

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

Self-esteem, the New Christian “Virtue” Part 2

written by Bob DeWaay

2Corinthians 5:15 - *“He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”*

Last month's commentary ended with a quotation of this verse: *“Because you say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,’ and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed. . .”* (**Revelation 3:17,18a**). This passage was addressed to the Laodicean church. Obviously, Christians are in danger of the delusive practice of feeling good about themselves when things are not good. We are in danger of not “knowing” our own wretchedness. How quickly we see the speck in another's eye and totally miss the log in our own (**Luke 6:41**). However, some modern teachers see low self-esteem has the primary human problem.

The New Reformation

In 1982 Robert Schuller made a bold move when he wrote **Self Esteem the New Reformation**, and had free copies of it sent to ordained ministers across the United States hoping that by influencing us we could be enlisted to persuade our congregations and change the very foundations of the church. The copy I have before me came through this program. In it he states, “Yes, what we need in the worldwide Christian church today is nothing less than a new reformation. Where the sixteenth-century Reformation returned our focus to sacred Scriptures as the only infallible rule for faith and prac-

tice, the new reformation will return our focus to the sacred right of every person to self-esteem!”¹ If self-esteem (in his earlier books he used the term “self-love” synonymously²) is not a Biblical teaching, then the new reformation is a rejection of the old one. It is my assertion that this is the case.

Speaking of the relationship of his new reformation to the old, Dr. Schuller states, “Reformation theology failed to make clear that the core of sin is a lack of self-esteem.”³ He goes on to elaborate, “The most serious sin is the one that causes me to say, ‘I am unworthy. I may have no claim to divine sonship if you examine me at my worst.’”⁴ As the Scriptures we examined last month show, Christ commended people who said that they were unworthy. We have been challenged to reform the church and it is only right that if we are not willing to do so according to the terms laid down by Robert Schuller, good reasons for not doing so should be given.

Paul Brownback wrote in 1982 about how new self-esteem as a Christian teaching is, “No doubt many Christians would react the same way [as young people do to hear that there was life before television] today, if they were told that the popular ideas of self-love, self-esteem, the Christian's need for a positive self-image, and a parent's responsibility to develop his child's self-worth were not prominent concerns for the informed believer of even ten years ago.”⁵ Dr. Brownback's excellent book clearly defines the issues and shows the pitfalls and fallacies of these modern doctrines. In spite of his criticisms and those of others, the self-esteem reformation has rolled along seemingly ignorant of dissenting opinions. The tactic of the immensely powerful and successful leaders of the self-esteem movement has been to continue to teach self-esteem with very little response to critics and to requests for Biblical justification of the doctrine. There has been a greater reception of the self-esteem reformation than there have

been voices of opposition.

Is There Warrant for the

It is pertinent to ask from whence came the “epidemic” of low self-esteem that has now “afflicted” most of the population. As Dr. Brownback stated, self-esteem was not a concern for most Christians twenty (ten when he wrote) years ago. Anyone over forty probably went through high school never hearing about self-esteem or being analyzed by themselves and others about their degree of self-esteem (a common theme for school children now). It is not just the church that is being reformed, it is the entire American culture. It seems more than coincidental that the self-esteem teaching arose simultaneously with the “decade of the self” of the late 1970's and early 1980's. If it can be shown that self-esteem is not taught in Scripture and that it is a popular secular doctrine of recent years, is it too big of a leap to assume that this teaching is another instance of the church mimicking the world in ways that are damaging to its identity and purpose?

Popular Christian writers just previous to the self-esteem reformation taught quite differently on the matter. Popular Christian writer Arthur Pink wrote in a 1954 copy righted book that was written over a decade earlier:

The call to careful self-examination receives its urgency from the very great danger there is of self-deception. Sin darkens the understanding, so that man is unable to perceive his real state before God. Satan “hath blinded the minds of them which believe not” (2Cor. 4:4). The deep-rooted pride of our hearts makes us think the best of ourselves, so that if a question is raised in our hearts, we are ever prone to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt.”⁶

More recently, Biblical commentator William Hendriksen wrote, “The expression ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ merits a word of explanation. What Paul - and before him Jesus - actually means must at least include this thought: it is a certain thing that a person

will love himself, and it is also certain that he will do so in spite of the fact that the self he loves has many faults.”⁷ Paul said, “*For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake*” (**2Corinthians 4:5**). A. T. Robertson in his commentary on this passage, discusses preaching “ourselves,” Paul’s bypassed theme, “Surely as poor and disgusting a topic as a preacher can find.”⁸

The dialogue between Peter and Jesus in **Matthew 16** shows how antithetical common human thinking about one’s relationship to self is to that revealed by Jesus. After Jesus prophesied of His own death, burial and resurrection (**Matthew 16:21**), Peter took Him aside and rebuked Him for not having His own best interests in mind! Peter said, “*God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You*” (**Verse 22**). In today’s terminology, Peter’s counsel could be paraphrased, “You have to quit practicing this negative thinking. You must develop a better self-concept.”

Jesus’ response shows that Peter’s hasty response was tantamount to a temptation from Satan: “*Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.*” The advice to think more highly of yourself and to preserve your own life at all costs was inspired by Satan (remember **Genesis 3:4,5**). Peter thought Jesus to be a Messiah who would be king, not a suffering Messiah, the Shepherd who would suffer for His sheep. The new self-esteem reformation echoes Peter’s misguided advice. “You must think of yourself first, you must love yourself before you can love others, you must quit thinking of any negative scenarios (as Jesus was when contemplating the cross) and think good, positive thoughts about yourself, etc.” is the counsel now given Christians. Peter’s faulty guidance now passes as simple common sense. Remember that **Philippians 2:5-8** makes Jesus’ attitude as shown by His self-sacrificing action normative for Christians!

The teaching that Jesus gave in reply to Peter is the Biblical principle about the believer’s relationship to “self.” **Matthew 16:24-26** - “*Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to*

come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?’” The nature of sin is such that a most radical solution is necessary - death, even death on a cross. **2Corinthians 5:15** - “*He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.*” This transformation of purpose, from living for self to living for Christ, is at the heart of the Gospel solution to the sin problem. Living out life in this fallen world keeping this purpose in our hearts is difficult enough without the focus on self that is necessary for one to esteem oneself more. **Romans 6:1-8** tells us how the cross deals with our “old self,” it puts it to death. This cannot be reconciled with the idea that we do not think highly enough about ourselves and should love and esteem “self” more. Therefore there is no Biblical justification for the proposed self-esteem reformation.

Popular Self Theory is

Though the Bible does not validate a self-esteem reformation, perhaps modern science proves the need to get Christianity “up to speed” with modern discoveries. Dr. Schuller asks, “Are we aware that theology has failed to accommodate and apply proven insights in human behavior as revealed by twentieth-century psychologists.”⁹ Dr. Paul Vitz shows in his book **Psychology As Religion**, that the theories of “self” promoted by many prominent, twentieth century psychological theorists (upon which most modern, Christianized psychological theories depend) are not proven “facts” of science. They are speculative theories that lack the proper, controlled, scientific demonstration to be called “facts.”¹⁰ Secular science is far less unified around the theories of the self-theorists than are some in the nominal church. Paul Vitz has a chapter entitled “Selfism as Bad Science.” He begins the chapter by stating, “From the description of the

preceding chapter it is no doubt becoming clear that self-theory is a widely popular, secular, and humanistic ideology or ‘religion,’ not a branch of science.”¹¹

Psychologist David G. Myers wrote a book entitled **The Inflated Self** that contains vivid descriptions of experiments and observations of life circumstances that consistently show that humans are motivated by selfish and self-serving motives and that these can be exacerbated by various situations (ones where the opportunity and reward for self-serving behavior are the greatest and the restraints the least).¹² He gives examples of the self-serving bias of people in which they take personal credit for any positive achievement and shift the blame for failure. He states:

In experiments that require two people to cooperate in order to make money, most individuals blame their partner when the couple fails to cooperate. This finding illustrates a tendency evident in the most ancient of attributions: Adam’s excuse that “The woman you gave me. . .” Students exhibit this self-serving bias. Researchers have found that after receiving an examination grade, those who do well tend to accept personal credit by judging the exam as a valid measure of their competence. Those who do poorly are likely to criticize the exam as a poor indicator.¹³

This is the very picture the Bible gives us, as Myers shows in his reference to Adam. Self-justification and attributing blame for personal failure to others is a part of the fallen nature of humans. We need the conviction of the Holy Spirit to halt this process and confront us with the need for repentance and forgiveness.

Myers cites a College Board survey of

a million high school seniors who were asked, “‘how you feel you compare with other people your own age in certain areas of ability.’ Judging from their responses in the most recent year for which data are available, it appears that America's high school students are not racked with inferiority feelings. In ‘leadership ability,’ 70% rated themselves above average, two percent as below average.”¹⁴ In other cases, people considered themselves better than their peers most of the time and rarely thought they were below average. Yet we are being constantly bombarded with the notion that low self-esteem is the pervasive problem facing our youth.

After several chapters citing many studies, experiments, and observations that lead to the conclusion that humans have a “self-serving bias,” David Myers proposes that the Biblical theology of sin agrees with what can be seen in human interactions:

... we are all susceptible to the words of the Serpent: “you will be like God.” Sin is thus estrangement from God and devotion to finite realities - our career, our groups, our children, or any of many such idols. If this is indeed the root of the spiritual problem, its implications are profound. First, sin is not peripheral to our existence: the corruption emanates from the very core of our being as we center our existence on false securities. . . This religious understanding that evil is inherent in us - an inevitable corruption of our nature - is now paralleled by the scientific idea that selfishness, escalating greed, and the other social and cognitive sources of evil are intrinsic to our biological and social existence.¹⁵

If this is true, then having a high sense of self-esteem could not possibly remedy the problem. The “self” we love, cherish, esteem, and nurture is innately prone to evil, autonomous, and idolatrous attitudes and actions. If Vitz and Myers who each wrote as professors of psychology are right, then the self theorists have some problems with their theories and promoting “self” in its various manifestations as a therapy or theology is not based on “proven insights” of science. The self-esteem reformation has two

major problems, its lack of Biblical support and its dependence on twentieth-century self theory that lacks scientific evidence.

Self Hate

A common objection to those of us who find no place for self-esteem as either a Christian teaching or therapeutic practice is that some people quite obviously do hate themselves. If they hate themselves, then they must need more self-esteem to remedy the problem. Let us examine the major premise, that many people hate themselves. On the surface this seems to be the case - if suicide, depression, person testimony about self-hate, and the fact that many people wish they were in some condition other than the one they are in now are accounted as evidence for self-hate.

In this discussion, we are searching for **motivations**. **2Corinthians 5:15** and many other Biblical passages that pertain to this issue are about motivations. That someone may have the **feeling** of being extremely unhappy or disgusted with themselves can be admitted. This does not prove, however, at such times these individuals are not subject to the self-centered and self-seeking bias that motivates fallen humans. Others have pointed this out. Dave Hunt states:

No one hates *himself*, but he may hate his circumstances or appearance or lack of ability. The very fact that we dislike our appearance or lament our inability or become upset when people or circumstances abuse us is proof that we love and esteem ourselves, for if we did not esteem ourselves we would not care, and if we hated ourselves we would be glad when things go against us.¹⁶

Used in its strongest sense, it is true that one would not feel bad when something terrible happened to someone he or she hated. Even used in a relatively weak sense as meaning “to not support, to have disregard for” as is often used in sports when one “hates” a certain opposing

team, one never feels badly that the team he or she hates lost the game. People do not wish that the team they hate had better players or could win a championship. Yet those who claim they hate themselves cite such things as wishing they looked better, were smarter, more successful, or had more friends, as reasons for their “self-hate.” Dave's point is valid, people do not wish these things for individuals they hate.

Often, what is “hated” is the negative circumstance in which we have found ourselves or negative personal traits we wish could be different. These feelings are better explained by underlying **selfish** motives than my true self-hate. The best evidence for self-hate may be that of suicide; but even that can be explained by other motivational causes. Not to belittle the plight of those who tragically turn to suicide or attempted suicide, but it is possible that hopelessness, extremely painful circumstances, or an unwillingness to live the life God has put us here to live can create self-destructive

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thoughts.

Even the self-destructive demoniac of **Mark 5** cried out to Jesus, first still under the demonic influences and then after his deliverance (**verses 6-8,18**). He wanted and needed help. Had he been motivated by self-hate, the same objection would apply, people do not seek help for those they truly hate. Another point to consider is that extreme and rare pathological conditions (whose causes may be organic or demonic) do not demonstrate the claim that people by nature do not love or esteem themselves enough and need to be taught self-esteem as a remedy. We are searching for motives here and demonic or organic causes are not the same as the attitude of self-hate.

Self-hate is not really an endemic loathing of the self, but preoccupation with self in one of its varieties of manifestation. We love and nurture self, but hate the unpleasant circumstances, lack

of fulfillment, lack of gifting, or other matters in which we might compare ourselves to others and find ourselves wanting. Self always craves and never finds total fulfillment. We may hate that fact, but are trapped in the desire for self-fulfillment and the nagging preoccupation with self that only the cross can remedy.

David Myers points to Paul's admonition to the Philippians to "in humility count others better than yourselves," and remarks, "Yet, the true end of humility is not self-contempt (which still leaves people concerned with themselves). To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, humility does not consist in handsome people trying to believe they are ugly, and clever people trying to believe they are fools. . . True humility is more like self-forgetfulness than false modesty."¹⁷

A major problem with identifying self-hate as the "disease" and self-esteem as the "cure" is that it leaves us to manipulate our own self-attitude in futile attempts to find happiness. In the process we lose the joy of serving God, leaving thoughts of self behind for a moment and serving others, or even "getting lost in our work" so that a day goes by so quickly we are amazed. A fellow who came to the Lord at our church some years ago in the midst of horrible trauma and emotional upheaval came to my office some months after some of our initial times of looking together in the Scriptures for answers. He was a truck driver and told me, "I had a tremendous day yesterday, I drove all the way to Green Bay and back and then realized I had not thought about myself once."

That statement reminds me of the nature of most good times people have, they somehow get lost in something (hopefully something good) and escape preoccupation with themselves. William Kirk Kilpatrick describes this in his book **Psychological Seduction**, "We are happiest when we are immersed in a game or a hobby or a conversation and have for the moment forgotten about the pursuit of happiness. That is why an emphasis on self-awareness, a common prescription for happiness, is often self-defeating. Happiness comes more frequently when attention is focused outside the self."¹⁸

Self-hatred and self-esteem are narcissistic brothers that keep those who pursue self-fulfillment on a treadmill that will run indefinitely without supernatural intervention. Some people lead yo-yo lives in which they conversely feel good about self (like the man in **Luke**

12:16-20) or feel badly about self (like the man in **John 5:5-14**) depending upon how self is doing at the moment in comparison with others. I assert that the transformation of motives that happens through repentance and the embracing of the cross is the Biblical answer. "*He who loses his life will find it*" Jesus said. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit and far transcends mere happiness which seems so illusive.

Chosen, Crucified

The church is comprised of people from all categories of human existence who have believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ and thus embraced the offence of the cross. Jesus was despised and rejected by men. People who might have reason to feel badly about themselves if they were to compare themselves by worldly standards to others find healing not through the hopeless task of pulling on their own self-esteem bootstraps; but through God's choice of them in Christ Jesus.

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God. (1Corinthians 1:26-29)

The result of this calling is not a life of self-hate, self-derision, and self-abasement, but a precious, faith filled, transformed life that glorifies God. The self-esteem reformation offers a humanistic reinterpretation of the Christian message that robs it of the power to transform lives. The cross is an instrument of death - an executioner's device, not an inspiring story that can help us dream great dreams for ourselves. To deny one's self, pick up his cross and follow Christ is to die to one life in order to live another. The old life was lived for self, the new one for Christ (**2Corinthians 5:15**). "*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me*" (**Galatians**

2:20). If the church is built upon Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone (**1Peter 2:4-5**) it does not need a new reformation built upon self-esteem.

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End Notes

1. Robert Schuller, Self-Esteem: The New Reformation, (Waco, Word Books, 1982) 38.
2. *ibid.* 15.
3. *ibid.* 98.
4. *ibid.*
5. Paul Brownback, The Danger of Self Love, (Chicago: Moody, 1982) 11,12.
6. Arthur Pink, Exposition of Hebrews, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954) 1003.
7. William Hendriksen, Romans, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 440.
8. A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1931) Vol. IV p 225.
9. *op. cit.* Schuller, 27.
10. Paul Vitz, Psychology as Religion - The Cult of Self-Worship, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 41-44.
11. *ibid.* 37.
12. David Myers, The Inflated Self, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980) chapter 2.
13. *ibid.* 21,22; citing numerous studies to this effect in n. 15.
14. *ibid.* 24.
15. *ibid.* 34,35.
16. Dave Hunt, Beyond Seduction: a Return to Biblical Christianity, (Eugene Oregon: Harvest House, 1987) 170.
17. *op. cit.* Myers, 38.
18. William Kirk Kilpatrick, Psychological Seduction, (Nashville: Nelson, 1983) 62.

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