

CHRISTIAN GUILT

“You know, I think I’m getting tired of being a Baptist,” someone said recently.

“Why?” was the obvious reply. “What do you mean?”

“It’s all the guilt that gets thrown on you from the time you walk into the building until you leave. There’s always things we are told we should feel bad about: the way we dress, the length of our hair, the music we listen to. Didn’t Jesus say something about making our joy full? How can we have joy when we’re constantly piled on with all this guilt?”

When this conversation was relayed to me I knew exactly what the speaker was talking about. I wouldn’t say that it was a particularly “Baptist” characteristic, but I have encountered many preachers who have felt that it was their duty to make the congregation feel guilty. Is this kind of “Christian Guilt” Biblical? Do we not have liberty in Christ, or are we still under Law? Even in the time of the Apostles, the Church struggled against those who would bring them under the bondage of the Law (See Romans 6 and 7.) To this day there are many who agonize over their own versions of the Law, and continue to demand that others live up their lists of dos and don’ts for Christians. Not only that, but for each such “leader” there are dozens, hundreds or thousands of “sheep” who obediently follow and try to make others live by their standards as well.

Is this right? Is this Biblical?

Before we get into the Word, let’s take a look at what is meant by “guilt.”

Guilt Defined

The following are two definitions of guilt that appear in “Christian” sources. Key points have been highlighted for clarity.

GUILT, GUILTY

Bearing **responsibility for an offense or wrongdoing**; remorseful awareness of having done something wrong (Lev 4:3; Ezra 9:6,13,15). Although the word guilt is not specifically used, some classic examples of guilt in the Bible are: Adam and Eve (Gen 3:7-8), Cain (Gen 4:8-9), and David (2 Sam 11; Ps 51:1). One Greek word in the New Testament translated as guilty means "under justice," or **answerable to the judgment and condemnation of God**. Also see SIN. (from Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Copyright (c)1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers)

GUILT

(guilt): The Christian idea of guilt involves three elements: **responsibility** (Greek aitia, "cause," depending upon a man's real freedom), **blameworthiness** (Latin reatus culpae, depending upon a man's knowledge and purpose) and **the obligation to make good through punishment or compensation** (Latin reatus poenae; compare Greek opheilema, "debt," Matt 6:12). In other words, in thinking of guilt we ask the questions of cause, motive and consequence, the central idea being that of the personal blameworthiness of the sinner. (from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database Copyright (c)1996 by BibleSoft)

The critical aspects of guilt, in these definitions, are the guilty person’s:

- 1) Responsibility and blameworthiness for their sins
- 2) Obligation to atone for their sins through compensation or punishment
- 3) Position as under judgement or condemnation for their sins

Is this the condition of a Christian? Any true Christian believer? Let's take each point in order.

1. Responsibility and Blameworthiness for their sins

The Blamelessness of Those In Christ

1 Thess 5:23-24

²³ Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

1 Cor 1:4-9

⁴ I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, ⁶ even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Eph 1:3-4

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love

Eph 5:24-27

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; ²⁶ that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.

Phil 1:9-11

⁹ And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; ¹¹ having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Phil 2:12-16

¹² So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. ¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or disputing; ¹⁵ that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked

and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, ¹⁶ holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.

Col 1:21-23

²¹ And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, ²² yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach-- ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

2 Peter 3:14

¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless,

Jude 24-25

²⁴ Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, ²⁵ to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

2. Obligation to atone for their sins through compensation or punishment

In Christ we are Forgiven and God is Satisfied

Rom 4:7-8

⁷ "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven,
And whose sins have been covered.

⁸ "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

Eph 4:32

³² And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Col 2:13-14

¹³ And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, ¹⁴ having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

1 John 2:12

¹² I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake

1 John 4:10

¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

3. Position as under judgement or condemnation for their sins

No Condemnation for those In Christ

Rom 8:1

^{8:1} There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

John 5:24

²⁴ "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

Conviction of Sin

There is a place, in Scripture, for conviction of sin. The Spirit convicts the ungodly of their sin:

John 16:7-12

⁷ "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. ⁸ "And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰ and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you no longer behold Me; ¹¹ and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.

This conviction leads men to Christ:

1 Thess 1:2-5

² We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; ³ constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, ⁴ knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; ⁵ for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake

In coming to Christ, the Christian already knows that he or she is a sinner, and has already been convicted of sin by the Spirit. When we examine ourselves, it is not to see whether or not we sin (we should already know that we do! – 1 John 1:8), but it is to see if we are truly in the faith:

2 Cor 13:5

⁵ Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you-- unless indeed you fail the test?

Admonishment

So, what are we to do about sin in the Church? Aren't the "leaders" supposed to do something? According to Scripture, each of us is to admonish the one who are willfully sinning. Admonishment doesn't mean making them feel guilty; rather, it is a coming alongside of the person for their good, and guiding them to the right.

Rom 15:14

¹⁴ And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another.

1 Cor 4:14

¹⁴ I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.

1 Thess 5:14

¹⁴ And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men.

2 Thess 3:15

¹⁵ And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

Admonish NT:3560 noutheteoo, nouthetoo;
(nouthetees, and this from nous and titheemi; hence, properly, equivalent to en too noo titheemi, literally, "put in mind", German: an das Herz legen);
to admonish, warn, exhort:
tina, Acts 20:31; Rom 15:14; 1 Cor 4:14; Col 1:28; 3:16; 1 Thess 5:12,14; 2 Thess 3:15.
((1 Sam 3:13); Job 4:3; Sap. 11:11; 12:2; Tragg., Aristophanes, Xenophon (430?-355? B.C.), Plato (428-348 B.C.), and others.) *
(from Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 2000 by BibleSoft)

Why?

Why, if Scripture shouts our blamelessness, forgiveness and freedom from condemnation, do so many seem determined to cause the utmost guilt among Christians they claim to serve? What is the purpose of guilt, when we are supposed to be under grace? Why should so many "Christian leaders" spend so much time beating their congregations over the head with all of their alleged sins and failings?

These men, who deal in guilt and rule over the congregations, claim to be the leaders of the Church, but what did Christ say?

Mark 10:42-45

⁴² And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

There are many reasons to believe that the sort of leadership seen in institutional Churches today is not what the Bible calls for (see "System", "Show Me", and "Strange Fire" on this site). Like the leaders of the gentiles, leaders of the Corporation Church must maintain power over the people "under" them, and guilt can be a very effective means of keeping people in line. A character in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*,

revealed how arbitrary legalism works. Speaking to someone whom he thought had been cowed into submission to the “moochers” of the bureaucracy:

"Do you really think we want those laws to be observed? We want them broken. There is no way to rule innocent men. The only power any government has is to crack down on criminals. When there aren't enough criminals, one makes them. One declares so many things to be a crime that it becomes impossible for men to live without breaking the law. Create a nation of lawbreakers and then you can cash in on the guilt. Now that's the system!"

Whether used consciously, with full knowledge of what they are doing, or as a result of training or prior experience, guilt is widely used in “Christian” circles as a means of controlling those who should be controlled exclusively by their Lord and His indwelling Spirit. It is a tool of the Nicolaitan system, and its power can only be broken when God's Word is the only source and standard for life and Godliness.