GUILT IS A CRY

Howard Gordon

GUILT IS A CONCEPT PROMINENT both in theology and psychology. Broadly speaking, theology tends to concentrate on objective guilt, that is on the *condition* of having done wrong, while psychology focuses on subjective guilt, that is on the *feeling* of having done wrong. This leads to a significant contrast. For, whereas wrongdoing normally (although not invariably) leads to a subjective feeling of guilt, subjective guilt often cannot be traced back to objective wrongdoing. This anomaly has fascinated not only those who work in the field of secular psychology, but also those Christians who are involved in pastoral work, and particularly those who care for the mentally ill. The simple formula, 'If you feel guilty, you must have done something wrong', is inadequate and inaccurate as a diagnostic assumption. A distinction has therefore been made between true guilt and false guilt. Objective guilt, when understood as the result of what would widely be accepted as wrongdoing, can always be regarded as true guilt; but subjective guilt may be either true or false.

My own fascination with this distinction increased significantly when from 1981 until 1992 I served as the Free Church Chaplain at Fulbourn Hospital, a psychiatric hospital in Cambridge, England. My weekly half-day in the hospital brought me into contact with all kinds of mental health problems, and with all kinds of patients. One problem which I came across repeatedly both intrigued and concerned me: the problem of unresolved guilt feelings. I was intrigued by it because of its frequency; I was concerned by it because it raised questions about Christian ministry. I, the Chaplain, was supposed to be in touch with a God who could deal with guilt feelings; but in practice the solution I was offering did not seem to work. I was quite prepared for the fact that talk of a God who forgives the repentant through Christ might well not help patients who were not Christians. But, disconcertingly, it did not seem to be helpful to Christians either. Typical conversations with Christian patients would develop like this:

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Patient:	I feel so guilty.
Chaplain:	God can forgive every kind of wrongdoing.
Patient:	Yes, I know that.
Chaplain:	Have you asked God to forgive you?
Patient:	Yes, I have.
Chaplain:	Do you believe that he has forgiven you?
Patient:	Yes, I do.
Chaplain:	Then what is the problem?
Patient:	I don't *feel* forgiven.

I noted that staff frequently advised such patients to learn to forgive themselves, but the concept of self-forgiveness was never explained, nor was any procedure for it ever suggested.

I therefore began to investigate the problem of guilt in greater detail. I did so first during a two-month sabbatical, in which I read some of the relevant literature, and then as a research project. After a wider literature review, I interviewed 23 former mental health patients in depth. These patients fulfilled four criteria: they regarded themselves as Christians; they had suffered from a depressive illness; guilt feelings had featured prominently in their illness; and they had received treatment. The interviews were analysed using Grounded Theory, a qualitative methodology in which concepts rather than statistics are compared. The concepts are then arranged in categories, and finally a core category is selected. The literature, both Christian and secular, greatly increased my understanding of the problem of guilt, but it was the interviews which enabled me to distinguish between different kinds of guilt feelings and to discern practical and effective ways of dealing with each of them. Although the interviews were conducted with former mental health patients, I am convinced that the findings of my research may legitimately be applied to those whose guilt feelings are not part of a psychiatric illness, but are nevertheless causing concern or even distress.

What I discovered from these interviews was that there are three kinds of guilt feelings. In all cases the sufferers believe that they have done something wrong. But in two of the three kinds there has been no wrongdoing. Because the Christian solution of repentance, confession and forgiveness is appropriate only to genuine wrongdoing, its use in the other two cases may be not merely ineffective, but actually counter-productive, because it will reinforce a conviction of wrongdoing which

is not justified. In addition, a person may be suffering from two or even all three kinds of guilt at the same time; in these cases, each kind needs to be carefully identified and distinguished, and then treated accordingly.

Transgression Guilt

The first kind of guilt feeling I called transgression guilt, because it is the result of wrongdoing which breaches widely accepted legal, moral or religious prohibitions. This is what is normally and correctly understood by the word 'guilt'. Some interviewees described transgression guilt that was so strong that it had made them mentally and emotionally ill. A male respondent aged 43 years described his guilt in the following way:

> We had what is commonly called an affair, which eventually led to both our divorces, although we both say to ourselves and to each other now that . . . we would both have separated from our previous partners anyway, because we both felt that those particular marriages weren't working. The guilt arises from the betrayal of my ex-wife, albeit I feel very little for her now, but I feel it was still a betrayal; betrayal of a friend, namely my wife's ex-husband; and the third thing in the guilt . . . is the impact my separation has had on my daughter . . . I became ill during the first three months after I parted from my first wife, and it was the deceit, it was the betrayal, not a little sense of regret, nostalgia—I'm a great one for going for the things that used to be and wondering why they aren't as good now as they were. . . . There had been no history of divorce or marriage separation in my family; I was the first one . . . I just felt I'd let everybody down. The standards were there . . . set by example; nobody had actually sat me down and said . . . 'Marriages are sacrosanct for life'.

The guilt here arose from the interviewee's transgression of widely held standards for marriage to which both he and his family subscribed, from the betrayal and deceit which accompanied it, and from the consequences to which that transgression led. These consequences included a loss of innocence of which he was acutely aware—expressed in the word 'nostalgia'.

There is agreement between Christian and secular writers on the factors most likely to cause those with transgression guilt to feel unforgiven and to inhibit their own healing:

- They may be continuing the wrongdoing, or may wish, consciously or unconsciously, to continue it. In Christian terminology they have not truly repented.

- They may blame someone else for the wrongdoing rather than accepting their own responsibility or their own share of the responsibility.

- They may have an unforgiving attitude to another person, and be unable to receive forgiveness because they are unwilling to give it. This recalls the words in the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us', and the comment of our Lord which immediately follows in Matthew's Gospel: 'But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' (Matthew 6:15).

- They may see their guilt feelings as an appropriate punishment for their wrongdoing; that is, their guilt is an attempt at self-atonement. Sadly, it is one which never satisfies and never ends.

- They may need to make reparation where loss, damage or injury has occurred. Reparation may have been deliberately withheld, may never have been considered, or may have been considered but not yet undertaken.

- They may need to hear a formal pronouncement of forgiveness by the person wronged, or by an authority figure. The Catholic confessional, when correctly understood and used by the transgressor, is a powerful agent in this respect. Protestant clergy tend to use a relevant verse of Scripture, for example: 'If we confess our sins, He who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9).

- They may have a perfectionist personality. Perfectionists find it difficult to feel forgiven because their search for forgiveness is inseparably linked to the desire for the restoration of an unblemished self-image. Though forgiveness is possible, this kind of restoration is impossible.

In those who are suffering from unresolved transgression guilt, repentance needs to be initiated and forgiveness needs to be appropriated. For this to happen, gentle probing or even counselling is often required, in order to analyze which of these inhibitory factors may

be at work. The Church itself has often erected a barrier to forgiveness by over-emphasizing the doctrines of sin and punishment, and under-emphasizing the doctrines of mercy and grace. Guilt can be wholly negative and destructive. But, handled sensitively, it can also be a source of creative renewal. Jesus' words to the woman caught in adultery provide an excellent model: 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again' (John 8:11). This comment is totally satisfying both spiritually and psychologically. It neither condemns nor condones, but hears guilt positively as a cry for forgiveness, and challenges the forgiven person to respond with conduct demonstrating true repentance.

Perfection Guilt

The second kind of guilt feeling I called perfection guilt. As my interviewees revealed, perfection guilt is the result of unrealistic and idealistic expectations imposed by home, school and church. Two examples from the interviews illustrate this type of guilt. The first was a man aged 50 years:

> If you didn't go to Oxford or Cambridge you were an academic failure. And I didn't. I think my parents—they wanted me to be clever. I remember my father once called me—very amiably, I hasten to add—he called me a beta plus. And I spent the rest of my life trying to prove him wrong. I think he'd be horrified if he knew how much that innocent remark of his had caused. But all the time I was trying to be alpha double plus, and nothing else would do . . . I got enough qualifications to go to university, probably the lowest that anybody's ever done—scraped my second A-level by two-thirds of a per cent—you know, one of those. And ever since then I went to the opposite extreme in the university, and almost got a first, because I wore myself out in the process of doing absolutely everything I could . . . to get the necessary result.

This man's perfectionism, which began in the home, was reinforced by his school and by the church which he attended. His upper second class degree at one of this country's leading universities, which for anyone else would have been regarded as a significant achievement, was for him an abject failure because it was not a first class degree at Oxford or Cambridge. He entered the Christian ministry, but his continuing striving for perfection caused his mental and emotional

health to break down—perfectionism frequently leads to workaholism—and he had to take early retirement.

The second example was a woman aged 56 years, who described a church service which she had attended in her mid teens:

> I went to hear somebody speak . . . at a well-known [church]. I was sixteen, I think . . . and at the end of the address the preacher invited all those who wanted to be the best for God to make a promise that we wouldn't read another word when we got up in the morning of any newspaper or book or magazine before we had first read our own Bibles. I was very keen to be the best for God . . . but I found myself in a dilemma, because whilst in those days I read Bible reading notes which accompanied the Bible reading most days, there were some days when I missed. So I found myself in a dilemma. Yes, of course I wanted to be the best for God; I wanted to make all the promises that were going, but I didn't want to break my promises; I didn't want to promise something and then not deliver—in that sense I had very high standards. And so I sat tight for a bit. And then this other very strong, powerful urge began to work, and I felt I couldn't sit down. I mean, physically something was making me stand up, and I found that very disturbing, because I felt caught between the two—I wanted to do both things—I couldn't make up my mind, and something else was getting hold of me to make me stand up. And whether it was to do with other people's approval, perhaps even God's approval, I really don't know, but I stood up and made that promise. Inevitably I broke it, and it took me a very long time to manage the guilt of having let God down, having let myself down.

This account poignantly demonstrates both the appeal of perfectionism—a fine ideal is being presented—and the danger of perfectionism—it is an unattainable ideal. It raises some pertinent questions. Did the preacher ever miss his own daily Bible reading, or read secular material before he read the Bible? If so, did he suffer from perfection guilt? If he did suffer from perfection guilt, did he have strategies for dealing with it, and what were they? If he did not suffer from perfection guilt, why not? And did he ever advise his congregation on how to cope with their occasional lapses from these perfectionist ideals?

The appeal and the danger of perfectionism

Failure to attain high standards may certainly sometimes be the result of laziness or inefficiency, in which case it may cause

transgression guilt. But when the standards are impossibly high, or the individual is not sufficiently gifted to reach the standard set, then the feeling of failure is one of perfection guilt.

At this point the Christian is faced with a problem: Jesus himself said, 'You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48 RSV). Was he setting an impossibly high standard for his followers, which would be bound to result in constant feelings of guilt? The Greek word (*teleios*) which is used in this saying is misleadingly translated 'perfect'. With a root meaning of 'end' or 'purpose', it signifies, not absolute spiritual perfection, but rather completeness or fitness for a task. We may therefore paraphrase the saying in the following way: 'Just as God is entirely what he is intended to be, what he is capable of being, what we need him to be, so we as Christians are called to fulfil what we are intended to be, what we are capable of being, what God and other people need us to be'. It is still a high ideal, but no longer unrealistically or impossibly high, and it acknowledges differences of ability.

If transgression guilt is a cry for internal repentance and external forgiveness, perfection guilt is a cry for attainable internal standards and external affirmation. Does the teaching of Jesus contain any insight about this? The parable of the talents is conceived precisely along these lines (Matthew 25:14-30). A property owner entrusts three of his employees with financial resources while he is away from home, the critical words being 'to each according to his ability'. The first receives five talents, the second two talents and the third one talent. The third employee simply buries his money in the ground, and on the property owner's return is severely reprimanded. But the first produces another five talents in addition to his original five, and the second brings his two talents with a further two talents' profit. The first and the second have achieved according to their respective abilities, and are both affirmed with the words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant'.

The Church may well provoke feelings of perfection guilt by constantly demanding high standards of discipleship and rebuking those who fall short. The way of Christ is undoubtedly a high calling, but its proclamation must always be tempered by a realistic allowance for the differences between individuals and for the limitations of human nature. What is required of us is a goodness and faithfulness consistent with our own capabilities, and a willingness to offer to others proper and regular acknowledgement of achievements which are consistent with theirs.

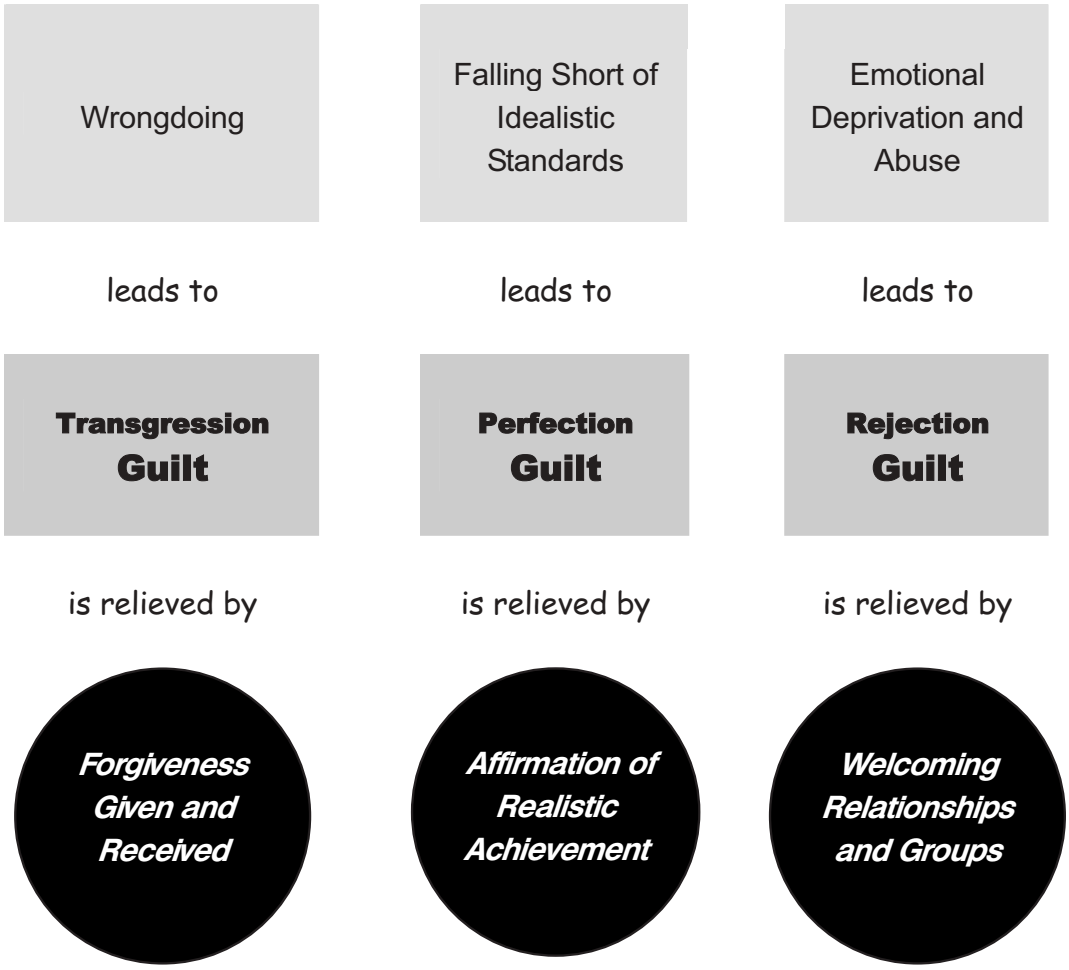
Rejection Guilt

The third kind of guilt feeling I designated rejection guilt, because those who felt this type of guilt so frequently used the word 'rejection', and described experiences of rejection. These were people who had been abused verbally, emotionally and physically. Their sense of guilt and personal culpability came from a flawed but understandable process of reasoning: 'I have always been punished and rejected; only people who do wrong are punished and rejected; therefore I must have done something very wrong to be treated as I have been'.

The clearest expression of this kind of guilt in the interviews came from a woman of 49 years of age who described her life in the following way:

> I think I was almost born guilty. All I ever knew was total rejection by my mother . . . Until I was nine years old, I wasn't told that [my father] was dead even. I'd got the notion from somewhere that he'd been in an aeroplane, and I can remember at the age of nine waving at planes and saying 'Daddy'. . . . I was always punished. . . . I was the sort of daughter that was never wanted, and also I was brought up on the fact that I was very premature, and I nearly killed my mother [in childbirth], and it was my fault that she couldn't have any more children. And I think when you're a child and nobody tells you your father's dead, you assume that you've done something wrong, otherwise he'd come and see you . . . I was never touched; even to this day my mother backs away from me, if I try to give her a peck on the cheek even. At school . . . I never made any friends at all—complete loner . . . At university . . . I wanted to sort of get rid of my mother and be like my father—I thought if he was about, he would like me, he would understand, you see . . . You probably find this universal with people like me: it's not so much love that you need in your life as trust; it's very difficult to ever trust anyone.

The guilt feelings expressed here resulted from the interviewee's actual rejection by her mother, including deprivation of physical affection, and her assumed rejection by her father. Three other consequences flow from this kind of rejection, in addition to the sense of guilt: a profound sense of isolation; difficulty in trusting others and therefore in forming relationships; and a low self-image. All these could be seen in this interview.



What, then, is the answer, and above all an appropriate Christian response, to rejection guilt? If transgression guilt is a cry for absolution, for the assurance of forgiveness, and perfection guilt is a cry for affirmation, for the assurance of achievement, then rejection guilt is a cry for integration, for the assurance of a welcome into accepting relationships and accepting communities. There is a temptation for the church to long for members who are talented, confident and willing to contribute. This is entirely understandable, but it must be balanced by an openness to those who are damaged, diffident and lacking in gifts.

Does the teaching of Jesus provide any insights or patterns here? In the parable of the Great Feast (Matthew 22:1-10; Luke 14:15-24) Jesus describes how a host who provides a sumptuous banquet is taken aback at the excuses given by his well-heeled and successful acquaintances for not attending. He orders his servants to go out into the streets, and to invite instead the poor, the disabled, the blind, and the lame. As one

who always practised what he preached, Jesus himself was regularly found in the company of society's rejects, and because of the welcome he gave to them, they felt valued and were willing to trust him. We do well to remember that the parables of the Kingdom are vignettes of what life is like when God is king, that is when God is allowed to take control, when God's will is done and God's way is followed. Jesus supremely embodied that life. Let the Church heed both his teaching and his example.

The Alleviation of Guilt

Psychiatry and psychology offer several approaches to guilt feelings. Psychiatry employs a medical model of treatment whose basic tenet is that psychiatric illnesses are organic disorders caused by physical and chemical disturbances in the brain and central nervous system, and are to be treated by physical and chemical means, most commonly by medication. According to this view, as the other symptoms disappear, so does the guilt. The reduction of the distressing symptoms of psychiatric illness is certainly to be welcomed, but sadly, as many of the interviewees indicated, the guilt does not necessarily disappear when the other symptoms have gone. And what if guilt is not a symptom but the underlying cause of the illness?

The psychoanalytic tradition proposes two solutions to guilt feelings: reducing the severity of the superego—that is, making the conscience less sensitive; and reparation. These solutions are also recommended in cognitive behavioural therapy. Reducing the severity of the superego is certainly desirable in the case of perfection guilt, and can be helpful in the case of rejection guilt—although it is preferable to aim at making the conscience more mature rather than less sensitive. In the case of transgression guilt, the idea of reducing the sensitivity of the conscience should be treated with caution, since it may create the impression that wrongdoing need not be taken too seriously. Reparation has already been mentioned as an essential component in the alleviation of transgression guilt when damage or injury has occurred. But it cannot deal satisfactorily with the other aspects of transgression guilt, for example the loss of innocence and the sense of unworthiness, because it is impossible to say how much reparation is required to remove how much guilt. And reparation is necessarily an inappropriate

approach to perfection guilt and rejection guilt, since there has been no wrongdoing.

At its heart the problem of guilt is one of unacceptability. This was the core category which emerged from the interviews. We feel unacceptable when we have done wrong, and we want to be forgiven. We feel unacceptable when we do not achieve the standards we would wish to attain, but we still want to be affirmed for what we have achieved. We feel unacceptable when we have been ostracized, and we want to be welcomed. At the same time we have to acknowledge our own need for genuine repentance, for realistic ideals, and for basic trust. However difficult, these conditions are essential if freedom from guilt is to be realised.

Nevertheless, guilt is a relational dilemma. We are unacceptable to other people. Acceptance and the feeling of acceptance must therefore be provided by other people. That is why advising those who suffer from unresolved transgression guilt to learn to forgive themselves is misleading. A person suffering from this kind of guilt may retain anger and disgust against themselves for the wrong which they have done, and they may need to let go of such self-punishing attitudes as an essential part of the healing process. But this is not forgiveness, for forgiveness is interpersonal, and self-forgiveness may be compared to sending oneself a birthday card. Indeed, from a Christian perspective the whole Bible can be seen as a treatise on the theme: we cannot forgive ourselves. The point is succinctly expressed in the well-known biblical verse, 'by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God' (Ephesians 2:8).

Self-forgiveness is like sending oneself a birthday card

When the interviewees spoke to me about the resolution of their guilt feelings, they described acceptance as being derived from four sources. First, there were professionals—doctors, psychologists, counsellors, clergy—who, in addition to their professional skills, were good listeners, sensitive, understanding, non-judgmental, and encouraging. Secondly, there were supportive non-professionals—husbands, wives, other relatives, close friends—who exhibited the same personal qualities as the professionals, but were also more easily and frequently accessible. One female interviewee coined a new word for them: it was their 'being thereness' which counted. Thirdly, a new and more mature relationship with God had developed, which had replaced an immature and even harmful view of God. One interviewee, who had

been brought up with a strong sense of God as judge, found to his surprise that, as he expressed it, 'God is nice'. Another, who had suffered considerable rejection, said, 'God became my friend'. The lady who had wanted to be 'the best for God' but felt that she was never good enough, spoke of 'God's love for what he has made, and that means me'. The clergyman who had retired early after striving unsuccessfully to exercise a perfect ministry spoke of discovering subsequently 'the untidy God . . . much less institutionalised . . . much more real . . . who accepts me in all my weakness'. Fourthly, a few spoke of someone whose perception of the crux of their problem had enabled that person to make a liberating pronouncement which provided either substantial or complete release.

We too, as the people of Christ, are called to be the agents of acceptance. Guilt is a cry—a cry to be forgiven, a cry to be affirmed, a cry to be welcomed. The guilt of others becomes for us an invitation to engage in Christ's healing work by offering continually to one another in his name forgiveness, affirmation, and welcome. When we do so, we contribute to the prevention as well as to the alleviation of guilt.

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