

Guilt Complex

Nobody specifically set out to create the "Guilt Complex" - it just happened. Some friends were in the habit of exchanging letters and articles, occasionally including original writing and sometimes consisting of press cuttings or correspondence. The following pages began as a series of letters and articles that passed between them during 1997. It started with a single letter raising questions about guilt - often a problem among people who come from a religious background or who were raised strictly. One by one, they each pitched in with ideas, further questions, brief comments and a few running jokes, until they realised they had created something special. Several suggested that it should be published, but how can you convey this kind of lively informality in cold print? It needed a free format that can jump from thought to thought. It needed the Internet.

When you read these pages you move into a unique society. These people had come to know one another well enough to banter like close friends... but they rarely met each other. Spread widely around the country, a few of them might possibly come face-to-face once or twice in a year. But they carried on this postal fellowship over a period of about fifteen years during which they touched many other lives in the United Kingdom, the USA and elsewhere in the world. Following a joking comment in one of their early letters they came to be known as "Adullam's Cave Writers' Guild", sometimes shortened to "The Cave", "The Guild", "The Troggs" or just "ACWG". The reference to Adullam recalled an Old Testament story¹ about the outcasts and rebels who gathered around David, the future king of Israel, after he had been banished by King Saul. Most of the ACWG members had been banished from fellowships in the movement that later became known as the "New Churches". It was a time of great change in the British churches, a time that produced much that is good, but which also produced some sad mistakes.

The group that became known as "ACWG" had no official status, did not have a membership and never sought to establish its authority or to make itself permanent. It did, however, earn a certain respect and spun off several publications (e.g. "Insights", which is referred to within "The Guilt Complex"). The group's most important achievement was to reassure people who had been spiritually or psychologically damaged by religious people or institutions. God is love, but the people who claim to follow him do not always behave in loving ways. The Troggs reached out to encourage and support confused believers and to help them rediscover their foundations in a faith that is based on grace.

Grace is the message behind "The Guilt Complex". Read on to find how a bunch of ordinary people reaffirmed their own confidence in a God who is not 'out to get us', who does not lay heavy burdens of guilt on our shoulders, but who - well, read it and see for yourself...

¹ 1 Samuel 22.1

From LM, London 2nd April 1997

Dear Maurice

LM is referring to the fact that Maurice is always talking about 'Grace' e.g. his recent book. (See [book review](#) on [WRITERsite](#))

Dave B's letter about "wresting from religion" and his extremely apt virtual reality analogy of religion have got me thinking some more about the latest "Insights" on your favourite subject.

I'm definitely one of the folks out there still 'wresting'. "It is all of grace ... So very few see it." Too true. Many of us still have a major problem making this reality part of our life and thinking. It seems so simple yet it remains so elusive. I'm trying to fathom out why. Do you think I could be getting warm with the following?

Over the years, we become so attached to feelings of religious guilt, inadequacy and failure that they become part of us, who we are. They eat into our life and pervade many of our thought processes like some nasty rampant cancerous growth. They become inextricably interwoven into our whole personality. So much so, that it becomes 'normal' to carry around all this psychological crap and we can't imagine life without it! We would feel so insecure without our insecurity and guilty if we didn't feel guilty!?!? Some sort of maladaptation process. Make sense?

A bit like people with a major health problem such as a weak heart or arthritis. Their illness becomes part of who they are, how they see themselves and they adapt their life and conversation around it. These people are often reluctant at the prospect of being totally well and fear to be healed because it would disrupt their image of themselves and their altered life-style, something they have grown uncomfortably comfortable with, and without it they would have an identity crisis!

Yes! Pam H

In the same way, could it be that some of us are reluctant or unable to take on board the concept that it is all of Him, all of grace? We simply cannot imagine life without guilt, insecurity etc because we have become so accustomed to that way of thinking?

I have been out of a church situation now for about twelve years, see very little of 'conventional' Christians and read very little literature but still the old feelings persist and rear their ugly heads especially when I'm feeling low and wobbly ... maybe they cause me to feel low and wobbly? I think that for me absolute Grace is for much of the time only a virtual reality. Just now and then I glimpse the real thing and it is inexplicably, breathtakingly wonderful - and then frustratingly it disappears from view and I CANNOT of my own will cause it to reappear.

Perceptive! Pam H

Does any of this ring true to you or reflect what some of your many friends struggle with or am I going slowly barmy in my own little world? ...

Would love to come and spend a day with you again, Maurice. Am up to my neck in college work and exams at the moment but will get back to you on this in the near future.

Much love
LM

There's a lot of scope in Dave's virtual reality analogy. DP

Dear LM

What a delight to get a personal letter from you. Do hope you can find time to slip down and see us sometime. Enjoyed the brief chat with your husband too and hope we'll meet up again.

We were over with Alan and Doreen on Monday/Tuesday - we old folks have time to get together! Showed Al your letter when we were chatting and he liked it too. He was impressed by Dave B's 'virtual reality' image, which had not reached his corner of the cave yet.

You ask me about the 'elusive' nature of a continual realisation about Grace being the root, stem, branch, leaves and fruit (my analogy) of everything. I am not much good at answering questions and tend to answer by way of a story that lasts for hours! (Beware if you come down.)

I can say I thought your understanding of how feelings of religious guilt become part of our personality was very intelligent. I do know that I have always felt the Catholics are right when they say, 'Give us a child for the first seven years and you can do what you like then' sort of thing. The same seems true of our (stand by for religious swear words!) first awareness of God, especially if that has been by way of evangelical and/or fundamentalist contacts (for seven years?). We are given God-Plus from the very start and it does seem extremely difficult to escape such law. And quite easy to become 'entangled again' as well.

Excellent AH

I don't understand it, but with such folk *suffering* seems to play a part very often. I won't enlarge upon this for I shall get into theory: I just state an observed fact. Of course the glimpse you experience is the reality, and somehow we have to learn to trust that even when the glimpse has gone. We cannot walk by sight. This appears dangerously near to the infamous 'name it and claim it' nonsense, but actually it is a thousand miles distant. I'd rather talk about this than write, for I sense, I could be on the verge of pages of explanation. I prefer to drip-on verbally not in writing - although I make a good attempt at the latter sometimes, I am aware.

Thankfully when the 'old feelings persist!' (as you say), I know they are only feelings and ignore them, even if feeling ghastly. And I have learned to tell the parrot sitting on my shoulder quoting legalism in my ear that he must shut up. He hasn't been around for years now, so maybe he got offended?

Certainly we cannot of 'our own will' cause the sense of Grace to reappear. Perhaps because it (He) has never actually gone away! Once we accept we are perfectly alright where we are (seemingly the wilderness), we find we are actually in (the Promised Land) a place of rest.

'Scuse the religious analogies, it is how I think after so many years (but that's OK - everything is!). Once we stop chasing the butterfly round the garden it may well land on our shoulder - it certainly won't while we run. So many TRY to give up. Oh how many folk I have had to tell over and over and over again that they will eventually have to *give up Giving Up* and just BE. But like me, most cannot enter into real rest until they have exhausted themselves trying to do so.

Serendipity! AH

I am beginning to go on and on, and I mustn't TRY to make you see it for once and for all, but I am sure the penny has really dropped and you will soon stop trying to bang the side of the machine and just wait for the chocolate to appear.

Loads of love to you. Nice to have you young ones around; enjoy your studies, I hated it, but then I was always at the bottom of the class.

From Eileen and me - affectionately. Give love to... too please.

Maurice

PS No doubt the Troggs will have something to add below. I sent a copy with your letter around the guild. Thanks for allowing circulation.

Two excellent letters - wish I'd seen Dave's original letter! **AH** ← (Just arrived!!)

As Maurice says in his unique style, I have found a similar experience. There is a freedom & peace which emerges once a point of acceptance of 'things-as-they-are' is tripped over, bumped into, surprisingly encountered. Also this point of acceptance tends to present itself unexpectedly. **DB**

Wish I had seen Dave's article it hasn't flown this way yet.

Perhaps I was so damaged by religion that I have thrown out the baby with the bath water, wouldn't know where to start in bible reading as 'fear' takes over. I know there is God, but anything else?? However I do sleep at night, feel more peaceful than ever, and if I need to know more I can't believe an all knowing God is going to leave me and yet!! I also do not have the certainty of 'heaven' and feel sure there's no after life 'Hell'. **SA**

Sadly, the 'virtual reality' letter seems to have been lost

Some thoughts on Guilt

From BJ

LM's ideas concerning Guilt stimulated some thoughts. This feeling of guilt tends to pervade our whole thinking not just that which pertains to religion. Certainly for us from an evangelical background it has loomed large in our history. The basic aim of an evangelistic preacher is to create guilt in his hearers so that he can then present 'The Gospel' in order to produce repentance. Whatever the validity of this approach maybe, having come through this stage, ideally the believer should be introduced to 'God's outrageous grace' totally liberating him from all guilt so that the only valid motivation then is love i.e. we do things not because we ought to but because we want to. Unfortunately instead of this the new believer is told he ought to read the Bible, pray, witness, join a Church in which he ought to attend meetings regularly, support financially ... So in a short time he is totally dominated by Law. Guilt stems from the inability to attain standards - external or self-imposed.

This is an 'in-joke' about MS, a former leader in the British House Church

The church seems to insist that we can reach these standards and so we get on that miserable roundabout. Me, I got off with help from Abbot Maurice. Hooray! SA

Many of us spent years in this state so it is no wonder that it is extremely difficult to get rid of guilt. The good news must be that there are no standards to attain or live up to. Jesus has fulfilled all the Law on our behalf and has wedded his spirit with our spirit so that if we respond naturally from inner conviction rather than guilt we shall inevitably 'walk in the spirit'. As some Old Duffer from Herts is constantly exhorting us - 'Live from the inside'. Not from the Bible, Tradition, or Reason but by the inner prompting.

Objection! AH

AH lives in Hertfordshire

But Guilt does not raise its ugly head only in the 'religious' realm. It constantly seeks to prompt action. We are constantly bombarded through the post, in the streets, by the Media that we should support this or that or do something to help. I feel terribly guilty every time I put the latest plea from the Sally Army or the Association for the Blind in the bin. I am not sure I have mastered this one yet!

Yes SA

It is so easy to get someone to do something which they do not wish to do by instilling a sense of guilt. We so often use it in our personal relationships. Take the Case of the Garden Broom. It usually resides in the garden shed where it is handy for Chris to sweep the paths and patio. But sometimes I use it to sweep out the garage which is in a block around a hundred yards away. Of course when finished I invariably leave it there. So the next time Chris wants to use it she asks me to fetch it from the garage in a tone that leaves me in doubt that the broom should be in the shed and thus I ought to go and get it for her. So I go and fetch it, not because I want to please her, but because I feel guilty in having left it in the garage. So I seek to be sensitive to what is motivating me to respond or that which is prompting me to take some action. If it is guilt then I try to ignore it. The problem is that guilt can never be appeased - its standards are unobtainable.

Brian

We British seem to be particularly cultivated at precisely this sort of thing. Why don't we simply state our objections: call a spade a spade? ... or a broom a broom!! AH

How about having two brooms! SA

How about Brian sweeping the paths and patio? AH

Where does conscience take over, or have its place, in relation to guilt? Is guilt always negative? SA

Liked these thoughts. Helpful. MS

Continued/-

Comments from AH

Liked Brian's piece on guilt, though one particular phrase at the end of the first paragraph was peculiarly inapt not to say inept!

Mind you the example of the broom needs the application of lateral thinking. Sheila's two brooms is an excellent possibility, my idea of Brian sweeping both is even better ... or maybe leave paths, patio and garage unswept.

The feeling of guilt of course has a legitimate function when we are guilty. Every time I rob a bank, it is right that I feel guilty especially should it restrict the frequency of that activity. But Brian is right (dangerous admission) when he questions the use of guilt to change another's behaviour. This is a powerful weapon, much used by parents, teachers and preachers to induce conformity and submission. Also used as Brian suggests by fundraisers for charities with great effect. Most of us know the effect of guilt. I know a few folk who seemed so consumed by it that their individuality has been swamped.

Sheila's question on conscience, which is usually a factor in guilt, is interesting. Kant believed conscience to be an innate moral law, with universal application whilst Freud places it in the controlling superego built up by strict parental injunctions which have become internalised.

I in my uneducated way believe my conscience to be the Voice of the Holy Spirit, tho' I wouldn't be brave enough yet to admit this to all and sundry.
Anon

The orthodox Christian position is nearer to that of Socrates who called it an inner 'divine voice', perhaps equivalent to the Quaker 'that of God in every man'. Evangelical Christians would probably agree with Ortiz that it is the 'voice of our spirit' which needs to be united with the Holy Spirit to work properly otherwise it is malformed by early teaching. Ortiz's Pentecostal conscience wouldn't let him whistle, my Baptist conscience forbade alcohol and more than one cinema visit per week. Nonconformist conscience kept one from any idleness, and all of these made sex something furtively nasty. He suggests that 'new birth' gets rid of all these biases - I am not so sure!

I think I feel closer to the Socratic idea, whilst recognising that early instruction affects its clear operation. In the Royal Navy before the advent of modern technology, the helmsman was not allowed to carry his knife because of the effect it might have on the compass. I suspect that analogy could be relevant to conscience.

Why have I allowed myself to get into this long tirade? ... all because of Brian and his wretched broom!

I think he should fly off on it!!

Alan

Superb contribution again from the Old Duffer. **MS**

Continued/-

Additional notes on

'The Guilt Complex'

← From DP

Well, with all the accretions growing around LM's original letter, it is looking a bit complex at this stage. So, why not add another layer?

When LM's letter first passed by me I let it go with just a minimal comment. Having seen the strength with which it hit others in the group I began to wonder why I didn't respond more fully. I have been busy, it's true; but that's not unusual. Then it struck me.... I just don't feel guilty these days. What a delight that is, but how did it happen?

Many years ago (and I mean about 35 years) someone asked my advice about feelings of guilt. It was not that she had any dark secrets, but simply that she felt the same vague feelings of guilt that others have mentioned in this 'complex' of correspondence. Of course, I expressed myself in evangelical terms at that time, saying, "If the Holy Spirit convicts you of sin, he'll tell you what the problem is so that you can confess it and be cleansed. If you just feel vaguely guilty, with nothing specific to aim at, that's the devil's accusation, so ignore it." I wouldn't express myself in the same terms today, but I recall it as a reminder that the solutions I now enjoy are nothing new. I already knew how to be free all those years ago, but it took a long time for the experience to work into my psyche.

Grace, as LM says, can appear to be just a *virtual* reality, rather than a solid experience. Then we seem to wake up to a reality that is not so pleasant. At another time, however, the light of grace suddenly becomes overwhelmingly and delightfully real once more.... until it fades again. We are pulled this way and that, just like Paul said². The battle goes on until we become exhausted, and that's the point where we reach the real breakthrough. The anonymous mediaeval writer of '[The Cloud of Unknowing](#)' offers this tip - "*When you feel utterly exhausted from fighting your thoughts, say to yourself 'It is futile to contend with it any longer', and then fall down before them like a captive or a coward*". Give up. Stop trying. Don't care. If God wants you to feel guilty after offering you all that grace then that's his problem. If he doesn't want you to feel guilty then it's still his problem. If it is grace then there's no point in my fighting for it.

Sheila comments "Is guilt always negative?" and, as Alan points out, it "has a [legitimate function](#) when we *are* guilty". It is like fear, which usefully prepares us to run away from danger but can crush us when it comes into play in inappropriate situations. The root of our guilt problem is not usually in our evangelicalism, but in childhood misunderstandings with our parents or other adults. In saying that, I am accepting the Freudian concept that Alan describes. The trouble with evangelicalism is that it fails to clear these psychological problems and thereby misses its stated objective. Instead of receiving the gospel of grace we were given another basin-full of law that reinforced our original problems. Christianity has failed. But God didn't invent Christianity; he invented grace.

Our problem with guilt is a problem of *un-learning* ideas that have become habituated in us. We don't need a new gospel for this, or a new teaching, or a new technique. We knew the right answers years ago but, as Dave's song says, we still felt "caught between what's right and wrong". So let's give up and stop caring; and let's not care that we don't care!

I agree with Maurice that this exchange is "an excellent use of [ACWG](#)".

² Paul had a lot of useful things to say about grace, guilt and freedom from the law. He appears to contradict himself in some NT letters and to drift off into legalism and setting down of tiresome rules. However, before we condemn Paul for his inconsistency we should check that it really was Paul who wrote those things.

Derrick

*This has been a really helpful letter for me, particularly the paragraph from the "[Cloud of Unknowing](#)". Have taken a photocopy. **LM***

This is a really good letter.

Finding this exchange enlightening.

Had a few hours with a girl from Bangladesh yesterday. We (Eileen and I) met her on a train in NY State (University student). A Moslem with a real heart for God. She has just come now from Bangladesh. Spoke to her Ma on the phone who invited us out there. Dad is a Ph.D. and the girl quite brilliant. Home is made of cardboard with a tin roof - but they're on the phone.

SABINA would have loved this correspondence.... May come to England to study, if so you'll all meet her. Just a little more of my waffle!

MS

PS Exactly 6 yards of material in a Sari!!

*220 yards in a furlong. **Bri***

ADDENDUM from AH

Very interesting exchanges here! There seems to be some semantic confusion. I think [Derrick's heading](#) helps in that it is the 'guilt complex' which is the killer. 'Guilt' is an objective fact. The emotion of guilt is a different matter. Its effect is always bad except when it effects an immediate change of behaviour for the good. The psychopath (and extreme Union Lifers!?) are the only ones who never experience the emotion of guilt, but residual guilt cripples and is a power tool in the hands of leaders and dominant folk. Internalised guilt (Freud) is the worst aspect, it is the traitor within that co-operates with the 'enemy' without.

Maurice's continuing theme that 'you are all right as you are' is the antidote. Christians seem always to get involved in the Catch 22 situation - you must be perfect ... you can't be perfect! An insoluble conundrum which results in perpetual guilt. Grace and living carelessly from within disperses guilt, whilst enhancing natural compassion.

How's that for a piece of pious pomposity!!

Two brooms to you, too!

AH

*The 'Case of the Roast Potato' is on its way! **Bri***

THOUGHTS by Phil S

Like Derrick, I suddenly realised a few weeks ago that I no longer feel guilty about things, and that's not because I carefully avoid situations that would make your average God-soul feel guilty.

Individuals 'revelling' in guilt-placing! Could well put it down to a 'seared conscience'. If that is the case, I would choose to remain as I am, 'seared' but immensely contented. ↗

Paul's analysis MS

As we are all aware, it's that old haunting business of the law - less forgiveness than a penalty.

Unlike Alan (and even the scriptures!), I sometimes wonder if it (the law) does have 'a legitimate function when we are guilty'. Does the 'worse-ness' that we feel, necessarily precipitate us into something better and less legal?

Ronald Knox certainly felt that life would be considerably easier without the rogue business of the law...

*"Lord, in as much as without Thee
We are not able to doubt Thee,
Give us the grace to tell the whole race
We know nothing about Thee."*

I go along with Derrick and suggest that it is not a case of being not serious enough, but of being not carefree, or even careless enough. A morbid sense of guilt totally out of proportion to any actual misdeed is a major factor in people's gloom.

Yes, and can well lead to real depression. SA

Isn't true faith in the gospel being able to say, "So what. I don't care a damn!" Arrogance, carelessness, like disbelief, is surely an act of faith.

As for leaving the broom in the shed and feeling guilty about it!!!! If that is all Brian had to be condemned concerning, then he ought to read my secret journals!

Please send by return. Bri

Now they do sound interesting stuff. SA

I think it all comes down to FEAR, which crouches mischievously at the crux of everything if we permit it.

Love the way you express this. SA

No fear - no law - no guilt. As one of my favourite novelists, Elizabeth Von Arnim says. "Everything is natural and everything is clean except for the person who is afraid it isn't."

Phil S

PS (for Brian) Next time, return the broom to where it belongs. It will save us all a lot of hassle!!

Another fine thoughtful letter from Phil. I'd like to keep some of this correspondence, so please don't destroy it anyone. I would have put the order: NO LAW, NO FEAR, NO GUILT. MS

I would really like all these 'guilt' writings somehow summarised into a pamphlet or article or something. So helpful. PH

Final comments from Colin

Please be patient with my writing and spelling but I want to add a few thoughts to the Guilt concept.

To me guilt has been like Norman Barnes expressed. People taking communion, they screwed up their eyes and tried to ‘see’ Jesus. I tried to feel guilt when in the church. I felt guilty because I didn’t have any guilt.

I of all people should have done as I’ve always skated close to the civil law, let alone the religious law. I guess its in the genes and I don’t say that lightly as I do believe we are all different some are “see-ers” some are “feel-ers”.

To me the important thing is we need each other’s thoughts and input.

Yours

Colin

PLEASE HELP COLIN TO FEEL GUILTY (no only joking). But he made people feel guilty all the years he was preaching. SA

This comment is from Colin’s wife!

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May 2000

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Whilst everyone in ACWG would have seen this correspondence, the specific individuals who contributed to the “Guilt Complex” were -

(AH) Alan Halden	(LM) (prefers to remain anonymous)
(BJ or Bri) Brian Johns	(MS) Maurice Smith
(CA) Colin Ashe	(PH) Pam Holden
(DB) Dave Bryant	(PS) Phil Streeter
(DP) Derrick Phillips	(SA) Sheila Ashe

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