

Self-Esteem

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One theme which seems to be uniting social thinking in North America in the 80's and 90's is a preoccupation with self-esteem and self-love. It seems to be affecting so many areas of North American society. What is this self-esteem that we are hearing so much about? What are we to think of it? Is there such a thing as a Biblical concept of self-esteem?

I. HUMANISTIC SELFISM

Considered in itself the term "self-esteem" is actually neutral. "*Esteem*" means to put a worth in something, to regard it as having a certain value. You esteem a thing highly or lowly, more or less. "*Self-esteem*" simply means how you value yourself, what worth you see in yourself.

"Self-esteem" as a psychological concept is a notion which first came to formal expression in the writings of Sigmund Freud. He spoke of "ego ideal". Shame is seen as the symptom of "low self esteem". This is where the phrase was used first. But how did this particular concept become so popular in American society? In our study we will first look at the historical development of the concept of self-esteem and its effect upon American society, and then we will move into a Biblical perspective of self-esteem.

A. Its Historical Development

One thing that is remarkable is the shift in thinking that has taken place on this point. For centuries it has been thought quite improper to be preoccupied with oneself. But it appears this has changed.

Narcissism was always considered to be a bad thing, a psychological aberration. "Narcissism" is defined as self-love, excessive interest in one's own self: in personal appearance, comfort importance and abilities. The word "narcissism" comes from Greek mythology about Narcissus who was an attractive youth who refused to return the love of a mountain nymph called Echo. As punishment Nemesis cursed him with a spell which caused him to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Day after day he pined away gazing adoringly at himself unaware of his own foolishness until he was turned into a flower by his name. That is tilt-explanation in Greek mythology for the origin of the Narcissus.

Now Greek mythology thought it rather foolish to refuse to love someone else and saw it as a curse to end up pining away in love with oneself. And self-love is a foolish, self-defeating curse. But in the 60's, 70's and 80's self-love gained a much better reputation. It has come to be considered something good, something to be promoted. It is even declared as the one thing lacking in American society. The great social problem, it is said, is that people need more self-esteem.¹

For some 20 years it has been promoted. Rarely did we see any criticism of self-esteem until just recently in a *Newsweek* magazine. The cover announced the feature articles with the title, " *The Curse of Self-Esteem.*"^a

But how did this shift in thinking develop? It came along with the development of humanistic philosophy and psychology over the last 200 years. The reason for this confusion is ultimately rooted in our society's general abandonment of God and His law. Society has accepted the belief system called "humanism", which began to gain new prominence during the Renaissance and the French Revolution. Today's secular humanism is a philosophy which excludes faith in God. Western thinking has denied the existence of an objective absolute standard of right and wrong. Who then is to determine what is ultimately right or wrong? Man. Self. Each person determines what is right or wrong for himself. The human *ego* is the all-important center of knowledge and truth.

We can trace the development of self-esteem psychology from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution on to its influence upon religious thinking in America. To trace this line we will look at 5 names.

John Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) denied the Christian teaching of the fall of humanity. Obviously, he must have dismissed the Bible. He held that man is "noble" by nature. He sparked the search for the "noble native". This humanistic idea of self (a fundamentally optimistic view of self) caught on and was carried out into the 90's.

John Paul Sartre (b.1905) further developed this humanistic idea. He wrote frantically about rejecting the God of the Bible. The following is a sample of his humanistic existentialism:

"If I've discarded God the Father, there has to be someone to invent values... To say that we invent values means nothing else but this: life has no meaning *a priori*. Before you come alive, life is nothing. It is up to you to give it meaning and value is nothing more but, the meaning you choose/

While humanistic existentialism was applied to secular psychology (and was especially popularized by Carl Rogers Rogerian Psychology), two men were responsible for applying the language of humanistic psychology to Christian concepts and thus allowed it to make its inroads into North American religion. They were Fosdick and Peale.

Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick was a liberal American preacher who wrote about "self-realization," "becoming a real person," the "infinite worth of each person" and "endless possibilities". Fosdick made this statement: "In modern psychological parlance, the word 'integration' has taken the place of the religious word 'salvation'."⁴ This "integration" or "salvation" is achieved by self-discovery, self-acceptance and self-love.'

Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, as early as 1937 he wrote about "self-realization" and in 1952 he wrote his well-known book *The Power of Positive Thinking*. He taught, "Believe in yourself ... have faith in your possibilities." "How to create your own happiness". "Expect the best and get it." "How to draw upon the higher power." God was considered no more than some divine genie standing ready to carry out every wish of a positive-thinking individual.

What happened in the time of Fosdick and Peale? A generation, having become skeptical with traditional Christian values and ignorant of true spiritual life, increasingly embraced humanistic notions about themselves. They started to turn inward for the meaning of life and to discover the value of their "real self." Having rejected God as the source of life and the basis for the meaning of life they tried to find the source of meaning in themselves. Humanistic concepts became dressed up in the cloaks of traditional Christian terminology. It was humanism in Christian words. Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick and Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, in the name of Christianity derailed a whole generation off the Christian track and into the swamp of self-centered humanism.

Then came the 50's and the 60's, with its post-World War II disillusionment and anti-establishment unrest. The "baby boomers" came into a society which was

susceptible to this humanistic philosophy. Selfism was nurtured with evangelistic zeal in a public school system. It was the staple diet of university students and became the pop-psychology of the secular media on through the seventies.

This brings us to **Rev. Robert Schuller** of the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. Selfism made its way into several mainline Protestant denominations. One of the most popular promoters of it is Rev. Schuller, who is associated with the Reformed Church of America. He preached the "positive thinking" of Peale as a new gospel. He is listened to, and watched on television by millions throughout North America every week. He is also spreading taped messages of his Crystal Cathedral throughout the world and beaming them by way of satellite. He is listened to with zeal. Schuller's book, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, was widely read. In 1969 he wrote *Self-Love: the Dynamic Force of Success*. It starts with an introduction by his teacher, Norman Vincent Peale. Some examples: Schuller defines "self-love" as "the crowning sense of self-worth; it is an ennobling emotion of self-respect. It is a divine awareness of personal dignity. It is what the Greeks called reverence for the self. It is an abiding faith in yourself. It is sincere belief in yourself. It comes through self-discovery, self-discipline, self-forgiveness, self-acceptance. It produces self-reliance, confidence, and an inner security."

"Our future possibilities" writes Schuller "are tremendous if we will learn to believe in our potential which may be hidden. YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT A TREMENDOUS PERSON YOU CAN BE IF YOU WILL ONLY BELIEVE IN YOURSELF."⁶

In 1982 Schuller published *Self-Esteem, the new Reformation*. Thai title is no accident. He deliberately contradicts the teachings of the Reformation. The teachings of the Reformation were Justification *by faith alone* (on a basis of a righteousness outside of oneself), Salvation *by grace alone* (a power outside of oneself) and Truth on the basis of *Scripture alone*, Sola Scriptura, (a standard outside of oneself). But Schuller rejects the Reformation's teaching and calls for a new reformation basically to undo everything the Reformation did. The worst thing, according to Robert Schuller, is that Protestantism adopted the doctrine of total depravity.

He defines "self-esteem" as "*the human hunger for the divine dignity that God intended to be our emotional birthright as children created in his image.*"⁷ According to Schuller a person is in hell when he has lost his self-esteem.

Schuller calls for a redefinition of sin. He asserts that "Reformation theology failed to make clear that the core sin is a lack of self-esteem. ... 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.' For once a person believes he is an 'unworthy sinner', it is doubtful that he can really honestly accept the saving grace God offers in Jesus Christ."⁸

So you see, Schuller tells us that a sense of unworthiness will resist the success of the gospel in having us come to faith. Accordingly he says that salvation is "to be permanently lifted from sin (psychological self-abuse with all of its consequences as seen above) and shame to self-esteem and its God-glorifying human need-meeting constructive, and creative consequences. To be saved is to know that Christ forgives me and I now dare to believe that I am somebody and I can do something for God and for my fellow human beings.... And the result is that we become possibility thinkers with God all things are now possible; 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me'.⁹

On a TV broadcast Schuller recently "preached" a message to millions of viewers on Sunday morning and entitled it "If you can dream it, you can do it." What is faith, according to Schuller? To him faith is self-esteem; faith is believing in yourself. "What is 'lack of faith'? It is really a profoundly deep sense of unworthiness. It is a lack of trust, a projection of a deep inner insecurity. So the 'unsaved' will be incapable of belief in

'salvation by grace.' The unsaved person cannot perceive himself as worthy of 'divine grace' and hence rejects it."¹⁰

"Self-esteem then, or 'pride in being a human being,' is the single greatest need facing the human race today."¹¹

Needs

Much of today's discussion about needs is very much related to the self-esteem concept. There has been a development of a new view of needs. Desires have been identified as needs. You have the psychiatrist asking, "What are your felt needs"? When you insert the word "felt" you have changed the definition of 'needs'. Then needs are just things you want to have, things you long for. That is a very dangerous re-definition of needs because we have sinful desires, and not all the things we desire are things we need.

But, in the context of non-directional counseling, this is a non-confrontational way of speaking about, and even learning to accept our sinful desires and habits. Self-esteem needs, which secular psychologists have identified as the highest of human needs, are also spoken of by Christian psychologists in superlative terms. It would be better that conservative protestants used different terminology to describe our sense of human dignity than to go along with humanistic concepts which have made their inroads into mainline protestantism via Schuller and such.

That is then a brief sketch of the historical development of the concept of self-esteem.

B. Its Effect on North American Society

What is its effect on Society? You say "So what! So a bunch of philosophers got together and thought up this humanistic idea and the psychologists went on to write all kinds of books about self-esteem. Does it affect us?" Yes it does.

This is one movement that has profoundly affected American sociology. It is amazing how it has made its inroads, not only into churches but into education and business. Many of you may have been exposed to positive thinking psychology in some motivational seminar connected with your work.

1. Areas of Influence

In many areas of our society the influence of this preoccupation with self-esteem has resulted in a loss of practical wisdom and true moral value.

Psychology

In the psychiatric field psychologists are trying to make sense of a whole plague of social ills: addiction to drugs, alcohol and pornography, even sexual practices, teenage pregnancies, drop out rates, violence and a whole epidemic of social problems are all now being attributed to one single cause: low self-esteem.

Somehow you wonder, do people feel a little better when someone says that the reason why you are having a problem is because you have a low self-esteem?

Education.

It affects education. In Minnesota the school was implementing what was called the "Very Important Kiel" program. This program was started in Preschool classes to encourage self-esteem in 3-6 year olds. It was reported in 1984 that in Grand Rapids 500 Christian school children, from 4th and 5th grades were given a week of training in "how to recognize their true worth". They wrote essays on why they liked themselves, or didn't. They acted out a little skit called "A pat on the back". They were told how to feel good about themselves.¹²

Marketing

It affects the market. A company by the name of "High Self-esteem Toys Corporation" has been making a fashion doll named "Happy-to-be-Me". The waist of this doll is to the scale of 27 inches in order to counter the harm to the self-esteem of so many girls who

have been comparing themselves to Barbie's 18 inch waist. Now girls can feel better about themselves because they have scaled the doll to have a larger waist.

Crime

It has affected crime. In connection with a series of rapes in Montgomery, MD, police warned citizens in the county to be on the lookout for a man in his 30's with a medium build, 5'-10" wearing blue jeans, a white T shirt, and ... just in case you cannot identify him by all of that — with a low self-esteem. Now, that helps! You'll pick him out of a crowd easily!

Church

Churches have been influenced by the movement. A minister in a mega-church in "Somewhere", USA, was not using the word "sin" because it was too negative. It turns people off. Instead he keeps referring to the problem of low self esteem.

A well known author has written, "If I could write a prescription for the women of the world I would provide each one of them with a healthy dose of self-esteem and personal worth. I have no doubt that this is their greatest need."¹

2. Practical Consequences

What is the practical consequence of this? But what overall effect does it have upon our society practically?

1) First, we see a **loss of true motivation and accountability** in society. For all its motivational intent self-esteem psychology leaves people less motivated. In *Newsweek* magazine, Feb. 17, 1992 there was an extensive report showing the foolishness of the movement of helping people feel good about themselves in the hopes of improving their job performance. At the height of this movement school teachers gave gold stars and happy faces to all the students in their class regardless of how well or how poorly they did. After all, you can't give them a sad face or tell them they did poorly, because you might hurt their self-esteem! A high school student would not get an "F" in English Literature the course in which he slept or skipped half of the classes! No, after all, the poor kid did not feel very good about himself! He simply takes the course over and over and over until... Voila, he gets a "C" and passes. But he never sees the "F" that he deserved in the first place. When he takes his report card home to show Dad, he can come with a considerable sense of pride in his heart and with a new sense of self-worth after spending 7 years of his life to complete (senior) high school. To be sure, no one ever mentioned that he had "failed". He was a success!

Thousands of extra public dollars are being spent sending students through extra years of schooling because they were not properly motivated to perform. They were not forced to face the consequence of their own lack of performance. Having been pampered in their laziness in school, what kind of performance are they going to produce at work? Thousands of extra dollars are being spent in the school system because -- who cares! — it is government money. But in the private sector, when the boss weighs every dollar that he spends, is he going to say "Oh well, you messed up this job, we will have to throw it in the trash, we won't give you an "F" for that. We will let you try it again even if it costs me ten thousand dollars." No. There will be reality. Performance will have consequences.

Lillian Kats, a professor of Education at the University of Illinois, held to a more old-fashioned view. She makes this statement: "There is a huge self-esteem industry out there. A lot of it is nonsense." She advocates the view that self-esteem does not precede, but follows real accomplishment. "I am getting sick of these empty slogans," she says. "Schools have established award structures the happy helper of the week, the reader of the week. Teachers think that if they don't do this stuff, the kids won't do the work, but that's ridiculous! We don't need all this flattery. No other country does this."¹

2) North American schools are recently being criticized for the evident **loss of academic achievement**. Psychologist Harold Stevenson University of Michigan, found that American school children ranked far ahead of the students in Japan, Taiwan, and China in

self-confidence about their abilities in math and science. They feel good about themselves whereas the Japanese, Taiwanese and Chinese students feel very insignificant and would rate themselves poorly if they would have to estimate how they would do. But unfortunately this high score for self-esteem was marred by the fact that their *actual performance* in math and science ranked American students near the bottom.

Japanese parents don't lavish very much praise on their children. They are concerned that they will end up thinking too much about themselves and not enough about the group. So in an international test American students rated very high in self esteem, but rated very low in actual performance. They failed, but they felt very good about it.

3) North American industry is suffering a **loss of productivity**. Many businesses have been giving their workers training seminars which focus on self-esteem. It is alleged that this contributes to better communication and team-work among the employees. However, there does not seem to be any improvement in productivity. An economist has written a book entitled, *Why America Does Not Work*. In fact, American companies are going outside of the United States to have their products assembled.

4) The self-esteem movement has also **contributed to the destruction of the family**. Commitment to the family is being undermined. Selfism has further hardened a whole generation against the idea of self-denial.

Now if you are in everything for yourself and for your self-esteem then denying yourself for the sake of your spouse is simply not on your agenda. You have been told to get as much as you can out of life for yourself. What is that going to do to a relationship? Self-denial is essential to maintain a marriage. Marriage can be the most beautiful relationship here on earth by the grace of conversion when both husband and wife deny themselves for the good of each other and the children. The self-esteem movement has further destroyed North American families.

5) **We witness also a loss of true human significance**. How ironic! The self-esteem movement has aimed at increasing man's view of himself to raise man's value of himself. But what do we see? Human significance is at an all time low. Human life can be blown away in the movies, slashed to pieces in our city streets, it can be snuffed out in abortion clinics and old age homes and cause only a minimum of private emotion or public outcry. North Americans do not value human life as much as thirty years ago. The sanctity of human life is at an all time low.

But how can this be? On the one hand we have this world-wide movement to promote human self-esteem and yet, on the other hand, we have a devastating loss of value in human life. Why? It is the end result of the process of secularism. *Our western sense of esteem for humanity is now completely cut loose from God*. God is the only and real source of any value in our life.

II. A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SELF-ESTEEM A. A Biblical Critique of Selfism

What would be a Biblical perspective on this? How are we to assess this movement? Is there anything that we can salvage out of the idea of self esteem from a Biblical perspective?

Does what we hear about self-esteem come from reliable scientific psychological studies? No, when you come clown to it, there really are no psychological studies that scientifically bear out this concept and method of promoting self-esteem. It is not really science but faith. Humanism is a faith system. It is a belief system, a world-and-life view, which is not at all based on true science.¹⁵

Besides, humanism or secularism it is a *bad* world-and-life view. In relation to Biblical teaching we must categorically reject the view that tries to boost self-esteem of natural man in a manner that cuts him loose from God. Without God at the center of our view of the creation around us and of our view of humanity, our idea of self will become

idolatry. It will become selfishness, the idolatry of self. When it comes to our needs the Bible tells us "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" do not first seek your own honor, your own glory. After all, as the Westminster Confession teaches us, "What is the chief end of man? It is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." *Humanism says the chief end of man is to glorify himself, and to enjoy himself.* You see, the perspective of God is lost and that is critical. The Lord teaches us that man can not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord. Why? Because man's significance, man's real purpose has to do with God. Man lives by the creating and sustaining word of God's power. As far as our needs are concerned, where are we to look so supply our needs? The Bible tells us that God supplies our needs. Man is ignorant of his true need. God rebukes man in Rev. 3:17, "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." You see, we might *think* that we are very rich and actually be very poor. We don't assess our needs rightly.

What about esteem? Is there a Biblical use of the word "esteem"? As we saw from the scripture reading there is indeed. We are to esteem others more highly than ourselves (Phil.2:3). Above all others we are to esteem God, we are to value God, we are to esteem Christ. He is the richest blessing and gift given to humanity. When it comes to self esteem, it militates against our love for God. Jesus in his teachings to his disciples

says, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." We are to love our neighbor in such a way that we are willing to deny ourself for the good in others. "In lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves." So then, does the Bible not talk about self esteem? Is there no Biblical perspective here? Is there no sense of human dignity that can be salvaged out of this? Must we reject everything that has to do with the dignity of humanity? If we cut our view of the human self loose from God, we are going to go wrong. God says in His Word, "They have forsaken me, what wisdom shall they have."

B. God-centered (Trinitarian) Human Dignity.

What is the Biblical alternative to a humanistic self-esteem? It is a God-centered, humble view of human dignity. We need a view of human dignity that centers in *God*, not man. A Christian view of human dignity is also Trinitarian. What do we mean? We mean a perspective which views man in relation to the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Before we elaborate on that, it must be said that, while a man-centered perspective nurtures pride, a God-centered view of human dignity calls for humility. How does the Bible call for that? The Bible's view calls for humble repentance before God the Father who created us and against whom we sinned, a humble trust in Christ the Redeemer through whom there is forgiveness and righteousness, and a humble dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit for our sanctification.

There is something about the Christian gospel which humanists will not understand. The same message which calls for humility also restores dignity. Humility and human dignity are not opposites. They go hand-in-hand. Humility is man seeing himself in his proper place in relationship to God and fellow image-bearers. That is the marvel of Christianity. When does man find his true significance? Not when he bows to Satan's temptation and says, "I'll do it my way, regardless of God or others". No, but when man humbles himself before God and others he finds real dignity as a creature.

Here we see that a God-centered view of the dignity of human nature has to do with seeing man in relation to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Let me elaborate on that. How do we gain a Biblical sense of human dignity?

1) By Faith in the Father Who Created

If we see man in relationship to God the Father we start with creation. God made Man.

Out of Dust

To keep us humble, He reminds us that He made us out of *dust*. Some scientists have estimated that if you break clown the human body into its basic elements, if you take the water and set it aside (about 70%) and then all the calcium, and other basic elements the dust which we are made of is not worth much. Its value is just worth some loose change. (Now there has been another estimate in terms of donating your organs which comes to a higher value. But that includes the principle of life. I'm simply talking about our body as dust.) God reached down and took dust. He started off with dust. Now, that is humbling. But He formed us with His own hands. That's dignity. He called everything else into existence by His word. But He made man with His own hands.

In His Image.

Furthermore, He breathed into this human body the breath of life our human life principle, our soul. Man became a living organism. But a human being is more than a living organism. There are many plant and animal organisms in the world. Evolutionists will tell us that we are no different just a little higher in terms of degree of evolution.

However, God made man as a distinct creature. God made him "a living soul.". He made him a rational-moral creature. He gave him a mind, he can think for himself. Human thought is not just instinct. God gave us the ability to think, imagine and will, to make choices. God made us in His own image: with the ability for conscious thought, choice, communication and fellowship.

God made us as spiritual beings, to live in fellowship with Him as Augustine says: "Thou hast made us for Thyself. We are restless until we rest in thee." Man was created to be the servant of God but also the friend of God, to live "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."

What a dignity man was created with! Out of dust God created this prince of a being, Adam. The God made Eve. For Adam she was a perfect match. Adam exclaimed: "This now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh." She was the most beautiful creature that he had seen yet. He had looked at all the creatures that God had made and he esteemed her to be the very best of them all one he could feel one with and one who made him feel complete. Man found added dignity in marital union. It filled his need for human communication, companionship and love. We have been created with profound dignity.

Human Dignity and Sin

We need not only to remember that we were created by God the Father, but that we rebelled against our Creator. We sinned against the Father in •whose image we were made. There is something about human dignity that makes sin even worse.

Let me illustrate that: Suppose you would drop a few quarts of paint off the roof of a building onto a piece of cardboard and say, "That is a painting." If someone walked over it with muddy feet, you wouldn't feel too bad; you wouldn't feel that terribly insulted. But now it would be different if your grandfather 50 years ago had ordered one of the best artists in the country to paint a portrait of himself. Suppose the artist, after many painstaking hours, produced an excellent likeness of him. If that were hung in your family's living room the family would value it. It was going to be passed on from generation to generation, but then someone came into the house, took that picture, cut it with a knife, poured acid on it and left it in a dump somewhere, totally destroying the dignity of that picture. There is something far worse about that. What a brutal act of destruction! But you would also feel it as a blatant insult aimed at the person of your grandfather. The painting bore his image.

So it is with our human nature. Sin is even more heinous because we take the image of God the Father, which he has placed upon our original human nature and we align it with Satan, sin, rebellion and un-cleanness.

But man was also the friend of God. That friendship was betrayed by sin. Closeness makes betrayal even worse. Jesus was grieved by the fall of Judas. It was a betrayal predicted in the words of the Psalmist: "Mine own familiar friend hath lifted up his heel against me." (Psalm 41:9) If some enemy would come, and he, after perpetual enmity, would attack you, it would be somewhat expected. But how devastating when it is a close friend! You see, the original dignity man had in a relationship of friendship with God makes his sin even worse. Having been the friend-servant of God in Eden, makes man's rebellion utterly wicked.

What will God do? Will he let such wickedness go unpunished? No, He pours His wrath upon human nature. He takes indignity against His own image very personally. His holiness militates against man's sin. As an eternal memorial to the heinous sin of marring human dignity there will be weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth forever. Hell proves that God takes serious the marring of His own image and the rebellion against His own dignity as God.

Even after the fall something of that human dignity has been preserved. This is confirmed by the fact that God doesn't just extinguish human nature but that He will resurrect the human nature of all sinners even of wicked, hardened, unrepentant sinners. They will be everlasting memorials to the original dignity of human nature.

Worthless or Unworthy?

What else is implied by the fall?

We need to distinguish between **creative dignity** and **moral worth**. In much of this discussion about self-esteem, confusion has come in where people have failed to distinguish between creative dignity and moral worth. That is why there is confusion when people talk about being "worthless". Maybe it is better to say being "unworthy". Do you sense the difference?

If we would say (or even imply) that human beings are "worthless" garbage, are we not insulting the Creator with regard to our created dignity? To take little babies and throw them in the garbage can is an affront against our Sovereign Creator. Is it not an insult to His creative Word, who called that life into existence and against the Holy Spirit who nurtured that life in the womb? It is defiance against the Triune God, the Author of life, to treat human life like garbage.

So, that is settled, clear enough: we may not treat human life as worthless when it comes to creaturely dignity.

But now we ask a different question, "Does human nature, fallen in sin, have *moral worth*?" Then we must say, No. We must all be convicted personally in our hearts of our moral, spiritual unworthiness before God as sinners. The Bible teaches the doctrine of total depravity. Total depravity means that we are not only *guilty* but also utterly *corrupt*. We are ethically unworthy of any reward, or of any good. What we are worthy of is eternity in hell. What we are worthy of in terms of what we have done and who we are is to be eternally punished.

This teaching is not accepted by all preachers. There has been a growing criticism of what is derogatively called "worm theology". (For example, it is with such language that Robert Schuller opposes the Reformed doctrine of total depravity.)¹⁶

But in the Old Testament Job says, "Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not; yea, the stars are not pure in his sight. How much less man, that is a worm? and the son of man, which is a worm"? (Job 25:5,6)

Why should man call himself a worm? This is spiritual terminology in which man humbly confesses his place in relation to God. He is confessing his relative lowliness as a creature of the dust before the transcendent God. He is confessing his own lack of moral worth. If we would militate against this terminology to describe human finiteness or unworthiness what are we going to do with Psalm 22:6?! "I am a worm and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people." There it is prophetic of Christ's humiliation. This Messianic Psalm is referred to at least six times in the account of the crucifixion of Christ (cf. Mark 15:34, Matt. 27:35,39,43, Luke 23:27,34).

What happened to Christ's human nature is the pattern of the kingdom of God: through human self-abasement comes divine exaltation. (Luke 14:11, 18:14) We find this pattern in Philippians 2. The Son of God, though he lived in the glory of heaven, humbled Himself, "made Himself of no reputation", took upon himself the form of a servant and the guilt of his people. He descended to the depth of human suffering where he was grovelled in the dust of the garden of Gethsemane and later He writhed in pain on the cross in those hours of darkness. He too felt like a worm and no man. He felt low. He felt the burden of guilt the enormous weight of His people's iniquity was laid upon Him. He felt the curse of God's wrath He experienced utter abandonment.

If David experienced this and if Christ took David's words to describe His own experience why would the language of unworthiness be inappropriate for convicted sinners?

A real *sense of our unworthiness is not wrong*. In fact, the Scriptures teach us that self loathing is something that God will produce in the heart of men and women when His grace works repentance in them. Note Ezekiel 36:26

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh ... Then shall ye remember your own evil ways "

The Lord here promises to regenerate sinners. What is the fruit of it? When God gives us a new heart what happens? Verse 31:

"Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall *loathe yourselves in your own sight* for your iniquities and for your abominations."

That is what will happen when God works in us by His grace. The world might say, "Well, that proves that you have low self-esteem." So be it! We *must* know ourselves to be unworthy before God.

Let me illustrate that with the case of Nebuchadnezzar. He was one of the greatest emperors of all time. One day he walked on the top of his great palace, and saw all that he had made and he said: "Is not this the great empire that I have made by my hands and by my wisdom" Did he lack self-esteem? No! His ego was full of self-esteem. He felt very good about himself. He felt he was the best man that ever lived, the most powerful, wisest man that ever lived. But God was out of the picture. "The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God [is] not in all his thoughts." (Psalm 10:4) However, God is zealous to defend His own glory. In that very moment Nebuchadnezzar lost his intelligence. In Babylonian culture such people who had lost their sanity were just driven out of society. He was left out in the field. His body was wet with dew, his hair and nails grew and he had to eat grass. What was God teaching him? God was teaching him that there is no dignity in man apart from God. There is no accomplishment of man apart from God. There is no wisdom in man apart from God. There is no intelligence apart from God. We cannot live or move apart from God. But then, at a certain moment, Nebuchadnezzar began to look up and from the moment he looked up (we don't know what happened there, but there must have been a moment of humility) God gave him back his intelligence. Later the glory of his kingdom came back to him. Then he wrote the record of it. Read it in the book of Daniel chapter 4. His conclusion was: "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and *those that walk in pride he is able to abase.*" (Dan.4:37)

We do well to heed the warning. It is dangerous to be so filled with self-admiration that we begin puffing out our chest with a feeling of pride and self-sufficiency. We are on a very slippery footing when we think we can stand without God. We are headed for disaster when we think success is our own doing. We are tempting God to humble us. "Pride goeth before destruction; and a haughty spirit before a fall." (Prov.16:18) God will

humble those that exalt themselves (Matt. 23:12, James 4:6) "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." (Mat.5:5)

We are also called to a sense of dependence upon God for any good that comes in our lives. In Isaiah the Lord says, "Fear not, thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel..." Yet, this is in the context of an encouragement for Israel. "... I will help thee, saith the Lord and thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel." (Is. 41:14) There you see the connection: a gospel which both humbles man and at the same time offers hope and dignity to him. There are other passages that do the same thing: humbling man and exalting God as the Source of our help. But that is where man is put in his place. "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine help." (Hosea 13:9)

We are also called to self-denial. What is the first thing that Jesus invited his disciples to do? "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9:23, cf. Matthew 16:24-25). Self-denial is essential to Christianity. Walter Chantry has written a little book called *The Shadow of the Cross - studies in self-denial*. I cannot recommend it enough. It shows that self-denial is at the heart of every Christian duty. It includes a little 10-page chapter on marriage. I tell people, "You can read all the books you want but if you don't understand this small chapter on self denial, you will never understand what it takes to preserve marital harmony." Self-denial is essential for practical Christianity.

Chantry expounds the connections between the doctrines of grace and self-denial. He writes:

"True Calvinism always leads to the appreciation of self denial. When the doctrines of grace are warmly and experimentally preached, denial of self is as necessarily one of the chief experiences of the soul, each one of the doctrines infinitely exalts the most high God and humbles sinful and human self as a mere worm. What is it that you love about the doctrines of God's sovereignty and human depravity. Is it not the wonder and realization of it all flooding your soul? Is it not the blessed slaying of self-admiration, of self-indulgence, self-satisfaction, self-determination ... all of self? Is it not the rising beam of love to God with the prayer of Psalm 115:1? 'Not unto us, O Lord, Not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and thy truth's sake'."⁷

2) By Faith in the Son Who Redeems:

Secondly, the Christian gospel calls us to a humble trust in Christ's redeeming work as a basis for forgiveness and righteousness. I am reminded in this connection of *the* account in Luke 18 where it is recorded that "Jesus told this parable to certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous". Their idea of being right with God had everything to do with themselves. How did Jesus address this problem? He told the parable of the publican and pharisee who both went to pray in the temple. The Pharisee stood up in the temple in a very religious way and said, "I thank thee Lord, that I am not as other men are." He recites a whole list of sinners those "other men". He tells God how good he is: how he fasts faithfully and gives tithes. He feels rather good about himself. Jesus says that this man "trusts in himself. He is trying to justify himself on the basis of who he is and what he does. He esteems himself and thinks God should too. Jesus implies that this man did not go home justified by God. He justified himself. When it comes to righteousness we need to look away from ourselves to Jesus Christ because there is no righteousness, no right-ness in our relationship to God. There is no justification by self. Self-justification is sin. The publican bowed before God. He dared not look up and said "God be merciful to me a sinner".

"But," we may ask, "Why would Jesus die for such people, such 'worms'?" The psalmist says, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" What is the answer? Why would God be mindful of such miserable sinners? Is there an answer to that question?

What is man that God would be motivated to be mindful of him, and that he sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for such people?

Robert Schuller's answer to that question would be: There you have it, man must have a great worth because God sent his own Son for him. He sacrificed such a dear price as his Son to save humans. Man has great worth; that proves it. God was willing to sacrifice his Son in exchange for humanity. Robert Schuller preaches the cross of Jesus Christ as a way to boost self-esteem. He preaches the exact opposite of what the cross meant to Martin Luther. It humbled Luther in the dust of repentance and self-loathing. But is that not what the cross should do to each of us? Should it not humble us and to cast ourselves at the Lord's feet for mercy? That is all we can plead because there is nothing in ourselves that would motivate such a great sacrifice of his Son. There is nothing of ourselves that would motivate God to forgive our sin. But that is what grace is all about. Do you see it? Without the biblical doctrine of sin salvation would not be the grace it is. God had compassion on man only for reasons within himself. He sent His Son out of unconditional love. If there is any worth in redeemed humanity it is a worth which comes from the blood of Jesus Christ. There is a moral worth in believers which was not theirs. It has given to them. Is the righteousness of Jesus Christ worth something? Yes, it has an enormous worth! The riches of His perfect righteousness is offered in the gospel and freely imputed to us as we are justified by faith. Is the blood of Jesus Christ worth something? Yes, it is very precious for it cleanses from all sin. What is the great comfort of the believer? That his Saviour Jesus Christ has fully satisfied for sin and purchased him with his own blood. Because of great payment the believer confesses: "I am not my own but *belong* unto my faithful Saviour." Redemption means that Christ has invested His own worth in us to make us His. Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!

3) By Faith in the Holy Spirit who Renews:

Dignity does not come from us. It all comes from God: from the Father's creating hand, from Christ's redeeming blood, and, thirdly, from the Holy Spirit's renewing power. The dignity of our nature is somewhat restored when the Holy Spirit begins to work in our heart. There is no ability in ourself to do good. ("Who is good?") But the Holy Spirit restores dignity by renewing ethical goodness in man.

We are held accountable, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." But in Philippians 2:13 Paul goes on to say, "For it is God who worketh in you both to will and do of His good pleasure." That is humbling; but also encouraging. God gives man who has no moral worth in himself and can do nothing good of himself, He gives a sinner, who is by nature dead in sin the will to do good. This personal ethical dignity is restored at the beginning of sanctification. But there's some thing more.

Suppose you lived in some humble abode somewhere in the outskirts of Dundas or Hamilton, and all of a sudden you got this letter from the Queen's secretary. The Queen of England was going to come into your house to visit you. Suddenly your little cottage would gain a real notoriety in the community. Imagine all the neighbors or even reporters who would come visiting. "Is this where the queen was? Did she stand here or sit in this chair?" What gave that home such dignity? The person who came to visit there.

Now apply that to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Just to think that this human nature which has been aligned with sin and has been totally depraved should become, by grace, the temple of the Holy Spirit!

This is what Paul wanted to get through to believers in the letter to the Corinthians. Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Read how he exhorts them (in I Cor.6:15,16). He warns them not to join their bodies to a harlot. He motivates the believers on the basis of the dignity that the Holy Spirit has given to that body by coming in and dwelling in it. He calls them to live holy, to live a sanctified life. If we see that human dignity all comes from God, who makes us out of dust, and from the God the Son who redeemed us through his blood, and God the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell in the human nature of the believer, then we see that a Christian has a dignity that ought to

humble him to the dust every day. Just think of it: that God would come down to have dealings with such a worm as I am! That He would give His Son and give His Holy Spirit! What a dignity He has bestowed on man! He has made him "a little lower than the angels". (Psalm 8:4,5) After this life believers will enjoy even higher privileges than the angels. This dignity is not from us. It is all from God. We need to realize that this is only possible through grace. By nature we are dead in sins and trespasses and have rebelled against the Father. We have nothing to recommend us to God the Son nothing appealing about us to invite the Holy Spirit to come in to our hearts. Salvation is all of grace.

Therefore, as Paul concludes, "Him that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord." If you are going to boast, don't brag about yourself. Don't think so much about yourself. Give the praise to God.

[As an aside I am rather upset about the distortion of the Biblical statement: "Now I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me". (Apart from the fact that the context shows that Paul is talking about suffering, about bearing all things, not doing anything I can dream of...) I find it too often used by people who put all the emphasis on the word "I", rather than on "Christ". We need to be careful.]

Religious pride is subtle. It can enter our heart while we are giving thanks to God (Luke 18:11). How soon we can become preoccupied with ourself. We can speak pious words with our mouth while there is pride in our heart.

Let us pray that God may keep us humble for, as John the Baptist said, "He must increase; I must decrease." Worthy is God the Father, worthy is the Lamb, and worthy is the Holy Spirit. To the Triune God alone be all the glory. ^

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *Self-esteem then, or 'pride in being a human being,' is the single greatest need facing the human race today.* "For at the deepest level, all social, political, economic, religious, and even scientific problems relate to the private and collective need for positive pride, or healthy self-esteem." Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem - The New Reformation*, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), p. 19,145
- ² *The Curse of Self-Esteem - What's Wrong with the Feel-Good Movement*", *Newsweek*, February 17, 1992, pp.46-52.
- ³ *Jean Paul Sartre, Existentialism*(New York:Philosophical Library, 1947), p.5 (emphasis added -p.v.) Four theorists who further applied existentialism to psychological theory: 1) Eric Fromm (b.1900) who wrote *You Shall be as Gods*, asserting that the concept of "God" had evolved to the point that now man is God; 2) Carl Rogers (b.1902) who developed the very popular "Rogean" techniques of "non-directive" or "client-centered" therapy aimed at self-acceptance, self-direction, self-expression and self-confidence; 3) Abram Maslow (b.1908) developed a pyramid of human needs: physical needs, security needs, love needs, self-esteem needs, and, on the top of the list of needs, self-actualization needs; 4) Rollo May (b.1909) developed a theory focusing on self-awareness and self-fulfillment. cf.Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 17-27.
- ⁴ *Paul Vitz, Psychology as Religion*,p. 71
- ⁵ *Robert Schuller, Self-Love: The Dynamic Force of Success*,(New York: Hawthorn Books, 1969), P-32.
- ⁶ *Schuller, Self-Love*,p.36,37.
- ⁷ *Self-Esteem - The New Reformation*, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), p.14

⁸ *Self-esteem*, p.98.

⁹ *Schuller, Self-Esteem*, p.99

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 15,16

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹² *Banner*, (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications), August 13, 1984.

¹³ *James Dobson*, *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Women*, (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1975), p.35

¹⁴ *quoted in Newsweek*, Feb. 17, 1992, p.49.

¹⁵ *nose students wanting an historical review of the development of the three world-and-life views (Christianity, Deism, and Secularism) are advised to get R.C.Sproul's lecture series, "Battle for'theMind', from Ligonier Ministries.*

¹⁶ *Christianity Today*, October 5, 1984, p.12

¹⁷ *Walter Chantry*, *The Shadow of the Cross*, (*Banner of Truth*, 1981), p.8