



themelios

*An International Journal for Students of
Theological and Religious Studies*

Volume 34 Issue 3 November 2009

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THE GOSPEL COALITION

EDITORIAL

— D. A. Carson —

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Most of us have had the experience of drifting, half awake and half asleep, in a gray mist of semi-consciousness, only to be jerked fully awake by some sudden and vivid memory of a shameful thing we have done or said in the past. The action or words are terribly vivid, and we break out in a cold sweat of shame. An inner writhing makes us wish we could relive those moments and behave differently. But in the immortal words of Omar Khayyam,

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

What is striking about these experiences is that the acute shame we suddenly feel is almost invariably with reference to a horizontal relationship—that is, we feel shame for what we have said or done that has wounded a friend or diminished us in the eyes of a family member or colleague. Almost never do we feel such acute shame before God. Why is this?

I suspect that at least one of the reasons is that many of us care rather more for what fellow human beings think of us than for what God thinks of us. To put this in theological language, we do not fall under adequate conviction of sin—conviction that simultaneously makes us feel guilty because we *are* guilty, and makes us ashamed because we have been so profoundly disloyal to our Maker and Sovereign. What *he* thinks of us when we act or speak despicably ought to be far more important to us than what anyone else thinks of us. That it is not usually so is itself a measure of our estrangement from the living God.

This common experience of God's fallen image-bearers, people like you and me, takes on particular hues in specific disciplines. That is why it is worth asking readers of this digital journal what it is that is most likely to induce a sense of shame or embarrassment among theologians young and old, among pastors and teachers.

Would it be unduly cynical of me to suggest that most of us are more likely to feel troubled by something we have said or done that has upset a colleague or parishioner than by something that has dishonored God? Some do not want to be too closely associated with anything the scholarly guild judges old-fashioned or fundamentalist: that, surely, would be shameful. On the other hand, Jesus says some blunt things about those who are ashamed of him and his words (Mark 8:38). The question resolves into something pretty straightforward: Whose approval do we most earnestly desire? Whose approval do we want when we prepare for a lecture (whether to deliver it or to learn from it)? Whose approval do we seek when we preach a sermon? Whose approval matters most when we write a paper or slog away at a dissertation? Whose approval do we hunger for when we choose a vocation, decide how to use our

time, take pains to build links of affection and accountability in the local church, exercise, bring up our children, nurture our families, read, lead a Bible study, help a neighbor?

If we do not want God's approval the most, where does idolatry begin?

Mind you, the really wonderful thing about occasional midnight writhings when the person we have most offended is God is that this God also provides everything that is necessary to cleanse our conscience so that we may once again look boldly into his face. He is "faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). So we return to the cross, and rest once again.