

# Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

by Roland Cap Ehlke

["Promoting self-esteem, does it have a place in the gospel ministry?"]

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## Introduction

Ours is a humanistic age. Man and physical, earth-bound concerns have taken center stage from God and spiritual, heavenly matters.

In this monumental shift, the study of man, *psychology*, has replaced the study of the divine, *theology*, as the premier focus. Today's man on the street has problems understanding basic Christian terms such as justification and sanctification, not to mention a word like propitiation. At the same time, the vocabulary of psychology has become everyday jargon.

In *The Psychological Society*, Martin Gross well describes the modern state of affairs:

As the Protestant ethic has weakened in Western society, the confused citizen has turned to the only alternative he knows: the psychological expert who claims there is *a new scientific standard of behavior* to replace fading traditions.<sup>1</sup>

Some psychological jargon infiltrated the language as early as forty years ago. Others are at the height of their fashionable ascent. *Identity crisis, projection, libido, defense mechanism, self-actualization, Oedipus complex, peak experiences, penis envy, interpersonal relationships, inferiority complex, sibling rivalry, feelings of inadequacy, compulsive personality, paranoid, extrovert, trauma, phallic symbol, meaningful relationships, infantile sexuality, working through, human ecology, latent homosexuality, introvert, acting out, underachiever, castration complex, transference, sublimation, Freudian slip, pleasure principle, bisexuality, death wish, love-hate relationship*, and the Freudian structures of *id, ego, superego, conscious, preconscious* and *unconscious* are only a sampling of the psychological glossary.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of this brave new world is the SELF. For the last two decades or so "the psychological society" has been preoccupied with self. Self-concept, self-image, self-love, self-worth and self-esteem have become the catchwords. We use these terms freely and perhaps define them loosely. The emphasis, however, is unmistakable. It's on the self.

An underlying assumption in the self-esteem movement is that if people are to get along in life, they need to have a healthy view of themselves. Some speak of having a "high view" of oneself, others of "feeling good about yourself." This approach to life is considered a sine qua non of modern existence. As Jay Adams puts it, "The self-esteem influence has so pervaded our society that it is no longer perceived as anything but the most familiar and acceptable way of thinking."<sup>3</sup>

My 1976 *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines self-esteem as "1. belief in oneself; self respect 2. undue pride in oneself; conceit."<sup>4</sup> The negative second definition is not fashionable today. Rather, what we are to avoid at all costs is *low* self-esteem.

What are we to make of all this? What role, if any, does the modern psychological movement—in particular, the self-esteem movement—play in today's ministry? Or, to use the words of this conference assignment, "Promoting self-esteem, does it have a place in the gospel ministry?"

## The secular self-esteem movement

In answer to this question, we'll begin with a brief look at some of the sources of today's emphasis on self-esteem and self-love. As touched on a moment ago, the self-esteem movement is connected to the growth of modern psychology, which in turn is rooted in humanist soil.

The modern concept of self-esteem can be traced back to the American psychologist/philosopher William James (1842-1910), who "is generally identified as the earliest self-psychologist."<sup>5</sup> James used the term self-esteem for *positive feelings* about oneself. For him self-love was a separate category, defining what we do in our own best interests. Today the term self-esteem is used in a much wider sense, defining people's entire attitude about themselves, which can include negative feelings toward the self as well as love.

Throughout the course of this century, numerous writers have spread the gospel of self, whether they used the word self-esteem or not. At the head of the list is Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud's studies of the self set the stage for all subsequent psychology and psychiatry.

Moving to our own time, many names come to mind. Some of them, and their works, include: Nathaniel Branden (*The Psychology of Self-Esteem*), Erich Fromm (*The Art of Loving, Man for Himself*), Thomas Harris (*I'm OK -- You're OK*), R.D. Laing (*Knots, The Divided Self, Self and Others*), Maxwell Maltz (*The Magic Power of Self-Image Psychology*), Abraham Maslow (*Toward a Psychology of Being*), Rollo May (*Man's Search for Himself*), Ayn Rand (*The Virtue of Selfishness*), Carl Rogers (*On Becoming a Person*), David Seabury (*The Art of Selfishness*).

This list is hardly exhaustive. No doubt you recognize at least a few of the names, and quite possibly you could add at least a few more. The books cited have sold in the millions. Some of them are required reading at colleges, including Christian schools.

The authors mentioned do not represent a unified school of thought. Yet all emphasize the inward-look at self and the importance of a positive self-image. R. D. Laing pictures it this way, as he depicts the perils of a negative self-image:

JILL

I don't respect myself  
I can't respect anyone who respects me.

I can only respect someone who does not respect me.

I respect Jack  
*because* he does not respect me

I despise Tom  
*because* he does not despise me

Only a despicable person  
can respect someone as despicable as me

I cannot love someone I despise

Since I love Jack  
I cannot believe he loves me

What proof can he give?<sup>6</sup>

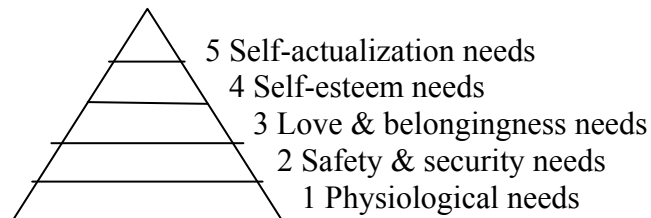
Some of our writers on the self are openly critical of Christianity, because they feel it is harmful to healthy self-esteem. Erich Fromm, for example, sees in Calvin's and Luther's doctrines a lack of "respect for the integrity of the individual."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he takes issue with Paul and Augustine, and with Christian thought in general:

St. Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin have described this good conscience in unmistakable terms. To be aware of one's powerlessness, to despise oneself, to be burdened by the feeling of one's sinfulness and wickedness are the signs of goodness. The very fact of having a guilty conscience is in itself a sign of one's virtue because the guilty conscience is the symptom of one's "fear and trembling" before the authority. The paradoxical result is that the (authoritarian) *guilty conscience becomes the basis for a "good" conscience, while the good conscience, if one should have it, ought to create a feeling of guilt.*<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, Fromm sees Christian doctrine as a detriment to a positive view of oneself. While others are less hostile, they do not hesitate criticizing the churches, theologians and, at times, the Bible itself.

At an even more popular level than that of literature, selfism has spread through songs—"I gotta be me," "I did it my way"—and various slogans—"I'm number one!" "Feel good about yourself," "Do your own thing," "You owe it to yourself," "You deserve a break today," etc. Movies and TV have brought the message into every home.

But to return to R. D. Laing's "Jill" for a moment. Why did she have a bad self-image? Answers would vary. Yet, I believe, in one way or another, they would touch on the concept of her primary needs not being met, or not having been met in childhood. Abraham Maslow's "pyramid of needs" is an oft-used diagram illustrating the development of self-esteem.<sup>9</sup>



Before one can have a proper self-esteem, his or her needs for food and shelter (level 1), safety (2), and love (3) must be met. At the highest level (5), an individual is able to reach out to others and help them. But even this is seen as the fulfilling of personal needs; we cannot be totally fulfilled until we interact with others.

The pyramid is an inversion of the biblical approach to life. We need look no further than our Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul for examples of this. They did not wait until their personal needs were fulfilled before they reached out to others. As a matter of fact, they both knew poverty (so much for level 1), were constantly in danger (2), were hated and persecuted (3), and depended entirely on God rather than self (here, of course, Jesus and Paul were in one respect worlds apart -- the sinless Son of God and a sinful man, 4). Yet both gave themselves to others (level 5), not merely to "actualize" themselves, but out of love. If Maslow's pyramid is correct, this kind of love should be impossible. For the Christian, agape love remains the starting point, the foundation of Christian faith and life.

In the face of this, it's startling that Maslow *et al.* have found wide acceptance in Christian circles. This writer has seen the "pyramid of needs" favorably used in our circles. And that brings us to our next section. Just how have Christians taken to the self-esteem movement?

### **The Christian self-esteem movement**

Within American Christianity the self-esteem movement seems to have gained a strong foothold, sometimes in very blatant forms and at times in surprising quarters.

Probably the most blatant exponent of self-esteem within conservative Christianity (and Christianity in general) is Robert Schuller, known for his fabulous \$20 million Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, and for his "Hour of Power" TV program. Schuller follows in the footsteps of Norman Vincent Peale. In the 1950s Peale proclaimed "the power of positive thinking"; now Schuller preaches "possibility thinking."

Robert Schuller's *Self-Esteem, the New Reformation* presents his views of the self. 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*" (italics his).<sup>10</sup> He also redefines some key biblical terms:

What do I mean by sin? Any human condition that robs God of glory by stripping one of his children of their right to divine dignity....

And what is "hell"? It is the loss of pride that naturally follows separation from God -the ultimate and unfailing source of our soul's sense of self-respect . . . . A person is in hell when he has lost his self-esteem. Can you imagine any condition more tragic than to live life and eternity in shame?<sup>11</sup>

Schuller sees historic Christianity as having failed to identify people's deepest needs:

Oddly enough, in twenty centuries, the church has moved forward without understanding or acknowledging this question: *What is the deepest need of human beings?* The church has survived through these centuries by assuming that every person's ultimate need was "salvation from sin." It has held out "hope for forgiveness" as the ultimate answer.<sup>12</sup>

Apparently no one before Schuller had his depth of insight on a number of issues, including the meaning of the Lord's Prayer, the gospel, and our most basic problems:

What is the central, underlying theme in the Lord's Prayer? It is the priceless value of every person. The church must make this message crystal clear. We must proclaim the Good News! God wants to reclaim and redeem lost humanity. We must tell people everywhere that God wants all of us to feel good about ourselves!

Our primal problem, though is lack of trust, *first* in oneself. Then, this lack of trust is projected onto others. God included.<sup>13</sup>

Classical Reformed Theology declares that we are conceived and born rebellious sinners. But that answer is too shallow. It ignores the tough question: Why would love-needing persons resist, rebel against, and reject beautiful love? The answer? We are born nontrusting. Deep down we feel we are not good enough to approach a holy God....

It is precisely at this point that classical theology has erred in its insistence that theology be "God-centered," not "man-centered."<sup>14</sup>

Having gained such insights, modern Christians can now reach out with the message our world is dying to hear. "At the Central Presbyterian Church on urbane Park Avenue, a . . . minister advertised 'I'm OK! You're OK!' on its announcement board as the New Salvation."<sup>15</sup> Although the terminology is not Schuller's, we think he would approve.

While other Christian figures are much less brazen than Schuller in their discussion of self-esteem, many do fall into error. Among them is James Dobson, who next to Billy Graham may well be the best known and most beloved man in Evangelical Christendom.

In the book *Hide or Seek*, Dobson sets out to deal with the problem of "how to build self-esteem in your child" (the book's subtitle). He begins by lamenting "the current epidemic of self-doubt . . . in our society,"<sup>16</sup> and proceeds to diagnose the source of this epidemic. It is the tremendous emphasis on beauty and intelligence; if you lack these characteristics, you are considered less important or worthy. It's difficult to argue with this description of modern America. Many who lack good looks and above-average intelligence feel they don't count. (We could also add athletic ability and the gift of making money as highly prized features.)

So far so good. Now how does Dobson deal with the problem? Instead of urging Christian parents to ground their children on surer values -- namely, on Christ, the Rock -- Dr. Dobson plays ball with the world's value system. He tells parents to help develop "compensatory skills"<sup>17</sup> in their children -- for instance, establishing a niche in music or art. He writes,

. . . it is your job as a parent to help him find them (compensatory skills) . . . . There is nothing more risky than sending a teenager into the storms of adolescence with no skills, no unique knowledge, no means of compensating. When this occurs, his ego is stark naked . . . . His only source of self-esteem comes from the acceptance of other students -- and their love is notoriously fickle.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of feeling good because he or she is beautiful or intelligent, the child now has self-esteem because "I am the best trumpet player in the band." What happens when a better trumpet player joins the band?

Recently Dobson has come under attack, some of which may be overly harsh.<sup>19</sup> That Dr. Dobson is a sincere and dedicated Christian, we don't question. In this area, however, he has missed the boat.

Other Christian writers send confused signals on self-esteem. Josh McDowell's offering, entitled *Building Your Self-lineage*, asserts on the front cover, "A healthy self-image is seeing yourself as God sees you -- no more and no less." That and much of the contents are fine. But what are we to think when we read the back cover?

The author, Josh McDowell, knows what you're going through. After struggling for years with feelings of worthlessness and fear, he overcame a low self-image and grew to be a dynamic speaker and writer . . . .

Josh McDowell is a magna cum laude graduate of Talbot Theological Seminary and member of two national honor societies. Author of seven best selling books . . . McDowell has spoken to more than five million students at universities in fifty-eight countries.<sup>20</sup>

Why is this information necessary? Are we to believe that it's our low self-image which keeps us from such wondrous feats?

Some Christian writers are openly hostile to the whole self-esteem movement. We'll close this section with one sampling, the opening paragraphs from an article by John Piper which appeared in *Christianity Today*:

According to the spirit of this decade, the ultimate sin is no longer the failure to honor God and thank him but the failure to esteem oneself. Self-abasement, not God abasement, is the evil. And the cry of deliverance is not, "O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me?," but, "O worthy man that I am, would that I could only see it better!"

Today the first and greatest commandment is, "Thou shalt love thyself." And the explanation for almost every interpersonal problem is thought to lie in someone's low self-esteem. Sermons, articles, and books have pushed this idea deep into the Christian mind. It is a rare congregation, for example, that does not stumble over the "vermicular theology" of Isaac Watts's "Alas! And Did My Saviour Bleed": "Would He devote that sacred head/ For such a worm as I?" . . .

What distresses me in all this is not only what I regard as an unbiblical shift of focus from God to man as the goal of redemption (see Ezekiel 36:22-32) but also the paucity of opposition to it. This article should be taken as one small vote against the cult of self-esteem.<sup>21</sup>

### The Scriptural view

The Bible has much to say about our relationships -- to God, to others and to self. An in-depth discussion of Scripture's view of any one of these relationships goes far beyond the scope of this essay. Happily, each of us approaches a topic like the one before us with a great deal of background knowledge. The knowledge which we carry with us comes from our Catechism and seminary training, our ongoing work in the Scriptures, and what we've gained in the rugged school of experience. Having said that, we'll take a moment to review a few basics.

On the one hand, the Bible comes down harshly, very harshly, on the self. Since the fall into sin, the human self has been in a sorry state. "Dust you are and to dust you will return," declares the Lord to Adam after the Fall (Genesis 3:19). "What is your life? You are a *mist* that appears for a little while and then vanishes," writes James (4:14). "*Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!*" asserts Solomon (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Here Solomon uses the Hebrew word *hebel*, which has the root meaning breath or mist. "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me," confesses David (Psalm 51:5). "I know that *nothing good* lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature," laments Paul (Romans 7:18).

The Bible pronounces the sinful, fallen self an enemy of God (Romans 5:10), an object of his wrath (Ephesians 2:3), dead in transgressions and sins. (Ephesians 2:1), and -- dare we say it? -- *worthless* (Jeremiah 2:5).

This is strong medicine. An unbeliever like Erich Fromm rebels against it; a Robert Schuller doesn't talk about it; and each of us finds something within us repulsed by it. This is the law of God.

On the other hand, the Bible teaches the gospel, the *good news*. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). While we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). He has become sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Indeed, he became "a worm and not a man" (Psalm 22:6) -- in other words, *worthless*.

Having humbled himself for us, the Son of God is now exalted. We who are joined to him by faith have become his brothers and sisters, and share in a glorious new life.

Because of Jesus Christ this new self has peace with God (Romans 5:1), is accepted by God (Ephesians 1), is a child of God (John 1 :12), is in-dwelled by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16), has access to God's wisdom (James 1 :5), is helped by God (Hebrews 4:16), is reconciled to God (Romans 5:11), has no condemnation (Romans 8.1), is justified (Romans 5:1), has Christ's righteousness (Romans 5:19), is completely forgiven (Colossians 1:14), has its needs met by God (Philippians 4:19), is tenderly loved (Jeremiah 31:3), is a temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16), and is blameless and beyond reproach (Colossians 1:22).<sup>22</sup>

All this, and more, we are in Christ. As Martin Luther said, "God doesn't love us because we are valuable; we are valuable because God loves us."<sup>23</sup> A proper understanding of law and gospel leads to a proper view of self.

Herein lies a valuable principle in dealing with the whole self-esteem issue. Many, including Christian writers, look for human value in God's creation. Hence the popular slogan, "God made me and God don't make no junk." David Valleskey puts his finger on the problem of this approach:

I know myself -- I know that deep down I'm not all that good. I know that, though I agree that God doesn't make junk, it doesn't mean that I haven't made junk out of the good stuff God has made; and I know that I have done just that, many a time. I also know that what I put my mind to are all too often those things that serve self-centered desires and that those things I tend to have

no trouble accomplishing. But I also know that when I try to turn out from myself, from serving self to serving others, I am often a dismal failure.<sup>24</sup>

To attempt building one's self-image on the doctrine of creation, then, leads either to despair (I am no good) or to self-deception (I pretend those evils aren't really there). But building on the doctrine of redemption brings a solid sense of worth. God has seen me as I am, inside and out, and he still loved me. So I can come before the Almighty:

Just as I am, without one plea  
But that thy blood was shed for me!

The Bible goes on to teach God's redeemed children to use our talents and appreciate our gifts, including the gifts of intelligence and beauty. These gifts are used not in a futile struggle to find self-esteem through them, but to glorify our Savior God. Likewise, Christian parents will encourage their children to develop whatever God-given abilities they have. These are not mere "compensatory skills," but means of honoring our Lord and in Christlike love benefitting other people.

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). What an overwhelming source of confidence to instill in our children! The unchanging, all-powerful God has blessed us with the gift of salvation and with every gift we enjoy during life on earth.

### **Love your neighbor as yourself**

The most quoted Bible passage in the self-esteem discussion is, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Self-love and self-esteem advocates insist that we must love ourselves before we love others, and that this loving of ourselves has to be learned, since many people hate themselves.

Just what does God teach us with these words? A quick look at a concordance will tell us that the passage in question is very important not only to self-esteem devotees, but also to God himself. The words occur in *nine* different verses in the Bible: Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31,33; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8.

In Leviticus we find the words nestled among various precepts: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. Keep my decrees. Do not mate different kinds of animals . . ." In Matthew 19 Jesus quotes them to the rich young man who asks, "What must I do to get eternal life?" In the parallel Matthew 22 and Mark 12 context, they are part of the discussion of "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" In Luke the words are spoken by the expert in the law and set the stage for Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan. Paul refers to them as the "one rule" (Romans) and the "single command" (Galatians) which sums up the law. And James calls them "the royal law found in Scripture."

We'll look at them in their original, Old Testament, setting and in Matthew 22 where Jesus sets them alongside the "greatest commandment."

The Hebrew of Leviticus 19:18 reads ~t0 'inn 1:17?K'. . The word *ahav* has a somewhat unusual use here. Most of the time it refers to a person's relationship to God, a man's relationship with a woman, or parents with children. Moreover, *ahav* usually takes a direct object. But in this verse the relationship is less intimately personal and the verb takes an indirect object introduced by the particle *I-*.

This indirect object usage occurs three other times, and each time it deals with rather impersonal relationships: (1) with "the alien living with you" (Leviticus 19:34); (2) with Hiram who "had always been on friendly terms with David" (1 Kings 5:1, the NIV doesn't even translate it as "love" here); (3) with Jehoshaphat who is warned, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord?" (2 Chronicles 19:2) In this final passage "love" stands in parallel position to "help."

In line with this, the word *ahav* in Leviticus 19:18 expresses *doing* or being of benefit to, rather than a more personal *feeling*. Jewish scholar Abraham Malamat renders the passage in a "less poetic" but "truer to the meaning fashion": "You should be beneficial or helpful to your neighbor as you would be to yourself."<sup>26</sup> Now for the Matthew passage in its context:

One of them (the Pharisees), an expert in the law, tested him with the question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:35-40)

Love of self is *not* commanded here; it is assumed. Quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus says we are to love (ἀγαπήσεις) God "with all your heart . . . soul . . . and mind." Then he says we are to love (ἀγαπήσεις) our neighbor -- that is, everyone in need -- in a similar way, "like" this. Loving God and loving our neighbor are parallel parts of the two commandments. Similarly, the command to love with all our heart, soul and mind stands parallel to how *we already love ourselves*. Piper rightly observes:

And we should note that Jesus' point is not affected by the fact that most people have a distorted notion of what is good for them. A man may attempt to find his good in a bottle of bourbon or in illicit sex or in a fast motorcycle; still, all human beings desire and seek what they *think*, at least in the moment of choosing, is best for them. Thus Gunther Bornkamm is right when he says, "We are most skilled in the love of ourselves; whether in selfish passion or in cool reflection, whether prompted by blind instinct or by some ideal, we desire our own self" . . . .

Only when one sees "self-love" in this light will the tremendous force of the command "Love you neighbor as yourself" be apparent. Jesus is saying to the lawyer: Take note how much you love yourself, how you try to get the best place in the synagogues, how you seek to be seen praying on the streets, how you exercise all rigor to maintain purity. Now my command to you is: Take all that zeal, all that ingenuity, all that perseverance, and with it seek your neighbor's well-being.<sup>27</sup>

Elsewhere Jesus says the same thing in different words, "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). Paul also speaks of that natural love of self when he writes, "Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies . . . . After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it" (Ephesians 6:28,29).

Self-esteem, or self-love, it seems comes naturally. The trick is to esteem God and others with that same intensity. It is not self-love that we need to learn. Rather, we need to learn to express and channel that love properly, since it is distorted by sin.

### **The ministry and self-esteem**

As we've observed, many see an epidemic of low self-esteem today. Others see quite a different picture. A number of studies have shown that people often tend to view themselves highly. Experiments have shown, for example, that teachers and therapists tend to take credit for positive results, but blame others for failures. (Might we apply that to the ministry?) In marriage people often see themselves as the more noble or responsible partner. Students accept credit for good grades, while they criticize the exam if they do poorly. On the annual College Board aptitude test, most high school students rate themselves as above average in "leadership ability" and "athletic ability," and in the "ability to get along with others, *zero* percent of the 829,000 who responded



rated themselves below average, 60% rated themselves in the top 10%, and 25% saw themselves among the top 1 %!"<sup>28</sup>

It may be, as William Saroyan said, "Every man is a good man in a bad world -- as he himself knows."<sup>29</sup> The problem arises when others don't appreciate what we have to offer, or when we focus on those areas where we don't measure up. And while it might be the case that some people are down on themselves too much, with others it may not be nearly enough. Perhaps for many of us it's a mixture of both feelings at the same time. It could well be that many people hold both a high *and* low view of themselves.

The fact is that we live in a complex world, filled with very complex people. For ministers of the gospel this is hardly news. We are aware that every believer is *simul justus et peccator*, saint (the new self) and sinner (the old self) at the same time. And in this complex world, ministers are called to divide and apply the law and gospel to all kinds of people. For centuries theologians such as Marlin Luther and C. F. W. Walther have seen this as the most difficult and highest art.

We need to be careful lest we break the "bruised reed" (Isaiah 42:3) -- in today's parlance, the person with "low self-esteem" -- by being heavy-handed or indifferent. We also need the courage to apply the hammer of the law (Jeremiah 23:29) to the hardened sinner who persists in manifest unbelief and sin. In this ministry we need to focus on God . . . but not at the expense of ignoring people. God is to be glorified, and people are to be saved.

To this we must constantly rededicate our churches and schools. Are they places where the law and gospel are preached, taught, applied and lived? Or do they issue confusing messages? Do we preach love and then ignore the lonely stranger in the narthex, while the cliques gather after services? Do we teach the value of every child, only to fill school newsletters with the names of the "winners" in athletics and spelling bees? Do we talk about the Christian life, and then let open sin go unchecked in our churches?

This is theological talk. But it all applies to our topic -- the self. It deals with the original question of our essay: "Promoting self-esteem, does it have a place in the gospel ministry?" When we relate to our people in love, we are dealing with all kinds of self-issues. Except, not in psychological terms.

There are, I believe, good reasons for pastors to know some things about the whole self-esteem topic. The language of psychology is the language of today. Christians and non-Christians alike are immersed in it. If we live as exiles in Babylon, it's good to have at least a working knowledge of the language. Many people in our churches speak it quite fluently. We may find in some of the literature useful insights, which we may not have been aware of before.

At the same time, I wouldn't recommend playing amateur psychologist. In this essay I've pretty much avoided talking about building people's self-esteem through the ministry, but instead have stayed with scriptural categories. In sermons, instruction classes, Bible classes and so on, I see no need to try to fit biblical terms into the mold of terms such as self-esteem. Often those terms don't really overlap. Using them can be misleading. For example, to say that "I'm OK -you're OK" through Christ may leave someone thinking, "Oh, the Bible and Tom Harris (author of *I'm OK -- You're OK*) are saying the same thing." God's Word has so many rich, wonderful expressions. Let's immerse ourselves in them, teach them and use them.

Looking at it that way, we are not in the business of promoting "self-esteem." We are to proclaim God's love in Christ, and then help people to love their neighbors as themselves.

In closing we turn to the words of Mary, the mother of Jesus. As we approach another Christmas, they are appropriate. They are also fitting as we stand before our God every day, aware of who we, are and what he has made us, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (Luke 1:46,47).

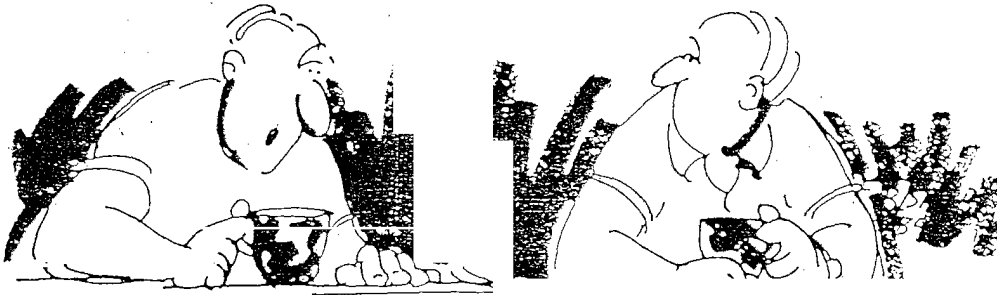


## Appendix 1

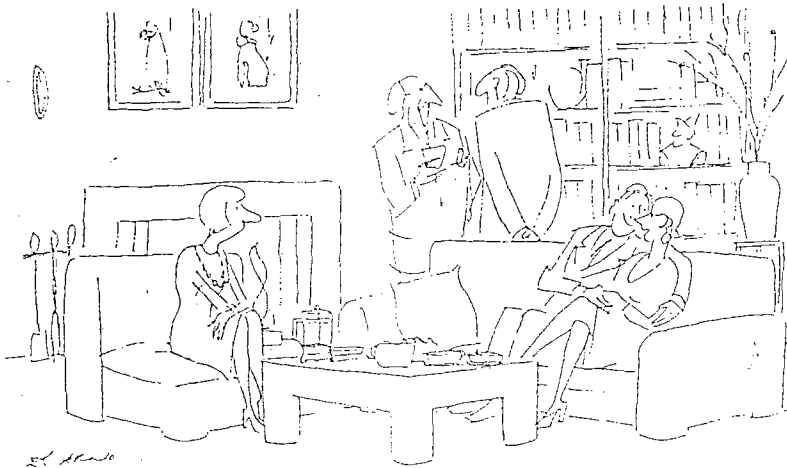
Chart from *The Search for Significance* by Robert S. McGee, pages, 40-41.

| Chapter                            | False Beliefs   | Consequences   | God's Answer  |
|------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <i>Six</i><br>The Performance Trap | <i>I must meet certain standards in order to feel good about myself.</i>          | The fear of failure; perfectionism; driven to succeed; manipulating others to achieve success; withdrawal from risks.                        | Justification<br><i>Justification means that God has not only forgiven me of my sins, but has also granted me the righteousness of Christ. Because of justification, I bear Christ's righteousness and am, therefore, fully pleasing to the Father (Rom. 5:1).</i>  |
| <i>Seven</i><br>Approval Addict    | <i>I must be approved (accepted) by certain others to feel good about myself.</i> | The fear of rejection; attempting to please others at any cost; overly sensitive to criticism; withdrawing from others to avoid disapproval. | Reconciliation<br><i>Reconciliation means that although I was at one time hostile toward God and alienated from Him, I am now forgiven and have been brought into an intimate relationship with Him. Consequently, I am totally accepted by God (Col. 1:21-22).</i> |
| <i>Eight</i><br>The Blame Game     | <i>Those who fail are unworthy of love and deserve to be punished.</i>            | The fear of-punishment; punishing others; blaming others for personal failure; withdrawal from God and others; driven to avoid failure.      | Propitiation<br><i>Propitiation means that Christ satisfied God's wrath by His death on the cross; therefore, I am deeply loved by God (I John 4:9-11).</i>   |
| <i>Nine</i><br>Shame               | <i>I am what I am. I cannot change. I am hopeless.</i>                            | Feelings of shame, hopelessness, inferiority; passivity; loss of creativity; isolation; withdrawal from others.                              | Regeneration<br><i>Regeneration means that I am a new creation in Christ (John 3:3-6).</i>  |

Appendix 2  
On the lighter side.

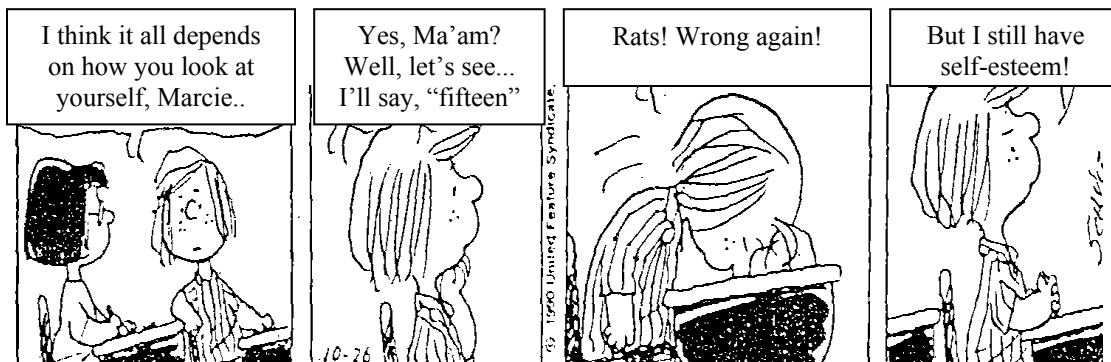


"I once tried to be somebody  
but it just wasn't me!"



"I don't like myself, and Peter doesn't like himself, but we do like each other."

PEANUTS



## Notes

1. Martin Gross, *The Psychological Society* (New York, NY: Random House, 1978), 4.
2. *Ibid.*, 14-15.
3. Jay Adams, *The Biblical View of Self Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1986), 3.
4. David B. Guralnik, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Cleveland, OH: Collins, 1976).
5. Cf. Silas Krueger, "Developing a Biblical Self-Image in our Students," Conference presentation, November 10, 1989, 2.
6. R. D. Laing, *Knots* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1970), 18.
7. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1947), 127.
8. *Ibid.*, 154.
9. Cf. Adams, *Biblical View of Self-Esteem*, 31 ff.
10. Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem, the New Reformation* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 15.
11. *Ibid.*, 14-15.
12. *Ibid.*, 31.
13. *Ibid.*, 58.
14. *Ibid.*, 63-64.
15. Gross, *Psychological Society*, 286.
16. James Dobson, *Hide or Seek* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1979), 20.
17. *Ibid.*, 81.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Herman Otten, "Bobgans Say James Dobson Presents Man-Centered Gospel," *Christian News*, September 17, 1990: 1 ff.
20. Josh McDowell, *Building Your Self-Image* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), back cover.
21. John Piper, "Is Self-Love Biblical?" *Christianity Today*, August 12, 1977: 6.
22. This list is adapted from McDowell, *Building Your Self-Image*, 134-135.
23. Quoted in McDowell, *Building Your Self-Image*, 158.
24. David Valleskey, Outline on self-esteem, Christian Today Seminar. October 1985: 3.
25. Abraham Malamat, "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself -- What It Really Means," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, July/August 1990: 50.
26. *Ibid.*, 51.
27. Piper, "Is Self-Love Biblical?" 8-9.
28. These examples are from David Myers, *The Inflated Self* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1980), 20ff.
29. *Ibid.*, 21.

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