is seen as something toward which all believers are progressing which is higher than what was lost. It includes eternal life and conformity to Christ, neither of which was guaranteed as part of the garden experience. In this regard, to understand image-bearing it shifts the focus from the past and the present to the future and toward what the redeemed are becoming, rather than what they lost at the fall. Divine image studies reflect a growing discussion and understanding of how believers reflect God's image. As defined by Stanley J. Grenz,

At the heart of the divine image ... is a reference to our humanity as designed by God. We are the image of God insofar as we have received, are now fulfilling, and one day will fully actualize a divine design. And this design—God's intent for us—is that we mirror for the sake of creation the nature of the Creator.<sup>14</sup>

The gifts we receive from God are part of an overarching grant design of Imago Dei. Union with Christ is both an individual and corporate blessing. Consequently, the spiritual gifts we receive as individuals were meant to be organically expressed and nurtured in the

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<sup>14</sup> James M. Howard, *Paul, the Community, and Progressive Sanctification: An Exploration into Community Based Transformation within Pauline Theology* (NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 62.

community of the church which is the spiritual body of Christ with diverse physical and institutional manifestations.

To put it metaphorically, God, the great maestro, bestows spiritual blessings like musical pieces which express the Trinity (God as an ontologically communal unity). These spiritual blessings are nurtured and expressed in symphony through the grand orchestra of the church. This process involves both individual and collective human effort as well as a mystical mediation between the maestro and the church orchestra by the spirit. The collective expression of these spiritual gifts by the church, as mediated by the spirit, becomes a communal witness to the world of who God is. Good works are therefore a natural expression of our spiritual blessings which are, by their very nature, communal and perichoretic expressions of the divine nature and also essentially missional.

**Conclusion: Enacting Forgiveness in the Community of God**

But how are we to enact divine forgiveness in community? This can be done in many different ways, and no formula is to be rigidly applied in this regard. However, such enactment must entail discipling the church as a safe place for sinners to confess their sins in the knowledge that the dominant response to such confession is prayerful support and declaration of the gospel message of forgiveness and transformation. It would also entail developing new songs of worship that specifically address the problem of shame (Kirk Franklin’s, “Imagine Me” comes to mind) and newly focused sermons that teach forgiveness and gracious accountability as the way of the church. Finally, the church would need to be disciplined into basic human responses that affirm those who are suffering with shame with the simple understanding that friendship and physical presence is one of the most powerful forms of evangelism and transformation.



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