Abstract:

One of the most destructive effects of abuse trauma is shame. While there is a growing body of biblical literature on shame in the ancient biblical world, there is still a need to give further attention to how abuse was understood and responded to in these honor-shame cultures and make contemporary application. Thus, in this presentation I will: (1) survey how Scripture, from an honor shame cultural perspective, addresses abuse and shame; (2) discuss how the early church fathers, particularly Augustine understood sexual abuse; (3) explore biblical teaching on how the cross of Christ mediated by Christian community removes shame and gives honor; (4) present a few case studies from east Africa to illustrate the experiences and healing of sexual abuse shame. My thesis for this presentation is as follows: while sexual abuse creates some of the most severe levels of destructive shame, particularly for those who live in honor-shame cultures, the message of the cross of Christ, experienced in loving community, is the most powerful antidote for removing and transforming sexual abuse victims’ shame.
Introduction

[Picture of large group] Our Congolese host had arranged for our team to drive to a village several kilometers in the bush to visit a ministry there to sexually abused women. This was in 2007, not long after the Second Congo war had ended. Staggering numbers of women were being raped in this providence particularly by soldiers and militia. Christian ministries like this one were overwhelmed with needs. Shortly after we entered the dilapidated building, a dozen women arrived and began sharing their stories. We were utterly unprepared for what we saw and heard. Woman after woman told us of being captured and sexually assaulted by soldiers, often at gunpoint. The most haunting story came from a woman who recounted being seized by a small band of militia as she was on her way to the shamba (garden). All night she was raped, beaten, and tortured. She literally crawled back to her home early in the morning and collapsed unconscious just outside the entrance to her hut. When her husband found her, he declared that she had brought shame on him, the family, and the village. So he threw her out.1 Almost all of the other women reported similar experiences. Many were cast out of their churches and driven from their villages. One woman reported that when she would go to fetch water the other women in her village would come up behind her, curse her, and bite her on the back. Again, she had brought shame on the community. We were traumatized just listening to their stories. As westerners from a highly individualistic, nonhonor-shame culture, we had no way to understand such seemingly irrational and cruel responses to sexual victimization. Our intuitive response was simply to: (1) condemn the culture and (2) redouble our efforts to educate victims and communities regarding sexual assault, seeking to remove victims’ shame through cognitive

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1 The similarities between this story and the one recorded in Judges 19:1-29 regarding the gang rape of the Levite’s concubine are tragically ironic.
reframing (“rape wasn’t the victim’s fault”; “it isn’t the victims’ shame to carry” etc.). This educational strategy met with limited success. After ministering in East Africa for the past ten years and studying the dynamics of honor-shame cultures, I am now beginning to appreciate the beauty of honor-shame culture, understand what these abused women experienced from their communities, and offer suggestions for transforming sexual abuse shame.

I. Cultural and Biblical Understandings of Abuse and Shame

In reality, the culture we experienced in the Congo was much closer to the cultures of the biblical world than our Caucasian American culture. In fact, some 80% of modern cultures can be described as “honor-shame,” particularly those found in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. A basic definition of honor is “a claim to worth that is publicly acknowledged.” In other words, it is the value and respect individuals in a community give to another person. There are two primary types of honor, ascribed (particularly through one’s parents, ancestors, or tribe) and achieved (gained through actions considered worthy of honor). The Apostle Paul alludes to his attainment of both types of honor prior to his conversion. He had ascribed honor by being a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin and attained honor through his scrupulous observance of the law (Phil 3:5-6). Shame is the opposite of honor, “it means to be denied or to be diminished in honor.” In other words, to be devalued and demeaned by others. While the experience of shame is universal among humans, “shame” and its antithesis “honor” play a particularly pervasive, critical role in some cultures, thus making these “honor-shame”

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3 Ibid.
cultures. No two honor-shame cultures are identical. For instance, how shameful versus honorable behavior is defined and responded to varies greatly from culture to culture. But honor-shame cultures do share certain general traits which distinguish them from nonhonor-shame cultures. In particular, compared to most Western cultures, honor-shame cultures prioritize shame and honor over guilt or innocence and social well-being and harmony over individual fulfillment and expression. Recognizing these characteristics helps to explain the seemingly cruel and irrational responses experienced by Congolese women raped at gunpoint. The community was not focused on the raped women’s legal/moral innocence or even on the raped women’s individual personal needs (as we were) but were primarily looking at the shame their sexual abuse had created for the community and on the resultant needs of the collective group. Clearly, if one is going to minister effectively to sexually abused women cultural context must shape ministry strategy.

In terms of a biblical theology of shame, it is important to note that shame and honor appear prominently in Scripture. The English word “shame” and related terms (dishonor, reproach, humiliation, etc.) appear approximately 300 times in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Paul most fully develops the concept of shame, using sixteen different Greek terms for shame and eight different words for honor. Shame and honor were exceedingly important to the biblical writers, an obvious fact which until recently escaped the notice of many western biblical scholars. Since all humans experience shame, one of the most powerful of all emotions,

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4 Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 80.
6 For instance, one of the most respected academic Bible dictionaries, the six volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) does not have an entry for “shame” or “honor.” Similarly, one of
it is essential to understand, appreciate, and appropriate honor-shame promises in Scripture. God promises to remove his children’s shame, turning it into praise and honor (Zeph 3:11, 19; cp. Joel 2:26-27). Those who wait on Yahweh will not be put to shame (Is 49:23). Similarly, the one who believes in Christ will not be put to shame (Rom 10:11). Believers who faithfully endure trials and persecution will receive divine honor and glory (2 Cor 4:15; 1 Pet 1:7; 5:4). The pursuit of honor is encouraged—it is offered as a reward to those who patiently pursue truth and godliness (Rom 2:6-10).

Interestingly, shame and honor are often addressed in Scripture in the context of abuse, particularly physical and verbal abuse. For instance, the psalmist laments that God had allowed their abusive enemies to shame, taunt, and scorn them, making them “a laughingstock among the peoples” (Ps 44:13-15). Dangerous abusers brought shame and dishonor upon the psalmist which had broken his heart and left him in despair (Ps 69:19-20). Slanderous, murderous enemies cursed and wagged their heads to shame the psalmist, making him an object of scorn to others (Ps 109:25-29, 31). Being shamed by one’s abusive enemies caused even the psalmists’ neighbors to reject and dishonor them (Ps 31:11 and 89:41). Since shame has such destructive power, it is important to note that God promises to shame abusers and not his own people (Ps

It is also important to note that the most frequent context for shame in the Psalms involves the psalmists asking God to shame their abusers.\(^7\)

Sexual abuse and resultant shame are also addressed much more robustly in Scripture than most evangelicals realize.\(^8\) We can draw the following summary principles from a half dozen key Old Testament texts dealing with sexual abuse.

**Deuteronomy 22:25-29; cp. Exodus 22:16-17—Mosaic legislation regarding rape**

The sin of raping is comparable to physically attacking and murdering one’s neighbor (Deut 22:26). It involves an act of destructive violence against another human being who should be treated with respect (as a neighbor). A raped woman is to be given justice and protection. She is not guilty of any sin and should not be shamed. Her rapist is guilty and should be severely punished. Thus, a rapists’ actions are utterly shameful.

**Genesis 34—the rape of Dinah\(^9\)**

Rape is an “outrageous” act (v. 7) which creates great shame for victims who are treated as “harlots” (v. 31). Hence, “the sexual abuse of rape denigrates and violates a woman’s

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\(^7\) For instance Ps 31:17; 35:4, 26; 40:14-15; 53:5; 57:1-3; 70:2-3; 71:13; 83:16-18; 86:17; 109:29; 129:5. For a concise discussion of abuse victims asking God to shame the abuser see Steven Tracy, *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 89.


\(^9\) Historically scholars have debated whether Dinah was actually raped or whether the text suggests she bore some responsibility. For arguments in favor of this being a clear case of forcible rape, see Susanne Scholz, “Was It Rape in Genesis 34? Biblical Scholarship as a Reflection of Cultural Assumptions” in *Escaping Eden: New Feminist Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. Harold Washington et al. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 183-98.
whole being—body, mind, and spirit.”\textsuperscript{10} The shame that rape brings on the victim and her family can lead to drastic revenge measures on the part of male family members seeing to redress the dishonor (v. 25-26).

\textbf{2 Samuel 11—the “power rape” of Bathsheba}\textsuperscript{11}

The rapist alone is guilty of shameful evil (2 Sam 12:1-7; Ps 51:4) but his actions can bring life-long consequences not only on himself but also on his victim, their families, and others in the community.

\textbf{2 Samuel 13—the rape of Tamar}

Rape is an act of violence which often involves deception, manipulation, and collusion with other witting and unwitting individuals (vv. 3-7). Rapists implicitly and explicitly shame their victims (v. 15-17). Rape victims’ shame is intense and may lead to life-long dishonor and loss (v. 19-20).

\textbf{Judges 5:30—song of Deborah} (a quotation from King Sisera’s mother)

“Have they not found and divided the spoil?—A womb or two for every man.” Rape is an extreme act of shame and dishonor. A rape victim becomes a mere object for male exploitation not a fellow image bearer to be honored.

\textsuperscript{10} Davidson, “Sexual Abuse in the Old Testament,” 142.

\textsuperscript{11} Richard Davidson makes an excellent case for this being an example of “power rape” by David, the sovereign Hebrew monarch. He gives eighteen different arguments to support this thesis, Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 523-32; cf. also Larry Spielman, “David’s Abuse of Power,” Word and World 29 (1999): 251-59.
Judges 19—the gang rape of the Levite’s concubine

In some patriarchal honor-shame cultures, hospitality toward male visitors is deemed more important than protecting one’s own female family members from sexual assault (v. 19-24; cp. Gen 19:8). Anything, including the heterosexual gang rape of one’s own family members, is preferable to homosexual rape of men since male on male rape is considered the ultimate shameful act whereas women are expendable.\(^\text{12}\) Rape stories like this one depict “the horrors of male power, brutality, and triumphalism; of female helplessness, abuse and annihilation.”\(^\text{13}\) Such twisted behaviors in which women are not protected and valued but are used and abused like animals\(^\text{14}\) are the quintessence of shameful actions which hideously pervert the gracious plan of God (Jud 19:30; 21:25; cp. Gen 2:22-25).

II. Early Church Fathers’ Understanding of Sexual Abuse and Shame

[picture of ancient Romans from the internet] The New Testament world was a thoroughly shame-honor world. From the time a Roman citizen got up in the morning until he went to bed at night, virtually all of his or her actions were shaped by what would maximize honor and minimize shame.\(^\text{15}\) And sexual behavior, particularly a woman’s, was a particularly powerful matrix for the cultivation of shame. This was predicated on the patriarchal nature of Roman and Jewish society. Sexual standards, and thus what would be considered shameful, were

\(^{12}\text{See Roy Gane, God’s Faulty Heroes Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association (1996), 122-129.}\)

\(^{13}\text{Phyllis Trible, Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 65.}\)

\(^{14}\text{Cp. Jud 19:29 and 1 Sam 11:7. This concubine was considered no more than an animal to be butchered to send a message to the nation.}\)

quite different for men and women. For instance, a husband could always prosecute his wife for infidelity, whereas a wife could not. Furthermore, a married woman would be legally guilty of adultery if she had sexual relations with anyone other than her husband, whereas a husband was only guilty if the other woman was married.16 This gender shame disparity is quite relevant to sexual assault since rape was viewed primarily as a violation against the husband.17

Most significant for this study is the story of the rape and subsequent suicide of Lucretia in 510 BC. This iconic story was among the most well-known Roman legends since it purportedly led to the birth of the Roman Republic. Lucretia was raped at knifepoint by the son of King Tarquinius when her husband was out of town. Afterwards she committed suicide because of the dishonor she bore.18 In the ancient Roman world Lucretia was viewed as the ultimate model of chastity and virtue.19 Ironically, this pagan story was cited by several of the early church fathers to justify a Christian woman committing suicide to prevent the dishonor and moral defilement resulting from rape. For instance, Jerome commends Lucretia who “would not survive her violated chastity, but blotted out the stain upon her person with her own blood.”20

The church fathers’ view of the impact of rape reflects their honor-shame orientation. Eusebius, who positively recounts the example of a Christian mother who persuaded her two daughters to

17 Thus Philo argues that the rape of a widow is half as serious as adultery and should not be given capital punishment (as would be fitting in the case of the rape of a married women), On Special Laws LCL 320.515
18 In Livy’s classic account of this event Lucretia states that while she was guiltless, her honor had been lost (and by inference her husband’s honor) and thus “while I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself of the punishment,” History of Rome 1 (LCL 114.196-211.53-54). Similarly, Valerius Maximus positively recounts the suicide of a Greek woman named Hippo to prevent her rape by enemy sailors. Thus, “her soul could not be vanquished nor her chastity captured,” Memorable Doings and Sayings (LCL 493.13).
19 For instance, Ovid recounts this story, emphasizing Lucretia’s chastity and virtue by noting that when she was falling down after stabbing herself “even in dying she took care to sink down decently,” Fasti. (LCL 253:114-).
20 Ad. Jovianus 1.46. Joan Stivala argues that the example of Lucretia was actually more influential for the early church fathers than for the pagan Romans, “Death before Dishonour! Suicide of Christian Victims of Rape,” Eras 13 (2011): 1-17.
join her in drowning themselves to prevent soldiers from raping them, argues that they were justified in killing themselves to prevent “the threat of fornication.” In other words, the experience of being forcibly violated intrinsically makes one guilty of terrible sexual sin. What is ironic is that while the pagan Romans did not generally consider suicide immoral, Christians did except in the case of rape, indicating the great dishonor and moral corruption they believed sexual assault created for the victim.

The view that raped women are somehow guilty and morally polluted continues to be prevalent in many modern honor-shame cultures. For instance, I asked some of our ministry partners in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to conduct surveys with raped women, caregivers, and pastors regarding how raped women are viewed by others and whether rape brings shame on the woman, her family, and the community. The answers were quite homogeneous. The most common beliefs were that raped women: (1) are often to blame for being assaulted; (2) are dirty and shameful; (3) bring shame on their families and communities. Below is a representative sampling of the responses.

- “If a woman is raped when she is 20-50 years old, people will put the blame on her. People will see her as unworthy. She can be viewed as a prostitute.”
- “There is usually a feeling that the rape victim is somehow tainted, that the body is a part of the crime. Thus, feelings of shame become almost unavoidable.”

21 Eusebius, *The Church History* 8.12; cp. 8.14. The Greek word which in Paul Maier’s translation is translated “fornication” is *porneia*, a common New Testament term which always refers to a form of shameful sexual sin (Mat 5:32; Gal 5:19; Rev 14:8). Chrysostom says this woman’s name was Domnina and her daughters were Bernice and Prosdoce. Other early church fathers who justified (or even admonished) suicide to prevent rape include Jerome, *In Ionam* 1.12; *Aduersus Iouinianum* 1.43, Ambrose, *De uirginibus* 3.7.32-34, and Chrysostom, *De sanctis Bernice et Prosdoce* 6.

• “A woman who has been raped in Uganda is viewed as being irresponsible, wicked, careless, seductive, and disobedient.”

• “Most raped women in our country bring shame to themselves, their husbands, the families, and their villages because rape itself is a disgrace in the community. People discriminate against raped women out of fear of sharing the shame and losing respect from friends and family.”

• “A raped woman in my culture is seen as a curse to the society. She loses her dignity and hope.”

• “Raped women bring shame to their husband, their family and village. The rapist leaves his “dirt” on his victim, and not only her but also all those who approach her and those who live with her. That's why people avoid the raped one.”

• “The shame of a raped one so great no one is fit to express it.”

• “The raped woman is looked at as a "mukumbira" (one who smells). She is accursed, miserable, and no longer has value or worth.”

• “She feels dirty. She finds that she cannot serve the holy God—she is dirty, impious. Why sing in a choir? How can she lead a devotion time?”

[picture of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (AD 354-430)], Augustine, one of the most influential theologians in the history of the Christian church, gave a very helpful corrective to the views espoused by other early church fathers and contemporaries such as those surveyed in East Africa. In his magnum opus, The City of God, Augustine responded to the widespread rape of consecrated Christian virgins when Rome as sacked in AD 410. He argued in considerable detail that the sin, guilt, and shame belonged only to the rapists and not to the women. He
acknowledged that rape can inflict pain and a sense of shame but asserted that it cannot take away one’s virtue. He states that shame can “invade a thoroughly pure spirit from which modesty [sexual purity] has not departed.” Furthermore, he argues that a godly raped woman remained pure and honorable in God’s eyes. The guilt and shame belongs solely to the rapist: “When a woman is violated while her soul admits no consent to the iniquity but remains inviolably chaste, the sin is not hers, but his who violates her”; “the sanctity of the soul remains even when the body is violated.” In other words, rape in itself cannot remove a woman’s virtue or honor. Given the fact that in many contemporary honor-shame cultures raped women are believed to be dishonorable, Augustine’s three major assertions are very helpful in modern honor-shame cultures. (1) The rapist alone is guilty of sin; the victim bears no blame; (2) the rape victim may feel shame but doesn’t have legitimate shame; (3) God views raped Christian women as pure and honorable as they were before being raped.

Unfortunately, after providing a salutary discussion of rape and the impropriety of actual or potential victims committing suicide, Augustine goes on to speculate regarding why God allowed the consecrated virgins to be raped. He admonishes the rape victims directly: “faithfully interrogate your own souls” to discern whether you have become “unduly puffed up” over your own chastity due to a desire for human honor so that God needed to take away your source of sinful pride. Then, anticipating that many of the rape victims would respond by asserting that they did not take pride in their chastity or desire human praise, he says they must not complain that God gave the barbarians permission to “so grossly” dishonor them since they may well have

23 City of God 1.16.
24 City of God 1.19; 1.18. Similarly, in 1.28 Augustine states that “purity both of the body and the soul…cannot be forcibly taken from an unwilling person.”
25 Augustine, City of God, 1.28
had a subconscious character defect which would have ultimately betrayed them had they not been subjected to the “humiliation” [shame] of being raped. In other words, he suggests that these women are at least partially responsible for being raped and that ultimately they were raped for their own good. Historically, blaming the victim and minimizing the pain and evil of rape are two of the most common and destructive responses to sexual assault given by Christian leaders.

III. The Role of the Cross in Transforming and Removing Abuse Shame

The atonement of Christ is one of the richest, most complex doctrines in Scripture. It is the very foundation of the Christian faith. A robust understanding and personal application of this doctrine is essential for the transformation of shame. Evangelicals have fixated almost exclusively on the penal nature of Christ’s death—the satisfaction of God’s righteousness and appeasement of his wrath. This is often referred to as the “objective” nature of the atonement in that it was designed to achieve something in God, something outside of humans. The penal view thus places the focus on how human guilt can be removed by virtue of what happened to God through Christ’s death. While Scripture certainly teaches that Jesus’ atonement was penal (Is 53:5-6; Gal 3:13; 1 John 4:10) and affected change in God, biblically, this is just one of many results of the atonement. The New Testament writers also recognize and

26 Ibid.
28 For instance, over one thousand years later Calvin and Luther responded in a similar manner to the biblical accounts of the rape of Dinah and Tamar, Michael Parsons, “Luther and Calvin on Rape: Is the Crime Lost in the Agenda,” Evangelical Quarterly 74 (2002): 123-142.
highlight the “subjective” nature of Christ’s atonement, i.e., the way it impacts humans. This is a significant point, particularly for honor-shame cultures. As Timothy Tennant notes, western theology books are filled with references to Christ’s death removing guilt but virtually silent regarding his death removing shame and conferring honor. Tennant then puts this into biblical perspective by way of emphasis:

This omission [explaining that Christ’s death removes our shame] continues in spite the fact that the term guilt and its various derivatives occur 145 times in the Old Testament and 10 times in the New Testament, whereas the term shame and its derivatives occur nearly 300 times in the Old Testament and 45 times in the New Testament.²⁹

To understand how the cross can transform and remove abuse shame we must begin with the nature of crucifixion in the ancient world. For the Romans, loss of honor was a fate worse than death. So it is understandable that they used crucifixion as the preferred form of execution for the dregs of society—slaves and enemies of the state.³⁰ It was a diabolical method for creating not only prolonged pain and death, but utter, permanent shame. Jerome Neyrey argues that crucifixion “at every step entailed a progressive humiliation of the victim and loss of honor.”³¹ He then lists numerous ways crucifixion shames the victim. It: was the punishment of those considered the most shameful; followed “status degrading” public trials; included torture


³⁰ One slave owner upon being challenged that she was about to crucify an innocent slave retorted, “You idiot! Is a slave a person?” In other words, crucifixion is always fitting for those who are subhuman, Juvenal, Satires LCL 91.252-55.

while nude which often maimed the body and caused the victims to soil themselves with urine and or excrement; included carrying the cursed cross; involved the confiscation of ones clothes and public execution while nude; striped the victim of all power through pinning ones hands and feet to the cross; was a form of crude public entertainment and public ridicule; often denied victims an honorable burial—their bodies were left to rot on the cross or be devoured by scavenger animals and birds. Truly, crucifixion was the ultimate experience of shame and disgrace. Hence, it is quite understandable that in spite of the fact that crucifixion was a daily occurrence in the Roman Empire, it was considered such a disgusting and obscene topic that ancient writers were loath to discuss it. Cicero said, “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears.”32 In other words, crucifixion was too shameful to even speak about.

This helps us understand why the message of Christianity was so offensive to the pagans. It glorified that which was utterly shameful. For instance, Pliny the Younger, upon hearing from two slave girls that Christians worshipped Christ “as a god” declared that such religion was a “perverse superstition.” 33 In fact, the earliest extant picture of crucifixion comes from the second century AD. It was found on the wall of a school for imperial pages in Rome. [Alexamenos] The picture is of a rough cross on which is a man with the head of a donkey. To the left of the cross stands a man with one arm raised in worship. Underneath are the words "Alexandros worships a God." To the Romans, worshipping a crucified man named Jesus was as foolish and shameful as worshipping a donkey and calling it god.

32 Pro Rabirio Perduellionis, LCL198.466-67.
33 Pliny the Younger, Epistulae 10.96.
Ironically and quite strategically, the New Testament writers acknowledge and reframe the worldly foolishness of the cross. That which is most shameful to the world is in fact most honorable and powerful (1 Cor 1:18). The shameful cross is the very means by which human shame is removed and honor is bestowed. Jesus became a curse for us so that we could be honored with the blessing of Abraham (Gal 3:13). Jesus was despised so that we could be made whole (Is 53:3, 5). Jesus was rejected, mocked and spit on by sinners so that we could be welcomed, honored, and embraced by God (Matt 27:30-31; Rom 8:16-17, Eph 2:16-19). As Bruce Longenecker notes, “the transmutation of the cross from being an object of disgrace into a symbol of honor and glory (by way of its association with the resurrection) lies at the heart of virtually every text of the New Testament.” The New Testament forcefully reframes the humiliation and shame of Jesus’ crucifixion into honor, victory, and glory through his resurrection and ascension (Phil 2:5-11; Col 2:12-15). And this transformation is applied to the followers of the crucified Jesus because they are united with him in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:5-11). And they are now sons and daughters of God, members of the royal family, and joint heirs with Jesus (Rom 8:17; Gal 4:4-6; 1 Pet 2:9). Jesus’ followers enjoy his glory (John 17:22).

Thus, the crucified Jesus is the believer’s only true boast and source of honor (Phil 3:1-10; Gal 6:13). Philippians 3:8 makes this point most dramatically. After noting the great ascribed and achieved honor he possessed as a Pharisee, Paul says he has gladly given all that up for the sake of gaining Christ and sharing in the sufferings of Jesus. In fact, compared to the honor of being linked to Jesus, he considered his former glory to be nothing more than excrement.

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(skoubalon)—that which is most shameful! Hence, Paul’s life ambition was to “share his sufferings, becoming like him in his [shameful] death” (Phil 3:10).

The transformation of shame into honor is very relevant for abuse victims. When unbelievers abused and shamed the early Christians for their faith, the Christians reframed that shame as honor. For instance, when the apostles were beaten for proclaiming Jesus, they left the Jewish council “rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus]” (Acts 5:41; cp. 1 Pet 4:12-13). This transformation is very challenging to sexual abuse victim, however, due to the heightened shame of sexual violation and due to the motivations of rapists. Few raped Christians in the ancient and modern world are raped because of their Christian faith. Rather, they are most often assaulted for other reasons such as male lust, misogyny, and tribal hatred. Therefore, we must clarify how rape victims can experience the transformation of their shame. Two principles which flow out of the previous discussion are most helpful. (1) Jesus experientially relates to abuse victims. He experienced all major types of abuse, including public sexual shame. Thus the abuse victim can and should look to Jesus for compassion and help. This is precisely what the writer of Hebrews urged his readers:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:14-16; cp. Heb 2:17).
(2) Regardless of the source of shame, Scripture is patently clear regarding how God views his children. Because of their union with Christ, believers are unconditionally loved, valued, and accepted by God. No human or demonic abuser can separate us from his love; no one can legitimately shame a child of God; no matter what has been done to a believer, God views them as precious and honorable (Rom 8:31-39).

IV. Practical Ministry Suggestions

We can now draw out four specific action steps for helping sexual abuse survivors overcome their shame.

1. Redefine sexual purity

This is where Augustine’s comments to the raped sacred virgins is most helpful. Abuse victims and their families need to be educated regarding the nature of sexual purity. They particularly need to understand that a raped woman remains pure and honorable in God’s eyes because the guilt and shame belong solely to the rapist. Rape cannot remove a woman’s virtue or honor. Other contemporary biblical scholars have reiterated this same point—“rape victims do not lose their moral virginity.”35 This kind of sexual purity teaching, particularly through the use of an African pastor/theologian who shared an honor-shame world view and dealt with mass abuse trauma can be very powerful.

[pastorsBHWConf] In 2016 we had the privilege of conducting several trauma ministry trainings in the Congo. During some of the small group interaction we discovered that in one of the groups three of the five participants, all pastors, had daughters who had been raped. None of

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the men knew this about each other and yet all had responded in virtually identical ways—they had shamed their daughters and forbidden them from partaking in communion because they were no longer “pure.” However, based on the teaching they had just received on the nature of sexual abuse they made immediate personal application. Each humbly shared that they were sorry they had treated their daughters this way and would immediately go home, apologize, and rectify their previous blaming, shaming responses. They had come to realize through education on the nature of rape and sexual purity that their abused daughters were not to blame and were not “dirty.”

2. Expand the atonement of Christ—Jesus and the Father were shamed to remove our shame.

Clarifying and emphasizing the subjective aspects of Christ’s atonement, particularly the removal of shame, is essential for helping abuse victims heal. So in our African trauma conferences we teach extensively on the nature of ancient crucifixion and how the cross removes shame. We place particular attention on the New Testament emphasis on Jesus suffering abuse shame (including the shame of public nakedness) and hence being able to experientially relate to and have compassion for abuse victims’ shame. [cover of By His Wounds—Jesus on cross]

Hence, we commissioned a professional artist to paint a realistic picture of Jesus hanging on the cross so we could use this for the cover of our training book, *By His Wounds*. Expanding abuse victims’ understanding of the atonement must, however, be more than a cognitive educational process; personal application is essential. In our Africa trauma conferences we incorporate several exercises in *By His Wounds* to help abuse victims overcome their shame. These include:

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36 Steven and Celestia Tracy, *By His Wounds: Trauma Healing for Africa* (Phoenix: Mending the Soul Ministries, 2014).
1. **[BHW cross exer; [Rwanda art exer]** Expressive art exercises, reflections, and prayers centered on the crucifixion of Christ. These include: drawing a picture Jesus on the cross as Jesus looks at abuse victims; writing down some of the shame the attender experienced through their abuse and symbolically nailing the shame list to a wooden cross; drawing a picture of the presence of God in heaven above Jesus on the cross and reflecting on what God experienced watching his son suffer on the cross [childcrosspict]\(^{37}\); writing a prayer to Christ about one’s shame after reflecting on the cross picture.

2. **[FaLoveLet]**. Public reading of “The Father’s Love Letter.” This is a list of forty-five biblical statements regarding how God sees his children, written as a love letter from God. We have found it most helpful to have the conference attendees turn to the love letter in their book and then read the love letter out loud, going around the room and letting each attender read one of the statements. This multisensory, corporate exercise can help abuse survivors begin to hear and feel how God lovingly views them. This has been one of the most transformative exercises we use in our trainings.

3. **[JesusHugChild]** A final Christocentric shame tool we utilize is a reflection exercise. The participants receive a beautiful picture of Jesus hugging a child. We explain that

\(^{37}\) This exercise is particularly important for husbands in honor-shame cultures whose wives or children were abused. In patriarchal honor-shame cultures these husbands/ fathers experiences a great sense of impotence and resultant shame. As one study done among Congolese rape survivors and their spouses revealed “a husband’s failure to protect his wife is perceived as a humiliation, and blaming the woman become the best way for the man to recover his dignity,” Nissou Ines Dossa, et al., “Social Consequences of Conflict-Related Rape: The Case of Survivors in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo,” *Journal of Peace Psychology* 20 (2014), 244.
the pictures images Jesus’ eternal love for each of his children. The attenders reflect
on the details of the picture for several minutes and then write down their thoughts
and/or a prayer from their reflections. This past May we gave each of the participants
a copy of this picture at the end of the day. We asked them do the reflection at home
and be prepared to discuss their experiences the next day. One of the first people to
share was a young man in his mid-twenties. He explained that he grew up being told
he was nothing but a shameful bastard. So, had always considered himself to be
nothing more than a bastard child. (Given his age and self-description it is likely he
was conceived through rape during the 1994 genocide38). Furthermore, he said he
had been suicidal and did not believe he should continue to live. However, in doing
this reflection he came to realize for the first time that he had worth because Jesus
truly loved and embraced him. The fact that he shared his shameful birth status with
a room full of fellow Rwandans evidenced the shame relieving power of this simple
exercise.

3. Give sexual abuse victims honor in the Christian community—Mama Abia

We have seen that the early Christians dealt with the extreme shame heaped on them by
their unbelieving community members by honoring each other in the Christian community.
Members of Christian congregations are to function as an “alternative ‘court of reputation’ that
grants esteem to one another on the basis of our worth in Christ.”39 Scripture expressly says

38 On the long term struggles of children conceived by rape during the genocide, see Danielle Paquette,
“Turning Pain into Hope: Rwanda’s Children of Rape are Coming of Age—against the Odds,” The Washington
Post, June 11, 2017.
39 deSilva, Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity, 318.
believers are to honor everyone, particularly fellow believers (1 Pet 2:17). In fact, honoring each other in the Christian community is to be such a priority that we are commanded to “outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10). The many “one another” commands in the New Testament helps to flesh out what honoring (valuing) one another looks like in concrete terms. This honor command has particular relevance to sexual abuse survivors since they have experienced some of the greatest levels of dishonor. Jesus is the perfect model for such honoring, for he repeatedly and extravagantly honored the sexually shamed, often shaming their accusers in the process (Luke 7:36-50; 15:1-32; John 4:1-42; 8:1-11).

[Abia greeting] We have witnessed amazing examples of African believers honoring sexual abuse victims. Mama Abia, the founder and director of CEPIMA, a Congolese ministry with five residential centers for the mentally ill is one of the most beautiful. Most of the CEPIMA patients are suffering from severe abuse, often sexual. In a culture where sexual abuse as well as mental illness are exceedingly shameful, she and her staff have created an environment of love, compassion, and acceptance. Her patients repeatedly experienced miraculous healings as a result of the healing environment. [Neema1Trauma] These two pictures are, with her permission, of a woman named Neema who had been raped by soldiers in the bush. She was so traumatized that she had stopped eating and was virtually catatonic. Her own family had rejected her after finding out she had been raped and impregnated by her rapist. She was on the verge of death when her family brought her to the modest, cramped

40 For instance, believers are to: “love one another with brotherly affection” (Rom 12:10); welcome one another as Jesus had welcomed us (Rom 15:5); “be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another” (Eph 4:32); “encourage one another and build one another up” (1 Thess 5:11); “keep loving one another earnestly,” “show hospitality to one another without grumbling.” and use spiritual gifts to “serve one another” (1Pe 4:8-10).

CEPIMA residential clinic in North Kivu. Immediately, Mama Abia and her staff began to care for her and treated her with the greatest tenderness, love, and respect. Our team met Neema at this clinic ten years ago when she was in such poor psychological condition that she could no longer talk or care for herself. [NeemaHealing] The next year when we returned we initially did not recognize her. We had thought she was a middle aged women when in fact she was just twenty. After experiencing such great shame at the hands of other people, she need to experience great honor and love if she was to heal. By God’s grace, this painstaking honor did miraculously heal her shame.

4. Take on the sexual abuse victim’s shame—Pastor Fataki

A final, and the most costly, way to help sexual abuse survivors heal from toxic shame is an extension of the previous point. Not only must we offer loving, honoring community but we must also we willing to take rape survivors’ shame on ourselves. When I conducted research this spring on sexual abuse and shame, Jean Pasteur Katavo, one of our long-term Congolese partners sent the following story to me to illustrate how his ministry leaders have learned to help abuse survivors heal their shame.

A young woman named Masika was raped on her way to the family garden by a gang of Interahamwe (the same group who committed the Rwandan genocide) and left for dead. Neighbors found her and brought her to her home but her parents were so filled with shame that they did not seek medical care for many days. When the girl was finally taken to the medical clinic, it was discovered that she was pregnant from the rapes. She was overcome with additional
grief, pain, and bitterness. Her parents said that her unborn child was a devil and must be aborted. The girl and her mother went to their pastor who assured them that the pregnancy was not her shame and that God unconditionally loved the girl and her baby. Unfortunately, they could not receive this counsel. They lived in an honor shame culture which overwhelmed them with shame for the rape and pregnancy. Thus, they were very upset when their pastor and doctor refused to help her obtain an abortion. The girl was in such despair that she stopped eating. She declared that if she were forced to have the baby she would not nurse it and the baby would die. Her shame had become unbearable.

[PastorFatakiDaughter—black our the girls eyes] Their compassionate pastor, Rev. Fataki, sought wise counsel from Dr. Isaac Moyonga. Isaac advised him to consider taking the child as his own. This was a monumental request, for that shame would now fall on Pastor Fataki and his family. Fataki’s wife concurred that this was God’s plan—together they would receive and raise the child of shame as their own. When this plan was presented to the girl and her family, they quickly agreed. Now, for the first time in weeks the girl stopping crying and regained a sense of hope. Pastor Fataki told her, “Keep my pregnancy until delivery and nurse my baby until weaning. Then, bring him/her to us.”

The girl laughed repeatedly and asked, When people ask me whose pregnancy it is what shall I say? The pastor replied, “tell them the pregnancy is Pastor Fataki’s.” From that day on, the girl again began going out in public, her head held high, with joy on her face. The pastor and his wife gave her a little money for her material needs from their meager salary. They paid the hospital bill. Fataki’s wife cared for her in the hospital and escorted her home with a big beautiful baby girl. The first Sunday the girl (now a mother) attended the worship service, she came to the pastor's home to "show the baby to his father." The pastor had become the true father.
of the baby. Two months later, two elderly people from the girl's family came to tell the pastor how appreciative the family was for their sacrificial love and that their actions were changing the whole family. The curse and shame had been removed! Pastor Fataki and his wife were willing, at great cost, to carry shame that was not theirs to remove shame a girl could not carry and could not remove.

Conclusion

I will conclude by sharing some of the suggestions given by our African ministry partners to two open ended questions: “How are raped women viewed in your culture?” and “How can a raped woman have her shame removed?” In other words, how can she experience honor again? Their answers, as Christian leaders living and serving in honor-shame cultures, reinforce the suggestions given above.

There is a need to create a loving environment where the raped women are not judged or blamed for what happened because a number of people might have blamed them already. This enables them to feel loved and safe to share what they have gone through. It is also good to listen to them and be supportive of the raped woman and her entire family.

As Christians, we work with our Lord Jesus Christ. Through us He can touch and transform rape victims.
We can help rape victims by encouraging them through counseling to understand the assault was not in any way their fault but was the fault of the abuser. This can build confidence and bring back honor to the victim.

The raped person needs a good "alongsider" (accompagnateur, caregiver, counselor), who tells her the value she has before God and God's good plan for her life, a plan of happiness and not misfortune. She needs an environment that shows true love to her. Then she can have her shame removed and again experience honor.

In order to remove her shame, she needs to understand that the Lord continues to love her and does not consider her as a dirty person. The priority is to help her accept herself as a worthy person. Others will then accept her.

In conclusion, shame from sexual assault is overwhelmingly destructive for victims and their families, particularly those in honor-shame cultures. Yet we are not left without hope. The message of the cross of Christ, experienced in loving community, is the most powerful antidote for removing and transforming sexual abuse victims’ shame. May God give us his grace and power to see and treat abuse survivors as he does!