

Blast from the past

(A series featuring abridged versions of past articles from the Journal of Christian Education)

Self-esteem, self and sin, William E Andersen, Formally lecturer in education, University of Sydney, JCE Vol. 42, No. 1, 1999.

Within the ranks of Christians, there have been those who shrink away from any mention of “self” or “self-esteem” because of the possibility - a genuine one - that a concentration upon self may usurp the place that should belong to God. Among the neo-Puritans there has been an anomalous tendency, on the one hand, to identify “self-worth”, with sinful self-indulgence; but on the other hand to affirm certain acceptable kinds of “self-love”, including a “gracious self-love”, generated by the Holy Spirit. This latter notion is affirmed in this article, but is positioned within the wider biblical and theological framework.

Within the world of popular psychology and New Age intuition, there has arisen a self-esteem movement which concentrates on making children and adolescents “feel good” and which attempts to shield them from failure and self-blame.

Within psychotherapy, many clients will have suffered lack of love and respect from parent-figures, resulting in the inability to perceive themselves as worthy, or to make an acceptable contribution to others or to society. This is a deprivation, a gap, a void, a vacuum in the psyche: a stunted self; and it takes a long time, therapeutically, to bring about change.

Scripturally, several significant insights bear on the self and self-esteem:

1. The human being is a being made for orientation around, or focus upon, God. From a human angle this is a need, and then a fulfillment (or lack of fulfillment where the self is orientated elsewhere). But such orientation is both corporate and individual.
2. Such orientation upon God fans out, as it were, to include right and harmonious relationships with other human beings, with nature and with self.
3. Self is to be seen as an instrument to be used in the service either of Christ or of sin. In order for self to be an effective instrument, self-understanding and self-evaluation are important.
4. Paul in his letters warns against both high-mindedness and self-denigration, instructing his readers instead to develop a realistic judgement about the self which is both descriptive and evaluative.
5. The “self-esteem movement” has attempted an “educational” stance, presenting self-esteem as a gospel; while the stance of psychotherapists is to view its absence, with all the attendant personal trauma, as a disease.
6. The proper locus for building appropriate and balanced self-esteem is the family, as envisaged in the letters of Paul. Endurance and encouragement are crucial qualities both in facing reality and dealing with disappointment.

Is self-esteem sinful? Brian Hill, Emeritus Professor of Education, Murdoch University, Western Australia. JCE Vol. 46. No. May 2003.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbour as you love yourself” (Matt. 22:43-39) While Jesus spoke of these as the two greatest commandments ...he is speaking of three loves, not merely two: love of God, love of neighbour, and love of self. We may add to this a fourth, best represented by the creation command to humanity to “tend the earth”. (Gen 1:28) Jesus attitude...endorsed

the role of conservator...and perceived the self not as disembodied spirit, but as a being related to the natural as well as the social and spiritual.

I will argue that we cannot really love ourselves until we discover that God has accepted us. Then out of this rejuvenated spirit, we begin to love God...we also begin to see the external world differently (and) ...we also see our neighbours differently. These, then are the four dimensions of spirituality, the four vectors along which we must practice the presence of God and through which we gain a proper self-esteem.

Those who operate only on the I-It level lose respect even for themselves, and must be forever trying to prove themselves by their works. Those who nourish I-Thou affirmation build each other up. God whom we may have thought of as the great It, a distant creator of the distanced world, becomes the affirming Thou, who cherishes relation with us, even to the extent of befriending sinners.

Evangelical Christians have given little attention to this issue (low self-esteem). Having embraced the scriptural assurance of personal salvation....they are more motivated to pass on this life changing message. Paradoxically, some slip back into salvation by works “God must be pleased with me because I am being driven into the ground by all I have to do”. Secondly, ...they have difficulty admitting that they - with all believers - have moments of weakness and self-doubt. (Thirdly) saved by the grace of God...takes delight in repeating that nothing good can come from our natural self. An artificial self-esteem is therefore created by disowning one’s part.

God is willing to take us as we are and work with us to transform our old natures. Now our self-concept is in the process of being reorganised around a new centre. This reconstruction has two notable features. First, it is a process, not an instant product. Second, it is a partnership. God expects us to work at it along with him.

Those who desire to become teachers or counsellors must examine their reasons, particularly to check whether they are motivated by... “need love” or “gift love”. The former will prompt them to lord it over their clients, and feed on their dependency. The latter will enhance in those clients the development of a healthy self-esteem. We must ask ourselves from time to time: What is left of us when we lay aside our roles? Do we derive our self-esteem entirely from I-It criteria. Christian woman still needs to be raised up and affirmed as an equal in the economy of God (and) then, perhaps the church will at last begin to accept and benefit from the special leadership gifts of women.

A Christ-based self-esteem frees us to enjoy our selves, serve others, and worship God without reservations. It provides the incentive for helping our neighbours - whether clients, students or acquaintances - regardless of any prospect of reward. At all levels, it is the catalyst in us of authentic God-shaped love.

(The Journal of Christian Education, including back issues, is available fro the Business Manager, JCE, PO Box 602, EPPING NSW 1710)