

*The Face of Forgiveness: A Pastoral Theology of Shame and Redemption*

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*"All faces fail, including our own. All love is only temporary, because all is broken by the weight of sin. No face openly offers love in all ways at all times. All faces look away."*

## The Dying Face of Christ

In very important ways, our identity is shaped by the faces that we carry with us. At this juncture we may see in a new way the devastating nature of shame – the shame that is principally signaled by the downturned face. Such are the imagined faces of the shamed that one's own face must look away. All shame strategies are variations on the downturned face. They are all attempts to save face by a refusal to encounter meaningfully the face of another. In Genesis 3 and 4 we have observed how the faces of Adam, Eve and Cain are all turned down and away from interpersonal encounter. By breaking relationship with God, which marks the entrance of sin into reality, the primordial humans encounter a shadow that falls over all relationships. This break in relations is humanity's reorientation from *imago Dei* to *sicut Deus*. *Sicut Deus* is shame-based living. That is, it is the human proclivity to look away from the other and toward the self for the project of identification. We are curved back upon ourselves and at the deepest level, we have attempted to become the creators of our own identity.

Human beings live in terror that other faces cannot be trusted. All other faces fail at particular times and particular places to meet the needs of the human ego. This failure is of course a closed loop. Even though we are created to be shaped by other faces, our sinful brokenness fails us in two important ways. First, we have unrealistic expectations. The *sicut Deus* human begins with inflated wants and desires. To be like God is to require more than attention, one deserves worship! And so ultimately no face ever lives up to those sin-based requirements. Second, even as we find the gaze of the other insufficient, we fail to give the other what they need from us. All faces fail, including our own. All love is only temporary, because all is broken by the weight of sin. No face openly offers love in all ways at all times. All faces look away.

The Christian answer to this unsolvable problem is the doctrine of the atonement. The triune God has intervened and done what no mere human can do. To meet God in Jesus Christ is to encounter a face that looks in love and that refuses to look away. But it is a face that one must learn to love, for even though it looks at us lovingly, this is a face that is deeply marred. We are socially conditioned to assume that the beautiful and desirable face will be the one that will answer our needs. Surely it must be that perfect beauty (however measured by any given culture) will have the power to mend human brokenness. But none succeed in accordance with human needs, because all beauty is fading.

And so we must learn to look for another face. We must and may encounter another, unexpected face: a face that redefines beauty. Jesus' is the unexpected face – not one to which we would be naturally drawn. Instead, his is the face from which we would naturally "hide our faces" (Is 53:3) because it bears the sins of the world and all the shame that such sin bearing must imply. The dying face of Jesus is cloaked in shame and such shame would

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cause us all to look away. But to yield to that face, to not turn away, is to find life and salvation, for this face has the power to heal because this face belongs to God become human, Jesus Christ. The fixed dying gaze of the Savior communicates salvation every bit as much as the divine forgiveness of our guilt pronounced in “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34). The fixed, dying gaze is the origin point for a new identity, a new way of being human. Or perhaps to state more accurately, the fixed, dying gaze restores to us the old and original way of being human—*imago Dei*.

*“Jesus dies in the posture of shame, embracing the world’s shame.”*

We listen to Jesus’ words from the cross in order to understand how he completely addresses human sin. Jesus dies naked before a watching, sinful world. The man Jesus who fully reveals God is fully revealed before the eyes of all. It is now the precise moment of his death that concerns us. Even as he is breathing his last, there is one more humiliation that awaits him. “After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), ‘I am thirsty.’ A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (Jn 19:28-30). Sinful humanity takes one more opportunity to mock the dying man, giving him vinegar to slake his thirst. It is not his words that now draw our attention, however, but his posture. In dying, Jesus bows his head and he is gone.

His last act, Jesus’ last movement, high and lifted up, the man who fully reveals God, now fully revealed, is to join sinful humanity in our downward gaze. Jesus dies in the posture of shame, embracing the world’s shame. “It is finished.” The face, once set like a flint (Is 50:7) on his way to Jerusalem, to this very death (Lk 9:51), now stares unblinkingly downcast, bearing humanity’s shame. He joins all of us: solidarity with the shamed. But again, this face is different. For this face in his downward gaze is not looking away from his neighbors, he is looking at them. The last act of the dying Savior is to fix his gaze upon those who are in need of salvation. Our forgiveness has already been pronounced (Lk 23:34) and now the dying God provides the means to accept it. Karl Barth notes that there is no other face like Jesus’. Jesus’ is the face that will not look away. Jesus’ is the face that sees all and still loves all. Jesus’ face alone is the one that has power to forgive and give to us the healing power to accept such forgiveness.

*— Adapted from chapter six, “As One from Whom Others Hide Their Faces . . .”*



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## Whatever Happened to the Forgiveness of Sins? A Q&A with Philip Jamieson

**Why are the concepts of forgiveness and sin something that today's church needs to grapple with?**

I believe that there is a great need for a new look at the doctrine of the atonement. In particular, the Western church's emphasis (since at least Anselm) on the satisfaction theory has caused us to focus primarily on our guilt. The shorthand version goes along these lines: The guilt that we have accumulated as a result of our sin exacts a death penalty upon us. Jesus, who is not guilty of any sin, takes our place and dies our death. Therefore, the slate has been wiped clean and we are offered a new beginning. Thanks be to God, this is most certainly true, but what if our individual sins are not really the heart of our problem? What if it is our shame rather than our guilt that most needs to be addressed? What if our essential problem is not so much what we do or don't do, but who we are, or who we think that we are? In other words, what if our essential problem is not our failure to behave but instead it is our failure to recognize the truth of who God is, and who we are in relationship to that God?

**If you could sum up your thesis for *The Face of Forgiveness*, what would you say?**

This book is an attempt to offer an answer to Jane and to all Christians who struggle with offering faithful responses – disciple-like responses. And to begin to formulate a faithful response, we must acknowledge the changing context in which forgiveness is discussed within the church. The language of forgiveness is undergoing a dramatic change in connotation. In part, this is due to a slow but thorough loss of the language of sin among Christians. And ultimately, forgiveness will be redefined if sin talk is either muted or disappears all together.

**Why do you think Christians shy away from the language of sin?**

There are a number of answers to that question, but I would begin by asking another: "What part has Christian theology itself played in causing Christians to be hesitant in acknowledging sin's reality?" I want to focus in this book on the way in which a different emphasis within the doctrine of the atonement might cause us to face our sin with greater honesty. And more importantly, I want to focus on how a different emphasis might cause us to face our sin with greater hope, including the hope of transformation.

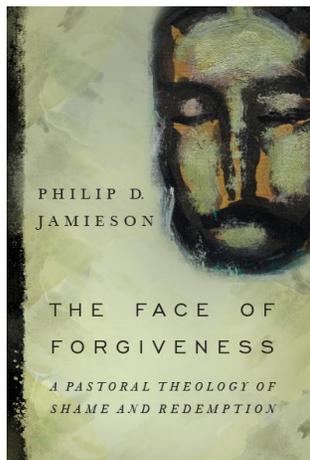
In order to truly forgive others we must know what God the Father does through Jesus Christ the Son and how we come to appropriate that work through the power of the Holy Spirit. No other beginning point will create a suitable foundation for the power to forgive. No other place allows us to take seriously and honestly our own sin and need for forgiveness.

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Christians stand in a place of privilege in that their sin is meant to be a call to remember the God who forgives. There is no healing in the inward glance of self acceptance, but then there need not be because the God who does accept, forgive and restore has been, is and will continue to be at work.

### **How does psychology play a role in our understanding of sin and forgiveness?**

A Christian psychology argues that to truly understand the healing of humanity, we must first consider the reality of human nature as revealed in the Bible. Ultimately, human nature can only be understood in terms of what Karl Barth referred to as “real man.” “Real man” is only revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Since Chalcedon, Christians have systematically confessed Jesus Christ as truly human. He alone shows us what it means to be authentically human. But once having begun with Christ, we will find that many of the insights of the social sciences can be properly appropriated.

– *These answers are adapted from chapter one.*