

Facing Shame Issues in a Small Group

Joe and Jane have found themselves in a small group that wants to start sharing more deeply, building authentic relationships, and developing true accountability. But even as the group leader makes the case for this kind of authenticity as a vehicle for spiritual growth, Joe and Jane both feel ill at ease with what the changes might entail. They, like many others, carry a deep dread of being known. They chose a large church so that they could melt into the crowd, but the church was high on small groups and it wasn't long before they were invited to participate in one by some well-meaning people they had begun to respect. Now they are beginning to dread what the acceptance of that invitation is going to cost them.

You might assume that we all share the same desire to be known and to engage in loving community. At our very best, when we are walking in harmony with our created design, this is true. But because we are all products of the fall, our default position is to avoid the pain that can easily come when we open our hearts to others. Prior experiences in relationships have taught us that it is very risky to be vulnerable and that loving community is an elusive dream. Internally, we often make a vow to never be hurt again. And we begin to deeply mistrust our hunger for relational intimacy.

The Reality of Shame

What could be going on for Joe and Jane? Somewhere along the way, they have had their eyes opened to their nakedness. Maybe it was rooted in the struggle Joe had with reading in elementary school—the teasing that came when he stumbled over words the other kids all seemed to know. Joe learned that the safest strategy was to lay low and avoid exposure, or else risk being seen as a fool. Jane's father made fun of her childlike naivety to the point that she felt her judgment was flawed. That was reinforced through a sexual encounter in high school. Both Joe and Jane have sewn fig leaves to cover their feelings of shame and experiences of betrayal.

Shame is a murky awareness of being deficient or undesirable in the eyes of someone we hope might deeply enjoy us. We are sure we will eventually be found out. As a result, we begin to hate our longing to be wanted and enjoyed. Sooner or later God comes walking in the garden and asks, "Where are you?" He sometimes does that in the form of a small group that is determined to engage people in what they bring into their group and not ignore it. The next question is logical: "Who told you that you were naked?" This is the way God pursued Adam and Eve in their shame, and it's instructive for us. Following the path of shame exposes more than a story. Dr. Dan Allender points out that it exposes how we really feel about ourselves, what we demand of ourselves and others, and where we believe life can be found. It unearths the strategies we use to deal with a world that is not under our control.

It should be pointed out that there was nothing innately sinful in Joe or Jane's stories. They could not say, "God, forgive me for being stupid" or "Forgive me for being naïve." But trusting in the self-protective strategies they have created to cope with life is sin. It has become idolatry. Their shame is informing them of who they are, rather than their Creator.

It is easy for people caught in shame to commit to rules and systems of accountability. As long as they can perform, they can feel good about themselves. It might just be doable to earn your acceptance if you work hard enough! Shame-based people can be some of the busiest, hardest workers in Christian service. But, ultimately, unaddressed shame shuts God out, keeps inner lives secret, and results in more shame-producing behavior. It also becomes a way to hide addictions.

The way some groups think of "accountability" contributes to the problem. If accountability is reduced to reporting your failures and having others hold your feet to the fire, it is an incubator for guilt and shame. Some think that the shame of confession is what produces godly discipline. Far from it. Rather than produce self control, it actually drives negative behavior underground.

Good small-group accountability will look deeper at what is driving the behavior—what beliefs you have formed from your interpretation of life experiences. Group members will want to know your whole story, not just your current struggles. They will want to get involved not only in hearing confessions of failure, but in looking at the wound that makes it so difficult to walk in the first place ([Heb. 12:12-13](#)).

The Value of Love

So what can a small group do for people like Joe and Jane? There is no greater antidote to shame than pursuing people in love—even when exposing sinful strategies. After Adam and Eve's sin was exposed, God covered them with garments from the skins of animals he sacrificed. People in shame need someone to offer grace and re-clothe them with the dignity that God has provided.

The group can stand in as advocates for both grace and truth. Their compassion can make it safe for Joe and Jane to come out of darkness, because they are not deceived about their own sin. "Joe, it took a lot of courage for you as a young boy to come back to class after being made fun of. I would give that boy a purple heart!" "Jane, your father missed your soft, tender heart. His teasing drove you away and kept you from having a safe place to go when you needed to share what had happened."

But the group must also be eager to encourage one another to walk in the light. "Joe, your withholding does not honor all that God has created in you and that you are capable of offering." "Jane, I notice that you share deeply with the women, but with the men you give less. What needs to happen so that we do not miss out?"

Group leaders need to guard against allowing group members to respond to stories by rescuing people from their feelings. Some find it difficult to weep with those who weep. But many formative experiences have contained losses that need to be grieved. Not only were these experiences damaging, but they resulted in damaging ways of living for which the individual now needs to take responsibility. If he or she chooses to trust the group, they can find great help. The group can help them recognize and name the shame.

The group can observe them isolating in shame—or, as others sometimes do, overcompensating by dominating—and give gracious feedback. "Joe, can you tell us where you've been? We've

missed hearing from you." "Jane, we'd like to take five minutes to talk about what you've brought up. Is it okay if we hold it to five minutes by giving you a signal when you have one minute left?" Or maybe, "I've noticed that when you share, something takes over and it becomes hard to contain what is going on inside. Do you have any idea what that might be?"

How people's shame is responded to by a group and its leaders will determine how deep they or others will feel safe to go. What would make it safe to share issues of shame in the first place? Group leaders set the tone. When leaders are in touch with their own brokenness and can talk openly about it because they have received help and healing, they create space for others to do the same. If people are not bringing up real struggles of the heart, could it be that they do not feel safe because it has not been modeled in the group?

We have been talking about shame over who I feel I am. But there is also legitimate shame over what I know I've done. It is not the goal of the group to talk people out of either kind of shame. Both expose what I am allowing to define me. In both cases, I have lost awareness of who I really am in Christ. Fortunately, once I have identified what is going on, I have the opportunity to go to the Cross and confess what I have believed. It is a beautiful thing when a group can go there together with one of their members, pour out their heart in confession, and, in exchange, have the righteousness of Christ poured out on them.

As a final thought, it could happen that someone will confess shame and, along with that, communicate a desire to do harm to themselves or someone else. Or someone could confess having committed a reportable offense. In either case, the responsibility of the group is to preserve and protect life. Get outside help. No group agreement of confidentiality supersedes this responsibility. Loving community will, however, walk with the willing through the darkness and into the light, wherever that leads.

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Discuss:

1. What parts of my life do I prefer to keep hidden away? Why? Is this a conscious effort, or automatic?
2. How would members of our group define accountability? How can we maintain a healthy view?
3. Do I set the tone for accountability and love as the leader of our group? How can I be intentional about doing so?