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## Guilt, Shame, and Forgiveness Crucial Questions of Life in the Perspective of Reformation Theology

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### GUILT AND SHAME—QUESTIONS OF LIFE TODAY?<sup>1</sup>

In March 2015 the whole of Germany and the world beyond was shocked when a 27 year old pilot of Germanwings (an air-carrier of the Lufthansa-group) committed suicide by veering an aircraft with 149 people on board into the French Alps. The flight from Barcelona to Düsseldorf had among its passengers a school class returning from a school exchange. Pilot Andreas Lubitz used the moment when the other pilot went to the toilet to lock the cockpit door, making it impossible for his colleague to reenter. Then he slowly and steadily lowered the aircraft, calmly breathing (as the voice recorder revealed later), until the plane finally crashed into the mountains killing all passengers and himself.

1. I would like to thank Bernd Wannewetsch (Kandern) and J. Samuel Hammond for comments on an earlier draft of this paper and Marie Hammond (both Durham, North Carolina) for editing its English version.

Quickly the question arose who was to blame for this act of killing. Obviously it was the pilot who steered the aircraft into the mountains, seemingly clearly aware of his doing and in a healthy condition. But was he really? Investigation revealed that Lufthansa had twice refused to renew Lubitz's medical certificate because of a serious episode of depression. From 2009 onwards the license continued to be renewed on an annual basis. Who takes responsibility for renewing the license of someone who had been in therapy for suicidal tendencies? Many questions remain even after the case has been closed, but this much is certain: to be a pilot had been Lubitz' childhood dream, and while this dream had come true, it had been put in jeopardy by the diagnosed depression. Depression, we know, is a deeply painful condition, usually marked by withdrawal, ruminative sadness, self-blame, and excessive feelings of guilt. Was it a sense of shame over the prospect of losing a position that guided his premeditations as he conducted an internet research on "cockpit doors" and "suicide" only days before crashing the plane into the French Alps? The question remains: How could he so calmly steer the aircraft into the rocks when he must have been aware of ringing alarms and the second pilot banging at the door and screaming at him?

Germanwings flight 4U9525 has created a narrative of guilt and shame. Citizens of the town of Montabaur, where Lubitz lived, felt shame fearing their town might henceforth be known as the home of a mass murderer. Parents felt guilty of having sent their children on the school exchange. The media searched for a scapegoat and memorial services were held trying to find ways expressing the pain, guilt, and shame that seem unbearable.

*Feelings* of guilt and shame, it seems, are known to us, but what is the concept behind these feelings? Are they more than just that—subjective expressions of an emotional state? The German philosopher and journalist Ulrich Greiner, for example, argues that our Western societies have constantly moved away from the inherited "culture of guilt" and the even older "culture of shame" towards what he calls a "culture of embarrassment." In his book *Schamverlust (Loss of Shame)*<sup>2</sup> he follows—mainly through the lens of European literature—the path we have travelled towards a shameless culture. His key point is this: The notion of shame refers to the moral awareness of the human being, that is, the capacity to see oneself as a moral subject and to be conscious of one's responsibility to obey the dictates of a recognized authority. Failure to act according to the moral standards on which civilization rests causes a "bad conscience." Hence, a "culture of shame" presupposes an objective moral law and the personal conscience that signals divergence

2. See Greiner, *Schamverlust*.

from this law, finding expression in shame. For Greiner, the shift is exactly here: transcendent moral law is no longer generally accepted in late modern societies, and its place is being filled by the many rules of "political correctness" that every person has to yield to. Therefore, embarrassment, replacing shame, is the result of having neglected one or several of those many, changeable and, in fact, changing rules. Life is awkward when all that matters is to behave in a politically correct way, but this, Greiner maintains, is the core condition of survival in the West.

Greiner's book contains many valuable insights. Though it cannot count as a full-scale analysis of the phenomenon of shame in Western societies, two points in his analysis are especially worth pondering:

- The *first* is indeed a significant shift in the way our societies relate to authority. Kant's moral law still implied the awareness of a transcendent reality. One's life had to stand the test of time, even after one's time on earth was over. Goodness, for Kant, was found in enacting the good will, that is, in following the categorical demand for a maxim that is universally applicable. It is the dignity of the human being as "Spirit" to follow a validated ethical command rather than changeable impressions. The rules of "political correctness" work entirely differently, because in substance, Greiner argues, they aim at saving one's personal competitiveness based on good health.<sup>3</sup> Greiner mentions chastity as an example: Though ridiculed as a virtue today, chastity has not disappeared but has been thoroughly co-opted into the fitness-cult and the art of body-performance. "You shall style your body and keep it in good condition" proves for many today a more demanding commandment than obedience to a religious rule was for previous generations.
- A *second* valid point of Greiner's book is his demonstration that the promise of unbounded individualism to live one's life as one prefers is, in fact, a liberty that comes at the price of constantly bowing to the changing commands of professional career, social environment, and fashion trends. The world in which everybody is wired to conforming to imperatives that keep changing is marked by extreme insecurity.<sup>4</sup> This insecurity, I would add, makes us good consumers because peo-

3. *Ibid.*, 76. An example from daily life would be the constant admonition that every person—children and the elderly in particular—needs to drink about two liters of liquid a day. To send children to school without a water-bottle is widely regarded as irresponsible in Germany nowadays. My childhood memory tells me that under the same climate conditions nothing of that sort was discussed when I was a schoolboy in the 1980s.

4. *Ibid.*, 74.

ple tend to compensate the sense of insecurity preferably by acquiring goods that promise to make life safe.

So what about *guilt* in our societies? In 1946, still amidst smoking ruins resulting from a disastrous war, the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers reflected on the concept of guilt. Among its layers he counts “metaphysical” guilt as something Germans in particular needed to face.<sup>5</sup> This guilt is based on the “solidarity” of all human creatures who are held responsible for injustices around the world because they have not done everything possible to prevent evil. For Jaspers, this guilt cannot be justified by humans but calls for “jurisdiction” that belongs to God only. However, within just a few decades from the time of Jaspers’s writing God was increasingly moved to the rear as an actor to be reckoned with in history. As a result, people are less bothered by having to face God’s wrath than by the impression of God’s absence from the world. As Tillich pointed out, the existential problem of modern humans is not sin but life’s apparent “meaninglessness.”<sup>6</sup> So the focus was shifting from the justification of sinners to the justification of God for allowing terrible things to happen. As C.S. Lewis observed: People today “want to know, not whether they can be acquitted for sin, but whether He [God] can be acquitted for creating such a world” as the one we find ourselves in.<sup>7</sup>

Today our societies have by and large probably moved even “beyond” this concern. For many people, the eclipse of God is so complete that God is not even considered for the role of the scapegoat that can be blamed for natural disasters. The tribunal for metaphysical guilt, it seems, has been firmly closed. But to get rid of *God* does not necessarily mean to be rid of *guilt*. The focus, though, is now radically anthropocentric. With God out of the picture, the human desire and need to have one’s existence justified leads to desperate attempts of self-justification, a merciless enterprise marked by competition for recognition and “praise.” So guilt and shame are still with us. The “blame-game” is in full swing, for example when we say: “It is not my fault” and begin to blame someone else. People still seem to know that shame is an appropriate response to certain types of behavior when they exclaim: “Shame on you.” In short: we are far from having outgrown guilt and shame as questions of life that call for an answer.

5. See Jaspers, *Question*, 32.

6. See Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 46–51.

7. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” 95.

## GUILT, SHAME, AND THE CONCEPT OF MUTUAL RECOGNITION. A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

We began with the disastrous killing of 149 people in a crashed airplane carried out by the pilot to whom they had been entrusted. But is this kind of reference not something of a theologian’s trick? To introduce the notion of guilt and shame by bringing up an atrocity where nobody can really identify with the actor? Do we really need to go to such extremes to establish the validity of concepts like guilt and shame—in order that we can then offer forgiveness as the way out? It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who rejected the strategy of exploiting human weakness for the sake of introducing “God.” Bonhoeffer intended to speak of God “not at the boundaries but at the center, not in weakness but in strength,” i.e. in the strongest hours of human life.<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer’s point can, in some way, be complemented by C.S. Lewis who, in his reflections on the task of apologetics, argued for a descent to the level of everyday life when probing the depth of contemporary notions of guilt and shame. He writes:

our continual effort must be to get their [the audience’s] mind away from public affairs and “crime” and bring them down to brass tacks—to the whole network of spite, greed, envy, unfairness and conceit in the lives of “ordinary decent people” like themselves (and ourselves).<sup>9</sup>

Following the general direction hinted at by Bonhoeffer and Lewis, I would like to employ here the philosophical concept of “recognition” (*Anerkennung* in German) in order to identify the matrix underlying contemporary understandings of guilt and shame. To receive and to grant recognition is something that stands at the very center of our lives. It is also a concept that will prove helpful in elaborating forgiveness as the theologically sound response to the questions of life dealt with here.<sup>10</sup>

Let us take as our starting point a question of Jesus preserved in the Gospel of John. In the context of discussing why the Jews would not accept his messianic authority, Jesus asked: “How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (John 5:44) Of particular interest here is the analysis of the general human condition implied by this question.<sup>11</sup> A person is a social being, em-

8. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 366–67 (letter dated April 30, 1944).

9. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 96.

10. Widely regarded as the point of reference for the concept of “Anerkennung” in philosophy is Honneth, *Recognition*.

11. For a helpful interpretation of the text, see Ridderbos, *John*, 205–6.

bedded in social structures and strictures by being related to other people. A fundamental form of relating to each other and, in that process, of discovering one's own identity is recognition, expressed in biblical terms as "receiving glory," that is: by being praised, recognized by others as an agent who matters. Our self-perception is to a significant degree rooted in relations of recognition to parents and the family we have not ourselves chosen. As humans we long for recognition, for signs of goodwill and praise, or even of correction and critique if they are themselves acts of goodwill. We dwell on recognition by others, and without it die the death of social isolation. Our soul hungers for recognition like our body longs for food and water. The "hook" in the biblical quote given above, as I see it, is the question: From whom do we actually care to receive recognition? Our self-perception may vary significantly depending on whose recognition we think really matters. And here is the fork in the road: the (post)modern project is built on the assumption that there is no such "thing" as God to be taken into account when it comes to recognition. All that matters is what other *people* think of us, though actually not just *any* people but certain people whose praise really counts for us because we acknowledge them as subjects whose judgment is important.

The voices that matter in this realm of constructing identity relentlessly call out: "Be yourself, be authentic!—and we will praise you." To achieve the good life in this highly individualist sense, however, is actually rather hard work. To be "authentic" carries a requirement of originality that is incompatible with trust in traditions, role-models, and cultural frameworks. The actualizing of the original self knows of no referential authority but is staged in front of expectations of what it means to lead the good life. To live up to the expectations of others earns you praise, while failure to do so earns you disregard or disrespect.<sup>12</sup> So the need to be wholly authentic and the pressure to conform to wider expectations of what it means to "Be yourself" turn out to be an inescapable paradox.

Due to the socially structured reality of human life, self-esteem cannot be developed in isolation from others.<sup>13</sup> To be sure, to care for yourself you do not need the other ("You take care of your own stuff. And I don't care what you think about me"), but self-*care* is not the same as self-*esteem* that

12. E.g., with the current moral vision, having sex outside the marriage of a man and a woman is widely accepted, though some rules apply that everyone must know: don't touch children under the age of fourteen; above that age, make sure of mutual consent. So there is no longer a shared narrative of the good of marriage in terms of regulating sexual desire, but merely a shifting pattern of rules one needs to be aware of.

13. An insightful study that lies behind some of the thoughts developed in this section is Majer, *Scham, Schuld und Anerkennung*.

presupposes relations of mutual recognition.<sup>14</sup> To have self-esteem means to hold convictions concerning what kind of behavior would be appropriate towards myself,<sup>15</sup> even when I am being shamed by contrary attitudes or actions.

Guilt and shame may (philosophically) be understood as conflicts in relations of recognition. They may be distinguished in various ways. For Herbert Morris guilt (and innocence) deal with *morals* (rights and wrongs), while shame deals with *models*, i.e., our sense of what is heroic, measured in terms of honor and glory on the one side and shame on the other.<sup>16</sup> One might say that guilt deals with *rules* while shame deals with *roles* in society. A sense of guilt is caused by the violation of a set of rules: I have not lived up to the expectations others have of me. The feeling of shame is rooted in the painful (though not necessarily public) loss of trust in oneself as to being acceptable to others: I cannot play my self-scripted role anymore; I have failed in aspiring to the (heroic) model that I regard as authoritative for a good life. To put it another way: To feel guilty is to sense the consequences of the *power* of my thoughts, words, and deeds. To be ashamed is to feel their *powerlessness*. In Sartre's terms, shame arises when one feels oneself as a mere object stared at by others.<sup>17</sup> This "objectification" is humiliating because it hurts the self-esteem: My self-perception is crumbling because I have no say anymore, my look at others meets no response, and consequently I cannot fill the role I had crafted for myself.

To summarize this point: Both guilt and shame deal with conflicts of recognition, but in different ways. Shame is more self-referential, focusing on one's own failure and the loss of authority to count as a valued agent in the network of mutual recognition, while guilt refers to other people's expectations expressed in rules society upholds.<sup>18</sup> Embedded in a framework of (ideally) mutual recognition life becomes a constant struggle for acceptance by others and to uphold the authority to be some person whose judgment of others really matters. This struggle is intensified by the widely-shared assumption that the life we have is limited to our earthly existence, and that there is no source or subject of recognition beyond the human sphere. Without God in view, the struggle for mutual recognition among

14. In the terminology of Majer, mutuality is a core characteristic of recognition while respect is different in this regard: to respect the other in his or her dignity as a human creature does not necessarily imply mutuality. I owe respect to every human being no matter how he or she responds or behaves generally.

15. Majer, *Scham, Schuld und Anerkennung*, 53.

16. Morris, *Guilt and Shame*.

17. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

18. Majer, *Scham, Schuld und Anerkennung*, 96.

humans easily turns into a vicious cycle. The question is: Can the vicious cycle in which people strive to “accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God” (John 5:44) be overcome by God’s action on their behalf? And would the gift of forgiveness be a theologically appropriate description of the way in which God breaks the vicious cycle?

### “FREE AT LAST”: THE PROMISE OF FORGIVENESS IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Keeping in mind the valuable contributions philosophy has made to the concepts of guilt and shame, we turn to biblical and theological thinking to answer crucial questions of life. God needs to break the vicious cycle—and that for two reasons:

- *First*, contrary to modern intuition it is not of primary importance what we think about God but what God thinks about us. Reflecting on who may be the “others” whose recognition matters, we need to become aware of recognition by God as the one who has made us. There is no way to answer questions of life without taking into account the Giver of life, God.
- *Secondly*, apart from God, revealed as the God “for us,” as Karl Barth liked to put it, humans lack the ability to consider seriously the *depth* and the *nature* of guilt and shame. Sin will not enter the picture as long as guilt and shame are seen as subjective feelings that may be overcome by technical (therapeutic) means or handled by moral strategies of rehabilitation. To recognize oneself as a sinner falling short of God’s command is simply unbearable as long as no redeemer is in sight. Hence, without God entering the circle of the struggle for mutual recognition humans will not find the courage to be serious about the human condition as it really is. Consequently, to justify the “good life” one lives takes the form of *self-justification*, expressed in acts of mutual (non)recognition between individuals competing for praise by others and, at the same time, ignoring the only subject who does not enter the competition, God.

In considering the Christian response to human guilt and shame, I shall primarily draw on Romans 8 and the theologies of Martin Luther and John Calvin. We take as our starting point Romans 8, “the inner sanctuary within the cathedral of Christian faith; the tree of life in the midst of the Garden of Eden; the highest peak in a range of mountains,” as this chapter

has been called by interpreters.<sup>19</sup> A short expression of what is happening here would be: The *questions* of life meet the *Spirit* of Life who opens up human existence to the *fullness* of life.

It is not my intention here to expound the marvelous texture of this Pauline chapter but simply to identify some of the keys woven into the text that may open the door to a solid Christian response to human feelings of guilt and shame. My point, in brief, is this: The Gospel promise of forgiveness offers what humans need: on the one hand *acquittal* from the accusation of (metaphysical) guilt and on the other a new identity by *adoption* into the family of God.

### Acquittal: “No Condemnation Now I Dread”<sup>20</sup>

With the eclipse of God in Western societies it does not suffice to simply state that “God” is the solution to our deeply felt problems. Rather we must clearly identify who we actually mean when speaking about God. Paul indicates in a subtle but effective way that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, present in the Spirit. This is what Douglas Moo writes: “Note how Paul involves Father, Son, and Spirit in the work of redemption.”<sup>21</sup> The only appropriate way to narrate the story of God’s redemptive work in history is to unfold this drama by high-lighting Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the triune actors for the sake of salvation. In other words, the gift of forgiveness is inseparable from the identity of the giver, who is the triune God. Regarding the concept of recognition, we note that God as the triune One eludes human definitions. In the circle of mutual recognition God is the subject that cannot be objectified under human scrutiny because God transcends our notions of “person” or “being.” God is, as a subject, the “radical other” (Kierkegaard) on whose recognition human self-perception depends but who does not depend on the praise of creatures.

For Paul, the presence of the Holy Spirit makes a world of difference to the human life, for “natural” human life is subdued to the “law of sin and death” (v. 2). According to Moo, this expression could refer to the Mosaic Law but is more plausibly understood in a figurative sense (as becomes obvious from the opposite of the “law of the Spirit”).<sup>22</sup> Paul speaks of the “principle” or “authority” of sin and death that hold humans captive to despair

19. Moo, *Romans* (NICNT), 467.

20. Charles Wesley, “And Can It Be that I Should Gain.” In *United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 363, verse 5.

21. Moo, *Romans* (NIVAC), 256.

22. Moo, *Romans* (NICNT), 474–7.

and decay. But by the gracious activity of God in Jesus Christ this “scheme” has been met with the “authority” of the life-giving Spirit who breaks the bonds of sin and death.

What is the significance of Paul’s metaphorical speaking of the “law of sin and death” for the question at hand? Paul would not be surprised to learn that throughout history this “law” takes on different forms and manifests itself in changing ways. Our condition recognizes no all-persuasive moral law with binding force but an “inner” law that could well be described as the craving for recognition and acceptance by the human “other.” But this focus on human recognition alone, bereft of the divine “other,” fails to achieve the fullness of life offered in Christ. The good news of the Gospel according to Romans 8 is that for all those who are “in Christ” (v. 1) the higher law of the Spirit breaks the power of the principle that condemns humans to struggle for the ultimate acceptance by God, unattainable by human effort.

The defeat of the law of sin and death is pronounced by Paul with the words, “no condemnation” (v. 1), a judicial term used here to point out what is accomplished by Christ’s redemptive work. To be “in Christ,” i.e. to be united to him by faith through the Spirit of Christ (v. 9), is to receive acquittal from sin and guilt by the hands of the supreme judge. The sentence “not guilty” proclaimed by Christ breaks the chains of mutual accusations that hold people captive, making them crave for the recognition without which no one can live. For Paul, this is not simply the change of a psychological condition that may follow from the advice: “Simply do not care what others think about you.” It is a real “realm-transfer” (Rom 8:8–9). The fear and fate of condemnation is no longer a threat to believers because they have been transferred to a kingdom ruled by the law of the Spirit. Moo declares:

“No condemnation” is the banner triumphantly flying over all those who are ‘in Christ’ (v. 1) only because ‘in Christ’ we have been set free by the Spirit from that realm, ruled by sin, in which condemnation (= death) is one’s ineluctable fate.<sup>23</sup>

The penalty of ultimate exclusion that “natural” humans deserve was laid on Jesus Christ, who “suffered outside the city gate” (Heb 13:12).

According to the apostle, the new life free from accusation and guilt is not bought at the price of diminishing the weight of sin as rebellion against God. The vicious cycle of counterfeit recognition and lack of acceptance is not broken by claiming that there would not actually be any reason to disregard the other; we are, in fact, signed by sin. Rather, the gift of forgiveness means that God allots to himself, in his Son, what humans deserve, while

23. Moo, *Romans* (NICNT), 477.

they receive, free of charge, what belongs solely to God by putting their trust in Jesus Christ. Paul expresses this as follows: “And so he [God] condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (Rom 8:4)

The concept of union with Christ has been aptly taken up in Luther’s theology of the cross.<sup>24</sup> In his well-known treatise, *The Freedom of the Christian*, he uses the image of the marriage, in which Christ is the bridegroom and the soul of the faithful the bride, to express the miracle of a mysterious exchange realized in faith: “Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation; the soul is full of sin, death, and condemnation. Let faith step in, and then sin, death, and hell will belong to Christ, and grace, life, and salvation to the soul.”<sup>25</sup> Marriage is, and not only for Luther, the supreme image to portray the complete surrender to the other. In this sense there is mutuality in recognition. At the same time, one should not overlook the ultimate asymmetry within this reciprocity, for what Christ gives is a gift worthy to be received: salvation, grace, and life, while the gift of the human soul is, as it were, a non-gift: it is the acknowledgment of having nothing to offer, the act of giving up all claims to having deserved the grace bestowed. So the mystery of this marriage is God’s accepting a non-gift for what it is not: a gift. Hence, the exchange of asymmetric gifts establishes a real union grounded in the full surrender of both partners.<sup>26</sup>

The Finnish school of Luther interpretation especially emphasizes that God’s gift is actually Christ himself.<sup>27</sup> Understanding the *personal* character of the gift received in faith helps to avoid the misconception that is implicitly present in the discussion of the forensic versus the effective understanding of justification. I prefer to follow those interpreters who read Luther as keeping these aspects close together. To receive Christ as the giver of forgiveness is to allow Christ to be henceforth the ruling principle of the believers’ life. In Luther’s own words (from 1539): “Christ did not only earn *gratia*, ‘grace,’ for us, but also *donum*, ‘the gift of the Holy Spirit,’ so that we might have not only forgiveness of sin,” but may also cease sinning.<sup>28</sup> Christ did not lay down his life so that forgiven sinners might refuse to live the new life.

24. Elert, *Lutheranism*, 166–76.

25. Grimm, ed., *Luther’s Works*, 31:113.

26. Holm, “Justification and Reciprocity.”

27. Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*.

28. Gritsch, ed., *Luther’s Works*, 41:114 (“On Councils and the Church”). In the edition quoted the final sentence is: “also cessation of sin.”

Faith in Christ introduces a new mode of recognition: divine recognition. Faith opens the eyes to the awareness that God recognizes in the believer not only the outward person (the body “subject to death”; Rom 8:10) but something more than that, the righteousness of Christ bestowed on all who are “in Christ” by faith. This *personal* recognition is framed by Christ presenting the Church *collectively* to himself “without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph 5:27). While humans as sinners have every reason to see in themselves and in the church *less* than there actually is (despairing at their shortcomings), God recognizes *more* in them than there is to be seen by human eyes.<sup>29</sup> The reality of sin is taken seriously and not simply glossed over, but at the same time God grounds the believers’ identity in a gracious act of forgiveness. Being forgiven, believers are enabled to recognize in others, by faith, what no one else can see in them, namely, God’s creatures, for whose sin Christ died the sinners’ death.

#### Adoption: “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind”<sup>30</sup>

We saw that Paul could express in judicial language that believers are released from the threat of condemnation under the law of sin and death. He complements this by using the participatory language of adoption. Whoever is united to Christ through the life-giving Spirit becomes a child of God, calling God “Abba, Father” (v. 15). The language of adoption goes to the very heart of relationships grounded in recognition, because adopting someone is, in a fundamental way, an act of recognition. Turning our attention to Calvin, we find him to be distinctively a theologian of “adoption,” because the adoption of believers “is at the heart of John Calvin’s understanding of salvation.”<sup>31</sup> According to Sinclair Ferguson, Calvin “does not treat sonship as a separate locus of theology precisely because it undergirds everything he writes.”<sup>32</sup>

While Calvin is prepared to speak, though only in a qualified sense, of a sonship of all humankind since they are created by God into God’s image, sonship, properly speaking, is the peculiar privilege of those who belong to the church of Christ. Adoption as children of God is made possible by

29. For an excellent study of justification within the framework of recognition (from a Roman Catholic perspective), see Hoffmann, *Theologie der Gabe*.

30. John Greenleaf Whittier, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.” In *United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 358.

31. Griffith, “First Title of the Spirit,” 135. The following section of this paper owes several insights to Griffith as well as to Westhead, “Adoption.”

32. Sinclair B. Ferguson, cited in Griffith, “First Title of the Spirit,” 135–36.

the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Calvin points out that there is no sonship of the believers without the incarnation of the Son of God: “He being the true Son, has been given to us as a brother, so that that which he possesses as his own by nature becomes ours by adoption, if we embrace this great mercy with firm faith.”<sup>33</sup> The fruit of redemption, wrought by Christ’s atoning death, is received by faith and cannot be earned by human deeds. To be sure, adoption in this theological, metaphorical sense is different from the human practice of adopting a child. Usually, adoptive parents had no relationship to the child before the adoption process began, while God, as Calvin acknowledges when using “adoption” in a broader sense, is from the very beginning related to the creature as the Creator.

Calvin is well known for the pneumatological overtones in his teaching on salvation that resonate well with Paul’s interest in Romans 8 to give the Spirit of Christ a prominent place. For both Paul and Calvin, it is the communication of the Holy Spirit that makes sinners sons by adoption. Calvin identifies “Spirit of adoption” as the “first title” of the Spirit, because the Spirit “is witness to us of the free favor with which God the Father embraced us” in his Son, so as to become our Father “and give us boldness of access to him” by crying in us “Abba, Father.”<sup>34</sup> Adoption is sealed by the inner testimony the Spirit gives and by which the believers are assured of their salvation (Rom 8:15), which is, in effect, “union with Christ,” the well-known focus of Calvin’s soteriology.<sup>35</sup>

Whether this inner witness gives assurance of a salvation that cannot be lost has remained a matter of dispute between Calvinists and Arminians, but Calvin and Wesley are very close in arguing that adoption does not simply inaugurate a new status but initiates a process of conformity to Christ. Adoption is not only a matter of having a good conscience but of obedience to the law of Christ and the indwelling reality of the Spirit. To quote Calvin: “Whomsoever, therefore, God receives into his favor, he presents with the Spirit of adoption, whose agency forms them anew into his [Christ’s] image.”<sup>36</sup> Weaving the words of Romans 8 together, Calvin arrives at the conclusion that the grace of adoption has its end in good works that glorify God. Like Luther, Calvin emphasizes the sufferings of Christ that are the model for the pilgrimage of the believer (Rom 8:17), while Wesley and the evangelical movements tend to emphasize the power of the resurrection life imparted to believers by the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:13–14). In any case,

33. Calvin, *Institutes* III.20.36.

34. Calvin, *Institutes* III.1.3.

35. Canlis, “Fatherhood of God,” 412.

36. Calvin, *Institutes* III.11.8.



they would have agreed when Calvin claims that “the Lord adopts us for his sons on the condition that our life be a representation of Christ.”<sup>37</sup>

How does this promise of adoption relate to the contemporary sense of shame understood as the fear or the state of losing my role, my authority, in relations based on recognition? The answer is twofold:

- *First*, adoption into God’s family creates a new conception of the self. The Christian is brought into a personal relationship based on unconditional recognition by God, the “other,” whose recognition ultimately matters because God *created* this person. While the person as visible to human eyes—a frail body and failing to perform the Master’s plan time and again—does not as such fit into the family formed by faith, God in Christ is not ashamed of the adopted child. “Both the one who makes people holy [Christ] and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (Heb 2:11 NIV). There is no reason to be ashamed of oneself when God—who would have every reason to be ashamed of his creatures—is not ashamed to call them “my children,” giving them an ultimate sense of belonging which no human relationship can ever provide.
- *Secondly*, the Son through whom they are adopted provides a trustworthy role-model for the pilgrimage of the many sons and daughters who are being adopted into God’s family. While the denial of mutual recognition is expressed in blaming others for what they have done (to me), Jesus Christ presents a life based on the concept: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27–28 NIV). The vicious cycle of craving for recognition at almost any price is powerfully broken by Jesus Christ who interrupts the spiral of mutual accusation and blame by taking upon himself the shameful penalty of human guilt. At the same time one needs to be clear about the implications for the daily Christian discipleship. Jesus’ advice to his disciples just quoted does not follow the logic of success-orientated self-promotion. It is about faithfulness to God that may (and often will) result in suffering of many sorts. Believers, following the Servant King who was cast out by the “powers” and “authorities” of his time, may well experience acts of shameful social exclusion themselves. It is the Spirit of Christ who frees them from fearing such rejection and disregard and who upholds them as members of the community of Christ’s brothers and sisters.

37. Calvin, *Institutes* III.6.3.

In summary, the biblical Christian response to crucial questions of life like feelings of guilt and shame is not just another concept proposed for consideration, but a person, Jesus Christ, present in the power of his Spirit as the one who forgives and renews. If personal relationships of recognition are as fundamental to human life as I indicated above then it seems fully plausible that frail human relations can find an anchor in, and broken ones can be healed by, a personal relationship, by being rightly related to the triune God through Christ.

### The Weight of Glory: “Thou my Everlasting Portion”<sup>38</sup>

In presenting the Gospel as response to human needs, there is always a danger of accepting uncritically the questions of life raised in contemporary society. Due to the human condition there may be something wrong with the questions themselves. Failing to see this leads to what we may call the “existential fallacy,” which is the attempt to model the Gospel according to contemporary questions even at the price of a substantial reduction of the message. The truth is, however, that in answering the existential human questions of life the Gospel changes the questioner by broadening the *world and life view* from which the questions emerge.

Both for the New Testament writers and the Reformers the Gospel of forgiveness is more (and certainly not less) than a consolation for troubled souls. It is the proclamation of *salvation* inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead by the power of God’s Spirit. Both Luther and Calvin were keeping together the tension they found in Paul’s Letters between the *cosmic expanse* and the *anthropological concentration* of Christ’s redemptive work.<sup>39</sup> The Gospel is impoverished once the promise of forgiveness is disconnected from God’s acting in history to destroy the powers of evil and to bring about a new creation. “It is well, it is well with my soul”<sup>40</sup> is certainly a confession that has its place in worship, but the expanse of God’s renewing work comprises *soteria* for the “cosmos”—humans being God’s representatives (Gen 1:28)—with far-reaching consequences, as Paul points out in Romans 8:19–22. Among others Wolfhart Pannenberg argued strongly for a “critical revision” of the way Reformation theology has been widely received. He criticizes the identification of “salvation” with “forgiveness” which resulted from an understanding of the Gospel that was shaped

38. Fanny J. Crosby, “Close to Thee.” In *United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 407, verse 1.

39. This is the point strongly made by Peters, *Rechtfertigung*, 313.

40. Horatio G. Spafford, “It Is Well with My Soul.” In *United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 377.



by the juxtaposition of law and Gospel as prevalent in *some*, but not all of Paul's writings.<sup>41</sup> With Paul's letters *and* the Gospels in view, Pannenberg insists that the Gospel message is the proclamation of eschatological *soteria*, of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God inaugurated by the resurrection of the Son of God. "The forgiveness of sins abolishes the separation between God and us. [But] Basic [for it] is the presence of the rule of God in the work of Jesus."<sup>42</sup> Peter Brunner was another noted German theologian concerned about an existentialist reduction of the Gospel. Brunner argued that salvation is a thoroughly eschatological concept that is often bereft of the future notion of everlasting life.<sup>43</sup> According to him, the ministry of the church is not to help the world to solve its problems but to resolutely transcend the vision of human life. The church should understand itself as the chosen means of grace for the eschatological salvation of those who believe in Christ, offering a broader vision of life to people enticed by the illusion "that they are alone in this world with themselves, without an [divine] other, without God who created, sustains, and finally judges them."<sup>44</sup> I agree with Brunner that it is this illusion that needs to be unmasked, refuted, and rejected.

Returning to Romans 8 we find that the vision of earthly human life is definitely broadened when Paul uses the concept of *inheritance* "to introduce his qualification of our adoption in terms of its future aspects"<sup>45</sup> by saying: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (v. 17). In his interpretation Douglas Moo emphasizes the proximity of this metaphor to family-life: "a child who has been adopted into a family, while truly part of that family, does not (usually) receive all the benefits of that adoption until a later time."<sup>46</sup> The privileges believers enjoy in this life are incomplete until the Kingdom of God becomes fully manifest in the second coming of Jesus Christ and the final transformation of the believers which Paul mentions in several places. For the apostle this eschatological transformation of the believers will be accomplished by the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead (v. 11). Consequently, the experience of having one's sins forgiven and one's mind renewed is not at once identical

41. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 460–61.

42. *Ibid.*, 461. (The English translation obscures the climax in the second sentence the original conveys.)

43. See Brunner, "Rechtfertigung heute," 128–29.

44. *Ibid.*, 129; translation mine.

45. Moo, *Romans* (NICNT), 504.

46. *Ibid.*

with the eschatological consummation of all things, which remains a revelatory event eagerly expected by the followers of Christ.

Paul's distinction between salvation received and consummation expected rests in his conviction that God in Christ has won a victory over the "powers and authorities" (Col 2:15; Eph 6:12), but has not yet destroyed them. Though they cannot separate believers from Christ anymore (Rom 8:38), they can still assault them by spreading their venomous influence. Only when Christ returns, assures Paul, "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (v. 21).

Why is the distinction between the personal acceptance of the Gospel and the cosmic consummation important for answering the crucial questions of life? Because, if salvation was solely the acceptance of being accepted by God (to allude at Tillich's famous phrase), then salvation could well be interchanged with other (religious) messages or psychological therapies that aim at overcoming feelings of guilt and shame. We could deal with subjective experiences that help people to get along better, though we would have to counter the accusation that Christianity offers a solution to a plight (sin as separation from God) which humanity would not have known without Christianity. Paul, however, is convinced that the Gospel of Christ testifies to an objective battle against the principalities and powers of darkness that hold humans captive in their natural condition. The Gospel of grace, therefore, reaches further than humans in their fallen state could possibly anticipate in their questions. The conflict in which they find themselves is of cosmic expanse and has eternal consequences. The resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit have *begun* to make "all things new" but the *fullness* of life will be celebrated in the heavenly banquet depicted by Jesus. Until that consummation, watching and waiting remain needful elements of Christian discipleship.

A final point: initially I introduced the notion of recognition as a rather *negative* concept; I highlighted the problems that follow once we crave solely for human recognition, leaving God out of the picture, with the consequence of putting unbearable demands on the human "other" as well as on ourselves. This diagnoses stands, but if we rightly confess the triune God to be the same as the Creator and the Redeemer, we should expect that the human longing for recognition and acceptance is not fully explained as a sinful desire. Rather, we may expect it to be a pointer to the Creator, expressing a sense of belonging instilled into man and woman at creation. So another reason why longing for recognition is so persistent with human nature lies in the fact that we were created for recognition—for a recognition, however, that links the earthly with the heavenly life.

We may, therefore, fully share C.S. Lewis's surprise to find that "such different Christians as Milton, Johnson and Thomas Aquinas [take] heavenly glory quite frankly in the sense of fame or good report. But not fame conferred by our fellow creatures—fame with God, approval or (I might say) 'appreciation' by God."<sup>47</sup> For Lewis, this notion made full sense considering the biblical teaching that we are to come to God like children, and "nothing is so obvious in a child . . . as its great and undisguised pleasure in being praised."<sup>48</sup> Christian believers who find their new identity in Jesus Christ seek to please the One who made them by doing the "good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 1:10). Lewis saw even more of the glorious recognition that is to come:

The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret. And surely, from this point of view, the promise of glory, in the sense described, becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory means good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgement, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.<sup>49</sup>

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47. Lewis, "Weight of Glory," 101.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 103.

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