

# CHRIST-ESTEEM OR SELF-ESTEEM

## WHAT IS THE REAL *PROBLEM*?

Christ Esteem, written by Lutheran pastor Don Matzat, presents an attempt to answer the current teachings of self-esteem brought into the church by humanistic psychology. Matzat rightly questions those teachings, as well as the shallowness of modern psychology's solutions. He defines the "real enemy in the church" as "the self-esteem, positive confession, and positive-self-image teaching" because "these teachings seduce the people of God into focusing their attention upon enlarging themselves, feeling good about themselves, and even in some situations, desiring to be like God" (p. 81). His answers are focused on the believer's personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Much of what Matzat has to say is very sound. However, there are some serious weaknesses that must also be addressed. His focus on "identity crisis" as a fundamental problem of man must be examined. The sources of several of his quotations are not theologically sound. His basic position regarding psychology is weak, even though he seriously challenges its teachings.

### Strengths

**Sin and Self-Knowledge.** Matzat rightly acknowledges the doctrine of original sin. When Adam sinned, all sinned. As he states, "My 'negative self-image' is beyond emotion and is based upon some very cold, historical facts" (p. 59). He notes that the problem of man is not a negative *self-image* but a negative *self*. Therapists counsel people to confess and believe that they are valuable and worthwhile, but this leads away from Jesus Christ. Knowledge of one's own sinful condition is an essential yet continuing task:

"The pursuit of self-knowledge is an endless task. We never arrive at the place of being fully aware of the depth of sin that dwells within our hearts." (p. 43)

Those who do come to an accurate assessment of their sin often experience frustration:

"Christians who come to grips with the perverted condition of their sinful nature and set out on the path of self-improvement soon discover that there is something very wrong. They find that, no matter how hard they try, they are unable to change their lives." (p. 47)

Indeed, striving in the flesh is a futile venture. Matzat

correctly acknowledges the absolute necessity for the believer to abide in and depend on Christ. He also recognizes the ongoing conflict that believers experience during earthly life:

"As the result of our 'double birth' in Adam and in Christ, while we are still upon this earth, we possess a double life." (p. 119)

In contrast to modern psychologists, Matzat rightly recognizes the basic problem of **sin**. On this point he can be commended.

**Renewing the Mind.** Matzat includes an excellent discussion on the importance of the believer's thought life:

"Since our minds are at the very center of our being, whether we live in old Adam or live according to our new life in Christ is related to the direction and substance of our thought-life. *This truth is the most important practical aspect of living and walking in the Spirit.*" (p. 132)

The author also does a good job here of contrasting this renewal of the mind with modern psychology's positive confession/thinking, which relies on "alleged inherent power" and "visualization of desired result" (p. 134), thus eliminating Jesus Christ (p. 135). This sort of technique is "based upon faith in one's self and turns God into a mere servant" (p. 135).

Matzat teaches that the believer's "confession" must be based on the truth of God's Word, and that he must agree with God about his sinful condition:

"What we confess is not determined by whether the confession is positive or negative. *It is determined by whether it is true or false!*" (p. 145)

His emphasis here on **truth**, and on the believer's thought life, is generally well written and helpful.

**Relationship with the Lord.** Throughout the book, Matzat repeatedly stresses the believer's relationship with Jesus Christ as the answer to life's basic problems. This is a welcome emphasis and a good reminder to those who seek to grow in their obedience to God's Word. Without abiding in Christ, the believer cannot expect to progress in sanctification.

**Crucifixion with Christ.** Matzat correctly emphasizes the believer's having been crucified with Christ, and thus the necessity to turn away from self. This certainly contrasts with the counsel of psychologists to elevate and focus on self.

## Weaknesses

**Sufficiency of Scripture.** Matzat poses a dichotomy between the person of Jesus Christ and God's Word:

"It is one thing to claim that the traditional message of the Christian church is not sufficient to answer the questions of modern man, but it borders on heresy to suggest that there is something insufficient about what God accomplished in and through Christ Jesus." (p. 30)

"Even most of the arguments leveled against the intrusion of psychology into the church have been motivated by the desire to preserve the authority of the Bible as a propositional textbook. Some have even spoken of 'counseling from Scripture' as if 'religious,' biblical rules are somehow better than the principles of psychology." (p. 30)

The "traditional message of the Christian church" and "what God accomplished in and through Christ Jesus" are inseparable. Both describe "the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). The authority of the Bible is a crucial issue, because it is through this God-breathed writing that believers today may know Jesus Christ accurately. The Bible does indeed have "rules" or principles for godly living, that the speculations of psychology radically oppose. The Christian counselor **must** use Scripture as his one authoritative source for effective biblical counseling.

Matzat notes that Christians who integrate psychology with the Bible claim that not all of life's problems are fully addressed by Scripture. He goes on to say:

"According to this way of thinking, the integration of psychology with theology poses no problems. Both disciplines deal with the same subject matter of human behavior and are both dedicated to helping people live more meaningful lives. Since it is philosophically correct to say that all truth ultimately comes from God, it is therefore reasonable to suggest that psychology is able to fill up that which is lacking in the body of Christian truth. This understanding is based upon a wrong definition of the very essence of Christianity." (p. 29)

"The Bible does not provide specific solutions for specific human behavioral problems. God does not repair and adjust human life. From His perspective, human life is beyond repair." (p. 52)

This really confuses some crucial issues. Both disciplines do indeed deal with the "same subject matter." Matzat's position

would be so much stronger if he noted that *because of this overlap*, Christians must rely solely on God's Word. Psychology is based on the speculations of godless men about such basic issues as the nature of man, how he should live, what changes he ought to make, and how those changes are to be made. It therefore usurps the authority of Scripture. If its conclusions coincidentally cross paths with Scripture, there is redundancy. If its conclusions differ from Scripture, it is in error. Furthermore, there is *nothing lacking* in the body of Christian truth, wherein God has provided **everything** we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3,4), including the "specific solutions" that are supposedly absent to guide the believer's sanctification. Matzat's "essence of Christianity" is the believer's relationship with Christ. Important as that is, it does not stand opposed to the sufficiency of Scripture to address all problems of daily living that the believer may face. Matzat creates a false dichotomy here and confuses the "all truth is God's truth" defense of integrationists.

**Basic Position - Psychology vs. Scripture.** It is encouraging to see an author who has the courage to challenge the intrusion of psychology into the Christian church. Matzat recognizes that its answer are shallow and theologically inadequate. He believes that those who promote of integration of psychology and Scripture demonstrate a lack of understanding of either biblical content or the essence of the Christian faith (p. 10, 28).

However, he is "not against psychology as a legitimate discipline studying the cause and effect of human behavior" (p. 10). This seriously weakens his position. Precisely what does he mean? Study of human behavior on the basis of **biblical** presuppositions, or with the addition of **theories** proposed by godless men like Freud, Maslow, Jung, and such? Does he intend to limit this "legitimate discipline" to pure research? If Matzat really wishes to challenge modern psychology, clarification is definitely needed on this issue.

Furthermore, he opens himself to the criticisms that are likely to be leveled by the integrationists:

"Most of the books I have read that have been written by 'Christian psychologists' demonstrate a very shallow understanding of biblical theology. I realize that in making that statement I am opening myself up to the counter criticism that what I am writing demonstrate a shall understanding of secular psychology. **I am more than willing to accept that criticism.** I am not a psychologist nor have any desire to be one. I am a Christian pastor, trained in theology, who preaches Jesus Christ." (p. 11, emphasis added)

Certainly Matzat doesn't need an advanced degree in psychology to challenge its teachings. What he ought to do here is develop a basic position, supported from Scripture, about the Bible's **sufficiency** to address problems of living. God warns about walking in the counsel of the ungodly (Psalm 1:1) and adding to His Word (Proverbs 30:5, 6 and elsewhere). In addition, Matzat could review the qualifications (or rather the lack of them) of unbelievers to offer counsel. Using God's Word alone, a position of biblical sufficiency can be firmly established without any need to do extensive psychological research.

**Needs.** One of the major weaknesses in this book is the emphasis on and confusion about human needs. Although the author rightly presents Jesus Christ as the *answer*, and although he emphasizes the reality of sin, he weakens his case by confusing some of the basic *questions*, or needs. For example:

"Humanistic psychology defines many human **needs**, but at closer examination, it is merely dealing with symptoms which require the mere application of a Band-Aid to stop the bleeding. We are told, for example, that man **needs** to find himself. Why is this true? How did man get lost in the first place? We are told that man's most basic **need** is to feel good about himself. Why? Why doesn't he naturally feel good about himself? Man **needs** to find meaning in life. Why? Man **needs** a positive self-image. Why? Why does he have to develop one? Why doesn't he have one?" (p. 33)

Matzat doesn't refute these assumed **needs** of man and show that the whole emphasis is wrong: Man's **need** is for redemption--forgiveness of his sins and reconciliation with God. Instead, he accepts these **needs** as legitimate, rather than distinguishing between *perceived needs* and *biblically defined needs*.

**"Identity Crisis."** One supposed need, for "identity" and meaning in life, is a basic theme of Christ-Esteem:

"While modern man wants to believe that he is a good, worthwhile, valuable human being, he cannot escape the emptiness and meaninglessness of his own existence. In spite of all the self-help books and the media blitz attempting to convince him that he should feel good about himself and maintain a positive image of himself, our society is faced with an epidemic of drugs, alcohol, and suicide." (p. 19)

"Right or wrong, the traditional Christian expectation for life today does not provide a great deal of hope for those who are not ashamed to say that they have lost their identity and their life upon this earth is meaningless." (p. 27)

"We are dealing today with a generation of people who have seemingly stumped the church with a new set of questions. They are not asking, 'How do I get saved from sin and go to heaven when I die?' but rather, 'How do I find meaning and purpose in life today?' Rather than dealing with forgiveness and eternal life, people today are concerned with *personal identity* and the meaning of their *present existence*." (p. 27) Matzat accepts "identity" as a fundamental need of man, even describing his own "identity crisis" as a new pastor. Although he asked God to show him his heart, and in turn gained a more in-depth knowledge of his sinful condition, the emphasis remains too strongly on **identity** rather than **redemption**. Even his discussion of original sin, while generally true, steers us away from a biblical definition of man's basic need:

"While it is certainly true that Adam was originally created in the 'image of God,' which meant that he found himself by looking at God, when he fell into sin he took his eyes off God and focused upon himself. In this way, he became lost. He chose to separate himself from the source of his identity: his God. It is no wonder that **modern man is looking for himself**. 'Being lost' is also a characteristic of Adam." (p. 66, emphasis added)

The emphasized phrase, "modern man is looking for himself," reveals the deficiency in Matzat's reasoning. Modern man (and man in all time periods) is alienated *from God, not from self*, by his sin. This is a crucial distinction. Man needs reconciliation *with God, not with self*. "Identity" is not the basic need of man!

Nevertheless, Matzat extensively presents Christ as the answer to this presumed need:

"It is my purpose to demonstrate that a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ more than adequately solves the **identity crisis** of this generation and brings meaning and fulfillment to life." (p. 11, emphasis added)

"...in addition to being our righteousness, Jesus Christ is also our **identity**, our life, our fulfillment, our **pride**, our hope, our peace, our joy, and our ultimate **worth**." (p. 31, emphasis added)

"Our new **identity** and life is determined by the historical redeeming work of Jesus Christ." (p. 75, emphasis added)

"When we turn away from and reject self and turn unto Jesus, the very first thing that He gives to us is a new, lofty personal **identity** in Him." (p. 87, emphasis added)

"The **identity** that God gives to us in Christ Jesus lifts us far higher than anything this world can offer."  
(p. 87, emphasis added)

"God has not given us an **identity** on this earth. We are strangers, foreigners, and pilgrims. Our real personal identity is in the heavenly places since God has also **identified** us with the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ." Therefore: "It is not surprising that people have so much difficulty trying to **find themselves** in this world. They are looking in the wrong place." (p. 88, emphasis added)

"While the death of Jesus frees us from the 'negative self,' His ascension frees us from trying to find a 'new spiritual self,' which can be just as big a problem." (p. 90)

"Because of this failure to identify 'self' with Christ Jesus in His ascension, many today boast of their new **identity** here on this earth." (p. 91)

"The New Testament directive to find our **identity** and life in Christ Jesus is not a simplistic solution. It is profound."  
(p. 192, emphasis added)

While Matzat's emphasis on the ascension and on our status as pilgrims in this world is basically correct, it is rather confusing to view these biblical truths as merely the solution to an "identity crisis."

Matzat also correlates "identity" with the doctrine of justification, and distinguishes it from sanctification, which he defines as "the life we live by looking unto Jesus" (p. 103). He cautions against confusing identity and life:

"If I try to apply my perfectly righteous identity in Christ to my human life, I will be filled with guilt and condemnation. If, on the other hand, my sinful human life becomes my identity before God, I will experience doubt over whether or not my sins are actually forgiven and that I am going to heaven. So, we must distinguish our identity in Christ from our life lived upon the earth." (p. 103)

Justification and sanctification are both important doctrines that need to be understood and distinguished by the believer. However, it would be better to describe justification as one's *position* in Christ rather than *identity*. It would also be helpful to further describe sanctification as the life that is lived by walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, wherein the believer increasingly grows away from sin and toward godliness. Matzat's rather weak view of Scripture, as discussed earlier, tends to also

weaken his view of sanctification. It is vitally important to "look unto Jesus," as he states, but Scripture gives specific *standards* and instructions for sanctification.

The errors of mysticism are discussed, and the author notes that our identity (*position*) is not based on Christ dwelling within, or a distorted focus on some "Christ-self" within, but on what God has done *outside* of us. He rightly recognizes the influence of occult psychiatrist Carl Jung in bringing mysticism into the church.

Matzat also discusses natural gifts and abilities, and states that these now belong to Christ. They are not the basis for the believer's identity. Aside from the continuing emphasis on identity, these comments are basically in line with biblical teachings about spiritual gifts being used for the good of the whole body of Christ.

**"Identity Crisis" in the Church.** Matzat carries the "identity crisis" problem into the church body: "The church of Jesus Christ today is facing an identity crisis" (p. 196). He correctly notes that the church is not intended to be a "psychological support group" and that "our goal is not to preserve each other's pride and build up mutual self-esteem" (p. 197). Contrary to the popular psychological selfisms and "codependent" teachings:

"The conflicts that readily surface through interpersonal relationships demonstrate to us the damaging results of being self-centered." (p. 198)

Matzat believes that believers share a relationship with Jesus Christ and are therefore able to "take off their masks and open themselves up to one another" rather than hiding behind a "pious facade" (p. 201, 204-5). They openly and honestly relate to one another only after they turn away from self and find their *identity* in Christ.

Again, the "identity crisis" issue surfaces, and this is the wrong problem. Believers are indeed exhorted to speak the truth in love, and to admonish, encourage, instruct, and comfort one another. Matzat's focus away from self is good, but his emphasis on "identity" confuses what would otherwise be valuable teaching about relationships within the body of believers.

**Confessing the Truth.** One of the strengths noted earlier was Matzat's emphasis on the renewing of the mind, and how this contrasts with "positive confession" teachings. However, despite his emphasis on *truth*, which is good, some of what he says tends to remain too self-focused:



"Standing firmly and confidently upon the truth of God's Word and focusing upon our identity in Christ Jesus in the heavenly places, we also confess, 'I agree. I am forgiven and righteous in Christ. I am seated in the heavenly places! I am more than a conqueror. I can do all things through Christ Jesus. I believe your Word and promise.'" (p. 146, emphasis added)

Nothing here is false, but note the repetition of "I." These biblical truths must be balanced with praise and glory to **God** for what He has done for us in Christ. Salvation is **His** work, an act of sheer grace having nothing to do with the "worth" or merit of the recipient. Matzat wants to emphasize Jesus Christ, which is wonderful, but at some points he seems to cater to the current self-focus of the world *and the church!*

**Self-Image.** While giving some good teaching on accurate knowledge of one's sinful condition before God, Matzat gives too much credit to psychologists:

"Our self-image is very important. It has been said that the teaching regarding self-image is the most important psychological discovery of this century." (p. 60)

This weakens his comment that "contrary to popular opinion, how I think about myself will not change the situation nor adjust what I am" (p. 71). Indeed it will not, but the truth is confused by crediting psychology with the discovery of the importance of "self-image." It would be better to say that the Christian must examine his own heart before God. *Self-confrontation* or *self-knowledge* would be better terms, less likely to be integrated with the erroneous teachings of humanistic psychology.

**Questionable Quotes.** Some of Matzat's sources are theologically questionable, even when the content of the particular quotes is not necessarily objectionable and may serve a useful purpose. These sources include Tournier, Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and Frankl. This critique has focused on the actual content of Matzat's writings rather than on who he quotes, but some mention of his sources is needed. The reason is that those who respect him may naively (though wrongly) assume that the men he quotes are theologically sound. Because of those who listen to him and believe what he teaches, he has a responsibility to take great care in his use of quotations. His points could be made just as well without these sources. When erroneous sources are quoted, there should be an accompanying critique to properly instruct his audience.

Special mention should be made of his extensive use of Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who developed "logotherapy." Frankl

places much emphasis of man's search for "meaning," as does Matzat in this book. Frankl also teaches self-detachment, but his "getting off self" is more of a "coping mechanism" than what Matzat intends to teach. The author does at least recognize that Frankl does not have valid solutions to the problems that he claims to observe:

"While Frankl's theories certainly do not offer any lasting solutions for human problems, he is one of the few theorists within humanistic psychology who accurately identifies one aspect of the problem" (turning from self). (p. 73)

"On the basis of his understanding, we are not suggesting the psychologically damaging attitudes of nihilism, or the repression and denial of our problems, inner hurts, and conflicts. What we are saying is that focusing upon these things neither solves them nor changes them but merely magnifies and activates them." (p. 74)

"Calling a Christian away from himself unto Jesus is not a 'coping mechanism' of logotherapy but is based upon our crucifixion with Christ." (p. 136)

Matzat could have called the Christian away from self without quoting an unbeliever. It is good that he acknowledges Frankl's lack of answers, but these comments would be better reserved for a critique of Frankl. It is useful at times to quote this type of source merely to examine what is going on in the world around, and then to offer a biblical critique with biblical answers.

## Conclusions

Perhaps one final quote will help us summarize the issues presented in this book:

"Because we are not happy, we may seek solutions in counseling and psychology rather than realizing that what we need is repentance. The solution to our negative human characteristics is not found in good advice but in separating from self and clinging to Jesus." (p. 124)

There is much to be commended in Matzat's attempt to combat the self-focused teachings of modern humanistic psychology that have invaded the church with full force. The believer's relationship with Jesus Christ is crucial, and abiding in Him is essential to living a godly life. The focus away from self, in the knowledge that one has been crucified with Christ, is certainly vital. Matzat rightly recognizes the reality of human sin and accurate self-knowledge. However, there are weaknesses in Matzat's view of the fundamental *problem* as being one of "identity

crisis," and he fails to give a solid, biblically based response to some of the crucial issues at stake, such as sufficiency of Scripture and the inability of unbelievers to offer valid counsel to the church. There is some basically good teaching in this book, but it does need to be read with biblical discernment.

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