

A TRINITARIAN FOUNDATION FOR SELF-ESTEEM

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Introduction

The importance of self-esteem as a necessary component of the psyche of a healthy and functional individual is generally recognized. As such, self-esteem undergirds appropriate behaviors and positive social interactions.

The purpose of this article is to identify and explain aspects of the trinitarian foundation for the maintenance of self-esteem. The study also has implications for the remediation of self-esteem problems in the context of pastoral counseling. In particular, self-esteem will be analyzed in relation to the doctrines of God, of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.

Definition of Self-esteem

In order to effectively integrate self-esteem and specific religious beliefs, it is necessary to define the concept. This represents no easy task because of the great body of literature dealing with the topic.¹ Although there is no universally accepted definition of self-esteem, there is a generally accepted understanding of it. James Coopersmith has expressed it well:

By self-esteem we refer to the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself: it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy.²

In this perspective self-esteem is an internal process of self-evaluation as well as the resulting orientation, either negative or positive. Self-esteem

¹For excellent surveys of studies on self-esteem, see Roy F. Baumeister, ed., *Self-esteem: The Puzzle of Low Self-Regard* (New York: Plenum, 1993); R. C. Wylie, *The Self-Concept* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961); L. Edward Wells and Gerald Marwell, *Self-esteem: Its Conceptualization and Measurement*, Sage Library of Social Research, vol. 20 (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976).

²Stanley Coopersmith, *The Antecedents of Self-esteem* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1967), 4-5.

represents the extent to which the individual experiences the self as capable, significant, successful, and worthy.

Self-esteem includes both thoughts (cognitions) and feelings (affections) toward the "self" as an object. In a healthy person these interact to form "a subjective and enduring sense of realistic self-approval."³ This state of mind is possible for all normally self-conscious individuals regardless of age, race, gender, or religion.

Self-Esteem in a Psychological Context

In much of the psychological literature self-esteem is explained in terms of intrapsychic (mental) and interpersonal (social) factors. This means that self-esteem is understood exclusively in terms of mental processes and social interactions. The parameters for exploration consist of the self and its immediate interpersonal environment (significant others). In much of the research in this area the idea of a transcendent source of self-esteem is ignored. In this respect psychology reveals its strong scientific moorings. Modern science understands that all reality is comprehended entirely in the nexus of physical, empirical, cause-effect relationships.⁴ In this system of thought, self-esteem is rooted firmly in the objective human condition and situation. Nathaniel Branden stated this view succinctly:

Since man is the motor of his own actions, since his concept of himself, of the person he has created, plays a cardinal role in his motivation—he desires and needs the fullest possible experience of the reality and objectivity of that person, of his self.⁵

Psychologically, self-esteem is interpreted only in reference to the human sphere with no mention of the divine.

The psychological focus on human agency and experience, intrapsychic process, and interpersonal environment has created a situation in which expressions of dependence on God and confessions of personal sinfulness are often viewed as antithetical to self-esteem.⁶ Thus some self-esteem measurement instruments are so "humanistically" biased as to result in negative assessments of believers.⁷ This criticism should not be

³Richard L. Bednar, M. Gawain Wells, and Scott R. Peterson, *Self-esteem: Paradoxes and Innovations in Clinical Theory and Practice* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1989), 4.

⁴Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Rudolph Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 300-301.

⁵Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-esteem* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1969), 213.

⁶P. J. Watson, R. J. Morris, and R. W. Hood, "Antireligious Humanistic Values, Guilt, and Self-Esteem," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (1987): 535-546.

⁷Ibid.

interpreted as an indictment of the ideas generated by psychology relating to self-esteem, but it does underscore the limits of psychology and the need for a complementary theological approach.

Self-esteem in a Theological Context

In much of the theological literature self-esteem is problematic because there is no integration of psychological concept and theological context.⁸ A concept conditioned by the presuppositions of modern science can hardly be harmoniously integrated into a theocentric faith structure. If self-esteem is determined exclusively by intrapsychic processes and interpersonal relationships, where does God fit in?

The idea that self-esteem is rooted solely in the soil of human experience is theologically problematic.⁹ True, human experience does provide the context for the satisfaction of self-esteem. However, this does not mean that experience is a closed universe with only intrapsychic and interpersonal realities. Theologically, the human experience is inexplicable apart from reference to the divine (Deut 6:5; Matt 22:37). Therefore, human experience should be interpreted with reference to the divine presence.

The Doctrine of God

The doctrine of God can be correlated with self-esteem in a number of ways. Specific aspects of these various correlations will be dealt with in the following sections.

The Transcendence of God

The affirmation of the existence of God as a transcendent, infinite divine being has implications for self-esteem (Ps 8:3-8; 2 Tim 1:7). It suggests that the ground of human worth is not contained within the

⁸The integration of psychology and Christianity is problematic in that the broad perspectives of each field appear to be diametrically opposed. See Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). The difficulty of integrating self-esteem and Christian beliefs is that it attempts to correlate a concept conditioned by materialistic humanism with a theistic belief structure. The "problem is entangled in questions of semantics involving humanistic and theistic language structures" (P. J. Watson, R. W. Hood, Jr., R. J. Morris, and J. R. Hall, "Religiosity, Sin and Self-Esteem," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 13 [1985]: 126).

⁹"For if we first allow the legitimacy of the natural man's assumption of himself as the ultimate reference point in interpretation in any dimension we cannot deny his right to interpret Christianity itself in naturalistic terms" (Cornelius Van Til, "The Reformed Position," in *The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. Millard J. Erickson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), 62).

sphere of observable phenomena. Browning has expressed this idea clearly:

It has been my contention that this inner datum of experiencing oneself as an object of primary value cannot be reducible to the totality of interpersonal sources of positive regard and empathy. Instead, it is the consistent witness of life that there is a source of human affirmation which transcends and constitutes the ground of all its specific and interpersonal origins.¹⁰

In the trinitarian framework, human factors in the maintenance of self-esteem are only part of the total picture. From this perspective the scientific worldview, although distinguishing human from animal and attributing high value to the human, cannot morally and logically establish a satisfactory basis for human worth.¹¹ The Christian worldview, however, establishes human worth on a transcendent basis. It does so through the belief that above all human sources in the maintenance of self-esteem is a God who is infinite, omnipotent, and personally involved with the individual.

An Alternative System of Self-valuing

A major process in the development of self-esteem is the comparison of the "ideal" and the "perceived" self.¹² The ideal self is an "internalization of values transmitted by significant others and the culture."¹³ The value system thus formed is used to evaluate the perceived self. It has been suggested that these internalized social values can create uncertainty about self-value because the self has only relative value, based on relative social norms.¹⁴ The trinitarian view identifies a source of self-esteem independent of social norms (Gal 2:6). In such a context human worth is not bound to particular cultural, social, or personal standards but is fixed by God and established by the divine evaluation. In Christianity the value is attributed to each individual apart from the social reference group or external criterion (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11).¹⁵

¹⁰Don S. Browning, *Atonement and Psychotherapy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 261-262.

¹¹William M. Counts, "The Nature of Man and the Christian's Self-Esteem," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 1 (1973): 39.

¹²Craig W. Ellison, *Your Better Self* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 3.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Gerd Theissen, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology*, trans. John P. Calvin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 37.

¹⁵Ibid., 38.

Modern industrial cultures tend to measure worth in terms of superiority and success while denigrating such human limitations as weakness, inadequacy, and ordinariness.¹⁶ This can lead to a self-esteem problem for individuals unable to measure up to such criteria.¹⁷ In contrast to the modern value system is the value system based on the doctrine of God, as expressed in 1 Cor. 1:26, 29 (NIV):

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

E. L. Johnson has suggested that God actually “reverses the values of the world.”¹⁸ This reversal provides an alternative source of self-esteem for those who are not at the top of the social, moral, intellectual, or even spiritual ladder. The idea that God values the weak and sinful suggests the possibility that self-esteem is a gift of God’s grace (Eph 2:8-9). In the trinitarian view, superior traits, talents, and achievements are not prerequisites to a healthy sense of self-esteem. Belief in the existence of a transcendent God and the divine affirmation of the value of every individual is sufficient.

The Person as Creature

Inherent in the doctrine of God is the distinction between the creator and the creature (Gen 1:26-27; Rom 1:25). This fundamental tenet of Christian belief, at the very heart of monotheistic religion,¹⁹ affirms that there is only one God, the creator of the universe (Deut 6:4; 1 Chr 16:26), and all other beings are created by and subservient to the divine being (Rev 4:11, 13-14; 14:7).

The biblical creation account has profound implications for self-esteem. W. M. Counts explains that significance: “The biblical view of creation is that in every way man is a planned, purposeful, significant,

¹⁶V. M. Bilotta, “Pride: An Obstacle Along the Formative Journey,” *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 4 (1983): 315, 318.

¹⁷Ibid., 321.

¹⁸E. L. Johnson, “Self-esteem in the Presence of God,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 13 (1985): 233.

¹⁹*Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1988), 28-35.

valuable creature."²⁰ The implication of this insight is that in the account of the origin of the human race a sufficient ground for self-esteem is given. Cognitive and affective components of self-esteem may be rooted in the divine creation.²¹ In any case the perception of the self as the product of divine activity fixes its worth independently of achievements, attributes, and relationships.

The idea of God as creator relates to self-esteem in another way. Ernst Käsemann, reflecting on the creation account, concluded that "man cannot be defined from within his own limits."²² In the Christian tradition the transcendent quality of human nature is emphasized.²³ However, much of the psychological literature defines the self in purely natural categories with no reference to any transcendent qualities. Theologically these transcendent aspects of the self constitute its deepest value (Matt 16:26).

Sustained reflection on the creation account might also foster a consciousness of limitation and dependence which is essential to self-esteem. In a modern technological culture which tends toward overachievement this is a needed emphasis. Bilotta has analyzed the modern tendency: "In our culture our ordinary actual selves are not valued. Competing to win success becomes a way to become more than who we actually are. Our culture fosters the striving to develop an unreal vision of who we are."²⁴

The high value placed on superiority and success might explain the well documented tendency, in both high- and low-esteem individuals, to overestimate the self.²⁵ The doctrine of creation might remedy this

²⁰Counts, 41.

²¹In the creation account human worth is fixed by the creative activity of a transcendent God. Scientifically, this is a problematic assertion but not without precedent. In philosophy the possibility of self-esteem apart from interpersonal and intrapsychic factors has been suggested. John Deigh identified class and cultural attributions of worth in which human value is "fixed independently of one's conduct" (John Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique," *Ethics: An International Journal of Social, Political, and Legal Philosophy* 93 [1983]: 241).

²²Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 31.

²³Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 1:12-18.

²⁴Bilotta, 318. In the media human experience and nature are depicted in their most polished and practiced form, thus fostering an "unreal vision" of the self.

²⁵R. F. Baumeister, Dianne M. Tice, and Debra G. Hutton, "Self-Presentational Motivations and Personality Differences in Self-Esteem," *Journal of Personality* 57 (1989): 547-579; B. R. Schlenker, M. F. Weigold, and J. R. Hallam, "Self-Serving Attributions in

tendency by placing emphasis on the finite and dependent nature of the self (Gen 6:3; Job 14:1-2). In this way personal limitation and deficiency could be faced and handled without denial and exaggeration.

In the trinitarian view, the transcendent ground of self-esteem is the creator God and the divine creative activity. As a creature, the self derives cognitive and affective satisfaction from a source outside the framework of experience and achievement. The biblical creation account undergirds the experience of the self as an object of primary value.

The Doctrine of Christ

The second component of the trinitarian foundation of self-esteem is the doctrine of Christ. In the trinitarian perspective the person and work of Christ are potentially significant sources of self-esteem.

The centrality and priority of the person of Jesus Christ in the context of Christian faith is usually recognized. Evangelical faith is often interpreted in christocentric terms. From this perspective the Christian life is understood as a personal relationship with Christ in which the self is subordinated to Jesus' divine authority (Matt 16:24; 1 John 5:11-12; Acts 4:12). The relevance of this idea for self-esteem is noteworthy. In the evangelical tradition, Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon have explained that relevance: "The victorious Christian neither exalts nor downgrades himself. His interests have shifted from self to Christ."²⁶ This perceptual shift is significant, for the self is no longer the central value, at least ideally. This means that self-esteem is no longer derived exclusively from direct self-relevant factors. For the Christian, the person of Jesus is central in the self-esteem process.

Another aspect of Christology that is relevant for self-esteem is the affirmation of the saving work of Christ. Ellen White perceived this connection and explained: "In vain are men's dreams of progress, in vain all efforts for the uplifting of humanity, if they neglect the one source of hope and help for the fallen race."²⁷ From this perspective any effort to uplift humanity, in thought (self-esteem) and deed, is only temporal

Social Context: Effects of Self-Esteem and Social Pressure," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58 (1990): 862; D. M. Tice and R. F. Baumeister, "Self-Esteem, Self-Handicapping, and Self-Presentation: The Strategy of Inadequate Practice," *Journal of Personality* 58 (1990): 461; David Myers, "A New Look at Pride," in *Your Better Self*, ed. Craig W. Ellison (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1983), 82-97.

²⁶Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1985), 202.

²⁷Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1908), 21.

and insignificant apart from the saving work of Christ.²⁸ Following this line of reasoning, the endeavor to ground self-esteem on an exclusively humanistic basis is not sufficient. The humanistic basis consists primarily of the attributes and achievements of the self and the immediate interpersonal environment. The believer does not reject the humanistic basis of self-esteem but subjects it to a thorough christocentric critique. In this way the estimation of the self occurs only in reference to the person and work of Christ.

Incarnation

The theology of the incarnation can be correlated to self-esteem in a variety of ways. For example, it has been suggested that the incarnation provides a theological foundation for an emphasis on the self (Matt 1:18; John 1:14).²⁹ The significance of this idea is that human value is not secondary, but rather a primary concern for theology. The implication is that human concerns and needs are not trivial but vital (Phil 4:19). In the doctrine of the incarnation human need is connected with divine sufficiency (Matt 1:23; John 1:14). Theologically, the incarnation undergirds the endeavor to satisfy the self-esteem need. However, self-esteem is satisfied, not in a way of the individual's own devising, but through the action of God to fulfill a legitimate human need.

A second way that the incarnation is related to self-esteem is that it highlights the important status of humanity in the universal order (Gen 1:27; 2:7; Eph 3:10). Karl Barth explored this idea in his treatise on Christ's human nature: "It is only in the human and not in any other creaturely sphere that the creaturely correspondence, image and representation of the uniqueness and transcendence of God has been actualized as an event."³⁰ Neo-orthodox faith thus affirms the uniqueness and divinity of Christ in the human sphere. This incarnation of God marks the human as a creature of immeasurable worth and value.³¹ In this view the self derives value from an event which is unrepeatable and unchangeable, the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

²⁸Ellen White understood the development of self-esteem (self-respect) as a part of the work of Jesus Christ in the restoration of fallen humanity. See Ellen White, *Mind, Character, and Personality* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), 1:28.

²⁹Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. M. J. O'Connell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 12.

³⁰Clifford Green, ed., *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 233-234.

³¹Oscar Cullmann considered the worth of the individual person as the chief distinguishing mark of the Christian proclamation in contrast to Judaism (*Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd V. Filson [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950], 217).

In theological terms the incarnation establishes the value of every individual apart from any human factors. Barth reflected on this idea:

A decision has been made concerning the being and nature of every person by the mere fact that among all other people he [Jesus] too has been a human being. No matter who or what or where they may be, they cannot alter the fact that this One is also human. And because this One is also human, all people in their places and times are changed, i.e., they are something other than they would have been if this One had not been human too.³²

Admittedly, such an observation is not without difficulty. However, the mystery and complexity of the theology of the incarnation is not our main concern here. The Christian faith affirms that the birth of Jesus into the human race elevates the value of every individual. The value of the individual is thus established on a christological basis. It might be that the contemplation of this amazing and mysterious event could instill a sense of self-esteem not subject to social norms and personal inadequacies.

The incarnation of Christ is related to self-esteem in yet another way. The incarnation sets the standard of evaluation for that which is valuable in the human. In the Christian tradition the ideal of human perfection is embodied in Christ (John 1:14). Thus, in the person of Christ an understanding of what it means to be human, according to the divine design, is possible.³³ The perfection of human character is actualized in the character of Jesus Christ (Matt 5:17). For the believer all personal and social ideals are subordinated to and critiqued by this ultimate standard. This means that the attributes and achievements which constitute the intrapsychic and interpersonal foundation of self-esteem are embodied in the person of Christ.

Crucifixion

The documents of the New Testament and the history of the Christian church are witnesses to the centrality of the cross of Christ.³⁴ Therefore, it is not surprising to discover that the work of Christ on the cross is central to the theological assessment of self-esteem. Browning has suggested that the cross provides a "new ground of worth" for the self.³⁵ Ellen White expressed a similar idea: "It is through the cross alone that we can estimate the worth of the human soul. . . .

³²Green, 228.

³³Ibid., 233-234.

³⁴John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 17-46.

³⁵Browning, 262.

The worth of man is known only by going to Calvary. In the mystery of the cross of Christ we can place an estimate upon man."³⁶ From this perspective the value of the individual self is established without reference to any personal or social norms (John 3:16; Rom 5:8). The cross event alone is the great argument for human worth, since Christ would not have suffered death by crucifixion if it were not for the immense worth of the human creature. Thus, the worth of the human is as great as the mystery of the cross.

The work of Christ on the cross is often described theologically in terms of justification by faith (Rom 3:24-25; 5:18). The relevance of this doctrine for self-esteem is twofold. First, justification by faith provides a way to deal with the consciousness of sin which might inhibit a healthy sense of self-esteem (Heb 9:14). This process is traditionally understood in terms of Christ's bearing human sin vicariously on the cross (1 Pet 2:24). Gerd Theissen, using psychological exegesis of selected Pauline texts, offers the following analysis: "The cognitive restructuring of the self-image takes place through changed causal attribution of sin. Sin is attributed to . . . the one who vicariously took on flesh."³⁷ The biblical language of vicarious substitution is interpreted psychologically in terms of causal attribution. Such a comparison should not be accepted uncritically, for it would be unfortunate to allow psychological language to obscure biblical meaning. However, the analysis does suggest a potentially significant insight. The substitutionary death of Christ on the cross (the attribution of personal sins to Christ) releases the believing individual from guilt (sustained negative self-attributions) and its effects (Rom 6:11).

Second, justification by faith is relevant to self-esteem in that it provides a source of positive self-attributions. This idea is traditionally expressed in terms of the imputation of Christ's righteousness (Rom 4:22-24).³⁸ In this way the attributes and achievements of Christ are credited to the individual and provide a new basis for self-esteem.

Justification by faith opposes the strong achievement orientation of certain psychological perspectives relating to self-esteem enhancement. Human accomplishment, in the Christian view, is not the ultimate foundation for self-esteem (Acts 13:39; Eph 2:8-9). Martin Luther explained the significance of achievement in the Christian life:

³⁶Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1937), 2:634-635.

³⁷Theissen, 264-265.

³⁸White, *Steps to Christ*, 63.

The works of a believer are like this. Through his faith he has been restored to Paradise and created anew, has no need of works that he may become or be righteous . . . but that . . . he may provide for and keep his body, he must do such works freely only to please God.³⁹

Thus human achievement is significant but not central; important but not paramount. Extending this insight to the mental domain means that human works are not the central source of self-esteem for a believer in Christ. The theology of the cross affirms that the achievements of Christ overshadow the achievements of the self as the ultimate reference point for human worth, value, and significance.

New Creation

The concept of the new creation is intimately related to the incarnation and cross, which make it possible (Eph 2:10, 15-16).⁴⁰ Through faith in Christ the individual participates in this new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Theissen explains the significance of this understanding for self-esteem: "We need no longer understand ourselves according to the role of Adam but can rather orient ourselves on the role of Christ and judge and assess ourselves anew in its light."⁴¹ This orientation of the believer to the role of Christ is a faith orientation. One of the distinct characteristics of biblical faith is that it is not dependent on physical, observable reality (Heb 11:1). Faith apprehends the invisible and hears the inaudible; it grasps what is not internal and present but only external and potential, in the form of promise (Rom 4:18). Martin Luther explained the dynamic impact of such faith:

The third incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. . . . Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own If he gives her his body and self, how shall he not give her all that he is?⁴²

Understood in this way, a faith orientation is such a close identification with Christ that the self benefits from all that he is and does.⁴³ The

³⁹John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 69.

⁴⁰Werner G. Kummel, *Man in the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. John J. Vincent (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 95.

⁴¹Theissen, 264-265.

⁴²Dillenberger, 60.

⁴³Cullmann referred to this complete identification in the following terms: "One can even say that the main points of the second article of the later creed are here [referring to Col 3:1-4] connected with the life of the individual: with Christ he dies, with Christ

radical nature of this concept is almost psychologically inexplicable. It is an assertion of faith that self-esteem can be derived not only from the experienced self but also from an "alien self," the perfect self of Christ.

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the third component in the trinitarian foundation of self-esteem. The work of the Holy Spirit relates particularly to the human factors in the maintenance of self-esteem.

The Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit is relevant to self-esteem issues in two significant ways. First, the divine Spirit is perceived as the agent of conviction of personal sinfulness (John 16:8), a perception often criticized on the ground that it tends to foster low self-esteem.⁴⁴ Second, the Holy Spirit is perceived as the agent which restores the individual to the image of God (Gal 5:22-23; Col 3:10). In the development of positive self-attributes, significant achievements, and meaningful relationships, the intrapsychic and interpersonal basis of self-esteem is strengthened. These two insights appear to be contradictory, yet in the trinitarian context they are explicable.

Sanctification

In the Christian tradition the work of the Holy Spirit is generally referred to as sanctification. Sanctification is understood as the process by which the believer is restored to the image of God (Col 3:10; 2 Thess 2:13). Conviction of sin is an indispensable part of this process (1 John 1:8-10). Restoration is accomplished as the human agent turns away from self-generated efforts of renewal and toward the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:26; Phil 2:13). Thus the Spirit works within the life of the individual to restore the sin-damaged person to the divinely created state of perfection.

In the context of the Holy Spirit's work the present condition of the believer in Christ is important. This is a complicated matter, not to be settled here. The following remarks are not intended to solve the issues but only to suggest the significance of the complexity of the present human condition for self-esteem.

he rises, with the Christ who sits at the right hand of God he makes his home 'above.' With Christ he takes part in the present hidden state of glory upon earth" (Cullmann, 218).

⁴⁴However, some researchers do take issue with this prevalent idea. See Watson, 116-128.

The classic theological expression of the paradoxical nature of Christian experience is *simul justus et peccator*,⁴⁵ simultaneously righteous and sinful. The concept is illogical and paradoxical, and yet Scripture (Isa 64:6; Rom 3:10-12; 6:11-12; 8:3-11) and Christian experience support it. Anthony Hoekema emphasizes the relevance of this idea for self-esteem: "In Christ we are now justified sinners, sinners who have the Holy Spirit dwelling within, sinners who are being progressively renewed. Our way of looking at ourselves must not deny this newness but affirm it."⁴⁶ Self-esteem is derived from the new view of the self based on the new situation: justified (positionally new), sanctified (relationally new), and renewed (experientially new). Much of the Christian literature on the topic highlights this "newness" as a means to enhance self-esteem. However, this emphasis ignores that at the same time a human being is sinful. It would seem more consistent to relate self-esteem to both perspectives of the Christian experience embodied in *simul justus et peccator*. Theologically, this concept undergirds the affirmation that two divergent yet simultaneous self-attitudes should coexist in the individual; self-denial (low self-esteem), and self-acceptance (high self-esteem).

Another important way the paradoxical nature of Christian experience is interpreted is through the theology of the "already" and the "not yet." Oscar Cullmann offers a classic expression of the concept:

In Christ we already have redemption from the power of sin; this means that now as never before we must battle against sin. This apparently contradictory joining of imperative and indicative is nothing else than the application to ethics of the complexity . . . of the present situation in redemptive history. We are dealing with the working out of what we have called the "tension between the already fulfilled and the not yet fulfilled."⁴⁷

Hoekema explains the importance of this theology for self-esteem issues:

We are in Christ, to be sure, and therefore we share in His decisive victory over the powers of evil. But, since we are still on this side of His Second Coming, we do not yet enjoy the totality of Christ's victory. Our self-image must leave room for eschatology—for the fact that we are not yet what we shall be.⁴⁸

⁴⁵See Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (New York: Longman House, 1981), 59, 125, 228.

⁴⁶Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Christian Looks at Himself* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 55.

⁴⁷Cullmann, 225.

⁴⁸Hoekema, 72.

From the perspective of biblical eschatology, the present condition of the self is not a sufficient basis for total self-affirmation.

Larry Crabb affirms that this side of heaven the human condition is imperfect and therefore subject to pain and frustration.⁴⁹ The significance of this view is the observation that the self-esteem need is not completely satisfied in the present experience. However, the Christian eschatological expectation helps to alleviate the frustration of an unfulfilled present need (Rom 8:18). At the resurrection and glorification the individual will be fully and completely perfect and free from sin (Rom 8:22-25; 1 Cor 15:51-53). Until then the ideas relating to the future perfection of the self are vital in the present maintenance of self-esteem.⁵⁰ In the trinitarian view the internal basis for self-esteem will be fully established only at the eschaton. Only then will the self-attitudes be consistently positive because there will be no sin to distort the perception of self-worth.

Conviction of Sin

Gospel faith affirms that the Holy Spirit operates in the life of the individual in order to bring about a consciousness of personal sinfulness (John 16:8). This operation might be similar to a psychological process discussed by Theissen:

There remains within the individual an obscure region that, just like the behavior of one's fellows, remains withdrawn from the individual's judicial competence. And this too is an humane characteristic: the human being is not God. One is not fully transparent to oneself. Even when one, as *homo religiosus*, has experienced an enormous expansion of consciousness with regard to oneself and others, even when the "Spirit of God" has been conferred on one, even then, yes, precisely then, does one become conscious that this does not exhaust matters.⁵¹

If the operation of the Holy Spirit can be interpreted in terms of an "expansion of consciousness" and increased self-knowledge, self-esteem issues are relevant. In this view the individual's self-knowledge will be ever expanding. Hidden aspects of the self will be brought to consciousness to be evaluated by the "individual's judicial competence." This means that the cognitive structure on which self-esteem is based is

⁴⁹Larry Crabb, *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988), 13-20.

⁵⁰Deigh mentions the possibility of the person's identifying, "for the purpose of self-assessment, with the person he will become" (Deigh, 241). Ellen White expresses a similar concept in the context of a helping relationship with another person: "Our advancing ideas of what he may become are a help we cannot ourselves fully appreciate" (*Mind, Character, and Personality*, 1:255).

⁵¹Theissen, 106.

not static but subject to change. In consequence, as negative aspects of the self are disclosed by the Holy Spirit, self-esteem might also decrease. However, this is not problematic because in the trinitarian perspective a double self-attitude, consisting simultaneously of elements of high and low self-esteem, is entirely consistent with the paradoxical nature of the present human condition and experience.⁵²

Restoration of the Image of God

In Scripture the work of the Holy Spirit is described as a restoration of the human into the image of the divine (2 Thess 2:13; Col 3:10). David Clark comments on this process: "Our truest selves are enhanced and enriched when tendencies to egocentricity are overcome by the Spirit's power. Then we make progress toward our full potential as real humans—we become like Christ."⁵³ As positive attributes, significant achievements, and meaningful relationships are more fully realized in the individual life, corresponding self-esteeming attitudes will develop. In the trinitarian perspective the restorative work of the Holy Spirit is understood as providing a stronger intrapsychic and interpersonal basis for self-esteem.

Implications for Pastoral Counseling

Pastoral counseling, from the trinitarian perspective, will primarily involve the remediation of extremes on the self-esteem continuum.⁵⁴ Ellen White provided the basic insight for this approach:

If you form too high an opinion of yourself, you will think that your labors are of more real consequence than they are. . . . If you go to the other extreme and form too low an opinion of yourself, you will feel inferior and will leave an impression of inferiority which will greatly limit the influence that you might have for good. You should avoid either extreme. . . . You may form a correct estimate of yourself, one which will prove a safeguard from both extremes.⁵⁵

⁵²Stott, 278-285.

⁵³David Clark, "Interpreting the Biblical Words for the Self," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 18 (Winter 1990), 317.

⁵⁴This is in marked contrast to the usual approach in the theological literature on the enhancement of self-esteem. Pastoral counseling is often based on the faulty assumption that low self-esteem is always negative and high self-esteem is always positive. For extended treatment of this issue, see Paul A. Fisher, "The Relationship of the Self-Esteem Variable to Specific Christian Doctrines" (M.Div. thesis, Andrews University, 1992), 32-38.

⁵⁵White, *Testimonies*, 3:506.

A correct estimate of the self will require a sensitivity to the complexities of the human condition. The pastoral counselor must help the counselee to recognize personal worth in the context of personal sinfulness.

Extremely high or low self-estimations should be explored by the pastoral counselor and counselee. Intrapsychic and interpersonal sources of self-esteem should be identified and explained. However, focused attention should be given to the relevance of specific Christian doctrines to self-esteem. Above all, the counselee should be helped to perceive that God has fixed human worth independently of all social or personal criteria. The christological basis (incarnation and cross) of self-esteem should be especially emphasized. The operative assumption in this process is that belief in these theological truths, by providing an alternative source of self-esteem, can remediate the negative aspects associated with high and low esteem.

The pastoral counselor's perception of the individual is also significant, for the counselor is a significant interpersonal source of self-esteem.⁵⁶ Furthermore, as a minister of the gospel, the counselor mediates the presence of the divine (2 Cor 5:20). It is as if the divine attitude were present in the counselor's perception.

The power and promise of pastoral counseling for self-esteem issues is tremendous. Through a combination of theological and psychological insights self-esteem can be maintained. Perceptual inaccuracies can be regulated, and individuals can function more effectively.

Summary and Conclusion

The doctrines of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit comprise the trinitarian foundation of self-esteem. This theological perspective enhances the psychological insights relating to the maintenance of self-esteem.

In much of the psychological literature self-esteem is perceived to be rooted entirely in human experience, in intrapsychic (mental), and interpersonal (social) sources. In a theological context these factors are important but do not constitute the entire ground of self-esteem.

The most significant contribution of theology to self-esteem is that it identifies a transcendent source of self-esteem. In this trinitarian view personal and social norms are not the central criteria of self-assessment. Apart from all relative human measurements is a God who has fixed the value of the self independently of all personal attributes, achievements, and social relationships.

⁵⁶Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1923), 281.