

Honor and Shame

The sexual excesses described in the latter part of Romans 1 are characterized not only as “lustful” and “impure” but also as “degrading” (or “shameless”).

²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the *degrading* of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶For this reason God gave them up to *degrading* passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed *shameless* acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (Rom. 1:24-27; italics added)

Two related Greek words that are translated here as “degrading” literally mean “dishonoring” or “dishonorable.” References to things that are “dishonorable” or “shameless” represent part of a larger cultural reality that scholars describe using the language of “honor and shame.” If we are to understand these words and the moral force and logic that undergirds them, we need to learn about how the dynamics of honor and shame operated in the ancient world.

Anthropological/Cultural Perspectives on Honor and Shame

Anthropologists characterize a number of cultures, both ancient and modern, as “honor-shame” cultures. In these cultures, sensitivity to the dynamics of honor and shame is one of the centrally defining values that shape all social interactions. In these contexts, “honor” represents a claim to worth or value, along with the social acknowledgment of that worth or value. One can have *ascribed* honor, as a result of the family into which one was born, or the wealth one has inherited. One of the major purposes of genealogies in the Bible is to set out a person’s claim to ascribed honor by virtue of his or her ancestry. One doesn’t need to do anything to have ascribed honor; one is simply born with it. However, there is also *acquired* honor, which one gains by excelling in social interactions with others: these interactions are called *challenge and riposte*, in which a conflict and competition for honor results in one person’s gaining honor and the other person’s losing it.¹ In honor-shame cultures, honor plays the role that money plays in most Western cultures. One of the important words in Greek for both money and value is the same word; it is often translated “honor.”² If you have honor in honor-shame cultures, you can accomplish what you set out to do. People will cooperate with you and do what you ask — because they honor you. On the other hand, if you lack honor, all of life will be difficult. The presence or absence of honor in these cultures is roughly equivalent to the presence or absence of wealth in North American culture. Honor brings with it both power and value.

This brief introduction must define one more basic element in honor-shame cultures. Honor and shame are not absolute realities; instead, honor and shame are defined by how others treat and regard you. In every public interchange where honor and shame are in play, it is the observers who determine who receives honor and who is shamed. Anthropologists speak of these observers as the Public Court of Reputation (often abbreviated as PCR). Consider, for example, the story of Jesus’ healing of the woman who was unable to stand up straight in Luke 13:10-17. Jesus heals the woman on the Sabbath. Immediately, the leader of the synagogue is indignant and publicly rebukes Jesus for performing the healing on the Sabbath. Jesus re-

1. Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), pp. 31-34.

2. See the following texts, where the Greek word *timē*, usually translated “honor,” is rendered as “price” or “money”: Acts 4:34; 5:2-3; 7:16; 19:19; 1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23.

sponds to the challenge by pointing out the inconsistency of practice on this issue, where Jews were permitted to care even for their animals on the Sabbath. His riposte concludes with a rhetorical flourish in Luke 13:16: "And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" Luke then narrates the result of this challenge and riposte: "When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing" (Luke 13:17). Jesus thus gains in honor in the Public Court of Reputation, and his critics are shamed for their criticism of Jesus.

Scholars describe the society of the ancient Mediterranean world in which the Bible was written as an honor-shame culture. Certainly, in every human culture, dynamics of honor and shame do operate to some extent. But when anthropologists speak of an "honor-shame culture," they are speaking of those cultures in which these dynamics are much more central to social interactions, particularly among males. Honor-shame cultures also treat honor as a *limited good*. That is, if someone gains in honor, someone else must lose honor. This injects the competitive challenge-riposte dynamic into a great many public social interactions. Modern cultures that can be characterized as honor-shame cultures include Japan, some other Asian cultures, and some Arab societies, as well as subcultures like those of gangs in many North American urban settings.

Gender also plays an extremely important role in honor-shame cultures. Public competition for honor happens mainly — but not exclusively — among males, who, in terms of gender, embody honor. Females are thought to embody shame. Shame here is considered a positive quality: it is sensitivity to what other people think and the willingness to adapt one's behavior and demeanor to publicly accepted values. We might describe this sort of shame by using the word "modesty." Modesty and sexual purity are considered the essential virtues for females in an honor-shame culture. The early Jewish text Sirach 4:21 declares: "There is a shame that leads to sin, and there is a shame that is glory and favor." Shame can thus be construed very positively. The opposite of this positive sense of shame is *shamelessness*, a disposition in which one's public behavior shows obliviousness or lack of concern for what other people may think.

Finally, it is important to note that the honor of females is bound up with the honor of the males who are responsible for them, usually the patriarchal heads of the households in which wives and daughters reside. If women act shamelessly — by failing to maintain sexual purity or public

modesty, for example — the male head of the household is shamed. Sirach 22:4-5 says: "A sensible daughter obtains a husband of her own, but one who acts shamefully is a grief to her father. An impudent daughter disgraces father and husband, and is despised by both." Honor-shame cultures are thus collectivist cultures where males are the clear heads of households.

Interpreting Romans 1 in an Honor-Shame Cultural Context

When viewed through the honor-shame lens, some different and commonly ignored aspects of Romans 1:26 tend to emerge more clearly. One is the reference to "their women" in Romans 1:26: "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural." What we can see here is not simply the shaming of women, but also the shaming of the men in whose households these women reside. In an honor-shame culture, just about any kind of sexual impropriety on the part of females would be considered shaming the male head of household. Such shame is clearly what the writer has in mind here, particularly when we note that there is not a parallel reference to "their men" in the following verse. Whatever the "dishonorable passions" referred to in Romans 1:26 might be, the effect of this behavior is to bring shame, not only on the women themselves, but on the heads of their households as well. This suggests some kind of public disgrace — and not merely a private act. Again, the outrageous public sexual behavior of the women in the household of Gaius Caligula explored above (in chapter 8) fits this description perfectly.

Yet this interpretation is not universally embraced. Some scholars think that Romans 1:26 refers to female same-sex eroticism; others believe that Paul has in mind other forms of heterosexual misbehavior between men and women, either oral/anal intercourse or simply a failure to act in sexually proper ways. Yet, despite the opinion among some commentators that Romans 1:26 refers to lesbian sexual behavior, such an interpretation of that verse appears nowhere in the early church prior to Chrysostom in the East, and Ambrosiaster in the West, in the late fourth century. In other words, the "lesbian" reading of Romans 1:26 is completely unattested in the early church in the first 300 years of its life, despite fairly common discussion of this text among the patristic commentators. For example, both Clement of Alexandria and Augustine interpret Romans 1:26 as referring

to oral or anal intercourse between women and men.³ Jeramy Townsley notes that, while there is a close connection between male same-sex activity and idolatry in the ancient world — specifically in the widespread Magna Mater, or Cybele, cult — there are no associations anywhere in the ancient world between female same-sex eroticism and idolatry, making such a linkage less likely in the context of Romans 1, where the larger question in view is clearly the consequences of idolatry (Rom. 1:22-23).⁴

Therefore, there is good reason to question the contemporary assumption that Romans 1:26 refers to lesbian sexual behavior. By referring to "their women," this passage ties the sexual misbehavior of women more closely to the men with whom they live. But when we apply the lens of honor-shame to this entire passage, what emerges more clearly is the relationship between the female sexual misbehavior referred to in verse 26 and the male sexual misbehavior of verse 27. The symmetrical references to "males" and "females" in these two verses (and the balanced use of the Greek particle *te* in both verses) suggest that there is some sort of analogy between the sexual misconduct of the two verses. As we have noted, it has often been assumed that what is analogous between the two verses is that both refer to same-sex eroticism. Yet what is stated explicitly in the text is something a bit different. Both of these forms of sexual misbehavior are explicitly identified as "degrading" or "shameless." The "dishonoring" of bodies is first introduced in verse 24, and then repeated again in the reference to "degrading passions" in verse 26 and in the reference to "shameless acts" in verse 27. The text makes it clear that at least one thing these behaviors have in common is that they all violate ancient Mediterranean understandings of honor and shame.⁵

For women, the honor-shame codes are violated by engaging in any kind of sexual impropriety, and violating such codes brings shame on both the woman and the head of the household in which she resides. For men,

3. See Clement's "Discussion on Procreation" (*Paedagogus* 10), and Augustine's "On Marriage and Desire," bk. II, chap. 35. For further discussion, see James Miller, "The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?" *Novum Testamentum* 37 (1995): 1-11.

4. Jeramy Townsley, "Paul, the Goddess Religions and Queers: Romans 1:23-28," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, forthcoming.

5. Of course, the behaviors of both men and women in this passage are also said to be "contrary to" or "in excess of" nature. I will explore the meaning of that phrase in the next chapter. See also note 1 in the next chapter, which explores how the discussion of female sexual misbehavior in Rom. 1:26 and male actions in Rom. 1:27 are parallel in that they both "exchange" proper behavior for improper.

the relationship between honor, shame, and sexual impropriety is a bit more complicated. In the ancient world generally, men would lose honor if they violated the rights of another man by having sex with his wife or daughter. But for a man to have sex with his female slave or a female captured in war was not considered dishonorable; this was the man's right.⁶ In the wider Greco-Roman culture, it was not even regarded as shameful for a man to make sexual use of male slaves, as long as the master was not himself penetrated.⁷ However, for a man to play the role of a woman and to be penetrated was clearly a violation of honor: it was considered inherently degrading.⁸

Yet the biblical writers also qualify in important ways the common ancient assumption that only the passive partner in male-male sex was degraded or culpable. In the Levitical prohibitions of male-male sex (18:22; 20:13), no moral distinction is made between active and passive partners; indeed, both are subject to the death penalty (20:13). Likewise, Romans 1:27 makes no distinction between the active partner and the passive partner in its negative portrayal of male-male sex. Some traditionalist interpreters argue that this means that violations of honor-shame are not operative in these passages and that the core moral logic here focuses instead on violations of gender complementarity. But Romans 1:27 is explicit in describing male-male sex as a "shameless act," and in invoking the categories of honor and shame in condemning this behavior. Honor-shame codes are clearly applicable here, even though the passive partner is not singled out for special reproach.

6. The book of Leviticus addresses the problem of a man having sex with a female slave who is pledged to another man (19:20-22). Such a case is considered a sin, since the man to whom the slave was pledged is harmed; but the penalty is notably milder (scourging) than that required by other forms of sexual misconduct. The case is clearly not considered equivalent to adultery or rape. Leviticus is notably lacking in any legislation against a man having sex with a slave who is not pledged to another man. This was considered a man's right, apparently even in ancient Israel. Note also the clear instructions given about marrying a woman captured in war in Deut. 21:10-14. A man may marry such a woman, and if she is not pleasing to him, he may set her free. The only restriction on the otherwise typical practice in the ancient world is that, after sleeping with her, the man may not sell her as a slave. Cf. Num. 31:18 for a similar practice with even fewer restrictions.

7. See the extended discussion, along with relevant texts, in Martti Nissinen, *Homosexuality in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 57-88. See also the discussion of these issues in William Stacy Johnson, "Empire and Order: The Gospel and Same-Gender Relationships," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 37, no. 4 (2007).

8. See the discussion of this issue near the end of chapter 4 above, pp. 82-83.

This apparent quandary is resolved by way of a wider consideration of the biblical writers in their context. Because the active role in male-male sex is portrayed so negatively in the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19) and the Levite's concubine (Judg. 19), we see very early in the biblical witness a resistance to sanctioning this kind of behavior, whether or not it might have been accepted elsewhere in the ancient world. It was too closely linked to violence of the worst kind and inhospitality toward the most vulnerable. In addition, given the fact that male-male sex is associated with cultic prostitution in the ancient world generally, and in the area surrounding Israel in particular, there were also religious reasons for rejecting both the active and passive roles in male same-sex behavior, particularly since the active role belonged to those making use of cultic prostitution.⁹ The biblical writers clearly do not accept the common ancient assumption, documented above, whereby a male could make sexual use of other males (particularly slaves and social inferiors) as long as he himself was not penetrated. To degrade others in this way was to violate deep biblical values: the call to love one's neighbor as oneself, as well as the call to justice and hospitality. You cannot violate the honor of another and also love that person. Hence, the fact that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, as well as Romans 1:27, do not single out the passive partner for special blame does not negate the dynamics of honor-shame that operate in these passages. To treat a man like a woman is still seen as a negative act that necessarily degrades the passive partner. Honor-shame codes are still at work. But the summons to justice, love, and religious faithfulness are also deeply embedded in the biblical witness, rendering the active partner equally culpable (see a further discussion of the Levitical prohibitions in chapter 12 below).

While these values surrounding honor and shame for men are clearly documented elsewhere in Scripture and throughout the ancient world, Paul also clearly links the shamefulness of the behavior described in these verses with its excessive passion. Romans 1:26 characterizes all the sexual misbehavior of these verses as "degrading passions," underscoring the close link between shame and passion in Paul's mind, a link echoed in verse 27, where shamelessness and passion are again closely linked. For men, being overcome by passion was losing control over their own lives — and thus being subject to shame.

We see the same linkage between honor-shame codes and gender identities in 1 Corinthians 11, where the problem focuses on length of hair and/

or head coverings. I have already explored Paul's qualified endorsement of patriarchal household relationships in this passage in chapter 4 above. But for our present focus, 1 Corinthians 11:14-15 is particularly noteworthy: "Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?" Here we see the same juxtaposition of the language of honor-shame and references to "nature" that we find in Romans 1:26-27. I shall explore these shared references to "nature" in more detail in the next chapter. But for our present purposes, it is important to note the close linkage between the blurring of gender distinctions and the loss of honor in the world in which Scripture was written. To present oneself in a way that conforms to gender expectations was considered honorable; to violate those gender expectations was shameful. This confirms the understanding of the moral logic implicit in the honor-shame language of Romans 1:26-27. The sexual misbehavior described here, in addition to being characterized as "lustful" and "impure," is considered "degrading" or "shameless" for a particular reason: such behavior violated established social expectations of the time regarding gender — and regarding behaviors that are appropriate to males and females. For females, such dishonor arose from any kind of sexual behavior outside marriage, as well as the failure to maintain the appropriate passive or submissive role within marriage. For males, dishonor or shame was more particularly a result of either actively degrading others into the female role or shamefully adopting the passive female role for oneself. This shame also expressed itself in the irrationality of excessive passion (associated in the ancient world with the feminine).

Evaluating Honor-Shame as a Form of Moral Logic in Cross-Cultural Settings

Although the Bible was written in an honor-shame culture, most Christians in the Western world do not live in this kind of cultural setting. We do not regard all public interactions among males as contests where honor is either gained or lost. Western cultures are not (at least not entirely) patriarchal; males no longer play the unquestioned role as the head of all households. Moreover, most Western cultures have become much more flexible on the question of gender roles more broadly as well. In most Western cultures, women play important and active roles in public life. We no longer think that it is shameful for women to wield economic power, in

9. See Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, pp. 37-56.

contrast with the ancient perspective articulated in Sirach 25:22: "There is wrath and impudence and great disgrace when a wife supports her husband." Similarly, forms of dress, by both men and women, vary dramatically from one culture to another. Nineteenth-century missionaries were shocked by bare-breasted women in some tropical cultures; most people in the ancient world would have been equally scandalized by clothing patterns in modern Western cultures. What is "shameful" in matters of dress or hairstyle is highly specific to the norms of the culture in which one finds oneself.

This raises the larger hermeneutical question: In what way, if at all, is the biblical discussion of honor and shame relevant in cultures where honor and shame are understood quite differently? It is tempting simply to say that all these discussions of honor and shame in Scripture are simply irrelevant to us because we live in a cultural setting vastly different from the ancient world. Yet there are many honor-shame texts that seem to make important claims that continue to be relevant to contemporary life in a wide range of cultural settings. Most Christians believe that the command "honor your father and mother" is still relevant to contemporary life, even if the fulfillment of this command may express itself somewhat differently in different cultural settings. Likewise, Paul's injunction to "outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:10) represents a broadly compelling way in which the gospel subverts competitiveness into concern for others. Similarly, the polemic in the Epistle of James against those who "dishonor the poor" (James 2:6) continues to speak powerfully across a wide range of cultures and settings.

Moreover, the emotional dynamics of honor and shame are universal in the human species, despite the fact that the specific definitions of what may be honorable and shameful are widely disparate in different cultures. In every culture, people long to be praised and honored by others. Every culture knows and abhors the feeling of embarrassment. In every culture, a flushed face, a downcast look, and drooping shoulders mark the universal response of shame when someone feels embarrassed or disgraced. In almost every culture, a raised face, bright eyes, and a smile denote the feeling of pride. The relative importance and means of allocation of honor and shame may vary from one culture to another, and the context by which we define honor and shame is culturally specific. But the emotions of pride and embarrassment are universal.

In light of this, what seems relevant across all cultures, from a biblical and theological perspective, is that people have an inherent worth that

should be recognized in social interactions. The call to honor one another is always relevant, regardless of the cultural setting, because all humans are created in God's image and thus have an intrinsic worth that must be recognized and affirmed. What seems subject to significant cultural variation, however, is the delineation of specific relationships that mark out the boundaries of honor and shame. The text of 1 Timothy 6:1 requires slaves to "consider their masters worthy of full respect" (*pasēs timēs*, literally "worthy of complete honor"). In the ancient world this seemed self-evident; in the modern world, we now recognize the master-slave relationship as inherently disordered and in violation of the implications of the gospel that attributes incalculable value to each person. In our contemporary context, therefore, this command for slaves to honor their masters makes no sense at all. The summons to give appropriate honor is relevant cross-culturally; but the specific delineation of who should receive honor and who should give it is marked by cultural particularity and is not necessarily cross-culturally relevant.

Moreover, we must recognize the close linkage between ancient honor-shame codes and ancient understandings of gender roles in their limited cultural particularity. Most modern cultures no longer restrict the public role of women in the way that was practiced in the ancient world. The attributes of submissiveness or passion in men — or aggressiveness in women — are no longer regarded with universal suspicion. In Western cultures, it is not shameful for a woman to speak in public, or even to argue or debate with men. This makes the appropriation of texts such as 1 Corinthians 14:35 ("It is shameful for a woman to speak in church") much more problematic in our contemporary settings.

What is vitally important to recognize here is the simple fact that, even in the ancient world, honor and shame were culturally defined and socially governed realities rather than absolute and transcendent concepts. What was honorable was, quite simply, what most people thought honorable, and shameful things were defined by the negative reaction that most people had to those things. Honor and shame were simply part of the collectivist social world in which the Bible was written. Therefore, honor and shame have little to do with transcendent meaning; rarely are exhortations using the language of honor and shame justified by an appeal to God's will in the Bible. Such appeals are unnecessary because we learn honor and shame from our youngest years, and we internalize them in ways that seem completely self-evident to us. Honor-shame conventions find their content, meaning, and justification in the concrete fabric of specific social in-

teractions and relationships. Honor and shame constitute one important means by which the larger values of a society get lived out in the specifics of day-to-day interactions.

Honor-shame codes, therefore, do not have a privileged, culture-transcending status, despite the fact that, in most specific cultural settings, they are considered normative. In fact, at many points the New Testament also challenged the honor-shame codes of its day. Its proclamation of a crucified Messiah implied a radical revision of what should be considered honorable and shameful. Jesus repeatedly pushed the boundaries of honor-shame codes, associating with tax collectors and sinners, allowing himself to be touched by a menstruating woman, and to be publicly kissed by a woman known to be a sinner (Luke 7:36-50). Paul repeatedly declares that he does not worry when others regard his behavior as shameful, because he is confident that he will be vindicated (i.e., honored) by God (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:27; 4:10; 2 Cor. 6:8; Phil. 1:20). In other words, wherever the honor-shame codes in the ancient world were felt to contradict core values of the gospel, they were readily and quickly challenged or set aside. Paul was quite willing to be considered a fool in the wider culture in order to be faithful to Christ (2 Cor. 11). A large part of learning to live by the gospel in the New Testament entails learning to relinquish both true and false shame, to give up worldly honor, and to relearn the meaning of honor and shame, in light of the overwhelming love of God revealed in Christ.

This capacity to live counterculturally, to reframe prevailing codes of honor and shame in light of the gospel, has continued in various ways throughout the life of the church. In the early church the martyrs shocked the empire by their peaceful and purposeful devotion to Christ, in the midst of a world bent on violently shaming them. Their witness converted a dying empire, radically altering its understandings of honor. During the Middle Ages, the practice of celibacy challenged the assumption that patriarchal heads of households were the only truly honorable positions in society. Figures like the desert fathers and Saint Francis of Assisi embraced poverty, critiquing the unquestioned honor granted to the wealthy and the powerful. In the nineteenth century, the abolitionist movement persuaded the world that the institution of slavery made it impossible to obey the biblical command to "honor everyone" (1 Pet. 2:17). Likewise, in the twentieth century, most Western cultures came to realize that traditional gender roles failed to fully use and honor the gifts of women given by God, and gender roles were revised in dramatic ways, resulting in a much more active role for women in society. The ongoing critique and revision of

honor-shame codes in and through the church has continued throughout its history.

Implications for the Homosexuality Debate in the Churches: The Meaning of Shame

And now the church faces the question of shame, particularly in its engagement with the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons in its midst. In almost all societies, it is particularly in the area of sexuality that shame wields enormous power. As in the ancient world, shame can be both positive and negative. James Fowler speaks eloquently of the positive role of shame in our lives:

Spiritually, shame is related to the deepest places of truth in our souls. Shame cuts to the heart. In its healthy forms, it helps to form and inform the heart. Shame provides the primary foundation for conscience and for the instinctive sense of what is worthy or unworthy, right or wrong. Shame, as an emotion, relates to the sensitive feelings touched in love and deep communion with others. Shame protects the intimacy of our closest relations with friends, lovers, spouses, or children. It surrounds our relation with the Holy or the domain of what is sacred to us. Shame, in its positive influence, is the caretaker of our worthy selves and identities. When we listen attentively to the voice of our healthy shame, we speak and act from our "center."¹⁰

A healthy sense of shame is vital to our humanity. But precisely because our sense of shame is socially constructed, it can also be the place where we internalize the prejudices, fears, anxieties, distortions, and hatred of those around us, particularly those closest to us. Moreover, it is in the area of shame that the traditionalist approach to gay and lesbian persons becomes fraught with deep problems. The typical slogans clearly express the ambivalence: "Welcoming, but not affirming"; "Hate the sin, but love the sinner." On the surface, the gay or lesbian person is welcomed into the traditionalist fellowship; but the desires and the emotional orientation or disposition of the person's sexuality are shunned. Ironically, in this context, the more

10. James W. Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 92.

deeply the gay or lesbian person is welcomed and loved by the fellowship, the more profound the problem of shame becomes. The internalized message becomes something like this: "These people love me so much, they must be right when they say that my sexual orientation is a manifestation of sinful brokenness. Therefore, I must resist this part of myself all the more insistently." Sometimes such a process is effective in helping a person who is confused about his or her sexual orientation to move toward embracing the wider norms of society in his or her sexuality. But research shows that such change happens only in a small minority of relevant cases. And when this attempt to embrace the dominant society's perspective on sexuality is unsuccessful, when desires for others of the same sex persist, the result is a deeply internalized sense of shame, frustration, and self-loathing. The self is divided, and shame becomes toxic. Shame always becomes toxic when it is constructed out of double messages (e.g., "We love you, but we abhor the way you operate emotionally"). These conflicting messages create divided souls, and those inner conflicts, precisely because they are so shameful, powerfully resist the light of day. They remain submerged, manifesting themselves in depression, scapegoating, sickness, anger toward others, or even suicide.

It is important to emphasize, in this context, the difference between shame and guilt. Guilt is specific. When we feel guilty, we condemn ourselves for specific things we have done wrong. In a Christian context, guilt can be addressed by repentance and the receiving of forgiveness. But shame is not so easily dealt with. Shame quickly becomes all-encompassing: it defines the self in its entirety. Guilt says that we have done bad things; shame says that we are bad. In a traditionalist context, homosexual *acts* may incur guilt, but a homosexual *orientation* causes shame.

As Fowler notes, release from shame involves not only the acknowledgment and exposure of the defect or lack to a trusted other or others, but also the undertaking of substantial change in one's way of being a self.¹¹ Guilt can be healed through forgiveness, but the healing of shame cannot happen apart from a dramatic alteration in the basic way we understand and relate to our very selves. Twelve-step programs recognize this, and they provide powerful and persistent support for people seeking to redefine themselves in the most basic ways. Unfortunately, attempts to replicate this strategy with gays have been much less fruitful. Since sexual orientation is so deeply embedded in the fabric of our experience of the world, such at-

11. Fowler, *Faithful Change*, p. 107.

tempts to dramatically alter one's self-understanding and self-definition most commonly end in failure — only deepening the sense of shame.¹²

Pastoral Responses to Shame

Of course, merely describing such painful dilemmas does not in itself solve the problem. Traditionalists are quick to point out that other Christians find themselves needing to wrestle throughout their lives with shameful addictions or temptations to sexually abuse children. It does not help these unfortunate people to tell them that there is nothing shameful about addiction or pedophilia. Instead, they simply need the support of the church as they seek to resist these shameful urges. The church rightly stands with them when it welcomes them but does not affirm their impulses to sinful behavior. It does this as an expression of love. We do not love someone when we affirm behaviors or dispositions in them that will lead to disastrous consequences. We love them when we help them resist such shameful impulses, whether or not they are able to fully eradicate these impulses themselves from their lives.

But it is at this point that greater precision is important. No one disputes that the shame over addiction or child abuse is healthy and appropriate. The negative and ultimately disastrous consequences of these dispositions are evident to all. The deep reformulation of the self that is required to move beyond this shame is extremely difficult, but it is absolutely necessary work, and the church is right to do all it can to assist in that arduous task. But the parallels with the shame attached in many cultures to gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered experience seem much more strained, at least when one considers the consequences of actions. Of course, gays and lesbians may, like heterosexuals, experience sexual addiction or impulses to pedophilia, and these addictions and impulses should certainly be resisted with the church's help. (Despite common prejudices, however, gay men are no more likely to be pedophiles than straight men are.)¹³ But when these excesses are excluded, a wide range of loving, com-

12. See the discussion of change in sexual orientation in chapter 7 above.

13. See the helpful review article by Gregory M. Herek on this topic at: http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/facts_molestation.html. His conclusion: "The empirical research does *not* show that gay or bisexual men are any more likely than heterosexual men to molest children. This is not to argue that homosexual and bisexual men never molest children. But there is no scientific basis for asserting that they are more likely than heterosexual

passionate, same-sex desire may remain, untainted by these more specific problems. Should these desires be painted with the same brush of shame?

What Exactly is Shameful in Romans 1:24-27?

This requires a closer look at Romans 1. More specifically, the links between shame and the sexual excesses portrayed there need to be made a bit clearer. Everything depends on how we interpret Paul's references to "degrading" and "shameless" behavior. Traditionalists argue that what is degrading or shameless is "homosexuality," or same-sex eroticism in general. Whenever sexual contact takes place between two people of the same gender, regardless of the amount of love, mutuality, or self-giving that might be present, shame is always the result. But as I have repeatedly noted, broad and generic concepts like "homosexuality" did not exist in the ancient world; and it is considerably less than clear that Romans 1:26 even envisions same-sex eroticism between women. Our explorations in this chapter and the previous two chapters suggest a different perspective: What is degrading and shameless about the behavior described in Romans 1:24-27 is that it is driven by excessive, self-seeking lust, that it knows no boundaries or restraints, and that it violates established gender roles of that time and culture, understood in terms of masculine rationality and honor. Such behavior is, in the context of the ancient world, incapable of expressing love, incapable of being a vehicle by which compassion, kindness, self-giving, and mutual service might find expression. You cannot love someone at the same time that you are dominated by self-centered passion, and are in the process violating his or her honor or the honor of the household in which that person resides.

By this reading, revisionists can claim that Paul is exactly correct in what he affirms. Indeed, whenever either heterosexual or same-sex behavior is driven by lust and licentiousness, whenever it violates the boundaries of an ordered community, and whenever such behavior violates the honor and dignity of persons as that dignity is understood and expressed in a particular cultural setting, such behavior *should* be regarded as shameful. In these cases, the deep work of repentance and reformulation of the self is required, empowered by the light of the gracious and transformative gos-

men to do so. And . . . many child molesters cannot be characterized as having an adult sexual orientation at all; they are fixated on children."

pel of Christ. But in these cases, the disciplining of the affections is clear: the direction for healing involves relinquishing excessive desire, learning self-restraint, honoring communal boundaries, and respecting the honor of others. These are deep values about which there is no disagreement. It is quite another matter, however, when the desire to love and to be loved by someone of the same sex is shamed. Here it is not a matter of disciplining the desire; traditionalists believe that same-sex desire must simply be eradicated. Here it is not a matter of recognizing the destructive nature of what one desires (as in the case of addictions or child abuse); rather, it is a matter of renouncing a desire to love and to be loved by another in an intimate relationship. To insist that moderated, loving same-sex desires are incapable of being sanctified is to attempt to make equivalencies between same-sex desires and more toxic relationships where they simply do not exist. The toxic and destructive impact of child abuse and addiction is obvious to all. To make the same claim about all committed gay or lesbian relationships is completely unwarranted — both by experience and by a careful reading of the way the language of shame is used in Romans 1 and related texts from the ancient world. In the ancient world, male same-sex eroticism is regarded as shameful not because there is "too much sameness," as some attempt to argue, but rather because the ancient world thought it was an expression of excessive self-centered passion, and because they believed it was inherently and unavoidably degrading for a man to play the role of a woman and be penetrated by another man. There is no reason to read the references to dishonor and shamelessness in the Romans text as assuming anything different from this overall ancient consensus.

What is at stake here is the distinction between healthy and toxic shame. Healthy shame can always name the deep values that are being violated — a simple task in the case of addictions or child abuse. Toxic shame, by contrast, is almost always vague about the deep values that are violated. The worst of traditionalist rhetoric resorts to mere Bible-thumping and proof-texting, consigning gays and lesbians to the shadows under the weight of unquestionable divine authority and refusing even to countenance any questioning of this dogmatic assurance. Other traditionalist strategies attempt to be more compassionate, but they remain almost as vague. Gay men, for example, are told that they have not developed adequate non-sexual friendships with other men or that their relationship with their father is "wounded." Simply fix these things, it is said, and desire will return to its proper object. But it is precisely such vagueness that allows shame to persist in the darkness. Moreover, the ineffectiveness of "reparative therapy"

that is based on these questionable assumptions has led professional groups such as the American Psychological Association to explicitly rule out such therapeutic approaches because they don't work, and they only compound shame and frustration on the part of the client. If shame cannot be clearly named, and its destructive elements cannot be clearly identified, it is toxic shame, and the deeper call of the gospel is not to reinforce such shame but to expose its deceptiveness by the light of Christ.

A number of traditionalist writers have attempted to focus the shameful-ness of male-male erotic relationships somewhat differently — on the physical and psychological health risks that such behavior allegedly involves. Thomas Schmidt's analysis is the most extensive and graphic in his depiction of a wide range of health problems associated with male homosexual practice in the United States.¹⁴ What is clear in his discussion, however, is that almost all the health problems he describes are associated with sexual promiscuity and the use of multiple sex partners. There is every reason for Christians to agree on this: sexual promiscuity of any kind — homosexual or heterosexual — violates the purpose of God. Scripture clearly links sexual expression with "one-flesh" unions that establish lifelong, stable kinship ties. *Eros* is intended to lead to *agapē*; desire finds its transformative end in mutuality and self-giving. Christians should not say with their bodies what they are unable or unwilling to say with the rest of their lives. The failure to respect this divinely intended purpose for sexuality results in multiple destructive consequences. Shame attached to promiscuity of any kind is healthy shame, not toxic shame. But again the question arises: Should committed, long-term gay relationships be painted with the same brush?

Consider as an analogy the way the writings of the New Testament confront heterosexual brokenness. As the gospel confronted the Gentile world, early Christian leaders encountered all sorts of sexual problems, sin, and distortion. The New Testament is full of exhortations about such things, often reiterating its call to holy living. If the New Testament writers had access to an ancient survey on sexuality, they might well have felt that their cause was hopeless, given that so many heterosexuals did not live according to the will of God. But they pressed on, confident in the sanctifying and healing power of the Spirit, moving people to greater sexual wholeness

14. See Thomas E. Schmidt, "The Price of Love," in Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), pp. 99-130; cf. Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), pp. 471ff.

and integrity. For centuries the church has consigned gay and lesbian sexuality to the shadows and to the closet. Is it really surprising that, banished from the clear light of Christian teaching and the supportive context of redemptive communities, some serious problems have emerged? Again, we see the importance of clear light when shame is healthy. But when we insist that all homosexual relations are shameful because they are *necessarily* unhealthy, we move again from clear light into the shadows. In fact, research shows no significant health-related issues among lesbians at all, and the failure to differentiate between committed partners and bar-cruising one-night stands will not illuminate a helpful direction for Christian ethics. It is entirely reasonable and appropriate for the church to ask gay and lesbian couples to express their love to each other in ways that do not damage each other's bodies. The same expectation should stand with heterosexual couples. Why not simply take this approach rather than claiming that all same-sex love is inherently unhealthy?

The church will stay on much stronger and clearer footing — and remain more closely linked with its Scripture — if it approaches honor and shame more clearly in the light of deeper and more sustainable scriptural principles. What is honorable is what contributes to a form of life and dignity that is permeated by the gospel of Christ. What is shameful is any impulse or behavior that diminishes life and dignity, as that life and dignity is portrayed in the gospel of Christ. The missionary character of the gospel makes it clear that this new life and dignity will take a somewhat different shape in different cultures and settings — and in different times and places. As the gospel of Christ delves more deeply into these various cultural settings, honor-shame codes may continue to undergo deeper transformation — in light of the gospel. It remains to be seen whether the inclusion of gays and lesbians in committed relationships will be one of those places where honor-shame codes undergo a deeper transformation in the life of the church. However, the history of the church suggests that, if that happens, it won't be the first time or the last time that such transformation takes place.

Summing Up

- Paul's characterization of the sexual misbehavior in Romans 1:24-27 as "degrading" and "shameless" requires that we understand this form of moral logic.

- This language must be understood in the context of an honor-shame culture in which public esteem is valued very highly, and where male and female roles are clearly and sharply delineated.
- In this context, the reference to "their women" in Romans 1:26 probably does not refer to same-sex activity but to dishonorable forms of heterosexual intercourse. The reference to degrading acts between men probably refers both to the ancient assumption that same-sex eroticism is driven by excessive passion, not content with heterosexual gratification, and also to the general assumption in the ancient world that a man was inherently degraded by being penetrated as a woman would be.
- Although the need to honor others is a universal moral mandate, the specific behaviors that are considered honorable and shameful vary dramatically from one culture to another.
- In the past, the church has often contributed to the toxic shame of gay and lesbian persons by the ambivalent response, "We welcome you, but we abhor the way you operate emotionally."
- What is shameful about the sexual behavior described in Romans 1:24-27 is the presence of lust, licentiousness, self-centeredness, abuse, and the violation of gender roles that were widely accepted in the ancient world.
- The church must wrestle with whether all contemporary gay and lesbian committed relationships are accurately described by Paul's language. If not, then perhaps this form of moral logic does not apply to contemporary committed gay and lesbian relationships.

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Nature

Nothing has been more central to the debates over homosexuality in the churches than Paul's language regarding "nature" in Romans 1. The claim that same-sex intimacy is "unnatural" or "contrary to nature" constitutes the heart of most traditionalist opposition to any move toward the acceptance of these relationships in the life of the church. The importance of the references in this passage to "nature" becomes evident when the recurring use of the language of "exchange" is noted in Romans 1: verse 23 speaks of how sinful humans "exchanged [*ēllaxan*] the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles." Verse 25 uses the same verb in a slightly modified form, speaking of how these godless people "exchanged [*metēllaxan*] the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature, rather than the creator." The last "exchange" is noted in verse 26: "Their women exchanged [*metēllaxan*] natural intercourse for unnatural," and similarly, men "giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another" (Rom. 1:27). These polarities are summarized in the table on page 224. In this context, "natural" aligns with divine glory and truth, and "unnatural" aligns with idolatry, deception, and all-consuming passion. Paul links departure from the worship of God to a departure from what is "natural."¹ In this light, one can readily understand

1. For further explication of these parallels from a traditionalist perspective, see Ulrich Mauser, "Creation, Sexuality, and Homosexuality in the New Testament," in Choon-Leong Seow, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).