



SOCIALY
AWKWARD
EVANGELISM

**OVERCOMING FEARS IN
SHARING THE GOSPEL**

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InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Socially Awkward Evangelism* by Mark R. Teasdale.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com



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EVANGELISM, ANXIETY, AND STIGMATIC SHAME

Moses answered, “What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you?’”

Then the LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?”

“A staff,” he replied.

The LORD said, “Throw it on the ground.”

Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it. Then the LORD said to him, “Reach out your hand and take it by the tail.” So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand. “This,” said the LORD, “is so that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has appeared to you.”

Then the LORD said, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” So Moses put his hand into his cloak, and when he took it out, the skin was leprous—it had become as white as snow.

“Now put it back into your cloak,” he said. So Moses put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored, like the rest of his flesh.

Then the LORD said, “If they do not believe you or pay attention to the first sign, they may believe the second. But if they do not believe these two signs or listen to you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground. The water you take from the river will become blood on the ground.”

Moses said to the LORD, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.”

The LORD said to him, “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.”

But Moses said, “Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.”

Then the LORD’s anger burned against Moses. (Exodus 4:1-14)

Moses was a realist. He knew he was not a good speaker. He stumbled over his words and was not convincing or impressive. One even gets the sense that he might have avoided public speaking whenever possible because of this. He also did not have any credibility among the Israelites, much less the Egyptians and Pharaoh, who knew him as a murderer. He had not even lived in Egypt for the past forty years, setting down roots in Midian as a shepherd instead. Moreover, he was not spiritually mature. Many of the signs he asked God for seem as much to convince him as to convince his future audience. This was not the job for him!

Moses was anxious. He could foresee the dangers ahead, he knew his limitations, and he wanted no part of the entire endeavor. He was even willing to risk God’s wrath just to avoid the social awkwardness that awaited him.

Moses was not wrong. The Israelites did doubt him, and Pharaoh and the Egyptians dismissed him even after seeing several miraculous signs. Things got awkward quickly, with everyone judging Moses while he was trying to share the message God had given him.

While we know the rest of the story, Moses did not know what the outcome would be as he was going through it. All he knew was the crushing pain and social scrutiny he was being forced to endure on God’s behalf. He could not foresee when it would end or whether he would come out of it safely. Moses had genuine reasons to be anxious.

We do too, especially when we consider what Jesus is asking us to do as evangelists. For Christians in some parts of the world, the danger is extreme, including the possibility of imprisonment or martyrdom. Others of us do not face such terrible consequences, but the cultural and social realities still induce anxiety about sharing our faith.

THE GROWING PRESENCE OF ANXIETY

While being uncomfortable with evangelism is not an anxiety disorder, learning about anxiety can help us understand what we are experiencing when we are afraid of sharing our faith and why we are experiencing it.

The American Psychological Association describes anxiety as “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure.”¹ All people feel anxiety at some point, though the stimuli that cause the anxiety can change from person to person. One person may find giving a speech anxiety producing, while another may be completely at ease. However, the non-public speaker may love going to parties and making small talk, while the public speaker becomes anxious at the thought of doing so.

According to Bunmi Olatunji, the director of the Emotion and Anxiety Research Laboratory at Vanderbilt University, anxiety can be associated with both fear and disgust.² It is not just that we are afraid of what might happen to us; we feel icky about it. The spider on the wall, for example, raises my anxiety level not just because I am afraid it will bite me but because it’s creepy!

Under normal circumstances, Olatunji explains that, while unpleasant, it is good for us to feel anxious. This is because it motivates problem solving, helping us become more adaptive to our situations.³ It is especially effective at keeping us safe. If we encounter something that makes us feel anxious, that anxiety generates the energy to respond in a way that protects us from whatever is producing that anxiety.

Perhaps the best-known example of how anxiety motivates us is the fight-flight-freeze response. When we experience this, the amygdalae, two small clusters of cells near the top of the spine used by the brain to

¹“Anxiety,” American Psychological Association, www.apa.org/topics/anxiety.

²Kim I. Mills, “What Is Anxiety and How Can We Address It Effectively?: With Bunmi Olatunji, PhD,” *Speaking of Psychology* (podcast), January 2022, www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/anxiety.

³Mills, “What Is Anxiety?”

process information and emotion, send signals to release adrenaline and other hormones that engage the sympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system operates automatically, without requiring rational reflection. This makes it ideal for reacting to immediate danger by doing things such as shutting down digestion, tensing our muscles, and increasing our heart rate and blood pressure. In this state, we are primed for action in response to the danger we face, such as jumping out of the way of a car coming toward us.

Anxiety does not occur only when we are in danger. It is also present when we are dealing with something that is important to us, requiring us to shut out distractions to do our best. Whether playing in the big game, studying for an exam, or preparing to ask that special someone out on a date, anxiety heightens our capacity to do well and demonstrates to us that we care about what we are going to do. When it operates this way, anxiety is a gift because it allows us to give our undivided, best effort to the situation we are facing.

There is theological support for the idea of God granting us anxiety as a protective gift. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, reflected extensively on the negative and positive aspects of fear, which would not have been distinguished from anxiety in his day. He was especially interested in the anxiety people feel in the face of death. In a letter John sent to his father, Samuel Wesley, he considers the positive outcome of the “evil” experience of anxiety, concluding that God uses anxiety to protect us: “But if pain and the fear of death were extinguished no animal could long subsist. Since therefore these evils are necessarily joined with more than equivalent goods, the permitting these is not repugnant to, but flows from, infinite goodness.”⁴ In other words, while we do not want to be caught in a perpetual state of anxiety related to death, the fact that we—and all animals—instinctively react with anxiety when facing potentially deadly situations demonstrates God’s goodness to us

⁴John Wesley to the Revd. Samuel Wesley, 1731, in *Letters I (1721–1739)*, ed. Frank Baker, Works of John Wesley 25 (Abingdon, 1980), 265.

by preserving us from a great many dangers that might otherwise harm us.

Heather Heinzman Lear, who served as the director of evangelism for the United Methodist Church, suggests that this positive form of anxiety can even be used by the Holy Spirit to prompt us to action. In those moments when we become aware that God wants us to speak, engage, or get involved, it can often feel like anxiety.⁵ Perhaps this is what the prophet Jeremiah was describing when he complained, “If I say, ‘I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot” (Jeremiah 20:9). The experience may be uncomfortable, but the way it prompts us to focused action is good.

As beneficial as anxiety can be for us, it becomes a problem if we begin experiencing it outside these situations. When this happens, anxiety can go from being a welcome means of protecting and motivating us to a disorder that hinders our ability to participate in daily life. This is especially the case when our anxiety is caused by something we encounter on a regular basis that is not a real danger.

Far from being uncommon, “anxiety disorders are among the most common of all mental health disorders, affecting an estimated 15% to 20% of people at some point in their life.”⁶ This is a large enough number of people that everyone reading this book either has experienced an anxiety disorder or knows someone who has.

Of the many anxiety disorders, one of the most prolific is social anxiety disorder. Social anxiety disorder is the fourth-most diagnosed psychological disorder, found in about 7 percent of the adult population of the United States. It is defined as a disorder in which

the individual is fearful or anxious about or avoidant of social interactions and situations that involve the possibility of being scrutinized. These include social interactions such as meeting unfamiliar people, situations in which the individual

⁵Heather Heinzman Lear, interview, January 2, 2025.

⁶Mills, “What Is Anxiety?”

may be observed eating or drinking, and situations in which the individual performs in front of others. The cognitive ideation is of being negatively evaluated by others, by being embarrassed, humiliated, or rejected, or offending others.⁷

The danger of losing status in front of other people is far more important than just saving us from possible embarrassment. As therapist Jennifer Shannon explains, it is tied directly to our sense of survival: “We have always hunted and housed ourselves together in packs, so we can watch out for each other. Your ancestors’ social status within their families and tribes was crucial to their survival. . . . These two ever-present possibilities—death, and losing social status or being kicked out of the tribe—are universal.”⁸ Even if we are not as immediately dependent on others for physical survival today, thousands of years of human history have shaped us to care deeply about how others view us. We feel the impact of others’ judgments in a visceral way, and for some of us the weight of this becomes excruciating.

Along with the 7 percent of adults in the United States who have been diagnosed with social anxiety disorder, up to an additional 10 percent of the population experiences subthreshold social anxiety, meaning they can still suffer severe distress in social situations, just not at the level that tips over to being a psychological disorder.⁹

The percentage of youth and young adults who struggle with social anxiety disorder is even higher than the overall adult population. The National Institute for Mental Health estimates that approximately 8 percent of thirteen- to fourteen-year-olds and approximately 10 percent of fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds struggle with it. It is far more prevalent among teen females (11 percent) than teen males (7 percent).¹⁰

⁷*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 5th ed. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

⁸Jennifer Shannon, *Don't Feed the Monkey Mind* (New Harbinger, 2017), 8-9.

⁹Michaela B. Swee, Chloe C. Hudson, and Richard G. Heimberg, “Examining the Relationship Between Shame and Social Anxiety Disorder: A Systematic Review,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 90 (2021), article 102088, p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2021.102088>.

¹⁰“Social Anxiety Disorder,” National Institute of Mental Health, www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/social-anxiety-disorder.

In the case of social anxiety, the fight-flight-freeze response becomes “avoid-or-escape.”¹¹ Avoidance is self-explanatory. We try to avoid interacting with other people, such as by turning down invitations to meet other people or refusing to answer our phone. Escape occurs when we cannot avoid the people and so try to be as invisible as possible around them. We do this either by staying quiet or, if forced to speak, by being submissive and agreeing to what everyone else says.¹² In one of the largest studies of its kind, including over 1.3 million participants, researchers showed conclusively that this submissive behavior was on the rise from 2000 to 2020, with many more people refusing to state or defend their personal beliefs so they would not be seen as unique or be forced to disagree with others.¹³ All of this is meant to make a person as small a target as possible for others’ judgment and disapproval.¹⁴

Does any of this sound familiar? A desire to avoid-or-escape interacting with other people because of a high level of anxiety that we will say or do something to draw the negative judgment of others?

It sounds like how many of us treat evangelism.

To be clear, I am not pathologizing a lack of willingness to share one’s faith. I am also not saying it is bad to be introverted. All personality types have authentic ways of sharing their faith with others. Rather, I am recognizing that the same patterns of behavior that appear in those who are socially anxious often appear when we are faced with the possibility of claiming our faith publicly regardless of how we might do that.

¹¹Jill P. Weber, *Be Calm* (Althea, 2019), chap. 5.

¹²Swee et al., “Examining the Relationship,” 9.

¹³William Chopik, Kim Götschi, Alejandro Carrillo, Rebekka Weidmann, and Jeff Potter, “Changes in Need for Uniqueness from 2000 until 2020,” *Collabra: Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2024): 5.

¹⁴In one study, it was found that people with social anxiety disorder who were forced to give a speech spent substantially more time looking at blank areas in the room instead of at their audience compared to those who did not have social anxiety disorder. Nigel Teik Ming Chen, Lauren Maree Thomas, Patrick Joseph Fraser Clarke, Ian Bernard Hickie, and Adam John Guastella, “Hyperscanning and Avoidance in Social Anxiety Disorder: The Visual Scanpath During Public Speaking,” *Psychiatry Research* 225 (2015): 667-72.

A primary reason for this is that all forms of anxiety trace back to intolerance of uncertainty.¹⁵ Like the man with the shriveled hand in the introduction and Moses speaking to God, we don't know what is going to happen next, and that uncertainty makes us extremely uncomfortable. Couple this with negative experiences we may have had with evangelism or negative views people in our context have about evangelism, and it becomes easy for us to have anxious feelings when we have to display our faith publicly. We don't know what is going to happen, but it seems likely whatever it is will be bad.

MORE TRAINING IS NOT THE ANSWER

Consider the following scenarios, all of which are drawn from people's actual experiences.

You are asked to go out with a team from your church to knock on doors in the neighborhood, ask whoever answers about their beliefs, and then share your faith with them and invite them to your church. How do you feel about this? (In this story, the person kept encouraging other team members to be the lead person who spoke and made a point of standing near the back.)

You are on a weekend away, splitting a hotel room with a group of friends who are not Christians. Your friends decide to watch a pornographic movie in your shared room. They know you're a Christian but clearly don't think your faith is an impediment to your joining them. How do you respond? (In this story, the person grabbed the hotel Bible and headed out of the room until the movie was over.)

A friend of yours who was hurt by the church hears on the news about a major scandal related to a celebrity pastor. Knowing you are a Christian, your friend confronts you angrily, declaring how corrupt the church is and demanding to know how you could possibly choose to be so

¹⁵J. F. Boswell, J. Thompson-Hollands, T. J. Farchione, and D. H. Barlow, "Intolerance of Uncertainty: A Common Factor in the Treatment of Emotional Disorders," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 69, no. 6 (2013): 630-45, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.21965>.

ignorant as to support such an irrational and hypocritical faith. What do you say? (In this story, the person dodged the direct question and just agreed the church has lots of problems that do not reflect the teachings of Jesus.)

In each of these cases, we are presented with a situation that puts our faith on public display. And in each case, the reason for feeling anxiety is palpable: We do not know what will happen, and our intolerance of uncertainty makes that lack of foresight very uncomfortable. We are anxious we will break our relationship with people who are not Christians by seeming to disrespect them, or we are anxious we will be judged by other Christians who think we are not evangelizing properly.

Our initial response might be to suggest more training is the answer. If we improve our ability to share our faith, that will bolster our confidence. To be sure, training can help. However, as mentioned in the introduction, there are more resources available now than there ever have been to help support Christians in sharing their faith. These include webinars, classes, books, videos, and mobile apps that automate the process of sharing core Christian doctrines with others. Even with all this, Christians remain less willing to evangelize.

This provides a reason to pause and reconsider what is happening. What if our discomfort related to evangelism is not just a matter of not knowing how to evangelize well? What if it is also a psychological issue related to feeling anxious?

At first blush, this seems like too much. Really? We stand within a “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), many of whom were derided, tortured, and even martyred for practicing their faith and publicly proclaiming God’s word. How could we be so fearful that we seek to avoid-or-escape the biblical mandate to be witnesses for Jesus Christ?

Yet the data are clear. Most Christians in the United States are not sharing their faith with others. In addition to the statistics presented in the introduction, a joint study conducted in 2017 by Barna and Lutheran Hour Ministries found that 74 percent of self-identified Christians in the

United States have nine or fewer spiritual conversations with anyone (including other Christians) per year, while 9 percent have none.¹⁶ A Lifeway Research study conducted together with the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism at Wheaton College in 2019 found that only 29 percent of unchurched people had ever had a Christian share how to become a Christian with them.¹⁷ Another Lifeway Research study done with Evangelism Explosion in 2021 found that 60 percent of unchurched people reported that their Christian friends rarely talk about their faith.¹⁸

According to the Barna study, the number one reason people avoided faith-sharing conversations was fear. They were afraid that they would be misunderstood, persecuted, marginalized, or silenced if they spoke up for their faith. More than this, the younger generations were far more likely to be concerned that others would see their efforts at sharing their faith to be offensive.¹⁹

This anxiety can be further heightened by other issues, such as when people are called to evangelize across racial and ethnic lines. For example, I have worked with the pastors of three historically Black congregations that used to have vibrant witnesses in their respective neighborhoods. However, all three now find that their neighborhoods are gentrifying so that they no longer have a clear demographic or socioeconomic connection with the people around them. This has led to stymied practices of neighborhood evangelism that cannot be separated from anxieties related to race relations. I have also worked with an immigrant church that feels called to be a witness for Christ in its host country, but its members are anxious as to whether the ways they express the faith will

¹⁶Barna Group, “Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age: How Christians’ Approach to Sharing Their Faith Has Changed in 25 Years,” 2018, as cited in Don Everts, *The Reluctant Witness: Discovering the Delight of Spiritual Conversations* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 20-22.

¹⁷“Unchurched Report,” Billy Graham Center Institute and LifeWay Research, April 24, 2019, as cited in Rick Richardson, *You Found Me: New Research on How Unchurched Nones, Millennials, and Irreligious Are Surprisingly Open to Christian Faith* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 60.

¹⁸“Evangelism Explosion Study of Americans’ Openness to Talking About Faith,” Lifeway Research, February 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Evangelism-Explosion-Survey-of-Americans-Report.pdf>, slide 12.

¹⁹Barna Group, “Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age,” cited in Everts, *Reluctant Witness*, 4, 36.

look too foreign to the mainstream host culture and whether their unique cultural identity will be forgotten as they engage in this evangelistic work. These examples demonstrate that our anxieties about evangelism are often multifaceted.

All of this suggests that if we want to address the lack of evangelistic activity today, we would do well to consider psychological insights about social anxiety.

ANXIETY, MEET STIGMATIC SHAME

While our intolerance of uncertainty provides an environment for us to feel anxiety, it does not push us toward a negative experience of anxiety by itself. Within this environment, there needs to be a possible outcome that frightens us. In the case of evangelism, we are anxious about experiencing shame.

According to psychologists, shame is tied to our twin realizations that we have autonomy and that other people have the capacity to judge how we use that autonomy. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson explains that this happens when we are still children: “The child who is learning to stand and walk alone becomes quickly aware of the great discrepancy in height and size between him- or herself and adults. In addition to this awareness of smallness, he or she must face the relative ease with which the assertions of infantile autonomy can be overwhelmed or ‘shamed’ by adults or older children.”²⁰ After describing how the feeling of shame develops in children, Erikson goes on to explain how shame is experienced:

Shame is a visual phenomenon. It derives from a sense of being seen or exposed before one is ready. Exposure means revealing one’s vulnerability or one’s deficiency. The vulnerability or deficiency is not a moral failure. It involves something deeper and more essential to self. The person (or child) who feels shame experiences an exposure to others in which a deficiency in being, an inadequacy intrinsic to self, is on display.²¹

²⁰James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (Harper & Row, 1981), 59.

²¹Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 59-60.

Shame moves someone from feeling inadequate about performing an action poorly to feeling devalued as a human being. Worse yet, that devaluation is evident for everyone to see.

Shame is often used to describe our internal sense of feeling devalued. However, we can also be shamed by others. On a social level, shame operates in relation to stigmas. “Stigma relates to personal characteristics, or cues, that are socially considered shameful,” creating social norms by assigning shame to certain activities to deter people from engaging in them.²² Linked with these stigmas, shame is “a social process which reflect[s] the importance of the established social norms and [is] enacted in the name of the community.” Stigmatic shaming, then, is the mechanism that people in a society use to enforce stigma and, by extension, social norms. “Stigmatic shaming labels the individual not only as someone who has done something bad, but also as someone who is bad . . . denigrat[ing] the relationship between the individual and society, probably for his/her entire life.”²³

The potential pain of being shamed for breaking with these social stigmas is so great, according to Shannon, who uses the metaphor of a monkey to describe our already anxious brain, that we are hardwired to avoid it:

In order to protect your social status, your monkey mind is always watching and listening to those around you, looking for signals telling you whether you are respected, whether you are loved, and whether you belong. If you are alienating your neighbors, irritating your friends and family, or a subject of scorn to your community, even if you are not aware of it, the monkey reads the signals and sounds the alarm. A serving of fear, with a side order of shame, will focus your attention and remind you that you need to play well with others.²⁴

Sadly, there is some reason for Christians to believe they are deserving of stigmatic shame, not because of the message of the gospel but because

²²Jennifer Wogen and Maria Teresa Restrepo, “Human Rights, Stigma, and Substance Abuse,” *Mental Health and Human Rights* 22, no. 1 (2020): 53.

²³Rodger A. Bates and Bryan LaBrecque, “The Sociology of Shaming,” *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology* 12, no. 1 (2020): 3.

²⁴Shannon, *Don't Feed the Monkey Mind*, 8.

the church has not presented itself well. Whether the moral failings of high-profile church leaders, the internal conflicts that have bubbled over into court cases and public attacks by one group of Christians on another, or questionable forays into the political arena that seem more motivated by institutional gain than being a witness for Christ, there is ample evidence of Christian hypocrisy to fuel an individual Christian's belief that all Christians are worthy of being stigmatically shamed. To avoid being on the receiving end of this shame, we therefore avoid-or-escape public demonstrations of our faith. We do not want to be labeled as one of "those people."

This sort of hypervigilance to stigmatic shame seems tailor made to stymie evangelism, especially because shame has become far more common in Western culture today. It catapulted into the American mainstream in the early 2010s. There was Brené Brown's TED Talk in Houston in 2012 that garnered millions of views on YouTube.²⁵ In March 2015 *Christianity Today* dedicated an entire edition to the rise of shame in the United States, including a major article by Andy Crouch.²⁶ A year later, David Brooks picked up on this in *The New York Times*.

Each argued that Western culture had moved away from guilt, which is concerned with the moral right or wrong of behavior, toward shame, which focuses on how well a person fits with the prevailing values of a group of people. This is neither good nor bad. Many cultures across the globe operate with shame rather than guilt as their primary ethical framework. However, as Crouch and Brooks point out, this framework operates well only so long as there is a common value system people are drawing on.

Unfortunately, the West has not sustained these common values. Rather, prodded by a combination of the individualism that arose from

²⁵Brené Brown, "Listening to Shame," TED Talk, March 16, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=psNIDORYYV0.

²⁶Andy Crouch, "The Return of Shame," *Christianity Today* 59, no. 2 (2015): 32, https://andy-crouch.com/articles/the_return_of_shame.

the Enlightenment and the rejection of socially defining metanarratives as a result of postmodernism, the culture has moved in the direction of tribalism. This means that individuals tend to find a group of people who have similar values and stay within it, stigmatically shaming all others who disagree with them.

The problem with this in a shame culture is that it makes it nearly impossible to avoid being stigmatically shamed. As Brooks explains:

Everybody is perpetually insecure in a moral system based on inclusion and exclusion. There are no permanent standards, just the shifting judgment of the crowd. It is a culture of oversensitivity, overreaction and frequent moral panics, during which everybody feels compelled to go along. . . . The modern shame culture allegedly values inclusion and tolerance, but it can be strangely unmerciful to those who disagree and to those who don't fit in.²⁷

This is not to suggest there are no values that are common to people across tribal groups. As Brooks writes, the current culture prizes one value above all others: tolerance. Tolerance does not require people to agree with each other or even to respect each other, but it does demand that everyone live and let live. The primary way this is accomplished is through avoidance-or-escape.

This is exactly what Americans are doing. Pew Research has shown that the greatest predictor of whether people will associate with each other is their political identity.²⁸ They have also shown that people's anxiety increases when they must participate in a conversation with those who disagree with them.²⁹ By segmenting ourselves into groups that agree with each other, we avoid this anxiety. If we must engage those who belong to another group, we do so while surrounded by people who agree with us, secure in the knowledge that whatever we say or post

²⁷David Brooks, "The Shame Culture," *New York Times*, March 15, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/03/15/opinion/the-shame-culture.html.

²⁸Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, "America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide," Pew Research Center, November 13, 2020, <https://pewrsr.ch/2JZY9fb>.

²⁹Ted Van Green, "Republicans and Democrats Alike Say It's Stressful to Talk Politics with People Who Disagree," Pew Research Center, November 23, 2021, <https://pewrsr.ch/3CFmHjm>.

online will not actually change the status quo. We can live and let live by restricting who we relate to so we are judged only by those who will not shame us because we hold common values with them. Essential to this is never disagreeing with our group or engaging meaningfully with those in other groups because both actions would cause anxiety. All this gives us a sense of certainty that we will not be stigmatically shamed in the future, ameliorating our intolerance of uncertainty.

However, evangelism does not allow for this kind of segmentation. The message of the gospel is that God offers abundant life to all creation through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, so Christians are commissioned by Jesus to share this good news with all people. This means that we must violate the structure of the culture around us by initiating meaningful contact, inviting people in both our group and other groups to faith in Jesus Christ. In doing this, Christians expose themselves to stigmatic shame.

There is an irony here. One of the most common insults lobbed at evangelists is that they are “fundamentalists” because they invite all people to accept the gospel. Yet it is the very logic of segmentation that demonstrates the classic in-group/out-group bifurcation with its willingness to condemn those who are part of the out-group that marks a fundamentalist mindset.³⁰ Evangelistic practice offends precisely because it claims that everyone is welcomed into the in-group of God’s abundant life through Jesus Christ. This shatters the segmented groups people use to avoid stigmatic shame. It is no wonder that when we engage in public faith sharing we are raising a topic that anywhere from one-third to one-half of adults in the United States would rather not discuss.³¹

³⁰Charles B. Strozier, David M. Terman, and James W. Jones, *The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History* (Oxford University Press, 2010), xviii-xix, 7.

³¹The Lifeway Research and Evangelism Explosion survey showed that approximately one-third of adults in the United States did not want to discuss religion with a friend, and one-half did not want to discuss it with a stranger (“Evangelism Explosion Study,” slides 8-9, 11-14).

SHAMED BY THE GOSPEL

Evangelistic practice goes a step beyond refusing to abide by the social norm of tolerance through avoidance-or-escape. It also calls people to repent and participate in the abundant life God offers us. We see this in the summarization of Jesus' message recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark:

From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 4:17)

"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15)

The message Jesus brought was undoubtedly good. The Gospel of Mark even includes Jesus describing his message as "the good news" (which is a literal translation from the Greek, *tō euangeliō*). However, to believe this good news is not a matter of just intellectually accepting it but of participating in it. This is because living in the kingdom requires living in accordance with the ways of the kingdom. Jesus made this point throughout his teaching, and it can make people feel exquisitely uncomfortable with being evangelized (a point we will discuss at length in chapter eight).

The parable of the wedding banquet explains the difference between just believing the kingdom exists and repenting. The parable begins with several invited guests refusing to attend a king's wedding banquet. So the king orders his servants to go out and invite whomever they can find to come to the banquet. However, just accepting the invitation is not enough:

When the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, "How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?" The man was speechless.

Then the king told the attendants, "Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

For many are invited, but few are chosen. (Matthew 22:11-14)

Commentators believe the expectation of wearing wedding clothes could mean different things (possibly that the king would have provided

special clothes to the guests or that guests would at least wear clean clothes). Whatever the meaning, commentators agree that all the guests had access to the appropriate clothes.³² Despite this, one guest chose not to wear the proper clothes. Lacking any explanation for why he did this, the guest was subject to the king's disapproval and ejected from the banquet.

As he was caught by the gaze of the king and likely watched by everyone else in the hall as the king spoke to him, shame is added to the condemnation the guest receives. Not only was he thrown out of the banquet, but he was thrown out publicly.

This parable flips the script on who is anxious about being stigmatically shamed. It is not the evangelist but the one who is invited. Suddenly the invited person is confronted by someone outside their in-group and faced with examining their life based on a different set of values from the ones they have espoused. While it is highly unlikely that most people today fear the level of judgment described in the parable when they are being evangelized, it is disconcerting that the evangelist is bringing their lives under the scrutiny of the Christian faith, which is decidedly outside the protective barrier of their chosen group. The potential for feeling shame is very real because people's life choices are exposed to the light of a belief system based on the expectations of a righteous God.

Given this, it is not surprising that most people seek to avoid-or-escape being evangelized. Whether closing the door (or never opening it) to the evangelists who come to their home, giving a wide berth to the person handing out tracts on the sidewalk, or finding reasons not to visit

³²While commentators differ on whether there was a historical precedent for the king providing clothes, they agree that Jesus is making a larger point about the righteousness people need to demonstrate to be welcomed by God at the judgment. This righteousness is provided by Christ alone and must be accepted through repentance. Commentators as disparate as John Wesley (who wrote his famous "On the Wedding Garment" sermon based on this parable) and Presbyterian Matthew Henry (who sees the man without the wedding garment as a hypocrite who claims Christ but does not fully profess faith) hold this view. See John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 4, *Sermons IV*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Abingdon, 1987), 140-48; Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, vol. 5, *Matthew to John* (Fleming H. Revell, 1890), Matthew XXII, §VI.

that one relative who always talks about Jesus, most people back away from putting themselves in a position in which they may feel shame because of how they are living. If they cannot avoid it, they likely go on the offensive, doubling down on the cultural value of tolerance so they can stigmatically shame the evangelist as much as possible to avoid being shamed first.

I have personally seen this last tactic in practice. When I tell people I am ordained and teach at a seminary, they quickly avoid-or-escape any follow-up by stating they respect religion and are a good person even if they are not religious. After all, being good people who are tolerant of others is all that's needed. Having thus set the basis by which all people should judge their lives, they foreclose any further conversation that might call them to repent. All this just because I introduced myself and answered the question, "So, what do you do?"

We will explore the discomfort of those being evangelized in much more detail in part two. For now, it is worth recognizing that this resistance to being evangelized is having an impact on Christians in the form of convincing them it is rude to evangelize. In the Lifeway/Evangelism Explosion study, approximately 50 percent of all Christian respondents agreed that inviting someone to change their religious beliefs was "offensive and disrespectful." Likewise, 48 percent of Christians stated that sharing with a nonbeliever how to become a Christian is "scary." Of those who do not believe in any religion who were asked this same question, 60 percent saw it as "scary" to have a Christian evangelize them.³³

This research and its reference to fear helps clarify the relationship of shame to anxiety. Anxiety always feels uncomfortable, but it can be beneficial or harmful. When it is beneficial, it energizes and focuses us, helping us to move forward even in difficult situations. When it is harmful, it overwhelms us and causes us to protect ourselves unnecessarily. As we will see in the coming chapters, though, it is up to us which

³³"Evangelism Explosion Study," slides 73, 75.

form of anxiety we will experience. In the case of evangelism, we very reasonably feel anxious because we want to protect ourselves from being stigmatically shamed. Whether that anxiety leads us to face the potential for stigmatic shame or to run from it is something we decide.

In our pluralistic culture, in which we all have reason to feel anxious about interacting with someone who could stigmatically shame us for disagreeing with them, most people have chosen to let the anxiety take hold negatively. People have segmented themselves into groups of those who are like-minded and barricaded themselves in their respective groups to avoid being stigmatically shamed by others. They do this because the potential for encountering stigmatic shame outside their groups causes them to feel anxiety. Rather than claiming that anxiety as a beneficial source of energy and focus to engage with others, they claim it as a motive for protecting themselves and so avoid-or-escape relating to those who think and believe differently than they do.

As a result, Christian evangelists—prodded on by the commission of Christ—are the ones who must initiate contact, enduring potential stigmatic shame for seeking to bypass the barricades and suggest a universal good news that calls all people to repent. It is little wonder that most Christians, especially the younger generations suffering from greater levels of social anxiety, choose to take the same path most others are taking. Anxious because of the stigmatic shame they will receive from those they evangelize, they avoid-or-escape by making their faith a private matter they never share or, if they do, they couch in terms that make it clear it is meaningful for them but not something anyone else needs to believe.

NO SAFE PLACE: THE SHAME OF INACTION

While not evangelizing may seem to be the safest course of action because it avoids stigmatic shame, it turns out that Christians who take this route are still not preserved from shame. Unlike stigmatic shame, which is driven by external social norms, this shame is internal.



Remember, shame is not just an assessment of how well we do something. It is a sense that our very self is less valuable. It is one thing to have others claim we are less valuable because they do not like how we identify ourselves. It is another thing to conclude ourselves that we are less valuable. Avoiding a difficult task, especially one we know is good, can have that effect—leading us to be ashamed of ourselves.

This internal form of shame is far more potent than stigmatic shame because we cannot assign its source to anything or anyone else. We were the ones who chose to let our anxious feelings get the better of us and avoid-or-escape doing what we knew we should do. So, we must live with a perpetual sense not just that we have failed but that we are failures. The longer we nurture this idea, the more our anxious feelings control us, and the more our shame hardens and deepens.

Worse yet, the more we convince ourselves we are a failure at something, the more it becomes apparent to others. A study that involved public speaking illustrates this. In the study, participants were invited to watch and rate several speeches. Unbeknownst to the participants, the speeches were delivered by three groups of people: those with no anxiety, those with general anxiety, and those with social anxiety. In the end, the participants unanimously rated the speeches given by those who had social anxiety lower than the others. Their reason for this was that these people tended to speak at a lower volume, rarely made eye contact by looking at the camera, and did not have much energy in their presentations.

Ironically, the people with social anxiety had done these things intentionally as “safety behaviors,” meant to minimize how vulnerable and visible they were to others. In fact, these behaviors made them more conspicuous in negative ways.³⁴ By enacting their avoid-or-escape plans, the socially anxious people generated precisely the kind of negative

³⁴Karen Rowa, Jeffrey R. Paulitzki, Maria D. Ierullo, Brenda Chiang, Martin M. Antony, Randi E. McCabe, and David A. Moscovitch, “A False Sense of Security: Safety Behaviors Erode Objective Speech Performance in Individuals with Social Anxiety Disorder,” *Behavior Therapy* 46 (2015): 304-14.

attention they did not want. Put another way, acting out of a deep sense of internal shame as people who believed themselves to be failures at public speaking, the socially anxious group brought stigmatic shame on themselves.

This means that internal shame becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. People believe they should do something because it is good and right; however, they are also anxious about being stigmatically shamed for doing that good thing because it breaks with social norms. Based on this anxiety, people choose not to do the good thing to avoid the stigmatic shame, but this causes them to devalue themselves (internal shame), leading them to engage in avoid-or-escape activities more often when in public, leading those they interact with to have a less favorable opinion of them, which reinforces their anxious feelings and shame. Unless broken, this becomes a feedback loop and downward spiral.

Something like this is what the church in the West has been experiencing for several decades now. We have reached a point at which many of us are convinced that to engage in evangelism will cause us to be stigmatically shamed, which only strengthens our anxiety about not being able to share our faith well. The result is that we just keep avoiding-or-escaping evangelism, and in so doing we feed our internal shame at the downward slump of the church and perpetuate the cultural narrative that evangelism itself is a distasteful activity.

In chapter two, we will look more closely at this tendency to choose the path that avoids doing what we know we should do. For now, it is worth recognizing that evangelism entails experiencing shame one way or another. Either we choose to practice it and likely face stigmatic shame, or we choose to avoid it and feel the internal shame of failing at something we believe Christians ought to do well.³⁵ We will feel anxious

³⁵While I am just dealing with the individual choice to evangelize here, I recognize that there is a third possible source of shame: the Christian community. There are certain groups of Christians who will stigmatically shame those who do not evangelize. This adds another layer—either being stigmatically shamed by the culture for evangelizing or feeling internal shame *and* being stigmatically shamed by the church for not evangelizing.

regardless of which route we choose, but if we choose the route of enduring stigmatic shame, we can harness that anxiety for the beneficial purposes of energizing and focusing our evangelistic witness. If we choose the route of internal shame, it is because we let the anxiety overwhelm us and lead us to avoid-or-escape sharing our faith with others.

A PSYCHOLOGICALLY INFORMED APPROACH

What is the solution to this dilemma that many Christians, especially younger Christians, feel related to practicing evangelism?

As mentioned above, the church's initial response was intellectual, providing more and better resources related to evangelism. This has been going on for nearly three generations, dating back to the mid-1900s. Despite this and the exponential growth in the quantity and quality of these resources over the past generation, the willingness of Christians to share their faith has continued to wane. That there is growing discomfort with faith sharing among younger generations bolsters this point. In fact, all the indicators are that more Christians now allow for spirituality without committing to a specific belief system.³⁶

Even for those who are open to the idea of faith sharing, simply having the additional resources does not guarantee they will evangelize. Just like students who have studied hard can freeze when they take a test, an individual Christian who is familiar with the evangelism material can still lose their nerve when trying to share their faith in public, especially within a culture that is highly skeptical of Christianity. It is one thing to know all the "right answers" about the gospel, to practice sharing those answers behind closed doors, and to be kind to people in day-to-day life. It is another thing when we are articulating a belief that runs counter to

³⁶"In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/. See also "U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals," Pew Research Center, September 10, 2020, www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/09/10/u-s-teens-take-after-their-parents-religiously-attend-services-together-and-enjoy-family-rituals/.

the social norms, exposing ourselves publicly to the responses of other people either in person or virtually.

The intellectual approach ignores this discomfort. It assumes a completely free level of human agency. “If you just understood more,” it asserts, “you would want to change how you are acting.” A corollary to that is that if we do not change after learning more, we are failures. We have failed to grasp the concepts well enough, failed to obtain the necessary skills, or simply failed to have the necessary courage, drive, and faith to put these to use.

This nested assumption is damning for someone struggling with anxious feelings and shame. The fear of stigmatic shame in social settings breaks their capacity to share their faith, the internal shame convinces them they are not capable or worthy to share it, and now the church reinforces their negative self-evaluation.

Anxiety and shame are not overcome by increased knowledge or skills. To address the discomfort many of us have with evangelism requires something more than just an intellectual approach, something that allows us to generate a psychological bridge from the path we have taken away from evangelism back to the path of evangelizing.

This is why evangelism training needs to be informed by not only intellectual engagement but psychological approaches that have proven to help people dealing with feelings such as anxiety and shame. A psychologically informed approach meets us where we are without judgment, accepting our descriptions of what we are feeling. The goal of this training is to help us overcome the feelings that hold us back from sharing our faith while simultaneously giving us a foundation that will allow us to withstand the stigmatic shame that evangelists are likely to face.

As we delve into this, I want to repeat a point I made earlier: I am not suggesting everyone who is uncomfortable sharing their faith publicly has a diagnosable case of social anxiety. Rather, my point is that the anxious feelings many of us have as we anticipate experiencing stigmatic shame for evangelizing are similar to feeling socially anxious insofar as



both entail strategies of avoidance-or-escape. It is based on this similarity that I am suggesting a new form of evangelism training informed by therapeutic practices that have been effective in overcoming anxiety.

In the following chapter we will consider acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), a specific kind of therapy that is commonly used to help people suffering from social anxiety. After an overview of ACT and how it can faithfully be used by Christians to inform evangelism training, we will consider the six processes included in ACT and how we can use them to reduce our anxiety related to evangelism.



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