

The Roots and Fruits of Selfism

Extract from the book
Beyond Seduction: A Return to Biblical Christianity, Chapter 8
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When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat (Genesis 3:6)

The prohibition against taking from or adding to God's Word is consistently implied throughout Scripture, and at times it is stated explicitly, as in the following admonition by Solomon: "Every word of God is pure. ... Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar" (Proverbs 30:5,6). No other reason should be needed for rejecting the claim that psychology contains parts of "God's truth" necessary for bringing God's Word up-to-date. The Bible ends with Christ's promise to "come quickly", preceded by this explicit and sober warning:

"If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book; and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book" (Revelation 22:18,19).

The Ancient Roots of Cultism/Selfism

Unfortunately, the tendency to disregard God's clearly stated commands lurks in every heart and lies at the root of most human problems. It began in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were the first to take liberties with God's Word. They had no written Scriptures, but God had spoken to them personally and apparently audibly: "They heard the voice of the Lord God. ... I heard thy voice in the garden" (Genesis 3:8,10). We know nothing of the marvelous insights which God must have shared with this pair, but we do know that He commanded them not to eat of one particular tree in the Garden. God considered this of such great importance that the penalty for disobedience was death.

"That old serpent called the Devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world" (Revelation 12:9), was immediately at work in the Garden of Eden providing what has ever since been the most effective rationale for legitimizing disobedience: the *reinterpretation* of what God has said to bring it into line with human desire. Questioning God's command, Satan perverted its meaning, turned the death penalty into a promise of godhood, and persuaded Eve to accept his innovative and appealing interpretation of God's Word.

Eve had found a 'prophet' whose twisted but appealing perversion of truth was irresistible. The Bible warns that the time will come when the church will be full of such teachers who "shall turn away their [the people's] ears from the truth..." (2 Timothy 4:4). The people, however, are equally guilty, for it is they who "heap to themselves" such false teachers by supporting and following them. Personal accountability cannot be escaped, and certainly God held Eve accountable.

Every cult has its origins in the same deception, voiced by a guru or prophet who pretends to have a new or exclusive insight into what God has *really* said. And the most seductive false prophets serve up on a different platter the same lie which Eve believed and which we each want to hear: that we can escape God's judgment and its consequent suffering, sickness, and death. Through being initiated into an esoteric knowledge that opens the door to our own godhood we can control our own destiny. Somehow we can be like God.

The Evil Origins of Selfism

Satan's seduction of Eve was the original appeal to *self*. "You can be like the gods" (or "like God", depending upon the translation) was the seductive promise. Something inside Eve responded to that. It was then that "self had its awful birth, and established its throne" [1], said William Law. "It is man's dreadful fall from the life of God in his soul that has given birth to self and the deceit of pride" [2]. Calling sinful self "one of the greatest curses in life", Lloyd-Jones said, "It is a result of the

Fall" [3]. Eve succumbed to the same temptation by which her seducer had earlier deceived himself, to his own destruction. Of this once beautiful, wise, and good being, Scripture declares:

Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God. ... Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth ... perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee (Ezekiel 28:12-15).

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning. ... Thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God ... I will be like the Most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit (Isaiah 14:12-15).

Here was the birth of the first new theology and the forerunner of all the false theologies that have followed. Each one has been inspired by the same evil genius who is the "god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4). Satan's boast, "I will be like the Most High!" was a rejection of monotheism (belief in one God) and the assertion of polytheism (belief in many gods). Satan cannot be accused of atheism. He didn't deny God's *existence*, but challenged God's *uniqueness* by his self-exalting ambition to be *like* Him. Let us not accuse Lucifer of desiring to be *greater* than God; he only aspired to become a god himself, in God's class, with all power at his disposal.

Lucifer's fall presents some solemn lessons. It was the very wisdom and power which God had given him that corrupted Satan: He began to look upon it as his own, something that *he* possessed intrinsically. This secret pride was instantly known to the Most High, and in that moment the wisest and most beautiful and powerful being ever created lost his position in heaven and became the archenemy of God and the epitome of evil. Let every man take warning! The moment we think we are or have something intrinsically good in and of ourselves we have become partners with Satan in his pride. If it was pride in his beauty ("Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty" - Ezekiel 28:17) that corrupted Lucifer's great wisdom, how much more easily would we of lesser wisdom be corrupted by finding beauty - moral, physical, or intellectual - within ourselves. It was certainly not a "negative self-image" that was Satan's downfall, but a very "positive" one. William Law declared:

"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. ... Every son of Adam is in the service of self, regardless of education or position in life, until a humility that comes solely from heaven has become his redemption through the indwelling Christ" [4].

The Cosmic Conspiracy

Satan seems to have seen in the human race a means of furthering his claim to equality with God. Judging from the dispute between God and Satan over Job's loyalty to God and the reason behind it, mankind apparently plays a peculiar role in this battle. Satan must have decided that Eve would be easier than Adam to deceive with the promise of godhood. Of course, he didn't tell her that she would be a counterfeit god, nor did Eve realize that the elite club of 'gods' she was joining were demonic beings who were already under the judgment of the Most High.

Although Adam was not deceived (1 Timothy 2:14), he joined in the rebellion, apparently in order not to lose his wife. In shame they were banished from God's presence and paradise and from the tree of life, whose fruit otherwise would have kept them alive forever. God would not perpetuate man in his fallen condition. He did, however, promise that one day "the seed of the woman" (i.e. the virgin-born Messiah) would "bruise the serpent's head" and thus provide a just means of forgiveness for rebels who were willing to receive it.

This brief scenario introduced in the Bible's first few pages sets the stage for everything else that Scripture has to say and presents a plot so intriguing that it far surpasses the most ingenious novel ever written by man. Not confined to earth, the breathtaking drama sweeps across the galaxies to the very throne of God in a gigantic battle for control of the universe. What makes this classic story more than fascinating is the fact that this same cosmic struggle rages in every human heart and involves the eternal destiny of each one of us. We have all fallen victim to the proud delusion that destroyed Lucifer and by means of which he has attempted to drag the entire universe with him into the lake of fire, thereby hoping to thwart God's plans and love. Francis Schaeffer attempted to awaken Christians to the reality of this battle and the vital role they must play:

"Do we really believe that we are engaged in this cosmic battle? Do we really believe that there are 'powers of this dark world' which rule our age? ... The primary battle is a spiritual battle in the heavenlies ... but it is equally a battle here on earth ... in the visible world, in the minds of men and women, and in every area of human culture. ... But if we to win the battle on the stage of human history, it will take ... a life committed to Christ, founded in truth, lived in righteousness and grounded in the gospel" [5].

Our only hope is to stand in the victory that Christ has already won on the cross. Nor is our battle with "flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12). It is equally important, however, to recognize the horrible truth that Satan and his minions have an ally within our won hearts, which will betray us into their hands unless our sinful self is put to death through our identification with Christ in His death on our behalf upon the cross. Giving the secret of victory, John wrote:

"The great dragon was cast out, that old serpent called the Devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world. ... And they [the saints] overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto death" (Revelation 12:9,11).

What is Self?

"The whole trouble in life", declared Lloyd-Jones, "is ultimately a concern about self" [6]. Taking a different view, one of the all-time best-selling Christian authors has long portrayed Christianity as an "adventure of self-discovery" that helps believers to "become aware of [their] innate goodness" [7]. This kind of teaching has become so popular that many Christians have forgotten that self is their biggest enemy. Unfortunately, the influence of psychology in the church has led to a preoccupation with and glorification of self.

Logically we ought to define self before discussing it further. That is not so easily done. The Bible gives no definition of self, and a dictionary says something like "one's own person as distinct from all others", which isn't very helpful. It tells us nothing *about* self, except that it is an exclusionary term - *myself* refers exclusively to me in distinction to all other beings. Thus, to be selfish is to put *myself* ahead of *yourself*. One can easily see that Eve put *herself* ahead of God and Adam. Yet such an attitude, due to the influence of humanistic psychology, is commended today not only in the secular world but in the church as well. One evangelical leader declared:

"I hope my wife will never divorce me, because I love her with all my heart. But if one day she feels that I am minimizing her or making her feel inferior or in any way standing in the light that she needs to become the person that God meant her to be, I hope she'll feel free to throw me out even if she's one hundred. There is something more important than our staying married, and it has to do with integrity, personhood, and purpose" [8].

Such false "integrity" dishonors God, His Word, and the marriage vows in order to be "true to oneself". This is the very self-centeredness that began in Eden and has been recognized since then as the root of evil, but is now being glorified as the answer to our problems due to the influence of psychology.

Humanistic psychologist Carl Roger's selfism has heavily influenced Christian psychology. Explaining why he was not able to give his wife of many years the attention she needed and should have expected from him in the last months of her terminal illness, Rogers writes:

"I realized that it was necessary for my survival to live *my* life, and that this must come first, even though Helen was so ill" [9].

What Satan seduced Eve into was one big self-trip. She was tempted with the thought of how delicious the forbidden fruit would taste to *her*, how wise it would make *her*, and how glorious was the godhood *she* would achieve. She never thought she was doing *evil*. As McCandlish Phillips has so well said, "One of Satan's tactics is to persuade men to disobey God on the promise that they shall obtain good by it" [10]. Eve was simply learning the great importance of *looking out for number one*. Her motivation was *self-interest* and *self-satisfaction*, and it took a lot of *self-assertion*, all qualities that are honored today as essential for "getting ahead" and being one's "own person".

Totally absorbed in what *she* would get out of eating this wonderful fruit, Eve stifled any concern for what she *ought* to do. There was no *ought* at all: no regard for duty, moral commitment, or restraint upon her desires - no real concern for anyone but herself. Eve threw out honor and obedience as though she owed nothing to the One who had created and lovingly placed her in this beautiful garden. Eve trampled loyalty and love and trust in her selfish stampede toward what would today be called self-realization or self-actualization. The end was so *good* that surely the means of achieving it could not be wrong. Her decision was totally *self*-centered and therefore doomed her to guilt and sorrow and death.

From that tragic moment her life became a living death in which we all share - the frustrating daily attempt to deny the obvious truth that fulfillment is not found in self but in God, not in what *I* want and think is best, but in what *He* has so lovingly and wisely ordained. The tragic consequences of this choice remain with us all today. Cut off by his own self-will from his Creator, man is like a fish out of water, gasping for air, struggling for life, writhing, dying - and madly grasping at any straw that promises an escape from God's just judgment and the finding of a *self*-satisfied life instead.

Denying a "Hateful" Idol

There is no need to speculate what kind of fruit Eve ate or how beautiful and tempting it looked. The details are immaterial. To Eve it held the key to realizing her full potential, but it was an act of deliberate disobedience. And disobedience, as we all know, is an act of *self*-assertion in *self*-interest. Satan had seduced Eve into the first *selfish* act in human history. Nor is it an overstatement to say that *self* is the root of *sin*. J. Gregory Mantle calls self a "hateful idol" and speaks of those who are obsessed with self-esteem and self-love and "love to worship at the shrine of self" [11].

The seventeenth-century Scottish preacher Samuel Rutherford, so well-known for his inspiring letters, wrote:

"But alas! that idol, that whorish creature *myself* is the master-idol we all bow to. What hurried Eve headlong upon the forbidden fruit, but that wretched thing *herself*? What drew that brother-murderer to kill Abel? That untamed *himself*. ...

Every man blames the devil for his sins; but the great devil, the house-devil of every man, the house-devil that eateth and lieth in every man's bosom, is that idol that killeth all, *himself*.

Oh! blessed are they who can deny themselves, and put Christ in the place of themselves! O sweet word: 'I live no more, but Christ liveth in me!'" [12].

Although we cannot define self any more than we can define soul or being or beauty, we can clearly see where self was first manifested, how it happened, and the eternal result. We can also see that self not only defines one person as distinct from all others, but it also defines man as distinct from God. What the Bible seems to mean by self is man cut off from God, acting and possessing independently. This is why Christ made the denial of self a condition to becoming His disciple and why there is a fatal flaw in the theology of self-esteem.

We must also distinguish between a humanistic self-denial and a biblical denial of self. The first is self still on the throne but denying itself certain pleasures; the second is the death of self through our identification with Christ in His death for our sin. If self is not put to death, it will deify itself. "Pride", said Chambers, "is the deification of self" [13]. See the contrast in Christ, the perfect Man, who said:

"My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34).

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do. ... I can of mine own self do nothing. ... For I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him that sent me" (John 5:19,30; 6:38).

"The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself; but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works" (John 14:10)

Unfortunately, the glorification of self that has entered into the church through the influence of Christian psychologists has turned Christian values upside down. One Christian leader tells how involvement in a therapy group allowed him to "deal with" - psychologically, but not biblically - long-buried anger against "God, the church, his father, himself and his wife. ..." His wife went through the same experience, "got in touch with her own anger", and, he confesses, "it was the beginning of the end for us as a couple. ..." They were divorced, but with the new selfist views firmly implanted, they decided that it was in fact, "a healthy new beginning for each of [them]" [14]. Decrying such folly, one writer has commented:

"The striking thing is that [he] discerns in this a principle for Christian living. [He] describes himself as an Abraham, called by faith to leave the security of marriage to embark on a spiritual pilgrimage. [He] consciously values an undefined search for individual, emotional authenticity over the Christian call to commitment, faithfulness, and perseverance in marriage" [15].

It is saddening that increasing numbers of Christians, through believing that psychology is scientific, are embracing beliefs which even non-Christians recognize to be fallacious and dangerous and warn against. One recent book resulting from five years of study by a team of researchers from a variety of universities warns that "the American 'cult of the individual' is destroying our ability to remain connected" with family and friends and moral values. The study indicates that "Americans in therapy frequently 'give birth to the self'," causing them to "lack a larger moral fiber on which to base decisions, other than 'present whim'." The authors go on to say:

"One begins to develop values on the basis of wishes and wants, what things he's willing to give to get it and what he's not willing to give to get it, establishing a perception of the world that has more to do with how things work than how they ought to work. ... The question, 'Is this right or wrong?' becomes 'Is this going to work for me now?'" [16].

Exonerating Self

In the footsteps of his ancestors, modern man still conspires to recreate the Eden that self lost: by legislation, technology, and psychotherapy (and its many self-help offshoots) as well as through the revival of mystical and occult practices. If, consequently, anything goes wrong in our schemes (and it inevitable does), the moral culpability is not the individual's. It is the fault of 'society', or circumstances, or the abuse that one suffered as a child. Such arguments attempt to deny the loss of Eden and the sin that caused it. It is a mad scheme to shift the blame from ourselves, to deny the obvious - that we are the ones who have destroyed our world - and if all else fails, to find the defendant (ourselves) "not guilty by reason of insanity".

Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz searched all of the reports and findings generated by the murder/suicide of 900 people in Guyana and found that the politicians, journalists, lawyers, psychiatrists, and other experts had universally concluded that Jim Jones was insane. Commenting upon this conclusion, Herbert Schlossberg writes:

"New York columnist James Reston seemed to speak for everyone when he said that Jones was an obviously demented man. Yet Szasz could find no evidence that anyone had doubted Jones's sanity before the incident. In fact, a gala fund-raising dinner in his honor, endorsed by 75 prominent leaders, was scheduled in San Francisco for December 2, 1978, and had to be cancelled after the massacre.

Szasz's explanation makes more sense ... 'I think he was an evil man.' ...

The significant point is that so many people concluded that a monstrous act like Jones's had to be an act of insanity; they no longer believed, if they ever had, that evil acts are done by evil people" [17].

David G. Meyers, himself a professor of psychology, points out that "research psychologists have not said much about evil. In *Psychological Abstracts* the word evil is not an index term and, of the nearly 300,000 titles cited between 1967 and 1978, it appears in only seventeen" [18]. Such blatant and blind bias has even infected Christians and affected the proclamation of the gospel, which now must be 'positivized' because man is basically good and only needs to be awakened to that fact. As one critic of the New Reformation has written, "He [Schuller] says we convert people not by telling them what they truly are (sinners), but 'By telling them they *are* what we wish they would become'" [19]. One of today's most widely heard Christian leaders attacks what he calls a "basic defect in much of modern Christianity":

"What is that basic flaw? I believe it is the failure to proclaim the gospel in a way that can satisfy every person's deepest need - one's spiritual hunger for glory. Rather than glorify God's highest creation - the human being - Christian liturgies, hymns, prayers, and scriptural interpretations have often insensitively and destructively offended the dignity of the person. ..." [20].

We can only wonder what 'Christ' the new gospel wins men to, when instead of telling them that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save *sinners*" (1 Timothy 1:15), its goal is to preserve their dignity. How different the approach found in Joseph Alleine's *Alarm To The Unconverted*. His success at winning souls was considered exceptional even among the outstanding Puritans of his day. Consider the following earnest appeal from Alleine, who died in 1662 at the age 34 after being twice imprisoned for his faith:

"I am not baiting my hook with rhetoric, nor fishing for your applause, but for your souls. My work is not to please you, but to save you. ...

If I were to please your ears, I would sing another song. ... But how much better are the wounds of a friend than the fair speeches of the harlot. ...

I know, if we succeed not with you, you are lost; if we cannot get your consent to arise and come away, you will perish forever. No conversion - no salvation!" [21].

Because he is made in the image of God, man can never be happy, try what he will, unless he is holy in Christ. Christianity stands in stark contrast to the empty psychological solutions being offered today, and we dishonor our Lord and mislead the world when we lower the gospel to a level that caters to ungodly tastes.

Paradise Lost, Heaven Gained

It was Eve's "spiritual hunger for glory" that got her into trouble, and God was apparently unconcerned about "offending the dignity" of Adam and Eve and under no illusion about the need to restore their shattered self-esteem. In expelling the guilty pair from the Garden, God was acting both justly and in love. He kept man from the tree of life because it would not have been an act of love but a capitulation to man's self-indulgence to perpetuate him in his fallen condition. One of the marks of those who have truly met Christ is their willingness to see good in what they otherwise would have complained against. A young man recently wrote from prison:

"I have been saved and Spirit-filled for a little over a year ... [and] have had such a hunger for spiritual teaching as only a fellow Spirit-filled Christian can appreciate. ... I've been locked up nearly twenty months, and believe it or not, I thank God for it, because otherwise I'd never had stood still long enough to hear the Gospel and respond to it" [22].

It is popular today to speak of 'unconditional love', often interpreted to mean 'Love me but don't correct me'. Yet love does not operate in a vacuum; true love disciplines and corrects: "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth" (Hebrews 12:6). Love speaks and applies the truth. Anything less than this is not love at all, but mere sentimentality. If love fails to act according to truth and justice it has lost its virtue and has sunk to the level of lust or insanity or blind indulgence. In God's response to the rebellion of Adam and Eve we see real love in action. God's love does not violate truth or justice, and for God to provide the pardon that His love desires to dispense, man must confess his sin, repent, and receive the remedy that God has provided in Jesus Christ.

The final hell in which all unrepentant rebels will one day find themselves is the state of independence from divine standards that they demanded and the freedom they insisted upon to do their 'own thing'. Too late they will realize fully the insatiable loneliness of self cut off completely from its Creator and thus from the source of life, love, joy, and all that is worthwhile. Engulfed in hopeless despair, man will discover at last that he is a false god who has betrayed himself and is now alone and unable to climb out of the eternal grave that he himself has dug.

Heaven is man's return to paradise, which is essentially the return to God. It must therefore be on God's terms or not at all. Those terms are spelled out quite clearly in the opening chapters of Genesis. Sin put the flaming sword of God's judgment between man and the tree of life:

"So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24).

God was not vindictively barring man's access to eternal life, for in the last chapter of the Bible we see redeemed man in paradise once again and now eating freely of "the tree of life" (Revelation 22:2). What happened to that sword of judgment, from which all men have fled in fear and against whose harsh and final stroke all men have complained so bitterly? In contrast to all others, one Man, the only one who could, one day walked up to that sword and took its fatal stroke for all the rest of us.

Judgment's sword was sheathed in His heart and its flame was quenched in His blood. He had no sin of His own, so He could die for ours. This is why Christ alone, in contrast to Buddha, Krishna, Confucius, and all the founders of the world's great religions, could say without contradiction: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh to the Father but by me." To become the way for us back to the tree of life, He had to take the judgment we deserved.

Paradise regained, however, is much better than the paradise that had been lost. It would be no solution at all simply to restore what Adam and Eve had forfeited. We would lose paradise again just as they did. Something more was needed. The new paradise has a new Adam in charge - the virgin-born "seed of the woman" who is also the Son of God. Jesus Christ is called the "last Adam" and also the "second man" (1 Corinthians 15:45,47). There was no other human being who walked this earth since Adam who deserved to be called a "man" until, as the *first* had been formed from the ground by the hand of God, the *second* was formed in the womb of a virgin. Though He is the *second* Adam, He is called the *last*, because there will never be a *third*, much less a *fourth*. Paradise restored will never be lost again. The new Adam, the second and last, will personally see to that.

Jesus Christ is the progenitor of the new race of those who have been "born again" through faith in Him and who are destined to inhabit God's new universe. Sin will never enter into that new paradise, which will forever be under His direction, having been bought with His blood poured out at Calvary for our sins. The responsibility for keeping paradise restored will no longer rest upon mere human beings but upon Him who is both God and man. Redeemed man will never be banished from God's presence. Forever Christ will maintain the perfect union between God and man in His own person - a union that He brings into every heart that opens to Him as Lord and Savior. In contrast to the pompous rule of self over its false kingdom, the true King who will reign forever said concerning Himself: "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29).

"The way of the cross", says David Wilkerson, "is surrender of all that is dear to us in this life" [23]. We must follow Christ in that path to the new paradise. As the old hymn said (the new songs usually avoid the cross), "I must needs go home by the way of the cross; there's no other way but this. I can ne'er get sight of the gates of light if the way of the cross I miss." This is not popular teaching, now that the new theology has gained such a strong foothold. As Tozer said:

"Among the plastic saints of our times, Christ has to do all the dying and all we want is to hear another sermon about His dying. ... No cross for us, no dethronement, no dying. We remain king within the little kingdom of Mansoul and wear our tinsel crown with all the pride of a Caesar; but we doom ourselves to shadows and weakness and spiritual sterility" [24].

Conflicting Views of Self

Unfortunately, human history is one long tale of man's rejection of God's solution and his hapless persistence in beating the dead horse of his own doomed efforts to restore paradise his own way. Selfisms of every kind are being promoted as desirable not only in the secular world but in the church as well. J.I. Packer has well said:

"... modern Christians ... spread a thin layer of Bible teaching over the mixture of popular psychology and common sense they offer, but their overall approach clearly reflects the narcissism - the 'selfism' or 'meism' as it is sometimes called - that is the way of the world in the modern West" [25].

As a result of the church giving psychological 'truth' an equal status with the Bible, anew view of self has arisen that is in diametric opposition to the long-established one. The Christian Association for Psychological Studies would have us believe: "Humility and positive self-esteem are not based upon self-negation or the 'emptying of oneself'. They are based upon

affirmation of God's regard toward us. ..." [26]. Robert Schuller declares, "Self-affirmation then is the pathway to self-denial" [27]. So Christ's command to deny self is interpreted to mean affirmation of self. As Jay Adams has said:

"Certainly this older, standard evangelical view of man and his problem, and the new Reformation, self-esteem, self-esteem views are at odds. There is a new wind blowing through the church today. It demands change - a change of viewpoint, belief, and approach. Is it true or false? You must decide ... man's problem cannot be at the same time too little and too much self-esteem" [28].

What a debt self owes psychology! Instead of being denied, self is now loved, esteemed, and promoted. Indeed, we are being told repeatedly from pulpit, radio, television, books, and magazines that the greatest need facing the church is for Christians to develop their self-love, self-esteem, self-worth, and positive self-image.

One Christian leader calls self-esteem "the single greatest need facing the human race today" [29], and many others use similar language. Obviously there is a serious conflict between what Jesus said (and what the church has historically believed on the subject of self) and the new view now being popularly accepted: that self-esteem is "the universal hope" [30]. Consider, for example, the following from John Calvin in his classic *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

"Accordingly, in every age, he who is most forward in extolling the excellence of human nature is received with the loudest applause. But be this heralding of human excellence what it may, by teaching man to rest in himself it does nothing more than fascinate by its sweetness and, at the same time, so delude as to drown in perdition all who assent to it. Whosoever, therefore, gives heed to those teachers who merely employ us in contemplating our good qualities, so far from making progress in self-knowledge, will be plunged into the most pernicious ignorance" [31].

Thankfully, there are still dissenting voice calling us back to biblical Christianity. J. Gregory Mantle reminds us that "self-centeredness [is] man's most persistent problem" [32]. Humanism, of course, has much in common with the new self-centered gospel, particularly with its emphasis on self-esteem. California State Assemblyman John Vasconcellos, who believes that restoration of self-esteem is the great need, has been in the forefront of the move to push the religion of humanism upon society because he sincerely believes it is our only hope. He explains:

"The issue is *always* whether or not we believe that we humans are inherently good, trustworthy and responsible. This issue is becoming *the* central social and political challenge of our times: to transform all our relationships and institutions (personal and political) to fit our new-found faithful sense of ourselves. ... It is the only way to life! ... We seek means to ... open ourselves to our innate potential for goodness; to reclaim our individual self-esteem. ..." [33].

Similar ideas are being promoted by Christian leaders who argue that the primary goal of the gospel must be to meet "every person's deepest need - his hunger for self-esteem, self-worth, and personal dignity" [34]. Many others, however, are equally convinced that man's true hunger is for *God*, and that it is God's glory and not man's dignity and self-worth that is at stake.

There is a legitimate desire placed by God within all people to find the purpose and meaning of their existence. The error of humanism and psychology is in looking to self for what only God can provide. "O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself," said Jeremiah; "it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and we are restless until we find our rest in thee." The selfist attempts to find this rest not through confidence in God but in the self-confidence that comes from a positive self-image. Pascal spoke of the God-shaped vacuum within that only God could fill. But today this inner emptiness is explained as a lack of self-worth and self-esteem; selfist solutions are offered which do not satisfy that spiritual thirst for God Himself.

We are back to a major error that we have already dealt with in slightly different form: seeing God, in effect, as little more than a means to self-fulfillment and viewing all that He has done, including the cross of Christ, primarily from the selfish perspective of what we get out of it. It is the same old rebellion, but now justified by the theories of psychology. In turning the focus from God to man, the selfist gospel does away with grace, which can have no part in self-esteem or self-worth. As Jay Adams points out:

"Many proponents among the self-worth movement are tampering with the precious doctrine of grace in order to support a non-Christian humanistic theory. ..." [35].

Is Self-Esteem Necessary?

Confessing that it "was appropriate for Calvin and Luther to think theocentrically" [36], the chief apostle of the new reformation argues that a *God-centered* theology is now outdated and must be replaced by a *man-centered* theology that "incorporates psychology" [37]. "It is blasphemy", counters Jimmy Swaggart, "to say that we need some kind of man-centered theology to replace the traditional God-centered theology" [38]. Were Andrew Murray alive today, he also would vehemently disagree with the new self-centered gospel. "To be nothing before God and men", wrote Murray, "to wait on God alone; to delight in, to imitate, to learn of Christ, the meek and lowly One - this is the very key to the School of Christ, the only key to the true knowledge of Scripture" [39]. Defending the new theology (in a book that was sent free to about 250,000 pastors, seminary and Christian college teachers, and other church leaders through funds provided by the president of the Napoleon Hill Foundation), its chief promoter writes:

"Where the sixteenth-century Reformation returned our focus to sacred Scriptures as the only infallible rule for faith and practice, the new reformation will return our focus to the sacred right of every person to self-esteem!" [40].

The selfist enthusiasts claim that man cannot be happy without a sense of *self-worth*, a "positive" *self-image*, plus *self-esteem* and a host of other *self-isms*. But why is that? We speak of selfless love because that is the only kind of love there is. We speak of selfless service, of self-sacrifice for the good of others. The "what's-in-it-for-me-gospel" is not biblical. Even the rank worldling recognizes this and despises it, though he may not be willing to take the way of the cross. Donald Grey Barnhouse put it all in biblical perspective:

"If you exalt man in any way, God is thereby debased. But if you exalt God as He should be exalted, man thereby takes his true position of utter nothingness, and only then can he find his real exaltation, for it will come to him through the grace of God in Christ.

Man can thus reach the heights by taking the proper place of depth. It is, once more, the divine principle that 'every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted' (Luke 18:14) [41].

The redeemed should have no thought of themselves but only of pleasing and glorifying their Redeemer. In heaven all of the attention will be upon our Lord and none upon ourselves. Nor will we want any, because turning to ourselves would destroy heaven. It is true that we will be there in glorified bodies and will be given crowns and rewards and will hear from our Lord's lips, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant ... enter thou into the joy of the Lord" (Matthew 25:21). But will that give us a positive self-image, a sense of self-worth and self-esteem, and cause us to feel good about ourselves? C.S. Lewis answers:

"The child who is patted on the back for doing a lesson well, the woman whose beauty is praised by her lover, the saved soul to whom Christ says, 'Well done', are pleased and ought to be. For here the pleasure lies not in what you are but in the fact that you have pleased someone you wanted (and rightly wanted) to please. The trouble begins when you pass from thinking, 'I have pleased him; all is well,' to thinking, 'What a fine person I must be to have done it.'" [42].

What Lewis is saying has been the general consensus of the church since its beginning. Self-esteem theology has only lately come on the scene and is trying desperately to prove that it is in fact the "faith once for all delivered to the saints". We learn much of the established doctrine of the church from hymns that have stood the test of time. Consider these words, which were inspired by the letters of Samuel Rutherford and written by Anne Ross Cousin about 100 years ago, and notice not only how at odds they are with the new self-centered theology, but how much better they are:

"The bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear Bridegroom's face;
I will not gaze at glory,
But on my King of Grace:

Not at the crown He giveth,
But on His pierced hand.
The Lamb is all the glory
In Emmanuel's land" [43].

No thought of self there! One could hardly say that because Christ is "all the glory" we have somehow missed out by not "feeling good about *ourselves*". A man who was truly filled with the love and peace and joy of His Lord, Samuel Rutherford dies in 1661 repeating these words triumphantly: "*All the glory* in Immanuel's land! *All the glory!*" We may be certain that Rutherford was not thinking of himself but of his Lord.

Neither self-esteem, self-worth, self-acceptance, self-love, nor any of the other selfisms plays any part in "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance", that supernatural fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) which is the ultimate expression of Christ's life in the believer. No, self-esteem and the many other selfisms are not necessary. In fact, those who propose this new theology, no matter how sincere, have introduced a discordant note that clashes with everything the church has stood for, with its hymns and prose, with the testimony of its greatest saints and martyrs, and with the Bible itself.

Why is Self-Esteem So Important?

Yet the self-theorists insist that self-esteem is not only *necessary*, but that it is the essential ingredient (the *sine qua non*) of human happiness and fulfillment. They are not willing to let go of self, but are determined somehow to salvage some honor for this false god under the mistaken idea that they are thereby honoring the true God. Many people have unwittingly been deceived by the specious theories of humanistic psychology which have been matched with a seeming proof-text here and there.

The attempt to baptize humanistic psychology into Christianity goes against the whole tone of Scripture. There is *not one* hero or heroine of the faith in the entire Bible who can be pointed to as an example of a person who maintained a positive self-image or high self-esteem or who suffered from the lack of any of today's popular selfisms. And the promotion of 'me-ism' is as absent from the writings of the saints down through history as it is from the Bible itself. Among his many 'self-affirmations' the great apostle Paul called himself the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), a "wretched man" (Romans 7:24), and "less than the least of all saints" (Ephesians 3:8).

Paul urged the Philippians (and us also), "In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than ourselves" (Philippians 2:3). He warned the believers in Rome with these words: "I say, through the grace of God given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think" (Romans 12:3). Nowhere in the Bible are we warned not to think more lowly of ourselves than we ought to, yet there should be many such Scriptures if our problem is lack of self-esteem. Clearly that is *not* our problem, but pride surely is. C.S. Lewis acknowledged that, far from having a lack of self-esteem and self-love, his problem was quite the opposite:

"Do I think well of myself, think myself a nice chap? Well, I am afraid I sometimes do (and those are, no doubt, my worst moments). ... Go a step further. In my most clear-sighted moments, not only do I not think myself a nice man, but I know that I am a very nasty one. I can look at some of the things I have done with horror and loathing" [44].

This kind of honesty opens one up to the biblical perspective of self. When Dan Denk applied it in counseling, the effect was liberating. "I began to take a long look at the psychology of me-ism", Denk relates, "when counseling as a pastor and later as a teacher at a Christian college. Doug came to talk with me one day (as he had many times before). He was feeling down on himself again, overwhelmed with his own shortcomings. ... On previous occasions I had tried to help him improve his self-concept. It would work for a while - then he would be in the pits again." Denk goes on to say:

"This time it struck me how self-absorbed Doug was. He didn't need to be more preoccupied with himself. 'Doug,' I said, 'I don't think your problem is one of poor self-concept at all. I think you are actually quite proud. The reason you *feel* inadequate and wretched at times is that you *are*... just like the rest of us. Why don't you accept who you are and get on with life? Forget yourself for a

while and get interested in other people and their concerns.'

The look on Doug's face changed from surprise to horror to unbelief... then to a smile. He had never heard advice like that. He certainly didn't expect to hear it from me. But as we continued to talk, his eyes began to light up and a new freedom came over him - freedom from the slavery of self-concern, freedom that comes from taking an honest look at yourself for the first time" [45].

Not I But Christ

The issue before us is much larger than the pros or cons of selfist psychological theories. If we would take Jesus seriously, the difference between His command that His disciples must deny self and the new gospels' promotion of self-love, self-acceptance, and self-esteem could be the difference between heaven and hell (Matthew 16:24,25). Clearly we are confronted with an issue of the utmost importance. It is staggering to realize that psychology has influenced the church to such an extent that *honoring self* is now a major theme in the church. Dave Wilkerson points out:

"Go to any bookstore and count the number of books dealing with human hurts - such as depression, fear, rejection, divorce, remarriage, loneliness, etc. Attend nearly any seminar or crusade, and you will hear much insight on how to cope with personal pain and distress. Yet how little is written or taught about sharing the sufferings of Jesus Christ, the Lord" [46].

Georgi Vins, so long a prisoner of the Soviets until that historic exchange brought him to the West, challenges us with the choice that he and other Soviet Christians made in obedience to Christ in 1962: "All over the country, believers were taking a stand against apostasy. The disturbing spiritual condition of our churches caused us to examine our own lives." Repentance brought a determination to base "all matters of life and faith" thereafter solely "on the absolute authority of the Bible" [47]. That was the beginning of revival that continues to this day. Though he has suffered much persecution and is now in prison, catch the joy and victory in this statement from Gennady Kryuchkov, president of the unregistered Baptist churches in the USSR:

"We left everything behind and came out from among them, possessing nothing but our faith and the promises of God, and we entered into the abundance of God's blessing. ... May the Lord continue His mighty work among us until He comes, that our song of praise to Him, begun in this vale of tears, may continue for all eternity in His heavenly Kingdom" [48].

Self is so obviously not at issue - neither its esteem nor its love nor its worth nor its acceptance - but only Christ. If we are to remain true to our Lord, then we must begin to practice a purely biblical Christianity. We find such a Christianity described in the letters that Paul the apostle wrote from prison in his day. It is also expressed in the prison letters of many of God's people suffering even now in Communist labor camps around the world. Consider this from Vladimir Kosteniuk, 57-year-old preacher from an unregistered church in the Ukraine, serving his second term in the Gulag and threatened with an extended sentence:

"It is the desire of my heart that the Lord make me an instrument of His peace, that where there is hatred, I may sow love; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is sorrow, joy; that in everything He would grant that my life be a good example. ...

My dear ones, there is so much I wish I could say to you in this letter. ... Mostly I desire to always be ready for the coming of my Savior! I am so grateful to the Lord that He is leading me along this path and that He will not let me out of His hands.

When we look at the path that Christ and His followers walked, our hardships seem small and insignificant. For the most important issue in the life of a Christian is this: what will we take with us when we stand before God? What will we have to lay at His feet?" [49].

Footnotes

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- [29] Schuller, *Self-Esteem*, p19.
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