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A Biblical Philosophy of Self-Image

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A biblical philosophy of self-image will enable a person to cut through the confusion generated by humanistic psychologists and eclectic evangelicals. It will also cause one to function with the proper attitude toward God and in his ministry to others. It will provide the answers in counseling those who truly have a self-image problem. However, to arrive at a biblical philosophy of self-image, a person must know what self-image is. It is not a substance, an entity or a thing which can be pumped up or squashed. Self-image is the result of the conclusions a person reaches when he evaluates himself.

Craig Ellison writes, "Self-esteem is generally considered to be measured by the extent of the discrepancy between perceived self and ideal self for any individual. Therefore, the less discrepancy, the higher self-esteem and vice versa."¹ The perceived self comes from a person's private perceptions and the acceptance of the assessments of others; whereas, the ideal self comes from how a person would like to be and ought to be.

An excellent definition of self-esteem comes from the pen of Stanley Coopersmith:

By self-esteem, we refer to the evaluation which the individual makes and constantly maintains with regard to himself. It expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval and indicates the extent the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitude which the individual holds about himself.²

From this definition John Bettler points out the words evaluation, believes, judgment, constantly, maintains and attitudes. His conclusions are that self-image is a judgment, not a feeling, and it is a judgment which can get locked into a habit of thinking which leads to a resulting behavior.³

An inaccurate self-image can lead to troubling patterns of behavior. God commands the Christian to have an accurate self-image (Rom 12:3; II Cor 13:5). This is especially significant in light of the babel about self-image in secular and Christian circles.

An individual needs to regard himself as capable, significant, successful and worthy.

Babel about Self-image

Today there is a great deal of confusion about self-image. Most of what is being said is the product of humanistic, existential philosophy and psychology. Paul Vitz in *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* writes,

The most important direct source for today's humanistic selfism is Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. First published in 1841, revised in 1843, this work by a left-wing follower of Hegel became widely known for its influential attack on Christianity. Among other later thinkers whose ideas about religion were directly or indirectly affected by Feuerbach were Marx, Nietzsche, Huxley, John Stuart Mill, Freud and Dewey. The tradition of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud leads to Fromm and May, that of Mill, Huxley, and Dewey connects directly to Rogers and Maslow.⁴

With their stress on unconditional love based on humanness, the self-love theorists are presenting a man who is innately good and a love based on being rather than doing. To them, to love oneself is a duty, a prerequisite to relating to God and others. Advocates of this philosophy have deduced that self-love is not selfishness and pride. Paul Brownback responds, "Self-theory is merely the psychological expression of existentialism. The latter asserts that the individual is god. The self-theorist attributes to the individual the god-like quality of being intrinsically loveable."⁵

Accepting this approach to self-image are many evangelical writers and public speakers. They have adopted Carl Rogers' basic structure, with God in the role of the "significant other" whose unconditional acceptance is the key to our positive self-image or self-love.⁶ John Stott points out that these evangelical voices are chanting that a person must love himself at all costs; that self-love needs to be added to love for God and neighbor as a much neglected commandment; and that dire consequences will overcome a person if he refuses to concentrate on self-love efforts.⁷

Among evangelicals who are promoting this "man is everything" stress are Cecil Osborne in *The Art of Learning to Love Yourself*, Ray Ashford in *Loving Yourselves*, Bryan Jay Cannon in *Celebrate Yourself*, Walter Trobisch in *Love Yourself*, H Norman Wright in *Improving Your Self-Image*, Bruce Narramore in *You're*

The Bible opposes "man is everything" and "man is nothing" views.

Someone Special, James Dobson in *Hide or Seek*, Peter Gillquist in *Love Is Now*, Anthony Hoekema in *The Christian Looks at Himself*, Robert Schuller in *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* and others.

There are other evangelicals who follow Keswick theology such as Charles Solomon. They stress the doctrine of total depravity along with the doctrine of sanctification in an unbalanced way. They belong to the "man is nothing school" in their approach to self-image. Although both approaches ("man is everything" and "man is nothing") are unbalanced, there is a bona fide need for an accurate self-image.

Bona Fide Need for an Accurate Self-image

People develop an inappropriate self-image because of sin, faulty theology, poor parent-child relationships, unrealistic expectations, faulty thinking and acceptance of wrong community influences.

People with undeserved low self-esteem lack confidence, have negative thoughts about themselves, feel isolated (unlovable), compensate by working for affirmation from others, take personally every remark or decision someone makes, get angry, feel guilty when they have not done wrong, refuse to stop blaming themselves when God and others have already forgiven them, are lonely, get depressed, are fearful of rejection, get envious or jealous, withdraw from others, have a problem with anorexia, bulimia, gluttony, drunkenness, drug abuse, digestive disorder, high blood pressure or sexual problems, have higher anxiety levels, receive more negative reactions from peers and generally do more poorly in school. Craig Ellison adds,

Finally, those with low self-esteem are more likely to be submissive and dependent, more vulnerable in interpersonal relations, more concerned about what others think of them and more likely to have their feelings hurt.⁸

Joan Guest asserts that a poor self-image often feeds a vicious circle, "The very things we do because we feel worthless tend to make us less desirable to friends and family, thereby cutting us off from their warmth we desperately seek. This cycle can spin a person into a deep depression."⁹

Individuals affected by an inaccurate self-image who are characterized by these symptoms need a correct self-image. However, it is correct at times to have low self-esteem because of

sin which needs to be confessed and forgiven. When forgiveness is recognized, the person's self-esteem is increased.

Since a person's self-evaluation affects his behavior, it is especially important for a Christian who is to have a testimony for Christ to have an accurate self-image. To function according to such a self-image, a Christian needs to understand the relationship of self-image, sin and God.

Beginning of Self-image

God created man in His image and likeness with personality which consists of intellect, emotion and will (Gen 1:26-27). Man was created a moral (Gen 2:16-17; Eph 4:24), social (Gen 2:18; I Cor 10:24) and purposeful being (Gen 1:28; 2:8,15; I Cor 10:31). Before the fall into sin, Adam and Eve's focus was on God. They were God-conscious. After the fall, they became self-conscious, focusing on themselves (Gen 3:7-10). Craig Ellison writes,

The original sin was fundamentally a violation of relationship. It was not only a negating of God's authority and truthfulness, but it was also a negating of his character. In the process of God-negation, humanity, which was made in the image of God, negated itself. We could no longer look at ourselves with unconditional self-regard. In violating our relationship with God, we cut off our central source of self-esteem and became self-centered.¹⁰

Sin caused man to blameshift and to hide from God and each other. To avoid negative self-knowledge and to escape responsibility for breaking the relationship with God, Adam and Eve tried to shift the blame and tried to cover up with fig leaves. Their action blocked off the major sources of self-esteem found in positive relationships with God and others.

After the fall, man is still a moral, social and telic being, but all of these have been affected by sin. Morally, sinful man suppresses the truth (Rom 1:18; I Tim 4:2), obeys some authority even if it is self-authority, and has guilt and guilt feelings. Socially, sinful man is born not belonging and afraid to relate, although he is born to relate. Telically, sinful man substitutes glorifying man by seeking positions, possessions and power in the place of glorifying God.

Sinful man is anthropocentric, not theocentric. He is self-conscious, not God-conscious. To avoid a low self-image, many people delude themselves and use defense mechanisms to increase

Men seek positions, possessions and power instead of seeking to glorify God.

their self-image. Thus, all lost people have a self-image problem—either a depressing self-image or a deluded self-image.

Biblical Way to Have an Accurate Self-image

Luke 9:23 sets forth God's instruction for finding oneself. It reads: "And he said to them all, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." Jesus declares that a person must deny himself. He must say "no" to his way and "yes" to God's way. In the context, Peter was rebuked for advocating his way in opposition to God's way. God's way was for Christ to die for man's sin on the cross, to be buried and to be raised from the dead.

The use of "for" in verses 24, 25 and 26 gives the reason for Jesus' statement in verse 23. Christ does not want man to forfeit or lose himself. He wants man to find out who he really is. John Bettler comments, "Here we see Jesus' vital concern about our personhood. He is telling us how we can find out who we are, how we can keep from losing our identity, how we can keep from forfeiting our true selves."¹¹

Jesus in verse 23 sets forth three steps to discovering a person's true identity. The first step is to repudiate one's own way, aspirations, plans and desires which are against God's way. This is a repudiation of personal autonomy. The second step is to take up the cross daily. This indicates death to one's way daily. It speaks of the sanctification experience of the believer which is growth through life's struggles. The third step is to continually follow Christ. In following Christ as commanded by Him in Matthew 22:37-40, a person will arrive at an accurate self-image by loving God and loving his neighbor. John Stott states,

At that point we reach the ultimate paradox of Christian living that when we lose ourselves in the selfless love of God and neighbor we find ourselves (Mk 8:35). True self-denial leads to true self-discovery.¹²

To this agree the words of Paul Brownback, "The cross to be borne daily is that of self-denial. It is the rejection of self-oriented living so that our lives can be poured out in service to God and others."¹³ To know one's true identity a person needs to receive Christ as Savior and submit daily to the Lordship of Christ by serving God and one's neighbor. This is how to have an accurate self-image.

Matthew 22:37-40 is a key passage in the controversy regarding self-concept. The "man is everything" advocates insist that the words "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" teach that man is commanded to love himself first. Only then can he love his neighbor and God. Walter Trobisch goes so far as to declare it a

The way to have an acceptable self-image is by selflessly serving God and neighbor.

command to love yourself. He writes, "The command to love your neighbor is never given without the command to love yourself."¹⁴ This is faulty exegesis. The passage states that there are only two commands. Jay Adams declares,

The fact that Christ distinguishes but "two commandments" (v 40) is decisive. Had he intended to stress a third (particularly when one of the other two was dependent upon it) He could not have done so by using the language that He employs in this passage.¹⁵

"As yourself" is not a command. It indicates the extent or intensity of action that is to be expressed to one's neighbor. Jesus assumes here that love of self exists. The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:29 indicates this, "No man ever hates his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it." This is parallel to the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12 which reads, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

"Love" in Matthew 22:37-40 is not referring to feelings of love, self-esteem or self-acceptance. The word is *agapao* which speaks of loving conduct or action. Brownback goes back to the Hebrew word *ahab* (Lev 19:18; Dt 7:13) which indicates will and action.¹⁶ Therefore, the love here is not referred to feelings of love or self-esteem, but means selfless conduct for God and neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan proves this by the Samaritan's conduct. John Piper adds,

Furthermore this self-love of which Jesus speaks has nothing to do with the common notion of self-esteem. It does not mean having a good self-image or feeling especially happy with oneself. It means simply desiring and seeking one's own good.¹⁷

Thus Matthew 22:37-40 which is misused by evangelicals who push the love-yourself theme with psychological meaning does contain God's way to having an accurate self-image. It is by selflessly serving God and neighbor. Jesus confirms this in John 12:24-25, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal."

A Christian's love for his neighbor even is to go beyond his own conduct for himself. It is to be sacrificial conduct as Christ

One's worth is judged by what God says, not what man may say.

loved (Jn 13:34). It is a love that is more than love for one's person. It may go to the point of total self-giving (Jn 15:13). This love is manifested in selfless conduct for God and neighbor. It is not feeling-oriented or an emotional evaluation of self as with the advocates of the "man is everything" philosophy.

This emotional self-love is one of the marks of the last days. Paul writing in a condemnatory way points out that people will be "lovers of self" instead of "lovers of God" (II Tim 3:1-4). Selfless loving conduct toward God and others is the opposite of this, and is the way to have an accurate self-image.

Biblical Basis for Evaluation

A Christian's basis of evaluation of oneself should be by God's Word (II Cor 3:18; II Tim 3:16-17; Jas 1:22-24). John Bettler sets forth nine standards from Luke 9; Romans 6, 12; Galatians 3 and Philippians 2 which should be used for evaluation: (1) The believer is to deny himself. This means to repudiate, disown or disown the self who is in opposition to the way of God. This is repudiation of autonomy and is submission to God's way (Lk 9:23). (2) He or she must follow Christ and His way. His way is to be in loving conduct toward God with one's entire being and in such conduct toward one's neighbor (Lk 9:23). (3) He or she must do it daily. This stresses the growth in the Christian life which is a day-to-day struggle (Lk 9:23). (4) A Christian must not dwell on past sins since he or she is dead in Christ (Rom 6:11). Life should be lived in the light of one's union with Christ. It should not be lived in the past. (5) A believer must put on righteousness. He or she must live like those who are alive in Christ. Life is to be lived like one is forgiven (Rom 6:11-13). (6) A saved person must think accurately with respect to his or her gifts (Rom 12:3). (7) He or she should exercise their gifts with the value God placed on them (Rom 12:5-6). (8) Self is to be examined before God and not others. One's worth is judged by what God says and not man (Gal 6:3-5). (9) The Christian is to think as Christ and evaluate self in relation to his ministry to others (Phil 2:3-11).¹⁸ A positive evaluation according to these standards in the Word leads to self-confidence.

Conclusion

A biblical philosophy of self-image is based on God's Word and not psychology. The way for a Christian to have an accurate self-image is to die to his way and to submit to God's way, which is a

daily selfless life lived for God and his neighbor. David Wells correctly concludes:

True self-denial leads to true self-discovery. True self-discovery is finding self not in terms of the self-movement of our culture, but in terms of God's revelation and the life and death of his Son. Such a discovery is the discovery of what it means to be human as God intended us to be. It is the discovery that we can become whole people precisely and only because he is making us holy people. There is no shortcut in all of this. Prescriptions for quick fixes of possibility thinking, of hyped-up self-esteeming, of self-serving puffery, barely even qualify as the proverbial bandaid for the gaping wound.¹⁹

Like Moses who had a self-image problem and changed because of his focus on God and Israel (Ex 3,4), so a Christian to have an accurate self-image must focus on loving God and others.

*A Christian must die to his way and
submit to God's way.*

Notes

¹ Craig W Ellison, ed, *Your Better Self* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publ, 1983) p 3

² John F Bettler, "Gaining an Accurate Self-Image-Part II" *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, VII, No 1 (1984) 44-45

³ *Ibid*, p 45

⁴ Paul C Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ Co, 1977) p 67

⁵ Paul Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982) p 68

⁶ *Ibid*, p 92

⁷ John R W Stott, "Must I Really Love Myself?" *Christianity Today*, May 5, 1978, p 34

⁸ Ellison, *Your Better Self*, p 4

⁹ Joan Lloyd Guest, "Feeling Worthless . . . And How To Get Over It" *His*, Dec 1984, p 2

¹⁰ Ellison, *Your Better Self*, p 7

¹¹ John F Bettler, "Gaining an Accurate Self-Image-Part III" *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, VII, No 2 (1984) 54

¹² Stott, "Must I Really Love Myself?" p 35

¹³ Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, p 151

¹⁴ Walter Trobisch, *Love Yourself* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1976) p 11

¹⁵ Jay E Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973) p 143

¹⁶ Brownback, *The Danger of Self-Love*, p 147

¹⁷ John Piper, "Is Self-Love Biblical?" *Christianity Today*, Aug 12, 1977, p 8

¹⁸ John F Bettler, Counseling and Self-Image class notes, Westminster Theol Seminary, Jan 1985, pp 16-17

¹⁹ David F Wells, "Self-esteem: The New Confusion" *The Reformed Journal* (Oct 1983) p 18

Also See

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People with low self-esteem take remarks personally, get angry, are lonely, get depressed, withdrawn from others.