

THE SELF MOVEMENT

{Part 1}

The apostle Paul once warned us not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Romans 12:3), reminiscent of a Garfield comic strip in which Garfield was depicted as bragging about himself to his stuffed animal, Pooky: after a while of this Garfield said, "Pooky, I'm tired of talking about me. You talk about me for a while." Though it's sad to say so, this cartoon is an accurate picture of the times we live in, especially when the Lord's church is included. The "me-generation" (singular) has multiplied itself into me-generations (plural). Self-regard or selfishness is rampant in our world!

The theme of one of the Frasier comedy shows pertained to and correctly illustrated the intolerable rudeness people exhibit today—whether in traffic or in stores, people seem to think of no one but themselves; and this attitude shouldn't surprise us with all the teaching to that effect in practically every area of our lives: books, media, schools, you name it. Pop psychologists, motivational speakers, religious leaders, and even singers are teaching the immense importance of self-esteem, self-image, self-love, self-worth, and on and on it goes: self, self, self!

Since this "self-movement" is so extremely deceptive in how it is and has been communicated to us over the years, there may be someone who doesn't know exactly what it is. Allow me, then, to share with you how an anonymous author of a booklet called *What You Should Know About Self-Esteem* defined and described this issue. Some people refer to this movement as "the feel-good movement," and that's exactly the way this author described it, saying that self-esteem is "how you feel about yourself.... There's no one else in the world like you. That's reason enough to be proud" (Bete 2)! He went on to say, "You owe it to yourself to learn to feel good about who you are" (Bete 3). He began his summary by saying, "Make it a point to be your own best friend" (Bete 12). In chart form, he subsequently explained how this is to be accomplished: take pride in yourself, praise yourself, love yourself, and trust yourself (Bete 15). Even though the Bible speaks adamantly against trusting in ourselves, this author explained what he meant by trusting in ourselves like this: "Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings. Act on what you think is right. Do what makes you feel happy and fulfilled" (Bete 13). (Incidentally, pamphlets such as this one target our children!)

In case there are those who don't realize the toll that this self-movement is taking on religion, note a few cases where religious material and methods are being changed in order to conform to it. Song lyrics are being criticized and changed. Based on such passages as Job 25:6 where the Bible speaks of man as a maggot and a worm, Isaac Watts wrote some lyrics in his famous hymn, *Alas and Did My Savior Bleed*, which speak of Jesus dying "for such a worm as I"; however, Anthony Hoekema, a self-love defender, criticized Mr. Watts, saying that the "hymn could convey to many people a quite unflattering self-image" (Hoekema 17). Long before the "me-generation" came along, the song *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* said, "and pour contempt on all my pride," and *Amazing Grace* spoke of "a wretch like me"; now, however, there are "religious" songs like the one entitled *They'll Know We Are Christians*, wherein one sentence reads, "we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride."

Evangelistic methods are being criticized and changed. According to Robert Schuller in his book *Your Better Self*, instead of convincing people that they're sinners in need of Jesus, warning them of their fate, he says that we must "stroke" or caress them into faith. Wayne Colwell was quoted to have stated to his class at Rosemead School of Psychology that "Depression always has a loss of self-esteem in the foreground.... [So] be slow to direct a depressed person to the Scriptures ... no preaching. I would recommend a recess from church if there is preaching done in the church" (Adams 22).

Where did this modern self-movement come from? When did it begin? Well, it's pretty obvious, especially to those who are 40 years old and older, that its roots are in the hippie movement of the 60's and 70's or in the "find-your-inner-self" movement; in fact, the word "hippie" is thought to be derived from the word "hip," meaning to be "tuned in" or "aware." Although most people didn't accept all the hippie philosophies, and although it took a decade or so, the general concept of "finding oneself" did eventually have an extremely profound impact on society and religion: one writer said that it was in the early 70's when "the Christian public's awareness of self-love was born" (Brownback 12). Coincidentally, some attribute the beginning of the actual self-movement to none other than the

renowned James Dobson due to his best-selling 1973 book, Hide or Seek, wherein he fervently advocated building high self-esteem in our children. (Again, our children, those most responsive to new ideas, are targeted.)

This article is designed, then, to take an extremely brief look at a very broad subject—the modern self-movement. There will only be space here to examine two primary claims that are advocated by self-theorists (as I will refer to them) in the light of what the Bible teaches.

Self-Theorists Claim that Man Only Has One Chief Need—Self-Love.

One non-self-love psychologist rightly noted that self-love theorists want us “to believe that” our “self-esteem is the most important thing in the world,” and that we “should do everything [we] can to raise it” (Thurman 22). Read the following quotes from some pro-self-love writers. From the book that perhaps started it all among “Christians” (Hide or Seek), Dobson wrote, “Whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in twentieth-century America, then widespread ‘mental illness,’ neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, and social disorder will certainly occur. Personal worth is not something human beings are free to take or leave. We must have it, and when it is unattainable, everybody suffers” (Dobson 148). Dobson took this so far as to say that a “lack of self-esteem can ... extinguish the desire to go on living” (Dobson 80). Robert Schuller (probably the greatest proponent for the modern self-movement) said, “Self-esteem is ... the single, greatest need facing the human race today” (Schuller 19); and he went so far as to say, “I contend that this unfulfilled need for self-esteem underlies every act [of crime]” (Schuller 15). Lawrence Crabb wrote, “People have one basic personal need ... a sense of personal worth...” (Crabb 61). There are at least two problems, however, with the idea that a lack of self-love is the world’s greatest need.

1. **More crime is actually attributed to people with high self-esteem than to those with low self-esteem.** A study conducted along these lines that I read about demonstrated that in all actuality criminals don’t have near the low self-esteem that psychotherapists would have us believe; in other words, the sickness and crime that Dobson and Schuller refer to is more likely due to people’s self-image being too high. As a result of the self-movement, Brownback more accurately wrote, “Whenever he can and to whatever extent he can, modern man assumes the existential approach to life, seeing himself as the center of the universe and doing whatever pleases him. This explains in part the rise in divorce, alcoholism, drug abuse, and other problems. Its influence is also seen in the “rights” movements of today [such as] women’s rights.... That’s why the rights of the mother and not her unborn baby are considered in abortion cases. When she becomes the center of the universe, everything else must be judged accordingly” (Brownback 34).
2. **Jesus taught that the single greatest need of humanity was just the opposite from self-love.** Observe Luke 10:38-42 for example: while Martha was serving physical food to Jesus, Jesus was serving spiritual food to Mary. After Martha complained about her lack of help from Mary, Jesus reproved Martha by telling her that there’s really only one thing in life that is necessary, and Mary had rightly chosen it (verse 42). What Jesus said here was reminiscent of another statement He made about how man’s primary need in life is to live by every word of God (Matthew 4:4). Again, observe Matthew 6:25-34: the pagans of that time were preoccupied with what they thought was the basic need of life (food, clothing, shelter, etc.), but Jesus taught that such was only a by-product added to the one real need. What was the one real need that Jesus exalted? He answered, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). Jesus, then, pointed us away from our own supposed needs to His kingdom and His righteousness, focusing our concerns on Him and others. Pagan thought emphasized getting what you need (or, rather, what you think you need) while godly thought emphasizes giving God the honor and service in His church that He deserves totally apart from whether our needs are met or not! So, as Solomon said, “Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13, NIV).

Self-Theorists Claim that Man Has One Chief Command—Self-Love.

Based on the belief that man's one need is self-love, the self-theorist says that there is therefore the one chief biblical command to love self. Normally we would think that if we love God, then all other commands and necessities fall into place, but not so according to the self-theorist, for he says that if we love ourselves, then all other commands and necessities fall into place. Where do they find a biblical "proof-text" for this claim? Matthew 22:39 (essentially the one and only biblical passage the self-theorist can produce to assert that the Bible encourages us to foster a love for ourselves), but this passage is mishandled. Based on Matthew 22:39, self-theorists maintain that we must always be one step ahead in loving ourselves in order for us to be able to love others or even God.

Here is what they say: "Without self-love there can be no love for others.... You cannot love neighbor, you cannot love God, unless you first love yourself" (Trobisch 11); "We cannot love God more than we love our neighbor and we cannot love our neighbor more than we love ourselves" (Captain). They are, therefore, clearly saying that we cannot love God more than we love ourselves, placing ourselves at the top of the totem pole. This is reminiscent of a song by Whitney Houston called "The Greatest Love of All," wherein she sings, "Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all." Now...

Here is what the Bible says: concerning our relationship to others, we are to "honor one another above" ourselves (Romans 12:10, NIV), and "esteem others better than" ourselves (Philippians 2:3); concerning our relationship to God, we're to love our own lives less than we love God (Luke 14:26), and "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). Self-theorists, however, want us to accept the idea that there's an essential relationship between loving ourselves and loving others or God, but Jesus claimed no such dependent relationship. Instead of self-love being "the measuring stick for loving others" (Trobisch 11) and God, Jesus taught that Scripture is the "measuring stick" for such love. We can know this for certain because Jesus said that the commands to love God and our neighbor correlate with the entirety of Scripture (Matthew 22:40). Furthermore...

Self-theorists maintain that there are three commands in Matthew 22:37-39. Here's what they say: "The command to love your neighbor is never given without the command to love yourself" (Trobisch 11), and (Matthew 22:39 inverted) "Love yourself ... as you love others" (Jepson 86). In other words, they want us to believe that Jesus gave three commands: love God, love others, and love yourself. Now...

Here is what the Bible says: concerning the number of commands in this passage, Jesus said, ""You shall love the Lord your God...." This is the first ... commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets"" (Matthew 22:40). Not only is there no command here to love self, there's also no command anywhere in God's Word to love self! Adam Clarke quoted a Mr. T. Burkitt as saying, ""Indeed, there is no express command in Scripture for a man to love himself..." (Clarke 5:128). In fact, in order for self-theorists to get a command out of the Bible for self-love, they have to reverse the order of verse 39 as Mr. Captain did above, but even when they do that, there are still only two commands, not three. So...

What does Matthew 22:39 actually teach? This second commandment (called The Royal Law in James 2:8) establishes and illustrates itself by presuming upon our innate love for self—as in the desire for self-preservation. In other words, the command is to love others as we already love ourselves due to that which is naturally in us through birth; in fact, this verse could literally read, "You must love your neighbor as you are loving yourself." Besides the grammatical construction of the language, this interpretation is also true for at least two other reasons.

1. **Notice Luke's parallel account found in 10:25-29: comparing verse 29 of Luke 10 with verse 39 of Matthew 22 reveals an important contextual addition to the circumstances at hand.** Luke told us that the lawyer, "wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" What was the lawyer's problem? Was he suffering from a lack of self-esteem when Jesus quoted the second commandment? No. Rather Luke said that he wanted to justify himself; in other words, the question he raised about his neighbor had to do with an attempt to stump

Jesus in order to justify his own sinful ways. So he asked the question out of self-interest; he liked himself the way he was and didn't want to give of his time or money to his neighbor, but wanted to be like the Priest and the Levite in the parable—remain all wrapped up in himself. In answer to his question, Jesus told *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*, a parable that certainly wasn't designed to encourage self-esteem, but just the opposite: the very point of the parable is that one must love his neighbor as himself. He must look after the needs of others and, if necessary, even put himself out for others.

2. **Notice the context of the original statement found in Leviticus 19:18 (verses 9-18), taking special notice of how God summed up this passage.** This passage clearly pertains to our relationship towards others, how that, as Jesus said in The Golden Rule, "Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). Paul summed up the words of Leviticus for us when he wrote, "Love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the Law. For the commandments ... are summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of the Law" (Romans 13:8-10). Now...

In order to get a better understanding of what Jesus meant by loving others "as we love ourselves," notice that Jesus said this second commandment is like the first one (Matthew 22:38). How is that?

- They both speak of and command love. More importantly, however...
- We're to view the second commandment to be just as intense as the first one—it's to be observed with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We're to love others just as wholeheartedly as we love ourselves.

This love that we naturally have for ourselves is almost always allowed to become excessive, so Jesus capitalized on that, teaching that we should extend that same kind of love to others. Incidentally, this is the same argument Paul made for a husband loving his wife just as he already loves his own body (Ephesians 5:28-29). And how is that to be accomplished? With the same nourishing and cherishing attitude with which he already cares for himself. Normally it doesn't take any urging to motivate us to care for ourselves, rather it would require restraint to stop us from satisfying a need; but when it comes to meeting someone else's needs, we haven't been naturally wired to be sensitive to them, so Christ's and Paul's commands call us to that kind of awareness. So with all this in mind, we can confidently say that...

[Part Two with the Bibliography is on [this page](#).]

[Tony E. Denton, October 1998.]

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THE SELF MOVEMENT

{Part 2}

The Bible Does Not Encourage Man to Love (or to Foster a Love for) Himself.

The apostle Paul prophesied of and condemned the modern self-love theory: "In the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves" (Second Timothy 3:2). As we read on in this context (verses 2-4), notice that this sin is the first in line and I believe placed there purposely, being the foundation for each sin listed thereafter. "Men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money [covetous], boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, [and] lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."

So the question now is, how do we harmonize Matthew 22:39—that we're to love others as we do ourselves—with Second Timothy 3:2—that we aren't to love ourselves? The key is in the original words for "love." When Jesus spoke of loving others as ourselves in Matthew, He used the Greek word "agape," which is the most selfless of all the various kinds of love. As John Bisagno wrote, "Nowhere [in the New Testament] is [agape] defined in terms of the emotional. Love is always equated not with what one feels, but with what one does. Love is something you do. 'If you love Me, you will obey My commandments'" (Bisagno 21). This kind of love is an "unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another" (Merriam-Webster). On the other hand, when Paul spoke of loving ourselves in Timothy, he used the root word "philia," which is a very selfish love. Philia "cherishes and has tender affection for the beloved, but always expects a response" (Wheat 60). The word Paul used in Second Timothy 3:2 was "philautoi" from "philia" and "autos." "Philia" means "love" as in "*Phila*-delphia" (the city of brotherly love), and "autos" means "self" as in "*auto*-nomous" (self-governing). So the compound term Paul employed, literally translated, would be "love-self" or "self-love." Incidentally, this is the only place in the Bible where this word can be found, and it is in a list of contemptible sins, so much so that Paul gave this warning: "From such people turn away" (verse 5).

With these two Greek words in mind, which one sounds the most like the modern self-love theory? "Philia"—the Greek word that stands for "friend," "friendship," or "friendship love." This word should be reminiscent of the tract on self-esteem I quoted from in the beginning that said we ought to make it a point to be our own best friend by being proud of ourselves, praising ourselves, loving ourselves, and trusting ourselves. So just from the viewpoint of the word Jesus chose, when self-theorists run to Matthew 22:39, they're running to the wrong passage—"agape" isn't the word they're looking for, because it doesn't harmonize with their philosophy. Surely no one can fail to see that the very sin Paul condemned is the very concept that is and has been cunningly force-fed to us for decades.

Since the love we naturally possess for ourselves is enough, the Bible doesn't encourage us to foster a love for ourselves, rather it teaches and encourages two other attitudes.

- 1. Attitude Number One: Love Others.** Since we don't have a natural tendency to always show agape love for others as we do ourselves, we're to foster a love for others. Remember how Jesus illustrated The Royal Law to the lawyer in The Parable of the Good Samaritan, teaching him that he must learn to put himself out for others? Well, that same type of illustration was used by Jesus in an earlier conversation with The Rich Young Ruler who claimed he wanted eternal life. After Jesus quoted The Royal Law and after the ruler claimed to have obeyed all God's commandments concerning human relationships, including The Royal Law, Jesus tested him in order to show him (and anyone else around) that he had either deceived himself or that he was lying. Because he hadn't treated others the way he should have, but had actually been covetous, Jesus presented him with this challenge: "'If you [really] want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven'" (Matthew 19:21). What was Jesus speaking of? Not self-love, because, as with the lawyer, the ruler's problem was that he had too much of love of self; rather, Jesus was speaking of the self-theorists taboo concept of "self-denial." Biblical love is other-oriented, not self-oriented or self-directed, which leads to...
- 2. Attitude Number Two: Deny Self.** Earlier Luke 14:26 was alluded to where Jesus said, "'If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his ... own life..., he cannot be My disciple.'" Here are some related passages. Jesus once said, "'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself...'" (Matthew 16:24); then He went on to illustrate this by saying, "'Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it'" (verse 25). By inspiration, John restated what Christ said this way: "'He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life'" (John 12:25). Now here are some related examples. Referring to martyrs for Christ, John wrote that "they did not love their lives to the death" (Revelation 12:11). Speaking of tribulations that may include his execution, Paul said, "'But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy'" (Acts 20:24). Why does it sound inconsistent to the human ear today to hear someone connect joy with the idea of not esteeming his life dear to himself? Because we've

been trained by self-theorists that to be happy, we must love ourselves and our lives. Robert Ringer wrote a book called Looking Out for Number One, wherein he fervently advanced getting all the gusto out of life that you can: "We sometimes lose sight of the fact that our primary objective is really to be as happy as possible and that all our other objectives, great and small, are only a means to that end" (Thurman 127).

So why should we want to deny ourselves? Obviously God wants us to see ourselves as He sees us. But how does He see us? Just one passage out of hundreds sums up God's view. After Paul dealt with the sinfulness of every person in the world in chapters one and two, he wrote the following in Romans 3:10-12 and 23: "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands.... They have all gone out of the way; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.... All have come short of the glory of God."

"Even if you're right," someone may object, "this passage refers to non-Christians, people outside of Christ, but I am in Christ." Well, although that may be the case, the key phrase is "in Christ." Yes, baptism is the step that ultimately puts us into Christ (Galatians 3:27) and makes us a new creation (Second Corinthians 5:17), but at the same time we put on Christ, *we take off ourselves*. Paul said it like this: "I have been crucified with Christ [through baptism, Romans 6:3-6]; [so] it is no longer I who live, but Christ [who] lives in me" (Galatians 2:2). This is self-denial. Recognizing our hideousness without Christ, James urgently admonished us to constantly examine ourselves in the mirror of God's Word: "Lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls." He continued to say that if we fail to do this, we are "like a man observing his natural face in a mirror [God's Word]" and then he "goes away, forgetting what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty [the mirror of God's Word] and continues in it ... this one will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:21-25). One way of explaining how we are blessed in constantly examining ourselves in the mirror of God's Word is that by doing so we become more like Christ, which is what the title "Christian" means. Paul said, "We all..., beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (Second Corinthians 3:18). Since the mirror reflects Jesus, it's attempting to transform us into His image with each gaze it receives from us; then, in turn, the more of Jesus we see in ourselves, the more of Jesus the world will see: as Paul said, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ [who] lives in me." These passages are attempting to turn us away from self-esteem by turning us toward Christ-esteem; instead of praising ourselves and trusting in ourselves as that tract encourages us to do, we need to be praising Jesus and trusting in Him: Paul said, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord," not in himself (First Corinthians 1:31 & Second Corinthians 10:17). Perhaps Paul was condensing Jeremiah 9:23-24: "Thus says the Lord, 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord....'"

Jesus taught us how we should view ourselves in Luke 17:7-10: "'Which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat?' But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'?" Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded of him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, "We are unprofitable servants. We have done that which was our duty to do."

In a master-servant relationship as Jesus pictured here, who receives the honor? The servant? No, his job is to serve and honor the master. According to this passage, then, we should view ourselves as "unprofitable servants." In harmony with this passage, I cannot see God the Father praising me or thanking me one day for fearing Him and keeping His commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13). (Incidentally, some writers have rightly noted how the self-theory also cancels out the grace of God.) So after we've done our duty in our jobs, our families, the church, the community, and even after we've brought great honor to the Lord, we still tell ourselves, "we are unprofitable servants."

Somewhat as John the Baptist did (John 3:30), we're to decrease, that is, downplay our own importance, because our task is to serve the Master (have Christ-esteem), and in due time, He will honor us: God said, "Those who honor Me, I will honor" (First Samuel 2:30), and Peter said, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time" (First Peter 5:6). Do we not want the honor of God? Sure we do. And do we not want it more than we want our own honor? Sure we do. But we cannot receive it if we honor ourselves: Jesus said, "Whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12), and Paul likewise wrote, "Not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends" (Second Corinthians 10:18); in fact, right after speaking about how we shouldn't count our lives dear to ourselves, Jesus said, "If anyone serves [or honors] Me, him My Father will honor" (John 12:26).

Conclusion

The modern self-movement is extremely destructive because it's so very deceptive. Bruce Parmenter illustrated it as follows: "A barrel of wine tipped over in the cellar and spilled out on the floor. A mouse tarried long at the wine. Fully satiated, he staggered erect on his hind-legs, flexed his muscles, doubled his fists, and bravely shouted, 'Bring on the cat!' Here was a mouse who felt very good about himself, quite self-confident, OK indeed. How long he continued to feel OK would depend on whether there were any cats in the vicinity" (Parmenter 164). The self-movement is not only deceptive in its nature, but it's also very deceptive in how it's communicated in so many unsuspecting ways.

Instead of having pride, something the Lord hates (Proverbs 6:17), let's constantly work for the honor of God. Self-theorists may advance the Garfield attitude, but Solomon said, "Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth" (Proverbs 27:2). "To seek one's own glory is not glory" (Proverbs 25:27). Why? Because unless and until we secure the honor of God, our souls (created for the purpose of honoring Him) will never be truly satisfied. Listen to how Jesus perfectly summed it all up: "If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing.... [So] My Father ... honors Me" (John 8:54).

[Tony E. Denton, October 1998.]

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