A Contrite Heart is Better than an Esteemed Self:

How Self-Esteem Ideology Contradicts Reason and the Bible

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Ⅰ．Introduction

The self-love/self-esteem teaching has become an established feature of modern popular culture. Judging by papers delivered at recent conferences on education, the idea is alive and well in the educational world as well. To sum up this idea in a nutshell, it is that everyone ought to think highly of himself or herself. Furthermore, if one does not have self-esteem, then he or she will be emotionally handicapped and unable to do much in life. In other words, a feeling of self-approbation is the foundation of all achievement and moral action, and the lack of it probably is the reason why most people fall short in their lives.

Many Christians have also jumped on the self-esteem bandwagon, with a difference: they believe that they have found more Biblical basis for subscribing to this view. One proof for it they find in the doctrine that man is made in the image of God. Moreover, some argue that the Biblical injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself" assumes

that self-love is something good and necessary to a happy and healthy life. Without self-love, they reason, a person can not obey this command and love his neighbor. However, these two notions ought to be looked at more critically, because the Bible has much more to say on these matters than the advocates of self-esteem seem to think.

In this paper I will examine the concept of self-esteem in two lights: (1) in respect to its logical merits and (2) in respect to a broad survey of scriptural texts that bear on the subject. I believe that both reveal this notion to be lacking in persuasive force. In fact, both reason and Scripture seem consistently to point in the opposite direction.

Ⅱ. Self-Esteem in the Light of Reason

A. The Problem of Definitions

One issue concerns how to define the main concepts. What does it mean to say that a person "loves himself" or "esteems himself" ? I am using the terms *self-love*, *self-esteem*, and *good self-image* interchangeably, since for all practical purposes they are usually used as synonyms by their advocates. When we look at them closely, however, we find a number of inconsistencies and ambiguities. For example, love can be defined in varying conflicting ways, such as sexual attraction, disinterested self-sacrifice, romantic infatuation, friendship-affection, or deep admiration. Furthermore, love is usually thought of as directed toward others rather than toward oneself. So the notion of "loving oneself" presents still greater problems for the understanding.

Some such as Jonathan Edwards have contended that it is impossible for a person not to have an inclination to make himself happy, which can be called "self-love." So not having any love for oneself is an impossibility. That is because we have a faculty of will, and personal choices amount to decisions made for one's own benefit.[1] For example, at a restaurant we usually choose to order something that tastes good to us and that will bring us momentary pleasure. It is a manifestation of concern for oneself or "self-love." In fact, basic survival would be impossible without that kind of self-love. If a person without any self-love existed, he would soon die of self-neglect. The first problem that besets the self-love advocate is simply proving that there is such a condition as the absence of love for oneself.

In regard to the problem of defining love, Hollywood movies and TV have succeeded in propagating a romantic idea about the irresistible experience of "falling in love" with some person perfect for oneself. Reacting to that common misconception, some psychologists have posited a more realistic, practical definition of love, equating it with benevolent action toward others. While there are problems in this definition as well, it is probably a good corrective to the opposite, destructive illusion spread by the popular media. However, more in line with the Hollywood view of love, self-love advocates often define love simply as a feeling about oneself. Sociologist John Hewitt remarks that self-esteem is most often used in the sense of a set of feelings or a mental

mood.[2] Love defined as "self-esteem" or "self-acceptance" does not consist in action at all but in a certain attitude or feeling. In his excellent book *The Danger of Self-Love*, Paul Brownback explores these definitional difficulties in more depth.[3]

B. No Reasonable Grounds

Whether or not there are actual *grounds* for such a positive self-image does not seem to matter much to the advocates of this view. Just being human seems to be reason enough to feel good. In many ways, this is a typical example of utilitarian thinking: the results are what matter, so if an idea produces positive results, that is reason enough for adopting it, apart from considerations about whether or not it is really true. But the suitability of any love depends on the true value and worthiness of the object of that love, even if the object happens to be oneself. Educator Richard Paul has this to say about an emphasis on groundless self-esteem:

Healthy self-esteem emerges from a justified sense of self-worth, just as self-worth emerges from competence, ability, and genuine success. If one simply feels good about oneself for no good reason, then one is either arrogant (which is surely not desirable), or alternatively, has a dangerous sense of misplaced confidence. Teenagers, for example, sometimes think so well of themselves that they operate under the illusion that they can safely drive while drunk or safely take drugs.[4]

So another basic problem with the notion of self-esteem is that the idea rests on some questionable reasoning. Accepting the arguments of self-love advocates requires a kind of leap of faith even greater than that demanded by many irrational religious sects. A believer in self-esteem, Kohn admits that the self-esteem teaching is "a matter less of scientific pedagogy than of faith".[5] In other words, self-esteem has no compelling argument or evidence to support it, and believing it depends entirely on whether it "feels true to me." At that level of argument, perhaps anything can pass as believable.

Though an emphasis on self-esteem seems well-entrenched in many quarters, others have noted that little empirical evidence exists that correlates high self-esteem with academic achievement or positive behavior. Commenting on the research report of the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, established in 1986, Hewitt remarks "Considering their high expectations and strong beliefs in the importance of self-esteem, it is hard to believe the Task Force members were not disappointed by the research findings... the most consistent report in the chapters is that 'the associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent.'"[6] In fact, there is much more empirical evidence for the opposite. Three researchers in the *Psychological Review*, after extensively examining relevant research literature on the topic, concluded that violence is very often the way that people with irrationally high self-esteem respond to those who do not endorse

their high opinion of themselves. In studies of many violent groups including rapists, psychopaths, school bullies, child abusers, murderers, and members of street gangs, Baumeister, Smart, and Boden found that violent individuals shared the characteristic of tending to respond to threats to a high level of self-esteem by lashing out violently.[7] For example, the code of street gangs has been observed to center around respect, and they have learned "that humility (which is one of the concepts linked to modesty and low self-esteem) is not a virtue."[8] In contrast, in studies people measured as having low self-esteem are usually not as violent. They note that modern attempts to solve the problem of increasing violence by aiming at increasing self-esteem actually run the risk of producing the opposite effect, since "it will almost certainly be impossible to insulate everyone against ego threats" which will tend to incite people to violence.[9] Along the same lines, psychologist Harold Stevenson found that school children in the US have much greater self-confidence about their abilities in math compared with school children in Japan, Taiwan, and China. In actuality, however, the math skills of Asian children in these places are generally superior.[10]

C．Guilt and Moral Failure

So it is hard to reconcile the self-esteem teaching with reality. When we hear the exhortation to esteem ourselves more, an inner voice says "Why should I?" How can the self-esteem perspective respond to that? There is not much to say. As Mark Twain put it, "deep down no man much respects himself." That is why the assurances of the self-esteem enthusiasts often ring hollow. We sense that it is a lie that we have an unconditional right to feel good about ourselves. It is because our self-esteem is closely connected with our moral self-approval or the lack of it. Kohn comes close to the truth when he writes, "The need to be best at anything at all, which is to say at everything, actually represents an attempt to stave off a persistent and pronounced sense that one is fundamentally no good" and "one wants to be stronger or smarter than others in order to convince oneself at some level that one is a good person."[11] Here we see that the problem seems not to be one of a perceived lack of competence but of *moral* worth. It is very revealing that Kohn speaks in terms not of ability or giftedness but of *goodness*. According to this analysis, the real problem would seem to be a sense of shame --in other words, a deep, abiding sense of moral failure; that is, guilt. If so, then any attempt to erase that feeling by either accomplishments or groundless self-esteem is doomed to failure. A sense of moral guilt can only be dealt with in a moral way: by atonement for crimes and forgiveness. Thus the problem of "low self-esteem" leads not to the solution of the instant, painless self-esteem proposed by many, nor can it be dealt with by a sense of greater achievement.

This brings us to another problem with the self-esteem doctrine: its claim to be a moral cure-all. One important facet of the self-esteem movement is its ethical appeal. Its proponents claim that greater self-esteem will enable people to live better lives.

However, like many other elements of the self-esteem ideology, there are strong grounds for doubting that notion.

In fact, the reverse is probably closer to the truth. Trying to produce concern for others by focusing more attention on pumping up one's own ego is a little bit like trying to put out a fire by covering it with wood. One could argue that fires spread because they are seeking more fuel to burn. Therefore, if we throw more wood on a spreading fire, it will receive the fuel it needs and will not have to spread and destroy. That analogy seems to me not too far from the logic of the self-love advocates, who say that to heal the self, we need to attend to its wounded vanity. However, obsession with personal well-being --the "me-first" attitude-- can just as easily be charged with many of the evils of the age. If my main concern is to satisfy personal emotional needs, I may justify abandoning my wife and finding another. If my principle concern is my own financial well-being, I might resort to unethical means to get it.

One informal observation is as good as another, and mine is that many people do not suffer from any lack of self-regard but rather from too much of it. They can not seem to see or think about anything beyond themselves. They certainly seem to be the most important thing in the universe in their own eyes. In one Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, little Calvin says to his imaginary playmate Hobbes "You know what I hate? I hate when I'm talking and someone turns the conversation to himself! It's so rude! Why do they think I'm talking?! It's so they can hear about me! Who cares what they have to say! If I start a conversation, it should stay on the subject of me!" Most people are not as honest as Calvin, but they also lose interest when the topic of conversation is not themselves.

The Japanese novelist Ayako Miura has written insightfully about this issue. In the third volume of her autobiography *Hikari Aru Uchi Ni* ("While There Is Still Light"), she has a chapter titled "Various Kinds of Love." In it she argues that human love is fundamentally flawed and weak. When love for someone else has to compete with self-love, self-love will usually win out in the end. As for herself, she confesses that she is terrified of the wild bears that roam the woods of her native Hokkaido, and if she and her husband ever met one while walking outdoors, she admits that she would probably shove him in front and run in terror. In many cases, love for others finishes a poor second to self-love. To illustrate the opposite, Miura discusses a famous incident in which a Japanese ferry named the Doyamaru overturned in a typhoon off the coast of Hokkaido in 1954. As the boat was sinking, many passengers did not have life-preservers, so two missionaries decided to give theirs to two Japanese teenagers who had none. When the ship sank, the missionaries drowned. In view of that kind of sacrifice, Miura observes "real love is a thing that has a severity in it, such that it may even lead to giving up one's life for others."[12] Far from originating from self-love, love for others often seems to run counter to it.

At least one study has found no connection between self-esteem and helping others. In a psychological survey of Europeans who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, the

researchers described their findings this way: "Rescuers had no more favorable views of themselves than did non-rescuers. Their responses to a self-esteem scale consisting of ten statements showed that they were just as likely as non-rescuers... to feel that they had negative qualities and to think ill of themselves." It is also interesting to hear how the researchers try to account for these findings:

> The absence of a connection between self-esteem and altruism should not be surprising... people who think ill of themselves can become so obsessed by their own distress that they barely register others' needs; however; they can just as easily respond to others needs as a way of enhancing their own self-image. Some rescuers felt they had done nothing of merit in their lives. This, too, should not be surprising, for as William James noted many years ago, people evaluate themselves with respect to their self-expectations. Because of their internal standards, those with high aspirations risk not feeling good about themselves even if they accomplish more than others. As some rescuers noted, 'I didn't do enough.'[13]

The possible connection between the strictness of one's moral standard and self-evaluation is especially insightful. If the standard were simply brushing one's teeth and flossing after every meal, someone with good dental hygiene could think highly of himself and look down on the rest of us. The lower the standard, the easier to feel self-respect. Conversely, people with morally higher standards tend to be more severe on themselves. This observation appears to contradict conventional wisdom about the moral power of self-esteem.

Self-esteem ideology may even undermine moral accountability. According to advocates of self-esteem such as Kohn, the lack of a connection between performance in life and a good self-image means the best self-concept is completely unconditional. In other words, even if I murdered ten people the previous day, presumably a healthy self-concept would not suffer. Of course, the self-esteem advocates might argue that a person with a healthy self-concept will not commit such horrendous crimes. However, my main point is that if self-esteem is really to be unconditional, it must have absolutely no connection with my moral life. No matter how often I violate my own moral standard, my healthy self-image ought to be able to keep me feeling good about myself. Is this a realistic expectation for a person with a healthy conscience? Furthermore, if there need not be any connection between behavior and self-esteem, then how does self-esteem become a prescription for moral reformation? According to their own reasoning, ideally self-esteem and morality should be independent. On this point it seems as if the self-esteem advocates want to have their cake and eat it too.

Finally, if evil behavior comes merely from an unhealthy self-concept, what happens to punishment and blame? A psychological flaw becomes sufficient to explain everything. There is no basis for blame in evil behavior arising out of a psychological

flaw alone. In fact, describing it as evil behavior seems inappropriate. Sickness would be more appropriate. A sickness needs only a cure --not punishment, forgiveness, or repentance. We consider evil behavior to be worthy of condemnation precisely because it arises out of evil dispositions or motives. Evil behavior rooted only in a personality flaw merits no morally critical attention at all. From that new perspective, even a person like Adolph Hitler can be considered a sufferer of low-esteem who ought not to receive the severe moral censure he has had until now. In the end, the self-esteem prescription appears to make the whole notion of moral accountability meaninglessness. In fact, in his book *Whatever Became of Sin?* psychiatrist Karl Menninger bemoaned the fact that in many respects such psychological explanations for poor behavior have made ideas such as moral accountability irrelevant.[14] Furthermore, MacArthur argues in *The Vanishing Conscience* that self-esteem ideology has indeed helped to extinguish a sense of personal moral responsibility in the minds and hearts of many modern people.[15]

Ⅲ. Self-Esteem in the Light of the Bible

As we have seen, the self-esteem ideology does not make much sense considered by itself. A final point worth making, however, is that it may not really matter much what we think of ourselves. Our views of everything, including ourselves, are limited and unreliable. What we need is an objective, reliable opinion from someone who knows us completely but views us without prejudice or favoritism. Only one such person is available --God. So naturally Scripture should have the final word on the subject.

A. Love: A Scriptural Definition

To begin with, Scripture sheds considerable light on the proper definition of love, a problem we considered earlier. As we have seen already, some define love in terms of feelings; others define it as benevolent, other-directed action. However, Scripture makes it clear that this is a false dilemma. One is not required to choose action and reject feeling or vice versa. In fact, without both, there cannot be love in a Christian, Biblical sense at all. In opposition to various partial, incomplete definitions of love, Scripture defines love as both action and feeling. True love is action arising out of heartfelt concern or affection. As Tom Wells puts it, "love is an affection that leads one person to seek the benefit or promote the interest of another person."[16] John teaches "let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (I John 3:18). I Corinthians chapter thirteen provides a more detailed description of the characteristics of real love than anything one can find in all secular literature. This passage makes clear that love must be heartfelt and sincere, with concrete, benevolent behavior as the result. In I Corinthians 13:3, Paul sees benevolent action devoid of heartfelt love as worthless: "if I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing," which implies that action to help others by itself does not establish the

existence of sincere love. Everyday experience confirms that indeed one can do various self-sacrificing or benevolent acts out of fear, a sense of duty, or a desire for praise. Almost any conceivable outward action can be done from questionable motives. Peter exhorts believers to "have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart" (I Peter 1:22). Conversely, it is possible to have various feelings and express them in many words, without taking any action that benefits the object of this feeling. In such a case most would question the depth, sincerity, or other-directed character of those feelings. In other words, the feeling may simply be infatuation or selfish desire for the object of one's "love." If action alone or feeling alone were proof enough of love's reality, such texts as these would not have been written.

Besides offering a definition that goes directly contrary to a lot of conventional wisdom about love, these verses create problems for self-love advocates. Paul defines love as "not self-seeking" (I Corinthians 13:5). This text seems to indicate that love based on self-concern is an impossibility. Rather than being an impetus to virtuous, other-directed love, it could just as easily be a hindrance. According to Paul, love by definition is completely other-directed. To him, "love oneself" is like saying "kiss oneself" and is just as meaningless a concept. By definition, self-sacrificial love does not draw attention to self.

B. "Love Your Neighbor As Yourself"

According to the self-love advocates, "love your neighbor as yourself" means we have to love ourselves first. Without self-love, they say, there can be no other-love, and healthy self-love produces other-love as its natural fruit. However, it might also be the case that the text assumes that people already do love themselves without being taught to do so and bases the command on that. If there were any need to lay a foundation of self-love first, then Jesus and other Biblical writers would surely have taken the trouble to lay that foundation. Since they did not, we can easily conclude that they would have viewed such an undertaking to be superfluous. When Jesus reaffirmed the Old Testament injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself," he was probably assuming that we all tend to love ourselves to the exclusion of others. All we are able to deduce from the command "love your neighbor as yourself" is that self-love is not necessarily an evil thing in every case.

So the Biblical command to "love your neighbor as yourself" proves nothing about a causal relationship between self-love and love for others. If anything, it proves the opposite --that there is no necessary causal link between self-love and other-love. If one led naturally to the other, there would be no need for Jesus to say anything about other-love at all. He would only need to command "love yourself" and other-love would take care of itself, by arising naturally out of self-love. Grammatically, the plain sense of the text is that we should love other people *as*, meaning "to the extent that," we love ourselves. Nothing more is intended or proven by the construction of the text.

At any rate, not much can be concluded on the basis of a passing reference to love for oneself. In another place Jesus says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters --yes, even his own life-- he can not be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Using the same kind of reasoning as the self-love advocates, one could conceivably argue that a person must hate himself and his family before he can become a true Christian. At present we do not see anyone writing books advocating self-hate. Self-love advocates put far too much weight on rather odd interpretations of a few fragments of Biblical texts.

Another problem which texts such as I Corinthians 13 bring to light is this: when we see the full, intense, life-changing character of love in the Biblical sense, it also becomes obvious that this love is not something frail humans are able to produce by extending their own self-regard to include others in its embrace. And the Bible itself has no such expectation. It links love to the inward work of the Holy Spirit, who causes the believer to bear love as a character fruit. Even if it were true that love for others flows from enlightened self-love, the kind of love a believer strives for is something much greater than natural love. He seeks a kind of supernatural love that "God has poured out... into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has been given us" (Romans 5:5).

One kind of love that self-love definitely does not naturally lead to is the love of God. So self-love is certainly not an ethical cure-all, since it does not help to fulfill mankind's highest ethical obligation, which is to love God.

Ｃ. The Divine Image: Cutting Both Ways

Another favorite Biblical text among believers in self-esteem is the one that refers to men and women being made in the image of God, Genesis 1:27. Some reason simply that if we ourselves are a reflection of the greatest Being in the universe, then we ought to think well of ourselves. This may be true as far as it goes, but in no place in Scripture are people told to draw such an inference from the image-of-God teaching. We are told that we should always treat other people with respect and love as creatures made in His image (James 3:9). But it is another thing entirely for each person to esteem himself because he bears the divine image.

The reason we cannot feel unqualified self-approbation is that the image of God in us can no longer be contemplated apart from its present condition. In other words, humanness is no longer the undefiled, noble example of God's wisdom and workmanship it once was. Fallen and corrupted, it has become a monster instead. Everything once good and noble about it has become tainted with moral ugliness. Since sin has come into the picture, it has become impossible to consider humanness without looking at its subsequent corruption. All the abilities and qualities that make men so unique and amazing have become tools of rebellion against God. Is it possible to rejoice in abilities completely apart from their present use? That would be like admiring a brilliant but

sadistic serial murderer. Do his sophistication and intelligence make him an attractive individual worthy of our praise and high regard? On the contrary, since his genius is in the service of brutality, he is that much more frightening and dangerous. The same is true of fallen mankind. All its exalted God-like abilities make it that much more tragically depraved. Of course, the image of God, considered by itself, is a valuable thing, but the point is that it cannot be considered in isolation any longer.

So the truth that men are created in God's image is a two-edged sword. Special blessings are always privileges from God carrying the requirement that they be appreciated and not abused. For example, Jesus predicted that the Jewish towns that rejected him would fare much worse on the Day of Judgment than Sodom, a notoriously evil city (Matt 11:22). In the same way, men made in the image of God are even more liable to blame and condemnation for abusing that privilege. Independently considered, bearing God's image is a reason for considering oneself to be superior to an animal. But then again, animals do not wage wars or lie. It is not animals that have to face the possibility of eternal punishment. So Biblically it is very questionable whether people should encourage themselves to feel unqualified joy about the mere fact of being made in the image of God. It also ought to make them tremble a little.

D. Bible Texts Against Self-Esteem Ideology

After looking at the Biblical definition of love, we examined the main Scripture-based arguments for the importance of encouraging self-esteem in people's lives, and we found those arguments to be very weak. In certain respects, the few oft-quoted texts even provide arguments against the ideology of the self-esteem advocates. Now it is time to look at texts which run explicitly counter to the mentality of the self-esteem movement. In contrast to the handful of texts which the self-love advocates draw upon, these texts are very numerous, so I will limit myself somewhat to a broad sampling, referring the reader to others along the way. I will group these texts thematically into the following categories: (1) those which judge the human condition to be extremely bleak, (2) those which enjoin humility, self-loathing, and repentance, (3) those which show faith to be contrary to self-confidence, (4) those which find joy, thankfulness, contentment in sources other than the self, (5) those which direct people to a life of sober self-reflection rather than self-esteem, and finally (6) those which show self-regard to go against a generally God-centered life and outlook.

Before looking at some of the passages in the Bible on humanity's ruined condition, it might be good to clear away an objection. Some do not even want to listen to such negative news. For instance, Schuller believes that the traditional, Biblical description of men as sinners "is not so much inaccurate as it is insulting."[17] A negative description of human beings is particularly difficult for modern people to accept, in his opinion. However, people have always been averse to hearing themselves described as evil. Over two hundred and fifty years ago, a British minister named John Taylor felt the same

way and wrote a book against the doctrine of original sin. Jonathan Edwards had the following to say about it:

> Another objection, which Dr. Taylor and some others offer against this doctrine, is, that it *pours contempt upon the human nature*. But their declaiming on this topic is like addressing the affections and conceits of *children*, rather than rational arguing with *men*.... I am sensible, it is not suited to the taste of some, who are so very *delicate* (to say no worse) that they can bear nothing but compliment and flattery... If we, as we come into the world, are truly sinful, and consequently miserable, he acts but a *friendly* part to us, who endeavors to discover and manifest our disease. Whereas on the contrary, he acts an *unfriendly* part, who to his utmost hides it from us...[18]

As Edwards points out, it is more helpful to tell the painful truth when that truth can lead to recovery than it is to conceal it. That the Bible does very honestly, for which we can be grateful.

E. Mankind's Condition and How to Feel About It

Among the many Biblical writers who touch on this theme we can consider David. David was not only a poet, a singer, and a man of personal religious experience; he was also a student of mankind. His diagnosis of the human condition was not very positive. One of the most striking things in David's thought is that, along with his exuberant praise of God, there is a repeated emphasis on human depravity in counterpoint to the pure character of God. God's dependability and love he contrasts with the undependability and betrayal of human companions. David learned that the only one he could ultimately depend on was God. Other than a few close friends such as Jonathan, there was no one David could put complete confidence in. But David's descriptions were not only personal. His psalms also contain general descriptions of mankind as an evil race. Many speak of God's looking down, condemning, rebuking, and then punishing and destroying men in their wicked schemes, not only against David himself but against the godly and God's Messiah. Ultimately, God sees their hostility as directed against himself. One passage repeated three times in the Bible is Psalm 14:1-3: "The fool says in his heart 'there is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt, there is no one who does good, not even one." David repeats these words also in Psalm 53:1-3, and Paul quotes them in Romans 3:10-12, in the context of establishing the universal badness of mankind. Similar passages about the depth and universality of human wickedness can be found in Ps. 2:1-3, Ps. 35:1-4, 37:12-14: 50:16-21, 52:1-4, 53:1-4, 55:20-21, 56:1-2, 57:4, 58:1-5, 59:3-4, 6-7, 14-15, and 64:2-4.

To that we can add the testimony of Jesus, the Son of David. Of all the scriptural

judges of mankind, he must be considered the best judge of the human condition. Twice he expressly calls his listeners "evil": "if then you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will you father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?" (Matt. 5:11). Jesus's way of addressing his listeners does not seem designed to bolster their sense of self-worth. In fact, in both passages he deliberately sets the character of God and that of man in opposition. One is exceedingly good, and the other is correspondingly evil. In Matthew 19:16-17 he rejects the praise of a rich young man who calls him "good," not because Jesus did not believe in his own goodness but because the young man took Jesus to be only a man, a "teacher" like other Rabbis, and it bothered Jesus to hear men called "good": "there is only One who is good" (Matt: 19:17), or "No one is good --except God alone" (Mark 10:18). He was obviously concerned, not that men might have too low an opinion of themselves, but that it might be too high. In contrast to Robert Schuller, who thinks men should never be called "sinful," Jesus believed that men should never be called "good."

Included among Jesus's descriptions of his contemporaries are the following: "children of the devil," "you who are evil," "you of little faith," "a wicked and perverse generation," "an adulterous and wicked generation," "hypocrites," "blind fools," "whited sepulchers," "liars," and "murderers." Of course, many of the activities of the Lord Jesus must be regarded as very encouraging and positive, such as healing the sick and preaching the good news of God's forgiveness, but in marked contrast to the advice of the self-esteem movement, he also spent a lot of time doing negative things: condemning the religion of the Pharisees, rebuking sins in his own disciples, predicting judgment for the unrepentant, and preaching against many specific sins. For example, Matthew 23 contains a scathing denunciation of the wickedness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. He knew that sin cannot be dealt with unless it is exposed in all of its ugliness.

Scripture not only emphasizes how ugly mankind's condition is; it also indicates what is the proper attitude people should take toward themselves: self-abhorrence. After his vision of God's greatness, Job, an exemplary man in his own time, says "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Similarly, predicting the future repentance and restoration of his people, Ezekiel tells them they will one day come to "loathe themselves" for all the sins they committed. Ezekiel 20:43: "you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done." The words "loathe them-selves" appear also in Ezekiel 6:9 and 36:31. In Ezekiel 16:63 we find it stated somewhat differently: "Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Lord." In this case, the self-loathing is severe enough to silence people completely. If "loathing oneself" is a Biblical synonym for humility and contrition, it follows that "esteeming oneself" could be a synonym for hardness of heart. In contrast, one New Testament text predicts that unrepentant people will one

day be "lovers of themselves" (2 Tim. 3:2). Can a person really esteem what he also finds to be "loathsome"?

Once I heard a Christian counselor on a radio interview show discussing self-love. In reply to the criticism that self-esteem only means narcissism, she asserted that narcissists are really insecure and "not comfortable with who they are." If we really know ourselves and all the evil that is in our hearts, how can we "feel comfortable" with it? There is something terribly smug about saying "I feel totally comfortable with myself." At any rate, that does not seem to be the attitude of Ezekiel and Job.

Ｆ．Self-Confidence: Contrary To Faith

Besides being contrary to repentance, self-esteem is also contrary to faith. We find in Scripture that heartfelt humility is an essential element of faith. Many passages clearly imply that self-confidence is the opposite of faith, since the man who trusts in himself cannot be said to trust in God alone. Self-confidence means "trust in oneself." By definition, it is an attitude that finds some basis for security in one's own gifts or strengths. Habakkuk condemns this attitude while praising the attitude of faith in the famous passage Hab. 2:4, quoted three times by the apostle Paul: "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright, but the righteous one will live by his faith." Habakkuk was writing about the Babylonians, whom God criticized for making a religion out of their own military prowess. In other words, they were very self-confident people. Far from being synonymous with faith, as Schuller and other self-esteem teachers have argued, self-esteem is actually the negation of Biblical faith. The man who has a lot of self-confidence has proportionately that much less God-confidence.

The clearest proof of this, once again, appears in the life of Jesus. On only two occasions did Jesus praise people for their faith. It is no coincidence that in both instances the people did not speak well of their own worth. One was the centurion, who told Jesus that "I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you" (Luke 7:6-7). Rather than dealing with his lack of self-esteem, Jesus responds "I have not found such great faith even in Israel!" The other was the Canaanite woman in Matt. 15:21-28, who accepted Jesus's comparing her to a dog. In ancient Israel and in many Arab countries today, dogs are considered to be unclean, filthy animals. So here is an example of the Lord himself comparing a person to a detested animal! However, the woman counters with "even the dogs take the crumbs that fall from the children's table." Jesus praises the deep faith revealed by her answer and grants her request. Both events reveal that deep faith coincides with a deep sense of unworthiness of God's blessings and presence. Faith in the Bible is intimately linked with humility. It is impossible to have great faith without great humility, because only the humble can acknowledge that God rather than self is worthy of trust.

G．Humble, Contrite Faith: The Real Foundation of Moral Virtue

Humble faith, not self-esteem, leads the believer into a life of thanksgiving, joy, and empowerment to live well. Conventional wisdom holds that you enjoy something in order to reward yourself. The Bible takes the opposite tack: I do not deserve this, but I can be happy in it because God is gracious and generous, and it pleases him to shower his blessings on people like me. It glorifies him for me to give thanks, not for me to be guilt-ridden because I do not deserve it. Our sense of guilt often makes it impossible for us to experience unmixed joy in anything. At the back of our minds there is often the nagging thought "I don't deserve this. Why is it happening? Is some punishment coming later to make up for it?" However, thanks to the atonement of Christ which takes care of guilt and fear of punishment, a believer can experience unmixed enjoyment of all his blessings.

In fact, that sense of joy and release is not possible unless a person has a clear grasp of the desperate nature of his condition. By showing us the blackness of humanity's state, the writers of the Bible display the great justice and grace of God. If we do not see how horrible sin is, we can not see the glory of his victory over it in Christ. How can someone who thinks highly of himself possibly appreciate the grace of God to him? He would be like the Pharisee in the parable, thanking God for his virtues and excellent points (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisees had very good self-images in the days of Jesus; they thought they were righteous and good. They did not think of themselves as tainted men and were offended when Jesus suggested they were also guilty before God. By minimizing human sin, self-esteem advocates also detract from the glory of God's grace. They present man as a creature needing very little of it. Finally and most importantly, only seeing the horror of our own sin prepares us to appreciate the worth of the blood that atones for it and cleanses from it. It must be very valuable and powerful blood that can wash out so many stains. That blood must be very precious if it can more than compensate in the eyes of God for so much offense. However, what Christ has done will probably not seem very important to people who feel they need very little redeeming to begin with. The death and suffering of Christ might even seem like a waste of effort to people who already have high opinions of themselves. In fact, they are likely to be offended by the idea that they need a bloody salvation.

We have seen how self-love advocates would have us believe that self-esteem is the foundation of all virtuous behavior and a happy life, but various texts indicate that the opposite is really the case. According to such texts, a high opinion of oneself and self-centeredness are the root of all kinds of sin, while self-denial is the root of a better life. "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom," according to Proverbs 11:2. Likewise, in 13:10 we find that "pride only breeds quarrels." This is not surprising, since pride is having an inordinately high opinion of oneself, resulting in looking down on others. This leads to treating them with less respect and consideration. Arguments and conflict come when we feel our pride and dignity being trampled on by

others. Contrary to the conventional wisdom on this point, a low opinion of oneself is more likely to make one content, peaceable, and loving toward others. When one's own needs seem less important in one's eyes, it will be easier to see the importance of the needs of others. Similarly, pride is at the bottom of a complaining attitude, because the proud person feels he is getting less than he deserves and resents his circumstances. It is very doubtful that an increased measure of self-regard will lead to a more contented life.

So how should a person think of himself? Instead of higher self-esteem, one text recommends sober, accurate reflection on oneself in order to find one's place of usefulness in Christ's church: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, according to the measure of faith God has given you" (Romans 12:3). The text indicates that our tendency is not to think too poorly of ourselves but rather too highly. If after honest self-examination one has grounds to consider that he has a certain gift or strength, it is false humility to deny that fact: "we have different gifts, according to the grace given us" (Romans 12:6). Even in that process of positive self-assessment, though, he is brought back to grace and God, not to self-congratulation.

H. Self-Esteem and the Glory of God

Finally, many texts indicate that human self-regard stands in the way of God glorifying himself. According to them, it forms a barrier that God himself will remove before finally establishing himself in his kingdom on earth. Self can even be an idol, supplanting God: "There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive.... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Interestingly, nowhere in the Bible is there any prediction that one day multitudes will suffer from a great lack of self-love; instead, the opposite is predicted. Significantly, the passage begins with a description of what people will love --themselves-- and ends with what they will not love --God. Ignoring such passages, Schuller writes that self-esteem "is a divine awareness of personal dignity. It is what the Greeks call a reverence for the self. It is an abiding faith in yourself. It is a sincere belief in yourself."[19] The use of words such as *divine awareness* shows us that we are not just dealing with pop-psychology here; we are dealing with a new kind of deity. In this way, wherever the self-esteem teaching goes, it seems to take God out of the spotlight.

However, God's main concern is not whether or not people feel good about themselves, and his real priority appears clearly in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah predicts that "the eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the Lord alone with be exalted in that day" (Isaiah 2:11). Almost the whole book is devoted to the theme of how human pride will be humbled so that the glory of God can be exalted. Israel, the nations, and mankind in general will face terrible judgment in order to accomplish this feat. Isaiah 2:17, 3:16-22, 5:15, 8:7, 10:12-13, 13:11, 14:13-14, 16:6,

23:9, 25:11, and 26:5 are just some of the passages that show how God is determined to bring down all evidences of human arrogance, whether in the form of confidence in military power, love of wealth, physical vanity, pleasure-seeking, confidence in economic might, or religious self-righteousness. Without the humbling of human pride, God can never be adequately magnified, since he is the only one who really deserves exaltation. Isaiah makes it clear that his creatures, especially the rebellious ones, are puny in comparison, even whole countries full of them: "Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing" (Isaiah 40:17). If whole nations amount to "less than nothing," what about individual human beings? Scripture is obviously committed to taking humanity off its pedestal and putting God there instead.

Ⅰ. The Real Source of a Sense of Personal Worth

Nevertheless, Isaiah shows that there is a kind of person for whom the Lord has a very high regard: "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2). In the days of the Old Testament, God told people brought out of their slavery in Egypt that "I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high" (Leviticus 26:12). Just like the New Testament believer, the Israelites had their salvation to thank for this new way of walking.

Seeming to speak the language of the self-esteem movement, Jonathan Edwards wrote: "What a sweet calmness, what a calm ecstasy, doth it bring to the soul! How doth it make the soul [to] love itself..."[20] Here he is talking not about normal human experience but about a state of salvation. There is something in the Biblical Gospel that confers very great worth on people and makes them able to respect themselves. That dignity comes completely from a new relationship to God. As Edwards exclaimed, "How hath he honored us, in that he hath made us to glorify him to all eternity! How are we dignified by our Maker, who has made us for so high and excellent an end!"[21] Paradoxically, only when people put themselves far below God, acknowledging that he is the only one who deserves esteem, they are amazed to find that they receive the gift of a real sense of worth, without any aid from the self at all. Or, as John puts it, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (I John 3 : 1).[22] Only by grace through faith people can enjoy forever the most intimate association with the Person from whom all worth flows.

Endnotes

⑴　Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: The "Miscellanies" 501-832*, Chamerlain, A., ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 18: 73-76

⑵　John Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

⑶　Paul Brownback, *The Danger of Self-love*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982).

⑷　Richard Paul, *Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Know in a Rapidly Changing World,* (Sonoma: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 1992), 11.

⑸　Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 98-99.

⑹　Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, 59-60.

⑺　R. Baumeister, L. Smart, &J. Boden, "Relation of Threatened Egotism to Violence and Aggression: The Dark Side of Self-Esteem." *Psychological Review* 103:1 (1996): 5-33.

⑻　Ibid. 22.

⑼　Ibid. 29.

⑽　J. Adler et.al., "The Curse of Self-Esteem: What's Wrong With the Feel-Good Movement." *Newsweek*, Feb. 17, 1992, 51.

⑾　Kohn, *No Contest*, 100.

⑿　Miura, Ayako, *Hikari Aru Uchi Ni* (While there is still light). In *Miura Ayako Zenshu* (The collected works of Ayako Miura) (Japan: Shinkoubunkou, 1991) 15: 253.

⒀　S. Oliner and P. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*, (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 177-8.

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⒄　Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, (Waco: Word, 1982), 98ff.

⒅　Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Original Sin*, Holbrook, C. ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) 3: 423-4.

⒆　Robert Schuller, *Self-Love: Dynamic Force of Success*, (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1969), 32.

⒇　Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Sermons and Discourses 1720-1723*, Kinnach, W. ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 10: 479.

㉑　Ibid. 427.

㉒　Bible quotations are all from *The New International Version*, (New York: International Bible Society, 1973).

[Abstract]

A Contrite Heart is Better than an Esteemed Self:
How Self-Esteem Ideology Contradicts Reason and the Bible

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This paper critiques the thinking of both secular and religious advocates of self-esteem. Many in the secular and religious worlds claim that self-esteem is the key to successful and happy living. However, closer examination of the reasoning behind self-esteem ideology shows it to be full of flaws and contradictions, and a number of researchers have found that self-esteem ideology rests on scant solid evidence. Furthermore, the Biblical writers point in the opposite direction. Scriptural texts that are often believed to teach self-esteem actually appear to teach the opposite. The unscriptural nature of self-esteem is especially evident in Biblical teaching on the depraved condition of mankind and the close connection between humility and faith. Finally, texts explicitly condemning human self-regard and those insisting on the preeminence of the glory of God throw the overwhelming weight of the Bible against self-esteem ideology. Biblically, a sense of personal worth can only be obtained through the gracious gift of the believer's status as a child of God.