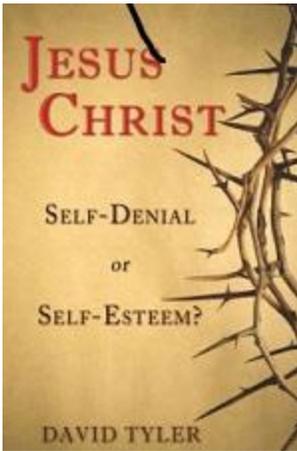


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Jesus Christ: Self-Denial or Self-Esteem?

A Portion of Chapter One



Some of the most popular themes in psychology are self-image, self-esteem, self-worth, and self-love. The emphasis, regardless of the terminology used by a particular advocate of this movement, is on self.

Over the past twenty-five years the concept of esteeming oneself has had a powerful influence on the church. Before the 1970's the subject of self-esteem was almost unheard of in evangelical circles. Christians, who have generally thought of self-esteem as sinful, have lately been encouraged by beloved Christian authors in their books to develop a "healthy" self-esteem. These authors have warned that negative self-esteem is the basis of most psychological problems and that it even leads to sinful behavior. They have advanced the premise that an individual who does not love himself will find it impossible to develop genuine love relationships with God and others. Self-esteem has been said to be the key that unlocks the door to fulfillment, success, and happiness. It is the proposed answer to nearly all of life's problems.

If the advocates of self-esteem are right, then we must reform our theology. We must change our emphasis from man's unworthiness and focus on man's worthiness and his right to esteem himself. The church will need to recognize the tremendous significance that this teaching will have in the lives of individuals, pastors, parents, children, schoolteachers, and so on. Pastors will have a fundamental obligation to their congregations to instruct and nurture them in esteeming themselves. One writer said, "What the church needs more than anything else, is a new reformation—nothing else will do! Without a new theological reformation, the Christian church as the authentic body of Christ

may not survive. “The author continued by saying that self-esteem is the universal hope for the church today. In this same vein, James Dobson has said, “...the health of an entire society depends on the ease with which its individual members can gain personal acceptance... Personal worth is not something human beings are free to take or leave. We must have it, and when it is unattainable, everybody suffers.” Therefore, for the sake of our children, our church, and primarily for ourselves, we must learn to love ourselves. We must not cling to the past. We must change. We must change the way we worship. We must change our parenting methods.

But if the advocates of self-esteem are wrong, then clearly the church’s fascination with self-esteem is heretical. Jesus called His followers to imitate Him in denying themselves: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). The cross, with all it symbolizes, permeates and gives meaning and unity to all the ethical teachings of Jesus. Jesus consistently tied together self-denial and the cross. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die... In fact every command of Jesus is a call to die.” Bonhoeffer continued by saying that the way of the cross is the path of every Christian. The antithesis of the cross is self-love. Therefore, selfism is classified as a “different gospel” (Galatians 1:6), opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Because of the extensive appeal and profound acceptance of self-love by evangelicals, a more critical biblical examination of the concept of self-love is needed. Most material on the subject has been written by the proponents of the self-love theory, and little of that has been written from a conservative theological point of view. Fortunately, the tide has begun to turn.

These vast claims made by Christian self-esteem theorists must be tested by Scriptures. Are their teachings based on a new exegesis of the Scriptures? If not, where did they originate? The answer, to that question is that they originated with secular humanists who studied man, not from the

viewpoint of God's Word, but from the subjective observation of self and by self. Their theories were accommodated and incorporated into the teachings of the church

The purpose of this book is to examine representative samples of the words and actions of the Lord, in order to demonstrate that Jesus taught, and modeled self-denial as opposed to self-love. Whereas Jesus focused on God and neighbor, the self-esteem advocates focus on self. These two views, the other-oriented and the self-oriented, are incompatible with one another. An individual cannot esteem himself and take up his cross at the same time. A man cannot serve two masters, for he will ultimately choose one over the other.

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