

The Christian's Self Image
Part Two

Sin, Psychology and Reformed Theology

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Introduction

In Part One of this presentation, Alan discussed the question of self esteem and the Christian. He described and critiqued the views of Robert Schuller, Jay Adams, Dave Hunt and Anthony Hoekema as they pertained to the psychology and theology of self esteem. I would like to continue that discussion by turning our attention to some very practical matters in this regard. They include the following questions:

1. What about sanctification?
 - a) Trichotomist view versus dichotomy?
 - b) Positional identity or actual identity?
2. What is self esteem about? (sinful pride or confidence?)
3. Is there a valid role for a Christian psychology?
4. What should be the role of the church in sanctification?

These questions do not arise out of an armchair interest in analyzing controversies. They are a direct result of some very personal struggles I have wrestled with over the past ten years. Perhaps some of my background will highlight their pertinence.

In 1973 I had what may be called a fairly dramatic conversion experience. On a road in North Carolina I met Jesus personally. God became very real to me. An overpowering awareness of His Presence invaded every aspect of my life. I lived every moment to please Him and to enjoy His pleasure in me. As I encountered Christians in typical church settings, however, it was rare indeed to find anyone who shared my voracious hunger for Him. There was grumbling, complaining, backbiting. There were half mumbled songs during worship time. Conversations revolved around sprinkler systems and ice cream socials. Since my conversion centered around verses like Matthew 6:24 "No one can serve two masters..." and Rev. 3:15 "...I would that you were cold or hot..." I could not comprehend that these people REALLY KNEW God - the GOD of fire and smoke, of thunder and earthquakes, of famines and parting seas... the GOD of mercy and love, of raising the dead, calming the winds... the GOD of the CROSS and of thousands of martyrs who'd gone to their violent deaths by fires and lions rather than renounce His name. These so called Christians I met

seemed to see God as a taken for granted comfortable old bathrobe. Only when I came in contact with people involved in a cult did I find the high degree of intensity and devotion that I expected. After all, doesn't it logically follow that an encounter between a finite human being and an Infinite God would make a major impact? Since Jesus said to "beware of false prophets...you will know them by their fruit..."(Matt.7:15,16) I figured the church people were false and the cult people were holy men and women: *genuine* Christians.

Only after 7 and a half years in two different Christian cults did I recognize the unhealthy distortions that created an *image* of super-spirituality. Legalism, spiritual peer pressure, compulsive personality traits, a desire for black and white answers, a blind drive for unquestioning loyalty and obedience - these factors combined to effect a pseudo-spiritual mirage of the body of Christ. Finally, by God's grace, I saw the arrogance, hypocrisy and works orientation that was leading me *away* from growth in God. At that point I left.

But to where??!! My illusions with perfection were shattered. But is watered down religion the only alternative? Cannot one be totally committed to God and expect to find like minded believers without becoming a cult? What *is* the role of the church in the sanctification process? Are we only sinners, saved - yes- but forever struggling with willful sin natures? Or are we SAINTS, already sons and heirs with Christ? Can we *expect* to lead holy lives ourselves? Can we expect the same of each other?

To consider these questions we must first look at some theological perspectives.

Sanctification

Obviously if we are concerned with *how* one responds to God we must ask about the nature of man. A very popular view of man, and widely held by Arminians, is the trichotomist position. It teaches that man is comprised of three parts: body, soul and spirit. The soul is then further divided into three more parts: mind, will and emotions. (Thomas, 1964) I Thess.5:23 is the reference trichotomists often use to prove man is a trinity. "...and I pray God your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless..." It is unclear why trichotomists stop here when Mark 12:30 commands us to "love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...mind...and strength". In his book *The Mystery of Godliness*, Ian Thomas is anxious to be as faithful to the Scripture as possible, yet he makes this interesting and apparently unfounded assertion

moments later: "The *most important* part of man is his spirit; that is why it comes first in Paul's description. The *next important* part of man is his soul, and the *least*, though not unimportant part of him, is his body" (p.56). This hierarchy of value has almost a Gnostic flavor and, indeed, often leads subscribers of this view to discount emotional and physical problems. They surmise that if they were just "spiritually together" all their other (lower human) problems would magically disappear. The spectrum of responses based on this belief swings from the fairly innocuous Bible thumper to the zealot who refuses medical treatment for their dying child on the basis of a "more spiritual" faith healing which God may or may not provide. Since psychology is seen to pander to the soul, which is hopelessly invaded by sinful egotism, it can be nothing if not a tool of the devil. The proper response to "low self esteem" or other emotional traumas is to quote Scripture.

Watchman Nee, one of the chief proponents of the trichotomist view, alleges that the reason most Christians "live soulical " or unspiritual lives is because they are enslaved by their emotions and desires. Nee asserts that rational thought often conflicts with true spiritual intuition and as such stumbles the believer. (Lewis & Demarest, 1990:168) Therefore one's thoughts and feelings are entirely untrustworthy and must be rejected in order to follow God. This teaching has been one of the most instrumental tools in convincing cult converts that their sole responsibility is to obey their "more spiritual" leaders without question. If this were the case, why would Scripture commend the Bereans for being more noble minded "for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things (teachings by apostles) were so"? (Acts 17:11)

Dichotomists hold that man is metaphysically one being including both an outer material body and an inner immaterial spirit. (Lewis & Demarest:p.144) II Corinthians 4:16 "...but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day" expresses this view. While trichotomists make a parallel between the Trinity and tripartite man, dichotomists note that man's physical and spiritual natures parallel Jesus' human and divine nature. The body is not to be equated with "the sinful flesh", another Gnostic idea. The physical body was part of God's creation, all of which He pronounced "very good" (Gen.1:31).

In many biblical texts, the terms soul and spirit are used interchangeably for the same functions. Either one may refer to inner capacities such as thought, desire or will. The human spirit, for example, is said to be obedient or disobedient (Num14:24), stubborn and obstinant (Deut.2:30), full of wisdom (Deut. 34:9), or distrusting and bitter (Judg.9:23, I Sam.18:1). The soul, likewise functions intellectually and volitionally. People love God with all their soul (Deut.6:4,5). Job was bitter in his soul(Job7:11). The soul rejoices in the Lord (Ps35:9), thirsts for God (42:2), finds rest in God alone (62:1), may refuse to be comforted(77:2), or it may praise the Lord (146:1). The soul that sins will die (Ezek.18:4,20).

Dualists view both inner and outer man as equally valued. The redemption of the physical body would not be on God's agenda if He viewed the body as essentially worthless. John prays that his friend's body may enjoy good health, even as his soul was prospering. (3 John2) On a practical level, sanctification is not seen by dualists in a hierarchical manner. Paul asserts in I Cor.3:16, 17 "Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God indwells you?...for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are." Romans 12:1-2 clearly lays out the plan for sanctification of the outer man "...present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship". It continues by describing the sanctification process of the inner man:"...be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." The dualist view therefore, does not imply a sinful flesh battling with a regenerated soul/spirit. Rather, it commands that one's mind and body automatically begin on the path of sanctification when regeneration occurs.

An important corollary to the above discussion is the question of the identity of believers. Are we sinners struggling with sin natures that fight with our new natures? Or are we SAINTS in our most essential being? And what does the answer to this question mean to daily living?

Ian Thomas does an excellent job of delineating the first position that logically follows from his negative view of the soul:

"There is war in your soul, and you will always be baffled and perplexed until you recognize...that within the soul of every regenerate person there are two powerful forces at work; the constant down-drag of the old, Adamic nature, and the mighty liberating power of Christ the Lord." (Thomas, 1964:p.135)

David Needham, in his book *Birthright - Christian Do You Know Who You Are?* calls this the "Christ filter" identity. That is, God looks down from heaven at the believer through the Christ filter and reckons him righteous positionally. The believer is one who "gets" salvation, "gets" to go to heaven, "gets" the Holy Spirit, and "gets" a new nature to war against the old. To be a Christian in this view is to *control* one's essential nature by saying "no" to it and "yes" to God. With the Holy Spirit's help, one hopes to succeed in denying self the majority of the time.

This position naturally creates turmoil for several reasons. One is consigned to alienation from self until one is made perfect in heaven. Inner struggle is expected, failure to "control oneself adequately" becomes a not uncommon occurrence. In order to rationalize these failures, it is my distinct impression that today's churches choose largely to ignore clear Biblical instruction on church discipline. After all, mustn't we all be merciful to one another and not be judgmental? No one is perfect! Thus the standard for holiness is lowered, and honoring God's name with such righteous behavior that the WORLD can tell the difference (as in Matt.5:16 "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may SEE your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" or I Peter 2:12 "Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles...that they may, on account of your good deeds, as they OBSERVE them, glorify God..." or John 13:35 "By all this men will *know* that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another".) becomes a farce. Of course, ignoring church discipline is only one of the fruits of this teaching. The other obvious result is that Christians are not taught to EXPECT anything higher than making stabs at righteous behavior. Teaching about the issue of spiritual warfare against demonic oppressors is also neglected. Warring against powers and principalities through prayer and fasting as a body of believers is ignored. The entire gospel is watered down to an easily digestible series of contracts and "good faith" attempts at living nicely. Worship is reduced to singing about how "good, good, good Jesus makes us feel". Because of the continual focus on man's weakness and struggles, God's power that was exhibited on the Cross is minimized. The very power *that raised Jesus from the dead* INDWELLS us today. (Romans 8:11) But because Christians learn that they are merely sinners who one day, God willing, get to go to heaven - they do not behave more than mere humans who have received a

gift to be redeemed at death. And since God was so nice to do this for us, we ought to try to be nice back to Him. This is ANATHEMA. This is NOT the gospel of Jesus Christ!

So what IS the gospel of Jesus, the Lord? I believe Needham does an excellent job of outlining both the gospel and the Christian's identity which are inextricably linked. It is from him that I will quote extensively in the following section. (Needham,1978)

First, what is sin? What does it mean to be spiritually dead? It is much, much more ruthless than missing the mark or simply doing the wrong thing. It is the attempt to find or create meaning apart from God. Needham asserts that a chief purpose in God's creating us is so that we, through a dependent fellowship with Him, could receive and display the very life of God - the glory of God. (p.23) "Life" is fulfilling this purpose. When Adam and Eve chose to ignore God and exert their own will, they departed from this purpose and became dead. Being cut off from God, they were cut off from their source of meaning. Jesus, who was without sin, led a totally dependent life on His Father. The essence of His life, all that He did, His words, His works, His entire life - came from His Father. (p.21) John 14:10 "...I do not speak on My own initiative..."John 17:4"I glorified Thee on the earth,having accomplished the work which Thou gavest Me to do..."John 14:9"...he who has seen Me has seen the Father..." speak of this dependence. Life apart from God is called futility. (I Peter 1:18, Eph 4:17, Jer.2:5, Eccles.1:2, I Sam.12:21) It is worthless. It accomplishes *nothing*. That is why Romans 3:10-18 negates the benefits of anything man does apart from God, no matter how "good" it may appear from a worldly perspective. It does *not* derive from the Source of meaning, it does not glorify the Creator. Since we are created *to* glorify Him, it is worthless. "Without Me, you can do *nothing*. (John 15:5). Sin, then, is the attempt to derive meaning and fulfillment apart from God - autonomously. As fallen creatures, we turn to our minds, senses, imagination, idealism, and creativity to generate a sense of fulfillment. I John 2:16 categorizes all that is in the world "...the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life..." as not being from the Father, but from the world. They are the ways in which man tries to satisfy his created inner hunger for meaning. Because of the fall, man no longer is a conduit for God's eternal personhood. Physical death demonstrates vividly man's separation from his Source of life, even as spiritual death condemns him to a meaningless existence. Sin, then, is not something

one "has", it is the non-Christian's most basic nature and as such, is inescapable. Within this context, it is clear that the opposite of sin is faith, and never virtue. (p.36)

Who then, are we as Christians? Are we people who "get" things from God? No; regeneration is much more than having some-thing taken away from us (our sins); it is more that adding something to us (a new nature and help from the Holy Spirit). It is BECOMING someone we never were before. It is a change of our essential core personhood such that we now pursue meaning in God. It is our deepest inner desire to glorify Him. Sinning - seeking fulfillment apart from God - is no longer a part of our essential nature. I John 3:7-9 asserts that "no one who is born of God continues to sin because God's seed remains in him". Salvation is a *radical* change of core identity. It is not merely a legal transaction in some heavenly ledger book. It is the restoration of fellowship between a holy Creator and His created. II Cor.5:17 says "If anyone is in Christ he is a *new* creature; the old has gone; the new has come." We are no longer slaves, but heirs. (Romans 8:15)

Needham describes three types of "truth" in this regard. There is positional truth, such that God reckons something to be done even though we do not experience it. There is "experiential" truth, those teachings we experience now in our present life. A third kind of "truth" is one that is most often overlooked in modern church teaching. That is "actual" truth. Often the Bible teaches that something is *actually* true. Not positionally - to be experienced someday in eternity. But something, that though we do not experience it now because of poor teaching, is *actually* real. He asserts that the transformation of our inner man is an example of "actual truth" that we can experience and live in the light of, if only we were to be taught to have faith and expect it. We often live "lower" than God's truth, because instead of "...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.."(Heb. 12:2) we have focused our eyes on ourselves and our own weaknesses. This lack of faith is sin. (also see Romans 8 & Hebrews 11)

Awareness of our true identity helps us to understand our meaning. The following are examples of identity/meaning:

<u>Identity</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood	... that you may declare the praises of Him
"You are aliens & strangers in the world	... live godly that they may see your good works and glorify God (1 Pet 2:9- 12)
"You have been raised w/ Christ	... set hearts on things above where Christ is (Col 3:1)
"God's chosen people, holy and and dearly loved	... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility & patience
"We are God's workmanship created in Christ	... to do good works which God prepared (Eph.2:10)
"We were once darkness but now we are light in the Lord	... live as children of light & find out what pleases Him (Eph 5:8, 2 Cor 6:14)
"No longer a slave but a son	... keep standing firm and do not be subject to yoke of slavery (Gal.5)

Awareness of our true personal identity affects not only our sense of purpose, but our behavior as well. That is why Paul exhorted the Corinthians who were fighting to remember who they were. (1 Cor.6:1-7) "...do you not know that we shall judge angels?!... do you not know that the *unrighteous* shall not inherit the kingdom of God?!" In rebuking them for strife in the church he reminded them "you are acting like mere men!" (1 Cor 3:3) as if that were NOT the truth about them. Even Jesus' temptation in the wilderness was a confrontation about His identity. Did He know who He was? Was He going to live in faith that His identity was true? (Mt.4:14 "...**IF** You are the son of God...") How we think about ourselves has everything to do with how we act. That is why the issue of self identity is crucial. Proverbs 23:7 "As a man thinketh so he is" supports this.

The operating principle present in everyone, believer and unbeliever, is the incessant demand for meaning. Our fleshly bodies are well equipped to function on a shallow level of providing meaning through our minds and senses and are constantly bombarded with counterfeit meanings from the world and from the devil. *This* is the war between flesh and Spirit, as identified in Gal. 5:17. The warfare we fight is not against

ourselves, but a war against worldly things that entice us away from trust in, and dependence on God. Eternal life is not to live in heaven for eternity. Eternal life is KNOWING GOD now and forever. (Jn.17:3) Jesus prayed for us that we would know that He is in the Father and we are in Him and He is in us. (Jn 14:20) ... that apart from Him we can do nothing (Jn. 15:4-7) ... that we may be one in the Father and the Son and that the glory the Father gave Jesus would be in us. (Jn. 17: 21-26)

We are like prisms or diamonds. As (God's) light shines on us, we sparkle out through the facets of our personalities the many colors that reflect God's light and glorify Him. Our trials produce more facets and cleaner surfaces. Without the light a diamond has no beauty. It is dull, lifeless, unseen; as we are apart from God.

This is our identity and our heritage. It is no watered down gospel of being nice and going to heaven. It is being reunited with ourselves and our God. It is being reconnected to the vine. (Jn.15:1)

Self esteem

Now that we have looked at self identity, we can evaluate some pertinent issues about self esteem. Popularly it is a notion deriving out of secular psychology referring to the value one places on oneself. In this sense it is clearly a "worldly" concept directly related to a drive for meaning and value autonomously. Needham calls depression the result when "one's idolatrous source of meaning has been disrupted" (p.34). The popular concept of raising one's self esteem similarly is rooted in simply doing a better job at deluding oneself about autonomous value. Low self esteem is probably one of God's best tools for bringing people to Himself. At last they recognize their inadequacy apart from Him. It is part of witnessing to others that Christians minister a kind of "low self esteem" to the arrogant unbeliever!

On the other hand, are Christians to have a low self esteem? If one believes the trichotomists, or the Christian filter school of thought, one would no doubt reach that conclusion. Both leave the Christian subject to an inferior mind and body, to an Adamic nature, to perpetual turmoil against oneself. How can one walk in bold confidence and faith with all this "drag down" as Thomas calls it, pulling on them? Furthermore, if they *are* new creatures in Christ, their inner man is gasping for more purpose and meaning than they are seeing or receiving through the teaching they are being subject to.

High self esteem as defined by the world is confidence in self. It is based on an illusion. But there is such a thing as great confidence and faith in God, the One in Whom believers dwell. This looks similar except it is much more powerful. Believers who are full of God's approval do not rely on the approval of men and are able to do what *God* desires. This may include simply "bucking the system" or performing signs and wonders as God ordains. (Gal. 1:10 "If I were still trying to please men, would I be a bond servant of Christ?" ... Jn.14:12 "he who believes in Me, the works that I do he shall do also; and greater works than these shall he do because I go to the Father.")

I would suggest then, that a proper self esteem is one in which the believer can operate in boldness and confidence; derived from a proper understanding and alignment with their Source of life.

Christian psychology

There were five things that functioning first generation Christians seemed to have a grasp of:

1. Who they were and why they were alive
2. That holiness does not occur passively but by active participation of their wills
3. The Lordship of Jesus is not an option
4. The Holy Spirit's presence as an experienced reality
5. The individual Christian is not an isolated pilgrim but a part of a body that could not function apart from love. (Needham, p.120)

In what I would call a psychology of distress, there are five correlate sources of pain and dysfunction in the body of Christ:

1. A lack of identity or sense of higher purpose; emptiness
2. abdication of personal responsibility for one's behavior
3. alienation from God, self and/or others
4. A sense of powerlessness; victimization; absence of joy
5. Isolation; no sense of belonging, being needed, accepted, helped or loved.

Christians do not come to the Lord unstained by the world. They are not miraculously freed instantaneously from the effects of sin. Sanctification is the process of being freed. Because I do not consider the mind/soul/inner man to be innately evil OR somehow inferior, I think there is a very important place for Christian psychology in the sanctification process. Dependence on God does *not* imply that one covers over, or suppresses past painful events. Indeed we are instructed to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor.10:5) John exhorts us to "walk in the light even as He Himself is in the light" (I Jn.1:7)

Sanctification is the process of reeducating our inner and outer man to "agree with God and be at peace; thereby good will come to you" (Job 22:21).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline a comprehensive Christian methodology for ministering emotional healing. Suffice it to say that such a psychology is valid insofar as it assists the believer in becoming disentangled from thought distortions and self destructive patterns. The result should be an increase in the believer's ability to love God, to relate comfortably with self and others, and to grow in faith. As the above five areas of distress are alleviated, a major improvement in these abilities will occur.

Role of the church

This paper has addressed several areas in which the church needs to play a vital role in the life of the believer. Unfortunately, American culture with its emphasis on individualism, has often conformed the church to its values rather than the other way around. There is seldom any sense of shared life or community among believers. Church members frequently do not know one another except on a superficial, albeit friendly, level. How can we show the world we are His disciples by our love for one another when we do not even know one another?!

The church needs to teach sound doctrine that leads believers into faith-filled relationships with God. It needs to teach and preach all of the Word and not ignore passages about discipline, spiritual warfare, fasting and other possibly inconvenient practices. It needs to advocate community life and sharing of resources (see Acts 2:43-46). One might ask how appropriate it is for Christians to depend on the social welfare system rather than on one another for financial help? The idea that children of Jesus would have to "beg bread" from a secular government was certainly not a reality David entertained in Psalms 37:25! Similarly, Paul was horrified at the thought that Christians were not settling disputes among themselves, but were appealing to secular courts for this service. He rebuked them sharply: "Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of *this* life? (1Cor.6:3)

How can a church in this culture and time grow to conform to the Biblical injunctions our Lord has placed upon it? How can it move away from traditional mentalities that no longer fit (and perhaps never did) to inspire love and holiness in God's people? I suggest four strategies to start with:

1. Devote selves to corporate worship. Allow plenty of time for people to really focus on God.

Worship God in prayer, in song, in testimonies of salvation or of God's great power that the believer has seen manifested. This will lead to a

2. Greater commitment to prayer, individually and jointly.

3. Through expository preaching, give the body a clear vision of God's plan for both the local and world-wide church. This would include instruction on everything from how to practically put others' interests higher than your own, how to gently confront one another so exploitation of another does not become a problem, to evangelism, political involvement, and caring for the poor, aliens and widows within and outside the church. Assist believers in finding their identity as saints and thereby make relevant God's teaching for today.

4. Insist on personal involvement and accountability for all via small groups, one-on-one discipleship or specialized prayer groups or women's ministries. Actively assist with the development of genuine koininia in these groups.

The church is to be built up until all attain to the unity of the faith...to the measure of the stature which belongs to the *fulness* of Christ. As a body we are "to grow in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ...according to the proper working of each individual part...causing the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." (Eph.4:12-16) This is not an individual Christian trying to control sinful impulses. This is a body of believers who have a corporate vision of love, holiness and dependence on God. May we be that body.

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