

# **Self-Esteem—The Rest of the Story**

[Presented to the Metro-North Pastoral Conference, SE Wisconsin District, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Cedarburg, Wisconsin, September 16, 1991]

*by Rolfe F. Westendorf*

## **Introduction**

At our last conference we heard an excellent paper on the subject of self-esteem. Brother Roland C. Ehlke had carefully researched his material and provided abundant references for further study. He knows and understands most of what has been said about self-esteem, and I learned a lot from it, a lot that I needed to know. And I agreed with most of what he said in that paper, except for his conclusions. Brother Ehlke concluded that the concept of self-esteem has no real place in our ministry, because it originates in the thinking of humanists, has been sanctified by synergistic Reformed, and thus is incompatible with Scriptural and Lutheran doctrines of sin and grace.

My research into the matter of self-esteem has not taken place in the library. It has happened in my office, in the streets, in the home, around the kitchen table, and in the Holy Scriptures which are able to make us wise unto salvation. I have not been bothered too much by the humanistic and Reformed origins of the self-esteem concept, because I have not bothered to examine those sources. This independent research has led me to some different conclusions. With all due respect I do not agree that the concept of self-esteem has no place in our ministry. I think we can convey Law and Gospel better by understanding and employing the self-esteem concepts in our ministry. In fact, I have an unfinished manuscript that says most of what I want to say about the value of self-esteem. I was uncharacteristically quiet while Brother Ehlke's paper was being discussed. For a change I had decided to try to learn from the discussion instead of trying to add to it. But now I want to present the other side of the self-esteem story, so we can discuss it and decide better whether or not self-esteem belongs in our Gospel ministry.

## **Part I—Why We Need to Discuss Self-Esteem**

Perhaps the biggest reason for our conflicting opinions lies in the area of semantics. I would not have liked the God that Luther knew before he discovered salvation by grace. I would also have no use for the kind of self-esteem promoted by humanists. In order to treat the matter fairly and objectively, we need to get down to the basic meaning of the word. "Esteem" comes from the Latin "*aestimare*" which means to value, to estimate. In our language the word has taken on a positive meaning. Holding our parents in love and esteem means having a high opinion of their value in our lives. On the other hand estimates may be negative as well as positive. The negative value has been identified by the adjective "low". Conversely when we want to emphasize the positive self-esteem, we generally refer to a "high" or "healthy" self-esteem.

Thus, stripped of its acquired baggage, self-esteem is nothing more than the opinion we hold of our own value. And obviously we all have such an opinion. We don't really have to decide whether or not we want to deal with self-esteem in our ministry. We are already dealing with it, whether we know it or not, because self-esteem obviously exists.

But if self-esteem has always been around, why haven't we heard about it in previous generations? The answer is that we have heard about it, only by different names. "Character" is not identical to self-esteem. But a person of strong character is also a person with a healthy self-

esteem, and conversely a person with a weak character does not have a healthy self-esteem. Courage, fortitude, “guts”, the ability to rebound from misfortune, all the things that Ummus wanted in his football players, are included in a healthy self-esteem. Cowards and quitters are generally people of low self-esteem.

Self-esteem is nothing new. Before the Fall Adam and Eve knew a sense of self-esteem that no one has experienced since. After the Fall their sense of self-esteem fell to the same painfully low levels that people experience today. In discovering self-esteem, we have not discovered something new. We have only attached a more descriptive label to something that may be the most important of all emotional motivators.

There is another reason why the concept of self-esteem has been attracting so much attention these days. An abnormally large portion of the population is suffering from the lack of it. To speak in the most general terms, materialism places value upon material things, and a materialistic society has placed material values ahead of human values. Material things are worth more, and human beings are worth less. As a result a lot of us have lost a sense of our own value that we could not afford to lose. When people begin reacting to the pain of their own worthlessness, they behave in a manner that attracts a lot of attention. The rest of us wonder why they are so strongly attracted to self-destructive behavior. In any individual case the causes are complex and often inconclusive. But when the behavior happens consistently, it demonstrates a low opinion of self-worth. “If you thought you were worth something, you wouldn’t waste yourself.” When students of human behavior find a common cause for so much negative conduct, they use the word over and over again until even lay persons include it in their vocabulary.

If AIDS had remained confined to the locality where it originated, none of us would know or care what acquired immune deficiency syndrome was all about. The epidemic has forced that awareness upon the consciousness of the world. In the same way the epidemic of low self-esteem has gained considerable attention. And I happen to think that the latter is the deadlier of the two.

We cannot ignore the implications of self-esteem in our ministry, because self-esteem exists, whether we recognize it or not, and because the epidemic of low self-esteem is infecting our congregations, including those that are not located in the inner city.

## **Part II—The Origins of Self-Esteem**

Since self-esteem has often been described and applied in ways that are unscriptural, it is important that we adopt an understanding of self-esteem that is both Lutheran and Biblical. Again, self-esteem is simply the opinion you have of your own value. It is, by definition, a very subjective opinion that may be far removed from reality. But in this situation objective reality has very little weight, unless you can be convinced that the objective reality is real. For example, we have all heard choir members who have a very high opinion of the value of their singing voice, who have all but demolished the choir in the process of demonstrating that value. On the other hand some of us have struggled vainly to encourage a better-than-average student to live up to a potential he knows he cannot achieve. Self-esteem is a subjective opinion of personal value that is not necessarily in tune with reality.

Similarly a person’s self-esteem is not loosely related to actual accomplishment. Often it is futile to try to cheer up a discouraged person by reciting a list of the good things he has done. Certainly personal success contributes something to a healthy self-esteem. A hole-in-one can make a golfer feel good about himself for a week, maybe even for a whole summer. But that

outstanding achievement will not cure a low self-esteem, nor will success in business or even winning the lottery because self-esteem depends not so much upon what you have accomplished, but upon the personal love and attention you are able to attract from others. And the strongest influences upon self-esteem are those which occur before we develop conscious recognition of the motives behind that attention. In other words, the core of self-esteem results from the treatment we received in the first six years of our lives. That core can be strengthened or weakened by later events. But first-graders who are unsure of their worth are likely to struggle with low self-esteem for the rest of their lives, while those who are confident of their value will likely survive significant attacks later on.

Thus there is no simple formula for developing a healthy self-esteem. I think that the nurturing attention of a full-time parent may be an ingredient that outweighs all the rest put together. But so much depends upon how that attention is applied that the absolutes are simply unavailable. Nevertheless, self-esteem depends not so much upon personal accomplishment, but rather upon the attitudes of others, especially in the earliest years of life.

### **Part III—How Self-Esteem Behaves**

Before we consider the effects of self-esteem, it is important to distinguish between self-esteem and aggressive or passive personality. At first glance it may seem that aggressive people have a high self-esteem, while passive people have a low self-esteem. Not so! Aggressive or passive personalities are genetic in origin. That is often apparent during the first weeks of life. The first child may demand immediate attention for his needs and wants, while the second child rarely demands anything before it is offered to him. Some children are born very aggressive. Others are very passive, and most are somewhere in between. But these traits have little to do with environment. They are chiefly genetic in origin.

However, when the genetic trait is combined with factors of self-esteem, the results may be dramatic. The nicest possible person is the passive person with high self-esteem. This person does not have to demand attention from others in order to establish his own value. He gratefully receives every recognition and calmly brushes aside every insult and slight. You would have a hard time getting him angry enough to fight. He is definitely not a wimp. He will stand up for his beliefs, but he will not likely ram them down your throat.

The unhappiest person is the aggressive person with low self-esteem. He is constantly demanding attention to prove his worth, and never getting enough of it to satisfy his need. His demands soon generate rejection, which further proves his own worthlessness. But he cannot go off into a corner and sulk. His aggressive personality won't let him. He is driven to make his anger known and is more likely than the others to accomplish this with violence.

The most pitiful person is the passive person with low self-esteem. This person is also keenly conscious of his own worthlessness, but he has no hope of changing that. He has no confidence in himself, and expects no one else to trust him either. He is easy prey for the aggressive people who need to elevate themselves by abusing others. In fact, he almost encourages the abuse, which he inevitably receives and endures to an extent that baffles the observer. Occasionally building resentment suddenly lashes out in wild and totally unprecedented anger. But usually this passive person simply accepts the abuse that low self-esteem has taught him to expect.

The most productive person is the aggressive person with high self-esteem. He is confident of his abilities and eager to put them to use. He is likely to attempt projects that others would never try and sometimes offends others who are not ready to move so fast, who are made

to feel inferior by his bold confidence. If this person is intelligent enough to avoid serious mistakes, he will probably be successful in whatever he tries.

Of course, the four personalities defined above are more caricatures than descriptions. No one is 100% aggressive or 100% passive. Strength of self-esteem varies from person to person and even from day to day. But these caricatures demonstrate how self-esteem or the lack of it can affect behavior in combination with aggressiveness or the lack of it. We have no control over the aggressive/passive factor. But self-esteem is largely the product of environment. And over that we have some control.

The caricatures above have given some hints concerning the affect that self-esteem has on behavior. But we need to examine self-esteem in particular as a motivator of action. Basically we all hunger for recognition. When that hunger is satisfied, it is easy to be pleasant and patient, calm and content. Healthy self-esteem enables us to put up with a lot, and to put out a lot. On the other hand, the opposite happens when that hunger is not satisfied. The hunger produces real emotional pain, and the sufferer will act to relieve the pain. If the hunger is mild, the actions will be rational and often successful. If the hunger is intense, the action will often be irrational and destructive, like the driver who swerves in front of a truck trying to swat the bee that has just stung him.

Whether we realize it or not, our emotional need for self-esteem motivates our behavior as much as our physical needs. In a prosperous society, where there is rarely a shortage of food and shelter, the hunger for self-esteem may be the greater motivator.

#### **Part IV—The Current Epidemic of Low Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem is an intangible. Like faith and love, it has no physical properties that allow us to identify its presence or absence. Like faith and love, it can be seen only in the actions of those who possess it.

Basically a healthy self-esteem gives a person a sense of security that allows him to function well in adverse conditions. He is not easily depressed. His self-esteem allows him to accept his failures as unavoidable incidents rather than symptoms of inadequacy. He does not have to draw attention to his accomplishments. Although he appreciates praise, he can get along without it, because the accomplishment itself gives him satisfaction enough. When the symptoms of confidence and contentment are present, we can assume that self-esteem is strong enough to satisfy current needs.

On the other hand symptoms of insecurity and hostility indicate a self-esteem that is not adequate for current needs. Basically each of us has a hunger to be worth something. When that hunger is not satisfied, the resulting pain drives people to actions that are apparently irrational, yet rational enough when the pain of low self-esteem is recognized.

A fatal shooting results from an argument over a drink. The false accusation drew an angry response. Insults escalated. Each desperately needed to win, for low self-esteem could not tolerate another defeat. When it became apparent that victory could not be achieved with words, weapons became a reasonable alternative. The resulting murder gives a momentary sense of achievement that is not diminished by the threat of life imprisonment. Prison is not an unthinkable terror for one who expects nothing but failure from his worthless talents. Occasional incidents of fatal violence can be attributed to other causes. Frequent fatal violence is a strong indication that low self-esteem has reached epidemic proportions.

Unintended insults between husband and wife are easily forgotten when strong self-esteem cushions the blow. Low self-esteem magnifies the insult all out of proportion, and the resulting anger can lead to divorce and even death by domestic violence.

Low self-esteem may be more significant than erotic stimulation when it comes to pregnancy out of wedlock. The pain of feeling worthless is eased by the ability to attract a male who will give full attention, if only for a couple of hours. And the prospect of producing a baby for everyone to admire is also attractive to low self-esteem, along with the prospect of being needed by that helpless baby.

Again, unwed mothers are not unique to our generation. But when large numbers of births take place outside of marriage, they are obvious symptoms of the epidemic.

The probable reason for the epidemic has already been suggested. Materialism has increased the value of material things, and decreased the value of persons. People are worth less, because things are worth more.

The institution that has suffered most from materialism is the family. Demands for higher incomes have wasted the energies that used to be applied to nurturing children and spouse. Children who have been nurtured less have less to give to their children. A vicious circle ensues which increasingly deprives each generation, a circle which logically leads to social chaos. Whether or not that will actually occur is in God's hands. In the meantime we are surrounded by and occasionally tainted by an epidemic of low self-esteem. And there is something we can do about it.

### **Part V—The Place of Self-Esteem in our Gospel Ministry**

Self-esteem is not the exclusive property of the Christian Church. There are unbelievers with healthy self-esteem and believers with low self-esteem. But in theory at least, the Christian should have a better opinion of his own self-worth because of what he has learned from the Law and the Gospel.

First and foremost, the Gospel declares that God valued us so highly that he sent his Son to rescue us from the death we deserved. God loved us so much that he made us his children, for now and forever, at a cost which is humanly inconceivable. If we can believe that, we will know that we are not worthless, no matter how much family and society have declared our worthlessness. Only weakness of faith allows low self-esteem to come into a Christian's life.

Secondly, the moral law, the Ten Commandments, provides the sure-fire method for developing and preserving healthy self-esteem. Violations of those commandments not only make us guilty before God. They also reduce the value of self and others.

Obedience to the commandments protects and strengthens self-esteem. Disobedience destroys it. Obviously the Ten Commandments were not given as a guide to healthy self-esteem. But God's commandments were given as a blessing for God's people, and a healthy self-esteem may be the foremost earthly blessing for those who obey them, even for the unbeliever.

A strong moral life based on the Ten Commandments or some reasonable equivalent can build a positive self-esteem that is totally independent of God. Such self-esteem is a major stumbling block on the pathway to heaven. Therefore the Law must also be used to crush the self-esteem that derives solely from worldly sources. The same Law that builds and protects a Spirit-born self-esteem also convicts the sinner who thinks he has no need of repentance and forgiveness. When God's blessings lead us to a false confidence in our own worth, the Law is there to tell us that we are worthless apart from the forgiving grace of God. A healthy self-esteem that is based upon Law and Gospel never eliminates in this life our need for daily

contrition and repentance. Thus the Law also serves to build healthy self-esteem by destroying the false sense of worth that is based solely upon human praise and accomplishment.

At the same time, a low self-esteem may make it impossible, humanly speaking, for an individual to accept the fact of his guilt before God. He is already in great pain because of his low self-esteem and cannot bear the greater pain of accepting guilt before God. I know the problem exists. I do not know the best way of dealing with the problem. But it may be necessary to build up that person's self-esteem with the assurances of God's love before he will be strong enough to confess his guilt before God.

Chronologically this contradicts the principle that the Law must be preached first, and then the Gospel. But I don't think that the principle was meant to be, applied chronologically in the first place. Jesus provided Peter with many assurances of his forgiveness before he confronted him with his guilt. This may be what the psalmist had in mind when he said, "But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared." (Psalm 130:4) It has been my experience that children from nurturing families will admit their guilt more quickly than others. I think it works the same way with adults. It may be well to keep this in mind when counseling persons with low self-esteem.

### **Conclusion**

Whether we realize it or not, we have been ministering to the self-esteem of our people through Law and Gospel, through Word and Sacrament. Basically this essay does not suggest that we need to do more or less than we have been doing.

However, if it is indeed true that our society is experiencing an epidemic of low self-esteem (and we always must say "if", for the disease is not biologically identifiable), then we need to realize that more of our people are suffering from this special pain. We need to be more alert to the symptoms of this pain. We need to be even more persistent in applying the healing balm of the Gospel and stiff doses of the Law in treating this pain. We need to recognize this pain in ourselves and in our children, so that we may protect ourselves from the epidemic.

Whether you agree with this essay or not, the concept of self-esteem is here to stay. Its value in Christian teaching has been recognized by many, including those in our Synod. Instead of rejecting the concept, we need to clarify the concept in terms of Holy Scripture and add this understanding to the tools that the Holy Spirit has given us for building and preserving the Kingdom of God.