

Testing Models, Shifting Paradigms Bringing Shame upon an Honored Missiological Paradigm: A Study of Conviction and Elenctics

by Christopher Flanders

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Those who have lived in Southeast Asia likely know about durian, that fruit of legendary smell and taste. It has an extremely hard outer casing more like a hand grenade than a typical fruit. To open it one must find and cut along the natural seams of the outer shell. If a person were to try to cut *across* those seams rather than *with* them, opening a durian would be nearly impossible, requiring a chain saw rather than simply one's hands and a knife! But when done properly, a durian opens nicely and reveals the fruity treasure hidden inside.

In certain ways, ministering to people is like opening a durian. For quite some time now missiologists have helped us see this same reality in understanding cross-cultural notions of sin, conscience, and conviction. That is, if we are working at cross-purposes with a person's or a culture's natural form of conviction, we will experience frustration. But, if we can understand the "seams" of a person or a culture, that is, if our approach works *with* rather than *against* these natural cultural "seams," we will potentially find greater connection and effectiveness in our evangelism and discipleship.

This cultural variability of the human conscience—the way we think about sin—has been ably noted.² We now recognize that individuals, and to some degree cultures and sub-cultures, tend towards an orientation that is guilt or shame prone.³ Generally speaking, "shame orientation implies a relational personality type, guilt orientation implies a standard-centered personality type."⁴ Both these ideas are uncontroversial, though perhaps still underappreciated. Admittedly, we use these terms sloppily and can often over-generalize, but no culture is unilaterally a "shame culture," an "honor culture," or a "guilt culture." Each culture experiences all these dynamics variably, but these distinct terms reflect real-world differences.

Unfortunately, there have been strong messages in historic missiology that have directed many of us to try and cut across the seams of human conscience.

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Much has been written on the way Western approaches to theology, evangelism, and discipleship rely too heavily on legal notions.⁵ When this guilt orientation is assumed in other contexts, this bias results in the missiological equivalent of opening a durian the wrong way.

Due to the way our Western tradition can frame the nature of the gospel, missionaries and missiologists have at times accepted this distinction begrudgingly. They look at shame-orientation as a sub-Christian framework, similar to a cultural accommodation. It's like "allowing" for belief in other gods until it matures into a more adequate belief in the existence of one single God; or, like one surrendering to certain local religious terminology because of its familiarity in the minds and hearts of local people. Acknowledgment that shame-oriented people and cultures exist comes with a begrudging acceptance, as mere accommodation that will hopefully mature into a more "Christian" stance of a guilt-oriented conscience. A guilty conscience has become the normative standard based on the nature of the gospel itself.

This deep-seated perspective is in part due to the influential Dutch missiologist, Johan Bavinck, and his writings on sin, conscience, and conviction, what he termed *elenctics*.⁶ What I wish to demonstrate is that one significant misunderstanding in his writings turns out, ironically, to argue the exact opposite of what Bavinck intended. Bavinck claimed that elenctics and the convicting work of the Holy Spirit must rest upon a sense of guilt. Elenctics in scripture, however, does not rest upon guilt, but rather on shame. To put it another way, the biblical terminology Bavinck and many Western missiologists have used to ground a guilt-oriented approach actually authorizes an elenctics rooted in shame.

Elenctic theology was polemical and its aim was to help people see where they were wrong. That was the point. Elenctics was apologetic, confrontative, aimed at unmasking human religious effort wherever false and sinful.

Elenctics: A Short History

What is *elenctics*? If you were a student of missiology in the 1970s–1990s, you would likely have been familiar with the term. Elenctics is a subdiscipline of missiology, brought into prominence in North America by mainstream missiologists such as David Hesselgrave and Harvey Conn. It was a major

topic of missiological instruction during the late 20th century in prominent training institutions such as Westminster Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Wheaton College, and Fuller Theological Seminary.⁷

In practice, elenctics was primarily concerned with the persuasion of others, thus it was often folded into discussions of apologetics and Christian interaction with non-Christian religions. It surfaced in the conversations between conservative Christian voices over against the more progressive, modern, and liberal voices that began to emphasize dialogue and take a more progressive turn in their theology. But, more than just merely persuading people of God's truth, elenctics was also about inculcating in others a sense of conviction about what is true and right and conversely, what is wrong.

The history of elenctics predates modern missiological literature as a type of practical theology, beginning with Gisbertus Voetius and his reformed theology of the 1600s. Voetius provided an encyclopedia for theology in his *Exercitia et Bibliotheca Studiosi Theologiae* (1644), where he separates theology into the traditional divisions of biblical, systematic, and the practical. But he then adds a fourth division—*theologia elenctica*. Voetius derived this term "elenctica" from the Greek verb *ελέγχο* (elencho). As the semantic meaning indicates, Voetius believed this important area of theology should focus on disproving, refuting, and exposing untruth and error, particularly in apologetic disputes Christianity had with paganism, Judaism, and Islam. The famous Reformed theologian Francis Turretin later picks this idea up in his strong reaction against perceived liberal tendencies in his theological environment. These tendencies minimized the notion of personal sin, the importance of personal conviction of human culpability, and the status of a sinner before a holy God. For both Voetius and Turretin, elenctic theology was polemical and its aim was to help people see where they were wrong. That was the point. Elenctics was apologetic, confrontative, aimed at unmasking human religious effort wherever false and sinful. Subsequent Reformed theologians such as Abraham Kuyper advocated elenctics to counteract the growing liberal theological tendencies of 19th and 20th century Protestant theology.

Elenctics, however, was not a missiological issue until the work of the great Dutch missiologist Johan H. Bavinck,⁸ whose writings established this focus of study as a sub-discipline in North American missiology. In his 1960 text *Introduction to the Science of Missions*, one of the most influential texts in modern missiology,⁹ Bavinck laid out his notion of elenctics and its importance for missiology. He defined elenctics as a missionary science that asks the question, "What have you done with God?" In particular, elenctics referred to the work

of the Holy Spirit in convicting people of sin (John 16:8). According to Bavinck,

elenctics is the science which is concerned with the conviction of sin. In a special sense, then, it is the science which unmasks to heathendom all false religions as sin against God, and it calls heathendom to a knowledge of the only true God.¹⁰

It is “strongly controlled by the missionary motive . . . and attempts to convince . . . of sin and to move them to repentance and conversion.”¹¹ So important was elenctics that Bavinck argued it formed one of three areas that encompassed the discipline of missiology: mission theory, mission history, and elenctics.¹² It was Bavinck who brought elenctics directly into the missiological conversation, placing it squarely in the context of missionary proclamation and practice.

A point critical for Bavinck’s notion of elenctics came from his understanding of the Greek term *ελέγχω* (*elengcho*). Bavinck notes that

“elenctic” is derived from the Greek verb *elengchein*. In Homer the verb has the meaning of “to bring to shame.” It is connected with the word *elengchos* that signifies shame. In later Attic Greek the significance of the term underwent a certain change so that the emphasis fell more upon the conviction of guilt, the demonstration of guilt. It is this latter significance that it has in the New Testament.¹³

I will return to this important claim of a linguistic shift later, but here I note that for Bavinck, elenctics was about exposing human guilt and the conviction of guiltiness before a holy God. So, as a practical example, Bavinck recommends that in the initial stages of evangelism, missionaries should concentrate on the proclamation of sinfulness, guilt, and repentance.¹⁴ Guilt and guiltiness form the foundation of the New Testament usage of this term and Bavinck’s understanding of elenctics.

David Hesselgrave brought Bavinck’s notion of elenctics squarely into the North American conversation and popularized it for a generation of missiologists. Drawing primarily on the work of Bavinck, Hesselgrave noted that the term elenctics

comes from the Greek word *elengchein*, which originally meant “to bring to a sense of shame,” but later came to mean “to bring to a sense of guilt.” The latter meaning is found in the New Testament.¹⁵

In his enormously influential text *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, Hesselgrave repeated this claim that “the meaning of the word ‘elenctics’ shifted from ‘to bring shame’ in Homer to ‘to bring guilt’ in Attic and New Testament Greek.”¹⁶ In a 1983 article in *Missiology*, Hesselgrave provided a strong endorsement of Bavinck’s assertion that *elengchein* was based in guilt and was “in accord with Scripture.”¹⁷

Furthermore, Hesselgrave argued that though guilt, shame, and fear all can function to lead unbelievers to conversion, guilt remains central:

elengchein refers to conviction of *guilt*. This is not so much cultural as it is transcultural and spiritual. Sin and guilt, atonement, and forgiveness—these are not culturally derived accidents which are seized upon by God. They are supercultural and spiritual realities insisted upon by him...¹⁸ (italics original)

That is, “only those who recognize their guilt will value the payment made on the cross; only those who value the cross will embrace its Savior.”¹⁹ Hesselgrave makes room for the Holy Spirit to work through various motivations such as shame and fear. However, he posits guilt as the primary, most “Christian” motivation, noting that guilt is “most compatible with, if not derived from, the Judeo-Christian view of a holy and omniscient God.”²⁰ According to Hesselgrave,

shame and the specter of shame . . . are frequently inimical to faith in Christ, because, when a sense of shame supplants an awareness of guilt, the respondent is often so preoccupied with the approval or disapproval of others that he cannot consider the requirements of God.²¹

Parallel to the work of Hesselgrave was that of German missiologist Klaus Müller, whose significant writings in this area have been quite influential in Europe. Like Hesselgrave, Müller argued that elenctics was about guilt and guiltiness and that shame was problematic for the gospel. For example, Müller argued that in 2 Timothy 3:16 the Greek term *elegmon* (typically translated as “rebuking” or “reproof”) should be translated as punishment, meaning something like “to be guided by guilt.”²² He argued that shame acts as an impediment to proper Christian conversion. It is

superficial, the search for prestige, acceptance by others, and the values that lead there, are the motive for a decision. This leads to a sort of “rice Christian” . . . Syncretistic elements are the consequence, if the guilt feeling does not grow . . . Shame is however not only an obstacle on the way. It has to be directed towards God like in the Old Testament, on his omnipotence, omnipresence, and incorruptibility.²³

Like Hesselgrave, Müller relied heavily on Bavinck, and pointed out how the meaning of *elengchein* had shifted from its earlier, pagan definition of “to bring to shame” to an idea of “convicted by guilt” in New Testament context. Müller suggested the gospel should ultimately reshape the human conscience, that when “a shame-oriented conscience accepts the Holy Spirit as his authority, it internalizes the ‘significant other’ and experiences a change to guilt orientation.”²⁴ The goal of gospel proclamation, in Müller’s summation, is that “people should be convicted of their guilt before God in their very consciences, and should accept redemption from the saving work of Jesus Christ.”²⁵

From this short survey of influential voices, elenctics should lead to forgiveness of sins based on a consciousness of guilt before God. Bavinck, Hesselgrave, and Müller alike agree that though there was an earlier sense of shame in the biblical narrative, in the New Testament the meaning of *elengchein* had changed to a focus on guilt and guiltiness.

U-Shaped Conversion

This cultural assumption of guilt and guilt awareness as basic to the Christian experience of the gospel is nothing new. Such a guilt-focused approach in missiology parallels the recent history of conversion in the modern Western Evangelical experience. Historian Bruce Hindmarsh's study of British and American conversion narratives in the 18th and 19th centuries alerts us to the strong expectation of guilt in the western theological imagination. Hindmarsh identifies what he terms the "U-shaped conversion" model, the dominant pattern among the Puritans and early evangelicals in North America. This was a very specific cultural model, one that assumed an explicit awareness of forgiveness of sins and a concomitant personal experience involving guilt-awareness, which became for quite some time the *sine qua non* of authentic conversion in Western Evangelical Protestant Christianity.²⁶ Hindmarsh explains the outline of this conversion model. Such involved a

U-shaped pattern that begins with serious religious impressions in childhood, followed by a descent into worldliness and hardness of heart, followed by an awakening or pricking of religious conscience, and a period of self-assertion and attempted moral rectitude, which only aggravates the conscience and ends in self-despair. This self-despair, paradoxically, leads to the possibility of experiencing a divinely wrought repentance and the free gift of justification in Christ. Forgiveness of sins comes as a climax and a psychological release from guilt and introduces ideally a life of service to God predicated on gratitude for undeserved mercy.²⁷

This model followed the pattern of the younger son in the parable of Luke 15, where the son begins with a type of knowledge of God, but then falls into sin, is filled with guilt, and ultimately finds release for that guilt in the forgiveness of the loving father. This model assumed a guilt-laden conscience that would find relief of its guilt in the cross. Prominent evangelists and preachers such as Charles Finney and Jonathan Edwards would base their appeal for authentic conversion upon this U-shaped expectation. There was continual doubt that a conversion was authentic if it did not exhibit this U-shaped pattern.

Missionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries traveled with this expectation. For example, it represents the dominant framework of modern Thai Christianity, dating from the beginning of Protestant missionary work in the early 19th century and continuing in some places into the present. Early missions

in Siam (modern-day Thailand) demonstrated this same expectation, which formed part of the significant frustration these early missionaries experienced. Many pondered why it seemed the Siamese (and later, Thai) just didn't "get" the gospel. The Siamese did not seem to be moved with the heavy, guilt-laden conscience when receiving or responding to the Gospel. Pioneer missionary Daniel McGilvary and others like him found such a lack of this guilt-laden, U-shaped conversion model frustrating.²⁸ Siamese would verbally accept they were culpable and were a sinner. But these missionaries desired something more to manifest, that is, a deeper psychological experience of a guilty conscience. They did not want their converts merely to acknowledge their guilt, but they needed to feel that guilt deep in their hearts.

When Thai converts failed to exhibit the expected characteristics dictated by Western missionary expectations, the primary defect was thought to be in Thai culture itself. For example, influential 19th-century missionary Jesse Caswell notes that the Thai mind was "peculiarly unfitted for understanding and embracing the doctrine of the forgiveness of sin through an atonement."²⁹

With roots in Europe and North America, this model was individualistic, and emerged with both a distinctive sense of independent self and a heightened sense of introspective conscience.³⁰ The model also assumed the juridical patterns of penal substitution and a Western legal interpretive filter that focused on guilt and pardon. Although there does emerge some level of variance in modern American and European Protestantism, "on the whole . . . the basic U-shaped pattern . . . remains consistent in all the evangelical autobiographies whatever their differences and variations at other levels."³¹

This evangelical conversion narrative, viewed through a legal framework, assumed an experience of deep emotional guilt and an explicit focus on the forgiveness of sins. This was the central motivation for and the chief benefit of conversion. When aligned with this model, the Protestant dialectics of law and gospel, judgment and mercy, and terror and comfort encouraged a level of internal tension that drove people toward a crisis of conscience before the gospel resolved that crisis. Evangelical homiletics stimulated and expressed this pattern.³² As missionaries did their work in non-Western worlds, they carried these expectations with them, assuming people of other cultures would display similar experiences.

As Hindmarsh notes, however, the expectations for this "proper" conversion were often not realized. Many Western missionaries were surprised by how difficult it was to reproduce this conversion model and all its concomitant psychological experiences in their non-Western mission contexts.³³ When missionary preaching did not result in the expected conversion experience, missionaries frequently blamed either

the local culture or the hardness of hearts.³⁴ Often, if religious change did happen among the local people, this “conversion” was viewed with hesitancy or suspicion, especially if it lacked these “authentic” conversion markers of guilt; that is, they were not content with acknowledgment of culpability, but desired something akin to the psychological experience we know as a guilty conscience.

Bending Sin towards Guilt

I return now to Bavinck. Recall that he framed his understanding of elenctics on the Greek term *elengchein*, which he argued changed from a shame-oriented experience in pre-Christian Greek to one of guilt-orientation in the New Testament. There is one significant problem with Bavinck’s claim that the meaning of *elengchein* had changed—he was wrong.

Critical to Bavinck’s discussion of elenctics is his reference to the work of biblical scholar Friedrich Büchsel, author of the article on the *elench* semantic domain for the famous *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*. It is this work that Bavinck claims establishes a meaning shift from the earlier notions of shame to the New Testament sense of guilt. In both the original German entry and the subsequent English translation, however, Büchsel says no such thing. What Büchsel argues is that the focus or criteria of *elengchein* is reoriented towards sin and God’s truth. He does not, however, say anything about the mode of conviction changing from shame to guilt. Quite the opposite, throughout his brief entry he consistently points out the fundamental sense of shame in the term *elengchein* throughout Hellenistic, Jewish, and Christian writings. He notes that in Homer and the LXX, the term means “to shame,” “to scorn,” “to expose,” “to rebuke.”³⁵ Indeed, Büchsel is clear to point out the New Testament speaks more specifically to sin than guilt; but, he also argues that among late Jewish and early Christian writers, discipling and moral formation were accomplished through the means of *elengchein*, that is, to convict or rebuke *through shame*.³⁶

What is clear is that Büchsel does not argue, as Bavinck suggests, for a shift in meaning from “shame” to “guilt” in the New Testament. Bavinck’s note about the *TDNT* entry is illuminating. Bavinck interpolates into Büchsel’s definition the notion of guilt and guiltiness, making elenctics about conviction of guilt. How did Bavinck make this mistake? I hardly think that such could have been deliberate. Rather, I suspect that the dominant modern Western legal framework of his theology led him to assume quite naturally that a

focus upon sin before God (instead of earlier usages that were not theological in focus) meant that *elengchein* *must* mean guilt and guiltiness.³⁷

Bavinck is not alone in doing this. Others have made similar errors of interpolation, based presumably on this Western tendency to read guilt into the idea of conviction. John McClean writes about elenctics in his *Thinking of God* blog, itself a fine blog. He quotes John 16:8, one of the occurrences of *elengchein* in the New Testament; but, McClean adds guilt. John 16:8 notes that when the Holy Spirit comes, he will convict (*elengchein*) the world concerning righteousness, sin, and judgment. McClean, however, changes the verse to “convict the world *of guilt*.” That is, he adds the term guilt to the verse.³⁸

There is one significant problem with Bavinck’s claim that the meaning of *elengchein* (elenctics) had changed. He was wrong.

McClean is simply quoting from Cornelius Haak, whose article in the *Calvin Theological Journal* addresses this topic of elenctics.³⁹ There, Haak does exactly this very thing. His article begins by quoting the text of John 16 and he, too, injects into the verse the term guilt.⁴⁰ Haak notes correctly how *elengchein* is a Greek term that means to pull off the mask, to reveal, to expose—all experiences that typically correlate with shame. He then makes the unwarranted and unsupported claim that due to the juridical nature of the term, elenctics involves the guilt of people in the courtroom of God.⁴¹ I find it ironic that Haak, though he acknowledges that shame is the fundamental sense of the term, continues to read *elengchein* with a focus on guilt, to the point of adding the term into his scriptural citation.⁴²

My purpose is not to disparage or unduly critique these men. It is, however, to point out how easily Western interpreters slip the notion of guilt into our understandings of what it means to convict. It’s more likely that our notions of what constitutes conviction have been profoundly shaped by our Western social, legal, and philosophical presuppositions. This influential Western-legal framework leads us to miss shame dynamics that are present in scripture, and assume there to be a consistent case of guilt dynamics. This seems to be evident with elenctics.

Correcting Western Anthropology

Some of this bias among missiology and biblical interpretation was likely influenced and reinforced by the writings of anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict. Many have written on how their early notions of shame and guilt cultures were flawed, and while mainstream

anthropology generally rejects these distinctions, the ideas persist in popular opinion and mission literature.⁴³ Mead and Benedict clearly make a strong connection of guilt to conscience in contrast to its absence in shame, which they argue is more attuned to public opinion.

True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, as an internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism... it requires an audience. Guilt does not.⁴⁴

There is little empirical support for their claim that shame arises from public exposure of failure, whereas guilt arises from the more private pangs of one's internalized conscience.⁴⁵ In more collectivistic cultures, people internalize standards from what is important in the opinions of others. Thus, they are often much more sensitive to failing to meet those expectations and often feel "shame" when they do not.⁴⁶

Lau notes that in the Old Testament the idea of guilt is about *being* guilty and not *feeling* guilty. Shame, in contrast, denotes "the subjective experience of objective guilt," that is, "deep regret, sorrow, and compunction for past moral failings."

What, then, does it mean to convict or to be convicted? Conviction does not equal a mere cognitive recognition of facts but assumes an affective reaction of dis-ease (discomfort) that accompanies that recognition. "The activity of the conscience is subjectively experienced through the awareness of self-conscious emotions, such as shame, pride, guilt, or embarrassment," sometimes called "moral emotions."⁴⁷ It is this reaction that moves individuals and communities to *repent* or *return*. The biblical notion of conviction assumes this fuller sense of recognition, with the appropriate emotions of self-assessment. Elenctein is no mere rational judgment, not a court simply pronouncing a guilty verdict, but it includes an appropriate recognition. This means that reason alone is not what the term assumes. Conviction must involve both *reason* and *affect*, both *realization* and *emotional response*. This internalized sense of failure and blame, what we call conviction, can come in two forms—guilt or shame.

The Western view primarily thinks of conviction as legal—the declaration of someone's guilt—with perhaps an accompanying sense of guiltiness. This brings us to the semantic complexity of the English term guilt. To be guilty can certainly mean to experience feelings of guilt, the pangs of a guilty conscience, but the primary sense is to simply *be guilty*. That is, to be culpable, to be declared guilty or in the wrong. This sense produces an objective assessment where

one is guilty regardless of feelings. Therefore, "to be culpable" is one definition of the English term guilt. The confusion is that often missiologists and theologians do not clarify which sense of guilt it is they are talking about—the *fact* of guilt or the *experience* of guilt. This often muddies the waters.

Shame and Conviction in the New Testament

As I have pointed out above, however, the Greek term *elenctein* is not about conviction by guilt, but rather by shame. Or, to use the second sense of guilt, *elenctein* is an attempt to bring about shame based upon the guilt (*culpability*) of a person. To counter a common Western misconception, conviction of wrongdoing, sin, or moral failure is experienced not only as a form of guilt-conviction, but also, shame-conviction. This is what the New Testament use of *elenctein* points towards, and it raises the question as to what it means practically to experience a shame-conviction.

Here I must draw upon the work of New Testament scholar Te-Li Lau. In a recent work on shame in Paul's writings, Lau discusses at length the term *elenctein* and "shaming refutation."⁴⁸ He notes carefully and extensively the dominant role the term played in the Greco-Roman notions of moral education. He also summarizes the shame/guilt terms in both the Hebrew Bible and ancient Jewish thought. Lau notes that in the Old Testament the idea of guilt is primarily one about *being* guilty—of guilt-culpability—and not *feeling* guilty. The Old Testament emphasizes the *fact* of having transgressed YHWH's moral code. Shame, in contrast, when it is associated with the law or the salvific work of God, denotes "the subjective experience of objective guilt," that is, "deep regret, sorrow, and compunction for past moral failings."⁴⁹

Lau is careful to differentiate among different types of shame. He notes, for example, what scholars term *disintegrative shaming* (which treats the offender as fundamentally bad, a defective person). This is the type of shame that eventually assumes a master status and defines the person as a totality.⁵⁰ But there is another type, that of *reintegrative shaming* (shaming that is followed by efforts to bring the person back into a rehabilitated state). This focuses significantly on the act(s), assuming that the person is still fundamentally good and sound, someone who has gone temporarily astray.⁵¹

It draws attention to what is shameful about the behavior or the perspective. Lau argues that Paul operated with a modified version of this second type.

Lau also carefully demonstrates how Paul uses *retrospective shaming* (situations where the shame causing event is in the past) and *prospective shaming* (where the potentially shameful event is still in the future).⁵² In the case of the Galatian church, Paul

uses shame as a salutary tool so that the Galatians are able to perceive accurately their predicament. He wants to transform their minds so that they are capable of self-testing, self-examination, and self-reflection.⁵³

And again,

Paul uses shame (both retrospective and prospective) as a pedagogical tool to transform the mind of his readers into the mind of Christ so that their identity and behavior are rooted in the crucified Messiah.⁵⁴

Lau provides a summary of Paul's extensive use of shame in his letters.⁵⁵

1. Shame is a moral emotion that is vital to the Christian life. That is, emotions play a significant role in Christian spirituality and moral formation.
2. Shame is a powerful emotional response and a window into our moral character. This means that when we experience shame toward a truly shameful event, it demonstrates we have appropriated Godly values and shifted our "court of approval" to God and divinely approved communities. If we lack shame toward a truly shameful event, we demonstrate shamelessness. A good example of this is how Paul uses shame to express his disapproval of the Corinthian church's response to the man guilty of sin in 1 Corinthians 5.
3. Shame is a moral emotion that has the potential to affect our belief structure.
4. Shame is a moral emotion that provides rhetorical amplification and deepens convictions. Paul does this to help his readers "know moral truth in such a way that it affects the core of their being."
5. Shame is the premier social emotion that supports the communal nature of Pauline ethics. Since we often experience shame publicly and communally, particularly in the presence (real or imagined) of those who are close to us or who are important to us, shame can function to discourage violation of social responsibilities and the breaking of accepted social norms.

6. Shame motivates, but gratitude is the ultimate emotional motivation for doing good.

When believers understand that the basis of their honor truly is Christ, their shameful before God and their desire to receive a crown of righteousness from him (1 Cor. 9:24–27; Phil. 3:14; 2 Tim. 4:7–8) motivate them to keep the faith and do that which pleases him.

Paul is not of course the only voice who recognizes shame as a powerful tool for God's work in human life.⁵⁶ The term *elengchein* or its cognates appear several times in the New Testament.⁵⁷ What difference would this shame perspective make for how we read these texts? It is beyond the scope of my discussion here to look at each of these closely. Allow one example to suffice.

In 2 Peter 2, we read of false teachers and false prophets. The language of the entire chapter is one that drips with shaming language, with deeply uncharitable comparisons, and ends with two of the most memorable shame-laden images in scripture.⁵⁸

The term *elengchein* appears in 2:16 describing the effect of the donkey on Balaam. Most English translations render this as "rebuke," "convict," or "correct." The donkey did indeed rebuke Balaam, but it was certainly more than that. The account in Numbers 22 in the Greek version of the Old Testament uses the term *ἐμπαίζω* (*empaizo*), which typically means to mock, make a fool of, or humiliate another. That a talking donkey humiliated Balaam, convicted him through shaming, rather than merely rebuking him, makes more understandable his response of rage and violence,⁵⁹ a common reaction to public shaming and humiliation that at times can even result in murder! This same term *empaizo* occurs in the Genesis 39 account of Joseph where Potiphar's wife reports to the household servants that Joseph had tried to *humiliate* them by trying to forcibly sleep with her.⁶⁰ Again in verse 17, she tells her husband that Joseph tried to humiliate her. What this suggests is that the story of Balaam and the donkey is not about a mere rebuking, or Balaam's conscience convicting him of his guiltiness, but rather a rebuke by shaming. *Elenchein* here in 2 Peter certainly seems to carry strong shame connotations.

I encourage you to examine each of these occurrences of *elengchein* in the New Testament and to substitute the terms "to shame" or "to convict by shame" to see if that does not fit with the context. Of course, I do not suggest that we should expect that every occurrence of *elengchein* in the New Testament must be translated with a sense for shame. What I wish to propose, however, is that unless there is good reason to render it otherwise, the normal semantic meaning should be understood with the sense of shame.

The Value of Shame in Elenctics

So what? How does a more accurate way of understanding elenctics help us?

First, the example of Bavinck and others provides a cautionary tale of how easily we can allow our own biases and presuppositions to impact our theology and even our understanding of the biblical text. It goes without saying that

Western missionaries historically come from backgrounds stressing law-guilt, and tend to emphasize selectively the corresponding biblical imagery (sin as crime, as transgression of the law; guilt as formal pronouncement of a judge in a court of law, as deserved punishment...).⁶¹

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We must guard against the tendencies of this cultural background. The uncritical imposition of our models and frameworks can impede the work of the Holy Spirit in human hearts and minds.

Second, understanding elenctics helps us read Scripture more faithfully. As those who value the truth, we all strive to read the Bible accurately. Seeing the shame dimension in elengchein helps us to step into the shame-laden world of the New Testament, and we become better readers of the Bible. This will assist us in a missiology that must ultimately emerge from and rest upon good theology and an accurate understanding of Scripture.

Third, seeing the shame-dimension of conviction can help correct outdated anthropological notions that still work their way into our missiology and our popular mission writings.

Endnotes

¹ Since making that presentation, I have become aware of two excellent resources that make similar points to those I make here. One of these is the excellent monograph by Hannes Wiher, *Shame and Guilt: A Key to Cross-Cultural Ministry* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2003). The second is the recent work on shame language in Paul's letters. See Te-Li Lau, *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020). These two excellent works support my basic arguments here. I highly recommend them both.

² Robert J. Priest, "Missionary Elenctics: Conscience and Culture," *Missiology: An International Review* 22, no. 3 (1994); Thomas Schirrmacher, *Culture of Shame/Culture of Guilt: Applying the Word of God in Different Situations* (Bonn, Germany: Culture and Science Publication, 2013), 64–77; Wiher, *Shame and Guilt*, 30–178; Jayson Georges and Mark Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 162–163, 195–196; Lau, *Defending Shame*, 206–233. Also see the entire January–March 2014 issue of *IJFM*, which focuses on these issues.

In part, this is due to missiology being a derivative discipline. At times, outdated and mistaken theories from anthropology are retained and continue to limit our ability to perceive, transcend and correct our previous missiology. By expanding our understanding of how shame functions, we can clear out these older theories and engage in a refresh of sorts.

Finally, recognizing the legitimacy of both shame-oriented and guilt-oriented consciences will free us to better connect with those who exhibit these differences. We can embrace shame not simply begrudgingly, as mere accommodation, but as the actual basis for a thoroughly biblical notion of conviction. Those of us who live and work in contexts where shame is a more obvious feature of the dominant culture, or where people tend to exhibit a more shame-oriented conscience, should engage in a renewed effort to look for local shame terminology and use these more intentionally in teaching and training. That is, we must learn how local cultural modes of conviction function, fully allowing shame to function as part of that work.⁶²

I end with a quote from mission anthropologist Robert Priest that I have found very helpful.

Conscience is God-given and functions as an internal witness which ratifies the biblical message that we are sinners in need of salvation. Conscience contributes to repentance and faith, and it plays a pivotal role in the sanctification of the believer. But conscience is also culturally variable. As a result, cross-cultural missionaries seldom understand native conscience and frequently work at cross-purposes to it.⁶³

If Priest is correct (and I believe that he is), understanding the essence of shame in elenctics can assist us in this important work. We will avoid the frustration of working against the seams of human conscience. Instead, working together with the diverse responses of the human heart, we can find new resources for seeing how shame shapes conscience and conviction. It will provide new bridges across historically difficult frontiers. **IJFM**

- ³ This has become an accepted distinction in social-scientific and missiological literature. See Wiher, *Shame and Guilt*. Also see Sally Folger Dye, “Cultural Variation in Conscience: Part of God’s Design,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 31, no. 1 (2014); Wayne Dye, “Toward a Cross-Cultural Definition of Sin,” *Missiology* 4, no. 1 (January 1976); Paul Gilbert and Bernice Andrews, eds., *Shame: Interpersonal Behavior, Psychopathology, and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); June P. Tangney, Patricia Wagner, and Richard Gramzow, “Proneness to Shame, Proneness to Guilt, and Psychopathology,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 101, no. 3 (August 1992); Daniel Sznycer, Kosuke Takemura, Andrew W. Delton, Kosuke Sato, Theresa Robertson, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, “Cross-Cultural Differences and Similarities in Proneness to Shame: An Adaptationist and Ecological Approach,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 10, no. 2 (2012).
- ⁴ Wiher, *Shame and Guilt*, 169.
- ⁵ “Western missionaries historically come from backgrounds stressing law-guilt, and tend to emphasize selectively the corresponding biblical imagery (sin as crime, as transgression of the law; guilt as formal pronouncement of a judge in a court of law, as deserved punishment; grace as justification, canceling of deserved punishment).” Robert Priest, “Guilt,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 419.
- ⁶ See the section on “Missionary Elenctics” in *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, eds. John Bolt, James D. Bratt, P. J. Visser, and James A. de Jong (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 83–90.
- ⁷ René Holvast, *Spiritual Mapping in the United States and Argentina, 1989–2005: A Geography of Fear* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 300.
- ⁸ Several European voices followed Bavinck such as Johannes Blauw, Walter Freytag, Marc Spindler, and Cees Haak, though elenctics did not gain as much popularity in Europe as it did in North America. Holvast, *Spiritual Mapping*, 300. As Haak notes, elenctics, due to the influence of Bavinck, remained a core element of 20th century Reformed mission theory. Cornelius J. Haak, “The Missional Approach: Reconsidering Elenctics Part 1,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 44 no. 1 (2009), 40.
- ⁹ H. L. Richard, “The Missiological Vision of J. H. Bavinck: Religion, Reticence, and Contextual Theology,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 31, no. 2 (2014), 84.
- ¹⁰ Johann H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1960), 222.
- ¹¹ Bavinck, *An Introduction*, 223.
- ¹² Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 31.
- ¹³ Bavinck, *An Introduction*, 221.
- ¹⁴ Thomas L. Austin, “Elenctics,” *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 308.
- ¹⁵ David J. Hesselgrave, and Earl J. Blomberg, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and Foreign Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 146–147.
- ¹⁶ David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 610.
- ¹⁷ David J. Hesselgrave, “Missionary Elenctics and Guilt and Shame,” *Missiology: An International Review* 11 no. 4 (1983), 47.
- ¹⁸ Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 480.
- ¹⁹ Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 482.
- ²⁰ Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 479.
- ²¹ Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 479.
- ²² “Elenktik (engl. elenctics) ist der deutsche Begriff für ‘elengchein,’ das in 2.Tim.3,16 (für “Strafe”) vorkommt und soviel bedeutet wie ‘von Schuld überführen.’ Das ist das Ziel der Evangeliumsverkündigung: Die Menschen sollen in ihrem Gewissen von ihrer Schuld vor Gott überführt werden und die Erlösung durch das Heilswerk Jesu Christi annehmen.” Klaus W. Müller, “Elenktik: Die Lehre vom Scham- und Schuldorientierten Gewissen,” *Evangelikale Missiologie* 12 (1996): 101. (English translation: “Elenctics is the German expression for ‘elengchein,’ that in 2 Tim. 3:16 (for punishment) comes and means something like “to be guided by guilt.” That is the goal of the proclamation of the gospel: that people should be convicted of their guilt before God in their very consciences, and should accept redemption from the saving work of Jesus Christ” [1996]: 3.)
- ²³ Klaus W. Müller, in Wiher, *Shame and Guilt*, 145.
- ²⁴ Klaus W. Müller, “Elenktik: Giessen im Kontext,” in *Bilanz und Plan: Mission an der Schwelle zum dritten Jahrtausend*, ed. H. Kasdorf and K. W. Müller (Bad Liebenzell: VLM, 1988), 447.
- ²⁵ Klaus W. Müller, “Elenktik: Die Lehre vom Scham- und Schuldorientierten Gewissen,” 101.
- ²⁶ See Bruce D. Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), who traces how this particular model of conversion influenced the eighteenth and nineteenth century Protestant missionary movement. What Hindmarsh notes about the U-shaped evangelical conversion narrative, and the experiences of the early missionaries in Siam also continues today. For a part of my doctoral research in 2003, I surveyed Western missionaries working in Thailand and asked the question, “If someone does not experience a personal sense of guilt before accepting Christ, is their conversion valid?” 53 missionary respondents, and 23 of those selected “strongly agree” or “agree.”
- ²⁷ Bruce D. Hindmarsh, “Patterns of Conversion in Early Evangelical History and Overseas Mission Experience,” in *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment*, ed. Brian Stanley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 73.
- ²⁸ For more on this basic assumption of early missionaries see both Philip J. Hughes, *Proclamation and Response: A Study of the History of the Christian Faith in Northern Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Payap University Archives, 1989) and Christopher Flanders, “Becoming

- God's Clients: Patronage, Clientelism, and Christian Conversion in Contemporary Thailand," in *Revelation and Leadership in the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of Ian Arthur Fair*, ed. Andrei A. Orlov (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2020), 65–89.
- ²⁹ Jesse Caswell, "Communications from the Missions. Siam. Annual Report of the Mission," *The Missionary Herald* 44 no. 1 (1848), 16.
- ³⁰ Hindmarsh, "Patterns of Conversion," 93. The seminal work regarding the emergence of the modern introspective conscience and its impact on Protestant conversion theory is Krister Stendahl, "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199–215. Much biblical scholarship has followed Stendahl that Paul was not introspective in any modern sense nor given to the type of burdened sinful conscience the Evangelical conversion narrative assumed.
- ³¹ Hindmarsh, "Patterns of Conversion," 75.
- ³² Bruce D. Hindmarsh, "'My Chains Fell off, My Heart Was Free': Early Methodist Conversion Narrative in England," *Church History* 68 no. 4 (1999): 925.
- ³³ Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 326.
- ³⁴ When Thai converts failed to exhibit the expected characteristics dictated by Western missionary expectations, the primary defect was thought to be in Thai culture itself. For example, influential 19th century missionary Jesse Caswell notes that the Thai mind was "peculiarly unfitted for understanding and embracing the doctrine of the forgiveness of sin through an atonement." Caswell, "Communications," 16.
- ³⁵ F. Büchsel, "ελέγχο" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 473.
- ³⁶ Büchsel, "ελέγχο," 473. Liddell-Scott, the standard lexicon for early Greek notes the meaning as "to reproach, to disgrace, to dishonor, to put to shame." Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Liddell & Scott Greek-English Lexicon, Abridged* (Chicago: Follett Pub. Co., 1946), 531. Other standard New Testament Greek reference works (e.g., *NIDNTT* edited by Colin Brown, the *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* edited by Balz and Schneider) similarly do not bring into their definitions or discussions the idea of guilt or guiltiness. Thayer's Greek lexicon draws specific attention to the shame dimension of the term defining it as "to convict, refute, confute, generally with a suggestion of the shame of the person convicted." Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon to the New Testament* (Boston: H. L. Hastings, 1896), 202.
- ³⁷ Wiher suggests Bavinck's "unconscious presuppositions" were at work here. Wiher, *Shame and Guilt*, 134.
- ³⁸ "The term comes from the Greek word for convict (*elegcho*), used in John 16:8–11 which says the Spirit 'will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.'" McClean has since changed this blog, which was originally published in 2015 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20160421232843/http://thinkingofgod.org/2015/08/gracious-elenctics>). His updated version no longer has the interpolation of the term "guilt" into the text of John 16.
- ³⁹ Cornelius J. Haak, "The Missional Approach: Reconsidering Elenctics (Part 1)," *Calvin Theological Journal* 44 (2009): 37–48.
- ⁴⁰ His citation of John 16 is as follows: "When he [the Counselor] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment." Haak, "Missional Approach," 37. He does not note what translation he uses, but a quick survey of the standard English translations reveals none that inject the term "guilt" into the text of John 16.
- ⁴¹ Haak, "Missional Approach," 40.
- ⁴² This interpolation of guilt into the text of John 16 finds its way into other blogs, such as <https://theologyinteralia.net/2019/07/07/gracious-elenctics/#more-359>.
- ⁴³ See, for example, my chapter on honor cultures. Christopher Flanders, "There Is No Such Thing as 'Honor' or 'Honor Cultures': A Missiological Reflection on Social Honor," in *Devoted to Christ: Missiological Reflections in Honor of Sherwood G. Lingenfelter* (Pickwick: Eugene, OR, 2019), 145–65. For a longer discussion of the notion of shame and guilt cultures in anthropology, see my book. Christopher Flanders, *About Face: Rethinking Face for 21st Century Mission*, American Society of Missiology Monograph Series 9 (Pickwick: Eugene, OR, 2011). Also see Millie R. Creighton, "Revisiting Shame and Guilt Cultures: A Forty-Year Pilgrimage," *Ethos* 18 (1990) and Takie Sugiyama Lebra, "Shame and Guilt: A Psychocultural View of the Japanese Self," *Ethos* 11, no. 3 (1983).
- ⁴⁴ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946), 223.
- ⁴⁵ June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: Guilford, 2002), 24.
- ⁴⁶ Although terms for shame and guilt exist in every language, "an increasing body of literature suggests that the valuation, elicitors, and behavioral consequences" will differ across cultural contexts. Y. Wong, and J. Tsai, "Cultural Models of Shame and Guilt" in *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*, ed. J. L. Tracy, R. W. Robins, and J. P. Tangney (New York: Guilford, 2007), 219. Much of this cultural difference in shame and guilt experience relates to different types of self-identity that occur in highly individualistic or highly collectivistic cultures.
- ⁴⁷ Frans Schalkwijk, Geert Jan Stams, Hedy Stegge, Jack Dekker, and Jaap Peen, "The Conscience as a Regulatory Function: Empathy, Shame, Pride, Guilt, and Moral Orientation in Delinquent Adolescents," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 60, no. 6 (May 2016): 676.
- ⁴⁸ Lau, *Defending Shame*, 37–59.
- ⁴⁹ Lau, *Defending Shame*, 86.
- ⁵⁰ So, for example, the thought that "I am a failure" or "You are worthless." These global attributions comprehensively describe the person as a whole.
- ⁵¹ Lau, *Defending Shame*, 79–188.
- ⁵² Lau, *Defending Shame*, 91. Lau devotes two entire chapters to careful exegesis of how Paul engages in both these types of conviction strategies.

⁵³ Lau, *Defending Shame*, 105.

⁵⁴ Lau, *Defending Shame*, 161.

⁵⁵ Lau, *Defending Shame*, 161–166.

⁵⁶ Thomas Aquinas notes that godly shame is a recoiling from what is dishonorable and disgraceful as “it instills in us a horror for what dishonors.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Vol. 43, Temperance* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1968), 144. The Jewish writer Philo, a contemporary of Paul, notes this about God, using the term *elenchein* to describe the divine work on the human conscience through shame: “Let us, therefore, address our supplications to God, we who are self-convicted by our consciousness of our own sins, to chastise us rather than to abandon us; for if he abandons us, he will no longer make us his servants, who is a merciful master, but slaves of a pitiless generation: but if he chastises us in a gentle and merciful manner, as a kind ruler, he will correct our offences, sending that correcting conviction, his own word, into our hearts, by means of which he will heal them; reproving us and making us ashamed of the wickednesses which we have committed.” Philo of Alexandria, *s* 7, 146, accessed November 13, 2020, <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book7.html>.

⁵⁷ Matt. 18:15; Luke 3:19; John 3:20; 8:9, 46; 16:8; Acts 6:10; Eph. 5:11, 13; 1 Tim. 5:20; 2 Tim. 3:16, 4:2; Titus 1:9, 13, 15; Heb. 12:5; Jude 22.

⁵⁸ Verse 22, where these false teachers are compared to dogs that return to their own vomit and washed pigs that return to wallowing in the mud.

⁵⁹ “Balaam answered the donkey, ‘You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.’” Num. 22:29.

⁶⁰ Gen. 39:14.

⁶¹ Priest, *Guilt*, 419.

⁶² Some have remarked about shame-oriented people that they do not feel deep remorse for sin as do Westerners. Multiple studies have shown how this is in fact a deep misunderstanding. It is true that many non-Western cultures do not feel conviction (shame or guilt) when breaking laws. Many Thais do not feel excessively bad if labeled guilty (*mii khwaam phit*) or a law-breaker (*phuu lameurt gotmaay*). The same may likely experience a significantly negative emotional reaction and deep conviction (both shame and sometimes guilt) when the sin is relational and the designation is shame-based (being called an ungrateful child—*pen luuk akatdanyoo* or *pen luuk nerakhun*, both strong shame labels that can cut to the heart of most Thais).

⁶³ Priest, *Missionary Elenctics*, 291.