

The Christian's Self Image
Part One

Self-Esteem and Reformed Theology

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the issue of "self-esteem" as understood by psychologists and many Evangelical Christians in an attempt to determine the implications of the Reformed faith for this controversial issue. We live in a time when many seminaries are finding their Christian counseling and psychology departments to be their bread and butter. It is not unusual to find that one-half or two-thirds of the student body some Evangelical seminaries are enrolled as counseling majors. Most of the curriculum for these degrees promote the idea that a positive self image is essential for mental health. The concept of self esteem is having a profound impact on the church. How is it to be understood? What does the Bible have to say on the subject? What is the Reformed view of Christian psychology and of the self? In the space allotted an exhaustive treatment cannot be given. Nevertheless, a few preliminary remarks will be attempted that may serve as a guide to the more elaborate task of constructing a Reformed psychology.

My own interest in this topic stems from my undergraduate degree in psychology from a secular university, my theological training and commitment to a consistently Calvinistic world view, and my current position as a Christian counselor to young men addicted to drugs and to those involved in cults and the occult. The question boils down to this. If I am to be an effective counselor how do I respond to what appears to be a monumental amount of psychological research suggesting that if I am to help my clients I must bolster their self-esteem? What am I to do in light of the view of self traditionally held by Christians?

There have been several responses to this question. We shall be considering three that claim to come from members of the Reformed community; Robert Schuller, Jay Adams and Anthony Hoekema. Some remarks will also be made concerning Dave Hunt's writings against Christian psychology and his view of general revelation. I shall conclude with an attempt to set forth an outline of my own thinking on the subject with some suggestion as to the direction of further study in this area. The paper may seem to be incomplete

without a full survey of Scripture. This will, hopefully, be remedied in part two, to be presented by my wife Kathy at a subsequent Round Table meeting.

Robert Schuller

Perhaps no one represents the positive self-esteem movement, either in Christianity or secular thinking, better than Robert Schuller. Schuller is the pastor of the Crystal Cathedral in southern California and a minister in the Reformed Church in America. His popular Hour of Power TV show spreads his message of self-esteem to a nation wide audience. A survey of Schuller's position practically eliminates the need for a discussion of secular perspectives, since Schuller pretty much accepts the secular interpretation of self-esteem psychology with almost no modification.

A study of Schuller's position in his *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, quickly leads to the conclusion that he has not only seriously departed from the Reformed faith, but that he is also teaching blatant heresy. Schuller is calling for a new Reformation as a means of correcting the deficiencies of the reformation of the sixteenth century, in particular its doctrine of human depravity. He boldly asserts that the problem with orthodox theology is its insistence upon constructing a God centered theology. What is really needed is a theology calculated to meet humankind's greatest need; the need for a positive self-esteem. Such a theology must be man centered. It must have the human dignity and pride as its starting point and ultimate standard by which all else is judged. (Schuller, 36-38)

What is this thing called self-esteem that is so important in Schuller's thinking? Schuller believes, "Self-esteem is the human hunger for the divine dignity that God intended to be our emotional birthright as children created in his image." (Schuller, 15) Self-esteem is set up as the most important need of human beings. Without self-esteem one cannot properly love God or anyone else. This fundamental need must be met first.

Schuller has apparently derived his theory of needs from the model of self-actualization and the hierarchy of needs proposed by humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow. In this scheme the human ability to love others in a sacrificial manner cannot be carried forth until one has had basic physical needs met and

until one has had basic significance needs met. Those who are hungry or who have negative concepts of their worth are simply unable to love or give unselfishly.

Having based his anthropology on a heathen concept of needs it is no wonder that Schuller desires to make man the center of his theology. Schuller has bought into the secularist claim that a positive self-image is the key to human happiness, health and fulfillment. This presupposition becomes the hermeneutical key by which Schuller redefines numerous key Biblical concepts. He reasons that God's greatest priority is to fulfill the need of humans for self-esteem.

Sin is defined essentially as anything that strips human beings of dignity and self-esteem. This interesting interpretation follows from his view of God's dignity being offended when humans are denied their self-esteem. The implication is that God's dignity is derived in some way from human dignity. (Schuller, 14) The fallen nature is redefined by Schuller as the human tendency towards self-hatred. When Adam fell he ceased to trust God and what he lost was primarily his self-esteem. (Schuller, 65)

Hell is said by Schuller to be that state of existence that occurs when a person loses his or her pride. To live without self-esteem is to live in hell. Nothing is said of hell as a state of eternal damnation. Salvation obviously becomes the restoration of self-esteem in Schuller's system. Again, the eternal state is not a significant part of the discussion. (Schuller, 14)

An interesting aspect of Schuller's soteriology is his rather bizarre claim that the reason people do not accept Christ as savior is that they have a low self-esteem. (Schuller, 98) In fact, all sin may be traced to this root problem.

Any analysis of "sin" or "evil" or "demonic influence" or "negative thinking" or "systemic evil" or "antisocial behavior" that fails to see the lack of Self-dignity as the core of the problem will prove to be too shallow.

...

What is "lack of faith?" It is 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. (Schuller, 15-16)

Hence, we must change our evangelistic strategy. Instead of telling people that they are sinners who need to repent, we must tell them they are created worthy of God's grace. Christ died on the cross because of our

great value to him. (Schuller, 74) We should join God's team because he needs us to help Him create a society of self-esteeming people. (Schuller, 79)

In light of the above it should come as no surprise to find that Schuller has discovered a new definition of salvation.

What does it mean to be saved? It means 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. (Schuller, 99)

Likewise, regeneration is redefined.

When the Ideal One (Jesus) invites us to accept his divine pardon and join him in his high and holy work of building a society where human beings treat each other with dignity, suddenly the offer of pardon, the declaration of credited righteousness on our behalf, the call to meaningful service, all lead us into an existential encounter with such unconditional love and acceptance that we are literally born again. (Schuller, 100)

Regeneration apparently is no longer a supernatural act of God through which He creates a new nature in us, but it is now a subjective experience (much like a neo-orthodox view of encounter as revelation) that creates within us positive feelings about ourselves.

It should be evident now that Schuller is no friend to the Reformed faith. His Arminianism is made explicit in his statement that, "God's plan includes all who choose to be included." (Schuller, 73) If we can simply show the poor sinner that he is really very good and worthy of salvation then he or she will immediately choose to follow Christ. This is the essence of Schuller's theology.

A detailed refutation of Schuller is hardly needed at this point because the nature of his errors are so blatantly obvious. And in any case, Jay Adams has provided a valuable critique of Schuller's position that is readily available. However, Adams himself makes some serious theological and psychological mistakes of his own by moving to a form of extremism at the opposite end of the spectrum. We shall now turn our attention to his work.

Jay Adams

While a comprehensive overview of Jay Adams' work would require a survey of his numerous writings, fortunately he has brought his material concerning self-esteem and his view of modern psychology

together in one small volume, *The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, Self-Image*. It is his intention to refute the philosophy of Schuller and, indeed, any notion among Christians that they should in any way or for any reason maintain a positive view of themselves.

Since there is much to be commended in Adams' book I will begin with an assessment of its positive aspects. Adams attempts to ground his own theory of humanity on Scripture and in so far as he does so he serves as a valuable corrective to the heresies of Robert Schuller.

Adams attacks self-esteem philosophy on the grounds that it is really a form of humanism dressed up in religious and psychological language that is infiltrating the church. While not agreeing totally with his thesis one may recognize a good bit of truth in what he says. He demonstrates clearly the humanistic origin of self-esteem philosophy as it is expressed in modern psychology. In particular he argues that our views of what basic human needs are should be derived from scriptural exegesis. Empirical research should not be used to supplant it. Hence, he concludes that the most basic human need is not self-esteem or even physical needs such as food and shelter. It is, rather, the need to seek first God's kingdom. It is the need for Jesus and His word. (Adams, 44-47, cf. Matt. 6:33; Luke 10:42)

If Jesus' statement in Matt. 6:33 is taken seriously, then clearly humankind's basic need is to get right with God and to seek his kingdom. The promise of meeting our physical needs is predicated on this. And of course, the first step to having our needs for love and acceptance met is to be reconciled to the God who made us. Yet, it is not totally this simple. James warns us against offering spiritual comfort to those who are hungry without giving them something to eat. The Bible is concerned with more than just the spiritual.

Another extremely helpful point made by Adams is his refutation of the notion that we are commanded to love ourselves in Jesus' statement in Matt. 22:36-40. While many promoters of philosophy have held that the statement, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" requires self-love as a prerequisite to loving others, Adams points out that such an interpretation makes hermeneutical putty out of the text. Jesus clearly states that he is setting forth *two* commands not three. The only two commands given are to love God and to love others, period. The text assumes a type of self-love that exists in most people, namely that natural instinct that causes people to take care of themselves and seek their own well being. A refutation of

the notion that self-love is commanded has been needed for some time. As we shall see, it does not help people who are already feeling profound self-hatred to pile more guilt upon them by informing them that even in this they are being disobedient. Holding up self-love as a law to be achieved is only to add condemnation to condemnation.

Finally, Adams also makes a needed balancing statement to much theorizing in the field of family systems and child development when he reminds us that children are sinners as well as adults. There is a tendency among psychologists, in tracing the origins of dysfunctional behavior to patterns learned in the experiences of early childhood, to essentially view the child as a totally innocent reactor to his or her environment. Adams reminds us that children respond as they do to family dysfunction, at least partly because they are sinners. When a child internalizes the blame for its father's abuse and alcoholic behavior and believes the lies being told it (it's your fault, etc.) this is an action that grows out of a fallen nature. It may not be a conscious sin, but sin it is nevertheless. I realize this statement is likely to make counselors angry, but even though we have no empirical example of a non-fallen preschooler to see how it would react, I am convinced that a non-fallen child would find a way to escape the typical pattern we observe with abused kids today. Adams illustrates how Jesus refused to accept the blame for his parents' anger and frustration when they came looking for him in the temple at the age of twelve. (Adams, 129-132)

Having stated the above, it should be understood that I do not advocate blaming either the child or the parent alone in an abusive situation. Recovery from such abuse involves forgiveness on the part of both parties, but it especially involves each one being willing to assume responsibility for changing themselves in the here and now.

To this point I have noted the helpful aspects of Jay Adams' work. It is most unfortunate that he spoils what could have been an excellent book by assuming a more negative position than is defensible either psychologically or biblically. For the heart of his thesis is that human beings, redeemed or not, have no significant value or worth. We are neither unique nor wonderful in any sense. (Adams, 78)

There are really two distinct questions at issue here. The first is the question of whether or not humankind as created in God's image has value or worth. The second concerns the specific status of

redeemed human beings. Does our standing in Christ give us any reason to view ourselves in a positive light? Adams gives a resounding no to both of these questions.

On a psychological level Adams makes at least two fatal errors. First, he lumps all Christian psychologists who advocate any form of self-esteem into the same camp. This is grossly unfair as there is a vast difference between the view of Schuller and that of biblical counselors such as Larry Crabb or of theologians such as Anthony Hoekema. Both Crabb and Hoekema take quite seriously the devastating effects of sin, even in the life of the believer, and treat seriously the need for dealing with sin as a part of counseling. However, they also recognize that one's view of oneself impacts one's thoughts, feelings and behaviors and that there is a sense in which a negative self-image, especially in the life of a believer, can create problems.

The second error that Adams makes is the assumption that those who express self-hatred in a pathological sense, only do so because they have been taught self-esteem philosophy. It does not take much working with adolescents, for example, who have been severely abused to realize that this is sheer nonsense. Having spent five years in counseling with such children I have seen numerous instances where pronounced depression and self-hatred were precipitated by horrendous family situations. As far as I could tell, few if any of these children had received instruction in self-esteem teaching. The desire for significance as a person seems to me to be innate.

Adams' psychological mistakes are a result of his faulty theology. This again shows itself in two areas. Adams first of all asserts that there is no biblical basis for ascribing any value whatever to human beings. In discussing Genesis 1:27;9:3 and James 3:9 (to which I shall return later) Adams states, "Intrinsically man is worth little..." Adams explicitly denies that being created in the image of God gives human beings any value. (Adams, 81-82)

If Adams is arguing against the idea that humans have inherent autonomous value then I, of course, would fully agree. However, from the context of his discussion it seems that he is denying any value to human beings period. This is a serious error. The point of God's image as the basis of human value is that human value is not autonomous, it is derived. It is because Genesis 1:27 and James 3:9 teach that human value is derived that these texts may be used to support the reality of that human value. God is the source of

value and the reference point for meaning for all things. Humankind is valuable, not only because it bears the divine image, but because God has given it value. God has created human beings and sovereignly assigned a place and purpose for them in His plan. Since his creation is good and His plan is perfect, just and righteous (including His predestination of the fall), then human beings have value and significance because God gives it to them as they fit into the structure of His plan.

Furthermore, it is incorrect to argue, as Adams does, that the image of God in humanity is merely the same as a photographic image. Adams asserts that if one destroys and curses a photograph of a person then that amounts to cursing of the person. Hence, if a person is murdered this demands punishment, not because the person has any value, but because God's dignity is insulted. (Adams, 82) While it is true that murder insults God's dignity, the command in Genesis 6:9 concerning capital punishment for murder seems to me to involve more than just an avenging of God's dignity. A human being is not a photograph. A person is alive and beyond simply being a picture of God's attributes, actually shares in some of God's attributes; commonly known in systematic theology as the communicable attributes. Taking a human life is more than simply destroying a lifeless picture of God. It is destroying a being who shares, even though fallen, in some of the attributes of personhood and life that God Himself has and has bestowed upon it. It is to destroy what God has given value to.

Adams' second area of theological error involves his inadequate view of the effects of regeneration in the life of the believer. This mistake steers Adams into what appears to be a rather Platonic theory of sanctification that, in my mind, leads irretrievably to legalism. Many Christians (such as Hoekema) teach that the regenerate person is given a new nature and that the old nature is actually, not just legally or positionally, put to death. Adams is concerned because this is used to provide a basis for a positive self-esteem. Hence, he argues that the Christian's basic concept of himself is that he is a wretched sinner who must constantly fight against sin. (Adams, 78) This implies that sin is to be expected as consistent with the identity of the believer. The statements in Scripture to the effect that we are new creatures in Christ and that the old nature is dead are taken as statements of not what we actually are but only of what God reckons us to be. Our status in Christ is not a present experiential reality but rather a Platonic ideal. It is a state held

above us that we are to strive to attain in our daily living. The biblical texts concerning our new nature were not written to assure us of who we are in Christ, but instead were given to give us an ideal by which we may see how far short we fall so that we will try harder in striving for perfection. (Adams, 75-79) Although it is not stated, this position seems to depend upon the Arminian view of the believer as having two spiritual natures, a sinful one and a new one. Only in Adams' theory, the new nature is virtually impotent.

The inadequacies of Adams' approach will become clear as we examine the view of Anthony Hoekema. A large part of Adams' polemic concerning the status of the believer is directed against Hoekema, whose view we will examine in a moment. First, however, we shall briefly consider one of Jay Adams' chief disciples: Dave Hunt.

Dave Hunt

Dave Hunt is a free-lance researcher and writer who created a storm of controversy with his two books *The Seduction of Christianity* and *Beyond Seduction*. These books have much to say of great value, particularly regarding the positive confession heresy and the influx of New Age ideas into the church. However, their discussion of psychology and self-esteem is seriously flawed. This is largely because of Hunt's Arminianism and his out right denial of the doctrine of general revelation.

Hunt begins his attack on psychology with an assault on the notion that "all truth is God's truth." He contends that only in the Bible is there any truth to be found concerning the human mind and its workings. (Hunt, 1987:137-139) The Bible is said to contain all truth. Thus there is no truth to be found in the scientific study of behavior. But what about other scientific disciplines? Hunt admits that there is truth, such as in physics, outside of the Bible. But in his newsletter he states that this is not God's truth. It is somehow neutral.

Those who proclaim "All truth is God's truth" confuse *the truth* with mere *facts of nature*. That the latter are not included in the former is quite clear from what Jesus said: "When He the Spirit of truth is come ... *whom the world cannot receive...* He will guide you into *all truth* (John 14:17, 16:13). Since *all truth* is revealed only by the Spirit of God "whom the world cannot receive," and since "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God" (1Cor.2:9-14), if science were part of "God's truth," then *all scientific discoveries* would have to be made *only by Christians*. Yet non-Christians make great scientists. So even if psychology were a science, which it is not, it would still not be part of "God's truth," which is revealed by God only to his own. (Hunt, 1989:2, emphasis his)

At first glance this argument may look impressive. However, there is a problem here. Upon closer observation, Hunt's point simply does not logically follow. If it did, then all truths which are not God's truths, that is all scientific truth, would somehow have to exist independently of God. They would be uncreated, because obviously, if God had created these truths (such as gravity) then they would be His. Hunt is assuming a heathen view of fact as having independent existence and meaning apart from God. Hence, the natural world can reveal nothing of God's truth. And thus, a psychologist can discover nothing about human behavior.

Hunt has with one stroke denied both the doctrine of general revelation and creation. This amounts to serious heresy and ought to be immediately challenged. That the heathen have knowledge of "God's truth" is clearly taught in Romans chapter one as well as other texts. The problem with unbelievers is not that they do not have revelation from God in nature. The problem is that in their sinful rebellion they deliberately distort this knowledge until it is almost unrecognizable. The doctrine of general revelation has been held without dispute by almost every Christian theologian throughout the history of the church. Treatments of it may be found in all of the standard systematic theologies, such as Berkhof (1941:36ff), Hodge (1970:22ff), Erickson (1986:153ff), Strong (1907: 26ff), Lewis and Demarest (1987:59ff) or Calvin (1960:51ff).

But what of the texts that Hunt uses to support his position. We cannot let Hunt's interpretation stand because to do so would create a contradiction in Scripture with texts such as Romans 1:18ff. The solution would seem to be in studying both the meanings of the words "truth" and "all" in the contexts they are found in. John Owen, in his monumental work, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, demonstrated quite conclusively that the word "all" in scripture may be limited in its meaning by its context. It does not always mean "all things that exist". It may refer to all things concerning the particular issue at hand. Thus when Paul says in Romans 11:26 "And so all Israel will be saved..." it does not mean that no Jews will go to hell. After all, Judas Iscariot was a Jew.

Likewise the word "all" in John 16:13 is limited to the particular kind of truth being discussed by Jesus in the context. Jesus in verse 12 is clearly preparing the disciples for the eventuality of further

revelation, that is the words of Jesus which they are not yet ready to bear but which will be revealed and eventually become the New Testament Scripture. The "all truth" here, then is *all truth concerning Jesus' words for the church to be recorded in Scripture*. It is a promise that they will receive the inerrant revelation of God when they write the New Testament documents. It is this truth, concerning salvation and spiritual life, which is quite clear from the context of 1 Cor. 2, that the natural man cannot receive. In fact, the very passage that teaches general revelation the strongest (Rom 1:18ff) affirms that the natural man does not receive the truth to the extent that he obeys it and worships God.

Simply put, the passages quoted by Hunt are irrelevant to the discussion because they do not discuss the truths of science or the facts of nature. The text says nothing about them being the truth of God one way or another. But other texts make it quite clear that all things are created and that all of nature reveals God clearly. (Psalm 19:1-6) If the facts of nature reveal God and are created by Him then certainly these facts are God's truth.

Having defended the doctrine of general revelation it is necessary to make some cautions. While this doctrine is unquestionably true, it has been abused. There are those Christians who use general revelation as an excuse for practicing Eastern forms of meditation on the premise that through general revelation the heathen have learned enough about spirituality to teach us methods of approaching God that are not in the Bible. Hence, occult forms of meditation such as TM or other Hindu practices are said to be "neutral." Once the Hindu philosophy is removed the "neutral" technique may be practiced by Christians. This dangerous position fails to understand that sinners distort general revelation. This distortion may be viewed as a continuum such that at one end the distortion would be minimal, while at the other end it would almost be total. Abstract and hard sciences such as mathematics, logic, physics, chemistry and biology would be less prone to distortion. Sciences that depend more upon statistical verification such as psychology and sociology would be in the middle of the continuum, while disciplines such as history and philosophy would be closer to the other end. Finally, non-Christian religions, to the degree that they depart from the biblical revelation, would be towards the end where there is the most distortion. To the extent that the sciences apply valid

scientific methods rigorously and interpret their data on the basis of biblical presuppositions, they will be closer to the no distortion end of the continuum.

Tendency towards distortion						
low distortion						high distortion
logic mathematics	physics chemistry	biology	sociology psychology	history philosophy	non-Christian religion liberal theology	

Christian theology is not included here because it is primarily based on the interpretation of special, not general, revelation. To the degree that each of the above disciplines is corrected by the presuppositions and propositions of special revelation they will tend to be less distorted. Nevertheless, not all available truth comes from special revelation and that which comes from general revelation is true and it belongs to God.

Having seen that all truth, if it is really true, is indeed God's truth, we may look specifically at what Hunt has to say about self-esteem. Hunt's treatment of self-esteem is bizarre. He denies that anyone ever has self-hatred.

Of course, there are many who express varying degrees of self-hatred. That they don't actually hate themselves can easily be seen. The person who says, "I'm so ugly, I hate myself!" doesn't hate himself at all, or he would be *glad* that he was ugly. (Hunt, 1985:200, emphasis his)

This statement demonstrates a profound ignorance of the kinds of struggles those with devastated self-images actually possess.

When confronted with a suicidal individual, filled with rage and expressing disgust and hatred towards herself because she believes she deserved to be regularly raped by her father as a child, it simply will not do to say, "Knock it off! If you really hated yourself you would be glad your father raped you." This kind of crass, irresponsible and ungodly insensitivity would follow naturally from Hunt's position. Fortunately the word of God does not support such nonsense. The Bible teaches that we should be compassionate towards those who have been abused and oppressed. (Matt. 25:34-46)

Self-hatred is a very devastating reality for many. This, however, is not to deny that many of those suffering from low self-esteem are also taking a posture of self-sufficient rebellion against God. There is a paradox involved that makes self-hatred and arrogant pride able to exist in the heart of the sinner simultaneously. I will have more to say about this in a moment.

If it is true that self-hatred does exist, that all truth (if it is true) is created and thus God's truth, then Hunt has no Biblical basis for opposing psychology. There must be some unbiblical motivation behind his position. What that is becomes apparent in the form of a humanistic theological presupposition that seems to me to be at the bottom of his attack on psychology. The real motive behind Hunt's position surfaces in the following quotes:

...to arrive at a scientific explanation for human personality , behavior, happiness, and fulfillment would destroy mankind, for the very qualities "scientifically explained" would thereby become *natural* processes governed by scientific laws and would thus be meaningless. (Hunt, 1987:127, emphasis his)

To attempt to deal with human behavior "scientifically" denies man's free will and spiritual nature. (Hunt, 1985:191)

Thus we see that Hunt is attacking the science of psychology because it infringes upon free-will. Notice the move made in the first quote above. Hunt has suddenly (and contrary to the testimony of Scripture) introduce a dichotomy between natural, scientific law and God's creatorial sovereignty and plan for history. That which can be explained scientifically has no meaning. But did God not create the universe and the laws governing it? How can that which has been created by God be said to be meaningless? Do not all of God's actions have purpose?

Also, where does Hunt get the notion that meaning somehow is derived from free-will? What chapter and verse yields such an idea? Where does Scripture teach that the reality humankind's spiritual nature is based on free-will? One would search the Bible in vain to find such teaching. My Bible teaches that all meaning and purpose for life are derived from God and His sovereign plan. (Is. 46:10; Eph. 1:11)

I would agree that a scientific account of human behavior would destroy free-will. But then I deny the Arminian notion of free-will anyway. The fact is, human beings are created in the physical world just

like the rest of God's creation. If God controls nature through "scientific" laws, then why can He not control human behavior in the same manner? And again, if God controls human behavior by predetermining human actions in history are not those actions and that history a part of what God has created? How is it that something created by God suddenly becomes meaningless? All meaning is derived from God, not from some supposed autonomous capacity of the human will.

It is clear that Hunt's real agenda is to defend Arminianism with its irrational, destructive, unprovable and unscriptural presupposition of human autonomy or free-will.¹ Having exposed the Arminianism inherent in Hunt's position it is time to move on to more positive matters. The theology of Anthony Hoekema will now be briefly discussed.

Anthony Hoekema

Dr. Hoekema was, until his death in 1988, professor of systematic theology at Calvin Seminary. Those who are familiar with his work know that his credentials as an orthodox Reformed theologian are impeccable. What does he have to say on the subject of self-esteem? His position is set forth in his book *The Christian Looks at Himself*.

The primary question for Hoekema concerns the attitude that a Christian should have of his or herself. "Should a Christian, in thinking about himself, lay primary stress on his continued sinfulness? Or should his primary emphasis be on his newness in Christ?" (Hoekema, 13) He does not deal with the situation of the unbeliever or of human nature apart from Christ, except to state briefly that he believes that the image of God in man does imply that man has value.

¹It should be noted that my opposition to the doctrine of free-will is in reference to the notion that the will operates as an uncaused cause. That is, there is no precondition of any kind, psychological, biochemical, environmental or spiritual that determines my behavior. This is the only definition of free-will that satisfies the requirements of Arminianism. However, this is flatly false. Any neurologist can testify to the profound impact of chemical states in the brain on one's feelings and behavior. In addition this notion of free-will implies that ultimately all of our actions are random acts of blind chance and hence meaningless.

I do believe that the human will is free in the sense that I am able to chose to do what I want to do in accordance with my nature and natural law. That is, I am a human, not a fish, so I cannot chose to live under water without an air supply. I can chose, within limits, what I want to do and this without outside coercion, but my desires themselves are predetermined by factors beyond my control. For a full discussion and demolition of the Arminian idea of free-will one should consult Jonathan Edwards *Freedom of the Will* in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1. Paul Ramsey, ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.

Hoekema's view of the Christian's self-esteem is based on his rejection of the two nature theory of sanctification. He argues that when Scripture describes us as new creatures in Christ it is describing an actual supernatural change in which the believer's old sin nature is changed into a new nature through regeneration. This is actual in the life of the believer. It is not merely a positional or reckoned state or ideal to be lived up to.

In favor of his position, Hoekema notes that Paul consistently discusses who the believer is in Christ when discussing sin. (Hoekema, 26-30) In fact, the admonitions given by Paul concerning proper Christian conduct come after discussions of who the believer is in Christ. Rather than seeing sin as the natural product of the inner nature of the believer, Hoekema quite correctly observes:

when we slip into an old-man way of living, we are living contrary to our true selves; we are denying our true self image. Paul does not say in Romans 6:11 "Consider yourselves to be *mostly* alive to God and *mostly* dead to sin." What he says is, "Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God." *This, then, must be our Christian self-image.* We must consider ourselves to be new persons in Christ, who have once and for all turned our backs upon the old self, and who refuse to be identified with it any longer. (Hoekema, 46-47, emphasis his)

Because we are new creatures, Hoekema further argues that this makes us both free from the law while it takes away all excuses for continued sin. We cannot simply throw up our hands in frustration, admitting defeat and saying that we cannot help sinning. While we will never achieve perfection in this life, we should be identified mostly with victory. "If the old man is considered an inescapable part of me, I then have a handy, built in excuse for sinning." (Hoekema, 96) But since we are no longer primarily sinners in our new nature, we should be able to experience victory and take advantage of the escapes that God provides us from temptation. (Hoekema, 59)

Regarding the law, we are not to be legalistically attempting to achieve some kind of Platonic standard. The law is not over us, rather it is now written in our hearts. Hoekema argues that the struggle of Romans 7 refers to the unregenerate man or the Christian attempting to live on the basis of legalism. We, however, are free from this law of sin and death.

... we must conclude that believers are not doomed to perpetual defeat in trying to keep the law -- the kind of defeat pictured in Romans 7 -- but are now able to fulfil the law's just

requirement, in principle though not yet in perfection, through the indwelling Spirit who enables and strengthens them. (Hoekema, 66)

The issue for the Christian, then, is not so much to foster a positive self-image on psychological grounds as it is to simply get the Christian to believe what the Bible says about who he or she really is in Christ. This has two immediate practical results. First it alleviates believers from carrying false guilt, since we come to see and believe that we are actually forgiven. (Hoekema, 32-35) Second it enables us to truly find holiness and victory in our lives as we approach temptation with the attitude that to succumb would be a violation of who we really are as new creatures in Christ. We are freed from an impossible legalism to experience true Christian growth. (Hoekema, 36) But in order to live consistently as who we are, we must see ourselves as God sees us. We must have faith in our newness. (Hoekema, 97)

Conclusion

It should be apparent by now that I substantially agree with Hoekema. His position, in my opinion, does the greatest justice to both those scriptures that teach total depravity as well as the biblical data concerning regeneration. I wish to conclude by adding a few remarks of my own to his excellent presentation.

One might ask about the clear scriptural teachings to deny ourselves, to not love ourselves; the warnings against pride and so forth. These warnings should be taken seriously, yet I think we often misunderstand exactly what they are about. The kind of pride condemned in Scripture is that exhibited by the Pharisee in the temple who prayed, thanking God that he was not a sinner like other men. (Luke 18:10-14) It is the pride demonstrated by the rich man who filled his barns up without consideration for the state of his soul. (Luke 12:16-21) It consists in the belief in one's self-sufficiency, independence or autonomy from God. It is the refusal to acknowledge that one is created and therefore dependant upon God. And it is the refusal to worship and praise the God upon whom one is dependant for life. What it involves, then, is the denial of who one really is; a sinner but created in God's image.

It is my observation that this denial of who one really is results in the unbeliever's attitude towards the self being largely irrational. Much like Van Til's view of the heathen being caught up in the belief in

rationalism and empiricism (irrationalism) at the same time and bouncing back and forth between the two like a ping pong ball, I think unbelievers are filled with both a self-pride and love that is characterized by an arrogant denial of the need for God as well as a self-hatred and loathing that leads to self destructive patterns of living. Some non-Christians adhere to one side more than the other, but by and large they tend to bounce back and forth between the two depending upon whichever is most convenient for the purpose of preserving their autonomy at any given moment. Thus the paradox of suicide as an act of self hate and destruction that is also incredibly self centered.

Research into human behavior has clearly established that abuse and family dysfunction leads to predictable patterns of behavior among children that continues throughout their lives without intervention. Addictive behaviors of all sorts have been successfully explained and treated with this knowledge. The person's self-esteem is important in the success of such treatment, yet such treatment needs to be brought into a biblical context.

It does no good to cater to the pride of sinners by bolstering their self-esteem only to have them die and go to hell. In light of the devastating effects of sin upon human nature there is not much comfort I can offer to those unwilling to receive forgiveness. The Bible intends us to see ourselves as we really are. If we are unregenerate we may have some value as creatures of God but this is far outweighed by our depravity. Until the sinner learns to hate his or herself, in the sense of hating his or her sinfulness, then salvation cannot come.

On the other hand, believers need to see themselves as they are as well. Simply becoming a Christian and "trusting the Lord" does not automatically heal of us the hurts and years of conditioning that produce sinful, dysfunctional behavior. Healing and sanctification are parallel processes and they both require an accurate knowledge of who we are in Christ. We are not merely saved sinners, still locked in depravity. We have been given new natures and seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:6, 2 Cor. 5:17) We need to begin believing this and living as though it were true, instead of living as though the lies we have been taught about ourselves are true.

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addendum July 1999:

A most helpful discussion of the problems of the Arminian view of free will may be found in R. K. McGregor
Wright *No Place for Sovereignty*, Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1996.