

Self-Idolatry

An extract from *The Seduction of Christianity*, Chapter 13
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Evangelical Humanism

The idea of man's innate goodness – of the innocent child that resides within us all – is the cornerstone of psychology. Under that sponsorship, evangelical tradition is being replaced by a new humanistic view of man, which ridicules as 'worm theology' the former emphasis upon conviction of sin, repentance, and humanity's unworthiness.

The new gospel of self-esteem has even been embraced by earnest Christian leaders with effective ministries. One of the most highly regarded writes:

"In a real sense, the health of an entire society depends on the ease with which the individual members gain personal acceptance. Thus, whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in twentieth-century America, then widespread 'mental illness', neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur... [emphasis in original]" [1].

This idea that low self-esteem is rampant and the root of almost all problems is confidently stated as though it were proven fact. Yet many other psychologists would strongly disagree. Although the author sincerely desires to be biblical, he has based his ministry upon a belief that was not derived from Scripture, but is only one of many conflicting psychological theories. Selfism is also at the heart of the entire success/motivation world. One of the best-known Christian leaders in that field writes:

"As you accept yourself, you will see yourself as a person who truly deserves 'the good things in life' ... Shakespeare said it, 'This above all, to thine own self be true' ... Once you accept yourself for your true worth, then the symptoms of vulgarity, profanity, sloppiness, promiscuity, etc. disappear. There, my friend, goes your problem" [2].

This seductive gospel of selfism is now preached by prominent pastors and proclaimed by well-known conference speakers. This selfist psychology dressed up in Christian terminology would be easily recognised for the obvious fraud it is, were it not for the fact that what is allegedly 'God's truth' in psychology has been granted authority at least equal to the Bible.

The Scriptures differ with the current assessment that many of mankind's problems arise from a deficiency of self-esteem or self-love. In contrast, the apostle Paul warns that self-love in the end times will be at the root of such problems. Are we seeing this prophecy fulfilled in our day?

"This know also, that in the last days perilous times will come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy. Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good. Traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:1-4).

Some of the most sincere servants of the Lord are accepting ideas completely at odds with what evangelicals stood for only a few years ago. What makes this problem difficult to unmask is the fact that psychologists and psychiatrists are usually sincerely devoted to helping other people. ...

But far from being supported by the Bible, this new 'self-esteem' theology/psychology is opposed by Scripture. God chose Moses, who was "very meek [humble], above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3), to confront the mightiest emperor on earth and to deliver Israel, so that God and not man would get the glory. Moses shrank from this call, considering himself incapable. Instead of giving him months of psychological counselling to bolster his poor self-image and build up his self-esteem, God promised to be with Moses and to work through him miraculously (Exodus 3). Today we are being robbed of the presence and power of God (that Moses and others like him knew) by being told that the lack of joy and power in our lives is due to a poor self-image.

The only correct self-image comes from viewing God, not ourselves, and it isn't flattering – but it changes lives and turns us from self to Him. It was when Isaiah "saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" that he cried, "Woe is me! ... I am a man of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:1-5). This glimpse of God's glory, and his own unworthiness in comparison, changed Isaiah's life. The turning point in Job's life came when he said, "now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes ... So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning..." (Job 42:5,6,12). So it has been with all men and women of God in the past, but today such an experience would be considered psychologically damaging to one's self-esteem.

Old and New Principles

Once psychology is presumed to contain parts of God's truth that are missing from the Bible, its pronouncements must be accepted as equally authoritative. The practical effect is to give psychology the final word, for those who understand only the Bible but not psychology are unqualified to judge this new truth. ...

One thing is certain, however: The Bible never urges self-acceptance, self-love, self-assertion, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-forgiveness, nor any of the other selfisms that are so popular today. The answer to depression is not to accept self, but to turn from self to Christ.

A preoccupation with self is the very antithesis of what the Bible teaches, and would be unknown in the church today were it not for the seductive influence of selfist psychologies. God made man in His own image. One thinks immediately of a mirror, which has *one purpose only*: to reflect a reality *other than its own*. It would be absurd for a mirror to try to develop a 'good self-image'. It is equally absurd and certainly unbiblical, for humans to attempt to do so. If there is something wrong with the image in the mirror, then the only solution is for the mirror to get back in a right relationship with the one whose image it was designed to reflect. So it is with man who is designed to reflect the image of God. And to whatever extent we focus upon a self-image, no matter how sincerely, we are robbing ourselves and God of that relationship we must have with Him if we are rightly to reflect His image.

There seems to be no stopping the proliferation of these unbiblical, illogical, and unsupportable theories. It should be clear that none of today's popular selfisms delivers from self, which is our real enemy; but, on the contrary, self is being strengthened with greater esteem, confidence, assertion, etc. to reign over its kingdom. The only thing the Bible tells us to do with self is to deny it through accepting Christ's death as our very own. That used to be sufficient for the apostles and early church. It is implied that it doesn't work anymore. To deny ourselves will shatter our fragile self-esteem and thereby destroy our sense of "authentic personhood." The following suggestions from a Christian author are representative of much that is popular today:

“To build your self-image, make a list of your positive qualities on a card and keep it for handy reference ... Brag on yourself from time to time. Get in your own corner... You should also set aside a few minutes each day for the sole purpose of deliberately looking yourself in the eye [in a mirror]. As you do this, repeat some positive affirmations of things you have done ... Then repeat many of the things other people have said to you or about you that were positive ... ” [3].

Strangely enough, too few within church leadership seem uncomfortable with the fact that Christianity is beginning to sound much like humanistic psychology. Compare what Christian leaders are saying with the following by Los Angeles psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden, author of *The Psychology of Self* and *Honoring the Self*. Sin, even criminal violence is viewed as a ‘psychological problem.’ No one is willfully doing evil; we are all innocent victims of a disease for which we cannot be held accountable. A plague of ‘poor self-concept’ is sweeping our world and that is the cause of all that has gone wrong. Explains Branden:

“I cannot think of a single psychological problem – from depression to fear of intimacy to criminal violence – that is not traceable to poor self-concept ... Until we are willing to honor the self and proudly proclaim our right to do so, we cannot fight for self-esteem – and we cannot achieve it” [4].

In contrast to the new ideas that have been borrowed from selfist psychology, William Law reveals the view that the church held for centuries:

“Men are dead to God because they are living to Self. Self-love, self-esteem and self-seeking are the essence and the life of pride; and the Devil, the father of pride, is never absent from these passions, nor without an influence in them. Without a death to self, there is no escape from Satan’s power over us...

“To discover the deepest root and iron strength of pride and self-exaltation, one must enter into the secret chamber of man’s soul, where the Spirit of God, who alone gives humility and meek submission, was denied through Adam’s sin...

“Here in man’s innermost being, self had its awful birth, and established its throne, reigning over a kingdom of secret pride ... This is that satanic, natural self that must be denied and crucified, or there can be no disciple of Christ. There is no plainer interpretation than this that can be put upon the words of Jesus, ‘Except a man deny self, and take up the cross and follow me, he cannot be my disciple’” [5].

An epidemic of Humility?

Not only is it the clear teaching of the Bible, but even non-Christians know in their hearts that the besetting sin of humanity is pride. We all tend by nature to think too highly of ourselves. That long-established biblical truth, however, has lately been discovered to be in error. Enlightened by psychology, pastors and Christian leaders are now proclaiming that the besting sin of the human race is not pride after all, but humility. We don’t think too highly of ourselves, but too poorly. We all have a bad self-image, or low self-esteem, from which nothing but psycho-therapeutic rituals, which have been Christianized for the church, can rescue us.

But this advice from psychology is in direct conflict with Philippians 2:3: “In lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.” Paul’s clear warning in Romans 12:3 not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to is somehow turned around to mean that the greatest danger we face is not to think highly enough of ourselves.

Under this new inspiration that has come to us through the apostles of psychology, Christian leaders are devoting sermons, seminars, and even entire books to the gospel of self-esteem. If it exists, such an “epidemic of inferiority” would be a first in the history of humanity and no doubt was caused by the flood of lectures, sermons, and books warning about it. Instead of being salt and light, the church has bought into the world’s philosophy of success and honoured its stereotype of the self-assured and self-assertive man or woman exuding self-acceptance and a good self-image.

Craig W. Ellison edited *Self-Esteem*, a compilation of the writings of leading Christian psychologists on this subject, published by the Christian Association for Psychological Studies. Ironically enough, the modern idea that these men have accepted and preached not only opposes the truth of God, but is contradicted by the findings of psychology itself. In *The Inflated Self*, psychologist David G. Myers points out:

“Jean-Paul Codol conducted twenty experiments with French people ranging from twelve-year-old school-children to adult professionals. Regardless of those involved and the experimental methods, the people’s self-perceived superiority was present consistently ...

“[American] students typically rate themselves in the top of the class ... Judging from their responses ... [to self-rating tests], it appears that America’s high school students are not racked with inferiority feelings. In ‘leadership ability’, 70% rated themselves above average, 2% below average ... In ‘ability to get along with others’, zero percent of the 829,000 students who responded rated themselves below average, 60% rated themselves in the top 10%, and 25% saw themselves among the top 1%!...

“Note how radically at odds this conclusion is with the popular wisdom that most of us suffer from low self-esteem ... Preachers who deliver ego-boosting pep talks to audiences who are supposedly plagued with miserable self-images are preaching to a problem that seldom exists” [6].

From Self to Christ

... What we really need is to turn from any preoccupation with self to Christ. God redeemed us because of who He is, not because of who we are or even what He could make us become. God loves us because He is love, not because we are loveable or lovely. Here is a solid basis for deep confidence. The new teaching that God valued me so highly that Christ died for me may make me initially feel more secure, but that feeling will last only so long as I can continue to have this sense of self-worth. In turning from the One who loves me to myself as the object of His love, I am being robbed of the true joy and freedom that is found in Him alone. To know that God loves me not because of who I am but because of who He is, really sets me free and gives me a security that the gospel of self-esteem can never produce.

Footnotes

[1] James Dobson, *Hide or Seek* (Revell, 1974), pp. 12-13.

[2] Zig Ziglar, *See You at the Top* (Pelican, 1975), pp. 90-91.

[3] *Ibid.* pp. 84.

[4] *Brain/Mind Bulletin*, September 10, 1984, ‘Nathaniel Branden Rises to the Defense of Self’, p. 3.

[5] William Law, *The Power of the Spirit* (CLC, 1971), ed. Dave Hunt, pp. 141-44.

[6] David G. Myers, *The Inflated Self* (The Seabury Press, 1980), pp. 23-24.